The Queerness of Childhood

“Anna Fishzon and Emma Lieber curate an exciting collection of essays that playfully interrogate queer childhood and the queerness of the ways in which childhood is portrayed in literature and visual media, including animation, science, and mythology. How is “the child”, a specter of the unpredictable and unknowable, theorized as the promising future in need of protection, the guiding nostalgic past and the horrific and uncanny present? This collection holds these temporal potentialities to expand the reach and depth of queer studies and psychoanalytic theories of development and subjectivity. It is an appealingly nuanced book for psychoanalysts, clinicians, and academics finding themselves compelled by the temporal queerness that is childhood.”

—Katie Gentile, Chair of the Department of Interdisciplinary Studies, John Jay College of Criminal Justice, CUNY, USA

“This book understands queer kids to be not only persons but instruments: agents of confusion, sand in the gears of normalcy, trouble on multiple horizons. From fantasies of origins to claymation animals, this book returns the queer child to its central place of outsiderness in both time and space. It not only brings the queerly analytical child up to the moment, but it moves that moment forward. This is a book that we will want to take off the shelf again and again to remind us of where we are going and why we might not ever get there. A tour de force of necessary thinking!”

—Steven Bruhm, Robert and Ruth Lumsden Professor of English Emeritus, Western University, Canada

“This book is a breath of fresh air in the often turgid relation between queer theory and childhood. The authors in this volume largely abandon a fantasmatic and overly idealized queer child, divesting from queerness as a reaction formation wholly outside and self-consciously against the social. They relinquish the framework of a directional queer childhood that grows only sideways, resisting adulthood, reckoning instead with the myriad ways in which regimes of the normal animate queerness in children. From the institutional spaces that produce surprising intimacies to the ones that can and should excavate the “hows” of queerness, this is a refreshing redirection of psychoanalytically informed queer thought. Sexuality is transmitted, these authors tell us, in its enigmatic gestures, affective excesses and absences, and intimate meetings and misses. It emerges not into fluidity but into particularity in the psyche and the body. Queerness is animated by actual relation, both bestowed and developed in opposition to very real others. By foregrounding the actual over the figurative, the related over the antisocial, the how over the why, one feels in reading this book an optimism, not merely for childhood, but for its relationship to queerness.”

—Tey Meadow, Associate Professor of Sociology, Columbia University, USA
...my own observations prove that we have under-estimated children and are no longer able to say just what they are capable of.

—Sigmund Freud, “History of an Infantile Neurosis”
While children mostly appear in popular culture as wide-eyed innocents asking why the world is so evil, sometimes they become powerful and creepy vectors for evil itself. In classic horror films like The Shining, Rosemary’s Baby, The Exorcist, Village of the Damned and The Omen, children are symbols of corruption, Satanic possession, amoral violence and anarchic will. In George Romero’s Night of the Living Dead, a family huddles in the basement hiding from the zombie onslaught. As Ben, the lone black character among a group of white survivors, works hard to save the small group, the white people turn on each other and Ben. Harry, the white patriarch, insists that his wife and daughter move down to the basement, where it will be safer. But while they are down there, the daughter, Karen, succumbs to a zombie bite she had incurred earlier and transforms into a flesh-eating monster. Ben has had to kill Harry and Karen feasts on his remains before killing her mother too. This gory family affair is all the more gruesome for the involvement of Karen in the bloody violence. Far from an innocent child in need of protection or help, the child in the horror film often channels deep-seated dissatisfaction with the family and enacts violent revenge against them.

The violent or knowing child represents the reverse image of the more palatable representation of youthful innocence or innocent victimhood. Oddly, children often exhibit more agency in horror than in other genres, where they are more frequently pawns for adult conflict, symbols of uncorrupt life or signs of futurity. As many of the essays in this compelling anthology demonstrate, the child carries a heavy burden, symbolically speaking, and can never fulfill the hopes and fears heaped onto their small
bodies. And queer children live within a nexus of additional pressures, as they are forced to represent and reproduce a family system that often deliberately excludes them. Queer children, and trans children in particular, must answer to the fears, anxieties and expectations of adults who cast such children as misguided or aberrant, unknowing or all too knowing.

I focus here on the horrifying child not because the essays collected here focus on bad seeds, so to speak, but because children offer forms of knowing about the world that can appear violent, scary and destructive to adults. While many films geared toward children represent them as morally superior beings with an innate orientation to the good and the true, children actually have to be trained into moral systems preferred by adults. Kid knowledge about life, about embodiment, about art and about power is rarely cultivated and tends to be cast as a naïve version of what adults already know. Children, however, clearly experience the world very differently from adults: they are drawn to different kinds of material, they attach to alternate kinds of objects and they laugh and cry at different times and in response to different stimuli than those that give adults pain or joy. Children engage in different aesthetic choices from adults, and what looks tacky or messy to an adult might represent a true expression of how the world looks to a child. Cultural expressions of bad taste, indeed, are all too often cast as childish and immature. Why, finally, does the childish stand in for all that must be abandoned as we move toward adulthood?

My book, *The Queer Art of Failure* was preoccupied with alternative strands of being and becoming that lie dormant in the child. And the child in my work is not the agent or target of reproductive futurity as it is in Lee Edelman’s *No Future*. Rather, in *The Queer Art of Failure*, children represent a potentially permanent state of rebellion and refusal that threatens to upend the whole enterprise of bourgeois stability. Because the child represents threat as much as he or she represents potential, the child must be trained, managed, oriented and directed. My book follows childish rebellion through its archives and celebrates and embraces the small, the silly and the inconsequential.

While exploring rebellious narratives of childhood, I thought deeply about how we train children, what we train them to become and what we force them to abandon. A few features of childhood stand out as important reminders of alternative forms of being—children mostly experience life in the context of groups, for example. While the dominant mode of adult sociality in Euro-American contexts favors the couple and derives from conventional notions of the family, children, who may or may not be
completely aware of the family structure, are mostly placed in groups with other children and may well be experiencing life as a collective rather than an individual endeavor. If you have ever seen a gaggle of children tethered to one another as their teachers walk them safely through a crowded cityscape, you will appreciate the group context as an important setting for early social awareness. But, of course, as soon as the deep work of socialization sets in, the child loses this sense of being part of a larger community and must be taught to think in terms of the family, the couple and the individual. What opportunities are wasted though on account of this winnowing down of social opportunity?

At a time when most parents do not stay married to the same partner their whole lives and when social critiques of the family and calls to abolish the family are widespread, perhaps it is also time to reconsider childhood, children and the odd otherness of the young. In her recent book *On Freedom: Four Songs of Care and Constraint*, Maggie Nelson pulls back from Lee Edelman’s rejection of the child and proposes that we should care about children not because of hetero-futurity but on account of environmental decline and the legacy of such ruination that adults are in the process of passing on to younger people. She writes: “children matter simply because they matter…they were us, they are us.” They matter because they matter. This simple framing of the value of the child reminds the reader that the child is not pure otherness—“they were us, they are us.”

A recent Booker Prize winning novel offers a deeply unsentimental depiction of gay boyhood. *Shuggie Bain* by Douglas Stuart examines the tormented and knotted relations between an alcoholic mother and her queer son. The book crafts a complex voice for the young Shuggie and digs into the bonds that tie the broken parent to the queer son. The book is moving not only for its scenes of queer childhood but also for the love that arcs back and forth between mother and son, sometimes expressed as joy within ruination, at other times experienced as just the unfettered astonishment of survival. Agnes Bain, Shuggie’s mother, both depends on her “wee poofter” son and constantly abandons him to the violence of a Glaswegian working class housing development in the early 1980s. She is his life and his burden to bear; he is her “no future” and the only feature of her life that offers an exit from brutal relations to men, drink and family. Indeed, Agnes Bains is not only destroyed by alcohol, but also by the men in her life. Her husband for example, a man Shuggie’s mother loved passionately, leaves his wife and children not by simply walking away but by promising them a better life in a better part of town and then moving
them to a distant public housing project, far from family, friends and neighbors. He leaves her there because: “She had loved him, and he had needed to break her completely to leave her for good. Agnes Bain was too rare a thing to let someone else love. It wouldn’t do to leave pieces of her for another man to collect and repair later.” The son, Shuggie, is the person who must collect the pieces of his mother and try to offer her something in the way of repair. While dealing with bullying and sexual pressure, Shuggie adores his mother, even in her broken state, and tries to pull her from the brink. Ultimately, Agnes Bain must choose between life, children, love and alcohol and she chooses alcohol. Her son, however, chooses not life exactly but persistence, resilience and writing.

The zombie child of The Night of the Living Dead and the gay child of Shuggie Bain may seem to have little in common. But both children are stranded in white patriarchal family structures where the only escape route is violence and requires the death of the parent. Oedipal as this may sound, neither story is about the reproduction of the same as Oedipal narratives tend to be. The zombie narrative represents the horror of the white family as it casts all threats as monstrous and joins forces with a murderous police force. And Shuggie Bain, with clear-eyed realism, reveals, details and then abandons the violence of the family for a life of writing and reading. The queer child in both narratives represents the end of the line for brutal patriarchal enforcement and signals to the mother that there are lives lived otherwise, beyond the heterosexual matrix and outside of the geometries of violence, humiliation and abandonment that enclose families.

The Queerness of Childhood does not look beyond the enclosure of the family for false liberation, instead it offers rich descriptions of immature temporalities, queer futures, childish aesthetics and much more. Not content to focus on tomboys and sissies, this book looks for the textures of queerness beyond bodily manifestations. The queerness of childhood, perhaps, lies in the promise that things could be otherwise and in the violent intensity with which queerly oriented children remove themselves from the futures their parents plan or spoil. A queer childhood does not conjure a queer future, it only refuses the expectations of futurity altogether in favor of improvised relations to the moment, the experience, the here and the now.

New York, NY, USA

Jack Halberstam
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CHAPTER 1

Introduction: The Queer Child and the Childish Queer

Anna Fishzon and Emma Lieber

This volume is framed by a number of interrelated questions. Why the queer child, and why the queer child now? What kind of work has the child performed in queer theory to date? To what extent and in what ways are the child and the queer always inextricable from each other? What has the introduction of the queer child in particular—the gay child or proto-gay child, the child queered by difference—as well as the suggestion that any child, from the vantage point of the adult, is constitutionally or figurally queer, done to the discourses of queer theory and to genre and media like memoir and animation? And in what ways can psychoanalysis intervene in these questions?

The Queerness of Childhood: Essays from the Other Side of the Looking Glass represents a meeting of queer theorists and psychoanalysts around the figure of the child. Our intention is not only to interro-
gate the discursive work performed on, and by, the child in these fields but also to provide a stage for examining how psychoanalysis and queer theory themselves interact. Psychoanalysis was central to the origins of queer theory—a necessary theoretical apparatus for its enunciation—and the child is central to psychoanalysis, if alternately privileged and obscured within its pages. Indeed in many foundational variants of psychoanalysis, childhood is itself a queer failure: whether in Freud’s theory, where drive and sexual object are “merely soldered together,” or during Lacan’s “mirror stage,” when the infant is provided with the illusion of perfect bodily control, or in Winnicott’s claim that “there is no such thing as a baby”—that is, that the baby has no life or status independent from the environment in which it is housed—the infant, the toddler, and the young child constantly fall short of implicit adult norms like individuation, empathic attunement, object love, and physical adroitness. In this sense, the child in psychoanalysis reveals the ways in which such normative aspirations themselves defend against the constitutional queerness already resident within. Though some aspects of psychoanalysis (elements of Freudian theory among them) have rightly been accused of propping up normative insistences about development and sexuality, at its best—and at the places at which it is truest to itself—psychoanalysis takes a radical stance against the notion of sexuality and desire as anything other than wayward, impossible, and strange—a position, needless to say, also assumed by queer theory. At the same time, as discussed below, the child has become an important, if contested, figure in queer studies, alternately understood as the ur-representative of heteronormative futurity and as the quintessential queer. Yet just as contemporary American psychoanalysis often forgets its origins in Freud’s interrogation of infantile sexuality (preferring to emphasize ego defenses, object relations, the intersubjective field, etc.), queer theory has, at times, forgotten psychoanalysis. This collection attempts to return psychoanalysis and queer theory to their obscured or repressed origins, which are found in each other: queer theory is brought once again into proximity with the vocabulary and insights of psychoanalysis, and psychoanalysis is urged to remember the discourses of infantile sexuality and polymorphous

temporality that queer theory has come to take seriously. It is our proposition that the returns of these theoretical positions are made most generative when applied to the queer time and sexualities of childhood.

**At the Intersection of Queer Theory and Psychoanalysis**

Having made several cameo roles in the work of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, the Child appeared as the conceptual center of queer theory in Lee Edelman’s controversial and instantly classic *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (2004). With irreverence and flair, *No Future* mobilizes the vocabulary of Lacanian psychoanalysis to aim critical fire at the politics of “reproductive futurism”: the figural children in the name and for the protection of whom we are constantly called to sacrifice the present. The Child, according to Edelman, is the anti-queer: the fantasmatish object that promises imaginary wholeness and discursive unity by screening out the disavowed constitutive lack in the heteronormative order. *No Future* exhorts queers to turn away from the political spectacle of cooing white babies, arguing that such a politics always excludes the queer and, indeed, is constituted through the queer’s abjection. Children are not our future. Edelman tells queer theorists and all outcasts to “fuck Little Orphan Annie,” look askance at the wide beckoning eyes of Tiny Tim, and, more grandly, reject the impossible neoliberal queer variant of reproductive futurism: same-sex marriage, gay adoption, and so on. Instead, he challenges queers to occupy the politically unthinkable position assigned to them by the sociopolitical order (a position they cannot, by definition, escape anyway) so as to undo it from within: to embrace negation, masochistic enjoyment, and the ruthless work of the death drive.

Since the appearance of Edelman’s book, the unthinkable has happened. The queer child has become visible in contemporary popular culture and political debate not as a scare image to be feared by “normal” adults or a pathological adolescent to be cured by therapists, but as a sympathetic victim: the target of homophobic bullying at school; the suicidal teen needing support and recognition; the beneficiary of

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transnational adoption or puberty blockers afforded by understanding parents; the one for whom it eventually gets better. Initially alongside and perhaps in reaction to Edelman’s controversial intervention, and also in response to the return of the repressed queer child in public discourse, Jack Halberstam and others in queer and childhood studies have treated the fantasy of the queer child as the spark for imaginative exploration in the political sphere and a vital source of new affective modes and social alternatives.\(^6\)

Thus, despite Edelman’s call for the queer refusal of the Child and the entire symbolic order it signifies, queer theory seems unable to let the child go. The child has become that thing queer theorists cannot not talk about. In fact, queer studies, psychoanalysis, the history of childhood, and the politics of the child are increasingly converging. Kathryn Bond Stockton, for one, has explored childhood as a queer, nonlinear time of “sideways growth”—an elastic temporality that permits children not simply to “grow up” in one continuous vertical movement, but to expand horizontally, incorporating sensations, emotional connections, and experiences (e.g., masochistic scenes, violent impulses, and seductions) later disavowed by the retroactively conceived, figural Child. In *The Queer Child: Growing Sideways in the Twentieth Century* (2009), she not only asks how gay children play with the asynchronicity of their queer, publicly impossible, and deferred identity, but also looks at the undeniable strangeness of all children. Stockton takes apart the implied whiteness and middle-class privilege even of the polymorphously perverse and onanistically inclined psychoanalytic child (the child queered by Freud) to illuminate other models of “dangerous children”: the child queered by innocence, the child queered by color, the child queered by money, the grown homosexual seen as a child, and the gay child made ghostly, unavailable to itself, by legal and parental misrecognition.\(^7\) In *The Queer Aesthetics of Childhood: Asymmetries of Innocence and the Cultural Politics of Child Development* (2020), Hannah Dyer bridges queer theory and childhood studies, showcasing and reading a range of affects and experiences often disavowed or pathologized by developmentalists. The book traverses a variety of art


\(^7\)Kathryn Bond Stockton, *The Queer Child, or Growing Sideways in the Twentieth Century* (Durham, NC, 2009).
forms and texts by, for, about young people, attending to the violence inflicted on actual children by racialized and heteronormative notions of child innocence, as well as the reparative work of children’s creative output in war-torn parts of the world.  

The It Gets Better anti-bullying campaign was widely criticized for perpetuating the myth that gay, white, cisgendered children would “get more normal” in adulthood—achieve financial success and find acceptance, love, community, and family. And yet now trans children and their supportive families, as Tey Meadow documents in her recent ethnographic study, *Trans Kids: Being Gendered in the Twenty-First Century* (2018), are commanding media attention and shaping the discourses of transgendered agency and embodiment.

What can we make of this apparent dialectical synthesis of the Child and the Queer? Is the queer child a newly created object or an old one, re-found? More to the point, is the queer child the latest fetishistic invention, or has it been there all along, the specter shadowing both Edelman’s fantastic Child and the adult queer? As Kenneth Kidd (*Freud in Oz: At the Intersections of Psychoanalysis and Children’s Literature*, 2011) and other theorists of children’s culture have emphasized, it was psychoanalysis that introduced us to the queer child when it located “perversion” in infancy and posited an adult genital sexuality gradually achieved through narcissistic, oral, and anal pleasures. In *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* (1905), Sigmund Freud famously suggested that homosexuality was regressive, that it meant getting stuck at a primitive, pre-genital stage of development. But another strain in his thought universalized perversion and lamented the libidinal sacrifice required by “normal” adult genitality. Arguably, it is from this Victorian understanding of psychosexuality that

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10 See, for example, Kenneth B. Kidd, *Freud in Oz: At the Intersections of Psychoanalysis and Children’s Literature* (Minneapolis, MN, 2011); and the path-breaking volume that inspired this collection, Steven Bruhm and Natasha Hurley, eds., *Curiouser: On the Queerness of Children* (Minneapolis, MN, 2004).

the idea of the ever-threatened and threatening “child” emerged—a child at once innocent of fully realized sexual knowledge and the seedbed of abnormality, a potential victim of corrupting adult perversion and the pervert haunting each of us. The impeccable childhood requiring protection at all cost, the childhood structuring therapeutic optimism (and hopefulness as such), results from the disavowal of both psychoanalytically normalized, ubiquitous queerness and the psychically mature queer.

Though No Future has been exhaustively critiqued and arguably superseded, it remains exemplary in its merger of applied psychoanalysis and queer theory and in its identification and use of the congruence between the two fields. Lacanian psychoanalysis asserts that one’s sense of self (and specular unity as such) is created through an internalized understanding of oneself as an object (I have, rather than I am, a body), a certain framing, or delimitation of one’s perspective. The subject of the unconscious depends, in other words, on exclusion, difference, and self-distance. Fundamentally split, subjects view themselves from a gaze located elsewhere, a gaze supported by the social world and by language, which in turn lend validation and coherence to identity and self-possession. And since human beings are also subjected to the demand of the drives—repetitive, dumb, and insistent on satisfaction—their self-images and symbolic identifications are marked by uneasiness, continually threatened by irruptions of jouissance. Edelman conceives queerness and the queer as figurations of the blind force of the drives that both structure and disrupt the workings of the Symbolic, meaning everything from a politics to social arrangements and culture, broadly defined.

To add conceptual power to this last claim, Edelman draws on Lacan’s notion of the sinthome, a neologism designating the idiosyncratic way that each subject manages the unruly drives (the Real) by knotting them with the Symbolic (language) and the Imaginary (the body ego) registers. If

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the *sinthome* is senseless and radically contingent, it also anchors each subject in the symbolic order and guarantees its consistency.\(^{13}\) Created at the place of the lack in the Other, the *sinthome* functions as a limit to the psychoanalytic cure. The end of analysis for Lacan is the “identification with the *sinthome,*” that is, an acceptance of the fact that one’s identity—and one’s very being—is fixed by a random, undecipherable, and self-created signifier.\(^{14}\) Edelman recursively creates his own neologism, *sinthomosexuality,* the permanent condition of the queer qua *sinthomosexual.* Like the procedure of the psychoanalytic cure, the figure of the sinthomosexual perpetually undercuts the fetishistic Child (through whom mortality is disavowed) and exposes the arbitrariness of fantasmatic identity. The queer-as-sinthomosexual, then, will always be perceived as a danger to the social order, even as affluent gays and lesbians increasingly marry, adopt children, and become domesticated through campy media depictions.\(^{15}\)

*The Queerness of Childhood* takes its starting point precisely from this element of Edelman’s discussion, for the unseemly sinthomosexual and his sinthomosexuality also comprise the great scandal of psychoanalysis, as none other than the Freudian baby and infantile sexuality. The embarrassment of Freud’s infantile sexuality, as Alenka Zupančič reminds us, is not so much that children are sexual beings, for example, attaining pleasure unrelated to nourishment from breastfeeding (though that, too, has generated its share of outrage), but that sexuality can operate independently of biological and symbolic support: infants’ sexual organs are not yet fully functional and children have no means of making sense of their sexual feeling.\(^{16}\) Still more disconcerting, infantile sexuality does not become completely contained by biology and culture in adulthood. It persists throughout a subject’s life, amorphous and enigmatic, eluding both symbolic capacities and the exclusive purview of reproductive organs.

In spite of its sustained application of psychoanalytic theory, *No Future* missed the opportunity to reveal the inherent queerness of childhood: the sinthomosexual baby veiled by the innocent figural Child. Fifteen years later, and in the context of the recent eruption of media coverage

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\(^{15}\) Edelman, *No Future,* 31, 165.

surrounding LGBTIQ (and especially transgender) youth, we urge queer theorists to redouble their engagement with psychoanalysis. For it is not simply that psychoanalytic theory offers the insight that drive sexuality, denatured and perverse, arrives prior to innate, hormonally based sexuality. Psychoanalysis also posits the unconscious: with primary repression the infant becomes the point of convergence for drive and “instinctual” sexuality, a convergence that produces the sexual as the fissure in being and knowledge—irreducible, confounding, and inassimilable.

Indeed, even at the very moments that Freud puts infantile sexuality center stage—as he does, for example, in the Wolf Man case—he admits that the child remains for psychoanalysis an obscure, shadowy, barely knowable object of investigation. The primal scene both is and is not a historical event; it both did and did not happen at a particular time. Freud’s proposal that Sergei Pankejeff’s dream of the wolves at age four (itself the origin of childhood neurosis and a nodal point in the treatment of the adult) was a response to his witnessing, at age one and a half, of a scene of coitus a tergo between the parents is already a speculative reconstruction. It is then immediately thrown into question by the suggestion that perhaps the earlier scene was not an event at all, but rather a phantasy inspired by the sight of animals copulating and projected onto the parents. Not only do we have the action of nachträglichkeit, by which a later event (a dream) activates the traumatic potential of an earlier one, but we also have the suggestion that phantasies—comprising one’s psychic reality—are just as formative as so-called real events. Are perceived originary moments and early sexual memories cases of deferred action or retroaction? It is not enough to replace the “either/or” with an “and”; instead, in the words of Peter Brooks, the “either/or” represents “a moment of sequential and causal undecidability” with respect to childhood sexual scenes, trauma, and symptom formation. In which case, how is it possible to write about a child?

In Jean Laplanche’s theory, the concepts of après coup and (infantile) sexuality are closely related, as he emphasizes the “retroactive revision” of nachträglichkeit, or the subject’s ongoing attempts at initially failed translation: meaning production that recasts other, previous signifiers in relation to themselves and to one another. Developmental accounts of sexuality tend to downplay or elide the repression constitutive of the sexual

(and not merely performed *upon* it). For Laplanche, infantile pleasure is sexual because it is compromised *from the outset* by “enigmatic signifiers,” the intrusive unconscious and sexually inflected messages of caregivers confronting newborns in their first contact with the world. These messages, subject to repeated efforts of translation, are enigmatic not only for children but also for the adults generating them. The point worth stressing here is that infants’ pleasurable experience is sexualized through the encounter with the unconscious of adults. In this “primary seduction,” infants confront not a *surplus* of “mature” genital knowledge (incomprehensible to young children and hence difficult to translate) but an *absence* or *minus*—a missing part in the solicitations of the Other. The unconscious comes to us from an external source and as an ontological negativity or failure that also constitutes sexuality.

Yet inevitably, autobiographies, memoirs, case studies, and other reconstructions of childhood create teleology and meaning: narratives have straightening effects (which Freud for one knew well—an inevitability that he at times succumbed to, at times tried to counter). How might we give shape to the life of the queer child or the queer child in adults? How might we hold open the space for the queer child to emerge as incomplete, as a potentiality? The chapters in this volume approach these questions from many angles: from within the discourses of psychoanalysis, queer theory, and trans studies; by examining cultural institutions and aesthetic productions that put to question the place and possibilities of queer experience as bodied forth in the life of the child; by performing such possibilities in narrative and aesthetic forms that themselves open queer spaces; and by thinking the queer, with psychoanalysis and queer theory, as both constitutinal and as dialectically produced by normative culture—that is, both as originary to subjectivity and as testifying to the impossibility of locating origination as such.

**Attempting Queer Narration: Essays**

Part I of the volume, “Queer Pasts: Origins, Development, Normativity,” thinks these various queer failures—the failure to grow up, to get bigger, to achieve the “positive” (heterosexual) outcome—while exploring the


19 See Zupančič, *What is Sex?*, 11.
cultural and generic formations that might produce and give expression to queer possibilities. Through memoir and literary criticism, Emma Lieber’s chapter (Chap. 2) “Parenting the Atemporal Child” explores parenting in the face of the child’s queer temporalities. As Lieber navigates her own experiences with her two young children, she finds that the cultural environment of Fyodor Dostoevsky’s novels offers an unexpected queer alternative to the ethic and mandates that in part determine the normative demands of contemporary American parenting culture. Reading Dostoevsky becomes a salve for the pressures of industrial capitalism and Protestant individualism and their imprint on evaluations of child development and growth in America today. The paradox here—that a manifestly anti-queer Russian national environment might mask, or in fact constitute a reaction formation to, an indigenously queer cultural imaginary—is further borne out by Allison Miller’s chapter (Chap. 3) “Progressive Penology Meets Youthful Queerness in the Interwar United States,” which similarly asks how to find the queer within the normative. Miller analyzes a personal relationship among two women in the El Retiro School for Girls in Los Angeles in the 1920s in order to suggest the surprising ways in which institutional life might provide queer affective possibilities and even be good for queer children. Sometimes conservatism can have queer results.

Kevin Ohi’s “First Love” (Chap. 4) then examines Eudora Welty’s short story of the same name, as a drama of the origins of queerness and the queerness of origins: the origins of love, sexuality, attachment, language, and the formation of the subject as a homology for or reference to the formation of a nation. Here, literature once again becomes the site of a queer emergence that is both that of origins and that of writing itself: the suspension of meaning to a consummation that produces an initiation “ever yet to come,” and given form in Ohi’s repetition of Welty’s title. Lastly, “Home You Carry with You” by Kerry Moore (Chap. 5), a memoir of queer childhood, creates a polyphonic verbal tapestry by conjugating several forms of enunciation: the stories of various speakers, fairy tales, letters, song lyrics, names and acronyms, and other texts. A collective composition that performs the polymorphousness of the speaking subject in its emergence and imbrication with others, Moore’s piece gives shape to the (erotic) life of the body as itself the waywardness of the signifier. At the same time, it testifies to the new genres of writing produced by an attention to the queerness of childhood.

Part II, “Born This Way? Science, Mythology, Psychoanalysis,” puts to question the construction of the child and its sexuality within queer
theory, transgender studies, and psychoanalysis as a way of challenging these discourses according to their own terms. In Chap. 6 “Our Babies, Ourselves: From Little Spirits to Wired for Love,” Victoria Malkin contrasts the ways various cultures construct the baby and the child; the baby is a “fiction” whose “poetics” are dictated by the era and discourse in which they are located, and this is no less true of the figure of the child within both queer theory and psychoanalysis than of the innocent child of the Romantics. Malkin is rigorous in her skepticism. In admitting the queer child and the psychoanalytic child into the pantheon of cultural constructions of the child, she challenges both queer theory and psychoanalysis to attend to their own assumptions and poetics and heed the impossibility at the heart of speaking about children: the extent to which “discourse … erases the baby as much as it constructs her.”

Jules Gill-Peterson’s similarly non-dogmatic approach, in Chap. 7 “The Cultivation of Queer and Trans Childhood: Eugenic Logics of Genetics and Endocrine Science,” to the relationship between the biological and life sciences and the theoretical discourses of trans and queer children, also yields surprising results, as Gill-Peterson, by examining the history of the concept of gender plasticity, finds “a profoundly disconcerting pair of ideological bedfellows”: “today’s theoretically plastic, genderfluid or capa-
ciously queer child … was yesterday’s eugenic child in the life sciences.” That is, assertions about the constitutional plasticity and potentiality of the child’s body have historically motivated medicalizing and eugenic projects of racial species-improvement. To fail to attend to these strange bedfellows inhibits queer theory and transgender studies in their critiques of contemporary etiological science’s treatment of queer and trans children as evidence of the biological foundation of gender and sexuality. Lastly, Daniel Polyak’s chapter (Chap. 8) “On Growing Up: A Cautionary Tale for Psychoanalysts” puts to question the assumption that, in the field of sexuality and gender identity, “the normative and the nonnormative are split off, mutually exclusive, and/or antagonistically connected to each other.” Through a reading of the “push-pull force of normativity” in Freud’s Three Essays, the film But I’m a Cheerleader, and clinical vignettes drawn from his own work as a psychoanalyst, Polyak instead gives shape to the ways that social norms bear a dynamic relation to the excrescences of sexual and gendered life that they necessarily produce. He suggests how contemporary analysts might listen more subtly to patients’ speech about becoming sexual, gendered, and embodied not against, but through “a reckoning with the normal.”
Part III, “Queer Futures: The Politics of Childhood,” continues this examination of the cultural spaces and practices that produce, promote, and give form to the queerness of the child and its future in the adult while attending to the definitional action and status of our theorization of queerness itself. In Chap. 9 “Adults Only: Lee Edelman’s No Future and the Limits of Queer Critique,” Gila Ashtor invokes Laplanche as a corrective to trends in queer theory that may locate the child too easily. In a sustained critique of the primacy of anti-normativity in queer theory—and particularly of Edelman’s call to queer negativity—Ashtor examines the ways in which the child has been too quickly rejected by a field that at times has overlooked its figural and real complexities in order to fix it as the banner of the normative. In Chap. 10 “Philosophy for Children and the Wonder Kids,” Kenneth Kidd examines the Philosophy for Children movement that developed in the United States in the 1970s as “a progressive educational project with queer energies and inclinations.” An enterprise that takes children’s thought seriously in its present rather than future incarnation, and one that envisions the possibility of extending the child’s capacity for open wonder into adulthood, the “P4C” movement reveals the ways in which even a project that does not address questions of gender and sexuality per se might be considered properly part of queer discourse. Finally, in Chap. 11 “Enigmatic Signifiers and Sexuality Afterwards,” Natasha Hurley explores the ways that sexuality is transmitted to children connotatively rather than denotatively, through forms of cultural address (children’s literature among them) that bring sexuality to be via and within the very lacunae of signification. Through an elaboration of Laplanche’s idea of the “enigmatic signifier,” which figures sexuality as an effect of the inevitable missed connection between child and adult, Hurley attempts to think “what exceeds the manifest narratives we tell about sexuality at the level of plot” as itself the germ of the sexual in the child.

The last part (Part IV) of the volume, “Queer Culture: The Case of Animation,” takes on animation as a distinctly queer genre both in its aesthetic form and in its association with childhood, as a way of interrogating what this genre of cultural production does for queerness: both how it weaves queer temporalities, characters, and aesthetic practices, and how it opens up new possibilities for pleasure and interpretation in its audiences. In Chap. 12 “Queue Time, Animation, and the Queer Childhood of Late Socialism,” Anna Fishzon explores the queer temporality of late socialist animation and literature, as it reproduced “queue time”: that is, the temporality of the perpetual standing-on-line in Soviet daily life.
response to the failure of the socialist historical narrative with its positing of a communist future, Fishzon argues, Brezhnev-era cultural production “reactivated hope not through a restoration of linear time but, rather, via a reconceptualization of stagnation as a libidinally saturated and magical temporal order”—that is, a celebration of queue time that maps onto the concept of queer time as elaborated by Jack Halberstam and other theorists. Lastly, Clement Goldberg’s chapter (Chap. 13) “The Deer Inbetween,” a graphic chapter composed of movie stills about a queer deer and conspiratorial mushrooms, demonstrates the queering effects of stop-motion clay animation—perhaps leaving the readers of this volume in the position of the child itself, full of wonder, ready to see what will happen.