

H-Net Reviews

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Loren R. Lerner, ed. *Depicting Canada's Children*. Studies in Childhood and Family in Canada Series. Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2009. Illustrations. xxv + 438 pp. \$95.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-55458-050-7.

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After Ariès

Depicting Canada's Children presents recent, cross-disciplinary scholarship on the visual culture of children and childhood. The nineteen essays in the book examine multiple topics, use diverse sources and methodologies, and draw on a range of contextual literatures. Issues central to the history of childhood are evident throughout. Many of the essays are outstanding, but the value of the collection as a whole is to be found in the crosscurrents among the individual contributions. The essays amplify each other—similarities and differences abound, complexities accumulate, and questions emerge.

The opening section of the book, "Symbol and Reality," contains five essays. François-Marc Gagnon examines the iconography of the child in Quebec art beginning with seventeenth-century representations of Aboriginal and French children. Secularized paintings, albeit with continuing religious references, first appeared in the mid-1800s when portraits of children of the French bourgeoisie came into fashion. Complete secularization emerged in the interwar twentieth century; only then, Gagnon argues, did painters reveal the true condition of children. This essay, like those that follow, is characterized by numerous high quality illustrations, both black and white and in color, which immediately illuminate the combination of intrinsic complexity and aesthetic appeal inherent in visual culture.

Abigail A. Van Slyck uses a graphically distinctive map to discern changes in a boys' summer camp in On-

tario's Algonquin Park. The physical configuration of Camp Amhek in the early 1920s reflected the ongoing imperative to rescue boys from feminized domestic environments. Their innate masculinity could best be resuscitated, it was thought, through immersion in all-male settings in nature. Alterations in the camp's landscape around 1930 represented the material manifestation of a complex ideological transition driven by new academic theories. In accordance with emergent ideas of child psychology, the camp was redesigned to facilitate staff in assisting boys to overcome their assumed inherent pathologies.

Images of First Nations residential school children in the first half of the twentieth century serve as the basis for Sherry Farrell Racette's thoughtful illumination of the shifting meanings photographs acquire over time. Most extant pictures were taken for promotional purposes, so few document the traumatic journeys or devastating arrival rituals the children endured. Nevertheless, read from the perspective of what we understand today about residential schools, Racette argues that these photographs now provide quite different insights into the children's experiences than was originally intended.

Photographs of children are also at the center of Carol Payne's study of the Still Photography Division of Canada's National Film Board. She argues that in the 1950s and early 1960s stock pictures of children were used to represent idealized citizens dependent on a wise,

paternalistic government. By the later 1960s, however, the “pliant” images of children assumed a new signifying status; they “stood for” a citizenry of liberal individuals in a multicultural environment. Payne’s conclusions complement Racette’s. Both authors emphasize the unstable meanings of images, but whereas Racette demonstrates that meanings shift over time, Payne argues that images can carry different messages at virtually the same time.

Jacqueline Reid-Walsh and Claudia Mitchell focus on the materiality of girlhood. Carefully defining what constitutes a Canadian doll, they then expand the category using assisted memory-work methodologies that are designed to foster deliberate as opposed to accidental remembering. The authors convincingly stress the importance of finding the place where dolls shift from being out-of-context commodities to becoming material culture.

To state the obvious, the subject matter of these five essays is disparate. Nevertheless, embedded within them are intriguing juxtapositions. For example, on the one hand, Van Slyck argues that in the 1920s it was believed boys’ masculinity could be “saved” by “playing Indian.” Racette, on the other hand, describes First Nations children being “saved” by erasing their Indian culture. At the same time members of the Algonquin Golden Lake First Nation were invited to instruct boys at Camp Ahmek in birchbark canoe construction, residential schools systematically demeaned Native skills and ways of knowing. The essays taken together raise the question of whether two such seemingly oppositional ideologies might actually have worked in tandem.

The second section, “Others and Outsiders,” opens with two studies that examine depictions of Canada’s home children. Alena M. Buis argues that images of the children formed an “artistic fiction” according to which, transformed by training, work, and rural life in Canada, home children would function as regenerators of the empire. In a carefully developed analysis, Margaret McNay situates images of home children as immigrants, laborers, and “others” in the context of narrative family memory. Buis and McNay directly link children, families, and British imperialism. Racette similarly connects children, families, and residential schools, depicting it as a Canadian colonial project. Where and how children are reared are sites of intimacy, sites that Ann Laura Stoler has argued are integral to the formation of empire.[1]

Elsbeth Tulloch provides a sophisticated and engaging examination of the representation of gender at a time when feminism and the socialization of girls were sub-

jects of intense debate in Canada. Tulloch compares a short story (1980), a task force report (1982), and a National Film Board production based on the short story (1986). The main protagonist of the story and film is an eleven-year-old girl who, larger and less conventionally feminine than the other girls in her class, is assigned the male lead in a ballet recital. Tulloch argues that the film was in some ways more progressive and in others more regressive than the precursor story. At the same time, she concludes, both the story and film highlight the “fundamentally performative nature of gender” (p. 186).

Four comic strips about the Ontario government and squeegee kids in late 1990s Toronto form the subject of Derek Foster’s piece. This is the one essay in the book where the state emerges from the shadows in the wings to occupy center stage; ending squeegeeing at street corners took pride of place as a top priority for the Conservative government, in addition to cutting taxes and balancing the budget. Examining the comic strips through the lens of visual rhetorical theory, Foster argues that, while the young people involved “were not children, in the strictest sense of the word,” an understanding of the cartoons depended on readers being aware of a generalized ambivalence and anxiety about children as both risks and at risk (p. 206).

Susan Hart assesses the iconography of children on two commemorative statues in Ottawa. The Vietnamese Commemorative Monument (1995) depicts a child held by a fleeing mother, and the Korean War Memorial (2002) is composed of a boy and girl with a Canadian soldier. The children represented on the monuments are not Canadian; rather, their juvenile status indicates “other” nations, ones less developed than ours. However, located in Ottawa, the two statues do have something to say about Canada. Using the 1939 War Memorial for comparison, Hart concludes that “children have entered the unfolding narrative of imagined national identity ... but it appears they have merely joined or perhaps replaced women as allegorical figures in it” (p. 228).

The second section, then, adds a range of new subjects to those introduced in the first section, and again the reader finds crosscurrents. One of these relates to children’s roles as producers and consumers. In *Pricing the Priceless Child: The Changing Social Value of Children* (1985), Viviana Zelizer famously argued that there existed a transition between 1870 and 1930 from the idea of the child as economically productive to the emergence of a new child who was economically worthless but emotionally priceless. Several essays in the first two sec-

tions effectively qualify Zelizer's argument. On the one hand, Racette, Buis, and McNay demonstrate that, in fact, child labor continued well into the twentieth century. On the other hand, Van Slyck, Tulloch, and Reid-Walsh and Mitchell write about children who were sufficiently valued to have time at summer camp, take ballet lessons, or own dolls. These "priceless" children, however, were clearly far from economically worthless; they remained significant economic actors in that they were consumed for or were consumers themselves.

Sharon Murray opens the third section, "Subjects of Care," with an examination of a missionary photograph album belonging to Amanda Jefferson, a Canadian who moved to the United States as a young woman and formed a lifelong relationship with an American woman. Together, they spent their working lives as missionaries. The final image in the album shows two young Indian girls in Western dress except for their bare feet; underneath the picture are the words, "Mutkie [and] Savitni, 1898. Little Hindoo Girls adopted by Miss Minor & Miss Jefferson" (p. 237). Murray employs a theoretical analysis derived from postcolonial literature to argue that the photograph of the girls represents a complex, multi-faceted contact zone, a "liminal space between being one thing and being another" (p. 252). With her focus on a historically specific imperial site of intimacy, Murray's arguments, like those of Racette, Buis, and McNay, can be located in relation to, and can qualify, patterns observed by Stoler and other postcolonial historians.

"Canadian" and "children" are central categories of *Depicting Canada's Children*, but how are they constructed for the purposes of the book? In their respective essays, Foster and Hart specifically ask who are "children," and who is "Canadian," building arguments from the answers. But what of the little girls in Miss Jefferson's album? Murray does not know what the word "adoption" means regarding Muktie and Savitni, and it is not evident in what way the girls were Canadian (p. 245). The question of whether or not children are Canadian is relevant in regard to other essays as well. At what point did British home children or First Nations children become Canadian? Andrea Walsh (see below) specifically notes that Inkameep school children were not Canadian citizens in the 1930s (p. 298). By questioning the boundaries of "Canadian" and "child"; and by thinking about who is included, who is excluded, by whom, and why, historians uncover circuits of power that might otherwise be obscured.

In the second essay in section 3, Annamarie Adams,

David Theodore, and Patricia McKeever report their findings after commissioning eighty young patients at Sick-Kids in Toronto to take pictures of the hospital's atrium. The images were analyzed in relation to pictures taken of hospitalized children before 1940. The earlier pictures showed hospitals to be "therapeutically efficient or socially joyous" (p. 276). The commissioned images, in contrast, show the atrium as both open and confining and reveal the children's desire to be somewhere else. The children were specifically asked not to photograph people, which may have encouraged the number of pictures taken looking out through the atrium windows. Nevertheless, interviews conducted as the photographs were taken make clear the children's longing for the outside world. Five of the eight pictures examined in the essay are attributed to sixteen and seventeen year olds; this again raises the question discussed above of how "child" is understood in the context of *Depicting Canada's Children*.

Adams, Theodore, and McKeever's study is important because it undertakes to recover experience, to reveal what was thought and felt, and thereby to accord agency to the child. In this, their concern is similar to Tulloch's. Although the child in the story and film Tulloch analyzed is fictional, what emerges is a sense of the intense pain children can experience from being, or perceiving themselves to be, different. Historians, like Neil Sutherland in *Growing Up: Childhood in English Canada from the Great War to the Age of Television* (1997), have argued that recovering the child's perspective is at the very heart of the history of childhood.

As part of a research project on the Inkameep Day School undertaken collaboratively with the Osoyoos Indian Band, Andrea N. Walsh engages in a critical analysis of the "production, circulation, and consumption of drawings created by Okanagan students at the Inkameep Day School" (p. 279). The children's writings and drawings were shown widely within Canada and traveled abroad to Dublin, Glasgow, Paris, Vienna, and Prague. The May 1938 and January 1939 issues of *Canadian Red Cross Junior* showcased the children's artistic interpretations of the Twelve Health Rules for Canadian Children. Walsh concludes, "the Inkameep students' drawings interrupt the Red Cross's dominant narrative of health and citizenship by providing embodied evidence of the impossibility of a healthy 'universal' childhood" (p. 279). The children's art expressed a culturally different way of understanding the body than the one the Red Cross attempted to normalize.

Walsh adds an additional overlay to her argument. “It can be hypothesized,” she writes, “that the animals depicted in the health rules drawings are not just fanciful images from a child artist’s imagination—they could be [depictions] of the children themselves practicing good health measures, in a transformed state of being” (pp. 295-296). She reaches this conclusion by situating the drawings in the context of traditional Okanagan cultural beliefs and in conjunction with the children’s other artistic endeavors at the school. Tulloch uses fiction and film, while Adams, Theodore, and McKeever rely on interviews to gain access to experience. Walsh draws on memories, personal narratives, and historical photographs to argue that the Inkameep drawings may be visual representations of the children’s experience of actual events.

Kai Wood Mah uses Toronto’s Wellesley Street School to examine a late nineteenth-century user-material, culture-environment nexus. The school was recognizably modern when it was first built in 1873 in terms of the way it was situated, its heating and ventilation systems, and its furniture and apparatus. Nevertheless, to accord with newly emerging ideas of health, safety, and efficiency, alterations to the school’s interior were undertaken in the 1880s. Wood Mah, like Van Slyck, reads ideological change out of renovations; both authors show how very quickly—and how very visibly—new ideologies acquired physical form.

Loren R. Lerner, editor of *Depicting Canada’s Children*, opens “Inner Visions,” the fourth and final section. In a deeply knowledgeable analysis of emotionally affective genre paintings by George Reid in the 1890s, Lerner delineates the symbolic function the children on the canvas played in articulating Reid’s narrative of the Canadian nation. His work changed over time, and by the interwar years he had turned to landscape painting. No longer part of his imagery, children were still a critical element in Reid’s art; Lerner explains, “his intention was for the paintings to be seen by children at school ... the landscapes would, he hoped, promote their connection to Canada and a love of Canada’s land” (p. 343). Lerner’s insight, that images without children present may still depict something important in relation to them, reframes the boundaries of representations of childhood.

Sandra Paikowsky focuses on four paintings by James Wilson Morrice (c.1901). In a “master class” in seeing, she illuminates the tension inherent in *Return from School* where the “image of five young women making their way along a country road in the grey days of winter encapsulates both Morrice’s modernist distillation of

the momentary and Quebec’s traditional preservation of the past” (p. 347). (Since she notes that most Catholic children left school at ten [p. 353], the phrase “young women” can presumably be read to mean young girls.) Paikowsky situates *Return from School* in the context of early twentieth-century Quebec’s distinctly antimodern education system, a system completely at variance with the rapidly modernizing Wellesley Street School in Toronto in the 1870s and 1880s. Paikowsky and Wood Mah reveal the divergent regional sensibilities inculcated in Canadian children.

The last three essays examine Canadian artists working in varied formats from the 1970s to the present. Johanne Sloan focuses on Jack Chambers, Daniel Bower, and Rodney Graham for whom “childhood and adulthood are understood as interlocked forms of consciousness, while an immersion in pop-culture forms and media allows movement back and forth between child and adult selves, and between past and present” (p. 365). Martha Langford, analyzing the work of eight artists, draws on poststructuralist and psychoanalytical theory to illuminate “ways in which the depiction of a child figures the creative process in an artist’s work” (p. 410). Monique Westra situates Paterson Ewen’s depiction of his son in the context of their parallel personal narratives and Ewen’s more typical celestial panoramas. By representing the twenty-four-year-old Vincent as a child, Ewen revealed his son’s “true and quintessential self” (p. 422). A common thread in these essays is their exploration of the varied ways in which contemporary professional artists find inspiration both in children’s imaginations and artistic directness, and in their own adult memories of childhood. The boundary between adult and child blurs, then dissolves.

Change is a recurring leitmotif among the contributions to *Depicting Canada’s Children*. Generally the anthology’s authors construe change in the context of a decade or several decades; uniquely, Gagnon envisions change over *la longue durée*. Van Slyck directs attention to the complex overlap as one ideology succeeds another. “At Ahmek,” she argues, “the physical traces of seemingly conflicting theories of childhood coexisted and even worked in complimentary ways” (p. 46). Some authors use depictions of children to identify changes in such things as artistic conventions, national discourse, or modernity; others emphasize the changing meanings of images. The last three essays in the collection, however, implicitly suggest a change in childhood itself. Sloan, Langford, and Westra evoke the agency of children through references to their imaginative energy,

their uncontrolled energy, their potential to wreak havoc, their appropriation of images, their shared authorship of images, their ability to persuade, their ability to direct the viewer's gaze, and their creativity. How powerful these children seem in comparison to those of the early twentieth century depicted earlier in the book.

In 1998, Hugh Cunningham observed that long debate about Philippe Ariès's *Centuries of Childhood* (1960, trans. 1962) had made historians of childhood wary of visual and material sources as evidence. He noted, though, "indications of a new confidence in the use of non-written sources." [2] In Canada, Brian J. Low's study of the National Film Board's portrayal of children and now the wide-ranging *Depicting Canada's Children* are testimony to Cunningham's prescience. [3] In her intro-

duction, Lerner states that the purpose of the anthology was "to demonstrate the significance of visual culture" to the study of childhood (p. xv). *Depicting Canada's Children* succeeds admirably in accomplishing its objective.

Notes

[1]. Ann Laura Stoler, "Tense and Tender Ties: The Politics of Comparison in North American History and (Post) Colonial Studies," *The Journal of American History* 88 (2001): 829-865.

[2]. Hugh Cunningham, review essay, "Histories of Childhood," *American Historical Review* 103 (1998): 1199.

[3]. Brian J. Low, *NFB Kids: Portrayals of Children by the National Film Board of Canada, 1939-1989* (Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2002).

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