

Review

A Queer History of Adolescence: Developmental Pasts, Relational Futures.

Gabrielle Owen.

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“Badly brought up but nicely behaved”. At sixteen, I snipped each word of this headline from the newspaper and blu-tacked it to my bedroom door, like a ransom note. But this wasn’t the work of a subeditor. It was my own cut-up: a rearrangement of the original headline, with the adverbs swapped over. In its first form, “Nicely brought up but badly behaved”, the heading topped a late-1990s opinion piece about teenagers, characterised – naturally – as angry, sulky and rebellious. I recalled my DIY intervention while reading Gabrielle Owen’s book, *A Queer History of Adolescence: Developmental Pasts, Relational Futures*, which productively deconstructs adolescence to reveal its role both as a disciplinary mechanism of the self and as a scapegoat for a variety of social ills.

In this monograph, Owen deftly uncouples the institutionalisation of adolescence from the people we call adolescents, showing how from the nineteenth century to the twenty-first, societies have invested in categories of age – and specifically, in the adolescent – to shore up and solidify hierarchies of gender, sex, nation, race, and class. Owen shows how reliant we have become on the false, cosy assurances of developmentalism – the idea that we grow up and away from innocent childhood (if we are white, if we are straight, if we are cis), through messy, unfinished adolescence, to reach a stable and fixed state: adulthood (a state

constructed, of course, around a normative adult: the straight, white, wealthy man). In dismantling these categories, demonstrating their historical contingency and how they are discursively produced through the performance of particular processes and practices, Owen's liberatory politics are clear and persuasive. She urges her readers towards a future beyond metaphors of biological growth and "beyond reproductive futurism"; a future that, in seeking to move towards "queer and ethical possibilities" and "beyond the biopolitical imperatives of adulthood, normative gender, heterosexuality, and the nuclear family", will do away altogether with what she terms "the logic of adolescence" and its relentless temporalising (ix). Above all, Owen is calling for a more ethical understanding of, and relation to, the broad spectrum of all those named by different categories of age – the child, the adolescent, and the adult.

It's the kind of thinking that is still troubling to many. Children's literature scholarship has continued to grapple with the overlapping meanings of the category 'child', from Jacqueline Rose's 'impossible' child, discursively produced and socially constructed, to the living beings we call children, as centred in work on child agency by Marah Gubar and Robin Bernstein, among others. The 'good' child and the 'bad' adolescent, as Owen shows, conspire in the social imagination to "contain a range of fantasies and fears" mobilised by adults in medical discourses, the media, even within the university (138). "What is queer theory doing with the child?", Karin Lesnik-Oberstein and Stephen Thomson asked anxiously back in 2002. Queer theory has been doing things with the figure of the child for some time now, from Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's "proto-gay child" (91) to Lee Edelman's symbolic "Child in whose name we're collectively terrorized" (29) to Kathryn Bond Stockton's "child queered by color" (30). The field of childhood studies and the history of childhood has flourished in recent years, too, and Owen draws on significant new studies such as Jules Gill-Peterson's *Histories of the Transgender Child* (2018). *A Queer History of Adolescence* situates itself at the intersection of these fields, as part of the 'ethical turn' in childhood studies. In focusing on the category of the adolescent, specifically, Owen is doing important and necessary work, weaving together multiple threads of contemporary scholarship which until now have been somewhat loosely gathered. One of Owen's major contributions is to bind together the material and the theoretical, "attending to the discursive functions of categories of age with the aim of understanding their effects on actual bodies and lives" (13).

Owen begins her project to "dislodge adolescence from its present knowability", appropriately enough, by toppling the so-called "father of adolescence", American psychologist and educator G. Stanley Hall (1846-1924) (29). Although Hall's 1904 two-volume study of the category 'adolescence' is often positioned as the first acknowledgment of a previously unrecognised life stage, Owen's research uncovers over 2,000 pre-1900 references to the term across both US and British newspaper databases, and reveals its surprising connotations during the early part of the nineteenth century, as a byword for strength, health and vigour. As developmentalist discourses took hold from 1870 onwards, however,

categories of age became co-opted into the drive to classify and taxonomise. Tracing the social evolutionist thinking of Ernst Haeckel, Herbert Spencer, and Hall as it developed in concert with new thinking about biology and the natural world, Owen shows how any person or group marginalised due to their race, class, gender, or their sexuality might find themselves “relocated along a developmental timeline” (46). Categories of difference and age became mutually constitutive: colonial subjects were primitive; nations immature or underdeveloped; Black adults childlike (and by extension, lacking adult intelligence or self-control, deviant, inclined to criminality); homosexuals arrested or stuck; while adolescence itself was a new territory to be discovered, mapped, and controlled.

Adolescence continues to be pressed into service for a variety of political ends. (White) trans adolescents, for example, are seen as innocent children who cannot know their own minds; Black teenagers, such as Trayvon Martin, shot and killed aged 17 on his way back from the convenience store in 2012, as dangerously adult. To understand how the figure of the adolescent has been read and misread over the twentieth century, Owen turns to the adolescent reader, via JD Salinger’s *The Catcher in the Rye* (1951) and Sylvia Plath’s *The Bell Jar* (1963). Through this shifting subject-position – what of those adults who read YA, or the adolescents who read anything but? What of those books that slip between the status of universal classic and teen page-turner? – Owen shows our folded closeness to adolescence by way of our own past selves, as well as the ways in which we disavow and distance ourselves from them. Ripe for institutional regulation, the adolescent reader ultimately evades it: reading itself is a practice more unpredictable, full of possibilities, queerer than censors and educators have often assumed. These queer possibilities for self-fashioning and survival are explored in Owen’s final chapter through Kate Bornstein’s “teen self-help book” (156), *Hello, Cruel World: 101 Alternatives to Suicide for Teens, Freaks and Other Outlaws* (2006), which continually resists stability and essentialism: “Keep in mind that the you that makes life worth living today probably won’t be the same you that makes life worth living this time next year” (qtd. in Owen 174).

Personal, urgent and practical, *A Queer History of Adolescence* draws from a wide range of sources: from newspaper advertisements to sex education pamphlets, from Hall’s *Adolescence* (1904) to LM Montgomery’s *Anne of Green Gables* (1908). Owen demands a certain agility from her reader; an ability to situate these texts in context and a familiarity with the theorists she thinks with. But there’s an appealing openness and lightness, here, too, as if the book is itself in the process of becoming; a kind of onion-skin structure to Owen’s thought, as she wraps her tight critical, historical, and theoretical frameworks and careful archival research in a series of larger questions. At its most confident, *A Queer History of Adolescence* is energising and expansive: “[w]hat might a more ethical conception of childhood look like?” (27). “Can there be institutional practices of care and knowledge-making that are not driven by hierarchy and control?” (124). Most urgently, “How do we live? What world do we make?” (30). At times, this energy overreaches, the epilogue venturing

boldly into a discussion of queer theory's relationship, as a disruptor of epistemological certainties, with Trumpian post-truth and 'alternative facts', in which Owen asks "Have the methods of queer theory been co-opted for evil?" (185) – a question, perhaps, for another book. But in intervening in current debates over poststructuralist critique and post-critique, the "value of literary study and the work of the humanities" (4), this is also a monograph aware of its own status, and of the book as a particular marker within the contemporary academy. At one point, Owen comments on neoliberalism's punitive emphasis on productivity in "a society that expects its citizens to [...] dedicate themselves to work without meaning or purpose, to think of their value primarily in terms of labor and professional success", adding: "[t]he great irony of writing these words in an academic book for tenure does not escape me" (163). The category of scholar, too, is shown to be performative. It's an appropriately self-reflexive rhetorical move for a book so concerned with the ways that subjects are represented and produced, and a refreshing one.

"We cannot live without our constructed selves" (159), Owen writes. Owen reveals the ways "adolescence operates as a kind of hermeneutic of the self": readers will undoubtedly grapple themselves during the reading process with the ways in which "[t]he question of adolescence inevitably becomes a question about the present, a question about the meanings we use to make sense of ourselves and others" (7). We long for our adolescent freedoms; we are embarrassed by our adolescent pasts; we police our adolescent children. But in relation to actual adolescents in their current modes of being and becoming, Owen astutely points out that the category of adolescence renders young people as visible and obscured at the same time, forever figured as what they will want, what they will be, rather than as people in their own right, with agency. *A Queer History of Adolescence* advocates for the ordinary yet radical act of accepting everyone "in the immediacy of who they are, in each moment, without projecting or anticipating a developmental arc" (62). This is a book for adolescents everywhere, and of every age.

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