

Neither Literature nor Object: Children's Writings in the Digital Public Realm

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Abstract The interpretation of children's writings has often presented a particular challenge to Galleries, Libraries, Archives and Museums (GLAM), as the represented child has historically been deprived of agency, and children's writings are neither 'literature' nor traditional display objects. In this article we will explore the methodologies of representation that are associated with the merging of children's history and digital humanities. We will lay out an approach for digitally representing children's writings held in museums. We will demonstrate the possibilities that have been put forward by librarians, archivists and curators internationally, and explore the tools and approaches that have emerged from the field of digital humanities for re-presenting the agency of the child creator and the child visitor within memory institutions. Moreover, in this article we will propose that the digital environment facilitates a critical site of experimentation in displaying children's collections that allow creator, object, context, critique, and visitor to be equally valued.

Keywords Museums. GLAM. Digital humanities. Ethics. Digitisation. History of childhood. Child diaries. Youth culture. Visitor experience. Manuscripts. Collections. Hybrid digital spaces.

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1 Introduction

As GLAM institutions are couched in an ever more networked industry which melds digital and analogue experiences, they must increasingly look to digitise aspects of their collections, for visitors who expect to experience digital exhibition interactions and access objects via digital means. The method of choosing what material is converted into a digital form, and the manner in which this is conducted, is often complicated and inconsistent. In this article we argue for the uniqueness of children as creators of museum objects and museum visitors. In particular, we suggest that the interpretation of children's writings has often presented a particular challenge to GLAM institutions, as the child has historically been deprived of agency, and children's writings are neither 'literature' in a canonical sense nor are they objects which can be easily understood through traditional means of display.¹ The nuances of children's writing collections, and the ways in which they can be explored digitally and ethically, will be the focus of this article.

Pluralistic methodologies of representation are found with the merging of children's history and digital humanities. The digital environment facilitates a critical site of experimentation in displaying children's collections that allow creator, object, context, and visitor to be equally valued. Ultimately, in this article we will explore the theoretical and real-world implications of the digital humanities as a bridging ontology between publics and museums, and offer reflections on and recommendations for meaningful digital engagement with children's collections. We will highlight that establishing a rigorous ethics of collections digitisation is of particular importance when considering those objects which were made by children. The focus will be on 19th and 20th century collections of childhood writings, as this reflects the authors' primary research interests, yet the experiences of contemporary youth in museums is given significant consideration. First, our critical methodology will be established by examining recent developments in the history of childhood, museums, and digital projects, before we consider The Museum of Childhood in Edinburgh as a case study for digital engagement. To finish we gesture to two digital projects, "Girl on a Whaleship" and "The Anne Frank House Museum", which, in our view, have successfully implemented digital mediation of children's writings held in museum collections.

1 Children's writings are subjects of academic interest primarily for children's literature studies, juvenilia studies and life writing studies. Journals associated with these fields tend to interpret children's writings as texts ripe for close reading and other literary analyses, or even as works of art, but their status as objects in collections is not a primary concern in these venues. As children's writings are ambiguously classified as objects by museums (and our case study venue The Museum of Childhood in particular) we will refer to them as objects for the purpose of this article.

1.1 The Current Field of the History of Childhood

A fascination with liberating children's archival material from obscurity has pervaded recent historical research. In the past decade many conferences and journal articles have hinged on the theme of "uncovering", "liberating" or "rediscovering" archival material related to the child, or alternatively on centralising the child's voice and foregrounding instances of children and young people "speaking up and speaking out".² Myriad social and cultural shifts are responsible for this dual focus on archival research and the child's voice.

The power of the child's voice can be seen in contemporary political and activist contexts, which is exemplified in pioneering figures like Malala Yousafzai and Greta Thunberg. The importance of documenting children's lives has been impacted by the phenomenon of a global extended period of adolescence for young people, as well as an increase in youth self-publication, through social media and other cultural products. Many new digital platforms are commanded by youth users; 41% of the 800 million monthly users of TikTok, a mobile video creation platform, are between 16-24 years old (Beer 2019). In June 2020 teenage users of TikTok used their collective influence to digitally disrupt American President Donald Trump's election rally in Tulsa, after registering for thousands of tickets with no intention of attending the event (Lorenz, Browning, Frenkel 2020). This example highlights the self-fashioning and curatorial use of digital media by children to engender agency and create narratives of their own contemporary childhood.

Many scholars working on the history of childhood acknowledge the ongoing methodological challenge that is representing and interpreting children's experiences, while acknowledging the adult intermediary that is always present in this process. In the first volume of the *Journal of Juvenilia Studies* published in 2018, Victoria Ford Smith asked in her article "Exhibiting Children", "What if we begin [...] with the assumption that the child artist is an intentional agent subject [...]?" Although Ford Smith writes here about child artists, her radical questioning of existing adult assumptions that surround the child artist can equally be applied to the child writer. In the words of the anthropologist Allison James,

² The Children's History Society UK conference, scheduled for June 2021, is entitled *Children and Youth Speaking Up and Speaking Out*. In 2017 a workshop *Speaking When Spoken To: Re-Integrating the Experiences and Perspectives of Children into Historical Research* was held at the University of Edinburgh, and in 2018 the conference *Opening Up the Archives: Collections, Collaborations, and Forgotten Histories in Children's Literature* was also held there. Recently published articles include: Hoegaerts 2016; Alexander 2012; Moruzi, Smith 2012.

giving voice to children is not simply or only about letting children speak; it is about exploring the unique contribution to our understanding of and theorising about the social world that children's perspectives can provide. (2017, 262)

Understanding children's voices from the past, and the ways in which youth today engage with these histories, can be part of the opening up current practice in GLAM institutions, to see children as the sites of their own knowledge creation as well as a glimpse into the future of childhood representation and archival practices. Children are not only individualised digital actors but they also represent one of the largest museum visitor groups and thus one of the primary user groups museums can, and do, engage with. For example, "in the United States, about 80% of museums provide educational programs for children (Bowers 2012) and spend more than \$2 billion a year on education activities (American Alliance of Museums 2009)" (Andre 2017, 49). Part of the impetus of this current research is to reinforce the ambiguity or abstraction of each unique museum experience and to show how the evolving relationship between physical and digital object is part of this democratising and individualising boundary breaking.

1.2 Representations of Childhood in Museums

Museums define and classify objects "according to the frameworks of knowledge that allow them to be understood" (Hall 1997, 191). The discursive formations which make up the "frameworks of knowledge" by which the museum presents the child are rooted in the authority of the adult to survey childhood in a highly specified way. Therefore, children are often underrepresented in museum exhibitions and collections, despite the universality of the biological experience of childhood. When their lives are interpreted and exhibited for public consumption, there is a risk of an uncomplicated and sentimentalised portrayal of childhood, as an idyllic and distant idea. The gimlet eye of reminiscence is used to curate exhibitions which represent an adult interpretation of a previous time. The "sanctity of a happy childhood" is a universal value, a value which finds itself repeatedly presented in the display of childhood (Hamilton 1997, 119). But the ways in which groups of people are interpreted positions them as subjects, and this presentation needs to be problematised. Such signifying practices produce meaning which "involve relations of power, including the power to define who is included and who is excluded" (Woodward 1997, 15). As with other marginalised groups, children are not seen to be able to be creators of their own worlds. To suggest that narratives of children focus solely around adult notions of child-

play is to deny the agentic abilities of children to narrate their own lived experience. Todorova notes that "letters and diaries by children have the potential to represent a more individual contribution to historical writing from a child perspective" (2017, 25), and we argue that it is digital methodologies which have the capacity to facilitate this participation.³ The goal of utilising digital means is not to rewrite history nor to suggest that the overarching narrative of historical events is wrong, rather to contextualise history in a way that was previously unachievable. Digital methodologies have the capacity to show that histories can be read against the grain and in doing so provide scope for wider and more inclusive narratives to be told.

It is not only the child as a creator which needs to be renegotiated, but also the child as a visitor. The digital can be an experimental site which enables children to engage with objects and texts they would not usually be allowed to. Described by some as "messy", "leaky", "chaotic" and "undisciplined" museum users, it can be difficult to find ways to facilitate children's access and engagement (Shldrck 1996; Birch 2018; Scollan, Farini 2020). Children do not often fit into how a museum space has been socialised, and their engagement is often looked down upon. Unfortunately, in such spaces "children's embodied practices, and those of their family or guardians, are not always recognised with such open-minded enquiry, often being judged to be out of kilter with institutional mores" (Birch 2018, 519). Huhtamo observed that

any exhibit with something to click, pull, or rotate drew hands like a magnet, but normally the experience both started and ended there. It was as if there had been nothing at all to be gained beyond the momentary acts of punching and tapping, pushing and pulling. (2017, 65)

We would argue that such a biased and restrictive reading of museum interaction actively marginalises children. Huhtamo goes on to say that the "user interface has become The Thing, instead of serving as a gateway to more cerebral pleasures and discoveries (as I believe it is supposed to do)" (65-6). If the "user interface has become The Thing", then we reason that as a manipulatable interstitial space the user interface already suggests itself to be foundational to facilitating child agency.

Finding ways to structure and display children's works can enable the renegotiation of the social and material context of these objects. As digital tools feature strongly in contemporary methodologies that can be used to circumnavigate the problems of space and physical

3 This is explored further in the case studies in § 3.1.

display, it follows that they can lead to the re-agentic individualisation of children within museum collections, "discontinuing a long history of othering children through space and activities designed 'for' them" (Birch 2018, 517). Children have difficulty presenting themselves as self-directed creators or users because of the inherent power and politics of a museum space which is why we argue for the capabilities of digital spaces to enable transformative engagement.

The project of recuperating children's history is not divorced from the drive to actively display the history and achievements of other historically marginalised individuals. Mary Jo Maynes recognises that seeking to re-conceptualise children's agency is analogous to recognising the agency of women (2008). As signifying terms, 'women' and 'children' are often homogenised groups considered 'other' to the norms of representation and narrative. Shildrick writes that "the binary structure which characterises Western epistemology is no less entrenched in the ontology of self and other, or in the categories of sameness and difference" (1996, 5). Facilitating child agency in representation and display in a museum has the capacity to challenge those norms and create new forms of knowledge. To return to our opening gambit, the ambiguity of children's writing as juvenilia not considered to have aesthetic merit as literary works and as complicated objects which upon being presented in a display case are stymied of their whole-ness, benefits from non-binary forms of engagement.

Digital tools can enable the actor, event, time, location, and medium to coalesce into a singular space of interpretation and facilitate the visitor's understanding of contextual digital information without prior interpretation of the object. The digital space can be hybrid, coming out of the hegemonic institutional framework of the physical museum and yet malleable, extrapolatable and with the capacity to enable variant readings and interactions - a third space. A third space

constitutes the discursive conditions of enunciation that ensure that the meaning and symbols of culture have no primordial unity or fixity; that even the same signs can be appropriated, translated, re-historicised and read anew. (Bhabha 2004, 55)

The creation of a new cultural understanding can only exist in a space, a third space, which is neither reliant solely on one or other absolute reading of cultural history, within a museum context we suggest that a hybrid digital space fulfils this role. Bhabha writes that this third space "displaces the histories that constitute it, and sets up new structures of authority, new political initiatives, which are inadequately understood through received wisdom" (Bhabha, Rutherford 1990, 211). This third space accommodates a shifting power dynamic that enables the child author-creator to be heard with minimal adult mediation.

Many museums aim to represent the history of childhood and display a balance of amusement and instruction which tends to characterise the lives of young people. In the United Kingdom the museums which primarily represent the history of childhood are the National Trust Museum of Childhood, Derbyshire; the Victoria and Albert Museum of Childhood, London; the Museum of Childhood in Edinburgh and the Highland Museum of Childhood in Strathpeffer. In regard to digital engagement, all of these museums have websites; only the National Trust museum has a publicly-searchable collections database, and none of the websites have digitised collections.

2 Digital Work in the History of Childhood

If the reparation of children's histories is akin to the reparation of women's histories (Maynes 2008), then the ethical concerns of representing children's collections digitally are equally as complex. Michelle Marovec (2017) has outlined various issues that are inherent in digitising the creations of marginalised figures. Although many digital projects have begun in the spirit of "techno-optimism" (Moravec 2017, 189), the reality is that most digital projects are at the mercy of short funding windows and often focus on digitising a specific, known aspect of a collection, which in turn can reinforce marginalisation of other individuals represented in a collection. There is also the "bias squared" idea, put forward by Oonagh Murphy of the Museums and AI Network, which recognises that if museum exhibitions and museum stakeholders have biases, then inevitably digital technologies employed in museums will also have biases (Murphy, Villaespesa 2020). Attention must be paid to these digital concerns in the unique context of representing children's perspectives.

Museums' engagements in the digital realm are by no means consistent. Digital projects are affected by opportunity and economy, neither of which are equitable across the sector. In a study by the Network of European Museum Organisations (NEMO) published in 2020, it was found that

3 out of 4 museums report that their biggest obstacles regarding the digitisation and online accessibility of the permanent collections are insufficient resources (money) and insufficient (time of) staff.

Furthermore,

less than 20% of the collections of responding museums are available online. This means that less than half of the digitised objects are available to the public. (NEMO 2020)

Although a commitment to digitisation is a necessary responsibility for most – if not all – museums, in reality this is not currently practicable on a mass scale.

Museums have had a tendency to “overprovide meaning for (adult) visitors rather than concentrate on the object-audience encounter” (Birch 2018, 521). We argue that digitisation brings a primacy to the object-audience encounter which not only reduces the reliance on a proscriptive text-based interpretation of an object but also gives the visitor agency over their own engagement with the object. The possibilities for digital engagement abound, from visitor engagement with object surrogates and narrative responses to objects created and recorded by visitors (Ferris et al. 2004), to exhibits that sense users and project content at them – altering the size of projection based on user distance from the object (Wolf et al. 2015), to “digital augmentation” of tangible museum objects (Not et al. 2019) and generative 3-D object creation of museum objects with open accessibility for printing and remixing (Smithsonian 2020). In fact, certain digital aspects are expected by museum visitors and are becoming universal elements of exhibitions. Carrozzino et al. (2018) acknowledge that a challenge to the creative cultural industry is an increasingly active audience who seeks to partake in the process of communication and interpretation. Touch-screen exhibits have already become ubiquitous to the modern museum experience. Haidy Geismar argues that

digital screens have become not just the vehicle for delivering information but objects of appreciation in their own right that mimetically appropriate the effects and engagements of glass cases. (2018, 13)

Developments in digital history underpin museums' engagements in the digital realm. Digital history is aligned with the broader field of digital humanities (DH), “wherein computational methods are implemented in pursuit of humanistic questions” (Romein et al. 2020, 293). DH is an interdisciplinary venture which seeks to reveal, better represent and engage with an array of texts from the humanities through digital means. The elasticity of DH means that it can often cater to those texts and projects which have historically proved problematic to analyse and represent. The records of children are notoriously difficult to uncover for researchers. In fact, there currently exists no physical or digital archive dedicated to children's history and culture in the Anglophone world. Although there are many academic or researcher-led digital projects which engage with diaries or children's narrative experiences, these projects are often unfortunately

separate from the museum space.⁴ Whether due to funding issues, lack of physical space or technology, or because the source material comes from multiple repositories, rarely do the institutions which these projects have taken their source material from display such projects. This suggests there is still a siloing between forms of discourse which engage with children's writings. As such the available information concerning children's collections is disparate, disjointed and diffuse. The use of DH methods, with their ability to bring together history, culture and scholarship and present research to new audiences in novel ways, has the potential to re-engage and represent the narratives of this marginalised group. DH tools provide ways to circumnavigate the previous lack of access to children's histories, by bringing together small and disparate pieces of information, digitally presenting the physical object, and opening displays to various possibilities for interaction.

We suggest that the merging of DH and children's collections goes further than that. We propose that digital mediation of children's works has the capacity to create a third space within a museum environment; a hybrid space within which to create new notions of identity beyond those which are prescribed. Children are inherently bound to adults as the agents of power and control in their lives, they rarely have autonomous shaping power over how their identity is recorded and classified. This is not to say that adult mediation is damaging; it is necessary and often beneficial. But, it is important that adult mediation facilitates a space within which children's own representation is primary and, to borrow a term from children's literature, exhibitions are open to a "crossover" audience, including both adults and children. To return to our earlier point, to "other" children and see them as "they", is to make them "the subject of verbs in a timeless present tense", and to see them "not as [the result of] a particular historical event but as an instance of a pre-given custom or trait" (Pratt 1985, 120). In other words, the displayed work of a single child comes in to represent the "essence" of all children's creations (Gelman 2003). This essentialist view of childhood should not be the norm in exhibitions.

In engaging digitally with their children's history collections, museums can allow for pluralistic readings which centralise the role and agency of the child-creator. It is this ability to represent children's

⁴ Projects such as *The Great Diary Project* (<https://www.thegreatdiaryproject.co.uk/>), *Children's Diaries During the Holocaust* (<https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/childrens-diaries-during-the-holocaust>), the BBC's *Childhood and Evacuation in WWII* (<https://www.bbc.co.uk/history/ww2peopleswar/categories/c1162/>). The British Library's work on Children's writings from WWI is a notable exception (<https://www.bl.uk/world-war-one/articles/childrens-experiences-of-world-war-one>).

writings alongside mainstream or primary museum resources that is especially powerful, given that this can provide access to children's histories; which, as collection subjects, have been on the margins. As providing stewardship, preservation and access to collections are a curator's core responsibilities, digital techniques must be called upon to provide ongoing engagements with the history of childhood.

2.1 The Museum of Childhood and Digital Engagement

Established in 1955, the Museum of Childhood in Edinburgh was the first museum in the world to specialise in the history of childhood. Their collections of children's writings will be the focus of our recommendations for digitisation and digital engagement. Started by a former Edinburgh city councillor, Patrick Murray, the original purpose of the museum was to tell a history of childhood for adults; it was not to be a museum for children. Murray's eccentric approach to curatorial work can be seen today in outdated albeit humorous remnants of his documentation and labels. His sarcastic and sometimes derisive style of writing labels demonstrates that he projected his personal subjective responses on the objects in the collection, a technique that has become obsolete in recent years. The idea of the Museum of Childhood as a child-free zone has also long been dismissed.

As a free museum that receives more than 200,000 visitors from around the world annually, the Museum of Childhood is a flagship museum of Edinburgh Council's 13 Museums and Galleries venues. The two onsite stores contain collections including toys, games, clothing, objects related to children's education and medicine. A book collection held in a separate store in Edinburgh contains a further estimated 20,000 items, including children's novels, religious books, fairy tales, magazines and annuals. The focus of this article, children's writings, is also held in the Museum's collection.

The main gallery in the Museum underwent substantial renovations in 2017. Mostly funded by a Museums Galleries Scotland grant, the re-imagined gallery included digital elements, including an edited video, oral history listening stations, and a large digital touch-screen photo album. On visiting the museum in November 2019 the Authors noted the positive and persistent engagement with this form of digital interaction. Both adult and child visitors cooperatively engaged with the digital touch-screen photo album in particular. They talked together and created narratives which extended beyond the contextual digital information given about the images of the children, such as the activity they were doing, or related their own experience to the geographical location from which the image was taken (Burke, Simpson 2019). This vignette evidences visitors' willingness to not only interact with digital displays as a novel form of museum inter-

action but also how visitors cite their own lived experience in the wider socio-cultural environment. This new initiative presented collections in novel ways, and represented collections which had never been exhibited before. Moreover the digital elements involved significant collaboration with individuals and institutions: the video clips were sourced from the National Library of Scotland's Moving Image Gallery, and the curators invited staff from across Edinburgh City Council to submit their home photos to be included in a digital album.

The Museum's rudimentary engagement with the digital realm invites speculation on how this engagement can be further developed, in line with the view that children's perspectives still need to be better heard. The digital space offers the opportunity to rethink how we choose to engage with our own socio-cultural history; foundational to rethinking that history is bringing in a multitude of perspectives that have always been there but have not necessarily been heard or seen, as with the digital photo album described above.

2.2 The Museum's Collections and the Child's Perspective

The elusive and complicated status of the child's perspective is arguably epitomised in children's writings. As Moruzi, Musgrove and Pascoe Leahy state in the introduction to their 2019 edited collection *Children's Voices from the Past*,

finding children's voices remains methodologically challenging and theoretically complex, but the ethical imperative of the task demands that historians continue in the attempt. (20)

There are multiple considerations surrounding accurate and ethical interpretation of these objects. For example, scholars have identified ethical issues with the framing of Anne Frank's diary, one of the best-known examples of children's writing. Many have written on the 'misuse' and 'appropriation' of Frank's diary, particularly regarding the editing of Frank's words, and the book covers of the various editions of the text. As Todorova notes about children's writing more generally, the

the adult agents involved in the production of the book for mass consumption, however well intentioned, ultimately are silencing - or at least muting - the child-author's voice by speaking for and about her, by translating and interpreting her rather than enabling child and adult readers to hear her. (2017, 26)

The postwar sensibilities of those publishers who interacted with Frank's diary obscured her original intentions. This meant that, in

the words of Ozick, “the diarist’s dread came to be described as hope, her terror as courage, her prayers of despair as inspiring” (1997, 22). A misuse or unethical appropriation of children’s writings is something that must be avoided, in exhibitions as well as in publication.

The types of writing in children’s documentary collections vary widely, from diaries to letters and periodical magazines, and at the Museum of Childhood they have been stored in boxes entitled “Communication” and “Creative Writing”. The Museum holds various children’s writings from the 18th to the 20th century. These include letters from the year 1770 written by a school girl Isobel Wilson to her mother (accession number 24119);⁵ the *Pierrot* magazine (MC86.86) which was written by children between 1911-1915, the contents of which reflects the outbreak of the First World War; and a diary written in 1960 kept by an Edinburgh girl (MC6704). These documents are rich historical resources, as they provide both a written and material historical record. Recent research by Burke (2019), Gleadle (2018; 2019), Sloan (2017) and Pooley (2015) has emphasised the historical value of conducting archival research into collections of children’s writings, and drawn attention to the range and variation of these materials. Children’s written (documentary) evidence can also offer insights into aspects of youth which are perhaps taboo, for example girls’ first-hand experiences of puberty and menstruation can perhaps only be found in few diaries, and no other primary sources (Brumberg 1997).

Although children’s writings can be visually appealing to some museum visitors (one part of the child-made magazine the *St. Bernard’s Budget* - accession number MC808.96 - from 1892 is on display in the Museum of Childhood’s Gallery 4), they present a range of interpretation difficulties for curators. A displayed child-written manuscript is neither a ludic object which is compelling to very young visitors; nor is it ‘literature’ written by a recognisable author whose name attracts visitors.⁶ The manuscript might present palaeographical issues for visitors, and it will be vulnerable to light and other environmental damage. Furthermore, displaying a two-page spread in a bound manuscript volume might not represent the heterogeneity of the text as a whole. Essentially, the manuscript becomes an object which incurs cultural visibility but not readability.

5 *Letter to my Dear Mamma from Isobel Wilson (1770)*. The Museum of Childhood, Edinburgh. 24119.

6 Exceptions to this might be juvenilia written by authors who became notable in adulthood. Two digital examples of 19th century juvenilia are Virginia Woolf’s childhood magazine *Hyde Park Gate News*, and Lewis Carroll’s *The Rectory Magazine*. <https://www.bl.uk/collection-items/hyde-park-gate-news-a-magazine-by-virginia-woolf-and-vanessa-bell>; <https://hrc.contentdm.oclc.org/digital/collection/p15878coll30>.

A particularly ambiguous and complicated example of children's writing held in the Museum is the *Evergreen Chain* (MC2018.059), a home-made (manuscript) magazine which was written, edited and circulated by a group of adolescent girls living around the UK in the 1880s and 1890s. The girls would contribute poems, short stories, puzzles, and drawings to the editor, who then circulated the bound volume around the group. The volumes of the *Evergreen Chain* are sophisticated documents – research into them has revealed insights into the collaborative nature of youth writings in the late nineteenth century. They are also dynamic: the goals of the magazine changed as the writers aged, and submissions to the writing competition had to be divided into two age categories reflecting the diversity of the younger and older adolescent writers. The feedback on submissions also became more substantial, and the Headmistress of a girls' school was brought in as a critic.

These findings into a unique historic children's culture could only be located through dedicated study, and this information would otherwise be obscured from public knowledge. Presenting the *Evergreen Chain* in a digital format would enable wider engagement and appreciation of these documents which would otherwise require close analysis, and could not be entirely comprehended through traditional means of exhibition.

3 Digital Ethics and Engagement Possibilities with Children's Writings

There are various ways in which children's writings can be presented digitally to allow engagement for adult and child visitors and researchers alike, such as techniques that generate data from the collections and make them machine readable and searchable. These techniques are often primary in providing digital surrogates, or copies, of child-created texts.⁷ There is the potential to conduct network mapping using children's correspondence and other shared writings, such as collaboratively-written creative works.⁸ Rich metadata is often contained in museum documentation as well as in the textual ob-

⁷ XML encoding is frequently used to create digital documents that can not only mimic the original physical document but can be more than a digital surrogate being enriched with tooltips, linked to images of the original document and to other contextual documents or objects. An example of the possibilities of XML encoding is given further on with "Girl on a Whaleship".

⁸ Utilising network mapping digital tools, such as Gephi (<https://gephi.org/>) or GraphCommons (<https://graphcommons.com/>), can demonstrate children's cultural networks and can create a compelling and nuanced argument for children's agency and self-made culture.

jects. In the case of the children's manuscript magazine *Evergreen Chain*, we might know the names of the contributors, their addresses, friends and relations. For example, an adult critic of the *Evergreen Chain* was Mrs A.M. Hitchcock, a Headmistress who influenced the suffragette Emily Wilding Davison.⁹ Network mapping can situate children's connections and cultures in a broader historical context which is visually meaningful. Linguistic text analysis platforms can reveal new information about children's writings.¹⁰ The range of information gleaned from this analysis can give critical weight to child writers as creators/authors, and improves understanding of a group or individual creator's literary themes, influences, and levels of literacy. Similar work is done by the Anne Frank House museum website in which Anne's diary is compared to those of other child writers of the Holocaust.¹¹ Yet, if museums are to facilitate digital engagement with their content and use digital tools to explore that content, how do they evidence ethical practice when they move beyond traditional practices of curation, display and study to the digital re-presentation, re-mixing and exploration? Underneath this umbrella question are a number of factors which we will elaborate on now.

Firstly, as adults in a position of power, museum stakeholders must be comfortable with what is being asked of the content and the user. They then must consider what creator and visitor or user data is required, where it is being presented or displayed, and who, within the institution, is responsible for that data. Museum stakeholders must also consider who can view the data within an institution. The proprietary status of the software, interface or display must be examined. If it is proprietary, then the long term sustainability of the product and an end-of-life data disposal plan must be considered. Similar considerations arise with open source software and hardwares. It is notable that one of the primary issues with digital engagement within a museum environment is the maintenance of digital displays – for example, institutions being unable to get basic items such as touch screens repaired due to being locked into maintenance contracts (Field Notes 2019). If a digital display device requires internet con-

9 See the history of the Headmistress's connection to the suffragette in this history of Kensington Preparatory School, https://issuu.com/kenprep/docs/kps-wrap-aw_our_history_final_artw.

10 Linguistic text analysis platforms such as Voyant Tools (<https://voyant-tools.org/>) which is a web-based reading and analysis environment for digital texts. It calculates a summary of vocabulary density, average words per sentence, and the most frequently used words in the corpus. It also visualises this data through a word cloud which presents the most frequently used words. Trends shows a line graph of the relative frequencies across the corpus, with a search box.

11 <https://www.annefrank.org/en/anne-frank/go-in-depth/holocaust-diaries-anne-frank-and-other-young-writer/>.

nection, is endpoint security being used and is there an institutional policy to change default passwords? Finally, there is the question of who owns the data, whether the data actually needs to be collected, and if the amount of data being collected is appropriate in relation to the task at hand. The aim of listing these considerations is not to place a further undue burden of responsibility on the institution that looks to extend its digital engagement, but to make manifest important conditions around the creation of digital content. DH tools only work successfully as a bridging ontology between the physical and digital production of content if they are consistently scrutinised to ensure open and ethical practice. In the following section we will examine two museum projects which have successfully digitally represented children's writings.

3.1 Case Studies of Digital Children's Writings

The website "Girl on a Whaleship" (<http://www.girlonawhaleship.org/>) is an excellent, although dated, example of the digital preservation and curation of children's writings. The site was produced as an online exhibition by Martha's Vineyard Museum in 2010; the building of the site was facilitated by a National Endowment for the Humanities programme, "We The People". The exhibition is built around Laura Jernegan's journal, which is held in the museum's permanent collections.

Laura's journal documents a 3-year whaling voyage she took with her parents, brother, and ship's crew in 1868. On the website one can access the colour scan of the journal, its transcription, and an audio recording of the journal. This tripartite model of presentation ensures maximum accessibility for visitors to the object, and allows new understandings which cannot be sought through accessing the physical manuscript only. Importantly, the wealth of digital contextualising information renders this piece of nineteenth-century children's writing comprehensible to current school-age children. The website provides rich additional interpretation to this already exceptional object. Interactives include a timeline, a history of whaling, a picture gallery, glossary of terms, and an interactive figure of a whaling ship. The picture gallery contains paintings, drawings and objects from Martha's Vineyard Museum's wider collections, which enable the user to understand how the manuscript fits within the museum's larger collection and also relates the manuscript to its historical socio-cultural context.

In the transcribed journal entries, hyperlinks are attached to esoteric vocabulary - that which is either specific to whaling or now obsolete. The digital diary entries provide a diplomatic transcription of the manuscript; they reproduce Laura's grammar, syntax and pres-

entation of her journal as close to the original as possible, including redacted spelling errors indicated by the use of strikethrough. This all contributes to the impression that the transcription work honours the original intention of the author, and in doing so gives credence to the girl author's intent and perspective. It facilitates the autonomy of the child user to learn about whaling history, while simultaneously respecting the original child-created object. "Girl on a Whaleship" is a highly accomplished digital project with respect to the goals of utilising a digital environment to create novel opportunities for engagement with the history of childhood. It stands out as a model of best practice for the representation of children's writings which has paid due diligence to the author, the subject of the writings, the context in which they were written, and also the user who accesses these pages digitally. It allows for full access and analysis of the diary as an historical document.

Another example of accessible and sensitively presented child writings in a digital format can be seen in the sections of the Anne Frank House museum website (<https://www.annefrank.org/en/anne-frank/diary/>) dedicated to her diary. The pages of the website are multifaceted, and display images of Anne's manuscripts and published works, specially commissioned videos, as well as text. These carefully curated web pages have the effect of dispelling the mythology, as we noted earlier, surrounding Anne's written works and allowing the visitor to access the various incarnations of them, which underwent various edits in both manuscript and published forms.

Perhaps the best-known child writer there is, Anne Frank kept a diary while in hiding in a secret annex in Amsterdam during the Holocaust. She wished for her diary to be re-written and published,¹² and after she died in Bergen-Belsen internment camp in 1945, her father Otto Frank sought publication for it. One page on the Anne Frank House museum website dedicated to her diary is entitled "The Complete Works of Anne Frank". The text on this page is set up in a question and answer format, with questions such as "When does Anne get her diary? When does Anne start writing? In which language does Anne write?" followed by succinct responses. This dialogue style seems to represent visitors' frequently asked questions which would be addressed in museum labels in a physical display.

In answer to the question "Does Anne only write in her diary?", we learn about four different types of text that Anne wrote beyond her diary. This is illuminated by the title of the web page - "The Complete Works of Anne Frank" - which is usually reserved for the publications of canonical authors, and has the impact of suggesting that Anne was a child writer who wrote, to borrow the words of Ford Smith, "with

¹² Evidenced by her own ongoing editing of her journal and creation of 'clean copy'.

deliberation and insight" (2018, 68) in several different genres. The website also contains pages dedicated to Holocaust diaries written by other young writers. These features facilitate both adult and juvenile learning about Anne Frank's life and works and encourage further research by signalling other child writers and including reference lists for further reading and teaching materials aimed at primary school pupils. This online exhibition of Frank's writings occupies the third space of Pratt's notion of a "contact zone" (1985), in which the child writer is represented ethically, and the present visitor is engaged in a dialogue with the agentic child of the past.

The website also features the Anne Frank video diary, a 15-episode series recorded in Dutch with subtitles in nine languages.¹³ The series is recorded as if it is a home-video taken from Anne's perspective. Although anachronistic, this method of filming prioritises the character of Anne's perspective, and it resonates with contemporary forms of childhood self-representation, which is often facilitated through smartphone use. Therefore, this video series achieves the goal of reconciling children's historical status as writers and creators with children's contemporary digital engagements, which we wish to champion in this article.

These examples evidence a unique way of encountering child-written texts held in museums. Both websites facilitate an encounter with these objects in a way which is special, individual, responsive and subjective. They break away from the notion of exhibiting which instruct visitors how to appropriately engage with them, whilst facilitating the encounter with the complexity of the writings.

3.2 Looking Ahead

This article has offered both ethical and practical recommendations for the interpretation of children's writings through the use of digital environments, while advocating for the literary richness they contain. As there is currently no Anglophone digital archive dedicated to children's collections as far as we are aware, we argue strongly for the potential of a large-scale multi-institution digital archiving project.

The critical recommendations presented in this article have overwhelmingly supported the idea that digital means can interpret children's writing to an extent which facilitates engagement, but does not digest them so thoroughly that these complex objects are understood in a single, uncontested way. If "museum objects are said to function as active producers of meaning", as we have argued, then museums must provide visitor experiences that are ambiguous and open (Light

13 <https://www.annefrank.org/en/museum/web-and-digital/video-diary/>.

et al. 2018, 408). The goal of digital engagement is that it opens up space for engagement between the child created artefact, adult and child visitors, researchers, and curators alike. Yet caution must be taken in the ethics of this digital space; sensitive interpretation decisions, an understanding of the implications of dealing with a marginalised or usually muted group and close adherence to copyright regulations and data legislation are requirements in this configuration.

As creators, visitors and users, children are generally less resistant than adults to engaging with digital interfaces. The creation of hybrid digital spaces can take advantage of this willingness and engender a kind of agency for children that does not present them based on their dissimilarity to adults. Hybrid digital spaces can present an ambiguous in-between space in which the child as creator and consumer might fashion their own narrative. Continuing to exhibit those objects that we currently have greater access to means that museum stakeholders are producing and reproducing bias and distorted arguments, whereas access to a greater digital corpus, both within museums and remotely, means that people can use, reuse, re-interpret and re-present previous binary heteronormative and patriarchal interpretations of children's history. The authors' work on digital archives of Anglophone 19th century women (Ball, Burke, Simpson, forthcoming) has shown a huge disparity in uniformity and presenting information in apparently similar web projects. Our view is that the collections of historically marginalised groups should be as open and accessible as possible.

Museums have a continuing responsibility to act as stewards of their collections; to both preserve them and also allow access to them for as long as access is sustainable. These priorities remain in the digital age, and museums' engagements in the digital realm broadens access to collections in ways that were previously unimaginable. Representing collections that evidence childhood is a crucial yet heretofore overlooked aspect of museums' digital engagements. Our goal has been to explicitly merge insights from museum studies, digital humanities, children's literature studies, and the history of childhood to argue for new critical approaches to children's writings held in museums. After all, children's manuscript writings are strange, uncategorizable texts or objects that are interesting and analyzable from a number of disciplinary perspectives. Future work in this area should seek to model these insights.¹⁴

14 The Authors are currently developing a digital project which analyses meaning and semiotics in the writing of the multiple child-contributors of the *Evergreen Chain* and will use the outcomes to argue for a stronger research impetus into the historical creative literary works of children.

The hybridity of our histories is an unassailable fact of our lived experience. In a hybrid digital space of engagement, the museum has the possibility to be more than a mainstream cultural institution and to become the site of insurgent counter-hegemonic digital presences. In these spaces, narratives drive learning, the object (explicitly not its interpreters or translators) is centred, and the quality of the digital contextual information explodes dominant knowledge frameworks.

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