Poststructuralism and "The Child"

—Laura M. Robinson

My first response to Sebastien Chapleau's article "Quand l'enfant parle et que l'adulte se met à écouter, ou la littérature enfantine de retour à sa source" was simply to agree. Yes, literature by children is marginalized within the area of children's literature in the same way that the study of children's literature in general is marginalized within literary studies. Of course, we really should place "the child" at the centre; and we should listen to what real children in the real world have to say. Most certainly, I agree that the treatment of children's literature in general, and literature by children specifically, tells us something about how our society devalues the child and childhood.

On thinking about Chapleau's assertions, however, my second response was befuddlement. Chapleau faces an insurmountable conundrum in his article: how to maintain a "childist" focus and at the same time deploy a poststructuralist theory of childhood and children's literature, one rife with theorists' names, such as Lyotard, Barthes, Foucault, and Derrida. He consistently refers to "us" and "we," clearly assuming that the "us" are academics reading his journal article and that "we" are well acquainted with the theories behind the names, as he does not explain them. He asserts that he keeps the child in the foreground: "j'essaie de toujours placer l'enfant au premier plan" (117). However, he is party to the very style of analysis that he requests that academics avoid. Where is the child in his text? Like those he criticizes—and potentially this is anyone, adult or child, who engages in a discussion of the *representation* of the child and childhood—Chapleau necessarily leaves the actual child behind at the very moment he is attempting to liberate the child.

A theoretical problem emerges in Chapleau's concern about the child. While he repeatedly

alludes to poststructuralist theorists throughout his article, he seems to sidestep poststructuralism when he suggests that academics concern themselves with hearing and listening to the actual child. This is not so straightforward. First off, who is "the child"? When I teach children's literature, I spend the first class attempting to trouble an easy definition of "childhood" and "the child," primarily to show the students their ideological assumptions surrounding childhood. As many writers have pointed out, society's understanding and definition of the child and childhood shifts and changes—it is socially, culturally, and historically specific, not an unchanging fact. One Young People's Texts and Cultures session at Congress 2008 is entitled "Shifting Borders of Childhood, Youth, and Adulthood," and seeks to interrogate the ever-changing interpretations of these categories of identity. "The child" is constructed, in part, through the literature and culture created by adults or children.

Moreover, literary studies tends to engage with representation rather than actuality. I occasionally have much ado in children's literature classes (and others) to re-direct my students from discussion-ending statements about the books, such as "that's just how children [little boys, little girls, mothers, fathers] are." Instead, I attempt to encourage them to see how children are represented in a given text and the effect of that representation. Although Chapleau encourages us to listen to "the child," this feat is problematic if we acknowledge that we are always examining representations. Even when children write and draw, their productions are already removed from actual experience. A child writer may not present a more "authentic" voice or provide more real insight than an adult writer, for example. Children are different from other colonized and oppressed groups in that the dominant group—the adults—all used to be children at one point. The lines are far blurrier than Chapleau acknowledges.

Clearly, even when a journal may turn an issue over to criticism (by adults or children) of works by children, the adults are still the ones offering the space, stepping aside with a flourish of *noblesse oblige*, perhaps. The fact that the adult scholars are the ones with the power to decide, hierarchize, and canonize remains entrenched; the adults have simply generously allotted space to the child writers/readers. The change that Chapleau appears to envision must occur on a more deeply systemic level than simply for the academy to read and teach more books by children. Children must be granted more rights globally; they must not be regarded as property; I could go on, but this line of social criticism falls outside of my area of expertise.

Chapleau's position is praiseworthy. He

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encourages the academy to pay attention to how society colonizes the child through the production and publishing of children's literature, through the study of children's literature, and by ignoring the actual voice of the child. Chapleau contends that academics tend to overlook children's productions, or regard them with condescension. While I would, of course, agree with this in principle, I would also point toward programs of study in Canada that focus on the child. York University, for example, boasts a new interdisciplinary program in Children's Studies. One of the professors, Peter Cumming, dazzled a packed audience at the annual, international Children's Literature Association conference in Newport News, Virginia in 2007. In a session entitled, "De-Colonizing Childhood, Empowering Children: The Children's Studies Program at York University," Cumming was one of four professors who demonstrated how they attempt to overcome the colonizing impulse of studying children and childhood. Cumming's paper, entitled "Reading Children Reading: Decolonizing Childhood Through the Voices of Child Experts," detailed how he recruits children into his classroom to help teach his university students. Nipissing University offers a degree in Child and Family Studies from its Muskoka campus, an interdisciplinary program that focuses primarily on the social sciences. The University of Winnipeg, already well-known for its focus on children's literature, has a new research centre, established in 2006: The Centre for Research in Young People's Texts and Cultures. Part of the work of this research centre, spearheaded by Mavis Reimer, has been to begin a new association called the Association for Research in Young People's Texts and Cultures (ARYPTC). In 2007, at the Congress of the Humanities and Social Sciences, a very eclectic group of educators, practitioners, illustrators, children's literature professors, sociologists, and others gathered to discuss the complicated parameters of such an association. In 2008, as a result, a multi-tiered session of the ARYPTC will debut, hosted by the long-standing Association of Canadian College and University Teachers of English (ACCUTE). Even a glance over the 2008 ACCUTE conference schedule shows papers on children's literature sprinkled throughout

the various panels.

This is not literature *by* children, I grant you. Children have written and do write, and specialists in children's literature often do attend to these writings. In French Canada, Alexandra Larochelle is a fifteen-year-old author who has just published her sixth novel in a best-selling series.[1] Her first novel was published when she was ten. Sadly, English Canada remains largely unaware of this Québeçoise phenom: her works have yet to be translated into English. This neglect by anglophone Canada emerges because Larochelle is writing in French, not necessarily because she is a child writer.

I certainly hope that more writing and criticism by children will make its way into print and into universities, if only because it adds to the multiplicity of voices and perspectives. So, yes, I agree with Chapleau, but I am apprehensive of the degree to which he is enacting precisely what he criticizes. Perhaps it is, ultimately, impossible for anyone to evade this troublesome, and potentially productive, conundrum in the attempt to theorize the exclusion of the child writer.

Notes

[1] Here is a list of Alexandra Larochelle's works in chronological order:

Au-dela de l'univers. Montreal: Trécarré, 2004.

Mission périlleuse en Erianigami. Au-delà de l'univers 2. Montreal: Trécarré, 2004.

La Clé de l'énigme. Au-delà de l'univers 3. Montreal: Trécarré, 2005.

Quiproquo et sorcellerie. Au-delà de l'univers 4. Montreal: Trécarré, 2006.

Épreuve infernale. Au-delà de l'univers 5. Montreal: Trécarré, 2006.

Lorafil—L'avenir à l'agonie. Au-delà de l'univers 6. Montreal: Trécarré, 2007.

Works Cited

Chapleau, Sebastien. "Quand l'enfant parle et que l'adulte se met à écouter, ou la literature enfantine de retour à sa source." *CCL/LCJ* 33.2 (2007): 112–26.

Cumming, Peter. "Reading Children Reading: Decolonizing Childhood Through the Voices of Child Experts." Children's Literature Association Conference. Christopher Newport University, Newport News, VA. 15 June 2007.

"Joint Sessions with the Association for Research in Young People's Texts and Cultures [ARYPTC]." *Centre for Research in Young People's Texts and Cultures*. University of Winnipeg. 9 Mar. 2008 <http://crytc.uwinnipeg.ca/newsExtension.php#jointSession>.

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