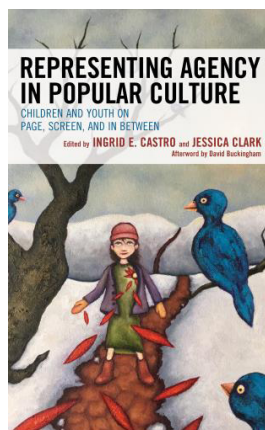


Review/Recension

INGRID E. CASTRO & JESSICA CLARK (EDS.)

**REPRESENTING AGENCY  
IN POPULAR CULTURE**  
**Children And Youth on Page,  
Screen, and In Between**

Lanham: Lexington Books, 2019 (299 pp.)



*Representing Agency in Popular Culture: Children And Youth on Page, Screen, and In Between* is an anthology about the representation of children's agency in popular culture, edited by Ingrid E. Castro and Jessica Clark. The book aims to contribute to research on children's agency in two main ways. Firstly, by examining agency from humanities and arts perspectives. Secondly, by also raising new questions about the concept of agency as such.

The book has twelve chapters in addition to a preface by the editors and an afterword by David Buckingham. Taken as a whole, this is a popular culture and childhood studies book, but many of the chapters have an orientation towards media studies or comparative literature. The authors work at universities in the United States, the United Kingdom, Germany, Australia and New Zealand, and the material they study includes even more countries, such as China, Japan and Northern Ireland. Despite its focus on agency, this is a broad and varied anthology. The twelve chapters are divided into three sections – Political Agency, Social Agency and Generational Agency. This separation could be questioned on the grounds that both political and generational agencies are inherently social, but it gives the book structure and works well in this context. As even a very limited description of the anthology's content requires space, I will only highlight one chapter in each section before dealing further with the book as a whole.

In the political section, an article worth mentioning is John C. Nelson's contribution "Wise as Serpents and Innocent as Doves': Agency and Dehumanization of Children During Wartime." It fo-

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cuses two films: *Osama* (2003) and *Turtles Can Fly* (2004). The former is set in Afghanistan, while the latter takes place on the Iraqi-Turkish border. In Nelson's analysis, the films show how the children develop agencies of resistance and ingenuity out of necessity, partly due to highly restricted social spaces and partly due to the abuse that they are subjected to. His article is a good example of the anthology's broad scope and of the authors' broad knowledge. Nelson analyses Shakespeare as well as the Western war story genre before going into the analysis of his main, and much less known, Iraqi and Afghan material – which is treated with regard to both agency and gender.

Terri Suico's chapter is a representative example of the social agency section of the volume. "Fractured Friendships and Finding Oneself: Adolescent Girls Losing Friends and Gaining Their Voices in Recent Young Adult Literature" is thematically similar to the two surrounding chapters, which are also about friendship, but the girls here are younger, and the empirical material consists of the graphic memoir *Real Friends* (2017) by Shannon Hale and LeUyen Pham, the graphic novel *Roller Girl* (2015) by Victoria Jamieson as well as the young adult novel *Where You'll Find Me* (2016) by Natasha Friend. Suico demonstrates how the girls in these novels gain more agency and become more capable of managing their lives not only through the process of winning friendships, but also through losing them. In addition, Suico highlights differences in terms of medium between the two graphic novels and the typographic one, but one cannot help but wonder if not more could have been made of them. For example, do the panel in *Roller Girl* showing Rachel's expression or the "medieval" depiction at the end of *Real Friends* do something that would have been hard to replicate in prose? And if so, does it matter in relation to the topic of agency?

An interesting contribution in the generational section is Sin Wen Lau and Shih-Wen Sue Chen's article "Children's Agency and the Notion of *Guai* in Chinese Reality Television." *Guai* represents a Chinese ideal, commonly viewed as including characteristics like obedience, sensibility and academic achievements. However, the authors present a more nuanced definition of the concept, which allows for moderation and some elasticity. In the reality series examined here, children are supposed to solve problems with their fathers, and *guai* immediately comes into focus, as it plays an important role in the fathers' views on how children should be raised and serves as a framework for the children's negotiations with their parents. Lau and Chen demonstrate how the children find room to adjust the presented problems and influence the older generation's perspectives

on things like obedience and gender roles. The authors manage to take historical, cultural, philosophical and medial aspects into account while staying on target (i.e. children's agency). The fact that their empirical material is so different from Western tradition makes this even better.

The great variation in terms of content that these and the rest of the articles display must be considered highly valuable, both in relation to the anthology's various subjects and in light of the need for more pop culture research targeting children's agency – particularly so as variation here does not come at the expense of focus. In addition to delivering what it promises, the book opens up for and strengthens the position of comparative literature and media studies within multidisciplinary fields such as youth studies and childhood studies, which still commonly are dominated by the social sciences. This is a very good thing for all parties involved.

However, some critique can also be directed at the book, and some has already been built into it through David Buckingham's afterword. Buckingham briefly raises an issue that is really about the anthology's whole premise, and which could be developed into a few important questions: What is the relation between actual agency and fictional agency? What does it mean that the child protagonists whose agencies are portrayed in film and literature are part of and have been designed to fill functions in *fictions*? What is the significance of the fact that all the material is created by adults, in some cases perhaps also *for* adults? These questions are not critical of the anthology's idea, but they have to be asked and require answers to a greater extent than they receive in this anthology.

The problem is touched upon by John Kerr in "Children Redefining Adult Reality in Maternal Gothic Films," where he explores the mother-child relationship in horror films, showing that while the films focus on the children and how they process their parents' deaths, handle obsessed adults or simply try to get adults to believe them, the children's agencies ultimately benefit the adults more. At the end of his chapter he points out that the representation of children's agency in fiction may say more about the adult creators than about the children depicted. His ending note is ultimately about whether children's perspectives can be achieved by the adult who categorizes them and tries to recreate them.

Another author who also touches upon the issue, albeit with a different approach, is Jessica Clark in her article "Speddies' with Spray Paints: Intersections of Agency, Childhood, and Disability in Award-Winning Young Adult Fiction." Clark, who is also one of the

editors of the anthology, draws attention to how the fictional characters in her material are protected by their friendships in situations where they are considered different by the surroundings. The friendships here become a sort of prerequisite for agency. She argues that the representation of children's agencies in fiction can help to loosen up and question antiquated and problematic social roles in real life. This has a great deal to do with the complicated relationship between fiction and reader (in a broad sense). Does fiction reflect and affect real life, and if so, how?

A third stance can be glimpsed in Michelle Nicole Boyer-Kelly's chapter "Māori Agents of Change: Examining the Children of *Whale Rider*, *Once Were Warriors*, and *Potiki*." The chapter deals with how young Māori handle rapid change within the framework of a traditional society, which they also use to create new identities. The empirical material here consists of two novels and the subsequent film adaptations – Witi Ihimaera's *Whale Rider*, which was published in 1987 and made into a film in 2002, and Alan Duff's *Once Were Warriors* first published in 1990 and adapted to the screen in 1994 – with Patricia Grace's novel *Potiki* (1986) discussed towards the end as a potential future object of study. You could argue that Boyer-Kelly's text implies that the fictions discussed are imprints of actual conditions in New Zealand. Here, the notion of fiction as a representation of lived experience can be linked to the often criticized pragmatic treatment of literature, where its literariness is lost.

None of these approaches are untenable by any means, nor left without consideration. But they would be served by a more thorough and critical treatment. The problem can be clearly observed in the very first analysis in the volume, intended to exemplify its overall perspective. In the introduction, Castro and Clark begin with Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1960) and argue that the story should be read as a story about children's agency – in addition to the canonized interpretations – because the child Scout is focalized. They see (following a quote from Harper Lee) the book as a form of childhood memories, as lived experience. What they do not touch upon, however, is the function that this focalization has in the novel, where Scout's perspective and largely privileged agency serve to justify the portrayal of Atticus as a white, American role model. The adult reader is invited, through the focalization, to sympathize with the perspective of an admiring daughter. The privileged agency of this white, middle-class child lets the reader explore the fictional world freely, unhindered by the boundaries of class and colour that are very real and obstructive for most other people. Here, in a

fiction–reader perspective, the fictional child’s agency is put to adult, idealistic use.

In his afterword, Buckingham also points out that while the anthology aims to develop the concept of agency, several of the contributions lean towards psychological and cognitive theories of agency, which he thinks is problematic given that the more recent, sociological perspectives on agency were developed in response to the psychological ones. Buckingham lets Albert Bandura’s theory about core agentic properties stand as an example. As Bandura explains in “Toward a Psychology of Human Agency” (2006), the agentic properties are “intentionality” (to have intentions and some idea of how to achieve a goal), “forethought” (extending intentionality in time – i.e. plan for the future), “self-reactiveness” (the ability to regulate a course of action) and “self-reflectiveness” (the ability to reflect upon one’s own identity). In Bandura’s theory, humans gradually develop a self and an identity from childhood to adulthood. While Bandura perceives this theory to constitute a middle ground between individual and society, Buckingham disagrees. He points out that it is based upon individual cognition of a surrounding environment, and that it implies a view of childhood as a normative matter of becoming rather than being. As Bandura’s theory is referred to in five of the entries as well as in the introduction, this critique potentially concerns a good portion of the anthology.

Buckingham then moves on by dating the sociological perspective on agency, dominant in the anthology’s other chapters, to the 1990s. Here, the criticism is less sharp, and Buckingham also highlights many merits in the chapters he touches directly upon. But it nevertheless appears as criticism when only one out of twelve contributions explicitly gets a theoretical thumbs up: Tabitha Parry Collins, Mary L. Fahrenbruck and Leanna Lucero’s chapter on trans perspectives on children’s agency (which modifies Bandura’s theories).

Naturally, the editors do not quite agree with Buckingham. His critique is played down in their introduction. In their summary of the afterword, Castro and Clark say that Buckingham “reminds us” about the tug of war between psychology and sociology, which they consider proverbial. In turn, they point out that the search for a third path between the two major perspectives has been going on for at least twenty years.

You could also add, to the defense of the anthology on the issues raised by Buckingham, that you do not have to agree with his characterization of Bandura’s theory, and even if you do agree, some of the chapters that refer to this theory do so merely in passing. In Anja

Höing's contribution "Animalic Agency: Intersecting the Child and the Animal in Popular British Children's Fiction," for example, there is a brief reference, not a complete adoption of Bandura's perspective. The author is clearly seeking new ground and is well aware of traditional perspectives on agency, childhood and the relationship between nature and culture. In her chapter, she manages to show how these are present but at the same time transcended in five recent children's books. She finds, among other things, that the protagonists balance the differences between culture and nature that are essential in older conceptions of children and their agency, but without the books becoming traditional, idyllic descriptions of childhood.

All in all, this is a valuable contribution to the research in its field(s). You could read a lot or very little into the apparent tension between introduction and afterword, but if you do read a lot into it, it should be considered a strength rather than a weakness. This anthology allows for different perspectives, and does not hide tensions and disagreements from its readers.

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