

**The Conquering Queer Child:  
Invading Heterotopic Spaces in Queer Theatre by Young Audiences**

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## **Abstract**

Emily Freeman's *And Then Came Tango*, a play for young audiences that includes LGBTQ+ characters, has faced cancellation in two American school districts, first in Austin, Texas (2012) and in Fresno, California (2015). Queer topics are still taboo in cultural products for young people despite increasing representation of LGBTQ+ stories in popular culture and the recent legalization of same-sex marriage in the United States. This dissertation explores ways in which theatre artists and creators could represent queer topics to young people without facing controversy.

Using Kathryn Bond Stockton's theory of the queer child, I establish that all children are queer and that this queerness should be reflected within their cultural products. Because adults create and produce children's culture, their projected, nostalgic idea of the child sanitizes the child's true queerness, exemplified through 'Disneyfication.' I marry Stockton's theory with those of theatre scholar Matthew Reason who claims that theatre for young audiences (by adults) is impossible. This impossibility leads me to conclude that theatre for young audiences cannot reflect the queer child without facing resistance from heteronormative thought.

I use Foucault's relational space to define schools as heterotopic/heteronormative spaces that reject queer subject matter coming from adults who are presenting theatre to young people. I theorize that this rejection can be circumnavigated if the queer child was allowed to create their own (queer) cultural content. Three American theatre companies allow for just that; Northwestern University's Griffin's Tale, New York and Los Angeles' Story Pirates, and Chicago's Barrel of Monkeys. Through my personal interview with Barrel of Monkeys' Artistic Director Joe Schupbach, I analyze three stories by young people, presented by the adult Barrel of

Monkeys ensemble, to students in Chicago Public Schools that explicitly depict queer themes and characters without meeting any resistance or controversy. These stories are paving the way for other mediums to truly reflect the queer child, by positioning the child as both creator and spectator.

## Introduction

Roy and Silo are two male chinstrap penguins who live in New York City's Central Park Zoo. In 2004, the New York Times published an article, "Love That Dare Not Squeak Its Name," about the same-sex pair bond the two formed and the egg they adopted and successfully raised together.<sup>1</sup> The 'gay penguin' story garnered national attention. Writers Justin Richardson and Peter Parnell wrote a children's book, *And Tango Makes Three* (2005), based on the true story, and playwright Emily Freeman wrote her version of the story, *And Then Came Tango*, as a play for elementary school audiences. Since its publication, *And Tango Makes Three* has "topped the ALA's 10 Most Challenged Books List between 2006 and 2010,"<sup>2</sup> citing numerous attempts to ban the book from public libraries. Freeman's *And Then Came Tango* remains unpublished and two of its scheduled tours to elementary school districts have been cancelled, first in Austin, Texas (2012) and recently in Fresno, California (2015).

Censorship of stories with 'gay themes' aimed at young audiences is rampant. I experienced the same cancellation phenomenon when I directed Gabriel Jason Dean's *The Transition of Doodle Pequeño*, another play for young audiences, which features a boy who likes to wear dresses and problematizes the incorrect use of the word "gay" as a derogatory slur amongst children. My production's second tour date faced cancellation amidst concerns over "inappropriate content." These two plays are the only plays for this particular age group (elementary schoolers) which address queer topics

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<sup>1</sup> Dinitia Smith, "Love That Dare Not Squeak Its Name," *The New York Times*, 7 February 2004 < <http://www.nytimes.com/2004/02/07/arts/love-that-dare-not-squeak-its-name.html?pagewanted=1> > [accessed 9 August 2015].

<sup>2</sup> Sherry Machlin, "Banned Books Week: And Tango Makes Three," *The New York Public Library*, 23 September 2013 <<http://www.nypl.org/blog/2013/09/23/banned-books-week-and-tango-makes-three>> [accessed 9 August 2015].

explicitly and it is nearly impossible to bring these stories into schools without facing resistance.

This dissertation asks why adults cannot bring queer theatre for young people into schools and explores ways to navigate this pervading rejection so young people can be exposed to queer topics. I discuss queerness and its sanitization within children's media and introduce strategies for bringing queerness and queer subject matter into spaces which might otherwise reject it. In chapter one, I look to Kathryn Bond Stockton's theory of the queer child where she claims, "if you scratch a child, you will find a queer, in the sense of someone 'gay' or just plain strange."<sup>3</sup> Stockton looks at 'the child' as an idea and cultural construct while rethinking the adage of 'growing up' into 'growing sideways,' a directional qualifier conducive to on-going growth and narrowing the divide between 'child' and 'adult.' Stockton develops archetypes that reveal the queer child: the ghostly gay child, the grown homosexual (the retrospective queer child), the child queered by Freud (the not-yet-straight child), and the child queered by innocence or queered by colour/money (the separation between adult and child controlled by the discourse of innocence and economic hierarchy). Stockton's queer child provides a theoretical foundation for my argument in order to situate all children within their queerness.

In chapter two, I couple Stockton's theories with those of theatre scholar Matthew Reason and his acknowledgement of "the impossibility of theatre for children" given the "unequal power relationship between adult and child, with children in our

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<sup>3</sup> Kathryn Bond Stockton, *The Queer Child, or Growing Sideways in The Twentieth Century* (Duke University Press, 2009), p. 1.

society largely constructed as powerless and vulnerable.”<sup>4</sup> I argue that this dichotomy stemming from adults creating children’s cultural products, leads to the sanitizing of the queer child within media for young people, exemplified through ‘Disneyfication,’ where children’s queerness is acknowledged only through acceptable queerness portrayed in Disney animated movies.

Reason’s observations strengthen Stockton’s queer child and bridge the gap between theory and theatrical practice. Reason looks at young peoples’ agency through their post-show interpretations of their theatrical experiences, looking at memory and retelling as a kind of agency. I further his ideas around young people’s agency to explore the queer child as creator of queer stories. In my expansion, young people create stories for young people, thereby making theatre for young audiences possible as well as queer. Here, I also engage Foucault’s idea of relational space and the heterotopic space to explain why queer plays like *And Then Came Tango* and *The Transition of Doodle Pequeño*, created for young people, face cancellation when they tour to schools and how queer plays by young people do not face the same resistance.

In Chapter Three, I explore how allowing the queer child into creative processes through direct contribution opens the door to the queer child within their own cultural content. I look specifically at case studies of three existing theatre companies where queer children are creators. These companies take stories children have written, theatricalize them, and perform them at their schools for the authors and in a limited number of public performances. I look at Northwestern University’s Griffin’s Tale, New York City and Los Angeles’ Story Pirates, and Chicago’s Barrel of Monkeys. Because the content of their stories comes from the (queer) children themselves, there is great

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<sup>4</sup> Matthew Reason, ‘The possibility of theatre for children’, in *Theatre for Young Audiences: A Critical Handbook*, ed. by Tom Maguire and Karian Schuitema (London: Institute of Education Press, 2012) 23-34, p. 25.

potential for the submitted content to have explicit queer themes, characters, relationships, etc. Through my personal interview with Barrel of Monkeys' Artistic Director Joe Schupbach, I analyse stories written by children and performed by the company's ensemble in Chicago Public Schools that depict explicit queerness and faced no controversy when they were performed in their schools. These stories have the potential to queer educational spaces, circumnavigating concerns over 'inappropriate content' because the content has come from the children themselves.

Up until now, queer theatre for young people, let alone other forms of queer storytelling for young people, barely exists. Before we can grow the canon and begin infiltrating mainstream children's culture with queer content, we must find alternative strategies to queer normative and heterotopic spaces in order to build a solid foundation of material which introduces these topics to young people. Few creators (whether in theatre or in other fields of media) are tackling queer topics for this overlooked age group. I aim to provide possible strategies so artists can begin filling this gap and create more queer work for (and by) young people without fearing censorship and resistance.

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Before I continue, I wish to address two topics: first on the notion of queerness, children, and sex, and second on grammar.

### **A Note on Queerness, Children, and Sex**

As I will mention briefly in my observations, adults often conflate the discussions of queer and LGBT topics with kids as akin to discussions of sex. While I do not have enough room in this paper to properly parse this common conception I want to quickly speak to the topic because it is important to acknowledge given the conception is so widespread. The queerness I discuss in this dissertation is not concerned with sex, or



queer sex for that matter. Most young people do not know what sex is, let alone understand it. When explaining queerness and gayness to a child, the child can understand these concepts because the child understands love, family, and relationships. These narratives surround children both in culture and in the home. Welcoming Schools, a Project of the Human Rights Campaign, tells parents and teachers to explain what gay means to young people by focusing on “love and relationships. You can clarify that people love each other in different ways. Some women love and want to be partners with a man and some women love and want to be partners with a woman.”<sup>5</sup> It is my belief that conversations around gayness and queerness aimed at children do not and should not concern themselves with sex.

Within queer theory, discourses around children and queerness tend to lean towards discussions of paedophilia and sexualizing the child. The first section of Stockton’s *The Queer Child*, “Sideways Relations: ‘Paedophiles’ and Animals,” looks at Nabokov’s *Lolita* in order to debunk the myth that children are not sexual.<sup>6</sup> While her arguments are valid, they are not concerned with the child’s perspective on the world, rather the adult’s perception and construction of the child. My use of Stockton does not engage these arguments because I am more interested in the child’s personal queer experience rather than the adult projection of ‘child’ that Stockton’s argument deconstructs. Because I am dealing with this particular perspective, my arguments do not engage ideas around sex, queer sex, gay sex, children’s sex, or any sex. I wish to correct the misconception that discussions and representations of queerness with children necessitate discussions of sex. I can begin to do this by separating these

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<sup>5</sup> ‘What Does Gay Mean?’, *Welcoming Schools*, 2012  
[www.welcomingschools.org/pages/what-does-gay-mean/](http://www.welcomingschools.org/pages/what-does-gay-mean/) [accessed 11 August 2015].

<sup>6</sup> Stockton, part 1.

conversations from one another, first and foremost by excluding the discussion of sex from my argument because it is not the central issue I wish to engage.

### **A Note on Grammar**

In an effort to advocate for and respect all queer identities, I use ‘they’ as both a singular and plural pronoun throughout my arguments. I use ‘they’ instead of the ‘neutral’ he/she in order to avoid perpetuating the gender binary and to make visible those who do not ascribe to it. ‘They’ has become increasingly accepted as a singular pronoun within academia and journalism which writer Ben Zimmer covers in his article, “‘They,’ the Singular Pronoun, Gets Popular,” for *The Wall Street Journal*.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Ben Zimmer, “‘They,’ the Singular Pronoun, Gets Popular,” *The Wall Street Journal*, 10 April 2015 < <http://www.wsj.com/articles/can-they-be-accepted-as-a-singular-pronoun-1428686651?mod=e2fb> > [accessed 9 August 2015].

## The Queer Child

Kathryn Bond Stockton establishes her theory of the queer child in *The Queer Child: or Growing Sideways in the Twentieth Century* (2009). Stockton's investigation follows a pattern of queer theorists turning their attention toward the child, begun in the collection of essays *Curiouser: On The Queerness of Children* (2004), edited by Steven Bruhm and Natasha Hurley, featuring works by J Halberstam (listed as Judith Halberstam), James Kinkaid, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, alongside Stockton. Gabrielle Owen's review of *The Queer Child* places it in the context of *Curiouser* as these particular essays and theorists "represent moments over the past twenty years when queer theory, however briefly, has turned to children as a site for inquiry, a powerful location for questions of identity, sexuality, language, and culture."<sup>8</sup> *The Queer Child* itself is, according to Owen, "the first of its kind," in its extended scrutiny of the child's place within queer theory.<sup>9</sup>

Stockton comes to this marriage of subjects through the fields of queer theory (drawing on ideas of queer temporality, in particular), childhood studies, and animal studies, but her approach deviates from typical sociological, therapeutic, and legal case studies common in these fields.<sup>10</sup> Instead, Stockton traces the queer child through twentieth-century fictional texts beginning with "a Henry James novella from the 1890s, titled *The Pupil*, to a queer turn by Johnny Depp as Willy Wonka in Tim Burton's *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* (2005), based on the book by Roald Dahl,"<sup>11</sup> although it is important to note that Stockton's argument purposefully does not take a chronological

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<sup>8</sup> Gabrielle Owen, 'Review: *The Queer Child or Growing Sideways in the Twentieth Century*,' *The Lion and the Unicorn*, 35 (2011), 101-106, p. 101.

<sup>9</sup> Owen, p. 101.

<sup>10</sup> Patricia Nelson, 'Patricia Nelson on *The Queer Child*,' *E3W Review of Books*, 11 (2011), < <http://www.dwrl.utexas.edu/orgs/e3w/volume-11-spring-2011/new-work-in-sexuality-studies/patricia-nelson-on-the-queer-child> > [accessed 3 August 2015].

<sup>11</sup> Stockton, p. 51.

approach. Stockton's methodology reveals the queerness of the child through adults' fictionalization of children where these fictions reveal gaps between the reality of the child and the adult projection of the child. This methodology is not without its flaws where it overlooks the true nature of the queerness of children and the child's queer perspective. Stockton does not do the work of understanding the queer child themselves. But the gaps Stockton's argument leaves in order to pursue her methodology reinforce her claims rather than deconstruct them, which I will demonstrate as I explicate her theory.

### **Scratch A Child: The Queer Child's Archetypes**

According to Stockton, "if you scratch a child, you will find a queer, in the sense of someone 'gay' or just plain strange."<sup>12</sup> To Stockton, all children are queer. All children are queer specifically in relation to the normatively positioned adult as a socio-cultural construct. She explores the constructed idea of the child as "the act of adults looking back."<sup>13</sup> The idea of the child is the adult's projected *nostalgia* (more on this term later). Because of this imagined "child," the ideals surrounding that child, like innocence, are also adult constructions. To Stockton, "innocence is queerer than we ever thought it could be."<sup>14</sup> Stockton imagines multiple pathways (including a deconstruction of innocence) toward establishing a child's queerness in an effort to reconfigure the adage of 'growing up' into 'growing sideways.' The child's sideways mobility would deconstruct the adult/child hierarchy. She believes that "there are ways of growing that are not growing up."<sup>15</sup> While 'growing up' might reflect a child's physical growth, it does

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<sup>12</sup> Stockton, p. 1.

<sup>13</sup> Stockton, p. 5.

<sup>14</sup> Stockton, p. 5.

<sup>15</sup> Stockton, p. 11.

not represent their intellectual growth, which is horizontally expansive, rather than narrowing-ly vertical.

...'Growing sideways' would likely be an extremely apt phrase for what recent cognitive science recognizes as the brain's growth (throughout a person's lifetime) through the brain's capacity to make neural networks through connection and extension. Hence, 'growing up' may be a short-sighted, limited rendering of human growth, one that oddly would imply an end to growth when full stature (or reproduction) is achieved. By contrast, 'growing sideways' suggests that the width of a person's experience or ideas, their motives or their motions, may pertain at any age, bringing 'adults' and 'children' into lateral contact of surprising sorts.<sup>16</sup>

This new directional qualifier is conducive to continuous growth and narrows the divide between 'child' and 'adult' and reinforces the child's queerness.

The child's queerness manifests itself most visibly in, what Stockton coins, the ghostly gay child. This child is the gay adult's projection of their younger self. The notion that a gay adult 'knew' they were gay from a young age; "the gay child makes us perceive the queer temporalities haunting all children."<sup>17</sup> Stockton makes her claim for the existence of the queer child:

...No matter how you slice it, the child from the standpoint of "normal" adults is always queer. It is "homosexual" ...or, despite our culture's assuming every child's straightness, the child can only be "not-yet-straight," since it, too, is not allowed to be sexual. This child who "will be" straight is merely approaching while crucially delaying (in its own asynchronous fix) the official destination of straight sexuality, and therefore showing itself as estranged from what it would approach.<sup>18</sup>

The child is "not allowed to be sexual," so the presumption is that the ghostly gay child is only queer in the adult conjuring their childhood. Despite the desexualizing of the child, the child is still assumed straight until the gay adult provides evidence to the contrary. Steven Bruhm and Natasha Hurley demonstrate in their introduction to *Curiouser: On The Queerness of Children* that a "cute boy-girl romance reads as evidence

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<sup>16</sup> Stockton, p. 11

<sup>17</sup> Stockton, p. 7.

<sup>18</sup> Stockton, p. 7.

for the mature sexuality that awaits them, and any homoerotic behavior reads as harmless play among friends or as a mistake that can later be corrected by marriage"<sup>19</sup> to the eyes of the parent or caregiver. While the child is always assumed to be 'not-yet-straight' and simultaneously unaware of this nebulous future sexuality, the gay adult proves, in retrospect, that their child-self had an awareness of their latent queerness, and therefore was a sexual figure at the time. The idea that children are "not allowed to be sexual" is a false pretense adults place on children, illuminating the child's true queerness in juxtaposition with the gay adult's sexualizing recollection.

In addition to Stockton's identification of the queer child through the ghostly gay child, Angel Matos describes the "archetypes, or versions, of the queer child which focus on varying expressions of childhood and queerness,"<sup>20</sup> Stockton develops, including the grown homosexual, the child queered by Freud, and the child queered by innocence or queered by color/money. I will expand upon her claims with my own explorations of the queer child through the pre-structural child and the child queered by capitalism. The ghostly gay child and the grown homosexual work in tandem. The ghostly gay child creates the grown homosexual, and the grown homosexual illuminates the ghostly gay child. One would not exist without the other. The ghostly gay child and the grown homosexual represent the 'not-yet-gay' child, and provide a clear entryway to the origins of the queer child.

Next is the child queered by Freud. This queer child is "the not-yet-straight child who is, nonetheless, a sexual child with aggressive wishes."<sup>21</sup> This queer child,

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<sup>19</sup> *Curiouser: On The Queerness of Children*, ed. by Steven Bruhm and Natasha Hurley (Minneapolis: Minneapolis University Press, 2004), p. ix.

<sup>20</sup> Angel Matos, 'An Overview of Kathryn Bond Stockton's *The Queer Child*,' *The Ever and Ever That Fiction Follows*, September 2013 < <http://angelmatos.net/2013/09/02/the-queer-child/> > [accessed 3 August 2015].

<sup>21</sup> Stockton, p.27.

discovered through Freudian theory of childhood, seeks to prove that all children are sexual, and therefore queer, even if they are not the nostalgic recollections of homosexual adults. The grown heterosexual, like the grown homosexual, recollects the ghostly straight child of their youth. Like the ghostly gay child, the ghostly straight child, or the child queered by Freud, becomes sexual through this recollection. The child queered by Freud expands the definition of the queer child to include all children who are not-yet-gay *and* not-yet-straight, turning the newly sexual child into the queer child.

Next, Stockton looks to the child queered by innocence or queered by color. First, the child queered by innocence. The idea of the child “is the spectre of who we were when there was nothing yet behind us.”<sup>22</sup> Stockton wishes to expand her idea of the queer child even further to encompass the seemingly normative child who is neither not-yet-straight nor not-yet-gay (the ghostly gay child and the ‘ghostly straight child’ discussed previously). This child appears completely de-sexualized. One could, following my parallel phrasing, identify this child as the not-yet-asexual child. This child “on its path to normativity, seems safe to us and whom we therefore seek to safeguard at all cost”<sup>23</sup> through adults upholding the notion of the ‘innocent child.’ For adults, “innocence is alien, since it is ‘lost’ to the very adults who assign it to children.”<sup>24</sup> So innocence is, more specifically, produced by the adult’s nostalgia for their ‘lost’ innocence. This nostalgia, defined by Bruhm and Hurley, “is the fantasy of a preferred past...Caught between these two worlds, one dead, the other powerless to be born, the child becomes the bearer of heteronormativity.”<sup>25</sup> Innocence is a manifestation of adult projections that stem from this (generally) heteronormative nostalgia. So innocence is a

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<sup>22</sup> Stockton, p.30.

<sup>23</sup> Stockton, p. 30.

<sup>24</sup> Stockton, p. 30.

<sup>25</sup> *Curiouser*, p. xiii.

pretense of the normative adult's view of childhood, which children do not naturally adhere to, making childhood innocence extremely permeable and therefore allowing for the existence of the queer child even for the seemingly normative child; "they all share estrangement from what they approach: the adulthood against which they must be defined."<sup>26</sup>

In Stockton's child queered by innocence, she focuses in on this normative adult projection of the child:

The contours of this normative strangeness may explain why children, as an *idea*, are likely to be both white and middle-class. It is a privilege to need to be protected – and be sheltered – and thus to have a childhood. Not in spite of privilege, then, but because of it, the all-important feature of weakness sticks to these markers (white and middle-class) and helps to signal innocence.<sup>27</sup>

Here, Stockton takes the child's intersectionality into account. She establishes the child queered by color/money as an alternative for the child who is not queered by innocence. Adult projections of children reinforce normative values as well as normative social constructions favoring the white, middle/upper-class, straight, able, educated, male child. Adults who fall outside of this narrow category can easily be classified as queer, where queer theorist Eve Sedgwick asserts,

"Queer" can refer to: the open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning when the constituent elements of anyone's gender, of anyone's sexuality aren't made (or *can't* be made) to signify monolithically.<sup>28</sup>

Sedgwick classifies those whose identities fall between the cracks of normativity as queer, particularly those whose identities fall into multiple cracks and establish their intersectionality. So it follows that the projected child-version of those queer adults would, in the ilk of the ghostly gay child, also be queer. The child queered by color,

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<sup>26</sup> Stockton, p. 31.

<sup>27</sup> Stockton, p. 31.

<sup>28</sup> Eve Sedgwick, 'Queer and Now,' *Tendencies*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993) 1-22, p. 8.



might be another version of the ghostly gay child (perhaps the ghostly queer child), but lacking the coming out and 'I've known I was gay since...' narratives. A child of color might discover their queerness in their first experience of discrimination, or a child in the lower/working classes might realize their classmates' parents do not have to work two part-time jobs a piece to stay above the poverty line, and for someone with ability differences, every time the child in a wheelchair sees a set of stairs they cannot ascend.

### **Cognition and Capitalism: Additions to Stockton**

One observation of the queerness of children, which I believe Stockton overlooks as her interpretations focus on the adult construction of childhood rather than the children's experience themselves, is the pre-structural child. Jean Piaget's theory of cognitive development claims, "the human organism tends to organize reality into coherent and stable patterns at certain points of cognitive development."<sup>29</sup> Children develop these patterns as they grow sideways. They are the social scripts and constructs adults use to navigate the world. We can recognize that babies do not understand the world around them the same way adults do. They do not process the information around them through the same patterns we recognize. Adults interpret the same information through the normative societal scripts, or patterns, humans learn throughout their lives. 'Growing sideways' has much to do with building these internal patterns, such as potty training, learning to read, and the pervading idea of "the happily-ever-after of fairytales and Disney films."<sup>30</sup> The child (particularly the young child) is pre-structural where they do not yet process the world through these rigid social

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<sup>29</sup> George W. Hardiman and Theodore Zernich, 'Considerations of Piaget's Cognitive-Structuralist Theory and Children's Artistic Development,' *Studies in Art Education*, 21 (1980) 12-19, p. 12.

<sup>30</sup> *Curiouser*, p. ix.

structures and scripts of adulthood. Their naivety of these constructs contributes to their strangeness. When a child says ‘the darndest thing’ it is written off as something they will ‘grow out of;’ rather, it reveals their true queerness as their actions are inconsistent with normative social scripts. Children easily fall into the cracks of queerness when they cannot tell where the gaps exist between normative constructs.

I also believe there is more to be said for the child queered by money. While Stockton focuses on a child’s economic status as a product of their parent/guardian’s economic status in relation to the queerness of those in poverty, I wish to highlight the child’s personal relationship to money and the economy. Children, by law, are not allowed to contribute to the labor economy (in most fields) until they turn 16, at least in the United States. They are not allowed to control their own assets if they do have them unless they become emancipated from their parents before they turn 18 (interestingly, emancipation is only an option in the United States, there is no similar option for minors in the United Kingdom). Most children’s relationship to money is that of the weekly allowance. The adult’s control over the child’s access to money establishes a hierarchy and perpetuates the child/adult dichotomy. This hierarchy coupled with the separation from economic systems further establishes the queer child as a figure outside normative capitalist constructs of supply and demand, although children are still active consumers and are aggressively targeted in marketing strategies.<sup>31</sup>

In Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels’ *The Communist Manifesto*, their anti-capitalist/pro-communist arguments lead them to ask, “Do you charge us with wanting

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<sup>31</sup> Juliet Schor, *Born to Buy: The Commercialized Child and the New Consumer Culture*, (Simon and Schuster, 2004).

to stop the exploitation of children by their parents? To this crime, we plead guilty.”<sup>32</sup>

They go on to explicate the “influence of communist society on the family,” where,

[Communism] will transform the relations between the sexes into a purely private matter which concerns only the persons involved and into which society has no occasion to intervene. It can do this since it does away with private property and educates children on a communal basis, and in this way removes the two bases of traditional marriage – the dependence rooted in private property, of the women on the man, and of the children on the parents.<sup>33</sup>

In Marx and Engels’ communism, all children will be educated together publicly, disintegrating the child’s dependence on parents to fund their private education or, alternatively, to labor for their education. The child would then depend upon the state much like their parents, rather than depending directly upon their parents, weakening the hierarchy of adults and children. The child’s financial dependency is therefore a partial product of the capitalist system and its emphasis on private education. While this dependency would not necessarily be eradicated in Marx’s communist society, it would indeed weaken the adult/child dichotomy where both the adult and the child depend upon the state rather than one solely upon the other. The child is further queered by this dependency upon the adult’s capital and lack of control over their choices within their families largely due to the hierarchical structure of capitalist society. Both the pre-structural child and the child queered by capitalism reinforce Stockton’s queer child. Stockton’s archetypes and observations of their braiding, in addition to my contributions of the pre-structural child and the child queered by capitalism provide profound evidence of young people’s queerness.

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<sup>32</sup> Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, ‘Manifesto of the Communist Party,’ trans. by Samuel Moore (1888), *Marx/Engels Selected Works*, 1 (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1969) 98-137, p. 24.

<sup>33</sup> Marx, p. 52.

## The Impossibility of Queer Theatre for Young Audiences

Scholar and theatre practitioner Matthew Reason looks at the inherent problems in theatre for young audiences (TYA), a theatre largely created by adults for children in his book *The Young Audience: Exploring and Enhancing Children's Experiences of Theatre* (2010). His argument stems from the history linking TYA and education. In his review of *The Young Audience* for *Theatre Topics*, Matt Omasta describes how this historical relationship has "led many adults to assess TYA primarily in terms of its pedagogical rather than aesthetic merits,"<sup>34</sup> leading to a general lack of artistry in TYA. This pervading mediocrity stems from adults considering "children to be *future* audience members, Reason urges us to regard them as *present* ones," failure to do this leads to theatre that does not intend to impact the present child, instead focusing on pure entertainment value rather than truly considering and respecting the young audience. This lack of respect for the present child causes young people to associate negative connotations with theatre that pervade into adulthood.

Reason draws upon extensive qualitative research working with elementary school-age children to prove that young people deserve respect and that their artistic content should reflect that. Because "there exists little field-based, qualitative research which illuminates what the actual theatre experience means *as theatre* to young audiences,"<sup>35</sup> he constructs his own qualitative assessment of the child's experience as a spectator. His research focuses on "children's lived experience of theatre, on what they remember, how they construct meanings, the stories they tell and the knowledge they

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<sup>34</sup> Matt Omasta, 'Review: *The Young Audience*,' *Theatre Topics*, 23 (March 2013), 110-111, p. 110.

<sup>35</sup> Matthew Reason, *The Young Audience: Exploring and Enhancing Children's Experience of Theatre* (London: Trentham Books Limited, 2010) p. 45.

have”<sup>36</sup> through anecdotal collection and observation of visual arts workshops. He uses a drawing workshop which,

...[seeks] to uncover a rich and detailed description of how young children respond to, remember and engage with theatre...[by] adopt[ing] a methodology that would be engaging, reassuring, and appropriate for their levels of understanding, their interests and their particular skills and abilities.<sup>37</sup>

Reason uses his tailored research to observe how to make, what he coins, ‘the impossibility of theatre for children,’ possible by proving the young audience’s aesthetic complexity.

### **Reason, Willy Wonka, and Acceptable Queerness**

For Reason, “the impossibility of theatre for children requires us to acknowledge the unequal power relationship between adult and child, with children in our society largely constructed as powerless and vulnerable.”<sup>38</sup> Young people, particularly when it comes to theatre, have little control over what cultural content they are exposed to leading to a power imbalance where “theatre for children is a product made *for* children but is made and consumed in a manner that is far from equal or democratic.”<sup>39</sup> In theatre for young audiences, “the added dynamic is of course power, with the privileged knowing subject inevitably being an adult who speaks for the experience of the child”<sup>40</sup> where “the image of childhood presented is an idealized construct motivated by adult desires.”<sup>41</sup> He expands his observation of the impossibility of theatre for children to other forms of cultural content including Jaqueline Rose’s ideas on the impossibility of

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<sup>36</sup> Reason, *The Young Audience*, p. 47.

<sup>37</sup> Reason, *The Young Audience*, p. 47.

<sup>38</sup> Reason, ‘The possibility of theatre for children,’ p. 25.

<sup>39</sup> Reason, ‘The possibility of theatre for children,’ p. 17.

<sup>40</sup> Reason, ‘The possibility of theatre for children,’ p. 26.

<sup>41</sup> Reason, ‘The possibility of theatre for children,’ p. 24.

children's fiction, and Steven Klein's broader theories of the impossibility of culture for children where "children's culture has always been primarily a matter of culture produced for and urged upon children."<sup>42</sup> Reason's observations closely echo those of Stockton, although neither engages directly with the others' text. His arguments marry easily to Stockton's queer child theory where the adult/child dichotomy is a problematic hierarchy within theatre and cultural texts created by adults for young people.

Reason's observations strengthen Stockton's queer child and bridge the gap between theory and theatrical practice. Coupling Reason's observations of TYA with Stockton's (and my) idea of the queer child reinforces the adult's projection of an idealized childhood that is in turn presented back to children. The queer child lacks reflective representation within their cultural products, inclusive of theatre, television, film, and fiction/novels to varying degrees. Using Reason's observations in tandem with Stockton's theories one concludes that theatre for young audiences rarely explores the queer child's experience because it is constructed by the idealizing and normative adult's ideas of what the queer child wants and needs. This content instead reflects the adult's projected idea of the child in their desexualizing, normative innocence.

This sanitizing of the queer child generally leads to normative storytelling. In my paper, "Punchdrunk Enrichment: Rethinking Relational Aesthetics and Neoliberal Capitalism Through Theatre for Young Audiences," I question the queer child's absence from cultural content for young audiences where Reason's idea of adult-created content for children,

...reveals the reason behind the general lack of progressive content available to children, including an absence of queer narratives, the myth that girls are more likely to watch male protagonists than boys are to

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<sup>42</sup> Reason, *The Young Audience*, p. 18.

watch female protagonists, and the increasingly predominant gender gap within child marketing strategies.<sup>43</sup>

This normative content is the theatre Reason references when he speaks of the ‘impossibility of theatre for children’ where TYA does not respect the child’s capacity to understand complex aesthetics, and does not acknowledge the child’s queerness. But the child’s queerness does not go completely unacknowledged; there is nuance here that can be explored through Stockton’s methodology. She uses cultural texts to reveal the queer child and while most of the texts she uses are primarily fictional adult depictions of children within cultural texts *for adults*, she does engage one text where adults depict children in a film meant *for children*: Tim Burton’s *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* (2005).

Stockton reads Burton’s film in the conclusion of *The Queer Child* as “the manufactured white child’s dream of the factory (he might run) that manufactures dreams.”<sup>44</sup> Here, we might be seeing the queer child at work in a film made for children, by adults. Stockton looks at Johnny Depp’s Willy Wonka as joining “ ‘the child’ to ‘the queer,’ as we are bound to see, when Willy Wonka...is something of a fag.”<sup>45</sup> Depp’s Wonka is the “grown queer child” who “sit[s] down to dinner with the innocent child (eponymous Charlie).”<sup>46</sup> Wonka’s queerness is reflected in his factory and his love for chocolate where the “mystery of manufacturing [is] akin to the mystery of sex itself.”<sup>47</sup> Willy asks the children, “Did you guys know that chocolate contains a property that triggers the release of endorphins that give one the feeling of being in love?”<sup>48</sup> The

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<sup>43</sup> Lindsay Amer, ‘Punchdrunk Enrichment: Rethinking Relational Aesthetics and Neoliberal Capitalism Through Theatre for Young Audiences,’ unpublished, p. 4.

<sup>44</sup> Stockton, p. 57.

<sup>45</sup> Stockton, p. 238.

<sup>46</sup> Stockton, p. 238.

<sup>47</sup> Stockton, p. 238.

<sup>48</sup> *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*, dir. by Tim Burton (Warner Bros., 2005).

metaphor deepens in flashbacks to Wonka's childhood, fictionalized by Burton since Dahl never expands upon Wonka's backstory in the original text. Growing up with a dentist father, Wonka must hide his love for chocolate, his mouth confined by a muzzle-like set of corrective headgear and braces. His father finds his precious chocolates and "throws the 'evil candy' into the fireplace where he burns it; so candy is the sign of the boy's forbidden pleasure(s), whatever they encompass, whatever else is ghosted in Willy's young life, making young Willy a stranger in the family, before he runs away."<sup>49</sup> Stockton positions Wonka, both as child and as adult, as a representation of the queer child with his love of forbidden and luxurious chocolate as a metaphor for that queerness. In this case, the child's queerness is reflected back to the queer child viewer that this film targets.

While *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* succeeds in representing this strangeness to children, it only succeeds in this through metaphor and through a character who is only revealed as a queer child through his queerness as an adult. I posit that the queer child, in instances when they are represented in cultural texts for children/by adults, is only depicted through *acceptable* representations of queerness. These acceptable representations of queerness include metaphor (like chocolate in *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*), the queerness of adults (like Depp's Wonka) in lieu of representing queer kids, and in sanitizing the queer child's predicament.

This filtered queerness is most recognizable in Disney movies and the notion of Disneyfication. Disney movies notoriously 'Disney-fy' stories to make them more palatable for young audiences. In his article "Animating Youth, The Disneyfication of Children's Culture," Henry A Giroux claims, "this is a media apparatus in which the past is filtered through an appeal to cultural homogeneity and historical purity, which erases

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<sup>49</sup> Stockton, p. 243.



complex issues, cultural differences, and social struggles,” and pushes “the belief that happiness is synonymous to living in the suburbs with an intact white middle-class family,”<sup>50</sup> that is also most likely, confined to heterosexual nuclear family structures. Whenever queerness does sneak in to cultural content for children, particularly mainstream media, it becomes sanitized.

Disney movies depict this acceptable queerness in two common ways: the story of the other, and the queer villain. In *Aladdin*, Aladdin is othered from the law-abiding society of Agrabah by his economic status. His first scene has him running through the streets from the local authorities for stealing a loaf of bread from the market as they call him “riffraff” and “street rat,” and while he sings that he “only steal[s] what [he] can’t afford / that’s everything.”<sup>51</sup> While Aladdin’s economic status queers him, his experience becomes glorified as he escapes heroically from the guards, swinging to and fro with little acknowledgment of real-life risk in his situation. His poverty and thievery give him an otherness which resonates with the child’s queerness, but what in reality would be considered a survival tactic, becomes a superhero-like act of bravery. A young person in a similar economic situation with little food to spare in their household might have a difficult time equating their queerness to Aladdin’s, notwithstanding any cultural differences. The racist undertones of *Aladdin* undercut any other queerness Aladdin exhibits where “the film’s opening song, ‘Arabian Nights,’ begins its depiction of Arab culture with a decidedly racist tone. The lyrics of the offending stanza states, ‘Oh I come from a land / from a faraway place, where the caravan camels roam / where they cut off your ear if they don’t like your face / it’s barbaric, but hey, it’s home.’”<sup>52</sup> While

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<sup>50</sup> Henry Giroux, ‘Animating Youth: Disneyfication of Children’s Culture,’ *Socialist Review*, 24 (1994) 65-79, p. 66.

<sup>51</sup> *Aladdin*, dir. by Ron Clements and John Musker (Disney Animation, 1992).

<sup>52</sup> Giroux, p. 72.

Middle Eastern culture finds representation within the film, its depiction is far from respectful, thus alienating any audiences who might have seen their culture and their queerness reflected back to them.

Belle in *Beauty and the Beast* becomes the other in her opening sequence where she sings of her displeasure with her small home town and dreams of a life outside “this provincial life,” while the townspeople all agree she’s “a beauty but a funny girl, that Belle.”<sup>53</sup> She might be a bit weird, and stand out from the crowd with her nose buried in a book, but she is beautiful so it is all right, she is not a complete outcast and her otherness can be tolerated because she conforms to normative standards of beauty. The French townspeople simultaneously establish and destabilize Belle’s queer status when they project their normative standards onto her body. Gaston, the dreamy macho man of the town, and the embodiment of toxic masculinity and patriarchal standards reinforces the townspeople’s observations of Belle when he announces his intent to marry her simply because she’s the most beautiful girl in town; “right from the moment when [he] met her, saw her / [he] said ‘she’s gorgeous’ and [he] fell.”<sup>54</sup> He strips Belle of her queerness and refuses to acknowledge anything other than her normative features. While Gaston is the villain of the film and the young audience is not supposed to empathize with his perspective, he still contributes to the erasure of Belle’s queer status as an independent, intelligent woman in a town overrun with patriarchal values.

Ariel from *The Little Mermaid* sings that she wants to be part of the human world with feet instead of fins. She wants “to be where the people are.” She rejects her normative culture for a life she wants that is just beyond her reach. She feels queer within the world of mer-people and longs to be human. But her self-defined queerness

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<sup>53</sup> *Beauty and the Beast*, dir. by Gary Trousdale and Kirk Wise (Disney Animation, 1991).

<sup>54</sup> *Beauty and the Beast*.

disappears when she loses her voice while gaining her legs. She can no longer express her queer status as a mermaid in a human body; when she becomes mute, so does her queerness. She cannot tell her prince who she truly is and where she is from, and she can barely express her feelings for him, let alone her inability to understand the norms of the human world. Aladdin, Belle, and Ariel fall into the trope of the other designed to cater to children's feelings of queerness in an acceptable way. While Aladdin is othered by his economic status, he quickly sheds his status with the help of his magic genie to become Prince Ali and ascend the economic ladder. Belle might be a bit of an oddball, but she's still beautiful, so her queerness becomes normalized. And Ariel feels like a human inside a mermaid's body, but she immediately becomes a helpless and vulnerable mute woman as soon as she gains her land legs. These depictions of other make the child's queerness acceptable by pairing traits of queerness with normative signifiers; Aladdin's heroic male status, Belle's normative beauty, and Ariel's vulnerable female gender stereotyping.

In Disney movies, characters with queer traits are also frequently positioned as the villains of the film. Matt Roth in "*The Lion King*, A Short History of Disney-Fascism," observes Scar, the villain in *The Lion King* as "the Bad Leader [who] brings the kingdom to ruin. Mannered and aristocratic, and clearly not producing heirs like his more manly brother [Mufasa], he is pointedly gay."<sup>55</sup> Scar's queerness becomes inseparable from his villainy particularly in comparison with his uber-heterosexual brother. Ursula, the villain in *The Little Mermaid*, was, "according to the directing animator, Ruben Acquine...modeled on the drag queen Divine," providing a direct allusion to queerness

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<sup>55</sup> Matt Roth, '*The Lion King*: A Short History of Disney-Fascism,' *Jumpcut*, 40 (March 1996) < <http://www.ejumpcut.org/archive/onlinessays/JC40folder/LionKing.html> > [accessed 4 August 2015].

in the character's assemblage.<sup>56</sup> Again, queerness becomes intertwined with the character's attachment to evil and wrongdoing. Many other Disney villains demonstrate coded gay behaviors like Jafar in *Aladdin* and Governor Ratcliffe in *Pocahontas*. These villains fall into the trope of the fop; an effeminate stock character portrayed throughout English literature that exhibits flamboyant and often coded mannerisms for gayness; "One who is foolishly attentive to and vain of his appearance, dress, or manners; a dandy, an exquisite."<sup>57</sup> These characters are only allowed to display these coded queer characteristics because they are the villains of the stories, aligning queerness with villainy within children's media. The othered protagonist and the gay villain present overly simplistic portraits of queerness in attempts to satisfy the child's true queer experience. Instead of acknowledging and reflecting the child's true queerness, these Disney character both normalize and vilify that queerness through these character tropes.

### **Invading Heterotopic Space**

True queerness rarely, if ever, reveals itself in cultural texts for young audiences. When this true queerness does surface outside of metaphor or veiling of any sort, it immediately meets controversy and censorship exemplified in the cancellations of two plays with explicit, not implicit or filtered 'acceptable,' queerness. *And Then Came Tango* is a play for young audiences by Emily Freeman (mentioned in my introduction) based on the true story of Roy and Silo, two male chinstrap penguins, who formed a same-sex

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<sup>56</sup> Laura Sells, 'Where Do The Mermaids Stand: Voice and Body in *The Little Mermaid*,' in *From Mouse to Mermaid: The Politics of Film, Gender, and Culture*, ed. by Elizabeth Bell, Lynda Haas, and Laura Sells (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995) 175-193, p. 182.

<sup>57</sup> "fop, n," *Oxford English Dictionary Online*, Oxford University Press <  
<http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/72746?rskey=iL0QD9&result=1&isAdvanced=false#eid>> [accessed 4 August 2015].

pair bond and raised an abandoned egg together in New York City's Central Park Zoo in 1999. *And Then Came Tango* has had two scheduled school tours to local elementary schools cancelled. The school boards and parents who championed these cancellations raised concerns because of the play's 'gay themes.' In Texas, "10 scheduled performances of 'And Then Came Tango,' were cancelled "at Austin-based elementary schools, with some officials questioning the age-appropriateness of the subject matter."<sup>58</sup> President of the conservative group, Texas Values, praised the school board's decision to cancel the tour claiming that Texas "define[s] marriage very clearly...so if you have a play that tries to push and promote a different marriage definition, which is clearly illegal, it leads students to ask questions about it, and it leads to the discussion of sex"<sup>59</sup>(important note: this quote was taken before the June 2015 ruling from the Supreme Court federally legalizing same-sex marriage). This conflation of showing depictions of queerness to children with necessitating a discussion of gay sex reveals itself as a consistent fear voiced by those who protest these cultural texts. This particular cancellation received national media coverage from both the online pop culture blog Gawker, and The Huffington Post.

The second cancellation erupted in Fresno, California (2015) where a hearing took place before the Sierra Charter Foothill School board because they were scheduled to host a performance of *Tango*. When the Fresno State Theater Troupe sent the play's synopsis to the school,

"...the administration wretched over what they perceived as a 'gay theme.' They immediately made attendance voluntary and sent out 'warnings' to all their parents. This effort was not enough for many in the community

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<sup>58</sup> 'And Then Came Tango,' Gay Penguin Play, Cancelled by Texas School District,' *The Huffington Post* (November 2012) <  
[http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/11/12/and-then-came-tango-gay-penguin-play-canceled\\_n\\_2119085.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/11/12/and-then-came-tango-gay-penguin-play-canceled_n_2119085.html)> [accessed 4 August 2015].

<sup>59</sup> 'And Then Came Tango,' Gay Penguin Play, Cancelled by Texas School District.'

who demanded that the ability to opt out was not enough. They insisted that the school needed to cancel the production all together or they would boycott it for the day.<sup>60</sup>

Rob Watson, a gay father whose son attends the school, wrote a public letter to the Sierra Charter Foothill School Community criticizing the play's censorship, citing his love for his sons, his husband, and standing up for all the families *Tango* represents. He writes,

That is our story, and it is reflected in the factual story of the penguins in the play. The penguin real life story occurred in 1999 at the Central Park Zoo, and they met with the same intolerant attitude that your community is exhibiting. Homophobic people rose up and demanded that the penguin family be broken apart. They felt what had happened naturally was somehow 'sending the wrong message.' The *Tango* story is about love. My family's story is about love...theatre arts are meant to illustrate, illuminate and shake their audience from pre-conceived notions and feelings. This play was brought to you not so you can judge and censor it, or the families like mine that it represents, but so you can watch and grow from finding out about us.<sup>61</sup>

Because *Tango* depicts explicit queerness that falls outside the acceptable queerness otherwise aimed at young audiences, it has faced these instances of controversy in its touring productions.

I experienced the same cancellation phenomenon when I directed Gabriel Jason Dean's *The Transition of Doodle Pequeño*, (also mentioned in my introduction) another play for young audiences, primarily elementary and early middle school ages, which features a boy who likes to wear dresses and addresses the incorrect usage of the word 'gay' as a derogatory slur amongst young people. My production's second tour date faced cancellation amidst the school's administration's concerns over 'inappropriate content.' We had a successful weekend of performances on the Northwestern University

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<sup>60</sup> Rob Watson, "A Gay Dad Sounds Off On The School That Cancelled 'And Then Came Tango' Play," *The Huffington Post*, (10 May 2015) <  
[http://huffingtonpost.com/2015/05/10/and-then-came-tango-canceled-\\_n\\_7227422.html](http://huffingtonpost.com/2015/05/10/and-then-came-tango-canceled-_n_7227422.html)> [accessed 13 August 2015].

<sup>61</sup> Watson.

campus in the winter and were scheduled to perform at three local elementary schools. It went wrong at the first school. During that performance, I watched as a teacher left the auditorium and came back minutes later with the interim principal in tow. The principal proceeded to take one of my tour managers aside behind a set piece, within partial view of the audience. I later joined the discussion to hear that the principle was voicing her concerns as to whether our play is promoting 'cross-dressing' and 'gay kids.' I calmed her down; assuring her that the play is simply about a boy who likes to wear dresses and calls attention to the improper use of the word 'gay' as a derogatory term. We were able to finish our performance without further disturbance. We later went into the principle's office to discuss what had happened and she proceeded to express her worries about what she would tell concerned parents who learned about the content of our little play. She then told me "we don't even teach sex Ed until seventh grade," again revealing a pattern conflating queer representation with queer sex,

My team later found out that an administrator at this first school had called an administrator at our second scheduled school. Because of this connection, our second scheduled performance was cancelled citing 'inappropriate content.' This situation happened in spite of the fact that we had previously informed the schools of the play's content with a transparent synopsis, had supplied them with an informative study guide with the express purpose of expanding upon the topics discussed in the play, and preceded every tour performance with a twenty minute workshop the cast and touring team had devised specifically for this production using techniques from Augustus Boal's forum theatre capitalizing on audience participation. I wrote a guest column for the *Daily Northwestern* concerning the incident and describing the emotional journey I endured as events unfolded;

At first I was angry. I was angry at the school. I was angry that I had not done more to make sure this did not happen. Then a profound sadness set in. These administrators have actively kept a room full of students from seeing this story. Because of their actions, students who might have identified with any of these characters suffer. That is what grieves me the most about this situation. This play has an enormous potential to touch lives, but that will not happen if the story is not told. We cannot accomplish the important work this play hopes to do if the story is kept from those who need it.<sup>62</sup>

I constantly return to thinking about the roomful of young people who were denied seeing this play, and the young people who are still kept from seeing stories like these because of censorship and adults who believe these young queer characters are inappropriate despite reflecting the child's true queerness.

*Doodle*, in its explicit depiction of a queer child, has only been produced twice (at University of Texas – Austin where it was developed, and by Purple Crayon Players at Northwestern University, the production I directed), despite its publication in 2012 and winning the American Association for Theatre and Education's Distinguished Play award, the 2012 Kennedy Center ACTF Theatre for Young Audiences Award, and getting runner-up for the 2012 Kennedy Center ACTF Mimi & Harold Steinberg National Playwriting Award. Dean in the article "Queer Narratives in Theatre for Young Audiences: A Call to Action," for the theatre blog Howlround, which I co-authored, cites conversations he has had with Artistic Directors about possible productions of the play where they say, "We love your play, but, unfortunately our audience isn't ready for it.

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<sup>62</sup> Lindsay Amer, 'Guest Column: *The Transition of Doodle Pequeño* Director Responds to Cancellation of Play at Local Elementary School,' *The Daily Northwestern* (June 2014) <<http://dailynorthwestern.com/2014/06/04/opinion/guest-column-the-transition-of-doodle-pequeno-director-responds-to-cancellation-of-play-at-local-elementary-school/>> [accessed 4 August 2015].



We wish they were.”<sup>63</sup> This mentality from school administrators and theatre artists alike has kept *Doodle* from young audiences.

These queer narratives, still created by adults and for young people, attempt to invade normative spaces like schools. Mary Louise Rasmussen’s essay, “The Production of Sexualities and Genders in Schools Spaces” in the collection *Youth and Sexualities: Pleasure, Subversion, and Insubordination In and Out of Schools* turns to “the production of dividing practices that produce ‘safe spaces,’ ‘queer spaces,’ and that enable the production of subversive spatial acts.”<sup>64</sup> Rasmussen looks to Foucault’s writing in “Of Other Spaces” (1986) and his idea that spaces are “a relational production, shifting according to the places, times, and bodies with which it interacts.”<sup>65</sup> His theory asserts that a space is not defined by its physical attributes, but rather by those who inhabit it, and how their relationships influence the space. For example, a child and their parents sit down at the dinner table. The space there reflects the parent/child hierarchy where the parent exhibits control, telling the child when they are allowed to leave the table, telling them off for not eating their vegetables, etc. In a child’s bedroom, the young person has control over their surroundings, and insubordination can naturally occur until the parent walks in and changes the dynamic. Rasmussen also uses Foucault’s idea of heterotopia within this consideration of relational spaces “that have the curious property of being in relation with all the other sites, but in such a way as to suspect, neutralize, or invert the set of relations that they happen to designate, mirror, or

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<sup>63</sup> Lindsay Amer and Gabriel Jason Dean, ‘Queer Narratives in Theater for Young Audiences,’ *HowlRound* (June 2014) < <http://howlround.com/queer-narratives-in-theater-for-young-audiences-a-call-to-action> > [accessed 4 August 2015].

<sup>64</sup> Mary Louise Rasmussen, ‘The Production of Sexualities and Genders in Schools Spaces’ in *Youth and Sexualities: Pleasure, Subversion, and Insubordination In and Out of Schools*, ed. by Mary Louise Rasmussen, Eric Rofes, and Susan Talburt (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004) 131-152, p. 131.

<sup>65</sup> Rasmussen, p. 133.

reflect.”<sup>66</sup> These heterotopic relational spaces are normalizing spaces. The child’s bedroom might become a heterotopic space when the parent enters, ‘neutralizing’ the child’s queerness, previously reflected in their privacy, upon the parent’s entrance into the space causing a shift in the relational dynamics toward this heterotopia.

Rasmussen’s research looks specifically at high schools in its characterization of “schools as unsafe places for students and teachers due to the homophobia and transphobia that occurs within their surrounds,” but I believe her conclusions apply to elementary schools as well.

Consider the queer child within the adult/child (and teacher/student) dichotomy alongside Foucault’s thoughts on relational space in an auditorium of an elementary school, much like the one where *Doodle* was performed. The adults have the relational power over the auditorium’s space because they have control over the students in the school setting (much like parents have relational power at home). Before *Doodle* came into that auditorium space, the space itself reflected the ideals of the adults. These ideals are those that Stockton points to where the adult’s idea of a child is a constructed projection, nullifying the child’s queerness and simplifying the young person to a nostalgic innocence. The elementary school auditorium, with the presence of both teachers and the subordinate students is a heterotopic space. But the dynamic shifted when *Doodle* came into the space. In this temporary usurping of power over the teachers and administrators, the *Doodle* ensemble shifted the relational space away from the teachers’ heterotopia in this particular school. The auditorium began to reflect the queer child. When *Doodle* entered this heterotopic space, the relational dynamic shifted and the themes of the performance subverted the normative values of that space leading to the ensuing controversy.

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<sup>66</sup> Michel Foucault and Jay Miskowiec, ‘Of Other Spaces,’ *Diacritics* (1989) 22-27, p. 24.

This seems to be the case with the cancelled performance of *Doodle* as well as the cancelled tours for *Tango* where queerness attempted to invade heterotopic spaces and faced enormous resistance from adults. It is important to acknowledge the third school on our Evanston tour of *Doodle* where the play had an overwhelmingly positive reception. When we were going through our pre-show workshop at this school, the students were having a difficult time staying quiet in their seats. When we could not get them to calm down and listen, the principle took the stage. He told the students that they needed to listen to what we were saying because we had an important lesson to teach (I believe he was referring to our engagement of the use of 'gay' as a derogatory slur). The principle's direct statement to the young audience acknowledges that that particular auditorium was not heterotopic. *Doodle* did not invade this space; it was welcomed.

This relational dynamic which invites queerness rather than resisting it occurs rarely in schools, but commonly when these plays are produced in spaces that are primarily theatrical. *Tango* has had productions that did not tour to schools. The productions that have not toured to local elementary schools have not received the same critical treatment as its school tours. I directed a production of *Tango* as a part of The New York International Fringe Festival in the summer of 2014 that met no controversy. These productions, including the Northwestern University production of *Doodle*, did not meet resistance because they are not usurping heterotopic spaces. There is a consumerist element of choice when an adult brings their child to the theatre and pays for their ticket. That adult acknowledges the queerness of the theatrical space they are entering and acquiesces, therefore negating any possible resistance. Instead of the play invading a normative space with queerness, the space is already established as queer and the queer child is invited to come and inhabit that space. But this presents a

problem: Not every parent understands children's queerness. These parents continue to shelter the 'innocent child' from queerness. These are the parents who called for the Fresno cancellation of *Tango*. And these are the children who typically need to be exposed to queerness the most because their lives are most likely devoid of it. The best way to access these young people is through school tours and performances because the consumerist ticket-buying element no longer puts the parent in charge of the young person's exposure to cultural content. So how do we inject the child's queerness into their cultural content and actually ensure that young people will see these queer stories without worrying about administrators and parents cancelling productions and censoring material?

### Queer Theatre by Young Audiences

To return to Reason, he argues that we must give the child personal agency through their role as an audience member in order to reinstate the child's voice within theatre for young audiences. When the queer child has this agency, "then culture for children becomes more ideologically possible: not necessarily in its moment of creation, [...] but certainly in its moment of reception."<sup>67</sup> Reason believes that while the child "may not have power in the creative process, they can have full power as a free-thinking spectator."<sup>68</sup> Reason looks at young people's agency through their post-show interpretations of a theatrical experience, looking at memory and retelling as a kind of agency.

Reason looks at young people's imagination as a way they can take control over their experience as a spectator. Reason's observations "focus on those particular moments when the children seemed to claim the performance for themselves, when in acts of rebellion, or playfulness or empathy or creativity they made the theatrical experience their own."<sup>69</sup> These observations serve to prove his claim that theatre for young audiences is indeed a possibility through "the active agency of the young audience."<sup>70</sup> Reason's ideas around the child's active agency stem from observations of re-enactment. He claims, "children frequently structure their memories of a performance around favourite instances or moments, which might be considered favourite instances precisely because they can be re-enacted and taken ownership of."<sup>71</sup> One might even say the child is able to project their queerness onto the reimagined text. Reason has encountered this re-enacting in both his visual arts workshops and in drama

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<sup>67</sup> Reason, 'The possibility of theatre for children,' pg. 26.

<sup>68</sup> Amer, 'Punchdrunk Enrichment,' p. 5.

<sup>69</sup> Reason, 'The possibility of theatre for children,' p. 28.

<sup>70</sup> Reason, 'The possibility of theatre for children,' p. 28.

<sup>71</sup> Reason, 'The possibility of theatre for children,' p. 29.

class exercises. Class exercises involving Tall Stories' production of *Them With Tails* brought up frequent re-enactment of the phrase "I'm still hungry" said in the story by a Clay Pot Boy who would repeat the phrase no matter how much he ate. Many of the young audience members "remembered and repeated this line, both individually and in chorused groups, and for some it became the central feature around which they structured their memories and drawings."<sup>72</sup> The young audience members find multiple routes to assert their ownership of their experience, manifesting both through play and drawing, by restructuring it to abide by their memories and imaginings.

Reason draws upon Derrida's idea that "readers' and spectators' responses to art form a countersignature to the original work."<sup>73</sup> These countersignatures "provoke other texts – responses, commentaries, interpretation, controversies, imitation, forgeries, plagiarisms, echoes, effluences, influences,"<sup>74</sup> etc. Through the countersignatures of the young audience members, the productions become entirely new experiences. Here, the work itself begins to exist outside of its natural confines; it "exists in the mind and response made by the young audience...The thing, the work, the performance, is therefore incomplete until it is received, processed and, in a sense, countersigned by the audience."<sup>75</sup> Therefore, theatre for young audiences and its productions cannot completely exist without the imaginations and reclamation of the young people themselves. Reason concludes that the "shift from being culture *for* children to being children's own culture" occurs when the world of the production "is integrated into their creative play and into their sense of identity and self."<sup>76</sup> For

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<sup>72</sup> Reason, 'The possibility of theatre for children,' p. 29.

<sup>73</sup> Reason, 'The possibility of theatre for children,' p. 32.

<sup>74</sup> Reason, 'The possibility of theatre for children,' p. 32.

<sup>75</sup> Reason, 'The possibility of theatre for children,' p. 32.

<sup>76</sup> Reason, 'The possibility of theatre for children,' p. 33.

Reason, theatre for young people becomes possible as well as *important* when it matters in a young person's life.

While Reason's research and respect for the young audience member is monumental within the field of TYA in its particular address of the young person's agency and beginning of a cultural autonomy, his conclusions exist outside of the young person's immediate experience of the production. The child, to Reason, can only express their queerness outside of the theatrical space. The child can only project their queerness rather than seeing it reflected back to them. I believe Reason does not push his theorizing far enough. I believe that TYA, when considering the queer child, is still impossible despite considering Reason's assertions of the child's active agency.

I further Reason's ideas around young people's agency to explore the queer child as creator of their own queer stories. Here, young people create stories for young people, thereby making theatre for young audiences possible as well as queer. Working within these frameworks, I posit that allowing the queer child into creative processes through Reason's ideas of agency and my expansion of that agency of the child's direct contribution might open the door to allowing queer stories into previously heterotopic spaces through case studies of existing theatre companies. I look at companies such as Griffin's Tale at Northwestern University in Evanston, Illinois, Story Pirates in New York City and Los Angeles, and Barrel of Monkeys in Chicago which receive stories written by children, theatricalize them, and bring them into schools providing a reflective vessel for the queer child. These companies, through participation and creative contribution, provide a voice for the queer child and create the elusive queer spaces for them to inhabit and freely explore their own queerness.

## Theatre By Young Audiences: Griffin's Tale, Story Pirates, and Barrel of Monkeys

Griffin's Tale was established in 1989 as "Northwestern University's only Children's Repertory Theatre Company! [They] take stories and poems written by kids in the Evanston and Chicago areas and turn them into skits, sketches, songs, raps, dances, and more! THEN [they] get to go to the schools these amazing students attend and perform their stories for them."<sup>77</sup> The student-run organization still exists on campus today where they rehearse stories submitted by young people from the local Evanston school district and tour to schools to perform these stories in front of their authors. They also perform the stories on campus for their fellow college students for one weekend every spring. The performances of each story range anywhere from two to ten minutes and include an assortment of costume pieces and props one might find in a child's dress up collection. The result is a raucous and energetic performance complete with song. The ensemble uses various theatre techniques to adapt the stories into staged performances, depending what the performers feel would best represent the story. Barrel of Monkeys and Story Pirates are both professional companies that grew from Griffin's Tale alumni, bringing its foundational mission to promote literacy and creativity, and its techniques for adapting stories with them.

Story Pirates was founded in New York City in 2003, and has since expanded to Los Angeles in 2013. Since their founding, they have grown from sixteen company members to 300, from performing just in the state of New York to performing in eighteen different states, from collecting 1,500 stories to amassing over 30,000 stories and reaching 3,200 kids to a whopping 70,000 kids in 2013 alone. Story Pirates as had by far the most exposure of the three companies to critical acclaim. Jon Stewart, John

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<sup>77</sup> *Wildcat Connection*, 'Griffin's Tale Theatre Repertory Company,' <<https://northwestern.collegiatelink.net/organization/griffinstale>> [accessed 4 August 2015].



Oliver, and Conan O'Brien of late night talk show fame have all endorsed the company in segments on their shows, including performing in some of the stories themselves. Story Pirates' brochure describes the company's philosophy where it,

...Celebrates the words and ideas of young people. We believe that kids have the best ideas, so we turn their original stories into wild sketch comedy musicals featuring professional actors to show those kids just how amazing their ideas are. We believe that desire drives learning, so we pair top-notch teaching artists with professional comedians to create writing curricula that make kids want to learn. We believe that there is a powerful link between literacy and confident self-expression, so we haven't stopped expanding since the day we started providing programming at a single Harlem elementary school in 2003.<sup>78</sup>

Story Pirates' main focus lies in promoting children's literacy where theatricalizing a young person's story empowers them to continue reading, writing, inventing, and learning.

Erica Halverson and Halena Kays founded Barrel of Monkeys in 1997 when they "realized that there were underserved students in the Chicago Public School who would benefit from similar programing,"<sup>79</sup> as Griffin's Tale. Since its founding, Barrel of Monkeys has "helped more than 7,000 3<sup>rd</sup>, 4<sup>th</sup>, 5<sup>th</sup>, and 6<sup>th</sup> graders with limited literacy skills and few opportunities for creative expression to gain self-esteem and confidence in their own ideas and abilities. More than 18,000 students have seen their own and their peers' stories come to life through performance by professional actors."<sup>80</sup> They partner with Chicago Public School to bring their programming where it is most needed, they have advanced after-school program where they continue the important work with students who wish to continue their relationship with the program, and they perform their show "That's Weird, Grandma," at the Neo-Futurarium, home of the Neo-Futurists,

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<sup>78</sup> *Story Pirates*, 'About: Brochure,' <<http://info.storypirates.org/welcome.pdf>> [accessed 4 August 2015].

<sup>79</sup> *Barrel of Monkeys*, 'About: History,' <<http://www.barrelmonkeys.org/about/history>> [accessed 4 August 2015].

<sup>80</sup> *Barrel of Monkeys*.

in Andersonville, Chicago where they present selected kids' stories to adults to widespread critical acclaim.<sup>81</sup>

### **Just Monkeyin' Around: Queer Stories by Queer Kids**

Barrel of Monkeys' Artistic Director Joe Schupbach spoke with me over Skype in July 2015, discussing his experiences with children's queerness and the stories he has encountered through the company's work over the years. He has been with Barrel of Monkeys for ten years as of this writing, becoming a company member in 2007, taking on the role of Education Coordinator in 2011, and was promoted to Artistic Director in 2014.<sup>82</sup> Before joining Barrel of Monkeys, Schupbach worked as a teaching artist and performer in Chicago, working with companies such as Lookingglass Theatre, and the Neo-Futurists.<sup>83</sup>

Schupbach outlines Barrel of Monkey's mission within Stockton's queer child and Reason's ideas around agency, asserting their "axiom that every [child's] idea is a good idea," in order to encourage a "safe space for everything, for processing the reality of their lives, and very specific experiences that they've had, and it also affirms kids who are exploring things for the first time,"<sup>84</sup> including their queerness. This safety is the crux of Schupbach and Barrel of Monkey's progressive mission to create an alternative learning environment for young people where they can express themselves freely through their stories. This safe space is carefully curated during their ensemble's story writing workshops at the schools they partner with in order to create a close

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<sup>81</sup> *Barrel of Monkeys*.

<sup>82</sup> American Theatre Editors, 'Joe Schupbach Named Artistic Director of Barrel of Monkeys,' *American Theatre* (October 2014) <  
<http://www.americantheatre.org/2014/10/24/joseph-schupbach-named-artistic-director-of-barrel-of-monkeys/>> [accessed 4 August 2015].

<sup>83</sup> American Theatre Editors.

<sup>84</sup> Joe Schupbach, Personal Interview, 1 July 2015.

audience/performer relationship before, after, and during the residency and allow that safe space to exist during the performances themselves. In order to create this environment, Schupbach advocates for “the radical act of listening to children.”<sup>85</sup> This radical act must be solidified with a positive response: “saying yes is a powerful thing.”<sup>86</sup> These three tasks: the asking, the listening, and the answering, establish a trust between adult and child that provides safety for the young person’s queerness. Rasmussen engages this idea of the ‘safe space’ as a counterpoint to the heterotopic space, problematizing the use of these ‘safe spaces’ within high schools, “while the trope...is ostensibly designed for the protection of the rights of the individual, it has also been deployed as a means to remove troublesome students.”<sup>87</sup> This analysis of ‘safe spaces’ within schools does not apply to the spaces created by Barrel of Monkeys because in Rasmussen’s situation, individuals are isolated within these spaces rather than allowing the safe space to transform a public forum, like a large auditorium where the Barrel of Monkeys ensemble performs stories for the whole student body.

Schupbach’s and Barrel of Monkey’s ‘safe space’ is a space reflective of the queer child. Barrel of Monkeys (and Story Pirates and Griffin’s Tale) are creating queer spaces within schools and they are not meeting resistance. The difference between what happened in the auditorium where *Doodle* performed and the auditoriums where Barrel of Monkeys performs is all to do with the authors of the source material. *Doodle* is a queer play created by adults and for young people (interestingly, Dean, the adult playwright in question is a heterosexual ally). Here, the power struggle is between two factions of adults: the teachers and the performers. The invading ensemble threatens the teachers’ power and this usurping of the heterotopic space causes resistance. Barrel

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<sup>85</sup> Schupbach.

<sup>86</sup> Schupbach.

<sup>87</sup> Rasmusser, p. 135.

of Monkeys on the other hand performs stories written *by children* and for children. While adult performers are still invading the space, they are not projecting their own queer content onto that space. They merely serve as the mirror that reflects the queer child. They have brought in material that changes the heterotopic space through the nuance that teachers believe their heterotopic space is still intact. The performers are not introducing an unknown queerness into the space that could threaten the students' precious innocence. Barrel of Monkeys is reflecting the queerness they have been handed on a silver platter: the children's stories, which are naturally queer. Upon my asking whether Barrel of Monkey's had ever come across controversy over any stories they have performed over the years, Schupbach said that in the company's eighteen years, they have not had any feedback from adults on controversial material. The only resistance he has encountered was over fart jokes, moments teachers think might be "too gross for kids," and levels of violence. He has never come across resistance over queer topics.<sup>88</sup>

While Schupbach rarely encounters stories with explicitly labeled LGBTQ+ characters or issues, he has encountered stories that reference same-sex relationships, but more often, he finds other queer trends. First, in the theatricalizing of the children's stories, the Barrel of Monkeys ensemble frequently and consciously uses gender-bending techniques originating in the British pantomime tradition where male actors play women. Martina Lipton chronicles the history of the dame in modern British pantomime in her essay "Principally Boys? Gender Dynamics and Casting Practices in Modern British Pantomime" for *Contemporary Theatre Review* (2008).

Traditionally, a middle-aged man who remains recognizably masculine despite his female dress plays the dame, the hideous caricature of feminine sexuality, neutralized by the masquerade...Dan Leno is credited

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<sup>88</sup> Schupbach.

as establishing this pattern of identity of the dame who remains clearly marked as male when he made his debut in *Jack and the Beanstalk* at the Surrey Theatre in 1886.<sup>89</sup>

Panto's dame has popularized in modern culture since Leno's initial performances.

Lipton cites the company, Qdos Entertainment's, "Britain's largest panto producer,"<sup>90</sup> use of the dame as an example of male cross-dressing "which perform[s] gender as queer spectacle," that, "confuses meaning and creates new ways of conceptualizing sexuality and gender identity."<sup>91</sup> For Lipton, panto's dame is decidedly queer.

Lipton turns to Judith Butler's ideas on gender performativity where "gender is performativity constituted by the very expressions that are said to be its results."<sup>92</sup> Butler's famous, and controversial theory, suggests that gender is not an inherent attribute, rather it is a "performative act, a repeated set of manipulated codes and costumes, rather than a key component of an inner, essential identity."<sup>93</sup> Meaning, gender is a construction of specific external performative behaviors an individual might practice, rather than an internalized personal identifier. Placing Butler's theory of performativity onto the history and growth of modern British pantomime establishes a particular queerness within the practice and techniques typical in TYA. Pantomime is a queer foundational tool of TYA, giving TYA a queerness that other cultural products for young people do not possess. Griffin's *Tale's*, *Barrel of Monkeys*, and *Story Pirates*' use of this technique is indicative of their proclivity for and ability to express queerness, and reflect the queer child through queer technique. Schupbach observes the "power in

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<sup>89</sup> Martina Lipton, 'Principally Boys? Gender Dynamics and Casting Practices in Modern British Pantomimes,' *Contemporary Theatre Review* 18 (2008) 470-486, p. 471-472.

<sup>90</sup> Lipton, p. 472.

<sup>91</sup> Lipton, p. 475.

<sup>92</sup> Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex* (New York: Routledge, 1993) p. 25.

<sup>93</sup> Lipton, p. 475.

playing with gender,"<sup>94</sup> in the stories his ensemble performs. They use this technique consciously, making sure that the techniques of theatricalizing accurately reflect the needs and purposes of the given stories. While this queerness comes from the adult ensemble more so than from the child and the stories themselves, the technique exists in popular culture aimed at children that young audiences already regularly consume. This technique does not meet resistance from heterotopic spaces because it is an accepted and familiar form of queerness.

Three Barrel of Monkeys stories in particular stood out to him in our discussion; "Tough Love," "Will and Grace," and "Derek/Dasia's Happy Life." The story "Tough Love," which Schupbach encountered nearly seven years ago, long before this year's Supreme Court decision to legalize same-sex marriage and the mainstream acknowledgement of LGBTQ+ issues, came out of a student creating a character profile during a Barrel of Monkeys workshop. Schupbach describes the profile, later turned story:

The character's name was Suzie, and we get to gender and the student looks at us and he goes, 'she has no gender.' And first of all that's fascinating because he was making this interesting choice and also because he said, '*she* has no gender,' still participating in the construct. He was definitely exploring this idea, or the idea that he didn't have to make a decision right then, or that it was sort of matter of fact that this character wasn't a lady or a man or whatever."<sup>95</sup>

This student is exploring the possibility that this character for their queer imagining might be agender or non-binary, decidedly queer gender identities outside normative gender constructs. This character eventually became part of a larger narrative that was then theatricalized and performed for the author as well as their fellow students. The student's exploration and questioning of the gender binary was presented back to them

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<sup>94</sup> Schupbach.

<sup>95</sup> Schupbach.

by the ensemble. The character's queerness and appropriateness was never questioned because the queerness of the character came directly from the child's imaginings.

Schupbach discusses another story, "Will and Grace," which came from 'Stretch the Truth Day,' a day within the workshops where students are "supposed to take a true story that had happened to them and use figurative language to stretch it into a narrative, a fictional narrative."<sup>96</sup> This particular student went outside of the workshop's rules and, as Schupbach describes,

...took the plot of *Will and Grace* and put herself inside of it which was really fascinating. Actually at this point *Will and Grace* was already off the air, it was in syndication, so she had been watching it in syndication, and [the show] actually wasn't very progressive, but at the same time, no other kid in that class had referenced that cultural phenomenon. She was specifically talking about...when you're interested in someone and they are not interested in you because they are not oriented towards you and that was really interesting. And it turned into a summary of the *Will and Grace* plotline.<sup>97</sup>

In this case, the student is engaging an explicitly LGBTQ+ cultural text: *Will and Grace* a program from the 1990s that uses the classic situation comedy television format to tell the story of best friends, the titular Will and Grace, who became so because they had originally dated and then broken up when Will came out of the closet as a gay man. The student's story explores sexuality through the comedic aspects of the show's premise. Again, the student, and the Barrel of Monkey's ensemble can depict these explicit queer themes because of the queer child's relational power within the space created by the stories.

Schupbach details a recent story with queer themes entitled, "Derek/Dasia's Happy Life," he interprets as indicative of "where the world is moving."<sup>98</sup> This story

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<sup>96</sup> Schupbach

<sup>97</sup> Schupbach.

<sup>98</sup> Schupbach.

came from a day in the workshop where students bring in a photograph from a magazine to write stories about and generally use as inspiration.

The student – this girl – got a picture of this dude and she was turned off right away, didn't want to use the photograph and that's actually common ...and she had turned to one of our teaching artists and said I don't wanna write about this, and he said what don't you wanna write, and she said, I don't wanna write about a boy. And [the teaching artist] said to her, do you want it to be a girl? And she was like, 'yes.' And [the teaching artist] said, well make it a girl. And he meant, write whatever you want to...but what she ended up doing was, she ended up writing a narrative about a man transitioning to be a woman...she heard, 'make him into a girl,' and went, 'oh, I can do that.' And she actually wrote this very progressive, very simple story about a guy named Derek who wanted to become Dasia...it's actually really special because it is so simple and sort of matter of fact.<sup>99</sup>

Schupbach describes the first line of the story: "My name is Derek and I wanna be Dasia."<sup>100</sup> To which the doctor he is talking to says, "Okay."<sup>101</sup> The story shows Derek's transition to Dasia through a consumerist perspective, going to a wig store, a dress store, a makeup store, and a shoe store as she becomes Dasia, outlining a "very specific wardrobe for Dasia, which is adorable and also like, oh interesting, we can have a conversation about what it means to be a woman."<sup>102</sup> The student here develops a decidedly queer narrative around the trans\* experience as a response to an exercise where the student was *assigned* a magazine picture of a boy that she was unhappy with and decided to, instead, write a story about that boy becoming the girl she wanted to write her story about. Not only does the author depict the trans\* experience, but she also mirrors it in her creative process.

Schupbach describes other stories that reflect the queer child in its broader definitions, and in accordance with Stockton's archetypes, with less explicit reference to LGBTQ+ issues and explorations, and generally through fantastical and creative re-

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<sup>99</sup> Schupbach.

<sup>100</sup> Schupbach.

<sup>101</sup> Schupbach.

<sup>102</sup> Schupbach.



imaginings of the world. In one such story, a student queers and takes ownership of capitalist normativity by creating glitter/sparkle currency. Where one student wrote about, “glitter/sparkle/sticker people and they lived in a Candyland, but the stakes were very high.”<sup>103</sup> In this fantastical world where glitter is money, the student imagines themselves with access and control within this glitter economy and expressing their queerness within the reality of capitalist structure where they cannot directly contribute to the economy themselves. Other stories depict young people who want to fantasize outside the queerness of their economic status where, in their stories, they wake up to four hundred Christmas presents, “like what does it look like when money is not an issue.” Schupbach describes one last story, “Ariel/*The Little Mermaid*,” depicting the specific queerness inherent in feminism in a ballad against the patriarchy, adapted to the tune of “Part of Your World.” In the story, the student wrote about Ariel “wanting Prince Eric to pick up their kids from school so that Ariel could go to the club...and [Schupbach] was like this is about her mom,”<sup>104</sup> and the student expressing the gender roles she has observed between her parents.

All of these stories reflect aspects of the queer child back to the young audience members in the school auditorium, subverting that heterotopic space and meeting little to no resistance. Griffin’s Tale, Story Pirates, and Barrel of Monkeys have found a way to bring the queer child into culture for children by allowing young people to become active creators, the adult ensemble merely being facilitators of that creation and vessels for the stories themselves. These companies therefore become champions for the queer child and the queer child’s stories, actively subverting heterotopic school spaces and allowing young people to take complete and total ownership over cultural materials

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<sup>103</sup> Schupbach.

<sup>104</sup> Schupbach.

targeting them. Queer theatre for young people becomes possible when the queer child creates it.

## Conclusion

We are a long way off from seeing the queer child truly reflected in culture for young people. Griffin's Tale, Story Pirates, and Barrel of Monkeys can only reach so many young people. While the companies' influences continue to grow, particularly Story Pirates, their reach is still limited. A few companies have begun to take on the model of having young people write stories and using adult ensembles to theatricalize them. The Tricycle Theatre in London's Kilburn neighborhood recently started a project called StoryLab where "each participating class writes a single story to be adapted for the stage based on drama work done at the Theatre and in class."<sup>105</sup> Companies like Tricycle take on the Griffin's Tale/Story Pirates/Barrel of Monkeys model and allow queer representation in children's culture, but the major problem facing queer TYA lies in the pervading normative mentality that the child's 'innocence' must be protected. Until this heterotopic agenda disintegrates, it remains difficult to reflect young people's queer experiences.

But there is hope! Momentum is building behind the advocacy for queer narratives and characters for young people, riding the coattails of the gay rights movement's recent successes (particularly in The United States) and shifting perceptions of LGBTQ+ people and issues in popular culture. In the field of live performance, Eilidh MacAskill, a Glasgow-based live artist, has teamed up with Edinburgh's Imagine, "a unique organization in Scotland, promoting, developing and celebrating the performing arts for children and young people,"<sup>106</sup> on her project, Gendersaurus Rex, "a new research project looking into gender, feminism, sexuality,

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<sup>105</sup> *Tricycle Theatre*, 'Creative Learning: Schools,' <<http://www.tricycle.co.uk/home/about-the-tricycle-pages/youth-tab-menu/schools/>> [accessed 4 August 2015].

<sup>106</sup> *Imagine*, 'About: What We Do,' <<http://www.imagine.org.uk/about/what-we-do/>> [accessed 4 August 2015].

queerness and difference, and how these areas intersect with the field of live performance for children.”<sup>107</sup> The project is still in its research phase, but it will most likely culminate in a performance for young audiences that engages these topics.

Modern children’s television cartoons have also begun to address queerness and LGBTQ+ topics. Cartoon Network’s shows *Adventure Time* created by Pendleton Ward and *Steven Universe* by Rebecca Sugar deal with both explicit and implicit LGBTQ+ topics and children’s queerness. *Adventure Time* depicts best buds “Jake the dog, and Finn the human,”<sup>108</sup> and their adventures in the post-apocalyptic land of Oo. Three characters in this series are expressly queer. BMO is genderfluid. They are a walking and talking electronic device to whom both Jake and Finn refer with both male and female pronouns. BMO is simultaneously male and female, breaking out of the normative gender binary construction. In his analysis of the character, Mike Rugnetta of “PBS’s Idea Channel” on *YouTube* aligns BMO with third wave feminism where “BMO implicitly challenges the genderness of all his wacky adventures and goes one step further to challenge whether or not a character need even be a single gender at all.”<sup>109</sup> The two other characters are Princess Bubblegum and the vampire Marceline. The episodes “What Was Missing,” and “Sky Witch,” hint at a previous romantic same-sex relationship that the two shared before the timeline of the show. Marceline’s lyrics in the song “I’m Just Your Problem,” point toward bitter break-up-like feelings between the two; “But I shouldn’t have to be the one that makes up with you so, / Why do I want

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<sup>107</sup> Eilidh MacAskill, *Gendersaurus Rex*, ‘The Gendersaurus Rex Project,’ <<https://gendersaurusrex.wordpress.com>> [accessed 4 August 2015].

<sup>108</sup> *Adventure Time*, created by Pendleton Ward (Cartoon Network, 2011).

<sup>109</sup> Mike Rugnetta, ‘Is BMO From Adventure Time Expressive of Feminism | Idea Channel | PBS Digital Studios,’ *YouTube* (July 2013) <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uqtNSdDFGBM>> [accessed 4 August 2015].

to? Why do I want to..."<sup>110</sup> The actor who voices Marceline, Olivia Olsen, has officially canonized the relationship saying that creator Pendleton Ward once told her, "Oh, you know they dated right?"<sup>111</sup> While the queer relationship is not explicit within the cartoon itself, its inclusion in a cartoon watched by millions of young people is not negligible.

There is also Rebecca Sugar's *Steven Universe*, a relatively new cartoon that explicitly depicts a same-sex relationship and non-binary characters. The young protagonist Steven is half human and half gem. Gems are a technologically advanced alien species who invaded earth. Steven's mother, Rose Quartz, had to give up her physical form in order to have Steven, and left three gems in charge of him: Garnet, Amethyst, and Pearl. In addition to having superhero-like powers, the gems have a few other alien features. First, they are non-binary. Sugar asserted in her public *Reddit* AMA (Ask Me Anything) that "gems are gems,"<sup>112</sup> and that they do not have genders, although the gems on the show identify as female, and consistently use feminine pronouns. Next, they have the ability to create fusions. When two gems dance together, they combine and create a gem fusion, a singular individual made up of the two (or more) fused gems. In the season two finale, we learn that one of the main gem characters, Garnet, is actually a fusion of two gems: Ruby and Sapphire. Ruby and Sapphire are constantly fused as Garnet and they are in an explicitly romantic same-sex relationship. The episodes "Jail Break" and "Keystone Motel," depict their affection for each other. Writer

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<sup>110</sup> *Adventure Time*, "What Was Missing."

<sup>111</sup> Sarah Karlan, 'Adventure Time Actor Confirms Princess Bubblegum and Marceline The Vampire Queer Once Dated,' *BuzzFeed* (August 2014) <<http://www.buzzfeed.com/skarlan/adventure-time-actor-confirms-princess-bubblegum-and-marceline#.fxWVv1M9mw>> [accessed 4 August 2015].

<sup>112</sup> Rebecca Sugar (RebeccaSugar), 'I am Rebecca Sugar, creator of Steven Universe, and former Adventure Time storyboarder, AMA!' *Reddit* <[http://www.reddit.com/r/IAmA/comments/2e4gmz/i\\_am\\_rebecca\\_sugar\\_creator\\_of\\_steven\\_universe\\_and](http://www.reddit.com/r/IAmA/comments/2e4gmz/i_am_rebecca_sugar_creator_of_steven_universe_and)> [accessed 4 August 2015].

and storyboard artist for the show, Joe Johnston, took to his *Tumblr* page to answer a fan's question after the initial airing of "Jail Break:" "'are you allowed to tell us if Sapphire and Ruby's love is romantic of more platonic?' He answered with a very succinct, 'Romantic yo.'"<sup>113</sup>

In addition to these budding representations of queerness in cultural content for young people in mass media, the age of the internet has brought young people increasingly more control over the cultural content they can access for free and without their parents' prior approval. *YouTube* recently launched the app, *YouTube Kids*, which provides an easily navigable format and design specifically aimed at young people.<sup>114</sup> While the app is not yet fool proof and is still in development, it provides ample opportunity for queer content that young people can access. *YouTube* and blog culture have increasingly become an oasis for queer teens to seek out advice and to explore their queerness in an anonymous environment that has connected international audiences in an unprecedented capacity.

The not-for-profit company *Everyone is Gay* founded and run by Kristin Russo and Danielle Owens-Reid began as an advice blog for queer teens which later evolved into a webseries on *YouTube*, then a book, *This Is A Book for Parents of Gay Kids*, and a large digital following on social media, creating a unique online community for young people.<sup>115</sup> Who is to say that the same community cannot exist for even younger people, even an elementary school-aged audience? Olly Pike of "Pop'n'Olly," a British *YouTube* channel for kids "providing LGBT+ educational videos, which teach about equality and

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<sup>113</sup> Mey, 'Steven Universe and the Importance of All-Ages Queer Representation,' *Autostraddle* (March 2015) < <http://www.autostraddle.com/steven-universe-and-the-importance-of-all-ages-queer-representation-281482/> > [accessed 4 August 2015].

<sup>114</sup> 'Introducing the Newest Member of Our Family, the YouTube Kids App,' *YouTube Official Blog* (February 2015) < <http://youtube-global.blogspot.com/2015/02/youtube-kids.html> > [accessed 4 August 2015].

<sup>115</sup> *Everyone Is Gay*, <<http://everyoneisgay.com>> [accessed 4 August 2015].

diversity,”<sup>116</sup> released a video “What Does Your Family Look Like?” addressing alternative family structures, including households with same-sex parents which has reached over 12,000 views as of August 2015. I am currently experimenting in my own artistic practice with the possibilities of *YouTube*, and am developing my own educational web series engaging LGBTQ+ topics for young people on my channel, “Queer Kid Stuff.”

While mainstream culture has quite a lot of catching up to do when depicting queer topics for young audiences, companies like Griffin’s Tale, Story Pirates, and Barrel of Monkeys are both paving the way and filling the void until projects like Gendersaurus Rex can gain attention. More young people can then be exposed to the queerness of cartoons like *Adventure Time* and *Steven Universe*, and those narratives can become more explicit over time. Finally, young people can connect with free and internationally accessible platforms available on the internet like *YouTube*, where they can learn about LGBTQ+ topics and find their queerness reflected back to them in their cultural content. These free and accessible emerging platforms might even make it possible for young people to begin contributing their own queer content to online spaces.

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<sup>116</sup> Olly Pike, “Pop’n’Olly: About” *YouTube*  
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