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### The Queer Child in Retrospect

Children often hold a central part in the narrative of queerphobia. Right wing talk show hosts will say that ‘queer people will turn your kids gay!’, and parents will wonder why their teen is saying they’re transgender when they were ‘such a normal kid.’ In a heteronormative society, we frame children as the vulnerable people who must be “protected” from queerness. But, people and films alike are continuously disrupting this narrative as society becomes more queer-friendly- films like *I Saw the TV Glow* and *Moonlight*, which portray queer childhood as a complex and often hidden experience in our society. A large focus of both of these films are on childhood; and the queerness of adolescence. However, there is also a focus on queer temporality. The queer child does not exist in a linear progression of identity, but rather as fragmented retrospective figures reconstructed through memory and context. Both of these films are baked in nostalgia- with the protagonists living in the 90s as kids, and modern day as adults. And with that knowledge- it’s not unreasonable to assume that the past in these films are not perfect, but rather memories by an unreliable narrator. Using these films, queer theories, and statistical data, it can be shown how queerness shapes and is shaped by childhood, highlighting the erasure, self-discovery, and resilience of queer identities within a heteronormative world and extremely heteronormative childhood.

Both *Moonlight* and *I Saw the TV Glow* explore the isolation of queer childhood. In *Moonlight*, Chiron's journey begins with his identity as 'Little,' a young boy who struggles to navigate his identity and his role in the world. He's shown from the first scenes to be a target of bullying, hiding away in a crackhouse to escape his pursuers. He's often shown to be nearly silent- shrinking into his surroundings and opting into silence and observation. Chiron has two allies- Juan (his father figure) and Kevin (his romantic interest). Chiron leaves Juan, as Juan was selling drugs to his mother. And Kevin, in a dramatic turn, is socially pressured to fight Chiron. This is much the same in *I Saw the TV Glow*, where Owen continuously struggles in his social relations. Apart from his mother and his lone friend Maddy, Owen is never shown to have a positive social interaction with anyone. Instead of friends, he puts his cathexis into a show, the Pink Opaque, which he uses as a lens to make sense of his fragmented reality. When he loses both Maddy (disappeared), his mother (dead), and the Pink Opaque (cancelled) at the same time in early teenhood, he's left completely alone.

Both Chiron and Owen are awkward children, but the similarity and effectiveness of their isolation is notable. Taking these events in the film as symbology, this is the isolation one feels when they realize they are different. In childhood, both Chiron and Owen are ignorant to the fact that there is something going on with them. In both films, the children exist in the blind spot of their own identity, while everyone else seems to catch on. Chiron's mother says to Juan: "What, so you gon' raise my son now, huh? You ever see the way he walk, Juan? You gon' tell him why the other boys kick his ass all the time? You gon' tell him?" The kids who bully Chiron recognize he's different, his parental figures (Juan and Paula) likely recognize he's queer, but Chiron himself is confused. He may know he's different, he knows he's the target of bullying for some reason, but his potential queerness is a blind spot to himself at this stage/age. Things are no

different for Owen, who, when he's a little older, says "When I think about [my sexuality], it feels like someone... took a shovel and dug out all my insides... And I know there's nothing in there, but I'm still too nervous to open myself up and check. I know there's something wrong with me. My parents know it too, even if they don't say anything." It's unclear if Owen knows that they're queer, but it's not hard to think their mother does. In one of her last scenes, she says; "Just want you to know you're on the right path, you know?" This could be read as her suggesting Owen is on the heteronormative path, but because she has always been an ally to Owen throughout the movie, especially opposed to their father, and because it's obvious Owen isn't on the heteronormative path, it may be more plausible that the 'path' she refers to is Owen's individual path, their path of queer self-discovery. Again, Owen is only aware something is wrong with them, but it seems the people around them are aware of underlying aspects of their emerging identity.

The blind spot shown in these films isn't realistic for most queer kids- if it was, the act of 'coming out' wouldn't be so common. Rather, the isolation and the blind spot these characters face is representative of what childhood looks like retrospectively. In a present in which someone recognizes they are queer, the past in which they didn't know they were queer seems uncomfortable, it makes their childhood self look not-whole. To start with isolation, it's representative of the depression anyone who feels not-whole feels. When one hides their identity, it's hard to be happy. For the blind spot, that's us making sense of our confusing past. When we sit in the present, without knowledge of queerness, we believe *it must've been obvious that we were queer. How did I not recognize earlier?* But this is fallacious, as we can only recognize we're queer once we know what queerness is. Which makes queer youth quite interesting. But, what we see in queer youth is still a lack in identity and questioning of the self.

While they do learn to view themselves as their expressed gender (not natal sex), they have a much weaker concept of identity than control groups of children do (Olson et al). Some may say this gives reason to believe the heteronormative framework- as queer children are not fully aware of what being queer means. But, who is completely aware of what being queer means?

Queerness is as much about self discovery as it is identity, and even adult queer people struggle knowing what being trans, gay, etc means to them. These children rather reject the heteronormative framework, and show that when educated on what queerness is, they have the ability to navigate through that queer space.

Which brings us into self-discovery, which both characters have very different methods of it at the same time in their life. There's an argument to be made that Owen's self discovery is only at the end of the film- when he (as a reference to earlier in the film) symbolically cuts open his chest to dig out his insides, showing what's really inside of him, but we see in early scenes of Owen that he incredibly resonates with the Pink Opaque- something relatable for many queer youth. Media serves as a crucial tool for children to learn about the world, including learning about the queer world. The Pink Opaque is a late night, eerie, supernatural show that blurs the lines between fantasy and reality, and Owen finds himself feeling like he is one of the characters, Isabel. It offers sanctuary for Owen, and the queer subtext allows him to learn about what he may be. What happens later in the show is suppression, not a lack of knowledge.

And this is the issue for many queer children- as how can a child be queer if they don't have a full concept of what queerness is? Access to queerness for children has always been a barrier to discovery. When queer people are labelled deviants and representation of queer people in media are hidden, it becomes impossible for a child in a heteronormative world to learn the

possibility of queerness: “If I had know the term ‘transgender’ when I was a teenager in the 1970s, I’m sure I would have grabbed hold of it like a life jacket on rough seas” (Halberstam). When kids know what queerness is, their potential of identity is unlocked (See Olson et al, discussed previously). This possibility is something many only learn in their later teenhood; the queer adult exists, but the queer child only exists in retrospect. Mainstream understanding of childhood does not allow for the existence of the queer child- we assume that childhood is a time of purity: free from the complexities of the outside world, including the complexities of queerness. The language we use around queerness in youth- from ‘queer awakening’ to ‘coming out’ to it being ‘a phase,’ all suggest a child is cisgender/straight before queer from a heteronormative perspective. As a heteronormative society, we simply don’t have the ability to frame the possibility of a queer child through language; queerness is antithetical to what a child is (Gill-Peterson). Childhood is innocent; queerness is sexual. Childhood is simple and comes naturally; queerness is complex and requires discovery. Childhood is a time of learning societal rules; queerness rejects societal rules and norms. However, reality does not align with these expectations of childhood. Early adolescents receive a huge boost in libido due to the increase in hormonal compounds such as testosterone, estrogen, or GnRH. Childhood is, in many ways like queerness, not simple and is a time of self-discovery, we only frame childhood as being easy in the retrospective as we become adults and face more serious challenges. And kids and teens alike are known for rebellion and questioning authority- this doesn’t make queerness ‘childish,’ it makes queerhood and childhood a time of questioning the functions of the world around us (Stockton).

Self discovery plays out much differently for Chiron- he asks in childhood to Juan “What is a faggot?” and then “Am I a faggot?” The response he gets is that *no one* gets to call him a

faggot, but he'll know when he knows if he likes boys. Later, in the second act 'Chiron,' Chiron has a dream of Kevin hitting it from the back on another person- and later, he himself gets intimate with Kevin on a quiet beach night. Juan and Kevin both act as guiding figures for Chiron in the film, and both share some qualities- they're both associated with the beach, both wear the same earrings, both are both seen cradling Chiron's head at one point. In different ways, they are queer educators to Chiron. Juan teaches Chiron what being gay is, and that there isn't anything to be ashamed about. Kevin is Chiron's first (and as far as we know only) love interest, and that experience teaches a lot. These similarities may be coincidence, but both of these characters are important queer mentors to Chiron, and inform who he becomes in the third act as 'Black'.

Both Owen and Chiron receive a level of queer knowledge- one from a show, the Pink Opaque, and one from queer mentorship. And both of these resources are taken from both of these characters as they progress into adulthood, and what we see from that is a closed off adult who is putting on a performance of someone they aren't. For Owen, he's still quiet, asthmatic, apologetic for his existence. And he's getting himself into the American Dream that he doesn't care about. For Chiron, he becomes 'black,' a hardened drug dealer who needs to keep up his masculinity via musculature and is nearly unrecognizable to his former self. These are unhealed people, carrying on burdens from their childhood. In the end of *I Saw the TV Glow*, when Owen cuts open his chest, they reveal TV static in there- reminiscent of their childhood and the Pink Opaque. And in the end of *Moonlight*, Chiron has never gotten over his intimacy with Kevin- even now that Kevin has a kid and is seemingly fulfilled in life. In both of these cases, the film shows nostalgia and retrospectivity. In many ways, these characters are anchoring their identity

to their past, and what made them know they were queer, *The Pink Opaque* and *Kevin*. Although adults, key parts of their childhood now are what made them queer- the child is queer in the retrospective.

By using childhood as a site of queer possibility, *I Saw the TV Glow* and *Moonlight* challenge erasure and marginalization of queer youth, and show what the temporality of a queer child looks like. Heteronormative linear temporality does not account for the queer framework, which is fragmented and built on by retrospection and connection. Through media, mentorship, and memory, queer people can navigate their childhood through a different lens.

## Annotated Bibliography

Gill-Peterson, Jules. *Histories of the Transgender Child*. Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 2018.

*Histories of the Transgender Child* focuses on archival research to dismantle the myth that transgender children are a recent phenomenon. Largely focusing on the 20th century, Julian Gill-Peterson traces involvement in children in early medical practices to how race interplayed in transgenderism. While dismantling the myth of trans children being new, it also challenges the idea of queerness being absent from childhood by definition. Gill-Peterson covers the erasure of queer identities among children and how this prevents further development, as well as the systemic barriers that occur when doing this sort of work.

Halberstam, Judith. *Trans\* What's in a Name? Trans: A Quick and Quirky Account of Gender Variability*, 2018. <https://content.ucpress.edu/chapters/13294.ch01.pdf>

This essay explores the complexities of gender identification and naming through a historical lens. Halberstam examines how terms like 'transgender' came to be, and introduces the term 'trans\*' with an asterisk to signal openness and resist rigid definitions when discussing trans experiences. In terms of this essay, it is used for one quote that features at the beginning of the essay, as it encapsulated what living in a world without knowing what queerness is is like.

*I Saw the TV Glow*. Directed by Jane Schoenbrun, Fruit Tree, 3 Apr. 2024.

*I Saw the TV Glow* is a film about queer children, Owen and Maddy, who bond over the TV Series The Pink Opaque. As Owen and Maddy realize their queerness and the threat the heteronormative world pushes on them, they both grieve and suppress their emotions in different ways, incorporating elements of psychological horror. While this film is not exactly straightforward, Owen and Maddy serve as two separate queer protagonists who both realize something is 'wrong' with them and express it in different ways. This framework is seen often in queer media (see



*Moonlight*) and is worth exploring the societal and theoretical impacts of it.

Kathryn Bond Stockton. *The Queer Child, or Growing Sideways in the Twentieth Century*.

Durham, Duke University Press, 2009.

Kathryn Bond Stockton's *The Queer Child* explores the discussion of children's queerness, and how children have been queered throughout history. Most important for this essay, there is heavy discussion on 'growing sideways.'

Coined by Stockton, growing sideways is ignoring the linear trajectory of childhood -> teenhood -> adulthood, and rather growing up in a queer way with irregular growth. This is a large basis of my essay, as it focuses on how child development is a heteronormative ideal and not necessarily reality for all.

*Moonlight*. Directed by Barry Jenkins, A24, 21 Oct. 2016.

*Moonlight* (2016) explores homosexuality in black communities, with a heavy emphasis on the War on Drugs and the 'coming of age' of a queer child. Protagonist Chiron is bullied for his queerness in youth, finds brief refuge in his romance with Kevin, and then hardens as an adult, modelling his childhood mentor Juan. Similar to *I Saw the TV Glow*, the central protagonist is a young, black male for the majority of the screen time, also having difficulty coming to acceptance and full discovery of their queerness. Connecting this to queer development, as well as queerphobia within childhood.

Olson KR, Key AC, Eaton NR. Gender cognition in transgender children. *Psychol Sci*. 2015

Apr;26(4):467-74. doi: 10.1177/0956797614568156. Epub 2015 Mar 5. PMID: 25749700.

One of Kristina Olson's studies, who is the pioneer in trans-youth studies (particularly trans kids).