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**“How ‘the Child’ Turned Me Sideways”:
An Interview with Queer Theorist Kathryn Bond Stockton**

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1. Tell us about your foundational intervention in the intersection between childhood studies and queer theory. What was it that attracted you to this area of research and activism?

“Attracted” is a fitting word. The child is attractive. As a thought, a quandary, a gay/trans perplex, a flesh of many colors, and a whole domain of queerness. Why not think about something so magnetic, something we have all supposedly been? That’s what hooked me.

But how we’ve been this mysterious human animal called “the child” is full of fraught dimensions. It doesn’t seem convincing to say we’ve all been *it*. We’ve dwelt in a category. One that has treated us to such intense varieties of racialized gender and sexual yearnings and cultural flavors and strange reflections, as we’re each encased in our own (weird) bodies. This barbed intensity, ringed with tender dangers, for and *from* the child, is what has drawn me in. What are the contours of this concept we have lived?

Living is reading. You won’t be surprised to hear me make this claim. (I’m a literary theorist, after all.) Child-bodies always are reading their environment, through any of their available senses. And deeply through the word. The word is constantly getting *in* the flesh, filling every child with inhuman elements transferred to their bodies from other people’s bodies. How many times each day do countless sets of words enter children’s fleshy brains? What is the life of any word in a body? And what about the words draped *upon* child-bodies? Some are veritable cones that are lowered onto bodies from birth.

To say these are juicy matters is only charming understatement. As I’ve felt them beckon, I’ve entered through the portal of beautiful fictions. I’ve been a fiction to myself, as it happens, as I sought from youngest days to kiss girl-bodies but kiss the boy-word upon my own self. (It didn’t go well. See my memoir *Making Out*.) But there were novels in my life –Toni Morrison’s *Sula*, then *Beloved*; *Go Tell It on the Mountain* by James Baldwin, read alongside Oscar Wilde’s *The Picture of Dorian Gray*– that made me notice the strangeness of children and child-like youths. I was fully lured by their cool, slanting ways. They were growing sideways: something I recognized.

Then came queer theory. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick was telling us all about effeminate boys –why the world violently wished them away– and Lee Edelman proposed that the Child (as a big, bad, cavernous category) was a pleasure-killer for pleasure-seeking queers. I

stepped to the side of these bold thinkers to scout how “children” do not obey “the Child”. Young-bodied people are full of crafty swerves. They move inside their cones, and I wished to track these moves.

2. What has changed since the publication of *The Queer Child*, in 2009? What hasn't changed?

It certainly appears that the ghostly “gay” child of the twentieth century –the child who couldn't be– the child who could only be birthed backwards inside adulthood –is now present-tense. I hear people say what was never then said, “I think my child is gay”. supplanting the earlier, telling phrasing of “I think my child may grow up to be gay.” There's so much public talk about affirming LGBT “kids” and “youth”. It still shocks me because it's so at odds with the prevailing vibes of 2009. “Trans,” moreover, is a category everyone *seems* to know; and gender can almost appear as a buffet, with many terms on offer and the word “non-binary” rocketing into use. (Where was this word when I was a kid? Was it nascent in 2009?). Likewise, it has looked like a racial “reckoning” in the United States might get underway, after George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery (the list goes on....).

But then I look more closely. Yes, there is certainly talk, coverage, and exploration of all these changes in the public sphere. It can feel explosive. Twitter is abuzz, as are the *New York Times* and the cinematic universe. Yet, there's something lagging. Embrace can be shallow. Backlash is billowing in the US. This year was the year of transgender sports bills banning trans girls from all school sports. Happening now and truly aflame is the phony attack on Critical Race Theory, which opponents haven't read. And, as you might guess, the rise of “non-binary” is stirring the pot for all those lovers of the binary system (boy/girl, man/woman) that, as a system, is constantly referenced by the word “non-binary”. Not to mention that talk of “gay” and “trans” children is almost always scrubbed of any kind of reference to children's sexuality. “LGBT youth” is wonderfully cloaking the matters it would name.

Where are we now, then, twelve years past my book's publication? What can the queer child (who is every child, since every child is strange from the standpoint of adults) expect to find in 2021? For sure, more talk. More talk of embrace, and sometimes more action. More social media viral-spreading-of-ideas on the move. And more forgetting, sad to say. Our history falls behind us. World racial history that shapes us all gets suppressed as “the past” –even if that past is foggily known and wildly present. And the life of the words “gay” and “trans”, or other words from other regions of the world, from earlier times is supplanted by a US-focused set of namings obsessed with “identities”.

Greater attention to resource-distributions of every key kind can thus get muted. How can we defeat nationalist hoardings that harm young bodies? How devise a more attuned global listening?

3. Which books and articles have taken your intervention to the next level? What are the main topics, problems, and authors?

There's a book that definitively takes queer childhood to its next level and next big place. Aptly for what I've said about forgetting, it takes us back. Into the archives. Into a past which shapes all gender(s), yours and mine, by propping up sex. Let me be less cryptic.

In my new book, entitled *Gender(s)*, I nutshell what I've learned by reading Jules Gill-Peterson's field-defining treatise, *Histories of the Transgender Child*. What I've discovered there is something I didn't know about children, never mind about gender, as a gender studies scholar (!). "Gender," Jules tells us, was invented right around 1950, by scholar and researcher John Money (and his fellow colleagues), to *save* the crumbling notion of biological sex: the binary notion of male and female bodies.

I had thought that feminists' separation of the concept "gender" from "sex" in the 1970s made gender our hero –crafting gender as the happily changeable cultural behaviors that mute the force of sex. Perhaps that's true in part. But Money got there first and laid a foundation that proved to be fateful in medical circles (and all of our lives?). I'll put it just briefly. From his contact with intersex and transgender children, Money knew that bodies were "naturally" "indeterminate" in terms of sex. He and his colleagues knew that numerous "predictors" for male or female status were ... unpredictable. Chromosomes were not a sure grounding force; a body's having testes or ovaries didn't anchor it; hormones, with all their complexities, Money knew, didn't predict with any finality; and genitals or secondary sex characteristics could present askew. Enter gender. To *shore up* sex. To unqueer what is queer about biology. In the face of children's "plastic" bodies, Money said that children needed to grow in "developmental" channels –male *or* female–channels he called *gender* –if they were going to escape social stigma.

Or, as I summarize what I glean from Jules and state in *Gender(s)*: "There's your circle. Society, ignorant of medical research, makes a stigma out of something our bodies do quite naturally: *not* conform to a sexual binary. Thus, society's enforced binary corrects a problem of its own making. And medicine complies, against its own research. Quite unlike later feminist notions –that gender is dynamic, changing, changeable, and capable of undermining social norms and their stigmatizing ways– Money's 'gender' ... argued for something much more fixed and stigmatizing, all while purporting to sidestep stigma". One last twist. This dynamic was racialized in the US. Only certain bodies –white child bodies– were deemed plastic "enough" to be fixed in developmental ways. You'll have to read Gill-Peterson to find out why.

Bottom line: the queerness of children encircles their sex and gender and sexuality. Gender's invention, at least in northern hemispheric realms, is also strongly racialized. We need to know this history because it's with us now.

But how is it with us –*is* it with us?– in other global contexts, such as the Latin American domains this dossier explores? I'm eager to be schooled.

And because I stand to learn so much from these essays, I'll underscore how limited my next assertions are, while I put them forward for revision and critique. From my narrow US perch, the issues before us are: trans* and gender issues as they seem to morph before us, though they were always morphing so their newness isn't new; resulting legal issues now seen in schools and sports; fascinating intergenerational issues that make a layer cake of older terms and new ones, all being lived across a spread of different ages; and, most profound of all, global racialized sex-and-gender issues that make the Euro-American categories bend and break, for all their vaunted force.

A short list of texts that would take you to these matters would include Jack Halberstam's work on Pixar films in *The Queer Art of Failure*; the magical anthology, *Queer Game Studies*; three distinct collections, with three different angles, that theorize queer ways taken by "children" (*Monstrous Children and Childish Monsters*; *Deleuze and Children*; and the forthcoming, broadly psychoanalytic volume, *The Queerness of Childhood*); Rebekah Sheldon's eerily important *The Child to Come: Life After the Human Catastrophe*; and two special issues in different journals that complement each other, "Child" (in *Women's Studies Quarterly*) and "The Child Now" (in *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*). In the latter issue, in an essay entitled, "The Queer Child Now and Its Paradoxical Global Effects," I attempt to place "the queer child" in global racial context as I theorize what I call "kid Orientalism" and "reverse pedophilia," as a way to explain how the innocent child must be "made" overseas as a project outsourced by United States fears of the sexual child. And, if you'll permit me, the dossier that follows breaks tremendous ground that is urgently needed if we're going to think past the current North American colonizing blinkeredness surrounding "childhood".

4. Which of the disciplines has been more crucial to you, in terms of your intervention and belonging, childhood studies, queer theory or comparative literature? Why?

I'm always thrilled to learn from childhood studies when the chance presents. This, because I'm a queer theorist who theorizes "children" –not a queer person steeped in childhood studies (though I've read liberally inside this field). I did have a revelatory time in Sweden, in 2018, when I attended the 30th Anniversary Symposium of Child Studies at Linköping University, with twenty scholars invited from Europe, Australia, and the United States. There seemed a hunger and warm welcome there for queer contributions to international perspectives on Euro-American figures of childhood –and how those figures impact "children" or younger bodies around the globe.

But literature, specifically, and queer theory, generally, are my homes. If you read my last book, entitled *Making Out*, you'll see how these entities slot together. It's a book that braids memoir, conceptualizations, and brief reflections on novels and films. (It had its origins in a piece I published back in 2015: "Reading as Kissing, Sex with Ideas: 'Lesbian' Barebacking?" in the *Los Angeles Review of Books*.) In fact, it's my attempt to write accessibly, invitingly about queer childhood for a broader audience.

Kissing itself is just plain strange. Kissing is neither hetero nor homo; trans nor cis. Children do it, too –even with adults. Asexuals and celibates may partake. But is kissing sex? Odder still, is reading? For adults and kids?

Making out is a prism through which to look at the cultural and political forces of our world: childhood, race, economics, books, and movies. And racialized gender. In essence, it's my memoir about a non-binary childhood before that idea was alive in my world. I think about kissing as you accompany me to the bedroom, to the closet, to the playground, to the movies, and to solitary moments with a book –that is, with words– as the ultimate source of wounding and pleasure. Reading, I explain, is not just like sex. It *is* sex. (You'll have to read the book. But it has to do with words making physical entry into our bodies....).

There were childhood moments when I read a kiss –relating it, as a child, to my own desires. My own trail of kisses made for a layer cake of words through which I made myself out: “girl” turning “gay” feeling “trans” under “white” facing “God” soaked in “shame,” having a “blast”.

Some of us, in retrospect, were a linguistic prequel to “trans,” though transgender was happening and being somewhere around us, out of our grasp. We were crafty creatures; but unlike the gender scene now emerging, ours was more denuding, maddening, stranding. Part of my story of kissing and reading therefore spotlights two-word children: word-stranded children; or, in the positive, word-aspiring children; weird-reading children. (I was truly this). Those of us said to be “girl” or “boy”, without any way to ditch our one word and get the other word, were impaled upon both while falling between them. Not-girl-not-boy (wasn't the one, couldn't be the other), not “trans” either (no such word I knew), we were prequel-people, linguistically stranded at that point in history. With no surgery or drugs known to us, weird word-kissing –kissing a *word* we could read not “have”– was all we knew to do.

Weird little readers beyond the scope of genitals. That's one way to redefine “the child”.

I know many other ways lie just ahead, as I become the reader of your dossier's essays. I'm now ready to be opened by these words.