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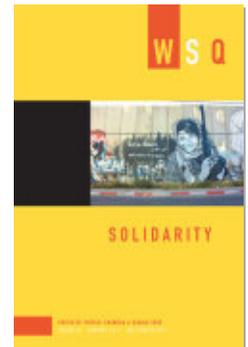
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## **The Value of the Future: The Child as Human Capital and the Neoliberal Labor of Race**

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## The Value of the Future: The Child as Human Capital and the Neoliberal Labor of Race

Julian Gill-Peterson

“A mind is a terrible thing to waste. But a wonderful thing to invest in.” This slogan greeted pedestrians during a recent winter at a bus stop on Manhattan’s Upper West Side. The bus ad was for Better Futures, a simulated stock option that capitalizes on a meta-awareness of financial capitalism’s role in the destruction of public education and the racialization of the achievement gap in the United States. The United Negro College Fund (UNCF), perhaps sensing a need to adapt to the dominant funding arrangement of the neoliberal market, has jumped into the sphere of finance—or its careful simulation. In an effort to solicit “investors,” passersby are asked to make donations to what is the latest version of UNCF’s historically important college-funding program, one adapted for the era of information capitalism by a forecasting algorithm on its website that can tell potential investors *exactly* how many dollars of “social return” will be produced for each dollar spent. Suggesting, in turn, that investors imagine the viral proliferation of the campaign from bus stop to Internet, the ad asks “friends” to contribute through social media, so that the future dollars on the screen can multiply precisely and exponentially (United Negro College Fund 2013).

Each “share” of Better Futures costs ten dollars and UNCF displays its simulated return value on its home page: 0.96% per dollar per annum. Despite a marketing strategy suggesting that the developing minds of children of color are really worth more “socially” than monetarily, the efficient conversion of those minds into dollars in the calculator undermines any final distinction. The simulation achieved by UNCF coincides with Marx’s (1978, 335) basic formula for capital accumulation, which financialization

fully reflects: M-M', "money which begets money." The missing "C" here (M-C-M'), recall, is intentional. As Marx details in the first volume of *Capital*, the commodity can be removed to simplify the formula because its beginning and end is circulating money. Perhaps, though, the missing "C" might also be in this case the *child*. For Better Futures, the commodity is the cognitive capacity of children's neuroplasticity, their capacity to learn (the "mind" that is, according to UNCF's well-known slogan, "a terrible thing to waste"). This capacity is quantified by its projection into a probable future, stretched out as financial speculation across the life span of the child and divisible into discrete spheres by UNCF's calculator that include not only eventual salary but also "health savings," "crime savings," and the nebulous "other savings" (United Negro College Fund 2013).

In speculating on the value of the future by monetizing the body and mind of the child of color, UNCF suggests that the value of the child to neoliberal capital is not identical to the idealized modern concept of childhood as a shelter from the labor market, one that took root as whiteness in the Progressive Era (see Macleod 1998). If the orphan Annie incarnates this child figure of American industrial capitalism, the vulnerable, white, and feminine future citizen who must be saved by the nation from the dehumanizing and immoral dangers of the market, she has likewise become in recent years the avatar of the reproductive futurism diagnosed as endemic to the social, most famously according to Lee Edelman, who unceremoniously declares in *No Future* (2004, 29), "Fuck Annie." Reproductive futurism, for Edelman, signifies the centrality of the child figure to the social organization of time and its root value as political: the child is the emblem of the future in whose name the totality of society is contracted, a precious resource governing the parameters of public politics and private sociality to secure the welfare of tomorrow in a stable form (reproduction), consigning queerness to the purely negative. Edelman argues that only an affirmation of the fully negative, which would comprehend the annihilation of Annie and everything vouchsafed by her image, could possibly overcome the straitjacket of the future upon which she calls.<sup>1</sup>

The savvy logic of UNCF in Better Futures signals, however, how distant Annie is from the generation of children growing up in the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis and its neoliberal antecedents. Edelman's Lacanian-Symbolic reading of the child under industrial capitalism, to be sure, obscures how labor was the norm for working-class and racialized children in the United States, especially girls, immigrants, and African Americans.

Yet the catastrophic arrangement of today's generation is located in a different political economy from Annie's: alongside the persistence of industrial child labor is the simultaneity of high youth unemployment (United States Department of Labor 2014) with the unprecedented capitalization of children's bodies, near infinite student debt (Norris 2014), hyperconsumption, and declining health prospects in an age of biomedicine and the childhood obesity "epidemic" (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention 2014). The ideological structure of reproductive futurism reads too narrowly for a generation now coming of age with globally lower life expectancies, diminished prospects for retirement, and a general precarious forecast compared with the correlative expectations of their parents. The future of these kids feels austere and diminishing because their present already is.

If the child as the Symbolic anchor of reproductive futurism typical of Fordism has been eclipsed by the precarious and volatile conditions of contemporary capitalism—a capitalism that does not need the slow, sheltered fantasy of childhood as deferral of labor—then the relation of the child to the value of the future might be better approached through the lenses of labor and materiality. This does not exactly amount to a critique of *No Future*. Edelman is clear that "the image of the Child" ought "not to be confused with the lived experiences of any historical children" (2004, 11). The Symbolic function of the Child-with-a-capital-"C" precisely holds hostage the capacity to think otherwise about actually existing children. The problem is not the impulse of Edelman's analysis: there is no shortage of projective work being done by the child figure today. Yet vital though the child figure remains to the future, its value must nevertheless be calculated within the ambit of contemporary economic, ecological, and political catastrophes that threaten the viability of *any* future for humans in ways that override the optimistic ideology of American liberalism, however facetious it may have been (see Sheldon 2013). The UNCF stock option redefines college education for children of color as an investment activity, and in so doing it judges education's value not as a liberal equalizer of opportunity but as a form of "human capital" that black and brown bodies cannot afford to pass up.

Following UNCF's proposition, this essay explores cinematic texts and media of contemporary American childhood to understand the economy of the future. The present calculation of the value of the future suggests that race, not only sexuality, might be understood as the coefficient that

incorporates the laboring body from childhood. If modern childhood, as Kathryn Bond Stockton (2009, 13–16) carefully outlines, is structured by a temporality of delay—delay of labor and delay of heteronormative sexuality—the queer problem of “growing sideways” that it generates is also, as she explains, more an expression of the twentieth century than of the twenty-first. What is at stake in this essay is hence less a lateral growth than the circumstances surrounding the person Stockton calls “the child queered by color”: a child who, being nonwhite, is barely a child, unable to inhabit the scenography of innocence assigned to American childhood. If one cultural narrative designed to compensate for this debility, as Stockton reminds us, “is to endow those children with abuse” (33), then perhaps, in the film and media that follow, another narrative seeks to make those children work for it.

Released several years before *Better Futures*, the 2009 documentary *Ten9Eight: Shoot for the Moon* proposes the reorganization of public education for children of color through entrepreneurial labor. *Ten9Eight* follows a set of archetypal “at risk” children participating in an entrepreneurial competition in New York City. The “national business plan competition” that has brought finalists out of twenty-four thousand entries to a hotel in Times Square offers the promise, through a ten-thousand-dollar business investment, of escape from poverty, institutional neglect, and above all the specter of dropping out of high school. Indeed, the title *Ten9Eight* refers to the statistical artifact that prefaces the film: on average, every nine seconds in the United States a student drops out of school. The documentary challenges its audience to “imagine if they didn’t” through the practical replacement of school with entrepreneurship by collapsing their distinction, with the students in the film exclaiming, without being able to explain quite how, that starting businesses will help them graduate.

*Ten9Eight* is in part a racial uplift film for a multicultural era, in which the celebration of ostensible legal equality and the cultural relativism of ethnicity authorize rigid competition between assimilating immigrant groups and the exceptional isolation of African Americans (see Chow 2002 and Sexton 2008). While the students in *Ten9Eight* are all African American, Latino, or recent immigrants, the communities and families of the black competitors incur the most diegetic pathologization. Melodramatic and stereotyped tales of drugs, alcohol, prison, sexual abuse, foster care, homelessness, teen pregnancy, and the specter of death govern their biographies. In the face of this cultural pathology, an individual narrative

of overcoming is rehearsed: *Ten9Eight* unambiguously suggests that starting businesses is the only way for black children to break a pattern derivative of the Moynihan report. As with Daniel Patrick Moynihan's *The Negro Family* (United States Department of Labor 1965), systemic inequalities and the planned maldistribution of life chances by race can be criticized as a moral wrong, but their actionable field of remedies is simultaneously confined to the private sphere of individual improvement. The will to overcome and disavow the signifier "inner city" in places like Baltimore, Chicago, New York City, and Washington, DC returns again and again in *Ten9Eight*. One competitor, Ja'Mal Wills, explains that he wants to win the competition because he "doesn't want to end up dead."

Rather than understanding these narratives of black childhood only as *representations* of a purely ideological devaluation, a cultural ruse for the neoliberal state's institutionalized racial exploitation, an analysis of the proposed labor function of the film's children maps the new social contract for which they are targeted as human capital. Not for nothing do *Ten9Eight's* promotional materials emphasize that Thomas Friedman of the *New York Times* said, "Obama should arrange for this movie to be shown in every classroom in America" (qtd. in *Ten9Eight: Shoot for the Moon* 2014). There is an ideological conceit in Friedman's suggestion, since the film is not addressed to every classroom but rather targets under the category of "inner city" the black and brown bodies whose futurity is of so little value to the nation that public investment in their education or communities is absolutely out of the question. Still, Friedman's proposition is also symptomatic of a mode of investment in the productivity of children whose dispersed strategies cohere through the calculating force of what we habitually signify in using the terms "race," "gender," and "class." The value of the future contracted through neoliberal child labor assigns risk and speculates on the future of kids as the incorporation of race, gender, and class—economic coefficients that materialize as the growing bodies of children. *Ten9Eight* suggests that the racialization of labor and investment might be understood as originary of American neoliberalism's reason, its political economization of life's growth from infancy to adulthood through childhood.

Under this neoliberal social contract childhood becomes a form of futures trading. The phrase is not metonymic, but emphasizes that capitalism does not mobilize subjects with a preexisting race, gender, or class; rather, it is a subjectification machine that reorganizes human life into those

categories. As with UNCF, *Ten9Eight* transforms black and brown children into human capital by restaging education as an entrepreneurial labor. In his 1978–79 collected lectures, *The Birth of Biopolitics*, Michel Foucault (2007) turns likewise to the child as his example in diagramming American neoliberalism. What distinguishes *American* neoliberalism, according to Foucault, is its theory of human capital, a theory that permits “the extension of economic analysis into a previously unexplored domain,” the social (219)—once Annie’s shelter. American neoliberalism reproaches political economy for ignoring the centrality of labor to the production of capital, but unlike Marx, *it makes labor into capital* (224). Human capital makes *Homo economicus* into an entrepreneur of the self, taking the self as its basic resource, projected into the future through potential wages. This enterprising self represents a theory not of labor power but what Foucault calls “capital-ability” (225). When neoliberal economists began to define human capital in the 1950s and 1960s they argued that all human behavior could be analyzed in economic terms by adapting theories of utility maximization from Adam Smith and Jeremy Bentham. Gary S. Becker, one of human capital’s major proponents, worked over his career on economic analyses of racial and gendered discrimination, crime and punishment, marriage, divorce, and child-rearing, which he summed up in the title of his Nobel Prize lecture (Becker 1992): “An Economic Way of Looking at Life.”

The economic rationalization of human life also worked to discredit state projects to reduce inequality or combat poverty, especially where they accounted for race and gender. By making human value and its return a factor of *private* investment in the individual, human capital rendered unreasonable alternate modes of economic redistribution, particularly those both public and based on social justice. Becker’s *Treatise on the Family*, for instance, argues that a sexual division of labor, where women stay at home investing in the human capital of children while men work, is more efficient than equal pay for equal work (1981, 22–23). Becker also argued that state programs aimed at redressing racialized economic inequality were less effective than a color-blind and competitive labor market (1957, 129).

Within this framework the theory of human capital deploys the child to recalculate the value of the future in terms of private investment. The theory’s scriptural basis is a passage in Smith’s *Wealth of Nations* on “fixed capital” ([1776] 1909, 225), capital held as stock for the enhancement

of the production, but not the circulation, of commodities. According to Smith, there are four types of fixed capital: machines, buildings, land, and “the acquired and useful abilities of all the inhabitants and members of a society” (228). This last form becomes human capital. Smith continues: “The acquisition of such talents, by the maintenance of the acquirer during his education, study, or apprenticeship, always costs a real expense, which is a capital fixed and realized, as it were, in his person. Those talents, as they make a part of his fortune, so do they likewise that of the society to which he belongs. The improved dexterity of a workman may be considered in the same light as a machine or instrument of trade which facilitates and abridges labour, and which, though it costs a certain expense, repays that expense with a profit” (228).

Human capital names a production cost that enhances the quality of workers, repaid with a surplus in future output. As Foucault emphasizes, the theory of human capital is less preoccupied with innate capacities than with acquiring new skills. Education was hence the first target of economists: in one classic essay, Jacob Mincer (1974) calculates the increase to workers’ salaries from additional years of schooling through regression formulas. Yet human capital is also dependent on childhood, understood as the critical period of development, and for this reason Foucault turns his attention to the child in *The Birth of Biopolitics*. Through “the inversion of the relationships [*sic*] of the social to the economic” (2007, 240), in his words, “we thus arrive at a whole environmental analysis, as the Americans say, of the child’s life which it will be possible to calculate, and to a certain extent quantify, or at any rate measure, in terms of the possibilities of investment in human capital” (230).

Foucault does not broach race in this lecture. Yet the theory of human capital might be understood as a global strategy for rationalizing American racism, consolidating work on “discrimination coefficients” (Becker 1957, 6) and the rational value of crime (1968) to explain ostensibly irrational, nonproductive human behavior. In Becker’s work on family economics, he understands what he calls “the price of children” (1981, 93) in opposition to the Malthusian anxiety about fertility, according to which children are valuable in quantitative terms. Becker suggests that it is instead “the interaction between quantity and quality” that explains parental investment in children, and he points to Anglo-American history, where, as quantitative income, education, and health increased toward the end of the nineteenth century, the amount of children born declined sharply, a trend repeated

after the postwar baby boom (106–7). Becker reads these demographic trends as parents concentrating their resources more efficiently to invest in the increased *quality* of each child born. A child in whom more time and money is invested from birth will eventually yield greater returns on human capital, obviating the need for more kids.

Although it leads to a color-blind conclusion, race is far from absent in Becker's formulas. The child is not a *tabula rasa* for him; rather, "rates of return on human capital are more sensitive to endowments" than other commodities (113–14). An "endowment" might be as ambiguous as personality or attractiveness, but it also includes "the sex, race, ability, age, allocation of time, social background, and many other characteristics of children" (120). Race is a primary coefficient of American human capital, affecting the average base value of children's bodies, as well as the rate of return on investment, something of which parents are conscious. "Families usually must commit most of their investments," Becker suggests, "before they know much about their children's market luck" (119). Human capital hence turns childhood into futures trading for parents, who have to speculate on the effect of endowments like race and gender on their investments.

This framework rationalizes racism in taking the perspective of the abstract parents who always "maximize their utility by choosing optimal investments in the human and nonhuman capital of children" (136). In this calculus, as Becker puts it, "discrimination against minorities not only reduces their income but also the effect of their family background on income" (137), thus lowering the value of their future. As an example, he argues, "Black families *should* be less stable than white families, if only because blacks are much poorer and black women earn much more relative to black men than white women do to white men" (231; emphasis added); not surprisingly, he cites the Moynihan report as evidence. Black families both would have less money to invest in the human capital of their children and would expect less of a return than white families, reducing their incentive to make investments, and by analogy reducing the state's incentive to do the same. Becker suggests that taxes levied for "public education and other programs to aid the young may not significantly benefit them because of compensating decreases in parental expenditures" (153). Since children are assumed to be property of parents, if the state steps in to redistribute inequality through public education parents will invest less in human capital to compensate. Given that human capital rationalizes investment as a *private* practice, even though race and gender are under-

stood as coefficients their value remains private, so that the conversion of education and other forms of care into labor becomes the only way to address endemic inequality.

This genealogy of human capital contextualizes *Ten9Eight's* otherwise presumptuous claim: if children of color have almost no public value to the United States, then it becomes reasonable, even “rational,” for them to shoulder the labor of their own education by covering its cost through entrepreneurship. Not only does the state have no motivation to invest in the future of black and brown kids but also the cost of public education is so risky for the nonwhite contestants in *Ten9Eight* that they must bear it in competition to prove their future value to the nation. In this light, Foucault’s definition of *American* neoliberalism misses the originary force of racialization in evaluating human life’s course by monetizing the growing body of the child. And while Foucault adds that the return on investment in human capital is “the child’s salary when he or she becomes an adult” (2007, 260), thirty-five years later, in a digital economy the salary of the child is not necessarily only bound to adulthood. Childhood is also futures trading because increasingly children are generating revenue streams *during* childhood as supplements to or substitutes for future salaries, particularly through a digital economy of social media and mobile phones that decomposes children into data aggregates of likes, consumer interests, tastes, and attitudes that can be bundled and exchanged. In this form of child labor, a feminized, stylized whiteness in social media juxtaposes itself to *Ten9Eight*.

Consider the “haul” video. On YouTube haul videos are usually included as a recurring segment on channels devoted to fashion or beauty. In a haul video, the host presents her shopping from the day. Clothes are not usually modeled but taken out of the bag, held up to the camera, and presented with commentary on how to wear them, what they go with, why they are good for this season, or how cheap they are. In a viral video contemporaneous with *Ten9Eight*, Blair, or “juicystar07,” who has hosted her channel since 2008, presents “Forever 21 Haul” (2009). Blair is sixteen at the time and emphasizes that she works two service industry jobs to buy the clothes and makeup she features. In this video, which has to date about 1.75 million views, she intersperses items for winter from Forever 21 with appeals to her viewers to follow her on Twitter and watch her other vlog posts.

The haul video exemplifies the role of digital labor in childhood as

futures trading because it produces value through what is otherwise a purely social activity: style. It is an example of how consumption is production, considering that its identification with a store is free advertising (as is this essay, unfortunately). YouTube also generates profit through views, quantifying attention as a capacity of users: at the point of 1.75 million views, Blair is paid a percentage of the ad revenue that YouTube pulls in from her video. (I had to watch a thirty-second ad to see Blair's video on YouTube, so I was also compelled to produce value through attention within the once ostensibly nonmarket activity of thinking and writing.) Finally, the haul video foregrounds the collapse of labor and consumption: many, like Blair's, are about saving money. She, for instance, is most proud of a six-dollar pair of jeans on clearance. It is fair, further, to speculate that the jeans were made by the hands of a girl or young woman whose value to the global economy is calculated very differently from Blair's, in a factory in Southeast Asia (Hicken 2012).

The juxtaposition of children in these contemporary forms of child labor is not incidental: on the one hand, there is the black child, often a boy, on the threshold of social or biological death; on the other hand, there is the cheery, suburban white girl to whom futurity accrues easily. As *Ten9Eight* dramatizes, the privatization of public education requires that its investment risk be devolved onto children through entrepreneurship of the self, particularly for black and brown bodies that have almost no public value to the nation, save for programs like UNCF. The YouTube haul videos produced by white girls add that even investment in the ideologically valuable child as human capital cannot wait until adulthood to begin demanding returns, not even for the white Annie of reproductive futurism: surplus value must be extracted through digital labor below the threshold of inhumanity attached to "child labor" by Progressive Era reformers, Western feminism, and human rights discourse (see Macleod 1998, 107–20). The white girl is called upon to produce surplus value online through gendered rehearsals of consumption, which cultivate human capital as good style. No longer a dramatic inhumanity, child labor in its digital form passes quietly under the radar because it is fully *socialized*: it happens without calling itself work.

Side by side, *Ten9Eight* and the haul video underscore how neoliberal child labor has served to intensify stratifications of race, gender, and class by recontracting how value is added to and produced by human life. These calculations of human capital far outrun the child figure given by Edelman.

Even Blair is no Annie; if her style channel is akin to Annie's virtuosic labor of singing and dancing, Blair still works two jobs to pay for her clothes. Moreover, the fact that a black boy's or girl's value remains so low to the nation that walking down the street is enough reason to incur murder at the hands of a police officer or civilian who will not be held responsible, a fact painfully, repeatedly demonstrated, underscores the insidiousness of Becker's economic rationalization of American racism. Still, *Ten9Eight* remains the celebrated solution to the racialized dimension of human capital, the outcome of a total privatization of race that has restricted politics to the narrowest economy possible.

To understand the contemporary arrangement of child labor beyond industrial forms, in which the value of the future has to be calculated as it arrives, and in which labor both consists of entrepreneurship of the self while also reaching digital simulation online, what we might pursue is a materialism of the child that does not need to "fuck Annie." The demands on American children today, violently maldistributed by race, class, and gender, call upon a materialism that understands the child as more than a Symbolic figure underwriting reproductive ideology. The child today is the focus of a broader unequal distribution of wealth, the perpetuation of debt, the extension of work to all life-building activities, and the implosion of public education and welfare. In a sense, the child is as central to capital as it was during Fordism, but the contours of that centrality have changed with the value of the future. A materialism of the child that dispenses with the imperative of affirming no future at all will be left with the more complex task of working toward something other than the labored austerity offered by *Ten9Eight* or YouTube celebrity. It remains to be seen if Better Futures can be unyoked from its trademark.

**Coda: *Annie*, the Remake (It's *Still* a Hard Knock Life)**

*#Ferguson is America's selfie*

—Tweet by Chris Williams (@iamchriswms)

The release, coincident with the writing of this essay, of a remake of *Annie* starring Quvenzhané Wallis and Jamie Foxx, and produced by Jay-Z, Jada Pinkett Smith, and Will Smith, generates an aperture in which to reflect on the relationship of race to materialism, labor, representation and cultural politics.<sup>2</sup> At the level of representation, the remake, in which black

actors play Annie and Daddy Warbucks, is caught in an ideological tension over futurity and the meaning of blackness in the United States. The sheer impact of Wallis as Annie is palpable, perhaps since this film follows Wallis's performance in *Beasts of the Southern Wild* (2012). Part of the impact of restaging the master cultural narrative of reproductive futurism today is its re-creation with a black child—a black girl, moreover, at a moment when both black boys and girls are murdered by the police and civilians with impunity. At the same time, the white supremacist backlash on Twitter against the film propels it into an interminable culture war over what kind of child ought to represent the hope of and for the future of the nation (“Quvenzhané Wallis Role” 2014), consigning Annie to a reactive political position.

The representational, reparative gesture of the film and any such reading of it, even if to critique white supremacist reactions, is also forced to willfully misrecognize in part the operation of film and media under contemporary capitalism, which in a certain Marxist version of ideology functions as a kind of cinematic false consciousness of the world that can be replaced with politically inclusive representations (see Clough 2000, 69–107). This mode of ideological mediation has nevertheless historically given way to a scattered bundle of affective modes of getting by through the social's mostly banal promises of self-continuity that rarely achieve the crescendo of the orphan Annie's adoption (see Berlant 2011). The representational excess of Wallis's blackness as Annie is not guaranteed to have progressive political effects as a cultural politics under the neoliberal regime of child labor. As Steven Shaviro (2013) puts it in a reflection on aesthetic value, “Neoliberalism has no problem with excess. Far from subversive, transgression today is entirely normative.” Thirty years ago, Fredric Jameson, whom Shaviro references, expounded on this concern in his foundational essay on postmodernism:

We must go on to affirm that the dissolution of an autonomous sphere of culture is rather to be imagined in terms of an explosion: a prodigious expansion of culture through the social realm, to the point at which everything in our social life . . . can be said to have become “cultural” in some original and as of yet untheorized sense. . . . *It also suggests that some of our most cherished and time-honoured radical conceptions about the nature of cultural politics may thereby find themselves outmoded. However distinct those conceptions may have been—which range from slogans of negativity, opposition, and subversion to critique and reflexivity—*

*they all shared a single, fundamentally spatial, presupposition, which may be resumed in the equally time-honoured formula of "critical distance." . . . What the burden of our preceding demonstration suggests, however, is that distance in general (including "critical distance" in particular) has very precisely been abolished in the new space of postmodernism. (1984, 87; italics added)*

With the dissolution of critical distance, the affirmation of subversive cultural figures will have little purchase on the relation of child labor to blackness that this essay has tracked—and that a film like *Ten9Eight*, while even more ideologically reductive than *Annie*, yields when read not for its representational content but as part of a strategy of labor and the rationalization of racism (a reading to which the new *Annie* film might be subjected). The violent reminder that children of color and girls are not as valuable as the abstract “child,” even when reduced to future workers, recalls José Esteban Muñoz’s challenge, delivered in a reflection on the child of color alongside Edelman’s work: “It is important not to hand over futurity to normative white reproductive futurity” (Muñoz 2009, 95–96). It is far from certain that the remake of *Annie*, representationally, meets Muñoz’s challenge.

Lest this coda ring punitive in its pessimism, recall that Jameson also suggests that Marx’s dialectic had the original goal of “lift[ing] our minds to a point at which it is possible to understand that capitalism is at one and the same time the best thing that has ever happened to the human race, and the worst” (1984, 86). Although this essay has not followed a faithfully dialectical materialism, the point remains *valuable*. If there are forces constitutive of race that are irreducible to capitalism, including aesthetics, they are an immanent field for politics, no matter how successful their commodification has become, and no matter how violently they operate in neoliberal America. The destructive heights of financial capitalism, even in its conversion of childhood into futures trading, might simultaneously produce new political projects, even amid (or indeed, through) unprecedented precarious economies of violence and money. If there is a future to call upon here, however, it is neither Edelman’s villainous and white reproductive futurism nor the potentially reparative inverse representation of Wallis in *Annie*. It is rather something more difficult and yet wondrously speculative, perhaps in the spirit of modes of aesthetic and political production like Afrofuturism, which dares to imagine futures for blackness without the violently limiting, unfulfilling parameters of humanism. This is a future in which the value of the creatures we presently call

children, with all the attendant labors of race and gender to which we consign them with startlingly little pause, cannot be decided with a mere stamp of “value.”

**Julian Gill-Peterson** is a PhD candidate in American studies at Rutgers University. His dissertation, “Queer Theory is Kid Stuff,” examines the genealogy of the gay and transgender child. His most recent work can be found in *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* (2013) and *Transgender Studies Quarterly* (2014). He is also coeditor of “The Child Now,” a forthcoming special issue of *GLQ*.

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### Notes

1. Edelman’s polemic has been the subject of a long debate in queer theory, with some critics charging that his concept of reproductive futurism, in its restriction to Lacanian psychoanalytic structures, occludes other relevant forms of futurity that might or already do accrue to children, particularly those unrestricted to queerness-as-sexuality. In the case of the child of color, see Muñoz 2009, to which I return in the coda. This essay does not attempt to resolve the debate over the political meaning of futurity but stresses how Annie, Edelman’s version of the child grounded in a sexual logic of reproduction, does not fit with contemporary forms of child labor beholden to the racializing capture of human capital.
2. Jay-Z also released the album *Vol. 2 . . . Hard Knock Life*, in 1998, which featured “Hard Knock Life (Ghetto Anthem),” a track that sampled the Broadway version of *Annie*. The contemporary remake of *Annie* was possible in part because Jay-Z was able to purchase the rights to the soundtrack.

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