Introduction: Literary Cultures and Twenty-First-Century Childhoods

Nathalie op de Beeck

In the midst of a turbulent century, how are we to characterize twenty-first-century literary culture and childhood? How might we understand the ways literary depictions of imaginary and actual young people inform our lived experiences and influence our policies and our metaphors? Two decades into the new millennium, we belong to a world population of more than 7.5 billion people, about 30 percent of whom are under the age of 18 and legally classified as minors—the children and youth of literary cultures moderated (if not always created) by adult gatekeepers (United Nations World Population Prospects 2017). In any given moment, we are awash in bewildering international events reported and shared across multiple media platforms in real time. We witness clashes among those calling for global human rights and those espousing nationalism and xenophobia, and we wonder at the prospects for today’s young people, their voices, their health, and their votes.¹ We invent and interact with marvelous macro- and micro-technologies that make our lives easier, yet we rely on cheap labor (including child labor) to produce and sustain these

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technologies; in the production and fabrication of our conveniences, we jeopardize biodiversity and the climate that up-and-coming generations need to survive.

Daily, we filter an outpouring of art, literature, news, and criticism in response to our strained circumstances, and our children learn to see this all-at-once culture as normal. In our literature and creative work, we project a spectrum of planetary outlooks from utopian to cataclysmic, optimistic to untenable. Even as we develop our cyborg posthuman consciousness and an uneasy awareness of our deep kinship with nonhuman species, we reckon with all-too-human matters of gender, racial, national, age, and religious difference; we recognize how intersectionality determines individual identities, collective status, and oppression amid uneven social hierarchies. Young people grow up steeped in these volatile environments, engaging in international conversations across social media and comprehending the magnitude of the gap between the haves and have-nots, between the critically literate and the uninformed, between those with considerable control over information and power and those on the economic and technological fringes. The literary cultures of childhood, metaphors of childhood, and children themselves are tremendously rich in potential and at the same time under grave threat.

In this time of radical change and diverse perspectives, we imagine an array of possible futures for those young people recently born into this dazzling and interconnected world. Our book and media formats reflect a technical paradigm shift: As Eliza Dresang and Kathryn McClelland explained at the turn of the century, “Radical change, as a theoretical construct, identifies and explains books with characteristics reflecting the types of interactivity, connectivity, and access that permeate our emerging digital society” (“Radical Change: Digital Age Literature and Learning,” 160). Trends in narrative content and snapshots of multifarious childhoods indicate a rush to rethink the experience of youth as well. Representing twenty-first-century childhoods in print and in digital formats, determining young people’s roles in recent social and political history, and isolating trends in present-day literary culture and childhood is a daunting and near-impossible prospect, complicated by the proliferation of niche audiences and emergent identity categories that deserve utmost respect and consideration. The project of identifying literary cultures of childhood navigates controversial opinions about what constitutes contemporary youth and reckons with the slipperiness of the child-as-referent. Depending on the context and the audience, the child and childhood may
be connotative terms, strategically deployed for their sentimental or ideological potency. We could be referring to a socially constructed, imagined, metaphorical child and a prescribed, universal, or collective condition known as childhood. The child and childhood at other times may denote actual individuals whose well-being depends upon the care of others—everyday, real-life, not-so-ideal children with singular, personal, and unpredictable childhoods. Speaking of actual children, idealized children, and the literary cultures of childhood reawakens Jacqueline Rose’s much-debated assertion about “the impossibility of children’s fiction.” Rose famously argues that children’s fiction attempts and fails to bridge a generational-experiential gap between adults who write and young audiences who read. Yet the twenty-first century, and the dizzying blur among generational categories, complicates the understanding of literature for, about, with, and even by children (Rose, The Case of Peter Pan).

This collection of chapters thus asks how the written word and related media presently comprehend, describe, and shape the contemporary child and childhood. As a snapshot of our current moment, this collection identifies emergent trends, points to how longstanding conventions around childhood and literature are faring, and observes destabilizing factors in literature and media for and about children. This collection explores how literary and artistic representations of childhood and youth mirror or twist twenty-first-century perspectives. Readers might think of these chapters as a core sample of literary practice and a speculation on the century to come, with a convenient numerical marker (the year 2000 to date) and without the luxury of hindsight.

As we question what our current century will mean for us and for children, we might reflect on the year 1900, when Swedish social theorist Ellen Key confidently proclaimed that the twentieth century would be “the century of the child.” After the publication of her book of that title—published in an English-language edition in 1909—Key’s future-directed prediction became “a slogan all over Europe” (Rönnberg, 3) an anticipation of special privileges for the youngest populations, and a rallying cry for worldwide education reformers invested in childhood security and autonomy. Did Key’s memorable statement come true in any affirmative sense, so that we of the twenty-first century might build upon a reliable foundation? What were the implications and the limits of Key’s assertion? If the twentieth century was the century of the child, what sort of children and childhoods did the century’s events produce, and what remains unfinished today?
Literary and artistic constructions of childhood, and nonfiction accounts of lived childhood, both reinforce and contradict Key’s promise. In the early decades of the twenty-first century, we still find ourselves grappling with the legacies of past centuries and their cascading effects on children and all people. We realize anew how the ripples of imperialism, and of revolution, continue to reshape our world and our generations. We see how we have been informed by stories and also how we have been failed by textbook histories that are only ever partial (and always edited to reflect a presumed status quo). Like Walter Benjamin’s Angel of History, we are caught up in a storm called progress, gazing at the debris of the past.

Reflecting on twentieth-century events and cultural productions, we recognize unresolved opinions about the idealized children Key implied, and how our present zeitgeist makes it possible to ask whose child the past century validated. Commentators now link Key’s outwardly optimistic phrase to eugenicist notions about evolution, discredited recapitulation theories favoring Anglo-European dominance, and the medical, psychological, and educational establishments’ concerns with “the adequate reproduction of the human race” in a specifically racialized and nationalized sense (Dekker, 136). Throughout the twentieth century, children worldwide faced dire threats to their health, education, moral growth, and adult communities, despite a growing attention to socioeconomically fortunate young people as market influences and sources of cultural cachet (see Kinchin and O’Connor; Johnson; Solomon). Some 120 years on, these issues are still relevant, as we span the period from 1918’s Spanish influenza to 2020’s COVID-19 pandemic, from 1920’s women’s suffrage to 2020’s massive, global Black Lives Matter movement.

If the twentieth century became the century of the child, at least for some, it became so in the sense that public attention turned toward the categories of the child and childhood, and not because children themselves universally fared better than they had in all recorded history. Childhood was more rigorously described, monitored, and documented than ever before in this era of scientific and ideological curiosity, influenced by nineteenth-century endeavors including Friedrich Froebel’s theories of play and Louis Agassiz’s concept of nature study; paradigm-shattering turn-of-the-century work in psychoanalysis by Sigmund Freud; G. Stanley Hall’s child study movement and his monumental psychological report on Adolescence (1904); Maria Montessori’s educational theory and school movement; and John Dewey’s democratic educational philosophy. While medical advances, personal insurance, and healthcare, declining child and maternal mortality,
improved labor laws for working-class families (even though some outspokenly protested the loss of their children’s income), and increased access to public and affordable education improved the lots of many young people, the twentieth century also saw attention and resources lavished on certain fortunate children and families, to the neglect or outright abuse of less affluent children and historically oppressed groups.6 This was the period, in Viviana Zelizer’s words, of “pricing the priceless child,” and in the twenty-first century, debates still rage as to whether and how (and whose) childhood is priceless or sacred (Zelizer; Thorne).

International conflict, hard-won by ostensibly democratic nations, brought tenuous periods of peace to the twentieth century. As the decades advanced, Anglophone nations and former colonies dealt with the complex results of slavery, imperial conquest, diaspora, and inherited societal inequities. For instance, until 1954—and unofficially for years thereafter, to the present day—African American children attended segregated schools and suffered under Jim Crow laws. Until the 1980s, Native American children, Canadian indigenous children, and Australian Aboriginal children endured so-called boarding or residential schools that suppressed indigenous knowledges and undermined sovereignty.7 South African children suffered under an official system of apartheid, and non-official forms of apartheid and segregation persist. Mirroring these social, economic, and political histories, literature written in English during the twentieth century and into the twenty-first century disproportionately represents and is addressed to young people with Anglo-European and Anglo-American heritage, as well as middle- to upper-middle-class upbringings. The book trade of the twentieth century normalized a narrow vision of what childhood and youth could or should be, eliding other lived realities. If sheltered and materially comfortable childhoods have been treated as conventional in mass media entertainment of the past century, diverse childhood experiences—in the long shadows of slavery, servitude, colonialism, and genocide—consistently have been devalued or erased in a way that scholarly and popular audiences have only now begun to fathom. A range of childhood experience largely went—and still goes, to some extent—unaccounted-for, rendering children doubly marginalized and requiring that twenty-first-century scholars locate and re-evaluate past literature in regard to youth and social justice.8 Twenty-first-century scholarship on childhood is characterized by fresh attempts to plumb the archives and amend the enormous gaps in literature for and about children of color and of marginalized demographics, as well as by efforts to account for
authentic childhood experiences across time and in the present day (see, e.g., Robin Bernstein, Kate Capshaw, Kenneth Kidd, Julia Mickenberg, Philip Nel, Mavis Reimer, and Kathryn Bond Stockton—to name just a few scholars participating in this vital recovery effort).

During the twentieth century, as marketers aimed to connect with young people’s economic power, childhood came to be seen in terms of just these sorts of demographics. Demographic categories expanded, with consequences for literature, education, bookselling, librarianship, and literary depictions of youth. In the United States, Hall’s category of adolescents and historically recognized and distinct categories like infants, babies, toddlers, and tots were augmented in the 1910s by teen-agers (which soon lost its quaint hyphen), at mid-century by categories including preteens and tweens (terms applied from the 1920s to the 1940s and popularized from the 1960s to present). Later, marketing categories (some say genres) emerged to further divide audiences into young adult (YA) and—since approximately 2009—20 something new adult categories, new adults being those who have outgrown young adulthood but not all of its trappings or literary interests. This ever-expanding lexicon calls to mind media critic Henry Jenkins’ remark: “We do not so much discard old conceptions of the child as accrue additional meanings around what remains one of our most culturally potent signifiers” (Jenkins, 15). Jenkins’ point echoes Adam Phillips’ comparison of what it is like to be a child and the concepts older people devise to explain it: “If the child, and stories about childhood like psychoanalysis, have acquired a quasi-religious significance, have become our most convincing essentialism, it is perhaps because children are, as their parents always say, impossible” (Phillips 155). Such cultural criticism and theorization should give us pause, even as we persist in assigning reductive categories based on age and our own grown-up assumptions.

Whether demographically categorizable or not, young people of different races, classes, genders, and ages experienced the twentieth century, and experience the present day, in diverse and phenomenally unequal ways. Socioeconomically and legally, those categorized as children have incomplete status as citizens or as full human beings (Woodhouse 2004, 2010). Cooperative global and intergovernmental organizations, and worldwide non-governmental organizations and charitable foundations, and more localized and national administrations made only halting progress toward the equitable treatment and representation of young people. With each new global, national, or sectarian conflict came updates to
existing, but inadequate, protections and laws (Fass, “Historical Context”). Across the twentieth century, young people’s rights to their basic needs and to protection were stated in multiple treaties, legal accords, and official documents, yet these statements have been and largely remain advisory, due to loopholes that reward ratifying countries with the ability to make special exceptions to the rules (e.g., concerning child labor or gender equity across nations) and due to certain nations’ rejection of or inaction on rights accords. Nevertheless, this action may be viewed as evidence toward a century of the child, because “[m]oving from viewing children as objects of love and charity to seeing them also as subjects of rights is a significant shift,” write Jonathan Todres and Sarah Higinbotham. “Rights are not gifts that governments grant to individuals upon reaching the age of maturity” (Human Rights in Children’s Literature, 197).

Over the past hundred years, humanists, politicians, and activists have sought to shift values from an openhearted but ultimately toothless sympathy toward equity-based civil and legal rights that truly protect vulnerable populations; ethicist John Wall persuasively calls for “a more child-inclusive humanistic methodology” (“Childism” 68; see also Wall’s “Ain’t I a Person?”). Meanwhile, we may question how and whether our literary practices and tropes have marked the ordinary moments, the rites of passage, and the existential dangers associated with the condition known as childhood.

Hindsight thus cautions against proclaiming “the millennium of the child,” for our access to information too readily reveals a world alternately optimistic and fractious. The figure of the child remains associated with playfulness, wonder, curiosity, joy, and other affirmative qualities. Surveys of children’s and teenagers’ hopefulness register a sense of optimism for the new millennium, adjusted for the likelihood of hope among diverse groups in terms of refugee and immigrant status, gender, nation, health, and class; measures of youth well-being include the Children’s Hope Scale, developed for measuring hope among children ages 8–16 and adapted for different age and identity categories (Snyder; Edwards and McClintock). Yet childhood is a precarious life stage. In 2005, historian Steven Mintz identified five “myths of childhood,” among them the notions that “childhood is the same for all children,” that “home [is] a haven and bastion of stability in an ever-changing world,” and that “the United States is a peculiarly child-friendly society” when actual situations and policies indicate that people are “deeply ambivalent” about children (Huck’s Raft,.2).
There is no sign that Mintz’s sobering myths of childhood shall be abolished anytime soon. His perceptions of American childhoods might in fact be extended throughout the globe, where children’s futures are equally if not more tenuous. We inhabit a planet in which all beings—among them human children—remain vulnerable to state-sanctioned trauma and grow up in terrible conditions of economic, environmental, and cultural uncertainty. In the United States, easy access to guns and lax gun policy threatens children and other humans of every age, to the point that US public schools have added lockdown drills to their regular fire drills and weather-related exercises—a throwback to the bombing drills of World War II and post-atomic “duck and cover” Cold War activities. Racial animosity and gender inequality ensure that children of the dominant culture enjoy a prolonged innocence or ignorance while others, typically children of color, are not treated or represented equitably. Global outcry against (along with contrarian justifications of) the abuse and neglect of children, among them refugees, asylum seekers, and other migrants, reveals an ongoing, unresolved, and racist violence deployed against people at vulnerable ages, especially in marginalized populations. Anxieties and concerns about our world and that of future generations are reflected in our literature for and about youth and young people, and today we read the literary figure of the child with a conflicted sense of its historicity. When, for instance, adults rushed to write, illustrate, and publish explanatory children’s books about the September 11, 2001, hijackings and terrorist attacks by Al Qaeda in the United States, they may have assuaged grown readers’ personal grief, spoken to established political standpoints, or tapped into a rich vein of melodrama. Yet they failed to contextualize a complex and violent geopolitical situation for an elementary-school audience in a country that soon became steeped in Islamophobia and dangerous for all people of Middle Eastern or South Asian heritage. Scholars now question a post-9/11 literature of trauma as presented to children, which is characterized by a lack of representation of Muslim and Muslim-American families and by a depiction of normative European- or Anglo-Americans as innocent victims (Kidd, “T Is for Trauma”).

Children lack the life experience and deep historical consciousness to respond in depth to such realities in their eras, and they seldom craft or judge literature for and about childhood. Their responses are predicated on the necessarily partial and situated information they glean from adult gatekeepers. (A US exception—and an example of adults listening to
children’s voices—is the annual Children’s and Teen Choice Book Awards, established in 2008 by two literacy organizations, the Children’s Book Council and Every Child a Reader.) Children themselves do have their own stories to tell, of course, and the twenty-first century is a period in which children’s subjective agency has risen to the fore in scholarship and in participatory all-ages networks. Children are innovators and have taken leadership roles in climate justice and other issues, albeit under the guidance and support of adult activists. Young people demonstrate agency and wisdom in dire circumstances, and twenty-first-century events for good or ill have given them ample reason to do so. In 2014, 16- and 17-year-olds were granted the right to vote in a referendum on whether Scotland would remain in the United Kingdom, and 75 percent of them did so. A year later, Scotland enfranchised all citizens age 16 and older, on the same day that the British Parliament chose to restrict people under 18 from voting in the European Union referendum that ultimately led to Brexit. Young people have shown leadership in other twenty-first-century crises too. In 2011, the environmental legal organization Our Children’s Trust began working with child plaintiffs to take legal action against US states, arguing that state policies were in violation of public trust; their lawsuits and filings charged that states were undermining environmental health for future generations and doing harm to those not yet old enough to vote. In another highly publicized example, teenage survivors of a mass shooting on February 14, 2018, which left 17 people dead in Parkland, FL’s Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School, became ardent gun-control activists. Only six weeks after this horrific crime, with little time to process their trauma, the students responded to media attention by leading a “March for Our Lives.” Their raw and deliberate action, a demonstration of teenagers’ savvy handling of online social networks, culminated in a Washington, D.C., rally and related US and global events on March 24, 2018. In yet another case, young people hoisted “I Am a Child” picket signs at the New York offices of U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement, arguing for the protection—not the detention—of migrant children. The “I Am a Child” signs, designed by Paola Mendoza to echo Martin Luther King, Jr.’s Civil Rights slogan “I Am a Man,” called attention to children’s identity and vulnerability. This direct action with, by, and for children helped galvanize public sentiment against the separation of migrant parents from children, and led to national and international “Families Belong Together” events on June 30, 2018. Young people’s assertions of subjectivity, imagination, and visions for social justice find a
platform on social media and in the material public square, albeit at risk to real children’s lives and vaunted ideals of innocence. Despite passionate action on the part of children, none of these issues have yet been resolved.

Literature for and about young people of the twenty-first century mingle frustration, despair, and unsteady optimism about whether all can or will ever be well. M. T. Anderson’s *Feed* (Candlewick, 2002) prophesies a future in which privileged teenagers upgrade the hardware and software literally implanted in their brains, gaining access to a perpetual “feed” of advertisements and misinformation, while losing the ability to sustain critical thought. Individuals who resist the feed out of economic necessity or a desire for intellectual freedom are marginalized and under erasure. Andrew Smith’s allusive and disturbing monster-movie parody *Grasshopper Jungle* (Penguin, 2014) imagines a dystopian future in which mutant praying mantises take over the world and a few human survivors find shelter in an abandoned nuclear bunker. Amy Sarig King’s poignant *Me and Marvin Gardens* (Scholastic, 2017) involves a boy whose family farm is subdivided and developed into cookie-cutter houses; near the polluted creek that runs through the last woodland on the property, the boy befriends a doglike, slimy, and affectionate creature that eats garbage and defecates toxic waste.

Other twenty-first-century fiction directed at young audiences and their adult minders features ghost children or detached children who recall traumatic circumstances from chillingly informed perspectives. Tim Tingle’s *How I Became a Ghost—A Choctaw Trail of Tears Story* (Scholastic, 2015) recalls the American federal government’s 1830s forced relocation of Choctaw people from Mississippi to Oklahoma and reflects on seldom-taught Native American history, through the voice of a murdered child. Similarly, Jewell Parker Rhodes’ *Ghost Boys* (Little, Brown, 2018) is inspired by the murders of Black children and teens by police and other authority figures. Set in Chicago, *Ghost Boys* is narrated by a 12-year-old African American child who has been shot by a police officer, and the voice of the departed rebukes the systemic racism and violence perpetrated against Black communities across history and notably in the present day. In another dystopian future, Canadian Métis author Cherie Dimaline’s *The Marrow Thieves* (Cormorant, 2017), a Métis teenager called Frenchie flees to the northern wilderness to escape “marrow thieves” who extract indigenous people’s bone marrow to restore white Canadians’ lost ability to dream. In the barren woods, which are devoid of most animal life, Frenchie meets other indigenous people and discovers a means by which
to resist a violent fate. Dimaline’s indigenous futurism, at first a grim account of a devastating future, interrupts a dystopian teleology of doom with a re-valuing of imagination. In a similar mode, Palyku novelist and law professor Ambelin Kwaymullina’s *The Interrogation of Ashala Wolf* (Walker Books Australia, 2012) mobilizes Australian Aboriginal dreaming to counteract dystopian despair.

Roni Natov writes, “It seems that much contemporary writing for children is more explicit about the traumas of children than ever before. The accompanying feelings of grief, terror, loneliness, anger, and anxiety are explored more fully and, I believe, demonstrate the release that such expression often offers to the characters in the stories and to the empathic reader.” Natov observes that although the ambiguities and the dangers of children’s lives are spelled out in complex emotional detail, “the vision at the heart of each story is not exclusive of hope, even in the portrayal of the darkest, often unimaginable pain that is, horrifyingly enough, the truth of some children’s lives” (Natov, 219–220). Natov finds literary examples across a range of authors and genres, citing Korean American novelist An Na, the African American poet Sapphire, and British fantasists David Almond and Philip Pullman. To this list we might add Neil Gaiman, whose horror fantasies *Coraline* (HarperCollins/Bloomsbury, 2002) and *The Wolves in the Walls* (HarperCollins/Bloomsbury, 2003) feature the unsettling illustrations of Dave McKean. Gaiman and McKean’s nightmarish scenarios—*Coraline* about a girl who gains entry to a parallel world where her demonic Other Mother has button eyes and sinister motives, and *Wolves* concerning a girl with the conviction that murderous wolves haunt her family—depict resilient children, yet both emerge from a fearful twenty-first-century zeitgeist.

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With only two decades of the twenty-first century to draw upon for this volume, and daily changes shaking our social and environmental foundations, we cannot predict the events of the coming month, much less the next 80 years. Coming generations will have to reckon with this volatile uncertainty, turning at times to literature and related media for wise counsel, for diversion, and for alternative visions. By reflecting on emergent qualities of contemporary literary and artistic practice, we may be able to mount effective critiques and envision generative new forms. Thus the multi-disciplinary contributors to this volume examine engagements with
ethical action, political activism, collective public participation, and issues of social justice for youth. They look at how literature represents subjective agency among young people, and they consider environmental concerns shaping the everyday lived experiences of all sentient beings, so that we might imagine a sustainable future beyond the iconic “seventh generation.”

Because literary representations of children both model real childhoods and contribute to the degree of respect afforded to actual young people, this collection opens with essays on “Children’s Rights and Role Models.” Ensuring the full human rights of children, individually and collectively, influences the well-being of families and of people in general. Attention to young people’s protection from harm and to their participation in the public sphere is fundamental to a functional (and dare we say democratic) global society. The essays in this opening section therefore ask how literary and multimedia texts address the human rights of young people, and how young people are represented in literature shared across plural audiences. The essays engage with how children and adults speak, share opinions, and take public action in literary works, reinforcing or revising dominant paradigms. Societal and political values, whether presented as the greater common good, as children’s best interest, or as topics to be questioned by children themselves, are present in familiar texts. We may ask whether children’s books and books about youth, traditionally understood as having a didactic function, still uphold a status quo or take normative positionalities for granted. Could readers of the twenty-first century have a deeper comprehension of human rights and justice, an outcome of twenty-first-century developments, even if those developments run at times counter to the achievement of full human rights?

Legal expert Jonathan Todres, of Georgia State University, opens this section with his chapter on “Children’s Right to Participate: Insights from the Story of Malala.” Nobel Peace Prize-winning Pakistani activist Malala Yousafzai has grown to adulthood, yet she is still understood as the strong adolescent girl who survived an assassination attempt by the Taliban, and she is known on a first-name basis to her admirers. Todres looks at how Yousafzai has been configured as a child hero in literary and pictorial narratives, including her own book-length autobiography—which happens to be available in an adult version and in an abridged version for young readers. Whereas Yousafzai has attained celebrity status, everyday people and their community roles are the focus of Yasmine Motawy’s “The Wisdom of Getting Involved: Civic Engagement in Contemporary Egyptian
Children’s Literature.” Motawy, of the Department of Rhetoric and Composition at the American University in Cairo, reads tales of children’s active mobilization for community change and addresses the ideological limits on such tales. Motawy finds a strong tradition of activist narratives in recent Egyptian children’s literature, while considering what forms of protest or resistance are allowable in publications intended to reach and foster a youthful audience. Because texts for and about young people recommend appropriate means of addressing authority, and hold up particular individuals to be emulated or scorned, trends in children’s biography shed light on timely and context-specific values. Clémentine Beauvais, in “Bright Pasts, Brighter Futures: Biographies for Children in the Early Twenty-First Century,” investigates the biography’s genre conventions and explores why scholars have not, until recent years, dealt seriously with this popular form. Beauvais, of the University of Cambridge’s Homerton College, examines what we have come to expect from—and how we can understand norms through—the inspirational rhetoric, accounts of success, and dependable closure characteristic of biographies.

Building upon the notion of rights and role models for success, the essayists in “Social Justice and Diversity in Literature for Young Readers” highlight specific issues of race, ethnicity, gender, and class within the field of publishing and across literary disciplines. The first decades of the twenty-first century have been marked by technological and organizational innovations that enable once-marginalized groups to center and amplify their public voices. These decades have seen the children and grandchildren of past social justice movements maturing into leadership positions and teaching new generations. In the United States, a historically Anglocentric and heteronormative children’s and YA book industry gradually has initiated more inclusive practices of hiring and publishing. In her comprehensive account of these ongoing changes, “We Need Diverse Books: Publishing, Equity, and Children’s Literature,” Sarah Park Dahlen surveys recent developments and issues a timely call to action. Dahlen, an Associate Professor of Library and Information Science at St. Catherine University and a founding editor of Research on Diversity in Youth Literature, documents the ascent and challenges of the movement toward meaningful diversity in publishing and librarianship, noting the industry-wide recognition of underrepresented populations and demonstrating how people have mobilized around campaigns like We Need Diverse Books and Own Voices. Dahlen shares annual data from the University of Wisconsin-Madison’s Cooperative Children’s Book Center (CCBC),
which compiles statistics on authorship and content having to do with racial and ethnic diversity, and provides insight into the conversations among scholars, creative writers, editors, and bloggers—and critics who do all of the above. Where Dahlen chronicles racial and ethnic diversity across children’s and youth publishing, Derritt Mason of the University of Calgary Department of English considers how the representation of LGBTQ identities has shifted. Mason looks in particular at Lesléa Newman’s watershed picture book, 1989’s *Heather Has Two Mommies*, and its edited and re-illustrated 2015 edition in “What Having Two Mommies Looks Like Now: Queer Picture Books in the Twenty-First Century.” In the late 1980s, the original *Heather’s* focus on a daughter’s mothers provoked public outcry about lesbian partnerships and parenting alike, and led to book challenges in a climate of anti-gay hostility. In the twenty-first-century version, Mason discovers, the theme of lesbian parenthood is marginalized to the point of erasure despite the book’s “two mommies” reference, and Heather herself—coded as a queer and indeterminate figure—becomes the narrative hub. Twenty-first-century readers, writers, and illustrators may reconfigure once-divisive matters of gender, race, and class in the visual and verbal information picture books provide, yet the old divisions still haunt our texts, demanding without achieving resolution.

While the work we read, write, illustrate, and critique has the potential to reveal damaging stereotypes, undermine prejudices, and challenge the advantages of privilege, literature may as soon reinforce essentialisms as dismantle them. Some twenty-first-century texts have radical aims, while others acknowledge unresolved social issues around human rights, social justice, and diverse identities. “Representing Youth, Claiming Identity, and Exercising Agency” demonstrates how these conflicts play out in multimedia texts. Nina Christensen, head of the Centre for Children’s Literature at Denmark’s Aarhus University, investigates graphic narratives about girlhood in her “Laughing Out Loud or Lost in the Woods? Tween Girl Identity in Picturebooks and Graphic Novels for Children.” Christensen considers how picture books and graphic narratives, which draw upon literary sources including the fairy tale and the cautionary tale, envision and verbally describe girls’ growth from prepubescent childhood to adolescence. Girls’ development in these texts is marked as hazardous, comical, embarrassing, or a combination of all three. In the illustrated texts Christensen analyzes, tween girls navigate a loaded visual culture of women’s product advertisements, gratuitous displays of female bodies,
fairy-tale allusions, and aggressive Barbie dolls; this pervasive and normative visual culture signals gender norms and delivers coded threats to bodily autonomy, and girls must figure out how to engage as a consumer or a critic. If such visual-verbal representations of girlhood and the feminine recall and interrogate the gender binaries of earlier generations—as yet still with us—representations of boyhood likewise may be invested in traditional roles. In “‘Ganesha Is My Best Friend’: Homological Boyhood in Hindi Mythological Animated Films,” Anuja Madan studies Indian animated films that structure boys’ identity around religious figures and traditional masculinity. Madan, of Kansas State University, looks at recent animated films and television shows in which Krishna and Ganesha take the form of boy-gods and secretly help prayerful, devout mortal boys solve problems. The films and TV shows introduce young viewers to ancient figures in a decidedly contemporary manner, while underscoring the specialness of boyhood and the privileges of masculine identity. If Christensen and Madan attend to gender and its manifestations in disparate texts and genres, Edgar Roberto Kirchof attends to class and socioeconomic differences in his essay, “Brazilian Childhood and Literature in the Age of Digital Technologies.” Kirchof, a faculty member in the Doctor of Education and Cultural Studies program at the Lutheran University of Brazil (ULBRA), describes his research on how children in socioeconomically disadvantaged households and communities of southern Brazil gain access to and demonstrate fluency with English-language, predominantly American apps and games. Kirchof studies how children respond to web-based texts, compares their fervent gaming habits with their lack of fluency in traditional literacies, and connects his classroom research to theories of convergence culture. His findings underscore children’s ability to engage with international digital media despite language barriers and socioeconomic diversity, and raise questions about how children within and outside materially comfortable, affluent households learn about and reproduce globalized consumer culture. In these chapters, multimedia texts present possible identity formations, make judgments on traditional customs and on nonconformity, and represent subjective agency on the part of fictive protagonists and real-life media users alike.

In the closing section of this volume, “Coming of Age in the Anthropocene,” three writers give attention to posthumanism, to relationships between young people and other sentient beings, and to the complex environmental crisis of the twenty-first century. Their essays assess aspects of the natural world and ecocriticism in youth culture, the
human impact on our companion species and our planet, and climate change as the subject of fact and of literary fiction. Psychologist and Purdue University Professor Emeritus Gail F. Melson details child psychology and the changing nature of human/nonhuman bonds in “Animals in Children’s Development: A Roadmap for the Twenty-First Century.” Melson looks at work published from the late twentieth century to the present day, assessing and proposing ways to study human children’s relation to nonhuman species that serve us as pets, food, zoo exhibits, and wild co-inhabitants of common outdoor spaces. Melson cites her own and others’ scholarship on children’s biophilia, and wonders whether a beneficial and ethical attachment to nonhuman species may be sustained in a literary and media culture rife with virtual pets and lifelike representations. Amy Ratelle approaches related ethical questions in “Examining Animal Bodies in War-Related Media for Children.” Ratelle looks at dramas that depict domesticated animals deployed in actual wartime battle practices, as well as slapstick or otherwise comedic texts that pit animals against would-be hunters or exterminators in ecotone territories. She wonders how writers and filmmakers perpetuate a “military-animal industrial complex” and images of animal trauma in the name of melodrama or ostensible humor, and she asks how posthumanist theory might remedy the cliché of a battle to the death among humans and other species. Alice Curry, founder and director of the United Kingdom’s Lantana Publishing, concludes this grouping of essays with “The Power and Potential: An Ecocritical Reading of Twenty-First-Century Childhood.” Curry explores how critical accounts of the myriad possibilities in child indeterminacy—including Maria Nikolajeva’s influential discussions of aetonormativity, or adult norms as disciplinary guideposts in children’s literature—have troubling implications in regard to ecocriticism. Curry, echoing scholars’ theories of aetonormativity, inquires whether child power shall be interpreted as an anthropocentric dominion over nonhuman species and shall duplicate the mistakes and deliberate violence of prior generations. Curry also cautions that Clémentine Beauvais’ affirmative vision of the openness of the future and a “mighty child” poised to make a better world must be weighed against the environmental destruction committed by past generations; adults who craft children’s texts or make decisions for young people have, to a strong degree, set the ecological tasks future generations have ahead of them. Climate crisis now determines what mighty children must do in order to survive, or to perish, and a phenomenal change in human norms will be essential. Not without optimism for child agency, Curry reminds us that radical, large-scale change is always conditional on past practices.
Environmental transformation, she suggests, may come about through young people’s recognition of—and agential praxis to remedy—adult fallibility. Curry’s concluding chapter resonates with the combined urgency and vision expressed throughout this volume, calling upon a twenty-first-century academic readership to recognize and speak to the tasks ahead of us.

Each contributor brings reliable historical and cultural knowledge as well as a distinct future vision to this volume on Literary Cultures and Twenty-First-Century Childhoods, and each has a distinctive critical perspective to share. Because this volume addresses twenty-first-century literary and media representations with a scant 20 years’ evidence, we see our task as an opportunity to point to contemporary developments in literature and childhood studies, as well as a chance to look ahead to monumental changes in the world in which texts are produced and real young people grow up. Topics in childhood studies and multimedia representation have become the stuff of hourly news reports and minute-by-minute social-media chronicles. We see our contributions as joining ongoing and ever-shifting conversations about those who are and those who will be the youth of this moment, and we look for ways to construct, critique, envision, and empower a sustainable new century and literary culture for coming generations.

**Notes**

1. Deszcz-Tryhubczak (2016) continues the work of fusing the literary-critical area of children’s literature studies with the more sociohistorical area of childhood studies in an effort to address human rights and political realities.
2. Theories of intersectionality (e.g., Crenshaw 1989) have been taken up by social, cultural, and literary critics such as Hispanic activist Gloria Anzaldúa, in her theories of Nepantla, and legal scholar Patricia Hill Collins (e.g., 1998, 1990). Intersectionality and critical race studies are increasingly influential in accounts of diverse childhoods and families, and age too can be considered an intersectional category. See also Jiménez (2017) and Ranft (2013).
3. Abate (2016) considers the multiplicity of specialized, independently marketed, and often propagandistic texts for young readers, which address narrow fields of interest and purvey political views outside a mainstream. While Abate’s examples point out extremist sensibilities, her survey acknowledges the increasing rarity of a commonly held mass-popular culture and the diminution of shared childhood collective.
4. In his controversial *No Future*, Edelman takes aim at the way the figure of the child drives ideological calls for social safety and purity, undermining queer potentialities. The heteronormative imperative to be a reproducing body and the ostensibly corruptible innocent reproduced combine to destroy the queer subject. For fetal politics that circumvent autonomy, see Berlant and Edelman (2013), and essays on “The Theory of Infantile Citizenship” and “America, ‘Fat,’ the Fetus” (Berlant 1997).

5. Dekker (2000) believes “the 20th century should not be coined as The Century of the Child, but rather as the Child-Oriented Century” (134), adding that “the fact that Key is speaking about the future does not make her ideas automatically modern” or progressive (135).

6. Koop (2005) claims Key based her prediction on then-fashionable beliefs in “eugenics, the ‘natural’ course of development, and the salvation to be gained through science” (125), foreseeing a perfectible child and an improved condition of childhood. Koop outlines changes in theories of child development and argues that today, “We tend to foist a ‘culture’ of their own on children and adolescents and we even allow commerce to exploit this culture. It is difficult to get rid of this, in my opinion exaggerated, child-centeredness” (131). He calls for more nuanced understandings of childhood and children’s capacities: “Let us definitely close the door on Ellen Key’s ‘Century of the Child.’ Postmodern developmental psychology, which is nevertheless based on the rationality of the Enlightenment, is ready for its important humanitarian task in the 21st century!” (132).

7. For accounts of Native childhoods in North American history and twenty-first-century scholarship on Native representation, see Woolford; Lara-Cooper and Cooper; Heller; and Debbie Reese’s blog, *American Indians in Children’s Literature* (americanindiansinchildrensliterature.blogspot.com).

8. See “#WeNeedDiverseScholars: A Forum” in *The Lion and the Unicorn* 41.1 (January 2017), the ongoing survey of diverse literature from the University of Wisconsin’s Cooperative Children’s Book Center (ccbc.education.wisc.edu), and the open-access online journal *Research on Diversity in Youth Literatures* (sophia.stkate.edu/rdyl/) for a reckoning with the lack of diversity in children’s literature and children’s literature scholarship.

9. Fass (2011) explores how young people’s rights to have their basic needs met were stated in multiple treaties, legal rulings, and other official but hard-to-enforce documents. High moral standards rang hollow against the evidence of war on an unprecedented international scale and due to enhanced media coverage of violence against young people. Children’s rights to free participation in society were declared widely, yet evidence emerged of the unlawful limits on young people’s expressions of identity and injustices done to the young.
10. In 1989, the United Nations put forward the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), which as of 2015 had been ratified by all member nations except the United States—which backed out of the U.N. Human Rights Council altogether in June 2018. In that same month in 2018, the United States engaged in practices—for example, of separating migrant families including Central American asylum seekers on the border between Texas and Mexico—prohibited by the CRC and condemned among human rights activists.

11. On the heels of World War I, the League of Nations’ 1924 Declaration of the Rights of the Child called for children’s provisional rights to basic survival needs like food, healthcare, shelter, to prioritized aid and refuge from danger, and to education and understanding within a community. More than a decade after World War II, the United Nations’ 1959 Declaration of the Rights of the Child (UN DRC) added to these “positive” provisions, which ensure children are granted their basic needs; the UN DRC established a set of “negative” or protective rights meant to guard children against violence, discrimination, neglect, and separation from parents. High moral standards frequently rang hollow due to war on an unprecedented international scale, and enhanced media coverage of violence against young people in the Civil Rights era and Vietnam War put the lie to sanitized depictions of innocent youth. Children’s rights to free participation in society were declared widely, but only as evidence emerged of the unlawful limits on young people’s expressions of identity and injustices done to the young.

12. For an excellent review and debate of the conversations around children’s agency and its expression in literature, see the forum on Divergent Perspectives on Children’s Agency in the journal *Jeunesse: Young People, Texts, Culture* (vol. 8, no. 1, 2016, pp. 254–310). Here, scholars Richard Flynn, Marah Gubar, Perry Nodelman, and Sara L. Schwebel argue and expand upon critical approaches to the meaning of agency in regard to children and young people’s ability to take action on their own and others’ behalf.

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