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Introduction: Adolescence in Canadian Literature

Heather Snell, Heidi Butler,
John Clement Ball, and Jennifer Andrews

The re-election of Stephen Harper as prime minister of Canada on 2 May 2011, this time with a majority government, has important implications for youth. In 2008, the Harper government proposed tougher sentences for teenagers convicted of violent crimes and argued that their identities should no longer be shielded (Clark et al.). Had this proposal been passed, it would have meant that teenagers as young as fourteen (sixteen in Quebec) could serve the kinds of sentences currently reserved for adult offenders, including life imprisonment (Clark et al).[1] The Harper government's proposal not only contradicted a Supreme Court decision that made it harder to sentence youths as adults, but it also amounted to an overhaul of the Youth Criminal Justice Act (Clark et al.), which maintains that "the greater dependency of young persons and their reduced level of maturity" demands a separate criminal justice system that sanctions "enhanced procedural protection to ensure that young persons are treated fairly and that their rights, including their right to privacy, are protected" ("Youth Criminal Justice Act"). The Harper government wanted teens convicted of violent crimes branded as criminals and incarcerated with adult prisoners, a move that risks perpetuating both youth crime and violent crimes against incarcerated youth.[2] Despite protestations to the contrary,[3] neither Harper nor his former government appeared to have much concern for already marginalized and at-risk youth in Canada — or at least for those who end up in court. It remains to be seen what the new Harper government will do about youth crime and crimes against youth. The election of a majority Harper government may hold frightening prospects for poor and/or racially stigmatized youth in particular — young people who are as much at risk of violent crimes against their own persons as they are likely to be reported as perpetrators of violent crimes against others.[4]

In a collection of essays that focuses on cultural studies after 9/11, Lawrence Grossberg argues that in the United States there is a war against "kids": "I want to suggest that kids are increasingly delegitimated, that is, denied any significant place within the collective geography of life in the United States" (96). Grossberg's argument applies easily to Canada, which, as evidenced by the earlier Harper government proposal, is also witnessing what Grossberg refers to as "rearticulated and reinvigorated attacks on kids" (Grossberg 96). Bernard Schissel argues that "whether Canadians like to admit it or not, Canada's war on crime, like the war on crime in many other countries, and in other eras . . . has, in an important sense, become a war against youth" (9). Adults routinely co-opt youth cultures even as they scapegoat youth for all kinds of perceived social ills, oftentimes in direct contradiction to existing statistics.[5] While Statistics Canada reports an increase of 30% in the rate of violent crime among young people since 1991 ("Youth Crime"), it also points out that "one-fifth of all violent crimes reported to a set of 122 police services in 2003 were committed against children and youth aged 17 and under" ("Children and Youth").[6] A 2005 report by Kathy AuCoin similarly states that "in 2003, children and youth . . . under 18 years of age were the victims of 22% of violations against the person." Significantly, "the risk of violent victimization for children and youth increases with age" ("Children and Youth"; see also AuCoin).[7] Youth exists paradoxically as a highly contested site of regulation and appropriation: youths exist as objects of disciplinary power by dint of the threat they pose to the social order, yet they also embody what adults seem to feel they have lost — innocence, vulnerability, and futurity. The anxieties the very idea of youth tends to generate are reflected in the proliferation of labels that get attached to them: "tween," "teen," "juvenile," "young adult," and "adolescent" name at once niche markets and attempts to understand a group that has been largely "othered."[8] In fact, Canadian sociologists James E. Côté and Anton L. Allahar blame the extension of "youth" beyond the teen years for "transform[ing] young Canadians from productive citizens into relative dependents on their families and the government, and from valued citizens to second-class citizens who have minimal participation in the mainstream economy" (6).[9] "Kids," the label Grossberg uses to refer "both to children and adolescents" in an attempt to avoid "the complex connotations of children, adolescents, or youth" (95), "are no longer innocents who have to be

protected, long the dominant view of childhood in the United States in the twentieth century" (104). "Rather," he elaborates, "they are another species, some kind of animal, and we are failing to civilize, to domesticate, them" (104). Indeed, might this be what is really at stake for the Harper government: namely, that youths who commit crimes symbolize the failure of the nation-state to civilize its youngest members? Youths who make trouble, or who are deemed to have made trouble, are consigned to the category of adulthood so that only certain kinds of youth — that is, happy, smiling, shiny young people who obey, participate, and protect (the very same values espoused by the "Discover Canada" study guide for potential citizens on the government of Canada's website) — may reflect the successes of the nation-state. Those kids who fashion themselves in opposition to certain constructions of tweenness, adolescence, or in-betweenness, not to mention nationhood, need not apply.

The papers in this special section variously consider adolescents and their often fraught relation to the larger body politic, and engage questions about identity, belonging, and the use of narrative as a means of negotiating social, cultural, political, and geographic space. In doing so, they build on work in the fields of Canadian literature and Canadian children's literature while also providing new lenses through which to view adolescence. They include analyses of texts for, about, and by young people in an attempt to parse out the meaning and significance of adolescence in diverse Canadian contexts. The task these papers take on necessitates remaining attentive not only to the positioning of adolescents within the Canadian nation but also to the instability of the terms *adolescence* and *Canada*, which, as with the terms listed above, name highly contested sites of negotiation. The *Canadian Oxford Dictionary of Current English* defines *adolescent* merely as one who straddles the divide "between childhood and adulthood" ("Adolescent," def. 1), and *Canada* is equally difficult to pin down. Critics Stuart Hall and Kwame Anthony Appiah have emphasized in the contexts of the Caribbean and Africa, respectively, that identities, including national identities, are highly constructed. Hall draws attention to the fluidity of identity and the important role that narrative plays in constructing it: "[through] silencing as well as remembering, identity is always a question of producing in the future an account of the past, that is to say it is always about narrative, the stories which cultures tell themselves about who they are

and where they came from" (283). It is not that identity can never be "real" or "authentic" — although these terms are problematic to be sure — or that the nation is nothing more than a spurious fiction founded by an imagined community.[10] Appiah reminds us that identity is real when people believe in it or give it meaning (227), and that "nations are real enough, however invented their traditions" (224). The texts examined in this special section reflect the "realness" of individual and collective identities, and the material realities that ensue, even as their narratives unsettle dominant notions and views of adolescence and the national imaginaries that tend to marginalize and/or exclude them.

The foregoing comments suggest that attending to both real and symbolic registers of adolescent identity in Canada and Canadian literature requires an acknowledgement of both the slipperiness of adolescence and the inescapability of defining it as something separate from childhood or young adulthood. The traditional equation of adolescence with the teenage years, for example, is no longer widely accepted. Still, it is worth setting parameters for adolescence. If adolescence is considered to begin at the onset of puberty, this can be as early as age seven for girls, who are really still children; if adolescence is considered to end when one has assumed the adult responsibilities of full-time work and/or a romantic partnership, then some people would never exit adolescence. Adolescence can be defined as the period during which people begin actively developing their own identities while relying on the support and approval of communities, family members, and peers more directly and to a greater degree than adults. This dependence informs the way adolescents conceive of themselves as individuals and as community members; it also helps adolescents observe and critique the adult societies that retain authority over them. This definition is loose, but it still provides a framework that allows for a consideration of adolescence past the teen years; after all, most Canadians do not automatically achieve social or cultural adult status when they become twenty years old, especially considering that a lack of employment for post-secondary graduates and high student debt levels often cause people to return to their parents' homes during their mid-twenties. It is also useful to consider that during adolescence boys and girls are made aware that they must begin constructing themselves as adults. Issues of race, gender, ethnicity, and ability take on greater significance than in childhood, as adolescents begin defining themselves in relation to the children they were, to their

peers, and to the adults they emulate or resist. As they begin thinking of themselves as community members and as Canadians, adolescents begin understanding the ways in which they are socially and culturally marginalized; in turn, they may also make the shift from identifying themselves as powerless children to understanding themselves as citizens who can affect local and national change.

Contemporary studies of adolescence generally determine that adolescents are not a homogenous group, but are individuals capable of making their own decisions and are strongly influenced by cultural, social, and familial forces. Within the past decade, psychologists, sociologists, and cultural studies scholars (Henry A. Giroux, Courtney E. Martin, David Moshman, and Don Tapscott, to name only a few) have paid considerable attention to the significance of adolescence. Conclusions are wide ranging. Overgeneralizations variously position adolescents as completely capable individuals who should be permitted to join the military and who should be encouraged to start families during their teen years; as victims of the marketing industry's constructions of youth; and as delinquents who need constant surveillance. These definitions influence contemporary constructions of adolescents as a self-obsessed cohort whose reliance on technology and over-dependence on parents has created a generation of selfish incompetents, and as a powerful demographic whose concepts of the individual and of social justice contrast with their apathetic Generation X and baby boomer parents. Wide-ranging studies of teen pregnancy, youth criminal justice, and adolescent consumerism position adolescence as a time of re-visioning and/or accepting gender norms, and as a time in which girls consciously and unconsciously perform femininities and gender roles.

Interesting parallels can be suggested between the development of Canada — as a still youthful country — and the adolescent characters depicted in Canadian literature. Henry A. Giroux suggests that when youth are not demonized, they "are either commodified themselves or constructed as consuming subjects" (2). Contemporary media (including television, internet, and print advertisements) insist that adolescents have a social duty to consume and appear consumable. Unlike children who are unaware of these pressures, and unlike adults who may be confident enough with their own identities to resist them, adolescents can have difficulty disregarding them. However, they are capable of thinking critically about these messages even as they carry out assigned

gendered tasks such as modifying their bodies to fit social norms. This has implications for a reading of Canada as an adolescent nation when compared to countries such as the United States, which historically has been much more culturally, socially, and economically dominant than Canada. Those conceptualizing Canada as adolescent need not focus only on its struggles against powerful states, but can consider adolescence as a time when the nation is both defined and deconstructed. Jonathan Kertzer, drawing on work by Lorraine Weir and Earle Birney, among others, has written that "Canada and its literature are commonly characterized through a 'lexicon of maturation' (Weir. . .), by which the country is pictured as an irresolute youth striving for maturity. History and literature can then be assessed biographically. For example, the land is 'young' but eager to prove itself; or it suffers from an identity crisis as it matures from colony to nation; or it remains 'a highschool land / deadset in adolescence' (Birney. . .)" (Kertzer 44). Psychologist Jeffrey Jensen Arnett suggests that adolescents enjoy an age of identity explorations, instability, and new possibilities; by extension, Canadians might use this period of transition to question how and for what purpose their country is constructed by others and by themselves.

Questions of Canadian adolescence became prominent in early twentieth-century literature with L.M. Montgomery's *Anne of Green Gables* and the *Emily of New Moon* series. Montgomery's work provided a foundation for the literary exploration of adolescence that developed throughout Canada in the mid-twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. Some of Canada's best-known works of fiction by its most popular authors have focused on adolescent characters. Alice Munro's *Lives of Girls and Women* provides one of the best examples, as this text continues to be examined by scholars for its relevance to feminist, gender, and youth literary studies. In this influential work, Munro defines some of the most important issues confronting adolescent characters, including their relationships with individual family members, the development and construction of their sexuality, and their roles within families and communities. Issues of adolescence are also examined in Margaret Atwood's *Cat's Eye*, which focuses largely on an adolescent girl's fraught relationships with her peers; Margaret Laurence's *A Bird in the House*, which presents the challenges facing a girl who feels trapped within her family and her prairie hometown; and Timothy Findley's *Headhunter*, which suggests that adolescents are demonized and exploited by cruel

adults and a society that feels no empathy for their needs. These novels suggest that more similarities than differences exist between adolescents living in large centres (such as Atwood's Toronto) and in rural communities (such as Munro's Jubilee).

Later novels with adolescent protagonists are more likely to focus as much on the significance of characters' age as on their gender. Many popular contemporary Canadian novels feature adolescent characters in order to explore the links between youth, nation, and society. Montreal-based author Heather O'Neill's *Lullabies for Little Criminals*, which won Canada Reads in 2007, explores the ways adults' relationships to girls change as the girls reach adolescence. When the protagonist, Baby, is a child, adults help her cope with poverty and with her father's addiction; when she enters puberty, she is perceived as sexually promiscuous, is shunned by many adults, and is exploited by others. An examination of the links between adolescent girls' sexuality and the way adults perceive these girls is the focus of fiction by Vancouver writer Nancy Lee, whose short story collection *Dead Girls* centres on the pressures adolescent girls face to provide sex when men demand it, either through becoming prostitutes or losing their virginity without fully understanding even the physical aspects of sex. As Ella Soper-Jones argues in this special section, attempts to prevent adolescents from exploring, or even acknowledging, their sexuality is one of many topics examined in Winnipeg-based author Miriam Toews's bestselling novel *A Complicated Kindness*. These are only three examples among many contemporary Canadian novels, short story collections, and graphic novels that use adolescent protag-onists to examine the connections between adolescence and nationhood — other notable pieces of contemporary Canadian fiction include Dionne Brand's *What We All Long For*, Douglas Coupland's *Girlfriend in a Coma* and *Hey Nostradamus!*, Brian Lee O'Malley's *Scott Pilgrim* series of graphic novels, Eden Robinson's *Monkey Beach* and *Traplines*, and Mariko Tamaki and Jillian Tamaki's graphic novel *Skim*. All of these literary works suggest that Canada alternately ignores, shapes, and punishes youth for physically embodying national problems such as poverty, homelessness, and mental illness. Conversely, Tanis MacDonald's article in this issue focuses on Terry Fox to demonstrate that adolescents who embody qualities that reflect positively on the nation are reified and promoted as examples of Canadian determination and resourcefulness.

MacDonald's rich and provocative exploration of Fox's powerful image as the idealized "perpetual adolescent" within the Canadian cultural imagination begins this special section. MacDonald probes the parallels between Fox's prosthetic leg and narratives about Fox that serve as already displaced substitutes for his missing limb and perpetual status as an adolescent hero, arrested from ever fully growing up by virtue of his tragic death and his subsequent representation in a variety of texts aimed primarily at young readers. In particular, she examines how ideologies of citizenship are refashioned through one fictional narrative, Eric Walters's *Run*, in which a boy befriends Fox and learns valuable lessons about identity, community, home, virility, and heroism. MacDonald's study suggests that representations of Fox in adolescent literature raise important questions about how his legacy has been deployed to shape future generations of Canadians into "good" citizens.

While Terry Fox has inspired Canadian writers and readers of adolescent literature for three decades, L.M. Montgomery's youthful female protagonists have endured for over a century and garnered extensive critical attention. The two articles that follow add to this body of scholarship in innovative ways. Jenn Macquarrie's "Growing Up in Nature: Health and Adolescent Dance in L.M. Montgomery's *Emily* Series" approaches Montgomery's texts through the cultural history of dance, analyzing how this art form opens up new avenues for understanding this canonical writer's work. As Macquarrie argues, pairing contemporaneous representations of dance (especially as articulated by Isadora Duncan) with close readings of the *Emily* books reveals Montgomery's interest in the links between the natural world, modern dance, and health. Emily's passionate desire to dance becomes emblematic of her refusal to acquiesce to the stereotypical role of Victorian consumptive invalid, as was the fate of her late father. This desire to see oneself differently is echoed in the article that follows, by Leslie Clement. In "Mobilizing the Power of the Unseen: Imagining Self/Imagining Others in L.M. Montgomery's *Anne of Green Gables*," Clement considers how (in)visibility shapes the maturation of the young carrot-topped orphan, whose ability to see people and issues from a variety of perspectives enables her to develop strong and healthy relationships with members of her adoptive community. Clement suggests that Montgomery's emphasis on this aspect of adolescent development provides a model for young readers, one that teaches them to gain an empathic perspective on the

world by attending to what is both seen and unseen, and by using that knowledge to feed their imaginative capacities.

Montgomery's theme of the somewhat rebellious young woman coming of age extends into the next two articles, which look at three darkly comic novels by two prominent contemporary writers. In "Ravines and the Conscious Electrified Life of Houses: Margaret Atwood's Suburban *Künstlerromane*," Cheryl Cowdy examines the role of the suburban ravine, a vertical space of liminality and transition within a horizontal one, in the development of adolescent girl into female artist in two Atwood novels. In the context of the ravine's associations with the unconscious and with mythologized fear, abuse, and darkness of various kinds, Cowdy explores the influence of the "gaping moments" that occur in this quintessentially Atwoodian space. She argues that for both *Lady Oracle*'s Joan and *Cat's Eye*'s Elaine, "learning to exist in the space between dichotomies, to find there material to translate into art," is part of the artist's education; both characters refuse confinement to gendered suburban domestic spaces and go on to translate their repressed memories of ravine experiences into creative words or images. A generation younger than Atwood and raised in a prairie Mennonite community, Miriam Toews also depicts an adolescent girl's resistance to the limited options sanctioned by local culture and its normative spaces. Ella Soper-Jones, in "'Hello abattoir!': Becoming Through Slaughter in Miriam Toews's *A Complicated Kindness*," shows how Happy Family Farms in Toews's celebrated *Bildungsroman* functions as a symbol of "the foreclosure of adolescent potential" in protagonist Nomi Nickel's Mennonite town. Nomi acerbically resists the teleological life-narrative in which small-town life inscribes her, opting for her own script of "becoming" rather than the community's (and the *Bildungsroman*'s) "preordained ending" of "having become." Along the way, Nomi's ironic commentary on East Village, Manitoba, prompts a secondary analysis of the community's nostalgia- and tourism-driven commodification of its own pastoral "simplicity."

The anti-teleological ethos of *A Complicated Kindness* is echoed in the three young adult novels examined by Deborah Wills and Amy Bright in their article "'On the Cusp': Liminality and Adolescence in Arthur Slade's *Dust*, Bill Richardson's *After Hamelin*, and Kit Pearson's *Awake and Dreaming*." The young protagonists in all three texts embark on journeys from the real "waking" world to a fantasy dream world in

which their fluid "transliminal consciousness" enables them to successfully navigate challenges and fulfill quests. The movement across and between states of awareness usually thought of as mutually exclusive — awake and asleep, alert and hallucinatory — is of a piece with these novels' emphasis on the virtues of boundary-crossing liminality in the context of child development. Against dominant discourses of adolescence as a temporary, transitional state to be passed through and transcended in favour of more settled, defined adult identities, Slade, Richardson, and Pearson are shown to privilege the relative flexibility, spontaneity, and "childish" wonder of the unsettled (but nonetheless heroic) adolescent adventurer. Youth empowerment is similarly at the heart of the three texts considered in Jennifer Hardwick's "'We're writing our own stories': An Examination of Youth Writing in *Our Story: The Aboriginal Writing Challenge*." Focusing on writing by adolescents rather than just for or about adolescents, Hardwick shows how stories by three aboriginal young people featured in a writing contest draw on traditional knowledges and engage critically with a history of colonialism and racism. All three stories, as Hardwick says of one of them, "show that internalizing Indigenous identities, histories, and values can help young people solve problems and confront contemporary issues." Considering creative writing as a way for youths to "bridge Indigenous and Western cultures without ideological interference," this final article in our special section demonstrates young writers' awareness of the ways traditional pedagogies, kinship relations, and ceremonies can help aboriginal peoples respond productively even to such traumatic legacies as those of Canada's residential school system.

While not all of the articles collected in this special section engage notions of "Canada" or "Canadianness," they do engage scripts that represent what Appiah describes as "invented histories, invented biologies, and invented cultural affinities" (223). Such inventions, Appiah argues, "come with every identity; each is a kind of role that has to be scripted, structured by conventions of narrative to which the world never quite manages to conform" (223). We could specify this further, expanding Appiah's list to include the scripts that define the nation, adolescence, citizenship, and even happiness. These scripts are usually established collectively, by a community or a nation, although the various adolescent characters discussed in this section often create their own scripts in defiance of those to which they are expected to conform

or which exclude them. In fact, all of the essays collected here stress the importance of narrative in constructions of individual, cultural, religious, regional, and national identities, and draw attention to the intersections at which adolescence and genre meet. In doing so, they suggest that adolescents necessarily struggle against conventions of narrative that attempt to define them in advance and which often dictate the roles they are to take up as they move across the threshold between childhood and adulthood. Yet, as with adolescence, "childhood" and "adulthood" name scripts rather than realities, even as the uneven power relations that inhere between children and adults, and which create sexed, raced, classed, and gendered subjects-in-the-making, mean that the experience of living in the gap between childhood and adulthood is very real indeed.

Notes

[1] See also "Stakeholders Speak"; "Critics Pan"; "Playing Politics"; and "Tory Plan."

[2] Part of the justification for a separate system of justice for youth was precisely the proven inefficacy of incarcerating youths with adults. Stephanie R. Penney and Marlene M. Moretti explain that prior to 1857 "youths deemed to be 'wayward' were incarcerated along with adult criminals and exposed to harsh prison conditions. This state of affairs was quickly discovered to be untenable, as delinquent youths would become educated in the 'art' of organized crime by the adult convicts to whom they were exposed. Moreover, adult inmates would frequently abuse and exploit youths that entered the institution. These youths would often leave adult prisons more hardened and entrenched in criminality than when they entered. An indirect consequence of treating adolescent offenders as adults, therefore, was that juvenile crime continued to rise" (21). The passing of the Juvenile Delinquents Act in 1908 led to the establishment of separate courts and penal institutions, so that "with the exception of juveniles transferred to adult courts, no convicted youth could be put in custody in any place 'in which adults are or may be imprisoned'" ("The Evolution").

[3] See, for example, "Harper Hears."

[4] As Ruth M. Mann, Charlene Y. Senn, April Girard, and Salma Ackbar, for example, explain, "Particularly at risk are adolescents who qualify as runaway youth. Runaway youth, girls especially, stand out for their special vulnerability to sexual victimization and, even more importantly, youth prostitution" (44). Aboriginal youth are also at risk. Bryan R. Hogeveen notes, "As a group, Aboriginal adolescents are the most disadvantaged in Canadian society. Similar to the situation facing Australian Aborigines, Canada's First Nations are subjected to systemic racism at all levels of the youth justice process. Government reports and investigations, which regrettably seem to be gathering dust at present, have consistently pointed to a gross overrepresentation of native adolescents at the most punitive end of the system" (296). Ross Gordon Green and Kearney F. Healy concur: "A significant majority" of youths appearing in court, they report, "are Aboriginal" (59). Bernard Schissel reiterates the significance of socioeconomic and cultural circumstances in assessments of youth crime, arguing that "most repeat offenders and their families are

victims of socio-economic conditions beyond their control, and they are more likely to be repeatedly victimized as clients of the systems of law, social welfare and education" (19).

[5] See Schissel for a sustained account of how children function as scapegoats in Canada.

[6] In fact, some researchers dispute the claim, made by Statistics Canada and the media alike, that violent youth crime has increased dramatically since 1991. For example, Penney and Moretti argue that "serious youth violence has been consistent for the past three decades," and that "children are more likely to be the victims of violence than they are to be arrested for a violent crime" (19-20). Schissel likewise argues that "youth crime rates have not increased progressively, and in fact, rates have diminished significantly, especially for males since 1991; and rapid fluctuations in crime rates are closely associated with changes in law, especially to the implementation of the *Young Offenders Act* in 1984, amendments to the YOA from 1992 to 1998, and implementation of the *Youth Criminal Justice Act* in 2003" (108-09). Anthony N. Doob and Carla Cesaroni stress the importance of placing statistics in context: "One has to remember that these percentage increases obscure a rather important fact. We are talking about a very small number of youths who have been found guilty of serious offences. The increase in serious violence refers to the behavior of roughly fifty to 100 youths out of 2.45 million youths in the country" (131).

[7] See also *Children and Youth in Canada*.

[8] In a study on child justice in Canada, Clara Chapdelaine Felicati Aroni confirms that "Too often they [children] are seen as property instead of persons, as objects of the law instead of subjects of the law, and as a collective and undifferentiated class instead of individuals" (281).

[9] Pat Carlen goes even further, arguing that "Instead of a moral reciprocity of citizen rights, there is an asymmetry of citizenship [in Canada], with young people being punished for not fulfilling their citizenship obligations even though the state fails to fulfill its duties of nurturance and protection towards them" (2).

[10] The term "imagined community" is borrowed from Benedict Anderson, who uses it to define the nation: "it is an imagined political community — and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign" (6).

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