

Queer Theory Wrestles the “Real” Child: Impossibility, Identity, and Language in Jacqueline Rose’s *The Case of Peter Pan*

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We have been reading the wrong Jacqueline Rose.

When Jacqueline Rose writes “we have been reading the wrong Freud to children,” she proceeds to give us a reading of Freud that brings to the surface a number of pressing theoretical issues (12). In Freud she finds language and meaning unstable, identity and truth always under tenuous construction, our subjectivity fragmented and contradictory. Of course, Freud’s own inconsistencies and contradictions open his work to this kind of reading, a reading that uncovers the postmodern dimensions of psychoanalysis. Rose brings this way of looking to Freud, not only to better understand Freud, but also to better understand the kinds of investments that have led us to read and misread Freud in the ways we have. Like Rose, I too want to bring a particular way of looking, but this time to her book *The Case of Peter Pan, Or The Impossibility of Children’s Fiction*. This way of looking comes out of queer theory, which I believe reframes Rose’s work in useful ways. But this reframing speaks to queer theory as well, where Rose is conspicuously absent from recent criticism on the child.¹ What we will see, through this way of looking, is how the terms *child* and *impossibility*, which are so important to Rose, take on new meanings, new resonances with the concerns of queer theory, concerns of identity, agency, and power.

I am going to talk about constructions of the child. I am going to talk about actual people called children. I do not believe that these two projects are ever really separate from one another, even though they often emerge out of very different disciplinary practices. Queer theory understands the categories of gender and sexuality not as stable, but as shifting, malleable, contextual—and I see that theorized complexity as belonging to the child as well as to fiction for the child. So often, the child functions ideologically as an empty category—one

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that can be filled with our anxieties, desires, hopes.² The fantasy here—the story we tell to cover up this projection of meanings—is that children cannot know themselves or what is good for them, and so they need *us*, need our guidance and protection. We have been reading the wrong Jacqueline Rose because one of the things that *The Case of Peter Pan* reminds us of is the difficulty and unpredictability of shaping anyone, even a child, into someone we've imagined them to be. Rose puts it this way: “if children’s fiction builds an image of the child inside the book, it does so in order to secure the child who is outside the book, the one who does not come so easily within its grasp” (2). We might understand this image of the child Rose speaks of not only in terms of the pious Harry and Lucy characters who appeared in children’s fiction throughout the nineteenth century, but also in terms of what happens in the very act of imagining the child as a reader of the book.³ And yet, when we consider what Rose means by “the one who does not come so easily within its grasp,” what we find is a notion of *child* that disappears right in front of our eyes.

Kathryn Bond Stockton also describes a kind of disappearing when she talks about the “gay child” in *The Queer Child, or Growing Sideways in the Twentieth Century*. The field of queer theory has recently begun to explore the topic of childhood in order to illuminate questions about sexuality and culture, and Stockton’s book is the first to investigate *queer* and *child* as intertwining conceptualizations.⁴ While Stockton argues that all children are queer, one of the contradictions she takes up is that the gay child does not exist in our language or representations until we construct her retrospectively. The gay child is not allowed to be conscious of herself *as* gay, and so conceptually exists only in memories of childhood. What happens to gay children in twentieth-century novels and films, according to Stockton, is that they disappear, or are ghosted through metaphors. Stockton writes that “the gay child shows how the figure of the child does not fit children—doesn’t fit the pleasures and terrors we recall.” She sees “this notion [of the gay child] figuring children as fighting with concepts and moving inside them, sometimes successfully, sometimes not” (6). Here Stockton is negotiating between cultural ideas and the relationship of actual people to them. There is the “we” who know the figure of the child and who recall a childhood that doesn’t fit. And, there are people called children who are fighting and moving, children who have agency of some kind, children navigating ideas about the child. I see the fighting and moving Stockton describes as quite similar to the movement Rose implies when she writes about the child who does not come so easily within the grasp of the book. Rose implies a child who is moving, who escapes, and I want to suggest that this movement, this disappearing, is what happens when the child is depicted not as empty, but as a powerful, unpredictable, desiring agent. We see a child disappearing in *The Case of Peter Pan* because, when we grant the child this kind of personhood, we no longer see a child.

This disappearing refers literally to the ways we fail to see what is powerful, sexual, or adult about the children around us, but it also refers to the ways the

workings of actual children are negotiated in *The Case of Peter Pan*. That is, I am making the claim that Rose talks about actual children, but not in the usual ways. Consider for a moment how Stockton works through the matter of talking about children. Stockton does not cite Rose, though she takes up an issue that I think follows directly from the problems set before us in *The Case of Peter Pan*:

We should start again with the problem of the child as a general idea. The child is precisely who we are not and, in fact, never were. It is the act of adults looking back. It is a ghostly, unreachable fantasy, making us wonder: Given that we cannot know the contours of children, who they are to themselves, should we stop talking of children altogether? Should all talk of the child subside, beyond our critique of the bad effects of looking back nostalgically in fantasy?

Fantasy, I find, is more interesting than this. It is fatter than we think, with dense possibilities. (5)

The idea of the child as memory and fantasy comes from psychoanalysis, and we might regard this dimension of psychoanalysis as underpinning the projects of both Rose and Stockton. However, we know from psychoanalysis that fantasy is inescapable. Fantasy shapes the ways we experience reality, indeed shapes reality itself. And following Stockton and Rose, I am interested in this notion of fantasy in relation to the child. I am also interested in what happens if we begin to look around us with these insights in mind. I am interested in our experiences with children, our treatment of children, our talking about children. I am interested in what happens to these lived realities when we think through the problems put before us by *The Case of Peter Pan*—the problems of impossibility, identity, and language—the problems put before us by the very category *child*. I believe Rose offers not only a theory of what happens in and around the idea of children's fiction, but a theory of how the stories we tell ourselves about what happens—or even, what *can* happen—so often operate independently of the lived reality right in front of us. The stories we tell so often obscure the lived reality of language and meaning in motion, identity and truth always under tenuous construction, and our subjectivity divided. And thinking of *child* in the usual ways—where it functions as an empty category ready to be filled with our desires, projections, and disavowals—makes it impossible to really see either the child or ourselves.

The Problem of Impossibility

Alice laughed. "There's no use trying," she said: "one *ca'n't* believe impossible things."

"I daresay you haven't had much practice," said the Queen. "When I was your age, I always did it for half-an-hour a day. Why, sometimes I've believed six impossible things before breakfast. There goes the shawl again!"

—Lewis Carroll, *Through the Looking-Glass* (177)

This is the impossible relation between adult and child.

—Jacqueline Rose, *The Case of Peter Pan* (1)

Perhaps what troubles us most about Rose's book is the word *impossible*. It is right there in the title, taunting us. She is talking to us. She is talking about us. And it sounds like she is saying that our parenting is impossible, our teaching impossible, our reading and writing for children impossible.⁵ It is of little comfort that Rose does not mean this literally: "Children's fiction is impossible, not in the sense that it cannot be written (that would be nonsense), but in that it hangs on an impossibility, one which it rarely ventures to speak. This is the impossible relation between adult and child" (1). What does it mean, then, to be in an impossible relation? And where does that leave us as critics, as writers of children's books, or as parents and teachers who work with children every day? These are questions about the lived reality of her claims, questions we have been left with in the wake of *The Case of Peter Pan*. After impossibility, what is left?

This question, seemingly strange and unfamiliar in the context of adult/child relationships, is not unfamiliar to queer theory. Queer lives are often defined by impossibility, both in ideological ways and in lived, material ways. Impossibility is a condition of existence, something that must be negotiated. *Queer* describes, here, not only gay or lesbian, but ways of being that fall outside of intelligibility, fall outside of definition, outside of what is usually understood as reality. These ways of being are often conceptualized in queer theory in terms of gender or sexuality, but they may be framed in other ways, too; in terms of Freud, they might be understood as the perverse or neurotic, which Freud himself remarkably located in the realm of childhood. I refer here to Freud's *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*, a text that is central to Rose's argument, but there are other places we might look to see connections between queer and child.⁶ Freud located queer sexualities in the child, framing the child's pleasure in terms of polymorphous perversity. The child would presumably grow out of these queer desires through the mechanisms of a developmental sequence, a sequence ending with normative heterosexual desires. The sequence described by Freud is inextricably bound up in cultural norms that dictate heterosexuality as the direction in which we are supposed to develop. Rose articulates these submerged cultural dimensions in Freud's work:

Freud effected a break in our conception of both sexuality and childhood from which we do not seem to have recovered. The neurotic simply bears witness to the effects of what is always at some level an impossible task—the task of cohering the fragmented, component and perverse sexuality of the child. The fact that Freud used a myth to describe how this ordering is meant to take place (the myth of Oedipus) should alert us to the fictional nature of this process, which is at best precarious, and never complete. (14)

This interpretation of Freud has significant resonances with queer theory, where the ways we arrive at heterosexuality and at notions of ourselves as gendered might be considered part of an ongoing fictional process. Queer theory, in one sense, is concerned with those lives that do not follow the normative developmental sequence, those lives that have undertaken a different process of cohering and ordering the self.⁷ Queer theory is concerned with the ways of being and relating that are possible when the normative sequence of heterosexual romance, marriage, and reproduction renders those who do not follow the sequence invisible, irrelevant, or impossible.

The child is imagined as that which is *before* the sequence—that which is *before* heterosexuality—and as such the category *child* has an important role in maintaining the sequence even while it presumably does not participate. In the sequence, the child is also invisible, or simply irrelevant, since the sexuality of children is imagined to be impossible. Child and queer overlap considerably in this formulation, but I do not want to make the claim that they are the same. Instead, I want to consider for a moment what queer can tell us about the child and “the impossible relation between adult and child” that Rose describes. How might impossibility work as a condition of existence for childhood, as something that must always be negotiated?

Impossibility is not something we like to associate with children. We like to tell children that they can be whatever they want when they grow up. We like to tell them that they can do anything. What is so interesting in sentiments like these is that they don’t usually mean that a child can grow up to be gay, queer, or strange. We mean they can be doctors, lawyers, dancers, teachers, writers. We mean they can be astronauts and millionaires. It seems as though childhood is full of possibility, both real and imagined. So, what might impossibility mean here?

To answer this question, I want to turn to a moment in Lewis Carroll’s *Through the Looking-Glass* (1872). I turn first to this familiar text, and to Alice, because we know Alice.⁸ In one scene, Alice finds herself in a very curious conversation with the White Queen: “Now I’ll give *you* something to believe. I’m just one hundred and one, five months and a day,” the Queen tells Alice. But Alice says, “I ca’n’t believe *that!*” (Carroll 177). We might say that Alice finds the Queen’s age to be *impossible*. The logic of *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking-Glass*, however, makes this incredulity seem as ridiculous as the Queen’s age. After falling down a rabbit hole, stepping through a looking-glass, and speaking to a Queen whose shawl seems to be alive, why is it the Queen’s age that Alice finds so difficult to believe all of the sudden? Of all the things that have happened, the Queen’s age is not that ridiculous:

“Ca’n’t you?” the Queen said in a pitying tone. “Try again: draw a long breath, and shut your eyes.”

Alice laughed. “There’s no use trying,” she said: “one *ca’n’t* believe impossible things.” (177)

What is so interesting in this scene is that Alice appears to be the voice of reason, the voice of a culture that tells us what is normal, what is right, what is possible.⁹ The Queen, then, seems to represent the fantastic, the impossible, the queer. And yet, we could easily reverse these roles. The Queen's tone is thick with condescension, as if she is instructing Alice about the ways of the world, pointing to what is obviously true. She says, "I daresay you haven't had much practice," and "when I was your age, I always did it for half-an-hour a day," as if it were simply a matter of education, something to be learned in school, something to be practiced as a child. We might read the Queen's dialogue as an ironic commentary on the arbitrariness of social rules and norms, rules that one must learn and believe in to be a participant in adult society. In this reading, Alice is the child who must learn, the child who must practice poetry recitations and proper manners, the child who must practice believing in the imaginary logic of the government, the legal system, capitalism. Alice is the skeptical child, the wise child. The White Queen is the adult who has learned to believe in impossible things.

Social norms, then, are learned through practice, and there are few places in which this is more obvious than in the raising and educating of children. Because the idea of being queer, or the idea of growing up to have queer relationships, is so often rendered invisible or impossible by these early lessons, queer theory understands both possibility and impossibility to be a matter of perception, as ideological notions constituted by social norms. And, if queer describes what is outside those norms, excluded, impossible, then what is queer becomes *possible* only through the practice of believing in it. Queer relationships are no more imaginary than marriages between men and women, but they are far less often *imagined* within social norms that might constitute their possibility. *Impossibility* as a theoretical term, then, is productively unresolvable. It allows us to see and describe what is beyond the limits of language and meaning, what is usually rendered unseen or unthinkable *in order to make it so*. Impossibility, in this sense, is defined by culture. So, if we consider Rose's declaration about the "impossible relation between adult and child" in these terms, the impossible relation she describes is constituted by the very social norms she seeks to make visible. In other words, she does not make the claim that adults and children cannot relate to one another but rather describes a culture that renders such a relation impossible within the systems of meaning defining childhood itself.

If childhood is understood as something entirely separate from adulthood, if the idea of the child describes someone who is naïve, unknowing, innocent, and without agency or desire, then it is this construction that renders the relation between adult and child impossible—impossible because *child* is emptied so significantly of anything we might recognize as being ontologically meaningful. Rose attempts to account for this problem and work responsibly around it when she writes: "Let it be said from the start that it will be no part of this book's contention that what is for the good of the child could somehow be better de-

fined, that we could, if we shifted the terms of the discussion, determine what it is that the child really wants” (2). In one sense, Rose is right, only because what is good for another person is not something that can be definitively known and decided ahead of time by someone else—for example, by someone like Rose. The project of determining what it is the child really wants is not something that can be done in generalized terms, or in a book of academic scholarship, but only something that can be partially and contingently known in a fleeting exchange between one person (maybe a child) and another (maybe an adult). In another sense, when Rose speaks of “the impossible relation between adult and child,” I cannot help but think that what she is describing here is really the impossibility—or, to put it another way, the difficulty—of any one person relating to another.

Perry Nodelman eloquently talks of “both the complex weaves that form individual subjectivities and the complex and often conflicting range of discourses and ideologies available to each of us as we go about living our lives” (4) in order to articulate this difficulty in another way. “I hasten to add,” Nodelman writes, “that I’m not suggesting that children are by nature inherently different from adults—except insofar as all of us humans are inherently, in our inevitably different weavings of discourse, different from one another” (8). Between any two people, relationality presents difficulties of identity and representation, what it means to *know* another person, the difficulties of shared meaning and language, what it means to read and interpret one another. Certainly, these difficulties are compounded when we consider the ways ideological notions of childhood operate so powerfully in culture, inevitably shaping the ways we hear and understand those beings called children.

For those who are queer, the difficulty of this relationality is compounded because of the ways queer identities and experiences are rendered invisible or irrelevant by social norms. For example, if queer relationships are not recognizable as marriages or families, the terms of social recognition become extremely difficult to achieve. At first glance, it seems that queer presents this difficulty of relationality because it is to some degree uncategorizable, whereas the child presents this difficulty by virtue of being overdetermined by the categorical meaning of *child*. I want to suggest, however, that this is the same problem, a problem having to do with the ideological function of the categories themselves. What interests me is the uncanny resemblance between the problem of relationality for someone who is queer and the problem of relationality for someone who is a child.

To consider this resemblance for a moment, I want to turn to Judith Butler’s *Undoing Gender*, which takes up the problem of relationality from a theoretical position that interrogates sexual and gendered categories. One of the problems with categories is that they inevitably oversimplify things—they exclude any number of characteristics and even entire groups of people. Creating more categories is an endless task and doesn’t account for the problematic hierarchical ordering that categories enable between *man* and *woman*, for example, or

between *adult* and *child*.¹⁰ The problem of relationality here is a problem of hierarchy. However, the idea that we could do away with *all* categories, or the queer possibility of failing to occupy any of the available categories, presents us with another problem when it comes to relationality—the problem of unintelligibility. I wonder, though, the degree to which *child* presents us with both of these problems.¹¹ As Butler explains:

To find that you are fundamentally unintelligible (indeed, that the laws of culture and of language find you to be an impossibility) is to find that you have not yet achieved access to the human, to find yourself speaking only and always *as if you were* human, but with the sense that you are not, to find that your language is hollow, that no recognition is forthcoming because the norms by which recognition takes place are not in your favor. (*Undoing* 30)

To what degree are those people who are called children rendered unintelligible by the ideological functions of *child* as a category? Certainly, we can hear the uncanny resemblance if we shift the terms of Butler's prose to encompass child and adult: to be a child is *to find that you have not yet achieved access to adulthood, to find yourself speaking only and always as if you were adult, but with the sense that you are not, to find that your language is hollow, that no recognition is forthcoming*. This problem of relationality is always being negotiated to varying degrees of effectiveness in any given encounter between one person and another. I am interested in the moments when the category of *child* powerfully shapes these encounters, the moments when we might say, "she's just a child," and what that moment means for the person who is being characterized this way. And, then, what does this moment mean for us?

The Problem of Identity

The widow cried over me, and called me a poor lost lamb, and she called me a lot of other names, too, but she never meant no harm by it.

—Mark Twain, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (14)

All subjects—adults and children—have finally to take up a position of identity in language; they have to recognise themselves in the first-person pronoun and cohere themselves to the accepted register of words and signs. But it is the shift of that "have to" from a necessity, which is shared by both adult and child, to something more like a command, which passes from one to the other, that seems to find one of its favourite territories in and around the writing of children's books.

—Jacqueline Rose, *The Case of Peter Pan* (141)

The trouble seems to begin with naming. We sense this trouble when the names we are called fall short of describing *what we are*. We can see this trouble in *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1884), in which we find a character who

is perpetually being called something he is *not*, something we as readers know he is not and feel good about knowing. The widow prays for his lost soul, cries over him, calls him “a poor lost lamb” and “a lot of other names, too” (14), and we can practically see Huck standing there, in his new clothes, this name-calling hanging in the space between them. We don’t find out what insults the widow hurled at Huck, but this is hardly the point; the irony of this moment is that “poor lost lamb” is just as terrible, if not worse, than any of the other names the widow might have used. One of the most beloved characters in American literature isn’t a “poor lost lamb” at this or any other moment in the book—and the best part is that he doesn’t even seem to know it, doesn’t even seem to know that he’s already been found to have a heart of gold. Huck tells us, “she never meant no harm by it” (14), and we get to think he’s a better Christian than the widow ever could be for forgiving so easily, so generously, after everything he’s been through. Twain plays with names here. He uses names to play on our sympathies, to create a little joke between writer and reader, and in doing so he reminds us of the trouble with names.

Perhaps it is this trouble with naming that Rose refers to when she writes: “There is no child behind the category ‘children’s fiction’, other than the one which the category itself sets in place, the one which it must believe is there for its own purposes” (10). If we read Rose alongside this scene from *Huckleberry Finn*, we can hear another meaning behind the widow’s words—the widow needs to believe Huck is a “poor lost lamb” so that *she* can save him; she needs to believe for her own purposes, for her taking Huck in to have a purpose at all. We might have the instinct, in this moment, to feel superior to the widow, to say Huck is a good boy, to call Huck the *right* name. But is the right name ever really the *right* name? Certainly, the levels of irony in *Huckleberry Finn*, not to mention the abundance of literary criticism written over the years, simultaneously suggest numerous, contradictory interpretations of Huck. There is no “poor lost lamb” behind the character Huck, except the one the widow sets in place.

Rose asks us to think of *child* as a name, as a category defining the literature written for children. When Rose says *there is no child*, I don’t think she means that we cannot talk about children at all. I don’t think that she herself is particularly interested in talking about children, but that doesn’t mean that her work precludes the possibility of ever speaking about them. But this speaking is fraught from the beginning. Even if we think of a person called a child, a person who lives in a world even *more* complex than a book, we can imagine the abundance of interpretations possible and the failure of a term like *child* to tell us anything about the person who is named by it.

This failure, the failure of names, is something queer theory has grappled with out of necessity, out of the failure of identity to encompass queer subjectivities. Rose points out that identity, in some sense, always fails; but the illusion of its not failing might be understood to afford a certain degree of privilege. This is the trouble with names. Eve Sedgwick describes it as “one of the things that

'queer' can refer to: the open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning where the constituent elements of anyone's gender, of anyone's sexuality aren't made (or *can't be* made) to signify monolithically" (8; emphasis in the original). Sedgwick describes here a failed, or troubled, meaning-making enterprise. Queer is when the name doesn't fit, can't fit. This problem of identity, however, is not one that only the queer must grapple with. We might hear an echo of Rose's insistence that *there is no child* in the claim that *there is no gender*, a concept put forth most forcefully in Judith Butler's groundbreaking work, *Gender Trouble*.

Butler articulates gender as performative, a copy with no original, and she later complicates this idea in *Bodies That Matter* by thinking through the degree to which even biological sex is subject to social meanings which inscribe certain bodies as bodies that matter, as bodies with matter or substance. The bodies that fall outside these social meanings both do not matter, do not have matter, but also *cannot* matter if the immense social meanings attached to sex are to remain sustainable. In other words, Butler implies that the queer outside of the usual sexed and gendered categories is not just excluded, but that it is this very exclusion that upholds the binary system in the first place. The inside *needs* the outside in order to be inside. We can see how this functions in the rhetoric surrounding the debate over gay marriage—the panic that the very institution of marriage will no longer have meaning if same-sex partners are allowed to call their relationships by the name *marriage*. We might think of the White Queen or Alice in *Through the Looking-Glass* having to practice believing when someone makes the argument: "I *believe* marriage is between a man and a woman." Clearly, when this kind of argument is made, what is at stake is not the fact that any individual relationship between a man and a woman could lose its viability, that married men and women could fall out of love everywhere if gay marriage were to become legal; rather, what is at stake is the meaning of marriage, the meaning of a name to signify monolithically. The name itself is not at stake, nor the existence of marriages or children. What we are negotiating here is marriage as having gendered meaning, what *marriage means*. What we are negotiating is what *child* means, as deployed in a concept like children's fiction. What is threatened by a theory that says *there is no gender* or *there is no child* is the system of meanings around gender, the system of meanings around the idea of the child.

Rose attempts to articulate this system of meanings around the child in *The Case of Peter Pan* by asking a different sort of question of children's literature: "It will not be an issue here of what the child wants, but of what the adult desires—desires in the very act of construing the child as the object of its speech" (2). Rose is interested in the ways the child functions ideologically, in the ways that the child is part of a system of cultural meanings, a system that she attempts to get at through the psychoanalytic notions of fantasy and desire. What I find interesting about her arguments is that the child functions

ideologically in a number of ways that gender might be said to function: “to hold off a panic, a threat to our assumption that language is something which can simply be organised and cohered, and that sexuality, while it cannot be removed, will eventually take on the forms in which we prefer to recognise and acknowledge each other” (Rose 10). The word *eventually* is significant here because it suggests that the child, even as an idea, has *not yet* taken on these forms. On the contrary, the idea of the child itself signifies contradiction, movement, contingency. If children’s fiction is the place where we can believe that language is simple, as Rose suggests, then the child is paradoxically the site where even the simplest language becomes unpredictable and impermanent. Here, Rose points to the child as both a site of fantasy and disavowal, a place to locate what we want to believe about ourselves and the world, and a place to locate what is uncertain, unstable, unresolvable. The idea is that if uncertainty belongs to childhood, then it doesn’t belong to us.

Scholarly conversations in children’s literature following the publication of *The Case of Peter Pan* have sometimes polarized in ways similar to scholarly conversations in feminist studies or queer studies—a polarization that stems from the ever-present tension between theory and identity politics. We do not usually think of childhood studies and children’s literature criticism in terms of identity politics, but I think the terms of identity politics are useful if we are to understand the stakes of the debate following Rose, or what I will refer to here as the “real” child debate.

Citing Rose, Karín Lesnik-Oberstein, in her book *Children’s Literature: Criticism and the Fictional Child*, takes the idea that *there is no child* literally, arguing that we cannot talk about “real” children and implying that any scholars who are not at work critiquing constructions of childhood are actively in the business of construction themselves. On the other side of this debate, I locate mostly everyone else; that is, people who are aware of childhood as a construction, but who also have very real and immediate investments in working with and caring for people called children. Lesnik-Oberstein goes so far as to vilify a few children’s literature scholars who *do* critique constructions of childhood for momentarily pointing towards a “real” child.¹² Elsewhere, Lesnik-Oberstein and Stephen Thomson find queer theory guilty as well, taking on Eve Sedgwick and Michael Moon in their article titled “What Is Queer Theory Doing with the Child?” Analyzing one instance where Sedgwick mentions childhood in the context of what they consider an otherwise theoretically self-reflexive work, Lesnik-Oberstein and Thomson ask: “Why . . . risk mobilizing the child at all?” They conclude that “the child in queer theory (but certainly not only in *queer* theory . . .) signals impending collapses of poststructuralist self-reflexivity” (37; emphasis in the original). While we can see that Sedgwick and Moon do employ ideas of the child in their examples, the cost of this employment is hardly a collapse of poststructuralist self-reflexivity. The idea of the child moves: it moves in the texts of Sedgwick and Moon. And regardless of our degrees of poststructuralist reflexivity, I would argue that we are all implicated in the

construction of childhood, just as we are implicated in the construction of all social meanings, to varying degrees of consequence. While Lesnik-Oberstein and the University of Reading critics are at work on an important theoretical problem, one that I too am concerned with, their work privileges certain kinds of questions while making others seem irrelevant. I don't think it's irrelevant to ask, *what do we do, then?* I think that as scholars we might do better to acknowledge the dialectic between working out how to *think* about something and what to *do* about something. The tension between theory and identity politics is, in fact, a dialectic out of which emerge dynamic shifts in both thought and action. It might seem surprising that I am framing *child* as an identity (and thus as one that might have both a theory and an identity politics), but I think this framing makes clear that we are not naïve or romantic for asking about actual people, people called children.

If we consider for a moment the work that comes out of education, psychology, library science, publishing, and even parenting—areas where there are actual people called children at stake in our articles, in our classrooms, and in our homes—it becomes immediately apparent that notions of *child* shift continually. People who work with children everyday are continually reminded of how little we can know about the child, how little this category can tell us about the people we encounter in our classrooms or libraries. We see contradictions, exceptions, changes every day in the groups called children, students, readers. Certainly, work in some fields might essentialize these groups at times. Certainly, current disciplinary conventions might put us in competition to say that we really “know” the child. But this body of work is characterized by revision, by exceptions, by the exploration of previous misunderstandings and inadequate definitions. The essentializing or “knowing” in this work has a rhetorical immediacy that may be necessary to get things done.¹³

Lesnik-Oberstein fails to recognize or contend with these rhetorical contexts or their practical concerns because she does not have to contend with actual children in her book, or with the decisions a kindergarten teacher must make in her classroom every day, or with the ways a mother (who thinks gender is constructed) helps her three-year-old identify “man” and “woman” along with the colors on the color wheel and circles, squares, and triangles. This kind of defining and categorizing, this kind of essentializing, is part of what education is about, part of what it means to function in the social world. Even Butler concedes that we need norms to live and to live well.¹⁴ I think what we have to gain, then, in doing cultural critique, in thinking through the functions of ideology, is a capacity to let go in the moments that come later, the moments that we insist on categories and definitions. What we have to gain is the capacity to understand why we want to insist in the first place, and what our wanting can tell us about ourselves.

When Rose talks about constructions of the child as fantasy, she does not mean that we are all delusional for thinking and writing about people who are called children. In psychoanalysis, fantasy is conceptualized as part of an

essential and ongoing process of identity formation, and it is this process that Rose describes when she writes: “All subjects—adults and children—have finally to take up a position of identity in language; they have to recognise themselves in the first person pronoun and cohere themselves to the accepted register of words and signs” (141). What psychoanalysis reveals is that identity is not something we arrive at, finally, once and for all, but something more fluid and contradictory. Butler puts it this way:

Moreover, there is no better theory for grasping the workings of fantasy construed not as a set of projections on an internal screen but as part of human relationality itself. It is on the basis of this insight that we can come to understand how fantasy is essential to an experience of one’s own body, or that of another, as gendered. . . . There is always a dimension of ourselves and our relation to others that we cannot know, and this not-knowing persists with us as a condition of existence and, indeed, of survivability. (*Undoing* 15)

The problem of identity is not only a problem of naming, but also one of knowing. Naming is an essential part of how we understand ourselves and others; and yet, it is worth asking how naming constrains, when and how naming requires us to pick one interpretation, requires us to simplify or ignore complexity. It is worth asking when making something visible in a named way makes its other ways of being *invisible*.

Rose points to the problem of naming in this way: “it is the shift of that ‘have to’ from a necessity, which is shared by both adult and child, to something more like a command, which passes from one to the other” (141). Perhaps Rose makes an important distinction here between telling children what to *do*—what we *want* from them in terms of asking for something—and the kinds of telling that construct *who they are* or *who they should be*. It is the latter that becomes dangerous, that can make other ways of being invisible or impossible. And so, when we tell a child *to be a nice boy*, or that *girls don’t sit like that*, we shape behavior with gender. If we then link gender with sexuality, the commands are sometimes more subtle, even unspoken. The child is presumed to be on their way to heterosexuality, presumed to be either a girl or a boy. If we consider the possibility of a queer child, the possibility of a child that will grow up to identify against the *accepted register of words and signs*, we can see the threat of these commands.¹⁵ It is not necessary for *all* children to suffer under a command for it to be insidious, nor am I denying the endless potential of children to negotiate such commands. However, the function of a command to impose identity, to stabilize identity, suggests that another approach would be better, suggests that it is better to savor the gaps, to leave room for ways of knowing, being, and interpreting that perhaps aren’t what we thought they were, that might turn out to be queer, strange, or contradictory.

The Problem of Language

Grown-ups never understand anything by themselves, and it is tiresome for children to be always and forever explaining things to them.

—Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, *The Little Prince* (8)

The child is there, and the original meaning is there—they *reinforce* each other.

—Jacqueline Rose, *The Case of Peter Pan* (19)

As scholars of children's literature, we are interested in, and troubled by, not only what happens in the lived world, but also what stories we tell ourselves about those experiences, what those stories leave out, and why. Children's literature is one of the places where these stories get told; and as stories, they are full of projections, desires, disavowals. Children's literature is one of the places where we imagine the world and imagine ourselves. One question I have yet to address is the question of children's fiction, the question of stories written and published *for* children, and what we are to do with these impossible fictions. If we reframe impossibility, reframe the fantasy of children's fiction, we can see how Alice or Huck operates in relation to social critique, how the child might be imagined as the audience for things we find unnamable, unknowable, impossible—what Butler understands as the critical promise of fantasy:

fantasy is part of the articulation of the possible; it moves us beyond what is merely actual and present into a realm of possibility, the not yet actualized or the not actualizable. The struggle to survive is not really separable from the cultural life of fantasy, and the foreclosure of fantasy—through censorship, degradation, or other means—is one strategy for providing for the social death of persons. Fantasy is not the opposite of reality; it is what reality forecloses, and, as a result, it defines the limits of reality The critical promise of fantasy, when and where it exists, is to challenge the contingent limits of what will and will not be called reality. (*Undoing* 29)

I have quoted at length from Butler because I think she makes visible the doubled function of fantasy to both contain and escape. Children's literature is fascinating for this very reason: it is always operating both ways at once. At the end of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, we find out that it had all been a dream, the dream of a child, allowing both Carroll and the adult reader a way out of its fantasy without questioning anything about the social world. We would be mistaken to assume that the fantasy is *for* the child, for the survival of children, when the stories we tell are for ourselves, for our own survival. The category of *child* is itself a kind of story, a fantasy which provides us with ways to both contain the queer and strange, and to delight in the possibility of the queer and strange.

I turn to a familiar text one last time. The narrator of Antoine de Saint-Exupéry's *The Little Prince* (1945) draws for us on the first page a boa constrictor

that has swallowed an elephant. He calls it Drawing Number One. He explains, “I showed my masterpiece to the grown-ups, and asked them whether the drawing frightened them” (7). But he is discouraged to find that the adults interpret his drawing as a hat. He draws another, which he calls Drawing Number Two, which shows the elephant inside the skin of the giant snake. But he is discouraged again, directed to return to his studies. “Grown-ups never understand anything by themselves,” he remarks, “and it is tiresome for children to be always and forever explaining things to them” (8). The irony here is that our narrator is already a grown-up himself, a pilot who has flown around the world. He is now the adult that needs these explanations, and yet he identifies with the child—certainly the very projection that Rose describes—the child as the pure point of origin, the child as meaning, the child as simply someone who is there. And yet, reading against this interpretation, perhaps we understand that the narrator is *not* the child, but instead the adult who tirelessly believes in the norms that delimit what is visible and invisible, the adult who sees only a hat. The problem of language, then, is the fact that the child is not *there*, but here.

The child’s experience of the book, Rose reminds us, is “more or less impossible to gauge” (9), suggesting the difficulty of making the claim that children’s literature is either oppressive or liberating. Indeed, Rose herself is careful not to use the term “oppressive,” distancing herself from this term explicitly in her conclusion. But, I would add that the child’s experience is impossible to gauge in the same way that our own experiences with books are more or less impossible to gauge. There is no original meaning. If we were to tell the story of our own reading, about what happens when we read, it would be marked by narrative decisions that inevitably simplify, distort, misrepresent. However, that doesn’t mean that the story is not important. Just because what we know is always partial, contingent, changing, unstable, contradictory, all at once, does not mean that we know nothing. It doesn’t mean that we should stop talking about books and reading, or that we should stop talking about ourselves and others. But in talking, we are always faced with the limits of language and representation, the limits of our perspective and positionality, the limits of what can be known about each other.

The fact that ideology, or fantasy, shapes so much of what we understand as reality is not a problem. Rather, ideology—whether in the form of fantasy or narrative—is inevitable. We *need* it. But it is when these powerful constructions start to operate as reality, as truth—as truth imposed on others, as claims of knowledge about children or readers—that we run into trouble. It is when our ideas about someone become so powerful that we cannot see what is right in front of us, cannot see the lived reality of multiple, shifting, contradictory, queer possibilities. To recognize that something is an ideological construction allows movement and revision within it. What we are revising is *not* the world or our experiences, which are already full of contradiction and instability. Rather, we are allowing paradox, play, and possibility within the stories we tell ourselves about that world.

Notes

1. Rose is not cited in Kathryn Stockton's *The Queer Child* or in James Kincaid's *Child-Loving* or *Erotic Innocence*, despite overlapping interests in psychoanalysis, childhood, and desire. In the introduction to the anthology *Curiouser: On the Queerness of Children*, editors Steven Bruhm and Natasha Hurley briefly mention Rose and quote her as having argued that "childhood innocence [is] . . . a portion of adult desire" (xiii), but her work is not mentioned in any of the essays included in the collection.

2. I echo here the constructivist perspective of "the child" as a historically figured and contingent category. However, I follow Rose, and notably Kincaid, in framing this question as one that is about the present—present desires, present disavowals, present investments—and in being relevant to a lived world where we relate to actual children. In *Child-Loving*, Kincaid expresses an interest in the consequences faced by actual children, writing: "I will argue that the chief casualties are the very children we think we are protecting: needing the *idea* of the child so badly, we find ourselves sacrificing the bodies of children for it" (6, emphasis in the original).

3. I refer here to the recurring characters Harry and Lucy, who appear in many works by Maria Edgeworth, including *Moral Tales for Young People* (1801) and *Early Lessons* (1801), which circulated widely throughout the nineteenth century. These famously well-behaved characters are reworked as precocious troublemakers in Catherine Sinclair's *Holiday House* (1839), which suggests an implicit debate among children's fiction writers about who children *really* are.

4. Published prior to Stockton's *The Queer Child*, Bruhm and Hurley's 2004 anthology takes up some of the theoretical questions posed by the terms *queer* and *child*, but many of the essays focus on some aspect of children and childhood sexuality. It is interesting that *queer* is the term used in the title of this anthology to describe the act of even talking about children and sexuality in certain ways.

5. I am summarizing here the abundant misreadings of Rose that have followed the publication of *The Case of Peter Pan*.

6. For example, there is the 1935 letter in which Freud addresses a mother's concerns about her son: "Homosexuality is assuredly no advantage but it is nothing to be ashamed of, no vice, no degradation, it cannot be classified as an illness; we consider it to be a variation of the sexual function produced by a certain arrest of sexual development" (787). The homosexual son is, according to Freud, stuck in an earlier stage, one belonging to childhood. We can find another example in Freud's "Psychogenesis of a Case of Homosexuality in a Woman" (1921), in which he claims, "it was possible to trace its origin and development in the mind with complete certainty" (147). It is not surprising, perhaps, that Freud traces the origin of homosexuality to the childhood of the woman in question and to the floating oedipal signifiers of her mother and father.

7. For example, Judith Halberstam refers to transgendered experience as "queer time" in her book *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives*. For Halberstam, "queer time" might be described as "the perverse turn away from the narrative coherence of adolescence—early adulthood—marriage—reproduction—child rearing—retirement—death, the embrace of late childhood in place of early adulthood or immaturity in place of responsibility" (qtd. in Freeman 182). The recent scholarship on the child in queer theory might be understood in terms of queer theory's turn toward

time. Indeed, when we begin to unravel assumptions about time—assumptions about progress, development, sequence, and memory—we begin to unravel ideas about the child.

8. In Bruhm and Hurley's introduction to *Curiouser*, Alice is "Exhibit A" for what queerness has to do with childhood (xi). In this essay, I read Alice, along with other canonical figures, in order to make visible theory at work and to make visible the resonances between queer theory and Rose in a familiar context. My reading of Alice differs from Bruhm and Hurley's in that I do not locate queerness in Alice, or in the perspective of the child. Rather, I see queerness as something that moves in the text, in any text, and in our readings at the limits of what is visible, intelligible, or thinkable.

9. Alice often occupies this position of being aligned with manners and social norms in *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*: scolding herself about crying and cheating at games (15), instructing the Mad Hatter about how to have a tea party and have conversations (60–8), and objecting to the court procedures and evidence in the mock trial (104–9), to name a few examples.

10. Creating new names for things has its purposes, especially for those, such as Katharine Jones, who work in policy-making arenas. In "Getting Rid of Children's Literature," Jones proposes a number of new terms to describe the theoretical issues at stake in discussions of childhood and children's literature—including *age role*, *age difference*, and *ageuation*—terms intended to describe cultural processes in much the same way as feminist scholars have worked to describe gender. However, I am less interested in inventing new categories than I am in understanding existing categories and their power dynamics.

11. I think it makes sense to think of any category in a secondary position of a hierarchical relationship as having not only the problem of hierarchy, but also the problem of intelligibility, whether it be a gendered category or one of sexuality, race, class, or age.

12. Nodelman responds to Lesnik-Oberstein and the University of Reading critics directly in "The Precarious Life of Children's Literature Criticism," where he reads Butler's *Precarious Life* to consider the problems of relationality in regard to children's literature criticism.

13. We can see the dialectic between rhetorical immediacy and conceptual thinking in the history of feminism, feminist theory, and women's activism, which have also been characterized by revision, by waves of feminism, by contingency and context.

14. Butler takes up this issue throughout the essays in *Undoing Gender*, but I am thinking particularly of her articulation of "the doubled truth that although we need norms in order to live, and to live well, and to know in what direction to transform our social world, we are also constrained by norms in ways that sometimes do violence to us and which, for reasons of social justice, we must oppose" (206).

15. I think that Eve Sedgwick's chapter "How to Bring Your Kids Up Gay: The War on Effeminate Boys" in *Tendencies* illustrates this point powerfully (154–64). A version of this chapter can also be found in Bruhm and Hurley's edited collection *Curiouser*.

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