



Detours of Growth

—David Lewkowich

Farley, Lisa. *Childhood beyond Pathology: A Psychoanalytic Study of Development and Diagnosis*. SUNY P, 2018. 196 pp. \$20.95 pb. ISBN 9781438470900.

Throughout this curious, thoughtful, and provocative text, Lisa Farley asks us to consider how notions of normalization in theories of human development effectively condemn the very children they purportedly seek to help. Through regulatory and repressive discourses of social control, children who fall outside of normalized categories are often interpreted as fundamentally deficient and defective, and in dire need of cure and correction. As the title of this book makes clear, *Childhood beyond Pathology* interrupts this straightforward line of reasoning that links “normalcy with wellness and difference with pathology” (Farley 119) and instead develops a psychoanalytically informed theory of childhood that understands internal conflict and difficulty not as a problem to be solved, but as foundational for human growth. Turning to a variety of child figures appearing in literature, censorship controversies, psychoanalytic theory, case studies, and court transcripts, Farley foregrounds the *representation* of childhood, and in doing so, challenges readers to notice how social constructions of childhood—and the question of who actually gets to be a child—often address the concerns of adults while bypassing those of actual children. In each of these cases, Farley implores her readers to imagine more creative ways of understanding the interpretive challenges of childhood, emphasizing that the narratives that adults tell about children and childhood, fictional or otherwise, always “impact the lived lives of children” (8). Especially in an era when children are often treated as political pawns, for example, migrant children trapped in detention facilities at the southern border of the United States, Farley’s analysis of adults’ conceptualizations of child development is persuasive, prescient, and certainly much needed. In this book, Farley offers five considerations of

childhood beyond pathology: a literary figure regarding the productive uses of melancholic inheritance and loss; a figure of autistic childhood that compels psychoanalysis to augment its own conceptual ground; an excluded figure of racialized youth born of the normative structures of white innocence; a figure of literary controversy that views mixed feelings as a way to stage a meaningful encounter with history; and a figure of transgender embodiment that encourages deliberation on the creative potential of gender identification.

In the introductory chapter, entitled “Why Study the Child after a ‘Century of the Child’?,” Farley considers how adults’ uncertainties and anxieties, many of which date back to forgotten childhood, shape the interpretive categories they construct to understand the lives of younger people. Following the work of Erica Burman and Deborah P. Britzman, Farley describes how this overfamiliarity with childhood functions to blur the line between the child and adult self for those who are nonetheless “children-no-longer” (3). Throughout this chapter, Farley posits the status of childhood as a shifting cultural myth; despite being framed as a neutral and “natural stage of development,” it could be more appropriately viewed as “a placeholder” for the “political struggles, philosophical ideals, and social anxieties that reflect the preoccupations of adults” (1-2). Rather than placing her focus on the individual child, Farley explores the ways in which scholarly understandings of childhood are also products of history and how these histories—of conflicted and contested meaning—are themselves foundational to the interrelated fields in which she locates her study: education, psychology, and childhood studies. An Associate Professor of Education, Farley’s investigation operates between literary and educational fields of inquiry, reading literature for its emotional testimony of childhood, and reading the cases of actual children as “harboring symbolic meanings that are deeper than any curriculum or diagnosis can represent” (16).

In the interdisciplinary tradition of childhood studies, Farley’s work engages with critical, queer, and reconceptualist notions regarding the ways in which idiosyncratic and non-normative childhood challenges that which is “otherwise repressed inside social norms” (9). The reconceptualist understanding, for example, posits that theories of seemingly universal child development lead to practices of social exclusion that reproduce unequal power relationships among children, between children and adults, and toward the

category of childhood itself (Bloch, Swadener, and Cannella; Boldt and Salvio; Castañeda; Pacini-Ketchabaw and Taylor; Soto; Taylor). Mindy Blaise, for instance, develops the term “postdevelopmentalism” (3) as a means to question modernist conventions of truth and universality, while Gaile S. Cannella troubles the ways in which dominant discourses of early childhood education often forget that they are themselves human constructions, “generated within a time and context . . .” (18). In her book, Farley summons these ideas, and further notes how such claims to universal truths about childhood and development often reveal a defensive mode, through which adults may be seen as protecting themselves against the uncertain risks of uncertain knowledge. Indeed, in this context, Jonathan G. Silin argues that the discourse of development helps the adult defend against unwanted anxieties, which is similar to Joseph Tobin’s focus on the obsession with the “outcome-driven” (14) in early childhood education, as well as Deborah P. Britzman’s claim that expertise in education often emerges as a “defense against all that is uncertain about our profession” (30).

Building on these arguments, as well as the work of literary theorists involved in the study of queer and divergent childhood (Cocks; Hurley; Kidd; Stearns; Stockton), Farley also contends that literary children often appear as “fictional irritants to . . . normative frames of development . . .” (13), effectively throwing the reliability of such interpretive structures into question. As Farley describes Carolyn Steedman’s discussion of one of the first queer child figures in Goethe’s *Mignon*, “This child rather embodies the elusive qualities of being that cannot be tied to a certain or known point of origin” (15). Along with Jen Gilbert, as well as Steven Bruhm and Nat Hurley, Farley employs a psychoanalytic frame to further emphasize how the adult’s unconscious, fantasy, and desire appear to be implicated in their constructions of therapeutic truth. Working against such universalism, Farley argues that the lasting power of the queer child figure lies in making strangeness the norm. As Jennifer Miller notes in her consideration of queerness in children’s literature, when queerness meets straightness, a “definitional crisis of normativity . . . emerges at their intersection” (1647).

In chapter 1, Farley emphasizes the social and historical particularities of children’s lives, and charges that a theory concerned with examining childhood “as both a historical artifact and lived experience” (119), as she phrases it in the postscript, needs to constantly reassess

the dynamic relationship between the inner and outer world. Farley recognizes that our lives are both “uniquely felt and historically endowed” (7), and often turns to psychoanalytic theorists—such as Melanie Klein, Julia Kristeva, and Donald Winnicott, among others—to conceptualize between the unstable categories of what is shared and what is idiosyncratic about human development. As Farley notes, psychoanalysis “offers a language through which to speculate about how . . . we are changed by the social histories we inherit, just as those histories are affected by internal agencies, objects, and relationships that become enlivened, resisted, and transformed in the well of the unconscious” (123). In her attention to inherited histories, and the relationship between such legacies and the inner lives of adults and children, Farley accounts for the lived experience of childhood as a creative struggle and a question of meaningful self-expression in the face of a world that children did not create.

Farley presents in this chapter the first of five cases in her broader argument against the “normative narratives of childhood repeated in schools, in courts, and in clinics” (120). She discusses “the replacement child,” whose symbolic position indicates how children shoulder the weight of a past they do not know in ways that continue to haunt them throughout their lives: “They are melancholic objects,” Farley writes, “or, psychic replacements—carrying the shadows of historical losses” (22). Turning to Ann-Marie Macdonald’s 2014 novel, *Adult Onset*, Farley reads the protagonist’s situation as that of a replacement child confronting symptoms of inheritance and loss. She then interprets the protagonist’s productive uses of melancholia as an allegory for what adults might do with spectres of difficult history circulating through discourses of childhood in psychology, childhood studies, and education: “to view development less as a progressive march from innocence to reason and more as a continual reckoning with the untold past” (38).

In her second chapter, “Psychoanalysis on the Spectrum: From Psychosis to the Child’s Rightful Claim of Potency and Privacy,” Farley considers how the field of psychoanalysis has dealt with the particular challenges of working with autistic children. While pointing to certain missteps, like Bettelheim’s largely discredited theory of the “refrigerator mother” (130n19), Farley discusses how the autistic child’s sensation-dominated experiences encouraged psychoanalysts in the postwar era to pose the question of how to account for ways of relating

that appeared to exceed a classical focus on language and traditional notions of attachment and transference. Reviewing this period of debate and revision, Farley investigates the work of Frances Tustin and her idea of the “autistic object” (50-51), Barbara Dockar-Drysdale, Edith Jacobson, Anna Freud, Anne Alvarez, and Thomas Ogden, as psychoanalysis shifted its grammar to include the psychic significance for all children of nurturing the sensate qualities of lived experience. Turning to a paper by Donald Winnicott, Farley illustrates the value of privileging therapeutic uncertainty: “to work psychoanalytically,” she notes, “is not to impose an order of meaning in the name of diagnosis or a cure, but rather to follow the clues of patient’s communication, which includes the right not to communicate” (55). Farley thus challenges contemporary theorists of childhood to follow Winnicott’s lead and allow for uncertainty as “the ethical ground of representing the diversities of a child’s inner world . . .” (61).

Chapter 3 takes up Steven Bruhm’s consideration of the “counterfeit child” to explore how Black youth in the North American context are often constructed as threats to the presumed innocence of white children. For Black children, this split construction, which Farley argues is proliferated through “the racist structures of schooling and society . . .” (66), effectively excludes them from the category of childhood altogether. Though young, their claims to childhood and childhood innocence are therefore counterfeit; Farley cites Rinaldo Walcott’s assertion: “‘Black boys become Black men,’ justifying mistreatment, miseducation, and murder” (qtd. in Farley 70). Using the psychoanalytic language of projective identification and splitting, whereby unwanted anxieties and fears are unconsciously projected outward and away from the self, which keeps the threat of these undesirable qualities at a distance, Farley illustrates how the colonial logics of white hegemony render racially minoritized youth as dangerous and deficient. As racialized youth are estranged and expelled from normative structures of childhood innocence, these normative structures are in turn “produced through the displacement of the child perceived to threaten this ideal” (70). Essentially, through the fearful logics of projective identification, Black youth are feared as a threat to an ideal of white innocence, when in reality it is the protection of this ideal that requires the threat. Introducing the case of Leticia King, a fifteen-year-old Black transgender adolescent murdered by a white classmate in 2008, Farley emphasizes that categories such as the counterfeit child are not just metaphors, but a

part of the hidden curriculum of contemporary social structures that position blackness and Black youth as “indelibly connected to violence and death” (79). For teachers and theorists of childhood, this chapter invites a reconsideration of where we allow notions of childhood innocence to reside and where we do not.

Farley examines the censorship controversies surrounding Sherman Alexie’s *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* in chapter 4, showing how expectations of innocence often serve to protect certain groups of young people at the expense of others. Farley also discusses the ways in which readers’ mixed feelings can disrupt settled meanings and presumptions of universal categories of childhood. While most of the challenges levied against this novel focus on the effects of Alexie’s representations of violence on “presumed-to-be-innocent settler child readers” (88), Farley also locates a smaller number that read Alexie’s book as reinscribing colonial legacies and negative stereotypes of Indigenous Peoples. Other readers, however, champion Alexie’s uses of humour and irony as a form of anticolonial critique. From a close reading of this controversy, Farley suggests that instead of focusing only on notions of censorship and childhood innocence, readers may more productively “speculate about the value of disagreement in colonial contexts demanding sameness, the meaning of pedagogical responsibility in relation to historical violence, and the nuances of teaching through controversy” (98). Calling this speculative strategy of reading in and through conflict having a “good fight with history,” (83) Farley then turns to Alexie’s story itself, interpreting the argument and eventual reconciliation between the two main characters, Junior and Rowdy, as an attempt to create a transitional space that allows for difference—and different viewpoints—and simultaneously honours healing, “mending and minding the ongoing impact of colonial legacies with a fighting chance . . .” (98). Using the past to forge a future, this chapter examines how disagreements conducted amid difficult histories might offer ways to proliferate multiple meanings of childhood, beyond a simple focus on questions of damage or innocence.

Farley turns in her fifth chapter to the child’s embodiment of gender identity, reiterating her understanding of conflict as an integral part of the “inner work of growth” (4). “My discussion,” she clarifies, “works against the construction of gender conflict as an exception belonging only to trans children and instead examines the uneven ground of gender for all

human subjects, even while it is uniquely embodied" (102). Guiding her readers through a captivating discussion of Avgi Saketopoulou's case study of a five-year-old child named Jenny who, though she had identified as a girl since the age of two, was experiencing distress and confusion over the question of how to relate to her natal body, Farley articulates a psychoanalytic reading of transgender embodiment that explicitly argues against the diagnostic logics of reparative therapy, and its association of gender with normative notions of biological certitude. While a key component of this therapeutic approach—exemplified by Kenneth J. Zucker, Hayley Wood, Devita Singh, and Susan J. Bradley—is that the majority of transgender children will eventually "desist" in their transgender identification, Farley wonders how the productive nature of gender conflict in childhood might be instead conceptualized as a creative process in which the body's psychical meanings are constantly in question. Using Winnicott's theory of transitional phenomena, which signals "an intermediate realm where the psyche, the material body, and the social world come together and into tension" (102), Farley speculates on the creative potential of gender identification as a means of embodying multiplicity, while also wondering if the child's "creative narratives of gender" (111) may serve to spark the adult's curiosity regarding the ways in which bodies can be used to "exceed what is given . . ." (117).

In her brief postscript, entitled "The Child in Mind: Four Affective Challenges to the Fields of Childhood Studies, Education, and Psychology," Farley builds on this idea of how, as scholars of childhood across the disciplines, we may "exceed what is given . . ." (117), both in terms of the normative narratives of childhood regularly produced in schools and other sites of social formation and exclusion, and how the enduring effects of historical inequities reiterate themselves in the categories that adults habitually create to understand the lives of children. Beyond the normative structures of pathology and diagnosis, Farley encourages her adult readers "to engage the disquiet of knowledge . . ." (120) in dealing with children, and "confront the vulnerability of not knowing . . ." (121), since it is only under such conditions of openness and humility that we may be able to "welcome the divergences, difficulties, and conflicts of childhood . . ." (124). Though the interpretive challenges that Farley accentuates throughout this book are many and diverse, they may remind us that curiosity—though eminently childish—is sometimes a difficult task for adults to master.

Works Cited

- Alexie, Sherman. *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*. Little, 2007.
- Blaise, Mindy. *Playing It Straight: Uncovering Gender Discourse in the Early Childhood Classroom*. Routledge, 2005.
- Bloch, Marianne N., Beth Blue Swadener, and Gaile Sloan Cannella. *Reconceptualizing Early Childhood Care and Education: Critical Questions, New Imaginaries and Social Activism*. Lang, 2014.
- Boldt, Gail M., and Paula M. Salvio. *Love's Return: Psychoanalytic Essays on Childhood, Teaching, and Learning*. Routledge, 2006.
- Britzman, Deborah P. *The Very Thought of Education: Psychoanalysis and the Impossible Professions*. SUNY P, 2009.
- Bruhm, Steven. "The Counterfeit Child." *English Studies in Canada*, vol. 38, no. 3-4, 2012, pp. 25-44, doi: 10.1353/esc.2013.0008.
- Bruhm, Steven, and Nat Hurley, editors. *Curiouser: On the Queerness of Children*. U of Minnesota P, 2004.
- Burman, Erica. "Desiring Development? Psychoanalytic Contributions to Antidevelopmental Psychology." *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, vol. 26, no. 1, 2013, pp. 56-74, doi: 10.1080/09518398.2011.604650.
- Cannella, Gaile S. "Reconceptualizing the Field (of Early Care and Education): If 'Western' Child Development is a Problem, Then What Do We Do?" *Critical Issues in Early Childhood Education*, edited by Nicola Yelland, Open UP, 2005, pp. 17-39.
- Castañeda, Claudia. "Childhood." *Transgender Studies Quarterly*, vol. 1, no. 1-2, pp. 59-61, doi: 10.1215/23289252-2399605.
- Cocks, Neil. *The Peripheral Child in Nineteenth Century Literature and its Criticism*. Palgrave, 2014.
- Gilbert, Jen. *Sexuality in School: The Limits of Education*. U of Minnesota P, 2014.
- Hurley, Nat. "The Perversions of Children's Literature." *Jeunesse*, vol. 3, no. 2, pp. 118-32, doi: 10.1353/jeu.2011.0022.
- Kidd, Kenneth B. *Freud in Oz: At the Intersections of Psychoanalysis and Children's Literature*. U of Minnesota P, 2011.
- MacDonald, Ann-Marie. *Adult Onset*. Knopf, 2014.
- Miller, Jennifer. "For the Little Queers: Imagining Queerness in 'New' Queer Children's Literature." *Journal of Homosexuality*, vol. 66, no. 12, 2019, pp. 1645-70, doi: 10.1080/00918369.2018.1514204.
- Pacini-Ketchabaw, Veronica, and Affrica Taylor. *Unsettling the Colonial Places and Spaces of Early Childhood Education*. Routledge, 2015.
- Saketopoulou, Avgi. "Mourning the Body as Bedrock: Developmental Considerations in Treating Transsexual Patients Analytically." *Journal of the American Psychoanalytic Association*, vol. 62, no. 5, 2014, pp. 773-806, doi: 10.1177/0003065114553102.
- Silin, Jonathan G. *Sex, Death, and the Education of Children: Our Passion for Ignorance in the Age of AIDS*. Teachers College P, 1995.
- Soto, Lourdes Diaz, editor. *The Politics of Early Childhood Education*. Lang, 2000.
- Stearns, Clio. "Bad Kids and Bad Feelings: What Children's Literature Teaches about ADHD, Creativity, and Openness." *Curriculum Inquiry*, vol. 45, no. 4, 2015, pp. 410-26, doi: 10.1080/03626784.2015.1064303.
- Steedman, Carolyn. *Strange Dislocations: Childhood and the Idea of Human Interiority, 1780-1930*. Harvard UP, 1995.
- Stockton, Kathryn, B. *The Queer Child, Or Growing Sideways in the Twentieth Century*. Duke UP, 2009.
- Taylor, Affrica. *Reconfiguring the Natures of Childhood*. Routledge, 2013.
- Tobin, Joseph. *Making a Place for Pleasure in Early Childhood Education*. Yale UP, 1997.
- Walcott, Rinaldo. *Queer Returns: Essays on Multiculturalism, Diaspora, and Black Studies*. Insomniac P, 2016.

Zucker, Kenneth J., Hayley Wood, Devita Singh, and Susan J. Bradley. "A Developmental, Biopsychosocial Model for the Treatment of Children with Gender Identity Disorder." *Treating*

Transgender Children and Adolescents: An Interdisciplinary Discussion, edited by Jack Drescher and William Byne, Routledge, 2013, pp. 75-103.

David Lewkovich is an Associate Professor in the Faculty of Education at the University of Alberta, where he teaches in literacy education. His research interests include psychoanalytic theories of teaching and learning, the study of comics and graphic novels, representations of teachers in popular culture, and autobiographical inquiry.