

## Girl Zombies and Boy Wonders: The Future of Agency is Now!

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In the latter decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century childhood began to be reconceptualized in the academy, public life, and institutions of welfare. A new era of scholars pushed against previous determinations of children and youth as defined predominantly by innocence, vulnerability, and dependence, instead advocating new imaginings where children are active and meaningful contributors to worlds (Alanen 1988; Corsaro 1997; James, Jenks, and Prout 1998; Qvortrup 1994). Agency is a defining feature of this “new” social studies of childhood, whereby children are constructed as agentic beings in their own right, rather than just in training for the adults they will become. While agency is a much-utilized concept in the broad interrogation of its theoretical definition and subsequent applications, in relation to children and childhood, agency is less well-attended to (Clark and Castro 2019). While agency as a term is regularly deployed in Childhood Studies, it remains, with notable exceptions (see, for example, Alanen 2010; Castro 2017, 2019; Clark and Richards 2017; Esser 2016; Gallacher and Gallagher 2008; Oswell 2013; Tisdall and Punch 2012), enshrined in neoliberal models of individualism and Enlightenment notions of the human. The present essay collection responds to this gap by placing agency as the central analytic foundation when conceptualizing, theorizing, and discussing representations of children and childhood in science fiction (SF).

SF is an imaginative genre with enormous potential – it can expand our understandings of life and posit new beings and worlds that often give us pause. In fact, SF is “linked to new ways of seeing, new ways of believing, or even new ways of knowing” (Castro 2018, 253). Inevitably, we realize the future (or alternate past/present) in SF is not so much more different than when, what, or where we live in now, but so much more real in the

unreal. SF texts in this volume include televised, cinematic, animated, and literary sources aimed variously at youth and adult audiences. While SF has a longstanding documented appeal to young audiences and is argued to contribute to the liveliness and vigor of children's popular culture, children and youth are most often inserted in SF written for adults (Westfahl 2000). While SF, as a term, is complex to define, it is broadly encapsulated here as fiction that is not necessarily about science but involves science, using it as a basis for extrapolation (Baxter 1970). SF may include elements such as alien worlds, space and/or time travel, dystopia/post-apocalypse, new technological forms, bodily transformation/genetic evolution, experimentation, and imaginings of hybridization/the posthuman. Extending between children's and adult SF, both subgenres frequently ask readers and audiences to consider the implications and usage of scientific and technological knowledge, including philosophical, ethical, or societal dilemmas, that may pose a threat to or a solution for young people and their current or future lives (Bick 1989).

*Explorers* is an interesting example of youth agency in SF. This 1985 film, directed by Joe Dante, landed on cinema screens in the era that hits such as Steven Spielberg's *E.T. the Extra-Terrestrial* (1982) and Steven Lisberger's *Tron* (1982) captured audience imaginations. While it was not the blockbuster hit that was hoped for from the director of *Gremlins* (1984), it has since amassed a cult following for its well-played characters and charming encapsulation of the wistful longing for 1980s suburban childhoods (Rabin 2014).<sup>1</sup> The three central characters in this coming-of-age SF adventure are young teenage boys: Wolfgang, Darren, and Ben. They use visions from Ben's dreams, Wolfgang's scientific aptitude, and Darren's not-quite-legal access to a junkyard to build a spaceship constructed from bits of fairground rides, spare tires, and an old TV set. Their invention is a success and their first foray into space is intercepted by a much larger spaceship. Expecting to be eaten or experimented on by alien monsters, the boys instead are greeted by two green cartoonish

aliens, Wak and Neek. Wak and Neek are themselves adolescents who, having become obsessed with earth's popular and material culture, psychically sent Ben images of technological blueprints and stole their father's spaceship to meet and make friends with the boys.

There are clear responses to dominant cultural concerns of the 1980s in *Explorers*, notably including the rise of popular and consumer culture symbolized by poor-quality B movies, sitcoms, and advertising, wherein consumerism does not just dominate earth but infects the entire universe. However, while *Explorers* is often listed as part of the rise in the mainstream popularity of children's SF in the latter decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century (see Neustadter 1989; Geraghty and Janicker 2004), it is rarely interrogated for its representation of childhood and youth. The crafting of a spaceship from bits and pieces leftover from pop/consumer culture is a shared endeavor, demonstrating the importance of the boys' peer culture, commitment to a cause, and creative knowledge. In undertaking their spaceship project, the boys navigate adult social structures for their own ends as they manage to complete their spaceship in Wolfgang's basement under the noses of his unsuspecting parents and younger siblings. Suspicions are raised as their experimentation nears completion, risking discovery by adult authorities, but the boys negotiate these interlopers to keep their spaceship, dubbed Thunder Road, a secret.

[INSERT Figure 1.1 HERE]

Caption: The boys' spaceship "Thunder Road": *Explorers* (1985)

While active, agentic boys building machines to navigate other worlds does rely on a past and still somewhat contemporary tendency to view boys as both more active and geographically mobile than girls (see Brown et al. 2008), the project and trip to space also

demonstrate two important elements of children's agency in SF. First, the crafting of the spaceship relies on the combined abilities of all three boys working together. Rather than a narrative that relies on a single hero who navigates worlds alone, *Explorers* positions friendships as one of the core resources in the boys' everyday lives and their new technological adventure.<sup>2</sup> As an example, Darren joins the duo of Ben and Wolfgang after he defends Ben from a school bully – Ben justifies Darren's entrée into Wolfgang's basement and their peer group culture by simply and breezily explaining to Wolfgang: "He saved my life today." As we argue elsewhere (see Castro 2019; Clark 2019), in such social exchanges, neoliberal models of individualized agency are challenged by a focus on interdependency, reciprocity, and shared knowledge and work. The knowledge that these boys embody to build the ship is the second core element. Scientific and technological knowhow displayed by the boys, especially in prodigy Wolfgang, position children as technological or digital natives, in opposition to the technological or digital immigrants of their adult counterparts (Nelissen and Van den Bulck 2018).<sup>3</sup> Children entering outer space on a homemade spaceship could be read as a representation of fears surrounding the corrupting force of technology in the lives of the young. However, in *Explorers* the boys display significant technological prowess and subsequent successful experimentation in the making of Thunder Road, and their collaboration provides the context for the emergence of their expertise, creativity, and agency.

Once Wolfgang, Ben, and Darren make the journey into space, they are captured by an alien spaceship. Fearing for their lives, and in a lovely example of intertextuality, the boys reference their past experiences with SF popular culture in the attempt to predict what will happen next. Instead of monstrous beings set on their death or dismemberment, they meet their captors and find they are friendly teenage aliens, Wak and Neek.

[INSERT Figure 0.2 HERE]

Caption: (From left to right): Traveling boys Wolfgang (River Phoenix), Darren (Jason Presson), and Ben (Ethan Hawke) discover teenage aliens Neek and Wak stole their father's spaceship to meet up with them in space: *Explorers* (1985).

These alien siblings appropriated their father's spaceship to embark on their own space adventure. They are the ones responsible for transmitting the dreams of spaceship technology specifications to Ben, so they could meet some humans. The aliens' desire for this meeting is prompted by intergalactic interceptions of Earth's satellite communications, predominantly centering around elements of pop culture. Their command of the English language is based on straight-to-TV movies and advertisements for junk food. While this kitsch has comedic effect and provides a foil to alternative, sinister imaginings of alien species in forerunning SF films like *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (1978) and *Alien* (1979), it also continues to demonstrate the creativity and agency of youth. While these teenagers, whether human or alien, are embroiled in various adult-defined social institutions (such as family and school), they expertly navigate such structures together for their own ends. To have such an intergalactic meeting spawned by popular culture appears to trivialize the encounter. However, if we avoid giving credence to the Western tendency to divide high and low culture into that which is worthy and that which is unworthy of attention and merit (Bright 1995), then Earth's first meeting with species from outer space is left, perhaps appropriately, in the technologically savvy, collaborative, and agentic hands of the young.

SF allows us to see those people and things who are shrouded in mystery, cloaked in secrecy, and silenced in perpetuity. One such colonized population rapidly entering the zombie literary and filmic canon are children. For example, recent books and their quickly following film adaptations like *Warm Bodies* (2010/2013) and *The Girl with All the Gifts*

(2014/2016) portray zombies who are children or youth; in these stories we find new imaginings of who and what monsters are and how humanity may live on in them, even while they feast on human brains and entrails. Boon (2002) posits there are seven types of zombies in SF film and literature: zombie ghost, zombie ruse, zombie drone, zombie ghoul, zombie channel, tech zombie, and cultural zombie. With the introduction of children into the mix of zombie lore, we argue there is a new, eighth, version of zombie: hybrid zombie. Zombies are frequently branded as the “posterchildren” for “posthuman creatures/antihumans” who embody and reflect the meanings and anxieties of being human today (see Földvary 2014; Knickerbocker 2015, 61; McReynolds 2015; Sommers 2016). Children, as underserved and underestimated people living in undervalued cultural times and spaces of childhood, make such connections realized in their hybridized lives.

The hybrid zombie, as child, is the seamless blending of multiple strands of thought regarding children/childhood and zombies. First, children in posthumanity negotiate cultural discourses regarding their hybrid bodies, voices, and knowledges when facing structural barriers to their full participation in families, institutions, and societies (Castro 2017; Prout 2000; Willis 2009). SF’s undead monsters – zombies – have also long operated as an allegory for colonized persons and cultures. While situated in various “cultural anxieties,” the zombie as a “dehumanized human” reflects “genocidal collective behavior [that] may serve as a vengeance fantasy on the part of any group to have suffered at the hands of powers created during a modernity informed by humanist ideology” (Clasen 2012, 225; Knickerbocker 2015, 70). Second, in their hybridity children are frequently branded as “angels/devils,” “innocent/savage,” or, definitively, “monsters/beasts” (see Gillis 2008; Gittens 1998; Jenks 2005; Mouritsen 2002; Valentine 1996). Such terms have mythological, ambiguous implications of the character and different/exceptional status of children, reflecting “all the complications of love and longing, repulsion and fear” held by adults toward them

(Bohlmann and Moreland 2015; Mouritsen 2002; Warner 1994, 55). These labels are closely affiliated with the nature/culture or animal/human oppositionalities that ideologically populate conversations about children's and childhoods' place in society (Höing 2019; Lassén-Seger 2006). In these connections, children are "represented as innocent or pure...[or] used to represent a natural environment increasingly seen as under threat. In other instances unkempt 'out of control' children are associated with 'beasts', with being 'no better than animals'" (Gittens 1998, 117). And yet, children's hybridity allots possibilities, whereby contradictions between the poles of nature/culture, natural/social, or animal/human can be collapsed, allowing for "a new form of political enquiry which attends to the interconnectedness of the human and more-than-human world" (Lee and Motzkau 2011; Prout 2005; Taylor 2011, 431). Zombies, too, are envisaged to threaten society through their hybridized dichotomous existences as people (our neighbors, sisters, brothers, friends, parents) who used to be human but are now other, now monster. They are "metaphors for sociocultural anxieties" that are "the most fully realized articulation of this dynamic interdependency between the human self and the monstrous other" (Boon 2002, 34; Clasen 2012, 225). Third, related to the interconnectedness between good and bad, here and there, is the similarly positioned child and zombie as hybridized liminal entity. Conceptually, liminality allows for consideration of children's and childhood's inbetweenness, taking a fluid approach to their identities that can potentially challenge preexisting social orders (Bettis and Adams 2005; James, Jenks, and Prout 1998; Seymour 2015). Zombies, too, are liminal figures "who transgress boundaries between human and monster"; they are transitional beings existing within uniquely blurred boundaries who "[guard] the border between the acceptable and the forbidden or the Other" (Földvály 2014; Knickerbocker 2015, 62; Smith and Moruzi 2018, 15). Intersecting children and monsters (presently, zombies), Tesar and Koro-Ljungberg (2016) argue that hybridizing them together in one form serves to

deterritorialize fear, which they say leads to children's ability to liminally travel in the border spaces between darkness and light, human and animal, speed and slowness, and mind and body, each accessible simultaneously. Fourth, both children and zombies are critically constrained by society's lacking recognition of their agency. Children should be credited as "hybrid 'actants'" who strategically call on agency as a resource to assertively define their identities and enact various efforts in their generational relationships with others (Castro 2017, 2019; Clark 2019; Halloway, Holt, and Mills 2019; James, Jenks, and Prout 1998; Prout 2005, 82; Willis 2009). While children's agency is a pillar of "new" Sociology of Childhood and Children's Geographies theory, it is still questioned and/or blocked by adult society and its structure at large. Similarly, the tale of the zombie in film began with "expressed fantasies about absolute control and anxieties about loss of agency and autonomy," since "In the zombie, death is given agency" (Boon 2002, 34; McReynolds 2015, 150). For the child hybrid zombie, a posthuman figure, elements of agency, power, and humanity are integral to shaping possibility through both individuality and interconnection (see Braidotti 2006, 2013; Talafuse 2014; Whatmore 2009).

So, the narrative of the zombie and the narrative of the child is that of hybrid existence on all theoretical and embodied fronts. SF is a forgiving genre, allowing for similarly hybridized stories that are both SF proper and SF adjacent: frequently, an SF tale is also fantasy, is also biography, is also fable, is also horror. As found in the recently released and original screenplayed film *The Dark* (2018), the child hybrid zombie is perfectly illustrated through the story of Mina. Mina's undead life has its origins in sexual abuse. While some of the backstory is vague, Mina's father is gone (the viewer assumes dead) and her mother is now an alcoholic dating a man (Nate) who sexually assaults Mina. The monster grows in Mina as the abuse continues, and one night when her mother is passed out on the couch, Mina bites Nate on his hand and neck during an assault.<sup>4</sup> He retaliates by beating her



with a snow globe that depicts a portrait of Mina's happier family from the past. He drags near-dead Mina from her house to a neighboring cave, buries her, and Mina rises: undead human, vengeful monster, hybrid zombie. While viewers do not see Nate's death,<sup>5</sup> they do witness Mina killing her mother in anger – Mina's mother promised her Nate would not return to their home, but he did and she was too drunk to intervene, final apologetic missives to her child hybrid zombie too little, too late. Mina then becomes the legendary zombie monster of Devil's Den, violently killing all who dare enter and eating their entrails afterward. Mina truly exists in a zombified body: she can no longer eat "human" food and is cold to the touch, and she has long, thick fingernails (the better to gouge the eyes out of her victims), head injuries that do not heal, different colored eyes, and quick reflexes and speed (the better to catch her prey).

Mina's solitary monstrous life changes when a kidnapper and pedophile drives into Devil's Den and enters her dismantled family's home. Josef dares touch Mina's things and lie on her bed, and she promptly kills and eats him. While exploring his car, Mina discovers an adolescent boy – Alex suffers from Stockholm Syndrome, professing his love for Joseph and need for him to return even though Alex has telltale bruises on the back of his legs and is blinded by Josef's hand. Alex's eyes are burned shut, mutilated, Josef's punishment and retaliation for Alex not obeying "the rules." Mina kills a police officer who enters her home in search of Alex, and then Alex and Mina go on the run from more police and volunteers combing the woods for Alex. No one, it seems, looked for Mina with such tenacity after her family tragedy; in fact, locals try to steer clear of Devil's Den if at all possible.<sup>6</sup> Through connecting with Alex and his terrible ordeal, Mina slowly begins to return back from zombie to human girl. However, Alex transfers his dedication to Josef onto Mina, and he kills a woman whose house they enter for refuge, claiming he does so for Mina. Mina realizes Alex

needs to return to his family and allows for him to be rescued. Then, Mina sets off into the world on her own, no longer zombie.

[INSERT Figure 0.3 HERE]

Caption: Mina (Nadia Alexander), monstrous hybrid zombie, pictured with her weapon of choice: *The Dark* (2018).

Mina's transition from zombie back to girl happens for two interrelated reasons: her ethic of care is enacted, and she makes a real, tactile and emotional connection to a peer her age, one who cannot see her monstrous form. Mina's caring for Alex starts when they first meet – he urinates his pants from fear when she finds him under a sleeping bag in the car's backseat. She goes into the bathtub of her home, where she keeps the clothing of all her victims, and finds him a pair of sweatpants to wear. She then talks to Alex through the night (hiding in the very same cave Nate buried her in), in his blindness leads him by the hand through woods and fields, retrieves a phone for him from the searchers (who all meet bitter ends), and feeds him soup at the woman's house (after which, Alex hugs her, crying).

Children who embody the ethic of care are able to empathize with others' plights, understanding their feelings and needs (Brannen, Heptinstall, and Bhopal 2000). While it is said that children who enact an ethic of care are doing so with their own agency (giving care instead of merely receiving care in passivity), these children are too frequently branded by nation-states and their institutions as vulnerable, dependent, and in need (Brannen, Heptinstall, and Bhopal 2000; Cockburn 2005; Wihstutz 2011, 2016). Though care relationships can be framed by and with unhealthy, conservative, and asymmetrical power structures, they can also reflect (intra)independent and empowering social relationships between children and others close to them (Castro 2019; Clark 2019; Tronto 1987; Wihstutz

2011, 2016). Notably, Emond (2010) finds that children enact care with one another for protection, support, and guidance, fostering a “sense of unity against a threatening world outside” (73).<sup>7</sup> Certainly, the care that Mina and Alex enact with one another encompasses all of these elements, both positive and negative. While spending the night in the cave of her undead burial, Mina tells Alex about Devil’s Den, narrating her hybrid zombie life thusly:

These woods are cursed, you know? Why do you think they call it Devil’s Den? There’s this monster that roams around stalking the woods hungry for human flesh and bone. It used to be like you and me, but then something bad happened to it. Something really bad. They say it has claws like knives that it uses to tear people apart, like arms and legs flying everywhere. And that it uses its razor-sharp teeth to bite into people’s hearts while they’re still beating just so they can watch the moment they die... Ask anyone. She’s real.

Mina and Alex share the common bond of suffering at the hands of abusers; as a result, they agree they both “believe in monsters.” Even though as hybrid zombie Mina is *a* monster, she is not *the* monster. Here, Mina’s “monstrous feminine represents aspects of female power that are especially threatening to patriarchy” (Talafuse 2014, 3). As evidence, with the exception of her mother, Mina is depicted only killing males who cross her path. She warns the woman in the house, “I don’t want to hurt you” just before Alex kills her. Failing in the attempt to eat that woman, her aversion is instead met with the painful memory of killing her mother.<sup>8</sup> As a hybrid zombie who finds a boy who too experiences true suffering at the hands of an older male, Mina reconnects on a deep level with her hidden girlhood self. This caring relationship gives the child hybrid zombie an additional layer not usually found in zombie characterizations: she is able to communicate with a peer, no longer a solitary monster (see Knickerbocker 2015).

[INSERT Image 0.4 HERE]

Caption: Holding hands, Mina (Nadia Alexander) and Alex (Toby Nichols) enter the light beyond Devil's Den: *The Dark* (2018).

We argue Mina becomes monstrous hybrid zombie to protect her humanity, her girlhood. In this process, the “child loses humanity in order to survive as a human in the posthuman moment” (Sommers 2016). For Mina, this posthuman moment includes the demise of her idealized family form and the onset of sexual abuse, retaliatory beating, and final burial of her undead body. As a girl, her shifting shape from human to zombie and back again reflects “a potent metaphor for the depiction of sexual abuse,” wherein supernatural girls are able to escape and take refuge from the hypermasculinist rape culture that left them, as human girls, vulnerable or powerless (Lassén-Seger 2006, 176; Smith and Moruzi 2018). At the end of the film there is a sense of loss – Alex cries out over and over for Mina as he is taken away by ambulance, and Mina pauses in her solo journey away from Devil's Den to draw a picture of Alex, eyes intact. Mina, too, has lost some power in this retransformation – the final scene shows a woman pick Mina up from a lone stretch of road, begging and warning in the last line of the film, “Please, hon, get in the car. It's not safe out here for a young girl like yourself.”<sup>9</sup> Ostry (2004) points out that posthuman SF girls can only gain emotional, but manageable, human inner lives by surrendering their superpowers, since “If to be human means feeling emotion, then losing total control over one's emotions...puts one's humanity in question” (236-7). That said, Mina's hybrid zombie form gives hope – just as children's ethic of care is not always defined by their vulnerability, zombies do not necessarily have to solely represent the depressing demise of society's populations. Sometimes, zombie stories “can paradoxically offer us a glimpse of worlds that might be better if we were forced to fight for our survival, for our joys, and for the right to define

ourselves as we want to be” (Rushton and Moreman 2011, 7). *The Dark* offers such possibilities for self-definition through an agentic journey into the depth of despair and the breadth of hope youth can embody.

Echoing our analyses of *Explorers* and *The Dark*, the chapters in this book position SF narratives and representations as offering unique spaces for the consideration of children’s agency. The cognitive estrangement provided in familiar and yet unfamiliar landscapes of SF pose new possibilities and challenges for young characters, and their travels within such narratives demonstrate control but also power, structure but also agency. The authors in this book hail from a range of disciplines, each drawing on the social studies of youth as an established theoretical frame while incorporating other positionalities and disciplines to truly expand the interrogation of children’s agency in the multifaceted field of Childhood Studies.

## The Past

The first section of our book, *The Past*, considers representations of youth and their agency from the viewpoint of previous decades. These chapters, whether they analyze representations made in the 1980s or more recently, all variously examine children’s agency located in cinematic, televisual, and literary works set in past decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. Media representations of children and youth regularly depend on nostalgia to justify constraints on children as social actors or to reify preferred versions of childhood itself. However, the authors in this section present *Stranger Things*, *Back to the Future*, and the *X-Men* to consider ways in which youth disrupt such narratives and how such representations can generate childhood power and discursive shifts in our collective consciousness. Joseph Giunta’s chapter, “*Why Are You Keeping This Curiosity Door Locked?*” *Childhood Subjectivities and Play as Conflict Resolution in the Postmodern Web Series Stranger Things*

begins by offering a state-of-the-art review of the “new” social studies of childhood and the powerful transition it predicated in exploring the agency of young people, as well as a discussion of the children’s television and film genre’s reluctance to follow where Childhood Studies’ progresses have led. In particular, Giunta identifies the powerful role of bricolage, play, and peer cultures in locating children as moral agents within scholarship. While previous SF and other works are identified as presenting narratives of freedom and agency toward adulthood’s beginnings and childhood’s ends, instrumentalized to preserve the status quo, in *Stranger Things* children are not developmentally located to gain agency as they move out of childhood. Instead, it is their positionality as children, Giunta argues, that facilitates their abilities to be agentic, moral, and informed negotiators for change while traversing the suburbs of small-town America.

In his chapter “*It Was a Wonder I Was Ever Born*”: *Reversing the Technical Performance of Childhood in Back to the Future*, Kip Kline discusses the iconic film *Back to the Future* with its various representations of 1980s and 1950s American youth consumer culture. While Kline identifies that the film has a clichéd nostalgia for 1950s American life, he also finds within it a thread of youth resistance. Drawing on Baudrillard’s (2014) oft-underused theories on the “technical performance of childhood,” Kline suggests that childhood perhaps does not slip into perpetual sameness or scissiparity in Zemecki’s *Back to the Future*. Rather, Marty McFly’s need to navigate the 1950s, the time he accidentally travels back to, prompting efforts to ensure his parents meet and establish a relationship so he can be born, is not simply slapstick or overdrawn period representation. Instead, Marty expertly, or at times with less surety, manipulates circumstances to his own end to resolidify his own familial and bodily existence. This time-traveling representation functions to reverse the sameness of the technical performance of contemporary childhood, presenting a unique contribution to how youth agency is portrayed in SF film.

Kwasu David Tembo and Murieann B. Crowley's chapter *In the Shadow of the Claw: Jubilee, X-23, and the Mutated Possibilities of Youth Agency across Generations in the World of the X-Men* continue the exploration of SF representations of agency in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century by examining various iterations of the *X-Men*. By focusing on the introductions and story arcs of two teenage sidekicks to main character Logan/Wolverine, Jubilee and X-23, Tembo and Crowley are able to examine and problematize the notion of youth agency at two historical moments, the late 1980s and the early 2000s. The positioning of these teenage sidekicks, who themselves have enhanced abilities, offers unique opportunities to consider the representative contradictions of youth agency in comic books and related media. These girls, separated out from larger society, at times have autonomy and significant bodily power, but are also policed through various socioeconomic, political, and cultural institutions by virtue of their status as simultaneously "mutant" and "child." Here, notions of vulnerability, resistance, gender, and generation are examined to consider how young mutants are able to navigate and negotiate their agency and legacy.

### The Present

While the previous section provides insight and readings of the how youth agency is conceptualized in texts set in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, this section attends to *The Present*, the second decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. Here, authors variously explore televised and animated SF (*Akira*, *Hunger Games*, *Black Mirror*, *Electric Dreams*, and *The 100*) to consider how alternative imaginings of present day landscapes or current implications and contestations of future landscapes provide new ways of understanding and interrogating youth agency. Jessica Clark's analysis of *Akira* in *Biker Gangs and Boyhood Agency* examines how this iconic anime film positions the "future" of 2019, as was anticipated at its creation in the 1980s. The

agency and resistance of young biker gangs and psychic children is realized in the context of relationships with people and things. A focus on reciprocity and loyalty offers a critique of neoliberal constructions of agency. Thus, youth agency is positioned as not only being enhanced within relationships but as necessary for the future of the Japanese nation and, indeed, humanity itself. Clark's approaches to posthumanism and constructions of young masculinity demonstrate how boyhood agency in *Akira* must be applied in the consideration of technology, materiality, and the nature of im/mortality.

Continuing a focus on the SF in present (or, in this case, unspecified) time, Megan McDonough draws on Katniss Everdeen in her chapter *From Tribute to Mockingjay: Representations of Katniss Everdeen's Agency in the Hunger Games Series* to consider how alternative visions of society allow opportunities for considering the intersection of youth agency, gender, and power. Here, Young Adult (YA) fiction and dystopian narratives offer representations of young characters creatively navigating oppressive adult state-sponsored structures. Her focus on relational or social agency encourages readers to consider how relationships both close down and open up opportunities for agentic action among Katniss and her fellow competitors. The chapter suggests an alternative reading to the *Hunger Games* series epilogue, questioning whether the final scene of Katniss's children playing is indeed a transgression to her feminist ideals and activist journey. Instead, McDonough argues, Katniss's final choice to have a family, when she swore all along she would not, demonstrates the reclamation of social and family life post-games and new availability of the freedom to agentially choose.

We next have two chapters that analyze televisual shows set in the future, but whose moral or creative implications are situated solidly in today's world. Jessica Kenty-Drane's chapter *The Yoke of Childhood: Misgivings about Children's Relationship to Technology in Contemporary Science Fiction* considers how SF stories are cultural artifacts that reveal



much about where society is and where it may be heading. Providing a modern historical context regarding narratives of technophobia and protectionism, Kenty-Drane suggests two episodes from contemporary web series *Black Mirror* and *Electric Dreams* function to continue those societal fears and warnings surrounding children and childhood. Contrasting to adults, while technology can be emancipatory and children are both empowered by it and powerful enough to use it, the dominant representation of the agency of youth is that it is undermined by technological innovation, demonstrating ongoing concern for family relationships in today's fast-paced world.

Erin Kenny's chapter "*Ship Wars*" and the *OTP: Narrating Desire, Literate Agency, and Emerging Sexualities in Fanfiction of The 100* examines how contemporary young audiences engage with images of the future to challenge heteronormative notions of identity, relationships, romance, and sex. Drawing on fanfiction based around the television SF drama *The 100*, Kenny demonstrates that counternarratives generated by young audiences today challenge dominant televised narratives about the future. The literate agency demonstrated in the crafting of this SF fanfiction resists sexual commodification of the teenage girl and subverts normative cultural expectations of sexuality and intimacy. Fanfiction is not just passive response to programmed pop culture; instead, online fandoms reflect deep personal and political content and conversation, wherein agentic young people respond to SF narratives, harnessing the breadth of social media for its liberatory potential.

## The Future

The final section of our book explores alternative visions of *The Future* of children and childhood, societies, and humanity, represented either within literary text settings or through new theoretical and analytic propositions and assemblages. At times, SF futures elicit

terror, serving to shore up visions of impending human societies that maintain the status quo. However, found in *Ender's Game*, *Unwind*, *Ready Player One*, and *Emergence*, approaching futures or disasters also offer the possibility of creative imaginings wherein children and youth are able, together and individually, to generate positive change, harness the power of new technologies, or formulate new iterations of posthumanity. *A Pedagogy of Childhood Agency: Teaching Power of Youth in the Ender Universe* by Joaquin Muñoz considers tension between agency and structure to be at the heart of Orson Scott Card's *Ender's Game* and the wider Enderverse. Ensnared in the military industrial complex of their Battle School, Ender, Bean, and Zeck are able to navigate adult structure for their own ends, drawing on resources found in their peer relationships. Muñoz demonstrates the complexity of boys' lives and the capabilities of youth to define understanding, rationality, and agency on their own terms. In exploring the characters as individuals and their relationships with each other and the adults around them, elements of hegemonic masculinity, control, and power highlight how boyhood agency can manifest in multiple, often contradictory, ways.

Stephanie Thompson's chapter *Sanctuary and Agency in Young Adult Dystopian Fiction* examines YA dystopian novels *Unwind* and *Ready Player One* with focus placed on the spaces where agency can emerge. Thompson argues that in YA SF dystopian narratives, spaces of home, traditionally framed out as secure, are now reconceptualized as hostile and oppressive. Home becomes intangible, a lost connection between child and family, thus transformed into a space further afield that is wholly defined by children and youth themselves. Children's refusals to comply with and conform to genocidal edicts or corporate greed bloom in such SF future landscapes, and their desires to forge meaningful human relationships become the terrain for agentic action. Dystopia threatens children's rights to emplaced citizenship, so the creation of new home spaces by youth provides meaningful context for agentic navigation of their uncertain worlds.

Ingrid E. Castro continues the study of children traveling through uncertain landscapes in her chapter *The Emergence of Agency after Bionuclear War: Posthuman Child – Animal Possibilities*. Here, a posthuman framework is deployed to consider the agentic journey of the girl. Experimentation and a new posthumanity can prompt nostalgic desire for previous forms of childhood past, but, instead, central character Candy creates new forms of selfhood, belonging, and familial and peer networks. Castro argues the inclusive companionship shared between posthumans and animals in SF offers new territories of agency to explore. In this context, blurred lines between human and “other” destabilize traditional hierarchies such as animal/human, nature/culture, and child/adult. Posthuman future children evaluate deep-rooted constraints of adults and follow by choosing and erecting their own operational structures. In doing so, children visibly display rationality and emotional dexterity, and thus generate meaningful agentic imaginings of selves, relationships, and futures.

In the *Afterword: The Children of Wonder*, SF expert Gary Westfahl concludes this volume by neatly encapsulating the history of children in SF, wherein their centrality is demonstrated since the 19<sup>th</sup> Century. Displays of agency in these past tales, and in youth’s real technological discoveries and following scientific advances, are charted through the centuries by Westfahl. Such stories, developments, and contexts shift and evolve, responding to dominant social constructions of childhood, historical events, and wider social change. In our volume, scientific progress, mechanical change, and societal anxieties coalesce to generate and contextualize young SF characters who variously embody inventors, superheroes, leaders, mutants, voyagers, military personnel, activists, and hackers. In seeking belonging, home, rebellion, exploration, redemption, and liberation, SF provides complex landscapes through which children and youth demonstrate, in a highly visible manner, their power, creativity, and agency.

Academic enquiry into SF representations of agentic children and youth is best enframed by their movements, interests and advancements, and experiences, or, travel, technology, and time. The children who span our pages literally travel– they make arduous journeys across their towns, societies, countries, and sometimes even from earth to cosmos, but also figuratively travel – they liminally move in and between various identities, embodiments, and planes of existence. Contained within and going beyond the pages and scenes of SF texts, youth’s interpretive reproduction in the search for answers to complicated questions or problems is often formulated outside of adult purview and frequently accomplished in secrecy or under cover of night. In this social project, the usage of technologies they newly imagine, independently appropriate, or creatively repurpose to achieve co-constructed peer goals leads to a range of emotions – pain, pleasure, fear, elation, sorrow, and joy. The past, present, and future topographies children and youth live through and in, being and becoming themselves, place SF in the unique position of reflecting a limitless range of possibility. At a moment when debates surrounding childhood and adolescence continue to circulate in the academy and media, time – the quality of existence, indefiniteness, continuation, progression, and wholeness – is both binding and unbounded, just as agency is simultaneously situated in structure, negotiation, and freedom.

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### Notes

<sup>1</sup> See Gordon's (2008) theories on important messages likewise reflected in Spielberg's "suburban trilogy" films.

<sup>2</sup> For an example of a solo boy's space adventure in the 80s, see *Flight of the Navigator* (1986).

<sup>3</sup> While Wolfgang's father is portrayed as a scientist, he is quite disorganized and forgetful, always misplacing elements of his experiments (see Castro 2019 for more on the portrayal of bungling parents).

<sup>4</sup> Mina enacts several of the agentic strategies outlined in Kitzinger's (2015) work on sexually abused children: Mina tells the abuser what he wants to hear, but she also fights back.

<sup>5</sup> Later in the film, viewers learn from a searcher that Nate was found dead in Mina's home.

<sup>6</sup> Prior to his death, one of the searchers talks of Mina "disappearing" when he "was a kid." This statement, in combination with the general state of disrepair of her house, implies that Mina, not aging in her monstrous form, has existed as child hybrid zombie for many, many years in Devil's Den.

<sup>7</sup> Interestingly, most theorists and researchers who discuss the ethic of care do so referencing children caring for family members, primarily parents or other trusted adults (see Castro 2019 for further discussion). They may mention the importance of friends or peers in passing, but never delve into those caring relationships in earnest. Emond's (2010) work is the only one we find that puts children and youth peer care for one another, situated within an applied "ethic of care" framework, at the forefront.

<sup>8</sup> See Kerr (2019) for more on children's relationships to their mothers in "maternal horror" films.

<sup>9</sup> To note, the woman is driving a station wagon, a car that symbolically typifies happy, intact, suburban families of the past.

However zombies are not new. The term, from the Kongo word nzambi which means "spirit of a dead person", has been long associated with the Vodou religion of Haiti (popularly known as Voodoo). For a long time most people assumed that zombies were nothing more than mythical figures, like werewolves and vampires. However this changed in the 1980s when a man called Clairvius Narcisse claimed that he had been turned into a zombie by means of drugs and forced to work on a sugar plantation for two years before escaping. Wade Davis, a Harvard scientist, investigated the claim and obtained something called "zombie powder" from Haitian bokors.