Children's Culture, Children's Studies, and the Ethnographic Imaginary

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Within the last decade, and particularly in the last several years, scholars of children’s literature have seen exciting new work on “children’s culture.” New York University Press alone has put out three representative anthologies: The Children’s Culture Reader, Generations of Youth: Youth Cultures and History in Twentieth-Century America (both 1998), and Childhood in America (2000). Obviously the term “culture” means many things to many people. Like “discourse” and “ideology,” “culture” is at once a problematic and useful term. On the one hand, the culture idea is so generic or universal that it threatens to mean nothing at all, as some scholars have pointed out. Yet that is exactly why we like it. We rely on its vagueness. Its wide range of designation (alongside more specific meanings) allows for the greatest possible expansion of our critical efforts, such that “children’s culture,” as we are now imagining it, refers to music, film, television, toys, and other material goods, as well as to literature proper. Articles in the above volumes address (among other topics) the history of childhood, child-rearing practices, food and nutrition, interactive technology and cyberspace, sports and athleticism, fan clubs, and beauty pageants. The idea of children’s culture allows us to claim greater interdisciplinarity and intellectual freedom.

“Children’s studies” is usually articulated along the same lines, appealing directly or indirectly to the concept of children’s culture. The debate about children’s studies and its alternate terms—among them “child studies” and “childhood studies”—attests to the very success of an interdisciplinary zeitgeist. We would not be having this conversation were there not already some consensus about the importance of interdisciplinary, or at least extra-literary, scholarship. Of course, both children’s culture (as a domain) and children’s studies (as a practice) raise interesting questions for literary scholars. How are we to think about our work these days? To what extent are we, as teachers and students of children’s literature, already identifying as something else? How will our relationship to a long-devalued, now revalued form of literature shift in the wake of a more general appreciation of objects and practices long disdained by the defenders of legitimate culture? For so long children’s literature wasn’t taken seriously, and just as it’s being granted greater respect, the academy is turning to cultural and area studies, theory, and “everyday life.” Will our emergent interest in children’s culture be indulged at the expense of the literary tradition we have worked so hard to champion?

No doubt scholars will continue to explore such questions, and I want to make clear my enthusiasm about the shift away from a narrow vision of literature, criticism, and academic life. This is an exciting period, and children’s culture and children’s studies make possible new projects and perspectives. Even so, I’d like to suggest that as children’s culture and children’s studies gain popularity, we are not so much venturing into uncharted territory as we are reshaping the academic field to meet current needs. The nomenclature may be different, but our practices are largely the same, not despite differences in the material we study but indeed as is evidenced by those differences. That is, the very shift in focus from literature to culture attests to the staying power and adaptability of analysis as a vocation, and of “culture” as an organizing field. Culture may be a new thematic interest, but it has been there all along in more diffuse form, securing the very place of literature.

I want to sound a cautionary note, not about the decline of literature, but about our current faith in culture, often too utopian and ahistorical. To begin with, the culture idea has been around for a while. And however much we benefit from its fungibility, the culture idea has an intellectual history that we can trace in and around anthropology, cultural studies, and the historiography of English studies. Current formulations of children’s studies appeal to the culture idea ideologically and rhetorically but usually without acknowledging that history. At least two dimensions of the culture idea underwrite current critical efforts. The first is the classic anthropological understanding of culture as, in E. B. Tylor’s words, “that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society.” That expansive definition opens Tylor’s Primitive Culture (1871), setting the stage not only for anthropology but also for the humanities and social sciences more generally. Culture was a positive term for Tylor, the so-called father of anthropology; it meant something comprehensive, if not entirely comprehensible. By the 1920s, however, this sense of culture had yielded to the cultural or comparative anthropology of Franz Boas, Ruth Benedict, and Margaret Mead. Central to cultural anthropology is ethnographic fieldwork, the close observation of local cultures, often conducted to debunk claims of universality. To this day, the holistic, more archetypal idea of culture persists alongside a variable, pluralistic, ethnographic sense of culture.
At the risk of gross oversimplification, I would argue that these two anthropological modes of culture-think are residual in children’s studies. This essay historicizes the ever-morphing yet weirdly familiar idea of culture to suggest that “children’s culture” doesn’t automatically mean something new or progressive. A deeper understanding of the culture idea will also help shed light on children’s studies and debates about how that field should be formed. Some scholars have been harshly critical of poststructuralist approaches to children’s forms, arguing for interdisciplinarity, practicality, and realism in the familiar name of culture. In his introduction to The Children’s Culture Reader, for instance, Henry Jenkins appeals to an unreconstructed idea of culture in order to indict wild theory. Jenkins appeals repeatedly to “real children” to authorize children’s culture against an otherwise empty poststructuralist mode of analysis. (Here I think of Wednesday’s query in one of the Addams Family films: “[D]o your Girl Scout cookies have real Girl Scouts in them?”) In such declarations of new (inter)disciplinarity, culture gets no treatment as an evolving idea or cluster of ideas.

As poststructuralist theory makes clear, appeals to real children and the real world themselves derive from anthropological and sociological methods of observation and research, and from the texts that such work generates: case studies, field reports, statistical analyses, and so forth. Realism is never self-evident: it must be produced. While the holistic idea of culture apparently migrated to literary study in the 1930s, ethnography did not really take root in the field of English until the advent of cultural studies, beginning, perhaps, with the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies in the 1960s. With varying degrees of emphasis, the ethnographic approach to culture also informs children’s studies, for better and for worse. What I am calling the “ethnographic imaginary” is a descriptive rather than a prescriptive term. It refers to field research with children and their materials, as well as the symbolic repertoire of classic ethnography—the familiar language of observer and observed, the practices of ethnographic writing that estrange as much as bring close their subjects. Although allied with comparative anthropology, ethnographic work can also support essentialist or centrist understandings of culture.

I have in mind as a model Michèle Le Doeuff’s term “the philosophical imaginary.” By this, she means not only philosophy’s repertoire of images and conceits, but also its claim to objectivity, its disavowal of literariness or subjectivity. An intellectual discipline’s imaginary, she proposes, works to cope with—often to mask or disguise—problems posed by the theoretical enterprise. I’m similarly interested in the ethnographic imaginary of children’s studies, as it claims objectivity, generates and recycles images and metaphors, and collaborates as well as conflicts with a more holistic sense of culture. Some of the fiercest critics of poststructuralist excess in children’s studies put their faith not only in the idea of culture as “a complex whole” but also in the ethnographic imaginary. Even so, it’s unfair to imply that poststructuralist thinkers aren’t also inspired by the ethnographic imaginary, particularly since poststructuralism emphasizes the relativity of culture(s). I thus address also the compatibilities of poststructuralism and the ethnographic imaginary.

My goal is to trace the origins and effects of the culture idea in children’s studies, not so that we can correct all our biases—that might not be possible or even desirable—but so that we may better understand the current enthusiasm for culture as representing continuity as well as innovation. Although this essay is deconstructive to an extent, I hope that a stronger sense of history and disciplinarity will help alleviate the tension between poststructuralist and more traditionally humanist assessments of culture.

Literature and/as Culture

Children’s literature, of course, has long been more eclectic and interdisciplinary than other academic specialties, perhaps necessarily so. Children’s literature has often meant children’s culture, embracing not only a diverse group of written texts but also oral narrative. Scholars in the field have been writing about film and television for quite a while, even if film and media theory is a more recent arrival. Scholars of children’s literature already know quite a bit about children’s work and children’s play, drawing from both representation and direct personal experience. Still, we’ve not paid much attention to the culture idea’s influence on our discipline.

Literature used to mean something similar to culture. It did not signal, as it often does now, a limited body of texts, often traditional ones (a canon), but rather a set of values, ideals, and traditions. There are different explanations for the resemblances between literature and culture, which are really variations on a larger theme of mutual influence. Scholars have persuasively shown that advocates of literature borrowed the anthropological idea of culture in the early twentieth century, recognizing the advantages of linking literature to that “complex whole” of Tylor’s vision. At the same time, as other scholars have emphasized, the late nineteenth-century anthropological idea of culture derives from a bellettristic vision of literature as holistic and ennobling. Bellettristic criticism, a weird mix of aesthetic appreciations and moral analyses of literature, preceded and helped clarify the anthropological project. So familiar was the language of culture to men of letters that Frederic Harrison, Matthew Arnold’s frequent antagonist, called the talk of culture “the silliest cant of the day,” noting that such talk “sits well on a possessor of
belles lettres" (qtd. in Guillory, "Literary Study" 26). John Guillory notes that culture and literature alike were expected to be ambiguous and non-utilitarian, and that literature especially "has been made to play a kind of allegorical role in the development of the disciplines, as the name of the principle antithetical to the very scientificity governing discipline formation in the modern university." ("Literary Study" 37).

English departments were founded in the last quarter of the nineteenth century, although most came into being later on. Previously, professors of oratory or rhetoric or even classics had taught Shakespeare and sometimes the British Romantic poets. The earliest literary scholars were philologists, many of them trained in Germany. As a number of scholars have shown working from different angles, English studies has always been a nationalistic project, inspired by European romanticism and nineteenth-century interest in native language and culture (recall here Perrault, the Brothers Grimm, and the great civilizing project of folklore as traced by Jack Zipes). A comprehensive story of the rise of English has yet to be told, one that brings together domestic histories of the field with Marxist and post-colonial accounts of English abroad. In any case, the study of literature has long been coterminous with the study of culture.

It was the 1930s, claims Susan Hegeman, that witnessed the incorporation of the culture idea into literary studies. Hegeman’s book Patterns for America documents the rich exchanges between anthropology and literature during this period, alongside problematic assertions of aesthetic superiority and the national psyche. Anthony Easthope confirms that the study of literature, as advocated in the 1930s, demanded a separation of literature from everything else. Culture was at once denigrated in the form of the popular or the mass, and redeemed/re-written in the idiom of literature’s organism, wholeness, and transformative power. F. R. Leavis, for instance, hated popular culture but tried to preserve the culture idea by distinguishing between culture—known best as literature, art, and music—and civilization, the repository of everything trashy. For Leavis, civilization was the enemy, and culture the savior. "This golden time," writes Hegeman, "was the moment of high modernism, when the intellectual was seen to have operated as a critically distanced, but engaged, commentator on society" (170).

Raymond Williams effectively turned the tables on Leavis in his Culture and Society (1958). Taking a longer historical view, Williams also argues for culture’s wholeness, but a wholeness spanning industry and labor and class formations, the whole sorry underbelly of capitalism. Williams strategically appealed to the classic Anglo-American formulation of culture à la Tylor precisely to challenge the Leavisite assumption that culture means only high culture. Culture and Society shows how the fantasy of cultural wholeness was highly selective and served as a defense against modern industrial life.

Accompanying the disenchantment with holistic views of literature and culture, though, was the sense that critical practice itself might be suspect, no matter its methodology or objects. Cultural studies calls into question all forms of symbolic activity, including its own claims to social relevance. As Bruce Robbins points out, Williams’ intervention in the scene of culture also showed how "criticism" in the narrow disciplinary sense—the study of literary texts—could base its ascent on the grandiose claim to be a kind of self-appointed conscience of modern society. And it explains how this rise in the pretensions of literary criticism could have taken place during a period when literature itself was being relegated to an increasingly marginal role within the cultures of Britain and the U.S. How could literary criticism become the staging ground for social critique when literature itself was losing its social influence? It was precisely because literature was not central to society or representative of its dominant trends that it could serve as a condensation and epitome of culture. (60-61)

Thus, cultural studies has had to acknowledge its debt to literary study and that strategy of estrangement, and to urge relevance along different lines. Cultural studies has tried to bridge the gap between society and art, to challenge academic elitism. But as critics point out, cultural studies has its own formalist and estranging tendencies. How can it not, as a mode of analysis that demands at least some remove from the everyday?

It is not that literature is only lately losing its relevance, as opposed to cultural studies or children's studies; rather, literature’s relevance or cultural power has long (if not always) depended upon its remove from the public sphere. If this is true, then we might think differently about the current "crisis" of the humanities. Literature’s estrangement from society is simply becoming more problematic, as competing forms of cultural capital—internet knowledge, for one—promise both cultural and economic legitimacy. If students are now less invested in the humanities, it’s probably because they know that the humanities aren’t as profitable as business or engineering, and that the cultural (compensatory) capital of literature is on the wane.

In Cultural Capital (1993), a brilliant account of literature and its discontents across the centuries, John Guillory proposes that critical theory has become a supplement to literature, a form of cultural and linguistic capital in its own right. He contends further that theory effects a "transference of transference," transforming the student's
love for the teacher into the love of the teacher’s subject or discourse (181-207). Theory thus becomes both a middle-class form of cultural capital and a mode of cultural transmission. For Guillory, whose debt to French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu is clear, theory is less a bold new intellectual adventure than another form of what Bourdieu calls “distinction.” Guillory does not address the culture idea per se, but clearly culture is a sustaining link between literature and theory (perhaps even a compromise of sorts between them). For Guillory, “cultural” is an adjective rather than a noun, but we could easily reverse the terms: if literature is a form of cultural capital, as he holds, then culture is also a form of literary capital, perhaps now more than ever.

There is nothing especially natural about a career in English. And disciplinary and methodological shifts are the very stuff of intellectual life. Given these realities, it is surprising how many literary critics bemoan the decline of literature at the hands of culture. In his recent book The Fateful Question of Culture (1997), for example, Geoffrey H. Hartman argues that the adoption in anthropology of what Clifford Geertz called the “text analogy” has weakened rather than refined our understanding of literature. “After a heady period,” Hartman writes, “during which the semiotic theory of culture drew every human activity into its net, students and scholars of literature are no longer sure what they profess” (2). But Hartman’s own book quite clearly illustrates how literary criticism profits by the “text analogy.” Not being sure of what we profess has its perks. How else could Hartman, an English professor (not an anthropologist), explore the fateful question of culture, and through such loving attention to Wordsworth? Denis Donoghue assures us in a blurb that Hartman is uniquely qualified for that project in part because “he has read everything,” establishing a baseline for cultural knowledge that echoes Tylor’s faith in totality. Culture, it seems, has gone literary, even if literature has vanished into culture. Hartman is not shy about playing anthropologist and social critic, postulating that the culture idea keeps the hope of embodiment alive, against the ghostliness of daily living. Given such assessments, it is odd that Hartman seeks as he does to recuperate literature, since clearly literature’s disciplinary expansion made “fateful” the question(s) of culture.

Again and again, critics concentrate on the failures of culture as a concept rather than appreciating culture’s generative power (which depends on that “failure”). While Hartman questions the excesses of cultural studies in order to redeem literature, Terry Eagleton, one of our sharpest and most socially progressive critics, contends in his own recent monograph The Idea of Culture (2000) that “we are trapped at the moment between disabusingly wide and discomfortingly rigid notions of culture,” that we need to move beyond both (32). Is moving beyond either possible or desirable, I wonder? “It is hard,” writes Eagleton, “to resist the conclusion that the word ‘culture’ is both too broad and too narrow to be greatly useful” (32). He is taking his cue in part from anthropologists themselves, who have questioned the viability of the culture idea. Adam Kuper, for instance, concludes that “the more one considers the best modern work on culture by anthropologists, the more advisable it must appear to avoid the hyper-referential word altogether, and to talk more precisely of knowledge, or belief, or art, or technology, or tradition, or even of ideology” (x). In The Faded Mosaic, English professor Christopher Clausen likens the culture idea to a cult. "But what most scholars downplay is that literary criticism has always authorized itself through/ as culture-writing, even if (precisely as) the terms of culture have changed." Disciplining Children’s Studies

What does all this mean for children’s studies? It means, first of all, that we ought to study the dialectical relationship of English and anthropology. We should also pay more attention to the history of English studies. These fields show that culture is far from a new idea in our discipline. I am not arguing that we should not aspire to ideals of wholeness or interdisciplinarity; rather, we need to remember that the idea of culture has long enabled the professing of literature.

In his recent essay “The Future of the Profession,” Jerry Griswold urges scholars of children’s literature to publish and network outside our field, so that we do not wind up “only talking to ourselves and our protégés” (237). He cites Jack Zipes’s recent book Sticks and Stones: The Troublesome Success of Children’s Literature from Slovenly Peter to Harry Potter, remarking that Zipes, too, is worried about the profession’s narcissism, if from a different angle. At first glance, then, Griswold seems to urge a wider vision, at least within the field of English. Griswold offers five measured recommendations for sustaining the enterprise of children’s literature. His final suggestion, which he knows will be controversial, is that we make more careful distinctions between children’s literature and “children’s reading.” Quick to acknowledge how easily such distinctions might seem reactionary, he nonetheless feels that children’s literature should not be confused with just any children’s texts. He hopes that future generations of scholars will manage to weave “their way between the Scylla of a needed openmindedness and the Charybdis of worries about becoming reactionary” (241). “It seems to me,” he remarks further, “that when we are able to talk about Children’s Literature as literature, we will be able to address others outside our discipline with genuine confidence and authority” (241).

Put another way, literary expertise is still the key to our success as professionals. Here Griswold sounds much
like Hartman. If we write only about comic books or the Teletubbies, he implies, we’ll forget The Odyssey and lose scholarly face. Too broad or popular a sense of culture might lead to disciplinary disaster, whereas retaining a literary sensibility will safeguard our cultural voice. Griswold’s concern about professional insularity, then, actually comes out of a fairly traditional commitment to literature. Griswold does take an unusual approach to the problem of cultural studies. Rather than argue, as many do, that cultural studies will prevent us from talking about literature, which will in turn prevent us from participating fully in the academy. It seems to me, however, that children’s literature scholars now benefit from their knowledge about popular culture, even when it displaces literary knowledge. A firm command of Toy Story in tandem with some knowledge of Baudrillard makes better career sense these days than a firm command of Dickens. Why police the border between literature and reading, since that border is mythical anyway, and since culture has again become a dominant term?

Contributors to the recent special issue of The Lion and the Unicorn on children’s studies (April 2001) also urge a professional vision that is less novel than it seems at first. In her introductory essay, sociologist Gertrud Lenzer pleads for an integrated, multi-disciplinary approach to childhood and children, commenting that “we cannot arrive at a comprehensive understanding of children by simply accumulating, aggregating, or adding up segmented findings from a far-flung variety of inquiries in the various disciplines” (183). That a “comprehensive picture” is even possible and desirable is assumed from the start. Co-founder and Director of the Children’s Studies Program and the Children’s Studies Center at Brooklyn College, Lenzer aspires to a humanistic, holistic understanding of child and culture alike. She is not invested in literature, or rather, her vision of culture does not privilege literature. Children’s studies, she writes, “makes the ontological claim that children must be viewed in their fullness as human beings. The various child-focused disciplinary endeavors must contribute to such a holistic understanding of children rather than reducing them to specialized abstract fragments” (183). Lenzer does a little reducing of her own, dismissing poststructuralism. She wants to cultivate “enlightened knowledge among our students,” to be sure that children are viewed “not merely as objects of specialized scholarly research or of social policies and social action” (185). Lenzer hopes to reconstitute at the disciplinary level the wholeness of childhood not realized elsewhere, because it is not otherwise achievable. Such wholeness, in my view, is sheer fantasy; the point is that it is not a new fantasy.

Lenzer’s scheme finds a close counterpart in Mary Galbraith’s “Hear My Cry: A Manifesto for an Emancipatory Childhood Studies Approach to Children’s Literature,” the next essay in the special issue. Galbraith, a psychologist, is even more dismissive of poststructuralist theory, although she’s quite happy to embrace Habermas’ utopian faith in the public sphere. A proponent of “emancipatory” theory, she identifies as useful the work of Alice Miller and Lloyd de Mause (both problematic in my book, especially de Mause). I could not be happier to hear of efforts to empower children and assure their rights, but I doubt that the academy’s “postmodern skeptics” are blocking the way, as Galbraith holds. Is emancipatory criticism significantly different—institutionally, rhetorically, disciplinarily—from the skeptical work that Galbraith does not like? Isn’t she advocating a different critical canon as much as anything else? Galbraith’s passion is admirable, deriving (as she acknowledges) from an Enlightenment faith in humanistic rationality. But to accept uncritically the culture idea seems just as presumptuous as to interrogate dubious assumptions about identity, representation, and power.

The children’s culture wars (of which my essay is obviously a part) turn on the issue of what constitutes a good-faith scholarly enterprise, and/or what our real subjects should be (so much so, in fact, that these questions seem foundational to the enterprise). Do we write about books or about real kids? Is writing even worthwhile? Galbraith and others seem to believe that writing does not matter as much as other kinds of care and feeding of children, and they may be right. But aren’t we always (already?) writing, and in professional contexts, for each other? Is writing really incompatible with and less important than parenting, teaching, and other kinds of field-work?

Richard Flynn makes the same point in his critique of Peter Hunt’s distinction between “book people” and “child people.” Both Flynn and Karen Coats defend the importance of “books” in children’s studies, by which they mean literature and criticism alike. In her essay assessing the shape and fortunes of children’s studies, Coats suggests that we keep children’s studies plural, meaning that we try to respect as much as bridge disciplinary differences, and strike a balance between the study of representation(s) as informed by critical theory and the study of actual children. Proposing an “alternative manifesto,” she points out that even the most emancipatory project presumes that “wholeness is possible” and that lack is de facto traumatic, presumptions that she challenges from a Lacanian perspective (144).

Clearly, theoretical differences underscore these discussions, and I don’t mean to sound disrespectful. Still, it is troubling that some advocates of children’s studies idealize culture while objecting to poststructuralist insight. In his introduction to The Children’s Culture Reader, Henry Jenkins at once embraces and criticizes poststructuralism,
in order to recuperate the holistic culture idea in a contemporary theoretical vein. Jenkins avers that the displacement of the child from children's culture (studies) was a "necessary first step for critiquing the mythology of childhood innocence" (23). Now, he says, it is time to bring the child back into culture, and here the discussion gets weird. Jenkins suggests that if we do not study real children, the child exists "purely as a figment of pedophilic desire" (23). The implication is that children's studies without actual children amounts not merely to narcissism or insularity, as Griswold worries, but indeed to pedophilia.

In their introduction to Disciplinarity at the Fin de Siècle, Amanda Anderson and Joseph Valente point out that we usually associate interdisciplinarity with freedom and disciplinarity with constraint, forgetting that "the dialectic of agency of determinism, currently distributed across the disciplinary/interdisciplinary divide, was at the heart of disciplinary formation itself" (2). It is as if discipline and disciplinarity are dirty words, connoting—like didacticism or sentimentality—narrative and/or moral inflexibility.

The Ethnographic Imaginary

Like the culture concept, ethnography has come under fire in anthropological circles. Although he affirms ethnography as a practice, Martyn Hammersley, in his monograph on the subject, remarks, "I no longer believe 'ethnography' to be a useful category with which to think about social research methodology" (203). Ethnography, of course, has long been the heart of anthropology, first as a method of participant observation of and reportage from the field, as codified by Bronislaw Malinowski in Argonauts of the Western Pacific (1922), and later as a reconstructed, more self-conscious and experimental practice of writing about cultural others, and about the otherness of self. Thanks largely to the textualization of fieldwork, anthropology often treats culture as a series of texts to be interpreted, so it is not surprising that Margaret Mead and other early practitioners emphasized the hermeneutic and aesthetic powers of the anthropologist.

Given this heritage, what James Clifford calls the post-1950s "dispersion of ethnographic authority" is also/instead a redistribution of that authority along familiar, if now postmodern and poststructuralist, lines that authorize the literary critic to hold forth on culture (24). Clifford's book is titled The Predicament of Culture (1988), but we might think also about the culture of predicament and how we sustain it. Analysis of culture and its ills, after all, has been one of culture's centrifugal forces. Furthermore, in some of the critical literature the deconstruction of culture seems little more than a plea for the restoration of literature; there is little in either Hartman or Eagleton about anthropology or ethnography, residual in children's culture work.

Near the end of his review of The Children's Culture Reader, Richard Flynn asks this question: "After Rose, after Ariès, after Kincaid, what are the cultural and historical effects of the persistence of developmental models of childhood? Where are the descriptive ethnographies of the child at the end of the twentieth century?" (473). It is worth asking (with Flynn) what kind of ethnographies of childhood we want to write and why. What methods of textualization and collection/display are strategic? How might we deal productively with ethnography's rhetoric of realism, its reputation as a mimetic mode of mapping and description? Might not a seemingly innocuous title like Children's Culture tend to establish authority, much in the manner of classic texts named "simply" after the people they describe: The Andaman Islanders, Street Corner Society, The Mountain People? Until the twentieth century, the ethnographer and the anthropologist were separate creatures, with different tasks; do we now expect the scholar of children's culture to gather data, translate customs, interpret and theorize, all of the above? What happens to the model of participant observation in the field when we observe our own children, or when we remember our own childhoods? Jenkins argues that we should give kids the right "tools" with which they can "realize their own political agendas or to participate in the production of their own culture" (30). I agree, but isn't this language familiar? What are the pros and cons of imagining children as primitive people with a distinct culture, along the lines of early comparative anthropology? Should we cheer on the "dispersion" of ethnographic authority when children talk back?

These are difficult questions, and here I can only emphasize that, for better and for worse, the ethnographic imaginary takes different narrative forms in children's studies, among them pop-journalistic exposés of youth culture as well as more academic and theoretical treatments of childhood. If children's studies is to encompass non-academic as well as academic work, then we might want to pay more attention to discussions of youth in the popular press. We can see ethnographic language and methods most obviously in some recent books about American adolescence. Consider, for instance, A Tribe Apart: A Journey Into the Heart of American Adolescence (1998). The synopsis on the dusk jacket makes even clearer than the title the book's ethnographic spirit:

For three fascinating, disturbing years, writer Patricia Hersch journeyed inside a world that is as familiar as our own children and yet as alien as some exotic culture—the world of adolescence. As a silent, attentive partner, she followed eight teenagers in the typically American town of Reston, Virginia, listening to their stories, observing their rituals, watching them...
fulfill their dreams and enact their tragedies. What she found was that America's teens have fashioned a fully defined culture that adults neither see nor imagine—a culture of unprecedented freedom and baffling complexity, a culture with rules but no structure, values but no clear morality, codes but no consistency.

Here the language of culture is comparativist rather than singular, in keeping with ethnography. The ethnographic imaginary can accommodate both the traditional holistic sense of culture, as codified by Tylor, and the comparative idea of culture as introduced by Boas. Another example would be Elinor Burkett's recent ethnography *Another Planet: A Year in the Life of a Suburban High School* (2001), whose cover looks like a field notebook and/or a diary (as if Margaret Mead and Harriet the Spy were collaborating).

Also invoking adolescence as the undiscovered country is Thomas Hine's *The Rise and Fall of the American Teenager* (1999). In chapter 3, "Coming of Age in Utter Confusion," Hine appeals to Mead's work as a model for defamiliarizing and illuminating the culture of American adolescence, which (like Mead before him) he alternately sees as stable and as vanishing. "Strange stories from exotic locales," he writes, "can provide perspectives on our own culture and its weird and painful practices" (44). His penultimate chapter, "Goths in Tomorrowland," surveys today's "tribes of youth," whom he regards largely as "modern primitives," fond of tattoos, piercing, and other enigmatic practices (277). These books on adolescence resemble most contemporary studies of boyhood, girlhood, and the family, which make frequent appeals to anthropological knowledge and the ethnographic imaginary.

But what about more properly academic writing? How does the ethnographic imaginary work to cope with problems posed by the theoretical enterprise known as children's culture? My impression is that the ethnographic imaginary has not only survived the poststructuralist revolution but has inhabited it rather fully, or, as we might say after Michel Foucault, rather productively. Poststructuralism has changed the terms of the critical conversation, but it has also appropriated ethnography to its own narrative ends, for better and for worse. Foucault's work has been especially influential in children's literature studies as well as in the emergent field of children's studies. We tend now to think of children as docile bodies, as subjects of an institutional and disciplinary surveillance previously affirmed as the positive, necessary experience of schooling and socialization. Foucault's critique of the repressive hypothesis in and around modern subjectivity has done much to undermine what I would call the progressive hypothesis of children's literature and culture, the tale of ever-expanding autonomy and rationality.

At the same time, despite Foucault's emphasis on reverse discourses and so forth, Foucauldian analysis rewrites the story of children's freedom as the story of discipline through discourse and commodification. Simply put, Foucauldian analysis often assumes that children and other populations are subaltern victims of oppressive social norms. Foucauldian analysis is organized around key figures of social specification and regulation—among them the (masturbating) child—and children's culture may likewise depend upon an estranging sense of childhood at the level of rhetoric if not the analysis, per se.

One way to defamiliarize childhood is to suggest a significant divide between child and adult, and their respective cultures, such that the child is always other to the adult (self). But in order for the inquiry to be worthwhile, that otherness must also be manageable: this is the delicate economy of poststructuralist ethnographic writing, which appeals less to the wholeness of culture than to the otherness of subjectivity. Along these lines, consider Christopher Jenks' *Childhood*, one of Routledge's "Key Ideas" books, a sociological analysis of construction(s) of childhood past, present, and future, organized around issues such as child innocence, child abuse, and the alleged "disappearance" of childhood. Early in the first chapter, Jenks proposes that in developmental psychology and socialization theory (he singles out the work of Jean Piaget and Talcott Parsons respectively), the project of accounting for the experiences of childhood "proceeds[es] rapidly to an overattentive elaboration of the compulsive processes of integration," or of becoming an adult (4). In his view, we never really examine what a child is, because we are too preoccupied with that child's evolution into adulthood. Jenks suggests, in effect, that we do not sufficiently understand the child as other. "Simply stated," he writes, "the child is familiar to us and yet strange, he or she inhabits our world and yet seems to answer to another, he or she is essentially of ourselves and yet appears to display a systematically different order of being" (3). This chapter, which ruthlessly questions the idea of development, resorts to an ethnographic thematic of otherness. We might see this as standard procedure; don't we often defamiliarize our subject in order to make it our own, especially in writing?

Maybe so, maybe not. In any case, Jenks specifically invokes anthropology and its language of estrangement. Throughout this first chapter, he appeals to the classic child-savage analogy of evolutionary science and anthropology even as—or alternatively, by—ostensibly disavowing it. This discussion begins in a section actually titled "The Child as 'Savage'," in which select quotation marks and rhetorical markers identify the association as troubling. And yet Jenks consistently likens the work of the child culture theorist to that of the anthropologist, such that the section title winds up a
The potential of children’s studies is exciting. But we need in children’s studies and discussions of children’s culture a stronger sense of intellectual and disciplinary history. Identifying and challenging the holistic idea of culture as it resurfaces in current debates is fairly easy. Ethnography is trickier to deal with, for while the ethnographic imaginary is often troublesome, fieldwork with children can be responsibly conducted. But so far, children’s studies has not demonstrated the kind of critical self-consciousness about ethnography that is now crucial to anthropology and sociology, which makes it harder to distinguish between more and less legitimate forms of child study.

As Le Doeuff shows with respect to philosophy, an intellectual discipline’s imaginary is intimately bound up with its critical concepts and rhetorical strategies. Perhaps we cannot divest ourselves of culture or its more troubling metaphors unless we stop thinking of ourselves as academics working in the humanities. I am not sure exactly where to go from here, but why not push for a children’s studies informed by self-reflexive field research and poststructuralist theory (not just the optimistic stuff) and what we might call disciplinary studies—a children’s studies that acknowledges to the fullest possible degree its debts to anthropology, cultural studies, and so on?

“Culture is a deeply compromised idea I cannot quite do without,” writes James Clifford (qtd. in Buzard 312). We may share Clifford’s ambivalent attitude, but we should know by now that ambivalence is fundamental (if not necessary) to academic work. Clifford’s very career attests to the critical fortunes of the culture idea and to the generative effects of ambivalence. Clifford is not technically an anthropologist, as one might surmise from his writings, but rather, he is a literary theorist and intellectual historian teaching in the History of Consciousness Program at UC-Santa Cruz. He has played deconstructive anthropologist for some time now, capitalizing on yet another migration of the culture idea to English studies. As James Buzard shows in “Notes on the Defenestration of Culture,” just as comparative anthropology began to doubt the culture idea around the middle of the twentieth century, that idea invigorated and authorized cultural studies (in which poststructuralist anthropological theory remains a staple).

For all its progressive impulses and self-conscious posturing, cultural studies has one major blind spot: disciplinarity. Buzard argues persuasively that cultural studies arrogantly positions itself as anthropology’s brighter and politically promising sibling without admitting as much, reclaiming culture as its central concern but refusing to see itself as a discipline informed by other disciplines. Whether or not children’s culture is a deeply compromised idea we cannot quite do without, children’s studies must learn from this tendency of cultural studies to deny its own disciplinarity history.
NOTES

1. The academic discourse on "everyday life" had its heyday in 1950s and 1960s France, later inspiring British and American cultural studies as well as Marxist criticism. We might identify Henri Lefebvre's Critique of Everyday Life (1947) as the inaugural text, though Situationist writing was also influential. Interest in the "everyday" has intensified again in the wake of cultural studies and a renewed interest in sociology; for more information on this body of work and its current purchase, see The Everyday Life Reader, edited by Ben Highmore.

2. As anthropology became more sophisticated in the twentieth century, the twin issues of representation and interpretation were hotly contested, such that anthropology now is an incredibly self-conscious discipline, hyper-aware of (even hyper-apologetic about) its own procedures. Even so, the holistic idea persists, most often as a fantasy of critical reconstruction. A field study is still supposed to tell you something important about a culture, as well as legitimate the author.

3. As Richard Flynn notes in his review, The Children's Culture Reader is useful as an introductory textbook but has little to offer beyond the standard poststructuralist insight that childhood isn't, well, so natural after all. At the same time, the book appeals to an undertheorized, ahistorical idea of culture, perhaps as compensation for the deconstruction of "childhood." NYU Press' Generations of Youth, by contrast, makes an effort to engage more locally with issues such as race and class bias, often against a monolithic culture idea. It is also more successful as an anthology, cohesively while wide-ranging, perhaps because youth culture is already an established topic of cultural studies.

4. Obviously, the ethnographic imaginary, like other such sweeping concepts—Le Doeuff's philosophical imaginary, or the "political unconscious" of Frederic Jameson—threatens to be nearly as totalizing as the culture idea. Even so, I think it will be useful in this context, as a rhetorical and theoretical counterpart to other discursive conceits, among them the culture idea. It is also more successful as an anthology, cohesively while wide-ranging, perhaps because youth culture is already an established topic of cultural studies.

5. Thanks to J. D. Stahl for directing me to this text.

6. "A literary education has many values," Eagleton wryly observes, "but systematic thought is not one of them" (239). But as Eagleton also acknowledges, we've benefited from our resistance to systematic thought; literature is in many ways articulated against such.

WORKS CITED


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