

SIGNIFYING THE CHILDISH ADULT OF HORUS GILGAMESH'S AWKWARD
MOMENTS OF THE CHILDREN'S BIBLE

by

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THESIS ABSTRACT

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Title: Signifying the Childish Adult of Horus Gilgamesh's *Awkward Moments of the Children's Bible*

This project focuses on Horus Gilgamesh's *Awkward Moments of the Children's Bible*, Vol. 1 (2013), an adult picture book that parodies the Bible by illustrating biblical scriptures with child unfriendly images of gore, sex, and God's sexy ass. Using semiotic, religious, and queer theory, I read this text as not only a satirical one, but one that is life affirming to "childish adults"—those individuals who don't quite fit into the heteropatriarchal standards normalized by religious right ideologies.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION: THE CHILDISH ADULT

What does it mean to be “childish?” To most adults in the U.S., being called childish is an insult. It suggests that one is not mature enough to fit into society and unable to function in the world of adults. To those of us who don’t quite fit in to begin with, however, being childish can signify differently. I, for example, am a young, Japanese, gay man whose inability and unwillingness to adhere to U.S. norms doesn’t indicate immaturity or naivety, but rather informs my displacement in a society that is dominantly white, heteronormative, and Christian. My colleagues constantly remind me to keep my shoes on when I enter their houses. They giggle when I am confused at a *Bachelorette* episode, assuring me that, apparently, one woman eliminating dozens of men week by week in the pursuit of “true love” is a normal, heterosexual “thing.” And of course, I will never forget the freaked out look on my Christian friends’ faces when I told them that I found the concept of eternal heaven “creepy.” My friends’ attempts to educate and acculturate me, while in some ways appreciated, remind me that I don’t quite fit in the same ways they do.

My point here isn’t necessarily to equate queerness and being a person of color with childishness, but rather to emphasize how straightness, whiteness, and Christianity¹ are inextricably bound with the standards of adulthood—being proper, professional, successful, and so forth—within a U.S. cultural context. If this postulation remains true, how can we as queer scholars think through queer texts to infiltrate and overturn U.S. expectations of adult appropriateness? This central question guides my fascination with Horus Gilgamesh’s *Awkward Moments of the Bible* (2013), an adult picture book that

parodies the Bible by illustrating biblical scriptures with very child-unfriendly images of gratuitous gore, wanton sex, and God’s sexy ass. For instance, the title cover of the book illustrates the heroic story of Noah’s ark with an image of Noah leisurely sipping a martini while surrounded by a deluge of human, puppy, and kitten corpses (figure 1).

Awkward Moments follows a vein of adultish picture books such as Adam Mansbach’s *Go the Fuck to Sleep* (2011) and Avery Monsen’s *All my Friends are Dead* (2010), which respectively use “bad” language and cynical contemplations of death to uproariously remind us that sometimes it’s okay to be terrible parents and pessimistic loners. These books fall

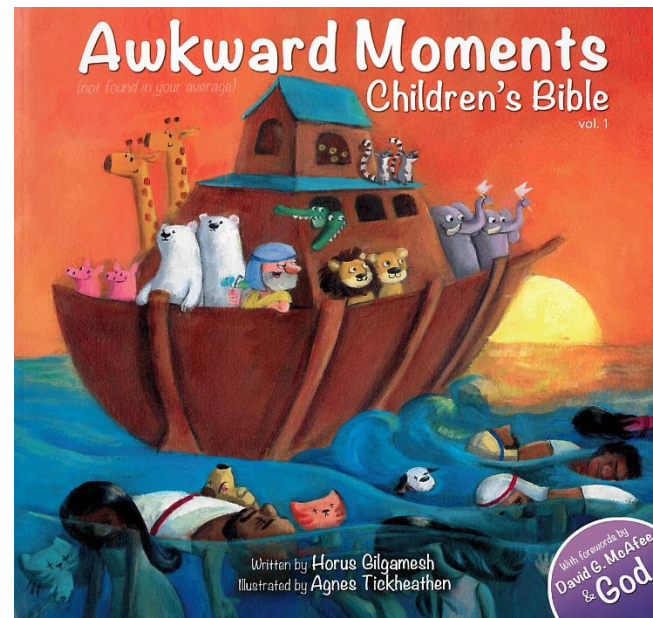


figure 1: Cover page

into a genre that we might call “adult picture books,” which subvert traditional children’s books with child-unfriendly signifiers of text (such as the word “fuck”) and/or image (such as Noah sipping a martini). Terri Toles Patkins, noting how adult picture books have “hijacked” the genre of children’s picture books, claims such texts blur the line between adulthood and childhood, illustrating “a society of independent but often immature adults who are incapable of (or unwilling to) accept responsibility” (101). As opposed to drawing out these “immature adults” as a pejorative problem in U.S. society, I want to draw on their queer power by looking at *Awkward Moments* not only as a queer text within a line of adult picture books, but also as a parody of the Bible, a text that substantiates and reinforces numerous ideological beliefs of U.S. Christianity. Subversion of the Bible via child-unfriendly signifiers is by no means an exclusive innovation,

however: texts such as R. Crumb's comic book *The Book of Genesis Illustrated* (2009) and Evan Mascagni's adult picture book *The Bible Said What?: 10 Things They Didn't Teach me in Catholic School* (2014) have also drawn attention for visualizing the sex, violence, and death of the Bible. In terms of scope, I focus on *Awkward Moments* as a generative site to consider queerness because it not only harkens to a genre of literature that challenges conventional notions of child and adult, but also because its aesthetics—assumedly simple interplays of text and image—have caused me to revisit a question central to my research: how does the queer signify?

As an ex-Christian queer Asian, I am personally invested in thinking through how *Awkward Moments* deconstructs Christian ideologies that have historically oppressed minority peoples, often through dogmatic and insisted interpretations of scripture. In this paper, I take on the ideologies of homophobia, heteropatriarchy, and the right of life over death and consider how their subversions can give life to queers and death seekers. My commitment to the disintegration of hetero-patriarchal masculinity is, of course, rooted in my commitment to the flourishing of the queer who finds (or doesn't find) themselves as livable in the context of U.S. Christianity. Tangentially, but not entirely separate, lies my interest in the death seeker, who by their very wishing to die subverts the Christian obsession over the rights of life and living over death. I am interested in this queer figure insofar that it reveals—and resists—how Christian ideologies' insistences on life derives certain rights and privileges from the people who need them most: for example, the pregnant woman who is denied the right to her own body, or the terminal patient who wishes to die peacefully.² As a parodic, adult picture book, *Awkward Moments* plays with normalized expectations of proper Christian children and adults, generating new and

unexpected visualities of homoerotic holy men, murderous gay sissies, and sardonic death seekers who of sidestep, mock, and overturn these pernicious ideologies.

While childhood and adulthood scholars have discussed numerous conceptions of the U.S. child and the U.S. adult, as well as their cultural significances, what grounds my research moreso is a commitment to a way of adult being that elides preestablished notions of maturity and propriety. One axiom that my paper acknowledges, then, is that there is a certain expected standard for adults to behave as adults and to contribute responsibly to society. Steven Mintz, for example, points out that a common complaint plaguing U.S. adults accuses them of being “aimless, irresponsible, and emotionally immature” (21). These claims—which of course still persist to the present day—are made in broad strokes via popular media, standardized by capitalistic, Christian, gendered, and heteronormative parameters. Yet the child is also not free of similar ambiguities and rigorous social constructions. Caroline F. Levander and Carol J. Singley have noted, for example, that the U.S. “has seized upon the image of the child in opposition to that which is constructed or institutionalized, and in the extent to which it has promoted the child as a force of resistance as well as innocent vulnerability” (4). This claim is proved by the recent scholarship of various queer theorists and children’s literature scholars, such as Kenneth Kidd, Jack Halberstam, and Kathryn Bond Stockton, which have theorized around the image of the child as a force that resists institutionalized ideologies, many of which position the child as an innocent, de-sexed, and vulnerable being. Acknowledging the depth of ways that adults and children have been defined/undefined by scholars working in U.S. contexts, my fixation in this project is not necessarily to tease out these various definitions, but to focus my efforts in hypothesizing and reading through a new

way of adult queer being. The object of my studies—*Awkward Moments*—will illustrate my theorization of this being, as well as carry out its imperative: to visualize and flourish ways of disrupting homophobia, patriarchy, and the obsession of life over death. In some ways, my investments are like those of Jack Halberstam, who writes in the Introduction to *The Queer Art of Failure*: “I hold on to what have been characterized as childish and immature notions of possibility and look for alternatives in the form of what Foucault calls ‘subjugated knowledge’ across the culture: in subcultures, counter cultures, and even popular cultures” (23).

Inspired by Halberstam’s dedication to childish possibilities and subjugated cultural knowledges, my approach assumes that dominant U.S. ideologies that demand heteronormativity and homogeneity are dependent upon overarching demands of proper adulthood. Furthermore, these entrenched ideologies inform and are informed by oppressive Christian beliefs and practices (such as homophobia and misogyny), which are founded—through complex veins of learning such as preaching, communal study, and personal devotion—upon interpretations of Biblical scripture. If these assertions are true, I suggest that a childish re-rendering of the Bible, such as *Awkward Moments*, can do much work in exposing, ridiculing, and dismantling U.S. Christian ideologies that continue to harm the lives of minority peoples. The childishness of *Awkward Moments*, however, is not just childishness that rejects notions of proper adulthood. It also involves the laughter of adults, who likewise reject notions of proper childhood. At the same time *Awkward Moments* embraces childishness by tampering irresponsibly with a sacred text, its positioning of said text with child-inappropriate imagery humors adults who know that mature images of sex and gore are “awkward” here because they contrast with

commonly-known Christian interpretations and teachings. If I may, then, hypothesize a ghostly figure—one who revels in childishness and rebels against notions of proper adulthood, yet is simultaneously acculturated to adult U.S. norms and laughs at their disintegration—I would like to call this figure the “childish adult.” In my configuration, the childish adult refers to us who don’t quite fit into U.S. society, and laugh when the structures of our society that prevent our very “fitting in”—such as capitalism, queerphobia, racism, and sexism—are parodied and torn apart in forms that would conventionally be described as “childish.” We might call these forms of text childish literature: texts that are aimed towards children and/or imitate tropes—recognizable linguistically, visually, or otherwise—from conventional children’s literature.

My goal in this project is not only to explore, through close reading, how *Awkward Moments* parodies and dismantles oppressive Christian ideologies, but to press upon my own assertion that the text functions on what I call “the semiotic landscape of the childish adult.” I define the semiotic landscape of the childish adult as a mode of semiotics that signifies through contentious difference, using tensions between form, context, text, and illustration to parody and pervert ideologies that are restrictive to the flourishing of the childish adult. While I use the verb “parody” in reference to the way that texts or readings imitate their traditional counterparts to subvert commonly understood meanings, the verb “pervert” requires more nuancing. The noun “pervert” is often used derogatorily—to refer to sexual predators, for example. However, I use the verb pervert much like its etymological definition in the Oxford English Dictionary: “To turn aside (a process, action, text, etc.) from a correct state, course, or aim” (“pervert, v.”). In my usage, perverting, like parodying, engages in a mode of imitation to subvert

meanings from “a correct state.” However, pervert’s very pejorative inflection hints that something is a bit “off,” indeed, that something is not right with what is considered right. To label something as a perversion is not to deem it “bad,” but rather to manifest and imagine that which sidesteps and subverts tired, conventional notions of rightness—thus giving pleasure to those who can’t quite contend with these notions to begin with.

I begin this essay by framing my thoughts around those of queer theorists who have examined the queerness of children and adults. My goal here is not to essentialize the childish adult as an identity category that amorphously embodies all those who “don’t quite fit,” but to theorize how feelings of queer childishness and adult failure can resonate deeply with those of us who revel in/identify with adult childishness. As I am embarking on a literary project, I want to also use queer theory to frame adult childishness not only as a way of being, but as a way of framing a complex mode of semiotics that permeates adult picture books such as *Awkward Moments*. Towards this aim, I focus on the works of semiotics scholars in the next section to establish the semiotic landscape of the childish adult. The semiotic landscape of the childish adult is vital to my work because it raises the importance of collectively examining signifiers/signs of text, illustration, context, and form. But more importantly, it also helps describe the very visual stage that allows *Awkward Moments* to queerly subvert oppressive ideologies. This configuration is especially important when applied to a text that juxtaposes the sacred to the profane. From here, I close read three vignettes from the text through this semiotic framework to exemplify the queer potential *Awkward Moments* has for the childish adult. Finally, I conclude with attention to religious satire more broadly, pondering how popular forms of derision can suggest hope for childish adults in an era where religious oppression

continues to run rampant. Throughout, *Awkward Moments*, as my primary text, not only helps me think through these ideas but serves as the primary example of life-giving reading, laughing, surviving, creating.

CHAPTER II

THEORIZING THE CHILDISH ADULT

One of the major forces that the childish adult must contend with is the fact that U.S. culture is deeply fixated upon heteronormative demands of reproductivity. This fixation—evident in rhetoric surrounding the nuclear family, gay rights issues, and sex education, for example—is undoubtedly intertwined with the way children and adults navigate U.S. society. Indeed, U.S. social norms and practices demand that both children and adults be/grow into productive citizens, and punish them for failing to do so.³ It is no surprise then that “family friendly” contemporary texts aimed at children and adults, such as *Despicable Me 2* (2013, in which the previously single villain-father Gru meets and marries Lucy, a female agent of the Anti-Villain-League) or *Finding Dory* (2016, in which the titular blue tang Dory abandons her adopted family of clownfish on the insistence that she must find her biological family), continue to reflect these values and suggest that nuclear, reproductive families are the ideal way to lead fulfilling lives.⁴ However, in recent years, both children’s literature scholars and queer theorists have questioned the seated, axiomatic norms of U.S. reproductivity. In doing so, they have imagined and illustrated queer childhoods and adulthoods that push beyond the constricting obsessions that burden queer children and adults. In this section, I use the work of these scholars, mainly those of queer theorists Kathryn Bond Stockton and Jack Halberstam, to suggest that my conception of the childish adult is indebted to queer childhoods that resist expectations of growing up into proper adulthoods. At the same time, however, the childish adult, because of their acculturation with the forms of standardization that constitute U.S. ideologies, also draws pleasure from recognizing that

which is considered “inappropriate” to idealized notions of the proper child. Somewhat ironically, then, my figuration of the childish adult is the result of queer children and adults *missing* each other. At the same time that the queer child seeks what would destroy the proper, reproductive child—nonreproductive lifestyles, dangerous adult practices—and longs for the state of adulthood where their inadmittable desires would go unchallenged, the queer adult longs for the past, ghostly gay child, that melancholy state of life when their very forbidden desires forced them to grow up quickly. The childish adult draws from both of these desires but also laughs joyously when the U.S. values which queer children and adults divert and play around are subverted through explicit signs of child/adult impropriety.

For both children’s literature and queer scholars, questioning the U.S. ideal of the reproductive child has been generative in dismantling U.S. heteronormativity and its embeddedness in culture. Perhaps most famously, in his work *No Future*, Lee Edelman castigates heteronormative reproductivity and calls for the destruction of what he calls “the Child,” the figurehead image of innocence that preserves “the absolute privilege of heteronormativity by rendering unthinkable, by casting outside the political domain, the possibility of a queer resistance” (2). Edelman’s claims have been revolutionary to the fields of queer theory and queer children’s lit. However, they have also drawn critique from scholars who—rightfully so—argue that Edelman’s disavowal of the Child erases possibilities of children’s queerness and queer futurity, especially of those children who don’t figure into Edelman’s assumed figure of the reproductive middle-class white child.⁵ Indeed, as children’s lit scholar Kenneth Kidd notes, queer studies concerning the child have primarily focused on two strands of thought: one concerned with queering the

Child's nonnormative potential and the other, alongside Edelman, more attentive to "underscoring the Child's normative power" (183). If these two foundational, contentious, and interconnected methods of approaching children/queer studies persist (and I believe they do, although the lines between/through them are increasingly and beneficially becoming more muddled) then I want to use them to consider the being of *queer adults*—specifically, of course, the figure of the childish adult. Although I acknowledge and draw power from the ways that Edelman resists the normative power of the Child, my investment in the childish adult compels me to argue that the childish adult's desire for childish literature that subverts dominant U.S. norms is certainly emblematic of a desire to resist adult reproductivity, but also owes its power to queer children/childhoods, both remembered as a ghostly afterimage and lived in the present.

To think through these converging points of queer adults/childhoods more clearly, I turn to the illuminating, imaginative works of both Kathryn Bond Stockton and Jack Halberstam to establish the childish adult as a figure who not only borrows power from queer children/childhoods but is an active agent of adult nonreproductivity. In particular, I find Stockton's theory of "growing sideways" useful in theorizing the childish adult not necessarily as a product of temporal queer childhoods, but rather as a figure who is positioned sidewardly to queer childishness. Growing sideways, as Stockton explains, is similar but not completely reducible to Edelman's anti-reproductive death drive, and more importantly "locates energy, pleasure, vitality, and (e)motion in the back-and-forth of connections and extensions that are not reproductive" (13). From my perspective, the childish adult aligns with this notion of growing sideways: the childish adult, drawing (motifs, conventions, textual forms, (e)motions, pleasures) from (queer) childhoods that

resist compulsory heteronormativity, locates power and energy in queer adulthood by presently subverting the (re)productive demands of normative adulthood. Indeed, it is no coincidence that in listing versions of the queer child who have grown sideways, Stockton includes who she calls “The Grown Homosexual.” She describes this figure as one who is “fastened” to the figure of the child, “both in the form of a ghostly self and in the form of ‘arrested development’” (22). Stockton’s goal here isn’t to define the grown homosexual as a pejorative figure born of fundamentalist and religious accusations of immature homosexuals, but rather to imagine and visualize another way of being queer, of being sideways to both normative childhood and adulthood and diverging from reproductive heteronormativity. For my purposes, Stockton’s conception of growing sideways is invaluable in placing childish adults in sideways relations to and drawing power from both queer childhoods and adulthoods. In terms of my project, the childish adult becomes an important figure by which to theorize texts that are childish literature (i.e., center children’s literature conventions) but also recognize what might constitute “inappropriate” signifiers within these texts.

Along similar notions of queer child/adulthoods that evade heteronormativity, Halberstam revels in examining how the art of failure resists normative reproductivity. If success denotes heteronormative, adult ideals of advancement, capital accumulation, and propriety, failure becomes a counterhegemonic practice by which hegemonic systems become open to corruption by nonconformity, nonreproductivity, and negativity.⁶ Childish adults embody failure by not only reveling in the childish, but furthermore laughing when the standards of adult appropriateness are turned upon their heads. The

failure of the childish adult in conforming to U.S. ideals of adulthood becomes the force that threatens oppressive heteronormativity and Christian ideals.

The childish adult, like Stockton's grown homosexual, is haunted by a queer childhood lost to the demands of heteronormativity but now finds pleasure in perverting heteronormative childhoods and adulthoods with the profane, with the "too-inappropriate-for-kids." The childish adult is also a product of queer failure and resists heteronormative reproductivity in their failing to "grow up." *Awkward Moments* is only one text that embodies this power of the childish adult. Here, the ideal Child is not safe: for this so-called children's bible, rather than teaching good, heteronormative values rooted in U.S. Christian ideologies, presents children with shocking images that would horrify ideal Children and parents. Nor is the heteronormative adult safe: for this adult picture book undermines the axiomatic power of the Bible with the disgusting, the profane—even, at times, through literal translations of Bible verses themselves. This ability—to create an underground space where the raucous laughter of queer beings unsettles heteronormative constructions of the ideal child and adult—exemplifies the queer potential of theorizing adult childishness through text.

CHAPTER III

SETTING THE SEMIOTIC LANDSCAPE OF THE CHILDISH ADULT

My musings on the power of the childish adult raise another question: how does *Awkward Moments* queerly signify the childish adult? Here, I propose that this work signifies and draws the power of the childish adult not merely as a text in and of itself, but through the interacting tensions of its signifiers: combinations of text, visual imagery, and cultural contextualization.⁷ In unpacking the semiotics of *Awkward Moments*, I establish that the text operates within what I call the semiotic landscape of the childish adult, an operative force that pushes the hegemonic and oppressive limits of certain U.S. Christianities by playfully putting signifying text, images, and dominant U.S. culture in contentious contradictions. Once again, my aim is not to essentialize the childish adult; there is no singular identity that is drawn to this specific interplay of semiotics. Rather, my stake here is in sketching out a complex mode of semiotics that—for many people besides just queer peoples and childish adults, I assume—gives life by uproariously parodying the Bible at the expense of oppressive Christian beliefs and practices.

Awkward Moments visually communicates perverse, childish queerness by locating conflicting signifiers of queerness and Christianity within a U.S. context, where mediums of religious propriety reign supreme. Indeed, reading this text away from an understanding of dominant U.S. culture would be misreading it. To illustrate the complex system of sign, signifiers, and signifieds that collaborate with understandings of U.S. culture to create queer meaning and power for childish adult, I use the term “semiotic landscape of the childish adult.” The semiotic landscape of the childish adult is derived from the work of Gunther Kress and Theo van Leeuwen, who use “semiotic landscape”

to describe “the range of forms or modes of public communication available in [society], and, on the other hand, their uses and valuations.” Kress and Leeuwen argue that the meaning of any visual communication must be read in context to the semiotic landscape: in the same way that features of a landscape, such as a hill and a clump of trees, only make sense by considering their larger environment (e.g. in this case, “field”), so too must modes of visual communication be read alongside and against other modes of communication in their societies (33). In terms of *Awkward Moments*, forms including but not limited to children’s picture books, children’s bibles, and Christian bibles help form the semiotic landscape that informs the text’s queer potential. Significantly—considering the mediums of U.S. Christian children’s bibles and bibles—*Awkward Moments* parodies and subverts these mediums, drawing derision towards them and the cultural power they have both historically and presently wield(ed). Disrupting this flow of cultural power is vital in the disestablishment of oppressive ideologies, such as heteronormativity and sexism, that have for so long been espoused by Christian-based strictures of idealized child and adult appropriateness. This is the work of texts that operate within the semiotic landscape of the childish adult.

Crucial to the power of this semiotic framework is an understanding of how meaning can be signified through difference. My work on the semiotics of the childish adult follows the writings of theorists who have asserted that contradictions and tensions between forms of signifiers create meaning in text. What signified meaning is conveyed when signifiers within a sign contradict, especially within a semiotic landscape that contends with oppressive, dominant ideologies? Émile Benveniste argues that things convey meaning “by virtue of the formal features that distinguish them from other things

of the same class” (37). Similarly to Kress and Leeuwen’s concerns with considering media within larger contexts of available communication, Benveniste necessitates that textual meaning be considered in relation to a legacy of texts that are similar to it. But it is the differences between the object in question and similar objects that signify meaning. Jacques Derrida agrees when he considers that every signified concept is not essentially meaningful, but rather exists in a chain of concepts that refers to each other meaningfully through a play of differences.⁸ More relevant to my work, however, is his consideration of deconstruction. In “Signature Event Context,” Derrida points out that metaphysical concepts, when seemingly in opposition, are never locked in a face-to-face dialogue between two isolated terms. Rather, contention between concepts always points to “hierachi[es]” and an “order of subordination” under which meaning is categorized and understood (108). As he writes, the objective of deconstruction is to, by means by a “double gesture/science/writing,” “practice an *overturning* of the classical opposition and a general *displacement* of the system” (108). The semiotic landscape of the childish adult, by placing contending signifiers of holiness and the profane on a visual plane, deconstructs hierarchical understandings of maturity and proper adult being.

In sum, the semiotic landscape of the childish adult—the framework that I apply to *Awkward Moments*—calls for a centering of *difference* in the examination of texts that subvert U.S. dominant ideologies in recognizable childish/adultish forms. This framework functions at a couple different levels: 1.) a consideration of the object to dominant forms of media by which the childish adult has been historically oppressed, and 2.) a recognition of the actual signifying components of the object, such as text and image, and the ways that they not only differ from like components in similar objects but

the ways in which they contest *each other*. Only by recognizing these signifying differences can we begin to discuss the queer potential of a text such as *Awkward Moments*, which conjoins signifying components of text and image to parody recognizable textual forms that have historically pushed to produce the appropriate child/adult.

To illustrate the queer potential of texts that operate within the semiotic landscape of the childish adult, I turn to an excerpt from *Awkward Moments* that uses contradicting signifiers to create a “bad” reading of scripture, evoking laughter towards the Bible as privileged form and questioning the homophobia of certain U.S. Christianities. In “Tear Those Boys To Pieces,” a scripture describing the prophet Elijah’s summoning of two “bears” to punish a band of unruly boys is illustrated with an image of Elijah angrily summoning two “gay bears,” who stand next to a pile of boyish corpses (figure 2). The illustrated bears signify not as “animal bears” but as “gay bears” because of visible signifiers that are recognizable to those familiar with U.S. gay culture:

buff, shirtless bodies, accompanied by tight pants, open jackets and suspenders, and, of course—sassy hand gestures.⁹ A tension is thus instilled between text and illustration signifiers: acculturated U.S. peoples would probably assume that a “correct” historical/theological/Biblical interpretation of the 2 Kings scripture would not argue that the bears Elisha summoned were gay bears. It—well—just doesn’t make sense. Indeed, if we even approached this scripture from only a historicist perspective, this scene would temporally impossible, as the association of “bear” with hairy men in the gay community was not popularized until the late 1980s.¹⁰

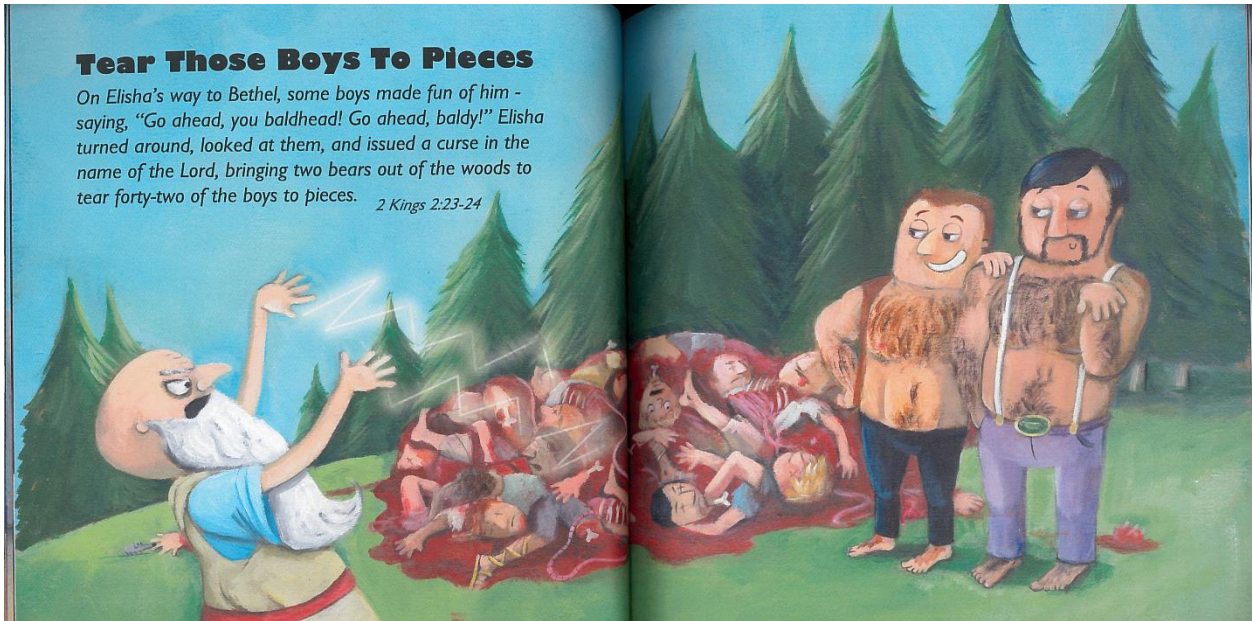


figure 2: *Tear Those Boys To Pieces*

However, it is this “not making sense”—the sheer ridiculousness that permeates the queer sign of mismatched scripture and illustration—that gives power to the childish adult by not only ridiculing the holy text of the Bible, but also by violently and pervertedly inserting gayness where it has never been conceived: indeed, in a text from which mobilizations of homophobia have drawn *their* power. Gayness, after all, has been historically oppressed by interpretations of the Bible. *Awkward Moments*’ amalgamation of “mismatched” signs is recognizable as “mismatched” because signs, within the context of U.S. society, are coded with meaning by ideological state apparatuses: in terms of our discussion, by schools, media, and, of course, churches.¹¹ When we are confronted with a visual plane that puts signs of religious morality right alongside images of gore and gayness, the awkward affect that stems from our association of signs to ideology becomes a rupturing force that threatens the standards of U.S. Christian morality. Indeed, how can proper adults explain away the juxtaposition of holy scripture to images of sexy bears and a ravaged pile of corpses, all pervertedly working together to tell a story that is—at least

scripturally—in numerous “official” translations of the Bible? This is not even to mention the title of the vignette, which simultaneously functions as a descriptive title and a sexual innuendo that insinuates sexual violence. The implications of this passage—that Christian standards of morality, such as the condemnation of gayness, are themselves ridiculous—are the kinds of readings that pleasure the childish adult who delights at the deconstruction of that which seeks to erase them.¹²

CHAPTER IV

THE SEMIOTIC LANDSCAPE OF THE CHILDISH ADULT IN ACTION:

GLORY OF THE HOMOEROTIC

Images of the homoerotic are another form of sociopolitical resistance and perversion deployed by *Awkward Moments*. As suggested with the previous example, the text does not shy from combining gay imagery with scripture to mock the Bible. In the scene “Behold, my Glory!” (figure 3), God’s sexy ass takes center stage, defiling a sacred moment with the homoerotic body of God. The image is accompanied from a scripture excerpted from the Moses story:

Moses said, “Lord, show me your glory!” The Lord replied, “I will put all of my glory in front of you and I will shout my name! But, don’t look at my face or I’ll have to kill you!” Then the Lord said, “When my glory passes by, I will put you behind a rock and cover you with my hand until I’m ready. Then, I will remove my hand and you will see my backside! But don’t ever look at my face!” Exodus 33:18-23

As illustrated here, the famous scene in which Moses beholds God's glory in the wilderness is interpreted away from traditional readings of scripture. In the forefront of the illustration, the great prophet peers coyly at the figure of God through a hole in a rock wall with widened eyes and an upturned grin. In turn, God, who stands further right of Moses and behind the rock, lifts his clothes and exposes his muscular buttocks. His face, slightly angled, reflects Moses's gaze: a similar upturned smile, while one eye looks back at Moses with voyeuristic pleasure.

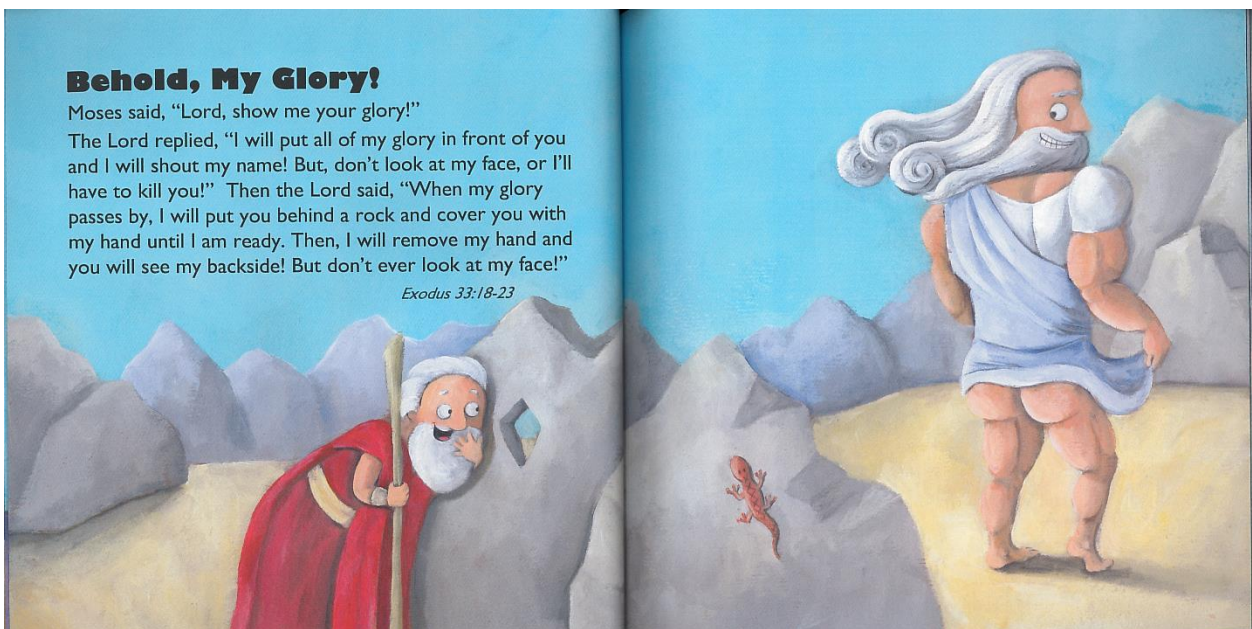


figure 3: Behold, My Glory!

The semiotic landscape of the childish adult reads this scene away from traditional, holy understandings and instead playfully inserts a homoerotic moment between the divine figures of Moses and God. Popular readings of this scripture typically assert that the reason Moses cannot gaze upon God is because of his indescribable, fervent holiness.¹³ The glory of God can only be experienced by mere man through some sort of covering. However, this vignette's illustration instead reimagines this moment as an intimate scene of homoeroticism: Moses is indeed sheltered, but a small hole in the

rock wall allows him to gleefully gaze at God's "backside." This "backside" is not the turning of God that obscures his blinding holiness, but rather the literal exposure of God's sexy ass.

Furthermore, "Behold, My Glory!" takes the signifying word "glory" and—via an accompanying visual signifier that clashes with the biblical scripture—ascribes queer meaning to it. No longer does glory refer solely to the reverent power of God, scathing to lowly men—it is beheld, by the pleasurable staring of Moses, as God's well-toned ass. Through a slippage of the term backside, glory is stripped of its sacred meaning and reduced (elevated?) to an anatomical component of God, one that heightens the homoerotic energy between Moses and God as they simultaneously spy and be spied upon. In considering the broader semiotic landscape, another queer interpretation of glory can be observed: the glory of gloryholes. Gloryholes are holes carved into the walls of public bathrooms. They became popular for the use of anonymous sex in the latter half of the 20th century and were especially popular with gay men due to their anonymous, no-strings-attached nature.¹⁴ The sign of the gloryhole in "Behold, My Glory!" is apparent not only through imagery, which depicts a hole in the wall through which Moses peers with delight, but also in the title and scriptural translation, which repeats the word "glory." In this scene, the gloryhole becomes the vessel through which Moses witnesses the homoerotic image: the exposed ass of God. Straying from traditional readings of this scripture in which Moses must turn away from the glory of God, the gloryhole becomes the discrete, pleasurable opening that fixates on the object of homoerotic desire. In the same way we queer childish adults might walk into a toilet stall, notice an opening in the wall, and recognize it as a unique part of queer and sexual history, we might also giggle

at “Behold, My Glory!” because it offers the same insider pleasure and uses it to pervert the powerful text of the Bible. Like the earlier excerpt concerning “gay bears,” this awkward moment disrupts the traditional values of U.S. evangelism, which have historically asserted the dominance of heteronormativity over queer expressions of eroticism and self-expression.

Awkward Moments, however, is not the only work that uses erotic imagery of holy figures to disrupt the power of U.S. evangelism. I am reminded here of the works of scholars and artists such as Richard Rambuss, Nicholas Laccetti, and Andres Serrano, who use literary analysis, contemporary photography, and queer theology to queer and eroticize Christ.¹⁵ These works, in addition to the homoeroticizing work of *Awkward Moments*, rework cultural heteronormative understandings of God and Christ. In doing so, they carve out spaces for queer peoples and childish adults to recognize what they might have been longing for—the infiltration of gayness into the holy realm. Where sexual austerity and homophobia once reigned, holy homoeroticism brings perversion, pleasure, and body-wracking laughter.

CHAPTER V

THE SEMIOTIC LANDSCAPE OF THE CHILDISH ADULT IN ACTION: CELEBRATING THE RIGHT TO DIE

The queer potential of *Awkward Moments*—underneath a framework of the semiotic landscape of the childish adult—can extend beyond just homoeroticism. In examining the excerpt “Jesus Cures Cancer” (figure 4), my focus shifts to consider how queer semiotics methodologies can queer the privilege ascribed by Christian ideologies to the rhetorics of life, which overshadow the right of death seekers to ethically terminate their own lives.

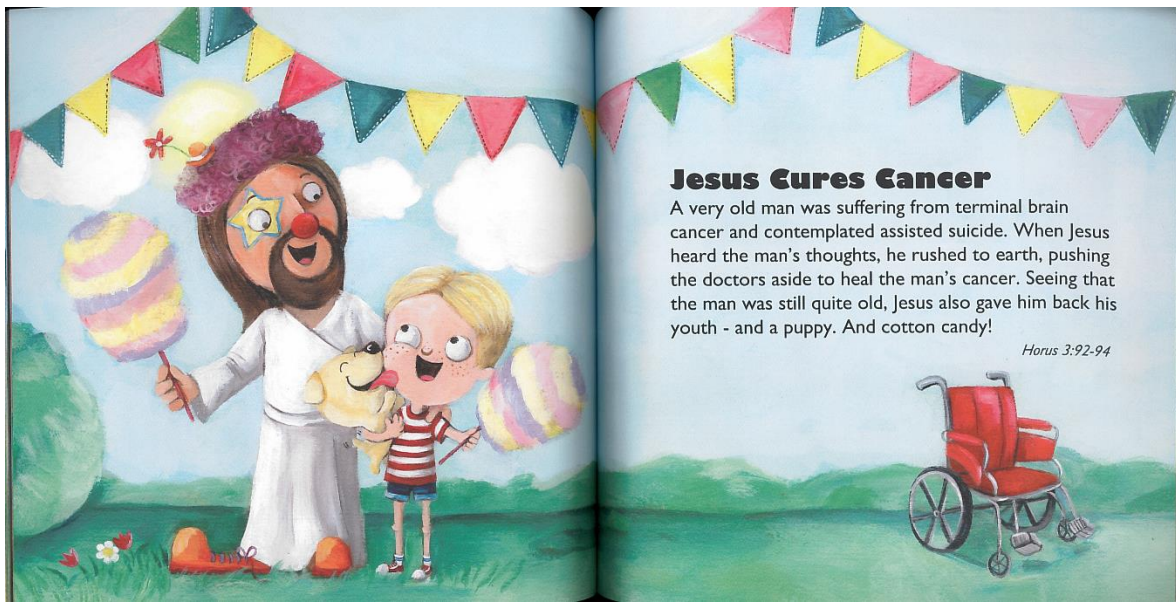


figure 4: *Jesus Cures Cancer*

“Jesus Cures Cancer” via visual and textual signifiers tells an almost sickeningly sweet story about a man cured of brain cancer. In this scene, the “scripture” describes an account of exaggerated healing that is not present in any iteration of U.S. bibles. As it describes,

A very old man was suffering from terminal brain cancer and contemplated assisted suicide. When Jesus heard the man's thoughts, he rushed to earth, pushing the doctors aside to heal the man's cancer. Seeing that the man was still quite old, Jesus gave him back his youth—and a puppy. And cotton candy!

(Horus 3:92-94)

Not only does Jesus rush down to Earth to heal a specific individual, he even restores his youth.

In additional descriptive clauses, added on like afterthoughts with a hyphen and coordinating conjunctions of “and,” Jesus gives the healed man saccharine presents of cotton candy and a puppy. Illustrating the scripture is a rather absurd image of Jesus dressed similarly to a clown. He is dressed in a frizzly wig, has face paint, and dons a little red nose and big, clownish shoes. Next to him stands a beaming young boy, presumably the old man mentioned in the scripture, now cured of his ailments and standing buddy-buddy next to Jesus. A discarded wheelchair isolated to the far right of the image symbolizes the boy's past pains, now cast off in the rebirth of new life. Bright pastel colors, embodied in fluffy clouds, colored streamers, and vibrant grass, also add to the joyfulness of this scene.

What makes this scene especially awkward—if readers aren't already turned off by the sheer joyfulness of the scene—is that this moment signifies a biblical story *that never happened*. A faux miracle, if you will. Horus is not a book in established U.S. versions of the bible and is most likely a reference to the author's own name. Thus, the scripture “Horus 3:92-94” is distinguished as a “made-up” scripture, a satirical imitator,

in context to the semiotic landscape of religious literature. Additionally, we once again run into a temporal issue: assisted suicide and cotton candy are contemporary innovations and have no place in a text that historically stretches back centuries.

By presenting readers with a miraculous moment of healing that never happened, “Jesus Cures Cancer” queerly satirizes the authority of the Bible and the oppressive ideologies that espouse/are espoused by it: namely, the privileging of life over the right to die. Indeed, while I do not deny that the idea of valuing life can itself be worthwhile, fundamentalist Christianities have used the value of life to routinely oppress minority groups. Arguments that assert fetuses’ rights to live have been used to deprive women of the right to govern their own bodies. Arguments against gayness have mobilized under reproductive concerns, stigmatizing homosexuality as “unnatural” due to its inability to produce new life. And, as I will focus on this section, arguments against assisted suicide prioritize above all the value of life and faithfully maintain that miracles can cure even the scientifically incurable. “Jesus Cures Cancer” hints at this latter issue by introducing a man who “contemplated assisted suicide.” By describing a ridiculous, nonsensical account of how Jesus flies down from heaven, cures the old man, and—rather randomly—gives him cotton candy and a puppy, this scene satirizes anti-assisted suicide rhetoric. Such rhetoric is carried by pro-life Christian groups such as The American Life League, which equate assisted suicide to murder and use stories of miraculous healing to justify the blocking of assisted suicide bills.¹⁶ Indeed, what we see signified in the excerpt “Jesus Cures Cancer,” heightened to saccharine levels, is not what we can imagine happening in an actual terminal illness case. This childish reimagining overthrows the logic of miracle workings, making way for death seekers who may have no other way of

existing in a way that is ethically just to their personhood and right to peace. A bit harsh, perhaps—but to clarify, I have no quarrel with those who maintain faith in miraculous healings. What is at issue here, and what *Awkward Moments* contends with, is when a belief in faith healings overextends its jurisdiction to dictate what people can/cannot do with their own bodies.

The presence of Edelman’s death drive becomes apparent when we read this scene as a miraculous moment of healing that is satirized by its very nonexistence and relation to contemporary sociopolitical discourse. Reproductive futurism would laud the miraculous healing of an old man back from the reaches of death. His reincarnation into an image of the Child allows the cycle of productivity to begin anew, fore fronting renewal and hope in reproductive futurism’s effort to privilege heteronormative existence. Yet, this idyllic moment is oversaturated with a sickly sarcasm that lambasts this very Christian insistence on life. *Awkward Moments*, both as a sign containing conflicting signifiers and as a sign that awkwardly contradicts with like forms across the semiotic landscape, queerly reminds us that, well, this occurrence of miraculous healing never existed to begin with. “Jesus Cures Cancer” is yet another jab at the preconceived sociopolitical trends that base their authorization on biblical interpretation. It highlights the issue of assisted suicide, mocking conservative arguments against it by confronting them with the ridiculous image of Jesus curing cancer, reversing age, and conjuring cotton candy. Instead of optimistic productivity, then, “Jesus Cures Cancer” offers an alternative to life—by literally offering chosen death.

CHAPTER VI

CONCLUSION: TOWARDS A QUEER PRODUCTIVITY?

In this essay, I have explored the ways that *Awkward Moments of the Bible*, an adult picture book, subverts and perverts dominant scriptural interpretations of U.S. Christianities. By doing so, the text suggests new ways of minority being that have and continue to be oppressed. In conducting my research, my central focus has remained on the childish adult—those peoples who refuse to conform to the standards of normative adulthood, who find themselves ostracized and not quite fitting into proper society and find great pleasure in upturning the neat ordinances that govern our homes, workplaces, and public spaces. Texts like *Awkward Moments* gives life to these peoples by fantastically and brilliantly satirizing the ridiculousness of normative adulthood and religious morality. But I also wonder: are there ways that religious satire can actively intervene in and better the lives of non-Christians?

Perhaps this question marks an avenue for further research, but I would like to briefly turn to a social media presence to expand upon some of the core motivations of my research. The online figure “God” is social media celebrity who appropriates the persona of the Christian God, mocking his omnipotent power, creational choices, and his followers’ conservative values. His online presence is remarkable, boasting almost 3.5 million followers on Facebook. God, who I will call Facebook God for clarity, also created a website entitled *TheGoodLordAbove.com*. On this website, he declares his mission: “God made the world. Then he flooded it. Then God went to sleep for 2000 years or so. Anyway, eventually God woke up and felt pretty bad for what he’d done in the past. In 2011, after years of therapy, God started his [Divine God Facebook Page](#) to

restore his good name.” In his satirical work, Facebook God strives to “restore his good name” mainly by confounding and mocking conservative Christians who show prejudice against other peoples. They also do not shy away from political commentary that targets the conservative sociopolitics of the present U.S. Recent headlines include “Trump Has Epic Meltdown After Court Decision, God Responds,” “God Responds to Judgmental Christian,” and “God Schools Megachurch Pastor Joel Osteen.” Facebook God pushes back against the Religious Right by claiming the authoritative voice of God, making fun of Christians, and ironically asserting that acceptance for all and respect for humankind are the true values that Christians should embody.

In addition to his satirical jabs, however, some of Facebook God’s responses encourage those who are struggling to survive. In the article “God Talks to Transgender Human who has Questions” (2017), online Facebook user “Alec” asks Facebook God a series of questions questioning his existence as a transgender person: “why make transgender people? Why make us suffer through questioning our own core identity? ...Why make us go through the trouble of having to deal with people that won’t understand us and that won’t even let us use the proper bathroom?” (“God Talks”). Alec’s questioning embodies their struggle as a transgender person, and they find Facebook God, the appropriation of Christian God, a figure to whom they can vent and find solace. After all, from Alec’s perspective, it is God who created Alec’s painful existence as a transgender person. Facebook God compassionately responds that “trans people are divine, they teach other humans that they should grow and become tolerant. I accept and love you for who you are. Please be well.” For many years, queer peoples have experienced the hatred of God through oppressive church institutions of the U.S.

However, Facebook God, as a comedic figure, provides comfort to the oppressed by affirming their existence and seeking to undo the wrong that the historical figure of God has caused for centuries.

In my reading, Facebook God appeals to the childish adult in many ways that *Awkward Adults* does, albeit with a larger social media platform that reaches a broader audience. By impersonating—or, rather, taking the mantle of “the Christian God” himself, Facebook God reinvents and plays with the harmful tenets ascribed throughout U.S. history by Christian ideologies. For example, by telling Alec that “trans people are divine,” Facebook God reinvents a new understanding of being trans away from the transphobia of U.S. Christianities. Transpeople are not to be abhorred or segregated, but rather upheld as a divine figure who teaches other humans to be tolerant. Of course, there are problematics here—transpeople shouldn’t have to feel like they are “teaching moments” for cis people. But the fact remains that Facebook God is doing disruptive, generative work that heals and sustains childish adults who fall outside of the U.S.’s Christian parameters of “normalcy.” These are the stakes for those of us invested in working with the childish adult.

As a childish adult myself, I acknowledge and admire the work Facebook God does in satirizing oppressors and providing comfort to the oppressed. As I hope I have demonstrated in this paper, the chaotic and indeed, childish work that individuals perform in overturning dominant heteronormative institutions *is* meaningful. And it *is* liberating. And it *is* all, I hope, working towards a society in which less peoples have to be afraid of simply *being*. In the era of Trump where homophobic, white supremacist, and patriarchal voices continue to rise and affect the very livelihoods of minority peoples, perhaps it is

adult childishness, that which the dominant ideologies of the U.S. reject, that can begin to show how playful subversion and mockery can resist the forces that threaten to squash us, and at times, simply make fun of them.

¹ In this paper, I use the terms “Christianity” and “Christianities” broadly to refer to a series of harmful U.S. ideologies (mainly, heteronormativity, homophobia, patriarchy, and the privileging of life over death) that are reinforced through some, but not all, Christianities. This is not to broadly claim that all Christianities teach and perpetuate these ideologies, but to provide a frame of analysis for my object of study—as a queer project, I am not invested in thinking through how the adult picture book *Awkward Moments* denies certain Christianities and agrees with others, but rather how it can generate new modes of possibility and existence for childish adults who wish to resist these vicious ideologies. In sum, it can largely be argued that these harmful ideologies center strongly in U.S. Christianities, although some denominations are queer affirming, women affirming, etc.

² Within the scope of my argument, I am talking explicitly about patients who have a terminal illness. I want to address here that the issue of euthanasia is highly contested within the field of disability studies and has disturbing implications for disabled peoples. As Alison Davis notes, pro-euthanasia enthusiasts’ very usage of the phrase “right to die” is in fact “a subterfuge for what is really a “duty to die” because society prefers not to provide appropriate support to help us to live with dignity but prefers the cheaper option of killing.” While my focus here is on the terminally ill, I also do not want to elide that my research on queer subversions of “the right to live” may have dangerous implications for disabled people. I am taking this risk in this project but hope to revisit and reconcile it in a future project that considers Christian parody and disability more closely.

³ There is probably much to be said about how peoples who don’t fit into these broadly defined age categories, such as teenagers, also navigate U.S. reproductivity. However, the scope of my project is limited to children and adults.

⁴ For whatever it is worth: despite my critiques of these movies, I still enjoyed them. It is always such a conundrum for me—that I watch these films and recognize that they weren’t made with adults like me in mind, but I still can’t help but love their zany, appealing-for-all-ages tropes, and their insistence on happy, all-ends-tied-neatly endings.

⁵ For example, see José Estabon Muñoz’s brilliant discussion of Edelman’s work in *Cruising Utopia*, 94-96.

⁶ Halberstam, 89.

⁷ Here, I use the terms sign and signifier as defined by Saussure’s *Course in General Linguistics*. In this foundational work, Saussure posits that the meaning of a word is derived by what he terms as “signs.” The linguistic sign unites “a concept and a soundimage” which Saussure respectively terms as “signified” and “signifier” (66-67). In other words, a sign, or word meaning, is composed of both a concept (signified) and a sound-image (signifier). For more, see Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, 65-67.

⁸ Derrida, “Différance,” 63.

⁹ For readers who might not be familiar with gay culture, the term “bear” usually refers to a gay man who has a large build (not necessarily muscular, but definitely not slim) and has a good amount of facial and/or body hair. For more, see BEAR Magazine, “About us—*Then and Now*.”

¹⁰ See BEAR Magazine, “About us—*Then and Now*.”

¹¹ Here, I use the term ideological state apparatuses as defined by Louis Althusser, who defines ideological state apparatuses as institutions that interpolate subjects towards the interest of the State (9).

¹² It is important to note that my work follows a legacy of queer scholars who have proposed queer interventions to traditional readings of the bible. Although queer theology is not a focus of my essay, see Teresa J. Hornsby and Ken Stone's anthology *Bible Trouble* for examples of biblical scholars who push against normative interpretations of bible and scripture. For a work of scholarship in which queer Christians sketch out the ways that queer lived lives might flourish under contemporary Christianities, see Kathleen T. Talvacchia, Michael F. Pettinger, and Mark Larrimore's *Queer Christianities*.

¹³ For example, bible commentaries on the site *BibleHub* read the glory of God in this verse as "unspeakable," "goodness," and even "afterglow." For more, see *BibleHub*, "Mathew Henry's Concise Commentary" and "Pulpitt Commentary."

¹⁴ For a U.K. based narrative of how gloryholes were commonly used for men to anonymously have sex with other men, see Mark Simpson, "The Global Gloryhole." For more information on the role of the gloryhole in gay sex practice/culture, see Charles Silverstein and Edmund White's *The Joy of Gay Sex*, "Tearooms and Back Rooms."

¹⁵ See Richard Rambuss, *Closet Devotions*, Andres Serrano, *Piss Christ*, and Nicholas Laccetti, "Calvary and the Dungeon: Theologizing BDSM."

¹⁶ For more, see *American Life League*, "Euthanasia" and "Miracles." It is also important to note that the site, more broadly defined as a pro-life organization, also protests abortion, contraception, and other practices.

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