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Things to Do with Your Imaginary Child

—Steven Bruhm

Abstract: *This essay considers texts in which adults consciously invent children whom they represent to the world as "real," children who can then investigate the limits that their inventors may test in other people. Drawing on clinical psychological theories of children's imaginary playmates—and the value that psychologists ascribe to the juvenile practice of inventing imaginary children—I consider what the adult invention of a child might suggest about the "uses" of children more generally. Texts under consideration are Edward Albee's* Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, Armistead Maupin's* The Night Listener*, and Lorrie Moore's* Anagrams.

Keywords: *imaginary friends; imaginary child; ethics*

There are many treacherous patches on the road from childhood to adulthood. One of the slipperiest appears in the area of the imaginary companion: who exactly can have one, when, and why? As early as 1934, psychologist Margaret Svendsen asserted, with no supporting evidence, that while imaginary companions were ubiquitous and normal among children, their invention by adults signalled the probability of psychopathology. As the century moved on, though, theorists such as Marjorie Taylor began to cite historical luminaries including Niccolo Machiavelli, Jean-Paul Sartre, Alice Walker, and even Quentin Tarantino to illustrate how imaginary companions could be productive political interlocutors, homegrown psychotherapists, or artistic muses (Taylor 149); but even those adults, Taylor suggests, may suffer from illness or trauma: "there is often a reported history of physical or sexual abuse and psychological problems" (147). Psychologists Espen Klausen and Richard H. Passman concur: they point to studies on imaginary companions of adults and older adults as evidence of

"coping with psychopathology or with life traumas such as dementia . . . , schizophrenia . . . , and childhood abuse" (357). Nor would popular culture disagree, at least with the pathology part: nothing says "madness" in a fictional character like the presence of another that only she or he can see, talk to, sleep with, or fight. Whether it is Jimmy Stewart's Elwood P. Dowd with his imaginary rabbit friend Harvey, or *Fight Club*'s narrator with his Tyler Durden, or *Dexter*'s murderous Travis Marshall, whose chief inspiration, Professor Gellar, turns out to be a corpse in a freezer and not a living companion at all, our culture remains unsure of the value of imaginary companions in adults. Many children—perhaps 65% of them—invent a friend (Klausen and Passman 349),[1] but adults who do so are considered to exhibit symptoms of psychosis.

Any ambivalence regarding the status of adults' imaginary companions seems to become wholesale dismissal when the imaginary companion is a child—that is, a child who is the imagined offspring of the adult in question. While much has been written on the possible benefits of imaginary companions for children, the imaginary child's function for the adult has usually been examined only in the broadest psychopathologizing terms. Robert J. and Roxane Head Dinkin attempt a more sympathetic reading in their book, *Infertility and the Creative Spirit*, pointing out that a number of famous people have had imaginary children: Ella Wheeler Wilcox, Katherine Mansfield, and Theodor Geisel/Dr. Seuss, who, with his wife Helen, imaginatively parented a daughter named Chrysanthemum Pearl. Such authors cannot be considered damaged or dysfunctional, but their imaginary children reveal, for the Dinkins, the same impulse to fantasy that subtends their creators' fictions on a larger scale. Thus, while the inventors are to be admired, they are also to be pitied: they hold onto a fantasy child as a replacement for a child of flesh and blood.[2] So too for creative writer and high-school teacher Belle Boggs, for whom the imaginary parent in fiction also partakes of pitiable delusion. Boggs, who habitually takes her classes to the Christmas performances of *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* (one of those ur-texts of adults with an imaginary child), decries the cruelty she is sure her pupils absorb along with the cultural prejudice about childlessness that Albee's play makes clear:

> I realize that [my students] . . . must also recognize, from the literature we've read together, a familiar idea within this story of a childless, miserable couple: failing to have children has a socially distorting, morally corrosive effect on people's lives, especially on the lives of women. (122)

The corrosive effect that most worries Boggs is that George and Martha "represent an idea about what the rest of a childless marriage looks like [; theirs is] the subversion of the traditional heterosexual relationship" (123), a relationship that presumably remains unsubverted for couples who have children. As she reflects on her

own experience as a woman biologically unable to have a child, she voices her disillusionment at the failed redemptive project of literature:

> We count on literature to prepare us, to console us, but I am shocked by how little consolation there is for the infertile, or even for those who are childless by choice and trying to live in a world that is largely fertile and family-driven. (126)

As the very terms "infertile" and "childless" suggest, Boggs reads the characters in such narratives as defined primarily by what they lack—a reason other theorists suggest the less pejorative term "child-free" (Dinkin and Dinkin 10).[3] Her reading thus participates in the widespread cultural assumption I want to examine here—that imaginary children must always and only be read as symptoms of a pathology (or at least a deep sadness), that they are reaction formations of a delusional or damaged actor who has failed to comply with the dictates of social and personal reproduction.

Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?, with its putatively damaged George and Martha and their imaginary offspring, Sonny Jim, is the perfect place to initiate a set of questions that current theory does not answer, or that answers all too clearly with its resounding silence. Psychological truisms aside, we need to ask what uses *fiction* might make of the imaginary child. What purchase might narrative offer on the multiple significations of producing an imaginary child? How might these imagined or invented children comment on the normalized demands of sexual reproduction and parenting in a post-second-wave-feminist and gay-liberated culture that has suggested our lives could be lived otherwise? Indeed, what is the theorizable difference between a "real" child and an "imaginary" one? And what happens in the reading experience when we realize that the child who has been central to a story is really a fabrication or a lie, diegetically speaking? What does this realization of ghostliness tell us about parental and imaginative productions over and against the normative field of re-production? How does one's imaginary child differ from the child one might have had, or from the child one has already had (and perhaps has lost), or the child one might never want to have, or never want to have had? In its broadest terms, my question is this: what does the imaginary child do, what can it be made to do, how is it deployed in the narratives in which it appears?

I offer no definitive answer to these questions, but rather want to posit a loosely connected catalogue of things to do with one's imaginary child, a catalogue that I hope does justice to the strangeness of the figures in my archive. I have already mentioned *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*: this play seems to offer the most salient representation of—and perhaps resistance to—the cultural truth that imaginary children are produced from the fertile admixture of pathology and pathos. It is also one of the earliest texts to figure a child whose ontological status

The seemingly pathetic deployment of an imaginary child in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* becomes much more sinister in Armistead Maupin's millennial novel, *The Night Listener*.

comes to be exposed as illusory or mendacious.[4] Written in 1962, *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* introduces us (kind of) to Sonny Jim, whom George and Martha deploy as the imaginary son against their hapless and unsuspecting young guests, Nick and Honey, who have dropped in after a party to continue the late-night merrymaking. As the play unfolds, we learn that Jim is imaginary, a fantasy that George and Martha have shared privately for years. Introduced into the conversation against George's wishes, Jim is then "killed off" by George—against Martha's wishes—in a seeming attack on both his wife and his guests, as well as on Jim himself. As Belle Boggs's reading has made clear, the imaginary child in this play enacts the dysfunctions of an anguished and hopeless George and Martha, and thus of (hetero)sexuality in America, as this toxic "family" destroys any illusions Nick and Honey might have about their own chances at reproductive happiness.

The seemingly pathetic deployment of an imaginary child in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* becomes much more sinister in Armistead Maupin's millennial novel, *The Night Listener*. This novel, based on the "true story" of the author's own experiences, recounts the friendship between gay writer-protagonist Gabriel Noone and the HIV-infected sexual-abuse sufferer Pete Lomax, a thirteen-year-old boy whose memoir Gabriel has read with great engagement, and who contacts Gabriel to establish a long-term intimate relationship over the telephone. As it turns out, Pete is a fabrication of Donna Lomax, the woman who claims to have rescued him from his abusive biological parents and the child-pornography ring into which they had sold him. All of this is Armistead Maupin's rewriting of an experience he had with one Anthony Godby Johnson, whose memoir, *A Rock and a Hard Place: One Boy's Triumphant Story*,

Maupin had read and endorsed during the AIDS crisis. As is now well documented, Maupin spent six years in a telephone-only relationship with Johnson and his adoptive mother, Vicki, during which it became clear that Anthony did not actually exist; he was a hoax, a fabrication on the part of Vicki, who had been "doing" his voice all along. Like Sonny Jim of *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, Pete/Anthony was, it seems, a weapon for manipulating, and perhaps humiliating, the gullible innocent who receives his story and who, in Gabriel Noone's case, wants to turn that story into a public broadcast. (This is exactly what Armistead Maupin does by writing *The Night Listener*.) But, to complicate matters even further, Gabriel keeps his faith in Pete long after he has cause to believe the child is an invention. Like Maupin himself, Gabriel has been plagued by writer's block, and by becoming a receptacle for this story of an imaginary child, Noone/Maupin rediscovers his own creative capabilities. Surrogate fathers to imaginary sons, these men become impregnated with a narrative. Donna and Vicki may be written off as mad, but their imaginary children give impotent authors an urgent story to tell.

The idea of imaginary children as the fodder for procreative activity also underlies Lorrie Moore's 1986 novel, *Anagrams*, my third example. *Anagrams* features the central character Benna Carpenter, whose "story" is told across five distinct yet interrelated narratives (one per chapter). Benna and her companions share little in common with their representations in the other chapters apart from a name and loose occupational affiliation. The final and longest chapter, "The Nun of That," introduces us to Benna's "daughter," Georgianne, whose name is an amalgam of those of Benna's dead husband, George, and a favourite niece, Annie (with an allusion to the famous Renoir painting "Madame Georges Charpentier and Her Children," a print of which hangs on the wall of Benna's apartment). Like Albee's Sonny Jim, Georgianne is a private invention meant chiefly for her parent's personal enjoyment; but unlike George and Martha, or Donna Lomax, for that matter, Benna has no intention of deploying her as a weapon against others: she only accidentally lets slip the "existence" of Georgianne as she talks to her friend Gerard near the end of the novel. Moreover, unlike Sonny and Pete, who are only gradually exposed as fabrications, Georgianne's game is exposed from the moment we meet her: "My imaginary daughter, Georgianne Michelle Carpenter, is six and will soon be in the first grade" (65). Thus, we know from the beginning of "The Nun of That" that Georgianne is imaginary, even though the rest of the story invites us, through a wealth of convincing details, to forget this revelation and believe in her existence. And with the kind of pathologizing we have already seen in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* and *The Night Listener*, the spectre of psychosis is never far away from Benna and her imaginary child: *Anagrams* tracks obliquely the incipient dissolution of Benna's mind, Georgianne representing both her safe harbour and the stormiest of her emotional seas. In projecting a dead

husband and estranged niece into an imaginary daughter, Benna makes us fear for her mental health.

Thing One to Do with Your Imaginary Child: Hold the Mirror Up to Nurture

If narratives of the imaginary child confirm the psychological theory that their inventors are delusional (or at least dangerously engaged in wish fulfillment), they also offer useful interventions in a culture that considers child-bearing the ticket to mental health and full citizenship. Psychoanalytic critic Walter Davis in his reading of *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* may offer the first working hypothesis for the imaginary child's utility:

> A child for any couple holds the irresistible appeal of magical thinking. By making the child imaginary, Albee is able to highlight the psychological functions actual children perform. A child conceived to heal a couple becomes the psyche produced by the parents to project their conflicts . . . . The story of the imaginary child is perhaps the true story of every real child—the story of the binds the child's psyche finds itself in thanks to the desires of the parents. (227)

For Davis, *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* stages the imaginary child as a conflict between Martha's desire for a libidinally rich domestic economy that includes her husband, her father, her self, and their "son"; Jim exists for her as the guarantor of lively (even if illusory) familial relations. For George, Jim's non-existence puts death—and the death-drive—at the heart of the family: Jim, and the father's eventually killing him off, becomes the tool by which domestic relations are stripped of their illusions. The play's real argument, Davis asserts, is that in masking over death, families merely stage and project it. From this Lacanian thesis that the Real destroys the fabric of the familial imaginary comes Davis's universalizing conclusion:

> The bitter knowledge contained in the psychoanalytic recognition that parents act out and reproduce their sexual conflicts in and through their relationship to the child is that we are all, in effect, fantasy children. The real child is as absent as the fantasy child, since to be a child is to be the clash and paralysis of parental projections. (235)

Sonny Jim, Pete Lomax, Georgianne Carpenter, you and I: all are receptacles for the private and communal conflicts raging inside our creators; all are mere tools in the game of another's Oedipal conflict. Thus, Albee provides us with Thing 1.1 to Do with Your Imaginary Child: use it to critique the normative in which you do not or prefer not to take part. Use it, then, as Lee Edelman does: as a fantasmatic receptacle that is by definition doomed to failure, exposing the individual's impossible desire for fulfillment and self-presence.[5]

Suggesting that children are a futile panacea for

a marital relationship that can never be more than a negotiation of incompatible needs, Albee operates with surgical precision to make Sonny Jim the always-already dissolved suture that would repair George and Martha's marriage. The final act of the play demonstrates how George can kill off Sonny Jim as a means of destroying Martha's belief in the illusion of familial happiness. But that is not all Albee and Sonny Jim are up to in this play. George and Martha may have wanted desperately a child they could create only imaginatively, but Albee also uses Sonny to expose a dynamic beyond George and Martha, in the younger, fresher generation represented by Nick and Honey. A would-be but "failed" and "childless" mother, Honey has had, in the past, a hysterical or false pregnancy (an imaginary child of another sort). "She blew up," says Nick, "and then she went down," to which George replies, "And while she was up, you married her" (94). Following from this failed attempt, Honey declares emphatically, "I DON'T WANT . . . ANY . . . CHILDREN. . . . I'm afraid! I don't want to be hurt. . . . PLEASE!" (176). A reasonable enough position, but Albee does not leave it there. When Honey hears Martha's bucolic rendition of her own life-with-child (that is, life-with-imaginary-child, although Honey does not know that yet), when she hears Martha croon, "It was true! Beautiful; wise; perfect" (222), Honey surprisingly flip-flops:

> HONEY: (Suddenly; almost tearfully) I want a child.
> NICK: Honey. . . .
> HONEY: (More forcefully) I want a child!
> GEORGE: On principle?
> HONEY: (In tears) I want a child. I want a baby. (222-23)

Moving beyond George and Martha's private psychodrama, Albee uses the imaginary child to consider sexual procreation at a more public site. Honey reveals here the dynamic familiar to readers of René Girard: our most profound emotional investments are not "authentically" our own, Girard suggests, as much as they are part of an imitative desire.[6] Honey seems to want a child because an imaginary one has been presented to her as the key to the fulfillment she can otherwise never enjoy, despite her fears about the endeavour. Honey wants less to reproduce than she wants to re-reproduce—to re-reproduce her own imaginary foetus, to re-reproduce Martha's (illusory) child and its bliss, to re-reproduce the very event that may have unglued her relationship to her husband Nick in the first place, in the sense that her false pregnancy forced him to marry her. This is the "principle" that George calls her on in the exchange. George and Martha's imaginary child in the fictional sense (they *know* that Jim is not real, even though they behave as if he were) is Honey's imaginary child in the Lacanian sense: it is what raises the imaginary child (in lower case) as fictive game to the Imaginary Child (in caps) that Honey seems truly to believe will guarantee her meaning and fulfillment in the world. The Imaginary Child is Edward Albee's brutal indictment of

the normative will to reproduce that he sees operating in his culture, an indictment that aligns with a larger queer politics that refuses reproduction as the privileged marker of cultural belonging.

If you hear redundancy in the re-reproduction that Honey appears to desire, that is because the redundancy is inscribed in the very word "reproduction." As the *Oxford English Dictionary* tells us, "reproduce" means "to produce again, . . . to bring forth again, . . . to present again" (as if it somehow did not work the first time). Moreover, there is in the etymology of "reproduce" no innate difference in the meanings of "produce" and "reproduce" other than for the "re" to suggest that it be done again, a second or further time, supplementally—but never originally or authentically. Similarly, the original Latin root of "produce"—*prōdūcere*—suggests not the making of something new but the changing of something that already exists: stretching it out, presenting it. The root "duct"—as in educe, education, etc.—means to lead or draw out something that is thought already to exist, again confirming the sense not of the new or other, but of a modification of what already exists. (The "re" merely suggests the doing it again, not doing it differently.) The "pro" in "procreate" has the same grammatical re-doubling, the same fold: like "re," "pro" retains the somewhat redundant sense from Latin, so that "create" and "procreate" mean much the same thing.[7] Better, then, to write the progenitors of Imaginary Children as ~~re~~producing, as ~~pro~~creating, where the cancelled prefixes "re" and "pro" gesture both to the normative presence of the sexual and to the refusal of normativity through the will of a resistant imagination, a recalcitrant determination not to participate in the sexual mode of productivity.

If *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* delineates a brutal mechanics of parenthood as a kind of redundant re-reproduction of cultural fantasies, *The Night Listener*'s wheels turn less smoothly. In contrast to Albee's George and Martha, who wanted children but could not have them, neither Donna Lomax nor Gabriel Noone ever wanted kids to begin with. What exactly Donna's motives might be for inventing a child are never really clear—and it is significant, I think, that we never know—but Maupin does not stint on possible diagnoses: schizophrenia, multiple personality disorder, necrophilia (!), Munchausen by proxy, even the possibility that Donna is the imaginary creation and Pete is the real person. (No one entertains this theory for long.) But if the roots of imaginary parenting remain enigmatic where Donna is concerned, the topic interests Gabriel very much. He states early on and with great certainty, "Frankly, I've never wanted a kid. Never once believed that nature's whim [his homosexuality] had robbed me of my manly destiny" (1). Yet, as Davis argues of Sonny Jim in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, Pete as Imaginary Child obviously gives Gabriel something that "real" children are supposed to provide. Even before denying that Pete might impugn his homosexual credentials, Gabriel says:

> I know how it sounds when I call him my son. There's something a little precious about it, a little too wishful to be taken seriously. . . . Pete and I were an accident, pure and simple, a collision of kindred spirits that had nothing to do with parental urges, latent or otherwise. That much I can tell you for sure.
>
> *Son* isn't the right word, of course.
>
> Just the only one big enough to describe what happened. (1)

The exhausted but necessary set of familial signifiers—"son" and "dad," "marriage" and "family"—are all that can be used by an exhausted but necessary community of queers in the midst of the AIDS crisis, the San Francisco of the 1990s. To this community Gabriel Noone, host author in the radio show *Noone at Night*, presents characters who are "a motley but lovable bunch, people caught in the supreme joke of modern life who were forced to survive by making families of their friends" (7). And into these "imaginary" or "nonce" families Pete can slide, filling a gap in relational need and creating a queer relational politics for the AIDS generation. As an imaginary child, Pete is less a replacement for reproductivity than he is a beloved and loving community member, an "outsider" and "honorary queer," as Gabriel calls him (129), a useful spur to political activism.

In a way that seems closed off to Albee's Honey, the child's *symbolic* status remains pointedly present to Gabriel Noone. If official narratives of parenting always put the child's needs in front of the parents, Noone can identify such narratives as cant and lay bare his own motives. Early in the relationship, when he still assumes Pete to be a real, living child, he confesses: "Our visits on the phone had become almost nightly now, which spoke far less to my charity

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than to my need. He was the perfect listener, the only confidant with whom I felt utterly secure" (74). This "value of a generous listener" (108)—let us call this Thing 1.2 to Do with Your Imaginary Child—continues to seduce Gabriel well after he comes to suspect that Pete is a fraud, but the novel makes clear that the possible gullibility is worth the ticket: the *child* might be fraudulent but the attractiveness of feeling needed is not. Gabriel asserts at one point: "If there's even the slightest chance he exists, I wouldn't dream of creating doubts about him. He's suffered too much already. He had a hard enough time just finding his voice" (146). Such begging the question has the air of narcissistic self-delusion—which is certainly how Gabriel's ex-lover Jess wants him to see it—but it is more than that. If Gabriel needs a "son" to whom he can attend—and who can attend to him—it is because he is trying to rewrite the failed father-son dyad between himself and his homophobic Republican father, from whom he gets his name. "Pete" might be dangerous for being imaginary, but he is also a sidestep from the kind of paternal lineage that paralyzes all gay men in the novel. (Jess, we learn heavy-handedly, has also been traumatized by *his* father.) Pete "works" not in spite of being imaginary but *because* he is imaginary; Gabriel's relationship to him allows for a discursive candour and proximity that biological lineage does not permit, at least in Maupin's world. *The Night Listener* records the possible dangers of narcissistic self-replication in child-bearing, a danger at the heart of Albee's *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, but it also works to dislodge them. Thus, Thing 1.3 to Do with Your Imaginary Child: use it to repair—or at least to mitigate—the damage that real families might have inflicted.

This narcissistic dislocation, this cancelling of the "re" and the "pro" in reproduction and procreation, is part of the project of *Anagrams* as well. Like Donna and Gabriel, like Martha and (sometimes) George, Benna Carpenter enters fully into the fantasy of raising a child, but not before the earlier sections of the novel have had a lot to say about her investment in this role. In the first chapter-story of the novel, provocatively titled "Escape from the Invasion of the Love-Killers," Benna and her friend Gerard are discussing children and families. Gerard, who teaches aerobics to preschoolers for a living, trumpets the familiar line about the importance of family: "that it was only through children that one could connect with anything anymore, that in this life it was only through children that one came home, became a home, that one was no longer a visitor" (6). Like so many of Lorrie Moore's cynical, world-weary characters, Benna will have none of this "Shirley Temple movie" sentimentality (6). Being "a woman who said she had no desire to have children," Benna opines that "Once you've seen a child born you realize a baby's not much more than a reconstituted ham and cheese sandwich. Just a little anagram of you and what you've been eating for nine months" (6-7). And such anagrams, at least for Benna, are not even that, as she tells us in the passage that all of Moore's critics light upon as

the key to the misshapen, ill-fitting universe of Moore's women:

> There was a period where I kept trying to make anagrams out of words that weren't anagrams: *moonscape* and *menopause*; *gutless* and *guilts*; *lovesick* and *evil louse*. . . . I would scribble the words over and over again on a napkin, trying to make them fit—like a child dividing three into two, not able to make it go. (17)

The only anagram that really works is one devised by her friend Eleanor—*boredom* and *bedroom*—which delightedly captures Benna's deflation of the whole enterprise of dating, loving, and sexual reproduction. Babies for Benna are not the connection, the home, the identity that they are for the dewy-eyed Gerard: at best they are a processed sandwich, at worst a word game that will not come out right.

Informed as she is by the tenet of second-wave feminism that children wrench women from the workplace and into financial precarity, Benna answers Gerard's early hymn to children by saying, "maybe I'm just too exhausted from work" (7), and recalls the false pregnancy (echoes of Honey and Nick?) that presaged her divorce and husband's eventual death. From there she notes, "I got the house in outer suburbia and an imaginary ankle-biter" (75). In the second chapter-story, "Strings Too Short to Use," Benna terminates a pregnancy that had already cured her of "Career Women's Diseases" (21), a lump that had grown in her breast, she is told, because she had never been pregnant. But as with Gabriel Noone, the desire not to procreate is not the same as the desire not to engage, and to engage with someone who might fall under the catechrestic banner of "family." In "Strings Too Short to Use," Benna (who has switched places with the earlier version of Gerard and is teaching aerobics to seniors) observes:

> it was hard being close to these women who, I realized, had exactly what I wanted: grandchildren, stability, a post-menopausal grace, some mysterious, hard-won truce with men. They had, finally, the only thing anyone really wants in life: someone to hold your hand when you die. (27)

Grandchildren, we note, not children: for deathbed consolation Benna will have wanted the kind of parenting where you conveniently skip the part about birthing and primary caregiving. And this is a through-line in *Anagrams*: Gerard, we remember, was enamoured of children because he was looking after other people's (only in a later chapter does Gerard have a child of his own); parenting is fun if you are parenting someone else's kids. If some form of narcissism exists here, it is not the anagrammatic reflection of the self (we have already learned that anagrams don't work) or the brutal instrumentality of the child-as-weapon that animates

Albee's George or Donna Lomax. Nor is it the child-that-never-was (false pregnancies, unsympathetic tumours, the aborted foetus) that tortures Albee's Martha or Honey. Rather, Georgianne is to Benna as the imaginary children of Marjorie Taylor's celebrities were to them: an alternative rather than a replacement, what we might describe as a metonym rather than a metaphor, a playful production of language where the earnest re-production of self might have been deadly.

Playful production, rather than re-production, is key. When Benna lets slip to Gerard the existence of Georgianne, he replies,

> "You made her up? You made up an *imaginary* daughter?" "Of course not," I say. "What, you think I'm an idiot? I made up a *real* daughter. . . . I don't go around making up *imaginary* daughters." I pause. "That would get too abstract. Even for me." (201)

After this flash of verbal pleasure (a talent in all our imaginary parents, it seems), she adds, "It seemed one of the few decent ways to bring someone into the world" (201). Moore plays this commitment to reproduction earlier in the novel when she has Benna pun on the term "kidding": "kidding" is joking, Benna knows, but "kidding" is also having a child. The latter meaning of "kidding" is the earlier one—the *Oxford English Dictionary* places its first use, as child-bearing, in the fifteenth century. But the recent, nineteenth-century meaning, "To hoax, humbug; to joke with, tease," is the one we now most often use, and the one that most characterizes Lorrie Moore's literary style. Brought together in Benna's ~~pro~~creativity, kidding at kidding is the most decent form of ~~re~~production, a way of constructing a livable world where sexual re-productivity by no means recommends itself. Which brings us back to the other kids and their kidding parents: Sonny Jim and Pete may take us to the Real of human emptiness, but these imaginary children are also what can make life livable along the way (Thing 1.4 that the imaginary child can do in an otherwise non-nurturing world). That dialectic between illusory fulfillment and the sterile terrain of the Real was rife in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* of 1962, and it remains central to our thinking in the new millennium, at least in Queer Theory. As Lee Edelman has so forcefully and polemically argued, the "Child" can merely be a figurative prop for sustaining the illusion that personal and/or political fulfillment awaits us in the future, while more optimistic voices like Michael Snediker's or José Esteban Muñoz's counter that an optimistic desire for futurity is all that remains to us as politically engaged queers.[8] In holding the mirror up to nurture, the imaginary child is the figurative reflection that refuses to clarify itself for non-~~pro~~creative life.

Thing Two to Do with Your Imaginary Child: Deploy It as a Nonce Fiction

The kind of verbal acuity and playfulness I have just named in Benna Carpenter (George and Martha display it too, as does Pete Lomax) is not merely a charming character trait but a rich resource in their dealings with their children. If parenthood is anything, I hear, it is a constant verbal negotiation of one's own relationship to oneself as parent, to the child as individual other, to the world that both supports and polices the entire enterprise of child-reproduction—and ultimately, to the rich and treacherous project of defining the boundaries of your own sense of privacy in the context of someone else's. (Let us return to the social scientists for a moment and note that while the phenomenon of children having imaginary companions is ubiquitous, it is also geographically confined: in heavily populated countries such as India, children rarely have imaginary friends, which suggests that a certain amount of privacy and autonomy is necessary for children to generate imaginary playmates [Klausen and Passman 352].) What makes imaginary children remarkable, at least for my analysis, is that if there is no real child who is subject to the dictates of biology or material environment, if there is no actual person whose facts can be checked at some National Registry for Imperiled Children, then one can treat the imaginary child as a thought experiment, a narrative game in which she or he need adhere to no rules other than those defined by the teller's pleasure and the listener's gullibility . . . or perhaps the listener's need.

Embedded in this idea of imaginary children, then, is the idea of a certain kind of narrative freedom . . .

Embedded in this idea of imaginary children, then, is the idea of a certain kind of narrative freedom: their story can, but need not, have a beginning; it can, but need not, have an end; it can, but need not, align itself to the normative demands of growing up (whose queer resistances have been so beautifully theorized by Kathryn Bond Stockton

and Elizabeth Freeman); it need not follow the logics of maturing, although it might. And if no web-based fact checking is possible, then one can—indeed, one needs to—make up new stories, something we might call "nonce fictions," about the child as new and unexpected details are introduced. Thus, Thing 2.1 to Do with Your Imaginary Child: treat the exercise as a raconteur's theatre sport, where fictions can procreate new lives on the spot. Then, limn this narrative with some sense of the nonce as it came to us in Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's *Epistemology of the Closet* to name "the making and unmaking and *r*emaking and redissolution of hundreds of old and new categorical imaginings" (23) and the stories to which they give rise. In other words (and this is Thing 2.2 to Do), use your imaginary child to imagine children otherwise.

In the cultural contexts of both *The Night Listener* and *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, nonce narratives are inescapable—and sinister, probably for that very reason. Donna can easily exploit the nonce possibilities of Pete's health because, in the setting of the early 1990s, the relative newness of HIV belied diagnostic certainty: the unpredictability of AIDS, its apparently endless ability to elude the science attending to it, allows Donna to change Pete's medical status quickly and frequently, yet still with credibility.[9] Such quick-change truths also occupy the world of *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*—at least as far as George is concerned—as he belittles Nick's faith in biology (Nick is a scientist) in favour of his own profession of history. Human life, George asserts, is not a matter of test-tube knowability but rather of "glorious variety and unpredictability, . . . the surprise, the multiplexity" (67). George's human history is like Sonny Jim and Pete Lomax's personal ones: always nonce, always changing. And as such, these histories can be used to exploit hapless listeners. To the degree that nonce narratives of imaginary children are always deployed by a cryptic subject for a credulous other, they can exploit the potential to invade the other's privacy. They proceed from someone's unknowable motives to work inexorable effects on someone else's trust, generosity, or open sensibility.

But might the imaginary child's nonce-narrative status suggest more reparative, less caustic effects? It certainly does in *Anagrams*. Georgianne may be six years old when she is introduced to us, but we know there is no biological imperative for her to age; no scientific or chronological forces need intrude on those mercurial, surprising histories that Albee's George described. Because of this, Benna and Georgie can, at one moment, return to the comforting, reassuring, even Kristevan language of baby- and body-talk,[10] while at other moments Benna can imagine with Georgianne a certain timelessness, spacelessness, and placelessness that make fantasy function in productive and generative ways:

> Sometimes as I'm drifting toward sleep, in the beginnings of that dissolution, I wonder where I am, when this is, and realize that at these moments I could be anywhere, anytime, for all I know: eight and

> napping in the trailer . . . or thirteen at night clutching a pillow to my neck . . . or twenty-seven in the arms of my husband, or thirty-three next to my imaginary daughter; at every place in the whole spinning shape that is my life, when I am falling asleep, I am the same person, the identical awareness, the same fuzzball of mind, . . . the very same me . . . . Georgianne, too, perhaps, even when she's old, will be the same flanneled muffin as now, this snoring puff, this snoozy breath and heart always. (104-105)

In this passage, both Georgianne and Benna are diachronic constants, but given that Georgie, unlike Benna, need never be old, she is all the more tractable, all the more stable and dependable. Which is another thing about imaginary children: they are always pliable when you need them to be. And even when they are not—Georgianne runs away one evening, returning only when she is full of cookies from the lady down the street—even when they disobey, the rebellion that *your* psyche has staged for them is merely a safe(ish) exploration of your own encounters with loss. Ego boundaries stretch with the nonce, but they need never snap.

Such stretching without snapping characterizes Gabriel's relation to the nonce narrative as well. Without question, Gabriel and his readers find Donna's narrative inventions manipulative and exploitive: if there is any salvational reading for Donna, it is that she succeeds in getting a barren author to reproduce a story he was otherwise unable to bring forth. But in his own narrativizing project, Gabriel too finds the value of space cleared by nonce fictions. Immediately following Donna's (unverifiable) announcement that Pete has died, Gabriel is summoned home to South Carolina to attend to his father, who is also dying. Kind words are exchanged before the old man expires. This has all the makings of sentimental closure until we read in the novel's Afterword that the death of Gabriel Noone Sr. was itself a fiction, a story that Gabriel Jr. (like Donna) had invented but which had never really happened. What we have read in Maupin's novel about the father's death, indeed what we have read in the novel *in toto*, is what Gabriel's audience will have heard on the radio as part of a story called "The Night Listener," but it is not a "real" event in the novel's world. Rather, the nonce fiction of the father's death is used here to reconnect—or at least to reimagine—broken ancestral lines. Gabriel Jr., the alienated son, can at least fantasize a reconnection to a father with whom he will never satisfactorily reconnect. And by making *himself* an imaginary child, Gabriel can imagine himself as a parent who parents differently from the father Gabriel is used to.

If making oneself into an imaginary child allows one to flirt with the hopeful, reparative moves of parental reconciliation (Thing 2.3 to Do with Your Imaginary Child), it can also do the opposite (Thing 2.4): that is, to

flirt with the recognition, perhaps equally reparative, that reconciliation will and should never happen, that alienation is incontrovertible. The narrative events of *The Night Listener* are Gabriel's way of trying on attachment and loss, both as a son and as a father. It is significant, then, that we learn how those pregnant opening sentences of the novel—"I know how it sounds when I call him my son" (1)—are also its closing sentences (338). *The Night Listener* (as novel) ends with Gabriel beginning to read aloud "The Night Listener" (as radio story) to his audience of generous listeners, making the novel a metafiction of how the story (its nonce narrative) comes to be told. If Gabriel Noone/Armistead Maupin is telling the story of his own imaginary fatherhood *after the fact* of its demise, it is to register the dialectic of desire to be a father and not to be one at the same time. The power of the story—both Noone's and Maupin's—is that it resurrects Pete from an abject grave to which it also then consigns him.

Thing Three to Do with Your Imaginary Child: Kill Your Darlings

Attentive readers of these three texts will notice how children are exposed as imaginary; they will attend, that is, to what Gabriel Noone calls "jewelling the elephant": embellishing or diminishing, adding and deleting "facts" for the sake of the story and for the sake of people who need it. But at the end of this nonce bejewelling, and for all my salubrious imaginings about the reparative and critical uses of the imaginary child, the stench of imminent death envelops each of the invented children. At the end of *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, Sonny is dead, slain by his father's speech act. George and Martha play with the possibilities of his return—"I don't suppose, maybe, we could. . . . " asks Martha—but "No, Martha" George replies; "Yes. No," Martha agrees (241). The couple then must leave the stage with the knowledge that illusion can no longer sustain them. Pete Lomax dies as well, but then reappears in a narrative that, for both Armistead Maupin and Gabriel Noone, was not ready to be concluded when the author himself inscribed "The End" on the manuscript in the year 2000. By 2006, when Maupin wrote the screenplay for the Robin Williams movie, the "real-life" Pete had drifted into oblivion, his life nothing but a tale of an infamous hoax perpetrated on a celebrity. Georgianne Carpenter fares better, but only a bit, as she at least remains in play at the end of the novel. She will go off to school, or run down the street for cookies; she will become temporarily unavailable to the Benna of the "real" world when Benna suffers the tragic death of friend Gerard—but she always comes back. With all the clichéd charm of her Knock Knock jokes, Georgie reappears as *the* someone in Benna's life whose absences never need portend her death. Except that, in a chilling way, they do: Benna tells us at the conclusion of the novel, after Gerard's death,

> *This* is why a woman makes things up: Because when she dies, those lives she never got to are all going down with her. All those possibilities will just sit there like a bunch of schoolkids with their hands raised and uncalled on—each knowing, really knowing the answer.
>
> Life is sad. Here is someone. (225)

That someone, her imaginary daughter, "is a gift I have given myself, a lozenge of pretend" (225), and this gift, this lozenge, is at the core of all the psychologically reparative moves I have wanted imaginary children to make in this essay. Yet this lozenge of pretend is one more part of Benna's life that is going down with all the others: Georgie's is a life that was never lived but that will be lost all the same. The fact that all of these imaginary children are ultimately children-unto-death returns us to the implacable sense of loss that we cannot help but find in the literature of childhood: even though imaginary children need not face the inevitable aging that "real" children face (although Sonny Jim does; he is killed off the day he comes "of age"); even though they need not experience the deadly fact of aging into pubescence that Golden-Age Children's-Literature children experience, imaginary children are shrouded in the mortality of the people who imagine them. Edward Albee's George thus provides a withering summary of the imaginary childhood energy that animates all children of the imagination: we may not know the difference between truth and illusion, he says, "but we must carry on as though we did" (202). And carrying on as though we did implies that the clock runs out on the life of the "child" because it runs out on our own. And that "running out" might offer us some critical purchase on a culture that, for many of us, remains alienatingly Child-centric (with the capital "C" in "Child" signalling the ideology, the fantasy of reproduction rather than any "real" child or embodied individual). If the ultimate Thing to Do with the Imaginary Child is to speak it to death, that is at least to grapple with the illusions we use the Child to obfuscate, and to follow Walter Davis, Lee Edelman, and psychoanalysis to consider the abyss that lies at the heart of human existence.

I conclude, then, with my own Imaginary Child, and to find it, I will invite my reader once again for a drive along that treacherous stretch of road I noted at the beginning of this essay. In "Yard Sale," another of the stories in Anagrams that precedes the introduction of the imaginary Georgianne, Benna speculates on her life following the departure of her boyfriend Gerard:

> My new apartment might be in a place where there are lots of children. They might gather on my porch to play, and when I step out for groceries, they will ask me, "Hi, do you have any kids?" and then, "Why not, don't you like kids?"
>
> "I like kids," I will explain. "I like kids very much." And when I almost run over them with my car, in my driveway, I will feel many different things. (53)

Figure 1

Figure 2

Figure 3

Figure 4

Figure 5

I think I have some sense of what those "many different things" might be. Recently, I stepped out for groceries to a funky artistic neighbourhood near my home. As I drove to the store, I was accosted by signs on many of the lawns reading, "Drive like your kids live here!" (see fig. 1) A couple of months earlier, this would have struck me as just another version of the "Baby on Board" phenomenon (now available in gendered pink and blue, or in packages of two, I have learned! [see fig. 2, 3, 4, 5]), which suggests that because I do not have a baby on board my car, you need not exercise caution around me: tailgate me, sideswipe me, make me your own. Or I would have heard, and grinned sardonically at, the now-familiar sound of *The Simpsons*' Mrs. Lovejoy asking, "Won't Someone Please Think of the Children?" But as I thought about the sign, I realized that this might be another one of those slippery patches on the road of the Imaginary Child. For I was not just being asked to take care for another person's child (a reasonable enough request), I was being (im)personally commanded to imagine I *have* children, and that they live with me. I was being called to partake without question and without choice in a culture where child-bearing is the frame through which I exercise my responsibility to my neighbours. But that interpellation was at odds with itself: as I was being commanded to imagine that I have a child, I was also being invited to *replace* another person's child—your child, their child—with my own imaginary one. The "as if" was a command to substitute my kids for my neighbour's, a substitution whose blatant narcissism would not announce itself as such but would seem to underwrite the social contract in my village. And finally, having replaced someone's real child with my own imaginary ones, I was to adjust myself (in all aspects of my life) accordingly. My imaginary child, that is, was to ground a Kantian Categorical Imperative for the New Millennium. What I had in this simple sign, then, was a ~~re~~productive directive ~~pro~~created to dismantle itself. The problem—and the malicious fun it produces—is that each of us is called to have an imaginary child that is cancelled out by the fact of each other's imaginary child. No wonder Benna felt many things! Imaginary children and what is perhaps most imaginative *about* children allow Benna (and Martha, and Donna, and Gabriel) a livable life; but the child as imaginary figure *for* culture, with its normalized strictures, its false promises, its disavowed heralding of death: that is the child we can afford to drive on by. Or over.

Notes

[1] Klausen and Passman draw this percentage from a study conducted in the United States, but the findings hold true for the United Kingdom and northwestern Europe as well.

[2] The Dinkins recount the poignant story of Ella Wheeler Wilcox and her husband Robert, who "talked throughout her first and only pregnancy about an anticipated daughter whom they named Winifred: 'She became a real personality to us; and we thought of her as if she had lived many years under our roof'" (Dinkin and Dinkin, 15; they are quoting Wilcox 123). "In reality," they report, "Wilcox gave birth to a son, Robert Jr., who survived only twelve hours. . . . Later, in her autobiography, Wilcox explained why the image of Winifred remained deeply in their consciousness for years whereas the real child, Robert Jr., did not. She wrote, 'So brief was the life of this son, and so unprepared were we to think of him as a son, that, as time passed, he became like the memory of a dream to us; while the thought of Winifred has always lingered, as of one we had known and loved and dwelt with'" (15; quoting Wilcox 124). What intrigues me most here, and what I will consider throughout this essay, is not just what Winifred is but what Winifred does. Wilcox says that throughout her marriage to Robert, "we used Winifred as a sort of mentor when either wished gently to rebuke the other. My husband . . . found me rather rebellious and indignant one day over an unjust and ungrateful action of an inferior, [and said,] 'You must control yourself, my dear. . . . how do you think you would appear to Winifred in such a mood?'" (124). Wilcox, conversely, used Winifred to cajole Robert to cut down on cigars. Both of them clearly knew what use to make of their imaginary child.

[3] The Dinkins have in mind here the work of feminist sociologists Gayle Letherby and Catherine Williams.

[4] I am leaving aside here the medieval and Romantic representations of non-corporeal children as muses or angels. Rather, I am concerned with a particular kind of deployment, a mendacious use to be made of the idea of childhood in the wake of its sentimentalizing forces in the nineteenth century.

[5] Edelman's critique of the Child as signifier is most famously laid out in *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive*. For Edelman, our culture uses "the Child" as symbolic of a future, a promise of fulfillment and longevity that can never be obtained. "The Child" in Edelman's analysis is "fantasmatic" in that it bespeaks a "future" that must always be postponed, that is always a day away; the purported fulfillment it guarantees is an illusion.

[6] Girard lays out his theory that our desires are most profoundly an imitation of the desires we see in another in his *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel: Self and Other in Literary Structure*, chapter 1.

[7] One notable distinction that the prefix "pro" introduces is that it signals a relationship with another person or thing. So, while one can create on one's own, one can only "procreate" with another. Moreover, there is a second, delicious sense in which "pro" means "to stand in for," such as the "pro-dean" who often presides over a thesis defence, or a "pro-general" who acts in the place of the military leader. By these lights, "procreation" is something that stands *in the place of creation*, so that rather than an artwork, say, being a sublimation of sex, sexual reproduction would be become the sublimation of a more "original" creativity.

[8] The most sustained (and civil) consideration of this question

may be Edelman and Lauren Berlant's co-authored *Sex, or The Unbearable*.

[9] There is one moment when we hear from a doctor who has been on the forefront of AIDS treatment, and who raises medical doubts about Pete's condition and resilience. Neither the doctor nor we are to believe that Pete has been through what Donna claims he has been through and remains alive. Still, the novel does not accord science the master narrative. Unlike in the world imagined fearfully by Albee's George, science remains an impotent or inconclusive narrative: stories are all.

[10] I am thinking here of Kristeva's discussion of the "semiotic," which she most famously undertakes in Revolution in Poetic Language. Kristeva intends "semiotic" to refer to the pre-symbolic—and thus undefinable—diffusions, rhythms, energies, and sensory stimulations that the child feels in proximity to the maternal body prior to being wrenched into the (more Lacanian) castrations of the symbolic system of language.

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