

Can the Child Speak? Childhood in the Age of Nation-States,
Children's Rights, and the Role of Children's Literature

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Abstract: Positing that the institutions of childhood, and children's books in particular, contain the child as both a controlled subject and a disruptive presence, this article notes the potential of children's literature for fostering a dialogical engagement between child and adult voices within as well as outside the texts.

This essay takes its inspiration from Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's discussion of *vertreten* (represent) and *darstellen* (re-present) in "Can the Subaltern Speak?" The English rendering of Marx's famous passage on small peasant proprietors, Spivak notes, translates the German *vertreten* as "represent": "They cannot represent themselves; they must be represented. Their representative must appear simultaneously as their master, as an authority over them, as unrestricted governmental power that protects them from other classes and sends them rain and sunshine from above."¹ *Vertreten*, a verb related to yet distinct from *darstellen*, connotes substitution and what Spivak calls "rhetoric as persuasion" whereas *darstellen* indicates "rhetoric as tropology"; the difference between the two is hence much like "the contrast s. . . between a proxy and a portrait."² Spivak's commentary on Marx's passage helps to illustrate the ideological position of children in contemporary society. Much like the small peasant proprietors Marx discusses, children cannot represent themselves but are represented by adult guardians who serve as both their masters and protectors. Since children do not have a political voice in modern nation-states until they reach the age of majority, adults represent children in the public and political realm, functioning as their decision-making proxies or representatives. Children's literature offers an additional dimension to this representation, as it re-presents (*darstellen*) childhood, portraying the child's role in relation to the adult. In this case, adults serve as the re-representatives of childhood, too, since it is they who produce the texts for children: the re-representation (*Darstellung*) of childhood in the books is always an adult portrayal. The term children's literature is, in fact, misleading since it refers not to a body of work written *by* children, as the possessive suggests, but rather *for* them. Once again, children cannot represent themselves; rather, they depend on the adult for both their *Vertretung* and *Darstellung*.

As I interrogate this two-fold re/presentation of children, my essay begins with a discussion of the similarly constituted discourses surrounding children's rights, on the one hand, and children's literature, on the other. I argue that the restrictions on the rights of children are founded on their status as "not-yet" citizens, as *becoming* rather than *being* enfranchised subjects within the nation-state. Defining childhood as a colonized or imprisoned space, however, creates a false analogy that accurately reflects neither the status nor agency of children. I recommend instead an exploration of how the institutions of childhood, and especially children's literature, *contain* the child, both as a controlled subject and as a subversive presence. In other words, rather than focusing on how texts for children participate in the *containment* of the figure of the child and thus in limiting and controlling it, I intend to highlight the ways in which children's books employ the child's voice as their dynamic and even volatile *content*. By incorporating the child's voice, which then enters into a dialogue with the adult's voice in the texts, these books draw attention to children's ideological positioning in the world and interrogate their disenfranchisement. Children's literature can thus form an important component of children's rights education and contribute to the realization of the participation rights put forth by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child.

In the wake of the children's liberation movement of the 1970s, the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) was conceived in 1979, the International Year of the Child. Drafted over the next decade, the CRC was unanimously adopted by the United Nations General Assembly in 1989 and has since then been ratified by 192 countries, making it the most quickly and most widely signed international treaty in history.³ (Although the US signed it in 1995, it has not ratified the convention due to concerns over American sovereignty and fears that parental rights would be superseded by children's rights if the CRC were to be implemented.)⁴ The CRC puts forth the so-called three Ps, granting children rights of protection, provision, and participation, thus moving beyond the scope of its predecessor, the

1959 Declaration on the Rights of the Child, which included only the child's rights to protection and provision. Reflecting a shift in the attitude towards children, Articles 12 to 15 of the CRC promote the child's participation rights, including the right to freedom of expression and the right to access "information and ideas of all kinds, regardless of frontiers."⁵ These articles affirm a child's right to her own voice and that this voice deserves a space in which it can be heard. The child's right to participation, however, often stands in conflict with the child's right to protection; in fact, this tension between controlling the child and allowing for the child's agency informs our contemporary construction of childhood. This construction has in the West developed over the last two centuries, which saw a consistently increasing separation between the child's and the adult's spheres. As the rise of the modern nation-state gave rise to the need for a homogenous citizenry, the indoctrination of the child into a national hegemony became imperative, which is reflected in the creation of a mandatory education system and the notion that the child has a right not to liberty, but to custody.

The nation's youngest members need to undergo a lengthy process of socialization through the school and the family before they reach the age of majority and thus the privileges of adulthood and full citizenship. No longer considered "little adults," containing within themselves all the qualities of adulthood, children have become a separate class of people, imagined as inherently different from and inferior to adults. As a developmental life-stage defined in opposition to but at the same time preparing for adulthood, childhood is in effect "the 'not-yet-ness' of adulthood."⁶ This concept of childhood has, moreover, been constructed not as the cultural but the natural, with assumptions regarding children's immaturity – and their associated asocial, asexual, and apolitical characteristics – presented as biological facts rather than cultural constructions.⁷ Yet it is a mistake, I believe, to conceive of the relationship between the nation and the child as purely one-directional and to posit the child's

agency as a future potential only. Rather, children are not only acted upon but can also act in ways that provoke change or that question existing structures.

Although the participation rights spelled out in Articles 12 to 15 of the CRC represent a significant step forward for the child rights movement, they in effect remain rather limited. Article 13, for example, grants the child the right to freedom of expression yet also makes it clear that this right can be restricted “for the protection of national security or of public order (*ordre public*), or of public health or morals.”⁸ Similarly, Article 15 asserts the child’s right to “freedom of association and to freedom of peaceful assembly,” but again restrictions can be placed on this right “in the interests of national security or public safety, public order (*ordre public*), [or] the protection of public health or morals,” and the child’s granted agency is thus immediately curtailed to protect the larger, hegemonic nation-state system.⁹ Article 12 raises further questions regarding the power dynamics implicit in the childhood conception it puts forth: “States Parties shall assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child.”¹⁰ Arguably the most radical element of the Convention, Article 12 grants the child a limited political voice – limited to “matters affecting the child,” a definition of which the CRC does not provide – but it also expresses an idea of the child as deficient, immature, and inferior vis-à-vis the adult as the exercise of this participation right is limited to children who have proven to be “capable of forming . . . views,” views which will then be evaluated based on “age and maturity.” The adult thus effectively retains her position of power over the child as the person who decides whether or not a child is capable, how mature she is, and hence how much weight to attribute to her views. Ultimately, then, the adult will serve as gatekeeper of the child’s voice, since the adult, by virtue of the definition of adulthood, is always more capable, older, and more mature than the child.

Nonetheless, Article 12 and the CRC's participation rights more generally present a notable departure from the previous discourse on children's rights that put forth a welfare or needs-based approach towards children rather than acknowledge their agency. Providing for what Anne Griffiths and Randy F. Kandel call "an international 'sound space' for the child's voice," Article 12 especially is an important step towards giving children the opportunity to participate in politics and policy-making in a meaningful way.¹¹ Significantly, granting children participation rights is a move towards acknowledging the child as a citizen with agency in the present and not just a future adult-in-the-making, "promot[ing] the recognition of children as contemporaneous rather than merely future citizens, as citizens who must be given a voice."¹² The CRC thus reflects a changing perspective on the child that is shifting from one of parental property to a view of the child as an independent agent and bearer of rights.¹³

The CRC's participation rights can, therefore, be understood as an attempt to revise and reframe the ambivalent position of the child in the nation-state, where she occupies a temporary space of quasi-citizenship and does not enjoy the same rights granted to the adult citizen. Claire Cassidy has pointed out that the legal status of the child reflects the "negative notion of the child as *becoming*" because children are "powerless individuals who have to wait their turn before they are allowed to *be* in society."¹⁴ She further explains this idea of children as only potential citizens when she notes that "children are not currently considered by society to be persons. Recalling the Kantian claim that we should treat a person as an end in himself or herself and never simply as a means, children very often continue to be treated as a mere means to an end, that end being adulthood with full powers of participation."¹⁵ Paradoxically, then, although the figure of the child is the quintessential bearer of rights in a nation-state system that grants citizenship based on nativity, children lack most of the rights associated with the citizen: they do not have the right to work, the right to vote, the right to free movement, the right to own property or to enter into contracts, or the right to self-

determination. Rather, the (social) rights the child does enjoy have been founded on notions of protectionism and on a needs-based approach that treats the child not as being but as becoming, not as an end but a means.

The prevalent needs-based approach that posits adults as the protectors and teachers of children rests on the idea that children rely on the assistance of benevolent adults as they grow into full citizens themselves.¹⁶ This “paternalistic or welfare approach . . . does not recognize its target group as bearers of rights,” as Katherine Covell emphasizes, but rather focuses on the role of the duty-bound teacher or parent.¹⁷ As citizens-in-training, children are subjugated to an education that, while preparing them for the exercise of their future rights as adults, neither recognizes nor teaches children about the rights they currently hold. Even the child’s right to education has been framed according to this perspective that identifies children as *becoming* rather than *being*: it is “a *past-tense adult human right* to have received an education . . . as a child,” Clark Butler points out, and as a result, “[p]arents and schools need to act on behalf of the adults whom children will become.”¹⁸ Conceiving of the rights children have as past-tense adult rather than present-tense child human rights once more highlights the status of the child as a means rather than an end, pointing to a hierarchy of rights in which those of the adult, even in the past tense, take precedence over the child’s. Schooling based on the past-tense adult right to education is focused primarily on accommodating the needs of the future adult that the child represents, and it thus aims to socialize children into adult citizens and to instruct them in the roles and responsibilities they will hold in the future. A focus on the present-tense child’s right to education would instead treat children as ends in themselves, actualizing those rights they currently hold as children rather than laying the groundwork for rights children will hold only in the future. Such an education would foreground the child’s participation rights while also providing children with a space to practice and exercise their voice.

Inherent in a discussion focused on past-tense adult rather than present-tense child rights is a hierarchy of rights that further underscores the notion of children “as *current* human beings and as *future* citizens” who enjoy social but not civil or political citizenship.¹⁹ This hierarchy presents a significant obstacle to the exercise of children’s participation rights as the child’s voice remains second to and dependent on the adult’s. For the CRC’s participation rights to become more than merely tokenistic, it is crucial that children be recognized as current, not future, citizens. Children’s literature can, I argue, participate in this process of empowering the child, as Article 17 of the CRC recognizes: “State Parties shall . . . encourage the production and dissemination of children’s books” while at the same time ensuring “the development of appropriate guidelines for the protection of the child from information and material injurious to his or her well-being.”²⁰ Following the articles outlining the child’s participation rights, Article 17 points to the importance of children’s books in encouraging a child’s self-expression and fostering a child’s “social, spiritual, and moral well-being.”²¹ In its emphasis on keeping reading material that could prove “injurious” out of the child’s reach, however, the article also highlights the perceived necessity of censorship founded on the construction of the child as needing protection. Article 17 thus underscores the precariousness of children’s books as a genre expected to, on the one hand, protect children from information deemed appropriate for adults only and, on the other, encourage children’s participation in a dialogue with adults.

This two-directional pull between protecting the child and allowing for the child’s agency and expression is an inherent feature of children’s literature, a genre characterized by the ambivalence inherent in the child/adult power structure. Prominent children’s literature scholar Perry Nodelman notes that while childhood is not a stable concept and includes varying ideas about children, leading also to differing definitions of children’s literature, the genre “centrally represents adult views of childhood, not those of children themselves.”²² This adult construction of childhood voiced in children’s literature serves both to define adults – as

the opposite of children – and, at the same time, to teach children how to be childlike or, in other words, to instruct children what their role in society is: “childhood as characteristically presented in texts of children’s literature is a fictional construct for *both* children and adults. It is an invention of adults, the main quality of which is exactly the way in which it is conceived to be opposite of adulthood.”²³ The stability of the child/adult power relationship in texts for children constitutes the subject of an ongoing debate in recent children’s literature criticism. Maria Lassén-Seger agrees with Nodelman that the child/adult hierarchy is inherent to the genre as well as the discourse about children’s literature, but she believes that the application of Foucauldian power and postcolonial theory to the criticism of children’s books has demonstrated that a “one-sided domination of adults over children” cannot be taken for granted.²⁴ She concludes that “narratives for children and teenagers may actually question child/adult power relationships” and thus affirms that texts in the genre can be potentially subversive of systems of domination.²⁵ Nodelman, however, arrives at a different conclusion, asserting that “[c]hildhood exists . . . to allow adults to be adults – so children’s literature exists in order to impose childhood on children.”²⁶ According to Nodelman, then, children’s literature is necessarily didactic as it teaches children how they are different from adults and which qualities constitute childhood.

Based on this understanding of children’s literature as didactic by definition, Nodelman furthermore argues that the genre serves to colonize children. Positing adult control as a main factor in texts for children, he maintains that, “children’s literature might be best characterized as a literature that works to colonize children by persuading them that they are as innocent and in need of adult control as adults would like them to believe.”²⁷ Employing Edward Said’s theory of Orientalism as a starting point, Nodelman identifies the child/adult relationship as analogous to that of the colonized and the colonizer: as the colonized is defined by the colonizer as the Other, so the figure of the child, too, is primarily conceived of as Other by the adult and thus, paradoxically, needs to be both kept in its place

and, at the same time, taught how to move out of its state as Other and become more adult.²⁸ While children's literature is expected to, on the one hand, offer "protection, both from knowledge and from experience," it needs to, on the other hand, serve as a teaching tool that instills knowledge and values in children so that they can grow out of childhood.²⁹

Yet Nodelman's argument, drawing on the Self (adult)/Other (child) binary in children's literature and concluding that childhood is a colonized space, relies on a false analogy since the status of children differs from that of actual colonized peoples. Lassén-Seger directly challenges Nodelman's comparison of the child/adult hierarchy and colonialism, referring to the work of Victor R. Ramraj who has argued that "the actual colony, unlike the *colony* of childhood, has literal oppressive military forces, literal political prisoners; and the actual colony does not literally grow out of its colonial state as does the child who, on reaching the age of majority, is no longer a colonized figure but now takes his or her turn at being an adult-imperialist."³⁰ David Archard similarly notes that the state of children "is not permanent in that . . . children will grow out of their diminished condition. In the normal course of events children will *become* rational, autonomous adults."³¹ Although the child/adult binary remains a relatively stable fixture in contemporary society, individual children will, of course, outgrow their disenfranchised status, become full-fledged citizens, and in turn enter into a position of power over the next generation of children. While circumventing the question of whether all texts for children necessarily reinforce the child/adult hierarchy and indoctrinate children into hegemony, Nodelman's identification of children as colonized furthermore minimizes and disregards children's participation in reading and the meaning-making process. Analogies that characterize the child as colonized or imprisoned thus perpetuate the conception of the child as powerless and victimized, portraying the child/adult binary as one-directional rather than dialogical.

In order to acknowledge and give a space to the voice and agency of the child, I propose that exploring how the institutions of childhood – and especially children's literature

– *contain* the child is more productive than discussing how they imprison and colonize her. The meaning of the verb “contain” here is two-fold: the child is contained, defined, limited, and restricted by the institutions of childhood, and it is this containment of the child that scholars such as Nodelman focus on in their analyses. But these institutions also contain – that is, include, or have as part of their content – the figure of the child and the child’s voice, with all its disruptive and counterhegemonic potential. In the case of the family and the school, they contain this potential in the form of real children; in the case of children’s literature, this potential rests in fictional characters embodying constructions of childhood. An analysis that foregrounds the ways in which the child is contained in as well as by the institutions of childhood hence emphasizes not only the existing power structures that benefit the adult and marginalize the child, but it also highlights how the child can challenge these power structures and use her voice as a means of resistance and enfranchisement. Children’s literature scholarship has typically emphasized the study of the child’s *containment*, focusing on the adult’s position of power within the texts as well as in the production of children’s books, and this emphasis has led to important insights into the child/adult binary and the child’s marginalized status. Studying the inclusion of the child’s voice as part of the texts’ *content*, as I propose, can amend and extend these insights by underlining the child’s responses and challenges to the adult ideological world.

When this voice of the child is given a space in a text for children, it demands from the reader a serious, dialogical engagement with the child’s agency and subject position. The space allotted to the representation (*Darstellung*) of the child’s voice varies from text to text, depending largely on the agency attributed to the child character, but all children’s books contain this voice both through their containment of it, as they control, define, and restrict the child as a controlled subject, and as they include and depict the subversive presence of the child in the content of the text. The more these texts work towards the containment of the

child, the less space will be allotted to her voice; and the more the texts employ the child's ideological position in the world as their content, the larger the space for her voice becomes.

I further propose to conceive of children's books, and the ways in which they contain the child, on a spectrum that moves from the didactic to the dialogic, with the former reinforcing the adult's power over the child and the latter demanding an engagement with the child's voice and subject position. Didactic texts for children highlight the indoctrination of both the child character and reader into a national hegemony, teaching children their place in society and maintaining a vertical teaching model that defines the adult as the ideal the child needs to become. Texts on the other end of the spectrum provide ample space to the voice of the child, demand a serious engagement with the figure of the child and its ideological world, and advocate for a dialogue between the child and the adult. "Didactic" here refers to a one-directional, monologic teaching model that grants the adult power over the child and that is steeped in the dominant economic and social ideologies as it intends to mold the child into an ideal adult citizen. "Dialogic," on the other hand, presupposes that the child's marginalized voice is given a space, taken seriously, and engaged with in ways that are not tokenistic but rather recognize this voice's worth, for it relativizes the adult voice and exposes its complicity in hegemony. This didactic—dialogic spectrum offers, I believe, a fresh model and language for discussing and analyzing the politics of texts for children.

In proposing the didactic—dialogic spectrum as a model of analysis for children's books, I draw on M. M. Bakhtin's discussion of social heteroglossia and on his identification of the dialogization of languages as a defining feature of the novel. For Bakhtin, "[t]he fundamental condition, that which makes a novel a novel, that which is responsible for its stylistic uniqueness, is the *speaking person and his discourse*," and that speaking character is always "an *ideologue*, and his words are always *ideologemes*."³² This ideologically demarcated discourse, representing a particular way of viewing the world and striving for social recognition, extends beyond the character's speech as such: "The area occupied by an

important character's voice must . . . be broader than his direct and 'actual' words."³³ Hence my use of the term "voice" throughout this essay is meant to refer not only to a character's spoken words but also, and more generally, to the representation of her agency and subject position within the text.

Since they represent specific world views, Bakhtin asserts, all languages of heteroglossia may "be juxtaposed to one another, mutually supplement one another, contradict one another and be interrelated dialogically," as is the case for the languages of the child and the adult in children's literature.³⁴ This dialogical interrelation between the child's and the adult's languages manifests itself in the interplay between the child character and the adult author as well as between the child character and the adult character. Bakhtin points out that heteroglossia in the novel "is *another's speech in another's language*," constituting "a special type of *double-voiced discourse*" that "serves two speakers at the same time and expresses simultaneously two different intentions: the direct intention of the character who is speaking, and the refracted intention of the author."³⁵ As children's literature offers a space for the voice of the child, it is not, of course, the unadulterated voice of the real child but rather the adult-constructed voice of a child character that speaks in the texts. In the double-voiced discourse that results when an adult writer writes a child character's speech, then, "there are two voices, two meanings, and two expressions [and] these two voices are dialogically interrelated . . . A potential dialogue is imbedded in them, one as yet unfolded, a concentrated dialogue of two voices, two world views, two languages."³⁶ Nodelman points to this relationship between the adult writer and the child character, too, when he speaks of "the hidden adult" (a phrase serving as the title and focal point of his seminal book on the genre) that pervades text for children. Significantly, however, Nodelman's analysis reasserts the adult's power over the child both within and outside the text, whereas Bakhtin writes of the dialogical exchange between different ideological world views that results from this double-voiced discourse.

While there is a potential dialogue between author and character embedded in the novel, then, heteroglossia is typically also “personified, incarnated in individual human figures, with disagreements and oppositions individualized,” even as these disagreements are submerged in and reconceptualized through social heteroglossia and showcase the clashes of two distinct world views.³⁷ For these disagreements and oppositions between child and adult characters to take place, the characters need not only a voice but also a space from which their ideological positions can be heard: “The words of the author . . . create the situation and conditions necessary for [another’s speech] to sound,” since “it is impossible to represent an alien ideological world adequately without first permitting it to sound, without having first revealed the special discourse peculiar to it.”³⁸ Hence I conceive of children’s literature as texts that allot a space for the voice of the child to sound, allowing for an engagement with the child’s “alien ideological world.” The representation of this world and the inclusion of the child’s voice is inherent to all children’s books that employ a child or child-like character (and the inclusion of such a character constitutes a defining feature of the genre), yet the space allotted to the child’s voice varies, with texts tending towards the didactic end of the spectrum offering less, and texts towards the dialogic end offering more space for the child’s voice to sound.

The child’s voice in children’s literature is, as I have noted, of course always a representation and an artistic creation, and as such it is distinct from the voice of the real child. Bakhtin observes that “the languages introduced into the novel are shaped into artistic images of language (they are not raw linguistic data), and this shaping may be more or less artistic and successful, may more or less respond to the spirit and power of the languages that are being represented.”³⁹ In my discussion of the child’s voice in children’s books, I use the term “voice” not in its naïve, humanist sense as the expression of an essential personhood but rather to point towards the representation of a child character’s relative agency and ideological worldview. This marginalized and ideologically demarcated voice of the child

enters into discourse with adult voices in the text as it struggles for recognition and enfranchisement. Despite the fact that it is written by the adult, this voice of the child, and thus the representation of the child's ideological world, challenges the notion of the adult's one-directional dominance over the child. The child's voice in children's literature is, of course, created based on specific assumptions about the nature and characteristic traits of the child, a figure which has been relegated in contemporary Western society to a marginalized space. Since the child is typically defined in opposition to the adult and characterized as deficient vis-à-vis the adult, the child's voice that grows out of this construction of childhood always speaks from a space that lies outside the adult's world and, as a voice from the margins, resists easy absorption into the hegemonic structure. It is hardly surprising, then, that those texts for children that allocate the largest space for the child's voice are also typically the texts that pose the greatest challenge to hegemony and that have the most explicit political dimension.

The counterhegemonic potential of children's literature is closely linked to the texts' inclusion of the child's voice, even as adult writers, publishers, librarians, educators, and parents determine the extent to which the genre can provide a space for this voice. Given that both the adult's role as gatekeeper and the texts' incorporation of the child's voice constitute defining features of the genre, no text for children can be truly conservative or truly subversive. Rather, I suggest, children's books that allow the child's voice to sound, demanding for it to be heard and emphasizing a dialogical relationship between the voice of the child and the voices of both the adult character and the adult writer, demonstrate subversive tendencies, and they do so by virtue of providing a space for a marginalized and disenfranchised voice. Yet I refrain from calling even those texts tending towards the dialogic end of the didactic—dialogic spectrum *truly* subversive: because adults still preside over these texts, the figure of the child cannot in the end have the last word. Children's books that significantly curtail the space for the child's voice, on the other hand, tend towards the

didactic end of the spectrum and show conservative tendencies: in not allowing the child's marginalized voice to sound loud and clear, these texts ultimately reinforce a status quo that relegates the figure of the child to a place of silence and conformity. However, I refrain from calling such texts *truly* conservative because in children's literature the child's voice can never be fully silenced. Since the inclusion of a child or childlike character is a defining feature of the genre, these books necessarily represent a disenfranchised character whose voice is present in her actions and the representation of her ideological world even if she is not given (much) room to speak actual words of "her own."

While the didactic—dialogic spectrum provides a way to identify whether any given text for children tends towards the subversive or the conservative, it also offers a new language through which to analyze children's literature that can, I believe, be more productive and nuanced than the mere identification of texts as either conservative or subversive or both. Significantly, literary analyses that focus on the ways in which the figure of the child is contained in children's literature foreground and emphasize the presence of the child, rather than the adult, when mapping texts onto the spectrum. Tracing the incorporation of the child's voice into the texts moreover makes visible the ways in which the voice of the child enters into a dialogue with both the adult author and the adult character. The child/adult binary and the power structure on which it rests are thus uncovered and scrutinized: through the discursive struggle between the child's voice and the adult's, and hence between their respective ideological worlds, children's books can expose the adult's complicity in hegemony and challenge the adult's one-sided domination over the child. Texts for children can consequently question, amend, and revise the child/adult power structure by incorporating the child's voice (and thus the discursive representation of the child's agency and ideological world) as a large part of their content.

When real children are given a voice in public discourse, however, a serious engagement with their subject positions is often lacking, so that their participation remains

tokenistic rather than productive. Cassidy observes that “[if] children, with their different voices, are consulted and included in debate and dialogue with no further purpose, the exercise has limited value. Indeed, this lack of meaningful opportunities for participation points to the key problem of the role and status of children in society.”⁴⁰ The status of the child as not-yet citizen accounts for the mostly limited implementation of the child’s participatory rights and for the scarce opportunities children are offered to exercise their right to freedom of expression and communication. R. Brian Howe, discussing the CRC’s implementation in Canada, points out that “government action is highly influenced by political pressure. However, in the area of children’s rights, little pressure comes from the chief stakeholders – Canada’s children. They do not vote, they have little money and resources, and they seldom are involved in organizational and lobbying activity.”⁴¹ Ultimately, the child’s exercise of her participation rights in dialogue with adults has remained largely limited to the spheres of the school and family. The CRC does, however, have important implications for the child’s education in the school and the family, as Clark Butler notes, since it suggests a “universal right of all children to education in dialogical skills” and moves away from a model of education that treats the child as deficient vis-à-vis the adult.⁴² Rather, an education in dialogical skills foregrounds the child’s agency as it incorporates and engages the child’s subject position. Children’s literature, I believe, can play a vital role in fostering these dialogical skills.

The CRC has sparked debate about child’s rights education in schools that teaches children about the rights they presently hold while also promoting participatory skills. Marie-France Daniel, who proposes the use of philosophical novels in preschools in order to engage the students’ subject positions and encourage dialogue, finds that children’s literature too often serves a distinctly didactic purpose that can prove counterproductive.⁴³ In order for a children’s book to inspire dialogue and allow the child to think independently, she posits that it “must not contain an explicit or even implicit moral toward which the youngsters are

directed. Indeed, children's literature too often contains messages relating to 'proper' behaviors. Pupils rapidly detect these messages and adjust their thinking accordingly . . . [T]hinking within an author's perspective is not thinking."⁴⁴ While many works for children are indeed steeped in the values of the status quo, aim at socializing the child into hegemony, and fulfill an explicitly didactic function, other children's books foreground the dialogue between child and adult voices in the text. These latter books, which fall on the dialogic end of the didactic—dialogic spectrum, can serve as a valuable addition to a curriculum designed to promote children's participation rights.

Even as opportunities for children to participate in society in meaningful ways remain sparse, texts for children that represent a dialogical discourse between child and adult characters can promote dialogical skills in their readers. By foregrounding the child character's subject position and representing her discursive struggles for enfranchisement as she engages the adult voices in the text, these children's books can foster a sense of agency in their child readers while encouraging them to partake in dialogue with adults.

Notes

1. Quoted in Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, “Can the Subaltern Speak?” in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, ed. Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (Urbana and Chicago: U of Illinois P, 1988), 276-277.

2. *Ibid.*, 276.

3. Brian R. Howe, “Implementing the Convention on the Rights of the Child in Canada: A Question of Commitment” in *Child Rights: The Movement, International Law, and Opposition*, ed. Clark Butler (West Lafayette, Indiana: Purdue UP, 2012), 142.

4. Katherine Covell, “The Case for the Convention on the Rights of the Child from the Perspective of the Child” in *Child Rights: The Movement, International Law, and Opposition*, ed. Clark Butler (West Lafayette, Indiana: Purdue UP, 2012), 38.

5. United Nations General Assembly, “Convention on the Rights of the Child,” *Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights*, n.d., 9 Feb. 2015, <http://www.ohchr.org/en/professionalinterest/pages/crc.aspx>

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7. Sheila Martineau, “Reconstructing Childhood: Toward a Praxis of Inclusion” in *Governing Childhood*, ed. Anne McGillivray (Aldershot, England, and Brookfield, US: Dartmouth Publishing Company Limited, 1997), 226.

8. United Nations, “Convention.”

9. *Ibid.*

10. *Ibid.*

11. Quoted in Allison James and Adrian L. James, *Constructing Childhood: Theory, Policy and Social Practice* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 83.

12. Covell, “The Case,” 39.

13. *Ibid.*, 37.

14. Claire Cassidy, "Implementing the Convention on the Rights of the Child in the UK: A Problem of Political Will" in *Child Rights: The Movement, International Law, and Opposition*, ed. Clark Butler (West Lafayette, Indiana: Purdue UP, 2012), 167 (emphasis in original).

15. *Ibid.*, 166-67.

16. Covell, "The Case," 39.

17. *Ibid.*

18. Clark Butler, "Children's Rights: An Historical and Conceptual Analysis" in *Child Rights: The Movement, International Law, and Opposition*, ed. Clark Butler (West Lafayette, Indiana: Purdue UP, 2012), 18 (emphasis in original).

19. Archard, *Children*, 112 (emphasis in original).

20. United Nations, "Convention."

21. *Ibid.*

22. Perry Nodelman, *The Hidden Adult: Defining Children's Literature* (Baltimore: John Hopkins UP, 2008), 149.

23. *Ibid.*, 197 (emphasis in original).

24. Maria Lassén-Seger, *Adventures Into Otherness: Child Metamorphs in Late Twentieth-Century Children's Literature* (Åbo, Finland: Åbo Akademi Press, 2006), 20.

25. *Ibid.*

26. Nodelman, *The Hidden Adult*, 169.

27. *Ibid.*, 167.

28. *Ibid.*, 166-67.

29. *Ibid.*, 158.

30. Quoted in Lassén-Seger, *Adventures Into Otherness*, 12 (emphasis in original).

31. Archard, *Children*, 53 (emphasis in original).

32. M. M. Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, ed. Michael Holquist, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: U of Texas P, 1981), 332-33 (emphasis in original).

33. *Ibid.*, 320.

34. *Ibid.*, 292.

35. Ibid., 324 (emphasis in original).
36. Ibid., 324-25.
37. Ibid., 326.
38. Ibid., 358, 335.
39. Ibid., 417.
40. Cassidy, "Implementing the Convention," 166.
41. Howe, "Implementing the Convention," 144-45.
42. Butler, "Children's Rights," 18.
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