

London School of Economics and Political Science

**The Theory and Practice of Childhood:  
Interrogating Childhood as a Technology of Power**

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## Abstract:

This thesis explores the social, political, and theoretical consequences that emerge when the contested category of “childhood” gets unequally applied to individuals and populations. The interdisciplinary theoretical project conceives of childhood as a technology of power that produces the contentious contours of various bodies and experiences, individuals and populations, and ways of life and forms of relation. It argues that childhood’s fantasmatic, figurative, and “real” subjects extend far beyond, and sometimes explicitly exclude, the early years of life. In conversation with childhood studies, feminist, trans, queer, critical-race, and psychoanalytic theory, this research is primarily concerned with the ways in which childhood is negotiated and re-imagined through discursive, institutional, and representational practices in the contemporary U.S. The analysis explores the psychic and political ambivalences of childhood, and attends to the investments in childhood’s uneven distribution. Asking specifically after the role of childhood in shaping and challenging the disposability of young black life, the queer life of children’s desires, and the steadfastness of the gender binary, this thesis outlines a theoretical framework of analysis that interdisciplinary scholars working in feminist, trans, queer, and anti-racist theory can use when addressing children and childhood, and it substantiates this framework through three case studies.

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At its core, this is a thesis about how to sustain social justice projects and the subjects that ground them without casting aside all their complexities; it is a project about how desire, investment, and ambivalence must structure our commitments to making a better world. These are things I would not be able to adequately articulate without everything I have learned through sharing a life with Edie Duepner. Thank you, as always, for everything you teach me about love.

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## Chapter One:

### Introduction

“She is still a child.” This powerful statement contains within it an awareness of something that this thesis argues is vital to an analysis of childhood in the contemporary United States: There are structures of power whose harmful effects are assumed to be most directly interrupted by the re-articulation of someone’s location in childhood. The need to make this re-affirmation for children is an unfortunate burden that is unevenly carried by feminist, trans, queer, and anti-racist projects that work to mitigate the effects of sexism, transphobia, homophobia, and racism. It is a re-articulation that is often required because children who are girls, trans, queer, and of color are precariously understood within the frame of childhood. However, implicit within this necessary assertion is the assumption, or rather the *wish*, that it is childhood itself that, in its confirmation, can counter power’s subjecting force. In this thesis, I argue that this wish—this investment in childhood as a productive political object—is structured by a twinned fantasy.<sup>1</sup> This fantasy assumes that childhood, in its contemporary political life, is itself separable from the very things we have come to understand as gender, sexuality, and race; and that the persistence and force of sexism, transphobia, homophobia, and racism are not themselves co-produced with childhood as well. Interrogating this wish and this fantasy, this thesis argues that childhood is a complex site of political contestation and ambivalence, and not just for children.

Examining childhood as a highly productive technology of power, this research is specifically interested in the ways in which the varied application of childhood to those within and beyond the early years of life extends and challenges entangled investments in the gender binary, normative sexualities, and racism. Asking specifically after the role of childhood in shaping and challenging the disposability of young black

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<sup>1</sup> In this thesis, I use ‘fantasy’ to signal those imaginings, wishes, and desires which operate at the conscious level, and I use ‘phantasy’ to signal those which work within the unconscious. This distinction places most of the deployments of childhood which I interrogate as firmly within the level of fantasy. However, as I outline in Chapter Three and return to in Chapter Six, I additionally argue that the psychoanalytic frameworks of cathexis, projection, and ambivalence can help interrogate some of the moments in which the work that childhood is being put into practice to do relates to unconscious phantasies.

life, the queer life of children's desires, and the steadfastness of the gender binary, this thesis makes the case for interdisciplinary scholars working in feminist, trans, queer, and anti-racist theory to more fully and critically engage with the political and psychic life of childhood. As a transfeminist, queer, and anti-racist piece of research, this thesis is primarily concerned with the ways in which childhood—as a conceptual frame for bodies and experiences, individuals and populations, and ways of life and forms of relation—is negotiated and re-imagined through discursive, institutional, and representational practices in the contemporary U.S. In this context, this thesis' key argument is twofold. First, because claims to childhood extend and limit the possibilities for social justice in regards to gender, sexuality, and race, childhood must be interrogated within feminist, trans, queer, and anti-racist projects. Second, these projects need to approach childhood through a framework that prioritizes questions of psychic investment, ambivalence, and childhood's deployment as a technology of power.

This approach is important, I argue, because the exclusion or inclusion of individuals and populations from and into the frame of childhood is a salient way in which injustices are legitimated and challenged. Naming, for example, some of the ways in which the frame of childhood legitimates injustice, Barrie Thorne writes:

Different types of power—of kings over subjects, slave owners over slaves, and men over women—have been justified by defining the subordinates as “like children,” inherently dependent and vulnerable, less competent, incapable of exercising full responsibility, and in need of protection. (1987: 96)

In this sense, applying childhood to marginalized populations is a tactic by which their position within hierarchical, constraining, and violent structures of domination is justified and maintained. This argument should come as no surprise to scholars aware of the historical deployment of childhood, as infantilization has been thoroughly unpacked as a tactic of racist, sexist, and colonial subjugation within a range of contexts by numerous scholars.<sup>2</sup> And yet, this thesis argues, Thorne's important diagnosis of the use of childhood to legitimate subordination is not the entire story. As well as being

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<sup>2</sup> While there are too many scholars to name here, this thesis specifically learns from Frantz Fanon (1967) and Shulamith Firestone (1971). For more on infantilization and for a specific analysis of how infantilization functions as a racist response to the Black Lives Matter movement, see Chapter Four.

available for resignification, and being subject to historical and geopolitical shifts, claiming childhood for one's self or for others has been, and continues to be, an essential strategy *within* social justice movements.<sup>3</sup> As just one example of the usefulness of childhood for social justice projects, Robin Bernstein documents the invocation of childhood within the Civil Rights Movement: "When U.S. culture began, at mid-century, to libel black children as unhurt-able and unchildlike, African Americans—both children and adults—began asserting that black children were, of course, children and did, of course, feel pain" (2011: 55). In this context, being understood as a child meant more than simply being placed into a paternalistic relationship to those in power; it also meant asserting one's claim to humanity. Childhood, then—more than just a socially constructed frame for understanding particular groups of young people, and more than just a longstanding means of marking marginalized populations as inferior—is a complex and ambivalent site for the constantly contested workings of power.

In this thesis, I am analyzing—in the development of what has become known as childhood studies; in the scholarly fields of feminist, trans, queer, and anti-racist theory; and in the contemporary debates about race, gender, and sexuality within the U.S. public sphere—who or what is included within or excluded from childhood.<sup>4</sup> However, as inclusion and exclusion do not align straightforwardly or respectively with social justice or injustice, this thesis is not an argument for a more universal inclusion of marginalized individuals and populations within the frame of childhood. Rather, while it understands the impulse behind this argument, it asks after the psychic work that the desire for inclusion facilitates, and after the political violence that exclusion and inclusion allow for. Doing so, this thesis takes an approach that centers the ways in which childhood allows for and brings into being particular investments in social and political life. It is

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<sup>3</sup> In this thesis, I speak often about "social justice movements" and "projects." In saying this, I do not have a specific theoretical framing of "social justice" or of "social movements" that guides the boundaries of who or what is included in this. Rather, I am using this open phrasing as a way of implicating all forms of movements which take on this aspiration for their own work. For a similar stance in regards to this framing of social justice, see: Wiegman (2012: 3 n4).

<sup>4</sup> A limit to my project, then, is my Anglo-American focus. And yet, I am not intending to produce a global truth to childhood, as attending to subjectivity and to power means locating them within situated histories of emergence. For references to projects interrogating the political life of childhood outside the contemporary U.S. see the notes in the following chapter.

within this frame that my notion of the “putting into practice” of childhood emerges. Adding to Michel Foucault’s articulation of the “putting into discourse” (1978: 12) of a concept, a power relation, and a technology—what I am calling the putting into practice of that same discursive object is the subsequent layering of that object with psychic and political investment in the hope that its deployment brings about a particular end.<sup>5</sup> Attending to these investments and the ways they are structured through childhood from a standpoint of feminist, trans, queer, and anti-racist scholarship, this thesis seeks to make the putting into practice of childhood more available to interruption or proliferation.

To do so, this thesis proceeds in Chapter Two by presenting a critical history of the emergence of “childhood” as a concept from within the field of childhood studies itself. From there, in Chapter Three, I further outline what I mean by the putting into practice of childhood, and I explain the methodologies that I use to attend to childhood across this thesis. In this chapter I also situate my theoretical framing of investment that becomes crucial for how I read the scenes, images, cases, and objects across my three main analytical chapters. These three chapters—which I shall explain in further detail at the end of this chapter—begin from three separate moments in which a person’s location within childhood is made significant or is signaled as being up for debate. They are specifically concerned with the ways in which the putting into practice of childhood aligns with and challenges questions of gender, sexuality, and race, and they unpack these deployments of childhood through scholarship and contemporary cultural productions. In Chapter Four I interrogate the racialized visual and discursive representational landscape of childhood, adolescence, and innocence that emerged in response to the murder of Trayvon Martin in 2012, and in the formation of the Black Lives Matter movement. In Chapter Five, I begin with an auto-ethnographic account of a young person’s provocative dance performance, which took place at a queer youth activist event that I organized in 2009. My analysis extends from this performance to theorize the question of children’s queerness, and the figure of the “queer child” within

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<sup>5</sup> In *The History of Sexuality Volume I* (1978), Michel Foucault argues that his overall project is one of tracing out a history of the “discursive production” of sex (1978: 12). Foucault writes: “since the end of the sixteenth century, the ‘putting into discourse of sex,’ far from undergoing a process of restriction, on the contrary has been subjected to a mechanism of increasing incitement” (1978: 12). As I argue here and in Chapter Three, the putting into practice of childhood is an act which follows its putting into discourse.

queer theory's turn to the child and within the film *Palindromes* (Solondz 2004). Finally, in Chapter Six, I turn to trans people's narratives of their own childhoods, the film *Tomboy* (Sciamma 2011), and the exclusion of Coy Mathis, a 6-year-old trans girl, from the girls' restrooms of her elementary school in 2012. In so doing, I interrogate the gendered life of childhood as a way of advocating for a transfeminist politics of articulation.

I work with these sites of representation and cultural production, as well as these specific cases—the racist murder of a child, a child's provocative dance, and the exclusion of a trans child from a public space—because, along with being examples of contemporary conflicts about race, sexuality, and gender structured by investments in racism, normative and queer sexualities, and the gender binary, they are also produced as significant through the deployments of childhood that structure them. In focusing on these cases, I do not claim that they are the only sites through which an analysis of the racial, sexual, and gendered work of childhood must be interrogated; rather, as particularly dense and pressing sites through which the contemporary life of childhood can be illuminated, I prioritize them for a few key reasons. First, I argue that the specific analyses of childhood that I articulate within these cases allows the structuring issues at their heart to be re-imagined and interrupted in important ways. Additionally, because these re-imaginings and interruptions align with ongoing and foundational debates within feminist, queer, and anti-racist projects—about racial justice, progress, and representation in the face of anti-black state violence; about the critical capacity of “queer” to account for an ever expanding list of sexualities and sexual politics; and about the shared genealogies and critiques of trans and feminist politics—my analysis of these cases has implications for these political and theoretical projects more broadly. Finally, I hope that these chapters will gesture towards the immense potential that theorizing childhood as a technology of power has for other interdisciplinary and intersectional projects similarly invested in social justice.

Along these lines, there are numerous scholars whose work I situate this project in conversation with, and from whom my analysis has substantially benefitted. Because my project is an interdisciplinary one that actively works to put childhood into the forefront of a wide range of scholarship on race, gender, and sexuality, I cannot begin to acknowledge all of these scholars here, but I work carefully within each chapter to think with scholars who have an established and longstanding commitment to unpacking the

political life of childhood. At the same time, without flattening the breadth of the interventions and positions of these scholars, my thesis contributes to the gaps in these literatures in three key overarching ways. First, in relationship to childhood studies—a field of scholarship that has increasingly been incorporating an intersectional analysis into its understanding of childhood—I argue that there is still a need to critically interrogate the ways in which race, gender, and sexuality do not simply come after the child, but are indeed foundational to the very child who appears in, or is elided by, childhood studies’ frames. My second and third overarching contributions are made in relationship to the critical fields of feminist, trans, queer, and critical race studies—fields that have begun to think through the complexities of childhood in intriguing and inspiring ways. In relation to this scholarship, my thesis’ second key contribution is the particular way in which I hold together gender, sexuality, and race—and the fields of inquiry that take these three nodes of subjectivity and power on as their proper object. I do so by attending to their points of tension, their mutuality, and their ambivalences. Whereas many other projects interrogate the child and childhood through one of these nodes—and even my own work here ostensibly separates out its specific focus on race, sexuality, and gender into distinct chapters—one of the hopes of this thesis is that my theoretical frameworks of investment and the putting into practice of childhood might allow for a shared language through which the deployment of childhood can be interrupted and proliferated across these critical fields. Finally, the third key contribution to the literature that this thesis makes emerges out of its insistence that, as I argued above, childhood begs fundamentally challenging questions of the fields of feminist, trans, queer, and critical race studies themselves. Here, my thesis makes the argument that those feminist, trans, queer, and anti-racist theoretical projects that see childhood as tangential to their analysis must re-consider the range of questions, provocations, and possibilities that centering childhood has for our collective work.

### **Childhood as a Technology of Power**

In this thesis, I begin with a Foucauldian framework to argue that childhood operates as a technology of power. I do so in order to make the case that childhood is not a neutral description; rather, it is a means of allocating individuals, populations, and ways of

being into hierarchical disciplinary and biopolitical relations.<sup>6</sup> Here, “technology” is, as Claudia Castañeda describes it, a “generative system” as well as the application of knowledge for practical and political purposes that produces specific effects (2001: 51 n5). While there have been other projects that sought to re-define childhood through diverse theoretical lenses—Thorne (1987), for instance, uses a Marxist feminist analysis and an attention to standpoint to argue that children should be understood as agentic, while Nick Lee (2001) approaches childhood through theories of assemblage and becoming to challenge the idea that children are more “unfinished” than adults—I find Foucault’s theory of power to be most useful for my project. Using a Foucauldian understanding of childhood as a technology of power is important, I argue, because it does not assume that childhood is merely affected by power—it does not assume that “childhood” describes particular subjects at the receiving end of “repressive” regimes of control and supremacy—but rather that childhood is a site through which power operates and is distributed. Foucault’s theory, which I shall situate further here, is also important, I argue, because of what it gestures towards in terms of how technologies of power might be interrupted, proliferated, and differently distributed.

My understanding of childhood as a technology of power thus draws upon Foucault’s work in *The History of Sexuality* (1978), and specifically from his discussion about the technology of sex. Foucault’s language about “technology” is, however, rather complicated. He speaks about sexuality as an “effect, produced in bodies, behaviors, and social relations by a certain deployment deriving from a complex political technology” (1978: 127). Simultaneously, he argues that sex itself was “a technology” that, by the end of the nineteenth century, “required the social body as a whole, and virtually all of its individuals, to place themselves under surveillance” (1978: 116). In other words, sexuality was both the effect of a technology of power, and a form of technology itself. As a technology, sex was made useful through a proliferation of techniques—which Foucault identifies as a “distribution of pleasures, discourses, truths,

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<sup>6</sup> In *Society Must Be Defended* (1997), Foucault outlines disciplinary and biopolitical power. Under disciplinary regimes, power’s focus is on the individual body. Technologies of surveillance and organization of individuals are established, creating and enforcing societal norms of how a body should look, feel, speak, and be (1997: 242). Biopolitical power is more focused on the regularization, production, and valuation of populations. Biopolitics, Foucault writes, “is addressed to a multiplicity of men, [...] a global mass that is affected by overall processes characteristic of birth, death, production, illness” (1997: 242).



and powers” (1978: 123)—which intensified the hold of the “ruling class” within power relations by “underscor[ing] the high political price of its body, sensations, and pleasures, its well-being and survival” (1978: 123). Here, productive of “a whole web of discourses, special knowledges, analyses, and injunctions” (1978: 26), sex, as a technology of power, became a specific site through which disciplines such as pedagogy, economics, and medicine could produce knowledge about, learn to identify, and set up regulations on, various populations. Indeed, sex worked to produce *as* “populations” these very groups of people in the first place.<sup>7</sup>

Foucault thus argues that while the technology of sex was initially used to produce the value of the bourgeoisie and the aristocratic family, eventually, the working classes were “granted a body and a sexuality,” but only after “a whole technology of control [...] made it possible to keep that body and sexuality, finally conceded to them, under surveillance” through “schooling, the politics of housing, public hygiene, institutions of relief and insurance, [and] the general medicalization of the population” (1978: 126). Sexuality, then, rather than an innate feature of human beings, is an effect of the various technologies of power (such as sex) by which different populations have been placed into hierarchical relationships with one another. In as much as sexuality became an effect of power, Foucault argues that sexuality is the primary mode through which bodies are disciplined and produced within and by power.

For Foucault, the child, and specifically the figure of the masturbating child, was one of the four primary figures (along with the hysteric woman, the perverse adult, and the Malthusian couple) through which the intensification of discourses about sex became coalesced through the new form of disciplinary power (1978: 104-105). While he never completed the volume of *The History of Sexuality* that he initially planned to dedicate to this figure, quite a bit of his work thinks through the child’s relationship to sex and to power.<sup>8</sup> Describing what was at stake in the increased focus on children’s sexuality within the eighteenth century, Foucault argued in an interview titled “The End

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<sup>7</sup> Elizabeth Povinelli succinctly describes the importance of Foucault’s language of “population”: “This conceptual distinction between population and people is absolutely crucial for the topos of Foucault’s political imaginary. The population is the collective political subject of Western liberal democracies, *not* the people. The population is the living vitality that biopower attempts to govern” (2015: 181, emphasis in original).

<sup>8</sup> Foucault announces his desire to write this volume in a 1977 interview (Foucault 1989: 141). Unfortunately, due to shifting interests and his untimely death at age 57 due to an AIDS related illness, this volume was never written.

of *Monarchy of Sex*” (1989) that “at the crossroads of body and soul, of health and morality, of education and training, children’s sexuality became at the same time a target and an instrument of power” (1989: 141). As such, “a specific ‘children’s sexuality’ was established: it was precarious, dangerous to be watched over constantly” (1989: 141). Because Foucault’s work is primarily concerned with how sex became the most important indicator of selfhood and truth and thus the most primary means of establishing the relationships between individuals and populations to disciplinary and biopolitical power (rather than simply a means of reproduction or as acts of pleasure), he is centrally concerned with the nexus of childhood and sexuality rather than just “childhood” on its own. But this is not to say that he does not provide an analysis of childhood itself (beyond sexuality) as similarly useful for power. In one passage, for example, Foucault states:

[W]hat was important was the reorganization of the relations between children and adults, parents and educators: it was an intensification of intra-familial relationships, it was childhood which was at stake for the parents, the educational institutions, for the public health authorities; it was childhood as the breeding ground for the generations to come. (1989: 141)

This quote suggests that while sexuality—and, following Stoler (1995), sexuality’s co-production with coloniality, race, gender, and class—was vital to the truth claims enabled by the figure of the child, sexuality cannot fully encapsulate the layers of power and knowledge that coalesced within and as childhood.<sup>9</sup> In this sense, childhood, rather than an innate feature of the early years of human life that is a site of regulation, could be understood as an effect of the technologies of power by which “the early years” have come to be understood as a population.

To think about childhood as a technology of power is thus to begin to address the ways in which a range of techniques—discourses, knowledges, representations and cultural production; forms of surveillance; and biopolitical uses of “childhood” to designate individuals and populations—have been developed and deployed under the

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<sup>9</sup> Ann Laura Stoler (1995) argues that Foucault’s notion of the disciplining of children’s sexuality cannot be understood outside of the colonial encounter. Through her archival work, Stoler demonstrates that concern was about white European children touching, and being touched by, their colonial nurses.

guise of childhood being a natural or given state of being. Speaking to the regimes of knowledge production that have produced childhood as an effect, Allison James and Alan Prout write:

If the concept of childhood as a distinct stage in the human life cycle crystallized in nineteenth century western thought, then the twentieth century has seen that theoretical space elaborated and filled out with detailed empirical findings. Technologies of knowledge such as the psychological experiment, psychometric testing, sociometric mapping, ethnographic description and longitudinal surveys have all been applied to childhood and structured our thinking about children. (1990: 9)<sup>10</sup>

Extending and challenging this notion that childhood is the effect of technologies of knowledge, I argue that childhood, as a particularly compelling impetus for what Foucault calls “maximizing life” (1978: 123), must be recognized as simultaneously disciplined through proliferative discourses, and as a means for the disciplining of differently aged bodies. Here we can think of the ever increasing sets of knowledges within medical, pedagogical, and sociological disciplines about how to raise healthy, successful children—including practices such as the highly gendered idea of attachment parenting (Bowlby 1969), or the bio-technical surveillance of childhood obesity (Butler-Wall 2015), and the regimes of truth about race located in the consequences of family formations (Spillers 1987)—as encouraging the regulating and disciplining of individuals and populations through “childhood” in order to maximize the life of (some of) the population(s). These regimes of truth are clearly not just about the effects they have for “actual” children; they are also about the surveillance of gendered, sexual, and racialized populations and the value placed on them. This framing of the back and forth dynamic of childhood—as both an effect and a mechanism—is absolutely central to my overall project.

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<sup>10</sup> While Allison James and Alan Prout use Foucault’s notion of “regimes of truth” to argue that “ways of thinking about childhood fuse with institutionalized practices to produce self-conscious subjects (teachers, parents and children) who think (and feel) about themselves through the terms of those ways of thinking” (1990: 23), they still see childhood as only those discourses which revolve around “actual” children.

My framing of childhood as a technology of power additionally learns from, but is slightly different to that of Jo Ann Wallace. In her article “Technologies of ‘the child’: towards a theory of the child-subject” (1995), Wallace writes that her title suggests “an exploration both of the disciplinary apparatuses by which children are simultaneously produced and subjected, *and* those practices by which children come to recognize themselves as desiring subjects” (1995: 285-286, emphasis in original). For Wallace, the notion of the technology of “the child” focuses her attention on the question of children’s agency and their possibilities for self-representation:

The emergence of a discourse of childhood [...] coincident with the emergence of a discourse of citizenship and Enlightenment rationality suggests the need for both a theory of the child-subject *and* a consideration of the ways in which ‘the child’ marks an aporia in many current theories of the subject. Admittedly, it is difficult at this stage to imagine how a theory of the child-subject might proceed, particularly since ‘the child’ is everywhere in representation [...] but almost nowhere in public *self*-representation. [...] Ultimately, the question that a theory of ‘the child-subject’ must address is the question of agency. (1995: 293-294)

Although I follow many of Wallace’s convictions—such as her argument that the school is a “primary site of the kind of ‘technology of power’ that calls ‘the child’ into being” (1995: 291)—I am less interested in her (perhaps ambivalent) desire to have a theory of the “child-subject” that incorporates and speaks from, rather than for, children and childhood.<sup>11</sup> Instead, I begin from her question of “what kinds of activities does an idea of ‘the child’ authorize?” (1995: 286) and move from there into thinking about how childhood itself is a technology of power, rather than just one of its effects. This framing thus asks not only that we better attend to how childhood has come into being as a frame of intelligibility that authorizes various political activities, but, following Foucault, why childhood has become so invested with power.

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<sup>11</sup> While Jo-Ann Wallace does seek a child-subject, she also begins her paper by stating: “not only will the paper not attempt a coherent theory of the child-subject [...] it will not discuss children as historical agents” (1995: 286). On the other hand, as Claudia Castañeda (2001) argues, Wallace’s desire for self-representing child-subjects is problematically based on the need for an agentic subject to engage in practices of representation. Wallace both refuses a child subject, and requires (or desires) there to be one as the basis of her theory of representation.

Being initially produced within the elite classes in terms of location, wealth, gender, class, and sexuality (more on this history in Chapter Two), childhood—like sex—emerged as a technology by which the bourgeoisie could invest in, expand, and preserve its well-being and survival, precisely at a time when the mortality rate of children was so high. As Philippe Ariès, author of *Centuries of Childhood* (1962) and founder of a social constructionist view of the historical invention of childhood, writes, up until the nineteenth century adults could not become too attached to children as too many of them died in infancy (1962: 38-43). And yet, he argues that, from the seventeenth century onward, “a new sensibility granted these fragile, threatened creatures a characteristic which the world had hitherto failed to recognize in them: [...] the importance accorded to the child’s personality” (1962: 43). This importance, Ariès demonstrates, was initially produced through the intensification of knowledges and practices that set out to mark the importance of wealthy, European boys. He argues, it “preceded by more than a century the change in demographic conditions” that made children’s lives so precarious (1962: 43).

In thinking about childhood as initially produced as a means of maximizing the life of, and producing as valuable, the bourgeoisie and the aristocratic families and their lineages, the question thus becomes: through which processes, and under which terms, did childhood eventually become “granted” to the proletariat? Extending this notion of childhood’s expansion onto marginalized populations into the contemporary moment, this thesis asks: How might we come to understand and analyze the conditions under which individuals currently excluded from childhood’s protective (and insidious) grasp might eventually become included within it—and what might the consequences of this expansion be? As I argue in the three main analytical chapters of this thesis, childhood is still in the process of becoming dispersed among non-hegemonic populations through unresolved legacies of, and contemporary enactments of, what Foucault sweepingly calls “conflicts” (1978: 126). In this passage Foucault identifies “conflicts” as disputes over urban space such as “cohabitation, proximity, contamination, epidemics, such as the cholera outbreak of 1832, or [...] prostitution and venereal diseases” as well as what he calls “economic emergencies” which include “the development of heavy industry with the need for a stable and competent labor force” and “the obligation to regulate the population flow and apply demographic controls” (1978: 126). In this thesis, I am framing conflicts as being not just about contestations over shifts in “material”

conditions, but also about discursive, representational, and affective ones. Here, I ask after the “affective emergencies” such as “crises” in racial and national belonging in a so called post-racial moment, or anxieties about the blurring of gendered lines after the “transgender tipping point” (Steinmetz 2014), which motivate the need for childhood’s dispersal into, and formation of, new populations.

As such, the “conflicts” that I am tracing in this thesis are not just debates about the meanings that childhood itself as a category of existence carries, but are also about the shifting dynamics of racial belonging (Chapter Four), sexual normativity (Chapter Five), and the gender binary (Chapter Six). In this sense, using a Foucauldian analysis of power as a means of attending to how childhood functions in the contemporary moment is vital, for it recognizes that the debates about whether or not someone is located within or beyond childhood are negotiations whose effects determine the ways in which non-hegemonic populations will be affected by, and brought into being by, the dispersal and redistribution of mechanisms of power.<sup>12</sup> Expanding on Foucault’s notions of power, technology, and discourse, this thesis additionally analyzes the conflicts about childhood’s dispersal as ones located within cultural production. As I discuss further in Chapter Three, this research argues that cultural production—and particularly film—is a privileged site in which these conflicts about childhood are enacted and emboldened. As such, I produce an analysis of the contemporary political and psychic life of childhood by reading its contested contours within discourses, cultural productions, and representations of childhood, as they enforce and challenge investments in gender, sexuality, and race.

But Foucault is not only useful for his genealogical understanding of the workings of power. Indeed, it is additionally his understanding of the proliferative nature of power that holds such promise, not just for thinking about how childhood has been distributed, but also for thinking about what might be done in response. Describing the productivity of power, and challenging what he calls the “repressive hypothesis”, Foucault writes:

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<sup>12</sup> For another take on the “conflicts” which motivated the dispersal of childhood, see: Hendrick (1990). Harry Hendrick argues that negotiations of childhood did not emerge without contest. The production of childhood, he writes, “was a consciously executed political and cultural enterprise and, therefore, was often fiercely contested territory” (1990: 55-56).

Since the classical age the West has undergone a very profound transformation of these mechanisms of power. “Deduction” has tended to be no longer the major form of power but merely one element among others, working to incite, reinforce, control monitor, optimize, and organize the forces under it: *a power bent on generating forces*, making them grow, and ordering them, rather than one dedicated to impeding them, making them submit, or destroying them. (1978: 136, emphasis added)

In a landscape in which power operates as a generative force, rather than an oppressive one, the question of what to do in response to its mechanisms—as well as how to best understand them—becomes much more complex. Judith Butler (1997), writing about the formational bond of subjectivity, outlines the predicament that power’s generating forces has for our relation to it:

[I]f, following Foucault, we understand power as *forming* the subject as well, as providing the very condition of its existence and the trajectory of its desire, then power is not simply what we oppose but also, in a strong sense, what we depend on for our existence and what we harbor and preserve in the beings that we are. (1997: 2, emphasis in original)

If, as Butler writes, power relations are both something we oppose and something we desire, and if they constitute the very foundation of our subjectivity, then they are also, Butler argues, central to our psyche. Because power takes a “psychic form” (1997: 2), the proliferative life of power must be understood and analyzed at the level of the psyche, and through a psychoanalytic approach.

It is because of this that (despite Foucault’s reservations), I prioritize and utilize the language and tools of psychoanalysis alongside his framework of power.<sup>13</sup> In each of the chapters of this thesis, then, the putting into practice of childhood is understood

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<sup>13</sup> For his own part, Foucault was not interested in psychoanalysis (indeed he was often hostile towards its authorial voice on sex and sexuality), and so the pairing of his framing of power and its psychic life might be seen as incompatible. However, Foucault also recognized that the “strength of psychoanalysis” is in its “logic of the unconscious” (1980: 213). For Butler, Foucault and psychoanalysis can and must be understood together because unpacking subjection requires a psychoanalytic account of the psychic effects of restriction and prohibition (1997: 87).

both as a productive act within generative power relations, as well as one that operates through desire, projection, ambivalence, and attachment. As I outline in Chapter Three, my own pairing of psychoanalysis and Foucault is less situated in the bind of subjectivity, and more concerned with the lines of attachment and investment that people have in discursive formations and disciplinary power. I make this pairing through a particular reading of affect theory, which suggests that people's relationship to the political, to discourse, cultural productions, and their effects, is embodied, felt, and internalized.

The final argument that is important in relation to Foucault is more of an aspiration or gesture towards what might become. Moving beyond an analysis of liberatory projects' pure cooptation of, or complicity in power relations, Foucault argues that these projects also have the potential for shifting the dynamics of power. Speaking specifically about the sexual liberation movements in his time, he states:

I believe the so-called "sexual liberation" movements must be understood as movements of affirmation "beginning with" sexuality. Which means two things: these are movements which take off from sexuality, from the apparatus of sexuality within which we're trapped, which make it function to the limit; but at the same time, these movements are displaced in relation to sexuality, disengaging themselves from it and going beyond it. (Foucault 1989: 142)

This notion, that practices of critique and of engagement with the mechanisms of power simultaneously function *within* and *beyond* the frames they grapple with, is a fundamental contention at the heart of this thesis. What I explore within each of my chapters is thus the very negotiation with the ways in which childhood is being deployed and distributed. Within this, I interrogate both the moments of implication with(in) power and the moments or gestures that creatively disengage and move beyond.

### **Framing, Scope, and Ethics**

My interest in the political and psychic ambivalence of childhood first emerged out of my own engagement with, and investment in, what the strategy of organizing as "children" and young people offered myself and my peers within the various queer youth activist spaces that I participated in during the first decade of the 2000s. After



having first come out at 14, I joined a few queer youth activist organizations in California's Bay Area, and I became heavily involved in work that sought to make a livable life for queer kids. Over the course of ten years of queer youth activism I became interested in, and often infuriated by, the ways in which ideas about childhood were central to the type of work we did, how it was funded, how it was received, and who we could work with. I began noticing how despite—or, actually, because of—the sympathetic (and belittling) praise we received as young people, the demands for action we initiated ended up going unheard.

One moment in particular still stands out to me: At the end of a three hour community meeting with over a hundred people in attendance, a meeting that my peers and I organized to get a school board to simply agree to comply with an already passed state-wide anti-discrimination legislation related to sexual orientation and gender identity, a member of the school board—who had argued against the policy, and had made the process of organizing the meeting difficult—told us that we young people were “the future”. While this statement could be understood as banal or even hopeful, it felt much more insidious, and functioned, I argue, as what Sara Ahmed would call a “non-performative” (Ahmed 2004c). This statement, in other words, worked against the bringing into being of the very thing it claimed it was advocating in its articulation; our hold on futurity, that is, allowed adults to lay claim to the now. It was in this moment that I started to wonder if the investment in children—the repeated calls of “children are the future” and the moves made on behalf of the “best interests” of children—were directly responsible for the delaying of the work that we, as children and young people, were currently organizing for, and were demanding be done in the present. While the process of writing this thesis has somewhat veered me away from requiring the work of childhood to be held solely responsible to the social and political needs of “actual” children, it has been this longstanding attention to the work that childhood does, against and along with the work it claims to be doing—and who it claims to be doing it for—that began my thinking towards this project.<sup>14</sup>

The research that founds this thesis thus began with an initial curiosity and skepticism in regards to childhood's application. Beginning with this skepticism, my thesis asks: How is childhood applied, to whom is it allocated, and to whom is it

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<sup>14</sup> For more on the relationship between “real” children and the “figure of the child”, see Chapter Three.

denied? Seeking answers to these questions led me to read through diverse histories of childhood and childhood studies, but my disquiet about the children and childhoods left out of these histories and their incorporation into the social sciences led me to additional questions. In Chapter Two, where I provide a history of childhood studies, I thus ask: Does the current formation of the child, one that has political gaps in its configuration and deployment, have a history? How is this history narrated? How does childhood studies itself interrupt or preserve these gaps within its own frames, methods, and genealogies? From here, I became interested in what I am calling the “putting into practice” of childhood. Expanding on this theoretical framing, Chapter Three asks: What is actually being debated or distributed when someone is placed within—or removed from—childhood’s multiple frames? What is the work—the doing or the undoing—that this uneven application or distribution does? How is it gendered, racialized, classed, national, and sexual? Through what forms of power—from disciplinary, to biopolitical, to psychic—does it operate? And, finally: How do we begin to untangle the investments motivating the putting into practice of childhood in these particular ways? Put simply, these questions ask that we consider what is at stake in the act of locating someone within or outside of childhood, beyond simply a confirmation of their age.<sup>15</sup> This chapter thus wrestles with what type of object childhood is and how it might best be understood.

The following three analytical chapters emerge out of this framework and are structured by the following animating questions: How do these investments in childhood align with or challenge some of the aims of feminist, trans, queer, and anti-racist social justice projects, and how might these investments be interrupted or proliferated in productive ways? What role, in other words, does childhood have in feminist, trans, queer, and anti-racist projects and theories? Asking all of these questions has led me to structure my approach to childhood through methods of interrogation that are necessarily interdisciplinary, attentive to psychic and affective investments, concerned with questions of representation, and situated within critical and longstanding analyses of gender, race, and sexuality.

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<sup>15</sup> Throughout this research process I have become skeptical of age as the given marker of one’s location in childhood. For two brilliant analyses of the work “age” does to mask other motivations for locating children, see: Pande (2012) in regards to the establishment of “digital age” in India; see also: Crawley (2007) about “age disputes” in the UK asylum process.

Integral to this thesis' overarching approach to childhood, then, is the recognition that childhood is a difficult and multifarious concept. Indeed, even one's access to one's own childhood is never an unmediated or simple process. As Jacqueline Rose (1984) argues, childhood is primarily the site of the adult's psychic and discursive self-representation, and thus adults—and I am certainly not innocent of this—use acts of projection, misrecognition, and deferral onto childhood which, to varying success, provide themselves with a sense of coherence. For Rose, childhood is never fully available to adults, precisely because what is at stake in producing the child as the adult's origin, as a fixed and knowable location, and as the adult's other, is the fiction of adult selfhood itself (1984: 15). Describing what she calls “the impossible relation between adult and child” (1984: 1) through the language of desire, Rose writes:

What is at stake [...] is the adult's *desire* for the child. [...] [D]esire [refers] to a form of investment by the adult in the child, and to the demand made by the adult on the child as the effect of that investment, a demand which fixes the child and then holds it in place. (1984: 3-4, emphasis added)

As a means of unpacking and critiquing this demand and its effects within the deployments of childhood that I center in this thesis, I turn to psychoanalytic accounts that think about the phantasmatic nature of the relation between adult and child. Along with Rose, I work with Claudia Castañeda (2002), Lee Edelman (2004), Elspeth Probyn (1995), Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (2003a), Carolyn Steedman (1995), and others, to argue that because childhood is a site of psychic investment on behalf of adults, it requires an approach that is firmly based in theories of psychoanalysis, affect, privilege, and investment. My thesis thus engages heavily with the psychoanalytic scholarship of Sigmund Freud, Jacques Lacan, and Melanie Klein—as well as with many scholars, like Teresa de Lauretis, Juliet Mitchell, Jacqueline Rose, and Luce Irigaray, who expand on and challenge these accounts. This attention to psychoanalysis is vital to my project, not just because, as I argued above, there is a psychic life to power that requires understanding; but also because psychoanalysis provides a language and a set of conceptual tools (loss, cathexis, attachment, investment) with which we can analyze the structuring force of childhood's various deployments.

Because my questions about the psychic investments in the racial, sexual, and gendered deployments of childhood are ones that could be answered in numerous contexts and across a range of sites—and indeed I hope that one of the things this thesis engenders is precisely this extension of (and challenge to) its analysis into the moments that I have not had the opportunity, desire, or insight to attend to—I have had to make some important decisions about the scope of my thesis. As with all projects, positionality has played an important role in this, not just in terms of the (un)marked structures of raced, gendered, classed, sexual, and national location in which I am located, but also in terms of the perhaps less quantifiable questions of desire, relation, affect, capacity, and intersubjectivity, which have informed my research.<sup>16</sup> As decades of feminist and critical race scholarship have argued, positionality (whether acknowledged or not) is central to the ways in which knowledge is undertaken, validated, and reproduced.<sup>17</sup>

In terms of this thesis, then, because one of the most salient ways in which my own positionality is productive of partiality, and is visibly read, accommodated, and experienced (by others, and, more often than not, by myself) is as a white, middle-class cis-man from the U.S., the questions of responsibility, ethics, and accountability, particularly when writing a project centered in trans, feminist, queer, and anti-racist politics, have been, and continue to be, continually asked after, both by myself and by various readers of this work.<sup>18</sup> Positionality thus becomes deeply important for me because, as Patricia Hill Collins (2000) argues, the predominance of white men in knowledge validation processes has historically meant that, for example, black feminist

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<sup>16</sup> In privileging these additional frames, I am arguing that the language through which subjectivity is often articulated (i.e., race, gender, sexuality, class, age, and nation) does not always adequately signify the quotidian, historical, and interpersonal dynamics which shape political location or the partiality of knowing and being. Along these lines, Adrienne Rich (1984) argues for a shift from saying “the body” to “my body”, because, for her, “to say ‘my body’ reduces the temptation to grandiose assertions” and instead “plunges me into lived experience, particularity” (1984: 215).

<sup>17</sup> For more on partiality, embodied knowledge, and standpoint, see, among others: Bailey (1998); Collins (2000); Harding (1991); Hartsock (1983, 1998); Hennessy (1993); Kaplan (1997); Rich (1984); Stoetzler and Yuval-Davis (2002).

<sup>18</sup> In speaking about my own unsteady relation to my positioning, I am referencing Haraway’s contention that “we are not immediately present to ourselves” (1988: 585). For Donna Haraway, being unavailable to one’s self allows for forms of accountability and feminist epistemologies which pay attention to the erasures inherent to identity formation (1988: 586).

thought is often marked as de-legitimate. Collins writes that “even those who think they are familiar” with black women’s realities “can reproduce stereotypes” and indeed it is often precisely the assumption that one is “already knowledgeable” or producing knowledge through assumed solidarity and criticality that racist and dominant frameworks are perpetuated within scholarship (2000: 253-254). This critique of myopia and epistemic violence is not limited to the erasure and tokenism of black women’s experiences, and a range of scholars has critiqued other ongoing erasures as well (cf. Narayan and Harding 2000; Spelman 1990).

However, following the suggestion from a number of feminist scholars about positionality and objectivity that one of the ways to attend to this erasure is to refuse to maintain ontological certainty in regards to identity and experience, I want to hold up positionality as an open question.<sup>19</sup> Here, thinking of positionality as a question means not that one should (or could) disavow their position and its effects, nor that the current uneven questioning of the validity and coherence of particular racial, sexual, and gendered positions is justified. Rather, it means that, as Linda Martin Alcoff argues:

[L]ocation *bears* on meaning and truth [which] is not the same as saying that location *determines* meaning and truth. Location is not a fixed essence absolutely authorizing an individual’s speech [...] Location and positionality should not be conceived as one-dimensional or static but as multiple and with varying degrees of mobility. (1995: 106, emphasis in original).

Keeping positionality open is not just about achieving a mobile identification, but is also about what is at stake in the move from one position to another. Movement is not apolitical, nor absolved of implication, and thus attending to these movements helps to unpack the difficulties of identity as they are lived and felt in social and political life.

Centrally concerned with these questions of positionality, location, and power, then, I have limited the scope of my thesis to three moments in the contemporary U.S. in which the positioning of someone within or beyond childhood is based on two things: a particular understanding of the axes of race, sexuality, and gender; and a desire for these

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<sup>19</sup> This understanding of identity is itself a complicated and contested one, one that I situate and grapple with more substantially in Chapter Three’s analysis of Paul Gilroy’s writing on the politics of “race” (Gilroy 2000).

axes to function or signify in a specific way. The question that could and should be asked here is of course why *just*, or why *specifically*, I use these three categories of identity and not, for example, ability, class, citizenship status, educational background, etc. This is an important question, not just for what it suggests needs to be continuously asked after in regards to my research, but also, as Butler argues, for the exhaustion and embarrassment that accompanies the “etc.” at the end of this list. For Butler, the “exasperation” (1990: 196) which attaches to the failure (and refusal) to name all the categories that might be at play in subjection is a symptom of the political processes that posit identity as being available to a conclusive knowing, instead of as the effects of ongoing regimes of subjection and signification. Similarly, for Robyn Wiegman (2012), the desire to have a conclusive list of axes that one must attend to in order to feel like proper justice has been done to one’s political commitments is a dangerous desire, for it relies on a fantasy in which knowledge production itself could possibly ever be able to assuage the inevitable problems of partiality, misrecognition, and epistemic violence. Centering these critiques of the desire for more inclusive and comprehensive knowledge production, I prioritize my three case studies precisely because I am interested in thinking through the complex and often contradictory questions of positionality. I have thus selected my three cases because race, gender, and sexuality are the main ways in which childhood is made ambiguous within them.

In the final months of writing this thesis, the idea that I might find closure in relation to my cases has become all the more obviously a fantasmatic one. In writing about the ongoing present, I have found myself continuously surprised by the expansive life of the objects and movements that I began researching and writing about four years ago. At the beginning of this thesis, these movements, debates, and scholarly inquiries were still seemingly fleeting moments in public discourse, singular interruptions against an ostensibly unending flow of opposition. When I began researching this thesis, for example, Trayvon Martin, whose murder and its aftermath is the basis of Chapter Four’s analysis, had just recently been killed, and George Zimmerman, the Neighborhood Watch captain who fatally shot him, was still awaiting trial. At the time, the Black Lives Matter movement, which officially emerged when Zimmerman was acquitted in 2013, existed only in the form of an ongoing critique of anti-black racism, but had not yet come into being as the monumental movement it is today. Similarly, I could not have guessed that the research I undertook for Chapter Six’s analysis of the transphobic

exclusion of Coy Mathis from the girls' restrooms of her Colorado elementary school—an important but localized and momentary example of the regulation of sexed and gendered access to public restrooms—would eventually need to account for a national legal battle that pitted the federal government against at least one entire state legislature. And while the discursive and legal terrain that Chapter Five interrogates in relation to childhood and sexuality has—perhaps predictably—*not* changed, the scholarship on the “queerness” of childhood that comprises the focal point of much of my analysis in this chapter continues to be published at a speed that this thesis cannot possibly account for. These drastic shifts in scale and resonance of my cases and objects of analysis are in many ways revitalizing. Having dedicated the last four years of my life to thinking through the complex questions and political resonances inherent to these moments, I cannot help but be encouraged by their expansion into sites I could not have anticipated. I see this as a sign that understanding these cases—with help from the analyses my thesis makes of them—is imperative to interrupting and proliferating the pressing and ongoing contemporary life of race, sexuality, and gender through the technology of childhood.

### **Outline of Thesis**

This thesis is an interrogation of childhood, not as a time of life but as a technology of power by which racism, sexual normativity, and the gender binary are justified and challenged. It works through three case studies, explained below, to develop and substantiate this argument, and it does so by outlining and centering its theoretical frameworks of investment and the putting into practice of childhood. In so doing, it wrestles with feminist, trans, queer, and anti-racist investments in childhood, understanding them as investments that are particularly productive and dangerous for social justice projects and critical theory. Seeking out a rearranging of our desire for childhood, this thesis articulates a framing of childhood that might allow childhood to proliferate in unexpected modes and new forms of relation.

In Chapter Two, *Childhood Studies and Power/Knowledge*, I produce a genealogical account of the emergence of childhood as a technology of power through the field of childhood studies itself. I do so by drawing on key scholarship from within childhood studies particularly in regards to the “new paradigm”, and in the relationship between

feminist theory and childhood studies. I argue that childhood studies is a site of power/knowledge through which the exclusive confines of, and investments in, childhood continue to be reestablished and negotiated. My main questions within this chapter include: What are the discourses, truths, and knowledges being produced about children and about the field of childhood studies? What is the history of the child, and how is this history narrated within the field? How is the story of childhood studies' emergence and institutionalization told, and what are the effects of this narration? In asking these questions, this chapter is specifically interested in the child's historical conditions of emergence as they formed through the negotiations of race, gender, and sexuality. It seeks answers to these questions by forging different ways of reading childhood studies' central texts.

In Chapter Three, *Putting Childhood Into Practice: Methods, Ambivalence, and Wanting* I explain further what I mean by the putting into practice of childhood, and I outline the methods that I use to attend to childhood across this thesis. Here, I situate my analytical approaches to discourse, figuration, representation, and affect, which structure how I read the scenes, images, cases, and objects of my three main analytical chapters and my conclusion. In each of these analytical chapters I wrestle with what type of analytical and political object childhood is. Is it dangerous, proliferative, a site of potentiation, a means of oppression, or another kind of object? What are the implications, this chapter asks, both for theory and for childhood, when childhood is understood as one type of object or another? To answer these questions, this chapter aligns itself with, and then distances itself from, the politics of negativity and opposition which emerge in the work of Paul Gilroy and Lee Edelman. It concludes by seeking a different kind of politics, one that is open to the desire we have for dangerous objects, and is accountable to their and our structural ambivalence.

Chapter Four, the first of my three main analytical chapters, is titled: "*The 'fresh faced' boy in the red T-Shirt*": *Imaging Trayvon Martin Amidst the Negation of Black Childhood*. This chapter centers around the visual and discursive landscape that emerged in the aftermath of the murder of Trayvon Martin. Martin was a black 17-year-old who was racially profiled and murdered on 26 February, 2012, by George Zimmerman, a 28-year-old Hispanic man who was captain of a Neighborhood Watch



program in Sanford, Florida. After his murder, Martin became a symbol of the disproportionate number of fatal shootings of black people by law enforcement. In the wake of Zimmerman's acquittal (which brought into being the Black Lives Matter movement), Martin's murder shone a national light on the institutional racism of the police and the criminal justice system. This chapter responds to Martin's murder by attending to the ways in which childhood, adolescence, innocence, and blackness came together in a so-called "post-racial" moment to both justify Zimmerman's acquittal, and to advocate on behalf of Martin's innocence. In this chapter I argue that debating Martin's location within or beyond childhood was absolutely central to whether or not Zimmerman was arrested and acquitted. But, more so than this, I make the case that Martin's location in and beyond childhood was also central to how race and racism could be characterized in a post-racial moment.

Chapter Five is titled: "*I want to have lots, and lots of babies. As many babies as possible*": *Queer Theory, Identification, and Children*. This chapter begins with a memory of my own from an annual event I organized in 2009 that brought the local community together to celebrate the tenacity of queer and trans youth. At this specific year's event, the provocative dance of a gay, 12-year-old, mixed-race boy caused both a flurry of upset from the audience, and a complicated mix of desire and identification from myself. This negotiation between desire, identification, anxiety, and a queer child's performative "betrayal" of a shared queer space functions as the starting point for this chapter's investigation of queer theory's turn to the child. Interrogating this scholarship, this chapter's main focus is on how the "queer child" emerged in queer theory, what structuring investments shape its contours, and what the gaps are—particularly in relationship to race, motherhood, and feminism—in theorizing it. Working to offer my own queer child as a way of creating a reparative relation to this body of scholarship, this chapter provides a reading of Todd Solondz' film *Palindromes* (2004). This film, I argue, flips the dominant narratives and positions of childhood, sexuality, and queerness. My reading of Aviva—the central character of the film who is played by eight different actors—offers a critical alternative to queer theory's current formulation of the "queer child".

Chapter Six is the third and final of the main analytical chapters of this thesis. Titled: “*At his young age he may appear to be a female*”: *Childhood and Transfeminism*, this chapter seeks out a transfeminist politics that intervenes in the ways in which the putting into practice of childhood facilitates transphobic and misogynist projects. The quote in the title of this chapter comes from a school district in Colorado that was defending its decision to prohibit Coy Mathis, a 6-year-old trans girl, from using the girls’ restrooms in 2012. The school justified its position by simultaneously denying Coy her location within femaleness and within childhood, likening her body to that of an adolescent male. In its analysis of this moment, this chapter troubles the use of childhood as a legitimating narrative for transphobic *and* trans-affirmative positions. Doing so, it moves from Coy to the justifications for trans gendered affirmations that stem from narratives of childhood. In working with a number of trans narratives, this chapter argues for a transfeminist politics that emerges out of the ambiguities, possibilities, and tensions of gendered identification within childhood. Doing so, this chapter concludes by providing a reading of Céline Sciamma’s *Tomboy* (2011), a film about a young French girl named Laure who introduces herself to a new group of friends as a boy named Michael. My reading of the film argues that approaching Laure and Michael together—understanding these two children as existing simultaneously and in opposition throughout the film—might allow for an exploration of, or at least a momentary playfulness with, the gendered attachments and refusals that take place through childhood.

The conclusion of my thesis, *Somewhere Between Reparative Reading and Loss*, picks up a twinned strand of analysis that weaves throughout each chapter: a doubled mode of reading childhood that comes from a position of negativity and repair. Here, I return to Sedgwick’s delineation of reparative reading (2003b), and I put it into conversation with David Eng and David Kazanjian’s analysis of loss as a catalyst for a militant future (2003). In thinking about the space between Sedgwick, and Eng and Kazanjian, I work to pull together the wider conclusions of this thesis to demonstrate how they might be useful in responding to a final difficult moment in which the racial, sexual, and gendered contemporary life of childhood becomes strained.

## Chapter Two:

### Childhood Studies and Power/Knowledge

#### **Childhood Studies' Field Formation**

Childhood studies, as Mary Jane Kehily puts it, is a “field of academic endeavour” that “points to the importance of childhood as a conceptual category and as a social position” (2009: 1). As such, childhood studies is a field, centered around the study of children and childhood, that “offers the potential for interdisciplinary research” and the production of paradigms (2009: 1). Childhood studies has a wide-reaching, thriving, and impactful history of multidisciplinary engagements and interventions that continues to shape how children are understood. One branch of childhood studies, working across a range of disciplines, focuses on the study of children as people within a specific social position and biological stage.<sup>1</sup> These disciplines include sociology, anthropology, psychology, education, political theory, and international human rights. This branch of childhood studies recognizes children as known, albeit historically determined, objects of study, ones available for ethnographic, quantitative, and qualitative research. It has generated international frameworks such as the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989), and it continues to advocate on behalf of children. Another branch of childhood studies looks not to children specifically, but rather to the way that childhood as an idea has been shaped, and is shaped, by sociopolitical moments across time and space.<sup>2</sup> Located in critiques of literature, film, socio-cultural practices, media, and discourse, the representation and production of childhood as a concept, and of the figure of the child, take precedence here. While I shall argue in the following chapter that the understandings of “real” children and the “idea of childhood” cannot be so

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<sup>1</sup> For key texts which provide an overview of this frame of childhood studies, see, among many others: Archard (1993); Berk (1994); Hardman (1973); A. James and A. James (2012); A. James, Jenks and Prout (1998); A. James and Prout (1990); Jenks (1982; 1996); Kehily (2009); Lee (2001); Montgomery (2008); J. Mills and R. Mills (2000); Prout (2005); Qvortrup (2005); Qvortrup, Corsaro, and Honig (2009); Thorne (1987); Vandenhoe et al. (2015); Wells (2009); Woodhead and Montgomery (2002).

<sup>2</sup> For key texts in this frame of childhood studies, see: Ariès (1962); Cvetkovic and Olson (2013); P. Holland (2004); Levander and Singley (2003); Lury (2010); Rose (1984); Steedman (1995); Stephens (1995); Zornado (2001).

easily separated, in this chapter I focus more specifically on the body of work that turns its lens on “real” children’s lives. I do so to attend to the contours of “children”—as itself a contested category—across different lineages of thought within childhood studies. In so doing, my aim throughout this chapter is twofold. Primarily, it is to situate my own reading of childhood in relationship to a diverse set of interventions within childhood studies, and to map my arguments’ congruencies and points of departure. Following Michel Foucault, who argues that “relations of power cannot themselves be established, consolidated, nor implemented without the production, accumulation, circulating and functioning of a discourse” (1980: 93), I situate the debates about children within childhood studies as ones investing in, producing, and resisting relations of power. I thus ask: What are the effects of the discourses, truths, and knowledges being produced about children? What different ways of reading childhood studies’ central texts need to be undertaken to create a stronger relationship of accountability between childhood studies’ interventions on one hand, and, on the other, a cautious framing of the field itself being a site through which childhood’s availability for power is made more effective and precise?

As a way of answering these questions, the first half of this chapter follows a number of debates about the ontology of children, and their ensuing shifts about the status of children as objects of knowledge. It situates these shifts in relationship to the narrativized founding and development of childhood studies as a field. My attending to the narrative of childhood studies is important because the normative story about its field-formation reproduces a progress narrative does a few things that require further attention. It elides the violent making of “the child”; it relegates persistent problematic framings of childhood’s ontology to the past; and it allows for a sidelining of the field’s ongoing indebtedness to feminist interventions. This exploration of the studied ontology of children analyzes these shifts as both situated within particular contexts, and as conceptual framings and approaches whose legacies carry over into the present. Put simply, because childhood studies occupies a strong authorial voice on the truth of childhood, and thus childhood’s contours and possibilities, the histories and narratives produced within the field directly affect the ways in which childhood is put into practice. In this chapter, I trace out a history of childhood studies in the Western Anglo

tradition in order to situate my thesis' wider project within a legacy of scholarship that is at the forefront of thought about children and childhood.<sup>3</sup>

The organizing set of questions for the first part of the chapter are: What is childhood studies? What is a child (or what is childhood studies' object)? How are children known and studied, and what are the effects of these methodological approaches? What shifting notions of children, and of their study, have contributed to the current diverse and productive field of childhood studies? And what are the contours and consequences of the narratives told about childhood studies' development as a field? The second part of this chapter situates this thesis' original contributions to childhood studies within two different ongoing debates that are central to the field. The first of these debates concerns the political project of childhood studies as a discipline. As this thesis elaborates and establishes its own framing of childhood as a technology of power, and is therefore centrally concerned with the political, social, and psychic life of childhood, I situate my approach to childhood as one which compliments, challenges, and expands the field's various understandings of power and the political. The second set of literatures that I unpack within childhood studies are on the role of race, sexuality, and gender in an analysis of childhood. This section positions this thesis' three core chapters' explorations of how childhood, race, sexuality, and gender are co-constituted, in relationship to the different ways in which these nodes have been theorized in childhood studies. Across both of these sections I outline a critical understanding of childhood and childhood studies from which the following chapters will emerge.

### *Childhood Studies' Precursors: Dismissing the Child*

Narratives on the genealogy of the field of childhood studies, for example by Chris Jenks (1982); Jean Mills and Richard Mills (2000); Jens Qvortrup (2005); and Qvortrup, William Corasaro, and Michael-Sebastian Honig (2009), chronicle a story of the field's development through what Allison James, Jenks, and Alan Prout name as the various

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<sup>3</sup> One of the lenses through which I critique the production of childhood in this heterogeneous and contested context is by thinking about the geopolitical, national, and colonial dependencies and boundaries of the U.S. and its children. For a few histories and analyses of the child within the U.S., see: Ashby (1997); R. Bernstein (2011); Cross (1997); Illick (2002); W. King (1995); Macleod (1998); Mintz (2004); Schneider (1995); Winkler (2012). For scholarship that interrogates childhood in non-Western contexts, see: Aitken, Lund, and Kjørholt (2008); Balagopalan (2014); Wells (2015).

“presociological” understandings of children (1998: 10). These previous frameworks—which include socialization, developmental psychology, and recapitulation, and which tend to ignore or dismiss children, or to overemphasize children’s biological immaturity, deny their agentic capacities, and understand childhood as a universal ontological stage—are argued to “begin from a view of childhood outside of or uninformed by the social context within which the child resides” (James, Jenks, and Prout 1998: 10).<sup>4</sup> Despite their narrative relegation to childhood studies’ past, and their dismissal as critical and useful theories for understanding children’s lives, these “previous” understandings are central to much ongoing contemporary research.<sup>5</sup> More than just being pivotal yet outmoded perceptions of children, then these framings have lineages that continue on into contemporary scholarly, popular, and cultural understandings of children.

One of the central animating arguments that beget the current field of childhood studies came from an opposition to a particular understanding of children within theories of socialization. Socialization frameworks understand children as unfinished becomings, and as adults in the making, assuming the givenness of society and its ordering. They ask how children, as beings without language or knowledge of this ordering, come to be slowly introduced into the world around them.<sup>6</sup> This understanding, while providing space for important critiques of the social world—Barrie Thorne, for example, notes how the framework of socialization has allowed feminist scholars to argue that binary gender roles and patriarchy are not inherent to society, but are instead learned positions (1987: 92)—understands the child as, at best, merely a

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<sup>4</sup> Due to their prominence within the field of childhood studies, and their central role in its institutionalization, I heavily cite the work of Allison James, Chris Jenks, and Alan Prout here.

<sup>5</sup> Across different disciplinary approaches to children and childhood, this relegation and dismissal of these “presociological” theories is not consistently held nor universally welcomed. As James and Prout note, “the still dominant concepts of ‘development’ and ‘socialization’ are extraordinarily resistant to criticism. They persist despite all that has been said against them” (1990: 22).

<sup>6</sup> In their history of the development of childhood studies, James and Prout situate socialization theories as emerging within a 1950s positivist inquiry (1990: 12). Positivist theories of socialization held much sway, James and Prout argue, until they came under substantial critique in the mid- to late-1970s. However, for more recent approaches to socialization, see: Grusec and Hastings (2015); Hoghugh and Long (2004); Kuczynski (2003).

receptacle of adult knowledge, and, at worst, an improper object of study or an unimportant being. Stating this notion explicitly, Oscar Richie and Marvin Kollar outline their sociological approach to children:

The central concept in the sociological approach to childhood is the process of *socialization*. A synonym for this process may well be *acculturation* because this term implies that children acquire the culture of the human groupings in which they find themselves. Children are not to be viewed as individuals fully equipped to participate in a complex adult world, but as beings who have the potential for being slowly brought into contact with human ways. (1964: 11, emphasis in original)

Decrying this socialization framework as dehumanizing, Jenks notes that it assumes adults to be “mature, rational and competent (all as natural dispositions)” while children are defined, in juxtaposition, as “less than fully human, unfinished or incomplete” (1996: 19). Because of this problematic framing of childhood, this version of socialization did not go unchallenged for long. Martin Richards (1974), and Richards and Paul Light (1986), among other early defectors from this framework, critiqued the socialization model and its psychological accounts of children’s development, and Robert MacKay (1973) and Norman Denzin (1977) established alternatives to the socialization model (intersubjectivity and symbolic interactionism, respectively). These critiques brought into question the idea that, as Richards puts it, “the child is mere putty to be worked on by external forces” (1974: 4).

This framing of the child as an open receptacle for adult knowledge finds its lineage in the writing of John Locke (1692), the Enlightenment philosopher who famously theorized the child as a *tabula rasa* upon which an “incremental build-up of knowledge, skills and attitudes” (J. Mills and R. Mills, 2000: 11) could be acquired through education and experience.<sup>7</sup> Locke argued that because people are innately prone

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<sup>7</sup> While the concept of *tabula rasa* is often associated with Locke, it has been central to philosophy since Aristotle. However, as G. A. Russell argues, Locke’s notion of the *tabula rasa* was influenced by a 1671 translation of *Hayy ibn Yaqzān* (1158), an Arabic text by Ibn Tufayl which “depicted the development of the mind of a child from a *tabula rasa* to that of an adult, in complete isolation from society. [...] One could call this work, with perfect justification, a case study for the main thesis of Locke’s *Essay*” (1994: 224).

to molding through education, they should be understood as available for inscription from infancy. While Locke's theory is credited with inspiring and shaping child-centered education (Archard 1993), it is also problematized within childhood studies as positing that children are imperfect social becomings that, despite their innate reasoning skills, are not yet "rational, virtuous, contracting members of society, and exercisers of self-control" (James, Jenks, and Prout 1998: 16). As James, Jenks, and Prout put it, while Locke's revolutionary acknowledgement that children had "sets of interests and needs that are special and should be recognized as such" (1998: 16), Locke also asserted that their needs had to be reasoned with, tempered by adults who "have knowledge and experience and are in a position to exercise responsible control" (1998: 16).

The lines of thought that animated Locke's understanding of children, and the socialization framework in sociology, found another home in the field of developmental psychology, most notably in the work of Jean Piaget.<sup>8</sup> Piaget's work, which James, Jenks and Prout locate within the "dustbin of history" (1998: 9), is described by the author himself as "the study of the development of mental functions, in as much as this development can provide an explanation, or at least a complete description, of their mechanisms in the finished state" (Piaget 1972: 207). While working in Paris on the development of standardized intelligence tests, Piaget, Martin Woodhead (2009) notes, became disinterested in "measuring children's relative competence and much more interested in trying to understand the mistakes they made, in terms of trying to understand their mental processes" (2009: 28). Piaget thus outlined four distinct stages in the psychological development of the child: sensorimotor, preoperational, concrete operational, and formal operational (Piaget 1972). Within these, he outlined the ways in which children's intelligence emerges (Berk 1994: 20-21). In so doing, Piaget created his developmental model of childhood intelligence, a model that is widely acknowledged as being the most influential within the field. As Laura Berk describes it, "Piaget's cognitive-developmental perspective has stimulated more research on children than any other single theory. It also convinced many child development specialists that

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<sup>8</sup> Jean Piaget is widely considered the most influential scholar in developmental psychology, and his research greatly influenced the development of child-centered pedagogies, particularly in early education. A few of his key contributions include: *The Language and Thought of the Child* (1923), *The Child's Conception of the World* (1926), *The Construction of Reality in the Child* (1954), and *The Moral Judgment of the Child* (1932).



children are active learners whose minds are inhabited by rich structures of knowledge” (1994: 21).

Despite this, Piaget’s work is not warmly embraced within childhood studies. Described by James and Prout as being “essentially an evolutionary model” (1990: 10-14), Piaget’s work sets up the adult as the acme of the child’s biologically necessitated becoming. The biological aspect of this developmental model is key to Piaget, and equally to the critiques of Piaget, in that it presents the child’s growth as a natural, and thus a universal, process.<sup>9</sup> Calling out Piaget, and developmental psychology generally, James, Jenks, and Prout argue: “Developmental psychology capitalizes, perhaps not artfully but certainly effectively, on two everyday assumptions: first, that children are natural rather than social phenomena; and secondly, that part of this naturalness extends to the inevitable process of their maturation” (1998: 17). Critiques of Piaget’s work argue that his developmental teleology is more of a normative one than a “natural” one (Jenks 1982; James, Jenks, and Prout 1998). And, although Woodhead (2009) argues that Piaget was giving credence to the ways that children think and make sense of their world as being different from adults, and that this difference should be respected and understood on children’s terms, James, Jenks, and Prout argue that his theories posit children as innately exhibiting a “lack of competence” (1998: 18).<sup>10</sup> They further argue that Piaget’s theories provide “grounds to establish differences between adults and children” that “justify the supremacy of adulthood and further [ensure] that childhood must, of necessity, be viewed as an inadequate precursor to the real state of human being, namely being ‘grown up’” (1998: 18).<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Piaget’s “universal” model of cognitive development assumed that boys had more superior structural and critical thinking skills than girls of the same age. Observing children’s play, he argued: “The most superficial observation is sufficient to show that in the main the legal sense is far less developed in little girls than in boys” (Piaget 1932: 77). For a critique of Piaget’s androcentric model of knowledge, see: Gilligan (1982).

<sup>10</sup> As Debra Van Ausdale and Joe Feagin (2001) argue, Piaget’s model’s timeline of the ages children come into an awareness of the world around them positions them as coming into an awareness of race and racism much later than they actually do. Van Ausdale and Feagin’s research shows that children have an awareness of race, and use racial (and racist) language and frameworks by the age of three, well before the child within Piaget’s model could understand such concepts.

<sup>11</sup> Although Piaget’s work was heavily located within his own participant observation, he allowed for the possibility of comparative data to challenge his developmental stages. Citing studies across the globe, Piaget argues that the discrepancies within their results are correlated to the different developmental experiences of children in towns versus the

The notion that children went through distinct stages of development until they became fully human adults was not held just in developmental psychology or sociology. Anthropological research similarly discounted the child's world and saw it as a stage of being that had no culture, and thus required little study. Charlotte Hardman, an anthropologist who coined the term "muted groups" and argued that children deserved study in their own right, additionally critiques these anthropological approaches to children. Hardman outlines the dehumanizing approach normative anthropological researchers took to thinking about children:

Those anthropological fields concerned with children [...] view them to a greater or lesser extent, as passive objects, as helpless spectators in a pressing environment which affects and produces their every behavior. They see the child as [...] having little autonomy, contributing nothing to social values or behavior except the latent outpourings of earlier acquired experiences. (1973: 87)

While Hardman thus rightly critiques anthropology for its dismissal of children's cultures, the problem with the then standard approach to theorizing childhood within anthropology was not merely a lack of consideration. Bolstered by psychological frameworks, and theories of socialization, anthropological approaches to children not only understood children's culture to be non-existent, they also mapped the child's stages of development into adulthood onto developmental theories of evolution, culture, and empire.<sup>12</sup> This can be seen most clearly in the recapitulation theory, which understands the development of the individual to be the embodiment of the development of the race.<sup>13</sup> This theory brought anthropological and sociological developmental

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country (1972: 212). Piaget is thus open to the possibility of critique, albeit only when it is located within some truth about the country and the town as coherent spaces which contribute globally-common yet locally-informed "factors other than those of maturation" (1972: 212).

<sup>12</sup> For critical analyses of the colonial life of anthropology, see: Argyrou (2002); Asad (1973); Fabian (1983); D. Lewis (1973); Said (1978).

<sup>13</sup> Recapitulation theory was formalized by Étienne Serres and Johann Friedrich Meckel, through the Meckel-Serres Law. This logic assumed the development of embryos in "higher order organisms" underwent a process of development in which they passed through the evolutionary stages of species development (Meckel 1811). Beyond embryology, it was a theory of individual and cultural development which understood children and "primitive" cultures to be less evolved.

theories together to give constitutive meaning to childhood and colonialism. William Kay (1968), writing in the logics of this theory, outlines four stages of societal intellectual evolution, locating what he calls “modern primitives” in the “pre-logical” stage. He argues both that “it becomes apparent that this anthropological argument is Piaget’s psychological argument writ large upon the pages of history” (1968: 73), and that the “infant school child” is “really a modern version of primitive man” (1968: 75). Through this framework, the theory of the child’s developmental growth and the adult’s superiority become co-produced with the justificatory logics of colonialism and racism. Hardman, who productively critiques this co-production, yet who continues the language of “primitives” to describe non-Western people, states:

Native thought is seen as childish ignorance when the actions or ideas concerned are misinterpreted by the anthropologist. They seem irrational, because not explained by any cultural criteria, and therefore similar to child behavior, which I might add is likewise often misinterpreted. (1973: 90)

Hardman’s critique of the “misinterpretation” of children’s behavior shed light on the problems of dismissing the child, and led to a stronger focus within anthropological—and sociological—research on the ways in which children’s experiences contributed to, and formed, their cultures and relationships. At the same time, however, the connections between childhood and colonial subjects is one that continues to operate within contemporary state building projects, colonial encounters, and theories of international development to this day.<sup>14</sup>

All of these frameworks of development, however, are themselves actually a shift from a previous understanding of the child wherein children were not “unfinished”, they were “evil” or untrustworthy. The concept of the evil child, or what Jenks terms the “Dionysian” child (1996: 62), “assumes that evil, corruption and badness are primary elements in the constitution of ‘the child’” (A. James, Jenks, and Prout 1998: 10). This

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<sup>14</sup> Kalpana Wilson (2011) provides an example of this in her analysis of the Nike Foundation “girl effect” campaign. Wilson argues that this campaign operates through visual and discursive framings of race and gender which have a long history within colonial and Western logics about “third world” women and girls. Wilson argues that the girl subject—who is understood as needing “our” help to fulfill her potential, not as being an independent agent of change herself—is again made to represent the infantilized “third world” in this campaign. See also: Shain (2013).

understanding of the child saw children's process of becoming-adult as rife with potential danger. The evil child, always about to "fall into bad company, establish bad habits or develop idle hands" (Jenks 1996: 63) had to be molded into a proper adult through strict parenting, education, religion, and control (A. James, Jenks, and Prout 1998: 10-13; Jenks 1996; J. Mills and R. Mills 2000: 10-12.). This understanding of children is located within childhood studies as emanating in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries from Calvinist doctrine, the work of Thomas Hobbes, and the teachings of Puritanism. It emphasized children's "weakness in the form of susceptibility to corruption and being 'easily led'" as well as their embodiment of original sin (Jenks 1996: 63). In James, Jenks, and Prout's narration of childhood studies' development as a field, this model for understanding children has waned, being cast as "an outmoded and hypocritical morality" (1998: 12) that, while still remaining a "powerful theme in contemporary literature and cinema [...] and [in] more everyday contemporary public understandings of the child's capacity to murder or bully" (1998: 10-11), is no longer held as a sociological framing for understanding children. However, as Thorne notes, the contours of the evil child are not actually far gone; rather, they emerge in contexts of social crises, and moral panic: "Children, especially from working-class households, were seen as potential threats to social order. [...] In the changing construction of social problems, images of children as threats and as victims have continued to appear and reappear" (1987: 90). And indeed, a number of other, more contemporary social and moral crises (which are also mired in racial, gendered, and sexual terms), such as the Columbine school shootings, have similarly thrown back into public discourse the image of children as threats.<sup>15</sup> Thorne's argument, in other words, asks us to consider the social and political circumstances that cause the shifting contours of childhood to fluctuate, stick to particular bodies, and to re-emerge.

This caution, I argue, should also be applied to the dismissal of the other framings of the child outlined above. While perhaps not central to the methodologies within the current field of childhood studies, these models and understandings of

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<sup>15</sup> The shooting at Columbine High School in 1999 was an attack by two students, Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold, who killed twelve students, one teacher, and themselves, and injured many others. It was the worst school shooting until the massacre at Sandy Hook Elementary School in 2012. While many rationales were given for the Columbine attack (depression, bullying, the influence of violent video games), Harris and Klebold reanimated fears around children's innate evil nature, particularly because they were white. For more on the racial confines of innocence in childhood, see Chapter Four.

childhood cannot so easily be relegated to another time or another place. And yet, in their dismissal of the frameworks of understanding the child that I have outlined above, James, Jenks and Prout write:

This spacious category [of the presociological child] contains the dustbin of history. It is the realm of common sense, classical philosophy, the highly influential discipline of developmental psychology and the equally important and pervasive field of psychoanalysis. [...] These understandings of children compromise, in different, sometimes contradictory ways, a complex array of motifs through which childhood has been and is still imagined [...] they are models which continue to inform everyday actions and practices alongside more sophisticated sociological theorizing about childhood. (1998: 9-10, 21)

Counter to their notion that these models are somehow “unsophisticated”, or beyond the realm of the sociological study of childhood, I have argued throughout this section that precisely because they rely on and facilitate complex and indeed sophisticated (if not deeply problematic) logics of coloniality, racism, sexism, evolution, and gender *which persist*, they are vital to unpack and hold onto as models that inform how childhood is lived and understood. As I argue in the following section, this caution must also be carried over from the models that are deemed “disrespectful” of the child, to the ones that value the child.

### *Valuing the Child: Rousseau’s Legacy*

In contradistinction to the evil child, the framing of the child that has held immense and lasting sway for childhood studies comes from Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s notion of the child’s innate innocence. Rousseau’s shift in thought on the ontology of the child—from the evil child, and from Locke’s *tabula rasa*—is widely narrated as being particularly productive for childhood studies, in that it “urged that children be treated *as children*” (K. Smith 2011: 19, emphasis in original) rather than as incomplete adults. Indeed, as Priscilla Robertson argues, Rousseau called for a focused attention on the specific needs of children: “For the first time in history, he made a large group of people believe that childhood was worth the attention of intelligent adults, encouraging an interest in the process of growing up rather than just the product” (1976: 407). According to James,

Jenks, and Prout, it was this emerging interest in the personification of children as individuals who have a say in their own varying processes of growing up that “paved the way” for the establishment of childhood studies (1998: 13). Whereas the evil child and emergent adult had to be tempered by adult society, Rousseau’s innocent child demanded a separation from adults as well as a recognition of a deserving subjective space. It was a being on its own rather than a becoming. This shift in focus was articulated in Rousseau’s writing by a declaration that “the man be considered in the man, and the child in the child” (1762: 80).

Because of Rousseau’s pivotal role in the contemporary field of childhood studies, it is vital that his writing be carefully unpacked for the contours of childhood that it valorizes. Rather than dismiss these contours as specific to Rousseau’s geopolitical and historical context, I interrogate them here because these contours have extended beyond Rousseau’s time (as have their the conditions of emergence), and because the standard practice of silencing (or bracketing) them in an account of Rousseau’s importance to the field allows for them to retain their hold on childhood. My analysis of Rousseau plays another role as well. In the previous chapter, I introduced my theoretical frame of childhood as a technology of power. This framing, I argued, addresses the ways in which a range of techniques, discourses, and knowledges about childhood were developed as a means of, at least initially, investing in, expanding, and preserving the life of the bourgeoisie, and defining them as a particular population. Arguing here that Rousseau’s approach to childhood is one of those discourses that increased the investment in and valuation of childhood within particular and privileged populations, I additionally interrogate it to think through the contours of Rousseau’s innocent child as it dictated the bodies in whom childhood continues to be (contestably) contained.

In *Emile* (1762), Rousseau’s canonical work within childhood studies, Rousseau creates and educates a hypothetical pupil as a heuristic to outline his thoughts on child rearing and pedagogy.<sup>16</sup> As Rousseau spends time elaborating on his selection of Emile—his ideal pupil—he debates which geographic area Emile should come from:

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<sup>16</sup> The first four books of *Emile* consist of Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s choosing and teaching of Emile, while the fifth deals with Sophie, Emile’s wife-to be. I do not spend time working through the blatant sexism in this book, but for a refutation of Rousseau’s treatment of Sophie, see: Wollstonecraft (1792).

It appears [...] that the organization of the brain is less perfect in the two [geographic] extremes. Neither the Negroes nor the Laplanders have the sense of the Europeans. If, then, I want my pupil to be able to be an inhabitant of the earth, I will get him in a temperate zone—in France, for example—rather than elsewhere. (1762: 52)

As is already clear, Rousseau's construction of the innocent child from nature is fundamentally predicated on his selection of a specific child rather than just any child. In his selection of a suitable pupil, Rousseau relies on racist and nationalist frameworks to cast out vast populations from even accessing the opportunity to figure the child. However, as within most colonial engagements, Rousseau's perception of the non-European's relationship to the child is deeply ambivalent. On one hand, as above, he is wary of the cognitive capabilities of those he deems "savages", and yet, in also framing these very same people (he does not specify which people) as being less civilized and thus less contaminated by the corruption inherent to cities and society, he equates the "savage" and the child as similarly close to idyllic nature (1762: 118). However, through Rousseau's pedagogy, only children—white male European children—can flourish in and from their nature, eventually becoming appropriate and moral adults. This progression is denied to the "savage", who, despite age, is constantly understood to be "attached to no place, without prescribed task, obeying no one, with no other law than his will" (1762: 118). It is through this ambivalent outlook towards the "savage"—an outlook reliant on a framework primitivism that justified centuries of colonialism and was carried on within the logics of recapitulation—that the possibilities of Rousseau's child pupil are initially formed.<sup>17</sup>

Rousseau's language is not limited to the savage, nor to his colonial passions, and it continues along similar lines to leave behind children who are "crippled", "sickly and ill-constituted", and "invalid" (1762: 53), as well as those who are reared by "wicked" nurses, or worse, nursed by mothers who, despite knowing "the duty of women", display "the contempt they have for it" and thus spoil their milk (1762: 45). Indeed, as Rousseau laments, it is the failing of European women to properly raise their

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<sup>17</sup> Jacqueline Rose makes this connection between the idea of the innocent child and Rousseau's colonial logics in *Emile* explicit, arguing that children's fiction has "a set of long-established links" with colonialism (1984: 50).

children, let alone desire to have them in the first place, that was depopulating Europe and producing a future in which “it will be peopled with ferocious beasts” (1762: 44-45). It is this very perception of moral and national decline that inspires Rousseau to take on a hypothetical male pupil of his own. And yet, while Rousseau argues that Europe’s morals will be “reformed” as soon as mothers once again “deign to nurse their children” (1762: 46), he does not account for any of the particularities of how his own pupil shall be nursed, birthed, or cared for by the boy’s mother, nor by any women at all. In all of these ways, Rousseau’s *Emile* is not just an abstract figure of a child whose eminence from nature inspires an innocent critique of child rearing and pedagogy, and a shift away from the previous understandings of children’s ontology; rather, he, and the critiques he engenders through *Emile*, are specific products that are invested in, and produced through the violences of racism, sexism, and colonialism that are consistently effaced and repeated in childhood studies’ passive, and at times celebratory, uptake of his legacy.

An exploration of Rousseau’s racism and sexism is rare to come across in the repeated stories of Rousseau’s centrality to childhood studies’ field formation.<sup>18</sup> The scholars who do take on Rousseau’s legacies within childhood studies present us with complicated and patchy responses to the centrality of his work.<sup>19</sup> Roger Cox (1996), for example, acknowledges the sexism inherent in Rousseau’s writing, particularly in book five of *Emile*, but he locates this sexism only in Rousseau’s treatment of Sophie (Emile’s wife), rather than as it dictates childhood generally. He also argues that “contemporary readers” can “dismiss Rousseau’s discussion of modesty as a patriarchal anachronism” (1996: 73). Valerie Walkerdine (2009) is a notable exception to the

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<sup>18</sup> Outside of childhood studies, particularly in feminist, anti-racist, and postcolonial critiques of the autonomous individual subject of modernity, Rousseau’s work is critiqued. See, among others: Wollstonecraft (1792); Pateman (1988); Okin (1979).

<sup>19</sup> For works that cite Rousseau, and particularly *Emile*, as integral to the field of childhood studies but do not mention or thoroughly interrogate the implications of how Rousseau’s vision of the child—and Emile himself—are produced through race, gender, or nation, see: Archard (1993: 22); Clarke (1991: 278-282); A. Colón and P. Colón (2001: 403-404); Cunningham (1995: 65-68); Gittins (1998: 150-152); Hendrick (1997: 36); Hogan (2005: 30); James, Jenks and Prout (1998: 13-17); Jenks (1996: 65; 1982: 45); Lee (2001: 111-112); Valentine (2010: 23); Woodhead and Montgomery (2003: 66).



silencing of Rousseau's legacies.<sup>20</sup> Along with framing the productivity of Rousseau's child through sexism, she additionally critiques Rousseau's language of a "civilizing project" that relies on a vision of "human nature" and development that understood "lower classes, colonial peoples, savages, women [...] and children" as "lower down the evolutionary scale" (2009: 115). Walkerdine argues that developmental psychology in particular needs to be attentive to "the historical specificity of the introduction of the idea of development" (2009: 116), which she situates in relationship to Darwinism. Interestingly, Stuart Aitken acknowledges the "sexist and classist assumptions" within Rousseau's version of the child, but then asks: "If these sexist and classist assumptions are bracketed (but not dismissed), what can be made of Rousseau's enlightened concern about the state of childhood and its relations to nature?" (2001: 31).

Here, in the act of bracketing Rousseau's sexism and classism, these assumptions are seen as important, but not integral to, the production of "contemporary concern about children as individuals" inspired by Rousseau (Aitken 2001: 32). And yet, bracketing off, as Clare Hemmings (2013) argues, is about selectively marking the negative aspects of someone's work as belonging to their writing, their time, and their circumstances, even as you carry forth, and identify with, the more positive or pleasurable aspects. When this takes place within the formation of critical subjects, or fields of knowledge production, the marking off is also a means of producing the sign of criticality without being held accountable for the disavowal. In bracketing off the sexist, racist, colonial, and classist assumptions within Rousseau, childhood studies gets to keep a historical legacy that fits within the positive acknowledgement of children's agency, yet does not have to attend to how the legacies of colonialism, sexism, and heteropatriarchy inform this very framework.

This bracketing functions, I argue, in a similar fashion to what Jacqueline Rose diagnoses within children's literature: it allows for the reiteration of the assumption that understandings of childhood have moved away from this geopolitical context, despite the constant return to this moment (and despite this moment's persistence), and it refuses to admit that understandings of children have, Rose writes, "never completely

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<sup>20</sup> Valerie Walkerdine writes: "Using a model of nature derived from evolutionary biology, a model of childhood and development as a natural stagewise, quasi-evolutionary progression began to have sway. [...] 'the child' as a subject in the emerging discourses was modeled on an active, rationally enquiring boy" (1997: 80). See also: Walkerdine (1984, 1989).

severed [their] links with a philosophy which sets up the child as a pure point of origin in relation to language, sexuality and the state” (1984: 8). Additionally, and more centrally for my own framework, in bracketing off Rousseau’s violent logics as relegated to the past, childhood itself as a structure of investment in particular and privileged populations drops out of the focus. In so doing, Rousseau’s idea of the innocence of children becomes merely one of many historically located ways of understanding children, rather than as an early indication of the ways in which childhood itself makes different populations intelligible, viable, or disposable.

*“Childhood did not exist”: Philippe Ariès*

Where Rousseau’s text gave childhood studies a subject deserving of study in its own right, Philippe Ariès’ seminal text argued that the frame through which that subject was understood needed to be carefully and historically located. Importantly, however, Ariès, who is credited as initiating the historical inquiry into the social construction of childhood (R. Davis 2011: 379; Gittins 2009: 38; Hawkes and Egan 2010: 13; K. Smith 2011: 27), is important for childhood studies not just because he initiated a line of thought about childhood as a social construction, but also, as I mentioned briefly in the previous chapter, because his historical inquiry centered the dynamics of gender and class. In *Centuries of Childhood* (1962), Ariès argued that the current protected and “natural” space of childhood is a modern idea that is socially and historically constructed, being produced and introduced through shifts in and reifications of class and gender in early Europe. By producing a genealogy of the concept of childhood, Ariès argues that the child, in its “modern” form, is only a recent construction and that it “did not exist” in medieval times. For Ariès, it was not that there were no children in medieval Europe, but rather that children did not occupy a separate state of being from adults:

In medieval society the idea of childhood did not exist; this is not to suggest that children were neglected, forsaken or despised. The idea of childhood is not to be confused with affection for children: it corresponds to an awareness of the particular nature of childhood, that particular nature which distinguishes the child from the adult, even the young adult. In medieval society, this awareness was lacking. (1962: 125)

Ariès came to this conclusion by paying attention to the clothing of children in portraits in early modern Europe, noting that “nothing in medieval dress distinguished the child from the adult” (1962: 48). He traces a shift between the thirteenth and seventeenth centuries, arguing that by the end of the sixteenth century, “the adoption of a special childhood costume [...] marked a very important date in the formation of the idea of childhood” (1962: 55). For Ariès, the history of children’s clothing marked not just a shift in fashion, but also a shift in thought: the development of an understanding that initially lumped children and adults together and eventually arrived at the “modern” knowledge that children occupy a separate ontological space. “What Ariès is illuminating”, Jenks notes, “is that the manner of their recognition by adults, their representations, and thus the forms of their relationships with adults, has altered through the passage of time” (1996: 55). This understanding inspired a wealth of scholarship on the historical and social fluctuations of the concept of childhood.<sup>21</sup>

Ariès work, however, is not without critique, most of it debating or outright refuting his use of sources and his methodology, as well as the inferences he makes from his sources, and even the possibilities of paintings (or images and representations more generally) as providing an accurate historical source (Beales 1975; Hanawalt 1977; Laslett and Wall 1972; L. Pollock 1983; Stannard 1974; A. Wilson 1980). Linda Pollock, in her book which rejects much of Ariès’ work, for example, declares that because of Ariès, “[t]he history of childhood is an area [...] full of errors, distortion and misinterpretation” (1983: viii). David Archard, who is skeptical of Ariès’ methodology, and whose argument is typical of those insisting that Ariès simply took the “modern” understanding of childhood and looked for it in other places across time, argues that “the evidence fails to show that previous societies lacked a concept of childhood. At most it shows that they lacked our concept” (1993: 20). David Stannard calls this method “historical presentism” and argues: “to argue in isolation of other data that the *absence* of a distinctive mode of dress for children is a mark of their being viewed as miniature adults is historical presentism at its very best” (1974: 457, emphasis in original). The refutations of Ariès’ findings vary from those, like Archard’s and

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<sup>21</sup> For histories of childhoods outside of Europe, see, among others: for North America: Bremmer (1971); Kett (1977); W. King (1995); for Latin America: Hecht (2002); del Priore (1999); for East Africa: L. Fox (1967); for West Africa: White (1999); and for China: Hsiung (2005); Saari (1990). For a global text, see: Wells (2009).

Stannard's, which acknowledge that childhood is privy to historical shifts but take issue with Ariès' archival sources, methods, and findings, to those, like Pollock's, which understand childhood as universal across time and space. Outlining her universalist approach, Pollock writes: "parents have always valued their children: we should not seize too eagerly upon theories of fundamental change in parental attitudes over time [...] There are some basic features of human experience which are not subject to change" (1983: 17). While these two critiques of Ariès differ in their approach to childhood, they both tend to pass over the important argument that Ariès made in locating the development of childhood within emerging differentiations between boys and girls, and the family and the outside world.

Ariès' historical account of the discovery of childhood illuminates how the shift in the understanding of "children" as a social category was predicated on and productive of shifts in and reifications of class and gender. As Diana Gittins argues, to say "children" in reference to the shift that Ariès traces in clothing within paintings "is deceptive and misleading, because it was in fact *boys* who were first singled out as a distinct and different social category" (2009: 44, emphasis in original). Gittins continues:

They were not just *boys*, however, but also *middle-class* boys. The construction of childhood historically was therefore not just about increased differentiation between age groups, but was also clearly articulated by gender and by class. The historical development of childhood in Western Europe was articulated through boyhood. (2009: 45, emphasis in original)

Jenks reiterates this claim by arguing that "only particular privileged groups or classes within society could afford the luxury of childhood with its demands on material provision, time and emotion and its attendant paraphernalia of toys and special clothing" (1982: 57). Ariès himself declares repeatedly that he was identifying the discovery of childhood through its gendered and classed appearance. He mentions this, for example, in relation to boy's dress:

It is interesting to note that the attempt to distinguish children was generally confined to the boys: the little girls were distinguished only by the false sleeves,

abandoned in the eighteenth century, as if childhood separated girls from adult life less than it did boys. (1962: 56)

Ariès thus explicitly acknowledges that “boys were the first specialized children” (1962: 56).<sup>22</sup>

Importantly, Ariès does not simply note this gendered and classed emergence of the child, he diagnoses it as indicative of, and co-produced with, a shift in gendered and classed divisions and awareness more generally. He does so specifically in tracing two shifts in boys’ dress. The first was the introduction of a specialized attire which distinguished boys above the age of four or five from men and from younger boys and girls of all ages (who were not distinguished in terms of dress from women). The second was the emergence of the trend for boys in middle-class families to adopt the fashions of working-class attire. Ariès argues that these two shifts can be theorized in relation to the “society’s consciousness of its behavior in relation to age and sex” (1962: 56), as well as its “spontaneous expression of a collective characteristic, something like an awakening of class-consciousness” (1962: 57). I emphasize Ariès attention to the emergence of childhood vis-à-vis gender and class “awakenings” both because this co-production is vital to my own framing of childhood, and also because, as Gittins argues, this co-production is often effaced.<sup>23</sup> Writing about the effectiveness of the work of childhood in forging particular gendered relations, and in reifying the patriarchal family, Gittins argues that:

the way in which these changes [in middle-class home life] were constructed through discourse suggested that they were effectively universal: they were presented and represented not as “the middle-class family”, but as “*the* family”, not as “middle-class boyhood” but as “*childhood*”. (2009: 45, emphasis in original)

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<sup>22</sup> For more on the gendered and classed production of childhood within Philippe Ariès, see: Calvert (1982); Gittins (1998); N. Miller and Yavneh (2011); K. Smith (2011); Sofaer Derevenski (2000).

<sup>23</sup> Here, however, I would argue that these expressions of a gendered order and a class consciousness cannot be understood as merely “spontaneous”, indeed, I argue that they are part and parcel of the intensification of these structures of power.

This effacement, I argue, also takes place in subtle ways in the presentation and representation of Ariès' text itself. In various recognitions of Ariès' contributions to the field of childhood studies, his frame of the gendered and classed emergence of middle-class boyhood tends to get subsumed under the moniker of, for example: "the archaeology childhood" (James, Jenks, and Prout 1998: 4). Therefore, while Ariès' text also often leaves much to be desired in terms of offering an in-depth classed, gendered, and especially racial analysis of the development of childhood, eliding Ariès' central argument that childhood developed in and through classed and gendered differentiations suggests that childhood's contours can somehow be located as a universal historical construction.

### *Feminist Interventions: The Woman Question and the Child Question*

In keeping with my interrogation of what narratives and histories are centered or bracketed off in the story of childhood studies' development as a field, I now move from the erasure of the legacies of racist, sexist, and colonial subject production in Rousseau and the co-production of gender, class, and childhood in narratives of Ariès' importance to the field, to the ambivalent relationship that feminism has to both childhood studies, and to the child as an object of study. Despite this ambivalent relationship, which I shall explore further below, childhood studies as it is currently known, is, I shall argue, deeply indebted to feminist interventions. I have already hinted at the prevalence of some of these feminist interventions in the earlier sections of this chapter through my citations of Hardman, Rose, and Thorne. Here, however, I want to return to their work in order to more specifically situate it within wider feminist interventions and within the field. I do so because feminism is often only gestured towards in childhood studies' narratives (often via the citing of either Thorne's or Hardman's work).<sup>24</sup> I do so as well because a closer attention to the feminist texts that

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<sup>24</sup> Two generous, yet paradigmatic examples of this narrated separation of childhood studies and feminism can be found in James and Prout (1990). In their introduction, James and Prout cite Charlotte Hardman as a precursor to the new paradigm, writing: "One of the forerunners of this 'emergent paradigm', Charlotte Hardman, in 1973 compared her work on the anthropology of children to the study of women [...] What the emergent paradigm attempts is to give a voice to children [...] as Hardman suggested" (1990: 6-7). Here, Hardman is cited, as is her conceptualization of the shared object status of women and children in research and society; however, her feminist politics are subsumed under the notion of the "study of women". In Anne Solberg's

animated childhood studies illuminates complex engagements within these originating texts which might be productively brought back into childhood studies.

Hardman, whose formative critiques of anthropological approaches to children I introduced earlier, reveals that her questioning of the child's denigrated position in research began with her thinking about the similar position women occupied. Hardman writes:

Edwin Ardener's article "Belief and the Problem of Women" (1972) encouraged me to think that children *were* valid as a group to be studied. Both women and children might perhaps be called "muted groups" i.e. unperceived or elusive groups (in terms of anyone studying a society). [...] I suggest that children have much to offer. Male models of society alone are not sufficient to represent a society, or to reveal its meaning; we may achieve new insights if other dimensions of society are considered. (1973: 85-98)

For Hardman, then, studying children as legitimate subjects of anthropological research followed theoretically and politically from the contention that under-represented people—and women in particular—should be centered and validated.<sup>25</sup> For Thorne, who also questions children's de-legitimation as subjects of knowledge, producing child-centered scholarship is both about understanding childhood from children themselves, and about critiquing the objectivity of adult perspectives and interests. Calling on feminist critiques of objectivity, Thorne writes:

Feminists entered this process of critique by placing women at the center, as subjects of inquiry and as active agents in the gathering of knowledge. [...] The process of critique—of attending to diversity among women, and among men, and of theorizing intersecting patterns of domination and their effects on

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chapter in the same volume, feminism is mentioned, and Barrie Thorne is cited, yet Thorne is not considered a feminist, and feminism itself is blamed for a wider disregard of the child (Solberg 1990: 142). These two examples, while themselves ambivalent about feminism, are more generous than many other accounts which do not even mention feminism as central to childhood studies.

<sup>25</sup> Leena Alanen (1988) makes a similar case for the development of the sociology of childhood.

knowledge—has become a complex project. I want to add to that complexity by pursuing a relatively simple observation: Both feminist and traditional knowledge remain deeply and unreflectively centered around the experiences of adults. (1987: 86)

Thorne and Hardman, then, both consider children's lives as important both for decentering myopic androcentric models of society, and for bringing into question the conventional contours of knowledge production.

Along with again pushing for childhood studies to pay more attention to gender as a structure of power, this attention to thinking critically about knowledge production is one of the main reasons I center feminist approaches to childhood as foundational to the development of the field, particularly when so much of the field's current impetus is to develop and expand empirical research and to produce new paradigms of knowledge. I do so as well because returning to the specific nuances of this careful attention to the contours of thought is useful for a field that now—as I shall elaborate further in the following section—prioritizes children's agency. Thorne's critique in particular articulated quite a complex stance on what it might mean to understand children as autonomous, agentic beings. While Thorne argues that it is essential to grant women and children autonomy, she notes that normative forms of autonomy are highly androcentric (1987: 104). As such, Thorne builds on "women's and children's experiences of relatedness" as well as the interventions of feminist theorists—Nancy Chodorow (1978), Jane Flax (1983), Sandra Harding (1986), and Nancy Hartsock (1983), in particular—to argue that the "'masculinist' ideal of self defined through separation" must be rejected (Thorne 1987: 105). Thorne argues instead that "selves defined through relationships with others, retaining full awareness of social hierarchies" must be developed for re-visioning children and "overturn[ing] traditional knowledge" (1987: 105). Thorne's feminist analysis provides important caution in the move away from dismissive theories on childhood as emergent (discussed above) to those that prioritize children's agency (discussed below), as the terms of how agency is conceived are as important as those through which it is distributed to differently aged or gendered bodies.

Another feminist critique of the idea of agency is articulated by Erica Burman and Jackie Stacey in their co-edited special issue on the child in *Feminist Theory*



(2010a). In their introduction to the special issue, they call into question the desire to center the “authentic” voice of children:

While feminists have long critiqued the colonial and classed features of academic claims of “giving a voice” to marginal subjects [...] childhood researchers have until recently been dogged by the prevailing cultural ethic of children’s authentic and iconic status, only recently addressing these problems and often largely within the paradigm of existing models of colonization.

(Burman and Stacey 2010b: 230)

For Burman and Stacey, the notion of the child as a “competent social actor” who inhabits an authentic voice thus needs to be understood as representational of a frame of agency that is mired in the “apotheosis of Western masculine individualism” (2010b: 230). They thus call instead for a study of childhood that centers “the complexities and mutual dependencies of child–adult, and especially child–women, relations” (2010b: 230).

In highlighting the relational aspect of childhood, feminist theorizations have also encouraged research on childhood to attend to structural frameworks and power dynamics. Leena Alanen (1994), for example, takes from the notion that society is gendered to make the case for the sociology of childhood’s interrogation of what she calls the “generationed” aspects of social phenomena which constitute the child and the adult. Alanen thus argues that attending to generational dynamics would focus sociology’s attention on the issues that “concern the *organizing, managing, regulating*, and occasional ‘*modernizing*’ of the *generational system*, from the standpoint of those belonging to the hegemonic generation and the hegemonic gender whose business is to do the ruling” (1994: 38, emphasis in original). In a more impassioned analysis of the ways in which gendered oppression and generational power dynamics might be thought together, Firestone (1971) articulates the interconnectedness of feminism and a rethinking of childhood.<sup>26</sup> She writes:

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<sup>26</sup> Valerie Polakow Suransky critiques Shulamith Firestone for finding her solution to the mutual oppression of women and children in a “cybernetic socialism” which eliminates pregnancy through technology and severs the child’s dependence on the female body (1982: 10). Suransky’s concern is that this model of feminism too quickly denies “human attachment, spontaneity, and love, in favor of a nightmarish rationalism

Women and children are always mentioned in the same breath [...] The special tie women have with children is recognized by everyone. I submit, however, that the nature of this bond is no more than shared oppression. And that moreover this oppression is intertwined and mutually reinforcing in such complex ways that we will be unable to speak of the liberation of women without also discussing the liberation of children. (1971: 81)

Throughout her writing on childhood, Firestone understands children to be agentic beings deserving of their liberation (yet stymied by male oppressors and patriarchy), and she presents a strong case for the elimination of what Alanen would call the generational conditions of emergence for the hegemonic age order. The constitution of the child as an integral feature of patriarchy, Firestone maintains, is sedimented in children's forced economic, physical, and familial dependence, as well as their educational and sexual repression. Within these spheres of repression, children and women share mutual forms of oppression that reinforce one another. These shared experiences, Firestone argues, include a refusal by men to take either's bodily integrity and capacities for consent seriously, patterns of behavior that belittle and disregard either's will, forms of institutional segregation across educational, economic, and domestic spheres, and a coupling of the livelihoods of women and children in such a way that restricts both of their capabilities. Locating Firestone's fervent feminist critique as a key inspiration for the development of childhood studies, then, would assist in orienting the field towards an analysis of the situated and marginalized position children occupy in social, economic, sexual, and gendered relations of power.<sup>27</sup>

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and unremitting social alienation from the very bonds that cement human relationships" (1982: 10). For other radical feminist approaches to the elimination of childhood from the 1970s, see: Greer (1971); Fuller (1979); Millet (1970); Rossi (1977).

<sup>27</sup> There is much still to be done with a feminist analysis of childhood and gendered inequality. According to a UNICEF report, children still occupy a financially precarious position, as 32 percent of children in the U.S. were living in poverty in 2012; an increase of two percent from 2008 (UNICEF 2014). According to the Institute for Women's Policy Research: "Among people in poverty, 15.8 percent are young women of ages 18 to 34, compared to 11.8 percent of men in that age range" (IWPR n.d.). Furthermore, Black girls, Kimberlé Crenshaw argues, additionally experience disproportionate rates of expulsion, suspension, and disciplinary action (Crenshaw 2015).

Firestone's critique of the mutual reinforcement of women's and children's oppressions points to a set of tensions between feminist and child-centered texts, a set of tensions whose ambivalences—and the ways in which these ambivalences are theorized and located—have important implications for the study of children. As Burman and Stacey argue in their introduction to the special issue of *Feminist Theory* on feminism and childhood, it is important to note the anxiety that making the connection between gender and the child (and particularly between women and children) has produced within feminism (2010b: 228). Indeed, the colloquial “womenandchildren,” as Burman puts it in an earlier article of hers, historically “*equates* women and children – to the extent of running them together or combining them such that [...] they are seen as a single entity” (Burman 2008: 180, emphasis in original). This equating of women and children, as Burman and Stacey argue, has produced a patchy genealogy of ambivalent attention to the child within feminism. They write:

Feminism's relationship to children and childhood has never been far off the political agenda but its theorization has been slow to follow [...] until recently there has been little explicit discussion of how the child and childhood have been, and more importantly, should be understood within feminist theory and politics. (2010b: 227)

This ambivalent take up of the child, they argue, is a product of the multiple structures that have worked to infantilize women, as well as the ways in which childhood is stretched out onto adult women's subjectivity by linking women's lives with children's (2010b: 228). However, this connection is not just one of metaphorical similitude. Women, particularly as defined through their naturalized connection to motherhood, have their lives shaped around the lives of children. “In some ideological constructions,” Thorne writes, “women are *likened* to children. In other constructions, women are *closely and unreflectively tied* with children; womanhood has been equated with motherhood in a mixing of identities that simply does not occur for men and fatherhood” (1987: 96, emphasis in original). These links between women and children have meant not only that feminists had to (and continue to) argue that “women are *not* ‘like children,’ and [as such] their subordination is not legitimate” (1987: 96, emphasis

in original), but also that taking up childhood as an object of analysis within feminist thought could risk the entrenchment of this connection.

And yet, this tension of the linking of women's lives with children's, requires further racial, classed, and historical locating. While Burman and Stacey rightly argue that there is a whirlwind of "theory and practice which equated women's interests with those of children" (2010b: 228), the genealogy that they trace that demonstrates this produces this connection as one of pairing. This genealogy, in other words, does not attend to the mother and child subjects that have been produced through multiple racial and biopolitical regulations of the family, some of which pair mother and child, while others cleave. As Hortense Spillers (1987) writes, "the moves of a dominant symbolic order, [which pledges] to maintain the supremacy of race [...] forces 'family' to modify itself when it does not mean family of the 'master,' or dominant enclave" (1987: 75). Here, Spillers turns to the writing of Frederick Douglass, whose "careful elaborations of the arrangements of captivity" narrate his forced separation from his mother in infancy:

For what this separation is done, I do not know, unless it be to hinder the development of the child's affection toward its mother, and to blunt and destroy the natural affection of the mother for the child. This is the inevitable result. (Douglass 1968, cited in Spillers 1987: 75)

As Spillers and Douglass make clear, the tension of the equating of women and children tells only part of the story, and provides only a particular understanding of the dynamics that mutually shape gender and generation. Centering the work of feminists of color who have been documenting the forced separation of children from their mothers as a means of racism and colonialism (Brant 1988; Collins 1994; A. Davis 1981; Dill 1986; M. Jacobs 2009; Roberts 1997; Sánchez-Eppler 2005) brings into question the notion that reinstating the pairing of women and children might reproduce the patriarchal entrenchment of women's subordination. Indeed, for those families who have been forcibly separated, the act of pairing might rather be an act of resistance. My highlighting of this tension that theorizing childhood through feminism—or, more accurately, through feminisms—begets, is thus an effort of drawing out the importance of theorizing childhood through the contested and multiple standpoints and relations that different children and childhoods inhabit and call forth. My desire to re-center feminist

critique within a narrative of childhood studies' development is not only a desire to make the feminist critiques of agency, autonomy, social structure, and a hegemonic gender order more fundamental to the field's ongoing work, it is also a desire to hold onto the tensions that arise out of theorizing from multiple and discordant positions.

### *The New Paradigm, and its Departures*

James and Prout, editors of *Constructing and Reconstructing Childhood* (1990), are credited with making explicit the goals and frameworks of what they call the “new paradigm” of childhood studies. This paradigm dramatically animated the field of childhood studies, exciting the publication of numerous texts, inspiring the development of multiple research centers and departments, and instilling the study of childhood as a legitimate field of knowledge. The new paradigm grew out of what James and Prout identified as a “growing unease” of “professionals involved with children [and] with the study of childhood” about “the way in which the social sciences have traditionally conceptualized and dealt with children and childhood” (1990: 2). They argue that the consensus around these concerns indicates that “a new paradigm for the study of childhood is emerging, though for many it remains implicit” (1990: 2). Importantly, James and Prout acknowledge that the “background to the emergence of this new approach” is “complex and often contradictory and [that], at this stage, a claim to novelty through a complete disjuncture with past work would be both premature and unhelpful” (1990: 5). Instead, they argue that although the new paradigm “displays clearly identifiable shifts in focus, emphasis and direction” from previous scholarship, “it is prudent to keep an open mind on whether these represent a break or a continuity with the past” (1990: 5). I highlight their reflexive uptake and elaboration of the new paradigm's location within scholarship because, as Patrick Ryan (2008) argues, this complex relation between their book and its indebtedness to the longstanding shifts in the understandings of childhood—some of which I have worked through above—is sometimes erased in simplified narratives of childhood studies' turn. That said, it is important not to understate the importance and impact of the new paradigm, and James and Prout's contributions. As Alanen writes:

The shift in the approaches and contents of the study of children has been remarkable enough to deserve the name of a completely new paradigm. Since

the new paradigm was introduced, as in the book edited by Allison James and Alan Prout (1990), some of its “tenets” have cohered so much as to rename it the “competence paradigm”. (2005: 35)

While the new paradigm has undergone some serious revisions since its initial enunciation (which I explore further below), it offers an essential re-thinking about how children’s lives should be understood and researched. Because this text and its approaches are so important to the field, and to how childhood itself is currently known, I work here to outline the importance of the new paradigm and then to situate it within a number of critiques and re-articulations.

The new paradigm centered around six core tenets. Broadly, these tenets state: 1. Childhood is a social construction rather than a universal and natural feature of human societies; 2. Children cannot be understood outside of the social worlds they live in, nor the raced, gendered, or classed identities and positions they inhabit; 3. Children’s relationships and cultures are worthy of study in and of themselves; 4. Children must be understood as actively engaged in shaping their worlds; 5. The study of children requires methodologies that prioritize and center children’s voice (such as ethnographic work); and, finally, 6. Childhood studies itself needs to be accountable to the effects of its own research on children’s lives. As is clear, these tenets are in direct juxtaposition to many of the methods by which children were studied, or ignored, in the scholarship I mentioned at the beginning of this chapter.

The scholarship that has come out of this new paradigm has been prolific and has established new fields and sub disciplines, such as children’s geographies (Aitken 2001; McKendrick 2000), and girlhood studies (Forman-Brunell and Paris 2011a, 2011b; Gonick 2010); and it has generated new methodological approaches, such as researching play (Evaldsson and Corsaro 1998; Factor 2004; Glenn et al. 2012), and “doing adulthood” (Johansson 2011). At the same time, strong debates have emerged in the wake of the new paradigm about many of its main premises. These discussions include: whether or not the new paradigm over-emphasizes the split between “culture” and “nature” in ways that reify both (Lee 2011; Prout 2005; Taylor 2011); the reification of authenticity stemming from the child’s voice (Burman and Stacey 2010b; Castañeda 2001; Spyrou 2011); the racial and colonial implications of the uneven distribution of the paradigm’s interrogation of childhoods (primarily in the global

south), rather than childhood (in the global north) (Balagopalan 2014; Stephens 1995); and, the negotiations of privilege and power in doing research from a privileged adult position (Castañeda 2001; Johansson 2011). Finally, one of the more proliferative critiques of the new paradigm, which I expand upon further below, comes from various articulations of the importance of introducing a framework of assemblage and “becoming” into a paradigm that over-emphasizes children as fully realized “beings”.

This latter critique was articulated most prominently by Prout, who, fifteen years after co-editing *Constructing and Reconstructing Childhood*, wrote a follow up reflection on the new paradigm and its uptake within the field. In *The Future of Childhood* (2005), Prout takes issue with his own work, and argues that many of the tenets of the new paradigm were structured through dualistic claims. Prout admits that childhood is “not best studied” within frameworks that rely on “oppositional dichotomies” (such as those between nature and culture, or being and becoming) but that because “childhood [was] treated as a social construction” within the new paradigm, it implicitly did just that (2005: 2). Prout traces the fault of this framing through a mapping of the social studies of childhood onto the project of modernity:

The history of childhood studies describes a trajectory through this relationship [between nature and culture], which, because it has operated within a modernist field of thought that separated culture and nature, zig-zags between the poles of the opposition, now placing childhood at the biological end, now at the social. Sometimes it has found a more or less uneasy compromise that included both but this has proved hard to stabilize because it is constantly undercut by definitions of nature and culture that are mutually exclusive. (2005: 44)

However, Prout allows the new paradigm some leeway, arguing that these “zig-zags” are understandable, “because, in order to establish their distinct contribution, novel intellectual initiatives, such as the new social studies of childhood, frequently overstate their case, overplaying their difference from earlier formations” (2005: 2). In a humble response to the limitations of his own work, Prout turns to post-structuralist thought, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari (1987), Donna Haraway (1989, 1991), and Bruno Latour (1993), to argue that childhood needs to be understood through a framework of “nature-culture” (Prout 2005: 44), “ambiguity” (2005: 64), and “non-linearity, hybridity,

network and mobility” (2005: 82). In his concluding words, Prout argues that childhood is:

cultural, biological, social, individual, historical, technological, spatial, material, discursive [...] and more. [...] Each particular construction, and these come in scales running from the individual child to historically constituted forms of childhood, have a non-linear history, a being in becoming that is open-ended and non-teleological. (2005: 144)

While not everyone has taken up assemblage theory as their central approach to childhood, in the wake of the debates about the implications and limits of the new paradigm, the contemporary field of childhood studies has further embraced this shift in theorizing the complexities of children’s lives and childhood’s onto-epistemologies.<sup>28</sup>

Finally, one of the more interesting effects of the new paradigm, at least for my own framing of childhood as a technology of power, is its model of the child as social agent being complimentary with, and productive of, disciplinary power and governmentality. Governmentality, as Foucault defines it, is the “ensemble formed by institutions, procedures, analyses and reflections, calculations, and tactics that allow the exercise of this very specific, albeit very complex, power that has the population as its target” (2007: 108). The domain of governmentality, Foucault argues, centers on people and populations, and particularly their “movement in space, material subsistence, diet, [and] the care given to an individual and the health one can assure him [...] It refers to the control one may exercise over oneself and others, over someone’s body, soul, and behavior” (2007: 122). As such, while governmentality has the population as its target, it simultaneously brings into being—and is enacted through—individualization: a type of power that constitutes within power a subject whose qualities are “analytically identified, who is subjected in continuous networks of obedience, and who is subjectified through the compulsory extraction of [an internal, secret, and hidden] truth

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<sup>28</sup> For more on the notion of “onto-epistem-ology”, see: Barad (2007). Karen Barad argues for a “way of understanding the world from within and as part of it” (2007: 88), suggesting that the traditional divide between ontology and epistemology needs to be broken. She instead argues that knowing needs to be understood as “a material practice of engagement as part of the world in its differential becoming” (2007: 89). For more on assemblage, see the notes in the following chapter.



[which is produced]” (2007: 184-185). While governmentality structured and produced children and childhood prior to the new paradigm (N. Rose 1989), the new paradigm helped newly consolidate the child as an individualized and actualized subject.

Writing about the effects within discourse of what she calls the new paradigm’s “participative child,” or “self-socializing child,” Karen Smith, author of *The Government of Childhood* (2014), argues that “contemporary child-rearing and educational norms may be more ‘democratic’ than in the past, but they are linked to forms of knowledge and expertise which view children’s agency in instrumental terms” (2011: 30). As such, Smith writes, the child is newly produced as a more governable subject:

[T]he idea of the participative child is associated with the extension of the psychological gaze into the inter-personal and *intra*-personal aspects of children’s worlds. The manner in which children relate to others and *to themselves* is thereby opened up for measurement and management. (2011: 30, emphasis in original)

Precisely because governmentality relies on and operates through the insistence that individual freedom is necessarily a form of sovereignty over the self (N. Rose 1999), the idea of the participative child as it is articulated in the new paradigm allows for, and indeed advocates for, the agentic child-subject to be subjectified through and within “procedures, analyses and reflections, calculations, and tactics” (Foucault 2007: 108) in new ways. These new tactics, Smith argues, include the individualization of risk and the discourse of “responsibilization” (2011: 24)—both of which are accompanied by new forms of surveillance and regulation of children’s lives, the lives of those who care for children, and childhood as an idea more generally. In other words, because the insistence on understanding the child as an agentic subject was simultaneously accompanied by a demand for, and subsequent production of, new ways of knowing, studying, articulating, and inhabiting childhood, the new paradigm can be understood as further opening up the child to structures of power/knowledge structured by self-sovereignty and individualized subjection.

While I find the articulation of the governmentality of childhood to be a compelling one, my own understanding of childhood understands this framing as partial.

Where this frame sees a range of disciplinary techniques directed at and emerging out of the child subject, it still begins with a universal child subject already in mind, and thus cannot account for the racial, sexual, and gendered frames through which that child has already come into being. Nor can it account for the racialized, sexual, or gendered child subject who sits precariously within or just outside of the space of childhood itself.

### **Politics, Power, and Intersectionality**

In the first part of this chapter I have outlined a few key conceptualizations of childhood—from socialization to social construction to assemblage—and situated them within discursive and disciplinary shifts in the study of childhood. I have argued that a critical inclusion of childhood’s problematic histories is necessary for understanding the contemporary and ongoing lineages of childhood, and that a re-visiting of critical feminist approaches to childhood can help trouble and differently situate the current field. I now turn to the questions of power and intersectionality within childhood studies, and I present a diverse body of scholarship on the political work that childhood takes on when it gets put into practice. I do so both to establish my own theorization—that of childhood as a technology of power—as a departure from the usual frameworks, and to offer this framing as another way to approach the political questions that childhood studies engages with.

#### *Childhood is Not a Neutral Description*

The questions of power and the political are not unusual within childhood studies, even as they have been theorized in very different ways.<sup>29</sup> On one hand, the question of the political gets asked in relationship to politics and representation, and is often theorized in relationship to children through a centering of their lack of political say. As Allison James and Adrian James write:

It is, of course, somewhat unusual to couple “children” with “politics”. Across the world, children are, for the most part, excluded from any active participation in the politics of nation states. Even within more local political arenas, their

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<sup>29</sup> Previous work on the political in childhood stemmed from socialization theory and interrogated the question of: How do children form political opinions? (Connell 1971; Greenstein 1965).

everyday engagement as social actors or participants may be limited and is often rather tokenistic. [...] [I]n other parts of the world [outside the U.S. and Europe] there are examples of the deliberate exploitation of children by governments, both legitimate and illegitimate [...] In these instances it becomes starkly clear that though, as minors, children may not have any political rights, as people they are not spared from the effects of political acts that adults perpetrate. (2005: 3)

For James and James, politics and children are separate entities which interact with one another in often uneven ways. This framing of the political thus understands childhood and politics to come together in the sites through which children's lives are affected by the political actions of adults. Similarly, for Qvortrup (1994), children occupy a precarious position politically. As subjects who are excluded from political participation, and are segregated from much of adult society—both for protection and due to paternalism—Qvortrup argues that children occupy a “marginalized” position in society (1994: 21). This framing of a marginalized position, Qvortrup argues, understands children to be a minority group defined by a “subordinate relationship to a dominant group” (1994: 22), and insists that childhood is not a temporary stage of life, but instead a permanent form in society, even if its members change and its contours shift historically (1994: 23). Even though James and James, and Qvortrup argue that children are agents rather than passive subjects, they still envisage politics and children to occupy separate spaces. In my reading of the bringing together of “childhood” and “the political”, rather than only understanding childhood as being in relationship to the political by its subordinate and marginal position, I argue that childhood is a productive site through which marginalization flows and is distributed.

This former approach, which has rightly identified many of the ways in which those understood and produced as children are placed into dangerous and uneven relations of dependency, articulates its political aims (if and when they are named as such) to be an articulation of children's agency, autonomy, and rights. The most notable declaration of such a political project can be found in the United Nations' Convention on the Rights of the Child, signed in 1989, which, among declaring other rights, requires states to allow for the child's free expression of views and to give these views “due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child [...] in all matters affecting

the child” (United Nations General Assembly 1989).<sup>30</sup> At the same time, much of childhood studies names the granting of such autonomy to children as a theoretical and methodological task, rather than a political one. Describing the overarching project of the collaborative international research project: “Childhood as a Social Phenomenon — Implications for Future Social Policies” (Childhood Project), for example, Qvortrup writes:

The Childhood Project never intended to make a moral or political stand regarding children’s life situation. If any radicalism can be ascribed to this project, it does not lie in dramatic proposals as far as children are concerned. It would rather be found in the aim outspokenly declared from the very beginning of the Childhood Project: to provide children and childhood with “conceptual autonomy”. Thus, the Childhood Project does not pretend to be more than an effort to give a voice to children from the perspective of sociology and related sciences. (1994: xi)

Beyond the Childhood Project, a large body of scholarship within childhood studies has similarly aligned their political (or theoretical) project with one that grants children autonomy, or “gives” them a voice.<sup>31</sup>

An alternative framing of this desire understands children to already be politically active, or politically constituted, and thus thinks about the politics of childhood (and childhood studies) to be necessarily engaged with the sites and

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<sup>30</sup> The UNCRC defines a child as anyone under the age of eighteen, unless the age of majority is younger than that in their state. It has been signed and ratified by 196 members of the United Nations, and has been signed but not yet ratified by the U.S. It has become the primary means through which organizations like Save the Child, Amnesty International, and UNICEF have worked to advocate on behalf of children internationally.

<sup>31</sup> The notion of giving children a voice is central to the UNCRC. Article 12 declares: “States Parties shall assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child” (United Nations General Assembly 1989). For an in-depth analysis of Article 12 and its implementation internationally, see: Landsdown (2011). For reflections on children’s agency and participation in research, see, among others: P. H. Christensen (2004); C. Gray and Harcourt (2012); Harcourt, Perry and Waller (2011); M. Hill (2006); James (2007).

institutions in which children find themselves. Norman Denzin, for example, articulates children's relationship to the political as both subject and agent:

[T]he politics of childhood quickly translate into the politics of education and socialization—for to be a child or the caretaker of a child is to be a political creature, a person who acts in a number of ways that compliment or challenge broader political ideologies and beliefs. Children, then, are political products—they are created, defined, and acted on in political terms. (1977: 16)

This framing thus understands the political to be what is at stake in the ways children come into contact with arenas such as the state, education, the institution of the family, and international development. All of these above framings of the political realm of childhood are of course important and their immense impact is not to be understated. At the same time, along with there being conceptual and theoretical difficulties in the project of “granting” autonomy and voice to children (see the discussion above on feminist interventions), this framing of what is at stake for childhood studies assumes the subject of the child in advance. Taken on its own, this framing does not attend to the ways in which childhood itself is already produced through, and productive of, its own inclusions and exclusions.

My own analysis of power and the political in relation to childhood and children is more aligned with scholars who center prioritize discourse and knowledge production. As Jenks conceives of it, the child “emerges from a particular structuring of social relationships [and] its various meanings, derive from the forms of discourse that accompany those relationships” (1996: 61). These discourses come from diverse sites such as pediatrics, psychology, schooling, and visual culture. The child's production within these discourses means, he writes, that “the child is part of a social structure and thus functional within a network of relations, a matrix of partial interests and a complex of forms of professional knowledge that are beyond the physical experience of being a child” (1996: 61). As such, the child is “not neutral but rather always moral and political” (1996: 61). James and Prout also argue that “there can be no concepts of childhood which are socially and politically innocent” (1990: 22). They make this argument not just to center the discursive and disciplinary production of the child, but,

more specifically, to argue that the paradigm that they articulate within sociology is similarly implicated in the production of knowledge on the child:

Ideas, concepts, knowledge, modes of speaking, etc. codify social practices and in turn constitute them. Within these discourses subject positions (such as “the child”) are created. Seen from this point of view, then, different discourses of childhood constitute childhood (and children) in different ways – not only as sets of academic knowledge but also in social practices and institutions. (1990: 25)

Sociology, James and Prout note, thus becomes just one site for the production of what Foucault (1977) calls “regimes of truth” on the child and childhood. In this sense, James and Prout’s analysis is particularly useful for my own, especially as they integrate and build on a Foucauldian framework. James and Prout position discourses on, and ideas about childhood as being “embedded within a tightly structured matrix of significations binding childhood with, and positioning it in relation to” societal structures such as “the family” (1990: 22). They thus understand the political task of childhood studies—or at least its main analytical approach—to be an “unlocking [of] these relationships” (1990: 22). Agreeing with this notion, my framing of childhood’s binding to social structures such as the family would take an additional step, and would position the family itself as a particular configuration of subjects, an institution or technology itself, that is necessarily mired in a historical context and is the effect of a certain type of power. Indeed, as Nikolas Rose writes:

[T]he regulation of children [has] to be located within a wider history, in which “the family” had become a key mechanism of social control and ideological support for a patriarchal capitalism that maintained both women and children in a state of dependency. “The family” was an ideological mechanism for reproducing a docile labour force, for exploiting the domestic labour of women under the guise of love and duty, for maintaining the patriarchal authority of men over the household. [...] The function of this familial ideology [...] provided vital economic functions for capitalism: reproduction of the labour force, socialization of children, exploitation of the unpaid domestic labour of

women, compensation to men for the alienating nature of their work, and so forth. (1989: 126)

As such, “unlocking” the relationship between children and their production within, and ties to, social structures cannot merely end with the structure itself. It must situate these structures within longstanding investments in types of power, fields of ideology, socio-economic conditions, and subjection.

With this framing, this thesis, as I explained in the previous chapter, works to “unlock” the relationships between childhood and race, sexuality, and gender. I thus understand my political project to include the questions of the aforementioned framing of the political. Along these lines, I would ask how childhood studies would specifically advocate for the agency, rights, and autonomy of children of color, queer children, girls, trans children; particularly considering the conditions of emergence through which these subjects precariously fit into the category of childhood itself? But this framing of the political as productive is not enough. Our understanding of the political life of childhood must also understand race, sexuality, and gender to be themselves contested and productive, pushing beyond this question and seeking to unlock the ambivalent relationship childhood has to the power relations sustained by these differentiations.

### *Race, Sexuality, and Gender in Childhood Studies*

Writing about the “set of divisions” that brings the idea of a universal childhood into rupture, Jacqueline Rose argues that addressing a universal child readership through children’s fiction is a fantasy:

[T]he idea of speaking to *all* children serves to close off a set of cultural divisions, divisions in which not only children, but we ourselves, are necessarily caught [...] class, culture, and literacy – divisions which undermine any generalized concept of the child. (1984: 7, emphasis in original)

Precisely because the generalized idea of the child is caught within these divisions of class, culture, and literacy, as well as, centrally for me, race, sexuality, and gender, research on childhood and children is necessarily constituted by an inherent question of: “on behalf of which children are we speaking, writing, studying, and thinking?” (Thew

2000: 132). In this light, scholars within childhood studies have worked to emphasize the relationship between childhood and the varying and multiple identities that children occupy. James and James thus argue that childhood is “fractured by the major fissures of class, gender and ethnicity and by the relentless march of poverty of a child’s family and/or household composition” (2005: 4), while James and Prout argue that as a variable of analysis, childhood “can never be entirely separated from other variables such as class, gender, or ethnicity” (1990: 4). For Richard Mills, who theorizes childhoods, rather than childhood, childhoods are “social constructions [whose] cultural components [are] inextricably linked to variables of race, class, culture, gender and time” (2000: 9). Additionally, Neill Thew argues that “it is important to notice that children as well as adults have races, genders and classes, and that these dimensions impact on children’s lives and experiences” (2000: 137).

Across these and other theorizations, race, class, gender, and culture are understood as either intersecting with children’s experiences of childhood, or as factors existing prior to childhood which influence a child’s life opportunities. Race, class, gender, and culture are thus also understood here primarily as givens, as nodes of identity that are somewhat static in themselves, rather than as dynamic, performative, contested, or shifting markers of intelligibility and subject production. Childhoods, James and Prout write, are thus meant to be studied under the assumption, borrowed from Kurt Danziger, that “a child is socialized by belonging to a ‘particular culture at a certain stage in its history’” (Danziger 1970: 18, cited in James and Prout 1990: 15).

Problematizing this analytical framework, Sharon Stephens questions the givenness of culture, race, and gender, as well as the notion that children’s global cultures can somehow authentically be understood “in their own terms”:

But how and where are we to locate in the contemporary world distinct cultures, to be analyzed as each “in their own terms”? The culturalization of childhood should not be bought at the cost of an awareness of the complexities of cultural definition in a postmodern world. Rather than merely explicating Western constructions of childhood, to be filled out in terms of gender, race, and class differences and to be compared with the childhoods of other cultures, we need also to explore the global processes that are currently transforming gender, race, class, culture—and, by no means least of all, childhood itself. (1995: 7)



The theorization of race, class, and gender—and notably not sexuality, immigration status, caste, religion, ability, or practically any other node of subject production—within the new paradigm’s attending to the multiplicities of childhoods thus tends to understand these as given, pre-existing variables. Even with this expansion from childhood to childhoods on a theoretical level, the actual attention to multiple experiences of childhoods within scholarship, Shirley Hill writes, has been sparse:

In the United States, race and class have been major factors in shaping differential access to status and resources and child-rearing ideals. Notions about children and child rearing [however] have been constructed primarily by the dominant racial group—white, middle-class Americans—and variously appropriated to and embraced by subordinate racial groups. (1999: xviii)

This tendency, however, has changed, at least partially, since the new paradigm began to sustain critiques about the reified child-subject that it promulgated. Discussions on childhood have thus expanded to include: migrating and asylum-seeking children (Laoire et al. 2010; Seeberg et al. 2009; Sime and R. Fox 2014; Vathi and Duci 2016; Vitus 2010; Wernesjö 2011); gendered experiences of childhoods (Bartholomaeus 2012; Rönnlund 2015; Sreenivas 2010); the sexualization of children (Baird 2013; Egan and Hawkes 2008; Kehily 2012; Voléry 2015); children’s experiences and understandings of racism (Christou and Spyrou 2012, 2014; Haavind et al. 2015; Ritterhouse 2006; Van Ausdale and Feagin 2001; Zembylas 2010); and disabled children’s lives (Singal and Muthukrishna 2014). Some of these accounts have been intentional about their centering of intersectional understandings of childhoods (Boocock and Scott 2005). Additionally, in the wake of feminist theories on the performativity of gender (Butler 1990), childhood studies has also begun to research the ways in which children, as social agents, actively engage in gendered practices, and shift the meanings attached to gendered embodiment (Blaise 2005; Messner 2000; Paechter 2006). Interestingly, inasmuch as sexuality appears in childhood studies as a factor of one’s childhood, it does so primarily through the lenses of sexual violence, sexualization, gendered practices, and children’s experiences of lesbian and gay parents, rather than in explorations of children’s own sexual identities, or their negotiations of sexual desire—

with the notable exceptions of Emma Renold (2005), and George Rousseau (2007). All of these approaches have dramatically expanded the scholarship on childhoods, and have increased an understanding of the multiple experiences and forms of subjectivity that children live and create.

As a way of concluding this section, I highlight three different approaches to thinking about childhood and race, sexuality, and gender—from Miriam Forman-Brunell and Leslie Paris (2011a, 2011b); Renold (2005); and Yasmin Jiwani, Candis Steenberg, and Claudia Mitchell (2006)—which I find particularly useful for my own project. I highlight these approaches because they are intersectional, and because they also emphasize the dynamic interplay between notions of race, sexuality, and gender—themselves intersecting, shifting, and dynamic nodes of subjectivity—and childhood. This notion of the entanglement of subjection through and of childhood is absolutely central to the wider analysis of this thesis.

Forman-Brunell and Paris, whose edited volumes (2011a, 2011b) address the historical and cultural dynamics of girlhoods across the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, contextualizes the idea of “girlhood” and its diverse forms:

Girlhood is never merely a biological stage. Rather [...] it is a period of life whose meaning and endpoint have been made in particular historical contexts. The term encompasses both cultural constructions of girlhood and girls’ own lived experiences in particular historical circumstances. The parameters of girlhood have been defined as much by legal designations, social practices, girls’ degree of biological maturation, and broader ideological and political forces as by actual age. (2011a: 3)

For Forman-Brunell and Paris, studying girlhood is not just about attending to how it is inhabited by and defined by different girls across different positions and moments in time, it is also about asking to what degree girlhood and womanhood are “co-constructed” within “various waves of feminist activism, or how girls’ age shaped their experience of gendered cultural paradigms such as the emergence of ‘compulsory heterosexuality’ in the early twentieth century or the so-called ‘sexual revolution’ of the 1960s” (2011b: 4). As I noted in my introduction, my overall thesis is concerned with how childhood extends and limits the possibilities for social justice in regards to race,

sexuality, and gender, and as such, Forman-Brunell and Paris' framing of girlhood being co-constructed with historical shifts in feminist activism is particularly close to my own.

In similar fashion to Forman-Brunell and Paris' understanding of girlhood as co-constructed by, and of, gender, Renold privileges childhood's and sexuality's co-construction. Renold, outlining the theoretical frame that guides her ethnographic work with children, argues that one of her projects is a "'queering' of childhood" (2005: 9). This, she argues, is a mode of "paying attention to the multiple and contradictory ways in which sexuality is constitutive of both the subject 'child' and the social and cultural institution of 'childhood'" (2005: 9). I will spend more time theorizing the potentials and limits of a "queering" of childhood in Chapter Five, but I mention Renold's frame of queering here because it firmly entangles children's lives and everyday practices within a dynamic relationship to the varied and contested ways sexuality constitutes, and is constituted by, childhood. Finally, I highlight the work of Jiwani, Steenbergen, and C. Mitchell (2006). Their approach to girlhood and childhood is deeply intersectional: "we contend that childhood is always a *gendered, raced, sexed and classed* space, inscribed by particular behavioural dictates, social norms and mores and ways of seeing the world" (2006: x, emphasis in original). Additionally, they situate girlhood in an understanding of the "processes of racialization", and varied "constructions of femininity" which are "determined by issues of race, class, ability and sexuality" (2006: xiii). They then write:

What we have said of race [...] could easily be applied to issues of sexuality, and class, albeit not as separate and mutually exclusive categories, but rather as experiences articulated through a framework of patriarchal and capitalist structures of power. Underpinning all of these hegemonic ideals are ambivalences which once again border on and define the acceptable and unacceptable. But between these bordered edges of dominant ideals lies a nebulous, fluid and dynamic landscape, one marked by complex layers, intersecting and interlocking mediations with their variegated outcomes: the girlhoods of today. (2006: xiii)

Jiwani, Steenbergen, and C. Mitchell's recognition of the ambivalences, the intersecting processes of racialization, gendering, sexuality, and class, and the ways in which

children and childhoods are formed, and formational of, these historical and dynamic nodes of subjection is vital to my own project. It is with this frame in mind that I work across the three core chapters of this thesis to attend to the contestations of childhood as they negotiate with not merely the processes of racialization, gendering, and sexuality, but also childhood's entanglement with ageism, racism, normative sexualities, and the gender binary.

What my own research adds to these intersectional framings is an analysis of the ways in which childhood is desired, deployed, put into practice, and has a psychic life. While these analyses provide important understandings of how childhood emerges within heteronormativity, racism, and sexism, and how children construct their own childhoods through negotiations of these dynamics, their primary focus on children's own understandings of childhood limit their analysis of the intersectional, political, and psychic life of childhood to the "real" child. My work accompanies and extends these analyses by arguing that misrecognition, disavowal, disidentification, and projection are also integral to childhoods' co-production with—and justifications of, and challenges to—race, sexuality, and gender. I additionally argue that childhood is produced in mediated terms through its uneven deployment to individuals and communities within and beyond childhood. This takes place, as I show within my three main analytical chapters, not just in relationship to "real" children, but also in relation to representation, cultural production, discourse, and, as I have argued here, the institutionalization of knowledge production on the child.

## **Conclusion**

The study of children and childhood is a political, theoretical endeavor that emerges out of and extends a number of ongoing legacies of race, coloniality, gender, class, and sexuality. While the reproduction of these differentiations is not often narrated as central to the field, they absolutely constitute the child and childhoods at stake in the continued (re)production of childhood studies. Attending to these productions and lineages of thought, and moreover, tracing them alongside the critical dialogues that have worked to deconstruct and interrupt them orients the field towards a committed relationship of accountability to childhood's political and ambivalent contours. In re-thinking the question of what is political in and about childhood studies and childhood itself; in attending to the ways childhood is entangled with and co-produced with the shifting

dynamics of race, class, gender, and sexuality; and in raising the question of how we might tell different stories of childhood studies' emergence as a field, I have worked to situate the relations of power that childhood engenders into a critical relationship with the discourses, truths, and knowledges produced about it in the field.

## Chapter Three:

### Putting Childhood into Practice: Methods, Ambivalence, and Wanting

#### Introduction

Childhood's varied application extends and challenges entangled investments in racism, normative sexualities, and the gender binary. In interrogating these investments, this thesis centrally attends to the ways in which childhood, as a technology of power, is negotiated and re-imagined through contemporary, discursive, institutional, and representational practices. In my analyses of these investments, my main analytical chapters turn to a wide range of sites—including academic scholarship, films, digital images, newspapers and online blogs, social media, online commentary, federal and state laws, autobiographies, interviews, and personal narratives—because they encapsulate the reach of childhood's capacity to make populations intelligible and to distribute value across them. This chapter outlines the methodological approaches that I use to interrogate and deconstruct these types of evidence and to illuminate the particular workings of power that structure childhood. Tying these multiple scales of childhood's reach together under one larger theoretical concept, I term the discursive, figural, affective, and representational uses of childhood as a form of “putting into practice”. This understanding of the putting into practice of childhood, I argue, allows for an analysis of childhood's deployments across contexts in a way that does not require the particularities of these contexts to be flattened or equated.

The first part of this chapter thus provides an outline and justification of my notion of the putting into practice of childhood. Building on the above, it situates this concept in relation to the methodological approaches I take to discourse, affect, figuration, and representation. In so doing, the first part of this chapter argues that the putting into practice of childhood is a unique object of analysis that requires a combination of these particular methodological approaches to understand its contours

and effects. And yet, precisely because the putting into practice of childhood creates effects, I argue that its study cannot end merely with an identification, or cataloging, of various practices. Because of this, this chapter brings into light the questions that emerge when seeking to study an object like childhood, which is, as I argued in the previous chapter, inherently political. Following on from the arguments made in the previous two chapters, wherein I argued that childhood emerges out of and extends a number of ongoing legacies of race, coloniality, gender, class, and sexuality, I additionally ask what might be required, both politically and theoretically, of a project whose object is childhood.

In the second part of this chapter, my focus thus shifts from working to justify my methodologies, to thinking about the political and theoretical work required in a study of the object of childhood itself. What type of object, I ask, is childhood? Is it dangerous, proliferative, a site of potentiation, a means of oppression, or some other kind of object? What consequences emerge—for theory and for childhood—when childhood is decided as one type of object or the other? In asking these questions, the second part of this chapter turns specifically to the work of Lee Edelman (2004) and Paul Gilroy (2000). I work with them because their articulations of the objects they analyze (reproductive futurity and “race”, respectively) engender important diagnoses of objects like childhood. They have also engendered, in multiple scholars’ critical responses to their work, insightful debates about their political projects which my own analysis learns from. Finally, the third part of this chapter returns to the notion of “investment” in a more rigorous way. Turning to Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s notion of “cannot not” (Spivak 1993), and two of Sigmund Freud’s elaborations of “object-cathexis” (Freud 1917, 1923), this concluding section brings in a psychoanalytic approach to analyze the putting into practice of childhood. It does so in order to make clear this thesis’ overriding focus on the psychic life of childhood, and it works to provide conceptual grounding for the ambivalent modes of reading childhood that are undertaken in the following chapters.

## **Methodology**

In this thesis I am interrogating what I am calling the “putting into practice” of childhood. By speaking about childhood as something that is put into practice, I am stepping back from understandings of childhood that frame it as a time in one’s life or a

stage of biological immaturity (see Chapters One and Two). Instead, I turn my attention to the various scales, registers, relations of power and regimes of truth that are formed and produced through the idea of childhood. My framing of “the putting into practice,” rather than merely the “invocation” of childhood, is intended to register the multiple meanings that “practice” carries. Practice is both the application or putting to work of an idea, as well as a habitual, customary or methodical enactment. At the same time, as well as carrying the meaning of the habitual, or the almost subconscious repetition and implementation of an idea, practice also means the studied, repeated, and worked at rehearsal of an activity in the attempt of improving it. The putting into practice of childhood, then, is the intentional, repeated rehearsal of childhood’s proficiency as a technology of power. As a concept, however, the putting into practice is distinct from the well theorized notion of “social practices”, where, as Lilie Chouliaraki and Norman Fairclough write, practices are:

habitualised ways, tied to particular times and places, in which people apply resources (material or symbolic) to act together in the world [...] they constitute a point of connection between abstract structures and their mechanisms, and concrete events – between ‘society’ and people living their lives. (1999: 21)

While one understanding of childhood might define it by a particular range of social practices, and while the subjects who might be intelligible within childhood are arguably determined by the historical and geopolitical limits of the social practices “children” are allowed to engage in, the “putting into practice” of childhood speaks to practice differently.

Here, the putting into practice of childhood is the intentional use of childhood to bring about a particular end. In this sense, the acts of putting childhood into practice come in a wide array of forms. Childhood might be put into practice through, for example, deployments of the figure of the child, through motivated representations and cultural productions of children, through discourse, or through a binding of the child to a particular affect. These acts might thus be understood as performative deployments, as they create effects in and of themselves. But, unlike the idea of performativity set out by J. L. Austin (1970) and Judith Butler (1990), in which statements and actions produce and challenge the very thing they articulate (or perform) in their doing (in their



utterances), the notion of putting childhood into practice suggests a doubled enactment in the deployment of childhood.<sup>1</sup> More than just performatively enacting and resignifying childhood itself, the putting into practice of childhood additionally responds to, interrupts, or aligns with something seemingly disconnected from the child, children, or childhood. In this thesis, I am specifically analyzing the moments in which childhood is put into practice in response to contested investments in race, gender, and sexuality. I use the frame of practice, then, to assert the argument that even childhood's quotidian, or seemingly banal invocations are deeply and productively tied to a more pointed and generative project, a web of invocations, habits, customs, discourses, representations and repetitions that collectively intensify childhood's effects and that are deployed to justify or challenge racism, the gender binary, and normative sexualities.

How does one study what I am calling the putting into practice of childhood? Thinking through this question has led me to encounter a number of different methodological approaches, and to assess their promises and limitations as they help me illuminate different facets of childhood's effects. In what follows, I untangle four different methodological approaches that have become central to my own, and I situate my use of them in relationship to the ways they have been articulated within a range of scholarship. These central methodologies are: discourse analysis, and theories of figuration, representation, and affect.

### *Discourse Analysis*

The study of discourse is an expansive field with diverse approaches, not just in relation to what "discourse" itself means or where it is located, but also in this field's political or scholarly commitments. Indeed the distinctions between "discourse analysis" and "critical discourse analysis" (Chouliaraki and Fairclough 1990; Fairclough 1992, 1995; Kress 1990; Toolan 1997; van Dijk 1997), "feminist discourse analysis" (Baxter 2002, 2003; Lazar 2005; Sunderland 2004; Talbot 1998; Wilkinson and Kitinger 1995;

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<sup>1</sup> Understanding childhood through performativity would mean, for Judith Butler, arguing that childhood itself is not inherent to the child, but is rather what she would call an "effect" of politically enforced acts, styles, and ways of life. A project which centered the performativity of childhood would thus think about the ways in which childhood might be (as Butler describes gender as being) "open to splittings, self-parody, self-criticism, and those hyperbolic exhibitions of 'the natural' that, in their very exaggeration, reveal its fundamentally phantasmatic status" (Butler 1990: 200). See also: Sedgwick (2003a).

Wodak 1997), and “poststructuralist” or “postmodernist” discourse analysis (Simons and Billig 1994), all indicate the multiple ways in which discourse itself has been, and continues to be, interrogated. In this thesis, I privilege a Foucauldian discourse analysis, and here, I outline this approach and situate it within wider debates about discourse. In *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (1972), Michel Foucault theorizes discourse in relationship to statements, language, thought, and relations of power. A statement, Foucault writes, “is always an event that neither the language nor the meaning can quite exhaust” (1972: 28). Statements, then, are events that are “subject to repetition, transformation, and reactivation” and are tied to both the “situations that provoke [them], and to the consequences that [they] give rise to” as well as “the statements that precede and follow [them]” (1972: 28). Statements as events are important for a Foucauldian understanding of discourse because they become the object through which an analysis of discourse can begin. Foucault is thus interested in the production of statements, and he outlines an approach to their study through the specific question: “how is it that one particular statement appeared rather than another?” (1972: 27). This question differs from one that interrogates language as an object, an inquiry that would instead ask: “according to what rules has a particular statement been made, and consequently according to what rules could other similar statements be made?” (1972: 27).<sup>2</sup> Rather than asking after the grammar and syntax of a particular statement, then, a Foucauldian discourse analysis asks after the conditions of emergence of a particular statement, and examines why one statement, rather than another, was produced.<sup>3</sup>

And yet, the inquiry into why one statement was made rather than another is not, for Foucault, about determining the intention of the speaker: “The analysis of thought is

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<sup>2</sup> One of the feminist critiques of Michel Foucault’s analysis of discourse is related to this point. As Janet Ransom argues, Foucault disregards the speaker in order to privilege the spoken. This putting aside of the speaker, Ransom asserts, is troubling for feminist critiques of objectivity: “Foucault’s democratisation of knowledge is the outcome of a method which severs the moral link between the theorist and the theorised. It effects a closure on the epistemological resources of empathy or identification upon which a great deal of feminist work has been built” (1993: 134). This understanding of Foucault’s poststructuralism is challenged, however, by Jana Sawicki, who argues that Foucault’s discourse “invites its own critique” (1991: 8), and that his poststructuralism “does not entail a complete rejection of identity based politics” (1991: 7).

<sup>3</sup> Other approaches to discourse analysis within linguistics or speech act theory do attend to the grammar and syntax of discursive statements and texts. See: Austin (1975); Garfinkel (1967); Labov and Fanshel (1977); Searle (1969).

always allegorical in relation to the discourse that it employs. Its question is unfailingly: what was being said in what was said? The analysis of the discursive field is orientated in a quite different way” (1972: 27-28). Instead of producing a history of thought, Foucault argues, discourse analysis entails an alternative approach to locating the statement:

[W]e must grasp the statement in the exact specificity of its occurrence; determine its conditions of existence, fix at least its limits, establish its correlations with other statements that may be connected with it, and show what other forms of statement it excludes. We do not seek below what is manifest the half silent murmur of another discourse; we must show why it could not be other than it was, in what respect it is exclusive of any other, how it assumes, in the midst of others and in relation to them, a place that no other could occupy. (1972: 28)

This line of questioning establishes its inquiry into the exclusion of statements through an analysis not just of what was said, but who made such a statement, why this person was deemed qualified to make such a statement, how that statement was validated, and what institutions—juridical, cultural, scholarly—have sanctioned such a statement (1972: 50).<sup>4</sup> Writing in *The History of Sexuality Volume I* (1978) about the “putting into discourse of sex” (1978: 12), Foucault thus argues that:

The central issue then [...] [is] to account for the fact that it [sex] is spoken about, to discover who does the speaking, the positions and viewpoints from which they speak, the institutions which prompt people to speak about it and which store and distribute the things that are said. (1978: 11)

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<sup>4</sup> Along these lines, Mary Talbot (1998) outlines the aim of what is called “critical discourse analysis”, arguing that it is “to stimulate *critical* awareness of language, in particular awareness of how existing discursive conventions have come about as a result of relations of power and power struggle. This involves unearthing the social and historical constitution of naturalized conventions” (1998: 150, emphasis in original).

Institutional validity, distribution, and power relations are thus all deeply important to Foucault's approach to discourse, as he is concerned with the ways in which particular statements as events give rise to authoritative consequences.

One of these authoritative consequences that Foucault is concerned with is the production of objects of discourse, or, more precisely, in discourse. Returning to his previous work in *History of Madness* (1961), Foucault (1972) articulates the approach he decided not to take in locating madness as an object of history and discourse:

[W]e are not trying to find out who was mad at a particular period, or in what his madness consisted, or whether his disturbances were identical with those known to us today. [...] We are not trying to reconstitute what madness itself might be, in the form in which it first presented itself [...] and in the form in which it was later organized (translated, deformed, travestied, perhaps even repressed) by discourses, and the oblique, often twisted play of their operations. (1972: 47)

Rather than take on such an approach, which would assume madness was constituted prior to discourse, Foucault argues that a history of objects such as madness must be conducted with an eye for "the body of rules that enable them to form as objects of a discourse and thus constitute the conditions of their historical appearance" (1972: 48). Importantly, the specific type of formation that Foucault is concerned with here is how particular objects of discourse become made available and relevant to disciplinary structures. He argues, then, that the question of madness as a discursive object cannot primarily be one of "the opposition of content between 'psychosis' and 'neurosis'", but must rather be about how "criminality could become an object of medical expertise" (1972: 48).

Along these lines, the question of childhood as an object of a discourse would similarly ask not about the "opposition of content" between, say, childhood and adolescence, but would rather ask after the question of how childhood became an object of analysis for disciplines such as developmental psychology and sociology. It would ask after what specific statements are made about childhood, how these statements come about such that they, rather than any other, are the ones articulated, and it would think about the formation of childhood as an object within discourse that is produced through institutional validation, and regimes of truth. As such, centering discourses about

childhood would additionally not understand childhood to be an authentic pre-discursive object, rather, these discourses would be understood as “practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak” (1972: 49). This framing of childhood as produced through discursive practices located in institutions and sites of knowledge production is one that the previous chapter’s interrogation of childhood studies was grounded in, and it informs the following three analytical chapters. In relation to my analysis of the putting into practice of childhood, a discursive analysis makes two moves. The first would respond to a statement made about childhood along the lines of questioning outlined above, thinking specifically about how childhood is produced as an object of discourse. The second, however, in recognizing that this same statement might be relying on childhood and the meanings it carries to bring into effect, or respond to, something “beyond” childhood, would ask after the set of discourses (and their histories, relations, and effects) surrounding and producing this “external” context. In the following three analytical chapters, the discourses beyond childhood that I am interrogating are those around the contemporary mobilizations and uses of race, sexuality, and gender.

### *Figuration*

Within the humanities, the notion of the “figure” and its relation to meaning, history, and power has been widely theorized. Here, however, I situate my understanding of figures and figuration within social sciences, where figuration has also been analyzed as an instrument through which power flows, subjects are produced, and discourses travel.<sup>5</sup> In Imogen Tyler’s definition, figures are “highly condensed” forms of social classification that are “over determined and [...] publicly imagined (are figured) in excessive, distorted, and caricatured ways” (2008: 18). This over determination, Tyler argues, allows figures to become essential to the logics of the political economy, to the mobilization of social capital, and, for the two figures in Tyler’s analysis, the “chav mum” and the “chav scum”, to the formation of classed identities:

Social classifications are complex political formations that are generated and characterised by representational struggles. Indeed, all processes of social

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<sup>5</sup> For a collection which thinks through the questions of figuration in relationship to women, bodies, age, and ageing, see: Woodward (1999).

classification, including gender, race, and sexuality, are mediated. It is my contention that these representational struggles are often played out within highly condensed figurative forms. (2008: 18)

While figures are thus central to representational struggles, they cannot be understood as confined to the realm of the semiotic. As Tyler notes, the study of figures must theorize them in relation to both the etymological and the ontological. Similarly, Claudia Castañeda (2002) refuses to separate the material and the semiotic aspects of figuration. “A figure”, Castañeda writes:

is the simultaneously material and semiotic effect of specific practices. Understood as figures, [...] particular categories of existence can also be considered in terms of their uses—what they “body forth” in turn. Figuration is thus understood here to incorporate a double force: constitutive effect and generative circulation. (2002: 3)

Castañeda’s concept of figuration, she explains, “makes it possible to describe in detail the process by which a concept or entity is given particular form—how it is figured—in ways that speak to the making of worlds” (2002: 3). Thinking across these multiple and simultaneous registers of figuration, Castañeda situates figures as the effects of “knowledges, practices, and power” (2002: 4).

As over determined, condensed, semiotic and material effects of knowledges, practices, and power, figures are mobilized for social and political ends. In Tyler’s work, for example, the emergence of figures is “always expressive of an underlying social crisis or anxiety” (2008: 18). For her, these anxieties are particularly connected to social capital and projects of “class making” (2008: 18), but they can also operate along more abstracted psychic lines. In *History of Madness*, for example, Foucault theorizes the figure of the madman, arguing that it facilitated the production and entrenchment of boundary making practices within social and psychic life (1961: 11). Writing about the forced exiling of the madman, Foucault notes this figure worked to:

underline in real and imaginary terms the *liminal* situation of the mad in medieval society. It was a highly symbolic role, made clear by the mental

geography involved, where the madman was *confined at the gates of the cities*. [...] A posture that is still his today, if we admit that what was once the visible fortress of social order is now the castle of our own consciousness. (1961: 11, emphasis in original).

The figure of the madman thus emerges out of and intensifies a set of knowledges about interior and exterior, sane and mad, reason and un-reason. Following Foucault's argument, the effects of figuration can thus be found in the work they do to establish relationships of power within the register of the psychic. In more directly psychoanalytic terms (interrogated further later in this chapter), Edelman (2004) maps the work of the oppositional figures of the innocent "Child" on one hand, and of queerness on the other, onto a Lacanian understanding of the Symbolic order. These figures, whose meanings align with reproductive futurism and the death drive, respectively, facilitate not just the privileging of heteronormativity, but also, Edelman argues, what counts as possible within the political itself (2004: 11). "Politics," Edelman writes, "never rests on essential identities. It centers, instead, on the figurality that is always essential *to* identity, and thus on the figural relations in which social identities are always inscribed" (2004: 17, emphasis in original). For Edelman, then, it is not just that figures are political, but that the political itself cannot be thought outside of the frame of figurality.

Because figures are central to the ever changing field of the political, critical inquiry into how they operate must be attentive to the work they facilitate and the histories they draw from for their intelligibility. As Jasbir Puar and Amit Rai argue in relation to the figure of the "terrorist monster" that emerged in the U.S. after September 11, this figure is inconceivable outside of its historical production through the palimpsestic lineages of the "racial and sexual monsters of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries" (2002: 117). Understanding this historical lineage, they argue, allows for a frame of analysis that connects the construction of this figure to the historical production of knowledge on racialized sexual perversity. For Sara Ahmed, who theorizes the racialized and sexualized figure of the "stranger", the task of interrogating figures is similarly less about "how and where" something is "produced as a figure, but also *how that figure is put to work, and made to work*, in particular times and places" (2000: 15, emphasis in original). Castañeda describes her methodology along

corresponding lines: “The task [...] is to describe in some detail the constellation of practices, materialities, and knowledges through which a particular figuration occurs, and in turn, to identify the significance of that figuration for the making of wider cultural claims” (2002: 8). Following Castañeda’s argument that figures are simultaneously semiotic and material, Tyler describes her methodological approach as a “zoom[ing] in on” figuration as “not only as representational (in a more structuralist sense) but as a constitutive and generative process” (2008: 18).

My approach to figuration thus asks after the deployment of the figure of the child: it attends to the work that this figure facilitates in its contemporary and contested mobilizations. In my theorization of the figure of the child, I follow Jo Ann Wallace’s contention that:

the mobilization of the figure of “the child” in response to a perceived set of social problems, regardless of whether children as a specific group are at “real” risk, has “real” effects on our productions of “childhood” and the child-subject, and ultimately on the lives of children. (1995: 297)

Along these lines, and extending the approaches to figuration outlined above, I struggle with the impetus to easily separate out the “figure of the child” from the “real” lives of “actual” children.<sup>6</sup> Put another way, I do not assume that “real children” precede “the idea” of childhood.<sup>7</sup> Rather, I argue that the two inform one another in dynamic ways that tend to expel or ensnare various bodies, subjects, and experiences from, or within, the categories of children and childhood. Finally, I argue that the deployment of the

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<sup>6</sup> Many authors who critique the figure of the child recognize that it is important to distance their critique from the “actual” lives of “real” children. Lee Edelman, for example, writes that “the image of the Child” is “not to be confused with the lived experiences of any historical children” (2004: 11). Caroline Levander notes that her book “focuses on the idea of the child as a rich site of cultural meaning and social inscription” (2006: 16). However, Levander defines the child as: “not only a biological fact but a cultural construct that encodes the complex, ever shifting logic of the social worlds that produce it” (2006: 16).

<sup>7</sup> This argument learns from Butler’s articulation of the dangers of reifying the givenness of “sex” (1993c). Critiquing the assumed materiality of the body. Butler writes: “To ‘concede’ the undeniability of ‘sex’ or its ‘materiality’ is always to concede some version of ‘sex,’ some formation of ‘materiality.’ [...] This marking off will have some normative force and, indeed, some violence, for it can construct only through erasing” (1993c: 10-11).



figure of the child is one of the ways in which childhood is put into practice. Understanding various uses of the figure of the child to both produce the contours of childhood itself, and to establish relationships of power more broadly, this thesis interrogates figuration as a key way through which childhood is put into practice and is established as a technology of power.

### *Representation*

Another key way childhood is put into practice is through various modes of representation. The importance of representation to understanding childhood's shifting conditions of emergence and historical contours has been established as a central methodological approach since Philippe Ariès' *Centuries of Childhood* (1962). While Ariès himself does not spend much time elaborating his own methodology, he nonetheless prioritizes pictorial representations, the history of art, and the development of iconography, as entailing a particular type of evidence for the emergence of childhood and the institution of the family.<sup>8</sup> In this thesis' analysis of the putting into practice of childhood, I also prioritize visual representations as sites through which the meanings attached to childhood are produced, reproduced, negotiated, and contested. My analysis, however, expands beyond just the visual, and looks to three specific types of representation: images (photographs, digital images, and manipulated viral images), narratives (memory work, personal narratives, and memoirs), and film. In what follows, rather than sketch out a review of all the ways in which images, narratives, and film have been theorized in relationship to semiotics, ideological and material (re)production, encoding/decoding, and spectatorship—a task that is simply beyond the range of this thesis—I instead specifically focus on the particular questions and lines of thought that my use of these types of representations allows in my three main analytical chapters.<sup>9</sup>

Analyzing childhood through representation, however, is inherently a troubled project. Representation, as Spivak writes, is about both *vertreten* (i.e. representation as speaking for, as in a political representative) and *darstellen* (i.e. “re-presentation”, as in

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<sup>8</sup> See Chapter Two for a discussion on Philippe Ariès and his methodological approach.

<sup>9</sup> Many of these topics will be revisited in the following chapters. For a few central overviews of these issues, see, among many others: Dent (1992); During (1993); Hall (1997); Kuhn (2006); de Lauretis (1984); *Screen* (1992).

art or discourse). As such, representing (speaking for) childhood runs into difficult territory, as children themselves are in many instances unable, or deemed unable, to self-represent. Jo-Ann Wallace (1995), as I noted in the previous chapter, suggests that while “‘the child’ is everywhere in representation”, it is “almost nowhere in public *self*-representation” (1995: 293-294, emphasis in original). She thus asks: “Can children represent themselves – culturally, socially, politically – or is advocacy the only means by which their well-being can be safeguarded?” (1995: 295). Extending the analysis of Jacqueline Rose (1984), Wallace concludes that “in public culture ‘the child’ is nothing more than the site of the adult’s representation and discursive address” (1995: 294).<sup>10</sup> Theorizing the other side of representation, the *darstellen* of childhood, is mired in complexities and power relationships as well. Because what the child is often made to represent is precisely this space prior to the capacity for representation, representations of the child (particularly in film) are structured by an inherent questioning of the child being seen. As Karen Lury writes:

[I]t is frequently suggested that the most effective performances (particularly from children) are nothing more than “captured actuality”. [...] [I]t is precisely this uncertainty (about whether or not they are acting) which makes them so troubling, yet so appealing. In fact, it refers directly to a central problem [...] how can children’s subjectivity, their emotions, their experiences and their thoughts be represented on screen? (2010: 10)

Lury’s question of the child’s representation is not asked in the hopes of identifying some notion of authentic representation; rather, her argument is that representations of children are always necessarily structured by adult perceptions of what children are “like” (2010: 11). While my own project answers neither Wallace’s nor Lury’s question, it does share their unease towards the relations of power that have constructed the child as occupying a heightened yet negated relationship to representation in both senses. For the child, as Wallace and Lury make clear, is not just the subject who is “nowhere in public self-representation”, it is also the subject position that is made to carry the sign of representation more broadly. For Wallace, this question of the child as representation is

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<sup>10</sup> For further debates about the child’s “discursive address” and about Jo-Ann Wallace’s theory of the child subject, see Chapter One and Chapter Two.

centrally about how the child is made to represent the subject prior to the citizen, prior to the Enlightenment, and prior to a particular formation of the state (1995: 293). Other theorists, as well, have elaborated on the burden of representation that the child is made to take on. Carolyn Steedman (1995), for example, argues that the child, and the personal and individual history that it embodied, was made to be the site of representation for human “insideness” and “interiority”. Additionally, Karin Sánchez-Eppler (2005), Caroline Levander (2006), and Anna Mae Duane (2010), all argue that images of the child propelled the emergence of early-American colonial sovereignty by representing not just the new nation, but also the racial logics its state-building project relied on. In these ways and more, the child is simultaneously produced as the subject beyond representation, as well as the site of representation itself. Analyzing childhood through representation, then, requires asking not just: How are children represented?, but also: What are children made to represent?

Another question that emerges in theorizing childhood and visual representation, and specifically childhood and cinema, together, is that of the gaze.<sup>11</sup> Vicky Lebeau argues that the “privileged role of looking in cinema”, is “grounded in a passion for perceiving [...] [a passion] grounded, in turn, in childhood” (2008: 44). The grounding of this passion within childhood takes place in two ways. First, through what Lebeau identifies as the highly “recognizable motif in cinema” of the “child’s enraptured gaze at the screen” (2008: 44). Second, it takes places through Freudian and Lacanian understandings of the child’s gaze, which have structured what it means to theorize the pleasure one derives in watching film, and the relations of power inherent to cinema and representation itself. “Cinema”, Christian Metz, the film critic who became famous for his application of semiotics and psychoanalysis to film criticism, writes, is “[a] very strange mirror [...] very like that of childhood, and very different” (1975: 51). For Metz—who many recognize for his argument that films function as the equivalent of dreams, but who also importantly made this connection between childhood and the screen—the act of watching cinema functions and operates in a similar fashion to the Lacanian mirror stage (Lacan 1949). Here, the depiction on screen is not understood to be one’s own depiction (as it is for the infant in the mirror), rather, “the spectator

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<sup>11</sup> The question of the gaze, which I elaborate on here, becomes central to my analysis of *Palindromes* in Chapter Five. There, I think more directly about the questions of spectatorship, desire, and identification in relationship to casting.

*identifies with himself*, with himself as a pure act of perception” (Metz 1975: 51, emphasis in original).

This identification is made possible because, Metz writes: “the spectator has already known the experience of the mirror (of the true mirror), and is thus able to constitute a world of objects without having first to recognise himself within it” (1975: 49). The child’s gaze, then, has underscored framings of the pleasure in looking, the notion of identification, and the question of the screen-as-mirror, which have informed many fundamental analyses of cinema. This thesis specifically returns to these original psychoanalytic analyses of cinema, the gaze, identification, and spectatorship because I argue that returning to them through the lens of the child and childhood’s proliferative psychic life can offer new ways of thinking through these foundational texts. As such, I turn to Laura Mulvey (1975), who famously used these framings to argue that this identification is principally structured through phallogentrism, the image of the castrated woman, and the heterosexual division of labor. Mulvey, arguing that under these terms women connote “to-be-looked-at-ness” (1975: 11) while men occupy the camera’s scopophilic gaze itself, thus demands that the questions asked of cinema are not just about representation (in terms of image) but also about the structural relations different subjects occupy in relation to identification, objectification, and desire. These relations become central to my three main analytic chapters and will be returned to fully within each.

Under these terms, one analysis of the child within film would ask, as Lebeau does: “What does cinema [...] *want* of the child?” (2008: 39, emphasis in original). Theorizing cinematic representations of childhood in light of these notions of identification, desire, and objectification, thus begs numerous questions related to what role children (on the screen or in the audience) are meant to play: Do children occupy the gaze, and if so, how? Or, are they alternatively the subject of the gaze, and if so, is this a form of possession or identification or both? These questions become particularly difficult in light of the ongoing scholarship in response to Mulvey’s analysis, filling in the gaps left by her inattention to racial difference and her flattening of homosexual desire and diverse feminine spectatorships.<sup>12</sup> While much has thus been written in the

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<sup>12</sup> For critiques of Mulvey in relationship to race, see: Bhabha (1983); Diawara (1988); Fain (2015); Gaines (1990); Negra (2001); Ross (1996); Young (1996). For critiques in relationship to homosexual desire and diverse female spectatorship, see: Doane (1982,

decades since Mulvey's key text, my own analysis returns to it directly because I find its use of psychoanalysis necessary for my own.<sup>13</sup> Indeed, Mulvey's insistence that psychoanalysis be used critically within feminist film criticism as a tool to understand and interrupt the mechanisms of patriarchy vis-à-vis the screen is an insistence I heed, and one I expand to think through racism and sexuality as well. As the end of this chapter shall make clear, psychoanalysis plays an extensive role in this thesis' analysis of the putting into practice of childhood, and as such I privilege analyses of the screen which, like Mulvey's, advocate its use within feminist, queer, and anti-racist projects.

Questions of representation are important to my project not just because of the centrality of childhood to representation itself, but also because my main analytical frames of race, sexuality, and gender are inherently tied to representation. Along these lines, Richard Dyer, in *The Matter of Images* (1993), describes the interconnectedness between representation, subjectivity, and materiality, particularly as it affects marginalized groups: "[H]ow social groups are treated in cultural representation is part and parcel of how they are treated in life, [...] poverty, harassment, self-hate and discrimination (in housing, jobs, educational opportunity and so on) are shored up and instituted by representation" (1993: 1). This interconnectedness has implications, then, for how representations are encoded, distributed, and decoded, and thus for how they are analyzed as a particular site of power/knowledge. Because, as Sander Gilman writes, representations and visual conventions are "the primary means by which we perceive and transmit our understanding of the world about us", an analysis of representation must attend to the "ideologically charged iconographic nature" of representations (1992: 171). In my own analysis, I attend specifically to the ways in which representations of childhood map onto or come to stand in for—that is, are put into practice as—ideologically charged representations and framings of race, sexuality, and gender. Centrally, I argue that creating representations of childhood allows a cover for more insidious iconographic images of race, sexuality, and gender to travel. I thus interrogate representations of childhood for the wider cultural and political meanings they engender.

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1988); Hansen (1986); Heath (1978); Pajaczkowska (1981); G. Pollock (1977); Stacey (1987).

<sup>13</sup> For a special issue celebrating and responding to the fortieth anniversary of Mulvey's "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema", including a contribution from Mulvey herself, see: Rhodes (2015).

Partaking in this type of analysis, particularly as it has brought into effect a debate about “positive” and “negative” images, as well as a debate about the marginalization of various communities from the institutional structures of cultural production (Mercer 1994), has led to what Stuart Hall identified as “a struggle over the relations of representation” (1992: 253). For Hall, who pioneered British Cultural Studies, and who wrote about the links between media production and racism, this struggle emerged out of a particular conjuncture, a set of historical conditions in Britain in the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s, in which black people in particular have “typically been the objects, but rarely the subjects, of the practices of representation” (1992: 252). As such, “[t]he struggle to come into representation”, Hall writes, “was predicated on a critique of the degree of fetishization, objectification and negative figuration which are so much a feature of the representation of the black subject” (1992: 252). Kobena Mercer additionally argues that it is precisely because of this fetishization and objectification that marginalized communities experience a “sense of urgency [...] [w]hether one is making a film, writing a book, organizing a conference or curating an exhibition” (1994: 235). Mercer argues that for black artists, this urgency has burdened them with the “impossible task of speaking as ‘representatives’” of the race (1994: 235).

One way to challenge this burden is to engage in what Hall calls “a politics of representation itself” (1992: 253). This mode of reading images opens up space, Hall writes, for oppositional readings:

One of the most significant political moments [...] is the point when events which are normally signified and decoded in a negotiated way begin to be given an oppositional reading. Here the “politics of signification” – the struggle in discourse – is joined. (1980: 127)

Articulating this politics as a methodological approach to representation, Teresa de Lauretis argues for a practice of “reading between the signs” and “reading a text against the grain” (1984: 6). Both Hall and de Lauretis thus prioritize oppositional, engaged, and alternative modes of reading representations. Across all of these analyses, representation itself must thus be understood as “part of a constantly changing dialectical process within which”, Robert Stam and Louise Spence remind us, “we are far from powerless” (1983: 20). And yet it is precisely because representations

themselves are powerful too, that they play a privileged role in this thesis' interrogation of the putting into practice of childhood. While the historical moment and geopolitical context in which my thesis situates its analysis is different from that of Hall's, Mercer's, or de Lauretis', the questions they pose of media and representation—those of the burden of representation, the struggle to come into representation, the encoding and decoding of meaning, and the critical relationship the viewer has to images—are all central to my analysis, especially because, as I show, representations of childhood allow this work to continue in ways that constantly require interrogation.<sup>14</sup>

### *Affect*

The final theoretical frameworks I use within this thesis are affect theory (discussed here), and psychoanalysis (explored further in the remainder of this chapter). In this thesis I use theories of affect, the psychic life of power, fantasy, and cathexis to examine the motivating intentions behind various moments in which childhood is put into practice. Rather than assume that analyzing a statement through affect necessarily untangles an authentic internal thought, I situate approaches to affect in two ways. First, as I shall show, while these theories of the affective register of statements and discourse cannot be taken for granted in their production of evidence, they do provide unique and rigorous methods—which are as institutionally varied, contestably defined, and vetted as those across other methodological and disciplinary approaches. Second, the theories of affect that I rely on and privilege are those that are situated in relation to the historical, the institutional, and the production and intensification of power/knowledge.

There are a number of different established ways of theorizing affect that bridge across disciplines such as social psychology, psychoanalysis, cultural studies, and feminist, queer, postcolonial, deconstructionist theories. Across these, affects are variously defined as being experienced as a “state”, or as an “intensity”, and there are numerous debates about how they should be understood in relation to emotions,

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<sup>14</sup> These questions have continued to be interrogated in feminist, queer, and postcolonial film theory, particularly in relation to transnational and diasporic cinema. While there are too many interventions to cite here, see, among others: Bean and Negra (2002); Marcianiak, Imre, and O’Healy (2007); Mulvey and Rogers (2015); Naficy (2001); Negra (2001); Patel (2001); Ramanathan (2006); Shohat and Stam (2003).

feelings, and drives.<sup>15</sup> Freud, for instance, theorizes affects as subordinate to drives, while Silvan Tomkins theorizes affects as the “primary motivational system” for the drives (Tomkins 1962: 6). Brian Massumi (2002), Eric Shouse (2005), and Baruch Spinoza (2001) understand affects to operate separately from emotions and feelings, while others, such as Tyler (2008), tend to use affect and emotion interchangeably. In a broad sense, Clough suggests that affect “refers generally to bodily capacities to affect and be affected or the augmentation or diminution of a body’s capacity to act, to engage, and to connect” (2007: 2). For her, affects are understood as things that are transmitted, shared, and passed between people, objects, and spaces. In the debates about what affects are, what they do, and how they can be read and represented, there is deep contention about their relationship to knowledge and meaning. Some, like O’Sullivan, argue that because affects are “moments of *intensity*, a reaction in/on the body at the level of matter”, that they “are not to do with knowledge or meaning; indeed, they occur on a different, *asignifying* register” (2001: 126, emphasis in original). Others, like Ahmed (2004a, 2004b) and Lauren Berlant (2004), see affects as objects, sentiments, or scenes that can be analyzed for their historical and contemporary imbrication with social and political life. My aim here is not to establish a definitive notion of what affects are, but rather to situate my interrogation of affect across this thesis within these wider debates and to make a case for understanding the practice of childhood through particular theories of affect.

My own approach to affect positions it in relationship with the workings of social, psychic, and political life (cf. Hemmings 2005). Theorizing affect as it is intimately connected to the political is important because affects are sensations, events, or mechanisms through which investments in particular worlds, experiences, states of being, people, and populations can be analyzed. Affects can thus be understood as indicating—as providing a certain type of evidence for—the ways in which someone is experiencing a particular event. Here, analyzing the putting into practice of childhood through affect would attend to the affective register through which one’s invocation of

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<sup>15</sup> The child (and the infant) play a privileged role in the parsing out of the differences between affect, feeling, and emotion in various scholars’ locating of affect within or prior to the social. Because, as Claudia Castañeda writes, the child is “repeatedly figured as that which comes ‘before’ the Subject” (2001: 32), linking affect with children and infants is used within affect theory to demonstrate affect’s “analogue” (Sedgwick and Frank 2003) and “extra-discursive” (O’Sullivan 2001) nature.



childhood was deployed—anger, fear, joy—and attend to these registers as indication of a particular response to a provocation.

At the same time, analyzing affect in this way becomes increasingly problematic, as affects are never straightforwardly indicative, singly experienced, nor temporally limited. As Tomkins notes, a single affect might have multiple and contradictory instigators and mitigators (1962: 23). Additionally, as Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick argues, while affects may serve the function of creating the impetus for immediate action, they are also not limited to such a shortened timeline. Writing about anger, for example, she notes that it “can evaporate in seconds but can also motivate a decades-long career of revenge” (2003a: 19). Affects are also complex (and differentiated from drives), in that they can have themselves as objects: experiencing joy can be joyous, and it can make one’s feeling of joy be heightened (Sedgwick and Frank 2003: 99-100). At the same time, affects can have their object be other affects; as Sedgwick writes: “one can be excited by anger, disgusted by shame, or surprised by joy” (2003a: 19). Because of all these factors, locating affects as a type of evidence is inherently complex.

However, it is precisely because of this complexity and the contradictory and manifold nature of affects and their objects that they become so central to my own analysis. As I am working across this thesis to situate the putting into practice of childhood as a productive mode or technology through which power flows, interrogating childhood’s deployment through a framework that prioritizes and has the capacity to work through contradiction at its core is integral. As such, Sedgwick’s and Tomkins’ notions of affects having manifold instigators and mitigators is rather important for my own thesis’ analysis, for it not only implies that an affect can be attached to multiple and “improper” objects, but also that singular objects can be the object of multiple and contradictory affects. Returning to Tyler’s analysis of the work that the figure of the chav does in regards to class making, she notes that not only does the affectively mediated chav travel “on a wave of continually repeated disgust reactions”, but also that this disgust “is intimately bound up with, and authorised by, comedy and the community forming power of laughter” (2008: 30). Tyler’s framing suggests that because there are multiple investments in an object, critical responses to “negative” affects and negative figures cannot simply counter the effects of these affects by resignifying these objects with more positive signification. As Berlant writes: “The

Freudian notion of *Schadenfreude*, the pleasure one takes in the pain of another, only begins to tell the unfinished story of the modern incitement to feel compassionately—even while being entertained” (2004: 5). Attending to the multiple layers of affective resonance of objects and figures, then, can point us towards the mechanisms—like the sensationalist media entertainment industry in the U.S. that Berlant is referring to, the “class cross-dressing nights” hosted by British universities that Tyler writes about, or, as I discuss in Chapter Four, the role of blogs, viral images, and social media in spreading racist hostility—by which disgust joyfully travels. It can therefore allow a theorization of affects which, in their amplification of responses to the social and political investments in childhood, are unevenly held, differently experienced, and multiply located.

In order to more directly articulate how an analysis of affect aligns with my overall framing of the putting into practice of childhood, I turn finally to Ahmed (2004b). Explaining her theoretical approach to affect, Ahmed distances herself from theories that separate “internal” affects from their political utility. Ahmed argues: “Rather than seeing emotions as psychological dispositions, we need to consider how they work, in concrete and particular ways, to mediate the relationship between the psychic and the social, and between the individual and the collective” (2004b: 119). The “work” that emotions do, Ahmed argues, is that of making populations and individuals intelligible. Along these lines, Ahmed writes: “emotions *do things*, and they align individuals with communities—or bodily space with social space—through the very intensity of their attachments” (2004b: 119, emphasis in original). In Ahmed’s analysis of emotions and their circulation (specifically within discourses on asylum seekers, immigrants, and “strangers” in the British context), she traces the ways in which fear, shame, and hatred “stick” to racialized bodies to produce them as others to the national body, and to produce the nation’s “ordinary” subjects as white ones. The circulation of these “sticky” feelings, Ahmed argues, is mediated through the deployment of figures. Crucially, the deployment of these figures (for Ahmed these are the mixed-racial couple, the child molester, the rapist, the alien, and the foreigner), along with the affects that these figures produce, are circulated in response to affects themselves. Fear about the “loss” of a white British ownership over national culture, in other words, is mediated and produced through the deployment of the frightening figure of the foreigner. This

frightening figure, Ahmed argues, is both itself productive of affect, and deployed in response to affect.

It is within this particular reading of affect that I want to re-situate my framework of “putting into practice”. Here, the putting into practice of “foreignness”—to extend my framing into Ahmed’s context—is facilitated through the deployment of a figure (reified through and produced by discourses and representations), and, this putting into practice of foreignness is both motivated by, and circulated through, an affect. The particular analytical framework that I am offering here—of the “putting into practice” of an object—thus seeks to combine the multiple layers of production—discourses, figures, representations, and affects—through which the “work” of an object like “foreignness” or “childhood” takes place. For both of these objects, their being put into practice is a directed act, one responding to, and hoping to intervene in, the productivity of power.

### **What to do With a Dangerous Cathected Object?**

Moving now from my theoretical framing of the putting into practice of childhood to my articulation of how to respond to its deployments, the second part of this chapter makes two moves in response to the question of: What to do with a dangerous cathected object? Or: What to do with childhood? As I explain in detail in the sections below, my framing of childhood as a “cathected object” is a means of interrogating childhood as an object—both real and fantasmatic—whose confines and effects are dependent on the psychic attachments and investments that people place within it. Drawing on Freud’s delineation of the object-cathexis, I argue that the contemporary life of childhood is structured by the wishes that people place within it, and by the psychic nourishment that a particular version of childhood provides. This framing of childhood, as well as my subsequent question of what to do with childhood, became central to my thesis as the focus of my research moved from the previous two chapters’ explorations of childhood’s production within racist, sexist, and heteronormative conditions and histories, to the following three analytical chapters. In these upcoming chapters, my attending to the contemporary life of childhood analyzes it as an object that works both for and against social justice projects. In this context, where childhood is both useful

and dangerous, the question of what to do with it becomes more complex.<sup>16</sup> I thus articulate this question in this way in response to childhood's productivity as both a technology of power, and as an object of analysis. Here, I work with two examples of polemical responses to difficult objects of analysis as a means through which I establish my own response to the question of what to do with childhood.

Turning towards Gilroy's *Against Race* (2000), and Edelman's *No Future* (2004)—as well as a number of challenges to these texts—I am hoping to make two conceptual moves. First, I hope to show the impetuous for, and the pull of, negative framings of the political and the work of dangerous objects, as these framings have variously shaped my research across the life of this thesis. Second, I take a step back from these negative framings and attempt to grapple with an understanding of difficult objects like childhood as being multiply invested in and cathected. My argument here is not about their objects ("reproductive futurity" and "race") per se; rather, I am privileging some of the different modes of opposition (of being-against) that are articulated through various responses to these scholars' objects. In unpacking these two approaches to dangerous objects, I aim to provide a sense of the types of strategically ambivalent readings that take place in the following three analytical chapters. By using the notion of "dangerous" I am drawing on Foucault, who argued that his theoretical project was not about suggesting that "everything is bad, but that everything is dangerous, which is not exactly the same as bad" (1984: 343). "If everything is dangerous," Foucault writes, "then we always have something to do" (1984: 343). It is this interplay between bad and dangerous, and indeed the hopeful, that the second part of this chapter seeks to more fully engage with.

### *Gilroy's Tarnished Object*

The articulation of opposition that initiated my exploration of the possibility of, and importance for, this stance on childhood comes from within the debates on the legacies

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<sup>16</sup> My phrasing of childhood as a "dangerous object" is responding to childhood as an object of analysis, and as an object of attachment and orientation in theoretical and social justice projects, not as an "object" in the psychoanalytic framework of object-relations.

of “race” and raciology in Gilroy’s *Against Race* (2000).<sup>17</sup> *Against Race* presents a particularly compelling argument of elimination, as Gilroy advocates against the ethicality of any continued use of the idea of “race”. *Against Race* was a departure from Gilroy’s earlier writing in *There Ain’t No Black in the Union Jack* (1987) and *The Black Atlantic* (1993). Unlike in *Against Race*, in these earlier texts, Gilroy made the case for a more nuanced and centered analysis of “race” within sociological and political debates. In the wake of these writings, Gilroy became a highly renowned and widely cited scholar within Afro-Caribbean, black, and diaspora studies, and his interventions re-shaped the scholarly analyses of race, racism, nation, and culture, particularly within British academia. *Against Race* is his most controversial text, and in it he links the study of “race”—the production of knowledges about “race” that implicates everything from the scientific study of racial biology to race thinking and to the affective resonances of racial communities—to the ongoing histories of racial violence. Gilroy’s contention is that “the old, modern idea of ‘race’ can have no ethically defensible place” within “multicultural social and political life” and even, or particularly, within antiracist politics (2000: 6). He maintains that the histories of violence that have been undertaken under the rubric of “race” and raciology have completely compromised any possibility of the usefulness of the term or the concept. Gilroy’s argument holds consequences not just for antiracist politics, but also for the possibilities and limitations of scholarly interventions more broadly:

Any opportunities for positive change [...] are circumscribed by the enduring effects of past catastrophe [...] It [“race”] cannot be readily re-signified or de-signified, and to imagine that its dangerous meanings can easily be re-articulated into benign, democratic forms would be to exaggerate the power of critical and oppositional interests. In contrast, the creative acts involved in destroying raciology and transcending “race” are more than warranted by the goal of authentic democracy to which they point. (2000: 12)

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<sup>17</sup> Paul Gilroy puts “race” in inverted commas to challenge the idea that race is a biological category by which people are separable. When referencing his arguments, I will follow suit, but I do not take this on as a general practice.

So tarnished by, and implicated in, the forms of inhumanity that underlie not just slavery and segregation, but also “numerous episodes in colonial history and [...] the genocidal activities that have proved to be raciology’s finest, triumphant hours” (2000: 18), Gilroy argues that the idea of “race” has no possible future as a benign description or political tool.<sup>18</sup>

Additionally, drawing upon Frantz Fanon’s Hegelian reading of blackness (Fanon 1967), Gilroy argues that the logics of “race” itself must be eliminated because they are inseparable from racial ontologies as racial hierarchies; race cannot continue because it is not ontological, but relational. Convinced by an understanding of hierarchal relationality as racial ontology, yet expanding the ontologies of race beyond just blackness and whiteness, Gilroy argues that all racial thought, even within antiracist practice, is similarly compromised. “The only appropriate response” Gilroy writes, “is to demand liberation not from white supremacy alone, however urgently that is required, but from all racializing and raciological thought, from racialized seeing, racialized thinking, and racialized thinking about thinking” (2000: 40). Gilroy’s negativity, his politics of opposition, should be understood as seeking a complex reconfiguration—separate from the confines of “race”—of the ways in which people are placed in relation with one another. His demand for race’s elimination ends up in a call for a cosmopolitan global humanism.<sup>19</sup>

I find Gilroy’s work convincing, moving, and urgent in its argument that a tarnished object, one that gets mobilized in projects of racism and anti-racism, needs to be distanced from and let go of. I am particularly interested in two aspects of Gilroy’s work here. First, I am interested in his understanding of the ways in which “race’s” history gets re-lived in the present, even in the moments that it is seemingly detached from or responding to that very history. This is an important question for any project that seeks to undertake an analysis of the work that childhood does in the moments that it is put into practice, for, as I argued in the previous chapters, childhood emerged as a

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<sup>18</sup> Gilroy’s argument about “race” in *Against Race* is a stark contrast from his analysis of “race” in *There Ain’t No Black in the Union Jack* (1987). Critiquing the sociological elision of race under the framework of class, Gilroy argues for a more studied analysis of “race”. He becomes more skeptical of “race” in *The Black Atlantic* (1993). There, however, he argues that diasporic cultures transcend traditional notions of the divisions between ethnicity, “race”, and nationality.

<sup>19</sup> For more on Gilroy’s cosmopolitanism, see: Gilroy (2005). For other approaches to cosmopolitanism, see: Appiah (2015); Beck (2006); Kant (1977).

technology through processes of racial, colonial, classed, sexual, and gendered exclusion, and this history of exclusion continues to inform the work childhood does across its various deployments. Attending to this through Gilroy's lens, one might need to be against "childhood" because it is so deeply entrenched in these ongoing projects and legacies. And yet, it is precisely because of these histories, and their ramifications and enactments within the present, that negativity as a critical project might be a drastically insufficient response.<sup>20</sup> As Ahmed notes in regards to the lack of transcendence within Gilroy's politics of "againstness", being against is only possible if what one is against maintains itself:

To be anti "this" or anti "that" only makes sense if "this" or "that" exists. The messy work of "againstness" might even help remind us that the work of critique does not mean the transcendence of the object of our critique; indeed, critique *might even be dependent on non-transcendence*. (2004c, emphasis in original)

For Ahmed, it is not just that being against maintains one's bad object, but also that, specifically in regards to Gilroy, one cannot be against "race" per se, because race is an effect rather than a given. Sympathetic to Gilroy's project, but cautious about his critical approach, Ahmed writes:

[W]e cannot do away with race, unless racism is "done away". Racism works to produce race as if it was a property of bodies (biological essentialism) or cultures (cultural essentialism). Race exists as an effect of histories of racism as histories of the present. Categories such as black, white, Asian, mixed-race, and so on have lives, but they do not have lives "on their own", as it were. They become fetish objects (black *is*, white *is*) only by being cut off from histories of labour, as well as histories of circulation and exchange. (2004c, emphasis in original)

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<sup>20</sup> For a black queer feminist response to Gilroy's definition of blackness, see: Michelle Wright (2015). Counter to Gilroy's rhizomatic definition of blackness (Gilroy 1993: 4), Wright argues for a paired definition, one that combines a framing of blackness as constructed, with an awareness of the phenomenological manifestations of blackness within what Wright calls "Epiphenomenal time" (M. Wright 2015: 4).

Similarly against Gilroy's assertion that race should be eliminated, Amit Rai (2012) and Arun Saldanha (2006) draw upon theories of assemblage to challenge the refusal within antiracist (and anti-"race") work to acknowledge the givenness of race and its biological underpinnings ("race" for Gilroy is not embodied, it is solely socially constructed).<sup>21</sup>

Saldanha writes:

Far from being an arbitrary classification system imposed upon bodies, race is a nonnecessary and irreducible effect of the ways those bodies themselves interact with each other and their physical environment. The spatiality of race is not one of grids or self/other dialectics, but one of viscosity, bodies gradually becoming sticky and clustering into aggregates. Battling against racism is then not a question of denying race, but of cultivating its energies against the stickiness of racial segregation. (2006: 10)

Saldanha's intervention here to Gilroy's argument is based on an understanding that in Gilroy's rush to transcend race he does not fully ask what race is and how it functions, and he places too much emphasis on the role of language and signification. Seeing race as an inherently dynamic interplay between bodies and language, Saldanha emphasizes phenotypical connections, assemblages, and events.<sup>22</sup> Rai, too, uses the language of assemblage to reconfigure the process of racialization. While Gilroy argues that re-signification does not work, as it simply allows another sign to take on the work of the violence of subjection, Rai argues for constant and multiple processes of signification and affective resonance (termed "race racing"). Never letting race settle, and never

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<sup>21</sup> For scholars like Amit Rai and Arun Saldanha, the challenge to the unity of the subject within assemblage theory (Deleuze and Guattari 1987: 8) can also be helpful in refusing the "unity" of race. See also: Puar (2007); Rai (2012).

<sup>22</sup> To explain Saldanha's notion of "phenotypical connections", he turns to Frantz Fanon's interpellation through the declaration of "Look, a Negro!" (1967: 84). Saldanha writes, "Within a racialised visual regime, it is the concentration of melanin in Fanon's skin that attracts the attention to the white boy—not his suitcase, or coat, or smell, or even posture. [...] His phenotype is capable of conjuring up a whole series of fears, desires, clichés, and antagonisms [...] such is the variegated force of phenotype" (2006: 11). For Saldanha, this articulation of the racialized *body* can challenge racist materialist conceptions of race. He asks: "why are nature and biology, just like the body and matter in general, assumed to be static and deterministic? What if the cultural and biological dimensions of race are both inherently dynamic?" (2006: 15).



becoming fixed in a specific form of measurement, Rai's framing of "race racing" argues that race cannot be so easily used within biopolitical projects.

Across these three counter-arguments to Gilroy's text, negativity is turned into proliferation. As Saldanha writes: "What is needed is an affirmation of race's creativity and virtuality: what race can be" (2006: 21). This generous framing of race is important for a cautious and hopeful investigation into the politics of childhood. Rather than reiterating childhood as fixed—a reiteration that might be understood as being complicit with the exclusions fueled by other stuck notions of childhood—my approach to a politics of opposition asks not just: Through what violent histories did childhood come to be? But also: Through which frames of analysis can we differently imagine and produce what childhood can be? This commitment to centering the creativity of childhood, the multiple frames through which it functions as both dangerous and hopeful, is thus a call to analyze how childhood works in vibrant new ways.

#### *Edelman's Lacanian Death Drive*

Within queer theory, Edelman's polemic *No Future* (2004) is one of the most well known, and fiercely debated, articulations of a politics of opposition (what is generally called the "antisocial thesis").<sup>23</sup> Edelman's text, which adamantly rejected the inclusionary and assimilating impulse in mainstream LGBT activism (and some queer theory), was so polarizing that it generated numerous heated responses, being cited and challenged by almost every subsequent publication within queer theory, even by those who aligned somewhat with his resistance to futurity.<sup>24</sup> In this text, Edelman demands that queers and queerness embrace their collective interpellation as being against what he calls the "coercive universalization" of "the image of the Child" (2004: 11). On behalf of the innocent child, Edelman argues, politics becomes necessarily heteronormative, "rendering unthinkable, by casting outside the political domain, the possibility of a queer resistance to this organizing principle of communal relations" (2004: 11). What makes Edelman's argument polemic is his accession to this

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<sup>23</sup> For more on the antisocial thesis within queer theory, see, among others: Berlant and Edelman (2014), Bersani (1995, 2010), and Caserio et al (2006).

<sup>24</sup> For some of the more explicit responses to Edelman's *No Future* from within queer theory, see: Freeman (2010); Halberstam (2011); Love (2007); Muñoz (2009); Puar (2007).

conscription of queerness as necessarily antisocial. Instead of arguing the normative case, that queers are not against the Child, and do not figure the death drive, Edelman argues that “queer” is only useful as a political project in the moments that it accepts “its figural status as resistance to the viability of the social” (2004: 3). Edelman concludes:

Queers must respond to the violent force of such constant provocations [...] by saying explicitly what Law and the Pope and the whole of the Symbolic order for which they stand hear anyway in each and every expression or manifestation of queer sexuality: Fuck the social order and the Child in whose name we’re collectively terrorized. (2004: 29)

In the following unpacking of Edelman’s antisocial thesis, I make two different arguments about his polemic. First, in conversation with José Muñoz (2009)—and building on the previous section’s arguments about the proliferative nature of tarnished objects—I argue that Edelman makes a slippage between queer subjects and queerness as a figural position that complicates his argument for a queer politics of negativity. Second, looking more closely at Edelman’s Lacanian framing, I explore the promises and limitations of his construction of an ethical relationship to objects from the positionality of the death drive. The questions that emerge in this latter exploration become extended and more thoroughly grappled with in the remainder of this chapter, wherein I turn from negativity (via Gilroy and Edelman) to ambivalence (via Freud).

While I find Edelman’s diagnosis of the political to be intriguing and to carry significant implications for theorizing childhood and the role of phantasy in structuring the coercive will of what is framed as the political, my initial concern about his argument is that because it is necessarily constituted by abstracted figural and structural positions, his implications stumble over the semiotic, material, contradictory, and shifting constitution of figures. Edelman slips, that is, from identifying the surplus figured within queerness, to the political implication of being a subject figured as “queer”. This slip assumes in advance a particular queer subject—despite Edelman’s careful objections (2004: 17-18)—and it assumes a secure knowledge of the lines of subjection through which one’s sexuality is positioned as anti-social. Wrestling with the

difference between figures and subjects, and with the political project of queerness, Edelman writes:

By denying our identification with the negativity of this drive [...] and hence our misidentification from the promise of futurity, those of us inhabiting the place of the queer may be able to cast off that queerness and enter the properly political sphere, but only by shifting the figural burden of queerness to someone else. The *structural position* of queerness, after all, and the need to fill it remain. (2004: 27, emphasis in original)

This slippage between queers as subjects, and queerness as a figural position, brings Edelman's polemical argument for queer people's refusal of reproductive futurity into crisis. As Muñoz argues, Edelman's articulation of negativity is not a viable strategy for a queer politics because negativity must always be articulated and enacted in relationship to those for whom a foothold in futurity is only a utopian aspiration:

The future is only the stuff of some kids. Racialized kids, queer kids, are not the sovereign princes of futurity. While [...] this monolithic figure of the child [is] indeed always already white [...] that is all the more reason to call on a utopian political imagination that will enable us to glimpse another time and place: a "not-yet" where queer youths of color actually get to grow up. (2009: 95-96)

Rather than join Edelman's "celebration of negation", Muñoz argues for what Shoshana Felman (1983) calls "radical negativity" and he suggests that queer theory cannot ethically position itself against futurity when this very future is still just an aspiration for many young queer people.<sup>25</sup> Similarly, I argue that we must interrogate the conditions of emergence and contestation for the "us" within Edelman's notion of queer. Edelman's polemic, in other words, imagines a particular subject who inhabits "queerness", a

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<sup>25</sup> Negation, for Shoshana Felman and José Muñoz, is a participation in oppositional logic, while radical negativity is an approach that basks in the "scandal" of the negation's lack of opposition. Felman writes: "Radical negativity (or "saying no") belongs neither to *negation*, nor to *opposition*, nor to *correction* ("normalization"), nor to *contradiction* (of positive and negative, normal and abnormal, "serious" and "unserious," "clarity" and "obscurity")—it belongs precisely to *scandal*: to the scandal of their nonopposition" (Felman 1983: 104, emphasis in original).

subject who is positioned as queer because of their opposition to the Child and to reproductive futurity, rather than, as I explore in Chapter Five, a subject who is positioned as queer because of their commitment to reproductive futurity. This subject, while outside of Edelman's figuring of the queer is, I argue, necessary for a critical queer politics. It is thus that his project of opposition cannot hold up to the multiple registers, parameters, and dynamics of power through which investments in reproductive futurity operate.

However, what happens if we accept Edelman's premise, that queerness (as figural) is positioned in a negative relation to the Child (as universal), and we follow his framing of the political along a Lacanian model of the Symbolic order? What interventions and understandings does his argument hold, and how might it be useful for an analysis of the putting into practice of childhood? Drawing upon Lacan's theories of the Symbolic order (Lacan 1977a, 1977b), Edelman calls the coercive universalization of the Child "reproductive futurism", and he argues that its framing of the political operates as a "mirror of desire" (2004: 10):

Politics, [...] names the struggle to effect a fantasmatic order of reality in which the subject's alienation would vanish into the seamlessness of identity [...] This means not only that politics conforms to the temporality of desire [...] but also that politics is a name for the temporalization of desire [...] Politics, that is, [...] allegorizes or elaborates sequentially, precisely *as* desire, those over-determinations of libidinal positions and inconsistencies of psychic defenses occasioned by what disarticulates the narrativity of desire: the drives. (2004: 8-9, emphasis in original)

In order to understand Edelman's argument, it is important to unpack what he means by desire. Using a Lacanian model, Edelman argues that desire is "born of and sustained by a constitutive *lack*" (2004: 10, emphasis in original). In Lacan's terms, desire is "neither the appetite for satisfaction, nor the demand for love, but the difference that results from the subtraction of the first from the second, the phenomenon of their splitting" (1958: 287). Desire, in other words, can only be maintained by its un-fulfillment, for its fulfillment (obtaining the desired object) would bring into being its own end. It is because politics, as Edelman argues, is the narrativization of desire (a narrative that

promises a fulfillment of desire's lack, but only by deferring this fulfillment off onto the space of the future which only politics itself can eventually bring about), that it wraps itself so tightly around the figure of the Child. Politics relies on the Child, Edelman argues, because it is a figure imagined to enjoy "unmediated access to Imaginary wholeness", precisely for its location in the imagined past—it thus embodies for politics the site at which "being and meaning are joined as One" (2004: 10). Promising this figure, or wrapping itself around the promises that this figure makes in relation to our own imagined wholeness, politics thus allows us to refuse to acknowledge the "overdeterminations of libidinal positions and inconsistencies of psychic defenses" (2004: 9) that we are necessarily constituted by.

If politics, however, is the mirror of desire, then the death drive, Edelman writes, "names what the queer, in the order of the social, is called forth to figure: the negativity opposed to every form of social viability" (2004: 9). Drives are important to Edelman because they emerge not in relation to lack, but rather "in relation to a constitutive *surplus*" (2004: 10, emphasis in original). The surplus that the drive, and specifically the death drive, marks, is, Edelman writes, "the excess embedded within the Symbolic through the loss, the Real loss, that the advent of the signifier effects" (2004: 9). Articulating this Real loss that the signifier effects, Edelman argues that the signifier is an:

alienating and meaningless token of our Symbolic constitution as subjects [...] this signifier only bestows a sort of *promissory* identity, one with which we can never succeed in fully coinciding because we, as subjects of the signifier, can only be signifiers ourselves, can only every aspire to catch up to whatever it is we might signify by closing the gap that divides us and, paradoxically, makes us subjects *through that act of division alone*. (2004: 8, emphasis in original)

If the queer figures the death drive, if it marks the surplus of the Symbolic, then it is the constant and reiterative—for Lacan and Freud the drives are nothing if not repetitive—reminder that the political subject, and hence politics itself, is necessarily constituted by the failure of this promissory identity. This queer signification of Real loss—being made, in other words, to signify the reality that promised wholeness can only exist in phantasy—is absolutely necessary for a queer politics, Edelman argues. Acknowledging

this excess, he writes, means “recognizing and refusing the consequences of grounding reality in denial of the drive” (2004: 17). As such, queerness, as the reiterative reminder of the failures and deferrals of politics, must, Edelman argues, remain this reminder; its “efficacy”, its “real strategic value, lies in its resistance to a Symbolic reality” (2004: 18).

My argument against Edelman’s framework, however, rests precisely here: where he ends. In taking on the role of the drive, Edelman demands of queerness (and therefore of a politics of negativity) that it not just refuse to engage with politics on its terms—indeed that it seeks to unravel politics through a negation of its terms—but also that its relationship to the ego and the ethical is that of a reiterative resistance (the death drive) *internal to the analysand*. Why, I ask, not demand that queerness instead take up the position of the analyst? Taking on a position internal to the analysand and containing the political and the queer within this subject not only limits the possibilities for imagining different subjects who might inhabit these figures, as I argued above, but it also refuses to think beyond itself, or to intervene in its own problematic processes. Remaining within the analysand, the queer as “ethical” is bound only for a repetition of its conditions of emergence.

To make this point, I turn not to Edelman or Lacan, but rather to Freud. Describing the role of psychoanalysis generally, and the analyst specifically, Freud writes:

The patient cannot remember all of what is repressed in him, and what he cannot remember may be precisely the essential part of it. Thus he acquires no sense of conviction of the correctness of the construction that has been communicated to him. He is obliged to *repeat* the repressed material as a contemporary experience instead of, as the physician would prefer to see, *remembering* it as something belonging to the past. [...] When things have reached this stage, it may be said that the earlier neurosis is now replaced by a fresh, “transference-neurosis”. It has been the physician’s endeavour to [...] force as much as possible into the channel of memory and to allow as little as possible to emerge as repetition. (1920: 228, emphasis in original).

In this statement, Freud suggests that the role of the analyst is to interrupt the patient's repeating of a repressed past trauma within current experience by working with the patient to uncover the original trauma. In so doing, the patient might recognize and acknowledge (bring into memory) the repressed event, and can begin to consciously process it. The analyst's role, in other words, is to bring into light the underlying instigators of repetitious acts that are engendered by repression such that they might be intervened in.<sup>26</sup> In this sense, if queer theory worked towards cultivating the position of the analyst rather than the death drive internal to the analysand, it might understand its relationship to the social as one that is propelled by the desire for critique, social change, and interruption, rather than stubborn reiteration.

Engaging with Edelman's mapping of the political along and as the narrativization of desire from the position of the analyst rather than the analysand still allows for many of Edelman's critiques to hold, but it repositions what relationship queerness, as a political project and a scholarly one, has to the problematic structures through which queer is constituted by and in which it can intervene. Here, queerness might, rather than say "no" to a Symbolic reality that projects its lack onto the Child, instead become the vessel onto which politics transfers the repressions that structure this problematic relation, and thereby begins to live through them, recollect them, and recognize them. In moving away from merely figuring the death drive, a politics of opposition that locates itself in the figural and active role of the analyst might thus instead engender a relation to its object that appears as something less akin to unending negativity, and more akin to proliferative hope.

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<sup>26</sup> This argument might find difficulty in a particular understanding of the counter-transference. Within this notion of the counter-transference, Sigmund Freud initially warned that the analyst's occasional inappropriate responses to the patient's transferences may cloud the analyst's evaluation (Freud 1910). Because of this, queer theory's working towards the position of the analyst would not necessarily mean that queer theory would transcend its own repetitions. However, as Neil Aggarwal outlines, this "narrow" view of the counter-transference has broadened to one in which they are understood as "an inevitable and necessary vehicle toward understanding the patient" (2001: 547). Here, through a "careful monitoring" of the counter-transference, "the analyst could obtain useful insights into what the patient was trying to get the analyst to think or feel" (2001: 547).

## Cathexis and Wanting

In my above discussion on opposition, elimination, and negation, I have grappled with the promises and limitations of an approach to childhood that understands it as an object to be against. Having argued that these theoretical approaches cannot properly account for the multiple subjective positions they assume in advance, nor the myriad potentialities of objects' re-significations, I turn now to an analysis of childhood as an idealized object. I do so through the psychoanalytic concept of "cathexis", as well as through a theoretical framing of "wanting". Rather than address childhood as an object to be against, then, in this section I ask after what it might mean to think about childhood as a set of investments that, in Spivak's words, "we cannot not want" (1993: 45). While I will speak to some of the specific reasons why childhood might be ambivalently wanted in the following three chapters, here I hope to sit with the question of wanting. Spivak's quote—initially in response to feminism's relationship to liberalism (1993: 42-46)—has been taken up across many different debates, but I want to spend a bit more time with the notion of "wanting" that structures her notion of "cannot not". Giving a reading of this wanting, Wendy Brown writes: "Spivak's grammar suggests a condition of constraint in the production of our desire so radical that it perhaps even turns that desire against itself, foreclosing our hopes in a language we can neither escape nor wield on our own behalf" (2000: 230). And indeed, Spivak speaks in a similar grammar across some of her work. In "Righting Wrongs" (2004), for example, Spivak writes: "Neither [the assumption that it is natural to be angled toward the other, nor the question of responsibility being a begged question] can survive without the other, if it is a just world *that we seem to be obliged to want*" (2004: 537, emphasis added). What does it mean to want an object, world, or relationship? How might Spivak's framing of the ambivalence at the heart of the political be thought together with a psychoanalytic framing of desire, and what might this pairing allow for a theorization of childhood as a technology of power? These questions animate this section. In it, I provide an initial sketch of the theoretical work that answering these questions requires, and I establish this line of analysis as a theoretical approach that structures the thesis generally. To answer them, I re-frame Spivak's and Brown's questions of wanting and constraint in the production of desire through the psychoanalytic concept of cathexis as theorized by Freud. In so doing, I shall argue that cathexis allows for a revisiting of these questions in productive ways.



### *Object-Cathexis*

In “Mourning and Melancholia” (1917), Freud describes the relationships one has with objects of love through the language of “object-cathexis”. This object-cathexis, he writes, is a “great expense of time and cathectic energy [...] in which the libido is bound to the object” (1917: 245). Object-cathexes, as investments in libidinal energy, are not merely directed towards a particular person (such as a loved one), they are additionally attachments to objects “of a more ideal kind” (1917: 245). The cathected object, in other words, is one whose conditions of attachment are structured through an idyllic “thing-presentation” of the object within the unconscious (1917: 256). Freud’s description of the idealization of a cathected object can also be found in his writing on the Oedipus complex. In *The Ego and the Id* (1923), Freud describes the mother as the infant’s primary and original love object, and as the infant’s first idealized object-cathexis. In his outlining of the boy’s development of his super-ego, Freud writes:

At a very early age, the little boy develops an object-cathexis for his mother, which originally related to the mother’s breast [...]; [whereas] the boy deals with his father by identifying himself with him. For a time these two relationships proceed side by side, until the boy’s sexual wishes in regard to his mother become more intense and his father is perceived as an obstacle to them. [...] An ambivalent attitude to his father and an object-relation of solely affectionate kind to his mother make up the content of the simple positive Oedipus complex in a boy. (1923: 455)

Cathexes, then, are libidinal and psychic investments in objects (both real and phantasmatic) wherein the object’s thing-presentation to the unconscious is primarily structured not through identification, but rather through idealization, pure affection (or, alternatively, abhorrence), and, importantly, a refusal (via repression) to consciously acknowledge the object’s ambivalence. The object-cathexis thus is structured by a wish that one places within that object: a desire, structured by the id, for a particular version of the object, and what it provides.

To approach childhood as a form of cathexis is thus to understand it as an object, real and phantasmatic, whose confines and existence are integral to the psychic attachments and libidinal investments that people place within it; it is additionally to

recognize that childhood functions as an object in its conscious (or fantasmatic) social and psychic life as an idealized one lacking in ambivalence. Indeed, it is precisely because the concept of childhood functions as an object-cathexis—as an object deeply laden with psychic energy and investment—that the moments in which it is put into practice expand to include all types of negotiations and contradictions, from using childhood to resolve a conflict with one’s own understanding of self, to, as this thesis more specifically grapples with, the use of childhood to resolve anxieties about race, sexuality, and gender. Returning to Jacqueline Rose’s contention, which I cited in the previous chapter—that the notion of a universal child serves to disavow a set of cultural divisions in which everyone is caught (1984: 7)—this thesis understands the needs and desires that the cathected child serves to be ones specifically related to how people experience identity categories, subjection, the markers of race and gender, and their own sexual life. Like the boy’s mother in Freud’s mapping of the Oedipal complex, the cathected object of the child is flattened, idealized, and invested in precisely because it provides psychic and material nourishment or sustenance. Crucially, though, the frame of cathexis is useful not just for the diagnosis it provides about why childhood gets put into practice. It is additionally useful—as I argue below through the lens of melancholia and ambivalence—because it pinpoints the ways in which the putting into practice of childhood might be interrupted or expanded.

### *Cathexis, Melancholia, and Ambivalence*

Because object-cathexes are structured by an overwhelming investment of libidinal energy in an idealized notion of the object, and because they are structured by a repression of the object’s constitutional ambivalence, they can become central, Freud writes, to problematic relations between one’s self and one’s object, and one’s self and one’s ego. In relation to melancholia, Freud argues that in the melancholic loss of a real or phantasmatic object or relation, the object-cathexis breaks, but only in so far as the object itself is removed; the libidinal energy placed within that object remains and, instead of finding a new object to idealize and attach to (as it would, eventually, in mourning), it turns inward, towards the ego, and serves to identify the ego with the loss of the object (1917: 249). Importantly, however, within melancholia, the constitutional ambivalence of the object (which was initially repressed), begins to structure the libidinal energy and libidinal loss that is incorporated in the ego. Freud thus writes that

while “[c]onstitutional ambivalence belongs by its nature to the repressed; traumatic experiences in connection with the object [prior to its loss, or in the event of its loss] may have activated [this] repressed material” (1917: 257). Indeed, Freud asserts:

[T]he loss of a love-object is an excellent opportunity for the ambivalence in love-relationships to make itself effective and come into the open. [...] In melancholia, the occasions which give rise to the illness extend for the most part beyond the clear case of a loss by death, and include all those situations of being slighted, neglected or disappointed, which can import opposed feelings of love and hate into the relationship or reinforce an already existing ambivalence. (1917: 250-251)

This ambivalence plays two countering roles in melancholia. On one hand, the ambivalence structuring one’s ego-identification with the object can be dangerous, as it can cause an ego-identification with the hate one felt for the object, and it can act as a means through which the ego itself becomes an object towards which its own hostility must be directed (1917: 252). On the other hand, however, the ambivalence directed towards the object can be incorporated into the ego in ways that allow for the object loss itself to take a less devastating result:

Just as mourning impels the ego to give up the object by declaring the object to be dead and offering the ego the inducement of continuing to live, so does each single struggle of ambivalence loosen the fixation of the libido to the object by disparaging it, denigrating it and even as it were killing it. It is possible for the process in the *Ucs.* to come to an end, either after the fury has spent itself or after the object has been abandoned as valueless. (1917: 257)

While this elaboration of the work that ambivalence plays in one’s emergence from melancholia may appear dangerous as well, what Freud is detailing here is that in the process of emerging from a pathological state of melancholia, the object’s constitutional ambivalence gets wrested from the unconscious. Ambivalence’s repression into the unconscious, that is, both structures the object-cathexis, and its emergence from the

unconscious is precisely what is required as a psychic tool to break the problematic identification that the ego forms with a lost object.

Understanding this process in relationship to childhood as a cathected object, then, frames the investment placed in childhood's contours through a disavowed (or repressed) ambivalence that is constitutional of childhood itself, and it understands the recognition and embrace of this very ambivalence to be the means through which problematic investments in childhood can be reconfigured or come to an end. By returning to Rose's argument about the cultural divisions closed off by the disavowals that structure the universal child, I hope to make this point more clear. If we reframe this disavowal through the Freudian language of repression, if we theorize it as the (politically) repressed constitutional ambivalence of our own relationship to, and location within, these divisions, we can, I am arguing, perhaps also locate, prioritize, and analyze the moments in which this constitutional ambivalence brings this repression into rupture. This rupturing force of ambivalence is particularly important in relation to the gendered, sexual, and racial life of childhood that this thesis interrogates.

In this light, my analysis of the racial, sexual, and gendered lines of investment in the child additionally learns from postcolonial, feminist, and critical-race theorists' explorations of melancholia. Gilroy (2005), for example, argues that the ongoing refusal to mourn the loss of the British empire has led to an "extensively fragmented national collective" (2005: 102). Stuck in its refusal to mourn, Gilroy writes, the nation turns instead to racist violence. Speaking to the U.S. context, Anne Cheng (2000) analyzes melancholic loss in two ways. On one hand, Cheng writes, national racial marginality "retroactively [posits] the racial other as always Other and lost to the heart of the nation [...] naturaliz[ing] the more complicated 'loss' of the unassimilable racial other" (2000: 10). And, on the other hand, dominant white identity, Cheng asserts, "operates melancholically" as an identification system built on exclusions that it disavows (2000: 11; see also: Eng and Han 2000). Across these scholars' work, then, melancholia—and the internalization of ambivalence about racial, sexual, and gendered identification (Butler 1997; Schiesari 1992; Silverman 1988)—are central to subject formation. However, theorizing melancholia within these lines of power can also allow for an undoing of these structures as well. Ranjanna Khanna (2003), in her articulation of what she calls "postcolonial melancholy", argues, for example, that the undoing of empire and colonialism is central to a reading of melancholia. Theorizing a colonial melancholy

that is produced within a “critical nationalism that emerge[s] in melancholic remainders”, Khanna argues that these remainders “manifest an inability to remember, an interruption, or a haunting encryption that critiques national-colonial representation” (2003: 21). For Khanna, then, melancholia is central to a decolonial critical practice.

Theorizing the putting into practice of childhood through these scholars’ interventions thus understands childhood as a necessarily ambivalent object that straddles the boundary between unconscious and conscious. It again reiterates the inherent productivity (in the Foucauldian sense) of childhood itself, and it locates my analysis of childhood in a line of critical inquiry specifically engaged in questions of race, sexuality, and gender. My framing of the putting into practice of childhood as ambivalent thus seeks to analyze deployments of childhood as produced by the wishes that animate their invocation, as well as defined by the relations that bring into being these wishes’ very undoing. Theorized in this way, childhood is far from being an object that requires a critical position of being against; rather, it is one that requires constant grappling *with*. Let me stress these points: it is not just that constitutional ambivalence brings this repression into rupture, but that it brings it into *necessary* rupture, a rupture that must be undertaken by the political (the ego) if it is to do justice to its object and break out of a “pathological” state. And, therefore, this “constant grappling” must also be pushed towards not just multiple lenses of interrogation, but rather deep psychic disentanglement: a fraught, careful, measured, and ambivalent accounting of dangerous objects, structured by a reflexive approach that understands and requires the inconsistencies of self and object to be the terms of our attachments.

### *Oedipal Wishes and the Super-Ego*

The second reason I argue for the importance of cathexis comes from Freud’s writing on the development of the super-ego. As I noted above, Freud argues that within the Oedipus complex the boy develops an object-cathexis for his mother and identifies himself with his father until he begins to perceive his father as an obstacle to his erotic interest (1923: 455). What I am interested in here is the specific process by which Freud argues that the object-cathexis the boy has of his mother is given up. Describing this process, Freud writes:

Clearly the repression of the Oedipus complex was no easy task. The child's parents and especially his father, were perceived as the obstacle to a realization of his Oedipus wishes; so his infantile ego fortified itself for the carrying out of the repression by erecting this same obstacle within itself. [...] [This took place through the] forming of a precipitate in the ego, consisting of these two identifications [with the mother and the father.] [...] This modification of the ego retains its special position; it confronts the other contents of the ego as an ego ideal or super-ego. (1923: 458)

On one hand, Freud argues, the object-cathexis of the boy's mother is given up through repression of the Oedipal wishes, but, at the same time, this cathexis is given up because the boy recognizes that his libidinal and psychic investment in his mother is actually interrupted by the mother's relation to someone else. Mediating this recognition of the mother's inherent relationality, the boy develops a super-ego which introduces both an identification with the father—"You *ought to be* like this (like your father)" (1923: 457, emphasis in original)—as well as a separation from the father: "You *may not be* like this (like your father) [...] you may not do all that he does; some things are his prerogative" (1923: 457, emphasis in original). In this mediation, the boy's object-cathexis for his mother—and thus the terms through which this object relation is experienced as intense and solely affectionate, and is structured by a repression of the constitutional ambivalence of the mother—comes into rupture. The object-cathexis' relationality, in other words, brings this solely affectionate object relation into a crisis that can only be resolved through an ambivalent identification structured by a recognition not just of the mother's own ambivalence, but, crucially, of the mother's agency and relationality.

Here, I want to make two important points about what the insights that Freud's elaboration of the development of the super-ego offer for my theorization of childhood as a cathected object. One of these insights is that the cathected object is cathected in relation to, and often intensifies in response to, a structuring barrier to the fulfillment of the wish it provides. The father, understood not as the literal father, but, as Freud (and later Lacan) understands him, as a "dictatorial 'Thou shalt'" (Freud 1923: 475), operates here as a set of structural conditions under which the Oedipal wish cannot be fulfilled. Theorizing the work of childhood in this context thus means that any analysis of its deployment must locate the wish invested in childhood to be constituted in relationship

with, and to be intensified by, the structures—both real and phantasmatic—that oppose it. As I will argue in more depth in the following chapter, we can see this taking place, for example, in relationship to the ways in which childhood as a cathected racial object—as a marker of and investment in whiteness—becomes a heightened object of libidinal energy precisely at the moment that white people fantasize that their racial privilege is slipping. Childhood’s cathexis as a racialized object in a phantasmatic moment of nationally instituted “reverse racism” thus operates in relationship to the specific, historical, and psychic conditions under which one experiences the interruption of one’s hold on an object (a job, a nation, a college acceptance, a set of relations) as stemming from a “threatening” force.<sup>27</sup> Importantly, of course, these threatening forces need have no material hold: the fantasy that they might, however, is often enough to instigate a heightening of one’s object-cathexis.

The other insight gleaned from this Oedipal triangle is thus that deployments of childhood—investments in it fulfilling a particular wish—refuse not just childhood’s ambivalence (as I argued above), but also its inherent relationality. For my own analysis across this thesis, this relationality is constituted not just through the multiple and contradictory subject positions that are interpellated by and negated by the category of childhood itself, but also through the situated and contestably negotiated historical conditions of emergence through which childhood initially became a technology of power. This framing, then, implies that in order to understand the hold that childhood as a cathected object has in problematic and proliferative practices is to interrogate the precise conditions through which a particular notion of childhood, constituted by necessary exclusions, and heightened in response to phantasmatic conditions, has come into being.

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<sup>27</sup> In Gilroy’s discussion on postcolonial melancholia, this relation to race and the nation is also described as emerging in relation to a “loss”. Gilroy asks: “Why should these anxieties [about economic decline, privatization, erosion of the family, loss of hope in everyday life] have fastened onto race and immigration as the primary cause of the nations’ woes, [...] why do they promote the magical rehomogenization of the country as the favored solution to its postcolonial plight?” (2005: 115). For Gilroy, the idea of the nation and of race are reified and invested in, in the face of a “threat” that is projected onto racialized others and immigrants.

## **Conclusion**

In this chapter I have argued that attending to the ways in which childhood is negotiated and re-imagined through contemporary, discursive, institutional, and representational practices requires not only a mixed methodology of discourse analysis alongside theories of representation, affect, and figuration, but it also requires an ethical relation to childhood's elimination, proliferation, and contextualization, one that accounts for its ambivalent psychic and political conditions and effects. In the following three chapters I engage with much more specific instances of the putting into practice of childhood that are particular to contemporary investments in racism, normative sexuality, and the gender binary. Using the methodologies and theoretical framings set out in this chapter, the three following analytical chapters continue the work I began here, as they seek to build an anti-racist, queer, and transfeminist relationship to childhood's dangerous and desired effects.



## Chapter Four:

### “The ‘fresh faced’ boy in the red T-shirt”:

#### Imaging Trayvon Martin Amidst the Negation of Black Childhood

After I got the phone call I immediately called my mother and my sister, and I had a conversation with them. I was still in disbelief, and it just all of a sudden hit me. And I had to pull my car over because I was driving. And I just broke down, I just yelled. And I just could not believe that this was happening to me. I just could not believe it. That Trayvon was shot and killed. It just was unimaginable for me as a mother that he was not going to be here. I drove home, and when I got home my family was there. We cried together, we prayed together, and we continue to pray together, so that we can all get through this, because this is not just an incident that Tracy and I are going through. A lot of people are going through this.

Interview with Sybrina Fulton (Dias 2012)

[George Zimmerman’s not guilty verdict] came as a complete shock for me. And the reason I say that is because I just look at people as people, and I thought for sure that the jury looked at Trayvon as an average teenager that was minding his own business, that wasn’t committing any crime, that was coming home from the store, and [was] feet away from where he was actually going. And I just believed that they realized that. But, when I heard the verdict, I kind of understand the disconnect. And that maybe they didn’t see Trayvon as their son. They didn’t see Trayvon as a teenager. They didn’t see Trayvon as just a human being that was minding his own business.

Interview with Sybrina Fulton (Ford and Carter 2013)

#### **A Child on the Grass**

On the rainy evening of February 26, 2012, a lone hooded figure walked through the streets of the Retreat at Twin Lakes, a residential community in Sanford, Florida whose peach stucco houses look practically identical. Under the hood of his sweatshirt, Trayvon Martin, a black 17-year-old, stood out among the houses. The proximity of his blackness to them—a proximity that was intimate, as he lived, some of the time, in one

of them—made him suspicious to someone else whose attachments to those repeating homes were also ones of intimacy, dwelling, and proximity. Following Martin in his car, George Zimmerman, a 28-year-old Hispanic man appointed as Captain of the local Neighborhood Watch program, called the local police. Speaking to the dispatcher, Zimmerman reported Martin’s “suspicious” presence and asked for an officer to attend to what he perceived as being a situation:

Hey we’ve had some break-ins in my neighborhood, and there's a real suspicious guy, uh, [at] Retreat View Circle, um [...] This guy looks like he’s up to no good, or he’s on drugs or something. It’s raining and he’s just walking around, looking about [...] looking at all the houses. (City of Sanford, Florida 2012)

While on the phone, Zimmerman became impatient, eager to not let Martin become what he described to the dispatcher as one of “these assholes” that “always get away” (City of Sanford, Florida 2012). When Martin ran, spooked by the hovering presence of a trailing vehicle, Zimmerman exited his car and pursued Martin by foot. Despite being told that his pursuance was unnecessary, and that an officer was on the way, Zimmerman persisted. Zimmerman thanked the dispatcher, got off the phone, and, a couple minutes later, confronted Martin. Screams were heard, a gun was fired, and a body lay face down on the wet grass. When the police arrived at the scene, they pronounced Martin dead, took Zimmerman in for questioning, and then released him. It took seven weeks, and an assemblage of protests, and calls for justice by high-profile civil rights activists and Martin’s family, before Zimmerman was finally arrested and charged with second-degree murder. The trial lasted 15 days, and on July 14, 2013, Zimmerman was acquitted.

After his murder, Martin became a symbol of the institutional racism of the police and the criminal justice system, and of the disproportionate number of fatal shootings of black people by law enforcement. While official statistics are difficult to ascertain, as many organizations, like the FBI, do not break down their reports by race, the Bureau of Justice Statistics estimates that between 2003 and 2009, black people were approximately 4.3 times more likely than white people to be killed by police officers (Burch 2011). This statistic is even more meaningful considering that it is

compounded by the over-policing of black communities and bodies.<sup>1</sup> Not only, then, are black people more likely to be killed by police in arrest-related deaths, they are also more likely to have their livelihoods threatened by interactions with police due to practices such as stop and frisk,<sup>2</sup> broken windows policing,<sup>3</sup> the school to prison pipeline,<sup>4</sup> and the cycle of indebtedness that the criminal justice system perpetuates.<sup>5</sup> Along these lines, the criminal justice system, as a part of the wider prison industrial complex, has historically profiled, arrested, and incarcerated black people in

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<sup>1</sup> The New York Civil Liberties Union has documented how “stop and frisk” (explained in the note below) specifically and overwhelmingly targets people of color. In New York in 2011, for example, while black and Latino men between the ages of 14 and 24 only made up 4.7 percent of the population, they made up 41.6 percent of police stops, and, as such, “[t]he number of stops of young black men exceeded the entire city population of young black men” (NYCLU 2011).

<sup>2</sup> “Stop and frisk” is the name given to a legal search procedure by law enforcement, in situations where they do not have probable cause to arrest a suspect. Despite the Fourth Amendment’s prohibiting of “unreasonable search and seizures”, the supreme court ruled in *Terry v. Ohio* (1968) that this right was not infringed upon in stop and frisk situations if officers have a reasonable suspicion that the suspect is “armed and dangerous”.

<sup>3</sup> The “broken windows theory” was outlined by George Keeling and James Wilson who argued that repeated acts of “low level” crime and public disturbance (such as vandalism and panhandling) snowball into further acts of major crime (Keeling and J. Wilson 1982). Subsequently, Keeling became a consultant to the Boston and Los Angeles police departments, and the New York City police department began targeting low-level crimes such as graffiti, fare-evasion, and begging. This policing disproportionately targets low-income people, and, coupled with stop and frisk, communities of color.

<sup>4</sup> The “school to prison pipeline” is a description of the effects of the increasing police presence in schools, and the enforcement of zero-tolerance policies. It is a system in which the increasingly harsh disciplinary procedures undertaken in schools are linked to the growing incarceration of young people, particularly low income students and students of color. For more on the school to prison pipeline, see: Monahan et al. (2014).

<sup>5</sup> One explicit example of the cycle of indebtedness that the criminal justice system perpetuates can be found in the U.S. Department of Justice report: *Investigation of the Ferguson Police Department* (2015). The Ferguson courts’ specific targeting of poor black communities is cited as a major factor that contributes to cycles of poverty and incarceration. In 2013, the report writes, the Ferguson courts “issued over 9,000 warrants” for “minor violations such as parking infractions, traffic tickets, or housing code violations” (U.S. Department of Justice 2015: 3). Because these violations are coupled with “charges, fines, and fees”, these “[m]inor offenses can generate crippling debts, result in jail time because of an inability to pay, and result in the loss of a driver’s license, employment, or housing” (2015: 3-4).

extraordinarily disproportionate numbers.<sup>6</sup> As Michelle Alexander reports, if the current trend of racist incarceration continues, “one in three African American men will serve time in prison,” and, in many cities across the United States at the time of Martin’s murder, “more than half of all young adult black men [were] under correctional control—in prison or jail, on probation or parole” (2012: 9). It is within this context of genocidal carceral politics that Martin’s murder became a catalyst for widespread, national condemnation of racist police and vigilante violence, and of the injustice of the prison industrial complex.<sup>7</sup>

In responding to Martin’s murder, this chapter attends to a number of debates about the visual and narrative representations of Martin, beginning from the initial reporting of his death, to just beyond Zimmerman’s acquittal. This limited time period is a function both of the conditions of writing a doctoral thesis about the ongoing present, and a recognition that the terms of public debate about race in the United States have shifted drastically and rapidly in response to the subsequent murders of Tanisha Anderson, Michael Brown, Michelle Cusseaux, Eric Garner, Renisha McBride, Gabriella Nevarez, Tamir Rice, and Aura Rosser, among others, in just the year following Zimmerman’s acquittal, as well as to the formation of the Black Lives Matter movement in 2013.<sup>8</sup> I have decided to limit my analysis to the formation of the Black Lives Matter movement because its engagement with the questions of innocence and representation, particularly in response to the murder of young black people, directly challenges the discourses, frames of representation, and, as I argue, deployments of childhood that consumed the debate about Martin’s murder. Because the terms on which

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<sup>6</sup> According to the Bureau of Justice Statistics, there were 4,347 black men incarcerated in federal prisons or local jails for every 100,000 U.S. residents in 2010, compared with 1,775 Hispanic/Latino men, and just 678 white men (Glaze 2011: 8). These statistics do not take into account immigration detention, military detention, juvenile detention, civil commitment, or people on probation.

<sup>7</sup> For critiques and analyses of the prison industrial complex within the U.S. beyond which this thesis engages directly, see: Bottoms, Rex, and Robinson (2004). Additional analyses of the prison industrial complex will be discussed later on in the text. For abolitionist, restorative, and critical analyses about the criminalization of young people, see: Crawford and Newburn (2003); Muncie, Hughes and McLaughlin (2002).

<sup>8</sup> The names listed here are of course not comprehensive, but they are informed both by the Black Lives Matter movement and by Say Her Name. Say Her Name is a movement that speaks about black women’s experiences of police violence, advocating for a gender-inclusive approach to racial justice. For more on Say Her Name, see: Crenshaw and Ritchie (2015).

the Black Lives Matter movement responded to these subsequent murders (and those which have continued into the present) gained much of their footing in the specific aftermath of Martin's murder and Zimmerman's acquittal, I am interested in the emergent negotiations that attempted to grapple with how to frame the loss of black life, and particularly Martin's young black life in the intimate public sphere.

This chapter, however, cannot possibly do justice to Martin's foreshortened life, nor can it bring to justice the person who took that life from him. Knowing that it cannot, this chapter seeks instead to interrogate the conditions, like those just mentioned, under which Martin's young life was already marked as disposable, and to parse out the ways in which the legitimation and continuation of the systemic violence directed toward black life in the United States operates, in part, through the putting into practice of childhood. In so doing, this chapter's response to Martin's murder emerges in conversation with the now expansive and growing scholarship on Martin's foreshortened life (Evans-Winters and Bethune 2014; Fasching-Varner et al. 2014; J. Gray 2015; D. Johnson, Farrell and Warren 2015; Nguyen 2015; Rankine 2015; Yancy and J. Jones 2013), a body of work that theorizes this tragedy in relation to visual and popular culture, embodiment and subjectivity, historical and contemporary racisms, gender, education and curriculum, mass incarceration, the criminal justice system, and Florida's "stand your ground" laws. Adding to these incisive analyses, this chapter focuses specifically on the work of childhood in relation to Martin's murder and its wake.

While there has not yet been other research that has directly linked childhood itself as a technology through which Martin was already marked as disposable, there has been writing which has linked him to other black children. Much of this scholarship has connected his murder to Emmett Till's (B. K. Alexander 2015; Harawa 2014; Wills 2013). Till was a 14-year-old black boy from Mississippi who was tortured and lynched in 1955, and his murder has been understood as a major incitement for the civil rights movement. The scholarship that connects Till's and Martin's murders not only situates them in relation to the movements they were catalysts for, but also recognizes that Martin's murder was a contemporary instance of the persistent criminalization and

dehumanization of black boys, which also marked Till as disposable.<sup>9</sup> As Daniel Harawa writes, “the deaths of Emmett Till and Martin [...] reveal one important fact: Black masculinity is still often perceived as threatening and dangerous in the United States” (2014: 57). Scholarship like this, which connects Till and Martin as nodes of a continuation of racist and gendered violence directed at young black boys, is of course correct in making this link, and my own chapter expands upon this analysis in relation to questions of the gendered embodiments, narratives, and representations of blackness.<sup>10</sup> At the same time, this chapter moves away from thinking about Martin just in relation to the violences black boys experience, and it turns to the ways in which childhood itself, as a racial logic and as a technology through which Till and Martin were marked as disposable, functions within a continuum of racist and gendered violence to justify Till’s and Martin’s murders in particular ways. As such, while I do recognize that Martin and Till are connected, because this chapter situates the specific work of childhood in relation to Martin’s murder within the particular historical moment in which his death and its aftermaths took place (one separated from Till’s by almost 60 years), it moves away from this straightforward historical linkage. While historical logics and their contemporary palimpsests play a central part in this chapter’s analysis, the uses of childhood in relationship to Martin must be understood as responding to, and investing in, a different discursive (and affective) terrain.

One of the more explicit differences between Till’s murder and Martin’s murder is that Till’s was a catalyst for the civil rights movement, while Martin’s took place after many claimed the civil rights movement had been a total success. Indeed, at the very same time that those protesting Zimmerman’s lack of arrest and eventual acquittal were connecting Martin’s murder to the continuing consequences of slavery and segregation, and to the ongoing effects of mass incarceration and systemic and interpersonal racism, a counter-narrative of a “post-racial” and “colorblind” America was being entrenched as

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<sup>9</sup> The circumstances around the murders of Emmett Till and Trayvon Martin share more than their effects: both boys were killed by vigilantes, both were young, neither had committed a crime, and both, coincidentally, were murdered while out to purchase candy.

<sup>10</sup> Recognizing the gendered nature of this violence does not mean that black girls do not also experience violence. While this chapter focuses on the nexus of black masculinity, childhood, innocence, and adolescence, it does so not to prioritize an analysis of men’s and boys’ experiences over those of women and girls.

a national fantasy.<sup>11</sup> This narrative, which I shall expand upon later on in this chapter, proposes that in the “successful” aftermath of the civil rights movement, race no longer determines one’s life chances. In this narrative—which, given the statistics above, can only be properly described as fantasy—anyone claiming that race still matters, or that racism persists, is deemed both racist (for bringing back into being the inherently divisive and “backwards” notion of race) and unpatriotic. Absolutely central to this deeply polarized political context, this chapter argues, are the ways in which childhood was put into practice to simultaneously facilitate claims for and against Martin’s innocence and what his innocence signified for the wider struggle for racial justice. Attending to the work that childhood takes on across the post-racial fantasy and the demands for racial justice in Martin’s name, and asking after the perhaps undutiful consequences that opposing investments in childhood produce, this chapter works to situate this thesis’ longer project of critical suspicion towards the productivity of childhood within a deeply political moment in the contemporary U.S.

Martin was murdered in the winter before I began researching this thesis. At the time, while I had not yet substantially engaged with the material that now makes up this thesis, I could not help but feel torn about the terms through which he was advocated for. On one hand, of course, the murder, or what William David Hart (2013) calls the “execution”, of an unarmed young black boy absolutely had to be decried and challenged, particularly because Martin’s life, as I argued above, was merely one of the many young black lives that the contemporary U.S. insists on imprisoning, impoverishing, and ending. And yet, while I joined the thousands of people pointing out and insisting upon Martin’s innocence, I, like many others, had also engaged with and learned from the activism and scholarship of many black, queer, trans, and feminist abolitionists (CR10 Publications Collective 2008; A. Davis 1971, 2003; Mogul, Ritchie and Whitlock 2012; Spade 2011; Stanley and N. Smith 2011) that innocence itself is a racial logic, one that is unevenly distributed. With the evidence of Martin’s innocence so heavily wrapped up in the rightful claim that he was “just a child”, the very frame of childhood, too, appeared to be structured by the same racial logics and deployments that

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<sup>11</sup> This notion of the U.S. being “post-racial” is not the same as Paul Gilroy’s desire to leave behind “race”, which I discussed in the previous chapter. Because he recognized that racism persists, he would argue that the U.S. cannot be understood as post-racial, particularly when the post-racial I am speaking of here implies that racism itself has ended.

were bound to innocence. As I show across this chapter, engaging in a debate about Martin's location within or beyond childhood was absolutely central to whether or not Zimmerman was arrested and acquitted. More than that, however, it was central to how race and racism could be characterized in a post-race moment.

As the narrative went, if understood to be a child, Martin would be innocent, Zimmerman would be understood as having racially profiled him, and the refusal of the Sanford police department to arrest Zimmerman could be understood as a product of systematic racism and injustice within policing. If understood, rather, as a teenager, Martin would be more easily read as violent and aggressive, allowing Zimmerman's shooting of Martin to be considered as "self-defense", and to be absolved of the "unnecessary" (and, as I return to later in the chapter, "unethical" in post-racial America) introduction of race in a situation merely about community policing. Thinking about this logic, I wondered about what it meant to need Martin to be a child in order for him to be innocent. What did it mean, as well, to need Martin to be innocent at all in order to deplore his murder? Were the conditions of empathy and sorrow so neatly aligned with the conflation of childhood and innocence that childhood itself—rather than Martin's mere fact of being alive, and certainly, it seemed, rather than his black life—had to structure our critique of his death? Aligned with all those demanding justice for Martin, and critically suspicious of the terms through which that demand seemingly had to be made, I began researching the various histories and technologies through which Martin's innocence came to be figured through his childhood. At its heart, then, this chapter's skepticism toward the frames used to prove Martin's innocence come from a demand that the currently limited range of markers, narratives, lives, and bodies which can be used as evidence for the value of black life be more critically expanded, and that the impulse to use childhood as that evidence be at least done in direct relationship to, and refutation of, the histories and logics that I trace out below.<sup>12</sup>

In the sections that follow, I respond to the tragedy of Martin's murder by thinking through the ways in which the putting into practice of childhood along and as race allows for and makes possible competing arguments for and against Zimmerman's guilt, Martin's innocence, and the continuation and justification of contemporary

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<sup>12</sup> For more on the historical racial logics of childhood within the U.S., see: Barrett (2014); R. Bernstein (2011); Duane (2010); W. King (1995); Lareau (2003); Levander (2006); Sánchez-Eppler (2005).



racisms in the U.S. In the initial section of this chapter—“Constructing an Image”—I ask a number of questions that interrogate the contested grounds upon which Martin’s location in childhood was defended and negated. Thinking specifically about the visual representations of Martin, I ask: What role did images of Martin play, and how did these representations evoke and rely on childhood? What might an interrogation of Martin’s imaging tell us about the relationship between race, childhood, and representation? The following section—“The Racial and Gendered Markers of a ‘Troubled’ Teen”—asks: How did the gendered and racialized discourses on criminality, the “pathology” of the black family, and urbanization come to bear on Martin’s description as a “troubled teenager”? Extending my interrogation of Martin’s adolescence further, the following section—“A National Feeling”—thinks about the relationship between adolescence and infantilization by examining the affective character of the accounts that alleged Martin’s guilt. I unpack this affective material, and ask specifically about what the affective character of the post-racial moment tells us about the investment in Martin’s age.

Having interrogated the forceful removal of Martin from childhood, the following section—“Skittles and the Transference of Whiteness”—analyzes the representations of Martin in relationship to childhood. Thinking specifically about the use of Skittles (the candy) as a symbol of Martin’s innocence, I ask: What is the relationship between embodiment, blackness, innocence, and childhood? How did those advocating for Martin establish his innocence, and what were the terms under which this took place? Finally, the chapter’s conclusion works to think about the productive and interruptive imaginings of black subjectivity that emerged in response to the representational field that Martin’s murder provoked. It asks: What were the effective strategies of resisting the negation of Martin’s black childhood, and how did they emerge in the temporal disjuncture of life and death that were operative in the viral #IfTheyGunnedMeDown campaign? This campaign, which engaged in a preemptive refusal of postmortem racist representation by suturing juxtaposed images together, might offer, I argue, an important provocation for engaging with childhood’s historical and contemporary racial life. Across these sections, then, this chapter seeks to respond to Martin’s murder by bringing into question the multiple and dangerous links between racism and childhood.

## Constructing an Image

In the immediate aftermath of Martin's murder, the Martin family provided the media with a photograph of him as a smiling young teenager. Along with this initial image of a happy, youthful Martin in a red Hollister T-shirt, photos of him holding his baby brother, as well as one of Martin as a baby himself, were used to accompany various articles and news coverage. These photographs were both illustrative and purposeful; they gave a face to the person who was murdered, and they painted an image of young boy whose childish innocence demanded that justice be done in his name. The family released these photographs in their demand that Zimmerman be arrested, after his initial release without charge.<sup>13</sup> Demanding this arrest, Tracy Martin and Sybrina Fulton (Martin's parents) started a petition—which received over two million signatures—calling for the Florida Attorney General to persecute Zimmerman. They organized “Million Hoodie Marches” in New York, Pennsylvania, and Florida, and, in recognizing their activism, President Obama addressed Martin's murder in a White House press conference, saying that if he had a son, “he'd look like Trayvon” (Office of the Press Secretary 2013). This activism, however, was met with vehement resistance, much of which—perhaps gestured towards by Obama's signaling of the role of appearance—played out within visual culture. Contesting the images of Martin that his parents were using for portraying him as an innocent child, and less capable of instigating a violent altercation with Zimmerman, bloggers, news sites, online commentators, and Zimmerman's own legal defense team challenged this “youthful” representation. Many people online thus responded to these photographs with images of their own, ones that they argued provided a more honest (and consistently older) image of Martin. These images, and the stories they told, became the most followed news item for weeks (Pew Research 2012b), and the intensity of Zimmerman's, and his supporters' investment in representing Martin's age “accurately” grew increasingly vociferous after the Florida police released Zimmerman's 911 calls from the night of Martin's murder (Pew Research 2012a). In the midst of this, the representation and framing of Martin became an over-burdened site in which race and childhood gave one another meaning.

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<sup>13</sup> The Sanford police's refusal to place George Zimmerman under arrest continued for a month, despite opposition from Martin's family until it was handed over to the State Attorney's Office. A month later, the State of Florida charged Zimmerman with second-degree murder.

While the question of which of Martin's images should be used is important because it was a significant point of contestation leading up to Zimmerman's trial, it is additionally important because the practice of using an image to encode a narrative of deviance onto a racialized body follows a longer history of subject production through the technology of photography. The image—here both the photograph and the digital image—as an object used to place Martin within and beyond childhood, functions in this chapter as one technology through which childhood and its historical and contemporary contours were put into practice to dictate the confines of race. In this initial section's interrogation of the image, then, I analyze it, and the visual field more generally, but in so doing, I seek to introduce the chapter's broader approaches to analyzing the objects, narratives, and logics that lent meaning to Martin's death.

Tina Campt, who unpacks the relationship between the emergence of a diasporic black European subject and the photograph, argues that photographs are “one of the most accessible objects through which complicated processes of projection, desire, and identification come into view” (2012: 23). For Campt, what becomes important in analyzing diasporic formation through the photograph is “an engagement with the specific modes of representation and reading through which both diaspora and race become historically visible” (2012: 24). Theorizing through this mode of representation, Campt notes, must also grapple with its very history as a technology of race-making. Photographs, she argues, have been and continue to be “forces in the deployment of the racialized index” (2012: 33). This indexing, Campt argues, “produce[s] subjects to be seen, read, touched, and consumed as available and abjected flesh objects and commodities, rather than as individual bodies, agents, or actors” (2012: 33). Here, as Campt notes, the very development of photography itself is directly productive of the racialization of the body. As Eleanor Hight and Gary Sampson argue:

Once available in the mid-nineteenth century, photography was used extensively to create “type” or specimen photographs in the newly developing science of biological or physical anthropology. In these photographs, a non-European person under colonial scrutiny was posed partially or even totally unclothed against a plain or calibrated backdrop to create a profile [...] From these photographs physical traits were gleaned and ordered so that different ethnic groups could be classified according to common characteristics. (2002: 3)

The indexing of the racialized body was a tool not just for legitimating racial difference itself, but also, in the American context, for justifying slavery. This indexing was most infamously undertaken with Joseph Zealy's daguerreotypes in 1850. Commissioned by a Harvard natural scientist, Zealy photographed African-born slaves from South Carolina plantations in order to provide "evidence with visible proof of 'natural' difference in size of limbs and configuration of muscles" which would establish "once and for all that blacks and whites did not derive 'from a common center'" (Trachtenberg 1989: 53). My turn to the photograph (and the digital image) as a site through which to interrogate the deployments of childhood and race, then, is a method that places the imaging of Martin into the longer racist and dehumanizing history of the photograph. And yet, as Campt argues, certain images "thwart such expectations by asking us to consider both how and why race matters" (2012: 50).<sup>14</sup> With this framing of the image's questioning hail in mind, I turn to the debates about the visual representation of Martin to interrogate this debate itself as being precisely a negotiation of how the image—and the imaging of childhood—continues to index race in a post-racial moment.

The debates about Martin's imaging, and the images used to represent him often pushed at the limits of intelligibility. Speaking to this, Jonathan Capehart, an opinion writer for the *Washington Post*, wrote an article documenting a number of complaints he received from readers about the image of Martin he used on an earlier article about the murder. Capehart's readers, he wrote, decried this youthful image as a misrepresentation:

Many folks took issue with the picture I used yesterday and again today—that of a smiling, fresh-faced Trayvon wearing a red T-shirt from Hollister [...] Some think he's as young as 11 years old or as old as 14 in that snapshot. Martin family attorney Benjamin Crump told me this afternoon that the slain teenager

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<sup>14</sup> Analyzing family photos from the 1930s of Hans Hauck, a biracial child of African and German descent, Tina Campt argues that his positioning within his otherwise white family means that these photographs cannot be read purely as indexical mediums: "domesticity", Campt writes, "displaces racial difference in ways that provided Hauck and his family a means of staking claim to normativity, while simultaneously producing an alternatively racialized diasporic subject who departs radically from the normative ideal of Germanness" (2012: 51-52). In a complex image of an interracial domestic space race cannot be read as purely indexical.

was 16 when that photo was taken in August 2011[six months before he was murdered]. (Capehart 2013)

One of Capehart's readers, who took issue with this image, sent him an email (with an "updated" image attached) asking:

Why didn't you show the up-to-date picture of Trayvon Martin as below instead of the one where he is much younger? [...] I don't take either side because I just don't know all the facts, but what I do know is you can't beat honest reporting. (Capehart 2013)

This reader, Capehart reports, sent him a "more accurate" photograph of Martin that actually turned out to be an image of Game (Jayceon Terrell Taylor), a rapper who was 32 years old at the time of Martin's murder.

How should we read this commentator's elision of Martin's body? Rather than simply disregard their sharing of Game's image as a mistake, we might rather understand it as operating within a particular logic.<sup>15</sup> For indeed, this reader's insistence that Game's body was Martin's was not isolated. As *PolitiFact* reported, Game's image was claimed to be Martin's in a chain email (Sanders 2012), and news sites from *Business Insider* and *Good Morning America* similarly "mistook" Martin's body (Chittum 2012a, 2012b). If the image is a force in the deployment of a racial index and it produces racialized subjects to be consumed, not as individual bodies, then how are we to read these "bodies" of Martin's? Understood through the lineage of racial classification that stems from Zealy's daguerreotypes, the collapsing of Martin's and Game's bodies into the same signifying image explicitly uses racial difference and the fact of the black body to both claim a representation of a particular body (Martin's) and to mark this body as expansively replaceable under the sign of blackness. Aligned with the political project of Zealy's daguerreotypes, in which hierarchal racial difference is

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<sup>15</sup> Numerous studies have shown that black children are assumed to be older, more culpable, and less innocent than white children. Studies by Aneeta Rattan et al. (2012) and Phillip Goff et al. (2014) have shown that black youth are more likely to receive harsher punishment, and adult status by jurors (Rattan et al 2012), and that they are "prematurely perceived as responsible for their actions during a developmental period where their peers receive the beneficial assumption of childlike innocence" (Goff et al. 2014: 540). See also: Poe-Yamagata and Jones (2000).

made truthful through its imaging, yet explicitly refusing the “precise” indexical nature of the photograph to document embodied specificity, this reader—just like Zimmerman—abstracted black masculinity as the grounds upon which Martin was consumed and framed. Here, as with the examples I explore below, the “framing” of the image works across both meanings of this word—Martin was simultaneously contained by the image, and “his” image was presented as false evidence against him.

Along with those who discredited images of Martin for depicting him as “younger” than he “actually” was when he was murdered, the contestations of Martin’s image were also spurned by the publishing of Martin’s “incriminating” photos. Conservative news blog *The Daily Caller* obtained Martin’s social media profiles (despite their being deactivated by his family after his death) and published photos of his that they argued painted a more accurate picture of him (Martosko 2012). These images (which, presumably, are only the ones chosen by the blog, rather than the extent of Martin’s collection) show him “with gold dental grill and making obscene gestures to the camera” (Gutman 2012). The *Daily Caller* published Martin’s tweets, along with images taken from his phone (released by Zimmerman’s defense team) of marijuana plants, and a gun. Soon, digital manipulations and collages with added captions were published online across blogs and social media. Composite images comparing the media’s “biased” portrayal of Martin (as youthful and innocent) to more “accurate” ones went viral. These composite images not only decried Martin’s youthfulness, they also challenged the use of Zimmerman’s mug shot to represent him. One composite image paired two versions of Martin’s and Zimmerman’s image, one pairing sitting above the other. On top were Zimmerman’s mug shot and Martin wearing the Hollister t-shirt, accompanied by the text: “Don’t believe in the ‘Media Narrative?’ Then why are you shown this.... (5-7 years old)”. Below, an image of Zimmerman in a business suit sat opposite one of Martin, shirtless, sagging, and flipping off the camera, and captioned with: “Instead of this (current)”. Other images like these with similar captions that pointed out the “dated” nature of the images used in mainstream media and the more recent production of the uncovered images proliferated online.

This latter, “more accurate” image of Martin, along with a number of others, again ended up not being of him. In an instance similar to the one in the *Washington Post* mentioned above, an article in the *Business Insider* (which used this latter image

and one other) had to explain their use, and removal, of two images depicting Martin which they mistakenly thought were of him:

There are images circulating online that are supposedly other pictures of Trayvon Martin. We saw one on Stormfront a racist message board. It was embedded with another picture purporting to be Trayvon that the *Miami New Times* points out is not Trayvon Martin. One conservative website has already apologized for publishing it. (We originally published the entire image found on Stormfront, which included two photos, but we took the second down after finding out it wasn't Trayvon Martin). And now there is also question as to whether the other image is of Trayvon. We have now removed both. (Dougherty 2012)

These images passed as representations of Martin even though they were other black boys (and men) because the depicted performances of black masculinity mapped onto the assumptions of who Martin was or could be. Relying on the criminalized codes of black masculinity (which I return to later on in the chapter) these other racialized and gendered bodies thus became Martin's in order to deny him his individual body, and to make him the justification for his own murder.

Speaking to the register of the visual which allowed these other boys and men to replace, or stand in for, Martin's body, Mimi Thi Nguyen (2015) argues that they must not be simply understood as "misrecognitions". For Nguyen, it is "resemblance, not recognition" which informs the "preemptive rationale that pervades our political moment" (2015: 805). Resemblance, Nguyen argues, more accurately describes the current regime of policing and security, which conceives of threat as an "absolute potential" that is carried within particular bodies and signs and is imagined as signifying a "violence [that] is realizable at any moment" (2015: 805). Nguyen's analysis specifically interrogates the sign of the hoodie—which Martin was wearing the night of his murder, and which became a symbol of him in its aftermath—and he asks after the questions that the hoodie itself raises about (mis)recognition, resemblance, and the relation between blackness and things. The hoodie, Nguyen notes:

populated the landscape of protest and punditry: Million Hoodie Marches in New York City, Philadelphia, and over a hundred other cities nationwide; the viral spread of the hoodie photograph across mediascapes as a gesture of solidarity and critique; Fox news commentator Geraldo Rivera's "cautions" issued to parents of black and Latino youth to unhood their children; shooting targets of featureless hoodies; (presumably, predominantly) nonblack youth recreating the spectacle of Martin's death, substituting their own prone bodies in hoodies in mockery, not solidarity; and the proliferating news features querying [the hoodie]. (2015: 791)<sup>16</sup>

Across all these competing contexts, the hoodie—as with the other bodies which replaced or resembled Martin's—came to operate as an "index" (Peirce 1955; see also: Mirzoeff 2003), constituting what Sara Ahmed (2006) might call the "background" of Martin's framing. And, as Nguyen rightly notes, the hoodie-as-background carries multiple registers of meaning. The hoodie, Nguyen writes, "is soft, hard, pleasing, frightening, comforting, street, cool, criminal, just *this* or perhaps *that*" (2015: 796, emphasis in original). Because it is all of these things, it must be analyzed in relation to the body that wears it. As such, Nguyen argues:

where racial optics operate through vitalizing or animating a thing such as the hoodie as contiguous with the body it covers, we find that race [depends on] a dynamic constellation of signs, screens, expectations, and forces. [...] [T]he hoodie is crucial to the profile that covers for antiblack violence, because it is a decisive object that clears the ground and provides a background for that violence, and because it is a suspicious object that is called upon to render race an incidental detail in a murder. (2015: 812)

I agree with Nguyen's argument that the implications of what images and signs could be used to represent Martin were not simply about accuracy or recognition; Martin's figuration, his placement within or beyond the frame of his own body, must be

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<sup>16</sup> Mimi Thi Nguyen cites three examples of news features which focused in on the hoodie's history and signification: Kuperinsky (2012); B. Palmer (2012); D. Wilson (2012).



understood as a continuation of the use of the visual to provide particular evidence for the discourse of black criminality.

Making this argument, Nguyen extends Judith Butler's analysis of the use of witness video in the aftermath of Rodney King's beating by the Los Angeles police in 1991. Butler writes: "the visual field is not neutral to the question of race; it is itself a racial formation, an episteme, hegemonic and forceful" (1993a: 17). The racial formation of the visual, the racial optics of objects and bodies that resemble one another and carry expectations of threat, thus rely on and perpetuate the preemptive logic through which Martin and King were already marked as requiring the violence they encountered. As Butler writes, "He [King] is hit in exchange for the blows he never delivered, but which he is, by virtue of his blackness, always about to deliver" (1993a: 19).<sup>17</sup> And it is precisely this forceful use of the visual to signify blackness as the always about to be delivered blow that operated both as a sign that marked Martin as suspicious to Zimmerman in the first place, and as a logic through which Zimmerman (and his supporters) successfully substantiated his self-defense claim.

How do we understand the signification of blackness in relationship to childhood? Along with emerging out of the various objects and bodies that resembled Martin's, I argue, the very terms through which Martin's body was marked were founded through the visual field of representation in which Martin's race, age, and innocence collapsed into one another. The sheer volume of signs which were deployed to do this work—from images of Martin as a child, to the hoodie he was wearing, to fabricated viral images and digital resemblances, to, as I show later, the people Martin was close with and the objects he carried—points to, as Nguyen argues, the "excess assigned to that [black] body" (2015: 795). We could thus argue that the excess assigned to Martin's body already marked him as exceeding the space of innocence and childhood. But childhood, like the visual field, is not neutral to the question of race; indeed it is also a racial logic, and a forceful episteme. For while Martin's innocence centrally rested on whether or not he could be viably be understood as a child, the racial life of childhood produced that excess—that preemptive marking of threat and disposability—as well. We can see this explicitly in an argument made by Zimmerman's defense team:

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<sup>17</sup> For an analysis of the racist logic of the "preemptive strike" in the context of British postcolonial melancholia (discussed in the previous chapter), see: Gilroy (2005: 101).

On the surface, it seems like a ridiculous pursuit to note the difference between these photographs, but here is the important distinction: it is lunacy to think that the “fresh-faced” boy in the red T-shirt could successfully physically assault George Zimmerman -- which is George's claim, and it is no stretch to believe that the young man [Martin] pictured in the 7-11 security footage [taken the night of Martin’s murder] could. (George Zimmerman Legal Case 2013)

The linguistic shift here from innocent “boy” to culpable “young man” happens exactly as Martin’s representation shifts from a “smiling, fresh-faced Martin wearing a red T-shirt from Hollister, the mass clothier of adolescence” (Capehart 2013) to “more recent” photos of him being taller, older, and defiant (Zimmerman Legal Case 2013). The jump from boy to man, Zimmerman’s lawyers argue, extends the plausibility that Martin attacked Zimmerman. His image as a young man thus not only founds this plausibility, but, because of its production within and as a history of the optics of blackness, it becomes the evidence through which the violence Martin experienced was justified and, in the moment, required.

But what do we make of the pairing of these images by Zimmerman’s defense team? How do these two images sit together? This younger photo, we remember, was taken merely six months prior to the security camera footage. It is thus precisely because these images mark no age distinction that the entire question of Martin’s age becomes both irrelevant and exactly the point. Both Martins—separated by mere months—are preemptively “read, touched, and consumed” (Campt 2012: 33) through the optics of blackness. And yet only one image tenuously—and we must say “tenuously” because it was this body, too, that Zimmerman registered as suspicious—locates Martin in innocent childhood. The other, while also a representation of Martin as a child, is unintelligible within that signifying space. What becomes clear in this contested visual field, then, is not that precise age verification matters.<sup>18</sup> Rather, the particular reading of the body within the markers of criminalized black masculinity become the evidence for removing Martin from childhood. And, at the same time, the confines of childhood, as a legacy of white privilege and inheritance, becomes the

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<sup>18</sup> As cited in Chapter One, for critical analyses of age verification see: Crawley (2007); Pande (2012).

evidence for locating Martin in violent black adolescence.<sup>19</sup> For Zimmerman's defense team, the justification of the need to hit (or in this case shoot) before being hit, emerges precisely as Martin is removed out of childhood—even as, we might recognize, his body has already been removed from childhood by its very signifying of its removability and excess. His body's easy and already removal must, I argue, be understood as a product of a history that had set the racial terms of childhood before he was even spotted by Zimmerman.

### **The Racial and Gendered Markers of a “Troubled” Teen**

One of the ways in which Zimmerman's case attempted to gain legitimacy was by claiming that he responded in self-defense to an aggressive and intoxicated teenager. Repeatedly, in these accounts, Martin is referred to in racialized and gendered language that uses the frame of “teen” to establish a liminal space between childhood and adulthood that nevertheless indicates a departure from the innocent space of childhood. The frame of “teen”, I argue, is not primarily or straightforwardly descriptive. Like child or childhood, it gets strategically applied to various bodies that may, at times, contradict one another. As a term, “teenager” has a well-documented history, and, like childhood, its deployment produces populations and is invested with psychic and political demands.<sup>20</sup> In this section I shall give some examples of the language used and images produced to place Martin in the “teen” space outside of childhood and adulthood. In so doing, I shall discuss the ways in which these frames are gendered and racialized, as well as their implications for an analysis of contemporary racism.

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<sup>19</sup> My argument that childhood is a legacy of white privilege and inheritance is situated in the historical uses of childhood for racist projects in the U.S. since slavery. Under slavery, the negotiation of black childhood was so integral to racial domination that it threw into rupture the legal structure of inheritance previously standardized in English common law. In 1662, the Virginia legislature overturned English common law and tied a child's bonded inheritance—and racial status—to the mother (General Assembly of Virginia 1662). Further reiterations of this law enslaved mixed-race children with white mothers, and criminalized white women for giving birth to such children. As Anna Mae Duane (2010), Wilma King (1995), and Autumn Barrett (2014) argue, this negotiation was not just about how blackness was distributed to children, but also how childhood status—and therefore a slave's potential to progress into rights and freedoms—was allocated or denied.

<sup>20</sup> For more on the history of the teenager, see: G.S. Hall (1905); Palladino (1996); Savage (2008).

The racialized and gendered portrayal of Martin as a teenager who engaged in criminal and problematic behaviors centers around the “exposing” of his life history. Having a history that can be exposed, as Kathryn Bond Stockton (2009) argues, is grounds itself to no longer be considered a child. This is so, Stockton argues, because childhood is constructed as “the specter of who we were when there was nothing yet behind us”, and, as such, antithetical to childhood are “sex, aggression, secrets, closets, or any sense of what police call ‘a past’” (2009: 30). Proving that Martin had a past was thus vital to proving that he was no longer a child. However, in looking over the material that was presented as evidence of Martin having a past, it becomes clear that not just “any” past signifies an end to one’s childhood. To have a past that properly lifts one out of childhood is to have a past that is already produced through racist and gendered discourses. Stockton’s language of having “what police call a past” is crucial here as it points to the role of discourses of criminalization, institutional racism, and white property ownership in shaping what type of past is marked. For Martin, these were discourses that implicated him in a specific futurity; or, more precisely, a history that justified the negation of his futurity. Martin’s past worthy of exposure, then, was his complicated history with school and his alleged affinity for objects that carried the racial markers of ghettoization—a grill, a bag with marijuana residue in it, a gun—not, on the other hand, his time spent in a non-profit program that introduces young people to aviation.<sup>21</sup> As such, the material from which his past is produced includes primarily Martin’s previous suspensions from school, as well as his self-representation on social media sites. Although Zimmerman had no knowledge of Martin’s identity, let alone his history with suspension, this history played a central role in the portrayal of Martin within the media and the national imagination as someone who was more than likely to have acted violently in response to being confronted.

In reporting on one of the gatherings of people in Sanford to protest the lack of Zimmerman’s arrest, the *Miami Herald* presented this lengthy depiction:

As thousands of people gathered here to demand an arrest in the Trayvon Martin case, a more complicated portrait began to emerge of a teenager whose problems

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<sup>21</sup> Martin’s parents spoke of Martin’s love for planes and told reporters that in the summer of 2009, they enrolled him in a non-profit program in Florida called “Experience Aviation” that builds science, technology, engineering and math skills through aviation (Segal 2012).

at school ranged from getting spotted defacing lockers to getting caught with a marijuana baggie and women's jewelry. The Miami Gardens teen who has become a national symbol of racial injustice was suspended three times, and had a spotty school record that his family's attorneys say is irrelevant [...] In October, a school police investigator saw Trayvon mark up a door with "W.T.F" — an acronym for "what the f---." The officer said he found [...] women's jewelry and a screwdriver that he described as a "burglary tool" [...] Word of the incident came as the family's lawyer acknowledged that the boy was suspended in February for getting caught with an empty bag with traces of marijuana, which he called "irrelevant". (Robles 2012)

Rather than begin with a description of the protest that thousands attended, the *Miami Herald* opened its reporting with a damning account of Martin's past. It connected directly, in the same sentence, Martin's becoming a "national symbol of racial injustice" with his "spotty school record", making this link as a way of both discrediting Martin (removing him from innocent childhood), and connecting his alleged deviance and criminality to those demanding justice be done in his name. Despite its acknowledgement that this history was considered irrelevant by Martin's family lawyer, this paper, as did others, laboriously made this history not just relevant, but also central to an understanding of the night of Martin's murder.<sup>22</sup> This "complicated" portrayal of Martin as a "troubled teenager" is also explicit in reporting by CNN:

"I am Trayvon Martin" has become the catchphrase for protesters expressing solidarity with the slain Florida teenager and outrage over his killing. [...] But who really was Trayvon Martin? There is plenty of speculation, including some bloggers who point to his recent school suspensions — including for drug residue in his backpack — and images of him sporting tattoos and what appeared to be a gold tooth grill as possible evidence of a troubled teen. (Segal 2012)

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<sup>22</sup> This explicit questioning of Martin's history can be seen, for example, in the headlines of these news features: "Multiple suspensions paint complicated portrait of Trayvon Martin" (Robles 2012); "Trayvon Martin: Typical teen or troublemaker?" (Alcindor 2012); "Trayvon Martin was suspended three times from school" (MSNBC 2012).

Like the reporting in the *Miami Herald*, this article opens with a questioning of Martin's innocence and a removal of him from childhood. While this article does also produce a more positive narrative of Martin's past, its insistence on making Martin's life a question ("Who really was Trayvon Martin?") points to the fact that, as I have been arguing, Martin's childhood innocence was already in question.

Not only do these narratives extend the questioning of his innocence, they tie his history to an assumption of his guilt. The direct link between narratives of Martin's past and his assumed guilt is directly articulated in, among other places, a reader comment on an article in the *Huffington Post*: "There is no doubt in my mind that Trayvon could have been the aggressor. [...] [H]e was suspended from school for drugs, burglary tools[, ]having women[']s jewelry and tardiness" (galfrmjerz3 2012). In this narrative, as within the others I have cited, Zimmerman's profiling, shooting, and killing of Martin is made reasonable, if not justifiable, through Martin's previous and unrelated actions. Possession in this narrative, namely the possession of marijuana and stolen goods, and specifically "women's jewelry" (something a teenage boy would never possess without suspiciously acquiring), marks Martin out as an already established criminal. By reporting these possessions as relevant, these narratives work to legitimate his death by firmly locating him within the frame of adolescent and not child. All of these examples work to push Martin outside of childhood in slightly different ways, but what they share is an underlying legitimating discourse about race and gender as tied to deviance and criminality that has a longer history—to which I next turn.

By centering on particular criminalized acts—graffiti, marijuana possession, and theft—these narratives tied Martin to the constructed markers of deviant black masculinity, and to a historical discourse that has defined deviance, poverty, and criminality as inherent to black culture (cf. Aldous 1969; Bernard 1966; Moynihan 1965). In this discourse—which Maxine Baca Zinn calls the "cultural deficiency model" (Baca Zinn 1989)—deviance is located within racialized, classed, and highly gendered values and behaviors. Describing this discourse, Edmund Gordon writes:

Poor Blacks are seen as caught in an unbroken cycle of poverty and social disorganization characterized by irresponsible, unemployed, and unattached males; dysfunctional, "matriarchal" families; and inadequately socialized Black

children. [...] Black male “deviance” is understood to be a result of the generalized pathology of the “ghetto” culture of poor African Americans. (1997: 36)

While this pathologization has a longer history, its most infamous, and most impactful articulation comes from Daniel Patrick Moynihan’s *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action* (1965). Written for President Johnson and published by the U.S. Department of Labor, this deeply “victim-blaming” (W. Ryan 1970), pathologizing report simultaneously declared the success of the civil rights movement, and its “inevitable” failure.<sup>23</sup> Moynihan describes the “failure” of the civil rights movement as emerging from “the tangle of pathology” (1965: 29) that is “the negro family”, and argues that the poverty within black communities is due to their having too many absent fathers, a matriarchal family structure, increasing rates of illegitimate children, and what he calls “the failure of youth” (1965: 34).<sup>24</sup>

The failure of black youth, Moynihan writes, can be evidenced in their “consistently poor performance on the mental tests that are a standard means of measuring ability and performance in the present generation” (Moynihan 1965: 35), their “loneliness [...] in making fundamental decisions about education” (1965: 37), and their “predictabl[y] [...] disastrous delinquency and crime rate” (1965: 38). These failings, Moynihan argued, were contagious:

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<sup>23</sup> Daniel Patrick Moynihan opened his report with the following declaration: “In the decade that began with the school desegregation decision of the Supreme Court, and ended with the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the demand of Negro Americans for full recognition of their civil rights was finally met. [...] In this new period the expectations of the Negro Americans will [be] that in the near future equal opportunities for them as a group will produce roughly equal results, as compared with other groups. This is not going to happen. [...] [T]he circumstances of the Negro American community in recent years has probably been getting *worse, not better*. [...] The fundamental problem, [...] is that of family structure” (Moynihan 1965, emphasis in original).

<sup>24</sup> Most of the analyses of the Moynihan Report focus on his indictment of black matriarchy, but there is much to be said about his analysis of black children, especially as a precursor for the conditions under which Martin’s murder was justified. I will speak to some of the questions that the Moynihan report raises in relation to its pathologization of black motherhood in the following chapter.

The children of middle-class Negroes often as not must grow up in, or next to the slums [...] They are therefore constantly exposed to the pathology of the disturbed group and constantly in danger of being drawn into it. [...] In a word, most Negro youth are in *danger* of being caught up in the tangle of pathology that affects their world, and probably a majority are so entrapped. (1965: 29-30, emphasis in original)

Blackness, in Moynihan's reasoning, is thus the sign of a deeper pathology, and, understood here perhaps more as pathogen than pathology, it is also the source of its spread. As Premilla Nadasen writes, one of the key effects of this discourse within the Moynihan report was a "shift [in] the debate about urban poverty from structure and economics to culture and values" (2005: 144). As it related to black children, the connection the Moynihan report made between poverty, delinquency, and crime on one hand, and black culture and values on the other, carried over beyond the debates the report engendered, and into the policies and discourses of the following decades.

While the logics of the Moynihan Report never went away, its insidious reach came back into pinpointed relevance during the last decades of the twentieth century. Citing an alleged "soaring" increase in crimes committed by black youth from the 1970s to the mid-1990s, one that exceeded (but was apparently made all the more troubling by) the "spike in the young [black] male population", John Dilulio (1995) successfully evoked this very connection to bring into being policies that incarcerated black youth at alarming rates. Dilulio's article—which gave fodder for the "War on Drugs"—revitalized Moynihan's report in the mid-1990s by introducing the term "super-predators" into public discourse. In an editorial for the *Weekly Standard*, Dilulio, a Harvard professor, wrote:

On the horizon [...] are tens of thousands of severely morally impoverished juvenile super-predators [...] for as long as their youthful energies hold out, they will do what comes "naturally": murder, rape, rob, assault, burglarize, deal deadly drugs, and get high. [...] We're not just talking about teenagers. [...] We're talking about boys whose voices have yet to change. We're talking about elementary school youngsters who pack guns instead of lunches. We're talking



about kids who have absolutely no respect for human life and no sense of the future. (Dilulio 1995)

While doing so in slightly more coded language than Moynihan, Dilulio also located this “moral impoverishment” in black family structures. “Moral poverty”, he writes, “is the poverty of growing up surrounded by deviant, delinquent, and criminal adults in abusive, violence-ridden, fatherless, Godless, and jobless settings” (Dilulio 1995). Dilulio’s emphasis on the youthfulness of these “super-predators” both evoked the “evil child” ontology discussed in Chapter Two, and, in so doing, removed these children from childhood: “The buzz of impulsive violence, the vacant stares and smiles, and the remorseless eyes [of these super-predators] were at once too frightening and too depressing (my God, these are children!)” (Dilulio 1995). Dilulio’s shock emphasizes the implausibility of his recognition, and registers at once that these are, and are not, children that he is describing.

Constructions of black masculinity thus operate as symbolic and discursive registers through which, Herman Gray writes, “panics about crime, the nuclear family, and middle-class security” are fueled and sustained (1995: 402). Denied its varied and contested multiplicity, black masculinity is thus made meaningful through power relationships read on and through bodies, practices, representations, intimacies, and discourses.<sup>25</sup> These constructions are further intensified through the intersection of race and childhood. As Ann Ferguson argues, “a discourse that positions masculinity as ‘naturally’ naughty is reframed for African American boys around racialized representations of gendered subjects. They come to stand as if already adult, bearers of adult fates inscribed within a racial order” (2001: 96). The narratives about Martin’s past that I have cited in this section thus directly evoke the racist discourse of cultural deficiency, as well as the construction of black masculinity as deviant and criminal, in order to both justify their assumptions of Martin’s guilt, and to remove Martin from the place of childhood. Using the markers of criminal and deviant black masculinity and the ghetto that is the “gold tooth grill” as evidence for Martin’s complicated history of

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<sup>25</sup> For more on masculinity as a hegemonic structure of power, see: Connell (1987, 1995). For further discussions on masculinity and femininity in childhood, see Chapter Six.

deviance, serves to simultaneously re-invest in these markers as valid, and to use their validity to place Martin in a “troubled” location outside of childhood innocence.<sup>26</sup>

### **A National Feeling**

While the use of childhood in these depictions of Martin as a “troubled teen” clearly emerges out of a continued investment in the reification of the discourse of deviance as located in black communities and particularly in black masculinity, something else seems to be at stake here. Inherent in these descriptions of Martin’s past is a tone that establishes the necessity of their revelation with a sense of frustration, elation, and righteousness. What is revealed, I ask, in the affect that structures these negotiations of Martin’s childhood? Particularly in a moment where, as I argue below, minor and major progress towards racial justice has been experienced by many white Americans as an injurious personal attack, attending to the affective register of these negotiations shows that what is at stake in Martin’s location far surpasses its implication for Martin or Zimmerman. The feelings of righteousness and anger that are enunciated in the demands that Martin’s past be revealed and that his age be represented “accurately” demonstrate that feelings of victimization and loss located in whiteness hinge on the results of such proclamations.

To give an initial sense of the affective weight that childhood carries in this context, I return to the reader comment cited above, but expand it to include the longer comment:

[Y]ou are so right. [...] [The mass media] have him [Zimmerman] guilty already[. ]They of all people should know the way the law works. [...] They [the mass media, as well as Martin’s mother] are all pot stirrers and should wait for the outcome of this trial. [T]here is no doubt in my mind that Trayvon could have been the aggressor. Also they should stop showing his picture when he was 5 or 6... Let[’]s remind people that he was suspended from school for drugs, burglary tools[, ]having women[’]s jewelry and tardiness. This teen is no angel..... (galfrmjerz3 2012)

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<sup>26</sup> For more on the grill as a marker of deviant black masculinity, see: Daniels (2007); Knight (2011).

Taking into consideration the full comment, a layer of meaning and investment emerges beyond the straightforward linking of Martin's past to his alleged guilt. Something else is at stake here: a sense that the commentator, and the wider public, has been deceived; a sense that the media's framing of Martin as a child is duplicitous and unethical; and a sense that the premise of "equality under the law" and a fair trial is being overthrown in the name of race. The tone of the comment thus points to a feeling that Martin's representation in the media has provoked for this commentator. Putting this comment into the context of a wider array of similar ones, ones, like the following excerpt from a blog entry, that are even more explicit in their declaration of outrage, we can begin to build a picture of what might be called a national feeling:

At the time of the shooting, the media and Martin's family, abetted by race hustlers Jesse Jackson and Al Sharpton, portrayed Zimmerman as a trigger-happy racist, with the *New York Times* describing him as a white Hispanic, an unusual term the paper never uses. A congresswoman portrayed it thusly: Martin was [a] "sweet young boy hunted down like a dog." It turned out that Martin was anything but sweet, despite the media's repeatedly showing photographs of him that led readers and viewers to believe he was only 12 or 13 years old when he was shot. (Kirkwood 2012)

As the affect in this language makes clear, what is at stake in proving Martin's guilt and his placement in adolescence hinges on this author's (clearly incensed) feelings about racial belonging. The similarity between these two comments' affects is important, and it is indicative, I argue, of a larger structure of feeling that constitutes what has been called the post-racial or colorblind moment.

Defining the post-racial moment is tricky, as the term itself can be understood to emerge from a future-oriented politics that aspires to a day in which race carries less weight for socio-economic realities, but it can also describe an assumed reality in which racial tensions and inequalities are deemed to be irrelevant already. Outlining this latter understanding of a post-racial America, Lawrence Bobo writes:

[P]ost-racialism has the most in common with the well-rehearsed rhetoric of color blindness. To wit, American society, or at least a large and steadily

growing fraction of it, has genuinely moved beyond race—so much so that we as a nation are now ready to transcend the disabling racial divisions of the past. (2011: 14)

Fueling this notion that the U.S. has transcended “previous” racial tensions and inequalities is a social, political, and legal discourse that marks its difference from the racism of the past by refusing to use overtly racist language while still actively disavowing ongoing and persistent inequity. As Lisa Marie Cacho asserts:

No longer imbued with open racial overtones, law and policy – as sites where the fictional becomes real – employ a “color-blind” liberal discourse, which functions to mask the implicit, yet just as consequential, racialized “nature” of legal apparatuses. This “color-blind” ideology operates to disavow systemic racism, defining racism as aberrant actions of individuals while simultaneously, turning a “color- blind” eye to institutionalized and systematic racism. (2000: 405)

Precisely because it disavows systemic racism and locates racism instead in the individual psyche, the discourse of color-blindness situates itself as the ethical imperative for a post-civil rights era. Indeed, although many civil rights leaders advocate for race-conscious policies like affirmative action, or racially-targeted housing, mentoring, and fellowship programs, many Americans, as Rogers Smith, Desmond King, and Philip Klinkner point out, believe that these policies are “unjust—even a form of reverse racism” (2011: 125). Ironically, they write, this split understanding of the ethics of racial justice after the civil rights movement has meant that: “both advocates of color-blind policies and proponents of race-conscious policies present themselves as the true heirs to the anti-segregation civil rights movement. Both criticize their opponents for betraying its aims” (2011: 125). This assumption of rightful ethical inheritance has meant that advocates of colorblind policies frame their politics in affective terms of both righteousness and anger.

This affect intensifies through a combination of, on one hand, “the waning salience of what some have portrayed as a ‘black victimology’ narrative” (Bobo 2011: 13), and, on the other, resistance to the disavowed yet persistent “mechanisms for

skewing opportunities and life chances along racial lines” (Cacho 2000: 392-393).<sup>27</sup> Combined, these competing framings of the social solidify into what Cacho has identified as “an ideology of white injury depicting European Americans as ‘victims’ of efforts to remedy racial discrimination” (2000: 393). In the reader comment and the blog post excerpt cited above, this discourse can be seen explicitly. Disavowing the systematic structures and histories that marked Martin’s body, both of these authors responded in defensive and self-righteous ways to what they perceived to be an unethical introduction of race—sometimes termed “playing the race card”—into a moment that should be free of it.<sup>28</sup> These “white victims”, and the white injury discourse more generally, thus produce, and are a product of, a fantasy of racial relations, which imagines that “minorities (especially blacks) are the ones responsible for whatever ‘race problem’ we have in this country” (Bonilla-Silva 2006: 1). This affective reversal of suffering illuminates the affective and psychic life of colorblind racial politics, but it also suggests something further. Because injured white affects, particularly those which emerge in relationship to Martin’s murder, are tied to notions of temporality and progress, they suture the state to a (fantasmatic) race-neutral present, while containing black people themselves in a backwards, or out-of-time, relation to it. The demand placed on black communities and those advocating for race-conscious politics is thus to “get with the times”. We can see this in Bonilla-Silva’s analysis of his interviews:

Most whites believe that if blacks and other minorities would just stop thinking about the past, work hard, and complain less (particularly about racial discrimination), then Americans of all hues could “all get along.” [...] In case after case, [...] respondents vented anger about what they interpreted as blacks’ whining (“I didn’t own any slaves and I do not understand why they keep asking for things when slavery ended 200 *God-damned* years ago!”) [...] The story lines then serve whites as legitimate conduits for expressing anger, animosity, and resentment toward racial minorities. (2006: 1, 98, emphasis in original)

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<sup>27</sup> The “black victimology narrative” frames black critiques about inequality and discrimination as “well-worn tales, at least passé if not now pointedly false assessments of the main challenges facing blacks in a world largely free of the dismal burdens of overt racial divisions and oppression” (Bobo 2011: 13).

<sup>28</sup> For more on the history of “the race card” see: Crenshaw (1997); L. Williams (2001).

Adding to Bonilla-Silva's account, I argue below that the temporality of this affective response can be understood as operating akin to infantilization. It positions the white people who deploy it as temporally located in a present that, they imagine, black people have not yet emerged into. And this "whining", or what might be understood as the assumed temporal dislocation of black critique, functions as an interpellation through which the whining subject is situated as childish.<sup>29</sup> Here, the demand of "getting with the times" can thus be understood as functioning like a demand to "grow up". This infantilizing discourse, however, becomes particularly complex in relationship to the landscape of representation that sought to characterize Martin not as a child, but instead as an adolescent.

Infantilization itself is a racial and colonial structure of power.<sup>30</sup> Writing about the psychic life of colonialism within *Black Skin White Masks* (1967), Frantz Fanon describes infantilization as one of the mechanisms through which the colonial relation is played out: "A white man addressing a Negro behaves exactly like an adult with a child and starts smirking, whispering, patronizing, cozening. It is not one white man I have watched, but hundreds" (1967: 19). Fanon calls this relationality a pathology "in accordance with an inhuman psychology" (1967: 20), a psychology birthed by colonialism, the intent of which is to "fasten him [the black man] to the effigy of him, to snare him, to imprison him, the eternal victim of an essence, of an *appearance* for which he is not responsible" (1967: 22, emphasis in original). Anna May Duane also

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<sup>29</sup> Sara Ahmed (2010) describes this logic as a projection, one that locates "bad feeling" within the racialized bodies that speak up against the racism they are experiencing. Writing about a scene in Andrea Levy's *Fruit of the Lemon* (1999), Ahmed argues that in the moment that Faith Jackson, a black British girl, names racism, she becomes "the origin of bad feeling": "Faith [...] shouts to be heard. And in shouting, the black woman [Faith] is the one who becomes the origin of bad feeling. So it is she who must leave" (Ahmed 2010: 85-86).

<sup>30</sup> For more on infantilization, see: M. Jacobs (2009); Lucas (2006); Sánchez-Eppler (2005).

understands the concept of infantilization as a means of producing a colonial subject.<sup>31</sup> “Coming from a tradition in which the child represented a dependent subject,” Duane writes, “European colonists depended on old meanings of childhood to create infantilizing metaphors that answered the need for a new conceptual structure required by the colonizing process” (2010: 10).<sup>32</sup> Lesley Ginsberg, writing about infantilization in relationship to the U.S. slave trade, describes this relationality as a “romanticization of dependency”, which was “predicated on an increasingly literal analogy between the peculiar institution and the more familiar pattern of subordinations upon which the antebellum family was built” (2003: 90).<sup>33</sup> As an example of this romanticization, Ginsberg presents the memoir of Mary Schoolcraft, a daughter of a plantation owner in South Carolina, who writes: “How I do love to recall the patriarchal responsibility, and tenderness, my father felt for his poor, ignorant, dependent slaves” (Schoolcraft 1852, cited in Ginsberg 2003: 90). This romanticization, therefore, was not just used as a

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<sup>31</sup> Duane argues that the infantilization of slaves must be understood through Homi Bhabha’s concept of hybridity. Bhabha (1991) argues that the colonial encounter is “always [open] to a process of splitting [...] where the trace of what is disavowed is not repressed but repeated as something *different* – a mutation, a hybrid” (1991: 159, emphasis in original). Duane, affirming this, argues that “both terms of a metaphor exert influence on the other, subtly changing the ways in which each term is understood” (2010: 11). For Duane, then, “the structure of the child metaphor often changes the meanings of *both* terms” (2010: 11, emphasis in original).

<sup>32</sup> This framing of the child as dependent was not the only one operating at the time. As Duane argues, the understanding of the child as an emergent citizen deserving of rights and recognition was also becoming established. Because of this, Duane writes, the infantilizing of slaves was also a revolutionary tactic, as the pairing of child and slave linked the idea that “children are individuals whose temporary vulnerability demands care, and whose inherent potential demands freedom” (2010: 133) with the notion of the slave’s humanity and need for emancipation. And yet, counter to Duane, I argue that the way in which this logic worked for enslaved *children* was not so capacious. Prior to the Civil War, many states in the North, including Vermont in 1777, Pennsylvania in 1780, Rhode Island and Connecticut in 1784, New York in 1799, and New Jersey in 1804, enacted a gendered system of “gradual emancipation” in which children and young people were forced to remain slaves (in some states until the age of 28) as compensation for their white masters’ loss of property. In other words, it was the very framing of adult slaves as child-like, as requiring emancipation on the fact that they deserve, like children, to *eventually* become free, that set the stage for the prolonged and gradual emancipation of enslaved children.

<sup>33</sup> As Gavin Lucas (2006), writing about slavery in South Africa, points out, while the narrative of romanticism used infantilization, it was a romantic notion of slavery itself as an institution, not a recognition of the humanity of enslaved people.

vindication of the violences of one's family history; it was also integral to the affective and discursive justification of slavery.

In the more contemporary context, Lauren Berlant analyzes infantilization in relation to citizenship and the creation of what she calls the "intimate public sphere" (1997: 4). Berlant writes about the figures, fetishes and effigies—like the figure of the child, or the image of the fetus—that "condense, displace, and stand in for arguments about who 'the people' are, what they can bear, and when, if ever" (1997: 66-67). The "image of the citizen as a minor, female, youthful victim", Berlant writes, justifies and produces a state whose "adult citizens, especially adult men" are primarily mobilized around civil protection, and the regulation of sexuality (1997: 67). Across all these critiques of infantilization, it is understood to link the colonized, enslaved, or figurative subject to the child through metaphor, framing them as dependent, less intelligent, linked to a temporal and spatial "past", and as requiring the paternalism of the colonizer, the master, or the state. The question I want to ask, then, is: What takes place within an infantilizing metaphor that relies more on adolescence than childhood or infancy?

While the fantasmatic relations that adulthood has to childhood are often ones of paternalism, care, and protection (with all the insidiousness that these relations have for colonized, enslaved, and infantilized subjects), these relations can become messy and difficult in adolescence.<sup>34</sup> Indeed in adolescence, the relation of dependency can become a central site of conflict, as parents and teenagers grapple with how much independence and autonomy teenagers can have, and what rights and privileges they are afforded. Adolescence, therefore, becomes a negotiated period of the child's progression into their future adulthood, but it is still one that is negotiated, for many, through a power dynamic that carries over from childhood. What becomes important then, along with situating the vitriol directed at those who "deceptively" worked to depict Martin as a child within post-racial affects, is unpacking the specific placement of Martin into adolescence rather than adulthood. If, as I have been arguing, the investments in

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<sup>34</sup> There is a wealth of literature that documents the framing of youth culture within moral panics. In *Folk Devils and Moral Panics* (1972), for example, Stanley Cohen outlines the discursive connection between the invention of adolescence and the idea of moral decay: "The argument is that in the absence of a ritualized transition to full adult status, a limbo is created characterized by conflict, uncertainty, defiance and deviance" (1972: 151). For further analyses of youth culture and moral panics, see: Gilroy (1987); Giroux (1996, 1997); Hudson (1989); Margarey (1978); McRobbie and Thornton (1995); Shore (2002).



Martin's placement are indicative of the unresolved tensions and anxieties of racial belonging in post-racial America, then the evocation of adolescence in particular is important, and it perhaps tells us something about the racial feeling of citizenship. By marking Martin as an adolescent rather than a child or an adult, those advocating for justice in his name were interpolated into relational tropes that posited them as *precociously demanding*—on behalf of Martin—to be recognized as adult subjects.

The “troubled teen” discourse thus functioned on a few different levels. It became a way of refuting Martin's innocence through a negation of his location in childhood—its defensive opposition to the representations of Martin as a child operated within affective registers that re-asserted white injury and disavowed persistent racial injustice—and, in a seemingly counter-intuitive move, it used the temporal “dislocation” of black critique as evidence for the claim that black people were not yet ready to occupy a paternal relationship to the state. Mapped to the fantasies of differently situated subjects of historical and contemporary racial relations, the placement of Martin into adolescence by those whose structural (and paternalistic) grip on America was presumed to be under threat (those experiencing white injury), can be read as an attempt to re-establish the authority of whiteness. Indeed, under the paternalistic logic of colorblindness, the very demand that black people be recognized as full citizens is what justifies their location outside the frames of intelligibility the post-racial state relies on. As such, we can understand this belittling and paternalistic discourse of adolescence in relation to Martin in the face of the demands that he be recognized both as an innocent child victim and as a valid subject and citizen of America, as being indicative of a post-racial desire to re-affirm the partial-subjectivity of black people in the face of the “success” of the civil rights movement. Reifying Martin's status as a teenager was thus an investment in a particular racial relationship of power.

### **Skittles and the Transference of Whiteness**

These narratives of Martin's adolescence did not go without fierce challenge. Interestingly, one of the main ways that they were challenged was through a proliferation of references to the fact that Martin had bought a pack of Skittles on the night he was murdered. In this section, I follow some of the work that Skittles did in relationship to Martin. Here, Skittles play a substantial role in my analysis both because

they took on so much work in the counter-representations of Martin, and because I am interested in the ways they figure Martin along racialized markers of childhood. The image of Skittles was ever present in various responses to Martin's death. As the *New York Times* reported:

At Spelman College, the historically black women's liberal arts school in Atlanta, the student government is buying Skittles in bulk and reselling them for 50 cents a bag to raise money for the family of Trayvon Martin. [...] The candy has been piled into makeshift memorials, crammed into the pockets of thousands of people who have shown up at rallies in his name and sent to the Sanford Police Department to protest the lack of an arrest in the case. (Severson 2012)

Along with these uses of Skittles, the candy was taped over protestors' mouths at public gatherings, attached to signs calling for Zimmerman's arrest, presented as evidence during the trial, and superimposed over viral images of Martin online. It was also evoked in personal terms by those who attended rallies in support for Martin and his family. Across these uses of Skittles, the candy was used to connect Martin to the realm of childhood. We can see this, for example, in a narrative about the night of Martin's murder that presents us with two children and a childish object:

The family of a 17-year-old African-American boy shot to death last month in his gated Florida community by a white Neighborhood Watch captain wants to see the captain arrested, the family's lawyer said on Wednesday. Trayvon Martin was shot dead after he took a break from watching NBA All-Star game television coverage to walk 10 minutes to a convenience store to buy snacks including Skittles candy requested by his 13-year-old brother, Chad, the family's lawyer Ben Crump said. (Liston 2012)

Skittles, like most other aspects of the case, played a dual role: they were simultaneously evidentiary and fantasmatic. They stood in for and evoked forms of racialized subject production that are under constant negotiation and tension. As such,

their role both in the evening of Martin's murder and in the responses to it were deeply challenged and challenging.

One of these challenges is about who the Skittles were for. Some accounts of the evening, such as the one above from *Reuters*, and the one below from Marian Wright Edelman, the President of the Children's Defense Fund, suggested that Martin was purchasing the Skittles for his younger brother:

[Martin's] killer, George Zimmerman, saw the teenager on the street and called the police to report he looked "like he's up to no good." At the time Trayvon was walking home from the nearby 7-11 carrying a bottle of Arizona iced tea and a bag of Skittles for his younger stepbrother, leaving many people to guess that the main thing he was doing that made him look "no good" was [...] walking while Black. (M.W. Edelman 2012)

Other narrations of the evening, however, did not mention that Martin even had a brother. An article from the *New York Times*, for example, mentioned both Martin's younger brother and Skittles, but it did not say who desired them (Kovaleski 2012). They were both simply present, and their presence was important. These narratives worked to entrench Martin's connection to childhood by placing him into proximity to another child's body and to a childish object. While Martin's brother only persisted in some narratives of the evening, the candy took on an affective and highly politicized role in the galvanizing of support for Martin and the demand that Zimmerman be arrested.<sup>35</sup> In many iterations that paralleled those above, the inclusion of Skittles into the story was used repeatedly to stand in for, or declare, Martin's childhood. His stated possession of Skittles begged the repeatedly asked question of what possible mal intent someone could have had whose journey out into a rainy and dark evening was motivated by a desire for candy.

This argument, and its explicit and implicit racialization, was made clear in an article in *The Guardian*:

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<sup>35</sup> In some of this reporting, the link between Skittles and the night of Martin's murder was discussed as if it was damaging to the brand. See, for example, the *New York Times* article "For Skittles, Death Brings Both Profit and Risk" (Severson 2012).

Whether or not you believe George Zimmerman, the neighbourhood-watch coordinator who says he shot Martin in self-defense, these [the items Trayvon Martin had with him at the time of his death: his cellphone, a cigarette lighter, earphones, a can of Arizona watermelon fruit juice cocktail, \$40, and a bag of Skittles] don't sound like instruments of burglary. Indeed, the Skittles especially, with their bright playground colours and “Taste the Rainbow” slogan, have become a symbol of Martin's innocence. He may have been suspended from school at the time, and had traces of cannabis in his blood, but when you look behind the appearance of a menacing black teenager, those Skittles say, you find the child inside. (Benedictus 2013)

Skittles thus takes on a figurative life that shifts from something that Martin had placed in his pockets, to something that comes to act as an intermediary for Martin himself. In stark contrast to the ways in which Martin's body (or the body assumed to be Martin's) was used to place him in a gendered and racialized space of deviant adolescence, the image of Skittles also mediates Martin's body, but this time situates it within the affects evoked by a non-human object. The striking visualization of this replacement, the repeated images of Skittles packets covering, burying, and accompanying images of Martin and his supporters, created a collective demand that the childhood innocence that the candy evokes would speak back to the histories of criminalization that had encapsulated him as a “really suspicious” young black man.

But what are the terms of this figuring? If, as I have been arguing, there are vast discursive and material structures within contemporary America that make young black men's location within childhood precarious, we should attend to why this embodiment rather than any other, was able, at this particular moment, to assert Martin's innocence. One of the ways to answer this question is to think about the notion of the transferability of childhood innocence across racial lines. This notion of childhood's transferability comes from Robin Bernstein who situates it in relationship to the two child characters, Eva and Topsy, of Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin; or, Life Among the Lowly* (1852). Within its narrative, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* dramatically brings together several versions of childhood to advocate for the abolition of slavery, and, as Bernstein (2011) and Levander (2006) have argued, it produces the child as integral to the

abolition of slavery and to a monumental shift in prebellum race-relations.<sup>36</sup> One of the central ways that children and childhood undergird the abolitionist call of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* is through the interactions between Eva and Topsy, and particularly in the moments in which whiteness, innocence, and childhood are transferred from Eva (who is racially marked as a child) to Topsy (who is racially marked as beyond childhood). I turn to Bernstein's reading of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* briefly here as a means of extending her analysis of the "transfer of whiteness" from Eva to Topsy, to the transfer of innocence from Skittles to Martin.

Topsy, a young black girl, is first introduced in contradistinction to Eva, a young white girl described as "the perfection of childish beauty" (Stowe 1852: 131), whose father purchases Topsy as a slave. As Bernstein argues, Eva's childhood innocence—her "undulating and aerial grace, such as one might dream of for some mythic and allegorical being" and her "airy and innocent playfulness [which] seemed to flicker like the shadow of summer leaves over her childish face" (Stowe 1852: 131)—is mapped directly to her whiteness. It is equated, that is, to her "racially marked 'golden-brown' hair and 'deep blue eyes' [and to Stowe's] references to the girl's habit of dressing in only white" (R. Bernstein 2011: 4). The reader's introduction to Topsy, on the other hand—first described as a "thing"—establishes her as a character that is racially, and thus also fundamentally, oppositional to Eva: "There stood the two children [...] representative of their races" (Stowe 1852: 218). As a "representative" of her race, Topsy is described in terms antonymic to Eva:

She was one of the blackest of her race [...] her wooly hair [...] stuck out in every direction [...] she was dressed in a single filthy, ragged garment, made of bagging [...] there was something odd and goblin-like about her appearance,—something, as Miss Ophelia afterwards said, "so heathenish," as to inspire that good lady with utter dismay. (1852: 211)

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<sup>36</sup> *Uncle Tom's Cabin* quickly became the second best selling book (just behind the Bible) of the nineteenth century. The narrative exceeded its pages through "illustrations, dramatic stagings [...] games, advertisements, and household items such as handkerchiefs" and dolls (R. Bernstein 2011: 6), and became "arguably the most famous U.S. antislavery novel ever written" (Levander 2006: 41).

Topsy, the same age as Eva, is further described as “wicked”, a “little plague”, “dreadfully dirty”, and “disgusting” (1852: 211-213).<sup>37</sup>

In Bernstein’s analysis, Stowe’s oppositional descriptions of Eva and Topsy demonstrate how “angelic white children were contrasted with pickaninnies so grotesque as to suggest that only white children *were* children” (2011: 16, emphasis in original). Because of her unintelligibility as a child, she required Eva’s whiteness and innocence to be transferred to her in order for the reader to sympathize with her. Writing about the transfer of innocence to Topsy from Eva, Bernstein asserts:

Stowe argues that Topsy can be healed, but only through Eva’s moral, loving influence [...] Topsy’s conversion only occurs when Eva combines words of love with gentle touch [...] Only the touch of Eva’s “white hand” combined with declarations of love for Topsy as a “poor, abused child” transforms “the black child”. At that moment, a “ray of real belief, a ray of heavenly love” penetrates Topsy, and for the first time in the novel, she weeps. It is in this scene that Topsy is converted into sensation, into humanized childhood, and even, Eva promises, potential angelhood—“just as much as if you were white.” (2011: 45-47)

Topsy, Bernstein argues, thus required the touch of Eva in order to have her childhood and her innocence validated. Both childhood and innocence, in other words, had to emerge from an embodied white child subject to endow, or to be transferred to, a black one.<sup>38</sup> It is precisely this transfer that we can identify as taking place in the use of

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<sup>37</sup> Robin Bernstein argues that Topsy’s character stems from, and is iconic of, the caricature of the pickaninny, a cultural stereotype of young black children defined by “juvenile status, dark skin, and, crucially, the state of being comically impervious to pain” (2011: 20). The pickaninny is an archetype used specifically for children, and its infamous depictions of black children’s imperviousness to pain engendered racist depictions of black children harming themselves as a form of conventional humor. Often, these depictions centered on small black children on their own (without parental supervision), in the nude or in very little clothing, being eaten by wild animals.

<sup>38</sup> According to Kathryn Bond Stockton, one of the other ways to endow black children with innocence and with childhood is to over-burden them with narratives and images of abuse: “As odd as it may seem, suffering certain kinds of abuse from which they need protection and to which they don’t consent, working-class children or children of color may come to seem more innocent” (2009: 32-33).

Skittles to mark Martin as innocent. For it is only in his possession of Skittles, in his proximity to them, that he is converted from a “menacing black teenager” to a “child.” The candy, being brightly colored and pure sugar, symbolized childhood and innocence in a way that his own body could not. In their reiterated connection to and figuring of Martin—in the covering of his memorials with them, in his supporters holding signs with images of them, in them being brought to protests and taped over protestors’ mouths, and in their repeated reference as the key object that produced empathy and sorrow for the loss of a child—Skittles transformed Martin into an innocent child.

The use of the Skittles packet thus simultaneously evokes the innocence of children—an innocence that is coded along and as whiteness—and transfers that innocence to Martin’s body. Doing so allowed Martin’s supporters to decry the horror of Zimmerman’s violent murder of a (now) innocent child. For, within a discursive terrain that assumes black guilt, Martin, without the Skittles, would have simply been a suspicious black body in a neighborhood where he was not recognized. He would not have had something to signify his innocence, and the only thing that would have been available to make sense of his death would have been Zimmerman’s word and Martin’s past—a history that I have already shown to be laden with racial and gendered discourses of criminality. Furthermore, the claim of innocence that is transferred to Martin through Skittles would not work if that object, like the gold tooth grill, implicated him in histories of the skin that further criminalize black men and cast them out of childhood. While it was his blackness that initially made him a suspect to Zimmerman, the claim of injury—the claim of racial profiling—can seemingly only be made through the intelligibility of the injury done to his childhood innocence as figured by Skittles. This is deeply concerning for it implies that optimistic calls for racial justice that use Skittles in Martin’s name are predicated on forms of racial intelligibility—scripted through and as childhood—that reify the deviance of black masculinity and the innocence of whiteness. If these are the terms upon which a claim for racial profiling needs to be made, we might need to re-imagine them outside of the confines of the discursive practice of childhood.

### **Conclusion: #IfTheyGunnedMeDown**

On August 9, 2014, thirteen months after Zimmerman was acquitted, Mike Brown, an 18-year-old black male, was shot dead by Darren Wilson, a white police officer in the

Ferguson Police Department. The next day, C.J. Lawrence introduced the hashtag #IfTheyGunnedMeDown on Twitter, tweeting: “Yes, let’s do that: Which photo does the media use if the police shoot me down? #IfTheyGunnedMeDown” (Lawrence 2014). Along with this text, Lawrence posted two images sutured together: one of him giving a speech at his college graduation (at which a highly amused President Bill Clinton laughs at something Lawrence has said), and another of him gesturing to the camera and holding a bottle of alcohol. Directly challenging the postmortem representation in the media of black people after their murders by the police, Lawrence’s hashtag quickly went viral, and over 180,000 reiterations of the tweet were posted in the following three days. These posts became part of a digital archive collection through the social media site Tumblr.<sup>39</sup> Some of these sutured images were posted simply with the hashtag, while others were accompanied by personal narratives and rebuttals like the ones below:

But seriously... #IfTheyGunnedMeDown which picture would they use? I already know the answer to that, they’d do anything to portray me as a criminal even if I was so innocent I didn’t see the bullet coming. This is white America and the police are making sure they do their part to keep it that way.  
(@vicariouslylivingx)

Would they paint me as a kid who had trouble in school? Who was struggling with mental illness and was probably unstable and probably running the streets at all hours of the night? Or would they paint me as a kid who was loved in school by teachers? A kid who had trouble, but did their best? A kid with lots of friends and family? I think we know. (@gentlemanlypansexual)

When Trayvon Martin and Jordan Davis were killed, various outlets used the most thuggish pictures they could find of those young men. So, I ask you all, #IfTheyGunnedMeDown, which picture would the media use of me? I think I already know the answer. #RIPMichaelBrown (@benny-thejet)

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<sup>39</sup> These posts, including the ones cited below, can be found at: <http://iftheygunnedmedown.tumblr.com>



They wouldn't show the smiling girl who graduated abroad at one of the best schools in the country. The media would portray me as a hard and mean-looking girl who was asking for it. They wouldn't honor the life I had lived, but rather, justify the reason I was dead. (@mariefatale)

How do we understand these young people's repeated references to their own future death? And what does it mean to situate this anticipated death within the repeated invocation of "we already know", and the suturing of these images? Thinking through these questions, I conclude this chapter by putting this campaign into conversation with the racial work of childhood that I have been tracing across this chapter.

"Trayvon Martin", Hart writes, "was dead before his deadly encounter with George Zimmerman. His execution [...] was a post-mortem event; a ratification after the fact of the facts of black male being-in-America" (2013: 91). As I have argued throughout this chapter, one of the ways in which Martin's body was marked as already dead, and his deadly encounter—his execution—was justified, was through the racial logics imparted by the technology of childhood. Childhood, as a historically negotiated racial technology that distributes exclusion, negation, enslavement, and incarceration to black communities, worked directly in the political aftermath of Martin's murder to mark Martin as deserving his death. It also, I have argued, became a dense transfer point of innocence and whiteness through which Martin's own innocence could be established, but at the cost of replacing and negating his particular body. While we will never know whether or not Martin anticipated his own premature death, nor can we assume what stories and images he would have used himself if he had contributed to the #IfTheyGunnedMeDown campaign, we might ask what political work these images do in relationship to the representational field that emerged in the aftermath of his murder. Writing about this campaign, Campt analyzes these images through a black feminist politics of fugitivity and refusal:

Refusing to wait passively for a future posited as highly likely or inevitable for black urban youth, the photos [in the #IfTheyGunnedMeDown campaign] actively anticipate their sitters' own premature deaths. In doing so, they enact anterior practices of fugitivity through their refusal to be silenced by the probability of a future violent death they confront on a daily basis in the present.

Through these images they fashion a futurity they project beyond their own demise. (2017, forthcoming: 8-9)<sup>40</sup>

This refusal, coupled with the intentional suturing of apparently “opposed” (and oppositional) imagery, is central to my own reading of these images. For in the suturing of these images, the future imagined and demanded by them is created as a space in which both images exist simultaneously. Here, in reading these images through the theoretical framework of the “suture”, I am drawing upon a body of work on cinema that attends to the production of identification through the cinematic apparatus (Dayan 1976; J. A. Miller 1977-78; Silverman 1983). The “suture”, Kaja Silverman writes, “is the name given to the procedures by means of which cinematic texts confer subjectivity upon their viewers” (1983: 195). In simple terms, wherein the camera’s limited field of vision comes to be recognized by the viewer *as* limited (and, in psychoanalytic terms, as lacking, as castration, and thus as unpleasurable), the cinematic narrative itself sutures in the viewer, making them desire the narrative’s closure, and thus continue to permit the fictional characters to stand in for themselves. As such, the suture persuades the viewer, Silverman writes, “to accept certain cinematic images as an accurate reflection” of their own subjectivity precisely through the transparency, or the concealment, of the “apparatuses of enunciation” (1983: 215). This concept of transparency is important, particularly when the theory of the suture—in adapted terms—becomes useful as a technique and a discursive tool through which digital assemblages, like those in the #IfTheyGunnedMeDown campaign, can be analyzed.<sup>41</sup>

Here we might then think about the visible suturing of seemingly “oppositional” images and narratives in the #IfTheyGunnedMeDown campaign. What does the proximity of these images speak to? How do we read the seam that connects and separates these perhaps juxtaposed images? In the digital melding of imagery, the posting of two images as one, these images demand that they be seen and read together. As representations of these subjects’ pasts, these seemingly “opposed” images, and the

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<sup>40</sup> Page numbers for this text correspond to an unpublished version of the final chapter, which Campt shared with me in personal communication, rather than to their location in the forthcoming book.

<sup>41</sup> See also Nicole Fleetwood’s (2011) analysis of the use of the “suture”, the “cut”, and the “wound” in the digital assemblage and contemporary media artwork of Fatimah Tuggar.

foreshadowed postmortem narratives they tell, cannot not be read as belonging to the same person.<sup>42</sup> At the same time, the visible seam connecting and separating these images functions as more than simply a reminder and marker of their subjects' non-oppositional complexities. By tying image to image, and images to narrative, they make visible the means of production through which these narratives are already unevenly deployed in postmortem representations of their subjects, as embodied and narrative justifications for their foreshortened lives. Making this seam visible, these images refuse and expose these terms. As Campt notes, it is not simply that these images and narratives project a future beyond these people's potential—or inevitable—deaths; rather, their suturing acts as a “fundamental renunciation of the terms imposed upon black subjects that reduce black life to always already suspect by refusing to accept or deny these terms [possibility or negation] as their truth” (2017, forthcoming: 9). The holding together of possibility and negation, the renouncement of the postmortem representation of preemptive black death through a demand that the complexities of the contradictory pasts that these images speak to and reject, thus becomes an act of refusing the simplistic and violent reading of childhood—and its negation—upon these subjects. While Martin did not have the opportunity to decide how his young life would be represented and accounted for, thinking with the political work of the #IfTheyGunnedMeDown campaign, we might work to acknowledge, center, and highlight all of Martin's nuances, and demand that they, more so than simply his “innocence”, place him squarely within childhood, and squarely within a present with a future.

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<sup>42</sup> For another meditation on how to remember and represent the loss of a young, complicated, and nuanced black life amidst the oppressive weight of discourses of black criminality, see: Cacho (2011).

## Chapter Five:

### “I want to have lots, and lots of babies. As many babies as possible”: Queer Theory, Identification, and Children

[A] panoply of policies continue to degrade Black women’s reproductive decisions. Plans to distribute Norplant [a birth control pill] in Black communities as a means of addressing their poverty, law enforcement practices that penalize Black women for bearing a child, and welfare reform measures that cut off assistance for children born to welfare mothers all proclaim the same message: The key to solving America’s social problems is to curtail Black women’s birth rates.

(Roberts 1997: 7)

*[Q]ueerness* names the side of those *not* “fighting for the children,” the side outside the consensus by which all politics confirms the absolute value of reproductive futurism.

(Edelman 2004: 3, emphasis in original)

#### Unpolished Movements

Eight years have gone by since I first came out and I am twenty-two. I am sitting at the back of a dark auditorium in the midst of the sweltering heat of the California summer, sweating as stationary fans attempt to make up for the lack of air conditioning, and I am hoping that it will go well. It is why, after all, all two hundred of us are here in the first place. To support courageous queer kids like the next performer, an out, 12-year-old, mixed-raced boy, whose lesbian mothers have been fierce advocates for him in the face of harsh bullying (what else could a celebration of the tenacity of queer youth want?). As the lights go down and the music begins to boom my heart races—and then, appearing from behind a rainbow flag, a small kid with spiked, gelled hair, and a slight frame, wearing a shirt proclaiming “G-A-Y” in large block letters, and a huge smile on his face commands attention at center stage and begins break dancing to the beat. What

a sight! To have been able, at twelve, to not only be out but to be twirling a pride flag around my head and my body to the beat of music and the applause of a full house! The crowd erupts, cheering him on with shouts and praise. They know, as I do, that this performance is a product of all our years of hard work, of creating not just a liveable life for young queer kids, but also a present—this moment!—where they are celebrated. And then it happened. His dance betrayed us. As his movements transitioned from those that mimicked break-dancers to those that mimicked sex acts, repeating the easily citational gesticulations of pelvic thrusts (citations of sex acts, it seemed to me, probably not yet accessible from a personal lexicon—but perhaps that is besides the point), the cheers became a murmur. In the moment of those thrusts, the room itself was pushed into a collective affect of discomfort and anxiety, completely unsure of what to make of this performance before us. I, on the other hand, find myself caught up in exhilarating waves of memory, identification, and desire: a wish. A wish that I could have been this boy (or that this boy could have been me), a hope that this boy will have and will be all that I desire for him, and a desire for him himself. To be next to him, and, maybe, to dance with him. A memory emerges of a past self—myself at twelve: reclusive and closeted—that I longingly place into this moment. A fantasy of two gay children dancing on stage as if there was no one else but us. Time slows down. I am this boy and this boy is mine. I am my childhood self again (although this version of me is different—I'm more outgoing, more like the me I wished I could have been), and we are two kids dancing together.

My fantasy breaks momentarily (as with all fantasies, I'll return to it again and again), as I scan the audience. They look panicked. The applause has died down. Caught between a desire to support this kid, and an anxiety about celebrating, let alone witnessing, something akin to a child's sexuality, the reactions to this moment were swift and harsh. At the end of the night, I, as the organizer of the event, found myself in trouble. The performance was “too much,” I was told, it was “inappropriate,” and “uncomfortable.” I realized at that moment—or, (allow me the fantasy), I like to believe that it was this moment, as if my realization happened amidst a backdrop of stage lighting and collective queer celebration and panic—that our embrace of queer children rests on unstable and ambivalent grounds. That to celebrate queer kids is to applaud them in their bravery of declaring publicly their orientations, but not to witness, nor acknowledge, nor fantasize, that they, too, might have desires of their own. In our

embrace of queer kids, the kids themselves, in all of their mechanical thrusts and unpolished movements, disappear, and a narrative—a narrative that has been persistently used to define and constrain both queers and children—seeps in. In the years following this event, I have continued to return, not just to my fantasy of it, but also to the questions that linger in my attempt to grapple with the evening in all its complexity.

This is where this chapter's work began: with questions that followed this child's performance. How to accommodate his young, queer, unruly, dancing, mixed-race body into queer theory and queer activism? How to address the investments cathected in and refused by this body?<sup>1</sup> And how to understand the disarray his performance produced? Attending to these questions, this chapter asks after the ways something called the "queer child" comes into sight, is made present, and is embraced, in queer theory. In seeking to answer these questions, I turned to queer theory at a time when it was just beginning to establish its relationship to the child. For while it has been more than a decade since Lee Edelman's polemic *No Future* (2004) argued that queerness is antithetical to the figure of the child and the heteronormative reproductive futurity that it signifies (for more see Chapter Three), current writing on childhood within queer theory wholly refuted this opposition. The argument made by Edelman's detractors—that queers and children are, or can be, one and the same—is being taken up as the presiding position for queers to take (cf. Cobb 2005; Lesnik-Oberstein and Thompson 2002). This position can be found most directly stated in Steven Bruhm and Natasha Hurley's edited collection *Curiouser: On the Queerness of Children* (2004a), Jack Halberstam's *Gaga Feminism* (2012), Kathryn Bond Stockton's *The Queer Child, Or Growing Sideways in the Twentieth Century* (2009), and Michael Moon's *A Small Boy and Others* (1998). It has also been articulated in journal articles and special issues, such as the 2010 special issue on childhood and feminist theory in *Feminist Theory* (Burman and Stacey 2010a), the 2011 special issue of *Lambda Nordica* (Vänskä 2011a), the special issue of *Women's Studies Quarterly* (Chinn and Duane 2015), and "The

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<sup>1</sup> In using the language of "cathexis" and "investment" I am returning to my theoretical framework of childhood as an "object-cathexis" from Chapter Three. There, I argued that understanding childhood as a cathected object prioritizes an interrogation of childhood as an object whose confines and effects are dependent on the psychic attachments and investments that people place within it. This framework also suggests that childhood becomes a privileged object through a disavowal of its ambivalences.

Child Now”, the upcoming special issue of *GLQ* (Stockton and Gill-Peterson 2016, forthcoming).<sup>2</sup> This captivating body of theory, discussed further below, settled many of the questions I had, but it left others unsettled. As with the crowd’s reaction to this boy’s performance, there are particularities to this body of work that often require seeing a specific child in order for its frame to extend, grow sideways, be radical, and be queer. Beginning with my memory of this child’s performance, this chapter seeks to extend the reach of what this body of theory might do as it embraces the queer child.<sup>3</sup> In conversation with queer theory on the child, queer of color critique, and, as we shall see, mothers and children of varying kinds, this chapter asks for a different type of politics to coalesce around, in, and with the queer child.

Centrally, then, what this chapter is asking is: How does a queer project support queer kids? But, lingering in this question, and made striking in the moment of this boy’s unruly movements, is another provocation: How can a queer project support the queer kid who refuses it, betrays it, and interrupts its own lines of identification and desire? Upon what grounds is a queer child identified, desired, or secured in the first place? The queer child, in as much as this subject and figuration can be defined, facilitates queer interventions and world building projects, but they also align with, complicate, subvert, and throw into disarray these very investments. What then do we do with the queer child whose movements betray us? Or perhaps, I wondered, is this the wrong question? Perhaps it needs to be asked the other way around: What does queer theory do with its investments when they betray (or are betrayed by) the queer child? I ask these questions of support and betrayal in the face of a queer theoretical project that has come under multiple strain for its aim, orientation, and object. In asking how a queer project might support the queer child who refuses it, I am thus asking how queer theory might support and define a child when queer theory itself is so deeply entrenched

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<sup>2</sup> Unfortunately, at the time of submission, the *GLQ* special issue “The Child Now” (Stockton and Gill-Peterson 2016, forthcoming) had not yet been published. Because of this, my analysis of the sub-field of queer theory on the child within this chapter cannot account for what topics this issue might address. That said, the central aim of this chapter is to ask—as an ongoing question—how queer theory accounts for its objects when they refuse this embrace. As such, I would argue that this chapter’s analysis is not wholly dependent on there being a gap in the literature, nor that a singular issue could possibly bring this gap to a closure.

<sup>3</sup> For analyses of the queer child beyond those which this chapter directly engages, see: Durber (2007); Kalha (2011); Kryölä (2011); McCreery (2004).

in a *fort da* relationship with the very questions of identity, definition, coherence, and refusal themselves.<sup>4</sup> My suspicion, one which I grapple with in this chapter through a close reading of a few different registers and sub-fields of queer theory, and through a reading of a film that flirts with the issue of witnessing the sexual child, is that what the child most provocatively offers queer theory is a troubled relationship with some of queer theory's most animating questions.

In order to arrive at this grounding suspicion, this chapter takes a somewhat circuitous journey. The slightly longer first half of this chapter jumps into the questions of queerness, childhood, and sexuality, by locating them within queer theory itself. I begin with a discussion about the difficult ethical and political consequences of theorizing childhood and sexuality together, and then I move to provide some context for, and a few close readings of, the queer child as it is articulated within queer theory. Here my focus is on how the queer child emerged in queer theory, what it is being used for, what structuring investments shape its contours, and what the gaps are in theorizing it. In the latter half of this chapter I take up a queer child of my own, one which I embrace as both a theoretical exploration of the questions of queerness, race, gender, reproduction, and mothering (intersections of the queer child that I argue fall somewhat silent in queer theory's wider articulation), and as a reparative response to my own

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<sup>4</sup> In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920), Sigmund Freud argues a child's game—of repeatedly throwing a toy "*fort*" (gone), only to quickly retrieve it "*da*" (there)—is an act of repeating a "distressing experience as a game" (Freud 1920: 225). Freud thus argues that by repeating an unpleasurable act one can "make oneself master of it [...] as a primary event" (Freud 1920: 226). In arguing that queer theory has a *fort da* relationship with these questions of identity and definition, I am suggesting that queer scholarship tends to reiterate an assumed primary absence—that of a proper object of queer, defined as, to various extents, not intersectional, critical, "queer", specific, global, etc. enough—in order to have a mastery over this loss. In one iteration of this return, a particular queer genealogy (Butler 1990, 1993b; Sedgwick 1990; de Lauretis 1991; Warner 1993) is understood as emerging out of a break from (a certain branch of) feminism and gay and lesbian studies (cf. Halley 2004; Hemmings 2011; Wiegman 2004, 2012). This prompts debates about the "proper object" of queerness (Eng, Halberstam and Muñoz 2005; Halley and Parker 2011; Wiegman and E. A. Wilson 2015). In another vein, the work on what E. Patrick Johnson termed black "quare" studies (R. Ferguson 2004; S. Holland 2012; P. Johnson 2008; P. Johnson and Henderson 2005; Somerville 2000), and the arguments against queer's geopolitical referents (Blackwood 2008; Cruz-Malavé and Manalansan 2002; Vanita 2002), challenge the founding whiteness of this primary absence. This return, however, is complicated by queer's feminist, queer of color, and black and indigenous feminist genealogy (Anzaldúa 1987; Lorde 1978; Moraga and Anzaldúa 1981; Muñoz 1999).



paranoid reading of the field provided in the first half of the chapter. I find this queer child within Aviva, the main character of Todd Solondz' provocative film *Palindromes* (2004). This is a film, I argue, that flips the dominant narratives and positions of childhood, sexuality, and queerness; and Aviva makes for a staunchly difficult queer child. And yet it is precisely her adamant refusal to be either queer or a child that I find to be most useful in defining her as paradigmatically queer. Embracing Aviva, I ask what queer theory and queerness might look like if they were to support her in all of her intricate complexities. With this question of refusal and embrace structuring my own queer child, the conclusion of this chapter brings me back to the questions of identification and desire that have just begun it. Here, I turn to queer and feminist engagements with the theory of identification and spectatorship, and I work to produce a politics of identification with the queer child that accommodates their—or our—refusals.

### **Childhood and Sexuality**

I realize, of course, that this memory and these questions are in and of themselves unsettling. Pairing childhood and sexuality, let alone childhood and queer, and certainly childhood and desire, raises important questions of ethics, consent, sexual violence, exploitation, sexualization, coercion, and trauma.<sup>5</sup> Like other issues, children's ability to cope with and negotiate these issues—along with their vulnerabilities to them—are deeply impacted by the intersections of gender, race, class, ability, sexual orientation, and citizenship status. Because the realities of childhood sexual abuse can be so intensely violating, and are often premised on a power dynamic in which the child cannot consent to, nor refuse, the perhaps unintelligible sexual advances of adults who coerce them into silence, any conversation about childhood and sexuality that does not begin with, validate, and prioritize the voices and experiences of survivors is immediately met with suspicion. In speaking about childhood and sexuality in this

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<sup>5</sup> For a volume on feminist perspectives on child sexual abuse, see: Driver and Droisen (1989); see also: La Fontaine (1990). For works which seek to give voice to those who have experienced sexual abuse as children, see: Bass and L. Davis (1988); Elliott (1993). Patricia Beezley Mrazek and Henry Kempe (1981) provide an overview (albeit dated) of the issues and promises of psychological treatment and evaluation of survivors. More recently, Samantha Ashenden (2004) has additionally asked after the governance of child sexual abuse. See also: Reavey and Warner (2003).

chapter, I recognize that my own account will be faced with similar questions, and it is not my intention to discredit, ignore, or sideline the important recognition of sexual violence. At the same time, while I am speaking about sexuality and childhood, this chapter is not about children's experiences of sexual violence. This distinction is important. One of the contentions of this chapter—and indeed one of the contentions of the literature that has worked over the past couple decades on the very question of childhood sexual abuse and the sexualization of childhood—is that while acknowledging that children do experience very real forms of sexual violence is important, this recognition cannot be the end of the conversation. Indeed, because these issues are so important, they cannot be explained or dealt with solely through an approach that ends the conversation at the pronouncement of their violence, particularly when children's vulnerabilities are also impacted by the ways in which the figure of the innocent child contains children in the realm of the vulnerable.<sup>6</sup>

One of the scholars who has illuminated the difficult work of the very idea of innocence for children is Jacqueline Rose. In her 1992 preface to *The Case of Peter Pan*, Rose provides a careful yet critical analysis of the ways in which a national conversation about childhood sexual abuse problematically re-entrenched the twinning of innocence and childhood. Rose argues that in the years since the first publication of *The Case of Peter Pan* in 1984, “the concept of childhood innocence has been put under multiple strain [...] [because of] a crisis in the public perception of what, exactly, *is* a relation to a child” (1992: ix-x, emphasis in original). Writing about the “discovery” of the “wide-spread sexual abuse of children” within British culture, Rose argues that “in response [...] innocence [returned] with all the renewed authority of a value literally and brutally under assault” (1992: xi).<sup>7</sup> In the face of a panic about abuse, Freudian notions of the child's inherent perverse polymorphous sexuality (which had been growing in acceptance) became disavowed, and, Rose writes, “a conceptual price” was paid (1992: xi). This conceptual price was the disavowal of childhood sexual knowledge and

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<sup>6</sup> One way of accounting for the complexities of this type of violence is through the work already begun in trauma studies. See, for example: Antze and Lambek (1996); Caruth (1995); Fahs (2016); Felman and Laub (1992).

<sup>7</sup> Jacqueline Rose argues that in the moment childhood innocence came “under assault” in Britain, Englishness, and a particular nationalist racism, were bolstered in defense. Englishness and childhood innocence, Rose writes, “appear as mutually reinforcing terms” (1992: xii).

experiences, and the cultural inability to speak about childhood sexuality in nuanced ways. This took place, Rose notes, because the child victim must be believed, and thus must necessarily be desexualized in order for the reality of sexual abuse to be insisted upon, “for there does not”, she writes, “seem to be a readily available language in which one can talk of childhood sexuality and insist on the reality of child sexual abuse at the same time” (1992: xi).

Similarly, James Kincaid argues that the way in which childhood sexuality and childhood sexual abuse is spoken about within public discourse is not only narrow in terms of its range, but it is also “continuous with the problem it is addressing” (Kincaid 1998: 7). For Kincaid (1994, 1998), the incessant stories about childhood sexual abuse and pedophilia combine with a manufactured eroticism of childhood and the figure of the child to create a climate that simultaneously promotes, sensationalizes, and disavows, a problematic national pedophilic desire. The discourses that wrap around the sexual child, Kincaid argues, have thus not made children less sexual, nor less exploited; in fact, he claims, they have done the opposite. But neither, Judith Levine (2002) argues, have these attempts to protect children from sexual abuse given children the tools to speak about desire, their bodies, pleasure, or sexuality other than as violation. Levine’s argument is that “sex is not in itself harmful to minors” (2002: xxxiii). Rather, she argues, “the real potential for harm lies in the circumstances [poverty and racism] under which some children and teens have sex” (2002: xxxiii). Despite this, Levine writes, the drive to protect children from sex has exacerbated rather than mitigated the circumstances under which children experience sex as harmful.<sup>8</sup> Adding to Levine’s argument, I would note that the current framework for dealing with the complex issues that are tied up with children’s sexual exploitation has produced a vast system of surveillance, discipline, and extra-legal punishment and confinement<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> The effects of child protection are not just limited to young people, nor those imagined as subjects of the nation state. Nandita Sharma (2005), for example, argues that the figure of the “vulnerable trafficked child” gets used to enforce racist anti-immigration policies.

<sup>9</sup> For a comparative and historical analysis of sex offender registration and monitoring, see: T. Thomas (2011); see also: Harrison (2011); Maddan (2008); Meiners (2015); R. Wright (2009). In seventeen states across the U.S., civil commitment laws allow judges or juries to keep those deemed “sexually violent predators” in indefinite custody even after they have served their original sentence. For more on civil commitment, see: A.

that does nothing to challenge misconceptions about recidivism<sup>10</sup> nor address familial, intimate, or other forms of non-stranger sexual abuse.<sup>11</sup> It has also repeatedly criminalized young people themselves (placing them on life-long sex offender registries, for example) for being in mutually-consenting underage relationships,<sup>12</sup> for sending or receiving a sext,<sup>13</sup> or for engaging in survival sex.<sup>14</sup>

Furthermore, the recognition that children are uniquely vulnerable to sexual violence cannot be the end of the conversation particularly when beginning from a queer political standpoint, precisely because of the historical deployment of children's vulnerability against queer populations. Bruhm and Hurley, referencing Foucault's tracing of the figure of the masturbating child as one of the figures through which sexuality became mobilized within power (Foucault 1978), argue along these lines that it was specifically through the policing of children's sexuality in the nineteenth century that "enabled the persecution of perversions [and] would eventually earn the sodomite his certified homosexuality" (Bruhm and Hurley 2004b: xv). Historically, then, the sexuality of queers and children, as well as their sexual identities and their production as sexual subjects, have been mutually entwined. At the same time, however, queers and

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Harris (2005); D. Harris et al, (2009); Levenson (2009); *US v Comstock et al* (2010). In terms of the forced transience that sex offender laws produce, see, among other reports: "Sex Offenders Forced Live Under Miami Bridge" (Allen 2009).

<sup>10</sup> James Worling and Tracey Curwen (2000), for example, have shown sex offenders to have much lower rates of recidivism than nonsexual offenders.

<sup>11</sup> As Lisa Sample and Mary Evans write, "the majority of victims of sex crimes knew their attackers. [...] [T]herefore, although citizens search Web sites to discern information on potential strangers who may offend against their children, it is more likely that they already know likely offenders" (2009: 230-231).

<sup>12</sup> See, for example: "No Easy Answers: Sex Offender Laws in the U.S." (Human Rights Watch 2007); "The Accidental Sex Offender" (Pesta 2011); "Caught in the Gray Area of a Child-Abuser Database" (Ramshaw 2011).

<sup>13</sup> How to respond to the sending or receiving of a sext by young people is still a contentious issue. As the *New York Times* reports, "7 percent of people arrested on suspicion of child pornography production in 2009 were teenagers who shared images with peers consensually [...] The laws that cover this situation, passed decades ago, were meant to apply to adults who exploited children and require those convicted under them to register as sex offenders" (Hasinoff 2016).

<sup>14</sup> For a comprehensive report about the effects of criminalizing LGBT young people's engagement in survival sex—sex had in exchange for necessary food, money, shelter, or drugs—see: "Locked In: Interactions with the Criminal Justice and Child Welfare Systems for LGBTQ Youth, YMSM, and YWSW Who Engage in Survival Sex" (Dank et al. 2015).

children have posed mutually imbricated threats to one another. Children, it was, and is, proposed, are under threat from homosexuals, sex workers, sex educators, pro-choice feminists, pornography (and pornographers), fetishists, “perverse” racialized and immigrant communities (and “terrorists”),<sup>15</sup> and other sexual “deviants” who might corrupt their innocence or recruit them into “pretend” (UK Parliament 1988), alternative ways of life. Queers, on the other hand, have their lives and legal protection constantly under attack from that childish figure of reproductive futurity that Edelman describes and rejects so vehemently.

Extending the argument of the previous chapter into this one, it is vital here to note that within these discourses, the production of “childhood” and its sexual innocence that is under threat by queers is inherently racialized.<sup>16</sup> And this racialization begs different questions of the pairing of childhood and sexuality—questions that differ, I argue, even from the ones queer theory has so far been asking. Centering childhood’s historical and contemporary racialization means that at the very same moment in which we describe “childhood” as being under threat from sexuality (even in the moments we “queer” this discourse), we are speaking about discourses that do not locate this danger evenly across all populations of children. Children of color, and particularly girls of color (as I discuss later in this chapter), are already and continually cast as being hyper sexual or too reproductive (having too many babies, too young, in improper

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<sup>15</sup> For an analysis of the ways childhood sexuality are linked to the production of the racialized figure of the terrorist and to the War on Terror more generally, see: Puar and Rai (2002).

<sup>16</sup> The racialized response to children’s innocence also constructs blame unevenly in response to systemic abuse. Joseph Campbell, the director of the FBI’s Criminal Investigative Division, for example, decried what he called an “epidemic level” of pedophilia and child sex-trafficking in the U.S. (Pannell 2015), but refused to locate blame within whiteness—even as 87 percent of all child pornography convictions for possession in the U.S. are of white men (U.S. Sentencing Commission 2012). Compare this with the blatantly racist comments made by Jack Straw, the former U.K. Home Secretary, in response to the arrest of nine Muslim men in Rochdale, England, in 2012, for allegedly running a pedophilic “grooming ring.” Quoted in the *Telegraph*, Straw’s position is laid out: “White girls [Straw argues] are sometimes treated as ‘easy meat’ for some young Asian men who are ‘fizzing and popping with testosterone’ but had no ‘outlet’ within their own community” (Straw, cited in Bingham 2012). Unlike Campbell, Straw directly locates the problem of the Rochdale case within the “problem” of a racialized community. I make this argument not to argue for wider racialized blame, but rather to ask after the uneven deployment of race as a diagnosis for social problems disavowed from whiteness.

households), or as beyond the framework of intelligibility that “innocence” holds. What, then, this chapter asks, is the relationship between the queer, the child, and the sexual, when the child at stake—and perhaps also the queer—is a child of color? What is the relationship between the queer child and their young mother, particularly if this mother is also a child?

Because all of these questions about the relationship between childhood, race, gender, reproduction, and sexuality lead to further complexities, tensions, and alliances, rather than to hard, fast, and homophobic answers about, as Anita Bryant (1977) would have it, “saving the children”,<sup>17</sup> beginning with an acknowledgement that the discussion of sexuality and childhood is mired in violence and trauma cannot be the end of the discussion. Indeed, as I have just argued, the discussion itself is never just about this trauma, nor does it account for the multiplicities of children—queer children, children of color, children with children—who occupy this melding of difficult terms. While I do not have the space to do so in this chapter, I would argue that precisely because the pronouncement of violence cannot be the end of the conversation, new ways of having the discussion about childhood and sexuality—ones which hold up all the complexity of contestation and violence, power and agency—need to be fostered.

### **Queer Theory and the Child**

Arguably, the first enunciation of the queer child comes from Sedgwick, in her article “How to Bring Your Kids up Gay” (1991). In this piece, Sedgwick documents some of the extensive efforts that are undertaken to maintain what she calls the “open season on gay kids” (1991: 18). This open season, Sedgwick writes, is fueled by an “annihilating homophobic, gynophobic, and pedophobic hatred” (1991: 21), a hatred sustaining a wish “endemic in the culture [...] that gay people *not exist*” (1991: 23, emphasis in original). Enforcing this wish are “institutions whose programmatic undertaking is to prevent the development of gay people” and whose “scope [...] is unimaginably large” (1991: 23). These institutions, “the state, the military, education, law, penal institutions,

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<sup>17</sup> Anita Bryant, a beauty queen cum political leader, formed the infamous Save Our Children, a coalition that worked in Florida and Kansas to overturn the passage of anti-discrimination laws protecting people on the grounds of sexual orientation. Bryant’s concern with these laws was that they would allow “homosexuals and Lesbians, flaunting their perverted sexuality” (A. Bryant 1977), the “legal right to propose to our children that theirs is an acceptable alternate way of life” (A. Bryant 1978: 127).

the church, medicine, and mass culture”, Sedgwick writes, enforce this wish “all but unquestioningly, and with little hesitation at even the recourse to invasive violence” (1991: 23).

Sedgwick’s focus on gay and proto-gay kids comes about through her critique of a shift in psychoanalysis (as it was institutionalized via the American Psychological Association) and the work of professional psychologists, wherein the turn to ego-psychology in the 1980s meant that the only “healthy homosexual” was “one who (a) is already grown up, and (b) acts masculine” (1991: 19). In this context, the proto-gay child, rather than the gay adult, becomes the site of intervention, because they are made visible through different types of knowledge (gender rather than sexuality), and because they are implicated in different structures of blame and accountability (socialization, the family, mother and father figures, and education). Because the markers of proto-gay children are produced through discourses of homosexuals’ failed assumption into normative masculinity and femininity, attempts to make proto-gay children straight (and thus gay adults not exist) get targeted towards gender-nonconforming children. For Sedgwick, then, the proto-gay child is the “gender-nonconforming child”, the “effeminate” or “sissy” boy, or the girl who asserts “that she actually is anatomically male”. Being “proto”, for Sedgwick, is less about a child’s process of coming into sexual self-determination as a “queer” adult, and rather about the structures through which the gender binary is entrenched, and masculinity and homophobia are secured as sites and techniques of power.

What Sedgwick described as the proto-gay child eventually became (through a bit of twisting) the queer child. Stockton, who authored the eponymous *The Queer Child, or Growing Sideways in the Twentieth Century* (2009), beget the shift from Sedgwick’s “proto-gay child” to the “queer child” through, appropriately, a chapter in *Regarding Sedgwick* (Barber and D. Clark 2002), titled “Eve’s Queer Child” (Stockton 2002). This chapter playfully suggests that Sedgwick herself wrote Henry James’ “The Pupil” (1891)—or at least the version she passed off to Michael Moon, upon which he based his “A Small Boy and Others” (1991)—and that the pupil in the story, Morgan Moreen, was Sedgwick’s and James’ queer child. And yet, Moreen, Stockton writes, is not Sedgwick’s only queer child; so too are the various “versions” of the queer child that unfold from Sedgwick’s “How to Bring Your Kids Up Gay” and find themselves in Stockton’s own subsequent articulations. One of these children is the “retroactive” gay

child, the one who arrives “only later in life as a recognition of a road not taken”, such as in the statement: “I was a gay child” (Stockton 2002: 185). Describing a few other versions of the queer child, Stockton writes:

In supposed contrast to the queer-child-on-linguistic-delay [—] the most efficient means for aborting gay kids: Allow them to appear only when they can no longer exist [—] and the grown-homosexual-as-a-child are two other models. One might be called the child queered by Freud. This would be the not-yet-straight-child who is, in fact, a sexual child with criminal wishes—from wanting the mother to have its child, to wanting to have its father’s baby, to wanting to kill its rival lover. The other model is the child queered by innocence. This is the child brought to its fame by so many landmark studies of childhood and by the Romantic poets who nurtured it—that child, in whose estimation, we imagine, sex itself seems shockingly queer. (2002: 185-186)

In her subsequent writings, Stockton additionally outlines the child queered by color (“peculiar” children “endowed” with experience, suffering, oppression, and knowledge); the child queered by money (children made strange, vulnerable, and dangerous by money, an allowance, and economic power); the ghostly gay child (the mourned straight child who “died” and became a gay one); and “the ‘lesbian’ child” figured as an animal (the lesbian child whose connection to animals, like Stephen and her horses in *The Well of Loneliness*, allows for delays—pause/paws—in their “growing up”). What all of these queer children share, Stockton argues, is “an estrangement from what they approach” (2002: 186).

Inspired by Stockton and Sedgwick (indeed including them in their collection), Bruhm and Hurley (2004a) brought together a number of contributors to extend the theoretical interrogation of the queer child. Bruhm and Hurley begin their introduction to *Curiouser* by describing and critiquing what they call the “dominant narrative” about children and childhood. This narrative, they write, states both that “children are (and should stay) innocent of sexual desires and intentions”, and that, “at the same time, however, children are also officially, tacitly, assumed to be heterosexual” (2004b: ix). Within this narrative, they argue, romantic attachments between boys and girls are seen as precursor for an eventually mature heterosexuality, while homosexual affinities are



disregarded merely as play, as a phase that one will outgrow. Bruhm and Hurley argue that this dominant narrative makes it such that homosexuality in childhood is something “that will not *be*, but will only *have been*” (2004b: xix, emphasis in original). And yet, they write, the production of the sexually innocent heterosexual child within narrative has its inherent queer cracks. “In telling stories about children and sex,” Bruhm and Hurley argue, “our culture’s storytellers have long gestured to the stories that ought not feature children: stories that make children ‘queer’ in a number of distinct ways and therefore are rarely told” (2004b: x). But, inherent to the stories that we do want to feature children, and those that we do tell to and about children, something queer is happening: “The very effort to flatten the narrative of the child into a story of innocence has some queer effects [...] in this sense the figure of the child is not the anti-queer at all. Its queerness inheres instead in innocence run amok” (2004b: xiv).

Here, we can see the queer child’s queerness being detailed, so as to “queer” the child means resisting the ways in which, as Ellis Hanson writes, the “sexual behavior and [the] sexual knowledge [of children] are subjected to an unusually intense normalizing surveillance, discipline, and repression of the sort familiar to any oppressed sexual minority” (2004: 110). The queer child thus refuses the naming of homosexuality as a “phase”, and they revel in the childhood sexualities that are understood as problematic and perverse. This notion of queer children’s sexual alterity is also articulated in Moon’s *A Small Boy and Others* (1998). Moon describes queerness as typified by a “daring and risky weirdness, dramatic uncanniness, erotic offcenteredness, and unapologetic perversity” (1998: 4), and he traces out the many ways in which pleasure and perversion in childhood are central to producing a queer analysis of children and childhoods. Additionally, for Kevin Ohi, at stake in queer theory’s recognition of children’s queerness is the possibility for “thwarting” the “comforting self-recognitions” about the adult self and its “sexual normativity” (2004: 82). For Ohi, queering the innocence of the child is thus a means through which the “murderous disregard for proto-gay, proto-pedophilic, proto-masochistic, proto-voyeuristic lives” can be interrupted (2004: 82). As such, for Bruhm and Hurley, the queerness of the child is established specifically in relation to its sexual alterity and its peculiarity:

the figure of the queer child is [...] the child who displays interest in sex generally, in same-sex erotic attachments, or in cross-generational attachments.

[...] The essays in this volume [...] tease out the range of possibilities for child sexuality. [They] look to the dominant heteronarrative to see how normalizing language itself both produces and resists queer stories of childhood sexual desire. [...] In short, this collection suggests that the children who populate the stories our culture tells about them are, in fact, *curiouser* than they've been given credit for. (2004b: x, xiv)

Clearly, then, across these and other framings of the queer child, the queer project, or the queering that “queer” does to the child, is one of resisting the child’s alleged asexuality and heterosexuality; allowing for the child’s pleasures, desires, and perversities; refusing the sexual narrative of growing up and becoming a proper sexual subject; and thwarting the normative frames of sexuality and identity that have constrained the child and the queer. More specifically, the normative identities and structures of sexuality that stick to the normative child and are resisted by the queer child, queer theory tells us, are: the “inevitable” role of motherhood for little girls (Bruhm and Hurley 2004b: xi); the demand to grow up, get a “real job” and get married (Kent 2004: 179); the discourse of “pro-reproductivity” that reduces women “to their childbearing and maternal capacities” (Downing 2011: 60); and an emergent “hetero-parental tolerance” of gay and queer children that incorporates them into the family without changing the family structure itself, nor heterosexuality (J. Jacobs 2014). The queer child refuses this growing up, “delays” it, as Stockton argues, and, in “growing sideways”, builds alternative relations, futures, and possibilities for living an intimate life.<sup>18</sup>

In the articulation of the queer child, however, a few gaps emerge. To begin with, as I explore in more detail in the sections below, the scholarship on the queer child almost consistently ignores the question of race (with a few notable exceptions), and the queer children that linger in its critical trajectories are practically all white. This structuring whiteness of the queer child is, in part, an effect of the limited range of

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<sup>18</sup> A question that should be asked here is: What figures the “queerness” of eventually-homosexual children in a contemporary moment that is increasingly folding homosexuality into the normative? Learning from those who have critiqued the assumed radicalism of the politics which stick to queer (Butler 2008; Duggan 2002; Puar 2007), we cannot assume that becoming a queer or a homosexual adult will necessarily challenge a problematic understanding of childhood. Along these lines, see: K. Bryant (2008) for an analysis of homonormativity in relation to gay and trans children.

cultural objects and queer subjects that queer theory has looked to in order to explore the potentials that emerge out of queering childhood. However, it is also, as I outline below, an effect of seeing race as doing only a particular type of work to the idea of the child. Additionally, while less evaded than the questions of race and racism, the relationship that the queer child's articulation has to feminism is deeply ambivalent within this scholarship. On one hand, gender as a structure through which the queer child is marked has been central to the articulation of the queer child since its emergence in Sedgwick's "How to Bring Your Kids Up Gay" (discussed above). In the analyses that subsequently prioritize gender, same-gendered affiliations within childhood (Kent 2004), and children's embodiment of gendered play and rebellion (Halberstam 2004), are also integrated into an analysis of children's queerness. The question of gender has also been important to the queer child, as the very notion of children's sexual innocence is, as Kilby (2010) and Vänskä (2011b) point out, gendered such that girlhood is already constructed through a hypersexualized virginity. On the other hand, however, the actual scholarly endeavor of feminism, wherein it is even referenced in queer approaches to the child, has been framed as a barrier to the types of sexual liberation that queer theory advocates for the child.

In the introduction to *Curiouser*, for example, feminism is a haunting absence, named only in the moments it—via the requisite citation of Andrea Dworkin's and Catharine MacKinnon's "certain branch of radical lesbian feminism in the 1980s" (Bruhm and Hurley 2004b: xxii)—is mapped along and as a conservative (Reaganite) policing of the child's sexuality. The citations of Gayle Rubin, Pat Califia, and Kate Millett, however, despite also being feminists (lesbians! in the 1980s!), are only named in the introduction's mapping of the genealogy of queer critique on the child as "writers on child sexuality" (Bruhm and Hurley 2004b: xxii, xxvi). Similarly, feminism is wholly absent from Stockton's *The Queer Child*, and Moon's *A Small Boy and Others*. Where it does appear in the outlining of the queer child, perhaps without surprise, are in the special issues on the child within feminist theory journals (*WSQ* and *Feminist Theory*), issues which, while specifically feminist in orientation, include a couple explorations of the queer child (Burman and Stacey 2010a; Chinn and Duane 2015; Lesnik-Oberstein 2010). Other than these texts, however, the queer child and their explication through a queer feminist lens is remarkably absent. This absence of feminism means, as I argue later on in this chapter, that the types of normative positions

that the queer child is celebrated in rejecting are unevenly directed at motherly and familial practices and subjectivities, an uneven distribution of queer negativity that places the burden of representing and deconstructing heteronormativity onto women's bodies, relations, and intimate lives.

*The Child Queered by Color, The Queer Child of Color*

As of current writing, I have only been able to identify four theorists who have articulated the “queer child” and who engage with race (to varying degrees) as something that sticks to the child in complex ways: David Eng (2001), Kathryn Kent (2004), Tavia Nyong'o (2011), and Stockton (2004; 2009).<sup>19</sup> Other than these theorists—whom I discuss further below—there are scholars who do engage with race, the figure of the child, and childhood sexuality (some of whom are included in wider collections about queering and childhood), but these scholars do not specifically name the “queer child” as their object (cf. Ahmed 2000; Berlant 1997; Fields 2005; Kincaid 1994; 1998; Rose 1984; Stoler 1995). As such, while race has indeed been theorized as a structure through which children of color are estranged from innocence (and thus, Stockton argues, makes children of color “queer”), the queer child as it emerges through racialized sexualities, or what Sharon Holland calls the “erotic life of racism” (2012), or the uses of sexuality as a technology to regulate, discipline, and pathologize racialized populations, are lingering silences within the scholarship on the queer child. This limited focus on race as distanced from sexuality (other than as a barrier to queerness) has had consequences for the queer child—primarily casting the child queered by color as a child estranged from innocence, not from normative (hetero)sexualities.

Often, where race does appear within this literature is in the unspoken whiteness that structures the queer child and queerness more generally. Kent (2004), who is troubled by her own nostalgic privileging of her queer childhood (which emerged in the homosocial bonding space of a Girl Scout camp) upon which she theorizes queer counterpublics, is one of the few queer scholars who works to address and grapple with the whiteness of the queer child. Kent argues that an account of the potentials of

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<sup>19</sup> Tavia Nyong'o (2011) articulates queer black boyhood via Michael Jackson, but I do not engage with his text fully here. For Nyong'o, the life and music of Jackson points “toward an incoherence in the ideology of the Child” (2011:42), which makes Jackson himself, at all ages, a queer child figure.

theorizing queerness as emerging from this white childhood space must recognize that they are the product of unstable relations, ones which often rely on racial and classed exclusion (2004: 180). Kent asks, for example, “Is lesbian identity, as a set of practices, styles, and counterpublic identifications, itself a form of imperialism?” (2004: 186). While this is an important question to ask of queerness and lesbian identity, here too, Kent’s attending to race appears as a focused attention on the racial logics of access and privilege, rather than (or in addition to) the racial logics of heterosexuality.

As I argued in the previous chapter, the contours of childhood innocence follow along a racial logic such that innocence sticks to white bodies, and, for Stockton, this stickiness means that children of color are only able to be conceived within the realm of the innocent child when they are endowed with experience, knowledge, and, ironically, abuse. As such, the child *of* color, Stockton writes, is “queered” (made strange) *by* color. In whimsical ways, Stockton’s outlining of the child queered by color “braids” together the child of color, the child queered by innocence, the “Freudian child who is Oedipalized in several directions at once” (2009: 184), and the “ghostly gay child” in order to make Oedipalization “lively again” (apparently it had died) within theory (2009: 184). This making lively, Stockton writes, takes place through the entwining of the Oedipus complex with the drama of interracial marriage, such that the incestuous intergenerational desire at its heart is itself “newly raced”, and such that the white parent of a black child-in-law retrospectively (and, queerly, we can suppose) births a black child.

Stockton locates the “newly raced” Oedipal triangle in relation to three films in which mixed raced couples introduce their new significant others to their parents: *Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner* (1967), *Six Degrees of Separation* (1993), and *Guess Who* (2005). In so doing, Stockton reads these films’ negotiations of acceptance, inclusion, and intrusion through Hortense Spillers’ analysis of the Moynihan Report, such that, for John Prentice (the black suitor being introduced to his white girlfriend’s parents in the original *Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner*), he becomes the pathologized (and castrated) child of color seeking acceptance from a white man “positioned as [his father], in the sense of white men being the judges of ‘Negro families’ [...] and the legal gatekeepers of miscegenation” (Stockton 2009: 195). Interestingly, rather than take this “newly raced” Oedipal triangle as a sign or symptom of the racialization of heterosexuality—or, as Spillers might, as the structuring conditions of the flesh, abjection, and incoherence

through which gender, kinship, and heterosexuality are misnamed and rendered already impossible in black communities, such that black intimacies are rendered queer (estranged from the whiteness of normative heterosexuality)—Stockton instead focuses on the retrospective and reflexive processing children of color engender in white parents such that their acceptance of their child of color confirms their tolerance and liberal politics.<sup>20</sup> Stockton writes:

[T]hese children [children of color in mixed marriages] [...] are “strangers in the family”—to borrow the tag often used of “gay” children in recent years—who would like to be acknowledged by the families they “invade”. They are also tied to a backward birth. [...] That is, the child intruder, the child queered by color, makes parents reflect upon their ethics of inclusion (“guess who’s coming to dinner?”) and reflect upon their image as liberal intellectuals. (2009: 192)

In this analysis, the child queered by color is not the queer and racialized child estranged from the whiteness of heterosexuality, but is rather the child “queered by” their metaphorical similarity to the estranged structural position of (white) gay children in (white) straight families.<sup>21</sup>

In contrast to Stockton’s skirting the question of heterosexuality’s racialization as a process through which racialized childhoods are already queered, Eng’s analysis specifically locates race as a structure through which heterosexuality and masculinity are denied to racialized bodies, rendering them inescapably (and tragically) queer. In “Primal Scenes: Queer Childhood in ‘The Shoyu Kid’” (2001), Eng writes of the

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<sup>20</sup> My articulation of “being rendered queer” to describe the effects of the conditions of the flesh that Hortense Spillers describes is not her own. Indeed, Spillers would probably describe this as a misnaming too. For Spillers, the actual conditions of mutilation, exile, and dismemberment, and the theft of the black body, means that “African and indigenous peoples [...] lose at least *gender* difference *in the outcome*, and the female body and the male body become a territory of cultural and political maneuver, not at all gender-related, gender-specific” (1987: 67, emphasis in original). It would thus be within a certain framing of “queer”—one more carefully articulated that I have done so here—that “queer” might be understood as describing the effects of being rendered flesh, “that zero degree of social conceptualization” (1987: 67).

<sup>21</sup> For two critiques of the framing of “queer” as “like race” and as like the civil rights movement, see: Cobb (2005); Halley (2000).

relationship between the primal scene, Japanese internment, and the whiteness of heterosexuality and masculinity. Eng argues that:

[I]dealized images of whiteness and heterosexuality are inextricably bound together in our present-day cultural imaginary, [such that] whiteness necessarily works in tandem with heterosexuality to regulate which subjects will or will not have retroactive psychic access to sexual as well as racial normativity in the primal scene. (2001: 130)

The primal scene is important for Eng not just because it is the site through which sexual knowledge is conferred upon a child, but also because it is the main traumatic event in Lonny Kaneko's short story "The Shoyu Kid" (1976). This story revolves around three Japanese American boys in an internment camp, one of whom (named Itchy) witnesses the molestation of a fourth boy (the Shoyu Kid) by a white guard: a witnessing that Eng analyses as a queer primal scene for Itchy. In his analysis, Eng argues that "'queerness' and 'Japaneseness' come together to mark Itchy's witnessing of the white soldier's sexual assault on the Shoyu Kid as a primal scene not heterosexually but homosexually as well as racially circumscribed" (2001: 129). Eng continues:

Instead of undergoing the belated heterosexualization (and ascendancy into male privilege and social empowerment) typical of Freud's male infant, Itchy's primal scene opens upon the psychic territory of the negative Oedipus complex. This is a primal scene whose trajectory of desire holds him at once to an unpleasurable identification with queerness as it holds him to an insistent identification with Japaneseness. (2001: 130-131)

What Eng's analysis of the primal scene illuminates, then, is that racial difference interrupts heterosexual identification such that "Japaneseness and homosexuality come to inscribe the psychic limits by means of which Japanese American male subjectivity is molded, formed, and constituted in queer childhood" (2001: 131). Eng's analysis thus flips Sedgwick's premise in "How to Bring Your Kids up Gay" by arguing that, under the racialized limits of masculinity and heterosexuality, there cannot be a situation in which Japanese American children grow up to be anything but. I would also argue here

that the “open season” on gay kids takes a wholly different meaning in the conditions of the internment camp, such that answering the question of: Under what terms might the war on queer Japanese American children end?, will lead to an analysis of the nexus of racist, gendered, heterosexual, and imperial logics through which childhood becomes a heightened site of intervention.

In my overview of these approaches to theorizing the queer child through race, a couple things become clear. First, despite being theorized by Kent, Nyong’o, Stockton, and Eng, the theorization of race, childhood, and queerness is still a lacuna in the wider literature on the queer child, one that has as of yet only really been theorized through a somewhat limited range of thinking on the complexities of race and racism. Second, as is perhaps clear from the scholars’ texts from which they theorize the queer child of color (or the child queered by color), this child (apart from Kent’s reflexive analysis of her own childhood) has only been understood as a male child: Nyong’o analyzes Michael Jackson, Stockton theorizes the three male protagonists of the films she analyzes, and Eng explores the four male characters of “The Shoyu Kid”.<sup>22</sup> The gap in the literature on the queer child of color is thus not just limited to its narrow conceptualization of race, but also to its limited gendered analysis. As such, theorizing the queer girl of color—a subject who this chapter theorizes more fully in its subsequent analysis of *Palindromes*—might allow not just for an expanding of the possibilities for theorizing the meeting of “queer”, “child”, “gender” and “race”; it might also initiate a grappling with the meeting of queer, anti-racism, and feminism.

### ***Palindromes***

In what remains of this chapter, I want to pause and make an incongruous, or, hopefully, what Sedgwick would call a “reparative” move.<sup>23</sup> Concerned with the layers of desire

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<sup>22</sup> Stockton also theorizes the boy queered by color in William Blake’s poem “The Little Black Boy” (1789), and the two male characters of *Hoop Dreams* (S. James 1994).

<sup>23</sup> For Sedgwick, the reparative critical position is “additive and accretive [...] it wants to assemble and confer plenitude on an object that will then have resources to offer to an inchoate self” (2003b: 149). While I cannot claim that my subsequent analysis fully immerses itself in a reparative reading, I take some bit of (perhaps paranoid) comfort in realizing that Sedgwick’s own articulation of these positions situates them as inextricable. For more on the paranoia of the reparative, see: Berlant and Edelman (2014); Love (2010); Stacey (2014). Sedgwick’s reparative reading will be explored more fully in Chapter Six and in the Conclusion to this thesis.



within and for the child, as well as the racial and gendered histories of exclusion that produce and facilitate the naming of the “queer child” as a queer project, I want to introduce Aviva, my own “queer” “child”, and I want to think through some of her issues, promises, and difficulties. I do so in the hope of offering an additional approach to queer(ing) childhood that is in line with Sedgwick’s call for us to center our own attachments to our objects of critique (2003b: 123-151). My attempt to engage, struggle with, and even fail in embracing Aviva is thus a desire to situate my reading of other approaches to queer children as stemming from my own attachments to them. Here, building on my analysis of Gilroy’s and Edelman’s politics of opposition from Chapter Three, the reading of Aviva I provide below attempts to reorient my own reading of queer theory’s approach to the queer child away from a straightforward skepticism or negativity, and towards a reading of the child that is more forgiving.

*“I’m going to be a mom!”: Introducing Aviva*

Aviva is the main character in Todd Solondz’s film *Palindromes* (2004). Solondz is well known for his films’ complex and sympathetic portrayals of characters whose non-normative intimate lives and desires are usually rendered unintelligible or pathologic. Many of Solondz’s films, including *Palindromes*, follow continued narratives by returning to the fictional families portrayed in his earlier films; *Palindromes* builds on *Welcome to the Dollhouse* (1995), while the family whose generational reproductions of messy desire is explicated in *Happiness* (1998) returns in his more recent *Life During Wartime* (2009).<sup>24</sup> In continuing to follow these familial narratives, *Palindromes* brings us into a world that, while often disquieting, is at least familiar. The film itself begins with grainy home-video footage of the funeral of Dawn Wiener, the main character in *Welcome to the Dollhouse*. Dawn, we are told, was a troubled child, a middle-child who grew obese, had bad skin, and, after allegedly becoming pregnant from a date rape, committed suicide. It is in this context that we meet Aviva, Dawn’s 6-year-old cousin, who relays this gossip to her mother in a fit of tears: “Missy told me after the funeral that Dawn was pregnant from a date-rape, and that that’s the real reason she killed

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<sup>24</sup> As I note below in the text, Aviva is the cousin of Dawn, the main character in *Welcome to the Dollhouse*. The plot of *Life During Wartime* follows the same three sisters (albeit played by different actors) who were featured in *Happiness*, and the boy in *Life During Wartime* (see note above) is the son of Bill.

herself: she hated the idea of bringing another Dawn into the world!” Traumatized by Dawn’s early death, and upset that Dawn would even conceive of not wanting a child, Aviva becomes convinced that the best way to make meaning in the world is by producing her own children and loving them unconditionally: “I want to have lots and lots of babies! As many babies as possible”, she tells her mother, “Because that way, I’ll always have someone to love”. The film’s narrative takes off “several years later...”, as we follow 13-year-old Aviva over the course of about a year as she works to build relationships that will provide her with the type of sex that will give her a child.

Aviva herself is difficult to describe, not just for the fact that she remains oddly mysterious and mostly silent, but also because Aviva is cast by eight different actors during the course of the film: Emani Sledge, Valerie Shusterov, Hannah Freiman, Rachel Corr, Will Denton, Sharon Wilkins, Shayna Levine, and Jennifer Jason Leigh. These actors are not cast in a way that reflects the temporality of the film; they do not, that is, all look like similar versions of the same person in different moments of her life. Rather, their incongruous bodies (some more harmonious than others) all occupy the screen in various, somewhat random intervals of a narrative that follows Aviva for only a short period of time. Yet never in the film are Aviva’s shifts in casting remarked upon. Indeed, when we first meet Aviva, she (Emani Sledge) is a young black girl, even as everyone at Dawn’s funeral, and Aviva’s own parents, are white and Jewish: a difference that goes unnamed, even as Aviva’s physiques, genders, and ages, change.<sup>25</sup> As Berlant—who writes briefly on *Palindromes* in “A Properly Political Concept of Love: Three Approaches in Ten Pages” (2011a)—describes them:

Their genders, races, and degrees of fatness and tallness change, as do their normative attractiveness and class-related comportment: they’re graceful yet grotesques [sic], even when they’re played by a movie star. But they enact the same style of encountering the world, a dreamy, aleatory longing, and a slightly catlike stealthiness on their way to getting what they want and adjusting when necessary. (2011a: 689)

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<sup>25</sup> Even the family portraits in Aviva’s home change to reflect the new Avivas, thus emphasizing the film’s desire to see these shifts in casting as consistent with the film’s diegesis, rather than interruptive to it.

The film thus follows these actors—whose bodies (if not their affective bearing) vary greatly—as they cyclically replace one another as Aviva struggles with, and then escapes, the monotone drudgery of her parents (Angela Pietropinto and Bill Buell), and seeks to become a parent to castaway children just like herself.

Aviva's first attempt to become a mother gets violently intercepted by her parents. Seven years after Aviva's discussion with her mother about Dawn, she (now Valerie Shustero, a young, large, white teenage girl with long curly brown hair) is still determined to have multiple children as soon as she can, and her first opportunity presents itself when her family visits a couple with a teenage son named Judah (Robert Agri), a large, dopey, white boy who has no qualms about impregnating her. When Aviva's parents discover her pregnancy (the subsequent morning sickness gives it away), they demand that she (now Hannah Freiman, a skinny, white, young woman, with long straight red hair) get an abortion. Aviva has no choice in this matter. For Aviva, being a child means that her capacity to make decisions about her body and her sexuality do not belong to her; these are decisions for her parents to make.<sup>26</sup> Without choice, Aviva is driven to the abortion clinic, walked through a cluster of pro-life protestors, and reassured that all will be okay. Unfortunately, however, the procedure has complications that result in the need for a hysterectomy.

Aviva, however, awakes from the procedure without this knowledge. Or, perhaps—the film is unclear on this point—she is possibly with it but without knowing its implications. The scene of the procedure fades in and out, as if the camera itself is under anesthesia, a white vignette of doctor and parents becoming a white screen, as the sounds of Aviva's sobbing parents and the doctor's apologies—staccato-like echoes of “I, I, I, I’m sorry, sorry, sorry. There was, was, was, extreme hemorrhaging”—blend in with the beeping of hospital machinery. Fading in from white, a shot comes into focus of Aviva's parents filmed almost-directly, looking just off-center of the lens, as

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<sup>26</sup> This inability to make decisions about her own reproductive health is, of course, not limited to Aviva. In the U.S., thirty-eight states require parental notification, 21 of which additionally require at least one parent's consent (Guttmacher Institute 2015a). Additionally, eighteen states allow physicians to notify parents that their children are seeking STI services, and twenty states allow only particular classes of minors to consent to contraceptive services on their own behalf (Guttmacher Institute 2015b).

their faces, stricken with a flat affect, are directing their gaze to Aviva.<sup>27</sup> Slowly waking up, she asks them if it's all over, and they tell her she's "100 percent okay ... good as new". As the scene ends, the shot cuts to a baby-pink overlay with a small white dress in one corner, two infants' footprints in another, and the name "Henrietta"—the name Aviva has given to her aborted daughter/fetus—stenciled in the center in cursive font. Title shots like this one, alternating between pink and blue (with dress and overalls respectively), punctuate the narrative as each new embodiment of Aviva (listed in the casting as their overlay baby-name, the following Aviva thus being "Henrietta Aviva") is first introduced.

In the next scene, "Henrietta" Aviva (Rachel Corr, another young, white girl with curly long brown hair, this one perhaps a bit younger than the others) is hitchhiking on the side of a busy freeway, running away from her parents and the doctor that stole her child from her, seeking someone else who will give her a baby. This desire for a child sends her on an *Alice in Wonderland* like journey on which she meets a bevy of odd characters. Solondz, as Berlant concludes from watching his films, "is not really a fan of humans. He finds them squishy and monstrous and cognitively disabled by their too-intense attachment to their appetites and habits" (2011a: 689), and so the people we encounter on Aviva's journey are all somewhat emblematic of this excessive and perverse humanity that Solondz enjoys. One of the first people Aviva meets is Joe (whose real name is Bob, or possibly Earl), a sweaty and heavy-set truck driver (Stephen Adly Guirgis) who has anal sex with her in a motel room and then abandons her in the morning. Forced to be on her own again, "Huckleberry" Aviva (Will Denton, a skinny teenage white boy with mid-length hair) wanders the highway until she, now "Mama Sunshine" Aviva (Sharon Wilkins, a large, adult black woman) is brought by a strange, nerdy, lisping child to the home of Mama Sunshine (Debra Monk). Mama Sunshine, as the name might suggest, is an overly-chipper, larger than life mother-figure to a gang of children who, one could argue, are "queer" in a multitude of ways. The Sunshine family consists of twelve children, including a blind albino girl, an epileptic boy, a girl whose leukemia is in remission, a boy who is described as having been "born a heathen", and a few characters whose peculiarities go without definition but include

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<sup>27</sup> For more on flat affect, "underperformativity", and deadpan (which *Palindromes* revels in), see: Berlant (2015). For an analysis of flat affect (theorized via Tilda Swinton) as a mode of resistance to conventional genres of femininity on film, see: Stacey (2015).

varying degrees of non-normative genders, sizes, and abilities. One of them is a dog. Mirroring Aviva's own shifts in casting, Mama Sunshine's children could be understood as representing for Aviva the type of unconditional loving relationality that stems from having lots and lots of babies (even if they are not one's own). While she only stays in this household for a couple days, Aviva quickly makes friends, finds Jesus, joins the Sunshine Singers (the Sunshine family's Jesus sing-along-group), and learns how to give a proper burial to (and pray for) all the children lost to the "baby killers" that have been dumped in the landfill behind the Sunshine home.

Despite believing that she has been accepted into a new queer household, Aviva surreptitiously learns that the Sunshines have a medical exam as a bar for entry. Peering into the basement through open blinds, Aviva looks into a room where the Sunshine family's doctor (Richard Riehle), Joe/Bob/Earl, and Bo Sunshine, the patriarch of the Sunshine household (Walter Bobbie) are having a meeting. As the camera takes up Aviva's gaze, partially obstructed by blinds that the camera, moving up and down, attempts to readjust for, we hear the doctor's news: "That new girl of yours. I don't know how to say this Bo, but when I examined her yesterday ... that girl's a child whore. I just think you outta know that much before you go any further with her becoming a part of the family and all." Overhearing this conversation, Aviva learns that the limit of the embrace of a queer child turns out to be the moment the queer child becomes the sexual child.

Rejected from yet another household, and castigated once again from a family because of her precocious desire to have one of her own, Aviva, now "Bob" Aviva (Shayna Levine, a young, curvy, white woman with long, dark curly hair) decides to take matters into her own hands. She joins forces with Joe/Bob/Earl, who has returned in the narrative because he has been hired as a hitman by Bo to kill the very abortion doctor who preformed Aviva's abortion/hysterectomy (the cheekily named Dr. Fleischer). Reunited with the man she hopes will give her a baby, and determined to help him kill the man who took her first attempt at creating one, Aviva embarks upon a *Lolita*-esque drive across the country. After finding and killing Dr. Fleischer (Stephen Singer), and—accidentally—his young daughter, Aviva and Joe/Bob/Earl flee to a hotel room where the clerk, suspicious of their relationship, alerts the authorities to the presence of a pedophile. The police arrive, Joe/Bob/Earl is killed on the spot, and

Aviva—now “Mark” Aviva (played by Jennifer Jason Leigh, a skinny, middle-aged white woman with curly blonde hair)—is reunited with her parents.

### *Queering Motherhood*

Aviva is not a queer child in the traditional sense. She exhibits no homosexual attractions during her childhood (except, perhaps, in the fifteen fleeting seconds in which, once again cast as “Huckleberry” Aviva, she is having sex with Jonah) and she is clearly attached to a vision of the good life that is almost dogmatically reproductive. Indeed, Aviva’s desires are exclusively reproductive: not knowing that she cannot produce a child of her own, she never expresses any desire (for food, friendship, or other objects) other than to be a mother. “I’m not going to have any boyfriends. I don’t want any boyfriends!” she tells her perplexed mother, who mistakes this declaration of her singular desire for a child (uncoupled from any form of coupling) as her coming out as a lesbian. “What do you mean you don’t want any? Are you trying to tell me something? Aviva? It’s okay, you can talk to me. Are you a . . .” Frustrated that her mother is missing the point, Aviva interrupts her mother’s lingering suggestion with a clear no. But Aviva’s refusal to be a queer child must not be mistaken as an easy alignment with heterosexual desire. For even heterosexual sex does not have much of a hold on her. Right before she has sex for the first time with Jonah, Aviva asks him if he thinks about sex a lot—a preposterous question given that the walls of Jonah’s room are plastered with overlapping posters of swimsuit models, and that they have just been discussing his plans to produce a feature-length pornographic film of his own—and yet Aviva confides in him, flatly: “I don’t think about it. I just think about having a baby.”

Pleasure, it seems, is outside the realm of sex or intimacy for Aviva. For Aviva, sex is what happens to you on the way to acquiring a child. Underneath Jonah, and Joe/Bob/Earl, she stares blankly upward, making no attempts at affection and expressing nothing. Aviva’s boredom, however, might itself be read queerly. Emphasized in her intimate scene with Joe/Bob/Earl by the film’s tepid classical soundtrack and the camera’s slow pull back shot exposing the bland motel room, the ennui of copulation perhaps gestures towards Leo Bersani’s axiom that, in truth, most people do not actually

like sex (Bersani 1987).<sup>28</sup> Refusing the pleasure of a perversely queer sexual identity, and confronting us with her own (and perhaps our) aversion to sex, Aviva forces an analysis of her queerness away from one that emerges out of a queer perverse (homosexual) identity, and towards something akin to Cathy Cohen's queer politics. Cohen argues that "the radical potential of queer politics [...] rests on its ability to advance strategically oriented political identities arising from a more nuanced understanding of power" (2005: 43). This "more nuanced" understanding of power, Cohen writes, while still attending centrally to questions of sexuality, additionally means interrogating the ways in which "multiple systems of oppression are in operation" such that "power and access to dominant resources are distributed across the boundaries of 'het' and 'queer'" (2005: 43). In order to read Aviva queerly, Cohen might argue, our analysis must cross the boundaries of heterosexual and queer, and must look to the specific array of power through which Aviva's sexuality comes into trouble. In the film, this trouble is firmly situated in Aviva's singular desire to be a mother, a desire that is constantly met with intense resistance. From families—her own and the Sunshine's—that define how and when she can be sexual and create her own family, to medical procedures that intervene in her bodily integrity, to the suspicious and regulatory gaze of a public that judges her relationships and calls upon the police to intervene in them, Aviva lives an impossible sexuality that runs up against normative and wished for ways of being in the world, and she experiences rejection, isolation, and abjection for it. Aviva's partner—not to mention her child, nor her capacity for reproduction—is killed in an act that violently enforces the impossibility of his and her desires. What makes Aviva such a queer child, then, is her singular desire for motherhood.

In order to justify this argument, I want to think about the relationship between the queer child and the queer mother further by returning for a moment to the wider scholarship on the queer child.<sup>29</sup> As I argued in my earlier overview of this scholarship, one of the main strands of anti-normativity that emerges almost universally across the

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<sup>28</sup> Leo Bersani argues that there is a "certain *aversion*" (2010: 4, emphasis in original) towards sex within hierarchical and heteronormative structures of gender and sexuality which reproduce a myth of the masculine ideal and which make gay people become complicit with the "murderous representations of homosexuals" (2010: 28).

<sup>29</sup> For a feminist analysis of motherhood and childhood on film, see: Addison, Goodwin-Kelly, and Roth (2009); Byars (1991).

queer work that the queer child does, is directed at the “normativity” of the family, and, more specifically, of motherhood. Motherhood, it appears, is the queer child’s worst nightmare. While a number of scholars articulate this point (see my discussion of the queer child’s anti-heteronormative stance above), Bruhm and Hurley make this argument most clearly, and so I unpack their outlining of the queer child’s rejection of motherhood here as somewhat paradigmatic of the wider scholarship. In the introduction to *Curiouser*, Bruhm and Hurley’s initial example of the queer child is Alice from *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* (1865). Alice, Bruhm and Hurley argue, is paradigmatic of queerness in childhood because, along with her “queer episodes” being “transmogrified” by her sister into pastoral tales, she “rejects the role of motherhood that golden-age Victorian literature sees as inevitable for little girls” (2004b: xi). “One of those queer episodes”, Bruhm and Hurley write, “is Alice’s adventure in babysitting, during which the infant for whom she is forced to care transforms into a pig” (2004b: xi). Detailing this story, Bruhm and Hurley write:

Alice releases the pig into the forest with horrifying nonchalance: “It would have made a dreadfully ugly child,” she reasons, “but it makes a rather handsome pig, I think.” At this moment, Alice rejects the role of motherhood [...] but the rejection is lost on her sister. [...] She [Alice’s sister] imagines Alice as a grown woman repeating her adventures to the “other little children” whom “she would gather about her.” As the sister sees Alice’s role of storyteller as a particularly *maternal* one, she transposes the queer into the domestic pastoral. (2004b: xi, emphasis in original)

According to Bruhm and Hurley, Alice’s sister, and her inability to understand the “curiouser and curiouser” quality of Alice’s stories, is thus wholly stuck within the realm of the (hetero)normative, while Alice herself, rejecting the gendered expectations of her, and finding pleasure in the strange, figures the queer child. Bruhm and Hurley’s use of the word “horrifying” to describe Alice’s release of the pig might thus be read not as their own reading; rather, it appears that this is their assessment of a heteronormative reading (that of Alice’s sister, to whom this story is told) of this “anti-mothering” act. Here, a rejection of the necessary assumption of the role of mothering as tied to girlhood



is named as a queer refusal, but what are the terms of this naming, and what do they do when mapped onto a queer politics?

On one hand, this account of Alice's adventures in babysitting becomes questionable for whom it assumes the queer child to be. Alice's "queer" rejection of motherhood, we should note, is premised on her blazé adversity to providing care to a child only in the moment that this child transforms into a non-acceptable child form. In the paragraphs just before those that Bruhm and Hurley cite, Alice's "rejection of motherhood" looks and sounds a lot less like a "queer" act, and her infant/pig (rather than Alice herself) appears to be the queer child:

"Don't grunt," said Alice; "that's not at all a proper way of expressing yourself." The baby grunted again, and Alice looked very anxiously into its face to see what was the matter with it. [...] Alice did not like the look of the thing at all. [...] "If you're going to turn into a pig, my dear" said Alice, seriously, "I'll have nothing more to do with you. Mind now!" [...] This time there could be *no* mistake about it: it was neither more nor less than a pig, and she felt that it would be quite absurd for her to carry it any further. (Carroll 1865: 59-60, emphasis in original)

In this context, wherein the pig, rather than Alice, might figure the "queer" child, Alice's release of the infant/pig might be understood not as a rejection of mothering *per se*, but rather as a specific refusal to mother a queer child.<sup>30</sup> Whereas a queering of motherhood might rather envision a motherhood that partakes in an embracing love of a child that *is* a pig (handsome or not), in Bruhm and Hurley's reading of motherhood as innately heteronormative, and Alice's (human) body as being the only embodiment that can figure the queer child, motherhood is understood primarily as a sexed *role* rather than an intimate gendered *relation*.

Understanding motherhood as a relation, Sedgwick might remind us, is deeply important when working to build a world in which proto-gay kids can grow up queer. In "How to Bring Your Kids up Gay", Sedgwick was concerned with the gendered

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<sup>30</sup> Even Lewis Carroll describes the pig through the language of the queer: "Alice caught the baby with some difficulty, as it was a queer-shaped little creature, and held out its arms and legs in all directions" (1865: 59).

structures through which proto-gay kids were identified and disciplined, and gendered parental roles played a large part in this: “The reason effeminate boys turn out gay, according to this [psychoanalytic] account, is that other men [specifically their fathers] don’t validate them as masculine” (1991: 21-22, emphasis in original). As such, Sedgwick argues, “the one explanation that could never be broached” for the development of the proto-gay child, “is that these mysterious skills of survival, filiation, and resistance could derive from a secure identification with the resource-richness of a mother” (1991: 22-23). In this discourse, Sedgwick writes:

Mothers, indeed, [are understood to] have nothing to contribute to this process of masculine validation, and women are reduced in the light of its urgency to a null set: any involvement in it by a woman is overinvolvement, any protectiveness is overprotectiveness, and, for instance, mothers “proud of their sons’ non-violent qualities” are manifesting unmistakable “family pathology”. (1991: 23)

For Sedgwick, then, motherhood is not just a sexed role—one that bears the brunt of gendered policing—additionally, and crucially, it is a source of support, validation, and sexual and gendered pedagogy for proto-gay kids.<sup>31</sup> To see motherhood as merely a role that queer children necessarily refuse (indeed their refusal itself is what makes them queer) is thus to participate in a discourse that simultaneously locates blame unevenly with the mother (motherhood as the site of heteropatriarchy), and refuses to acknowledge the loving, generous, pedagogical, laborious, and relational aspects of motherhood.

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<sup>31</sup> Contra Sedgwick, Jacobs would argue that heterosexual parents cannot provide the right type of pedagogy for their queer children: “what young queers in fact need most is other queers. Heterosexual parents [...] are still unable to familiarize their children with the traditions, habits, social codes, aesthetics, or values of specifically queer communities” (2014: 319). I disagree with this direct connection between sexual orientation and pedagogy, as it assumes too much about the radicalism of queer communities and the normativity of heterosexual ones, let alone their separability.

Along these lines, Aviva's singular desire for reproductivity makes her a difficult queer child, but an intriguing queer mother.<sup>32</sup> For there is a queerness that lingers around Aviva's heterosexuality, which I argue we need to take seriously. Precisely because she is a child, Aviva's commitment to hyperbolic, heteronormative, reproductive futurity, and her commitment to the idea of the child "as the emblem of futurity's unquestioned value and purpose" (Edelman 2004: 4), incites those around her to respond to her as if her desire for a child were queerness itself. Against Edelman's framing of the Child as the figure of reproductive futurity, Aviva's parents argue that she is working against her own futurity as a child by simultaneously having a child of her own. In the distressed and affectively laden words of Aviva's mother:

I won't let your life be ruined by this. [...] I know this is difficult, but really you're still just a child. There's so much you have to live for, and experience. You don't want to be tied down by a baby! [...] What if it turns out deformed? If it's missing a leg, or an arm, or a nose, or an eye? If it's brain damaged or mentally retarded? Children of very young mothers often turn out that way, and then what? Then you're stuck! Your life is ruined forever! You end up on food stamps! Alone!

Seemingly perversely responding to Edelman's rhetorical question of: "Who *would*, after all, come out *for* abortion or stand *against* reproduction, *against* futurity, and so against *life*? Who *would* destroy the Child?" (2004: 16, emphasis in original), Solondz answers: Aviva's parents.<sup>33</sup> Picking up my argument from Chapter Three, Edelman's argument that the "structural position of queerness" as an "identification with the negativity of this drive [the death drive]" (2004: 27) comes into crisis here, as Aviva's child is projected as, and figured as, the disabled, poor, racialized subject. As the content and affect of Aviva's mother's statement makes clear, it is *this* subject (contra

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<sup>32</sup> Most scholarship on queer motherhood and queer reproduction centers around lesbians becoming mothers, or various techniques through which queer (gay and lesbian) parents can have a child. See, for example: Agigian (2004); M. Bernstein and Reimann (2001); Mamo (2007).

<sup>33</sup> Aviva's mother also had an abortion, and she tells Aviva this as a pedagogical revelation which she hopes will allow Aviva to feel more secure in having her own abortion.

Edelman's queer one) that is understood to interrupt Aviva's own childish hold on reproductive futurity. At the same time, as Aviva's white heterosexual mother demonstrates, the subjects who occupy the structural position of the death drive (at least for Aviva) are much more capacious—and certainly more racist, classist, and ableist, let alone heterosexual—than Edelman diagnoses them as being. In this moment, in other words, Aviva's heterosexual parents take up the figural position of the death drive, demanding that Aviva's child be destroyed, and arguing that her child signifies the “radical dissolution of the contract, in every sense social and Symbolic” (Edelman 2004: 16). Aviva's complicated positioning in this scene thus figures her as the queer-child-as-queer-mother (of queer child). And it is precisely these competing layers of reproductivity, futurity, innocence, and queerness that Aviva's childhood holds in tension. Held together, Aviva's queer politics, or the queer politics we require to support Aviva, thus begs that different questions be asked of and in queer theory.

In other words, the racialized, classed, and gendered discourses around “children having children” (Fields 2005) and the figure of the innocent child, suggest not only, as José Muñoz has argued, that “[t]he future is only the stuff of some kids [...] [r]acialized kids, queer kids, are not the sovereign princes of futurity” (2009: 95), but also that the coercive investment in procreative futurity is racially scripted.<sup>34</sup> The raceless (and therefore raced) “children” who are having children are posed as a problem specifically for their reproductivity; for their reproduction of a racial futurity in the face of vast regimes that seek their sterilization and their non-existence.<sup>35</sup> Along these lines, then, theorizing Aviva as a queer child, and a queer mother, might shift a queer politics of

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<sup>34</sup> Outlining the justifications for welfare reform in the 1970s and 1980s, Susan Harari and Maris Vinovskis write: “Although blacks have always been more likely to give birth outside of marriage, the change in the behavior of white adolescents [...] alarmed those concerned about the costs of AFDC [Aid to Families with Dependent Children]” (1993: 38-39). Framing black youth sexual activity as inevitable, this argument positions the precarious yet established sexual innocence of white youth as the federal government's primary concern. And yet, black and low-income communities bore the brunt of these policies. As Diana Pearce writes: “teen pregnancy [is seen] as merely a symptom of the dynamics of modern poverty, specifically urban black poverty” (1993: 53). Pearce argues welfare cuts stem from a desire to stop black children from “inappropriately engaging in adult sexual behavior” (1993: 48) and therefore as disproportionately targeting the sexual lives of working class black communities.

<sup>35</sup> For more on the racist histories of sterilization, eugenics, and the control of black and poor women's reproductive capacities, see, among others: Collins (1999); A. Davis (1981); Ginsburg and Rapp (1995); Roberts (1997); S. Thomas (1998).

childhood towards a different understanding of mothering that attends to sexuality and reproduction as a project of racial belonging and futurity as much as it is one of gendered or intimate pleasure and danger. It is within this framing that Sharon Holland argues for a rethinking of the “place of reproduction” within queer theory such that it is not understood just as “hetero or homo, not as feminist or women’s”, but is additionally a structure of “biology, race, and belonging” (2012: 74). Following Holland, I argue—with Aviva as my guide—that one of the ways in which queer theory’s evasion of the questions of race—and of feminism (for indeed is not feminism the longstanding harbinger of a critique of assumed sexed roles?)—might begin to be addressed is in making space within this growing scholarship on the child to read motherhood queerly.

### *The Queer Child on Screen: A Question of Casting*

Aviva’s bodies make us ask these questions about race, gender, and reproduction. Or do they? As I have already noted, eight actors were cast for Aviva, “some of whom”, Jon Davies writes, “look the part of a thirteen-year-old Jewish girl, while others do not” (2007: 379). Because of this incongruous casting throughout *Palindromes*, Aviva confronts us with her multiplicity, making us reflect on our attachments to and identifications with her different embodiments in various moments. Along these lines, Aviva’s circuitous casting makes us ask additional questions that challenge our frames for identifying queer children. Most important of which is: is she a child? This question leads us to others: Is she having sex because someone is forcing her, or is she having it with consent? And, wait, isn’t she too young to consent, or to have a child? Well, maybe not *this* version of Aviva, but certainly *that* version. *That* version is definitely too young. But at what point does Aviva become this or that version, and how long does she stay that way? And are these other versions really just different versions of an “original” Aviva? Maybe there is a particular form of hers that we think, or are supposed to think, most accurately reflects who she really is: perhaps it is one of the ones who “looks the part”? I argue, however, that the very point of this multiple casting is that it is impossible to know. The question that Aviva poses for any of these readings of her then, is not: Is Aviva a queer child?, but rather: What does it mean to locate someone in childhood or in queerness in the first place? What version of them do we hang on to in order to use them as emblems of queer children?

For Berlant, the significance of Aviva's embodiments is a question of casting, and as such it is irrelevant. Or, rather, the question itself (asking after the meaning of casting particular racial and gendered actors) *is* relevant, even if the one eventually cast is irrelevant. Comparing "Dawn" Aviva—the initial 6-year-old Aviva that we are first witness to, and who returns to deliver the final line of the film—to Dawn Weiner, Berlant writes:

Dawn is white and Aviva is African American, a difference on which there is no comment, because one question of the film is whether "casting" X specific being in the role of the exemplary object really matters when we are talking about love. (2011a: 688)

Here I depart from Berlant's reading, for while the lack of comment may have no bearing on who occupies the position of exemplary object within loving attachments (and yet here too the racialized and gendered histories of impossible, illegal, or disavowed romantic formations might suggest that, indeed, it does matter), in order to understand the work that the "queer" "child" does on the screen, we must situate these various castings within a wider discussion on spectatorship, the gaze, and identification.<sup>36</sup>

Carefully attending to the question of casting means not just thinking about whose bodies appear on screen and whether or not they accurately represent the "original", it also means considering what relationship the act of looking at these bodies has to the forms of pleasure, desire, and identification that Aviva's various embodiments engender. While there has been more scholarship on spectatorship and identification than I can adequately work with here, I want to re-visit a few key

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<sup>36</sup> In Freud's chapter on identification in *Group Psychology* (1921), he defines identification as "the earliest and original form of emotional tie", and as one of the lines of attachment through which the child initiates the Oedipus complex and becomes a gendered and sexual subject (1921: 107). Freud argues that identification is different than desire: identification is "what one would like to *be*", while desire describes "what one would like to *have*" (1921: 106, emphasis in original). Freud's easy separation between wanting to be and wanting to have, has, however, faced numerous critiques. Like Jackie Stacey (1994), who argues for a theory of identification which centers its eroticism (and specifically its homoeroticism), Diana Fuss argues that "identifications are erotic, intellectual, and emotional" (1995: 2). For more on the political life of identification, see, among others: Butler (1990); Muñoz (1999).

approaches to identification with the image as a means of thinking about the specific work that *Aviva* does for the questions of queer childhood that I have been asking across this chapter.<sup>37</sup> One of the difficulties of doing such a reading of *Palindromes*, however, is that not only, by centering on a young female protagonist, does it depart from the type of film that Laura Mulvey (1975) initially used to elaborate her highly influential theory of the male gaze.<sup>38</sup> It also refuses to sustain a consistent body within the frame. Additionally, Mulvey's text is principally diagnosing a very particular system of looking that was central to mainstream Hollywood cinema at the time. This type of cinema—which relies on a shot/reverse shot system of identification that limits the breath of possibilities for identification—is almost completely absent from *Palindromes*. Here, *Palindromes*, which revels in irony, camp, playfulness, and absurdity, differs greatly from the classical Hollywood narrative model—and its subsequent mechanics of identification—that Mulvey was critiquing. However, rather than dismiss Mulvey, I want instead to think through the possibilities that emerge in the moments Mulvey's analysis (and the analyses of those who followed and critiqued her) sticks to, and fumbles over *Aviva*. As such, while *Palindromes* differs greatly from those Mulvey works with, and thus arguably cannot be read in the same frame, it is precisely the film's refusal to allow for a straight forward identification with *Aviva* that I am interested in exploring here. After speaking to some of the mechanics of identification which Mulvey critiques, I thus move into an analysis of *Palindromes* as an example of “queer cinema” (Halberstam 1998), or as operating through multiple identifications and “disidentification” (Muñoz 1999).

As I discussed in Chapter Three, the pleasure of looking at the screen cannot be understood outside of power, or, as Mulvey famously wrote: “the fascination of film is reinforced by pre-existing patterns of fascination already at work within the individual

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<sup>37</sup> For additional approaches to spectatorship and identification beyond those addressed below, see, among many others: Dyer (1986; 1993; 1997); Erens (1990); Gamman and Marshment (1988); Metz (1974; 1975; 1982); Shohat and Stam (1994); Young (1996). For analyses that are specifically related to children as viewers and consumers of media, see: Buckingham (1993, 1996); P. Palmer (1986); Valkenburg (2004).

<sup>38</sup> Most of *Palindromes* departs heavily from the cinematic techniques of looking which Mulvey diagnosed. Indeed, there are only a few instances in which the camera specifically takes up *Aviva*'s gaze, and there are practically no shot/reverse shot techniques used throughout. This disjuncture, and the hurdles that ensue from reading *Palindromes* through Mulvey, are discussed further in the text.

subject and the social formations that have moulded him” (1975: 6). “In a world ordered by sexual imbalance,” Mulvey writes, “pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female” (1975: 11). For Mulvey, this means that the very act of spectatorship (facilitated by the camera, the cut, and the editing technique of shot/reverse-shot) is mapped along and as phallocentrism such that the man on the screen holds the active role in looking (with whom the male audience identifies), while the woman (occupying the space of desire and signifying the threat of castration) connotes “to-be-looked-at-ness” (1975: 11). Through its (re)production of a binary and monolithic structure of identification and desire, narrative cinema itself, Mulvey argues, functions as a tool through which the “patriarchal unconscious” is coupled with projection and pleasure (both narcissistic and scopophilic) to reinforce sexual difference and phallocentrism.

In the years since Mulvey’s article was published, her analysis of the active/male and passive/female binary structure of the gaze has been challenged on numerous accounts—most notably around the question of the female spectator’s relationship to identification and pleasure.<sup>39</sup> Mary Ann Doane, challenging Mulvey’s inattention to the female spectator and her flattening of female identification to a straightforward masculinization asks, “even if it is admitted that the woman is frequently the object of the voyeuristic or fetishistic gaze in the cinema, what is there to prevent her from reversing the relation and appropriating the gaze for her own pleasure?” (1982: 77). Theorizing femininity as a “masquerade” more than a “trans-sex identification” (more on this in the following chapter), Doane argues that femininity itself can be “flaunted” in order to destabilize the image and defamiliarize the lines of female iconography (1982: 82).<sup>40</sup> Also critiquing the straightforward alignment of the female spectator with

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<sup>39</sup> Mulvey herself addressed some of these concerns in a follow-up article (1981). Here, Mulvey maintains her initial position, arguing that the female spectator continues to be trapped in a “phantasy of masculinisation [which] is always to some extent at cross purposes with itself, restless in its transvestite clothes” (1981: 15). The female spectator and the female protagonist, Mulvey writes, are thus only able to access masculine activity by returning to an earlier active/masculine childhood erotic disposition which has since become repressed, and which, therefore, still operates within a phallic economy.

<sup>40</sup> For Mary Ann Doane, the flaunting of femininity as masquerade allows for the woman on screen to use her own body as image, manufacturing a “certain distance between oneself and one’s image” (1982: 82). For alternate understandings of femininity as masquerade, see: Irigaray (1985); Riviere (1966).



a masculine identification, Teresa de Lauretis argues for an understanding of the “double identification” of the female spectator as both the “desire for the other, and [the] desire to be desired by the other” (1984: 143). Responding to both of these understandings of female spectatorship, Stacey (1994) argues for a theory of spectatorship that is not merely textual (such that it additionally incorporates the space of the cinema, and the actual act of being in an audience with others), and she argues for an expansion of the terms of identification beyond heterosexual desire.<sup>41</sup> While they differ in approach and conclusion, what these three critiques of Mulvey’s analysis share is a questioning of the assumptions Mulvey makes about who is engaged in viewing cinema, what it means to occupy the space of the female spectator (how this subject—textual or actual—negotiates and understands their own gendered and sexual identities), and how they relate to the bodies on the screen.

These assumptions of Mulvey’s, of course, are not just about sexual difference and sexuality, but are also structured through questions of race and class. Along these lines, then, much too has been written. bell hooks, for example, writes:

black female spectators have had to develop looking relations within a cinematic context that constructs our presence as absence, that denies the “body” of the black female so as to perpetuate white supremacy and with it a phallogentric spectatorship where the woman to be looked at and desired is “white”. (1992: 118)

hooks thus identifies an “oppositional gaze” which emerges out of an engaged form of looking that is centered within an awareness of the politics of race and racism (1992: 123). For hooks, then, black female spectatorship complicates (and spurns) Mulvey’s original contention, such that an oppositional gaze necessarily refuses to “identify with white womanhood” and does not “take on the phallogentric gaze of desire and possession” (1992: 122). For Gaines, “the effort to understand the ideological work of mainstream cinema in terms of the psychoanalytic concept of sexual difference” has meant that “class and racial difference have remained outside its problematic, divorced

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<sup>41</sup> Stacey argues that the privileging of the spectator as textual (as discursive, as positional, as site of address) rather than as actual means that women’s experiences of watching films in cinemas are problematically dismissed (1994: 23).

from textual concerns by the very split in the social totality that the incompatibility of these discourses misrepresents” (1990: 198). As such, Gaines writes: “The very questions that Mulvey did not address have become the most compelling: Is the spectator restricted to viewing the female body on the screen from the male point of view? Is narrative pleasure always about male pleasure?” (1984, emphasis in original). And here, thinking of the multiple gendered, aged, and raced positionings that Aviva takes on, we could add: Is narrative pleasure only about white pleasure? Is racial identification and the pleasure (or displeasure) one takes in viewing the white (female) body on the screen always restricted to an identification with (or rejection of) whiteness? How does identification work across generations? And are there ways of reading the racialized and gendered bodies in the image as multiply signifying, producing identification and opposition, and speaking to both the gendered and racialized nature of desire, affiliation, and sexuality?

Thinking through some of these questions through an interrogation of Frantz Fanon’s *Black Skin White Masks* (1967), Diana Fuss (1995) argues that identification cannot be theorized outside of its colonial history, and that any recuperative approach to identification needs to situate the potentials and limits of identification within its colonial genealogies. In her reading, cross-racial and cross-gendered identification takes place within Fanon’s text in complex ways. Fuss argues that in his articulation of the “Negrophobic” white woman’s rape fantasy “a cross-gendered and cross-racial identification” takes place wherein the woman “usurps the position she herself has assigned to the black man and plays the role not only of victim but of aggressor” (1995: 155). Here, cross-racial identification takes place precisely through the fear of and desire for the black man’s sexuality. For Kobena Mercer, who theorizes the act of the white spectator looking at the image of the black body through the work of Robert Mapplethorpe, “the image of the black male body presents the [white male] spectator with a source of erotic pleasure [...] [that re-inscribes a] fundamental *ambivalence* of colonial phantasy, oscillating between sexual idealization of the racial other and anxiety in defense of the identity of the white male ego” (1994: 436, 438, emphasis in original). Additionally, Kaja Silverman (1989) and Gail Ching-Liang Low (1989) both theorize racial identification in relation to white colonial subjects appropriating the dress of the colonized other, and while for Low “the fantasy of donning native costume, in the context of imperialism [...] expresses another attempt at control of subaltern peoples,

another attempt at laying the burden of representation on them” (Low 1989: 98), for Silverman, cross-racial identification is both structured through imperial desires and, at the same time, can be the site from which a traitorous identification emerges, inspiring anti-colonial resistance (Silverman 1989).

My intention in rehearsing these debates is to think through the (im)possibility of their mutuality in the act of looking at Aviva, as well as to theorize their analysis of identification as akin to the wider project of knowing the queer child. Indeed, I return to these founding debates because I argue that reading them through *Palindromes* provides another way of thinking across these questions of identification and desire. Departing from the type of film Mulvey initially critiqued, *Palindromes* is an unconventional film that relies on absurdity, strangeness, and oddness in order to disturb and challenge the viewer. While the theories explained above about multiple, oppositional, or ambivalent identification make important interventions into the structures of looking inherent in normative Hollywood cinema, they do not map directly onto how we look at Aviva. In this sense, if Aviva’s body is to be read directly, as straightforwardly engendering a particular identification from a particular gendered and racialized spectator, then each different shift in casting facilitates a specific way of reading the scene. Depending on who the spectator is, “Dawn” Aviva would thus facilitate different lines of identification than “Henrietta” Aviva, and so on. But identification, as I have argued, does not always work so directly, and the structures of looking made possible within *Palindromes* do not allow such an identification at all. Beginning from an approach that prioritizes the “multiple and coexisting” registers of identification, which “produce conflicts, convergences, and innovative dissonances within gender”—and I am tentatively adding racial—“configurations” (Butler 1990: 85-86), Aviva’s shifts in casting might be read as all individually being available for overlapping gendered and racial identifications in themselves. Additionally, because of the film’s oddness and strangeness, and its reliance on the bizarre (both in terms of its diegesis and its cinematography), *Palindromes* refuses the very potential for a direct identification. *Palindromes* might, in this sense, be what Halberstam defines as “queer cinema”, a category of film that creates “invitations to play through numerous identifications within a single sitting”, and which allows for a “creative reinvention of ways of seeing” (1998: 180).

In this sense, the shifts in casting specifically and intentionally elicit and proliferate multiple ways of seeing, identifying with, and desiring Aviva. At the very

moment that a straightforward approach to spectatorship and identification seems to make more sense in relation to Aviva's particular relationship to the shot, scene, and narrative that she occupies, a new title scene appears and a new Aviva with her. What Aviva thus proposes, with each of her shifts in casting, is that any attempt to secure her in a particular reading can never catch up with her. In this line of analysis, the queer work Aviva does is in getting us to become uncomfortable with the lines of critique we have become accustomed to. We are left unable to place her, or her desires, or what's best for her, because she absolutely refuses to be recognized in such a way. She is simultaneously six, thirteen, in her mid forties, a teenage white boy, an overweight black woman, a young Dominican woman, and a couple of emaciated white women of different ages. Perhaps she is also each of the Sunshine family's children. Aviva thus becomes the type of queer child that Ohi elaborates, one who "thwarts a sense of an easy identification" and insists upon the very "impossibility of identification" itself (2004: 104).

However, this invitation for play requires particular racialized interruptions in and relations to the Aviva we see. Interestingly, Solondz himself spoke of this casting technique in such a way that both highlighted the substitutability of the actors (and the multiplicities of identification) while at the same time recognized the differences in effect that each of their particular bodies had on the viewer:

As far as the casting thing goes [...] each one has a different reason. I knew that I needed to begin with a black child to set some things off. Maybe she's adopted because Ellen Barkin is the mom and then you say, "No. She's Latino. She's a redhead. Wait." At a certain point, or first your disoriented, but then it kicks in, the *connection*. It's like, "Okay, it's the same character, but different actors playing this one character." [...] Then [...] you get to a big black woman, and for me that was my Gulliver, so to speak, with the Lilliputians around her. (Solondz, quoted in Murray n.d., emphasis in original)

For Solondz, the use of different actors comes from a desire to emphasize their connection and their possible mutuality, but, at the same time, it is precisely the (fetishistic) shock of the black woman's body (and the black child's incongruity with the white family) that interrupts and makes possible the viewer's multiple identifications

with Aviva. Here, then, an entirely flexible model for spectatorship and identification cannot sustain itself on its own.<sup>42</sup> As Stacey cautions, “this more flexible model of spectatorship suggests that sexual difference”—and here I am adding racial difference and one’s location within childhood—“is so fluid as to have little determining significance in cinematic spectatorship” (1994: 31). Rather than inviting free play, therefore, Aviva’s shifts in casting—and specifically her black adult and child bodies, bodies who I have argued sit uncomfortably within queer theory’s turn to the child—interrupt not only the act of identification, but also the queer theoretical frames through which multiple, proliferative identifications are assumed to take place. Rather than highlight the queerness of childhood through an analysis of Aviva’s refusals to be securely identified with, a critical queer reading of Aviva’s childhood would instead refuse the racialized terms through which only particular castings are deemed distinctive enough from childhood to interrupt the act of looking.

### **Aviva’s Final Look**

At the very end of *Palindromes*, Aviva and a slightly older, taller, and fatter Jonah (John Gemberling), have sex once again. In between the thrusts of the young man’s awkward and overweight body, Aviva’s various incarnations cycle, as Berlant writes, “in ghostly fashion through the place her body holds in the image” (2011a: 689), while she imagines the possibilities of producing another life via the *jouissance* of someone else’s orgasm. Finally, after Jonah finishes, Aviva returns to us as “Dawn” Aviva and breaks the fourth wall. Looking directly into the camera, with a big smile on her face, Aviva declares optimistically: “I have a feeling, though it’s just a feeling, that this time, I’m going to be a mom!” Unlike her other shifts in casting, the return of “Dawn” Aviva in this concluding shot comes as a bit of a shock. We have not seen this Aviva since the film opened and a lot has taken place. Too much, perhaps (we hope), for this Aviva to have been the Aviva all along. Looking steadfastly into the lens, however, Aviva’s

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<sup>42</sup> Along these lines, I depart from Davies’ analysis of the shifts in casting within *Palindromes*. For rather than arguing that the young black girl at the beginning and end of the film is, as Davies describes her, a “ghost of Aviva’s childhood” that haunts her sexual encounters, “remind[ing] us that every adolescent was once a child and that every child will one day grow up” (2007: 380), we might rather attend to the ways that childhood itself is a racially privileged position that is not so equally inhabited—nor, as I argued in the previous chapter, so evenly lived through.

statement of “*this* time” demonstrates her awareness of those other times—indeed, it tells us that she has been there with us throughout the film all along. And you—her direct gaze reminds you—you have been watching.

## Chapter Six:

“At his young age he may appear to be a female”:

### Childhood and Transfeminism

This was the act accomplished between the beginning and the end of that short sentence in the delivery room: “It’s a girl.” This was the act that recalled all the anguish of my own struggles with gender. But this was also the act that enjoined my complicity in the non-consensual gendering of another. A gendering violence is the founding condition of human subjectivity; having a gender is the tribal tattoo that makes one’s personhood cognizable. I stood for a moment between the pains of two violations, the mark of gender and the unlivability of its absence. Could I say which one was worse? Or could I only say which one I felt could best be survived?

(Stryker 1994: 249-250)

### **Positioning Coy**

Speaking to the media in February of 2013, Kathryn Mathis, a middle-aged white woman living in Colorado with her husband and their five children, defended her and her husband’s decision to file a discrimination complaint on behalf of Coy, their 6-year-old daughter:

We were very confused because everything was going so well, and they had been so accepting, and all of a sudden it changed and it was very confusing and very upsetting because we knew that, by doing that, she was going to go back to being unhappy. It was going to set her up for a lot of bad things. (Payne and Fantz 2013)

The confusing incident that shook the Mathis family was a decision, made in December of 2012 by their daughter’s school district, that Coy could no longer use the girl’s restrooms:

We got a call one evening, it was the principal and he said he wanted to set up a meeting with us to discuss options for Coy's future use of the restroom. [...] It came out that Coy was no longer going to be able to use the girl's restroom and they were going to require her to be using the boy's restroom or the staff bathroom or the bathroom for the sick children. (Whitelocks and Greig 2013)

This decision was made because the district believed that it was no longer appropriate for Coy, a trans girl, to share the space of the restroom with the other girls. Fearing for their child's safety, and upset that the school district was abruptly curtailing their support of Coy's gender identity, the Mathis family took her out of school and filed a discrimination complaint.

In a response letter by W. Kelly Dude, the school's attorney, he justified the district's stance by putting into question Coy's location in childhood, her sexed embodiment, and her gender identity. Dude, who excuses his use of male pronouns for Coy as "not [an] attempt to be disrespectful, but because I am referring to male genitals" (Dude 2012), made the following statement:

The District's decision took into account not only Coy but other students in the building, their parents, and the future impact a boy with male genitals using a girls' bathroom would have as Coy grew older. [...] However, I'm certain you can appreciate that as Coy grows older and his male genitals develop along with the rest of his body, at least some parents and students are likely to become uncomfortable with his continued use of the girls' restroom. (Dude 2012)

On the premise of Coy's potential (and fantasmatic) future male genitalia and the discomfort they would allegedly create, the school district argued that it would be inappropriate for her to use the girls' restrooms.<sup>1</sup> What does it mean, this chapter asks, to regulate access to a space based on the future possibility of male genitals? What does it mean, particularly in this case, when the possibility itself of adult male genitalia is

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<sup>1</sup> The school claimed that it was not discriminating against Coy based on sex, seeing as she was "a male" and was not being denied access to the boy's restroom (Chavez 2013: 5-6). It also argued that even if it *was* discriminating against Coy for not letting her use the girls' restroom, this practice was sanctioned by the Colorado Civil Rights Commission (Dude 2012).



both fantasmatic—hormone and surgical interventions for trans girls shift the temporality and necessity of obtaining “future” male genitals—as well as foreshadowed. Coy, at the time of being excluded from the girls’ restrooms was 6-years-old, most likely a long way off from obtaining this fantasmatic adult male penis. As this exclusion both directed its violence at a child, and simultaneously and transphobically projected that child into adulthood, this chapter centrally asks how childhood works for and against a transfeminist politics. Returning to my theoretical framework from Chapter Three, it asks this question of transphobic projection in the face of the deployment of affect (here operating as “discomfort”) and its entrenchment of a gendered act of putting childhood into practice. In answering this question, this chapter begins with and keeps returning to Coy, as it thinks through the role childhood plays in trans narratives of self-discovery and transition; in the psychic life of gendered attainment; and in the possibilities of imagining collective solidarity between a feminist tomboy girlhood, and a trans childhood.

The questions I ask in this chapter in relationship to Coy, and the research that I undertook to write it, emerged out of a particular moment in which Coy’s challenge to her denied entry to the girls’ restrooms was the most public case in which trans bathroom access was being debated.<sup>2</sup> Since writing this chapter, Coy’s case has been won, but the question of trans people’s access to public facilities—particularly in schools—which align with their gender identity (rather than the sex listed on their birth certificate) has become a seething national debate with particularly violent rhetoric and consequences. As I complete the writing of this dissertation, the U.S. Department of Justice and the state and governor of North Carolina are in a legal battle over whether or not biological sex, rather than gender identity, should be the basis for entry to public same-sex facilities (Lynch 2016).<sup>3</sup> This lawsuit, which has potentially national consequences, began when North Carolina passed the Public Facilities Privacy and Security Act (also known as House Bill 2) in March of 2016. This bill dictated the

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<sup>2</sup> Another important case took place in 2014, when the Maine Supreme Judicial Court ruled that a transgender fifth grader was being illegally discriminated against by her school (John Doe et al. v Regional School Unit 26) for forcing her to use a unisex staff bathroom. Earlier that year, in California, Assembly Bill 1266 required all California schools to allow transgender students to participate in all school activities, programs, and facilities according to their gender identity (California General Assembly 2014).

<sup>3</sup> For a prison abolitionist critique of Lynch’s speech, see: Kapp-Klote and Peoples (2016).

protected classes across the state, nullifying local ordinances, and limiting these classes to race, religion, color, national origin, age, handicap, or biological sex as designated on a person's birth certificate (North Carolina General Assembly 2016). Not only, then, did this law supersede local regulations (some of which included sexual orientation as a protected class), it also established sex and gender as determined by a birth certificate. The passage of this law has drawn intense national scrutiny and debate, with multiple companies, artists, and authors taking part in a boycott of the state. And yet, North Carolina's law is not the only incident of transphobic regulation of public space being enacted. Numerous other bills (many of which did not come to fruition) were subsequently proposed across the country. These bills took many forms, but they all share a desire to limit trans people's access to restrooms and other public services, and to allow individuals and businesses the right to discriminate against trans people based on religious or moral beliefs.<sup>4</sup> While much has been said about these bills' enactment as a particular backlash against what was called the "transgender tipping point" (Steinmetz 2014), this chapter can only begin to speak to this context.<sup>5</sup> As an analysis of the role that childhood plays for and against transfeminism, this chapter limits its investigation of the restroom debate to Coy (and thus to a moment just prior to the "transgender tipping point"), and extends its analysis of gender, sexual difference, embodiment, childhood, phantasy, and transfeminism from there.

In relationship to childhood, however, much could still be written in relationship to North Carolina's discriminatory law, as the rhetoric that was central to the passage of House Bill 2 specifically evoked a figure of a monstrous adult pseudo-transwoman (described as a man, and understood as a sexual predator) and the threat she/he posed to the young girls whose innocence was assumed to be at risk. Subsequent petitions in other states were centrally based around this rhetoric of the danger posed for young girls

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<sup>4</sup> For a complete list of these bills see: NCTE (n.d.).

<sup>5</sup> Julian Gill-Peterson describes the so-called "transgender tipping point" as an incorporation of a particular form of trans politics into a neoliberal progress narrative: "For *TIME*, the visibility of transgender bodies is a result of the [...] linear measure of liberal tolerance and civil rights, making transgender the new, the now, and the next of American identity politics" (2015: 119). That said, *TIME*'s highlighting of the black trans actress Laverne Cox's role on *Orange is the New Black*—a drama set in a women's prison—could also be understood as making central Cox's own black transfeminist abolitionist politics.

by sex offenders claiming to be transwomen.<sup>6</sup> In these campaigns—which conveniently ignore the fact that trans inclusive bathroom policies do not, of course, seek to legalize sexual assault or rape, and the fact that the sex-segregation of bathrooms does not in any way act as an effective barrier to an individual’s forced or unnoticed entry into the “wrong” space—childhood operates along the now familiar lines of sexual and racial innocence and victimhood that this thesis has explored in depth.

In this way, this campaign, and the others that followed its lead, are extensions of the logic behind Coy’s exclusion from the girls’ restroom: the safety and comfort of the girls who are imagined to rightly occupy the restroom operates as justification for the prohibiting of a trans person’s entrance. However, these campaigns differ from the Colorado district’s exclusion of Coy as the trans person being excluded in Coy’s case was herself also a child. And yet, in the very justification for Coy’s exclusion, Coy herself was lifted out of the space of childhood and projected into the body of an older male. The district, as cited above, argued that Coy must use other facilities because of “the future impact a boy with male genitals using a girls’ bathroom would have as Coy grew older” (Dude 2012). In this rhetoric, then, Coy was also understood to be an adult male. In the terms of this argument, the district relied on complicated and contradictory logics and deployments of gender, sexual difference, and childhood, which I argue are important to work through in order to think critically about the wider connections between transfeminism and childhood.

Specifically, the district claimed that a 6-year-old girl could be understood to be already possessing (through its ghostly foreshadowed presence) a future adult male penis, and yet, at the same time, it made a very different claim. For a moment, that is, Coy was recognized as (or, according to the district, misrecognized as) inhabiting the same subject position as the other girls at the school. Because of this (mis)recognition, she was able to use the girls’ restrooms without issue. Explaining their previous leniency in relation to Coy’s gender, the district argued that it was the essential androgyny of childhood that allowed Coy to use the girls’ restrooms prior to their intervention:

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<sup>6</sup> For an explicit version of this rhetoric see: Campaign for Houston (2015). No campaigns, it should be noted, were concerned with the danger posed to boys, precisely because of the ways that sexual innocence, as I have argued throughout this thesis, is gendered.

The reason it has not been “an issue” to date is that fellow students and even the other teachers in the building are not aware that Coy is a male and at his young age, he may appear to be a female. (Dude 2012)

This reasoning—based on the premise of an understandable yet inaccurate collective (mis)reading of the child’s body—emphasized the fluidity of a 6-year-old’s gendered embodiment, rendered temporarily inconsequential Coy’s sexual anatomy, and allowed her to coexist with the other girls for a time. In other words, the temporary (mis)reading of Coy as female negated the very need to know whether or not she had a penis. As such, in the district’s argument that Coy’s body had “not yet” or “only just” become problematically located in the girl’s restroom—a suggestion that is explicitly made in the district’s declaration of her body *eventually* causing trauma—her temporary access was thus only excused because as a child she, like the rest of the girls, was not yet understood to be inhabiting a properly sexed body. Coy’s location in a particular position within childhood meant that she oscillated between these two discourses, one that understood her body as an adult male’s, and one that could not distinguish her body from other girls’ bodies. While the district asserted that the issue had to be reexamined because Coy’s enrollment in the first grade meant she would be more likely to use shared restrooms rather than single-occupancy ones, it was precisely this jump between her passing as a girl due to her “young age” and her being unable to pass due to fantasies of her “growing older” that the district decided she needed to use alternative facilities.

In this chapter, I use this oscillation of Coy’s positioning as a springboard to ask after the investments at work in the fantasy that sexual difference and bodily inhabitation are simultaneously inconsequential during childhood and always under threat. What does this fantasy mean, I ask, particularly when the gendering of boyhood and girlhood is so intense? What does this fantasy allow for when trans people themselves evoke this particular duality of the child’s positioning within and before sexual difference as a justificatory device through which trans narratives of self-discovery and transition can be legitimated? Alternatively, what role does the temporary dismissal of sexual difference and sexual anatomy in childhood play in the psychic life of the gender binary, and what demands—of femininity and of girls in particular—does it allow for in the violence (and pleasure) of cisgender attainment? How, in expanding

this final question, might we understand this fantasy as related to the phantasmatic life of gendered subjectivity? Can we understand the transphobia, which excluded Coy from the restroom and which was justified through a narrative of her as an adult male, as being an effect of the psychic life of gender? In asking these questions, this chapter turns, initially, to two different types of texts. In the first section, I work with trans narratives of childhood found in autobiographies, biographies, published interviews, and testimonials. In the following section, I take a more psychoanalytic approach and read Freud's and Lacan's analyses of the role of the penis/phallus as they structure gendered achievement, and as they make light of the school district's decision to exclude Coy. As a means of thinking these two types of questions together, and holding them up as the tensions inherent in imagining a transfeminist politics of childhood, the final section of this chapter turns to the film *Tomboy* (Sciamma 2011). *Tomboy* is a film that plays with gender, embodiment, pleasure, and childhood, and it opens up the question of how one might read a gendered self upon its central character—sometimes known as Laure, sometimes known as Michael. Across these three explorations of gender and childhood—trans narratives of gendered identity, psychoanalytic understandings of femininity, and the transfeminist possibilities of Laure/Michael—this chapter seeks out a transfeminist process of articulation that might intervene in the ways in which childhood makes possible transphobic and misogynist projects.

### **Transfeminism: A Note**

In the introduction to the special issue of *Transgender Studies Quarterly* titled “Trans/Feminisms” (Stryker and Bettcher 2016), Susan Stryker and Talia Bettcher describe the political project they seek to undertake in articulating “trans/feminism”:

Rather than cede the label *feminist* to a minority of feminists who hold a particular set of negative opinions about trans people, and rather than reducing all transgender engagement with feminism to the strategy embraced by some trans people of vigorously challenging certain forms of antitransgender feminist speech, we should instead demonstrate the range and complexity of trans/feminist relationships. (2016: 7, emphasis in original)

Undertaking a similar project of articulating the shared politics of feminist and trans critiques, Emmi Koyama's "Transfeminist Manifesto" (2003) also calls for a transfeminism that emphasizes their points of coalition:

*Transfeminism* is primarily a movement by and for trans women who view their liberation to be intrinsically linked to the liberation of all women and beyond. [...] *Transfeminism* is not about taking over existing feminist institutions. Instead, it extends and advances feminism as a whole through our own liberation and coalition work with all others. (2003: 245, emphasis in original)

In using the term "transfeminism" in this chapter, I similarly aim to think through these points of coalition. My use of transfeminism, then, is not to suggest that feminism on its own is in danger of cisgendered "myopia" or transgendered essentialism—to transpose Clare Hemmings' (2014) calling into question of a potential reading of Robyn Wiegman's (2014) phrasing: "queer feminist"—nor do I mean to suggest that feminism on its own is anachronistic and thus in need of the new prefix "trans" in order to be relevant.<sup>7</sup> Rather, aligned with Wiegman's desire to articulate a coalition between assumedly split political projects and fields of knowledge (and their "separate" objects of analysis), I am attempting to continue the wider project of bringing into being a transfeminism that takes up the tensions deemed inherent in this pairing as a generative project that "share[s] political and theoretical genealogies" (Wiegman 2014: 20 n.1) and finds points of coalition between trans and feminist theories.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Robyn Wiegman, in a note about her use of "queer feminist" argues that this pairing indicates "a distinct body of work in its own right" which "many scholars working in literary and cultural studies today are forging" (2014: 19-20 n1). Clare Hemmings, in response, asks: "Is queer the descriptor here, that qualifies 'feminist'? Is 'feminist' on its own in danger of either heterosexual myopia or lesbian essentialism?" (2014: 28). For Wiegman, as for Hemmings, and for myself, the answer to these questions lies in the political project of genealogy: "'queer feminist' [for Wiegman] describes simultaneity across rather than difference between generations" (Hemmings 2014: 29). In response to Wiegman, see also: G. Lewis (2014); Stacey (2014).

<sup>8</sup> For other articulations of a transfeminism that shares political and theoretical genealogies, see: Ahmed (2016); Bettcher and Garry (2009); Enke (2012); Heaney (2016); Scott-Dixon (2006); Serano (2007); Stryker, Currah, and Moore (2008); C. Williams (2016)..

As Stryker and Bettcher alluded, this tension has an impassioned history, but it is also one that might best be understood through its moments of coalition. Even Janice Raymond's *The Transsexual Empire* (1979), which violently and explicitly accuses "transsexuals" (Raymond's term) of being the antithesis of feminism, opens with an acknowledgement of the possibilities of coalitional politics for a transfeminism:

Transsexualism highlights, in a unique way, several key issues in feminist studies—among them sex-role socialization, "nature versus nurture," and definitions and boundaries of maleness and femaleness. [...] Transsexualism touches the boundaries of many of the existing academic disciplines in such a way as to raise fundamental questions about the territorial imperatives of biology, psychology, medicine, and the law, to name but a few. (1979: 1)

And yet, despite acknowledging some of the overlaps in terrain between transsexuality and feminism, Raymond argues that due to the fixed nature of chromosomes, sex itself is determined at birth and cannot be changed through surgery or hormones, and that (male to female) transsexuality is a male practice of patriarchy, enabled by the patriarchal medical system, and exacting further control and domination over women.<sup>9</sup> Raymond's critique of transsexuality does not stand alone within feminist theory, as the texts by Julie Bindel (2004; 2009), Germaine Greer (1999), and Sheila Jeffreys (1997; 2014), make all too clear; nor does it stand without fierce criticism from within the trans community (see, for example: Califia 1997; Prosser 1998; Serano 2007; Stone 1991). Wherein the subsequent debates about Raymond's work, and trans exclusionary radical feminism more generally have articulated the issues at stake (rather than just reiterated or countered the vitriol through which they are made), they have centered around the questions of male privilege, embodiment, the penis as the site/sign of patriarchal

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<sup>9</sup> As Jacqueline Rose argues, this argument could be re-articulated as a coalitional politics between trans people and radical separatist feminism: "male-to-female transsexuals expose, and then reject, masculinity in its darkest guise. This side of the argument is missed by Greer et al, who tend to overlook the fact that if you want more than anything in the world to become a woman, then chances are there is somewhere a man who, just as passionately, you do not want to be" (2016). For a transfeminist politics emerging out of a politics of disidentification with radical separatist feminism, see: Lees, Fae, Minou and Crawford (2013).

violence, safe spaces for “women”, bodily integrity, gender stereotypes, and the authenticity of gender identity.

The tensions between these communities, however, are not unidirectional; as Krista Scott-Dixon argues, “trans scholarship has frequently ignored feminism as a political movement and mode of thinking” (2006: 24; see also: Nicki 2006), and indeed some of the work that narrates the tensions between trans people and feminists from trans perspectives verges on blaming feminist thought itself—or, rather, “radical lesbian feminist” thought—for particular transphobic uses of feminism. In Jay Prosser’s critique of Raymond, for example, Raymond’s book is described as “Janice Raymond’s lesbian feminist *The Transsexual Empire*” (1998: 7). Cressida Heyes’ “Reading Transgender, Rethinking Women’s Studies” also places Raymond’s work within a “hopelessly dated [...] radical feminist critique” (2000: 179). In both of these critiques, the emphasis of the damaging legacy of Raymond’s work is not solely located within a particular theorist’s politics, but rather within all radical or lesbian feminism, a feminism that is, and apparently should stay, in the past. As Cristan Williams points out, these quips about the essentialist and exclusionary politics of some radical feminists as indicative of an inherent transphobia within radical feminism writ large ignore and erase the “long and courageous trans inclusive history” of radical feminism (2016: 255).

Beginning here, *within* a transfeminist politics, might thus be an uncomfortable space from which to stage this intervention, as there are multiple debates across feminisms about trans subjects, some of which have a history of positioning trans subjectivities as jeopardizing the progress that feminism has made, or hopes to make. However, it is precisely this risk (along with a few others) that I want to situate this chapter within. Rather than continue to rehash these debates, then, I am more interested in hanging onto the tensions that they engender and the moments of coalition that might be found between them by looking towards the child. This turn to the child and to childhood within transfeminist theory is important not just for what it makes possible when articulating the coalitions between trans and feminist critique, but also because the question of childhood has yet to be substantially interrogated within trans theory. While there is a growing body of work on trans experiences and theory more generally—a corpus which is too extensive to list here but whose depth might be suggested in the two fantastic Transgender Studies Readers (Stryker and Whittle 2006; Stryker and Aizura 2013) and the recent establishing of *TSQ* in 2014—not much of this work thinks about



trans children specifically, nor the trans child as a figure through which sex, gender, and childhood might be productively interrogated.<sup>10</sup> Thinking with the cis- and the trans-child—and their relationships to their own gendered becomings and the ways in which their bodies and their identities are questioned, regulated, and naturalized—this chapter explores the ways in which transphobia, misogyny, and transfeminism are enabled and challenged through the practice of childhood.

### **Narratives of Trans Childhood**

The Mathis family's legal battle with Coy's school district to allow her to use the girl's restrooms was propelled to national recognition when a feature article about Coy was published in *Rolling Stone*. The article, "About a Girl: Coy Mathis' Fight to Change Gender" (Erdely 2013), which uses male pronouns for Coy up until she is described as having been properly diagnosed with Gender Identity Disorder at age four, gives credence to Coy's desire to transition and to use the girl's restrooms through a narration of her early childhood. The article begins with a highly gendered anecdote of eighteen-month-old Coy:

When Coy Mathis was a year and a half old, he loved nothing more than playing dress-up. He didn't show much interest in the fireman costume or the knight outfit, but would rummage through the toy box to grab the princess dress with the flowery headpiece. His mother, Kathryn, would text photos to her husband of their plump-cheeked blond boy twirling in a pair of pink-and-purple butterfly wings or wearing a frilly tutu. (Erdely 2013)

While Coy's parents are recounted as lovingly accepting this dress-up play even as they brushed off the retrospectively obvious (at least to *Rolling Stone*) implications of it,

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<sup>10</sup> As of this writing, I have only been able to identify a few engagements with the figure of the child, and the political deployment of childhood within trans theory. These include two short entries on "child" and "childhood" in the *TSQ* keywords special issue (Meadow 2014; Castañeda 2014); a short discussion by Dean Spade (2006) on the limitations of the "tranny narrative" in trans diagnosis (discussed below in the conclusion); and Gill-Peterson's doctoral thesis on the queer and trans child in theory (2015). As Gill-Peterson argues, this limited address is a product of the "assumption that the transgender child is an incredibly recent offshoot of adult transgender subjectivity" (2015: 2 n1).

diminishing it as merely the “cute” play of a toddler, this moment is narrated as the introduction to Coy’s story precisely for the ways in which it secures as natural and given Coy’s female selfhood. Anything but “merely play”, *Rolling Stone* asserts, this moment establishes the inherent nature of Coy’s female identity as evidenced by her desire for princess dresses and flowery head pieces during her toddler years.

While the conventions of gendered normativity generally take as given and natural a cisgender person’s gender identity, this same acceptance is not so routinely granted to trans people. Across this chapter, and in this section in particular, I am interested in thinking through the consequences of this contradiction, and its implications for childhood’s role in the workings of gender, by turning to narratives of trans childhood like the one about Coy above. Using narratives of gendered discovery in childhood, particularly ones that fit with binary notions of boyhood and girlhood, is one of the strategies by which trans people’s claims to their rightful inhabitation of their gender is made, and while my intention is not to criticize trans people for responding to the uneven demand to justify their identities, I do want to think through, along with trans people, the consequences that these narratives have for our understandings of how childhood, sex, and gender co-constitute meaning for one another.<sup>11</sup> My intention, then, is to think through particular deployments of childhood within some of these narratives.

When narrated through what Elspeth Probyn (1995) calls the “event”—or what Carolyn Steedman (1992) calls the “form”—of childhood, the claims to one’s rightful or honest inhabitation of gender are understood to gain further legitimacy. These uses of childhood within trans narratives are a version of putting childhood into practice that I want to interrogate further. Writing about the use of childhood in narrative more generally, Steedman argues:

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<sup>11</sup> Trans people’s claims to their gender are constantly repudiated, questioned, criminalized, and ignored (Feinberg 1996; Halberstam 2005; Spade 2011; Stanley and N. Smith 2011), and as such their strategies for legitimation need to be understood as tactics for survival, and critiques of them must be situated carefully. Jay Prosser argues against external criticism, writing: “it is not clear what is at stake in this urge to subvert, the desire to ‘work’ the contradictions of transsexual representation and reveal the putatively latent story of transsexual autobiography before even its blatant story is known” (1998: 132). While I share Prosser’s desire for these autobiographies to be more widely read, I argue that marginality requires a carefully situated relationship of accountability, rather than justifies a distancing from critique. In the two decades since Prosser’s *Second Skins*, trans autobiographies have been more widely published. For just a few examples, see: Andrews (2014); Bond (2011); Bornstein (2012); Boylan (2003); Dolan (2015); Jacques (2015); Maroon (2012); Mock (2014); Valerio (2006).

[C]hildhood [is] a *form*: an imaginative structure that allows the individual to make an exploration of the self and gives the means to relate that understanding to larger social organisations. [...] [I]t [childhood] has shaped a very wide range of writing, and in the late 20th century society is a taken-for-granted means of understanding the human subject, of locating it in time and chronology, and “explaining” it. (1992: 11, emphasis in original)

These questions of event, form, interiority, and self-explanation are central to trans narratives, both because the “self” that they help explain is one that requires defending, and because having a coherent or intelligible gender is so central to understandings of the self. As Prosser—whose book *Second Skins* (1998) arguably prompted what has now become the growing field of trans theory—argues, one of the key political motivations of transsexual autobiographies is the use of this crafting of interiority via narrative in order to take ownership of one’s gendered self: trans autobiographies are the putting into writing of “the transsexual as authorial subject” (Prosser 1998: 9).<sup>12</sup> Transsexual autobiographies, then, are a response to the fact that providing a narrative—telling a particular type of story about gender identity, something that is often required in order to receive hormones, name changes, or any other support for transitioning—is what Prosser calls “the linchpin of the transsexual diagnosis” (1998: 113). In this light, Prosser argues, “It is not simply in the clinician’s office but in the very conception of transsexual subjectivity that autobiography subtends (supports and makes possible) transsexuality” (1998: 115). For Prosser, Probyn, and Steedman, the writing of memory—and particularly childhood memories—is a complicated act, one which raises questions of temporality, history, evidence, and subjectivity. And while Prosser implicitly attends to the narratives of childhood that underwrite practically every transsexual autobiography—and, in my argument, trans narratives more generally—his

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<sup>12</sup> Prosser’s argument about transsexual autobiographies more generally might be a product of his own particular desire for recognition within an “unambivalent status” of maleness (1998: 1).

analysis of childhood is focused more on an interrogation of the writing of “epiphany”, or the mirror-scene, as the structures through which the gendered self is written.<sup>13</sup>

While Prosser writes about narratives that include moments within childhood, in other words, his attention is not drawn to childhood in particular but rather to how childhood is called upon to interact with other narrative devices. Recounting, for example, a moment from Mario Martino’s *Emergence: A Transsexual Autobiography* (1977) where Martino thinks back to a moment in his childhood in which he stood in front of a mirror and transformed his female body with prosthetics to give himself a penis, Prosser argues that it is the device of the mirror and its doubling back of the gaze that “coheres this young girl with the [adult] male subject writing” (1998: 102). “The childhood mirror scene” Prosser writes, “functions simultaneously as autobiographical and as transsexual prolepsis, foretelling and naturalizing this plot of sex change, suggesting that, in the imaginary (the mirror) the penis has been there all along” (1998: 102). While Prosser privileges the mirror as a narrative device, one that he adeptly traces through numerous transsexual autobiographies, I am interested in how childhood, more so than the mirror, is understood to so easily take on the roles of foretelling and naturalizing for gender.<sup>14</sup> For Prosser, then, narrating the childhood mirror scene—from the vantage point of the adult—as evidence of Martino having had fantasies of trans embodiment all along, allows for the production of a linearity, a sexed and gendered

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<sup>13</sup> The narratives which I explore below differ from those Prosser wrote about in two additional ways: first, they relate to trans experiences beyond transsexual ones, and second, they are (for the most part) narratives of trans children, rather than adults. This difference comes about mostly because at the time *Second Skins* was published, the biographies and autobiographies available—including: *Christine Jorgensen* (Jorgensen 1967), *Conundrum* (Morris 1974), *Emergence* (Martino 1977), *Mirror Image* (Hunt 1978), *Second Serve* (R. Richards 1983), *Nine Lives* (Rutherford 1993), and *A Self-Made Man* (Hewitt and Warren 1995)—were all written by and about adults. At that time, there simply was not a prevalence of out and public trans children and young people. Indeed, “Gender Identity Disorder of Childhood” was not introduced until 1980, and the use of puberty blockers—which allow trans children to extend their pre-pubertal embodiment until they are old enough to undergo surgery—has only been approved in the last decade.

<sup>14</sup> In Prosser’s earlier article “No Place Like Home” (1995), he articulates childhood as a narrative device in a similar manner as I am doing here: “The point to be emphasized is that the desire for a different body (a gendered home) has been there all along, as the narrative of discomfiting shame suggests, at least since childhood; the shift is in the literalization of this desire through the body” (1995: 495).

coherence across time, precisely because it mirrors narrative form.<sup>15</sup> For me, however, doing so posits this coherent gendered selfhood as stemming not from narrative structures generally, but from the specific form of childhood *as* narrative.

In this section, then, I extend Prosser's analysis by interrogating the use of childhood in trans narratives (including, but not exclusively from autobiographies) to legitimate claims to a gendered selfhood. Doing so, my concern is about the consequences of naturalizing this identification through the child. In my reading of numerous biographies, autobiographies, interviews, and testimonials, there are three particular roles that childhood plays that I want to think through. The first is the assertion that a claim to trans identity was the very first speech act the child made. The second is the claim that as a child, the trans person's gender identity emerged prior to any awareness of sexuality or sexual difference. And the third is the opposite claim: that the child's precocious awareness of sexual difference and genital anatomy was precisely what justified their transitioning. These three narrative devices, as I illustrate below, all function to naturalize trans gender identity through competing notions of childhood, sex, and gender. In so doing, these narratives produce childhood as a particularly effective technique through which the normative disbelief of trans identity can be interrupted.

In the following excerpt, taken from one of Andrew Solomon's interviews in *Far From the Tree* (2012), the father of Scott, a trans man, thinks back to a moment in Scott's early childhood when he first asserted a desire for masculinity:

Gender irregularities were plentiful in Scott's early life. "As a little girl, Anne-Marie [Scott's assigned name at birth] had this beautiful curly blonde hair," Scott's father, Morris, said. "One morning we got up and Anne-Marie, who was eighteen months old, was in her older brother Ben's room, and Ben, maybe five, had cut off all her hair. Ben got in trouble, but later I wondered if Anne-Marie somehow asked for it." (Solomon 2012: 637)

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<sup>15</sup> As outlined above, one of the key differences between the narratives Prosser works with and those I explore here, is that the childhoods which they are "returning" to are radically differently experienced. The people whose autobiographies Prosser reads have transitioned in adulthood, and thus passing is more reliant on negating (re-writing) a previously-gendered past. It is perhaps because of this that the mirror plays a more central part for Prosser than the nexus of childhood and sex/gender does.

This narration uses Scott's desire for having short hair in early childhood as a sign that his gender identity is not only stable (concordant with his adult gender identity) but also natural. Narrating Scott as "somehow" asking for a haircut is a way of positioning him as desiring maleness and masculinity before being able to articulate, in language, this desire. Placing his desire for masculinity, short hair, and perhaps to also be like his brother, before his capacity for speech is a tactic of locating his desire before cultural influences and even before construction. It is a way of using the framing of childhood as existing prior to (or on the edge of) sociality to validate Scott's claim—or the claim made on Scott's behalf—to gendered selfhood despite the "reality" of the sexed body. Mapped along the understanding that sees the child's ability to speak as one of the markers of the child's emergence into sociality, gendered performativities in early childhood—like Scott's memorable persuading of his brother to cut his hair—take on the signification of pre-cultural naturalization for trans gendered selfhood.

Another way that this placing of trans identity before language is articulated in these narratives is through stating that the child's own first use of language was to correct their repeated misgendering by their parents. Asserting that this correction is the first thing trans kids articulate, the identification with a gender is located before the child could speak.<sup>16</sup> In the following three narratives about trans children, it is this very telos that gets used. The first comes from an *ABC News* profile of Jazz Jennings, a trans girl who, due to her television interview with Barbara Walters in 2007 (when she was 6 years old), is arguably the most well-known trans child in the U.S.<sup>17</sup>

From the moment he could speak, Jazz made it clear he wanted to wear a dress.

At only 15 months, he would unsnap his onesies to make it look like a dress.

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<sup>16</sup> The question of "before" is also asked in relation to what comes before the ego, and whether or not the signifiers of gender are incorporated before gender is understood within language. For an analysis which weaves a reading of Jacques Lacan's mirror stage (1949) with Hortense Spillers' critique of psychoanalysis (1996), and the Clarks' Doll Tests (1947) in order to ask whether or not race signifies prior to language for children's ego development, see: Viego (2007).

<sup>17</sup> Since her interview with Barbara Walters, Jazz Jennings has had a documentary made about her, *I am Jazz: A Family in Transition* (Stocks 2011) for the Oprah Winfrey Network. She has also started her own non-profit organization, Purple Rainbow Tails; been named one of the 25 most influential teens by *TIME* magazine in 2014 (*TIME* 2014); had a children's book made about her (Herthel 2015); and, at age 16, published a memoir titled *Being Jazz, My Life as a (Transgender) Teen* (Jennings 2016).

When his parents praised Jazz as a “good boy,” he would correct them, saying he was a good girl. (Goldberg and Adriano 2007)

The second example, which uses the exact same language, is an excerpt from an online guest article for *Bitch Magazine* written by a mother of a trans girl (anonymized as “M.”), who runs a blog named *Gendermom*: “As a parent of a young transgender child, I encounter [disbelief] on a daily basis. My child is five years old, was born anatomically male, and has identified strongly and unvaryingly as female from the moment she could speak” (Gendermom 2013). Finally, using slightly different language, the third example comes from a *CNN* profile of Ryan Whittington, a deaf trans boy who became famous for the documentary made about his life, *Raising Ryland* (Feeley 2015):

When I asked Hillary [Ryland’s mom] when she knew Ryland was transgender, she said there were a lot of signs. Ryland would scream “I’m a boy” as soon as he started speaking, and showed an aversion to anything feminine, said Hillary. (K. Wallace 2015)

All three of these narratives (and these are just a selection of the many others like them) use the same phrasing—“from the moment [he/she] could speak”—to give credence to these children’s innate and pre-linguistic claim to their gender identity. In so doing, they position childhood as well as gender as existing before linguistic capacity as well as before—precisely by being against—the influences of culture.

The knowledge of one’s own gender identity, in other words, precedes, or is formed simultaneously with, what Judith Butler calls the “founding interpellation” of gender:

Consider the medical interpellation which (the recent emergence of the sonogram notwithstanding) shifts an infant from an “it” to a “she” or a “he,” and in that naming, the girl is “girled”, brought into the domain of language and kinship through the interpellation of gender. But that “girling” of the girl does not end there; on the contrary, that *founding interpellation* is reiterated by various authorities and throughout various intervals of time to reenforce or contest this naturalized effect. (1993b: 7-8, emphasis added)

For Butler, the unpacking of this founding interpellation is important because it allows for the recognition that gendering takes place prior to—or through the same structures as—the sexing of the body, and therefore both are available for radical contestation and possibilities. But the temporality of this being “brought into the domain of language”, even as it requires a “matrix of gender relations [to be] prior to the emergence of the ‘human’” (1993b: 7), can also produce a subjective before-space wherein the child’s *own* founding interpellation of a shift from a “he” to a “she” (or vice versa) re-naturalizes gender identity through the pre-gendered (if not pre-“human”) space of childhood. Co-constituting meaning for one another, both childhood and gender are mutually produced as before and outside of language, culture and discourse in these narratives. The solidification of gendered subjectivity thus moves from the moment of being interpellated by others as inhabiting a particular sexed body at birth (and the repeated reiterations of this interpellation) to naming one’s gender for one’s self—through a trans child’s initial speech act, or, in Scott’s case, through performatively enacting gendered desires and embodiments prior to the ability to speak.<sup>18</sup>

What is fascinating about these claims to children’s natural identification with gender is that they often refer back to a time in which children are also understood to be before sexual maturation. In another interview in *Far From the Tree* where this temporal positioning of the sexed body plays out, Solomon speaks to a trans man named Tony. In Tony’s narration of his childhood, he remembers bursting into tears at 5 years old after his mother scolded him for taking his shirt off to play football with (and like) his brothers:

At five, Anne [Tony’s assigned name] and her twin, Michelle, were playing football with their brothers, Frank and Felix, and Anne took her shirt off. Her mother said, “Girls don’t take their shirts off.” Anne began to cry and said she was a boy. (Solomon 2012:616)

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<sup>18</sup> Luce Irigaray argues that the “first distinction” one makes about another’s gender—including this founding interpellation—is one based on a fantasy of knowledge which disavows ambivalence, or the possibility one might be wrong (Irigaray 1985b: 13-14).



This memory, along with others, is produced as gendered self-knowledge even before sexual or genital knowledge. Tony relates his story in his interview:

Three early behaviors are often taken as indicators of fixed identity: what underwear the child selects; what swimsuits the child prefers; and how the child urinates. “I remember trying to stand up and pee as a little kid,” Tony said. “I never wore girl underwear or bathing suits. I didn’t even know that people had intercourse, but I knew that my gender was male.” (Solomon 2012: 616)

Here, narrating himself as not knowing about sexuality places Tony within a space of childhood that exists before sexual desire and sexual maturation. Interestingly, it is his very location in this space of childhood innocence where sexual difference (along with sexual desire) has not yet taken a hold of the body that reifies his claim to his maleness. Knowing he is a boy and desiring to perform masculine behaviors before he had been introduced to the sex practices of others—or even to his own sexual body—Tony reifies the innateness of gender identity (and, as his tears might attest to, its failings). At the same time, he dislodges the “inherent” connection between sexual anatomy and gender identity or expression. This deployment of childhood as being before sexuality, sexual maturation, or genital embodiment tends to both posit children’s gendered performativities as natural and inherent as well as negate children’s complex gendered experiences: imagining children as being *before* sexual difference requires them to also be before the pains, joys, and relations that having a sexed body engenders. It also demands that the complexities and failings of the binary gendered system be ignored or over-stated. In this light, how might we read Tony’s desire to place himself within naturalized hegemonic masculinity through his narrations of childhood when his bursting into tears might be read as either the act of a childish tantrum (an act which seemingly sees no gendered limitations) or as the (dis)allowed expressions and experiences of femininity, emotionality, or failure inherent within hegemonic masculinity?<sup>19</sup> In other words, the use of childhood innocence to reify gender identity in

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<sup>19</sup> For more on hegemonic masculinity, see: A. D. Christensen and Jensen (2014); Connell (1987, 1995); Connell and Messerschmidt (2005); Kimmel, Hearn, and Connell (2005). For literature on female masculinity, and the blurred gendered boundaries of masculine performativity, see: Cooper (2002); Halberstam (1998); Nguyen (2008); Paechter (2006); Schippers (2007).

this way both establishes a strong claim to gendered selfhood, and troubles the very grounds upon which that gender's coherence is put to use.

Another twist on this narrative that places the child's desire for gender before genital embodiment, and thus reinforces the naturalness of gender identity, occurs through stories in which trans children articulate an imagined developmental telos of genital maturation that unfortunately does not take place. In Cortez's *Sexile* (2004), an explicit and beautifully illustrated graphic biography of Adela, a trans woman who fled Cuba for the United States, one version of this fantasmatic development is articulated. Adela recalls being a child and thinking: "I couldn't wait to grow up because I knew that when I turned 10 my dick would fall off my pussy would grow and finally I'd become a complete girl" (Cortez 2004: 6). This understanding of genital development demonstrates a creative re-imagining of the body that allows trans children to use their partial awareness of puberty and genital becoming to find hope in their body's wished for ability to intervene. As a narrative structure, this imaginative story again uses the culturally imposed ignorance of sexuality in children—an ignorance fabled to be natural—as a naturalizing narrative frame. Here, Adela's gender identity is thus located within a pre-cultural, unadulterated space of self-awareness. As with Tony's story, the use of a narrative device that cannot quite live up to the work it is required to do raises some interesting questions. For it is not that Adela is sexually innocent, as the narrative deployment of childhood might require her to be. Speaking about her own childhood sexuality, Adela recalls:

I was fascinated by farm sex. Cow sex. Chicken Sex. Insect Sex. [...] Oh my god, I was the most horniest little kid. I used to fuck this one banana tree. I carved a little round hole in the trunk and child, I hit it hard! [...] The tree [eventually] got boring and I graduated to humans. I used farm temptations to get sex. [...] Nine years old and I was pimping a goat to get laid! [...] Ha! Ha! Ooh child. (Cortez 2004: 6-7)

In this context, the naturalization of Adela's gender in childhood is not simply produced through her being prior to sexuality, but rather through her having not yet been socialized into a particular type of appropriate (or adult) sexual knowledge. Adela's use of childhood ignorance thus puts her gender identity into a moment of sexual

development when sexuality is understood to be unorganized: a pre-Oedipal messy desire, rather than a distinct orientation. In this hyper-sexual, unorganized and “ignorant” space, Adela’s childhood imagination and her trans identity can be understood as having no relation to a cultural imposition. Again, it is through the narrative distancing of relation, the projecting of messy desire into a childhood past that is no more (or can only be read as childish), that Adela’s gendered relationship to her body and her identity is justified.

And yet, when the body does not intervene in its own trans becoming, sometimes the child does. In an interview with Sarah, the mother of a young trans girl named Danann, for example, she relates a story in which her daughter’s precocious self-awareness led to Danann taking her body into her own hands:

[At the age of four] Danann began insisting she was a girl. [...] One morning we were getting ready to go to church, and Danann said she didn't want to go. I asked why, and he said, “I don’t think God is that great. He made a mistake when he made me,” and pointed to his penis. [...] Just a few weeks later I walked into the kitchen, and Danann had taken scissors and was getting ready to cut off his penis. (Edwards-Stout 2012)

A similar distressing scenario is relayed in a newspaper article for the *Metro* by Kerry, the mother of a girl named Danni:

Kerry McFadyen, from Scotland, has let her child, Daniel, live as Danni, after she realised she was more interested in dolls than footballs. The 32-year-old knew that Danni, who is now six-years-old, should have been her daughter when she caught her with a pair of scissors. Kerry explained how she found Danni in the bathroom with a pair of scissors “above his bits”. She said: “I tried to be calm and asked him what he was doing, and he told me he was about to cut off his willy so he could be a girl.” (Mann 2015)

In these narratives, trans children’s refusing of their sexed bodies—an attempt at chopping off a penis, or creating a narrative of development that understands genitalia as swapping at puberty—troubles the understanding that children are before genital

awareness. Because of this, the use of these narratives raises interesting and critical questions about the assumptions of children's embodied knowledge of sex and gender. And yet, the cultural currency of this assumption of children's genital ignorance means that when trans children articulate an awareness of mistaken genital presence, they are seen as preemptively aware of sexual difference. This "precocious" awareness places them into an ambivalent relationship to gender.

For example, in response to Sarah's narration of Danann's declaration of trans identity at age four, the interviewer (Kergan) and Sarah share this dialog:

[Kergan]: What a profound thing to come out of a 4-year-old's mouth!

[Sarah]: Exactly. Who has that kind of self-awareness at that age? (Edwards-Stout 2012)

Here, it is precisely because Dannan's awareness is cast as precocious that she is deemed as both exceptional to the normative telos of childhood development, and as experiencing a natural gendered and sexed relationship to her body and her selfhood. While this telos works—through its production of the exceptional trans child—to justify and naturalize the trans identities of children, it has repercussions for children of all gender identities. As Claudia Castañeda argues:

For a child to claim a transgender status (or for an adult to claim transgender status for a child) is difficult because the child is always already seen as incomplete, as not yet fully formed; its gender is not fully mature, and the child is also seen as not fully capable of knowing its own gender. (2014: 59)

Castañeda's argument that the child's "gender is not fully mature" is not her own, but is rather made in reference to the claims made by people who seek to invalidate trans kids' desires for self-determination. On one hand, then, the understanding that the child's gendered self is not yet fully formed gets used to delegitimize trans desires, and, on the other hand, when a trans child asserts an awareness of their body—one which appears out of sync, too aware, perhaps—their gender identity is understood to supersede the "given" fact of their body (their sex) and to naturalize their claim to a gender. In this sense, the ambivalent positioning of childhood as prior to and formed by various types

of knowledge of sexual difference allows childhood to both naturalize gender identity and to delegitimize trans desire as childish. In a framework in which trans children are not deemed mature enough to know their gender and are too young to be appropriately aware of their sex, the trans child only needs to state an awareness of the genitalia they have to be understood as having a precocious or asynchronous gendered development. As I have argued throughout this exploration of a few forms of trans narratives of childhood, this ambivalence of childhood both founds and troubles the effectiveness through which childhood coheres trans selfhood. This ambivalence also took place in the narratives about Coy.

Coy's feature article in *Rolling Stone* relays a now familiar (yet still distressing) anecdote of Coy's "precocious" genital awareness that begins with a questioning of Coy's sexuality:

[Kathryn Mathis] told no one of her suspicion about Coy [being gay] – it felt creepily premature to speculate about the sexuality of a kid still in diapers. Then one night in January 2010, Kathryn was tucking him in for bed under his pink quilt, and Coy, then three, seemed upset. "What's wrong?" she asked. Coy, his head resting against his kitty-cat-print pillow, hugged his pink stuffed pony with the glittery mane that he'd gotten for Christmas and said nothing, his mouth bent in a tight frown. "Tell me," Kathryn urged. Coy's chin began to quiver.

"When am I going to get my girl parts?" he asked softly.

"What do you mean?"

"When are we going to go to the doctor to have me fixed?" Coy asked, tears now spilling down his cheeks. "To get my girl parts?" (Erdely 2013)

Like the other narratives I have relayed above, in this account, Coy's gender identity becomes all the more justified, naturalized, and necessary to establish in her daily life, precisely through her awareness of her genitalia (and their mismatch with her gender) at a moment in time when to even speculate about her sexuality is deemed "creepily premature". This narrative of Coy's knowingness as the impetus for her transition uses the device of childhood to cohere a gendered selfhood to her, but it does so by reifying this understanding of childhood (childhood as genital ignorance) through Coy's shocking break of it.

As such, while Coy's troubling of the understanding that defines childhood through a lack of embodied knowledge justifies her rightful occupation of the girls' restrooms and of femininity and femaleness (at least for her parents), its effectiveness in doing so maintains the space of childhood as that which is defined by its ignorance. Coy is thus produced as a girl both through her location within childhood, and through her narrativized break from it, and it is this break that was also used against her by her school district. Indeed, in the school district's logic, it was Coy's assertion that she was a girl—and thus her acknowledgement that her body included incorrect and unwanted genitalia at a time in which children (and particularly girls) are not supposed to have an understanding of their anatomy—that produced the concern around her presence and interpellated her into the realm of male adolescence. For the district, Coy's awareness of her genitalia, and the rupture it caused in relationship to her own location in childhood—and even her own body—was understood as potentially threatening to the other children; the district assumed a contagiousness of this genital awareness which they used as justification to keep her out of the very space that her narrativized “precocious” knowledge sought to naturalize her inclusion within. Coy was thus explicitly excluded from the girl's restrooms because she disrupted the normative timing of the movement from early childhood to adolescence: at 6 years old, her bodily awareness cast aside her actual body, being understood as so asynchronous to childhood itself that the district understood her as already having mature, adult, male genitalia.

Finally, I want to suggest that narrative itself played a central role in this temporal and subjective positioning. As I argued above, trans lives and trans narratives are intimately intertwined. As Prosser writes: “transsexuality is always narrative work, a transformation of the body that requires the remolding of the life into a particular narrative shape” (1998: 4). Therefore, what trans narratives expose, Prosser argues, is a collective desire for coherence and bodily integrity such that “transition does not shift the subject away from the embodiment of sexual difference but more fully into it” (1998: 6).<sup>20</sup> Prosser thus contends that before critiquing trans autobiographies “for conforming to a specific gendered plot,” one that establishes one's self and one's gender

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<sup>20</sup> An important challenge to these narratives and the work they do is Halberstam's critique of their desire for finality. Halberstam argues that “there are problems with his [Prosser's] formulation of a transsexual desire for realness and his sense that gender realness is achievable. After all, what actually constitutes the real for Prosser in relation to the transsexual body?” (2005: 50-51).

as coherent and linear, “we need to grasp the ways in which the genre of autobiography *is* conformist and unilinear” (1998: 115, emphasis in original).<sup>21</sup> Autobiographical narratives, Prosser writes, function precisely by taking the randomness of life events and endowing them with “chronology, succession, progression—even causation” (1998: 116). The work that trans narratives do thus specifically asserts a trans person’s “claim to already (truly) be” the gender they identify with (1998: 119). Because the narratives that Prosser is reading are ones written by adults about their current gender identity—and thus their returns to childhood are a reading back onto childhood of their coherent gendered selves—the linearity of them is retrospective: it builds a coherence that begins in adulthood and reads that self back into the past.<sup>22</sup>

However, in most of the narratives that I have been working with here—and certainly for Coy—the subject at stake is a child, and thus their constructions of coherence, linearity, chronology, and causation put them into an adulthood that has not yet come to be. Relying on narrative structures that implant the child subject “more fully into” sexual difference, and define them as “already (truly) being” an adult future self thus create the conditions under which a transphobic re-reading also functions, precisely because they emerge out of the ambivalent (and fantasmatic) space of childhood. Put simply, for those advocating on Coy’s behalf, this narrative entrenchment in a future sexual difference, and this linear production of a future self that has always been, relied on childhood as narrative to stake the rightful claim that Coy must be recognized as a girl. For those advocating against her, however, those same structures of entrenchment and “already currently being” a particular gendered and sexed self, functioned as the device through which her fantasmatic adult male body could already be read onto her. Because childhood as narrative functions so ambivalently in this context, it needs to be approached carefully in advocating for trans children like Coy. As a means of further

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<sup>21</sup> It is thus important to disentangle the linearity within particular trans narratives from the understanding that children, or childhood, is linear, or that narrative itself is linear. For more on narrative’s “performative dynamic” and intersubjective structure see: Huffer (2013). For the complexity of children’s narratives, see: Treacher (2006).

<sup>22</sup> Carolyn Steedman (1992) critiques autobiography for producing the fantasmatic evidence upon which its structuring nostalgia is assumed to be best suited to uncover. Steedman argues against “the confirmation that biography offers, that life-stories *can* be told, that the inchoate experience of living and feeling can be marshaled into a chronology, and that central and unified subjects reach the conclusion of a life, and come into possession of their own story” (1992: 163, emphasis in original).

unpacking the ways Coy's exclusion worked, I turn next to the production of this fantasy of Coy's body and the discomfort it allegedly would (already) cause as a site through which not narrative structure itself, but rather the logics—the investments in the gender binary and misogyny that founded Coy's exclusion—might be interrupted.<sup>23</sup>

### **The Psychic Brutality of Cisgender Attainment**

As I noted at the opening of this chapter, Coy's school district argued that her future male genitalia would transform the space of the girls' restroom into one of discomfort. "As his male genitals develop along with the rest of his body," Dude declared, "students are likely to *become uncomfortable* with his continued use of the girls' restroom" (Dude 2012, emphasis added). This fantasmatic narrative, one that revels in a perverse desire for its own fulfillment, seems to understand the space of the girls' restroom as currently being comfortable because it is understood to be a place of shared femaleness. The district thus assumes an imaginary of mutual recognition within sex (between girls) that posits similarly sexed bodies as not being sites upon which the ambivalence of gendered recognition and identification are read. In thinking about the fantasmatic production of this assumedly shared comfort and the ways that it worked for the district's exclusion of Coy, I want to re-think the above section's interrogation of the requirement that trans people justify their claims to gendered self-determination. As I argued above, the use of childhood as a narrative form to legitimate trans identity is often necessary because unlike cisgender people, trans people must continuously explain and justify their gender; there is a gendered divide in the allocation of givenness. And yet, against the school district's claim that Coy would introduce an otherwise absent discomfort into the same-sex space of the girls' restroom, and against the notion of this "givenness", cisgender attainment cannot be understood as unexamined, unquestioned, or produced outside of disciplinary power, particularly for girls and femininity. In this section, then, I want to think about the coming together of both of these points—the gendered structures of disciplinary power through which femininity is interrogated, embodied, produced, and internalized; and the uneven allocation of the givenness of gender—as

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<sup>23</sup> Here, and in the rest of this chapter, I am using the frame of "misogyny" rather than "sexism" in order to specifically speak to the embodied, psychic, and affective structures of abjection and cruelty directed at the female body and at femininity.



psychic processes of gendered violence, disavowal, and projection. This pairing leads, I argue, to a transfeminist politics that actively centers a critique of trans-misogyny.

Feminist and psychoanalytic theories have consistently called into question, and attempted to find explanations for, the naturalization of the processes of gendered becoming. For its part, psychoanalysis—which has been castigated by many feminist scholars for its descriptions of women, and for its phallocentrism—does not assume as natural the link between, for example, femininity and women.<sup>24</sup> Rather, it sees the achievement of femininity, and all other versions of gender, as dependent on the internalization of social and familial processes and relationships into the psyche. For Sigmund Freud, in particular, the ability to explain gendered becoming was not just a question that needed to be asked after, it was also most complex in regards to femininity (1933: 416). Rather than taking for granted the idea that femininity is the natural product of having a female body, Freud argues that the development of masculinity and femininity must be explained. In this sense, Freud’s questioning of the development of femininity can be read as aligning with Simone de Beauvoir’s argument that “one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman” (de Beauvoir 1949: 295). For both Freud and de Beauvoir, the process of becoming feminine, or becoming woman, is one formed through a patriarchal society that itself delineates and produces the “fact” of sexual difference. Sexual difference, in this account, is different than anatomical difference, as the latter, Jacqueline Rose argues, comes to figure the former. Within a patriarchal order that requires the sublimation of femininity, anatomical difference, Rose writes, “becomes the sole representative of what [sexual] difference is allowed to be” (1982: 42).

The role that anatomy plays in producing gendered subjects is thus a complicated one—one which differs across various psychoanalytic accounts. In Freud’s outlining of the Oedipus complex, the girl begins her process of achieving “normal femininity” (1933: 424) only after acknowledging real physical anatomy, both her own and the anatomy of others (1933: 423). Comparing their own genitalia to those of their

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<sup>24</sup> There are too many feminist refutations of psychoanalysis, and particularly Sigmund Freud’s version of it, to cite here. For a few of these challenges to Freud, see: de Beauvoir (1949); Benjamin (1995); Chodorow (1978); Horney (1967); Irigaray (1985a, 1985b); Klein (1928). As J. Mitchell writes, however: “To Freud, if psychoanalysis is phallogentric, it is because the human social order that it perceives refracted through the individual human subject is patrocentric” (1982: 23).

parents or their siblings, children, Freud argues, come to map the power dynamics of their parents (and of society) onto their own bodies: the presence or absence of the penis comes to signify for the child either their own masculinity and authority (in boys) or their own inferiority and femininity (in girls). There are, therefore, important reasons to think about the body as the site through which social relations are read, felt, and produced, particularly for the ways they inscribe otherness and inferiority onto the female body.

For Jacques Lacan, however, anatomy is not at all central to this process; rather, the cultural meanings that are inscribed to anatomy are: “[the] facts reveal a relation of the subject to the phallus that is established without regard to the anatomical difference of the sexes” (1958: 282).<sup>25</sup> Lacan thus shifts Freud’s language from the penis to the phallus and thinks along the lines of the symbolic rather than the anatomic.<sup>26</sup> For Lacan, it is not whether one has a penis or not, but whether one represents what it means to “have” or “be” the phallus (1958: 289). “Clinical experience has shown”, Lacan writes, not that “the subject learns [of its location within the structure of desire by] whether or not he has a real phallus, but in the sense that he learns that the mother does not have it” (1958: 289). The notion of the mother not having the phallus (rather than the penis) is a recognition of her structural position and, importantly, the father’s role in this. Describing the difference between Freud’s and Lacan’s understanding of the penis/phallus, Rose writes:

Freud gave the moment when boy and girl child saw that they were different the status of a trauma in which the girl is seen to be lacking (the objects often start here). But something can only be *seen* to be missing according to a pre-existing hierarchy of values (“there is nothing missing in the real”). What counts is not

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<sup>25</sup> Judith Butler argues that the misconception that it is the “literal” penis, rather than the symbolic phallus, is central to the reproduction of heterosexuality: “[T]he belief that it is parts of the body, the ‘literal’ penis, the ‘literal’ vagina, which cause pleasure and desire—is precisely the kind of literalizing phantasy characteristic of the syndrome of melancholic heterosexuality” (1990: 91).

<sup>26</sup> De Beauvoir articulates precisely this point prior to Jacques Lacan, writing: “It is not the lack of the penis that causes this complex, but rather woman’s total situation; if the little girl feels penis envy it is only as the symbol of privileges enjoyed by boys. The place the father holds in the family, the universal predominance of males, her own education” (de Beauvoir 1949: 74).

the perception [of the penis] but its already assigned meaning [the phallus] – the moment therefore belongs in the symbolic. (1982: 42, emphasis in original)

In both frameworks, however, the implications of internalizing one's femininity into the psyche (which stems from a recognition of the meanings attached to female embodiment) means recognizing one's self and one's gender as lacking the symbolic value of the phallus, and acquiescing (or repressing, or refusing) to one's own castrated position.<sup>27</sup> In both descriptions of the process of achieving "normal femininity", that is, the meanings attached to femininity (and female bodies) are understood to be negative traits set up in opposition to, and as inferior to, masculinity.

Along these lines, Elizabeth Grosz argues that "patriarchy requires that female sexual organs be regarded more as the absence or lack of male organs than in any autonomous terms," and as such, "for the others in the child's social world, the child's female body is lacking" (1994: 59). This inscription of misogyny onto the female body, Karin Martin suggests, begins in early childhood and is enacted through norms that discourage girls from learning about (or being taught about) their own bodies:

Girls are culturally denied knowledge about their bodies, particularly their genitals [...] Whereas parents often name boys' genitals—for example, wee-wee, pee-pee, or unit—they are much less likely to give girls specific names for their genitals. Girls' genitals often become generalized to "down there" or "private parts." Rarely do girls have specific names that distinguish between vagina, clitoris, vulva. (1996: 23)

In other words, there are intense disciplinary norms (which are highly policed in early childhood) that construct the female body as having, as Freud would say "inferior" genitalia or as having genitalia defined through "lack".

By calling into question the disciplinary norms that define the female body as such, Gayle Rubin (1975) uses Freud's argument that anatomical distinctions "must

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<sup>27</sup> Importantly, the process of achieving "normal femininity" can (and often does) fail. In Freud's own language: "The discovery that she is castrated is a turning-point in a girl's growth. Three possible lines of development start from it: one leads to sexual inhibition or to neurosis, the second to change of character in the sense of a masculinity complex, the third, finally, to normal femininity" (1933: 424). See also: Rubin (1975).

express [themselves] in psychical consequences” (Freud 1933: 423) to challenge the structures that work to ensure that women align with normative femininity. Rubin argues that what is commonly understood as a normal (and natural) disposition might best be understood as a form of gendered violence:

It is certainly plausible to argue [that] the creation of “femininity” in women in the course of socialization is *an act of psychic brutality*, and that it leaves in women an immense resentment of the suppression to which they were subjected. [...] One can read Freud’s essays on femininity as descriptions of how a group is prepared psychologically, at a tender age, to live with its oppression. (1975: 196, emphasis added)

In arguing that achieving normative gendering is not a fact of biology, but rather a process of integrating the violence of misogyny into the psyche, Rubin asserts that it is not a girl’s potential failure to achieve normative femininity that should be of concern (as it is within at least a normative reading of Freud). Rather, Rubin contends, concern should be placed in the conditions under which the *desired* outcome is produced. Achieving normative femininity, while not any more so of a problematic form of gendered relationality in and of itself than any other, is troubling because it is produced as desired (and as natural) despite only being achieved through an act of psychic brutality. In this sense, the idea that the girls’ restroom is a space of comfort might be understood as a disavowal of the violence of normative gendering, as it seeks to name the communality of that gendered experience as having nothing to do with anxiety or resentment.

Thinking across Freud, Lacan, and the logics behind Coy’s exclusion, these questions of embodiment, psychic violence, and femininity come to a head. In Dude’s justifying of Coy’s exclusion, it was the assumption of the visual recognition of Coy’s “male sex organ” by the other girls in the same-sex space of the restroom that was produced as the precise act by which the girls would recognize their own inferiority and their discomfort would arise. In investing in this act, even as a fantasy, the girls are discursively cast as inherently vulnerable to, and thus passive receptors of, a psychic violence enacted by the presence and recognition of a male body. This is explicit in the fourteen page decision by the court. Steven Chavez, the Director of the Colorado Civil

Rights Division and author of the decision (which sided with Coy), had to argue against the district's contention that if Coy was allowed to use the girls' restroom on the basis of gender identity it would set a harmful precedent:

The Respondent [the school district] also proffers “what-if” scenarios, such as a request coming from “a male high school student with a lower voice, chest hair and with more physically mature sex organs who claims to be transgender and demands to use the girls' restroom after having used the boy's restrooms for several years.” (Chavez 2013: 8-9)

The link between the projection of Coy into an older male body—“as Coy grows older and his male genitals develop along with the rest of his body” (Dude 2012)—and this fantasmatic figure of the older, hairy, and phallic man, is more than simply evidence of the district's creative gendered imaginary. In this narrative, the school district locates the site of gendered violence and vulnerability as taking place in the meeting of opposite sexed bodies; reproducing the Freudian narrative almost directly, the school district lifted Coy out of childhood and into an adult and post-pubescent male body, as if to mimic the Oedipal moment of genital recognition between the little girl and her father. And yet, when we take into consideration the Lacanian turn from penis to phallus, we recognize that Coy only becomes the source of that psychic violence through a transphobic projection and disavowal. In locating Coy's body as being the “literal” penis that produces this discomfort, the district overemphasizes the act of perception, assuming that it—rather than the pre-assigned meanings already assigned to the perceived “organ”—is the source of discomfort. The violence of gendering and the insipid and constructed hierarchy that marks the female body as inadequate is thus projected onto Coy's body in this perverse fantasy of Coy's phallic body.

My aim here in drawing out this projection is to posit it as a node of coalition for transfeminism. The school district's transphobia—their refusal to acknowledge Coy as female and their policing of space and gender based on genitalia—might, I am arguing, best be understood as a disavowing of, and simultaneous investment in, the misogynistic norms that mark femininity and female bodies as inferior and vulnerable. A transfeminist politics, then, might respond to this trans-misogyny by challenging the meanings attached to the achievement of “normal femininity”. Articulating precisely

this political project, Julia Serano argues, “Examining the society-wide disdain for trans women also brings to light an important yet often overlooked aspect of traditional sexism: that it targets people not only for their femaleness, but also for their expressions of femininity” (2007: 5). For Serano, having transfeminism challenge the disdain of femininity centers the pervasive misogyny that she argues undercuts much transphobia:

From the perspective of an occasional gender bender or someone on the female-to-male spectrum, it might seem like binary gender norms are at the core of all anti-trans discrimination. But most of the anti-trans sentiment that I have had to deal with as a transsexual woman is probably better described as misogyny. (2007: 3)

Constructing a transfeminist politics that centers a critique of misogyny thus allows for a few important critiques. It challenges anti-trans discourses mired in an investment in the gender binary’s steadfastness, and in the body as the source of gendered selfhood. It also seeks to counter the misogynistic disciplinary gendered norms and their psychic internalization that target female bodies and femininity. In so doing, this transfeminist critique additionally challenges the assumed split between the subjects of trans and feminism for whom a transfeminist project works. For indeed, one of the implications of my analysis here is that the term “cisgender” (as a binary opposition to transgender) can be inadequate for a detailed and situated analysis of the gendered structures of power which, for example, differentiate and hierarchize “female femininity” from “male masculinity”. Because these gendered positions would be elided under the frame of cisgender in the guise of constructing a transgender critique, the opportunities for coalitional politics across the multiple and overlapping regimes of gendered power—experienced and internalized by those across cis and trans—could be missed.

### **Playing with Laure and Michael**

Not wanting to overemphasize the violence of gendering as the node of solidarity through which a transfeminist politics emerges and is most useful, I turn now to another pairing of trans and feminist children in order to explore a transfeminism that revels in performativity, refusal, and pleasure. To do so, I turn to Laure, the main character in

Sciamma's *Tomboy* (2011).<sup>28</sup> Or, do I do so by turning to Michael? Granted, Laure and Michael are the same person, and, unlike the character of Aviva from the previous chapter, they are cast by the same actor (Zoé Héran). But which one of them—the girl, Laure, that the film opens and closes with, or the boy, Michael, that Laure becomes (has always been?) in the transitory space of Summer, between moving to a new town and beginning a new school year—which one is the proper subject of transfeminism?

*Tomboy* is Sciamma's second full-length feature, after her debut film *Water Lilies* (2007). Receiving numerous awards at international LGBT film festivals, the film, which was shot over twenty days with a small budget, tells the story of Laure, a French 10-year-old girl who moves to a new neighborhood and attempts to make new friends and attract the affection of her neighbor Lisa (Jeanne Disson) by presenting herself as a boy named Michael. All three of Sciamma's feature films—including *Girlhood* (2014), her most recent—tell intimate tales of the bonds of identification and desire between young girls, but *Tomboy* centers around her youngest characters and is most explicitly about the performativity, and ambiguity, of gender in childhood. The film—in which, Darren Waldron argues, the camera “functions like an anonymous child observer who scrutinizes Laure's behavior and its reception” (2013: 65)—is set in a small world where the intimacies of the young characters' desires are mirrored by the natural and picturesque scenes in which they find one another, play, share glances, and bask in the risk and pleasure of opening up to one another.<sup>29</sup> The film portrays this risk and pleasure as central to childhood through the main character's gendered becoming. As a spritely yet coy 10-year-old, Laure's androgynous presentation allows her to explore the possibilities of being known as Michael. Approaching Laure and Michael together, thinking about these two children who exist simultaneously and in opposition throughout the film, allows for, I argue, an exploration of, or at least a momentary

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<sup>28</sup> For other analyses of *Tomboy*, some of which are engaged with directly below, see: Duchinsky (2016); Farley and Kennedy (2015); Vilchez (2015); Waldron (2013).

<sup>29</sup> Analyzing the cinematography of *Tomboy*, Darren Waldron writes: “A predominance of close-ups and medium shots maintains us in proximity to the child characters. Often, we see only their waists, framed from the knees up and chest down, or their legs or torsos. [...] The adults are mainly forced to bend down to enter the shot, and the image-track barely leaves the children. Laure features in almost every shot, centrally positioned as the camera tracks her actions and movements. [...] Even on the rare occasions when the shot focuses on the adults, their conversation is difficult to hear” (2013: 64).

playfulness with, the gendered attachments and refusals that take place through childhood that have troubled this chapter so far.

Turning to Laure, I might read this film as a girl's desire for, and creative embodied production of, a feminist subversion of the male dominated space of childhood. The world that Laure lives in, a French suburb filled with lush forests and fields, is an affluent childhood space that is explicitly regulated along gendered lines. The children of the neighborhood exist within a landscape that allows free roaming movement, play, wrestling, and flirtation; and yet, these activities are deeply gender segregated. Girls stand aside as the boys play; they are the spectators while the boys take up space. All of girls, that is, except for Laure, who joins the boys as a (tom)boy.<sup>30</sup> And yet, is Laure's becoming (tom)boy an entrenchment of this gendered divide, or a subversion of it? Does it require that we recognize Laure as partaking in what Owain Jones describes as a "quasi-male identity" that reinforces "the always problematic admission of female gender within childhood" (1999, 118)?<sup>31</sup> Challenging and reversing this argument, I want to also suggest that Laure uses her body to refuse that very distinction and to trouble the assumptions made within feminist scholarship about the gendered critiques tomboys engage in. Importantly, Laure's ability to trouble gender in this way is dependent on her existing within a particular child body. We watch as she decides this for herself: Laure stands facing the mirror in her bathroom at home. Tentatively feeling her chest under her tank top, she hesitates, and then removes it, standing in front of herself shirtless. Viewing her from behind, with the camera lingering over her shoulder, we see her examining her reflection in the mirror. She takes her time touching her skin, inspecting her arms for signs of musculature. Sighing, she does not speak. Shifting back and forth she presents her profiles, left and right, to herself and to us. Her young chest has not quite yet begun to develop. She might still be able to get away with being shirtless in a group without giving herself away. The boys go shirtless while they play, and she wonders if she might risk joining them. She looks

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<sup>30</sup> As Robbie Duchinsky argues, a feminist reading of *Tomboy* cannot forget that while Laure's becoming Michael allows for her own transgression of gender boundaries, Lisa, the girl Laure flirts with, is not granted such freedom: "Lisa facilitates Michael's movement to insider status, but is not able to follow" (Duchinsky 2016). However, this reading assumes that transgression only happens across sexed lines.

<sup>31</sup> The "tomboy" has been interrogated by many in feminist theory. See: Halberstam (1998, 2004); O. Jones (1999); Morgan (1998); Paechter (2010); Reay (2001); Thorne (1993).



at herself, folds her arms, sighs again, and then spits. Smiling as her saliva hits the sink, she finds pleasure in her ability to persuade herself.

In the film, it is Laure's pre-developed chest that allows her to remove her top, not just in the private space of her bathroom, but also in the public landscape of the football field and the open air of the lake. It is Laure's current yet temporary embodiment of the pre-sexed "androgyny" of childhood that gives her body access, and yet she still stands there in a girl's body. Her naked flat chest is (mis)read by others as a boy's but it is still hers. In this instance, Laure does not embody quasi-male childhood, nor does she simply imply, as Waldron argues, that the "outward signs of masculinity [swaggering, spitting, playing football, and fighting] have no innate grounding in boys" (2013: 67). Rather, Laure flaunts a body that is (mis)recognized by the other children as a male child's, thus shifting the site of the embodied sign of sexual difference from her genitalia to her chest. If her flat chest is what allows her to access male childhood spaces, might we need to rearticulate the relationship of gendered bodies and the meanings they carry in the moment of childhood (mis)recognition and say that maleness, rather than be understood as the genital presence by which female embodiment is produced as an absence, is actually a childish embodied lack of female definition? Temporarily embodying maleness as childhood femaleness, Laure (re)presents maleness back onto itself as a childish lack that she, as a girl, has the ability to move in and out of. Holding onto the moments left before her body might betray this movement, before school begins, her body starts to change, and the seasons with it, Laure strategically uses (and reverses) the contradictory frameworks of childhood and sex to negotiate her own feminist self-determination for them.

Laure's gendered representation has important connotations not just for her, but also for the other girls in her social space. At the very end of the film, after her she has been forced by her mother to come out as a girl to Lisa, the two girls stand together next to a tree, and Lisa asks Laure to tell her the truth about her name.<sup>32</sup> Cautiously, as the camera moves in for a close up shot of Laure's face, keeping Lisa out of frame, Laure tells Lisa that her name is Laure, and, after a short inhalation of breath, and a couple

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<sup>32</sup> The question of the "reveal" of Laure's sex has already been central to the film, as the other children in her social group force Lisa to check her anatomy. And yet, as Waldron writes: "Although Lisa's look conveys her sense of betrayal, their exchange also implies the continuation of their affective connection. Lisa maintains her gaze at the level of Laure's eyes" (2013: 71).

nervous glances, Laure catches Lisa's eye. Something in Lisa's off-camera glance resonates with her, and her caution turns to a smile, and then a smirk. This smirk, I argue, might be read as a playful recognition between Laure and Lisa that "Michael" was not just an identity Laure exploited to get to Lisa (or to leave Lisa on the sidelines), but rather was a cunning refusal of the values and assumptions that stick to their female bodies. This mutual recognition thus functions as a generous re-reading of the pleasure they both had (for indeed they did both find pleasure) in what they can now remember as the summer they created the possibility for intimacy amidst the space opened up by the boys' inability to read gender as anything other than anatomical difference.<sup>33</sup> What emphasizing this shared recognition between Laure and Lisa makes clear, in other words, is that analyses that castigate tomboys (and tomboyhood) for sitting too closely with heteronormativity and normative gender roles cannot quite hold when the tomboy is understood not as simply an individual, nor even just a girl among boys, but is rather a girl formed through her intimate and political relationships with other girls.<sup>34</sup> Indeed, Laure flirts with, plays with, and confides in Lisa; and she bonds with, resists, and teaches her younger sister Jeanne (Malonn Lévana). These connections—Laure's, Lisa's, and Jeanne's—are important. As I argued in Chapter Three, one of the insights that Freud's theory of the super-ego offers our reading of a dangerous cathected object like childhood is the recognition that the promises it affords and the politics it engenders must be situated within its inherent relationality. By focusing on Laure's expansive relations, by insisting that the multiple ways of inhabiting and resisting girlhood must be

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<sup>33</sup> In arguing that the boys fail to read gender as anything other than anatomical difference, I challenge the notion that tomboy performance, as Duchinsky defines it, "not only does not critique gender norms directly, but in fact is dependent upon them" (Duchinsky 2016). This straightforward reading of gender roles leaves no space for the ambivalence of gendered performativities and identifications, and it assumes that in order for gendered subversion or critique to take place, the critique itself must be registered by the boys. Against this, I argue Laure and Lisa's mutual smirk signifies a clear pleasure inherent to their own shared critique, and that this in itself is an important moment for feminist analysis.

<sup>34</sup> Most analyses of tomboys situate their social group as otherwise solely male, an arguable overstatement of their separation from other girls, and thus these analyses miss the complex negotiations of gender transgression and play experienced between girls of varying gendered performativities and identities. Shawn McGuffey and Lindsay Rich, however, argue that girls create "group solidarity in resistance to boys' [assumed and overstated] dominance" (1999: 622). For further analyses of girls' group identities, solidarities, and play practices, see: Maccoby and Jacklin (1987); Thorne (1993).

read within and through these intimate connections, a more generous reading of Laure's political project emerges. All three of these girls, then, share risk and pleasure in Laure's gendered play, and the shared smirk between Laure and Lisa reminds us of the feminist potentials that childhood makes possible.

Does this reading erase Michael? Does reading for the ways in which Laure troubles embodiments of and discourses around maleness and femaleness in childhood, in other words, supplant a trans reading? Mirroring the narratives of trans childhood that I have worked through within this chapter, Michael presents his future self with memories of childhood that might sediment his future (and current) gender identity: Silently, Michael carefully, though not precisely, cuts in half his old one-piece swimsuit. Trying on the makeshift briefs, he stands in front of his reflection and realizes that something is missing. Biting his nail, he stands unconvinced as he brushes his dangling arm against his slightly protruding hip. In the other room his sister is assembling a puzzle that she cannot seem to get right: the pieces, despite her forceful pounding, do not seem to fit. Michael joins her, bringing out a box of toys and a few small tubs of modeling clay. Rolling the clay between his hands, he slowly crafts and sizes up his forest green prosthesis. Satisfied with its weight and shape, he returns to his room, stands in front of the mirror, and drops the clay into his swimsuit. The clay, he decides, makes a perfect bulge. Turning, again, side to side, he smiles. The scene cuts, and we next see Michael swimming in the lake with the other laughing children.

Throughout the film, Michael presents himself with himself in a number of mirror scenes like this, and he molds (and models) his own prosthetic clay penis to develop a bodily schema of a boyhood that will be and currently is. Placing his penis in his homemade swimming briefs, he might be read as allowing for a future narrative that would place his adult post-op penis, as Prosser would argue, as having "been there all along" (1998: 102). The film itself, too, might be read as similarly using childhood to produce and naturalize Michael's trans identity. The tropes of summer, new beginnings, and play, all function within the film as metaphors for transition and for childhood itself. Indeed, the film revels in transitional spaces and moments. It opens with Michael perched upon his father's lap in a car, as they engage in the particular intergenerational masculine father-son-pedagogical bonding act of teaching one's son to drive. The space of childhood as naturalized transience becomes a scene upon which Michael's transition is experienced. No longer Laure, and not having been her even from the opening shot,

Michael may never have been her in the first place. His negotiation of his male embodiment presents not a subversion of the regulation of femininity, but rather a desire for masculine gendered coherence that can only be (at least somewhat) safely expressed within the time-space of childhood. Indeed, it is precisely the androgyny of this space that allows Michael to be himself without being questioned by his family too much. Knowing that they will accept (at least for a while) his androgynous masculine gender presentation because it might be read as childish play, Michael is deeply invested in the mutual coherences of gender and childhood that I have been troubling throughout this chapter.

There is more that could be said about the various moments of gendered regulation and sexual difference within the film, but I want to conclude by way of taking up an ambivalent position between Laure and Michael. Both of these children present us with various readings of the ways in which particular gendered forms of intelligibility are given meaning and resonance through the child. Indeed, this openness in terms of reading and audience identification was one of Sciamma's aims for the film itself:

I wanted to keep all the hypotheses open when I was building the character. Not to avoid answers, but to make it more complex and accurate. That's what interested me in setting that story in childhood. It's a time where everybody pretends to be someone else for an afternoon, everyone makes up stories about themselves. I made it with several layers, so that a transsexual person can say "that was my childhood" and so that an heterosexual woman can also say it. The movie creates bond[s]. That's something I'm proud of. (Bendix 2011)

In Sciamma's opening up of the audience's identification with Laure/Michael, it is childhood itself, as a narrative form and trope of return—"that was my childhood"—that allows for this multiple reading.

Perhaps, then, instead of taking Laure/Michael up as confined subjects and separate political projects staking oppositional claims to ownership of this film, we might consider them as positions. Here, borrowing from Sedgwick's reading of Klein (1935; 1940; 1946), describing the politics that stick to Laure or Michael as positions conveys a critical practice that sits with "changing and heterogeneous relational stances"

(Sedgwick 2003b: 128).<sup>35</sup> As Hinshelwood writes of Klein's own use of "position", the term position "describes the characteristic posture that the ego takes up with respect to its objects [...] a much more flexible to-and-fro process between one and the other" (1991: 394).<sup>36</sup> Theorizing Laure and Michael as positions, and particularly as objects to be read from within the reparative position (as discussed in the previous chapter), is a way of embracing an "oscillatory" reading (as Sedgwick describes it), one in which the politics sticking to either Laure or Michael need not be wholly separated. The depressive position, Sedgwick writes, "is an anxiety mitigating achievement [...] from which it is possible in turn to [...] assemble or 'repair' [or re-pair] the [...] part-objects into something like a whole" (2003b: 128). As positions, Laure and Michael variously present simultaneous readings of the same situation which offer not competing versions of what the scene might definitively mean, but rather various interpretations of how the scene is multiply experienced. As I have worked to demonstrate throughout this chapter, yet have continuously struggled with and against, gender and childhood confer and disentangle one another. Yet even in this phrasing "gender and childhood" the two are separated by an "and" that splits yet states their coproduction.<sup>37</sup> Laure and Michael,

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<sup>35</sup> In "A Contribution to the Psychogenesis of Manic-Depressive States" (1935), Melanie Klein first outlines the depressive and paranoid positions. One of Klein's main contentions is that the super-ego is formed not through the Oedipus complex, but rather through the child's first attachment to the mother and her breast (first as part-objects—good breast/bad breast—then as whole objects). This attachment, however, is structured by paranoid and defensive (depressive) positions. In early stages of ego development, Klein writes, the "preservation of the good object is regarded as synonymous with the survival of the ego" (1935: 118), and thus the ego relation is one of paranoid anxiety, for fear of the object's destruction. After time, however, the ego "becomes more fully identified with the object" (1935: 119) and changes the subject's relationship to objects: "the dread lest the *good* object should be expelled along with the *bad* causes the mechanisms of expulsion and projection [the paranoid relation] to lose value. [...] At this stage, the ego makes a greater use of introjection of the *good* object as a mechanism of defense. This is associated with another important mechanism: that of making reparation to the object" (1935: 119-120, emphasis in original).

<sup>36</sup> Juliet Mitchell describes Klein's understanding of "position" as "an always available state, not something one passes through" (J. Mitchell 1986: 116). For Klein's articulation, see: (1935: 235 n12, 1946: 191).

<sup>37</sup> Writing about Sedgwick's title for her essay on the reparative, "Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading, or, You're So Paranoid, You Probably Think This Essay Is About You" (Sedgwick 2003b), Lee Edelman argues that her use of "and" and "or" redoubles "the binary logic of the title itself—or rather, of the ambiguity as to whether it binarizes or unifies" (Berlant and Edelman 2014: 44).

gender and childhood, trans and feminist, the act of pairing requires a splitting that is both present and refused at every turn. Reading with Laure and Michael, attending to their positioning, and taking them up from within a reparative position, requires embracing this ambiguity and tension as we advocate for ways of living that make both of their lives possible.

### **Conclusion: Telling Different Stories**

If, as Prosser argues, the linearity of trans body narratives (and their production of an “unambivalent status” within gender and sex) is a product of narrative structure, and if, as I’ve argued, this lack of ambivalence produces a version of childhood that has its own complexities and politically ambivalent investments, then perhaps our responses should be telling different stories, or telling stories differently.<sup>38</sup> In thinking about this question of how to tell different stories, I conclude this chapter by engaging with two narratives, from Dean Spade and Janet Mock, two trans people who approach the question of gendered validity, selfhood, and childhood in radically different terms than Prosser and than many of the narratives that I have worked with thus far.

In Spade’s chapter for the first *Transgender Studies Reader* (2006), he weaves in an analysis of the diagnostic criteria and legal barriers that trans people face when desiring to transition with a reflexive narrative of his own complicated process of identity-formation. Speaking against the trans (and gay) childhood narrative and its role in the diagnostic event, Spade writes:

“When did you first know you were different?” the counselor at the L.A. Free Clinic asked. “Well,” I said, “I knew I was poor and on welfare, and that was different from lots of kids at school, and I had a single mom, which was really uncommon there, and we weren’t Christian, which is terribly noticeable in the South. Then later I knew I was a foster child, and in high school, I knew I was a feminist and that caused me all kinds of trouble, so I guess I always knew I was different.” His facial expression tells me this isn’t what he wanted to hear, but

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<sup>38</sup> Doing so requires creating a different economy of knowledge production. It means creating the space for different stories to be told, and to be published. As Kate Bornstein writes: “Up until the last few years, all we’d be able to write *and get published* were our autobiographies, tales of women trapped in the bodies of men or men pining away in the bodies of women” (1994: 12, emphasis in original).

why should I engage this idea that my gender performance has been my most important difference in my life? It hasn't, and I can't separate it from the class, race, and parentage variables through which it was mediated. (2006: 319)

Working to build an intersectional analysis, one that cannot separate poverty, transience, and structural inequality from gender, Spade raises concern about the demand placed on him to locate his childhood difference in a particular way. Recognizing the use of childhood as an especially effective response to this demand, yet arguing that its deployment is problematically “strategic”, Spade describes his intentionally oppositional responses:

I've worked hard to not engage the gay childhood narrative—I never talk about tomboyish behavior as an antecedent to my lesbian identity, I don't tell stories about cross-dressing or crushes on girls, and I intentionally fuck with the assumption of it by telling people how I used to be straight and have sex with boys [...] I see these narratives as strategic, and [...] I don't want to participate. (2006: 319-320)

Absolutely refusing to engage in the deployment of childhood that I have been tracing across this chapter, Spade positions himself wholly against the “transsexual childhood” narrative. Creating a trans politics of opposition similar to those of Gilroy and Edelman, which I discussed in Chapter Three, Spade's negativity towards the transsexual childhood narrative is both understandable—particularly in relation to the demand against which it emerges—but it also forecloses the possibility that childhood might operate differently, or that this deployment itself might not actually sit well with his own memories of his childhood. Recognizing this, and stepping back slightly from his own negativity, Spade makes an important reflection on his own decree:

So now, faced with these questions, how do I decide whether to look back on my life through the tranny childhood lens, tell the stories about being a boy for Halloween, not playing with dolls? What is the cost of participation in this selective recitation? What is the cost of not participating? (2006: 320)

It is precisely these questions that this chapter has been asking, and, as Spade makes clear, the answering of them will only be done tentatively, and through a complex negotiation of childhood, gender, and power.

In Mock's autobiography, *Redefining Realness* (2014), she also speaks back to the demand that she locate her womanhood as stemming from her childhood, but she does so in a way that allows for the ambivalence of this strategy to be central to how she tells it. Describing this demand, Mock initially acknowledges her own use of childhood as a legitimating site through which she sought validation for her gender identity:

When I look back at my childhood, I often say I *always knew I was a girl* since the age of three or four, a time when I began cataloging memories. No one—not my mother, my grandmother, my father, or my siblings—gave me a reason to believe I was anything other than my parents' firstborn son, my father's namesake. But it was my very first conviction, the first thing I grew certain of as a young person. (2014: 16, emphasis added)

Situating her desire for womanhood as originating within childhood—indeed as being her very first conviction—Mock understands the power of using her childhood as a legitimating site. Describing herself as always having known that she was a girl, Mock's narrative mirrors those of the other trans people whom I began this chapter with. And yet, this narrative does not sit comfortably with Mock, for fear of the work that it does to legitimate particular forms of gendered subjectivity:

When I say *I always knew I was a girl* with such certainty, I erase all the nuances, the work, the process of self-discovery. I've adapted to saying *I always knew I was a girl* as a defense against the louder world, which has told me—ever since I left Mom's body in that pink hospital atop a hip in Honolulu—that my girlhood was imaginary, something made up that needed to be fixed. I wielded this ever-knowing, all-encompassing certainty to protect my identity. I've since sacrificed it in an effort to stand firmly in the murkiness of my shifting self-truths. (2014: 16, emphasis added)



Advocating for a trans narrative that settles in the murkiness of ambiguous and ambivalent selfhood, Mock troubles the use of her own childhood as a narrative device to legitimate a coherent adult selfhood. Importantly, however, for Mock, this troubling is situated within a recognition of her own implication in, and desire for, the re-telling of the narratives that she is wary of. As with the ambiguous positions of Laure and Michael, Mock's situating of her troubling of the child in trans narratives acknowledges the promises *and* limitations of both narrations: she raises them as positions she hopes, through their re-telling, to re-pair. Like the many trans people whose narratives and critiques I've worked with across this chapter, Mock presents herself with herself, but this self is not straight forward or easily settled even as it continues to rightfully establish her as a woman. It is precisely this cautious yet determined deployment of childhood—that dangerous, yet pleasurable fantasy; that object, state of being, narrative form, and memory; that formational yet partial antecedent for the gendered selves we might become and the politics that bind us—that this chapter has been unpacking and advocating for.

## Conclusion:

### Somewhere Between Reparative Reading and Loss

“I am Amber Cole’s father. I am angry, confused and completely at a loss” (Izrael 2011). So begins Jimi Izrael’s crushing and melancholic open letter. In it, Izrael, a writer, journalist, and academic, tells his readers that he found himself at a loss because his daughter—who is not, I should note, his biological daughter—had a devastating week of public scrutiny. Cole, a 14-year-old black girl from Alabama, had become infamous overnight when a video of her was posted online without her consent. The video, which she did not even know was being made, showed her performing oral sex on her ex-boyfriend, as he stood behind a brick building at their high school. The video, which is technically child pornography, garnered millions of views after it was posted, and it was shared across numerous websites and social media pages. As the story goes, Cole’s ex, who had recently broken up with her, told her that the only way he would get back together with her was if she performed oral sex on him first. Perhaps feeling desired, pressured, and out of options, Cole obliged. That day, the video was posted to YouTube, and it proliferated from there. In response to the viral sharing of the footage, Cole was subjected to bullying, mockery, and derision. Those who bullied her, called her a slut, and shamed her, refused to see how their taunts were part of the same sexist logic that positioned her as a sexual object in the first place. She only received faint support from a select few.<sup>1</sup> A movement was not made on her behalf, and the silence of voices coming to her defense was deafening. Indeed, even those who stood up for her—most famously Jordann Marie, another young black girl who made a YouTube video titled “Leave Amber Cole Alone” (2011)—were mocked, parodied, and laughed at. It was in the aftermath of these events that Izrael found himself angry, confused, and completely at a loss. His letter, however, struggles with itself to articulate solidarity

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<sup>1</sup> Most of the writing I have found in support of Amber Cole was published in response to Jimi Izrael’s letter. Perhaps this is because his letter was re-blogged on *Jezebel.com*, a widely-read mainstream post-feminist blog site. For two of these responses, see: Lynn (2011); Neal (2011).

with Cole. In voicing his frustration, Izrael slips into problematic narratives of blame mired in the pathology of matriarchal black families, the sexualization of girls and black girls in particular, the deviance of young black masculinity, and the psychic brutality (or false-consciousness) of hetero-femininity. Izrael writes:

I am trying to convince her that the world will still love her if she keeps her clothes on. I do not know if she can hear me, or if she is listening. She would listen to her mother, if her mother was not busy. Doing something, anything that is not parenting. I want her mother to spend less time being “empowered” and more time being aware and engaged with our daughter. I want her mother to be a better role model [...] I want to know who has been teaching my little girl how to act like a woman while I have been trying to teach her to be a young lady.  
(Izrael 2011)

Attempting to come to Cole’s defense, but at a loss for alternative narratives of accountability and explanation, Izrael’s letter collapses into itself. “I am Amber Cole’s father,” Izrael writes again, “and I am not raising a slut” (Izrael 2011).

Izrael’s letter, which I will not reproduce further here, has haunted the writing and researching of this thesis. Many times throughout the writing process, I have sat with this letter and grappled with its contradictory discourses and the painful conditions of its emergence, only to find myself, like Izrael, at a loss. When I was initially planning to respond to it in the earlier stages of my research, I felt compelled to focus primarily on the ways in which the circulation of this video, the lampooning of Cole, and the dearth of support for her was only possible because, as a young, sexual, black girl, she was already understood as outside of a particular framing of childhood. Indeed, her positioning outside of childhood might itself explain how this clip became, as Izrael describes it, “the most widely seen piece of child pornography in history” (Izrael 2011). Not seen as a child, the distribution of Cole’s video was understood more as insidious *schadenfreude* than a felony. As I have argued across this thesis, childhood has particular confines that map onto specific bodies, experiences, desires, and populations, yet struggles to include marginalized others. This is still a reading of this letter and of Cole’s harassment that I think is important. It is one that I hope this thesis has convincingly argued is integral to how childhood must be analyzed as operating within

this moment. However, having spent the last four years coming to terms with the ways in which childhood is also resisted, multiply invested in, and deeply ambivalent in its deployment, this reading of this moment seems to no longer be adequate. This is not to say that I now see political value in the public derision of Cole or in the sharing of the video. I do not. Rather, it is to say that at the end of this research process, my focus in the letter has moved from the deployment of childhood within it, to an ongoing question about what it means to be at a loss.

This thesis has been structured through an exploration of three difficult instances in which childhood was unevenly deployed, and was put into practice along lines of race, sexuality, and gender in the contemporary United States. In these moments, childhood, as I have argued, functioned as something that was deeply desired. Something that was wanted precisely because it felt like childhood itself could take on so much of what was missing or hoped for in a particular context. In fact, throughout this thesis, I have argued that childhood is one of the most salient sites through which our hopes—particularly those animated within (and animating of) transfeminist, queer, and anti-racist social justice movements—are cathected. Childhood, I have argued, engendered a diverse range of support for a black child whose death might otherwise have been overlooked by many; it functioned as a site of potentiation from which a politics of queerness could be newly articulated; and it provided the space for two seemingly incompatible gendered selves to coexist. Childhood, that is, functions as a place where a great range of political desires can and do take up residence. It is because of this, however, that when childhood falls apart, when our hopes are dashed or we realize that our idea of childhood cannot possibly do the work we need it to do, we, like Izrael, find ourselves at a loss.

In many ways, then, this thesis has also been about loss: the loss of a child; the loss of access to a public space; losing one's privileged hold on a fantasy of national belonging; finding oneself lost to a memory; and losing out on the promise that childhood cruelly provided (Berlant 2011b). In thinking through these losses, this thesis has articulated childhood as an attachment, as something made whole and productive through the wishes invested within it. Childhood, I have argued, is something central to political desire. It is one of the main structures through which we compensate for, and experience, these losses. In making this argument, this thesis has attempted to grapple with the many contradictory, productive, and dangerous investments in childhood—both

my own and those of others. One of my main structuring arguments has been precisely about this claim. Childhood, I have reiterated, is not a time of life, nor stage of becoming; rather, it is an object that gets put into practice when the crushing weight of the world seems too much, when the force of opposition feels strong enough that one can only resort to investing in an object that has proven time and again to be up for the task. We invest in this object, I have shown, even when (and sometimes precisely because) it is so dangerous to do so, when doing so brings with it the history of exclusion and intensification that has been central to childhood since its inception.

Within each main chapter, when the investments within childhood were perhaps most difficult to hold in tandem, when childhood was deployed both for and against the children whose lives this thesis has centrally advocated for, I have worked to hold together these tensions by thinking with Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's notion of the reparative (2003b). Reparative reading has been a frame, within each of my chapters, that I have found necessary in order to carry on and to advocate for these children's lives in all their complexities. Now, however, like Amber Cole's "father", I am left wanting for alternatives. In this conclusion, which is an all too brief musing on what it means to be confounded by childhood, I argue that one of the places where this thesis' overarching argument gestures towards—one of the sites in which I hope to situate my final analysis of childhood—is precisely somewhere between reparative reading and loss.

As I have already outlined in Chapter Five and Six, Sedgwick's notion of the reparative is a mode of reading she develops, inspired by Melanie Klein's paranoid and depressive positions (Klein 1935; 1940; 1946), that seeks a less defensive relation to texts, criticism, and knowledge production. Against paranoid reading, which she describes as anticipatory, mimetic, comprised of negative affects, and devoted to exposure, Sedgwick writes:

to read from a reparative position is to surrender the knowing, anxious paranoid determination that no horror, however apparently unthinkable, shall ever come to the reader *as new*; to a reparatively positioned reader, it can seem realistic and necessary to experience surprise. Because there can be terrible surprises, however, there can also be good ones. Hope, often a fracturing, even a traumatic thing to experience, is among the energies by which the reparatively positioned

reader tries to organize the fragments and part-objects she encounters or creates.  
(2003b: 146, emphasis in original)

Reading reparatively, reading with hope, Sedgwick argues, allows for new relations to emerge out of situations that often feel split, irreconcilable, and dangerous. This framework has been central to the analyses I have articulated in the three main chapters of this thesis. In Chapter Four, I wrote about the #IfTheyGunnedMeDown campaign's pairing of "oppositional" images and narratives of youthful blackness, wherein the suture of these images functioned as a reparative move—an intentional pairing of "split" images and narratives—which allowed black childhood to live on in hopeful new ways. In Chapter Five, I evoked Sedgwick's reparative not in relation to a split object, but rather in relation to my own deeply paranoid reading of a field with which I was critically engaged and inspired by. There, my use of the reparative was an attempt to ease off of my own negative exposure project, and to find alternative new ways of articulating childhood queerness in conversation with these other approaches. Finally, in Chapter Six, I approached the reparative through Klein's language of positions, arguing that a transfeminist project might be most useful for children struggling with gender when it situates itself within the always-partial shifting and negotiating process that is inherent to the oscillatory depressive position. Across this thesis, then, I have used the framework of reparative reading to animate a hopeful and strategic reading of childhood such that its deployment within anti-racist, queer, and transfeminist projects might be more fully situated in childhood's necessary surprises and hopeful potentials.

At the same time, the reparative has clearly not been my only mode of analysis. In Chapter Two, I undertook an anticipatory exposure project, outlining the emergence of childhood within childhood studies, and arguing that the ways in which the field narrates and positions itself often sustains the problematic investments placed within the child. In Chapter Three, while I eventually came around to a more hopeful praxis, I began with a reading of two compelling articulations of opposition by Paul Gilroy (2000) and Lee Edelman (2004). My privileging of their politics of negativity emerged out of my own politicized analysis of childhood that situated it within a violent history. This history, as I argued in Chapter One, could be best understood by a framing that recognized childhood as a technology of power, a means by which individuals and populations have historically been, and continue to be, marked as valuable or

disposable. To conclude this thesis, I want to briefly situate this reading of childhood within what David Eng and David Kazanjian call the “modern and postmodern epoch of loss”, an epoch “characterized by the fragmentation of grand narratives as well as by war, genocide, and neocolonialism” (2003: 5). While the contexts of violence and fragmentation I situated this thesis’ analyses within were perhaps less “grand” than those Eng and Kazanjian diagnose, it is this attention to the ways in which violence, antagonism, and loss are constitutive of the contemporary life of childhood, and its historical emergence, that engendered my turn to negativity. I move to Eng and Kazanjian because their analysis of what to do in the face of loss allows me to rearticulate not just my own politics of opposition, but also the space between loss and the reparative.

The analysis Eng and Kazanjian have of loss is somewhat reminiscent of Sedgwick’s reparative reading (which is perhaps unsurprising, as all three work heavily with psychoanalysis, and Klein in particular). Along these lines, rather than arguing that loss is a “pathologically bereft and politically reactive” state, Eng and Kazanjian seek out what they call a “counterintuitive apprehension of loss” that is “full of volatile potentiality and future militancies” (2003: 5). In this call for a turbulent and militant future, Eng and Kazanjian situate their analysis of loss within an insistence that “ruptures of experience, witnessing, history, and truth are, indeed, a starting point for political activism and transformation” (2003: 10). The difference between Eng’s and Kazanjian’s analysis, and Sedgwick’s, then, is the affective and political form that their reparative relation to violence takes on. For Sedgwick, a reparative reader might sit with, and find solace (and new critical analytical approaches) within a hope that looks and feels a lot like love. For Eng and Kazanjian, a creative reader of loss will necessarily end up in a revolutionary praxis that begins with a broken world, and demands a new one. It is precisely between these two approaches, in the space between a hopeful repairing of childhood’s constitutive ambivalences and an ongoing demand that in the wake of its violent histories we forge a new radical future for it, that I want to settle my final reading of childhood.

For Cole, the girl whom Izrael struggled to support, the forging of this space would be rather complex, but certainly necessary. For her, reading childhood reparatively might mean a few things. It might mean demanding that the racial, gendered, and sexual frames through which her location in childhood was split and

severed—the frames through which she became, as Klein might articulate it, a bad object—be recognized as inadequate for how we analyze childhood. For in order for her to be the “bad” object, she must also be the good one. The work of splitting that these frames “do” to childhood, Sedgwick’s and Klein’s work reminds us, is actually our own doing: unable to recognize that the “good” object and the “bad” object are the same—for fear that we lose what the good object offers us, for fear that we recognize its fallibility—we institute the splitting ourselves. In other words, a reparative reading of Cole would recognize that her mistreatment, harassment, and lack of support was constitutive of our own racial, sexual and gendered splitting of childhood, a splitting we insisted upon to produce a good version of childhood, and to protect ourselves from losing out on its cruel promise. As I have argued throughout this thesis, a reparative reading of this split would require that we not only demand that Cole be read within childhood, but also that the terms through which we comprehend childhood’s contours—terms we are deeply and problematically invested in—be re-examined. It would mean that we find hope in the repairing of this split, for us and for Cole.

On the other hand, reading Cole from a place of militant loss might engender another analysis. In this light, a militant reading of the violence of the encounter—a critique of the malicious exploitation of her vulnerable position (not to mention the glee with which this exploitation was shared), and of the insidious force of childhood’s racial, sexual, and gendered confines to remove her, and others like her, from its protection—would demand not a loving relation with these terms. Rather, it would insist upon a radical refusal of them. Importantly, however, in reading loss critically for Cole, we would not frame our responses to these violences through the pathologizing narratives of blame that came so quickly to Izrael. These pathologizing narratives, Eng and Kazanjian would argue, must be understood as the misdiagnosed symptoms (the effects) of structurally harmful processes and histories. They must not be understood, that is, as the location of blame. Understanding Cole from a place of militant loss, Eng and Kazanjian might additionally argue, would differently position us in relation to Cole’s childhood as well. Here, we might ask what it would mean to position ourselves as witnesses to this exploitation, whether we viewed the footage or not. As witnesses, I would suggest, our role in response to this encounter requires us to act; it must become, as Eng and Kazanjian write, “a starting point for political activism and transformation” (2003: 10). This mode of responding to Cole requires very different work than



Sedgwick's reparative approach. Rather than seeking to resolve childhood's inadequacies and ambivalences within its own confines and within our relationship to its splitting, this mode of analysis requires a future-oriented militancy that looks beyond the frames through which the "loss" of Cole's childhood functioned as a cover for the justification of misplaced blame.

I conclude with this exploration of how to read Cole because I want to find a space between these two readings. And yet, this space "between" cannot simply be an either/or. As I hope to have shown across this thesis, reading childhood in a particular way is a strategic maneuver, one that risks the violence of essentialism and erasure, and yet is often required in order to begin to account for the children and childhoods at stake in our contemporary moment. This strategic reading, as I outlined in Chapter Three and elaborated across each subsequent chapter, invests in childhood so heavily that it might best be understood as a cathected object. As a cathected object, childhood becomes dangerous, as one of the structuring conditions of an object-cathexis is its production through disavowed ambivalence. This disavowal allows childhood to stand in for a vast array of political projects, but it also limits the capacity of these projects, restricting the terms through which justice—and children—can be advocated for. Fortunately, however, not only can ambivalence do reparative work against this disavowal, but, the reparative itself is also deeply enmeshed with, and productive of, ambivalence. Indeed, as Jackie Stacey (2014) argues, ambivalence is central to the reparative process in ways that require further attention. "What we see in paying closer attention to Klein's text", Stacey writes, "is that the nature of the repair brings with it fresh anxieties that then need to be managed" (2014: 45). Because the reparative emerges out of a psychic process within object relations—translated into a mode of reading inadequately described as "love"—the relationships it engenders with its objects are inherently ambivalent ones. As such, Stacey notes, "whilst reparation restores [...] it nevertheless simultaneously generates anxiety and guilt that cannot be 'fixed' by this process" (2014: 46). Stacey, who argues that a mode of reading more closely aligned with Klein's text would be productively "*grounded in ambivalence*" (2014: 47, emphasis in original), concludes her argument by encouraging the production of conceptual models that sit with ambivalence: "the ambivalence within all object relations is precisely what makes this theory so interesting as a point of departure for critical reading practices [within] queer feminist criticism at this current moment" (2014: 47). Heeding Stacey's call, I end

this thesis by returning to the role of ambivalence in the psychic and political life of childhood.

In my earlier exploration of ambivalence, I argued that it not only is, as Stacey notes, constitutive of object-cathexes, but also that acknowledging it can be a productive way of interrupting dangerous relations. Unpacking Freud's articulation of the object-cathexis and the child's development of the super-ego in Chapter Three, I argued that while disavowed ambivalence structures the child's investments in their mother, the recognition of this ambivalence is also precisely what is required to break the child's lines of identification and desire, and to open them up to new objects and relations. Acknowledging our own ambivalence towards childhood—our racial, sexual, and gendered lines of investment in it—in other words, might similarly allow for a means of being “at a loss” with childhood in productive ways. Here, being at a loss does not mean abandoning childhood. Rather, like the child in the Oedipal triangle, being at a loss means that in coming to a more nuanced and forgiving understanding of our object, our relationship to that object can shift, and can open us up to others.

While the strategically un-ambivalent putting into practice of childhood through (a narrow reading of) reparative reading or militant loss may be required to respond to the ruptures of childhood that are experienced in the moment as most urgently devastating, to do justice to childhood—and to children like Cole—we must recognize that they require more complex frames of articulation from us. For surely there will be other moments, other times in which we are confronted with childhood's capacity to take on so much work; moments in which we laden childhood with immense directed political and personal energy, but yet again find ourselves at a loss as it falls apart under the weight of our demand. I hope that in these instances we will be able to sit with childhood's ambivalence and learn that what is necessary in response is opening ourselves up to a particular loss of childhood, and embracing the possibilities for new relations that can subsequently emerge. I hope, for Cole's sake and for ours, that this is the work we are willing to do.

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