

# INTRODUCTION

## What Is the Now, Even of Then?

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and Kathryn Bond Stockton**

*What are we to make of the unexpected future in which we find ourselves?* With this open question, we framed “Child Matters,” a conference hosted by Indiana University in 2015, in celebration of the recent efflorescence of work in childhood studies. Across the twentieth century, of course, the child and the future circled each other with close reciprocity. Planning and conducting this conference, however, we came to realize that the *concept* of the future has changed in *this* century. In this age of potential extinctions, the question of the future is no longer primarily social or even exclusively human; in the catastrophe of climate change, the future can no longer be counted on to serve as a blank backdrop for human life. It asks us, instead, to reckon with new forms of temporal change. Will plastic objects “outlive” Time, if human time expires? Increasingly, the drama of the plastic water bottle projects its own futurities. Chronology falters. Time grows stranger.

The child, to be sure, has been a creature of chronology. Built on the assembly lines of the last one hundred years, the child now stands for a future out-of-date. Therefore, we propose that the study of the child find new concepts. The task of recalibrating our theoretical instruments and object relations is one that we undertake in this special issue. We offer the now not as a displacement or dismissal of the future but as a mutation of our attention: toward the unique strangeness of childhood as of today. Indeed, the most striking dimension of the “now” that titles this issue is that it has been anything but static or rooted in a stable present. When we first conceived of this issue almost three years ago, the gay child still felt oddly new, and the transgender child still ghostly. The utter disregard for refugee and undocumented children and the killings of African American children by police were not new phenomena—both have long and complex histories—but it was not a certainty these children would soon occupy such a central place in

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battles over definitions of the local and the global, the national and the international. Some question of the future inheres for all these children, but something else about their irruptive force inside the “now” commanded our attention a few years ago, as it does today. The children of the twenty-first century are making what counts as the now move ever more quickly, without much time for us to catch our breath. Through their play in the remains of rapidly obsolescing narratives, the figures of children we’ve collected in this volume deform what we thought we knew about the past as they forge new modes of speculation in the present.

Perhaps oddly, then, thinking the child *now* also means to move orthogonally from an emphasis on futurity to an interest in the historicity of the present. Here queer studies might engage more robustly with the fields of children’s literature, childhood studies, and the history of childhood. Anglo-American childhood studies has investigated the production of modern childhood as a form of idealized shelter meant to grow the gap between a person’s birth and their adulthood. By taking children in the Progressive Era off the streets, out of factories, and placing them into mass schooling or institutions for juvenile delinquency, childhood was constituted as an ostensibly empty innocence based in deferral and delay: of work, of sex, and of civil rights.<sup>1</sup> Children were then assigned the vital task of directing our consumption, of leading the economy toward a fully consumer mode of demographics and leisure. This childhood for the twentieth century was deeply, doggedly gendered, with the meanings of innocence for boys and girls shoring up the boundaries of domesticity and the desired, but difficult to induce, heterosexuality that was supposed to be childhood’s end. As early as 1970, Shulamith Firestone had identified the innocent child as the thin scrim of ideology covering the multiplex effects of dependency. Childhood, for Firestone, is just another name for heteropatriarchy. Robin Bernstein’s *Racial Innocence* (2011) crucially adds that American childhood also hoarded innocence to make modern childhood the exclusive property of (propertied) whiteness, with tragic effects. While immigrant children from Europe were forcibly whitened in the new public schools and settlement houses of major cities, African American youth were dispossessed of the status of childhood altogether and made available for imprisonment and exploitation by the withholding of innocence.

While these narratives remain in force, the twenty-first century has also witnessed massive breakdowns in the fantasized modernity of US childhood. Child labor was never eradicated by Progressive reforms, but merely reorganized and made less visible. Today, the notion that childhood offers a wondrous shelter from work feels, finally, unconvincing. The longer children wait to work, the higher their future debt as adults. In the meantime, public education lies in the grip of collapse

after decades of planned state disinvestment and public education's failure to pursue seriously the project of racial integration. The employment prospects of many children seem bleak, given that wages have proved mostly stagnant in this century, despite most workers' increased productivity and longer hours. Credit card debt, student loan debt, mortgage debt, health care debt: the twentieth-century promise (however hollow then) of eventual affluence in adulthood has disappeared for children before they start working.

Children today are also diagnosed as ill on a mass scale, whether in terms of the obesity "epidemic" or the "need" for children's chronic medication for anxiety, depression, and ADHD. These shifts slide onto the body and expose it to those technologies of discipline central to the formation of sexual subjectivity: namely, the cultivation of the self and the responsibility to self-govern. In short, the progressive generational ideology of the twentieth century, according to which children incarnated the future precisely because they would be healthier, richer, and happier than their parents, has now lost its purchase, however delusional it was all along. The modern fantasies of the child-figure have simply become unconvincing in the face of the material conditions of contemporary life.

This fantasy meltdown makes for strange feelings in the precincts of childhood. For children excluded from US ideals, the breakdowns of the now are not really news, much less cause for nostalgia or grief. Rather, for many children of color, queer children, trans children, immigrant children, disabled children, and poor children, the instability of futurity is finally a partial national admission that as children they *have* been excluded from these ideals. Somewhat differently, this breakdown of fantasy also cracks an opening for children outside the United States and global north. If the United States is especially guilty of exporting its idealized version of childhood as a universalizing, colonizing force, even that process is becoming stranger today than we might realize. Several of the essays collected here provincialize historical narratives of modern Anglo-American childhood. They do so by scouting situations where the state deployed a child ideal so as to induce the guaranteed failure of actual children (for instance, in Mary Zaboriskis's piece, Native children in state boarding schools). Or these essays shift terrain—geographic terrain—and thus our expectations of the relation between the global south and north.

Kathryn Bond Stockton's essay, "The Queer Child Now and Its Paradoxical Global Effects," takes us deep inside these tangles. Stockton's crafted theoretical ballasts, kid Orientalism, reverse pedophilia, and manifest latency, each serve to comment, in ways that surprise, on the gaps among what adults think they know, what they want children to think and tell, and where children have moved

while adults have been busy telling and thinking. Forging these new concepts, Stockton reexamines the “ghostly gay child”—a central figure from her book *The Queer Child* (2009)—to ask how it’s been changing, conceptually and politically, in our current century, and whether its ghostly specificity is subsiding. How does it *now* mark every child’s queerness and to what oddly global effects? Engaging these questions, Stockton speculates on something that’s been surfacing in Anglo-American public culture over the last ten years or so. “A future the public fears is coming—child sexuality, evidenced by sexting, ‘gay’ kids in middle school, and sexual bullying—is accompanying *exportation* of a fading child (the figure of the innocent child) to other lands,” where it seems available to be rediscovered. Quite paradoxically, an aesthetics of world documentaries on the-child-in-peril-in-the-third-world (a genre enjoying conspicuous success on the art-film circuit in the United States) may be “restoring” the “Western”-style innocent child through, of all things, the sexualized, racialized, “HIV child.” Nonetheless, Stockton claims, this child-in-peril, this kid Orientalism, becomes a threat in a different direction. It becomes the icon of globalized poverty that makes us want to run from it, because of the demands it makes for our response. Feeling thus threatened, we flee from children whom, we imagine, are desiring us (in reverse pedophilia). Is there any antidote to these strange dynamics, especially when they center on the role of children’s faces? Moreover, how does literature, especially experimental literary form in the novel *Push*, and something Stockton calls “lyrical fat” in the film *Precious*, work against this fray? Stockton finds answers among depictions of children’s passion for signification—children’s libidinal relationships to signifiers—and through new conceptions of (sexual) latency via the latency of signification.

Paul Amar’s essay, “The Street, the Sponge, and the Ultra: Queer Logics of Children’s Rebellion and Political Infantilization,” leads us in equally twisting directions. Amar’s expansive project lies outside the United States, in the detailed fieldwork and comparative frameworks he has developed through his work on Brazil—revisited through current events in Egypt. Amar makes the figure of the child revolutionary and the young football fanatic, “the Ultra,” an animating force of his searching analysis, rather than a problem to be solved by an a priori epistemology. Amar demonstrates how the illegibility of children’s actions in a revolution doubles as a blind spot in scholarly analysis. Thus, he charts how the cloak of childishness, under conditions of disenfranchisement and political infantilization, enables children’s informal political, economic, and social activities. Matters of formal and informal agency thicken even further, when, as Amar shows, it falls to the pirated, circulated image of SpongeBob SquarePants to foster the dissident worlds of children after the Egyptian counterrevolution of the past several years. SpongeBob

captures the anarchic energy and queer ambience of youth mobs in Egypt. Like him, children's marginality to serious matters of state in that country is revealed as dense with unanticipated significance. Child revolutionaries may be deemed marginal by the state and by the scholarly frameworks that define them, yet these margins are also incubators of twenty-first-century unruly childhood. With Amar, then, we find the movements of contemporary children within these queer and dizzying logics.

From the US child abroad to the child revolutionary working in Egypt, the issue's first half locates the child in affective relays that draw surprising connections among the security state, American popular culture, and the global south. The second half turns directly to the law and the state's overwhelming imprint on productions of sexual citizenship out of childhood. Clifford Rosky's essay, "Same-Sex Marriage Litigation and Children's Right to Be Queer," brings legal studies (by a law professor) back to *GLQ* for the first time in many years. The venue of this journal allows this legal scholar to ask what one can do as a law professor *and* a queer theorist. With the rapid jolts to the "now" of same-sex marriage litigation over the past few years in this country, Rosky's genealogy of the queer child under marriage law organizes bold discursive shifts into a captivating, telling transformation. The courts have moved from a fear of the queer child to a veritable adoption of the doctrine of "No Promo Hetero," according to which the state has no justified right in promoting heterosexuality, including in children. While mining queer theory—which has barely begun to be cited in academic legal journals—for what it might offer for tracing the limits of marriage law, Rosky shows how two recent decisions, *Perry v. Schwarzenegger* (2013) and *Obergefell v. Hodges* (2015), lay the groundwork for a law that might cultivate a child's right to be queer.

The concluding essay textures the background of children's rights or enforced fate to be deemed "queer"—via state policy. This piece considers histories in which the alchemy of race and sexuality generates a queer-child melancholy. Where Rosky illuminates the welcoming into citizenship of gay adults and children through marriage, Zaborskis, in "Sexual Orphanings," reveals Native children's enforced citizenship through the genocidal project of state boarding schools. Like Stockton's turn to *Push*, Zaborskis's turn to literature finds that the child asks us to trust in a weird slippage between the historical and the fictional. For those children whose racialized sexuality makes them historically impossible subjects, the aesthetic is just capacious enough to give them a brief form of life not entirely bound to the slow death forced on them by the settler state. Reading Tomson Highway's *Kiss of the Fur Queen* (1998) alongside the history of boarding schools in the United States and Canada, Zaborskis draws on the growing perspec-

tives of queer Native studies. Deftly, she describes a bold double bind that elucidates how children can be made queer in a clearly nonempowering, devastating sense. The boarding school's predetermined heterosexualization of Native children "orphaned" them, in Zaborskis's wording, from any possible claim on an indigenous sexuality. Just as perniciously, this institutional heterosexualization was *also* rigged to fail because it was racialized by the state and was often delivered through sexual violence, forcibly queering Native children through an estrangement controlled by the state. Zaborskis's rendering of sexual orphaning insists, therefore, on the difference that race makes in closing off the opportunity for indigenous sexuality to be recuperated during or after childhood. Living on through such double binds in some sense leads to *fictional* lives for the children who cannot find adequate life in the aftermath of cultural and erotic erasure.

Is it still the case, then, as Lee Edelman argued in *No Future* (2004), that it is impossible to talk about the child without discussing the politics of futurity? These four essays give us answers neither in the register of outright affirmation nor that of opposition. They respond instead by following bends in the concept of the future from within the now and from a range of disciplinary and methodological coordinates. While literary studies and queer theory are key dimensions here, we also want to underline the insights that come out of law, global studies, comparative political economy, and indigenous studies. "The Child Now" is motivated not only by our wish to catch up our thinking to the twenty-first century but by our kinship with a mass of work unfolding today. Without trying to classify that work and thereby restrict its scope, we instead point to links between this issue and other collections that have recently been published or are forthcoming, including *WSQ: Women's Studies Quarterly's* recent special issue "Child," edited by Sarah Chinn and Anna Mae Duane (2015); *Monstrous Children and Childish Monsters*, edited by Markus P. J. Bohlmann and Sean Moreland (2015); and the forthcoming *Worlds of Wonder: The Queerness of Childhood*, edited by Anna Fishzon and Anastasia Kayiatos. We are excited to see queer studies, children's literature, and childhood studies combine to nurture new voices from other fields in the humanities, social sciences, and elsewhere. In a different moment, these disciplines may not have seen themselves working on common problems. The overlaps and gaps that define our respective and varied work are now too obvious and too compelling to remain siloed—and far too productive to be summarized by a single issue, monograph, or collection.

There is less attention to psychoanalysis in this issue than has characterized some of the landmark work that contributors nonetheless claim as important elements in the genealogy of the child now. Like the volume *Curiouser: On*

*the Queerness of Children*, edited by Steven Bruhm and Natasha Hurley (2004), we are drawn to the many ways the child has yet to be taken up, is only beginning to be theorized, or might challenge ongoing conversations in queer studies and the liberal arts and sciences more broadly. Investigations of the post-human might consider the strange inhumanity of human development, the way that the human, rather than a ready-made object for critique, has to be grown out of processes—pregnancy, infancy, and childhood—that are radically incommensurate with the rational subject. In many ways, these matters return to the genealogical connections between the child and the life sciences spelled out by Carolyn Steedman's pioneering work in *Strange Dislocations* (1998). Various neomaterialisms or object-oriented inquiries into the liveliness of things at nonsubjective or nonhuman scales might engage with the history of animating childish form, the ways in which plasticity or potentiality as concepts owe a debt to the biological and psychological child sciences. The child as a screen against which adults project claims about life finds literalization (as Heather Warren-Crow describes in *Girlhood and the Plastic Image* [2014]) in the bodily modulations of Lewis Carroll's Alice and her many sisters.

Our own new work carries on in this vein. In her book, *The Child to Come* (2016), Rebekah Sheldon explores how the catastrophic temporalities of climate change condense into fears over the end of human reproduction and a future without children. Such matters make strange patterns of thought against two current backdrops: the proliferation of forms-of-life in the new biology of patentable transgenics, and the new realities of increasingly constricted reproductive rights.<sup>2</sup> The vertiginous technologizing of these domains links to another site of public worry. Here lie generational anxieties over the idea that the digital is in some ways synonymous with youth. Here lies the fear that only children can keep pace with digital change, in ways that grant them a threatening autonomy. Turning yet elsewhere, Julian Gill-Peterson, in his book-length project on the history of transgender children, argues that the growing body of the child became the central object of the twentieth-century life sciences, particularly modern endocrinology. Gill-Peterson shows that the overwhelming plasticity of biological life, held in the sexed and gendered forms it takes, was the object of the broader eugenic project of the improvement of human stock. The radical openness of sex and gender in their embryonic and childish stages was sharply reduced to developmental trajectories. Yet this genealogy—the child in life sciences—reveals long-overlooked counterhistories of the modern body. One striking instance, he avers, involves transgender children in the 1960s and 1970s, who took up and *took on* the discourses that sought to confine them to experimental test cases for a general theory of sex and gender.

These conversations, all contemporary, *about* temporalities, touch on several profound ways in which the child—as figure, as threat, as ideal, as spoiler—changes the framing of our work in academe. The child is the hybrid creature assigned the impossible but obligatory role of crossing from nature to culture, with all the contradictions, tensions, and offshoots that ensue. In the era of biopower in which we live, the child is also the preeminent reservoir of that enigmatic signifier “life itself,” the surplus forced to hold itself somewhere so as to grease the cogs of capital, biomedicine, and technoscience. Where the human is already too closed off, too settled, or too exhausted to be of use for the latter’s full extractions, the child is a natural resource that promises the boundless cultivation of nature. “Gender,” “sexuality,” “race”: the child (un)makes each of these linguistic registers by reminding us that they must be both implanted in yet grown out of the flesh of children. The uniquely intense quantum of vitality we have implanted in the child, of course, is the stuff that biopower and capital bank on. It is what promises to propel life forward into the human, if all goes well, or into the dystopian and catastrophic, if it doesn’t.

A future, then. But not the one the modern child led us to expect. Instead of the futural child and its horizon, we now offer the involutions of the present, the folds in which we find ourselves. Instead of the spectacle of revelatory meaning, we offer this issue in full knowledge that the child “now” will only ghost the outlines of the child “then.” And so we limn where the two now touch, and will touch again.

## Notes

1. We do not mean to suggest, however, that the historical emergence of modern childhood was linear or even. For a thorough discussion of these historical and literary developments, see Sarah Chinn’s *Inventing Modern Adolescence* (2008) and Marah Gubar’s *Artful Dodgers* (2009). On innocence, see James Kincaid’s classic *Erotic Innocence* (1998) and Kathryn Bond Stockton’s elaboration on the strangeness of innocence in *The Queer Child* (2009).
2. On these two matters, see Franklin 2013 and Latimer 2013.



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