

Down the Rabbit-hole: Girlhood, #metoo, and the Culture of Blame

Shari Savage
The Ohio State University

ABSTRACT

Using narrative inquiry as a methodological tool, I explore how the culture of blame works to contextualize and sexualize girlhood. I dismantle the historical justifications behind Lewis Carroll's controversial relationships with girls and discuss current socio-political movements like #metoo in relation to female agency. The following research story aims to do two things: revel in the rabbit-hole that is research and also allow an accessible examination of how socio-cultural movements and shifting ideologies can bring new questions when analyzing data. By telling my research story, I shed light on how social discourse is always evolving and significantly impacted by the socio-cultural spaces we inhabit. Through narrative inquiry, I hope to encourage readers to challenge the ways in which girls are silenced and blamed by those who contextualize, historicize, or justify their sexualization.

KEYWORDS: #metoo; girlhood; culture of blame; sexualization of girls

You wait little girl on an empty stage
For fate to turn the light on
Your life little girl is an empty page
That men will want to write on

(Song lyrics, Rogers & Hammerstein, *Sixteen Going on Seventeen*, 1959)

Art education research is often driven by social issues, activism, and concerns about voices not heard. As art educators, we look critically at how visual culture proliferates myth and upholds dominant ideologies about socio-cultural issues (Durham, 2008; Freedman & Stuhr, 2004; Levin & Kilbourne, 2008). Because my research is centered on issues of girlhood—innocence as a marker of desire and the ways in which popular visual culture contextualizes the sexualization of young bodies—it is important to understand historical underpinnings. While our current socio-political landscape is dominated by the #metoo movement, highlighting the continued lack of female agency, it seems clear more voices need to be heard. This inquiry aims to do two things: revel in the discursive rabbit-hole of research regarding girls, desirability, and the culture of blame; and also examine how socio-cultural movements can bring new questions

to older data. Using the *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (Carroll, 1865) "rabbit-hole" metaphor, I explore the discourse around girlhood to investigate the tacit socio-cultural themes present in visual culture texts (Carroll, 1865; Grant & Waxman, 2011; Mann, 2015; Newsom, 2011; Nabokov, 1958). The texts in question are varied and uphold long-term myths about girls as objects of desire, which add to culture of blame narratives. In analyzing these words and images, I hope to encourage art educators to challenge the ways in which girls are silenced and blamed by those who contextualize and historicize their sexualization.

Methodological Intent

Research is about curiosity, a thought or idea that puzzles us to question further, to dig deeper and look for interesting rhizomes and roots to pull on. Like the rabbit-hole Alice discovers, scholars run, stumble, and fall along the way, pulling and pushing data into neat little piles of maybe's and what if's. As a methodological tool, I find that writing *through* my research helps me better understand my positionality and reveals new ways of seeing data (Richardson & St. Pierre, 2005). In this article, I analyze discursive spaces through the investigation of stories, journals, letters, interviews, blogs, and visual texts, looking for identifiable themes and areas of discord and agreement. In this sense, narrative inquiry acts as a type of discourse analysis that recognizes the intertextuality inherent in complex socio-cultural issues (Clandinin, 2007; Goodall, 2008; Rose, 2001).

I see narrative inquiry as a purposeful and engaging type of arts-based research, one that lends itself to privileging storytelling as a way to co-construct and share meaning (Goodall, 2008; Leavy, 2015). Narrative inquiry can also be highly personal, allowing the researcher to acknowledge their own bias or intentionality. As a woman, I cannot separate myself from this inquiry—I let it get under my skin at times, revealing emotional ties to what drives my research. Using both words and images, I tell research stories that tend not to be tidy or prettily wrapped up in a conclusory bow. I'd rather leave my reader wondering or thinking more fully about a particular issue that they might not have considered before. Finally, narrative inquiry is accessible research writing, often told with an artistic or literary touch (Goodall, 2008; Richardson & St. Pierre, 2005).

I began making mixed-media collages as a way to critically challenge mythic narratives about girls early in my research trajectory. Arts-based research explores meaning making—the social and cultural understandings ascribed to visual culture—allowing for critical investigations of how culture creates mythic narratives (Barone & Eisner, 2011; Butler-Kisber, 2008; Rose, 2001). Arts-based activities can act as a way to reconsider research images, producing tactile and

visually powerful interpretations of data. When I can extend pieces of visual data into arts-based representations that explore, trouble, or alter meaning, it taps into new ways of seeing data. While my arts-based collages reconnect me to my data and help me to look more deeply at girls in visual culture, I also find them to be unsettling. It is their unsettling quality that resonates and hopefully unnerves the viewer as well. One of the arts-based collages I created during my rabbit-hole explorations has been my screensaver for quite some time, a daily reminder of my research topic (see Figure 1).

Down the Rabbit-Hole

Recent inquiries led to some odd connections between controversial photographer Sally Mann, author Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita* (1958), and photographer and author Rev. Charles Lutwidge Dodgson, aka Lewis Carroll. I found curious similarities and thematic structures regarding little girls, innocence, and desirability, despite the years that separate these writers and artists (Savage, 2017). It was a deep rabbit-hole, one that left me with a few tantalizing questions still unexplored, including "could Lewis Carroll have been a pedophile?" Questions around Carroll and his muse Alice Liddell are not new, but they have resurfaced in the literary spotlight thanks to new scholars who dare to push harder at the boundaries of context, asking an important question—and I paraphrase here—can a great work still be great if the person writing it is not such a great person after all (Woolf, 2010b)? Questions about morality and intention are suddenly topical and worth revisiting, as multiple revelations against producers, actors, directors, news anchors and journalists, United States Senators, Judges, and our current "that was locker room talk" President fill the daily news. As the hashtag #metoo swept social media, women and girls spoke out in anger against sexually predatory behavior—disgusting in both sheer numbers and range of offenses. Calls to boycott work by famous directors, producers, and actors who used their power to harass or assault are being discussed as an option to push back. One important discussion regarding sexual harassment and abuse concerns silence and the shame and blame placed on women and girls who felt compelled (or coerced) to remain quiet.

Contextualizing why or how something occurred is central to excuses or apologies by the harasser: "Different times ... I thought it was consensual ... she came to my room," to name a few excuses, along with the shifting blame tactic, "Who do you believe? Me or some lies from women I've never met?" In a time when the blaming and shaming of females are go-to offensive strategies, I found myself looking again to the long-held cultural myths and literary histories that support such narratives. Questions are now being raised about Carroll regarding how scholars contextualize his child-friendly relationships and nude photographs of girls and their

place in normalizing erotic girlhood tropes. My analysis unearthed intertextuality in visual and written texts with enculturated messaging about desiring innocence and the silencing of female agency over time.

The rabbit-hole I fell down is full of scholarship regarding Carroll's actions, literary texts, and photographic images. Scholarly articles and essays concerning all aspects of Rev. Charles Lutwidge Dodgson's life, from childhood to Oxford graduate and math lecturer, children's book author, and photographer, can be found through *The Carrollian*, a periodical published by The Lewis Carroll Society of England. Carroll's letters and diaries have been cataloged and analyzed in several volumes (Cohen, 1979, 1995; Wakeling, 1994), his photographs archived in books and digital collections (Cohen, 1998; Photographs of Charles L. Dodgson, 1832-1898). Google, my usual rabbit-hole entry point, leads to the strangest places, mirroring the nonsensical dream adventure Alice herself embarked on. For the past two years, I've been engaged in deep interactions with multiple Carroll biographies, primary documents such as his diaries and letters, and critical feminist analysis of his artistic work (Cohen, 1975, 1995; Douglas-Fairhurst, 2015; Gardner, 2015; Grant & Waxman, 2011; Leach, 2005). My decision to pause is directly related to #metoo and the need to start writing through my research now, as this is a watershed moment in our culture.

Shaming and Blaming

My original research area looked at Lolita-like representations in popular visual culture, which includes literature and images related to Vladimir Nabokov's novel *Lolita* (1958). *Lolita*, a narrative by Humbert Humbert, a middle-aged self-professed pedophile, describes his all-consuming obsession with 12-year-old stepdaughter Dolores, aka Lolita. My topic found me through a story that moved me to action. In a course I taught, a student revealed heartbreaking events in a writing assignment about feeling invisible. She wrote, "Invisible is when your Uncle rapes you from ages nine through fourteen, and when you finally tell your mom, she believes her brother's denials over her daughter's story." As I read through my own hot, angry tears, more devastating words followed. *Shame, blame, secrecy*. Her last sentence asked, simply, "Why did he think this is ok?" I wrote back, offering every possible bit of help and empathy I could, honoring her courage and expressing support. The worst betrayal a child could endure is to not be heard and believed by someone who should protect her. I begged her to seek counseling. Her final question haunted me. Why did he think this is ok? Dismantling the culture of blame means looking closely at the discourse that supports tacit agreements about girls, innocence, and desirability, as both words and images work in tandem to create such narratives.

Why did Humbert think it was ok to sexually pursue and molest his 12-year-old stepdaughter Dolores? Why did literary reviews of the Nabokov book fail to acknowledge rape, incest, and kidnapping as part of her story (Davies, 1958; Hollander, 1956; Shelton, 1999; Trilling, 1958)? How did Nabokov, through Humbert's first-person telling, manage to make Dolores blameworthy, silencing her side of the story, pushing her anger and disgust into the margins (Bayma & Fine, 1996; Patnoe, 1995; Shelton, 1999)? How did he invoke Lolita as a blueprint for eroticizing girlhood (Bordo, 2003; Durham, 2008; McCracken, 2001; Shute, 2003; Wood, 2003)? Moreover, how did he convince popular culture that this was some kind of love story for the ages? While *Lolita* (1958) is often seen as the genesis of the erotic girl, these myths began long before Nabokov's *Lolita* left the pages of his book. His novel accelerated the genre, but Lewis Carroll's controversial photography documents Victorian era obsessions with girlhood innocence.

The Lewis Carroll rabbit-hole is filled with visual and textual gems about girlhood that shimmer with possibilities to analyze and discuss. I also analyzed blogs and website communities that draw people together in forums that discuss child-friends (as Lewis Carroll called his little girls), child-love, or argue that the admiration of nude prepubescent girls as an art form is perfectly acceptable. It is in these online community discussions that Lewis Carroll's letters and diaries are eerily present, as are Humbert's long lists of reasons prepubescent girls are preferable to women. It is also where photographic images are shared, including those of Lewis Carroll, Sally Mann, Jock Sturges, and others. Defenders of girls as objects of desire use the same arguments we hear in today's socio-political arena, as seen in the recent Judge Roy Moore controversy.

Judge Moore's Alabama senate race, another #metoo moment, consumed the political landscape. Moore was accused by several women of sexual assaults that occurred many years ago. One woman says she was 14 years old at the time of the assault. Contextualizing girlhood is key to Moore's defense. At first, he and his lawyer claimed that it was culturally acceptable at the time for 30-year-old men to date young girls. Moore said he asked mothers for permission (Hannity, 2017). However, the local mall in Gadsden, Alabama banned Moore due to his habit of harassing young shop girls, so perhaps it was not as culturally acceptable as Moore claims (Betha, 2017). I wondered if Roy Moore had ever read *Lolita*, since he and his spokespeople appeared to mimic Humbert's justifications, both employing cultural narratives normalizing relationships between men and young girls. Alabama state auditor and Moore supporter Jim Ziegler trotted out a biblical reason, using Joseph and Mary as an exemplar for similar relationships (Wegmann, 2017). More women came forward, denying these interactions were consensual. Soon, his justifications were no longer palatable to many voters. Moore

changed course, denying he knew any of the girls at all, calling them liars. While the Moore campaign shifted blame to the women, the rest of the U.S. was watching a seismic shift as accused harassers were removed from Congress, news anchor jobs, and fired from movies and television shows.

Newly empowered women spoke out in droves, believed and supported. Many of the men were fired or resigned, except for those who denied, blamed, and shamed their accusers. Seeing the difference between reactions in Alabama and the rest of the U.S. was telling, and a grave reminder that blaming girls for speaking their truth works to silence others from coming forward. Equally distressing was footage of female Moore supporters dismissing other women as liars, liberal agenda-driven pawns in a grand political witch hunt (Live Satellite News, 2017). Watching these interviews, I imagined how devastating this must be to girls and women who have not been able to speak out yet. It was in this socio-cultural milieu of secrecy, of blaming and shaming women, that I dropped back into my rabbit-hole. When I hit the bottom, Alice was waiting.

The Annotated Girl

Alice Liddell was the muse many believe was the main focus of Rev. Dodgson's obsession with little girls. Writing under the pen name Lewis Carroll, Dodgson's book *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* was based on a story he created while entertaining Alice and her sisters on a boat trip near Oxford in 1862. The Dean of Christ Church, where Carroll was a math lecturer, was the father of Alice, Edith, and Lorina Liddell. Through that association, Carroll became a trusted family friend, including having unchaperoned access to the girls, often photographing Alice alone or with her sisters—Alice was his favorite. Carroll was banished from seeing Alice after a mysterious falling out with the Liddell family (Cohen, 1995; Douglas-Fairhurst, 2015).

I reread *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, using the annotated version, the one written in honor of the book's 150th anniversary (Gardner, 2015). I was entranced by the ways in which scholars and Carroll supporters have analyzed nearly every possible aspect of *what it all means*. For example, despite Carroll's repeated claims that the book was not based on child-friend Alice Liddell, the book itself is full of dog whistles to the contrary. Freudians delight in the rabbit-hole metaphor (sex, of course). The annotated edition contains all versions of Martin Gardner's introductions (1960, 1990, 1999, and 2005). Each introduction attempts to contextualize Carroll's friendships with girls, his nude or semi-nude photographs of child-friends, and his misunderstood intentions—and as the years go by—some revisionist history. For example, Gardner claims that although Carroll did photograph nude girls, he made sure all plates were destroyed

and none of the images survived (Gardner, 1960). In 2005, Gardner amends his claim, noting that at least four nude images have surfaced in the Rosenbach Foundation collection (Gardner, 2005). Another image recently turned up in France and appears to be Alice's post-pubescent sister Lorina, fully nude. Experts are divided on the provenance, but the process and age of the photograph are correct. If proven to be authentic, this image upends the majority of Carrollians who believe Carroll's intentions were pure (Furness, 2015).

Gardner (2005) also rejects a group of scholars belonging to "Contrariwise: The Association of New Lewis Carroll Studies." Contrarians are willing to critically illuminate the sinister undertones of Carroll's relationships. Gardner eviscerates Karoline Leach (2005) and her book *In the Shadow of the Dreamchild: A New Understanding of Lewis Carroll*. He likens Leach's arguments on Carroll's sexual predilections as "on the same level with the absurd premise in Dan Brown's *The DaVinci Code*, that Jesus was married to Mary Magdalene" (p. xxxii). I've read Leach's book, and like many other Carroll scholars, it's about as likely as anything else written about Carroll, in that Carroll is dead and cannot respond. Ground zero for most Carroll scholars lies in his letters and diaries, as they offer detailed accounts of his life by his own hand. One notable exception is that upon his death, his family removed specific parts of his diaries, including the time period before the mystery surrounding Carroll's dismissal from the Liddell family circle. Mrs. Liddell "tore up" all of Carroll's early letters to Alice, further adding to the ambiguity (Gardner, 1990). Here, in the heavy absence of the known, scholars play in the shadows of what if's. It's a swirling discourse of conjecture and possibilities, myriad theories abound, and everyone is seeking the proverbial smoking gun. Far from locating a bombshell, I simply wanted to revel in the narratives—the he said, she said of what is known—and better understand his obsession with girls.

Before we get much deeper into this rabbit-hole, here are some facts about Carroll that are difficult to place in modern day contexts. Carroll preferred the company of children, girls specifically. His apartment at Christ Church was filled with games, toys, costumes, and books for children. He writes in his diaries of the beauty of nude girls (he found naked boys to be distasteful). Innocence was key to their attractiveness, as was their prepubescent state, which Carroll aligned with purity and Godliness. He wrote to his child-friends, describing wanting to cover them with kisses and touches, addressing them as lovers. He took over 1500 photos of young girls. He wrote a letter begging a mother to allow him to photograph her 6-year-old daughter nude, without chaperone. Friends believed he was sexually repressed or filled with religious guilt over sexual thoughts. Diary entries refer to "white stone" days (a reference to marking a special day or event), which were "almost always ... days he entertained

child-friends or made the acquaintance of a new one” (Gardner, 1960, p. xvii). Today, such activities would do more than raise eyebrows, but Carroll defenders point to Victorian beliefs about innocence and purity in children. However, Carroll was subject to rumors and speculation about his relationships with children, Alice in particular (Cohen, 1995; Douglas-Fairhurst, 2015; Leach, 2005). Young Alice Liddell was unknowingly elevated to an object of curiosity and desire and, like Nabokov’s *Lolita*, remains eroticized in visual culture today.

Pigtails and Wonderland

On July 4, 1862, Carroll took Alice and her sisters on a three-hour boat trip, during which Alice asked for a story. The rest is history—contested and partial—or as Burstein writes, “a bit of a palimpsest” to be written over, inked with new theories or possibilities (Gardner, 2015, p. xxxix). Part of my research rabbit-hole led me to blogs and websites devoted to defending Carroll’s love of the child-body and his child-friends, which also display resistance to questioning his relationships with girls. The discourse attends to contextualizing or normalizing the desire for girls, adding to the mythologies around the sexualization of young girls. How those myths are enculturated over time is worth dismantling (Grant & Waxman, 2011; Robson, 2001).

Until the Contrariwise movement, little research was devoted to the pedophilic shadows related to Carroll’s child-friends or his semi-clothed or nude girls. Instead, many scholars cling to Victorian ideals of childhood innocence, or the ideology that children were without sin and pure in heart. These arguments, which foreground most discussions about his child-friends, are brief in comparison to the amount of disconcerting evidence. Still, such arguments are commonly used to dismiss the rumors surrounding Carroll. Contextualizations like this also fail to address the other side, in that the same ideologies of purity and innocence could not be said of Victorian men (Cohen, 1995; Robson, 2001). Carroll was allowed to photograph girls under twelve, semi-clothed or nude, without chaperone, but when he asked to photograph an eleven-year-old, the mother refused, stating she was too close to the age of consent¹ (12 years) for this to be proper. The contextualization of consent, based *not* on agency or desire for marriage, was largely a societal construct. While notions of innocence and purity supposedly protected the well-born, at the same time, Victorians seemed less interested in this ideology when considering poor children, who were used with regularity in the sex trade (Robson, 2001; Woolf, 2010a).

In Oxford rumors of a “cult of the child” were discussed, and

1 While age twelve was the age of consent at the time, most men postponed the marriage until at least sixteen.

considering some of the men involved, their intentions appear Humbert-like. Writer and art educator John Ruskin,² a well-known lover of little girls, and poet Earnest Dowson, who stated it was a pity “the world isn’t composed entirely of little girls from 6-12,” also spent time in Oxford (Douglas-Fairhurst, 2005, p. 112). Nabokov’s Humbert spoke of desirable age ranges and lines of maturity, too (Nabokov, 1958). Dowson wrote an article called “The Cult of the Child” regarding “the ritual adoration of little girls.” Similarly, Edgar Jepson spoke of his time in Oxford, describing a “cult of little girls, the daughters of dons and residents: men used to have them to tea and take them down the river and write verses for them” in clear reference to Carroll, Ruskin, and Dowson (Douglas-Fairhurst, 2015, p. 111). While online communities would not emerge for another century, it appears Oxford’s likeminded child-lovers had managed to locate one another, and Alice Liddell was central to their attentions.

Carroll made note of artworks that celebrated young girls, like Sophie Anderson’s *Rosy Morn*, John Everett Millais’s *Cherry Ripe*, and work by sculptor Alexander Munro. He reached out to both Anderson and Munro, inquiring about access to the child models they used (Douglas-Fairhurst, 2015). Likewise, photographer Sally Mann reveals in her memoir *Hold Still* (2015), that men became obsessed with images of her nude children, writing to her and her children in an effort to make contact. One man in particular wrote of being “bedridden with love sickness for the Mann children” (p. 160). In the same predatory vein, Carroll writes of seeing a child so perfect he followed her to her house (for twenty minutes), as she was “a child of unearthly beauty” (Gardner, 1960, p. xviii). He wrote poems filled with despair over disappearing youth, passages devoted to slowing time and the ripening of bodies (Douglas-Fairhurst, 2015). It is no wonder Carroll’s photographs feature illusory moments of girlhood, capturing Alice and other well-born girls frozen in youthful glory. Literature celebrating relationships between young girls and older men also captivated Carroll, according to scholars who cataloged his library (Douglas-Fairhurst, 2015; Lovett, 2005). In 1862, he composed a poem entitled “Beatrice” to celebrate Dante and Beatrice’s relationship. Fittingly, Humbert also references Dante and Beatrice in his justifications for pursuing girls between the ages of nine and fourteen. In a strange connection, Nabokov was asked to translate *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* into Russian, his native tongue. Nabokov said this about Carroll:

I always call him Lewis Carroll Carroll because he was the first Humbert Humbert. Have you seen those photographs of him with little girls? He would make

2 Ruskin’s quests for young girls are well-established in his writings and through his fated obsession with nine-year-old Rose La Touche (Robson, 2001).

arrangements with aunts and mothers and take the children out. He was never caught, except by one girl who wrote about him when she was much older. (Nabokov quoted in Vogue, Gilliat, 1966)

Given the depth of Carroll's activities and desire to have access to girls, it is exceedingly difficult to contextualize as innocent. Law enforcement profilers describe pedophiles as men who tend to pursue work in careers that come with trusted access to children—as teachers, librarians, clergy, coaches, or doctors—allowing for the grooming of children through relationships that begin with gifts, special games, books, or anime with sexual content (Carnes, 2003). They believe the child welcomes their interest, using the same justifications Humbert writes about, that the charming, precocious child possesses identifiable nymphet qualities. Three scholars claim that Carroll was likely a pedophile, but no evidence that he acted on his urges have been proven (Bakewell, 1996; Cohen, 1995; Thomas, 1998). Nabokov's assertions could be tied to child-friend Agnes Hull, who wrote that Carroll's kisses had become sexual in nature (Cohen, 1995). Carroll's relationships with girls are one of the main areas of contention when perusing blogs about Carroll's books and photographs.

During one rabbit-hole session, Google directed me to a site called Pigtails in Paint, a blog "dedicated to the portrayal of little girls in art and media" (pigtailsinpaint.org). I read an impassioned response by one of its moderators, Ron, regarding a post about Carroll's pedophilic tendencies. He uses many of the same contextualizing arguments, but more troubling are the images he uploads. After clicking on the "Lewis Carroll" sidebar, I fell down a disturbing rabbit-hole of images, the first being several watercolor illustrations by Margaret Tarrant (one of the many *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* illustrators), which were sweet and without controversy. But as I fell further, the images became more provocative. Alice with her legs spread, petting a cat lapping milk from a bowl near her thigh (artist Maximilian Esposito, 2013). More Lolita-like images by Esposito follow, which become increasingly difficult to engage with because of the amount of nudity and sexuality. I stopped at an image by Capitolo Primo (1989), afraid to continue. The mission page, which Ron says he was counseled to add so that the site would no longer be flagged for inappropriate content, states: "At first, the idea was to showcase art and media that would be appreciated by those of us tantalized by little girl imagery" (pigtailsinpaint.org). Ron realized his site could do much more to educate viewers, listing three reasons for the site's relevance: one, it's a progressive site that can be used to help educate children on sexuality; two, it is a child advocacy site, and three; it is a feminist site. My analysis is that it does none of those things, but instead is more closely aligned with co-moderator Pip's statement:

While at the outset battling censorship was only one small part of what this blog was about, towards the end it became increasingly clear to me that I and my sweet little blog were at the very van of the front line of one of the weightiest and hard-fought battles of the Culture War: the rights of artists to depict children in the nude or in erotic contexts, and in that respect, we held a unique status on the internet. Thus, it became one of our central missions. (pigtailsinpaint.org)

As a female scholar who fights in the culture war Pip speaks of, I am angry and disgusted by his rhetoric. I also know sites like these can be used to groom children.

Alice's Adventures in Wonderland is a major thematic thread in this blog, and discussions about Carroll's books and photographs are prominent, mostly skewing to the provocative side. These are not Carroll scholars, rather they are men contextualizing the eroticization of girls in a forum of likeminded viewers. A side note—Pigtails in Paint is interested in images of girls age 4-16, their preferred age range. I am saddened and upset by the ideas and images Ron and Pip have put forth. Unfortunately, they are not alone. Many blogs exist that invite collaboration on young girls as desirable, which share images of nude girls by photographers Jock Sturges, Sally Mann, and Lewis Carroll—all seemingly legal under the category "art nudes." Something no Carrollian wants to acknowledge is "The Wonderland Club," an extensive ring of pedophiles discovered in Great Britain in 1998. Over 750,000 child pornography images and 1800 videos were shared through their international network of members, using Wonderland as its online identifier ("Wickedness of Wonderland," 2001).

The Star Trek Theory

I opened this article with song lyrics from popular culture. As I was researching, *The Sound of Music* was on television in the background (December 17, 2017). Rolf and Liesl began singing *Sixteen Going on Seventeen* and it was as if I was hearing it for the first time:

You wait little girl on an empty stage
For fate to turn the light on
Your life little girl is an empty page
That men will want to write on
(Rogers & Hammerstein, 1959)

These kinds of narratives about girls are so ubiquitous in our culture that we hardly notice. Between Humbert's prose on the charms of nymphets, Carroll's poems and photographs, and Roy Moore's

cultural justifications for chasing young girls are the universal truths behind desiring innocence and purity. For some men, wanting to be the first “to boldly go where no man has gone before” is a large part of the appeal of desiring a young girl. The idea that girls need men to bring them to life, to “write” them into being, to turn the light on, is an enculturated notion. I first encountered this idea in 2008, when I came upon a blog post³ by a pedophile describing the sacredness of his relationship with a young girl. He wrote of having the great responsibility of introducing her to the world of pleasure, of teaching her his ways, imprinting on her, that only he could bring her to life. Protecting special relationships requires trust and secrecy, he states. But there is also this, the idea that she herself wants and needs this and that men like him are uniquely qualified to recognize her among other girls. *Blame, shame, and secrecy.*

Carroll, Ruskin, and others said the same about Alice Liddell. She had a special quality, a charming way about her that drew them in. She seemed different than other girls, receptive to their attention and even flirtatious; Alice demanded attention in return (Douglas-Fairhurst, 2015). Both men courted her, stealing alone time when they could. In a letter to Alice, Ruskin writes, “I am horribly vexed ... it was all your fault,” while requesting time to see her (p. 206). Ruskin (the Liddell family art tutor) describes visiting Alice, that she sent him a note about her parents being away. He makes his way through the snow; a warm fire greets him, an armchair, music, laughter, and “Alice bringing the muffins to perfection” (Douglas-Fairhurst, 2015, p. 207). Her parents return unexpectedly, disrupting what Ruskin hoped would be a private evening. “How sorry you must be to see us, Mr. Ruskin!” to which I replied, “I never was more so.” Ruskin declares, “The whole incident was like a dream” (p. 207).

Blame is placed on Alice for her “vexing” personality, her precociousness, her desirability. Alice was a blank page that Carroll wanted to write on. And so he did, sending *Alice’s Adventures Underground*,⁴ his handwritten and illustrated story, to twelve-year-old Alice Liddell as a gift, despite being banished from her life. He tried to draw her face on the last page, covering over his attempt with a photograph he had taken of seven-year-old Alice (as seen in Figure 1). Just after his diary entries resume, Carroll looks inward, asking for forgiveness for something we cannot know: “I am utterly weak, and vile, and selfish ... oh deliver me from the chains of sin” (Woolf, 2010a, pp. 111-112). Cohen (1995) tracked every self-admonishment in Carroll’s diaries, and almost all occur after being with Alice or other

child-friends. While Carroll supporters see his prayers as evidence of his determination to repress his abnormal desires, Contrarians are less sure. When comparing the many biographies about Carroll, Cohen’s is the most complete and the most willing to share examples of unthinkable activities. Other scholars tend to gloss over specifics or fail to mention many of the more indefensible events, like when 11-year-old unchaperoned Phoebe Carlo spent a weekend with Carroll at his seaside rental (Cohen, 1995; Robson, 2001). Had I not read Cohen’s book, I might have been more receptive to the Victorian contextualized leanings Carrollians adhere to. In short, Cohen does not sugar coat what might have occurred; rather, he allows Carroll’s damning words to stand alone.



Figure 1. “Down the Rabbit-hole” Mixed-media, Savage, 2016

The Real Alice

Once she became part of popular consumption as the girl in the story, Alice belonged to us all. Fiercely private for most of her adult life, Mrs. Alice Liddell Hargreaves tried to distance herself from the intrigue. In her old age, she was pushed back into the public eye by an “ambitious son” who had interest in the economic outcome of a “The Real Alice” tour (Douglas-Fairhurst, 2015, p. 6). We are still

3 In 2008 I searched the terms “economics of Lolita porn” and his blog popped up for some reason. He had some thoughts on the money aspect of maintaining pedophilic relationships.

4 *Alice’s Adventures Underground* was the original title of Carroll’s story.

consuming her, making her into sexy Halloween costumes, blogging about and sharing her images, making movies and cartoons, studying Carroll's photographs, dissecting and annotating her images into a million puzzling snippets. I am almost sorry to be adding to the narrative.

Can we still embrace the book, love the story despite the author? The book itself does not promote anything untoward or sinister (other than children should not drink potions or eat unidentified mushrooms). Freudians be damned, the book will not expose children to sexual ideas. However, people who are obsessed with Carroll and his child-love Alice might. Nabokov's *Lolita* (1958), on the other hand, does promote ideas that are worth challenging. Wood (2003) quotes Trent, who says of Nabokov's text, "He did more than investigate the idea that pubescent girls can be sexually attractive, he proves it" (p. 188). Some educators won't assign *Lolita* (1958), or if they do, they issue a trigger warning (Kennedy, 1994; Patnoe, 1995). Thomas Kennedy (1997) asks, "I wonder if *Lolita* is popular for the wrong reasons? I wonder, in fact, if it is even great?" (p. 130). Seeing Alice Liddell's images used to promote the erotic joy of girls' nudity on a disturbing online site is beyond unnerving, surely not something she'd have wanted, but not a reason to admonish the book itself. Instead, I'll acknowledge that there are significant unanswered questions about its author and his obsession with young girls. For Alice Liddell, who became a beloved character, her life is inextricably intertwined with Carroll's, no longer herself, no longer just a girl. Sally Mann's children understand better than most, having also seen their childhoods immortalized:

Those images, our childhood stories, our very characters, were consumed by an outside meaning, which was in a way bigger than we were. As we grew up we didn't just grow into ourselves, we grew into the larger conception of our characters that others projected for us. (Mann, 2006, p. 28)

I still have questions about Alice and hope to locate her voice in the cacophony of Carroll defenders. Of the 117 (and counting) books about Lewis Carroll's life, books, diaries, letters, and photographs, only 4 concern Alice Liddell herself. She remains the entirety of Carroll's success as an author, the central point of discomfiting eroticized imagery, the unknowing star of Oxford's cult of the child, and a contextualized marker of desire in popular visual culture.

Shame. Blame. Secrecy

During the editing stage of this inquiry, the U.S. Women's Gymnastics team doctor was sentenced to life in prison for sexually molesting

over 150 females during his time at Michigan State University. Dr. Larry Nassar used his position as medical expert to systematically enact unspeakable abuse on girls as young as six, under the guise of internal pelvic massage treatments. When girls did question his actions (at least 14 girls had reported to an adult), coaches, other doctors, counselors, and some mothers expressed disbelief, choosing to believe Nassar's version of events. More lawsuits are pending concerning who did or didn't report properly. Some of the excuses for ignoring victim reports are untenable. "Girls that young don't know where their vagina is ... they were confused" or, "He's a well-respected doctor, I am sure it was proper." Girls were shamed, silenced, and in some cases intimidated by others to remain quiet for the sport. *Shame, blame, secrecy*. I watched trial footage of many of the victim statements, stories revealing years of abuse and shame, and girls now empowered by the agency to demand justice. As this legal #metoo moment played out, I could not help but think of Alice, the Carroll defenders, of 12-year-old Dolores, of my former student's abuse and betrayal—of all the voices unheard or silenced.

As art educators, we have a duty to challenge cultural myths. By encouraging our students to remain curious about how society contextualizes or normalizes sexualized representations, we can examine and expose cultural tensions. Grant and Waxman's (2011) book *Girls! Girls! Girls! In Contemporary Art* looks at feminist responses to heteronormative myths, using historical and contemporary imagery as cultural criticism of sexualized girlhood. Acting as artistic counter-narratives, the artworks⁵ featured offer new ways of conceptualizing female agency. Critiques of how advertisers and other image producers depict girls and girlhood can be integrated into our curriculum, opening dialogues that could empower students to speak out and push back. Such discussions are difficult, but necessary for dispelling the culture of blame. Another example is Newsom's (2011) documentary *Miss Representation*, which breaks down the proliferation of passive, sexualized images of female bodies that consumers are subjected to by media makers. In addition, it addresses representations that are missing in media—strong female roles. Unpacking cultural messages behind gendered media representations promotes critical thinking about female agency. Students can create visual counternarratives, reconceptualize or reimagine images that serve to silence or dismiss. While activities like these are well-suited for middle and high school students, the real challenge is how we address these issues with younger students, the ages most targeted by those looking to shame and blame. I am unsure how we do that, but it will be the focus of my next rabbit-hole.

5 Not all images are appropriate for younger students.

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