

Queer Children, New Objects; the Place of Futurity in Loewald's Thinking

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The present is not enough. It is impoverished and toxic...

Muñoz, **2009**, p. 27

I am honored to be joining my colleagues in this brief symposium inspired by Loewald's idea of the analyst as a new object (**1960**). Drawing on my experience in child work, I will explore a somewhat undertheorized part of his paper on therapeutic action: the transformational potential held by new objects that are constituted through the envisioning of an other's future. This has especially potent implications when it comes to queer children because their otherness can often make their futures seem or actually be tenuous. I'll follow the trail of Loewald's thinking on futurity to reflect on queer kids¹ considering psychoanalytically the recent onslaught of queer youth suicides² and exploring how we can collectively try to keep these children in mind.

Loewald's essay has been celebrated for its progressiveness in marrying the topographical model with an understanding of early mother-infant dynamics and for recognizing the centrality of the patient-analyst relationship (Chodorow, **2008**; **2009**). The place of futurity in his work however, remains largely unexplored. With notable exceptions (**Cooper, 1997**; **Jacobs, 2008**; Seligman, 2009), his belief in the clinical power inherent in analytic imaginings of a patient's future, quoted extensively below, has not been given its clinical due.

*The parent ideally is in an empathic relationship of understanding the child's particular stage in development, yet ahead in his vision of the child's future and mediating this vision to the child in his dealing with him. This vision, informed by the parent's own experience and knowledge of growth and future, is, ideally, a more articulate and more integrated version of the core of being that the child presents to the parent. This "more" that the parent sees and knows, he mediates to the child so that the child in identification with it can grow. The child, by internalizing aspects of the parent, also internalizes the parent's image of the child-an image that is mediated to the child in the thousand different ways of being handled, bodily and emotionally... The bodily handling of and concern with the child, the manner in which the child is fed, touched, cleaned, the way it is looked at, talked to, called by name, recognized and re-recognized-all these and many other ways of communicating with the child, and communicating to him his identity, sameness, unity, and individuality, shape and mould him so that he can begin to identify himself, to feel and recognize himself as one and as separate from others yet with others. The child begins to experience himself as a centered unit by being centered upon... In analysis, if it is to be a process leading to structural changes, interactions of a comparable nature have to take place (Loewald, **1960**, p. 229-230).*

Loewald speaks evocatively of the process of being able to imagine a future for an other. That process, he tells us, is mediated not only through language, but is also transmitted through multiple avenues, including maternal embodiment. Drawing on Laplanche (**1999**) we might even add today that such communications often exceed conscious registration and/or intent. As the ability to empathically envision a future becomes internalized, an experience of the self 'as a centered unit' arises. As the early kernels of identity are sown, subjectivity is made possible.

It's easy to see how this passage can generate clinical controversy. Friedman (**2008**) addresses some of the well-founded concerns; worry about infantilizing patients by imagining for and, therefore, in lieu of them; over-investment in particular outcomes; narcissistic overvaluing of the analytic role. These critiques notwithstanding, his recommendation is especially productive when what is imagined does not reside in anticipated ego adaptations as sites of stable meanings (e.g. that a child will grow up to be a surgeon or live in a brownstone) but when it lies in the potential for envisioning growth and emergent possibility. Having a future made imaginable through an other can be doubly powerful for children, because the future lies ahead as something adults promise but not yet known to be possible.

Further, some children's very existence invokes future-lessness like kids afflicted by life-threatening

medical illnesses or those who, absorbing parental hatred, live under ongoing threats of psychic annihilation. For them, imaginations of futurity permit the introjection of a new object that is benign and life-giving rather than life-threatening and persecutory. This is especially pronounced with queer children because temporality is mapped differently onto their lives than in those of normative others' (**Bruhm & Hurley, 2004**; see also **Harris, 2008**). Deemed too young to claim sexuality or gender³, children's otherness is considered only retrospectively. Only when the adult subject looks back to announce that early kernels of queerness had been there all along, is queer childhood taken seriously. Paradoxically then, queer children's deferred identities are often only recognized as having existed after their expiration date has passed. This non-linear relationship to time literalizes *nachträglichkeit*, "putting past and present...side-by-side almost cubistically" (Stockton, **2009**, p. 14).

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Furthermore, despite facile proclamations that non-normative youth now live in a post-gay society (**Savin-Williams, 2006**), Sedgwick's famous saying that *it's always open season* (**1994**) on queer kids continues to be true today. Consider, for example, the implicit messages that state policies like 'Don't Ask, Don't Tell' convey to gay youth. Or the more explicit homophobic statements made by public figures such as Carl Paladino who unapologetically proclaimed that he didn't "want [children] brainwashed into thinking that homosexuality is [a]...valid and successful option" (**Harris, 2010**).

¹ By queer I am referring mostly to gay and gender variant children, but also include all those children whose non-normativity-be it in its racial, classed or other dimensions- excludes them from dominant discourses, limiting the range of what is imaginable for their lives (see also **Halberstam, 2005**).

² Raymond Chase aged 19, Zach Harrington aged 19, Tyler Clementi aged 18, Cody J. Barker aged 17, Justin Aaberg age 15, Billy Lucas aged 14, Phoebe Prince aged 14, Brandon Bitner aged 13, Asher Brown aged 13 and Seth Walsh aged 13 all self-identified as queer, suicided within weeks of each other in September - October 2010.

³ Normative inflections of sexuality and gender are, of course, exceptions. Heterosexually premised play for example (e.g. little girls dressing up Barbie for her wedding day), does not generate the kinds of reservations that meet gay kids' expressions of sexuality.

It's not hard to see how several queer kids took the cultural hint and killed themselves in September-October 2010.

On the heels of these heartrending suicides however, an interesting media phenomenon emerged: the 'It Gets Better' (IGB) project. Posting on youtube a self-made video addressing queer youth, journalist Dan Savage promised teens that something better awaits them if they survive adolescence. Hundreds of others responded by posting videos of their own. Within weeks the project caught like wildfire.⁴ Clip after clip, this *in loco parentis* intergenerational intervention attempts to envision a livable future on teenagers' behalf, outlining a path from victimization to adult happiness. Hailed by the press (Stelter, 2010) and media (Ellen, 2010) as an admirable communal effort. From a Loewaldian perspective we might consider this as a culture-wide proto-attempt to create new objects for queer youth.



Embedded in these videos, however, lie uninterrogated limits as to which kids exactly deserve this happiness. As critics protest, the promise is only extended to those who can embody futures demarcated by whiteness, education, financial success (Halberstam, 2010; Lim, 2010; Nyong'o, 2010; Puar, 2010). Happiness, cultural critic Ahmed (2010) argues, is a politically distended category with powerful calls to normativity. Fall outside these parameters and out you fall from societal graces. For non-white, working class, immigrant and otherwise *othered* queer children, IGB constitutes what Seligman (2009) calls a *pseudohopeful object* whose promise for an unattainable idealized futurity precludes real temporality and presses for inauthentic selves. What is our analytic responsibility then to youngsters who are not easily folded within such neoliberal projects? What are the kinds of futures we ought to be able to imagine for our queer kids?

How do we respond to parents who are trying to maintain an attitude of openness to a child's non-normativity but agonize over whether their child will be happy, when this seemingly innocuous wish has already embedded in it the plea for sloughing off parts of the self? How do we move from a call to 'happiness' to one of lived potential or, as Adam Phillips (2010) asks, "what are we going to have to renounce or ignore if we want to be happy?" Loewald's advice that we attend to the "version of the core of being that the child presents to the parent" (1960, p. 229) can help ensure that our imaginations follow the contours of the child's well-being rather than those of regulatory anxiety (Corbett, 2008). Only then can we hope that our imagination does not go "straight when, in following the patient, it should have gone queer" (Corbett, 2009, p. 139).

In the wake of the recent brutalizing of a gay teenager in the Bronx⁵, Anthony is sitting on my couch fidgeting. When we first met his concern was that my patient, his 5-year-old son, stop playing with dolls. Nowadays it's all about safety. Anthony feels that his son's black skin places him at higher risk for homophobic violence. "What do you envision for him?" I ask. Marking the x where our work has softened his homophobia, he locates a memory from when he was nine. An effeminate adolescent is verbally taunted, then cornered by a bunch of teenagers. As they are threateningly closing in on him, the teen dismounts from his high-heeled platforms, taking them in his hands to ward off his attackers. "That" Anthony says to me playfully "is what I want. That if he ends up in heels, he'll know how to use them."

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⁴ Among the many well-known figures adding their voice to IGB were also Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton, lending state support to the project. Videos by fashion consultant Tim Gunn, transgender activist Kate Bornstein, and Texas councilman Joel Burns stand out as especially moving intergenerational addresses. See also Ann Pellegrini's video addressed to parents.

⁵ <http://abclocal.go.com/wabc/story?section=news/local&id=7713884>

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