

# Revisiting the Inner Child

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Thank you so much for that kind introduction, Jen. I'm delighted to be here today to celebrate with you all. I will keep my talk as concise as possible so we have ample time to acknowledge and rejoice in your achievements.

When students walk into my office, one of the first things I often hear is, "Oh, this doesn't look like other professor's offices." The feelings behind this claim vary immensely, ranging from surprise, delight, confusion, and discomfort. And I understand where they are coming from. Picture books full of color and vivid imagery adorn my bookshelves. Children's toys and figurines are placed on the shelves, ranging from the iconic Lumpy Space Princess from the cartoon *Adventure Time* to the Red Power Ranger, who, admittedly, was my first childhood crush. I brought an area rug to cover the drab carpet and bring loud splashes of color to the atmosphere. I've constructed this space to convey many meanings. Of course, I study and teach on issues of gender, sexuality, and queerness in children's and young adult literature. The books I read and the cultural artifacts I examine will reflect the field's fashions, styles, and sensibilities. But my office is more than just a reflection of what I study. I want people to feel something when they enter this space. Things they might have forgotten or are afraid to revisit. After these students leave, I think about their first comments and impressions. I think about how my office, surrounded by images, objects, and words connected to youth and childhood, stirs emotions and responses that can't be contained. Youth and its images immerse us in profound, upsetting, joyful, hopeful, anxious, and sometimes terrifying memories, emotions, and sensations. I want to think more about these anxieties, these impulses.

Childhood is a category that can mean almost anything and everything. In the study of childhood and youth texts, “might” is a concept developed by Clémentine Beauvais that focuses on the fact that children have more time to think about themselves and their desires. In contrast, adults are typically locked down and overwhelmed by our pasts, experiences, broken dreams, and the realization that not all the futures we envision will or can come to fruition. It’s easier for children to channel different and alternative ways of existing in the world because they have not been molded and bogged down by the responsibilities, expectations, and pathways toward success elevated in adult cultures. Of course, we can pressure these assumptions in important and radical ways. Critics in childhood and queer studies, such as Kathryn Bond Stockton, José Esteban Muñoz, Gabrielle Owen, Ebony Elizabeth Thomas, and numerous others, have drawn attention to the connections between notions of childhood, power, and privilege. Who has the privilege of being a child? What do we make of children who need to “grow up fast” and assume a more adult positionality toward the world? Who are the children being imagined when we claim they must be protected? How do we, as adults, know what is best for children when we are collectively responsible and complicit in continuously hurting and destroying the world? Childhood is such a powerful concept. It is a metaphorical black hole with an undeniable and inescapable pull, bringing in different feelings, hopes, aspirations, political beliefs, dangers, and dreams. But suppose childhood is built upon foundations of hope, possibility, anticipation, and transformation. Why are we then so eager and desperate to leave these foundations behind?

I spent so much of my life trying to create a split between who I was then and now. I needed to insert myself into a broader story that assured me that happiness, success, and pleasure could only be obtained by leaving behind the so-called naive feelings, practices, and dreams I held as a child, thus facilitating my transition into successful adulthood. I enforced this split in so

many ways. I stopped playing video games during my PhD even though they were a vital source of joy and were formative to who I was as a teen. I didn't want my peers and professors to think that I wasn't serious enough about my academic studies. I was worried they'd view my engagement with video games as a sign that I was naïve, immature, or disconnected from the responsibilities of adulthood. As I grew up, I got rid of many letters, journals, trinkets, and notes meaningful to me as a teen because I was embarrassed by how naïve and emotional I came off. It didn't help that I belonged to a subculture known back then as Emo. We were known for being too sensitive and feeling too much, basking in our sadness. We would wear dark eyeliner and take selfies while looking sorrowfully down at the floor. And yes, these selfies became our profile pictures. We were also known for writing lots of delightfully bad and melodramatic poetry. And trust me, I wrote A LOT of poetry back then. It felt painful to read those notes as an adult. There was just TOO much. There was an excess of emotion. I didn't want to be that person anymore. I had to be a serious, driven, and successful adult. But where does this apprehension come from? Why is there so much pressure to approach our childhood as a life stage that must be left behind? Why are we so keen on approaching our childhood and current selves as two completely different people rather than viewing these times as profoundly and intimately connected?

Of course, my worry was also connected to broader stories on queerness perpetuated by the dominant society, narratives that insist queer folk are people experiencing arrested development or are overly attached to their childhood. They call it the Peter Pan effect in some academic circles. I didn't want to be the boy who refused to grow up.

Critic Juana María Rodríguez has pointed out that queer Latine people are often considered to be excessive and "too much." I think constantly about my time as a graduate

student in a primarily white institution; I was already considered too much because of my queerness and Latinidad. I was reminded of my excesses all of the time.

“Oh my, who is wearing men’s perfume in the classroom?”

“Can you please lower your voice? It’s a classroom, not a ballpark.”

“The instructor moves his hands too much when he speaks.”

“I’m surprised you managed to contain your excitement this time.”

And one of my favorites is “You are the most Puerto Rican.”

I was afraid to express the joy and pleasure I got from reading young adult literature, playing video games, and engaging with play in profound and meaningful ways. I was afraid it would further compound the too-muchness of my body, movements, and attitude. I was scared to disappoint. I spent so much time trying to create a separation of my past and present self that it became difficult to see how my excesses matter, how they pose a challenge, and how there were aspects associated with these surpluses that might be worth holding onto, rather than letting them go in efforts to succeed, to fit in.

I see people enforcing this divide all the time, consciously and unconsciously. Childhood and its artifacts are often approached as underdeveloped or as mere curiosities. I hear giggles when some students claim their favorite book is a teen novel. During student fairs at Bowdoin for prospective students, you can always count on some students staring in awkwardness and disbelief as they hear about my courses on queerness and video games or queerness in youth literature. “Isn’t that kid’s stuff?” And, of course, there’s the infamous “Why are you wasting your time taking a class on children’s literature when you can get more out of a class on Shakespeare?” Why is children’s culture less compelling to explore than canonical literature? Why is it dismissed as simple fodder for children?

I find it deeply ironic that, on the one hand, children's literature is dismissed as trite, naïve, underdeveloped, and superficial. On the other hand, it is considered too powerful and too influential. Look at the top books banned in the US at any given moment in the past decades. Most, if not all, are texts written primarily for youth audiences. For years, a picture book about two male penguins raising a young chick has consistently topped the charts. Take a look at the reactions towards drag time story hours across the country or the fact that even the local institutions here in Brunswick have cut programming connected to queer youth literature because of complaints they've received. I understand that many other dynamics are at play here that connect to broader intersectional, political, and economic realities. But at the same time, I am left speechless when institutions limit access to specific knowledges to support not the oppressed but the dominant voices. These people are already in positions of power. They continue to erase stories, imaginings, and histories in the name of normative and supremacist values. Why is queerness as an *adult* issue or reality? I mean, take a look around the room. Many of us grew up with queerness intimately framing our desires and viewpoints. Queerness was a part of many of our childhoods. And if you don't believe this, then I guess you haven't talked to many queer people.

I tend to avoid concrete answers in many of my classes and offer questions and provocations. I am going to wrap up this talk by doing the same. Childhood studies critic Marah Gubar has pointed out how dominant culture represents children as powerless, denying them the ability to make choices and carve their pathways. We reinforce futile binaries that render childhood a helpless state, and we deny youth their subjectivities. Gubar compels us to view childhood and adulthood as akin to each other: "Children and adults are akin to one another, which means they are neither exactly the same nor radically dissimilar. The concept of kinship

indicates relatedness, connection, and similarity without implying homogeneity, uniformity, and equality” (453). Exploring the continuity of our childhood can be a powerful exercise in self-discovery. What if we cease to perceive childhood as a distinct phase of life and instead view it as a moment in time that is deeply intertwined with our present-day identities? What happens if we view our childhood and current state as akin to each other?

By reflecting on the emotions and possibilities we left behind in our pursuit of adulthood, we may uncover valuable insights into our current condition and time and use this to think about the futures we desire to shape. Take a moment and think: what were you forced to sacrifice in the name of adulthood? Why were you forced to sacrifice it? Why are fun and joy aligned with childishness? Why are knowledge and experience aligned with adulthood? What happens to your world when you open up your life to think and feel in ways you were told were unruly, immature, and childish—and how do power and control inform these dynamics? There are practices and emotions that we have neglected or forgotten, which are worth revisiting and holding onto. Life is not a “straight” and linear journey with a predefined goal or objective but rather an ever-evolving process of growth and transformation. We don’t grow up, but rather, we perpetually grow and never stop growing. By acknowledging this, we can explore different life paths and create new ways of living, thriving, and succeeding in a broken world.

Take a moment to reach out to your inner child, to ponder these questions, and to find meaning in your never-ending journey towards becoming.