

## Preliminary Materials Toward a Theory of the Virtual Child

My sketch of a theory of the virtual adolescent begins in an unlikely place: Fond-du-Lac, Wisconsin, the bucolic setting for Maureen Daly's novel *Seventeenth Summer* (1942), which is often cited as young adult literature's urtext. Alternately hailed for its groundbreaking portrayal of a young woman's self-fashioning (Carroll) and derided for its "glacially slow" narrative, which is "bogged down in far too many rhapsodic passages describing the [local] fauna" (Cart 12), *Seventeenth Summer* is noteworthy in that it "help[s] fashion an interiority for the adolescent character," as Kenneth B. Kidd points out (159). Kidd describes *Seventeenth Summer* as "a story of self-love" (162), one that "[revels] in the protagonist Angie Morrow's self-absorption" (160). I don't disagree. But I do believe that too sharp a focus on the psychology of Angie's interiority risks overlooking another iteration of the young protagonist offered by *Seventeenth Summer*: the virtual adolescent.

I read *Seventeenth Summer* not as a story of self-love, but a story of networked love. Daly's novel anticipates theories that would follow thirty years later: Deleuze and Guattari's "body without organs" and "desiring machines." Angie is a virtual adolescent in the Deleuzoguattarian sense: she animated by desire, constantly in process of engaging her bodily "becomings" through an expansive network that consists primarily of the much-maligned (at least by Cart) fauna of Fond-du-Lac—this is why, I argue, her environment is described so frequently, in great detail, and with palpable eroticism. "The rough bark of trees was good, hard," Angie narrates on one occasion, "and I thrilled to the soft, silken curve of the dog's head as I stroked it. Words came out of my mouth like bubbles" (182). Insofar as Daly's is a novel about narcissism, I argue that it is simultaneously a story of queer connectedness, bodily potential, and the free flow of networked desire. *Seventeenth Summer*, then, might offer a theory of the virtual-adolescent-as-potentiality as a possibility for theorizing how young people engage with (and desire) the virtual as digital simulation. The latter—the virtual/digital—will be the focus of my co-panelists' papers.

### Works Cited

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