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"All the Uncertainties about Innocence": Wendy Ewald and the Critique of Romantic Childhood

Stephanie Anklin

Wellesley College, sanklin@wellesley.edu

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“All the Uncertainties about Innocence”:
Wendy Ewald and the Critique of Romantic Childhood

Stephanie V. Anklin

Wellesley College

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Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
of the Prerequisite for Honors in Art History

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Introduction

The Image and Ideal of the Romantic Child

Looking back on her career as both an artist and an educator, American photographer Wendy Ewald (b. 1951) said, “I knew, of course, that there were risks in guiding children towards genuine artistic expression. There was the risk of challenging a hierarchical and exclusively adult vision of our common humanity. There was a risk of buttoning up in the abstract all the uncertainties about innocence, art, and personal integrity.”¹ Through taking these risks, she has created a body of work that both intersects and challenges earlier representations of children and childhood and questions the very nature of authorship and collaboration through her distinctive method of creating images.

Since the late 1960s, Ewald has taken her initial interests in documentary photography and education, and combined them to create a career of collaborating with children in impoverished communities, teaching and guiding them in the art of photography. In a method that sets her apart from other fine art photographers of children, she has handed the camera over to her students to enable them to take pictures of themselves, their communities and their inner lives. In the subsequent publication and exhibition of these photographs, Ewald has selected images to create series that form narratives about the children’s communities, about art made by children, and about a new vision of childhood. The individual photos and collective narratives both interact with

¹ Wendy Ewald, *Secret Games: Collaborative Works with Children 1969-1999* (Zurich: Scalo, 2000), 18.

and sometimes challenge a trope of childhood representation that scholars such as Anne Higonnet have dubbed the ‘Romantic Child.’²

The Romantic child is seen as inherently innocent and naïve; a notion that took shape in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, it remains pervasive even today in the visual culture of Europe and America. Any violation of or challenge to this trope of the Romantic child engenders controversy, often meeting dissonance and resistance. This interpretation of childhood has always come from adults and adult thinking. In some ways, Ewald’s unusual method of having her child subjects photograph themselves and the world around them allows them to have a voice in their own depiction. Ewald is contributing to a new portrayal of childhood, in which children have the capability for a full range of emotions and experiences, a layered and acutely aware view of the world, one that is, in the words of William Hamilton from the *New York Times*, “fierce, not frightened or unformed.”³

In my thesis, I will examine the individual images, the narrative series, and the overall body of work of Wendy Ewald and her young students to explore how the work reflects, rebels against and interacts with the notion of the Romantic Child through a number of recurring themes: the child’s relationship with the natural world, gender as performance, the understanding of race, play and violence, and finally voice and authorship. Each of the themes we see repeating throughout the body of Ewald’s work has a deep connection with the visual language of the Romantic child, either reinforcing its iconography or challenging it in some way. The photographs that Wendy Ewald

² Anne Higonnet, *Pictures of Innocence: The History and Crisis of Ideal Childhood* (New York: Thames and Hudson 1998), 23.

³ William Hamilton, "At Home with Wendy Ewald: Life through Childhood's Lens," *The New York Times*, 12 October 2000.

presents to us create an image of childhood that is tied to both the past and the present, revealing how growing up in a world as complicated as our own is no simple task, that childhood is not as sheltered, innocent or homogeneous as we, as adults, like to imagine.

Over the span of her career, Ewald has traveled all over the U.S. and the world, to Kentucky, Columbia, South Africa, India, Saudi Arabia, Morocco, and North Carolina, integrating herself into diverse communities as both an artist and an educator. As her career has progressed, she has experimented with various methods of collaboration. She has kept her artistic and teacher roles separate, as in Kentucky, where her work and her students' work were displayed and published distinctly from one another. In Columbia, she fully integrated her work with her students, creating a publication of the collected images, Ewald's work side by side with her students', almost indistinguishable. She has experimented with taking simple portraits of her students, which they then altered by scratching or drawing on the negative, creating a more obvious symbiosis of her and their work. Eventually, her photographic role was reduced to almost zero, relying on her students' images completely to be the photographic body of work. As she stated, "with time I learned to back off from the world and let it reveal itself to me."⁴ Ultimately, Wendy Ewald's various methods of collaboration with her students have allowed her to interact with the idea of the Romantic child in a novel way, revealing a new perspective on a visual trope that has saturated Euro-American visual culture since the European Enlightenment of the eighteenth century.

In Europe during the mid-eighteenth century, new ideas about childhood were taking hold, ideas that would be reinforced and reflected in the new visual trope of the

⁴ Ewald, *Secret Games: Collaborative Works with Children 1969-1999*, 325.

Romantic child. The Romantic child would continue to be the dominant representation of children in visual culture through the modern era, with iterations and variations in paintings, photographs, illustrations and advertisements. In the twentieth century, Romantic Child imagery was changed and challenged as never before. The Progressive Era, the Great Depression and other social upheavals showed us an iteration of the Romantic child as a political tool, while the blossoming genre of street photography in the middle of the twentieth century showed how it could find its place in the new bustling cities. Finally, contemporary photography revealed to us how the Romantic child could be defied and the controversy that those challenges would create. Wendy Ewald and her students' images stand in the shadows of this history, engaging in a dialogue about the tensions and truths that arise from such a narrow vision of childhood.

Exactly what the nature of childhood was in the time before the Enlightenment is a heavily debated issue among social historians given the paucity of reliable and plentiful sources from the time.⁵ It is generally accepted that childhood and childrearing practices have changed over the course of history, and that the Enlightenment represented a turning point in thinking that has led us to our current conception of childhood as a separate and special time. Up until the eighteenth century, children in the visual arts appear mainly as secondary subjects, personifications of religious or mythical characters or miniature

⁵ The history of childhood and child rearing is often treated as a marginal historical subject, making it a hard topic to write about with authority. Children themselves leave behind few historical documents, and their dependant status makes them far less visible than other social groups. Historians have begun to look towards sources such as letters and diaries for clues to the attitudes towards childhood in the centuries leading up to the Enlightenment, but they are anecdotal sources at best.

Steven Mintz, *Huck's Raft: A History of American Childhood* (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2004) vii-viii.

adults, generally represented with little regard to their emotions or experiences.⁶ The depictions of children as religious figures, such as the Christ child, or mythical characters, such as cupids or cherubs, offer us little information about childhood. In the time before the Enlightenment, one of the few places where children appear as primary subjects of art is royal and aristocratic portraiture. Such portraits, as Erika Langmuir in *Imagining Childhood* states, were “painted to enable far-flung relations, often at foreign courts, to keep in touch, played an important role in international alliances, and...were frequently produced to be replicated.”⁷ These children were symbols of their families’ dynastic futures and so they were painted as miniature adults, representative of their future roles as rulers.

Diego Velázquez spent much of his career painting members of the royal Spanish court, including many portraits of its younger members. His first portrait of the royal Spanish children and one of his best known, *Prince Baltasar Carlos with an Attendant Dwarf* (1632) (Fig. 1) shows the young heir apparent, almost three years old at the time, in full royal regalia. In the foreground, we see the prince’s dwarf; dwarves were prized attendants in the Spanish court, their subservient position reinforced in paintings by showing them as pets or perennial children, being petted or leaned on by the royal heirs.⁸ The young prince stands slightly behind the dwarf in the center of the painting, framed by rich red curtains, wearing what he was believed to wear to his *juramento*, the oath of allegiance to the heir to the throne: “a skirted captain-general’s uniform with armored

⁶ James Christen Steward, *The New Child: British Art and the Origins of Modern Childhood 1730-1830* (Berkeley University Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive, 1995), 17.

⁷ Erika Langmuir, *Imagining Childhood* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), 188.

⁸ The visual analysis of this painting in *Imagining Childhood* provides much of the historical details that support my own observations. (See citation above)



Figure 1
Diego Velázquez, *Prince Baltasar Carlos with an Attendant Dwarf*, 1632, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston

collar plate and red sash. He holds a baton of command; his left hand rests on his sword.”⁹ His bright white skin seems to glow against the rich red of the curtains, and his dark eyes stare out at the viewer intimidatingly. His posture is stiff, and his placement in the portrait, in the middle ground slightly above the position of his dwarf attendant, makes it seem that he is looking down on the viewer, his expression blank. His sash and skirt seem to balloon behind him, as if he is moving forward despite his static pose. The framing of the curtain seems to present him on a stage, with his dwarf as his first subject. Additionally, the dwarf holds the prefigurations of a royal scepter and orb in the form of a rattle and apple.¹⁰ This toddler has the posture, the cool gaze and the composure of an adult, a powerful ruler. To all those who would have seen this portrait, it would have been evident that the Spanish court was introducing them to their future king.

The Age of Enlightenment, a multifaceted cultural movement that swept Europe in the eighteenth century, greatly shifted the social landscape. A number of new philosophical and cultural ideas would come together to give rise to a new conception of children and childhood that was congruent with the Romantic child in the arts. Firstly, ideas by philosophers such as John Locke and Jean-Jacques Rousseau promoted the idea that individuals, including children, had rights to independence and happiness. Secondly, Locke, in his treatise *Some Thoughts Concerning Education* (1693), advanced the idea of the person, specifically the young child, as a *tabula rasa*, a blank slate.¹¹ Children, in his view, were born free of original sin and then shaped by their environment and education,

⁹ Langmuir, *Imagining Childhood*, 195.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Peter N. Stearns, *Childhood in World History* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 76.

for better or worse.¹² Rousseau, in his book *Emile, or on Education* (1762), posited that children are born inherently innocent and good or ‘natural’ as he would describe in the first line of *Emile*: “everything is good as it leaves the hands of the author of things; everything degenerates in the hands of man.”¹³ These ideas were in stark opposition to earlier Protestant ideas, that children were the manifestation of the original sin of Adam and Eve, inherently evil and sinful, and in need of being shaped by “strict, even punitive discipline.”¹⁴

The idea of the inherently innocent child became increasingly widespread during the Enlightenment and assumed a place within the rising ‘cult of domesticity.’ Paintings shown in the French Salon, such as *The Village Bride* and *The Well-Loved Mother* both by Jean-Baptiste Greuze, (Fig. 2-3) idealized simple ‘middle-class’ values. In *The Village Bride* we see values, such as the close-knit nuclear family and marriage based on love rather than status or wealth, romanticized through the tender depiction of two young lovers being joined in marriage. The philosophy of separate spheres assigned men to the public sphere and women to the domestic. The ideal of mothers raising their own children, rather than turning them over to wet nurses or nannies, was also of key importance during this time and paintings and popular images showed children being lovingly doted on by their parents, primarily their mothers. This is depicted to the extreme in *The Well-Loved Mother*, where a husband comes back from the outside world

¹² Margaret J.M. Ezell, "John Locke's Images of Childhood: Early Eighteenth Century Response to Some Thoughts Concerning Education," *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 17, no. 2 (Winter, 1983-4).

¹³ Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Emile, or on Education: Includes Emile and Sophie, or the Solitaries*, vol. 13, The Collected Writings of Rousseau (Hanover: Dartmouth College Press, 2010), 161.

¹⁴ Stearns, *Childhood in World History*, 76.



I. Jean-Baptiste Greuze, *L'Accordée de village*, 1761. Oil on canvas, 92 × 117. Musée du Louvre, Paris. Photo: RMN.

Figure 2
Jean-Baptiste Greuze, *The Village Bride*, 1761, Musée du Louvre, Paris



III. Jean-Baptiste Greuze, *La Mère bien-aimée*, 1769. Oil on canvas, 99 × 131. Collection comte de la Viñaza, marquis de Laborde, Madrid.

Figure 3

Jean-Baptiste Greuze, *The Well-Loved Mother*, 1769, Collection comte de la Viñaza, marquis de Laborde, Madrid

to find his wife being smothered by the love of their children. These images of family life furthered the ideal of the inherently innocent Romantic child, one that needed protection from the world through a loving and close family. As Peter Stearns describes the depiction of children in eighteenth-century middle-class popular literature in *Childhood in World History*, children were “wondrous innocents, full of love and deserving to be loved in turn.”¹⁵ Academic genre paintings in both Britain and France reflected these changing ideas about childhood, and soon these novel ideas of the naturally innocent child raised in a close and loving nuclear family had permeated Europe.

Thomas Gainsborough’s *The Artist’s Daughters Chasing a Butterfly* from 1756 (Fig. 4) was painted just as the ideas about the Romantic child were forming and becoming popular. This early iteration of the Romantic child shows us its fundamental elements as found in European paintings, highlighting a style and iconography that would be widely imitated as the Romantic child spread to American painting, illustrations and photography. This double portrait shows two young girls, Gainsborough’s two daughters Molly and Peggy, dressed in flawless silk dresses, seeming to bound across the canvas, reaching towards a delicate white butterfly at the edge of the frame. Their pale skin and rosy cheeks almost glow against the dark browns and greens of the wooded background; the lighter colors just around their figures suggest their hurried movement towards a creature they will never catch. The older sister grips her younger sister’s hand protectively, trying to hold her back as the young one bounds ahead full of motion, their poses reflecting the relationship of close sisters. They exist in a world free

¹⁵ Ibid., 79.



Plate 1. Thomas Gainsborough, 1727-1788, *The Artist's Daughters Chasing a Butterfly*, ca. 1756, oil on canvas, 49 $\frac{3}{4}$ × 41 $\frac{1}{4}$ in. (126.4 × 104.8 cm), The Trustees of The National Gallery, London.

Figure 4
Thomas Gainsborough, *The Artist's Daughters Chasing a Butterfly*, 1756, National Gallery, London

from hardship or labor, where they can escape into the woods and chase dainty, fleeting creatures, a clear symbol for the fleeting nature of childhood itself.

Forms and symbols found in Gainsborough's painting, along side other British artists, would come to define the Romantic child. Almost exclusively white, Romantic children are pale and rosy-cheeked, almost glowing with health. They are typically shown dressed in simple, light clothing, casual enough to freely play in, but always well kept and clean. Sometimes they are shown at play, often outside in nature or with animal companions, representing their connection with the natural world. The most common expression is one of quiet content or placid excitement, rarely showing any extreme in emotion. They seem to be innocent in the sense of free from any desire or expression of individuality, the pure *tabula rasa* that Rousseau and Locke imagined. As Anne Higonnet has written, "the Romantic child makes a good show of having no class, no gender, and no thoughts – of being socially, sexually and psychically innocent."¹⁶ These forms and symbols would be continuously repeated in European paintings of children in the eighteenth century, becoming the standard for the Romantic child.¹⁷

In the late eighteenth century, as European ideas about childhood and their visual expressions became more and more popular, the imagery of the Romantic child jumped the Atlantic to America, to the new United States. The philosophical works of Rousseau and Locke were widely influential in the U.S., contributing not only to the political ideas that helped found the nation, but also to Americans' ideas about children and childhood.

¹⁶ Higonnet, *Pictures of Innocence: The History and Crisis of Ideal Childhood*, 24.

¹⁷ The idea of the Romantic child is discussed in various texts and scholars, including Anne Higonnet's *Pictures of Innocence*, James Christen Steward's *The New Child: British Art and the Origins of Modern Childhood 1730-1830*, Claire Perry's *Young America: Childhood in 19th-Century Art and Culture*, and Ray Merritt's *Full of Grace: A Journey through the History of Childhood*.

Children were the future of the growing country and raising them to be strong citizens was pivotal to the survival of the nation.¹⁸ While American painters drew inspiration from their European colleagues, the distinctive culture of the United States led them to approach the Romantic child with a slightly different sensibility. Some of the American paintings of children featuring the Romantic child showed an emphasis on young boys playing out in the countryside, personifying the ideal of the young American exploring the vast untamed land of the continent. Girls were usually depicted mimicking their future roles as maternal caretakers and protectors, showing them as docile and gentle in contrast to their male counterparts. The young members of the African-American community were excluded, with few exceptions, from this vision of an American Romantic childhood, shown either in demeaning caricature or in a romanticized vision of a benign slavery, although this trend began to shift as abolitionists sought to humanize the cause of ending slavery through their own propagandistic material depicting suffering slave children.¹⁹ These depictions were windows into the dreams and anxieties of a nation in its youth, seen through its future hopes: its children.

Winslow Homer is an example of an American painter whose images of children show us the Romantic child with particularly American adaptations. His genre painting *Boys in a Pasture* from 1874 (Fig. 5) presents the Romantic Child ideal of an innocent childhood spent outdoors. Two young boys relax in the wide expanse of a field, one sitting up gripping his knee, the other lazily reclining. The green and brown grass of the

¹⁸ Further in-depth discussion on the place of the Romantic Child in the context of a new America can be found in Claire Perry's *Young America: Childhood in 19th-Century Art and Culture*.

¹⁹ Claire Perry, *Young America: Childhood in 19th-Century Art and Culture* (New Haven Yale University Press, 2006), 2.



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Boys in a Pasture, 1874
Oil on canvas, 38.7 x 57.2 cm (15 x 22 in)
The Hayden Collection,
Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, MA

Figure 5
Winslow Homer, *Boys in a Pasture*, 1874, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston

field almost completely surrounds them; only the rounded top of one of the boy's hats rises above the horizon line, mirroring the shape of the patch of forest in the distance.²⁰ The sky is a flawless light blue with wispy white clouds. Homer has painted the grass closest to the picture plane at the bottom of the frame in fine detail; as the field expands towards the horizon, Homer paints large patches of textured brown, the distant trees represented by irregular green shapes, in sum creating an almost dream-like atmospheric perspective. The two boys wear the stereotypical rural farm boy outfits of loose, cropped trousers and white shirts, capped with a straw or cloth hat. The front figure looks away from the viewer off into the distance, while the other seems to gaze at nothing in particular. Both of the boys' faces are obscured by shadow and loose brushwork. With the lack of distinguishing features, the boys lose their individuality, becoming stereotypes, stand-ins for the viewer's own fantasies or memories. The idealized natural surroundings, the serene relaxation and relative anonymity of the subjects form a dream world for the viewer's own nostalgia to reside. These boys seem to exist in a world that is both perfect and unchanging, a fantasy where neither nature nor children nor a country ever grow up and become corrupted, remaining pure and innocent forever, as far as the eye can see.

While the Romantic child had its roots in European academic painting, in both Europe and the United States the trope would become culturally pervasive through the growing middle-class art market and the reproducibility of illustrations and prints. In the early nineteenth century, the art market was growing, starting to include the middle class as its customers, and while genre paintings had low standing in the rigid academic

²⁰ Randall C Griffen, *Winslow Homer: An American Vision* (New York: Phaidon, 2006), 74.

hierarchy, they sold incredibly well.²¹ Saccharine paintings of children cuddling with kittens, mesmerized by bubbles or playing dress-up flooded the market and were profitable to painters of all talents. The even larger mass-market of prints, illustrations and advertisements reproduced these images and further saturated the visual culture with the narrow stereotype of the Romantic child until it was the dominant and ubiquitous way to represent children and childhood: innocent and naïve in a glow of soft-focus ambiance.²² With the rise of photography in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, images of the Romantic child could be made to seem even more real and natural, the paintings and illustrations brought to life through a new, revolutionary technology.

Photography was still a nascent art in the Victorian Era and it seemed that children quickly became a favored subject for this developing technology as millions lined up to have pictures taken of their families and their precious children.²³ Artists began to experiment with the aesthetic potential of this new medium, wanting to establish it as an art form. Photographing children was safe and neutral, an already popular subject in painting and an obvious place to start. These new photographers recreated the Romantic child image that they saw in paintings of the same time period, making the innocent child seemingly all the more real. One amateur artist in particular would become emblematic for the growing trend of photographs of Victorian children, securing the Romantic child's place in the photographic realm. Lewis Carroll was the pen name for Charles Dodgson, an Oxford mathematics professor by day and passionate photographer and writer in his free time. His singular subject and, some might say, obsession was

²¹ Higonnet, *Pictures of Innocence: The History and Crisis of Ideal Childhood*, 35.

²² *Ibid.*, 51.

²³ Ray Merritt, *Full of Grace: A Journey through the History of Childhood* (Brooklyn: powerHouse Books, 2006), 19.

photographing and spending time with young children, specifically young girls. He was quoted as saying that “next to conversing with an angel... comes, I think, the privilege of having a real child’s thoughts uttered to one.”²⁴ Carroll fervently believed in the natural innocence of children, and young girls represented this innocence for him both physically and emotionally. He would invite the young daughters of his friends and colleagues to his home and, as one of his young friends Beatrice Hatch remembers, “he kept various costumes and ‘properties’ with which to dress us up, and, of course, that added to the fun. What child would not thoroughly enjoy personating a Japanese, or a beggar-child, or a gipsy, or an Indian?”²⁵ The resulting images were technically masterful and had a certain unstudied nature, making the notion of the innocent Romantic child even more real, an idea in which Carroll himself fervently believed.

Alexandra Kitchin was the young daughter of Lewis Carroll’s colleagues at Christ Church at Oxford. Carroll nicknamed her Xie and she became one of his favorite subjects. Carroll photographed her in 1875 when she was only eleven years old, feigning sleep in a large chaise. (Fig. 6) Xie leans back in the chaise, head resting to the side, loose white dress casually falling off her shoulders. The chaise is overwhelmingly large compared to her small body, the arms seeming to envelop her. The lines of the furniture and the revealing neckline of her dress draw our eyes up towards her serene face. All of the photographic focus centers on her face, the space around it slightly blurry in comparison. In his era, admirers of Carroll’s work heralded his images for their naturalism; the perceived truth of the photograph enabled the ideal of the innocent

²⁴ Morton Cohen, *Reflections in a Looking Glass: A Centennial Celebration of Lewis Carroll, Photographer* (New York: Aperture Foundation 1998), 78.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 7.



Figure 6
Lewis Carroll, *Alexandra (Xie) Kitchin*, 1875, Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center, University of Texas at Austin

Romantic child to seem like reality, instead of just an artistic notion. The small details of studied imperfection create the illusion of naturalism: the dress falling off her shoulder, the rumbled folds of the fabric, the wispy hair framing her face, seeming as if Carroll stumbled upon Xie sleeping peacefully and happened to snap a picture.²⁶

While the goal of the image was to depict Xie in a seemingly natural way, we can see forms that point to images of grown women from an earlier era. She reclines in a pose that harkens back to Odalisque images found in Neoclassical and Romantic era paintings of the early nineteenth century. This pose and its implicit reference to the depiction of nude Odalisques, Ottoman empire concubines, sexualizes the photograph in a way that seems to both eroticize the girl and fetishize her innocence. In our modern reading, this creates a rift in the sexual innocence of the Romantic child, while at the time of the photograph's taking, such images were seen as representative of natural innocence and thus naturally innocent themselves.²⁷ This undercurrent of the eroticization of innocence is a theme that has become pervasive in modern discussions of Carroll's work. His unabashed obsession with young girls and photographing them has led modern historians to surmise that he had pedophilic tendencies. There is no definitive evidence that Carroll had any inappropriate relationships with the girls that he photographed, but it is an idea that from our modern perspective is hard to ignore while examining his images.²⁸

Images of the Romantic child often have a focus on the corporeality of the young child as the site of their inherent innocence, and with the introduction of photography this focus on corporeality was suddenly attached to children who seemed more real than

²⁶ Higonnet, *Pictures of Innocence: The History and Crisis of Ideal Childhood*, 110.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 125.

²⁸ Cohen, *Reflections in a Looking Glass: A Centennial Celebration of Lewis Carroll, Photographer*.

before. A viewer could interpret this veneration of the innocence of young children as a fetishization of their innocence and in turn a fetishization of their bodies, something that seems far more sinister. These interpretations bring to light not only how the imagined relationship between the photographer and the subject is integral to how we read an image, but also how the societal norms of the current time shape our readings. Carroll's photographs would not be the only images of children to face such criticism, and as photography began to push the boundaries of, and redefine, the Romantic child, these and similar controversies would continue to arise.

While the photographic image of the Romantic child brought the ideal of a happy and protected childhood to life, the stark opposite, the victimized child, the impoverished child, has long been used to spur social change. Social documentary photography, a genre of photography that Wendy Ewald would feel very connected to, aimed to document the lives of people struggling on the outskirts of society in order to raise awareness and inspire reform. These emotionally striking pictures, from Jacob Riis's journalistic shots of the late nineteenth century New York City slums to Lewis Hine's hauntingly beautiful images of child laborers taken at the turn of the century to the Depression-era images by the photographers of the Farm Security Administration (FSA) that stirred a nation, are connected to the idea of the Romantic child because they illustrated the result when outside forces denied children the innocent childhood that was seen as their inherent right. As Higonnet so succinctly explains, "because the 'normal' image of the child was Romantic innocence, any sign of deviation from innocence could be understood as violation. Signs of want, of brutality, of labor, of filth, of sexuality, of any physical or

emotional trauma, would appear as a forced, social ban from natural innocence.”²⁹ When social documentary photographers of the Depression era, seeking to build support for government assistance programs, focused their cameras on suffering children they used the accepted idea of the ‘natural innocence’ of children and their inherent blamelessness to, in a way, silence their critics. While adults could be blamed for their poverty or hardships, it was impossible to blame the blameless child. In these emotionally stirring images, these Romantic children seem thrust into a world that is stealing their inherent innocence from them, and we as the viewers are overcome with the desire to save them.

The Farm Security Administration was a governmental program that attempted to remedy the problems of desperately needy agricultural workers during the Great Depression. The historical section of the FSA, under the leadership of Roy Stryker, served not only to make a photographic record of the FSA projects and its successes, but also to humanize the struggles of the farmers to the wider public in order to inspire change and support.³⁰ Dorothea Lange, one of the dozens of photographers who traveled across the U.S. documenting the Great Depression, was the artist behind one of the most recognizable FSA images, *Migrant Mother*. Many of the FSA images, including *Migrant Mother*, featured children and the hardship that they endured along with their parents. As a young child, Lange was deserted by her father and burdened by a lifelong limp caused by polio. As she explained later in life, her disability “formed me, instructed me, helped me and humiliated me.”³¹ These early challenges allowed her to relate to the struggling families of the Depression, allowing her to take images that were deeply compassionate.

²⁹ Higonnet, *Pictures of Innocence: The History and Crisis of Ideal Childhood*, 117.

³⁰ Beverly W. Brannan and Gilles Mora, *Fsa: The American Vision* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc, 2006), 9.

³¹ Merritt, *Full of Grace: A Journey through the History of Childhood*, 117.

The children in her photographs seem to be profoundly burdened with adult responsibilities and worries, the Romantic child thrust into dusty despair.

FSA Rehabilitation Clients, Near Wapato, Yakima Valley, Washington taken in 1939, shows how the image of the young child can garner emotion and sympathy in a powerful way. (Fig. 7) A young girl leans against a crude barbed wire fence; her mother looks on in the background, shielding her eyes from the bright sun. Although the girl is close to the picture plane, assumedly close to the photographer, she looks down, refusing eye contact, and her dark short hair falls into her sullen face. Her floral patterned dress folds against the barbed wire as she seems to press her body against it, holding onto it between the sharp barbs. She seems trapped, aching to escape. The ground below her is dry and lifeless; the faint outline of the bottom of a wooden cabin is barely visible in the background. The mother is dressed in a similar simple dress with a checkered apron. She looks on, hand on her hip, with what we can believe is a mix of inquisitiveness and concern. The image is filled with washed out grays, creating the illusion that the hot sun has bleached even the photograph. The young girl is the central focus in the frame; everything around her is blurred out, eliminating fine detail. This shallow depth of focus creates the illusion of isolation. The young girl is physically and emotionally isolated from the world, making everything else just a blur. Her downcast eyes highlight the shame and despair that even the youngest victims of the Depression felt. Instead of being granted the privilege of a Romantic childhood, the young girl is burdened with the very adult concerns of poverty and hardship. The girl's nameless face suggests an image that could have been repeated countless times across the wide plains of the country, the faces of the children humanizing the very human struggle of the Great Depression.



FSA Rehabilitation Clients. Near Wapato, Yakima Valley, Washington, 1939

Figure 7
Dorothea Lange, *FSA Rehabilitation Clients, Near Wapato, Yakima Valley, Washington, 1939*, Dorothea Lange Collection, Oakland Museum

As the landscape of the world changed, the Romantic child found itself in new, more urban and modern surroundings. More mobile camera technology, hand-held cameras and rolled film, allowed photographers to shoot spontaneously and capture children unnoticed in their revelries. While the ideal of innocent Romantic childhood was reiterated in photographs of the big city child – creating a world of fantasy in the busy streets – the unstudied capturing of children as they went about their lives created images that showed a more nuanced, emotionally complex picture of what it meant to be a child. In these photographs, urban children play, laugh, fight; are gentle or cruel, quiet or animated. Gone is the singular emotion of quiet contentment of the Romantic child found in the staged paintings and photographs of earlier times. The full spectrum of emotions and experiences are seen through the lens of the street photographers’ camera. Helen Levitt focused her Leica lens on the smallest inhabitants of the big city of New York and managed to show just how lyrically beautiful yet multifaceted a childhood growing up in the bustling city could be.

Helen Levitt was a native New Yorker, and she captured the street life of the mid-twentieth century with a distinctly poetic eye. In one of her few statements about her own work, Levitt insisted, “that the aesthetic is in the reality itself.”³² She aimed to capture the city as she saw it, raw, alive and beautiful, and children perfectly represented the ever-changing life on the city sidewalks. Levitt photographed them using a right-angle lens, one that would allow her to shoot an image without the subject realizing.³³ This clandestine technique let her capture spontaneous moments in her anonymous subjects’

³² Brooks Johnson, ed. *Photography Speaks: 150 Photographers on Their Art* (New York: Aperture, 2004), 174.

³³ Melissa Block, "Helen Levitt Captured Perfect Moments Unnoticed," *NPR*, <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=102504602>.

lives, small moments of beauty that Levitt saw with her quick eye and even quicker shutter. The eighteenth image in *A Way of Seeing*, Levitt's 1965 monograph, untitled and undated (as were all of her published images,) is a striking example of how Levitt used the iconography of the Romantic child and married it to the city and its structures. (Fig. 8) Four girls walk up the slanted sidewalk away from the viewer; the dark stonewall of an elevated street creates a stark background, extending into the far distance. They all look over towards the high stonewall; five delicate, shiny, perfect bubbles float past them, dotted along the horizontal lines of stones like notes on a music score. The street becomes a classical tableau, a stage for this transitory moment of beauty: the rough surface of the stonewall becomes a backdrop for the glassy bubbles, the sidewalk a plain platform for the starkly outlined forms of the little girls, each contrasting element highlighting the others. The receding sidewalk and gradually disappearing wall create the powerful pull of perspective familiar from Renaissance paintings, leading our eyes diagonally into the scene. Despite the depth of perspective in photographs such as these, Andy Grunburg describes Levitt's images as having "a sense of smallness that in other hands could be mistaken for a smallness of artistic ambition. But her pictures are not so much small as intimate."³⁴ As we see this group of young girls walking away from us, oblivious to our gaze and unidentifiable to us, we feel as if we are voyeurs. We are granted the opportunity of observing the secret adventures of this gang of young girls, yet we are removed from a world in which we can no longer partake as adult viewers.

Helen Levitt manages to expand the narrow representation of the Romantic child by including children of diverse races in the new urban setting. The children's naïveté

³⁴ Andy Grundberg, "Photography View: Finding Grace in the Awkward Humanity of People," *The New York Times*, November 1, 1987.



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Figure 8
Helen Levitt, untitled, undated

regarding the racial attitudes that cut so deeply through American culture is not only a sign of their innocence, but also perhaps a subtle statement of Levitt's own opinions on race. The group represents the racial diversity of New York's working class, a young white girl casually walking with three African-Americans, suggesting the naïve obliviousness of children to racial boundaries. This can be interpreted as another sign of their innocence, their insulation from the prejudices to which adult society subscribed. Showing children in integrated settings and connecting that to their natural innocence portrays integration as a natural condition. The classic iconography of the bubbles, found frequently in the genre paintings of children in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries to represent the fleeting nature of childhood and the fragility of innocence, is here paralleled with the modernity and the solidity of the city. The roads and walls and towering buildings show us the Romantic child in a new and different context.

In the following years, contemporary photography, growing from the experimentation of the post-war era, looked back on and challenged its own history while also exploring new visual languages and technologies.³⁵ Those photographers who chose to focus on children looked back on the visual history of the Romantic child and saw a trope that was begging to be challenged, re-examined and redefined. The narrow vision of the Romantic child was challenged in a way it never had been before, opening the way for a new, more complex vision of what it means to grow up, what some scholars have called 'the child revealed' or 'the knowing child.'³⁶ A vision of childhood that is both light and dark, no longer a pure and innocent blank slate as Locke theorized, but children

³⁵ Merritt, *Full of Grace: A Journey through the History of Childhood*.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 305.

with personalities, wants, desires, emotions and experiences, existing in an ever-more complicated world.

Sally Mann has come to be considered the most notable photographer of children and family working today. In her book *Immediate Family* (1992), documenting her children and husband in their native Blue Ridge Mountains, she refers back to the Romantic child trope and its connection with the natural world, but dares to challenge the idea of inherent innocence. It seems that typical iterations of the Romantic child reflect the image of childhood that adult viewers wish to see, a perfected nostalgia of innocence and naïveté. Mann's images serve more as a window into the daily lives of her children, into the truths of their childhood and perhaps all childhoods. *Immediate Family* is a collection of unbelievably beautiful portraits; together they create the story of a childhood lived in a rural paradise, running wild and naked among the rivers, mountains and woods, growing up in a family with all its complicated relationships and emotions. In the introduction, Mann poetically explains what she and her children are trying to accomplish through the images:

When good pictures come, we hope they tell truths, but truths 'told slant,' just as Emily Dickinson commanded. We are spinning a story of what it is to grow up. It is a complicated story and sometimes we try to take on the grand themes: anger, love, death, sensuality, and beauty. But we tell it all without fear and without shame.³⁷

Mann's critics have condemned the omnipresent nudity in her images and the perceived sexualization of her subjects, but instead of fetishizing the innocence of her children, she asserts that sensuality is a part of the complete child, an idea that is deeply threatening to those who cling to the trope of the innocent Romantic child. Perhaps because her images

³⁷ Sally Mann, *Immediate Family* (New York: Aperture, 1992), 7.

are set in landscapes that are reminiscent of typical iterations of the Romantic child, the deviations in Mann's work from the Romantic child standard are especially striking.

In the ethereal portrait of her young son, tellingly titled *The Last Time Emmett Modeled Nude* (Fig. 9), Sally Mann uses the serene natural background of rural Virginia to direct our gaze towards the standing figure, creating an image that is both complex and striking. Emmett stands nude, waist deep in the opaque water. Placed slightly below the center of the frame, he is surrounded by the dark shadows and blurry lines of the water and shoreline. The water stretches out behind him, ending at a far shoreline, connecting to a wooded hill, only a small sliver of sky visible above the tree line. He places his hands on the surface of the water and the movement of the river rushing around his hands and waist creates triangles of delicate waves, of which he is the peak. The tiny waves create disturbance and distortion on the otherwise mirror-like surface of the water. Where his reflection would be there are rushing ripples instead, his body the only element not reflected in the water. The triangle of bright white sky is reflected in the river as a larger triangular expanse of light on the water; this diametric and concentric trio of triangles draws our eyes straight to Emmett, almost daring us to stare at his naked form. His dark eyes seem to radiate a combination of annoyance and anger, defiantly looking up at both the photographer and the viewer. Compositionally, Emmett is the central focus of the image and Mann has reflected this centrality in her technical choices. Emmett's face and chest are in sharp focus, while the moving water distorts his hands slightly. The trees are reflected onto the river in wavy dark shadows, and their counterparts are out of focus in the distance. The tones of the print vary between the soft grays and careful exposure of the subject and the deep, almost black shadows of the trees on the water, creating a halo



The Last Time Emmett Modeled Nude, 1987

Figure 9
Sally Mann, *The Last Time Emmett Modeled Nude*, 1987

of reflected light around Emmett, framed by darkness. His location in a seemingly idyllic natural setting places him in a tradition of the Romantic Child that we have seen many times before: the young child one with nature, his innocence paralleled with the innocence of the Earth. While within the Romantic child ideal, the child's naked form serves as the physical representation of youth and innocence, Mann challenges this simplistic idea by creating a web of ambiguity and questions brought on by Emmett's nudity: does the title point to the child's reluctance to pose nude? Is he distorting the water with his hands to prevent a second image of his nude form? What is the fierce look in his eyes telling us?

Mann's nude depictions of her children have caused considerable controversy, stirring up accusations that she was taking advantage of her children, sexualizing them by photographing them nude, and even creating child pornography. This particular image not only invites us to look at Emmett's body, but demands it, confronting us with the tension between photographer and subject, subject and viewer that is reinforced by the title, *The Last Time Emmett Modeled Nude*. The title suggests that Emmett began to feel some modesty or shame by being photographed nude, and this would be his last time. The raw emotion in the young boy's eyes demonstrates the intimate and maternal relationship between Sally Mann and her subject. Mann creates this image that gives voice to his feelings; we the viewers are not simply looking at him, but he is looking back. The compositional lines pointing towards Emmett's body command us to look at his nude form, but the defiant gaze of Emmett seems to both confront his mother for photographing him and indict us, the viewers, for looking.

Wendy Ewald stands in the long shadow of the Romantic child, its adherents and its challengers. The body of work that Ewald has amassed over her forty-year career is one that is full of complexities and questions. Like any good artist, she gives us work that makes us wonder and think, compelling us to grapple with its constants and its inconsistencies, its ambiguities and its tensions. By giving the camera up to her child subjects, she is attempting to give us a more truthful, in her eyes, document of what it is to grow up in our world. As Ewald writes in her introduction to *Secret Games* about the work of her students, “their images tapped into certain universal feelings with undeniable force and subtlety.”³⁸ In her work and the work of her students, we find images that both reinforce and reject the Romantic child ideal; we see that children are neither fully innocent nor corrupted and that a child’s world is just as complicated as an adult’s.

³⁸ Ewald, *Secret Games: Collaborative Works with Children 1969-1999*, 18.

Chapter 1

“Bound to Nature’s Rhythms”: Connection to the Land in Rural Appalachia

Allen Shepherd was a young student of Wendy Ewald in Lechter County, Kentucky, deep in the Appalachian Mountains. About his photographs, and his life growing up in the Appalachians, he wrote, “the mountains – I feel they have secrets like nobody has ever heard of. Some people say if they could talk they would speak wisdom. I feel that way too.”³⁹ As Wendy Ewald taught, photographed, and immersed herself in the remote communities of the Appalachian Mountains, she was struck by the deep bond that the children had with the land around them, with the mountains rising from the mist.

In 1975, after graduating from college and briefly living in San Francisco, Wendy Ewald moved to Ingram’s Creek, a small community deep in the Kentucky Appalachian Mountains. She intended to make a document of her new home, one that she felt would capture the “soul and rhythm of the place.”⁴⁰ Instead she found herself limited by the presence of her camera and searching for a way to connect with the community. During college, Ewald had spent her summers teaching young Native American children in Canada how to photograph, and she decided to offer to teach in the local elementary school in Ingram’s Creek. A grant from the Polaroid Foundation provided the cameras and film, and within a few months she was teaching photography classes for the local children in two schools. Her project working with school children in Appalachia continued for almost six years. In her introduction to *Portraits and Dreams* (1985), the

³⁹ Wendy Ewald, *Portraits and Dreams: Photographs and Stories by Children of the Appalachians* (New York: Writers and Readers Publishing, Inc, 1985), 23.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 11.

publication that collected the photographs and writings of her Appalachian students, she described the area as one that was both idyllic and impoverished. Families lived nestled in remote ‘hollers’, small valleys between the mountains, next to creeks with names like Kingdom Come and Campbells Branch. One of the schools at which Ewald taught was so small that the largest grade boasted three children; the families living in the valleys had lived there for a century among the coal-filled mountains. Ewald describes the children as having been raised in communities deeply tied to the land, “bound to nature’s rhythms of birth, growth and decay,”⁴¹ among animals, hunting, crops, life and death.

Ewald’s understanding of Appalachian childhood seems to be rooted in the ideal of the Romantic child connected to the natural world. Within this ideal was the belief that a child is innately tied to nature, a child’s innocence mirrored in the unspoiled outdoors. The children of Appalachia, at first glance, seem to be the modern day embodiments of this trope, growing up wild in the rich and feral mountains. However, their relationship to the natural world around them is neither simple nor one-dimensional. Through their photographs and words, we can see that they see the land as something that is both magical and functional, a place to play like children and hunt like adults, where animals are both pets and dinner, where the mountains both represent the past of their ancestors and the future of the dark coal mines. But as these children grow up, and as they document the adults that have grown up in these same valleys, we also see how the magical aspects of the mountains, magic that the children hold so dear, fades, and the adults seem to be in a self-imposed prison of the interior. When the adults are photographed without their children they are often shown cloistered indoors. They seem

⁴¹ Ibid.

to hide from a land that has come to represent the struggles of rural poverty that continue to plague their communities. For the children of Appalachia, the mountains have dualistic importance: the magic and innocence of a childhood amongst nature and the future and often-harsh reality that mountain life can bring.

The Romantic child's connection to the natural world was shaped by a complex set of intersecting ideas during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in both Europe and the United States. The French philosopher Rousseau, in his widely influential writings such as *Emile* (1762), presented childhood as the natural or purest state of humanity, crafting the child's connection to nature as one that was innate. Picking up on these ideas, eighteenth-century artists, such as Thomas Gainsborough and Sir Joshua Reynolds, attempting to convey the inherent innocence of childhood, would situate their subjects in similarly pure and unspoiled natural surroundings. Sir Joshua Reynolds gives us an archetypal portrait of a young Romantic child placed within an idyllic natural background in his 1788 painting *Master Harre*. (Fig. 10) The child, still young enough to be dressed in the gown of an unbreeched boy,⁴² is shown framed by the winding vines and branches of a tree, meadows and hills in the distance. The wispy hair, rosy cheeks, pale skin and soft flesh are all physical indicators of his youth and innocence. The serene natural background reinforces the theme of the child's innocence, while also giving the artist the opportunity to show the subject's dominance over the land. His pointing outstretched arm, framing the land with his body, indicates this dominance. Natural

⁴² From the 16th century until the 19th century, young boys were dressed in gowns or dresses until they were 'breeched,' or first dressed in trousers or breeches. This was seen as an important rite of passage for a young boy. For more general information, <http://histclo.com/style/skirted/Dress/breech.html>



Plate 2. Sir Joshua Reynolds,
1723-1792, *Master Harre*, 1788, oil on
canvas, 30 $\frac{3}{8}$ x 25 in. (77.2 x 63.5 cm),
Musée du Louvre, département des
Peintures.

Figure 10
Sir Joshua Reynolds, *Master Harre* 1788, Musée du Louvre, Paris

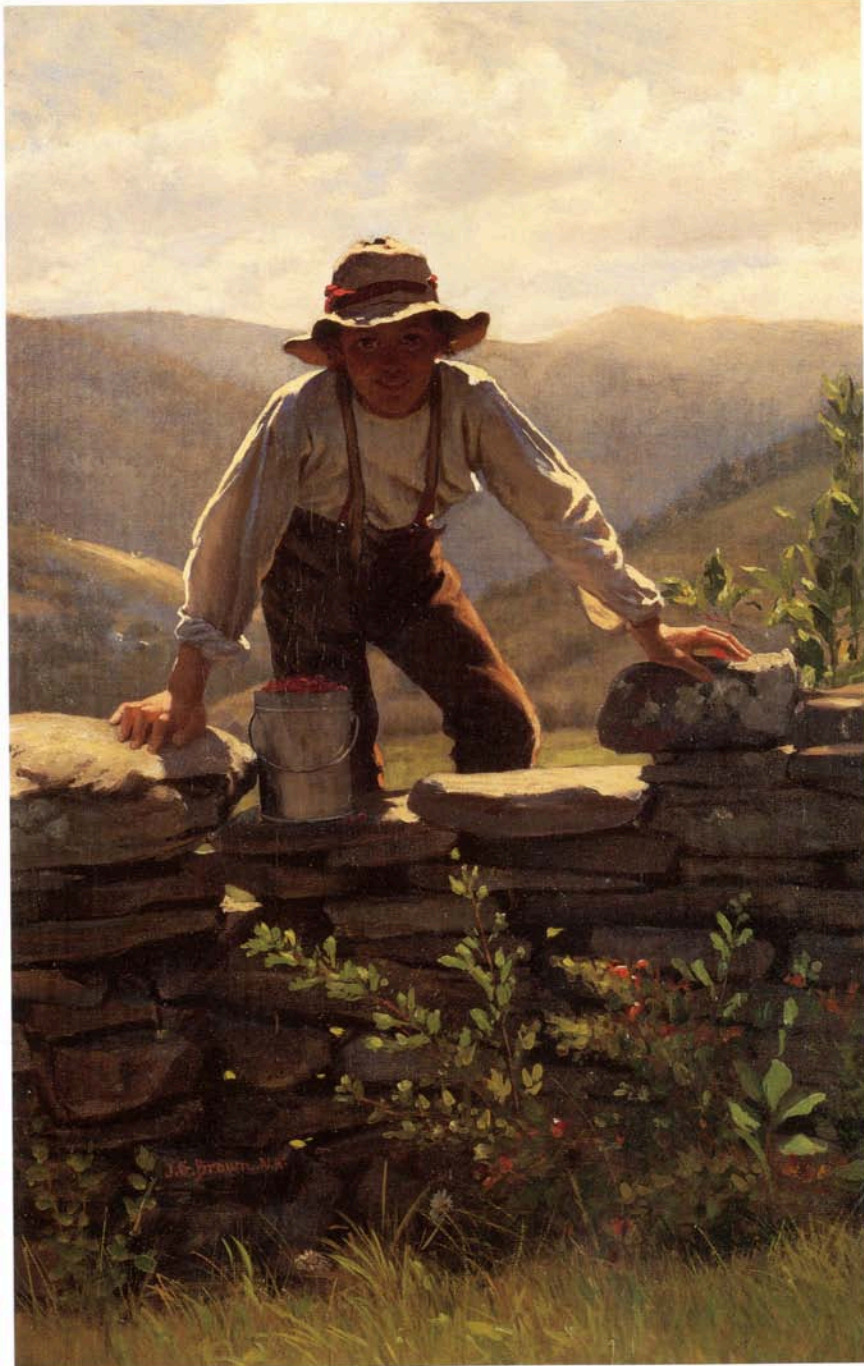


FIG. 15 John George Brown, *The Berry Boy*, c. 1875. Oil on canvas, 23 x 15 in. George Walter Vincent Smith Art Museum, Springfield, Massachusetts.

Figure 11
John George Brown, *The Berry Boy*, 1875, George Walter Vincent Smith Art Museum,
Springfield, Massachusetts

backgrounds would continue to be used in portraits of children as a corresponding visual symbol for the child's innocence.

On the other side of the Atlantic, nineteenth-century American artists embraced the same idea of the child innately connected with nature, but this trope took on a particularly nationalistic bent.⁴³ The 'country boy' image that was persistent during the nineteenth century represented a number of values and ideals that were of concern to the citizens of a growing nation. Young boys shown playing outside in rural landscapes physically represented the youth of the nation and the notion of the early Euro-Americans that the vast expanse of land on the continent was theirs to explore and tame. Against a backdrop of increasing urbanization and industrialization, the image of the 'country boy' became even more pervasive. Concerned about the damaging effects of urbanization, factories, and white-collar work, the country boy offered the physical ideal of a healthy child growing up in rural simplicity.⁴⁴

John George Brown's 1875 painting *The Berry Boy* (Fig. 11) shows the trope of the 'country boy' in a time when it reached its cultural ubiquity as a quintessentially American image. A young boy is shown climbing over a stone wall, a bucket of freshly picked berries resting in front of him. An expanse of pristine land stretches out behind him, and he is dressed in stereotypical rural clothing: floppy hat, trousers with suspenders and a simple shirt. He smiles delighted at the viewer, proud of the fruitful harvest he has gathered for his family. He is healthy and fit, tan from time spent playing and working

⁴³ The following ideas about the emergence of the 'country boy' trope are drawn largely from Claire Perry's *Young America: Childhood in 19th-century Art and Culture*, and are explored more in depth in her publication.

⁴⁴ Claire Perry, *Young America: Childhood in 19th-Century Art and Culture* (New Haven Yale University Press, 2006), 21.

outdoors, “[personifying] the physical and mental well-being that Americans associated with country life.”⁴⁵ We see him as both intimately comfortable in nature, returning from exploring a seemingly endless expanse of land behind him, sleeves rolled up and casually climbing over the stone wall. At the same time, the composition and his place in the painting displays his youthful dominance over the land; his harvest of the land is placed front and center, his figure physically dominates the mountains behind him, rising above the horizon line, and the sun sets behind him creating an angelic halo of sorts. He has seemed to collect this harvest not out of hunger or need, but rather from a sense of adventure and ingenuity, the type of romanticization and sanitizing of rural life that was central to the country boy trope. The photographs taken by Wendy Ewald’s students in Appalachia seem to repeat aspects of this idealized view of a childhood spent outdoors, yet they also reveal the reality of widespread poverty in their rural community.

Many of the photos and writings by the Appalachian children seem to fit neatly into the trope of the Romantic child in nature. The childhoods of these young children are deeply connected to their time spent outside and the land that surrounds them. The small community depends on the land, and a reverence for the land is passed down from generation to generation, resulting in the photographs and writings we see here. It is not a conscious connection to the historical idea of the Romantic child, but rather like a natural recreation of it. The children write about their young interaction with the land in a spectrum of experiences. Robert Dean Smith writes of his childhood relationship with nature as something almost animalistic: “I can’t remember it, but when I was two years old, I’d eat red worms out of the yard and wouldn’t wear a diaper or anything like that...I

⁴⁵ Ibid., 19.

was wild.”⁴⁶ Darlene Watts describes her relationship with the land as a place for both dreaming and comfort: “I’ve gotten lonely before, and I stayed out in the yard and just listened to the birds...I sat there and dreamt all day.”⁴⁷

Even as children of twelve or thirteen, they seem to look back on their younger years playing in the land with a sort of nostalgia. Photographing their younger siblings and cousins, they evoke this nostalgic mood through their images. As Ewald’s students capture spontaneous moments with their new found artistic voice, the veil of innocence slips over them and once again we see the iconography of the pure Romantic child. Luke Capps’s sweet portrait of his two younger stepsisters titled *My sisters playing in the mud* casts these two young girls in the realm of the innocent. (Fig. 12) The two girls, neither older than five or six, seem to be squishing their bare feet into a patch of mud along a dirt road. They are placed slightly off center of the middle in the composition, giving a sense of immediacy and spontaneity. The dirt road curves behind them, hugging the dark side of a mountain, only a small patch of sky peeking out in the corner. A small tricycle is cast off beside them, seeming about to tip into the mud with them. The sun shining on their flaxen-hair creates a bright white halo effect. The younger girl in front is naked except for some shorts, her hands hiking them up to avoid the dirt. The nudity of the young girl emphasizes both her young age and her connection with the natural world. She herself is in her natural state, unrestricted by society’s prescription for clothes. The young girls are immersed in their world of play, unaware of both the photographer and by extension the viewer. They both look down at their feet, distracted by their muddy entertainment and

⁴⁶ Ewald, *Portraits and Dreams: Photographs and Stories by Children of the Appalachians*, 29.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 95.



Luke Capps
My sisters playing in the mud

Figure 12
Luke Capps, *My sisters playing in the mud*

avoiding direct interaction with the camera. Their absorption in their own world creates a barrier between us and them, reinforcing the idea that childhood is somehow a world apart, completely separate from the world of the adult. In addition, their downward gaze and the shadows cast across their faces create a mask of anonymity, much like the anonymous boys in Homer's *Boys in a Pasture* (Fig 5). Without a confronting gaze or discernable features, they become representative of all children, a place where the adult viewers can recreate a nostalgic imagined childhood racing down dirt roads on tricycles, growing up wild.

In the mountains of Appalachia, as in the paintings of the traditional Romantic child, nature is not only a vast playground, but also a functional place for farming and hunting. The theme of the earth as a boundless resource was often depicted in images of the Romantic child, shown playing and working in idyllic pastures and farmland, a theme that appears in *Berry Boy*. From a young age, Wendy Ewald's young students play act the activities of the adults and learn to hunt, fish and make the land their own. Ewald wrote that the children learned early "respect for and fear of their surroundings. They watched the crops grow, the seasons change, the animals being born and slaughtered, and when the boys go hunting they sit quietly watching and listening for signs of nearby animals."⁴⁸ The children are taught to see nature as something powerful and commanding, not merely something to be patently dominated, but to be honored. Willie Whitaker's visually stunning portrait titled *My niece with a .22* (Fig. 13) shows us in both style and content how the children of Appalachia learn that the land is not only to be played in, but to be harvested for what it can provide in a community with few other resources. Willie's

⁴⁸ Ibid., 11.



Willie Whitaker
My niece with a .22

Figure 13
Willie Whitaker, *My niece with a .22*

young niece stands on the wooden stairs of the family porch, shotgun in hand, the butt resting on her small chest. She seems to lean back under the weight of the rifle, the gun almost as long as she is tall. A dog stands on the stairs, hiding behind her, nervous eyes barely visible above her head. Her hands grip the center of the rifle, finger seeming to test the trigger. The image is brimming with the tension of the small barefooted girl armed with fire of an adult-sized weapon. Her mouth slightly open, eyes cast downward to the gun, she seems fascinated by what she is struggling to hold in her hands, while us, the adult viewers, are terrified by the apparent danger. The flat grays of the house, her clothing, and her dog are contrasted with the ominous darkness and blurriness of the trees in the background. As you continue to stare at the picture, it takes on feelings of shock, fear, humor and wonder. This is not the innocent childhood spent imagining in the woods, it is a connection to the land that is much deeper, one where the land is both a home and a resource, a lesson that these children learn early. Amusingly, this image is placed side by side with Luke Capps' *My sisters playing in the mud*. With this clever editorial decision, Wendy Ewald highlights the two contrasting visions of a childhood that is intertwined with the land.

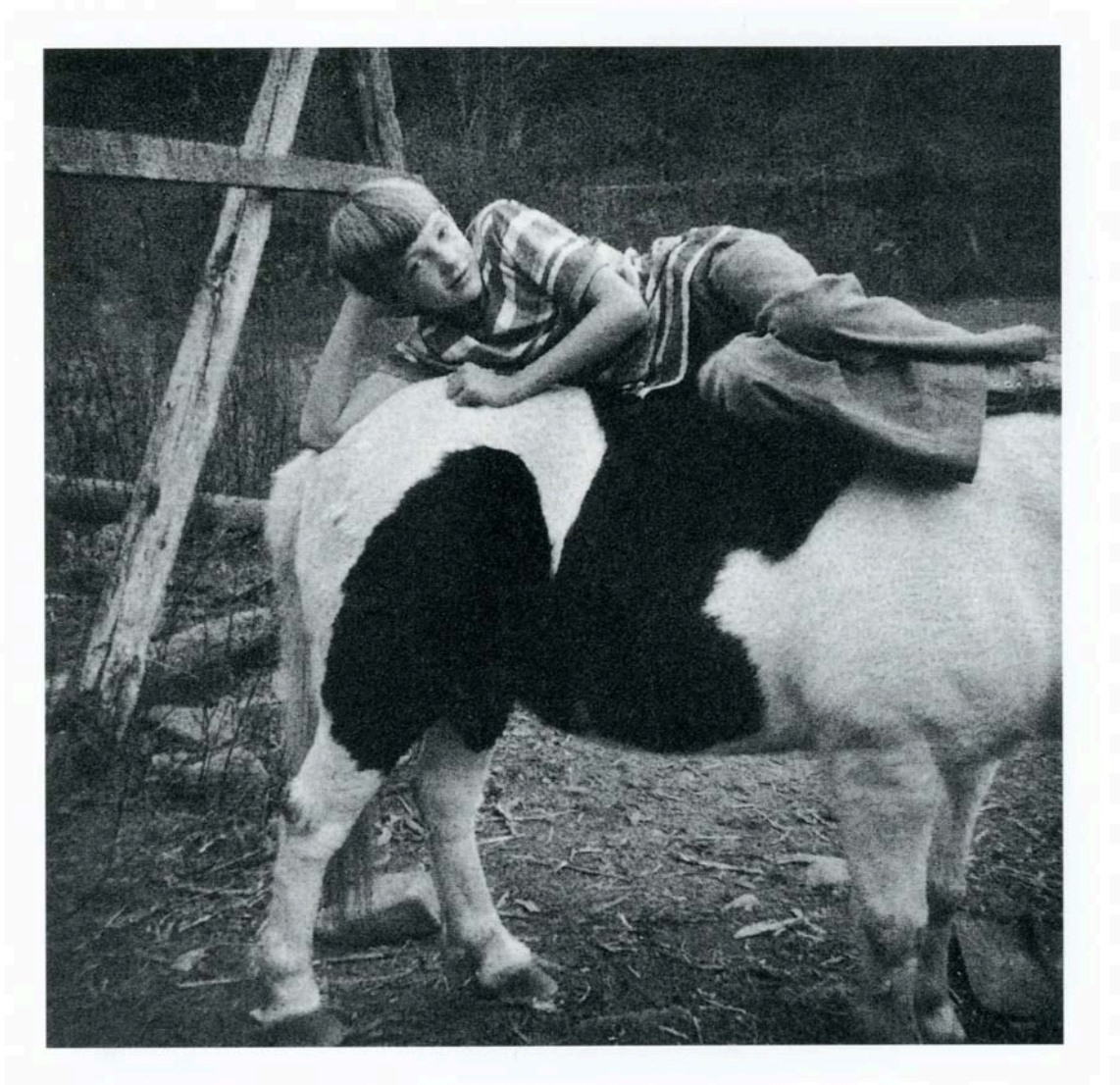
Animals were common companions in portraits of Romantic children, representing the physical manifestation of the natural world and its innocence, essentially equating the small children with animals. Often the animals were small, cute and cuddly, kittens, puppies or bunnies, cueing how the viewer should understand the child. On the opposite end, as Anne Higonnet observes, "occasionally the pet is absurdly large, cueing instead the projection of [the viewers'] adult self into the image as the child's

protector.”⁴⁹ Additionally, domesticated animals could be used to signify a young child’s ability to tame their own wild nature. The animals we see in the images of the Appalachian children say less symbolically about the child, but rather speak profoundly to the children’s relationship to the natural world through these animals. Animals, just as the land, have a dual purpose and meaning in the world of the Appalachian children and are photographed both as dear pets and as farm animals or food. As Ewald wrote, “for them the whole natural world was a playground and, as in dreams, their play easily crossed borders between animals and humans, between life and death.”⁵⁰ Animals represented this cycle of life and death, the borders between humans and nature in a tangible way, and thus because of their centrality in their communities and the individual connections the children form with these animals, they became popular subjects for photographing for the children.

Russell Akeman’s self-portrait *I am lying on the back of my old horse* (Fig. 14) shows us one side of this dichotomy, where animals are treasured pets and companions. Many of the students’ self-portraits were taken outside, some with animals, but none have such an odd composition as Russell’s photograph. On the back of a stocky horse, Russell reclines as if he is on a couch, head resting on his hand, legs curled in. The horse’s neck and head are cut out of the frame, becoming an indistinguishable four-legged mass of beast. The ground is scattered with twigs and leaves, an old fence structure rising out of the frame behind Russell. The amorphous black spot on the horse seems to melt into the form of the subject, linking them in the shadows. We can sense Russell’s connection to

⁴⁹ Anne Higonnet, *Pictures of Innocence: The History and Crisis of Ideal Childhood* (New York: Thames and Hudson 1998), 34.

⁵⁰ Wendy Ewald, *Secret Games: Collaborative Works with Children 1969-1999* (Zurich: Scalo, 2000), 37.



I am lying on the back of my old horse. — Russell Akeman

Figure 14
Russell Akeman, *I am lying on the back of my old horse*



Ruby Cornett
Daddy at our hog killing, Big Branch

Figure 15
Ruby Cornett, *Daddy at our hog killing, Big Branch*

his old horse, the trust he feels, enough to climb on his back and recline relaxed. But with this connection comes a tension in his balancing act, will his dear old horse hold still or buck him off, revealing its true animal soul. Between the children and the animals of Appalachia there is a sort of symbiotic relationship. Where there are few other people, animals become part of the community. As Darlene Watts, another of Ewald's young students, explained, "you watch animals play and all of a sudden it comes naturally to you. You love them. You get attached to them and you can't separate."⁵¹

Ruby Cornett's striking image *Daddy at our hog killing, Big Branch* (Fig. 15) illustrates the diametrically opposite role that animals assume in the communities of the Appalachian Mountains. While the children become attached to the animals as companions and pets, they are also food, an important resource. "God made animals so that when we got here, they'd be here for us to eat,"⁵² she writes in the paragraph accompanying the image. Yet not all the children took this so easily as fact: "It didn't seem right that people wanted to have [animals] around and then kill them, but I've learned it's for food...I've learned to try it and if I like it it's all right, but I just think about someone killing me."⁵³ This cycle of life and death is a tension that seems to be omnipresent in the images of Appalachia. In their deep connection to the land, the children are faced with the realities of living and dying beings.

Ruby's father stands in the center of the frame, only the very top of his head cut off. Next to him, a man laughs almost demonically. He holds the severed head of a massive hog in his hands. The white smoke from the fire swirls around his legs and back.

⁵¹ Ewald, *Portraits and Dreams: Photographs and Stories by Children of the Appalachians*, 43.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 53.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 43.

The image is grainy, blurry and underexposed, creating a feeling of motion, chaos and menace. Her father holds the pig head up for the camera, the skin of the pig seemingly bleached out and lifeless. For the subjects of the photograph the killing of a hog becomes a festive event, a gathering of the community, an opportunity for a good joke. For the viewer, perhaps more used to seeing pork in the freezer cases at the supermarket, the joking nature of man holding the hog's head becomes something more sinister and intimidating.

While the children of Appalachia have grown up in the embrace of the mountains, seeing them as playgrounds and as a resource in an environment of scarcity, as they grow older, we see this magic begin to fade. The sheer remoteness of the Appalachian communities has isolated them from continued economic progress, leaving them stagnant and entrenched in poverty. Coalmining is an omnipresent force in the Appalachian Mountains, an industry that sustains the economy, yet destroys both the environment and the health of its workers. The children write of fathers, uncles and grandfathers crippled and made sick by mining accidents and black lung, collecting disability checks and enduring tragic deaths. The mountains are no longer the comforting companions of the children, but the unpredictable and dauntingly powerful force that the adults are compelled to face. "They say that's the darkest dark you've ever seen down there,"⁵⁴ Allen Shepherd writes of what his father tells him about mining. The images that the children take of their parents and elders are primarily indoors, especially when there are no other children in the photograph, as if the parents have withdrawn from the harsh

⁵⁴ Ibid., 23.

realities that nature has now brought them. In their faces is an intangible combination of strength and hardship, hope and despair.

Martha Campbell's portrait of her parents, *Mommy and Daddy* (Fig. 16) holds a power that lets you into the inner lives of the adults in this isolated community. Martha's parents are the focus of the composition, her father reclining in a large shiny vinyl chair. The top of the composition shows their modest home: aging wood paneling and a littered bedroom space with boxes and personal possessions strewn about. The outside world is cropped out, shut out. Martha's father leans back in the chair, overweight and unshaven. His overalls are stained with oil or coal; the black smudges seem to creep over the fabric. He looks into the camera, half-smiling, seemingly exhausted or drunk with a vacant, yet loving look. Her mother leans onto the armchair, head resting on her hand. Handsome in a tough way, she also stares into the camera, barely managing a small smile. Her eyes are filled with emotions, but ones that are hard to define: anger and love, exhaustion and strength, worry and defeatism. A lifetime of struggle exists in her face. Ken Johnson of *The New York Times* writes that Martha's photograph is, "overexposed, off-center and fiercely unflattering, it is a picture of almost terrifying emotional candor."⁵⁵

The children of Appalachia seem to take the Romantic and idyllic tropes of a childhood spent playing outside and shine the light of reality onto it, revealing all the complications and complexities of growing up. We become witness to the joy that can be found despite lack of material wealth and the hardship of a community that is changing before their eyes, destroying the magic they once found in the mountains as children. Soon they will grow up to be the elders of the community, instilling a love of the land in

⁵⁵ Ken Johnson, "Images of Innocence: Young Enough to See All Things Honestly," *The New York Times*, 4 April 2003.



Mommy and Daddy — Martha Campbell

Figure 16
Martha Campbell, *Mommy and Daddy*

their own children, while they become, as Ewald writes, “mountain men and women with the limitations and protections of their society.”⁵⁶ Dewayne Cole, a young boy in Ewald’s class, wrote what seems like a eulogy to the changing mountains,

The same old thing, day after day. You don’t hardly notice things until they’re gone. The mountains are big and I feel good in them. I can go anywhere... They’re destroying them. They’ve killed almost everything that’s up there. I’d like to plant trees and set animals out because soon there won’t be anything to look at. It’ll just be a plain old place.⁵⁷

Their photographs freeze in a frame the Eden of their youth, preserving a memory and a way of life that will fade away with time, change and progress.

⁵⁶ Ewald, *Secret Games: Collaborative Works with Children 1969-1999*, 20.

⁵⁷ Ewald, *Portraits and Dreams: Photographs and Stories by Children of the Appalachians*, 79.

Chapter 2

“Characters They Chose to Create”: Gender as Performance

Wendy Ewald’s young students show themselves at play with dolls, toy guns, masks and dress-up clothes, assuming adult roles in a sort of dress rehearsal for growing up. Their play becomes a mirror for the environment they live in and the constant messages they receive about what it is to be a girl or a boy, a man or a woman. As we examine Wendy Ewald’s images in which children are acting out gender roles, they seem to be putting on a show, playing a part: glamorous girls or warrior boys. The gender role appears as a sort of costume, one that reflects what they have learned about gender rather than what is intrinsic within them, an idea that feminist philosopher Judith Butler refers to as gender as a ‘performative accomplishment.’⁵⁸ When we compare the images of boys and girls at play, girls usually appear performing a clearly defined gender display through dress-up or imaginary play, often attempting to mimic an adult femininity in a way that seems to reflect more of their child-like natures than any adult sexuality. In contrast, the boys shown in these images engage in a much different kind of imaginary play when acting out their interpretations of masculine cultural norms. When they do mimic manhood through play, it is with an undercurrent of almost sinister violence. In the photographs taken both by Wendy Ewald and her students, these recurring themes reinforce dual notions about the Romantic child. The ideal Romantic child is at the same time sexless, that is sexually innocent and immature, and yet rigidly gendered according to the norms of the time. Ewald’s students show themselves in the process of absorbing

⁵⁸ Gill Jagger, *Judith Butler: Sexual Politics, Social Change and the Power of the Performative* (New York: Routledge, 2008), 23.

and assuming these adult-defined gender roles, even when their impersonation of adult sexuality is at best a parody.

Contemporary feminist philosophy has wrestled with the notion of biological sex versus the social construction of gender since the notion of gender being ‘natural’ was dismantled during second-wave feminism. Judith Butler, an American post-structuralist philosopher who has contributed to both feminist and queer theory, takes this sex versus gender debate to a radical conclusion. In her book *Gender Troubles*, she posits that ‘foundational categories of identity,’ specifically the binary of sex and gender, are cultural and social performative actions that “create the effect of the natural, the original, and the inevitable” in regards to gender identities.⁵⁹ She theorizes that since the category of sex itself is gendered, gender cannot simply be a cultural display of biological sex. In Gill Jagger’s analysis of Butler’s theories, she writes that Butler believes that there is no “pre-cultural or pre-discursive sex that provides the basis for its cultural construction,”⁶⁰ and thus sex and gender categories are products of the power structures that depend on them, such as compulsory heterosexuality and phallogocentrism, the privileging of the masculine in the construction of meaning.

How do we wade through this complex post-structuralist philosophy to get at the core of how it relates to the images of Ewald’s students? The concept of performativity is central to the understanding of this theory. In linguistics, a performative utterance is a portion of speech that does not just describes something, but accomplishes an action in and of itself. For instance, when a pastor marrying two people says ‘I pronounce you man

⁵⁹ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1999), xxix.

⁶⁰ Jagger, *Judith Butler: Sexual Politics, Social Change and the Power of the Performative* 20.

and wife,' the bonds of marriage are created through this performative phrase. Butler applies this theory to physical and behavioral displays of gender: for example, a person is determined to be female because of her performance of feminine gender norms. So these 'sustained social performances' of gender recreate the strict gender binary and create the reality of gender itself. While the admirers of the Romantic child in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries used the image of the innocent child to naturalize the gender binary, we see in the images taken by Wendy Ewald's students that even young children are indoctrinated into a culturally constructed gender binary and put on their own performative displays of gender.

As the ideal of the Romantic child grew in popularity in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, ideas about the different roles of the genders and their proper place in society were increasingly defined in terms of an ideology of 'separate spheres.'⁶¹ Men were associated with public life, working outside the home to support the family, and with values such as self-interest, competition and material gain. Women were expected to remain in the domestic sphere, to be paragons of moral virtue, as well as delicate and meek in disposition. Paintings and prints that depicted children in these narrow gender roles naturalized these ideas by associating them with the innocent 'natural' child. Given the belief that children were not yet shaped by society and acted on 'human nature,' associating these ideas with children shielded its stereotypes from question or attack by

⁶¹ Historical background on the separate spheres of gender during this era found in Claire Perry, *Young America: Childhood in 19th-Century Art and Culture* (New Haven Yale University Press, 2006)., David Lubin, *Picturing a Nation: Art and Social Change in Nineteenth-Century America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994)., and Anne Higonnet, *Pictures of Innocence: The History and Crisis of Ideal Childhood* (New York: Thames and Hudson 1998).

any agents of reform by defining them as ‘human nature’ rather than ideological constructs.⁶²

The ways in which children were depicted served as a reflection of how society at the time viewed gender roles both in childhood and adulthood. In the Enlightenment era, as well as the Victorian era, very young children, from toddler to what we now think of as pre-school age, were depicted as essentially genderless. Both boys and girls were shown with wispy hair and loose gowns, perhaps suggesting their connection with and remaining dependence on their mothers and the very young child’s existence in the feminine domestic sphere. But by the time the children become somewhat autonomous beings, their depiction is clearly gendered. As Anne Higonnet describes, “boys, apparently, quickly become men, while girls remain girls.”⁶³

Young boys were often depicted in two distinctive tropes. The first shows the young boy exploring out in nature. The second was a sort-of dress-up, what were termed ‘fancy pictures’ in this era: boys dressed in adult male style clothing, imitating the dress of high class men and, in a way, trying on manhood for size. These ‘fancy pictures’ set up the paradox that Anne Higonnet observes, wherein the natural child “seems a more attractively natural child because he is costumed.”⁶⁴ Perhaps the most famous depiction of boys in this manner is Thomas Gainsborough’s *The Blue Boy* (Fig. 17), a painting that was much admired when it was shown at the Royal Academy of Britain in 1770. Its popularity was maintained and even heightened in the course of the eighteenth and

⁶² Lubin, *Picturing a Nation: Art and Social Change in Nineteenth-Century America*, 210.

Higonnet, *Pictures of Innocence: The History and Crisis of Ideal Childhood*, 36.

⁶³ Higonnet, *Pictures of Innocence: The History and Crisis of Ideal Childhood*, 27.

⁶⁴ Ibid.



Figure 17
Thomas Gainsborough, *The Blue Boy*, 1770, The Huntington Library, Art Collections and Botanical Gardens

nineteenth centuries through its reproduction in countless prints.⁶⁵ Gainsborough paints the young Jonathan Buttall in a style of dress that imitated the paintings of Flemish Baroque painter Anthony Van Dyck, a popular way to depict sitters during this time. Buttall stands outdoors, the natural backdrop painted in hues of green and brown with quick and wide brushstrokes, bringing a kind of frantic energy to the environment. The background reiterates the boy's connection to the land, but in a distinctly masculine way. He stands tall in front of us, hand on his hip, holding a large feathered hat as the blue silk of his costume ripples and stretches around his body. His pose and his costuming represent his future role, real or imagined, as master of an estate, of future social and political power. His pale skin, rosy cheeks and soft-featured face give away his youth even as he attempts to stare us, the viewers, down. The costuming of this young boy is a sort of dual disguise, both the sitter putting on the costume of manhood and the trappings of a higher social class, and the painter attempting to align himself with the masterworks of Van Dyck through the obvious reference.⁶⁶ The overly elaborate costuming, at once out of place in its time and secondly far too formal and mature for the subject, highlights the youth of the subject even as he easily asserts the pose of command, his figure dominating the painting and his gaze boldly meeting ours. As historian James Steward argues, the clothing of a by-gone era stirs the imagination of adult viewers, allowing them

⁶⁵ Michael Rosenthal, *The Art of Thomas Gainsborough* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999), 86.

⁶⁶ James Christen Steward, *The New Child: British Art and the Origins of Modern Childhood 1730-1830* (Berkeley University Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive, 1995), 205.

to create in their minds the vision of an idealized childhood in an era long before their own.⁶⁷

While in the works of Wendy Ewald and her students we do see iterations of the first trope of boyhood, the young boy playing in and exploring in nature, this costumed ‘fancy picture’ of aristocratic boyhood is something that we do not see repeated, primarily because it was a trope that was specific to the eighteenth century. *The Blue Boy*’s costume of silk and lace is associated with representations of seventeenth century aristocracy, and its reuse in the eighteenth century exemplifies the value then placed on inherited social class and position.⁶⁸ Eventually this trend of dress fell out of fashion as it became increasingly associated with overprotected ‘mama’s boys.’ In the images taken by Ewald’s students, we no longer see costumes of finery or mimicking aristocracy, but instead see boys mimicking a version of manhood that is far darker.

Within the imagery of the Romantic child, the depiction of boys and boyhood appears relatively simple when compared to the many layered of complexities and ambiguities that arise in the Romantic child depiction of girls and girlhood. The virtue of innocence was of central importance in the depiction of Romantic child girls, almost to the point of fetish. Paintings of Romantic child girls in the eighteenth century seem to equate girlhood with a sort of cherubic, toddler-aged youth and innocence. Paintings of very young girls depict them as angelic and undeniably cute: wide eyes, rosy red cheeks, wispy curled hair, billowing dresses with sashes and ruffled bonnets swaddling them in clouds of white clothing. In images of slightly older girls this innocence can sometimes

⁶⁷ Higonet, *Pictures of Innocence: The History and Crisis of Ideal Childhood*, 27.

⁶⁸ Barbara Dayer Gallati, *Great Expectations: John Singer Sargent Painting Children* (New York Bulfinch Press, 2004), 167.

seem to be eroticized, introducing a layer of tension and complexity (and, at least for modern viewers, discomfort). In our modern readings, this tension between innocence and eroticization arises over and over again, from the photographs of Lewis Carroll to Victorian genre paintings. These images give us a window not only into nineteenth-century society views of innocence, but also into the time period's ideas about what it meant to be a girl, and, by extension, a woman. Seymour Guy's 1867 painting *Making a Train* (Fig. 18) seems to encompass these complexities in its subject, symbols and composition.⁶⁹

A young girl, most likely Guy's nine-year-old daughter Anna, stands alone in her attic bedroom, glancing back as her skirt trails behind her in a train, pretending to be a bride or princess or simply a grown woman. Her bed is unmade and clothes and toys lie strewn around the room, representing both the spontaneity and undisciplined nature of childhood. An oil lamp rests on a chair in the foreground, creating a glow on the subject and deep shadow behind her. The pattern of light and dark creates an almost stage-like composition where the light area is her stage, and we, the viewers, are watching her, while the looming shadows create an ominous atmosphere.⁷⁰ Her undergarment falls off her shoulders, revealing her undeveloped breasts, the lack of adult features highlighting her youth and by extension her innocence. The little girl mimics the vanity and vamping of an adult woman, her imperfect imitation further emphasizing her childlike nature.⁷¹

⁶⁹ Much of the historical detail and inspiration for the visual analysis was drawn from David Lubin's extensive analysis of *Making a Train* in *Picturing a Nation: Art and Social Change in Nineteenth-Century America*, as well as Anne Higonnet's brief analysis in *Pictures of Innocence: The History and Crisis of Ideal Childhood*.

⁷⁰ Lubin, *Picturing a Nation: Art and Social Change in Nineteenth-Century America*, 210.

⁷¹ Higonnet, *Pictures of Innocence: The History and Crisis of Ideal Childhood*, 36.



115. Seymour Guy, *Making a Train*, 1867. Oil on canvas, 18 $\frac{1}{8}$ × 24 $\frac{3}{8}$ in.
Philadelphia Museum of Art. George W. Elkins Collection.

Figure 18
Seymour Guy, *Making a Train*, 1867, Philadelphia Museum of Art, George W. Elkins
Collection

The central ambiguity rests in the depiction of her play-acting: Is this a celebration of her childish innocence or is it an eroticization of her innocence and by extension her young body?

In his analysis of *Making a Train* in *Picturing a Nation*, art historian David Lubin theorizes that at the time of its painting, “the code of childhood innocence must have been forceful enough to preclude an erotic reading or at least displace it.”⁷² In contrast, when we examine the painting through present-day eyes, with our societal fear of child exploitation and abuse, we are unsettled by the visual implications of adult sexuality written on the body of child. Regardless of our current unease with the subject matter, the painting and its popularity illuminates nineteenth-century American views of girlhood and womanhood. Her isolation reiterates the importance of the feminine sphere as something unto itself, as synonymous with the domestic realm and removed from the outside, male world. The loving depiction of her imaginative play shows us the importance placed on play rather than work in childhood, but also emphasized that girls should act out the conventions of femininity – practice being a woman. The adulation of her innocence and her childlike gender performance was not only meant to prescribe how girls were to act, but also grown women. Associating the strict gender norms with the so-called ‘natural’ child and then venerating her innocence and femininity sent clear behavioral messages to women, reconfirming the naturalness of feminine gender roles and the desirability of a woman who embraces those conventions. *Making a Train* provides us with a visual representation of the problematic ambiguities that the veneration of childhood innocence set up. Was this cult of the innocence celebrating

⁷² Lubin, *Picturing a Nation: Art and Social Change in Nineteenth-Century America*, 220.

innocence or fetishizing it? Regardless of the individual proclivities of those who fervently celebrated girlhood innocence, these images show us nineteenth-century societal views on girlhood and by extension womanhood. These images came to reproduce the structures of power that sought to oppress women, keeping them in their ‘proper sphere.’

The photographs taken by Wendy Ewald’s students offer us a different perspective on gender performance: that of the children themselves. While *Making a Train* is clearly an adult vision of childhood gender performance, Wendy Ewald’s students give us insight into how children interact with these gender norms when they are given the power to represent themselves. Because the images are taken by children, the role of the viewer’s gaze is complicated; instead of presuming an adult artist’s perspective, we are being asked to assume the view of the child who has created the image.

In Denise Dixon’s self-portrait *I am Dolly Parton*, (Fig. 19) Ewald’s young student from Kentucky imitates the ideal of womanhood in her particular culture and time, a glitzy country music star who grew up in the same hardscrabble Appalachian Mountain villages where these children live. This particular image was taken as a part of an assignment in which the students were asked to photograph their dreams. Ewald wanted to access the fantasy play of children through photography, inspired by the children’s vision of their imaginary world as a “complete and fantastical existence.”⁷³ She created an open-ended assignment, encouraging students to represent their dreams or fantasies, waking or sleeping. Through this, she taught the students that “they can

⁷³ Wendy Ewald, *Secret Games: Collaborative Works with Children 1969-1999* (Zurich: Scalo, 2000), 37.



Denise Dixon
I am Dolly Parton

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Figure 19
Denise Dixon, *I am Dolly Parton*

actually create an image, that photography is not just finding an image, but that they could control and create one,”⁷⁴ and by being subjects in their own photographs “change themselves into whatever characters they chose to create.”⁷⁵

Instead of depicting a fantastical dream from her sleep, Denise depicts her girlish daydreams, illustrating her aspirations through the imitation of a famous idol. Draped in rhinestone outfits and topped with teased blond hair, Dolly Parton represents a hyper-feminine ideal of a girl from the mountains who has escaped a fate of poverty for fame and fortune. Ewald notes that when asked, the children stated “the portraits they admired were slick album covers of Hank Williams or Dolly Parton.”⁷⁶ Both are stylized representations of cultural gender norms in the form of famous country singers: Hank Williams, the hard-drinking and stoic man and Dolly Parton, hyper-feminine starlet with a bubbly and charming personality.

Denise poses herself as the country songstress in her yard, rolling hills in the background. She is shown in full length; just her feet are cut off. She poses in a glowing white dress with puffed sleeves, trimmed with lace. Plastic bracelets are layered on her wrist as she places her hand under her chin, posing as if for a studio portrait. She wears a short blond wig and the sunlight flowing down from the mountains shines in bright white, washing out the tops of the dense trees and making her blond wig glow like a halo. A dog wanders towards her in the background, unaware of the portrait session. The focus of the camera remains on Denise in her star pose. The grass around her seems warped and out of focus, and the background devolves into a light soaked expanse of trees and

⁷⁴ "Portrait of a Photographer: Wendy Ewald," in *NewsHour with Jim Lehrer* (PBS).

⁷⁵ Ewald, *Secret Games: Collaborative Works with Children 1969-1999*, 37.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

mountains. The edge of the house and the horizon of the mountains create a sort of frame that pulls us in. The setting seems spontaneous and unstudied, while Denise adopts her best glamorous pose, one practiced countless times in the world of imaginary play in girlhood. As adult viewers and outsiders to her community, the image encourages us to remember our own childhood memories of creating an imaginary world, yet the contrast between the rural, impoverished setting and Denise's glitzy dreaming calls attention to the very adult struggles she will inevitably face.

In this self-portrait, Denise is dressed up in the feminine ideal of her community, mimicking how she thinks that grown women – ones with the money and status she aspires to – act, dress, pose and posture. The image, in contrast to *Making a Train*, comes across as wholly asexual, girlish play-acting of an adult femininity that seems to lack any sexuality. Perhaps it is the modest dress and cartoonish wig that negates the presence of adult sexuality, but it may also have to do with a shifting of both agency and gaze that redefines our reading of the image. In paintings and photographs of the Romantic child that we examined previously, the artist is always an adult, more than likely a male. The image is intended to represent a gendered child from the perspective of an adult, an idolization of innocence. When we become aware of the artist's identity, an image that was purported to be singularly about childhood innocence becomes intertwined with an adult creator with adult sexuality. We begin to wonder about the relationship between the artist and the young subject, one that is inevitably a skewed power dynamic, and this colors our interpretation of the image. In contrast, *I am Dolly Parton* has upended this power structure; Denise is both the subject and the creator of the image. While she is shown in the frame, it is her idea that brings it to life. She has the agency to represent

herself and her daydream as she envisions them. I would argue that the images taken by Wendy Ewald's students, especially the female children, exist closer to the Romantic child ideal that paintings like *Making a Train* hope to embody, a child that is at once gendered, but innocent, void of adult sexuality.

In Wendy Ewald's publication of the images taken by her students during her time in the Appalachian Mountains of Kentucky, *Portraits and Dreams*, we see her role as curator and editor nudging us to look at the images through a certain lens, highlighting specific themes. *I am Dolly Parton* appears on the right side of a two-page spread, and to its left, immediately preceding it is an image also taken by Denise Dixon, *A Dream about my doll*. (Fig. 20) In this oddly ominous photograph, Denise photographs her doll on some kind of indiscernible wooden ledge. Denise places the doll on the far left side of the composition, leaving the rest of the frame comparably empty. The doll has pigtailed hair, and a lacy, frothy dress similar to the one Denise wears in the next image, the doll's hands placed almost invitingly in front of its middle. Dark shadows where the eyes should be shift this entire image from cutesy to downright terrifying. The unexpected dark shadows make the doll seem to come alive, not something human but sinister. By placing the two images side by side, Ewald forces us to view *I am Dolly Parton* not just as a little girl playing, but as a little girl dressing up, in essence becoming a doll. The visual analogies of the two images – the clothing, the girlishly curled hair – make them seem more like a diptych rather than two individual images. This linking of the images brings the concept of gender performance to the forefront. Dolls and dressing up are conventional feminine play activities, and the comparison highlights this. The sinister quality of the doll picture perhaps gives us a clue about Ewald's opinions on feminine



Denise Dixon
A dream about my doll

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Figure 20
Denise Dixon, *A dream about my doll*

gender performance. The at-first unthreatening doll has morphed beyond cute into something menacing. Perhaps this is what Ewald believes are the eventual effects of girls trying to squeeze into these narrow definitions of femininity. In the end, she envisions them becoming frightening dolls, stripped of their humanity. In *A dream about my doll* the doll seems to come to life, while in *I am Dolly Parton* the girl becomes the living doll.

While Ewald's young female students seem to reiterate the vision of the Romantic girl child, the male students fail to repeat the 'fancy dress' trope of Romantic male children. When they depict themselves playing or acting out dreams, a theme of macabre violence emerges, tinged with the fantastical elements of nightmares. Seen within the context of gender performance, these images of imaginary play suggest the masculine gender stereotype taken to the extreme. Just as Denise Dixon dresses to be the extreme of femininity manifested through Dolly Parton, the young boys take the gender stereotype of the strong man, capable of anger and even violence, to its extreme. Christian Alberto López Medina's photograph *A man killing his enemy* (Fig. 21) shows two young boys acting out a violent scenario. Medina was a student of Ewald's during her time in Mexico, and also took this photograph during the dreams assignment. Ewald noted that for the Mexican children, "dreams play as important a role in understanding the world as do waking events."⁷⁷ One boy pretends to shoot another, the gunman's face obscured by a demon-like mask and the victim flying downwards out of the frame. The gunman stands nearly in the center of the composition, gun pointed, but masked face turned towards the viewer. His fake victim falls to the ground, face falling out of the frame, leg in the air,

⁷⁷ Ibid., 132.

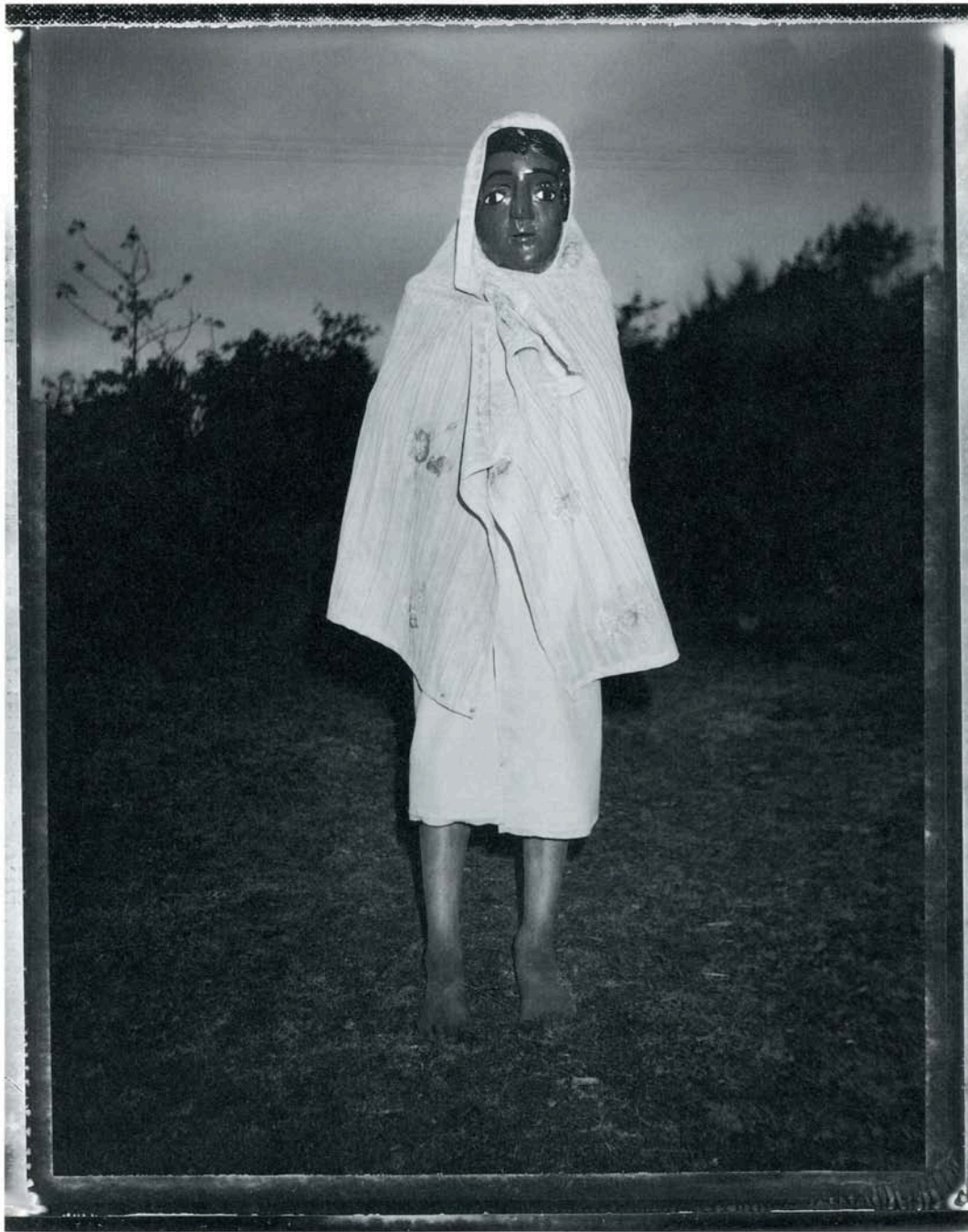


A man killing his enemy — Christian Alberto López Medina

Figure 21
Christian Alberto López Medina, *A man killing his enemy*

made blurry by his quick movement. The blank gray sky outlines the gunman's sinister masked face, the tree next to it further drawing our eyes to his. The title suggests that despite the demonic appearance of the mask, the gunman is intended to be a man, an evil man for sure, but not a mythical creature. The boys are acting out the extreme of the masculine gender stereotype, both what they have learned from society and perhaps what they observe in their own environment. Tellingly there is an absence of girls in any of the depictions of children playing out depictions of violence, an exclusively male domain that further points to its connection to gendered performative actions.

Sebastian Gomez Hernandez, another young boy from Mexico, in *A boy is dressed as a girl* (Fig. 22) wears a long shirt, drapes a towel over his head and fastens a dark plastic mask over his face; he has transformed himself into a girl. In the dusk he has become a figure that seems to emerge from the impending darkness. The forlorn expression painted onto his mask makes him seem both lost and sad. In his play he has imagined himself as the other, an action that highlights the notion of gender as performance while also subverting it. The mask on his face conceals his identity completely: is he wearing a mask to fully transform into his character of a woman or because he must hide his identity to be accepted? To transform into the feminine he must completely eliminate any traces of the masculine, reinforcing the idea of the genders as a strict binary, as diametric opposites. Picture after picture show children adhering to narrow gender roles ascribed to them by society, yet Sebastian has turned this narrative on its head, introducing complexities into a typically simple story. By challenging the gender binary, he has exposed it for the performance that it is, however unconscious this action may be. The children who created these images use imaginative play as a means to



A boy is dressed like a girl. —Sebastián Gómez Hernández

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Figure 22
Sebastian Gómez Hernández, *A boy is dressed like a girl*

perform gender roles, to try on the costumes and posturing of adulthood. As Judith Butler theorizes, as we grow up this dress-up becomes a permanent fixture of our lives; performing gender is not only reserved for play, it is for life.

Chapter 3

“Black and White, Good and Evil”: Representing Race in Apartheid South Africa

Wendy Ewald traveled to South Africa in 1992, a time when the country was undergoing a seismic cultural and political shift as the apartheid government was quickly unraveling. Reflecting on her teaching experiences there, she described the awe she felt in looking at her South African students’ photos, “they were able to take some beautiful emotional photographs...the way they photographed the human figure and created the portraits was incredibly graceful. Most children can’t make portraits like that.”⁷⁸ Initially, she was hesitant to even embark on a project in South Africa assuming that “my students’ photographs would be mere illustrations of a struggle I presumed I was familiar with,” that the country and the conflict it was embroiled in would “offer overly clear divisions between black and white, good and evil.”⁷⁹ In the end, Ewald’s work with three distinct groups of children, a group of black children in the volatile township of Soweto, another group of black children in the comparatively stable squatters’ community of Orange Farm and finally a group of white Afrikaner⁸⁰ children in the working-class suburb of Glenesk, would reveal not just the complexities of a country violently divided along racial boundaries, but how children internalize racial attitudes in a profound way. The striking

⁷⁸ Virginia Boyd, "Through a Child's Eye: North Carolina and South African Children Record Their Lives with Words and Photographs," *About...Time* 22, no. 5 (1994).

⁷⁹ Wendy Ewald, *Secret Games: Collaborative Works with Children 1969-1999* (Zurich: Scalco, 2000), 161.

⁸⁰ Afrikaners are white South Africans who can trace their heritage back to early Dutch settlers. They speak their own distinctive dialect, Afrikaans, and made up the majority of the ruling political party during the apartheid era, the National Party.

collection of photographs that Ewald wove together for her South African series shows that the children who live in these disparate townships have an acute perception of their community's views on race, no matter what side of the apartheid they were on. Through their images, they visually represented the trauma, paranoia and isolation of either side. This contrasts to the usual place that race occupies in images of Romantic childhood. Such images have generally served as vehicles for expressing adults' ideas about race, whether that be naturalizing and reinforcing racial prejudices and hierarchies or offering utopian images of racial harmony rooted in a Rousseauian Romantic childhood as yet untainted by adult prejudices.

In Europe, during the Enlightenment, pictorial images of the Romantic child focused almost exclusively on white Caucasian childhood. When images of non-whites appear in these works, they serve as contrasts to the white Romantic child, either subservient to the child or as a deviant opposite, all that the Romantic child is not. Jan Marsh observes that during this time "the vast majority of Europeans regarded themselves as more intelligent, more socially advanced and naturally superior to most other ethnic groups, in a manner that is today called racist."⁸¹ These deeply entrenched cultural ideas were expressed in the visual culture of the time, and perpetuated through the repetition of such images. As the number of images of non-whites in subjugated positions grew, the racist attitudes that they represented seemed to be more 'true.' Alex Nemerov explains this in his essay about the assumed 'realism' of American Western

⁸¹ Jan Marsh, ed. *Black Victorians: Black People in British Art 1800-1900* (Aldershot: Lund Humphries, 2005), 15.

paintings, “it is through other images that each picture comes to define the real.”⁸²

Ultimately, the images are not a depiction of any reality, but are merely reiterations of other images and the supposed reality that they represent. Theorists have called this the truth of the archive, or as Nemerov puts it, “proof in numbers”: a type of image is seen so repeatedly throughout a visual culture that viewers believe it to be the truth.⁸³ White European artists’ visual representation of non-whites invariably embodied white society’s complex and varying ideas about race and racial relationships, the sheer pervasiveness of these representations invariably turning those ideas and stereotypes into culturally accepted ‘truths.’ As was done with many other topics, the depiction of children recreating these cultural ideas seemed to make them more natural and less controversial, disguising racism by using the familiar faces of Romantic children.

Images of the Romantic child created in Europe during the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries sometimes depicted non-white figures – almost always as servants – inflecting our understanding of Romantic childhood through their visual subjugation. Arthur W. Devis’s portrait *Emily and George Mason with their Ayahs* (Fig. 23), painted from 1794 to 1795, shows how paintings depicting white Romantic children with their non-white servants became a statement about the family’s affluence, with the servants treated not as individuals but as symbols of social and financial status. The painting shows the two young children playing in a parlor. The girl reaches up to play a

⁸² Alex Nemerov, ““Doing the ‘Old America’”: The Image of the American West, 1880-1920,” in *The West as America: Reinterpreting Images of the Frontier, 1820-1920*, ed. William Truettner (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1991), 294.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 291.



Plate 12. Arthur W. Devis,
1762-1822, *Emily and George Mason
with their Ayahs*, ca. 1794-95, oil on
canvas, 39 × 42½ in. (99 × 108 cm),
Yale Center for British Art, Paul
Mellon Collection.

Figure 23
Arthur W. Devis, *Emily and George Mason with their Ayahs* 1794-5, Yale Center for
British Art, Paul Mellon Collection

tambourine, while her younger brother gazes up towards her, reclined on his toy regalia.⁸⁴ On a distant veranda, two ayahs are shown. Ayah was a term for a native Indian nursemaid who tended to children of white colonialists in India. The inclusion of the Mason children's ayahs had multiple purposes. First, the ayahs refer specifically to the children's upbringing in India and the family's wealth and success in that country. Secondly, it asserts the children's status; they are well cared for, the ayahs effectively referring to the Mason parents in absentia. Yet the children also command authority over their ayahs; this command is recreated compositionally in the painting. The implicit power structure is exhibited through the comparative sizes of the figures and the placement of the children in the central foreground and the ayahs in the background. The children are painted indoors and in large scale, while the ayahs are smaller figures shown on the distant verandah. As James Christen Steward notes in his analysis of Devis's portrait, "[the children and their ayahs] are linked by similarity of pose, with young George Mason reclining on the floor like his female ayah."⁸⁵ In this painting, as in others depicting Romantic children with their servants, the non-white subjects are reduced to fictive characters, representations of wealth and status, rather than distinctive subjects. This elimination of their individuality reflects the low status that white European society ascribed them at this time; they have become merely another descriptive element in the depiction of the Romantic child.

In nineteenth-century America, cultural attitudes about race were varied, complex and ever changing, drawn into especially sharp focus by the great upheaval of the Civil

⁸⁴ James Christen Steward, *The New Child: British Art and the Origins of Modern Childhood 1730-1830* (Berkeley University Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive, 1995), 85.

⁸⁵ Ibid.

War. Both before and after the war, white artists' representations of African Americans ranged from mocking to sympathetic. Images of African-American children were common in these representations. Focusing on African-American children, rather than adults, could suppress some of the more controversial stereotypes and fears, such as the stereotype of the hyper-sexualized African-American, fears of interracial marriage, and anxieties about the domination of the labor force by blacks. In the antebellum era, both abolitionist and pro-slavery artists used images of children to convey their messages. For abolitionists, images of children were a vehicle to garner sympathy, while for those with pro-slavery goals, images of children allowed them to disguise deeply racist ideas in the form of seemingly innocent children. Images of children were used to naturalize the messages and ideas they contained, no matter if that was a message of freedom or slavery. Whether the images were meant to reinscribe racial hierarchies or create sympathy for the causes of abolition and social justice, white artists used the image of the African-American child as a non-threatening means of expressing their messages.

Abolitionist imagery often focused on African-American children as a way to strike a sentimental chord in white Northern viewers. Depictions of suffering African-American children shocked Northern viewers unfamiliar with the realities of plantation life; coloring and verse books about black children for white schoolchildren were also prevalent, in the strategic hope that they would help influence their parents and eventually grow up to secure a slavery-free future.⁸⁶ In painting and prints, artists sometimes used the iconography and forms of the Romantic child in images of African-

⁸⁶ Claire Perry, *Young America: Childhood in 19th-Century Art and Culture* (New Haven Yale University Press, 2006), 78.

American children to engender sympathy for the abolitionist cause, and, later, for Reconstruction era policies.

Both in the ante- and postbellum eras, representations of African-American children were sometimes deployed to evoke the stereotype of the child-like nature of African-Americans, with images of the ‘silly black child’ highlighting the superiority of whites in comparison. These images, repeated in many media such as popular magazine prints and minstrel shows, were used both before and after the Civil War to reinscribe and reinforce the racial hierarchy of the status quo. Martin Berger writes that the images were intended to reach white Northern audiences: if they “could be convinced that blacks were contented, childlike creatures, then slavery might be explained as a necessary evil.” Popular minstrel shows and printed images, “entertained Northern audiences with portrayals of African-Americans as inferior beings who would be helpless on their own.”⁸⁷

Even white supporters of abolition, such as Lilly Martin Spencer, used their images to reinforce racial hierarchies, mocking African-American attempts to embrace middle class gentility. Works such as Spencer’s 1854 lithograph *Height of Fashion* (Fig. 24) made clear that such aspirations, in children and by extension African-American adults, were nothing more than a joke for the white upper class. In the eyes of white viewers, African-Americans were de facto excluded from social power, and any attempts to claim such status seemed ridiculous, a source of humor. In the image, the little girl is draped in adult-sized clothing, her dress falling off her shoulders, exposing her dark skin. The little girl has fashioned all of the trappings of gentility, the rings and necklace, the

⁸⁷ Martin Berger, *Man Made: Thomas Eakins and the Construction of a Gilded Age Manhood* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 32.



Figure 24
Lilly Martin Spencer, *Height of Fashion*, 1854

hat made to look like a bonnet, and the small lapdog, its white fur contrasting her dark skin. She looks at us through an eyepiece made out of metal scraps, “a mannerism for depressing the pretensions of a social newcomer,”⁸⁸ but the joke is on her instead. The young African-American girl is the one pretending, the one with the undue pretensions. Images of white children playing dress-up were seen as cute, as representations of what the young children would one day grow up to be. To the white viewer of that time, the image of an African-American child dressing up in the guise of white society was completely incongruent, a confusion of social order and thus the origin of a joke.

After the Civil War was won by the North and slavery was abolished through the Thirteenth Amendment in 1865, the immense work of reconstructing the South and instituting new laws and rights for freed slaves began. White Northern artists depicted the newly granted rights of the freed slaves, often using the Romantic child to create a sympathetic representation of African-Americans as newly emancipated people, while at the same time reinforcing a racial and status divide between the white audiences and the black subjects. Winslow Homer made childhood one of his primary subjects during the Reconstruction era and produced many images of African-American children that avoided the caricaturing that was common in popular imagery. He used the image of the Romantic child in his depiction of African-American children to create representations that were both naturalistic and sympathetic, and, at times, offered subtle support for Reconstruction era policies that provided for the education of African-Americans.

Homer’s 1875 watercolor *Taking Sunflower to Teacher* (Fig. 25) is a perfect example of the symbols and forms of the Romantic child ascribed to an African-

⁸⁸ Wendy Jean Katz, *Regionalism and Reform: Art and Class Formation in Antebellum Cincinnati* (Columbus: The Ohio State University Press, 2002), 66.



Figure 25
Winslow Homer, *Taking Sunflower to Teacher*, 1875, Georgia Museum of Art,
University of Georgia, Athens

American child. Homer paints a young African-American boy sitting down, dressed in ragged clothing. He holds a big bright yellow sunflower in his lap as a butterfly lands on his shoulder. He rests the sunflower in his lap as he gazes wistfully into the distance. The background is an abstract collage of green and leaf forms allowing us to focus solely on him as the subject. Homer has depicted the young boy in the guise of the Romantic child, with big, almost saucer-like eyes, loose, flowing clothing and surrounded by symbols of nature. Even the fleeting essence of childhood is represented through the butterfly. The title of the watercolor, *Taking Sunflower to Teacher*, and the small corner of a blackboard where Winslow Homer signs his initials and the year, point to the political reference. Southern slave owners had denied African-American children even the most basic education, an offence that had received special criticism from the Northern press in the years before and during the war.⁸⁹ Through this image, Homer represented one of the new freedoms that recently emancipated slaves were thought to have gained. Freed slaves, both young and old, were eager to take advantage of the new public schools that were opening across the Southern states, but their white neighbors met them with fierce hostility and violence.⁹⁰ It is hard to know exactly what Homer's views were on the Reconstruction era changes, but *Taking Sunflower to Teacher* was certainly an image that was created to appeal to white Northern viewers. The idealized image of the eager and thankful new student suggests a happy ending for emancipated slaves that white Northern viewers could connect with and take pride in. Homer's evocation of the Romantic child allowed white viewers to sympathize with the African-American boy, while also

⁸⁹ Ibid., 93.

⁹⁰ PBS, "American Experience: Reconstruction: The Second Civil War," <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/reconstruction/schools/index.html>.

reinscribing their sense of superiority. While the young boy's tattered clothes and status as an African-American marks his lower social rank, white viewers could feel that they had made this child's access to education possible through their victories in the war. Images such as *Taking Sunflower to Teacher* perpetuated the established racialized social hierarchy; not only were African-Americans automatically subjugated to whites, but they were also indebted to them for their freedom. Even the title, *Taking Sunflower to Teacher*, reiterates this concept of indebtedness. The little boy is so thankful for his new right to an education that he is taking a beautiful sunflower to his teacher, most likely a white Christian missionary. His gift becomes a symbol for the gratefulness that white Northerners believed the freed Southern slaves owed them.

Within the traditional western art historical canon, the majority of visual representations of non-white people were created by white artists. To the extent that these images have dominated visual discourse, they have continued to affect the perception of non-white peoples. As Pratiba Parmar explains, "images play a crucial role in defining and controlling the political and social power to which both individuals and marginalized groups have access. The deeply ideological nature of imagery determines not only how other people think about us, but how we think about ourselves."⁹¹ In the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries, when non-white artists, specifically African-Americans, began to counter imagery created by white artists with their own self-representations, their images of children often embraced the Romantic child because of its status as the dominant ideal of childhood representation.

⁹¹ Bell Hooks, *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (Boston: South End Press, 1992), 5.

James VanDerZee was one of the most renowned photographers of the Harlem Renaissance, a cultural movement that created an explosion of art and literature during the 1920s and 1930s. During this time, VanDerZee was the commercial and portrait photographer of choice amongst Harlem's most prominent residents.⁹² He was also a talented street photographer, documenting the bustling urban life in Harlem. His 1928 photograph *Dancing School* (Fig. 26) shows not only how the Romantic child continued to be the pervasive mode of representation for children through the advent of the twentieth century, but that even when African-Americans represented themselves, the trope of the Romantic child persisted. VanDerZee photographed five young African-American girls performing for him in a small apartment studio. All five girls are wearing dresses with ruffles and ribbons, with girlish Mary Jane shoes and ankle socks. The two girls in the front wear identical tiered white and black dresses and top hats. They pose dramatically and gaze off into the distance. The girls in the back row wave their hands in the air in synchronization, seeming about to jump. One girl has already jumped up; her face twisted and eyes shut. The image, with its tension between a staged coordination and the spontaneity of the girls' motions, seems to represent the carefree and innocent childhood of these young girls. They are posing like their favorite Broadway stars and joyously dancing and jumping.

It is important to note that an image like *Dancing School* is visually connected to a history of white artists depicting the stereotype of African-Americans as entertainers, as musicians and dancers, performing for the enjoyment and approval of white audiences. Yet VanDerZee is not merely repeating this demeaning stereotype in his photograph, in a

⁹² Deborah Willis-Braithwaite, *Vanderzee: Photographer 1886-1983* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc, 1993), 8.



Figure 26
James VanDerZee, *Dancing School*, 1928, Anthony Barboza Photos, New York

way he is both celebrating the cultural tradition of African-Americans and dispelling the stereotype of the African-American as a vehicle of entertainment for whites. As an African-American artist, VanDerZee reckoned with what W.E.B. DuBois called 'double consciousness,' the idea that marginalized races, in DuBois's writing specifically African-Americans, lived with a sort of split personality: the way that they saw themselves, and the way that they believed that others, namely whites as the dominant social group, saw them.⁹³ In VanDerZee's photograph, we see the girls dancing, yet they are doing so in the private space of a studio, away from any audience. By placing them in a dance school setting, VanDerZee is highlighting the tradition of African-American vernacular culture, passed on from generation to generation, which now has the opportunity to be taught in a formalized school setting. These images give viewers, white and black, a window into the African-American culture of the time, an intersection of and at the same time a challenge to the 'double consciousness,' suggesting how African-Americans like VanDerZee saw themselves and their community, and how they believed that white society saw them.

The photographs taken by Wendy Ewald's students in South Africa in 1992 also created a space for self-representation to the students, giving us a window into the personal experiences of children caught in the apartheid changes overtaking the country. 1992 was a year of both rapid change and chaotic violence in South Africa, a culmination of decades of oppression, violence and protest under the apartheid government.⁹⁴

⁹³ Judith Wilson, "Lifting "the Veil": Henry O. Tanner's the Banjo Lesson and the Thankful Poor," *Contributions in Black Studies* 9, no. 4 (1992): 37.

⁹⁴ Historical context for the South African apartheid is drawn from Heather Deegan, *The Politics of the New South Africa: Apartheid and After* (Harlow: Longman, 2001). and

Apartheid, an Afrikaans word meaning separateness, was a comprehensive group of government policies that segregated racial groups in South Africa from the 1950s to the late 1980s. While racial discrimination and segregation had existed in South Africa well before the National Party took power in 1948, through a series of oppressive laws and shrewd political maneuvers that eliminated political opposition, the Afrikaner-dominated National Party created an authoritarian government that institutionalized segregation and discrimination on all levels of personal and public life. The government classified each South African citizen into one of four racial groups, White, Black, Coloured (mixed race) and Indian. The laws based on these racial classifications disenfranchised non-white citizens, forcibly relocated over three million to distant rural 'homelands'⁹⁵, severely restricted social, political and economic freedom for those non-whites who were permitted to remain in urban areas, and enacted so-called 'petty apartheid' that segregated all aspects of public and personal interactions. Non-white groups were systematically discriminated against through sub-standard education, economic opportunities and resources, turning the majority of the South African population into a political and economic underclass.

The African National Congress (ANC) was the largest black political party, and, despite being banned in 1960, they continued to lead the anti-apartheid movement through civil disobedience, social protests and militant measures. Clashes between protesters and government forces had been occurring since the inception of apartheid, but

"South Africa Profile: Timeline," BBC News, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-14094918>.

⁹⁵ Homelands were a number of racially segregated areas that were meant to eventually become independent nation-states; after relocation Black South Africans were stripped of their South African citizenship.

the mid-1970s marked the beginning of a tidal wave of violence and lawlessness that would eventually lead to the collapse of apartheid. In the following years, the government searched for ways to maintain control and order as protests and uprisings continued and worsened.⁹⁶ They developed a program known as ‘total strategy,’ waging a counter-insurgency war on all opponents of the apartheid through channels of propaganda and media and increased police presence in volatile areas. Despite the launch of the ‘total strategy’ program, the revolts only increased and by 1984 a state of emergency was declared and the police were assisted by the military in fighting the black opposition. The state of emergency greatly expanded police powers and led to an atmosphere of despotic rule and terror in the black townships. In spite of various efforts by the apartheid government to curtail the violence and resistance, it was clear that the current state of affairs was unsustainable without the country sliding into chaos and civil war. F.W. de Klerk, the last National Party President, stated, “you cannot simply have a counter-insurgency approach, because the enemy is the majority of the population.”⁹⁷

The election of F.W. de Klerk in 1989 marked the beginning of political change, but the violence, chaos and terror at the hands of white security forces and apartheid supporters in the black communities raged on even as political talks between de Klerk’s National Party and Nelson Mandela’s African National Congress began in 1991. The year in which Wendy Ewald traveled to South Africa, 1992, represented the nadir of the political talks between de Klerk and Mandela. Heather Deegan writes “the ANC blamed the government for failing to stop the violence, while the NP saw the ANC as an

⁹⁶ Deegan, *The Politics of the New South Africa: Apartheid and After*, 61.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 67.

organization only interested in seizing power.”⁹⁸ International pressure and the increasing violence pushed the talks forward and by the end of 1992, de Klerk and Mandela had agreed on a series of multi-party negotiations and the writing of an interim constitution that would eventually culminate in the first election held with universal adult suffrage in 1994.

The photographs that Wendy Ewald’s students took in their communities are particularly striking because they offer a different perspective on the apartheid than the traditional photographic reporting of the protests and the politics. They shed light onto the daily lives of South Africans living during this time. They show the quiet that exists amid the chaos, the emotional scars that burdened the black community, and the deep-seated racism and isolation of the Afrikaners. Images of the Romantic child since the eighteenth century used children as vehicles for adults’ views of racial relations, whether that embraced white superiority or racial integration. In contrast, these photographs show us the perspective of the children themselves. These images gave a chance for the children to represent themselves and the world around them, a voice that the children that had not had before. This was especially true for the black children, after decades in which their community had been disenfranchised and silenced by the power structure of the apartheid government. The following images show that the children who documented their lives in diverse communities were far from naïve and their images less than idealized. These children, no matter which side they were on, were fully immersed and deeply affected by the very adult chaos that was going on around them.

⁹⁸ Ibid., 80.

Images such as those taken by Helen Levitt construct an ideal of innocent Romantic childhood that is blind to racial prejudices and the social structures that create them. The photographs taken by the Afrikaner children with whom Ewald worked reveal not only the psychological isolation of the Afrikaner community, but also how racism was a behavior learned early on. The children were well versed in the racism that permeated their society, bluntly reproducing their communities' prejudices. The Afrikaner children took photographs exclusively in their homes and front yards, fearful of the blacks who worked in small factories bordering their town of Glenesk. In *Secret Games* Ewald writes that when asked to photograph their favorite and least favorite aspects of their community “all of them, as examples of their dislikes, photographed black people.”⁹⁹

Nicoline Cuyler, a nine-year-old Afrikaner student, took one such picture, entitled *What I don't like about where I live – a black man* (Fig. 27). Nicoline, the photographer, stands in her front yard, the grass and small garden visible in the foreground. A shoulder-high wire fence separates the lawn from the sidewalk. Behind it is a street, running through the middle of the frame, with trees and on the other side in the distance an even larger fence blocking our view. An older black man stands behind the wire fence, holding a shopping bag and appearing to smile. The photograph is completely out of focus; the forms blur into one another. The trees in the background become amorphous blobs, the branches rising up like fingers into the washed out sky. The grass in the foreground becomes a carpet of grey, the wire fence a wobbly grid. The sun glints off of the glasses of the man, creating two bright white spots on his blurry face where his eyes should be,

⁹⁹ Ewald, *Secret Games: Collaborative Works with Children 1969-1999*, 161.



What I don't like about where I live — a black man — Nicoline Cuyler

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Figure 27
Nicoline Cuyler, *What I don't like about where I live*

making him seem, as Ewald writes, “an amiable monster.”¹⁰⁰ The entire composition is unsettling, almost nauseating. Ewald writes that when she asked the student if she had focused the camera, Nicoline said she had, “her mother had assured her that the strange blurriness was characteristic of the way that black people appeared in photographs.”¹⁰¹ The distortion of the image and its unsettling effect seems to visually represent the huge psychological gulf that the Afrikaners had created between themselves and the black community. The black man in Nicoline’s photograph is blurred almost beyond recognition, as if the surface of the photograph is some kind of barrier or screen that inhibits us from seeing him, just as the isolation of the Afrikaner community inhibited them from truly seeing the black community as anything but enemies.

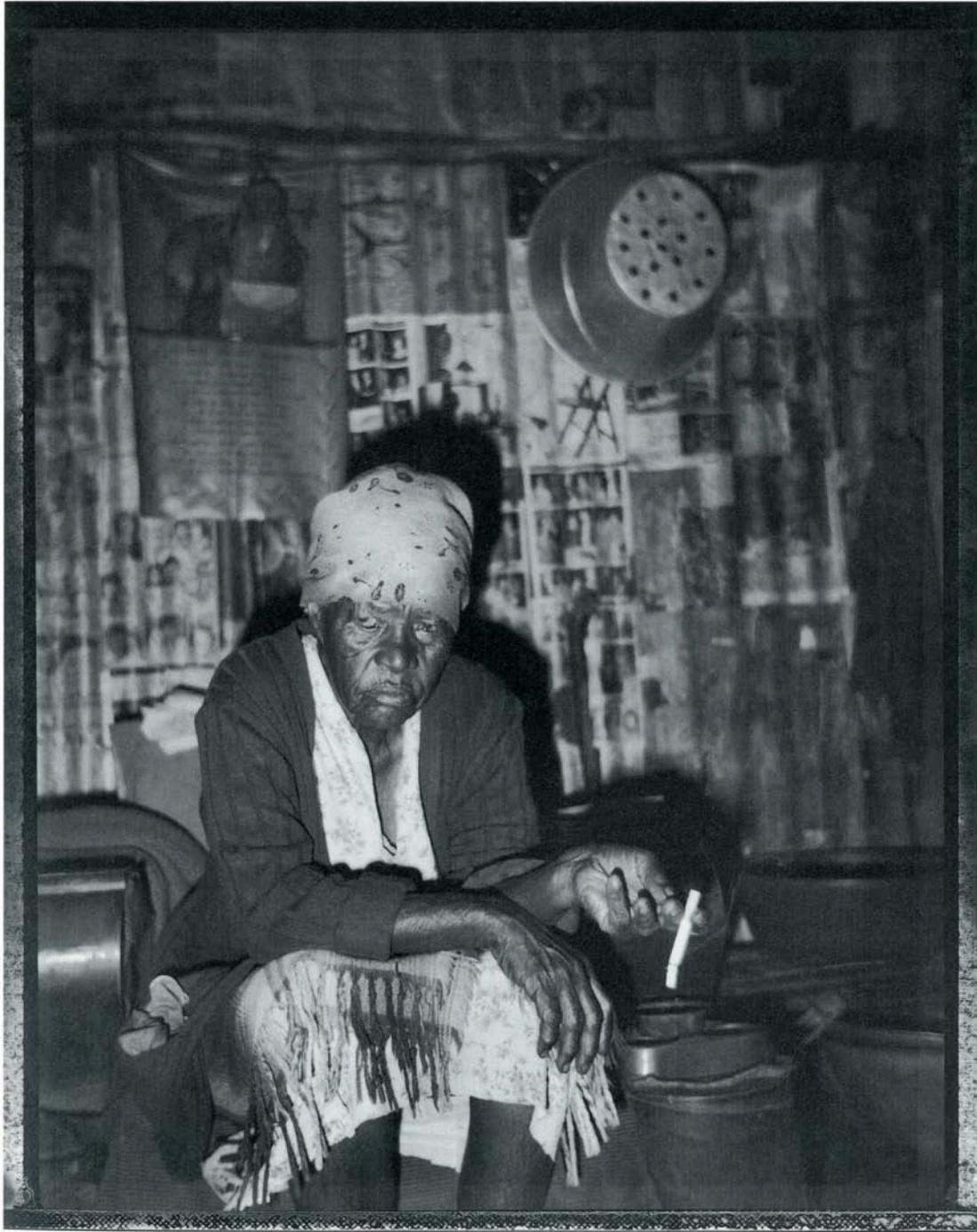
In a number of the photographs taken by the children living in the black townships, we see the emotional scars that the long era of the apartheid has inflicted on their communities, on their elders and on themselves. Ewald worked with one group of children in Soweto, a black township that was seen as the epicenter of uprisings and violence. Like the Afrikaner children, the children in Soweto only photographed in and close around their homes. Both groups were cloistered inside by fear, but in contrast to the Afrikaners, the children of Soweto faced very real threats of violence. Ewald wrote in *Secret Games*, “they were afraid to shoot outside, they said, because squinting through the viewfinder would narrow their vision and blind them to potential attackers.”¹⁰²

Granny having a smoke (Fig. 28) taken by Kaith Ntuli gives us a window into the despair of the township inhabitants. An elderly black woman sits in the foreground,

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 162.

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

¹⁰² Ibid., 161.



Granny having a smoke — Kaith Ntuli

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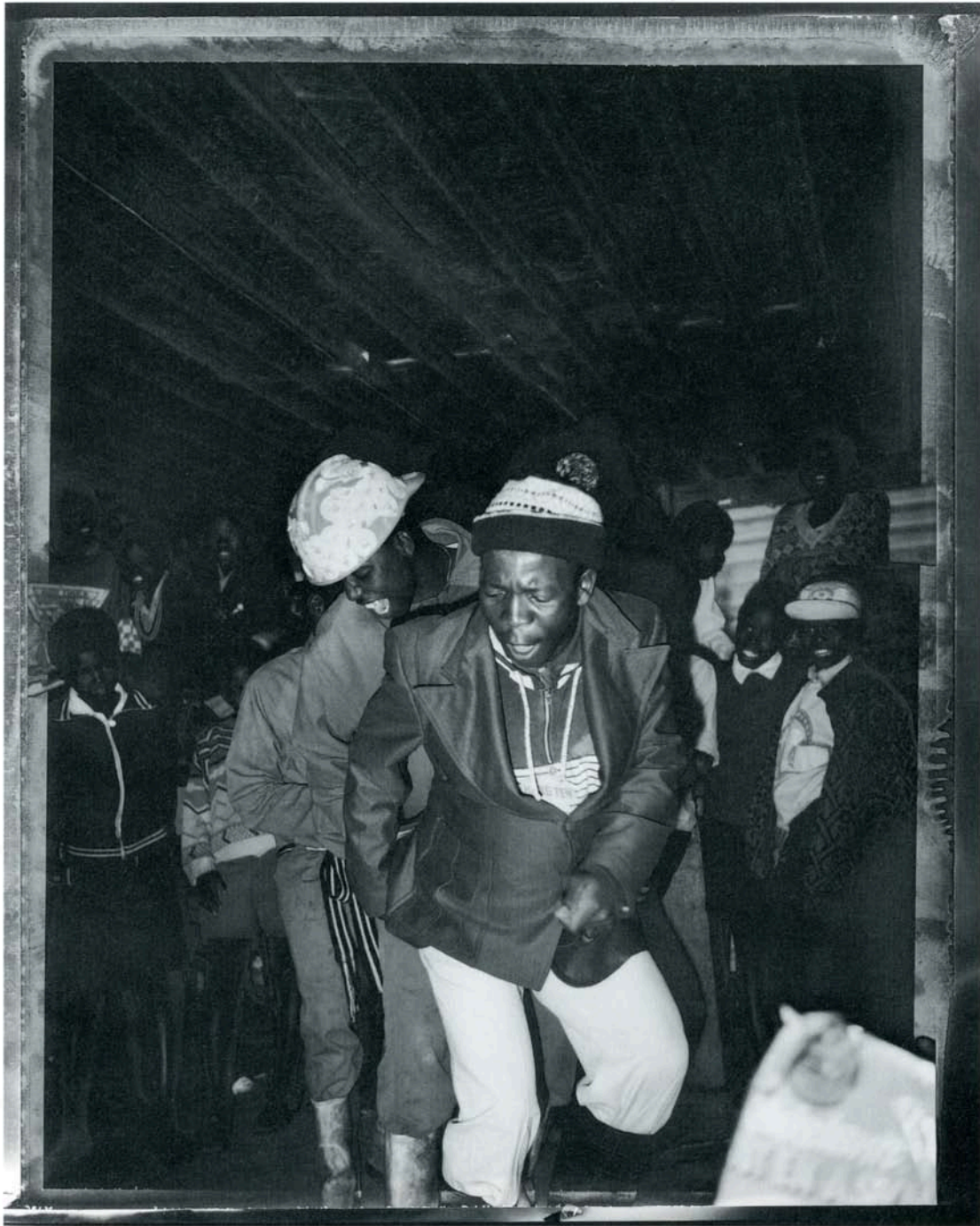
Figure 28
Kaith Ntuli, *Granny having a smoke*

bathed in a bright light, sitting close to the picture plane. In the out-of-focus background, the walls of the house are constructed out of corrugated metal, plastered with newspaper, and a large pot hangs on the wall. The woman, sitting slightly left of center, wears layers of a sweater, scarf, dress and a bandana. She hunches over, elbows resting on her knees. She smokes a cigarette, the long ash hanging precariously off the end. Her deeply wrinkled skin, wayward glance, indifferent scowl and utter disregard for the camera seem to project years of struggle and oppression in one cast-off look. A strong light source casts a deep black shadow behind her, almost creating a double of her figure, a sinister ghost looming just behind her. The dark shadow, the collaged look of the shanty walls and the woman hunched over uncomfortably all create an air of impending danger. It almost seems as if the old woman has stolen a quiet moment before the chaos continues, but the darkness is encroaching on her. Neither the young photographer nor the subject have attempted to gloss over or idealize the effects of the struggle on the people of their community. It is a document that captures a moment often overlooked or unavailable to journalist photographers and news reporters. This portrait shows one picture of the inner lives of the downtrodden township inhabitants, momentarily removed from the chaos of the outside world, aged from years of oppression and struggle, violence and survival.

In the series of photographs Ewald put together for her retrospective book *Secret Games*, she sets up a dual narrative about the South African communities where she worked. As with all of her projects, it is hard to tell whether the photographs we see published are a fair representation of the photographs taken by the children or if Ewald has chosen specific images to set up a narrative, one that may or may not be different from how her students see their community. While the individual images are the work of

her students, when examining a published series of photographs, Ewald's influence cannot be ignored. In this series, she seems to create an image of the black communities as oppressed under the harsh system of apartheid, but hopeful and dignified. Instead of documenting the ongoing violence and threat in their community, most of the pictures are quiet images of family and friends, gathered together. The figures look at the camera with strong gazes, seeming to stare right out to the viewers, demanding that they be seen. The images are visually interesting, with compositions that draw your eyes directly to the subject. One of the most visually arresting images is also one of the most joyful of the entire series; Florence Maile's image *The men are dancing* (Fig. 29) creates a scene of elation despite struggle. The image is taken in a darkened room; three men dance in a line, their mouths open, either singing or yelling. Behind them stands a crowd of smiling children, looking on delighted. A strong light shines directly on the dancing men, illuminating their clothing and putting them in the spotlight of the scene. Our eyes are drawn to their twisting movement and their faces frozen in a moment of musical escape. It is important to note that Ewald chose to publish this photograph with a blank page directly next to it. Most of the other photographs are set up as sort of comparisons between the white and black communities or diptychs of scenes of the black communities' everyday life, but this one is meant to stand on its own. Just as Granny has stolen a moment of calm amidst the chaos, these men are stealing a moment of unbridled joy, a joy and a hope that is noticeably absent from the photographs taken by the Afrikaner children that have been published in the series.

The images taken by the Afrikaners seem almost vacant in comparison to those taken by the black students. The compositions are less interesting, but it is the subjects



The men are dancing. — Florence Maile

Figure 29
Florence Maile, *The men are dancing*

that create a dominant theme of fear and unhappiness. In all of the Afrikaners' images, only one little girl attempts to smile; the rest look at the camera almost suspiciously. Their images seem to reflect a narrative of a people whose world is falling apart around them while they struggle to hold on to their power and the South Africa they once knew. The last image of the series, also tellingly published next to an empty page, creates a visual analogy for the psychological isolation that Ewald found with the Afrikaners.

Anthony Kinnear's *Neighbors in the yard* (Fig. 30) shows the apparent fear and discontent of the Afrikaners, trapped in a prison of their own making. The image shows two women, one holding an infant, standing in front of their house, looking inquisitively at the photographer. In the immediate foreground, two lines of barbed wire curve across the bottom of the frame, barbs still visible despite being extremely out of focus. The focus of the image ends up somewhere between the fence and the women. They seem blurry as well, their squinting eyes reduced to black slits. The title tells us that these women are the child's neighbors, but they come across as unfriendly strangers, even the infant's squirming registers as discontent. The barbed wire in the foreground and the nervous, unfriendly looks of the women set up a sort of dual prison. The barbed wire fence is an attempt to protect themselves from the black community that they so fear, but at the same time they have trapped themselves in a prison of paranoia and panic. As South Africa changes around them, it seems that the Afrikaner's psychological and physical isolation will eventually lead to their own demise. Unable to imagine an integrated world, they have cornered themselves into an increasingly violent and hostile situation, in the end risking the self-destruction of the very country they so love.



Neighbors in the yard — Anthony Kinnear

Figure 30
Anthony Kinnear, *Neighbors in the yard*

As the last image in the series, this photograph serves as both an ending to Ewald's narrative and a foreshadowing of future events. When *Secret Games* was published in 2000, the end of the apartheid had played out. Nelson Mandela had come and gone as the first black president of South Africa and state-sanctioned segregation had been written out of the law books. Nevertheless, this series of photographs serves as an important document of the time through the unyielding eyes of South Africa's youngest citizens, the ones who would inherit the new post-apartheid country. The images show us that children have a much more complete and complex view of the world than adults often give them credit for. As Ewald was quoted as saying, "we rarely listen close enough to understand that children see good and evil, peace and violence, beauty and ugliness for what they are."¹⁰³

¹⁰³ Theresa Bembnister, "Young at Heart: Wendy Ewald and Her Friends See the World Their Own Way," *PitchWeekly*, 7 November 2002.

Chapter 4

“An Unsettling Energy”: Violence in Images of Play and Dreams

Wendy Ewald, in a journal article about her work with children, hypothesized about the origin of the controversy her students' images of brutally violent scenes have caused amongst some adult viewers: “Because innocence is such a treasured condition, we and our schools welcome assurances that children are developmentally predictable, that at any given time there are certain essential experiences they cannot know. For better or worse, the often menacing images my students produce do not bolster this assurance.”¹⁰⁴ As anyone who has spent time with children can attest, their fantasy play and imaginary worlds can be at times cute and sweet, but more than often children's play and fantasies, especially young boys', are laced with macabre violence and cruelty, a way to act out their growing knowledge of the world while testing its boundaries. In depictions of the Romantic child, as well as other contemporary depictions of children, many are shown playing soldier or bandit in ways that only serve to highlight their innocence and their lack of knowledge about violence or aggression. The images taken by Ewald's students seem to capture these violent fantasy games at their most shocking and brutal: pointed scissors held over a screaming baby, an axe coming towards its victim, a child pretending to be a limp corpse, a gun pointed straight at the camera. These images shatter the visual standard of the innocent child ignorant and incapable of dark thoughts or actions, only capable of play-acting war or violence in the most juvenile of ways. This recurring theme throughout Wendy Ewald's entire body of work, across numerous

¹⁰⁴ Wendy Ewald, "Thirty Years of Collaborating with Children," *Visual Arts Research* 33, no. 2 (2007).

cultures, is perhaps the most hostile challenge to the ideal of the Romantic child that emerges from her work, shocking viewers and causing controversy along the way.

It seems obvious to say, but play is a pivotal behavior in a child's development. The common school of thought says that play, group and individual, organized and independent, provides "vital, social, emotional, physical, and cognitive skills...thereby learning how to prepare for a future role as a productive adult."¹⁰⁵ Play offers an opportunity for cooperation, creativity, and competition that all translate into important developmental skills. Child's play involving war, toy guns, weapons and mimicry of violence is an aspect of play, specifically boy's play, which has existed at least as far back as written accounts of children's play. Howard Chudacoff reviewed first person accounts of child's play in historical documents for his book *Children at Play: An American History*, finding that boys in colonial America engaged in wrestling matches, egged on by adult men, "who could keep the ring against all comers,"¹⁰⁶ and John Muir, famed naturalist, wrote of his childhood in the early nineteenth century, "showing the natural savagery of boys – we delighted in dog-fights, and even in the horrid red work of slaughter houses, running long distances and climbing over walls to see a pig killed."¹⁰⁷ Boys carved and created arrows, guns, and other weaponry to imitate the material culture of their adult counterparts, then, in the twentieth century, bought manufactured versions of these toys. Whether or not this is the 'natural savagery' of boys is itself a controversial subject, involving a debate between proponents of a supposed genetic or biological predisposition and those who believe that boys' behavior is the result of cultural and

¹⁰⁵ Howard Chudacoff, *Children at Play: An American History* (New York: New York University Press, 2008), 1.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 31.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 64.

societal gender roles that are taught to children from birth. Regardless of the origin of young boys' desire to partake in these activities, it is a phenomenon that is well documented both in anecdotal and sociological research.

Yet in the past thirty or so years, educators and child-care professionals have ruled this type of play inappropriate, creating zero-tolerance policies for play that even hints at violence or aggression. Jane Katch, writing about her own experiences as an educator, notes "the perception of increased real violence in the country has created an inhospitable setting for the pretend stuff... More likely the students are warned 'Don't even think about it! No weapons, not even cardboard ones! And no fingers!' The boys are barely able to hold back their explosions until the teachers are out of range."¹⁰⁸ Support for these policies is based on the belief that there may be a connection between a child's involvement in aggressively themed play during his or her younger years and the development of aggressive behavior.¹⁰⁹ Coupled with these beliefs is the growing fear in contemporary society that the omnipresence of violent imagery in the media, often splashed across the screen on television, in movies and video games, will have a damaging effect on young children and that this is manifested through aggressive play. Gloria DeGaetano writes in her essay "The Impact of Media Violence on Developing Minds and Hearts" that violent and criminal images "promote antisocial and often extremely deranged attitudes in children."¹¹⁰ On the other side of the debate, some child

¹⁰⁸ Jane Katch, *Under Deadman's Skin: Discovering the Meaning of Children's Violent Play* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2001), ix.

¹⁰⁹ Penny Holland, *We Don't Play with Guns Here: War, Weapons and Superhero Play in Early Years* (Berkshire: Open University Press, 2003), xii.

¹¹⁰ Gloria DeGaetano, "The Impact of Media Violence on Developing Minds and Hearts," in *Childhood Lost: How American Culture Is Failing Our Kids*, ed. Sharna Olfman (Westport: Praeger Publishers, 2005), 90.

psychologists believe that aggressive play is a mechanism for children to process traumatic events or negative feelings that they do not fully understand, taking those emotions “which the child then attempts to assimilate in grossly exaggerated or distorted form into his narrow range of schemata.”¹¹¹ In our current culture, where violence and suffering seems to be casually depicted in popular media, perhaps we try to cling to an idealized vision of childhood play that never truly existed, one where children have no concept of the darker parts of the world. This ideal is represented countless times in the visual arts, as the notion of the innocent child is portrayed through innocent play.

Lilly Martin Spencer painted numerous domestic scenes during her career, most often depicting mothers and children with an idealized sentimentality. *War Spirit at Home (Celebrating the Victory at Vicksburg)* (Fig. 31) reflects on the more serious subject of the Civil War and the effects it had on those at home. A mother is shown reading about the Vicksburg battle, a victory that was a turning point in the Civil War for the Union Army, while a baby writhes in her lap. Her other children march around the kitchen, dressed in makeshift military regalia, banging pots and pans joyously, parodying the chaos of war. The adults in the scene are shown as stark contrasts in mood to the children’s carefree games. The maid in the background is cast in shadow as she looks forlornly at the floor, while the mother is completely engrossed in the reports of the battle in the foreground with a somber and concerned look on her face, oblivious to the racket

¹¹¹ Jerome Singer, *The Child's World of Make-Believe: Experimental Studies of Imaginative Play* (New York: Academic Press, 1973), 232.



103. Lilly Martin Spencer, *War Spirit at Home (Celebrating the Victory at Vicksburg)*, 1866.
Oil on canvas, 30 × 32¾ in. Newark Museum. Wallace M. Scudder Bequest Fund.

Figure 31
Lilly Martin Spencer, *War Spirit at Home (Celebrating the Victory at Vicksburg)*, 1866,
Newark Museum

around her. In contrast, the children are placed squarely in the middle of the composition and bathed in light, as if on a stage. The youngest boy seems almost angelic, his pale skin glowing as he marches with his paper bag helmet. As David Lubin suggests in his analysis of the work, “children, this seems to suggest, understand no hurt but their own, being too young to comprehend the suffering of others. They exhibit a ‘war spirit’ at home, while their mother suffers ‘in spirit.’”¹¹² Their costumes, their posturing, and even their toy weapons seem to be more an indicator of their innocence than of any real understanding of violence or war.

As television and movies became ubiquitous parts of popular culture, young boys were introduced to a slew of ultra-masculine heroes, often characterized by violence and aggression, from the early Western character of The Lone Ranger to superhero Superman to sci-fi stars Luke Skywalker and Hans Solo. The marketers of consumer goods have sold young boys, and their parents, the necessary toys and accoutrements to inhabit the characters of their favorite tough guys. Bill Owens, an American documentary photographer, captured one such boy living out his fantasy in his image *Richie Ferguson, 1971, Dublin, California*. (Fig. 32) Richie, not older than five years old, has parked his Big Wheel at the end of his suburban driveway. On his feet he wears beat-up cowboy boots, his plaid pants stuffed into the tops. In his left hand he holds what is presumably a toy shotgun, the barrel rising above his shaved head. He stares menacingly at Owens, his eyes squinting into dark slits and his forehead furrowed. The young boy’s toys are the collective signifiers of manhood: a big gun, a vehicle with big wheels and big presence, cowboy boots and a cold, threatening demeanor. Perhaps Owens has created a metaphor

¹¹² David Lubin, *Picturing a Nation: Art and Social Change in Nineteenth-Century America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994), 197.



Figure 32
Bill Owens, *Richie Ferguson*, 1971, Dublin, California, 1971

of growing up, with the Big Wheels tricycles on the divide between the driveway and the street, the familiar safety of the driveway and the wide world of the road. Richie looks like he could be pretending to protect his home, stationed with his gun at the entrance, or is he about to ride off into the neighborhood, a lone ranger of California suburbia. But despite the big, grown-up, manly dreams of the subject, he is still a small boy, still dwarfed by his toy gun and his Big Wheels, his comically tough expression only further highlighting his youth and innocence. He is lost in a fantasy world of cowboys and Indians, tough guys and villains, a simplistic and childlike fantasy of conflict, violence and masculinity.

In comparison, the works by Wendy Ewald's students have, as she described it, "an unsettling energy."¹¹³ The works are confrontational and brutal in a shockingly realistic way; gone is the illusion that children have no notion of violence or capability for aggressive thoughts or fantasies. Catherine Berry's photograph of her young brother brandishing toy guns, *My brother with the guns* (Fig. 33) taken in the South African suburb of Glensek, is the troubling antithesis to Bill Owens' little boy bravado in *Richie Ferguson*. Catherine's skinny brother crouches in the middle of what seems to be an empty asphalt driveway. In each hand he holds a gun, pointed in the direction of the camera and by extension towards us, the viewers. His pointed guns cover part of his face, so only one eye peeks out, staring suspiciously at something out of the frame. A spotlight seems to be trained on him, and beyond the light source dark shadows obscure what lies in the background. This lighting isolates him both physically and, it seems, emotionally. He seems to be a boy alone, either facing a danger or confronting a threat, real or

¹¹³ Wendy Ewald, *I Wanna Take Me a Picture: Teaching Photography and Writing to Children* (Boston: Center for Documentary Studies, 2001), 14.



My brother with the guns — Catharine Berry

Figure 33
Catharine Berry, *My brother with the guns*

imagined. It is worth mentioning that Wendy Ewald placed this image directly next to the stunning and sad portrait *Granny having a smoke* (Fig. 28). Using these two images she creates a dichotomy of age, of race, of aggression versus victimization, a visual representation of the South African conflict, perhaps one that says more about Ewald's opinions on the apartheid struggle than anything else. The image is much more confrontational than *Richie Ferguson*. We sense that this boy in *My brother with the guns* has truly internalized the notions of violence and threat, of confrontation and fear. Instead of imitating a grown-up male hero with a gun that is twice his size, he seems poised to attack anything that comes his way, and the manner in which he points the guns towards us suggests that maybe we are the threat, or perhaps the world is a threat. In Bill Owen's photograph, the little boy is wrapped up in a world of fantasy and imagination, playing the character of a Lone Ranger, while in Catherine Berry's image we cannot quite discern what is play and what is reality in this boy's mind and it creates a tension in the image that unsettles us as viewers.

Helen Levitt photographed the children of New York as they turned the streets of the city into their own fantastic imaginary world. All of her published images are untitled and undated, leaving the viewer to create a narrative around these small moments that she captures. In one image in her monograph, *A Way of Seeing* (1965), on a simple stoop of grey stone, whitewash and black metal railings, three little boys play an imaginary war game, battling an unseen enemy (Fig. 34). One boy, pageboy cap pulled over his eyes, crouches and peers out around the corner, toy gun in his clutches. His accomplice leans down across the stairs, snatching a glimpse around the whitewash wall, their precious protection. The last figure cowers in the corner of the doorframe, hand grasping for his



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Figure 34
Helen Levitt, untitled, undated,

mouth, his whole body seeming to want to melt into the walls. His frightened expression and hand held nervously at his mouth seems to highlight his youth and innocence. Their adversaries and accomplices in their game are unseen, beyond the uniform metal grate, allowing us to imagine that there is another mirror image scene down the block, its occupants ready for imaginary attack. The composition is even, balanced and linear, cropped tightly to eliminate the city around them, creating a sort of isolated stage for the scene. The chaotic and gritty streets of 1940s New York are these children's playground, their battlefield, and their wild world full of possibility. Instead of threatening or scary, the scene is composed and captured in a lyrical manner, the vertical and horizontal lines of the building contrasting with the sinuous lines of the hidden boys. Through the beautiful composition and serendipitous capturing of this moment, we are led to think of our own childhoods playing war games and fighting imaginary enemies, the excitement and the fear.

During Wendy Ewald's time photographing with children in Mexico, they acted out a number of fantastical stories through their play, many of them wildly violent. Javier Bautista's photograph *Wolfman and his enemy* (Fig. 35) shows us just how realistic and brutal the violence can be that the children create in their images. Compared to the lyrical nostalgia that Levitt's pictures evoke, Ewald's students are capable of creating images that are disconcerting to adult viewers. A young boy stands on the stump of a tree; a rope loosely wraps around his waist, giving the illusion that he is tied to the tree behind him. In the foreground, a larger figure with an indiscernible mask, the supposed *Wolfman*, holds an axe above the boy's head, threatening to swing. The little boy's face scrunches up in a scream of terror, one so realistic we question the staged nature of the scene. The



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Wolfman and his enemy — Javier Bautista

Figure 35
Javier Bautista, *Wolfman and his enemy*

blurring of the background and the shallow depth of the image make the scene seem chaotic and full of motion, as if the axe might really swing down. The ghostly white of the *Wolfman* mask places the scene in the mythical, but then we see the very human hands gripping the axe, creating a tension between the imaginary basis for this scene and the very human and realistic actors in it. It is unnerving to think that such small children are told tales rife with violence, and that they can recreate those scenes with such brutal realism. It is a realism and turmoil that is lacking in the romanticized images of Helen Levitt's New York street children.

A number of Wendy Ewald's students' photos were taken during the assignment to photograph their dreams. Ewald wrote, "You can learn a great deal about your students' preoccupations and dreams for the future" through the visualization of their dreams, yet very often these dreams manifest themselves in ways that disturb us. One of the photographs that is both shocking and terrifying, almost a still from a cheap horror film is Natasha Prinsloo *A dream of my sister and her baby* from Ewald's time in South Africa. (Fig. 36) The scene takes place in a bare living room with white walls and a lace-like curtain hanging over the single window. Three matching armchairs are upholstered in velvet with a silvery splatter pattern. Natasha's sister sits in the middle of the composition, dressed in a school uniform, with ankle socks and collared shirt, her baby resting on her lap. Her sister wears a disturbing clown mask, wide eyes, single tooth in a chilling smile, the face of a carnival themed nightmare. A shock of hair sticks up at the top of the mask, seeming electrified. She holds a pair of scissors and points them straight at the baby in her lap, seeming to prepare for the moment of attack. The baby in her lap is terrorized, tiny arms and legs flailing, eyes and mouth scrunched up in a cry. The simple



A dream of my sister and her baby — Natasha Prinsloo

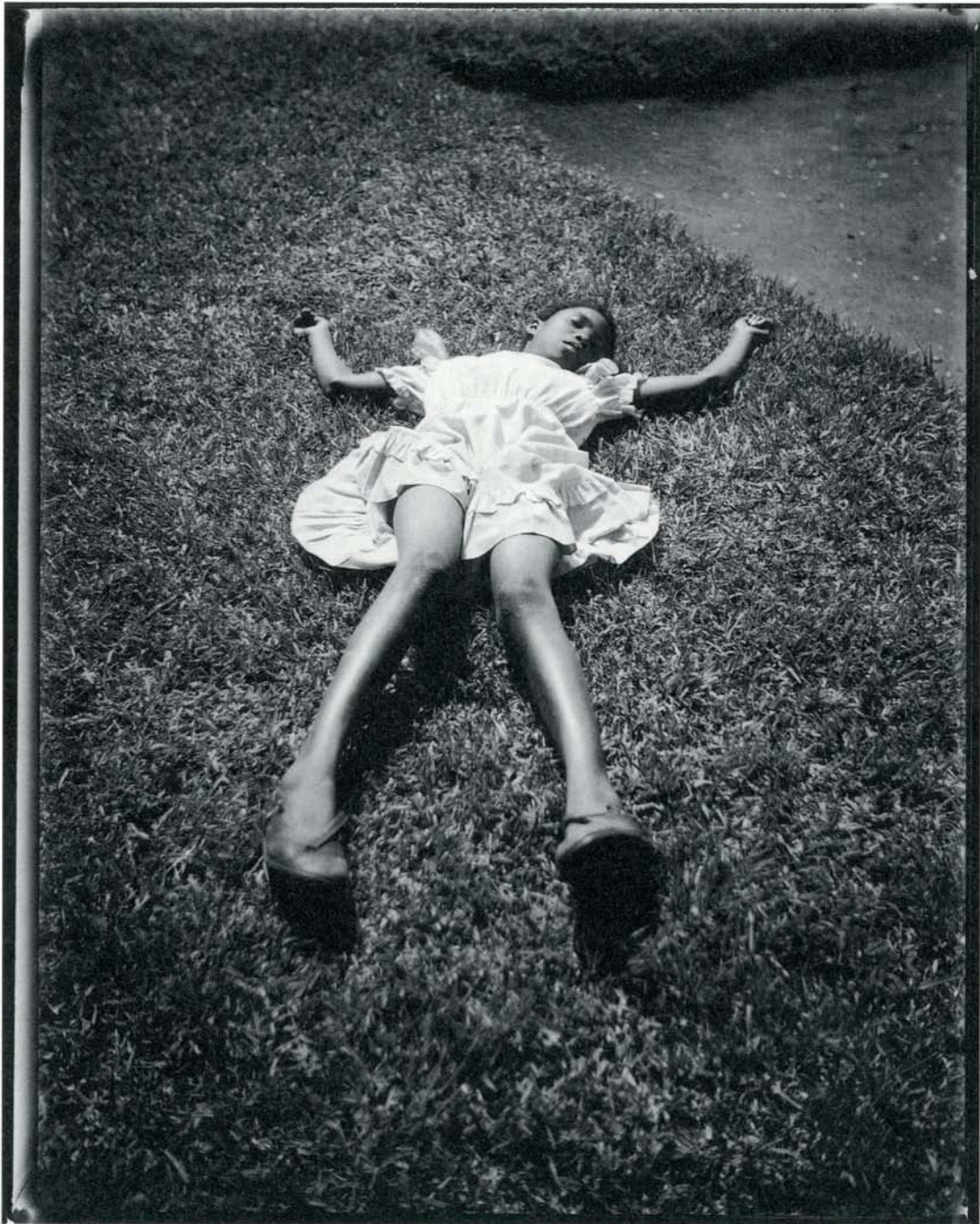
Figure 36
Natasha Prinsloo, *A dream of my sister and her baby*

composition of the photograph only adds to the terror by allowing us to notice the details of the scene: the anticipation of the violence, the shadow cast by the scissors on the white wall, the barrenness of the room, the cries we imagine from the baby, the frozen expression of the clown's mask. It evokes our own childhood nightmares, of horror movies, of some kind of alternate dystopia. When we see the image we are reminded of our own childhood terrors and fears, yet it is always shocking to see young children reenacting those dreams with such brutal realism, something we rarely believe that children are capable of.

Over and over again in Wendy Ewald's work we see violence being inflicted onto someone else. More often than not it is boys that are the aggressors of this imagined violence, whether they are setting up scenes where they are inflicting violence or creating characters that inflict violence on one another. Palesa Molahloe's striking image *I am dead* (Fig. 37) reverses and questions this pattern; instead she has photographed herself as the victim of violence, the visual representation of violence as a manifestation of fear that she has felt herself. Wendy Ewald writes about this particular image: "Palesa, a student living in Soweto, photographed herself lying on the ground, as if shot dead by a police bullet...My students in South Africa had troubling dreams; their dream images were uncomfortably close to reality."¹¹⁴

Palesa has composed the image so that she is sprawled out on the grass, arms and legs askew, her eyes closed and face slack. The low angle from which the photograph was taken makes her legs and feet look large and blurry, as if they are coming towards us as her face recedes into the background of the image. The ruffles and folds of her pure

¹¹⁴ Ewald, *I Wanna Take Me a Picture: Teaching Photography and Writing to Children*, 51, 73.



I am dead. — Palesa Molahloe

Figure 37
Palesa Molahloe, *I am dead*

white dress make her seem almost like an angel figure, shot down with no trace of gore or blood. In Ed Cairns' book *Children and Political Violence* (1996), he writes that studies have found play and dreaming "allows children to 'make sense and interpret' their experiences in situations of political violence as well to ventilate emotions."¹¹⁵ In Palesa's case, at the time this photograph was taken Soweto was overrun with violence and chaos as the apartheid government was falling apart. The children of the black township communities were exposed to violence and death on a nearly constant basis, and this kind of image was a way to represent the fear that they experienced every day. This image is in contrast to the other fantastical and macabre dreams and fantasies that some of the children enacted. The simple composition and simple subject serve to help Palesa vocalize and visually represent the immensely complex feelings of being constantly under threat.

The Romantic child ideal posits that children are somehow ignorant of violence, death and conflict, that their innocence somehow protects them. The images that Wendy Ewald's students have taken remind us that children are not only cognizant of the darker aspects of the world around them, but that they themselves are capable of disturbing, violent, brutal dreams and fantasies, ones that they recreate freely in play and art. Ewald writes about an experience she had displaying the images that she took with children in South Carolina. The images included scenes of death and violence, just as the images we have seen in her published works. She writes, "when the parents saw the work, they were visibly upset. Some confided that they hadn't expected that the dreams of their own

¹¹⁵ Ed Cairns, *Children and Political Violence* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1996), 85.

children, who lived relatively comfortable lives, would be so disturbing.”¹¹⁶ We as adult viewers see the violence in the world around us and can’t imagine that children can comprehend it, much less internalize it. We often forget that through play and art children process the world around them, the beautiful and the ugly, and the images by Ewald’s students remind us of that.

¹¹⁶ Ewald, *I Wanna Take Me a Picture: Teaching Photography and Writing to Children*, 74.

Chapter 5

Voice, Collaboration, Truth and Influence

In the conclusion of *Secret Games* (2000), Wendy Ewald reflected on her role in the collaborative process. She slowly “realized that I was working much like a choreographer with dancers or a director with actors. My job was to recognize the uniqueness of each child’s vision and nurture this vision to produce photographs.”¹¹⁷ Over the span of her career, she has experimented with various methods of collaboration, each new project questioning and reexamining the nature of collaboration and documentation. In the subsequent publication and exhibition of these photographs, Ewald selects images to create series that form narratives about the communities, about art made by children, and about a new vision of childhood. Within this process of education and artistic collaboration, Ewald raises and examines questions and issues about documentary photography and authorship: what is truth in documentary photography? Can we ever present an unbiased documentation of an individual or a community? What sorts of power and hierarchical structures are reproduced in the photographer/subject and teacher/student relationship?

In turn, when we as viewers examine these photographs and photographic series, a number of questions arise that force us to examine how we read images and bodies of work: how does authorship affect how we read an image? How is Ewald’s own style influencing the way that these children take pictures? How much influence is she exerting, conscious or unconscious, on their picture making? In the publication process,

¹¹⁷ Wendy Ewald, *Secret Games: Collaborative Works with Children 1969-1999* (Zurich: Scalo, 2000), 324.

how is she selecting and editing these photographs? Are the narratives she is creating through these series, about community and childhood, the same narratives that these communities and children would form about themselves? In her book written for educators, *Literacy and Justice Through Photography*, she states, “as an artist who works with a camera, I take pictures that aim to show something of a ‘reality.’”¹¹⁸ Exactly what, or whose, reality is she speaking about?

While the majority of the images that we see in Wendy Ewald’s body of work are photographs taken by her students, she participates in moments of influence throughout the artistic process. These collaborative moments, whether it be as fellow artist, teacher or curator, reveal questions and complexities about the photographs both individually and as series, questions about the nature of truth, power dynamics, authorship and collaboration, and how these questions, often unanswerable, are essential to the understanding of Wendy Ewald’s work.

Ewald writes that when her students photograph their lives and communities, they are “acknowledging the radiance of ordinary life in its unglamorized randomness – something that documentary photography has always been exceptionally good at.”¹¹⁹

Wendy Ewald stands in the long tradition of documentary photography, but her method of collaboration and education brings a different and challenging perspective to the genre. The history of documentary photography and the issues inherent in the genre have shaped Ewald’s work and the questions she asks of herself and her methods. Arthur Rothstein, a photographer who got his start in the famed Farm Security Administration, defined the

¹¹⁸ Wendy Ewald, Katherine Hyde, and Lisa Lord, *Literacy & Justice through Photography* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2012), 1.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 2.

genre in his book *Documentary Photography* as “the eyewitness observer of our world and its people.”¹²⁰ Throughout the span of photographic history, documentary photography has been connected to the recording of a diverse range of subjects and situations: architecture and landscapes, the horrors and realities of war, the struggles of the impoverished, the seemingly mundane everyday and every shade of subtlety in between. While documentary photography can record a range of subjects, the goal is ultimately to show us something about the world that we did not see before, to make us think about the subject in a new way.

Documentary photography has always been singularly concerned with truth and authenticity, and has claimed a special relationship to real life.¹²¹ In style and approach, documentary photographers aim to portray their subjects truthfully, using a simple, ‘straight’ compositional technique and the avoidance of any kind of visual manipulation. The mechanized nature of photography and its inherent indexicality has led people since the early days of photography to see it as a more objective or ‘truthful’ medium than other forms of visual representation. Documentary photographers, while many had a goal of conveying a certain social message, believed that their ‘straight style’ and emotional detachment from their subjects could enable them to be objective in their recording. The tension between artistic subjectivity and documentary objectivity that has existed throughout the photographic tradition is especially pivotal in the genre of documentary photography, given its goal of providing an objective record of the world around it. The prospect of gaining access to and understanding about a community while documenting it

¹²⁰ Arthur Rothstein, *Documentary Photography* (Boston: Focal Press, 1986), xviii.

¹²¹ Liz Wells, ed. *Photography: A Critical Introduction: Third Edition* (London: Routledge, 2004), 69.

in an objective way has driven documentary photographers to continually reexamine the process and technique of photographing. This focus, bordering on obsession, on truth in documentary photography has led both photographers and theorists to pose questions about the nature of truth, power and impartiality in the act of photographing.

Wendy Ewald is deeply connected to the branch of social realist documentary photographers who have recorded the lives of those in struggle as a means for social change, stating herself that “teaching for me is a political act – if politics addresses the power or powerlessness of people in their everyday lives.”¹²² But within this subsection of documentary photography, questions about objectivity and power arise as the photographers often come from a privileged position in relation to their subjects. An early critique of this hierarchical structure was expressed in Walker Evans and James Agee’s seminal work *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* in 1936, a work of both photographs and words documenting the life of three families of struggling tenant farmers. In Agee’s preamble, he rants about the obscenity of invading the lives of these tenant farmers to make a spectacle of their humiliating and impossible circumstances to the world.¹²³ In living amongst the tenant families, and recording their endeavors in the most honest way, Evans and Agee attempted to break the formal distance, “to try and deal with it not as journalists...but seriously,” attempting to document their subjects with dignity.¹²⁴

Beginning in the 1970s, a number of academics began to question and reject the idea that any act of looking and recording could be neutral. Relying heavily on the French philosopher Michel Foucault’s ideas of truth, power and knowledge, critics posited that

¹²² Ewald, *Secret Games: Collaborative Works with Children 1969-1999*, 326.

¹²³ James Agee and Walker Evans, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1939), 7.

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*, xv.

since power is not simply a force used to oppress a certain group, but exists throughout the entire social system, truth and power are intimately related, dependant on a constructed 'regime of truth' to distinguish true from false. Taken to this theory's logical conclusion in regard to documentary photography, "documentation cannot act to reveal inequalities in social life, for there can be no document that is merely a transcription of reality. Rather as a part of discursive system, it constructs the reality that it purports to reveal."¹²⁵ This questions fundamentally whether any image can be a so-called 'true' representation.

As Wendy Ewald collaborates with her students in order to attempt to produce pictures that are, in her eyes, more 'true,' we run into conceptual questions about authorship as she presents these images under her name. In the late 1960s, a debate began in literary theory that would have far reaching implications in post-modern art, centered on the role and importance of author and authorship in creative work, questions reflected in Ewald's work. The French literary critic, Roland Barthes launched the debate with his essay, "Death of the Author" in 1967. Barthes argued that to analyze texts through the lens of the author and his identity or persona, is both flawed and limiting. His essay concluded that texts are multi-layered, "a multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash" and these multidimensional texts will be interpreted differently by different readers. The true relationship lies not between the author and the text, but the reader and the text, as "a text's unity lies not in its origin but in its destination."¹²⁶ Two years later, Michel Foucault countered with his lecture "What is an Author?" exploring the definition and function of an author in modern literature and

¹²⁵ Wells, ed. *Photography: A Critical Introduction: Third Edition*, 105.

¹²⁶ Roland Barthes, *Image, Music, Text* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977), 148.

society. He argues that without the author and the function of the author, the fictive would be subject to another “system of constraint – one that will no longer be the author but will have to be determined or, perhaps, experienced.”¹²⁷ He asserts that the author and the work are indelibly intertwined; one cannot exist without the other. These ideas came to influence post-modern thinking on the role of the artist in the creation and analysis of both literature and art. Wendy Ewald’s work forces us to examine the nature and importance of authorship by claiming to establish a collaborative artistic relationship between her work and her students. This interweaving, and often confusion, of authorship also forces us to question how the concept of authorship changes our relationship to the work as a viewer.

Ewald’s work teaching and collaborating with children examines these questions of objectivity and power within documentary photography and offers a distinctive, but certainly not flawless, response. When she allows the children to document their communities and lives she has removed herself from the perceived position of power as the photographer, as the person clicking the shutter. By giving up the camera to her subjects, she relinquishes artistic control in exchange for what she feels is a greater truth. But as Ewald gives up her role as the author of the photographs, her role as a teacher, and the ways she interacts with her students during the artistic process, becomes even more central to examining how she collaborates and influences her students and how this affects their work.

In both the photographic process and the resulting publication and exhibition of her own and her students’ photographs, Ewald participates in moments of influence,

¹²⁷ Paul Rabinow, ed. *The Foucault Reader* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984), 119.

creating a collaboration that instills more of her style and her vision than she may admit. The actual process of the children taking, developing and printing these photographs is an educational endeavor with Ewald as teacher, mentor and new friend. Over the course of her long career, she has experimented with a number of different ways to collaborate with the students, to incorporate or remove herself in regards to their photography. Each of the roles that Ewald plays in the collaborative process, as fellow artist, teacher and editor, changes the way we read the photographs. It forces us to grapple with issues of authorship, collaboration and truth: who is taking the picture? Does it matter? In his essay, *Truth in Photography*, Scott Walden theorizes that “truth is a quality associated not with images themselves, but rather with the thoughts those images engender in the minds of their viewers.”¹²⁸ Why and how do the methods of collaboration that Ewald engages with cause her and us to see the images as more true?

Perhaps the most obvious mode of collaboration that Wendy Ewald has participated in during the span of her career is as an artist, creating and publishing images of her own along side her students. In 1982, Ewald traveled to Columbia’s Andes Mountains to work in a small mountainside village. In *Magic Eyes* (1992), the book that resulted from this trip, her photos and the work of the children are interspersed between the winding stories of two women she came to know in the village. The titles and photo credits only appear at the end of the book. In this set up, it is hard to know which photographs are Ewald’s and which are her students’, leaving us guessing, creating “an intricate admixture of visions that weave in and out of the text in almost hallucinatory

¹²⁸ Scott Walden, "Truth in Photography," in *Photography and Philosophy: Essays on the Pencil of Nature* (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2008), 4.

fashion.”¹²⁹ When the viewer is faced with the question of who the author really is, two very interesting things come into focus, first that Ewald’s students have gained the ability to take incredibly striking pictures, secondly that her students’ style has become markedly similar to hers, or vice versa. The photographs of her students and hers are stylistically congruent, creating almost a continuous body of work.

The first image we see in *Magic Eyes* is a scene of young girls, which we learn from the index, is titled *First Communion* (Fig. 38) and was taken by Ewald herself. In this square format photograph, a line of girls, only ten or eleven years old, stand in a ceremony for their first communion. Clad in pure white dresses, veils and crowns, each holds a bouquet of white flowers and a candle. The photograph is taken from close range; the girls fill up the whole composition. The young girl on the far left, face framed by a filmy white veil and the bright white flame of her candle, stares out at us intensely. The girl to her right, with an intricately embroidered veil, seems lost in thought. The movement of her hand as it adjusts her veil turns it into a blur in the camera. This flash of movement in an otherwise still and serene composition draws our eyes across the scene. The final two girls on the right are also lost in thought or prayer. As we look closely, we see the profile of a couple of young boys behind the girls, almost obscured by shadow. The girls look like a choir of angels clad in all white. The photograph seems to represent an otherworldly scene, yet the young girls’ expressions are a range of very worldly and world-worn emotions of prayer and contemplation.

Another photograph we encounter in *Magic Eyes* is taken by one of her students, although we obviously don’t know this right away. *A friend holding my little brother*

¹²⁹ Ewald, *Secret Games: Collaborative Works with Children 1969-1999*, 60.

Orlando by Alirio Casas (Fig. 39) shows the simple portrait of a man holding an infant. The man, dressed in a woven poncho and a black brimmed hat, stands slightly to the left of the center of the composition. Seen from the waist up, he takes up the whole height of the frame, the top edge cutting off just the top of his hat. He holds a sleeping infant, wrapped in white blankets, the baby's small face barely visible. The man has a look of pride and joy on his face; he seems to barely hold back a smile. He stands in front of a blank white background; only a small rectangle of grey runs along the bottom. The lack of contrast makes the photograph seem flat and grey. The blank background creates the effect of the man being outlined, like a cutout in a collage. The man's hands, and the baby he is holding, are slightly out of focus, seeming almost grainy. The photograph, with its subtle imperfections, seems unplanned, spontaneous, the capturing of a proud, but simple, moment. The man's eyes look directly into the camera and we can connect with him on the most basic level, the joy of a new life.

In *Magic Eyes* without captions or titles, we are left in a guessing game of who took the picture, changing the way we read the image. Is *First Communion* the documentation of a family member's precious first steps into religion, or Ewald being allowed into an important ceremony in the villagers' lives? Is the young girl staring out at the photographer because she is familiar or a stranger? Is the cropping of the composition, cutting off part of the crowns and seeming to squeeze the girls into the frame, making the photo seem claustrophobic or intimate, a choice of an experienced artist or the good luck of an amateur? Once we know that it is Ewald who has taken the picture, we see that Ewald has retained her careful compositional style, creating intimate



Figure 38
Wendy Ewald, *First Communion*



Figure 39
Alirio Casas, *A Friend Holding my Little Brother Orlando*

scenes that pull us in by cropping close to the subjects, but her technical style has begun to mimic that of her students.

The composition of *A friend holding my little brother Orlando* mimics this cropped style, and retains the same feeling of intimacy and interest to the viewer. In both portraits, the lighting is slightly too dark, the photographs seem flat and grey, and the field of focus shallow. Has her style and aesthetic changed to blend in with her students' work, or has her style shaped her students' photographing so much that their photos seem to exist in parallel? One can deduce that since Ewald is the teacher, teaching the students a certain method and technique for composing and taking pictures that this is her style coming through her student's photographs. Her photographs are technically rough, amateur-like. The shooting techniques seem spontaneous and the printing less polished. It seems she has adapted to blend in with the photographs of her students, to use spontaneity and chance to her advantage in creating photographs that are truer in her eyes.

Over the trajectory of Ewald's career she has slowly removed herself from the physical process of picture making, stating that she realized that "the crucial part of my artistic process was human interaction...with time I learned to back off from the world and let it reveal itself to me, and as I did, my projects became more conceptual."¹³⁰ Through this 'backing-off,' Wendy Ewald's role as teacher and mentor became the central part of her work. In 1989, Ewald returned to the United States, to Durham, North Carolina, in search of some permanence. She worked with the Center for Documentary Studies at Duke to establish the Literacy through Photography program in the diverse

¹³⁰ Ibid., 325.

public schools of Durham. What started out as a free-flowing and experimental experience during her trips abroad, turned into an organized program for school curriculums, integrating many different elements of her former projects. It was in her first classroom experience in Kentucky that she discovered that “photography and writing stimulated one another,”¹³¹ and the activities she developed there would become the framework for her LTP program.

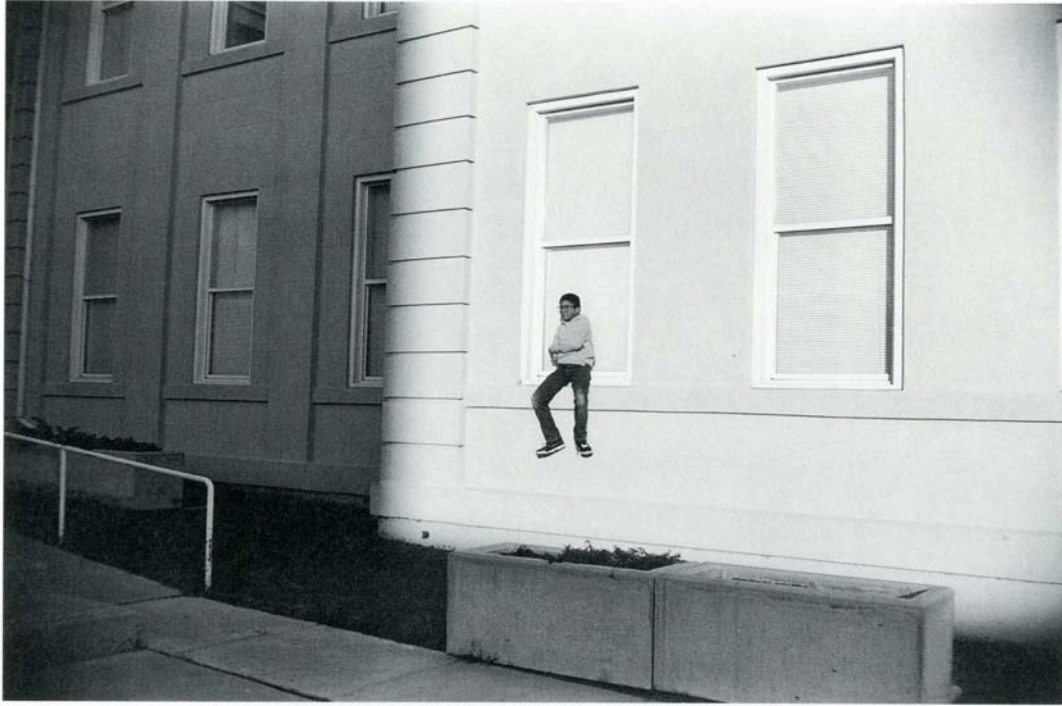
In 2001, she published *I Wanna Take Me a Picture*, outlining the program for other educators to adopt. The first part of the classroom experience focuses on discussion about how to read and interpret photographs. These discussions help the children construct ways of talking about photography in a meaningful way and at the same time, gain the knowledge and inspiration to take photographs themselves that will be expressive to them and to the viewer. After the students learn the technical details of taking, developing and printing photographs, Ewald begins giving them assignments that intertwine photography and writing, each action inspiring the other. The children start by writing about what photographs they plan on taking in each assignment, to focus their thoughts and ideas, and are also encouraged to reflect in writing on their photographs afterwards. Ewald groups the assignments into four sections: framing, the use of symbols, time, and point of view and pairs them with photographic assignments that focus on what the students are most familiar with: themselves, their families, their communities and their dreams and fantasies. Through these assignments, Ewald is not only teaching the mastery of a craft or a means to more expressive and adept writing, but creating a space for self-expression, a means to self-confidence and a connection to their creativity.

¹³¹ Wendy Ewald, *I Wanna Take Me a Picture: Teaching Photography and Writing to Children* (Boston: Center for Documentary Studies, 2001), 12.

Phillip Liverpool's striking self-portrait *I am alone in the wilderness* (Fig. 40) shows us an example of an image taken during the LTP program and how Ewald's program sought to reveal truths not only about the community but about the students' inner lives as well. The fourth-grader from Durham, North Carolina was said to have the highest IQ in the school, but he could not seem to concentrate, often misplacing or ruining his film. It was not until Ewald encouraged him to write a rap poem about his community that he found his focus and his misplaced film, rediscovering "beautiful, strangely composed glimpses into Phillip's mind."¹³²

In his self-portrait, Phillip is shot from afar, sitting on the ledge of a boarded up window. The frame is cropped tightly to exclude the sky or any other open space; the background consists only of the exterior of this boarded up building. A strong vertical dividing line shoots down the middle, a border between the sunlight and the shadow. Phillip sits in the sunlight on a window ledge, arms crossed, feet dangling down precariously. He looks off into the distance, squinting in the bright light. The washed-out white of the sunlit building seems to give Phillip a shadowy appearance, almost like an outline, a flat figure. In this seemingly serene photograph, there is an element of quiet chaos, of unbalance, as we lose any reference point to the world beyond the buildings, as Phillip himself seems to almost fall off the ledge. The decidedly urban setting is devoid of anyone but Phillip, and since the frame is only cropped to the buildings, giving us no frame of reference beyond it, we feel as if this emptiness could go on forever. In addition, the close cropping, eliminating sky or open space, gives it a claustrophobic feeling, as if the buildings are rising on forever, trapping us in this endless city. Phillip teeters on the

¹³² Ewald, *Secret Games: Collaborative Works with Children 1969-1999*, 264.



I am alone in the wilderness — Phillip Liverpool

Figure 40
Phillip Liverpool, *I am alone in the wilderness*

edge of the window ledge, his feet seeming to brace himself for the inevitable fall. He crosses his arms in front of his chest, seeming as if he is trying to protect himself, keep the outside from getting in. The title alone opens us up to the possibility of countless metaphors set up by the composition and the setting, *I am alone in the wilderness*. Solitary in this urban ‘wilderness,’ he has perched himself in the sunlight, but how long can it last? And even if Phillip is the smartest boy in Durham, can he ever escape the ‘wilderness’ that has enveloped him? Phillip’s battle with the urban world around him has inspired him to look at the mundane buildings, the boarded up windows, and the abandoned spaces as a looming threat, as something beyond their functional purposes. It is a struggle between his interior world and the exterior circumstances. Through his crossed arms he wants to keep this harsh world out, but his balance is uncertain on the ledge and the buildings seem to threaten to close around him. Through writing and photography, Phillip is able to not only articulate his inner world, but also visually represent it.

Throughout the arc of Wendy Ewald’s career, we see her attempting to remove herself from the physical process of photographing, including fewer and fewer of her photographs in the publications, shifting the artistic control towards her students. Yet through the teaching process, she is retaining some degree of influence over the way the students photograph the world around them. As she teaches them how to compose a photograph, why one image is ‘better’ than another, giving them certain assignments on what to photograph, she is imparting a vision of her own design. Although each child will ultimately interpret these lessons and assignments differently, they all come from the same starting point, Wendy Ewald. In this way is she truly an equal collaborator with her

students? Can the hierarchical relationship between student and teacher or adult and child ever really be completely broken? In my opinion, I don't believe it is possible. The children have an undoubtedly wonderful experience being able to photograph the world around them and eventually being exhibited in galleries and museums, but Wendy Ewald remains the curator, and primary author, of the work, filtering her vision through the children in both the teaching process and the editorial process.

Beyond her role as teacher and collaborator with her students, as the curators of the *Secret Games* exhibition write, "her role as author has often been as editor – selecting images and writings for exhibition and publication which are then orchestrated into a larger work, which is neither polemical nor political."¹³³ But just as no act of photographing is unbiased, this act of editing and selection reflects a vision of Ewald's making. The decisions made in curating and designing an exhibition or publication can greatly change the way we look at the works of art. Her projects ostensibly produce a huge number of photographs, of which she is responsible for choosing some to be exhibited, and then fewer still to be published. Every artist, and everybody, has their own opinion on good versus bad, preconceived notions and opinions, and certainly Ewald is no different. Through examining the individual series as well as the larger body of work through the retrospective *Secret Games*, we see a number of different narratives forming: about the various communities, about art made by children, and about childhood itself. We question whether these narratives that Ewald has shaped are the same narratives that the subjects – and the photographers – would have chosen. In the end, Ewald remains an outsider, with an outsider perspective, and this position cannot be eliminated. Ultimately,

¹³³ Ibid., 8.

Ewald is using her students' photography as source material to illustrate her own personal discoveries and opinions, creating a carefully selected collage of the students' work to reflect her own ideas.

The different communities Ewald has spent time in are diverse in both their location and character. She states that at the start of a trip, "the challenge for me is to kind of empty myself of any prejudices or ideas I might have about photography or the place that I'm in."¹³⁴ However, by the time Ewald is choosing which photographs to exhibit and publish, she has formed ideas and narratives about the communities. While the individual photographs exist as a window into how the inhabitants see their community, the narratives that Ewald forms using these images come from a distinct position of being an outsider. Despite the length of time Ewald spends in a community, she will always view it from the perspective of an outsider, a documentarian, and an artist. In each of the series we see dominant narratives form, despite her claims of 'emptying herself' of preconceived notions about the communities she enters. Surprisingly, the narratives she forms about them are remarkably stereotypical: the feral and romantic connection to nature in the Appalachian Mountains, the vast and quiet landscapes of the Netherlands, the rich mysticism of India to the stark racial divides in apartheid South Africa. In documentary photography, the photographer creates a narrative through the careful selection of who and what to photograph. Wendy Ewald has removed herself from behind the camera, but the end effect is essentially the same; the series of images are ultimately a reflection of her own artistic vision and experience.

¹³⁴ "Photographer Wendy Ewald Teaches Children to Shoot," in *Morning Edition* (NPR, 1996).

One series in which this narrative voice particularly stands out is the collection of photographs from Ewald's time in South Africa (Fig. 27-30, 33, 36-37) The differences between the images taken by the black African children and the white Afrikaner children were stark not only in subject matter, but in style, composition and quality. The narrative of the victimized black African communities and the oppressive white Afrikaners is established in the history of the South African apartheid, but it is nonetheless surprising to see this dichotomy recreated in photographs taken by children. This polarity leads us to question the influence of Wendy Ewald in the shaping of this body of work. Was this a true representation of the artistic expression of her students or did she participate in moments of influence that reflected her own political opinions about the apartheid conflict? Did she teach the groups differently, perhaps pushing the black children towards creating striking portraits while undercutting the white Afrikaner children? Or perhaps it was something more unconscious, choosing certain images over others in the publication process to create a certain narrative of victim and oppressor, good and bad? We might never know, but these are questions that cannot be ignored in the viewing of the images.

While Ewald is weaving narratives about the communities in which she is spending time, she is simultaneously creating a narrative of how the visual language and culture of a particular place changes the way that her students see the world and in turn, photograph. Some might expect children everywhere to see the world in the same unformed and naïve way and to produce art that is uniformly amateurish or simplistic. Wendy Ewald confronts this assumption; Ewald has often noted that as she traveled around the world she found that the children had radically different styles that emerged. She wrote in *Secret Games* that “each child and each culture seemed to have a different

sense of composition – determined, it often seemed by the landscape and the interiors of their homes.”¹³⁵ These diverse styles that she has discovered run in parallel to the narratives she has created about each of the communities.

During Ewald’s time in the Netherlands she found that many of the photographs “bore a striking resemblance – in choice of subject matter (often depopulated of human beings), in composition, and in their overriding sense of precision – to paintings and photographs from the past four centuries of Dutch art.”¹³⁶ Miranda Plooij’s stunning landscape, *A white swan in the middle of a polder* (Fig. 41) is a model of this style. Miranda’s landscape is divided by a strong horizon line, the bottom half featuring the vast, dark grass of the polder, only broken up by a single white swan in the distant center, the lone figure amidst the darkness. The horizon features a neat line of trees, uniformly leaning to the right in the wind. The top half of the composition features the boundless sky, with dynamic clouds creating an awe inspiring, sublime effect of texture and movement. It is impossible to know whether this young girl had any notable exposure to classic seventeenth-century Dutch landscape paintings, but her composition and choice of subject is incredibly similar. The inclusion of a vast amount of sky, the focus on the land, rather than the people, the strong horizon, and the dynamic clouds could be used to describe the great landscapes of Jacob van Ruisdael or Jan van Goyen. This forces us to wonder if the Dutch landscape itself has an innate power to elicit this type of style and reaction or if these famed painters have left a lasting influence on the Dutch aesthetic. Or did Ewald create this narrative herself, either through steering her students towards this

¹³⁵ Ewald, *Secret Games: Collaborative Works with Children 1969-1999*, 18.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*, 216.



A white swan in the middle of the polder — Miranda Plooi

Figure 41
Miranda Plooi, *A white swan in the middle of a polder*

aesthetic through her teaching or by choosing photographs that reflected this vision of the Netherlands that she has created?

As we examine Wendy Ewald's roles as a fellow artist, teacher and editor-curator, we are left with more questions than conclusions on how these moments of collaboration and influence affect the images that we see before us. While it is undeniable that the children have an incredible educational experience, gaining confidence and visual literacy in the process of making these photographs, how is Ewald using these children's experiences to serve her own artistic ends? As Ken Johnson writes in his *New York Times* review of *Secret Games*, "Ms. Ewald's employment of children adds a certain shadowy intrigue, a hint of moral ambiguity, to what otherwise would seem to be an enterprise of selfless altruism."¹³⁷ In the end, it seems that it is a choice of weighing this possible moral ambiguity with both the importance of the project in its benefit for children and the importance of displaying these pictures as alternatives to the traditional documentary photography viewpoint. As Johnson continues, "no matter whose needs are ultimately being served, you do feel that Ms. Ewald has tapped into a miraculously rich source of information about the world."¹³⁸ She has given us a different perspective on documentary photography and the world by allowing her subjects to photograph themselves and their lives. She has added to the narrative of representing childhood by allowing the children to have a voice in their own depiction, a voice that is often lost when adult artists attempt to portray children and childhood.

¹³⁷ Ken Johnson, "Images of Innocence: Young Enough to See All Things Honestly," *The New York Times*, 4 April 2003.

¹³⁸ Ibid.

The ideal of the Romantic child is limited in its opportunity for agency for the child subjects. Wendy Ewald offers her students the opportunity to represent their lives in all their complexities and in the process reveals the tensions and complexities of the Romantic child ideal. In her introduction to *Secret Games* (2000), she writes, “gradually I saw that it was less interesting for me, as an artist, to frame the world wholly according to my perceptions. I wanted instead to create situations in which I allowed others’ perceptions to surface with my own.”¹³⁹ Wendy Ewald displays and publishes her students’ images under her name, yet the individual images are credited to the students; she teaches the students’ how to photograph and curates the final project, yet her students snap the shutter on the camera. Where does her influence begin and end? Which are her perceptions and which are the students’? Are the narratives being formed a reflection of her experiences or the children’s? These are questions that cannot simply be answered by examining the images, yet they are essential to her images and her work.

The ideal of the Romantic child and Romantic childhood is, at its core, narrow and simplistic. It is a childhood lived in a vacuum, with no complexities and all the right answers, one that perhaps only exists in the nostalgic dreaming of adults. Wendy Ewald’s images are interesting, haunting and important because they leave us with more questions than answers, more complexities, tensions and contradictions than overarching ideals. We are forced to examine the nature of a number of relationships, from artist-subject to teacher-student to adult-child. Through her images, we question the veracity of any image, the importance of authorship, the spirit of collaboration and our own notion of how we conceptualize childhood and see children in our world. When we look at the

¹³⁹ Ewald, *Secret Games: Collaborative Works with Children 1969-1999*, 18.

images that Wendy Ewald's students have produced, the ideal of the Romantic child seems to sell children short, underestimating their capacity to experience and comprehend the complex and changing world around them. The images taken by Ewald's students demonstrate that children can have a remarkable facility for, as she put it, 'genuine artistic expression,' one that is truthful and perceptive, yet strikingly beautiful. It is perhaps in the questions that cannot be answered that we find the true spirit of Wendy Ewald and her students' work.

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