



What Are We Talking about When We Talk about Agency?

—Richard Flynn

“[T]he characteristic markers of children’s literature ‘are all variants of and manifestations of the basic opposition between adult and child implied by the very circumstance of adults writing for children.’”

—Perry Nodelman, “Discovery: My Name Is Elizabeth” (51), quoting Nodelman, *The Hidden Adult* (249)

Perhaps it is unfair of me to quote this short extract from a much larger argument out of context. While it has the virtue of representing a position with which I wish to take issue, abstracting it from the context of the nuanced and leisurely argument that Perry Nodelman makes in *The Hidden Adult* or even from the context of the essay by him that inspired this forum threatens to reduce the statement to a convenient straw figure. Furthermore, I have a great deal of respect for Perry Nodelman; I have been reading his work since the mid-1980s, when, as a graduate student, I accidentally but

happily stumbled into the field of children’s literature studies. Then the editor of *Children’s Literature Association Quarterly*, Nodelman was instrumental in helping to define that field. Nevertheless, nearly thirty years later in a review essay in *Jeunesse*, in which I reviewed *The Hidden Adult* in conjunction with several volumes of Nodelman’s children’s fiction, I began to delineate some problems I have with his “taxonomy of children’s literature” (“Ambivalent” 140). My primary objection, as I hope to make clear in the remainder of this essay, is to Nodelman’s premise that

“the very circumstance of writing for children” implies “a basic *opposition* between adult and child” (*Hidden* 249; emphasis added). This premise, which underlies the arguments in *The Hidden Adult*, overemphasizes both the alterity of children and the separation of adult literature from children’s literature. In so doing, it serves to perpetuate the idea, famously expressed by Jacqueline Rose, that children’s fiction “sets up a world in which the adult comes first (author, maker, giver) and the child comes after (reader, product, receiver), but where neither of them enter the space in between” (1–2).

In several earlier essays leading up to and including my review essay on Nodelman’s work, I have suggested that the opposition between adults and children is not so stark and that a once-useful hermeneutics of suspicion has devolved into a series of increasingly rote critical gestures that border on the clichéd.¹ I see these automatic critical gestures implicated in an overemphasis on children’s alterity, in a model of children as helpless or even as victims, implying that children exercise little to no agency in participating in and creating their culture. As someone who had been attracted to such outmoded models as Neil Postman’s *The Disappearance of Childhood* in my earliest critical work in the 1980s, I soon turned a critical eye on notions that valued children’s separateness from adults—and on ones that viewed childhood as something under siege—to models that focus on children as capable actors. This turn in my

own thinking was furthered by my participation in the late Gareth Matthews’s summer seminar on “Issues in the Philosophy of Childhood,” hosted by the National Endowment of the Humanities in 1998. While I was familiar with Matthews’s books already, participation in that seminar solidified my position that assuming that children are capable is preferable to thinking of them as incapable. While I remained committed to constructivist notions of childhood that began their ascendancy with Philippe Ariès’s *Centuries of Childhood*, I began to notice that, inflexibly applied, those notions had become truisms. Constructivist approaches to childhood, of course, have yielded a number of insights that have countered notions of childhood as “natural” and subject to an adherence to narrow models of development, models that were usefully interrogated in the seminar. In *The Future of Childhood*, Alan Prout, one of the leading scholars of sociology-based childhood studies, notes the benefits of “the new social studies of childhood” in authorizing scholarly attention to “children’s active social participation, their agency in social life and their collective life” and in contributing to an approach to childhood studies that insists on recognizing children “as social actors in their own right” (1). While the Western concept of childhood arose through “a heightened, dichotomized and oppositional relationship between [childhood] and adulthood,” Prout argues, “oppositional and binary

thinking about children and childhood provides an inadequate framework for a contemporary understanding of childhood” (10–11). Rather than reify the distinctions that have been seen as foundational in childhood studies—between the natural and the cultural, between being and becoming—Prout proposes a both/and approach.

The problem is not that children operate in ways that adults and culture script for them. It is clear to me that most children’s literature is written by adults; it is generally true that, without a notion of childhood as somewhat separate from adulthood, there would be no separate body of literature for children; I am not so foolish as to disregard the fact that adults have much more power than children. But I do object to the notion that the relationship between adults and children (or between adult writers and child readers) is inherently oppositional. Without ignoring that there is an imbalance of power between children and adults and that adults have the upper hand in their relationships with children, I agree with Robin Bernstein’s criticism of a “top-down understanding of children’s culture,” one that insists that it is “created by one empowered group (adults) and given to or forced upon another disempowered group (children)” (28–29). Children are not merely passive recipients of culture; they also learn to become active participants in that culture. In her essay for this forum, Sara L. Schwebel argues that “[h]istorians are left with the object and, as Robin

Bernstein has argued for dolls, the script—the intended usage, the intended meaning.” But in Bernstein’s view, the intended usage or meaning is *not* all we are left with; children are “experts in the scripts of children’s culture . . . virtuoso performers” of childhood. The meanings of their performances, Bernstein writes, “cannot be easily contained or controlled”: “Children do not passively receive culture. Rather, children expertly field the co-scripts of narratives and material culture and then collectively forge a third prompt: play itself. The three prompts then entangle to script future play, which continues to change as children collectively exercise agency” (29).

At this point, it seems necessary for me to define just what I mean when I talk about children’s agency. I decidedly do not subscribe to the idea that Nodelman ascribes to me in his essay “Discovery: My Name Is Elizabeth”: “The idea that children inherently and always possess the agency to do more than just improvise within the framework the adults in charge provides [*sic*] represents a kind of wish-fulfillment fantasy, a willed belief that children can and do resist the impositions of adult culture upon them more than we might suspect—that childhood is blissfully free from culture” (52). To say that children “exercise agency” either collectively or individually is not the same as saying they are free from the influence of culture or the influence of adults. While “agency” implies the ability to act, it is not synonymous with autonomy. Children’s



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actions, however, are not necessarily confined to the framework adults provide; children's frameworks often extend beyond the ones provided by adults in charge, including, for instance, their interaction with material objects and other children.

In my review essay entitled "Ambivalent, Double, Divided: Reading and Rereading Perry Nodelman," I suggest that "Nodelman's insistence on the child/adult relationship as inherently binary and inherently oppositional precludes or at least obscures" the ways in which adults may help children learn to negotiate and even collaborate in making children's texts and culture, rather than impose culture on them (142–43). Two years after writing this essay, I read the essay Perry sent me and nodded in agreement as I saw him clarifying his position by arguing that "positive acts of education" have perhaps been underestimated in a critical climate that views the construction of childhood in children's literature primarily in terms of "negative acts of repression" ("Discovery" 52).

So, I was taken aback when, near the conclusion of his essay, I found myself numbered among the "[m]any scholars [who] would like to believe [contrary to Jacqueline Rose] that the child might not be grasped at all—that children's literature is primarily benign because children can resist its efforts to grasp them" (52),² after which Nodelman quotes from my contribution to *Keywords for Children's Literature*: "Children are also capable of creatively misappropriating the cultural artifacts they inherit from adults and transforming them into their own texts. . . . [T]here are increasing numbers of scholars who respect children's subjectivities and take them seriously" (66). Returning to the essay from which my words had been quoted selectively prompted me to ask myself some questions. Had I really said that? Had I characterized children's literature as "primarily

benign”? Had I really “assume[d] that children generally have built-in defenses against adult efforts to construct them”? Had I forgotten “the extent to which the children who ‘misappropriate’ texts are already shaped by their previous reading, by the language and culture that has already shaped or grasped them”? I did not insist that “children inherently and always possess the agency to do more than just improvise within the framework the adults in charge provide[.]” Nor did I suggest that resistance was “somehow naturally present as a fact of being young.” I do not see any of the scholars mentioned in these recent essays maintaining “that childhood is blissfully free from culture” (52).³

In the short essay from which Nodelman was quoting, my entry on “Culture” in *Keywords for Children’s Literature*, I noted that, “[e]ven when we grant children some agency in the creation of their own culture, that creation usually takes place under adult supervision” (62). Nodelman’s omissions in quoting my essay are telling. Here is my concluding paragraph in full:

As an object of study, then, children’s culture is both shaped and contested by a host of adult institutions, ranging in the academy from scholars in literature and education to those in media studies and social history. Culture is, of course, also created by children—if they are interpellated by adult ideologies, they are nevertheless also

capable of resistance and action. Children are also capable of creatively misappropriating the cultural artifacts they inherit from adults and transforming them into their own texts—as anyone who has paid attention to children playing knows. If the study of children’s culture often appears to be the province of adult, experience-distant field workers (to borrow the language of ethnography), there are increasing numbers of scholars who respect children’s subjectivities and take them seriously. The traditional gatekeepers of Culture have begun to pay more attention to culture, and to acknowledge children’s agency in helping to make that culture. Nevertheless, as with the climate, cultural change occurs more rapidly than we expect, requiring scholars to try to become allies rather than gatekeepers, if we hope to keep up. (66)

In other words, the notion that children may be active participants in helping to shape their culture does not underestimate the power that adult and institutional discourses have in shaping children’s culture and, indeed, the academic field we call “children’s literature and culture.” Neither does the essay dismiss out of hand Jacqueline Rose’s “attention to poststructuralist discourses of power”; indeed, it lauds her “sophisticated Freudianism [that] expose[d] the tepid psychoanalytic approaches that had long dominated the field” and notes “the positive effect” it

had “in deepening our understanding of children, their literature, and their culture, as well as lending rigor to children’s (or childhood) studies” (65).

What I did suggest in the essay was that Althusserian, Foucauldian, and other poststructuralist discourses of power “today seem overused to the point that they risk becoming clichés” (65). In the hands of critics less nuanced than Nodelman, these discourses also authorize a view of children as victims who are utterly without agency, as both Gubar (*Artful* 32) and David Rudd (30) have argued. As I noted in a review of a book by one such critic, by discounting the possibility of relational subjectivity, they tell “a ‘story’ of childhood—and children’s literature and culture—in which the child is represented almost exclusively as a victim” (Review 435).

As I insisted in that same review, “children *do things with texts*” (435; emphasis in original). Indeed, many children make texts of their own even before they are old enough to read. Does this mean that they naturally do this “as a fact of being young” (Nodelman, “Discovery” 52)? No. But they have the capacity for doing so by virtue of being human. Potential, of course, is not achievement. Nevertheless, while Nodelman’s granddaughter Elizabeth may be “too new to know that she is new,” may “exist . . . outside adult assumptions about the world [adults] understand [her] to be discovering,” she is not so “radically dissimilar,” to borrow Gubar’s phrase, that she cannot communicate or interact with her adult caregivers. In proposing the

kinship model for children’s literature studies, Gubar argues that “we should not regard even the tiniest infant as entirely voiceless or non-agential” (“Risky” 453). She is fully cognizant of the fact that “human beings are not born with the ability to take care of themselves, to speak articulately on their own behalf” (453–54).

Advancing a model of children’s agency that focuses on children’s capabilities rather than their deficiencies does not mean ignoring or dismissing “culturally powerful adult ideas about childhood” (Nodelman, “Disappearing” 158), nor does it mean denying the immense power that social, historical, and ideological constructions have in shaping children’s—or, for that matter, adults’—subjectivities. What it *does* mean is that neither human beings nor texts are so thoroughly constructed by our dominant ideologies that no conscious or deliberate thought or action on the part of the person, the writer, or the reader is possible. This is not the same thing as “blinding ourselves to the repressive potential of texts” (Nodelman, “Disappearing” 158). Clare Bradford, for instance, argues that we should reject as fallacious the argument that the racism of “older texts” is merely a product of the times in which the texts were produced. “For despite the potency of what Michel Foucault refers to as a ‘régime of truth,’” Bradford continues,

the “system of ordered procedures for the production, regulation, distribution, circulation

and operation of statements" . . . whereby societies control and order what is deemed to be true, it is also the case that individuals and groups are not bound by dominant discourses as by a straitjacket but are capable of scepticism or resistance. For this reason, texts sharing a common provenance are liable to differ widely in relation to the thematics, representational modes and discursive features which characterize their treatment of race. (39–40)⁴

Linking Bradford with me and Gubar (and quoting all three selectively), Nodelman mis-characterizes all these critics' positions as "imply[ing] that children's literature itself might be more benign than it often actually is" ("Disappearing" 158). To insist that we "are not bound by dominant discourses as by a straitjacket but are capable of scepticism or resistance" (Bradford 40) or to observe that, while children "are interpellated by adult ideologies, they are nevertheless also capable of resistance and action" (Flynn, "Culture" 66) is not tantamount to "insist[ing] that the literature is not actually repressive" (Nodelman, "Disappearing" 158). Similarly, Gubar explicitly rejects the idea of calling for "a simple binary reversal" of accounts of children's literature that imply that it oppresses children; her interest lies in justifying further inquiry about what effects particular texts have had on particular children despite the fact that any such inquiry is attended by "thorny epistemological problems" (*Artful* 32, 33).

Nodelman began formulating his argument that the relationship between adults and children is essentially oppositional in his influential and controversial 1992 essay "The Other: Orientalism, Colonialism, and Children's Literature." At the heart of this essay is his laudable desire to intervene in common yet dangerous and contradictory assumptions about children, as well as the ways in which our unquestioned acceptance of these assumptions helps them become "self-confirming description[s]" or part of a "self-fulfilling prophecy" (32). For instance, Nodelman writes,

If we assume children have short attention spans and therefore never let them try to read long books, they do not in fact read long books. They will seem to us to be incapable of reading long books—and we will see those that [*sic*] do manage to transcend our influence and read long books as atypical, paradoxically freaks in being more like us than like our other. It may well be for this reason that a depressingly large number of children do *seem* to fit into Piagetian categorizations of childlike behavior, and that an equally large number of children do *seem* to like the kinds of books that adult experts claim to be the kind of books children like. (32)

Criticizing these assumptions and the "oppressiveness inherent in our use of concepts such as 'the eternal innocence of childhood,'" Nodelman calls for us to



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“try to operate as if the humanity children share with us matters more than their presumed differences from us” (34). In this essay, in *The Pleasures of Children's Literature*, and somewhat less so in *The Hidden Adult*, Nodelman is quite critical of the assumptions of developmental psychology that perpetuate what Matthews calls the “deficit conception” of childhood. Nodelman here seems to be arguing for something close to what Gubar is calling for when she proposes that we look at the differences between adults and children as “differences of degree, not of kind” (“Risky” 454). In *Pleasures*, Nodelman and his co-author, Mavis Reimer, argue that the dangerous and limiting adult assumptions about childhood arise from suspect notions about children's alterity that “operate on the principle that children are not only *different*, but also *opposite* to [adults]” (95). Nodelman and Reimer seem quite sympathetic to critiques by Matthews and others of the self-fulfilling prophecy inherent in a Piagetian model that insists on seeing children as limited rather than capable. In a section entitled “Beyond the Child as Other,” they write:

If the idea that children are limited or even empty is ideological, then it need not be the only possible truth, or the truth people need to accept. There is the choice of thinking about children in other, more positive ways, and creating a different and, we believe, better truth. Specifically, it might be productive to focus on the ways in which children are *like* adults rather than opposite to them. (98)

Recognizing that “this, too, is ideology” (99), they nevertheless point out that a view of children that assumes their capability “is much more likely than the usual assumptions to allow adults to help children learn ways of reading and of thinking about what they read that might give them

deeper and more satisfying pleasure and understanding” (99). Since he is on record here as preferring a model of children’s capability to one that emphasizes their limitations, it has puzzled me that, in his recent criticism, Nodelman has placed less emphasis on the humanity children share with adults, emphasizing instead their presumed differences—often in stark terms. Nevertheless, it seems to me that, in the course of our writing, revising, clarifying, and revising again our papers for this forum, we have found more areas of agreement than we had when we began this project.

The interrogation of “Common Assumptions about Childhood” in *Pleasures* has inspired me during my scholarly career, particularly as it has applied to my exploration of agency in cross-writing by poets such as June Jordan and Gwendolyn Brooks, and their insistence (in the words of U. C. Knoepfelmacher and Mitzi Myers) on “a dialogic mix of older and younger voices . . . in texts too often read as univocal” (vii). Jordan and Brooks, writers who fought throughout their careers for children’s rights and children’s agency, rejected regressive tropes that would relegate young people to victim status. And they did so by interrogating—and teaching young people to interrogate—the powerful racist assumptions of mid-twentieth-century United States.⁵

Branches of childhood studies that involve research with actual children are careful to delineate the complexity of what anthropologist Allison James calls in the subtitle to her 2007 essay, “Giving Voice

to Children,” the “Practices and Problems, Pitfalls and Potentials” of a “key theoretical tension within the field of childhood studies . . . the relationship between ‘childhood’ as a social space, ‘children’ as a generational category, and ‘the child’ as individual representative of that category and inhabitant of that space” (270). This definition of “the child” as individual representative rejects the universalizing gestures of “the Western mythologizing of ‘the child’” (265). Exploring “the cultural politics of childhood that shapes children’s everyday lives and experiences,” James recognizes that childhood is “a social space that is structurally determined by a range of social institutions,” that, “because of this, children as subjects are . . . structurally and culturally determined as social actors with specific social roles to play, as children,” but also that “children also ‘shape those roles, both as individuals and as a collectivity, and [that] they can create new ones that alter the social space of childhood’ itself” (270).⁶

What are we talking about when we talk about children’s agency? In my view, we are talking about paying attention to children’s competence and capability as social actors and about challenging what James calls “the more traditional, developmental discourse of children’s incompetence” (266). This includes looking at the life course as a continuum—there are, after all, both adults and children of varying ages, competencies, and capabilities—and recognizing the intersection of the natural and the cultural and of modes of being and

becoming that persist throughout our lives. Not only do adults form intersubjective relationships with children, but also they have an intra-subjective relationship with childhood, so that, as Gubar puts it, “our younger and older selves are multiple and interlinked, akin to one another, rather than wholly distinct” (“Risky” 454). This is far from engaging in a “wish-fulfillment fantasy” that children “inherently and always” possess unlimited agency (Nodelman, “Discovery” 52); children do not possess unlimited agency any more than adults do. Thinking of children as capable might help us criticize or intervene in dismantling the binary logic that Nodelman notes is characteristic of “all adult

thinking about children in the centuries in which a special children’s literature has existed” (*Hidden* 209). Without denying the power and longevity of the model that “understand[s] . . . childhood purely in terms of its opposition to, lack of, and subordination to maturity” (*Hidden* 209), I maintain that it is not hopelessly utopian to suggest that a model that assumes competency, that promotes an ethic of care and cooperation, and that recognizes young people as co-producers and co-performers rather than passive recipients of texts might further the goal of young people’s empowerment more than one that sees the perpetuation of the oppositional model as inevitable.

Notes

¹ I point especially to my *Keywords in Children’s Literature* entry on “Culture.” What I perceive to be Nodelman’s misrepresentation of that essay initiated the correspondence that evolved into this forum. For an elaboration of what Rita Felski terms “the limits of critique,” see Felski, *Uses*; Felski, *Limits*.

² As far as I can tell in terms of the books mentioned in this piece by Nodelman, only Peter Hunt in *The Oxford Handbook* identifies himself as a critic who “prefer[s] to see the project of children’s literature as essentially benign” (45).

³ Here is the relevant passage:

Assuming that children generally have built-in defenses against adult efforts to construct them seem [*sic*] to me much less respectful. What comments like this one of Flynn’s most significantly forget is the extent to which the children who “misappropriate” texts are already shaped by their previous reading, by the language and culture that has already shaped or grasped them—often, literally, for their good, as when an adult teaches them the kind of critical thinking that arms them against grasping texts, that is, constructs them into misappropriating readers. The idea that children inherently and

always possess the agency to do more than just improvise within the framework the adults in charge provides [*sic*] represents a kind of wish-fulfillment fantasy, a willed belief that children can and do resist the impositions of adult culture upon them more than we might suspect—that childhood is blissfully free from culture just as farms are free from complex machinery. (Nodelman, “Discovery” 52)

⁴ Here, Bradford quotes from Foucault’s *Power/Knowledge* (131, 133).

⁵ See Flynn, “‘Affirmative’”; Flynn, “Kindergarten.”

⁶ Here, James quotes from her co-authored book *Constructing Childhood* (213).

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