



## **To Be or Not to Be an Adult, That Is the Question**

—Heather Snell

In 2015, the ballyhoo over the phenomenon of so-called adults reading young adult fiction prompted Mavis Reimer and I to co-write an editorial entitled “YA Narratives: Reading One’s Age.” I write *so-called* adults, because no one really seems to know what an adult is. If the remarkably weak arguments of those on the side of the “adults-should-read-their-age” debate are not evidence enough, the increasingly popular category of “New Adult fiction” as a genre distinctive from YA and Adult fiction signals further the uncertainty around the question of when childhood begins and ends, and where young adulthood fits into this picture. After all, New Adult fiction targets the late teen/early twenties market, the rationale being that individuals who fall into this age range are conspicuously missing from Adult fiction. The ubiquity of capital letters in both descriptors of target demographics and debates about reading one’s age indicates that the dominant culture, at least in North America, where many of these debates originate,

values the separation of people on the basis of whatever stage of life it might be possible to corral them into. With separation-by-age comes differential-treatment-by-age, and not just socially. When one breaks the law, for example, it is important to know which laws will be applied—those designed for adults or those designed for minors.

The aftermath of the school shooting that occurred on 14 February 2018 at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida, functions as a reminder of just how political these kinds of differentiations are. When the young survivors of the shooting stood up to demand stricter gun laws, many refused to acknowledge them as young adults, dubbing them “children” instead. This discursive move on the part of those who considered themselves “adults” was meant to consign the survivors to a space that, in this context, defined them as ignorant and therefore incapable of exerting political agency. The moniker was effectively an attempt to disempower the

survivors. “Children” became a derogatory label in the wake of a tragedy in which fourteen students and three staff members were killed and fourteen others wounded. Demonstrating an impressive familiarity with the ways in which the language of childhood is manipulated for political ends, the survivors turned the adults’ strategy against them, placing the burden of the change for which they were calling fully on the adults. This is a remarkable move when one considers that children’s and young adult literatures tend to place the burden of change on young people, as if older people bear no responsibility for the future.

In this editorial I approach moral panics around reading one’s age from a different angle than Mavis and I did in 2015, reflecting on the precariousness of claims to adulthood. I then return to the child/adult divide through a reading of the tumultuous fallout of the Florida shooting. I argue that it was precisely many adults’ belief in the rigidity of the line separating childhood and adulthood that the survivors of the shooting manipulated toward their own ends, showing just how fundamentally unstable both concepts are. Looking at the event from a very different angle, however, brings into relief the unequal distribution of victimhood, suggesting that whether or not one is deemed worthy of protection is profoundly complicated when one considers the role that registers such as sex, class, race, and ethnicity play in debates about gun violence in the United States.

### **What Is Adulthood Anyway?**

Despite my age, and having successfully accrued many of the traditional markers of adulthood recognized in my culture, I wonder if I am an adult. As I often tell my students in my Field of Children’s Literature course, I feel as though I’m still waiting for adulthood to happen. This raises the question: is adulthood something that happens to a person or is it something a person achieves? If it’s something that happens, did I miss that magical moment when I crossed the threshold from childhood to adulthood? Did I cross over when I could no longer hear 17,400 Hz, that frequency that can supposedly be heard, among humans, only by those under twenty-one?<sup>1</sup> Or did I become an adult when I gained some cognitive abilities and lost others? Following the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, did I cross over when I reached the age of eighteen? Or did I make my crossing when I received a T-shirt for my twenty-first birthday that read “I’m an adult now”?

That last question may sound ridiculous, but it’s not so far-fetched when one considers the work of language philosopher John Langshaw Austin. In his 1962 book *How to Do Things with Words*, Austin argued that words can actually *do* things. There is, he argues, the act of “just saying something,” and then there is the act of performing something by saying something. Austin proposes the term “performative sentence” to denote an utterance that, in its very pronouncement, performs an action (6). If uttering the words “I do” can amount to



Words can  
transform children  
or adolescents  
into adults, but  
the reverse is true  
as well.



an indulgence in marriage and not just a report on it,<sup>2</sup> then why can't they also turn me into an adult? How *does* one measure one's level of adulthood? Is adulthood defined by biology, words, age, or maturity level? Or is it defined by traditional markers of adulthood? It's worth noting that traditional markers of adulthood differ depending on the context. They can include everything from taking responsibility for one's own herd of cattle to acquiring a house in the suburbs, both of which are increasingly difficult pathways into adulthood in the context of neoliberalism. Even biology is no guarantee of the strict separation of child and adult: in many cultures, more than one phase of life is defined in terms of adolescence, suggesting that ongoing hormonal shifts are just as important as age or traditional markers of adulthood when it comes to pinpointing one's place in the circle of life. In North America, for example, perimenopause is often compared to puberty and menopause to a "second adolescence."<sup>3</sup> Such comparisons suggest that humans do not necessarily leave adolescence behind once they reach, say, the age of eighteen or twenty-five. The advantage of thinking about human life as being circular, with a series of stages from adolescence to adulthood and back again, is that it rejects the idea that humans march in a straight line from birth through childhood to adulthood. As soon as one conceives of life in a straight line, one invokes the notion of progress, with all of its heavy and unwieldy baggage. The linear journey from childhood to adulthood is too easily recruited to colonialist thinking, perpetuating the long-standing association between the "primitive" and the childlike. As a number of scholars in the fields of postcolonial studies and children's literature have pointed out, this association continues to characterize discourses

about Indigenous peoples in Canada and the US; Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders in Australia; Maori in New Zealand; and many other groups throughout the world. Even whole continents, such as Africa, are subject to discourses that rely on condescending differentiations between child and adult. Words can transform children or adolescents into adults, but the reverse is true as well.

Cultural critic Jack Halberstam argues that linear thinking about human life perpetuates heteronormativity in addition to colonialist constructions of adults as children:

To give an example of the way in which critical languages can sometimes weigh us down, consider the fact that we have become adept within postmodernism at talking about “normativity,” but far less adept at describing in rich detail the practices and structures that both oppose and sustain conventional forms of association, belonging, and identification. I try to use the concept of queer time to make clear how respectability, and notions of the normal on which it depends, may be upheld by a middle-class logic of reproductive temporality. And so, in Western cultures, we chart the emergence of the adult from the dangerous and unruly period of adolescence as a desired process of maturation; and we create longevity as the most desirable future, applaud the pursuit of long life (under any

circumstances), and pathologize modes of living that show little or no concern for longevity. (4)

While being able to do things with words can be liberating, words, particularly when organized into discourse, can create oppressive norms. Following Halberstam, we might ask to what extent our definitions of child and adult depend on reproductive temporality, which excludes those who either cannot or will not have children or those who simply do not want to measure their life in accordance with the milestones normalized in a heteronormative regime: marriage, child-rearing, retirement, and death. Much children’s literature suggests—largely through modelling—that those who are dubbed “children” are supposed to desire crossing over into an adulthood that is really code for everything “safe,” “stable,” and “mature.” The fact that one is supposed to live predictably through the milestones named above make adulthood seem even more safe, since one knows what to expect when the magical moment of this crossing happens. Unlike childhood, which is associated with risk, play, adventure, immaturity, and dangerous unpredictability, the binary oppositions that structure discourses around childhood and adulthood dictate that adulthood is associated with the predictably mundane. The characterization of the later years as boring no doubt explains why so many adults are nostalgic for idealized childhood, and why some attempt to recapture it by engaging in playful,

exciting, and even risk-taking behaviour. Many of these adults are frequently accused of being in crisis<sup>4</sup> highlights further that in a culture that values maturity and longevity, one is expected to not only desire sustained stability but also achieve it. In a heteronormative regime that relies so heavily on the figure of the child to shore up its power, all adults are expected to desire a long life and pathologize those who do not. That long lives are associated with the supposed stability of marriage and child-rearing suggests that being an adult is inseparable from conforming to the dominant order. Our very desires are always already colonized by preconceived ideas about childhood and adulthood, necessitating the cultivation of alternative temporalities by which lives can be lived in accordance with logics different from those the dominant culture privileges.

Halberstam's argument has wide-ranging implications for those who do not, cannot, or will not abide by what comes to be accepted as "normal" in any given society. It's important to remember that the accepted pathways into adulthood are not accessible to all, regardless of desire. Some bodies, moreover, can never be seen as fully "adult" as a result of their perceived unruliness, leakiness, or even stickiness. In *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, Sara Ahmed defines sticky objects as those "saturated with affect, as sites of personal and social tension" (11). Both individuals and collectives can constitute such sites of tension. To take one example, for people who consider themselves able, disabled people

might constitute a "sticky" site that confounds traditional definitions of adulthood. It may not be possible for some to live life the way one is expected to; or the way in which one lives might be perceived as immoral by others as a result of its not measuring up to dominant societal norms. There are many reasons a person can remain consigned to a perpetual adolescence, a symbolic form of incarceration that nevertheless has real and material effects.

Speaking of incarceration, it's crucial to think about the ways in which those literally incarcerated in hospitals, remand, prisons, and juvenile detention centres can be pressed into involuntary infantilization, either through their treatment on the part of agents of a system that labels them defective or unruly, or simply as a result of being denied the ability to live life on their own terms. Eli Clare observes the ease with which those consigned to particular categories are locked up in institutions—sometimes for life—arguing that diagnosis can become "a means of social control" (123). It is no coincidence that those most likely to be given diagnoses that justify incarceration in psychiatric facilities, not to mention forced sterilization and often cruel and outdated forms of "treatment," are members of marginalized populations:

Sex workers, immigrants, people of color, poor white people, people with psychiatric disabilities, people with epilepsy, so-called sexual deviants, blind people,

deaf people, physically disabled people, unmarried women who had sex, effeminate men, prisoners, intellectually disabled people. (Clare 110)



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The same trend can be seen in correctional facilities. To take two examples of nations I know fairly well as a resident of the US/Canada border region, marginalized people account for far too many inmates. Looking at the statistics of incarceration by markers such as race and ethnicity, in Canada between 2015 and 2016 Aboriginal adults accounted for 26% of admissions to provincial and territorial correctional services and 28% to federal custody even though they comprise only 3% of the adult population (Reitano). In the United States during the same period, Black inmates comprised 34% of jail inmates, Hispanics 15%, and American Indian and Alaska Natives 1% (Minton and Zeng 4; Zeng 3). Yet Blacks or African Americans comprise only 13.3% of the general population (United States Census Bureau). In 2016, the highest jail incarceration rate was among non-Hispanic Blacks; American Indian and Alaska Natives came a close second (Zeng 3). Significantly, “[a]mong non-Hispanics in 2016, blacks were incarcerated in jail at a rate 3.5 times that of whites” (Zeng 3). While government publications omit the kind of detailed information that would allow one to see the full extent of disparities with respect to race and ethnicity,<sup>5</sup> the statistics suggest that some lives are more colonized by ideology than others.

It is important to note, however, that infantilization and criminalization are complexly entangled, as many people are always already criminalized. In other words, while criminalization and subsequent incarceration can be seen as a form of infantilization,

some people may experience various forms of criminalization outside of carceral institutions. This includes those who have never been in trouble with the law. Speaking to the ways in which Black people are criminalized in the Canadian and United States contexts respectively, Robyn Maynard and Michelle Alexander call attention to evolving practices of policing and confinement in this “new Jim Crow” era. In *Policing Black Lives: State Violence in Canada from Slavery to the Present*, Maynard explains that “[i]n the United States, Jim Crow referred to the de jure segregation of Black from white in the public facilities of the former Confederate states,” but that “Canada had its own iteration of practices that separated Black from white in what some historians call ‘Canada’s Jim Crow’” (33). These practices have collaborated with a history of slavery to ensure that Blackness is associated with “danger and criminality” today (9). Maynard elaborates that

the associations between Blackness, crime and danger continue to have enormous power in Canada nearly two centuries after the British abolished slavery in all their colonies. Black and white Canadians appear to commit relatively equal levels of most crimes, yet the Black population, viewed as dangerous, continues to bear the burden of the “criminal” stigma. (9)

Alexander points out that “mass incarceration in the United States had, in fact, emerged as a stunningly

comprehensive and well-disguised system of racialized social control that functions in a manner strikingly similar to Jim Crow” (4). She argues that barriers to upward mobility consign African Americans to an undercaste that prevents them from being seen as fully fledged citizens: “The current system of control permanently locks a huge percentage of the African American community out of the mainstream society and economy” (13). The disproportionately high numbers of racialized people in carceral institutions relative to the general population in the twenty-first century—and, indeed, the astounding level of incarceration, especially in the US<sup>6</sup>—is symptomatic of ongoing colonialism, the legacies of the transatlantic slave trade, and the systemic racism that accompanies violent acts of dispossession. As Maynard emphasizes, slavery and settler colonialism, albeit different forms of violence, are connected to historical and contemporary oppressions. The experiences of Indigenous and Black peoples have never been and are not now isolated. Rather, they overlap in complicated ways, particularly in their relationship to the state: “Black and Indigenous peoples experience grossly disproportionate incarceration, susceptibility to police violence, poverty and targeted child welfare removal” (Maynard 12). Even the ability to parent one’s children without interference from the state or one’s neighbours is in peril if one happens to be Black, Indigenous, or part of another marginalized population. We might, then, supplement the question “to what extent do our

definitions of child and adult depend on reproductive temporality?” with “who gets to be an adult?”—*adult* in this context being associated with mobility, employability, independence, and the freedom to accrue the markers with which it is associated. In Canada, that may mean going to a school that functions as a legitimate gateway to a diverse job market,<sup>7</sup> getting a job, and moving out of one’s childhood home, all of which may be made more difficult if one is Indigenous, Black, or a person of colour, and particularly if one is also poor, a woman, mentally ill, disabled, a sexual minority, or without citizenship. In North America, simply being a racially stigmatized person moving through a white suburb can lead to arrest and subsequent incarceration, injury, or death, effectively blocking the path to adulthood or to an adulthood recognized as legitimate by the dominant culture. Now imagine if one is a Black, Indigenous, or person of colour who is also transgender. The binary oppositions that underlie definitions of and discourses around adulthood can be transphobic and transmisogynist in addition to being colonialist, racist, elitist, sexist, and homophobic. Seen in this light, adulthood positively shimmers as an always desirable yet potentially ungraspable state of being, accessible to some but not to all.

Perhaps it is this lack of accessibility to adulthood that explains why so many adults reject it and why so many cultural producers who target young audiences cast adulthood as a boring, undesirable realm and youth as a hip, exciting, and empowering space that only

fools wouldn’t want to inhabit forever. As Richard Dyer argues in Chapter Three of *Only Entertainment*, entitled “Entertainment and Utopia,” entertainment deploys affective code to offer “the image of ‘something better’ to escape into, or something we want deeply that our day-to-day lives don’t provide” (18). The caveat is that “while entertainment is responding to needs that are real, at the same time it is also defining and delimiting what constitute the legitimate needs of people in the society” (Dyer 25). As with children’s literature, film and television entertainment that targets young markets participates in the shaping of meaning around childhood. It does this in part by modelling what it means to be young. But it also projects youth as a space of desirability in an era when adulthood is becoming more and more difficult to achieve. The Freeform TV series *Shadowhunters: The Mortal Instruments* is among the most blatant examples of this marketing strategy, as it highlights the undesirability of adulthood by dubbing the world in which most people live—a world coded as adult—the “Mundane.” In contrast, the shadow underworld in which most of the show’s action takes place—a world coded as young—is a dangerous if exciting one in which all of the myths and legends that tend to make up the stuff of children’s literature are actually real. The world of the shadowhunters is filled with hip, young, impossibly beautiful, ethnically diverse, and often rebelliously clad warriors, warlocks, vampires, werewolves, fairies, angels, and demons. Demonstrating that longevity isn’t just for



boring adults, immortals such as warlocks and vampires enjoy young, beautiful, and remarkably able bodies for centuries. The fact that they are able to go on for so long while also sidestepping the usual markers of a life lived heteronormatively attests to their refusal of adulthood even as many of them wax poetic about their old age and the experience that has come with living for several centuries. Compared to the drudgery of the mundane world characterized by repetitive work, paying bills, picking up and dropping off kids, with the occasional bout of (potentially deadly) road rage or possession by demons, the frequently horrific albeit sexy world of the shadowhunters seems pretty inviting. I mean, who the f\*\*k wants to be an adult anyway?

**“We Are the Children and You Are the Adults”: The Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School Survivors’ Strategic Deployment of the Child/Adult Divide**

The uneven distribution of adulthood was recently brought into relief after the Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School shooting when some Republicans dubbed the survivors who spoke out in favour of stricter gun laws “children” in attempts to discredit them. They accused the survivors of being disrespectful, and some even accused them of being paid crisis actors (Nicas and Frenkel). Many of them implied that the survivors were merely receptacles for anti-gun ideologies and not intelligent beings capable of forming their own opinions. For example, during discussion of a bill put before the house

on 7 March 2018, Florida State Representative Elizabeth Porter exposed the contradictions of the child/adult divide when she implied that the survivors were infringing on adult authority by speaking out:

We’ve been told that we need to listen to the children and do what the children ask. Are there any children on this floor? . . . Are there any children making laws? Do we allow the children to tell us that we should pass a law that says no homework, or you finish high school at the age of 12 just because they want it so? (qtd. in Qamer)

In her eagerness to define state power as adult power, Porter appears to forget that the survivors will not be “children” forever. Given that the children in question are actually young adults who will soon reach voting age, Porter’s dismissal of them as immature individuals with immature aims and desires who are transgressing their prescribed role in society is especially puzzling. Today the children are asking and demanding, but tomorrow they *will* be the ones making the laws. The notion that the child represents futurity is in fact premised on the inevitability of children becoming adults. The unstable ground on which adulthood stakes its claims is nowhere more clear than in Porter’s and other adults’ responses to the activism of the Florida shooting survivors. Faced with mature arguments for stricter gun control in the wake not just of the Florida shooting but of all those that preceded

it, they could do nothing but stake a precarious claim on adulthood.

The not-so-expected twist in this tale is that the so-called children used the condescending denunciations of their political agency as a form of capital, effectively *exerting* political agency even as they *accepted* a label that consigned them to a category in which political agency is not supposed to be possible. In effect, they enacted a symbolic displacement of agency from themselves to those claiming to be adults in their acceptance of childhood and all that this category entails, but in so doing they demonstrated their political power. Seventeen-year-old David Hogg made this clear during a CNN interview on 15 February 2018, asserting “We’re children . . . . You guys are the adults” (Turkewitz and Chokshi). His statement emphasized that in accordance with the logic that governs the child/adult divide in which adults are so invested, adults are supposed to protect children. While other survivors may not have been as blunt in staking a claim on childhood as a space of empowerment rather than subjugation, they explicitly rejected the notion that children are innocent and ignorant. In reclaiming childhood as a space of experience and wisdom, they were able to remain in their allotted place as children—those who are supposed to be protected by adults—while also placing the burden of change squarely on the adults who had failed to protect them. In her powerful speech at an anti-gun rally in Fort Lauderdale, Florida, survivor Emma González implied that if adults weren’t so busy lording

it over children and reducing them to crude stereotypes in the process, they might have been able to prevent the Florida shooting in the first place:

The people in the government who were voted into power are lying to us. And us kids seem to be the only ones who notice and our parents to call BS. Companies trying to make caricatures of the teenagers these days, saying that all we are self-involved and trend-obsessed and they hush us into submission when our message doesn’t reach the ears of the nation, we are prepared to call BS. Politicians who sit in their gilded House and Senate seats funded by the NRA telling us nothing could have been done to prevent this, we call BS. They say tougher guns laws do not decrease gun violence. We call BS. They say a good guy with a gun stops a bad guy with a gun. We call BS. They say guns are just tools like knives and are as dangerous as cars. We call BS. They say no laws could have prevented the hundreds of senseless tragedies that have occurred. We call BS. That us kids don’t know what we’re talking about, that we’re too young to understand how the government works. We call BS. (qtd. in Schwartz)

The logic of the heteronormative order that governs the US dictates that children are supposed to be innocent, ignorant objects as opposed to wise, experienced subjects. Yet here González uses her interpellation as



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a “kid” and “teenager” to disrupt the long-standing association between adulthood and political agency. She demonstrates that she knows the Republican outcry against narcissistic, surface-oriented “children” has more to do with their desire to yank out from under the survivors the powerful political ground they occupy. She also knows that the “adults” actually believe in their own adulthood while the Parkland survivors do not believe in their childhood, at least not in the way the dominant culture defines childhood. How could they, after witnessing their friends being shot, or being shot themselves? In accusing the adults of being “bad adults” as a result of their failure to do an adequate job of protecting their young charges, the survivors used their interpellation as children to their advantage and unsettled the notion that adulthood is inherently tied to age, wisdom, maturity, and experience.

To return for a moment to the anti-Blackness endemic to Canadian society, Maynard underlines the power of the state to inflict violence across myriad institutions, including schools, social and child services, and the police. She argues that

the state possesses an enormous, unparalleled level of power and authority over the lives of its subjects. State agencies are endowed with the power to privilege, punish, confine or expel at will. (5)

It is this power of the state that many adults exerted and defended in the wake of the Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School shooting. As is always the case when the state abuses its power, however, those it attempts to subjugate fight back. Just as Indigenous, American Indian, Alaska Natives, Blacks, Hispanics, and

others belonging to marginalized groups continually resist state power in the face of oppressive policing practices, the survivors of the Florida school shooting resisted the ways in which entrenched differences were being wielded against them.

For all that, it's important to recognize that the media hype over the Florida shooting gives disproportionate attention to the plight of predominantly white, middle-class students at the expense of acknowledging and calling out the shootings of Blacks that occur every day in North America. Of course, part of the reason for the hype is the insistence on the part of the survivors on keeping the issue of gun control in the spotlight by organizing protests and marches and by agreeing to interviews with CNN and other powerful media outlets. The success of the survivors' strategies was manifested in the rapidity with which their public speeches and interviews went viral and an invitation from US President Donald Trump to visit the White House to discuss potential solutions to gun violence.<sup>8</sup> As some of the survivors themselves acknowledged, their ability to draw so much media attention has a lot to do with unearned white privilege. During a Twitter question and answer session, seventeen-year-old survivor Cameron Kasky explained that "[t]here are communities that . . . have to deal with [gun violence] on a much more regular basis and have to feel a lot less safe than we do" (qtd. in Miller). Hogg concurred, writing that "[t]here is a lot of racial disparity in the way that this [shooting] is covered" (qtd. in Miller). He then asserted

that "We have to use our white privilege now to make sure that all of the people that have died as a result of [gun violence] and haven't been covered the same can now be heard" (qtd. in Miller). While I'm not confident that using one's white privilege to redress the ways in which the media spotlights white suffering and activism is the ideal solution to imbalanced reportage—as opposed to, say, organizing events in which other voices can be heard—the survivors make a good point when they highlight the disproportionate attention given to survivors of the Florida shooting relative to other incidents of gun violence.

In a powerful March for Our Lives speech, eleven-year-old activist Naomi Wadler took the initiative to call attention to imbalanced media reportage of gun violence in the United States while demonstrating that Black people and other people of colour do not need white people to speak out for them: "I am here today to acknowledge and represent the African American girls whose stories don't make the front page of every national newspaper, whose stories don't lead on the evening news" ("11-Year-Old Naomi Wadler's Speech"). The case of Courtlin Arrington, a seventeen-year-old Black girl who was shot to death at Huffman High School in Birmingham, Alabama, just three weeks after Parkland,<sup>9</sup> is a case in point. Many other Black and Indigenous young people, and young people of colour, have since spoken out against racist media coverage and gun violence that disproportionately affects people who look like

them, helping to further redress the media's privileging of white, middle-class kids at the expense of those who experience gun violence daily in schools, on the streets, in correctional facilities, and even in their homes.

Journalist Sarah Ruiz-Grossman observes that “[p]rominent black organizers and public figures have also noted the largely positive public response to the student activists from Parkland—most of whom are not black and who attended school in a largely white, relatively affluent Florida suburb—compared to the frequent vilification of young black activists protesting gun violence, particularly police shootings.” Notably, co-founder of Black Lives Matter Patrisse Cullors poses the following questions in response to the overwhelming attention given to the Florida shooting:

Why don't black people get to be victims? That's the question we have to ask ourselves . . . It's a question not just for elected officials but it's a question for us . . . Who gets to be a victim?” (qtd. in Ruiz-Grossman)

In asking “Who gets to be a victim?” Cullors asks who gets to be seen as worth protecting. This question could supplement the “Who gets to be an adult?” question I ask earlier in this editorial. Who gets to protect? Who gets to make the laws? This last question is particularly important, given Maynard's point about the enormous power of the state “to privilege, punish, confine or expel at will” (5). Unfortunately, it usually happens that those who make

the laws do so with bias that favours the populations to which they feel they belong.

In *Loaded: A Disarming History of the Second Amendment*, historian Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz traces the origins of US gun culture to laws designed to protect not the Indigenous peoples whose lands and lifeways were in peril as a result of settler colonialism, but the predominantly white settlers who were eager to protect their property and, in some cases, to expand it. The transatlantic slave trade only more deeply entrenched a rapidly developing gun culture as slave-owners hired men to go out on patrol looking for straying or escaped slaves. Dunbar-Ortiz argues that understanding the roles that settler colonialism and slavery played in the birth of the nation is key to understanding why so many of its citizens understand the Second Amendment as a sacred mandate to own a gun. Echoing Maynard, she emphasizes that it's also key to understanding the evolution of racist police practices, racialized violence, and the growth of cultures of militarization, not to mention the ongoing use of tactics initially deployed during the “savage wars” against Indigenous peoples in the US military (Dunbar-Ortiz 71). While many would argue with Dunbar-Ortiz, insisting that the Second Amendment refers to collective rights or that the NRA and/or consumer culture is to blame for gun culture, it's difficult to ignore the fact that statistics about gun ownership seem to line up with the historical narrative she provides. Most gun owners in the US are white males, prompting Dunbar-Ortiz to ask, “What are

the majority of white men so afraid of?" (93). Answering her own question, she suggests that the reason so many white men own guns may have less to do with fear and more with the nation having been forged through gun violence and the resulting ways in which danger and criminality have attached to particular kinds of bodies: "it seems the histories of racial domination, land theft, and genocide from which the Second Amendment emerged are impossible to confront, or that sublimated history is acted out in deranged ways, such as through mass shootings, police killings of unarmed Black people . . ." (190). That white men rush to create moral panics about those who are most at risk of being shot as a result of a deeply entrenched US gun culture speaks volumes about the entanglement of racism, ongoing colonialism, and gun love. The Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School shooting foregrounded this entanglement even as the disproportionate media attention it received relative to other incidents of gun violence showed that white children can be seen as more deserving of protection than Black adults.

In this issue of *Jeunesse* we feature several articles that reflect on the nature of childhood and adulthood and the narratives that reproduce or challenge dominant definitions of these life stages. Of course, given the nature of the preceding discussion, "stages" might seem the wrong word to describe either childhood or adulthood, as both can be constructed as sensibilities as much as official markers that cue particular social scripts. Bryoni Trezise opens the issue with an article entitled "Troubling the Image-Work of Children in the Age of the Viral Child: Re-Working the Figure of the Child," which highlights the performative elements of childhood as a script in and of itself.



The transatlantic  
slave trade only  
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culture . . .



Childhood is as much a performance as it is a sensibility or symbolic marker, and as a potentially viral one in a digital age, it is also a hot commodity. For that reason it can also be seen as a form of currency, particularly when one considers the benefits that accrue to those performances of childhood that manage to achieve virality. Beginning with the March for Our Lives demonstration that followed the Parkland shooting and using as a case study the “Charlie Bit My Finger” video that went viral upon its release in 2007, sparking the cultural phenomenon of the child YouTube star, Trezise interrogates the politics of viral circulation of the child figure. She argues that although digital platforms such as YouTube invite particular scripts of childhood as likely to catapult digital subjects into stardom, young cultural producers and actors can play with these scripts to launch innovative, even subversive, performances. Trezise draws on Robin Bernstein’s notion of “scriptive things”—that is, things that invite their users to do something in particular—to capture how unpredictable performances can arise in what otherwise appears to be a bland, homogenizing digital mediascape. She cites the Parkland survivors’ insistence on staking an agential claim on childhood as exemplary of such unpredictability. Aware of how they themselves, and figures of young people generally, circulate in digital media for the benefit of adults, they were able to repurpose the dominant rhetoric of innocence to harness political power.

In “Selfish Giants and Child Redeemers: Refiguring Environmental Hope in Oscar Wilde’s and Clio Barnard’s

*The Selfish Giant*,” Kyo Maclear reflects on the difference that categorization—in this case, by genres associated either with children or adults—makes in her analysis of Clio Barnard’s film adaptation of Oscar Wilde’s fairy tale *The Selfish Giant*. When the story is transformed into a feature-length film set in a bleak post-industrial British landscape and focusing on white, middle-class boys struggling to make ends meet, the clear moral demarcations in Wilde’s tale begin to unravel. The film’s brutal complication of the child figures that have become the stuff of fairy tales written for children reveals the fault lines in the kinds of discourses around childhood that Wilde’s tale appears to invoke. Maclear highlights the difficulty of sustaining the notion that childhood is a space of rosy innocence when childhood itself is represented in all of its messy and frequently horrific complexity.

Amber Moore reflects on her own ambivalence around the conventions associated with narratives designed for and marketed to young people through her analysis of YA novels that depict young women retreating to indoor spaces after having been sexually assaulted outdoors. On the one hand, such narratives are important for the recovery of young adult readers who have experienced sexual assault; on the other, they risk reproducing a long-standing expectation in many societies that women remain confined to private, domestic spheres. Moore explores how three notable YA novels engage traumatic geographies and ecology toward hopeful resolutions, arguing that critical readings



attuned to the semiotics of environment are crucial to understanding both young women's experiences of sexual assault and the implications of how these are represented in YA sexual assault narratives.

In "The Missing B Word: Compulsory Binarization and Bisexual Representation in Children's Literature," Jennifer Coletta reflects on the conspicuous absence of the word "bisexual" in children's literature. She argues that young readers are demanding that bisexuality be named explicitly in the literatures designed for and marketed to them, and that a sub-genre of literature in which bisexual young people are reflected be allowed to thrive. Because they lack visibility and are for this and other reasons susceptible to compulsory binarization, young people who identify as bisexual also have to contend with narratives that downplay, misrepresent, or simply erase their identities. Through analysis of three examples of literature that grapple, sometimes indirectly, with bisexuality, Coletta makes a good case for bi inclusion in children's literature.

In "Good Vampires Don't Eat: Anorexic Logic in Stephanie Meyer's Twilight Series," Emma Dunn reflects on the intersection at which vampirism, anorexia, and YA series fiction meet. She argues that Meyer's Twilight series perpetuates the same kind of anorexic logic that characterized Victorian ideals of femininity. In this the series collaborates with a post-feminist sensibility to represent powerful, often masculine-coded women with the kind of moral virtue and physical characteristics

that helped to define the ideal Victorian woman. Dunn teases out the differences between a post-feminist and Victorian sensibility before turning to Meyer's series and the frequently subversive fan fictions it has provoked. Focusing on three fan fictions in particular, she argues that fans expose the anorexic logic at the heart of the Twilight series while also revealing their own troubling investment in such logic. As with Moore's analysis, then, Dunn articulates some ambivalence about the contradictory representations of young women that circulate today.

Included in this issue, under "Resources," is a conversation in writing between children's and YA literature publisher and library director Daniel Goldin Halfon and anthropologist Michèle Petit; children's literature and literacies scholar Evelyn Arizpe facilitates their exchange. Entitled "*De la promoción de la lectura al arte de la hospitalidad / Promoting Readership and the Art of Hospitality*," the conversation ranges from reading practices to the value of literacy to libraries as potentially transformative spaces. This piece unintentionally ties together many of the themes taken up in this issue of *Jeunesse*, namely: the relationship between children and adults, made most manifest in the field of children's and YA literature by the fact that adults write for and market books to young people; the limits of thinking about reading as a practice that can cure or save; the importance of listening; and art as a space in which the brutality of the world can be simultaneously represented and undercut. Because the conversation took place



originally in Spanish, we have had it translated for the benefit of our anglophone readers.

The reviews in this issue cover an equally wide range of topics. In “Refusing the Role, Embracing the Hole,” Joshua Whitehead provides a playful and insightful review of Jonathan Allan’s *Reading from Behind: A Cultural Analysis of the Anus*, which posits an approach to reading that might be seen to supplement nicely Halberstam’s call for alternative queer temporalities. Deanna England, in a piece entitled “Envious Virgins and Adolescent Sexuality: The (Un)Importance of the Hymen in Virginité Studies,” assesses Jonathan Allan, Cristina Santos, and Adriana Spahr’s anthology, *Virgin Envy: The Cultural (in)Significance of the Hymen* alongside three YA novels published between 2015 and 2017. Both *Virgin Envy* and the novels England chooses as companions to this scholarly treatment of virginity challenge normative definitions of virginity. Kaitlynn Weaver reviews Florian Esser, Meike S. Baader, Tanja Betz, and Beatrice Hungerland’s collection of essays, entitled *Agency and Childhood: New Perspectives in Childhood Studies*, elaborating just how messy and complicated the relationship between children and agency can be. Karen Magro assesses Karin Murriss’s *The Posthuman Child: Educational Transformation through Philosophy with Picturebooks*, observing the value and limitations of Murriss’s approach to pedagogy. Samantha Cook reviews Laurent Poliquin’s *De l’impuissance à l’autonomie*, observing that one of its greatest strengths is its deft

tracing of youth literature in francophone Canadian communities to a much earlier era than has so far been acknowledged in extant scholarship. Finally, in “Moving Forward in Remembering a Truthful Past,” Catherine Appleton assesses two Holocaust narratives that combine historical fact and first-person narrative, finding that they are effective in helping young readers to understand the Holocaust and its legacies.

### Conclusion

I borrowed the title of this editorial from William Shakespeare, who uses it in *Hamlet* to articulate Hamlet’s internal conflict after he discovered that his uncle murdered his father before marrying his mother. Does Hamlet suffer in silence or kill his uncle? The first option seems unbearable, but the second could—and probably will—end in his death. Plus, well, murder *is* a grave sin. Does Hamlet really want to sink to his uncle’s level? While “To be or not to be an adult, that is the question” lacks the panache and seriousness of Shakespeare’s original line, it does capture the dilemma provoked by discourses around childhood and adulthood. Does one suffer adulthood with an eye toward taking advantage of some of the perks that come with it, or, following Halberstam, should one queer/query the temporalities by which one is expected to live? The first option is arguably safe, if possibly boring; the second risks ostracism. If one considers Lee Edelman’s argument in *No Future*, the second option also risks consigning one symbolically

to the realm of death,<sup>10</sup> and this in turn can lead to actual death if not social death. The problem is that the question of which option to choose presumes that one *can* choose. Not everyone gets to choose whether or not to suffer the slings and arrows of adulthood. Rather, they are corralled into adulthood, or not, when it is convenient for the individuals or institutions that have for one reason or another staked a claim on them. Who is and who is not respected in society is inseparable from the adult/child divide and the other kinds of binary oppositions it implies: wise/ignorant, mature/immature, protector/protected. To be seen as adult is to be seen as worthy of respect, which in turn comes with many privileges despite the banality of adulthood as it tends to be represented in heteronormative regimes. Whether or not one is accorded respect will depend, however, into which other categories one is corralled. One thing is for sure: to be

deemed an adult is to be more likely to live one's life on one's own terms and to have more say in how society itself is ordered. No one has learned this lesson better than all of those children separated by their parents at the US-Mexico border since President Donald Trump introduced his zero tolerance immigration policy in April.<sup>11</sup> Moreover, as I was writing this editorial, yet another school shooting occurred in the US, this time at Santa Fe High School near Houston, Texas, killing nine students and one teacher.<sup>12</sup> While they certainly have more agency than migrant children, the young survivors of this shooting have as much to gain from breaching the gate that guards adulthood. We might think about the perks that come with adulthood the next time we allow ourselves to be seduced by the youthful vampires, warlocks, werewolves, and shadowhunters that populate so much children's and YA fiction.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> The theory that the world is not experienced the same way by everyone and that it may be a different place depending on one's age has just received more credence in the form of the "yanny or laurel" debate prompted by an automated voice recording. See Chloe Watson's piece in *The Guardian* for details.

<sup>2</sup> Austin explains: "When I say, before the registrar or alter, &c., 'I do,' I am not reporting on a marriage: I am indulging in it" (6).

<sup>3</sup> In "Menopause Is the New Puberty," blogger Ellen Dolgen points out that the hormonal changes that accompany menopause can be

especially tumultuous if there are children in the house experiencing puberty: “Who just had a meltdown and locked themselves in their bedroom? Was it daughter, son or Mom?” With more and more women having children later in life, this hormonal clash is not uncommon.

<sup>4</sup> The very concept of a “mid-life crisis” has a long history as a hotly contested concept, demonstrating once again just how political is compartmentalization by life stage. Gail Sheehy, author of the popular albeit controversial 1976 book *Passages: Predictable Crises of Adult Life*, deployed the term in a way that marked a departure from misogynist conceptions of middle age. Her book takes issue precisely with dominant social-scientific discourses about development and life cycles in the United States, arguing that gender scripts inform American discourses about adulthood. Sheehy’s attempt to rewrite these scripts threatened many American social scientists in the 1970s, most of them male, who had a vested interest in defending middle-aged men’s desires for younger women and dismissing women’s mid-life transformations—which often entailed divorce—as a form of “man-hating” narcissism. Christopher Lasch’s *The Culture of Narcissism*, published in 1979, reacted to feminist rewritings of mid-life crisis as a moment of socially subversive empowerment for both men and women, dubbing the mid-life crisis a narcissistic disorder that marked the close of a social order in which it was accepted that men were the sole breadwinners. Susanne Schmidt explains that “[i]n the 1970s, the idea of narcissism expressed anxieties about declining status at a time of economic crisis, climbing divorce rates and changing sexual politics, and accused the women’s movement of furthering these problems” (162). During this period, the “second adolescence” trope privileged married men, normalizing their extramarital affairs while at the same time pathologizing women for wanting divorces (Schmidt 166).

<sup>5</sup> Writing about Canada, Wendy Chan and Dorothy Chunn point out that despite the fact that these disparities are a major focus in criminal

justice literature, “Canada lacks comprehensive, longitudinal national data on every stage of the criminal justice process—reporting, policing, prosecution, and sentencing” (90).

<sup>6</sup> Alexander points out that “[a]lthough crime rates in the United States have not been markedly higher than those of other Western countries, the rate of incarceration has soared in the United States while it has remained stable or declined in other countries” (7). The same can be said of Canada. According to the Elizabeth Fry Society of Manitoba, “Canada has one of the highest incarceration rates after the United States and Russia” (“Facts Sheet”).

<sup>7</sup> Not all schools are created alike. In fact, in both Canada and the US, segregation functioned to keep Indigenous peoples and Blacks from mobilizing upward. Restricted to lower-quality schools from which the state gradually disinvested meant that Blacks could not cultivate the kinds of skills that would enable them to compete with whites on the job market once they graduated. Maynard points out, for instance, that in Canada “[t]he attempt to restrict Black access to quality education . . . had the effect of keeping Black peoples in positions of economic subordination to Canada’s white population” (34).

<sup>8</sup> On 21 February 2018, US President Donald Trump invited students, teachers, and parents affected by school shootings to the White House to discuss solutions (“We Should Have Fixed It”). Of course, this is the gathering at which he suggested that teachers and coaches could be armed, hardly a viable solution to the problem of school shootings in the US, not to mention the deeply entrenched gun culture in that country.

<sup>9</sup> See Balingit for details.

<sup>10</sup> Edelman argues that in a heteronormative regime that values reproductive futurism, queerness is “the place of the social order’s

death drive: a place, to be sure, of abjection expressed in the stigma, sometimes fatal, that follows from reading that figure literally, and hence a place from which liberal politics strives—and strives quite reasonably, given its unlimited faith in reason—to disassociate the queer” (3).

<sup>11</sup> For details, see “Separation.” It should be noted here too that

detaining migrant children is a problem in Canada and other countries and is not therefore limited to the US (see Ball). This is not to downplay the current crisis, but to highlight that there is a need for change in many countries regarding the treatment of migrant families.

<sup>12</sup> See Fernandez et al. for details.

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