

Stadler's Boys; or, The Fictions of Child Pornography

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Though my account will lapse into coarseness, flippancy, lies, and pure pornography, you must never forget that I truly and impossibly did love him.

—Matthew Stadler, *Allan Stein*

The things that we find both treacherous and repugnant nevertheless contain important insights about how we engage the world around us: this is the problem expressed in the epigraph, taken from Matthew Stadler's 1999 novel *Allan Stein*. I expand on the narrator's plea to argue that it is through an investigation of not simply offensive things themselves but also the various strategies we deploy to deal with them that we stand to gain important insights into human sexuality. Yet what is it, exactly, about the narrator's account that would be so off-putting? *Allan Stein* tells the story of a young teacher from the Pacific Northwest who, disgraced by allegations of having slept with one of his adolescent male students, impersonates a curator friend and travels to Paris in order to procure a set of Picasso sketches on his friend's behalf. The curator friend, Herbert Widener, believes that the sketches may prove that Picasso modeled the young boy of his painting *Boy Leading a Horse* (1905–1906) on Gertrude Stein's young nephew, Allan Stein. Yet during his research the imposter Herbert seduces—and is seduced by—Stéphane, the fifteen-year-old son of his Parisian hosts. The two run away together to the south of France, where their relationship quickly deteriorates as the narrator's identity is exposed.

The narrator's plea cautions readers that his narrative, as one about a love between a man and a barely pubescent boy, lapses at times into pure child pornography. A cursory survey of newspaper databases, daytime talk shows, and nightly news programs would confirm child pornography's status as a topic sure to generate as much debate as declarations of disgust, and thus affirm the narrator's cause for concern. Such a survey, however, would also reveal child pornography as a source of persistent cultural fascination. This is the ambiva-

lent relation to child pornography that the narrator's plea and Stadler's novel capture so well: despite the reluctance we may feel upon reading the narrator's warning, the titillation it provides keeps us reading.

Following the work of scholars such as Richard D. Mohr and Jacqueline Rose, I claim that one of the ways that we have managed to deal with this ambivalent relation to child pornography is to project the desire to see it onto others; we do so because these representations—and the responses they engender—trouble our seemingly secure sense of who we are. These strategies of denial and projection are in fact central to the prevailing notion of what child pornography is as it has emerged from a thorny history of court rulings, legislation, and psychological studies. Within the United States, child-pornography law is primarily thought of as a means for protecting children from exploitation. However, the law erects a powerful edifice that has two principal functions. First, it insists that child pornography is not a representation, subject to the deceptions of the signifier, but is evidence of a real crime committed against a real child. Second, it imagines a discrete population of pedophiles as the primary producers, distributors, and consumers of sexually explicit materials involving children. These two functions permit the censure of child pornography at the same time as they provide indirect access to the kinds of representations they condemn.

Moreover, in permitting both circuitous access and a sanitized excitement, child-pornography law bears important similarities to pornography itself. An analysis of the way that the law operates as a fiction—with very real effects—about what child pornography is and who uses it will be useful in challenging the particular notions of sexuality, subjectivity, and sociality subtending legal discourse. Despite the ease with which one might critique the strategies of child-pornography law, child pornography's perilous legal status places a formidable barrier in the way of any attempt to understand the more basic question of why sexually explicit representations of children have the capacity to both entice and disgust us in the first place. The mere expressed intention to view visual child pornography is enough to incur both the full force of child-pornography law and intense moral rebuke. Since written forms of child pornography remain (for the moment) largely free of legal prohibition and enjoy a much murkier moral status, these texts offer one possible solution to the problem of the legal barrier. Novels such as Stadler's *Allan Stein* provide a tentatively secure site in which to pursue these basic questions.

Like child-pornography law, which finds shelter in its status as law, *Allan Stein* is shifting, inconsistent, and at times sexually explicit in ways that readers would likely find objectionable were it expressed in a form other than the literary. Unlike child-pornography law, however, the novel's deceptions are its virtues. Its status as fiction and, according to the narrator, as child pornog-

raphy affords us a chance to inquire into the fantasies at stake in such texts. In the final section of this chapter, I offer a reading of Stadler's novel in the context of his own interest in intergenerational sex and youth sexuality. This reading illustrates what literary pornography may have to tell us about the fantasies at stake in sexually explicit representations of children. I conclude by suggesting that careful attention to literary examples of child pornography may provide one way out of the contemporary political and moral mess that such representations produce. They may do so by indicating new modes of ethical relation between adults and youths that begin with rethinking one's own relation to what is most troubling about the self.

Child Pornography, Pedophiles, and Realness

While erotic representations of children have existed for some time, our current understanding of child pornography did not emerge until the law identified it as a social and legal problem at the end of the 1970s. Until this moment, child pornography enjoyed a relatively quiet commercial existence. A number of scholars suggest that magazines and films containing sexually explicit images of children were relatively easy to find, if not widely available. These texts were both imported from Europe and manufactured domestically on a small scale. The modest heyday of child pornography ended as child abuse emerged as a social and political problem within the larger feminist project of identifying forms of domestic violence that previously had been shielded from legal scrutiny by the privatized space of the home. These intervention efforts had complicated consequences: at the same time that these campaigns identified children's well-being as a problem for state intervention, they also provided leverage for antiporn feminists and conservative critics to censor child pornography in particular, and hard-core pornography in general.¹

Yet such developments depended on a prior historical shift within the broader legal discourse of obscenity. As Loren Glass argues, "Unlike obscenity, the term pornography has no official legal status, but it was frequently used over the course of the century precisely in response to the muddle that arose when literary texts were deemed obscene."² With first *Roth v. United States* (1957) and then *Miller v. California* (1973), the Supreme Court established a relative definition of obscenity that evaluated a text according to "contemporary community standards," rather than the intrinsic value a work might have as determined by literary experts. As Glass and others note, if publishers and booksellers clearly market and restrict works to communities deemed capable of handling those works in a responsible manner, then they will likely remain immune from obscenity charges.³ This development in obscenity law produced a flexible mechanism for determining when a work lost legal im-

munity, and the text's relative value for a specific community served as this mechanism's most significant feature. The "end of obscenity," in other words, made it so that moral and legal objections to a text depend less on the intrinsic qualities of that text than its relation to those who encountered it.

The history of obscenity law provides an important backdrop for the emergence by the end of the century of child pornography as a distinct legal category. As Chuck Kleinhans notes, key to this emergence was the law's specific concern with visual images rather than written text.⁴ The Protection of Children Against Sexual Exploitation Act of 1977, for example, prohibited the use of children in the production of obscene materials, which largely directs the law toward photographic and filmic forms of representation. Between 1978 and 2000, a series of national laws and court decisions at the federal and district levels, too many to survey in this chapter, continued to develop a legal definition of child pornography in other ways. In 1982 the Supreme Court's decision in *New York v. Ferber* ruled that child pornography constituted its own constitutional category exempt from First Amendment protection; thus, child pornography became the exception to what Glass claims to be the categorical distinction between "pornography" and "obscenity."⁵

During the 1990s, the law continued to define, debate, and redefine the definition of child pornography with two significant outcomes. First, these debates broadened the scope of what visual contents could meet the definition of child pornography. In 1994 the lower court decision in *United States v. Knox* determined that an image could meet the standard of "lascivious exhibition of the genitals" even if the child were fully clothed.⁶ As a result, a wide range of images, including family photographs of children, often depicted nude, bathing, or dressed in costumes, could potentially constitute child pornography.⁷ Second, the legal wrangling over child pornography, in ways parallel to developments in contemporary sociological discourses, furnished the images with a documentary quality: child pornography constituted evidence of a crime.⁸ The Child Pornography Protection Act (1996), for example, defined virtual child pornography, computer-generated or "recombinant photo-realistic images" that transplant an image of a child's head on to the body of a nude adult, as legally suspect.⁹ As Kleinhans reports, the 2002 Supreme Court decision in *Ashcroft v. Free Speech Coalition* overturned this decision, arguing that "visual child pornography remains centrally defined by the fact that it is the recording of a crime and that its production creates victims. With virtual images, the 6–3 majority reasoned, these two elements are not present."¹⁰ Yet in doing so, the Court further affirmed the documentary quality of the image as an important condition for defining child pornography.

This emphasis on the realness of child pornography surfaced again roughly five years later, when the Supreme Court affirmed the 2003 Prosecutorial

Remedies and Other Tools to End the Exploitation of Children Today Act, otherwise known as the PROTECT Act. The Court's 2008 decision in *United States v. Williams* upheld the act's definition of child pornography that emphasized not only an image's contents but also the viewer's intent. Critics argued that the decision potentially exposed to prosecution any individual who requested or offered to share child pornography, even if those images only contained adults masquerading as children or virtual child pornography. Justice Antonin Scalia swiftly dismissed these concerns in his majority opinion: "An offer to provide or request to receive virtual child pornography is not prohibited by the statute. A crime is committed only when the speaker believes or intends the listener to believe that the subject of the proposed transaction depicts *real* children."¹¹ The Court's ruling in *United States v. Williams* constitutes a subtle but important shift in the law, as the question of the viewer's intent increasingly supplemented the evidentiary or documentary quality of the image for the law's definition of child pornography. In a way that seems to pervert the previous decades' development of a community standards-based definition of obscenity, child-pornography law thus does not extend but *revokes* legal immunity because of a text's value for a particular community of viewers.

This brief history of child-pornography law demonstrates its development as a specific hermeneutic not only of texts but of persons. Child pornography, as defined by the law, is less a genre composed of specific tropes and conventions than a pathological response to an often documentary representation. Yet, as Amy Adler shows, the ability for anyone to adopt this pathological response remains at the heart of child-pornography law. In her analysis of the 1989 California district court case *United States v. Dost*, Adler reveals how the law requires one to adopt the subjective position of a pedophile in order to determine whether or not an image constitutes child pornography. The Dost test, established by the court's ruling, provides a set of six guidelines for assessing a particular image. While some guidelines direct the examiner to consider the child's pose, state of undress, or perceived "willingness to engage in sexual activity," the most telling factor is the sixth, which asks the examiner to consider "whether the visual depiction is intended or designed to elicit a sexual response in the viewer."¹² For Adler, the Dost test exemplifies the tendency of child-pornography law to produce what she terms a *pedophilic gaze*: "The law requires us to study pictures of children to uncover their potential sexual meanings, and in doing so it explicitly exhorts us to take on the perspective of the pedophile."¹³ Following Michel Foucault's critique of the deployment of sexuality, she persuasively argues that child-pornography law remains a key force for a continued incitement to discourse around the sexuality of children.¹⁴

Adler's careful history of child-pornography law, however, falls short in its critique of the law. "It still seems better to have proliferating discourses

about the danger of child exploitation,” she argues, “than to have the exploitation itself.”¹⁵ Yet the problem of the subject’s pathological desire and pleasure has surpassed the problem of children’s exploitation when it comes to child-pornography law. Moreover, the current implementation of child-pornography laws ensures a great deal of collateral damage, as parents, artists, and business owners can unwittingly fill the role of pedophile trading in child pornography. In addition, as Ralph Underwager and Hollida Wakefield suggest, investigations into allegations of child pornography and child abuse can often be just as or even more traumatic than whatever violence the child in question may have suffered.¹⁶ Adler’s primary concern is that child-pornography law contributes to a vaguely elaborated process she terms the *sexualization of children*, by which she means that the pedophilic gaze causes a change in how we perceive children as sexual beings.¹⁷ If this is true, then the change it causes seems to produce an insufficient notion of children’s sexuality by insisting that whatever the previous notion was, it was *de facto* better. At the heart of Adler’s critique, the question of children’s sexual innocence remains unanswered.

Adler correctly points out that Foucault identifies children’s sexuality as one of the key areas of knowledge through which power attaches itself to the body. However, what Adler forgets is that the endless interrogation of our desires is in part an experience of pleasure, derived from the evasions, seductions, and revelations—what Foucault described as the “*perpetual spirals of power and pleasure*”—that characterize the confessional mode.¹⁸ According to Adler’s formulation, child-pornography law exemplifies the discursive production of sexuality and the extension of biopower into everyday life, but in order to have any chance of success in the endless scrutiny of images for a sexual truth, we must adopt the position of a pedophile. The implication seems to be that the pedophilic gaze thus requires that we have either some familiarity with or some capacity for recognizing what is sexually exciting about children. To paraphrase Justice Potter Stewart: we know it when we see it; but we only know it because we have already some capacity to experience pedophilic desire. In other words, the pedophilic gaze ensures that child-pornography law can only function if we find the potential pedophile within ourselves.

Child-pornography law enjoins the viewer to place images under intense scrutiny, but in doing so, it directs the viewer in a similar pursuit of truth that Linda Williams has attributed to pornography itself. According to Williams, hard-core pornography constitutes one of the many “medical, psychological, juridical, and pornographic discourses [that] have functioned as transfer points of knowledge, power, and pleasure.”¹⁹ In particular, hard-core moving-image pornography uses its various conventions to render the otherwise ever-

elusive truth of female pleasure visible on screen. The genre thus bears a significant resemblance to what Jon Davis identifies as a recent trend in both mainstream and independent films with thematic interests in pedophilia.²⁰ For Davis, these films deploy a series of structural techniques to compensate for the unrepresentability of illicit intergenerational sex acts on screen, what Davis calls “the black hole of representation that is arguably at the center of every pedophile movie.”²¹ However, Davis’s pedophile movies and Williams’s hard-core pornography achieve very different things from child pornography, as it is subject to the intense scrutiny of child-pornography law. If Davis’s and Williams’s respective accounts describe filmic conventions that attempt to make visible on screen the truth of the Other’s desire, then child pornography makes visible the perverse desire of the viewing subject, who finds in the provocation of his or her desire the grounds for prohibiting the image being viewed. The trouble with child-pornography law occurs when it asserts that this pathological desire is the exclusive property of a pathological subject: the pedophile.

As Richard Mohr suggests, the series of moves by which one participates in and then disavows a desire for the child appears to structure not just the law but also the wider public sphere. Mohr coins the phrase *the pedophilia of everyday life* to explain how, in spite of the legal ban on child pornography, viewers find enjoyment in the sexiness of children through the texts and images that constitute our everyday experience. This catalog of mundane, pedophilic delights includes Hollywood family films, clothing advertisements, public-service announcements, and news coverage of child sexual abuse scandals. These texts provide just enough exposure to the sexual appeal of children while effacing any conscious knowledge one might have of what makes these images so exciting in the first place. What prevents one from becoming fully conscious of one’s attraction to these images is the creation of a pathological subjectivity that can carry the burden of one’s disavowed desires as well as become the object of one’s condemnation. Mohr writes, “Society needs the pedophile: his existence allows everyone else to view sexy children innocently. But his conceptualization by society must not be allowed to be rich enough to be interesting, to constitute a life.”²² The unconscious fantasies that dictate how child-pornography law functions seem to extend far beyond the courtroom walls.

A telling example of the phenomenon Mohr describes comes from Philip Jenkins’s study of the moral panics that occurred around the issue of child pornography during the early 1990s. At the same time as expanding case law intensified the prohibitions on child pornography, the United States experienced an efflorescence of popular crime literature by authors such as Jonathan Kellerman, Robert Campbell, James N. Frey, and Andrew Vachss, whose novels featured pedophile villains. Describing this body of popular literature,

Jenkins writes: “Kellerman’s *When the Bough Breaks* featured the Gentlemen’s Brigade, a voluntary social work group that concealed a network of elite child molesters and ‘closet sickos.’ Ron Handberg’s *Savage Justice* had as its villain a judge who used pornographic videos to seduce pubescent boys and whose extensive connections enabled him to escape detection and to silence critics, by murder if necessary.”²³ The sudden popularity of crime novels with themes of child abuse and pedophile villains is suggestive. Jenkins’s brief account lends credence to Mohr’s otherwise polemical claim that prohibitions incite circuitous routes to oblique pleasures, and that the pathological subject provides one means for disavowing these enjoyments. According to this logic, one finds pleasure not only in seeing the villainous pedophile punished by the law but also in acting as the pedophile’s fellow traveler as he or she commits violent deeds.

More significant, however, is Mohr’s claim that “society seems to need these images. And the images are allowed to the extent that they are buffered, not read in the first instance as sexual representations.”²⁴ Mohr insists that the social depends on these images and on the process of provocation and disavowal that characterizes one’s relation to them. A number of scholars have already broached the question of why something akin to the pedophilia of everyday life might be so necessary, yet two of the most influential accounts belong to James Kincaid and Lee Edelman. According to Kincaid’s cultural-historical analysis, the modern child’s innocence and purity served as a counter to the rational man of the Enlightenment: “The child was figured as free of adult corruptions; not yet burdened with the weight of responsibility, mortality, and sexuality.”²⁵ The result, however, is that the child becomes a blank screen that displays whatever fantasies the adult wishes to project there. According to Edelman’s queer psychoanalytic account, the figure of the child serves as the linchpin in the collective libidinal fantasy of a redemptive future that structures U.S. politics.²⁶ As this future’s primary inheritor and as the means by which the citizen inhabits it via his or her identification with the child, the child ensures a conservative political order that prizes sexual reproduction and heteronormativity to the point of violently opposing all other forms of social and political organization. The particulars of Edelman’s and Kincaid’s respective insights aside, their accounts demonstrate various ways in which the desirability of children is not simply the product of pathology but central to the constitution of the modern subject.

The work of Mohr, Edelman, and Kincaid gestures toward more than a problem in the relation between children and the modern adult subject, who may or may not adequately recognize the child as a sexual being. While these relations are definitely at stake, the more central question concerns how notions of children and pedophiles manage one’s relation to the Otherness

that divides the subject from within. In making this claim, I echo Jacqueline Rose's 1984 psychoanalytic investigation of children's fiction, *The Case of Peter Pan; or, The Impossibility of Children's Fiction*, and second her insistence on the value of Freud's work for thinking about the connections between representations of children and subjectivity. Rose claims with respect to her own study: "The most crucial aspect of psychoanalysis for discussing children's fiction is its insistence that childhood is something in which we continue to be implicated and which is never simply left behind."²⁷ Just as Freud's analysis of his own childhood memories' fictional quality revealed those memories as attempts to reconcile present conflicts through the endless reworking of personal history, children's fiction concerns the relation between children and adults insofar as the children in question are the adults who tell the story.

According to Rose, children's fiction tends to imagine childhood in terms of a strict biological development through a series of discrete stages. This is a problem because the sequential model of psychosexual development fails to take on childhood's persistent revision within the psychic life of the subject. While acknowledging Freud's own equivocal stance on psychosexual development in his *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*, Rose nevertheless sees as key his reframing of childhood sexuality in terms of fantasy: "[Freud] described how infantile sexuality starts to turn on a number of questions which the child sets itself, questions about its own origin (the birth of the child) and its sexual identity (the difference between the sexes) which the child will eventually have to resolve. By describing the child's development in terms of a *query*, Freud moves it out of the realm of an almost biological sequence, and into that of fantasy and representation where things are not so clear."²⁸ As Rose observes, these questions are central to the subject's self-constitution, but at the same time they are never completely answerable because they address the child's status regarding his or her own Otherness: "Behind the question about origins is the idea of a moment when the child did not exist, and behind the question about difference is the recognition that the child's sexual identity rests solely in its differentiation from something (or someone) it is not."²⁹ The fact that these incomplete answers can come only through language, itself constituted by its own semantic short-circuits and deceptions, further highlights childhood's status as a never-ending inquiry into the subject's own meaning.

For Rose, the problem with most children's fiction is "the most emphatic refusals and demands" it makes by insisting on the child's linguistic and erotic innocence: "There should be no disturbance at the level of language, no challenge to our own sexuality, no threat to our status as critics, and no question of our relation to the child."³⁰ Another way to phrase Rose's claim is that the child of children's fiction affirms a particular form of subjectivity, whose truth lies hidden in an origin of linguistic and sexual innocence, while

repressing the disturbing effects of the unconscious that render such subjectivity untenable. There is no such thing as a subject of linguistic or sexual innocence. Yet children's fiction manages its partial repression of this fact through a representational scheme that reorganizes these forces into a more palatable—if highly overdetermined—form.

The relevance of Rose's argument about children's fiction for my own claims rests not in the assertion that the children who appear in pornographic videos and images do not exist, or that their exploitation is negligible. Rather, Rose's insights help to expose law's notion of child pornography as a legal fiction that, like dominant trends in children's fiction, avoids some of the more pressing questions of modern subjectivity. Child-pornography law constitutes the normal subject by insisting that the image in question is both innocent and documentary. As a document of desire, the image can then constitute a population of pathological consumers. The pedophile, whose supposedly tumultuous childhood explains his or her deviant desires, and the sense of realness, which absolves the text from the difficulties of representation, together constitute the law's fictions of child pornography: child pornography exhibits real children suffering real acts of violence, which only real pedophiles could possibly enjoy. Following Rose as much as Mohr, I argue that these conventions help normal subjects evade questions about their libidinal investment in both children and child pornography that they sequester within the pedophile.

These legal fictions have less to do with the texts themselves than with common anxieties about who uses child pornography and why. If Mohr is even half correct about the pedophilia of everyday life, then these anxious questions miss the wider problematic of children's sexuality. It seems that any attempt to interrogate the cultural and political work that representation of children's sexuality may perform will fall short without first attending to how child-pornography law directs one's attention away from such efforts in first place. Doing so would require that scholars approach child pornography in terms other than those provided to us by the law. One of the ways to do this would be to follow Laura Kipnis when she describes pornography, in terms resonant with Rose's own claims, as "a place where problematic social issues get expressed and negotiated."³¹ Thus, texts deemed child pornography may have a great deal to tell us about the fantasies and contradictions that organize not only Mohr's pedophilia of everyday life or the conservative political structure that Edelman dubs "reproductive futurism" but also how we understand the psychic strategies that we develop against our desires, pleasures, and the world we inhabit.³²

The central problem remains, however, that child pornography is still a genre defined by its legal prohibition. My intention is neither to endorse nor

to censor child pornography as we currently understand it. Rather, I argue that leaving a body of representations completely in the hands of the law is dangerous precisely for the way it inhibits rational discussion of what these images may mean. Child abuse will happen regardless of whether or not academics discuss child pornography, and this violence is likely to continue not simply as physical injury or sexual exploitation but also as the larger systemic violence that prevents children from having supportive social environments, schools to attend, and food to eat. As Pat Califia writes: "Neglect, violence, and the sexual abuse of children are shocking offenses, yet they are terribly ordinary acts."³³ Moreover, Ian Hacking has shown in "The Making and Molding of Child Abuse" that the history of child abuse as a concept "has been in the direction of dividing more and more types of behavior into normal and deviant."³⁴ These divisions become problematic when we forget that the apparently objective scientific knowledge of the normal is at the same time a moral prescription that ought to be questioned. The problem of child abuse is not simply a matter of adults oppressing children, but one of the central axes along which complex relations of power emerge among a variety of subjects. A better analysis of child-pornography law and child pornography may show us how such representations maintain and extend these relations in ways irreducible to the facile categories of pathological viewers and innocent victims.

No longer simply a means for preventing the exploitation of children, child-pornography law distributes normal and pathological subjectivities through the evidentiary status it assigns to the image. The law thus prohibits the careful analysis of child pornography as a visual genre on both legal and ethical grounds. However, the law has largely ignored sexually explicit written representations of children. I suggest that this is a result of the historical shift away from written texts toward visual images as the primary target of legal censure. In addition to differential attitudes regarding the cultural function of text over images, written texts generally sidestep the immediate and pressing question of exploitation because one does not need a real child to produce such a text in the first place. Of course, to say that the law has ignored written texts is not the same thing as saying that such texts are immune from it; however, the law's current lack of interest in written representations of children's sexuality, or sexuality writ large, affords scholars an opportunity to explore some of the problems simultaneously raised and foreclosed by visual forms. As I noted with respect to Jenkins's discussion of the sex-crime novels that grew to great popularity during the early 1990s, fiction has served as a surrogate source of the pleasures that readers could not find elsewhere. If the pornographic image of the child remains off-limits, then pornographic novels and other written texts provide literary scholars with an alternative route to some of these questions.³⁵

Matthew Stadler's small but incredibly rich oeuvre is a prime candidate for thinking through the problems that child pornography raises. This is the case in part because most of his novels take up the theme of sex between an adult and a barely pubescent boy, whose indeterminate pubertal status highlights the difficulty in evaluating or diagnosing a desire for minors based on standardized models of sexual development. Stadler's particular focus on man-boy relations also helps to specify gender's significance for accounts of such sexual relations, which the law often occludes through its use of the gender-neutralized category of "the child." The history of statutory rape laws provides a brief but useful example. As various scholars have noted, statutory rape laws were conceived during much of the twentieth century as a means to protect women's chastity and, as a consequence, were applied only to women under the age of consent. During the 1970s, following new conceptualizations of child abuse, reformers sought to protect all children, boys and girls, by neutralizing the gendered language of the law. However, this formal gender equality subsequently became a means to disproportionately prosecute gay men. In addition, many men report that intergenerational relationships with older men during their teenage years were often benign if not also deeply formative experiences.³⁶ The history of such laws thus reveals the dangers of losing sight of the child's gender, and it is through the specific figure of the boy that Stadler explores the ethical possibilities between men and men to be. However, Stadler's take on these relations also forms the basis for thinking more generally about intimacies, explicitly sexual and otherwise, forged along differentials of age.

Stadler's interest in the specificities of man-boy relations characterizes some of his other work as well, including an oft-cited feature story for the independent Seattle newspaper the *Stranger* on the North American Man-Boy Love Association (NAMBLA) held in Stadler's hometown in 1995. On account of his novel *The Sex Offender* (1994), NAMBLA's members invited Stadler to the conference as a guest speaker, and the account he produced of the clandestine event remains one of the best pieces written on the organization. Stadler's report traces the history of NAMBLA as it emerged out of the gay and lesbian rights movement of the early 1970s, when its members found themselves marginalized by the growing public debate about child abuse and pornography that intensified over the following years. Mainstream gay and lesbian politics abandoned NAMBLA early on, because the organization seemed incompatible with the movement's exchange of sex radicalism for respectability.³⁷ Stadler remains critical of the conference participants' politically naive "embrace of all the perversities of sex and affection," but he is nonetheless sympathetic

with their attempts to challenge prevailing sexual and social norms: “Only in a distant future — if we ever step back from our deep, deep feelings about children and begin to rationally assess their sexuality, particularly that of teenagers — will the age-of-consent laws be changed. This will be possible only if we care enough about kids to stop condemning them to the role of angels from some realm apart, and to begin to grant them power over their real experience as human beings.”³⁸

Stadler also found that conference participants, in addition to discussing political strategy, spent much of their time discussing sexual fantasies, retelling experiences with live boys, and trading images of children. Yet, as if anticipating Mohr’s argument about the pedophilia of everyday life, the vast majority of these images consisted of mainstream commercial films and advertisements. Stadler writes, “I had found NAMBLA’s ‘porn,’ and it was Hollywood. It was network television, Sunday ad supplements, Nickelodeon, and the Disney channel. NAMBLA doesn’t need to manufacture porn, because America manufactures it for them.”³⁹ Another one of the virtues of Stadler’s article is the degree of candor with which the men he interviews explain why they find these images appealing. One participant, whom Stadler identifies only as John, does so by contrasting these texts with “real porn”: “Real porn has nothing to do with boys — that’s what so strange about, you know, ‘boy porn.’ I mean, what boy would ever make *boy* porn? It’s just sexy to gay men. It’s *gay* porn, and the boys just happen to be in it. Sometimes I like the boys, but in a porn movie they’re not doing anything sexy, you know, like just being boys. Now, if some boys actually got together with a video camera and made their *own* porn, that could be sexy.”⁴⁰ What gives these images their erotic allure is, in fact, the absence of sex. This absence coincides with an absence of adulthood, since the only way to return sex to the image is to remove the adult who would be responsible for framing the shot and arranging the scene. John’s interpretation of these images seems to jibe with Kincaid’s assertion about the erotic innocence of children. Yet John’s understanding differs to the extent that his boys retain some creative potential that could be put to use in making “their *own* porn.” While the boy may be an absence of something, he is defined by some other, elusive positive content.

John’s account suggests that the men of the NAMBLA conference do not have an indiscriminate interest in children but rather a distinct set of fantasies involving boys, wherein the boy — and not the child — serves as a particularly dense nexus of meanings. Stadler’s article makes clear the centrality of the boy, and I suggest that it is the peculiar fantasy of the boy as an erotic yet elusive potential that Stadler addresses in much greater detail in his novel *Allan Stein*. Published in 1999 by Grove Press, the novel follows close on the heels of his feature on NAMBLA for the *Stranger*. Yet what makes *Allan Stein* particularly

relevant for a discussion of child pornography, beyond the narrator's opening insistence on portions of his narrative as "pure pornography," is that the plot depends on the narrator's relation to an image of a nude child.

The image in question is Picasso's painting *Boy Leading a Horse*, and the narrator impersonates his friend Herbert Widener, a curator, in order to travel to Paris to secure the sketches that might identify the boy in the image as Gertrude Stein's nephew, the eponymous Allan. In a discussion of the painting that Herbert has with his host family, Miriam Dupaignes, the mother of Stéphane, provides a description of the depicted boy that resonates with John's own take on the eroticism of boys. She explains: "This is one of the features of the Picasso Herbert speaks of, the most erotic and moving aspect of it—that it is a boy. He has tremendous power because he is nothing yet, no one, and so he has the power in him to be a god, like all children do, you see? If Picasso had painted a man leading the horse, just imagine it. This man would be someone, some man who will never be a god at all, just a man, without the limitless power this boy has."⁴¹ Miriam's description makes explicit John's implication of an elusive potential as the source of a boy's eroticism. Yet Miriam's description is far more complex and interesting. While it may be easy to recognize the eroticism in the anonymous nude boy, it's much more difficult to understand in what way a boy can be said to be powerful. Children are usually construed as vulnerable and in need of protection, but according to Miriam, a boy retains a degree of power unparalleled by any man. To further complicate matters, while a man is "someone," a boy is "no one" in addition to being a "nothing," a depersonalized entity that draws its power from an unexercised potential. It seems important to stress the indefinite article as well; Miriam speaks of "a boy" versus "the boy," thus emphasizing the boy's indefinite nature while reserving this nature for the boy alone. The eroticism of a boy appears linked to the power he keeps in reserve, the potential power he retains but loses in the moment he exercises it to become a man.

The narrator privately gushes over Miriam's description: "Oh, God bless her. A mother knows so much most men will never know."⁴² While it is important that he singles out the mother as having privileged access to this knowledge, I want to defer discussing the mother for a moment in order to point out that what structures the narrator's relation to the image also structures his relation to Stéphane. The boy frequently acts as an informal guide to the narrator as he halfheartedly conducts his curatorial errands, and in this way Stéphane serves as a source for much of the narrator's meditations on the boy's eroticism. The following passage is especially telling:

Language was the least of our barriers. Stéphane hovered behind a scrim, trapped inside a body whose proportions and angularity perfectly ex-

pressed something to me . . . “becoming,” I’d like to say, but it might have been nostalgia. His posture as he led me, the narrowing shoulders, the lilt of his arms and bounce of his blue knapsack that kept disappearing into the crowd, enthralled me by pointing elsewhere—away from him. The hollow of his back and then the turn at the hips, his long thighs, became abstractions, pure equations, so that he engaged that part of my mind that also loves geometry or angels.⁴³

Stéphane’s lack of familiarity with English contributes to his dropping away from the narrator’s space of attention, which is now fully occupied with the formal elements of the boy’s body. The narrator is not simply interested in the boy’s body as it is composed of flesh, but, as the language of his description suggests, he is taken with the form that the body expresses. The telling slip that substitutes *angels* for the perhaps more appropriately geometric term *angles* at once signals to the reader the subjectivized nature of the narrative and suggests that the boy’s form is not something immediately present to the narrator’s experience. The boy as a kind of form is potentially transcendent of Stéphane’s body, which nevertheless serves as the substance that replicates it. Finally, the narrator hints that the Picasso painting provides inspiration for this form: just as the boy leads the horse, Stéphane leads the narrator through the streets of Paris.

The narrator provides two terms for the relationship between Stéphane’s body and its form, *becoming* and *nostalgia*, and each describes a very different phenomenon. On the one hand, nostalgia as a sentimental longing for a past time or state seems to conflict with the rupture of the self from itself that characterizes becoming. However, the narrator may have nostalgia for the potential he embodied in his own youth but has lost in his adulthood. The tension the narrator sees between Stéphane as a boy of lived experience and the form of the boy glimpsed in the contours of Stéphane’s body would be this nostalgia’s trigger. Another way to understand this scene would be to read it in terms of Miriam’s description of the Picasso painting. The aestheticized vocabulary that the narrator deploys in describing this scene, as well as its status as a fully subjectivized account being retold to us from the narrator’s present moment, helps to legitimize this move. The narrator, as the one who is “just a man,” must deal with the loss of his own power to be nothing yet become anything. Although his deceptions and identity theft serve as an attempt to reactivate this lost potential, these efforts pale before what is invested in the form of the boy. As he recalls watching Stéphane move ahead of him, the narrator recognizes the boy’s power, and thus his erotic appeal, as emanating from his form as pure potential. Yet the real boy, Stéphane, keeps blocking this view with the body that locates him as an embodied subject.

The final lines of the novel help to clarify this point. After a successful seduction (it is unclear whether it is the narrator's or Stéphane's victory), the narrator lies to Miriam about taking her son on a short trip to southern France in order to abduct the boy. Stéphane, who requires a special diet, becomes ill at the same time that Miriam discovers that the narrator is an imposter. She demands, via letter, that he return Stéphane. The narrator reveals his first name as Matthew, and he and Stéphane part ways. Alone and having wandered off into the woods at night, the narrator concludes the novel with the following sentences: "I have imagined that whole worlds dwell in the body of a boy and have pried with words to relax these meanings from their hiding place, to coax the boy into the open. He stood still for a moment, caught in the warmth of my regard, and when I reached for him he was gone."⁴⁴

These lines raise a series of questions for the reader. Just as Matthew brought Stéphane to an obscure town in the south of France, the temporal and spatial coordinates of the narrative become unclear. The novel opens with Matthew's account of his and Stéphane's arrival at their destination before leaping back in time to narrate the series of events that brought Matthew to France. As the novel comes to a close, Matthew and Stéphane have already parted ways, and the final scene seemingly exceeds the boundaries of the opening frame. There is also the question of the narrator's effort to extract worlds of meaning from the body of a boy. Does the narrator's attempt to pry with words refer to his verbal seductions of Stéphane, or does it index the larger narrative as an attempt to give form to Matthew's own lost potential? The latter question troubles any attempt to claim that the events that exceed the boundaries of the narrative frame should be understood as actually happening or, at the very least, as somehow less subjectivized than the rest of the narrative. Finally, there is the matter of the boy. By the time Matthew and Stéphane arrive at their destination, the narrator has ceased to refer to Stéphane by his first name and instead uses the term *boy*. From this, two possible explanations follow: either the narrator has ceased to recognize Stéphane in his specificity as an embodied subject or the narrative is purely fantasy.

At this point it is important to keep in mind that what has served as the ostensible motivation for the narrator throughout much of the novel is his pursuit of the sketches that will prove that a real boy, Allan Stein, lies behind the erotic image of the boy in Picasso's painting. This theme repeats in the living tableau the narrator imagines as he watches Stéphane move ahead of him, and it appears once more in the novel's final scene. At stake in these scenes is a set of questions similar to those raised in discussions of child pornography, particularly as they address the realness of the image. Yet Stadler's novel marshals realism, with its particular emphases on the psychic life of the subject, against the documentary, evidentiary quality such images obtain from

the law. While such images invite indisputable claims about the world, the novel challenges the possibility of such claims in the first place. The novel's conclusion presents an interpretive dilemma wherein it becomes impossible to draw a clear line between the novel's world and the narrator's subjective experience of it. Yet rather than asserting the impossibility of knowing anything about the world, Stadler presents fantasy as the subject's sole means for interfacing with that world. There is no text or image, the novel suggests, that makes claims on the realness of things that is not already shot through with the fantasies of the interpreting subject.

Stéphane does not fare well by the novel's end. He becomes ill on account of the narrator's carelessness over his diet, which, the reader is repeatedly informed, must be strictly maintained. The individual who delivers these constant reminders is the boy's mother, Miriam. Yet this fact is not meant to assert the mother's unequivocal superiority over the pedophile. We should keep in mind that Miriam is the first to describe the boy in Picasso's painting as a highly erotic form of potential. It is safe to infer that Miriam has experienced this erotic draw and therefore engages the world through a similar set of fantasies. Miriam is a loving mother, but she is stern with Stéphane, especially over the regulation of his diet. Pat Califa, writing about his own experience of being a parent, explains this dynamic well: "Raising a child involves making all kinds of decisions that the child resents and opposes. Most children do not want to sleep in their own beds, take medicine, nap, get a shot, give up the baby bottle, get a bath, eat vegetables, learn their multiplication tables, etc. In order to avoid having every interaction turn into a pitched battle, adults condition their offspring to obey and please them. While this meets with varying degrees of success, there's never a time when the playing field is level."⁴⁵ The interaction between caretaker and child takes on a Foucauldian character, as the two engage in a play of seduction, resistance, tension, and repression, in a conflict between the child's desires and what the adult perceives as best for the child's well-being.

For Califa, the relationship between child and caretaker is never equal because of the adult's superior position. However, as Allan Stein suggests, it would be incorrect to assume that children are vulnerable because they are completely powerless. In conjunction with the figure of the caretaker, the novel demonstrates that the child, here conceived as a boy, may be vulnerable, but he is not without power. Matthew is seduced, hurt, and humiliated by Stéphane as much as he is the seducer and abductor. In contrast to the narrator, the novel offers the caretaker in the form of the boy's mother, Miriam, who is in an ethical position with respect to the tangle of seductions, tensions, and resistances that compose the child-caretaker relation. Miriam fully acknowledges the eroticism of the boy in Picasso's painting, yet her role as

caretaker, which is not dependent on sex, prescribes a particular means of engaging that eroticism as it expresses itself in the body of her son. The narrator caves to each of Stéphane's whims. While the boy seems to thoroughly enjoy his relation with Matthew, the narrator's permissiveness still leads the boy to fall ill. What Matthew forgets—which the caretaker remembers—is that the boy is only glimpsed, caught in the warmth of one's regard, for an instant in the young body of a child of lived experience. One of the important implications of the caretaker as an ethical position, as a way of relating to the child, is that even if fantasy functions as one's means for interfacing with the world, an interface that depends on one's self-relation, it remains possible to act in a way that is not necessarily hostile or indifferent to the forms of life that one encounters there. Fantasy is the necessary condition for all forms of action, from the most violent to the most generative.⁴⁶

There is much more to be said about Allan Stein and Matthew Stadler's oeuvre, just as there is much more to be said about child pornography and the fantasies that it expresses. The fictions of realness and *de facto* abuse that characterize contemporary discussions of child pornography are in urgent need of revision, because their insistence on the image as a record of something real effaces the complex fantasies that produce that realness as an effect of reading. This is not to deny the fact that children have been and still are exploited for the production of child pornography; this is rather to argue that our established frameworks efface this exploitation better than they expose it. The legal discourses that prevail in current discussions of child pornography serve only to disavow the subject's psychic investments in the desirability of children and to avoid the larger question of just what, exactly, a child is. Thus it becomes easier to ignore the systematic forms of violence perpetuated against both children and adults. One of the necessary tasks for scholars is to challenge the legal definition of child pornography through an elaboration of the genre as a genre—that is, a normative set of conventions that does social and political work. Literary pornography may be one of the best places to begin, in order to circumvent the law's prohibitions and safeguard against its overzealous advocates.

In his discussion of the pedophilia of everyday life, Mohr argues that one of its problematic effects is that we are prevented from conceptualizing the pedophile in such a way as “to be rich enough to be interesting, to constitute a life.”⁴⁷ I find this phrase provocative because, like this chapter's epigraph, it suggests that there is something of value in thinking through the pedophilic relation. Especially provocative is Mohr's claim that the pedophile can and should be interesting—attractive to us as a way of living in the world. Opponents of this argument will claim that this is precisely the danger of child pornography—that it makes pedophilia attractive. Perhaps. But as I have

argued, child-pornography law already does this. The questions remain as to what exactly this means and whether, as Mohr suggests, pedophilia may constitute a politically and ethically viable form of life. In the process of considering these questions, we might find ourselves delightfully scandalized to learn that child pornography has something valuable to show us about youth, desire, and life itself.

Notes

For their thoughts on this difficult subject, I would like to thank Tim Dean, David Squires, and my fellow colleagues enrolled in the History and Theory of Pornography seminar held at the University at Buffalo, SUNY, in the spring of 2010.

1. A number of scholars have written more-extended accounts of the relations among antiporn feminism, conservative U.S. politics, and the emergence of child abuse as a social problem. See Califia, "No Minor Issues"; P. Jenkins, *Beyond Tolerance*, 32; Levine, *Harmful to Minors*; and O'Toole, *Pornocopia*, 217–45. For a detailed account of the complex connections between antiporn feminism and conservative U.S. politics, see Strub, *Perversion for Profit*, 213–55.

2. Glass, "Redeeming Value," 360.

3. The 1968 U.S. Supreme Court ruling in *Ginsberg v. State of New York* established the assessment of obscenity according to the "ethical and moral development" of a particular social group likely to encounter the work in question. Normative categories, such as "adult" and "youth," reflected assumptions about an individual's acquired capacity to integrate sexually explicit material into a regime of sexual self-management. While adults could perform this task successfully, youth had not yet learned successful self-management and would risk self-corruption. See Hunter, Saunders, and Williamson, *On Pornography*, 214.

4. Kleinhans, "Virtual Child Porn," 73.

5. Glass, "Redeeming Value," 360.

6. Adler, "The Perverse Law of Child Pornography," 239–40.

7. The experience of photographers and academics such as Marian Rubin, Jacqueline Livingston, Marilyn Zimmerman, Betsy Schneider, and David Sonenschein reveal instances where law enforcement officials considered family photographs of children, often depicted as nude, bathing, or dressed in costumes, as potential child pornography. See Rubin et al., "'Not a Pretty Picture'"; and Sonenschein, "Sources of Reaction to 'Child Pornography.'" For an extended overview of the various scandals surrounding perceived instances of child pornography, see Califia, "No Minor Issues."

8. For examples, see O'Donnell and Milner, *Child Pornography*, 70; and Taylor and Quayle, *Child Pornography*, 4.

9. Kleinhans, "Virtual Child Porn," 75.

10. Kleinhans, "Virtual Child Porn."

11. *United States v. Williams*, 553 U.S. 285 (2008).

12. Quoted in Adler, "The Perverse Law of Child Pornography," 262.

13. Adler, "The Perverse Law of Child Pornography," 262.

14. Adler, "The Perverse Law of Child Pornography," 272.

15. Adler, "The Perverse Law of Child Pornography," 272.
16. See Underwager and Wakefield, "Sexual Abuse, Anti-sexuality, and the Pornography of Power." The authors argue that, like Adler's pedophilic gaze, criminal investigations produce their own body of pornographic representation through the interrogation of perceived child victims.
17. Adler, "The Perverse Law of Child Pornography," 265.
18. Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, 45.
19. L. Williams, *Hard Core* (1999), 35.
20. These films include Pedro Almodóvar's *Bad Education* (2004), Asia Argento's *The Heart Is Deceitful above All Things* (2004), Miranda July's *Me You and Everyone We Know* (2005), Gregg Araki's *Mysterious Skin* (2004), Todd Solondz's *Palindromes* (2004), and Nicole Kassell's *The Woodsman* (2004).
21. Davis, "Imagining Intergenerationality," 377.
22. Mohr, "The Pedophilia of Everyday Life," 20.
23. P. Jenkins, *Moral Panic*, 155.
24. Mohr, "The Pedophilia of Everyday Life," 20.
25. Kincaid, *Erotic Innocence*, 15.
26. Edelman, *No Future*, 11–13.
27. Rose, *The Case of Peter Pan*, 12.
28. Rose, *The Case of Peter Pan*, 16.
29. Rose, *The Case of Peter Pan*, 16.
30. Rose, *The Case of Peter Pan*, 20.
31. Kipnis, *Bound and Gagged*, 62.
32. Edelman, *No Future*, 2.
33. Califia, "No Minor Issues," 60.
34. Hacking, "The Making and Molding of Child Abuse," 287–88.
35. In making this move from the fictions of child-pornography law to literature, I am indebted to Kathryn Bond Stockton's excellent *The Queer Child*. Stockton argues that literary fiction and film "imagine and present what sociology, Law, and History cannot pierce, given established taboos surrounding children. Novels and films, in their inventive forms, are rich stimulators of questions public cultures seem to have no language for encountering" (10).
36. See Cocca, *Jailbait*, 18–19; and Fischel, "Per Se or Power?," 287–90, which draws much from Cocca's study. While Joseph Fischel is aware that many gay men often report favorably on relationships with older men during their teenage years, he argues convincingly for retaining the gender neutrality of youth as a protected legal class. Fischel's argument for revising statutory rape laws around a notion of sexual autonomy, rather than consent and force, may offer a more nuanced approach to adjudicating power differentials within sexual relationships.
37. Stadler, "Keeping Secrets," 17.
38. Stadler, "Keeping Secrets," 17.
39. Stadler, "Keeping Secrets," 15.
40. John quoted in Stadler, "Keeping Secrets," 15.
41. Stadler, *Allan Stein*, 82.
42. Stadler, *Allan Stein*, 82.
43. Stadler, *Allan Stein*, 117.
44. Stadler, *Allan Stein*, 263.

45. Califia, "No Minor Issues," 63.

46. In her reading of Henry James's novella *The Pupil*, Stockton provides another example of how fantasy, conceived in terms of the "fetishistic delay and stasis" of Deleuzian masochism, might offer a basis for an ethical pedophilic relation between a man and a boy. If Stéphane's occlusion within Matthew's sexual fantasy results in his rapidly declining health, then, in James's story, the masochistic verbal play that holds pupil and tutor together provides a means to pleasure while forestalling the boy's eventual death. Stockton, *The Queer Child*, 84, 78–88.

47. Mohr, "The Pedophilia of Everyday Life," 20.