Where Culture Meets Biology

—Karen Coats and Roberta Seelinger Trites

The question "are we after theory" raises another important question: Were we ever before theory? In other words, has there ever been a time in which literary critics were writing uninformed by any theoretical stance? To say "yes" would be an anti-intellectual act of solipsism in which we imagined ourselves to be somehow smarter than our forebears.

Like Plato.

Or Aristotle.

Or Samuel Johnson, John Keats, or Matthew Arnold.

Or Heidegger or Nietzche or Kant.

When Aristotle reacted to Plato's charge in *The Poetics* that poetry is morally suspect, he relied on similar theoretical assumptions to those that informed Ruskin's theoretical stance in the Victorian era: literature serves a significant social function. When Aristotle wrote about catharsis, he was working from a theory that assumes literature should be affective. While some readers might disagree with that stance, it is, nonetheless, theory—and theory that Wordsworth and Coleridge shared when they revolutionized literary theory with their introduction to a slim volume of poetry called *Lyrical Ballads*. (And it was the same theory that inspired many early children's literature critics to write affective criticism of children's books.) When Aristotle called for drama to respect the unities, he was again operating from a theoretically informed opinion—and one that has been respected by other theorists through time, from Samuel Johnson and Matthew Arnold right down to the *New York Times* drama critic Frank Rich in our own day.

Whether we are inclined to accept or reject the principles articulated by the venerable old gentlemen of Athens and their intellectual spawn, we still frame our analyses of texts according to the terms they established. In fact, we might even extrapolate from

Heidegger's strong statements in "The Question Concerning Technology" to say that we are enframed by their ways of looking. In other words, we approach texts the way Heidegger claims that we approach any object in the world—as ready-to-hand, that is, available for our use. And the use to which literary scholars put texts is more often than not to test and prove our theories, whether they concern the social uses (and abuses) of literary art, the aesthetic values that we consider important, or the psychological effects texts have on readers.

Jonathan Culler defines theory as reflexive, interdisciplinary analysis or speculation that assumes some critique of conventional wisdom (14–15). Given that sensible definition of "theory," literary criticism always has been and always will be theoretically informed. Culler's definition is also wisely and carefully limited. We think that a large part of the problem that leads people to throw up their hands in frustration over theory is that people want more from it than it can rightfully deliver. That lowest-common-denominator source, *The American Heritage Dictionary*, provides a sweeping definition that seems more in line with most people's expectations: theory is "the branch of a science or art consisting of its explanatory statements, accepted principles, and methods of analysis, as opposed to practice." While "accepted principles" can be construed to have a nicely communitarian ring that implies scholars working in socio-culturally inflected conversations over time to determine principles and challenge their acceptability, "explanatory statements" will give no end of grief to literary scholars if they truly believe that their "methods of analysis" will in fact lead to testable truth statements that actually explain things as they are in the world.

Indeed, Derrida himself warned us in 1966 in his "Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences" that we must be wary of assigning truth-value to our preferred schemas. Methodologically, we must be bricoleurs, using whatever theoretical frameworks seem most suited to the texts under study, and we must be willing to alter or abandon those frameworks if they don't work to produce interesting or effective interpretations of the work. Given that sort of MacGyveresque, field-expedient way of going about critical work, we can't expect our interpretations or explanations to amount to any sort of truth beyond our theoretical method, nor can we rely on one critical methodology to consistently deliver meaningful explanations of why a text works the way it does. Derrida warns that the approach of the bricoleur will cause anxiety, a nostalgia for a place where the play of signification stops. We think that this desire is at least part of what is behind the "after theory" movement. Publicly, most critics embrace the idea of the endless generation of multiple interpretations, but many of us, in our

hearts, want and believe our interpretations to be *right*.

Perhaps poststructural theory, however, can take as its claim that it has made scholars more aware of language and its construction than previous critics have been. To critics who believed in the existence and/or relative fixity of concepts, language was merely the glass cover through which readers could read a compass that guided them, as in M.H. Abrams's case, to four compass points that he labelled text, reader, author, and the world. But when language itself becomes the central problem, the traditional critical enterprise is set adrift. Instead of relying on specific compass points that guide readers as they navigate various works, readers have to consider textuality in all of its manifestations. Instead of a fixed and oriented world, we have a narrated socio-cultural historicity, and instead of authors and readers, we have subjectivities and intersubjectivities to explore. That awareness of language has caused an important shift in the way people think about language, and it seems to be something of a Pandora's box: now that we're self-conscious about language, it seems unlikely that we will go back to being unselfconscious about language anytime soon. Thus, if we change the question from "are we after theory?", which is an impossibility, since there was no time in which people actually *were* writing about literature a-theoretically, to the more accurate question, "has the utility of language-aware theories ended?", then the answer seems to be simple. No. Language awareness creates its own inevitability, just like being aware of sex or death or knowing there's no tooth fairy: once you are aware of language, you can never go back to being unaware of it.

But the question of the utility of these theories is a legitimate one, especially as that utility is applied to children's literature. Certainly, Nodelman raises a good point when he describes the sclerosis of many of our applications of language-aware poststructural theory to children's literature. At the 2002 MLA, some of the papers we heard that analyzed ideology were exactly the same as they had been at the MLA in 1992: Barbie is sexist. So is GI-Joe. They're both racist. Yes, we know that, and we have for a long time. For an ideological reading in children's literature to have anything compelling to add to the academic conversation at this point, it's going to have to do something more than point out that a text suffers from some dire form of "-ism," like classism or racism or sexism or heterosexism or consumerism or materialism or militarism or lookism or colonialism or ableism or ageism, or any of the "isms" that don't share the suffix but nonetheless often evoke the same type of hand-wringing. Please don't misunderstand us: we, too, object mightily to any literature that perpetuates discrimination in any form. But the field has already established that the vast majority of

children's culture is driven by a consumer economy that depends on reproducing the [racist, sexist, etc.] status quo. Those of us who are still doing the same thirty-year-old work pointing out that fact are, indeed, sclerotic, as Nodelman intimates.

On the other hand, more exciting work is being done in the name of evolving poststructural thinking than Nodelman perhaps gives the Winnipeg conference, specifically, and the field, in general, credit for. One paper in Winnipeg traced the history of exploitation in historical French literature in ways that opened up parallels to contemporary U.S. treatments of child actors. Another analyzed how the mutability of Edwardian child actors empowered them personally and professionally. What was exciting about these papers was that they were projecting the direction the study of children's literature is headed when it is at its evolved and poststructural best: to the intersection of texts and children who have either been alive or are alive.

Those living children teach us that we need to turn the same light we have used to illuminate language and constructedness to our discussions of embodiment. Despite wide cultural diversity, there are three things all human beings share: first, we are embodied; second, we exist in kinship structures; and third, we use language. Of course, how we live our embodied experience, including such seemingly phenomenal occurrences as pain, gesture, growth, and emotional response, will be greatly affected by our culture, what Marcel Mauss and Pierre Bourdieu after him have called our *habitus*. Our kinship structures are also culturally defined, but, as infant mammals, we would simply die without other direct mammalian contact. Finally, as we have indicated, the way we use language is a matter of cultural relativity and endlessly fascinating investigation. Our cultures also determine the relative importance and interdependence of each of these structural universals to our makeup as individuals. But the key point here, and the thing that children's literature scholars should know more about, and study more about, and write more about, than other scholars of literary criticism, is the fact that these universals set the terms for our humanity, and that they are largely determined in and through childhood experience. The origins of embodiment, kinship structures, and language reside entirely in childhood.

We are not claiming that children have some sort of "natural" body that exists separately from culture. But we are arguing that they are not solely discursive constructs, either. They have bodies, and they cannot read without engaging them. Texts physically affect the body by invoking such somatic responses as emotions and engaging the neurons involved in the cognition of perception. Moreover, reading involves many strategies for containment of the physical, like sitting still and directing the gaze or fingertips.

Textuality also relies on physical containments that are often defined by the demographics of embodiment, such as race, gender, ability, etc. Children read texts with their bodies, and texts, in turn, communicate to them about meanings that can accrue to their personal form of embodiment. In other words, we believe that the old distinction between the "child" people and the "book" people is one that, like Abram's compass points, needs to be nuanced so that critics can no longer believe there is a Platonic construct called "children's literature" that somehow exists without reference to the dynamic realities of the human body. Literary critics can no longer afford to focus only on literature as discourse. Discourse requires embodiment—and both the knowledge of discourse and the knowledge of embodiment begin in childhood.

Nodelman believes that "we know something other scholars don't" (16)—which Lissa Paul said in 1988 in "Enigma Variations." Peter Hunt expanded what she said in 1991 in *Criticism, Theory, and Children's Literature*. In 1996, Beverly Lyon Clark even made this point in a journal that is not addressed solely to other children's literature critics, *Profession*. But if we are so clever and we know so much, then we are going to have to do what we've been telling each other for years and quit talking to each other and talk to the critics who don't publish in children's literature. (Yes, we're aware that we are, ironically, still talking only to other children's lit critics in this essay.) Many scholars are comfortable with the homey children's lit circle in which no one ever questions our legitimacy in studying texts for youth. But if we're going to be cutting edge and drive other critics to recognize that the constructedness of textuality, language, and people begins in childhood—not at some magical point when one has gained the respectability of that mantle called "adulthood"—we really do need to proselytize better than we currently are.

Are we "after theory"? No, we are not, because neither the field of children's literature nor the entire field of literary criticism has ever existed in a world that was pre-theoretical. We are not even particularly post-poststructural, because we all do seem to agree on the constructedness of language. But children's literature may, indeed, be entering a new phase of its existence, in which we are aware of how the corporality of the child intersects with the constructedness of the child and her texts. If we are in any way "past" the theories of poststructuralism, it is in our recognition of the biological realities of the child that are not, and never can be, entirely matters of construction. Taken with the poststructural recognitions of language and cultural phenomenon as constructed, the analytical exploration of the embodied child may just prove to be a direction in which our field can push the rest of literary criticism.

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