



# The queer child cracks: Queer feminist encounters with materiality and innocence in childhood studies

Childhood

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## Abstract

This article questions how we might continue to envision an open and inviting engagement between the terrains of childhood studies and queer theory. Matters of childhood innocence in particular are problematised throughout. The paper builds on the offerings of queer of colour scholarship and women of colour feminism, endeavouring to contribute to an emergent childhood studies that is informed by queer and feminist understandings that uphold the materiality and lived experience of the child, both in theory and in practice.

## Keywords

Black feminist thought, childhood, feminism, materiality, queer of colour critique, queer theory

## Introduction: Placing the queer child on the map

Aligning childhood studies and queer theory as symbiotic interlocutors may at first appear a treacherous task: talking of queerness does not easily conjure the child and talking of children does not easily conjure the queer.<sup>1</sup> In the words of Cobb (2005), though, ‘interest in queer children has been around since queer theory’s own fraught childhood’ (p. 125), and the bridge-building exercise between these disciplines is thus not a new endeavour. Yet at present, the dialogue between queer theory and childhood is taciturn; queer theory, in spite of its subversive and disruptive prowess, oftentimes appears inattentive to the materiality of the child: it slips through our scholarly cracks. But, like a disgruntled child, materiality demands attention. This paper tends to and synthesises existing discussions on the matter of materiality, remembering and revisiting the possibilities of prior contributions to childhood studies that take the child’s materiality seriously.

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We are witnessing, in our current sociopolitical moment, a plethora of discursive constructions of the queer child. The transgender child in particular has taken a distinct precedence, emerging as a site not only of theoretical contemplation but also as a locus from which moral panic and transphobia, disguised as child protection and safeguarding, emanates (for instance, Brunskell-Evans and Moore, 2018); where queerness and childhoods merge, the echoes of hostility and indignation ring loud. We are also witnessing a resurgent global civil rights movement with the perennial assertion *Black Lives Matter* at its core. Without exploiting the mo(ve)ment for scholarly prowess, the demand for protection, preservation, and sustenance of Black life and Black childhood proves critical. Worlds are being stitched together before us, and in the face of this it must be reasserted that (queer) children are more than a theoretical challenge (cf. Kennedy and Hellen, 2010). This paper thus envisions a generous encounter (cf. Ahmed, 2000) at the interstices of queer theory, queer of colour critique<sup>2</sup> (hereafter QOC critique), women of colour feminism,<sup>3</sup> and childhood studies, in order to affirm and effect arguments that encourage the (re)centring of the material child.

Throughout, I think alongside existing scholarship in this journal and elsewhere with regards to the necessity of problematising innocence as both moral rhetoric and as a mechanism of white supremacy, whilst also contributing to continuing debates regarding the linearity of child development. The paper begins with a contemplation of the mechanics of innocence as applied to queer childhoods in particular, wherein the temporal incompatibilities of childhood and queerness are called into question. I then discuss the ways in which innocence has been bound to the fiction of race, considering the nuances of queer temporality and the way temporal logics become implicated in violent regimes that culminate in children's premature death. The final section seeks to contribute to the small but vital body of scholarship advocating for continuing disciplinary alliances and coalitional thinking between women of colour feminism, queer theory, and childhood studies, and argues that such coalitions must be brought to the fore of our theoretical imaginations. In lending our attention to normativity and innocence such notions may be queered from the inside out, their credence resisted and their rhetorics denaturalised, and success in this endeavour should keep the integrity and agency of the material child intact.

## **Innocent becomings: The temporalities of childhood and the futurity of 'queer'**

What a child 'is', is a darkening question (Stockton, 2009: 2), and what a child *should be*, is even more so. This question of childhood ontology serves as my primary point of departure, and I begin with a discussion of the traction that has been afforded to childhood development and the restrictive linearity it bolsters. Children and their growth, their emergence, their *becoming*, have long been known in accordance with discourses of development. Reflecting on sociological childhood studies, Moran-Ellis (2010) illustrates the ways in which children often become visible 'only in respect of their progress along the path to adulthood' (p. 187). This path to adulthood is of course the path well-trodden. The child can be figured as walking along this path, compass in hand, being oriented and learning to orient themselves in adherence to a trajectory of normative development that culminates in the child becoming the *right kind* of adult. The child may well walk of its own volition, but the direction of its travels is preordained.

In light of this, we may consider Castañeda's polemic attention to the mutable potentiality of the child (cf. Burman and Stacey, 2010: 231). Castañeda (2002) is rightly critical of the notion that 'the child is not only in the making but is also malleable – and so can be made' (pp. 2–3). Indeed, childhood appears akin to clay on a potter's wheel, ready to be coaxed upwards, shaped and contained. But both the clay and the child have minds of their own – agentic in their resistance to haptic pressure from too-heavy-hands, or to corralling by the logics of normativity – spilling out, twisting sideways. The child is *not* freely malleable. Overworked clay becomes brittle, and it breaks. The same happens to the (queer) child forced to become in line with heteronormative trajectories: the queer child cracks.

Whilst childhood may emerge as a 'temporality of anticipation' (Thomson and Baraitser 2018: 68), a waiting period oriented to a chrononormative future, there is always the possibility that the fruits of our labour of patience may turn out wonky. Does the queer child inhabit a wonky body-mind, does the wonky child embody a state of queer? It is to these queer inhabitancies and alternate modes of being and becoming that queer theoretical approaches working alongside childhood studies have turned. The temporal positioning of queerness is complex; perhaps queerness is reductively understood as 'phase', revoking the (sexual) agency of the child and straightening the child out. Or perhaps queerness is recognised as something that can be, just not now. Martin's (2009) study of mothers' assumptions of heterosexuality and inscriptions of heteronormativity illuminate the ways in which queerness is future oriented, kept out of reach of the child. One mother responds, 'I want [my daughter] to know that it would be ok whatever she *grew up to be*' (Martin, 2009: 202, emphasis added). Whether positioned as something to grow out of or something to grow into, queerness for the child-at-present is intangible. In Stockton's (2016) terms, the gay child is a ghostly child 'because it could not live in the present tense' (p. 507). The queer child is an apparition, selectively seen and existing on a temporal plane that is at once shaped by and at odds with teleological development; 'the queer child haunts normative descriptions and temporal positionings of what it means to grow up', and these normative and developmental temporalities can 'make queerness intolerable' (Dyer, 2020: 15, 26). Queerness, granted only in retrospect, resides outside of the domain of childhood, and is marked as the antithesis of the child.

Some of the most pertinent denials of childhood queerness in our current moment can be located in debates concerning the transgender child.<sup>4</sup> Brunskell-Evans and Moore's (2018) edited text *Transgender Children and Young People: Born in Your Own Body*, is a particularly illustrative example of this. The writings are rife with rhetoric wherein transness is denigrated (as fabrication, doctrine, ideology) and children's agency and self-knowledge are undermined, offering a fruitful insight into contemporary imaginings that place transgender childhood at their core. Borrowing from Gill-Peterson (2018), this collection of essays might be recognised as 'a libel placed on the very existence of trans children, a vicious question mark shaped around being' (p. vii), operating under the guise of rational debate. A chapter co-authored by both editors lays out the book's arguments as being 'written against the grain of this thinking and practice, and challeng[ing] transgender ideology'. They state, 'as Editors, our central contention is that transgender children don't exist' (Brunskell-Evans and Moore, 2018: 1). For these writers, the 'transgender child' is a risky figure, used to justify a project that is 'politically reactionary, medically

dangerous and abusive of children' (Brunskell-Evans and Moore, 2018: 3). In this imagination, to deny the corporeal experiences of trans childhood is to protect the *real* child who is marked as innocent and passive, vulnerable to corruption and medically legitimated harm. Bernstein (2011) asks the ever-burning question in her foundational text *Racial Innocence*, 'how did childhood acquire so much affective weight that the exhortation to 'protect the children' seems to add persuasive power to almost any argument?' (p. 2), and indeed we must consider how these calls to preserve the sanctity of normative and innocent childhood function as transphobia in (weak) disguise. Narratives such as Brunskell-Evans and Moore's are not new; the incongruence between childhood and queerness has long been problematic, arising from discursive constructions that naturalise the child as innocent and proto-cisheterosexual. In theory and in practice, there remains a fundamental negation of the fact that children are competent knowers of their own lives, identities, bodies, and minds, and the 'sanctified image of a phantom child' (Pugh, 2011: 162), always innocent and in danger of corruption, takes precedence over the lived experiences of real children, some of whom are already queer.

So what becomes of the bona fide queer child? For Dyer (2014), queer childhood is conceived as that which 'exceeds the confines of normalcy and resists normative assessments in growth' (p. ii). The value of queer theoretical scholarship thus resides in its generative capabilities; the queer child is coaxed out, no longer consigned to speculative shadows – queer theory makes space for the child to grow sideways (Stockton, 2009), usurping the temporal and developmental norm. Facilitating sideways growth means recognising the child as a knowing agent in their own right – it means sustaining the life and queerness of the corporeal child. It makes sense, then, that scholars working to cultivate worlds where queer children have liveable lives in the present would seek to espouse the tangibility of children's queerness, whether by claiming as Stockton (2009, 2016) does that childhood is a queer affect in itself, or by celebrating the 'outness' of real queer children and taking their refusals of shame and shadows as evidence of the vibrant possibilities that may be afforded to young queer life. Nevertheless, such cultivation is not in-and-of-itself straightforward, and it becomes necessary to interrogate the ways in which coaxing the queer child out of speculative shadows may too become problematic.

The whiteness of queer theory when applied to childhood results in a tendency to valorise the visibly queer child – why do we demand the queer child must be seen? Given the effacing nature of homophobic and transphobic rhetoric that places queerness and childhoods in opposition, this is a seemingly natural response – celebrating the existence of the 'out' queer child in a challenge to developmental normativity and discourses that demand queers remain 'closeted' until the temporalities of innocence and childhood are outgrown. But for QOC critic Brockenbrough (2015), the reliance on whiteness in queer theory texts casts coming out as a liberatory act, reflecting a white middle-class epistemological bias that does not necessarily resonate for queer people of colour. This tentative critique of queer visibility may appear at odds with broader activism and scholarship that values and affirms the visibility of queer, but what makes a QOC critique so useful here is that it situates the ambivalence towards coming out in the racially and culturally mediated lived experiences of queers of colour, demanding due attention to the politics of outness.

Brockenbrough's considerations occur primarily in the context of queer youth, but an extrapolation to childhood more specifically is possible. The child is typically regarded

as public property (of parents, the court, the state), and the child's right to privacy is contested. Brockenbrough's invocation to decentre whiteness and visibility allows for the possibility of the private child, and for the child's right to private personhood to be fulfilled. The nuance afforded to the tensions of queer visibility is thus fruitful and must be incorporated into our scholarly imagination. Taking heed of Brockenbrough's considerations of the racialised dynamics of outness and visibility, the queer childhood studies I am envisioning must conjure alternative ways of valorising queer lives as lived and queerness as embodied by children and young people. These must not be reliant on abstract theorising that neglects the corporeality of queerness and shies away from the possibility of actually queer children, nor should they be rooted in theoretical and empirical calls for ubiquitous queer visibility without consideration of the multiply mediated matrices of identity and self-knowledge that children negotiate. If we are to allow queer theory and childhood studies to 'thicken together' (Dyer, 2020: 5), we must facilitate a wider cognisance of the implications of our theorising on a corporeal level; it is a matter of suturing the disjuncture between theory and flesh, and dismantling innocence's hold on queerness without reifying and reproducing queer theory's notorious conceptual whiteness.

### **Queer undoings: The whiteness of childhood innocence**

Whilst queer theory's untethering of childhood from the bind of innocence has largely been situated in the domain of sexuality, the same theoretical grounding has been used to interrogate the concept in other sites too; a queer theoretical approach to childhood grounded in materiality must be taken beyond sex and sexual agency. Prior scholarship has laid foundational ground in this endeavour, but the nuances of innocence continue to demand attention. As Johnson (2001) proffers, 'most current formulations of queer theory either ignore the categories of race and class altogether, or theorise their effects in discursive rather than material terms' (p. 1). Indeed, 'the distinction between "the child" as a figure and "children" as actual biological bodies produces an ineffable gap in knowledge about race and sex, rather than extinguishing it' (Gill-Peterson, 2018: 57).

The spectre of the innocent and pure Apollonian child<sup>5</sup> is not only 'instrumentalised in regulatory surveillance of sexual practice', but also deployed in line with 'racialised accounts of what it means to be human' (Dyer, 2014: 28). There is a harrowing discrepancy in the way innocence is afforded and denied in our imaginations and the figure of the child that this conjures. As Stockton (2009) asserts, 'children, as an idea, are likely to be both white and middle-class. It is a privilege to need to be protected – and to be sheltered – and thus to have a childhood' (p. 31). Whiteness and middle-classness have long been signifiers of the archetype of humanity, and Stockton's elocution illustrates how childhood is not exempt from this systemic inequity. Childhood has long been operant in discourses of what it means to be human (Dyer, 2014), and these discourses are bound with historical and contemporary processes of racialisation. As Bernstein (2011) notes,

by the mid-nineteenth century, sentimental culture had woven childhood and innocence together wholly. Childhood was then understood not as innocent but as innocence itself; not as a symbol of innocence but as its embodiment (p. 4).

Bernstein (2011) offers a deep historical interrogation of the uneven attribution of childhood innocence, and she draws on mid-late nineteenth century conceptions of white children as ‘tender angels’, and Black children as ‘unfeeling, noninnocent, nonchildren’ to do so (p. 33). The conflation of normativity and innocence as operant under discourses of white supremacist heteropatriarchy (hooks, 1994) denies the shelter of innocence to the Black/brown/indigenous/migrant/disabled/queer child who is, by proxy, marked as risky. The terrain of childhood innocence is jagged and disparate, and to uncritically talk of innocence negates the structural and ideological matrices that render the risky child ‘suspect’. Patton (2014), in an article for the Washington Post, attends to the denial of innocence to Black children in particular: ‘Black children are considered innately inferior, dangerous, and indistinguishable from Black adulthood. Black children are not afforded the same presumption of innocence as white children, especially in life-or-death situations’. The work of Kamali echoes Patton’s evocations and Bernstein’s critical interrogation of Black children as ‘nonchildren’. Kamali (2012) refers to the case of Emmett Till, a 14-year-old Black boy who was brutally murdered in 1955 by white perpetrators, to illustrate the racialised mechanics of ‘adulthoodification’, a process which denies differentiation between adult and child. She writes, ‘when the black child is “adulthoodified” – imagined to be a black adult – the category of childhood is instantly decimated by the fiction of race’ (p. 34). The legal principle of *innocent until proven guilty* may well be sacrosanct for the white child, but for the Black child, it is often the inverse that rings true.<sup>6</sup> Cited in a 1956 article for Look Magazine (Huie, 1956), Till’s great-uncle testified: ‘he looked like a man’ (see also Kamali, 2012: 35); ‘the process of adulthoodification justifies harsher, more punitive responses to rule-breaking behaviour’ (Kamali, 2012: 34), and a boy’s ‘mannishness’ works to justify his death.

If queerness warps the temporalities of childhood, so too does Blackness. Kamali considers this in her engagement with well-worn childhood studies debates surrounding the notion of ‘being versus becoming’, and this discussion is necessary given the lack of consideration of being and becoming’s queer and racialised dynamics. In Kamali’s (2012) view, the process of ‘adulthoodification’, as rooted in the temporalities of childhood and bound to the fiction of race, has the capacity to ‘obliterate the process of “becoming” to the point that the “being” child – that child who has agency in the social world – is indistinguishable from the adult’ (p. 41). Under the guise of innocence, if the queer child is a perpetual ‘becoming’, the Black child is always a ‘being’, residing within an accelerated temporality, denied the transitional status of ‘child’. This conception rightfully problematises and complicates the current state of childhood studies thinking with regards to beings and becomings, but nonetheless elisions remain. If the queer child is always becoming, and the Black child is always a being, what do we make of the queer Black child who further complicates the bounds of being and becoming, in that they embody at once both and neither? This question is one I do not have immediate answers to, but it is clear that debates around ‘being’ versus ‘becoming’ have implications not only for children as agentic social actors, but also for children’s capacities to live a liveable life, and it is to questions like this that we must turn our attention if the embodied experiences of children are to be cared for in full.

Dyer’s (2020) *The Queer Aesthetics of Childhood* discusses the violence of adulthoodification with attention to the murder of 12-year-old Tamir Rice, a Black child, shot and killed



when his toy gun was mistaken for a real one. The comments made by Steve Loomis, president of the Cleveland Police Patrolman's Association, echo the testimony of Till's uncle and again the Black child is propelled at speed beyond the protective parameters of childhood: Rice was 'menacing. . . He wasn't that little kid you're seeing in pictures. He's a 12-year-old in an adult body' (Guarino, 2017). Dyer's (2020) consideration of Tamir Rice occurs primarily in the context of an artistic installation by Ebony G. Patterson, entitled . . . *when they grow up* . . . . The installation, Dyer describes, 'criticised the killing of Rice and other children whose racialisation fatally forecloses assumptions of their innocence' (pp. 34–35). In her work, Patterson curates a space where audiences are encouraged to mourn for these children whilst also witnessing a world in which their innocence is taken seriously and their deaths are not inevitable. Calls to dismantle innocence as a naturalised condition of childhood by those theorising children's agency and knowingness are necessary, particularly since 'innocence generally holds children captive to the adult's power', but for Patterson, 'innocence is a better alternative than death' (Dyer, 2020: 51). The bind of innocence is labyrinthine and the question of whether it is something to be expelled or espoused is one without definite answers, but Patterson's installation 'expresses some of the material struggles children can endure when not consigned to a position of inculpability' (Dyer, 2020: 55). Whilst it may appear paradoxical to assert that children *are* vulnerable and innocent after all, until the logics of innocence can be abolished in entirety, claiming innocence may actually work to prevent injury and violence: in reclaiming innocence, from the grips of whiteness for instance, we may breathe life back into the material child.

Perhaps Black childhood can be recognised as a queer temporality. Queered temporality in childhood offers a radical rethinking of normative and appropriate development, but can the skewing of time also do harm? Whilst queer time's refusal to submit to temporal logic is freeing in that it makes space for the child to grow sideways (Stockton, 2009), queered time may also be oppressive, doing violence to the body of the child whose trajectories of development are accelerated by the state and its agents, as in the cases of many Black and/or refugee children. Refusals of temporal logic are central to adultification; if temporal logics were upheld, perhaps these children would be alive today. Dyer (2020) explicitly states that her argument is about discouraging rhetorics of childhood innocence; 'I have sought new theories of childhood that redeem the life-making capacities of children's development without reinvesting in their innocence' (p. 125). This is a subtle juncture, but it is where my thinking and Dyer's, even if only slightly, seem to diverge. That is, I want to suggest that there is value in reclaiming innocence, at least until innocence can be recomposed for all. Whilst Dyer explicitly discourages a reinvestment in innocence, as this section illustrates, some children's innocence has never been invested in; (re)investments in innocence may be necessary in order to be reparative and productive in the long-term. Until we have successfully cultivated an overarching ethics of care that means we can move beyond the parameters of innocence/culpability for *all* children, some reclamation of innocence may be needed to sustain life for those children for whom innocence is denied. I am not claiming that we should rely on innocence or logical and linear temporalities and trajectories of development without question nor critique, and I am not claiming that doing so will set us free. Rather, I am wondering if we can work concurrently to abolish the logics of childhood innocence and

development in totality whilst also recognising that for now, if certain children were figured as innocent and appropriately grown, their lives may no longer be on the line. We must rescue innocence from its complicity in oppressive order and from its preclusions of experience and agency, instead making clear its radical potential for making participation and agency of all children possible.

## **Child as theory or child as flesh? Generous encounters with queer theory and women of colour feminism**

It would be naive to expect queer theory to wholly renounce its conceptualism or theoretical prowess but, in this section, I provide a necessary critique of the shortcomings of our current coalescence between childhood studies and queer theory. I also offer some antidote to this, engaging emerging and continuing dialogues between queer theory, childhood, women of colour feminism and QOC critique. This is not pioneering work, and indeed my thinking is here indebted to a collective of scholarly ancestors<sup>7</sup> (see Stephens, 2011; Gill-Peterson et al., 2016, for instance), but such an endeavour remains necessary nonetheless.

The title of this section invokes the work of Chicana feminists Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa (1983). Within their co-edited anthology *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Colour*, Moraga coins a ‘theory in the flesh’ as something that validates lived experience, offering space for the affective, personal and emotive dimensions of theorising to be upheld. Materiality and embodiment take a central position within their work, and are sites of distinct precedence within women of colour feminism and QOC critique more broadly. Johnson (2001) follows Moraga and Anzaldúa’s notion of ‘theory in the flesh’ and applies it to his framework of ‘quare studies’. As Henninger (2018) notes, ‘quare is a term derived from southern culture. . .to centre the experiences of queer people of colour who have too often been marginalised, if not brutalised, in theory and real life alike’ (p. 6). Thus, if queer theory has been ‘unable to accommodate the issues faced by gays and lesbians of colour who come from “raced” communities’ (Johnson, 2001: 3), quare studies is a ‘vernacular rearticulation and deployment of queer theory to accommodate racialized sexual knowledge’ (Johnson, 2001: 1). This is a necessary intervention given ‘queer theory’s (de facto white) discursive project’ (Henninger, 2018: 7), and its implications for mergings between queer theory and childhood studies too.

To illustrate the dangers of negating materiality and lived experience, we can consider Cobb’s (2005) suggestion that ‘something about children – less as actual beings and more as what they are made to signify – livens up queer theory’ (p. 120). Whilst this may be partially true, its implications are treacherous; his focus on the child-as-signifier denies the body of the child and children come to exist as a blank slate, a canvas for investigation and introspection. There is a danger in reducing children and their childhoods to mere signifiers, empty vessels from which we can take to enhance theoretical thinking. This same problematic emerges in the (vastly critiqued) work of Edelman (2004). His polemic text *No Future* (2004) figures the child as anti-queer – a signifier of futurity and reproduction, a tool deployed to perpetuate a heterosexist, misogynistic and capitalist social order. ‘Fuck the social order, and the Child in whose name we’re collectively terrorised’ (p. 29), he decries. For Edelman (2004), if this hegemonic, normative social order is to be



dismantled, ‘the Child as futurity’s emblem must die’ (p. 30). If the child were only ever a phantasmic figuration these assertions may well ring true, but Edelman is ‘not always skilled at differentiating between the symbolic and the actual, or articulating what they might mean for one another’ (Minadeo, 2019: 5).

The child is not merely a phantasmic figuration, and the dangers of negating the materiality of real children hence become clear. As Muñoz (2009) contends in his critique of Edelman’s *No Future*, ‘the future is only the stuff of some kids. Racialized kids, queer kids, are not the sovereign princes of futurity’ (p. 95). Not all children are wanted in the future: some of us were never meant to survive (Lorde, 1997). When Edelman writes of *death to the child*, for some children this really is the case. For these children – racialised and non-normative and queer – there is hope in futurity. When Edelman implores us to ‘fuck the future’ because the future is emblematic of trajectories of development and chrononormativity and adherence to the *right time*, he negates the fact that for some children, existing in the future is a radical act. If we decry the future and condemn the figure of the child to death, the ghost of the child will haunt us for our failings of its material siblings, cousins, and friends. Perhaps it is not so much ‘death to the child’, but death to your templates, your routes, your markers of appropriate progression. Death to rigidity and death to corralling may well give life to the child.

To counter the overly conceptual abstractions of much queer theorising, we might advocate for a partnership between childhood studies, queer/quare studies and women of colour scholarship, valorising and putting to use epistemological attention to matters of lived experience. Johnson’s (2001) articulation of ‘quare’ offers bridging material for the coalescence of queerness, racialisation, and childhood, in a way that speaks to the reality of our existence in material bodies (p. 20). In ‘quare’, the child as theory and the child as flesh grow together, sustained as whole. Pérez (2017) highlights how whilst critical, feminist, and poststructural thinkers have ‘queered’ normative views on gender and sexuality, this theorising has often ‘remained grounded in the work of white male scholars’, and there remains a fundamental ‘lack of theoretical influences by women of colour’ (p. 50). Her discussion is crucial, encouraging consideration of how a refocused childhood studies might emerge. She contends:

centring Black feminist thought in early childhood studies challenges the separation of theory from the flesh, making visible the oppression and empowerment of children of colour, and informing multiple understandings of childhood/s and the world (2017: 55).

In an endeavour to make this manifest, the project of ‘quaring childhood’ begins with Henninger. Henninger (2018) argues that “‘quaring childhood” is the work of materialising queer experience, and quaring material experience, and that figures of southern childhood are tools particularly suited for this work’ (p. 9). Her work functions as a clarion call to bring quare childhoods to the fore of our theoretical imaginations, and for Henninger (2018), ‘the repercussions for not doing so are as real as the bodies and experiences thus erased, from perpetuating racial injustice, to enabling sexual abuse, to high rates of suicide for LBGQTQIA+ teenagers’ (p. 13). To think quarely about childhood is to better understand ‘the spaces and temporalities of childhood’s queerness – [acknowledging] the matrices in which all sexualities, all childhoods, exist and function’ (Henninger, 2018: 14).

Johnson (2001), unconvinced that queer studies will change, summons *quare* studies as an ‘interventionist disciplinary project’ (p. 20), and given his intervention was first offered almost two decades ago, perhaps he is right. But nonetheless, I am doubtful that to do this work solely outside of the wider domain of queer theory and childhood studies is enough. Whilst I am cognizant of the intent and necessity of carving out academic space to care for the lives of those who have been marginalised and brutalised both in theory and real life (Henninger, 2018), in doing so, it seems that a both queer theory and childhood studies more broadly remain exempt from any real disciplinary change. Our wider scholarly paradigms must do this work too, and it is wholly possible that the central tenets of ‘*quare*’ be extrapolated from the south, borrowed and put to use elsewhere. In doing so there is potential to denaturalise the privileging of whiteness, and to echo hooks’ (1984) phrasing, shift the positioning of lived experience, racialisation, and materiality from margin to centre.

Pérez’s (2017) encouragement to centre Black feminist epistemology and both Johnson and Henninger’s evocations of ‘*quare*’ serve as a call to action to revoke the gaze of white supremacist heteropatriarchy in our childhood studies endeavours, too. Together, these interventions offer a vision of a tangible utopia made possible. What world appears when we decentre whiteness and normativity in childhood studies? Perhaps it would be one that attends to the flesh and blood child-as-lived with sincerity; one that valorises and encourages sideways growth; one that tends to the child’s queerness with care; one that willingly sustains the life of the racialised child. Perhaps it would be one that takes seriously the agency and future of the marginal child who is all too often condemned to early (literal or figurative) death. Perhaps it would provide space for fragmented identities to be made whole (p. 54).

## Concluding remarks

In countering queer theory’s ‘resistance to thinking about childhood as materiality’ (Dyer, 2014: 157), possibilities for new worlds and revitalised scholarship are opened up, taking us down paths less frequently travelled. The synergy of childhood studies and queer theory will always be incomplete, unless a theoretical and practical collaboration between the two bodies of knowledge also attends consistently and deliberately to the embodiment and materiality of the child. Whilst this work is underway, an embrace of women of colour feminism, *quare* studies, and QOC critique is still as necessary as ever. Without continuing to challenge the reluctance to materiality and lived experience that seems to reside within queer theory’s very core, and without continued critique of the ways in which ‘queer theory has tended to skim on acknowledging the salience of a racialised queer body – white or of colour’ (Boatwright, 2016: 74), the same narratives (abstract, conceptual, imbued with whiteness) will emerge, and theoretical marginalisation of materiality and lived experience of children (some of whom are queer, all of whom are racialised) will prosper. I am not making the claim that QOC scholarship should halt its operations as a distinct field of inquiry. Rather, my argument is that a renewed relationship between childhood studies and queer theory must centre the theoretical accomplishments of QOC critique and women of colour feminism as a deliberate act of epistemological resistance to the hollowing out and bleaching of theories of childhood, as resistance to the removal of theory from flesh.

This is not a call to use QOC critique or women of colour feminism as a plaster to remedy the inadequacies and soothe the wounds of a queer(ed) childhood studies, but instead an advocacy for the continuation of coalitional thinking and scholarship that takes the many manifestations of materiality in childhood seriously. What queer theory offers to childhood studies is something destabilising. Of course, any radical invocation of queerness and queer life should serve to decentre heterosexuality and heteronormativity. But, as I have demonstrated throughout this paper, when used in conjunction with women of colour feminism and QOC critique, the disciplinary alliance of queer theory and childhood studies – enriched by attention to materiality, lived experience, and asymmetry – contains infinitely greater possibilities for dismantling conceptions of what childhood *should be*, thus allowing understandings of what childhood *is* and *can be* to emerge. My analysis does not provide ready answers, but it does allow us to move away from norms of how children ought to ‘journey’ from birth to adulthood and beyond. In tending to some of the plethoric entanglements of queerness and childhood, this paper has explored the ways in which childhood may continue to be opened out so the multiplicity of childhoods-as-lived can unfold before us. If Stockton (2009) suggests that queer childhood is a state of sideways growth, perhaps there is hope that the interdisciplinary field of childhood studies will follow suit: expanding, decentering, emerging as a rhizomatic endeavour in both theory and practice, one that challenges normativity in all of its (dis)guises.

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### Notes

1. A note on my use of queer: in the context of this paper, ‘queer’ is used as an expansive and encompassing term. ‘Queer’ is deployed as both noun and verb. Queer as noun refers to identities that are beyond the bounds of normative (cisgender, heterosexual) notions of gender and sexuality, whilst queer as verb (queering/queered) refers to the processes and consequences of usurping normativity, subverting and making ‘strange’.
2. Drawing on Ferguson (2005), Boatwright (2016) defines QOC critique as that which ‘seeks to illuminate the unique lived experiences of queer people of colour and their communities by putting them at the centre of exploration’ (pp. 74–75).

3. When speaking of women of colour feminism, I am referring to an analytic paradigm conjured by women of colour that is primarily concerned with co-constitutive critiques of institutionalised racism, sexism, heteronormativity and homophobia. Women of colour feminism also advocates for close attention to lived experience and embodiment. Amongst others, this work is particularly indebted to the offerings of Gloria Anzaldúa, Cherrie Moraga, bell hooks, Audre Lorde, and Patricia Hill Collins, for instance.
4. I want to thank an anonymous reviewer for pointing out that there are a multitude of trans critiques of queer theory (see Benavente and Gill-Peterson, 2019), and that queer theoretical invocations of temporality are not necessarily generated out of concern for the transgender child. It is not my intension to argue that the trans child and queer theory are collapsible, but I do argue that the figure and materiality of the transgender child in this context proves illustrative for exposing the labyrinthine bind of queerness, temporality and innocence.
5. The Apollonian child is described by Jenks (1996) as 'angelic, innocent and untainted by the world which they have recently entered. They have a natural goodness and a clarity of vision that we might 'idolise' or even 'worship' as the source of all that is best in human nature' (p. 73).
6. See, for instance, Meiner (2016) for an extended discussion on carcerality and childhood innocence.
7. My thanks are once again extended to the generosity of an anonymous reviewer for directing me further towards this body of scholarship.

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