



EDITORIAL

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## **Childhood in Literature, Media and Popular Culture**

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Literary, media and popular texts are a powerful means by which the broad category of childhood is constructed, maintained, protected and challenged. Whether cultural texts are produced *for* children or *about* them, their depictions of childhood provide important resources for those interested in exploring the logics and practices through which contemporary childhoods are imagined, produced and experienced. In recent years, scholars have considered how representations of children and childhood in cultural texts contribute to shared understandings and normative discourses about children's place in the social world (Burman, 2008; Khan, 2009; Saltmarsh, 2011).

Of course, representations of childhood and the discourses in which they are implicated are neither determined nor fixed. As Alan Prout points out, globalising forces in the latter half of the twentieth century have brought about economic, social and technological changes that have in turn been implicated in destabilising the representation of childhood as a coherent and knowable category:

Traditional ways of representing childhood in discourse and in image no longer seemed adequate to its emerging forms. New ways of speaking, writing and imaging children are providing new ways of seeing them... These new representations construct children as more active, knowledgeable and socially participative than older discourses allowed. They are more difficult to manage, less biddable and hence are more troublesome and troubling. (Prout, 2005, p. 7)

Giroux & Pollock echo these observations, arguing in relation to childhood in the United States that '[c]hildren are now seen as both troubled and troubling, as the perspective of the country shifts from viewing children as a social investment to seeing them as threats to be contained or punished' (Giroux & Pollock, 2010, p. 21).

For some, the pervasiveness of media and popular culture in the lives of children worldwide contributes to what is seen as an erosion of childhood innocence and imagination, producing instead new generations of individualistic, street-wise and tech-savvy young consumers whose identities rest on interaction through mediated images, online social networks and access to globally distributed commodities. For others, children's safety and sanctity appear threatened because of a belief in the rise of children's exposure to violence in the media, and because of the sexualisation and commercialisation of childhood and youth (Furedi, 2002).

In response, some scholars identify both of these perspectives as moral panics that are overly reliant on nostalgic, idealised versions of childhood that overlook the complexities and ambiguities of everyday life for the majority of the world's children (Robinson, 2008; Robinson & Davies, 2008; Kehily, 2010). Yet it is precisely these complexities and ambiguities that, despite moral panics

representing childhood as 'in crisis', nonetheless have a tendency to be omitted from everyday cultural imaginaries that construct childhood as a kind of ordered progression toward idealised, if largely homogeneous, futures (Saltmarsh, 2011). What have yet to be fully explored are the ways in which childhood figures in the vast range of written, visual and multi-modal texts whose global circulation continues to unsettle cultural certainties and logics of practice with respect to children themselves.

In this special issue of *GSCH*, we take the cultural construction of childhood through a variety of textual forms as a starting point for dialogues that might respond to what Alan Prout argues is 'the need to intensify the interdisciplinarity of childhood studies' (Prout, 2005, p. 145). Contributing authors write from a range of disciplinary and theoretical perspectives, often blurring the boundaries of genres and textual and social forms in order to explore taken-for-granted representational practices. We see such interdisciplinary perspectives as, to borrow from Allison James & Adrian James, 'essential if we are to grasp fully the nature of the socially and culturally constructed character of childhood, as it unfolds and changes in and through everyday life' (James & James, 2004, p. 44, original emphasis).

The opening article by Clare Bradford invites readers to consider how children's literature, considered by some as a colonising discourse, might also function as a decolonising strategy that contests, rather than reproduces, the values of dominant cultures. Drawing on the work of Indigenous authors and illustrators from Australia and Canada, Bradford shows how the use of Indigenous language and art can offer spaces for the production of meanings that move beyond the reiteration of colonial hierarchies. In so doing, Bradford argues that child readers are invited to actively engage with Indigenous cultural perspectives, beliefs and practices. Similarly, albeit drawing on adult rather than children's literature, Lucy Hopkins takes up the question of colonialism and how it might be contested in literature from the vantage point of Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*. Hopkins considers how the novel paradoxically constructs exclusions mobilised around race, and, in particular, whiteness, yet simultaneously offers alternatives to the hegemonic universalism of whiteness as a category of authenticity and entitlement. Childhood is a central axis point around which the politics of exclusion are queried via the figure of the 'ideal white child' as a universal norm, juxtaposed with the non-white child characters who are the protagonists of the novel.

Cheryl Cowdy's article considers questions of childhood through the representation of play in three Canadian graphic novels, *Jellaby* and *Jellaby: monster in the city*, both by Kean Soo, and *Skim* by Mariko and Jillian Tamaki. Unlike literary forms for children that have traditionally tried to balance entertainment with instruction rather than encouraging agency, Cowdy argues that the graphic novels considered here assume clever, agentive readers who are invited to assume the position of 'playful accomplices' with the resistance and disruptive logics of the novels.

Ummni Khan takes up questions of textual complicities through her analysis of two very different Canadian texts, one a social science monograph, *Gangs and Girls*, and the other a novel, O'Neill's *Lullabies for Little Criminals*. Khan argues that discursive overlaps in these texts blur conventional distinctions between fact and fiction, in both cases gratifying what she refers to as 'the grown-up gaze' through voyeuristic images and fairytale conventions and logics. In so doing, she poses a challenge to the ways that knowledge about sexually exploited children is constructed, and suggests that the grown-up gaze be subjected to critical scrutiny. Sue Saltmarsh & Anna North's article takes up the question of gaze by exploring the ways in which popular parenting magazines construct childhood and parenthood. They argue that the construction of these discursive categories in economic terms simultaneously relies on and reproduces incitements to what they term 'exemplary ordinariness'.

Christopher Drew is similarly interested in the ways that knowledge about childhood is constructed through image and text, and draws on the *Spirit of Australia* advertising campaign by Australian airline Qantas to consider the discursive production of Australian childhoods and national identities. Drew argues that in these advertisements, produced and circulated over a decade, whiteness is affirmed and reiterated as the precondition for authentic and uniquely Australian childhoods and subjectivities. Also writing from an Australian perspective, Kristina Gottschall considers the pedagogic functions of film, arguing that 'coming-of-age' films play an important role in the constitution of the child/youth subjects. For Gottschall, the pedagogic work

of films invites audiences to accept commonsense discourses about the formation and regulation of youth subjectivities.

David Gurnham's contribution also considers the ideological nature of film, but changes the focus from youth subjectivities to parental constructions. Through an interdisciplinary analysis of the film *The Kids are All Right* and case law that addresses donor-conceived children of lesbian couples, Gurnham demonstrates a conspicuous overlap between pop-cultural and judicial investment in the presence of heterosexual coupling to create parental capacities. In this way, a heterosexual encounter between the biological father and the birth mother is discursively linked to 'the best interest of the child' in both law and film. Continuing the project of reading legal and cultural texts in relation to one another, Andrea Slane's piece explores how online luring victims (or potential victims) are portrayed in Canadian case law and in Internet safety campaigns. Slane outlines how Internet safety education is based on a prohibitive discourse to protect gullible (or reckless) youth from archetypal 'predators', while case law overemphasises the statutory age of consent in determining the presence or absence of harm, without considering the actual dynamics between the parties in question. She concludes by suggesting that a contextual analysis of the nature and circumstances of online relationships should be deployed to determine whether online communications are exploitative in a given instance.

Hernwall & Siibak's article also address the subject of online activity by considering how tweens in Estonia and Sweden experience and understand gender construction on social networking sites. Based on interview data with 10-14-year-olds in both countries, the authors explore how tweens negotiate gendered norms and values, particularly in selecting or manipulating posted images of the body-self. While the data suggest that tweens often adhere to hegemonic gender codes, Hernwall & Siibak suggest that new technologies can also enable young people to realise their own creative or educational potential.

Alexander Tymczuk closes this special issue with a comparative analysis of how Ukrainian media, popular and personal texts represent transnational childhoods, in which one or both parents work abroad while the children remain behind, usually in the care of relatives. Tymczuk finds that fictional and media texts uphold a model of care that privileges the nuclear family and physical closeness as the precondition for proper child care. In contrast to this, personal narratives of migrant parents and their children identify an alternative moral discourse that emphasises the migrant parent's ability to fulfil the child's material needs, the adequacy of alternative care relations, and the resilience of the parent-child bond. Such discrepant representations point to the contested terrain of transnational families and their significance in children's well-being.

This special issue thus showcases multiple ways to theorise childhood in relation to representational modes, global forces and ideological agendas. Yet, far from conveying a hegemonic vision of childhood, the authors reveal fissures, tensions and ambivalences in a variety of textual constructions and material practices. It is our hope that these articles will inspire further interdisciplinary and intertextual research that will continue to nuance and challenge how notions of childhood are conceived.

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