WORDS AND WORLDS AT PLAY:

NOSTALGIA AND CHILDHOOD IN CARROLL'S ALICE BOOKS

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by

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CERTIFICATION OF APPROVAL

I certify that I have read *Words and Worlds at Play: Nostalgia and Childhood in Carroll's Alice Books* by Katherine Bierbaum Salazar, and that in my opinion this work meets the criteria for approving a thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirement for the degree Master of Arts in English: Literature at San Francisco State University.

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In this thesis I argue against popular and critical understandings of Lewis Carroll’s novels as unmindfully “participant” in the Victorian “cult of the child.” Many view Carroll’s writing to be central to the development of a particular brand of nostalgia that I call “child-objectifying nostalgia,” predicated on the binary opposition of adult/child in which the adult is privileged. However, I argue that Carroll’s Alice books present us with far more complex pictures of adult/child relationships than the ones “child-objectifying” nostalgia produces. Ultimately I argue that the Alice books work to bridge the conceptual gap between adults and children through wordplay enabled by the ambiguity of the sign.

I certify that the abstract is a correct representation of the content of this thesis.

Chair, Thesis Committee

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Introduction

In this thesis, I argue against popular critical understandings of Lewis Carroll’s Alice books as “unreflective participants” in the Victorian cult of the child (Gubar, “Lewis in Wonderland” 392). Most critics consider Carroll’s writing to be central to the development of a particular brand of nostalgia that I call “child-objectifying nostalgia.” However, I argue that Carroll’s texts present us with far more complex pictures of adult/child relationships than those that “child-objectifying” nostalgia produces. Like more recent critics who have sought to destabilize the adult/child relationships within the text, I suggest that instead of reading the Alice books as products of child-objectifying nostalgia, we read them as critiques of it.

In Chapter One, I begin by exploring the concept of nostalgia itself and the pathological etymology that shapes perceptions of its negative implications. I suggest that nostalgia is inherently a process of objectification that engenders an idealized or imagined past. When the nostalgic subject transposes the child or childhood onto that idealized past (in other words, is nostalgic for some imagined, idyllic childhood), child-objectifying nostalgia ensues. The binary opposition of adult and child (or the child as other), which child-objectifying nostalgia depends on, is part of the dominant discourse in the field of children’s literature. This binary framework, so deeply ingrained and prevalent, proves nearly insurmountable. The very idea of literature specifically for children implies the opposition of adult to child. Yet, because adults are always the authors of children’s literature, as Jacqueline Rose argues, and adults can read such texts as “nostalgic,” children’s
literature for some seems to be more intended for adults than for children. However, when one reads the Alice books as critiques of child-objectifying nostalgia, the binary opposition implied within the idea of children’s literature breaks down and becomes fluid as power dynamics between adults and children are implicitly challenged through the playful nature of these texts. Thus, Carroll’s Alice books work to redefine children’s literature as for both adults and children. Continuing to flesh-out the concept of child-objectifying nostalgia, I examine how critics have described and read both Carroll and his texts as nostalgic, looking closely at the Carroll myth and the child-objectifying nostalgia that is a key aspect of the Carroll myth. I end the chapter by arguing how child-objectifying nostalgia can be read in the frames of the Alice books as not a reactionary but a mindful move on Carroll’s behalf that seeks to redefine the opposition of “child” to “adult.”

Chapter Two examines how the worlds of Wonderland and the Looking-glass resist notions of an idealized childhood and open a space where definitions of childhood and adulthood can be renegotiated and are constantly in flux in the fantastic, backwards madness of these two dream realms. Using Bakhtin’s notion of the chronotope, I begin by focusing on the garden as a chronotope emblematic of an idealized, Edenic version of childhood in order to argue that the Alice books examine but ultimately do not depict the garden as a space of child-objectifying nostalgia. The worlds of Wonderland and the Looking-Glass play with and dismantle the chronotope of the garden and the idea of returning to a childhood paradise, as Alice at the end of her journeys discovers that such
privileged places are not as promising as they initially seem. Instead of presenting readers with an idealized space of childhood, the Alice books enact Todorov's notion of the fantastic, for they are more concerned with the present (as opposed to an idealized past) and mock Victorian social and cultural conventions, importantly those that seek to position adults as rational and experienced, and children as innocent and ignorant. The fantastic aspects of the texts enable parody and play, which warp Carroll's and Alice's Victorian realities and continuously invert the binary opposition of adult/child. The fantastic in both texts blurs distinctions between adults and children and produces the child as the distorted mirror image of the adult and vice versa. *Wonderland*, a world of mad adults spouting nonsense or hyper-logic, positions Alice as the most sane and logical figure and *Looking-glass*, with its equally backwards adult characters, likewise places the child as ultimate authority, if only to radically question authority at large, in the end.

Chapter Three reclaims nostalgia as a narrative process that can unhang representations of child- and adulthood through reimagining such concepts. I argue that Carroll's wordplay in these two texts reveals the power of taxonomy, or the power of naming derived from the authority of the speaking subject. Parody, puns, and riddles run rampant throughout the Alice books, but wordplay also functions on a very basic level in these texts: any confusion of language and meaning is wordplay. In Wonderland and Looking-glass land words never have a clear, face value and always point in more than one direction. Thus, wordplay destabilizes absolute meaning and ruptures the signified from the signifier. Such rupturing allows for new meanings and new narratives about childhood
and adulthood to arise—narratives that position the two concepts as reflections of each other rather than as others. I look specifically at moments in the texts that showcase the scrutinizing gaze of adult-like characters and their tendency to name, define, and objectify Alice. Rather than viewing Alice as powerless under the duress of the adult gaze, I suggest that she continually seeks to assert her agency throughout the narrative often by talking back, thus making this version of childhood a narrative of resistance. Through the slippage of the sign, rupture, and multiple signifieds the concepts of adult- and childhood can be displaced, allowing for reconceptualization of the child and adult that bridges the gap established in the binary opposition. The destabilization created through wordplay confuses the concepts of adult- and childhood to the point that the two are not distinguishable. Such blurring, again, speaks to how these texts redefine children’s literature as for both children and adults.
Chapter 1

Child-Objectifying Nostalgia, the Carroll Myth, and Alice’s Critics

Lewis Carroll’s *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* (1865) and *Through the Looking-Glass* (1872) have been widely celebrated by popular and critical consensus as marking the “Golden Age” of Children’s Literature. These texts are viewed as beacons of the child’s imagination that pave the way for later works like J.M. Barrie’s *Peter Pan and Wendy* (1911). Rather than depicting children navigating real life or everyday tasks with the purpose of instruction and enculturation as earlier texts for children had done, Carroll delved into the child’s imagination through Alice’s dream of Wonderland and Looking-Glass Land. Morton Cohen, one of Carroll’s most renowned biographers, venerates Carroll by proclaiming that he “revolutionized writing for children”; Cohen contends that “children’s books after Carroll were less serious, more entertaining, and sounded less like sermons and more like the voices of friends than earlier prototypes” (xxii). Like Cohen, many critics observe that the *Alice* books seem to penetrate the mind of the child, producing a special, separate space of wonder and imagination and embodying what childhood appears to be at its core. For these critics and for the Victorians, accustomed to moralizing and didactic children’s literature, Carroll and his books tapped into the supposed creativity and imagination of childhood in a way that few others had done.

Describing Carroll’s intractable link to his dream child Alice, Karoline Leach constructs Alice as a symbol of humanity for Carroll’s generation. She posits that “for the Victorians, caught as they were on the cusp of a new age in which all old certainties were
dying, ‘Alice’ was embraced as a kind of demonstration that warm and nonsensical humanity was still paramount in their frighteningly new scientific age” (15-16). According to Leach, Alice held a sense of hope and preserved humaneness for Victorians as scientific theories like Darwin’s natural selection drew attention to the non-human origins of humankind. Such scientific theories engender and almost necessitate a desire to regain a perceived “loss” of the human as the primary subject of history. Leach goes on to delineate that “[Alice] came to symbolize Nostalgia in all its fantasy-filled self-deception and, by association, its author did as well” (Leach 15-16). Thus, Alice and Carroll, for their own generation, not only became hallmarks and arbiters of childhood, but also figures of redemption, which Leach describes here as a self-deceiving nostalgia. By association, lost humanity came to be located within the realm of the child.

The link between childhood and lost humanity runs deeper than Victorian anxieties produced by the scientific age. It has roots in the Romantic embrace of imagination as well. In Wonderland, it is the child’s imagination that dreams all of the wordplay, nonsense, and mad authority figures that construct and inhabit that world. As Leach describes, many of Carroll’s critics and biographers, past and present, have understood this newfound brand of child fantasy to be linked to the imagination and to nostalgia, two deeply Romantic notions. For many, Carroll’s descent into the child’s imagination through the authoring of Alice’s dream resembles the Romantic escape into the imagination. In English Romanticism, imagination itself becomes synonymous or closely linked
with childhood.\textsuperscript{1} In other words, the concept of the Alice books along with their basic plot structure is seen to provide an imaginative escape into childhood that seems inherently nostalgic, especially as the adult author re-imagines the subjectivity of the child and in so doing, returns to childhood.

Tinged by the looming shadows of his great Romantic predecessors and fastened tightly to the Victorian cult of the child, Carroll and his books seem to represent some form of nostalgia for childhood, in which the idea of the child is concocted as special and set-apart while simultaneously being corrupted and fetishized by the adult gaze. Whether this adult gaze is the gaze of the author or the gaze of subsequent critics, biographers, and Carrollians, it conceives of the relationships between adults and children in Carroll’s works and life as always operating on a binary that opposes the adult to the child, one which privileges the adult as creator and author of childhood. Nostalgia in this sense is hinged on two interconnected binaries: child and adult, and past and present, in which the longing for or fetishizing of childhood and the past is always paradoxically done in the service of re-establishing the priority and authority of adulthood and the present. Such nostalgia for childhood constructs it as a time and place to be regained.

\textsuperscript{1} Geoffrey Hartman complicates the idea of the Romantic escape into imagination, asserting, “It is the destiny of consciousness or, the English Romantics would have said it, of imagination, to separate from nature so that is can finally transcend not only nature but also its own lesser forms” (301). Transcendence lies within imagining power and imagining power has as one of its sources, the child. According to Ann Wierda Rowland, “the child is particularly appealing to the Romantics because of its claims to a ‘natural’ state and its capacity to evoke an interior remembered existence” (26). At the risk of conflating imagination and the “natural” state, a conflation that Hartman and Rowland discuss at length, the child as a source of imagination or unmediated nature is a Romantic trope that informs later writing for children. The child, as Rowland notes, is privileged and idealized nostalgically beginning, at least notably, with Romanticism.
The nostalgic construction of childhood as a lost time and place, a lost origin or higher form of humanity, presupposes an adult subject that imagines such a space. Edward Said's notion of "orientalism" proves useful in examining the power dynamic between adult and child in this version of childhood nostalgia. Said explains that "orientalism is premised upon exteriority, that is, on the fact that the Orientalist, poet or scholar, makes the Orient speak, describes the Orient, renders its mysteries plain for and to the West" (21). Said stipulates that by necessity the orientalist can never be of the Orient himself. Rather, through representation of the orient and the oriental other he ventriloquizes, makes "makes the Orient speak" (21). Colonial, imperial power enables such expropriation of culture and identity, Said explains, positioning "Orientalism as a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient" (3). To ventriloquize as the West does to the East (the orientalist to the orient) means to speak for and on behalf of others, necessitating the silence of the other. To speak for and on behalf of others is an act of domination.

Children's literature scholar, Perry Nodelman, was one of the first to draw a correlation between Said's work and the oppositional positioning of the adult and child. Nodelman uses Said's notion of the orientalist's "exteriority" to describe the adult othering of the child. He positions the acting, adult subject as the observer/analyst and the child as passive object. Nodelman writes, "the other is always conceived by those who study it to be unable to study itself, to see or speak for itself" ("The Other" 29). Nodelman explains that, just as the orientalist alone constructs the orient, childhood can only be
glimpsed—represented, imagined, and/or remembered—through the adult lens. Claiming that “it’s fairly obvious that our descriptions of childhood similarly purport to see and speak for children, and that we believe them to be similarly incapable of speaking for themselves,” Nodelman draws the parallel between the adult and the Orientalist: the adult speaks for the child and the orientalist “makes the Orient speak” (“The Other” 29; Said 21). Such ventriloquism shows the dominating power of adult authority to be close to the imperial/colonial power of the orientalist.

In reimagining childhood through nostalgia, adults, intentionally or not, seem to partake in the kind of objectification and othering which Said identifies in the idea of “orientalism” and which Nodelman later explicitly applies to the opposition of child and adult. As other critics of children’s literature have pointed out, speaking for the child is something that all books for and about children do. However, some do this with an explicit awareness of the ramifications that their adult, authorial position of power generates.

Pinning Carroll and his Alice books as unaware of this kind of adult power, or as hopelessly nostalgic participants in the Victorian cult of the child, I argue, makes for far too simplistic a reading. In the Alice books, the child becomes the agent of imagination in a text intended for children and transforms children’s literature in exciting ways. These are texts that consistently upend hierarchical relationships of power and play with the instability of meaning and representation; further, Carroll’s brand of nostalgia is, I will argue, not the child-objectifying nostalgia so many critics deem it to be. Though Carroll’s
true intentions and feelings towards his child audience and child friends can never fully be known, many biographical accounts perpetuate his life and works as emblematic of the Victorian cult of the child. Critiques of Carroll that promote him and his texts as unreflectively nostalgic tend to totalize nostalgia itself as a destructive and shameful force, stigmatizing it as a negative phenomenon bound to processes of objectification. In these kinds of critiques, Carroll and the Alice books are either read as perpetuating the Romantic image of the child, in which Carroll becomes the adult entrapping the child in the rose-colored nostalgia of the imagined space of childhood, and/or the genius author, celebrated for his uncanny ability to tap into the child’s imagination, to speak in the voice of the child. Both readings are linked to Carroll as a mythical author-figure. In this thesis, I argue that nostalgia is not a wholly destructive impulse that should be suppressed, denounced, or shunned, but can be a productive impetus that invokes a space for negotiating and examining definitions and ideological assumptions about both children and adults. The Alice books use nostalgia in this productive way.

Nostalgia, Child-Objectifying Nostalgia, and Children’s Literature

Given the pathological origins of the term, it is no surprise that nostalgia often evokes negative connotations. The *Oxford English Dictionary’s* (*OED*) first definition of nostalgia is an “acute longing for familiar surroundings, esp. regarded as a medical condition; homesickness.” Based on the Greek “nostos”—“a homecoming or homeward journey”—and “algia,” which forms “nouns denoting types of pain, typically in the location or of the nature specified by the first element,” nostalgia in its earliest manifestations is a
sickness or disease (OED). In *Nostalgia in Transition, 1780-1917*, Linda Austin traces the evolution of the word as moving “from occasional disease (of displaced soldiers during wartime) to a cultural aesthetic—a way of producing and consuming the past” (2). Nostalgia’s earliest semantic origin reveals its afflictive implications. For Austin, the aesthetic version of nostalgia seems less threatening. Yet, “producing and consuming the past” imply rather powerful, and some would say equally delusional, acts of reimagining. Austin suggests that “nineteenth-century writers” were responsible for the terms of nostalgia’s aesthetic appeal. She posits that by focusing on “false or hyperbolic memory, melancholia, and protracted mourning,” these writers disrupted nostalgia’s “links with illusion, trauma, and amnesia” (2). Thus, nostalgia transitions from disease to an aesthetic phenomenon by way of nineteenth-century writers (starting with the Romantics).

The *OED*’s etymology of nostalgia corresponds with Austin’s tracing of the concept. By the third definition, nostalgia loses its pathological undertones and transforms into “something which causes nostalgia for the past; freq. as a collective term for things which evoke a former (remembered) era.” Certainly contemporary understandings of nostalgia come closer to the latter definition; however, nostalgia, as understood by many in the study of children’s literature, has not totally lost its pathological implications. While Austin describes how “familiarity is the primary affect of nostalgia and a main element of its pleasure, and the underlying reason for popular consumption of a text at any level of cultural competence;” she does not entirely account for the problematic nature of consumption, which in itself has the capacity to become a kind of metaphorical pathological
condition (23). Someone consumed in reverie or enchanted by soothing familiarity might be equally enraptured and fixated as one pining for a return home. Though nostalgia may no longer be considered a literal sickness or disorder, the consumptive nature that Austin describes in the aesthetic conceptualization of nostalgia—“a way of producing and consuming the past”—leave its negative undertones intact. Consumption inherently necessitates processes of objectification and exploitation, processes that are ridden with power dynamics and predicated on the subjugation of another. These processes, however, often operate tacitly and undetected, masked by the appeal of nostalgia’s pleasurable aspects. Nostalgia becomes a clichéd, stock phrase or concept that on the surface seems to be about sentimental desire, which obstructs the complicated power dynamics between its imagining subject and imagined object. While many children’s literature critics seek to expose such dynamics in texts for children, the idea of nostalgia often goes critically unexamined.

Nostalgia as a consuming, power-ridden force is predicated on processes of objectification. The objectification and othering of the child become and remain part of the dominant critical discourse of children’s literature. When exploitative objectification processes are conflated with nostalgia for childhood or re-imaginings of the child, nostalgia becomes characterized as an unhealthy, destructively consumptive desire with deeper implications of adult power that seek to define and thereby control the child. Understanding nostalgia as a process of exploitative objectification also establishes, and is predicated on
the hierarchical binary opposition of the adult privileged over the child. This particular brand of nostalgia, I will hereafter refer to as child-objectifying nostalgia.

For psychoanalytic theorists like Jacqueline Rose, objectification of the child is inherent in all literature for and about children, hence the title of her seminal work *Peter Pan and the Impossibility of Children’s Fiction* (1984). “Children’s fiction,” she writes, “sets up a world in which the adult comes first (author, maker, giver) and the child comes after (reader, product, receiver), but where neither of them enter the space in between” (2). This relationship establishes a clear binary from the start, in which the adult takes precedence over the child in their active roles as “author, maker, giver,” and the child merely owes their existence to the adult in their passive roles as “reader, product, receiver.” She goes on to claim quite bluntly, “this is to describe children’s fiction, quite deliberately, as something of a soliciting, a chase, or even a seduction” (2). The relationship between adult and child develops into that of predator and prey. At the heart of children’s fiction hides the adult who, consciously or not, exploits or preys on the child in her representation because the adult must scrutinize and imagine the subjectivity of the child and the child, without choice or voice, submits by default. Again, Said’s concept of exteriority, by way of Nodelman, demonstrates the dominating act of speaking on behalf of others. As Rose puts it, “[children’s fiction] will not be an issue of what the child wants, but of what the adult desires – desires in the very act of construing the child as object” (2). Children’s fiction, by Rose’s definition, parallels Austin’s aesthetic nostalgia as “a way of producing and consuming the past” (23). Here the past takes on the form of the child
and the adult pleasurably consumes the “familiarity” (childhood), which she herself has produced, whilst simultaneously constructing her own authoritative image in contrast to the child (Austin 23).

This binary framework of adult-subject, child-object (predator and prey) proves inescapable, according to Rose, because of language. She contends, “we use language to identify ourselves and objects in the world . . . [and] objects are defined in language, but the relation between the linguistic term and its referent is arbitrary” (17). Most languages have subjects and objects, a dichotomy with inherent power dynamics. When children become the objects of adult subjects, imbalance and hierarchy ensue—it becomes “a chase” (Rose 2). Because nostalgia for childhood takes children as its object and requires an aged subject, child-objectifying nostalgia approximates this linguistic power imbalance.

When writing about children, the dichotomous, hierarchical nature of language becomes particularly charged as power dynamics of subject and object align with the adult and the child. Such alignments drive Rose to argue that “how we think about children – what it might mean to address them, to speak to them and write them down – is...directly implicated in this question of language” (17). Language, then, makes objectification unavoidable, rendering writing, always entrenched in hierarchy; this is the “impossibility” of children’s fiction that Rose comes to theorize, critically analyze, and popularize in the study of children’s literature. Rose and critics after her—such as Nodelman—have likened this objectification to the othering of colonialism.
The binary framework that Rose and other critics establish in order to speak about the problematic power dynamics of representing children has important implications for the study of children’s literature. Foremost, without first defining the inherent othering implicated in representation, it would be impossible to attempt to disrupt those patterns. Unfortunately, once conceptualized as an opposition, it seems equally impossible to escape those very parameters. When adults try to redefine children as more than innocent, oblivious, idyllic others, the redefinition vies towards characterizing children as adult-like, or attributing them with adult-like qualities—wit, intelligence, savvy, experience—a gross inversion of the opposition rather than a transformation. Herein lies the crux of the problem: how does one speak of children and adults outside the binary framework that has become ideology itself?

While critics like Nodelman and Rose write of children’s literature in general, of adults writing for children, the processes they describe mirror my conceptualization of child-objectifying nostalgia. In other words, Rose’s notion of the impossibility of children’s fiction and Nodelman’s notion of the child as other are analogous to child-objectifying nostalgia—child-pasts produced for the pleasure of consumption made possible through an othering in which the adult defines themselves while simultaneously creating and maintaining power. Destructive, exploitative, consuming notions of what I have defined as child-objectifying nostalgia have become part of the dominant discourse in the
study of children's literature.\textsuperscript{2} Fixation on this particular brand of nostalgia certainly emerges throughout the criticism of some of children's literature's most beloved texts, Lewis Carroll's Alice books.

\textbf{Reading Alice through the Carroll Myth(s)}

The reading of the Alice books as child-objectifying nostalgia has much to do with the author and the author-figure of these texts. The dominant narratives about Carroll's life, pieced together by biographers and dissected by literary critics, shape and reify what Karoline Leach refers to as the Carroll myth. Leach implies that the Carroll myth produces a doubled imagining of Carroll's identity. One mythic image of Carroll constructs him as a child-lover and participant in the Victorian "cult of the child": this version of Carroll situates him as having innate insight into the mind of the child—even being child-like himself—and perpetuating Romantic images of the child as innocent, inexperienced, and close to nature. The other mythic image of Carroll, also connected to the idea of the child-lover, pins him as the predatory, slightly pedophiliac figure. This version of the Carroll myth perpetuates the image of the child as victim or prey to the rapacious, domineering adult. Leach seeks to counter this version of the myth by arguing that the Carroll-as-predator myth was co-constructed by Carroll and Victorian society (16). Both versions of the Carroll myth, however, rely on processes of objectification that are linked to child-objectifying nostalgia. While some have criticized Leach for creating yet another

\textsuperscript{2} Recently, there has been more exposure of the tendency to continually frame the relationship of adult and child as oppositional in criticism of texts for children. Marah Gubar and even Perry Nodelman himself have acknowledged this problem within their discourses' structure. Their arguments inform and support my argument in this project.
polarized image of Carroll (Rackin 651), the Carroll myth(s) seep into readings of the author and his texts; these myths have become so ingrained in discussions about Carroll and Alice that they are almost an ideology themselves.

Looking more at the Carroll myth and the way it is constructed and projected onto the texts reveals that such conflation of author and text can lead to both reifying the mythic author and misreading the Alice books as perpetuating child-objectifying nostalgia. The myth emerges as the shadowy author figure must himself be scrutinized and objectified, for readers and critics cannot resist the mystique that the strangely genius author symbolizes: the man that created Wonderland, Alice, and all that madness. Carroll, for many, becomes a symbol waiting to be read and interpreted and so assumptions about his life penetrate and permeate the texts, latching on and producing twisted versions of Alice. Leach describes the kind of conflation that occurs and functions as part of the Carroll myth. She explains how

at the centre of the Alice stories lies the image of Carroll and at the centre of the Carroll image lies Alice. With the spread of his fame worldwide, the name ‘Lewis Carroll,’ an invention, the conceit of a man who liked to play with words and symbols, became in itself a word-symbol, a semi-tangible rendering of an idea. It became an aspiration. (15)

As two sides of the same coin, Carroll and Alice collapse into one another. This collapsing of the author-figure onto the text does not work to bridge the binary gap between
adult and child, however, but rather manages to mystify the child by establishing the au-
uthor as a mythic figure, whose myths are predicated on child-objectifying nostalgia.

The double myth about Carroll persists even as critics and biographers attempt to
name and call it out. Like Leach, Morton Cohen describes Carroll as a symbol, affirming
that “no consensus has emerged [about] Lewis Carroll [and he] remains an enigma, a
complex human being who has so far defied comprehension” (xxi). Beyond reach, Car-
roll’s curious life cannot be summed up or defined, according to Cohen. Yet, by placing
him out of reach, Cohen defines Carroll as a curious enigma, a troubling characterization
that further mystifies Carroll. Though he intends to complicate the myths’ reductive re-
constructions of Carroll, Cohen’s mystification of Carroll subsequently contributes to and
reifies the Carroll myth. Popular conceptions about Carroll’s fascination and relationships
with children manifests precisely because Carroll, despite his scrupulous record keeping,
wrote very little about his personal life, or what Cohen, in another conjuring move,
deems the “nature of his sins” (xxi). While Cohen purports to avoid characterizing Car-
roll in the light of his double myth, he ends up perpetuating it: shrouding Carroll in mys-
tery momentarily, then moving on to associate Carroll’s approach to children as a product
of Romanticism, which projects the other version of the myth.

Because we can never truly know what Carroll’s life was like and the nature of
his relationships with his various child friends, biographers and critics rely on situating
him within a particular literary history, informed by Victorian society’s Romantic vision,
and thus locate him as a late-century child-objectifier. Critics and biographers must deci-
pher and interpret the impact of alleged life instances—to “write on behalf of the dead”—and recreate biographical narrative (Anderson 197). Such narratives, after continual reification and reconstitution, become accepted as fact or truth and thus become part of the ideology surrounding the author, the era, and the text. In essence, the Carroll myth becomes a kind of ideology itself. This ideology, constructed of a mix of Romanticism, Victorianism, and Carroll’s supposed life, in turn, infects and affects understandings of the Alice books, so much so that it, like all ideology, seems inescapable.

Biographers and critics like Cohen and Leach construct and reify the Carroll mythic ideology by situating him within literary history as a product of Romanticism. Looking to his literary influences, particularly his Romantic predecessors, for answers to his life and texts reinforces part of the child-lover, genius-author version of the Carroll myth and readings of him as “participant” in the Victorian cult of the child (Gubar, “Lewis in Wonderland” 392). Cohen, like others, attributes the Romantics as primary influences on Carroll, noting that “next to the Bible and Shakespeare, Charles was devoted to the writings of Blake, Wordsworth, Coleridge...all Romantics and all variously commentators on the nature of the child and the child’s place in the universe” (106). Cohen’s connection between the Romantics and Carroll attribute Carroll with the literary tutelage of the Romantics and everything they supposedly embody.

The most important link Cohen wishes to draw between the Romantics and Carroll concerns their views of the child. He even goes as far as to insist that “some of Charles’s words and ideas are Blake’s: the divinely linked angel-child, the marriage of
song and joy, song and innocence” (108). All of the idyllic virtues of childhood—angelic, joyful innocence—that the Romantic child encompasses Cohen transfers to Carroll’s representations of childhood. While admitting that “Charles cloaked [his writing] in Victorian sentiment,” Cohen quickly reaffirms that “sentiment aside, [Charles] inherited from his literary models the idea that the child can teach an adult repentance and the way to salvation” (108). Cohen’s reconstruction of Carroll’s “inherited” Romantic fascination with childhood casts Carroll as the heir of Romantic, child-objectifying nostalgia, in which the regaining of childhood is analogous to redemption. Yet, as Cohen puts it, such implications about childhood are neatly enfolded in Carroll’s “Victorian sentiments,” a stipulation that connects Carroll’s Romantic idealization of the child with his Victorian impulse to do the same, but perhaps with more presumed Victorian priggishness.

However, much of Carroll’s work does not completely reflect this idealizing process. While Blake’s influential dichotomy of innocence and experience, respectively mapped onto childhood and adulthood, may very well emerge repeatedly in Carroll’s reveries, nothing can be so clear-cut with Carroll, or with Blake for that matter. These ties to Romanticism and the Romantic child inform understandings of Carroll and inform readings of his texts that inevitably pin him as a child-objectifying, nostalgic figure.

The Romantic legacy that Cohen imbues Carroll’s life narrative with reiterates the Victorian “cult of the child,” which has its origins in Romanticism. In this sense, Carroll becomes a text—the myth—that reflects not a real individual, but his society, or, more accurately, modern readers’ expectations of Victorian society. In this vein, Leach argues
that “it is important to recognize that the modern image of apparently bizarre child-centeredness belongs primarily to [the] Victorian wish to believe in Carroll and not the reality of Dodgson’s life,” contending that “it was an emanation of strange Victorian child-cult, the Blakean worship of the child as innocent, and it can only be understood in that context” (16). Like Cohen, Leach points to connections with Blake, but rather than seeing Carroll as a participant, she argues that Victorian society provoked such readings. The Carroll myth, she purports, “was a fantasy, constructed by a kind of mutual consent, by Dodgson himself and by the society in which he lived” (16). That Cohen reconstructs this nostalgic, mythic view of Dodgson in his biography demonstrates the power of the myth that Carroll and the fascination of modern sensibilities with Carroll, Alice, and Victorians to this day. To some degree, Leach also ends up inadvertently reasserting the Carroll myth that she seeks to disrupt because part of her argument conserves notions that Carroll is openly participant in the Victorian “cult of the child” and even suggests that he is partial author of the child-cult in his complicit construction of his own pedophiliac version of the myth.

That Carroll’s biographers inevitably end up reaffirming the view of Carroll as a nostalgic, child-cult Victorian, attests to the power of the myth and its ideological underpinnings that still haunt understandings of childhood today. James Kincaid’s poignant acknowledgment that “if we think of Victorian culture and Victorian constructions of children as shifting, various, and mysterious, we have some hope of glimpsing where our own unwarranted certainties come from,” explains the persistence of this ideology (63).
This inevitable looping back to the ideology of the Carroll myth occurs, perhaps, because "ideology has no outside (for itself)" and "it is necessary to be outside ideology... to be able to say: I am in ideology" (Althusser). In other words, one can never be outside ideology. Even as biographers and critics attempt to disrupt the myth of Carroll and the nostalgia that it represents, they inevitably end up back where they began, in ideology, in the myth. This myth, however, is predicated on viewing Carroll as complicit in child-objectifying nostalgia that emerges as part of the Romantic child and the Victorian "cult of the child."

The ideology of the Carroll myth permeates his texts, as "the author and his creation have penetrated one another, merging until the boundaries of their identities are no longer clear" (Leach 15). If the Carroll myth was born out of the Victorian cult of the child, as Leach claims, and out the legacy of the Romantic child, then it makes perfect sense that the literary criticism, born out of "the Golden Age" of children's literature, operates within those same structures: namely, the adult-subject, child-object dichotomy that I have conceptualized in child-objectifying nostalgia and demonstrated in the work of critics. Thus Carroll himself, or rather Carroll the myth, becomes a lens through which many read his texts.

The objectifying nostalgia embedded in the pedophiliac version of the Carroll myth seep into depictions and literary analysis of the Alice books. In *The Case of Peter Pan*, Rose uses Carroll and Alice to introduce child-objectification. She unequivocally asserts that
Alice’s underworld journey was long ago traced to its author’s fantasied seduction of a little girl, held to him by the act of telling the tale. A sexual act which we can easily recognize now, despite (or because of) the innocence of its youth object (3).

Rose sexualizes Carroll’s suspicious relationship to the real Alice (Liddell) and presents it as undeniable fact—a truth. The Carroll myth bleeds into his books as this act of storytelling becomes sexualized. In this recapitulation, the adult entraps the child in the web of a woven fairy-tale. Claiming that acknowledgement of this sexual act surfaces because of the innocence of the child-object, Rose depends on the dichotomy of adult/child while also perpetuating the Romantic notion of child innocence. The phrase “the author’s fantasied seduction” is telling; it roots Carroll’s intentions in fantasy or nostalgia (Rose 3).

Yet, the fantasy begins to mix with reality and morphs into truth as Rose deems it a real “sexual act” (Rose 3). The child-objectifying nostalgia of the Carroll myth persists in this pedophiliac depiction of the Alice books where Carroll’s presumed fantasies and real life relationships with the books’ namesake are transposed onto the texts.

The idyllic version of the Carroll myth likewise penetrates modern readings of his texts. Hugh Haughton invokes this version of the Carroll myth in his depiction of the Alice books as a more authentic representation of childhood. He describes the Alice books, attesting, “at the heart of the Alice books is Dodgson’s dream identification with his child heroine” (27). Haughton imbues Carroll with a special child-sense, noting that “the writer sees through Alice’s eyes” (27). Alice and Carroll, in another fusion, become one in this
characterization of the Alice books. Unlike Rose, Haughton’s purpose is not to condemn this rendering of the child, but to celebrate Alice as an authentic rendering of the child. He does, however, comment on Carroll’s subsequent relapse into superficial representations of children in works like *Sylvie and Bruno*, stating that “they are very much objects of adult manipulation; they are viewed through the sentimentalist’s or the voyeur’s lens” (27). Whether authentic author or sentimental voyeur, the celebration or condemnation of Carroll’s child-representations (predicated on objectification nevertheless) both play into the Carroll myth: he is either genius author or disturbing child-lover.

Another critic, Robert Hemmings, deals overtly with the topic of nostalgia in *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*. Much like I have done here, Hemmings prefaces his reading with an exploration of the concept of nostalgia. He describes nostalgia as “a function of the imagination, steeped in temporal and spatial longing, and the illusive object of that longing [in Golden Age children’s books] is childhood” (55). While admitting “Carroll’s *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* is not perhaps an obviously nostalgic text in the generic terms of pastoral idyll,” Hemmings ultimately argues that “Alice’s phantasmagorical experiences are not Dodgson’s childhood experiences; rather her beauty, wit, charm, and sexless purity embody the ideals through which the adult chooses to envision childhood” (59-60). Making it clear that the text does not reproduce Carroll’s own childhood, Hemmings implies that it produces an idealized childhood to be enjoyed (or consumed) by adults. In the vein of Rose and Nodelman, Hemmings predicates nostalgia in processes of objectification. His nostalgia mixes destructive objectification with Romantic impli-
cations of childhood purity, producing a rosier, yet still suspect perception of the idea.

For Hemmings, the act of consumption provides a link to childhood (through a kind of oral factory memory). He suggests that “the act of tasting, of consuming food in the lost world of childhood [Wonderland and the Looking-glass] recreated through nostalgia, like the act of tasting in Eden, reveals the fault lines that threaten the stability of the nostalgic vision” (63). The “nostalgic vision,” Hemmings posits, is established through the framing poems, which represent the direct voice of Carroll. While Hemmings acknowledges that nostalgia is threatened, he also holds that “the nostalgic tone so strongly set in the frame is present as well in the characterization of Alice as she wanders through her dream-world adventures” (61). Consuming, then, represents both a remembering of childhood through taste and also the loss of childhood aligned with the Edenic loss of innocence. In this configuration, Alice acts as a proxy for Carroll (another blurring of Carroll and Alice, an aspect of the Carroll myth). Her desire to consume in order to remember represents an adult desire to return to childhood through taste and consumption, a desire predicated on the power of othering through imagining.

Though Hemmings begins to trouble the idea of nostalgia, as he admits “fault lines” are revealed in *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*, he still positions the adult-subject (Carroll) against the child-object while simultaneously transposing Carroll’s supposed nostalgia onto Alice via her desire to consume. Hemmings’s interpretation of nostalgia within the text maintains the idea of the author objectifying childhood and his...
child-object, fixing Carroll as participant in the Victorian, child-cult aspect of his myth. Though Hemmings is one of the only critics I came across who dealt specifically with nostalgia, suffice it to say, other manifestations of child-objectifying nostalgia, and most definitely the binary framework of adult-subject child-object run rampant throughout other readings of the Alice books.

**Child-Objectifying Nostalgia in the Alice Books: “All in the Golden Afternoon”**

Part of my purpose for investigating some possible iterations of this kind of child-objectifying nostalgia in Carroll’s Alice books is to reframe the concept of nostalgia in a less destructive light—to find out if we can re-read nostalgia as a catalyst for the more progressive or even radical impulses in Carroll’s novels that lead to a transformed understanding of the child and the adult, not in opposition to each other, but perhaps in a fluid play that fluctuates along a spectrum. Nostalgia in Carroll’s children’s novels can be read in more ways than I can possibly explore in the scope of this project. My aim here is to address the readings of nostalgia that position it as a destructive force, evident in the concept of child-objectifying nostalgia. Although the novels are framed in nostalgia, the way that Carroll plays with the temporal aspects of these seemingly nostalgic moments disrupts readings of the texts as child-objectifying nostalgia.

Some of the most obvious nostalgic moments within the Alice books have to do directly with memory and do not occur so much within Alice’s adventures in Wonderland and the Looking-glass worlds, as they do in the poems and the beginnings and endings
that frame Alice’s adventures. The prefatory poem to *Wonderland* begins in the fading, but glad remembrance of the day Charles Dodgson and the three Liddell girls ventured a boat trip to Godstow, “all in the golden afternoon” (Carroll and Gray 3). The origins of the tale and the novel’s prefatory poem begin in a memory. Carroll’s recount truly waxes nostalgic; he paints the day favorably in warm sunshine, “all in the golden afternoon,” and adoringly comments on the diminutive arms and hands that try to guide their boat (ll.3-6). Carroll’s treatment of memory in the poem and throughout the novel points to a consciousness and intentionality that may very well be an exploration and at times a critique of nostalgia itself. The final stanza of the poem places memory not in a real past, but somewhere in between childhood and the mystical remembered past of childhood:

Alice! A childish story take,

And, with a gentle hand,

Lay it where Childhood’s dreams are twined

In Memory’s mystic band.

Like a pilgrim’s wither’d wreath of flowers

Pluck’d in a far-off land. (ll. 37-42)

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4 According to Donald Gray, editor of the Norton Critical Edition of *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*, Martin Gardener and James Kincaid “summarize the evidence that the day was ‘cool and rather wet,’ as meteorological records report, or sunny and warm, as Dodgson and Alice Hargreaves remember” (3, fn1). This interesting discrepancy raises the question of how well memory functions. Did Dodgson and Alice accurately recall the warm weather or did their fond memories paint the day differently in retrospect? These details reveal that the poems and frames (or memories) are narratives in and of themselves (Geer 1).
This final stanza asks readers to locate the “childish story”—“Alice!”—“where Childhood’s dreams are twined / in Memory’s mystic band” (ll.37, 39-40). The story of Wonderland, the final stanza suggests, belongs to a nostalgic mystical space where childhood dreams meet memory. These lines mystify childhood, dreams, and memory, wrapping them up together. The three are made more ephemeral by time, just like the “pilgrim’s wither’d wreath of flowers / Pluck’d in a far off land,” which show the wear of a long journey, but also originate from a foreign, unfamiliar yet familiar place—the “far-off land” (of childhood).

*Looking-Glass*’s prefatory poem might even be more nostalgic in its vision of the child. Indeed, many have commented that *Looking-Glass* as a whole more aggressively depicts the adult desire “to fix Alice in an idealized childhood world” (Geer 13). The prefatory poem of *Looking-Glass* conveys a more somber tone and focuses on lost time. The last stanza of the poem conveys a sense of remorse as the speaker suggests,

...though a shadow of a sigh

May tremble through the story,

For “happy summer days” gone by,

And vanish’d summer glory—

It shall not touch, with breath of bale,

The pleasance of our fairy-tale. (ll. 31-36)
The sunshine of *Wonderland*'s prefatory poem has already faded with “vanish'd summer glory” at the start of *Looking-Glass*. The speaker even comments that “a shadow of a sigh / May tremble through the story,” imbuing the *Looking-Glass* tale with a sense of gloom from the beginning. Despite the speaker’s insistence that “it shall not touch…/ the pleas-ance of [the] fairy-tale,” that “shadow of a sigh” still remains a possible threat to Alice’s new adventure (II.31-2, 35-6). Childhood in this frame, like the golden sun, has already passed and the speaker wishes to keep it safely within the bounds of the “fairy-tale” (Geer 13). The idealization of childhood in the *Wonderland* poem still holds true; it still has the potential of a magical, joyous place, but one that is acknowledged here as undeniably out of reach and irrevocable, except through the “magic words” of the story (II. 29).

By way of Jennifer Geer, Hemmings points out that “the golden world of these frames reflects the harmony of the dream-vision of childhood imposed upon child readers by the adult narrator…a forced harmony that belies the unruly and threatening events of the narrative the framing devices contain” (60). Hemmings suggest that the frames of the Alice books belong more to the adult desire to idealize childhood, to nostalgically objectify childhood, than do the core narratives themselves (60). He uses the frame as a kind of nostalgic lens through which adult desire is read into the texts, as mentioned. Geer argues the frames function in a similar, but more complicated way; she contends that “the frames’ idealized visions of Alice are themselves constructed narratives, as fantastic in their own way as the dream-tales they so radically reinterpret” (1). For Geer, the “nostalgic, gently teasing and ostensibly serene” frames—the prefatory poems and the ending of
Wonderland in which Alice’s sister envisions a grown Alice retelling her adventures to a child audience—are “not memories,” as the opening poem of Wonderland wants readers to believe, but “fictions” (5). The autobiographical nature of the opening poem that supposedly recounts the famous boat trip blurs Carroll’s reality with the text (a glimpse of the Carroll myth?). This “fiction,” as Geer puts, then, is a very literal nostalgic, objectification of the child and childhood.

Wonderland ends with memory as well, but one that takes place within Alice’s world, not Carroll’s. As Alice recounts her strange dream to her older sister, Alice’s sister begins to dream of Alice in Wonderland and slowly finds herself imagining, dreaming, maybe even remembering the fantastical place herself:

as she listened, or seemed to listen, the whole place around her became alive with the strange creatures of her little sister’s dream . . . The long grass rustled at her feet as the White Rabbit hurried by . . . she could hear the rattle of the teacups as the March Hare and his friends shared their never-ending meal . . . (96)

And on she goes through Wonderland. Alice’s sister’s imagining of Wonderland seems to slip seamlessly into dreaming it for herself, a subtle shift that suggests some universal understanding or collective memory—a nostalgic space of childhood. Alice’s sister so easily drifts to Wonderland perhaps because it is familiar, she may have visited herself; her dream could be a memory of a dream she once had.
And so, nostalgia frames the Wonderland narrative. The prefatory poem and the collective memory of childhood that bookend *Wonderland* and the poem that opens *Looking-Glass* embody the kind of child-objectifying nostalgia that many critics tend to capitalize on in tandem with the Carroll myth. Admittedly, the poem and the ending represent parts of the text in which adults, Carroll, the author of the poem and the character of Alice’s adult sister, retrospectively paint a picture of childhood through moments of reflection. Carroll reflects upon the actual boat trip and comes to idealize childhood in general in the final stanza. Alice’s adult sister revisits the tale of Wonderland in a sort of waking dream, a memory that represents a collective space of childhood. Carroll takes the thread of memory further, as Alice’s sister finally

picture[s] to herself how this same little sister of hers would, in the after-time, be herself a grown woman; and how she would keep through all of her ripe years, the simple and loving heart of her childhood; and how she would gather about her other little children, and make *their* eyes bright with many a strange tale, perhaps even with the dream of Wonderland of long ago, and find pleasure in all their simple joys, remembering her own child-life, and the happy summer days. (97)

The concluding paragraph of Wonderland presents an adult Alice pining for the “simple joys” of childhood through the prophetic vision of the adult-sister, and one could say even further, through the authorship of the adult writer. This final paragraph could not paint a more idealized nostalgia for childhood. The adult Alice reliving her Wonderland
dream through the excitement of child listeners echoes Carroll’s original telling of the tale to the Liddell girls. In a strange apparition of the Carroll myth, Alice and Carroll, again, become one. In her sister’s vision, Alice’s pleasure of tale telling, a transposition of Carroll, objectifies her own childhood and derives pleasure through her child listeners.

Part of the White Knight scene in Looking-Glass mirrors this concluding nostalgic moment. When the White Knight is about to sing his song to Alice, the narrator pauses to tell readers, “of all the strange things that Alice saw in her journey Through The Looking-Glass, this was the one she always remembered clearly” (186). Again, readers are presented with an image of future Alice reminiscing about her adventures. The narrator continues to tell of a grown Alice who “years afterwards...could bring the whole scene back again, as if it had been only yesterday” and then proceeds to paint a nostalgic image of Alice’s recollection of the White Knight with “the setting sun gleaming through his hair, and shining on his armour in a blaze of light” (186). Despite the fact that Alice’s actions towards the knight, though civil, suggest she is more interested in moving on to her last move in the chess-game than listening to his rambling song (Geer 19), the narrator presses on in this nostalgic depiction, concluding, “all this she took in like a picture, as, with one hand shading her eyes, she leant against a tree, watching the strange pair [the Knight and his horse], and listening, in a half-dream, to the melancholy music of the song” (186). In this recollected image, Alice holds “one hand shading her eyes,” presumably to keep the sun out; yet, her hand simultaneously gestures to a retrospective look back into the “half-dream,” as if trying to remember clearly. Because this nostalgic remi-
niscence emerges in the midst of Alice’s adventure, it also emphasizes the presence of the narrator and author-figure who purposefully stops the adventure to tell readers about future Alice’s own nostalgic vision. Such nuances, along with the aged character, lead many to see the White Knight “as a stand-in for Carroll” (Gubar, “Reciprocal Aggression” 337).

Geer troubles these retrospective nostalgic moments in concurrence with the prefatory poem. She proposes the nostalgic “frames work to erase suggestions of tension between children and adults [within the Wonderland and Looking-glass narratives], imagining an idyllic world where adult control over children offers a foundation upon which both groups can satisfy their desires” (6). The tale telling provides child listeners amusement and “gratifies [the teller’s] desire to amuse” (6). Both frames, however, “[downplay] power imbalances by emphasizing reciprocal pleasure” when in actuality “they rest on adult-power and self-interest” (Geer 6, 7). Geer’s positioning of tale telling as a power imbalance between the adult, tale teller and captivated (or captive) child audience adds another layer of complexity to the idea of child-objectifying nostalgia. Not only is the child the object of the tale, but the child becomes witness to that objectification, which, in turn, normalizes that particular representation of childhood and, in effect, becomes ideology. In other words, the child encounters itself through the nostalgic lens of the adult storyteller.

But is it possible for the adult to objectify her own child-self as Alice does in her sister’s and narrator’s visions. Are these nostalgic moments still objectification or is it a
process of narrative? I argue that this is more a process of narrative, in which nostalgia is
dramatized, than a heedlessly objectifying nostalgic moment. It is no coincidence that
Carroll, though objectifying and nostalgic as he may seem on the surface, carefully craft-
ed this distancing series: the author writing into existence an adult sibling, envisioning an
adult Alice, nostalgically retelling and reliving her childhood to a captivated child audi-
ence. To assume that Carroll was not aware of his own careful sequencing and the prob-
lematic nature of this child-objectifying nostalgic frame would perpetuate a possible facet
of the Carroll myth—that he was so absorbed in the fantasy, in delusional nostalgia, that
he himself was oblivious of the power dynamics he was creating between child and adult
on the page.

The question that concludes Looking-Glass also functions like Wonderland’s final
nostalgic sequence. At the end of Alice’s second dream journey, she says to her kitten,
“you see, Kitty, it must have been either me or the Red King who dreamed it” (207). In
the final line of the book, the narrator directly questions the reader, “which do you think it
was?” (207). While it may be either Alice, or the Red King, there is also another possi-
bility: it could be the author or author-figure of the text (or perhaps even the reader) that
dreamed it. The narrators direct address, which one might consider to be Carroll himself
interrupting the narrative, indicates a distinct awareness of the power dynamics involved
in representation. This question mirrors the sequencing of perspectives at the end of
Wonderland and ultimately asks readers to consider who the author of the dream is. Who
is the authority, the child or the adult? Who is objectifying whom? I, like Geer, propose
that the nostalgic frame of Wonderland and the concluding question of Looking-glass be read as “fiction[s]” about child-objectifying nostalgia, rather than as participants in child-objectifying nostalgia. Carroll willingly, dare I say intentionally, creates a fiction about nostalgia rather than an ideological repetition of it, and in doing so works to expose child-objectifying nostalgia as problematic and pernicious in nature.

“Child-objectifying nostalgia” is a term that can help us see and articulate the stigma that has come to be associated with the idea of nostalgia within the field of children’s literature. In popular belief and at times in the criticism of the Alice books, the idea of nostalgia is loosely thrown around to account for the fascinating world that the texts create and the peculiar relationships of their author and his child companions, but the concept often goes unexamined—nostalgia functions as a kind of truth. When unpacking the concept and its function within these texts, the connections between Victorians’ fixation on the child and the criticism born out of children’s books of that era, entwined with the Carroll myth that encompasses all of these facets, demonstrates that nostalgia should not be something we easily dismiss as cliché, obvious, or simple truth.
Chapter 2

Worlds at Play:

The Anti-Nostalgic Chronotopes of Wonderland and the Looking-Glass

When we think about childhood, the imagery that fills our minds might include golden sunshine, green grass, flower-filled meadows—in other words, nature imagery. The subsequent feelings conjured in tandem with such imagery might be joy, mirth, and even giddiness. As clichéd as golden sunshine, green grass, and sweet flowers may seem, these are the images that dominate the collective imagination of childhood. Such images seem obvious and inherent; yet, they are deeply linked to child-objectifying nostalgia because they are ideologically saturated, adult projections of what childhood is supposed to be. Thus, one might presume that similar spaces would compose the childhood worlds within literature for children—and they do to a degree.

In the Alice books, the frame of the narrative, specific characters, and moments appear nostalgic for childhood. While the majority of the text runs rampant with nature imagery, the worlds of Wonderland and the Looking-Glass manage to go beyond clichéd understandings of child-objectifying nostalgia. Indeed, Carroll plays with this kind of traditional childhood imagery within the worlds of the text in order to reveal that such spaces are fabricated. The worlds produced as a result of this play prove to be much more complex versions of childhood that bridge the gap created by the binary opposition of adult and child. The worlds of the Alice books present spaces in which Alice can find her
own agency and resist adult scrutiny. In other words, the binary opposition, which typically favors the adult, privileges the child in ways that resist over-simplified representations of childhood.

Because these worlds are not located in some idealized past they exist in a place outside of history: the present. If Wonderland and Looking-glass land represent the child’s imagination and childhood, as popular belief has it, this version of childhood resists nostalgic, mystifying representations of some lost past, some Garden of Eden, in which the child is blissfully one with nature or emanates a naïveté that might provoke such understandings. Indeed, Carroll plays with this spatiotemporal trope of childhood by setting his narratives primarily in open, natural spaces. He specifically calls attention to and plays with the natural and Edenic garden by mimicking this popular conception of childhood and then turning it on its head. In Wonderland, the garden that Alice finally encounters towards her journey’s end threatens beheading rather than guaranteeing sanctuary and paradise.

Thus, the spatiotemporal aspects of Wonderland and the Looking-glass constitute worlds that challenge popular conceptions of childhood as a utopic place and time. Because these worlds resist the very idea of a lost, idealized past (located in childhood), I argue that Wonderland and the Looking-glass belong more to the fantastic than to any inkling of an idealized past. Both narrative realms depict hyper-real versions of the present, Alice’s and Carroll’s own Victorian world. Madness, parody, and play, in *Wonderland* and the *Looking-glass*, destabilize reductive and idealized understandings of child-
hood popularized by Romantic and Victorian ideology. These worlds present readers with illogical, unreasonable, mad adults, who throw tantrums and make up their own rules as they go, and a child whose excessive rationality always puts her at odds with Wonderland’s and the Looking-glass’s inhabitants. These characterizations of adults and children at first seem to suggest a mere inversion of roles. Alice acts like a little adult and the Wonderland/Looking-glass adults often act like children. However, rather than reading these characteristics as mere inversions, we should see them as blurring of the adult/child binary. The fantastic dimension of these worlds, primarily expressed in adult-madness, works to expose the binary opposition of child and adult as a socio-cultural construct by enabling a hyper-real and parodic characterization of adults and adult, Victorian values. This staging simultaneously calls the binary of adult/child into being while helping to dissolve and blur the split as notions of agency, authority, and rationality (typically located in adults) are destabilized and (dis)placed onto the child.

The Utopia of Childhood, a Golden Age and Place?

M.M. Bakhtin’s notion of the chronotope offers a useful way to explore the spatio-temporal aspects of child-objectifying nostalgia and the worlds of the Alice books. Bakhtin’s chronotope helps draw conceptual distinctions between what a world of child-objectifying nostalgia might look like, for the chronotope theorizes the physical world of the text. “In the literary artistic chronotope,” Bakhtin posits that “spatial and temporal indicators are fused into one carefully thought-out, concrete whole” (84). The fusion of space and time, in the mind of the reader, intersect to form the body or world of the novel
and "time becomes, in effect palpable, visible; the chronotope makes narrative events concrete, makes them take on flesh, causes blood to flow in their veins" (Bakhtin 250).

In Bakhtin’s conceptualization of the chronotope, it is the imagination, or the imagining power of the reader that generate these worlds, called into being with words. If the Alice books are as nostalgic as popular belief would have it, the worlds invoked by the reader surely would be idealistic, utopic representations capitalizing on the imagery of the child in connection to nature. If these texts were truly nostalgic, they would favor this idealized past at the cost of the present.

Bakhtin’s notion of “historical inversion” mirrors nostalgia in that the past is clearly favored over the present (147). The past in historical inversion embodies an image of a pristine past, a “full” time, where the temporal and the spatial are harmoniously unified (147). The present gains its significance from the past and future. Such significance in historical inversion manifests as deficit, loss, and deprivation. In other words, the present does not measure up to the future or past and something is always missing. Just as nostalgia presents subjects with a longing for some lost past, historical inversion operates similarly. The past is idealized, sought after and yearned for in the present and as an ultimate future, or telos. Thus, the temporal aspects of historical inversion represent nostalgia in the most traditional sense.

In historical inversion, the emptiness of the present is made possible through idealization of the past, but it is also paradoxically the present that creates this version of the past. Perhaps the most obvious example of this kind of historical inversion and return to a
lost past is the Judeo-Christian one, Eden. The core of the Edenic, utopic, paradise chronotope invokes garden imagery and the pastoral. These idealized spaces of historical inversion, according to Bakhtin, include “myths about paradise, a Golden Age, a heroic age, ancient truth, as well as the later concepts of a ‘state of nature,’ of natural, innate rights and so on” (147). The spatial dimension of historical inversion renders the past as a physical place of redemption, bliss, or natural harmony. Thus, historical inversion shares the same imagery, and invokes the same chronotope of nature that permeates perceptions of childhood—especially Romantic and Victorian conceptions of the child as pure, innocent, and more connected to nature. Childhood in this sense becomes Eden, a garden that represents the “something out of the past” which “must only be realized in the future”—an eventual return to childhood (147). Such a return is always impossible because one can never grow young. Thus this version of the past positions the present in a consistent state of deprivation, which is to say that the present positions itself in a state of deprivation. The present, which we might equate with adulthood or the adult author of the past, lacks the vibrant, earthy joy of childhood. Childhood, doused in the imagery of sunshine and nature, then becomes spatially and temporally a “Golden Age” of the past and also a golden place. It becomes a mythic and mystified past and the destination of a return to innocence.

Thus, it seems the chronotope of child-objectifying nostalgia would be similar to the one invoked by historical inversion; it would be Edenic and linked strongly to nature invoking pastoral imagery; physical space (nature) and time would be in harmony; it
would be free of conflict and worry. Gardens, sunshine, and rainbows—akin to the pastoral—embody physical representations of child-objectifying nostalgia. Wonderland and the Looking-glass worlds, I argue, are not what might be considered chronotopes of child-objectifying nostalgia; rather, they play with such Edenic chronotopes to destabilize and displace this version of childhood and adulthood by confounding such spaces through parody. The chronotopes of Wonderland and Looking-glass land are fantastic, fragmented, mad, or backwards versions of the idealized childhood chronotope of child-objectifying nostalgia.

If the texts work to upend such idyllic spaces of childhood, as I argue, why then do so many (by critical and popular belief) understand these spaces as a perpetuation of child-objectifying nostalgia? Their popularity as texts from the “Golden Age” of children’s literature lead many to see them that way. The Alice books collapse into a mythic understanding of childhood and under this generic category come to be viewed as an expression of the mystification, or child-objectifying nostalgia embedded in the term “golden age.”

Viewing the Alice books as participant in child-objectifying nostalgia because they are of children’s literature’s “Golden Age” boils down to a conflation of child-objectifying nostalgic imagery (rooted in Romanticism), the term “Golden Age,” and the books themselves. Referring to Jerome McGann’s theory of Romantic Ideology, Angela Sorby posits that critics who originally adopted the term “Golden Age” unknowingly “[drew] on Romantic assumptions” (96). Sorby speculates that “from his Marxist perspec-
tive, McGann would describe [such critics] as engaging in Romantic dramas of displacement and idealization, in which the vision of timeless utopia elides textual conflicts and contradictions” (96). These Romantic assumptions link the term to nostalgia and the mythic locale of a utopic, “Golden Age” rather than to “a designation of generic excellence,” explaining one way the term, the Romantic imagery, and the texts seem to collapse into each other (Sorby 96). Thus, this critical history of the term “Golden Age” presents its own problems related to nostalgia.

Granted, Carroll in the prefatory poem seems to exacerbate this understanding when he begins *Wonderland* with the words, “all in the golden afternoon” (3). However, what I suggest that the term “Golden Age,” which reiterates the sunshine and nature imagery of the child-objectifying nostalgia chronotope, invokes the idea of loss in and of itself because it is predicated on the fact that the “Golden Age” is over. This sense of loss in turn, ignites a desire to return to some (invented or imaginary) past/childhood. In other words, the term invokes nostalgia. The distinction I am making is that while the Alice books *are part of* a “Golden Age,” they *do not chronotopically depict* a “Golden Age,” as I think many may mistakenly assume. The association or conflation of the term onto the texts proves problematic likely because the term itself is problematic.

Carroll does employ the Edenic garden imagery of childhood elsewhere in the body of the narratives; however, he does so in order to play with the chronotope in ways that destabilize ideological assumptions about adults and children hidden within that imagery. The beginning of Wonderland opens with a kind of pastoral scene in which Alice
and her sister sit on a riverbank and Alice ponders, “whether the pleasure of making a
daisy-chain would be worth the trouble of getting up and picking the daisies” (7). This
opening image immediately plunges the reader into a scene of the child in nature. The
focus remains on Alice who does not care for the book her sister is reading, for it has “no
pictures or conversations in it” (7). Such intimations compose an image of a child who
would rather make a daisy-chain, or frolic in nature, than read a book with so many
words. The fact that Alice’s sister’s book has no images subtly suggests that her sister is
older (which by novel’s end is made explicit) and that books adults read are no fun for
children (perhaps one of the reasons the Alice books are illustrated). Before Alice can
think any further about picking daisies, the White Rabbit appears and her adventure into
Wonderland draws her away from the riverbank, the daisy-chains, and the sunshine of the
“hot day” (7). Alice’s descent into the rabbit hole and Wonderland disrupts the idyllic
chronotope of the opening scene, which seeks to unify nature and childhood.

Yet, when Alice finally makes it down the rabbit hole one of the first things she
spies is a little door that leads to a garden, which seems to place her back in a potentially
idyllic, natural space. Kneeling down to peek through the tiny passage, Alice glimpses
“the loveliest garden you ever saw” (10). She immediately wants to go into the garden.
Giving access to Alice’s thoughts and desires, the narrator expresses that “she longed to
get out of the dark hall, and wander among those beds of flowers and those cool fountains
(9-10). Alice cannot resist the seemingly tranquil image of paradise. Her size, however,
prevents her from gaining entrance to this “loveliest” of gardens, a description which in
and of itself seems to point to a paradise or Eden. She is too big to fit through the space and her efforts to shrink and grow to just the right size to get through are continually frustrated. When she does get to be the right size, she finds she has forgotten the key to the door on the glass table, out of reach; eventually she ends up swimming in an ocean of her own tears and is carried off to another place in Wonderland (10-17).

The lovely garden that Alice spies through the tiny door provides a space for the enactment of a desire to attain paradise, in which Alice plays the voyeur who objectifies and imagines what the garden must be like. Desire, like the desire of child-objectifying nostalgia, masks and mixes with the power of the seeing subject. Alice’s desire and the chronotope of Wonderland, then, mimic the desire to escape into an imagined childhood as seen in the chronotope of child-objectifying nostalgia. That Wonderland continually obstructs and therefore delays gratification of Alice’s desire, demonstrates how this chronotope works to evade and trouble the idea of escaping into paradise or childhood, resisting the power of objectification.

When Alice finally gets to the garden towards the conclusion of her adventures, it turns out to be a place of madness, dashing the promise of tranquil paradise. After her quarrel with the Hatter and the Hare at the Mad Tea-Party, Alice storms of into the wood and discovers a tree with a door in it. When she enters, she finds herself in the hallway with the tiny door once more, though this time she successfully unlocks the door and manages to shrink to the right size. At first it seems that “she found herself at last in the beautiful garden, among the bright-flower beds and cool fountains” (59). Once in the
garden, however, Alice discovers the white roses being painted red by a pack of playing cards who serve under the Queen of Hearts. When Alice asks why they are painting the white roses red, the cards respond, “you see, Miss, this here ought to have been a red rose-tree, and we put a white one in by mistake; and if the Queen was to find out, we should all have our heads cut off” (61). Alice’s first experience in the garden reveals that the natural imagery—the flowers—and its presupposed pleasantness is really nothing more than a sham. Not only is nature corrupted, but the mad monarch likewise corrupts the sanctity of the garden, which initially seemed so pure and harmonious to Alice.

The corruption of this natural space continues to build as Alice plays in the Queen’s croquet game where the balls are hedgehogs, the mallets flamingoes, and the arches are the servant playing cards. The game seems to have no rules, for “the players all played at once, without waiting turns, quarrelling all the while and fighting for the hedgehogs” (64). In no time at all, the Queen is yelling “off with his head!” and “off with her head!” (65). The Queen’s orders further the theme of madness as beheading suggests a literal severing of adult intellect and reason, and therefore authority, located in that region of the body. All play in constant fear of the Queen’s wrathful temper. The garden, in other words, becomes a site of chaos and madness rather than the serene and peaceful place Alice imagines it to be at the beginning of her adventure. In playing with the Edenic, garden chronotope, the text questions and critiques the world constructed in child-objectifying nostalgia. If Wonderland represents a world of childhood, as so many have
come to associate it with, then that chronotopic world evokes a childhood that is ruled by a kind of adult madness, as seen in the Queen’s disorderly garden croquet game.

Though Alice does not specifically seek a garden in Looking-glass land, the trajectory of Alice’s adventure there mirrors the arc of her journey through Wonderland. In *Through the Looking-Glass*, Alice’s goal revolves around being queened in the chessboard game that makes up the Looking-glass world. Alice’s desire to play as the queen resembles a game of make-believe. Alice imagines the garden and being queen to be something that it is not; she idealizes these spaces and places only to have her vision shattered by the mad and backwards realities that Wonderland and Looking-glass land present. When Alice acquires her crown in *Looking-Glass*, she quickly realizes that being queen means dealing with pushy adults, like the Red and White Queens. Geer suggests that “determined not to let her take her place with them as an equal,” the Red and White Queens, “assert their own superior status by treating [Alice] like a child” resulting in her “uncomfortable position as child-Queen” (15). The imaginary world of playing queen presents “a profound disappointment” for Alice (Geer 15). Just as the garden in Wonderland fails to be the blissful paradise she imagines it to be, so does Alice’s Looking-glass kingdom. Thus, the chronotopic worlds of these texts play with the imagery or childhood, either of the child in nature or the child in imagination, in ways that unsettle the concept of childhood as a utopic place.

**Fantastic, Not “Golden Age”**
If Wonderland and the Looking-glass worlds do not align with some Edenic, idealized version of childhood and in fact play with such chronotopes, what representation of childhood (and adulthood) do they present readers? Rather than taking on the chronotope of child-objectifying nostalgia, the Alice books correspond to their own time and place. Wonderland and Looking-glass land do not represent idealized versions of a lost, utopic childhood, but are fantastic spaces that grapple with the Victorian need to other the child, which survives in modern ideology about childhood seated in iterations of adult authority. Tzvetan Todorov’s notion of the fantastic, which he locates specifically in the present, gives further insight into the spatial and temporal aspects of *Wonderland* and *The Looking-Glass*. Like Bakhtin’s chronotope, Todorov describes the fantastic as the world of the text. The fantastic world is a world, which is indeed our world, the one we know, a world without devils, sylphides, or vampires, [however,] there occurs an event which cannot be explained by the laws of this same familiar world. The person who experiences the event must opt for one of two possible solutions; either he is the victim of an illusion of the senses, of a product of the imagination — and laws of the world then remain what they are — but then this reality is controlled by laws unknown to us … The fantastic is that hesitation experienced by a person who knows only the laws of nature, confronting an apparently supernatural event. (Todorov 25)
The setting of the fantastic is reality itself. The corresponding temporal dimension to this reality is the present, as Todorov later makes explicit (42). The fantastic occurs when something inexplicable materializes in violation of the rules that govern reality and the protagonist and reader alike cannot distinguish reality from imagination (Todorov 25, 33).

When Alice enters Wonderland or the Looking-glass world, she enters “a world which is indeed [her] own world” (25). At the opening of her adventures, Alice is sitting with her sister on the bank of the river when “suddenly a White Rabbit with pink eyes ran close by her” (7). The narrator tells readers, “there was nothing very remarkable in that”—merely a rabbit scurrying past. Then, “there occurs an event which cannot be explained,” as Todorov puts it. The rabbit speaks! But, again, the narrator explains, “nor did Alice think it so very much out of the way to hear the Rabbit say to itself ‘Oh dear! Oh dear! I shall be too late!’ ” (7). Alice seems to be in her “same familiar world” (Todorov 5) and it is not until the rabbit checks his pocket-watch that “Alice started to her feet, for it flashed across her mind that she had never seen a rabbit with either a waistcoat pocket or a watch to take out of it” (8). The rabbit’s ability to speak fails to startle Alice. Rather its attire is what throws her—attire which is a reflection of her own (and Carroll’s) Victorian world. These normalcies—rabbit, waistcoat, and watch—when put together yield “an event which cannot be explained by the laws of this same familiar world” (Todorov 25). Alice’s common, everyday experience plunges into uncertainty through an unusual combination of signs, resulting in a supernatural, or more accurately, what I would call a hy-
per-real moment. She and her readers experience the hesitation of the fantastic as these familiar signs multiply and magnify all while remaining in the present, on the bank of the river, until Alice, becomes overwhelmed by curiosity and makes chase.

While the bank of the river where Alice and her sister sit slips into the fantastic-like world of Wonderland and Alice chases the White Rabbit down the rabbit hole, an even more apt representation of the fantastic begins with another “world which is [again, quite literally her] own”: the metaphoric reflection of the Looking-glass world. *Through the Looking-glass* begins with Alice chastising Kitty, one of Dinah’s kittens, for her various misdeeds. Holding Kitty up to the mirror, Alice threatens “and if you’re not good directly … I’ll put you through into Looking-glass House. How would you like that?” (108). The Looking-glass House, a literal reflection of Alice’s world and the very room Alice sits in with Kitty, in Alice’s mind, must represent something ominous. She goes on to describe the Looking-glass House to Kitty, “first, there’s the room you can see through the glass—that’s just the same as our drawing-room, only things go the other way” (108). This flipped version of her reality, where “things go the other way,” foreshadows the strangeness of the Looking-glass world. It is both her world and an alternate reality that holds the possibility of the supernatural.

As Alice continues to imagine what the Looking-glass House could be like, it suddenly becomes an exciting and new adventure rather than a place of banishment for her pet kitten. Alice urges,
Oh, Kitty, how nice it would be if only we could get through into the Looking-glass House. I’m sure it’s got, oh! such beautiful things in it! Let’s pretend there is a way of getting through into it … Let’s pretend the glass has got all soft like gauze, so we can get through. (109)

Whether it is Alice’s imagination that grants her access to the Looking-glass House, as she insists that she and Kitty “pretend,” or whether “the glass was beginning to melt away, just like a bright silvery mist,” as the narrator confirms is really happening, this moment presents readers with an instance of the fantastic (109). Is Alice pretending? Is she dreaming, as is apparently supposed to be the case by story’s end? Or is the reader to believe, along with Alice, that “the glass was melting away”? At this point, Alice and the reader experience the “hesitation” that Todorov defines as the fantastic—the point in which “a person who knows only the laws of nature, [confronts] an apparently supernatural event” (25). Alice’s entrance into the Looking-glass world takes this fantastic reality a step further than the beginning of the Wonderland tale. Carroll creates a world that is literally a reflection of the one that Alice inhabits, set in reality, in Victorian England.

Once in Wonderland and the Looking-glass worlds, Alice encounters spaces that are familiar to her Victorian sensibilities: gardens, tea parties, croquet games, courtrooms, and a royal feast. Though these spaces are not exclusive to Victorian England, they clearly place Alice in a familiar yet unfamiliar space where, as the Cheshire Cat insists, “all are mad” (49). In Wonderland and the Looking-glass worlds, the fantastic is expressed through madness or “backwards-ness” of the real world, Alice’s and Carroll’s.
Ruth Y. Jenkins’s psychoanalytic discussion of the texts gives further insight into their social and cultural implications. She argues that “Alice confounds efforts to distinguish the culturally privileged values from the abject, partly because she often inhabits both positions simultaneously” (79). According to Jenkins, these “culturally privileged values” concern proper behavior for children, specifically the behavior of little girls (79). Her conceptualization of Alice’s embodiment of both the abject and cultural values, leads Jenkins to claim the Alice books “reveal extreme anxieties of the Victorian era’s efforts to secure its cultural boundaries” (my emphasis, Jenkins 79). Like Jenkins, I read the Alice books as a critique of the Victorian need to create clear boundaries between adult and child. They are an expression of a fantastic present that not only “reveal extreme anxieties,” but stage those “anxieties” by blurring the boundaries of the adult/child binary.

Jenkins eventually ameliorates some of the cultural tension presented in Wonderland and Looking-glass by conceding that the frame of the dream diffuses some of the social anxiety as “symbolic order” is restored upon Alice’s waking (Jenkins 81-2). The frame of the dream, for Jenkins and other critics, presents a clear border from which reality and fantasy can be separated (Jenkins 81-2, Geer 6; Hemmings 60). But does the fact that these narrative worlds exist within a dream really quell what goes on within these worlds, which take up the most space within the books? Or does the frame become a mechanism for critical dismissal and further re-inscription of nostalgic, mystification processes, as I have alluded to in the previous chapter? The latter seems more likely. In other words, Alice’s actual adventures hold more narrative weight and space, and, there-
fore, are more significant than the dream frame, or the prefatory, authorial frame. Readers are free to imagine Alice having more adventures after the narrative ends. When readers or critics resolve the tensions at play within the text with these narrative frames, they finalize and fix meaning, reducing and re-inscribing the texts as illustrations of child-objectifying nostalgia. This kind of finalizing interpretive move obliterates the power of the fantastic.

One might argue that the frames resolve the fantastic hesitation within the Alice books, making it clear that Wonderland and Looking-glass are all dream. However, the space of the narrative corresponds its duration, making them mostly fantastic. Todorov stipulates, “the fantastic occupies the duration of this uncertainty” between the real and the imagined and “once we choose one answer or the other, we leave the fantastic for a neighboring genre, the uncanny or the marvelous”(25). The reader, then, must interpret this stipulation. If the dream absolves the disorder and anxieties surrounding Victorian symbolic order, as Jenkins suggests, then does the fantastic exist previous to that absolution? This part of Todorov’s definition is slightly ambiguous. Notice, though, he situates the fantastic temporally, it “occupies the duration,” and when the real or the imagined prevails, “we leave the fantastic,” spatially departing from that world and into the world of the next genre. In the Alice books, the temporal duration of uncertainty, the hesitation between “the real and the imaginary” comprises nearly the entire novel and when “we leave the fantastic” the novel is quickly over (Todorov 25). Therefore, the books are more
fantastic than not and have more to do with disorder and social tension than re-establishing order and Victorian “cultural boundaries.”

The fantastic, being of the present, manifests, in the Victorian spaces and discourses that Wonderland and the Looking-glass mimic and parody. These spaces and discourses provide settings that trouble. In Wonderland and the Looking-glass world, Alice consistently attempts to employ proper Victorian discourse, as she would in her own reality, but her discourse often backfires. One instance of this occurs when the Caterpillar asks Alice who she is and she cannot quite recall. She tells the Caterpillar, “I ca’n’t [sic] remember things as I used” (Carroll 35; Jenkins 80). Alice gives the example that she cannot recall the proper words to rhymes and the Caterpillar demands, “repeat ‘You are old, Father William’” (35). Under the madness of Wonderland, Alice fails miserably at her discourse and instead produces a far more comical version of the original poem, Robert Southey’s “The Old Man’s Comforts and How He Gained Them” (Gray 35n1). Donald Gray notes that the parody jests at the original poem’s “pious sentiment” (Gray 35n1). Such play and parody not only poke fun at the social and cultural values and expectations that Victorians placed upon children, but ridicule the didactic texts adults subjected children to, texts rooted in understandings of the child as naïve and innocent and in need of instruction and edification in a corrupt adult world.

In this instance, the fantastic manifests in parody and warps Alice’s routine recitation of nursery rhymes into a laughable moment. It is no coincidence either that “You Are
Old Father William” parodies a relationship between an old man and a youth that blurs lines between adult and child, as evidenced in the first lines Alice recites:

“You are old, Father William,” the young man said,

“And your hair has become very white;

And yet you incessantly stand on your head—

Do you think, at your age, it is right?” (36)

In the parody, the youth questions the adult’s behavior, pointing to the ridiculousness of an old man standing on his head. Such ‘childish’ behavior seems not “right” for an old man with white hair. The authoritative, noble qualities of aged wisdom are subjected to further ridicule, when “the sage” replies,

“In my youth,” Father William replied to his son,

“I feared it might injure the brain;

But, now that I’m perfectly sure I have none,

Why, I do it again and again.” (36)

There are several different accepted attributes of adulthood that play and parody disrupt in these first two stanzas. First, the old man should function as a sign of wisdom, as he does presumably in Southey’s original. In reality, wisdom should be respected and the old man as the harbinger of wisdom should presumably be a respectable figure. Second,
the old man stands on his head, the center of wisdom and Enlightenment rationality, which mark key features of adulthood in opposition to childhood. As Perry Nodelman puts it, “we adults can see ourselves as rational, virtuous, mature, and normal exactly because we have irrational depraved (fallen), childlike, different children to compare ourselves to” (“The Other” 32). The old man in this parody violates definitions of adulthood and becomes childlike. Aside from being a ‘childish’ thing to do, the old man’s headstand also draws attention to this literal inversion. Finally, all reason, like everything in Wonderland, is absent, for it turns out that the old man has no brain at all. Parody here showcases the kind of disruption of adulthood (and by proxy childhood) that play out all over the Wonderland and Looking-glass worlds.

The parodic, here, enables the adult to become the child, violating the cultural boundary of adulthood, and this transgression, comes through Alice’s failed Victorian discourse. As Alice explains to the Caterpillar, she tries to say the words, but they “[come] out all different” (Carroll 35). I read her failed discourse as a symptom of the fantastic, an expression of a “reality...controlled by laws unknown to us” (Todorov 25). Alice relentlessly tries to apply the rules of her own reality in Wonderland, but her rules make no purchase except to the savvy reader who delights in the humorous transgression of cultural boundaries.

Beatriz Turner makes a similar observation about the linguistic “power imbalance” between adults and children in Wonderland (246-7). She contends that “Alice’s attempts to apply what she understands as sense...only seem to lead her into logical
quicksand" (247). Such power imbalances play out in scenarios, or Victorian spaces, that are not altogether different from Alice’s own reality. When Alice arrives at the Mad Tea Party, for instance, the March Hare offers her wine and Alice observes that there is no wine to be had. She chastises the Hare, “it wasn’t very civil of you to offer it” (52). The Hare responds by saying, “it wasn’t very civil of you to sit down without being invited” (52). The exchange simultaneously mocks Victorian social conventions. Leila S. May suggests that the Mad Tea Party “certainly imitates the real tea parties often held throughout Victorian England—if caricature is a form of imitation—but it may also mime those mock tea parties held in English asylums whose goal was to model sane-like behavior to the inmates” (79). This kind of biting exchange continues between the Hare and Alice and the Hatter and Alice for the entire Mad Tea Party chapter, which eventually drives Alice to leave infuriated. Alice’s attempt to correct the Hare mimics what an adult might say to a child and in this mimicry Alice assumes a position of pseudo-authority that the Hare’s rebuttal immediately thwarts; of course, the reader can see that Alice has a point. It makes no sense to offer something that does not exist, but such is the fantastic, mad logic of Wonderland and the adult there. Still, Alice’s delivery, like on so many other occasions in Wonderland, is pretentious. In trying to act according to her own understanding of proper behavior, which often seems to mean to act like an adult, Alice’s discourse, again, fails her. The reader sympathizes with Alice and recognizes the antago-

5 As Leila S. May contends, “there are in these stories some mimetic elements alongside the fantastic — representations of things going on somewhere, somehow, in Victorian society — in which case the “different reality” presented will not be so terribly different as to be unrecognizable” (79).
nistic and contentious nature of the adult and adult-like characters that operate under and emit the madness of Wonderland.

**Staging the Adult/Child Binary**

As Alice continues to apply her knowledge of social and cultural customs, the fantastic, mad logic of Wonderland appears to obstruct her agency. The Cheshire Cat’s logical insistence that “we’re all mad here” partially explains away how the fantastic operates as a kind of mad version of reality or hyper-logic (49). Madness derives from the location: when Alice asks, “how do you know I’m mad?” the Cheshire Cat responds, “you must be...or you wouldn’t be here” (49). Being in Wonderland constitutes madness. However, to question this logic, as Alice herself does, most of the madness in Wonderland (or the backwards-ness in the Looking-glass) issues from the mouths of adult characters, adults who are supposed to be sane, rational, and composed compared to the child. While Alice may be misapplying her Victorian sensibilities and discourse, so much of the madness and miscomprehension surfaces in her hostile interactions with the primarily adult and adult-like population of these worlds: the Hare and the Hatter, who instruct, “you should say what you mean”; the Caterpillar, who repeatedly disagrees with Alice and menacingly asks, “who are you?” (35); the Duchess, who chides Alice, “tut, tut, child! ...everything’s got a moral if only you can find it” (68); Humpty Dumpty, who blatantly says that Alice is “a stupid name enough!” (158); and the live flowers, who jeer at Alice, “I never saw anybody that looked stupider” (119). Everywhere she goes, Alice encounters hostile adult-like characters that, interestingly, objectify her with their scruti-
ny or belittle her intellect. Adult madness, in these worlds, parodies this kind of objectifi-
cation.

Thus, the madness in Wonderland, which I view as an expression of the fantastic, provides a stage to convey a narrative concerned with what it means to be a child trapped in an adult world and in the adult gaze. Marah Gubar takes a similar approach in her analysis of the text. Suggesting that “one of the adult ideas Alice resists most vehemently during her adventures is the message that she should remain a child forever,” Gubar points to Alice’s confrontation with the train Guard in *Looking-glass* who insists that Alice is “travelling the wrong way” (Gubar, “Reciprocal Aggression” 337; Carroll 127). For Gubar, “travelling the wrong way” alludes to growing up (“Reciprocal Aggression” 337). Making a similar observation, James Kincaid notes, “the Alice books are, above all, about growing up, and they recognize both the melancholy of the loss of Eden and the child’s rude and tragic haste to leave its innocence”6 (“Alice’s Invasion” 93). Both Gubar and Kincaid, as well as other critics of this camp, aim to position these texts as representations that trouble the act of objectifying the child or “arresting” the child in childhood “forever,” which is also to say arresting them in a nostalgic past of childhood (Gubar, “Reciprocal Aggression” 337; Kincaid, “Alice’s Invasion” 93). For these critics, and for me, Wonderland and the Looking-glass worlds provide a stage for the adult/child binary

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6 In aligning childhood with innocence and Eden, Kincaid seems to presuppose and even re-inscribe Romantic notions of the child. However, he uses these concepts not as markers of the natural state of the child, but as ideologies that Carroll exposes through the adult/child dynamic in these texts.
to play out, which both calls the binary into being and immediately works to destabilize it.

To be clear, the Alice books are not about growing up in the bildungsroman sense. Alice does not come into herself. In the end, Alice is still Alice, a child. The very fact that Looking-Glass exists, and Alice is still a child, testifies to this, despite Wonderland’s nostalgic ending, which imagines Alice as an adult. To grow up, in the bildungsroman sense, means to come into adulthood and the adult world. One could construe Alice’s many confrontations with adults, like the one with the Guard, as an experience of facing adulthood, but the exchange is more about being bullied by adults rather than becoming one; indeed, from Gubar’s position, the exchange is about being bullied by an adult for wanting to become one—a critique of child objectification.

If read as allegories about an edifying, maturing process, these texts would situate Alice’s discourse, which plays at and mimics being adult but ultimately fails at being adult, as a child’s discourse. In this reading, her interactions are continuously troubled, not because she applies her discourse in a fantastic world where her Victorian values do not register, but rather because she fails to understand the adult and adult-like creatures and characters because she is a child incapable of understanding adults. Reading the Alice books as a literal metaphor for growing up reinscribes objectification of the child by robbing Alice of her agency. Rather than depicting the adults as lacking authority in their madness, Alice lacks authority until she literally and figuratively grows up at the end of both novels.
Many readings of the Alice books function along these lines, viewing Alice as powerless in Wonderland and the Looking-glass worlds. Alice only gains power through her journey, which if associated with growing up, indicates that power comes with becoming an adult—Alice’s power emerges at the end of both books. In Wonderland, when she claims to the royal court (a play on a kind of double authority),7 “you’re nothing but a pack of cards!” and, again, in Looking-Glass when at her own royal dinner, Queen Alice seizes the table cloth, declaring, “I ca’n’t [sic] stand this any longer!” upsetting her own hierarchy (203). In both of these endings, Alice physically grows in size, which again can be metaphorically interpreted as growing up. While I do think these are crucial moments in the narrative, associating them with Alice’s burgeoning adulthood places power in adult/Queen Alice, rather than child Alice, for Alice derives power from being adult.8

This reading then maintains the adult/child binary by making power and authority synonymous with adulthood.

This positioning of Alice’s power in adulthood placates other modes of her resistance throughout the narrative. In her encounters with frustrating adults, Alice both implicitly and explicitly resists their nonsense and scrutiny. Gubar gives the example that in response to the train guard’s warning that she’s going the wrong way, Alice later, “re-affirms her commitment to moving forward” (337). For Gubar, Alice resists the adult

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7 The royal court is doubly authoritative because the King (controlled by the Queen) represents hierarchy in a very literal sense, and he presides over the trial in the space of the courtroom, a locale of authority. Both of these hierarchical meanings, again, appeal to Victorian sociocultural values. Carroll uses this same trope in The Looking-Glass chess pieces.

8 Jennifer Geer argues that Alice’s newfound role as Queen, “only intensifies the sense that maturity is no prize at all, but a profound disappointment” (15). Alice’s desire to become Queen, to gain authority, backfires.
desire to entrap her in childhood very explicitly in her response to the guard and passengers who hound her about returning. “Indeed, I shan’t [go back],” she says (Carroll 128; Gubar, “Reciprocal Aggression” 337). Alice implicitly resists adult attempts to “arrest” her development in her actions to continue “moving forward” across the chess board that makes up the Looking-glass world and her persistence in Wonderland to get to the beautiful garden that she spies through the little door at the beginning (Gubar, “Reciprocal Aggression” 338). As Gubar puts it,

Rather than interpreting such moments [like the one with the guard] as unproblematic evidence for Carroll’s own desire to arrest the girlchild in place, we should instead recognize that they represent willingness to grapple, quite self-consciously, with the question of how damaging this particular adult yearning is, and how young people should respond to it. (“Reciprocal Aggression” 337)

Gubar’s notion of arresting development and “freezing” childhood expresses the tendency to read the Alice books as emanations of child-objectifying nostalgia, in which childhood becomes an idealized place and time that entraps its child-objects (“Reciprocal Aggression” 337-8). When Alice’s altercations with adults are read as a projection of Carroll’s nostalgic tendencies, the reader or critic reinscribes adult power by ignoring Alice’s resistance. Gubar suggests that Carroll is reflectively “stag[ing]” rather than participating in this nostalgia.
This staging, I argue, would not be possible without the fantastic. It is the fantastic that both gives distance (for the reader) and allows for the hesitation between the real and the imagined. The fantastic summons worlds that reflect the Victorian social-cultural values and through madness, play, and parody asks readers to question those values. At center stage of these fantastic worlds is the “dramatiz[ation of the] plight of the child bombarded by other people’s discourse” (Gubar, “Reciprocal Aggression” 334). This dramatization troubles understandings of the adult/child binary that transposes notions of rationality and reason onto the adult and ignorance and innocence (in opposition) onto the child. Inversions of roles confuse these typical characteristics of adulthood and childhood, which work at blurring the boundaries between the two. More powerful though is the child’s resistance to the adult’s will to objectify, entrap, and instruct. Thus, rather than reiterating child-objectifying nostalgia by creating worlds in which childhood is unreflectively idealized, the fantastic worlds of Wonderland and Looking-glass land provide spaces that complicate and critique that nostalgia primarily through relocating power in the child.
Chapter 3

Words at Play: Nostalgia and the Power of Taxonomy

The yearning for childhood, for some lost past in which the burdens of life are somehow magically nonexistent, captures some of the alluring and pleasurable aspects of nostalgia. Perhaps just as much a part of the phenomenon: the bewildering and nagging sensation of whether the childhood recollected is real or just imagined, delusion or accurate memory? In *Imagined Communities*, Benedict Anderson aptly describes memory’s limits in his theorization of national identity. He uses childhood as a metaphor for the kinds of amnesia that nations experience, a form of forgetting, which allow them to form new narratives about their “forgotten” identity. He describes adolescence’s tendency to estrange the self from childhood, explaining that “after experiencing the physiological and emotional changes produced by puberty, it is impossible to ‘remember’ the consciousness of childhood” (204). This metaphor functions as a means of conceptualizing that “all profound changes in consciousness, by their very nature, bring with them characteristic amnesias [and] out of such oblivions, in specific historical circumstances, spring narratives” (204). The transition from childhood into adulthood in Anderson’s metaphor, marks a “profound [change] in consciousness,” or in the least is perceived that way. Childhood becomes an “amnesia” that necessitates reimagining and this re-imagining, Anderson warns, is nostalgically constructed and re-invented. While Anderson is using childhood as a metaphor for national identity in order to theorize what he calls “imagined communities,” his metaphor reveals the constructed nature of the concept of childhood.
itself. In other words, when the metaphor is turned back onto childhood, it becomes apparent that childhood is also a collectively imagined concept.

Underneath the pleasure of childhood nostalgia lies the authority of adulthood defined through the imagining of childhood as a state, place, or time of not just blissful innocence, but anything the adult needs it to be. To roughly paraphrase Perry Nodelman again, the child as other constitutes the adult (The Pleasure of Children's Literature 80-81). Such is the narrative of child-objectifying nostalgia made possible by the “amnesia” left in childhood’s wake.

But is this the only narrative that can be gleaned from this perceived amnesia? Certainly nostalgia can give rise to other narratives, for the reflective act of nostalgia is story-telling itself. At this point it should be clear that the Alice books tell a more complicated version of childhood than popular or collective imagination would assume. Just as both children and adults delight in his creative texts, Carroll’s particular brand of nostalgia yields a complex narrative that bridges the gap between adult and child by continuously questioning the meanings of each. The Alice books disrupt conventional concepts of adult- and childhood in their incessant wordplay, constantly working to rupture fixed meaning. Such disruption allows for a displacement of traditional adult power onto the child, as adult-like characters are represented as mad, contentious, and/or hyper-logical, or as figures that spout ‘childish’ nonsense, and as Alice, the child, gains linguistic agency. The fact that such inversions and blurred boundaries go unchecked throughout these texts suggests that adults and children are not so different. Inside each adult the ludic
child waits to burst out and in every child there is a thoughtful, logical adult that seeks expression.

If indeed Carroll is nostalgic, the function of memory in his brand of nostalgia can illuminate the relationship between past and present in a less destructive light as it transforms narratives of childhood and adulthood to reflect rather than oppose one another. As I discussed in the last chapter, rather than locating the past temporally in some bygone era, Carroll’s texts open up a space and time for childhood that is fantastical. These alternate spaces are not mere idealizations of a child realm, but spaces where the very definitions of adulthood and childhood come into question as traditional and idealized understandings of childhood clash against the subversive staging of adult and child characters.

Just as these spaces of childhood can be read as resisting those that portray it in a reductive, idealized form, such resistance also occurs on a linguistic level through the instability of signs and multiplicity of meaning. Alternative views of childhood within the Alice books emerge when critics reappropriate nostalgia as an act of reading. Memory or remembering, rather, functions in nostalgia as a means of reading the past or the imagined past; reading, in turn, enacts forms of naming by attributing significance and meaning to those past or imagined moments. Because memory is unstable in itself, it can be read or remembered differently over time and such readings have the power to un-name, re-name, and alter understandings of supposed memories, which come to stand for comprehensive concepts like childhood. If child-objectifying nostalgia operates by othering (or naming) its very object—in the case of children’s literature, the child—then the Alice
books do the work of unnaming, unhinging, un-othering primarily through wordplay and
the rupture of the signified from signifier. In the Alice books the idea of naming and the
arbitrary nature of the sign manifest continually. Some critics have pointed out that Al­
ice’s inability to articulate, or name (both in the sense of her own identity and in her abil­
ity to recall the right words of certain maxims or rhymes, as I have previously discussed)
denotes her struggle to acquire agency in an incomprehensible adult world.9 I argue that
wordplay in the Alice books unhinge and unname representations of the child as other.

From Worlds to Words, or Words that Make Worlds

In the previous chapter, I mentioned that in Bakhtin’s conceptualization of the
chronotope it is the imagination or the imagining power of the reader that renders the
worlds of the text. The worlds of Wonderland and the Looking-glass, I have argued, are
more fantastic than nostalgic. As Bakhtin stipulates, words are what call these worlds into
being. The fantastic, mad versions of Alice’s and Carroll’s reality, in part, are called into
being by the wordplay, nonsense, and multiplicity of meaning that the words of these
worlds invoke. The destabilization that Alice experiences in these worlds, which waver
on the brink of the familiar and unfamiliar, is predicated on linguistic instability and the
slippage or rupture of signs. In these texts, multiplicity of meaning evades fixed stability

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9 Turner argues that “The Alice texts enact the relationships between subject and object, fiction and reality, through language” (244). She contends that “to wield language in these texts, be it intelligible, ‘normal,’ or otherwise, is to have the power to define, to create, and to destroy” (244). Later she attributes most of the linguistic power of the text to the adult and adult-like characters of the text: “the texts grant linguistic control to those who inhabit Wonderland and the Looking-glass world and, in doing so, define them as adults. They use this control in a very adult way, too: they exercise the adult’s right to tell the child what she is” (Turner 249).
and fantastic madness ensues. The slippage of signs destabilizes larger concepts like childhood and adulthood as nothing in Wonderland and Looking-glass land is free from the uncertainty and shifting logic that govern (if we can call it that) these narrative worlds.

That Alice’s Victorian discourse fails her in Wonderland when she attempts to recite poems not only highlights the fantastic at play, but what lies beneath the fantastic: language, words, signs. In other words, the fantastic hesitation that Alice and her readers experience (between the real and imagined) in Wonderland and the Looking-glass mirrors the hesitation between meanings that operates on the linguistic level. This relationship between worlds and words, which Bakhtin clearly expresses as a predicate of the chronotope, fits into Todorov’s model of the fantastic quite clearly as well.

Discussing the themes of the fantastic, Todorov distinguishes the polysemic image of the double as a primary theme within the fantastic (143). The double, Todorov suggests, “figures in many texts of fantastic literature; but in each particular work the double has different meaning, which depends upon the relations that this theme sustains with [other fantastic texts]” (143). He goes on to assert that from fantastic text to text “such significations can even be opposed to one another” and that “the very notion of seeking a direct equation [or signification] must be rejected, because each image always signifies others, in an infinite network of relations; and further because it signifies itself” (143,144). The image of the double in fantastic texts represents the doubleness or multiplicity of meaning in a matrix of meanings. Todorov’s stipulation that doubleness points
to "itself" reveals that the double literally calls attention, in its ability to mirror or point back, to itself. One might think of this as a process of reification and reinscription. But the double goes beyond reification or reinscription, for in its doubleness it also points to "other signifieds," or polysemy. The self and the other, then, simultaneously, emerge in the image of the double, hidden within one seemingly unified sign.

Though there is not really an explicit image of the double (aside from Tweedle Dee and Tweedle Dum) in the Alice texts, one might view Alice in Wonderland or through the Looking-glass as the double of Alice in her own Victorian reality. The closest imagery of this sense of doubleness is Alice looking at herself in the looking-glass before entering it and of course the mirror image of the Looking-glass House. Alice's failed discourse functions as a double as well while simultaneously pointing to the multiplicity of meanings: the parodic poems that Alice regurgitates is a double of Alice's learned Victorian discourse, which might seem all wrong, and unfamiliar, at the time, but is still familiar enough to be recognized as part of that discourse. Such moments of parody also accurately demonstrate how didactic literature can have very different implications for different readers, or multiple meanings.

This fantastic doubleness can also be seen in the images of adults who act like children or Alice who acts like a little adult, revealing that neither can truly be defined. As Todorov puts it, with the fantastic, "we reject ... reducing an image to a signifier

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10 As Linda Shires notes, "parody is the placement of distorted mirror image against an 'original' mirror image" (268). Alice's life in the Looking-glass world, as I've discussed, is perhaps the "distorted mirror image" of her and Carroll's own Victorian world. Such doubleness points to the familiar unfamiliarity of the fantastic.
whose signified is a [single] concept” (144). The image of the child and the image of the adult cannot be reduced to singular definitions. The characterization of these concepts and the interaction of child and adult characters resist distinct separation, rather both exist within the image simultaneously. So when Alice encounters adults who act like children, she, in a sense, is encountering herself. The childishness that Alice sees in the mad, contentious adults reflects her own behaviors and vice versa; Alice’s adult-like behavior, which on the surface seems strained, reflects the adult striving to be grown up and adult-like. To put it simply, sometimes adults act like children and sometimes children act like adults, and therefore adults and children are not so different. Wonderland and Looking-glass land are projections of Alice’s own self, but also places that construct narratives about the interconnectedness of adulthood and childhood.

These characters, and even Alice, speak their own multiplicity into being with their discourse, which helps to shape the fantastic. Indeed, language, the discourse of characters, comprises the most foregrounded image of doubleness within the texts. In other words, words about words within worlds of words (the books) form the ultimate double.

The Power of Naming in *Through the Looking-Glass* and *Wonderland*

In Chapter One, I stipulated that child-objectifying nostalgia entails imagining the child through objectification. In child-objectifying nostalgia, the child is imagined to be a Romantic idealization of the child, or really, as I stated earlier in this chapter, anything the adult needs it to be in order to help identify herself and to maintain authority
over herself and others. Underneath the rose-colored pleasure of nostalgia, adult power silently constitutes itself, for the objectification in child-objectifying nostalgia is a process of fixing meaning—of defining the child in opposition to the adult. Because the Alice books are largely concerned with language and the multiplicity of meaning, which together construct the fantastic madness of these worlds, they continually frustrate the kind of taxonomy produced in child-objectifying nostalgia. Eventually the wordplay of these texts explicitly frustrates the ideas of childhood and adulthood as separate in exchanges between adult-like characters and Alice that critically emphasize and expose the power of naming.

This naming process is, again, linked to processes of objectification and even subjugation because when one names, one automatically assumes a position of authority and authorship; the hierarchical power of naming emerges in the assumption that the named object cannot speak for itself, just as Edward Said explains in the exteriority of the orientalist (20-1). Of authority, Said expounds that

> there is nothing mysterious or natural about [it]. It is formed, irradiated, disseminated; it is instrumental, it is persuasive; it has status, it establishes canons of taste and value; it is virtually indistinguishable from the ideas it dignifies as true, and from traditions, perceptions and judgments it forms, transmits, and reproduces (19-20).

Said’s description of authority as “indistinguishable from the ideas it dignifies as true” is likewise almost “indistinguishable” from the act of naming. That is, authority and naming
exist as one, for they are so deeply intertwined that to try to explain what it means to
name objects would be impossible without the falling into describing authority in the way
that Said does here. Once authority finds its roots, it proliferates continuously reifying
itself as truth. The Alice books both question the truth of naming and words by playing
with language and dramatizing the act.

The act of naming appears early on in Alice’s Looking-glass adventure when she
comes upon a place where her ability to name, to fix meaning, temporarily fails her: “the
wood ... where things have no names” (133). Before entering this ominous place, Alice
asks herself “I wonder what will become of my name when I go in?” (133). When Alice
places foot in “the wood where things have no names,” she finds that indeed she cannot
recall the names of things. She looks to a tree and asks,

what does it call itself, I wonder? I do believe it’s got no name—why, to
be sure it hasn’t! . . . [Alice realizes,] it really has happened, after all! And
now, who am I? I will remember if I can! I’m determined to do it! (133)

Within the space of “the wood where things have no names” Alice, alas, cannot even re-
member her own name. Just as she does in Wonderland, Alice suffers a momentary iden-
tity crisis. The reader hears the echo of the Caterpillar, “who are you?” in Alice’s very
words. Her memory seems to have failed her, but peculiarly only when it comes to spe-
cific names, signifiers. She remembers, for instance, that as she came upon the wood that
it must be “the wood where things have no names,” for after she enters, she begins to test
her ability to conjure up what certain objects are called.
The wood itself does not induce total amnesia for Alice; Alice can remember her intentions and purposes when in that space. Rather, the wood induces a reversal of semantic satiation in which instead of a word losing its meaning through repetition, the object exists, it just cannot be articulated. The word sits on the tip of her tongue, but never fully emerges. The signified is severed from the signifier and everything in the wood, including Alice, eludes linguistic representation. Alice’s momentary amnesia for what things are called, strikes a dissonant chord within the reader. While Alice searches her mind for what to call a “tree” or what to call herself—an Alice, a little girl, a child—the wise reader recognizes the absent signifier. The reader maintains the power to name, but the text forces the reader to question, in a Saussurian moment, what the real connection is between the word “tree” and the object it stands for. By extension, the reader is also called upon to question the connection between the name “Alice” and the person/character called “Alice” and, eventually, the connection between the word “child” and what it ostensibly means. Such questioning allows readers to disassociate “meanings” from words and concepts, and subsequently enables them to produce their own new meanings.

Jacques Derrida’s description of rupture between the written word and its context helps shed light on Alice’s momentary amnesia. Derrida problematizes the idea of communication as a homogenous act of transmission. Disrupting the classical idea of writing as an “extension” of this kind of communication, he posits that
a written sign carries with it a force that breaks with its context, that is, with the collectivity of presences organizing the moment of its inscription. This breaking force . . . is not an accidental predicate but the very structure of the written text . . . This allegedly real context includes a “present” of the inscription, the presences of the writer . . . the intention, the wanting-to-say-what-he-means . . . But the sign possesses the characteristic of being readable even if the moment of its production is irrevocably lost (9).

Derrida describes this breaking away of the written word from its context as a “rupture” (8). Because the written word is readable (which indicates the absence, even death, of the author and therefore the obliteration of authorial intent), the context in this classical model of writing becomes obsolete as the moment of “inscription” divorces the word from the authority of the author as soon as ink marks paper. The word is “readable” and can be cited in an infinite number of contexts and “there are only contexts without any center or absolute anchoring” (Derrida 12). Carroll may be even more interested in polysemy than Derrida, who makes it clear in this particular treatise and elsewhere that he is not concerned with polysemy so much as dissemination (which we can read in this idea of multiple contexts). Rupture of the sign, the disassociation of the meaning from the word, again allows for new meanings to be made or read. Alice’s moment in the wood resembles, but does not fully realize the potential of rupture; she does not herself begin to exercise the ability to name, or re-name, quite yet. To be clear, Alice is not powerless, she often talks back even to the most authoritative figures, rather this particular moment enacts a gradual
break down of meaning through a momentary loss of memory, revealing the process of objectification inherent in naming.

Alice’s experience of temporary amnesia resembles a reversal of the rupture of context and meaning that Derrida describes here. When Alice enters the wood she enters a place where the rupture of word and context hang in a kind of purgatory. However, instead of the word destroying the context or meaning, Alice’s context (the wood) seems to destroy the signifier and her ability to name or fix meaning. In a sense, Alice becomes inarticulate, but not totally because she thinks out loud in this moment. She uses language, but cannot name the specific object that she focuses on. The context of the wood extinguishes Alice’s authorial and taxonomical power to name by robbing Alice of her ability to articulate. Alice’s lack of articulation disrupts her ability to author signs whereas, for Derrida, the ability to articulate extinguishes authorial intent. In both cases, meaning ruptures. Only within different contexts can meaning (though different) temporarily find its expression again, as happens when Alice leaves the wood and regains articulating power.

Carroll continues to interrogate fixed meanings throughout Alice’s encounters of the Looking-glass world. In a seemingly contrary instance of Alice’s inability to fix meaning, Humpty Dumpty also, though inadvertently perhaps, points to the arbitrary nature of words. When Alice fails to describe what her name means and asks, “must a name mean something?” Humpty Dumpty insists, “of course it must … my name means the shape I am—and a good handsome shape it is, too” (158n7). The name “Humpty Dump-
ty” not only describes the egg-man’s rotund figure, but also foreshadows the “great fall” that he will inevitably take—a prophetic as well as descriptive name. More importantly, Humpty Dumpty’s claim perpetuates, at least momentarily, the understanding that words are somehow inherently linked to the objects they signify (Gray 158).

Humpty Dumpty’s questioning of what Alice’s name means, materializes, again, later in a slightly different rendition when the unicorn inquires to the Haigha,11 what Alice is:

when [the unicorn’s] eye happened to fall upon Alice: he turned round instantly, and stood for some time looking at her with air of the deepest disgust.

“What—is—this?” he said at last.

“This is a child!” Haigha replied eagerly... We only found it today. It’s as large as life and twice as natural!” (174)

The answer to the Unicorn’s question might also be that “this” is an “Alice.” And the answer to Humpty Dumpty’s question, could equally be, by association, that Alice means child, just as Alice herself exasperates to the pigeon who screams that Alice is a serpent, “I—I’m a little girl” (42). An Alice is “a little girl,” a child—if names were to follow Humpty Dumpty’s understanding of them. Alice and the savvy reader, however, know that Humpty Dumpty’s rule for names is positively preposterous. Names, by nature, do

11 The Haigha is the Looking-Glass version of the March Hare in Wonderland—a double!
not necessarily "mean something," rather they refer to something or someone. Names are referents and referents are arbitrary.

Humpty Dumpty himself furthers this understanding of names as referents when he begins to play with the meanings of words, using his authorial power to make words mean what he wants them to. Shortly after their exchange about names, Alice questions what Humpty Dumpty means by “glory” when he says, “there’s glory for you” (my emphasis 161). He “contemptuously” responds, “of course you don’t—till I tell you … [because] when I use a word … it means just what I choose it to—neither more nor less” (161). Humpty Dumpty, unknowingly a deconstructivist at heart, makes his preposterous claim that “names must mean something” even more ridiculous as he himself undoes his previous argument. While names “must mean something,” for Humpty Dumpty, meaning never truly remains fixed as words can “mean what [he] chooses them to” (161). Humpty Dumpty’s fickleness around names and words demonstrates his authorial power to wield language at his will. Yet, this fickleness also leads Alice and the reader to recognize that he spouts pure nonsense. Thus, this exchange dramatizes the power of the act of naming while also displacing that power by recognizing it as nonsense.

While *Looking-Glass* has been noted as a text that is particularly concerned with wordplay, similar exchanges occur in its predecessor as well. At the Mad Tea Party, the Hatter, the March Hare, and the Dormouse hound Alice, insisting,

“You should say what you mean,” the March Hare went on.
“I do,” Alice hastily replied; “at least—as least I mean what I say—
that’s the same thing, you know.”

“Not the same thing a bit!” said the Hatter. “Why you might just as
well say that ‘I see what I eat’ is the same thing as ‘I eat what I see’!” (53)
The March Hare and Dormouse add to the Hatter’s example: “you might just as well say
that ‘I like what I get’ is the same thing as ‘I get what I like’ ” and “‘I breathe when I
sleep’ is the same things as ‘I sleep when I breathe’ ” (53). This exchange begins with the
idea of “say[ing] what [one] means,” as in accurately capturing one’s thoughts, and also
“mean[ing] what [one] says,” as in being accountable for what one says. The string of
eamples illuminate the idea of authorial power in a way similar to Humpty Dumpty’s
notion that a word can “mean what [he] chooses [it] to.” Yet, again, meaning is easily
confused with a simple inversion of terms, which addresses the kind of arbitrary and fick­
le nature of words’ meanings and suggests that even when one says what one means, it
might not be understood accordingly. The confusion of meanings again results in the kind
of nonsense that typifies the mad realm of Wonderland and the backwards-ness of Look­
ing-glass land.

Nonsense works to further destabilize the authoritative power inherent in the act
of naming. Linda Shires explains that “[fantasy, nonsense, and parody] explode or trans­
gress the frame of ‘the real’ and thus open up a space of uncertainty” (267). To think of
it in Derrida’s terms, nonsense highlights, perhaps even hyperbolically exaggerates, the
idea of rupture. Shires continues to explain that “pushing towards the realm of non-
signification where nothing is stable, these forms open a gap between signifier and signified which makes a definite meaning or absolute reality impossible to attain. (267). Nonsense, a process of un-naming through the intentional confusion of meanings, subdues the authoritative power of the act because nonsense can have multiple, continually shifting meanings. Other forms of nonsense, on other hand, subversively harness the ability to name in the form of made up words, which perhaps have no meaning at all. Carroll plays with both kinds of nonsense, and both magnify the process of making meaning and the authority that tacitly asserts itself in such processes.

"That 'fabulous monster,' the Victorian child"12

If Carroll’s penchant for wordplay frustrates fixed meanings, fixing meaning in regards to comprehensive representations and concepts, like childhood, proves contradictory to that work. Child-objectifying nostalgia, predicated on processes of objectification that inherently establish fixed dichotomies such as child and adult, as I have conceptualized it, by the same rule, contradicts the uncertainty that govern Wonderland and Looking-Glass.

Indeed, the texts call into question such larger representations (or fixation of meanings) directly as well. Wordplay comes in direct contact with the staging of adult/child power dynamics as the idea of the child and its supposed fixed meaning is un-

12 Nina Auerbach introduces this theme of the texts—child as monster—in “Alice in Wonderland: A Curious Child” (1973). Auerbach anticipates critical positions (like James Kincaid’s and Marah Gubar’s) that work against viewing the Alice books as heedlessly participant in child-objectifying nostalgia. She writes, “A closer look at the character of Alice may reveal new complexities in the sentimentalized and attenuated Wordsworthian many critics had assumed she represents, and may deepen through examination of a single example our vision of that ‘fabulous monster,’ the Victorian child” (317). Pinning Alice against the image of the Romantic child, Auerbach implies that the other narrative of childhood that the Alice books depict is one of rash egocentrism. This theme of child as monster takes on many iterations throughout the texts.
hinged in a literal examination of the term in the text. Returning to the Unicorn’s encounter with Alice, the act of defining childhood surfaces through Carroll’s use of irony. The ironic inversion of the fantastic and monstrous and the normal and innocuous map on to Alice and the Unicorn respectively. The Unicorn’s reaction of disgust upon meeting Alice and the Haigha’s explanation that “this is a child!... as large as life and twice as natural!” demonstrates not only a moment in which the child is being (re)defined as supernatural and beastly (thereby unhinging the notion of cherubim innocence associated with sentimental nostalgia for the child), but also a moment of humor for readers produced by the ludicrousness of the exchange (174).

Carroll brings this humor to a finer point when the Unicorn asks the Lion to guess what Alice is. In a taxonomical moment, the Lion asks Alice, “are you animal—or vegetable—or mineral?” The Unicorn hastily interrupts, “it’s a fabulous monster!” The ‘real’ “fabulous monster[s]”—the Lion and the Unicorn—deem Alice a creature of fairy tales in a process of objectification not unlike that of the adult fetishizing the child. Here they view the child as other, as monster. The joking banter between the Haigha, the Lion, and the Unicorn objectifies as well as silences, for it leaves no room for Alice’s voice. She cannot define herself, not because she has forgotten who she is as she did in “the woods where things have no names” or in her encounter with the Caterpillar in *Wonderland*, but because she falls under duress of their ridicule and gaze.

That Carroll, quite deliberately, plays out this process of objectification and naming on the page suggests his acute awareness and acknowledgment of the effects of such
processes. To quote Marah Gubar, again, “by creating a child protagonist who constantly
finds herself having poems, stories, and songs inflicted on her by nonsensical men [or
creatures], Carroll dramatizes the plight of the child bombarded by other people’s dis­
course” (340). Alice’s confrontation with the Lion and the Unicorn epitomizes Gubar’s
notion of the child being “bombarded by other people’s discourse.” Extending Gubar’s
point, the Lion’s and the Unicorn’s discourse certainly stifles Alice—she cannot manage
to get a word in. Alice seems to have no other choice but to endure their scrutiny and
submit to the power of their naming, trumping her agency. However, their discourse also
begins to define the child as object directly. The process of objectification plays out on
the stage of the page through a literal act of definition and fixation of meaning, but that
fixed meaning is undercut in the irony of the inversion of “fabulous monsters.” Their act
of naming disrupts typical nostalgic representations of the child as angelic and innocent
making Carroll’s implicit acknowledgement of the adult/child dynamic two-fold: he
points to both the objectifying taxonomy of naming the child, and also inverts the con­
vention of the innocent child by ironically deeming the child as monster.

The exchange between Alice, the Lion, and the Unicorn accounts for only one in­
stance in which adult-like characters declare Alice a monster. When Alice grows too
large for the White Rabbit’s house, in Wonderland, she becomes a kind of monster,
though she is not called it explicitly. Alice’s oversized arm, sticking out the window of
the Rabbit’s tiny house, snatches at the Rabbit as he attempts to pull it out (29). Alice’s
sheer size threatens the creatures of Wonderland (Auerbach 318-9). To rid themselves of
the giant, monstrous Alice, the White Rabbit and his accomplices decide to try to burn
the house down.

In “the wood where things have no names” Alice comes upon a fawn, which does
not recognize what Alice is (being “where things have no names”) until the two walk out
of the wood together and both are again able to name. In this moment the Fawn shakes
free of Alice’s embrace, declaring, “I’m a Fawn!” (134). In the next instant the startled
Fawn sees Alice for what she is, crying out, “and dear me! you’re a human child” (134).
The narrator imparts that “a sudden look of alarm came into its beautiful brown eyes, and
in another moment it had darted away” (134). The Fawn’s reaction, which anticipates the
Unicorn’s, indicates that “the human child” is something to fear.

Alice might be a potential predator, but the Fawn does not recognize her as such
until its ability to name returns. The Fawn’s reaction appears natural in the sense that any
animal might run away from a human. However, that kind of logic proves tenuous in the
Looking-glass world where so many other creatures engage fearlessly with Alice, and
indeed, like the Lion and the Unicorn, bully Alice. Rather, the Fawn distinctly responds
to the fact that Alice is a “human child,” linking Alice’s predatory or monstrous nature to
her child status (my emphasis, 134). The fact that the Fawn fails to sense any danger be-
fore the act of naming highlights the power of the act itself—the power of taxonomy,
which classifies and objectifies and creates hierarchy. Once the Fawn names Alice, all of
the associated meanings come rushing in—child, monster, predator—flooding it with
fear. The fact that Alice and the Fawn walk together without issue before the Fawn’s real-
ization enables the reader to question the validity of such power.

James Kincaid also sees the Alice books as narratives about childish egocentrism. He examines a similar instance of the Fawn’s startled realization in *Wonderland* when Alice eats the caterpillar’s mushroom and her neck snakes out, growing upwards through the trees where a nesting pigeon, frightened wails, “Serpent!” (41). Alice literally becomes the serpent in the tree, emblematic of the biblical fall. Kincaid argues that Wonderland is Edenic in the sense that it represents a loss of innocence. However, rather than re-inscribing the Romantic child and child-objectifying nostalgia, he demonstrate how the texts work to de-mystify the child. He claims, “it doesn’t matter if Eden is destroyed by purposeful malignity or by callous egoism and ruthless insensitivity that often pass for innocence” (92). The “callous egoism and ruthless insensitivity” the Kincaid refers to here belong to “Alice, the clear representative of all little girls—or serpents” (92). Innocence or ignorance, then, is not innocence, but rather egoism and insensitivity in masquerade. The monstrosity of the child derives from an inability to sympathize or empathize, as nothing exists outside of the child’s world and directly self-serving experience. Innocence, for Kincaid, indicates a selfish monstrousness. He upturns the Edenic image of childhood by warping the nostalgic dream into a nightmare steeped in supreme baseness. This version of “innocence” disrupts the Romantic view of the child as pure, the child as Eve before the apple.

Child monstrosity plays out all over the texts. Part of Alice’s failure in communicating early on is due to the fact that she continually mentions Dinah, her cat, to an array
of animal characters that could potentially become Dinah’s prey (Auerbach 319). The reiteration of Alice’s monstrosity continually calls attention to the idea of naming the child while ousting the mystifying understanding of the child as innocent. Kincaid posits that in *Wonderland* “there is often present a deeper and more ironic view that questions that value of human innocence altogether and sees the sophisticated and sad corruption of adults as preferable to the cruel selfishness of children” (93). Situating innocence as “cute and dangerous,” as Kincaid does, accounts for the purposeful staging of the child as monster. The pleasure of innocence (or ignorance) presupposed in child-objectifying nostalgia loses its appeal when the ugly, ‘real’ egocentrism of the child is exposed.

Thus, these moments of naming the child as monster can be read as a debunking of the Romantic/Victorian image of the child, and all the nostalgic associations packed into the image. But what are the consequences of this kind of reading? In re-naming the child as monster, or reading Alice as such, the adult still tacitly or subconsciously seeks to define herself as different or superior to the child’s baseness. What is at stake in re-naming the child “monster” is the persistence of othering and objectifying the child and reinstating the hierarchical power of the binary opposition, adult/child. Luckily, meaning never settles in the Alice books; contexts continuously change; and the only certainty is uncertainty.

**Alice’s Resistance and the Question of Authorial Power**

Absolute othering never reaches full potential in these moments of naming because the various creatures that continuously deem Alice a monster are often themselves
beasts. If we map their objectification of Alice onto the adult objectification of the child, the adult becomes the monster that continuously oppresses the child through the act of naming.

Just as Alice resists the adult impulse to entrap her in a state of childhood, as mentioned in the previous chapter, she likewise resists the adult impulse to name the child out-rightly by talking back. While Alice is silenced in her exchange with the Unicorn, she does manage to get in the final word. “Alice could not help her lip curling up into a smile as she began” the narrator conveys, “do you know, I always thought Unicorns were fabulous monsters, too?” Alice carries on, “I never saw one alive before!” (174). Her keen response points the finger the other direction, declaring her persecutors to be the “real” monsters. She shows the adult-like creatures, the Unicorn and the Lion—fabulous and predatory—are themselves what they name the child to be.

Alice’s final words mark her agency. In *Looking-Glass* Alice’s agency builds towards her crowning in the chess game and the moment she seizes the tablecloth to upset the hierarchical power of the royal dining party where she declares, “I ca’n’t [sic] stand this any longer!” (203). At the end of *Wonderland*, Alice deems the royal court to be “nothing but a pack of cards!” (95). It is Alice’s ability to name that marks her power, not because she has become adult-like, or grown up, but because she has become so fed up with the mad adults and adult-like creatures that continuously attempt to define her that she asserts her own linguistic power to name and talks back. Carroll ends both his Alice books in the same fashion: the child reasserts agency over the objectifying and ridiculing
adults and adult-like creatures of Wonderland and Looking-glass land.

However, true to the nature of the texts, nothing can be absolutely finite or fixed. As mentioned in the previous chapter, Carroll ends *Through the Looking-glass* with the elusive question, which dreamt the Looking-glass dream, Alice or the Red King? The final words of the narrator to the reader—“Which do you think it was?”—steep the entirety of the text in uncertainty. If Alice is not the dreamer, the child’s agency surely diminishes, does it not? If the Red King is the dreamer, the Looking-glass world is not of Alice’s imagination, but the King’s, an obvious figure of adulthood and ultimate authority. The adventure ceases to be hers and she becomes a mere pawn on the chessboard, shuffled through the ludicrous fantasies of a chessboard king. Her agency as Queen, though perhaps unsatisfactory all the while, at the end of book is an absolute sham. Of course, the master of the game is the chess player himself, leading back to the question of authorship; in this case, “Which dreamed it?” suggests that the reader is not only being asked to consider if it were the Red King or Alice who dreamed the looking-glass world, but to consider the author as the dreamer/author of *Through the Looking-glass* (Gubar, “Reciprocal Aggression” 340). By extension, one might even consider the reader as a possible source of the dream.

Note Carroll’s use of direct address in this moment magnifies the presence of the author. Only on a few other occasions does he question his audience directly. When he does, he breaks the fantastic, imaginative power of the reading experience, ceasing narration and becoming interlocutor to the reader. The content of the question itself provokes
the idea of authorship—as in, who authors the dream?—making Carroll a prominent figure and even a possible character in the text. This kind of transparency, in which the reader clearly sees the author, supports the possibility that authorial control is ultimately restored at the end. However, in this self-conscious move, Carroll engages the reader by relinquishing power. He leaves it to his readers to decide. Such a move gives merit to the possibility that Carroll is very aware of his own adult authorial power and the ramifications of that power. He finds his readers, adults and children alike, fully capable of making this decision.

The blurring of adult and child in the question of who dreamed it, either through Alice and the King or Alice and Carroll, blatantly, again, plays at questions of power and control. Yet, the final riddle also begs the question of one being so disparate and contradictory to the other. What I mean to suggest here is that Carroll may not only be asking readers to come to some conclusion about whether the adult or the child is the author/dreamer, but whether it could be both. With a splitting of the subject, multiplicity emerges. The child within the adult dreams; they are not so opposed as adults and Victorians would like to think. They exist on the same plane, on the same spectrum, for just as a child grows into an adult, they are still the same person. To explore this possibility in more depth, I turn to Derrida once more.

Looking again at the idea of rupture, presence and absence (presence/absence) of the author (or receiver) always simultaneously exists within the written sign. Derrida asserts, "this breaking force [of the sign from 'the collectivity of presences organizing the
moment of its inscription] is not an accidental predicate but the very structure of a written text (my emphasis “Signature Event Context” 9). The rupture of presence (of the author or receivers) engenders absence, and by necessity indicates that, at one point, there was presence otherwise the mark would never exist. Without this structure, writing would not be writing, according to Derrida—the opposition structures the sign.

The authorial dilemma posed at the end of Looking-Glass points to both the absence and presence of the author, but also to the multiple presences, or possibilities of authorship. The dreamer could be Alice, the Red King, Carroll, or the reader. In other words, the question “which dreamed it?” can be read in more ways than one. It asks ‘who, in the end, has control?’ or who is the dreaming subject? It also asks ‘who, in the end, has control?’ To which the answer could be, ‘no one’ or ‘everyone.’ This final dilemma, along with the rampant word play that emerges in these texts, resembles Derrida’s concept of “rupture.” Torn from any certain context, signs float in freeplay, bouncing from context to context, and absolute meaning is destabilized. The various acts of naming, or un-naming—Humpty Dumpty’s reappropriation of “glory,” Alice as the “fabulous monster,” “human child,” “little girl,” or her inability to name herself—dramatize the rupture between the signifier and the signified, between words and their contexts.

While ruptured meaning continuously emerges and shifts throughout the text, such difference exists because of the opposition itself. Elsewhere Derrida argues that “we cannot do without the concept of the sign, we cannot give up this metaphysical complicity without also giving up the critique we are directing against this complicity, without the
risk of erasing the difference [between signified and signifier]” (“Structure, Sign, and Play” 250-1). Again, the opposition (signified/signifier; presence/absence), which produces difference, structures the sign. Derrida insists that we cannot do without the opposition, or we would erase the very difference that structures the sign, in effect collapsing the signified and the signifier. The word would literally become the meaning, just as the duchess’s baby in Wonderland literally turns into a pig moments after she calls it that (Carroll 45, 47-48). Without difference, critique of the hierarchal force that signs and binary oppositions represent would be impossible; this is the complicity Derrida mentions. To collapse the binary entirely, or to exist outside of it, would be to ignore the power of the hierarchal relationship and deny its existence altogether.

So what do rupture and the necessity of difference have to do with the adult/child binary opposition in the context of the Alice books? The difference within the binary makes rupture possible. The Alice books do the work of deconstruction in their continual rupture of signifier and signified; these continual ruptures loosen the authority of adults and allow for a reversal of power, imbued in the child. As Derrida puts it, “deconstruction does not consist in moving from one concept to another, but in reversing and displacing a conceptual order” (“Signature Event Context” 21). The conceptual order reversed and displaced in the Alice books is the authority that the adult has over the child in defining them, in containing them, in entrapping them in an imagined space of childhood, or in opposition to themselves.

This does not mean the adult/child binary is completely collapsed, but momentari-
ly disrupted, which demonstrates its construction. In discussing speech “events,” Derrida posits that “effects [of speech] do not exclude what is generally opposed to them, term by term; on the contrary, they presuppose it, in an asymmetrical way, as the general space of their possibility” (“Signature Event Context”19). Unintended meaning gives rise to intended meaning; it allows for the possibility and makes space for it. I think that this applies to all oppositions, not just those in speech. Without the possibility of difference any concept would not be possible, but that difference exists within the concept itself, as part of its concept-hood. If the concepts of childhood and adulthood are mapped onto this kind of opposition, the idea of adulthood “presupposes” the idea of childhood and vice versa. One exists within the other, but with difference, with the possibility of rupture.

The Alice books’ attention to language and unfixed meaning entertains continual rupture of the concepts of adulthood and childhood, challenging simplistic understandings of these texts as unreflective iterations of child-objectifying nostalgia in which the adult heedlessly represents the child, and calls them into being as their other. The Alice books displace the naming power of child-objectifying nostalgia by focusing on the very act of naming on the page and through a reversal of that power. The language of the text and the discourse of the characters, through the space of rupture, enable Alice to become the agent of her own authority. Alice’s refusal to be defined, demonstrates the child’s resistance to such pressure and power. Alice’s resistance, in turn, produces an alternative image of childhood that defies cliché nostalgic interpretations. Thus, the narrative of childhood, reimagined in the Alice books, is not one of ignorance, inexperience, and in-
nocence—it is the narrative of resistance.
Works cited


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