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“I WON’T GROW UP” Kathryn R. Kent

The Queer Child, or Growing Sideways in the Twentieth Century
by Kathryn Bond Stockton. Series Q. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2009. Pp. 312, 44 illustrations. \$79.95 cloth, \$22.95 paper.

Kathryn Bond Stockton, in her daring and often dazzling new book, *The Queer Child* (2009), not only expands upon but reconceives what it means to theorize children’s sexualities, the temporality of childhood, and the question of children’s erotic and economic agency. Building upon the work of James Kincaid, Lee Edelman, and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, whose groundbreaking “How to Bring Your Kids Up Gay: The War on Effeminate Boys” (1993) perhaps inaugurates this inquiry, Stockton posits a set of tropes or truisms about Anglo-American queer children in the last century that no doubt will reorient any work on the subject in literary studies and beyond. In so doing, she posits fiction as a privileged site for such explorations, arguing that because queer children are “not a matter of historian’s writings or of the general public’s belief . . . , the silences [surrounding them are] broken and broken almost only—by fictional forms. Fictions literally offer the forms that certain broodings on children might take” (2). Such a stance, supported, albeit briefly, through a sketch of the conceptual limits of historical work on the emergence of childhood in Anglo-America in the last hundred years, reiterates implicitly the power of fiction (and film), one might even say the fictional, as a cultural force.

Aesthetic representations occupy this privileged position, Stockton

argues, because of their different relation to temporality. Fiction enables challenges to conventional notions of time, which, she illustrates, is imagined as moving vertically. This conventional notion of time is instantiated most literally in the requirement that children “grow up” and achieve maturity most fully through heteronormative marriage and reproduction. In stalling, twisting, stretching time, Stockton claims fiction allows for “growing sideways,” movement through metaphor, the “spreading” of associations. As she notes, “Overall, I want to prick (deflate, or just delay) the vertical, forward-motion metaphor of growing up, and do so by exploring the many kinds of sideways growth depicted by twentieth-century texts” (11). She invokes Edelman’s criticisms of conventional notions of history as a linear assimilation of complexity into difference-denying fantasies of origin, identity, and periodization, but rejects his call to ignore history *tout court*. Instead, Stockton, through her discussion of the temporal queerness of childhood, proposes another version of it, arguing for history as just spread, a kind of accumulation that changes how we view sequence but has no real beginning or end: in a nod to Gertrude Stein, she writes, “History will just keep getting fatter” (39).

Stockton, in her claims for this queer time, instantiates, to borrow terms from Sedgwick’s taxonomy,

both universalizing and minoritizing versions of the queer child. On the one hand, all children are queer in the sense that they are “broadly strange” (3), simultaneously always already *and* not yet straight, due to the invention of childhood as a period of sexual innocence (which ironically, in a Foucauldian twist, Stockton demonstrates, reveals the underlying cultural fear of an inherent childhood sexual perversity from which children must be protected). On the other hand, she posits the quasi-minoritizing figure of the “ghostly gay child (emblem and icon of children’s queerness)” (3). This figure represents a host of key associations: first, there is the notion of ghostly as semi-invisible, a metaphor for the “hazy” and “shadowed” lives of all children, which at base are fundamentally unavailable to adults: “The child is precisely who we are not and, in fact, never were. It is the act of adults looking back” (5). Completely unknowable, except through unreliable memory, these children, Stockton asserts, should not be abandoned to absolute otherness, but be reimagined through examinations of how they are figured centrally through fantasy and/as fiction. Whether any of what she argues thus applies to “real” children appears to be less interesting to her and in fact, in her account, almost necessarily impossible to determine. To some readers, especially those invested in making claims about the larger so-

cial and cultural history of children and sexuality in the twentieth century, this will certainly be seen as one of the limits of her study.

Yet, she also posits the somewhat more minoritizing view of the specificity of the “ghostly *gay* child”; unlike the queer child, this child occupies a more particular space in the last century’s reinvention of childhood (and in particular, though she does not explore it, the historical emergence of the imperative to narrate the formation of a sexual identity). I quote Stockton here in full since the concept is luscious in its density:

Such a child, with no established forms to hold itself in the public, legal field, has been a child remarkable, intensely unavailable to itself in the present tense. The proto-gay child has only appeared through an act of retrospection and after a death. For this queer child, whatever its conscious grasp of itself, has not been able to present itself according to the category “gay” or “homosexual”—categories culturally deemed too adult, since they are too sexual, though we do presume every child to be straight. The effect for the child who already feels queer (different, odd, out-of-sync, and attracted to same-sex peers) is an asynchronous self-relation. Certain linguistic markers for its queerness

arrive only after it exits its childhood, after it is shown not to be straight. (6)

This child is a ghost, Stockton clarifies, because

[t]he phrase ‘gay child’ is a gravestone marker for where or when one’s straight life died. Straight person dead, gay child now born, albeit retrospectively (even, for example, at or after the age of twenty-five). This kind of backward birthing mechanism makes the hunt for the roots of queerness a retrospective search for amalgamated forms of feelings, desires, and physical needs that led to this death of one’s straight life. (7)

As Stockton so brilliantly points out, while all children are required to “delay” having or expressing a sexuality, the signifier of a normative maturity (the pinnacle of which is heteroreproductivity—and here one hears the ring of the clinical hand-wringing inherent in the phrase “delaying sexual activity”), she argues gay children are “put on hold in such intense ways” that their stories are paradigmatic for all others.¹ One might wonder at the general applicability of her claims for the norm of “delay”; at least for many poor children, especially poor children of color, the underlying assumption that they are always already sexual (as op-

posed to innocent) complicates such a formulation. Stockton addresses this to some degree in her idea of the “child queered by innocence or queered by color.” Black children, she argues, do not have the privilege of innocence (a privilege that comes with the price of seeing white children as weak and lacking agency), given black children’s historical associations with “strength and [sexual] experience” (31). On the other hand, paternalistic, sentimental appeals to allow such children to “have a childhood” reiterate the temporal logic of stalling Stockton identifies, and must turn the child into the object of “abuse,” she argues, in order to weaken them enough to qualify for the “innocent” appellation. No child may thus claim sexual agency and remain “a child.”

Stockton elaborates on the temporal queerness imposed by the norms of “growing up” as she outlines two more paradigmatic, perverse ways of conceiving children and/or childhood. One is the figure of the “grown homosexual,” who is automatically assumed to be in a state of “arrested development” (22). To some on the Right, Stockton notes, this idea reflects the ideology of queers as childlike, narcissistic, stuck at an earlier level of development, all problems that can be cured through salvation and reparative therapy so that queers can achieve full maturity through heterosexual marriage and procreation. Freud, Stockton argues,

presents this notion without making it a pejorative; other scholars of his work might take issue with this claim.² Nonetheless, in her notion of the “child queered by Freud,” Stockton extends this reading of arrested development to interrogate his strange, normative notions of husbands as babies to wives, and lesbians as mothers and daughters, as well as the way (queer) children reveal, through their various forms of precocity, the sexual secrets adults don’t always even know they have. And in her fascinating reading of Freud’s notion of perversion, she illuminates how he conceives of this practice, in and of itself, as a kind of erotic delay, a “lingering” whose expanded definition includes “normal” foreplay and which Stockton links to the experiments with repetition in Stein’s prose poetry and Picasso’s cubist paintings.

Such connections to a wide variety of literary, filmic, and visual media are where Stockton’s talents as an extraordinary reader come through. They are also the instances where her penchant for Derridean riffs and Nabokovian puns accumulate, even pile up, metaphoric associations, some of which may feel more like sheer play (too childlike?) than essential argument. Beginning with Henry James’s “The Pupil” (1891) and ending with *Hoop Dreams* (dir. Steve James, 1994) and *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* (dir. Tim Burton, 2005), Stockton takes us

on a meandering stroll that sometimes doubles back on itself (this book, true to its emphasis on the horizontal, does not present a vertical climb towards a climactic claim) through a panoply of disparate texts. Her assertions are cumulative—she returns to remind us of key ideas as they once again reveal themselves in ways that recall at their best Steinian repetition. In all of her chapters, she explores the question of children's agency, always conceived as sexual and frequently also through a relation to consumer consumption (the two are, to use her terms, often "braided" together). The latter concept is key, she argues at her most traditionally historical, because in the twentieth-century childhood was invented as a space "free" from labor, a space where children's consumption gave them desires and agency apart from their parents (even if adults still held the purse strings). Children who long for candy, children who now have separate rooms in which to play, children whose buying power exists in some uneasy relation to the norms of commodity culture, just as their sexual power exists in some uneasy relation to the adult eroticization of children—these are themes Stockton most explicitly addresses (but does not attempt fully to resolve) in most of her chapters, from the relation of the tutor and the pupil in James to the figure of Nabokov's eponymous *Lolita* (1955) and her manipulation

of Humbert (and Quimby's possible manipulation of her) to the fantasy, expressed in Burton's *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*, of owning the magical means of producing endless amounts of candy (and by extension, money).

In these various contexts, "growing sideways" ends up meaning many things. In British lesbian novels of the 1920s, relations of girls (and women acting like them) to animals become alternative figures for female-female love. As she puts it, "As a recipient of the child's attentions—its often bent devotions—and a living screen for the child's self-projections—its mysterious bad-dog postures of sexual expression—the dog is a figure for the child beside itself, engaged in a growing quite aside from growing up" (90). These works are suffused with mother/daughter imagery, which Stockton argues symbolizes the public impossibility of Sapphic desires:

Painting these women as mother and child . . . shows these lovers as doomed by (their) time. Theirs is a time that can never arrive: the time when mother and child can be lovers in the public's embrace; or when mother and child will inhabit the same generation. These are clear impossibilities, akin to the historical prematurity of queer love in the 1930s, in a world so clearly not ready to receive it. (93)

In addition to illustrating this “doomed” love, Virginia Woolf, Radclyffe Hall, and Djuna Barnes substitute girls’ love for dogs (and, in Hall’s case, also a horse) to allow for a different figure of affective relations.

Stockton’s interpretation of *Nightwood’s* (1936) bizarre conclusion, in which Robin seemingly goes mad, getting down on the floor and barking in light of the failure of her relationship with her lover, Nora, is the most convincing I have read: Stockton argues that, in becoming canine, Robin can become “her lover’s dog and thus legally belong to her lover” (93). In this reading, what appears at first a form of demotic devolution becomes instead a sideways temporal strategy; similarly, Stephen Gordon’s connections to animals signal her status as “out of (heterosexual) time, and are her route to connections with other women” (it is through a dog, for example, that she meets her first lover). Stockton writes, “[T]he world of horses and dogs offers girls—here young-women-who-are-not-seeking-men—what they can’t easily or otherwise discover: a lateral community that understands, affirms, and offers sorrows for unsupported choices” (100–101). Moreover, “[l]ike the queer child who will never be straight, who puts the goal of socially-sanctioned couplehood on perpetual delay, [the dog] grows sideways in relation to his mistress” (101). Stephen famously

relinquishes Mary because she cannot give her a normal life and children, only a dog that marks the space between them. Whether cats occupy a different lateral relation to lesbian coupledness, Stockton does not say, but her explanation here of queer girls’ attachments to other animals finally explained to me the horse-obsessed peers of my childhood.

My imagination was not as captivated by the second half of the book, which ranged from readings of the “arrested development” of the queer, childlike murderer in Truman Capote’s *In Cold Blood* (1966) to the question of intent versus motive and its relation to childish, yet queer desires in Peter Jackson’s *Heavenly Creatures* (1994) to the queerly Oedipal relations of black, poor pseudo-sons to white, upper-middle-class parents in *Six Degrees of Separation* (dir. Fred Schepisi, 1993). Especially in the last chapter, which argued that all black children are queer, I found myself considering the political ramifications of such a claim. On the one hand, Stockton’s ideas might be seen to echo Cathy J. Cohen’s classic argument that disparate groups of marginalized people, for example, “punks,” “bulldaggers,” black welfare mothers, and others, could form coalition, not on the foundation of identity politics, but on the basis of their shared experience of marginalization as “queer” (i.e., having a nonnormative relation to production and/or

reproduction).³ On the other hand, by the time Stockton got to *Hoop Dreams*, the focus shifted more to economic exploitation and inequity than to a specifically sexual relation to commodification.⁴ I also began to wonder, despite the complexities of temporal instability the book illustrates, *what constituted a child*, as increasingly Stockton focused on adolescents, whose relation to sexuality throughout this century has been much more fraught than “innocence” can represent. Furthermore, the teleology inherent in “being” a sexual identity goes relatively unquestioned; rather, Stockton just shows how one out of necessity may not fully fit the dominant temporal model, thus ironically she may risk reinforcing the imperative. Finally, the book opens up delicately the ethical question of how far one should go in acknowledging (rather than just fantasizing retrospectively or in the present) the sexual agency of a child—without offering any concrete suggestions for social change.⁵

These reservations aside, for someone who enjoys the pleasure of following the death-defying interpretive leaps of a daring critic, this book is candy. For anyone interested in how to think about Anglo-American childhood and the figure of the child, it is required reading. Sedgwick, in *Epistemology of the Closet*, famously writes, “A point of [this] book is *not to know* how far its insights and projects are generalizable, not to be

able to say in advance where the semantic specificity of these issues gives over to (or: itself structures?) the syntax of a ‘broader’ or more abstractable critical project.”⁶ Stockton follows this model: in a way, she leaves us hanging, waiting for the prescriptive ending; in another way, she provokes us into rethinking everything we thought we knew about childhood.

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NOTES

1. I should note that Stockton is careful to point out that not all adults who identify as gay will see themselves in this figure and that some straight adults will recognize themselves in it despite their identification as heterosexual.
2. Stockton definitely lands on the side of those who see Freud as challenging any notion of the normal rather than those who see him as reinforcing normative notions of gender and sexuality.
3. Cathy J. Cohen, “Punks, Bulldaggers, and Welfare Queens: The Radical Potential of Queer Politics?” in *Black Queer Studies: A Critical Anthology*, ed. E. Patrick Johnson and Mae G. Henderson (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005), 21–51.
4. It seems important to mention that the pairing black/poor is not inevitable, something Stockton does not fully explore in her notion of black children as always already strong and thus associated with physical labor, which in turn connotes economic necessity. One

might consider the degree to which economically privileged African American children, because of their class status, may attain “innocence” and be seen as in need of protection.

5. Although Stockton does worry about the new possibilities engendered by the fact that “gay children” are now allowed to exist and name themselves, a shift she traces to the 1990s, she acutely balances a sense of the possibility inherent in such a development with the worry that this will “desexualize” gayness.
6. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 12.