

“A Queer Semblance of a Baby”: Alice Dunbar-Nelson’s Queer Futurity
Brigitte Fielder, University of Wisconsin-Madison

In Alice Dunbar-Nelson’s short story, “His Heart’s Desire,” Andy is a five-year-old boy who desperately wants a doll. Because he will not ask for one, Andy “had gathered together material...[and] had fashioned it into a queer semblance of a baby” (416). Dunbar-Nelson’s manuscript story (first published in a 2016 issue of *Legacy*) is a story about intersectional childhood, doll-play, and desire. My paper examines the object of Andy’s desire – the baby-doll – in both its material substance and its symbolic resonance, in light of the implied futurity of childhood play. The rag-doll Andy creates suggests alternative masculinities and alternative childhoods. But, framed as desire, this alternative is always unfulfilled, always yet-to-be-realized.

I read this story alongside Toni Morrison’s *Bluest Eye*, a literary touchstone that explicates and critiques normative imaginings of the relationship between doll-play, desire, and childhood’s reproductive futurity. Examining these texts through queer theory’s discussions of childhood and time and Afrofuturism’s discourses of technology and the speculative, we can see how doll-play might project a speculative futurity of intersectional identity that defies normative trajectories. “His Heart’s Desire” paints children’s doll play not only in nonnormative gender roles but also with relation to nonnormative time. Rather than the iconic Child destined for a reproductive future, Andy’s queer orientation to the future is tempered by doll-play that locates pleasure in the now-ness of the material object. Andy here imagines queer futures that do not project the reproduction of future children but dwells in the hope for a sustained relationship to childhood, itself.