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Through the Black Mirror: Innocence, Abuse, and Justice in “Shut Up and Dance”

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Abstract Constructed as needing protection and lacking agency, the figure of the child is always a potential victim in whose name political battles based in moral panics are often waged. But where does this abstract child figure leave real children, who are not as void of desire, agency, and sexuality as contemporary understandings of childhood imply? The *Black Mirror* episode “Shut Up and Dance” approaches this question through the story of its teenage protagonist, Kenny, who is blackmailed into committing increasingly violent and dangerous tasks so as to prevent the release of a video that shows him masturbating to pornography. Although in being sexual Kenny has fallen from the pedestal of childhood innocence, his awkwardness, vulnerability, and intense shame about the video nonetheless mark him as non-adult, and the punishments he endures seem disproportionate and abusive—until, that is, we learn that it was *child* pornography Kenny was masturbating to. Faced with the idea of child-as-victim that the mention of child pornography evokes, can we still also conceive of Kenny as a victimized child, or does he, in that revelatory moment, irreversibly grow up into a predatory adult? Drawing

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on scholarship situated at the productive intersections of childhood studies and queer theory, this chapter interrogates conceptions of the child-as-victim and analyzes how “Shut Up and Dance” complicates the dominant discourse on child abuse.

"The endangered child, the molested child, the child of innocence: all are formulated by us, one way or another, as the child without means, the incapable child," James Kincaid (1998, p. 208) writes in *Erotic Innocence*, commenting on the myriad ways in which we construct the modern child as an emptied-out category defined by lack rather than agency. Kathryn Bond Stockton (2009), in her landmark study *The Queer Child*, similarly discusses the inherent strangeness—even queerness—of the abstract modern child figure, noting that childhood is characterized by a delay, a protected period of supposed innocence and purity defined against the adulthood that the child nonetheless must approach. In need of protection, the child thus understood is always a potential victim, and it is often in the name of this abstract child that social and political battles based in moral and sex panics continue to be waged. But where do contemporary constructions of the abstract child of innocence leave real children, who are not as void of desire, agency, and sexuality as these constructions imply? And given the rigid child/adult binary undergirding our understanding of differently aged subjects, what are we to make of the turbulent in-between space of adolescence?

“Shut Up and Dance,” an episode directed by James Watkins as part of the third season of acclaimed science-fiction series *Black Mirror* (2011-2017), approaches such questions about childhood and adolescence through the story of its teenage protagonist,

Kenny. Portrayed by Alex Lawther as shy, awkward, and vulnerable, Kenny is blackmailed by hackers equipped with state-of-the-art surveillance into committing increasingly dangerous tasks so as to prevent the release of a video that shows him masturbating to pornography. Although Kenny has fallen from the pedestal of childhood innocence by virtue of being sexual, the intense embarrassment he feels because of the video nonetheless contributes to his depiction as non-adult, and viewers will find the series of punishments he endures upsetting and abusive—until, that is, we learn that it was *child* pornography Kenny was masturbating to. Faced with the idea of child-as-victim that the mention of child pornography evokes, can we still also conceive of Kenny as a victimized child, or does he, in that revelatory moment, irreversibly grow up into a predatory adult? On the answer to this question hinges whether viewers experience the show's final moments—in which Kenny has to fight another man to the death and is then taken into police custody—as just retribution or as sadistic horror. What makes Kenny's story particularly disturbing is its plausibility; unlike other *Black Mirror* episodes, “Shut Up and Dance” utilizes current rather than futuristic technology to terrorize its protagonist. The question this episode raises, then, is not whether the events it depicts *could* happen but rather whether they should.

Drawing on scholarship situated at the productive intersections of childhood studies and queer theory, this chapter begins with an overview of contemporary constructions of the child as both erotic and asexual before delving into an analysis of how “Shut Up and Dance” interrogates conceptions of the child-as-victim and complicates the dominant discourse on child abuse. The episode invites us to question whether the laws prohibiting pedophilia and possession of child pornography are just and

effective, and I offer a discussion of the extent to which such legal regulations inadvertently harm the children they are ostensibly designed to safeguard. By building on Marek C. Oziewicz's findings in *Justice in Young Adult Speculative Fiction* (2015), a study which posits that we understand justice through scripts in narratives and which locates particular potential for investigations of ethical concerns in non-mimetic genres, I further discuss the ways in which Kenny's story challenges contemporary forms of retributive justice that effectively remove pedophiles—whether they are legally children or adults—from the realm of the human.

Given that constructions of childhood do, of course, take diverse shapes depending on their time and place of origin, childhood indeed arises *ex machina*, or out of the machine: instead of denoting a natural state, our usages of childhood reflect prevalent cultural attitudes toward children that delineate them as wholly different from adults, much like a species of their own. As Kincaid (1998) notes, the construction of the child is flexible as well as “functional, a malleable part of our discourse rather than a fixed stage; ‘the child’ is a product of ways of perceiving, not something that is *there*” (pp. 18-19, emphasis in original). Contemporary Euro-American constructions of the child have developed over the last two centuries, which saw a consistently increasing separation between the child's and the adult's spheres, culminating in the notion that the child has a right not to liberty but to custody, protection, and provision: as society's youngest members, children need to undergo a lengthy process of socialization through the school and the family before they reach the age of majority and can actively engage their agency. Adulthood has thus become precisely what the child is lacking and must nonetheless approach, so that “adults walk the line—the impossible line—of keeping the

child at once what it was (what adults are not) and leading it toward what it cannot (at least, as itself) ever be (what adults are)” (Stockton, 2009, pp. 30-31). As such, the modern child figure is largely characterized by its innocence and emptiness or, in other words, by its lack of qualities that are considered adult, and childhood “came to be in our culture a coordinate set of *have nots*, of negations: the child was the one who *did not have*” (Kincaid, 1998, p. 15; emphasis in original). Yet it is exactly this lack and purity of the child that makes it such an appealing cultural figure, and its supposed innocence and weakness not only make it subject to protection but also renders the child erotic despite, or perhaps because, of its supposed sexlessness.

Contemporary ideas about the child in fact developed alongside of modern notions of sexuality, and they remain what Kincaid (1998) calls “close friends” (p. 14), with much of what is considered desirable also characterizing the modern figure of the child. As attributes such as smooth skin, large eyes, and small, thin body shapes dominate our cultural notions of attractiveness, “[t]he physical makeup of the child has been translated into mainstream images of the sexually and materially alluring” (Kincaid, 1998, p. 17). Hence fashion and beauty models are often teenagers, the plastic-surgery and wrinkle-cream industries are booming, and it is considered a compliment for adults to be told that they look younger than their age. But the fetishization of the child extends beyond mere youthful appearance as innocence itself has been rendered sexually appealing precisely because of the virginal inexperience it denotes: “the instructions we receive on what to regard as sexually arousing,” Kincaid (1998) observes, “tell us to look for (and often create) this emptiness, to discover the erotic in that which is most susceptible to inscription, the blank page” (p. 16). The child figure in fact shares this

emptiness with the modern construction of what constitutes sexually alluring women, as both are characterized first and foremost by their availability as what might be termed “empty vessels” that have been vacated of any indicators of individual subjectivity.

In such a construction as an empty vessel, the child is moreover void of markers of race and class and, therefore, inherently understood as white and middle-class; children who are racialized, as well as lower-class children, are typically imbued with a past and thus with experience that renders them starkly different from the innocent child. We can see here how innocence and the protection that accompanies it are essentially signs of privilege, the privilege of actually being considered children: as Stockton (2009) puts it, “It is a privilege to need to be protected—and to be sheltered—and thus to have a childhood” (p. 31). The child figure’s innocence hence empties it of color and other identity markers that would run counter to its construction as vacant and pure. As the category of innocence is, then, unevenly attributed to actual children, the violence inherent to our contemporary construction of the child becomes all the more apparent: if only some children are seen as embodying the purity that has become synonymous with our understanding of childhood, other children fail to fit these parameters of childhood, so that, for instance, racialized children’s “inclusion in ‘the future of our children’ is partial, even brutal” (Stockton, 2009, p. 5). Furthermore, the category of innocence does not adequately capture children who display signs of sexual curiosity, because “just as the black child is not innocent by virtue of being black, the sexual child is not innocent by virtue of being sexual” (Levine, 2017, p. 153). By effectively casting children of color, lower-class children, sexual children, and all other non-normative children outside the realm of childhood, our current understanding of what constitutes a child ultimately

affords the privilege of childhood only to a select few, demonstrating the extent to which constructions of the child (and, by extension, of innocence) are steeped in persistent cultural hierarchies of race and class.

But the category of innocence presents significant problems even for those children who ostensibly fit under its narrow umbrella. Because innocence, particularly when understood as the pairing of ignorance with virginal purity, has come to be defined by what Kincaid (1998) calls “negative sexuality” (p. 55), the innocent child too cannot be imagined without calling to mind the sexual and erotic, and although this intimate connection between innocence and the erotic appears paradoxical, it is precisely the construction of the child as entirely asexual that makes it impossible to think the child without also thinking (the negation of) the sexual. In fact, despite the fact that the child is understood as asexual and pure, we have, in many ways, come to regard the sexualization of children as normal, even inevitable. As Kincaid (1998) explains:

Our culture has enthusiastically sexualized the child while denying just as enthusiastically that it was doing any such thing. We have become so engaged with tales of childhood eroticism (molestation, incest, abduction, pornography) that we have come to take for granted the irresistible allure of children. We allow so much power to the child’s sexual appeal that we no longer question whether adults are drawn to children. (p. 13)

Of course, the ways in which we invest children with sexual appeal—all whilst denying their sexuality—are inherently problematic and harm the very children we so insistently claim to want to protect. In other words, as Kincaid (1998) puts it with characteristic clarity and bluntness, “[t]o the extent that we learn to see ‘the child’ and ‘the erotic’ as

coincident, we are in trouble. So are the children” (p. 14). What is perhaps particularly noteworthy in this alignment of the child and the erotic is that it utterly robs children of any semblance of subjecthood: not only are children constructed as essentially lacking and empty, they are furthermore defined as void of any form of erotic or sexual agency themselves, able merely to attract adults’ sexual attention but incapable of engaging—or even having—their own sexual desires.

We can consider, then, the extent to which our ideas about child asexuality, too, are *ex machina* and have grown out of not factual contemplations of children’s erotic desires and sexualities but rather deep-seated cultural fears and anxieties regarding the realm of sexuality. Children’s literature scholar Perry Nodelman (2008) remarks on the challenge Freud’s observations of child sexuality as “bisexual, polymorphous, perverse” present to the notion of childhood innocence, concluding that this notion may ultimately be less about the repression of children’s sexuality than it is about warding off the potential complications such a sexuality posits to clear categorizations of “fixed” adult sexuality (pp. 161-162). Our insistence on childhood as a time of asexuality, even in the face of sexual children, thus indicates that this insistence is rooted not in the reality of actual children but rather in adult desires to, on the one hand, wrap childhood firmly in a cloak of nostalgic purity and, on the other, exercise control and power over children, all the while ignoring the questions child sexuality would pose to normative understandings of the sexuality of adults. Steven Angelides (2004) points out that, on the whole, “notions of child powerlessness and child sexual ignorance stand as unsubstantiated assumptions, begging the question of their political and performative function. . . . Too often it would seem that adult discourses of sexuality function primarily to reinforce certain relations of

power and domination between adults and children” (p. 152). Since Euro-American conceptions intimately link sexuality and age, so that child (sexual) ignorance and adult (sexual) maturity serve a form of age stratification that clearly separates the life-worlds of children from those of adults, the acknowledgment of child sexuality ultimately threatens to unravel the carefully stitched yet precarious threads that keep childhood apart and distinct from adulthood.

The dominant discourse surrounding child sexual abuse has only served to deepen this gulf between childhood and adulthood while further hindering any productive discussions of child sexuality. Although it appears obvious that the prevention of sexual abuse of children would be significantly aided by an appreciation of child sexuality, particularly if children were empowered in their sexual agency, the ways in which child sexual abuse is discussed instead serve to disempower children all the more and depict them as incapable, defenseless, and utterly dependent on the whims of adults. “[T]he discourse of child sexual abuse has expanded at the expense of a discourse of child sexuality,” Angelides (2004) argues: “Rigorous attempts to expose the reality and dynamics of child sexual abuse have been aided, if not in part made possible, by equally rigorous attempts to conceal, repress, or ignore the reality and dynamics of child sexuality” (p. 142). Instead of perpetuating the pervasive binary that attributes power to adults and powerlessness to children, Angelides (2004) suggests, we should not shy away from acknowledging children’s sexuality nor their agency, rethink our understandings of childhood and adulthood in ways that move beyond dichotomies, and give children the tools and space to engage with their sexualities and sense of power. Such an approach would, of course, radically shift the relations between children and adults—particularly

as it would imbue children, too, with subjecthood and agency—and it would significantly alter, or perhaps do away with altogether, the contemporary construction of childhood and adulthood as opposite and discrete spheres. As a consequence, we may even come to see the manifold ways in which child and adult sexualities are not distinct but continuous, never completely lacking nor entirely fixed but always in a process of becoming.

However, because children are currently constructed as the opposite of adults, both in the realm of sexuality and elsewhere, adolescents occupy a precarious position in between two ostensibly contrasting spheres. Adolescence has come to be the period in which the child grows up and begins to approximate adulthood, and since adolescence thus constitutes the transition between two such different poles, it is no surprise that this time is typically characterized by anxiety and insecurity. After all, “[h]ow can children be gradually led by degrees toward domains they must not enter at all as children?”

(Stockton, 2009, p. 62). As teenagers leave childhood behind and find themselves increasingly exposed to the expectations placed on adulthood, the uncertainty they may experience is reflected in our culture’s ambivalence about adolescence, and this ambivalence is particularly pronounced when it comes to teen sexuality. “[W]e live in a society that objectifies teen sexuality, at once glorifying and idealizing it while also stigmatizing and repressing it,” Roberta Seelinger Trites (2000) explains, while further noting that “[u]ntil the unlikely day when Western cultures can define sexuality in terms of *jouissance* instead of repression, discourses about adolescent sexuality are likely to remain stultified in this Möbius strip of denying sexual pleasure and then deriving pleasure from discussing that denial” (p. 95). Given how apprehensive adults tend to be about recognizing teenagers as sexual, let alone about facilitating teenagers’ appreciation

for their own sexualities, it only follows that shame and denial so often characterize adolescents' relationship to sexuality.

Such shame and denial appear to be the driving forces for Kenny, the adolescent protagonist of the *Black Mirror* episode "Shut Up and Dance." In many regards, Kenny seems to be what we consider a typical teenager: he is lanky, awkward, often a bit nervous, has fuzz and a few pimples on his face, and bickers with his younger sister, Linds, in an early scene of the episode. The cause for this spat between the siblings is that Linds had been using her brother's computer, which then froze as she was attempting to complete a movie download, prompting Kenny to install a malware cleaner called Shrive in order to fix the problem. Unbeknownst to him, however, downloading Shrive gives hackers access to his laptop and webcam, and they later watch Kenny as he masturbates in front of his computer to what we can infer to be pornography. When, shortly after, he receives an email stating only "We saw what you did" along with a video attachment of his masturbating, Kenny's panicked reaction serves to further delineate him to viewers as an adolescent rather than adult; an adult, it seems, would not experience such intense embarrassment and terror merely for "getting caught" watching pornography and masturbating. As Hector, a man whom Kenny is later blackmailed into robbing a bank with, puts it so bluntly, "Jerking off to porn or something? Well, everybody does that." For Hector and, I would surmise, most adults, the threat of having a video of oneself masturbating made public would certainly be unpleasant, but it would surely be unusual for an adult to be blackmailed by such a threat into committing a series of dangerous and violent criminal acts. Yet this is exactly what seems to be happening to adolescent Kenny.

As Kenny performs the various tasks Shrive instructs him via text messages to complete, the episode continuously reminds its viewers that he is only a teenager: he repeatedly cries and is shown with snot running from his nose, much like we sometimes see in images of young children. When Kenny is forced to partner up with Hector, a married man with children who is blackmailed by Shrive because he sent explicit nude photographs to a prostitute, the contrast between the adolescent protagonist and this adult man markedly enhances our perception of Kenny as a teenager who appears more like a child than he does a grown-up. It is Hector who drives them around since Kenny has not yet passed his driving test, and it is Hector who pays for gas because Kenny has no money. Furthermore, the adult man treats his teenage companion much like one would treat a child, and the episode thus heightens the power differential between them as Hector repeatedly tells Kenny what to do—yelling at him, for instance, to “Shut up and listen!”—and ultimately decides that it should be Kenny who robs the bank while he himself waits in their getaway car. During the robbery that Kenny commits with great hesitation, he is visibly shaken and pees himself. As is painfully clear at this point in the episode, Kenny is certainly not a hardened criminal nor is he, in any shape or form, adult-like; he is but a terrified teenager who finds himself living in a nightmare and, as such, he evokes our sympathy, even pity. The terror he is facing at the hands of the Shrive hackers is nothing if not abusive, and the fact that Kenny is so young makes watching the abuse unfold on the screen all the more uncomfortable for viewers.

“Shut Up and Dance” culminates in a showdown between Kenny and an unnamed adult man, who meet in the woods per Shrive’s instructions. While a drone is flying overhead filming them, Kenny learns from the man that they are expected to fight each

other to the death so as to keep the people behind Shrive from releasing the incriminating material they have collected on both of them. “I don’t know about you,” the man tells Kenny as he prepares for the fight, “but my life’s over if this gets out. Fucking over.” When the man inquires what Shrive is blackmailing Kenny with, his response indicates how disproportionate this punishment is for what he actually did: “I just looked at some photos. That’s all. I just looked at one or two photos.” So did the man, we learn, who then poignantly asks, “How young were they? In the pictures? How young?” As Kenny only shakes his head in horror in response, it is at this moment that viewers’ perception of Kenny may markedly shift: after all, he was not just looking at pornography and embarrassed to be caught masturbating to it, as the episode had thus far led us to believe, but he was viewing pornographic images of children, a crime so horrific that it may become difficult, at this moment, to continue seeing Kenny as a victim rather than a predator. When we later see Kenny emerging from the woods limping and with a bloodied face, we can only assume that he did indeed kill the man he was forced to fight. Yet although he followed all of their instructions and committed the violent and disturbing acts he was tasked with, the Shrive hackers release his video anyway, as Kenny finds out when his mother calls him on the phone: “What did you do, Kenny? They’re saying it’s kids!” she sobs. “Kids, Kenny!”

This *Black Mirror* episode thus employs *childhood ex machina* in its final scenes. While the familiar plot device *deus ex machina* functions to provide the denouement in the last act of a play or, more rarely, the last chapter of a novel, *childhood ex machina* here serves a similar purpose. By evoking childhood, or more specifically the child-as-victim that is called to mind by the mention of child pornography, “Shut Up and Dance”

offers its viewers both an explanation for Kenny's behavior—his intense terror about the potential release of the video is here retroactively attributed not to his young age but rather to the fact that he was looking at explicit images of children—and a resolution to the plot that now seems to resemble less an abusive nightmare and more a revenge fantasy in which pedophiles find their ostensibly justified demise. Because they are pedophiles, this use of *childhood ex machina* suggests, the unnamed man is presumably punished by death, whereas Kenny has to endure not only the release of his video but is also, in the episode's last shot, arrested by police and likely faces many years in prison. Other characters whom Shrive blackmailed face less severe repercussions for their behaviors—infidelity and racism—as they are punished only via the release of the incriminating material in the hackers' possession. Looking at child pornography, according to Shrive's moral compass (which we as viewers may or may not adopt as our own), seems to exist on a different plane of criminal behavior, one that cannot be forgiven and that deserves the harshest punishment imaginable.

The final moments of Kenny's story thus speak to the extreme vilification of pedophiles in our culture that has rendered the child sexual abuser, including the consumer of child pornography, our collective boogeyman. Kincaid (1998) explains that “[t]he ‘pedophile’ is the place where a host of current revulsions are relieved; it is perhaps our most frequented cultural and linguistic toilet. . . . Pedophiles have not really been, as we like to say, ‘othered,’ or marginalized; they have been removed from the species, rendered unknowable” (p. 88). The extent to which the child sexual abuser has become dehumanized and reduced to something akin to a monstrous beast seems to reveal our shared desire to protect children from harm, but it also and more generally

indicates the moral panic over issues related to sex that has dominated many public debates in Euro-American societies over the last several decades. The pervasive problem of child poverty in the United States, for instance, has much less of a stronghold on the public imagination than the fear of pedophilia, and so even as we labor to protect children from sexual harm by, for instance, instituting the U.S. sex offender registry as well as strict regulations regarding convicted sex offenders' movements, jobs, and places of residence upon release, this same desire to protect children does not extend with equal force to other areas in which children are victimized. Given the severe punishments for child sexual abuse and the fact that minors themselves are frequently prosecuted in the United States for crimes that fall under child sexual abuse statutes, David M. Halperin (2017) suggests "the possibility that sex offenses are being defined far too broadly and treated out of all proportion to the real danger they present—the possibility, in other words, that sex, not harm, is the actual target of regulation" (p. 15). It appears, then, that it is the specific combination of child and *sexual* abuse, not harm more generally, that has become culturally intolerable.

Even as there seems to be such pervasive concern over sheltering children from sexual predators, however, laws passed in the U.S. during the last few decades have had numerous consequences that actually harm the very children they were ostensibly designed to protect. Gayle S. Rubin (2011) argues that "legitimate concerns for the sexual welfare of the young have been vehicles for political mobilizations and policies with consequences well beyond their explicit aims, some quite damaging to the young people they are supposed to help" (p. 218), as such policies have been utilized to, for instance, deny children and adolescents sex education materials and even prosecute them for

sexting, as child pornography laws make it possible to charge minors for exchanging nude images of themselves. Aside from further disempowering young people and depriving them of sexual agency, then, child pornography and sexual abuse statutes have had the side-effect of labeling some teenagers as sex offenders for the rather innocuous act of taking a nude selfie and sending it to a peer (Halperin, 2017). In fact, both the sender and receiver face potential prosecution (and possibly inclusion on the sex offender registry) in such a scenario: the former for the production and distribution of child pornography, and the latter for possession of a sexually explicit image of a child.

Since current U.S. law defines anyone under the age of 18 as a child, or minor, child sex abuse laws function not only to deter potential adult pedophiles but also to maintain a clear distinction between childhood (sexual) innocence and adult (sexual) maturity. “Rather than recognizing the sexuality of the young and attempting to provide for it in a caring and responsible manner, our culture denies and punishes erotic interest and activity by anyone under the local age of consent,” Rubin (2011, p. 161) remarks. Other sex-positive feminists have echoed these concerns in noting that “the established culture of child protection,” characterized by “its fetishization of virginity and its constant battery of alarmist messages that equate sex with risk and danger,” curtails children’s sexual agency and development because “it tacitly redefines sex, like smoking, as a form of *harm*, permitted only to adults” (Lancaster, 2017, pp. 105-106; emphasis in original). It is, therefore, opportune to consider the ways in which efforts to ensure children’s sexual welfare in the United States effectively further the removal of all minors, children and adolescents alike, from the realm of adults and prohibit even consensual sexual play and experimentation among minors, thus hindering the healthy

sexual development of young people. While it is my firm belief that we should, of course, pursue appropriate avenues for preventing the sexual abuse of minors by adults, U.S. laws and policies designed to do so cast too wide a net in their pursuit of pedophiles and sex offenders. Those that end up caught in this net are often not the violent child rapists we associate with the term “pedophile” but rather children and teenagers themselves who do not conform to cultural ideas about young people’s sexlessness.

Indeed, juveniles make up a startling 25.8 percent of all known sex offenders and 35.6 percent of sex offenders against minors in the United States, according to a study published by the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (Finkelhor et al., 2009). About 16 percent of these offenders are below the age of 12, but these numbers actually only include perpetrators who were at least 6 years of age; children below the age of 6 were omitted from the analysis because “the notion of very young children committing sex crimes is problematic” (Finkelhor et al., 2009). The study does not specify why age 6 is used as the dividing line between “very young children” and potential sex offenders, nor does it detail why six-year-old children—or all those below the age of 18, for that matter—are considered capable of committing sex crimes but incapable of giving consent to sexual activity. The sexual crimes perpetrated by these minors further indicate that what many of these juveniles are ultimately punished for are not what we may term violent offenses but rather the “crime” of demonstrating sexual desires and engaging in sexual activities with other minors. Drawing on her research into the matter, Judith Levine (2017) suggests that the crimes committed by convicted juvenile sex offenders hardly square with our ideas of sexual predation and pedophilia:

Some engaged in consensual sex—mutual masturbation and blow jobs mostly—with teens or pubescent kids a little younger than themselves. Some viewed online images of other naked kids. Like their adult counterparts, many end up on the [sex offender] registry for ‘indecent liberties with a minor’—a crime that in most states includes such noncontact offenses as speaking ‘lewdly’ to a child or (more commonly) to an agent masquerading as a thirteen- or fourteen-year-old online. (p. 153)

If we are serious about protecting children from harm, then we must ask what protections should be afforded to minors who engage in victimless crimes such as consensual sex or sexting, and we should take care, in responding to this question, to not be blinded by fraught assumptions about children’s supposed asexuality.

As Levine astutely points out, juveniles and adults alike are sometimes convicted as sex offenders for having a sexually explicit or suggestive conversation online with someone they believe to be a teenager but who is actually an operative of law enforcement. Police not only pose as minors online, however; they also at times infiltrate and even run illegal child pornography websites. Recently, the extensive pedophile forum *Child’s Play* was taken over and maintained for close to one year by an Australian police taskforce in an undercover operation (Knaus, 2017). During that time, detectives not only monitored the forum’s active users, who continued to upload and look at images depicting child abuse, but also posted content themselves so as to maintain their cover; in order to ultimately protect children, the rationale goes, detectives had to share images depicting child abuse and exploitation (Knaus, 2017). Despite the taskforce’s

unconventional methods, which effectively constitute the viewing and distribution of child pornography, Hetty Johnston, the executive chair and founder of the Australian child protection advocacy organization Bravehearts, expressed her support for this kind of police work: unlike the offenders targeted by the undercover operation, Johnston argued, the detectives did not produce new child pornography but circulated images already in existence (Knaus, 2017). However, most sex offenders prosecuted under child pornography laws are convicted not for the production of sexually explicit images of children but for their possession, a noncontact offense; indeed, “the number of federal prisoners [in the U.S.] serving time for possession (not production) of sexually explicit materials, usually child pornography, increased sixtyfold between 1996 and 2010” (Lancaster, 2017, p. 83). The boogeymen punished under current child pornography statutes are hence only rarely the child-raping monsters Johnston hopes will be caught by undercover police operations such as that of the Australian task force’s.

It seems imperative, then, not to paint all convicted sex offenders with the same brush, especially in those cases when the perpetrators are legally children themselves, like Kenny. It is also worth asking which methodologies for catching potential offenders are ethical and appropriate, and this is of course a question that “Shut Up and Dance” encourages viewers to engage. Whereas most episodes in the science-fiction series *Black Mirror* are clearly dystopian and showcase the (ab)uses of technologies that could, potentially, be developed in the future, the skills employed by the Shrive hackers in “Shut Up and Dance” to collect incriminating materials on their victims is, in many ways, reminiscent of the technology detectives used to infiltrate the pedophile forum *Child’s Play*. The episode thus urges us to consider whether Shrive’s actions are just and whether

close surveillance of computers is an appropriate technique for law enforcement officials. In other words, do the ends justify the means when it comes to catching (sex) offenders? On the response to that question hinges whether we ultimately see Kenny's punishment as justified and Shrive as a commendable vigilante group, or perceive the Shrive hackers as abusive predators doling out draconian penalties to their victims. That Kenny, despite his young age and meek appearance, is not innocent goes, I believe, without saying, but the episode's final moments nonetheless encourage us to contemplate what would constitute a just ending to Kenny's story: Are the public shaming, violence, and loss of freedom he experiences appropriate retributive responses to his viewing of pornographic images of children? What other possible justice might we envision in a case like Kenny's?

Oziewicz's (2015) observations in *Justice in Young Adult Speculative Fiction*, a book that analyzes the use of justice scripts in non-mimetic genres, prove helpful in this context. Defining speculative fiction as a large range of non-mimetic texts that include science fiction and fantasy as well as derivatives and hybrids of these genres, Oziewicz (2015) notes that these texts are invested with a more profound potential for inspiring ethical reflections than their mimetic counterparts: because speculative fiction depicts alternative forms of social organization, it presents "venues for an essentially philosophical speculation on the human condition that involves issues of justice and moral responsibility" and thus "offers liberating projections that testify to the need to imagine a more just world" (pp. 12, 13). Literary and filmic non-mimetic narratives allow their audience to imagine hypothetical realms and scenarios that, particularly as these are compared to the workings of contemporary society, can inspire alternative visions of the

future and “keep our dreaming alive, including the dream of justice” (Oziewicz, 2015, p. 4). The *Black Mirror* series certainly fits within the parameters for speculative fiction that Oziewicz establishes, even as it tends to depict the future as markedly dystopian rather than utopian. In fact, I would suggest that it is precisely the cautionary, nightmarish scenarios the series showcases that inspire contemplations of our present moment, and especially of the non-ethical uses to which technological advances might be put, which can in turn direct us toward envisioning a more equitable future.

Yet the potential for evoking ethical considerations and new ways of seeing rests not only on speculative fiction’s depiction of alternative pasts, presents, and futures, according to Oziewicz, but also on these non-mimetic texts’ incorporation of justice scripts. Oziewicz (2015) explains that “complex ideas such as justice are stored and processed by the human mind as scripts—standardized sequences of causally linked events—and . . . actualized scripts, when described, take the form of multiply indexable stories” (p. 4). Although the cognitive process of scripting is universal, Oziewicz (2015) asserts, the specific elements of justice scripts vary depending on the cultural and historical contexts in which they develop. Classic European folk and fairy tales, for instance, tend to employ poetic justice scripts that ultimately present the world as inherently unjust so that the achievement of justice remains either elusive, attainable only in the afterlife, or deferred to the future; as such, these tales reflect the oppressive conditions peasants had to contend with in their feudal societies (Oziewicz, 2015). Contemporary Euro-American legal systems operate largely on the basis of what Oziewicz (2015) calls the retributive justice script, which “is activated by what is perceived as a harm or violation and . . . projects the achievement of justice as retribution

against the offender” (p. 115). Consequently, the law tends to present justice as the attainment of a form of revenge and underscores the need to punish delinquents with incarceration or other penalties designed to achieve a kind of payback for their crimes. Oziewicz (2015) further explains that “[t]he two signature phenomena of the retributive justice script are the retribution imperative, no matter what the cost, and the license for unrestrained violence” (pp. 119-120). Kenny’s draconian and brutal punishment in “Shut Up and Dance” clearly illustrates these components of the retributive justice script.

I do, however, want to submit that even as this *Black Mirror* episode follows the retributive justice script, it simultaneously contests the notion that retribution leads to the attainment of justice. Since “fiction is one of the main channels for the dissemination and evolution of specific justice scripts,” it provides its audience with “narratives [that] both reflect and challenge justice scripts predominant in a given society” (Oziewicz, 2015, pp. 18, 77). In presenting us with an adolescent protagonist who inspires compassion and pity, “Shut Up and Dance” turns our cultural expectations of what sex offenders are like upside-down, while its plot’s focus on the abuses Kenny endures at the hands of Shrive leaves us, I would argue, not with a feeling of satisfaction about Kenny’s utter downfall but with a bad taste in our mouths. As the narrative consistently emphasizes this young character’s shame and terror, it becomes near impossible for the audience to cheer the tragic ending of his story, which seems to succeed only in piling more violence on top of violence rather than in displaying any kind of real justice achieved through retribution. Although the revelation that Kenny consumed images that victimize children sharply alters our perception of this character, I posit that it cannot completely undo the previously sympathetic, even affectionate portrayal of Kenny. Given that he is depicted

as both young and a victim of Shrive's abuse throughout most of the episode, I find it unfathomable to shift my perception of Kenny so completely as to view him as an ostensibly adult predator during the final scenes. In other words, perhaps it is possible, even encouraged by the narrative, to condemn the ways in which Kenny has participated in the victimization of children while at the same time continuing to view him, too, as a victimized child.

If Kenny indeed constitutes such a child-as-victim, then the retributive justice to which he is subjected feels far from satisfying and instead represents only an additional layer of the abuse this character has to endure. "Shut Up and Dance" seems to suggest, then, that the retributive justice script is problematic, even outdated perhaps, and that we would do well to imagine alternatives that more appropriately capture our sense of justice. Oziewicz (2015) observes that although our legal systems continue to be steeped in the retributive justice model, new conceptions of justice have already begun to develop: "In the last thirty years or so there has been an increasing stress on a situational rather than absolutist understanding of justice, based on a view of human beings as historically conditioned by specifically realized forms of social life rather than as rational agents or generic abstractions in a social equation" (p. 15). The retributive justice script in "Shut Up and Dance," then, seems just only if we understand Kenny as the abstract embodiment of the culturally laden sex offender and pedophile figures; but as the narrative's depiction of this character renders such a view impossible, the episode ultimately encourages us, as speculative fiction so often does, to dream of a different tomorrow in which the quest for justice is more humane.

Given the extent to which sex offenders, and pedophiles especially, have been rendered as monsters and effectively removed from the realm of humankind, however, it can prove difficult to envision a society that regards even those guilty of the sexual victimization of children as worthy of redemption. Yet by compelling its viewers to develop affection for Kenny and by putting a human face, one that we are encouraged to regard with compassion, on the bestial figure of the pedophile, “Shut Up and Dance” implores us to do just that. The struggle for new conceptions of justice that see the humanity even in sex offenders—a group which, we may recall, includes a significant percentage of juveniles as well as perpetrators of contactless crimes—is doubtlessly fraught with ethical dilemmas and complexity, which are only heightened by the manifold quandaries involved in discussing any topic related to the sexual at our current political moment. As Amber Hollibaugh (2017) asserts, “There is great difficulty in trying to build a progressive moment to address issues of sex, desire, pleasure, and possibility, at a point in history when increasing conservatism makes it more and more difficult to talk about sex in *any* context” (p. 456, emphasis in original). Sex is, of course, political, and never more so perhaps than when it is spoken of in the same breath as the child. But in endeavoring to imagine a more just society for all, examining our attitudes toward children—and revising our conception of them as asexual beings who are nonetheless sexualized—might be a particularly productive place to begin. If we can strive to disentangle our cultural construction of the erotic from that of the child, while simultaneously empowering real children in their sexual agency, then, it seems to me, we will be off to a promising start.

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