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FEMINISM, CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE, AND THE ERASURE OF CHILD SEXUALITY

Steven Angelides

Historians do not usually like to speak of the “lessons of history,” as if [it] were some objective, finally definitive schoolteacher. But in many years of work at the craft, I have never come across a story that so directly yields a moral. The moral is that the presence or absence of a strong feminist movement makes the difference between better or worse solutions to the social problem of child sexual abuse. . . . Without a feminist analysis, evidence of child sexual abuse means that danger lies in sex perverts, in public spaces, in unsupervised girls, in sexually assertive girls. . . . As with adult rape, child sexual abuse without feminist interpretation supplies evidence and arguments for constricting and disempowering children.

In the 1970s the child protection lobby and feminism together spearheaded a painstaking interrogation and politicization of the social problem of child sexual abuse. By the 1980s a powerful discourse of child sexual abuse was working hard to expose the widespread problem of incest in the patriarchal family and was vigorously contesting legal definitions of abuse that ignored or downplayed nonpenetrative sexual acts. The myth of stranger danger was found to be a patriarchal ruse as feminists produced an array of statistics revealing that fathers, other male relatives, and male acquaintances were the primary perpetrators of child sexual assault. Drawing on the rhetoric of radical feminist antirape and antipornography movements, a new approach to abuse emerged that expanded the definitional ter-
rain of sexual abuse as well as eroded distinctions among the acts it comprised. Feminists were particularly influential in challenging the notion that children subjected to sexual abuse were somehow complicit in the crime (by seducing adults, “asking for it,” or fabricating charges) or that child prostitutes and children involved in pornography or intergenerational sex could knowingly consent to such activities. In a significant reversal of the common twentieth-century tendency of victim blaming, the innocent, powerless, blameless, and unconsenting “victim” and “survivor” of sexual abuse became key cultural terms.

The “rediscovery” of child sexual abuse—perhaps more accurately called a “reinterpretation”—has been profoundly important for Western culture. Few would dispute that patriarchal social structures, male sexuality, and power relations between the sexes and between adults and children have been subjected to much-needed critical scrutiny or that our reexamination of the dynamics of child sexual abuse and its detrimental effects has generated valuable insights into diagnosis, therapeutic intervention (for both offenders and victims), and management. However, significant gains are often accompanied by equally significant losses. This essay suggests that, despite admirable efforts to empower children and protect them from the harmful consequences of sexual abuse, they have in one particularly notable way been disempowered and disarmed by the child sexual abuse movement. I argue that the discourse of child sexual abuse has expanded at the expense of a discourse of child sexuality. Rigorous attempts to expose the reality and dynamics of child sexual abuse have been aided, if not in part made possible, by equally rigorous attempts to conceal, repress, or ignore the reality and dynamics of child sexuality. This placing of child sexuality under erasure has had deleterious consequences at both the level of everyday practice and at the level of theory. First, the desexualization of childhood has damaging psychological and psychotherapeutic consequences for child victims of sexual abuse. Second, with “child sexuality” figured only as an oxymoron in the feminist discourse of child sexual abuse, its erasure ensures that the categories of “child” and “adult” are kept distinct and at a safe epistemological distance. For queer theorists trained to unpack the mutual imbrication and constitution of binary oppositions, this is highly problematic. As will be shown, not only does queer theory have much to offer theorizations of the relationship between analytic axes of “sexuality” and “age,” but there may be an instructive methodological lesson for queer theory to glean from failed feminist attempts to hierarchize sexuality by way of a linear and sequential logic of age stratification.
Sigmund Freud and the Normalization of Child Sexuality

Although various cultures and societies have always recognized in children what we might call sexual desires and behaviors, in the West the concept and hence the experience of child sexuality have a definite history. In a broad sketch of changing conceptualizations of child sexuality since the seventeenth century, Sterling Fishman offers the following, rather crude periodization: (1) In the seventeenth century, little concern seemed to be paid to child sexuality. (2) In the eighteenth century, medical moralists began denouncing child sexuality (as manifested in the form of masturbation) as sinful and physically injurious. (3) In the nineteenth century, this denunciation was intensified and projected outward to society, such that child sexuality was deemed a “social evil,” the codification of which was essential to the well-being of both the individual and society. (4) Finally, in the twentieth century, under the leadership of Sigmund Freud, there was “a complete volte face and childhood sexuality is now seen as a normal and natural expression of the infant and child, the suppression of which creates both individual and social problems” (270). Despite his loose and imprecise periodization of mentalities, it is difficult to contest Fishman’s general description of the Freudian revolution in understandings of child sexuality.

Backed by the influential Freudian theory of infantile sexuality, various sociological, psychological, anthropological, criminological, and legal discourses began explicitly to acknowledge child sexuality as a normal and natural reality. In fact, prior to the 1980s representations of child sexuality were commonplace, particularly in the context of sexual encounters with adults. For instance, images of flirtatious, precocious, and seductive children were typical in the psychiatric literature. The work of Lauretta Bender and Abraham Blau is indicative. In their study of prepubertal children admitted to a psychiatric facility for observation following sexual relations with adults, they suggested that these children undoubtedly do not deserve completely the cloak of innocence with which they have been endowed by moralists, social reformers and legislators. The history of the relationship in our cases usually suggested at least some cooperation of the child in the activity, and in some cases the child assumed an active role in initiating the relationship. . . . a most striking feature was that these children were distinguished as unusually charming and attractive in their outward personalities. Thus, it is not remarkable that frequently we considered the possibility that the child might have been the actual seducer rather than the one innocently seduced.
As late as the mid-1970s psychiatric studies cited evidence that young children were capable of seduction and commonly engaged in it. In his 1974 *Guide to Psychiatry* Myre Sim found it “surprising” how “little promiscuous children are affected by their experiences [of sex with adults], and how most settle down to become demure housewives. It is of interest that [Sir Basil] Henriques lists two categories—the unaffected and the guilty—and that seems to put the matter in a nutshell.”\(^7\) A 1970 sex education text, *The Facts of Sex*, insists on the incontrovertible fact, very hard for some of us to accept, that in certain cases it is not the man who inaugurates the trouble. The novel *Lolita* . . . describes what may well happen. A girl of twelve or so, is already endowed with a good deal of sexual desire and also can take pride in her “conquests.” Perhaps, in all innocence, she is the temptress and not the man.\(^8\)

In anthropological research, too, child sexual activity was the norm. In *Patterns of Sexual Behavior*, their examination of 191 cultures, Clellan S. Ford and Frank A. Beach concluded that as “long as the adult members of a society permit them to do so, immature males and females engage in practically every type of sexual behavior found in grown men and women.”\(^9\) Alfred C. Kinsey, Wardell B. Pomeroy, and Clyde E. Martin’s sociological study of orgasm in prepubertal boys was clear in its “substantiation of the Freudian view of sexuality as a component that is present in the human animal from earliest infancy.”\(^10\) Like many scholars of their time, Kinsey, Pomeroy, and Martin dismissed the idea that intergenerational sexual interactions were in themselves harmful. Most researchers did so because of the widespread assumption that not only was child sexuality normative, but children could be sexually precocious. In *Sexual Behavior in the Human Male* even Kinsey, Pomeroy, and Martin, proponents of the cultural conditioning model, implied as much in their discussion of children brought to orgasm by adults: “The males in the present group become . . . hypersensitive before the arrival of actual orgasm, will fight away from the partner and may make violent attempts to avoid climax, although they derive definite pleasure from the situation.” However, “such individuals quickly return to complete the experience, or to have a second experience if the first was complete” (161). Kinsey, Pomeroy, and Martin found it difficult to think of intergenerational sex as harmful to children. Echoing Freud’s disbelief of Dora’s feelings of disgust when approached sexually by Herr K, Kinsey et al. noted in *Sexual Behavior in the Human Female* that it is “difficult to understand why a child, except for its cultural conditioning, should be disturbed at having its genitalia touched, or disturbed at seeing the genitalia of other persons, or disturbed at
even more specific sexual contacts.” They proffered the explanation common at the
time: “Some of the more experienced students of juvenile problems have come to
believe that the emotional reactions of the parents, police officers, and other adults
who discover that the child has had such contact, may disturb the child more seri-
ously than the sexual contacts themselves.”

A prominent state government–sponsored study of child sexual molestation
in 1955 described the mostly female victims as seductive, flirtatious, and sexually
precocious, claiming that in most cases there was “evidence of participation” and,
indeed, evidence of pleasure on the part of the child. Lindy Burton’s analysis of
sexual assault against children between the 1930s and the 1960s reveals the pop-
ularity of this view during that period. The adult offender was often portrayed as
a harmless victim of child seductiveness, and the usually female victims were often
deemed aggressive delinquents driven by sexual psychopathologies. While these
representations of child sexuality prior to the 1980s are problematic—indeed,
they have been importantly and rigorously critiqued by feminists working in the
area of child sexual abuse—the point I wish to underscore is simply that child
sexuality, however (poorly) conceived, was widely accepted as normative. If not
openly discussed, it was at least a structuring assumption in discussions of inter-
generational sex.

Nowhere is the recognition of child sexuality more apparent than in the
child emancipation and sexual liberation movement of the 1970s. The widespread
assumption that modern society had inherited an attitude of intolerance of sexual-
ity led many reformers to argue for a lifting of repressive strictures and for more
open and positive attitudes toward sexuality. These, it was claimed, would free
society of unnecessary inhibitions, mandates, and guilt, which were themselves
targeted as the causes of sexual perversions, sexual malaises, and marital trou-
bles. Some reformers touted the benefits of family nudity, while others advanced
the idea that adult sexual activity in the presence of children might have beneficial
pedagogical effects. Hal M. Wells, infamous author of The Sensuous Child, argued
that the traumatic effects on children of sex with adults had been exaggerated and
that “children have the right to sexual pleasure.” Even the incest taboo was chal-
lenged. In her book Sex without Shame the psychiatrist Alayne Yates suggested
that there is “an important lesson to be learned from non-coercive father-daughter
incest. Early erotic pleasure by itself does not damage the child. It can produce
sexually competent and notably erotic young women. Childhood is the best time to
learn, although parents may not always be the best teachers.” Such views were
often framed by the belief, promoted powerfully by the discourse of psychiatry, in
children’s ability and desire to initiate sex with adults, or at least to collude in it.
They were often justified as well by cross-species comparisons, which emphasized the naturalness of adult-child sex in other mammals. In *Sex Offenders* Paul H. Gebhard et al. claimed that “sexual activity between adult and immature animals is common and appears to be biologically normal.” Indeed, it “is precisely what we see in various animals, particularly monkeys.” This fact lessened “the horror with which society views the adult who has sexual relations with young children.”

As Robert S. De Ropp summed up, in a more matter-of-fact articulation of the underlying masculinist assumptions: “The craving of the elderly male for the young female is not necessarily confined to the human species. Old stags are always after little ones and the young does are always willing.”

At the same time, various interest groups in the United States, England, and western Europe also advocated intergenerational sex and agitated for the lowering or abolition of the legal age of consent.

Edwin J. Haeberle, who argued that children were being refused their “right to sexual satisfaction,” called for an end to laws prohibiting incest: “It would be a crime to force our children and adolescents into blind acceptance of a morality long overdue for reform.”

Many pedophile groups, employing the rhetoric of gay liberation, positioned themselves as the representatives of an oppressed minority akin to homosexuals. David Thorstad, spokesman for a coalition campaigning against the prohibition of adult-child sex, captured the pro-pedophilia political fervor in 1979:

> We are engaged in a war between the forces of sexual liberation on the one hand and the forces of sexual repression on the other. Man/Boy love and cross generational sex have become the cutting edge of that war.
> Repeal all age of consent laws!!!
> Freedom of sexual expression for all!!!

Not only was child sexuality a palpable conceptual figure for most of the twentieth century, but it had even become an overt political issue by the 1970s. Such a position is unthinkable in the climate of pedophilia panic early in the twenty-first century. I am not suggesting that throughout the twentieth century there was a near-universal consensus regarding child sexuality or that there were not wildly competing claims concerning its existence and meaning. Of course, there were multiple constructions of childhood. Indeed, many people still believed in the notion of childhood asexuality or sexual innocence. In fact, alongside the narrative of childhood sexual precocity ran that of childhood sexual purity. Both themes were deployed by a range of social actors, depending on their theoretical, political, and social positionings. Despite—or rather, because of—these competing con-
ceptions of childhood, a signifier or discourse of child sexuality was writ large in twentieth-century Western cultures until the 1980s. In other words, the affirmation and the negation of child sexuality are two poles of the same dialectic. Even in negating child sexuality, one cannot avoid reinscribing it. The advent of the child sexual abuse movement in the 1970s and 1980s, however, forced a significant change in this dynamic between the contradictory notions of child sexuality and child sexual innocence.

The Use of Power and the Evasion of Child Sexuality

Fishman’s brief history of child sexuality concluded with only a gesture toward the 1970s and the rise of the movement against sexual repression, which, as we have seen, culminated in the call for child sexual liberation. I would like to update Fishman’s analysis to demonstrate how in the late 1970s and the 1980s a monumental shift occurred in the representation of child sexuality. With the advent of a hegemonic discourse of child sexual abuse, feminists, Linda Gordon notes, thought that they “were engaged in an unprecedented discovery.” However, bringing child sexual abuse “out of the closet” and correcting the “historical amnesia” of whole societies were not their only significant achievements.28 Perhaps even more important, in that it directly contested decades of conventional wisdom, was the feminist “reinterpretation” of the meaning of adult-child sexual encounters and child sexual abuse. Feminists worked hard to reverse the tendency to blame the victims of child sexual molestation, and they did it by reinterpreting child sexual abuse “in terms of male power” (63) and child powerlessness. This move was an extension of radical feminist analyses of rape, which had been redefined not as a sexual act but as an act of violence and an assertion of power.29 The standard argument was that, although “many children appear to consent passively or even to cooperate,” children “are incapable of truly consenting to sex with adults.”30 David Finkelhor, a child sexual abuse researcher, was at the vanguard of this feminist reinterpretation, and his ideas are indicative of the standard feminist logic. “For true consent to occur,” he argues, “two conditions must prevail. A person must know what it is that he or she is consenting to, and a person must be free to say yes or no” (694). Drawing on the ethics of human behavioral research, Finkelhor’s notion of informed consent requires that “a person really understand” the meaning, social context, and consequences of his or her “decision,” in this case a child’s decision to participate in sexual activity with an adult (694). Children are incapable of informed consent because they “lack the [relevant] information”: 
They are ignorant about sex and sexual relationships. It is not only that they may be unfamiliar with the mechanics of sex and reproduction. More importantly, they are generally unaware of the social meanings of sexuality. For example, they are unlikely to be aware of the rules and regulations surrounding sexual intimacy, and what it is supposed to signify. They are probably uninformed and inexperienced about what criteria to use in judging the acceptability of a sexual partner. They probably do not know much about the “natural history” of sexual relationships, what course they will take. And, finally, they have little way of knowing how other people are likely to react to the experience they are about to undertake, what likely consequences it will have for them in the future. (694–95)

Moreover, Finkelhor contends, children ultimately lack the “freedom to say yes or no” (695). Drawing here on radical feminist analyses of power, he suggests that children “have a hard time saying no to adults” (695) because adults control the resources essential for children’s survival and usually are stronger than children. Finkelhor is quick to point out that many sexual relationships between adults—for example, secretary-boss, prostitute-client, and some wife-husband relationships—would also fail both of his conditions. He concedes that “ignorance” is often present in sexual encounters between adults, although “at least they have accessibility to [the relevant] knowledge” (696). He also suggests that “implicit coercion is present in many, if not most, sexual encounters in our society” (696). “What makes adult-child sex any different?” he asks. To distinguish between adult-adult and adult-child sex, Finkelhor makes a curious distinction between coercion and power. Subtle degrees of coercion are part of most sexual encounters, but subtle degrees of power apparently are not. Power, not coercion, is at issue for him, and the dynamics of power and powerlessness lie at the heart of objections to intergenerational sex. Adults possess power (and knowledge); children lack power (and knowledge). This ensures the “fundamental asymmetry of the relationship,” the “inherent power differential,” between adults and children (695, 696).32

If there is an underlying logic to the feminist discourse of child sexual abuse, it rests on this question of power and powerlessness. Arguments about child powerlessness and the inability of children to give informed consent have structured every influential analysis of the problem since the 1980s. In her landmark book, The Best Kept Secret, Florence Rush relies on the radical feminist redefinition of child sexual abuse as a “male abuse of sexual power.”33 Judith Lewis Herman and Lisa Hirschman’s groundbreaking studies on father-daughter incest take it for granted that child incest victims are in a position of “utter helplessness” in
the face of their fathers’ “abuse of power and authority.”\textsuperscript{34} The differential of power between adults and children is “an immutable biological fact.” Using the analogy of “freemen and slaves,” Herman and Hirschman conclude that children “are essentially a captive population, totally dependent upon their parents or other adults for their basic needs.” This asymmetry ensures that “there is no way that a child can be in control or exercise free choice.”\textsuperscript{35} Ann Wolbert Burgess and Nicholas Groth’s study of sexual victimization of children begins with the assertion that only “through negotiation and consent can sexual relations properly be achieved.” It is axiomatic to their analysis that “such consent is precluded in sexual encounters between a child and an adult.” For Burgess and Groth, as for Finkelhor, Rush, and Herman and Hirschman, the reason is the inherent power differential between adults and children; the adult, “by virtue of being mature, occupies a position of biopsychosocial authority and dominance in regard to the child.” Thus there are three basic ways that people make sexual contact. The first is through mutual consent; the second is through exploitation, “which involves a person’s capitalizing on his position of dominance (economic, social, vocational, and so on) to take sexual advantage of a person in a subordinate position”; and the third is through assault.\textsuperscript{36} Only the first is sanctioned, and inherent asymmetries of power and authority exclude children, ipso facto, from normative constructions of (adult) sexuality. In the context of sex with adults, therefore, they can only ever be coerced victims. As Roland C. Summit declares in his landmark article, “The Child Sexual Abuse Accommodation Syndrome,” “No matter what the circumstances, the child had no choice but to submit quietly.” To ignore the power imbalance between adults and children is to ignore “the basic subordination and helplessness of children within authoritarian relationships.”\textsuperscript{37}

Shifting the emphasis from sexuality to power was an ingenious way for feminists to counter the widespread belief that children were willing, desiring, culpable participants in sexual encounters with adults. The arguments they put forth are simple, powerful, and intuitively sound. Yet I would like to register briefly a number of objections to them.\textsuperscript{38} First, the category of “child” is only loosely defined in this body of work, and a child of five is rarely distinguished theoretically from a child of fifteen or sixteen. In this model, \textit{all} adult-child sex is refigured as abuse. According to the American Psychiatric Association's \textit{DSM-IV}, sex between a twelve-year-old and a seventeen-year-old, even if consensual, constitutes pedophilic abuse.\textsuperscript{39} Second, while feminists’ analysis of power was something of an advance over earlier analyses, which had largely ignored the question of power—and thus had implicitly construed the dynamic of power in intergenerational sex as a relation of equivalence—this analysis was far from unproblematic.
As I have noted, the discourse of child sexual abuse has drawn and continues to draw on the radical feminist model of power. In Foucauldian terms, it is a “sovereign” or “juridical” model, construing power as something adults possess and children lack. It likens the child to a slave or a prisoner, condemned to bondage to the adult and outside networks of power and knowledge. As Finkelhor notes in his discussion of why adult-adult sex differs from adult-child sex, “The crucial difference in adult-child sex is the combination of children’s lack of knowledge and lack of power.”

Whatever intuitive sense this kind of argument makes, however, normative arguments about intergenerational sex are sustainable only if they have as their implicit referent normative adult-adult sex. Crucially, when we take a closer look at the assumptions made of normative adult-adult sex, the limitations of this model for thinking about sexual relations in general become much clearer. The entire body of child sexual abuse research leans on the presumption that normative, consensual sex between adults does not, or ought not, involve differential power relations; indeed, it is, or ought to be, virtually free of power dynamics. Normative adult-adult sex is seen as occurring between autonomous equals in relationships free of dominance and subordination. For Burgess and Groth, the minimum conditions for informed consent are the “knowledge or wisdom or social skills to be able to negotiate such an encounter on an equal basis with an adult.” Echoing their emphasis on equality and mutuality, Summit asserts that “no child has equal power to say no to a parental figure or to anticipate the consequences of sexual involvement with an adult caretaker.”

From utopian statements about future nonpatriarchal societies one can also glean the radical feminist figuration of a normative sexuality free of power dynamics. Herman and Hirschman postulate that only when society has been restructured according to the liberal principle of equality will it be possible “for men and women, parents and children, to love one another without coercion or exploitation”—in other words, to enjoy forms of love uncorrupted by power.

In my view, this radical feminist conceptualization of a sexuality uncorrupted by inequalities and power differentials is not only a regulatory construction but also a construction that profoundly misunderstands the dynamics of human sexual and intersubjective relations. While I would certainly claim that children and adults do not share a relation of equivalence, this is not to say that children are universally positioned outside power. On the contrary, no non–physically forcible sexual relations (adult-adult or adult-child) and no parent-child relations can be disarticulated from power. As James R. Kincaid argues, “All forms of human contact involve unequal power equations.” In fact, not only are both
sexual relations and parent-child relations only ever constituted in and through unequal power relations, but they are also constituted in and through incommensurable power relations. Both of these arguments seem rather straightforward Foucauldian and poststructuralist, even psychoanalytic, propositions: each subject is differentially marked and positioned in power and discourse structures. Yet this circumstance represents the complete inversion of the radical feminist argument concerning child sexual abuse.

I suggest that the radical feminist simplification of our understanding of power relations has damaging ethical implications for social relations. For if inequalities of power are thought only to corrupt sexual and parent-child relations, then there can be no ethical sexual or parent-child relations. As Rex Stainton Rogers and Wendy Stainton Rogers put it, “All childhoods are oppressive, if by that we mean power unequal.” After all, isn’t the field of unequal, indeed incommensurable, power relations precisely the condition of possibility for the ethical? Clearly, this is a rhetorical question: I am not foreclosing the possibility of either ethical sexual or ethical parent-child relations, only exposing the contradictions of radical feminist arguments, as well as their implications for our understanding of all forms of sexuality and intersubjective relations. Moreover, I am alluding to the fact that ethical relations are much more complex than the radical feminist discourse of child sexual abuse would have us believe. For if we are to use the inequality-of-power argument to disqualify all adult-child sex as unethical, then surely we ought to apply the same logical and ethical test to all other adult-child interactions. Alternately, we are obliged, as Terry Leahy argues, to specify and defend rigorously sexuality’s difference from other modes of human interaction.

Within this radical feminist–inflected understanding of power, there appears to be a tension between the ontological register (what is) and the ethical register (what ought to be). On the one hand, there is a critique of current formations of sexuality as they have been constituted through unequal power relations; on the other, there is the implicit ethical ideal of how formations of sexuality ought to be constituted in a nonpatriarchal society. Margaret Jackson’s analysis is typical of the radical feminist position on which the discourse of child sexual abuse draws. Arguing that power differentials in sexual relations between men and women are culturally rather than biologically determined, Jackson shifts to the ethical register to speak of an ideal, egalitarian world free of such differentials, a world in which all power dynamics in sexual relations between equals would be eliminated. We “must challenge the assertion that the association between sex and power is inevitable or desirable,” she asserts, “and that dominance and submission are inherent in sexual activity and essential to pleasure.” I cannot agree. But my dis-
agreement issues, as I have made clear, from a post-Foucauldian, nonjuridical conceptualization of power that assumes that where there is a relationship between two people—and not a state of bondage or pure force—power is exercised, not simply possessed. I am not claiming that there is a biologically inevitable power differential between the sexes or between adults and children. I am claiming that in the field of power relations, no two people are situated in a dynamic of equivalence. We are all positioned differentially within social and discursive networks of power. Dominance and submission are not fixed positions determined by the presence and absence of power. Unless he or she is in a state of complete bondage, it is incorrect to assume that the person supposedly in submission does not exercise varying degrees of power. Thus in the domain of sexual relationships we are never situated outside power; there is no position of equivalence with regard to its forces. As long as we think that a society of egalitarian power relations is possible, not only do we misunderstand power and sexuality, but we are led to formulate simplistic, unhelpful political analyses and ethical agendas. It is highly unlikely that somehow the “child” at some arbitrary age—say, sixteen, seventeen, or eighteen—goes from a position of powerlessness to one of (adult) power, or from a position of sexual ignorance to a position of sexual knowledge. We ought at least to interrogate such assumptions with rigorous empirical and theoretical analysis. By and large, however, notions of child powerlessness and child sexual ignorance stand as unsubstantiated assumptions, begging the question of their political and performative function. The metaphor and rhetoric of power sorely require, as Kincaid demonstrates, a systematic and exhaustive deconstruction.

Too often it would seem that adult discourses of sexuality function primarily to reinforce certain relations of power and domination between adults and children. As we are all too aware in this post-Foucauldian climate, power is exerted through knowledge and discourse. Accordingly, children’s apparent lack of knowledge cannot be disentangled from adults’ exercising of power over them. Sex education, for instance, is routinely a question of adult attempts to control children’s access to knowledge about sex and sexuality—that is, attempts to ensure power over knowledge. It is far from self-evident, however, that all children lack the capacity to understand adult meanings of sexuality. Interestingly, the relations of domination inherent in this dynamic between adults and children seem to result from adult efforts to instate a kind of juridical network of power—the very notion of power that they decry when the topic is “non–physically forcible” intergenerational sex. Hence we continue to witness a near-hysterical outcry regarding children’s access to “adult” material on the Internet. The Internet, it is feared, threatens to undermine adult control of adult sexual knowledges, meanings, and
practices. The discourse of child sexual abuse therefore has a great deal at stake in remaining bound to a juridical understanding of power. Put simply, the dual concept of child ignorance and child powerlessness is that on which adult efforts to control child sexuality pivot. I am not suggesting that all forms of child sexuality should be made conceptually equivalent to adult sexualities, only that our blanket assumptions about the imprecise and homogeneous category of the child and about its relationship to power and sexuality ought to be interrogated.

In the case of intergenerational sex, it may be that a more complex account of power is required than the Foucauldian theory of power and resistance or, indeed, any theory of power provides. The Foucauldian critique of juridical formulations of power certainly seems to be a good place to start, as it opens up the possibility that children can exercise power and that they may not be unable, necessarily, to “consent.” However, it may be that a theory of power is in fact not the place to look for tools with which to address questions raised by child sexuality and intergenerational sex. For the purposes of this discussion, the important point I wish to make is that, although reinterpreting the issue of power and its relationship to knowledge was a critical way for feminists to challenge our society’s tendency to blame the child victim, the question and the discourse of child sexuality were unfortunate casualties of this process. In fact, the concepts of power, consent, and ethics replaced the concept of child sexuality in the feminist discourse of child sexual abuse. Their position outside adult power and knowledge economies excluded children from the domain of (adult) sexuality. Shifting the discursive focus away from child seduction or precocity and toward adult abuses of power thus enabled feminists to avoid the thorny issues of child sexuality. This is not to say that feminists working in the area of child sexual abuse rejected the concept of child sexuality. Indeed, many began in the late 1970s by acknowledging it. Finkelhor not only recognized the existence of child sexuality but approved of “sexual experimentation among adolescents . . . [and] sex play between prepubescent children.” However, no sooner is a notion of sexual desire in children invoked than it is displaced by a discussion of consent and power. Herman and Hirschman were also quick to recognize child sexuality, but they were just as quick to shift the discussion to the question of adult power and responsibility: “Children do have sexual feelings, and children do seek out affection and attention from adults. Out of these undeniable realities, the male fantasy of the Seductive Daughter is created. But . . . it is the adult, not the child, who determines the sexual nature of the encounter, and who bears the responsibility for it.” This move is representative of all the influential texts on child sexual abuse during the 1980s (and, indeed, is representative of those up to the present day). If the question
of child sexuality is brought into the frame of reference, it is immediately displaced by a discussion of power and consent. It was primarily during the early “rediscovery”-of-child-sexual-abuse years that child sexuality registered in feminist accounts. In fact, all of these accounts relied extensively on the Freudian model of infantile sexuality. However, with the expansion of the feminist discourse of child sexual abuse in the 1980s, there was less and less acknowledgment of—perhaps less need to acknowledge—child sexuality, which was increasingly ignored as the focus turned to issues of power and consent. The feminist use of power has functioned to evade, silence, erase, and repress a signifier of child sexuality.

When brought into the feminist frame of reference under these epistemological imperatives, child sexuality is severely compromised. Either it ceases to be sexuality, or else the use of terms such as sex play and sexual experimentation works to disqualify it by suggesting that childhood sexual desire is safely located outside power’s reach and is only an immature precursor to adult sexuality. This trivialization of child sexuality is reflected in the fact that ideas of child protosexuality form the epistemological kernel of the concept, universally accepted in child sexual abuse discourse, of “premature introduction into adult sexuality.” But an introduction into adult sexuality can be premature only if children are not deemed properly sexual beings. So although many feminist theorists recognized forms of childhood eroticism, and even grouped them under the rubric of “child sexuality,” this approach was altogether different from their implicit construction of an adult sexuality that acted as the feminist referent. Post-1980s writings collapsed all forms and developmental stages of childhood eroticism into a kind of childhood exploration that was seen to differ from, and to precede the onset of, “real” adult sexuality. Childhood and adulthood are thus separated by sexuality, rather than bound together by it, and the (psychoanalytic) idea that child sexuality inextricably informs adult sexuality is repudiated. This demarcation of childhood and adulthood is evident in the late-twentieth-century shift to a more identity-based construction of sexuality, from which children are generally excluded. It is also apparent in the late-1980s emergence of the categories of “child sexual abusers” and the “sexualized child.” As Paul Okami points out, “The extremely narrow range of acceptable behaviors—and the fact that virtually any sexual behavior may be defined as abnormal or abusive under circumstances of the investigator’s choosing—leave the irresistible impression that childhood sexual activity itself is being condemned.” Child sexuality has thus been evaded at best, erased at worst. Whereas the pre-1980s witnessed the coexistence of contradictory notions of childhood—as sexual and innocent—the post-1980s have been characterized by a conscientious effort to resolve this representational
dynamic. The dominant post-1980s figuration of children in terms of asexual innocence differs significantly from that of earlier decades. One side of the contradiction has been repressed or disavowed as overt representations of child sexuality have been eliminated by the hegemonic feminist discourse of child sexual abuse.

**Historical Myths and Analytic Simplifications**

When a new social movement or set of discourses mobilizes itself around a political or an epistemological identity, that identity usually authorizes itself by way of a historical-origins story. For those working in the field of child sexual abuse, that story almost always begins with Freud’s supposed rejection of the seduction theory. Freud is routinely positioned as the forerunner in the suppression of the truth of child sexual abuse, and feminists and child care professionals are the “pioneers” or revolutionary “pathfinders” who uncovered this hidden truth. In his early work on psychoneurosis, Freud had identified seduction, assault, and premature childhood sexual experiences as the root causes of hysteria. By 1924, however, he had “corrected” this thesis, having begun to appreciate the importance of infantile sexual fantasies. Freud explains this alteration of his seduction theory of hysteria by pointing out that, when he first formulated it, “I was not yet able to distinguish between my patient’s phantasies about their childhood years and their real recollections.” “I attributed to the aetiological factor of seduction,” he continues, “a significance and universality which it does not possess.” Feminists working in the area of child sexual abuse have pounced on this shift in theoretical emphasis, considering it a disingenuous attempt to conceal not only the prevalence of sexual abuse but also the evidence, which Freud odiously tried to subvert, that fathers and not uncles were the primary perpetrators. Feminists have also argued that Freud’s shift is the basis of the twentieth-century tendency to blame the victims. These events are read together to suggest that because the “discovery” of incest committed by fathers was far too great a “challenge to patriarchal values,” Freud was forced to abandon it. Even though he “had gone to such great lengths to avoid publicly inculpating fathers, he remained so distressed by his seduction theory that within a year he repudiated it entirely. He concluded that his patients’ numerous reports of sexual abuse were untrue.”

As many commentators have demonstrated, however, Freud never “repudiated” the seduction theory. Nor did he consider it “erroneous,” as Rush has claimed. In fact, he maintained for his whole life the reality of seduction as a pathogenic force in neurosis. What is more, Freud did not withdraw the claim that the sexual seduction of children was “not a rare abuse.” Instead, he affirmed
it, arguing in “Female Sexuality” that, alongside infantile fantasy, “actual seduction, too, is common enough.”\(^73\) In *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* he clarified: “I cannot admit that in my paper on ‘The Aetiology of Hysteria’ (1896) I exaggerated the frequency or importance of that influence [seduction], though I did not then know that persons who remain normal may have had the same experiences in their childhood.”\(^74\) Freud repudiated not the seduction theory as a whole but the part of the theory that had assumed that hysteria was universally caused by actual sexual abuse. His reasoning was not that abuse was rare but, on the contrary, that so many children were sexually abused without becoming hysterics that abusive encounters themselves had no etiological significance. As Freud pointed out even in the 1896 paper, “Hysterical symptoms can only arise with the co-operation of memories.”\(^75\) Here we glimpse an early formulation of Freud’s notion of deferred action, which is pivotal to his theorization of neurosis:

> Our view then is that infantile sexual experiences are the fundamental precondition for hysteria, are, as it were, the disposition for it and that it is they which create the hysterical symptoms, but that they do not do so immediately, but remain without effect to begin with and only exercise a pathogenic action later, when they have been aroused after puberty in the form of unconscious memories. (106)

As Freud came to understand the complexity and implications of deferred action in relation to the sexual etiology of neurosis, it became clear to him that because hysteria emerges only in concert with the “co-operation of memories,” a subjective reconstruction of the original event happens later. This enables us to grasp more firmly what Freud and Breuer meant by the phrase “Hysterics suffer mainly from reminiscences.”\(^76\) Many child sexual abuse feminists imply, erroneously, that Freud’s discovery of infantile sexuality resulted from a disingenuous denial of the widespread reality of sexual abuse and from an attempt to conceal the fact that fathers were the primary perpetrators. Further, they erroneously assume that Freud considered all patients’ claims of sexual seduction nothing more than fantasies. Instead, Freud remained so committed to a belief in the reality of widespread child sexual abuse that he was driven to seek an explanation for why most people are not hysterical. This search, in conjunction with his gradual discovery of infantile sexuality and the Oedipus complex, must be viewed in this context. It is certainly true that Freud began exploring, indeed emphasizing, the dynamics of sexual fantasy in analyses of neurosis. This shift is easy to understand, however, when we keep in mind the importance of deferred action. For fantasy plays an integral,
inexorable part of symptom formation. It is fantasy that works over the original scene of seduction and provides it, retroactively, with its neurotic force. So it is not enough to identify an act of sexual assault or seduction as the pathogenic cause, because it is the retroactive reinterpretation of this event in the context of later events that yields the clue to neurotic symptomatology. As Freud was quick to remind his audience as early as 1896, “No hysterical symptom can arise from a real experience alone, but . . . in every case the memory of earlier experiences awakened in association to it plays a part in causing the symptom.”

The common narrative in the discourse of child sexual abuse is that Freud deemphasized the reality of sexual trauma and so led later analysts to disregard its importance in understanding and treating trauma. Herman and Hirschman argue that, rather than “investigate further into the question of fact, Freud’s followers chose to continue the presumption of fantasy and made the child’s desire and fantasy the focus of psychological inquiry.” The problem with this account is that it simplifies and misrepresents the psychoanalytic notion of trauma by attempting to impute a traumatic essence to a single sexual act. As I have demonstrated, psychological trauma is a dynamic process. It cannot be a single sexual act (e.g., an act of sexual seduction), which alone would tell us nothing about the psychical processes that assign meaning to that act and thereafter give rise to a neurotic symptom. This event can happen only in association with later acts and their retranscription, which give the original assault its meaning and sexual definition for the child. Child sexual abuse feminists such as Herman and Hirschman, Rush, and Olafson who bemoan the prevailing pre-1980s assumption that the sexual seduction of children is not necessarily or inherently traumatic, and that children often participate in or desire such seductions, do so on the basis of this simplistic notion of trauma. They often incorrectly assume as well that psychiatrists and psychoanalysts claimed that childhood sexual desire and fantasy were themselves responsible for psychological trauma and neurosis. In rejecting this supposed claim, child sexual abuse feminists imply that all childhood sexual acts are inherently traumatic. This theoretical move is yet another means by which childhood is desexualized in the discourse of child sexual abuse.

The point to underscore here is that the feminist assumption that Freud’s notion of infantile sexuality was a smokescreen for his discovery of the prevalence of male abusers functions rhetorically to devalue, indeed to evade, the notion of child sexuality. This revisionist narrative provides those working in the area of child sexual abuse not only with some discursive consistency and a founding point of identification but also with a call to action to reverse the Freudian-led overemphasis on child sexuality and fantasy. Thus the discourse of child sexual abuse has
insistently refocused on the reality of sexual abuse. However, the resulting neglect of, if not the utter disregard for, child sexuality may be as damaging to a child's social and psychological well-being as the discounting of the reality of sexual abuse.

**Child Sexual Abuse and Child Sexual Neglect**

According to the discourse of child sexual abuse, the traumatic kernel of a child’s sexual experience with an adult is formed, at least in part, by the child’s premature introduction into adult sexuality. This conceptualization depends on the installation of sexuality as the dividing line between childhood and adulthood. Child sexuality is conceived of as premature (play, experimentation, imitation), whereas adult sexuality is conceived of as mature (developed, fully realized, authentic). Therefore it is no longer socially acceptable to view forms of childhood behavior through the lens of adult sexual meanings. Although we may recognize childhood behavioral erotics in adult-child interactions, it is no longer appropriate to take these erotics as evidence of either a child’s desire to have sex with an adult or a child’s capacity to understand adult sexuality. A child’s ability to consent to sex or to be held partly responsible for a sexual encounter with an adult is no longer at issue. In short, hegemonic norms ensure that childhood erotics are not read as a sign of (adult) sexuality or (adult) sexual capacity. I want to suggest that to trivialize child sexuality as premature, as play, and as imitative of adult reality is socially irresponsible. I do not deny that there are important differences between child and adult forms of sexual expression, or that adults must be accountable for their behavior toward children. But along with any psychological and developmental differences there are important similarities and continuities between “child” and “adult” sexualities that only psychoanalysis has examined rigorously, and these similarities and continuities give the lie to simple oppositions between premature and mature sexualities, between childhood and adulthood. Far from protecting and empowering children, the feminist evasion and erasure of child sexuality have disempowered children and may have made abused children more vulnerable to psychological trauma.

One of the most consistent findings of research into child sexual abuse is the child's self-blame. Indeed, self-blame is a typical means by which victims accommodate the abuse. Therapists and psychologists routinely refer to instances of self-blame as “cognitive distortions” and see them as root causes of the overwhelming feelings of guilt and shame that an abused child often experiences and that frequently lead to anxiety and depression later. The therapist generally aims
to change the child’s perceptions (i.e., distortions) of reality in order to help him or her work through the guilt and shame (and thus avert the anxiety and depression). As John W. Pearce and Terry D. Pezzot-Pearce put it, therapists “must correct some of the cognitive distortions children have about their victimization experiences for them to be able to reformulate the meaning of the abuse.”80 Children need to be convinced that they did not cause the abuse and that they were not responsible for their victimization. Or as Sandra Wieland advises, it “is important to explain to the older child or adolescent that seeing oneself as causing events is a result of the limited breadth of a young child’s thinking (egocentric) and is not from the reality of the situation.”81

But the very problem with these approaches is that they do attempt to impose a meaning that often directly contradicts the child’s own perception. While this kind of therapy may lead the child to reinterpret the event, often it does not, and many children firmly believe in their own power in and control over sexual encounters with adults. This is especially true of children who may have contributed to the continuation of the abuse by returning to the perpetrator’s home or by seeking gifts or rewards by engaging in sexual activities. “Saying ‘it’s not your fault’ is not helpful,” Sharon Lamb explains, because sexually abused children may feel that in the abusive situation they made some choices, however small, that led to the continuation of the abuse. With a greater intuition than many adults [have], children seem to conceptualize the situation as an interaction between two people. And, no matter how unequal the power in terms of physical strength, status, or mental capacity, from a systems point of view and the views of both the abuser and the abused it remains an interaction.82

Lamb’s important cautionary note has been positively cited by Pearce and Pezzot-Pearce, who in fact encourage therapists to tell abused children that they may have made mistakes or uninformed decisions, for instance, the decision to return to the perpetrator’s home. Despite their appreciation of the need to avoid casting the child purely as a victim, Pearce and Pezzot-Pearce’s overarching aim is still to “help children change their belief that they were responsible for the maltreatment.”83 Attempting to do so, however, only reinforces in children the idea that they lack power and control in encounters with adults. In other words, Pearce and Pezzot-Pearce merely confer on children the blameless-victim attribution that they caution against. Reliance on the therapeutic goal of correcting reality distortions brings into relief the problematic residue of debates about Freud’s supposed aban-
Donment of the seduction theory and his overemphasis on childhood fantasy. Rather than view the child’s perception of the sexual encounter as constituted through the complex interaction between reality and fantasy, as Freud did, therapists working within the child sexual abuse discourse try to alter the child’s perception of reality in the hope that a change in fantasized memory reconstruction will follow. This approach is akin to brainwashing. It relies on a linear understanding of causation, at the center of which are the omnipotent, all-controlling adult and the powerless, passive child. It also assumes, erroneously in my view, that reality and fantasy can be definitively disentangled.

However, the attempt to replace a child’s “reality” with an adult’s effects more than a misrecognition of psychological dynamics. It also ensures, at best, the trivialization or evasion of child sexuality and, at worst, its complete erasure. Yet another common research finding is that, in addition to a sense of sexual power over the adult abuser, children often experience pleasure in the encounter. Herman and Hirschman found that most of the women in their study had experienced sexual pleasure in their incestuous relationships and that the “daughters seemed almost uniformly to believe that they had seduced their fathers and therefore could seduce any man.” Typically, these feelings lead to massive guilt and shame, the repression of which can cause chronic anxiety and depression. However, when a therapist attempts to “correct” a child’s cognitive distortions and convince him or her that they stem from unrealistic, childish egocentrism, the unresolved guilt and shame are only compounded. A child’s sexual desires and experiences of power and pleasure must be acknowledged and normalized. Unfortunately, these feelings are stripped of their force for the child when the therapist reduces them to mere “curiosity” or “infatuation.” As Wieland explains:

Sexual curiosity and, as the child gets older, a wish to experience sexual feelings are part of normal sexual development. When curiosity and feelings are explored with a peer in a nonthreatening manner, these experiences are at a level that can be absorbed within the child’s understanding and are part of normal growing up. When the demands of someone older or in a threatening position are imposed, the sexual experiencing is shifted from the child’s level to an older level, and the experience becomes abuse. It is not the child’s curiosity or wish to experience something sexual that created the abuse, but the exploitation of this by someone older or threatening. Discussion along these lines with the therapist can help the child realize that her own increasingly sexual awareness was normal and did not cause the abuse. (28)
Here we see a clear attempt not truly to recognize and engage the child’s sexuality and sense of power but to impose the regulatory norm of sexuality as the marker dividing childhood and adulthood. Once again we are back at the juridical formulation of power, in which the therapist tries to convince the child that the abuse “resulted from a decision made by the older or more powerful person” (28). As Lamb makes clear, child victims of abuse are not well served by therapists who assume child powerlessness and “emphasiz[e] the adult’s responsibility to the child.” To avoid encouraging further repressions of guilt and shame, and thus anxiety and depression, it is imperative not to impose an adult perception (fantasy) but to engage with and take seriously the child’s perception (fantasy). In other words, we must take child sexuality and children’s sense of power seriously. As long as we evade or erase these issues by “correcting” “cognitive distortions,” we prevent children from venting, symbolizing, and working through the guilt and shame that compound the trauma. Engaging child sexuality and children’s sense of power entails more than intervening at the therapeutic level. We must actively reaffirm a social discourse of child sexuality and rethink the question of power in connection with subjectivity and adult-child relations in a much more complex manner than the binary of powerful/powerless allows. Children’s subjectivities ought not to be figured on the model of the tabula rasa, as the effects of a juridical inscription of power. Children’s beliefs and experiences ought to be taken seriously, seen as shaped by and shaping adult knowledges. We must provide children with discursive spaces and subject positions that enable them to negotiate their own emerging sexualities and to empower them to act on their own behalf.

Engagement with a discourse of child sexuality is constrained by the relative scarcity of research on children and sexuality. Since Freud, the discourse of psychoanalysis has insisted on confronting child sexuality. However, because psychoanalysis has been based largely on clinical findings from very small samples—in fact, often from individual case studies—many important insights from this research have been overlooked or rejected. Moreover, psychoanalysis has lost ground in the social sciences. With the rise of American ego and cognitive psychologies, and as a result of feminist critiques of the masculinism inherent in many classical psychoanalytic models, the study of child sexuality has been neglected. This situation is regrettable, for psychoanalysis is the only discipline among the human sciences, apart from anthropology, to have consistently argued for the importance of a discourse or signifier of child sexuality.

One effect of our willingness to ignore past and current psychoanalytic research, and to erase the voices of children, is the unfortunate deferral of sex education until adolescence in many countries. Decades ago Freud, as well as the
child psychoanalyst Melanie Klein, lamented the psychological effects of this delay on children.92 Many contemporary psychologists and psychiatrists are also quick to recognize the impact on children of this culture of evasion.93 Since the advent of the discourse of child sexual abuse in the 1970s, for example, there has been a tendency to desexualize children and to highlight their innocence in relation to adult sexuality. But all too often sex education is framed by the oppositions of pleasure and danger, good and bad, with the former terms being the adult’s reserve and the latter the child’s.94 This approach only reproduces the problematic binary between the sexual adult and the asexual child. It also misrepresents and simplifies child sexuality, sending children the message that sexual behavior, for them, is dangerous and wrong, especially in intergenerational contexts. The more we mystify and pathologize children’s relation to sexuality, evacuate childhood of the stain of sexuality, and reify simplistic notions of child powerlessness, the more we disempower children and foster their uninformed curiosity, desire, risk taking, and psychological maladjustment to emerging erotic orientations. Instead of polarizing our constructs of sexuality, I recommend that we follow the adolescent psychiatrist Lynn Ponton’s suggestion to rethink sexuality, for both adults and children, as less about danger than about risk, and to risk I would add the crucial category of pleasure.95 Only when we engage ideas not of morality and danger but of education, pleasure, and risk taking is it possible to think pragmatically about concrete strategies for assisting children in developing risk assessment skills and safe contexts for the experience of pleasure. This thinking requires a candid, transparent, and multifaceted discourse of child sexuality. I am arguing not that we should return to simplistic, pre-1980s ideas of child precocity, flirtatiousness, and seductiveness—far from it—but that we must not let the history of these discursive formulations prevent us from engaging the reality and complexity of child sexuality.

The moral of this history of child sexual abuse is not that feminism is an automatic guarantee to child empowerment and liberation, as Linda Gordon would have us believe. The moral is a more double-edged deconstructive one. Empowerment and disempowerment, liberation and subjection, are two sides of the same coin. No discourse ought to be so complacent as to assume its immunity from producing both positive and negative, constraining and enabling, effects. In the words of Barbara Johnson, “Any discourse that is based on the questioning of boundary lines must never stop questioning its own.”96 Thus feminism (as well as the social sciences) must confront its epistemological, ethical, and emotional evasions, disavowals, and repressions. It must interminably confront and engage a discourse of child sexuality.
In appealing to feminism, and indeed the humanities and social sciences in general, to engage a discourse of child sexuality, I have no interest in specifying some positive and distinctive ontological content for this category of “child sexuality.” In fact, I would resist such a move. Yet we must not shy away from theorizing the constitution of children’s subjectivity through dynamics routinely encapsulated under the rubric of adult “sexuality,” such as desire, defense, identification, unconscious fantasy, and pleasure. Moreover, to address these issues effectively, we must ensure that no unbridgeable spatial, temporal, and epistemological gulf opens between childhood and adulthood and between child and adult sexualities. How might we begin to theorize the epistemological relationship between sexuality and age? What might queer theory have to offer this endeavor? What might it have to gain from failed feminist efforts to theorize sexuality and age relations? In what remains I offer some tentative thoughts on how we might address these questions.

Queering Sexuality and the Linear Logic of Age Stratification

The feminist recodification of child sexuality as mere “experimentation,” as “sex play,” and as an immature precursor to “real” adult sexuality is not only dangerous in psychotherapeutic contexts. Equally problematic is the epistemological framework to which such concepts are attached, and thus the implications of this framework for theorizing sexuality more generally. Implicitly underwriting discussions of child sexual abuse and child sexuality both in feminist psychotherapeutic and in more prevalent discourses of sexuality is a linear and sequential model of age stratification premised on distinct chronological, spatial, and temporal stages of biological and psychological development. In the feminist discourse of child sexual abuse, efforts have been made to collapse the axis of sexuality into that of age, or at least to bring these two axes into epistemological alignment. For example, at their simplest, “childhood” is paired with gender identity formation; “adolescence” with puberty, sexual fantasy, and emerging erotic identity; and “adulthood” with fixed sexual identity.97 Notably, in discussions of sexuality, adulthood and adult sexual identities are almost always cast not as phases but as enduring end products of the transitional phases of childhood and adolescence. Despite gay-affirmative efforts to challenge heteronormative and homophobic orthodoxies often mobilized around this linear and sequential model of age and sexuality, adult heterosexuality frequently remains the idealized and fixed referent for the developmental series.98 But childhood and adolescence, precisely because they are considered transitional phases, are granted a certain impermanence and malleability. However, as Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick shows, all too often heteronormative framings of sexuality invoke the cat-
egories of childhood and adolescence to explain how and when such developmental “errors” or “deviations” as homosexuality arise. The problem is that in ascribing to adulthood a fixed sexual identity (be it heterosexual or homosexual) and to childhood and adolescence the qualities of capriciousness, mutability, and transitional-ity, we make it possible to read any childhood or adolescent sexual desires and behaviors as evidence of either developmental deviance or normality. Of course, it is impossible to predict, on the basis of childhood and adolescent behaviors, which developmental path a child will take. This suggests that the terms sexual experimentation and sex play are hardly benign and explanatory but, rather, regulatory constructions that all too often erase the stain of queer sexuality from the discursive field of childhood. When the queerness of one child’s erotic experiences can be explained away as mere sexual experimentation or play and the queerness of another’s as evidence of pathological development, the only thing distinguishing the two seems to be the (adult) identity and developmental narrative being forcibly and retroactively instantiated.

Queer theory offers an important corrective to the culturally prevailing linear and sequential model of age stratification and sexual development. In its psychoanalytic form, queer theory has inherited from Freud the idea that sexuality involves not a chronological unfolding of distinct stages of sexual development but an interminable interplay between these stages. The psychic field of childhood—its desires, unconscious fantasies, identifications, defenses, and so on—is not superseded by adulthood but remains an ever-structuring force in the production of adult subjectivity and sexuality. In its poststructuralist and deconstructive variations, queer theory also betrays this linear and sequential model with its insistence on the relationality of signifiers and axes of analysis and on the inevitable mutual constitution of pairs in binary and trinary structures (such as child[/adolescent]/adult). Such queer critical interventions highlight the importance of examining the signifiers of “childhood,” “adolescence,” and “adulthood,” and thus the analytic axes of age and sexuality, in the same frame of analysis. They also enable us to produce analyses more attuned to those moments in discourses of sexuality when the linear model of sexual development is articulated through a logic of heteronormativity. Heterosexuality is most often the privileged end point of the developmental series, while queer sexualities are almost invariably viewed as developmental deviations or errors.

Almost invariably? I would like to dwell for a moment on the near uniformity of heteronormativity’s reach, particularly in the context of the preceding discussion about the feminist discourse of child sexual abuse. Is the linear and
sequential model of sexuality coextensive with the logic of heteronormativity? Are queer sexual modalities always or almost always marked as errors or deviations? Is a heteronormative conclusion, in other words, an epistemological necessity of the model of linear and sequential age stratification and sexual development? When Sedgwick opened her discussion in *Epistemology of the Closet*, she provided, it now seems, arguably the central epistemological focus for the nascent field of queer theory. In just the second sentence she made the rather audacious claim that “an understanding of virtually any aspect of modern Western culture must be, not merely incomplete, but damaged in its central substance to the degree that it does not incorporate a critical analysis of modern homo/heterosexual definition.” Following on from Sedgwick, Michael Warner spoke of “the dawning realization that themes of homophobia and heterosexism may be read in almost any document of our culture.” Such claims of the almost or virtually all-pervasive reach of heteronormativity served as important reminders that few of us are immune to making assumptions, wittingly or otherwise, about the hierarchy of hetero- and homosexuality, no matter what field of knowledge we occupy. As a result of this important intervention, “sexuality” came to be seen as a separate axis of social analysis (along the lines of “race” and “class”), one most suitably articulated and examined, according to Sedgwick, “from the relatively decentered perspective of modern gay and antihomophobic theory.” The disciplinary analogy most frequently cited to legitimate this move was the appropriation of the category of “gender” as the grounding concept of feminism. The effect of this maneuvering, of course, was a hotly debated analytic separation of the axes of gender and sexuality. Drawing on Gayle S. Rubin’s influential analysis in “Thinking Sex,” Sedgwick posited her now infamous axiom 2: “The study of sexuality is not coextensive with the study of gender; correspondingly, antihomophobic inquiry is not coextensive with feminist inquiry” (27). Although this theoretical move is not without its problems, the at least partial analytic separation of gender and sexuality has opened up some profitable lines of inquiry for queer theory.

However, the time has come to make further refinements to our categories for analyzing sexuality, and the foregoing discussion of child sexuality offers some productive pointers. It is far from self-evident that the epistemological relations framing the representation and analysis of child sexuality in contemporary discourses are assimilable to the logic and dynamics of heteronormativity or homophobia, or even gender stratification. Unfortunately, the politico-discursive relations structuring the domain of sexuality all too frequently conform to heteronormative and homophobic imperatives. But in the feminist discourse of child sexual abuse
this is not necessarily so, and I suggest there is a productive lesson for queer theory concerning the relationship between the normative logic of age stratification and the logic of heteronormativity.

With regard to the recasting of childhood sexual behaviors as “play” and “experimentation,” it is certainly evident in the feminist discourse of child sexual abuse that such formulations naturalize childhood innocence and asexuality and, in so doing, reinscribe the adult-child opposition as a hierarchy and binary dynamic of mutually exclusive terms. However, this desexualization of childhood—and the erasure of child sexuality—is not necessarily heteronormative, even if cultural anxieties about children and sexuality were energized largely by what Pat Califia has called the “Great Kiddy-Porn Panic” of the late 1970s, with its homophobic association of gay sex with children.108 Nowhere have I found in this discourse a prioritization of heterosexuality and a marginalization or pathologization of homosexuality. (Nor have normative assumptions about gender represented the primary organizing perspective.) Neither have I found homophobic or heteronormative conclusions to be dictated by the epistemological terms of the linear and sequential model of sexuality. The primary concern for feminists working in the area of child sexual abuse has been to ensure, not that a homosexual identity is averted for children who have been “prematurely introduced into adult sexuality,” or that only the gendered construction of sexualities ought to be under critical scrutiny, but that a child’s (potential) sexuality is free to emerge uncorrupted by any adult—male or female—(sexual) influence or intervention. One can legitimately subscribe to the theory of sequential and distinct stages of sexual development without assuming either a heterosexual or a homosexual identity as the normative outcome. Therefore, while this model is indeed normative in its instantiation of sexuality as the dividing line between childhood and adulthood, it is not necessarily heteronormative.

This suggests to me that, to keep alive one of the more expansive goals of queer theory, best articulated by Warner—that queer represents a “thorough resistance to regimes of the normal”109—it might be well to initiate a partial analytic separation not just of gender and sexuality but also of age. Insisting on a degree of analytic separation for these categories need not entail, however, that each is deemed the “proper object” of a particular disciplinary formation, such as gender as the foundational category of feminism and sexuality as that of gay/lesbian/queer studies, as much feminist critique lamented in its reading of some of queer theory’s early pronouncements.110 In effecting a partial analytic division between gender and sexuality, on the one hand, and age, on the other, queer theory might instead live up to another of its early promises by interrogating and complicating not the hierarchical but the relational construction and mutual imbrication of both
the social axes of class, race, gender, and sexuality and such disciplinary fields as race, postcolonial, feminist, gender, and gay and lesbian studies, within which these categories are most clearly articulated and examined. Carving out a space for the theorization of age stratification as closely, and often inextricably, entangled in those more prominently analyzed social axes seems to me particularly useful not only for resisting and deconstructing problematic and normative assumptions about sexuality in general but also for realizing the queer (poststructuralist) task of scrutinizing relationality and interimplication. For only when age stratification is conceived of as a separate, albeit entwined, category of social analysis is it possible actually to grasp its relational constitution. Until this happens, the axis of age and analyses of the normative framing of child sexuality remain conflated with, or submerged in, models calibrated toward the examination of hetero/homosexual and male/female definition. Opening out such a space not wholly determined by the logic of heteronormativity or gender difference might enable us to interrogate the often neglected discursive and institutional formations that pivot on unexamined and sometimes oppressive age stratifications. Viewing age as an independent axis of analysis might also enhance our ability to expose the often inconsistent, uneven, and contradictory ways that normative age stratifications are applied across the social and discursive field.

A queer theory of age stratification would insist not on upholding arbitrary distinctions between linear and chronological stages of individual development but on subjecting these distinctions, and the sociopolitical, legal, and institutional formations that are both their cause and their effect, to much-needed critical scrutiny. This scrutiny would entail a thorough reexamination of concepts such as knowledge, consent, and power as they have been articulated through the linear and sequential logic of age stratification. How, for instance, does the social axis of age inform our understanding of power and knowledge relations? How are age-stratified notions of subjectivity constituted through the power-knowledge nexus? What is the relationship between consent, power, and age-stratified concepts of subject formation? To engage these kinds of questions, we ought to follow psychoanalytic and poststructuralist insights and examine child, adolescent, and adult subjectivities and sexualities not as fields of autonomous meaning but as mutually constitutive domains of meaning, both experientially and epistemologically, spatially and temporally. Only then will it be possible to begin to theorize the inevitably contiguous relations structuring age—and gender, sexuality, and other factors—and thus attend to the fluid and overlapping boundaries assumed to demarcate the categories of childhood, adolescence, and adulthood. In a contemporary context of escalating anxiety and panic surrounding pedophilia and child
sexual abuse, it is increasingly difficult, and perhaps for this reason all the more imperative, for queer studies to problematize the cultural and relational construction of age, child sexuality, and subjectivity.

Notes


2. Gordon notes how “radical feminist consciousness pulled incest [and child sexual abuse more generally] out of the closet” (“Politics of Child Sexual Abuse,” 56). There are, of course, multiple feminist positions regarding child sexual abuse and child sexuality. In this essay, when I speak of the “feminist discourse of child sexual abuse,” I refer to that loose assemblage of feminist psychologists, social workers, sociologists, and other health care professionals in the area of child sexual abuse whose discursive fields are united around a radical feminist–inflected model of power and consent. In this model, feminist assumptions join forces with the conventional liberal state position in what has become the hegemonic cultural perspective, in which children are incapable of giving informed consent to sex until certain arbitrarily set ages (usually between sixteen and eighteen). For an analysis of radical feminist and antipornography feminist assumptions regarding child sexuality and intergenerational sex see Pat Califia, “The Aftermath of the Great Kiddy-Porn Panic of ’77,” in Public Sex: The Culture of Radical Sex (San Francisco: Cleis, 1994), 53–70. For alternative feminist readings of the interlocking issues of child sexuality and child sexual abuse see Gayle S. Rubin, “Thinking Sex: Notes for a Radical Theory of the Politics of Sexuality,” in The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader, ed. Henry Abelove, Michèle Aina Barale, and David M. Halperin (New York: Routledge, 1993), 3–44.


23. See Jenkins, Moral Panic, 156–63; Rush, Best Kept Secret, 187–90.


25. Quoted in Rush, Best Kept Secret, 188–89.


31. While it is beyond the scope of this essay to engage in a rigorous deconstruction of the notions of power, coercion, agency, and freedom that are found in the discourse of child sexual abuse, it is that discourse’s reliance on these concepts that enables its own deconstruction.

32. With the former phrase Finkelhor is actually referring to sexual relationships between therapists and their clients, not between adults and children. However, he regards this example as analogous to the adult-child sexual encounter: “There may be many instances where patients benefit from sex with their therapist. But the argument that such sex is wrong does not hinge on the positive or negative outcome. Rather, it lies in the fundamental asymmetry of the relationship. A patient, I would argue, cannot freely consent to have sex with a therapist” (“What’s Wrong with Sex?” 695).


34. Herman and Hirschman, “Father-Daughter Incest,” 751, 748.


38. For an excellent analysis of the rhetoric of power in relation to child sexuality and

39. The DSM-IV: Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, 4th ed. (Washington, DC: American Psychiatric Association, 1994), 528, defines pedophilia as “recurrent, intense sexually arousing fantasies, sexual urges, or behaviors involving sexual activity with a prepubescent child or children (generally age 13 years or younger).” The pedophile must be at least sixteen and at least five years older than the child.

40. See Herman and Hirschman, Father-Daughter Incest, 27; and Finkelhor, “What’s Wrong with Sex?” 695.

41. Finkelhor, “What’s Wrong with Sex?” 696.

42. Burgess and Groth, “Sexual Victimization of Children,” 79.

43. Summit, “Child Sexual Abuse,” 182.

44. Herman and Hirschman, Father-Daughter Incest, 206. Finkelhor at least concedes that “implicit coercion is present in many, if not most, sexual encounters in our society.” However, by relying on a carelessly examined notion of “free will,” and by making a spurious distinction between coercion and power, he reaches the same conclusion, namely, that where there is an “inherent power differential,” the sexual encounter is wrong (“What’s Wrong with Sex?” 696).

45. This radical feminist theorizing reaches its apotheosis in the work of Sheila Jeffreys, Anticlimax: A Feminist Perspective on the Sexual Revolution (London: Women’s, 1990). It is far from obvious what, if anything, “equality,” “knowledge,” and “consent” have to do with our desire for sex or with the pleasure of sex. For this point I am grateful to an anonymous GLQ reader.

46. The problem is that too many feminist theorists working in the area of child sexual abuse erroneously assume that because adults are usually physically stronger than children, they possess power and children lack it. This is a simplistic notion of power, which Foucault rightly subjected to serious critique in The History of Sexuality, trans. Robert Hurley, vol. 1 (New York: Vintage, 1980). That children exercise power in myriad subtle ways in their relationships with their parents and other adults is glaringly apparent to anyone who observes the interactions between children and adults, and the same has been demonstrated in psychoanalytic, psychiatric, and psychological research with children and adults for nearly a century. Further, one consistent finding of research on victims of child sexual abuse who were not physically forced into submission is that often they felt a sense of power in the encounter. Although some might argue that this response is merely a “defense against the child’s feelings of utter helplessness” (Herman and Hirschman, “Father-Daughter Incest,” 751), such a conclusion warrants extreme caution, not to mention more sophisticated analyses of power. I should also point out that no two adults are in a relation of equivalence with respect to power.

48. In fact, this is true of relations, sexual or otherwise, between any two subjects.


50. Terry Leahy argues that to “separate sexual contacts from other child/adult interactions a missing premise must be supplied that shows that sex is unlike other forms of interaction between adults and children and that this difference implies that differences of power and knowledge make interaction evil in the case of sex while in other cases adult/child interactions can be beneficial” (“Sex and the Age of Consent: The Ethical Issues,” *Social Analysis* 39 [1996]: 30).


54. A common finding of research on child sexuality is that it scarcely differs from adult sexuality. In a footnote appended to “Infantile Sexuality” in 1920, Freud argues that “there is, of course, no need to expect that anatomical growth and psychical development must be exactly simultaneous” (*Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality, and Other Works*, ed. Angela Richards, trans. James Strachey, Pelican Freud Library [hereafter PFL], 7 [Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1977], 93). Moreover, as he states in “The Sexual Enlightenment of Children” (1907), “except for his reproductive power, a child has a fully developed capacity for love long before puberty; and it may be asserted that the ‘mystery-making’ [i.e., lack of information and education] merely prevents him from being able to gain an intellectual grasp of activities for which he is psychically prepared and physically adjusted” (PFL, 7:176). After summarizing more recent research on child sexuality, Constantine argues that “nothing in the preceding summary supports the notion that child sexuality is in any fundamental way different from adult sexuality” (“Child Sexuality,” 61). Ronald Goldman and Juliet Goldman also claim that the “evidence is that earlier experience and understanding of sexuality [are] well within the moral competence of children” (*Show Me Yours: Understanding Children’s Sexuality* [Ringwood: Penguin, 1988], 226).

55. With regard to intergenerational sex, Kincaid says that the “question is not the redistribution of power but its adequacy in the first place, its limitations as a tool for understanding and for living” (*Child-Loving*, 25).

56. Finkelhor, “What’s Wrong with Sex?” 696.

57. Herman and Hirschman, *Father-Daughter Incest*, 42.

59. See also Rush, *Best Kept Secret*, 149.


61. In an influential book Susan Forward and Craig Buck appear to rely heavily on the Freudian theory of infantile sexuality. Despite arguing that “incestuous desires are at the core of human psychology,” however, they downplay the inevitable and mutually constituting relationship between child and adult sexualities: “Oedipal desires are symbolic emotional desires and indistinct physical urges, rather than specific incestuous scenarios. The very young child does not specifically want to have intercourse with his mother. He wants her undivided attention; he wants to possess her; he wants her to do the things that give him pleasure and that arouse him. If he were older these desires would be sexual urges, but in his infancy and early childhood they are unfocused” (*Betrayal of Innocence: Incest and Its Devastation* [New York: Penguin, 1981], 7). Even if this conjecture is true, it fails to explain how such supposedly unfocused desires work to constitute adult sexuality. It is through the retranscription of these desires—that is, through infantile sexuality—that adult sexuality is formed. The two cannot be separated.

62. For instance, it is rare for a child to be described as gay or lesbian, even in biologically deterministic discourses. For an excellent analysis of the temporal logic through which adolescence is typically and retrospectively narrativized in relation to adult sexuality see Angus Gordon, “Turning Back: Adolescence, Narrative, and Queer Theory,” *GLQ* 5 (1999): 1–24.


64. Paul Okami, “‘Child Perpetrators of Sexual Abuse’: The Emergence of a Problematic Deviant Category,” *Journal of Sex Research* 29 (1992): 114. In the child sex abuser literature, normative child sexuality is poorly defined and often construed as “sex play.” Again, this reflects the increasing desexualization of childhood. As Cantwell reveals: “It is not clear to what extent sexual play among children is normal. Normal might be better defined but includes ‘looking,’ curiosity about another child’s genitalia with mutual undressing. However, oral-genital contact and penetration of the vaginal/anal opening with fingers or objects is probably abnormal” (“Child Sexual Abuse,” 581).


71. Freud, “Infantile Sexuality,” in PFL, 7:108; Sigmund Freud, *An Outline of Psycho-analysis*, ed. and trans. James Strachey (London: Hogarth, 1940), 44. Jean Laplanche and J.-B. Pontalis argue that Freud not only did not give up the seduction thesis but forever sought a material basis for it: “Freud could never resign himself to treating phantasy as the pure and simple outgrowth of the spontaneous sexual life of the child. He is forever searching, behind the phantasy, for whatever has founded it in its reality: perceived evidence of the primal scene . . . ; the seduction of the infant by its mother . . . ; and, even more fundamentally, the notion that phantasies are based in the last reckoning on ‘primal phantasies’—on a mnemonic residue transmitted from actual experiences in the history of the human species. . . . quite obviously, the first stage—the stage of the scene of seduction—simply must be founded in something more real than the subject’s imaginings alone” (*The Language of Psycho-analysis*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith [New York: Norton, 1973], 406–7).


73. Sigmund Freud, “Female Sexuality” (1931), in PFL, 7:379.


78. Herman and Hirschman, “Father-Daughter Incest,” 737.

79. Summit, “Child Sexual Abuse.”


84. The therapeutic discourse of child sexual abuse tends problematically to conflate, or to use as if interchangeable, the concepts of causation and responsibility. Saying that a child made decisions that contributed to the complex causal dynamics of an abusive situation is not the same as saying that the child was responsible for that abuse.

85. Whether from a poststructuralist or a psychoanalytic (or a poststructuralist psychoanalytic) position, reality and fantasy are two sides of the same coin of human perception.

86. Herman and Hirschman, “Father-Daughter Incest,” 751.

87. Wieland, Techniques, 27. Herman and Hirschman argue that a child’s “sense of malignant power can be understood to have arisen as a defense against the child’s feelings of utter helplessness” (“Father-Daughter Incest,” 751).


94. For a discussion of sex education’s avoidance of the question of pleasure in relation to the sexual activity of youth see Levine, Harmful to Minors, 90–116.

95. See Ponton, Sex Lives. With the publication of Pleasure and Danger: Exploring Female Sexuality, ed. Carole S. Vance (Boston: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1984), prosex feminists made an important intervention into American discourses of sexuality at a time when they were being influentially shaped by radical feminist theories. Aiming to offer a more balanced picture of female sexuality than the radical feminist one, in which heterosexuality was often portrayed as inherently patriarchal and thus “dangerous” to and oppressive of women, prosex feminists insisted on a focus not only on sexuality and danger but also on sexuality and pleasure. In my view, representing sexuality, if only in part, through the concept of danger all too often reinforces moralistic and normative discourses of good and bad sex. It might be more productive to view sexuality and pleasure against the backdrop of risk.


100. Although the Freudian model of sexuality incorporated elements of linear and sequential logic, it problematized them with its emphasis on such concepts as deferred action, repetition compulsion, and unconscious fantasies.


103. A queer psychoanalytic theory might also begin to theorize child sexuality by rethinking Freud’s notion of polymorphous perversity through the analytic axis of age. In this way queer theory might begin to give greater attention to the ways that sexual object choice is determined not only or primarily by gender but also by age.


107. In “Thinking Sex” Rubin argued that “gender affects the operation of the sexual system, and the sexual system has had gender-specific manifestations. But although sex and gender are related, they are not the same thing, and they form the basis of two distinct arenas of social practice. . . . I am now arguing that it is essential to separate gender and sexuality analytically to reflect more accurately their separate social existence” (33).


112. In “Thinking Sex” Rubin argues for a radical theory of the politics of sexuality that will attend to the issues of child sexuality and intergenerational sex. She explains our culture’s abhorrence of intergenerational sex as the result of a sex-negative and normative framework that views almost all forms of sexuality within a hierarchy of acceptability. At the top is married, monogamous, reproductive, heterosexual sex, with other sexual variations plotted down the hierarchy. There are at least two problems with this model. First, there is the very concept of a hierarchy. While certain forms of heterosexuality are indeed often valued above all other variations of sexuality, this has not been the case in all texts, discourses, or historical periods. To be fair, Rubin does identify the idea of social and political struggles over “where to draw the line” as a crucial factor in the different social and historical forms that the hierarchy takes (14). However, the model must be more complex than a hierarchy of “good versus bad sex,” with which it is difficult to analyze the intermingling, or relational, aspects of “good” and “bad.” This hierarchy also does not take into account other factors that may condition or intersect with sex and sexuality or that provide the context for sexual encounters. How, for example, would this model account for ideas such as love, truth, and honesty? Does married, monogamous, heterosexual sex in which both partners secretly fantasize about a family friend rate above monogamous, homosexual sex? Is married, monogamous, heterosexual sex without love better than loving, monogamous homosexual sex? Is married, monogamous, heterosexual sex between a seventy-year-old man and an eighteen-year-old girl of greater or lesser value than consenting sadomasochistic sex? The very fact that battles over “where to draw the line” mean that the line itself moves suggests that a hierarchy is never simply a hierarchy. It is such only by virtue of the horizontal relations established in it. This kind of hierarchy is not a useful way of understanding the range of factors responsible for our culture’s resistance both to child sexuality and to intergenerational sex. Second, the sex hierarchy model has a built-in bias toward seeing the logic of heteronormativity as determining the scale of values. Again, when child sexuality is at stake, often the issue of hetero- or homosexuality is secondary, if not irrelevant, to the framing of value.

113. I scarcely need to point out how an individual can be simultaneously deemed a child in one discursive regime and an adult in another.