



Theorizing Young People



The papers included in this section were originally presented as part of a round table on “Theorizing Young People,” hosted by the Association for Research in Cultures of Young People (ARCYP) at the Congress of the Social Sciences and Humanities in Fredericton on 31 May 2011.



Ignorant and Innocent: The Childs of Common Cultural Discourses

—Mavis Reimer and charlie peters

At an early point in most courses Mavis Reimer teaches in young people’s texts and cultures, she sets an assignment in which students are asked to bring to class at least one recent item about children clipped from a newspaper or magazine, transcribed from a television program, downloaded from a website, photocopied from a textbook, or found on

an advertising flyer. Requests for clarification of the assignment typically are queries about other possible sources of information; no one appears to find the terminology of “children” difficult or questionable. Working in small groups, students are asked to unearth the assumptions about children embedded in the texts they have found, using the sentence form

“[c]hildren are ____” and filling in the blank with a noun or a predicate adjective. It is at this point that students sometimes resist the assignment, protesting that texts that report on actual young people should not be grouped with texts that discuss abstract children or ideas about childhood. Whether the groups decide to sort their texts into these subcategories or not, the first round of discussions typically results in copious lists: children are found to be annoying, beautiful, competitive, consumers, creative, dangerous, egocentric, gullible, precious, smart, and vulnerable, among many other things. In a second round of discussions, groups are reorganized and asked to study the lists produced by all of the groups, in order to consider what positive ideals might underlie some of the negative descriptors attached to children and to assemble the descriptors into categories. By the end of their discussions, most groups have found that, with a few exceptions, the assumptions identified by the class fall into two broad categories. Groups describe these categories in various ways, but the first can be summarized as the assumption that children are or should be learners, and the second as the assumption that children are or should be the best of human beings, or alternatively that children represent or should represent the best of what it means to be human. That both texts about actual young people and texts about abstract children work within the same set of assumptions leads to a discussion of the ways in

which ideologies are instantiated in material practices and of the regulatory functions of discourse, in this case the discourse of “the child.”

The outcome of this classroom activity is not surprising, given that there are two dominant theoretical frameworks through which “the child” is conceptualized in those societies that continue to ground their laws, spoken and unspoken, on their inheritances from Western European traditions. The first of these is a narrative of development from an inferior to a superior state: at its barest, this narrative holds that young people are ignorant and unknowing subjects who will naturally acquire knowledge and grow in wisdom as they move toward adulthood. The history of this view stretches back at least to classical times, although it is common for developmental accounts of children’s growth to take the Enlightenment as a point of origin. One of the most frequently cited examples is from the work of the late-seventeenth-century English philosopher John Locke. In *Some Thoughts Concerning Education*, originally a letter written to a friend, Locke famously describes the “very little” gentleman’s son who is the particular subject of his letter “as white Paper, or Wax, to be moulded and fashioned as one pleases.” While Locke acknowledges that “there are possibly scarce two Children, who can be conducted by exactly the same method,” he nevertheless believes that young people are enough like one another that he can formulate “some general Views” on “the main



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End and Aims in Education” (261). The story “The Purple Jar” by Anglo-Irish writer Maria Edgeworth is a literary example of a child character in the process of learning how to be a prudent consumer. Rosamond chooses aesthetics (an appealingly purple jar to hold flowers) over utility (a pair of new shoes), even though her shoes have holes in them. While preparing the new purple jar for flowers, she empties it of the water that it contained when she purchased it and discovers that it was the colour of the water that had made her jar purple. Rosamond ends up with a jar that is no longer purple and such dilapidated shoes that her father will not take her on an outing. In the end, Rosamond remains uncertain about whether or not she will make a better choice next time: “I am sure—no not quite sure, but I hope I shall be wiser another time” (181). In other words, Rosamond understands herself to be a learner, always in the process of moving on to a higher state of knowledge.

A fuller account of the establishment of developmentalism as a cultural narrative would include the work of Charles Darwin on evolution and of Sigmund Freud on the achievement of adulthood as the resolution of and progression through oral, anal, and phallic stages of psychic life (Rogers and Rogers 178–81). In the twentieth century, however, the name most associated with the assumption that children’s growth is a continuous process of epistemological development is that of Swiss psychologist Jean Piaget. For Piaget, the developmental stages of the sensorimotor period, the period of concrete operations, and the period of formal operations always occur in that order, although children can progress more or less rapidly through these stages under particular training programs. The destination of development,

however, is not in doubt: the implicit standard against which the child's progress is measured is the normal, rational, social adult subject.

The second dominant theoretical framework features an innocent child corrupted by experience. Often referred to as the Romantic or Neo-Romantic view of "the child," this second narrative has people descend from a superior state of innocence to an inferior state of experience during their life journey. The literary text most often cited as the touchstone of this view of growth as declension is William Wordsworth's "Ode: Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood":

Our birth is but a sleep and a forgetting:
The Soul that rises with us, our life's Star,
Hath had elsewhere its setting,
And cometh from afar:
Not in entire forgetfulness,
And not in utter nakedness,
But trailing clouds of glory do we come
From God, who is our home:
Heaven lies about us in our infancy!
Shades of the prison-house begin to close
Upon the growing Boy
But He beholds the light, and whence it flows,
He sees it in his joy;
The Youth, who daily farther from the east
Must travel, still is Nature's Priest,

And by the vision splendid
Is on his way attended;
At length the Man perceives it die away,
And fade into the light of common day. (58–76)

In her study *Romanticism and the Vocation of Childhood*, Judith Plotz observes that "The Child" imagined by many of the major Romantic poets is a child no longer enmeshed in a group or a family as Rosamond is, but rather splendidly solitary and timeless, autonomous and creative, "both source and goal of humanity" (31). Central to this view of childhood is a privileging of the quality of knowing which children are observed to bring to their encounters with the world, an intellectual quality Plotz describes as "[a]ffective-sensuous unitary knowledge" (16). James Barrie's Peter Pan may stand as the best example of this child in the texts of the so-called Golden Age of children's literature, but the orphaned, self-sufficient, perceptive heroes of the many adventure stories that populate texts for young people from the nineteenth century to the present day also clearly display many of the characteristics of the Romantic child.

In *Children and Childhood in Western Society since 1500*, Hugh Cunningham explains that the narratives of ascent and descent in which "the child" plays so central a role have long shaped understandings of the human world and human history in Western societies:

"It has . . . been common to imagine the history of humankind as equivalent to the life cycle of a human being; some societies have seen this as an ascent from savagery/childhood to civilization/adulthood, others as a descent from primeval innocence/childhood to corruption/adulthood" (2). In other words, during the span of time that one's society associates with childhood, one might be encouraged to think of oneself as ignorant or innocent, primitive or uncivilized. During adulthood, one might come to think of oneself as wise or corrupt, sophisticated or civilized. Reimer has noted elsewhere that nature is the common term in both the development and the corruption paradigms; she suggests that it is this shared term that enables "the imperfect, corporeal, natural child" to exchange places readily with "the innocent, spiritual, natural child" (8). Within these two common conceptual systems, the figures of "the child" and its "adult" companion subtend ideas of progress, of degeneration, and of value. Good and evil attach themselves either to "the (natural) child" or to "the (unnatural) adult," depending on the sets of ideas and the rhetorical purposes in play: the evils of ignorance can progress to the goodness of wisdom or childhood innocence can degenerate due to the corruption that accompanies adulthood. If the savage child is noble, then adult civilization is corrupt; if adult civilization is noble, the savage child is corrupt. Both of these frameworks are frequently seen operating simultaneously in current cultural discourses, as

Reimer's classes repeatedly discover, yielding intensely conflicted and contradictory tropes of "the child." In Henry Jenkins's words, "the child" is a "semiotically adhesive" cultural signifier (15). Given the various narratives in circulation, human beings who identify with contemporary figurations of "the child" and "the adult" are likely to tell themselves stories about their own lives that are dominated by the contradictory trajectories of ascension and declension.

That the stories of development and of corruption are socially constructed narratives is widely acknowledged. Historians such as Hugh Cunningham and Philippe Ariès have done much to show how ideas about young people differ from one time, place, or social situation to the next. In *Centuries of Childhood: A Social History of Family Life*, Ariès famously (and infamously) argues that "the child" as we know it did not exist for the medieval people of France and England, but gradually came into being between the sixteenth and eighteenth or nineteenth centuries by means of two principal changes that correspond to the frameworks of an innocent (and therefore corruptible) child and of an ignorant (and therefore educable) child. Specifically, Ariès argues that, in the medieval period, young people joined in the activities of their elders as soon as they were weaned. Beginning in the early modern period, there came to be a collective belief that young people within the family circle should be coddled past the age at which they were weaned and

the contrasting belief among churchmen, moralists, and schoolmasters that young people ought to be disciplined, reformed, and made rational (128–33). Ariès's reading of the history of the child and of childhood remains controversial, particularly among medievalists. As N. Ray Hiner and Joseph M. Hawes observe, however, although "Ariès has been justly criticized for his selective and sometimes uncritical use of evidence, no one has successfully challenged his essential point that childhood is *not* an immutable stage of life, free from the influence of historical change" (xvi).

Many sophisticated critiques and deconstructions of the cultural narratives of developmentalism and corruptibility have followed Ariès's research on the historical child. Within literary theory, a significant contribution to a deconstruction of the framework of childhood innocence has been made by Jacqueline Rose in *The Case of Peter Pan; or, The Impossibility of Children's Fiction*. Drawing on the work of Franco-Algerian philosopher Jacques Derrida in *Of Grammatology*, Rose maintains that "[c]hildren's literature brings together two concepts of origin—that of language and that of childhood—whose relationship it explores" (138) and that, in children's literature, "the child is constantly set up as the site of a lost truth and/or moment in history, which it can therefore be used to retrieve" (43). Rose's most renowned assertion, made on the first page of her book, is that "[c]hildren's fiction

is impossible, not in the sense that it cannot be written (that would be nonsense), but in that it hangs on an impossibility, one which it rarely ventures to speak. This is the impossible relation between the adult and child" (1). As Rose explains in her 1992 introductory essay to the 1993 edition of the book, this relation is "impossible" because the concepts of both childhood and adulthood are cultural myths; perhaps, indeed, they "serve as the last of all myths," myths that seek "to guarantee a certain knowledge of ourselves" (xvii).

James Kincaid also understands childhood innocence as a cultural myth that guarantees the constitution of the condition of adulthood. In *Child-Loving: The Erotic Child and Victorian Culture*, Kincaid asserts that "[i]f the child is not distinguished from the adult, we imagine that we are seriously threatened, threatened in such a way as to put at risk our very being, what it means to be an adult in the first place" (7). In the process of shoring up the myth of capable adulthood, however, according to Kincaid, contemporary culture extends a process begun by the Victorians and empties childhood of positive qualities, leaving the category to embody "a kind of purity, an absence and an inability to do" (70). This purity and emptiness in turn is eroticized, seen as infinitely desirable and irrepressibly alluring. It is this construction that Kincaid explores in detail in *Erotic Innocence: The Culture of Child Molesting*, where he argues that "we" (by which he generally means Anglo-

American societies) repeatedly discover and uncover cases of child sexual abuse as a way of keeping alive the narrative of “a vacant child that is both marginal and central to our lives: easily disposed of, abused, neglected, abandoned; and yet idealized, treasured, adored” (17). While Kincaid in this book focuses on the patterns evident in the cultural narratives, he also observes that, in its incitement to discourse, the figure of the “vacant child” “draws our attention to the personal and the psychological, away from structural social problems” (12–13).

It is exactly the social and political functions of the constructions of childhood innocence that interest Robin Bernstein. In *Racial Innocence: Performing American Childhood from Slavery to Civil Rights*, Bernstein argues that it was the idea of childhood innocence—“itself raced white, itself characterized by the ability to retain racial meanings but hide them under claims of holy obliviousness”—that “secured the unmarked status of whiteness, and the power derived from that status, in the nineteenth and into the early twentieth centuries” (8). Like Kincaid, Bernstein emphasizes the contribution of religious discourses not only to the emergence of the dominant cultural narrative of the innocent child but also to the “doublespeak” it permits (Kincaid, *Erotic Innocence* 21). Specifically, according to Bernstein, the Calvinist doctrine of original sin (which made “the child” the most sinful human subject) was replaced by a

doctrine of original innocence, but an innocence that was understood to be “an active state of repelling knowledge” or “achiev[ing] obliviousness” (6). While Bernstein does not say so, the Calvinist doctrine of original sin and salvation she describes is an extreme version of the developmental narrative that understands the growth from childish ignorance to adult knowledge as progress. We might extrapolate from her argument to propose that the version of innocence as achieved obliviousness that Bernstein finds subtending the racist paradigm of American society is one in which the terms of the two cultural narratives of development and corruption are conflated and exchanged: if “the child” in this system marks the site of knowledge refused, then “the child” is simultaneously the knowing and the unknowing subject, at once the “[s]eer blest!” of Wordsworth’s poetry (114) and the dim-sighted child of Paul’s letter to Corinthian Christians (1 Cor. 13.11–12). Indeed, it is exactly its dim-sightedness that makes its seeing blessed. The educability of the child in this developmental narrative is demonstrated, in Bernstein’s words, by its “performance of forgetting” (8).

The knowing unknowing child has been identified as an important contemporary form of the figure of “the child” in a number of recent critiques that begin from studies of texts targeted to children. In *Innocence, Heterosexuality, and the Queerness of Children’s Literature*, Tison Pugh emphasizes that the child’s “innocence depends upon [its] ignorance of



The child is innocent in
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sexuality" (7). Classic narratives of children's literature, however, often seek to teach the targeted audience about normative heterosexuality: because normative heterosexuality is cultivated through prohibitions against homosexual attachments, as cultural critic Judith Butler has argued, the child must paradoxically both know and not know about sexuality and about the prohibitions against homosexual attachments in order to understand the normative destinations assumed in the narratives. The child is innocent in a queer way, to use Pugh's terms, because it knows what it does not know about sexuality, yet must disavow this unknowing knowledge. In *The Hidden Adult: Defining Children's Literature*, Perry Nodelman argues that it is a key characteristic of texts directed to young people to "possess a shadow, an unconscious" (206), a shadow that he describes as "the presence of knowledge that a text invites its readers to know but pretend not to know" (210). Nodelman's use of the idea of the unconscious suggests that he is working with a Freudian model of a layered self in which the achievement of functional human subjectivity is a matter of the successful sublimation of drives. Kincaid also considers the legacy of Freud in his account of "erotic innocence"; in fact, he attributes the "contemporary crisis" of eroticization of "the child" to Freud, not because Freud saw the infant as a site of polymorphous-perverse sexuality but because he retracted this insight by "making sexuality merely 'latent' in the slightly older child" (*Erotic Innocence* 15).¹ By doing so, Kincaid maintains, Freud provided "a useful and dangerous way of telling one story and living another" (16). Kincaid suggests that he is offering his analysis of "erotic innocence" in the hope that he can "startle" the existing stories "out of currency" and "tease the storytelling into a new territory, find new possibilities"

(24), although it is only in the last few pages of his book that he proposes some possible “new stories” (280). The stories that Kincaid would have us tell are of the “laughing child” of Blake and Wordsworth, a happy child that we have watched “wander out of our range” as we tell our stories about “the anxious, fretting child” who is “at risk sexually” (281–82). Kincaid would prefer that we tell stories of “a belief in the right to happiness” (282), that we tell complex, optimistic, relaxed, stoic, tolerant, everyday stories, stories that admit young people’s sexuality, “rationalist” stories, stories “of healing and happiness,” “stories that aren’t afraid to leave home” (282–94).

It was with the challenge of finding new critical and theoretical stories about young people that we approached the contributors to this forum. Deconstructions of existing formulations of “the child” abound; thoughtful and detailed accounts of the historical development of existing assumptions are readily available; critiques of the implications of current narratives are regularly produced. Is it possible now to move our storytelling to a new territory? What other models might be available for theorizing young people? What practices of criticism might allow us to think beyond the reproduction of the selfsame epistemological structures in which “the child” is conscripted to play the part of the other to the fully human “adult”? The three essays that follow offer different answers to these questions.

Loren Lerner’s answer is framed by her experiences as an art historian and curator. Through a discussion of an exhibition of images of Canadian girls that she curated for the McCord Museum in Montreal in 2005, Lerner explores the orientations and practices that she brings to her work. These importantly include recognizing the function of images of children as national discourses, focusing on the relationship between the seen and the seer, refusing to respect canonical generic categories, developing the capacity to see from within the period being studied, and working to make visible some of the narratives that have been marginalized by the authorized narratives of history. Rather than articulating a new method, Lerner ends her essay with an affirmation of the possibilities of patient and persistent study, agreeing with historian T. J. Clark that “astonishing things happen if one gives oneself over to the process of seeing again and again.”

Nat Hurley begins from her attachment to children’s literature as a queer theorist to propose that *perversion*, as an effect that originates at the centre of the normative, is a heuristic that could be much more productively used by theorists and critics of texts for young people. In her essay, she explores several possible ways forward: a focus on the participation of these texts in producing queer childhoods and queer theory; a focus on the gender and genre transgressions of texts for young people; and a focus on queer child readers and the narratives that they take up and recirculate. Hurley

concludes by suggesting that it is the persistence of the narratives of normative development that “the next wave” of queer theorizing about texts for young people needs to address.

Claudia Ruitenberg writes as a philosopher of education. Beginning from a summary of twentieth-century critiques of the “rational autonomous subject” as the end of human development, Ruitenberg observes that, if this subject is now understood to be a fiction, it is no longer possible to think of education as the task of turning young people into rational autonomous subjects “as expediently as possible.” In the remainder of her essay, Ruitenberg works through the question of how schooling might be reconceptualized if it were thought through Derrida’s “ethic of hospitality.” Among her interesting conclusions is that “mass schooling as social institution cannot be run based on the principle of unconditional hospitality.”

In our scan of the existing critiques on the dominant cultural narratives of the ignorant child who develops into the rational adult and the innocent child who is corrupted by entry into the adult world, we found that most recent critiques focus on the narrative of innocence and corruptibility. On the one hand,

this focus may suggest that it is this narrative that is central to current cultural structures and systems. On the other hand, the fact that critics and theorists are able to trace the history and parse the terms of the “doublespeak” of knowing unknowingness may suggest that the force of this formulation is no longer hegemonic. There appear to be fewer deconstructions of “the child” of developmentalism, perhaps because most critics of childhood and culture work within academic institutions and themselves have significant investments in the educability of young people. Two notable exceptions come from the field of queer theory and are discussed by Hurley in her essay in this section: Kathryn Bond Stockton’s exploration of the “sideways movements that attend all children, however we deny it” (3), and Lee Edelman’s argument that “the image of the Child” has been used to impose the logic of what he calls “reproductive futurism” as the limit to every political debate (2). Notably, too, both Hurley and Ruitenberg point to the narratives of normative development as the ones that most urgently need to be rethought if older people wish to understand younger people as full participants in the world we share with them.

Notes

- ¹ Freud discusses the polymorphous-perverse sexuality of the infant in his essay “Three Contributions to the Theory of Sex” (Freud 519–97).

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