

# **We Were Here! We Were Queer!: Remembering the Queer Imagination of Childhood**

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## **I. The Queer Imagination of Childhood**

*We have to reclaim the sacred ground from which the world is made—our imaginations. There is a part of each of us that can see beyond what exists. As children we see so much before we are taught to see everything in boxes and binaries. We have the gift and the responsibility to imagine.*

Adrienne Maree Brown “Dream Beyond the Wounds”

In *Tendencies*, one of the canonical texts for queer theory, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick begins with the tragic end of queer teens’ lives in the US. Written in the tumultuous early 1990s, the years when AIDS was declared the leading cause of death among men aged 25-44 ([cdc.gov](http://cdc.gov)), years when several of Sedgwick’s friends had died of AIDS, and Sedgwick too was battling cancer, it is notable that she opens with urgent concerns over queer youth. This observation, as well as Sedgwick’s argument, isn’t to prioritize one category of early queer death over another but to draw attention to the nation’s recklessly extravagant efforts put forth in “denying and despoiling queer energies and lives” (1). In the previous decades, the religious right ascended into the political sphere through a myriad of strategies; many of which centered around claims to “family values” that profited off of instilling fears around children’s proximity to gays and lesbians. By the 1990s, the religious right was the “most influential special interest group” (Gallagher and Bull, 2). Sedgwick’s accounting of the “queer energies and lives” routinely denied to children maps the dissemination of their tactics: teachers being fired; kids not having access to information, support, respect, and comprehensive sex education; separation of kids from queer parents; the exile of queer culture and queer lives from children; and the “complicity of parents, of teachers, of clergy, even of the mental health professions in invalidating and hounding kids who show gender-dissonant tastes, behavior, [and] body language” (Sedgwick 2). She follows her list with a devastating observation, “Seemingly, this society wants its children to know nothing; wants its queer children to conform or (and this is not a figure of speech) die; and wants not to know that it’s getting what it wants” (3).

A decade after the publication of *Tendencies*, Lee Edelman would shape the anti-social turn in queer theory in *No Future* by rejecting the heteronormative demands to build a “future” for the imagined, normative Child. Refusing the political order structured around such Child-centered futures, Edelman imagines the annihilation of the child, “kid stuff,” and future together. These two theorists are not necessarily opposed in the realm of “kid stuff,” but they are having different conversations about the connections between queerness and children. Sedgwick’s integration of the lives (and deaths) of kids into her expansive explanation of queer is where I locate an exploration

of queer imagination of childhood. In a definition of queer that centers gender and sexuality while also moving beyond it, Sedgwick positions queer power, rather than the disappearance of anti-queer statecraft, as the force that fosters the livelihood of LGBTQ kids. The “irreducible multilayeredness” of queer survival is tied to the “vividly remembered promises made to ourselves in childhood: promises to make invisible possibilities and desires visible; to make the tacit things explicit” (3). Though her reference to childhood is brief, her sharp focus on the dire situations for survival alongside the power of queer tethered to childhood is profound.

As a lesbian parent raising a child in Oklahoma, I wonder what *were* the promises I made to myself as a child growing up in an LDS (Mormon) family in rural Wyoming. Such a question doesn’t launch me blissfully backward into a utopic childhood where I imagined the impossibility of my present identity and made a promise to be a kick-ass lesbian mom. “Lesbian” wasn’t even near the wheelhouse of my imagination. So what were the promises? Can I remember them? Wanting not only to believe Sedgwick but also remember pushes me toward more expansive definitions of queer as well as finding the queer promises of childhood in inconspicuous places. The more I study and consider queer thinking and queer theory, the more I am drawn deeper into the rabbit hole of childhood and find childhood imagination as deeply queer. It is often in the playscapes of my own child’s childhood (conversations, playing, watching cartoons, etc.) that I remember the formidable power of queer imagining.

This article explores the power of the queer imagination of childhood, the need to recognize and remember childhood as queerhood, particularly so with the increase in anti-queer legislation and book bans (Block). Believing Sedgwick’s argument that “something about queer is inextinguishable,” I turn toward children’s cartoons not only as spaces of representation and formation of identity but as playgrounds for queer imagination. I begin by defining the queerness of childhood imagination and its association with queer politics, urging us as adults to remember our own queer imaginations. Then, in order to underscore the importance of childhood as queerhood, I consider the recent increase in book bans and anti-queer statecraft in the US. The tangible consequences of such contexts is indeed worrisome and needs our attention. I argue that what we must also bring to such problems are various ways of recognizing queer thinking and how children and portions of children’s culture provide a necessary and revitalizing energy. I end by examining the Netflix animated series *Centaurworld* (2021) in order to demonstrate how such cartoons can help recover and remember an imaginative, playful queerhood. *Centaurworld* functions as a playground of queer world making as it cultivates queer imagination and becomes a space for the critical optics of hope (Muñoz). Ultimately, I argue that cartoons like *Centaurworld* play a central role in fostering children’s queer imagination, recovering our own queer pasts, and recuperating our queer present in ways that help us confront some of the anti-queer strategies of the state and its actors.

## Understanding Childhood as Queerhood

In describing the qualities of queer, Sedgwick aligns its power through “the open

mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of memory” (8). Sedgwick’s phrases provide different avenues for thinking about our queer thinking as children. Other queer scholars of Sedgwick’s era also craft illuminating notions of queer that similarly expand concepts of gender and sexuality while moving beyond them. To provide texture to the meaning of queer within the context of queer childhood imagination, I draw from queer scholars in Sedgwick’s era as well as current queer scholars. To begin, Cathy Cohen’s reprimanding essay, ‘Punks, Bull Daggers, and Welfare Queens” wherein she points out how lesbian and gay activists in the 90s sequestered the concept of queer by forcing it into a queer/hetero binary. Heteronormativity for those activists represented “the norm” while queer was used to signify the gays and lesbians who were outside of “the norm.” Cohen takes them to task for reinforcing normative categories and taking potential power out of queer politics. Their version of “radical queer politics” is anything but “liberating, transformative, and inclusive of all those who stand on the outside of the dominant constructed norms of state-sanctioned white middle- and upper-class heterosexuality” (441). Instead Cohen imagines queer to move beyond the identities of the LGBTQ community, especially as those within the community are not the only ones disciplined by the norms. Her understanding of queer politics lends itself to pondering queer imagination within a realm like childhood where queer thinking works against norms and expectations.

Gloria Anzaldúa, even in describing her queer identity as connected to gender and sexuality, expands the understanding of “queer,” describing it as the experiences of those who live on a “border.” It is an open category, even as she contextualizes her own queerness as the child of migrant workers, feeling “alien” in her own homeland (*Borderlands*). As part of queer, she includes precarity, creativity, being in-between, having extra senses, and generally understanding and being in the world differently. Many of her examples are not explicitly tethered to gender and sexual identity but are frequently connected to the wonder of childhood. This Anzaldúan approach is important in understanding childhood as queerhood.

Kathryn Bond Stockton suggests that every child is a queer child, positioning “childhood-as-the-queerest-of-categories” (“The Queer Child” 507). Think of how easily children identify with strange objects and strange relations. Stockton writes “Scratch a child, you will find a queer,” meaning that children queerly interact with the world, and that they “approach their destinations, delay; swerve, delay; ride on a metaphor they tend to make material and, so, imagine relations of their own—my dog is my wife’ my dolly is my child” (“Growing Sideways” 278-79). Taking direction from Stockton we can recognize childhood and children as queer, and their imaginative world making, their creative genius, as more prevalent than we might remember. Kids often approach the world in non-normative ways before they are disciplined into ideal citizenships that are recognized by the state. She explains that within the array of queer childhood we must talk in terms of “growing sideways.” Growing sideways is a departure from the expected linear trajectory of childhood into reproductive heteronormative adulthood. It is using strangeness and metaphor to bulk up meaning making.

Scholars of queer culture and theory who write about children work diligently to recenter queer children, their resilience, and their unique insight. This is important

work, especially because, as Stockton points out, the state often does not “believe in [the] overtly same-sex oriented child” (“Growing Sideways” 270). For example, Mark Lipton posits that queer youth are unique in the ways they engage popular culture using a “queer imagination” and queer “world-making” (164). These practices are “interactive” and “resistant” (164). This way of “searching [to] out the (queer) subtext” helps to create the conditions queer youth need in negotiating their identities and ways of being in the world. The importance of queer context cannot be understated within popular culture, but I respectfully depart a bit from Lipton in order to avoid the limiting thought that queer context is only felt or imagined by LGBTQ viewers. Instead, I argue that queer contexts and “queer kids” are more numerous than we perceive when we extend beyond the borders of identity. What if the ability to search to “out” the queer subtext isn’t exclusively the property of queer identified kids but the queerhood of childhood? My departure from Lipton does not take away from the context and cultural experience of LGBTQ kids, who are indeed under dire erasure, and no doubt, have incredibly valuable ways of perceiving and experiencing the world. My purpose within the scope of this paper is to draw attention to childhood as queerhood and the possible realms for queer play and queer memory/recovery.

### **Remembered and Recovered Queer Childhoods**

In addition to Sedgwick’s list of the ways queer lives are denied to children, I argue we also forget our own queer worldviews as children. Anzaldúa explains in an interview that while she has many voices, the one she values the most is “Gloria Gaurita—her little child-self” who is creative, imaginative, open, vulnerable, and tender (61). While Gloria Gaurita is her “main voice,” her child-self also has to grapple with never having a “chance to be a child” (61). Her interviews frequently reflect on the paradox of the presence of a powerful and influential queer imagination as a child as well as a queer childhood so diminished that it is difficult to remember. Shane Moreman helpfully explains this conundrum of queer childhood as everywhere and nowhere. Queer childhood is rarely encouraged by adults or seen as a hopeful aspiration. Therefore, because queer childhood is continually denied, “the queer child is formed in memory and is not necessarily embodied in the present” (188). The remembering is both improvisational and imaginative. For example, Moreman, taking up the practice of *autofantasia* outlined in Isabel Millán’s work, remembers his 4-year-old self through an imaginative reconstruction of time, bringing together his child self with a contemporary children’s book *Jerome by Heart* to draw out a “there-but-not-there visibility” of his “queer Latinx identity” (192).

For Anzaldúa, Moreman, Sedgwick, and Stockton the depiction of a queer childhood is not limited to the childhood experiences and views of LGBTQ kids. Queer children, LGBTQ children, and queer childhood blurs together. The category of queer childhood as a container only for the experiences of LGBTQ kids is limiting as it draws a certain legibility on who has what at stake. This problem emerges more forcefully when we consider how queer childhood is difficult to remember. To be clear, thinking through childhood as queerhood then isn’t to exorcise LGBTQ children out of queer childhood in

a sort of homogenous “it’s a queer world after all” unifying gesture, but to remember childhood as a queerhood for LGBTQ kids *as well as* the queer flights of our imagination we had as children.

Moreman and Millán utilize an imagination that queers time, identity, and text. Anzaldúa, in her theory and accounting of her life and childhood, reflects a re-memory and positions her queer childhood within her adult future. Such remembering reflects Stockton’s sideways growth of childhood that she argues can be best perceived through metaphors “Supple and creative substitutionary chains... seem required for pointing to a kind of growing that is not a growing up” (281). Along with Anzaldúa’s paradoxically powerful queer childhood, Moreman and Millán’s fantasies as creative re-memory, and Stockton’s metaphor stretch through time. Past, present, and futures coalesce in what Moreman describes as “happy modes of fantasy that can temporarily release one from painful materiality” (187). Importantly, such fantasies are not mere escapes but experiences that can create and change queer futures (187). While the barely remembered queerness of childhood combined with the ongoing foreclosure of children’s queer texts and contexts feels bleak, the recognition of childhood as queerhood opens us to many possibilities particularly within the realm of the fantastical imagining. People (of all ages) learning to recognize and reunite with it once again, in whatever format they find, is restorative. We need to remember, we need to reconcile, we need to expand and grow sideways ourselves, thicken our recognition of queer thought and its virtuosos.

## **II. Book Bans and Curricular Laws and the Erasure of Childhood as Queerhood**

Now decades from the publication of *Tendencies*, Sedgwick’s list of queer contexts denied to children aren’t relics of a homophobic past. In fact, her list grows thick with ongoing anti-queer statecraft in the realm of children. Certainly, things have changed since the 1990s. Throughout popular culture, LGBTQ+ representation in film, television, celebrity culture, books, music, and video games has increased considerably. Through social media, many youth also have avenues for exploring and expressing their identities. Some LGBTQ+ youth have access to supportive clubs and social groups (in-person and virtual), and some queer, trans, and non-binary youth have access to affirming health care. Yet a discouraging amount of past and present anti-queer state policies orbiting the realm of childhood stands in opposition to these supports. In the US in 2022, nearly 240 anti-LGBTQ state bills were proposed, a 500% increase from 2018 (“Legislation Increase”). Florida’s 2022 Parental Rights in Education Bill, popularly known as the “Don’t Say Gay” law, exemplifies current policies deployed to ensure that “children know nothing” while limiting representation and supportive spaces for LGBTQ kids or kids with queer families in schools and other public spaces. Other states have passed or are attempting to pass their own versions of the bill, and in October of the same year House Republicans proposed the “Stop the Sexualization of Children Act,” federal legislation with a more expansive reach than state parental rights bills (Sosin, Wamsley).

Along with record-breaking numbers of anti-LGBTQ legislation targeting youth, book bans also surged in 2021 and 2022 in the US (Block). The bans are bolstered by curricular legislation prohibiting instruction related to the state lawmakers' perception of "critical race theory" and "diversity, equity, and inclusion" as well as "don't say gay" laws and bills targeting queer, trans, and non-binary youth in schools and extracurricular activities. PEN America catalogued 1,586 bans<sup>1</sup> against 1,145 titles in over 3,000 schools (2 million students) in 26 states from July 2021 to March 2022. While book bans have had a long history in the US, PEN notes the state's unprecedented involvement as 41% of the bans were initiated through state lawmakers and officials implementing educational gag orders.<sup>2</sup> The impact of the current surge in book bans is difficult to measure especially when considering the chilling effects that ripple through schools and public libraries that want to avoid controversy, the censorship of authors' and illustrators' creative efforts, and the limitation on representation and conversations. Certainly, the state's deployment of curricular laws and book bans create greater stigma for LGBTQ students and students from LGBTQ families (Rosky 1461). Even as I argue that children have powerfully queer imaginations, I also recognize that such creative "sideways" thinking isolated from diverse representations of children and their families is not enough to sustain the LGBTQ youth in the crosshairs of state legislation. In addition to these concerns are the normative ways children are framed through the state. "Don't say gay" and "anti-critical race theory" laws portray the child as straight, white, and cisgender in ways that resonate with Lauren Berlant and Lee Edelman's queer critiques of "the Child"—an enigma through which a heteronormative present and future are sanctioned. These current trends in legislation stem from a long history of curricular laws in the nation that reinforce childhood as an unimaginative, naive yet idyllic, white heteronormativity, and the bans of LGBTQ children's picture books in particular double down on that framing, seeking to shield children from an "introduction" to non-normative thinking as well as LGBTQ contexts and cultures.

In asking what is at stake within the debates over LGBTQ children's literature, our attention should also turn to the way book bans naturalize heteronormativity. Through the naturalization of heteronormativity, the targeting of LGBTQ picture books not only reinforce the ongoing denial that queer kids, teens, and families exist, but it also naturalizes the notion that kids are not the creators of queer thought. The state, as it legislates its way through book bans and curricular laws, shrouds children's queer imaginations, refusing childhood as queerhood. While much is at stake through book bans, recognizing the child caricatured as devoid of queer being (in relation to identity) as well as incapable of queer thinking (in those expansive ways Sedgwick, Anzaldúa, and Stockton frame the "child-self") opens reflection on how various queerhoods and childlike ways of imagining are also under erasure.

### **LGBTQ Children's Books and the Naturalization of Normative Childhood**

Importantly, the inability to recognize childhood as queerhood does not exclusively stem from anti-LGBTQ legislation and book banning. In terms of the naturalization of the normative (unimaginative) child, the anti-queer culture around the

book bans and the queer-friendly culture promoting LGBTQ children's picture books are not diametrically opposed. Proponents of the literature as well as those rallying around bans generally see the books as the cultural artifacts that contain the power to disrupt the status quo. Of course these are very different conversations fueled by oppositional hopes for the proponents of the books and terrors for the antagonists of the books: One, LGBTQ kids will be supported and flourish (and not die), and, two, kids will become familiar with and embrace. From opposite ends, they reduce the image of the child as yet-to-be-introduced to queer thinking. Just as the state positions children and childhood away from queerness through legislation and book bans, the cultural support for the books also reinforces the similar notions through framing the books as indispensable "introductions" to queer-friendly ways of thinking.<sup>3</sup>

For example, in a 2020 article for *Romper*, readers are told Todd Parr's *The Family Book* (2010) "introduces children to the many ways you can be a family" and Lesléa Newman's *Donovan's Big Day* (2011) will "introduce your child to the concept of same sex marriage" (Miller). In another article, we learn that Jessica Love's *Julian is a Mermaid* "introduces the idea of gender expression," Roy Youldous-Raiss's *A Day of Pride* will "introduce the idea of self-worth and celebrating other people's differences," and Robb Perlman's *Pink is for Boys* "allows kids to question society's rigid beliefs" (Sharkey). Through our current cultural imagination, LGBTQ children's books carry a heavy burden—being THE thing that introduces and cultivates queer thinking or at the very least tolerance for the non-normative. No doubt the growing body of children's literature contributes to a rich discourse of including and admiring difference, yet simultaneously the queer imagination of childhood continues to be misplaced as books are thought to "introduce" kids to different ways of understanding and questioning "rigid beliefs."

The ways the books are mediated as "introductions" curtails our recognition of childhood as queerhood in the sense of imagining children as normative—having naturalized unfamiliarity with LGBTQ identity, families, and culture. But more to my point, such positioning also ignores the expansively queer or "sideways" imaginings children already have about life beyond many rigid beliefs about families, relationships, and realities. "This book introduces" imagines that queerness is not evident in our surroundings, in the mundane, in our identities, and that it is not already part of the everyday for children and their imaginations. This is not to argue that we are already immersed in an easily recognizable queerness and that we can put aside any efforts to explore the richness of difference. Instead, it is to spur thinking about the strange and terrible problem of eradicating queer childhood imagination. As we have yet to abandon the claims of the child as a non-queer thinking being, childhood as queerhood will remain elusive to our adult selves.

We cannot and should not rely on LGBTQ children's books to do the heavy lifting in the recovery of queer imagination. With book bans, all is not lost even though they no doubt impact the positive representational effects that kids and adults need. However, we shouldn't presume that book bans create a dire scarcity in representational and non-normative queer content. We should also more readily recognize the problem of imagining that children's imaginations are already/naturally mired in

heteronormativity, needing (or risking) the introduction to queerness by concerned adults. Moreover, rather than positioning our adult selves as the arbiters of their security and freedom, two concepts wrapped up in anti-queer legislation and book bans, we can turn to the realm of children's imagination to recover our own lost queerhoods. In doing so, we learn to recognize other texts as "playgrounds" for queer imagination.

### **III. *Centaurworld*: A Playground for Sideways Voyages into Queer Utopia**

Cartoons have always been fertile ground for the wild imagination of childhood and they are an exceptional genre for the playfulness of queer imagination. Of course, cartoons also contain anti-queer, and anti-feminist messaging in ways like other children's television (Myers). They too are shaped by racial, sexual, gender, and class hierarchies, and aired through networks for corporate profit. Many cartoons are about growing up and away from any sideways being. In addition, as Jake Pitre argues, queer contexts and subtexts in children's cartoons are repeatedly diluted or censored. Yet even when the scripts of normativity constrain what seems possible and legible, the queer sideways directions so prevalent in cartoons can disturb what is being naturalized.

Cartoons are often facilitators of queer thinking, making the process of accessing queer imagination easier for the rest of us whose imaginations diminished along with our childhood, especially as the queer imagination of childhood is eroded in numerous ways for everyone not just queer children. Cartoons not only resemble but *reassemble* the sideways voyage into childhood as queerhood, a fattening up of queerhood through strange meanderings and unpredictable, paradoxical adventures full of contradiction, nonsense, odd hilarities, fear, and loving. As Stockton argues, "we are likely to find that metaphors are crucial to the love of sideways growth" ("*Growing Sideways*" 281), and the cartoons themselves are the metaphors that move, the vehicles for sideways thinking. The sideways directional growth of queer childhood nurtures queer power and storytelling, and these animated stories become the playgrounds for kids (and adults) to fling wide their ideas and sense of astonishment. Shows like Cartoon Network's *Adventure Time* (2010-2018) and *Steven Universe* (2013-2019) and Netflix's *Centaurworld* (2021), *Dead End* (2022), and *Kipo and the Age of Wonderbeasts* (2020) have brought prominent LGBTQ representation.<sup>4</sup> These particular cartoons are also exceptional in the ways they center queer imagination that resists norms and valued standards while "playing" within normative dystopias. Such shows frame their narratives within childhood already imagined as a queerhood.

Some cartoons more than others, become playgrounds for queer imagination as they avoid a direct linear narrative with a moral message intended for every viewer. Instead they are a bewildering meandering, a jumping from play structure to play structure with no clear rules—a playground for a multitude of sideways voyages, some of which seem incomprehensible or discomfiting for adult viewers. Such cartoons offer a unique practice of queer world building where viewers, as well as creators, play with multiple trajectories.

Megan Nicole Dong's animated musical comedy *Centaurworld* (2021) centers queer world building resistant to naturalized norms, not only around identity but also



the naturalization of the eradication of queer childhood. The series performs the crucial work of recovering queer memory and shoring up the queer imagination of childhood. In this final section, I use *Centaurworld* as a playground to illustrate imaginative directions that illuminate childhood as queerhood and show how a playful “childish” cartoon works against the ongoing anti-queer childhood of the state and its reified norms. After briefly describing the show, I draw attention to a few of the sideways voyages in *Centaurworld* that illustrate queer imagination. The first is the complexity of the queerly fraught family/herd that moves beyond mere representation and normative belonging. The second is the playful but serious contests over the logic of protection, and the third is the ever-present saturation of dis/comfort as queer being. I conclude by demonstrating how all three examples coalesce into what José Muñoz names a “critical optic” of hope while remembering and recovering a queerhood utopia (4).

The show opens in the theater of war as “Horse” (Kimiko Glen), a war horse, plummets into a deadly drop off a cliff, falling away from her beloved “Rider” (Jessie Mueller). Horse wakes in *Centaurworld*, a brightly colored world inhabited by centaurs of all animal types. The bewildered Horse realizes she can now talk, point with her front hooves, and do math. She meets a herd led by a pink alpaca-taur, Wammawink (Megan Hilty), Zulus, a zebrataur (Parvesh Cheona), Durpleton, a giraffetaur (Josh Radnor), Glendale, a gerenuk-taur (Megan Nicole Dong), and Ched, a finch-taur (Chris Diamantopoulos). Not only are the rules of physics stretchy but the characters are as well with animal-human-horse bodies that contort and shape in unnatural and hilarious ways. In their “nightly magic song” they boast about their magical powers to Horse; their “spells for days” consists of “shapely mane,” “sparkle blinkies,” “handsome for eight seconds,” “prehensile eyes,” “stretchy neck times,” and “portal tummy” (“Hello Rainbow Road”). They can also shoot tiny versions of themselves out of their own hooves. Surprisingly, yet somehow logically, the tiny versions immediately experience existential crises and run away screaming. Horse, grossed out at a world “so clean and colorful,” while also unsettling, nonsensical, and inexplicable, wants nothing to do with the group. When Wammawink admits her herd is “a lot,” Horse, surprised, responds “You guys are a herd? You don’t look like one,” drawing side-eye from Wammawink who responds “Well, we are, okay. Our herd may look different, but we take care of each other. Because that what families do. Don’t you know what that’s like?” Realizing she does in her bond with Rider, Horse asks the group for help. The two seasons follow the chosen herd as they travel “the Rainbow Road” throughout *Centaurworld* to help Horse reunite with Rider.

### ***Queer Herd/Wild Kinships***

The first episodes begin mapping some of the significant queer trajectories of the series one of which is queer belonging and kinship. The herd represents kinship in some of the expected ways of signaling queer culture—there are different types of relationships and affinities, diverse expressions of identities, non-patriarchal power structures, and family building around drag and performance. For example, in “Johnny Teatime’s Be Best Competition: A Quest for the Sash,” Zulus becomes a sort of drag

mother for Horse, helping her don heals and sing a heartfelt ballad about Rider. These direct connections to queer culture condition the representation of the herd in a clear manner. Yet the queer tropes go farther than aligning with representative culture. The herd avoids the picture book sheen of normativity by pushing the meaning of family in multiple directions. In other words, when it comes to family, the relationships in *Centaurworld* go sideways. Family is fraught and fought over. It is real and ethereal as well as full of contradiction. The bond between Horse and Rider is ever-present even as Rider is an enigma, and Horse worries Rider has forgotten her or won't recognize her.

Tangled within their joyful, funny adventuring, the herd, as well as Horse, carry trauma. They try to help each other work through it, though not always cleanly. Their different backstories are messy, reoccurring, and devastating. They cannot be resolved in one episode. Collectively they have experienced genocide, loss of loved ones, abandonment by parents and communities who shunned them, massive hits to their self-esteem, and public humiliation. Trauma is part of the characters and therefore their kinships.

Across a few episodes Wammawink's difficult backstory surfaces, and she becomes withdrawn to the point of becoming immobile. Horse then carries the unresponsive alpacataur on her back. The image is strange and silly. Horse packs around a "backstory" that she cannot fully understand. The narrative manages to convey concern and care while also finding humor, adventure, and unexpected detours. The episodes incorporate trauma as serious and in need of tender care, avoiding the use of pain and injury as easy humor so prevalent in cartoons. But the show carries this trauma, just as Horse does, as queer grief through absurd and joyful landscapes of queer pleasure, queering the ways we think about pain, kinship, and the duration of mourning. As Sara Ahmed argues, we are "shaped by [our] proximity to some bodies" and that the stories of histories of pain become a complex "involvement" that "cannot be 'taken in'... without feeling differently about those histories, and without inhabiting the surfaces of bodies and worlds differently" (36). As *Centaurworld* captures this concept of queer feeling through the herd, their kinships become wild departures from children's narratives of family that sequester grief and pleasure not only away from each other but from the experimental playing of its effect/affect on the family and community.

*Centaurworld* adds to the complexity of queer family and queer belonging not simply because of its extended playscape of a series with hours of storytelling, a luxury not afforded to picture books, but because of the contradictions, the struggles, the belonging and non-belonging, the burden of the herd that enriches the context and provides many jumping off points in thinking about togetherness. Difference, rather than being incorporated or ignored, as Lorde describes it so often is, becomes a rich, immersive, creative playground of grief, pleasure, and unrestrained silliness.

### ***Protection and Paradox***

Just as the wild kinships of *Centaurworld* offer a playscape of queer family and feeling, the show's frequent conundrums highlight the delightful unsettling of ideologies often imagined out of the reach of children. The state and its authority figures, including

groups of parents concerned over queer content, claim the ownership of the rhetoric of protection. As we see in book bans and curricular legislation, books, identities, gendered spaces, bodies, families, education, words, and activities all become challenged or forbidden in the name of protecting children or protecting parent's rights to protect their children from queer (imagined as dangerous) contexts. Indeed, as Paul Amar illustrates, children become "hubs" of security, and are seen as objects for security. The logic of security and protection often refuses to recognize children's agency or the ways the state will criminalize them in order to "secure" other children's protection (573). *Centaurworld*, rather than refusing the contest over the rhetoric of protection, promotes it as a central paradox.

In describing the writing of James Baldwin, Matt Brim's description of Baldwin's own queer imagination and use of paradox is useful here. He explains that queer imagination is a creativity that contains "surprising contradictions and unexpected ruptures" and is full of paradox (2). As the herd leaves the Valley they engage in the "Fragile Things" musical debate/duet over protection. Even the show's trailer focuses on this early disagreement over protection. Setting off on the rainbow road, Horse sings to the herd about war time courage and finding the resolve to be your own protector. Wammawink interjects that they need to be aware of their own vulnerability and that she will watch over them. The ensuing duet/duel harmonizes conflicting ideas. Wammawink sings with Horse's lyrics following and intermixing.

Wammawink: We are all just fragile things, soft and small

(Horse: You can all be fearless, too)

We haven't been here before

(You can fight for yourselves)

Outside can harm you

(You are alright by yourselves)

Just stay close

('Cause you know)

I'll protect you

(Only you can protect you)

Together they sing: See this is why I should be leading the way... Clearly, she's wrong/ You should believe me when I say ("Fragile Things")

The song gets more than one reprise throughout the show's two seasons, as the context for protection is continually resituated. The character's relations to the ideas of protection continually shift, creating an alternative ideology for protection—that it is always up for debate.

Even in the face of vulnerability, the perplexing idea that there is no settled protection scheme seems to grant a sort of protection through maintaining the ambivalent paradox for something so urgent. In the show's trailer, following part of the "Fragile Things" disagreement, an eerie war scene is overlaid with an ominous voice asking, "What were you thinking?" As the scene fades to black, the voice warns "You are going to be the undoing of this world." After the briefest of pauses, the bright purples and blues of a starlit twilight return along with the happy herd joyfully singing in chorus "So say bye to the old/And hello to that rainbow road," signaling the character's happy

delight in playing with a de/reconstruction of the world.

As Brim notes, queer is a “site of contest,” and through it protection gets a paradoxical fattening up, not in the sense of adding more and more protection but more and more context and conundrums (5). New narratives of protection are invented, some fall apart, and others merge in hybrid formations while still being debated. While the threat of “breaking the world” lurks, the paradox of protection becomes something to play with along a rainbow road. It slides up to the paradox Brim finds within Baldwin’s work —“a puzzle every time” that one might have difficulty knowing while only recognizing it “when it surprises and confounds you the most” (3).

### *Dis/Comfort*

As protection is played with and reimagined in fantastic ways throughout the show, so too are comfort and discomfort. Accompanying the strange and unorthodox bodies of all the creatures in *Centaurworld*, are ongoing conversations and songs about dis/comfort. Not only are the bodies of the centaurs all different, often stretched in strange ways, the bodies themselves change. The longer Horse is in *Centaurworld*, the more her body changes from war horse to curvy, stout pony. Her distress over her changing body is carried through the first season. But the writing of the show deepens Horse’s changes by incorporating Horse’s choices and actions into what happens with her body. While the changing feels beyond her control, the writers hang on to a slippery narrative of dis/comfort by connecting Horse’s ongoing self-realization to her *Centaurworld* identity.

One of the herd’s adventures in finding a way back to Rider involves Horse competing in Johnny Teatime’s Be Best competition, a pageant the centaurs host every day to keep themselves mentally healthy after the Great War destroyed most of their valley (“Johnny Teatime’s”). Horse is reluctant to compete but does so in hopes of winning the sash with a key she needs. Zulus, who is coded in a way to reflect ballroom culture, helps her prepare and tells her to “be best,” meaning be the best version of herself. Dressed in four thigh high boots and a big updo wig, Horse tries to “fake it till she makes it.” She enters the stage with her boots barely balanced on a tight rope until she clumsily collapses and does an uncool slide down the rope. The imagery with the tight rope sets the tone for a sideways meandering of what it means to “be best.” Deeply uncomfortable and confused throughout the hilarious competition, she participates in three events: the cat lick hairdo, the litter box obstacle course, and the ignore the laser pointer. The latter being her only success, she fails to fake it. During the talent (read drag) portion, switching tempo and mood mid-song she says, “This isn’t working!,” shakes out her wig, kicks off her boots, and sings the rest of “Who is She?” Through this self-affirming ballad Horse tells the spectators,

She is flawed, but she’s learning  
She is odd, but she’s yearning for someone worth it  
This is hard, but she’s worth it  
Hey, Johnny, I might not be your cup of tea  
But there’s no cat here in the valley quite like me  
Here I am, for all to see, when you’re asking:  
Who is she?

The song and Horse's persistence on being herself reach toward an expected conclusion of being rewarded and admired for being yourself especially when different.

But Horse's empowerment takes an unexpected direction. As she finishes the crowd gasps and cheers—she has completely transformed. No longer the angular and muscular horse, she becomes, as Durpleton describes with delight, “wibbly-wobbly.” Horse hates it as well as her rainbow tears and her sentient “stand-up comic” tail (Paul F. Thompkins) that frequently embarrasses her. While the show's subject of discomfort with bodies has many contexts for children and young adults, the show, like the Be Best competition, pushes what's best in a multiplicity of directions. What's “best,” one's comfort, self-recognition, and even coming out aren't linear nor static in Centaurworld.

Such sideways storytelling leans in the direction of Ahmed's queer theorization of dis/comfort. Ahmed describes discomfort as a feeling of “disorientation” that feels “awkward [and] unsettled” while comfort is the feeling of sinking leisurely into a place where one fits the norms (148). Defining heterosexuality as a form of “public comfort” that “allows bodies to extend into spaces that have already taken their shape,” Ahmed illustrates the ways that norms become naturalized and unnoticed. One who sinks into the comfort of heteronormativity “does not notice this *as a world*” because they have been “shaped by that world, and even acquired its shape” (148). Discomfort then is a queer feeling of being “out of place” so that the dissonance between the normative condition and the queer body draws attention to what has been unrecognized or naturalized. Her approach illuminates a sort of queer power within discomfort— “The closer that queer subjects get to the spaces defined by heteronormativity the more the potential there is for a reworking of the heteronormative, partly as the proximity ‘shows’ how the spaces extend some bodies rather than others” (152). Horse repeatedly fails to sink into any normative public comforts while also not being in constant despair. Her fluctuation with dis/comfort resembles an unscripted queerness that refuses public comfort through agreed upon norms. Her discomfort becomes part of the powerful narratives that value the unexpected and refuse to resolve into the traditional “growing up” tropes.

Clearly Centaurworld itself refuses a (hetero)normativity, and many of its inhabitants queer comfort, suffusing enormous value in discomfort as comfort. One of its beloved characters, Comfortable Doug (Flula Borg), embodies this queer dis/comfort. Comfortable Doug is a moletaur drawn with a fleshy, smooth, nipples torso topped with a globe of a head with a thin mouth as its only feature. His bottom half is very hairy, even for Centaurworld, and out of proportion with his top half. He sweats endlessly. After winning the Be Best Competition, beating out Horse in a further unexpected delightfully bizarre ending, he returns a few episodes later to sing “The Hero of My Story” (“The Rift, part 1). “Come forth and give love, to Comfortable Doug,” he tells those gathered and then sings the story of his life where he “never found a husband or a wife/ Never found a thing to love, or something to go after.” Deciding to leave his life as a “night guard in the Moletaur jail” he surfaces only to win Johnny's Competition and realizes he recently “*became* Comfortable Doug.” The song, again avoiding an oversimplified insisting on finding comfort, detours into him asking several present if they are comfortable. Some are, some are not, some don't know, and some are annoyed

that he has interrupted the rising action of the show's first season, the herd's farewell to Horse. The emotional range of this episode is a perfectly orchestrated series of scenes that underscore the flexibility and the illusory feelings of comfort and discomfort. While many of the characters are bewildered by what seems to be the wrapping up of their story with Horse, the episode doubles down on discomfort, plunging viewers deeper into queer imagination, into childhood as queerhood. While I watch with my own young daughter, I weep at the strange farewell while also cringing at the awkwardness of the offbeat interruptions. She squirms and laughs with clear, raucous joy, reveling in *Centaurworld's* reciprocity, knowing her imagination and sideways feelings are being recognized and encouraged to follow their many lines of flight.

The queer imagination of childhood is creative thinking, untethered from norms and upward growth. It relentlessly pushes strange and wild kinships, incongruous reasoning, and blatant disregard for the comforts of the norm. It is a force we can and should reckon with. Edelman's concerns over the "Child," who Stockton describes as a "singularity" that is imagined in order to kill pleasure and shape the "brutish," normative world, remains valid ("The Queer Child" 531). Such concerns are driving the anti-queer fervor of book bans and the need to "protect" the "Child" by protecting its parent's rights to demand we don't say "gay." But outside of that singularity of the Child are actual children who are diverse, creative, weird, and not quite fully tethered to adult realities. Perhaps this is why there is so much state craft around keeping children sequestered from queer lives and queer thinking. It isn't an "introduction" to queer living that is being shrouded, but a quarantine of our own queerhoods as children and the ongoing prevention of that adult recognition— which, if allowed, would be a powerful nod to a child's formidable creative power to playfully bend what we deem "reality" and "possibility."

Even in the hellscape of book bans and curricular legislation, I conclude with the belief in queer utopias and the ideas of Muñoz. Even in his agreement with Edelman about the anti-queer reproductive futurity of the Child, he turns instead to a "critical optic" of hope (92, 4). Acknowledging the difficulty in maintaining a steadfast belief in utopianism when "cultural analysis is dominated by an antiutopianism often functioning as a poor substitute for actual critical intervention," he puts his thinking and hope towards a queer futurity (4). Recognizing the need for a critical imagination, he asks us to not just "reconsider ideas such as hope and utopia" but also to "feel hope and to feel utopia" (18). Such a hopeful yearning for feeling can be found in the quotidian as well as the astonishing even when they end up being the same, just like the everyday cartoon can fill us with delight, discomfort, and curiosity. While Muñoz, like Edelman, disregard the "kid stuff," what if some of this "kid stuff" is the original queer stuff?

What does children's queer imagination do for queer adults, their pasts, and their futures? Perhaps like the songs of *Centaurworld* we can get a reprise. In the tradition of *autofantasia*, we can recover our own queerhoods by recognizing and encouraging the queer imagination of childhood. In Muñoz's queer futurity, time itself is queered, so the horizon of your childhood is still and always there.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> PEN categorizes book bans in schools as actions taken against books by legislators, community members and organizations, or administrators due to content. These actions include complete removals or restrictions that reduce accessibility. It does not include regular curricular updates and “collection weeding” or decisions on whether districts choose to not purchase a book, but it does apply when there is a blanket prohibition on a title.

<sup>2</sup> One Texas state representative issued a list of 850 books to be banned, arguing that they “might make students feel discomfort, guilt, anguish, or any other form of psychological distress because of their race or sex” (Chappell). It is no surprise that his list as well as other bans target stories of underrepresented groups. Several (22%) of the banned books during the nine-month period addressed issues of racism, and 33% had characters or themes related to LGBTQ identity or culture. Also banned are non-fiction books about civil rights, equality in education, human reproduction, book banning and burning, puberty, teen suicide, dating and relationships, religion, histories of Supreme Court cases related to student lives, legal rights for teens, human physiology, and the history of enslavement in the US (Friedman and Farid Johnson).

<sup>3</sup> Clearly the argument of the erasure of childhood as queerhood lends itself to an analysis of the actual books as well as the supporting culture. Other scholars (Esposito, Young, Hermann-Wilmarth and Ryan among others) have argued that many LGBTQ children’s books indulge in heteronormative and homonormative themes for various reasons, thereby diluting what could be a powerful queer narrative. An analysis of the exploration of childhood as queerhood in these same texts would resonate with these critiques as well as depart from the exclusive focus on identity markers for queerhood, but for the purposes of this article I keep my focus on how the books are framed through promotional LGBTQ-friendly media.

<sup>4</sup> Recently researchers at *Insider* created a database of 256 LGBTQ characters in US cartoons from the 1980s to 2021, noting that representation has surged within the last few years. In 2019, the peak year for representation, 74 LGBTQ characters made their debuts (White and Chik).

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