

hurt children's curiosity and imagination. Addressing the child as always already queer may be one way of supporting their imaginative inquiries about sexuality.

Stockton (2009) points out that the child and the homosexual have, historically, been positioned as oppositional, and so, the consideration of queer childhood becomes categorically provocative. The schematizing of childhood innocence and mutual rhetorics of vulnerability and its exploitation have devalued the child's sexuality and ensured that the traumatized child is a figure hard to miss in most historical renditions of homosexuality (Kincaid, 1998; Kelleher 2004). James Kincaid (1998) and Bruhm and Hurley (2004) show how an easy collapse of all childhood sexuality into definitions of trauma forecloses careful consideration of the child's agentic relationship to perverse and queer sexuality. Their work, like my own, is not interested in minimizing the corporeal or emotional impacts of sexual trauma experienced in childhood, but in understanding the possibility for children and youth to recruit amounts of bodily pleasure. With them, I am sure that the child can be hurt by theories of precious innocence that punish curiosity and assume the child's status as victim. This literature does not elide or contest the psychosocial damage done by molestation, rape, and other forms of child sexual abuse. Rather, it shows how making childhood sexuality a taboo subject is one way to protect the child's assumed proto-heterosexuality.

Queer theories of childhood are often brave in the ways that they wade into such taboo territory in order to show how what is considered perverse is often a mode of securing heteronormativity. Queer theory can be helped in its desires to prove that children are capable of possessing complexity and sexuality by exploring work done in the fields of early childhood studies and sociological studies of childhood. This is because these fields and their associated methods of inquiry prioritize the child's possession of knowledge and agentic relation to the world. Halberstam's (2011) theory of childhood tendered in *The Queer Art of Failure* is an example of why queer theory might learn to appreciate these disciplines' encounters with material children. Although the text carries persuading examples of what can happen in the fecund import of philosophies on childhood to queer theory, Halberstam's depiction of childhood also relies on ideas of what children do and like which seem a little too groundless or purposely hollow:

... children do not invest in the same things that adults invest in: children are not coupled, they are not romantic, they do not have a religious morality, they are not afraid of death or failure, they are collective creatures, they are in a constant state of rebellion against their parents, and they are not the masters of their domain. (p. 47)

A more thorough reading of the literature published in childhood studies may have demonstrated to Halberstam that children are, for example, afraid of death, demonstrate anxiety of social failure, and sometimes have great difficulty working with others. Halberstam's theory of children claims that they are not romantic, but in *The Queer Art of Failure* there is a romantic notion of childhood, in which a binary between childhood and adulthood is reified. Trying not to think of the child as a site of pure resistance to normativity (as Halberstam arguably does), I am interested in what queer theory, while it lucratively continues to debate the terms on which the future is realized, can do when it is also interested in the quotidian lives of children and their structural differences. In the same vein, I have been asking what childhood studies could do differently if, as Robinson (2005) and Tobin (2007) appeal, it was more interested in queer theory or at least queer affect that circulates in spaces where children move. In the next section, I counter queer theories of childhood (such as Edelman, 2004) that empty the child of matters related to its physical embodiment in order to interrogate the forgetting of vital evidence of children's remarkable experiences. I suggest that queer theory might consider giving the child's body back in order to recognize the ways its form is animated by histories of race.

Racialization and violence in queer theories of childhood

As Lee Edelman (2004) states in *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive*, our culture is obsessed with the child as the entity for which we build a future without conflict. For Edelman, the fantasy of the child as innocent futurity and as the object for which sociality is organized disciplines LGBTQ individuals. In order to be legible and productive subjects in the social imaginary, we must be operative members of what he terms "reproductive futurism." He explains, "*Queerness* names the side of those *not* 'fighting for the children,' the side outside the consensus by which all politics confirms the absolute value of reproductive futurism" (p. 3). The "cult of the child" (p. 19) signals an always already impossible future to which queers are promised potential belonging if they uphold the contract of futurity which assures that culture is repeated without difference. The reproductive body, in this schematic, becomes an emblem of achieved adulthood that signals the loss of childhood. Those who do not reproduce cannot be privileged in a symbolic order that celebrates life-producing sex as paramount contribution to humanity. So, Edelman asks that we learn to find pleasure in sites and acts that do not secure a future. Queerness, for him, is on the side of the death drive, never finding solace in identity, only ever disturbing the social categories that try to make us legible to others (p. 17).

Edelman's assertions are critical of liberal movements in queer communities toward replicating normative structures of kinship and progeny, which he understands as forlorn pleas for recognition from a culture that privileges those who secure repetition. No baby, no future, and thus no sincere privileging in the symbolic or political world (p. 3). Edelman hopes for a queer renouncement of loyalty to the child, a loyalty he believes rushes toward a future made of equality while ignoring the past and present conditions that create violence for LGBTQ individuals and communities. This rush toward the Child is a disavowal of the persistent hum of the death drive. Better, he thinks, to understand queerness as that which is destructive to the social order and in contradiction of reproductive futurity. Edelman capitalizes the Child, as conceptual figuration, in an effort to distance it from material, embodied children. Edelman's work has not been taken up in a sustained way by the field of childhood education and perhaps this is why. His polemical text cannot account for the child's queer existence, and although his provocations to the rhetoric of childhood innocence are sharp, they may be bettered by collaboration with scholarship that embraces the child's agency. Edelman's now seminal evocation of the child as innocent futurity is not relational or able to hold space for a theory of flesh and blood children, and I will now discuss some of what is lost in its inability to account for the traumatic loss of statelessness, genocide, or war.

Andrea Smith (2010), in an essay on convergences and distrust between queer theory and native studies, responds to Edelman's production of a subjectless critique of childhood innocence.² She posits that "Edelman's anti-oppositional' politics in the context of multinational capitalism and empire ensures that the continuation of th[e] status quo by disabling collective struggle designed to dismantle these systems" (p. 47).³ Smith's request that a theory of queer childhood makes room for recognition of the genocidal foundations of nation-states in North America deepens my understanding of child rights as contingent on relationality, nationality, and access to knowledge. Smith notes that "while Edelman contends that the Child can be analytically separated from actual children," an indigenous critique of his text reminds us that in the context of genocide, "Native peoples have already been determined by settler colonialism to have no future" (p. 48):

If the goal of queerness is to challenge the reproduction of the social order, then the Native child may already be queered. For instance, Colonel John Chivington, the leader of the famous massacre at Sand Creek, charged his followers to not only kill Native adults by to manipulate their reproductive organs and to kill their children because "nits make lice." (p. 48)

In this circumstance, the Native child is not invested with assurance of futurity and cannot cohere in Edelman's privileged portrayal of the cult of the Child. The Native child, for Smith, is queered because it "is not a guarantor of the reproductive future of white supremacy; it is the nit that undoes it" (p. 48). Smith makes her ambivalence toward Edelman's project clear: She finds "the idea of reproductive continuity as homophobia" (46) useful. However, she also makes it clear that she finds

Edelman's analysis lapses into a vulgar constructionism by creating a fantasy that there can actually be a politic without a political program that does not always reinstate what it deconstructs, that does not also in some way reaffirm the order of the same. (p. 47)

She continues, "That is, it seems difficult to dismantle multinational capitalism, settler colonialism, white supremacy, and heteropatriarchy without some kind of political program, however provisional it may be" (Smith, 2010). Smith invokes Jose Munoz in her assertion that "relationality is not pretty," but is required in the context of genocide and its enduring violence (p. 47).

Edelman's and Smith's texts help to clarify that there is a dilemma in administering education and rights to material children while revising a theory of childhood that encompasses its queer dynamics. I trace Edelman's and Smith's conversation here with the aim of demonstrating the difficult necessity of making conceptual and figurative references to childhood relate to concerns about how material children are treated. After *No Future*, and attentive to Smith's critique, I wonder if and how thought surrounding childhood might be sufficiently queered so that it resists being constrained by normative developmentalism and productively challenges how national, racial, classed, and gendered affiliations and identifications impact the distribution of rights and administration of education to children. This query, though related, is not accounted for in Edelman's polemic because he juxtaposes queerness to children. Although Edelman aims to deposit his critique in a post-political world, his analysis has been critiqued as an effort to elide collective narratives of struggle.

In *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*, Jose Munoz (2009), the revered queer theorist, offered a critique of Edelman's theory of childhood. Munoz revisited his own childhood to apprehend how he developed an understanding of himself as sexually non-normative. In the book, he recalls a moment where he learned his gender as shame, in which he felt "queer" and began to prudently conceal his difference. While reflecting on his own origins, he considers recent murders of queer, racialized youth in the United States to ask how thinking the child, as only abstraction, elides the impact of racism. Munoz's book is, in part, a response to Edelman's polemical attempt to unfasten queerness from humiliated optimism and refuse compulsions to defer to the future. Against futurity, Edelman takes down the cult of the child in shrewd and deliberate jabs at breeders and futurists. Munoz, on a different path, points out that the Child which Edelman builds as his thesis' target devalues the impact of structural disparities such as race, class, and gender. Not all kids, as Munoz insists, are wanted in the future or receive the state's protection. Here, he is allied with Andrea Smith. Tavia Nyong'o (2011) has made similar statements about how the rhetoric of innocence permits its own sorts of violence:

(B)lack popular culture, with its pained awareness that the privileges of childhood are unequally distributed, has long held an ambivalent stance toward this dominant culture of the child. We can be as sentimental as anyone else about imagined childhood purity, but our culture also contains great reservoirs of skepticism towards the ideology of the child, whose vulnerability and value in American culture are so often restricted to the white child, with the black child serving as a kind of foil, always already streetwise, tough, precociously independent. (p. 52)

Queer theories of childhood that do not account for histories of nation-states, slavery, or genocide cannot help effectively reimagine pedagogy of and for children. What does holding “childhood” and “queer,” seemingly opposites, in some kind of productive tension achieve if it cannot also consider the devastating effects of racism or colonialism? The *It Gets Better* social media campaign, as summarized below, offers an account of queer futurity that does not carefully attend to the corrosive force of racism and its colonial antecedents or the ways that social class can erode one’s ability (or desire) to transgress the location in which they are embedded.

Making childhood education “Get Better”

In 2010, an American initiated, though internationally responded to, social media campaign—*It Gets Better*—was created to show children and adolescents that it is okay to be gay because a kinder future hangs in the wings. *It Gets Better* is full of advice on how to turn out gay, which in 1991 Sedgwick pointed out was naught. Meant to show young LGBTQ people that there is a future beyond mandatory schooling, where homophobia can feel stifling and constant, *It Gets Better* is a strategy to prevent the high rate of suicide among this population. Initiated by Dan Savage, a White American media personality and author, and his husband, Terry Miller, *It Gets Better* began with a YouTube narrative in which the men describe how their lives improved after school and when they became adults. Savage says that because it was unlikely that schools would allow him to speak about sexuality to children, he used social media to “speak directly to LGBTQ kids ...” (Savage and Miller, 2011: 4). The very format of *It Gets Better*, then, is informed by a knowing assumption that children’s schools will be resistant to discussing non-normative and queer sexuality.

The campaign became a widespread phenomenon, inspiring 50,000 user-created videos and 50 million views. Quickly, the Internet became populated with digital narratives of queer adult’s self-described resilience in the face of discrimination. What can exist in the aftermath of heterosexual failure is, according to *It Gets Better*, potentially livable—even desirable. In relation to my concern for the seemingly innocuous but effectively damaging impacts of normative theories of childhood development is a consideration of how the advice provided in this campaign does not evenly support queer children and youth. The campaign has been highly critiqued for its inadequate consideration of how race and class, for example, are elided in Savage and Miller’s characterization of overcoming homophobia. A contentious dialogue surrounding Savage’s project has surfaced, spurred by divergent approaches to queer futurity. There is a growing amount of activist response⁴ and allied scholarly publications (Goltz, 2013; Majkowsi, 2011) that both critique the campaign for its shortcomings and sort through the psychosocial conditions which have compelled so many to participate in it. Many critics insist that the psychic and corporeal survival that is nurtured in dreams of a future that holds smaller amounts of homophobia and gender violence should not trump considerations of race, gender, disability, and other markers of difference. Jasbir Puar (2010) suggests that “Savage’s IGB video is a mandate to fold into urban, neoliberal gay enclaves, a form of liberal handholding and upward-mobility.” Puar appropriately asks, “But how useful is it to imagine troubled gay youth might master their injury and turn blame and guilt into transgression, triumph, and all-American success?”⁵ *It Gets Better* aims to repair a world broken by homophobia’s injuries, but its liberal underpinning is devastating in its inability to submit that maybe things don’t get better, but we learn to live in the wreckage of queer damage.

As case study, *It Gets Better* offers a valuable and complex examination of how LGBTQ identities get sutured to and evicted from educational settings, and how expanding the terms of queerness to analyze the contemporary residue of colonialism and slavery in the United States and Canada, for example, is necessary. A major criticism of *It Gets Better* is that it does not aim to correct

injustice in the contemporary moment or increase resilience toward oppression within schools, but postpones better feelings to the achievement of adulthood. The campaign could be improved by a thoughtful commitment to reducing homophobia and heteronormativity as it occurs in the present in childhood educational settings. Although the primary impulse of *It Gets Better* was a response to queer youth suicide and feelings of distress made from sexual difference, the application of its resultant cultural criticism to the field of childhood studies and early childhood education provokes a deeper understanding of what is at stake when children are not supported in queer explorations of sexuality. Both the campaign and its ensuing critiques admit that queer affect and homophobic damage circulate in classrooms and site of education and are thus valuable to a reworking of curricula and pedagogy for children.

Tavia Nyong'o reminds us that *It Gets Better* was a response to the trouble which arises when queerness enters the site of education. Its messages insist that surviving school is possible. In response to the campaign, Nyong'o has written that

I think there is a bit of a queer salvific wish going on in the *It Gets Better* videos, which exhibits a similarly melancholic refusal to work through the grief that might come with the recognition that it doesn't get better.

He continues, "Maybe the secret truth that we repress is that school sucks, even when we find a way to make it work for us."⁶ Nyong'o's suggestion that school could be better, that it is not enough to daydream of a future in which the student's desires may be realized, might inspire early childhood educators to construct a more welcoming environment for the child who is "growing sideways," as Stockton may deem it. Considering *It Gets Better* besides Munoz, Nyong'o and Smith's arguments remind us that the psychic machinations at work in the adult's compulsion to suggest that the world holds less amounts of homophobia for adults are resultant of a refusal to recognize the uneven distribution of justice and rights to children in the present.

To summarize, the *It Gets Better* campaign is an effort to assure LGBTQ children and youth that their future will hold less violence. As Munoz, Puar, Nyong'o, and Smith demonstrate, though, the future is not as kind to those whose bodies are imprinted with the legacies of colonialism or trans-Atlantic slavery, for example. The queer theory of childhood that I have been proposing would not find the campaign a suitable intervention because it does not address the present conditions in which children live and learn. The analytic possibilities made conceivable by theories of the child's queer existence can only offer a better future if they turn back toward colonial pasts. In my attempt to address homophobia's impact on childhood development, I have hoped to queer the damaging rhetoric of childhood innocence by suggesting that we, as adults, clear a path for children to symbolize negativity, queer affect, and sexual curiosity. Because, for queer theory, gender and sexuality are porous and mobile, a queer theory of childhood education should not be invested in predicting the child's future identity, but rather attend to the child's present curiosity about sexual difference. I have spent time with Edelman's and Halberstam's theories of childhood to show the limitations that arise when queer theories of childhood cannot bear the weight of the material child.

Conclusion: toward a queer future for childhood studies

A theory of the child by way of detour through queer theory can help to clarify the damage done when children's curious investigations of sexual difference and agentic responses to structures of social violence are punished. There is, on one hand, the necessity of supporting LGBTQ

children and, on the other, the related need to reimagine our theories of childhood so that they are not constrained by rhetorics of childhood innocence that invalidate the child's potential queer desires. I have traced some of the convergences and antagonisms between the disciplinary fields of queer theory and sociological studies of childhood education in order to assist in cementing a methodological bond between child studies and queer theory. Familiarity with debates about childhood in queer theory, spun out of adult opinions on what the future should hold and how innocence should be distributed, may help childhood educators to better support LGBTQ children but also, more broadly, remap theories of childhood development so that all children can be better supported in their curious and creative resistances to injustice. I have advocated that our adult theories of childhood are compelled by our adult affective, remembered and unconscious experiences with education, family, and sexuality and underwritten by histories of race.

Strengthening a conceptual relation between "queer" and "childhood" can help to cultivate a culture of critique concerning the interruptive force of heteronormativity on the child's development and, more broadly, expose asymmetries in how children are treated and the rhetoric of innocence is distributed. Queer theories of childhood may operate as analytics with which to make arguments about social relations between children and the adult world to which they must respond and in doing so invite questions about the embodied vulnerabilities, educational effects, neurological impacts, and narrative implications of discourses of childhood innocence. A vast majority of research on childhood development resuscitates liberal individualism, as it does not consider the sociality of pain caused by the communal experience of violence wrought under racism and genocide. Building a queer theory of childhood may be a project in which histories of race and racialization are better understood for their continued impact on schooling and education. Outlining an emergent discourse at the intersection of early childhood education, sociological studies of education, and queer theory, I have sought to broaden queer theory's angle of analysis to include a consideration of the material child who must live through childhood. This collaborative formation can, I suggest, be a space in which methodologies and concomitant practices of childhood education can be made better.

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Notes

1. Sedgwick's essay, originally published in *Social Text*, has been anthologized in *Curiouser: On the Queerness of Children* (2004).
2. There has been a large amount of research on the reproduction of gender in curriculum and pedagogy constructed for children. Generally, this work does not disrupt heteronormative assumptions about the child's growth, but rather emphasizes the reproduction of masculinity and femininity through supervised games, play, and curriculum. Gender and sexuality cannot easily be collapsed; queer theory has made this point very clearly. There are, of course, children whose desires do not easily fit within or reproduce gender binaries.
3. Smith cites Jose Munoz's critique of Edelman: "The future is the stuff of some kids. Racialized kids, queer kids, are not the sovereign princes of futurity. [Edelman's] framing nonetheless accepts and reproduces this monolithic future of the child that is indeed always already white" (page 48 in Smith, page 363 of Munoz (2007)).
4. For example, itgetsfatter.tumblr.com
5. See Puar (2010).
6. See Nyong'o (2010).

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Author biography

Hannah Dyer is an Assistant Professor in the Institute of Interdisciplinary Studies at Carleton University. Her work draws from feminist and queer theory, psychoanalysis, and art/aesthetics to consider how theories of childhood create the psychic and material conditions amid which children develop.

NOTICE: Do not click any links or open any attachments unless you trust the sender and know the content is safe.

Hi Ms. Nelson - we have not met, and I hate that. I miss being familiar with my kids teachers and the school staff. Kylie is in 7th grade. She tells me this week that a counselor reached out to her on Tuesday. However, she said this counselor was not you; it was "a sub." I'm not sure what is going on but I'd love to get some details filled in when you have a moment. I haven't received any kind of communication about this.

Thanks so much -

Joyfully, Denise Roberts
405-596-5094
denise_roberts@mac.com

<KRPanoramaFall21.pdf>

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Hi Ms. Nelson.

Would it be possible for me to take a look at Kylie's survey responses? I'm concerned about what may have caused an alert.

Joyfully, Denise Roberts
405-596-5094
denise_roberts@mac.com

On Nov 9, 2021, at 9:49 AM, Nicole Nelson <nicolenelson@smsd.org> wrote:

Good morning!

Thanks for reaching out. I'd love to explain what Kylie was talking about. All of the students (almost all) took the Panorama Social Emotional Learning survey a few weeks ago. It gauged areas of growth mindset, grit, student/teacher relationships, etc. From the data responses, we had a chunk of about 40 students that we (Student Services) decided to just briefly check in with because of their ratings being on the lower end.

I have a Social Work Master's program practicum student with me (Emalee Martin) for the year so she did a lot of these survey follow up conversations which is who Kylie thought was my sub. ___ These conversations are brief and surface level which is why communication wasn't received. However, Kylie mentioned that she would like a regular check-in with Emalee so she was planning to contact you about that and then ended up being gone for a few days but back here tomorrow.

I hope that all makes sense. If you'd like, I can have Emalee give you a call upon her return tomorrow!

Thanks,
Nicole Nelson

On 11/8/21, 3:48 PM, "denise roberts" <denise_roberts@me.com> wrote:

Joyfully, Denise Roberts
405-596-5094
denise_roberts@mac.com

On Nov 15, 2021, at 10:13 AM, Nicole Nelson <nicolenelson@smsd.org> wrote:

Good morning,

I apologize for the delay! I was out with a sick baby last week. These results are super vague but all that I have access to. I have put in a request to Panorama Support to see if I can get more detailed answers for you.

Below are explanations of each category to help conceptualize what she was being asked:

Grit: How well students are able to persevere through setbacks to achieve important long-term goals (not limited to academics), taking into account their experiences and identities. Question examples are: If you fail at an important goal, how likely are you to try again? When you are working on a project that matters a lot to you, how focused can you stay when there are lots of distractions?

Growth Mindset: Student perceptions of whether they have the potential to change those factors that are central to their performance in school. Question examples are: In school, how possible is it for you to change behaving well in class? In school, how possible is it for you to change being talented?

Self-Management: How well students manage their emotions, thoughts, and behaviors in different situations. Question examples are: How often did you come to class prepared? How often did you remain calm, even when someone was bothering you or saying bad things?

She rated herself pretty much in the middle for all of these which to me, doesn't ring any alarm bells. The questions might have been confusing, or she just didn't think that much in-depth about this. If you need anything else, please reach out!

<image001.png>

From: denise roberts <denise_roberts@me.com>
Date: Wednesday, November 10, 2021 at 4:41 PM
To: Nicole Nelson <nicolenelson@smsd.org>
Subject: Re: Kylie Roberts

From: Nicole Nelson nicolenelson@smsd.org
Subject: Re: Kylie Roberts
Date: November 19, 2021 at 8:04 AM
To: denise roberts denise_roberts@me.com



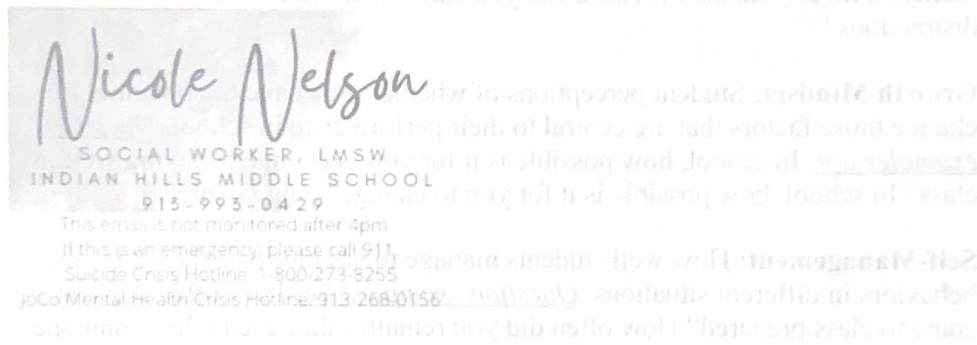
That would be correct. And to be fair, I don't think she fell on the lower end. Scoring herself 3/5 on most of the items is pretty much in the middle. She was flagged because nothing was marked above a 3 which would make it a "strength".

This is the response I got from panorama when I reached out for more details:

"This is the most detailed view we display individual student results in our platform.

In order to protect respondent and student confidentiality, our reports do not show how students answered individual questions, or how teachers answered individual questions about individual students. At the most detailed, we are only able to display topic-level scores for individual students. I apologize for any disappointment this may cause, but appreciate your understanding as student confidentiality is a crucial component of our offerings."

Thanks,



From: denise roberts <denise_roberts@me.com>

Date: Thursday, November 18, 2021 at 5:38 PM

To: Nicole Nelson <nicolenelson@smsd.org>

Subject: Re: Kylie Roberts

NOTICE: Do not click any links or open any attachments unless you trust the sender and know the content is safe.

Hi Ms. Nelson -

So - does this mean that parents are not able to see the specific questions that were asked and answered that caused her answers to fall into a category considered lower end?

Thanks -