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Historicizing Age, Sex, and Agency

KRISTINE ALEXANDER

As a historian of childhood who enjoys grappling with questions about evidence, epistemology, and ethics, I devoured *Unspeakable* when it first came out. Writing about the history of sex between children and adults in our current moment — a time when, as Joseph J. Fischel notes, the preferred mode of sexuality is “adult consensuality” — is a difficult task, and Rachel Hope Cleves takes it on unflinchingly.¹ She has produced a challenging and rewarding book that offers much to scholars working on sexuality, literary celebrity, and British expat life between the late nineteenth and mid-twentieth centuries. Her work should also be required reading for historians interested in age, agency, and the lived experience of young people.

While on one level, *Unspeakable* is an account of the adult life and preoccupations of the once-well-known British novelist and pederast Norman Douglas, it is also — perhaps unsurprisingly for a study of a man who claimed to have had sex with well over 1,000 young male and female virgins — a book about children. The first child the reader encounters is Douglas himself, born into British expatriate privilege in Austria in 1868. Insisting that his boyhood experiences “determined the life of the man,” Cleves writes that in mid-life, Douglas told friends that “his interest in sex [had begun] when he was six years old,” while hinting “that his earliest sexual encounters [had been] with his sister.”² While hating “the conformity and bullying” he experienced as a schoolboy, the young Douglas also enjoyed learning about natural history and was an active participant in the peer sexual cultures that were common across late nineteenth-century English public schools.³

As the book moves forward through time (after Douglas the child has grown up), the reader encounters dozens of other young people whose lives intersected with his. Some of these interactions were clearly unwelcome and/or traumatic, as evidenced, for example, by the words of sixteen-year-old Edward Riggall, twelve-year-old Duncan Knight, and ten-year old Esmond Knight, who testified against Douglas following his arrests for indecent assault in London in 1916 and 1917. The unhappy children discussed in *Unspeakable* also include Douglas’s sons Archie and Robin, born in the early twentieth century during his brief marriage to Elsa Fitzgibbon. While Douglas was

granted custody of the boys after his divorce, he was by all accounts a neglectful father who possibly molested one of them. While clearly preferring to spend time (and have sex) with other young people, Douglas occasionally turned to his sons when he needed them: after his second London arrest, for example, the teenage Archie helped his father pack so that he could jump bail and flee to France and Italy.

The hints of incest and allegations of sexual assault contained in the pages of this book are difficult to read. Differently challenging are Cleves's accounts of the numerous other young people who chose to accept Douglas's advances. Their stories jar with the understanding — near-universal since the 1980s — that children are defined by their inability to consent and that sexuality marks a clear and ideally inviolable boundary between childhood and adulthood.⁴ The fact that a number of youngsters (and in some cases their parents) did not object to the prospect and reality of sex with Douglas highlights the still-understudied ways in which the history of modern childhood, poverty, family, and work is also often the history of sex. In some cases, and in accordance with local custom, Douglas established contracts with young people's adult relatives, which formalized the exchange of money and gifts for youthful sex and companionship. Cleves's uncovering of this history echoes a point made by Steven Maynard some twenty-five years ago, in an article about late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century urban Ontario: "the actions of mothers who hired out their sons or who attempted to capitalize on the discovery of their sons' sexual relations were also rooted in the often harsh economic realities of working-class life."⁵

Douglas's sexual relationships with young people also raise important questions about agency, a concept that has recently been criticized by numerous historians of childhood and youth for its reliance on outdated models of power, individual autonomy, and choice.⁶ While I have written elsewhere about the limited intellectual potential of agency for historians of young people, I also agree with Rob Boddice and Mark Smith that "agency ... should still have a place within historiographical practice as an object of research in those contexts where the concept of agency was available to the historical actors themselves."⁷ This was clearly the case with Attilio, an "observant" and "tranquil" boy who before meeting Douglas had supported his fatherless family by carrying heavy loads of bricks along the rough roads outside Levanto.⁸ In post-First World War Italy, where widespread poverty meant that many young people had to perform dangerous

and unpleasant labour in order to survive, Attilio clearly understood that he could shape his life (albeit in limited ways) by making choices. Douglas, writing candidly about his relationships with boys in a 1919 issue of the *Anglo-Italian Review*, stated that Attilio had asked him: "Do you wonder at my preferring to be with you?"⁹ In addition to providing evidence of some young people's economic agency, stories like Attilio's also foreground the agentic sexuality of children and youth. Here Cleves's findings resonate with Don Romesburg's observation that some working-class teenage boys in 1930s Chicago similarly "came to appreciate the value of more formalized sexual exchanges with men and to embrace the utility of ... [their] own bod[ies] as a tool for material resourcefulness and opportunity to travel."¹⁰

The book's most significant analytical interventions regarding agency, consent, and the lived/remembered experience of intergenerational sex focus on a smaller number of boys: the Italians René Mari and Emilio Papa, and Eric Wolton, a working-class English boy who Douglas first picked up on Guy Fawkes night at London's Crystal Palace. With the blessing of their parents, these three youths lived and travelled with Douglas for extended periods of time, with the sexual side of their relationships ending after each boy reached puberty. Mari, Papa, and Wolton also maintained affectionate relationships with Douglas (marked both by written correspondence and in-person visits) throughout their lives. The diaries and letters written by these three individuals — both during their youthful travels with Douglas and as adults, after their sexual relationships with him had ended — comprise, as Cleves reminds us, an exceptional body of evidence. They provide unsettling proof that at least some of the youngsters who had sex with Douglas felt love and gratitude toward him throughout their lives. What can we make of the fact that these historical subjects neither experienced nor remembered their sexual relationships with Douglas as traumatic? Cleves offers one possible answer by reminding readers that "sex between men and boys may have been exploitative and predicated on power inequities, but so were many other types of sexual encounters in the early twentieth century."¹¹

Unspeakable, in other words, demonstrates that it is crucial — but can also be very hard — to historicize the subjects of our scholarship. This is perhaps especially so when those subjects include child sexuality and adults' fond memories of the intergenerational sex they had when they were children and teenagers. In this respect, we should remember two things: a) the categories, meanings, and expected life

experiences of “children” and “adolescents” are culturally and historically specific; and b) the idea that children are naturally pre- or non-sexual and that all sexual contact between minors and adults is abuse (the lens through which it is tempting to read this book) is actually a relatively recent development. The figures of the pedophile or adult sex offender and the innocent and sexualized (as opposed to sexual) child were, as a number of scholars have demonstrated, culturally and legally produced in the late twentieth-century United States as the result of radical feminist concerns about child pornography, incest, and child sex abuse.¹² The late twentieth-century redefinition of all “intergenerational sexual and power relations as inherently asymmetrical and one-sided” places children’s agentic sexuality under erasure, while promoting silence and squeamishness about what Cleves and Nicholas Syrett remind us is actually a “long history of age asymmetry” in histories of courtship, sex, and even heterosexual marriage.¹³

The perception that the contemporary focus on pedophiles and child victims is universal and trans-historical (as opposed to recent and contingent) is hard to shake, and it has shaped how some scholars have understood and engaged with Cleves’s work. Several of my history of childhood colleagues, for example, have told me that they are disturbed by the premise of *Unspeakeable* and do not intend to read it. In a 2017 video conversation about the book archived on the University of Chicago Press YouTube channel, the historian who interviewed Cleves consistently called Douglas a pedophile — a descriptor that is both anachronistic and, I think, an indication of how difficult it is to imagine or understand the lived experiences examined in the book through a lens other than the one that has been dominant in western culture since the 1980s.¹⁴ We need to think more about inequality, power, pleasure, and harm in more complex and historically specific ways. Cleves pushes us to do exactly this, in part by asking which was more disagreeable for poor youths: doing monotonous manual labour in settings where you could get seriously injured, or working for Norman Douglas? And who ultimately had it worse: the wife and children he neglected and treated cruelly, or the boys and girls he had sex with?

In the midst of all this, bigger questions begin to suggest themselves. Is sexuality, as Steven Angelides encourages us to wonder, different from “other modes of human interaction”?¹⁵ What makes a child a child? As a category of difference, is age somehow different from race, gender, and class? Another relevant question is raised by Kathryn Bond Stockton in her foundational book *The Queer Child, or*

Growing Sideways in the Twentieth Century: “are we ... much less troubled by children’s pain (for example, their economic suffering) than we are troubled by their sexualized pleasure, even though we cite their possible pain as our rationale for delaying their pleasure?”¹⁶

While exposing the limits of twentieth-century fantasies about innocent and emotionally priceless childhoods, Stockton’s emphasis on the queer child and “growing sideways” also undermines popular modern understandings of aging (and the adult/child binary) as the inevitable result of forward-moving and linear time. Her work is part of an interdisciplinary body of scholarship that aligns itself against reproductive futurism, developmental paradigms, and the tendency to see children as “becomings” instead of “beings.”¹⁷ Yet, as geographer Chris Philo notes, “while scholars almost take it as read that they should question absolutes/binaries, notably that which previously sealed-off ‘capable adult’ from ‘incapable child,’ there remains a reluctance to do the same for this boundary between ‘childhood’ and ‘sexuality,’ and even more so when the proposition arises of sexual encounters across the adult–child divide.”¹⁸

This reluctance, which informed Cleves’s decision to write *Unspeakable*, has also shaped the historiography of childhood and youth more broadly.¹⁹ Where might we go from here? Historians of young people (and others) would do well to heed Ishita Pande’s call, made in her recent book about childhood, sexuality, and law in late colonial India, to “provincialize ‘age’ as a measure of human capacity.”²⁰ Using postcolonial, feminist, and queer theory to build on the work of Carole Pateman and Charles Mills, Pande argues that our analyses need to consider the “epistemic contract on age,” which she defines as “an implicit agreement that chronological age is a universal and natural measure of human capacity and hence of legal and political subjectivity.”²¹ These words, along with Cleves’s thought-provoking examination of “the social world of sex between men and children before the 1950s,” make it clear that historians still have a lot of work to do.²² I look forward to following these debates in years to come.

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Endnotes

- 1 Joseph J. Fischel, *Sex and Harm in the Age of Consent* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2016), 6.
- 2 Rachel Hope Cleves, *Unspeakable: A Life beyond Sexual Morality* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2020), 21.
- 3 Cleves, *Unspeakable*, 23.
- 4 Steven Angelides, *The Fear of Child Sexuality: Young People, Sex, and Agency* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2019), x; Fischel, *Sex and Harm in the Age of Consent*, 7; Steven Angelides, "Feminism, Child Abuse, and the Erasure of Child Sexuality," *GLQ* 10, no. 2 (2004): 141–177.
- 5 Steven Maynard, "'Horrible Temptations': Sex, Men, and Working-Class Male Youth in Urban Ontario, 1890–1935," *Canadian Historical Review* 78, no. 2 (June 1997): 231. Like Cleves, Maynard also notes that experiences of intergenerational sex between men and boys in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Canada varied widely, from unwelcome advances and assault to long-lasting and affectionate relationships.
- 6 Karen Vallgård, Kristine Alexander, and Stephanie Olsen, "Against Agency," Commentaries, Society for the History of Children & Youth, October 2018, accessed August 20, 2022, <https://www.shcy.org/features/commentaries/against-agency/>; Mona Gleason, "Avoiding the Agency Trap: Caveats for Historians of Children, Youth, and Education," *History of Education* 45, no.4 (2016): 446–459; Susan A. Miller, "Assent as Agency in the Early Years of the Children of the American Revolution," *Journal of the History of Childhood and Youth* 9, no. 1 (Winter 2016): 48–65; Kristine Alexander, "Agency and Emotion Work," *Jeunesse: Young People, Texts, Cultures* 7, no. 2 (2015): 120–128; Mary Jo Maynes, "Age as a Category of Historical Analysis: History, Agency, and Narratives of Childhood," *Journal of the History of Childhood and Youth* 1, no. 1 (Winter 2008): 114–124.
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- 8 Norman Douglas, "At Levanto," *Anglo-Italian Review* 3–4 (1919): 170–73; quoted in Cleves, *Unspeakable*, 133.
- 9 Cleves, *Unspeakable*, 133.

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- 11 Cleves, *Unspeakable*, 12.
- 12 Kadji Amin, "Keyword 5: Pedophile," *Differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* 50, no. 1 (2019): 95; Fischel, *Sex and Harm in the Age of Consent*, 3; Gillian Harkins, "Foucault, the Family, and the Cold Monster of Neoliberalism," in *Foucault, the Family and Politics*, eds. Leon Rocha and Robbie Duschinsky (London: Macmillan, 2012), 82–180; Angelides, "Feminism, Sex Abuse, and the Erasure of Child Sexuality."
- 13 Angelides, *The Fear of Child Sexuality*, xxii; Rachel Hope Cleves and Nicholas L. Syrett, "Roy Moore is Not a Pedophile," *Washington Post*, November 11, 2017, accessed October 10, 2022, https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/roy-moore-is-not-a-pedophile/2017/11/19/1a9ae238-cb21-11e7-aa96-54417592cf72_story.html. See also Nicholas L. Syrett, *American Child Bride: A History of Minors and Marriage in the United States* (Chapel Hill, NC: UNC Press, 2016).
- 14 "By the Book: Rachel Hope Cleves and Alexis Coe in Conversation" University of Chicago Press, November 2017, video, accessed October 1, 2022, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gy_pDQbdo-sk&t=509s&tab_channel=UniversityofChicagoPress.
- 15 Angelides, "Feminism, Child Sex Abuse, and the Erasure of Child Sexuality," 151.
- 16 Kathryn Bond Stockton, *The Queer Child, or Growing Sideways in the Twentieth Century* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2009), 61–62.
- 17 Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004); Erica Burman, *Deconstructing Developmental Psychology* (London & New York: Routledge, 1994); Claudia Castañeda, *Figurations: Child, Bodies, Worlds* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002); Allison James, Chris James, and Alan Prout, "Theorizing Childhood," in *Childhood: Critical Concepts on Sociology, Volume 1*, ed. Chris Jenks (London and New York: Routledge, 2005), 148.
- 18 Chris Philo, "Foucault, Sexuality, and When Not to Listen to Children," *Children's Geographies* 9, no. 2 (2011): 125–126.
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