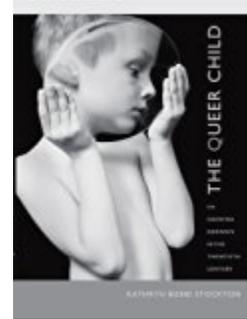


Kathryn Bond Stockton. *The Queer Child, or Growing Sideways in the Twentieth Century*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2009. x + 294 pp. \$79.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8223-4364-6; \$22.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8223-4386-8.

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Moving the Child

In *The Queer Child*, University of Utah English professor Kathryn Bond Stockton transforms a now-ordinary claim within critical childhood studies, namely, that socially constructed developmental trajectories are ill-suited to actual young people's bodies and lives. This densely written but compelling work asserts that accumulated processes in the past century have made *all* children strange to adults and set them up to behave in perverse ways. She shows, via literary and filmic readings, how young people express agency through sideways growth that frustrates adult agendas and eludes most histories of childhood.

In the introduction, Stockton lays out her most helpful claims. The first has to do with delay. Child development discourses, like poststructuralist literary criticism, favor suspended meaning that can only be resolved retrospectively. In the "century of the child"; fiction presents young people who, protected from adult legal and political rights and responsibilities, denied psychological self-knowing, and tracked out of work and into age-graded pedagogic institutions, grow "more sideways than up" (p. 37).

Stockton explains that children are queered in at least six ways. She foregrounds the ghostly gay child that only appears through "backwards birth" (p. 6). Retroactive creation can involve precocious or mature coming out. Ending childhood innocence, this act renarrativizes one's past against developmentalism's insistent trajec-

tory from not-yet-straight delay to straight destination. Backwards birth can also come through death. Gay youth suicide and antigay violence compel us to remake the child into a morality tale about the intrusions onto childhood of sexual identity and its policing. Referencing Eve Sedgwick, Stockton explains how the "protogay child" is made to trace paths of delay and tendency, even when identifying with gayness or queerness. This figure is braided in fiction with other queer versions of the child. The grown homosexual, subject to "arrested development," is a late-nineteenth-century concept that lives on in U.S. religious right discourses. It posits adult queers as vehicles of the deleterious effects of immature, impulsive acts to more literal children and the general population. The child queered by Sigmund Freud is "not-yet-straight" but "nonetheless a sexual child with aggressive wishes" (p. 27). Stockton gives the example of the tattling girl in *The Children's Hour* (1961) with her perversely knowing imagination, cruelty, and destructive force. These first three, the ghostly gay child, the grown homosexual, and the child queered by Freud, are figured as dangerous in the harm they can do to children and the rest of us.

The other three queer forms of children are made dangerous by what adults and society do to them. The child queered by innocence is an ideal inherited from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries placed, in the twentieth century, onto the developmental "path to normativity" and whom our society seeks "to safeguard at all costs" (p. 30). Its vulnerability is fused with privilege,

whiteness, middle-classness, and an asexuality veering toward gender normativity and heterosexuality. Stockton builds on James Kincaid's and Lee Edelman's work to reveal the brutality of innocence in its eroticization of youthful purity coupled with aggressively reproductive futurity. Innocence is strange, an alternative sexuality only known by those who no longer possess it. Stockton argues that it makes children into desirable aliens, estranged from the adulthood which they must approach. Inextricably linked are the child queered by color and the child queered by money. Marked by "experience" hard to square with innocence, we have endowed them with "abuse," making them into innocent victims and potential threats. This elicits a liberal sympathy that endeavors to restore and expand the claims innocence holds on the child.

The rest of the book pursues various braided strands. The first section, "Sideways Relations," explores fiction and sexology from the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, placing them into conversation with media representations of sexuality and childhood today. Chapter 1 reads NBC's pathologizing *To Catch a Predator* series and the self-justifications of the pedophilic North American Man/Boy Love Association alongside Henry James's *The Pupil* (1891). Stockton sees mutual masochism as sideways growth in the relationships between adult male tutor and boy pupil. This pleasure fused with pain got wedded to delay, withholding, and often some form of commercial exchange. In a society that, she asserts, had "no recognized form to hold" passionate intergenerational same-sex joy, such sideways motion sustained pleasure in suspension. In the second chapter, Stockton finds child/animal relationships and metaphors in iconic early twentieth-century lesbian literature. She argues, powerfully, that animals were markers of "queer child time" (p. 91) for imagining proto-lesbian girls and adult lesbians as children. Pets offered identifications and relations in delay that confounded parental mandates toward reproductive futurity.

The second section, "Sideways Motions," is the strongest. It investigates mid-century texts and recent films about the 1950s and 1960s. Stockton asks what moves people to grow sideways in terms of motive and motion. Chapter 3 centers on Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita* (1955), about a child queered by Freud and innocence who finds developmental sidetracks. Even as mid-century legal constructions of the child as sexual victim robbed children of their motives, Humbert, the antihero of Nabokov's novel, seeks to control Lolita through the era's mandates for girlhood innocence and wifely com-

pliance. Her own motions, however, keep dogging Humbert and the reader. Exploring the 1962 and 1997 films of *Lolita*, Stockton asks what moves us, adult voyeurs of the uncomfortable narrative and its provocative spectacles. In chapter 4, Stockton deepens her analysis of child motive as hazy sideways growth by showing it to be startlingly distinct from the more linear satisfactions of intent as articulated in the era's Anglo-American legal discourse. She argues that the film *Heavenly Creatures* (1994) and Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood* (1965), both based on true crime stories, spoil intent's promises of clarity by showing that what moves proto-homosexual young characters to kill has little to do with the end effect.

The final section describes how "sideways futures" are managed in the present era of children's heightened interracial and consumerist appetites, the recriminalization of U.S. children, and global narratives of child soldiers and workers. Children's sideways futures threaten to suspend dreams of developmentalism and thus critique liberal compassion, revealing the "limits of who ... liberals say they have been and [are]" (pp. 184-185). Reading *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* (1968) and *Six Degrees of Separation* (1993), Stockton suggests that children queered by color and money must strive for the initially resistant white father's embrace through their own self-abnegation to the mandates of color-blindness. While compelling, the chapter feels far afield from children or childhood. One wishes Stockton had more determinedly braided these types of queered children more substantially throughout and chosen more directly child-oriented texts for reading here. Stronger is her concluding exploration of *Hoop Dreams* (1994). Through athletic acumen and the harnessing of celebrity-consumerist culture, African American boys from low-income urban homes cultivate the perverse desire to become a shoe as a way out of structural inequalities and daily denials of "upwards" growth. No wonder, as Stockton remarks, candy, as not-quite money (or sex), is the coin of contemporary childhood's realm, a permission to overindulge when so much else is denied.

As a theoretical work, *The Queer Child* will find an appreciative audience among those engaged in critical childhood studies. It is less strong in the historical trace it seeks to mark. Stockton extols the virtues of literary criticism in studying the queerness of children in the past, explaining that novels and films present the best ways to apprehend children that "public cultures seem to have no language for encountering" (p. 10). She shows how fiction reveals particular means for understanding side-

ways growth as empowerment within the mounting social constructions that overlay one's experience of childhood. Then she denounces history (which she calls "History") as a method for this subject matter. To make her claim that historians and sociologists doing social history do not "cover this ground" (p. 41), she relies heavily on the historiography of juvenile justice as represented by Anthony Platt's *The Child Savers* (1969). Yet a growing historiography talks about childhood and queerness, both past and present. Studies completed over the past decades, including those published by Ruth Alexan-

der, Jackie Blount, Peter Boag, Roderick Ferguson, Angus Gordon, David Johnson, Steven Maynard, and Stephen Robertson come to mind. Stockton could have strengthened her own historical analyses had she more seriously engaged with "History."

This said, *The Queer Child* is dazzling and important. Its bold interrogations of delay and expansive argument for more sophisticated appreciation for sideways growth should become grounding concerns for those studying childhood, past, present, and future.

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