

CHAPTER 5**CHILDHOOD AS A 'QUEER TIME AND SPACE': ALTERNATIVE
IMAGININGS OF NORMATIVE MARKERS OF GENDERED LIVES****Kerry H. Robinson**

University of Western Sydney

Abstract: Taking up Judith Halberstam's call for alternative imaginings to current ways of being, this chapter explores childhood as a potentially queer 'counterpublic' (Fraser, 1992). Childhood is perceived as a time and space in which performances of gender and "the conventional logics of development, maturity, adulthood and responsibility" (Halberstam, 2005, p. 13) can be disrupted, allowing a space in which more flexible and fluid ways of being the child, as well as being gendered and sexual subjects more generally, are potentially possible. However, children's normative behaviours are highly regulated and policed in their everyday lives by adults and other children. Moral panic often prevails when normative values, especially heteronormative values, are transgressed. Childhood is thus a critical period in which the characteristics of the 'appropriate' and 'good' adult citizen are instilled and nurtured—discursively constituted in white, middle-class, heteronormative, Christian morals and values. It is argued that childhood innocence is an essential commodity in this process, as well as in the construction of child and adult subjects, in maintaining the boundaries between the adult and the child, and in constituting socio-cultural relations of power. Consequently, alternative imaginings of childhood and alternative performances of gender in children are rendered highly problematic. Based on focus groups with children and interviews with early childhood educators, childhood is highlighted as a time and space in which children are interpellated as heteronormative subjects and heteronormative gendered discourses associated with love, marriage and relationships are consolidated and perpetuated. Sue Saltmarsh provides a response to this chapter.

Keywords: Childhood, innocence, queer, time, space, moral panic, Bill Viola, gender, sexuality, heteronormative, adulthood, citizenship.

During a visit to the Museum of Contemporary Art in Sydney in 2008 I became intrigued and moved by a video installation by the artist Bill Viola, titled 'Heaven and Earth.' The installation was made up of the exposed tubes of two black and white video monitors positioned facing each other with a few inches between them. Both monitors were attached to wooden columns, one suspended from the ceiling and the other coming up from the floor. On the top monitor is an image of Viola's aged and dying mother and on the bottom monitor is an image of his newborn child. Although separate images, the glass face of each monitor reflects the image of the other, with the child's and elderly woman's faces becoming superimposed on each other, becoming one at different angles. Looking at this installation, I found myself imagining a space existing between the adult-child binary—'the in-between'—a space in which the boundaries between the two were blurred,

Kerry H. Robinson and Cristyn Davies (Eds)

All rights reserved - © 2012 Bentham Science Publishers

more flexible, or even non-existent on occasions—a queer space—an alternative imagining of the relationship between adulthood and childhood. Although the video installation is a representation of the separated spheres within the binary relationships adult–child, life–death and heaven–earth, it simultaneously queers these relationships, demonstrating the precariousness and fragility of these constructed spheres, and providing a space in which these relationships are reflected upon and potentially read differently. ‘Heaven and Earth’ represents, but simultaneously disrupts, the binary representation of the child as heavenly creature and essence of purity and innocence, and the adult as earthly, soiled, worn and grounded in life. This installation also reminded me of Judith Jack Halberstam’s concept of the technotopian space, one which “tests technological potentialities against the limits of a human body anchored in time and space, and that powerfully reimagines the relations between the organic and the machinic, the toxic and the domestic, the surgical and the cosmetic” (Halberstam, 2005, p. 103). Within the space created by ‘Heaven and Earth,’ and in the in-between space of the two spheres, the representation of the embodiment of the child and adult are transposed into ambiguity, while the viewer walks, sits, observes, bends, creating different meanings of adulthood and childhood.

Taking up Halberstam’s call for alternative imaginings to current ways of being, this chapter explores childhood as a potentially queer ‘counterpublic’ (Fraser, 1992). In this context, childhood is perceived as a time and space in which performances of gender and “the conventional logics of development, maturity, adulthood and responsibility” (Halberstam, 2005, p. 13) can be disrupted allowing a space in which more flexible and fluid ways of being a child, as well as being gendered and sexual subjects more generally are potentially possible. However, as pointed out by Nicholas Rose, “childhood is the most intensively governed sector of personal existence” (1999, p. 123). Children’s normative behaviours are highly regulated and policed, officially and informally, in their everyday lives by adults and other children. Moral panic often prevails when normative values, especially heteronormative values, are transgressed (Berlant, 2004; Kincaid, 2004; Robinson, 2008; Taylor, 2007). Childhood is a critical period in which the characteristics of the ‘appropriate’ and ‘good’ adult citizen are instilled and nurtured—discursively constituted in white, middle-class, heteronormative, Christian morals and values (Bell and Binnie, 2000; Berlant, 1997; Richardson, 1998; Robinson, forthcoming 2012).

Childhood innocence is an essential commodity in this process, as well as in the construction of child and adult subjects, in maintaining the boundaries between the adult and the child, and in constituting socio-cultural relations of power. Innocence is generally vehemently defended in western society as an inherent and definitive component of normative childhood. Childhood is

utilized to reproduce and regulate heteronormative cultures and is reflected in government laws and policies, as well as in media and popular cultural images of children (Berlant, 1997; Bruhm and Hurley, 2004; Kincaid, 2004; Stockton, 2009). As a result, alternative imaginings of childhood (and adulthood) as well as alternative performances of gender in children are rendered highly problematic, and this rendering is reflected in the resistance and moral panic often encountered when discourses of normative childhood are challenged. However, children's agency is mobilized to negotiate and challenge these discourses, with some children resisting the regulations and normative representations of childhood, including their constitution as heteronormative gendered subjects (Robinson and Davies, 2010).

This chapter highlights childhood as a time and space in which children are interpellated as heteronormative subjects, and actively regulate the reproduction of cultural values and practices perpetuated within heteronormative gendered discourses associated with love, marriage and relationships. In addition, this chapter explores how some children resist and queer these heteronormative discourses, producing different performances of gender in their everyday lives. In this context of resistance or queering, readings of childhood shift from a period of adult dependency, of voicelessness, of 'becoming,' to new and different subjectivities and life narratives, incorporating agency and competency. Childhood as a queer time and space is one in which normative performances of gender are disrupted by children who wish for, and demand, more flexible performances of gender in their lives. These children resist the rigidity of gender performances in their public lives and private spaces, often negotiating harassment from peers and adults (Kilodavis, 2010; Robinson and Davies, 2010).

Additionally, in the alternative imaginings of a 'queer childhood,' a lifetime and how one progresses through it may no longer be based on fixed normalizing perspectives of generational categories of ages and stages, but on flexible and meaningful life markers of one's own subjectivity, experience and choice. Negotiating normative life markers, whether in the context of 'straight' or 'queer' lives, or in childhood, adolescence, or adulthood, is about negotiating powerful hegemonic social, political, economic and educational representations of measures of one's personal and societal competency, worthiness and 'normality' (Jenkins, 1998; Epstein and Johnson, 1998; Sedgwick, 1990). These discourses regulate western adult-child binary relations of power, keeping adults and children in their 'rightful' places—'don't act like a child,' 'act your age' and 'too big for your boots' are just a few of the sayings acculturated in everyday practices that operate to instil shame in those adults, adolescents or children who

disrupt what are considered 'normal,' developmentally appropriate categorical behaviours and practices in the child, adolescent, and adult.

The heteronormative constitution of childhood discussed in this chapter is based on qualitative research undertaken by the author¹: firstly, through a discourse analysis of the representation of children in several media and popular cultural images that depict children in rituals associated with heteronormative conventional practices, such as marriage, intimacy, and relationships. These media and popular cultural texts constitute children as 'cute' through the fetishization of 'childhood innocence,' demonstrating children's contradictory and precarious relationship to this notion. The portrayal of children in these images simultaneously troubles the concept of innocence and disrupts the adult-child binary through links to sexuality. Secondly, the heteronormative construction of childhood is examined through interviews and focus groups with children, parents and other adults, examining their perceptions of the images of children described above, and of children's resistance to heteronormative constructions of gender more broadly. This research points out that for many children, heteronormative life markers such as first 'special' relationships, marriage, and having babies, are integral to the narratives of their early lives and of their perceptions of their 'destinies' (Blaise, 2005; Davies and Robinson, 2010; Renold, 2005).

Constructions of childhood and childhood innocence in western normative narratives of time and space

Normative narratives of time and space are constituted within universalized western enlightenment discourses of what it means to be human. The Enlightenment fostered the notion of an universal human history united by the common ideals of human reason and rationality, progress and perfection, all reinforced by and founded on scientific 'truths' and western philosophical ideals (Erickson and Murphy, 2003). Western psychological discourses of human development emerged from these humanist modernist perspectives, constructing childhood, adolescence and adulthood as the biological linear categorical markers of human maturation. Each of these life stages is rigidly separated from the others according to ages and stages in cognitive and physical development, which inflexibly define what it means to be a child, adolescent or adult (Piaget, 1929, 1950; Durkheim, 1956). Overlapping this process of cognitive and physical maturity are other biological and cultural life markers that operate as further signifiers of maturation along this perceived linear pathway, such as schooling, getting a driving licence, sexual maturity, starting work, voting, marriage, buying a house, reproduction, and retirement. Simultaneously these markers not only operate to constitute and reinforce the culturally defined boundaries between

childhood, adolescence, and adulthood, but also are the socio-cultural, political and economic organizing principles of relations of power in society. They ultimately become markers of the heteronormative *status quo* (Berlant, 1995; Berlant and Warner, 1998; Bruhm and Hurley, 2004; Halberstam, 2005; Jackson, 2006; Robinson, 2005a). Steven Bruhm and Natasha Hurley argue that adult utopianism and nostalgia plague the constitution of the child and are the preferred form of the future:

Caught between these two worlds, one dead, the other powerless to be born, the child becomes 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. (2004, p. xiii)

It is important to point out that when the boundaries between childhood, adolescence, and adulthood are transgressed in any manner, it often results in a degree of moral panic. Moral panic, particularly that associated with children, gender and sexuality, operates as a political strategy on the part of right-wing conservative governments for maintaining the hegemony of the nuclear family, the sanctity of heterosexual relationships and the heteronormative social order (Berlant, 2004; Robinson, 2008; Taylor, 2007; Tobin, 1997).

Within western discourses of human development, the adult–child binarism emerged constituting childhood in opposition to adulthood; children are viewed as inherently different from adults. In this context, the child is perceived as the immature and powerless other to the adult, who is represented as the pinnacle of human development, marked by physical and emotional maturity, and the ability to engage in abstract and hypothetical thinking. Consequently, the child has been perceived as not being fully human due to its infantile development, but rather as being in the process of ‘becoming’ human—as professed by the French sociologist Emile Durkheim (1982, p. 147) in the late nineteenth century:

In everything the child is characterized by the very instability of [its] nature, which is the law of growth. The educationalist is presented not with a person wholly formed—not a complete work or finished product—but with a *becoming*, an incipient being, a person in the process of formation.

The child is considered to be on a linear pathway depicted by various life stage markers of increasing maturation—adolescence and ultimately adulthood. The child (like the adolescent) does not become a ‘citizen,’ a fully-fledged ‘human,’ until it becomes an adult—and the child is encouraged to become a particular kind of adult citizen (Berlant, 2004; Davies, 2008a, forthcoming 2012). Adulthood is the representation of life experience, maturity, critical thinking, sophistication, and independence.

The child (and adolescent) is perceived as being everything that the adult is not—naïve, dependent, unsophisticated, immature, lacking critical thinking, inexperienced and unknowing—it takes up an oppositional location to the adult subject and is relegated to the margins of public life. The child is thus perceived as ‘lacking’ as a subject. This modernist paradigm has been instrumental in artificially creating the separate, distinct, and often mutually exclusive spaces, which have become known as the ‘world of adults’ and the ‘world of children.’

In fact, children are viewed as being in ‘need of protection’ from this world of adults, which is often represented as a space that is potentially dangerous, corrupt and evil, especially for the ‘innocent’ unknowing child (Bruhm and Hurley, 2004; Davies, forthcoming 2012; Jackson, 2006; Robinson, 2008). The call for protection of childhood and childhood innocence is nowhere more obvious and contradictory than in the context of sexualityⁱⁱ, which is perceived to be a critical marker between childhood and adulthood (for in-depth discussions of the relationship between childhood and sexuality see Bruhm and Hurley, 2004; Epstein, 1995; Kincaid, 2004; Renold, 2005, 2006; Robinson, 2005a, 2005b, 2005c; Tobin, 1997). Sexuality is considered the exclusive realm of adults in which children are constructed as the innocent ‘other.’ Kathryn Stockton Bond (2009, p. 62) talks about how childhood is a period of ‘delaying’: “Delay is seen to be a feature of its growth: children grow by delaying their approach to the realms of sexuality, labor and harm.” Stockton (2009, p. 62) makes the observation that “the act of sheltering is a kind of dance on the knife-edge of delay,” and asks, “[h]ow can children be gradually led by degrees toward domains they must not enter at all as children?”

Children’s sexuality within this discourse is perceived as nonexistent or, at the most, as immature. Ironically, the discursive understanding of children as asexual beings prevails in some quarters despite the intensive efforts taken to ‘control’ or curb children’s sexual behaviour at various points in time (for an historical example of the repression of children’s sexuality see Wolfenstein, 1998). In this context, children have also been denied access to sexual knowledge about their bodies and their sexual subjectivities, with detrimental impacts on their health and wellbeing on some occasions (Cahill and Theilheimer, 1998; Corteen and Scraton, 1997; Haydon, 2002; Levine, 2002; Plummer, 1990; Robinson, 2002, 2005c, forthcoming 2012). The ‘knowing child’—no longer pure and innocent—is often stigmatized and considered sullied (Gittins, 1998). It is undeniable that children do sometimes require adult protection in many different contexts: not just in the public sphere but, even more critically, in the private sphere of the family. However, this need to protect children is also about preserving their perceived innocence and maintaining rigid boundaries and power relations

within the adult–child dualism, which practices unduly prolong children’s dependence and lack of voice, of civil rights and of citizenship (Bruhm and Hurley, 2004; Robinson, 2005b, forthcoming 2012). Childhood innocence, a socio-cultural construct, has become the perceived essence of childhood, and is also linked to nostalgic longings on the part of many adults. Childhood takes on the mythology of a time of freedom, frivolity and irresponsibility, providing a stark contrast to adulthood. Historically, understandings of the individual in humanist discourse considered the child to be the core of the essence of self, representing a time lost to the adult through the process of maturation (Jackson, 2006; Stockton, 2009). Consequently, childhood has been nostalgically depicted as the ‘golden age’ (Jenks, 2005; Kociumbas, 1997)—a time of purity and innocence, filled with carefree play. This middle-class and racialized romantic image of childhood was solidified in Christian discourse and in the nineteenth century works of Rousseau and Wordsworth, whose representations of childhood innocence have lasted to the present day. (The photographs of Anne Getty are contemporary examples of this representation of childhood innocence.)

However, in more recent years, these humanist discourses of childhood, largely underpinned by, and fixed in, theories of child development, have been critiqued for their inherent biological determinism and universalizing generalizations of childhood, and the fact that they are based on research with small numbers and culturally biased samples of children. These discourses do not take into consideration the socio-cultural and experiential differences among children, or individual subjectivities that impact on childhood in different spaces and times (James and Prout, 1990; James, Jenks and Prout, 1998; Jenkins, 1998; Gittins, 1998). A child is born into society as an embodied being who grows and physically matures over time, but the collective notion of ‘childhood’ and understandings of what it constitutes are primarily socially, culturally and historically variable across ethnicity, class, gender and so on (Southon and Dhakal, 2003; Woodhead, 1999). The categorization of children’s behaviours within chronological ‘ages’ and ‘stages’ reinscribes normative understandings of children’s development that have been framed within white, middle-class and Eurocentric perspectives (Robinson and Jones Diaz, 2006). Childhood ‘innocence’ has been critical in the justification of keeping children separate from the public domains of active citizenry (Bruhm and Hurley, 2004; Epstein and Johnson, 1998; Robinson, forthcoming 2012). Karen Corteen and Phil Scraton (1997, p. 99) point out that “the infantilizing of children, sustaining childhood as a prolonged denial of personhood or citizenship, is particularly marked with regards to their developing sexualities.”

Children's and parents' readings of heteronormative images of childhood in media: contradictions in normative life narratives

Media, advertising, and children's literature play a critical role in perpetuating discourses that constitute normative life narratives, as well as normative gendered and sexual subjects. In this section of the discussion, I identify, describe and analyze the discourses operating in three images across these three contexts that are mobilized not only to sell products but also to perpetuate powerful discourses that work to constitute normative childhood within heteronormative frameworks. However, shadowing this process, the hetero/sexualization of the children in these images disrupts the hegemonic construction of the normative child as 'innocent' and 'pure.' The ambiguity and contradictions associated with gender and sexuality that constantly prevail within the adult-child binary are reflected in these everyday visual representations of childhood. The three media images described and critiqued below were also used as discussion prompts with young children and their parents in research conducted by the author. This research focused on children's education around sexuality in schooling, children's knowledge of gendered relationships and of sexuality, and parental practices in educating their children around these matters. Children's and adults' responses are incorporated into the discussion.

The first image is an advertisement that appeared in a glossy table magazine about dining out in an Australian city. It is an advertisement for a café, showing a young boy and girl (approximately seven or eight years of age) drinking coffee together and sharing a large plate of fruit and ice cream. The boy, dressed in black, is the larger character of the two and has an air of confidence and of being in control, which may be read in association with his hegemonic masculinity portrayed through his taller and larger stature, and his dark southern European good looks. He is in an active pose holding a black coffee cup with a gold ancient Greek print, smiling and looking down at she who can only be interpreted as his 'date,' sitting closely and demurely beside him. The girl is wearing a light sleeveless floral dress in pinks and mauves and a straw hat ringed with pink and crimson roses; she has her hands folded under her chin and is smiling. In a scene more reminiscent of the stereotypical practices of adolescents or adults, the bowl of ice cream on the table is an image of childhood and childhood innocence that is ignored, forgotten and lost in what is presented as more interesting and tantalizing—new love. The children's 'staged' performance and embodiment of gender encompasses a heteronormative interaction between the two based largely on the positioning of their bodies and their facial expressions—the girl has a look of coyness, seduction and desire, as she leans forward smiling and demurely avoiding the boy's sexually alluring gaze by staring at his coffee cup. Positioned behind them and above their heads on the wall is visible the lower (feet) section of a cupid statue. The

children are totally engrossed in each other's presence; the food is only a backdrop to a scene that is full of lust and anticipation. The caption below the picture reads, 'Ahhh...This is coffee.' The image simultaneously constructs the children as innocent and cute, and as sexually engaged, knowing and provocative.

How do young children read this image? Jimmy and Rosie are four-year-olds who gave the following account of the image, which provoked links to narratives and events in their own lives. They identified the ways that the girl and boy looked at each other, especially their facial expressions, as the primary impetus behind their thinking that the two were close in a special boyfriend-and-girlfriend way:

- Jimmy: I think they are friends.
 Researcher: Why do you think they are friends?
 Jimmy: Because the girl loves the boy.
 Researcher: And why do you think the girl loves the boy?
 Jimmy: 'Cause sometimes you got a boy and one likes the girl.
 Researcher: Is there something about the picture that shows that she might like the boy?
 Jimmy: Yes...um...
 Researcher: Can you tell me what it is?
 Jimmy: ...um, I don't know...they are smiling at each other...
 Rosie: I like a boy.
 Researcher: You were saying Rosie that there is a special boy and you like him. Does that mean he is your boyfriend?
 Rosie: Yes...boyfriend.
 Researcher: What is his name?
 Rosie: Robert.
 Researcher: Robert. And what do you like about Robert?
 Rosie: 'Cause he has lots of cool stuff and I like his cool stuff.
 Researcher: You like his cool stuff. Yeah. And does he like you?
 Rosie: Yes.
 Researcher: He does. So how do you show him that you like him?
 Rosie: Because he likes me a bit.
 Researcher: How do you know that?
 Rosie: Because I met him before.

Similar responses about the looks on the boy's and girl's faces as the indicator of the two 'liking' each other were given by two five-year-old girls in the following discussion. The discussion also prompted some interesting comments around age, relationships and marriage:

- Researcher: What do you think is happening in this picture?

- Belinda: Eating lunch.
 Belinda: It's a birthday.
 Researcher: Why do you think it is a birthday?
 Belinda: Because of the lollies.
 Christy: I don't think it is, because there is only two people.
 Researcher: What do you think the girl thinks about the little boy?
 Christy: They are best friends I think. I think they are best friends.
 Belinda: They like each other.
 Researcher: Do you think they could be girlfriend and boyfriend?
 Christy: They can't because they are kids.
 Researcher: What does it mean to have a girlfriend or a boyfriend?
 Christy: They have to be old enough, like in Year 5.
 Christy: I have one...boyfriend.
 Researcher: You have one do you? What's his name?
 Belinda: *[answering for Christy]* William.
 Researcher: William.
 Belinda: He is at my school.
 Researcher: What makes him special?
 Christy: He is my cousin.
 Researcher: He's your cousin?
 Belinda: You can't marry a cousin, that's what my dad and mum said.
 Christy: He's too old. He's twelve.
 Researcher: Why do you like him?
 Belinda: I think he is very kind and silly.
 Researcher: Do you think that the girl in this picture likes this boy? Why do you think she likes the boy?
 Christy: Um, the faces, they are looking at each other.
 Researcher: What do you think Belinda? Do you think the girl likes the boy? Or the boy likes the girl?
 Belinda: The boy likes the girl. The girl likes the boy...
 Researcher: Why do you think that they like each other?
 Belinda: Because of their faces.

This discussion highlighted how these young girls negotiate the power relations associated with the regulating hegemonic discourses of age, marriage and relationships. Both Christy and Belinda agreed that the picture portrays a sense that the girl and boy represented are in a close relationship—'best friends' or 'like each other'—due to the way that they are looking at each other (an intimacy is portrayed in their smiles). Christy was quick to make the point that they are too young to be girlfriend and boyfriend, which she located as something that grown-ups engage in, offering the example of children in Year 5! Still, Christy, who was about the age of the girl represented in the image, took up the power and position of

an older person, indicating that she had a boyfriend. Belinda, taking up a normalizing and regulating position, reminded Christy that she cannot marry William because he is her cousin. Christy responded by shifting her suddenly precarious position in the discussion back to one of control, discarding William as being too old for her.

The second image is a postcard of a young girl and boy (approximately seven or eight years of age) dressed in wedding attire and posing for an outdoor photograph after the ceremony as newlyweds often do. The girl is in a traditional white wedding dress with a long veil crowned with white flowers spreading out behind her; she is holding a bouquet of Australian native flowers, looking up at her groom. The boy is wearing a black tuxedo coat, which is slightly too big, over a cream shirt and long shorts, shoes and socks, and holding a black top hat. Both are looking into each other's eyes and smiling. The picture is in black and white, adding to the old fashioned style of the photograph, which is further enhanced by the old stone stairs leading up to a sandstone church in the background.

There is a sense for the viewer that this old fashioned style goes beyond the aesthetics of the picture to the values it is trying to represent: traditional heterosexual family values of virtue, commitment and monogamy. The scene perpetuates a sense of rebelliousness associated with masculinity, through the boy's unconventional clothing under the tuxedo coat juxtaposed against the conventional representation of the female bride. There is a frivolity in the boy's dress that might give the impression that he does not take the process as seriously as does the girl.

Both this image and the one discussed previously are examples of the heterogendered construction of young children being viewed in terms of 'cuteness' and the discourse of childhood innocence operating to silence and render invisible the heteronormativity incorporated within the texts. The content, as well as the everydayness of these images—that is, as an advertisement in a coffee table booklet or a postcard in a gift shop or newsagency—troubles the adult-child binary and its precarious and contradictory relationship to sexuality and marriage as markers of adult status and maturation. Halberstam (2005, p. 153) points out that normative life narrative "charts an obvious transition out of childish dependency through marriage and into adult responsibility through reproduction." The marriage scene between the young children inadvertently destabilizes the boundaries between adulthood and childhood and troubles the normative life narratives that are associated with becoming or being an adult. The first image of the young children on a date does a similar thing, but more obviously troubles the rigid boundary that sexuality represents as the critical distinguishing marker between adulthood and childhood within western

discourse (though there is always a sense of pending sexual activity associated with a wedding day). The ambiguity in these images is critical to the perpetuation of heteronormative narratives. Ambiguity becomes a strategy in constituting children's desires to become heteronormative adult subjects and for forming the basis of a road map of critical life narratives about how best to appropriately reach that destination.

The following discussion arose when the same children were shown the postcard image of the boy and girl in wedding outfits. Marriage for these young children was clearly considered to be a grown up activity, and they critiqued the image of children getting married. Mock weddings are often part of young children's play and Jimmy had previously commented that he had married his best friend in preschool. However, the image seemed to them to be a 'real' depiction of children getting married:

- Belinda: Kids getting married.
 Researcher: Kids getting married? What do you think Jimmy?
 Jimmy: That's real strange.
 Researcher: Why is it strange?
 Jimmy: Why? Because kids don't get married, it is meant to be grown-ups getting married.
 Researcher: What do you think Rosie?
 Rosie: Strange.
 Researcher: Can kids get married?
 Rosie: No way.

Heteronormative understandings of marriage prevailed amongst these four- and five-year-olds who had strong ideas on who could and could not get married:

- Researcher: Do you think that two boys can get married?
 Rosie: No.
 Researcher: Can you tell me why?
 Rosie: Because I only see girls and boys get married.
 Researcher: You only see boys and girls get married. Jimmy do you think that two boys can marry?
 Jimmy: *[less certain, as he has married his best friend in dress-ups]* I don't know...
 Researcher: You're not sure. Can two girls get married?
 Jimmy: No.
 Researcher: No. Why can't two girls get married?
 Jimmy: Because I have never seen one.
 Researcher: You have never seen one. So when do you usually see people get married?
 Rosie: When they are bigger. And one boy and girl get married...

- Researcher: When they are bigger. Are you going to get married?
 Rosie: When I am bigger.
 Researcher: When you are bigger. What about you Jimmy? Do you think you will get married when you are bigger?
 Jimmy: I am already bigger.
 Researcher: You are already bigger? And you have already gotten married, you told us, didn't you?
 Jimmy: Yeah.
 Researcher: Will you get married again when you are bigger?
 Jimmy: Yeah...I will be grown soon.

Marriage was a special event that represented growing up in these children's understandings of life narratives, and they actively constituted it as part of their future lives.

The third image analyzed is a photograph which captures the uncensored performance of a young boy and girl (approximately seven years old) embracing in a Hollywood style French kiss who, apparently, after watching the failed attempts of adult actors to make their kiss sexy enough for the producer shooting a commercial for jeans, unabashedly considered that they had what it took to do the job properly. This photograph appeared in a weekend magazine supplement to a major Australian newspaper in a regular segment titled 'The Moment,' which invites readers to send in photographs with a brief background story. In the photograph, the boy is bending over holding the girl around the neck and waist and kissing her on the mouth. The girl's back is arched and she is in a lunging position in order to keep her balance. Her hand is grasping the boy's arm, which is clutching the waist of her skirt and causing it to slightly hitch up on her body, and her midriff area is exposed due to the riding up of her shirt. Both children are barefoot, standing on an old jetty.

The photograph challenges the hegemonic reading of childhood—children as innocent, naïve and unknowing in terms of sexuality—and destabilizes sexuality as representing the rigid boundary between adulthood and childhood. In the background brief to the picture, the photographer comments:

There was so much energy in them—it really showed what the models were lacking. We continued with the shoot, and we did get something in the end, but it didn't have anything on those kids. No spark, no magic. (Browell cited in Hooton, 2001, p. 17)

The children's confident and public display of sexual behaviour in this photograph and narrative affects the reader/viewer. Many of the adults, including students, teachers, and parents with whom I have worked in my capacity as an educator and a researcher, are often left feeling troubled when

viewing this photograph. This was also the case for those participants in the adult/parent focus groups. This troubling tends to be associated with negotiating the multiple discursive readings of the children's behaviour that they encounter in this photograph—that is, children being sexual, behaving in an adult manner, as well as their lack of inhibition and exhibitionism. The photograph captures a rawness and brashness in terms of the children's relationship to sexuality. The image is troubling for many in that it leaves a questioning and uneasiness around the potential unethical coercion that may have resulted in the children's performance. Despite their fascination, gazing at it is equally problematic for some adults who experience a sense of guilt for looking at the photograph so inquisitively. This uneasiness arises from a destabilizing of "the normative practices that make everyone else feel safe and secure" (Halberstam, 2005, p. 10). The dominant discourse of children and sexuality is one of vulnerability and exploitation, not of knowing and agency. Margot, a mother in one of the adult/parent focus groups indicated that for her it was the children's engagement in 'passion' that was disturbing:

I think there is something about the pose, because it is so grown up, it is a passionate pose, it is a passionate kiss and the passion therefore leads to a sort of sexualization and that's what—if they were standing straight, kind of giving one another a kiss even with arms wrapped around one another would be, to me, just far, far less offensive. It is the pose, because it is depicting passion, and passion equals sex, and they are just too young for that pose and I think that is what it is about...it is all very disturbing.

The photograph led to a questioning of how children know about sexuality and how to behave in such a manner, leaving some of the adults considering their own childhoods:

William: Shocking!

Jenny: Well I think—I don't know how it actually makes me feel, but I think it is really interesting that children that young are able to play up that narrative so successfully, in fact almost more successfully than adults in a particular kind of way because it is so familiar to them that they know precisely what to do.

William: How do they know?

Jenny: Well, exactly, I don't know—it's all around them all the time, so it's not, it is kind of—it's not shocking. I mean it is sexualizing in that sense that there is something shocking about it, but then it's also so familiar that it's not shocking at all. I think that if I saw that as a young person I would have wanted to be that girl in a narrative that I felt that I could never get. But I would have to be quite honest about it, it is absolutely true, that is probably what I would have wanted—not necessarily the level of sexualization but what seems to be inside a narrative that I didn't have access to for whatever reasons.

The children's responses to the photograph reflected a similar uneasiness in that it troubled their understandings of adult-child behaviours and resulted in their questioning of the ages of those represented in the pose:

- Belinda: The last one...what is that?
 Researcher: What is happening in that one?
 Christy: They are kissing each other.
 Belinda: It looks like married but it can't be. It looks like—because they are kids.
 Christy: [*referring to the first picture they viewed*] The first one was married.
 Researcher: Do kids kiss like that?
 Belinda: I'm not really sure. No that looks—they must be grown-ups. Grown-ups dressed like kids.
 Researcher: They are grown-ups dressed like kids?
 Belinda: Yeah.

It is interesting how the children repositioned the girl and boy in the image as adults dressed like children in order to make sense of this scenario. These children's responses also highlight how marriage is often read as the context in which intimate practices, such as kissing, are made legitimate and possible.

Childhood can be viewed as a temporal space, constituted within the adult-child binary, in which understandings of what it means to be a child or youth are defined by adults' perspectives and values (Gittins, 1998; Mayal, 1996). There are many life markers of childhood that operate to define and regulate the normative development of the child, including learning to crawl, walk and talk, toileting, and manners, as well as learning the etiquette of respecting adults' space and time—being quiet until spoken to or until adults have finished talking. However, there are other critical markers of childhood that are intimately linked with heteronormativity and normalized through the process of heterosexualization, as the above images testify. As I have commented elsewhere:

The construction of children's gendered identities cannot be fully understood without acknowledging how the dominant discourses of femininity and masculinity are heteronormalised in children's everyday lives. That is, through the processes of gendering children are constructed as heterosexual beings. (Robinson, 2005a, p. 19)

There are numerous markers of the heterosexualization of childhood that are constituted initially in the binarization of genders, such as girls being given dolls, tea sets, or prams in which to push their dolls around, and boys receiving footballs, trucks or guns. This process of gifting reinforces the perception that gendered differences are natural and normal. Play is a significant site of the construction of heterosexuality, with mock weddings,

playing at mothers, fathers, families, doctors and nurses, and chasing and kissing all being representations of the institutionalization of heterosexuality in childhood and the inculcation of normative life markers—that is, critical stages of children growing up (Epstein, 1995; Robinson, 2005a; Robinson and Davies, 2007; Wallis and Van Every, 2000). These representations and markers are rarely viewed as part of the 'normalization' of the construction of heterosexual desire and the inscription of hetero-gendered subjectivities in young children, which continue throughout their lives (Robinson, 2005a).

Childhood as queer time and space: creating spaces for different ways of being

Childhood can be viewed and experienced as a potential counter-public, or a queer time and space, in which alternative imaginings about gender, sexuality and life markers are possible. Childhood becomes a counter-public or a queer space when children subvert dominant discourses of childhood and gender, doing childhood and gender differently wherein "queer space refers to the place-making practices in which queer identities engage, as well as new spaces constructed by queer counter-publics" (Robinson and Davies, 2007, p. 21). Counter-publics are "parallel discursive arenas where members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counter discourses to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs" (Fraser, 1992, p. 123). Children, like adults, are shifting and contradictory subjects, negotiating the different discourses of gender that they encounter in their lives. Most children take up normative performances of gender and strictly regulate, not just their own performances, but those of other children (and of adults). However, some children engage in counter-hegemonic performances of gender, sometimes in public, but often in private spaces away from the regulating gazes of others (Robinson and Davies, 2008). The recently published children's storybook *My Princess Boy* was written by Cheryl Kiodavis (2010), mother of a young boy who loves to dress up as a princess. Kiodavis devised the story to open up new conversations about doing gender differently, as well as to counteract the largely negative responses that her son was experiencing from other children (and some adults) as a result of his gender non-conforming behaviours. Supportive of their son's wishes to transgress normative discourses of gender, the Kiodavis family contribute to the development of a counter-public in childhood in which gender identities can be negotiated and reconceptualized.

Educators can also contribute to the formation of a space in which children can do gender differently, but most often early childhood education settings and schools are institutions that regulate and police normalizing performances of gender and sexuality (Blaise, 2005; MacNaughton, 2000;

Robinson and Jones Diaz, 2006; Surtees and Gunn, 2010). One of the major concerns encountered by many early childhood educators is that of parents not wishing to have their young boys dressing up in female clothing whilst in their care. This concern stems from parental fears, particularly from fathers, that this practice will result in their boys growing up to be gay in later life (Robinson and Jones Diaz, 2006). Interestingly, there are seldom fears expressed about girls dressing up in male clothing (Robinson and Davies, 2007).

Some children resist non-normative performances of gender in others, who might open up opportunities for children to read and engage with gender differently. Peta is a queer early childhood educator, who is frequently misread as male by the children with whom she works. Peta's performance of gender is one of female masculinity, which some children find extremely challenging to their understandings of male and female bodies. Peta talked about one particular boy who refused to accept her as a woman:

We were reading *Paperback Princess* and this young boy Christopher said, 'are you married?' I said 'no,' that I wasn't married and he looked at me and said, 'and you are a boy.' I said, 'no, I'm actually a girl,' and he said 'no!' I said that I really and truly am and he said, 'no!' I said that I really, really was a girl and some of the girls in the group said, 'yes she is a girl.' I said, 'yeah, yeah, I am a girl,' and that sometimes I joke but this wasn't a joke and that I really was a girl.

Christopher continued to resist Peta's confirmation that she was indeed a woman, despite the added confirmation of other children and educators. Christopher questioned Peta's proclamations, challenging her around her short hairstyle, clothes (jeans, T-shirt, sneakers) and low deep voice, which are typical markers that children (and adults) often use to determine the sexed body. After this initial discussion between Christopher and Peta, Christopher came back the next day with an additional question that highlighted his continued concern around Peta's performance of gender:

The next day he came back and he said to me, 'you know how you are a girl?' and I said 'yes.' 'And I thought you were a boy'; I said 'yes.' He said, 'do other big people ever think you are a boy?'

Hoping that his reading of Peta's gender might be reconfirmed by an adult, Christopher's refusal to be corrected demonstrates the rigidity of binary understandings of gender and of the category 'woman' that often prevail, especially for young children (Butler, 1990; Davies, 2008b). Young children utilize binary understandings of male and female, based on a range of oppositional readings of the physical body and physical appearance, such as those acknowledged by Christopher. Children, from the time they are born, are taught through daily social practices and everyday visual cues in various forms of media to recognize their own gender and that of others through this

binary system of classification. Children are also aware of the regulatory norms that operate around performances of gender, negotiating these regulations in their own performances and policing the behaviour of others (Robinson and Davies, 2007, 2010). Halberstam (1998) critiques the perpetuation of the binary gender system, 'man' and 'woman,' pointing out that it fails to address the multiple performances of male and female that currently exist. Within this system, masculinity is rigidly associated with the male body; it is not a performance of gender that is also produced and sustained across female bodies. Peta's performance of female masculinity challenges some of the characteristics associated with hegemonic forms of masculinity practiced by male bodies, destabilizing the gender binary.

Peta's queerness also challenges the normative narratives of time through her taking up of playful, often child-like or adolescent behaviour in her everyday life, particularly in context of her work with children—reflected in her comment above that she often jokes with the children. Halberstam (2005, p. 152), in a quest to “recraft relationality,” asserts that “queer temporality disrupts the normative narratives of time that form the base of nearly every definition of the human.” Halberstam argues that the stretched-out adolescence of queer culture markers disrupt conventional binary accounts of a life narrative, based on clear markers between youth and adulthood. Peta's taking up of behaviours that are considered adolescent and less associated with adults, particularly with adult males—her resistance to conventional clothing regulations, her practical joking, her playing, her disinterest in marriage or having children—blurs the distinct markers between childhood, youth and adulthood.

It is interesting that Christopher, who refused to accept that Peta is not male, transgresses some of the binary gender characteristics that he uses to constitute and recognize gender in others. In their discussion around her performance of gender, Peta reminded Christopher of his own queer performances of gender: “I said to him sometimes boys can wear girls' clothes and girls can wear boys' clothes and that it was just like how he wore dresses and swishy medallions in dress-ups and he said, ‘OK!’” In the early childhood centre that Christopher attends, he is able to wear female clothing during the day if he so wishes, without being made to feel it is inappropriate by other children or adults. He chooses to wear a particular long silky dress, with a dangly necklace and a special hat, especially when he is feeling upset. According to Peta, the clothing soon soothes his moods and fears. Reminding Christopher of his own transgressive behaviour during their conversation seemed to be the only point at which he was willing to begin to see that it was possible for one to transgress the rigid gender binary. However, ‘dress-ups’ or play acting may have been seen by this young boy as different from Peta's everyday public performance of gender.

Conclusion

In this chapter I have demonstrated how representations of childhood reinscribe normative narratives of life that are essential to the construction of the normative adult citizen subject. Vital to this process are the ways in which these narratives and life markers of human development are constituted within heteronormative paradigms, and rendered invisible through processes such as the heterosexualization of gender in young children's lives. From very early ages children learn to read and take up these normative everyday signifiers of what it means to grow older, and are both gatekeepers and resisters of these discourses. There seems to be minimal disruption of this process in their early lives—in fact, moral panic erupts when there is any transgression of these normative processes. The discourse of childhood innocence operates as a powerful regulator and protector of this process, especially in terms of regulating what knowledge is available to children, and when, around areas often considered adults' issues. Children negotiate these hegemonic discourses of what it means to be a child, adolescent and adult, as well as what it means to be a normative gendered and sexual subject. However, despite childhood being a period of extreme regulation, it is also potentially a time in which doing childhood and identity differently is made possible through some children's search for more flexible ways of being and of expressing themselves. Childhood can be a queer time and space allowing for transformation and critique of the "practices and structures that both oppose and sustain conventional forms of association, belonging, and identification" (Halberstam, 2005, p. 4). In order to envisage alternative ways of being it is critical that children have access to, or 'inherit,' a broad range of knowledge that includes alternative subjective possibilities in their lives that are often found within the contexts of subjugated knowledges.

ⁱ This research was undertaken with Cristyn Davies and was supported by a University of Western Sydney research grant.

ⁱⁱ Sexuality is used throughout this chapter as a general term referring to one's sexual subjectivity, the expression of one's sexual orientation, and the physical act of having sex. Sexuality is often read purely in terms of 'the sexual act,' which results in its perceived irrelevance to children and/or in moral panic when children and sexuality are considered in some relationship to each other. When I argue that sexuality is the boundary between adult and child, it is not just in terms of expressly sexual acts; sexuality more generally is also considered the exclusive realm of adulthood.

REFERENCES

- Berlant, L. (1995). Live sex acts. *Feminist Studies*, 21(2), 379.
- Berlant, L. (2004). Live sex acts (Parental advisory: explicit material). In S. Bruhm, & N. Hurley (Eds.), *Curiouser: On the queerness of children* (pp. 57-80). Minneapolis: University of Minnesota.
- Berlant, L., & Warner, M. (1998). Sex in public. *Critical Inquiry*, 24(2), 547-566.
- Blaise, M. (2005). Playing it straight!: uncovering gender discourses in the early childhood classroom. New York: Routledge.
- Breckenridge, J., & Carmody, M. (Eds.). (1992). *Crimes of violence: Australian responses to rape and child sexual assault*. Sydney: Allen & Unwin.
- Bruhm, S., & Hurley, N. (2004). Curiouser: on the queerness of children. In S. Bruhm, & N. Hurley (Eds.) *Curiouser: On the queerness of children* (pp. ix-xxxviii). Minneapolis: University of Minnesota.
- Butler, J. (1990). *Gender trouble: Feminism and the subversion of identity*. New York: Routledge.
- Cahill, B. J., & Theilheimer, R. (1998). Stonewall in the housekeeping area: gay and lesbian issues in the early childhood classroom. In W. J. Letts IV, & J. T. Sears (Eds.), *Queering elementary education: Advancing the dialogue about sexualities and schooling* (pp. 39-48). Lanham: Rowan & LittleField.
- Calvert, G., Ford, A., & Parkinson, P. (Eds.). (1992). *The practice of child protection: Australian approaches*. Sydney: Hale & Iremonger.
- Corteen, K., & Scraton, P. (1997). Prolonging 'childhood', manufacturing 'innocence' and regulating sexuality. In P. Scraton (Ed.), *'Childhood' in 'crisis.'* London: University College London Press.
- Davies, C. (2008a). Becoming sissy. In B. Davies (Ed.), *Judith Butler in conversation: Analysing the texts and talk of everyday life* (pp.117-133). New York: Routledge.
- Davies, C. (2008b). Proliferating panic: regulating representations of sex and gender during the culture wars. *Cultural Studies Review*, 14(2), 83-102.
- Davies, C. (forthcoming 2012). 'It's not at all chic to be denied your civil rights': performing sexual and gendered citizenship in Holly Hughes' *Preaching to the Perverted, Sexualities*, 15.
- Durkheim, E. (1956). *Moral education*. New York: Free Press.
- Durkheim, E. (1982). Childhood. In C. Jenks (Ed.), *The sociology of childhood: Essential readings* (p. 147). London: Batsford Academic & Educational Ltd.
- Epstein, D. (1995). 'Girls don't do bricks': gender and sexuality in the primary classroom. In J. Siraj-Blatchford, & I. Siraj-Blatchford (Eds.), *Educating the whole child: Cross-curricular skills, themes and dimensions*. Buckingham: Open University Press.
- Epstein, D., & Johnson, R. (1998). *Schooling sexualities*. Buckingham: Open University Press.
- Erickson, P. A., & Murphy, L. D. (2003). *A history of anthropological theory* (2nd ed.). Peterborough, Ontario: Broadview Press.
- Fraser, N. (1992). Rethinking the public sphere: a contribution to the critique of actually existing democracy. In C. Calhoun (Ed.), *Habermas and the public sphere*. Cambridge: MIT Press.

- Gittins, D. (1998). *The child in question*. London: Macmillan.
- Halberstam, J. (1998). *Female masculinity*. London: Duke University Press.
- Halberstam, J. (2005). *In a queer time and place: Transgender bodies, subcultural lives*. New York: New York University Press.
- Haydon, D. (2002). Children's rights to sex and sexuality education. In B. Franklin (Ed.), *The new handbook of children's rights: Comparative policy and practice*. London: Routledge.
- Hooton, A. (2001, July 14). Interview with Anthony Browell, Good Weekend, *Sydney Morning Herald*, p. 17.
- Jackson, L. (2006). Childhood and youth. In H. G. Cock, & M. Houlbrook (Eds.), *The modern history of sexuality* (pp. 231-55). Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- James, A., & Prout, A. (Eds.). (1990). *Constructing and reconstructing childhood: Contemporary issues in the sociological study of childhood*. London: The Falmer Press.
- James, A., Jenks, C., & Prout, A. (1998). *Theorizing childhood*. London: Polity Press.
- Jenkins, H. (1998). Introduction: childhood innocence and other modern myths. In H. Jenkins (Ed.), *The children's culture reader* (pp. 1-37). New York: New York University Press.
- Jenks, C. (2005). *Childhood* (2nd ed.). New York: Routledge.
- Kincaid, J. R. (2004). Producing erotic children. In S. Bruhm, & N. Hurley (Eds.), *Curiouser: On the queerness of children* (pp. 3-16). Minneapolis: University of Minnesota.
- Kiodavis, C. (2010). *My princess boy*. Seattle: KD Talent LLC.
- Kociumbas, J. (1997). *Australian childhood: A history*. Sydney: Allen & Unwin.
- Mayal, B. (1996). *Children, health and the social order*. Buckingham: Open University Press.
- MacNaughton, G. (2000). *Rethinking gender in early childhood education*. Sydney: Allen & Unwin.
- Piaget J. (1929). *The child's conception of the world*. London: Routledge.
- Piaget, J. (1950). *The psychology of intelligence*. London: Routledge.
- Plummer, K. (1990). Understanding childhood sexualities. *Journal of Homosexuality*, 20(1-2), 231-249.
- Renold, E. (2005). *Girls, boys and junior sexualities*. London: Routledge: Falmer.
- Renold, E. (2006). 'They won't let us play... unless you're going out with one of them': girls, boys and Butler's 'heterosexual matrix' in the primary years. *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 27(4), 489-509.
- Robinson, K. H. (2002). Making the invisible visible: gay and lesbian issues in early childhood education. *Contemporary Issues in Early Childhood*, 3(3), 415-434.
- Robinson, K. H. (2005a). Childhood and sexuality: adult constructions and silenced children. In J. Mason, & T. Fattore (Eds.), *Children taken seriously in theory, policy and practice*. London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.

- Robinson, K. H. (2005b). Doing anti-homophobia and anti-heterosexism in early childhood education: moving beyond the immobilising impacts of 'risks,' 'fears' and 'silences.' Can we afford not to? *Contemporary Issues In Early Childhood Education*, 6(2), 175-188.
- Robinson, K. H. (2005c). 'Queering' gender: Heteronormativity in early childhood education. *Australian Journal of Early Childhood*, 30(2), 19-28.
- Robinson, K. H. (2008). In the name of 'childhood innocence': a discursive exploration of the moral panic associated with childhood and sexuality. *Cultural Studies Review*, 14(2), 113-129.
- Robinson, K. H. (forthcoming 2012). 'Difficult knowledge': the precarious relationships between childhood, sexuality and citizenship. *Sexualities*.
- Robinson, K. H., & Davies, C. (2007). Tomboys and sissy girls: young girls' negotiations of femininity and masculinity. *International Journal of Equity and Innovation in Early Childhood*, 5(2), 17-31.
- Robinson, K. H., & Davies, C. (2010). Tomboys and sissy girls: exploring girls' power, agency and female relationships in childhood through the memories of women. *Australasian Journal of Early Childhood*, 35(1), 24-31.
- Robinson, K. H., & Jones Diaz, C. (2006). *Diversity and difference in early childhood: Issues for theory and practice*. London: Open University Press.
- Rose, N. (1999). *Governing the soul: The reshaping of the private self* (2nd ed.). London: Free Association Books.
- Sedgwick, E. (1990). *Epistemology of the closet*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Southon, J., & Dhakal, P. (2003). A life without basic services: 'street children say'. SathSath, Save the children UK (Nepal). Retrieved June 23, 2004 from http://www.savethechildren.net/nepal/key_work/street_children.html
- Stockton, K. B. (2009). *The queer child, or growing sideways in the twentieth century*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Surtees, N., & Gunn, A. C. (2010). (Re)marking heteronormativity: resisting practices in early childhood education contexts. *Australasian Journal Of Early Childhood*, 35(1), 42-47.
- Taylor, A. (2007). Innocent children, dangerous families and homophobic panic. In G. Morgan, & S. Poynting (Eds.), *Outrageous: Moral panics in Australia*. Hobart: Australian Clearinghouse for Youth Studies.
- Tobin, J. (1997). Introduction: the missing discourse of pleasure and desire. In J. Tobin (Ed.), *Making a place for pleasure in early childhood education* (pp. 1-37). New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Wallis, A., & Van Every, J. (2000). Sexuality in the primary school. *Sexualities*, 3(4), 409-423.
- Wolfenstein, M. (1998). Fun morality: an analysis of recent American child-training literature. In H. Jenkins (Ed.), *The children's culture reader*. New York: New York University Press.
- Woodhead, M. (1999). Combating child labour: listen to what the children say. *Childhood*, 6, 27-49.

RESPONSE**HETERONORMATIVITY, CHILDHOOD AND INVISIBLE CONSUMPTION****Sue Saltmarsh**

Australian Catholic University

Halberstam's work engages extensively with texts of popular culture, and my response to Kerry H. Robinson's chapter focuses on questions of heteronormative time, relationships and consumption that coalesce around the popular texts used by Robinson and Davies in their research with young children and parents. In particular, I am interested here in the ways that the economic order is an absent presence from the children's and parents' gendered readings of these texts, two of which were produced as advertisements for commercial products, while the other, it could be said, functions as an advertisement for the heterosexual social order upon which capitalism in no small part relies. I understand this in light of Halberstam's observation that "[s]o seamlessly has capitalism been rationalized over the last two hundred years, in fact, that we no longer see the fault lines that divide black from white, work from play, subject from object" (2005, p. 9). In this case, fault lines dividing child from adult are constructed by the parents and children in temporal terms, as governing norms through which the regulation of sexuality and, by extension, intimate relationships is instantiated. Yet I want to argue that heteronormative rationalities governing child-adult binaries are among the very practices that constitute, and render discursively invisible, capitalism, its logics and exclusions.

Like the Viola installation described in Robinson's introduction, past and future are superimposed in the narrative accounts of children and parents who were asked to comment on three popular images. As Robinson points out, these heteronormative images—of children posed as if on a romantic 'date,' of children dressed in oversized wedding attire, and of children engaged in a passionate kiss—simultaneously and somewhat paradoxically fetishize and potentially disrupt normative discourses of childhood innocence, particularly with respect to sexuality and sexual conduct. Indeed, each of these images plays with temporality, queering the discursive boundaries and cultural imaginaries of childhood as a separate phase of life that is innocent of sexual knowledge and intimate relationships. Yet the meaning-making of children and parents in relation to these visual texts is viewed through the lens of what Halberstam refers to as the "compulsory heterosexuality of the romance genre" (2001b, p. 294). Parents' and children's responses to the images and the questions they potentially pose

largely disavow the possibility of queer readings and any alternative pasts or futures they might imply.

As in the Viola installation, in which past and future—the dying grandmother and the newborn grandchild—gaze at and merge into and apart from one another in the mediated space of the visual image, the dialogue between past and future in the commercial images is mediated by the gender norms of Robinson’s respondents. Corresponding to Butler’s contention that “gender requires and institutes its own distinctive regulatory and disciplinary regime” (2004, p. 41), a queer reading of these images is resisted, even when respondents’ own gender performativities and articulated desires would seem to open up a potentially productive space in which such readings might be undertaken. Instead, looking forward (by children) and looking back (by parents) takes place within a regulatory gender framework that makes explicit the discourses of heterosexual subjectivity governing the conduct of children and adults, girls and boys, men and women in close friendships, marriage and intimacy.

These three texts utilize readily recognizable markers of heterosexual intelligibility in their interpellation of readers. Staging flirtatious or passionate encounters between boys and girls, photographing them in stereotypical romantic settings, and using wedding garments and accessories all function to inscribe, legitimate and normalize heterosexuality within “a powerful hierarchy in which heterosexuality defines and speaks with perceived authority about the ‘other’” (Robinson, 2005, p. 20). Protected childhoods and imagined futures are thus circumscribed within the perceived desirability of heterosexuality. As Halberstam puts it, “[r]eproductive time and family time are, above all, heteronormative time/space constructs” (2005, p. 10). Importantly, however, such “normalization of heterosexuality is rendered invisible and diverts attention and critique away from the macro and micro social, economic and political discursive practices, including those operating in educational institutions that construct and maintain this hierarchy of difference across sexual identities” (Robinson, 2005, p. 20).

While heterosexuality appears as a taken-for-granted assumption in these commercial texts, consumer participation and, indeed, the heteronormativity of consumer participation are less readily visible in respondents’ comments in relation to them. Perhaps not surprisingly, in light of the capacity of images that blur boundaries between childhood and adulthood to incite moral panics (Robinson, this volume), adult respondents comment on what they perceive as the sexualization of childhood in these images. Yet the commercial nature of these texts and the heteronormative economic practices they gesture toward appear to go unnoticed. As Butler points out:

Norms may or may not be explicit, and when they operate as the normalizing principle in social practice, they usually remain implicit, difficult to read, discernible most clearly and dramatically in the effects that they produce. (2004, p. 41)

Of particular interest, these images are produced primarily for the purposes of addressing adult consumers. Claudia Mitchell and Jacqueline Reid-Walsh observe that “it is not always easy to distinguish between who counts as the adult and who counts as the child in terms of being a consumer of popular culture” (Mitchell and Reid-Walsh, 2002, pp. 5–6). Yet it is also generally the case that overtly sexualized images are most commonly used in mainstream media as a technique for enhancing the appeal of products and services purchased by adults, such as coffee and clothing, and of ‘experiential commodities’ (Kenway and Bullen, 2001) such as visiting cafés and coffee shops, planning weddings, or shopping as a leisure activity. Yet the adult respondents in Robinson and Davies’ study voice concern about the pervasiveness of sexualized images as a familiar feature of *children’s* lives, while simultaneously failing to recognize the function of such texts as an everyday mode of address to *them* as adult consumers. Their voiced concerns reiterate and reinscribe what is seen as the necessity and appropriateness of adult–child boundaries. Yet simultaneously, they overlook their own constitution within this contested, contradictory and ambiguous space between childhood and adulthood, as well as their interpellation as the idealized heteronormative consumer of products, brands and commodified experiences.

Further, their concern about the sexualization of childhood is cast in terms of a potential threat to childhood innocence and purity, even though one respondent elaborates childhood desires of her own that would seem to disrupt dominant narratives that posit children as naïve and asexual. One respondent, Jenny, comments in response to the image of the boy and girl kissing: “I think that if I saw that as a young person I would have wanted to be that girl in a narrative that I felt that I could never get” (Robinson, this volume). Jenny’s observation, framed as a kind of confession, “I would have to be quite honest about it, it is absolutely true...” (Robinson, this volume), makes visible the unspeakability of childhood desires, and the ways in which the image of children engaged in a passionate kiss invokes a recollection of her own longings for access to imagined yet prohibited narratives as a young person.

Once again, Jenny’s comments gesture toward the queer space of blurred boundaries, in which a young girl can imagine herself within storylines of potential, if inaccessible, sexual intimacy. Yet this queer space and the desires it invokes have been artfully deployed by advertisers to interpellate readers as consumers, in a maneuver not unlike that discussed by

Halberstam in her work on the shifts between the first and second popular *Austin Powers* films from the late 1990s (Halberstam, 2001a, 2005). The first film, Halberstam argues, acknowledges “a sea change in sexual mores and gender norms” and in so doing, stages “a feminist critique of sexism that changes completely the constitutive forms of male masculinity” (2005, p. 148). The second film, by comparison, moves from its original queering of mainstream masculinities to parodies of masculinity with mass audience appeal, as well as the attendant shift from Austin’s “fight to save the world for free love” in the first film, to “[saving] it for multinational capitalism” (Halberstam, 2005, p. 148) in the second.

I see the images discussed by Robinson’s respondents functioning similarly, insofar as the queer space they potentially create for blurring the distinctions between childhood and adulthood is simultaneously rendered incontrovertibly heterosexual *and* appropriated by commercial interest. Thus this queer space and the desires it invokes have been artfully deployed by advertisers to interpellate readers as consumers, as well as to render them desirable only as heterosexual consumers. Ultimately for readers, as Jenny’s comments attest, the queer space is returned to a space of governability through discourses of shock and consternation over the potential sully of childhood innocence through exposure to such images. Additionally, it is a space that renders *invisible* its function as a site of consumption in the heteronormative economic order.

For the children in Robinson’s study, however, heteronormative consumption appears more obvious. For example, when the researcher asks Rosie, who has said she has a boyfriend named Robert, what she likes about Robert, Rosie replies, “he has lots of cool stuff and I like his cool stuff.” Access to and ownership of consumer goods is an important dimension of cultural status within childhood and school cultures (Dyson, 1997; Mitchell and Reid-Walsh, 2002; Saltmarsh, 2009). As Anne Haas Dyson observes, “[t]he symbolic material of books, cartoons, video games—of all aspects of our consumer culture—is useful only if it is used in everyday practices as a means for affiliating, differentiating, and negotiating a social place in the world of others” (Dyson, 1997, p. 143). In this case, the ownership of desirable commodities—‘cool stuff’—signifies participation in the economic order, thereby rendering one desirable within the heterosexual matrices of social life. According to J.K. Gibson-Graham, “[c]apitalism is not just an economic signifier that can be displaced through deconstruction and the proliferation of signs. Rather, it is where the libidinal investment is” (2006a, p. xxxv). Thus, we see in Rosie’s comments an acknowledgement of the personal, relational and libidinal desirability that accrues to those whose consumer participation is readily recognizable by others. The ownership of consumer goods, in other words, is seen as desirable within

the formation of romantic attachments. Further, Rosie's interest in Robert as a boyfriend, as distinct from a friend, illustrates the powerful associations that even young children recognize between consumption and heteronormativity. "Heteronormative life narratives" (Robinson, this volume) of growing up, establishing heterosexual relationships, and getting married are thus built on conceptual foundations through which are woven the desirability of capitalist economic participation and the material goods it can supply.

It could be argued that Rosie's interest in Robert and his ownership of consumer goods opens up another kind of queer space, in which the temporal narratives of heterosexual romantic futures are displaced by a preference for the 'here and now,' and an interest in the non-human as in part constituting desire and desirability. Indeed, Halberstam argues that "part of what has made queerness compelling as a form of self-description...has to do with the way it has the potential to open up new life narratives and alternative relations to time and space" (2005, pp. 1–2). Within the temporal space of childhood, the immediacy of ownership offers a counterpoint to future trajectories predicated on familiar storylines of marriage, children-rearing and so on. Yet, in the researcher's later discussions with Rosie regarding the photo of children wearing wedding attire, Rosie reiterates the heteronormative order of child–adult binaries, commenting on the strangeness of children dressed as though they are getting married, and affirming her intention to marry when she is older. Here, Halberstam's insights are instructive, particularly her use of the notion of queer time "to make clear how respectability, and notions of the normal on which it depends, may be upheld by a middle-class logic of reproductive temporality" (2005, p. 3).

The three texts discussed by Robinson's respondents both contest and reiterate heterosexual norms in ways that are readily recognizable to those who commented on them. Yet, with the exception of Rosie's interest in Robert's "cool stuff," the respondents do not appear to recognize or acknowledge the heteronormativity of consumption that these three distinct images represent. An additional observation I would make refers to the ways that the image of the two children kissing, and the newspaper narrative that accompanied it, posit children and childhood as central to spaces of capitalist production. Elsewhere I have argued (Saltmarsh, 2007) that contemporary popular texts have replaced notions of the child as dependent upon and subject to the vagaries of family and local economic circumstances with visions of the child as an active agent in economic innovation, entrepreneurialism and prosperity.

Despite Western cultural imaginaries of childhood as innocent of not only sexual, but also economic knowledge (Saltmarsh, 2007, 2009), children's consumer activities, and their participation in workplace employment in industries such as film, television and advertising (to name but a few) pose a significant disruption to such views. The advertising image of the two kissing children, and the accompanying narrative published with it, powerfully demonstrates this reconfiguration of the child as agentic economic subject. In a photo shoot during which the adult models fail to convey the sense of spontaneity and passion desired by the photographer, it is children who intervene to demonstrate what is needed in order for the image to fulfill its function as a commercial text. In so doing, they momentarily disrupt discourses of childhood naïveté with regard to both sexual and economic knowledge—they demonstrate their knowledge of the commonly held dictum that 'sex sells,' by performatively producing themselves in overtly (hetero)sexual terms.

In this instance, it is the children who queer the time and space between the socially constructed categories of child–adult. Yet the capturing of this moment by the camera poses a potential risk associated with adult complicity in such a disruption to dominant discourses of childhood innocence. The photographer's explanation for what might otherwise be interpreted publicly as a sexualizing, thus highly transgressive, photograph of young children functions to restore the dominant discourse of childhood innocence within heteronormative regimes of capitalist practice. Readers are thus reassured that the children were not being intentionally sexualized by adults, but rather, were captured in a moment of frustration with adults' inability to execute a demonstration of romantic affection which, according to Robinson's respondents, is something with which children are now widely familiar. The children are, in other words, constituted as agentic economic subjects, rescuing the photo shoot, hence the product promotion, through their own inventiveness in playing with the boundaries between (ineffective) adulthood and (competent) childhood. The invitation to readers to submit their own photographs and stories in turn establishes them as complicit in both the consumption and production of images that simultaneously queer *and* restore (hetero)normative discourse within the logics of capitalism.

Returning, then, to the questions initially raised by Robinson with regard to the Viola installation, I maintain that notions of temporality, relationality and sexuality are implicated in obscuring the associations between capitalist consumption and the gendered heteronormative order. If popular texts such as those responded to by participants in Robinson and Davies' study are to realize their potential for rethinking boundaries between child and adult,

young and old, past and future, I would argue that explicit attention needs to be given to the place of consumption in maintaining those boundaries.

REFERENCES

- Butler, J. (2004). *Undoing gender*. London: Routledge.
- Dyson, A. H. (1997). *Writing superheroes: Contemporary childhood, popular culture, and classroom literacy*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Gibson-Graham, J.K. (2006a). *A post-capitalist politics*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Gibson-Graham, J.K. (2006b). *The end of capitalism (as we knew it): A feminist critique of political economy*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Halberstam, J. (2001a). OH BEHAVE!: Austin Powers and the drag queens. *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*, 7(3), 425-452.
- Halberstam, J. (2001b). The transgender gaze in *Boys Don't Cry*. *Screen*, 42(3), 294-298.
- Halberstam, J. (2005). *In a queer time and place: Transgender bodies, subcultural lives*. New York and London: New York University Press.
- Kenway, J., & Bullen, E. (2001). *Consuming children: Education-entertainment-advertising*. Maidenhead, UK: Open University Press.
- Mitchell, C., & Reid-Walsh, J. (2002). *Researching children's popular culture: The cultural spaces of childhood*. London & New York: Routledge.
- Robinson, K. (2005). 'Queerying' gender: heteronormativity in early childhood education. *Australian Journal of Early Childhood*, 33(4), 19-28.
- Saltmarsh, S. (2007). Spirits, miracles and clauses: patriarchy, economy and childhood in popular Christmas texts. *Papers: Explorations Into Children's Literature*, 17(1), 5-18.
- Saltmarsh, S. (2009). Becoming economic subjects: agency, consumption and popular culture in early childhood. *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education*, 30(1), 47-59.