

## **The Child Gaze, the Stereoscope, and the Liquidity of Vision at the Turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century**

The stereoscope became popular at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century as a way to experience the world while standing solidly in the parlor. Though popular with adults, this bifocular device was more importantly a children's educational toy, used to allow child viewers to experience spaces foreign to them: other parts of the United States, Africa, Roman ruins, etc. The stereoscope was used to view stereographic cards that featured two seemingly identical photographs placed next to each other. When looked at through the stereoscope, though, the pair of images fused into one, taking up the entire field of vision and appearing in 3D – as close to visiting Africa as many American children could get. In "The Child Gaze, the Stereoscope, and the Liquidity of Vision at the Turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century," I argue that the popularity of the stereoscope evidences a mania for vivid visual representation at the turn of the twentieth century. That the child was a main audience for the stereoscope suggests that children had a unique connection to this new epistemology of the visual, that they became the "visual natives" of the early twentieth century, the precursors to the "digital natives" of the 1990s.

Building on the recent work on children's toys and parlor objects by Robin Bernstein and Karen Sanchez-Eppler, this paper especially considers how the stereoscope invited children to play, see, and experience. In raising the stereoscope to their eyes, the child viewer was able to erase their home parlor and enter a foreign space that frequently portrayed racial and cultural "others." In doing so, the stereoscope allowed viewers to temporarily liquidate social and geographical boundaries: to visually enter spaces denied to them by society, to play there, and to gaze at their leisure. In especially inviting child viewers to dwell upon bodies and places otherwise impossible or inappropriate, I argue that the stereoscope created a child's gaze that, like the male gaze before it, conferred specific power to the viewer. This paper seeks to explore this new liquid child gaze and interrogate the imperialistic power it confers.