

# Growing Sideways

## An Écriture of the Queer Kid<sup>1</sup>

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H. Zipfel

Dear earth book.

Today I devised a new Earth Destruction Plan. Then me and my earth parents will fly back to our homeplanet. Oh, earthlings are so naive! I have been living on their planet for ten years now and they don't notice (these primitive life forms). Of course, I would need some food for the trip, I was thinking of something like acid, cyanide and of course a large box of carbon dioxide to snack on. Now that I'm on my way out of here, I've finally figured out how the earthlings greet each other: they show the opposite person the middle finger. With us on \*?\*\$"§" %\* it works differently: since our sense organs are not firmly attached, we simply exchange them with every greeting.

When I flip through my old diary, this entry of ten-year-old me sticks out to me: could this be an early self-testimony of the very familiar feeling of living as an estranged Queerdo on earth?

Questionable, because just as sitting under your self-built blanket-tent shining your flashlight on the latest *Goosebump* stories, building your own childhood narrative means always to lighten up just certain parts of the story. Also, our grown-up mindset is aware that every retroaction means to realize that childhood is no longer what it was. What we call our memories – staring back at us from the abyss of the messy archive of our brains and bodies – are rather vague possibilities of what has been: During the retrospective designing process of childhood, our very own scaling software does a great job in producing highly transformed images, adding blank spots (due to traumatic experiences, for example) or beauty filters just as the glow of nostalgia. Feelings of a speculative past blend here with current states of mind and intertwine with family narratives, media images and 'common knowledge'.

And still, childhood is something worth investigating, especially since for many queer folks this lifespan can be associated with prolonged periods of suppression,

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1 This text is a revised and annotated transcript of the video essay *Growing Sideways. An Écriture of the Queer Child* (Zipfel 2023). It can be viewed online: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=G5Qw9EZNIwk&t=60s>.

patterns of shame and a feeling of ‘having nowhere to grow’. As we see in *Stone Butch Blues*, a semi-autobiographical work of fiction by Leslie Feinberg, the protagonist Jess is coerced into a traumatizing placement in a psychiatric institution for challenging the binary system at a young age. In strong parallel to *Stone Butch Blues*, Feinberg also reflects in *Transgender Warriors* what growing up as a gender non-conforming kid looked like inside a rigid hetero norm.

Memory 1 (Leslie):

My own gender expression felt quite natural. I liked my hair short and I felt most relaxed in sneakers, jeans and a t-shirt. However, when I was most at home with how I looked, adults did a double-take or stopped short when they saw me. The question “Is that a boy or a girl?” haunted me through my childhood. The answer didn’t matter much. The very fact that strangers had to ask the question already marked me as a gender outlaw. (Feinberg 1996: 4)

As we see here, childhood itself – a construct that seems to haunt personal narratives, memoir writing and queer theory alike – still needs to be reclaimed by different marginalized groups. So, Tomboys, He-Shes, Baby Butches and all the other tiny Gender Outlaws – this one is for you! To summon the ghosts of the past, I collected some individual memories in the form of pictures or audio recordings queers sent me after an open call on an online community platform. These oral histories will be woven together on a more scholarly level about the queer kid as a trope in cultural theory.

Sidenote: I am not interested in essentialist myths about queerness. Besides, ‘queer’ is used here as an umbrella term to grasp amalgamated forms of feelings, desires and representations of kids that act outside a hetero-norm – I use these words to integrate trans narratives, gender non-conforming behavior and/or just being very gay as a kid. Here, we must also keep in mind that desire is not just in the context of childhood a complicated term, but always co-structured, as bell hooks writes in “Eating the Other. Desire and Resistance”, by other categories, for example race and class.

## Growing Sideways

“The question of the child makes us climb into a cloud” (Stockton 2009: 2); cultural scientist Kathryn Bond Stockton writes and unfolds an idea about the ghostly qualities of the queer child. In Stockton’s reading, due to the lack of representation in the moment of childhood itself, queerness represents something ‘that is not there’ yet, but finds its rather vague expression in childhood-feelings of being estranged, different, odd or out-of-sync concerning a cis-hetero norm.

Stockton's idea stands in line with popular scholars on queer negativity pointing out experiences around loss and depression (which a lot of queers have in relation to their past), but still doesn't dismiss a potential future. Even though the awareness for one's own (queer) future emerges, following Stockton's idea, from a gaze in the back mirror, because queerness and its associated vocabulary may not emerge for many kids until later in life, or at least not in childhood. That's why Stockton compares the retroactive investigation with one's own queerness in childhood as a backward birth. The slightly spooky metaphor doesn't deny an existence of queerness in childhood as a lived or felt experience, but points out that many are being introduced to the 'concept' later in life. In the context of the backward investigation, queerness, here, also represents a lens or rendering for a former vague and ungraspable reality. With the ghostly presence in a state of 'still-to-come' or 'yet-to-be', Stockton refers to Derrida's concept of *Hauntology* – originally used to describe a state of late capitalism haunted by the ghost of communism (Derrida 1994). The queer temporality is also connected to a figure of delay many queers can relate to: maybe with the past feeling of not being able to fully express themselves under the consequences of closeting and character armor – or with a lack of the sheer possibility of their own queerness, leading to an exploration very late in life. Due to its persistence to reject the linearity of a 'straight' way of growing up, the queer kid – with its time bending qualities – grows sideways instead. Let's follow these sideways movements for a bit, where queerness may be not accessible yet in terms of language, but lingers around in fuzzy, hard to grasp categories, like 'intuition'. One might remember, for example, images with a certain stickiness: A James Dean-Poster, saturated with ambivalent feelings between romantic longing and identifying. Or memories of a huge excitement for Xena, the warrior princess, shown every Saturday on TV, and how her crystal-clear blue eyes would move you in a certain way you could not describe. As if something clicks.

## The Problem Starts with Childhood

In opposition to a reading as a simple lifespan between birth and adolescence, cultural scholar Jacob Breslow (2021) introduces childhood as a highly ambivalent cultural concept. Emerging from the 20<sup>th</sup> century disciplinary society, childhood is not just connected to ideas of domination and domestication, but also to the idea of a safe space. This safe space is reserved for some privileged, largely non-marginalized groups, as we will see, while others are excluded. We think, for example, of a black kid murdered in 2012 by police forces for wearing a hoodie – 17-year-old Trayvon Benjamin Martin – and being framed as an adult by public media discourse. Absurdly, at the same time, the infantilization of adult B\*POC, especially women of color, is a historical racist power move. Both – the infantilization of grown-ups, rendered as

primitive, unknowing or not able to take responsibilities, while at the same time not including black kids in the club of childhood innocence – point out a highly ideological, formative western principle of childhood. To make a stance for the queer child therefore means also to be against a specific normative and exclusive nature of an idea of childhood innocence.

*Fig. 1: Carnival, © private.*



#### Memory 2 (Hann):

This is my favorite childhood picture from the late 90s, because it's somehow impossible to not give it a queer reading. It shows my friend Li and the leader of our Christian-protestant kindergarten, Ruth, on carnival. Ruth, who always encouraged us to chant songs about Jesus or a popular German poem that starts with "Ich bin klein, mein Herz ist rein" ("I am small, my heart is pure") is dressed up as Mother Mary, while Li has chosen to be a vampire – perhaps drawn by the smell of blood by maidens that are as innocent as they are yummy.

When it comes to questions around infant sexuality, as we see in Ruth the kindergarten teacher, the white vest often comes as a dress and the 'immaculata' of the mother of Christ often provokes a certain flipside. Clever artforms like to play with

notions of a latent hypersexuality, think of Madonna's music video for *Like a Virgin* (1984), for example. I also wonder if the kindergarten teacher knew about the lesbian classic from a small publisher that suddenly went mainstream in the 1980s, *Lesbian Nuns: Breaking Silence* by Nancy Manahan. But this might be another topic.

Let's continue with our little seance:

Memory 3 (Hann):

Later, Li and I would reenact the Backstreet Boys in the garage, with a lot of water in our hair. We were not aware of any queer codes at the time, but knew that it would be better to shut the garage door during practice; creating our own little closet with its signature tension between prison and safe space – at that time a peaceful tomb for two baby nosferatus trying out what they want. For me it was a huge privilege to have a kid around that happened to be just like me (whatever that was), while I would be terrified of going to school every morning – getting chased from school toilets by teachers regularly, leaving me with shame, guilt and a continued and deep skepticism towards pedagogical institutions.

We remember the heat-rush that is also described in *Stone Butch Blues*, flooding Jess' system when the speech act "Are you a boy or a girl?" (Feinberg 1996: 4) is at work; or something more subtle, like a raised eyebrow you would notice.

In contemporary debates over trans kids using locker rooms, the soft power of school administrations exposes a harmful double standard, when they pretend to be concerned for the children's best interests though they are actually harming trans children via exclusion from social or public spaces, blatant stigmatization and shaming. Often the use of speculative fiction is at work here – by noting that the genitals a kid might develop one day *might* be a problem in the future. Sounds like *Minority Report*? Exactly. While projecting hypothetical sexual activities onto children in locker rooms and rendering them as future predators, actual queer infant desire in childhood is often dismissed as play or entirely shut down. Notions of assumed heterosexuality meanwhile seem to be less problematic and are projected onto kids from a young age.

As we see, childhood is ambivalent at best. The praxis of sideways movements can thus help to reclaim this space.

## Reclaiming Childhood

Memory 4 (Rita):

I was in the first or second grade, I think six or seven years old, and I remember asking the teacher to go to the bathroom. I was wandering through the school, this big school, and then as I was walking down the corridor, I saw a girl coming

right at me. She asked me my name and I said a boy's name, I said "Gabriel". We stood there for a few seconds, looking at each other in a gaze – and then I started running. I knew I did something strange, something funny or wrong, but I also felt joy. I felt adventurous, I felt free. My name is Rita.

The potential of childhood also lies in being an open field for experiments and a speculative force that denies a stable narrative. Many trans people are forced into extremely coherent narratives about themselves for psychological reports to get access to hormones and other gender affirming care. Everyone has a right to reclaiming their own narrative, but at the same time, everyone should also have the same right to an ambivalent queer childhood; including narratives that can be messy, marked by figures of doubt, dead ends or new beginnings. In *Stone Butch Blues*, Jess' passing as a cis man does not bring relief: "I feel like a ghost [...]. Like I've been buried alive. As far as the world's concerned, I was born the day I began to pass. I have no past, no loved ones, no memories, no me." (Feinberg 1993: 231) The ghostly presence of Jess – connected to suffering as a gender outlaw inside a rigid two-gender system – comes also with a sentence that seems to challenge this norm like a haunting promise: "As long as I live, I will be searching" (ibid.: 132). This reality is of course not just speculative, but lived by people every day and against all odds.

In *Stone Butch Blues*, the transitioning-process represents an awareness of the complexity of a multi-layered self-identification, one that is not carved in stone. Therefore, queerness can be read as the anticipation of a society liberated from the gender regime.

## Re-membering: Memories and Vision

I believe that self-archiving techniques are (still) necessary – and no one knew this better than Leslie Feinberg, probably. A book like *Stone Butch Blues* is also so important, because queers have always been discouraged from seeing themselves in history. Representation leads us to exclusions one can observe not just in the context of cultural history museums and archives, but also in the blank spots in our own family trees. In the genogram, queerness often has a ghostly presence *in absentia* – at least in my own family –, represented by relatives whose real stories are never told.

In a touching obituary to Feinberg in 2014, Sasha T. Goldberg emphasizes the role model character of *Stone Butch Blues* and the feeling of being located in the pages and words. This experience of self-assurance happened for Goldberg at an early age, even before reading *Stone Butch Blues*, when small Sasha was standing in front of a bookshop window, being stroked by the novel's iconic cover:

Memory 5 (Sasha):

And in the reflection of the glass, finally, literally and metaphorically, I could see myself, and Leslie, at once. I think I started to understand what I could be in that moment, that I belonged to a proud tradition of Butch women. For the first time, I understood that I was looking at who and what I would become as an adult. It was breathtaking. That there was a place for me in this world. That I could grow up. (Goldberg 2014)

Imagination can function as a tool to rethink the past and our relationship to it, reshaping or leading to speculations about future possibilities and building connections. In contrast to the hegemonic project of the rather exclusive western mindset of universalism, the queer memoir stretches its tentacles through time and space, connecting individual narratives in gentle ways. Re-memoiring means also to keep your club members in mind: think of how young Jess discovers the butches in the bar, finding others in the margins also growing sideways. And while kids may be a bit out of place in a bar, you can always take them to a bookstore.

## References

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## Figures

Fig. 1: Carnival, © private.



# SEA Bubbles

Zirz, wirst du  
manchmal  
für eine **Mutter**  
gehalten?

Well  
I'm feeding their cars,  
but  
I'm also sticking pipes  
in their cars.  
They are troubled when they realize,  
but most of them just sit in  
their leather seats,  
relax while they watch me and  
just unknowingly enjoy.  
Why you asking?

1 Medea hält auf dem Weg zur Medea Aufführung an der Gaysoline Station, wo Medeas Tante Zirz Tankwärt\*in ist.

2

3 Hinter Medeas Wagen bildet  
sich eine Schlange wartender  
Autofahrer\*innen.

ELENDE FRAU

4

VERWORFENE FRAU

5

WARUM DAUERT  
DAS SO LANGE??

SCHLECHTE FRAU

**BEING A MOTHER MYSELF  
HAT DIE REGISSEURIN**

**GESAGT** just being attracted to women  
**HAT JASON GESAGT**

geht doch auf

dass ich doch **AUCH** immer

eine **MUTTER**

eine **GESCHIEDENE**

eine Geschichte

dass ich doch verstehen müsse

weil alle mich in irgendeinem Punkt verstehen könnten

dass ich eigentlich alle Freiheiten hätte

weil ich ja selbst Medea sei

dass ich ja auch mit Kreusa schlafen könne

den Fluchtwagen selbst volltanken könne

dass ich fahren könne

nach der Aufführung fliehen

immer eigenverantwortlich, mein Schicksal in der Hand

eine Mächtige, eine Mutige, eine Mutternde

Mordende sollte ich bloß –

irgendwas ist mit dem Autolack nicht in Ordnung,  
da sind Blasen drin –

mein **MUTTERSEIN**, mein Ehemuttersein

mein Name, ich bin Medea.

Auf, **AUF, WIEDER** einen neuen

**TEXT VON EINE\*R AUTOR\*IN**, wieder

**DIESE FIGUR** sein, **IMMER**

**WIEDER FIGUR SEIN**

**REINSCHLÜPFEN IN** den **STOFF**, in einen

vorgeformten Körper, meinen Wutkörper entfalten

**WUT WALLEN LASSEN**



**UNMENSCHLICHE FRAU**



**ICH WILL JA KEIN  
TYRANN SEIN:  
ABER DIESE FRAU  
IST SCHLECHT**



**VERWORFENE,  
GRAUSAME FRAU**

9 Eine Gruppe Dykes on Bikes taucht an der Tankstelle auf.

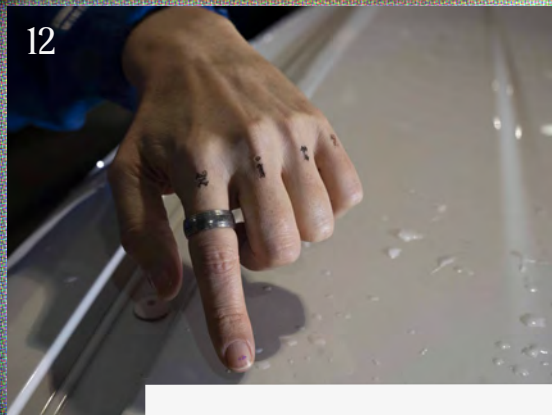


Wie wärs erstmal mit ner  
**PRONOMEN-RUNDE?**

**AUCH DIESE SÄULEN  
KENNEN KEINE HALLEN  
STÜTZEN ALLEIN SICH  
SELBST ZWISCHEN  
FLÜSSIGEM UND  
FLIESENDEM**

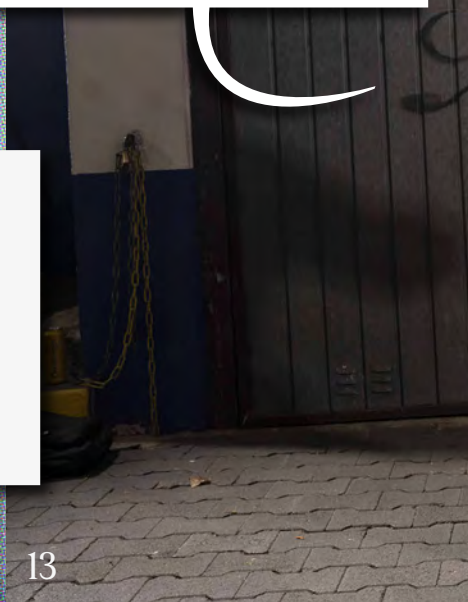
ich  
wandelnwölbewehe  
mich weiterweiter  
nehme jede Nische  
zum Anlass  
auszuwischen  
reinzulecken  
ich tauch in  
Blasen auf

12



*Medea, you're fueled in any case.  
And that's metaphorical.  
But your varnish does show  
some bubbles.  
Bubbles can be hot air but they can  
cause some trouble  
to your machines.  
You wanna do  
something about it at  
Gaysoline Station?*

13



10



Zirz verwandelt einen der Autofahrer  
in ein Schnabeltier.

Get some new *gaze* from  
these *gays*!

Find your inner *platy puss*  
at *Gaysoline Station*.

**ZITTRE!!**



11



**ANZEICHEN FÜR EIN LECK**  
ich tauche ab  
stopf mir einen Gum in den Mund  
kauekauekaue aber es hilft nichts  
ich blas ja doch  
irgendwann  
in die Füllmasse, **FÜHL ES**  
und **FÜLLFÜLL** wissend  
ich werd die Blase  
zum Platzen bringen  
den Rahmen sprengen und die  
Inhalte werden sich wieder  
über mir  
**Zirz, ich brauch einfach ne Pause**



14

*I hear you talking...  
You know the Dykes?*



15

*...You already know Medea?*



17

Medea: Hannah Birnbaumer  
Zirz: Rhonda D'Vine  
Autofahrer\*innen:  
Emil Huppenkothen, Louis Platzer  
Dykes: Hansi Wimmer, Fran Klein,  
Teresa Uhr

Konzept & Idee: Nike Hartmond,  
Fred Heinemann  
Text: Fred Heinemann  
Bühne & Kostüm: Nike Hartmond,  
Emily Schreiber

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Vanessa Krüger!  
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Nike Hartmond  
Grafik: Nora Keilig



Es gibt viele  
Versionen.

Dann gibt es auch eine,  
in der wir am Ende  
miteinander auf meinem  
Bike tanzen.



Besonderer Dank an die  
Johanna Tankstelle im 5. Wiener Bezirk!  
Gefördert durch den Bezirk Margareten und  
die Österreichische Hochschüler\_innenschaft.

Unser  
MARGARETEN



