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Figures of Children in American History: The Innocent Child, the Developing Child, and What to Do about Them

Introduction: Studying the Construction and Reconstruction of Children

Children are a discursive fiction, a nostalgic memory, and a material reality. Young people exist, but how any adult makes meaning of their youth is personally, socially, epistemologically, and historically determined. Moreover, the allocation of who gets to be a child and why is uneven. Even if childhood does not have one consistent definition, the boundaries of the category include some and exclude others, following historical flows of power and domination. The material-discursive complexity of children and childhood presents a challenge for scholarship on either topic. This challenge is especially salient in historical work, since the dominant historical constructions of children have shaped what kind of documentation was considered worth archiving, which children were considered worth documenting, and how those children were documented, among other factors.

Historians and theorists of childhood have grappled with these challenges for several decades, especially since the emergence of the field of childhood studies in the 1980s. By treating childhood as a social construct, childhood studies scholars have identified some of the major discourses surrounding and constituting childhood that made it appear as a natural, rather than socially determined, phenomenon for so long in U.S. history; they have additionally traced the uneven application of childhood along raced, sexed, gendered, and classed lines, outlining who has been included in the category, why, and to what effect. In response to these historical

narratives, some scholars have put forth their own theories and recommendations about how to move beyond these constructions in historical and contemporary scholarship, providing ways of contesting dominant constructions and opening possibilities for new ways of conceiving children and research on or about them.

This exam provides an overview of two of the major discourses¹ through which children were constructed in the nineteenth and twentieth century United States, as well as some of the recent contestations of these constructions, in order to consider the implications of both the constructions and the responses to them for historical scholarship. I begin with a brief discussion of the emergence of childhood studies to situate myself in the paradigm of childhood as a social construction, rather than a biological phase of life. Next, I turn to scholarship on the history of childhood to piece together two constructions that have dominated U.S. cultural, legal, educational, and medical understandings of children for several centuries: the innocent child and the developing child. Within these constructions, I follow how each included and excluded different kinds of people; for example, in the late 1800s, Black children were excluded from innocence via their postulated inability to feel pain while colonized adults were included in the construct of the developing child to render them evolutionarily inferior to white men (Bernstein; Castañeda). What this tracing shows is that each of these constructs has been used by multiple regimes of imperialism and eugenics to uphold the superiority of white EuroAmerican men. As such, I argue that anyone studying children historically must grapple with these histories. In the final section of the exam, I explore some of the responses to these constructions from queer

¹ By discourses I mean “a group of statements which provide a language for talking about – i.e. a way of representing – a particular kind of knowledge about a topic. When statements about a topic are made within a particular discourse, the discourse makes it possible to construct the topic in a certain way. It also limits the other ways in which the topic can be constructed” (Hall 291).

theory and feminist science studies, and what they mean for historical scholarship on children and childhood in the United States.

Part I: The Emergence of Childhood Studies

The publication of Philippe Ariès' *Centuries of Childhood: A Social History of Family Life* in 1960 opened the door for the investigation of childhood as (at least partially) a social construction (King; Cunningham; Gittins; Fass; James et al.). Treating childhood as a discursive category made by adults and foisted upon young people allowed, for the first time, investigation into the attributes and connotations of childhood as something reflective of a particular culture, rather than as something inherent to children themselves. As Hugh Cunningham explains, "it was Ariès' achievement to convince nearly all his readers that childhood had a history: that, over time and in different cultures, both ideas about childhood and the experience of being a child had changed" (Cunningham 1197).² In other words, Ariès's text inspired the first self-reflexive wave of thought about childhood as something other than a universal, natural, biological, and self-explanatory phase of human life.

This research gained momentum in the 1970s and 1980s as many fields in the social sciences realized the study of childhood in the twentieth century had been dominated almost entirely by developmental psychology, family studies, and education studies scholars (James et al. 3). In *Theorizing Childhood*, James et al. identify the time before this momentum as "presociological," while the momentum itself was a "transitional" phase before the

² Diana Gittins summarizes Ariès' introduction of childhood as a social construct in "The Historical Construction of Childhood." As she explains, to call attention to how attitudes towards children have varied over time, eventually resulting in the emergence of childhood, he examined changes in the way children were depicted in medieval and Renaissance European paintings over time. In medieval paintings, he asserted, painters "did not portray childhood as in any way distinct from adulthood" and that children, "when and if they were represented in art, were painted as little adults," thus concluding that children "were not represented as if they were perceived as 'other' or forming part of a distinct social group set apart from adults" (40). He used this representational evidence to argue that childhood did not exist during this period, and did not come into existence until paintings began to show children as distinct from adults through special clothes and child portraits (43).

“sociological” phase that emerged in the 1990s. As James and Prout elaborate in *Constructing and Reconstructing Childhood*, treating childhood as a relative, socially-constructed phenomenon in the “sociological” phase “posed a challenge to...the dominant and dominating conceptual pair of socialization and development [that] represented childhood and children as natural, passive, incompetent and incomplete and in doing so foreclosed a series of important questions for theory and empirical research, framing the field with ideas which in other areas of social science were regarded as obsolete, outmoded or under productive” (viii). During the presociological phase, social scientists did study children, but kept them largely silent regarding their own lives, instead building up a corpus of knowledge about them without their input.

The “sociological” phase of childhood studies was (and is) marked by what James and Prout call the “new” or “emergent” paradigm (James and Prout 2). In contrast to the presociological phase, during which childhood was treated as a completely biological phenomenon, and the transitional phase, during which myriad other disciplines (especially history) began their foray into treating childhood as an object of inquiry, the sociological phase is marked by the consolidation of childhood studies as an academic specialty and a shared commitment across childhood studies scholars to treating childhood as a social construct.

Treating childhood as a social construction in the emergent paradigm entails “exploring the ways in which the immaturity of children is conceived and articulated in particular societies into culturally specific sets of ideas and philosophies, attitudes and practices which combine to define the ‘nature of childhood’” (James and Prout 1). Said differently, one can study childhood by approaching it as the interpretive frame through which infancy and youth are given meaning, as I indicated in my introduction. In addition to treating childhood as a social construct, the emergent paradigm of childhood studies includes five other epistemological, methodological,

and ethical tenets to guide research on children and childhood. First, that childhood is a “variable of social analysis” that cannot be “divorced from other variables such as class, gender, or ethnicity” (James and Prout 8; I am quoting directly from the authors here because I will return to the significance of this point later). Second, that children and their lives are worth studying in their own right; third, that children are agential and thus actively help construct and determine their own lives; fourth, that ethnography is a useful way to study children since it allows them to participate in the data produced about them; and fifth, that studying childhood in this way will inevitably change the category of childhood itself, which is visible through reflexive scholarship. These six tenets have guided research since James and Prout articulated them in the first edition of *Constructing and Reconstructing Childhood* in 1990.

In the decades following the rise of the emergent paradigm, children and childhood have become increasingly popular objects of scholarship in the social sciences and humanities (see, for example, recent collections like *The Children's Table: Childhood Studies and the Humanities* (2013), *Children in Culture, Revisited: Further Approaches to Childhood* (2011), or the 2010 special issue of *Feminist Theory* on the child and childhood in feminist theory) (Duane; Lesnik-Oberstein; Burman and Stacey). Moreover, new fields and subdisciplines, such as children’s geographies and girlhood studies, as well as new methodological approaches, such as researching play, have emerged within childhood studies itself (Breslow 62). Despite this, psychology, medicine, and education – and their discourses about children/through which they produced children – still dominate everyday understandings of young people. For example, as James and Prout explain, the “common parental lament, ‘it’s just a phase s/he’s [*sic*] going through,’ relies heavily on an implicit...model of child development, providing a biological explanation for a breakdown in social relationships” (11). Thus, studying these dominant understandings is still

warranted, especially as they have been taken up by global advocacy groups and NGOs and exported from their sites of origin to places all over the world. For instance, since the 1980s, international agencies such as UNICEF and the World Health Organization have used phrases like “the world’s children” to group together young people from different countries, glossing over the fact that the very definition of children they are using for that grouping, and the rights and changes they are trying to institute by using it, came from denying the humanity of young people in formerly-colonized nations (James and Prout 1). Scholars like Erica Burman (*Developments: Child, Image, Nation*) are raising awareness of this irony, but that recognition is difficult to spread when even the human rights of children are dependent on a naturalized model of biological development (Burman).

The remainder of this exam is devoted to two tasks: examining two major constructs of childhood within Europe and the United States during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and parsing recent responses to those constructs within the field of childhood studies with special attention paid to what those responses mean for historical work on children and childhood. I am structuring my analysis this way for several reasons. As I have shown above, the dominant constructions of childhood from this time are still present and shaping policy, healthcare, education, and more; understanding their continuing importance entails understanding where they came from, why, and what power differentials they contain and disguise. In addition, the emergent paradigm of childhood studies, now in existence for 30 years, contains some unanswered questions. For instance, how can historians account for children – their bodies and selves – beyond just the discursive construct of childhood? What does it mean to think of childhood not as a “variable of social analysis” that intersects with race, gender, and class, but as something that *mutually constitutes* those categories (Breslow)? Ethnography is certainly a

useful method for contemporary research, but how should historians account for children's agency, especially when the very idea of agency has historically come at the expense of young people? Finally, how do new theorizations of childhood from scholars in diverse disciplines impact children, and are they helpful?³ I cannot answer all of these questions within the bounds of this exam, but I believe they are important for me to grapple with as I formulate my project.

Part II: The Historical Construction of the Innocent Child

Children have not always been considered innocent. However, since the figure of the innocent child emerged, this conception has dominated questions of how children should be reared, housed, educated, protected, tried in court, and used (as laborers, inspiration, or redemptive forces) by adults in the United States and elsewhere. The innocent child, as Henry Jenkins explains in "Childhood Innocence and Other Modern Myths," is a myth, a figure that surreptitiously transforms cultural ideas about childhood into natural facts, such that ideas of children as ignorant (of race relations or gender differences), pure (without desires, sexual or otherwise), and in need of protection from corrupting forces appear as self-evidently true (Jenkins 15). How did youth become associated with innocence? Where did the innocent child come from, and what has it done to structure the United States?

In this section, I trace the initial emergence of the innocent child in the U.S. I begin with the depraved, evil child in the eighteenth-century Calvinist teachings, showing how the blank and innocent child emerged in contrast as professionals in the U.S. took up Enlightenment and Romantic philosophies about childhood. Next, I explore how those conceptions were maintained,

³ Breslow summarizes the debates that have emerged in the wake of the new paradigm, including "whether or not the new paradigm over-emphasizes the split between 'culture' and 'nature' in ways that reify both," "the reification of authenticity stemming from the child's voice," "the racial and colonial implications of the uneven distribution of the paradigm's interrogation of childhoods (primarily in the global south), rather than childhood (in the global north)," and "the negotiations of privilege and power in doing research from a privileged adult position" (62).

reinforced, and debated in the nineteenth century United States, paying close attention to the nuances and contradictions within the evolving ideas of children's inherent innocence, how to prove its existence, what should be done about it, and the connection between innocence, race, and gender. Finally, I examine some of the consequences of the power given to the figure of the innocent child, including child labor laws, the use of children as agents of purification, and the emergence of modern concepts of sexuality and eroticism.

The Depraved Infant, Locke's *Tabula Rasa*, and Rousseau's Natural Child

In the United States, childhood innocence did not emerge until after the colonial period. As Robin Bernstein explains in *Racial Innocence: Performing American Childhood from Slavery to Civil Rights*, during the colonial period, Calvinists believed in the "doctrine of infant depravity" in which children were "born with original sin" (4). Under this doctrine, children were inherently sinful and sexual because they had not yet learned to control their desires; in contrast, adults were nearer to salvation because they used rationality and self-discipline to manage their impulses, sexual or otherwise.⁴ Parents' biggest fear at this time was that children would die before they could achieve Christian salvation, dooming them to "eternal hellfire." High infant mortality rates accordingly "motivated parents to limit children's sinful behaviors by any means, and as early as possible, because a child's soul literally depended on control of the body" (36). As Karen Calvert reports in *Children in the House: The Material Culture of Early Childhood, 1600-1900*, white parents attempted to make their children stand and walk as early as possible, generally hurrying them out of infancy as quickly as possible to mitigate their physical and moral vulnerability. This attitude shifted dramatically in the late 1700s and early 1800s, as I will report momentarily, but I want to draw attention to one important trend that emerged during

⁴ Breslow notes in *The Theory and Practice of Childhood* that ideas of the child as evil or sinful also came from the work of Thomas Hobbes, and the teachings of Puritanism (44).

the colonial era: saving child's souls via pain. Inflicting pain on children lost favor with time, but the relationship between children and visible suffering, originally forged during this era, has remained salient in the United States ever since.

By the beginning of the 1800s, Calvinism had retreated, replaced by Protestantism after the Great Awakening of the 1730s and 40s.⁵ Child-rearing practices also changed dramatically, as white parents began to receive entirely different information about children from doctors, child-care authorities, and popular culture. Because children were no longer at risk for eternal damnation, adults began to theorize about childhood as a distinct phase of life, rather than merely a vulnerability. Professionals in the United States turned to European scholars who had written about childhood in the centuries prior, latching notably onto John Locke's 1693 *Some Thoughts Concerning Education*⁶ and Jean-Jacques Rousseau's 1762 *Emile*. Both philosophers argued for increased freedom, less restriction, and less protection for children, but in very different ways.

For Locke, children were a *tabula rasa*, a blank slate onto which adults could inscribe their knowledge, skills, and attitudes (Breslow 39). This conception of children fit within the European Enlightenment ideal of rationality; children, although entering the world as blank slates, "could, with guidance and training, develop into rational human beings" (Kehily 5). However, this guidance had a firm limit. While children did need guidance, they should also be left alone, as they would "naturally outgrow many of the ordinary deficiencies of early childhood without parental intervention" (Calvert 60). Thus, Locke's teachings set up a contradiction that left white parents to walk a thin line between directing children's growth appropriately and

⁵ In fact, according to Bernstein, anti-Calvinists even used the idea of infant damnation as a way to criticize the Calvinists, calling it a "grotesquerie, an example of Calvinist excess" (Bernstein 254).

⁶ Calvert traces Locke's influence on the United States through the work of Dr. William Cadogan, a London physician who quoted Locke at length in his childrearing manuals. Cadogan's manuals were taken up by Benjamin Franklin, who included an excerpt from Cadogan's work in the *Pennsylvania Gazette* in 1749, thus introducing Locke's ideas to the American public. Additionally, Cadogan influenced Dr. William Buchan, whose books became the definitive authority on childrearing in the United States during the late 1700s (Calvert 59–60).

leaving them to their “natural growth.” However difficult Locke’s advice proved to follow, he did succeed in moving prominent U.S. ideas of children away from childhood as a period of vulnerability and deficiency and to childhood as a time in which children could, and should, be molded. Not coincidentally, these teachings led to the rise of child-centered education in the United States.

In contrast to Locke’s blank slate, Rousseau theorized the child as innately innocent, not as moldable but as enviably close to the freedom of nature. Parents no longer needed to protect their children from threats that would derail their growth. Instead, childhood was now seen as a period of robust health and spontaneity; children, unconstrained by adult civilization, would revel in their childishness and eventually follow a natural path to adulthood (Jenkins 17). In *Erotic Innocence: The Culture of Child Molesting*, James Kincaid explains that the Romantic idealization of the child was “everything the sophisticated adult was not, everything the rational man of the Enlightenment was not” (Kincaid 15). He continues:

The child was gifted with spontaneity, imaginative quickness, and a closeness to God...this new thing...was deployed as a political and philosophical agent, a weapon to assault what had been taken as virtues: adulthood, sophistication, rational moderation, judicious adjustment to the ways of the world. The child was used to deny these virtues, to eliminate them and substitute in their place a set of inversions: innocence, purity, emptiness (15).

In this description, it is clear that Rousseau’s Romantic child marks the beginning of the particular kind of childhood innocence that has permeated conceptions of the child in the United States since the 1800s. This innocence, as Kincaid emphasizes, is not just a characteristic of children, but a potent fantasy for use and manipulation by adults.

The Power of Innocence

Nineteenth century Romanticism, especially perpetuated in the United States by sermons and child-reading manuals that quoted the work of William Wordsworth, gave children a special

spirituality; their purity meant they could understand theology in a way that was no longer possible for adults (Bernstein 4). In fact, in direct contrast to the Calvinists, by 1832, American parents believed that “children were virtually angels incarnate who, should they die in infancy, would transmute back to their angelic state” (Calvert 105). Some theologians took this idea even further, claiming that the “near perfection of the infant state made children not only distinct from, but actually superior to, adults” (105). This conception of children reversed the developmental narrative put forth by Locke, and also contradicted the paradigm of biological development that was emerging out of the natural sciences and medicine during the same period. In fact, the Romantic child was the opposite of a child in development: as Calvert explains, “life now began on the pinnacle of sanctified infancy, then slipped steadily downward, the adult, battered by the exigencies of daily life, inevitably succumbing to compromise and corruption. Maturity and wisdom seemed less desirable than innocence and joy” (105).

As a result of this angelic purity, adults in proximity to Romantic children could benefit from their presence. Adults who had strayed from the state of grace into which children were born could access it again through their children if they lived a righteous life. Calvert tells of “dozens of books, periodicals, and temperance tracts [that] contained stories of adults saved by the intercession or example of an innocent child” (107). Women especially benefitted from the presence of a child; childhood gave mothers an opportunity to “render selfless service and devotion to the helpless babe” (108). The figure of the child became a savior, a savior of “the father from drunkenness or selfishness, the mother from purposelessness, and the home from emptiness” (109). Despite this rhetoric, however, the idealization of the innocent child did not necessarily improve the lives of actual children. Instead, it was far more common to use the figure of the innocent child to bolster national and/or class agendas.

For instance, in *Dependent States: The Child's Part in Nineteenth-Century American Culture*, Karen Sánchez-Eppler explores the popular temperance-era story plot of a drunken father creeping into bed with his young child, being cured of his alcoholism through the encounter, and eventually being converted into a temperate man. This scene has overt incestuous connotations, yet the narrative of the story, bolstered by the sentimental investment in the redeeming power of the innocent child, is alchemical: the father is transformed through the child's purity. It is hard to imagine that these stories reflected the reality children faced at the hands of their parents. Instead, Sánchez-Eppler explains, their redemptive plots were used to uphold structures of capitalism, connecting the intimate lives of the family to the fate of the nation. The innocent child's power did nothing to serve her, but the reform of her father ensured he could continue to contribute to the national economy. This creates, Sánchez-Eppler argues, a form of "disciplinary intimacy" in which the innocent child actually imposes domestic order, rather than merely being an object of discipline (74). In sum, the "salvific effects of a child's love" function as a mode of social control, benefitting larger power structures dependent on the model of the nuclear family.

The innocent child benefitted the power structures of capitalism and patriarchy, but those power structures did not directly help real children in return. Instead, the later 1800s saw a continued national investment in childhood innocence and the multiple contradictions housed within it.

The Borders of Innocence

In the mid and late 1800s, adults had to grapple with the question of what made a child innocent. The Romantic conception of the innocent child held that all children were born into a state of grace, but race relations in the U.S., including chattel slavery, troubled this ideal. Black

children had to be exempted from the figure of the innocent child in order to maintain its power and purity: if adults acknowledged that Black children were, like all children, innocent, then their enslavement and postbellum segregation would be revealed as unthinkable cruel.⁷ This led to, as Robin Bernstein elaborates in *Racial Innocence*, two related effects. First, innocence became redefined as ignorance in white children: “sentimental childlike innocence manifested through the performed transcendence of social categories of class, gender, and, most importantly...race” (6). “Innocence,” she continues, “was not a literal state of being unraced but was, rather, the performance of not noticing, a performed claim of slipping beyond social categories.” Race-blind innocence was a way of turning away from the parts of the world that contradicted the image of the pure, tender child. By performing it, white children upheld and naturalized a racial structure while white adults could plausibly claim that children had no ability to perpetuate racism since they could not see it. In this way, the idea of childhood innocence “mystified racial ideology by hiding it in plain sight” (Bernstein 18).

The other effect of the contradiction between the obligation to protect childhood innocence and the inhumane treatment of Black children was that representations of Black children in popular culture became charged sites in which adults made arguments for or against the humanity of Black children. This dynamic can be seen most clearly in the character of Topsy from Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, published in 1852, was the best-selling novel of the nineteenth century, but, as Bernstein argues, there was no time in which it existed only as a novel: it existed as “parlor performance, prose, poetry, visual art, and material culture” in addition to literature (13). Stowe’s Black characters, Topsy among them,

⁷ According to Bernstein, the ability to feel pain during this time essentially served “as a wedge that split childhood innocence, as a cultural formation, into distinct black and white trajectories,” a binary that “largely erased nonblack children of color from popular representation” (Bernstein 33). As such, I focus here on the opposition of Black and white children, which I acknowledge leaves out non-Black Children of Color.

became well-recognized, familiar presences in late nineteenth century America, bringing any meanings attached to them into both the public and private spheres. Thus, controlling Topsy's meaning became a way of quickly and efficiently spreading ideas about Black children's humanity.

In Bernstein's analysis, Stowe's novel was originally intended to prove Topsy's innocence and thus humanity by comparing her to the white children in the novel, demonstrating their similarities and revealing how slavery was responsible for the differences between them. Topsy's innocence is shown in two ways. First, she is repeatedly injured and shown in pain, which contradicts the stereotype of Black people as impervious to pain; in Topsy's suffering, Stowe proves that Black children and white children share the same ability to feel pain, and thus must be fundamentally the same. Second, later in the story, Topsy shares a similar fate to the drunken fathers of the temperance stories: although she is objectified when she is purchased in the middle of the novel, when she is later exposed to the affection of a pure, innocent, and highly emotive white child (the character of Little Eva), she is transformed, saved, and returned to full, humanized childhood (47). Through the same "disciplinary intimacy," Topsy is revealed to have been dehumanized only by slavery, not some quality that is inherent to her; further, she, and all children hardened by slavery, are redeemable because they are children (48).⁸

However, this subtle, humanizing message within the novel was overridden by performances of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* in which Topsy was depicted as unaffected by her punishment. In one adaption by George I. Aiken, Topsy responds to violence by *laughing and singing* about her invulnerability, inviting the audience to laugh along with her at her (unfelt) pain (49-50). As Bernstein explains, these performances "cultivated the seeds of minstrelsy that

⁸ See Nazera Sadiq Wright's *Black Girlhood in the Nineteenth Century* for more on the figure of the Black girl in African American literature (Wright).

Stowe had sowed in the character while exterminating the innocence that Stowe had insisted was Topsy's birthright" (16). This new character, "emptied of innocence, became the prototype for the pickaninny, an imagined dehumanized black juvenile and a staple of U.S. popular culture" in advertising, children's literature, animation, and film. The pickaninny, dehumanized version of Topsy, "contrasted with an angelic white child, argued in a polygenetic vein for irreconcilable differences between black and white youth...in many cases, angelic white children were contrasted with pickaninnies so grotesque as to suggest that only white children *were* children" (16). Although Stowe intended for Topsy to prove that Black children belonged within the boundaries of innocent, Romantic childhood, her character was used by white adults to argue the opposite, providing evidence not only for the exclusion of Black children from the category of the child, but also for the argument that Black and white people were entirely separate species. Unfortunately, the figure of the pickaninny resolved one of the tensions within the construct of the innocent child. If the child was defined through its ability to suffer, which proved its innocence, then insensate Black children did not trouble this construct. This legacy, as Breslow shows in his dissertation *The Theory and Practice of Childhood: Interrogating Childhood as a Technology of Power*, still haunts the U.S. today (Breslow, see especially chapter 4 "'The 'Fresh Faced' Boy in the Red T-Shirt': Imaging Trayvon Martin Amidst the Negation of Black Childhood").

The Rise of the Priceless Child

Black children were not the only kind of children to trouble the conception of the innocent child in need of protection from the corruption of outside forces. The large number of poor child laborers and unhoused children (or "street urchins") in the U.S. also contradicted this

construct. How could parents force their children to labor – essentially forcing them into an adult role – when childhood was so precious?

The answer, as Viviana Zelizer details in *Pricing the Priceless Child: The Changing Social Value of Children*, was to end child labor in the middle classes, and, eventually, the lower classes as well. Between 1870 and 1930, there was a “profound transformation in the economic and sentimental value of children” (Zelizer 1). Whereas in the beginning of the century, children were expected to contribute to the household, by the end, they were meant to be economically “worthless” but sentimentally “priceless:” their worth shifted from what they could produce for the family to their mere existence as precious members of their families and society. While some authors prior to Zelizer argued that this shift could be explained by changes in the economy, job distribution, and family structure, Zelizer finds in her study that the speed and intensity with which this shift happened went beyond rational, economic explanations. Instead, she argues, the expulsion of children from labor was part of a “cultural process of ‘sacralization’ of children’s lives,” in which children were invested with such extreme sentimental meaning that it overrode economic rationale and sense (11). Indeed, by the early twentieth century, the very idea that children had some economic value was taboo: “the new normative idea of the child as an exclusively emotional and affective asset precluded instrumental or fiscal considerations...the economic and sentimental value of children were thereby declared to be radically incompatible...[and] properly loved children, regardless of social class, belonged in a domesticated, nonproductive world of lessons, games, and token money” (11).⁹

⁹ Bernstein’s work provides a useful addendum to Zelizer’s conclusions. Childhood innocence did not work the same way for Black and white children in regard to their labor. She uses two representations of girls picking cotton to make this point. One representation is a Cottolene (a lard substitute made from cottonseed oil) advertisement in which a cherub-like Black girl smiles at the viewer while hugging a bundle of cotton like a pet. The other is a photograph by Lewis Hine, who worked for the National Child Labor Committee, of a small white girl looking miserably downward in a cotton field with a large, partially full sack laying on the ground next to her. Bernstein argues that these images do the work of making a Black child’s labor seem natural and unproblematic, while

The priceless child depended on the innocent child for its existence. Zelizer details the way child labor became framed as “unjustified parental exploitation” of children, rhetoric that relied directly on the idea that childhood is a precious time to be protected, not interfered with by adults (61). Eventually, the figure of the innocent child also led to reforms in the justice system (with the development of a separate juvenile court for children to be tried as non-adults) and the education system (as early education, and eventually even education for teenagers, became mandatory), although such topics are beyond the scope of this exam (See Block; Curry; Neem for more on the rise of public education; see Coupet; Stockton 40–48; Tanenhaus for more on the emergence of juvenile delinquency and juvenile courts). The legacy of the innocent child can be seen in many of the U.S. systems set up to protect children today. However, even within these systems, it is clear that “protecting” children from forces that might interfere with their innocence (such as sexual content, which I will discuss momentarily) is ideologically more important than protecting them from things that threaten their actual lives (such as poverty) (Kincaid 108, 160, 282; Stockton 67).

A Childrearing Paradox: Protecting Innocence, Ensuring Development

Zelizer documents the way defenders of child labor exploited another paradox within the construction of childhood innocence to argue their case at the beginning of the twentieth century. Within this paradox, childhood may be a special time to be protected, but at the same time, *it is the parents’ job to ensure that the child eventually becomes a functioning citizen at the end of childhood*. Child labor advocates claimed that child labor was safer than “child-idleness:” labor early in childhood was “nostalgically defended as the irreplaceable stepping stone in the life

protesting the use of an innocent white child as a laborer. They thus “emblemize the flexibility of ideology at the conjunction of childhood and innocence;” this flexibility enabled widely divergent political agendas (such as for and against child labor) to enlist the figure of the innocent child for their purposes (Bernstein 33).

course of American self-made men” (Zelizer 67). Although they eventually lost the battle to maintain child labor, these advocates made clear one of the largest fault lines within the construction of childhood innocence: children must grow up, so their innocence cannot be protected forever. This puts adults in the contradictory position of both leaving children alone and monitoring and guiding their growth towards non-childhood. As Kathryn Bond Stockton phrases it in *The Queer Child*, “Adults walk the line – the impossible line – of keeping the child at once what it is (what adults are not) and leading it toward what it cannot (at least, as itself) ever be (what adults are)” (Stockton 30–31). Said differently by Henry Jenkins, “This contradiction runs through our modern conception of childhood innocence – we desire it and we want to help children to move beyond it” (Jenkins 16).

The tension between wanting to preserve childhood while also wanting to usher children out of it manifested in intense surveillance and discipline in the name of maintaining children’s innocence and “freedom.” Nowhere is this contradiction clearer than in the treatment of sexuality in the innocent child. In *Erotic Innocence*, James Kincaid argues that “the development of the modern child and modern ideas on sexuality grew up over the last two centuries hand-in hand, and they have remained close friends” (14). The connection between the child and sexuality is made through innocence. Innocence, in nineteenth century theology, was defined by virginity, a purity from sex to be maintained until marriage. If innocence is defined by lack of sex(uality), and children are defined by their innocence, children then become defined by their lack of sexuality as well. What was at stake, then, was childhood itself: should children lose their innocence through sexual contamination, they would lose the very thing that made them children. Calvert summarizes: “If social perceptions of children were predicated on a belief that their perfectly innocent and pure natures, then anything that compromised that innocence

destroyed the image and the child. The loss of innocence was nothing less than the loss of childhood, the loss of a state of grace and promise. Mothers and fathers were obsessive in their zeal to protect their children” (136).

The result of this “zeal” to protect the innocent child was a complete rearranging of domestic space and ideals. Every person and every object threatened a sexual awakening. Children should be dressed in androgynous costumes to maintain their ignorance about sex and signal to adults that they were charmingly innocent (Calvert 103). But they still needed to learn to be little boys or girls, so they should be given sex-specific toys (110). Only boys got rocking horses, bicycles, and seesaws; “the straddle position, parents believed, threatened the sexual innocence of their young daughters” (114). For the upper class, servants and baby nurses could help ensure children were observed at all times to keep them out of harm’s way. Yet was a stranger an appropriate and safe influence? Some parents saw increasingly nurses, especially those from different classes and/or races, as potential child contaminants (122).

This racialized fear over lost childhood innocence was compounded by another fracture in the figure of the Romantic child. According to Rousseau, children were close to nature. But how close was too close? Where was the line between child and savage? As Calvert explains, “the fear that something might compromise the innocence of their little ones was always present, for parents believed there was a darker side to the nature of children” (136). Regardless of the origin of this “darker side,” too much time spent with servants and nurses was a surefire way to encourage the savage child to emerge and the civilized child to regress.

In *Race and the Education of Desire*, Ann Laura Stoler expands on Foucault’s work in *The History of Sexuality, Volume 1* to show how domestic servants and nursemaids played a crucial role in the development of nineteenth century discourses on child sexuality (Stoler 137–

38). Foucault focused on the “war against masturbation,” which he argued was meant to “produce new ‘local centers’ of power-knowledge, ‘lines of penetration’ that allowed more intimate surveillances of children and their guardians in public institutions and in the home” (139). This certainly did happen during the panic over masturbation; by blaming parents for not preventing masturbation, the state gained additional control over intimate and family relations. However, Stoler argues, discourses on child sexuality went well beyond this point, focusing on “the more general lack of self-control, civility, and restrained desire that children, in their ‘savage’-like behavior, displayed” (145).

The housekeeping manuals, childrearing guides, and pedagogical and medical texts that warned parents about their children’s lack of self-control attributed this same characteristic to domestic servants. Resultingly, not only were domestic servants framed as threats to children’s innocence (Stoler pinpoints a number of stories and manuals in which servants either supposedly masturbated near children or helped children learn to masturbate), but if children and domestic servants shared certain “savage” characteristics, then in order to become a proper adult, children needed to be raised to overcome these characteristics. Growing up, then, was implicitly white. Through the innocent child, “becoming adult and bourgeois meant distinguishing oneself from that which was uncivilized, lower-class,” and non-white (151). For Stoler, childrearing in the nineteenth century was a practice in which discourses on the nation, race, and development converged, linking questions of sexuality to much larger forces.

The figure of the innocent child continues to structure large parts of American society, culture, and politics from the 1800s to the present. Childhood and innocence are so discursively entangled that they have come to constitute and define one another. The loss of one becomes the loss of both. However, the innocent child contains many contradictions within it. Especially

difficult to navigate is the obligation for parents to preserve childhood as a unique, special phase of life while simultaneously ensuring children eventually move beyond it. I will return to this point in part IV, but for the moment, I want to turn to a second construct of the child, a construct that depended directly on the innocent child for its meaning and significance: the developing child. As I will show, ideas of child development take up many of the boundaries around the category of childhood established within the figure of the innocent child, especially boundaries forged along racial lines. Childhood innocence becomes a driving force in protecting appropriate development for white children. Simultaneously, Black children are consigned to a continual evolutionary past and other non-Black Children of Color are valuable only insofar as they can approach or approximate whiteness.

Part III: The Developing Child

As I mentioned in part I, the study of childhood in the twentieth century has been dominated by the concepts of development and socialization (James and Prout viii). The idea that children grow up and learn to become proper adults through personal, cultural, and institutional training is taken for granted in the present United States, guiding psychology, pediatrics, education, policy, and more. Development, as James and Prout explain, is “essentially an evolutionary model: the child developing into an adult represents a progression from simplicity to complexity of thought, from irrational to rational behavior” (10). As I will show in this section, viewing biological immaturity as the beginning of a teleological, progressive trajectory has its origin in nineteenth century evolutionary thought, not from Darwin, but from two theorists whose theories on evolution have fallen largely out of favor: Jean-Baptiste Lamarck and Herbert Spencer.

Beginning with these theorists lets me show how the idea of child development is intrinsically connected to race and colonialism, as growing “up” has historically meant growing away from primitivity (something I alluded to in the previous section). Through the theory of recapitulation, in which “fetuses literally retrace the development of their ancestors in the womb, only fully reaching the evolutionary plane of their parents at puberty,” child development and species evolution were made functionally equivalent (Schuller 58). When recapitulation fell out of favor in the early 1900s, it was replaced with the idea of biological plasticity (an idea that is still very popular in the U.S.), which maintained the inherent whiteness of growing up; as Julian Gill-Peterson shows in *Histories of the Transgender Child* and Kyla Schuller shows in *The Biopolitics of Feeling*, doctors and scientists were only invested in bodily malleability in children for whom racial perfection could be achieved, meaning only white or white-proximate children.

The idea of a linearly developing child is historical, not ontological. My goal in tracing the construction of the developing child is to draw attention to the historical situatedness of this figure. However, the idea of child development is deeply entrenched in nearly every knowledge-producing apparatus of the twentieth century. As James and Prout argue, it is reinforced through (and reinforces) discourses of rationality, naturalness, and universality, which help carry development far beyond its origins and shut down other potential discursive paths, rendering it difficult to see beyond or around (10). As such, what I attempt here is a brief examination of some of the ways the developing child was constructed to suit the needs of white American imperialists and eugenicists, as well as what that construction might mean for historical studies of children in the U.S.

Lamarck's Evolutionary Theory and the Developing Child

As I mentioned above, before Darwinian theories of evolution became dominant, multiple other evolutionary theories were popular in the U.S. and elsewhere. In *The Biopolitics of Feeling*, Kyla Schuller devotes a chapter to the “American School of Evolution,” a group of U.S. scientists who eschewed Darwin’s hypothesis that “species change occur[ed] through random variation and the struggle for existence” in favor of Jean-Baptiste Lamarck’s, which argued that “organisms’ pursuit of pleasure and avoidance of pain determines the course of evolution” (35). The consequences of a such an evolutionary theory are threefold. First, an organism’s environment, chosen or otherwise, determines its life course; what it is exposed to – or what impresses upon it, to use Schuller’s term – determine how it develops. Second, those acquired characteristics can be passed down to offspring. And third, different kinds of people have different degrees of impressibility, meaning different capacities at which they can be affected by their environment. As such, under a Lamarckian theory of evolution, race is not necessarily fixed, as different people can develop down different paths depending on their exposures, but certain races are more impressible than others, so their developmental endpoints vary based on that capacity.

Lamarck’s theories helped the American School create a racial hierarchy, not by phenotype, but by proposed capacity to respond to the environment, including publicly circulating sentiments. They argued that “emotional response to these physical sensations simultaneously impress[ed] the brain with ideas, creating memory and mental development” (36–37). Civilized people were able to receive the impressions of their environment and modulate their responses to them; these responses in turn became grounds for the self. This idea of civility is contrasted with primitivity, in which the body is more highly penetrable – sensations

pass through the body without sticking, therefore leaving the primitive person with no ability to recognize or respond to their surroundings. This inability to respond to the environment then became, in Lamarckian theory, an inability to properly control oneself. If “an emotional response to a physical sensation...motivates the body’s movement and subsequent development,” then those who respond properly will develop towards perfection, while those who cannot will, at best, fail to develop, and at worst, regress (48). Races emerge from impressibility; people are grouped based on “an allegedly differential capacity to be affected over time,” and racism then “entails managing the variability of the species as it evolves by regulating the interactions among the species’ members” (50).

For the American School, child development depended on three factors: group receptivity to the environment, individual variation of impressibility within the group, and the environment itself. Wealthy white adults in the late 1800s, especially those motivated to engage in charitable actions, saw it as their responsibility to manage the environment around potentially redeemable children.¹⁰ This led to the emergence of what Schuller calls “biophilanthropy,” the “elite and middle-class effort to impress a new heritable endowment on the bodies and minds of the children of the poor and otherwise allegedly uncivilized in order to render their labor profitable to the population as a whole” (136). Biophilanthropy works “via the steady accumulation of impressions that will redirect a class or race from foreordained death and force it to persist, as a newly proletarianized group, for the economic and moral health of the settler colonial project.” In other words, if certain impressible children could be exposed to the right environment, they could develop beyond the circumstances of their birth, into useful, proper citizens, effectively “rewriting their hereditary material” (136). White philanthropists, armed with Lamarckian ideas,

¹⁰ Charity for and towards children became extremely popular during this era as their sentimental value increased. See Zelizer chapter six “From Baby Farms to Black-Market Babies: The Changing Market for Children” for more.

essentially saw taking children out of “inappropriate environments” (and often away from their parents) as “taking evolution into their own hands,” since the children they reformed would then pass down their acquired characteristics to the next generation.

Schuller argues that there are two major examples of nineteenth century biophilanthropy towards children in U.S. history that depended on which children were considered redeemable based on their race: boarding schools for Native American youth, and the New York City orphan trains, also known as the Children’s Aid Society’s Emigration Plan.¹¹ These groups were chosen based on the American School’s ideas that Native Americans were “the evolutionary origins of the civilized races that could be nudged out of stasis and into the forward movement of time by whites” and that children of certain European¹² immigrants were “primitive beings who were rapidly becoming plastic, flexible Americans by virtue of their birth and residence in the United States” (55, 142). In both cases, these children were removed from their homes and subjected to discipline and appropriate impressions that would “transform” their racial bodies into (more) civilized ones, thus inseparably combining the idea of child development with (aspirations of) whiteness and civility.

For white (Anglo-Saxon) children, theories of impressibility had an opposite effect: because white children were also impressible, they had to be, as I mentioned in the previous

¹¹ Although Native American boarding schools and the New York City orphan trains were the largest biophilanthropy projects during the nineteenth century, Lamarckian ideas spurred the development of institutions for the improvement of children from many races. Schuller discusses how “Reconstruction-era campaigns to provide educational and religious training to black southern youth, from the Hampton Institute to the schools established by the Freedmen’s Bureau, operated according to similar social evolutionary principles. Over the next few decades, schools aiming to transform black and Indian youth into assets of the middle classes’ capital accumulation, rather than threats to civilization, counted among their pupils children from a variety of groups that now fell under U.S. imperial governance, including Puerto Ricans, Filipinos, and other Pacific Islanders” (161–62).

¹² Charles Loring Brace, who founded the Children’s Aid Society, believed that “peoples not of Northern European descent generally lacked the capacities for self-control...and thus failed to moderate their sensations and acquire judicious modifications.” This is most likely why the society “restricted participation to Irish, Italian, German, and Jewish youth,” since they were “the only children whom Brace regarded as worthy biological investments” (Schuller 145).

section, protected from corrupting forces. Interestingly, as Calvert describes, white, bourgeois parents were constantly worried that their children would inherit their acquired imperfections and sins; “the nineteenth-century family perceived itself as a close biological unit, the sum of each member’s thoughts and actions permanently affecting future progeny and linking them all together” (136, 138). If parents were imperfect, then each generation was accumulating an increasing number of vices and corruptions. In other words, Lamarckian theory actually predicted *degeneration*, rather than increased civility, for white children if parents were not vigilant about what forces children were exposed to. Masturbation, as Calvert explains, became an ideal scapegoat for parents’ fears about their children inheriting their flaws: it gave them “something to blame for their children’s defects or shortcomings besides themselves” (140). As a result, children were placed in individual beds, in separate rooms, and in footed night-dress pajamas, isolating them from servants, siblings, parents, and anyone else who might expose them to masturbation or sex. Here again, the figure of the developing child, premised on the innocent child, demanded disciplining to become fully white. Individual, nation, and species were brought together in the Lamarckian developing child.

However, Lamarck’s theories fell out of favor in the early 1900s, as Gregor Mendel’s work on genetics was rediscovered and new ideas of innate and immutable heredity gained momentum (Schuller 167). Acquired characteristics – and the forces that produced them – lost their power to shape the future. However, another evolutionary theory provided scientists with a way of rejecting the Darwin’s proposal of random variation-driven progress. The figure of the developing child provided a useful metaphor for ideas of human species development, teleological growth towards perfection, and, by extension, justification for colonialism, so scientists and other professionals were eager to embrace an evolutionary theory that maintained

this metaphor. In *Figurations: Child, Bodies, Worlds*, Claudia Castañeda details Herbert Spencer's "developmental evolution," which provided the metaphorical link European and American scientists needed to maintain their treatment of themselves, their children, colonized peoples, and colonized children.

Spencer's Evolutionary Theory and the Developing Child

In her first chapter, Castañeda argues that, in nineteenth-century scientific discourses, "the child-body was used to conjure other kinds of bodies in the time and space of a 'global' human history" (14). Said differently, the child appears in scientific texts as "as a developing body through which stories of human development are narrated" – the child is figured as a site wherein the entirety of human evolution, from prehistoric to pinnacle, plays out at the scale of the individual body (17). The child's developing body not only represented evolutionary drama through metaphor, but actually materialized it through the process of recapitulation, a process in which "an individual organism's embryonic development recapitulates the species' development through the ages" (Castañeda 39; Gould 142–48). Ernst Haeckel, the German zoologist responsible for the idea of recapitulation, provided the pithy phrase "ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny," to explain that "an individual, in its own growth, passes through a series of stages representing *adult* ancestral forms in their correct order – an individual, in short, climbs its own family tree" (Gould 143).

Recapitulation depends on the idea of developmental evolution, which does not align with Darwinian evolution. Developmental evolution lays out a specific and predictable trajectory of change over time. In contrast, Darwinian evolution, or evolution by natural selection, occurs randomly in response to particular environments and its trajectory cannot be predicted (20). Scientists and others looking for ways to improve the species eschewed the theory of natural

selection because it could not be manipulated, nor did it connect individual growth to the species. Thus, a different theory and a different theorist were needed.

In developmental evolution, the idea of individual physiological growth is transposed from one person to humanity as a whole; this transposition then enables the idea that humanity, endowed with the potential for growth, can be organized around a developmental growth trajectory just like the individual. Championed by “social Darwinist” Herbert Spencer, developmental evolution worked in concert with what Castañeda calls “temporal distancing,” in which “chronologically contemporary and spatially distant peoples” are placed along a “temporal trajectory, such that the record of humanity across the globe is progressively ordered in historical time” (13). As Schuller phrases it:

Frozen somewhere near the dawn of civilization, [B]lacks, Native Americans, Asians, and other racial groups formed different stages of “the infancy of civilized man,” which nonetheless persisted into the present. They were the roots of humanity, the base from which the civilized had branched off and surpassed. The primitive would retrace the evolution of lizards and other animals in the womb: they would become human at birth but remain frozen in the same developmental state as their parents, even as their body seemingly matured (Schuller 58).

Developmental evolution and temporal distancing together yielded species-level ideas like certain peoples being part of the “childhood” of humanity, in need of guidance and protection from “adult” races in order to complete their development. On the individual level, it also enabled comparisons between civilized children and uncivilized adults. As Stephen Gould recaps in *The Mismeasure of Man*, Spencer and other recapitulation theorists believed that “the *adults* of *inferior* groups must be like *children* of *superior* groups, for the child represents a primitive adult ancestor. If adult blacks and women are like white male children, then they are living representatives of an ancestral stage in the evolution of white males” (144, original emphasis). The field of psychology also extended these conclusions to mental capacity, with figures like G.

Stanley Hall (the U.S.'s leading psychologist) arguing that "savages and women are emotionally like children" (145). Thus, the figure of the developing child provided justification for imperial projects. Much has been written about Rudyard Kipling's racist poem "The White Man's Burden," but its true meaning can only be understood in the context of developmental evolution and recapitulation: the "new-caught sullen peoples" he describes, "half devil and half child," were made children through the figure of the developing child (148).

However, not all developing children were the same. A normal – or ideal – developmental trajectory turned the white boy child into a white man. All other children displayed some less-than-ideal, essentially "pathological," developmental trajectory, leading to the heterogeneity of the world's adult population. Spencer's writings detailed how "other" children could be compared to the normally developing child not just by their developmental endpoint, but also by the rate at which they developed (30). Different races were constituted through different overall rates of development as well as different kinds of development, which also proceeded at different rates (37). This allowed, for example, for sex differentiation *within* a particular race; for example, because girls developed more quickly than boys, their development would end sooner, producing a sex hierarchy within each race. Differential development also led to theories that the brain and the body could develop out of sync with one another, with intellectual and sexual development pitted against one another in a zero-sum struggle for existence. The idea that sexual development could outpace intellectual development, or outcompete it for limited resources, is one way that Black children (especially Black girls) were hypersexualized.

Finally, in Spencer's theory, the function of any given body part could explain its structure (23). In other words, if a scientist or doctor wanted to measure development, he could

measure skull size and shape, since the size and complexity of the brain (function) would determine the size and shape of the skull (structure). Accordingly, phrenology (and anthropometry more generally) became a way of charting developmental trajectories and hierarchizing developmental states. In the U.S., there was “an explosion of anthropometric examinations carried out by physicians on black soldiers during the U.S. Civil War, and then on the newly emancipated black population in the post-Civil War” to “measure mental development as a function of the developing brain” (Castañeda 30). This phrenological data was then compared to data from other populations, notably white children. When U.S. race scientists “found” that the skulls of Black soldiers most closely resembled the skulls of white children based on their techniques, they reasserted the accuracy of their developmental and recapitulatory theories, claiming that “whereas the white (male) child was a normally developing body, ‘the Negro’s’ path through a series of brain-types traced the normal developmental trajectory in a pathological form” (35). This shows, Castañeda argues, the “paradoxical flexibility inherent in the apparently rigid concept of development:” “savages [and other Others] were made developmentally equivalent to children, who were made developmentally equivalent to savages figured as children” (26).

Both Lamarckian and Spencerian ideas of evolution, including recapitulation, lost favor in the initial decades of the 1900s as scientists found increasing evidence for natural selection-driven evolution. As they faded, so (to some extent) did the child’s place within grand narratives of human development. Instead, as eugenic science in the U.S. became increasingly popular, discourses of development became more and more focused on the bodies and minds of individual children. I do not mean to portray this as a sequential progression of thought; these concepts and time periods overlapped. What changed at the turn of the twentieth century was the newly

medical focus on the individual child's development. With the rise of pediatrics, endocrinology, and psychoanalysis, children became an increasing target of medical intervention and experimentation. This was especially true of white children, whose normal development was required to ensure the future of the race. Accordingly, as I detail here, a new and intense focus on the appropriate development of sexual anatomy in children emerged during this era.

Biological Plasticity in the Developing Child

In *Histories of the Transgender Child*, Julian Gill-Peterson details the way the proposed malleability of the developing child's incomplete body became rationale for intervening in sexual development in the early twentieth century. During this period, sex emerged as a crucial topic of study for eugenics, since the perpetuation of the white race depended on successful and appropriate heterosexual reproduction. Normal sexual development in white children was the key to ensuring this reproduction. Consequently, eugenics-minded scientists and doctors were interested in finding ways to ensure that normal sexual development occurred and to intervene in sexual development that seemed to be going off course.

At the end of the nineteenth century, the study of sex in anatomy, physiology, embryology, and endocrinology had concluded that life was "naturally bisexual" – all animals, including humans, contained both male and female sexual characteristics, but the characteristics of one sex existed only "latently" in each (Gill-Peterson 41). This idea opened sex up as a potentially manipulatable phenotype in children; said differently, "sex became synonymous with a concept of biological plasticity that made it an alterable morphology" (35). This plasticity, combined with the logic of eugenic improvement, "offered a clear, material target for medical science: intervene into the growing organism before it has finished sexual differentiation and its eventual form could be cultivated *rationally*" (44-45, emphasis mine). Quickly, this natural

openness to cultivation became an obligation: G. Stanley Hall, pioneering scholar of adolescence and prominent eugenicist (who I mentioned earlier), argued that “children’s growing bodies and minds *demand*ed to be cultivated;” plasticity disappeared with age, so doctors had to intervene early to ensure proper development (47). Development was unpredictable, so “without the intervention of science, medicine, and education, that plastic indeterminacy could not be counted upon to achieve the specific (and fundamentally racist) form of the human that Hall advocated. Biology alone was not enough; it had to be cultivated” (47).

This cultivation, however, was reserved only for white children. In fact, Gill-Peterson argues, biological plasticity was coded “as an abstracted form of whiteness, a latent capacity to be reformed and transformed into something new” (79). Should a child be developing abnormally, such as in the cases of trans and intersex children Gill-Peterson covers, only white children were worth trying to correct. A white intersex child (then diagnosed with hermaphroditism) “could be made valuable through its plasticity, the promise of alteration and normalization through medical intervention,” while non-white children, especially Black children, held no such promise. Doctors treating trans and intersex children “projected a fungibility onto black children,” treating them “as suitable experimental subjects because of presumed access and disposability,” whereas white children “were framed as exhibiting the potential for a normative cure or at least improved normality” (79). Even further, while plasticity gained value in white children because it could be used as experimental material, “black children’s sexed plasticity was framed as atavistic” and animalistic.

My motivation in covering this particular instantiation of the developing child is to draw attention to the non-neutrality of the concepts of plasticity and development. Both are endowed with legacies of racism, and both have major consequences for historical scholarship on

children's bodies. In Gill-Peterson's words, "one of the historical problems endemic to Western childhood is that an abstract concept of 'the child' has profoundly overlaid – sometimes, overdetermined – the lives of actual children" (36). I will return to this point in my conclusion, but the glorification of biological plasticity by feminist new materialists, especially when it is framed as "unruliness" and applied backwards to show the body's "agency" in historical cases, erases plasticity's legacy of latent whiteness (see Schuller 25–27 for more on this point).

The developing child – now the dominant paradigm through which children are understood – has been used by multiple regimes of imperialism and eugenics to uphold the superiority of white EuroAmerican men. Anyone studying children historically, then, must grapple with this construct, recognizing both its situatedness and how deeply it has been naturalized. Children's linear, teleological growth cannot and should not be taken for granted. In the next section, I survey some of the ways recent scholarship has taken up this task.

Part IV: Responses to the Innocent Child and the Developing Child

In *The Queer Child or Growing Sideways in the Twentieth Century*, Kathryn Bond Stockton grapples with the legacy of childhood innocence, especially the legacy of asexuality left by this construction. Innocence, Stockton argues, actually *queers* children: "from the standpoint of adults, innocence is alien, since it is 'lost' to the very adults who assign it to children" (30). Every move that has attempted to "free" children from pain and corruption (in the form of labor, sex, traumatic topics, and more) has "only made [the child] stranger, more fundamentally foreign to adults" (5). Adults are literally defined by an inability to access what defines children. However, because innocence defines the boundary between childhood and adulthood, children must cross it at some point to become adults. This means that children "share estrangement from what they approach: the adulthood against which they must be defined" (31). Normative

development, under this model, means that children are like us, but not like us, simultaneously, making them profoundly queer.

As such, in Stockton's words, "the child is precisely who we are not and, in fact, never were. It is the act of adults looking back. It is a ghostly, unreachable fantasy" (5). She challenges her reader: given that we cannot know children, since they are profoundly estranged from us, and since "there are bodies (of children) that must live inside the figure of the child," how can we, or should we, write about them historically (5)? To address this dilemma, Stockton turns to fiction and sitting "beside the terms of History" (Stockton 9, capital H from author).

Sitting beside history leads Stockton to two versions of lateral movement. First, children grow sideways during periods when they are not allowed to grow "up" or advance forward in their developmental trajectories. They must grow sideways, she argues, since their forward movement is limited. Second, history grows sideways. It grows sideways partially because new information is always being added to the historical record, but also because, in looking back, historians often bring what is next to history – fictions – into it, expanding it outward in new ways. Accordingly, the rest of her text uses queer readings of literature and film to find queer children through the ways they grow sideways.

This approach to studying childhood helps to undo the boundaries set up by the figure of the innocent child. Stockton especially approaches topics of sexual desire – from children for themselves, from children for each other, from children for adults, and from adults for children – without the hesitation that comes from innocence negating children's sexualities.

Acknowledging the impossible queerness of children can yield exciting historical insights.

Notably, both Stockton and Gill-Peterson talk about gaining weight as a means of subversive,

sideways growth in children, which is an exciting possibility for the future of my work (Stockton 20–21; Gill-Peterson 157–58).

The idea of sideways growth is one way of dethroning the figure of the developing child and unseating the deeply teleological progress narrative contained within it. Sideways growth is a way of giving the child a present, of making them visible as more than just a being-in-the-making. Some scholars have used this, and other critiques of developmentalism, to argue for children's political agency and their active roles in constructing their worlds. However, for Castañeda (and other feminist thinkers), the idea of merely "giving" children agency is short-sighted. For her, the power of the figure of the developing child comes from the idea that this child is capable of, and indeed, must undergo, transformative change. The discursive linkage between childhood and development thus cuts off the possibility that people *other than children* are also able to transform. The figure of the developing child cannot be fixed by merely arguing that children are subjects too, nor by attempting to draw a continuity between childhood and adulthood through treating childhood as the presubjective ground for adult subjectivity. Instead, a critical approach to the developing child must find a way to connect children and adults in a way that does not grant adults defining power over children.

Castañeda's proposal recognizes two continuities between children and adults. Children, because of their youth and innocence, have been historically constructed as closer to "nature" and outside of subjectivity, whereas adults are closer to the binary opposite "culture." However, in Castañeda's argument, we are all, per Foucauldian theory, constituted as subjects through discourse, and we are all made of the same matter, which is shaped through various discourses to produce us. In other words, we are all nature-culture (166).

In feminist science studies, nature itself – and thus the matter that makes us – is considered *agentic*, “an active participant both in its own making, and in our knowledge of the world.” If children and adults are all made from the same matter, perhaps agency and transformative power, Castañeda suggests, can be relocated there, rather than in the figure of the incomplete child. Instead of dismissing the child as still in development or valuing the child as a site where adults can search for meaning or potential, Castañeda urges us to turn to the “agency of existence” as “the site of subjective possibility” (169). This reformulation puts all of us in development, even as it also accounts for “alterity, for the heterogeneity of situated processes at work in the realization of differentiated bodies.” In other words, children and adults are put on an equal playing field with regards to potential, but that does not mean all subjects are constituted equally. In her words, “a notion of the subject as a body that is always constituted both through the agency of nature and through particular discursive matrices begins to provide the ontic grounding for a theory...that subjects cannot be known in advance. Instead, knowing requires coming to apprehend the singularity of all subjects, the complexity of their histories, and the modes of their subjection as these change over time and place” (170). Undoing the figure of the developing child opens possibilities for new ways of imagining human relations, agency, and subject formation.

Conclusion

The figures of the innocent child and the developing child have dominated both traditional studies of children as well as critical responses from the field of childhood studies. In the United States, both have roots in the nineteenth century and even earlier, spanning scientific, religious, legal, and cultural domains. These figures, constructed and imbued with a power of their own, have shaped children’s lives, parent-child relations, ideas of what adults owe children,

ideas of what children are capable of and what they should or should not be exposed to, and more. Accordingly, anyone interested in studying children in U.S. history must contend with these constructions and their effects, especially how they have unequally distributed the category of childhood across race, gender, and class. The innocent child and the developing child are emotionally provocative, sentimentally laden, and have deeply shaped the present United States.

So where does that leave this aspiring historian? As I mentioned in part III, in *The Biopolitics of Feeling*, Kyla Schuller cautions against feminist new materialist approaches that “rediscover” the agency of “nature,” such as Castañeda’s, because they often “unwittingly reproduce the colonial logics of impressibility, or the idea of self-constituted matter, in their account of the agency and force of the material world” (27). Contemporary thinkers, Schuller argues, “have not been the first to break through the Cartesian wall and portray matter as plastic and agential. Rather, notions of dynamic matter were alive and well in the nineteenth century” (26). Paraphrasing Denise da Silva, she reminds us that “one of reason’s greatest achievements was the conception that the natural world is governed by law and that nature itself is identifiable as the law of how things affect each other...the idea of porous, plastic, vital matter is not in itself an alternative to liberal humanism” (27). Schuller’s critiques, grounded in Lamarckian ideas of evolution, provide a troubling genealogy to the proposals that attempt to find novel solutions to scholarship on children by turning to matter/nature’s agency. Schuller’s work also grounds affect studies in this same genealogy, problematizing that approach as well.

In her epilogue, Schuller turns to assemblage theory. Conceiving of the body “as an assemblage of corporeal and environmental processes,” she argues, “may nonetheless prove to refine, rather than undermine, feminist social justice paradigms” (210). Interestingly, assemblage theory is also where Alan Prout, one of the coeditors of *Constructing and Reconstructing*

Childhood, turns in his solo authored book *The Future of Childhood*. The book, which he frames as his attempt to move beyond the dichotomies that structured early childhood studies, puts forth a theory of childhood as “like all phenomena...heterogeneous, complex and emergent” (2).

Drawing on Deleuze and Guattari, he contends that childhood is:

cultural, biological, social, individual, historical, technological, spatial, material, discursive...and more. Childhood is not seen as a unitary phenomenon but a multiple set of constructions emergent from the connection and disconnection, fusion and separation of these heterogeneous materials. Each particular construction, and these come in scales running from the individual child to historically constituted forms of childhood, have a non-linear history, a being in becoming that is open-ended and nonteleological (144, ellipses in original).

The methodology for such an endeavor is still unclear to me, although Prout argues that it would have to “not reduce [childhood] to any of its particular, separated-out aspects” (144). Moreover, here Prout is discussing childhood, not children. A gap remains to be filled between Schuller’s corporeal assemblage and Prout’s conceptual one. It is my sense that this gap is where historians of children and childhood might turn as a way to account for both discursive constructs of the child as well as actual children.

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