The Other: Orientalism, Colonialism, and Children's Literature

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Child psychology and children's literature can be discussed and analyzed as the corporate institution for dealing with childhood—dealing with it by making statements about it, authorizing views of it, describing it, by teaching it, settling it, ruling over it; in short, child psychology and children's literature as an adult style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over childhood.

Anyone distressed by these strongly critical words about our institutions for dealing with children will be happy to hear that I have made the words up. Or more accurately, I have borrowed them. I have merely inserted phrases relating to childhood institutions into a quotation that actually discusses a quite different topic:

Orientalism can be discussed and analyzed as the corporate institution for dealing with the Orient—dealing with it by making statements about it, authorizing views of it, describing it, by teaching it, settling it, ruling over it; in short, Orientalism as a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient. (Said 3)

I came upon the original quotation in Edward Said's Orientalism, a brilliant investigation of European attitudes towards Arabs and Asians. Said works to reveal that what we call "the Orient" has little to do with actual conditions in the East—that it is more significantly a European invention that has had a powerful influence of how Europeans have not only thought about but also acted upon the East.

As I read through Said's powerful descriptions of the history and structure of Orientalism, I was continually astonished by how often they suggested to me parallel insights into our most common assumptions about childhood and children's literature. Perhaps I shouldn't have been so astonished: after all, Jacqueline Rose’s influential discussion of "the impossibility of children's fiction" works from the premise that children's literature is a form of colonization. Indeed, an exploration of the parallels between Said's descriptions of Orientalism and our representations of childhood in both child psychology and children's literature reveals a number of interesting things.

1. Inherent Inferiority

According to Europeans, Europeans must describe and analyze the Orient because Orientals are not capable of describing or analyzing themselves. Not only is Orientalism an area of study that can be pursued only by outsiders, but what defines them as outside of their subject is, exactly, their ability to study it: "the Orientalist is outside the Orient, both as an existential and as a moral fact" (21). Orientalism is thus inherently and inevitably a study of what theorists often call the other—of that which is opposite to the person doing the talking or thinking or studying. Since the opposite of studying is an inability to study, the other is always conceived by those who study it to be unable to study itself, to see or speak for itself. Thus, what the study will always focus on is how and why the other lacks one's own capabilities.

It's fairly obvious that our descriptions of childhood similarly purport to see and speak for children, and that we believe them to be similarly incapable of speaking for themselves. As far as I know, the writers and readers of the Children's Literature Association Quarterly are adults; children are not the ones who write either the texts we identify as children's literature or the criticism of those texts. Said's words force us to face the uncomfortable conclusion that our attempting to speak for and about children in these ways will always confirm their difference from, and presumably, inferiority to, ourselves as thinkers and speakers.

Of course, we may claim to believe that the inability of children to speak for themselves is not inferiority at all, but a wonderfully ideal state of innocence, just as Europeans have claimed throughout history to admire what they have interpreted as a lack of analytical reason in Orientals. But this supposed admiration of the inability to see and speak is undercut by the fact that it is based at least in theory on observation—seeing—and then, spoken about; it makes the other wonderful at the expense of making it not like us—in essence, not quite human. We undercut our admiration of the inability to speak as we do ourselves in the very act of speaking so enthusiastically about it.

2. Inherent Femaleness

Representations of those who can't see or speak for themselves are and must always be engendered by outsiders—those who can see and speak. According to Lacan's theory of the gaze, all such representations imply the right of he who observes and interprets to observe and interpret; he who can fix others in his gaze, and thus define who they are as no more and no less than what he sees, has authority over them. The representations of childhood we can find in child psychology and in children's literature thus imply our belief in our own right to power over children even just by existing. These representations, and the disciplines that produce them, are imperialist in essence.

Furthermore, I said "be who fixes others in his gaze" deliberately. In the history of art and in contemporary pin-up photography, it has traditionally been females who are subject to a male gaze, and therefore defined as appropriate subjects to be gazed at—available, passive and yielding to the convenience of detached observers.
the most obvious subject of a male gaze is female, then maleness and femaleness can and do become metaphorical qualities for gazers and gazees who aren't actually male or female: indeed, even oppressors who are actually female tend to describe themselves in language which implies their own aggressive maleness and the passive femaleness of those they oppress, both male and female.

For Europeans for whom the Orient is subject to the gaze, it is therefore, metaphorically, female—and that allows Europe to represent itself and its own authority as male. Said describes how "images . . . of frank sexual attention to the Orient proliferated" as "scholars, administrators, geographers, and commercial agents poured out their exuberant activity onto the fairly supine, feminine Orient" (219-220).

The parallel holds here also. Whether male or female, adults often describe their dealings with children in language which manages to suggest something traditionally feminine about childhood, something traditionally masculine about adulthood, and something sexual about adult dealings with children. Scholars, administrators, writers, and teachers—we all pour out exuberant activity onto what we assume are (or ought to be) the fairly supine bodies of children. We gaze at them and talk about how charming they are in their passive willingness to be gazed at, how cute they are in their endearing efforts to put on a good show for those who observe them. We describe them as intuitive rather than rational, creative rather than practical. And meanwhile, we woo them to our values. We tell them that their true happiness consists in pleasing us, bending to our will, doing what we want. We plant the seeds of our wisdom in them. And we get very angry indeed when they dare to gaze back.

3. Inherent Distortion

Obviously, the representation of childhood as perceived by this sort of gaze is a distorted one. Said says,

the real issue is whether indeed there can be a true representation of anything, or whether any and all representations, because they are representations, are embedded first in the language and then in the culture, institutions, and political ambience of the representer. If the latter alternative is the correct one (as I believe it is), then we must be prepared to accept the fact that a representation is eo ipso implicated, intertwined, embedded, interwoven with a great many other things besides the 'truth,' of which it is itself a representation.

(272)

As I suggested earlier, then, no representation can be truly objective; the irony is that those who most claim objectivity must be the least trustworthy. "As a judge of the Orient," Said asserts, "the modern Orientalist does not, as he believes and even says, stand apart from it objectively. His human detachment, whose sign is the absence of sympathy covered by professional knowledge, is weighted heavily with all the orthodox attitudes, perspectives, and modes of Orientalism that I have been describing" (104). No matter what claims we make to the contrary, our supposedly objective descriptions of childhood are equally anything but objective, and are similarly permeated with assumptions developed over a number of centuries by a history of adult observation and discussion.

The paradox is that we can claim objectivity for our observations only by being other than what we observe; but in being other, we have no choice but to interpret what we observe in terms of ourselves and own previously established assumptions. Thus, adult interpretations of children's behavior, whether in literature or in psychology, are always contaminated by previously established adult assumptions about childhood. Those assumptions emerge from the discourse about children developed over centuries in order to support the programs of various philosophical and political systems; they are now simply taken for granted as the absolute truth, even by those of us who no longer espouse those systems.

Piaget's notorious habit of always interpreting the results of his experiments in childhood development in terms that underestimated the capabilities of his subjects is a perfect example. He may or may not have shared the specific political concerns or philosophical prejudices that led Locke to assert that childhood thinking was different from and lesser than adult thought; he simply assumed that it was, and then made his results accord with those already existing assumptions of his culture. It has taken later experimenters with different cultural assumptions to reveal how slightly different versions of the same experiments reveal vastly superior capabilities in children.

4. Inherently Adult-Centered

Orientalism was and still mostly is a study pursued by Europeans; its representation of the Orient is therefore for the benefit of European interests. As Orientalism is primarily for the benefit of Europeans, child psychology and children's literature are primarily for the benefit of adults. We may claim to study childhood in order to benefit children, but we actually do it so that we will know how to deal with children; and as Rose suggests, we write books for children to provide them with values and with images of themselves we approve of or feel comfortable with. By and large, we encourage in children those values and behaviors that make children easier for us to handle: more passive, more docile, more obedient—and thus, more in need of our guidance and more willing to accept the need for it. It's no accident that the vast majority of stories for children share the message that, despite one's dislike of the constraints one feels there, home is still the best, the safest place to be.

5. Silencing and Inherent Silence

In the act of speaking for the other, providing it with a voice, we silence it. As long as we keep on speaking for it, we won't get to hear what it has to say for itself—and, indeed, that may be exactly why we are speaking in the first place. Said says, "There were—and are—cultures and nations whose location is in the East, and their lives, histories and customs have a brute reality obviously greater than anything that could be said about them in the West" (5). Similarly, our discourse about childhood often replaces and even prevents our real perception of the brute realities of childhood.

For instance: we produce a children's literature that is almost totally silent on the subject of sexuality, presumably in order to allow ourselves to believe that children truly are as innocent as we claim—that their lives are devoid of sexuality. In doing so, however, we make it difficult for children to speak to us about their sexual concerns: our silence on the subject clearly asserts that we have no wish to hear about it, that we think children with such concerns are abnormal. And if we convince ourselves that they are abnormal, then we render ourselves unable to hear what children are saying even if they do attempt to speak about such matters.

The final result of the silencing of the other is that we actually do make it incomprehensible to us. According to Said,
The relationship between Orientalist and Orient was essentially hermeneutical: standing before a distant, barely intelligible civilization or cultural monument, the Orientalist scholar reduced the obscurity by translating, sympathetically portraying, inwardly grasping the hard-to-reach object. Yet the Orientalist remained outside the Orient, which, however much it was made to appear intelligible, remained beyond the Occident. This cultural, temporal, and geographical distance was expressed in metaphors of depth, secrecy, and sexual promise: phrases like “the veils of an Eastern bride” or “the inscrutable Orient” passed into the common language. (222)

In other words, the more we say about what we understand, the more we understand that we can’t understand. The more we claim to know about childhood, the more we find ourselves insisting on its mysterious otherness—its silence about itself—and the more we feel the need to observe yet more, interpret yet further: to say yet more, and thus, create much more silence for us to worry about and speak about. The adult observation of childhood as an other that does not observe itself is always doomed to fail to understand, and thus, doomed to continue replicating itself forever—or at least until it stops assuming its subject is indeed other. But as long as the study of childhood makes that assumption, it can continue to be a necessary (and dare I suggest, profitable?) pursuit of adults.

6. Inherent Danger

Our eternal desire and failure to understand the other confirms something else also—its paradoxical attractiveness and danger to us. That paradox clearly relates to “femaleness”—it is the essence of our traditional discourse about women. Said speaks of “the motif of the Orient as instigating danger. Rationality is undermined by Eastern excesses, those mysteriously attractive opposites to what seem to be normal values” (57). It is because Europeans find themselves attracted to those “excesses” of Orientals that they work to blot them out; they must try to make Orientals more like themselves attraeed to those “excesses” of Orientals that they work to blot them out; they must try to make Orientals more like them, and therefore weakening Europeans.

The parallels in our attitudes to childhood are obvious. What we chose to understand as childlike irrationality or lawlessness or carelessness is attractively lax, a temptation to be less responsible, less mature, less adult. If adults have a secret desire to act childishly, our doing so is truly to subject it to our power. To know something is to be separate from it, above it, objective; he neither tries nor wants to unsettle already firm convictions” (65). Neither, apparently, do most children’s writers and most adult experts in aspects of childhood.

7. The Stability of the Other

We have just seen how the mere fact of our speaking for what we see as a speechless group merely confirms its continuing silence—merely confirms that it always has been and always will be other than our speaking selves. One of the essential qualities of Orientalism is its insistence across centuries that there is such a thing as “an Oriental mind,” a set of basic characteristics that transcend not only mere individuals but also such minor distinctions as those between Arabs and Asians, or Hinduism and Islam, or Egyptians and Turks, and that the Oriental mind doesn’t change significantly despite the passing of time. Said asserts that, “whereas it is no longer possible to write learned (or even popular) disquisitions on either ‘the Negro mind’ or ‘the Jewish personality,’ it is perfectly possible to engage in such research as ‘the Islamic mind’ or ‘the Arab character” (262); indeed, a letter that appeared in my local paper as I was working on this essay insists that “Arab people do not share our modern thinking . . . . Modern man’s striving for progress and the well-being of all people is lacking in the Arabs’ social and governing systems” (Winnipeg Free Press, May 26, 1991); I doubt the paper would have published that letter if it had said “Israel” instead of “Arab.”

“Childhood” is equally stable in the works of child psychologists, writers of children’s fiction, and children’s literature specialists. Just as “the scholarly investigator took a type marked ‘Oriental’ for the same thing as any individual Oriental he might encounter” (230), Piaget assumed that the few individual Swiss children he studied could accurately represent the inherent cognitive development of all children in all times and all cultures. Contemporary children’s literature is filled with images of childhood experience that accord more with Wordsworth’s visions of idyllic childhood innocence than with the realities of modern children’s lives, and contemporary children’s literature journals are filled with the same few generalizations about how all children are creative (unlike most adults), or have limited attention spans (unlike most adults). And we happily assume that it must have been the imaginative bits in medieval or eighteenth century literature that the children in the audience responded to, rather than the religious or moral parts—as if medieval or eighteenth century children were inherently different from their parents, inherently one with the children of contemporary urban agnostic liberals.

The major effect of these “eternal truths” is, obviously, to confirm our own eternal difference from the other. “What the Orientalist does,” says Said, “is to confirm the Orient in his readers’ eyes; he neither tries nor wants to unsettle already firm convictions” (65). Neither, apparently, do most children’s writers and most adult experts in aspects of childhood.

8. Power

But why? Why must we continually confirm our limiting assumptions in this way? The answer is simple: power. Knowledge is, quite literally, power. When we talk about mastering a subject, we don’t often allow ourselves to see the literal truth of the metaphor: our doing so is truly to subject it to our power. To know something is to be separate from it, above it, objective about it, and therefore in a position to perceive (or simply invent) the truth of it—to be able, in other words, to act as if what one “knows” is in fact true. Thus, “knowing” that Orientals are different from and therefore inferior to themselves, Europeans have been able to justify their efforts to dominate the East—just as we North Americans continue to use our knowledge of “the Arab mind” to justify our efforts to dominate Iraq.

We adults similarly use our knowledge of “childhood” to dominate children. My children’s teachers have frequently justified blatantly cruel punishments or deceitfully manipulative uses of group pressure by telling me that children of this particular age or stage cannot possibly possess my subtle moral perceptions, and therefore are not actually being hurt. What would be painful for us is acceptable for them, and allows us to behave toward them as we would not behave towards each other.

By and large, children’s literature tends to be a more subtle version of the same kind of wielding of adult power. I spoke earlier about the silence of children’s literature on the subject of sexuality; indeed, we almost always describe childhood for children in the
hope, unconscious or otherwise, that the children will accept our
version of their lives. In a famous formulation, Jacqueline Rose
suggests that, "if children's fiction builds an image of the child inside
the book, it does so in order to secure the child who is outside the
book, the one who does not come so easily within its grasp" (2). In
other words, we show children what we "know" about childhood
in hopes that they will take our word for it and become like the
fictional children we have invented—and therefore, less threatening
to us.

In crude forms, this is simply a matter of providing children
stories which ask them to see themselves in and thus accept the
moral conclusions reached by child characters they are supposed to,
as we say, "identify with." In more subtle novels, as Rose shows,
we provide young readers with a "realistic" description of people
and events that insist on the reality of one particular way of looking
at the world and themselves—our way.

9. Domination

Said says, "The Orient was Orientalized not only because it was
discovered to be 'Oriental' in all those ways considered common-
place by an average nineteenth-century European, but also because
it could be—that is, submitted to being—made Oriental" (5-6).
Children do similarly submit to our ideas about what it means to be
childish, and do show us the childish behavior we make it clear to
them we wish to see, simply because they rarely have the power to
do anything else. Exercising power over the weak in this way might
well be perceived as an act of bullying. If children are indeed weak
enough to be so easily overwhelmed by our power over them, then
they are weak enough that our unquestioning willingness to
exercise that power in the blind faith that it's good for them implies
some moral weakness in ourselves.

10. Self-Confirming Description

The fact that Orientals might be "made Oriental"—be manipu-
lated into acting as if they actually are what the outside other sees
them as being—suggests the extent to which a discourse of the other
can become a self-fulfilling prophecy. As Said says, "we might
expect that the ways by which it is recommended that a lion's
fierceness be handled will actually increase its fierceness, force it to
be fierce since that is what it is, and that is what in essence we know
or can only know about it" (94). 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 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. Indeed, in the current children's book market, driven
more and more by the marketing needs of a few major bookstore
chains, almost no other kind of book gets published, and therefore
few children have any way of discovering if they might indeed like
any other kind. Whether or not real children really do share these
attitudes, we have provided ourselves with no way of perceiving
their behavior as representing anything else.

11. Self-Fulfilling Prophecy

Furthermore, real children do often act as we perceive them to
act. The discourse of the other does often manage to absorb the
other into its conceptions of otherness. In treating children like
children, we may well doom them to a conviction in and inability
to transcend their inadequacy.

12. Other as Opposite

A century or so ago, the British colonial official Lord Cromer
summed up his knowledge of the East by saying, "I content myself
with noting the fact that somehow or other the Oriental generally
acts, speaks, and thinks in a manner exactly opposite to the
European" (Said 39). Or in other words: I define who I am myself
as a European by seeing the Oriental as everything I am not. A main
purpose of a discourse of the other is always this sort of self-
definition: we characterize the other as other in order to define
ourselves. "The Oriental is irrational, depraved (fallen), childlike,
different," says Said; "thus the European is rational, virtuous,
mature, 'normal'" (40). Similarly, we adults can see ourselves as
rational, virtuous, mature, and normal exactly because we have
irrational, depraved (fallen), childlike, different children to compare
ourselves to. We need children to be childlike so that we can
understand what maturity is—the opposite of being childlike.

13. The Other as Inherently Contradictory

"For a number of evident reasons the Orient was always in the
position both of outsider and of incorporated weak partner for the
West" (Said 208). This statement implies an inherent contradiction
in the discourse of the other as I've described it thus far, one that's
highly significant in discussions of children's literature.

On the one hand, as we've seen, Orientals are the opposite of
Europeans, in ways so basic and unchanging that the Oriental mind
transcends differences of specific places and times, and always in
ways that define European superiority. If there were no more
colonies to colonize, imperialists could no longer perceive them-
elves as being imperial; and so in a very basic sense "Oriental"
means "eternally and inalterably opposite to human."

On the other hand, however, as we've also seen, part of the
European's superior humanity is a more evolved sense of obligation
to others less superior; the strong must colonize the weak in order
to help them become stronger, and so, in a very basic sense,
"Oriental" means, "a less evolved being with the potential to become
human."

A non-human in the process of becoming more human. There is
no way of resolving this contradiction: Orientals cannot be both
our unchanging opposite and in the process of changing into us.
The same contradiction appears in our discourse about children
and children's literature, and there is no way of resolving it there either.
Instead, we tend to flip-flop, even within single texts, between two
contradictory ideas about children and our reasons for writing to or
about them.

I learned about this contradiction as I read through a Horn Book
that appeared as I was preparing this piece (May/June 1991),
looking for evidence of the current status of conventional assump-
tions about childhood in the journal most likely to represent it. On
the one hand, various authors and advertisers told me, "the strength
of children's imaginations is such that they can understand what
other children are feeling" (261) and "their imaginations make
fanciful things become magically real" (275). On the other hand,
however, children reading one new book "will begin to look at their

surroundings from a new perspective" (inside front cover) and another book "encourages children to look beyond and into" (264). In other words, children are essentially and inherently imaginative, and so we must provide them with books which will teach them how to be imaginative.

In a concise statement of this paradox, one Horn Book writer talks about a book which describes how some children find an inventive use for an impractical gift: "the message in this celebration of play is optimistic. It suggests that children take from their surroundings, no matter how inconsistent or inappropriate, the raw material for imaginative creation" (368). Is this a suggestion in the sense of an evocative description, or in the sense of a recommendation? It seems to be both at once; children need to learn from books by adults how to act like children.

14. Origin vs. Decline

How is it that we adults know better than children do how to act like children? Said provides an answer for this, too, as he describes how Orientalists approached their subject:

proper knowledge of the Orient proceeded from a thorough study of the classical texts, and only after that to an application of those texts to the modern Orient. Faced with the obvious decrepitude and political impotence of the modern Oriental, the European Orientalist found it his duty to rescue some portion of a lost, past, classical Oriental grandeur in order to facilitate ameliorations' in the present Orient. (79)

The parallel "classical texts" of childhood fall into two categories. First there are written descriptions of children of earlier times, not just the "classic" children's books but also the classic texts of child psychology—Piaget, Vygotsky, Kohlberg. Second, there are our personal versions of our own childhoods: what we identify as childhood memories. Believing that these texts describe an ideal childhood—childhood as it ought to be—and perceiving a gulf between this ideal childhood and the real behavior of children we know, we work in literature and life to make children more like the ideal—to restore to them a "childhood" they appear to have lost sight of.

But did we really experience childhood as we claim to remember it? Or have we come to believe we did because we ourselves in both our childhood and our adult lives have also read books by and had interactions with adults who worked to impose their visions of childhood upon us? Perhaps what we call "childhood" is always an imaginative construct of the adult mind, always being moved not only outwards to blind us to our actual perceptions of contemporary children but also backwards into the past, to blind us to our memories of our actual past experiences. Perhaps there never was a childhood as innocent, as creative, as spontaneous as adults like to imagine. Perhaps children are always more like adults than adults are ever able to see.

15. Circularity

Children oppressed by adult versions of childhood turn into the adults who oppress other children. Said suggests a similar circularity in the thought of Europeans about Orientals. Since the ancient Orient invented by European scholars is assumed to be the past of Europe as well as of the contemporary Orient, Europeans could assume that they were the true inheritors of that imaginary Oriental past. For instance, European linguists posited an ancient Indo-European of their own invention that evolved into both contemporary Eastern and European languages, then claimed that their own European languages were the natural evolution of Indo-European, the Eastern ones merely degenerate versions of it. This conviction of their own connection to ancient purity not only allowed Europeans to point out the degenerate nature of the modern Orient but also to work to replace it with the truly classical values they themselves represented an evolved version of. Similarly, we adults posit our own imagined childhood as what we must work to persuade contemporary children of.

But in actual fact, Orientals do not turn into Europeans who then oppress a new generation of Orientals. What distinguishes our thinking about childhood from other discourses about otherness is that in this case, the other does quite literally turn into ourselves. All those who survive childhood become adults, adults who tend to think of children as their other. Even those adults who happen to be feminists tend to talk and think of children of both sexes in terms of metaphors redolent of traditional assumptions about femininity—weakness and passivity; and those members of oppressed minorities who are most adamant about their own need for freedom from oppression are often among those who are most vociferous about controlling the image of the world presented in children's literature, trying to ensure that children adopt their own correct attitudes. The irony in that is as obvious as it is depressing: if our thinking about children is an act of colonization, then it is in fact ourselves we are colonizing, ourselves we are oppressing—albeit at one remove.

16. Fixity vs. Process

Said suggests two contradictory modes by which Europeans address Orientals. One is the evolutionary enterprise of educating them into being more like Europeans; the other is the self-confirming enterprise of educating them into being what Europeans have always imagined Orientals to be—typical representatives of "the Oriental mind." The same contradiction is so central to discourse about children and in children's literature that it might well be their defining characteristic.

On the one hand, we believe that good children's books accurately describe what is often identified as the wonder or spontaneity or creativity of childhood. In other words, they are good because they teach children how to be childlike by providing them with appropriate images of childhood. On the other hand, however, their themes or messages are almost always about becoming less egocentric, more rational, etc. In other words, they teach children how to be adults. Thus Anne of Green Gables or Harriet the Spy are considered to be good books, first, because they capture the joy of childhood, and second, because they end up by confirming adult ethical concerns.

This inherent contradiction, which appears in just about all children's literature, emerges automatically from its being a discourse of the other. Viewed from the perspective of its efforts to colonize, children's literature is essentially and inevitably an attempt to keep children opposite to ourselves and an attempt to make children more like us. It may be exactly that contradiction at its heart that is its most characteristic generic marker.

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By now I've persuaded myself that child psychology and children's literature are imperialist activities; I hope I've persuaded you. And most of us at least claim to dislike imperialism. So what should we do about it? What can we do about it?
We might, of course, attempt to do what Peter Hunt calls "childist" criticism—to think about children and read children's literature from a child's point of view. But in fact, this is merely a deception—another form of allowing ourselves to see and speak for them. Male readers can't really know what it feels like for women to read male-oriented descriptions of women, any more than masculinist authors could avoid producing descriptions of women that were male-oriented in the first place; and no more can we adults read as children, even if we once could. The best we can do is to line this path is to read as what we imagine children to be—that is, in terms of our adult assumptions. Indeed, because it's our adult attempts to see and speak for children that create children's literature and child psychology in the first place, our attempts to analyze texts in these areas are doomed to inhabit the same discourse as they would be if we were trying to reveal and criticize.

So again: what can we do? We might simply say that we can't do anything. Theory teaches us that all discourse is in fact a discourse of the other. According to linguists, it's an inherent characteristic of language that any given word can be meaningful only within a field of differences—only by being other than other words. The very act of making meaning requires us both to evoke an other (what we don't mean) and to marginalize it (make it less than what we do want to say).

Furthermore, we wouldn't speak or write if we didn't imagine another less than ourselves in at least one important way: an audience that doesn't yet know what we wish it to understand. As I do in this essay, we always speak to our audience in an attempt to speak for it—to colonize it with our own perceptions of things, including itself.

If our discourse about childhood is imperialist, then, it may not be much more imperialist than any other form of human speech. But that inevitable imperialism might be less dangerous if we were willing to acknowledge it and at least attempt to be aware of it. Orientalism could oppress vast numbers of people exactly by denying that it was oppressive—indeed, by insisting that it was the opposite of oppressive, that it had a high-minded interest in helping others less fortunate than oneself.

To be aware of the possible oppressiveness of our supposedly objective or even benevolent truths and assumptions about childhood does not mean that their potential oppressiveness will disappear. But we can at least work on it. We can try to move beyond thinking about individual children as if they did in fact represent some alien other. We can become suspicious of adults who claim to "like children," as if they didn't indeed share qualities en masse, and we can wonder about the suitability of those who make such claims to become teachers or child psychologists. We can try to see the oppressiveness inherent in our use of concepts such as "the eternal innocence of childhood" or stages of cognitive or moral development. We can try to operate as if the humanity children share with us matters more than their presumed differences from us.

I have to admit it: I find it hard to imagine a world in which children have the right to vote, serve on juries, and control their own destinies. But then I remind myself of all those people in recent history who found it hard to imagine a world in which women or Arabs could do these same things.

Treating children as if they were really just human beings like the rest of us might have some specific consequences unfortunate for readers of this journal: it might mean the end of something specifically identified as children's literature. It might do us out of a job.

But I don't think it will. No matter how hard we try, we aren't ever going to escape the imperialist tendencies at the heart of human discourse. There will always be somebody out there finding a new way to think about children or write about childhood; and the new ways will always inevitably work to impose somebody's ideas of childhood on both other adults and on children. Come to think if it, that's exactly what I'm trying to do here in this essay. The only difference is that I'm trying hard not to allow myself to forget that.

Indeed, not forgetting is the key to useful criticism. Which is to say: we critics of children's literature still have a job to do, and the job is to try to stop forgetting or ignoring or denying the ways in which children's literature is as inherently imperialist as all human discourse tends to be. If it is, then we need to explore how. What claims do specific texts make on the children who read them? How do they represent childhood for children, and why might they be representing it in that way? What interest of adults might the representation be serving? Perhaps above all, how does it work? How does children's literature make its claims on child readers? What are the strategies by which texts encourage children to accept adult interpretations of their behavior? And can we devise ways of helping children to be more aware of those strategies themselves, to protect themselves from the oppressions of the other?

Oh, yes, and one other thing: can we remember always to ask all these questions about our own writing about childhood and children's literature? Can I, for instance, allow myself the humbling embarrassment of suddenly realizing, as I did when I first wrote the last sentence in the preceding paragraph, my own imperial tendencies? For imperialist they undoubtedly are: in order to combat colonialism, I am recommending a benevolently helpful colonizing attitude towards children.

NOTES

1Rose focuses on the effort to persuade children of adult versions of childhood; in a sense, the thinking I report here is an attempt to expand on that thread of colonial thought in all of our discourses about childhood, and also, to relate it to the other major and opposite thrust of children's literature: its effort to turn children from acceptable versions of childhood into the right sort of adults.

2A discussion of "the other" as that which allows us to perceive ourselves bulks large in the work of Lacan, Derrida, and Foucault. According to Lacan, "The unconscious is the discourse of the Other" (Ecrits 172); Lacan explores how the other is what defines the self not only by being what the self is not, but also by being what it lacks and therefore what it both fears and desires. The way in which adults tend to see children in turns as wonderfully innocent and woefully ignorant, desirably or disgustingly different, reveals their function for us as this Lacanian sort of other; we make them into our own unconscious, prior to and separate from our real human life.

Jacques Derrida offers a different version of a similar idea: "Man calls himself man only by drawing limits excluding his other from the play of supplementarity: the purity of nature, of animality, primitivism, childhood, madness, divinity" (244). As ideal representations of this list of qualities, children are purer and better than adult humans, and therefore, in a way, less than human—not in fact human at all. Other.

The particularly useful work of Michel Foucault centers on how a repressive discourse of the other led to and is represented by the history of institutions like prisons and asylums and of disciplines like...
sociology and psychiatry that are devoted to efforts to make "abnormal" people normal. It's not hard to see how Foucault's analysis of institutions applies to schools, and how his analysis of disciplines applies to child psychology and children's literature. Indeed, Foucault suggests that the techniques that work to change people from abnormal self-interested individuals into a typical docile norm emerged first in schools before they moved to hospitals, the military, and prisons (138). Our ideas about children may be the basis for our ideas about criminals and lunatics.

See, for instance, John Berger's *Ways of Seeing*. In *Vision and Painting*, Norman Bryson provides a detailed analysis of "the logic of the gaze."

A variety of psychological critiques of Piagetian and other developmental theories can be found in books by Charles J. Brainerd, Jean-Claude Brief, Linda S. Siegel and Charles J. Brainerd, and Susan Sugarman. Further critiques can be found in the work of Robert Coles, Carol Gilligan, and Gareth Matthews.

And as I suggested earlier, our supposed "memories" of childhood may not in fact be actual memories at all.

**WORKS CITED**


