Title
Queer Developments: The Politics of Reimagining Age

Permalink
https://escholarship.org/uc/item/6175s823

Author
Mattingly, Emily

Publication Date
2014

Peer reviewed|Thesis/dissertation
UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA
RIVERSIDE

Queer Developments: The Politics of Reimagining Age

A Dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction
of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in

English

by

Emily A. Mattingly

December 2014

Dissertation Committee:
Dr. George Haggerty, Chairperson
Dr. Jennifer Doyle
Dr. Katherine Kinney
The Dissertation of Emily A. Mattingly is approved:

Committee Chairperson

University of California, Riverside
Acknowledgments

Dissertations are collective efforts. My efforts here are a result of the encouragement and support I have received from the many wonderful mentors and colleagues I have had the pleasure of working with at the University of California, Riverside.

This project was made possible by the guidance and feedback of my dissertation committee—George Haggerty, Jennifer Doyle, and Katherine Kinney. I can never thank them enough for sharing their time, experience, professional wisdom, depth and breadth of knowledge, and kindness throughout my graduate career at Riverside. They have been my dream team.

I would also like to thank Maggie Gover. Maggie gave me much-needed professional guidance, inspiration, and real-talk. She always gave me perspective about how a done—as opposed to a perfect-in-every-way—project is the best project. I’m deeply grateful to be a part of her dream team.

Dedication

To Livio, il mio preferito. You encouraged me to go, go, go.

Also to Frankie, my bearded lady.
ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Queer Developments: The Politics of Reimagining Age

by

Emily A. Mattingly

Doctor of Philosophy, Graduate Program in English
University of California, Riverside, December 2014
Dr. George Haggerty, Chairperson

“Queer Developments” examines how various twentieth-century and contemporary American artists, filmmakers, and writers reimagine childhood to construct queer visions of aging. This project integrates performance studies with visual and literary analysis to explore how a wide range of texts craft such visions using childhood as the raw material for artistic practices that simultaneously negotiate and make topsy-turvy dominant scripts of age. These practices destabilize straight narratives of growth and development organized around the child-adult binary and its discursive wedge: innocence. This project focuses on works that showcase these practices through critically reimagining popular children’s fiction, a genre that relies on the normative fictions of chronological aging for its powerful ideological energies. Such works foreground performative re-citations of children’s fiction to denaturalize innocence and expose how its privileges structure dominant discourses of age. These artistic practices scramble and recircuit innocence’s energies to fashion radical political statements about identity.
## Table of Contents

Introduction: Queer Developments and the Politics of Reimagining Age  1

1. Queer Binds  
   31

2. Graphic Anachronism  
   61

3. Patched Works and Reimagining Higgledy-Piggledy  
   98

Conclusion  
127

Notes  
132

Bibliography  
162
Introduction: Queer Developments and the Politics of Reimagining Age

The only time I was ever in drag in my life was as the Wicked Witch—to a children’s birthday party, which I’m sure raised a few parents’ eyebrows. I was maybe ten-years-old. Is that really drag? I guess it is. But I didn’t do it to be a woman. I did it to have green skin, which, as you can see, is coming true at my age.

—John Waters

Over the Rainbow

“The witch is a bitch.”

When I was about eight, I was sent to my room for an entire afternoon for this lyric, not to mention chewed-out for an hour about how white, middle-class-striving girls from Kansas shouldn’t use such *unbecoming*—as my mom put it—language. I was watching Victor Fleming’s 1939 classic *The Wizard of Oz* on VHS when mom walked in on me re-working the tune about how the Wicked Witch of the East is dead. This was certainly not the first time I had performed my own profanity-laced spin on the song—this was just the first time I got caught doing so. Initially, I didn’t notice mom surveilling my performance from the edge of our cramped living room. She stood in quiet horror as I gyrated in front of the couch and sang in dissonant harmony with the Munchkins. It was only when the song was over that I began to feel mom’s stare. Just as the image of Dorothy spiraling her way out of Munchkin Land flashed across the screen, I peeled my eyes away from the TV and slowly looked up at her from beneath my tilted-just-so polyester Halloween witch hat. My face suddenly burned a dark shade of red under the
careful smears of green and sparkly black eye shadow I had earlier applied in my bedroom mirror. A moment of cold silence passed before mom finally began, “Good girls do happiness right. Act your age.”

It was true; I wasn’t performing happiness correctly. I also wasn’t acting my age. Despite my musical revision’s upbeat tempo, it didn’t celebrate the Wicked Witch of the East’s demise. In fact, in my revision, I made no mention of death, celebratory or otherwise. My song, rather, simply extolled the un-virtues of the witch’s life. Unlike the Munchkins who, after Dorothy’s tornado-blown shack lands in Oz, break into a laudatory number about their freedom from the witch’s rule, I purred a song that praised her reign of bitchy fabulousness. She was my bitch-tastic idol, my villain muse with a serious attitude and a wardrobe to match. I loved her catty disdain for Oz’s technicolor cuteness and funky fashion sense—a sense evidenced, in my mind, by her striped stockings and red heels combo peeking from under the house. I also loved her sister, the Wicked Witch of the West, whose dramatic introduction as Oz’s resident party-crasher punctuated my song’s climax. I wasn’t supposed to enjoy when the witch interrupts the Munchkins’ syrupy fête. I did, though, and my performance was just as much about celebrating her bitchiness as it was about celebrating her crushed sister’s. For me, she functioned as a necessary narrative extension of her sister, a character whose delicious depravity viewers hear about but never actually get to see on screen. Indeed, the Witch of the East is purely a specter in the film, a figure dead upon Dorothy’s arrival whose villainous ways become musically embalmed. What the film merely divulges about the sister’s bitchiness through the Munchkins’ moralistic chorus, though, I eventually got to witness through the Witch
of the West’s dashing act. My performance was as much a tender memorialization of bitchiness, then, as it was an anticipatory gesture.

I’m not sure what mortified mom more: the fact that I used the word *bitch* or that I was enamored with the Wicked Witch of the West’s bitchiness, in particular. What I am quite sure of: I got in trouble because I was neither supposed to rejoice in nor desire the witch’s “beautiful wickedness,” as she puts it when she, drenched in water at the end of the film, melts into a steaming pool of black robes. I was supposed to desire Judy Garland’s character, the anti-bitch. Dorothy was supposed to be my identificatory locus, a cinematic point of intersection for both my silvered screen dreams and ideal constellation of white Midwestern childhood self. I was supposed to desire the untarnished beauty of her youthful innocence, recognize it in myself, and perform it as if it were my own seamless and mirror-like extension.

Yet, I was no friend of Dorothy. For me, the witch was, from the film’s start, the true star of the show. She stole the scenes. When the witch first appears, mid-parade, from behind a thick curtain of dark red smoke, I swooned. When she, in true diva style, stands center stage, armed against the Munchkins’ surrounding glee with her makeup-caked sneer and delightfully horrifying cackle, my heart almost skipped a beat. When she walks angry, hunched circles in the spotlight and spits promises to enact revenge against those responsible for her beloved sister’s death as Dorothy and the Munchkins quietly cower, I carefully mimed her every move. And, when she snidely bemoans Dorothy’s insatiable craving to return to her hetero-domestic heaven on the prairie, I nearly cried tears of joy. The witch’s resentment of Dorothy’s saccharine speeches, cutie pie
optimism, and doe-eyed wholesomeness echoed my own. I didn’t want to be like Dorothy; I wanted to be like the old, bitchy, jade-skinned crone.

I had long wanted to be like the witch, even before I saw Fleming’s film. My fascination with her began when I, during my rural neighborhood’s annual yard sale, bought a long-yellowed paperback reprint of a book that is now practically required reading for all who call home the same plains to which Dorothy returns: L. Frank Baum’s 1900 novel *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*. Along with the TV soap opera *All My Children*, *Oz* was one of my formative introductions to the fine art of bitchery and its highly stylized abjection. I spent countless hours alone in my bedroom pouring over the brief scenes in which the hyperbolic hag horror appears. I even lovingly dog-eared the few pages detailing her terrors to create an accessible narrative loop that bypassed Baum’s heavy-handed lectures about Dorothy’s virtuous innocence and girly cleanliness. I put this loop on constant repeat and never tired of reading the salacious tidbits about how the witch spends her days in a decomposing castle atop a craggy mountain, her panopticon-like pedestal of evil from which she dreams up Dorothy’s gory death.

These tidbits paint her as a child-hating loner whose murderous impulse braids with her queer optic obsessions with girlhood—obsessions embodied by the one functional, telescope-shaped eye she uses to watch her haloed prey. The accompanying full-page illustrations of the witch both visualize her hate and make clear that not even her constant—however remote—exposure to the homebound cherub can turn her frown upside down. Children are not a kind of wellspring of pleasure for the witch and nostalgically fawning over them is not exactly her pastime. She is immune to Dorothy’s
infectious, schoolgirl charms. She is anti-child to her deepest core and her obsession with Dorothy is less about fetishizing the child and more about destroying a cultural icon. Her lust, then, is not for the child we are supposed to both adore and gaze upon with bottomless—though thoroughly constrained, non-pathological—devotion. Her lust is for the child’s demise. The aspect of infanticide that excites her the most, though, is much more involved that the mere destruction of little Dorothy or some other innocent child. The part that excites her: infanticide’s ability to create a wake of destruction at a structural level. For the witch, infanticide necessarily entails the ruin of cultural institutions—including the institution of the child itself—that depend upon childhood innocence and its preservation for much of their power. After all, destroy the child and you destroy, amongst other things, interconnected dominant institutions like hope, futurity, and the family. Specifically, as Baum’s novel foregrounds, destroy the child and you destroy both Oz’s last bits of child-centric hope for a future sans bitchy tyrant and a wholesome, complete family in the heartland. Destroy the child, in other words, and you destroy the social order. Put simply, the witch’s victim may be quite small, but her dreams of destruction are big—almost as big as childhood’s importance within the social order itself.

The witch’s interest in this particular brand of destruction makes her a blasphemer in one of the great American holy scriptures of child worship. It is exactly Baum’s careful illustrations of her blaspheming ways that served as blueprints for my early reimaginings of the witch. I used makeup I secretly stole from my mom’s well-stocked cosmetics bag to meticulously transpose the witch’s defining physical features—her wrinkled scowl and
enormous eye patch—onto my baby-face. The makeup texturized my skin, inscribing strange meanings onto my child surface that was to remain, as the tenants of innocence and age dictate, blank. Standing in front of my bedroom’s dresser mirror with the pilfered makeup in place, I honed my bitchcraft and practiced throwing nasty doses of witch-esque shade at childhood’s angelic white glow. The makeup made me feel glamorous and less child, childless; the shade allowed me to explore my deep and bitter suspicion of innocence. In these moments, then, my bedroom transformed into a kind of perverse performance space in which I channeled the witch’s appetite for fucking over—à la Lee Edelman—the child.²

The queer desire to fuck over the child that I channeled through the witch entwined with my own queer kid desire to fuck others. I was the kind of kiddie pervert of Freud’s cream dreams whose combined sexual fluidity—a fluidity that continues to define me now—and interest in sexiness strained my relationship to childhood.³ My queer kid self neither confirmed childhood’s mythical ignorance nor followed heteronormative scripts of childhood (a)sexuality.⁴ I knew things kids shouldn’t know; I did things kids shouldn’t do. Because of my relationships to these shouldn’ts, I was estranged, at least in part, from the holy innocence so central to contemporary constructions of childhood. I was not some empty bastion of purity swathed in innocence’s complex privileges. I was not like Baum’s Dorothy, a titillating spectacle of self-impoverishment whose golden cap, her protective nimbus and trusty chastity belt, secures her role as a precious child fetish object. In many ways, I was alienated from the routine eroticization inherent in cultural constructions of innocence. I did not neatly align
with the child-ideal and, in the context of the dominant imaginary that obsesses over this innocent ideal and its preservation, I felt both child and not.

I was an official child according to most papers with institutional significance—medical forms, school records, and family photos, for example. Yet, on unofficial registers, I was a figure whose expected trajectory straight from innocence’s playground into the vast endpoint of adulthood was bent, stunted before it could really even lift off from the developmental origin’s ground zero. In this way, I was a figure who embodied what Elizabeth Freeman refers to as queer “temporal misalignments.” My timing was a bit off. I was a queer kid with cryptic scribbles of something non-child on what should have been my tabula rasa. According to dominant aging’s dictates, these scribbles befouled a blank slate that must remain a sanitized, bleached-white page upon which both the infinite fantasies of and parameters for childhood innocence can be projected onto without interference. Only with much oversight and during pre-ordained, developmentally-appropriate moments, after all, can this slate become anything less than properly marked. My scribbles, then, were supposed evidence of both my mis-managed developmental delay and untimely growth. The cultural fantasies of proper aging policed these scribbles and the same halo that makes Dorothy so valuable, so worthy of the witch’s soggy death, was my choker. This choker, a ring of control, gently strangled me with its glowy touch and I found new breath in the witch.

My performances of the witch reimagined her in ways that loosened this choker’s noose-like hold. In this sense, I indulged in Baum’s witch quite differently from Victor Fleming. Much like in my performances, Fleming expands upon the witch, turning the
original minor character who wreaks havoc in the margins into a full-frontal foe.

Fleming’s Hollywood expansion, however, simply develops a more in-depth account of the witch as a character who deserves punishment for her transgressions against the divine child. In his film, the elderly, ugly, “predatory butch dyke,” as film scholar Alexander Doty sarcastically calls her, embodies toxic pre-Stonewall stereotypes of lesbians. Fleming’s witch is supposed to be a kind of pathetic diesel dyke spinster on a broom whose old age and refusal to bask in Dorothy’s constant stream of sunny songs makes her exceptionally threatening and undesirable. The director narratively balloons the witch’s role as Oz’s queer threat to innocence, then, so that her deflation has a louder and more satisfying pop for majoritarian ears.

Unlike Fleming, I wasn’t interested in preserving Dorothy’s innocence through the witch’s demise. My performances—those both in front of my bedroom mirror and, later, in my living room—magnified her wicked ways to rehabilitate them and underscore what I read as their fabulosity. I luxuriated in Baum’s ageist and homophobic depictions of the witch as a post-menopausal lesbian curmudgeon. And, though I retained this abject haggotry, I recast her as a powerful site of seduction that was glamour-puss sexy. In this sense, my hag drag performance was a kind of disidentification with the phobic stereotypes of child-haters, old women, lesbians, and lady terrors (i.e., bitches)—stereotypes that certainly inform each other. I inhabited these stereotypes with a difference to explore identities and desires that exist beyond what the developmental life narrative’s straight and narrow trajectory from childhood into adulthood offers. Through my revision of the witch, I crafted a self that wasn’t wholly tethered to the dominant
scripts of innocence and growing up that Dorothy embodies. I crafted a self that was just as slippery and messy as the puddle Baum’s witch must transform into at the altar of childhood. Performing the witch allowed me to unpack my relationships to oppressive narratives of age and sexuality that intersect through the figure of the child. In a similar vein, my witch performances also allowed me to reimagine a kind of future for my fluid self that was pleasurable and expansive. This present and future was somewhere over and beyond Dorothy’s sanitized rainbow.

**Critical Aging**

My disidentificatory performances of age were not simple dress-up games that reinforced dominant sexist and homophobic fantasies of aging. Quite the opposite: my rehabilitation of the witch was an empowering creative experience in which I envisioned new possibilities for both seeing and being aged. These were new possibilities for envisioning and navigating the social order. These were possibilities that I both daydreamed about and enacted in my everyday—a phobic and restrictive everyday I wanted to infuse with a sense of a new and queer future that was not wholly restricted by hetero-development’s straightjacket. My performances were affirming sites of self-creation and survival that reflected my desire to neither assimilate into nor completely break free from the developmental strictures of aging. They embodied my queer desires for age—ambivalent desires that longed for, at least on some level, some of the same aspects of age that they simultaneously put pressure on. After all, I wanted to be older, even old. I wanted to be older, though, in a way that was developmentally off-kilter. I was no Rockwell-esque poster girl for childhood who dreamily prances around in her
mom’s fake pearls and over-sized heels, a girl who aspires to the developmental end goal—proper hetero-womanhood—that concludes her strictly-plotted course of maturation. No doubt, my own prancing involved some of the same accouterment as this girl. Similar accessories aside, though, I performed a desire for aging that is dangerous and perverse. In other words, it’s not that I didn’t desire aging; it’s that I desired aging with a difference.

Of course, I’ve only begun to understand these desires-with-difference now and through engaging works like those by the twentieth-century and contemporary American artists, filmmakers, and writers that inspire this project. These works comprise the conceptual heart of my investigation into how various artistic practices partake in the high-stakes politics of problematizing age. Especially important to my theorization of these politics is how such works construct queer visions of aging through deconstructing childhood. These visions are the critical centerpieces for my own disidentificatory wranglings with age throughout this project. I refract these wrangling through close textual readings—what Kathryn Bond Stockton calls the “history of my reading a series of fictions”—and, at times, more overt autobiographical musings. I offer such musings about my own fictions of childhood, in particular, not to reproduce the normative developmental fictions of age. I instead offer my musings as critical starting points for exploring the multitude of personal-political-artistic investments in deconstructing childhood and its role as ground zero for aging’s teleology—a multitude the works central to this study embody. Without these texts’ expressed investments, I wouldn’t be able to make sense of my own. And, in this way, these texts make up this study’s
theoretical backbone. They are the raw theoretical material for my disidentificatory meditations on aging and my thinking about age in “Queer Developments” is indebted to their artistic practices of survival, resistance, and analytical experimentation.

This project integrates performance studies with visual and literary analysis to explore how specific texts showcase queer visions of age through critically reimagining cultural production for children. I examine how texts reimagine childhood and its more bookish accessories, specifically, to simultaneously negotiate and make topsy-turvy dominant scripts of growth and development. In particular, I focus on works that differently reimagine popular canonical children’s fiction, a genre that relies on the normative fictions of chronological aging for its powerful and often contradictory ideological energies. Texts by indie film director Damion Dietz, graphic art duo Melinda Gebbie and Michael Moore, and avant-garde novelist Djuna Barnes, for example, foreground performative re-citations of such fiction to both denaturalize innocence and expose how its privileges structure dominant discourses of age. These texts, in other words, revise various works of children’s fiction with a critical twist to scramble and recircuit their articulations of childhood innocence. And, in doing so, queer masterpieces like Gebbie and Moore’s Lost Girls (2006), for instance, fashion radical political statements about development. Such statements offer new visions of temporality and subjectivity meant to empower folks disenfranchised by their relationships to dominant narratives of aging. These future-oriented visions critique such narratives through their re-visionary deployments of culturally potent texts that resonate, in various ways, with the ageist majoritarian public sphere.
It exactly through both my close readings of and polemical ruminations on such visions that I begin to flesh out some of the queer potentials of reimagining age. I want to emphasize some here because my study is neither meant to be exhaustive of these potentials nor a survey of all queer reimaginings of children’s fiction. Instead, this study is a kaleidoscopic collection of case studies that puts a wide range of seemingly disparate texts into a critical dialogue with each other to offer snapshots of these potentials’ diverse aims and investments. Much of my project, put simply, is a kind of analytical eavesdropping on the conversations I imagine these texts might have if they were to hang out and talk shop about their artistic practices’ unique critical spins on age.

I crack open the door to my own childhood home at the beginning of this project, then, to begin articulating what is often at stake in such texts’ conversations about what I call critical aging. Critical aging is a disidentificatory practice of political resistance that intervenes in maturation and development’s intricate ideological web of interpellative calls. This queer practice critiques and reformulates these calls—calls of social authority circulating in, for instance, canonical children’s fiction—that are supposed to hail us into the ideological complex of heteronormative aging. This practice, in short, makes what I coin the age complex more complex. In this way, critical aging is neither about completely assimilating into nor wholly opposing this complex. Rather, critical aging, as a disidentificatory practice, is about problematizing age and thickening its plot. This kind of thickening expands upon dominant narratives of aging by folding some of their ideological force into new visions of age. Critical aging, therefore, does not toss the
baby out with its ideological bathwater. Critical aging, instead, envisions new and queer developments in the developmental plot of age itself.

Jose Esteban Muñoz’s influential theorization of disidentification informs my discussion of critical aging as a disidentificatory practice. Building primarily upon philosopher Michel Pêcheux’s early conceptualization of disidentification, Muñoz describes this mode of analysis in *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (1999) as a “survival strategy” that “resists and confounds socially prescriptive patterns of identification.”¹³Muñoz suggests that minoritarian subjects can employ this strategy in various ways to “work on, with, and against” the interpellative calls of dominant ideologies.¹⁴Such calls reflect representational hierarchies of power that often elide various queer subjects, in particular. Queer folks, as Muñoz puts it, are either “locked out of the halls of representation or rendered static caricatures there.”¹⁵Disidentificatory practices, then, are about staging interventions in such hierarchies of representation by not only exposing their “universalizing and exclusionary machinations” but also recirculating their “workings to account for, include, and empower minority identities and identifications.”¹⁶The disidentificatory practices of critical aging central to the American artistic, filmic, and literary works I examine in this study, for example, lay bare dominant aging’s machinations. These practices, though, are not revelatory critical gestures that simply expose these machinations’ disciplinary effects. They are analytical springboards for queer artistic projects that contest sticky, intersecting networks of aged subordinations.
Disidentificatory practices like critical aging, put differently, lift the hood on the machinery of dominance, exposing its veiled and elaborate networks of power and exclusion. With the hood popped, such practices then do a bit of critical rewiring to spark new modes of seeing and being. They recycle the wires—the lines of identification—but do so in ways that give the machinery new lives. Disidentification entails, more specifically, what Muñoz calls a “partial disavowal” of the machinery that “works to restructure it from within.” This kind of restructuring uses the machinery as a vehicle for establishing new possibilities within and beyond dominant ideology’s far reaches. These possibilities strive to enact what Muñoz describes as “permanent structural change while at the same time valuing the importance of local or everyday struggles of resistance.” Disidentification, in this way, is not an assimilationist project interested in reproducing dominance’s status quo. It is also not a separatist project concerned with completely replacing the machinery’s wires to make a clean break from the majoritarian regime. Disidentification, rather, is a critical practice that transfigures this machinery to cultivate channels of resistance that recognize some of the limitations imposed by dominant culture.

Muñoz’s emphasis on restructuring—or transfiguring—the machinery of dominance underscores how disidentification is as much a mode of critical reception as it is a mode of critical production. This multi-part critical process is about both reading the dominant machinery through disidentificatory eyes and incorporating the analytical force of such revisionary sight into new texts. Such restructuring also underscores how disidentification does not necessarily relinquish what Muñoz describes as the “politically
dubious or shameful components” of this machinery. Minoritarian eyes often recognize spoiled, hurtful, or damaging messages in the machinery’s wiring. But, this recognition doesn’t mean that these eyes don’t still desire certain parts of the machinery—they simply desire these parts with a difference. It is with a difference, then, that such parts often become incorporated into empowering statements about both selfhood and community. These statements activate, Muñoz makes clear, new ways of imaging futures for queer identities. They are future-oriented visions in a critical crystal ball, visions of queer desires for what could be in present moments that offer little hope to those often imagined as having no futures at all.

It is precisely Muñoz’s discussion of queer desire and identities-in-difference as temporalized constructions I find so useful as a backdrop for my thinking about critical aging and disidentificatory performances of age. Muñoz explores how such constructions often reimagine pasts to create new futures in the present. In a similar vein, my project explores how different texts reimagine pasts (i.e., childhood pasts and specific works of children’s fiction) to create new futures (i.e., queer identities in and beyond hetero-development) in the present (i.e., now-times in which childhood and its innocence reign supreme). As much as this project is about reimaging dominant scripts of age, then, it is also about reimagining dominant scripts of time and identity in a broad sense. After all, the texts that inspire and inform “Queer Developments” go well beyond simply complicating age. They complicate age in ways that critique the heteronormative, thoroughly whitewashed, middle-class logics of progressive time, longevity, and reproductive futurity—logics deeply grounded in ageist discourses. This project follows
suit because, in a cultural and historical moment when majoritarian schemes of aging are an omnipresent regulatory regime, I believe it’s a worthwhile endeavor to continue imagining new possibilities for aged selves.

The Age Complex

I now pop the hood on dominant discourses of aging to contextualize my exploration of how queer disidentificatory performances of age rewire development’s complex machinery. I have a few goals in mind for my discussion of aging here: first and foremost, I’d like to briefly outline the broader cultural context in which influential twentieth-century and contemporary claims about dominant aging circulate. More specifically, I’d like to explore how these claims both create imagined communities of properly temporalized citizens and age certain forms of cultural production. I shine a spotlight on dominant aging to tease out how it shapes some creative and consumptive practices’ relationships to issues of identity and temporality. Shining this light is not a means to an end, a way to make clear that age is not simply a number; it is a way to explore the horizons of potential and risk cultural producers create when they negotiate aging by shining their own critical lights.

Central to my examination of proper aging is a specific kind of aged cultural production: children’s fiction. Like my discussion of queer reimaginings of children’s texts, my discussion of children’s fiction—a genre marked in complex ways by its relationships to dominant scripts of aging—is not meant to be comprehensive. Rather, this discussion is a backdrop for my consideration of how the radical works at the political center of this project reimagine such fiction to problematize aging’s cultural
logics. I am particularly interested in how these works upend such logics’ dependence on childhood and its literary archive for what Elspeth Probyn calls “a designated point of departure.”22 The majoritarian sphere’s most fetishized and fantasized about construction of age, childhood is the origin point for the properly aged self. It is the point upon which aging accumulates, the starting place for the expected trajectory into adulthood’s temporal vastness. The works I examine throughout this project rewrite children’s fiction in ways that complicate this origin point to envision queer selves and social relations in and beyond hetero-maturation’s developmental plotlines.

Children’s fiction is, of course, some of the kid stuff central to the dominant construction of aging and its landscape of origins. It is the literature of origins. It is both imagined and insisted upon as our first experience of literature—a kind of literature we uncritically engage with as children and then put away on our awaiting, innocence-lined bookshelves as maturity pushes us forward through aging’s timeline into adulthood. And so, when works like Shelley Jackson’s *Patchwork Girl* (1995) queerly reimagine L. Frank Baum’s illustrated children’s book *The Patchwork Girl of Oz* (1913), for example, they un-shelve books that should remain unsullied in the kiddie section of the aged archive. Of course, as my relationship to the Wicked Witch of the West demonstrates, what comprises this section is not always already as unmarked as dominant aging dictates. Moreover, un-shelving is not radical in and of itself. Certain kinds of un-shelving are, after all, necessary to the complex iterative processes that naturalize age’s supposed teleology through aged cultural production.23 What is radical: how artists like Jackson
reimagine children’s fiction to complicate this teleology as well as the cultural fantasies of innocence that inform its developmental line of flight.

Artists like Jackson do not dust off works of children’s fiction so that they may ritualistically kowtow to their fetishistic offerings of childhood innocence. These artists page through the fiction with perverse and critical thumbs, touching such offerings with a difference. And, ultimately, works like those by Jackson use this fiction as the “raw material for representing” what Muñoz calls “a disempowered politics or positionality that has been rendered unthinkable by the dominant culture.”24 These texts take what is often imagined as clear and solid evidence of childhood’s aged-realness and representational stability—children’s fiction—and transfigure it in queer ways. This transfiguration both breathes new life into children’s fiction to imagine new possibilities for aging at the same time it channels some of their influence. These possibilities reassess childhood’s literary cannon and its alignment with innocence and origins. And, by extension, they break down the supposedly coherent logics of dominant aging.

Such texts not only shake age’s conceptual tree, then, but also dissect the normative fruits of this tree’s ideological labors to reveal what makes dominant aging tick. The title of this section—the age complex—underscores some of what’s at stake when texts reassemble these dissections with a difference to furnish aging with queer energies. Some of what is at stake worth mentioning here: problematizing age—or, bending straight narratives of development—means problematizing other intersecting facets of identity that rely on aging for their normalizing force. In this way, the title also highlights some of my project’s key thematic underpinnings. The age complex refers to
the intricate web of relations between dominant discourses and institutions that simultaneously construct and reinforce norms of aging. The age complex is itself complex. What is most complex about this web: how it wields its disciplinary effects upon us in various—often inconspicuous and incongruent—ways that map various meanings onto our bodies and experiences.

In a similar vein, the age complex also refers to the dominant cultural complex about—or, intense affective attachments to and obsessions with—aging. American culture is age-obsessed; it has a complex about the complex. American obsessions with age are, too, complex. Age is a discourse of power that many of us are conditioned to think about, talk about, and participate in—either willingly or, perhaps more accurately, mechanically—all the time. How and why we obsess over or obsessively partake in aging changes, reflecting the historical mutability of hierarchies of power and oppression organized around temporality. And, in this way, dominant aging is a kind of slippery disciplinary routine.

Ageist discourses gloss over this slipperiness, though, making aging and its circuitry of signification seem less like a constructed institutional complex and more like a static and absolute biomedical and legal reality. Dominant age’s ideological reaches are far and hierarchies of power embedded in aging are frequently invisible, slipping semi-comfortably under everyday critical radars. This slippage renders dominant aging natural—a kind of naturalness that makes it difficult to understand the full extent of how the age complex wields its disciplinary effects in different ways and in different contexts. Much of this critical slippage stems from how aging is a closely-guarded fiction that
“accumulates the force of authority,” as Judith Butler might put it if she were more explicitly interested in age, “through the repetition or citation” of an “authoritative set of practices.” The accumulation of force through citation makes aging, as an axis of supposedly coherent and chronological identity, seem like it just is what it is because it simultaneously seems like it just always was what it was. This kind of citation operates in the name of authority, making dominant hierarchies seem temporally seamless.

Especially for those privileged by their relationships to these discourses, the age complex and its effects may seem axiomatic, or self-evident and universal truisms. Indeed, much like the broader “fiction of identity” Muñoz describes, the fiction of proper aging is often more accessible for majoritarian subjects than for those of us marginalized by our strained relationships to developmental norms (e.g., queer folks, poor folks, folks of color). This strain’s experiential landscape is shaped by how axes of identity and oppression differently intersect. And, while much of my project is dedicated to examining how artistic practices foreground disidentificatory schisms produced by and through these intersections, I am more interested here in the epistemology of age. Those imbued with ageism’s privileges often readily assume they can glean certain kinds of sound knowledge about a person or community simply by knowing age. Knowing age, in this context, is an epistemological compulsion. Know age and reliably know either who someone is or who someone may become. Know age and reliably know the expansive, synchronized temporal beats that shape its broader cultural cadences. The signs of aging, these ageist discourses make clear, are loaded with meaning. And, they’re right: the dominant signs of aging are loaded. These signs are just not loaded in the ways we are
often conditioned to believe insofar as they reflect nothing about eternal, aged truths. Rather, these signs reveal more about how institutions of power so often cling to fantasies of such truths to ensure that dominant teleologies of time appear mathematically sound and time-less.

Ultimately, normative aging is part of the discursive temporal landscape of what Elizabeth Freeman calls chrononormativity. In *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories* (2010), Freeman describes chrononormativity as a process of “temporal regulation” by which dominant constructions of time “come to seem like somatic facts.”

Chrononormativity is a kind of performative *chronos*—time—in which History and other “calendrical” orchestrations become naturalized. These orchestrations are mechanisms of institutional power that organize the dominant temporal order—an order that often inflicts violence on those whose counterperformative times, for example, dance to the beats of asynchronous and anachronistic rhythms. What keeps these orchestrations in line is their relationship to mathematical absolutes. This relationship is especially salient in dominant discourses of aging. Indeed, central to what makes dominant aging seem beyond construction is what Kathleen Woodward calls “our arithmetical precision about chronological age.” Such precision can be measured through an equation that may look a little something like this:

\[(\text{origin point} = \text{birth}) + (\text{accumulating layers of time})^{\text{experience}}\]

Add it all up and we get the answer for age. This equation embodies age’s chrononormative serialization: we start with zero and typically add an additional number every three-hundred and sixty-five days or so. Such addition is continuous and
exponential, a running tally of lived moments and birthdays past. The greater the number—or, more layers of time—added, the greater our temporal distance from age’s origin point. More specifically, then, this equation embodies a numerical fantasy of chronological being that both plots the life course and grounds shifting mythologies of the properly temporalized self.

I do not draw attention to cultural fantasies of age at the start of this project because I subscribe to some kind of pure social constructivist model of interrogating identity. Along the same lines, I do not draw attention to aging as a fixed constellation of the temporalized self because I subscribe to what are often labeled as essentialist identity politics. Rather, my account of critical aging and queer performances of age sides with what Muñoz articulates as disidentification’s “reprieve from the now stale essentialism versus antiessentialism debates.” These debates, on their own, are both tired and not particularly productive for articulating something as intricate as disidentificatory negotiations of identity within cultural fields. Specifically, in their purist forms, they reduce identity down to a kind of passive process, leaving little room for theorizing how identity-making can be what Muñoz outlines as a site of “struggle where fixed positions clash against socially constituted definitions.” My project is concerned with the negotiations—and clashes—between the fluctuating (im)possibilities for representation in the age complex and actual formations of aged being. I am especially concerned with what happens when such negotiations activate aged identities that break the age complex’s representational contracts. In this way, my project expands upon Muñoz’s version of disidentificatory identity politics—a kind of politics that “locates the
enacting of self at precisely at the point where the discourses of essentialism and constructivism short-circuit.”

The disidentificatory artistic practices central to this study negotiate representational contracts of age that are historically situated. In a project that claims to be deeply suspicious of chrononormative fantasies, it may seem contradictory to call upon any kind of past-ness. However, suggesting that a complicated landscape of discursive trends and phenomena have structured—and continue to structure—the age complex is not the same as wholly reproducing the dominant temporal order. Suggesting that such trends and phenomena are somehow historical simply reflects the limits of speaking about temporality—institutionalized limits disidentificatory critical practices can certainly help us to better navigate. The twentieth-century and contemporary queer reimaginings of canonical works of children’s literature throughout this project both come in contact with and respond to trends and phenomena within the age complex often situated as historical. These reimaginings specifically work on, with, and against the ageist logics circulating within what historian Ellen Key, in 1900, astutely predicted would become the long “century of the child.” This century, much like its child, no doubt, is itself a chrononormative fiction that wields powerful disciplinary effects through its own representational fields. It is a fiction, though, that also reveals how discourses of age rub up against each other through time to create narrative tendencies.

The dominant narrative tendency of which the century of the child speaks: childhood deserves a captive audience. Of course, tendencies are just that and alongside narrative tendencies are always narrative exceptions, deviations, and asides. Even so, a
resounding thematic tendency in the century of the child’s insistence that childhood merits an audience is innocence. Innocence, as I earlier suggest, is a mainstay in dominant American cultural imaginaries of age. Indeed, twentieth-century America’s pastime is getting off on stories of innocents. These innocents are national treasures that offer us fantasies of innately dazzling children (e.g., Dorothy) who require constant protection from omnipresent dangers (e.g., the Wicked Witch of the West) that threaten their virtue in pretty much every conceivable way. Central to the innocence that we fawn over, then, are dangers we revile. The same innocence we must protect, in other words, also produces the same menaces that we must police and punish. Oh, innocence, how we love thee! Let us count the infinite ways you can be mangled. Details, please. This interplay between discourses of risk and protection underscores what James Kincaid calls majoritarian culture’s “doublespeak” about innocence: the innocence fawned over requires imagining the supposedly unimaginable violence against it. Such doublespeak frames these violent imaginings as a kind of protective measure that invites us to keep vigilant watch over childhood’s must-be-looked-at-ness because we know what risks await it around every corner.

Innocence has, in this way, no value unless it can be lost. The greater the risk to innocence, the greater childhood’s value. And, in the long century of the child, discourses of this risk are pervasive. Contemporary scholars critical of majoritarian hetero-temporal schemas often describe such discourses’ relationships to a collective national future embodied by the innocent child. This focus on futurity and its investments in childhood innocence is incredibly useful for thinking about the threats disidentificatory
performances of age ultimately pose to broader dominant scripts of time and identity. However, what I’d like to focus on here is how risks to innocence ignite majoritarian cultural anxieties about maintaining dominant ageing’s coherence—a coherence upon which such futurity depends. Much of aging’s coherence is measured, of course, through the equation that maps aging’s serialization. But, what this equation does not—cannot—quantify in precise terms is the developmental break between childhood and adulthood. As much as dominant aging is organized as a chronology, then, it is also organized as a two-part series of self. So, while, according this equation, the human life span’s origin point remains a constant—zero—exactly when adulthood breaks from childhood is often unclear. What is clear, though: innocence plays an important role in organizing the child-adult binary. Innocence, specifically, is this binary’s ideological wedge. Lose or complicate the wedge and dominant aging’s temporal framework begins to come apart at the chrononormative seams.

**Narrative Tendencies**

The dominant narrative tendencies that locate innocence as the wedge between childhood and adulthood began taking shape well before the century of the child. Innocence is an enduring network of tendencies that animates the age complex and this century is its apex.43 Daniel Schäfer, Carolyn Steedman, Thomas Cole, and other influential age studies scholars typically trace innocence’s endurance back to eighteenth-century European and American scientific, philosophical, and popular schemas of development.44 These scholars regularly point to John Locke’s articulation of childhood in *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1690) to illustrate how such
developmental roadmaps of self began narrating childhood innocence and its central role in the child-adult binary’s organization.\textsuperscript{45} These scholars suggest that what began as a kind of thought experiment invested in this innocence—an experiment exemplified by Locke’s work—became the ideological backbone for dominant nineteenth-century discourses of age. Indeed, as Steven Bruhm and Natasha Hurley observe, the early Lockean \textit{tabula rasa} eventually “apotheosized” into a thoroughly romantic innocent figure during the nineteenth century.\textsuperscript{46} This figure developed a full-blown cult following and became the developmental plotline’s complex love child. And, as evidenced by the dominant narrative tendencies circulating throughout the nineteenth century, this cult eventually became institutionalized. This early institutionalization both gave rise to the century of the child and secured innocence as the discursive mainstay in the age complex’s organization.

Versions of these narrative tendencies, no doubt, prevail. To ground my discussion of such tendencies and their early institutionalization, I briefly turn to Michel Foucault, a scholar whose work models how ageist tendencies become, shift, and haunt. I turn specifically to his work on sexuality and majoritarian mechanisms of power—work I read as theorizations of the age complex’s far-reaching effects. I read his examination of nineteenth-century institutions designed to police sexuality, in particular, as a theory of ageism’s deep-rooted investments in childhood innocence.\textsuperscript{47}

In the first volume of \textit{The History of Sexuality} (1978), Foucault makes clear that nineteenth-century repressive mechanisms required childhood and its purity. The same mechanisms that policed sexuality, he suggests, were most interested in keeping their
watchful eyes peeled for “sins against this purity.” These sins were conflated with sexuality, one of the most enduring—and necessary, as Kincaid makes clear—dangers to childhood. Sexuality, as such a danger, became reserved almost entirely for adulthood. By the same logic, innocence—imagined as sexuality’s quasi-inverse—became reserved almost solely for childhood. Within this binary framework, sins against childhood were particularly heinous not only because they embodied what Foucault frames as sexual perversions but also aged perversions that undermined developmental norms. Such sins penetrated what Foucault calls the “indefinite lines of penetration” drawn “all around the child.” Ageist mechanisms of sexuality began drawing these lines to both parse out aged categories organized around the child-adult binary and map the (de)sexualization of chronological life phases. These lines were many and their indefiniteness around the child speaks to the imagined multitude of infinite dangers sexuality began posing to childhood’s innocence. The proliferation of the dangers, put differently, existed alongside a proliferation of institutionalized age categories within childhood. For each new category of child, then, new categories of sins tied to specific aged groups were also created and policed.

Foucault’s reflections on innocence make two things clear: 1. What radical age theorist Diederik Janssen calls the “erotic currency of innocence and its culture” is a potent narrative tendency that carries over into the century of the child. And, 2. Fucking with children in nineteenth-century Europe and America became a matter of fucking with the temporalized institutions that began organizing bodies and their relationships to the social sphere. Going against aging became a capital offense. And, these dominant
institutions of aging—interlocking components of what I call the age complex—were vast. They were vast not only in number, but also in their temporal reach. Indeed, ageist dominant narrative tendencies gave rise to what became, in the century of the child, institutionalized generational familial structures, an age-gradated educational system, age-focused medical fields and practices (e.g., child psychology, pediatrics, and geriatrics), a new sphere of legality focused on age (e.g., juvenile courts), and age-centric markets and marketing machines.

It is within this context that children’s fiction began being written and published. Indeed, the nineteenth century witnessed the rise of the modern children’s literature publishing market—a market created to meet the imagined age-appropriate needs and desires of American and European child consumer-citizens. This century witnessed, in other words, the rise of a literary market premised upon what Kathryn Bond Stockton calls children’s “managed delay.” Children’s movement through age’s chronology must be managed because their innocence—and the age complex’s reliance upon this innocence to uphold the child-adult binary—depends on it. Innocence is much too precious, after all, to be left up to its own devices. On many complex levels, as I explore in this project’s first chapter, children’s literature became the fiction of this management. It became the literature that gave rise to, confirmed, and reinforced complex majoritarian fantasies of childhood innocence and its natural place within the aged order. This literature did not shadow the institutionalization of this order—it existed and proliferated alongside it. Children’s literature, then, became—and continues to be—a performative extension of the child-adult binary and its disciplinary effects.
At first glance, literary critic Marah Gubar certainly complicates much of what I offer here as a snapshot of these effects’ narrative tendencies. Gubar makes the persuasive argument that children’s fiction often embodies much more nuanced cultural understandings of childhood than often credited in various critical threads of contemporary scholarship. And, as scholars like Kenneth Kidd, Roberta Seelinger Trites, Karin Lesnik Oberstein, Kerry Mallan, Eric Tribunella, Victoria Flanagan, and Michelle Abate all make clear, Gubar is not alone in suggesting that children’s fiction is—like the children who inspire it—not always as innocent as we are often prompted to believe. I certainly don’t doubt that nuances exist—in fact, some of the disidentificatory artistic practices central to this study exploit them. But these nuances are more a reflection of what Foucault offers as the majoritarian proliferation of dangers to innocence and institutionalized categories and less radical statements about complicating the age complex. In this sense, it’s not that childhood is not a nuanced concept. Sigmund Freud’s theories of childhood psycho-sexual developmental trajectories—trajectories that are sexualized at the same time they follow lines dictated by innocence—are prime examples of nuances in the century of the child’s discursive landscape. What I’m interested in exploring in this project, then, is innocence’s persistence.

I’m especially interested in its persistence through what children’s literature scholars often cite as the “Golden Age” of children’s fiction. The Golden Age typically refers to the classic works of children’s fiction published from about the middle of the nineteenth century to the middle of the twentieth. The Golden Age is not simply a temporal construct of a genre premised upon innocence; it is a thematic construct
premised upon a nostalgic majoritarian temporalization of childhood’s golden age of innocence. Golden Age fiction not only narratively reinforces childhood as the normative developmental golden age, then, but also persists in the century of the child as the literary embodiment of our favorite developmental fiction. For example, Lewis Carroll’s *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* (1865) and L. Frank Baum’s *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* (1900)—works that feature prominently in this study—circulate in the long century of the child as evidence of childhood innocence’s supposed narrative coherence. Such fiction—both as a by-product of ageism and, by extension, an institutionalized form of production within the age complex—fuels this persistence through its own cultural canonization. Indeed, the Golden Age is children’s fiction. And, these texts persist in the century of the child because they confirm majoritarian institutions of age that, ultimately, keep the golden child at the heart of this institution’s dreams alive. The proliferation of childhood species and institutions attest that these dreams are not static. However, the complexities inherent in this proliferation often are smoothed over by History’s chrononormative steamroller. The queer reimaginings of these works central to this study, then, intervene in these majoritarian dreams, not necessarily dashing them but complicating them and harnessing their potency in new visions of aging.
They say that breaking up is hard to do.  
—Neil Sedaka

A difficult, queer break-up punctuates American indie director Damion Dietz’s film *Neverland* (2003). The break-up takes place at the front entryway of the Darling family’s almost-beach-front mansion in a gated community somewhere just north of Los Angeles. The doorbell rings and Wendy Darling, knowing that it’s probably Peter Pan, answers it. Peter’s stern face greets her when she opens the door. She musters a large smile and immediately invites him inside. His face softens as he peeks into the foyer and indecisively shrugs his shoulders. An awkward silence passes between the teens. She senses his hesitancy to cross the threshold and offers to make him something to eat. Wendy knows it’s been a while since his last meal. Peter ignores this offer and cuts straight to the chase: “Would I have to go to school? If I come in—and be who you want me to be—would I have to go to school?” Wendy quietly suggests that he probably will, at least *eventually*, but that it’s a good thing. Going to school could, she emphasizes, lead to a career he enjoys. He rolls his eyes, “So, I’d be a man now? I’d be just like everybody else?”

Tears begin to well in his eyes. He moves away from the open door and takes a hunched seat on the front steps. The camera zooms in on his furrowed brow as he begins narrating his fears about growing up’s possible effects on his body: “I don’t wanna get
bald, get old, grow a beard and all that. It would be like giving up.” Wendy enters into the frame when she sits beside Peter and tries to reassure him that becoming older—in whatever form it takes—is not the worst that can happen to a teenager. When Peter refuses her reassurance, Wendy becomes irate and maneuvers the conversation to his living situation. Peter lives with a group of queer homeless kids—fairies—in an abandoned storage room at the nearby Neverland theme park. Wendy worries that Peter’s return to the decaying park will result in a day in court: either he will be put into the juvenile court system for truancy or arrested for stabbing Captain Hook, Neverland’s facilities director and resident sadomasochistic leather daddy. She also worries that his return will result in another kind of arrest: the arrest of his developmental trajectory into adulthood. Wendy is concerned, in short, that he will have no future, no adulthood. Peter isn’t interested in the kind of future Wendy wishes for him, though, and waxes poetic about his queer life beyond what he sees as chrononormative strictures. His J.M. Barrie-inspired account of fairies’ important place in this forever-child-like life pushes Wendy over the edge and she storms to the front door.²

Before stepping inside, Wendy pauses and turns around. “Peter, please don’t give up.” In this moment, Wendy and Peter’s disjointed conversation about age and their relationship comes to an emotional head. Indeed, both feel they may have very different relationships to giving up. Wendy’s version of giving up focuses on not giving up childhood, not cultivating a future for some kind of aging self. It focuses on not believing in a queer future for an aged self in now times and beyond. Giving up means, for her, giving up on a future. Peter’s version of giving up focuses on elongating childhood,
resisting dominant aging’s trajectory into the heteronormative, whitewashed, middle-class adulthood he believes awaits him. It also focuses on resisting a future. For Peter, the future is now. Giving up means, for him, giving up on a future in this now. If these characters’ respective investments in age and its relationships to a future sound like similar sides of a similar utopian coin, it’s because, as I later suggest, they may just be. Some common ground I would like to emphasize here: giving up requires, for both Wendy and Peter, a kind of *growing up*. This giving up also requires, by extension, futurity. Give up on growing up, these characters suggest in their own ways, and give up on futurity. Giving up and its attending requirements become, then, slippery in this scene and viewers are confronted with versions of aging that seem difficult to reconcile. Aging becomes a queer bind.

The scene becomes more difficult, dissolves into difficulty. Peter immediately jumps to his feet after Wendy’s plea against giving up and again stands toe-to-toe with her at the door. Both characters begin to cry and the communication between them breaks down even further. Peter looks at Wendy through semi-swollen, reddish eyes and stutters a half-hearted invitation for her to run away with him. Now it is Wendy’s turn to ignore an offer and cut straight to the chase: “Hey, boy, why are you crying?” Without skipping a beat, Peter unironically responds, “My name is Peter Pan.” “Yeah, I know,” she says with a twinge of sarcasm. Wendy is not amused. But, before she can continue on, Peter interrupts her with a conversational offshoot about how he’s trying to find his mother. Wendy stops him and says how sorry she is he doesn’t have a family or some other kind
of supportive network. She then tells Peter how much she wishes she could go back to Neverland, offering a half-hearted response to his already-tepid invite.

Wendy’s wishes are not completely empty. However, they’re expressed more as a nicety than as a genuine regret. Peter knows this and his facial expression shifts a bit. He continues to cry, but something like anger suddenly comes into the emotional fold. He throws a bit of shade at Wendy and sarcastically cuts, “Yeah, I guess you can’t. I guess you’re just an asshole like everyone else.” Assholes are, for Peter, those who both get caught in the trappings of growing up and adhere to dominant aging’s strict developmental norms. His guessing that Wendy is an asshole suggests that he’s not completely sold on her straight relationship to these norms. And, he’s onto something: Wendy is not sold on these norms. In fact, she is just as critical as he is about the trappings of growing up—just in a different way. This guessing is, nevertheless, painful and confusing for both characters. All-out alligator tears ensue and, before making an exit, Peter breaks into a strange, quiet laugh-cry. This scene’s difficult break-up ultimately becomes, then, broken up by difficult feelings.

**Hard Work**

This soaked scene about aging and its discontents streams difficulty through its complex presentation of emotion and temporality. I anatomize this break-up scene at length here because it underscores how difficulty is, in this film, not a straight project. Difficulty is, rather, a queer practice that exploits dominant aging’s conceptual knots to imagine new possibilities for age. These knots are many and Dietz’s *Neverland*foregrounds some of them to make aging more difficult. This film does not turn a blind
eye, then, to such knots. Instead, it amplifies sites where the normative fictions of
chronological aging do not line up, making their difficulties central to its disidentificatory
strategies. In this sense, the film incorporates some of dominant age’s ideological force
at the same time it makes aging—especially growing up’s developmental break between
childhood and adulthood—more difficult. Put simply, it breathes new life into growing
up’s difficulties. And, in doing so, the film inhabits dominant scripts of aging and their
complexities with a disidentificatory difference to present queer visions of age. These
visions ultimately transfigure growing up, making it knottier in ways that both complicate
age’s developmental teleology and activate new possibilities for futurity.

At the heart of this transfiguration is the film’s critical ambivalence toward the
innocence that organizes dominant aging and its temporal framework. The ideological
wedge between childhood and adulthood, innocence is, as I soon discuss, one of the
knottiest of all developmental fictions. Innocence’s assumed transparency and
“noncomplication,” as Kathryn Bond Stockton calls it, is a rich fantasy made thick by its
own difficulty. Neverland thickens this fantasy’s difficult plot. The film does not simply
breathe new life, then, into growing up’s difficulties; it breathes new life into the
childhood innocence that often makes growing up so difficult in the first place. The film
transfigures growing up by simultaneously holding onto the innocence that shapes its
chronology and exploiting its difficulties through a critical lens. It is exactly the film’s re-
cycling of innocence with a difference that produces a kind of ambivalent, difficult effect.
Indeed, as much as Neverland intervenes in the ageist majoritarian fantasies that produce
childhood purity, it also holds onto the same precious innocence and some of its
attending difficulties in the name of complicating them further. The film incorporates some of this preciousness’s allure into its queer visions of aging, in other words, but does so in ways that destabilize innocence. It desires childhood purity’s difficulties with a difference, then, and ultimately restructures innocence from within to critically recircuit its complicated machinery. Working on, with, and against innocence and its difficulties is central to Neverland’s filmic investments in what I call critical aging.

Critiquing age by exposing its conceptual difficulties is dangerous business. Whoever speaks against aging’s straight grains to expose its conceptual knots, after all, speaks against the broader mechanisms of institutional power that organize the dominant temporal order. Whoever speaks against these grains also inevitably speaks against the childhood innocence upon which they rely for their order and affective force. Speak against childhood innocence in the century of the child and you may just be accused of being a child-hater or, worse yet, a pedophile. You may also be accused of being an all-out separatist anarchist type against the social order as a whole—an order that depends upon this innocence for its own sense of futurity. You very likely will be accused of being all of these things (and more), however, as majoritarian anxieties about dominant aging’s coherence often braid such charges. Neverland is a film that navigates these dangers with much difficulty. Indeed, difficulty narratively anchors the work’s investments in this dangerous business. It is important to note here, though, that the film is not simply invested in the business of exposing dominant aging’s conceptual difficulties, especially the conceptual knots inherent in innocence. The film is, rather, in the business of transfiguring age in ways that acknowledge the difficulties dominant
aging poses for those marginalized by their strained relationships to innocence, namely queer people of color and poor folks. It is also in the business of envisioning new and difficult temporal possibilities and horizons of futurity for minoritarian subjects that exist in and beyond dominant aging’s ideological reaches.

*Neverland*’s investments in this business are not presented as a monolithic indictment against aging and the system of violence and privilege organized around the child-adult binary. The film does not present, in other words, a one-size-fits-all disidentificatory vision of possibilities and horizons for aging. Quite the opposite: the film taps into the powerful and often contradictory energies dominant aging produces to showcase—through characters like Wendy and Peter, for example—many visions. These disidentificatory visions acknowledge the aged (im)possibilities for representation various minoritarian subjects negotiate and how these negotiations often rub against each other in uncomfortable ways. The film inhabits, through such visions, dominant scripts of aging and their complexities with a disidentificatory difference to both account for and reflect upon multiple critical positionalities and the desires for aging that drive them. *Neverland* transfigures growing up and the innocence that organizes it to acknowledge, then, the complex of difficulties dominant aging poses for those marginalized by such scripts. *Neverland*, in this way, actually inhabits dominant aging’s scripts with *differences*. And, it is through this disidentificatory plurality that the film fashions a critical space that confronts viewers with multiple uneasy desires for growing up and its difficulties. Disidentificatory desires for aging are just as difficult as they are many and
the film puts some of them into conversation with each other to tease out their sometimes-uneasy relationships. In other words, the film transfigures growing up’s difficulties with differences to exploit what Jose Esteban Muñoz describes as disidentificatory “uneasiness in desire” and “desire within uneasiness.”

Disidentification is, Muñoz makes clear, an ambivalent mode of reception and production that clings with critical fingers to the same “problematic object” it works on and against. Neverland showcases a variety of busy hands that work on and against growing up and its innocence—a problematic object—in different ways. The film doesn’t narratively side with any of these ways—ways that elucidate both different investments in and desired outcomes for critical aging. Dietz’s work is not in the business of suggesting that one mode of critical aging is somehow better or more analytically virtuous than another. Neverland is, instead, in the business of producing critical unease through its depiction of disidentificatory practices that differently navigate ageist logics circulating in the century of the child.

The unease produced by these practices is itself a kind of disidentificatory ambivalence. Such ambivalence is grounded in the film’s narrative refraction of growing up’s difficulties and strained desires for aging through an intersectional lens. This lens puts diverse disidentificatory negotiations into a conversation with each other to explore how queer subjects negotiate hierarchies of power and oppression organized around temporality. Neverland dramatizes the ambivalent and, at times, antagonistic effects generated when heterogeneous disidentificatory desires make uneasy contact. This dramatization produces a meditative—rather than judgmental, flat—space in which
viewers are confronted by critical un-resolve. The film leaves characters and viewers alike suspended, then, in moments of critical uncertainty in which the difficulties of their own queer desires for growing up and its innocence are problematized and expanded upon. Difficulty is, the film makes clear, hard work.

**Difficulty in the Aged Archive**

*Neverland* puts a disidentificatory spin on one of the most celebrated and revised Golden Age fictions of development in the century of the child: British author and playwright J.M. Barrie’s *Peter Pan*. A slippery archive of children’s fiction defined by its own plurality and tenuous relationship to origins, Barrie’s work is difficult. Dietz’s film reaches into this complex archive to work on and against dominant aging and the developmental break that organizes it. Specifically, *Neverland* reimagines Barrie’s difficult work and the break-up that informs its narrative structure in ways that complicate the supposedly coherent logics of dominant age and transfigure childhood innocence. It holds on to both the difficulty of this work and the innocence so central to its resonance with the ageist majoritarian public sphere since its inception in the early twentieth-century. It holds on to the work, however, in ways that present new and queer visions of aging through exploiting this innocence’s difficulties.

More precisely, the film uses Barrie’s developmental drama as raw material for depicting these difficulties in ways that complicate the age complex’s representational contracts through their own impossibilities. Innocence’s difficulties are impossible in that they are not supposed to exist. They do, of course, and Barrie’s difficult and deep archive—as well as much of the cultural production it inspires—makes clear that these
difficulties are actually central to dominant aging’s ideological force. *Neverland* exploits these complications with a disidentificatory twist to envision queer selves and social relations in and beyond the child-adult binary’s innocence complex. The film reaches into the deep-end of the children’s fiction section of the aged archive, then, to source material for its critical work—work that channels the Barrie archive’s influence at the same time it activates new and difficult desires for aging.

I expand upon my discussion of Barrie’s difficult archive and the break-up between childhood and adulthood at its slippery narrative center in just a moment. But, here, I would first like to unravel some of the conceptual knots in the story of dominant aging’s developmental trajectory to examine just how difficult innocence’s difficulty can be sometimes. Growing up, much like breaking up, is hard to do. It’s hard because growing up entails a kind of breaking up. Maturation, after all, requires us to uncouple from our child selves as we enter into adulthood. This uncoupling comes with a serious price we all must pay: the certain loss of our innocence, the most prized of our possessions. Children must lose that which we are expected to cherish most—childhood’s purity—so they can enter into adulthood. It is only through this necessary and carefully managed loss that children are allowed to develop, or properly accumulate age. Growing up, in this sense, is temporalized narrative of loss. And, in this story about parting ways with a beloved across and through time, adulthood functions as a melancholic bookend always already both premised upon and the result of an imagined love lost.13 Losing love means gaining another in this story. Growing up fastens childhood and its innocence to the future, a temporal realm into which it must ultimately transition into through a
process of growth and development. Lose the love child and move into the much-loved temporal realm for which the child ultimately stands: the future.

Growing up’s tragic romance is complex. One complexity worth deconstructing: adulthood is often just as defined by its relationships to negation as its slippery developmental precursor. Considering my discussion of growing up’s imagined loss here, these relationships may seem quite obvious. After all, adulthood requires a developmental break and temporal distancing from childhood. It requires, at least at first glance, a kind of negation of childhood. And, even though adulthood is premised upon a kind of having had childhood, it simultaneously requires a kind of temporal distance from this origin point. Such distance goes the distance through time and is premised upon this point—childhood—it retains for its own coherence. Adulthood must lose, negate childhood and its innocence. However, it must also hold onto childhood for its own temporal logics. Perhaps ironically, according to dominant imaginaries of age, negation is almost solely reserved for childhood. Childhood is the temporal realm of negation in that children have nothing but the nothingness that defines them. Nothingness is a bit of a misnomer, though, as children are, of course, full of one thing: innocence.

Innocence, like the child vessel overflowing with its virtues, is what James Kincaid calls a “coordinate set of have nots.” Innocence itself, then, is a kind of nothingness. It is the fluffy white stuffing of childhood’s plush interior that gives children shape, but not substance. Children are to remain bloated with emptiness. They are to remain bound to lack for as long as possible through their managed developmental delays or else risk having no value—no meaning, ironically—at all. Their imagined emptiness is
an inversion of adulthood’s imagined fullness. Put differently, if childhood is a vast blank page, a Lockean *tabula rasa* and romantic temporal construct shaped by the nothingness we project onto it through rose-colored glasses, adulthood is a full manuscript smeared with experience. These imagined smears conceal the once empty whiteness of childhood’s collection of empty leaves. The presence of smears—the marks of knowledge (especially sexual knowledge, the dirtiest mark of all) and time’s hardening layers—entails the absence of complete lack. Adulthood, in other words, is a lack of lack.

Another, and related, conceptual difficulty: childhood does not transition into adulthood unscathed. Adulthood’s lack of lack requires violating innocence, dirtying what should remain pure. More specifically, built into dominant narratives of adulthood are narratives of developmental trauma. Growing up is as hard to do, in other words, because maturation is necessarily a series of traumatic events. Normative aging and its developmental trajectory requires, specifically, what Eric Tribunella calls the “contrived traumatization” of childhood. Adulthood must violate—traumatize—what we are told must remain inviolable. Childhood’s managed march forward through time into adulthood stomps on its own imagined innocence—an innocence that simultaneously requires the utmost care and protection. Of course, and as Tribunella’s use of the term *contrived* suggests, this violation is not a free-for-all. We cannot be developmental bulls in the china shop of growing up. This normative violation must remain safely contained within normative development’s confines—confines that dictate the acceptable times and methods for violation—or else it risks being labeled a perversion of the highest order.

The irony here is, of course, that dominant narratives of aging overlook the violation of
innocence from the moral high-ground of development. This kind of normative violation can be part of the landscape of America’s national pastime—getting off on stories of innocents—but only because once the violence ends, we are supposed to imbue the calm before the storm with the tender loving care it always already deserves.

When precious innocence is lost to adulthood, then, it’s not as much of a black and white matter as it is so often imagined: adulthood’s smears have often already begun darkening childhood’s white page before its bright light goes out. The lack so central to conceptualizations of childhood is, therefore, not as lacking as cultural fantasies tell us. Innocence has no value unless it can be lost. But, adulthood necessarily requires that we devalue it—only a little and only for a little while—in the name of growing up and adhering to broader temporal logics like History. This requirement speaks to Kevin Ohi’s astute observation that neither an a priori childhood innocence nor its imagined adult successor—experience—“can exist in a pure state, uncontaminated by the other.”

Dominant developmental narratives of aging require a suspension in disbelief, the turn of a blind eye to innocence’s necessarily un-pureness. Look the other way at the same time vigilant guard is maintained. Sleep with one eye open. The age complex begs us to overlook both childhood’s own special brand of lack of lack and our complex roles in this developmental puzzle in the name of the sacred child-adult binary.

Adulthood’s breakup with childhood—or, growing up—is always a messy ordeal. But, it is a messy ordeal that we necessarily sweep under the rug. Growing up—a metaphor for heteronormative development—is particularly messy at the breaking point between childhood and adulthood. At the same time children are suspended in childhood,
then, certain things with which they are expected to have delayed relationships—sex and labor, for example—are allowed to slowly become part of the discursive landscape of innocence as children grow up. In childhood, therefore, the age complex allows—and even expects—dim flickers of adulthood. Along the same lines of dominant aging’s strained logic, dim flickers of childhood are allowed in adulthood. Adults must lose their child selves, but these selves—as the foundation for a kind of selfhood that is defined as adult—are allowed flickering returns. Such flickers of childhood shift shape within the normative language of feeling like a child again, getting in touch with the inner child that is imagined to reside in all white hetero-adults, or simply feeling young. These soft flickers of childhood in adulthood speak to how children maintain their status as fetish objects within both the child-adult binary and the dominant heteronormative discourse of development.

This fetishization of childhood often has erotic undertones—touching, feeling—and yet such flickers in adulthood are less panic-inducing than those that sometimes surface within childhood (i.e., sexuality). As a general rule, though, as long as flickers of adulthood are not too bright and adhere to innocence’s culturally-sanctioned nuances, children can maintain their status as such. Specific kinds of eroticism within the age complex are, then, safely contained within the confines of the child-adult binary under the heading of normative aging. Contained in this way, such flickers are carefully managed by various interlocking majoritarian disciplinary forces. These forces are, as I suggest in my introduction, indefinite and shifty. It is exactly their indefinite shiftiness
that plays a significant role in both how childhood innocence’s cubist dimensions come into being and what flickers are acceptable—even loveable—or punishable.

Barrie’s difficult Peter Pan archive is itself an archive of these cubist dimensions and their attending flickers. As such an archive, Barrie’s Pan-centric work makes clear just how nuanced innocence can be, even in texts and performances for children that are supposed to confirm its coherence. These nuances are central to Jacqueline Rose’s influential theorization of children’s fiction in The Case of Peter Pan, or The Impossibility of Children’s Fiction (1984). Rose argues that such nuances make Barrie’s Pan-centric section of this archive reek of difficulty. She locates this archive’s “difficulties”—her own term here—in its “ongoing sexual and political mystification of the child.” This mystification is grounded in innocence and its conceptual knots. “Oddly labile as a concept (contrary to first appearances),” Rose makes clear, “innocence stretches its meanings and contracts.” Such stretching and contraction embodies innocence’s political and cultural adaptability in the century of the child. Innocence can become, in other words, whatever the ageist majoritarian culture needs for it to be in the name of the childhood it so worships. Peter Pan can be so many works, then, because this culture needs for the innocent child narratively threaded throughout its aged archive to be different things at different times. It needs this child to be so many things because broader dominant scripts of time and identity rely on them for their own chrononormative coherence.

The mystification of the child and its purity makes clear how the logics of dominant aging bend over backwards to maintain hierarchies of power and oppression by
bending—ever so slightly and with much tenderness—innocence. These logics imbue innocence with nuance to respond not only to its own political rally-cry organized around childhood but also the dangers inherent in its construction. This mystification also reveals how innocence is, as a narrative tendency, a veiled and elaborate network of power and exclusion that can do all kinds of fancy conceptual footwork in the name of upholding the child-adult binary. Innocence is, then, a fiction of its own management.

**Hooked**

It is exactly this kind of mystification of innocence and its relationship to dominant aging’s management of childhood that makes it so that Peter Pan—the innocent protagonist that slips and slides within the Barrie archive and beyond—can be so many things. He can be a bird, a boy, a girl, a woman, a mother. He can even be, as I discuss in a moment, the great white father he so often resists becoming in his refusal to grow up and enter into adulthood. He can be so many things in so many texts because innocence’s cubist dimensions allow—and even require—them. Such allowances and requirements embody the age complex’s far-reaching effects over time and in different cultural moments that demand novel modes of child management. And, in this way, Barrie’s *Peter Pan* is a fiction of this management. It is a fiction that allows the age complex to have its cake and eat it, too. It offers images of the innocence so cherished and central to the child-adult binary, but also depicts the aged horrors that might ensue if the promises of growing up are not fulfilled. It is both an invitation to gaze upon the innocent child and a warning to those who do not break-up with it. Peter is, in all his slipperiness, after all, often a kind of delightful, tragic figure who never grows up but remains untarnished and
vast in innocence’s bubble as Wendy transitions into adulthood. Though, no matter who
plays Peter, this fiction almost always fulfills dominant aging’s demands for both
growing up (vis-à-vis Wendy) and cataloging innocence as a mainstay in the annals of
childhood (vis-à-vis Peter).

Barrie’s *Peter Pan*, a difficult cornerstone in the fiction of this management,
ultimately offers a case study for how complex innocence’s blankness can be written in
so many diverse ways and still maintain its powerful energies. Innocence can be washed
with so many cubist dimensions in Barrie’s work, then, only because the break-up
between childhood and adulthood is never questioned. Steven Spielberg’s film *Hook*
(1991) is a great example of how Barrie’s archive can be reimagined in ways that both
maintain dominant aging’s complex machinery—machinery fueled by innocence’s
powerful energies. I briefly examine Spielberg’s film here to both offer a case study of
this case study and articulate what is at stake in the break-up so central to dominant
narratives of growing up—narratives that Dietz’s *Neverland* works on, with, and against.

In December 1991, Spielberg’s much-anticipated “family” film premiered to lukewarm
reviews.22 Despite this less-than-warm critical reception, however, Spielberg’s take on
Barrie’s archive was nominated for five Academy Awards and grossed almost $120
million in America alone. This success reveals something important about how Regan-
Bush era “family values” devotees and the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences
viewed the film: *Hook’s* cozily trite depiction of intimacy and familial domesticity that
made it a cinematic gem worthy of packing up the whole minivan for.
*Hook* appeared in American theaters at a time when the popular media’s coverage of the Gulf War, in particular, reinforced xenophobic and heterosexist discourses of foreign-ness assaulting “the American way of life”—a decidedly heteronormative way of life rooted in privatized notions of family, home, and citizenship.²³ In this anxious political and cultural environment, any perceived threat to America—as a nation and nostalgia-based site of social cohesion—also often posed threats to both the nuclear family and the hetero-reproductive futurism through which individuals acquire access to the intimacy of citizenship.²⁴ For these devotees and the Academy, therefore, *Hook* presented a screen dream of such intimacy and childhood innocence worth repeating again and again in which the family and its domestic setting always already take center stage in America’s national future. Instead of finding *Hook*’s adherence to a sentimental narrative formula that offers the family’s hearth as a metonym for this future boring or uninspired, in other words, the film’s enthusiasts celebrated how such adherence visually and narratively materializes the family’s own regenerativity through the figure of the innocent child. In short, these enthusiasts thought of this adherence less as some kind of thematic arrested development in which the family tree’s outward-reaching branches are cut short and more as a narrative embodiment of the family’s own re-producibility and genealogical trajectory.

Despite their somewhat different takes on *Hook*’s brand of sentimentality, then, most critics and viewers made clear that sentimentalism is the currency for screening not only family values, but also the family—and the innocent child at the center of it all. Indeed, for better or worse, critics’ and viewers’ attachments to the film sheds light on
how, within the larger heteronormative visual economy of futurity, sentimentalized cinematic visions of the white family’s hearth are, of course, always already supposed to serve as identificatory sites for an imagined stable and monolithic crowd of hetero-viewers who value childhood innocence.

*Hook* imagines what might happen if Peter Pan actually leaves Neverland to live with Wendy and the Darling family. In this way, the film reimagines the break-up scene so central to the Barrie archive, giving narrative life to Peter’s own break-up with childhood. The film depicts a grown-up Peter Pan-cum-corporate attorney, Peter Banning, who returns to Neverland by way of London during his paid holiday vacation to save his two kidnapped children from his still-alive and long-forgotten pirate nemesis, Captain James Hook. A film that portrays Peter as a hardened adult who bans—as his surname suggests—the supposed sweet joys of childhood innocence and play from his work-centric life, *Hook* foregrounds a sentimental image of a patriarch who soon gets in touch with his whimsical and adventuring inner child. Peter is, the film suggests, a little too invested in adulthood’s sphere—a sphere in which money and labor rule supreme. He is also too invested adulthood’s necessary break-up with childhood and he doesn’t properly value innocence. He needs to be taught a lesson about what happens to children when adults don’t gaze upon their innocence with the utmost adoration as their own adulthoods work on and against it.

Returning both physically and psychically to his childhood haunts in Neverland teaches him this lesson. Upon his return, he remembers that he was once Peter Pan, an orphaned boy who, like his kidnapped children, needed to be saved from both Captain
Hook and the lost boys, the unruly kids of color who populate the island. As the film progresses, Peter slowly remembers his childhood that was, as he had promised to himself as a boy, never supposed to end. Peter’s gradual ability to shorten the supposedly vast temporal and spatial distances between adulthood and childhood allows him to reconnect with—or, recover—his forgotten childhood interest in play and imagination. Moreover, this ability allows him to better connect with his children, especially his son, Jack. Before returning to Neverland, Peter is a workaholic father who often ignores his children’s interest in play. Indeed, he forgets about Jack’s baseball game and takes phone calls during his daughter’s performance as Wendy in her school’s stage production of *Peter Pan*. However, through his own recovery of his inner-Pan, adult Peter, by extension, is also able to cultivate a relationship to an ideal fatherhood that properly adores childhood innocence.

Once Peter remembers his childhood self, he rustles up his newfound Pan-esque courage to fight off the campy Captain Hook—a child-hater who repulses Peter—and soon returns his children to the safety of his wealthy urban domestic space and the nuclear family at its heart. Peter’s remembered childhood experiences as the fantastical Peter Pan, then, both bolster his enthusiasm for fatherhood and help him grasp normative adult masculinity. It is only through temporarily inhabiting his childhood that Peter is able to realize his central role as the patriarchal glue that both holds his family together and keeps his children’s innocence in tact. Peter Pan, *Hook* suggests, is at the core of Peter Banning’s newly-realized role as a father—a role that, in the end, defines him and makes him the film’s hero. The film illustrates, then, the normative developmental
rhetoric often central to twentieth-century and contemporary dominant American discourses of white masculinity: in the heart of every man is his innocent boy self, his very own Peter Pan. This innocent inner boy is suspended in time by his permanent delay into manhood. This boy is the starting point from which white manhood emanates, the foundation for self, and the soft core in adulthood’s temporal shell. He is the boy that must be remembered, cherished, allowed to flicker lightly in adulthood, but also kept at a safe distance so as to not derail development’s temporal progress.

In Hook’s final scene, the Banning family reunites in the comfort of great-grandmother Wendy’s Victorian townhouse nursery, staring dreamily out across central London’s urban landscape from a large balcony. The little children are safe and can now be properly fetishized. And, at the center of this image of aged and family and aged order restored is Peter. He is, in this final scene, a figure of both the properly temporalized self and innocence properly loved. He is the heart of it all and the family stands reunited behind him as his hands rest confidently on his hips, chest puffed out. This is a vision of the hetero-temporalized family, a family portrait within a film that attests to growing up’s necessity for its own visual coherence.25 The Big Ben clock looms large in the foreground of their collective gaze outside the window. Unlike the now-deceased Captain Hook, Peter is comfortable with the ticking clock he is so often depicted as loathing. The end of the film portrays him as safely couched in heteronormative reproductive time—a time that not only makes tangible his relationship to dominant futurity, but also ensures a safe distance between Peter’s time within fatherhood and his innocent inner child. In this film’s final scene, the innocent inner child is in its proper place—safely inside. And, in
this way, the normative break-up between the child and adult that finds its rightful place in the chronology of Peter’s aging. The film also gestures toward Peter’s saving his own children’s future break-up and maintaining their innocence in proper ways. Dominant aging and its innocent child are safe and sound. All is well on the white capitalist homestead.

**Final Scene**

As I have hoped to make clear here, Barrie’s *Peter Pan* archive is—as the fictions of management it inspires so often are—hooked on dominant scripts of aging. It is hooked on the break-up between childhood and adulthood that gives these complex scripts their shape. And, as a film like Spielberg’s *Hook* suggests, it is worth being hooked on these scripts because dominant futurity and the child at its heart depends on it. I’d now like to return to Dietz’s *Neverland* to examine how this film works on, with, and against these scripts in ways that imagine new possibilities for aging. These possibilities breathe new life into Barrie’s difficult archive and the normative developmental break at its narrative center to envision ways of being and seeing age that exploit growing up’s contradictions. Such possibilities are difficult, multiple, queer. *Neverland* uses Barrie’s archive as the raw material for disidentificatory practices that do not completely obliterate dominant scripts of aging. Instead, it inhabits this difficult archive with a difference to exploit its own narrative contradictions—contradictions grounded in aging’s normative difficulties. Central to my examination of *Neverland*’s final scene, in particular, is how such new possibilities for aging are put into a critical conversation with
each other in ways that envision horizons of futurity for minoritarian subjects like Wendy and Peter.

In *Neverland*’s final scene, Wendy and Peter become suspended in difficult layers of meaning. This suspension generates what seems like a relational impasse—a bind—grounded in the characters’ respective difficult feelings about aging and futurity. These characters hang together in a frustrating moment that doesn’t appear to lead anywhere other than a parting of ways. No doubt, these characters are at an impasse of sorts in that their feelings about growing up and innocence don’t easily align. It’s all too easy to read this impasse as a metaphor for the complicated normative developmental break between childhood and adulthood. Childhood and its innocence must reach, after all, a climactic impasse within itself and break—or, move—forth into adulthood. I read this scene, however, more as a queer uncoupling in which both normative relational and temporal forms organized around the child-adult binary become difficult. The break-up that punctuates *Neverland* is not an uncoupling that entails a full-blown disavowal of this binary; it is an uncoupling that holds onto this binary and infuses it with a disidentificatory difference. This difference leaves the break-up hanging, suspended in an uncoupling that exploits innocence’s difficulties to imagine new and difficult relational forms.

Wendy’s question about Peter’s tears—“Hey, boy, why are you crying?”—is a riddle of sorts that catalogues this difficulty. This is not the first time Wendy asks Peter about his tears. When he breaks into her house at the start of the film—the first time the characters meet—she asks the same question. Peter accidentally misplaced his car keys
while on a burglary binge in Wendy’s neighborhood the night before this introduction. He returns to her house and begins crying as he haphazardly rummages through the mansion’s downstairs darkness. The film never makes clear, though, that his tears are shed solely for his lost keys or that his keys are the sole purpose for his return. Indeed, his teary motives are just as mysterious as his curious movements through the house’s shadowy corridors. Wendy watches Peter’s tear-stained intrusion from atop the main stairwell for a few minutes before she interrupts his desperate search with her inquiry. She asks the exact same question she poses in the film’s conclusion. And, much like in the conclusion, Peter has no answer. He stands in silence for a moment, suspended in her hazy question. Head slightly cocked to the side, he squints a puzzled look and then simply introduces himself with a charming half-smile. His tears have no articulable origin, no emotional motive he can pinpoint. There is no answer to Wendy’s affective riddle—a riddle with its own tenuous relationship to clear motive.

This question, these tears, the puzzled looks bounced to-and-fro between the characters, and this inarticulateness index innocence’s difficulty. The scene writhes in childhood innocence’s conceptual knots. At the heart of this tangle beats questions about motive, or what Kathryn Bond Stockton calls “the mystery inside explanation” that is always already “birthed backwards.” This kind of backward trace—or, search—for motive presents its own kind of difficulty, especially in the context of childhood. Dominant scripts of aging, Stockton argues, construct children’s motives as “oxymoronic.” After all, how can young people—those whose assumed purity and conceptual blankness—have clear motives when they have little to no accumulation of
temporal backward-ness? Children are imagined as having no temporal retrospection; they are temporal retrospection. More specifically, they are adulthood’s backward trace, suspended in the innocence that separates them from the vast developmental endpoint. And, it is exactly this suspension in innocence that evacuates them of clear motive—at least in some ways—in the first place. Herein lies a rub, a difficult twist in dominant aging’s fiction: what drives children is their innocence. The feelings that drive children’s actions are innocent. They are as blank as the happy innocence upon which the infinite fantasies of children’s being are projected. When children cry, then, their tears are simultaneously empty and overflowing with innocence’s slippery and capacious meanings. In this way, it’s not that childhood is completely devoid of motive—it’s that the emotion that drives its suspended motion is uncomplicated by time’s imagined affective press.

*Neverland* folds this uncomplicatedness onto itself, making innocence and its difficult emotional realm curioser. The film narratively holds onto innocence’s imagined blankness—its strange openness to meaning—and exploits its difficulties through Wendy’s motive-focused questions to Peter. It also exploits such difficulties through Peter’s responses. Questions and answers are—much like the tears and motives accompanying them—cubist projects in this film. Inquiry and response are repeated with a difference, making meaning fatter with each utterance. Meanings and feelings spread in the film. What seems like it may be something akin to a Stockton-esque backward birth in which the mysteries driving emotion’s motives will reveal themselves in the film’s final moment is not. Indeed, this final question and answer session may reference back to
Wendy and Peter’s first meeting, but this session makes motive and its relationships to aging difficult.

This question is itself a kind of narrative backward birth in that it references not only the beginning of the film, but also how the inquiry circulates in Barrie’s archive. Motives are, in general, difficult to pin down in this film. Wendy and Peter hang suspended in innocence’s imagined blankness as questions and answers about motive flicker in their strained parting of ways. It’s not that the protagonists, during this break-up scene, do not have motives for their difficult feelings toward growing up. Their blank pages are smeared with difficult experiences—experiences that not only inform their attachments to difficult feelings, but also strain their respective relationships to innocence.

These experiences drive some of their motives for breaking up on the doorstep and leave them suspended in their difficulties. Wendy’s attachments to the idea of cultivating a future for the aging self that exists beyond childhood is informed, for example, by her own marginalized relationship to dominant scripts of aging. A black fag-hag adopted by a liberal white family who uses her as the face for their savior-like attachments to childhood and its fetishized place within the chrononormative, she has a strained relationship to innocence. More specifically, both her blackness and queer attachments to gay boys (her gay, white boyfriend, the film mysteriously glosses over, recently committed suicide), strain her relationship to the childhood innocence so often imagined as white and asexually heterosexual. She understands that the wealthy white family who adopts her gives her some kind of access to childhood innocence’s privileges.
Wendy can never have full access to innocence’s privileges because of her blackness.\textsuperscript{30} However, this family allows for her to have some kind of safety through innocence by proxy. She also understands that this innocence—or, imagined lack thereof—contributed to her boyfriend’s feelings of alienation from dominant aging and eventual suicide.

She is a child queered by both her race and affective attachments. She resents innocence’s privileges, but holds onto them with a queer difference. Indeed, at the beginning of \textit{Neverland}, she criticizes the classist, ageist, and racist of politics of these privileges. She makes clear that she is no young “Uncle Tom” figure who wants to be the face of happy, domestic chrononormativity. She also recognizes that her relationship to childhood innocence through her adoptive family has given her some kind of future and access to queer survival. She reads her access to this future through disidentificatory eyes. She narrates her disidentificatory relationship to this future when one of her brothers, Michael, shoots a home video and asks her what she wants to do when she grows up. She sits on the edge of her parents’ bed with a photo album full of pictures of her dead boyfriend on her lap and sarcastically details her adoptive family’s own “growing up” narrative. According to this narrative, she is supposed to go to college, become a social worker, and, in her words, “save children like me from childhoods like mine.”

Her future is, as her family imagines it, supposed to follow as many straight lines of development she it possibly can. She resents this narrative’s restrictive contours—contours that map out her future in ways that make her feel like she’s supposed to be chrononormativity’s institutional minion. At the same time, however, she recognizes that
this institution allows her access to a future, a life beyond the now. She clings, in some ways, then, to this innocence-focused assimilationist story with the hopes that it provides queer folks and folks of color with both basic necessities—such as food, shelter, and access to education—as well as basic rights too-often tied to chrononormative institutions. She is haunted by the same dying kids that haunt Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s writing—kids who always already have tenuous relationships to futurity not only because of death, but also because of their relationships to dominant aging. She clings to this story, though, with a disidentificatory difference. In this way, she recognizes that growing up can give black and queer kids futures at the same time she is critical of its problematic relationships to broader hetero-temporal institutions of race. These futures are not exactly the same as those that a critic like Lee Edelman rails against in his famous list of innocent-child-focused, hetero-fantasies he’d like to fuck over. These futures are, rather, disidentificatory lifelines that allow queer kids and kids of color futures that work on, with, and against dominant scripts of aging. These difficult futures are a kind of utopianism in which kids of all sorts of kids—not just the Peter Banning-types of the world—can have futures.

What drives Peter’s complex feelings toward growing up during the break-up scene are his difficult personal experiences as a white, “pansexual,” homeless boy. Peter is much more skeptical of the kind of pragmatism Wendy holds onto with a difference. He’s skeptical not because he doesn’t think that what this pragmatism promises—a sometimes less-marginalized political voice and some kind of security and comfort, for example—doesn’t sound great. Rather, he is skeptical because of his own first-hand
experiences with this pragmatism’s limitations. Specifically, toward the end of the film, Peter notes the following to Wendy as she tries to get him to leave the theme park with her and the other lost boys:

I just want to stay here and be a kid and have fun . . . You do all of the outreach, shelter bullshit. I’ve done that shit before. I know exactly what [you’re] talking about. You clean up your act for about a year, working at the fast food place or painting houses, or whatever other bullshit they have you do for not even enough money to survive. I’m just going to stay here and have a good time.

As this quote makes clear, Peter has a less optimistic take on what Wendy sees as growing up’s lifeline. He’s tried the path to growing up. He’s been there and done that—at least in some ways. And, it was a horrifying experience in which accepting growing up’s difficult smears did not alleviate the intersecting oppressions of poverty and heterosexism. Becoming open to these normative smears only left him smeared. Growing up in proper-ish ways did not make things better for him. It did not, as Dan Savage’s It Gets Better campaign claims it will, get better.

Peter’s childhood is smeared with enough experiences as it is and he does not feel that growing up in the ways Wendy suggests will give him a future. His version of the future—a kind of future that exists only in his now, in childhood—is better. In this future, he gets to actively resist the chrononormative institutions that Wendy clings to with a disidentificatory difference. He clings to futurity, then, but with a different kind of critical difference. He wants to live within, alongside, and outside of a dominant future premised on what he sees as temporal-economic exploitation. In this way, Peter’s difficult version of utopianism is premised upon a queer kind of aging that resists normative adulthood and clings, instead, to childhood with a difference.
“Utopianism,” Steven Bruhm and Natasha Hurley make clear, “follows the child around like a family pet.” What Wendy and Peter’s break-up offers is a dramatization of utopia—a horizon of possibility, a neverland—and its difficult relationships to the child. Both characters desire queer childhoods and futures with different differences. These difference rub against each other with disidentificatory effect in the film, revealing how time binds and puts different kinds of children in difficult, aged binds. Feelings and textual references—both within and beyond the film—combine and misalign. They refuse straight causation and linearity, prompting a sense of un-resolve. They smear childhood, but in ways that leave viewers questioning their own smeared attachments to aging. In the film’s final moments, then, it’s not just Wendy and Peter who have a messy break-up. Viewers are also confronted with conclusion’s difficulties. We are invited to feel something “betwixt-and-between,” as J.M. Barrie might put it. The film leaves characters and viewers alike suspended, then, in moments of critical uncertainty in which the difficulties of their own queer desires for growing up and its relationships to innocence are problematized and expanded upon. We are all put into queer binds.
Graphic Anachronism

fuck the clock!
—Patti Smith

We are but older children, dear, who fret to find our bedtime near.
—Lewis Carroll

When I was finishing high school, my family and I moved into a new house. This move was supposed to be a happy moment of American status-climbing in which we were becoming almost middle class. No doubt, the house provided many of the middle class-ish accessories necessary, according to my parents, for hetero-domestic bliss in the heartland: a lazy susan in the kitchen, a concrete cave in the basement to store my dad’s gun collection and animal carcass-lined freezer, and a lawn complete with a stand-alone mailbox. What Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick might have critically unpacked as a kind of aged panic, however, soon dashed mom and dad’s little house on the prairie dreams. And, it was exactly this mailbox and the unmarked envelops often therein that delivered such panic.

My parents, for the first several months of living in this house, watched the mailbox with nervous anticipation. Receiving mail required what seemed to me a mysterious and intense process of fretting and vetting. Mom and dad took turns checking the mailbox and a document shredder suddenly appeared in the kitchen. It wasn’t until quite recently that I found out the reason for their postal paranoia: upon moving into the
new place, they began receiving newsletters from The North American Man/Boy Love Association, or, as it is more casually known, NAMBLA. The county coroner who had previously lived in the house subscribed to NAMBLA’s bulletin—as well as other boy-love publications—and his gift just kept on giving.

My parents were absolutely horrified by the queer anti-ageism organization’s messages about pedophilia and radical love. Their horror had many levels:

1. They were scared that the mailman might think that my dad was a boy-lover and call the police. Of course, the publications they received in the mail were always in fairly unassuming, unmarked, vanilla-looking envelopes. For my parents, however, there may as well have been a scarlet letter $P$—for *pedophile*, naturally—stamped on the packages.

2. They were afraid of becoming known as the town pedophiles if the neighbors were to accidentally receive the newsletters. They also feared the neighbors finding the newsletters in the trash.

3. The thought of the waste management employees finding the publications in the trash gave them nightmares. These publications were, for them, the dirtiest filth imaginable.

4. They were disgusted—to their absolute cores, they made clear to me—that NAMBLA even exists. For my parents, organizations like NAMBLA are criminal. They are the lowest of the lowly lows.

During my parent’s recently-ended marriage, they didn’t bond over much. One thing they did bond over, though: their shared, NAMBLA-induced horrors. As I later discovered,
they also secretly bonded over the small fires they regularly started together in the backyard. Shredding the documents wasn’t good enough sometimes. During these fires, they burned the evidence of what they later referred to as—with much face crumpling and tones of utter disgust—*the kiddie porn*. Burning this porno gave my parents an incredible sense of relief, however short-lived at times. They found much comfort in the fact that the publications they received were up in smoke and not down in the dumpster for the trash truck operators to find. These quasi-ritualized burnings also gave them the sense that they were keeping their kids safe from being exposed to *filth* that has no right showing up in the family home.

The kiddie porn was a queer intrusion in our imagined straight domestic space, something that was out of place and out of time. For my parents, the kiddie porn was, in short, anachronistic. Of course, the kiddie porn in my family’s home was not exceptional—it was just anachronism coming home to roost. Kiddie porn itself is, as a genre, a kind of anachronism in that it embodies what Valerie Rohy calls a “range of temporal anomalies.” It is a genre that has no right time or place in American culture, a pathological genre that should never exist. It is also a genre that relies upon unimaginable desires—for example, those of the adult for the child and, heaven forbid, those of the child for the adult—in its construction. These temporalized desires and relational forms are out of sync with dominant aging’s logics. They rub against the fictions of childhood innocence and, in so doing, complicate this imagined wedge keeping the child-adult binary in place. Complicate this binary and the ageist mechanisms that map the (de)sexualization of chronological life phases are thrown off-course. Kiddie porn flies in
the face of ageist logics, then, confronting majoritarian culture with its worst fears imaginable: innocence assaulted. Assault innocence, put differently, and the braided temporal and social orders organized around the child-adult binary begin to unravel.

**Doublespeaking**

Because of its relationships to anachronism, child pornography is, perhaps, a genre that best exemplifies the kind of cultural “doublespeak” about childhood innocence James Kincaid rails against. In the century of the child majoritarian culture imagines, Kincaid suggests, a pervasive “kiddie porn industry” that invites us to imagine the unimaginable in the name of protecting innocence. In other words, majoritarian culture anxiously imagines—in graphic detail—sexual threats against childhood innocence to keep it safe. And, of course, the same threats that shouldn’t exist exist absolutely everywhere. On every street corner, in every dark and overgrown bush, and sitting behind every computer screen, for example, lurks sexual danger to innocents.

Majoritarian culture constructs the same anachronisms that it guards against, then, through its fetishistic protection of innocence—an innocence that grounds dominant aging and the broader chrononormative order. It guards against anachronism to keep the dominant temporal order safe. More specifically, it guards against anachronism to keep the innocent children at the heart of this order in tact, unsullied. The pleasures of keeping these children safe, put differently, necessarily entail the uneasy pleasures of imagining their devastation. In this way, dominant discourses of aging rely on the unimaginable to keep the innocent child at the heart of its temporalized fantasies unblemished. Protecting childhood innocence from temporal anachronisms becomes, in this context, a
chrononormative rallying cry for temporal order within the age complex. The all-important task of keeping this child safe becomes, then, a matter of policing the temporal order to ensure that anachronisms are kept at bay.

This chapter examines how American artist Melinda Gebbie and English writer Alan Moore’s graphic novel Lost Girls (2006) exploits this doublespeak about innocence and its reliance on anachronism to reimagine age. Anachronism is central to the text’s critical aging practices—disidentificatory practices that infuse age with queer difference. Specifically, Lost Girls foregrounds anachronism—both in its construction and narrative—to problematize childhood innocence. It uses this innocence as the raw material for pornographic artistic practices that imagine anachronistic ages and experiences of aging. These practices ultimately critique dominant aging in ways meant to play on majoritarian culture’s other worst nightmare: the childhood innocence it produces and protects can easily become a pornographic fantasy. More specifically, these practices consciously play on the fear that what Richard Mohr calls the “pedophilia of everyday life”—the much-denied pornographization of childhood innocence—may turn into something more explicit.6

**Peddling Kiddie Porn**

In August 2006, Lost Girls was released in its entirety. A collaborative mixed-media project nearly sixteen years in the making, Lost Girls was, for Gebbie and Moore, a publishing nightmare. Though eventually published as a three-volume graphic novel printed on expensive, heavy crème paper, Lost Girls had humble, rocky beginnings.7 The American publishing houses that Gebbie and Moore first approached about publishing
their work didn’t want to be associated with this famous duo’s manuscript. Perhaps not surprisingly, these houses feared the possible legal consequences of producing a text that features adult versions of iconic girl characters from the Golden Age of children’s literature—Alice from Lewis Carroll’s *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* (1865), Dorothy from L. Frank Baum’s *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* (1900), and Wendy from J.M. Barrie’s novel *Peter and Wendy* (1911). In particular, *Lost Girls*’s pornographic illustrations of pedophilia and child sex—consensual and otherwise—made many publishing companies and retailers fear being charged with peddling child pornography.

Top Shelf—a small, independent, Georgia-based comics publisher—eventually accepted the possible financial and legal risks of publishing the work in its entirety. Although no formal legal actions were ever brought against Top Shelf for producing *Lost Girls*, this publisher faced many obstacles upon first introducing the comic to American audiences, in particular. Perhaps not surprisingly, American book and comics retailers were hesitant to put the text on their shelves. Much like the various European publishers Gebbie and Moore first approached about printing *Lost Girls*, many American retailers were afraid of being charged with distributing child pornography. After none of the American retailers who first sold *Lost Girls* encountered legal troubles of one of the highest orders, however, several of the more cautious stores that did not initially carry the text were confident that they could also sell it without being taken to court. All ten thousand copies of *Lost Girls*’s first print run sold out in less than twenty-four hours. And, in a case of money trumping so-called morals, many newly-confident American stores soon eagerly waited for the text’s subsequent reprintings so they could partake in
the work’s retail success. Once in wider circulation, *Lost Girls* quickly became one of the highest-selling, independently-published American graphic novels of 2006.

My goal in discussing *Lost Girls*’s complex publication history at length here is not to belabor the controversies surrounding Gebbie and Moore’s work. Rather, I begin with this discussion about the work’s publication history to suggest that the anxieties surrounding *Lost Girls* embody deep-seated cultural angsts about anachronism and temporal discord. Seamlessly spin beloved children’s fiction classics into pornography and expect to pay a price. Seamlessly spin these beloved classics into pornography that features children, in particular, and the price skyrockets. In other words, touch innocence in a way not culturally sanctioned in the century of the child or actualize the fantasy—nightmare?—that innocence is under constant sexual threat and there may be hell to pay.

By spinning kiddie lit into kiddie porno, *Lost Girls* harnesses these cultural fears, foregrounding its queer investments by channeling such threats as a way to critique the cultural mechanisms that both police and give shape to dominant aging. The graphic novel peddles child pornography, then, in ways that ultimately problematize innocence by folding some of its ideological force into new visions of aging.

It’s funny: *Lost Girls* is part of a long history of pornographic reimaginings of classic children’s fiction. So, as much as children’s fiction and pornography are imagined as genres that do not—and *should* not—mix, they historically have. Eric Tribunella explores this mixing in “From Kiddie Lit to Kiddie Porn: The Sexualization of Children’s Literature” (2008). Tribunella traces how these genres are not strange bedfellows, elucidating how European and American pornographic takes on children’s fiction are a
genre unto itself. He reads this genre as a repository for adult-eyes-only critical statements about sexual empowerment within the age complex. Pornographic reimaginings like Chris Kent’s *Coral Island Boys* (1998) and Thomas Hughes’s *The Real Tom Brown’s Schooldays* (2002) are, Tribunella suggests, “adult reclamations of an element of children’s culture, albeit an element that in many ways is already for adults.”

Sexuality within childhood is, in other words, for adulthood. As such reclamations, then, these pornographic retellings offer “useful cases for investigating adult motives for both rewriting children’s literature and for reading children’s literature in the first place.”

These reimaginings illuminate how artists navigate the child-adult binary and rework a genre that relies on the normative fictions of chronological aging. They infuse children’s fiction with a pornographic difference that offers visions of childhood sexuality—a sexuality that is itself imagined as anachronistic.

Tribunella’s work focuses on reimaginings that depict “sexualized children and children who have sex.” To describe such pornographic works, Tribunella uses the phrase “kiddie porn”—a phrase that is, he notes, often associated with pedophilia. He uses this term to suggest that such pornographic reimaginings of children’s literature do not reflect a pedophilic desire “to have the child,” but, rather, embody “a desire to be the child.” Tribunella argues that such reimaginings—or, kiddie porn—can be particularly productive sites for critical engagements with age because they have the potential to explode restrictive tropes of childhood innocence and purity. He is careful to not critically enjoy kiddie porn too much, though, maintaining that such re-workings of children’s fiction are “not about pedophilia or adult desire for children.”

Kiddie porn for
him allows, rather, adults to forge critical and artistic spaces with which to imagine childhood sexualities—that is, children having sex with other children or children sexually exploring their own bodies—that undercut dominant constructions of aged sexual pathologies.

Tribunella argues that these spaces “represent a different strategy for nostalgically imagining childhood.”17 Nostalgia need not be trite, however, in the sense that it simply “imbues the past with greater happiness or pleasure than it ever possessed.”18 Nostalgia for him can, instead, offer opportunities for critical intervention in dominant constructions of childhood. Looking back on childhood and its innocence, in other words, does not require keeping purity fully in tact. Tribunella suggests that the nostalgic artistic lenses that shape kiddie porn, in particular, create “opportunities to relive and improve upon the experience of childhood, which was perhaps miserable, brutal, brief, or, for many, simply standard fare.”19 For Tribunella, then, kiddie porn’s brand of nostalgia infuses classic children’s fiction with a queer difference in ways that both reimagine and redefine childhood as sexual.

*Lost Girls* certainly exploits some of the critical possibilities kiddie porn, as Tribunella defines it, affords. However, it exploits these possibilities in ways that Tribunella only pussyfoots around in his theorization of this genre. As much as I find his theorization of kiddie porn’s potential to create empowering narratives of childhood sexualities insightful, then, his work offers little in terms of understanding depictions of intergenerational sex and desires in a text like *Lost Girls*. It is exactly *Lost Girls*’s depiction of such sex and desires that makes the graphic novel particularly radical—and,
in the context of the century of the child, quite dangerous. Kiddie porn often refers to reimaginings of classic children’s fiction that rework texts to depict either adults or children in pornographic ways. Never shall the two meet in bed. Innocence functions, after all, as a kind of gauzy curtain between these separate, aged beds. *Lost Girls* complicates the ideological wedge—innocence—keeping adult and child on segregated mattresses to complicate the dominant temporal framework that puts them at imagined safe distances in so many other ways.

At times, Tribunella’s focus on childhood sexualities often reads as an extension of majoritarian culture’s fears around sexuality and childhood within the age complex. Tribunella’s careful emphasis on this critical distance from pedophilia and myopic focus on kiddie porn that depicts sexualized children being sexual with each other draws attention to the hoops scholars often have to jump through when discussing pornographic depictions of children—or, childhood sexualities more generally, as I discuss in my next chapter. I don’t blame him for proceeding with caution, but I think it’s worth noting that his work uncritically speaks the Kincaidian language of doublespeak. So, while the fear of being labeled a pedophile is certainly not unjustified in a cultural moment in which this accusation carries serious weight, his adamant emphasis on not being a pedophile and applying the term *kiddie porn* only to those texts that depict children leaves little room for considering the particular brand of censorship *Lost Girls* experienced. His focus also leaves little room for exploring the kind of critical work—the kind of work I call critical aging—a text like *Lost Girls* performs through reimagining children’s fiction.
Kenneth Kidd begins articulating the kind of work *Lost Girls* performs in his 2007 review of the graphic novel. He suggests that Gebbie and Moore’s text confronts readers not only with depictions of intergenerational sex, but also a graphic narrative form that complicates the imagined child-adult binary that shapes boundaries for aged cultural production. In this way, Kidd argues, *Lost Girls* calls into question the supposedly strict divides between child-adult and their attending genres. Specifically, in his review, Kidd suggests the following about Gebbie and Moore’s work:

Lost Girls partakes of a knowing tradition of childhood and its forms, not so much an adulteration of children’s literature but rather an evolved genre of such. I hasten to add that it isn’t “for” children exactly, but neither is much of what passes for children’s literature, and in any case, what’s “for” children isn’t so self-evident. The “I know it when I see it” approach is too often taken with children’s literature as well as pornography, and at the very least, *Lost Girls* forces us to look twice.22

I quote Kidd at length here not because I want to participate in one of children’s literature studies’ favorite debates—what is children’s fiction anyway? I also do not quote Kidd at length because I want to go down the critical rabbit hole of defining pornography in precise terms. Rather, I quote Kidd here because he underscores the complexities of *Lost Girls*’s narrative double-dipping into archives of cultural production that depend on innocence and its exploitation for narrative effect. The graphic novel isn’t for children exactly, but it also doesn’t completely shake this possibility.23 *Lost Girls*, Kidd suggests, “forces us to look twice” at its narrative: once to see how it draws from mainstream pornography, another to see how it draws from children’s literature. But, as Kidd’s excerpt further reveals, *Lost Girls* also forces us to question what constitutes both pornography and children’s literature—two genres that, in many ways, do not have clear
sets of defining features. Kidd’s argument here is, in many ways, symptomatic of what scholarship on *Lost Girls* fails to explore. Much like the scholars who also examine *Lost Girls*, Kidd, too, ignores what “looking twice” suggests about innocence’s doublespeak and its anachronistic effects.\(^4\) Kidd and other scholars who discuss *Lost Girls*, then, neglect how, at the same time this graphic novel is a pornographic reimagining—and, more specifically, pornographic recasting—of beloved characters from the Golden Age of children’s fiction, it is also a text that foregrounds how its pornographic re-cycling does not move away from children’s literature. In other words, *Lost Girls* is not a text that gestures toward not being children’s literature. It is a text that refuses, rather, this impossibility.

The anxieties surrounding this graphic novel’s publication and distribution stem not simply from *Lost Girls* being a pornographic recasting of Alice, Wendy, and Dorothy. These anxieties stem, instead, from how *Lost Girls*’s fuses together genres to create a kind of queer children’s fiction—a fiction that depends upon anachronism for its own narrative construction. Gebbie and Moore’s work holds on to children’s fiction with a disidentificatory difference that works on and against the innocence that shapes its construction. It recircuits this fiction’s powerful articulations of innocence to offer anachronistic visions of age and sexuality that critique dominant narratives of aging. Likewise, the text holds on to mainstream pornography with a difference, harnessing its own powerful and popular articulations of innocence either undone or gone buck wild. The work also harnesses this genre’s reliance on age as a fetishistic category for both organizing desire and categorizing specific aged bodies and storylines.
Lost Girls transfigures these genres and their generic ageist protocols from within to imagine new possibilities for being and seeing age. These possibilities are critical visions of age that imagine anachronistic contact zones between genres that should have no contact. Such contact restructures dominant aging from within to both to negotiate (im)possibilities for representation in the age complex and complicate this complex’s representational contracts. Where these contact zones make contact are queer visions of friendship—visions that make central to their narrative circulation throughout the graphic novel depictions of such (im)possibilities. These friendships themselves are, then, relational contact zones in which the graphic novel’s protagonists collectively rub against the fictions of childhood innocence in ways that produce disidentificatory effects. Friendship—a theme often central to classic children’s fiction and mainstream pornography featuring queer women—functions as a vehicle for representing anachronism. In this way, anachronistic desires and queer relational forms entwine within Lost Girls to produce a kind of doublespeak about innocence that problematizes dominant aging and thickens its developmental plot.

Porno/Graphic Girl/Friends

To examine how Lost Girls, as kiddie porn, constructs anachronistic visions of aging through depictions of queer friendships, I turn to the graphic novel’s first volume, Older Children. While much of my first chapter is about conclusions—both filmic and aged in Damion Dietz’s indie film Neverland—this chapter examines introductions. Lost Girls is, as I soon examine, very much a graphic novel about introductions. Introductions—especially those between friends—feature prominently in the work’s first
volume as a narrative springboard for critical artistic practices that reassess children’s fiction and its alignment with innocence and origins. This volume depicts several kinds of introductions: friends introducing themselves and introducing readers to the work’s raw literary materials central to its queer transfigurations of age, for example. It is through such introductions that the graphic novel introduces its artistic investments in creating new and queer visions of aging.

This volume frames its introductions with a dust jacket that depicts Alice, Wendy, and Dorothy’s contact in and through a temporal divide that loosely separates childhood from adulthood. Specifically, the jacket’s front portrays these three characters as girls sitting on a nursery floor together in a semi-circle. Fully-clothed and surrounded by dolls, they gaze into their own adult faces—faces framed by a large gilt mirror with intricately-carved women lounging, kissing, and reading to each other. The jacket’s back panel depicts these characters as “older children” in the mirror gazing back at their girl selves as their nude bodies come into full view. They are tangle in a pleasure-chain of fondling with Dorothy in the middle, kneeling atop an elaborate stool crowned by a golden dildo. This jacket is itself a contact zone that foregrounds doublespeak and its anachronistic effects. It invites readers to “look twice” before cracking open the text: once at an image of childhood innocence and once more at its imagined sexual opposite.

Innocence and its opposite make contact through the jacket—a kind of contact in which the child-adult binary is put on full display with a disidentificatory difference. Innocence and its opposite are not so opposite here, though, as the girl friends on display in the nursery gaze with lust-filled eyes at their future selves as girlfriends. In the mirror
is, then, kiddie porn, a pornographic fantasy for the viewers, both younger and older. This fantasy reflects—quite literally—on the sexualized temporal divides between child and adult. These divides come in contact as the friends reach across and through time to imagine sexual desires and selves that should not exist. The fictions of children and their imagined (a)sexual heterosexuality touch the fictions of a kiddie porn both produced just for them and that invites their collective gaze.

As I suggest in my introduction, childhood and its attending innocence deserves a captive audience. And, no childhood deserves—and requires—a more captive audience than girlhood, the most innocent of childhoods. But, what this jacket portrays is an audience’s gaze gone awry, an adult audience that gets off on both looking back at and performing for childhood. Likewise, the children who make contact with this gaze look back at this pornographic scene through the mirror with much pleasure. Adult selves captivate child selves and vice versa. Friends, aged divides, gazes, and the fictions of childhood rub against each other on the jacket. This rubbing—or, doublespeak—creates a kind of sexualized friction between child and adult as well as the innocence imagined to separate them. In this way, the jacket visualizes looking twice on multiple levels: looking twice at how the work holds onto both children’s fiction and pornography with a difference as well as selves looking twice at each other (once in childhood and once in adulthood). The jacket ultimately presents a kind of narrative contact zone that binds the volume’s introduction to innocence’s doublespeak and its anachronistic effects.

This dust jacket frames Older Children’s introductions to various other forms of contact. Specifically, this volume introduces not only the work’s protagonists—Alice,
Wendy, and Dorothy—but also their first contact with each other. This contact is itself anachronistic in that the protagonists exist in different fictional planes in different works of fiction published at different times within the Golden Age of children’s literature. These planes collide in *Lost Girls’s* first volume to put fictions of innocence—and the girls at the heart of their ageist fantasies—into a critical conversation with each other. *Older Children* dramatizes this collision to intervene in majoritarian fantasies of the golden child that each Golden Age girl protagonist, in her own way, embodies.

This volume begins with the protagonists arriving separately at Hotel Himmelgarten—a luxury resort in the Austrian countryside—in June 1914, just days before Europe officially erupts into World War I. With its horny staff and bound copies of the hotel owner’s homemade pornographic stories in all of the rooms, the resort is a kind of pornotopia semi-guarded from the war’s horrors. This pornotopia is a utopian spatio-temporal realm that exists alongside of, apart from, and within the chromonormative. In this realm of infinite and never-ending pleasures, as Steven Marcus might put it, “it is always bedtime.” At the hotel, it is always bedtime—time for classic children’s bedtime fictions and their pornographic bedtime counterparts to be introduced to each other in anachronistic ways. It is always time to go to bed, more specifically, with these fictions.

The volume’s first three chapters, in particular, mark the start of such bedtime. These chapters depict the characters crawling into their separate beds almost immediately upon arrival to the resort. The first chapter introduces Alice—depicted as a late-fifty-something, wealthy, lesbian also known as Lady Fairchild—and her bedtime. The
chapter’s first several panels showcase her high-fashion arrival to the hotel after a long journey from South Africa. Woven throughout these panels is Alice’s background story: her brother quietly sends her to this hotel so that he can maintain what he refers to as an “imperial presence”—a hetero-presence embodied by his family—within the atrophying English empire after the second Boer War. More specifically, he makes clear that Alice’s “scandalizing” relationships with women in the empire are nothing but fodder for highbrow gossip. He feels that this gossip distracts from the more pressing political and economic matters facing the royal family and their power within the colonies. Alice has no interest in such matters and sells her family’s property to support her stay at the resort. She may arrive to Himmelgarten in style, but brings few belongings with her, save some clothing and her beloved mirror—the same gilt mirror that appears on the dust jacket. She travels light, knowing that, in this pornotopia, any accessories she may need for her much-anticipated sexual exploits will be provided. She just needs her mirror and, as I soon examine, her bedtime stories. She checks into the hotel and, without delay, takes these stories to bed with her—stories that cast her Carroll-constructed girlhood self as the main character in her own masturbatory bedtime rituals.

Soon after Alice sets up her room and narrates herself to sleep, the other protagonists arrive. The second and much shorter chapter depicts the next character to land at the hotel: Dorothy—a twenty-something, lower-middle-class, exhibitionist who leaves the sexually-repressive Kansas plains for Europe. Her introduction in this chapter is quite brief. She checks in, has a quick and unfulfilling tryst with a foot-fetishist who loves her silver shoes, and then heads to her room alone, sans her cum-covered pumps.
This second chapter ends with Dorothy closing her hotel room door behind her as she turns in for the night; the third begins with the hotel’s entrance being propped open for Wendy and her excruciatingly boring husband, Harold. One bedroom door closes as another begins to open. Much of this third chapter depicts Wendy—a thirty-something, prudish mother of two—and Harold dawdling about their hotel room as they get ready to sleep in their long-sexless bed. The couple flits about the room as Harold rummages through his luggage for a business report. As he drones on about his office life, Wendy half-heartedly listens and mends a nightgown. Explicit shadows dance across the wall behind the couple as their mundane interaction continues, mocking the couple’s every dull move. These Peter Pan-esque shadows of a man and woman in the throws of a pornographic passion shadow each mundane, non-sexual movement Wendy and Harold make. Just as Wendy tells her husband that she’s tired and ready to sleep, the shadows climax together and the passionate scene taking place behind the couple ends. Wendy then turns out the lights in the final panel and the shadows disappear in the room’s quiet blackness.

The beds central to the characters’ separate bedtimes become anachronistic stages upon which innocence is undone. Doublespeak ensues as their respective storylines—lines grounded in works of classic children’s fiction—begin to tangle during the first full evening at the hotel. Alice and Dorothy are the first of the friends to cross paths. Dorothy goes to the great dining hall for dinner and Alice, not one to dine alone, invites the young woman to join her at a table. Upon introducing herself to Dorothy, Alice casually mentions that she saw her the night before with a young man. Dorothy downplays her
foot-centric engagement. Alice is both intrigued by Dorothy’s casualness about sex and charmed by her down-home friendliness. And, after wining-and-dining her dinner companion, Alice invites Dorothy up to her room for desert and a toke of opium. Wendy and Harold are shadows in this brief dining room seduction scene. The couple sits a few tables over from Alice and Dorothy and occasionally glances over at the budding romance. The women’s flirtatious interaction intrigues them. They pretend to mind their own business, however, and focus on their own small talk until the women depart for post-dinner entertainments.

Once upstairs, Dorothy and Alice smoke a bit of opium and go straight to bed. The opium begins to take effect and Alice’s bed morphs into a dark-colored, psychedelic poppy field—a field much like the sleep-inducing meadow in L. Frank Baum’s *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*. Dorothy, surrounded by the red flowers, lays on her back as Alice goes down on her. She is relaxed, but the opium brings up memories of the time she fell asleep in the poppy field and felt extremely frightened. As Dorothy briefly describes her experience in the field, the emotion on Alice’s face shifts. Her eyes—just centimeters away from Dorothy’s open legs—widen and she begins to look scared. Dorothy’s vulva hypnotizes Alice as it transforms into a glowing caterpillar smoking a hookah—a smoking insect similar to the blue Caterpillar Carroll’s young Alice meets. In this moment, the women’s childhood stories—memories grounded in children’s fiction—make contact and intersect. Stories that should be innocent and kept at a safe distance from sex become narrative points of contact for anachronistic visions of age and sexuality.
These visions and their disidentificatory effects are frightening, uncanny. The caterpillar Alice sees between Dorothy’s legs scares her so much that she screams and jumps onto the edge of the bed. Dorothy asks the older woman what’s wrong. Alice, with a panic-stricken expression, holds her head between her trembling fingers and anxiously replies, “I was just seeing things, that’s all. I just remembered a sort of . . . a sort of dream I used to have. A sort of game . . . when I was young.” As Alice’s reply trails off, alarm also washes over Dorothy’s face. She turns away from Alice and says, “But . . . but that’s what I just did.” Dorothy and Alice hang suspended together in an uncomfortable moment of recognition. Specifically, Alice and Dorothy recognize that they both were sexual girls—girls who should not exist, girls whose relationships to innocence were tenuous at best. Their respective memories of girlhood sexuality frighten them; they feel haunted by these memories. The specters of queer sexualities and experiences of age that should not exist persist.

Carla Freccero’s theorization of spectrality and queerness is a useful critical backdrop for understanding these characters’ moment of recognition. In “Queer Spectrality: Haunting the Past” (2007), Freccero describes queer spectrality as such:

Spectrality invokes collectivity, a collectivity of unknown or known, “uncanny” (both familiar and yet not) strangers who arrive to frequent us. To speak of ghosts is to speak of the social. It suggests that fantasy is the mode of our experiential existence, that it mediates how we live our desire in the world. Further, haunting, ghostly apparition, reminds us that the past and the present are neither discrete nor sequential. The borderline between then and now wavers, wobbles, and does not hold still.

Freccero’s theorization of non-sequential tempos and queerness’s tense relationships to social fantasies of time is especially relevant to thinking about anachronism and how *Lost*
Girls reimagines children’s fiction with a disidentificatory difference to craft queer visions of aging. Alice and Dorothy are, in this scene, haunted by cultural fantasies of girlhood innocence—fantasies embodied by the fictions of their respective pasts. The memories that surface in this moment rub against these fictions. The sexualized ghosts of children’s fictions past haunt these characters. These hauntings leak into some kind of pornographic present, blurring sexualized boundaries of aging in ways that complicate childhood innocence, the child-adult binary’s ideological wedge. Such complication frightens Alice and Dorothy because it confronts them with a form of doublespeak about innocence that foregrounds what Freccero might call the “borderline” separating “then”—childhood—and “now”—adulthood. On Alice’s hotel bed, this imagined strict borderline is hazy.

Such haziness is uncomfortable for Alice and Dorothy and the two decide to end the evening by going to separate rooms and sleeping in separate beds. The end to the evening does not signal the end of the characters’ budding friendship and sexual relationship—relational forms deeply entwined. This end also does not signal their disinterest in hearing each others’ stories about girlhood. Indeed, as Dorothy leaves, Alice tenderly wraps her own robe around the young woman’s shoulders and tells her the following: “We can talk in the morning when I’ve had time to think. I really do think we should talk.”39 Dorothy solemnly agrees: “Yeah. Yeah, so do I.”40 The final exchange before Dorothy goes to her own room across the hallway embodies what Freccero calls, in her exploration of haunting and queer temporalities, an invitation “to return.”41 This anachronistic return is a kind of disidentificatory project that works on, with, and against
dominant scripts of hetero-aging. Alice invites Dorothy to return to memories of their
girlhood sexualities—sexualities often edited out of majoritarian fantasies about girlhood,
but that always already haunt girls through innocence’s doublespeak.

This invitation doubles back on itself and what follows is a chapter—“Straight on
Till Morning”—that depicts Wendy and Harold’s curiously parallel dining and bedtime
experience. This chapter depicts this couple coming out of the shadows of Alice and
Dorothy’s evening together. More specifically, this chapter depicts the couple’s dinner
and eventual return to their own hotel room—a return just moments and steps behind
Alice and Dorothy’s bedtime. Upon returning to the room to, in Harold’s words, “sleep
off that meal,” the couple crawls into bed. The couple sleeps with their backs facing each
other. They simultaneously open their eyes when they begin to hear Alice and Dorothy’s
opium-fueled fucking in the adjacent room. They lay back-to-back in silence together,
listening to the women. No words pass between them. They again close their eyes,
pretending to block out the neighbors’ noises.

As soon as their eyes close, the panels shift shape. When Wendy and Harold first
arrive to their room, the panels that frame them are square. As soon as Wendy and Harold
feign sleep, however, the panels become small, rectangular, and vertical. These latter
panels are visually claustrophobic and the gutters between them begin to look like the
bars of a jail cell. Smoky, cloud-like images of the couple’s respective thoughts appear
above the dark bed. Harold’s cloud-shaped thoughts portray the kinds of freaky things he
imagines Alice and Wendy doing together next door. He then imagines inserting
himself—quite literally—into the middle of their sexy fun. Wendy’s thoughts are quite
different. At first, and with a strained look on her face, she imagines a young man and woman—blurry versions of Peter Pan and herself—kissing romantically. Almost immediately, though, the young kissers vanish from her thoughts and multiplication tables appear above her head. The couple’s thoughts rub against each other; they embody their frustrations and fears of sexual expression. Their thoughts—much like the jail cell-like panels that frame them—are contained, restricted.

When she can no longer bear listening to Alice and Dorothy’s moans and kinky talk, Wendy sits up and clenches her forehead with her hand. The thought clouds above Harold’s head disappear when Wendy gets out of bed and tells her husband that she forgot to take a bath. The panels again become squares when she locks herself in the bathroom. She thinks that the bathtub’s running water will drown out the neighbors’ sounds. However, when she sits in the steaming water, she quickly realizes that she can still hear them. She covers her ears with her hands. Their noise continues seeping through the bathroom wall. Wendy cannot escape the women’s first evening together. The sweat dripping down her somber face mixes with the tears that begin streaming down her face when she hears Alice tell Dorothy about bringing her “dreams so much closer.”

At this moment in the bathtub, Wendy realizes she has long suppressed her own dreams and sexual desires. She feels an awful emptiness. Indeed, her life with Harold is a sex-less mess—a series of dull routines and cold, Victorian formalities. Overwhelmed by this emptiness, she tears at one of her breasts and forces her other hand under the scalding faucet. She wants to feel something, anything. Emotionally drained after she finishes her bath, Wendy crawls into bed and again gets into her usual sleeping position: turned away
from Harold. Just when she thinks the noise next door is over with for the night, she overhears Alice and Dorothy discussing their sexy girlhood memories. In this moment, her face shifts from annoyance to uncomfortable recognition. She recognizes these memories—memories she has long tried to suppress. Wendy, too, is haunted by the specters of her girlhood sexuality. Unlike Alice and Dorothy, however, Wendy actively tries to deny and censor these specters because they confront her with anachronism. Life with Harold, as terrible as it may be, offers Wendy what she thinks are the comfortable tempos of hetero-domestic life. These tempos offer a kind of temporal haven from the childhood sexuality’s queer, anachronistic effects. These effects both haunt her and put pressure on dominant aging’s teleology.

Wendy polices, then, her own temporal order to ensure that anachronisms are kept at bay in the chrononormative life she cultivates for herself. This policing wears her down and she, in this moment of recognition, realizes that she hates this life. She soon feels compelled to break the silence about her aged anachronism and return to her memories of girlhood sexuality. She wants to return to memories of her girlhood with Alice and Dorothy. As this chapter’s title—“Straight on Till Morning”—suggests, then, Wendy, until the following morning, will be “straight.” She will live in straight time for the time being. However, as this chapter’s title foreshadows, she will soon “till”—or, cultivate—a queer narrative about aging.

**Story Times**

Following this long night of invitations to return, the three protagonists become friends and their anachronistic stories intersect. After a brief meeting over breakfast,
Alice and Dorothy later go to a stream to talk about their girlhood fantasies and desires—
desires that, Alice suggests, are a “strange land one discovers as a child, where nothing
makes the slightest sense.” Once at the stream, Dorothy strips down and goes skinny-
dipping. Alice sits on the cool bank and reads Sidonie-Gabrielle Colette’s stylish, girl-
centric porno classic *Claudine* (1900). She invites Dorothy to come out of the water and
puts down her book. What follows are two full-page illustrations of the women having
sex: the first page shows Alice rubbing her clothed leg between Dorothy’s wet, naked
crotch while the second shows Dorothy on all fours, gazing upon herself in the stream as
Alice plays with her anus. Despite their sexual encounter the previous night, Dorothy is
unsure about how “women do it.” Turned on by the young woman’s curiosity and
willingness to please, Alice teaches Dorothy how to “sixty-nine”—a sexual position that
Alice, while face-down in Dorothy’s crotch, suggests is “a most delectable configuration”
that “resemble[s] people on a playing card.” Here, Alice and Dorothy’s playing card-
like sexual position is both an allusion to and queer revision of Carroll’s Queen of Hearts.
Alice is, in this scene, the queen of hearts, the royal ruler of lesbian love. It is also a
moment of learning and pure joy in which Alice teaches Dorothy about how to go down
on a woman.

This is also a learning experience for Wendy. Indeed, unbeknownst to Alice and
Dorothy, Wendy followed them to the stream. As Wendy watches the women have sex,
then, she, too, is part of the lesson. As Dorothy looks up from between Alice’s legs
during the lesson, she spies Wendy watching them from behind a bank-side bush.
Startled, Alice and Dorothy immediately end the lesson and confront Wendy about being
During this confrontation, Wendy—embarrassed she is caught watching the women—begins sobbing. She confesses she overheard them talking about their dreams the previous night: “You see, that’s my story. I’ve never told anyone else about it.” After Wendy confesses that she, too, had sexual dreams as a girl, the three women then stand in a circle in the grass and Alice extends the following friendly invitation: “Fate, seemingly, has brought us to the Himmelgarten for a reason. Therefore, I propose that we devote this afternoon to storytelling. Just the three of us. Together.”

Alice’s invitation shapes *Lost Girls*’s final chapters—chapters that illustrate Dorothy, Wendy, and Alice, respectively, revealing to each other their earliest memories of girlhood and sex. These final chapters offer a kind of queer kiddie porn historiography in which the specters of girlhood sexuality return with an anachronistic vengeance. These stories foreground what Freccero calls the “ghostly demand[s] to be heard and recognized.” And, importantly, the context in which these demands must be recognized is friendship. Friendship offers the women a safe space in which they can bond through anachronism and return together to haunted memories of queer girlhoods.

During the first return—a chapter titled “The Twister”—Dorothy tells Alice and Wendy about when she had her first orgasm. Dorothy tells how, just as a tornado passed over her family’s Kansas farmhouse, a “twister inside” her also whirled. The sepia-toned panels that accompany her kiddie porn depict her rolling around on her uprooted home’s floor, her blue-checkered dress up around her waist, as she masturbates. The hetero-domestic fantasy on the plains crumbles around her. In this scene, Dorothy is not the innocent fictional child I resented as a kid. She is the queer kid I was often ashamed
to be—a sexual kid who feels both herself and “different.” She cums and the world around her explodes into bright colors. She leans up against a broken fence and a rainbow—not a halo of innocence—crows her head. Reflecting back upon this first orgasm, Dorothy tells Alice and Wendy that she, in this moment of final ecstasy, felt the following:

Everythin’ was all different, with tress in the wrong fields; the barn on its side. The east gate had its sign broke in two so that ‘tresspassin’ lied there broke up in the mud, with ‘no’ screwed around sideways. Felt like I’d been pick up and twisted around, then put down someplace else in some whole other country.

Dorothy feels like she is both child and not after her first orgasm. She feels both shattered and “new.” The fictions of her childhood innocence are blown to bits. Her relationship to dominant scripts of aging are twisted.

Immediately after Dorothy finishes her story, Alice tells Wendy and Dorothy that the tornado story sounds “so different, yet so similar to [her] own.” Wendy feels the same about Dorothy’s story. With her eyes turned downward toward the floor in shame, however, Wendy expresses that she, unlike Dorothy, cannot “summon up the courage to talk about” her first memory. Wendy continues feeling uncomfortable about being open to what Freccero refers to as ghostly returns. Recognizing Wendy’s discomfort, Dorothy asks her the following: “Oh, now you hush! If I can tell you what I did, how come you’re any different?” What follows this question is Wendy’s story about her own first orgasm. Indeed, in the chapter “Come Away, Come Away,” Wendy narrates her kiddie porn flashback of when Peter—an elf-like, teenaged gigolo—visited her and her two brothers one night in their shared nursery. The panels depict Peter flying into the room and
fondling Wendy as her brothers watch and masturbate each other. Wendy is incredibly ashamed of this incestuous scene and begins crying. The memory of her first orgasm haunts her and rubs against not only her conceptualization of girlhood innocence but also the fiction of the proper hetero-domestic, chaste home. She hates herself for what happened. She also hates herself for not having straight narrative of growing up from a normative girlhood defined by sexual innocence into womanhood. Wendy feels a sense of relief, though, after telling her story to her new friends. A weight lifts off her shoulders: “I did so need to tell someone, but now you must fear that I am deranged.”

Wendy has long wanted to return to her ghostly memories and Alice assures her that her queer memories are both beautiful and, in her words, “sane.”

After Wendy finishes telling her story, Alice shares her own. Although Alice makes clear to Wendy and Dorothy that she does not enjoy “stirring up the past,” but, in the spirit of friendship and solidarity, she does. And, in Older Children’s second to last chapter—“Looking Glass House”—she tells about how she was molested by a family friend when she was fourteen. Like Dorothy’s and Wendy’s respective stories, the flashback of her sexual encounter includes an orgasm. However, this orgasm is framed by sexual trauma. Alice’s story depicts her being raped by an old man called Bunny, a bunny reference to the time-obsessed white rabbit young Alice follows down a hole in Carroll’s original work. Bunny lures Alice into her family’s home while her parents are away and her sister sleeps by a stream with a book on her lap. Alice recounts how, as Bunny lifted up her skirt and touched her between her legs, she imagined herself leaving her body and slipping away into a mirror above a fireplace—the same mirror she brings with her to
Hotel Himmelgarten. While in the mirror, she has sex with herself, a long-time “lover” double that comforts her in a beautiful, serene pool of water. She eventually loses consciousness and wakes up on a hallway floor, distraught and unaware of time. What is especially interesting about Alice’s story: it is both a tale about a lesbian girl who is always already interested in a kind of sexuality she should not have by virtue of her relationship to age and a kidde porn nightmare. It is a story about a girlhood always already undone, a girlhood that should never exist because of its relationship to sexuality. In this way, Alice’s story is much like the other women’s stories: an anachronistic tale about sexuality in a temporal realm of self that is impossible. It is also, though, a story about a queer girlhood assaulted by desires for the child. It is anachronistic desires rubbing against other anachronistic desires. It is devastation of aging layered with devastations against age.

When Alice finishes her story, all three women stare into one of the hotel’s fountains, overwhelmed, turned on, and saddened by each others’ respective narratives. Temporal and sexual anachronisms weigh on their minds. As the women gaze into the water’s reflection, Alice tells Dorothy and Wendy the following: “There was something of my story mirrored in your own. We must talk further.” Another invitation for further returns. On the surface, the stories the women with each other share seem quite different. When read together, however, it becomes clear that Alice is—in many and complicated ways—correct. These stories—stories in which, as Freccero might describe them, the “past is in the present in the form of haunting”—all challenge dominant narratives of aging and childhood innocence.
Specifically, the characters’ stories draw inspiration from—in different ways—classic children’s fiction to queer these texts and their fictions of girlhood. These fictions are the raw materials for the work’s disidentificatory lens that gazes upon aging with a raw difference. The characters’ stories about girlhood sexual experiences transfigure the authors’ original constructions of innocent girls, revealing a range of queer girlhoods and experiences of aging that put pressure on the child-adult binary. They construct stories about girlhood that include—in ways that are sometimes empowering and sometimes devastating critical commentary on—sex. The characters have power over their respective stories and take control over how they are told. These are not stories of how innocence needs to be protected and fetishized. These are pornographic stories that work on, with, and against innocence’s fictions.

The diverse kiddie porns that circulate within *Lost Girls* underscore how the fictions of innocence persist in difficult ways—ways that sometimes allow anachronistic sexual pleasures and sometimes invite sexual violence because of the cultural power dynamics that rely on them. Sometimes childhood sexuality can be an empowering realm of anachronism; sometimes it can be shameful. Sometimes, as is the case for Alice, imagined relationships to innocence make it so that children become open to violence because they are given so little agency over their temporalized bodies and experiences. Innocence can produce, in other words, the same violence imagined to assault it in every way imaginable because children are often denied access to consent. Sexual consent in childhood is itself anachronistic because children are imagined as (a)sexual. Innocence can be both a blessing and a curse. *Lost Girls* does not depict, however, this violence
against Alice, in particular, to make some kind of plea for keeping innocence safe from
temporalized sexual anachronisms. Rather, this work depicts such violence through a
disidentificatory pornographic lens to reveal how patriarchal institutions of age produce
aged power dynamics that can have very real consequences for girls, in particular. In this
way, it’s not that intergenerational desires and sex are demonized in *Lost Girls*. After all,
the stories the protagonists share with each other—pornographic stories about girlhood
that queer the imagined divides between child and adult—open narrative spaces for
sexual pleasure, empowerment, and community-building. Intergenerational sex and
desire are not always already traumas. Relationships to innocence can be a critical mixed
bag and kiddie porno can offer, *Lost Girls* makes clear, an artistic space in which to
explore the anachronistic pleasures and dangers of desire within and for childhood.

**Touching Girlhoods**

In his influential and highly controversial study *Erotic Innocence: The Culture of
Child Molesting* (2000), James R. Kincaid offers the following corrective about the
fictions of innocence:

> We might try to manage without stark essentialist ideas of sexuality and sexual
> behavior, see what might be done by positing a *range* of erotic feelings within and
toward children. Rather than assuming that such feelings exist in only two
> forms—not at all or out of control—perhaps we could learn something about their
differences, manner of expression, and effects, allowing them complex and
dynamic relativity.\(^6^4\)

Kincaid’s excerpt is a useful backdrop for reading both the protagonists’ stories and *Lost
Girls*’s political investments in kiddie porn and its anachronistic effects. Kincaid
illuminates how a work like *Lost Girls* crafts stories about girlhood to include a “range”
of sexual and temporal experiences that go beyond these two forms. As queer kiddie

---

porn, these protagonists’ stories reveal that girls not only have sexualities, but that these sexualities are neither heterogeneous nor always already pathological. Indeed, Dorothy’s and Wendy’s respective girlhood narratives are about enjoying sex in complicated ways that put pressure on dominant temporal constructions. These narratives are also about returning to—touching through time—these complicated pleasures in some kind of reimagined now in ways that are self-affirming. And, even though Alice’s story depicts both her sexual abuse and the traumatic aftermath of her rape, her narrative also underscores how kiddie porn is not itself a story about trauma. Her story depicts how narratives about sexual violence within kiddie porn can be conversation pieces for critical reflections on memory and aged experiences. Her story functions in the graphic novel’s depiction of now as a site of self-affirmation and survival. And, as some of the kiddie porn stories she later shares with her new friends within the graphic novel make clear, stories of violence can also exist alongside stories of girlhood sexual pleasure. Kiddie porn, in this way, can be just as much about pleasures as it can be about revealing how memories of violence return. In other words, these stories of girlhood sexual pleasures—pleasures that return to turn on the protagonists—exist alongside stories about violence.

The kiddie porn stories so central to Lost Girls offer a counter-narrative to dominant constructions of childhood sexuality that work on and against the “not at all or out of control” binary Kincaid rails against. Classic children’s fiction and pornography roll around in bed together in disidentificatory ways to produce, then, new and complex visions of aging and sexuality. After she finishes sharing her memory of rape, Alice wants to continue building upon this counter-narrative. However, Wendy’s husband and
Dorothy’s former companion, Captain Rolf Bauer, approach the women as they stand together at the fountain. These men interrupt these stories; these stories are for friends’ ears only. The women make plans to continue, however, the stories elsewhere and decide to take a train together to the Théâtre des Champs-Elysées in Paris to see the May 29, 1913 premiere of Russian modernist composer Igor Stravinsky’s and choreographer Vaslav Nijinsky’s controversial ballet *Le Sacre du printemps*, or *The Rite of Spring*. Attending the performance requires a kind of going back in and through time, a kind of turning back through time to touch an imagined past. Time becomes unhinged, anachronistic. The ballet performance requires a temporal return in which the present rubs against another queer past.

Much like when Alice, Wendy, and Dorothy share their stories about their first orgasms, this anachronistic return to a time past within the present is pornographic. The return to *The Rite of Spring*’s premiere opens a critical space within the novel where the protagonists reach orgasm together. This return marks a kind of pornographic moment in which their friendship comes to a head. This return also marks another contact zone in which the fictions of childhood innocence and mainstream pornography rub together in ways that, at this point in the graphic novel, come to a head. Classic children’s fiction and pornography sit together, side-by-side a public performance that makes central to its own narrative an anachronistic and pornographic return to pre-historic Russia. In this imagined return, unbridled sexual expression and temporal anomalies dance rampant across the stage. *Older Children*’s final chapter reimagines the riot caused by the ballet’s
radical depiction of anachronistic sexualities—a riot that caused *The Rite of Spring* to end its performance run with its premiere.

As feminist theater scholar Sally Banes notes in her study *Dancing Women: Female Bodies on Stage* (1998), theatergoers were incited to riot for the following reasons:

The music, with its unusual sounds, harmonies, polyrhythms, and repetitions, was shocking to Western ears; equally shocking to the ballet audiences were the twisting, stunted postures of the dancers, their impassive faces, their angular gestures with jutting elbows, their knock-kneed stances, their turned-in toes, the incessant earth-bound stamping, and their bolting jumps in place.65

In other words, theatergoers at *Le Sacre*’s premiere were incited to riot because of the ballet’s “unballetic,” as Kevin Kopelson calls it, queerness.66 The ballet’s second act, “The Sacrifice,” in particular, troubled the audience. This second act depicts young men and women whose performances were not traditionally gender coded, especially by ballet’s pre-modernist standards.

Specifically, Banes notes the following about this first part of *Le Sacre*’s second act: “the most crucial gender-coding event of the classical ballet is missing here—for there is no pas de deux. There are couples, but . . . there is no single principal couple taking center stage.”67 Moreover, the second half of this act—“Mystic Circles of the Young Girls”—showcases the Chosen One. The Chosen One is a sexualized girl figure who “transfigures” into a little lesbian.68 In the first half of the act, the Chosen One is a chaste girl pawned off into hetero-marriage—a marriage safely couched in the dominant temporal order. However, by the second half and with the help of her eroticized girl/friends who dance around her on the stage, she transforms from an innocent into a
pornographic figure whose coupling and relationships to teleological family time becomes, as Banes puts it, “abstract.” Anachronisms—sexual, aged, and artistic—dance across the stage. Premiere-goers, confronted with these anachronisms and other crimes against temporality, lashed out against the stage and each other. This kiddie porn sacrifices innocence at its own alter.

That Gebbie and Moore end Lost Girls’s first book with a reimagining of this riot is significant. These final scenes dramatize what sometimes happens when kiddie porn’s anachronisms confront majoritarian eyes with queer visions of intergenerational sex and desires that should not exist. What this scene also dramatizes: minoritarian eyes that find pleasure in this kiddie porn impossibility. In this final chapter, the girl/friend protagonists and two “tedious men”—Captain Bauer and Harold, who are disturbed deeply by the ballet’s own working on, with, and against dominant constructions of aging—arrive at the ballet just as the crowd begins to riot. As Alice, Wendy, and Dorothy watch the ghost-like girl dancers on stage, they become overwhelmed with desire for each other. Two large, parallel panels, one on top of the other, depict this desire. The top panels portray the ghostly-looking girls, as Alice describes them, “erupting into wildness, interweaving, spinning, adolescent, celebratory . . . the empty spaces blossoming between the moving bodies.”

As the girls in the top panels dance faster and faster upon the stage, the large bottom panels depict Alice, Dorothy, and Wendy starting up a threesome in the theater’s front row. This scene exploits doublespeak and “looking twice” through its own pornographic construction. This is the first time all three women have sex together. No
one in the crowd notices them. They are too busy losing their minds over the innocence lost—the ghostly apparitions of girlhood—and queer expressions of friendship on the stage. They fear that the anachronistic depictions of girlhood sexuality and friendship will become real, become a reality. Specifically, they fear the these will depictions will jump off of the stage and bite their imagined safe and chrononormative reality. Innocence’s doublespeak, they fear, may become more than just speak.

For Alice, Wendy, and Dorothy, however, this depiction of anachronisms is empowering, inspiring, and sexy. The stage inspires them to rub their own fictions—those grounded in Golden Age children’s fiction and pornography—together. After all three women orgasm together, they leave the theater and stand on a side street. They hold hands tenderly and, for the first time, introduce themselves to each other by their first names. After their respective first-name introductions, Dorothy smiles and asks, “Y’know, ain’t it just perfect we should all be friends?” Alice punctuates Dorothy’s rhetorical question with a final observation: “I knew so many stories.” Much like her new girl/friends, Alice knows so many anachronistic, queer stories about aging and sexuality, stories that rub against each other with disidentificatory effect. She knows about the fictions of innocence—especially those so central to classic children’s fiction—and the radical potential of their pornographic undoings. The relational forum for voicing these undoings: queer friendship.

What follows this final scene is a narrative explosion of kiddie porn, a constant stream of narrative returns to classic children’s fiction with a disidentificatory and pornographic twist. This twisted stream of stories deepens the protagonists’ friendship
and prompts them feel closer to each other. These queer relational bonds—both between
the friends and their fictions—form what Jose Esteban Muñoz describes as
disidentification’s ability to create narrative spaces for possibility. These possibilities
offer disidentificatory visions of what he calls “counterpublics—communities and
relational chains of resistance that contest the dominant public sphere.” These relational
chains put pressure on not only the child-adult binary, but also the fictions of innocence
that inform its imagined coherence.
Patched Works and Reimagining Higgledy-Piggledy

Scratch a child, you will find a queer.
—Kathryn Bond Stockton

This chapter is about scratching children, finding queers. Specifically, it’s about examining the queers we find when children in fictional texts are scratched, their imagined innocence slashed to bits, bloodied, made curiouser. Scratching, here, is an analytical mode of performance in which an artist’s hands rub against texts’ straight grains, her queer fingers first lingering over fictional children, then, with sharp and critical claws, digging into their fleshy and haloed abstractness. What remains after their claws retract: shredded kiddies, ghostly junk figures of futurity, monstrous assemblages of bodies and times that should never be touched with less-than-chaste intentions.

These tattered fictions’ queer textures not only interfere with innocence’s blankness, but also reconfigure childhood by sidelining its expected developmental trajectory straight into adulthood. Indeed, scantily swathed in their own perverse undoing, scratched children present visions of queer temporalities, social relations, and reading practices that expose and dismantle the universalizing ruse of childhood innocence and growing up. Scratching, then, rewrites the dominant script of age. This chapter is not simply about scratching as a disidentificatory artistic practice, but what happens when the post-scratching tatters are sewn together in strange ways that foreground the performative remnants of their undoing.
To explore how such scratching reimagines children’s fiction to problematize dominant aging’s cultural logics, I turn to American artist Shelley Jackson’s now-classic electronic hypertext *Patchwork Girl* (1995). A hypertext with neither an unambiguous narrative trajectory nor a clear-cut conclusion, *Patchwork Girl* presents a web of intertextual allusions to various theoretical, historical, and fictional works, including L. Frank Baum’s illustrated children’s book *The Patchwork Girl of Oz* (1913) and Mary Shelley’s gothic novel *Frankenstein* (1818). We, as readers, navigate *Patchwork Girl*’s complex network of allusions and links without knowing what we will read next. As we pilot through this network, we become hyperaware of—and, perhaps, frustrated by—this hypertext’s lack of a clear beginning, middle, and end. Feminist literary critic N. Katherine Hayles discusses these readerly frustrations in terms of their relationships to, in part, textual scaring. Specifically, Hayles interprets the work’s rhetorical comparison between “hyperlink” and the corporeal, memorial inscriptions, and “scars” as such:

>The user inscribes her subjectivity into the text by choosing which links to activate, which scars to trace. Contrary to the dictates of good taste and good writing, the scars/links thus function to join the text with the corporeal body of the user who perform the enacted motion that bring the text into being as a sequential narrative.

Readers’ respective interests and curiosities about which links to click next drive, in many ways, how they engage *Patchwork Girl*. Depending on which paths of links—or, lexias—readers choose to follow, the texts’ meanings change and shift. Though we navigate *Patchwork Girl* in what feels like circles and often repeat which links we follow and which lexias we read, we, as Hayles suggests, eventually organize the hypertext into some kind of sequential-ish narrative.
Such sequencing is driven by our navigation of the text, not the text’s narrative, per se. It is not that *Patchwork Girl*’s narrative has no sense of *first this happens, then this happens*, and so forth. Rather, this sense of happening is tenuous and highly relative because how we navigate the work varies. We may organize *Patchwork Girl* into something that may seem like a linear narrative, but, as we read this hypertext, we realize the following: Jackson’s work invites us to think about linear narrative structures as a narrative option, not a narrative rule. In this same way, the text presents disidentificatory visions of aging—visions that make chronological aging an option, not a chrononormative rule. Through stitching together the text’s tattered narrative patchwork, then, readers are confronted with queer developments that reconfigure dominant aging and its chronological telos.

In her often-cited 1997 talk at MIT, “Stitch Bitch: The Patchwork Girl,” Jackson shared with her audience that *Patchwork Girl* reflects her following preference: “My favorite texts loiter, dawdle, tease, pass notes, they resist the linear, they pervert it.”⁵ For Jackson, such texts—or, examples of “bad writing,” as she calls them—exemplify “everything that for centuries has been damned by its association with the feminine.”⁶ Electronic hypertexts are particularly damned. Because they often have numerous reading paths and multiple narrative entry points, Jackson notes, electronic hypertexts are “amphibious vehicle[s], good for negotiating unsteady ground, poised on [their] multiple limbs where the book clogs up and stops, [they] keep in motion.”⁷ Such hypertexts are, in other words, “what literature has edited out: the feminine.”⁸
Perhaps not surprisingly, Jackson suggests that hypertexts allow her to forge new possibilities for reconfiguring femininities. She articulates how *Patchwork Girl*, as a hypertext, opens a performative and metacritical space where she can critique traditional masculinist print narratives. Such masculinist narratives subordinate various feminine bodies and subjectivities, Jackson argues, because the patriarchal realm of language reinforces them. For Jackson, both *Patchwork Girl*’s non-linear structure and intertextual makeup subvert this language. Feminist media studies scholar Jenny Sundén corroborates Jackson’s criticism of patriarchal narrative structures. Sundén argues that many readers may bring this narrative baggage into their first *Patchwork Girl* reading experience, but that they may also learn “to give up the search for the True Story—which never existed anyway.” In other words, when we begin to read *Patchwork Girl*, we may look for linear narrative lines. Because we are conditioned to want masculine narratives, we look for a transparent narrative progression that fulfills our expectations for what “good writing”—and aging within this writing—looks like. We may want clearly marked chapters and numbered pages. We may want a story that we can follow from beginning to end, a story that is *stable*. The more links we follow and the more lexias we read, however, the more we are confronted by the feminine and aging that follows queer trajectories.

*Patchwork Girl*’s intricate web of lexias and links is, however, not particularly groundbreaking. Indeed, Jackson’s work was published at a time when hyperfiction was particularly sexy amongst postmodern writers and artists looking for critical outlets that allowed them to explore crafting narrative patchworks in electronic platforms. Moreover,
*Patchwork Girl*’s feminine performance reflects, in many ways, mid- and late-1990s queer and feminist hypertext artists’ interests in complicating feminine subjectivities and bodies.\(^1\) Like Jackson, these this group of electronic hypertext artists were deeply invested in both challenging masculinist print narratives and performing various femininities through hypertextual mediums. Media scholar Caitlin Fisher notes that many such artists working in electronic mediums revisited 1970s feminists’ interests in critically revising classic print texts, deconstructing domestic spaces, and consciousness-raising—projects deeply interested in deconstructing dominant aging and its relationships to femininity.\(^2\) Fisher suggests that several of Jackson’s contemporaries were particularly interested in using their work to “disrupt understandings of the boundaries of feminist theory.”\(^3\)

“[T]hrough their performance of feminist theories,” Fisher argues, Jackson’s contemporaries used their hypertexts to both create spaces that were “as much about feminism’s past as about its present” and “disrupt the easy linear developmental tale of the feminist then to the feminist now.”\(^4\) In short, these artists were interested in exploring the potentially productive relationships between feminist content and electronic hypertext form. They were also interested in disrupting dominant narratives of feminist generationality and feminine aging—narratives that often cling to ageist discourses of innocence, as I soon examine, in the name of preserving imagined innocents (e.g., women and children).
Queer/Feminine/Hypertext

Jackson’s work is notable within this broader context of electronic art precisely because of how it prompts readers to engage depictions of various feminine subjectivities and bodies through Storyspace—the software used to create Patchwork Girl—and the computer screen. Moreover, considering Patchwork Girl’s perceived place within the larger history—both feminist and otherwise—of hypertext, Jackson’s work is notable also because it exploits the content-form relationship between the illegible feminine subjectivities and bodies Jackson depicts. Laura Shackelford suggests the following about Jackson’s complex depictions of femininity:

[Patchwork Girl acknowledges] the multiplicity within the category of the feminine that compromises social systems’ and subjectivities’ attempts to stabilize a single gendered identity, as well as the material complexity of physical bodies—their lack of identity, sameness, or stability—marks the limits to a masculinist illusion of instrumental mastery. Foregrounding these limits, Patchwork Girl opens up the possibility of a different grammar, one that would enable nonoppositional, nonbinary differences rather than require the subjugation of difference and of a logic of [masculine] possession that attempts, but inevitably fails, to secure the reproduction of the same.15

As this quote from Shackelford makes clear, Jackson’s hypertext is invested in creating a narrative space that upsets various restrictive sexed and gendered identity constructs. According to Shackelford, this work depicts the patchwork girl—Jackson’s scarred protagonist made of various sewn-together human and animal parts collected from various gravesites—denaturalizes these constructs. The work’s depictions of the patchwork girl’s volatile feminine corporeality and personal history ultimately question how bodies materialize. Such depictions reveal, in other words, how seemingly stable sex and gender categories become naturalized through discursive repetitions by
foregrounding narrative alternatives to disrupt such repetition.\textsuperscript{16} Much of this disruption stems, as N. Katherine Hayles suggests, from the patchwork girl “having been assembled and not born, with no chance to grow into the adult she now is.”\textsuperscript{17} The patchwork girl has no origin point grounded in birth; no starting place for development’s teleological spread into woman-hood. She is made of body parts from several women, men, and a cow. Here is a sampling of her body’s strange and strained origins: her liver comes from Roderick, a gay fabrics importer who lived with his partner in the English countryside; her left breast comes from Charlotte, a woman who “squirted” her “extra milk on her dying babies”; her vagina comes from Eleanor, “a lady very dexterous with the accouterments of femininity”; her veins come from Helen, a “quiet and malleable young woman”; and her lower intestine comes from an unnamed cow.\textsuperscript{18} The patchwork girl’s piecemeal body underscores her illegible femininity and tenuous relationship to narratives of dominant aging tied to the imagined cohesively—aged, gendered, sexed—human body.

The patchwork girl’s illegible femininity certainly destabilizes gendered logics of the coherent. But, is she, as Hayles assumes, \textit{an adult}? Put differently, is her illegible femininity always already adult because she was, as Hayles suggests, “assembled and not born”? More specifically, does the patchwork girl’s assembled body and history only question how adult bodies and adult femininities materialize? Even the patchwork girl asks herself the following: “What is the age of the resurrected body?”\textsuperscript{19} In posing these questions, I draw attention to how contemporary feminist scholars often focus their critical energies on deconstructing the patchwork girl’s illegible femininity in terms of sex and gender categories, but overlook how age operates—or, does not operate—in this
work. This oversight is particularly striking, given early queer and feminist hypertext artists’ interest in critically examining the age complex—especially girls’ and women’s roles within this complex—through electronic mediums that questioned dominant narratives of development. This oversight is more so striking given Jackson’s use of texts that are about the horrors of aging and origins—especially Baum’s own *Patchwork Girl*—as raw materials for critiquing dominant narratives of age.  

Scholars’ oversight of how age operates in *Patchwork Girl* is symptomatic of contemporary feminist scholarship’s tendency to imagine children as both asexual and innocent. Steven Angelides examines this tendency in his influential essay “Feminism, Child Sexual Abuse, and the Erasure of Child Sexuality” (2004). Angelides suggests that, since the 1980s, “childhood sexuality” often “figure[s] only as an oxymoron” in feminist scholarship. He argues that this oxymoron has discursive roots in post-1980s feminist indictments of child sexual abuse and child pornography. Feminist discourses of child sexual abuse compromise, Angelides argues, childhood sexuality because it either “ceases to be sexuality, or else the use of terms such as *sex play* and *sexual experimentation* works to disqualify it.” Indeed, in feminist scholarship, tropes of sexual innocence haunt children. And, if feminist scholars do discuss children’s sexualities, they typically imagine children as asexual and oversimplify, trivialize, or downplay their sexual expressions as innocent games.  

Such feminist discourses, then, often reinforce a strict age-sex divide between children and adults. By reinforcing this divide, adults are figured as sexual and children as asexual. In other words, feminist discourses of sexuality tend to “collapse the axis of
sexuality into that of age.” This collapse upholds, Angelides argues, a “linear and sequential model of age stratification premised on distinct chronological, spatial, and temporal stages of biological and psychological development.” The collapsing of age and sex onto each other in this way is reflected in feminist scholars’ criticism of *Patchwork Girl*. By assuming that the patchwork girl is an adult, scholars like Hayles both deny that *Patchwork Girl*’s depictions of desire and sex between the patchwork girl and various other characters are anything other than depictions of adult sex. Such assumptions ignore Jackson’s hypertext’s complex illustrations of intergenerational sex and multi-generational bodies. Moreover, such assumptions ignore age constructs’ relationships to broader discourses of power and temporality.

“In its poststructuralist and deconstructive variations, queer theory,” Angelides maintains, “offers an important corrective” to the linear model of age, binary constructions of age-sex, and, in particular, the oversimplification of childhood. My project on disidentificatory visions of age takes Angelides insight here to heart. According to Angelides, such “queer critical interventions highlight the importance of examining the signifiers of ‘childhood,’ ‘adolescence,’ and ‘adulthood,’ and thus the analytic axes of age and sexuality, in the same frame of analysis.” Through such a queer lens, we are invited to see that even how we engage *Patchwork Girl* is inextricably linked to how we engage the patchwork girl’s illegible femininity and her non-sequential age, and vice versa. Indeed, when we navigate Jackson’s hypertext, we do not engage the patchwork girl as a character who relies upon linear narrative lines that determine her
subjectivity. We engage her, rather, as an unstable character who exists only through and during her hypertextual narrative construction.

The patchwork girl’s narrative construction underscores how Jackson’s work is a thoroughly queer text that revels in its own queer, feminine performance—a performance that disidentifies with the temporal machinery that drives dominant aging. Jackson’s hypertext underscores, more specifically, gender scholar Lynne Huffer’s discussion about “queer performativity.” In her work on narrative ethics and the grammar of feminist and queer theory, Huffer suggests the following:

Queer performativity . . . openly acknowledges its own linguistically constructed status, where the emergence of the speaking subject coincides with the moment of utterance of the speech act itself. Thus, while both narratives and performatives produce subjects, narrative depends on a retroactive legitimation of the subject position through the temporality of narrative grammar, while performativity admits that the subject it speaks in the present moment of the utterance is the only subject there is.29

Considering Huffer’s discussion about queer performativity, I suggest that *Patchwork Girl* is a queer text because it simultaneously foregrounds its own constructedness and “openly” constructs the patchwork girl’s volatile identity categories, especially these categories’ relationships to age. As such a text, *Patchwork Girl* is, as I later explore, both self-conscious of its “amphibious,” queer, feminine natures and how this amphibiousness is necessarily linked to the patchwork girl’s temporal multiplicities.

A queer reading lens helps this text’s amphibious depictions of age and sexuality, in particular, come to life. Indeed, using a queer lens to investigate *Patchwork Girl* allows us to move beyond feminist scholars’ sometimes flat discussions Jackson’s hypertext and its relationships to reading practices. Exploring *Patchwork Girl* through a
queer lens is especially productive because it invites us to both interrogate how Jackson’s work complicates the normative age-sex binary and better explore this text’s complex depictions age. Moreover, a queer lens allows us to examine how queer discourses of age inform Jackson’s depictions of queer feminine sexualities. Ultimately, such a lens encourages us to complicate the age-sex binary that feminist scholars often implicitly uphold in their respective critical discussions about Patchwork Girl and rethink Jackson’s hypertext’s place within feminist literary and media scholarship.

Assembling Innocence

Patchwork Girl’s depictions of queer couplings offer particularly fruitful insights into how this work complicates the age-sex binary. In particular, this hypertext’s portrayal of the queer relationships between the patchwork girl and her two primary lovers in the text—Mary and Elsie—foreground its deep interest in working on, with, and against this binary to challenge normative feminine constructs.

To begin my exploration of these queer couplings, I first turn to the hypertext’s depictions of the patchwork girl and Mary. Mary—a fictional version of Mary Shelley—writes and sews the patchwork girl. Keeping her creation a secret from her husband, Percy, Mary pieces the patchwork girl together late into night by candlelight. While assembling the patchwork girl, Mary feels like she is “sewing a great quilt, as the old women in town do night after night, looking dolefully out their windows . . . and imagining [Mary’s] sins while their thighs tremble.”30 These older, sexually frustrated women fantasize about—masturbate to?—Mary having sex-filled nights with Percy as they sew their evenings away. Indifferent to these women’s sexual curiosities, however,
Mary keeps on with her work. She is focused on her creating her monster. “[T]his creature is,” Mary thinks to herself as she diligently works to create what will eventually become the patchwork girl, “a brash attempt to achieve by artificial means the unity of a life-form—a unity perhaps more rightfully given, not made.” As she works on putting together the monster, she reflects not only about the patchwork girl’s artificial unity of self. She also reflects on her own feeling “interrupted” and pieced together in ways that seem artificial. She feels much like how the patchwork girl’s body looks: patched together. In many ways, then, what Mary calls her “brash” effort to make the patchwork girl whole and unified through sewing is an attempt for her, too, to feel whole and unified. She’s unsure about her efforts for unity, yet she continues her work during long nights in the hopes that her final project will be an embodiment of her own quest for a seamless self.

Central to Mary’s conceptualization of this seamlessness is childhood innocence. She projects innocence onto the patchwork girl and sews her with what she imagines are tender threads that will organize her blankness. Specifically, Mary imagines that the patchwork girl will be a version of the ideal Romantic child: innocent, close to nature, uninhibited, simple, carefree, and virtuous. Mary wants the patchwork girl to be the Romantic child she feels she never was—or, could be—as a girl. She projects her desires for innocence onto the patchwork girl, constructing her origins as innocence embodied. This innocence is important to Mary’s belief that the innocent child is the origin point from which a coherent, proper woman emerges over time—a woman she feels she is not.
Mary articulates her feelings of alienation from this innocent child as such:

“[W]hen I was a child I laid a piece of paper over a tombstone and rubbed a bit of charcoal back and forth . . . until the winged skulls and disconsolate maidens emerged . . . as if summoned up from my own bewildered and superstitious soul.”

Even as a child, then, Mary knows that she is expected to grow into proper—heterosexual—feminine womanhood from a proper—asexual, though, at the same time, heterosexual—feminine girlhood. Her girlhood was neither properly asexual nor heterosexual and the gravestone with the maidens she so desired marked both the death of her straight life and estrangement from the child ideal she fetishizes. As a girl, Mary is haunted by the image of the Romantic child and feels her own girlhood fell short of this ideal. It did and she is haunted by a queer childhood that should have never, in her mind, existed. She could have, if this queer childhood never existed, a seamless self. Deep down, Mary knows that the innocent child is an idealization, a child that is always already a fiction, a figment of the Romantic imagination that somehow became a cultural fetish object. This is an idealization, though, she can’t shake. And, as she constructs the patchwork girl, she hopes to realize this Romantic child and make material the ideal she always wanted to experience herself.

A rubiks cube of desire drives Mary’s long, candlelit nights in her workshop. In tense and dense ways, sexual desire, in particular, drives her fantasy to create a Romantic child. Just like the older women who longingly look at her window at night as she sews and writes, Mary stays up late into the night, driven by her own sexual frustration. Mary “craves” the patchwork girl—her sewn progeny—and what she describes as a “fierce
mad engine that [throbs] inside [her] serene life, staining [her] underclothes” motivates her creation. Part of what drives Mary’s sexual drive is, then, her sexual attachment to the innocent Romantic child. The Kincaidian language of doublespeak colors her descriptions of her mad engine. This language eroticizes the same innocence it imagines as bearing no potential for eroticism. In his critical articulation of such doublespeak and its specific attachments to the Romantic child figure, James Kincaid suggests that this figure is imbued discursively with fraught sexual fantasies. Perhaps ironically, such doublespeak haunts contemporary feminist discourses of childhood (a)sexuality. Indeed, these discourses construct discourses of childhood innocence that end up fetishizing innocence. These discourses embody broader majoritarian narratives of aging—narratives haunted by its fetishistic attachments to childhood purity. Such discourses eroticize children—especially girls, the ultimate innocents—at the same time they imagine them as asexual, lacking potential for erotic potential. They imagine children as sexuality’s inverse, the embodiment of sexual lack—a lack that keeps them safely separate from adults whose imagined sexual development poses dangers. Mary’s desire to create a Romantic child is, then, also a queer desire to both materialize her innocence—innocent?—fetish and appease the “fierce hunger under her stays.”

It is quite easy to read Mary’s relationship with the patchwork girl as a mother-daughter coupling. After all, Mary calls the patchwork girl her “child.” However, Mary does not see herself as a mother. She sees herself, instead, as existing outside the hetero-reproductive framework that constructs the innocent child. She constructs what she imagines is the innocent child at the same time she resists reproducing its normative
framework. For example, when the patchwork girl comes to life, Mary calls herself a “would-be parent.” This would-be role exists outside of the heteronormative parental and, more specifically, hetero-maternal role. This role resists parenthood and, at the same time, underscores a queer lexicon for forms of relationality not tied to heterosexual reproduction and motherhood. When Mary calls herself a would-be parent, then, she resists normative constructs of time and space grounded in heterosexual reproduction. As Judith Halberstam makes clear in her theorization of queer spatio-temporalities, “[r]eproductive time and family time are, above all, heteronormative time/space constructs.” Mary resists both reproductive and family time. Instead, she forges a queer time and space for herself in which, as Halberstam might suggest, “the separation between youth and adulthood quite simply does not hold.” In this time and space, in other words, the child-adult binary stands on shaky grounds. Mary is, then, neither ageless nor does she exist completely outside dominant narratives of age, per se. However, Mary’s age does not fit into the normative child-adult binary.

Even though Mary herself complicates heteronormative spatio-temporal constructs, she clings to the mythology of the Romantic child and continues to uncritically project this myth onto the patchwork girl. Mary loves when the patchwork girl runs through the hills near her home, “stamping,” “hallooing,” “jumping,” and “laughing”—fulfilling, in other words, all of her Romantic-child-of-nature fantasies. Moreover, Mary is excited—even turned on—by the patchwork girl’s carefree nudity as they roam the forest together. Mary is, in these moments, enthralled by the patchwork girl and describes her a “hoydenish child of overgrown proportions [when] she tears the
For Mary, the patchwork is an “exuberant, ferocious, loving, and unhinged” Romantic child of monstrous proportions. And, despite the passing years, her creature remains frozen in time by her desires for the innocence child, a child suspended in a temporal bubble by its own purity.

Curiously, at the same time Mary thinks of the patchwork girl as a Romantic child, she understands that her creation’s body is made of body parts that belonged to people and an animal who were very different ages upon their respective deaths and who died at different times. Like Mary Shelley’s creature and L. Frank Baum’s Scraps, her own patchwork girl is an aged collage. Mary also understands that “[s]craps of memories” that are attached to the patchwork girl’s various body parts “blow through her mind like bits of patterned cloth.” Initially, for Mary, such memories and body parts—scraps of Scraps and the creature—neither sway her attraction nor chip away at her thinking about the patchwork girl as an innocent child. Indeed, at first, Mary views the patchwork girl as “infant”-like because her normative linear age suggests that she is only a few years old. Her dreams of innocence unravel, however, once she and her creation have sex. More specifically, Mary’s fantasies of the patchwork girl as a kind of mythical Romantic child require that she remains an untouched object of desire. Once touched, her asexual child-ness is destroyed.

Innocence’s wedge between the child-adult binary is breached by sex. The patchwork girl’s returned affections undermine her creator’s fantasies that depend on this wedge. And, soon after these fantasies come to an abrupt end, Mary no longer shows interest in the patchwork girl. Her child is scratched by her desire; a queer is found. The
patchwork girl feels tattered, torn apart by Mary’s sudden indifference. She runs away from home and begins sinking into a deep depression, or what she calls “post-partum blues in reverse.”⁴⁹ She feels backwards, temporally reversed, like a child who is born and feels depressed by her birth. She is disillusioned by Mary’s long-time insistence that her creation is an embodiment of the Romantic child. She feels she has lost not only the creator who gave her a narrative, then, but also the temporalized narrative itself. She is no longer defined by Mary’s ideal Romantic child and becomes overwhelmed by her fragmented body and history—a body and history that has no “script,” no norm, no ideal.⁵⁰ She feels scratched; her queerness begins to ooze from her patched self.

**Wandering Times, Bodies**

Eventually, after parting with Mary, the patchwork girl begins wandering the world. This wandering is both temporal—she jumps from the early nineteenth century to the early twentieth—as well as spatial. Specifically, she moves from England to New York City. While in New York, the patchwork girl lives with Madam Q, an elderly, straight-talking spiritualist who makes her earn her keep by participating in séances. The patchwork girl’s stitched body—a body animated by the temporal ghosts of bodies past—serves as the visual centerpiece for Madam Q’s group conjurings of ghosts. After several years of living in New York, the patchwork girl grows restless with her role as a kind of fetish object in Madam Q’s business. She leaves the spiritualist’s home and “hopscotches” to late-twentieth-century Los Angeles.⁵¹ Frustrated by what she refers to as her “chequered nature” and its exploitation, she hopes her spatio-temporal leap west will both help her shed her pieced together body and history.⁵² Such shedding will, she
believes, provide a fresh, new start in life and allow her to “grow into [her much-desired] oneness.” Much like Mary, the patchwork girl desires a unified self—a self that follows a chronological trajectory, a self that without scars highlighting her queer temporal seams. In New York, her seams are on constant display. Her hope is that, once in LA, she will become seamless.

In LA, the patchwork girl works as a plumber and lives alone in a cramped apartment, which she fills with tacked-up photos of beautiful celebrities and her extensive collection of stuffed giraffe toys and knick-knacky figurines. When not at work, she spends hours by herself in her bathroom. Desperate for smooth, uniformly colored, scar-free skin, she often sits in her bathtub and stares dreamily at the photos of whitewashed movie stars on her bathroom walls. These celebrities are visions of feminine beauty, hetero dreams of perfection that embody a strained mix of youthful innocence and ideal sexual allure. As she gazes upon these posted icons, she douses her scars with acid, snips away at her raised tissues with scissors, and scours her entire body with pumice stones and facial scrubs. She uses the tools of the proper, adult feminine trade to perfect her body. Perfection is, for the patchwork girl, in the corporealized temporal details. Complete erasure—or flawless coherence—is her ultimate goal.

The patchwork girl does not, however, simply want to erase the networks of scars that fuse together her various body parts to make herself feel physically whole. She wants to create, rather, a corporeal tabula rasa, a clean slate upon which she can write—or, rewrite—a new history. On some level, the history she wants to write reimagines the normative lines of aging and her body is the text upon which she wants to reimagine her
temporal disjunctures. This blank slate is a medium, then, for imagining new ways of aging, starting from some kind of self-created ground zero. The network of lexias that showcase the patchwork girl’s quest for self-creation also showcase the twisted irony central to her depicted feelings of agency. This slate works on and against childhood innocence’s imagined blankness to envision new possibilities for selfhood. The patchwork girl’s work in the bathroom is destructive, though, and underscores her over-identification with white beauty. The visual lure of this beauty and its promises for unending happiness is incredibly potent. And, in foregrounding the patchwork girl’s in-the-toilet self-esteem and violence against her own body, this scene makes clear how dreams can so easily turn into nightmares.

Her painful scrub-and-snipe sessions in the tub yield few results. Despite her best and most painful efforts, the scars on her trans-aged, chimeric body remain. Distressed by these complicated and patched remains, she sets her sights on purchasing a coherent past. She desires historical accessories, more specifically, to complement what she hopes will turn into a seamless corporeal self. She uses her now-middle-class purchasing power for these accessories. At the same time she continues working on her scars in the tub she also begins pounding the LA pavement in a quest for someone else’s past—a past she can call her own. She believes that another’s supposedly whole past will satisfy her need for a history that is both coherent and “unified under the aegis of I.”54 Such past is, she believes, a necessary counterpart to her future corporeal wholeness.

She sees a young white woman, Elsie Hull, on a random city street. There’s something about this middle-class woman—something the patchwork girl can’t quite
articulate—that catches her eye. She can’t quite put her finger on why Elsie, of all people in the hustle and bustle of the street, stands out. Nevertheless, the patchwork girl imagines Elsie’s historical accessories as her own. She imagines Elsie and her attending accessories, in other words, as a hull—a frame or skeleton—for a history that could be her own. She chooses this hull, picks it right off the street, and offers to buy the woman’s history. Elsie agrees to the patchwork girl’s sales pitch and gives her a photo album.

The patchwork girl, delighted with her purchase, pours over the album’s images. She believes that the past is “just a nasty habit of thought” and spends hours memorizing various details from Elsie’s pictured life. Particularly interesting to the patchwork girl are images from Elsie’s childhood:

Her past was perfect for me. . . . I acquired the house I was born in and the blurred corner of my bedroom window. I acquired the red light of a flashbulb in my wide five-year-old eye, a blink at ten, a scowl at twelve. I acquired half a street sign: — ST ST. I acquired a B&W curtsey in a new grey dress held out at knee-length, and the same dress in a sandbox, revealed to be green, and flirting about the top of scrawny thighs.

The patchwork girl’s interest in these images of childhood reflects her desire to become “historical.” This sense of the historical is grounded in the album’s curated images of domestic life and a supposedly chronological age narrative. These images are partial and unstable snapshots of a girlhood, a patchwork of aged visions. These snapshots—as partial and unstable as they may be, as I soon discuss—embody a nostalgic fantasy of normative aging for the patchwork girl. She reads these snapshots as evidence of the normative trajectory of age in which “[l]ife once did flow toward death, parents engendered offspring, time moved from the beginning to the end.” The patchwork girl feels she is, without this album’s visual narration of this trajectory, “a disturbance in the
flow.”59 This album gives her a sense that her life goes with the proper flow of aging. She feels that her body and its piecemeal history disrupts the normative, linear, sequential model of age stratification. She also feels that buying Elsie’s history—and, in particular, Elsie’s girlhood—will allow her to transpose a linear model of age onto her own temporalized body.

The patchwork girl does not fit into a linear model of age. Neither her temporal self nor its mapping onto her patchworked body speak to this model’s demands for chronology along aged-sexed lines. Jackson’s loosely threaded together illustrations of the assembled protagonist in LA, specifically, foreground her strained relationships to the child-adult binary. These illustrations are rife with imagery associated with girlhood. For example, the patchwork girl hopscotches across the country from New York to Los Angeles and many of the stuffed giraffes in her apartment are actually “fuzzy baby toys.”60 And, just as many young girls post their favorite television, music, sports, and movie stars on their school locker doors and bedroom or bathroom walls, the patchwork girl tacks up photos of celebrities in her apartment. Moreover, the patchwork girl spends much of her time in the bathroom, an often rigidly gendered domestic space theorized in terms of its relationships to constructions of girlhood and femininity.61

Images of the patchwork girl as a child or doing child-like things are always paired, however, with narrative meditations on her so-called adult age. For example, after she meets Elsie, the patchwork girl notes to herself that the “motley effect of [her] patched skin has lessened with age and uniform light conditions, though [she is] still subtly pied.”62 She also notes that she has “lived in [her] frame for 175 years” and that,
by “another reckoning,” she has “lived many lives” and is “much older” because several of her body parts belonged to people and creatures from centuries past. Although she may be almost two-hundred-plus-years-old when she meets Elsie, the patchwork girl’s body does not embody the dominant signs of old (i.e., any of the beauty-focused pathologies the age complex projects onto aged feminine women, in particular). Rather, her body looks much like it does when she is first assembled. Just as much as her body puts pressure on the category of child, it also puts pressure on adult corporeality. Her patched body hangs suspended in time. History washes over her trans-historical body with a difference. Time lightens her seams, but her scars remain. Like Baum’s Scraps, she is a temporal quilt, a feminine figure held together by strange and loose yarn. She is a spectrum of times and bodies that, when sewn together through the hypertext’s linked narrative threads, queers aging and age-specific signifiers.

Her seams may become slightly less prominent with the passing of time, but she still feels disjointed. She continues focusing on her disunity and what she sees as her lack of complete self. The patchwork girl desperately wants to become “a real woman,” and, for her, an important part of becoming real is passing through a linear, coherent girlhood into adult womanhood. Elsie’s album gives her a sense of coherence. As the excerpt describing scenes from Elsie’s photo album suggest, however, the patchwork girl does not purchase a girlhood she can ever either fully know or fully incorporate into the new, smooth body she tries to bring to life in her bathroom. This excerpt makes clear that the patchwork girl only really ever purchases visual snippets of Elsie’s childhood: parts of her girlhood bedroom, half of the street sign that marks where she lived as a kid, images
of her eyes obscured by a camera’s flash. She buys images of one of Elsie’s girlhood
dresses that, in one black and white photo, seems grey and modest, then, in a color photo,
seems green and revealing. These images are partial and disjointed snapshots of
innocence. Elsie’s purity is also partial, an apparition colored by the sexualized
“flirtation” woven throughout the album. These photos are not as innocent as they may, at
first glance, appear. The girlhood innocence the patchwork girl believes will give her
some kind of coherence is not as coherent as she would like. Much like the patchwork
girl’s body, this photo album is an elaborate collage. And, the patchwork girl has in her
possession, much to her eventual disappointment, only partial images of this patchwork.
Girlhood innocence—the most innocent of childhood innocences—is a constructed
fantasy that even a woman who has a seemingly smooth body and history cannot embody
fully. This innocence only ever exists, she comes to realize, as a hetero-domestic fantasy.

**Falling to Pieces**

Elsie’s photo album serves, at least for a time before this realization, as material
evidence of a past and makes the patchwork girl feel like she has a History. Such feeling
historical helps her cope with her hard feelings attached to the physical scars that draw
attention to her strained relationships to innocence and linearity. She holds onto this
fantasy of historicity and denies the sexualized specters that dance throughout the photo
album. These photographic pieces help her feel real, complete, and undivided. For a
fleeting moment, the patchwork girl believes “that [she] put [her new body and history]
together so neatly.” Her body slowly begins, however, to fall apart. One morning, after
suffering through an evening of nightmarish, prophetic dreams about her organs
disbanding from her body, she wakes up and runs outside. As she stands in her backyard, her body explodes, erupting into a bloody mess. After gathering her body parts, she makes her way to her bathroom and tries to think of someone to call and help her. She has no friends or emergency contacts. She calls Elsie, who immediately makes her way to the patchwork girl’s house, no questions asked.

After Elsie’s initial shock of seeing the patchwork girl sitting in a bathtub brimming with “a warm reddish slurry of bathwater and blood” wears off, she, too, gets into the tub. In a lexia titled “I made myself over,” the patchwork girl describes the scene that plays out in the bathroom:

Elsie [is] immersed in me, surrounded by fragments, but somehow she held them. I [am] gathered together loosely in her attention in a way that [is] interesting to me, for I was all in pieces, yet not apart. I felt permitted. I began to invent something new: a way to hang together without pretending that I was whole. Something between higgledy-piggledy and the eternal sphere.66

N. Katherine Hayles suggests that this scene reveals the moment in which the patchwork girl “realizes that if she is to cohere at all it cannot be through unified subjectivity or a single narrative line.”67 The patchwork hangs together in the water, exploring her fragmented body in the tub and begins accepting her lack of unified self. Specifically, she begins accepting that “she is always already fragmented, ruptured, discontinuous.”68 Shackelford makes similar observations. Much like Hayles, Shackelford maintains that this bathroom scene is the first moment in Jackson’s hypertext in which the patchwork girl “finds a way to make [her] parts meaningful that does not aspire toward a union, conjoinder, or wholeness.”69 Specifically, this excerpt depicts, Shackelford notes, the
patchwork girl slowly recognizing that her patched body, history, and memory are neither whole nor will they ever be so.

Once the patchwork girl accepts her existence as somewhere “between higgledy-piggledy and the eternal sphere,” she begins to celebrate her multiple subjectivities and fragmented body. Unlike the patchwork girl’s earlier experiences in the bathroom in which she violently tries to erase her scars, the bathtub experience with Elsie makes clear that her body and relationship to time does not need to be defined by wholeness. As the patchwork girl sits with Elsie in the blood-filled bathtub, then, the bathroom shifts from a space in which to both inflict self-violence and feel shame into a space in which to celebrate her fragmented body. Sitting together in the tub with Elsie, the patchwork girl’s body becomes “supple,” her “furniture parts [become as] mellow as wax and [her] joints and junctures, long turned to proper purposes, [bend] past their right angles into impossible obliquities, or [find] curves not known to their before-uses.” For the first time since she was animated, the patchwork girl feels comfortable with her fractured memories. This sense of comfort she now feels allows her to explore her body’s range of movement in ways that she always resisted because such movement reminded her that she is chimerical.

The patchwork girl’s new-found acceptance of her multiplicity emphasizes how Jackson’s hypertext complicates corporeal boundaries and feminine subjectivities. We see in this bathtub scene that Jackson’s hypertext disrupts seemingly stable sex, gender, and age constructs by queering the normative discourses that construct the illusion of such stability. Both patchwork girl and Elsie’s tub experience and the events leading up
to this event call attention to how Jackson’s hypertext calls attention to such disruption. Specifically, the patchwork girl desires wholeness. But, the harder she tries to force herself to become whole by erasing her scars and substituting Elsie’s supposedly coherent childhood memories for her own, the more she, as Hayles puts it, “erupts into crisis.” The patchwork girl’s crisis stems, put differently, from her refusal to accept herself as an assemblage. The more she tries to transpose Elsie’s supposedly coherent childhood onto her own history, the more she—quite literally—falls apart.

When exploring her loosely-together body in the tub, the patchwork girl notes she is “many things before [she becomes] something like human again, and all the while Elsie [is] magnificent, like a woman in a fairy tale, holding her true love tight, though she turn badger or wildcat or asp.” Self-acceptance does not come easy for the patchwork girl and she, according to herself, is like a dangerous animal who does not want to be touched. Elsie hangs with her in the tub, though, sitting immersed in her loose body. Self-acceptance is, in this scene, refracted through both lesbian eroticism and a queer doubling. The patchwork girl—who is, at times, Elsie—and Elsie—who is the patchwork girl by photographic proxy through the album—become a queer assemblage in the water. Their bodies and strained relationships to temporality churn together in the tub. The strict age-sex divide between children and adults collapses in this scene, not onto itself, but in spite of itself. Time and bodies bind in this scene and queer aging becomes washed with queer desire.

This bathtub scene revises the Western fairy tale narrative tradition that typically ends in a happily-ever-after, hetero-coupling that follows some kind of developmentally-
significant journey. In this way, the scene reimagines—through a queer postmodern narrative lens—classic children’s fiction with a difference. Cristina Bacchilega’s theorization of fairy tale revisions offers useful insights into the political implications of what she calls “rereading” culturally-potent texts. She suggests that such postmodern revisions often work on the following two levels:

Postmodern revision is often two-fold, seeking to expose, make visible, the fairy tale’s complicity with “exhausted” narrative and gender ideologies, and by working from the fairy tales’ multiple versions, seeking to expose, bring out, what the institutionalization of such tales for children has forgotten or left unexploited. This kind of rereading does more than interpret anew or shake the genre’s ground rules. It listens for the many “voices” of fairy tales as well, as part of a historicizing and performance-oriented project.

Rereading here is a kind of disidentificatory artistic practice that transfigures a fairy tale from within. Taken as an entire network of lexias and links, *Patchwork Girl* is not simply a revisionary fairy tale, per se. I quote Bacchilega at length here, however, because she makes clear what is at stake in how this bathtub scene re-envisions the normative fairy tale narrative with a queer difference.

Elsie is “like a woman in a fairy tale” because she holds onto the patchwork girl and looks past her supposed abject grotesqueness. However, she is neither a stereotypical, self-sacrificing, virginal martyr who forfeits her sexual agency for a heroic, prince-like figure, nor is she a prince-like figure who rescues the patchwork girl from (self-) destruction. Elsie accepts, rather, the patchwork girl’s multiplicities and helps her understand that normative femininity and its teleological aging is a myth, its own kind of fairy tale for majoritarian culture. This bathtub scene does not offer a tidy ending that upholds such myths. This bathtub scene exposes, instead, what is left from such
narratives: multi-generational, intergenerational queer sex. Not only does this scene rewrite a fairy tale-like narrative that includes such queer sex, but it also suggests that such sex is central to the patchwork girl’s acceptance of her feminine multiplicities. Moreover, this sex scene works on and against the age-sex binary that, in many ways, haunts the patchwork girl throughout Jackson’s hypertext.

When the patchwork girl sits in the tub with Elsie, then, her resolution to create a “way to hang together without pretending that [she is] whole” disrupts how femininity is written on her body by characters like Mary. She no longer tries to cohere to normative sex, gender, and age categories. She no longer feels that she needs to grow and develop into feminine womanhood from an idealized feminine girlhood premised upon innocence and chastity. The patchwork girl describes what she discovers about herself after her bathtub experience with Elsie as such:

I had lived longer than anyone I knew of, without palpitations or forgetfulness. I would live even longer, no doubt. I thought, if my life has no foreseeable end, if the shape and reach of it is unknown to anyone, then what I know of lives from books and conversation has no bearing on my case.

If I clung to traditional form with its ordered—to youth, adolescence, middle age and senility—I belonged in the grave. I’d be like black holes and other zombies that live on their own extinguished matter, turn all light back into themselves, live a non-life without time in the aftermath of time, chewing on themselves. I could be a kind of extinguished wish for a human life, or I could be something entirely different: instead of fulfilling a determined structure, I could merely extend, inventing a form as I went along.75

This passage underscores this hypertext’s investments in destabilizing normative linear age-sex constructs. The patchwork girl’s description here of what she discovers about herself suggests that she accepts her unclear beginnings—or, birth—and unforeseeable ending—or, death. She realizes that she does not follow a “traditional form with its
ordered stanzas” and finds such stanzas restrictive, even boring. Through these images of self-acceptance and reflection, Jackson’s work forges an artistic-critical space that offers empowering images of queer *structures* and ways of being aged that do not follow dominant lines of hetero-aging.

By embracing her fragmentation, the patchwork girl disidentifies with normative feminine age constructs. Through such disidentification, she creates an alternative, subversive way to express her femininity—a way that embraces her patched body and queer narrative tempos. The patchwork girl accepts, in other words, that she is an assemblage and begins forging a flexible, constantly-changing, multiplicitous femininity for herself that complements her sewn-together self. Once the patchwork girl recognizes that her corporeal assembly—and the respective histories and memories of the various people and creatures imbedded in her assembly—allows for her contradictions, then, she celebrates how her contradictions and illegible femininity destabilize binary gender logics and these restrictive logics’ attachments to bodies.
Djuna Barnes’s avant-garde novel *Nightwood* (1936) reimagines the fairy tale Little Red Riding Hood in queer and multiple ways. At the novel’s narrative center is a reimagining of the wolf disguised as Little Red Riding Hood’s grandmother. Barnes spins the wolf into the queeny Matthew O’Connor, a long-winded pseudo-physician who performs both abortions and deliveries from his rented room—a room that looks like an unkempt museum of rusty surgical tools and feminine fineries past. The doctor is reimagined as the wolf in bed, disguised in grandma’s clothing. Only he is more than a wolf-grandma. He is also the innocent, haloed golden-girl who brings her ailing grandparent a basket of goodies. He is a queer archive of ages and temporalities within and beyond the fictions of human development, a perverse figure who complicates the dominant temporal framework.

Thinking that a “sodomite” lover has arrived for an evening of role-playing fun, the doctor invites the novel’s protagonist, Nora Flood, into his “disorder.” Misery brings

---

1. Djuna Barnes

her to his dark room; misery keeps her here, despite an overwhelming “metallic” smell of blood and the pail at the end of the bed “brimming” with aborted fetuses and other “abominations.”

She wants to talk with the doctor about her disastrous break-up with her former partner, Robin Vote, a woman who left her for another. She wants to leave her own abominations—difficult feelings of loss and confusion—in the pail. She seeks comfort, closure, and a venue for catharsis from her doctor friend. The doctor, a bit embarrassed by his appearance, grabs the blonde wig—his prosthetic innocence—from atop his graying head and pulls the sheets up over his nightgown. He quickly forgets about both his embarrassment and original plans for the night when he sees Nora’s distressed face. He is an ally in her difficulty and wants to help her through this dark time. What ensues is a lengthy, quasi-monologue-like rumination on queer love lost, hope, and existing in what he calls the “wrong time.”

Sprinkled throughout this meditation on desire and temporality are reflections on his own queer desires for proper aging and other supposedly comfy hetero-temps. He describes his complex resentment toward both his face that’s like “an old child’s bottom” and inability to have proper memories of himself as a beautiful girl—a girl who embodies his wishes for a girlhood he could have grown straight out of on his trajectory into womanhood. He notes that the kind of woman he wants to be(come) isn’t even particularly well to do, that he doesn’t need much to live the age narrative he so desires. He makes clear that his wishes for this gendered narrative of proper aging are quite simple, semi-straightforward:
God, I never asked better than to boil some good man’s potatoes and toss up a child for him every nine months by the calendar. Is it my fault that my only fireside is the outhouse? And that I can never hang my muffler, mittens and Bannybrook umbrella on anything better than a bit of tin boarding as high as my eyes, having to be brave, no matter what, to keep the mascara from running away?

The doctor does not always get what he wants. But, he makes clear, these unfulfilled wishes do not keep him from imagining queer futures in and beyond the present. The doctor lives by a queer calendar. And, though he suggests that living by this calendar is neither comfortable nor easy, he also submits that shedding tears for the chrononormative institutions that disenfranchise queer folks like him is often a waste of good mascara. He offers Nora insight into his own resentments toward and longings for certain tempos not to suggest that desires and the difficult feelings that they sometimes produce aren’t worth holding onto and exploring with a critical, beautifully-painted eye. Rather, he offers this insight in the hopes that she soon realizes that they shouldn’t keep her suspended in “misery.” Indeed, Nora is suspended in misery and wishes she could turn back time so she can be with Robin once more. She wants to be suspended in another time, a time passed, a time when she was happy with a woman the doctor describes as a “perpetual” child. She describes her miserable suspension in time and feelings as such: “Every hour is my last, and . . . one can’t live one’s last hour all one’s life!” Time binds her difficult feelings to a past and she hangs suspended in a depressive moment that seems infinite. Her future feels bleak.

In a kind of last-ditch effort to unhinge his friend from her suspension in this depressive state, the doctor sheds light on Nora’s own misery. He turns to a narrative past to offer her a sense of a queer future. Specifically, he suggests that the origins of her
bleak feelings stem from the origin stories of childhood: fairy tales. These stories haunt Nora in oppressive and slippery ways. He narrates these stories with a disidentificatory voice to inspire Nora to imagine new possibilities for her future. With this voice, more specifically, he reads the stories’ seemingly innocent hetero-romances with a queer and critical difference:

You never loved anyone before, and you’ll never love anyone again, as you love Robin. Very well—what is this love we have for the invert, boy or girl? It was they who were spoken of in every romance we ever read. . . . We were impaled in our childhood upon them as they rode through our primers, the sweetest lie of all . . . for in the girl it is the prince, and in the boy it is the girl that makes a prince a prince—and not a man. They go far back in our lost distance where what we never had stands waiting; it was inevitable that we should come upon them, for our miscalculated longing has created them. They are our answer to what our grandmothers were told love was, and what it never came to be; they, the living lie of our centuries.⁹

The doctor articulates here how dominant narratives of childhood innocence and hetero-reproductive futurity circulate in classic children’s fairy tales. Such narratives, he suggests, “impale” childhood with their interpellative calls—calls that are supposed to hail children into the age complex. His reflections on how these narratives circulate within the fictions of childhood expose both their disciplinary effects and universalizing ruse. These reflections impale such fictions, poking holes in their logics to reveal what makes the age complex tick.

The doctor holds onto these narratives, though, infusing them with a queer difference that simultaneously problematizes dominant aging and harnesses their ideological force.¹⁰ Specifically, in the above excerpt, the doctor rewrites dominant aging’s narrative machinery to articulate queer, “miscalculated longings” for age. He reads these fairy tales through minoritarian eyes that contest aged subordinations. In this
way, he creates an empowering narrative space for imagining new and queer futures that exist in and beyond hetero-maturation’s developmental plotlines—plotlines contoured by innocence that are supposed to culminate in fairy tale couplings. He offers Nora this future-oriented vision to inspire both hope and her own visions of a future beyond such plotlines. This disidentificatory vision uses fairy tales as the raw materials for painting a picture of what Jose Esteban Muñoz might call “a queer world within a very anti-queer future.”

Building queer worlds within a future imagined as anti-queer is, ultimately, what all of the reimaginings of children’s fiction I examine throughout this project do. As I have hoped to show throughout, these works work, on, with, and against majoritarian fantasies of childhood. They do so to inspire, complicate, and imagine. Through disidentificatory artistic practices—practices I call critical aging—such works make age fatter with meaning. Specifically, they make age spread with queer meaning in ways that offer visions of queer developments in dominant aging’s own developmental plot. These visions are important because they offer temporal lifelines to those of us so often desperate to find value in how we differently plot our own—personal and communal—fictions. They both speak to and reflect upon many of our own miscalculated longings for aging, offering visions of queer developments, horizons of potential and risk worth grasping for with critical thumbs.
Introduction: Queer Developments and the Politics of Reimaginings Age


8 I borrow the language of “difference” and disidentification here from Jose Esteban Muñoz, Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), p. 14. I expand upon these terms in my examination of critical aging and inhabiting narratives of age with a difference.

9 I pick on the iconic American little-girl-in-pearls here because it is a kind of culturally-potent image that both reinforces childhood’s supposed naturalness at the same time it gives viewers a safe glimpse into the girl’s hetero-normative adulthood. For
examples, see Norman Rockwell illustrations like “Girl Dressing Up in Mother’s Clothes” (1971) and “Prom Dress” (1939).

10 In this project, I use the terms “age” and “aging” interchangeably. In critical age studies, the terms are generally used to define very specific relationships to temporalized constructions of self—relationships I sometimes find un-useful. For example, the term “age” is deployed typically as a way to speak about the broader realm of identities constructed around chronological time. “Aging,” though, generally references being either an older adult or an elderly person. I swap these terms throughout this project to reference both the temporal construction of identities and their movements in, through, and against time. For influential critical discussions of aging as a way to denote elderly adults, see Thomas R. Cole’s The Journey of Life: A Cultural History of Aging in America (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992); Margaret Cruikshank’s Learning to Be Old: Gender, Culture, Aging (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2003); Carroll L. Estes’s The Aging Enterprise (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1979) and “Critical Gerontology and the New Political Economy of Aging” in Critical Gerontology, eds. Meredith Minkler and Carroll L. Estes (Amnityville, NY: Baywood, 1999); Anne-Julia Zwierlein, Katharina Boehm, and Anna Farkas’s edited collection Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Aging in Nineteenth-Century Culture (New York: Routledge, 2013); and Kathleen Woodward’s Aging and Its Discontents: Freud and Other Fictions (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991).

11 Stockton, The Queer Child, p. 10. In this way, I follow a similar kind of critical practice that Teresa de Lauretis outlines as such: “[M]y theoretical speculations and my reading of the texts follow the yellow brick road of my own fantasies, the less-than-royal road of my personal or experiential history.” See de Lauretis’s The Practice of Love: Lesbian Sexuality and Perverse Desire (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), p. xiv.


13 Muñoz, Disidentifications, p. 28. See also Michel Pêcheux, Language, Semantics and Ideology (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1982).

14 Muñoz, Disidentifications, p. 12.

15 Ibid., p. 1.

16 Ibid., p. 30.


For example, producing and re-printing children’s fiction, reading children’s fiction to children, and re-imagining this fiction in the name of upholding dominant childhood’s supposed coherence. A great example of un-shelving in the name of naturalizing age’s teleology through aged cultural production is Disney. Disney has built a media and printing empire through both producing and un-shelving children’s fiction. The company’s films—*Mary Poppins* (1964), *Bambi* (1942), *Alice in Wonderland* (1942), *The Jungle Book* (1967), and *Frozen* (2013), for example—speak to both the cultural potency and lucrative economics of such un-shelving. Another great example of such un-shelving that is not particularly radical—but certainly edgier than Disney—is Adam Mansbach and Ricardo Cortés’s *Go the F**k to Sleep* (2011), a spin on Margaret Wise Brown’s *Goodnight Moon* (1947).

Muñoz, *Disidentifications*, p. 31.

See Judith Butler, “Critically Queer,” *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 1 (1993): p. 227. See also Butler’s *Undoing Gender* (New York and London: Routledge, 2004). Butler’s theorizations of generationality and critical articulations of development in *Undoing Gender*, in particular, suggest her interest in what I call the age complex. However, her work is largely symptomatic of a kind of critical slippage. It is exactly this critical slippage, this oversight of age—especially in gender and sexuality, critical race, and, more broadly, various critical strands of cultural and performance studies—that is so striking to me. In both feminist and queer studies—fields of study that ground my project—this general lack of critical engagement with age, as a construction, is even more so striking. It is striking, specifically, because these fields, in general, often revere so highly critics who are so willing to deconstruct various other axes of identity,
such as race, gender, sexuality, and class, just to name a few. Why not deconstruct age with as much analytical gusto?

26 Ibid., p. 5.


28 Freeman, *Time Binds*, p. 3.

29 Ibid., p. xxii.

30 See Judith Halberstam’s *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives* (New York and London: New York University Press, 2005). Halberstam’s discussion of how Brandon Teena was punished for his trans-temporal misalignments is especially insightful.


32 Thank you to Livio Fedeli for offering some of his deep knowledge of mathematics as I began formulating this equation.

33 I suggest *typically* here only because, in contemporary middle-class American culture, it is a common practice to denote age using smaller units of time for children. Especially for those identified as newborns or infants, fractions of the year are used to indicate age. For example, a newborn may be described as six weeks old and an infant may be a year and four months old. This practice embodies the proliferation of normative aged categories that began taking shape during the nineteenth century through discourses of scientific aging.

34 Since the inception of critical age studies in the 1970s, it is exactly this fantasy of chronology that several influential age studies scholars spotlight in their calls for a kind of agelessness. Academic discourses of agelessness like those by Bernice Neugarten and Bill Bytheway and contend the following: completely demolish the dominant fantasies of aging and various ageist institutions will, almost as if by magic, follow. Without these fantasies and their discursive traces, they believe, there can be no ageism. Freedom, alas. Such discourses of agelessness, then, *know* age. And, while they do not necessarily assume that hard and fast facts about aged subjects can be wrought from this knowing, they reduce dominant aging down to a kind of cultural hocus-pocus. Feminist
critic Barbara Marshall argues that the quasi-separatist calls for agelessness, despite their good intentions, often reflect a kind of “postageist ageism.” In a disidentificatory critical move that foregrounds how such postageist calls manifest privileged positions within what I call the age complex, Marshall suggests they uphold ageism by ignoring the very real lived impacts of dominant age’s deceptively simple math. Fantasy or not, age and its arithmetic matters. How and why it matters in different contexts and moments, of course, shifts. See Barbara Marshall, “Sexualizing the Third Age,” in Aging, Media, and Culture, ed. Lee Harrington, Denise Bielby, and Anthony Bardo (London: Lexington, 2014), p. 169.

35 Muñoz, Disidentifications, p. 6.

36 Ibid.

37 Ibid.


39 Ibid., p. 21.


41 As James Kincaid reminds us in his beautifully acidic exploration of childhood purity’s complexities: “Innocence is a lot like the air in your tires: there’s not a lot you can do with it except lose it.” See James Kincaid, Erotic Innocence: The Culture of Child Molesting (Durham: Duke University Press, 1998), p. 53.

42 For example, Lee Edelman’s discussion of “reproductive futurism” and its relationship to the figure of the innocent child. See Edelman, No Future, p. 3. See also Lauren Berlant’s articulation of “infantile citizenship” and nationhood in The Queen of America Goes to Washington City: Essays on Sex and Citizenship (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997).


45 See Thomas Laqueur’s discussion of *Onania* in *Solitary Sex: A Cultural History of Masturbation* (New York: Zone, 2003). This text, for Laqueur reflects the medical and educational institutions’ respective—though thoroughly entwined—policing of childhood innocence.

46 See Bruhm and Hurley, *Curiouser*, p. xvi. For Bruhm and Hurley, the Lockean articulation of childhood innocence “apotheosized” specifically into the romantic child central to Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s theorizations of age. See also Rousseau’s *Emile, or A Treatise of Education* (London and Edinburgh: Donaldson, 1768). *Emile*’s articulation of three stage of youth—*infans* (infancy), *puer* (childhood), and *adolescence*—greatly impacted the institutionalization of age-gradated education in Europe.

47 Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Volume 1* (New York: Vintage, 1978), p. 4. Foucault makes this relationship clearest in his discussion about what he calls generation: “Nothing that was not ordered in terms of generation or transfigured by it could expect sanction or protection. Nor did it mean a hearing. It would be driven out, denied, and reduced to silence. […] Everyone knew, for example, that children had no sex, which was why they were forbidden to talk about it, why one closed one’s eyes and stopped one’s ears whenever they came to show evidence to the contrary, and why a general and studied silence was imposed.”

48 Ibid., p. 19.

49 Punishments for sins of the highest order are reserved, of course, not for those queer children who may be sexual (e.g., masturbating kids) but for those categorized as adults who direct sexuality toward children (i.e., some of the utmost of perverts).

50 Ibid., 42.

51 Here is a sampling of contemporary categories, in order from most innocent to least: newborn, infant, toddler, early childhood, adolescent, tween, and teen. For a discussion of contemporary age categories and their developmental telos, see Diederik


52 Ibid., 75.

53 Literary and cultural studies scholars like Seth Lerer and Philippe Ariès suggest that the history of producing literature for children has a much longer history. Lerer, for example, traces the history back to “antiquity.” I’m deeply suspicious of these “since the dawn of time” articulations of and am much more interested in the institutionalization of a children’s literature market—a market entrenched in the modern age complex. See Philippe Ariès’s *Centuries of Childhood: A Social History of Family Life* (New York: Vintage, 1962) and Seth Lerer’s *Children’s Literature: A Reader’s History from Aesop to Harry Potter* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008).


1. *Queer Binds*


2. Peter’s account of the fairies’ history is an almost word-for-word transcription of J.M. Barrie’s own account in the novel *Peter and Wendy* (1911). Peter, upon meeting Wendy, tells her the following: “You see, Wendy, when the first baby laughed for the first time, its laugh broke into a thousand pieces, and they all went skipping about, and that was the beginning of fairies.” See J.M. Barrie’s *Peter and Wendy* in Jack Zipes’s *Peter Pan* (New York: Penguin, 2004), p. 27.

3. I borrow the language of time binds here from Elizabeth Freeman. “Time binds,” Freeman suggests, refer to the ways in which meanings assigned to temporal constructs become bound—or, attached—to social meanings. She also uses this term to refer to how such meanings create socio-temporal confines. See Freeman’s *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), p. 3.

4. While at Neverland, Peter tells Wendy the following: “Look, Wendy, I always want to be young and happy, you know? And I think everyone else wants that. People are assholes. They get caught in these traps, they grow up, and get all of these stupid responsibilities. And, that’s just not going to happen to me.”

5. I borrow the language of “lining up” from Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s theorization of queer as a critical practice that reads “sites where meanings [don’t] line up tidily with each other” with “fascination and love.” See Sedgwick’s *Tendencies* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993), p. 3. Jose Esteban Muñoz expands upon Sedgwick’s theorization of queer as a critical practice: “To perform queerness is to constantly disidentify, to constantly find oneself thriving on sites where meaning does not properly line up.” See Muñoz’s *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), p. 78.

6. Ambivalence is a key term Muñoz deploys in his theorization of disidentification—a term I complicate later in this piece. Indeed, Muñoz suggests that, “at its core,” disidentification is “an ambivalent modality that cannot be conceptualized as a restrictive or ‘masterfully’ fixed mode of identification.” Such ambivalence is grounded in both desires for and negotiations of majoritarian fields of representation. See Ibid., 28.


9 I speak from personal experience here, as I have been accused of all these charges while sharing my work in professional settings—settings like academic conferences. My feeling is that these accusations are often less about critically engaging with dominant aging and more about navigating a culture of fear in which questioning age’s imagined mathematical soundness is often, as I mention in this project’s introduction, a crime. The accusations are, then, more like identificatory reflexes and less like disidentificatory critical rigor—the kind of rigor the texts at the heart of this project produce through their own artistic practices of critical aging. On many levels, these accusations reflect Steven Bruhm and Natasha Hurley’s following insight: “Discussions of queerness and child sexuality all too quickly invoke the specter of the pedophile, which all to quickly destroys one’s political credibility.” See Bruhm and Hurley’s excellent introduction to *Curiouser*, p. xxiii.

10 Muñoz, *Disidentifications*, p. 100.

11 Ibid., p. 71.

12 Barrie’s *Peter Pan* has an extremely complex history. This work is an intricate web of stagings, publications, and revisions. Arguably, Barrie’s first depiction of Peter Pan appears in his popular 1896 novel *Sentimental Tommy: The Story of His Boyhood*. In *Sentimental Tommy*, the protagonist, Tommy Sandys, imagines that a little boy is lost in the woods. Deeply troubled by the thought of this orphaned boy, Tommy is consoled by one thought: that the lost youngster would remain a boy forever. However, the most often-cited and most developed first incarnation of Peter Pan appears in Barrie’s novel *The Little White Bird*, a 1902 novel originally conceptualized for and marketed toward an adult audience. Barrie’s little-studied novel *The Little White Bird* is often widely regarded as the adult precursor to what we now often simply refer to as *Peter Pan*. However, even this origin story is much debated within children’s literature scholarship circles. Indeed, the publication history of Barrie’s Peter Pan-centric work is all too often fodder for scholarly pissing contests in which critics jump down the rabbit hole of the work’s archive to make strained cases for specific origin stories and archival truths. At the heart
of this contest are the following questions: What is the real and true Peter Pan? Is the real Peter Pan actually Barrie’s The Little White Bird, the much-overlooked publication Sentimental Tommy: The Story of His Boyhood, the novel Peter and Wendy (1911), Peter Pan: A Fantasy in Five Acts (1928), the much-revised collection Pete Pan, or The Boy Who Would Not Grow Up (1928), or any of the many stagings that Barrie created featuring Peter Pan? These inquiries underscore not only how questions of origins shape Barrie scholarship, but also how this scholarship revels in—and rebukes—what George Steiner calls “contingent difficulty”—a kind of difficulty in which readers dive head first into “looking things up” for answers that explain references that will, hopefully, elucidate something about a text. See George Steiner’s “On Difficulty” in the Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism 36:3 (1978): 267.

Jacqueline Rose refuse to participate in this contest and, instead, roll around in the works’ archival difficulties—difficulties that draw attention to Peter Pan as an open web of texts closely associated with literature and performances for children. Rose’s exhaustive and complex bibliographies of Barrie’s work is especially useful because it draws attention to this openness. See Rose’s The Case of Peter Pan, or The Impossibility of Children’s Fiction (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1993). For discussions of origins within the Peter Pan archive, see R.D.S. Jack’s “The Manuscript of Peter Pan” in Children's Literature 18 (1990): p. 101-13. See also Allison B. Kavey’s “I do believe in fairies, I do, I do’: The History and Epistemology of Peter Pan” in Second Star to the Right: Peter Pan in the Popular Imagination, eds. Allison B. Kavey and Lester D. Friedman (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2009), p. 75-104.

Barrie’s popular plays are especially difficult. In terms of staging, the first public performance of Peter Pan took place in London in 1904. Barrie delighted in revising his work, however, making the stage history of this play extremely complicated. For example, when directing Peter Pan for stage performances, he regularly made last-minute revisions—revisions that often appear only as brief, sometimes cryptic, notes in script margins. Because of his constant revision, then, there exists no single, authorized stage version of Peter Pan. Nevertheless, versions of what are usually considered early revisions of Barrie’s play appear in three places: in publisher Samuel French’s 1928 acting edition; in the twenty-three volume Uniform Edition of the Works and Plays of J.M. Barrie (1913-1937) as a semi-novelized version; and in The Definitive Edition of the Plays of J.M. Barrie (1942) as a script.

I borrow this language of love lost from children’s literature scholar Eric Tribunella. Tribunella theorizes that dominant narratives of maturation and growth are premised upon an experience of losing the innocence we love most. He articulates children’s imagined experience of this loss in the following way:

Why do we feel that such an experience is useful for ushering children into adulthood? Irrevocable loss, especially of something dear, is experienced as a trauma, so American children’s literature turns time and again to that which is traumatic as a way of provoking or ensuring the development of children. The striking recurrence of this pattern suggests that children’s literature, and indeed
American culture, relies on the contrived traumatization of children—both protagonists and readers—as a way of representing and promoting the process of becoming a mature adult. It is as if loss generates the escape velocity of youth. It is the fuel used to achieve the speed necessary for escaping the gravitational force of childhood.


16 See Tribunella’s *Melancholia and Maturation*, p. xi. This trauma is especially salient in developmental dramas about adolescence, the tween years, and teenage-hood, aged constructions on the brink—literally, figuratively?—of adulthood. Films both about and for teens, in particular, often dramatize this trauma and depict what are often considered difficult years full of angst, awkwardness, growing pains, and aged conflicts. Such films are often marketed as coming of age dramas in which the coming of age—the smears of adulthood—is either a problem or a well-spring of comedy. Here is a short-list of popular American films that foreground these smears in all their messy and awkward glory: Brian De Palma’s *Carrie* (1976), John Hughes’s *Pretty in Pink* (1986), and Paul Weitz’s *American Pie* (1999). Also worth noting here: there exists an entire market of developmental-focused self-help literature for parents and health professionals “dealing” with such growing pains. See, for example, popular publications like Cheryl Dellasega’s *Surviving Ophelia: Mothers Share Their Wisdom in Navigating the Tumultuous Teenage Years* (Cambridge, MA: De Campo, 2001) and Julie Ross’s *How to Hug a Porcupine: Negotiating the Prickly Points of the Tween Years* (New York: McGraw Hill, 2008).


18 See Rose, *The Case of Peter Pan*, p. 11.

19 Ibid., p. 11.
“Historically” a woman has filled the role of Peter Pan on the public stage. Barrie himself suggests, in some of his stage notes, that role should be played by a woman. Many queer and feminist scholars—Marjorie Garber, most famously—have grappled with this staging convention. Much has also been written about actress Mary Martin’s popular televised portrayal of Peter alongside her daughter, who played Wendy. Peter is also depicted as a bird—in *Sentimental Tommy* and *The Little White Bird*—as a bird or boy-bird hybrid. Peter has also been depicted as a boy in, for example, director P.J. Hogan’s film *Peter Pan* and the 1953 Disney film. For discussions of these depictions, see Marjorie Garber’s “Fear of Flying, or Why Is Peter Pan a Woman?” in *Vested Interests: Cross-Dressing and Cultural Anxiety* (New York and London: Routledge, 1992), p. 165-85; Susan Kissel’s “‘But When at Last She Really Came, I Shot Her’: Peter Pan and the Drama of Gender” in *Children’s Literature in Education* 19:1 (1988): 32-41; M. Joy Morse’s “The Kiss: Female Sexuality and Power in J.M. Barrie’s *Peter Pan*” in *Peter Pan In and Out of Time: A Children’s Classic at 100*, eds. Donna R. White and C. Anita Tarr (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow, 2006), p. 47-67; and Rose’s *The Case of Peter Pan*.

It is important to note here that Peter Pan has also become a kind of queer cultural icon. In both the popular American TV show *Queer as Folk*, for example, protagonist Brian Kinney is referred to constantly as Peter Pan. For discussions of Peter Pan as a queer icon as well as the queer potential in depictions of him, see David P.D. Munns’s “‘Gay, Innocent, and Heartless’: Peter Pan and the Queering of Popular Culture” in *Second Star to the Right: Peter Pan in the Popular Imagination*, eds. Allison B. Kavey and Lester D. Friedman (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2009), p. 219-242; Sarah Trimble’s “Playing Peter Pan: Conceptualizing ‘Bois’ in Contemporary Queer Theory” in *Canadian Women’s Studies* 24:2 (2005): 75-79; and Stacy Wolf’s articles “The Queer Performances of Mary Martin as Woman and as Star” in *Women & Performance: A Journal of Feminist Theory* 8:2 (1996): 225-39 and “‘Never Gonna Be a Man / Catch Me if You Can / I Won’t Grow Up’: A Lesbian Account of Mary Martin as Peter Pan” in *Theatre Journal* 49:4 (1997): 493-509. See also Jacqueline Rose’s discussion of the 1991 lesbian production of *Peter Pan* in the second edition to *The Case of Peter Pan*, p. ix-xviii.

See, for example, reviews like David Ansen’s “Drowning in Fairy Dust” in the *Newsweek* and Janet Maslin’s “‘Hook’ Deals Lavishly in Guilt-Edged Bonds” in the *New York Times*. These reviews’ respective titles make clear that Ansen and Maslin were not particularly fond of Spielberg’s take on the Barrie archive. Specifically, these reviewers criticized *Hook* for its sentimentalized depiction of the middle-class family at home in the intimate spaces and times of a private domestic sphere. Though thoroughly uncritical of *Hook*’s own ideological investment in this sphere as both the social foundation for and affective core of an imagined public realm, these reviewers were quick to scrutinize the film’s maudlin portrayal of the American family’s hearth as national heart as predictable,
even downright formulaic. Reviewers, then, focused their critical energies not on
deconstructing Hook’s narrative kneeling at a shrine devoted to hetero-patriarchal
economies of affect and space—and the innocent child’s importance therein—but, rather,
on trashing the film’s stale attachments to sentimental storylines that present images of
family feeling as the locus of national intimacy. While these reviews were both critical of
what they consider Spielberg’s formulaic spin on this archive, they are not critical of
what this formula represents (the importance of childhood innocence in the dominant
American cultural imaginary, growing up, and the family’s place in national futurity).
These reviewers suggest, rather, that Spielberg film could have made this formula more
interesting.

23 This film also appeared at a time when the pop culture phenomenon of “peter
pan syndrome” reached a kind of apex. Popularized by psychologist Dan Kiley’s
international best-seller The Peter Pan Syndrome: Men Who Have Never Grown Up
(1983), this “syndrome” applies to adult men whose childhood flickers are too great.
Kiley’s work is a take on Carl Jung’s theories of puer aeternus—Latin for “eternal
boy”—and was published as a self-help book for women in relationships with child-like
men. Spielberg’s Hook is a tale about a man depicted as the anti-peter pan, a man whose
adulthood is so extreme that he overlooks his hetero-responsibilities as a father.

24 For a discussion about the relationship between intimacy, nationhood, and the
child at the center of it all, see Lauren Berlant’s The Queen of America Goes to

25 This final image embodies many of the nineteenth- and twentieth-century
family photography conventions Elizabeth Freeman describes. She articulates these
hetero-domestic conventions as such: “domestic photography help[s] merge the
secularized, quasi-sacred time of nature and family with the homogeneous, empty time
across which national destiny move[s]: representations of family [make] simple
reproductive sequences look like historical consequence. The spatial conventions that
[attend] domestic uses of the visual media also [contribute] to this effect. For instance,
the family portrait is often recognizable as such because the subject are usually posed
with the elders at the back (and sometimes even portraits of ancestors on the wall behind
them, the children in the front, and an adult male-female couple at the center, flanked by
their own siblings or eldest children.” See Freeman, Time Binds, p. 22-23.

26 This scene’s layers of strange motions and motives embody Stockton’s
insightful discussion of motions and motives—terms that share, she reminds us, the Latin
root movere. Put simply, motive drives motion, Stockton suggests, and motion is

27 Ibid., p. 157, 55.

28 Ibid., p. 52.
In Barrie’s *Peter and Wendy*, for example, Wendy also asks Peter about why he cries. This question and initial meeting is framed as such:

> If he thought at all, but I don’t believe he ever thought, it was that he and his shadow, when brought near each other, would join like drops of water, and when they did not he was appalled. He tried to stick it on with soap from the bathroom, but that also failed. A shudder passed through Peter, and he sat on the floor and cried.

> His sobs woke Wendy, and she sat up in bed. She was not alarmed to see a stranger crying on the nursery floor; she was only pleasantly interested.

> “Boy,” she said courteously, “why are you crying?”

Peter is unable to pinpoint the motives behind his tears. Wendy quickly suggests, however, that his tears stem from his not having a mother. See J.M. Barrie’s *Peter and Wendy* in Jack Zipes’s *Peter Pan*, p. 24.

Kathryn Bond Stockton theorizes how innocence “excludes” and “eludes” children “queered by color.” I would like to extend her theorization here: such children are queered because of their problematic relationships to chrononormativity. They are queer, in particular, because of their strained relationships to both dominant temporal constructs of aging and fetishistic majoritarian relationships to whiteness’s glow. See Stockton, *The Queer Child*, p. 32. For a discussion of how innocence is “raced white,” see also Robin Bernstein’s *Racial Innocence: Performing American Childhood from Slavery to Civil Rights* (New York: New York University Press, 2011), p. 4-6.


Lee Edelman’s oft-cited list: “Fuck the social order and the Child in whose name we’re collectively terrorized; fuck Annie; fuck the waif from *Les Mis*; fuck the poor, innocent kid on the Net; fuck Laws both with capital Is and with small; fuck the whole network of Symbolic relations and the future that serves as its prop.” See Edelman’s *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004), p. 29.

Wendy’s working on, with, and against these scripts in ways that create critical spaces for children queered by race and sexuality echoes, in many ways, Jose Esteban Muñoz’s critical deconstruction of Edelman’s work. Muñoz rails against Edelman in the following way: “Although Edelman does indicate that the future of the child as futurity is different from the future of actual children, his framing nonetheless accepts and reproduces this monolithic figure of the child that is indeed always already white.” As much as I agree with Muñoz’s observation here, I think he overlooks how dominant constructions of aging construct childhood and its attending innocence as white—and that
deconstructing racist institutions of aging, as I think Edelman uncritically attempts, is a
worthwhile endeavor. What Neverland dramatizes is, then, a kind of critical voice that
works on, with, and against both Edelman’s and Muñoz’s theorizations of futurity and its
discursive relationships to childhood. See Muñoz’s Cruising Utopia: The Then and There

34 Specifically, Steven Bruhm and Natasha Hurley suggest the following about
utopianism and its relationship to dominant constructions of childhood:
Utopianism follows the child around like a family pet. The child exists as
a site of almost limitless potential (its future not yet written and therefore
unblemished). But because the utopian fantasy is the property of adults, not
necessarily of children, it is accompanied by its doppelganger, nostalgia.
Nostalgia is the fantasy of a preferred past (past pleasures, past desires for the
future). Caught between these two worlds, one dead, the other powerless to be
born, the child become the bearer of heteronormativity, appearing to render
ideology invisible by cloaking it in simple stories, euphemisms, and platitudes.
The child is the product of physical reproduction, but functions just as surely as a
figure of cultural reproduction. Thus both the utopianism and the nostalgia
invoked by the figure of the child are, in turn, the preferred form of the future.
See their introduction to Curiouser: On the Queerness of Children, eds. Steven Bruhm

xiii.

35 I borrow this language of horizon here from Jose Esteban Muñoz, who suggests
that “queerness is always in the horizon.” See Muñoz’s Cruising Utopia, p. 11.

36 Peter Pan is often referred to as a “betwixt-and-between,” a figure who exists
between animal and human because of his tenuous relationships to dominant aging. See
J.M. Barrie’s Peter Pan in Kensington Gardens in Jack Zipes’s Peter Pan (New York:

2. Graphic Anachronism

1 See Patti Smith’s poem “Neo Boy,” Early Works, 1970-1979 (New York:
Putnam, 1994), p. 73.

2 See Carroll’s Through the Looking Glass, and What Alice Found There (1871;
reprint, New York: Puffin Classics, 2010), p. xiv. This quote appears on Melinda Gebbie
and Alan Moore’s front dust jacket flap in Lost Girls (Marietta, GA: Top Shelf
Productions, 2006).

3 I borrow the language of “male homosexual panic” here to begin my discussion
of what I theorize as aged panic. Homosexual panic, according to Sedgwick, is an
“enactment of socially sanctioned prejudice against one stigmatized minority”—gay
men—that legitimizes and defends itself. Sedgwick points out that gender and race panic do not exist. However, I’d like to propose that age panic does exist, as illustrated by cases in which disgust with certain forms of intergenerational sex becomes a legitimate excuse for violence. See Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s *Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008), p. 19-20.


5 Of the imagined “multi-billion-dollar kiddie porn industry” in America, Kincaid writes the following: “As everyone who has inquired and all police agencies know, the ‘kiddie porn industry,’ if it exists at all in this country, is a puny cottage industry. […] The talk feeds the desire, which in turn feeds the talk—and the need to blame someone else. We are instructed by our cultural heritage to crave that which is forbidden, a crisis we face by not facing it, by writing self-righteous doublespeak that demands both lavish public spectacle and constant guilt-denying projections onto scapegoats.” See Kincaid’s *Erotic Innocence: The Culture of Child Molesting* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1998), p. 20-21.


7 *Lost Girls*’s first three chapters originally appeared in 1991 as three, eight-page, black-and-white installments in the fairly short-lived, controversial American cult comics anthology *Taboo*. *Taboo* was created by comics artist and publisher Stephen R. Bissette. Originally an anthology of horror-themed comics, this series was published from 1988 to 1995.

8 These texts are generally written about as being part of the so-called first Golden Age of children’s literature. For further information about the various “Golden Ages” of Anglo-American children’s literature, see Peter Hunt, *Children’s Literature* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001). Gebbie and Moore explicitly reference Barrie’s 1911 novel *Peter and Wendy* as the raw material for their depiction of Wendy.

9 Despite *Lost Girls* incredible sales in America, Gebbie and Moore’s work faced further controversy in both Canada and the European Union. Specifically, although Canadian and E.U. citizens were able to purchase *Lost Girls* on the Internet since its release in 2006, the comic was not available for sale in Canadian and E.U. retail stores until December 2007 and January 2008, respectively. For further information about controversies surrounding *Lost Girls* in Canada and Europe, see Katy Guest and Anthony Barnes’s article from *The Independent*, “Erotic Peter Pan ‘Sequel’ Sparks Outrage” (2006).

Ibid., 136. Tribunella’s work is especially interested in gay reimaginings of “boy’s fiction”—a sub-genre within children’s fiction that typically focuses on boy-centric spaces like all-boy schools. Key examples of such reimaginings in Tribunella’s work include Chris Kent’s queer spins on R.M. Ballantyne’s *The Coral Island* (1857)—in *Coral Island Boys* (1998)—and Thomas Hughes’s *Tom Brown’s Schooldays* (1857)—in *The Real Tom Brown’s Schooldays* (2002).

Ibid., p. 137.

Ibid., p. 152.

Ibid., p. 152-53. Tribunella plays with the phrase “kiddie porn,” noting that children’s literature itself might be—on some level—porn for children. Specifically, he notes that if “kiddie porn is porn for kids, if kiddie porn is what excites and titillates kids, then perhaps we have come full circle, and kiddie lit has been kiddie porn all along” (author’s emphasis). Tribunella is certainly not the first children’s literature scholar to suggest that children’s literature is pornography for children. Indeed, for further discussions about such pornography for children, see Perry Nodelman’s “Children’s Literature as Child Pornography” in *English Studies in Canada* 29:3 (2003): 34-39.

Tribunella, “From Kiddie Lit to Kiddie Porn,” p. 137.

Ibid., 143. Author’s emphasis.

Ibid., 138.

Ibid., 142.

Ibid., 152.

Perhaps ironically, given his definition of kiddie porn, Tribunella mentions *Lost Girls* in several footnotes. Specifically, Tribunella notes the following about *Lost Girls*: There is much to be said about *Lost Girls*, but it stands that it, too, can be read in terms of a retrospective fantasy of childhood agency. The villains of *Lost Girls* are pedophilic adults; the heroes are the lost girls themselves, wielding, as Wendy does in this retelling, her own body to fight off a sexual advance from a dirty old man with an arthritic hand. The crocodile is refigured visually by Gebbie as the vagina dentata. As the three women discover, the only salvation that is to be had will be found in stories about childhood and childhood agency—fantastic, sexualized stories.
As I hope to make clear in my reading of Gebbie and Moore’s graphic novel here, the text is not simply about sexual agency in childhood. Those who participate in intergenerational sex—especially sex between children and adults—are not all villains. Rapists and those against sexual consent are villains. Ibid., 153.


22 Ibid., p. 11.

23 In many ways, Kidd’s observations embody Melinda Gebbie’s comment during a 2006 interview with Metroactive.com: “I’m not promoting that any child should look at Lost Girls. Still, I don’t think children are harmed by erotic [or pornographic] pictures if the intention is good.” See Richard Von Busack’s interview in “Melinda Gebbie,” Metroactive.com, August 2006.


25 I borrow the language of “contact zones” here from Jose Esteban Muñoz’s own discussion of pornography and Richard Fung’s disidentificatory artistic practices. Muñoz borrows this phrase from Chris Straayer’s essay on Fung and the technology of pornography. Muñoz notes the following about this essay: “Straayer’s description is evocative of the way in which the terrain of pornography becomes a contact zone, one in which the ideological (visualized in Fung’s technological reinsertion into the representational field) and the epistemological (pornography’s need to carnally know the Other) collide.” This quote is particularly relevant to my argument here, in that Lost Girls visually intervenes in the ideological underpinnings of dominant aging—through its own graphic practices—to reimagine pornography’s need to carnally know the Other—childhood innocence. See Jose Esteban Muñoz’s Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), p. 88. See also Chris Straayer’s “The She-Man: Postmodern Bi-Sexed Performance in Film and Video,” in Screen 31:3 (1990): 262-80.


In many ways, Lost Girls’s back panel visually calls upon the promotional poster for director Bud Townsend’s 1976 reimagining of Lewis Carroll’s work, Alice in Wonderland: An X-Rated Musical Comedy. This work is considered a classic of mainstream hetero-porn and a staple in what is often referred to as the first golden age of American cinematic pornography. Alice in Wonderland’s poster features Alice (Kristene De Bell) astride a giant golden mushroom, flanked on each side by the black knight (John Lawrence) and the Mad Hatter (Alan Novak).

For a discussion of girlhood innocence as the most innocent childhood species, see Catherine Robson’s Men in Wonderland: The Lost Girlhood of the Victorian Gentleman (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2001). Robson suggests that girlhood lost much of sparkle by the end of the nineteenth century and boys became the poster-children for innocence. However, Lost Girls and the other reimaginings central to this study make clear that girlhood innocence is quite potent in dominant cultural narratives of aging and origins.

Worth noting here: this work reimagines the characters’ respective ages in relation to their original appearances in Golden Age fictions. In other words, Lost Girls constructs these characters as if they continued aging past the publication dates of the works in which they first appear. In this way, the graphic novel calculates the answers for the characters’ ages in 1914.

I borrow the term “pornotopia” from pornography scholar and Victorianist Steven Marcus. Marcus deploys this term to describe the utopian spatio-temporalities in pornography. In this utopian realm, sexuality, time, and space are always already on the horizon, unlimited, unbound to hetero-temporal constraints grounded in nationalism. Particularly relevant to this study is Marcus’s reflections on age in pornotopias:

In pornography . . . life or existence in time does not begin with birth; it begins with one’s first sexual impulse or experience, and one is said to be born in pornotopia only after one has experienced his first erection or witnessed his first primal scene. Similarly, one is declared dead when, through either age or accident, one becomes impotent—which helps to explain why in pornotopia women are immortal, and why in pornographic novels there are so many old women, witches, and hags, and so few old men. In another sense, time in pornotopia is without duration; when a past is recalled, it is for the single purpose of arousing us in the present.
As I examine in this chapter, *Lost Girls* puts these times—imagined as separate—into contact, recalling a past (childhood) to arouse (adults) in the present. See Marcus’s *The Other Victorians: A Study of Sexuality and Pornography in Mid-Nineteenth-Century England* (1966; reprint, New York: Basic Books, 2009), p. 270.

31 Ibid., p. 269.

32 Throughout this chapter, I cite Gebbie and Moore’s work by book, chapter, and page. I use the notation “b” for book, “c” for chapter, and “p” for page. See *Lost Girls*, b. 1, c. 1, p. 4. Authors’ emphasis.

33 The mirror here is a reference to Lewis Carroll’s 1871 sequel to his original work on Alice, *Through the Looking Glass, and What Alice Found There*. This work is often published as a companion piece to Carroll’s first novel. In this sequel, Alice is depicted talking to her little white kitten and going through a mirror above a fireplace in her nursery as such:

She was up on the chimney-piece while she said this, though she hardly knew how she had got there. And certainly the glass was beginning to melt away, just like a bright and silvery mist.

In another moment Alice was through the class, and had jumped lightly down into the Looking-glass room. The very first thing she did was to look whether there was a fire in the fireplace, and she was quite please to find that there was a real one, blazing away as brightly as the one she had left behind. “So I shall be as warm here as I was in the old room,” thought Alice: “warmer, in fact, because there’ll be no one here to scold me away from the fire. Oh, what fun it’ll be, when they see me through the glass in here, and can’t get at me!”

See Carroll’s *Through the Looking Glass*, p. 8.

34 These silver shoes are a reference to L. Frank Baum’s original work. See L. Frank Baum’s *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* (1900; reprint, New York: HarperCollins, 2001).

35 This shadow play is a reference to Peter Pan’s first appearance. In this original scene, he is depicted chasing his lost, mischievous shadow in the Darling children’s nursery. Wendy attaches his shadow using a bar of soap. See J.M. Barrie’s *Peter and Wendy* in Jack Zipes’s *Peter Pan* (New York: Penguin, 2004), p. 14.

36 Gebbie and Moore, *Lost Girls*, b. 1, c. 4, p. 7. Authors’ emphasis.

37 Ibid.

Alice’s first meeting with the white rabbit is described as such:

There was nothing so very remarkable in that; no did Alice think it so very much out of the way to hear that Rabbit say to itself, “Oh dear! Oh Dear! I shall be too late!” (when she though it over afterwards, it occurred to her that she ought
to have wondered at this, but at the time it all seemed quite natural); but when the Rabbit actually *took a watch out of its waistcoat-pocket*, and looked at it, and then hurried on, Alice started to her feet.

. . . she ran across the field after it, and fortunately was just in time to see it pop down a large rabbit-hole under the hedge.

In another moment down went Alice after it, never once considering how in the world she was to get out again.
See Lewis Carroll’s *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* (1865, reprint; New York: Puffin Classics, 2008), p. 2. Author’s emphasis.

61 Ibid., b. 1, c. 9, p. 7.

62 Ibid., b. 1., c. 9, p. 8.


65 See Sally Banes’s *Dancing Women: Female Bodies on Stage* (New York: Routledge, 1998), p. 100. Banes’s observations about the riot echo in critical work by the fabulous Kevin Kopelson:

*Le Sacre du printemps*, as anyone familiar with modernism can recall, caused a riot. Many who attended the premiere found the score, the décor, and the dance itself both ugly and tedious . . . For whereas [Stravinsky’s other ballets like] *Jeux* and *L’Apres-midi d’un faune* were somewhat graceful, *Le Sacre du printemps* was thoroughly unballetic. Percussive dancers faced one another, ignoring the audience, and then stomped, lurched, and trembled their way into expressionism and oblivion.


66 Ibid.

67 Banes, *Dancing Women*, p. 103.

68 Ibid., p. 104.

69 Ibid.


71 Ibid., b. 1, c. 10, p. 4.
3. Patched Works and Reimagining Higgledy-Piggledy

1 Kathryn Bond Stockton, “Growing Sideways, or Versions of the Queer Child: The Ghost, the Homosexual, the Freudian, the Innocent, and the Interval of Animal,” in *Curiouser: On the Queerness of Children*, eds. Steven Bruhm and Natasha Hurley (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004), 277-315.


4 See Hayles’s *Electronic Literature: New Horizons for the Literary* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2008), p. 129. In her discussion of Jackson’s *Patchwork Girl*, Hayles notes that “agency is distributed between conditions established by the media and embodied responses of humans who interact with the media.” However, she also makes clear that distributed agency “does not mean agential power is absent.” More pointedly, Hayles states the following about distributed agency: “[In] this framework, the points of intervention expand to include those who fashion the hardware and build the software, those who use the software to create works of electronic literature, and those who interact with electronic literature as users/players. Media technologies do not come into existence by themselves any more than bodies do.” In other words, we navigate *Patchwork Girl* by clicking on links and reading lexias that interest us. However, reading *Patchwork Girl* is not a “free-for-all” in which there are no organizing principles that govern how we read this hypertext. Indeed, the hypertext often guides us—in ways that we can neither see nor predict—to particular links.


6 Ibid., p. 248.

7 Ibid., p. 246. For further information about both the differences and relationships between print texts and electronic hypertexts, see N. Katherine Hayles’s “Print is Flat, Code is Deep: The Importance of Media-Specific Analysis” in *Poetics Today* 25:1 (2004): 67-90.


10 Ibid., p. 160.

11 Most notably, Australian artist and writer Linda Dement published her popular hypertext cyberflesh girlmonsters in 1996. Dement’s hypertext, much like Jackson’s Patchwork Girl, explores monstrous, multiple feminine embodiments and subjectivities that complicate dominant scripts of aging. See also Judy Malloy’s its name was Penelope (1993) and l0ve0ne (1994) as well as Caitlin Fisher’s These Waves of Girls (2001).


13 Ibid., p. 155.

14 Ibid., p. 157.


16 For further information about discursive repetition and disruption, see, of course, Judith Butler’s influential philosophical treatise Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity (New York: Routledge, 1990).


18 Throughout this chapter, I cite Jackson’s lexias, as her work has no page numbers. I use “l” in place of “p” to denote my citations. Jackson, Patchwork Girl, l. “left breast,” “right arm,” “veins.”

19 Ibid., l. “resurrection.”

20 Baum’s patchwork girl, Scraps, is an “ugly” quilted mash-up of old rainbow-colored cloth collected from around the Land of Oz. Dr. Pipt, a magician who wants to create an obedient servant for his wife, animates her using the “Powder of Life.” She has leftover brains so that she can better accept, according to the magician’s wife, her role as
an “obedient” servant who does not “feel above her station.” See Baum’s *Patchwork Girl of Oz*, p. 50-53.


22 Ibid., p. 142.

23 Ibid., p. 154. Author’s emphasis.

24 Kathryn Bond Stockton argues that, at the same time children are viewed as asexual, dominant discourses of age also—and conveniently—imagine them as heterosexual. See Stockton’s “Growing Sideways, or Versions of the Queer Child: The Ghost, the Homosexual, the Freudian, the Innocent, and the Interval of Animal” in *Curiouser: On the Querness of Children*, eds. Steven Bruhm and Natasha Hurley (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004), p. 283.


26 Ibid.

27 Ibid., p. 164.

28 Ibid. Author’s emphasis.


31 Ibid., l. “sewn.”

32 Ibid., l. “sewn.”

33 Ibid., l. “sewn.”

34 The Romantic child is figured as the most innocent of children, a feminized child who is swathed in innocence because of its imagined relationships to nature and origins. For a theorization of the Romantic mythologies as they relate to this child, see James Kincaid’s *Child-Loving: The Erotic Child and Victorian Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1994). See also Anne Higonnet’s influential study *Pictures of Innocence: The History and Crisis of the Ideal Childhood* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1998).

I borrow the language of gravestones marking the death of queer children’s straight lives from Kathryn Bond Stockton, who suggests that “the phrase ‘gay child’ is a gravestone marker for where or when one’s straight life died.” She goes on to suggest that “by the time the tombstone is raised (‘I was a gay child’), the ‘child’ by linguistic definition has expired.” See Stockton’s *The Queer Child, or Growing Sideways in the Twentieth Century* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009), p. 7.


Kincaid suggests the following about this Romantic ideal and its relationship to sexuality:

As for innocence: at one point a theological trope, in the nineteenth century it became more and more firmly attached to this world and to this world’s sexuality. It was, further, a characteristic that outran any simple physical manifestation: innocence became a fulcrum for the post-Romantic ambiguous construction of sexuality and sexual behavior. On the one hand, innocence was valued deeply and guarded by criminal statutes (albeit often bendable ones); on the one hand, innocence was a consumer product, an article to possess, as a promise to the righteous and the reward to the dutiful. It came to you in heaven or in marriage, a prize. We were trained to adore and covet it, to preserve and despoil it, to speak of it in hushed tones and in bawdy songs.


Ibid., l. “appetite.”

Ibid.


Ibid., p. 174.


Ibid.

Ibid., l. “infant.”

Ibid.

Ibid.

Jackson, Patchwork Girl, l. “I am.”

Ibid.

Ibid., l. “craft.”

Ibid., l. “tie.”

Ibid., l. “I made myself over.”


Ibid., p. 165.
See Shackelford’s “Subject to Change,” p. 91. Here, Shackelford’s analysis of the patchwork girl and Elsie’s bathtub experience echoes feminist literary critic N. Katherine Hayles’s influential essay “Flickering Connectivities in Shelley Jackson’s *Patchwork Girl,*” p. 166. Specifically, in this essay, Hayles suggests the following: This resolution, in which the monster realizes that if she is to cohere as all it cannot be through unified subjectivity or a single narrative line, leads to [the lexia] ‘afterwards,’ in which the monster decides that the only life she can lead is nomadic . . . . Thus the narrative pattern of her life finally becomes indistinguishable from the fragmentation and recombination of the digital technology that produces it.

Jackson, *Patchwork Girl,* l. “I made myself over.” In her description of the patchwork girl’s bathtub experience with Elsie, Shackelford suggests that following: “Comparing her morphology . . . to the ‘joints and junctures’ in furniture, the patchwork girl marks this ‘remaking’ as an intervention in the rules of differentiation that . . . organize and materialize her understanding of her body . . . .” See Shackelford, “Subject to Change,” p. 91. Here, however, Shackelford misreads Jackson’s depiction of “furniture parts.” Indeed, “furniture parts” is a direct reference to L. Frank Baum’s *The Patchwork Girl of Oz.* “Furniture parts” is actually a reference to Scrap’s brain.


Jackson, *Patchwork Girl,* l. “I made myself over.”


Steven Bruhm and Natasha Hurley describe this kind of majoritarian fairy tale of aging as such:

Those who discuss age-of-consent laws seem to consider anyone under that age (usually sixteen) to be a child: teenagers a ‘children’ (indistinguishable from toddlers, it seems) if they are involved in the making of pornography. Yet teens who rape or murder are tried as ‘adults,’ as if the concept of childhood were dependent entirely on the magnitude of the crime. Still other people mark sexual awakening by a person’s ability to reproduce—a stunning index of the heteronormativity that infuses theories of human development (operating with a fairy-tale logic of Sleeping Beauties with pricked fingers). As in the other narratives of the child we have been tracking here, the juridical child appears to get defined by whoever is talking on behalf of that child. Thus laws get manufactured despite—or perhaps because of—the murkiness surrounding the child sexuality and children’s nebulous ability to consent.
Conclusion


2 Specifically, *Nightwood* reimagines the original version of Little Red Riding Hood created by seventeenth-century French intellectual and aristocratic salon staple Charles Perrault. This tale was later revised and appropriated for a German audience by the Grimm brothers—Jakob and Wilhelm—in a collection titled *Kinder- und Hausmärchen* (1812-57). For a critical overview of Perrault’s work and its circulation within early twentieth-century American and British texts, in particular, see Ann Martin’s *Red Riding Hood and the Wolf in Bed: Modernism’s Fairy Tales* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2006).

It is important to note here that there is, perhaps, no genre—literary or otherwise—that highlights the complexities of the imagined relationships between queerness and childhood, age-specific cultural production, and the intertextual relationships between texts more so than the fairy tale. Literary and cultural scholars have long grappled with both the textual and historical complexities fairy tales present, often focusing their critical energies on, in particular, constructing an account of fairy tale origins and authenticity. Specifically, in their efforts to define this genre, contemporary scholars frequently piece together a developmental narrative of fairy tales’ growth from a sort of imagined pan-European oral folk tradition into a literary cornerstone of both print and consumer cultures. This dominant critical narrative of fairy tales’ growth and development reinforces an imagined evolutionary continuum of knowledge production and social interaction that assumes an often strict divide between orality and written language.

At the core of this narrative’s evolutionary model of fairy tales is an aged discourse of infantilization—a discourse that envisions oral traditions as a primitive (i.e., child-like), ephemeral, and shape-shifting precursor to a more developed (i.e., adult-like), enduring, and stable print culture. First taking shape in the early nineteenth century when European philologists—like the Grimm brothers—began forging this to construct coherent narratives of national origins and linguistic development, this model reflects not only modern conceptualizations of historical progress along developmental lines, but also majoritarian interests in using these lines to justify imperial conquests, colonialism, and capitalist industrialization. For critical examinations of these complexities and the history of Western fairy tales, see U.C. Knoepflmacher’s *Ventures into Childhood: Victorians, Fairy Tales, and Femininity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), Elizabeth

3 Barnes, *Nightwood*, p. 100, 85.

4 Ibid., p. 85.

5 Ibid., p. 89.

6 Ibid., p. 98.

7 Ibid., p. 143.

8 Ibid.

9 Ibid., p. 145-46.


Bibliography


—. “Time Binds, or, Erotohistoriography.” Social Text 23.3 (2005): 57-68.


—. “Former Editor’s Comments, or The Possibility of Growing Wiser.” *Children’s Literature Association Quarterly* 35.3 (2010): 230-42.


Turner, Beatrice. “‘Which is to be master?’: Language as Power in *Alice in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking-Glass*.” *Children’s Literature Association Quarterly* 35.3 (2010): 243-54.


