Feminism without Grown-Ups: Anti-Racism and the “Matter” of Childhood

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Introduction

Much feminist thinking deploys the concept of maturity, yet this term is far from unproblematic. Perhaps I should give an example. In response to a question about the larger political significance of her work, feminist philosopher Rosi Braidotti states that feminists can offer “the ordinary citizen” of Europe help in “addressing internal obstacles,” such as heterosexism and racial prejudice (Pető, 2014). She argues that, by promising that “it will come good in the end,” feminists can convince the European public that it is worthwhile to undertake the painful rejection of “identities [that] we don’t need anymore”: “We don’t need to be nationalist. We don’t need to be racist. We don’t need to be idiotic populists. Let’s be third millennium Europeans. Let’s grow up.” By framing her message as a call for individual transformation, Braidotti accomplishes two things. First, she reduces systemic, structural inequalities to the stubborn and outdated beliefs of “ordinary” Europeans. Second, she locates “feminists” as unimplicated in the social problems she has identified. More accurately, these feminists have already “grown up” and embraced the future. In both cases, she homogenizes the groups to which she refers. All feminists have rejected racist identities and all “ordinary citizens” are in need of re-education. Linking these moves is a developmental temporality, whereby mature feminists can lead their immature fellow Europeans to a multicultural, egalitarian future—but only if the latter group is willing to grow up. Social change is hereby predicated on the psychological development of individuals. Racists, nationalists, and populists are simultaneously outmoded and childish, whereas feminists are mature and progressive. The latter must guide the former to a shared, hopeful future for “European civilization.”

Something strange has happened here. Braidotti presents a politically astute, thoroughly modern, and (above all) mature feminism as the solution to European social stagnation. She is far from alone in associating processes of maturation with progressive politics. Anti-racist philosopher Shannon Sullivan (2014), in asserting the need for white anti-racist parenting,
argues that “adults’ racial habits, including those that function unconsciously, have their beginnings in childhood” (p. 87). She continues by claiming that “in childhood, developing habits tend to be labile and capable of relatively easy redirection. Once sedimented in adulthood, however, habits (racial and otherwise) are relatively difficult to change” (p. 87). Sullivan provides no evidence for these claims, which nonetheless serve as the basis for her argument. In a reversal of this temporality, Jack Halberstam (2011) has critiqued “the punishing norms that discipline behavior and manage human development with the goal of delivering us from unruly childhoods to orderly and predictable adulthoods,” instead celebrating “the wondrous anarchy of childhood” (p. 3). What links Braidotti, Sullivan, and Halberstam is a shared insistence that there is something politically salient about the process of becoming an adult. These theorists argue that maturation (either literally or figuratively) can form the basis of an anti-racist, feminist, and queer political project.

When I began researching Feminism without Grown-Ups, I found this logic compelling. However, I am now convinced that that it is at best misleading, and at worst pernicious, to invest too much political hope in either individual development or a discourse of maturity. Indeed, this logic works to reduce systemic power relations to the relative maturity of individual bodies. It is on this intellectual terrain that I approached the current project. What began as a study of the racial politics of early childhood soon shifted to the more theoretical reflection on anti-racist white feminism that you are currently reading. As I earnestly pursued my intellectual object, I realized that the more directly I focused on childhood, the harder it was to see. At first, I wanted to remedy what I perceived to be a failure of critical theorists to grapple with the political implications of “actual children” and their development. Yet as I moved from an ethnographic project to a more cultural studies-oriented one, I found myself no closer to answering the questions I had. It was only once childhood became a faint trace in my research that I was able to comprehend the interrelated problems of ethics and epistemology that initially drew me to it. My attention was captured by the association of childhood with ethical purity and epistemic
limitation and adulthood with ethical agency and self-awareness. From here, I shifted focus to less literal instances of this logic, especially as it relates to subject formation. In particular, I am interested in how subjects who benefit from white supremacy can effectively oppose it given their implication in it. Thus, the political agency of the white feminist subject, who is materially supported by the systems of domination to which she is (ostensibly) opposed, became a key site of inquiry for me.

Accordingly, *Feminism without Grown-Ups: Anti-Racism and the “Matter” of Childhood* addresses the uncertain relationship between knowledge and practice for white feminists. I (pace Braidotti) explicitly reject maturity as an ethical, epistemic, or political ideal. Its promises of self-awareness, ethical competence, and final solutions are counterproductive for privileged subjects who nonetheless desire an end to the unjust systems from which they benefit. As the same time, white feminists would be wise to avoid the romanticization of childhood innocence and malleability suggested by Halberstam. No white subject is innocent when it comes to white supremacy, and a capacity for self-transformation by no means guarantees the possibility of social change. Thus, *Feminism without Grown-Ups* is emphatically not an embrace of immaturity and childishness. It proposes a different framework altogether. If there is no “growing up” for white feminists, it is not because we are free to bask in the pleasures of unruly childhoods. Rather, it is because we are constitutively incapable of achieving the ethical competence and epistemic wholeness that maturity would seem to promise. White feminists emerge as subjects in infinite, inescapable responsibility for the ongoing injustices from which we benefit, including but not limited to white supremacy and colonialism. Being white, we remain ignorant and incompetent in the face of this responsibility for our entire lives, regardless of whether or not we eventually become adults. Even as white feminists find ourselves oppressed by sexism, heterosexism, ableism, classism, or adultism, we remain implicated in and responsible for systemic racial domination. No amount of theoretical sophistication or interpersonal intimacy with individual people of color allows white feminists to transcend our
ethical and epistemic limitations. Indeed, our status as limited, implicated, and incompetent subjects must form the basis of our anti-racist white feminist political practice. It is toward this end that *Feminism without Grown-Ups* is directed.

The chapters that follow each address questions related to anti-racist white feminist ethics and epistemology in some way. They all bear the traces of my continuing interest in childhood, maturity, and development. Chapter 2 perhaps most directly touches upon the “matter” of childhood. Through a feminist science studies analysis of what I call the “developmental sciences,” I arrive at an ethic of epistemic irreconcilability. This involves an embrace of the disunity of different feminist knowledge projects. Conceived of as the productive practice of making things more difficult that they need to be, epistemic irreconcilability echoes throughout this project.

Chapter 3 begins with a consideration of the developmental needs of hypothetical children, and from here moves to questions of epistemic incompetence and ethical responsibility. I call into question both the innocence of white childhood and the ethical agency of white adulthood. Instead, I propose that white subjects can more effectively challenge racism by embracing their confusion and shame. At the same time, they should become indifferent to their own futures in order to concentrate on remedying the injustices of the past and present.

Chapter 4 looks sideways at the concept of maturity as it pertains to white feminism. Noting that maturity means something other than merely acting like an adult, I critique approaches to multiracial feminist solidarity that rely on either the theoretical sophistication of white feminists or their intimacy with particular women of color. To the contrary, I suggest that rejecting maturity’s specious promises of interpersonal harmony and epistemic mastery may be the best way forward for white feminists who desire to building meaningful political alliances with people of color to end white supremacy.

Whereas the mature feminism proposed by Braidotti heralds a triumphant future, *Feminism without Grown-Ups* asks white feminists to take a harder look at ourselves. Our
desires for justice, our hard-won knowledge, our best intentions: none of these exempt us from our implication in systemic racism. We are not entitled to political solidarity or interpersonal intimacy with people of color, especially if our politics are fundamentally amenable to white supremacy. *Feminism without Grown-Ups* promises no answers to these problems. Instead, it suggests that white feminists spend more time pursuing questions.
Chapter 1: Epistemic Irreconcilability

Childhood is a key site of contestation over the content and meaning of human nature. As Daniela Caselli notes, “childhood today is for many theorists the privileged standpoint from whence to understand what is innate and what ‘merely’ cultural” (2010, p. 247). As a deeply naturalized social category, childhood is often posited as a biologically-based, universal, and ahistorical feature of human embodiment. As Allison James and Alan Prout describe it, “it is biological immaturity rather than childhood which is a universal and natural feature of human groups, for ways of understanding this period of human life—the institution of childhood—vary cross-culturally although they do form a specific structural and cultural component of all known societies” (1997, p. 3). While childhood is presented here as taking different forms across space and time, “biological immaturity” emerges to reestablish childhood as a cross-cultural, transhistorical phenomenon. Likewise, scientific knowledge about putatively natural processes of child development appears to govern what claims can reasonably be made about the ostensibly cultural phenomenon of childhood in all its variations. It is moments such as these, where a social category is rendered as biological, obvious, and unobjectionable, that the politics of truth are at their most contentious.

Although the epistemological disagreements around childhood are a particularly salient example of how some ways studying what it means to be human come to be seen as more rigorous and unmediated than others, they are far from exceptional. A similar truth politics attaches to feminist knowledge projects that seek to provide insight into questions about human nature. Whereas feminist scientific inquiry has shed light on the “naturecultural” (Haraway, 2008) materialization of gender, humanistic feminist approaches offer (non-scientific) resources for understanding the embodiment of femininities and masculinities. These approaches need not be considered antagonistic, and indeed they often complement one another. Nonetheless, Sari Irni (2013) has noted a “politics of materiality” within recent feminist theory, whereby
theoretical work is critiqued as limited insofar as it does not draw from the concepts and methods of the natural sciences. Similarly, Sara Ahmed (2008) has argued that internecine accusations of “anti-biologism” have worked to undermine the epistemic authority of feminist scholarship on the cultural and discursive features of embodiment. Accordingly, feminist knowledge projects are thought to hold greater epistemic authority insofar as they can attach themselves to the natural sciences. Scientific inquiry is hereby believed to help feminism become more mature: “[S]ustained interest in biological detail...will enable feminist research to move past its dependency on social constructionism and generate more vibrant, biologically attuned accounts of the body” (Wilson, 2004, p. 14). But as Irni and Ahmed argue, this epistemic politics does a disservice to the capacious, rigorous, and transformative feminist epistemologies that exist outside of the sciences. It treats feminist work across the humanities as if it were merely pre-empirical. At the same time, it subordinates feminism(s) to a narrowly-defined concept of scientific rigor. The epistemic value of feminist knowledge projects is hereby diminished and denied in comparison to the more “mature” natural sciences. Despite its affiliation with these fields, feminist science is not immune from this taming. While its association with the natural sciences grants it undue epistemic authority in relation to non-scientific feminist approaches, it nonetheless remains marginal to mainstream scientific inquiry. Thus, the subordination of humanistic feminist knowledge projects to scientific ones plays into a larger dynamic whereby all feminist epistemologies are seen as lacking rigor or substance when compared to the “objective” natural sciences.

While both feminist science and (humanistic) feminist theory have much to offer to feminist politics, neither should be understood as providing final grounding for the other. To the contrary, there remain key distinctions between how natural scientific and humanistic fields conceptualize and interrogate their objects, and these are not overcome by a shared political imaginary. In fact, the fissures and disjunctions between feminist knowledge projects should be understood as productive and valuable for feminist politics. Accordingly, I argue for an ethic of
epistemic irreconcilability that might guide feminists as we decide which kinds of truth claims to pursue. To illustrate this point, I consider some examples of how feminist science and feminist theory have each conceptualized the emergence of gendered embodiment. Rather than seeking to adjudicate between these approaches, I note that they each capture key aspects of reality of interest to feminists which the other cannot.

I begin by offering a brief overview of feminist science studies through the lens of the “developmental sciences.” Feminist sciences studies is a heterogeneous sub-field, straddling the border between the sciences and the humanities. Its insights offer valuable contextualization for scientific truth claims, such that the natural sciences are dethroned as the final arbiter of human nature without simply being discarded. What I call the “developmental sciences” have been instrumental in producing dominant understandings of what it means to live a normal life. My critique of these fields thus serves to open up epistemic room for dissonant feminist approaches to be considered without any of these being tethered to the mandates of normative development.

Next, I focus on one example of feminist developmental science which claims to observe the emergence of “gender itself.” I will then compare this to how some feminist theory has understood the origins of gendered embodiment. While noting that both paradigms are limited, I argue that these limits are productive. In other words, what makes these approaches valuable to feminist politics is precisely that neither can offer a totalizing account of gendered embodiment. Accordingly, I conclude by expanding upon my concept of epistemic irreconcilability. In doing so, I suggest that political concerns can and should guide feminists as we decide which knowledge projects best serve our ends.

**Developmental Sciences**

Feminism is far from alone in offering an account of what it means to be human. Indeed, much feminist energy has been expended in challenging prevailing conceptions of human
nature. What I refer to as the “developmental sciences” undergird the epistemic authority of dominant understandings of what counts as a normal life course. These disciplines (including but not limited to developmental psychology, developmental neuroscience, and developmental biology) are claimed to offer the most authoritative and unmediated knowledge about how key aspects of personhood (such as linguistic capacity, moral reasoning, or, notably, gender identity) take shape. Accordingly, the developmental sciences tacitly articulate a theory of subject formation. Given their epistemic authority, this may have disconcerting effects for feminist theories of the subject. It is in this context that feminist accounts of human experience often find themselves in competition with putatively apolitical scientific theories of development. While the developmental sciences can tell us some things, they cannot answer all of the questions we might have about how bodies change through time.

Developmental frameworks gain much of their epistemic authority for making claims about human nature through their affiliation with the natural sciences. Yet as feminist science studies scholars have argued, the natural sciences are themselves sets of culturally specific and historically contingent practices. As such, the argument that the natural sciences offer a more rigorous, compelling, or accurate account of reality than do other ways of knowing mobilizes Irni’s (2013) “politics of materiality.” Notably, calls for the scientific validation of feminist claims rely on prior political investments. These investments only retroactively seek the rhetorical and epistemic force of the natural sciences for validation, often by arguing that non-scientific approaches have ignored the true “materiality” of whatever object is under analysis (e.g., bodies, nature, sex/gender). Irni suggests that this position presents feminist theories that do not draw directly from the natural sciences as epistemologically flawed, and hence politically suspect. Accordingly, feminist critiques of the sciences’ epistemological status in general equally apply to the developmental sciences in particular. As the theories of subject formation offered by development both reinforce and benefit from the epistemic authority of the developmental sciences, these critiques work to destabilize its rhetorical force as well. Briefly reviewing the
feminist science studies literature, I wish to highlight three key points relevant to the present discussion.

First, the sciences are best conceived of as a set of culturally specific and historically contingent practices rather than a unified method of discovering eternal truths. Karen Barad’s (2007) concept of “agential realism” seeks to account for the mutual construction of matter and meaning in particular engagements. From another angle, Donna Haraway (1989) has argued for greater attention to the discursive elements of scientific inquiry: “Scientific practice may be considered a kind of story-telling practice—a rule-governed, constrained, historically changing craft of narrating the history of nature. Scientific practice and scientific theories produce and are embedded in particular kinds of stories. Any scientific statement about the world depends intimately upon language, upon metaphor” (p. 4). All of this is to say that scientific inquiry is a kind of labor. It is performed by specific, embodied historical actors under certain social and political conditions to definite ends.

Second, it is for precisely this reason that scientific knowledge claims cannot be “objective” in the sense of being without perspective and universally applicable. Because the sciences as themselves socially constituted and situated knowledge systems, the truth claims they make emerge out of specific contexts and represent certain interests. Donna Haraway (1988) has rejected the classical understanding of scientific objectivity as a view from nowhere, labeling it “the god trick.” Instead, she argues that the social locations of and relationships between knowers are key elements of knowledge production, and ones which any meaningful definition of objectivity cannot ignore. Other scholars, such as Karen Barad (2007), Helen Longino (1990), and Sandra Harding (2006), have each attempted to formulate politically sensitive and contextualized concepts of objectivity for scientific inquiry. While they differ in their specifics, what they each acknowledge is that all truth claims are made from a certain perspective and in a certain context. This kind of objectivity drastically differs from the decontextualized, universalizing “god trick” critiqued by Haraway.
Third, scientific inquiry is embedded in a specific historical context. Following from the first two points, this point acknowledges that science is not only what happens in the lab, but equally how its claims and questions arise from and are taken up by its larger sociopolitical context. What counts as science, what kinds of questions are asked, and how scientific knowledge is put into practice are all historical and political questions. In other words, they cannot be answered solely through references to the sciences themselves. Historians of science (e.g. Gilman, 1985; Haraway, 1989; Markowitz, 2001) have demonstrated how scientific knowledge and practice have been instrumental in advancing projects of colonialism, eugenics, social purity, and the pathologization of deviance. Likewise, branches of scientific inquiry are co-constructed with their cultural milieu. One contemporary example of this is Jenny Reardon’s (2005) analysis of the Human Genome Diversity Project. Reardon demonstrates how a putatively anti-racist scientific endeavor to disprove the existence of biological racial categories nonetheless worked to further entrench those same categories and the hierarchies attached to them. Thus, the sciences are never separable from their historical and political context, and how scientific knowledge is interpreted and put into practice is not separate from how it is produced in the first place.

The foregoing critiques offer an entry point to question the epistemic authority of the developmental sciences. My goal here is not to debunk these fields, but rather to displace their centrality as a source of knowledge about human nature. I will focus on the history of the modern developmental sciences as they apply to child development; the specific practices by which such sciences construct knowledge about children; and how the resulting truth claims are interpreted and put into practice.

First, the historical context in which the developmental sciences were formed is key to understanding why they continue to hold so much epistemic authority on matters of human growth. Erica Burman (2008) locates the origins of the study of child development at the intersection of biology and philosophy in the 19th century; it was believed to hold the key to
understanding human nature given children’s supposed similarity to primates, adult women, and colonized populations. Similarly, Nancy Lesko (2012) argues that the study of adolescence emerged simultaneously with evolutionary theories of human society, whereby more developed Europeans were believed to have achieved a higher level of civilization than “primitive” colonized populations. Finally, Claudia Castañeda (2002) notes that the body of the developing child was mobilized to make claims about racial, gender, and colonial hierarchies across scientific disciplines in the 19th century. As such, the impetus to turn to the study of child development as an indispensable source of knowledge about how human bodies and psyches grow and change is a historically specific phenomenon with a politically-laden past.

Second, the specific practices by which the developmental sciences establish their knowledge claims are themselves performed by embodied social actors in a given context. Accordingly, these practices are tools designed to test, measure, and investigate specific phenomena, which are themselves delimited by pre-determined concepts and frameworks. In particular, Burman (2008) argues that child development researchers can affect their results by how they set up experiments, interpret their findings, and frame their questions. Far from being infallible, unmediated means to access the truth of children’s natures, the practices of developmental scientists are historically contingent mechanisms, dependent upon human cognition and labor.

Third, the ways in which developmental knowledge claims are interpreted and enacted are inseparable from how these are established within their respective fields. The developmental sciences, being social and historical phenomena, are likewise inseparable from their larger context. This is to say that how developmental science is understood and put into practice in a wider public sphere both informs and is informed by the kinds of knowledge claims made by scientists. For example, Tara Zahra (2011) has argued that the study of child psychology was heavily informed by competing national political interests in the aftermath of World War II; rebuilding strong nations required rebuilding strong families, and child
psychologists were both enlisted in and significantly shaped this project. Whether these experts advocated for tight-knit nuclear families or strong communal bonds depended upon how they interpreted competing psychological paradigms in light of socialist, capitalist, and nationalist political projects. Similarly, Ann Laura Stoler (2002) has noted that debates about the proper care and education of white Dutch children in the colonies were central to Dutch imperialism. Theories of racial degeneration were central to arguments both for and against non-maternal care and nursery schools. In both cases, the research agendas, evidence bases, and truth claims of child development experts emerged from the particular political contexts in which they were working. Just as science as a social institution cannot be removed from its historical context, so too are the interpretations and implementations of developmental knowledges inseparable from the knowledge claims themselves.

Taken together, the foregoing critiques demonstrate that the developmental sciences are epistemologically limited, historically embedded, and (hence) subject to political critique. Crucially, these are the means by which the developmental account of a normal life course has achieved so much epistemic and normative force, rather than unmediated access to universal truth. One consequence of this is that feminist claims about embodiment, perception, enculturation, and cognition gain epistemic authority insofar as they can be validated by evidence from these fields. Yet the solution to this problem cannot be reduced to striving for better scientific practice, even if that is meant to refer to feminist approaches to science. Feminist interventions into the developmental sciences are themselves limited by the history, context, norms, and practices of these fields. In this way, the epistemic authority of the developmental sciences can work to set feminist science and feminist theory at odds with one another—to the detriment of both ways of knowing.
Sexing the Baby

Feminist approaches to developmental science, insofar as they reinforce its status as a key arbiter of human nature, may work to undermine the epistemic authority of other modes of feminist knowledge production. This is particularly noticeable in the case of gendered embodiment. By reviewing one example of feminist developmental science, I hope to call attention to how its strengths are precisely what limit the kinds of questions it can ask.

Anne Fausto-Sterling (1992; 2000; 2012) is a field-defining figure for feminist biology. Her work seeks not only to critique sexist and heteronormative models of and assumptions about human bodies but also to put feminist principles into scientific practice. Recently, she has co-authored two articles on the emergence of gendered behavior and preferences during the first three years of life (Fausto-Sterling, Coll, & Lamarre, 2012a; Fausto-Sterling, Coll, & Lamarre 2012b). Collectively titled “Sexing the Baby,” these texts seek to provide an account of “the productive processes by which gender itself emerges” (Fausto-Sterling et al., 2012a, p. 1684). Fausto-Sterling and her co-authors aim to “identify the earliest known sex-related biological and behavioral differences in young infants, toddlers and their parents” (p. 1684) in order to offer a feminist account of gender differentiation. Although these articles make a critical feminist intervention into the “health sciences” literature, they nonetheless reinforce a developmental account of the subject. In what follows, I will address how the articles’ placement in the health sciences literature; their subscription to developmental frameworks; and their definition of key terms all work to productively limit what kinds of knowledge they can provide about gender and embodiment.

Health Sciences

In order to understand Fausto-Sterling et al.’s argument, it is necessary to situate these articles within the “health sciences” literature from which they emerge and to which they are responding. Despite sharing a central focus on gendered embodiment, these articles are primarily concerned with presenting new theoretical paradigms that will aid researchers. As the
authors note, “[S]ex-related variation presents a theoretical challenge to the health sciences...[and] has important implications for health maintenance and disease prevention and treatment” (p. 2012a, p. 1684). In contrast to models that start from either a universal biological norm or two, non-overlapping sexed norms, Fausto-Sterling at al. propose a “dynamic systems” model that is a “process-oriented, dynamic accounts of the body. [This] framework integrates biology and culture in a fashion that has the potential to demonstrate the productive processes by which gender itself emerges and through which we can understand how seemingly sex-based differences in health are really due to the dynamic integration of biology and culture” (p. 1684). Thus, Fausto-Sterling and her co-authors are interested in the emergence of “gender itself” through the lens of sex-differentiated health concerns.

Developmental Frameworks

Although Fausto-Sterling and her co-authors are offering a critical feminist perspective on health sciences research, they nonetheless subscribe to many of the guiding norms and methodologies of this literature in order to remain legible within its terms. This constrains in advance what a feminist account of development can look like. Notably, developmental thinking frames how questions are asked, how variables are measured, and how results are interpreted. This can be seen in how these texts ground themselves in a search for the origins of gender difference; their subscription to a developmental temporality; and how they employ a form of methodological individualism.

A key component of “Sexing the Baby”’s argument is that the emergence of “gender itself” can be located and observed. This empiricism seeks to challenge claims that early arising “sex-related biological and behavioral differences” are innate, natural, and/or inevitable: “Our goal is to establish a time line for emergence of difference, which means starting before a phenomenon of interest is measurable in order to follow its appearance over time” (p. 1685). Crucial to this search for origins is an appeal to childhood as the raw material of adult gender
identities. By centering on the emergence of gendered behavior in the bodies of individuals, this focus on origins works to erase other key aspects of gender (as I will demonstrate later).

Equally important to “Sexing the Baby”’s framework is a reliance on a developmental temporality. This temporality presents a core, stable gender identity that slowly emerges out of an undifferentiated infant subjectivity. This model posits that a gendered sense of self emerges slowly over time, remains relatively stable thereafter, and persists into adulthood. These texts figure gender as sedimenting within the bodies of individual children, as if it were physically located there. Moreover, they imply that gender becomes fixed over time. While they do not state this explicitly, the articles’ temporality suggests that possibility of transforming how individuals experience and embody gender is largely limited to intervening in the early developmental environment that is under consideration.

This developmental trajectory institutes a methodological individualism as “Sexing the Baby”’s primary frame of reference. Gender is conceived of as one’s individual gender identity, and in this way it takes on a primarily psychological meaning. Each infant is presented as undergoing a process of enculturation that molds their bodies and psyches into adult gendered forms. Crucially, these articles draw broadly from the developmental sciences to support their arguments. The disciplinary boundaries of psychology, biology, and neuroscience are less important than are these fields’ shared interest in “development.” This means that the registers of behavior, physiological difference, and brain structure collapse into one another. “Gender itself” is presumably located somewhere between these. While a key contribution of Fausto-Sterling et al.’s “dynamic systems” approach is that it holds that the biological body is always already formed in and through culture, it nonetheless presents this process as occurring internally and separately for each of the bodies so affected. This is a productive limitation, in that it can tell us interesting and important things about how gender materializes in putatively natural features of embodiment. However, it is a limitation nonetheless, for it presents only one account of how gender materializes and then only at the level of the individual.
Key Terms

The effects of these developmental frameworks can be most clearly seen in how “Sexing the Baby” defines its key terms. Many of these, such as “sex,” “gender,” “men and women,” “biology and culture,” and “embodiment,” have been of interest to feminist scholars from across the disciplines. In both how it defines these key terms and in which authors it does (not) cite to support its claims, “Sexing the Baby” (inadvertently) undermines the scope and depth of feminist scholarship on these concepts. Crucially, this results not from any intentional or accidental elisions by the authors, but rather from how these texts are informed by the norms of their fields. Most notably, the authors reinforce a binary, anatomy-derived conception of gender through their use of key terms: “For both sexes, language and toy preference differentiation start after infants can at least passively distinguish adult men from adult women, but well before any demonstrated specific knowledge about gender stereotypes or the ability to self-label as male or female” (2012b, p. 1696). Sex is hereby treated as a binary, stable object that serves as the basis for cultural inscription. Gender is likewise reduced to self-perception and the ability to categorize others. Once again, each of the limitations noted above are productive. By holding certain concepts stable and relying on an individualistic frame, they allow “Sexing the Baby” to make a key critical intervention into the health sciences literature and to offer insightful perspectives on how gender becomes embodied. Yet at the same time, they also obscure other aspects of gendered embodiment. In particular, non-scientific feminist approaches to these concepts are eclipsed in Fausto-Sterling et al.’s discussion. Despite making a critical feminist intervention into the developmental sciences, neither of these articles cite any non-scientific feminist work. Moreover, the explicitly feminist scientific work that they do cite is largely limited to Fausto-Sterling’s own. This is in part to conform with the disciplinary norms of the health sciences, as it is unlikely that philosophical or cultural studies texts would carry the same epistemic weight “Sexing the Baby”’s primary audience. Nonetheless, this citational politics
works to reinforce Irni’s (2013) “politics of materiality,” as it suggests that feminist scholarship can only compete with “hard science” if it disowns its humanistic interlocutors.

This points not to any particular error on the part of “Sexing the Baby,” but rather to the need for feminist scientific and non-scientific epistemologies to be in dialogue with one another. Crucially, feminist theory must not be seen as needing to be empirically supported by feminist science. Rather, they should both be understood as valuable in their own right. Rejecting the “politics of materiality” that would adjudicate between divergent feminist epistemologies, the gap between them should be seen as a site of political and epistemological possibility.

**Feminist Theory**

Given that even feminist approaches to development are limited, other ways of understanding human nature, experience, and embodiment are needed. Fortunately, feminist scholars have long theorized these and related concepts outside of the frameworks of both the sciences and of development. If development harbors a tacit theory of subject formation, then feminist theory might be precisely the epistemic resource needed to offer alternative conceptions of how bodies and psyches emerge, interact, and change over time. Drawing on the work of Judith Butler (2004; 2005), I will demonstrate how feminist theory can offer epistemologically rigorous and compelling accounts of the emergence of gendered embodiment. Accordingly, it needs neither to replace feminist science nor to be supported by it. I will then examine one feminist cultural studies approach to autism (Willey, Subramaniam, Hamilton, & Couperus, 2015) as counterpoint to its treatment in “Sexing the Baby.” By engaging with these texts, I will demonstrate that feminist theory can productively challenge the undue epistemic authority of the natural sciences on key questions of human embodiment. I will discuss this in terms of context and individualism; origins and temporality; and the distribution of epistemic authority.
Context and Individualism

Whereas “Sexing the Baby” operated from a methodological individualism that located “gender itself” as an internal psychic and bodily trait, Judith Butler has argued that gender cannot be understood solely or primarily as a property of individuals. In “Sexing the Baby,” social context and cultural milieu are environmental stimuli that shaped how sexed individuals come to learn and embody gender as an identity trait; gender is thus both individual and about conforming to pre-established norms. In contrast, Butler argues that gender forms part of and is formed by a much larger discursive matrix of power relations: “Gender is not exactly what one ‘is’ nor is it precisely what one ‘has.’ Gender is the apparatus by which the production and normalization of masculine and feminine take place along with the interstitial forms of hormonal, chromosomal, psychic, and performative that gender assumes...To conflate the definition of gender with its normative expression is inadvertently to reconsolidate the power of the norm to constrain the definition of gender” (2004, p. 42). The key difference between these two models lies in what each understands gender to be, how it emerges, and where it is located. For “Sexing the Baby,” gender is a property of individuals, arises through processes of learning and development in a social context, and is located in the bodies and psyches of discrete persons. For Butler, gender is part of the discursive apparatuses of subject formation, emerges through shifts within and iterations of social norms, and is located prior to and existentially beyond the boundaries of the subject; moreover, it cannot be reduced solely to its normative expression. As such, Butler’s concept of gender differs considerably from that of Fausto-Sterling et al., and it provides a critical alternative to it.

Origins and Temporality

“Sexing the Baby” seeks to pinpoint and observe the emergence of “gender itself.” Fausto-Sterling and her co-authors aim to measure gender difference by tracing it back to when it first arises: “Methodologically, we insist that to study difference we must begin before it exists
and observe its emergence” (Fausto-Sterling et al., 2012a, p. 1690). Accordingly, “Sexing the Baby” then seeks to document and explain how gender congeals and stabilizes for individuals during the first three years of life. What is important here is that gender is understood to have a discrete origin, sediment over time, and remain relatively stable as an internal trait of individuals. For Butler, gender has no moment of origin, only appears to sediment, and can only present itself as stable and coherent because its contingency is culturally disavowed:

[T]he field of reality produced by gender norms constitutes the background for the surface appearance of gender in its idealized dimensions. But how are we to understand the historical formation of such ideals, their persistence through time, and their site as a complex convergence of social meanings that do not immediately appear to be about gender?...One cannot offer a full narrative account of the citational history of the norm: whereas narrativity does not fully conceal its history, neither does it reveal a single origin (2004, p. 52).

Moreover, this is true for Butler’s account of subjectivity more generally. Relevant to the concept of “development,” Butler does not understand adult subjectivity as arising from infant subjectivity in any linear fashion. In describing the “prehistory” of subjectivity, Butler’s temporality takes on a strange recursivity:

This prehistory has never stopped happening and, as such, is not a prehistory in any chronological sense. It is not done with, over, relegated to a past, which then becomes part of a causal or narrative reconstruction of the self. On the contrary, that prehistory interrupts the story I have to give of myself, makes every account of myself partial and failed...That prehistory continues to happen every time I enunciate myself. In speaking the “I,” I undergo something of what cannot be captured or assimilated by the “I,” since I always arrive too late to myself (2005, p. 78-79).

Taken together, Butler’s accounts of subject formation displace the continuous, linear, and stable developmental temporality found in “Sexing the Baby.” Crucially, they need not be understood as mutually exclusive. While Fausto-Sterling and her co-authors seek to intervene in the prevailing discourse of biologically-based, individual development, Butler aims to displace this model of subject formation in order to consider other aspects of how gender comes to be embodied.
Similarly, “Sexing the Baby,” insofar as it subscribes to the epistemological norms of the health and developmental sciences, cannot adequately address certain key concepts on its own. Among these, its treatment of autism is particularly glaring. Despite the existence of feminist and neurodiversity approaches to autism (e.g. Bumiller, 2008), which treat it as another spectrum of valuable human difference, Fausto-Sterling and her co-authors understand it only in terms of pathology. In these articles, autism is named as one gender-differentiated health condition among many. Its location alongside ADD and dyslexia enables the authors to establish the unique contribution of their “dynamic systems” theory to the study of human health and development. The authors list these conditions as examples of where their approach offers a significant advance over current biomedical models. While this reference to autism is made in passing, it remains troubling. It suggests that autism can be adequately understood within the framework of the health sciences alone, and thus secures gender-sensitive accounts of autism as the domain of the health sciences. Feminist approaches to autism are thus linked to its pathologization. Thus, it acutely demonstrates some of the dangers of granting foundational epistemic authority to the natural sciences.

In marked contrast, “The Mating Life of Geeks” (Willey et al., 2015) offers a queer, feminist, and anti-racist alternative to this stigmatizing medical model. While not denying that the sciences can tell us something about autism, the authors argue that autism cannot be understood outside of its discursive circulation within a larger political context. Crucially, the authors track the emergence of a newly “lovable” autistic subject, one is capable of being a productive worker and in engaging partnered, monogamous, and reproductive heterosexual love. This new subject is marked as white and male, and has come to stand in for the recuperable, “good” autistic subject. Thus, what would at first appear to be a study of the representation of autism in fact tracks the emergence of a newly viable gender formation. Linking the history of white supremacy, the return of sociobiological explanations for human
difference, and cultural representations of autism as the domain of white male heterosexuality, “The Mating Life of Geeks” convincingly demonstrates that feminist theory, history, and media studies are key to understanding how different forms of subjectivity emerge.

The key distinction between “Sexing the Baby” and “The Mating Life of Geeks” lies in their different epistemologies. “Sexing the Baby” aims to intervene in established scientific fields and so must accede to at least some of their epistemic norms in order to be taken seriously. Some of these norms predispose “Sexing the Baby” to view autism primarily as a health condition to be studied and managed, and upon which it can draw to assert its relevance to the field. In contrast, “The Mating Life of Geeks” is directed towards a feminist cultural studies audience and offers a critical response to dominant conceptions of autism, including scientific ones. Autism hereby serves as a textual anchor point that exposes the epistemic limitations of feminist science. It is a particularly visible example of what must remain stable in order for Fausto-Sterling and her co-authors to be able to make their critical intervention. Whereas “Sexing the Baby” relies on methodological individualism and a developmental temporality in order to be legible within the health sciences, “The Mating Life of Geeks” is not bound by these norms. As such, it is able to more effectively consider how issues of representation, historical context, and social norms influence knowledge production. Crucially, this means that “The Mating Life of Geeks” is able to track the emergence of “gender itself” in ways that “Sexing the Baby” cannot, namely by focusing on the operation of gender in a larger cultural frame. The epistemic fissures between the two articles are productive, and they need not be mutually exclusive accounts. Rather, it is a question of how their respective knowledge projects are best articulated to one another. In this sense, feminist science might be argued to need feminist theory just as much as the reverse (if not more so). Indeed, both knowledge projects are indispensable for a vibrant, diverse, and oppositional feminist politics. Yet it is their irreconcilability, rather than their convergence, that offers the greatest epistemic and political promise.
Irreconcilability

As I have demonstrated, even feminist, queer, and anti-racist approaches can be subsumed into hegemonic knowledges projects with which they share an epistemic framework. Because the politics of materiality works to set feminist epistemologies against one another, it risks taming their most radical aspects. While it can articulate scientific and humanistic feminist knowledge projects to one another, the politics of materiality can also work to obscure key differences between their respective epistemologies and contributions. Thus, there are risks to both embracing a totalizing epistemic unity and unilaterally privileging one kind of feminist epistemic practice over another. Instead, an ethic of epistemic irreconcilability, understood as the strategic negotiation between divergent feminist knowledge projects, offers significant benefits to feminist politics. Epistemic irreconcilability seeks to leverage the gaps between different feminist knowledges as a resource for feminist politics. Suspicious of easy answers and happy endings, epistemic irreconcilability inquires about the political work needed to make otherwise incommensurable knowledge projects and political positions line up neatly.

In warning against projects of epistemic convergence, Elizabeth Wilson (2011) argues that “the more things correspond in a linear fashion, the more they line up, match up, and ratify each other, the less we have moved from the place where we began” (p. 166). Although Wilson is referring to recent attempts to unite neuroscience and psychoanalysis, her comments could easily apply to the relationship between scientific and nonscientific feminist knowledge projects. Instead, she argues “the interdisciplinarity of these new neuroscience-psychoanalysis projects ought to have the effect, not of bolstering the authority of the neurosciences or psychoanalysis, but of each being somewhat undone in the presence of the other” (p. 150), an encounter she refers to as “incommensurability.” In this model, the interface between two or more incongruent epistemologies would be mutually transformative. In a similar vein, Lynne Huffer (2015) argues that “the return to nature in some contemporary feminist philosophy skirts the danger of universalizing the historically contingent frames of our present world as a new metaphysics of
life” (p. 140). For Huffer, the failures of attempt to bridge the discontinuities between different historical manifestations of “nature” points to the limitations of any attempt to know this object. As such, the limits of knowing are sites for ethical and political encounters, whereby a consciousness of one’s historical situatedness radically relativizes one’s epistemic capacities. This position clearly mirrors Sandra Harding’s approach to negotiating multiple, divergent scientific knowledges:

Different patterns of knowledge cannot fit together like pieces of a jigsaw puzzle...Even in the history of Western sciences one can reflect on the different representations of nature produced by thinking of it as an organism, a mechanism such as a clock, as a more complex mechanism such as a computer, or as a lifeboat or a spaceship. Each of these has played an important role in directing scientific practice to new knowledge and guiding sciences in revising assumptions when observations have failed to support hypotheses. Yet each is incompatible with the others in significant respects (2006, p. 141).

A common thread running throughout each of these accounts is a call to embrace the fissures between feminist knowledge projects as productive, rather than attempting to reconcile them into a single paradigm.

Indeed, this irreconcilability might serve as the basis for a practical strategy for determining which knowledge projects to pursue. Deboleena Roy has noted the importance of maintaining ties with feminists outside of her field: “Although I may have been somewhat isolated in the lab, I reached out to and was embraced by a community of feminist activists and scholars from other disciplines. This sense of community made it possible for me to stay in the sciences but also made me appreciate the importance of starting my scientific thoughts from the lives of marginalized others” (2008, p. 138). For Roy, engagement with a community of feminist scholars from across the disciplines enabled her to engage in more effective intervention into her scientific practice. This suggests that what makes a knowledge project feminist lies less in its methodology or its specific contribution than in the political perspectives and communities that shape and are shaped by it. Thus, the key question that feminists should ask when deciding which knowledges are useful to our political ambitions is not “is it true?,” but rather “what does it
(not) allow us to do?“ Crucially, this approach acknowledges (and indeed relies upon) the fact that the inescapable contestation, diversity, and incommensurability of different strands of feminist thought require a wide array of different epistemic practices. Epistemic irreconcilability operates at the edges of knowledge paradigms. It calls attention to what must be held stable in a given paradigm in order for it to function. These anchor points—which are often highly political, if tacitly so—can be illuminated by alternative frameworks. Because all epistemic frameworks require some anchor points in order to be able to make truth claims, they cannot be understood as interchangeable, combinable, or reducible to one another. They are simply irreconcilable. Only a stance that takes this epistemic irreconcilability as a starting point for feminist politics will be sufficient for feminist aims.

Epistemic irreconcilability, which advocates for allowing the contested ground of feminist politics to guide the kinds of knowledges we pursue, is directly inspired by Chela Sandoval’s (2000) *Methodology of the Oppressed*. Crucial to Sandoval’s theory is the concept of “differential consciousness,” a kind of collective, politically self-aware strategy for negotiating competing oppositional discourses. Describing its operations, Sandoval notes that it “enables movement ‘between and among’ ideological positionings… in order to disclose the distinctions among them. In this sense, the differential mode of consciousness functions like the clutch of an automobile, the mechanism that permits the driver to select, engage, and disengage gears in a system for the transmission of power” (p. 58). Moreover, differential consciousness is strategic in that it guides activists to present their claims in whatever register will most likely succeed in a given context: “Yet the differential depends on a form of agency that is self-consciously mobilized in order to enlist and secure influence; the differential is thus performative...When enacted in dialectical relation to one another and not as separated ideologies, each oppositional mode of consciousness, each ideology-praxis, is transformed into tactical weaponry for intervening in shifting currents of power” (p. 58). Practitioners thus intentionally mobilize otherwise irreconcilable political discourses in order to best advance their overall agenda.
Extending this framework to questions of epistemology and knowledge production, Deboleena Roy (2008) has adapted Sandoval’s approach to guide the practical action of feminist scientists. In Roy’s intervention, feminist scientists operate as “insider-outsiders” within their respective fields, making use of scientific frameworks and methodologies in order to subvert their power. As Sandoval and Roy demonstrate, an ethic of epistemic irreconcilability offers great promise to feminist politics. This irreconcilability begins not from a unified feminist politics, but from the unstable, diverse, and loosely collected body of thought called feminism(s). Accordingly, the knowledge projects needed for such a politics will not be easily reconciled with one another, nor should they be. The specious harmony of epistemic unity covers over the fractures and fissures within feminist thought itself. Instead, feminist knowledge projects should embrace these differences as a starting point for curiosity, inquiry, debate, and strategic alliances. This feminist politics, as advocated by Sandoval, does not emerge from the facile solidarity of shared identity, experience, ideology, or epistemology. Rather, it takes the irreconcilability of political ambitions, lived experiences, and ways of knowing as a necessary feature of and resource for oppositional politics.

Epistemic irreconcilability serves as a key resource for my thinking throughout this project. In this way, it might be best understood as the productive practice of making things more difficult than they need be. Indeed, appeals to what seems to be common sense often harbor a tacit, and potentially reactionary, politics. Feminism has rightly been critical of arguments that claim that the putatively innate features of individual bodies should determine how society is to be ordered. This skepticism should extend to even the most marginal, ostensibly unobjectionable, and taken for granted aspects of political discourse and social relations. Indeed, the marginal, the unexceptional, and the apolitical harbor some of the most contentious politics of all.
Chapter 2: Ethical (In)competence and Epistemic Limitation

Calls to protect childhood innocence are commonplace in US politics. While seemingly unobjectionable, these kinds of claims function to limit the scope of acceptable political discourse. For example, the Intercultural Affairs Committee at Yale University circulated a set of student costume guidelines prior to Halloween 2015. Entirely voluntary, the guidelines asked students to refrain from wearing racially stereotypical and/or culturally appropriative costumes in the interest of maintaining a welcoming environment for all participants (Hartocollis, 2015; Hartocollis, 2015; Stack, 2015). In response, child development professor Erika Christakis sent out an email in which she questioned the reasoning behind the guidelines (“Email from Erika Christakis,” 2015). In claiming authority as a “child development specialist,” Christakis frames her rejection of the guidelines as informed by an expert knowledge of human growth. She begins by likening the questionable costume choices of college students to the fantasy play of young children. By her logic, a child’s developmental processes depend upon fantasy and play. Any intervention in this domain, even if for laudable reasons, is presented as ignorant of the basic facts of development. A child’s play cannot be deemed racist, Christakis argues, because it is essential for her development into a fully realized person. Because children ostensibly cannot understand “adult” concepts like cultural appropriation, it would be preposterous to accuse them of such behavior. Although she never explains why the alleged developmental needs of hypothetical preschoolers should take precedence over the wellbeing of students and faculty of color at Yale, this logical leap undergirds Christakis’ argument. In this way, the child serves as a limit case that exposes the guidelines as overreaching and misguided.

Taken at face value, Christakis’ professed concern for children would seem to pose a compelling challenge to anti-racist activists. For Christakis, to be still undergoing a process of
development is to be immune from ethical and political critique. Yet the fact that learning and growth are lifelong processes does not negate the larger political implications of racist actions and the attendant need to impute responsibility for them in the pursuit of justice. If childhood poses a challenge to anti-racism, then it is not because it refutes the wrongness or systematicity of white supremacy. To the contrary, it calls into question the competent, knowing subject that undergirds individualistic models of racism. Indeed, white children and adults are more alike than different in how they come to, experience, and enact their racial subjectivities. Whatever developmental differences are believed to exist between them, both groups are constituted by their social locations as racially unmarked, transcendent subjects (Winnubst, 2006; Yancy, 2008). Accordingly, white children are no less implicated in white supremacy than are white adults. Moreover, white adults are no more ethically or epistemically competent to respond to racism than are white children. Both groups are complicit in and responsible for the systemic injustice of white supremacy, and neither group is ethically competent to fully face this responsibility. Thus, no white subject can transcend her implication in systemic racism. Yet far from advocating a kind of white supremacist nihilism, I argue that (pace Christakis) the impossibility of white subjects to adequately account for their complicity in systemic racism must be understood as a starting point for (rather than a negation of) a collective, political project of white anti-racism.

In this chapter, I will address the intertwined ethical and epistemological claims that undergird the model of responsibility found in Christakis’ letter. Relying on the twin fantasies of white innocence and ethical competence, this individualistic form of responsibility is insufficient for the task of transforming unjust political conditions. Accordingly, I will then present the arguments of two theorists, Judith Butler and Charles Mills, who deny the possibility of individual purity, even as they affirm the ethical and political necessity of assigning responsibility. Although Butler and Mills offer divergent accounts, the tensions between their theories suggest an understanding of responsibility as the collective obligation to grapple from and with one’s
material-discursive social location in the service of social justice and political critique. This reworked model of responsibility suggests two guiding principles for white anti-racist activism: confusion and shame. Emphasizing the importance of ethical and epistemic humility for white subjects, these principles underscore the necessity for white people to hold one another responsible as they collectively work to dismantle white supremacy. Taken together, confusion and shame direct white subjects to ignore their own futures in order to fully commit to ending racism. White people must cede control over the shape the future will take, even to the point of ceasing to care that they will have a future at all. Bearing in mind this existential indifference, I now turn to the fantasy of ethical competence that often distracts white subjects from a more thoroughgoing form of white anti-racism.

**Twin Fantasies**

Despite speaking about a voluntary policy directed at college students, Christakis quickly lapses into considering how this perceived mandate might affect young children. In her email, Christakis claims to be speaking “as an educator concerned with the developmental stages of childhood and young adulthood” (“Email from Erika Christakis,” 2015). In this role, Christakis is concerned about an “exercise of implied control over college students” on the part of administrators. In particular, she argues that “as a former preschool teacher…it is hard for me to give credence to a claim that there is something objectionably ‘appropriative’ about a blonde-haired child’s wanting to be Mulan for a day.” Although she acknowledges that “there is a difference between fantasizing about an individual character vs. appropriating a culture,” with the latter being more clearly objectionable, Christakis continues to conflate the two: “But, then, I wonder what is the statute of limitations on dreaming of dressing as Tiana the Frog Princess if you aren’t a black girl from New Orleans? Is it okay if you are 8, but not 18?” Crucially, Christakis appeals to the putative developmental necessity of “pretend play [as] the foundation

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1 All subsequent quotes from Erika Christakis were taken from this same document (“Email from Erika Christakis,” 2015). See Appendix A for a full copy of this document.
of most cognitive tasks.” She further argues that “we want to be encouraging the exercise of imagination, not constraining it.” In light of her query about the acceptability of racial cross-dressing at “8, but not 18,” it would at first seem that Christakis views college students as sufficiently immature to warrant the indulgence afforded to toddlers.

Yet alongside the playing child, the figure of the young adult plays an important role in Christakis’ argument. Returning to her expertise as a “child development specialist,” Christakis links her political and developmental concerns in a seemingly contradictory question: “What does this debate about Halloween costumes say about our view of young adults, of their strength and judgement?” Whereas previously she had argued for the developmental similarities between children and young adults, the crux of Christakis’ political argument now rests upon the latter’s innate capacities, which would seem to distance them from the former. In rejecting what she perceives as the “censure and prohibition” of “institutional agency,” Christakis appeals to Yale students’ “capacity...to exercise self-censure, through social norming,” and “to ignore or reject things that trouble [them].” For Christakis, adults’ ethical competence grants them moral autonomy over, and responsibility for, innocent children. However, this same competence ensures that adults are sufficiently capable of “exerci[sing] self-censure, through social norming” on matters of race and racism. Thus, adults themselves require no guidance except the court of public opinion in order to act ethically and responsibly. In positing children as unimplicated in racism and adults as capable of adequate ethical and political self-regulation, Christakis tacitly relies on an individualistic model of racism. Crucially, this relationship between childhood innocence and adult competence works to minimize the scope and scale of white supremacy.

By unpacking the assumptions that undergird Christakis’ argument, I hope to call into question the twin fantasies of white innocence and ethical competence that inhibit a more thoroughgoing anti-racist politics.

Christakis dismisses the possibility of a child’s play being “objectionably ‘appropriative’” on the grounds that “pretend play is the foundation of most cognitive tasks.” Accordingly, “we
want to be encouraging the exercise of imagination, not restraining it.” The child presented here is innocent because her play is developmentally necessary. Without it, she may fail to cultivate the cognitive prerequisites that would one day enable her to be a responsible adult. Put another way, a child who is not free to play may not persist as a subject at all. Notably, Christakis suggests that the separation of childhood play and the revelries of adults is not so distinct. In asking after the “statute of limitations” for dressing in a racially problematic costume, she asks “Is it okay if you are 8, but not 18?” In mocking a legalistic framework for adjudicating such questions, Christakis implies that any rationale given for such a distinction would be arbitrary. Similarly, she bemoans the loss of “American universities” as “a safe space” for “maturation.” Having previously expressed her concern with “young adulthood” as a developmental stage, Christakis hereby extends the protection she would afford to children’s play to the “regressive, or even transgressive” actions of adults. In this way, she suggests that whatever renders children immune from charges of racism is by no means unique to them.

Christakis’ postulation of children’s racial innocence emerges at the intersection of a naturalized model of child development and an individualistic understanding of racism. As noted above, Christakis argues that the actions of children cannot be deemed racist because children are not developmentally capable of racist behavior. Hence, to be a child is to be unimplicated in racism. Childhood racial innocence therefore depends upon a conception of racism as the intentional, hateful acts of knowing individuals. For Christakis, individuals begin as racially neutral, or non-racist, and only become guilty of racism based upon their behaviors. Importantly, Christakis does not understand racism as predicated upon racial hierarchies. Instead, she conflates racism with actions that might be considered “tacky,” “offensive,” “jejune,” or “hurtful.” Thus, any individual could presumably be reasonably accused of racist behavior by any other individual, regardless of the racial identities of the parties involved. Accordingly, children are doubly innocent: first, on account of their developmental status; and second, by virtue of their
never having personally committed racist behaviors. It is this innocence which serves as the backdrop to Christakis’ rejection of the costume guidelines.

It is worth pausing here to consider the racial politics of innocence. Robin Bernstein (2011) has argued that contestations over the putative innocence of children have been central to US racial politics since at least the 19th century. Which children were to be afforded the protection of innocence and until what age were key questions for both white supremacist and anti-racist movements. White innocence thus undergirds a conception of individual moral purity that forecloses inquiry into systemic racism. As anti-racist scholars have argued, white people can appeal to their presumed moral goodness as a baseline against which to judge their actions as racist or non-racist (Bonilla-Silva, 2014; Sullivan, 2014; Winnubst, 2006; Yancy, 2008). White innocence hereby affords white subjects the ability to be judged solely upon their own actions (and then only rarely and generously). Indeed, it is only in light of this foundational innocence that the concept of “non-racist” makes sense at all. The idea of non-racism depends on the premise that systemic racism does not exist and hence that whites do not benefit from it. It is assumed that whites begin as “not racist” and only lose this status if they openly espouse racist views and/or engage in hate-motivated violence. Anything short of outright bigotry is excused as non-racial and hence non-racist. As such, whites can point to their lack of explicitly racist behavior as confirmation of their fundamental non-complicity with racism. In Christakis’ email, the “blonde-haired child” and the non-Black girl, though not explicitly marked as white, nonetheless invoke both of the aforementioned forms of white innocence. The presumed innocence of whiteness, and of white children in particular, mobilizes racialized pro-child affect to dismiss the possibility that “dreaming of dressing” as a certain character could be anything other than harmless fun. Anyone who would dissent from this view is implied to either hate children or else be hopelessly clueless about them.

In addition to childhood innocence, Christakis’ rejection of the guidelines equally rests on a view of adults as ethically competent. As I noted above, Christakis understands adults as
capable of moral self-regulation. As such, they do not require any guidance on what is and is not politically acceptable. Moreover, adults are equally competent to determine what is and is not racist among themselves. In stating that “I don’t, actually, trust myself to foist my Halloweenish standards and motives on others,” Christakis asserts that “I can’t defend [mine] any more than you could defend yours.” Because she has conflated what is racist with what is merely “offensive,” or even “tacky,” Christakis hereby invokes a relativism that erases any conception of structural inequality or power relations. In effect, the harm that people of color experience by being inundated by racist and culturally appropriative Halloween costumes is equated with the frustration of the (presumably white) students who expressed their dismay about the guidelines to Christakis. Because ethical competence is a universal feature of adulthood and an innate trait of individuals, no adult has standing to claim that any political or ethical stance is more just than any other. Nonetheless, Christakis permits the “self-censure” of one’s peers through “social norming.” Presumably, what is hereby deemed socially inappropriate would simply be whatever is found to be “offensive” by the majority of adults in a given community. In the case of a predominately white institution such as Yale, this is a particularly frightful prospect for students and faculty of color.

Between the claim that children are unimplicated in racism and the assertion of adult ethical competence, Christakis’ argument begins to founder. First, children’s specious racial naivety does not render them unimplicated in white supremacy. On the one hand, children are complex social actors who both are cognizant of and manipulate racial hierarchies (Van Ausdale & Feagin, 2001). On the other hand, children are formed by and bound up in larger structures of systemic racism. That the world one enters and is shaped by is racist before and beyond one’s existence does not mean that one bears no responsibility for this racism. Rather, as I will show, it is precisely because one finds oneself in such a world regardless of one’s intent that one emerges as a responsible subject. Second, not all adults are equally ethically competent. In a world structured by white supremacy, white subjects are bound by a systemic ignorance that
renders them ethically and epistemically limited. Yet due to structural oppression, it is marginalized subjects who are often “presumed incompetent” (Gutiérrez y Muhs, Niemann, González, & Harris, 2012). In a strategic reversal of a racist distribution of epistemic and ethical authority, I argue that white subjects are uniquely incompetent. Moreover, white adults are no more competent than are white children on matters of race and racism. But even if adults never escape the epistemic and ethical limitations associated with childhood, it does not follow that no account of white subjects’ political and ethical responsibility for racism is possible. Rather, it is precisely because these similarities between adults and children call into question the viability of a competent, knowing subject that a new concept responsibility is needed.

**Butler and Mills**

In contrast to an individualistic model of racism and its reliance on a (potentially) innocent and competent subject, feminist and anti-racist scholars have proposed concepts of responsibility that are better suited to addressing the realities of systemic oppression. In particular, Judith Butler and Charles Mills have argued that the subject’s epistemic and ethical limitations do not negate her responsibility for forms of ethical and political injustice in which she is implicated. To the contrary, the inability to fully comprehend or adequately respond to one’s place in the world is the foundation for a more politically satisfactory understanding of responsibility.

Judith Butler’s (2005) challenge to individualistic models of ethics emerges at the intersection of post-structuralist critical theory and moral philosophy. Crucially, the former calls into question the self-aware, autonomous subject upon which the latter often relies: “Does the postulation of a subject who is not self-grounding, that is, whose conditions of emergence can never fully be accounted for, undermine the possibility of responsibility and, in particular, of giving an account of oneself?” (p.19). For Butler, the resolution of this tension lies in the recognition that the subject’s emergence in social conditions that precede and exceed her
existence lays the foundation for an alternative understanding of political and ethical agency. In this way, an inquiry into the conditions of subject formation becomes the starting point for ethics.

Butler begins by arguing that any account the subject might give of her actions necessarily takes the form of an address. This address locates the moral foundations of subjectivity in a larger sociality. Minimally, this means that it is directed towards a (real or imagined) other, articulated in language, and conditioned by the social norms that govern what counts as a valid address. Furthermore, the relation between the self and the other brings Butler to questions of social recognition. First, any account that the self gives for what she has done relies on a prior account of what that self is. Thus, the constitution of the subject takes the form of a narrative, and so is governed by the same norms as those of the address. Second, the other whom the self addresses must also be recognizable as an other. Crucially, this recognizability does not issue from any particular subject’s “special psychological or critical skills” (p. 33), but rather from the social norms that govern who will count as a subject. Even in the seeming intimacy of the self-other relation, there exists levels of social mediation that delimit in advance what forms such an encounter can take. As such, the subject cannot freely determine her relations with others, but is already bound by a prior sociality.

The subject’s limitation takes on an additional dimension when Butler turns to the conditions of her emergence. As noted above, any account that the self could give of who she is must take the form of a narrative, which is to say an address. This means that the self must rely upon social norms that delimit recognizability and intelligibility in order to understand herself. Accordingly, the subject is revealed as foreign to herself at this most intimate level of identity. She is dispossessed by a prior sociality precisely when she would seem to be most at one with herself. Indeed, it is here that the subject encounters a constitutive self-opacity. This is because not all of the elements of the subject’s formation can be wholly recuperated in and through narrative. This is not to reinstate an individualistic core of identity, but rather to note both that norms necessarily constrain what can and cannot be articulated in language and that the
subject is continually disposed by non-narratable features of sociality at the moment when she attempts to give an account of herself.

In light of the foregoing, Butler advocates an ethics of humility and generosity. While the former is an acknowledgement of one’s own limits (which, for the reasons given above, can never be complete), the latter is an extension of this acknowledgement to others. Consequently, Butler suggests that “ethical recognition” involves “letting the other live” (p. 43) insofar as the neither the self nor the other can ever give a complete, coherent, and truthful account of themselves. It is for this reason that Butler rejects judgment and condemnation as paradigmatic modes of ethical censure: “The scene of moral judgment, when it is a judgment of persons for being as they are, invariably establishes a clear moral distance between the one who judges and the one who is judged...It may be that only through an experience of the other under conditions of suspended judgment do we finally become capable of an ethical reflection on the humanity of the other, even when that other has sought to annihilate humanity” (p. 45). It is not that Butler argues that judgments are never necessary, but rather that they should serve as occasions of political and ethical reflection. Thus, Butler finds judgments unsatisfactory not only because they inflict a form of ethical violence, but also because they risk radically individualizing and othering the accused. As such, judgment risks reducing the actions of the accused to those of a deviant and deranged individual, rather than being understood as a manifestation of a larger set of social conditions in which even the accuser is implicated. It is for precisely this reason that the decision by white Yale students to wear racist Halloween costumes cannot be understood merely in terms of the poor choices of a handful of foolish young people, but rather as symptomatic of a larger system that consistently prioritizes the convenience of white subjects over the safety and dignity of people of color. Likewise, Christakis’ email was only intelligible due to preexisting cultural logics that privilege hypothetical white children over real people of color. Condemning either as uniquely bigoted or irrational allows other white subjects to
maintain their fantasy of innocence. Thus, viewing Christakis or the aggrieved white Yale students as exceptional misses the most important political lessons of this historical moment.

Butler accordingly advocates for an understanding of moral responsibility as bound up in political critique. Because the subject emerges within a prior sociality, who she is and what she can become are delimited by “regimes of intelligibility” (p. 109) that precede and exceed her. The subject cannot be separated from this context, as she is fundamentally and continually conditioned by language, norms, historicity, and sociality. It is important to note that norms are always productive constraints, such that some subjectivities become viable through the delegitimation of others. In the case of Christakis’ email, the (putatively white) child emerges as innocent precisely through the mutual construction of anti-racist activists as irrational and misguided. Accordingly, the subject cannot freely reject and accept norms as she pleases, nor is her goal the complete eradication of all norms. Rather, the subject should seek to establish norms that ensure livability and make possible less violent ways of being. In this way, the subject is constitutively responsible, not only for herself but for social conditions that form her. Since this responsibility comes before and extends beyond any possible response the subject could give, she finds herself constrained by the very social norms that ensured her emergence as a subject. It is here that Butler, following Adorno and Foucault, presents responsibility as consisting of this struggle with the norms that determine who and what one can become. Far from the individualistic model that she critiques, Butler offers here a concept of responsibility as ethical self-transformation. Because the self is constitutively social and relational and ethics are conditioned by their political context, responsibility is inextricable from political critique and social transformation.

Similarly, Charles Mills (1997) has argued that epistemic limitations necessarily result from becoming certain kinds of subjects. Drawing upon a modified version of Marxist standpoint theory, Mills argues that white subjects, under conditions of white supremacy, are “unable to understand the world they themselves have made” (p. 18). Mills refers to this “epistemology of
ignorance” as a “a particular pattern of localized and global cognitive dysfunctions (which are psychologically and socially functional)” (p. 18). For Mills, this epistemic limitation is neither an essential psychological characteristic that accompanies phenotypically white skin nor is it simply a deficit of specific forms of knowledge that could be corrected through education. Rather, this epistemology results from the material-discursive social location of white people as a political group: “[P]art of what it requires to achieve Whiteness, successfully to become a white person...is a cognitive model that precludes self-transparency and genuine understanding of social realities” (p. 18). Because Mills understands racial categories as political entities rather than natural ones, he appears to view whiteness as a historical possibility that emerges contemporaneously with white supremacy as a political system. Since whites do not experience, but nonetheless benefit from, racism, their knowledge of the racial constitution of the world is mediated in ways that is it not for people of color. Thus, whites are at a collective, systemic epistemological disadvantage in relation to people of color. However, this disadvantage is socially valued as a more “objective” form of knowing than are the epistemologies developed by people of color. In this way, the epistemology of ignorance is a culturally and politically sanctioned way of (not) knowing. White supremacist epistemic authorities sanction this interested and partial epistemology as objective truth and universal reason. As such, whites are not able to fully comprehend racial hierarchy precisely because they benefit from it.

Although Mills clearly understands white people as unaware of the true nature of “objective” reality, he nonetheless maintains that their collective ignorance does not excuse them from responsibility for systemic racism. Instead, Mills argues that white people can (in solidarity with people of color) develop alternative methods for understanding and evaluating the world. Though they can never fully transcend the epistemology of ignorance as long as white supremacy exists, whites can work to challenge forms of racial hierarchy from a place of partial or flawed knowing. As they work with people of color to dismantle racist institutions, whites can open up space for alternative epistemologies, including anti-racist ones.
I must pause here to add two qualifications to my reading of Mills. First, Mills’ appeal to a pre-discursive, objective reality seems to obscure the necessary imbrication of knowledge and power. While I am sympathetic to Mills’ political rationale for this choice, his theory would benefit from a critical engagement with the work of feminist science studies scholars, such as Donna Haraway (1988), Karen Barad (2007), and Sandra Harding (2006), all of whom have attempted to form a politically sensitive concept of objectivity. Second, my interpretation of Mills’ theory of white ignorance may be more radical than his own. At times, Mills seems to suggest that white ignorance is a form of “false consciousness” that whites can overcome, albeit laboriously. However, his theory is sufficiently flexible to accommodate a view of whites as constitutively and inescapably ignorant. It is this latter interpretation that I pursue here.

Responsibility

As Mills and Butler differently demonstrate, an individualistic model of responsibility cannot adequately account for many common political and ethical situations. For Butler, this model disavows the social formation of the subject and her attendant self-opacity. For Mills, it cannot address forms of systemic injustice in which one group has political power over another. As Butler’s and Mills’ differences result in tensions between their accounts, I will not attempt to synthesize their positions here. Rather, I wish to call attention to the challenges that Butler and Mills pose to the model of responsibility found in Christakis’ email. In this way, I hope to demonstrate that neither the putative innocence of childhood nor the moral autonomy associated with adulthood excuses white subjects for their complicity with systemic racism.

To briefly review Christakis’ position, she claims that a child’s actions cannot possibly be racist because children are understood to be developmentally incapable of understanding or perpetuating racism. Moreover, a child needs to engage in fantasy play in order to develop her cognitive capacities. Since she depends upon this play to achieve full personhood and she can only develop the cognitive prerequisites for moral agency through such play, a child’s actions...
cannot be judged as racist. Similarly, adults possess the capacities for rational debate and self-regulation. As such, they can be held responsible as ethical agents. However, it is precisely because of these traits that adults are entitled to moral autonomy. Therefore, they cannot be prohibited from engaging in racist action by any organized institutional means. Instead, they can only “self-censure” themselves and their peers through “social norming,” as anything else would be an unacceptable limitation on their freedom. Accordingly, there can be no final arbiter of actions as racist outside of public opinion. Systemic racism is thereby reduced to individual violations of whatever is currently deemed inappropriate by a given community of rational, individuated adults. Notably, no adult is more capable of any other of determining what should count as acceptable behavior because any rationale an adult subject might give for her position must ultimately conform to the same standards of universal reason and be validated by her peers. Thus, Christakis’ opposition to Yale’s costume guidelines rests upon a model of political and ethical responsibility that prioritizes individual freedom and the preservation of rational discourse over and above any attempt at achieving substantive equality.

There are several challenges that Butler and Mills pose to this model of responsibility. First, the individuated, self-aware adult subject that Christakis invokes neglects key features of subjectivity. As Butler and Mills argue, the subject is epistemically and ethically limited. For Butler, the subject is defined by self-opacity, such that she cannot wholly and truthfully narrate who she is. She never reaches a state of self-mastery as she is continually riven by social norms, her relations to others, the functioning of language, and the workings of her unconscious. Moreover, the subject is constitutively responsible. As such, she is responsible not only for her own actions but for the conditions which delimit her subjectivity. Since the subject exists only in and through the social conditions of her formation, any attempt to attribute responsibility to her must make reference to these conditions. Conversely, a subject is always already responsible for the conditions which enable and sustain her emergence. This subject, who is relational, wholly implicated, opaque, and only partially agential, stands in stark contrast
to both the fully realized adult subject and the innocent, developing child subject that Christakis presents. For Mills, whites operate from a collective epistemology of ignorance. This systemic ignorance orients whites towards the world such that they will be constitutively incapable of understanding its true nature. Though whites are at a collective epistemic disadvantage to people of color, the former’s ignorance is politically sanctioned as objective truth. As such, whites are not ethically capable of adjudicating what is and is not racist, even though they are permitted to do so by virtue of their political dominance. Second, the scope and nature of responsibility look significantly different for Butler and Mills than for Christakis. For Butler, responsibility is a constitutive feature of the subject. Being located in the conditions of subject formation rather than the subject herself, responsibility is infinite in both temporality and scale. It extends before the subject’s emergence and beyond any response she is capable of giving. Any response the subject could give is thus belated and inadequate. As such, the subject is incompetent in the face of this infinite ethical demand. However, as Mills argues, responsibility is also collective and political. For Mills, whites are the historical and contemporary agents of racial domination, even if individual whites oppose white supremacy. Notably, the historical possibility of being white is attendant upon the existence of systemic racism. Whiteness, and hence responsibility for racism, is shaped by racist institutions even as whites collectively shape these institutions. As such, to be white is to benefit from and have been formed by racism. Hence, to be white is to be collectively responsible for racism, both contemporarily and historically. Third, responsibility is differentiated among subjects by social location. The extent and form of one’s responsibility is derived not from one’s actions, but from one’s emergence as a specific kind of subject in a given cultural milieu. Accordingly, ethical responsibility in both Butler and Mills relies on the transformation of the political conditions that limit who and what one can become. For Butler, the fact that subjects emerge as responsible in, through, and for their social context means that they are bound to other subjects. It is for this reason that Butler rejects condemnation and judgment as paradigmatic ethical responses. As noted above, Butler
argues that these modes ostracize the accused rather than calling attention to the accuser’s constitutive implication in the same web of social relations. Once again, this is emphatically not to argue that those to whom harm is done are ethically on par with those who do harm. Rather, it is only to suggest that moments of accusation should be occasions for political challenges to unjust social relations that foreclose more ethical ways of being. For Mills, whites collectively perpetuate and benefit from the oppression of people of color. Regardless of the actions of individual whites, they are collectively responsible for racism in a way that people of color are decidedly not. Whiteness itself only exists as a possible political subjectivity by virtue of the existence of white supremacy. As such, whites must accept their epistemic limitations and ethical impurity as inescapable collective conditions to be negotiated instead of personal failures to be transcended. Crucially, both Butler and Mills call into question the possibility that any subject could be politically unimplicated or ethically competent. Furthermore, Mills argues that whites bear a particular historical responsibility for racism precisely because they are white, a claim which Butler might be read as supporting. Accordingly, white adults and children are both inescapably responsible for white supremacy and almost totally incompetent to do anything about it.

Taken together, the critiques posed by Butler and Mills present a limited and implicated subject who can never fulfill her ethical obligations. This subject is constituted in and by a social world populated by similarly implicated and limited subjects. Surprisingly, it is only this ineffectual subject who can be understood as politically and ethically responsible for systemic racism. The subject who is limited cannot escape her complicity with those unjust systems which have enabled her emergence. Rather than being forever doomed to moral failure by her limitations, the subject might instead come to understand the responsibility that she faces as shared with other similarly situated subjects. As such, responsibility comes to mean something like grappling from and with one’s material-discursive social location in pursuit of social justice. Accordingly, she must engage in the work of transforming the political situation in which has
been formed. This work is by definition collective and it brings no guarantee of success or reward.

**Confusion and Shame**

These critical revisions to responsibility vitiate a model in which individuals are only accountable for their actions. Since the individual is no longer the unit of ethical analysis, new frameworks for determining ethical action are needed. Fortunately, resources exist within Butler’s account of responsibility that suggest what directions white anti-racism should take. Of particular importance are Butler’s concepts of humility and generosity. Whereas Butler defines humility as a kind of “self-acceptance” of “one’s constitutive limitations,” generosity is a similar “disposition toward the limits of others” (2005, p. 80). As Butler argues, an ethic of humility presents a subject who is formed in responsibility for and dependence upon others. Her epistemic and ethical limitations are thus the foundation for, rather than a refutation of, her ethical agency. In the same vein, generosity affirms that others are similarly limited. Crucially, generosity follows from humility, such that one recognizes that others are no more innately competent than oneself. Although Butler argues that all subjects are constitutively limited, she does not therefore claim that injustice should simply be forgiven. Rather, Butler, like Mills, is less concerned with the condemnation of individual subjects than she is with the transformation of unjust political conditions. In the case of white anti-racism, humility and generosity seek to hold white subjects responsible while simultaneously challenging the fantasies of ethical competence and white innocence. These fantasies often work to reduce white anti-racism to a competition for individual purity among white people. In contrast, the principles of confusion and shame offer ethical guidance for the much harder collective tasks of transforming whiteness and ending systemic racism.

As an embrace of collective epistemic failure, confusion is a form of epistemological humility that seeks to displace the role of epistemic mastery in white anti-racist activism. Many critical race theorists direct white subjects to seek out knowledge about the lives of people of
color as an antidote to racism. Yet as Mills cautions, white subjects are epistemically incompetent on matters of race and racism. Crucially, this incompetence is not simply a lack of specific forms of knowledge, but is the result of systemic, collective ignorance. Any attempt to remedy this epistemic failure through the unqualified collection of knowledge will likely result in the production of even greater ignorance on the part of whites. This is because it is not what whites know, but how they know, that is of concern to Mills. For Mills, individual whites cannot transcend the epistemology of ignorance, but must instead learn how to ethically negotiate it. This collective epistemic humility is what I am referring to as “confusion.” Whereas the epistemology of ignorance produces in white subjects “cognitive dysfunctions” which remain “socially functional” (Mills, 1997, p. 18), an epistemology of confusion ensues when whites supremacist ways of knowing cease to operate as objective truth. Confusion asks whites to collectively reject what they believe to be true about the racial constitution of the world, while simultaneously holding that whites are not capable of fully comprehending the “objective” nature of reality. To put this in other terms, confusion demands that white subjects actively reject the “white racial frame” (Feagin, 2013) that forms the basis for their interpretation of reality, but without holding out hope that it can be replaced with any ethically or epistemically sufficient way of knowing. Thus, confusion is not a replacement for ignorance, but an ethical and political orientation towards it. Accordingly, confusion invokes the humility of recognizing that one is epistemically incompetent by virtue of one’s whiteness and the generosity of acknowledging that one is equally ignorant as every other white subject. In order to demonstrate the need for an epistemology of confusion, I will present an example of the epistemic hubris that attends many forms of white anti-racist knowing. I will then offer epistemic uncertainty as an alternative to the hubris that accompanies attempts at white epistemic mastery. Lastly, I will outline a positive role for knowledge in white anti-racism by presenting an example of how confusion might be enacted in white parenting.
In critiquing the “arrogant perception” by white feminists of women of color, Mariana Ortega (2006) proposes the concept of “loving, knowing ignorance” to name the epistemic hubris of the former. For Ortega, this refers to “the dangerous terrain white feminists traverse when they claim to be concerned about women of color while at the same time being fully engaged in the production of ignorance about the lives of these women” (p. 58). Loving, knowing ignorance professes a desire to know about and form relations with women of color (hence “loving”) in and through making knowledge claims about them (hence “knowing”). Yet this epistemic practice nonetheless remains ignorant, as it operates from a place of epistemic hubris. Ortega argues that white feminists who speak authoritatively about the lives of women of color are ignorant insofar as actual women of color are not directly consulted. Thus, it is as if white feminists claim to be more knowledgeable about the experiences of women of color than are women of color themselves, even if the former do not explicitly assert this.

While Ortega’s diagnosis of white epistemic hubris is insightful, her recommended solution to this problem leaves much to be desired. Drawing from the work of feminist philosopher María Lugones, Ortega suggests that “world”-traveling might “alleviate instances in which a feminist can make claims about the experience of women of color, without really knowing anything about her situation” (p. 70). According to Ortega, “‘world’-traveling has to do with actual experience” and demands that white feminists “deal with flesh and blood people [and] not just their theoretical constructions” (p.69). By this formulation, “‘world’-traveling relies on an appeal to an authenticity and wholeness of knowledge about women of color. Although Ortega acknowledges that “world”-traveling will not completely solve, and may occasionally exacerbate, the problem of loving, knowing ignorance, she seems to view the epistemic failure of white feminists as the result of a lack of accurate knowledge about women of color. As such, white feminists are asked to dedicate themselves to a more thoroughgoing project of epistemic mastery, whereby they might come to truly and fully comprehend women of color. In light of Mills’ critique of the epistemology of ignorance, such epistemic mastery seems likely to backfire.
In addition to being impossible to achieve, the fantasy of epistemic mastery leaves no space for white subjects to recognize their fundamental limitations. Indeed, it threatens to reinstall loving, knowing ignorance precisely as the moment when it is to be remedied. Consequently, white subjects continue to strive for transcendence rather than learning how to navigate their inescapable ignorance.

In contrast to the epistemic mastery of “world”-traveling, Adale Sholock (2012) claims that white anti-racism is better served by an ethic of epistemic uncertainty. Following Mills, Sholock argues that “while white subjects are socialized through an epistemology of ignorance, [they] are also expected to behave as authoritative agents of knowledge” (p. 708). Sholock hereby calls attention to the conflict between the simultaneous epistemic incompetence and epistemic hubris of white subjects. She likewise asserts that “the desire for epistemic confidence and mastery among white Western feminists is related to the epistemological entitlements that underwrite normative whiteness” (p. 708). In this way, Sholock critiques the pretension to epistemic mastery among whites as being encouraged by white supremacy. For this reason, epistemic mastery would seem to be a poor choice for an anti-racist strategy. The fantasy of epistemic mastery obscures the foundational epistemic incompetence of white subjects.

Because whites believe that they are capable of transparently understanding the world, they act from ignorance that poses as knowledge. Thus, epistemic mastery leads to ethical failure, especially when white subjects seek to challenge systemic racism. Accordingly, Sholock advocates for understanding “epistemic uncertainty as a viable method rather than a negative by-product of [white] ignorance” (p. 709). For Sholock, ignorance is an ineradicable feature of white subjectivity under white supremacy. As such, it cannot be transcended, but only negotiated. Thus, confusion, following Sholock, “should not resolve the self-doubt of white anti-racists, but rather strategically deploy epistemic uncertainty” in the service of racial justice (p. 709). Recognizing the durability of white ignorance, confusion seeks to make use of it for anti-racist ends.
While confusion would seem to leave little space for a positive role for knowledge in white anti-racism, this is far from the case. As an ethical orientation towards knowing, confusion asks whites to accept their ignorance and to learn how to ethically negotiate it in order to minimize the harm it causes. Accordingly, white subjects will require a significant amount of a particular kind of knowledge. They will need to learn strategies and practices that might enable them, contingently and humbly, to interpret, evaluate, and navigate the world as ethically as possible. Such knowledge would be by definition partial and temporary, as it would have to be collectively produced and continually renewed in light of a changing world. Moreover, it would need to be both practical and theoretical, offering whites both concrete steps and interpretive frames for challenging white supremacy. Since white adults are no less constitutively ignorant than are white children, developing this knowledge would need to be a joint project between both groups instead of a top-down transmission from adult to child.

Of relevance to this project of shared confusion is the concept of "racial literacy." Coined by France Winddance Twine (2004), racial literacy refers to the skills and practices that dictate "how to identify and respond to racial hierarchies and resist racisms" (p. 882). In studying the practices of the white parents of Black children, Twine frames the teaching of racial literacy skills by the former to the latter as an anti-racist act. What is important to note here is that these white parents were able to cultivate knowledge of the racial constitution of the world that was sufficiently developed for them to be able to pass it on to their children. Crucially, it was both politically and practically useful to those children. Twine makes clear that the white parents developed their own racial literacy skills through their involvement in the multiracial communities in which they lived and their commitment to anti-racist struggles. Thus, racial literacy skills are neither the automatic byproduct of parenting a child of color nor simply a form of individual cultural capital. Rather, they are collectively derived competencies which are contingent upon the particular conditions faced by a community of knowers. Accordingly, white parents of white children can certainly cultivate racial literacy skills in themselves and their offspring. However,
they cannot do so individually or in the hope of eradicating their ignorance. Instead, whites must work together to develop a collective and partial body of knowledge that might guide anti-racist action. For white parents, this means that the challenge of racial literacy exposes the limits of their competence as caregivers. White parents committed to anti-racism cannot claim to know what is best for their children in this regard because they do not possess any greater capacity for comprehending the racial constitution of the world than do their children. Any difference between them on this matter is the result of differences in racial literacy, not in fundamental white ignorance.

Because racial literacy must be checked against a changing world and validated by other (variously competent and incompetent) knowers, white adults must continually struggle alongside their children to become and remain racially literate. Their shared material-discursive social location as white continually undermines their ethical orientation towards anti-racism, even as it limits their epistemic capacity to know about the world and hence to develop racial literacy skills. As such, they must look outside the individual parent-child relationship to engage the broader communities in which they participate. Thus, racial literacy, as a collective project by whites to educate one another about the realities of systemic racism, might necessitate the transformation of white supremacist neighborhoods, schools, and other institutions into bastions of racial justice.

Whereas confusion is a collective epistemic alternative to the individualistic fantasy of epistemic competence, then shame is a collective ethical alternative to the individualistic fantasy of white innocence. Shame refers to the collective historical responsibility borne by white subjects for the ongoing systemic violence of white supremacy. In contrast to white guilt, by which an individual white subject seeks to extricate herself from implication in white supremacy (Winnubst, 2006), shame acknowledges that such a feat is impossible. This is because such responsibility is by definition collective and infinite. Furthermore, it attaches to all whites as a necessary condition of their emergence as white subjects. Formed from the same mold, the
white subject who opposes racism can at best politically oppose those systemic injustices in which she is nonetheless constitutively implicated. Linked by conditions she did not choose to other white people, she cannot simply disavow her whiteness; as Mills (1997) argues, whiteness is a sociohistorical, political category rather than an individual identity. Rather than seeking to transcend her whiteness by means of a triumphant individualism, the shameful white subject would come to understand herself as historically particular, partially substitutable with other whites, benefitting from tremendous historical injustice, and (above all) limited. In this way, shame functions as a corrective to white pretensions to racelessness and ahistoricity. Shame reveals the purportedly “culture-free” white subject as laden with cultural and historical specificity. In contrast to proposals that white subjects should cultivate “non-white” identities as an anti-racist strategy, shame asserts that white people already have a rich, extensive, and unforgettable history from which to act—namely one of perpetuating violence, domination, and exploitation. Shame argues that it is white subjects’ collective history as white that must be excavated, publically recognized, and affirmed as bearing heavily on the present. Crucially, this is not a celebratory gesture, but is instead aimed at exposing and memorializing these past atrocities and their contemporary legacies. Reparations must be made for historical racial injustices, and shame views these as a starting point for an indefinite process of uprooting white supremacy rather than a one-time event. By asking whites to recognize themselves as limited, responsible, and bound to one another, shame offers whites a more ethical way to relate to their shared history and each other than do denial and individualism.

Just as shame challenges white ahistoricity, it equally seeks to displace anti-racist approaches which advocate for white self-love. Notably, Shannon Sullivan (2014) has critiqued negative affects, such as guilt, shame, and betrayal as unhelpful for white anti-racist efforts. Inexplicably drawing on experimental psychological research in what is otherwise a philosophical text, she argues that shame induces “feelings of worthlessness and powerlessness that undercut rather than enhance responsibility within interpersonal
relationships. Shame tends to beat down an ashamed person, and a beaten-down person doesn’t usually have the psychosomatic resources to engage with others in uplifting ways” (p. 134). In relying on a narrowly-defined concept of shame lifted from the social sciences, Sullivan appeals to an individualistic, sentimental understanding of political agency. Accordingly, she instructs white people to love themselves, as if feeling good were the basis for ethical action. In this way, Sullivan prioritizes the self-esteem of individual white subjects over the transformation of unjust political conditions, as if the former were a prerequisite for the latter.

In contrast, my definition of shame affirms the political and ethical responsibility of all white people for systemic racism as foundational to white subjectivity. Crucially, this concept of shame attends to the constitutive implication of whites in systemic racism. Since whiteness emerges as possible subjectivity only under conditions of white supremacy, it is itself ethically and politically suspect. Emphasizing the foundational wrongness of one’s being rather than one’s actions, shame demands that whites transform whiteness into something less violent. Because whiteness cannot be individually or collectively escaped, white subjects must work together to radically reshape it. While shame affirms the urgent historical need for the eradication of whiteness-qua-racial dominance, its negativity foregrounds a necessary skepticism about whites’ capacity to achieve this. With a mandate to render whiteness benign and no guarantee of success, whites must understand themselves as historically limited. As such, they are not only bound by a racist past, but further are not entitled to share in a more just future.

**Indifference**

Taken together, shame and confusion suggest a certain affective orientation towards the future that white subjects should embrace. Christakis’ invocation of white childhood innocence suggests that white subjects are capable of continually reinventing themselves to be more ethical and knowledgeable with each generation. Yet under present historical conditions, white subjects are both epistemically and ethically incompetent as a result of their whiteness.
Because whiteness can only exist as a historical possibility under conditions of white supremacy, whites depend upon systemic racism to emerge as subjects. Moreover, white subjects’ limitations make it unlikely that they will be able to successfully transform their whiteness into something worthy of persisting into the future. Starting from these premises, I wish to provide here a brief sketch of what it might mean for white subjects to extend their epistemic uncertainty and ethical humility forwards in time. Central to the following discussion is the concept of futurity. Futurity refers to a linked set of concepts, including representations of the future, the imagined continuation of current social phenomena and subjectivities, and other related temporalities. In short, futurity directs attention to how conceptualizations of the future impact political projects in the present. As Eve Tuck and Rubén Gaztambide-Fernández (2013) argue, future-oriented approaches to politics can serve to naturalize the continued occupation of indigenous lands by white settlers. Thus, how we understand the future plays a key role in shaping current political discourse.

Many accounts of white anti-racism depend upon an underlying, stable white subject. For example, Jack Halberstam (2011), has argued for a vision of futurity based upon the communal negativity of punk music. Accordingly, all those who oppose normalcy and oppression are to join together in a post-identitarian, queer mob against the homogenous and united forces of capitalism, white supremacy, and heteronormativity. This group is juxtaposed to an abstract group of those who would embrace the status quo. Crucially, one can ensure one’s place in the future by choosing to oppose domination and normativity. In this model, all subjects equally benefit from this revolution, have no major grievances among themselves, oppose all of the same things, and share in the same common future. In contrast, Shannon Winnubst (2006) has argued for a “politics without a future” (p. 190). Advocating for a recuperation of “lost pasts,” Winnubst asks subjects to forego the future in favor of excavating other ways of being from throughout history. Her aim is to shift attention to “what might have been” (had past injustices been correct or never happened) rather than “what will have been” (when the past is forgotten).
and transcended) (p. 190). Winnubst presents this refusal of the future as a challenge to white ahistoricity, yet she equivocates as to which subjects are to adopt this posture. The specificity of white subjects’ responsibility for racial injustice is replaced with a general rejection of futurity by all subjects. Here again, white subjects find themselves comfortably among those who have “no future,” which here is ironically the best hope one has of continuing to persist. In both Halberstam and Winnubst, white subjects are tacitly guaranteed a place in a more just future. Though they may have to work hard to get there, they seem to risk little in doing so. There is no time of reflection or reparation, as all subjects find themselves on the same temporal trajectory. Disturbingly, whiteness appears to define in advance the parameters of what the future can look like. Either whites are allowed to join in a single, shared future or no subject is allowed to have a future at all. In an ultimate show of narcissism, white subjects hereby claim the authority to delimit what will count as a viable model of futurity.

In lieu of insisting that whiteness have a place in any racially just future or negating futurity altogether, the concept of indifference for white subjects offers a useful alternative. Critically revising Winnubst’s argument, indifference embraces a “politics without a future” for white subjects. Indeed, Winnubst herself seems to be primarily interested in how socially privileged subjects can oppose regimes of domination: “What if the future that we, the quintessential desiring beings of late modernity and phallicized whiteness, most deeply and passionately desire cannot be desired? What if we must learn to think and live without a future?” (p. 185). Yet she strangely generalizes the temporality required for white anti-racism to all subjects, regardless of social location.

Indifference extends Winnubst’s argument by specifying that it is white subjects who must turn away from the future, not all subjects. Accordingly, the historical violence of systemic racism, as well as whiteness as a subject position, become problems with which white subjects must grapple. Following Winnubst, this grappling is indefinite, without a predetermined destination: “To suspend the future, radically, may be to enter a kind of freedom that we do not
readily know or even want to know in these cultures of phallicized whiteness...It means to be involved in experiences and pleasures that offer no return to the closed economies of societal meaning, driven by utility and the mandate of concise, clear endpoints. It means to queer our worlds. And to queer...is to have no fixed idea of who or what you are or might become, and to find this an extraordinary pleasure” (p. 199). Rather than groundlessly promising whites a good future, indifference pragmatically acknowledges that no such guarantee is possible. Insofar as white subjects are bound to their shared whiteness while being insufficiently competent to transform it, they would seem to have no place in a racially just future. However, this uncertainty about one’s future is neither an appeal to a racist and reactionary nostalgia nor a celebratory embrace of nihilism. Both of these options locate the experiences of white subjects as the key point of departure for any consideration of futurity. Instead, indifference is an existential, ethical, and political challenge to whites to become otherwise. It asks white subjects to stop caring about their collective destination in order to focus on the process of transforming the present to account for the past. Accordingly, indifference makes one further critical departure from Winnubst’s model. For Winnubst, a future-oriented politics is riddled with “anxiety,” which she understands to be detrimental insofar as it “derives from the need for an answer, the desire driven by the lack of certainty, the demand that everything can be known and mastered” (p. 200). Conversely, indifference harnesses anxiety and redirects it from the future towards the present. Anxiety hereby productively undergirds efforts to disentangle the intractable knots of power relations that constitute the present. In this way, the present becomes too important for white subjects to concern themselves with their own future. This is the affect of shame and confusion projected into the future. Designed to counter white ahistoricity and a desire for quick resolutions, indifference imparts a sense of existential shame and ethical uncertainty upon white subjects. Rather than striving to escape the shame of white subjectivity, it asks whites to forego futurity in favor of the slow, uncertain labor of undoing white supremacy.
Crucially, white subjects are only asked to become indifferent to one possible futurity out of many, namely their own. As such, indifference decenters the importance of figuring out what will happen to whites while still maintaining that other futures beyond racism are possible. Accordingly, indifference leaves space for people of color to envision multiple alternative futurities of their own, without reference to whiteness. White subjects can (and, insofar as it advances racial justice in the present, must) participate in working towards these kind of futures. Yet they must do so neither in the hope that this will individually absolve them of their responsibility for racism nor secure their collective future. Instead, white subjects should adopt what Nicole Seymour (2013) has called “queer empathy,” whereby “one must care for nameless, faceless future beings...to which one has no domestic, familial, or financial ties” (p. 185). Though Seymour is writing in the context of ecology, her model of empathy suggests that neither personal nor political intimacy are prerequisites for advocating for justice. With this critical distance, the white subject can thus support the struggle for less violent futures to which they have no immediate connection. The key contribution of indifference is thus that if white subjects are to have a future, it cannot be on terms that they (collectively or individually) choose. Rather, in humility and uncertainty, they must accept the terms of participation they are offered by those that they have historically subordinated. Anything less than this abdication of control over the design of the future risks reproducing white supremacy ad infinitum.

Conclusion

It is tempting to quickly dismiss Christakis’ appeal to child development as a rationale for opposing Yale’s costume guidelines. Yet as I have attempted to demonstrate, directly responding to her arguments yields significant insight for white anti-racist practice. Regardless of age, the ethical competence or moral purity of an individual white subject cannot be the standard by which whites are collectively held responsible for white supremacy. If the putatively incompetent subject is nonetheless capable of and implicated in tremendous historical injustice,
then the supposedly innate features of subjects should not be the starting point for establishing more just social relations. Following Butler and Mills, the constitution of the subject must be understood as an ethical problem in itself. Crucially, the subject who is responsible for injustice is simultaneously deeply implicated in it; she cannot extricate herself to come to final reckoning. In the next chapter, I will extend these insights to the white feminist subject. As implicated in the unjust systems to which she is ostensibly opposed, the white feminist must also grapple with questions of ethical agency and epistemic competence. Just as is the case for the white subject generally, the facile promises of maturity do little to resolve her predicament.
Chapter 3: Feminism without Grown-Ups and the Problem of Maturity

Maturity, understood as the solidity, self-awareness, and ethical autonomy associated with adulthood, often plays a key role in feminist and anti-racist arguments. This is especially noticeable in certain descriptions of the relationship between a socially dominant group and a socially subordinate one. In a strategic reversal of historical depictions of the oppressed as child-like, the dominant group is depicted as immature (hence irresponsible and ignorant) in relation to a mature (hence responsible and knowing) subordinate group. While this imagery is rhetorically powerful and politically useful, it is not unproblematic. Indeed, there are good reasons to be skeptical of appeals to maturity in political theory. For example, in her diagnosis of “loving, knowing ignorance,” Mariana Ortega asserts that “white feminism cannot remain in a state of infancy despite its claims to greater maturity with regard to the experience of women of color” (2006, p.66). Although Ortega sets out to document a systemic racial ignorance in white feminist theory, this moment marks a turning point in her argument. In this case, Ortega’s choice of metaphor reduces white feminists’ complicity with racism to an individual, interpersonal moral failing, which could be overcome if white women would only act like grown-ups. This leads her to suggest that white women should seek out authentic relationships with women of color to transcend their ignorance. Thus, maturity seems to mean more than merely acting like an adult. For Ortega, it also refers to something like demonstrating the responsibility, reciprocity, or respect that is required for a mutual relationship between equals. Accordingly, this definition of maturity suggests that such intimacy and its attendant knowledge will allow white feminists to overcome their racial ignorance. By conflating the racism of white feminism with the ignorance of white feminists, Ortega confuses institutionalized power relations with interpersonal conflict. As such, this logic illustrates some of the problems with attributing bad politics to a lack of maturity. Reminiscent of my argument in Chapter 3, appeals to maturity imply that the ethical
and epistemic agency of individual white subjects can override structural racism. Whether figured as adult competence or the grounds for respectful and reciprocal intimacy, maturity obscures more than it reveals about the racial politics of feminist solidarity. Given white feminism’s ongoing imbrication in white supremacy, white feminists cannot rely on either theoretical sophistication or interpersonal intimacy with women of color to clear an easy path to multiracial feminist sisterhood. As such, the pursuit of greater maturity by white feminists seems unlikely to end their political complicity with racism. Instead of an illusory maturity, I argue that the confusion, uncertainty, and shame associated with childhood might better support the emergence of an actively anti-racist white feminism.

I begin by interrogating one attempt to theorize the possibility of personal and political alliance between white women and women of color. Situated at the intersection of theoretical innovation and the affirmation of “queer love,” Lynne Huffer (2013) proposes the concept of “narrative performance” as a “queer feminist” tool to negotiate the harms women inflict upon one another, which she calls “betrayal.” Although Huffer’s approach is not without merit, it is nonetheless hindered by the same limitations that plague maturity. In particular, narrative performance is limited by its aspirations to universality and its emphasis on interpersonal rather than structural forms of racism. By applying Huffer’s method to scenes from *The Bluest Eye* and *The Help*, I argue that it is more helpful to white feminists working to challenge their own complicity to racism than it is to building meaningful alliances with women of color. In this respect, narrative performance lends itself to the concepts of confusion and shame that I proposed in the last chapter.

Following this discussion, I elaborate a concept of “feminism without grown-ups” that might serve as a productive alternative to the specious solutions suggested by maturity. Because no final solution to white feminism’s racism is possible without the downfall of white supremacy, there cannot be any wholly satisfactory, singular theoretical innovation that will make white women unproblematic political partners for women of color. Insofar as maturity
works to reduce structurally conditioned power relations to the moral failings of individuals, it remains an insufficient concept upon which to base a political theory. There is thus no “growing up” out of racism, but only the long, ceaseless, and difficult process of unbraiding the possibility of an anti-racist white feminism from its ongoing imbrication in projects of white supremacy and colonialism. Echoing my concept of indifference, feminism without grown-ups asks white feminists to eschew their own future to focus on remedying the injustices in which they are implicated.

**Narrative Performance**

As part of her larger project of theorizing a specifically “queer feminism,” Lynne Huffer (2013) turns to questions about the harms that women inflict upon one another in an “attempt to link our slips and silences to less violent practices of social belonging” (p. 144). Under this framework, Huffer seeks to establish the grounds for political solidarity and personal intimacy between women. She is particularly interested in fostering the potential for love between structurally unequal women, and as such she turns to the concept of “betrayal”:

I wield the admittedly harsh word *betrayal* here both as a sign of injustice and as a tool of demystification; I use betrayal to expose the painful truths about relations between women that are sometimes obfuscated by a feminist focus on love and care or a queer focus on pleasure. Betrayal names the gap that continues to divide economically privileged women from poor and working-class women, white women from women of color, and women in industrialized nations from women in the developing world. And, since injustice will continue to inhabit the feminist struggle for access to opportunities and power as long as structural inequalities remain, there is no reason to believe that this betrayal will not remain part of queer feminism’s story as well (p. 148).

Although Huffer seems to address forms of systemic inequality, her use of betrayal eschews this more overtly political register. Crucially, Huffer understands betrayal to be endemic to love. Accordingly, she asserts that “the diagnosis of betrayal that shadows feminist discussions of intersectionality—either as angry accusation or guilty complicity—might be viewed less as a moral condemnation that reinvokes normative politics than as a recognition of a constitutive structure of othering that makes love hurt” (p. 148). In locating her theoretical intervention, Huffer’s tortured syntax marks an unclear ethical terrain. Intersectionality, a paradigm ostensibly
concerned with identifying political injustices, is figured here as a scorned lover. Its concerns are relocated from the domain of social justice (or “normative politics”) to the (dis)harmonies of intimacy between individuals. The refusal of “normative politics” in favor of the “recognition of a constitutive structure of othering” would seem to displace an analysis of structural power relations in favor of a more immediate focus on how those power relations manifest in interpersonal relationships, as betrayal. The intimacy indexed by betrayal seems to exist to the side of politics proper. However, the extent to which these can be disentangled is uncertain.

While Huffer hereby claims to address how structural inequalities shape interpersonal relationships, her subsequent analysis largely disregards the former in order to focus on the latter.

It is in this context that Huffer turns to the method of “intertextual narrative performance,” which she associates with practices of “retelling” and “rewriting” (p. 149). Huffer describes this “rewriting as a queer feminist endeavor whose purpose is to expose and rethink the explicitly ethical and political meanings of some of Western culture’s founding texts” (p. 154). She claims that “this contestational intertextual practice reveals the ideological gaps between the original texts and their rewritten versions. In that process the rewritten narratives can be seen to function not only as new interpretations of old stories; as heterotopias, they both register harm and performatively enact alternative visions of the social order” (p. 154). For Huffer, narrative performance appears to involve a critical retelling of culturally dominant stories in order to highlight “the hidden potential hidden in the fissures of narratives about marginalization and violence” (p. 153). Crucially, Huffer defines in advance what kinds of stories are amenable to being retold and what that retelling should look like. Her critical gaze is directed towards “Western culture’s founding texts,” and rewriting these is “a queer feminist endeavor.” Her canon of queer feminist storytellers appears to be primarily composed of white women (such as Angela Carter, Jeanette Winterson, Monique Wittig, and Sara Maitland), and the text she presents to be rewritten is a biblical narrative. Neither is implicated in the other, such that “queer
feminism” appears to stand completely outside of “Western culture.” Thus, she presents a unified feminism that is untainted by the oppressive forces to which it is uncompromisingly opposed.

This highlights what Huffer identifies as “two of narrative performances most important ethical functions,” namely “the acknowledgement of damage and injustice, what one might call narrative’s unmasking capacity to articulate harms” and “narrative’s more heterotopian, transformative function,” which “opens the given toward the proleptic transformations of genealogical retellings” (p. 157). Huffer hereby argues that narrative provides a kind of complexity that cannot be captured by the more overtly political language of intersectionality. Accordingly, the former can open “new possibilities” in “the symbolic space that joins…white woman with woman of color” (p. 158). It is by this logic that Huffer links narrative performance back to her concern with betrayal: “[T]he social structures that produced the terror and division are still in place, despite our ongoing collective desire for imaginative revisioning. In other words, genealogical transformation cannot happen in a vacuum, in the absence of a political contestation of the economic forces and institutional structures that continues to pit the [privileged women] against the [oppressed women] of the world” (p.154). While Huffer hereby acknowledges the political limitations of a focus on intimacy and “heterotopian” imagining, she reaffirms the centrality of both to her “queer feminist” project of fostering connection between structurally unequal women. Systems of inequality and domination function to impersonally and abstractly divide women who would otherwise be united by the bonds of sisterhood. Huffer hereby clarifies her earlier distinction between “normative politics” and “recognition.” It seems to rely on the assumption that racism is merely a tool of patriarchy that serves to divide women from one another, rather than a system of power from which white women directly benefit. As I will demonstrate below, it is according to this logic that Huffer elides structural racism in order to focus on interpersonal intimacy between women.
Narrative performance’s interest in the possibilities inherent in the critical retelling of familiar stories, so as to emphasize their “slips and silences,” is promising, as is its attention to the ways in which intimate relationships are conditioned by structural inequalities. Taken together, these aspects grant it the potential to both recover marginalized voices in established narratives and reveal the political elements of personal life. Nonetheless, the impasses and structural injustices that inhibit solidarity between white women and women of color are not transcended by Huffer’s application of narrative performance. If anything, they are further obscured. As such, Huffer’s attention to interpersonal love and betrayal flatten structural injustices into the equally distributed, inevitable slights of social life. Indeed, Huffer elides the possibility that the love she valorizes can not only be riven by betrayal, but can itself be a form of betrayal.

It is this latter possibility to which I turn my attention below. While Huffer’s method is not without merit, I hope to demonstrate that it most often succeeds in fostering solidarity between some women precisely by revealing the betrayal perpetrated by others. In applying narrative performance to scenes from Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye* (2007) and Kathryn Stockett’s *The Help* (2009), I draw attention to some of its strengths. I have deliberately chosen to read these texts alongside one another because I believe they call into question the analytic purchase of Huffer’s concepts of “love” and “betrayal” for anti-racist feminist political solidarity. In particular, I wish to highlight both how Huffer’s presentation of narrative performance elides key distinctions between forms of feminist love (and hence aspires to a misguided universality) and how it obscures important aspects of structural injustice by renarrating these as forms of interpersonal betrayal. As such, my application seeks to demonstrate how narrative performance might be deployed to better serve anti-racist feminist ends. The passages from Stockett’s and Morrison’s texts upon which I focus share an interest in the representation of the relationship between Black female domestic workers and the little white girls for whom they care. Equally important to my analysis are the ways in which both texts address the effacement of the domestic workers’
own children by these same relationships. Reading Stockett’s text against both critical commentaries on it and Morrison’s novel, this narrative performance opens a heterotopian space from which to critique the betrayal of love itself.

Kathryn Stockett’s novel *The Help* (2009), tells the story of three women: Eugenia “Skeeter” Phelan, Aibileen Clark, and Minny Jackson. Set in Jackson, Mississippi during the dawn of the Civil Rights era, the novel addresses themes of race and racism by shifting between the perspectives of its three protagonists. Whereas Skeeter is a white, college-educated daughter of cotton planters, Clark and Jackson are both Black women who are employed as maids for various members of Skeeter’s social circle. Skeeter, seeking a book project by which to launch her writing career, chooses to write an exposé that will detail the lives of Black domestic workers. As such, she seeks to enlist Clark and Jackson in her book project. Despite their initial skepticism, both eventually sign on. Readers of the text at first believe that they are reading the unmediated internal monologues of each protagonist. However, it is eventually revealed that Skeeter’s book, once published, is titled *The Help*. Though Stockett attempts to portray Clark and Jackson’s voices as authentic, this moves inserts hermeneutic doubt into the text. Thus, the representation of Black women’s lives is twice mediated by white authorial voices: within the text itself (by Skeeter) and extradiegetically (by Stockett). This analytic space is key to the ethical performance I derive from the text.

A major element of both Clark and Jackson’s narratives is their respective relationships to the white children for whom they are responsible. In the case of Clark, her relationship to the young white girl Mae Mobley is the source of what is arguably *The Help’s* most infamous line, namely “you is good, you is kind, you is important” (as cited in Wallace-Sanders, 2014, p. 68). This phrase is supposed to demonstrate Clark’s love for and devotion to Mobley, one of the many white children she has cared for over the course of her career. Indeed, Clark openly states that “taking care of white babies, that’s what I do…I done raised seventeen kids in my lifetime” (as cited in Wallace-Sanders, 2014, p.66). Crucially, all but one of Jackson’s “children”
are actually the white children of the families for whom she has worked. In contrast, Clark’s deceased son, Treelore, is mentioned only in passing throughout the novel. Similarly, Jackson’s five children receive scant attention, with Jackson’s relationship to a child-like white woman emphasized. In both cases, Clark and Jackson’s own children are all but erased from the narrative. Instead, the women’s maternal attention is redirected towards white children (or child-like persons). It is for this reason that Kimberly Wallace-Sanders argues that the novel “romanticize[s] the relationship between African American women and white children. In them, African American mothers are so strongly identified with white children that their own kids recede into the background until they are virtually invisible” (2014, p. 67). In this way, Clark and Jackson are presented as “black mother[s] who belon[g] to white children-the cornerstone of the complex and long standing Black Mammy stereotype” (as cited in Wallace-Sanders, 2014, p. 66). Thus, Stockett’s text collapses the facts of Clark and Jackson’s work routines into deep facets of their identities.

Yet despite itself, *The Help* leaves space for a critical retelling. The novel presents the stories of Clark and Jackson as if they were unmediated internal monologues. But because of the authorial mediation noted above, it is possible to read these narratives as Skeeter’s own interpretations. Indeed, Wallace-Sanders suggests as much in noting that “the novel’s liberal heroine who is willing to fight for the right of African American women to use the same bathroom as their white employers and who is writing a book about their experiences, plays a surprising role in both establishing and affirming the racial superiority of white children” (2014, p. 68). This is evident in Skeeter’s own description of her interview process for said book: “The talk turns mundane at times, with complaints of low pay, hard hours, and bratty children…But then, there are stories of white babies dying in arms” (as cited in Wallace-Sanders, 2014, p. 68-69). As such, an intertextual narrative performance might read *The Help* as presenting not the truth of Black women’s lives, but the curated, limited, and racist caricature of the same by a self-interest white woman trying to write a saleable book. In line with the spirit of Huffer’s method, this
interpretation is enabled by the fissures opened in the novel by Wallace-Sanders critical retelling and deliberately reads Stockett’s text against itself.

My point is to highlight that the “love” and “betrayal” to which Huffer calls our attention are, in this case, indistinguishable from one another. Moreover, the “love” that Huffer desires to reclaim is enabled here by the same unjust structural conditions that she decries: “Here is the brutal truth that must interrupt the long told tale of Mammy’s ‘inexplicable’ love and encouragement of white children: African-American women…were being paid (however poorly) to love and encourage children as part of their employment. Let me be clear: this doesn’t discount any genuine affection between the women and the children they helped to raise…But we must remember the uncomfortable reality that when love and affection are part of a job description, they are also part of job retention. There is a level of performance in domestic work that is too often overlooked; the more convincing the performance, the more reliable the employment” (Wallace-Sanders, 2014, p. 76). Thus, the heterotopian space to which Wallace-Sanders gestures offers Black women, like Clark and Jackson, the critical distance from white women and girls necessary to understand themselves in autonomous terms. Here, Huffer’s method succeeds in spite of its intentions, for it enables solidarity between Black women precisely by shattering the pernicious myths of easy friendship between Black and white women and the “‘inexplicable love’ between African-American women and their white charges” (Wallace-Sanders, 2014, p. 69). Thus, narrative performance hereby demystifies “love” as coerced by structural “betrayal,” a far cry from Huffer’s misguided refusal of “moral condemnation that reinvokes normative politics” (Huffer, 2013, p.148).

Whereas Wallace-Sanders critical rereading of The Help suggests that Black women’s “love” for their employers’ white children is in fact a skilled performance motivated by economic necessity, Toni Morrison’s The Bluest Eye (2007) offers a more damning indictment of the same scenario. The novel tells the story of Pecola Breedlove, a young Black girl, living in Lorain, Ohio in the early 1940s. The story is primarily narrated by Pecola’s friend, Claudia MacTeer, but is
interspersed with passages in which an omniscient narrator details the internal monologues of key characters. Pecola lives in relative poverty compared to her peers and faces intense discrimination for her dark Black skin. The novel centers on this latter point. Unloved by her parents and ostracized by her community, Pecola desperately seeks love and recognition. She comes to desire blue eyes of her own, believing that such a marker of white beauty would cause everyone to love her, just as they do Shirley Temple and the girl on the Mary Jane candy package. But Pecola is not the only character who internalizes a destructive message of white superiority. Her mother, Pauline Breedlove, is equally infatuated with whiteness, albeit differently so. Tired of the social marginalization and poverty that plague her own life, Pauline grows to love the world of white, middle-class domesticity in which she is employed as a maid. She comes to view her work as an escape from the disappointments of her home life, including her dark-skinned daughter.

In one particularly striking scene, Claudia and her sister Frieda go to visit Pecola as she helps her mother at work. The sisters travel to the home of Pauline’s employers, in a wealthy, segregated white neighborhood. The sisters arrive to find Pecola preparing to bring the white family’s dirty laundry to the Breedlove’s home to be cleaned. As Pauline leaves the kitchen to get the laundry, her employer’s daughter enters:

[...]In walked a little girl, smaller and younger than all of us. She wore a pink sunback dress and pink fluffy bedroom slippers with two bunny ears pointed up from the tips. Her hair was corn yellow and bound in a thick ribbon. When she saw us, fear danced across her face for a second. She looked anxiously around the kitchen. ‘Where’s Polly’ she asked.

The familiar violence rose in me. Her calling Mrs. Breedlove Polly, when even Pecola called her mother Mrs. Breedlove, seemed reason enough to scratch her (Morrison, 2007, p. 109).

Claudia’s narration calls attention to three key elements: the white girls’ fear, her over familiarity with Pecola’s mother, and her own outrage at the girl’s audacity. Presented as innocent, frightened, and frail, the white girl is nonetheless understood by Morrison to be an agent of racial violence. Indeed, it is precisely what makes this child loveable to Pauline (such her “corn
yellow” hair) that motivates Claudia’s resistance to “the universal love of white baby dolls [and] Shirley Temples” (p. 190). The white girl, in simply existing as she is, enacts racial violence. Her frailty, innocence, and fear are all validated as “universal” by a white supremacist society. Her intimacy with and authority over Pauline is construed as natural by this same society. Claudia resists this social order by refusing to be socialized into its norms. Pauline is more consilient. When she returns to the kitchen to find that Pecola has knocked over a cobbler onto the floor she has just cleaned, she is immediately displeased:

Most of the juice splashed on Pecola’s legs, and the burn must have been painful, for she cried out and began hopping about just as Mrs. Breedlove entered with a tightly packed laundry bag. In one gallop she was on Pecola, and with the back of her hand knocked her to the floor…in a voice thin with anger, [she] abused Pecola directly and Frieda and me by implication (p. 108-109).

Pauline quickly shoos Pecola, Claudia, and Frieda out of the kitchen. As the girls leave, they overhear Pauline “hushing and soothing the tears of the littler pink-and-yellow girl”:

“Who were they, Polly?”
“Don’t worry none, baby.”
“You gonna make another pie?”
“Course I will.”
“Who were they, Polly?”
“Hush. Don’t worry none,” she whispered, and the honey in her words complemented the sundown spilling on the lake” (p. 109).

This scene distills many of the key themes of Morrison’s novel, but for the present discussion I will focus on three points. First, this scene is unambiguously narrated by Claudia. In contrast to Stockett’s novel, the effects of the hypervaluation of white children is described here by a Black girl rather than a white woman. Claudia can identify certain ethical harms that Skeeter actively disavows. In keeping with Huffer’s interest in recovering the “slips and silences” of dominant narratives, Morrison’s novel hereby centers the subjectivity of Black girls in a white supremacist society. Second, Pauline’s affinity for whiteness, discussed in detail throughout the novel, is vividly confirmed. Morrison presents Pauline’s love for the white girl as both authentic and conditioned by a racist social order. Whereas Wallace-Sanders, like Huffer, leaves room for a love between Black maids and white girls that can be redeemed, Morrison gives no such
quarter. Crucially, she calls into question the desirability of affirming love between white and Black women, because it is here overdetermined by (and indeed constitutes) structural betrayal. Lastly, the displacement of Pecola by the white girl (as a proxy for whiteness-writ-large) is narrated in detail over the course of the novel. In contrast to the Black children effaced in *The Help*, Pecola is not summarily dismissed in a few sentences. Instead, the social genesis of Pauline’s lack of love for Pecola and Pecola’s own desire for blue eyes are made explicit, as are the consequences of both. Throughout the novel, Morrison highlights the racist social conditions that enabled Pauline and Pecola’s shared loved of whiteness, as well as the heartbreaking effects of the same. In this way, Morrison suggests that intimacy between white and Black women can be the product of the complex machinations of white supremacy, such that the particular white women in question matter very little as love objects. Once again, Huffer’s method has revealed “love” to be conditioned by structural injustice. Thus, narrative performance succeeds in spite of its stated aims. The fissures that Morrison opens between Pauline and the white girl, as well as within Pecola herself, suggest a specifically *Black feminist* ethics, rather than the queer feminist one Huffer champions. Here, the “new heterotopian spaces [that] can nourish the more specifically political work we might do” (Huffer, 2013, p. 154) offer Black women the symbolic space to eschew intimacy with white women in favor of solidarity amongst themselves. Some forms of love must end so that others may thrive.

Though Huffer never promises that narrative performance can guarantee solidarity between white women and women of color, it was in pursuit of such intimacy that she turned to it as a key component of her ethical project. In light of the foregoing analyses, it seems that Huffer’s method succeeds in ways that she did not intend. Huffer initially presented narrative performance as supporting the viability of “queer love” between structurally unequal women and as preferencing intimate “betrayal” over structural injustice. As I have demonstrated, Huffer’s method is most useful when it eschews forms of love between unequal women in favor of horizontal solidarity between similarly situated ones and when it recognizes betrayal in terms of
“normative politics.” Although narrative performance still leaves us with no clear answers, it is for different reasons than Huffer assumes. If “there is no final story” and we are instead to “practice love as a political act of working through” (Huffer, 2014, p. 158), then it is because the intimacy promised by “queer love” remains illusory and “normative politics” are still needed.

By opening fissures in presumed relations of solidarity narrative performance can productively inject distance and ambiguity into scenes of intimacy and certainty. Accordingly, the principles of confusion and shame that I introduced in the last chapter might be helpful in guiding when and how narrative performance should be employed. Narrative performance’s challenge to established cultural narratives works to undermine the interpretive frameworks familiar to white subjects. At the same time, its critical retellings call attention to the implication of putatively innocent white subjects in the perpetuation of structural domination. This interplay of confusion’s epistemic humility and shame’s ethical humility closely parallels Huffer’s own interest in “the ongoing interplay between the given and the new” (p. 158). Here, the comforting story of universal feminist solidarity is revealed to be a fiction predicated upon the violent erasure of the subjectivities of women of color. Accordingly, it is when connection seems too easy, structural injustice a distant threat, and our knowledge of ourselves and one another too clear that narrative performance can usefully destabilize what we think we know. By foregoing the facile promise of post-racial queer feminist love and fracturing racist certainties, confusion offers a promising alternative to Huffer’s mature appeal to sisterhood.

**Feminism without Grown-Ups**

As I have argued, the ethical competence and epistemic mastery promised by maturity are both illusory and unhelpful to the cultivation of an anti-racist white feminism. Yet, the specious innocence of childhood holds little potential for an efficacious oppositional politics. Instead, I have suggested that confusion and shame offer practical strategies for white feminist subjects as they engage in knowledge production and political action. These concepts locate
white anti-racist feminism differently in time than do either an optimistic orientation towards a future that might never be or a nostalgic retreat to a past that never was. The present hereby emerges as a site of reflection and action for the white feminist subject. Knowledge of the past and visions for a different future are vital, but only insofar as they can inform ethical, political, and epistemic practices in the historical present. Drawing on my concept of indifference, I will articulate a “feminism without grown-ups” that views uncertainty, limitation, and confusion as starting points from which to remake the world. In this sense, my project is allied with feminist and anti-racist epistemologies that seek to locate knowing subjects in time and space (e.g. Haraway, 1988; Harding, 1992; Mills, 1997). I take these theories as starting points for an anti-racist white feminist praxis.

Indifference suggests a strange and unclear orientation toward the future for the white feminist subject. Given her investment in fostering alternative futures in which her own role is uncertain, she can neither simply refuse nor easily embrace futurity. Epistemologically, she does not know how to do so; ethically, she is not entitled to do so. These twin uncertainties are linked through her relationship to the present. In the here and now, the white feminist subject is materially privileged by a system to which she is (theoretically) opposed. She desires a less violent reality, and yet her place in such a world is by no means guaranteed. Indifference advises that she critically distance herself from her own future in order to better envision more just realities. She is thus displaced from the future without being disconnected from it. However, the past is an equally fraught terrain. Bound to the historical injustices for which she is responsible as a white subject, the white feminist can neither transcend nor embrace her heritage. Her past is a political, ethical, and epistemological problem for her in the present. As such, both future and past are located squarely within the white feminist subject’s present.

Accordingly, the present emerges as the necessary site for political intervention, but not in any obvious way. The ethical and epistemological limitations that attach to white subjectivity warn against immediate action and quick answers. A focus on the present is emphatically not a
demand for less thought and more action. It is instead to take up the historical present as a political, ethical, and epistemological problem. This call to understand the present as a key site for critical intervention is echoed by George Yancy (2012), Judith Butler (2004; 2005), and Shannon Winnubst (2006). Yet like Yancy and unlike Butler and Winnubst, feminism without grown-ups narrowly targets white subjects rather than all subjects. Armed with confusion and shame, the white feminist must grapple with the conditions of her formation as a particular kind of subject. Thus, the white feminist is joined by her privileged sisters as these subjects collectively work to bring an anti-racist white feminism into being. Because these conditions are structural and historical, this is a collective and political task. Even so, the white feminist subject lacks the ethical and epistemological grounding necessary to forge a clear path ahead.

In coming to understand herself as limited, implicated, and infinitely responsible, the white feminist subject is forced into a state of irreconcilable cognitive dissonance. As a movement, white feminism is similarly faced with the dilemma of either admitting its partiality and complicity or persevering with a false and violent façade of universalism. This is the terrain from which “feminism without grown-ups” emerges. Politically, the white feminist subject can choose to deny this uncertainty and complicity, and, in so doing, adopt a posture of specious innocence or righteousness; or she can embrace her confusion and shame as constitutive features of her subjectivity rather than problems to be solved.

Feminism without grown-ups is the outgrowth of the latter option. Faced with her infinite responsibility for ongoing structural injustice and her ethical and epistemological limitations, the white feminist subject can work to cultivate an oppositional political practice of a very particular sort. If the present is a political problem that, once solved, reveals further uncertainties, then this ceaseless process of transforming the now can become the basis for an ethical orientation. If a feminism of maturity seeks final solutions to questions of identity, coalition, and strategy, a “feminism without grown-ups” embraces the continual unbraiding of white feminist subjectivity from the unjust historical conditions of its emergence. Crucially, this is not an individualistic
project whereby the white feminist subject seeks a solid moral ground upon which to rest, as if she had escaped her cultural milieu. Rather, it entails understanding how the conditions by which she has been formed as a subject have come to be; how she is located in the material-discursive landscape of the present; and how she can act to intervene in that landscape. The epistemic limitations of white subjectivity mean that no amount of careful study will enable the white feminist to act with complete certainty. Likewise, her ethical limitations ensure that no action she takes (individually or collectively) will ever absolve her of her responsibility. The present extends to encompass both future and past, which are subordinated to it.

The white feminist’s task is grapple from and with her inescapable limitations, continual failures, and enduring responsibility. This grappling is not the entirety of her politics, but rather the precondition of her engagement with larger political formations. Whereas Huffer’s narrative performance understands racism to only belatedly divide women who would otherwise be united in a single feminist movement, feminism without grown-ups holds no such illusions about political solidarity. White feminists benefit directly from the oppression of people of color, and no theoretical innovation or display of interpersonal magnanimity can transcend this fact. White feminists must demonstrate that they are capable of enacting subjectivities and politics that actively dismantle white supremacy. In other words, if she is to be an agent of transformation, the white feminist must commit to an endless practice of unknotted herself from her present. Each knot leads to several more, in a web too complex to be known in her lifetime. If she truly wishes to bring an anti-racist white feminism into being, the white feminist must continue, without any foreseeable endpoint, to unbraided.
Conclusion

Irreconcilability, confusion, shame, and indifference: these principles guided me as I researched and wrote *Feminism without Grown-Ups*. I began with grand ambitions, planning to present a comprehensive and original account of the political salience of childhood. For all of the obvious reasons, the final product does not accomplish this. I end newly humbled, but not humiliated. Indeed, there is value in the practice of engaging in repeated hermeneutical and epistemic failure. I pursued my interest in childhood relentlessly, even stubbornly. I tried to make my research do things it could not. I struggled to hold childhood stable and to make it speak in some univocal way. Only when I finally let go did I begin to find the major threads of my argument.

In this sense, I am in good company. The childhood studies scholarship that has most inspired me throughout this project shares a skepticism about its object’s inherent political potential. From Erica Burman’s (2008) cautions about scientific disciplines that claim to deliver the truth of children’s minds and bodies to Claudia Castañeda’s (2002) study of the cultural work that figurations of childhood do, it is not an accident that this work seems to willfully avoid discussing “actual children.” As suggested by recent considerations of the child from queer studies (Stockton, 2009; Bruhm and Hurley, 2004), the most interesting aspects of childhood, such as its strange temporalities and larger political meanings, are best approached indirectly. Indeed, I have been most underwhelmed by scholarship that claims to address childhood unproblematically, such as Jack Halberstam’s (2011) ruminations on children’s “anarchic” natures. In many ways, *Feminism without Grown-Ups* has been a meandering attempt to respond to Halberstam and others who would base entire political projects on childhood, as if it were some common human baseline that could link us all in a radical transcendence of the status quo. Against this arrogant and dangerous universalism, I have attempted to articulate an anti-racist white feminism rooted in humility, specificity, limitation, and patience. While these
principles promise neither glamor nor solutions, I believe they work to counteract the harm inflicted by easy answers to complex and intractable political problems.

At the same time, nothing I have proposed in *Feminism without Grown-Ups* is radically new. Throughout this project, I have found myself returning to the best insights of poststructuralist and women of color feminisms, critical race theory, and feminist science studies. These fields call attention to the fractures and slippages in established orders without holding out for a final, triumphant break with all that has come before. They counsel negotiation, strategy, and above all careful study of the machinations of the historical present. Thinking with these fields, I have come to appreciate the ethical stakes of knowledge production that is directed at cultivating a less violent world. Most of all, I value the uncertainty and doubt that such scholarship reveals in even the most apolitical, unobjectionable, and well-established truth claims.

Perhaps *Feminism without Grown-Ups* is thus best described as a bid to counter the violence of absolute certainties. As I leave this project, I am struck by how much more confused I am by childhood, by race, by feminism, by scholarly research, and in general. My attempts to comprehend my intellectual objects feel more partial than they did before, and yet they are strangely more satisfying because of this. Questions beget more questions, and the scope of what I think I know rapidly shrinks. As a scholar and a feminist, I wouldn’t have it any other way.
Works Cited


Email From Erika Christakis: “Dressing Yourselves,” email to Silliman College (Yale) Students on Halloween Costumes. (2015, October 30). Retrieved from https://www.thefire.org/email-from-
erika-christakis-dressing-yourselves-email-to-silliman-college-yale-students-on-halloween-costumes/


Appendix A: Email From Erika Christakis

The email from Yale child development professor Erika Christakis, which I analyzed in Chapter 3, has been reproduced in full below. Full citational information for this document can be found at the end of this section.

Dear Sillimanders:

Nicholas and I have heard from a number of students who were frustrated by the mass email sent to the student body about appropriate Halloween-wear. I’ve always found Halloween an interesting embodiment of more general adult worries about young people. As some of you may be aware, I teach a class on “The Concept of the Problem Child,” and I was speaking with some of my students yesterday about the ways in which Halloween – traditionally a day of subversion for children and young people – is also an occasion for adults to exert their control.

When I was young, adults were freaked out by the specter of Halloween candy poisoned by lunatics, or spiked with razor blades (despite the absence of a single recorded case of such an event). Now, we’ve grown to fear the sugary candy itself. And this year, we seem afraid that college students are unable to decide how to dress themselves on Halloween.

I don’t wish to trivialize genuine concerns about cultural and personal representation, and other challenges to our lived experience in a plural community. I know that many decent people have proposed guidelines on Halloween costumes from a spirit of avoiding hurt and offense. I laud those goals, in theory, as most of us do. But in practice, I wonder if we should reflect more transparently, as a community, on the consequences of an institutional (which is to say: bureaucratic and administrative) exercise of implied control over college students.

It seems to me that we can have this discussion of costumes on many levels: we can talk about complex issues of identify, free speech, cultural appropriation, and virtue “signalling.” But I wanted to share my thoughts with you from a totally different angle, as an educator concerned with the developmental stages of childhood and young adulthood.

As a former preschool teacher, for example, it is hard for me to give credence to a claim that there is something objectionably “appropriative” about a blonde-haired child’s wanting to be Mulan for a day. Pretend play is the foundation of most cognitive tasks, and it seems to me that we want to be in the business of encouraging the exercise of imagination, not constraining it. I suppose we could agree that there is a difference between fantasizing about an individual character vs. appropriating a culture, wholesale, the latter of which could be seen as (tacky)(offensive)(jejeune)(hurtful), take your pick. But, then, I wonder what is the statute of limitations on dreaming of dressing as Tiana the Frog Princess if you aren’t a black girl from New Orleans? Is it okay if you are eight, but not 18? I don’t know the answer to these questions; they seem unanswerable. Or at the least, they put us on slippery terrain that I, for one, prefer not to cross.
Which is my point. I don’t, actually, trust myself to foist my Halloweenish standards and motives on others. I can’t defend them anymore than you could defend yours. Why do we dress up on Halloween, anyway? Should we start explaining that too? I’ve always been a good mimic and I enjoy accents. I love to travel, too, and have been to every continent but Antarctica. When I lived in Bangladesh, I bought a sari because it was beautiful, even though I looked stupid in it and never wore it once. Am I fetishizing and appropriating others’ cultural experiences? Probably. But I really, really like them too.

Even if we could agree on how to avoid offense – and I’ll note that no one around campus seems overly concerned about the offense taken by religiously conservative folks to skin-revealing costumes – I wonder, and I am not trying to be provocative: Is there no room anymore for a child or young person to be a little bit obnoxious… a little bit inappropriate or provocative or, yes, offensive? American universities were once a safe space not only for maturation but also for a certain regressive, or even transgressive, experience; increasingly, it seems, they have become places of censure and prohibition. And the censure and prohibition come from above, not from yourselves! Are we all okay with this transfer of power? Have we lost faith in young people’s capacity – in your capacity - to exercise selfcensure, through social norming, and also in your capacity to ignore or reject things that trouble you? We tend to view this shift from individual to institutional agency as a tradeoff between libertarian vs. liberal values (“liberal” in the American, not European sense of the word).

Nicholas says, if you don’t like a costume someone is wearing, look away, or tell them you are offended. Talk to each other. Free speech and the ability to tolerate offence are the hallmarks of a free and open society.

But – again, speaking as a child development specialist – I think there might be something missing in our discourse about the exercise of free speech (including how we dress ourselves) on campus, and it is this: What does this debate about Halloween costumes say about our view of young adults, of their strength and judgment?

In other words: Whose business is it to control the forms of costumes of young people? It’s not mine, I know that.

Happy Halloween.

Yours sincerely,

Erika

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