

Amy Fish
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Temporal Power in Child Authorship

Childhood has long provided a conceptual tool for theorizing time in the United States, from W. E. B. Du Bois's figure of the "immortal child" to Lee Edelman's argument against the symbolic child of "reproductive futurism." The temporal uses of youth take vivid form in the history of child authorship. Rachel Conrad argues that "temporal discourse both reflects and is constitutive of adult-child power relations" in ways that child poets have expressed and negotiated. This paper proposes that temporalities of child authorship have reinforced race and gender oppressions, even as young writers have found ways to turn time to their advantage.

The publication of young people's writings emphasizes the ontological difference between published books, built for posterity, and children's bodies, continually changing. By the time texts are published and read, the authors are likely children no longer, aged into the tainted ranks of suspect "youth." The imminent disqualification of child authors as such has been central to the genre's appeal. For those members of marginalized groups whom U. S. society most tolerates in the exceptional state of childhood innocence, the celebration of child authorship can double as a form of discipline, reinforcing the oppression of those past a certain age. This temporal structure reverses conceptions of juvenilia, which looks forward to maturing authors' increasingly powerful futures. A case study of one girl writer of the late 1960s both reveals this power dynamic and points to the ways in which young writers have contested it.