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, admittingly, 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.

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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 Clèmentine 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 boggled down by the responsibilities, expectations, and pathways toward success elevated in adult cultures. Of course, we can pressure these assumptions in important and

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

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 "ideo gam0.00000q0.000008 93 Tm0 g0

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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*

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 ackno(0 G[ )b0 0 0e)(s)-(s)-(, c)(onne)-1s a tTJETn-20(i)7h

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