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Justyna Deszcz-Tryhubczak, *Yes to Solidarity, No to Oppression: Radical Fantasy Fiction and Its Young Readers*, Wrocław: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Wrocławskiego, 2016

Abstract: This review assesses Justyna Deszcz-Tryhubczak's *Yes to Solidarity, No to Oppression: Radical Fantasy Fiction and Its Young Readers*. Deszcz-Tryhubczak has two agendas in this volume: first, to explore the capacity of Radical Fantasy fiction to model for young readers the agency of youth forming collaborative, cross-generational, and possibly cross-cultural alliances to address glocal socio-political and/or environmental issues spawned by the injustices and inequities of late-stage capitalism; second, to model a new approach to participatory research, involving child readers not as subjects of study but as collaborative readers of texts. Deszcz-Tryhubczak provides a thorough examination of the problem of adult critics speculating about child readers based on constructed implied child readers rather than on actual children, then proceeds to identify how Childhood Studies may offer some productive means of thinking about and, more important, engaging with real children. She provides a clear definition of Radical Fantasy and brief readings of both core and marginal examples of the genre. This contextualizes her description of her methodology and discussion of results from two research projects collaborating with young readers. Finally, Deszcz-Tryhubczak contends that participatory research is a way to move forward in children's literature scholarship in a more democratic manner, and moreover that applying this methodology to Radical Fantasy is potentially also a means of engaging children in important debates on issues that are shaping their futures. I find this book a stimulating contribution to our understanding of youth reading that offers intriguing possibilities for further research.

Keywords: Justyna Deszcz-Tryhubczak, Radical Fantasy, participatory research, children reading

Yes to Solidarity, No to Oppression: Radical Fantasy Fiction and Its Young Readers is a brave book. Justyna Deszcz-Tryhubczak wants not only to understand the capacity of Radical Fantasy fiction to produce transformation in its young readers, but she also wants to transform the practice of children's literature criticism. As

she notes, the field of children's literature studies has been haunted to some degree by the need to demonstrate academic worthiness. To this end, there has been for the past several decades focus on the rigorous applications of various theoretical perspectives, with most scholars espousing a scientific approach to the discipline. Deszcz-Tryhubczak is quite right to point to the illusory nature of scientific objectivity in children's literature studies. In particular, trying to access what young readers experience and think while reading is a process that demands subjective engagement and situational sensitivity. Her study suggests that children's literature scholars might learn from the field of Childhood Studies to engage in more participatory research with young readers, treating them as collaborators rather than as subjects for study. The title of the book refers not only to the political content of *Radical Fantasy*, but also to the demand that children's literature critics find solidarity with child readers. This requires adult scholars to forego their comfortable authority and certainty about their conclusions. Deszcz-Tryhubczak's argument for change in the practice of children's literature scholarship will likely discomfit some in the field, but it is well worth considering as a fresh direction that could lead to productive nuances in how we read texts and understand reading.

The book is the culmination of a several years' work during which Deszcz-Tryhubczak has been developing her approach to *Radical Fantasy* and participatory research.¹ The introduction is titled "A Children's Literature Scholar's Journey," and it is both refreshingly personal and rigorous as she tracks the process by which she arrived at her current thinking on the importance of the intersection between *Radical Fantasy* and a participatory model of research that includes young readers. Deszcz-Tryhubczak is aware that some will find her process unscientific and subjective, but she has no need to ask for her "self-centred autoethnographic foray into... personal dilemmas" to be excused (25). While attempts to achieve scientific objectivity in the humanities has led to some rich and useful scholarship, the veneration of this ultimately unobtainable goal can also lead to a not so productive erasure of the "human" in humanities. As Deszcz-Tryhubczak observes, in the field of children's literature studies this has led in large part to the creation of a critical discourse on literature written or marketed for children that rejects engagement with children's actual experiences, relying instead on constructions of implied child readers. She finds this disjuncture even more problematic in the case

¹ See for instance her articles: "Utopianism in *Radical Fantasy* for Children and Young Adults." In: Blaim, A. and L. Gruszevska-Blaim (eds.). 2012. *Spectres of Utopia: Theory, Practice, Conventions*. Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 204–221; "'Minister,' Said the Girl, 'We Need to Talk': China Miéville's *Un Lun Dun* as *Radical Fantasy* for Children and Young Adults." In: Booker, K.M. (ed.). 2013. *Critical Insights: Contemporary Speculative Fiction*. Ipswich, MA: Salem Press, 137–151; "Ursula Le Guin's *Powers* as *Radical Fantasy*." In: Hubler, A.E. (ed.). 2014. *Little Red Readings: Historical Materialist Perspectives on Children's Literature*. Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 245–263; and "Using Literary Criticism for Children's Rights: Towards a Participatory Research Model of Children's Literature Studies." *The Lion and the Unicorn* 40.2 (2016): 215–231.

of Radical Fantasy. Many critics who write on utopian fiction for young people, and she includes some of her own past work in this category, assume that reading this fiction will make young readers want to become active in promoting social and political changes for the better, and that these idealized implied readers will also save humanity from its current stupidities regarding the environment and social injustices. Yet, as she notes, we have no way of knowing if reading Radical Fantasy has a transformative impact on young readers, or if it does, what the nature of that impact might be. The two participatory research projects described in this book are initial attempts to discern how actual readers respond to works of Radical Fantasy. Key influences on her work include New Childhood Studies and earlier examples of reader response research.² I was also intrigued to see that another factor that set Deszcz-Tryhubczak on this research path was her community engagement work through the University of Wrocław's Center for Young People's Literature and Culture.³

Yes to Solidarity, No to Oppression follows as logical a structure as possible, given that its two main subjects, while at times needing separate discussion, are deeply intertwined with one another. Chapter One analyses how existing discussions of utopian and radical children's literature have failed to address the distance and power imbalance between adult critic and child reader, then considers how participatory research might address these issues. Chapter Two proceeds to give a definition of Radical Fantasy fiction for young readers and is followed by two chapters identifying and discussing, respectively, core examples of Radical Fantasy and books that may not meet all the criteria to be classified as Radical Fantasy but which address similar concerns and contain some key elements of the genre. The final two chapters address

² In Childhood Studies, some of the relevant works on critical practice include A.L. Best (ed.). 2007. *Representing Youth: Methodological Issues in Critical Youth Studies*. New York: New York University Press; A. Clark, R. Flewitt, M. Hammersley, and M. Robb (eds.). 2014. *Understanding Research with Children and Young People*. Los Angeles: Sage; J. Faulkner and M. Zolkos (eds.). 2016. *Critical Childhood Studies and the Practice of Interdisciplinarity: Disciplining the Child*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan; and P. Alderson. 2016. *The Politics of Childhood Real and Imagined. Volume 2: Practical Applications of Critical Realism and Childhood Studies*. New York, Routledge. For works applying reader response research, see H. Blackford. 2004. *Out of This World: Why Literature Matters to Girls*. New York: Teacher's College Press; N. Mikkelsen. 2005. *Powerful Magic: Learning from Children's Responses to Fantasy Literature*. New York: Teacher's College Press, 2005; and K.M. Roemer. 2003. *Utopian Audiences: How Readers Locate Nowhere*. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press.

³ Community Engagement is of particular interest in many North American universities. Involving a variety of practices by which academics go into the community to research and work with community members, as well as invite community members to participate in activities on campuses, community engagement has been seen as a way to mobilize knowledge and make universities more relevant within their communities. In the humanities, which are suffering drops in enrolment as students seek degrees in Business and Sciences in hope of easier routes to post-degree jobs, community engagement may also provide an opportunity to make visible the relation between humanities work and community benefits.

Deszcz-Tryhubczak's evolving methodology in conducting participatory research with young readers and the results of two studies conducted. The conclusion gestures toward potential benefits of combining the exploration of Radical Fantasy for children and participatory research with child readers.

Chapter Two contains perhaps the most uncomfortable section of the book for children's literature critics. Deszcz-Tryhubczak is clear that she values the work of the critics she discusses, but she is equally clear that many of the works have fallen short in terms of matching their critical practice to the subject of the literary works analysed.⁴ She observes that it is particularly peculiar that while the authors of these studies address how utopian and dystopian texts for youth challenge "traditional constructions of childhood and adulthood" as well as adult authority, with young protagonists as "the only ones capable of effecting revolutionary transformation of the dominating political and social order," they make no attempt to explore "young people's actual reception of utopian literature as liberating and consciousness expanding" (44–45). To be fair, she applies a similarly cold, critical eye on her own early work on the genre. She then turns to developing support for more child-centred research, noting that this has been a topic of discussion in children's literature studies since the 1980s, even though it is rarely practiced. Major issues are the difference model, in which children and adults are seen as alien to one another, and the deficit model, in which children are seen as ultimately less than adults, less mature, less knowledgeable, and ultimately less sophisticated, which often leads to dismissal of their reading experiences. Deszcz-Tryhubczak seeks a more useful metaphor for child-adult interactions in Marah Gubar's "kinship model" and Maria Tatar's adaptation of Mary Louise Pratt's "contact zone."⁵ Because the latter speaks more to a space of connection in difference rather than to the relatedness of child and adult, Deszcz-Tryhubczak finds the former more effective in shifting how we imagine interactions between child and adult. She also acknowledges other challenges with participatory research, notably the opaque and private nature of the reading experience itself; the timeframe of reader response,

⁴ Among the words considered are C. Hintz and E. Ostry (eds.). 2003. *Utopian and Dystopian Writing for Children and Young Adults*. Columbus: Ohio State University Press; K. Reynolds. 2007. *Radical Children's Literature: Future Visions and Aesthetic Transformations in Juvenile Fiction*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan; L. Ousley (ed.). 2007. *To See the Wizard: Politics and the Literature of Childhood*. Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing; J.L. Mickenberg and P. Nel (eds.). 2008. *Tales for Little Rebels: A Collection of Radical Children's Literature*. New York: New York University Press; C. Bradford, K. Mallan, J. Stephens, and R. McCallum (eds.). 2008. *New World Orders in Contemporary Children's Literature: Utopian Transformations*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan; B. Basu, K.R. Broad, and C. Hintz (eds.). 2013. *Contemporary Dystopian Fiction for Young Adults: Brave New Teenagers*. New York: Routledge; and M.C. Oziewicz. 2015. *Justice in Young Adult Speculative Fiction: A Cognitive Reading*. New York: Routledge.

⁵ M. Gubar. 2013. "Risky Business: Talking about Children in Children's Literature Criticism." *Children's Literature Association Quarterly* 38.4, 450–457; M. Tatar. 2009. *Enchanted Hunters: The Power of Stories in Childhood*. New York: W.W. Norton.

which may continue long after someone has read a book; the possible challenges young readers may have in articulating their responses; and the very real possibility that young readers' responses to texts may be minimal or even banal. It is a little surprising that she accepts Maria Nikolajeva's assertion that young readers may have difficulty recognizing authorial intention (qtd. in Deszcz-Tryhubczak 54), since it is generally accepted in reader-response (and other) theory that author intention does not dictate the meaning of texts. The other concerns raised are valid. Participatory research needs to be recognized as contextual, specific, and glocal. Deszcz-Tryhubczak acknowledges that such work may well be inconclusive, but she argues that its benefits outweigh this, especially in the case of utopian fiction. If adult critics are prepared to set aside their authority, they can move "beyond abstract discussions of how literature for children may promote their critical thinking and agency by actually ensuring that young voices are heard, acknowledged, and appreciated as equally important as those of adults" (55).

The book's central chapters on Radical Fantasy are generally straightforward. Deszcz-Tryhubczak defines Radical Fantasy fiction for young readers as a form of utopian literature that challenges the dominant culture and features young protagonists who establish collaborative groups that transcend differences, including generational, in order to fight oppression and work toward achieving social justice. Her reading of the genre is informed by the work of Frederic Jameson on radical or materialist fantasy (60). She also views it as being in dialogue with forms of late postmodernism: cognitive-cultural capitalism, tied to the knowledge economy and the global economy's treatment of creativity, even children's, as capital; and cosmodernism, Christian Moraru's concept of a "cultural geography of relationality" with an implied duty to transcend the forces that reject difference, that promote global homogeneity and self-centredness.⁶ To some degree, fantasy has always been about challenging the world as it is by representing the world as it might be, but Radical Fantasy for young readers goes farther by promoting social activism and celebrating the capability of the young people to create alliances and effect change. Deszcz-Tryhubczak discusses several core texts of the genre: China Miéville's *Un Lun Dun*, two novels from Jonathan Stroud's Bartimaeus sequence (*The Golem's Eye* and *Ptolemy's Gate*), several novels by Frances Hardinge (*Gullstruck Island*, *Fly by Night*, *Twilight Robbery*, and *A Face Like Glass*), and David Whitley's Agora trilogy. I'm not sure why she says these are neglected works. Miéville's novel, like his other speculative fiction, has generated considerable critical attention, and both Stroud and Hardinge have been nominated for and won major awards. I also cannot help but notice all are British; I found myself wanting to know more about the European novels mentioned in the footnote on page 73, Polish author Dorota Terakowska's *Władca Lewawu* and Slovenian author Evald Flisar's *Alica v nori deželi* [*Alice in Crazy Country*].

⁶ C. Moraru. 2011. *Cosmodernism: American Narrative, Late Globalization, and the New Cultural Imaginary*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.

However, that might be a separate project, as the historical and glocal contexts differ, and I suspect these books, from a different perspective, might stretch the genre in different directions. Deszcz-Tryhubczak also considers Anglo-American works that come close to Radical Fantasy for youth in their representation of the urge to radical transformation but which are ultimately less optimistic about the success of resistance. She briefly considers J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* series, though she seems rightfully more interested in the radical energies of Harry Potter fan fiction than in the series, which despite the efforts of Harry and his crew, is more conservative than radical in the end. She also discusses Ursula Le Guin's *Powers*, Philip Pullman's *His Dark Materials*, Terry Pratchett's *Nation*, Rachel Hartman's *Seraphina* and *Shadow Scale*, and Kristin Cashore's *Graceling* and *Bitterblue*. The brief historical-materialist readings of these works are effective in illustrating the key elements of the genre, but their real function is to establish the context for two exercises in participatory research.

Deszcz-Tryhubczak is careful to situate her two research projects. She makes it clear that she does not consider her participants to be representative of their ages or genders. She conducted two studies in 2014: one from February to May involving 20 students, aged 15–17, from two Wrocław public general high schools, and a second one from March to December involving seven students, also aged 15–17, from three schools (including the two from the first study). All the students had achieved an upper intermediate level of English, and all reading and discussion was conducted in English. The sample sizes are small, but this is not an issue, as the research projects are essentially qualitative rather than quantitative. The discussion of the first study is in effect Deszcz-Tryhubczak's description of what did not work. Students read only one novel, *Un Lun Dun*. The study was prefaced by preparatory meetings at which Deszcz-Tryhubczak explained the project, discussed utopianism and asked about the students' views on the future, defined Radical Fantasy, and expressed her belief that adult critics should acknowledge and respect young readers' voices. This clearly breaches the usual standard of objectivity in empirical research, but as Deszcz-Tryhubczak explains, the goal of the study was not to treat the students as sources of data but to recognize "their individual voices and personal histories" (119 n. 90). She constructed a questionnaire to assess students' recognition of textual elements that feature in Radical Fantasy for young readers and to explore the degree to which reading *Un Lun Dun* generated a cognitive shift in their views on socio-political structures, inequities, and their own capacity to enact change. Somewhat predictably, the findings indicated that students varied considerably in their recognition of the key elements of Radical Fantasy, and only three of the 20 stated that the book had an impact on transforming their world views. Deszcz-Tryhubczak finds the questionnaire approach ultimately limiting, as she was unable to drill down into responses (and in some cases lack of responses) for more nuanced understanding of the students' reading experiences. She also

concludes that this study illustrates the problems that occur when a list of possible responses to a text are predetermined by “an adult professional reader” (135).

Determined to get beyond built-in adult bias and questionnaires, Deszcz-Tryhubczak constructed her second study as an “intergenerational exchange of ideas and beliefs” (136). She met with smaller groups of students (three girls, two girls, and two boys) and gave them a wider range of Radical Fantasies: Pratchett’s *Nation*, Hartman’s *Seraphina*, Hardinge’s *Face Like Glass*, Cashore’s *Bitterblue*, Miéville’s *Un Lun Dun*, and Le Guin’s *Powers*. Instead of filling out questionnaires with leading questions, the students met with Deszcz-Tryhubczak in what she describes as ecotones, or “exceptionally fertile boundary regions” (138), to her a finally more satisfying metaphor for adult-youth interaction than Gubar’s kinship model or Tatar’s contact zone, as it implies a productive cross-fertilization in the free exchange of readings and ideas. Deszcz-Tryhubczak is aware that it is impossible to completely erase the hierarchy and the power differential between an adult and a child; nonetheless, she found this situation more productive of genuinely collaborative discussion of texts. She asserts that “young readers’ individual and group experiences of texts supplement adult criticism not so much as validation but as extension of the usually coercive one-way communication between children and adults” (153), and indeed the findings of her discussions indicate that young readers do not necessarily read the same way that implied readers constructed by critics do. While the students in the study made connections between their reading and their own lived experience, they did so in variously individual ways. Clearly, this kind of research will not result in any great insight into how “the child” reads, or whether “the child” can be motivated by reading to socio-political activism. However, it is a salutary caution to adult critics not to become complacent in their constructions of implied readers. Moreover, it offers a genuine opportunity to redefine existing power structures in children’s literature scholarship and possibly establish new relevancy for the field in children’s lives.

Deszcz-Tryhubczak does not expect that all children’s literature scholars will engage in participatory research, nor does she suggest that traditional literary scholarship should cease. She makes an excellent point that “a *self-critical* approach to one’s work, position, and assumptions is likely to result in innovative and unorthodox methodologies achieving something more than speculating about young readers’ responses” (169). It is not impossible that such innovation could incorporate different forms of research in productive tension with one another. For me, one of the benefits of reading this book has been the ways in which it has pushed me to question my own critical practices. I am also fascinated by some of the implications of her conclusion. She points to the global reach of Anglophone speculative fiction, which suggests that it might be interesting to see a transnational participatory research project that explores a broader range of glocal responses to some of these texts. She also notes it might be possible to use Radical Fantasy texts to stimulate adults and youth to develop strategies to tackle community issues.

Finally, her research project has led her to suggest that children's literature studies can learn much from Childhood Studies; it is interesting to consider whether the opposite might also be valid. Certainly cross-disciplinary research projects might be fruitful. Whether readers are intrigued by or resistant to Deszcz-Tryhubczak's project, *Yes to Solidarity, No to Oppression* is one of those works of scholarship that should generate not only necessary professional self-examination, but also useful debate about radical change in the field of children's literature studies.