



## **Keywords in the Cultures of Young People**



The papers in this forum were presented first as part of a round table hosted by the Association for Research in Cultures of Young People (ARCYP) at the Congress of the Social Sciences and Humanities at the University of Ottawa on 2 June 2015.



### **Keywords in the Cultures of Young People**

—Elizabeth Marshall, Derritt Mason, and Tyler Pollard

In 1976, Denis Donoghue reviewed Raymond Williams's *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society* for the *New York Times Book Review* and wrote that Williams, as a teacher, loved “to show where ideas begin and end, in principle, only to emphasize that in practice their beginnings and endings are incorrigibly wayward” (2). The participants in this forum were

asked to adopt Williams's commitment to incorrigibility and to approach “keywords in cultures of young people” with an acknowledgement that language is erratic and unpredictable, with varied sets of meanings and associations, and that the ways in which language is used to make sense of particular problems are dependent on context. As times change, so too must

the language and the keywords we use to talk about the cultures that form and are informed by young people.

This forum is best situated alongside—and indeed would not be possible without—Bruce Burgett and Glen Hendler’s *Keywords for American Cultural Studies*, Philip Nel and Lissa Paul’s *Keywords for Children’s Literature*, and Nancy Lesko and Susan Talburt’s *Keywords in Youth Studies: Tracing Affects, Movements, Knowledges*. The process of choosing and defining keywords requires charting the history of a word and how it travels, its definitions, and the common-sense knowledge embedded in its everyday uses. In assembling the round table, the organizers aimed to include scholars working across the fields of cultural studies, education, literary criticism, childhood studies, critical youth studies, and history. Panellists were invited to offer critical interrogations of familiar keywords used in the study of cultures of childhood and youth while proposing and considering new and/or unexpected terms and definitions in order to capture and think through the complexities and contradictions that emerge through the study of young people’s cultures and texts. Like the contributors to Lesko and Talburt’s collection, our panellists deepened existing scholarship by creating space for those keywords that occupy “a peripheral, repressed presence in the field’s thought” (Talburt and Lesko 7).

The papers in this forum represent theoretical and methodological commitments to cultural studies, an orientation that also defines the larger goal of the Association for Research in Cultures of Young People (ARCYP), founded in 2008. The membership of ARCYP includes scholars from various disciplines as well as professionals and practitioners. As an organization, ARCYP continues to uphold two key objectives: first, “[t]o promote the study of and research in the cultures and texts of young people, in Canada and internationally, across a range of disciplines, and to build an understanding of such scholarship that defines ‘young people,’ ‘culture,’ and ‘text’ broadly”; and, second, “[t]o create interdisciplinary spaces to exchange research on the cultures and texts of young people; to create opportunities for collaborations” (“Constitution”). Following this charge, the “Keywords in the Cultures of Young People” round table was intended to create an interdisciplinary space for dialogue and collaboration and to address scholarship that engages broadly with debates surrounding the definitions of “young people,” “culture,” and “texts.” Additionally, the round table provided an opportunity for a group of interdisciplinary thinkers and practitioners to hold the language used to talk about the cultures of young people accountable to the unique economic, political, and social conditions shaping the present moment.



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The articles that follow are extensions of each speaker's ten-minute round table presentation about two words of their own choosing. The first word is a familiar one used often in studies of youth, cultures, and texts that the author believes demands deeper interrogation or redefinition in order to remain conversant with contemporary scholarship and the varied experiences of young people. The second word is a less familiar term that the writer thinks crucial enough to young people's cultures to be included in a keywords collection on the subject. Inspired by other keywords projects, each presenter was invited to provide a brief history of the words, their use in and importance for young people's cultures, and a rationale for why the old word should be interrogated or redefined and why the new word should be considered.

The following five papers capture the creative and theoretical impulses of the panellists, who draw on feminist, queer, and postcolonial theories, on everyday social practices, and on a range of methodological approaches, including historical-archival analysis, literary criticism, conceptual interrogations, and qualitative research. Thus, each author offers a unique paradigm for theorizing the diverse lived experiences as well as the cultural constructions of childhood and youth.

In "(En)countering Inclusion. Repeating: Refrain," English professor Louise Saldanha invokes the genre of the children's story and, in so doing, highlights the politics of this form. She critiques the word "inclusion" and traces its usage in the 1600s as a descriptor for "shutting up" or "confinement" rather than the kind of welcoming togetherness that might be regarded as its principal contemporary meaning. Saldanha argues that inclusion is "how the state repeats its power" to discipline differences of race, class, gender, sexuality, and ability into a coherent order. In contrast, she offers readers the term "refrain" as a way to desist and to be still. Saldanha writes that refraining "marks a point to recalibrate

inclusion away from its pressures of happy endings, improved perspectives, and better behaviour” and “leaves us the moment to look only here at our existing engagements against, for, and alongside each other.” Saldanha urges a look toward stories and images that refuse closure and that offer uncertainty, a refrain, a moment to remain critically quiet in the face of stories that refuse to be made “optimistically multicultural.”

In “Agency and Emotion Work,” Kristine Alexander, an interdisciplinary historian concerned with how “we understand the thoughts and experiences of young people in the past,” addresses two related key terms: “agency” and “emotion work.” While not willing to delete the term “agency” from the lexicon of childhood and youth studies, Alexander suggests nonetheless that it needs to be rethought in order to make sense of the ways in which unequal relations of structure and power have shaped childhood agency. For instance, Alexander reinterprets young girls’ actions during the Girl Guide Movement of the 1920s and 1930s as expressions of agency to demonstrate that the tendency to collapse agency into public acts of resistance limits our capacity to make sense of girls’ laughter or of their refusal to take part in certain activities in meetings as legitimate forms of agency. Alexander then argues that dwelling critically with the growing body of scholarship on “emotion work,” a phrase first used in the 1980s by sociologist Arlie Russell Hochschild, offers one way to think more broadly about what

childhood and youth agency entails. Using a number of historical and contemporary literary and cultural examples, Alexander argues that foregrounding the “emotion work” expected of children and of girls in particular “has the potential to enrich and to alter our understanding of children’s lives and cultures in the present and in the past.” Alexander’s intervention complicates scholarly thinking about the social construction of childhood “agency” and provides us with language for addressing the experiences of young people past and present as shaped by unequal pressures of “emotion work.”

Critical youth studies scholar Awad Ibrahim’s “Youth: Our New Cultural Theorists” begins with the contention that “[l]anguage is and has always been about power.” Ibrahim moves on to explore examples of “Global Hip-Hop Nation Language” as a “semiotic and metaphoric language, including verbal and non-verbal utterance.” He describes youth who theorize their own experiences, talk about and back to racism, and resist stereotypes, such as sixteen-year-old Hiwot Adilow, who uses spoken word as a medium for interrogating what it means to be a young, self-assured, and educated immigrant. Ibrahim suggests that young people who perform using Global Hip-Hop Nation Language are examples of what he calls “new cultural theorists.” He invites academics to listen to youth, whose “theorizing is grounded in an interdisciplinarity of radical possibilities, innovative grammaticalizing,

and social consciousness.” Notably, Ibrahim offers just one keyword in his paper—critical theorist—and, in so doing, breaks with the outline of the other work in the forum, an important instantiation of Ibrahim’s argument to pursue radical possibilities.

Cultural studies scholar and educational theorist Lisa Weems extends her piece on commodification in Lesko and Talburt’s collection to consider “resistance” and “intimacy.” Weems insists that “resistance” remains a key concept, especially for those marginal subjects who cannot afford to relinquish the term, but she argues that theories of resistance must be attuned to “the multi-dimensionality of texts, contexts, affects, and effects,” as well as to the circulation of power. Weems suggests that queer ethnographer Cindy Cruz’s work on “resistance in tight spaces,” through its analysis of how queer and trans youth of colour resist brutality at the hands of the Los Angeles police. Weems concludes by offering “intimacy” as a keyword that opens a number of productive theoretical possibilities at the intersection of power, affect, relationality, and time/space/place. As an ongoing “event,” moreover, intimacy resists concrete and stable notions of (inter)personal identity.

In the final essay, Natasha Hurley draws on queer studies to theorize the terms “reproduction” and “non-reproduction,” noting that the former, to her surprise, does not appear in any of the existing *Keywords* collections. Proposing that the

invisibility of reproduction as a concept is a product of its naturalization within childhood studies—“a field defined by the biological status of sexual reproduction”—Hurley moves away from biological connotations of the term to consider its non-reproductive histories and structures of signification. “Not reproducing,” Hurley asserts, “does not foreclose one’s relationship to childhood”; moreover, non-reproductivity suggests alternative modes of thinking about how we relate with, to, and in opposition to children and childhood. In addition to suggesting that we might be on the brink of an “age of non-reproduction,” evidenced by the widespread popularity of testimonials about non-reproductivity (or “kidless lit”), Hurley offers thirteen theses on the philosophy of non-reproduction for childhood. Through these theses, Hurley invites us to interrogate the ideological links between the child and reproduction and, in so doing, to reconsider our affective, relational, temporal, and linguistic orientations and attachments to children (both figural and material) and to childhood studies.

Hurley’s essay and this forum as a whole challenge us, as scholars of young people’s cultures, to question our investment in categories like “childhood” as well as other key concepts lodged at the heart of our (inter)discipline. Do these terms reveal more about our fantasies and anxieties as adult scholars than they do about the young people on the other end of our research? What are the productive impossibilities and

ambiguities of these keywords? How do we negotiate the terms that are available to us and made to matter in legal, social, and political contexts? Given the degree to which the cultures produced for, by, and about young people are constantly in flux, how might we imagine a project that involves rethinking and reinventing the terms through which we theorize these cultures?

Collectively, these essays gesture to a new set of keywords for addressing the current social, political,

and economic pressures bearing down on young people, and the creative ways in which they are resisting such forces. This forum positions childhood and youth studies at the crossroads of diverse and often divergent disciplines, theories, methodologies, and discourses and models a capacious, continuous, and dialogic interrogation of key terms that are embedded in (or absent from) studies and theorizations of young people's texts and cultures.

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