

**NEIGHBORHOODS OF MAKE-BELIEVE: PLACE, PLAY, AND POSSIBILITY IN  
DISNEYLAND, *MISTER ROGERS' NEIGHBORHOOD*, AND *THE MAGIC CITY***

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All imaginative play, all make-believe, is a process of transformation. Playing alters the world which the player inhabits; it creates a new space that overlays, interpenetrates, or replaces the “real” world. Make-believe can change the signification of the physical or geographical space, it can act as time-travel, it can alter the appearance and actions of others drawn into the playspace, it can rewrite virtually all the laws of science and nature. Perhaps most fundamentally, play transforms the *player*. Imaginative play empowers the player, allows her to shape and mold her surroundings, to create stories where none existed, or to overwrite or erase existing stories; it allows her to invent and inhabit alternative identities.

This project examines three places and spaces of play to consider the kinds of possibilities for transgression and transformation they engender. It begins with analysis of Disneyland, focusing on the park’s origins and early reception, arguing that the park was always intended as a space for adults and children equally, and that the design of the park makes it a kind of toy or stage manipulable by visitors. Next, it analyzes *Mister Rogers’ Neighborhood* by looking in depth at several key episodes of the program, examining the ways in which they represent alternatives or challenges to heteronormative culture, specifically concerning queer male identities. It also examines a sample of viewer mail sent to the program over a 35-year span

as a means of thinking about divergent reception and potential effects of the program. Finally, it considers the children's writing of E. Nesbit, and the ways in which Nesbit creates a world in which play, especially theatrical play, is possible and important for both adults and children.

This project concludes by suggesting that positioning play as a materially-situated activity as well as a method of exploration or inquiry, opens up new ways to consider and challenge a variety of binary constructs, particularly that of the child and the adult.

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## 1.0 INTRODUCTION

Space calls for action, and before action, the imagination is at work.  
- Gaston Bachelard

As James Kincaid has shown so well in *Erotic Innocence* – and as a multitude of critics have noted of all kinds of power relationships – the tension between the child and the adult has served no one well. The child becomes the empty vessel; the adult becomes filled with nothing good. The version of childhood we have constructed leaves no place in the world for adults; it is all a forgetting, Wordsworth writes, from those first moments when we appear trailing clouds of glory. And yet it *isn't* a forgetting, because along with the clouds of glory, we've also invented a brutal nostalgia that reminds us our best days are behind us while offering us no solutions for the present or future. Our childhood nostalgia largely tells a story that never happened, and it blinds us to the reality of real children's lived experiences and to the reality of adult life. Just as the construct of the child may be altered – because it *is* a thing of artifice – so too the “adult” is a constructed category, in dire need of alterations.

Marah Gubar's entry for “Innocence,” in *Keywords for Children's Literature*, lays out some of the stakes of the current construction of the adult and the child:

“It is easy to see how the notion that life goes steadily downhill after childhood . . . could be disabling for both children and adults. Idealized and sanctified by such discourse, actual children might encounter pressure and even anger from adults if they fail to live up

to this static, angelic, ideal, while adults who accept the idea that maturity is a dead end might experience depression, and envy, resenting children for their ability to inhabit such an (ostensibly) idyllic state.” (127)

Gubar continues: “[S]cholars suggest that perhaps we should start telling a different story about children, although it is still less than clear what that other story should be” (127). Telling new stories, about children and adults, about childhood and adulthood, thus becomes our cultural imperative, to liberate both from restrictive or oppressive constructs and ideologies. One way in which we can discover new stories to tell, in which we have already been telling new stories, is through imaginative and creative play.

We need to strike a critical balance between a cold and impersonal dismissal of children as inferior, unformed beings, and the Wordsworthian fantasy of the child “trailing clouds of glory” – again, like adults, children occupy a range of identities and abilities. Though they lack the breadth or depth of experience of a person several times their age, children possess rich, well-developed internal lives, a strong sense of self, and the ability to imagine and play creatively. Contrary to Wordsworth's gloomy claim, I would argue that we do not lose this imaginative faculty for play as we grow older; rather, our culture devalues this faculty, and for many adults, their capacity for creative play weaken with disuse.

The creation of dedicated playspaces in which to experiment, explore, transform, and transgress has been going on for decades, if not longer, though we don’t always recognize these spaces as such, or realize the depth of possibility inherent in them. The three “spaces” that I consider here represent three kinds of playspace, each operating in similar but not identical ways, with similar but not identical goals and outcomes. By drawing attention to the ways in which these spaces function, and the kinds of possibilities they enable, I hope to encourage a more

expansive view of playspaces, playtime, and – perhaps most importantly – who is allowed to play.

The Magic City, Disneyland, and Mister Rogers' Neighborhood are all disruptive spaces; they all remove the viewer/reader/visitor from her normal frame into a space designed for and created by play. In these play spaces, possibilities abound, as the imagination is encouraged to continue and expand on the play. All three of these sites or spaces place importance on storytelling, on creating, on constructing. All have a close relationship to toys, miniatures, and material culture. All complicate or disrupt or open up adult relationships to nostalgia, childhood, and play itself. And all three contain an element of radical possibility: they are all places where dominant or normative ideologies can be challenged, played with, overthrown, and where difference and emotion are not only allowed, but *encouraged*.

### **Why Place?**

Children's literature frequently features travel from one clearly defined location to another. In particular, this movement between spaces and places is a key aspect of a great deal of children's fantasy fiction. Child travel from the primary world to a secondary, fantasy world, is a highlight of many of the classics of children's literature; these secondary worlds are major identifying characteristics for the books in question. We frequently reference some of these places in routine speech – Wonderland, Neverland, Narnia. Many books make this secondary place so central as to feature it in their titles: *Treasure Island*, *Where the Wild Things Are*. In more recent years, fans of the Harry Potter series have attempted to recreate aspects of the secondary world of the books; the midnight release parties often featured guests dressed as book characters, and bookstores refigured as locations from the wizarding world.

This trope of places has been identified and named in *The Pleasures of Children's Literature* by Perry Nodelman as the "home-away-home" structure; Nodelman claims it is "the most common story line in children's literature" (198). Further, Nodelman suggests that a more clearly defined description of this trope would be "home/away/new home." The experiences of "away" are transformative in one sense or another – a space of growing up, as in *Peter Pan's* Neverland, a space of recovery of a lost person or item, as in the travels of *A Wrinkle in Time*. The home from which our protagonists depart is almost always an unsatisfactory home, due either to something fundamentally broken or missing (such as a parent), or to a sense of dissatisfaction or misfitting on the part of the protagonist. Time spent in the secondary world always results in the recuperation of the damaged home, through the protagonists' actions and personal growth.

What is key here is the location of the transformative space: it is always elsewhere. Even in much realist fiction, a character's transformation is not the result of a strictly internal process of self-discovery; the protagonist must go somewhere else to realize her full capacity. The power of the secondary space is undeniably strong, even when it is a place as quotidian as a grandmother's house or a neighboring town.

Within the bounds of children's literature, we can find similarly constructed imaginary spaces. Notwithstanding that every text is itself arguably an imaginary playspace, a number of children's novels and short stories narrativize the construction and operation of such spaces. These texts – and the spaces they contain – move beyond the simple psychological or didactic function of child-playing-with-toy, to propose alternative realities, alternative ways of being. Though perhaps inevitably the child-protagonists who enter these playspaces leave as changed people, the texts do not insist on didacticism in play.

The dedicated play space is an essential element of play itself. Both the materiality of the literal space – its architecture, its structures, its material culture – and the imaginative freedom of the figurative playspace are important aspects of how play actually works. As toys, as props, as aides-memoire, the *things* of the playspace require examination as part of an exploration of the larger space itself.

### **Why Play?**

All imaginative play, all make-believe, is a process of transformation. Playing alters the world which the player inhabits; it creates a new space that overlays, interpenetrates, or replaces the “real” world.<sup>1</sup> Make-believe can change the signification of the physical or geographical space, it can act as time-travel, it can alter the appearance and actions of others drawn into the playspace, it can rewrite virtually all the laws of science and nature. Perhaps most fundamentally, play transforms the *player*. Imaginative play empowers the player, allows her to shape and mold her surroundings, to create stories where none existed, or to overwrite or erase existing stories; it allows her to invent and inhabit alternative identities. Transformation occurs the moment play begins – perhaps with a declaration of identity: “I am a space kitty.” Or “You are a dinosaur.” Beneath and intertwined with the overt transformation – from human child to space cat, from adult man to dinosaur – are an array of possibilities for further transformation. All play, Johan Huizinga writes, has meaning. It has meaning to the players (to the primary creator and to those participating in the playspace) both intentionally and unintentionally. The meaning of play can, and often does, extend beyond the moment/space of play; the meaning generated, the effects of the meaning, the experience of the play, of the space, of the stories

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<sup>1</sup> “All play moves and has its being within a playground marked off beforehand either materially or ideally, deliberately or as a matter of course ... all are temporary worlds within the ordinary world, dedicated to the performance of an act apart” (10) Huizinga

being told and the emotions being triggered, of the imaginative exercise, of the *freedom* inherent in play – all carry over into the life of the player once the play has ended. Play does not exist in a vacuum, nor is it truly finite; it is fluid, continuous, ongoing, and deeply interconnected with non-play life.

Playing requires commitment from the players. The phrase “make believe” carries particular weight here; play doesn’t depend upon a suspension of disbelief; rather, play cannot proceed until the player(s) have *made* belief in the playworld into a fact of their play-reality. It’s a generatively creative act, playing; one must invent a playspace, the rules and identities of the playworld, and one must transform oneself – and one’s co-players – into believers in the importance and reality of the playspace.

Psychologist D.W. Winnicott offers potentially useful context for play and playthings: Transitional objects, he tells us, “belong to the realm of illusion,” and are a kind of early foray into creativity. Winnicott, interestingly, states his interest in examining the “substance of illusion, that which is allowed to the infant, and which in adult life is inherent in art and religion” (3). Early in his chapter, Winnicott notes that his study “widens out into that of play, and of artistic creativity and appreciation” (5).

“The transitional object and transitional phenomena start each human being off with what will always be important for them, i.e. a neutral area of experience which not be challenged” (12). This “neutral area of experience which will not be challenged” strikes me, in some ways, as the beginnings of a definition for my idea of playspaces. The transitional object’s identity is neither changed nor challenged by anyone other than the infant in possession of it. It may be possible to move up the age of the infant (to child, or even adult), and rephrase the transitional object as a playspace. But even retaining the sense of the object as precisely that, a single

physical toy, doll or blankie, the object offers a space for possibility, performance, play and experience, in which all creativity and meaning comes from the child creator/player herself. Winnicott himself, I believe, indicates that something like this may occur; he writes that the transitional object loses its intense meaning “because the transitional phenomena have become diffused ... over the whole cultural field” (5). This cultural field, of course, includes literature and multiple forms of theatre (home, toy, professional theatres, as well as the much looser, informal kinds of theatrical play I wish to consider).

Winnicott assumes “that the task of reality-acceptance is never completed, that no human being is free from this strain of relating inner and outer reality, and that relief from this strain is provided by an intermediate area of experience...which is not challenged (arts, religion, etc.). This intermediate area is in direct continuity with the play area of the small child who is ‘lost’ in play” (13). Winnicott here places child’s play/playspace on a similar footing as adult “play” in the form of the arts. Thus it may be possible to understand a text as a playspace in its own right.

Winnicott’s gestures toward play as a space of mediating between the outer and inner world offers, perhaps, a way of thinking the progressive or transformative possibilities of playspaces and toy narratives. Under this hypothesis, what might be the possibilities revealed or enabled by, say, a queer reading of a given text? If the transitional object is a way of differentiating (which also entails recognizing similarities) the child from the mother (or other objects), is there a way of viewing toys and playspaces and thing narratives as participating in this project of marking similarity and difference?

### **Why Possibility?**

This project is deeply indebted to, and engaged with, queerness and queer studies, though it may not at all times be primarily queer.

Queerness, as many writers on the subject concur, is by definition undefinable; it is elusive, mercurial, resistant, playful, disruptive, unstable as well as destabilizing. Marked by absences, gaps, lacunae, and slippery as a critical term, queerness nonetheless does have meanings and significations. At its core, queerness, and queer studies, derives from a deep investment in same-sex erotics and desire, in homosexuality, in gay and lesbian existence and ways of being. As queer studies progresses, this core of homosexuality has become, for some critics, less central; “queer” appears, at times, to signify *anything* that resists or contravenes social, political, or cultural norms.

Alexander Doty, in the introduction to his *Making Things Perfectly Queer*, reminds us that “it seems important not to have “queer” and “queerness” become the type of umbrella terms that implicitly position “lesbian,” “gay,” and “bisexual” erotics, cultures, and politics as mere subsets of some larger, and seemingly more complex, progressive, or politically efficacious concept” (xvii). Leo Bersani’s *Homos* offers a similar warning: “de-gaying gayness can only fortify homophobic oppression; it accomplishes in its own way the principal aim of homophobia: the elimination of gays” (5).

My original plan with this project was to remain firmly anchored to a queerness that is itself closely attached to sexuality and gender, yet as I worked, I realized I was taking queerness further afield in precisely the ways that Bersani and Doty warn against. How to maintain the position of queer inquiry when the subjects of the inquiry no longer contain recognizably queer forms of gender and sexuality? Or when the focus of analysis looks at attitudes and ideas that have virtually no overlap with gender and sexuality?<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> other than the obvious, which is that gender & sexuality are in and around everywhere people are – things cannot be extra-gender, extra-sexual, any more than they can be extra-race or extra-linguistic. At the same time, it is entirely possible to do successful critical work on other areas of identity and existence beyond gender/sexuality/sex.



By making things perfectly queer, Doty and other foundational queer theorists have created a critical practice, a framework or frameworks, a habit of thought that can be understood as queer, or queer-adjacent. The adjustments of vision and understanding that queerness demands (and sometimes thwarts) can and do spill over into other subjects, other issues. So while my discussion of Nesbit's *The Magic City* only occasionally touches directly on a literal mode of queerness, my critical perceptions of the novel are formed by looking at, say, toys, in ways very similar to the way I examine gender, or sexuality. It is not reading as a queer, or reading *for* queerness, that I undertake throughout this project, but reading *queerly*, using the tools and lenses of queer theory and queer studies on non-queer subjects.

I refer to this mode of analysis as queer-adjacent, a distinction which may seem precious and is certainly imperfect, but which most closely reflects the influence of queerness on my critical style without “de-gaying” queerness. Queer-adjacency does not mean disregarding queerness, and this project engages in both queer *and* queer-adjacent readings. I am deeply invested, both personally and professionally, in revealing and creating queer-positive or queer-loving spaces, and so my queer-adjacency always has one eye on this goal.

This project is not primarily concerned with locating and documenting the queers, or the queer, in a given text; evidence of queer *intention* is often very difficult to find. But the absence of evidence is not evidence of an absence. Doty again offers a key insight about how to proceed: “Unless the text is *about* queers, it seems to me the queerness of most mass culture texts is less an essential, waiting-to-be discovered property than the result of acts of production or reception” (xi). In the absence of queers or overtly queer behaviors, then, queerness (and queer-adjacency) resides in the production, or in my case, the case of this project, the *reception* of those texts or cultural practices. Here, we can think of queerness as a set of *responses* to what Robin Bernstein

refers to as scriptive things: “The term *script* denotes not a rigid dictation of performed action but rather a set of invitations that necessarily remain open to resistance, interpretation, and improvisation” (*Racial Innocence* 11-12).

Queer adjacency also means *learning from* queers, in some instances using queer-identified practices as potential models for non-queers. In particular, Judith Halberstam’s work on youth culture and subcultures in *In a Queer Time and Place* provided me with the spark of an idea about the child/adult binary that I have tried to develop in this project – her notions about queer adulthood seem to me to offer important solutions to some of the more problematic aspects of contemporary straight adulthood as it is constructed in the United States. In correcting for these aspects of straight adulthood, I have also been able to think about ways of repositioning the construct of the child.

In her brilliant reading of *Harriet the Spy* as a queer text, Robin Bernstein begins to demonstrate some of the possibilities of disrupting the adult/child binary via queerness. Citing Doty’s definition of queerness that includes “a quality related to any expression that can be marked as contra-,non-, or anti-straight,” Bernstein suggests that “Childhood, then, with its undifferentiated, polymorphous sexuality, fits the label” (*Critical Matrix* 33). Bernstein contends that *Harriet* “centralizes an oppositional binary between children (queers) and adults (heterosexuals), then persistently undermines that binary ... Thus Fitzhugh allows children (queers) to encroach on adult (heterosexual) territory” (*Critical Matrix* 34). Bernstein’s positioning of children/queers and adults/heterosexual suggests that both sets of binaries – queer/heterosexual, child/adult – can be, and are, undermined, disrupted, played with, perhaps even overturned.

Along with Bernstein's reading of childhood as queer, Kathryn Stockton offers additional critical support for the idea of the child-as-queer. *The Queer Child*, her analysis of the queer child, the gay child, the ghostly gay child begins from the supposition that all children are queer: "the gay child makes us perceive the queer temporalities haunting all children. For no matter how you slice it, the child from the standpoint of 'normal' adults is always queer" (7). If this is so, then all discourse about the child contains an element of queerness; to talk about children is to talk adjacently about queerness. And to talk about children is also to talk about adults.

In the last chapter of *In A Queer Time and Place*, Halberstam casts breadcrumbs for those of us who think primarily about children and childhood: "queer temporality disrupts the normative narratives of time that form the base of nearly every definition of the human in almost all of our modes of understanding..." including the artistic and aesthetic (152). It is precisely these normative narratives of time that underpin our understanding of the child/adult binary; as in Bernstein's reading of *Harriet the Spy*, this binary becomes unfixed when the element of queerness and queer time are introduced. Halberstam explicitly tells us that "for queers, the separation between youth and adulthood simply does not hold" (174). Thinking queerly, or queer-adjacently, about both children and adults is one way into revising our cultural constructs of both of these entities.

Chapter Two posits Disneyland as a site of play and possibility for both adults and children through readings of promotional materials and media coverage of the park's early years, as well as interviews and writing from some of the park's earliest designers. Analysis of these documents establishes that Disneyland was created as – and always has been – a space of play for adults *and* children. As a result, the park is a space that allows us to think about our understanding of the relationship of play to adulthood and childhood. My discussion of the

frequent use of the word “childlike” in a variety of kinds of publications to describe the experience of visiting the park opens up new ways of thinking about the constructs of the child and the adult. As part of this argument, I attend to the problems and possibilities of nostalgia, which often intrudes as a problem or distortion when considering children and childhood; nostalgia is also frequently used in a negative context to describe the aesthetics of Disneyland. Instead, I suggest that the kinds of nostalgia available at the park function less as a distortion of the past than as a way of thinking about the present and the future in new ways.

I read the park as a kind of adaptation from children’s literature, then demonstrate the ways in which the park is designed to generate play spaces. I consider the queer context of Disneyland as one significant method of reading the park “against the grain,” so to speak; the queerness helps establish the place as one of possibility for transgression and transformation, which in turn helps us understand the park as a site that challenges received ideas about childhood and adulthood. By focusing primarily on the first 10 or so years of the park’s existence, I am able to establish that the transgressive or transformational possibilities of Disneyland have been a part of its design since its inception. Though most of my attention to Disneyland focuses on its earliest years, I conclude this chapter with two contemporary examples of adult park visitors making use of the playspace to construct their own narratives that run counter to mainstream conceptions of adulthood, heterosexuality, play, and Disneyland itself.

Chapter Three takes as its subject the long-running PBS children’s program *Mister Rogers’ Neighborhood*, and forms both the largest portion of this project as well as its emotional and ideological heart. It is here that a number of strands of thought converge – about place, about play, about queerness, about children and adults, about emotion. The enormous quantity of primary material available (nearly 1,000 episodes of the television program, a large archive of

viewer correspondence, written materials generated by Rogers and Family Communications, Inc<sup>3</sup>) makes a thorough survey impossible in this context. But the program is vastly under-theorized and under-studied; there are virtually no sustained critical works on the program from the perspectives of literature, film/media, and cultural studies.<sup>4</sup> There is a great deal of work to be done on *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood*; this is merely a beginning, an attempt to establish the program as fundamentally progressive and queer.

This chapter introduces original archival research and analysis, primarily concerning the fan mail received by the program. The archive of viewer correspondence represents an invaluable resource for students of children as television viewers, public television, children's television, adult and child crossover programming, children as receivers of culture. My analysis of viewer mail corresponds with another key aspect of this chapter's significance: complicating our construction of adult and child by looking at the letters sent by some of the many adult viewers of the program.

This chapter looks in depth at several key episodes of the program, examining the ways in which they represent alternatives or challenges to heteronormative culture, specifically concerning queer male identities. The spaces within, and created by, the program are essential to understanding its functioning; I identify and describe the workings of these spaces. As a means of thinking about divergent reception and potential effects of the program, I look at a sample of viewer mail sent in to the program over a roughly 35-year span. Finally, as a solid example of the public convergence of queerness and emotion around the program, I address the 1969

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<sup>3</sup> Family Communications, Inc (FCI) was the company created by Fred Rogers to produce and distribute materials. In 2008, the company changed its name to the Fred Rogers Company. For the sake of consistency, and because most of my sources were either produced by, or refer to, FCI, I am using FCI throughout to refer to the company.

<sup>4</sup> A new book-length study of the program, *Peaceful Neighbor: Discovering the Countercultural Mister Rogers*, by Michael G. Long was released on March 15, 2015.

congressional testimony of Fred Rogers in support of extending federal funding for public television.

Chapter Four examines the children's fiction of E. Nesbit, particularly her 1910 novel *The Magic City*. Along with her fictional work, I consider Nesbit's treatise about play, education, child-rearing, and creativity, *Wings and the Child*. I argue that most of Nesbit's work for children privileges play as a way of being in the world, particularly a kind of performative, theatrical play. Significantly, Nesbit includes adult characters who also privilege play, representing them as natural allies of the children and as people who have achieved a measure of success in the adult world. These adults are fictional versions of the grown-up who has retained her child identity that Nesbit discusses at some length in *Wings and the Child*. The play of the fictional adults, paired with Nesbit's musings about memory and about constructing magic cities, offers a vision of a world in which adults *and* children play freely and pleasurably; the enjoyment which Nesbit's adults derive from playing is very much like the enjoyment which the children experience while playing.

Play, for Nesbit, is all about creation and make-believe. I discuss the significance of the literal construction of playspaces in *The Magic City* in part through considering the material world of the novel, the *things* of the text that contain meaning upon meaning, generating larger thematic structures and ideology, and assisting in the transformation of multiple characters. Making is the way into the playspace of the Magic City, and making, along with making-believe, underpins and facilitates the actions and emotional development of the characters within the text.

In *Wings*, Nesbit writes at length about make-believe, about the child's ability to see objects multivalently – to see bowls as the domes of temples, to see spools of thread as wheels for a train. This ability of seeing multiply is what I refer to as “play vision,” and it has an

inherent quality of queerness which in turn establishes the processes of make-believe as avenues for transgression and possibility.

I also examine the dangers that may lie within a world where play and make-believe is so potent, by looking at Nesbit's short story "The Town in the Library in the Town in the Library," a precursor to *The Magic City*, and by closely reading the chapter about the Ugly-Wuglies in her novel *The Enchanted Castle*. Both of these texts provide examples of creations overpowering their creators, of play escaping the control of the child who plays, and, in the case of *The Enchanted Castle*, of the complex relationship between theatrical players and their audiences. Nesbit's attention to the darker potential of creative play highlights the power of that kind of play, as well as acknowledging that play is not without risks or dangers. Playspaces, for Nesbit, as for each of my subjects, are *not* utopias. Despite this, Nesbit's texts offer perhaps the clearest example of the kinds of possibilities that creative play enables.

Bachelard writes in the introduction to his *Poetics of Space* "At times when we believe we are studying something, we are only being receptive to a kind of day-dreaming" (xxxviii). This project, at times, is the record of receptivity to a kind of day-dreaming, an attempt to connect ideas and emotions and places, a questioning musing that nearly always begins with "what if...?" It is partly from the desire to day-dream freely that I have tried to limit my use of theoretical and critical texts: I want to see what my own mind can produce when I let it play among ideas. My aversion to high theory is the result of my political and pragmatic goals; I do have a utilitarian goal, or day-dream, behind this project, and that is to make the world safe for sissies and those who play. No doubt the audience for this will be scholarly, but the people of whom I am thinking when I write are not, for the most part, scholars; they are ordinary people who really live and work and play in the real world as it actually exists. Any advocacy I do on

behalf of, or inspired by, those people ought not exclude them from participating based on the discourse I employ; ideally, this document could be fairly easily read and understood by non-academics, with no special training or knowledge of critical theory.

Ultimately, what this project is most engaged with is creation: creation of spaces, creation of buildings, creation of toys, creation of stories, creation of identities. Make-believe is not just an analogy or metaphor; when we create and when we play, we continually make belief in our stories, our possibilities, our selves engaged with is creation: creation of spaces, creation of buildings, creation of toys, creation of stories, creation of identities. Make-believe is not just an analogy or metaphor; when we create and when we play, we continually make belief in our stories, our possibilities, our selves.



## 2.0 DISNEYLAND IS YOUR LAND:

### PLAYTIME FOR ADULTS AND CHILDREN IN A STORY PLACE

We turn a space into a story place.  
John Hench

Much of the critical or scholarly work on both Disneyland and the Disney Company has focused on their evils and ills. Articles and essays about commodification and consumerism, gender and sexist stereotypes, cultural imperialism and manipulation of history, and racist representations of a variety of kinds of people are readily found in the bibliographies of fields like children's literature, women's studies, and pop culture.<sup>5</sup> The term "disneyfication" is used widely in scholarly and popular publications to describe products and projects of a contrived, sentimental, bowdlerized, consumerist nature. The OED entry defines it as "freq. mildly derogatory" and as meaning "The addition or acquisition of features or elements considered characteristic of Disney films, cartoons, or theme parks; the simplification, sanitization, or romanticization of a place or concept."<sup>6</sup> Like "disneyfied," disneyfication is often used synonymously with words like "twee" or "artifice."<sup>7</sup> To be disneyfied – or to be Disney – is to be fake, simplistic, culturally and historically insensitive, unrelentingly capitalistic in all ways.

The Disney parks come in for their share of scorn, as well; cultural geographer Yi-Fu Tuan observes in *Escapism* that: "well-educated people...are taught to dismiss the theme park as

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<sup>5</sup> Cf Schaffer, Scott. "Disney and the Imagineering of Histories." *Postmodern Culture* v.6 n.3 (May, 1996).

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.oed.com.pitt.idm.oclc.org/view/Entry/249855?redirectedFrom=Disneyfication&> (2/19/2015)

<sup>7</sup> <http://www.oed.com.pitt.idm.oclc.org/view/Entry/267245#eid81182018>

an unreal, fantasy world supported by hidden – and therefore somewhat sinister- forces” (xii). Enjoyment of the parks should be beyond “well-educated people,” and scholarly work that does not criticize or condemn can be met with a very cold reception. But Tuan continues: “Granted that theme parks are escapist fantasies suitable only for the immature, what human works aren’t? Is there a ladder of aspiration or pretension, at one end of which are the exuberantly or crassly playful and at the other end the deeply serious and real?” (xii). One goal of this chapter is to bring together the exuberantly or crassly playful and the deeply serious and real; or rather, to consider that playfulness *as* something serious and real.

Pockets of criticism that largely avoid making value judgments about Disney parks in particular have cropped up in American Studies and in architectural and urban studies, but on the whole, particularly within children’s literature, to talk about Disney is to criticize. It is hard to deny the capitalist, corporate structure of the company and its products; it is hard to argue that Disney animated princesses are feminist icons, that Disney characters are diverse and culturally sensitive, particularly when race is concerned, or that Disney films dwell on complexity and ambiguity. I take it as a given, in fact, that there are any number of aspects of Disney company culture and production that deserve harsh criticism.

But Disney has also been a purveyor of possibilities for much, if not all, of its history. Disneyland, in particular, presents an intriguing case study for the ways in which play, story and space can interact on adults and children in ways that produce alternative ways of thinking and being, both within the space of the park and outside its boundaries. Disneyland is a place where the normative identities that the “real world” enforces can be challenged, blurred, even transformed, and because of this, it provides a fascinating way to rethink those identities.

This chapter examines Disneyland primarily as it was originally planned and constructed; I have intentionally chosen to focus on the years from the park's opening in 1955 until Walt Disney's death late in 1965, partially for pragmatic reasons, but largely because we can see clear traces of the philosophy behind the park from the earliest days of Walt Disney's vision for it.<sup>8</sup> The footprint of that vision is enormous still, though it has been eroded and altered over time. Perhaps the most substantial difference is the one that marks all of the post-Walt endeavors of the company: the increasing emphasis placed on the park as a moneymaker. With Walt's death, his company – already heading in that direction – became more and more corporatized. It is now run by businessmen, CEOs whose main responsibility is to shareholders, not to their own imaginative or creative visions, or to the demands or desires of the public. It was precisely these kinds of business demands that contributed to Walt's unhappiness and lack of focus in the postwar years; being free from stockholders and bureaucracy was a major attraction for Walt in creating WED Enterprises.<sup>9</sup>

Understanding the background and context in which Disneyland was developed is important to recontextualizing its character and possibilities. The Disney Company with which we are familiar now is a significantly different entity than the one that created the park, and these differences matter in our thinking about the way the park can function. I argue that, although Disneyland (and even more so at the other Disney parks) has been considerably affected by the vastly increased corporate presence, the original structure still remains, and still has a profound impact on the park's character.

Disneyland began, first and foremost, with the cinema. By the late 1940s, Disney had more than twenty years of experience as a studio producing primarily animated features and

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<sup>8</sup> Because the corporate entity is so frequently referred to as Disney, for the sake of clarity, when referring to Walt Disney himself, I will use his first name.

<sup>9</sup> For more on WED, see p22.

shorts. The key elements of those years of filmmaking that translated into the development of the park were Disney's insistence on *quality* and *story*, and a sense that as both an individual and a company, Disney was more than capable of creating something entirely new that would surprise and delight the audience.

Filmmaking is generally a means of telling a story, and Walt himself was credited with having a particular gift for storytelling. In the studio's early years, he would walk his animators through storyboards, acting out each part with such conviction and enthusiasm that his artists were inspired to ever-greater accomplishments (some artistic, some simply the sheer willpower to work through nights and weekends to complete pictures on time). Filmmaking is also a mode of world-creation, and animation, in particular, allows its creators to work in almost boundless ways, unfettered by the rules and logistics of the natural world. Neal Gabler, in his biography of Walt Disney, writes that "the animator created his own world – an alternative reality of his imagination in which the laws of physics and logic could be suspended" (55). Gabler also offers this analysis of Mickey Mouse: "Whatever else he is – and he is indistinctly many things – Mickey Mouse is in thrall to his own abilities of imaginative transformation ... [he] is always in the process of reimagining reality" (155). Thus creator and creation are both intimately engaged in the work of imaginative world-building and transformation.

In the years immediately after World War II, Walt Disney and his studio were, to use Gabler's term, "adrift" (413). A variety of factors – financial stress, depleted staff, tension over the pre-war animators' strike that, by some accounts, created a permanent rupture between Disney and his staff – combined, leaving Walt without a clear focus, or even a sense that anything mattered. In 1947, at the suggestion of an employee and confidante, Walt visited a railroad fair in Chicago, along with animator Ward Kimball, a railroad enthusiast who had built a

full-scale narrow-gauge railroad on his property. Along with the trains, the fair included a variety of other kinds of exhibits.

The train fair sparked Walt's interest, and he threw himself into his hobby wholeheartedly. At Christmas, while purchasing model trains for his great-nephews, he bought one for himself as well, for which he constructed a large, elaborate miniature set. Recruiting workers from the studio to his aid, Walt scaled up his ambitions building a fully-functional, small-scale train large enough for him to ride. As with earlier animation projects, Walt was wrapped up obsessively with his trains, staying late and working weekends at the workshop he'd set up at the studio. At home and on vacation, he worked on his trains, moving on to crafting miniature furniture and accessories for the buildings in his train sets. Gabler argues throughout his biography that Walt was driven by the need for control, and then, curiously, collapses that need for control into the desire for "crafting a better reality than the one outside the studio" (479). The trains and models provided both: control and world-building. While this is likely true to at least some degree, it also seems likely to me that Walt had found a new medium for his storytelling. Conflating the compulsive need for control with the desire for a better reality undermines the significance of imaginative world-building. The wish to develop a better reality finds expression all over Western philosophy and literature, often wholly uncoupled from the ego-centric drive for control that seems to have been a part of Walt Disney's personality. Gabler aligns Walt's interest in trains with a kind of delayed childhood, which again may be true, but also depends on the assumption that play is a child's activity (475).

By 1949, Walt had begun collecting all kinds of miniatures, and developed a scheme to craft an entire miniature town, an "American turn-of-the-century village," to be displayed in a travelling show. He recruited more Disney artists into his project as it expanded over several

years, and grew in complexity; Walt and his team worked extensively to devise ways of making the miniatures into moving dioramas. It was during this time, Gabler writes, that although it is “impossible to say exactly when ... Walt Disney had decided to build an amusement park” (483).

In typical Walt Disney fashion, his idea for the park became all consuming; it was all he talked about, even during meetings concerned with other business. Initially, he envisioned a fairly modest operation, a train and park and small village around the studio property. In August 1948, Walt made notes for one of his designers: “It will be a place for people to sit and rest; mothers and grandmothers can watch over small children at play .... I want it to be very relaxing, cool and inviting.” Shops, a movie theatre, a restaurant, and then exhibits: an old farm, a western village, an “Indian compound” would fill this inviting, relaxing village (Gabler 485).

Late in 1952, Disney created WED Enterprises, which became the creative entity from which Disneyland would grow. The staff – the creative, artistic team that Walt brought into WED – were all film people, not engineers, landscape artists, or concessionaires experienced in running an amusement park. This cinematic background had a huge impact on the development of the park, and in fact, film and theatre became the guiding metaphors *within* WED as they worked on plans. Along with this was Walt’s determination to “make something different, something better,” what Gabler describes as “a kind of full imaginative universe that could provide a unified experience. ... Disneyland would be something for which there was no antecedent” (496).

The myth of the company’s founding places Walt in the position of visionary: he was the creative force, the imaginative risk-taker, the innovator, the artist, while his older brother Roy was the financially-minded pragmatist who enabled or restrained Walt’s vision as business necessitated. In fact, this myth contains a great deal of truth, though like all myths, it reduces a

complex relationship into an oversimplified binary. Walt's primary goal was never to make money simply for the sake of making money; financial success simply enabled the next, grander project. Gabler provides numerous first-hand accounts of conversations employees that attest to Walt's lack of investment in the moneymaking aspect of his work, including Kay Kamen, head of merchandising until his death in 1949, who wrote to a representative that "'The production of the Disney prestige was always more important than any royalties we would get'" (472). While Walt drew substantial take-home pay from his work (listing his income as \$104,000 in 1949) virtually all the profit from Disney enterprises was reinvested in the company (Gabler 474).<sup>10</sup> Though it seems difficult to believe from our contemporary position and understanding of Disney as a major corporate power, until the opening of Disneyland, the company routinely scrambled for financing for new projects, and at times even to meet payroll. The partnership with ABC television existed almost solely to finance Disneyland; Disney's outreach to corporate sponsors of various attractions was less a celebration of corporate might than an effort at securing funding to complete those attractions.

Though Walt grew more of a corporate businessman's mindset as the years passed, he never seems to have prioritized profit over product except as a means to finance greater projects. The deeply entrenched corporate nature of the Disney company now is not the legacy of Walt Disney, or even of his much more fiscally-oriented brother; much of the company's corporate identity was created under the tenure of former CEO Michael Eisner, who took over the company in 1984 and left it in 2005. Though obviously never averse to earning profits, nonetheless Walt designed his park from motives other than financial gain. This origin of the park from outside the profit motive is important in reconsidering the way certain aspects of it

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<sup>10</sup> \$104,000 in 1949 is worth slightly more than \$1 million in 2015, according the consumer price index via wolfram alpha.

function; because the main objectives in park planning were not profits, we can see other values and ideas built into the structure of the park.

As with many innovations of the twentieth century, Disneyland has an origin story, one that is quoted extensively and included liberally in films and programs about the park, about the company, and about Walt Disney himself. Like most origin stories, this one has passed into general knowledge as fact; like most origin stories, this one abridges, erases, streamlines, embellishes: its relationship to actual “truth” is tenuous at best. But origin stories reveal something that may be of far greater value than a historically accurate narrative: they tell us what the creators want us to think, the show us what aspects of the creation are most important.

Walt Disney’s interview, with Fletcher Markle on September 25, 1963, for the Canadian Broadcasting Company “Telescope” show, does all this and more. Markle asks: “Where did you originally get the first notion for Disneyland?” In his by-then famously avuncular, folksy manner (despite wearing a suit and tie), Walt Disney replies with this story: “Well it came about when my daughters were very young and I...Saturday was always Daddy’s day with the two daughters. So we’d start out and try to go someplace, you know, different things, and I’d take them to the merry-go-round and I took them different places and as I’d sit while they rode the merry-go-round and did all these things...sit on a bench, you know, eating peanuts...I felt that there should be something built...some kind of an amusement enterprise built where the parents and the children could have fun together. So that’s how Disneyland started. Well, it took many years...it was a...oh, a period of maybe 15 years developing. I started with many ideas, threw them away, started all over again. And, eventually, it evolved into what you see today at Disneyland. But it all started from a Daddy with two daughters wondering where he could take them where he could have a little fun with them too.”



The picture conjured by this anecdote – that of the affectionate father, actively engaged in his children's lives – conforms with the company's public persona as a family-friendly entity. But it also reveals the disjunction between child's play and adult's opportunity for similar play; Walt sees his daughters having fun and playing, and feels left out. Quite literally sidelined on that bench, Walt longs for a space in which he can have fun, as well. This fun is not just for, or about, the children, either; Walt does not mention an enterprise exclusively for a family unit, or a place in which he can participate in creating the fun his daughters enjoy – he, as an individual adult, wants to have fun, *too*, and the place which will allow and enable that does not yet exist.

The emphasis placed on *adult* visitors to Disneyland is made stronger in another question and answer from the same interview, a reply that rarely makes it into accounts of the park's origin. Fletcher Markle asks, "Who goes to Disneyland? What is the ratio of adults to children as part of the plan of fathers and daughters?" Walt replies: "Oh, it's four adults to one child. That is we are counting the teenagers as adults.<sup>11</sup> But of course, in the winter time, you can go out there during the week and *you won't see any children*. You'll see all the "oldsters" out there riding all these rides and having fun and everything. Summertime, of course, the average would drop down. But the overall...the year round average...it's four adults to one child" (my emphasis). That "oldsters" could and did ride the rides and have fun *without children* from the earliest days of the park's operation makes very clear that Disneyland is, and always was, a play space for adults. The relative absence of children tells us that adults were able to play in the park space independently of them; adults are fully capable of imagining, creating, and playing, and do not need to depend on seeing the world through the child's eyes or any other such Romantic cliché.

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<sup>11</sup> Choosing to count teenagers as adults rather than children is an interesting decision here that reveals something about the way teenagers were positioned and understood in American society at the time; it also suggests that counting them as adults was either neutral or an advantage in marketing. In other words, Disney did not feel the need to inflate the numbers of children visiting the park; children were not the main target to attract to the park.

There are two metaphors which are regularly employed by commentators on the park, and which offer useful perspectives on the park's function: that of the toy, and that of the theatre. Taken together, they help frame my understanding of Disneyland as a space for creative, imaginative, and potentially transformative play. Both metaphors have been used by Walt Disney himself, along with other park designers and planners, to describe the kind of space they hoped to (and often did) create. Indeed, the theatrical metaphor is much more than a figure of speech; the official language of the park's operations indicate that the imperatives of the theatre are very much at work in day to day life. Park employees are always referred to as "cast members," non-visitor spaces are "backstage," and each day of park operation is "the show" (France 4). Disney himself insisted on strict adherence to the rules of stage performance; no employee was permitted to "break character" in any way. The entire park functions as a stage, as a set, complete with props, costuming, background music providing a soundtrack, and cast members.

The staging of the park places the visitor in an ambiguous position, though: are guests part of an audience, or are they the stars of the show? When the park first opened, attractions were designed so that guests would find themselves in the position of the heroes of the stories. For instance, Snow White's Adventures, a classic amusement-park dark ride in operation from the first day of the park's opening, establishes guests *as* Snow White, riding through the scenes from the film. Guest feedback quickly revealed disappointment at not seeing Snow White in her ride, or Mr. Toad in his.<sup>12</sup> The solution leads to an interesting positioning of guest as both actor *and* audience; Snow White, Mr. Toad, Peter Pan et.al. were inserted into their attractions, but the fundamental narrative and experience of the ride remained the same. Instead of *being* Snow White, guests *accompany* her. The immersive nature of many of the attractions, particularly the dark rides, which, true to type, include selective, lowered lighting, rapid or zigzagging motion,

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<sup>12</sup> See Gordon and Mumford, 51.

and full darkness, allows the guest to ignore the presence of the heroine, if he prefers to occupy her space in the narrative instead of simply following along.

The park's initial vision about play and performance was thus more expansive than that of guests. The structure of individual attractions and the entire park itself insists that visitors at least occupy the role of an active member of the audience, while encouraging all visitors to participate as actors in the show.

Disneyland as a whole is often referred to by journalists as Walt's "toy," and his "childlike" excitement over the park is an even more frequent trope.<sup>13</sup> Considered as a toy, the materiality of the park takes on new significance; we can think of Disneyland-as-toy as a "scriptive thing," as Robin Bernstein calls them, a prompt for play but a prompt that is open to being played with, not a strict set of rules for the play (12). Recognizing the toyness of Disneyland is essential for understanding the way the park was intended to (and can/does) function.

Karal Ann Marling, writing in *Designing Disney's Theme Parks: The Architecture of Reassurance*, brings in the toy metaphor repeatedly. Marling describes Main Street as a "slightly-larger-than-normal model train layout," and quotes Walt Disney as telling a press conference that it is "only a scale model" (79). Disney himself, a man who enthusiastically attended railroad and model train shows, who had a small-scale train built in his own backyard, was intimately familiar with both the model and the miniature, terms which are essentially euphemisms for the less socially acceptable "toys." Adults are given permission to build, create and play with models and miniatures, though these activities vary only in degree, and perhaps quality, from the exact same actions undertaken by children with their train sets and dollhouses.

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<sup>13</sup> Cf. "Walt Disney's New Ten Million Dollar Toy." Los Angeles Times, 19 Sep 1954 Proquest Historical Newspapers.

One becomes an enthusiast, a collector, an aficionado; Disney, in the creation of the park, strips these terms back to their origins and their essences: toys and playtime. Walt Disney, in explaining the five-eighths scale of Main Street, said "This costs more, but made the street a toy ... and the imagination can play more freely with a toy" (Marling 81).

Walt's assertion of Main Street as a toy with which the imagination can play instantly transforms the guest into an active participant in her experience within the park. Toys are meant to be played with, and they do not hold static or fixed signification. Toys serve as springboards for all kinds of imaginative play; as such, they are repositories of nearly boundless possibilities.

Toys, of course, are objects within the child's realm; when we apply the term to adult possessions, it is nearly always figuratively, or humorously. The toys of adult life generally serve some ostensible utilitarian purpose, even if they are primarily recreational – for example, the motorcycle, the snowmobile, the classic car. Other items which, in a child's hands would be obvious toys, for adults become "hobbies" or "crafts" (the model train is probably the most obvious example of this). The point at which toys must become hobbies, or be set aside altogether, is a hazy one hovering somewhere around early adolescence.<sup>14</sup> But the Biblical injunction to "put away childish things" (*King James Version*, 1Corinthians 13:11) still obtains as a prevailing cultural norm; adults who have toys are viewed askance.<sup>15</sup> Even adults who *collect* toys, and display them rather than use them for creative play are criticized and put on the defensive.<sup>16</sup>

The scale of the park is not uniform; different scales and perspectives are employed throughout, as needed for effect. Marling discusses this question of scale as it presents itself in

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<sup>14</sup> In the last decade or two, this has become further complicated by objects like video games, which never cease to be advertised to a primarily male audience, and with the advent of dolls like Bratz that are specifically designed to target a slightly older tween market.

<sup>16</sup> See Myers, Means-Shannon, on recent controversy over Breaking Bad action figures.

Main Street: “in theory, every brick and shingle and gas lamp on street level was to be made at five-eighths true size. ... the old art director’s trick called ‘forced perspective’ convinced the eye that the upper floors were behaving according to the immutable laws of recession into space whereas the heart knew, secretly, that these were dollhouses, scaled for the private pleasure of the enchanted visitor. So Main Street was reassuring on all counts” (81). Marling lapses into the kind of poetic language employed by Bachelard, and creates levels of recursion: the secret within the heart, the understanding that the buildings are not only dollhouses, but given over to the private pleasure of the visitor. The interiority created by Marling’s description is actually an enormous imaginative space, and is one that is controlled by the guest; the structure of the park ushers the guest into that space of play, but how she decides to use it is up to her.

It’s worth pointing out the connection of Disneyland to the miniature; the concept itself grew out of miniatures, out of Walt’s small-scale railroad and his miniature sets. Walt’s collecting and creation of miniatures as a hobby was “a life saver,” as he wrote to a friend in 1951; “when I work with these small objects, I become so absorbed that the cares of the studio fade away” (Korkis 14). Miniatures serve as a world in which to get lost, a world which is paradoxically huge, as Bachelard notes: “thus the miniscule, a narrow gate, opens up an entire world. The details of a thing can be the sign of a new world which, like all worlds, contains the attributes of greatness. Miniature is one of the refuges of greatness” (155).<sup>17</sup> The very small stimulates creativity, imagination, and play, both for viewers drawn into the world of the miniature, or for the creators of that tiny world. Bachelard writes that “imagination in miniature is natural imagination which appears at all ages in the daydreams of born dreamers” (149). The miniature is thus linked with imagination and daydream; each suggests the presence of the other.

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<sup>17</sup> The greatness and the opening-up of worlds connected with the miniature finds full expression in E. Nesbit’s *The Magic City*, discussed in Chapter Three of this dissertation.

Most toys come with some form of script implied, a specific way in which the toy should be played with. Yet there is very little preventing a player from repurposing her toy, or playing with it in ways that counter the dominant script; in *Racial Innocence*, Robin Bernstein has shown very persuasively how 19<sup>th</sup> century children used and abused their dolls according to scripts of the children's own creation or adaptation. Seeing multiple uses in an object or toy is a key aspect of make-believe; this ability to see multiply is what I refer to as "play vision." While Disneyland may not offer as much flexibility in use as, say, a doll, visitors are encouraged and enabled to make use of their "play vision" in creating their own kinds of play experiences.<sup>18</sup> As park designer John Hench observes, if they "feel secure in the Disney parks, our guests can engage in forms of play not available to them in everyday life" (105).

Hench's book *Designing Disney: Imagineering and the Art of the Show* provides an illuminating glimpse into the philosophy of play and emotion that helped shape the park. Hench, employed by the Walt Disney Company since 1939, began as a sketch artist for the film *Fantasia*; he went on to work in a variety of departments in the animation and live-action filmmaking branch of the company, including story editing, special effects, color and styling, and background painting. After winning an Academy Award in 1954, for his special effects work on *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea*, Hench moved out of filmmaking into the division that would become known as Imagineering, the division of the company responsible for theme park design and development. He worked closely with Walt Disney until the latter's death, then carried on working with the company until his own death in 2004, at age 95. The *D23* biography of him describes Hench as "philosopher, animator, designer, storyteller, voracious reader (52 magazines a month!), and teacher," roles or qualities worth noting when examining his work and his reflections on that work in *Designing Disney*. His intellectual approach to considering the park's

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<sup>18</sup> For more on play vision, see Nesbit ch 3; for more on creating/rejecting scripts, see Gay Days.

design clearly demonstrates a strong commitment to artistic principles, and theories of play and place that underlay both Hensch's own work and the creation of the park as a whole. As with Bachelard and Winnicott, there is a kind of poetic dreaminess, an idealism, to Hensch's style that suggests an earnestness and depth of consideration not often associated with Disney apologists.

There are two drawings of Mickey Mouse by Hensch, one at the very beginning of the book, one on the last page. The first, page-sized image is accompanied by text reading "Images are expressed as forms of feeling and feeling is a heightened form of life" (viii). The final image, postcard-sized, reads "The first thing we strive for is the experience of being alive" (152). These two mottos convey Hensch's commitment to feeling – emotion – and a sense of alive-ness, both of which inform all of his work, as an artist and as park designer.<sup>19</sup> Disneyland is a place designed to evoke emotion, and to heighten the experience of being alive, and one of the ways it does this is by encouraging and prompting play.

Hensch opens his book thus: "The spark of inspiration for this book came from Walt Disney, who wanted Disneyland to be a place where adults and children could experience together some of the wonders of life and adventure, and feel better because of it. I heard Walt say this many times, and each time, I was fascinated and intrigued by the way Disneyland *would* make adults and children feel better for having used their imaginations while visiting the Park, so that they would leave feeling more self-assured, stronger, alert, and much more alive" (1). Visiting Disneyland was not intended to be a passive experience, with guests shuffled mechanically from one thing to another; the park is meant to stimulate imagination. For Hensch, to "feel better" is to imagine and play, and thus become more alive.

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<sup>19</sup> These commitments to emotion and feeling alive are shared by the two other creators discussed in this dissertation: E. Nesbit and Fred Rogers.

Reflecting on observing park visitors exit the Space Mountain attraction (essentially, a roller coaster housed in a dark building) in a state of exhilaration, Hench notes: "This is a demonstration of what playtime does for our guests. I haven't yet figured out how Walt understood so much about playtime. I do know that he always felt very much alive himself and guided us in creating forms that inspire play. He helped us to understand that to create a play space, we Imagineers must trust our own feelings and instincts, and must always nurture our own sense of play" (14). Linking emotions and play in this way reminds us that one of the possibilities of play is to stimulate, express, experiment with emotions, an attitude that, as the next chapter demonstrates, pervades *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood*. Underscoring the fundamental connection of play and a sense of aliveness helps us see that play is life: to be alive is to play, to play is to become more alive.

Because Hench is a designer, of course, he is most intensely invested in the creation of spaces and forms that foster play. As Hench writes, "When we design any area of a Disney park, we transform a *space* into a *story place*. ... not only must every space become a story place, but that place must be made special through its relationship to its surroundings" (69). Story has a close relationship here with play, the two becoming not quite synonymous, but very much a part of one another. The interdependence of place and story make the material, built environment of the park both the prompt for and the product of storytelling, and all three – place, play, and story – combine to create life, or aliveness. It is a manifestation in multi-dimensional space of Joan Didion's remark that "we tell ourselves stories in order to live."

Conventional wisdom suggests that Disney parks control and manipulate every aspect of a guest's experience, rigidly conveying the visitor through a prepackaged, corporatized product designed solely to stoke consumer desire. This view of the parks positions visitors as essentially



mindless consumers, and leaves very little room for individual agency and imagination. In fact, I argue, to experience the park is to engage in imaginative, creative play, at least partially guided or sparked by the built environment, but ultimately serving the desires of the visitor. Because guests are the final arbiters of the kinds of play in which to engage, Disney parks become sites of possibility for a variety of identities and attitudes, many of which resist normative, mainstream ideals.

"Visiting one of the Disney parks is an opportunity, for both children and adults, for playtime in a special dedicated play space, " Hench writes, and the park was designed and cultivated to enable and encourage that playtime (65). Significantly, Hench includes both children *and* adults in this play space. From the beginning, Disneyland intended to be a space that enables play by adults and children. To borrow from literary criticism, Disneyland has a dual address: it is speaking to both adults and children, on the same level. To strongly distinguish the effects of the park on children and on adults is to reimpose the cultural binary of childhood and adulthood, and all the baggage that attends it.

Although for children play is often spontaneous, unbounded, and independent of any designated space or set of materials, enabling adult play requires, perhaps, more structure, figuratively and literally. The cultural belief that play is for children only means that most adults are out of practice, hesitant, or otherwise uncomfortable in engaging in play themselves. Drawing out the play instinct in adult visitors to the park means creating a space that requires "guests' suspension of disbelief, which is essential for any active theater, and equally essential for the act of play. We encourage guests to accept their experience in the parks is real in the same way that a filmmaker asks the audience to accept the story of the film is real, by connecting it to their own emotions and memories" (Hench 124). Both play and performance, then, engage with

real emotions in meaningful ways to create belief in the stories that surround guests. Belief in the stories and in the meaning those stories have can remain with a visitor long after she has left the park. And as with any film or other text, getting lost in its world, engaging with its stories on a personal, emotional level, can have a transformative effect.

Disney officially announced plans for the park on 1 May, 1954; Los Angeles *Times* coverage refers to the project as a “wonder town,” or “wonderland.” Largely focused on factual details – number of acres purchased (160), projected cost for the project (\$9 million), Disney’s associates, (ABC and Western Printing and Lithograph Co) – the article is descriptive primarily by quoting Walt himself. These initial remarks, at the official announcement of Disneyland, offer some insight as to the (publicly stated) goals of Walt Disney and the park itself.

The *Times* restricts its editorializing to one paragraph that refers to “famed Disney touches,” and to Disney animated characters like Mickey Mouse and Snow White: “Their part in the undertaking will be unique for both youngsters and adults.” This reminds readers of the myriad elements one can expect from a Disney project, but more importantly, it emphasizes that *both* youngsters and adults are the audience for the park. The projected number of employees and parking spaces again speaks to adult interests of economics and logistics. Because the *Times* column carries no byline, it is hard to determine whether it is original reporting or simply a press release. Regardless, it employs the language that will continue to be affiliated with the park right up to the present day. Attention is called to the uniqueness of the park – predicated at least partially on its interrelationship with Disney films properties - thus establishing it as something new, something never seen before. The quotes from Walt and the company make clear that this “wonder town” is a hybrid, only describable as a combination of previously known venues. But

the project also deals in fantasy on at least three levels, all of which are referred to by the *Times* article.

The element of classic fantasy – “castles in the air,” fairy tales and the like – already associated with Disney animated films is the most obvious. But Walt’s quoted remark introduces a far more complex kind of fantasy, once concerned with *time*: ““It will be a place for people to find happiness and knowledge ... It is designed to capture the nostalgia of the past, and present exciting glimpses into the future.”” What Walt is really talking about is his own nostalgia for his own past; what Disney ends up constructing is a fantasy vision of turn-of-the-century America, intentionally and conspicuously generalized and presented *as* nostalgic. This, of course, is Main Street, USA, the one land of the park with no film tie-in, and the one land that isn’t actually a land. Main Street is a transitional space, a re-creation of a time and place that is conscious of having never really existed except in the nostalgic imagination.<sup>20</sup>

The exciting glimpses into the future offered by Disneyland also fall victim to the impossibility of transcending time. The future is *always* un-glimpseable; it is *always* just ahead of us, and thus always a realm of speculation and fantasy. The *Times* includes a mention of the “leading American corporations” who will also participate in the project, specifying the “Land of Tomorrow section, where the wonders of science will demonstrate what the future holds.” Even the phrase “wonders of science” attempts to establish as this as a realm of the fantastic even while it takes advantage of the utility and seriousness connoted by “science.” Yet everything on view in the Land of Tomorrow will *exist*; it will be very much a part of the present, something that can be constructed, deployed, displayed. Disneyland is an effort at making time *tangible*, but the only way to do this is through fantasy, play, and story. The future can only exist imaginatively.

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<sup>20</sup> See pp. for a fuller discussion of nostalgia in the park, and in Main Street, USA in particular,

The layout of the park is one of its many novel or innovative features. Designed in a hub and spoke fashion, there is only point of ingress and egress: the tunnels at the end of Main Street. At the opposite end is the park's icon, Sleeping Beauty's Castle. The other lands of the park radiate from the Hub, the cul-de-sac immediately in front of the castle. From this point, the portals to each land are visible: the stockade of Frontierland, the castle leading to Fantasyland, the Bamboo sign of Adventureland, the white geometric buildings and the TWA Moonliner rocket ship of Tomorrowland.<sup>21</sup>

The space of Disneyland is divided from the "outside world" by a raised ring of dirt: the berm. For Disney enthusiasts and Imagineers, "the berm" has its own set of special connotations. Inside the berm is where the magic happens; it is, almost literally, another world or worlds. Outside of the berm is the grey reality of everyday life.

The function of the berm is multifold: it serves as a solid line of demarcation, forming the perimeter of the park as guests experience; it supports the tracks of the steam railroad that encompasses the park. The height of the berm serves several functions: it forms a barrier to keep out unpaid visitors, and it keeps in the guests of the park. Perhaps the primary function it serves, though, through its height and mass, is to create the illusion of being sealed off from the surrounding area. When the park opened in July 1955, it had been carved out of orange groves and rural land devoted to other agriculture. Aerial photos from the 50s show a wide swath of nothing - no human construction, anyway, save a house here and there - in the place where Disneyland was built (France 17). Initially, the berm served mainly as barrier, though on opening day, eager throngs managed to crowd in over fences and barriers. But it did screen guests from the then-bucolic surroundings, thus allowing for the illusion that they were in the frontier, the jungle, a small-town America long since gone (and, most likely, never extant in the first place).

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<sup>21</sup> See Gordon and Mumford, 24, 27-8, 32, 46.

In *Walt Disney's Pictorial Souvenir Book of Disneyland* (publication undated) circa 1965, the berm is highlighted in a featured box in the book's final page, a triptych titled "Disneyland...will never be completed." The guidebook informs us that "An earthen berm, 20-feet high, was built around the entire Magic Kingdom. 'I don't want the public to see the real world they live in while they're in the park,' Walt said. 'I want them to feel they are in another world.' Disneyland is really many different worlds, for within that earthen berm, Walt Disney and his creative staff ... reshaped the flat land into broad rivers, arid deserts and flourishing jungles."

The creation of the berm was prescient; within a very short time indeed, the park was being surrounded by tourist amenities: motels, gas stations, restaurants. When Disney purchased the orange groves in the early 1950s, they were working with a slim reserve of capital; the parcel of land they acquired was not particularly large. Quickly, it became apparent to Walt Disney and his company that this acreage was not large enough. The real world is nestled right up against the outermost perimeter of the park; visible from the surrounding highways, the taller structures within are easily seen from the road and from neighboring businesses. The immersive experience Disney had imagined is thus compromised by this proximity to the so-called real world; the story spaces of the park are interrupted by reminders of places that not only distract from the story, but might contradict it, or make it impossible.

However, the structure of the berm manages to conceal nearly all of construction external to the park. Extremely careful and concealing greenery, some of which depended on the fullness of time for its true effect to take hold, aids in blocking out the surroundings. It is, in fact, remarkably easy to forget that one is standing only feet away from a busy interstate while one is

waiting in line for an attraction, a testament to the care and thoroughness with which the material environments of the park were constructed and maintained.

Critics of Disneyland have pointed to these efforts at obscuring the external world as simply commercially-driven devices organized to keep rigid control on the visitor's experience of the park. To some extent, this is true; the experience guests have at the park is, in a number of ways, highly managed and controlled. Whether or not this stems from simple capitalistic greed is another issue; what is not at issue is that, whatever its origins, this boundary system creates for the visitor an insulated, isolated world of play. John Hench writes that "There is a ceremonial, even ritual aspect to any form of play in which the playtime and play space are clearly marked as separate and distinct from everyday routine" (65). Both play time and play space are so marked at Disneyland; Hench's suggestion of ceremony and ritual in relation to the kind of experiences visitors can have in the park gestures toward something that has the potential to transcend consumerism and simple entertainment.

The Disney expansion in Florida best illustrates the desired effect of the parks, an effect Disney was unable to achieve in California due to circumstances largely outside the company's control (i.e., lack of capital at the start to purchase larger swathes of land). In a presentation video from 1965, Walt Disney stands before a blown-up map of the land acquired in Florida for "Project X." Pointer in hand, Walt announces that "Here in Florida we have something special we never enjoyed at Disneyland: the blessing of size." He mentions the size of the land they've purchased - 43 square miles - and remarks that they will need no fences to keep out trespassers.<sup>22</sup> "There's enough land here to hold all of the ideas and plans we can possibly imagine." The Florida land's tremendous size is emphasized by this reference to "all ... we can possibly

imagine;” imagination is, of course, limitless, and the physical space to hold it becomes seemingly limitless as well.

The Disney World project in Florida, because of its vast size, was able to maintain an enormous buffer zone around each of its parks. As a more fully realized version of the kind of play space Disneyland was intended to be, Florida’s Magic Kingdom (which is, essentially, a replication of Disneyland), requires multiple steps and modes of transportation for guests to reach it. By car, a guest parks in a remote parking lot - from which the structures of the park are not yet visible - then takes a tram to another embarkation point. At this point, guests can see the major landmarks of the Magic Kingdom - the train station, the castle, and so on - but are separated from it by a vast man-made lake.<sup>23</sup> To reach the entrance of the Magic Kingdom itself, visitors must board either a ferryboat or a monorail and circumnavigate the lake to the park gates. From the parking lot to the entrance turnstile is a distance of roughly a mile, an enormous buffer from the slightest reminders (cars) of the world beyond the parks. Immersion in the playspace in Florida is thus virtually total; guests are almost literally lost in the play world even before they begin participating in any narrative.<sup>24</sup>

Every aspect of the park as it was originally conceived, other than Main Street, has ties back to literature, specifically children’s literature. In some ways we can understand Disneyland as simply a massive exercise in adaptation and transmediation, moving from original written text to Disney film to attraction.<sup>25</sup> This connection to literature highlights the story-centered nature of the parks’ lands and attractions, but also draws attention to the possibilities of adaptation;

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<sup>23</sup> These landmarks – constructions that dominate the landscape of the park and serve as points of orientation for visitors – were referred to by Walt Disney and his staff as “wienies.” The origin of this term – why wienies? – is unclear, but it has passed into vocabulary of Disney employees and Disney fandom.

<sup>25</sup> And in the much more recent past, working from attraction to film, as in the case of the hugely successful *Pirates of the Caribbean* franchise, based on the park attraction of the same name, itself inspired partially by Disney’s live-action film of Robert Louis Stevenson’s *Treasure Island*.

Disney's use of source texts serves as a reminder and a model. Stories exist in the world as springboards or points of inspiration, and playing freely with those origin texts to create a new version or revision of an old story is not only possible, but encouraged.

By choosing stories, either specific tales or genres, as elements for the parks' theming, and then inviting guests to insert themselves into those stories, Disneyland makes locales and worlds previously only imagined by readers into literal places to which the reader may safely travel for a more physically realized experience. For the dedicated reader of fiction, the desire to literally enter into the world of the books she reads, the opportunity to visit textually familiar locales is hugely exciting.<sup>26</sup> It can also be more satisfying than seeing those book-worlds represented cinematically; a guest can insert herself more fully into the fantasy world without having to experience the ruptures or disjunctions that often accompany adaptations. The guest can choose to experience the space while playing the part of the protagonist (as Disneyland had originally intended) or in a role of her own devising. The theming provides the set, and perhaps the spark, to creative play and imagining.

Fantasyland, most obviously, is lifted directly from classic European fairytales and, especially at the time of opening, children's books. The undated *Pictorial Souvenir* asks "What youngster, listening to parents or grandparents read aloud, has not dreamed of flying with Peter Pan ... In Fantasyland, these classic stories of everyone's youth have become actual realities for youngsters - of all ages - to participate in." On opening day, Fantasyland's attractions consisted of Mr. Toad's Wild Ride, from the film based on Kenneth Grahame's *The Wind in the Willows*; Snow White's Adventures from the Grimm brothers' fairy tale; Peter Pan's flight, from J.M.

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<sup>26</sup> The truth of this statement can be seen in the very recent, very substantial, success of the Wizarding World of Harry Potter at Universal Studios in Florida; this "island" in the Islands of Adventure park, recreates key locations of the Harry Potter books/films, and has drawn attendants in their millions  
<http://www.npr.org/2014/06/20/323844556/universal-bets-potter-fans-will-visit-orlando-for-diagon-alley>



Barrie's play (1904) and novel (1911) of the same name; the Mad Tea Party and Alice ride, originating with Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* and *Alice Through the Looking-glass*; King Arthur's Carrousel; Dumbo the Flying Elephants and the Casey Junior Circus Train from the feature film *Dumbo* (which originated with a short children's story by Helen Aberson and Harold Pearl) and the Canal Boats, which were quickly renamed Storybook Land Canal Boats and feature miniature vignettes from fairytales like "Three Little Pigs" and "Cinderella."<sup>27</sup> Even the castle, the dominating structure of the park, is specifically Sleeping Beauty's Castle.<sup>28</sup>

Finally, Tomorrowland – which, on the day the park opened, was largely unfinished – has its roots in science fiction. Along with exhibits of rather dubious interest (the Kaiser Aluminum Hall of Fame and Monsanto's Hall of Chemistry), Tomorrowland debuted as the home of the *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea* submarine attraction, a tie-in with the 1954 live-action film, itself, of course, based on Jules Verne's 1870 novel.

In *The Playful Crowd*, historians of leisure Gary Cross and John Walton explain that “Disney saw his uplifting mission from the perspective of a boy ... perhaps a reader of early-twentieth-century magazines like *Youth's Companion* or *St Nicholas*” (173). More than most commentators on the park, Cross and Walton recognize and acknowledge the literary roots of Disneyland; Frontierland, they write, “was to be a storybook version of history” (173). Describing the blend of entertainment with education that Disneyland originally strove for, Cross

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<sup>27</sup> The story, by Helen Aberson and Harold Pearl, appeared in Roll-a-Book format (no versions of which appear to be extant); it was then printed in a small run in standard book format.

<sup>28</sup> At the time of the park's opening, Disney's *Sleeping Beauty* animated feature was still in the process of being made; the castle was both a forward-looking inclusion of a Disney film and a rather spectacular marketing device. A gallery hallway in the castle displayed miniatures of scenes from the upcoming film; guests could walk along the castle corridor and preview representations of scenes from the movie.

& Walton write that “they [Disneyland planners] were copying in three dimensions the tradition of the child’s storybook” (174).

At the time of the park's creation, Walt Disney was in his early 50s; the fiction of his childhood had more in common with the stories of adventure and empire we associate with the nineteenth century than with the more modern, marginally more enlightened, fiction of the 1950s. Though Walt was almost certainly engaging in some creative nostalgia in choosing the themes of these lands, he was also making a shrewd business decision, particularly regarding Frontierland: the widespread popularity of the western, and specifically the explosive popularity of Davy Crockett, make Frontierland both a response to and a creator of these western stories. Both Frontierland and Adventureland owe their existence and appearance far more to the tradition of children's adventure fiction of the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century than they do to any actual historical record. In *Designing Disney Theme Parks: The Architecture of Reassurance*, Marling describes both Adventureland and Frontierland as "schematic rendering[s] of pictures from a boy's book of derring-do" (103).

The themed lands that make up Disneyland have received considerable criticism, particularly those lands rooted in historical and geographical reality: Frontierland, Adventureland, and Main Street.<sup>29</sup> Frontierland and Main Street deal in versions and visions of the American past; Adventureland houses the exoticized lands of various colonial others (predominantly sub-Saharan Africa and India). On opening day, the only Adventureland attraction was the Jungle Cruise, its design modeled in part on the 1951 film *The African Queen*. Adventureland was also connected in the minds of planners to the True-Life Adventures nature

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<sup>29</sup> I exclude New Orleans Square from this discussion because it was not part of the original design; New Orleans Square was added during the large 1966 park expansion.

documentary series Disney had begun producing in the late 1940s.<sup>30</sup> Of the Jungle Cruise attraction, to which she devotes considerable analysis, Marling writes “the original plastic and fiberglass animals on the Jungle Cruise fooled nobody, of course, but allowed anyone who wished to feel properly menaced the occasion for savoring that possibility” (109).

What this tells us about Adventureland’s design is that its primary source was movies – *The African Queen* and the True-Life Adventures which, despite their name and documentary nature, were heavily edited and organized into a narrative; neither cinematic source can claim true historical accuracy or authenticity, and very possibly the space isn’t being offered as such. If the plastic and fiberglass animals didn’t fool anyone, then perhaps park visitors’ total experience was one of not being “fooled,” but of entering into conscious play. Marling’s description of the effect of the Jungle Cruise animals provides one cue for understanding the park: the attractions, the lands, and the entire park itself serve as stages and props that guests may use or engage with to tell whatever story they wished to play out.<sup>31</sup>

The aesthetic of Adventureland in particular feels lifted almost entirely from English boys’ adventure stories, many of which have a colonialist imperative (H. Rider Haggard’s *King Solomon’s Mines* and the seemingly endless succession of G.A. Henty books like *With Clive in India* exemplify this strain of fiction). Frontierland takes its cues from the western novel and from American mythology and folktale; on opening day, visitors encountered the Mike Fink Keelboats, the paddle wheeler *Mark Twain*, and the eponymous hero of Disney’s short-lived television series *Davy Crockett*.

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<sup>30</sup> <http://davelandweb.com/adventureland/> (3/17/15)

<sup>31</sup> There is ultimately no getting around the fact that Disneyland utilizes very troubling racist stereotypes in its depictions of “natives” in Adventureland and generic “Indians” in Frontierland, and generally proffers a colonizing worldview to guests. This racism is a deserving target of criticism, but also serves as a potential point of resistant play; despite the possibilities for resisting this racism, I would much rather see it removed.

Like the other lands of Disneyland, Frontierland does not arise from a desire to distort and misrepresent history. Nor does it arise from a desire to present a historically accurate, educational vision of the American West. Instead, what Frontierland takes as its foundation are the books, and to a lesser extent, television programs and films, that created the version of the American West that we recognize in popular culture. The literary roots of Frontierland in particular are made visible, incorporated in the attractions and landscape of the area. The central geographic feature of Frontierland is Tom Sawyer Island; one of the "wienies" of Frontierland is the steam wheeler named the Mark Twain. On Tom Sawyer Island, guests play in and pass through Fort Sam Clemens. Twain's writing played a substantial role in shaping popular images of the West as defined by the Mississippi River; he is also responsible for one of the canonical works of American children's fiction, *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*. Twain's images of a free and playful childhood - specifically boyish childhood - have become as representative, and as nostalgically false - as any of Frontierland's images of the West.

The influence of children's literature is most conspicuous in Fantasyland, which makes no secret of its storybook roots. While this, like Frontierland, may seem like mere sharp marketing, or perhaps a dearth of original film ideas from the studios - and the case can be made for both - the effect is immersion in story. Disney's film adaptations vary broadly in their fidelity to the source text; *Alice in Wonderland*, while it conflates both *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking-glass*, still remains very true in word and spirit to Carroll's original novels. *The Adventures of Ichabod and Mister Toad*, from whence comes Mr. Toad and his wild ride, however, is drastically different than Grahame's novel, having shed a number of characters and plots in favor of the action-packed Toad sequences. Fantasyland also houses Storybook Land, which began as Canal Boats of the World; at the time of the park's opening, the canal and its

boats were functional, but the attraction was incomplete. By June of 1956, however, the attraction was re-opened under its new name - Storybook Land. From the boats which still drifted through the canals, visitors could view elaborate, beautifully crafted miniatures depicting various locations and scenes from Disney films (which, again, were based on written texts). Storybook Land allowed Walt Disney to include some of the miniatures that he loved, and which gave rise to the concept of the park; it also links those miniatures to stories. Guests are doubly drawn in, engaged by the world of the miniatures, and by the world of the story the miniatures represent.

Children's literature continued to influence new additions to both the Disney film library and to the park. Films like *Swiss Family Robinson* and *Treasure Island* gave rise to attractions: the Swiss Family Treehouse, and the Pirates of the Caribbean. In a peculiar looping from film to park to film, the Pirates attraction, opened in 1966 and at least partly derived from Stevenson's genre-defining novel, engendered a film franchise of its own in the early 21st century. This unusual adaptation of park ride to live-action feature film suggests the permeability of the boundary between the park and film (and vice versa), and it also demonstrates the ways in which the park itself can generate narratives with existences outside of, independent from, the originary attractions.

The reference to 19th and early 20th century boys' adventure books is part of the larger nostalgia that the park both indulges in and engenders. The *Architecture of Reassurance* authors explain that "Nineteenth century culture prized imitation and illusion, or what Walt liked best about his miniatures. The culture of Disneyland comes from the pre-modern era" (176).

Much has been written about Main Street's nostalgia for the "lost" turn-of-the-century American small town. This area of the park has the most in common with the "real world,"

though it is comprised of nostalgic memories. Main Street was originally designed for a degree of actual historical verisimilitude; the shops along the street were functional and disparate: a pharmacy, a soda fountain, a Wurlitzer store, a ladies' undergarments boutique.<sup>32</sup> Name brands were everywhere, a tactic that served two essential functions. First, and most conspicuously, the sponsorships of these companies (Upjohn, Carnation, and so on) were a valuable fundraising partnership. The brands got the benefit of Disney publicity, as well as being in a position of semi-monopoly in a park swarming with guests. Secondly, and crucially, the presence of real-world brands and shops created an aura of authenticity in Main Street, the only thematic area of the park intended to maintain a sense of verisimilitude with the external world. Main Street is, perhaps, the most truly historical segment of the park; the "history" of Frontierland is the highly colored, adventure-story and spaghetti-western of fictional accounts of the old West. But Main Street is meant to evoke small-town America circa 1900 *and* contemporary 1950s material culture simultaneously. The version of nostalgia available on Main Street is and was always thus conflicted.

Even on Main Street, though, where nostalgia most vividly presents itself for reflection and consumption, it is disrupted by the forward-looking attitude that pervades its character. "Here is America in 1890-1910, at the crossroads of an era. Here the gas lamp is giving way to the electric lamp; and a newcomer, the sputtering horseless carriage, has challenged Old Dobbin to the streetcar right-of-way. America was in transition," the *Pictorial Souvenir* tells us. Thus Main Street does not represent a fixed, lost moment in time; instead, it hovers at the very brink of change, technology, progress.

Main Street is therefore always old-fashioned, outdated, outmoded. This imagined world of a small-town America is always in the process of fading away, being replaced with newer,

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<sup>32</sup> This latter shop, the Wizard of Bras, was only open for the first year or so of Disneyland's existence.

flashier technologies and modes of living. It cannot be coincidental that Tomorrowland most closely abuts Main Street; unlike Adventureland to the west, which is set back and shrouded in dense foliage that obscures its theming, Tomorrowland's futuristic structures are visible from Main Street. Neil Harris, in his "Expository Expositions" chapter of *Architecture of Reassurance*, remarks of large fairs and exhibitions that form part of Disneyland's ancestry: "Fairs had a special gift for looking backward and forward simultaneously" (24).

References to nostalgia frequently appear in discourses around the park, often emphasizing the most sentimental vision of the adult/child binary, one which positions childhood as a carefree and happy time that adults can only gaze back on wistfully, or very briefly recapture in spaces like Disneyland. Critical commentary takes a skeptical and negative view of the kind of nostalgia that Disneyland invokes; historians Gary Cross and John Walton are an exception when they write that the experience of the park is "not merely manipulated, sentimentalized, or sanitized. Rather, Disneyland expressed a playfulness that attracted a mass audience" (169).<sup>33</sup>

Svetlana Boym's *The Future of Nostalgia* establishes two modes of nostalgia: restorative and reflective. Restorative nostalgia "attempts a transhistorical reconstruction of the lost home. ... does not think of itself as nostalgia, but rather as truth and tradition...[it] protects the absolute truth" (xviii). By contrast, reflective nostalgia "dwells on the ambivalences of human longing and belonging and does not shy away from the contradictions of modernity" (xviii). Critically, reflective nostalgia calls into doubt the "absolute truth" to which restorative nostalgia is so committed. Restorative nostalgia is largely a public expression and experience, while reflective nostalgia is more personal, individual, though both operate to some extent publicly and privately.

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<sup>33</sup> It's important to note that, for my purposes today, I am concentrating specifically on the white, middle-class, in part because it is for them that the park was designed, but largely because our prevailing views about children and childhood – which I am trying to think about here – come from a white middle-to-upper-class position.

Reflective nostalgia "does not follow a single plot but explores ways of inhabiting many places at once and imagining different time zones; it loves details, not symbols" (xviii). It "lingers on ruins, the patina of time and history, *in the dreams of another place and another time*" (41, my emphasis). This lingering in dreams seems to describe almost perfectly the aesthetic of Main Street, if not of other lands within the park. Against this, Boym explains restorative nostalgia as manifesting "in total reconstructions of monuments of the past" (41). As noted above, the constructed pasts of Frontierland, Adventureland, and Main Street are not efforts at *reconstruction* at all; they are physical representations of a fictionalized, usually literary, past. With its multiplicity of settings – places and times – as well as its abundance of details of all kinds, Disneyland serves as an excellent backdrop or stage for formulating, working out, and playing with reflective nostalgia

What nostalgia there is at Disneyland – that is, the nostalgia built into the landscape of the park – exists either somewhere in between these two forms of nostalgia, or as something else entirely masquerading as nostalgia. But nostalgia is *not* the primary mode in which the park – or its guests – operate. What is understood as nostalgia in Disneyland is something that may be more akin to Wordsworth's experiences of his childhood recollections; it is a looking-back as a way of gaining inspiration, and of moving forward. It is not an attempt to retreat back into – or even mourn at length – those days. The space in Disneyland which is most commonly aligned with nostalgia (which the park's discourse itself denotes as nostalgic) is the first space a visitor encounters upon entering the park: Main Street, USA. At the entrance to Disneyland's Main Street – the portal to the park itself – is a plaque "Here you leave today and enter the world of yesterday, tomorrow and fantasy."



What Disneyland ends up constructing is a fantasy vision of turn-of-the-century America, intentionally and conspicuously generalized and presented *as* nostalgic. Main Street is an exception to the order of the park: it is the one land of the park with no film tie-in, and the one land that isn't actually a land, *per se*; it isn't themed around anything excepted a recollected aesthetic of early 20<sup>th</sup> century small-town America. But it signals its recollected-ness, it calls attention to its own display of nostalgia, in a way that restorative nostalgia, masquerading as historical truth, never could. Main Street is a transitional space, a re-creation of a time and place, and is conscious of having never really existed except in the nostalgic imagination. The effects of this space are not nostalgic, but are in fact closer to its opposite, a forward-looking optimism.

Boym notes that "What mattered in the idea of progress was improvement in the future, not reflection on the past" (10). Alan Bryman writes that the narrative of nostalgia at Disneyland "[is placed] next to optimistic accounts of the future and of learning from mistakes in the recent past" (142). Disneyland's Main Street confronts both nostalgia and progress squarely, incorporating the language of both into its form. Main Street is a space themed by three key words: peace, prosperity, and progress. In reimagining the world of early 20<sup>th</sup> century small-town America (not at all coincidentally the era of Walt's own childhood), Disneyland places it in a narrative of hopeful progress; significantly, this occurs in the 1950s, a time when optimism in the future was strong in part because of a sense of all the good that had already been wrought by progress. In other words – the 1950s is figured as a time when everything is great, but one can imagine an even more utopian future, and one that is not far off. Turn-of-the-century Main Street is yoked to the mood of the 1950s; both exist in a space where rapid progress has led to significant improvement in the quality of human life, and where such progress has generated faith in its continuance to a brighter future. Boym notes that progress "is the first genuinely

historical concept which reduced the temporal difference between experience and expectation to a single concept" (10).

From the vantage point of the mid-1950s, 1910-era Main Street appears quaint, antique, old-fashioned, yet only 40 years separate the two eras. Visitors can see, literally the moment they step into the park, how far their world has progressed. Main Street provides a frame of reference, a reminder, and a parallel, rather than an illusory opportunity to complete the *nostos*, the return home. Main Street is a kind of yardstick: a pleasant glimpse at a past time, where one can enjoy or chuckle over the aesthetics of that day, all the while knowing that time has been passed and *surpassed*. The proximity of Tomorrowland to Main Street – the structures of Tomorrowland are more readily seen from Main Street than those of any other land – highlights this idea of progress and optimistic futurity.

Boym explains that "Optimistic belief in the future was discarded like an outmoded spaceship sometime in the 1960s" (xiv). Walt Disney's death in December 1966 coincides with this abandonment of optimistic futurism, but in the parks, the emphasis on both progress as a positive and the possibilities of the future remains strong. In some ways, Disneyland is, and nearly always was, belated; the values underpinning much of the representational work of the park were on their way out a few short years after the park opened. Disneyland, in the form it took, could not have been created after the mid-to-late 1960s, resulting in the irony that the park's progress and possibilities outlook *itself* becomes the site of nostalgia.

Bryman's analysis offers another clue about the park's relationship to nostalgia (and thus its function as the attractive force for an adult audience); he writes that the nostalgia of the park "is particularly interesting because it seems to avoid the sense of melancholy with which it [nostalgia] is often associated. This pessimistic and melancholic sense of nostalgia is occluded

within the Disney parks by conveying it in positive terms” (142). The melancholy of nostalgia is an *essential* aspect of it. The term itself – *nostos*, “return home,” and *-algia*, “pain” – speaks the pain and melancholy of the emotional experience. “Nostalgia” as an identified and identifiable state of being was, in its earliest state, a medical diagnosis (often seen in soldiers away from home for an extended period of time).<sup>34</sup> Though our contemporary understanding of nostalgia has softened it into a variant of reminiscence, both the term *and* the set of reactions it describes still retain some of the original pain. If, as Bryman suggests, the nostalgia of the park is nostalgia without pain, then it can’t truly be *nostalgia* – it becomes something else, some other kind of experience of the world, an experience that is predicated on play.

Disney is notoriously secretive about its park-related data; demographic statistics are difficult to obtain. But a 1958 survey shows that, even in the very earliest years of the park, more than half of attendees were adults (while around 27% were under age 12). If these adults are motivated by nostalgia, it isn't for their own childhood recollections of attending the park, or, necessarily, of their own childhood fondness for Disney films; it may very well not even be for the turn-of-the-century charms of Main Street, or the late 19<sup>th</sup>/early 20<sup>th</sup> century adventure fiction that forms the foundation for much of the park’s theming. In 1958, a parent of a young child would likely have been born well after the era Main Street attempts to evoke; it’s already, and always, belated, and thus cannot and does not represent the home to which one wants to return.

Main Street also serves as the segue into the decidedly fantastic lands of the park, providing a transitional space from the immediacy of present-day reality into the imaginative elsewheres of the four lands. In constructing a replica of a time long passed, a version of 1900 that, in fact, may never have truly existed, Disneyland eases guests into the imaginative, imaginary spaces of the rest of the park by framing the first imaginative space in the guise of a

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<sup>34</sup> Boym, xiii; 3-4

past reality. The nostalgic play space of Main Street prepares guests for the play required to participate fully in the other spaces of the park, spaces that are clearly less closely tethered to the "real world" as guests know it.

Gary S. Cross and John K. Walton's *The Playful Crowd* includes a full chapter on Disneyland, positioning the park within and against the twentieth century tradition of "pleasure places." Cross and Walton contend that Disneyland is heir to, and a successful conversion of, earlier pleasure grounds like Coney Island; unlike Coney parks, which catered specifically to young adults drawn largely from working-class and immigrant backgrounds, Disneyland repurposed the amusement park to attract middle-class families, in particular younger children and adults.<sup>35</sup> Like Coney Island, Disneyland's "object was cultural inversion, a counter-world to everyday experience" (168-169).

As noted earlier, Cross and Walton read Disneyland as "not merely manipulated, sentimentalized, or sanitized. Rather, Disneyland expressed a playfulness that attracted a mass audience ... responding to the desires of an expanded and transformed American middle-class" (169). While Cross and Walton do not hesitate to point out some of the problems inherent in targeting this audience (the largest, perhaps, being race), they also view the middle-class as a legitimate constituency of the playful crowd. Work on the pleasures and pastimes of the middle-class too often looks down on this particular audience, even while, at times, appropriating or valorizing those popular-culture pursuits. "Middle-class" often seems to function as a synonym for bland, unsophisticated, passively and unquestioningly participating in the dominant culture, and though it is certainly true that the American middle-class often perpetuates hegemonic or

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<sup>35</sup> Interestingly, though Cross & Walton devote a few paragraphs to the introduction of "cool" to contemporary Disney parks as a way of pulling in teenagers and young adults, the relative placelessness of adolescents in Disney parks goes unexamined. There is something curious at work here, that I think has to do with the nature of contemporary American adolescence and the identities it seeks, and is allowed, to inhabit.

normative practices, this same class is also a broad collection of people co-producing culture and shaping social discourse. To simply discount the middle-class or its pastimes because it is the middle-class is to ignore both the realities and possibilities of cultural formation.

As noted earlier, Disneyland has its origins, at least in part, in Walt's wish to create a playspace that invited adults into the play, along with children: "we don't aim at children. ... We try not to insult any age level. We try to get the right balance. Adults far outnumber kids at Disneyland and I call them honest adults, not afraid to shed a tear of nostalgia and romance."

In part because of Disney's secrecy about its own research, it is difficult to obtain broad information, rather than anecdotal evidence, about visitor reactions. Judging from newspaper and magazine reportage at the time of Disneyland's opening, however, the response of adult visitors to the park was something other than "shed[ding] a tear of nostalgia and romance." Hedda Hopper's preview column, published in the *Los Angeles Times* on July 16, 1955, raves about the park: "There aren't enough adjectives in Mr. Webster's book to describe the wonders of this playground. Mervyn LeRoy called it 'the eighth wonder of the world.' I'll add, 'It's the ninth, tenth, eleventh and twelfth.'" Hopper excitedly describes riding the park's train: "I not only got to pull the whistle but Walt actually let me take his place as engineer." By the end of the night, Hopper writes, "we all went home with the feeling of having been reborn. ... The sun didn't want to set on such beauty." The delight she displays at pulling the train whistle and taking Walt's place as engineer – at *playing* trains – is palpable. Though sentimental at times, the tone of Hopper's article is not nostalgic; she instead sounds enthusiastic and excited. Many of the journalists commenting on the park seem to struggle to find adequate expression for the pleasures the park provides to adult visitors, which seems to be not dissimilar from the excitement, fun, and delight experienced by child visitors. Along with other members of the

press, Hopper falls back on the clichéd language of talking about "kids from 6 to 60" when she writes about the experience of adult visitors. Cross and Walton describe it thus: "Disney created neither a park just for kids or for regressing adults. It was a place that not only reached the sensibilities of every age group, but also claimed to bring all to a common experience of delight ..." (175).<sup>36</sup> The claim of the common experience is not just a feature of Disney's publicity language; Hopper's and other reporters' accounts suggest that a "common experience of delight" was, *in fact*, what visitors to Disneyland experienced, regardless of age.

Some of that delight, certainly, as Cross and Walton and others point out, may be a vicarious delight experienced with one's own child or children, though this is not true at least in the case of Hedda Hopper's preview article. But the expression "childlike" appears again and again in both journalistic accounts and critical discussions of the park, and its very prevalence draws attention to the inadequacy of the word and the assumptions on which it rests. Disney himself, when he discusses or guides reporters around his park, is often described as "childlike;" reporters going through attractions and considering the built environment feel "childlike," and sometimes experience "childlike wonder."

But what does this word mean? Children, like adults, are different, individuated humans; to say that a behavior is "childlike" is to say it is human-like – it's an empty signifier. The *Oxford English Dictionary's* definition of "childlike" commits one of the cardinal sins of defining words: it uses the word in its adverbial definition. "Like a child; in a childlike manner." In its adjectival form, the *OED* notes "Esp. of a quality, action, physical attribute, etc.: like that of a child; characteristic of a child. Freq. with reference to the innocence, charm, etc., of

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<sup>36</sup> Their argument is, in my view, somewhat marred by the concluding phrase of that sentence: "free of the obsession, refinement, pedantry, and other forms of life's advance beyond the holy wonder of the child." Cross & Walton reify the distinction between adult and child visitors, compounding this by defaulting to the sentimentalized language ("holy wonder") of the Romantic vision of the child.

children.”<sup>37</sup> The very definition of “childlike” depends on the artificial constructs of the Child which we have created. The Child is what we say it is; thus “childlike” is a flexible term, as much a construct as the child and childhood themselves. “Childlike,” as an adjective, is most commonly used to describe behaviors and emotions expressive of delight, wonder, surprise, joy, curiosity. But why should this set of responses be the sole province of the child? “Childlike” depends entirely on the culturally-formed Romantic child, as perfected by the Victorians. It assumes that all children share some fundamental characteristic, and that all adults *lack* it, except in certain situations, or in rare personalities. In the way that other terms, such as innocence, have proven themselves to be deeply problematic, it seems to me that “childlike” imposes both a set of expected behaviors on the child, and a set of restrictions or limitations upon the adult, to the benefit of neither.

Though critics of disneyfication contend, as do Cross and Walton, that “Disney believed that nothing should awe or frighten the child and all stimuli should cause delight,” the reality of Disney productions – both films and in the park – belies this assertion (178). Disney films, particularly the early ones like *Pinocchio*, *Fantasia* (1940), *Bambi*, and *Dumbo*, feature very dark characters and scenes, many of which find their way into the park. The scene in which *Snow White*’s Evil Queen transforms herself into the Peddler/Hag contains a number of genuinely frightening elements: the thunder and lightning storm, the scream of fright that is an essential ingredient to the potion the Queen is making, the presence in her dungeon workshop of skulls and other bones, the whirling, blurring visual tricks that occur during her actual transformation, the cruelty she displays in passing a skeleton behind bars, bony arms stretched toward a pitcher (“Thirsty? Have a drink!”). *Snow White*’s Adventures includes aspects of this scene, along with

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<sup>37</sup> “childlike, adv. and adj.” *OED Online*. Oxford University Press, March 2015. Web. 21 March 2015.

Snow White's flight through the terrifying woods, and her "dead" body in its glass coffin.<sup>38</sup> Mr. Toad's Wild Ride concludes with a quick whirl through hell, full of little red devils with pitchforks, and larger, accusing devils looming over visitors.<sup>39</sup>

Park designers had to find ways to use a new, unfamiliar medium to turn the narratives of the films into ride experiences. In the case of the Fantasyland dark rides, film screenwriter and art director Ken Anderson led this translation project. Rather than attempt to tell the entire story while visitors were being quickly moved past in ride vehicles, Anderson elected instead to emphasize the *emotions* that could be evoked from the scenes and settings of the narrative.<sup>40</sup> This decision to emphasize and evoke emotion in the guests spanned the whole range of emotions: delight and awe, yes, but also sadness, confusion, suspense, and even fear. In fact, the inclusion in the park of a number of "dark rides," which by their very nature unsettle and frighten, betrays this notion that children should be protected from fear. The suggestion that the park is pitched to the "lowest common denominator of culture (set at the child's level)" ignores the function and audiences of the dark rides entirely, in favor of a flawed understanding of what the childlike, or child, *is* (Cross and Walton, 178).

Cross and Walton provide a good example of the way the rhetoric of child innocence obscures some of what's possible in Disneyland. Disney was, they write, "focusing play not on the young adult or working class seeking an escape in the impersonal throng ... but on the face of the very personal 'innocent' child. This targeting of child-like wonder freed Disney from the formal, status seeking, and didactic qualities of 1900s gentility. Disney was, and is, 'fun.' The formula worked for so many years, and continues still, because 'happiness' built around

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<sup>38</sup> Snow White's Adventures was given an overhaul in 1973; renamed Snow White's Scary Adventures, designer Brock Thoman intentionally heightened the level of fear: " 'Fear is part of growing up . Not milquetoast scary, not cute, but real fear!'"

<sup>39</sup> See Gordon and Mumford, 22.

<sup>40</sup> See Gordon and Mumford, 21.



cinematic fantasy, childhood delight, and nostalgia continues to meet the needs of middle-class America” (201). Their insistence on linking innocence, nostalgia, and childhood papers over the longstanding focus on adult guests, and their desires to have fun, which, as I have discussed, are not exclusively motivated by nostalgia or vicariously, through their children.

Yet Cross and Walton are good historians, and their analysis of the park includes instances when the possibilities of Disneyland as a transgressive space show through the veneer of child innocence. In a gesture toward adjacency with the carnivalesque, they write that “Disney encouraged adults to play the child, riding mechanical toys, but they also put on the cute by wearing mickey mouse ears. ... The idea was more than to feel like a kid, but to put on the mummies’ mask of the cute, even reversing roles, not across classes as in the old Mardi Gras tradition, but across ages” (179). Play at Disneyland is not simply about consumerism, or nostalgia, or even letting out the “inner child.” It asks visitors to participate in transformative play, to occupy positions and identities that oppose those they normally hold; it asks adult visitors to *inhabit* attitudes that run counter to the prevailing social norms and tap into a genuine desire for a type of imaginative play that is not sanctioned in the world outside the berm.

Much of Disneyland’s – and other Disney theme parks’ – potential for transgression or at least intervention in what Leo Bersani refers to as “regimes of the normal” has occurred on an individual level, as personal, small-scale experiences. But in recent decades, the Disney theme parks have also been used as a staging ground for queer visibility in the form of Gay Days, now an annual event. While Gay Days were initiated and organized by external, independent groups, Disney has made no protest against them (despite pressure from conservative and religious groups to do so). Gay Days began in 1991 as a single day in the first weekend of June when the “LesBiGay community and friends were encouraged to “Wear Red and Be Seen” while visiting

the world's most popular theme park.”<sup>41</sup> In the intervening years, Gay Days has grown into a weeklong, large-scale event, run by Gay Days Inc.; along with pool parties, travel expos, excursions to a number of theme parks, drag events, and other parties, there is always a designated day for Gay Days visitors to go to the Magic Kingdom, wearing red. A 2010 story in *Time* notes that Gay Days also now encompasses large numbers of queer families, who avoid the partying but participate by wearing red and being seen in the parks.<sup>42</sup> GayDays.com reports that over 150,000 people attend events and visit parks during the week.<sup>43</sup>

In the very first few years of Gay Day park attendance, Disney neither embraced nor inhibited the event, publicly stating that Gay Day was not an official Disney event, but also making clear that the parks were open to all; a public statement from 1994 asserts that “We do not discriminate on any basis.”<sup>44</sup> In its timeline of the history of Gay Days, the Orlando *Sentinel* quotes a 1992 memo from Disney executives “telling cast members to disavow knowledge of the event, if asked by guests: ‘Remember,’ it says, ‘every day is a gay day at Walt Disney World.’”<sup>45</sup> Mid-90s protests from the Southern Baptist Convention and other members of the religious right only strengthened participation in Gay Days, and in 2005, the Southern Baptists’ boycott of Disney was officially ended.<sup>46</sup>

Though not primarily organized as such, Gay Days was and is a clever piece of activism: throngs of red-shirted LGB (initially; Gay Days has, over time, explicitly included transgender and other queers in its participants) at the Magic Kingdom, a seeming bastion of middle-class,

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<sup>41</sup> <https://www.gaydays.com/History/history.html> accessed 3/7/15

<sup>42</sup> <http://content.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,1995839-2,00.html>

<sup>43</sup> <https://www.gaydays.com/History/history.html> accessed 3/7/15

<sup>44</sup> [http://articles.orlandosentinel.com/2014-06-04/entertainment/os-gay-days-orlando-history-20140604\\_1\\_gay-days-gaydays-com-walt-disney-world](http://articles.orlandosentinel.com/2014-06-04/entertainment/os-gay-days-orlando-history-20140604_1_gay-days-gaydays-com-walt-disney-world) (3/7/15)

<sup>45</sup> [http://articles.orlandosentinel.com/2014-06-04/entertainment/os-gay-days-orlando-history-20140604\\_1\\_gay-days-gaydays-com-walt-disney-world](http://articles.orlandosentinel.com/2014-06-04/entertainment/os-gay-days-orlando-history-20140604_1_gay-days-gaydays-com-walt-disney-world)

<sup>46</sup> [http://articles.orlandosentinel.com/2014-06-04/entertainment/os-gay-days-orlando-history-20140604\\_1\\_gay-days-gaydays-com-walt-disney-world](http://articles.orlandosentinel.com/2014-06-04/entertainment/os-gay-days-orlando-history-20140604_1_gay-days-gaydays-com-walt-disney-world)

reproductive-heteronormative values. But, as Sean Griffin thoroughly explores, Disney has a long history of popularity within queer communities, and a similarly long history of employing large numbers of gay and lesbian workers.<sup>47</sup> Griffin performs readings of a number of Disney animated films that show quite clearly the rich potential for queer reception within those films, as well as offering anecdotal historical evidence of the ways in which Disney and its properties were aligned with or appropriated by gay and lesbian communities.<sup>48</sup> Though Disney “support” of Gay Days is driven by the bottom line, the company did make a conscious choice to allow Gay Days, even during the most intense criticism and scrutiny from anti-gay groups in the 1990s. Perhaps most interestingly, while opposition from the Southern Baptist Convention and their allies was gaining momentum in the summer of 1994, in the fall of that year, the Walt Disney Company extended employee benefits to the domestic partners of its gay and lesbian employees.<sup>49</sup> The decision made headlines, predictably, and though there was backlash (including from Florida state legislators), the move was not disastrous for Disney, and was, in fact, good for gay rights. In 1996, the *Sentinel* reported that “Disney brought these issues [gay rights] to Main Street. More large employers are following Disney's lead in extending medical and other benefits to the partners of gay employees.”<sup>50</sup> That a company of Disney's size and wealth, with the entrenched reputation of being family-friendly and wholesome, could successfully extend benefits to domestic partners emboldened a variety of American corporations to make similar moves.

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<sup>47</sup> Griffin, *Tinker Belles and Evil Queens*.

<sup>48</sup> Ch 2 Reading Disney Queerly. “A lesbian hobo of the 1930s who went by the name Box-Car Bertha related to Dr. Ben L. Reitman in 1935 that a group of wealthy Chicago lesbians threw soirees called ‘Mickey Mouse’s party.’ Bertha maintained contact with these women in order to borrow money, introducing herself by saying ‘I met you at Mickey Mouse’s party’” (48).

<sup>49</sup> Griffin (216)

<sup>50</sup> [http://articles.orlandosentinel.com/1997-06-08/news/9706090126\\_1\\_gay-employees-partners-of-gay-offer-benefits](http://articles.orlandosentinel.com/1997-06-08/news/9706090126_1_gay-employees-partners-of-gay-offer-benefits)

*Time* notes that “A former Disney employee ... told me that every year, Disney issues refunds or free next-day tickets to angry moms and dads who don't want their kids exposed to gay couples or gay-themed shirts.” But, as *Time* goes on to point out, the number of angry visitors is dwindling, and Disney has increasingly embraced Gay Days. As [gaydays.com](http://gaydays.com) notes, queer visitors to the park are met with “smiling cast members welcoming Gay Days visitors with unscheduled entertainment at the Castle Forecourt, expanded park operating hours, and a fireworks display usually reserved for the peak summer season and holidays.”<sup>51</sup> The many shops in the park also sell a selection of rainbow-themed souvenirs, clearly designed for a gay audience; rainbow merchandise is available year-round at Disney parks, not just during Gay Days.

From Griffin’s account, gay and lesbian employees of all kinds were always part of the Disney workforce, whether in the studios – as animators, artists, technicians – or, once they were created, in the parks, and by the early nineties were becoming a visible, at least somewhat unified, entity within the organization. Thus it may be overstating things somewhat to claim, as the *Orlando Weekly* does, that Gay Days “pushed Disney out of the closet.”<sup>52</sup> But the effect of Gay Days was to perform the kind of transformative work that play in the park can lead to: as visitors to the theme park, queer guests could and did wear red shirts, hold hands as they walked, publicly interact with each other as gay and lesbian couples, friends, and families, and enjoy the park “ ‘like everybody else,’ ” according to Gay Day founder Doug Swallow.<sup>53</sup>

Alan Bryman notes that “many visitors view the parks as a place of safety in the face of a world of danger and uncertainty” (139). This sounds reactionary, but when viewed in the context of the safety of out or open queer people, the safe space of the park becomes quite literal. In the

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<sup>51</sup> <https://www.gaydays.com/History/history.html>

<sup>52</sup> <http://www.orlandoweekly.com/orlando/how-gay-day-pushed-disney-out-of-the-closet/Content?oid=2262655>

<sup>53</sup> <http://www.orlandoweekly.com/orlando/how-gay-day-pushed-disney-out-of-the-closet/Content?oid=2262655>

play space, men and women who, in daily life may have had to live closeted or partially-closeted lives, were able to very visibly display themselves as un-closeted. “Like everybody else” includes “safely” – precisely *because* the Magic Kingdom is a closely controlled environment, Disney employees have the ability to police and manage guests and crowds in ways that do not exist in most public spaces, and thereby protect guests who – as visibly queer men and women – would be vulnerable to both verbal and physical attacks in the external world.

Though Gay Days was never intended to be major activism, it had the effect of making visible and first tolerable, then acceptable, queer visitors to the park – tolerable, then acceptable to Disney employees and executives, to the media, to other corporations, to the public at large. Crediting Disney with advancing gay rights seems like something of a stretch, but it is hard to deny the ripple effect that Gay Days had on national discourse and policies toward gay and lesbian citizens.

Of the 1998 Gay Days gathering in the Magic Kingdom, Griffin writes: “Although paying to participate, the gay men, lesbians, bisexuals, transgendered people and the many other queer individuals ... had gathered to share a communal experience, using Disney to celebrate their lives. The crowd may not have been ‘resisting’ the reading strategy those at Disney had intended for them to use.... Yet, the estimated thousands ... used this corporate space as an opportunity to make connections and bond together in a shared expression of their existence in the face of a still vibrant hatred and oppression” (Griffin 228-229).

Though the problem of capital cannot be avoided in discussing Disney parks – you have to pay to get in, which limits entrance to those who can afford the ever-increasing ticket prices, and the parks are run very much as for-profit businesses, where all decisions are made with one eye fixed on the bottom line – still, the mainly white, middle-to-upper class demographic who

comprise the park's primary audience is also the dominant culture of the U.S. As Disney products – films, toys, theme parks, books, television programming – both reflect and produce the values of that dominant culture, so too does Disney's increasing embrace of its queer audience reflect and produce those values.

Most recently, the tremendous success of the animated feature film *Frozen* (2013) has been accompanied by widespread mainstream readings of the film as queer, not just because of its absence of a central heterosexual romance plot, but because of the character Elsa, who must keep her magical ice-generating ability hidden from the world; Elsa is almost literally closeted away though the beginning of the film, shut up alone in her bedroom.<sup>54</sup> The film's climactic song, "Let It Go," sung by Elsa when she finally leaves her old life, builds herself an ice castle, and stops hiding her feelings and her abilities, has been massively popular, generating covers, spoofs, and sincere sing-alongs from fans.<sup>55</sup> Unlike the typical Disney princess films, which very specifically target girls, a significant part of the fan base for the film are little boys, many of whom routinely dress up and play as Elsa.<sup>56</sup> While there has been criticism of the little boys who dress up as Elsa, there has also been considerable support; Disney is again enabling, or being employed as the vehicle for, imaginative play with transgressive overtones.<sup>57</sup>

Within the parks, adult play has become more prevalent and prominent. Organized, unofficial cosplay/dress-up days, particularly at Disneyland, have encouraged mainly adult participants to visit the park in (often nostalgic) formal attire (Dapper Day), retro pin-up fashion

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<sup>54</sup> <http://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2014/04/its-not-just-frozen-disney-has-always-been-subtly-pro-gay/361060/>

<sup>55</sup> True to the pattern Griffin describes, *Frozen*'s identity as a queer film was publicized and popularized in part by right-wing reactions to the film; religious right radio host Kevin Swanson and blogger Kathryn Skaggs led the charge against *Frozen*. <http://www.rightwingwatch.org/content/swanson-disneys-frozen-satanic-push-turn-kids-gay>, <http://wellbehavedmormonwoman.blogspot.com/2014/02/movie-frozen-gay-homosexual-agenda.html#.Ux-LoFFdWLF>

<sup>56</sup> <http://www.nytimes.com/2014/05/18/fashion/disneys-animated-film-frozen-has-some-children-obsessed.html>

<sup>57</sup> [http://blogs.babycenter.com/mom\\_stories/10022014-frozen-elsa-halloween-boy-cosutme/#respond](http://blogs.babycenter.com/mom_stories/10022014-frozen-elsa-halloween-boy-cosutme/#respond)

(Pin-up Parade), and *Star Wars* Fan Day, among others; the February 15, 2015 edition of LA Weekly features a guide to the various cosplay days.<sup>58</sup> These occasions feature considerable participation: dapperday.com claims 20,000 participants at their events, which are very loosely organized, with no formal conventions, meet-ups, or other scheduled events.<sup>59</sup> As with Gay Days, none of these themed days are Disney-sponsored; all were created and organized by fans eager to play. Disney maintains strict rules for the kinds of costumes permitted within the parks (nothing that looks too much like actual Disney costumed performers is allowed), but otherwise – again, as with Gay Days – is amenable to the various events, including allowing group rates for hotels.

One of the other very recent fan-led forms of adult play within the parks are the “gangs” that have been organized at Disneyland. Profiled in March 2014 in the online magazine OZY in an article with the subheading “Because Disneyland isn’t just for kids, and cosplay isn’t just about head-to-toe Comic-Con costumes,” Disneyland fans have formed into “social clubs,” with membership gear patterned on motorcycle gangs (denim vests, patches, etc.). The clubs take their names from various attractions or locations within the park (the Main Street Elite, the Hitchhikers, affiliated with the Haunted Mansion), and basically serve as smaller sub-communities within Disney fandom. Of the club members, Paul Christian Vazquez writes “Clubs are set apart from the general crowds by more than just the vests. Tattoos, pompadours and piercings are typical, and tell of the wearer’s ties to various music and lifestyle scenes. Often already part of other subcultures to begin with, the majority of club members are accustomed to sporting an unconventional, uniform “look.” ... These tribes are all-inclusive when it comes to

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<sup>58</sup> <http://www.laweekly.com/arts/a-guide-to-disneylands-unofficial-dress-up-days-5402663>

<sup>59</sup> <http://dapperday.com/> (3/10/2015).

gender, age and sexual orientation.”<sup>60</sup> Membership is by invitation, though prospectives are encouraged to get to know club members as a way of acquiring an invite; the social clubs seem more interested in finding like-minded fans than in excluding anyone. Photos on instagram and facebook show members of all ages – children, teenagers, adults – visiting the park and posing in their vests.

While not true cosplay, since club members don’t usually dress in character-based costumes, this kind of highly visible fandom is a creative expression from its participants all the same.<sup>61</sup> The overlap between Disney social club membership, and participation in a pre-existing subculture recalls Judith Halberstam’s analysis of subcultures in *In A Queer Time and Place*: “subcultures...suggest transient, extrafamilial, and oppositional modes of affiliation” (154). Disneyland can thus be a space that reaffirms heteronormative families, but it can also function as a space that affirms subcultural or extrafamilial communities: queer identities, queer relationships, and queer families.

Disneyland is made of stories; it is, like Nesbit's Magic City, a book-built world. It is also a space that *encourages* stories: the creation and enacting of narratives by park visitors. These narratives can, and do, take many forms: the conventional, trite story of happy family vacation, of family reunion, of honeymoon, of vacation as gift for child or adult, and every variant on these fairly expected, traditional stories. There are also deeper narratives, though, that recognize the uniqueness of the space created by the park, its visitors, and its employees. As Hench said, “When we design any area of a Disney park, we transform a *space* into a *story place*” (Hench 69). The space of the park is a story place, and it is a story place for many kinds

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<sup>60</sup> <http://www.ozy.com/fast-forward/gangs-of-disneyland/6646.article>

<sup>61</sup> "cosplay, n." *OED Online*. Oxford University Press, December 2014. Web. 10 March 2015.  
<http://www.oed.com.pitt.idm.oclc.org/view/Entry/271924?redirectedFrom=cosplay&>



of stories: stories about families, about individuals, about identity, about the past and the present and the future.

These two recent examples of adult play in and with the park illustrate these possibilities for storymaking. Both groups – the Gay Days attendees and the social clubs and cosplayers – bring their own stories and sensibilities to the park space. As Griffin observes, Gay Days visitors may not be resisting the narratives the park offers, but they are not neutral or passive receivers of those narratives, either. These park guests are adding their own stories and desires, adapting to the park or forcing the park to adapt to them, both acts of creation that the park structure enables and encourages. If telling more, and more varied stories, and new stories, is part of a progressive worldview, then Disneyland and its sibling parks can and do provide a space in which to play and tell those stories.

**3.0 I LIKE YOU JUST THE WAY YOU ARE:  
QUEER MASCULINITIES AND MAKING BELIEF  
IN *MISTER ROGERS' NEIGHBORHOOD***

When children watch television, they're bringing their whole lives with them.  
Fred Rogers

On May 1, 1969, The Senate Subcommittee on Communications reconvened for its second day of testimony concerning the future of funding for public broadcasting. What we now know as PBS was still in its infantile stages; National Education Television was the entity then linking various regional public stations, offering those stations the opportunity to send and receive public programming from around the country. This collective effort had previously received funding from the Johnson administration, with renewal and extension options which the Senate Subcommittee was considering in its hearings. By this point, the war in Vietnam was under the direction of President Nixon, who partly in response to the cost of the war advocated for halving the budget that Johnson had authorized for public broadcasting. These hearings on the future of federally-funded public television were taking place under highly charged circumstances; the spring of 1969 had shown movement toward peace in Vietnam, but had also brought the secret bombing of Cambodia and the peak of US troop levels in the region. Nearly 34,000 Americans had been killed by the end of April, 1969. This backdrop of war and the ever-

increasing anti-war movement provided a politically dramatic context for the Senate Subcommittee's hearings.

Fred Rogers, the then-unknown creator and host of *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood*, was introduced by the Subcommittee Chair, Senator John Pastore of New Jersey, a notoriously brusque character who gruffly (and a bit dismissively) granted Rogers the floor. The following ten minutes of testimony are exemplary of the persona of Mister Rogers and of the mission of his program, as well as a remarkable moment of convergence between children's television, politics, and heart-felt emotion.

Even in response to Pastore's sarcastic initial questions, Rogers is calm and unflappable. He begins with an assertion that he trusts the committee to keep their word of reading the "philosophical statement" he has submitted, adding, "it is important to me. I care deeply about children." Rogers then makes a powerful statement about his goals for working in public broadcasting: "I feel that if we in public television can only make it clear that feelings are mentionable and manageable, we will have done a great service for mental health. I think it is much more dramatic that two men could be working out their feelings of anger, much more dramatic, than showing something of gunfire" (143). Afterward Senator Pastore remarked that he had goosebumps, and that, "it looks like you just earned the \$20 million." For contemporary and perhaps more cynical viewers of this now-archival footage, Rogers' earnestness may seem almost shocking, as does his insistence on framing his statements in deeply emotional terms. His testimony in support of federal funding is not a dispassionate, professional statement; it is deeply personal, and helps illustrate the profound, positive impact that Fred Rogers and his public access children's program had on generations of viewers.

The Fred Rogers Center published a biographical booklet in September 2008, “The Wonder of it All: Fred Rogers and the Story of an Icon,” co-authored by Margaret Mary Kimmel and Mark Collins, the editing team behind *Mister Rogers’ Neighborhood: Children, Television, and Mister Rogers*, the only book of scholarly work yet published on the program. This 36-page booklet is the closest thing to an official biography that we currently have – or, indeed, an unofficial biography, since Fred Rogers has been strangely overlooked in both critical and popular publishing. Kimmel and Collins introduce their booklet by claiming that “Fred Rogers’ background – his story – is *the* key ingredient to understanding his television mission” (2). Though I don’t agree that biographical information is “*the*” essential way of understanding the program, some knowledge of the earlier life of Fred Rogers is useful, if not necessary, in considering the work he did. The limitations of biographical criticism become apparent as one pursues Rogers’ biography, as do the complexities of conflating Fred Rogers the individual human with his on-screen persona. This latter issue is one of particular note in any analysis of *Mister Rogers’ Neighborhood*, because in so many ways, what you see is what you get: the Mister Rogers onscreen is basically Fred Rogers, according to the man himself as well as to those who knew him and encountered him. Indeed, one of the ways I came to this project in the first place was the large number of people I met in Pittsburgh who had Mister Rogers “encounter” stories – and all of them repeated the same theme: “I met Mister Rogers once, and he was *just like* he is on tv.”

Writing about Mister Rogers himself proved tricky for many journalists. In interview after interview, the journalists end up – or begin by – writing about themselves, not about Rogers; their articles become a record of the effect Rogers had on the writer. Rogers himself contributed to this problem by regularly asking questions of his interviewer, rather than simply

responding; he loved to take photographs of the journalists with whom he met. His continual deflection of attention away from himself means that, in some ways, he is an exceptionally elusive figure, an odd, seeming contradiction from a man whose public persona as Mister Rogers was avowedly *not* a character, but simply Rogers being himself. As our television friend and neighbor, we entered daily into his home – into the living room, kitchen, even bathroom; he spoke directly to us, addressing our concerns, anticipating our fears, asking us questions out of a genuine interest in our thoughts. Yet somehow, Fred Rogers evades our notice, and our analysis. There is only one full-length book published about *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood*, and that is a collection of essays, many of which are marked by accounts of the writer's encounters with Rogers. Other than one written for children, there is not a single biography of Fred Rogers. In the scholarly literature, there are a handful of published articles, but most of them attend to music, religion, and/or early childhood development. From the perspective of critical analysis rooted in literature, film, or media studies, there is virtually nothing.

The basic facts of Fred Rogers' life give some perspective on who he was, and how he came to do the work that he did. Born on March 20, 1928 in the town of Latrobe, Pennsylvania (roughly an hour's drive from Pittsburgh), Fred McFeely Rogers was the child of affluent parents with prominent positions within the community. When Fred was eleven years old, his younger sister Elaine was adopted into the family, but until then he had been a lonely only child – sickly and asthmatic, overweight, shy, with few friends his age, spending much of his time in the company of adults. Kimmel and Collins note that "Rogers often commented about his sense of isolation as a child" (6). His maternal grandfather, Fred McFeely, owned the McFeely Brick Factory, one of the larger employers in Latrobe, and was one of young Fred Rogers' closest companions. Tributes to his grandfather appear in *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood* in two

significant ways: in the name of Mister McFeely, the Speedy Delivery man, and in the hallmark phrase “You’ve made today a special day” – a phrase which his grandfather often said to Fred.

By the time he graduated from high school, Fred had gained friends and popularity: he was editor of the yearbook and president of the student council. After two years of studying at Dartmouth, Fred transferred to Rollins College in Florida to major in music composition. Here, he again participated in the school community in positions of responsibility and leadership. A note from Fred, aged about 21, to administration about the importance of house or dorm mothers for students’ emotional well-being gives an insightful, if unsurprising, snapshot of the kind of person Fred was in his very early 20s.<sup>62</sup>

While at Rollins, Fred met pianist Joanne Byrd; Fred proposed via letter, and the two married in 1952. By this time, he had discovered television, and decided to work in the field, to make it something better than “people throwing pies in each other’s faces” In late 1951, Fred moved to New York City to take a job with NBC, in a variety of positions until becoming floor manager for several of the station’s music-oriented shows (The Kate Smith Hour, The Hit Parade).

At this point, family connections and the launching of a new television station brought Rogers back to Pittsburgh, and set him firmly on the path to *Mister Rogers’ Neighborhood*. Leland Hazard, an attorney and vice-president of Pittsburgh Plate Glass (PPG), and friend of Rogers’ father, was heading the efforts to create a new community broadcasting station in Pittsburgh; Rogers was interviewed by Hazard and offered a job as program manager at the new station, WQED. The educational, non-commercial nature of the station was due in large part to the efforts of Hazard and Pittsburgh mayor David L. Lawrence, both firm believers in the great potential of nonprofit educational programming. In a 1955 reflective piece published in *The*

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*Atlantic*, Hazard writes “to concede that all television should be conducted as commercial enterprise would be irresponsible. ... Business has its important disciplines and values, but as a be-all and end-all it is not enough unless America is to become another Carthage.” As a condition for receiving its license from the FCC, the new station was required to finance itself entirely. Hazard notes, in *The Atlantic*, that they intentionally did not seek funding from local or state legislatures; instead, they turned to the community itself because “we knew the importance of developing local community standards for this new cultural medium.” Pittsburgh’s willingness and ability to contribute the entirety of the needed funding made WQED the nation’s first community-owned public television station. But it also established a mutually beneficial relationship between the city and WQED, a local, close relationship that has continued to flourish to this day, some sixty years later. The fact that the very station is, in essence, the product of a neighborhood coming together in common cause, may explain in part the truly neighborly tone of *Mister Rogers’ Neighborhood*, as well as Pittsburgh’s intense love for and pride in the program and its creator/host.

The persona of Mister Rogers – a persona which Rogers asserted, repeatedly, was not a character – is an important component of the program. In the documentary film *America's Favorite Neighbor*, Joanne Rogers says of her husband: "he's the most liberated man I know." Many of the popular media articles that address the show and its creator emphasize the man's personality as a fundamental part of the program's character, and its success (terms like "saint" are used with considerable frequency). But Rogers's masculinity is another aspect of the show's radical nature; he is what we might call a public sissy, a man who refuses traditional "male" behaviors and attitudes. His insistence on talking publicly and openly about feelings does not conform to stereotypical notions about gender; his program’s repeated themes of inclusiveness

shows both male and female characters pursuing a wide range of interests and careers, some of which run counter to gender stereotypes.

In 2008, PBS discontinued daily viewing of the program. Local stations can pay to have bundles of the episodes for local programming, but national, automatic MRN distribution came to a stop. Though this was lamented by some, for the most part, the disappearance of Mister Rogers from the public's attention went unremarked. But a surge of renewed interest in the program and its creator occurred a few years later; this new engagement with Mister Rogers suggests that the public still needs the kind of space and attention his program provided, and that critical attention to the program is valuable, now perhaps more than ever before.

The first instance of renewed interest came in June 2012, with the release of the PBS co-produced video titled "Garden of Your Mind." The video, an autotuned mix by Symphony of Science's John D. Boswell, takes as its theme and chorus the question posed by Mister Rogers in one episode of the program: "Did you ever grow anything in the garden of your mind?" Posted on PBS Digital's Youtube channel, one year later (21 June 2013), the video has had nearly nine million views. It was widely shared around the internet – on Facebook, twitter, tumblr, and other sites including the Huffington Post, nbcnews.com, and BuzzFeed. The websites for most major American newspapers posted some kind of piece and link to the video. In its post on the remix, MTV newsroom's John Mitchell remarks that "Like just about everything affiliated with Mister. Rogers, the clip ... is incredibly moving." The title instructs viewers to grab a tissue before viewing; at the article's conclusion, a caption for the video link reads "we were serious about that tissue, guys."

Six months after the autotune video was released, Mister Rogers went viral again, this time in the role of friend, counselor, and comforter. In the aftermath of the shooting massacre at



Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Connecticut, a quotation from Mister Rogers began appearing all over the internet as a way of consoling both adults and children reeling from the particularly disturbing shooting deaths of twenty elementary school children and a number of their teachers, aides, and principal. As a caption for various photographs of Mister Rogers and as the text of Mister Rogers gifs, “Look for the helpers. You will always find people who are helping” made its way all over the internet, largely through social media sharing.

This bit of advice, as a way for parents and caregivers to help children cope with tragedy or disasters, was in circulation since at least 1986. In response to the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, Fred Rogers – by then retired – filmed several short public service announcements in which he reiterates this advice: “When I was a boy and I would see scary things in the news, my mother would say to me, 'Look for the helpers. You will always find people who are helping.'” This 52-second PSA was also widely shared across the internet. The PSA, in which Rogers wears glasses, a jacket, and a tie, is directed at an adult viewership. At a piano placed before the castle from the set of the Neighborhood of Make-Believe, Rogers plays a few quiet notes and turns to the camera, addressing the viewer directly as he always does on his program. He mentions the requests from parents, asking for advice on what to tell young children about tragic events and disasters; his first advice is to find out right away, from the child, what she knows about it. Rogers goes on to tell watchers “what children probably need to hear the most from us adults is that they can talk with us about anything. ... I’m always glad to be your neighbor.”

In April 2013, following the bombing at the Boston Marathon, this quote in all its forms (image, meme, video, Facebook post, and so forth) went viral again, this time reaching even greater numbers of people. Both instances of the advice going viral were reported in mainstream

news outlets. This renewed burst of interest in, and affection for, Mister Rogers could easily be attributed to nostalgia, and no doubt there is, in fact, at least a touch of nostalgia for some sharers of the meme; after all, these Facebook and Twitter users are all adults or, at the very youngest, teenagers, who likely grew up watching *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood*. But this recent need among adults for Mister Rogers and his philosophy is not, in fact, very recent at all; it is just the latest instance of the way his program and his message has *always* resonated with viewers of all ages. Viewer correspondence shows clearly that adults watching the program for the first time in the 1970s and 80s had reactions to Mister Rogers that are very similar to the reactions of adults encountering him in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, regardless of any prior experience as child viewers of the program.<sup>63</sup> This undercuts the view of today's adults as simply nostalgic, reaching for or retreating to childhood memories for comfort; there is a quality inherent in Mister Rogers that speaks to adults *as* adults, free from the burdens of nostalgia, that is, if not singular, than certainly unusual in children's media.

It isn't just a question of a resonant message, or even of personal reassurance. The power of Mister Rogers and his program is the power of transformation, of catalysis. The program never instructs its viewers to do or be any specific thing: it suggests, gently, things viewers might try out at home, or think about, but there is no explicit call to action. Yet viewers – children and adults alike – received Mister Rogers' words and transformed them into both thoughts and actions that significantly affected their being in the world. The private, internal space or self that found reassurance from Rogers' consistently repeated remark "I like you exactly as you are," translated that private reassurance into public expressions or action. Any escapism offered by the program includes mechanisms for safely and productively returning to the "real" world while

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<sup>63</sup> See discussion of viewer correspondence beginning on p 93.

simultaneously *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood*, like many children's television programs both before and after, ignores the fourth wall and speaks directly to its viewers.

As noted above, discourse about Fred Rogers is generally sentimental, self-centered, and hagiographic. In his memoir *I'm Proud of You*, Tim Madigan goes so far as to suggest that Rogers is Christlike; recalling conversations with Rogers while Madigan's brother was dying of cancer, Madigan notes: "This is like walking through this stuff with Jesus himself" (135). Descriptions of Fred Rogers in popular media utilize any number of similarly adulatory adjectives: gentle, sincere,<sup>64</sup> earnest, sweet, friendly, reassuring, revered.

The mystification of Fred Rogers is one strand of the public discourse about the program that is in dire need of disruption – not because Rogers seethes with dark and terrifying qualities, but because the elevation of Rogers *and what he stands for* to saint status distances us from him, and from the possibilities he enables. Saints are rare, they are holy, they are miraculous, and they are not us. They are different, special, other – untouchable and inimitable. The magnetic force of Rogers' personality seems to be the opposite: what makes him so engaging and welcoming is his empathy, and his willingness to publicly and consistently demonstrate that empathy. But in his empathy, he is like us; empathy is a shared emotional experience, and Rogers accesses that emotion from his own life's repertoire of experiences. The mystification of Mister Rogers also serves to elide and erase the radical and progressive nature of his work; Rogers-as-saint is fundamentally a reactionary, conservative move that in fact counters and attempts to hide, or even undo, his radicalism.

The kind of conflicted, problematic discussions of Mister Rogers are exemplified in journalist Bob Garfield's foreward to *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood: Children, Television, and Fred Rogers*. Titled "Born Again in Rogers," this short essay is representative of a cringing away

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<sup>64</sup> See Wagner, Sedgwick, John. Fine Tuning, Mary T. Wagner

from, and an embrace of, Mister Rogers and his show as “wimpy.” The essay details Garfield’s shift from loathing the show to embracing it (thus, “born again”); he begins resenting the show’s “praying at the altar of wimpishness,” to viewing Mister Rogers as a “national treasure” and an “endocrinological wonder drug, restoring metabolic balance to our entire culture” (xii). Garfield refers to his own testosterone frequently, and attributes his turn away from Mister Rogers to a kind of homophobic anxiety, a feeling of being threatened by Mister Rogers. Garfield’s choice of metaphors for his essay – endocrinology and testosterone – reveal a great deal about how he (and we, culturally) think of Mister Rogers. Garfield wraps up his essay by suggesting that we need Mister Rogers, even “if not a male ideal, necessarily” (xiii).

Garfield’s narrative of “recovery” details explicitly his dislike of Mister Rogers, in language that reveals a deep disgust. Framing his experience as both conversion and 12-step program, Garfield writes “Hi. My name is Bob, and Mister Rogers makes my flesh crawl.” A few sentences earlier, he notes that his children had seen the “sheer revulsion” he felt towards Rogers (ix). In his litany of specifics about the program that he detests, Garfield includes “Lady Aberlin cooing at Daniel Striped Tiger with precisely the come-hither expression I’d fantasize about her bestowing on me” (x). The physical feelings of disgust that Garfield links to his experiences with the program make for a weirdly pathological, and sexualized, opening to a book concerned with the influence and importance of Fred Rogers.

But Garfield’s revulsion – which lasts, by his account, for some 25 years – is then framed as the kind of rock-bottom an addict must reach before recovery can begin. He insists on showing *The Ren & Stimpy* show to his children (girls aged 11 and 7), who react to the cartoon by “howl[ing] – like children possessed,” a sight he finds terrifying. This in itself is worthy of unpacking in what it suggests about adult views of children’s entertainment – how does he

expect children to react to satire and gross physical comedy in cartoons? Why is this howling so disturbing? For Garfield, the significance of the girls' response is in what it means for *his* perception of Rogers. The howling of the "possessed" children brings, for Garfield, "conversion," a "moment of epiphany": Rogers "isn't the problem; he's the solution. He isn't the devil in sneakers. He's an angel of God" (xii).

Adding to the metaphors of religion and recovery, Garfield begins to work in the metaphor of endocrinology: Rogers is "an endocrinological wonder drug, restoring metabolic balance to our entire culture." In rethinking Rogers, Garfield analyzes his previously-held ideas about his daughters' "docile demeanors," and their lack of accidents, fires, destruction of furniture or other disruptive behaviors. This he attributes to them being "testicularly challenged." While the girls watch another raucous cartoon, Garfield observes that "it was as though they'd been on an intravenous testosterone drip. Limbs were flailing. Otherworldly noises were coming from their mouths" (xiii). It seems that a good portion of Garfield's horror is over his girls' deviation from what he considers appropriate gender behaviors; he follows this with the realization that his own loathing of Rogers is deeply phobic: it comes from his "conviction that *he* [Rogers] was testicularly challenged" (xiii). From this, Garfield asserts that his "own glandular excesses" are at fault, that he has "testosterone poisoning" (xiii).

It's a weirdly roundabout way of saying that a certain kind of aggressive masculinity needs to be checked, especially when it begins to appear in *girls*. Rogers counteracts this abundance of testosterone, somehow; Garfield, in his hopelessly binaristic view of gender performance, seems to be casting Rogers as a female, or at least effeminate, counterweight. In a world overrun with testosterone-induced excesses, the antidote is Mister Rogers, that endocrinological wonder drug. Garfield ignores the fact that viewing social behaviors as

analagous to, or caused by, sex-related hormones raises an array of problems, and that using this kind of endocrinology establishes gendered behaviors as pathological. Reading Mister Rogers as somehow biologically, or at least endocrinologically, female is a convolution that distracts us from thinking about the kind of *masculinity* Mister Rogers enacts. Rather than reconsider and expand our constructions of masculinity, Garfield reasserts normative gender roles while simultaneously casting those roles as biological ones.

As with so many of the media meditations on Rogers, “Born Again in Rogers” is really about its author, not Fred Rogers. Bob Garfield is the main character in the foreward, and Garfield’s phobic biases loom large from every line of text. Even after his realizations about the benefits of Mister Rogers and his own “glandular excesses,” Garfield refuses to establish Rogers as a true role model; “he is a totally dependable adult. If not a male ideal, necessarily, he’s nonetheless a certain kind of prototype, living evidence that the Mom-and-Dad-established rules of conduct have some basis in grown-up reality. ... “among the problems he is the antidote for is the problem of me” (xiii).

Garfield circles back to his religious theme, repeating an assertion made by journalists for years: “put another way, the man is a saint” (xiii). The hagiographic approach to thinking and writing about Mister Rogers is probably the most pervasive “critical” strategy, but it’s also profoundly unproductive. To claim Rogers as a saint elevates him out of the realm of the everyday, a realm to which he most assuredly belongs; it further consolidates a Christian view of the world; it’s deeply unquestioning and uncritical; and perhaps most significantly, it lets writer and reader off the hook. The qualities and accomplishments of Mister Rogers are *saintly*; how can we be expected to follow his example? The canonization of Mister Rogers claims for a very specific kind of religious thought the behaviors and attitudes that he performs, as well as

removing those behaviors from the world of “ordinary” people. We can excuse his “wimpishness” because he’s a saint, so the hagiographic approach tells us, rather than assert his wimpishness as a fundamentally important aspect of both his life and a kind of masculinity that the program embraces.

Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick opens *Epistemology of the Closet* with an introduction entitled “Axiomatic,” that paves the way for the rest of the book by elucidating the theoretical metaphors and axioms that underpin her approach to queer studies. Taking Sedgwick’s axioms as, in fact, axiomatic, I’d like to begin – as Sedgwick herself does – with the simple statement: “People are different from each other” (22). Sedgwick continues her discussion of Axiom 1 by highlighting both its simplicity and its lack of theorization: “It is astonishing how few respectable conceptual tools we have for dealing with this self-evident fact”[the fact people are different] (22). “What is more dramatic is that ... every single theoretically or politically interesting project of postwar thought has finally had the effect of delegitimizing our space for asking or thinking in detail about the multiple, unstable ways in which people may be like or different from each other” (23).

Sedgwick may be correct in her assessment of the delegitimizing effect of theoretically or politically interest project[s],” but over on public television, unnoticed by academics, activists, or theorists, a children’s program – a seemingly unlikely space for this kind of potentially disruptive discourse – grew and quietly flourished: *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood*. For more than forty years, funded by taxpayers, private donations, and corporate grants, *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood* opened a space – literally and figuratively - for asking and thinking in detail about “the multiple, unstable ways in which people may be like or different from one another.” An earnest, low-budget program, aimed at young children (roughly ages 3-6), *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood* consistently foregrounded the difference, uniqueness, and worthiness of every

person. The simplicity and quietness with which *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood* asks and thinks – and asks its viewers to think – about difference obscures the radical force of its ideology.

Unlike other children's television programs (such as *Sesame Street*, created in 1969), *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood* does not claim to be, nor does it function as, the kind of schooling we might expect from children's educational programming. Though the show includes some basic skills training and reinforcement – for example, learning the alphabet – the program's primary focus from its earliest days was always on the emotional and situational lives of its child audience. As Rogers says in his 1969 Congressional testimony, the program deals with the "inner drama of childhood." But it also deals – directly and indirectly – with political issues across a broad spectrum of topics, including (but not limited to) class, race, war and peace, and gender roles or stereotypes. It is in the presentation of these issues – their inclusion in the first place, as well as the ideology that underlies their presence – that the radical nature of the program can be seen.

The power of Mister Rogers and his program is the power of transformation, of catalysis. The program never instructs its viewers to do or be any specific thing: it suggests, gently, things viewers might try out at home, or think about, but there is no explicit call to action. Yet viewers – children and adults alike – received Mister Rogers' words and transformed them into both thoughts and actions that significantly affected their being in the world. The private, internal space or self that found reassurance from Rogers' consistently repeated remark "I like you exactly as you are," translated that private reassurance into public expressions or action. Any escapism offered by the program includes mechanisms for safely and productively returning to the "real" world while simultaneously *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood*, like many children's television programs both before and after, ignores the fourth wall and speaks directly to its



viewers.<sup>65</sup> Rogers in particular, from the very beginning of the program in 1967, had a knack for speaking into the camera in such a way that the viewer is irresistibly drawn in. But he never adopts a condescending tone, or a position of dominance; instead, through the use of questions and silence, Rogers invites viewers into the conversation. His slow manner of speaking enables viewers to follow his thoughts with ease; more than the slow pace of his speech, however, are the frequent moments of *silence* when the viewer is asked to think. The auto-tuned “Garden of Your Mind” sample is a perfect example of this: Mister Rogers looks up into the camera and asks “Did you ever grow anything in the garden of your mind?” He places a slight emphasis on the first “you,” emphasizing that the focus is now on the viewer, and then, after asking his question, he pauses in silence, giving the viewer *time* and space to formulate an answer, to think over the question, and to respond. Letters from parents frequently report that their children would sit or stand near the television, and respond to all of Mister Rogers’ questions, as if they were having a conversation with him right in the room. The intentional crafting of a significant space and role for the viewer has the effect of making the viewer a part of the program – to borrow Robin Bernstein’s terminology, the viewer becomes a co-creator of the material of the program.<sup>66</sup> This co-creation is encouraged actively by Rogers and the staff at FCI; the *Mister Rogers’ Playbook* includes activities, questions, projects, and ideas to accompany each episode and extend the play and the conversation once the half-hour program has ended. There is a close, careful attention to the world outside the television, to the thoughts and feelings and actions of the viewers once the television visit has ended, and this attention is palpable to many, many viewers. It is what makes them feel that they “know” Mister Rogers, that he is practically one of the family, and that he

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<sup>65</sup> Eg, Ding Dong School, Captain Kangaroo, Reading Rainbow, Blue’s Clues all employ direct address; in fact, most non-narrative children’s programs speak directly to their audience at least some of the time.

<sup>66</sup> Robin Bernstein, *Racial Innocence*.

really does like them just the way they are bringing along any changes wrought in the escape/play space.

The structure of the program follows the same basic pattern – Mister Rogers enters his house, often bringing an item of interest with him, or having an interaction with a neighbor, either at his home or out in the neighborhood. This section introduces the major themes of the episode, which reinforce and expand on the theme for the week. After the initial segment, Mister Rogers prepares the transition to the Neighborhood of Make-Believe, often by recounting the previous episode’s events, or setting the scene broadly. The Trolley is the device used to transition from the human-only world, to the Neighborhood of Make-Believe, whose core residents are puppets, aided by human adjuncts.

In the Neighborhood of Make-Believe, the theme or concern of the episode is narrativized and psychologized in some way. Instead of simply recollecting mistakes, or making assertions about them, in the Neighborhood of Make-Believe, all kinds of mistakes are dramatized and enacted by various characters. This allows the viewer to see a process, a series of causes-and-events, how that makes the participants feel, and how they might resolve or express their feelings. The Neighborhood of Make-Believe is a kind of imaginative laboratory for the viewers – Mister Rogers always frames Neighborhood of Make-Believe segments with “let’s pretend” or “Let’s imagine that” – clearly setting the Neighborhood of Make-Believe up as a playspace similar to, maybe even contiguous with, but distinctly different from the “real” world of the audience. In the Neighborhood of Make-Believe, we see what playing can help us do, understand, think about, feel, and express. The play here is not meant to be the viewer’s play; rather it is a demonstration and a starting point for the viewer to use when she undertakes her

*own* play.<sup>67</sup> But the Neighborhood of Make-Believe is also essential as another medium through which the key messages of the program can be communicated and affirmed.

There are three primary spaces created by and within the program: the space of Mister Rogers' Neighborhood itself (the set consisting of his house, and the people and places whom he visits); the Neighborhood of Make-Believe; and the space created between and around the viewer and the program. Each space offers something the others do not, or cannot, but the three working together are essential for the overall effectiveness of the program.

This first space is primarily concerned with integrating various aspects of an individual's life into the larger world, or vice versa. Thus it is in this space that we are introduced to material culture, to places both specific and general (a restaurant, a doctor's office, the studio of a particular artist). Mister McFeely, the Speedy Delivery messenger, frequently brings a video for Mister Rogers to share with viewers; the videos are played on Picture Picture, a kind of screen within a picture frame on the wall.<sup>68</sup> Through the Picture Picture video segments, we are introduced to production and labor: each short video documents the making of an everyday object: sneakers, teddy bears, bicycles, crayons. Picture Picture is one of the major modes of revelation, of demystification, operating in Mister Rogers' Neighborhood. Rogers very particularly seeks to demonstrate that all things are created by people, through their work; sometimes it is the work of a team, sometimes the work of an individual, but in every case, the effort, time, and labor of creation (both of artistic endeavors and more utilitarian material products) is made obvious and valuable.

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<sup>68</sup> Picture Picture is not an actual screen at all, but the representation of a screen in the living room set. When videos are played, the television shows us the video in full-screen; Mister Rogers inserting a video or film into Picture Picture is just stagecraft.

The show begins and ends with a closet. Mister Rogers enters the main room of his set-home, and heads straight to the closet, located conspicuously in the back wall, just left of center. The camera closes in on Mister Rogers as he opens the closet, neatly hangs his suit-coat, replacing it with one of the knitted zip-up cardigans visible within the closet. This set-closet is relatively bare; only the sweaters and coat hang, sparsely, on the rail, with the back wall of the space clearly visible. Unlike most closets (both literal and figurative), this one contains no secrets; it is instead a gateway to releasing secrets. Mister Rogers's donning of his sweater is a clear signifier of the shift from exterior life to the intimate space of the home; the sweater indicates to the viewer that this space, and this time, are specially marked. Geographer Michael Brown points out that the closet may be "the ultimate interior, the place where interiority starts" (8). Brown himself suggests that the closet – the literal, physical compartment – "limits accessibility and interaction" (7). Yet for Rogers – and his viewers – the closet and the sweater-signifiers it contains, signal instead the beginning of accessibility and interaction on the show.

The unconcealed closet is just one of many revelations in this space of the program. Rogers works diligently to demystify every aspect of life for his viewers, including the production of his own program. The self-consciousness of production marks many of the program's interactions; for instance, when a new guest arrives, Rogers introduces her to his "television friends." There's an almost brutal honesty to Rogers' recognition of the division separating him from the viewers, revealed in the responses to fan letters: "You and I can only be 'television friends' and everyone needs people close to them to help with everyday concerns."

The constructed nature of the program – its artifice – is highlighted and made totally transparent in Program #1698 "Transformations;" the video that Mister. McFeely delivers is a time-lapse film of the crew assembling the set of the television house. In less than two minutes,

we see the transformation from an empty studio to the familiar, comfortable set of Mister Rogers' television house. Crew members bring in the rugs, the traffic light, the pictures that hang on the walls; the fishtank is wheeled on-set. Rogers notes how many people it takes, working together, to construct the set, emphasizing the cooperative labor involved, as well as the manufactured nature of the program. But nothing is hidden from the viewer here – we literally see the house coming together piece by piece. The large wooden flats, painted to look like the back wall of the kitchen, are clearly nothing more than cleverly painted sheets of plywood.

This segment serves multiple functions: it makes transparent the constructedness of the program, of Mister Rogers' house; it reveals the people whose labor creates the house set, and the program itself; and it also presents the very set of Mister Rogers' house as a kind of make-believe, a sort of large-scale toy in which the neighborhood is enacted. Just as the dollhouse, or the models of the structures in the Neighborhood of Make-Believe provide a space and inspiration for imaginative play, so the set of the house produces a similar space for play. It is a nearly full-scale model of a house, but *not* a house itself; despite running water in the kitchen sink, the house is only a representation of a home. Mister Rogers' house is then a manipulable space, manufactured for the purpose of play. The work of the program is thus play, mirroring Rogers' belief that the work of childhood is play.

Unlike Mister Rogers' neighborhood, the Neighborhood of Make-Believe is almost exclusively a space of play and emotion. While the focus in the Rogers neighborhood includes playing and feelings, it largely approaches these topics from a practical and literal stance. In the Neighborhood of Make-Believe, however, play, theatricality, and metaphor offer viewers another way to understand and rethink both their own feelings and identities, and the issues of the larger world.

The philosophy of the program necessitates honesty and openness amongst the characters and viewers, and the “pretend” or imagined nature of the Neighborhood of Make-Believe is never concealed. But it *is* a space that allows – even encourages – performance and alternative playacting, for their own sake or to work through a set of questions or issues. The citizens of Neighborhood of Make-Believe can – and do – assume other guises, in organized public performances, or in their own individual and private forms of play. Experimentation and expression are a substantial part of daily life in Neighborhood of Make-Believe, and this is what makes it a space of such radical possibility.

The Oxford English Dictionary places its definitions for "make-believe" under the larger heading "make." According to the OED, "make-believe" in its noun form is "a. The action of making believe; pretence, fanciful imagining (esp. that things are better than they really are)." Pausing over the etymology of the term "make-believe" gives us a deeper sense of the workings both of Neighborhood of Make-Believe and of *MRN*, and offers a new way to think about the functioning of creative, imaginative play. To *make* believe is to imaginatively construct an alternative to the lived reality of one's existence. The *believe* aspect of the term suggests a means to transfer the purely imaginative to the level of everyday life. To create or compel belief, as *make-believe* does, gives the imagination – and the imaginer – agency to bring elements of make-believe out of their internal, imaginative location and into the broader world. In other words, make-believe is a kind of enactment of Bachelard's assertion that "Space calls for action, and before action, the imagination is at work" (12). In the Neighborhood of Make-Believe, a space created specifically and explicitly for the imagination to do its work, imagining and playing generate possibilities for action. But the "real world" action is not necessarily the ultimate goal; play, in and of itself, holds significant meaning.

Because it is representational and play-ful, the Neighborhood of Make-Believe also offers Rogers and his staff a space in which to address political topics that might be more challenging to raise in the other portions of the program. The progressive politics of the program show through most clearly in the Neighborhood of Make-Believe; for example, the very explicit anti-war messages conveyed during "Conflict Week" come through discussions and activities in Neighborhood of Make-Believe. Lady Aberlin and Daniel Striped Tiger are able to stage an anti-war protest outside of King Friday's castle in ways that Fred Rogers, outside, say, the White House or the Pentagon, never could, and that even the other spaces of the program would not permit.

The 1968 broadcast season of *Misterogers' Neighborhood* <sup>69</sup> begins with a week dedicated to the problem of war. Through the Neighborhood of Make-Believe, the program introduces the idea of war to its young viewers. After Lady Elaine uses magic to rearrange the neighborhood, King Friday XIII, the benevolent despot of Make-Believe, has declared a war on change. The Make-Believe residents are required to give name, rank and serial numbers, and are set on guard around the castle. The war within Make-Believe escalates, until the castle is wrapped in barbed wire [actually chicken wire] and the borders of Make-Believe are under guard. Daniel Tiger and the human Lady Aberlin spearhead the peace movement within the neighborhood; Lady Aberlin sends balloons, with peace messages attached, to King Friday's castle. Among the messages are "Love" "tenderness" and "togetherness" and "Peaceful coexistence." The balloon messages are received; King Friday has a change of heart, and the war is over. In the following week's episodes, Make-Believe plans for and holds a "Peace Party," hosted by King Friday himself, with Lady Elaine in attendance dressed as the dove of peace. King Friday offers a speech at the Peace

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<sup>69</sup> For the first year or two, the show's title was spelled as "Misterogers' Neighborhood." It was changed to prevent any confusion over spelling it might engender in child viewers.

Party, declaring that in this war, there were ""no major casualties, but feelings were hurt." The group then sings the Peace song, composed especially for the occasion: "Peace and Quiet...peace peace peace, we all want peace." Throughout the week of war in Make-Believe, Mister Rogers provides some commentary and consolation to his viewers, all with a clear anti-war overtone.

Filmed in late 1967, these episodes offer a gentle, but still direct, rebuke to the escalating violence in Vietnam. Lady Aberlin's anti-war activism, in the form of non-violent balloon messages, has its direct analog in the student protests and other anti-war demonstrations then gathering momentum. There is no ambiguity about the program's anti-war stance. War is scary, and, as Mister Rogers says after the successful balloon protest "isn't peace wonderful?" Activism, in the form of direct, nonviolent petitioning of the government, is also clearly prized within the program's value system.

Though these war episodes, coming when they do against the backdrop of Vietnam, are an explicit example of the progressive politics of *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood*, a radical philosophy is implicit in nearly every aspect of the show. Julia Mickenberg's excellent study of radical children's publishing in mid-century America, *Learning from the Left*, provides numerous examples the policies of the artists and publishers actively working on socialist or communist causes; though I don't claim the program had a communist or socialist agenda, it's worth noting that the rhetoric employed by the left in addressing its child audience is strikingly similar to Rogers's philosophy. The similarities suggest that, though their politics may be at variance, the far left and Fred Rogers shared a basic approach to engaging with children about issues of importance. Mickenberg quotes a 1934 leftist pamphlet directed to children: "We think most of you have brains and want to use them. ... We think you should know about serious things and talk about them. And we know you have enough sense to understand them and enough spunk to



do something about them" (57). This attitude of understanding children as engaged citizens and thinkers, capable of knowing about "serious things" is echoed in Rogers' sentiment that "childhood was valuable, that children were worthy of being seen and heard, and who they were would have a lot to do with how our world would become."<sup>70</sup>

Psychologist D.W. Winnicott's theory of transitional objects offers a useful way to think about both things and the role of things in play, particularly play that helps the child mediate her world. Transitional objects, according to Winnicott, are those objects infants use as their first " 'not-me' possession" (1). The nature of the object itself is not of first importance; it may be a blanket, a doll, a soft or hard toy – in one case study Winnicott relates, it may be a piece of string. The child's relationship to the transitional object forms an intermediate area of experience, a space in which the child is moving away from his undifferentiated world of thumbsucking and breastfeeding, into the external reality of true object-relationships. Winnicott emphasizes that his examination of transitional objects is in part a way of addressing what he identifies as a third part of the life of the human, "an intermediate area of experiencing, to which inner reality and external life both contribute" (2). He goes on to assert that what he is truly studying here is "the substance of illusion," which for children is manifested in play, with (and without) transitional objects and spaces. The transitional object, the intermediate space, the illusions under examination then are all part of a creative process of play.

Winnicott uses the language of space and place to discuss this intermediate phase; of it, he remarks that the "term transitional object... gives room for the process of becoming able to accept difference and similarity" (6). He goes on to remark that "It is assumed here that the task of reality-acceptance is never completed; that no human being is free from the strain of relating

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<sup>70</sup> (qtd in Stewart, PBS Companion).

an inner and outer reality, and that relief from this strain is provided by an intermediate area of experience. ... This intermediate area is in direct continuity with the play area of the small child who is 'lost' in play" (13).

This space of play, this actual area in which the child may be "lost" in play, is of utmost importance. Building on Winnicott's assertions here, I suggest that larger-scale spaces of play are also – as with the small child – spaces in which we may feel relieved from the "strain of relating an inner and outer reality." These are also spaces in which we can, in a relaxed, playful way, continue to work on ways of relating the inner and outer realities. In these spaces, we can shape our outer reality to suit our inner reality (or vice versa); we can make the world into whatever kind of place we want it to be. For anyone who experiences themselves as different, perhaps radically different, from the "outer reality" they inhabit, these play spaces serve an essential role; they are places where the story of an individual's difference can be understood however she best wants it understood, where those differences can find confirmation, encouragement, and support, and where it is possible to create ways of living in the outer reality without compromising the inner reality. While this, of course, can apply to a broad variety of categories of difference, for queer viewers of *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood*, the program helps create a space that is especially welcoming

The third space, that created by the viewers and the program, is the most diffuse and challenging to define. It can exist physically anywhere, even in spaces without a television, though the TV is central to the production of this space. In some ways, this space is an imagined one, a construct built by both the viewer and the program - specifically, Mister Rogers himself - that positions the viewer and Mister Rogers in specific ways. This space is also one that depends most on the desires and imaginations of the viewer; it is a space created through response, and is

thus highly individual if not entirely unique. There are patterns or themes, however, that run through the diverse spaces crafted by viewers, along with versions of the Mister Rogers "character" that those viewers envision. These similarities become evident quickly through reading viewer correspondence.

In their letters, many of the adults (usually parents) who write refer to the way that Mister Rogers is a presence within their home. The earliest letters, from the late 1960s and early 70s, reflect a sense of television as an intrusion or portal into the home; correspondents use language suggestive of invitations and visits. There is a real way in which these viewers conceive of Mister Rogers and his program as guests who have been invited literally into the home living room, to interact with the child and family which resides there. This physical space is bound by the television, which of course occupied considerable space within the living room, and often served as a focal point for the room's decor and arrangement of furniture.

With children's television programming – perhaps even more so than with children's books – we tend to assume an almost-exclusively child audience. We expect that adults watching will find little to capture their interest or attention (with the notable exceptions of Jim Henson's creations, *Sesame Street* and especially *The Muppet Show*, which consistently feature double address). *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood*, however, operates almost entirely in a single-address mode – one we associate with child viewers, and fairly young child viewers at that. In *The Narrator's Voice*, however, Barbara Wall explains that: "Writers for children ... are in fact always speaking to children in the presence of other adults, and always needing to take account of that presence," an assertion that can help give context for the existence of such divergent viewers (13). Wall's description of Arthur Ransome's narrational style, single address, is also uncannily resonant with any description of Fred Rogers's demeanor on his program: "[Ransome]

developed a type of narrator – a friendly adult talking seriously and without condescension to children ... He simply put himself in the place of the children he was writing about and described what they saw and did, felt and thought" (30). It seems clear from the kinds of responses *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood* generated, however, that "single address," however convenient a category of narration it may appear, is neither simple nor truly single.

The archive of fan mail offers written evidence of a vastly more diverse audience than one would anticipate from a children's program, and includes some unexpected and intriguing patterns of viewership. I want to be clear, however, that this evidence is not definitive in any way; the absence of evidence of a certain kind of viewer does *not* constitute evidence of that viewer's absence.

The fan mail is housed at the archives of the Fred Rogers Center at St Vincent College near Latrobe, PA. There are dozens and dozens of archival storage boxes full of mail sent in to Mister Rogers, dating back to the mid-1960s and continuing until 2001-2002. The mail is semi-catalogued, loosely sorted by general topic or theme, but not easily searchable. As the program received these letters, staff and volunteers filed them by these loose topics, but many, letters have yet to be formally catalogued by the archivists. This makes the task of the researcher both more difficult and more rewarding; in essence, I was simply opening boxes, reaching in and reading whatever came out.

The process of reading other people's letters is a very strange and occasionally, emotional one. In her book on the archive, *Dust*, Carolyn Steedman writes that "The Historian who goes to the Archive must always be an unintended reader, will always read that which was never intended for his or her eyes. ... The Historian always reads an unintended, purloined letter" (75). Most of the viewer letters were likely never meant for any reader other than Mister Rogers, but

even he was, for most writers, an abstraction, a "character" they understood, and in part created, through their viewing of him on television. They wrote to the person they believed, or wanted, Mister Rogers to be, and in some ways this makes the letters even more revealing of their desires

Fan mail to *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood* was always treated with great respect and importance. Nearly every letter received a response from the staff, primarily from Hedda Sharapan, who worked on the program in a variety of capacities including assistant director, assistant producer, scriptwriter, and consultant. These responses – drafts of which are often (though not always) attached to the original fan letter in the archive– are written in the voice of Fred Rogers, and are signed by him. Viewer mail constitutes such an interesting and significant component of the program's history that in 1996, FCI released a book entitled "*Dear Mister Rogers: does it ever rain in your neighborhood?*" The book is a sampling of letters to Mister Rogers, along with the official letters sent in response, often accompanied in the book by commentary from Fred Rogers.

The preservation of these letters testifies, in some respects, to the importance placed on them (and on the viewers) by Fred Rogers and his company. The introduction to *Dear Mister Rogers* claims that all the fan mail received by the program was saved as it was received; the communications of the audience were privileged enough to be kept and preserved carefully. The mail in the archive is also protected against being made public; permission to quote from it must be obtained from FCI. For this work, FCI requested that I not include names or identifying details for the letters quoted; in some cases I use initials and give the year of the letter for context

The fan mail demonstrates, repeatedly and variously, just how important the program and its host was to the real, every day lives of its myriad viewers. The tone of the letters, along with

their content, indicate that Mister Rogers *and* his viewers constructed a space of genuine neighborliness, a space centered around the television in which the audience could feel affirmed in themselves and their interactions with others, a space which those viewers could then leave with a new sense of purpose and self-worth which then could take out into the rest of the world. The meaning of the program was thus not confined to the living room, to the televisual "exchange;" the meaning, and effects, of the program had an impact that was as varied as its viewership. Through these multiple and various viewers, we can discern ways in which the program –though seemingly simple at surface level – in fact generated a multiplicity of meanings, many of which had far-reaching and very real effects in the lives of the audience.

The letters in the archive represent a specialized segment of the viewing audience. All those letters are initiated by people familiar with the conventions of both letter writing generally, and the fan letter more particularly. Additionally, if the child is the initiator (which does sometimes seem to be the case), she must have a parent or other adult willing to provide a cover letter, a transcription of the child's words, a legibly addressed envelope and a stamp. This adult assistant must also, first and foremost, believe sufficiently in the importance or value of the child's ideas to agree to assist with the letter process in the first place.

For the letters to reach Mister Rogers and his staff, a number of communicative events must first occur, including the aforementioned compulsion to write, the ability of the communicant to either write herself or to employ a scribe, and access to an appropriate mailing address. It is clear that many letters were directed first to local PBS affiliates, who then forwarded them on to FCI; what is unknown is how many of these local stations received fan mail in the first place, or what they did with it. In an era before the Internet, searching out addresses for correspondence with a television personality was not necessarily an easy task, a

fact numerous letter writers acknowledge in apologetic phrases expressing a hope that they have found the right address.

In reviewing the letters – primarily from the late 1970s, and the mid 1980s – it struck me that this form of communication is now virtually absent in contemporary life. The monogrammed notepaper, the heavy stock of personalized cards, the careful handwriting of people who have written dozens of letters in their lifetimes: these elements all speak to the eroded past of slow-moving correspondence, of pre-electronic instant communication. One wonders if fan mail still appears for contemporary stars of children's programming, and how much of it takes the form of emails or, perhaps, letters compose and printed on a computer. The letters with their now-old-fashioned feel echo the program's slowness – the unconcerned lack of hurry, the deliberate pauses in which to think, the calmness which (as those very letters testify) pervades the program's host, and, by extension, its audience.<sup>71</sup>

Children, especially very young ones, do not generally leave behind much physical evidence of their thoughts and reactions to the books and media they consume. Marginalia, letters, journal entries, and other writings which provide such insight into the (adult) readers of novels or viewers of film, are all largely absent from the ephemera of childhood for the very simple and pragmatic reason that many children don't yet exist as compositional subjects. For the very young – the target demographic of *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood* – literacy is still a work in progress, and while they are often very engaged consumers of all kinds of texts, the ability to legibly record their impressions is usually beyond them. So the body of evidence for how children respond to texts as children is scanty; much of what passes for children's responses are actually adult recollections of their own attitudes as children. This is deeply flawed as evidence,

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<sup>71</sup> The silences of Mister Rogers invites responses from viewers; the desire to communicate on the part of the viewer finds encouragement in the demeanor of Mister Rogers, who always appears to be listening

given the many complex vagaries of memory, time and nostalgia. Of all the many voices left out of the historical record, the voices of children may be one of the most substantial.

This is one reason why the preservation of children's communications to *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood* is so extraordinary – it's a very large collection of primary documents from young children, spanning several decades. As a response to media, these are invaluable; they are a record of children's responses to the program as they viewed it, not as memories recollected from adulthood. Moreover, the nature of *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood* encourages letter writers to speak freely about their thoughts and feelings; as a whole, the correspondence from children is a substantial archive of children's emotional lives.

The archive reveals that many of the letters sent by children were composed at the child's instigation, with a parent (usually mother) or older sibling acting as scribe or secretary. The scribes are careful to note their role in the compositional process, often noting that they are replicating exactly what the child dictates. Scribes often append a postscript noting that the child wanted to send the letter, that the urge to correspond was initiated by the child shortly after viewing a particular program or reaching a personal achievement. These mediating notes demonstrate the confidential attitude both child and adult have toward Mister Rogers – each writes directly to him, talking around or across the other in a manner which feels remarkably organic and confiding.

Children – either as actual writers of mail themselves or as transcribed by parents or older siblings – represent a large portion of the letter writers, and range in age from about two years old to teenagers; their contributions are often in the form of painstakingly printed letters or, more often, drawings and scribbles. The children's letters tend to communicate specifics about the child's responses to the program, or of details about the child that she wants Mister Rogers to



know – such as milestones like getting chickenpox, not wetting the bed, and putting on one's socks without any help. Responses directly addressing aspects of the program are usually in the "I like" category – "I like Daniel Tiger best" or "I like your sweaters" – and occasionally questioning: "Why is Lady Elaine so bad?" "How does the Trolley go?"

Letters from children very often appear to have been prompted by a feeling of affection and a desire to share an accomplishment or idea with Mister Rogers. From both the children's words and the scribes' notes, it is very obvious that the children regard Mister Rogers as a person with whom a relationship already exists, a close friend and companion who is naturally interested in the thoughts and news in the child's life. A slightly older child's typed letter remarks that "I have just learned to use my father's typewriter. And the first letter I wanted to write was to my best friend. And that is you. ... I think of you as my best friend" (JC September 1989). This assertion that Mister Rogers is the child's "best friend" comes up again and again in the children's correspondence, along with "I love you." Her typed letter is almost unusual in the way it elaborates on the perceived friendship; most children simply address Mister Rogers as "my friend" or "my best friend," and close with "I love you." Frequently, this is the entire text of the communication, alone or with an accompanying illustration or scribble (these latter frequently from the very youngest viewers, children aged two and three who are not yet competent in conventional forms of drawing or any kind of printing that can be easily read by others).

Lengthier letters ask questions, everything from inquiries about the "realness" of the puppets ("are they pretend all the time?") to seeking advice about careers and boys (these mainly from high schoolers). While many, if not most, of the adult correspondents apologize or seem self-conscious for writing, the child writers have no such qualms. They enthusiastically share all

kinds of information: "I can put my socks on by myself" and "I am learning to use matches," and a number of potty-training success stories, as well as remarks on larger issues in their lives. Throughout the archive, one reads often of the concerns children have about divorced parents, questions from cancer-stricken children about death, plain statements of the loneliness or friendlessness the child feels, confessions of fear or sadness, and expressions of anger or uncertainty.

What the letter writers reveal about themselves and the meaning the program assumes for them opens up a wide spectrum of interpretive possibilities. It is essential to note that the letters only reveal what their writers choose to reveal. It is nearly impossible to discern categories of identity like race, ethnicity, religion, class, sexual orientation. Fred Rogers himself makes note of the lack of information the letters convey. In one of his notes in *Dear Mister Rogers*, Rogers explains that replying to some of the more complex letters is very difficult indeed, because only a tiny portion of any given situation or issue is contained within the letter. This makes the task of the respondent very delicate, and it is to the enormous credit of Hedda Sharapan and others at FCI that the replies they crafted are as sensitive, kind, and caring as they are. In fact, the archives reveal that these responses were often enormously important to the recipient, and in numerous cases, prompted an additional round of letter-writing, either as simple thank-you, or to provide further details or resolution to a problem, or, in some cases, as part of a series of correspondence between FCI and a viewer, carried on over weeks, months, even years.

The children's mail also forms the largest body of evidence that the program has real-world effects.<sup>72</sup> In a folder of correspondence collected after the airing of the specials about the dentist and the emergency room, parents write to tell Mister Rogers that those programs had a

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<sup>72</sup> Such effects do not *require* empirical evidence to prove that they are possible – the absence of evidence is not evidence of absence – but the existence of the viewer mail archive provides an abundance of “proof” of the effects the program had on its viewers’ lives.

huge impact on their children when those children had to be taken to the ER or hospital. The children's panic and fear was calmed almost immediately when they were reminded that Mister Rogers had recently shown them the hospital. One woman explains that her daughter had needed a serious eye operation for months, but was so panicked and resistant that doctors had been unable to schedule the surgery; the little girl would scream and flail the moment she was brought in to see the doctors. But after watching Mister Rogers in the ER, she calmly agreed to go in for the surgery, and was successfully operated upon.

Sick and disabled children are the subjects of a noteworthy portion of the viewer mail. These letters are often from the parents, who remark on the ways in which the program has helped their child with her specific issues (spina bifida, cerebral palsy, mental disability, and hearing or vision impairment are the major disabilities that are referenced). The letter writers attest to seeing marked improvement in their children's self-esteem, confidence and general happiness, particularly after witnessing specific episodes featuring children or adults with disabilities themselves. In particular, Chrissie, a girl with leg braces who plays the recurring role of the McFeelys' granddaughter, was a source of real inspiration for many child viewers, who reassessed their willingness or ability to do certain things (attend various social events, participate more fully at school, etc) after watching Chrissie's successes on the program. Many of these letter writers also mention the positive effects on their children of the program's consistent emphasis on the uniqueness and valuable difference of everyone.

Many of the adults who write in mention their child's viewing habits; very often we learn that the child speaks to Mister Rogers, answering his questions and using the silence he carefully deploys as an opportunity to express themselves. Frequently, parents or grandparents relate how their child will hug the television, or kiss the screen, when Mister Rogers comes on it. There is

also a conscious imitation of Mister Rogers: many letters report on the child's insistence on changing shoes and sweaters along with the program. Nearly as many inquire about where to find zip-up sweaters in a child's size; this inquiry was so common for a time that FCI had on file the contact information for several sweater manufacturers who produced zip-up sweaters, and would send this information along to inquiring writers. The specificity of these inquiries attests to the significance of even small material details; children seeking "Mister Rogers" sweaters wanted ones that zipped, like his, and emphatically rejected cardigans with button fastenings.

Of the non-child writers to the program, perhaps the most unexpected are the elderly. In the portion of the fan mail that I was able to read, there are thick folders of correspondence from senior citizens, many of whom are in their 80s and 90s. The eldest viewer from whom *Mister Rogers* received mail was 96 years old at the time of her writing. Perhaps unsurprisingly, given life expectancies, virtually all of the older viewers are female.

Many of them note that they are much older than the target audience, and often suggest an explanation/apology for their viewing of the program. But it is worthwhile to note that many of these elderly viewers also mention that they try to watch the program *every day*, and in the absence of any child co-viewer. In response to one letter from a senior citizen, Fred Rogers writes that "I like to think that our program is for growing people of all ages."

Despite this, it may be hard to immediately recognize what an elderly woman might find appealing in a program ostensibly designed for two-to-six year olds. But these older viewers respond to almost precisely the same elements of the show that the children enjoy. One aspect that seems to please audiences across all demographics is Picture Picture, the brief video segment that demonstrates the way certain objects or products are made. One woman mentions particularly enjoying the film showing how applesauce is made; others note as favorites the

segments showing the making of crayons, marbles and sneakers. Interestingly, in their written correspondence, both viewers and Fred Rogers refer to the Picture Picture segments as "visits" or "trips" – metonymizing the filmic experience with an actual excursion to the factory or workshop.

The other major aspect of the program which older viewers respond to and comment on in their letters is the program's consistent regard for the value of each individual. The phrase "I like you just the way you are," repeated in virtually every episode by Mister Rogers, is echoed back to him in these letters. A very large number of writers of all ages close their letters by turning the phrase back on him, with emphasis: "We like YOU just the way you are!"<sup>73</sup> Older viewers frankly remark on their sense of being displaced by a society that valorizes youth and productivity; they find comfort, reassurance and solace in Mister Rogers's daily reminders that they, too, are valuable and likeable *exactly as they are*.

A surprisingly large number of letters, perhaps something like 40%, are penned by adults – almost always women, almost always mothers. Often, these women are writing on behalf of, or in conjunction with, their young children. But there is a very substantial body of mail written solely from these mothers, expressing a range of responses and views. As in the letters from senior viewers, the mothers express their gratitude to the program and its host, for the benefits it brings to their children – but also, and perhaps especially, to *themselves*.

This community of viewers is one the program anticipates, and even encourages; ideal viewing of Mister Rogers occurs when both parent and child are watching together, and interacting about the program's content. For the women who write in, however, the program offers just as many – if not more – benefits to themselves as to their children.

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<sup>73</sup> Letters often use "we" to refer to the household of viewers; children and their mothers, grandparents and grandchildren, elderly couples with no children, and so on.

Many of these letters are written in the relatively early days of "women's liberation," and for me, were poignant, personal reminders of what it could mean to be a mother in the early 1970s. A number of the mothers express their sense of isolation, of feeling stranded with their children in the absence of any intelligent or meaningful adult company. The program thus provides them with some "adult" company, and with some pleasant escapism in the form of the stories of the Neighborhood of Make-Believe. Like the elderly viewers, the young moms express great pleasure at what they learn from the films on Picture Picture; like the children, they indicate their interest in the new topics and items brought to the program each week.

The mothers' letters tell us a lot about the ways in which this television program affected people's real lives. Many of the women begin by telling Mister Rogers that they feel like they know him, that he feels like a member of their family – he is, almost literally, in their living rooms daily (and in some cases, multiple times a day). These women also view him as a confidante because of his persona; several refer to their time spent watching the program as their "therapy," and many more remark upon the ways in which Mister Rogers simply seems to understand, and have great experience with, all the ups and downs of life with children.

These moms very often seek advice about specific problems: first days of school, problems with a child's siblings, various questions related to milestones like haircuts, visits to the doctor or dentist, and more emotionally complex issues, like divorce, serious illness and death. The mothers look to Mister Rogers as an expert, at the same time often revealing, both explicitly and implicitly, their own worries about their adequacies as parents. Many state plainly that they worry about whether they're doing a good job with their children, expressing insecurity, a lack of confidence in their knowledge of their own children. "I guess him being my first I goofed bringing him up but your show really helps me" (JR, 1970). Many writers share their own stories

of neglect, abuse or unhappiness as children, and comment on the ways the program has helped them deal with their issues. For this latter group, Mister Rogers' affirmations – "I like you just the way you are" are as valuable and confidence-boosting as they are for child viewers (if not more so). It is clear that the program makes these mothers feel much less alone, and gives them hope and companionship *as well as* advice on interacting with their children.

The advice-seeking letters often reveal the depths of emotion writers feel comfortable sharing with Mister Rogers. One mother of a young child tells Mister Rogers that she is pregnant with her second child, that her husband and his brother have been killed in a small plane crash, that she does not know how to help her daughter understand what has happened, or how to cope with either her own or her child's grief. This letter is extraordinary in that it is written within a week of the fatal plane crash; at such a moment, the instinct to seek guidance and consolation from him reveals just how important Mister Rogers was to both child and mother. Others write about sexual abuse or emotional abuse they experienced as children or adults. One woman recounts a dream she had, during a time of great emotional stress, in which Mister Rogers gives her a hug. All received thoughtful replies from the staff at FCI.

One woman's letter, written in 1995, ties together the personal and the political effects the program had on her and exemplifies the kind of action and transformation the program could enable. SD writes:

"You'll never know how touched I was or what your letters mean to my children and me. You made us feel so special. Thank you. I'm writing to thank you for something else, too. Yesterday I wrote to my senators and congressman regarding the possible cut of funding for public broadcasting. ... I never did anything like this before. You have given me a love and respect for myself so I can get beyond myself and think of others and live

my life. ...That opera you had on your show, Josephine the short-necked giraffe, I believe it was called, really helped me love myself the way I was before I started Overeaters Anonymous. My life has changed so much. ... I just wanted to share my first letter to a senator with the person who made my sending it possible."

Popular discourse about Mister Rogers and his program has almost always mentioned their queerness, often without seeming to realize it. At times, this discourse has had to work hard to elide the queer even as it praises that very queerness. During Rogers' lifetime, interviews and articles focused on his persona, which by nearly all accounts was essentially identical to the persona known from television.<sup>74</sup> In the ten years since his death, however, the bigger projects of memorialization have shifted their emphasis to the effect of Mister Rogers on the individual writing or creating the memorial; the most recent efforts at documenting and memorializing both the man and the program work to assert a heteronormative understanding of them. In particular, MTV producer Benjamin Wagner's documentary *Mister Rogers & Me* replicates prior reportage in focusing on the effects Rogers had on others, rather than on Rogers himself, and streamlines these narratives into one about Wagner's own "journey," concluding with details of his marriage and the birth of his first child. The work of this dissertation is, I hope, the beginning of a critical counterweight to the heteronormative and hagiographic readings of the program and its creator.

The kind of masculinity performed by Rogers and, in varying degrees, his neighbors and guests, runs counter to most mainstream notions of acceptable male behavior. Popular media comments on this routinely, using adjectives from "quiet" or "gentle" to "wimp" or "sissy." Though many writers explain Rogers' performance of masculinity as one that enables him to

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<sup>74</sup> Ronald Bishop's 2003 essay – written prior to Rogers' death – on media coverage of Fred Rogers provides a concise review of journalists' attitudes toward Rogers; using fantasy theme analysis, Bishop produces a compelling assessment of the practices of these journalists in creating a reverent image of Rogers. Bishop's essay shrewdly notes that "the reporter's respect for Rogers becomes part of the story, and an important fantasy theme" (28). Thus, a great deal of reportage about Rogers is *also*, and sometimes more so, about the reporter.



convey his message, none suggest that this performance may in fact *be* the message. Yet one of the foundational beliefs of everyone working on *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood* comes from Margaret McFarland, professor of developmental psychology at Pitt and Fred Rogers' mentor: "Attitudes are caught, not taught." Week after week, for decades, Rogers appeared in millions of homes as a gentle, emotional, artistic man. He rarely offers meta-comments on these qualities on-air; instead, he allows the audience to see that this kind of masculinity not only exists as a possibility, but in fact is encouraged, embraced, and valued by all kinds of people. It's a kind of normalizing that carries radical meaning. Rather than tell viewers that these kinds of masculinities are just like any other (thus using a normative ideal as a baseline while collapsing the unique value of difference into conformity), Rogers shows, again and again, a range of masculinities in all kinds of men, giving equal worth to each one of them. Because these other men are presented to viewers as deserving of our attention and admiration, as viewers we accept this premise almost unquestioningly.

Recurring male performers include Joe Negri, who appears as both a version of his real-life musician self, and as Handyman Negri in the Neighborhood of Make-Believe; Chef Brockett, a baker; Chuck Aber, a.k.a Neighbor Aber, who sings, knows sign language, and tap dances; Officer Francois Clemmons, a policeman who also sings opera, and Mister McFeely the speedy delivery man.<sup>75</sup> In the puppet world of the Neighborhood of Make-Believe, male characters include autocratic King Friday, avuncular X the Owl, and shy, timid Daniel Tiger. Daniel Tiger, importantly, seems to be the puppet-figure most strongly identified with by child viewers. Unattributed notes on the puppet characters from the archives say of Daniel "This little character seems to express the compatibility of masculinity and tenderness." Some of the most

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<sup>75</sup> Francois Clemmons is also an out gay man, and evidently was out for at least part, if not all, of his time on the program.

significant moments of queerness in the program occur around Daniel Tiger, perhaps most markedly in an episode from the week in which mistakes are the program's theme.

The "Mistakes" week narrative arc begins with Audrey Duck, a young puppet visitor to Make-Believe, in a state of anxiety. King Friday XIII has heard of a poem she has written, in which she references a king, and he has decided to host a gala poetry reading for her. Audrey's poem is very, very short and not substantial enough to warrant all the attention, and she is distressed. All attempts to explain her poem to the king are rebuffed. As the week's episodes progress, a new character appears in Make-Believe: Mister. Skunk, the first of his kind to come to Make-Believe. In a discussion with Handyman Negri, Mister. Skunk confesses his own anxiety: sometimes, when he's frightened or startled, he makes a bad smell that other people don't like. He explains "it's just part of being a skunk." To this, Handyman Negri agrees, saying "I guess all skunks do it sometimes." Mister Skunk, clearly ashamed, admits: "It's embarrassing."

Audrey Duck's anxiety serves to introduce one of the important lessons of mistake week: everyone, even kings, make mistakes. The appearance of Mister Skunk provides us with perhaps a more subtle lesson. Mister Skunk's "embarrassing" production of an unpleasant odor when he's startled draws the viewer's attention to the body and its functions, particularly its involuntary functions. Though Mister Skunk's scent-releasing may have more obvious human parallels, the attention to physicality and the operations of the body can easily lead back to sexuality and queerness. Anecdotal evidence from gay adults reveals that, for some at least, same-sex attraction begins at a very early age, well within *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood's* target audience of ages 2 to 6. Both Mister Skunk and Handyman Negri, however, offer confirmation that this kind of involuntary physical reaction is natural, "just part of being a skunk," and something that

everyone does sometimes. Everyone has a body, and while those bodies may be different, the things they do, are natural and not something to be ashamed of.

But it is Lady Aberlin's encounter with Daniel that really shapes this key episode in Mistakes Week, and enables a queer response. After some characters startle Mister Skunk into releasing his scent, everyone cringes and disperses to avoid the smell. As Lady Aberlin (the human niece of King Friday and Queen Sarah), makes her way around Make-Believe with a perfume atomizer to cover up the skunk's scent, she encounters Daniel Striped Tiger, the shy puppet, at his clock home. The subsequent exchange between Lady Aberlin and Daniel is extraordinary in the kinds of fears it raises. For viewers who understand themselves as different – but particularly, I think, for queer viewers – this conversation must feel both familiar and reassuring.

Daniel Tiger begins by telling Lady Aberlin that he has been wondering about something lately, something to do with mistakes. He tells her: "I've been wondering if I was a mistake." Lady Aberlin responds with the compassionate, attentive interest that marks every conversation about feelings that occurs on the program, asking Daniel why he would think that of himself. Daniel's response is one that again will feel familiar to any kind of outsider, especially outsiders who may not have encountered, in any representational form, others of their kind: "I've never seen a tiger who looks like me...talks like me...I don't know any other tiger who lives in a clock, or loves people. ...Sometimes I wonder if I'm too tame."

Daniel's anxiety about being a mistake operates in several ways, all queer. First, he wonders about the way he looks and talks, and wonders if he is "too tame." This, coupled with Daniel's sensitive, timid personality offers us a kind of "sissy" puppet, a male tiger character who behaves against male (and tiger) norms. The worry over being "too tame" in particular signals an

anxiety about identity that goes far beyond appearance; queerness is one of the forms of "otherness" that may be easiest to disguise or closet. Other traditionally minority groups are often organized around racial or ethnic characteristics, ones which are frequently visible to any observer. Queerness, on the other hand – particularly for those closeted, or those operating under Doty's formation of queerness as a practice of response or reception – may be less clearly conspicuous. Likewise, tameness may be a hidden trait; a tiger may look like a tiger (or a tiger puppet), but his degree of wildness is not always obvious. In human, queer terms, a boy may look like every other boy in his class, but he may not perform in stereotypically "boyish" ways (for example, he may prefer less athletic play, may choose girls as his primary companions, may demonstrate emotional sensitivity more readily, may be a "boy" in anatomy only). The words of the song Daniel sings about his worries echo the kinds of anecdotal experiences recounted by "sissy" or otherwise queer males:

sometimes I wonder if I'm a mistake/I'm not like anyone else....

sometimes I cry and sometimes I shake

wondering if it's true that the strong never break

I'm not like anyone else I know

I'm not like anyone else."

In the Neighborhood of Make-Believe, Daniel is the only one of his kind – that is to say, the only tiger who acts the way he does.<sup>76</sup> Just as much as his physical embodiment is unique, Daniel's personality is entirely his own and different in some ways from everyone else in the Neighborhood. The song highlights the loneliness or isolation of uniqueness, and the way that recognizing difference can give rise to anxiety about the causes of that difference. For Daniel, being different leads directly to an existential dilemma – wondering if he is a mistake. His

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questioning reflects the common societal (mis)perception that “different” is just a synonym for “wrong,” or at best, maybe, “lesser.” Regular viewers of the program may recall, in response to Daniel’s questions, Mister Rogers’ oft-repeated phrase “I like you exactly as you are.”

The second aspect of Daniel's anxiety resonates most vibrantly with a specifically gay or lesbian queer audience: his concern over who and how he loves. In the tiger-puppet/human world, this is rendered as "loving people." But moments later, this qualifier disappears; Daniel, after being reassured by Lady Aberlin, double checks by asking her if she really thinks he's okay, including "The way I look, the way I talk, the way I love." Lady Aberlin tells him "Especially that," thus highlighting the mode of loving as particularly central to his value.

One of the fundamental philosophies of the program is acceptance and care for the uniqueness that is embodied in every single one of us. Rogers routinely closes his show with a statement of affection for his viewers, and a reminder that they are each unique individuals: "There's only one person in the whole world just like you." More important than this reminder is the constant reiteration of the wonderfulness of that individuality. Rather than feeling isolated by this uniqueness, viewers are told: "You've made today a special day...by just your being you." In one episode, Rogers introduces the idea of "infinite variety," explaining that there are an infinite number of faces, and voices, in the world. He tells the viewer: "I like the way you talk. And I like the way you look. You help that infinite variety in the world."

The value of the viewer – child or adult – is a constant feature of almost every aspect of every episode. The program's opening song, which has been its theme since the show began in 1967, informs us that "I have always wanted to have a neighbor just like you/I have always wanted to live in a neighborhood with you." That famous invitation – "won't you be my neighbor?" – signals the all-encompassing embrace of *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood*. More than

simple tolerance or acceptance, the program actively seeks each of us out. The effect of this on child viewers is remarkable. A sample of viewer letters in the Fred Rogers Archive bears this out over and over again. Letters from the parents of children with disabilities of all kinds, from children of many races and ethnicities, make plain how reassuring being liked "just the way you are" can be.

Equally important, once we have left Make-Believe, is Mister Rogers' affirmation of individual identity. As always, the program turns on this moment, when Mister Rogers directly addresses the viewer to emphasize her uniqueness and her value. Commenting on Daniel Tiger's fears of being a mistake because he's different, Mister Rogers tells us: "All tigers are different, like people are different and there's no person in the whole world who is a mistake. Everyone is just fine."

Because gender and sexuality – the forms of being at heart of any definition of queerness – are such constituent parts of one's identity, affirmation of identity may serve as affirmation of that queer aspect of identity. Likewise, affirmation of queerness – how one behaves, how one loves - is also affirmative of whole identity. Much popular anti-queer – specifically anti-gay – rhetoric focuses on queerness as sin, as error, as aberration – in other words, as mistake. For the queer child who may recognize in herself something different from the norms she sees around her, the feelings of being a mistake or somehow bad, or wrong can be very strong. *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood* provides a space in which the internal reality of that queerness can find expression and confirmation in the external transitional playspace of the Neighborhood of Make-Believe, safely, because in the view of Mister Rogers's neighborhood, "no one person in the whole world...is a mistake; Everyone is just fine."

Along with this kind of affirmation, the program also, at times, quite brilliantly complicates our understanding of masculinity by representing masculinity as complicated and complex. We can see this clearly in episode #1484, from the week themed around competition. It begins with Mister Rogers carrying a football; he informs us that ""I don't play football very well, but I have a friend who does." This segue introduces us to Lynn Swann, wide receiver for the Pittsburgh Steelers, and future football Hall of Famer.

Swann's appearance on the show is noteworthy; while it was not unusual for the program to book celebrities as guests, having an athlete of Swann's prominence is significant. By 1981, he'd been instrumental in four Super Bowl wins, including being named MVP of Super Bowl X, the first time a wide receiver had ever been made MVP. 1981 was only a year out from the Steelers' most recent Super Bowl win, and Swann was still a vital part of the team.

But he wasn't on the program to play football. After Mister Rogers shows a photograph of Swann, and a few clips of him playing football, he tells us "You have to be very strong to play professional football. But you also have to be very strong for something else Lynn does, and that is dance ballet." We depart the house to meet up with Lynn Swann at his dance studio; Mister Rogers arrives ahead of Swann, and chats with the dance master (Robert Davis, dance master for the Pittsburgh Ballet Theater) while watching dancers rehearse. When Swann does arrive, he's dressed in football gear.

Swann made no particular secret of his ballet practice, but it also doesn't appear to have been particularly emphasized in the press, either: he was viewed first and foremost as an NFL wide receiver. On the episode in question, it is his football playing that takes a back seat; though Swann explains his football gear and protective padding, he does this as a prelude to his ballet lesson. We see the pads and cleats in detail because Lynn Swann is changing out of his football

clothes into his ballet clothing. As with nearly everything, Mister Rogers is attentively curious in Swann's explanations, asking questions and expressing his admiration and interest. Swann himself appears completely comfortable and matter-of-fact, talking about both football and ballet; he never uses one to justify the other, or in any way makes any efforts at apologizing for or dismissing his ballet practice. In fact, Swann tells us, "I was dancing before I played football or any other sport."

Mister Davis invites Swann and a ballerina to perform a pas de deux, which they do while Mister Rogers (and the viewer) looks on. At the conclusion of the pas de deux, Mister Rogers says "Lot of people have seen you on the football field, but not a lot of people see you dance," which prompts a short discussion about the dedication and hard work required for both dance and football, which is ultimately the theme of the program. Mister Rogers prepares to leave the studio, while Swann remains to continue practicing, but not before he tells us that football and ballet "help each other quite a bit. I danced way before I started playing football, that's for sure." As Mister Rogers leaves the studio, the camera lingers on Swann and the other dancers, continuing their rehearsal and work.

The juxtaposition of dance – specifically ballet – and football allows us to see two sports traditionally oppositionally gendered united in one body, Swann's, that has been coded in a very particularly masculine way. Not only does Swann do both ballet and football, he understands them as interdependent; it's not just that ballet helps Swann be a better football player – each activity aids the other. Neither is given higher priority than the other, or made more meaningful; if anything, a viewer could conclude that, because it came first, ballet is more central to Swann's life. But we are invited to view both football and ballet as equals, both requiring hard work, lots of practice, dedication, and athleticism.



That there is no explicit effort at reassuring viewers that it's okay for boys to dance ballet is part of Rogers's philosophy of "catching" attitudes, rather than teaching them. Because everyone in the program takes dance seriously, with real dedication and pleasure, we recognize it as worthy of our attention and respect. For the skeptics in the viewing audience, a program where only Mister Rogers and Mister Davis discuss ballet would confirm negatively-viewed stereotypes about dance and male "effeminacy" or queerness. By including such a prominent athlete as Lynn Swann, the program gives, not normalcy, but *complexity* to our understanding of gender and athletics. It isn't that it's okay to be a boy who dances ballet because Lynn Swann does it (though that message is certainly present); what the program shows us is that a man can be a ballet dancer *and* a star football player in equal portions, that both activities or identities can inhabit the same person comfortably. In the May 1982 issue of *Parents* magazine, a feature article about Rogers provoked a strong response from the media and individuals alike. The cause of this was a single sentence in the piece: "What does disturb him [Rogers] are the fathers who won't let their sons watch the show because they feel Rogers is a 'sissy' – too gentle to be a good role model for young boys." The Associated Press reported on this article with a headline subtitled "'Sissy' label bothers Mister Rogers." Various media outlets reprinted the Associated Press's piece, and the topic was taken up on both television and radio stations. The AP subtitle misreads Rogers' remarks; it isn't being labeled a "sissy" that troubles Mister Rogers, it's that fathers don't let their sons watch the show because Rogers' brand of masculinity isn't acceptable to them. Despite the media's efforts to spin the story as Rogers' attempt to distance himself from being labeled a sissy, the program's viewers respond to the real story: the value of Rogers as a role model precisely *because* he performs a different kind of masculinity.

The archives contain a folder about Mister Rogers as a role model, with specific reference to the AP article; the letters within are all positive. There is a letter of support of Mister Rogers, signed by ten families and sent to Family Communications; there are a small but meaningful number of letters in the archive that express similar kinds of support, primarily from mothers praising the example Rogers sets for their sons. One woman reclaims the pejoratively-used “sissy”: “If caring makes a man a sissy, then I say “hooray for sissies!” (RR, 1982).

Several mothers write in about their small sons, each described as a “sensitive little boy,” or “sensitive child,” a phrase that stands for a wide array of subtexts. Though this child as the subject of letters is fairly uncommon in the archive, the phrase and child it describes crops up often enough to warrant attention. What the sensitive little boy looks like, or does, is not detailed; we can guess that the child may display or reveal emotional delicacy or awareness; he may be more easily hurt, enraged, worried; he may more readily express his feelings ranging from love to revulsion. The sensitive little boy may display both inward and outward manifestations of “sensitivity” as the equivalent of “emotional,” but this description may also serve as code for effeminate, non-normatively masculine, or queer interests and behaviors.<sup>77</sup>

These letters reveal both the difficulties faced by the boys in question, and the positive effect the program has had on their families. One such mother writes, in 1982: “I have a 3 ½ year old son who is one of your most devoted fans. He is a very sensitive child and the fourth of five children in our family. For some time we have had some difficulty in dealing with his behaviour. However, recently he discovered your program...We have learned from it to accept him ‘as he is.’ He is responding to our acceptance” (LB). The stories this particular letter *doesn’t* tell are at

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<sup>77</sup> This “sensitive little boy” certainly seems to be a euphemism for something, some set of behaviors or characteristics that parents find unnerving or worrying; this parental reaction suggests that something queer is at work here. This issue –how the queer child was commonly talked about and understood prior to the late 1970s – is one that intrigues me, and is something I hope to research much more fully.

least as interesting as those it does – for instance, what kind of “behavior” is he displaying, and how, or why, has the family had some difficulty dealing with him? The absence of supporting details is one of the key drawbacks of analysing the self-reporting one finds in letters and diaries, or other personal kinds of writing: we simply don’t have all the information we would like, and possibly need, to fully analyze the situations disclosed through the letters. At the same time, parents’ choice to use only vague descriptors of their children’s differences and difficulties suggests to me that those differences were the kind that were still largely socially unacceptable, such as homosexuality, transgender, and gender fluidity. This hints at “proof,” if we needed it, of a queer viewership for the program.<sup>78</sup>

Another mother wrote in the autumn of 1982: “Our older son [aged 5] in particular, is an extremely sensitive child and I’ve often fretted about how he’ll ‘make it out there.’ It is encouraging to see that at least one other sensitive boy grew up, retained his feelings and still was able to make a living” (AF, 1982). This embraces the example Rogers sets both on *and* off his program, an important moment of recognition of his position as a success by most mainstream standards. Rogers is successful, not just on an individual or personal level, but as a professional, in a social and economic way. While the letter-writer doesn’t address this specifically, it’s easy to see that those more socially approved successes are not in spite of, but are in fact dependent upon the “sissy image.”

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<sup>78</sup> One of my personal challenges while writing this section was refraining from surveying LGBTQ adults for their recollections and experiences as child viewers of *Mister Rogers’ Neighborhood*. The extremely limited and statistically non-viable sample available to me, of gay friends who watched the program as children suggests at least the possibility that gender-non-conforming or gay children were connecting on a deeper level with Mister Rogers because of the kind of safety and acceptance he brings to every episode. Because I am not a sociologist or psychologist, but just as much because I do not want to privilege or over-value that kind of personal, empirical reportage as evidence, I did not feel comfortable conducting any kind of formal survey of queer-identified adults and their relationship with the program; I do, however, feel a very strong curiosity about any potential correlation between the two, and may later on pursue this line of inquiry.

Adult men also write in to support Mister Rogers in the wake of the publication of the AP article. One writes “...I too, have been accused of being too easy-going and ‘un-masculine.’ What a different world this would be if more programs were as tranquil and even-tempered as yours” (HA, 1982). Perhaps the most pointed individual response is this one: "Dear Mister. Rogers, I heard on the radio news today that some don't like to let their sons watch you on TV because you allegedly do not portray the kind of male image which they think their sons ought to emulate. .... I am a 6 foot, 200 pound teamster. And I, for one, appreciate the male image you put across on your program. Keep up the good work. ... Ps ..... (as they say on the dock) ‘you're doin' good, bud’” (RM, 1982). These responses come from what appear to be both ends of a scale or spectrum of masculinity: the even-tempered, “unmasculine” male who identifies with Mister Rogers, and the teamster, who notes his physical size and profession as evidence of his masculinity; his post-script, referencing what the teamsters say on the dock, and the use of “bud,” extends that performance of masculinity to partially include Mister Rogers through association.

One parent’s letter exposes another narrative commonly repeated in the letters of parents: "Before Emily (age 2), when I would happen to tune in your show I wondered about your masculinity & sexual preferences – if you take my meaning. Now that we watch a few times each week together and discuss it afterwards – I can realise the depths of your program, and the thought behind each. ... Emily still mentions that Mister Rogers has a baby (doll). We have a neighbor boy whose father would die rather than see his boy play with a doll. I hope that in future shows you can emphasize that little ones can explore all possibilities in play without jeopardizing future role identities” (TW, 1980). This parent unwittingly identifies one of the most essential aspects of the program generally, and of the way it supports queerness

specifically: children are encouraged by the program to “explore all possibilities in play.” Far from jeopardizing future identities, this experimental play may in fact enable those identities to take forms earlier or in more visible forms than would otherwise be socially permitted. Moreover, along with emphasizing this exploration of possibilities, Mister Rogers consistently frames difference as a positive.

The importance of acceptance, and of diversity, appears in the written statement that Rogers submitted to the Senate Committee in 1969. He writes: "A child's very birth cries out for acceptance and care." This written statement becomes more personal and more political as Rogers writes: "My chief identity is that of a man who had chosen to work with children," and that "my meetings with them [children] all over the country has made me aware of ... their great diversity. There is diversity in family tradition and in colors of skin. There are boys and there are girls. Some are affluent and others are much less so; ...each one brings a unique variation to the general themes of childhood. ...I encourage the discovery that feelings about yourself and others are mentionable as well as manageable." Along with his philosophical statement on television, Rogers also submitted the lyrics to several songs that appear regularly on the program, including "Everybody's Fancy." Though the words to "Everybody's Fancy" include cringe-inducing biological rigidity ("Boys are boys right from the beginning"), the song also reinforces the themes of diversity and value, and attaches this value to bodies ("Your body's fancy/And so is mine), a move that lends itself to queer analysis.

In fact, as my earlier reference to Eve Sedgwick suggests, much of the show's devotion to affirmation of difference offers a substantial space for queer possibility. Queerness – in childhood and adulthood – is often experienced as isolating, as strangeness, as difference, as alienating. But difference, in Mister Rogers' neighborhood, is not only acceptable; it is *desirable*.

Difference is what makes you the person you are, and Mister Rogers, for one, likes you just exactly as you are. It is possible, in this neighborhood, that queerness is encouraged and fostered.

Toward the end of his Congressional testimony, Rogers says: "I think it is much more dramatic that two men could be working out their feelings of anger, much more dramatic, than showing something of gunfire. I am constantly concerned about what our children are seeing, and for 15 years I have tried to ... present what I feel is a meaningful expression of care." Pastore's response is remarkable in its tone and content: "I'm supposed to be a pretty tough guy and this is the first time I've had goosebumps for the last few days." This moment of revelation from the senator not only furthers the public television cause; it is an early and important instance of enactment of precisely the values that Mister Rogers is attempting to convey. In the halls of Congress, we see two men – Fred Rogers and Senator Pastore – discussing their feelings, in front of reporters, camera crews, senators and others. Pastore has responded in kind to Rogers's patient, sincere statement, a sharp change from his earlier sarcasm. This emotional exchange arises from politics, and directly affects politics; Pastore announces, following Rogers' recitation of a song, "I think it's wonderful. I think it's wonderful. Looks like you just earned the 20 million dollars."

The clip of Rogers' testimony is available on youtube, and has had hundreds of thousands of viewings. User comments provide further proof of the effects of Rogers's speech, right up to the present moment. A brief sampling includes comments like "I tear up every time I see this," "Mister Rogers was a great man, we need more people like him in the world today," "He is the man," "If it wasn't for him...well I think I would honestly not be as good of a person" "With Mister Rogers I learned English...There is not a person like Mister Rogers in another country,"

"What a straight up gangsta" and "Hot damn." The most common comment seems to be one of awe and reverence, and of a wish for more people like Mister Rogers, of a wish on the part of the commenter to be more like him. Absent from the comment threads – and noted by some of the commenters – is the kind of vitriol or mocking so often found in youtube comments. Though he is often derided for his perceived "wimpiness," it is this very characteristic – this ability to express and communicate emotions – that enables Mister Rogers to create the environment he does. From this space of care-giving, the program opens up spaces of infinite possibility for all kinds of progressive ideals.

There's no reason we can't all be like Mister Rogers. While the qualities of kindness, empathy, caring, self-effacement may have come more naturally to him than to others of us, both he and his staff freely acknowledge that being this way was a conscious decision on his part, one that required constant, daily effort and attention. Even prior to his death, journalists took a hagiographic approach to writing about Fred Rogers, and this does a vast disservice to both the man and his work. Saints are born, not made – or if they are made, it is with a lightning-strike moment of conversion. Rogers *worked* to be the man we perceive him to be; to say "the man was a saint," is to write off that work and to deny the possibility that we, too, can be like him. For not only does the program offer a safe space from which to confront and conquer our fears and anxieties, in every episode, the program's host (as well as his guests and puppets) *model* how to do that work of caring and empathy. Every word, every action, every interaction that Mister Rogers performs on his program is for us – to reassure us, to engage us, of course, but also to show us a way of being that helps render ourselves and our world more comfortable and kind.

#### 4.0 MAKING'S THE THING:

##### ADULTS AND CHILDREN PLAYING TOGETHER IN THE FICTION OF E. NESBIT

At the centre of Edith Nesbit's writing for children stands the concept of imaginative play, with all its complex meanings. For play is at once forward-looking and backward-looking, light-hearted and deeply serious.

Julia Briggs

Though her work is not widely read by children now, Edith Nesbit's writing has made a lasting impression on the children's literature that has come after hers. Julia Briggs, in her seminal biography of Nesbit, remarks that "stories of magical happenings and visits to the past largely owe their existence to the models she established" (402). Many British writers of fantasy fiction for children mention Nesbit as a favorite of their own childhood. C.S. Lewis, for example, even borrows key ideas for his Narnia books from Nesbit's writing.<sup>79</sup>

Nesbit's work engages the reader wholly; she employs a narrative voice that is not condescending or didactic, and that is highly sympathetic to her child characters. Anita Moss writes, "Nesbit managed to liberate herself and children's books from Victorian constraints. She ... breathed new and vital life into the Romantic child" (226). Nesbit's child characters exemplify the "good bad boy" (or girl): highly imaginative and creative, frequently naughty, but

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<sup>79</sup> Nesbit's short story "Amabel and the Aunt" features a little girl who, as punishment, is locked in a guest bedroom with nothing of interest in it except a train schedule and a wardrobe, the latter of which she opens, only to find herself on a train in a strange new country. Lewis again pays homage (or appropriates) in *The Magician's Nephew*: the scene when Jadis appears in London and attempts to rule as queen is very similar to the episode of the ancient Babylonian Queen brought to Edwardian London in Nesbit's *The Story of the Amulet*. Edward Eager's books, including *Half Magic* and *The Knight's Castle*, are essentially reworks of Nesbit texts. In 2014, Kate Saunders published *Five Children on the Western Front*, a sequel to the Psammead books that follows those children – now grown into young adults – into the trenches of WWI.



never malicious, at heart innately honorable and good, these characters closely resemble real modern children.<sup>80</sup> Even the magic the children encounter is unlike the ethereal fairies and other magical beings that populate earlier texts for children: magic in Nesbit's world is unpredictable, often troublesome, and rarely conforms to the children's intentions and expectations.

In addition to its status as best-selling, genre-changing fiction for children, Nesbit's work can be understood as a part of the wave of social progress and reform that ushered in the twentieth century. Recognizing the socio-political undercurrents of her texts provides context that helps make sense of some of the seemingly contradictory ideas she expresses, and that adds force to the progressive ideals she advocates.

The Fabian Society, now the oldest socialist society in Great Britain, was founded in 1883 as the Fellowship of the New Life. In early 1884, the name was changed to the Fabian Society, after the Roman general Fabius, famous for his strategy of delaying his attack until just the right moment. The Fabian Society adopted this military strategy as a central philosophy, which is expressed in their early slogan, "when I strike, I strike hard." The Fabians advocated education as a means of change, and they felt that if the plight of the poor and working classes were better known, then positive change could occur. They also favored greater access to education for the lower classes. In an 1884 letter, Nesbit describes the Fabian Society thus: "Its aim is to improve the social system – or rather to spread its news as to the possible improvement of the said S.S." (66). Nesbit's books for children follow this tenet of Fabianism, some more clearly than others, and she informs her child readers, in a very simplified manner, of some of the

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<sup>80</sup> For more on the "Good bad boy," see Leslie Fielder, *Love and Death in the American Novel*.

social ills of the day.<sup>81</sup> She also, of course, encourages the reader to respond in a very particular way to these problems.

Nesbit's involvement with the Fabian Society appears in many accounts to be as social for her as it was political. Her enjoyment of the company of the Fabians, and the opportunities for attention her early role in the formation of the society afforded her, seem to be at least as important to Nesbit as the political goals of the organization. This is not to suggest that Nesbit was not committed to the ideals of the Fabian Society—she was, and even after her early enthusiasm for the Fabians had waned, this commitment remains evident in her children's texts as well as her poetry and political activism.

Nesbit's beliefs, especially as they are expressed in her children's fiction, are torn between a progressive ideal and fairly traditional bourgeois principles, resulting in an indecisive or selective mix of radicalism and middle-class complacency. In her work for children, her repeated emphasis on financial stability and middle-class (if not greater) wealth, along with a markedly condescending attitude toward servant characters, undermines instances of radical rhetoric or understanding. Though she lived an unusual, bohemian life, Nesbit also publicly expressed views directly counter to Fabian and other socialist agendas, views that in fact undermined or conflicted with her own lived experiences and choices. Her attitude toward women's rights, for example, not only ran contrary to her alleged political affiliations, but also seem to devalue her own literary work. She gave one of the first lectures to the Fabian Women's Group, titled "The disabilities of women," where she declared that "the world would lose little if all the output of women were obliterated" (Briggs 108). This misogyny is apparent in her treatment of her female characters, since in many of her children's novels, the highest insult

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<sup>81</sup> In *The Story of the Amulet*, for example, the children time-travel into the future where they find a world free of pollution and litter, where houses are child-proofed for safety, and where everyone has a comfortable, well-fed life.

amongst *both* boys and girls is to be accused of acting like a girl. Female characters who wish to pursue more “feminine” activities (sewing, cooking, reading indoors) are derided and dismissed, while active and adventurous girls are rewarded and admired.

Nesbit’s complicated and contradictory attitudes toward women’s roles and socio-economic class appear throughout her work. It is not my intention to resolve or explain the nature of these contradictions; my own way of handling them is to allow them to stand without canceling each other out. That is, a text can have tendencies toward maintaining the status quo without erasing the effects of the progressive elements in the text. We can criticize those aspects that preserve reactionary ideologies while simultaneously embracing those elements that offer progressive views or extend the possibility of radicalization.<sup>82</sup> Despite her contradictions and limitations, there is a great deal of potential and possibility in Nesbit’s fiction for children, and much of this appears as a result of her attitudes toward creative play. It is in play, and in *who* plays, that possibilities abound. In fact, though Nesbit’s work is the oldest of the three play spaces I examine, it is the one that provides the most thorough and explicit vision of what play can do for individuals and for society.

Published serially in *The Strand* in 1910, *The Magic City* is one of Nesbit’s last books for children, and, perhaps, the one which most thoroughly illuminates the themes common to her earlier work: the importance of imagination and play of all kinds; the tensions between the anti-play adult and the playful child; the influence of books on child’s play; the features of a socialist-inspired utopia; even lesser aspects, such as Nesbit’s privileging of boys, and her contradictory

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<sup>82</sup> This is very much the case with Disneyland, as well; as discussed in Chapter One, elements of the park, such as the racism and imperialism in Adventureland, are clearly problematic and deserve criticism. At the same time, these problems don’t preclude possibilities for progressive forms of play and reception. In fact, it may be particularly worthwhile to examine the pockets of possibility among otherwise troubling spaces and texts as sites for transgression, reading against the grain, and potentially unraveling the oppressive or problematic structures surrounding these pockets.

scornful attitudes about the servant class, appear in the text in significant ways. As such, *The Magic City* stands as a kind of exemplar of Nesbit's oeuvre, but it also offers a provocative vision of what imaginative play might look like, what it might enable, and how adults can (or should) fit into that vision.

*The Magic City* is the story of Philip, a boy of ten who has been raised in a fun, playful, and loving environment by his adoring and adored elder half-sister, Helen. Early on, she marries Peter Graham, a childhood sweetheart, and Philip's life changes drastically: Helen's attentions are no longer focused solely on him, and they move to The Grange, Peter Graham's home, where Philip is forced into the company of Graham's nine-year-old daughter, Lucy. Since his sister's engagement, Philip has been angry and hurt; now, with the newlyweds on their honeymoon, Philip takes out his unhappiness on Lucy by being rude and nasty to her, to such a degree that an aunt takes Lucy away for a time. Left alone in the enormous house, with no one else in it but servants (to whom he has also been disagreeable), Philip is bored, lonely, and miserable. The grey nurse, Lucy's nurse who now has charge of Philip as well, matches his disagreeableness with her own, by refusing to allow him to use Lucy's toys or touch anything in the house. The prohibition is broken when the grey nurse receives word of a family emergency, and leaves The Grange in a great hurry, granting Philip permission to use whatever he likes. He constructs the magic city out of toys and household objects, and then magically, at night, becomes small enough to enter the city.

From here, the adventures of the book begin in earnest. Polistopolis, the city, has a prophecy about a Deliverer and a Destroyer who will some day come to the city, and Philip takes on the challenge of being Deliverer. He must successfully complete seven deeds of valor around Polistarchia (the country in which Polistopolis exists) to win the title. By this time, Lucy has also

gotten into the city, and so Philip is once again forced into her company—Lucy, however, convinces him to agree to make up with her (in return, initially, for her assistance with one of the deeds of valor). The two children then proceed to work through the deeds of valor, aided by a variety of inhabitants of Polistarchia, and impeded by a sinister woman in a motor-veil who has been given the title of Pretenderette to the Deliverership. The Pretenderette is, in fact, the grey nurse, whose fate forms a major portion of the book's conclusion. At the end of the novel, everyone has gotten the rewards or punishments they deserve: Philip succeeds as Deliverer, he and Lucy become actual friends, and Philip makes peace with the changes brought about by Helen's marriage, and with Helen herself, before everyone is restored back to the "real" world of the novel's beginning.

Nesbit's attitudes toward play and creativity appear in easily legible ways throughout her writing for children. In fantasies like the Psammead trilogy and in realist novels like the Bastable books, or *The Railway Children*, imaginative play is a crucial aspect of her protagonists' lives. Play is not just an activity the characters engage in; rather, the entire narrative is about and of and in play. But a further, clearer expression of her philosophy of play can be found in *Wings and the Child*, or *The Building of Magic Cities*.

Aside from the Fabian socialist tracts she contributed to, *Wings and the Child* is Nesbit's only work of non-fiction. It is a short book, plentifully illustrated with drawings and photographs, and it defies easy generic categorization. *Wings* covers education, child development, religion, social reform, personal anecdotes both recent and from much further back in Nesbit's memory, along with a fairly straightforward "how-to" guide for building magic cities. Part One of *Wings* contains Nesbit's moralizing on child-rearing (and living in general). Part Two, slightly shorter than the first, focuses on the building of magic cities, taking as its starting

point and exemplar the magic city Nesbit constructed for the Children's Welfare Exhibition in 1912. *Wings* rarely rates more than a brief mention in most critical work on Nesbit. The text itself was out of print for some time, and only recently (2012) was digitized and made available online through Project Gutenberg.

*Wings and the Child* continues some of the themes of *The Magic City*, and of course is partially devoted to descriptions of how Nesbit constructed her city, and how others might go about building their own. But *Wings* also offers important insights that can help us better understand a number of issues that repeatedly arise in Nesbit's fiction: the emphasis on material culture and on children's creative play, and the function of the playful adult. Her persistent focus on the material, especially as both site and source of play and play-things, is further amplified in *Wings* in a number of ways: in her detailed memories of her own playthings, of constructing buildings and cities with her children, in explaining just how one might go about building a magic city. It is also through her attention to material culture that she introduces the idea of seeing a multiplicity of possibilities in everyday objects, a kind of looking that I refer to as "play-vision."

Her discussion of this vision begins with re-emphasizing the child's instinct to create: "The five-year-old will lay a dozen wooden bricks and four cotton reels together, set a broken cup on the top of them, and tell you it is a steam-engine. And it is. He has created the engine which he sees, and you don't see, and the pile of bricks and cotton reels is the symbol of his creation" (17). This, the engine that the child sees where the adult only sees bricks and spools, is play-vision: the ability to perceive the multivalent qualities of things, and it is essential to carrying out the program of magic-city-building. In this example, the bricks and spools vanish altogether in becoming the steam-engine. This is another instance of *making* belief – seeing

multiply allows the child to create all kinds of things and make them physically exist in the play world.

Nesbit carefully instructs her readers on how to cultivate this other vision:

And one of the greatest helps to a small, inexperienced traveller in this sometimes dusty way is the likeness of things to each other. Your piece of thick bread and butter is a little stale, perhaps, and bores you; but, when you see that your first three bites have shaped it to the likeness of a bear or a beaver, dull teatime becomes interesting at once. A cloud that is like a face, a tree that is like an old man, a hill that is like an elephant's back, if you have things like these to look at, and look out for, how short the long walk becomes. (28)

From these everyday incidents of pareidolia, Nesbit suggests it is an easy path to seeing bowls as domes, candlesticks as pillars, and dominoes as pavers. Building magic cities engages the imagination in a way that not only transforms the play space, but also alters all the other physical and material spaces the builder passes through. Imbuing both the commonplace – cotton-reels, dominoes – and the less quotidian – photograph-enlarging machines – with multiple identities, so to speak, the stuff of everyday life is destabilized, given multiple, shifting meanings and functions. Play-vision also suggests an entirely different way of viewing the world, a way that has considerable potential to be disruptive if not outright transgressive.

Sarah Ahmed's *Queer Phenomenology* suggests that this process of seeing multiply is queer, and produces queerness: "A queer furnishing might be about making what is in the background, what is behind us, more available as 'things' to 'do' things with . . . As soon as we notice the background, then objects come to life, which already makes things rather queer"

(168).<sup>83</sup> Play-vision of the kind Nesbit describes and valorizes is then a queer, or queering act, introducing a structural element of transgression into the creative play for which she argues. Nesbit tells us that “the prime instinct of a child at play ... is to create. ... he will use the whole force of dream and fancy to create something out of nothing” (17). Creating here means using the play-vision to construct something, an act we can read as queer; naturalizing the creative instinct thus naturalizes a measure of queerness in the child at play.

From its first chapter, *The Magic City* is deeply invested in materiality. Philip and his sister “had a little garden and a little balcony, and a little stable with a little pony in it – and a little cart for the pony to draw; a little canary hung in a little cage in the little bow window” (1). Philip's introduction to us consists of a detailed description of his material surroundings and possessions. Philip and his life with Helen are defined and understood via the material environment. When this environment changes with Helen's marriage to Peter Graham and its attendant relocation to Graham's house, The Grange, Philip's sense of self is shaken. He behaves very poorly to Graham's daughter, Lucy, and appears sulky and cold to all the servants.

The Grange is both a place of abundance and a place of loneliness and isolation for Philip. The servants treat him with indifference and dislike, and the house is chock-full of things that he is forbidden to touch. The Grange “was his to go to and fro in,” but at the same time, it is only a shell of a place for Philip, who is restricted from virtually everything within (and without – the gardens may be seen but not touched) (7). Not only must Philip resist touching – engaging with – the items of the house, but he is encouraged to spend his time alone, outside in the park. In this way, both human company and the material, man-made world are denied to Philip; he is thus exiled from the things that help structure and define his existence and identity.

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<sup>83</sup> Ideas about queer “junk” and things inspired in part by Andracki, Thaddeus. “Playing with Everything: Childhood, Animacy, and Biopower in *The Brave Little Toaster*.” ChLA 2013.



Social interaction with the servants is not an option; solitary play is also withheld by the grey nurse. In coming to The Grange, Philip experiences not just the loss of Helen and the threat of Peter Graham and Lucy in their lives, but the loss of play, of things to do. All of the things and activities he most values and enjoys are stripped from him. When the things you have and do constitute identity, to lose those things is to lose your self. Using the materials of the house would give Philip some sense of ownership or control, or at least begin to create a space for him within the world of The Grange. The grey nurse stands as the barrier to this. The plentiful toys in the nursery stand in stark contrast to Philip's thing-less existence. Faced with more toys than ever before, he is nevertheless forced to go without any playthings.

The great abundance of the house is evidenced in part through Lucy's collection of toys, all of which are forbidden to Philip in Lucy's absence. Her nursery is also a forbidden room, though it

attracted him most, for it was full of toys of the most fascinating kind. A rocking horse as big as a pony, the finest dollhouse you ever saw, boxes of tea things, boxes of bricks – both the wooden and the terra-cotta sorts – puzzle maps, dominoes, chessmen, draughts, every kind of toy or game that you have ever had or wished to have. (7)

The detail of Lucy's collection strikes the reader with its totality: not just the list Nesbit offers, but "every kind of toy...you have ever had or *wished to have*" (my emphasis) (7). Nesbit breaches the limits of the material world by including the toys of imagination and wishes in Lucy's nursery.

The narrative really begins once Philip gains permission and access to the things of the household. The grey nurse, hastily rushing off to meet her brother, tells him "Take anything you

want!” (9). Philip’s first act after receiving this permission is to examine all the toys of the nursery thoroughly. On the second day, however, he “longed to make something with them. He was accustomed to the joy that comes of making things” (9). Beginning with Lucy’s bricks and toys in the nursery, then moving on to the rest of The Grange, Philip plunders the house for materials with which to build his city:

A bronze Egyptian god...a set of Shakespeare...cotton reels...a collar box and some cake tins... Brass finger bowls...the lids of brass kettles and coffeepots...mother of pearl card counters ... a silver and glass ashtray...the crystal drops from the great chandeliers...a wastepaper basket...a photograph-enlarging machine. (12-13)

Nesbit’s emphasis on the things of the magic city, and the people and meanings they contain, force the reader to dwell on them. In her initial description of Philip’s construction of the city, she provides a wealth of detail about the materials he uses, details that reappear in even greater number in *Wings and the Child*. This focus on the objects with which Philip builds demands closer analysis of those objects themselves. As Elaine Freedgood demonstrates, the material objects of a text contain their own set of meanings; historical and cultural analysis of the object *as* an object can complicate or expand a reading of that text. As with many other Nesbit texts, the spoils of Empire appear as extravagances in the child’s world.<sup>84</sup> Thus the magic city is an image of the Imperial project in miniature. Philip recreates or repeats the British plunder in his scouring of The Grange for useful and beautiful artifacts, which are then appropriated to his own purposes. The completed city reminds the first person to see it, the maid Susan, of “them picture postcards my brother in India sends me” (10).

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<sup>84</sup> C.f., *The Story of the Treasure-Seekers*, *The Wouldbegoods*, *The Phoenix and the Carpet*.

Susan's subsequent sympathy for Philip offers him a way into the good graces of the other adults in the household; Susan advocates for him with the other servants who, once they have visited the city, begin to regard the boy with affection. Philip's construction-play is treated seriously by the servants; they visit it out of sincere interest, unmarked by either contempt or amusement at Philip's expense. Susan's initial report, that the city looks like postcards her brother sends her from India, establishes the child's creative play on a footing with other forms of entertainment or communication. Though both the postcard from India and the design (and materials) of Philip's city depend on an orientalist, Imperial view of the world, both are equal in generating in Susan and the others a sense of wonder and awe at the fantastic landscape they view. Most significantly, the servants *join in* with Philip's building activities. They become active suppliers of the raw goods from which Philip builds his city, donating cake tins and much more personal items like the collar-box. Involved with his city-building and feeling the effects of the servants' new interest in him, Philip responds by becoming a much friendlier, less sulky child.

As Philip creates an imaginative playspace from the goods and materials of the household—from the humble wooden bricks to the crystals he unhooks from the chandeliers, he reconstructs his built environment on a scale more manageable to himself. The grand estate of the Grange, a hateful and lonely place to Philip, is deconstructed, and reconstituted with its own parts, but to a child's scale. At the same time, Philip reenacts a kind of imperialism through both the materials and the architecture of his construction; the orientalist aesthetic in Philip's city appears in his use of the Egyptian god, and the elephants from Noah's ark, along with chessmen. The brass lids and fingerbowls are overturned to form domed roofs, an architectural style more likely to be found in India or the Middle East than in England. Philip constructs minarets, as well, bringing the

architecture of the Islamic Near East into his city along with the Indian and North African. Mother-of-pearl, which paves the streets of his city, was at that time imported largely from Asia, particularly China.

Not coincidentally, all of these places are sites of British imperial domination, either at the time of the novel or in earlier years. The inclusion of these artifacts of Empire in constructing the city establishes a resonance between the imperialism of the British and Philip's staking a claim for himself through the creation of the magic city. Interestingly, since Nesbit does not seem explicitly anti-imperialist, we soon see that the magic city, though built by Philip, has rules and agency of its own; he has created the place, but he cannot fully control it. The Magic City exists through and because of Philip, but it also has its own magic. For instance, Philip observes early on that he didn't include certain inhabitants or buildings. The potential dangers of play are hinted at here, but Nesbit explores them much more thoroughly in "The Town in the Library in the Town in the Library," a short story that clearly forms the basis for *The Magic City*.

In *Wings and the Child*, Nesbit writes

When I had built my first three or four magic cities this idea of getting into the city—being, of course, correct citizen-size—lived with me so much that I wrote a story-book about it called *The Magic City*, in which a boy and girl do really become the right size and enter into the city they have built. They have there all the adventures whose wraiths danced before me when I was building courts and making palm trees and finding out the many fine and fair uses of cowries and fir-cones. (125)

Though Nesbit presents *The Magic City* as the written result of her city-building, in fact a short story, "The Town in the Library in the Town in the Library," predates the novel by ten years.

This first iteration of the magic city in Nesbit's fiction does include adventures, to be sure, but it also contains unease, illness, fear, and at least the threat of real bodily danger. In this short story, the child protagonists Rosamund and Fabian<sup>85</sup> are left alone in the library of their home on Christmas Eve, while their mother distributes Christmas gifts to local poor people, and their nurse is ill with measles. The children are instructed not to touch the two top drawers of the bureau, and to *be good*. They promise to be very good, but within moments of their mother leaving them, they are "stroking the shiny top of the bureau" and opening the bottom drawers, just to see if "there was anything in the bottom drawers they ought not to look at" (247-248; *Nine Unlikely Tales*). Nesbit describes the bureau in detail – sloping lid, mother-of-pearl drawer handles, pigeon holes, different colored woods – attending closely to the material qualities and uses of the bureau, which is both beautiful and functional.

Having promised not to *touch* the bureau, the children quickly find the loophole and pry open the drawers using the fire-tongs and poker. They discover their Christmas gifts: one drawer full of toys, the other full of candied fruit, crackers, and other foods, all of which are described in detail. Rosamund, the younger sibling, regrets having spoiled the surprise of Christmas, and the two begin building after Fabian suggests pulling out the bureau's broken writing drawer and making a castle. Nesbit carefully warns her reader against trying this at home "because it leads to trouble. It was only because this one was broken" that the children were able to use the drawer this way (252). This cautionary note is uncommon for Nesbit, but fits well with the overall tone and theme of the story. As will later happen in *The Magic City* and *Wings and the Child*, the children's own blocks and bricks, as well as books from the library, are put into service as the building materials for creating not only the castle, but a town as well.

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<sup>85</sup> Both children's names are shared with Nesbit's actual children; Rosamund, her adopted daughter, and Fabian, her son who died of tonsillitis in 1900, at age 15.

‘It’s almost big enough to get into,’ said Fabian, ‘if we had some steps.’  
So they made steps with the ‘British Essayists’ and ‘Spectator’ and the  
‘Rambler’... and when the steps were done they walked up them.

You may think that they could not have walked up these steps and into a  
town they had built themselves, but I assure you people have often done it, and  
anyway this is a true story.

... Rosamund and Fabian simply walked up the steps into the town they  
had built. Whether they got larger or the town got smaller, I do not pretend to say.  
(253-254)

At first, the children marvel at the town they’ve built as they walk through its streets, but their  
pleasure very quickly turns to fear and anxiety. The street they don’t recall creating is the first  
hint that this town is not entirely under the children’s control. The bureau appears in the distance  
like a mountain, “larger than I want it to be,” as Rosamund says, another sign that though they  
built this world, they are not masters of it (255). As they watch, the drawer of the bureau opens,  
and the lid of one of the boxes slides open as well – slowly. From the box emerge the toy  
soldiers, who climb down from the drawer, assemble in ranks, and begin marching toward the  
town. “They seemed to be quite full-size soldiers – indeed, *extra* large. The children were very  
frightened. They ... ran up and down the streets of the town trying to find a place to hide” (257).  
What’s interesting here is that the mere sight of the over-large bureau makes them uneasy; the  
animated, active toy soldiers fill them with fear, rather than wonder or joy. The soldiers do  
nothing but climb down from their drawer and march in orderly rows toward the town – they are  
blue soldiers, not marked with any particular nationality or insignia, not behaving in any way  
other than as marching soldiers, yet the children have *no* sense of mastery or power over them.

Quite the contrary – simply seeing the approaching soldiers evokes fear and the desire to flee and hide. Unlike the guardsmen Philip encounters when he first reaches the Magic City, these soldiers - who are after all *toys* in a town the children have built themselves from toys and household objects – in some strange way present an immediate menace to the children. Fabian and Rosamund have had only a few minutes to enjoy the town they built before it turns menacing, the soldiers become a threat, and the entire tone of the adventure changes.

As the children search for a place to hide in the town they've built, they see their very own house and run inside, into the library of the house. "But when they looked out of the window it was not their own street, but the one they had built ... it was all very confusing" (256). While in this second version of their house, the captain of the blue soldiers appears and informs them that the soldiers have taken the town, and the children are now their prisoners. Though the children make an effort at explaining that it's *their* town (since they built it), the captain dismisses their argument and demands provisions for his soldiers, who are "very fierce" (257). As before, Rosamund and Fabian are confronted with the fact that the town is *not* theirs, and that they are at its mercy – it is a toy come alive, not to gratify the children's whims but to maintain its own order.

Secretly, behind his hand, the captain has told the children "you need only feed the soldiers in the usual way" (257). At this, Fabian and Rosamund again open the bureau drawer and remove the raisins and figs and dried fruit from it. Nesbit explains that, to feed tin soldiers, "You just put a bit of the fig or raisin or whatever it is, on the soldier's tin bayonet ... and then of course *you eat it for him*" (258). But the captain claims the soldiers are still hungry after the first round of rations are distributed, and the children hand out the candied fruits from the drawer, as well. After this, the children try to decide what to do "for they both felt that the blue soldiers

were a very hard-hearted set of men” (259). Again, Nesbit emphasizes the frightening nature of the soldiers, despite the fact that Nesbit has shown them doing nothing at all that is particularly menacing besides grumbling for more food.

The fear of the soldiers seems to leach into a fear of the town itself – fear they might be locked in the dungeon (the pigeon-holes of the bureau), and then locked inadvertently in the bureau by their mother, where they would starve to death, “For they could not be sure exactly what size they were, or which library their Mother would come back to. ...You see the curious thing was that the children had built a town and got into it, and in it they had found their own house with the very town they had built – or one exactly like it – still on the library floor” (259). Rosamund and Fabian realize that, though they are in their own house in the town, their mother is in a different house (the original house of the story). Dislocated in size and space, unable to control their bodies, let alone the town of their own construction, the children experience everything as a threat, potentially fatal. Rather than having mastery over their playthings, the toys dominate and intimidate the children; the children serve the toys rather than vice-versa. Play, and play space, is not always safe, and it has rules and logic of its own, separate from that of its creators or the children who engage with it.

Still afraid of the soldiers, Fabian wishes they had the other toys from the bureau – the mouse, the other box of toy soldiers, the donkey – to fight off the blue soldiers. The children extract the toys, certain they can get into this iteration of the town, and in fact they do: “So now they were in a town built in a library in a house in a town built in a library in a house in a town called London – and the town they were in now had red soldiers in it and they felt quite safe, and the Union Jack was stuck up” (261). The safety represented by these British elements – the red-coated soldiers and the Union Jack – suggest perhaps the previous version of the town was



foreign, or at least not British, but may also simply be an iteration of a Britain that works differently than the children's own home.

Once inside this new place,

They walked about this town and found their own house, just as before, and went in, and there was the toy town on the floor; and you will see that they might have walked into that town also, but they saw it was no good, and that they couldn't get out that way, but would only get deeper and deeper into a nest of towns in libraries in houses in towns in libraries in houses in towns in...and so on for always – something like Chinese puzzle-boxes multiplied by millions and millions for ever and ever. (262)

At this stage, the text begins to approach the metaphysical. Nesbit introduces the idea of infinity, and her recursive towns work something like parallel universes; they are identical, but have some fundamental difference that alters the tone of the place. Recursion doesn't evoke excitement or curiosity from the children, however – Rosamund begins to cry when Fabian explains that continuing to move from town to town will only take them further and further from home. Both the distance from home and the evident infinitude of these play spaces are frightening and overwhelming, and both emphasize the relative smallness and vulnerability of the children.

Attempting to consult the red soldiers for advice on how to get home leads nowhere; the soldiers don't know anything except drill. The children meet up with the clockwork mouse who is "big like an elephant," and the donkey who is "as big as a mastodon or a megatherium" (263). Rosamund begins to cry again, and tells the mouse she wants to go home. He replies, "I am sorry for *you*, but your brother is the kind of child that overwinds clockwork mice the very first day he has them. I prefer to stay this size" (263). Fabian gives his word of honor he won't break its

clockwork, and in fact will give the mouse to Rosamund, should the children return home. The donkey also questions him: “you won’t put coals in my panniers or unglue my feet from my green grass-plot?” Fabian swears again that he won’t misuse the toys, and the Mouse reveals the secret to getting “out of this kind of town. ... you just *walk out of the gate*” (264).

Walking out of the gate leads the children not home, but back to the town with the blue soldiers. The mouse and the donkey have reverted to their proper toy-size, and can no longer assist them. Fabian suggests using the same strategy – walking out of the gate – to exit this town and return home, but Rosamund is still afraid to go into the town full of the blue soldiers. They decide to run out of the gate, and do so, arriving back in the library of their own home, where they began.

Moments after their return, their mother enters the library, saying “‘What a dreadful muddle! And what have you done with the raisins and the candied fruits?’ And her voice was very grave indeed” (265). Nesbit’s narrator intrudes here again to inform her readers “you will see it was quite impossible for Fabian and Rosamund to explain to their mother what they had done with the raisins and things ... even I have found it rather hard to explain” (265). Instead of defending themselves, or attempting to offer an excuse or explanation, both children begin to cry, Rosamund saying “Oh, Mother, my head does ache so” (265).

Their mother scolds them for eating all those sweets – “‘I don’t wonder your head aches’” – and looks as if she would like to cry as well. “‘I don’t know what Daddy will say,’ said Mother, and then she gave them each a nasty powder and put them both to bed” (266). The story winds down quickly from here; the next day, both children are found to have measles, and by the time they recover, “every one [sic] had forgotten about what had happened on Christmas Eve,” including Fabian and Rosamund (266). The children, it seems, are sufficiently punished for their

misbehavior by contracting measles; neither mother nor their father administer any other punishments. Even prior to the measles, though, the children get their comeuppance in the form of the fear and anxiety they experience in the various towns they have built. Misbehavior here contains within it the mechanism for its own punishment.

In “The Town in the Library in the Town in the Library,” Nesbit is continuing a long tradition of cautionary toy-tales for children. Stories like Juliana Ewing’s “The Land of Lost Toys,” (1869) packed though they are with fantasy and imagination, clearly caution child readers about using toys “improperly” – not as they are intended, or without taking care of or maintaining them. In many of these stories, the child protagonist learns his lesson when his toys or possessions become animate or sentient, and threatening; Ewing’s toys, for instance, promise to treat the human who owned them exactly as she treated them – left out in the rain, dangled in the creek, left in a dust-hole.<sup>86</sup>

Here, though, Nesbit gives a somewhat more sinister turn to the cautionary narrative. The toy soldiers are brand-new and have yet to be handled by the children. This is not a revenge narrative where wronged toys mete out punishment, but a glimpse of a play world that is uncontrollable, hostile, and threatening to the children. In “The Town in the Library in the Town in the Library,” creative play is no guarantee of fun, safety, or mastery; the playspace has rules and intentions of its own, quite separate from those of the children who build it.

Nesbit’s novel *The Enchanted Castle* includes an episode of creative play gone awry, of the kind of potent transformative power that can accompany theatrical play and make-believe. The episode of the Ugly-Wuglies also presents readers with a stark example of the potential dangers of playing, an example that carries the negative repercussions of making-believe far beyond what Nesbit signals in “The Town in the Library.” The Ugly-Wuglies are also what

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<sup>86</sup> Ewing’s “Land of Lost Toys.”

happens when the creator loses control of her creation, and when making belief literally transforms material objects.

The children in *The Enchanted Castle* – siblings Gerald, Kathleen and Jimmy, and their friend Mabel – have found a magic wishing ring. The siblings are staying for the summer with a French schoolteacher from Kathleen's school, while Mabel lives with her aunt, the housekeeper at a castle nearby, where the magic ring was found. The magic of the ring is simple: if and when the wearer says "I wish...", whatever she has wished for becomes true, instantly. In the chapter under discussion here, the children have decided to put on a play for the French governess and Eliza, the maid, and spend the entire afternoon preparing for it, as a way of taking a break from playing with the wishing ring, which has, as magic often does in Nesbit's fiction, caused as many problems as it has created pleasures.

The children have converted the dining room to a stage, complete with curtains and an apparently full audience of adults. Mademoiselle, the governess, is startled by their presence and reprimands the children for not asking her permission to invite others. Mabel answers by saying "turn the gas up, It's only part of the entertainment" (137). When the lights are turned up, Mademoiselle examines the figure and "half laughed, quite screamed, and sat down suddenly. 'Oh! ... they are not alive!'" (137). Eliza the maid echoes Mademoiselle's shock: "'They ain't got no insides'" (137). And so they haven't – the seven audience members have been created by the children, out of bolsters and rolled-up blankets, broomsticks and umbrellas and hockey sticks for spines, gloves stuffed with handkerchiefs for hands and paper masks for faces. The children have made their audience with great detail, making shoulders with wooden hangers, and dressing them up in hats and coats and jackets.

The faces, painted by Gerald, are the most important feature: “The faces were really rather dreadful. Gerald had done his best, but even after his best had been done, you would hardly have known they were faces, some of them, if they hadn’t been in the positions which faces usually occupy, between the collar and the hat” (139). This homemade audience already has a rather creepy and uncanny appearance. The faces are only recognizable as such because of their positioning on the bolster-bodies, not because they contain anything fundamentally recognizable as facial features, but the shape and the detail of them is realistic enough to fool Mademoiselle and Eliza, initially, into thinking, in the dimmed lighting, that they were real.

The play, “Beauty and the Beast,” goes forward quite successfully. The children are pleased with their performance, and right before the final scene, after Mademoiselle and Eliza have applauded the previous scene, Mabel says (while wearing the wishing ring), “I wish those creatures we made were alive. We should get something like applause then” (143). Gerald’s response alerts readers to the ghastliness of the creatures: ““I’m jolly glad they aren’t ... Brutes!””(143). But of course Mabel has worn the ring, and her wish comes true. As the scene opens, Mademoiselle and Eliza begin clapping, but then comes the sound, the “dull padded sound” of the creatures’ clapping: “Nine faces instead of two were turned toward the stage, and seven out of the nine were painted, pointed paper faces. And every hand and every face was alive” (143). Mademoiselle and Eliza run shrieking from the room; the children are terrified.

The creatures – the Ugly-Wuglies – have come alive and responded as any audience would to the play. But the degree of horror they evoke from the children is astonishing; nothing could be more terrifying than the Ugly-Wuglies. The creatures begin to leave the house, and Gerald says ““Everybody in the town’ll be insane by tomorrow night if we don’t stop them!””

(144). Not just frightening, then, the Ugly-Wuglies are so far beyond the realm of the rational that simply being near them could induce insanity.

As they leave the house, one of the creatures, dressed respectably in men's clothing, speaks. Because they have no real mouths, only an opening with no roof, his speech is very difficult to understand, but Gerald somehow manages to understand him. "“Can you recommend me to a good hotel?” The speaker had no inside to his head. ... Yet the whole thing was alive” (147). This Ugly-Wugly, alive, has taken on the personality of a respectable, middle-aged man who only wants a good hotel – but is terrifying just the same.

The Ugly-Wuglies are all, for the most part, perfectly polite and amiable. They make conversation with Gerald and Mabel, inquiring about their schools, but the children remained horrified. Mabel feels as if “she were taking part in a very completely arranged nightmare” (159). Both children make reference, repeatedly, to a fear of insanity and to the impossibility or unthinkability of the Ugly-Wuglies. Before telling the bailiff the story, Gerald says, ““You’d think we were mad, and get us shut up””(167). The primary reaction the Ugly-Wuglies produce is one of insanity, or the fear of insanity – they are a completely destabilizing force.

But what are these Ugly-Wuglies doing here? Of all the magic-induced frights the children experience, the episode with the Ugly-Wuglies is by far the most intensely terrifying. The children grasp, fairly readily, the reality of the wishing ring and the magic they create with it. There is nothing especially terrifying in Mabel's or Gerald's invisibility, or even in Mabel's becoming four yards high due to a foolish wish. These situations are uncomfortable (physically and socially), but they don't create the kind of deeply felt emotional horror of the Ugly-Wuglies.

Mabel's wishing them alive comes as a result of their formally-staged home theatrical production. The applause of Mademoiselle and Eliza is, for Mabel, insufficient; wishing for a

larger audience – more applause, more adulation – brings the Ugly-Wuglies to hideous life. A kind of excess of desire for approbation in performance is thus punished here with the fearsome Ugly-Wuglies.

But there is more than that at work here. *The Enchanted Castle* ends with the relinquishing of the ring and its magic; magic leaves this text forever. Sarah Gilead discusses the novel briefly in “Magic Abjured: Closure in Children’s Fantasy Fiction,” suggesting that the magic ring “dissolves the barriers between reality, it also operates against desire by showing the crude and troublesome ways that desire obtrudes on reality” (284). Desire, in this episode, is virtually synonymous with theatrical play and make-believe. The mind-bending horrors of the Ugly-Wuglies demonstrate unequivocally the risks of this kind of play – performance and creation *causes* their monstrous coming-to-life.

In another way, the Ugly-Wuglies represent the very tenuous relationship between audience and actor. As a dumb collection of coats and pillows, the Ugly-Wuglies appear as totally passive receivers of the children’s play, precisely as they have been designed by the children/actors. But once they become alive, the children lose all control over their audience – physically and psychologically. The fear of the audience turning on the performed is thus made literal here; the Ugly-Wuglies rise up, overpowering the children’s theatricality by asserting their presence as a more dominant force. This episode acknowledges the potency and agency of the audience, any audience, and offers a cautionary warning to any players who might take their auditors for granted. More than that, however, the intensely psychological horrors of the Ugly-Wuglies put the brakes on the children’s desire for theatricality, for anything outside the space of the very rational, sane and real. In this book, ultimately, what the children desire is the very real – the utterly anti-theatrical.

The Ugly-Wuglies are also an instance of the creators' loss of control over their creation. Invented by the children, literally made by them from an eclectic array of household objects, the Ugly-Wuglies at first function as almost perfect instances of make-belief: they have the basic form of people in an audience. Under the dim lights, Mademoiselle and Eliza *experience* them as people in the audience. The play vision that Nesbit emphasizes in *Wings and the Child* is at work here as well; hockey sticks and paper and old coats are re-visioned into human adults. When the Ugly-Wuglies come alive, however, that doubling of vision is eliminated; they aren't hockey sticks and paper and old coats, they are, somehow, *actual* people. When the objects of creative play take over, the imaginative work required for the creation is made superfluous. Instead, the children are confronted with a reality which has both been made, and then voided, by creative play. What is left is something like the worst of both worlds—the animating power of make-believe continues, but the creative impulse and power that drives make-believe is obliterated. Out-of-control play, and out-of-control actors created by the children, present a very specific kind of intense fear, one that is antithetical to the forces of play.

Though Nesbit warns of dangerous possibilities in play and make-believe, in *The Magic City* she shifts to a much more positive vision of creative play, one that is more expansive and combines possibilities for individual transformation with possibilities for social change. Whereas in “The Town in the Library” using a toy or thing for its single, intended purpose is reinforced and valued, *The Magic City* exists precisely because the children appropriate objects for alternative, unmeant uses.

The entire narrative of *The Magic City* is intensely concerned with manufacture, with construction, with making things. The imaginary world of the novel – Polistopolis, Polistarchia and its attendant towns, villages and island – consists entirely of Philip's efforts at construction –



everything from his earliest efforts at stacking simple blocks, to the elaborate city constructed with the spoils of the Grange, to the sandcastle village he builds with Helen at Dymchurch. But the things with which Philip builds are themselves built objects, a fact which is made obvious to Philip in his first conversation with Mr. Perrin, the carpenter who has known Philip all his life, and in fact made for Philip his first set of building blocks:

“And what does carpenters do?”

“Carp, I suppose,” said Philip. “That means they make things, doesn’t it?”

“That’s it,” said the man encouragingly. “What sort of things now might old Perrin have made for you?”

“You made my wheelbarrow, I know,” said Philip, “and my bricks.”

“Ah!” said Mr. Perrin. “Now you’ve got it. I made your bricks, seasoned oak, and true to the thousandth of an inch, they was.” (65)

Perrin, like the other inhabitants of Polistarchia, provides information almost Socratically, asking questions until Philip works out the answers for himself. Tracing objects back to their source – or maker, as the discussion does not go back to the oak trees themselves but returns to Perrin who crafted the wood into blocks – becomes an important part of understanding how Polistarchia works. This understanding is essential for Philip to navigate his way through the country, and for him and Lucy to complete the seven deeds.

Perrin explains the manufacturing backstory, and its importance in the cities, thus:

All the cities and things you ever built in in this country. ... And as you made ‘em, you’ve for the right to come to them...Well, then, you made the cities, but you made ‘em out of what other folks had made, things like bricks and chessmen and books and candlesticks and dominoes and brass basins and every sort of kind of

thing. An' all the people who helped to make all them things you used to build with, they're all here too. D'you see? Making's the thing. If it was no more than the lad that turned the handle of the grindstone to sharp the knife that carved a bit of a cabinet or what not, or a child that picked a teazle to finish a bit of the cloth that's glued on to the bottom of a chessman – they're all here. They're what's called the population of your cities (67).

No maker is too insignificant to be included in the population – every person's contribution counts. In some ways, Nesbit, via Perrin, encapsulates some of Freedgood's exhortation to look behind or beneath the surface of everyday objects. But Nesbit also reveals her alliance with the Fabian socialists in her attention to the workers who have crafted every object of Philip's world. The workers are immanent in their creations, literally and figuratively. Every object carries a backstory, the traces of history and culture and personality that went into its creation and are part of its metonymic chain of meanings. But in *The Magic City*, these traces are made literal and visible; the makers, the history of the objects, inhabit the world built with their objects.

"Making's the thing," Perrin tells Philip, and *The Magic City* takes this as its motto and its message. The text valorizes creative, constructive (in all senses of the word) play; we can see this on every page, and in the central conflict between the city's Deliverer and its Destroyer. Among the Deliverer's tasks are several that require him to create something, but the Destroyer, by her very name, cannot make, she can only destroy.

The Destroyer, the Pretenderette, is Lucy's "grey nurse," the woman who has forbidden Philip from touching Lucy's toys or anything else in The Grange. She treats Philip harshly throughout the text, and shows herself, both within and without the magic city, to be a force of destruction. Even when, at the novel's end, we learn how she was able to enter the magic city,

her anti-imaginative and destructive nature is made clear: ““I was just going to pull it down, and I knocked down a brick or two with my sleeve, and *not thinking what I was doing* I built them up again”” (201, my emphasis). The nurse’s only attempt at making things is thus an unconscious one, and the very result of destruction. Yet it still grants her entrance to the Magic City, because *making’s* the thing that matters most here; even unconscious creating is still making.

Philip’s entrance into the magic city occurs at night, when he leaves his bed to go look at his city in the moonlight. “He gazed on it for a moment in ecstasy” and then turns, feels giddy, and looks back to the city, which had “in a quick blink of light, followed by darkness, disappeared” (15). Philip finds himself standing on what reminds him “of the illimitable prairie of which he had read in books of adventure.” Standing still on this plain, Philip thinks that, though he can’t see how, he must be dreaming. Within just these first moments of being “in” the Magic City, Philip has already characterized it as a dream, and as evocative of books. Both of these features or characteristics appear throughout the novel with some frequency, and direct our attention to the connections between dream, play, reading, and literature. All modes of storytelling, they also all create a kind of space in which the dreamer/reader/player can get “lost.”

Entering the city after climbing the tall ladder, Philip finds its shadowy, silent nature unsettling. “He did not feel exactly frightened. But he did not feel exactly brave, either” (19). This first experience in the Magic City recalls the unease and fear the children feel in “The Town in the Library in the Town in the Library.” The reality of the constructed cities is not purely joyous and magical; they are unknowable and out of the control of the child-builders. Oddly, Philip’s first action in the city is to sit down and fall asleep. While sleeping, he dreams that “everything was as it used to be before That Man came and changed everything and took Helen

away” (20).<sup>87</sup> Woken from this dream by a guardsman, Philip is brought to the guardroom to explain his presence. It is here that he learns that he is the first trespasser the city has ever known, though astrologers had prophesied one when the town was first built. They also prophesied that a “great deliverer” would enter the city in the same manner as the trespasser – both by the ladder that Philip has climbed. “Couldn’t I,” suggested Philip shyly, “couldn’t I be the deliverer instead of the trespasser? I’d much rather, you know” (24).

To become Deliverer, Philip must complete seven deeds of valor, each of which confers onto him a new, more powerful title. All but the two final deeds require the children to employ that kind of doubled play vision; they must be able to see things in at least two lights, but in reverse order from what Nesbit describes in *Wings*. Rather than perceive a locomotive, they need to be able to see the cotton reels and box that constitute it.

The first deed is slaying a dragon, one who turns out to be a clockwork dragon Philip recognizes and stops (by removing its key) easily. Next is untangling the Mazy Carpet – an enormous carpet, intricately woven, also bound by a prophecy—it must be unraveled only. Lucy recognizes it as a crocheted mat she had made, and instructs Philip on how to find one end and unravel the mat successfully. The next deed is to slay the Lions in the Desert, and here again Lucy is the one with the brains to solve the problem. Neither child wants to actually kill the lions, but Lucy recognizes them as animals out of her Noah’s Ark. The children manage to tie up the lions, then set their dog-companions to licking the paint off the animals’ legs. Lucy explains this is the only way to kill Ark animals: lick the paint off, and break their legs.

Once the dogs have licked the legs clean, Philip uses an axe to chop off their legs. Lucy picks up a bit that flew off as he chopped “and it was *wood*, just wood and nothing else, though

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<sup>87</sup> In some ways, this is reminiscent of Barrie’s *Peter Pan*, where the first thing the children do upon arriving in the Neverland is to build a house and pretend they are *not* in Neverland.

when they had tied it up it had been real writhing resisting lion leg and no mistake. ... Philip put his hand on a lion body, and that was wood too” (112). Lucy is able to see the wooden Ark animal in (or through) the apparently real and authentic lions, and the accuracy and usefulness of her play-vision is confirmed once the animals have been licked clean of the paint that transforms them from wooden toys to real lions.

Causing the dragon and lions to revert from real ferocious beasts to metal and wooden toys gives Philip and Lucy some mastery over the inhabitants of Polistarchia; it also saves them from having to commit real violence and kill actual, living animals. Further, reducing these things to the materials from which they were made reminds the reader, again, of the constructedness, the *thing-ness*, of the objects and toys in Polistarchia. This recalls Mr. Perrin’s remarks about the many people who have contributed to the making of these things, and the centrality of making in the functioning of the world.

The episode of the lions concludes with Lucy calling him “Phil,” and he calling her “Lu,” each for the first time. Philip adds, of Lucy’s strategy to defeat the lions, “It was jolly clever of you to think of it anyhow” (112). The successful completion of this deed draws the two children together in a much more genuinely comradely way, though again only Philip is acknowledged as the deed-doer, when he is elevated to the rank of Lord Leo.

En route to their next deed, Philip and Lucy, and their animal entourage (dachshunds Brenda and Max, both of whom speak English, and Polly the Parrot, who – like many other inhabitants – came out of one of the books used to construct the magic city), encounter the Pretenderette. Riding on the back of the Hippogriff (also from a book, the same one as the parrot), she literally drops in on the children and attempts to attach herself to their expedition. At the first sight of her, Philip says “‘It’s that nasty motor thing’,” metonymizing the motor lady so

that the metonym is not an actual human aspect, but a separate *thing*. The motor veil does not receive the same kind of positive, multiple attention that other things in the city do. This is, in part, due to the absence and distrust of machinery in Polistarchia. Mr. Noah has told the children about the “dreadful law ... that if anyone asks for machinery they have to have it and keep on using it” (103). Machines, in Polistarchia, dominate their users in a kind of forced bondage, so that the “motor” association of the veils represents something other and controlling.

The Pretenderette attempts to assert adult authority over the children by telling them they can all continue traveling together: “I have a right to be present at all experiments. There ought to be some responsible grown-up person to see that you really do what you’re sure to say you’ve done” (113). Angered, Philip asks if she is saying they are liars: ““I don’t mean to *say* anything about it,’ the Pretenderette answered with an unpleasant giggle” (113). She goes on: “If you fail, then it’s my turn, and I might very likely succeed the minute after you’d failed. So we’ll all go on comfortably together. *Won’t* that be nice?” (113). In Nesbit’s books, lying, and the accusation of lying, are very serious offenses indeed; suggesting that the children will claim to have completed deeds when they haven’t is tremendously insulting. The Pretenderette’s presumed superiority because she is a grown-up is a kind of echo of the most patronizing ways adults treat children in the world outside the magic city, and it attempts to reinstate the children at the bottom of the power hierarchy. But the children are *not* powerless, and in fact command much more power than she does. As claimant to the Deliverership, Philip can call on any citizen of Polistarchia, and they are obliged to come to his aid. In this instance, the parrot offers to take the Pretenderette away, and Philip agrees readily. The parrot voices the children’s feelings: ““the miserable outsider! Intruding into *our* expedition!”” (114). The Pretenderette’s arrival in the expedition has the same wet-blanket effect that most adults would have when interrupting

children's play, but in Polistarchia, unlike in the 'real' world, Philip has the ability to send her away. This is a substantial change from Philip's situation at the novel's beginning, when he was entirely at the mercy of the adults around him; Philip now has autonomy over himself *as well as* power to affect the adults around him.

When Philip and Lucy arrive at the home of the Dwellers by the Sea, Nesbit treats her readers to a view of a child-centered, child-controlled society. The Dwellers live in what Philip recognizes as a sand castle he built with Helen last summer, and in huts made from molds he made with his sandpail. The fact that the Dwellings are creations made while Philip was vacationing at the seaside evokes a holiday feeling for the entire place. As they approach the sand castle, Philip notes that the many inhabitants they can see seem young, and asks where they came from. The parrot explains they came from a book: "Happy troops/Of gentle islanders. Those are the islanders" (121). They don't live on an island, the parrot explains, because "There's only one island, and no one is allowed on that except two people who never go there. But the islanders are happy even if they don't live on an island - always happy, except for the great fear" (121). Discovering, and defeating, this great fear is the task that Philip must accomplish for the Dwellers.

As the islanders approach the children, Lucy shrinks away, saying "They're savages" (121). But their dark complexions are actually sunburns, and they are waving and smiling in a friendly way; Philip says "They're not savages ... They're just children" (121). Nesbit's choice to have Lucy misapprehend the children for savages is a clever kind of joke; the explanation of the Dwellers' community also has a satiric note to it, and in fact this whole episode plays with the traditional views and roles of children and adults.

The Dwellers are all children:

“when the government had to make sure that we should always be *happy* troops of gentle islanders, they decided that the only way was for us to be children. And we do have the most ripping time. ...for heavy work we have the M.A.’s. They’re men who’ve had to work hard at sums and history and things at college so hard that they want a holiday. So they come here and work for us, and if any of us do want to learn anything, the M.A.’s are handy to have about the place . It pleases them to teach anything, poor things. They live in the huts. There’s always a long list waiting for their turn” (125).

In this community of children, the subservient ones who do the heavy work are the adults – the college M.A.’s. Despite the wildness of the children, and the carefree ways in which they spend their days, they maintain order and authority among themselves and over the M.A.’s, who experience living and working for the Dwellers as a holiday. The Lord High Islander (named Billy) who explains this system pities the M.A.’s, the “poor things” who have worked hard at college and who take pleasure in teaching the children, a pleasure that hardly measures up to the enjoyment the children experience daily, hunting small game that becomes whatever food they like, playing games, bathing, and dancing.

The game hunted by the Dwellers is another instance of play-vision; the oddly-shaped indistinguishable animals from a Noah’s Ark are the prey, and when killed, rather than turn to wood (as the lions had), these become whatever food the children want. Billy explains ““We only hunt to kill and we only kill for food ... The intention makes all the difference. I had a plum-cake intention when we put up the blugraiwee ... and the graibeestes I intended for rice pudding and prunes and toffee and ices ... So, of course, when we come to cut them up they’ll *be* what I intended”” (125). The misshapen wooden creatures from the Noah’s Ark toy thus become live



animals, which are then “intended” into whatever food the hunters most want – from wood, to animal, to plum-cake, all at the whim of the child, who sees plum-cake when he hunts blugraiwee, and bread-and-butter when he takes down a pinkugger. The child-society imagined here is one where not only do children have authority over themselves *and* adults, they have the ability to control and change the physical world around them. It is worth noting, too, that except for the great fear, the children are entirely happy; and once Philip completes his deed, the fear is eliminated and the children now live in perfect happiness.

The solution to the islanders’ great fear of being swept out to sea by a storm is to construct an ark for them, on the highest tower of their castle. Mr Noah and Perrin are called in, the M.A.’s are the labor force, and the children watch eagerly as the ark is assembled. “It was a perfect example of the ark builder’s craft. Its boat part was painted a dull red, its sides and ends were blue with black windows, and its roof was bright scarlet, painted in lines to imitate tiles. No least detail was neglected. Even to the white bird painted on the roof, which you must have noticed in your own Noah’s ark” (130). Though evidently built from scratch, using actual carpentry tools and materials (rather than repurposing other objects), when it is finished, the ark is a full-size working craft, but with every appearance of a toy. Adorned not with real tiles, but painted lines, and with the dove painted on the roof as well, the ark is humorous touch – the toy city made real with a real ark made like a toy – but also demonstrates again the ease with which things can shift from one form or function to another.

After the completion of the ark, while everyone celebrates, the Pretenderette returns, having broken out of prison and stolen the Hippogriff again; she swoops down and snatches Philip by the back of his seaweed tunic, carrying him up and away. When the parrot attempts to intervene, the Pretenderette traps him as well, catching him in her motor veil. For a moment, it

seems her identity will be revealed; Lucy watches eagerly, “with the feeling that if only she could see the Pretenderette’s face she would recognize it” (133). But the Pretenderette is “too wily,” and turns her face away, then takes off with Philip and the parrot as her prisoners. Lucy, distraught and crying, turns to Mr. Noah for assistance; all he can offer is the suggestion of a good night’s rest. The next day, he explains, they can begin traveling to consult the oracle.

Here Nesbit’s narrative takes a turn in its style and tone. She writes, “Early in the morning there was no starting from the castle of the Dwellers by the Sea. There was indeed no one to start, and there was no castle to start from ... the sea had risen up and swept away from the beach every trace of the castle, the huts and the folk who had lived there” (134). On the suddenly desolate beach, Nesbit has neither Philip nor Lucy to employ as focalizer; their abrupt disappearance from the narrative leaves a peculiar gap, and the total erasure of any trace of the Dwellers brings the chapter to a sinister conclusion. Though the parrot – with shreds of motor veil clinging to him – appears, neither he nor we as readers know where *any* of our characters have gone, nor what their fates are.

Chapter Eight, “Ups and Downs,” is the next installment, and in it Nesbit shifts to a meta-level, signaling clearly the constructed nature of the text itself; like the magic city, the book is consciously assembled, and the act of reading becomes a kind of play-vision: the process of reading the words on the page transforms scratches of ink of paper into human characters, toys, animals, a magic city, and all the rest of the world of the story. As the narrator relates the events that befall Lucy, Mr. Noah, and the islanders, she makes reference to things that “I told you about in the last chapter” (143). The narrator draws attention to herself, to her telling of the story; she also moves around in time, relating the parrot’s arrival on the empty beach *before*

narrating the storm that sweeps the beach clear, then hearkening back to that moment several pages later.

Throughout the chapter, the text has been broken up with lines of asterisks into segments featuring different characters and different moments. The storm has its own section, then the parrot's arrival on the beach; then another when Lucy and Mr. Noah visit the oracle; and yet another row of asterisks when the narrative shifts to Philip and the Pretenderette. Here, the narrator says "I'm sorry this chapter is cut up into bits with lines of stars, but stars are difficult to avoid when you have to tell a lot of different things happening all at once. That is why it is much better always to keep your party together if you can. And I have allowed mine to get separated so that Philip, the parrot, and the rest of the company are going through three sets of adventures all at the same time. This is most trying for me, and fully accounts for the stars. Which I hope you'll excuse. However" (146-47). This exposure of the construction of the story mirrors the descriptions of Philip's construction of the city; we see both the materials and the builder making decisions about how best to employ them. As modes of play, then, city-building and novel-writing are comparable, and the child-builder and adult-writer engaged in similar tasks.

This chapter, which splits the narrative off in multiple directions, while also drawing out the narrator on the subject of her text, forms the pivot for Philip's change in attitude toward both his sister Helen, and Lucy. The Pretenderette, guided stealthily by the Hippogriff, is compelled to drop Philip on the Island-where-you-mayn't-go; at this point Philip makes two important discoveries. First, he learns the identity of the Pretenderette: she is "the only really unpleasant person Philip had ever met in the world. It was Lucy's nurse, the nurse with the gray dress and the big fat feet, who had been so cross to him and had pulled down his city" (148). Almost immediately after this discovery, however, which occurs as the Pretenderette flies off, leaving

Philip alone on the island, he realizes this the island he and Helen had imagined together, for years, and which she had drawn maps of.

Right before, and right after, this realization, Philip wishes Lucy were with him; the second time, realizing it with the knowledge that he would have to ask Helen before Lucy would be permitted on the island. When he thinks it is simply “dewy grass and sweet flowers and trees and safety and delight,” he wishes Lucy were there to enjoy it with him (148). With the realization it is his and Helen’s island comes “a glorious feeling of being at home .... warm and delightful” – and he still wants Lucy’s company (149). The tension between the two children has almost entirely dissolved, or resolved, by this point, and the island of his own invention, his creation, is something he wants to share with Lucy, rather than hoard selfishly.

The appearance of Helen on the island provides Philip with a way of working out the complex emotions her marriage has provoked. It also offers another quirk in the functioning of the magic city; Helen “just walked out at the other side of a dream ... How could I not come, when the door was open and you wanted me so?” (152). Lucy’s father has also “gone through a dream door” to see Lucy, though Helen adds that “he doesn’t know he’s really gone. He’ll think it’s a dream” (153). Helen’s playfulness is highlighted here; she can and does consciously and knowingly move from a dream to the island, but Lucy’s father, presumably more inhibited in play-ability than Helen, can only know his experience in the magic city as a dream.

Philip’s experience on the island is when he realizes “that Helen still belonged to him, and that her marriage to Mr. Graham had not made her any the less Philip’s very own” (154). The interlude comes to a close when Philip spies the ark heading toward the island, and Helen reminds him that, when they made their island, they made it so no one but the two of them could go there. Philip says ““the island is the place for islanders, isn’t it?”” (155). There follows a brief

conversation between the two, while Philip struggles against his selfish wish to keep the island *and* Helen, and his wish to provide the islanders a home free of their fear of the sea. This conflict exemplifies Julia Briggs' claim that, in *The Magic City*, "the primary act of imagination is that of love, and of identification with others" (332).

Helen vanishes the instant the Lord High Islander sets foot on the island, and Philip is stricken with emotion. Mr. Noah sees this and says "'The more a present costs you, the more it's worth. ... This has cost you so much, it's the most splendid present in the world'" (159). From resenting having to share Helen with anyone, Philip has transitioned to not only sharing her with Mr. Graham and Lucy, but he has given away their joint creation, effecting her removal from Polistarchia.

Leaving the island on the *Lightning Loose*, the yacht Philip and Helen had invented, he and Lucy set off for their next task in the town of Somnolentia, which is ruled over by a Great Sloth who must be made to stay awake and busy. They haven't traveled for long when they realize they are sailing in the wrong direction, on the wrong river – that everything is wrong. "'Someone has been opening a book,'" the parrot tells them, and this river has gotten out (164). Presently, the children discover more things they recognize from books, and Lucy wonders "'who is it that keeps on opening the books? Somebody must be pulling Polistopolis down'" (173). Philip believes it is the Pretenderette; no one else can get into Polistarchia except him and Lucy, and they are Deliverers, thus the Pretenderette *must* be the Destroyer. It is a curious fact that even in pulling down the city, the Destroyer still manages to create – the opening of the books as they are taken down from the city means more additions to the landscape and inhabitants of Polistarchia. Despite the name Destroyer, she is still unable to keep from creating,

even as she attempts to dismantle. The impulse to *make* thus works its way in despite the deconstructing, anti-imaginative agenda of the Pretenderette.

Philip's task in Somnolentia hearkens back to the early conversations he had with Mr. Noah about machinery and workers, as well as to Nesbit's Fabian outlook. The Great Sloth has captivated the town, turning its inhabitants into useless, somnambulant creatures entirely at the mercy of the Sloth. Lucy realizes, while talking to the women of the town, that they are all Halma men, and says so; the women hush her, saying that Halma "was the great captain of our race" and that the Great Sloth believes if they hear the name, it will rouse the Somnolentians to break their bondage and become free (180).

Lucy takes charge of the task of freeing the Somnolentians. She tells Philip to go around saying the name of Halma and telling the townspeople he is the Deliverer, while she goes to sing to the Great Sloth (at his command). But she sings upbeat songs, and refuses to leave when he tells her to; this disobedience startles the Sloth. Lucy manages to convince the Sloth to wish for machinery to draw water from the wells, so the Halma people would have more time to sing for him: "'You just say 'I wish I had a proper machine to draw up water for eight hours a day.' That's the proper length for a working day. Father said so'" (183). The Great Sloth makes his wish, and immediately his room fills with machinery, to which he is soon attached. Resisting and saying he won't work, the Sloth is corrected by the machine itself: "'you wished for me, and now you have to work me eight hours a day. It is the law'" (184).

This law about machinery is the one Mr. Noah explained to Philip earlier – that if one wishes for a machine, one must go on using it. Lucy cleverly turns this to her own advantage as a way of occupying the Great Sloth, both while she and Philip free the Somnolentians by crying "Halma," and after, to keep the Sloth from dominating the townspeople again. A nasty side effect

of the machinery law gets revealed when Lucy tells the Halma men she will go back to the Sloth and ““explain to it that if it does not behave nicely you will all wish for machine guns, and it knows now that if people wish for machinery they have to use it”” (186). Early 20<sup>th</sup> century anxieties about mechanization take an extreme, literal form in Polistarchia: machines relentlessly work the humans who wish for them, including machine guns, which, if introduced *must* be used.<sup>88</sup> Nesbit’s socialism is expressed here through Lucy (echoing her father) when she instructs the Great Sloth to limit its work on the machine to eight hours a day, the “proper” length of a work day.<sup>89</sup> Even this deed has making at its core – the creation of the machine, which the Great Sloth must then use, is the key to completing the rest of the task.

The denouement and the final deed occur where the children began, in Polistopolis itself. Lucy suggests that they return to the city ““ and find out who’s been opening the books. If they go on they may let simply anything out”” (188). Appreciative, Philip tells her that she is ““clever, really clever. No, I’m not kidding. I mean it. And I’m sorry I ever said you were only a girl”” (188). This is the last of the moments of reconciliation between Philip and Lucy, and this one comes with an apology from Philip for saying she is “only a girl.” Unlike Nesbit’s earlier children’s fiction, where admirable girls are told they are “like a man” or hardly like a girl at all,<sup>90</sup> here Philip recants his earlier statements about the limitations of girls. Lucy’s cleverness, bravery, and good companionship doesn’t get rewritten as boyish or masculine; Philip (and the text itself) see her as clever, brave, and good company *as* a girl, not in spite of being a girl.

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<sup>88</sup> The inevitability of machine gunnery in some ways anticipates the first World War; with each invention of new forms of mechanized weaponry, so armies on both sides rushed to deploy them in an escalating, machine-driven conflict.

<sup>89</sup> In 1890, Sidney Webb, like Nesbit one of the early founders of the Fabian movement, wrote a pamphlet advocating the introduction of a bill limiting the work day to eight hours. The eight-hour work day had not yet been universally adopted by the 1910 publication of *The Magic City*.

<sup>90</sup> Alice in the books about the Bastables, Anthea in the Psammead books

Lucy and Philip's rapprochement also involves Philip revising his views of girls. This is an interesting move, given Nesbit's usual ambivalence toward girls. Like the more positive view of creative play (as less threatening), this shift in perception of girls and boys suggests, perhaps, progress on Nesbit's part. As the construction of the magic city aids Philip in grappling with his issues about Helen's marriage and the changes it has brought for him, so the writing of *The Magic City* seems to have served as a means of working through, or working out, some of Nesbit's attitudes about play and gender. Until this moment wherein the two children reach concord, Philip continually rejects and resents Lucy's girlhood. He understands her through a stereotypically limited vision of what it means to be a girl, and even as Lucy demonstrates repeatedly that she does not meet this vision, Philip holds to it doggedly. It is only over the course of the entire book that Philip is able to leave off his persistence in marking Lucy as "girl" first and actor, friend, agent second.

Despite the fact that the cities are all of Philip's construction, they do not operate entirely under his rules or his vision of the world. In fact, it is Lucy who first realizes where the children are; she withholds the information from Philip until he agrees to a real Pax in which he will try to like and be nice to her. His response reveals his relative lack of power or control over the city: "“But I didn't build insides to my buildings ... And all the other people. I didn't put *them* in.”" (34-35). Lucy's knowledge placed alongside Philip's failure to recognize his own creation and his acknowledgement that there are things in the city that he didn't put there, gives her a kind of authority or dominance within the text.

The factories are one such place where the cities deviate from Philip's understanding of the world; gender relations are another. Prior to sending Philip and Lucy to the Dwellers by the Sea, Mr. Noah explains that Philip must conquer the Dwellers' great fear. When Lucy asks if this



fear is something they will fear as well, Philip seizes the opportunity to display more misogyny: ““Girls weren’t expected to be brave”” (102). Mr. Noah’s response to this tells us much about the gender politics of Polistopolis: ““They *are*, here ... the girls are expected to be brave and the boys kind”” (102). Philip, unable to offer anything more than a doubtful “Oh” in reply, finds himself shut down *and* rebuked (boys are expected to be kind).

The narrators of Nesbit’s novels share an ambivalence toward girls and women, not surprisingly, in light of Nesbit’s own contradictory stances on feminism and women’s rights. In Nesbit’s textual world, the exhortation “be a man” is used on boys and girls alike. Girl characters in particular take pride in their ungirlishness, and revel in the occasions when brothers tell them that they have been a man. But in *The Magic City*, this pattern is broken: here, Philip’s anti-girl sentiments are seen clearly as wrong. Early on, when Philip returns to the city to search for Lucy, he tells himself, ““Girls always keep to paths. They never explore.’ Which just shows how little he knew about girls” (63). This aside is brief, but meaningful. It comes at the end of a passage in which Philip must urge himself along his mission to find Lucy. Frightened, tired, and confused in the dark halls of his own construction, he argues with himself to keep going. The narrator’s remark, suggesting an adventurous character to girls, stands in contrast with Philip’s reluctance and timidity in the preceding passage.

Lucy’s courage and cleverness goes a long way towards altering Philip’s low opinion of her, but she does lapse into “girlish” behaviors, and Philip responds as a “typical” Nesbit boy. Before the yacht goes over the falls, Lucy asks Philip to kiss her. He uncomfortably resists, until Lucy invokes Helen: ““And you don’t mind kissing Helen. She *said* you were going to adopt me for your sister”” (166). Philip’s reaction matches the behaviors of other Nesbit male heroes: He “put his arm around her and kissed her. She felt so little and helpless and bony in his arm that he

suddenly felt sorry for her, kissed her again more kindly, and then, withdrawing his arm, thumped her hearteningly on the back. ‘Be a man,’ he said in tones of comradeship and encouragement” (166). Lucy figures here as small and helpless, frail and fragile, and in need of male protection: a very stereotypical version of feminine delicacy. But Philip’s character here has changed. He first gives in to Lucy’s entreaty for the kiss, and then recognizes that she needs some *kindness*, a quality demanded of boys in Polistarchia. Even the thump on the back and exhortation to “be a man” are, for Philip, acts of kindness and encouragement. And in the world of Nesbit’s novels, this is a moment of real equality for the two children.

After Lucy plans their route of Polistarchia, Philip announces his change of heart once and for all: “‘ Lu...you’re clever, really clever. No, I’m not kidding. I mean it. And I’m sorry I ever said you were only a girl’” (188). For a boy who despises “gas,” this emotional statement marks a substantial moment in his understanding of Lucy and gender roles. It is both his acknowledgement that he has wronged Lucy in thinking she is worthless because she is a girl, and it is a demonstration of Philip’s more “feminine” behavior of kindness and emotional expression.

When they return to Polistopolis, Philip and Lucy find it in turmoil. The captain of the guard who meets them in the streets of the city explains that the Pretenderette has taken over, claiming to be the Deliverer, to have completed the seven deeds, and to be queen. She has set guards around the city and locked up the Hippogriff to prevent messages from getting out, and aid from getting in. Her guards are “‘strange soldiers she got out of a book ... The Sequani and the Aedui, they call themselves’” (193). The Pretenderette has tricked the city dwellers into pulling down one of the books that form the Hall of Justice, and it is from this book that her guards have come.

Lucy tells Philip she thinks the book was Caesar, and recalls telling the Pretenderette about the barbarian forces after learning about them from her father. Lucy adds, ““She’s very clever at thinking of horrid things to do, isn’t she?”” (194). This combination of cleverness and horridness are part of what make the nurse/Pretenderette such a difficult enemy, but they are also traits Nesbit rarely, if ever, attributes to her characters of the serving classes. Cleverness, in particular, is notably absent from characters like the maids in the *Psammead* and *Bastable* books; those women are often described, by the narrator and by the children when talking amongst themselves, as stupid. The nurse is not stupid, but “horrid,” and one of the forms her horridness takes is a kind of twisted creativity.

Philip conquers the Pretenderette’s barbarian guards by finding the book from which they came (*De Bello Gallico*) and calling for Caesar himself to assist them. Caesar agrees, and gathers his troops. When Philip tells him that the opposing leader is a woman, Caesar instructs his men to take her prisoner and bring her to him: ““Caesar does not war with women”” (196). When the Pretenderette is brought before him, with Philip and Lucy at his side, Caesar hails her courage: “Yes, the Pretenderette had courage: they had not thought of that before. All the attempts she had made against them – she alone in a strange land – yes, these needed courage” (201). Once again, Nesbit shows a lower-class servant in a very positive light – both clever and courageous. The recognition that the Pretenderette was in a strange land – though Philip recognizes his own constructions, they are entirely foreign to her – *and* alone places the children’s accomplishments in a different light. They weren’t alone – they had each other, as well as assistance from the parrot and the dogs, Mr. Noah, and the citizens of Polistopolis.

The Pretenderette speaks at length at this point, to explain herself: ““my game’s up now, and I’ll speak my mind if I die for it”” (201). As noted earlier, she has gotten into the city by

chance; attempting to take down Philip's construction, she knocks down a few bricks then unthinkingly builds them up again. Once in the city, she follows Philip and overhears the prophecies: "'And I thought I could be as good a Deliverer as anybody else'" (201). What she says, and Caesar's response to it – including her punishment – are unexpectedly serious and, for Nesbit, out of character in her children's books, where politics and socialistic ideals are ventriloquized by child characters. Here, we get an adult woman of a lower class, suddenly placed in a more sympathetic light by virtue of being hailed for her courage, speaking about class and merit:

"You don't understand. You've never been a servant, to see other people get all the fat and you all the bones. What you think it's like to know if you'd just been born in a gentleman's mansion instead of in a model workman's dwelling you'd have been brought up as a young lady and had the openwork silk stockings and the lace on your under-petticoats" (202).

In typical contradictory fashion, this short speech is followed by Caesar making a joke about the Pretenderette's under-garments: "'You go too deep for me ... I now pronounce your sentence. But life has pronounced on you a sentence worse than any I can give you. Nobody loves you'" (202). Joke aside, Caesar's observation brings a moment of deep seriousness and, perhaps, sadness in considering the unloved state of the Pretenderette. If, as Julia Briggs suggests, "*The Magic City's* central lesson is the need to love and share love, " the Pretenderette's state of being both unloved and unable to love is indeed a harsh, possibly *the* harshest, sentence (335). Equally harsh is her own knowledge of this: "'don't you see that's just why everything's happened?'" (202).

Caesar sets a sentence for her that will rehabilitate and restore her:

“You are condemned to make yourself beloved ... you will teach the Great Sloth to like his work ... you must try to get fond of someone ... And when the Great Sloth loves his work and the Halma people are so fond of you that they feel they cannot bear to lose you, your penance will be over and you can go where you will” (202).

The Pretenderette’s reply, though spoken angrily, demonstrates that this sentence is no punishment at all: ““You know well enough ... that if that ever happened I shouldn’t want to go anywhere else.”” (202).

Though she offers no apologies, and is angry and tearful to the last moment, the Pretenderette’s final scene in the text does not provide any substantial punishment or even comeuppance, the traditional resolution for the “villain” of a story. Instead of seeing “evil” punished, we are instead shown a pathetic, sympathetic character whose unpleasantness is rooted in her sad state of unlovedness. Thus the villain of the story loses her villainousness, and becomes an object of pity instead of a defeated enemy.

Mr. Noah arrives in the city a few days later, to congratulate Philip on completing the last of the deeds, and to hold the coronation for Philip, who has now attained the rank of King (he became Prince of Pineapples after the sixth deed with the Giant Sloth). Both children receive crowns, there are fireworks and gun salutes, and the cheers and shouts of the Polistarchians. But abruptly, Mr. Noah tells the children that they must part: ““Polistarchia is a Republic, and of course in a republic kings and queens are not permitted to exist. Partings are painful things. And you had better go at once”” (203). The erasure of Philip from the city by virtue of his rank serves, of course, as the prompt or portal to return to the “real” world, but it also gives one last example of the kind of making that unmakes: by making Philip a prince, then king, Mr. Noah

establishes the conditions that will require Philip's departure from Polistopolis – and not just his departure, but his non-existence. Kings cannot exist in a Republic. Philip is a King; therefore, Philip cannot exist in Polistarchia.

Exiting Polistarchia requires one final act of creation from Philip: he built a house and got into the city, now he must build a house to get *out* of the city. Mr. Noah provides Lucy and Philip with a model of The Grange, from the store of models of all the houses Philip was ever in. The children build The Grange, and then stand looking at the model for a moment. Lucy says, “‘I wish we could be two people each ... and one of each of us could go home and one of each of us stay here’” (205). This is a considerable change from Rosamund and Fabian's desire to get out of the towns they have built at all costs. Lucy's wish for the children to have doubles gestures at the kind of recursion that is so frightening in “The Town in the Library.” Creative, constructive play has become a much more positive activity for Nesbit, and the idea of multiplicity much more inviting. But Lucy's wish is not grants; the children feel slightly giddy; the next instant, they are standing outside The Grange, the real one, and Helen and Lucy's father are there to greet them.

Nesbit winds up her story very quickly, indeed. The children return, Lucy never mentions where she was when she was “lost,” and Philip tells Helen the whole story and she says “how clever of him to make all that up ... ‘I *did* dream about the island – quite a long dream ...’” (206). But the Pretenderette gets the last lines: “I suppose she is still living with the Halma folk, teaching the Great Sloth to like his work and learning to be fond of people – which is the only way to be happy. At any rate no one that I know of has ever seen her again anywhere else” (206).

As with all home-away-home narratives, Philip and Lucy *must* return from Polistarchia, to a restored home, and so they do. Having to leave brings about mixed feelings, expressed in Lucy's wish that they were doubles, so they could be in both places at once. The inevitable loss

of the magic world in the home-away-home narrative is mitigated slightly by the translation, from Polistarchia to The Grange, of Max and Brenda, the dogs who accompanied the children on their adventures. Curiously, though, the villain of the story, the Pretenderette, gets to remain in the magic world, her only task learning to love and be loved by a friendly and willing people. Because nobody loves her in the “real” world, there is no loss for the Pretenderette in being relocated to the magic city. In fact, there is considerable gain: she no longer has to work as a servant, she lives among the gentle and kind Halma people, even the Great Sloth is much nicer now that it doesn’t sleep all the time – and, of course, she is living in a magical place. This fate suggests that the restoration/rehabilitation that concludes with the final return home in the standard home-away-home narrative may not be the only possible outcome. The Pretenderette’s rehabilitation occurs in the “away,” the place of possibility, creativity, and imagination.

Because fantasy fiction often dwells so lovingly and so deeply on the minutiae of the other or secondary world that is constructed, for readers it often has much greater appeal than the restored home in the “real” world. Even for characters within the text, the other world has a very strong appeal, as Lucy’s wish to be in both places demonstrates. The Pretenderette’s case gives a tiny glimpse of the possibility that resolution and rehabilitation can happen entirely within the play world, and that restoration – which is also often attenuated by children’s loss of power – may not be required for a successful conclusion. In other words, it may be possible to happily remain in the other world, with the initial conflict or problem solved, and without excluding any of the necessities of life in the “home.” This flicker of possibility – that the play world may be just as good as, and probably better than, the home world – offers perhaps the most extreme vision of the play place by hinting that it can become a permanent place. It also suggests that

through play, one can reach a better world: not a utopia, necessarily, but that play can be the way to achieve one's dreams or goals.

The second half of *Wings and the Child* is much more pragmatic and descriptive. It is, in essence, Nesbit's account of constructing a model Magic City at the 1912 Children's Welfare Exhibition in Olympia, provided as a kind of how-to for aspiring city builders. In this section, Nesbit offers practical suggestions for drawing adults into play, specifically into the constructive play of building magic cities.

Nesbit writes:

This book, *The Magic City*, produced a curious effect. ... But the letters about the Magic City ... held something else—a demand, severe and almost unanimous, to know how magic cities were built, and whether "children like us" could build one, and, if so, how? I got so many of these letters that I decided to build a magic city where any child, in London at any rate, could come and see it. And I built it at the Children's Welfare Exhibition which the *Daily News* arranged last year at Olympia. (126)

This account of inspiration behind building the exhibit Magic City is at least partly disingenuous, since her city was created as a means of advertising the book itself.<sup>91</sup> In Nesbit's telling, the exhibit then gave rise to requests for her to write an account of how to build magic cities—*Wings and the Child* is that book. There is an odd kind of circularity, in that Nesbit built magic cities with her children, which led to her writing "The Town in the Library," which led to her writing *The Magic City*, which led to building the Welfare Exhibition city, which led to writing *Wings*.

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<sup>91</sup> Jenny Bavage's essay "Exhibiting Childhood" makes clear that the Children's Welfare Exhibition included as much commercialism as it did social concern. Products of all kinds were advertised and sold in stalls and booths in the exhibit building.



Each act of creation prompts further creation, creating a recursive effect not unlike that which Rosamund and Fabian encounter.

The magic cities are positioned as a form of creative play that meets the needs of both children and adults: “Grown-ups suffer a great deal in playing with children: it is not the least charm of a magic city that a grown-up can play it and suffer nothing worse than the fatigue incidental to the bricklayer’s calling” (119). Nesbit encourages her reader to “try the experiment the next time you are spending a wet week-end in a country house where there are children” (120). She suggests gathering the children, getting permission from the host to borrow items as needed, and setting up in a room (the library is best) with sturdy tables and plenty of space. “You invite the children to help you build, and to build themselves” (120-121). Nesbit describes the initial activity of building, as tentative children become absorbed and confident builders:

Then, after a little while, a grown-up, bored and out of employment, will stray into the library with ‘Hullo! What are you kids up to with all this rubbish?’ and stand with his hands in his pockets contemplating the building industry.<sup>92</sup> If you answer him simply and kindly...it is almost certain he will quite soon...reach out to touch your magic walls...in hardly any time at all you have him building on his own account. (121-122)

After this first interested grown-up, more and more adults will find their way to the library, and embark on building as well. Nesbit turns the initial condescension of the adult to the children back onto the adult with the suggestion to “answer him simply and kindly.” Luring adults into play in this fashion looks like a role-reversal of adults attempting to deceive children into doing productive work or other unwanted chores, but in fact, it seems, Nesbit is offering a way for

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<sup>92</sup> Nesbit’s choice of the word “rubbish” raises the possibility of further connections with queerness and junk, of the kind explored by Andracki’s paper (cf note 11).

children and adults to meet on the same ground. She provides an excuse, a way in to participating in the play, that taps into the adult's already-extant play desires. As Nesbit tells us "I have never met a child who did not like building magic cities, and not many grown-ups" (124).

In all of Nesbit's books, adults often present an oppositional force to theatrical play, yet there are a few "good" grownups who engage in play with the children without condescension or nostalgia. These adult characters play earnestly and with a genuine spirit of theatricality that permits the possibility of a play-space that is both positive and productive. Marah Gubar argues that the bricolage and revision of texts performed by children as well as adults in Nesbit's fiction "break[s] down the divide between adult writer and child reader by suggesting that both parties can improvise on other people's stories to produce their own narratives" (*Artful Dodgers* 132). As part of her larger argument on behalf of children's agency, Gubar positions this breaking-down as one which allows children to "usurp the role of author for themselves" (134). Beyond noting the reciprocal nature of these textual exchanges, in which children get to usurp adult authors, and adult authors glean material for their own work, however, there is very little discussion of what these exchanges might mean for adults, or our understanding of adulthood.

The intertextual play Gubar discusses provides one example of the play engaged in by adults and children, but instances of adults participating in theatrical and other kinds of imaginative play occur across Nesbit's writing for children. In these adults, we can see the instinct to play functioning; we can see how adult-child relations are altered when conducted through and around play, and we can see fictional instantiations of the "children, disguised by grown up bodies" which Nesbit discusses at some length in *Wings and the Child*.

*Wings and the Child* begins with Nesbit's advice on how to think about, understand, and relate to children: from memory. There is a note of sentimentalism and idealization of the child here that feels incongruous with the representations of children in Nesbit's books, but which Nesbit also turns to the advantage of the child-like adult. She disavows any special knowledge about children, explaining that any knowledge she does possess comes from experience:

"I mean personal experience, that is to say, memory. ...observation is no key to the inner mysteries of a child's soul. The only key to those mysteries is in knowledge, the knowledge of what you yourself felt when you were good and little and a child. You can remember how things looked to you, and how things looked to other children who were your intimates" (3-4). While Nesbit starts off by discussing how one might understand children, she soon shifts her focus to discussing a group of people who are neither truly children nor truly adult:

The grown-ups are the people who once were children and who have forgotten what it felt like to be a child. And Time marks with the same outward brand those who have forgotten and those who do not forget. So that even the few who have managed to slip past the Customs-house with their bundle of memories intact can never fully display them. These are a sort of contraband, and neither the children nor the grown-ups will ever believe that that which we have brought with us from the land of childhood is genuine. The grown-ups accuse us of invention, sometimes praise us for it, when all we have is memory; and the children imagine that we must have been watching them, and thus surprised a few of their secrets, when all that we have is the secrets which were our own when we were children—secrets which were so bound up with the fibre of our nature that we

could never lose them, and so go through life with them, our dearest treasures.

Such people feel to the end that they are children in a grown-up world. (5)

There is a puzzling contradiction in Nesbit's descriptions here – she writes about retaining childhood memories, intact, into adulthood, but she also describes these people as “pretending to be grown-up; it is like acting a charade” (6). Here it is *not* recollection; it is actually feeling not just like a child, but that they actually *are* still their child-selves, in grown-up drag. This is not an infantilizing move, though Nesbit describes such “pretenders” as overly trusting, expecting of love and sad when they don't get it, easily pleased and easily hurt, she also writes that “to them the world will be, from first to last, a beautiful place,” and that they will expect “beautiful quixotic impulsive generousities and splendours from a grown-up world which has forgotten what impulse was” (7). These pretend grown-ups are not represented as being wrong, or faulted for their beliefs and expectations; rather, the grown-up world is understood to be lacking, to have forgotten the child's way of being.

Nesbit's faith in the persistence and integrity of memory is apparently total; nowhere does she suggest that memories may be false, distorted, shaped and reshaped, over the years until the recollection and the event itself look markedly different. The memories of adults – like herself, though she never says so in the first person, instead referring to these “pretend” grownups being recognized for what they are “when they write for and about children” – seem to be carried whole from childhood to adulthood without ever undergoing any kind of change. There is no reflection on the function - or even *existence* – of nostalgia in connection with what and how one remembers.

It is possible Nesbit genuinely believes that nostalgia doesn't influence her memories, or anyone else's. Likewise, it is also possible she is in denial about the ubiquity of nostalgia and its

effects. But there is also the possibility that memory, or at least nostalgia, operates differently for these “children in a grown-up world.” Returning to Svetlana Boym’s classification of two types of nostalgia as restorative or reflective may be of some use here. Restorative nostalgia “attempts a transhistorical reconstruction of the lost home. ... does not think of itself as nostalgia, but rather as truth and tradition...[it] protects the absolute truth” (xviii). By contrast, reflective nostalgia “dwells on the ambivalences of human longing and belonging and does not shy away from the contradictions of modernity” (xviii).

On the face of it, Nesbit may be working in a restorative nostalgic mode. She never questions the truth of her recollections, and represents the expressions of her truth (ie, her books about and for children) as utterly successful (the reference she makes to a child’s letter asking “how did you know?”) The language Nesbit uses to describe the negative effects of traditional education and social custom have on children, or childhood, strongly recalls Wordsworth’s “Intimations of Immortality,” and seems to have a strong stake in the Romantic vision of children and childhood, a mode of thinking which is often strongly conservative or even reactionary.

The practices of restorative nostalgia are often associated with conservatism, not just of the political stripe, but of all kinds. Yet Nesbit, despite her own ambivalence on certain topics (women’s suffrage, for instance), does not read as conservative in any sense. Her books don’t reflect a sentimentalized vision of childhood, either – there are bratty children, frustrated and bored children, punished (fairly and otherwise) children, and careless children by the score in her books. Even when fantastical, as in *The Enchanted Castle* and the Psammead books, the adventures of childhood are not clouded in a haze of nostalgia, but in a kind of matter-of-fact acceptance and interest.

If, as Nesbit suggests, she is one of the children pretending to be grown-up, then perhaps it is possible to understand her recollections of childhood as non-nostalgic, because the era that she is reflecting upon is not, in fact, in the past. One of the key aspects of nostalgia is that it provokes a longing which can never be satisfied, not least because the time or place for which one is longing never really existed in the first place, at least not the way it does in the nostalgic memory. If the time and place in question here is childhood, essentially the state of being a child, then Nesbit has no need for nostalgia; she is one of the “children disguised by grown-up bodies” (7).

Childhood is the time and place in which we locate whatever it is we mean by “child.” Employing the metaphor of the Customs-house marks childhood and adulthood as two separate places, with separate identities. Nesbit primarily describes the qualities of the child, and then sets grown-ups in the position of having “forgotten” those qualities, rather than as possessing a different set of qualities. But a Customs-house also suggests the transport of goods from one location to another; there is continuity between childhood and adulthood, we bring into adulthood the things of childhood. Or rather, Nesbit seems to say, it is *possible* to carry those things forward into adulthood, and when this occurs, the distinction between child and grown-up collapses. The difference for those who make it through customs with all goods intact is that they *look* different – they inhabit grown-up bodies, but are at heart, and essentially, still children. I think this functions as a critique of the childhood/adulthood binary. The child, a human, an individual person, grows and develops but never loses the person she began as. There is no “inner child” – the child is the person, the person is *you*. These are not distinct, opposing categories, and there is no boundary over which a child steps and becomes an adult. We have constructed a number of “rites of passage” that allegedly mark the moment of adulthood, but

they are all flimsy and obvious constructs, and vary enormously from person to person. The role of an individual in society may change over time, but the *person* is still herself.

Boym notes that reflective nostalgia "does not follow a single plot but explores ways of inhabiting many places at once and imagining different time zones; it loves details, not symbols" (xviii). This understanding of reflective nostalgia offers another way of thinking about *The Magic City*, which is most certainly interested in details, and which does explore the possibilities of other places and times. Though passages from *Wings and the Child*, *The Magic City*, and other texts reveal the kind of restorative nostalgia that is most reductive and oppressive to children and childhood, taken as a whole, we can think of Nesbit's entire catalog of writing for children as an extended exercise in reflective nostalgia.

Along with creative, literally constructive play such as occurs in *The Magic City*, Nesbit's child characters frequently engage in – and understand the world via – a kind of theatrical play that revolves around stories and story-telling. Literature, theatre, performance and play form a central part of their lives. They are spectators, attending Pantomimes, plays, circuses and Maskelyne & Cook's illusion shows, but more importantly, they make theatre a part of their daily lives. Theatrical play occurs frequently; the children enact stories from books, put on plays and circuses and enter into elaborate schemes of disguise and deception. Julia Briggs emphasizes the significance of books – of pre-existing story – in Nesbit's narratives: "Books themselves represent an important form of play. All her books bring about the confrontation between play and experience, though they often increase the power of the imagination within play by the use of magic. But much of the play itself derives from a range of other books" (401-402). The children are adept at repurposing existing narratives for their own play, moving between book world and play world almost seamlessly. A number of the most positive adult figures in Nesbit's

texts are authors, including Albert's uncle, who writes and who can *also* play. The connection between books and play is a very tight one, and enables the characters to make play and story out of virtually every situation.

Nesbit's books reveal a tension about certain kinds of play – in many ways, theatre and performative play are valorized and enjoyed as the best kind of play there is. At the same time, this kind of play continually runs against the limits of the serious, adult world, which usually figures as an anti-theatrical force. Yet Nesbit also includes instances of the kind of “children disguised as grownups” she discusses in *Wings* in the form of adults who understand and participate in theatrical or narrative-based play along with the children.

Three adults who seem to have achieved the right balance of recollection and continued-childness, and who engage enthusiastically in play, appear in *The Story of the Treasure-Seekers*, Nesbit's first novel for children: Albert-next-door's uncle, the Robber, and the Indian Uncle. These three men are figured clearly as adults, but in character and action they are much closer to the children. They may not be identical to the children disguised as grownups of *Wings*, but they are significantly similar in function. Taking a closer look at how these adults play, and what their function is within the story, offers a glimpse of how adult play and child play can be allied. Moreover, it suggests that adult play can be as legitimate and essential as child play.

Albert, the boy who lives next door to the Bastables, is scorned by them as a kind of Little Lord Fauntleroy in frilly collars and knickerbockers. More importantly, Albert “cannot play properly at all ... Albert-next-door doesn't care for reading, and has had not read nearly so many books as we have, so he is very foolish and ignorant” (*Treasure-seekers*, 23).<sup>93</sup> Albert's uncle, on the other hand, writes books for a living, and so knows the stories the children want to

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<sup>93</sup> This curious character of the child who cannot play – and in the Bastable books, never does learn to – deserves greater attention than I can give him here. The unplayful child is almost always figured as unnatural, artificial, or tragically old and careworn before her time – essentially, as an adult at its worst.



play. He is also imaginative, creative, and able to participate in the kinds of play the Bastables enjoy. Oswald as narrator says “I think he is more like us, inside of his mind, than most grown-up people are. He can pretend beautifully. I never met any one else so good at it, except our robber, and we began it, with him” (209).

Though Albert’s uncle appears as a kind of friendly advisor who helps the children out of scrapes and occasionally disciplines them, he is careful not to disrupt the playworlds they invent for themselves, unless they are doing real harm to themselves or (more likely) to others. In fact, as Oswald explains, Albert’s uncle was the one who taught the children to tell a story properly from start to finish, and to “make people talk like books when you’re playing things” (210). Not just a tolerant adult who can be cajoled into playing, Albert’s uncle actively assists the children, instructing them in ways that make their play richer and more complex.

Chapter Thirteen, “The Robber and the Burglar,” offers an opportunity to see a grownup actor, as well as consider the ways in which performative play and real life are often blurred and confused for the Bastables. Pretending forms a central part of life for the Bastables; everything they do is converted into some sort of play. Even simply gathering in a bedroom to talk is done as a performance. Left alone one night in the house, the children are able to “go in and be Red Indians in blankets most comfortably” (180).

While being Red Indians, the children discuss robbers, and what they would do if one was in their house, that very minute, when they hear a noise from downstairs. Since they are alone in the house – all the adults are out on errands – they are frightened and suspect robbers. Oswald narrates their fear quite interestingly, addressing the reader and then explaining that “It was not like in books; our hair did not stand on end at all, and we never said ‘Hist!’ once” (182). At the moment when reality – the sounds of an intruder – breaks into the children’s play, they

experience very real emotions in response. The physical reactions they feel as a manifestation of their fear is not like what they expected from the books they've read. This is a rare instance of "reality" overtaking all play and performance, but this reality, of course, is a terrifying and potentially dangerous one.

But the children's response, spearheaded by the intrepid Oswald, converts the situation rapidly into play. Oswald suggests that the noise was only a cat, and that they go investigate, an idea his braver siblings, Alice and Dicky, accept. But Oswald reveals to the reader that he is not at all sure that the sound was a cat, and that it may actually be robbers. He imagines waiting for the imagined intruder to creep upstairs, and decides investigating the source of the noise will be less frightening than waiting. Oswald also adds that "you would have known you were a coward besides" (183). All the children, but especially Oswald, have very specific ideas about how to behave properly, as brave, upright, honest people. Because of this, he is able to fall back on these ideas and perform the part of the brave young hero, despite his fear. This performance of heroism enables Oswald to do any number of uncomfortable or frightening things – from investigating the intruder to confessing to any misbehavior he's done. He cannot be the ideal child, but he can play the part when circumstances demand it, a theme that develops further in *The Wouldbegoods*.

Before advancing downstairs to discover the source of the sound, Oswald says "Let's play at burglars; Dicky and I are armed to the teeth [with a toy pistol and a fireplace poker], we will go first. You keep a flight behind us, and be a reinforcement if we are attacked" (184). By transforming the situation into a game of pretend, the four children are able to confront the source of the noise. The toy pistol and poker become real weapons; Alice and H.O., both a little

afraid, are allotted the part of reinforcements, which casts them in a definite play-role, and also gives their fear-induced reluctance a cover story.

Imaginative play enables them to act, and they do, creeping downstairs. When Oswald sees light coming from under the door, he becomes convinced it truly is a cat, and this belief encourages him to act as if there really was a robbers, to fool the others upstairs. He burst into the room, yelling “Surrender! you are discovered! Surrender, or I fire! Throw up your hands!” (185). To Oswald’s dismay, a “Real Robber” is standing in the room, “heavily armed with the screwdriver” near a cupboard that H.O. had broken. But the robber responds by surrendering and dropping the screwdriver. The other children discover the robber has been captured, and they all – robber included – sit down around the fire “and it was jolly. The robber was very friendly, and talked to us a great deal” (187).

The Robber tells them about his career as a robber: how he’s fallen on hard times of late, and the things he’d done before becoming a housebreaker: he was a highwayman, a pirate captain, a bandit, a war-correspondent and editor, a horse-stealer and a colonel of dragoons, but was brought up to the law. As he talks about these various adventures to his entirely credulous audience, “he talked of highwaymen as if he knew just how we liked hearing it” (188). He discusses Nelson and the “Kiss me, Hardy” episode with the children, who know the story, and wins the children over by being clever and interesting and, most importantly, a good storyteller.

The interlude with the Robber is disrupted by the breaking-in of an actual burglar, who escapes. The children’s father comes back shortly thereafter, and the Bastables all try to hurry their Robber out the back door, so he won’t be caught by the police. But Father’s entry ends that plan, when he says “in the voice we all hate, ‘Children, what is the meaning of this?’” before apologizing to the man, calling him Foulkes. (197). The Robber laughs and says “I’m not

Foulkes! I'm a robber, captured by these young people in the most gallant manner" (198). At this moment, the children begin to understand that their Robber was no robber at all; he was an old friend of their father's. "We were dumb with amazement" (198). So caught up in their own play and adventure of catching a robber, the children never realize that the "robber" is playing a game of his own. The Bastables are curiously immune to recognizing theatricality or performance in *others*; they accept readily that the Robber could very well have been and done all that he claims.

Though it would be fairly easy to read this belief in the realness of others' play as simple gullibility, I think something else is at work. Because of the enormous amount of theatrical play the Bastables engage in, they don't see clear distinctions between play and seriousness, theatricality and untheatricality. This isn't an inability to distinguish fact from fiction, but more a refusal to operate within those two terms. For the Bastables, fact and fiction are not categories that obtain to the world as they see and experience it. They think and feel in some sort of other, theatrical, space that permits of all kinds of possibilities.

*Treasure-Seekers* concludes with the introduction of the "Indian uncle," who the children have never met. It is clear to the reader, but not to the Bastable children, that this uncle may be the solution to the family's money problems. The episodes with the Indian uncle demonstrate very clearly one of the key features of adult/child play in Nesbit's work. When adults enter into the play, their attitudes toward the children (and, perhaps more importantly, the children's attitude toward them) changes drastically.

Their father wants to discuss finances with the uncle, and the situation is presented to the children as very grave and serious; they are to remain quietly upstairs while the uncle is in the house. Dinner, prepared by the hapless maid, is bad and burnt, and the Uncle and Father quarrel

about money. The children overhear the Uncle say something about “a poor, broken-down man like he was couldn’t be too careful” about what he drinks (216). From this, the children misunderstand their father’s intentions, thinking that “he is making a banquet for the Indian because he is a poor, broken-down man. We might have known that from ‘Lo, the poor Indian!’” (216).

Having mistaken the uncle for a different sort of Indian altogether, the children feel sorry for him, being a poor relation, and then having such a dreadful meal at their house. They had planned and purchased a feast for themselves with some money they found the day before, and decide to ask the Indian Uncle to come “have dinner with ... us children” (220). He accepts the invitation, and at first the children and the Uncle sit awkwardly at the table in the nursery, not speaking, until Alice says ““Would you like grown-up dinner, Uncle, or play-dinner?”” (222). The Uncle accepts play-dinner “by all means,” and the game begins. Here again the tension between the adult world and the play world is apparent; though some adults can (and do) play, grownups largely oppose play. But the Uncle, in his willingness to play, places himself on the same level with the children, and reveals himself to be a potential ally and compatriot. The Bastables are expert practitioners of play, but it is not necessarily only because they are children. Likewise, the play-dinner doesn’t function as a nostalgic way for the uncle to re-enact his own childhood. Instead, the children and their uncle enter a different arena – the arena of play, where all things are possible, and where transformation occurs.

The Uncle’s ready willingness and his *ability* to enter into play tells the Bastables that he is their kind of adult, one who can take seriously play and performance. Moreover, the play – hunting and gathering the food for the dinner – has something like a democratizing effect: the uncomfortable distance and power differential between the children, who are desperate to

impress the Uncle, and the Uncle himself, who at first seems not to know what to make of the children, is virtually erased as they transform themselves into hunters and players. “The uncle was very fierce indeed with the pudding [a wild boar at bay], and jumped and howled when he speared it” (*Treasure Seekers* 222). Even when they offer the Indian Uncle their last few pennies, he never breaks character as the poor uncle, but accepts a threepenny piece, and thanks them graciously: “Perhaps the poor Indian may be in a position to ask you all to dinner some day” (225).

The following day, a cab pulls up to their house and begins unloading an enormous amount of packages and parcels. The Indian Uncle accompanies the packages, and tells them that they are all gifts from a kind friend of his, for the children. To their father he says “I dined with you kids yesterday ... Jolliest little cubs I ever saw!” (230). He follows this up by telling Father that he can find a friend to invest in his business. The family are invited to dinner at the uncle’s house on the day after Christmas; in the interval, the uncle visits, and takes the children to the circus and the Crystal Palace, all paid for by the uncle’s kind friend.

At the Boxing-Day dinner, the children learn that the Indian Uncle and the kind friend are one and the same, and the uncle is in fact quite wealthy. The children and their father will live with him in his house. Oswald admits that “This ending is like what happens in Dickens’s books, but I think it was much jollier to happen like a book, and it shows what a nice man the Uncle is, the way he did it all ... Besides, I can’t help it if it is like Dickens, because it happens this way. Real life is often something like books” (238).

The Uncle manages this act of kindness in a theatrical way, keeping up his pretense of being the poor Indian, then revealing the truth and presenting it as a kind of gift to the children. This book-like ending to the treasure-seeking confirms the Bastables’ view that “real life is often

something like books” (238). The presence of so many theatrical or play-friendly adults – the Uncle, Albert’s uncle, the Robber – and the dramatic conclusion to *The Story of the Treasure-Seekers* ultimately gives the book a pro-theatrical tone. When adults and child play, especially when they play together, great things are possible.

The sequel to *Treasure-Seekers*, *The Wouldbegoods*, engages from start to finish with several kinds of theatrical play, with both adult and child players. *The Wouldbegoods* suggests that play and performance are both valuable and essential aspects of child life, though not all adults are able to perceive this value. The conflict that arises for the Bastables when their mode of play is viewed as being bad becomes a question that has great significance for children and adults both within and without the text: how does one live in a world where play is not permitted? For the Bastables, play is impossible to suppress: it seeps into every aspect of their lives. At the novel’s conclusion, the appeal and potency of the play-instinct wins out. Adults, too, are now playing openly and freely.

In the first chapter of the novel, “The Jungle,” the children reenact, complete with setting and props, a scene from *The Jungle Books*. The Bastables are joined in this book by Denny and Daisy, who have been sent to stay with them for the summer. Denny and Daisy are “white rabbits” who don’t know how to play properly; “The newcomers never would have done as knight-errants ... they would never have thought of anything to say to throw the enemy off the scent when they got into a tight place” (6). They are also *good* children with excellent manners who rarely, if ever, get into trouble. The contrast of the unimaginative, antitheatrical Denny and Daisy with the constantly-playing Bastables sets up a tension between the children, but it also reveals a certain set of sympathies. Though the theatricality of the Bastables nearly always ends in disaster (or at least being sent to bed as punishment), there is a way in which the books delight

in the theatrical play. Sets, costumes, plots and plans are described in detail; the theatre of the Bastables in fact forms the bulk of the narrative. The play's the thing in these books, *despite* the pressure from the grownup, anti-theatrical world. Even when considered as simply a lesson in moderation – there are, after all, grownups who can and do play, but know what the limits are – the unbounded imaginative performances of the children still holds more appeal than any more moderate kind of theatre.

The *Jungle Book* staging is one such example of unbounded theatre. For the Bastables, the demands of performance consumes all other practical considerations. After deciding to play *Jungle Book*, the Bastables begin designing their set. Oswald carefully organizes the time of performance for when all the servants and adults are away. Though theatre definitionally seems to require an audience, for Nesbit's child characters, unrestricted play and performance can only occur without the presence of adults (save for the rare exceptions noted above). The children perform for themselves, and their play-acting can also be read as a performance for the reader. Oswald as narrator is highly performative and conscious of his reading-audience; the detailed descriptions of the staging of the jungle serves as a kind of recreation of the original performance, acted out in text for the reader. This of course demands that the reader be imaginative as well. Though the descriptions are thorough, the reader necessarily fills in the visual gap with her own imagination. The enactment in the book of the jungle thus becomes a collaborative performance between reader and narrator/actor.

The children decide to make the jungle first “and dress up for our parts afterwards” (10). They choose the garden for their stage, and begin to decorate it with all sorts of things from the house of the Indian Uncle. Their *Jungle Book* jungle is thus outfitted with actual Indian objects, the spoils of empire and colonial enterprise. The skins of beasts, fur rugs and elephant tusks. The



boys coat themselves with Condyl's disinfectant fluid to make their arms and legs brown, to better play Mowgli. The attempt at playing "natives" is possible because of the colonial enterprise. British colonial existence in India gives rise to the Kipling stories and to the accessories used within them to stage the scene of the jungle. Moreover the jungle game not only stages India, it also parallels (in a vastly diminished scale) the process of colonization. The children appropriate (and damage) the resources of the "natives" (in the form of the uncle, the owner of the property) for their performance.

The children set up a hose, looping it into a tree so the water can create a waterfall; the rest of the hose stands in for Kaa the python. The uncle's collection of stuffed animals – foxes and duck-billed platypus and birds – also become part of the tableau. Oswald tells us it was jolly good fun to do ... I don't know that we ever had a better time while it lasted" (13). But the real world, in the form of adults, very quickly interrupts the theatrical moment, and the uncle comes back to his house with guests and discovers the jungle (comprised of his taxidermied creatures and animal skins) on his lawn. "The uncle had a Malacca cane in his hand, and we were but ill prepared to meet the sudden attack ... it was bread and water for us for the next three days, and our own rooms" (17). The end result of this bit of theatrical misbehavior is that the children are all sent to the country, to stay with Albert-next-door's uncle until they can be truly good.

Clearly, the appropriation (and soaking by the hose) of the uncle's possessions is a considerable part of the problem; Oswald admits that "he knows now that it is better not to take other people's foxes and things without asking, even if you live in the same house with them" (11). But the damaging of stuffed foxes seems disproportionate to the punishment – caning, three days on bread and water, *and* being sent to the country.

Understanding the jungle enactment as “being bad” establishes the children’s theatrical play as a negative act. Because the Bastables understand their own world as contiguous to the storyworld, appropriating everyday items from their own house for stage props seems a natural and reasonable thing to do. Despite his success in playing in *Treasure-Seekers*, in this initial story of *The Wouldbegoods*, the limited and limiting vision of the Indian uncle fails to recognize this, and because of their theatrical “badness” the Bastables and Denny and Daisy are sent to the country to learn to be good. Once in the country, the children decide to set up a “new society for being good in” (24). Even here they are mimicking adult organizations – the vast abundance of charitable and social organizations in Victorian England. Alice, Dora and Daisy have written a mission statement for this new society:

The aim of the society is nobleness and goodness, and great and unselfish deeds. We wish not to be such a nuisance to grown-up people and to perform prodigies of real goodness. We wish to spread our wings...and rise about the kind of interesting things that you ought not to do but to do kindnesses to all, however low and mean. (25)

After the girls propose the being-good society, Noel says “I think it would be nice...if we made it a sort of play. Let’s do the *Pilgrim’s Progress*” (26). Dicky acknowledges the play aspect of it by saying “he did not wish to play if it mean reading books about children who die” (26). For Noel, and the other children, being good – reforming their bad behavior, which consisted of excessive theatricality – is simply another form of acting and play. Oswald and Dickey, horrified by all this talk of being good, discuss the society between themselves, and Dicky reluctantly admits that “we must play the game fair” (28).

For the Bastables, being good means not doing anything interesting. Naturally highly imaginative and accustomed to converting everything to a theatrical game, the conscious effort at being good and quashing their natural impulse to play leads them to be “a little dull” (29). Their dullness manifests itself while Albert’s uncle tells them stories, strangely enough, for children otherwise so enthralled with storytelling. Albert’s uncle asks them if anything is wrong, in playful and performative language “what blight had fallen on our young lives” (29).

The blight, as Oswald points out in his narration, is the Society of the Wouldbegoods, and the unnatural and forced restraint they have placed on their imaginative play. “Playing” good is one performance they cannot pull off, since for them, in this book, badness comes in the form of theatricality. Goodness then, is anti-theatrical, and highly uninteresting. But because the Bastables have always lived in a story-saturated, performatively playful world, even their efforts at behaving turn into acts of play, because it is the only real way they have of understanding and being in the world. And though they have been banished to the countryside for the “transgression” of playing, the text ultimately shows that adults play, as well. The Bastables’ discovery of this is an embarrassment for the children, because of their misapprehension of the situation, but for the readers, there is a vindication of playing as a way of life for adults *and* children.

In this later chapter, the children have dug up a skull they think is a dragon’s; the gardener tells them it’s a horse’s skull. The following morning, Noel and H.O. confess to having sown dragon’s teeth and now, in the field where they did it, armed men have appeared. The children go out to investigate and are astonished to find the field full of a camp of armed and uniformed men. They ask the first man they come to if he is English or the enemy, to which he replies, in a flawless English accent, that he is the enemy. “‘The enemy!’ Oswald echoed in

shocked tones. It is quite a terrible thing to a loyal and patriotic youth to see an enemy cleaning a pot in an English field, with English sand, and looking as much at home as if was in his foreign fastness” (255). The English, the enemy soldier tells them, are over the hill, trying to keep the enemy out of Maidstone, the nearby town. Oswald’s shock at meeting “the enemy” reinforces British national pride, but also pokes fun at it – the melodramatic narration of this interaction positions Oswald as naively nationalistic.

In a deeply worried panic, the children discuss the situation among themselves, blaming themselves for sowing the seeds that brought the enemy to their village. At this point in his narrative, though, Oswald speaks to his reader: “If you are very grown-up, or very clever, I daresay you will now have thought of a great many things ... none of us thought anything of the kind at the time” (259). What they do think of are ways to help defeat the foe: altering signposts and blocking the road into Maidstone, before setting off to warn the English. “We walked two and two, and sang the ‘British Grenadiers’ and ‘Soldiers of the queen’ so as to be as much part of the British Army as possible” (261). Their play here includes performing a very specific kind of patriotism, one which the children know primarily through books and poems – even the pseudo-military jingoism of these children of the British Empire is play, a performance based on the romantic and dramatic representations of war found in the books and stories the Bastables love.

The English, when the children find them, are lounging around, smoking and chatting. Oswald asks to speak to the General, or whoever might be in command. The soldier he speaks to jokes with him. Oswald, outraged, suggests that the soldier may be taking it too easy, to which the soldier replies it is an easy. Oswald angrily replies: ““I suppose you don’t care if the enemy gets into Maidstone or not! ... If I were a soldier I’d rather die than be beaten”” (263).

The children lead the English to ambush the enemy, and are perplexed when the enemy colonel says to the English one ““By Jove, old man, you got me clean that time!”” (268). The children tell their story of “spying” and altering the signposts to both colonels, and as they tell the story, their listeners interrupt to shout “Bravo!” a number of times. The English colonel brings them back to have tea in camp, promises to mention their names to the War Office, and offers them soldier’s pay.

Albert’s uncle intercepts them on the way home and asks, ““What were you doing with those volunteers?”” (271). The children explained, and Albert’s uncle withdraws the word volunteer. “But the seeds of doubt were sown in the breast of Oswald. He was now almost sure that we had made jolly fools of ourselves without a moment’s pause throughout the whole of this eventful day” (271). Oswald discusses the matter privately with Albert’s uncle, who suggests that, though they may have sprung from dragon’s teeth, the soldiers perhaps were “only volunteers having a field-day or sham fight” (272). The elaborate war-game of the adults goes completely unrecognized as such by the children, who eagerly join in. They become literal actors in the larger game or performance of the volunteers. This is possible because the children understand the world in terms of performance and theatricality. There is nothing unreasonable in encountering the enemy approaching Maidstone, and their scouting behavior, as Oswald tells the two colonels, simply mirrors what they have read in books about British soldiers. This episode forms a sort of counterpart to the book’s beginning, when the children’s *Jungle Book* play is interrupted by the angry uncle. In each instance, the play of one group is misapprehended by another. The uncle views the children as being bad, deserving of serious punishment; the children view the volunteers as real soldiers engaged in real battle. It is worth pointing out that

the adult play is not criticized at all, and the embarrassment or awkwardness that Oswald experiences is because he couldn't distinguish play from reality.

It would be easy to set all of this aside as mere child's play; after all, children play all the time in all kinds of ways that seem entirely unremarkable. But Nesbit's insistence on *theatrical* play changes the parameters of child's play here, and makes it into something else: something potentially transformative, something didactic or ideological or something terrifying and thus resistant entirely to theatrical play. The world of the Bastables is understood and interpreted as and through theatrical play and story. The world of *The Enchanted Castle* resents and resists theatricality, and sounds a loud warning about the potential dangers inherent in making believe. But ultimately, play and making-believe are positioned as holding the most possibility, and the most positive benefits, for adults and children alike.

The play space as a place apart, the importance of material culture, the transformative and theatrical natures of the play space, the interrogation of gender norms, the relationship of play to the wider world, the involvement of adults in the play space – all have a place in Nesbit's fiction. Her commitment to imaginative play as an essential mode of life, for children *and* adults, makes her work especially exemplary for thinking about the possibilities that kind of play can hold. In particular, Nesbit offers multiple examples of adults who can, and do, play; these adults are highly valued by their child acquaintances, but Nesbit also makes sure to provide them all with successful and happy outcomes. The playful life is a full life, a rich life, and a happy life. Taken together, Nesbit's fiction for children provides a vision of what the play-full life can bring to children *and* adults.

## 5.0 CONCLUSION

In a way, at least two of the three playspaces I discuss seem to have passed out of the present moment to become nearly obsolete. Fred Rogers passed away in 2003, and, in 2008, PBS discontinued daily viewing of *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood*. Edith Nesbit's work is read by very few children today, and for years she was seen by critics as a hack, only regaining critical traction in the last couple of decades. Disneyland alone remains a vibrant presence in popular culture, though, the park has expanded and changed drastically from its original design; the corporatization of Disney has changed the company's goals for how the park functions.

Yet all three retain relevance, especially in pop culture, and all three offer great opportunities for further considerations of play, place, and problematic binaries of all kinds, but especially the adult/child binary. *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood*, in particular, has achieved a new level of visibility in recent years. In 2012, PBS launched a new program, *Daniel Tiger's Neighborhood*, an animated spin-off of sorts that includes a number of allusions and tributes to the older program, and it addresses many of the same kinds of themes, but it is very obviously and explicitly not attempting to recreate the old program. *Daniel Tiger's Neighborhood* has been highly successful, drawing a strong viewership and receiving an Emmy nomination in 2015.

Just as significantly, if not more so, has been the re-emergence of Mister Rogers as a pop-culture icon. As discussed in Chapter Two, Mister Rogers has been evoked widely in the wake of recent national tragedies. He has also been the subject of a number of lists of factoids on

websites like BuzzFeed and Cracked, many of which bring together nostalgia and the hagiographic tendency. Along with this has been the production of Mister Rogers merchandise that seems to trade on retro iconography and nostalgia. A sweater-changing mug, for instance, is decorated with various quotations from the program, along with a photograph of Mister Rogers; when hot water is added, the suit jacket he wears turns into a cardigan. The increase in visibility of Mister Rogers makes it all the more important that we consider the program in much greater scholarly depth. The move toward a kitschy nostalgia for Mister Rogers signals a need, I think, to “rescue” his image and work from going the route of restorative nostalgia, and becoming simply another iteration of a normalizing dominant culture. I am particularly invested in establishing the program as undeniably queer at its core, both because it is, and because queerness and play yoked together open innumerable avenues for exploration and re-visioning.

The kinds of re-visioning I think queerness and play can enable includes, very centrally, thinking about the child/adult binary. We talk a lot in Children’s Literature and Childhood Studies about The Child, but we rarely talk about The Adult, and I think that absence has been a huge mistake. The Adult and the child are two parts of a binary construct, and, as such, they are interdependent. If we want to change The Child, we need to change The Adult, too; so, allowing the adult more freedom to play seems to me an excellent starting point. Rather than reserve those qualities for the child (or the childlike), can we not uncouple the ideas of wonder/delight/play from age-specificity? Enabling that kind of play for adults – truly enabling and embracing it, not bracketing it awkwardly, or dismissing it as childish – could significantly lessen the pressure placed on the concept of the “innocent” child. If we cut children and childhood free from being the sole domain of imaginative play, curiosity, and delight, thereby making those things available to adults, this will have a salutary effect on adult *nostalgia* for childhood, which currently works



primarily to reinforce our ideas of the innocent child. There seems to be real tension right now about what it means to be an adult, as well as who gets to do it and how, and I think Children's Literature and Childhood Studies scholarship is a prime space to intervene in that larger conversation.

I have referenced several times Gaston Bachelard's remark, "Space calls for action, and before action, the imagination is at work." Each of the three spaces I address do call for action, of course, and so call imagination to work as well. The actions vary broadly, from the staging of *Gay Days* to writing letters to congressmen to simply feeling better about one's own identity. But the place and its play are bound up together to produce these results. Our places and our playspaces provoke our imaginations, which are boundless, and, with imagination, action can follow – or, to quote Walt Disney, "If we can dream it, we can do it." The fact that such results are possible from the seemingly innocuous and politically marginal spaces of Disneyland or *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood* make paying attention to those spaces a matter of real importance.

So where can we go from here? The need for much more scholarly attention to *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood* seems clear to me. I'd also like to see what, if any, other ways exist for thinking about the types of progressive identity (trans)formations Disney might be producing. Princess culture, for instance, is one that has been written about extensively as being "bad" for girls, but what about the little boys who are deeply invested in princesses (and those boys exist in considerable numbers)? It is too easy to criticize Disney for a variety of things – and they are certainly guilty of many – but as a huge cultural force in our world, I contend that it is worth thinking about what kinds of possibilities Disney might be opening up, as well. As for Nesbit, greater critical attention to her work is certainly needed, but I would especially like to see more

attention paid to the places and spaces of material culture in *all* children's literature as well as their roles in the lives of children.

The preceding chapters of this dissertation are not three identical iterations of any one concept or phenomenon; they are not cumulative, building upon each other. Instead, each chapter takes up a similar *kind* of cultural product – one that engages with ideas of (and actual) children and childhood, with imaginative play, with space and place, with queer possibilities and potentialities, and – perhaps above all – with *transformation*. They are three cogs with equal teeth: they can mesh with each other in any combination. Their arrangement in this order is ahistorical, resisting a specific kind of trajectory or narrative of progress or development. I do not argue that play has changed over the twentieth century, or even that cultural attitudes about play have changed over time. Instead, play offers ways of seeing and thinking about the world, and has been used for that purpose in a variety of eras and media.

The concept of adjacency has been important to me throughout this project, especially, as I discuss in my introduction, around the idea of queer adjacency. But the three cultural texts that make up my sites of analysis are also adjacent in multiple ways: adjacent to “real world” spaces, and also functionally adjacent to each other. The material conditions, or medium, of each is different—a theme park, a television program, a novel. Yet, despite these differences, each functions in similar ways to promote play and challenge pre-existing categories of being. Though their materiality matters and affects how they work, it doesn't limit them from performing similar kinds of work.

Ultimately, I think, all three cultural spaces offer similarly suggestive possibilities for ways of being in the world, ways that expand and challenge our currently held views on childhood and play, on imagination and place, on children and adults. These sites promote ways

of not only accepting or tolerating queerness, but prompt us to embrace and encourage it, or, at the very least, to take important cues from queerness that, perhaps, giving Fred Rogers the last word, allow everyone to “like themselves just exactly as they are.”

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