

What Future?: Imagining the Child of Color in Response to Lee Edelman's *No Future*

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“Searing polemic” are the words used to describe Lee Edelman's *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* on the back cover, and the text certainly lives up to this description. Edelman presents queerness with eyes fixed on its potential to rupture and a conviction that queerness *should* rupture—rupture the figurative Child, the Symbolic, the social order, the future, anything it can, it seems. Whether *No Future* provokes praise or ire from its reader, it certainly provokes thought. For fear that the rest of this essay will imply the opposite, I would like to affirm here that I do admire Edelman's text. My criticism of the gaps in Edelman's ideas does not eliminate my appreciation for the parts of the work that were startlingly resonant in many avenues of politics, language, and the language of politics. Since reading *No Future* I am noticing reproductive futurity in everything from political rhetoric to *The Walking Dead* and seeing that figurative Child<sup>1</sup> he so masterfully illuminates everywhere as well. However, despite the careful attention with which Edelman illustrates the Child in *No Future*, he does not account for the fact that this symbol can only be imagined as a white child.

This essay will attempt to show the various ways in which the Child as articulated by Edelman in *No Future* and the Child of Color— an alternate figure specifically representing children of color imagined in response to Edelman's Child— function differently in politics. While Edelman differentiates between “the image of the Child... [and] the lived experiences of any historical children”, I will use the lived experiences of actual children of color in order to expose the differences between the symbolic Child and the symbolic Child of Color, for a multitude of reasons (Edelman 11). Firstly, Edelman, though he does not explicitly acknowledge

it, is cognizant of the way the material lives of historical people can become symbolic for societal issues or phenomena, as evidenced by his reference to Ryan White as the child face who caused congress to act on the AIDS crisis (19) or his naming the threat of “[Matthew] Shephard’s life” to futurity as a stand in for the threat of queerness in general to futurity (116). Additionally, just as Edelman attempts to show how the politics of futurity embodied by the symbol of the Child produce oppression of real queer people, I hold that the place of children of color outside of the symbolism of the Child produces real oppressive political effects of their lives. The political rhetoric that discusses children of color, which will be analyzed here, cannot be divorced from its implications on the lived experience of children of color. It is especially important to analyze these political effects on the material lives of children of color since a new (or perhaps only a more boldly and clearly exposed) type of oppressive and racist American politics has shown its face under the Trump administration.

In *No Future*, Edelman describes all politics as conservative, because no matter how radically a set of politics would aim to revise the social order, it would still be upholding *a* social order to be transmitted into the future (3). Since politics is always oriented toward the future (supported by the figurative Child who represents that future) it is always opposed to queerness as that which does not participate in producing the future through reproduction. While the politics of futurism seeks to maintain and produce meaning through the Symbolic<sup>2</sup>, queerness serves to unsettle meaning by unsettling the future, thus undoing the identity and connecting to the Real. Edelman advocates that rather than avoiding the negation of meaning that queerness represents, queer people should embrace that role and become willing to figure as the societal death drive which they are made by futurism to represent. This would require a disavowal by queers of politics as a whole, but in exchange for giving up politics they would have greater

access to the *jouissance*— which provides enjoyment even as it negates the self- further, *through* its negation of the self— derived from their greater connection to the Real produced by their distance from the Symbolic.

Edelman devotes great attention to depicting the figure of the Child who carries the burden of futurity, citing many examples, in literature, film, politics, and popular culture. The Child, as a symbol, is “the perpetual horizon of every acknowledged politics, the fantasmic beneficiary of every political intervention”, and thus unifies all politics, no matter how differing they may seem, around achieving a future (Edelman 3). The symbolic Child compels everyone to compulsory protection of its innocence, even at the cost of oppressing and harming real people— especially the queer person who is figured as a danger to children, both symbolic and otherwise. The Child serves as a “reproductive alibi” for the sexuality of the parents, masking the de-realizing force of all sexuality by relating heterosexuality to the meaning-making act of creating the future through the Child (64). According to Edelman, parents then love their children because of the self they see in them. The self in the Child then serves to ensure that the parent, in some way, lives on in the future after they have died. The social order is preserved by collective reproduction, and so the futurism it represents creates “generational succession, temporality, and narrative sequence, not toward the end of enabling change, but, instead, of perpetuating sameness, of turning back time to assure repetition” (60). The Child provides hope via its potential to create a future in which meaning will finally be realized.

The state has a vested interest in the production of the Child, since the future of the state is ensured by the existence of the Child over which it will someday exercise its power. For this reason, there must be “a statist ideology that operates by installing pro-procreative prejudice as the form through which desiring subjects assume a stake in a future that always pertains, in the

end, to the *state* not to *them*” (53). The Child at once creates a generalized future toward which all politics bend, but also specific futures for the parents, the state, and the larger social order of which they are a component. It is for this reason that the Child is so totalizing, and as Edelman masterfully shows, so commonly used to oppress queer people who threaten the state and the social order by standing outside the process which creates the continued existence of those institutions.

Because of the ubiquity of the Child, Edelman is able to point to many examples of this symbol. To name a few, he lists Cosette (repeatedly called “the waif from *Les Mis*”), Tiny Tim from Charles Dickens’ *A Christmas Carol*, Eppie from George Eliot’s *Silas Marner*, and the various children in Alfred Hitchcock’s *The Birds*. Though they are all identified by their similarity as children, they are also conspicuously similar in another way: they are all white. This has previously been pointed out by José Esteban Muñoz in his essay “Cruising the Toilet: LeRoi Jones/Amiri Baraka, Radical Black Traditions, and Queer Futurity”, in which he writes that Edelman “accepts and reproduces this monolithic figure of the child that is indeed always already white” (“Cruising the Toilet” 364). Edelman does not analyze or even acknowledge this unrelenting whiteness of the Child; this seems to be a symptom of an effort with which Muñoz charges anti-relational or anti-social queer theory broadly: the attempt “to imagine an escape or denouncement of relationality as first and foremost a distancing of queerness from what some theorists seem to think of as the contamination of race, gender, or other particularities that taint the purities of sexuality of as a singular trope of difference” (*Cruising Utopia* 11). The Child is not only white as Muñoz states, but it must be white— the Child cannot be envisioned as a child of color and still fulfill the role of the symbolic Child in politics as outlined by Edelman.

Before interrogating the ways in which the Child of Color cannot accomplish the symbolic function of the Child in the current Western social order, it is important, in fairness to both this argument and Edelman's, to acknowledge the ways in which the Child of Color does partially execute this symbolic function. Principally, the Child of Color does fulfill the role of insulating its parents from the de-identifying force of their sexuality, which "suffers the mark of the signifier as lack," by integrating their sexuality into the fantasy of a future in which meaning will finally be achieved (Edelman 39). In this way the Child of Color can enable the parent to participate in the fantasy of immortality by allowing the self which the parent identifies in the child a place in the future. Because of these characteristics, the Queer can still be figured as a threat to the Child of Color by figuring the disconnection of sexuality from the continuous meaning-making process of reproductive futurity. However, though the Child of Color can complete this immortalizing function for the parent, I will later argue that it cannot function as an immortalizer of the social order or the state.

To begin the analysis of the difference between the Child and the Child of Color, children of color, particularly black children, are not always afforded the same perceptions about childhood afforded to white children. A study published in the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* titled "The Essence of Innocence: Consequences of Dehumanizing Black Children" showed that "perceptions of the essential nature of children can be moderated by race" (Goff et al. 540). Their study found that defining characteristics of children— some of the characteristics of the Child as theorized by Edelman— or in other words the characteristics that identify children as children, were not perceived in black children to the same degree they were perceived in children of other races. Namely, black children were seen as older: in one condition they were perceived as a staggering 4.5 years older than their age, meaning black children as young as

thirteen could be perceived as legal adults. They were also perceived as less innocent, more culpable for their actions, and less in need of protection. Where Edelman sees the Child as universally innocent, universally inspiring of a compulsion to defense, the Child of Color cannot be identified as such, because literal children of color, in this case black children, are not seen as universally innocent or universally worthy of protection in the same way that white children are. The overestimation of the age of black children means that they can be literally perceived as not-children, and the child that may be denied its childhood cannot as easily function symbolically as the Child who symbolizes the hopeful future. Put simply: the child who is not always a child (the child of color) cannot be the Child.

As an example of the problematic politics of the Child, Edelman analyzes the white supremacist slogan commonly referred to as the “Fourteen Words” as troubling for more than just its racism, but also for its reliance on futurism. The slogan coined by David Lane, described by the Anti-Defamation League as “a member of the white supremacist terrorist group known as The Order”, reads as follows: “We must secure the existence of our people and a future for white children” (“14 Words”). Edelman acknowledges the appalling nature of the racism of the statement, but also presses us to see the way the symbolic Child invoked here, in this instance explicitly acknowledged as white, is symptomatic of the larger impact of politics of futurity. The word “secure” implies that the existence of white people and a white future are under threat, inviting the question: what threat must the White Child and its future be secured from? The only answer being: the Child of Color. The future is necessarily the “time to come, from which, in time, we’re all destined to vanish” according to Edelman, so the threat is not the adult of color, but the Child of Color who would age out of childhood with the White Child (Edelman 33). The White Child and the Child of Color, as symbols, never age and so the threat remains infinitely, as

the future of the Child of Color forever looms as a threat to the future of the symbolic Child who is white.

The future of the Child of Color is a threat because the future which the Child of Color invokes is not the future “perpetuating sameness” that the (White) Child is figured to represent (Edelman 60). While people of color are oppressed, the Child of Color will symbolize hope for a future that is markedly different from the present experience of people of color. As evidence of this, we need look no further than the most famous call to abandon racism: Martin Luther King Jr.’s “I Have a Dream” speech. More than once in this speech, King invokes the image of the Child of Color, but perhaps the most famous is King’s declaration that, “I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character. I have dream today.” (King 232). The future “one day” that King envisions is not a future that replicates the “today” of 1963 in which the speech was delivered. Instead, the future is hopeful for King and civil rights activists precisely because of this difference. His dream that “the sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave owners will be able to sit down together at the table of brotherhood”, locates the past—the American slave past—which this future would not replicate, but rather repudiate (232). Only the children of this past can achieve this difference, “enabling change” while Edelman describes explicitly that the futurism of the Child does not (Edelman 60). The Child of Color, who would, if it were the Child, symbolically replicate this past into an evermoving future according to Edelman, would instead for King embody a future that overcomes the legacy of the past on which it stands.

The Child, described by Edelman as a figure “whose innocence solicits our defense” universally and without question, can only be figured as symbolically White, because the Child solicits defense only as it replicates the past in the future (2). The Child of Color, who

symbolizes a future without the oppression of its past does not solicit defense, but literally faces threat of harm. To recall one of those four little children that Martin Luther King Jr. would paint as a symbol of his dream, Yolanda King was sleeping in her home when a bomb was thrown onto the porch, “ripping a hole in the porch floor, shattering four windows, and damaging a porch column” (Azbell). Though this was before the “I Have a Dream” speech, the Child of Color in whose name the Civil Rights Movement attempts to build a new future is seen as the motivator for change, and so the King family home, the place of domesticity, is the site of the attack rather than the First Baptist Church where King himself was speaking that night (“King’s Home Bombed”).

Yolanda King was threatened with physical harm— not only threatened, but actual harm was attempted against her— rather than universally defended because she was the motivating symbol for the actions of her parent; another child who became a symbol of the Civil Rights Movement, Ruby Bridges, was threatened for her own actions even as a six-year-old child. As she walked into William Frantz Elementary School in November 1960 as the first black child to attend the previously segregated school, she had to be accompanied by four federal marshals to protect her from the crowds of white children and adults violently opposed to integration. While Bridges claims that the chants of “Two, four, six, eight, we don’t want to integrate” did not scare her, the white woman who waved a coffin holding a black baby doll did (“Ruby (Nell) Bridges”). The baby-doll in the coffin is a non-verbal threat of violence meant of course to symbolize Bridges, the Child of Color who at once symbolizes and enacts the change that severs the future from the past, especially because she enters the white school, the institutional growing ground of the Child and the future of sameness that it represents.



In response to my assertion that the Child of Color represents a symbol of change to the social order, Edelman would likely argue that it is still the Child because ultimately the change it symbolizes would integrate it into the social order, rather than entirely negate the social order in the way that queerness does. He seems to anticipate this argument when he states that “politics, however radical the means by which specific constituencies attempt to produce a more desirable social order, remains, at its core, conservative insofar as it works to *affirm* a structure, to *authenticate* social order, which it then intends to transmit to the future in the form of its inner Child” (Edelman 2-3). To this I would argue that the Child of Color actually destabilizes the social order as it symbolizes change to it. As previously stated, the Child of Color, if it is to act as a hopeful symbol of future as the Child does, must symbolize a future in which its oppression ends because of the eventual annihilation of racism; Edelman would argue that this would lead to integration into and thus affirmation of the social order. But what is the effect on the Western social order— which has for centuries, at least in some way, been organized by race— of the elimination of racism? To begin, the very ability of people of color to successfully integrate into the social order would undeniably prove that they were wrongly and meaninglessly excluded and oppressed by it. The elimination of racism would expose race as entirely Symbolic, with no relationship to the Real. If race is Symbolic, then so are identities based on race— which then threatens to expose identity itself, and indeed the self itself as Symbolic, meaningless, and not Real. For Edelman, the queer threatens the social order through its possibility to expose it as symbolic, and I would argue that the hope symbolized by the Child of Color of overcoming and eliminating racism functions similarly as that which threatens to reveal the social order as un-Real.

Just as the Child of Color cannot complete the function of upholding the social order, it also cannot complete the function of serving as ensurance of the future of the state, because the racist state does not see itself replicated in the Child of Color. Let us take for example the group of asylum seekers at the United States border in Tijuana in November 2018. They could easily be imagined as pinnacles of the long beloved American Dream if their skin color did not subsume every other aspect of their identity in the eyes of the racist state: they took a hard journey on foot in an attempt to escape violence in Central America, in hopes of giving their children— those they carry thousands of miles as well as the children they will one day produce— a better life. This action, American in spirit, is presented as a threat to America rather than an embodiment of American values because the children in whose name this action is taken are not the figurative Child who replicates the state into futurity, but the Child of Color who alters the future and threatens the social order.

On November 25, 2018, United States Border Patrol agents threw tear gas at the group of asylum seekers, which included children, as a portion of them attempted to cross the border. Kevin McAleenan, U.S. Customs and Border Protection Commissioner, described this as “less lethal” force (Hennessy-Fiske). His rhetoric is revealing: the state does not claim that throwing tear gas at people, including children, is not harmful, acknowledging the willingness of the state to harm these children who would cross the border. The term “less lethal” is a very important one, as it is masking the fact that the force has the potential of lethality and thus cannot be described as “non-lethal” force. When this “less lethal” force is used, there is of course risk that someone could die, showing the state’s willingness to harm and possibly kill the asylum seekers, children among them included. This is the greatest threat that the Child of Color poses to the state, greater even than the threat it poses to the state via its unsettling of the social order: it

threatens to expose the state as the universally reviled child-killer (alternatively, “the dreaded pedocide”, to employ Edelman’s terminology) by revealing that the state is indeed willing to kill children (42).

The only way the state can escape the act of harming literal children without being branded as opposed to the Child is that the children who would cross the border are not the Child. Here, the state can enact violence against children because the identity of these children, who should theoretically elicit protection, is negated by their other identities, which elicit fear and thus violence, instead. These children are perceived first as immigrants, as illegal, as not-the-same, and as children second. It is important to note here that it *is* legal to seek asylum, but these migrants are not being allowed to because “under current U.S. law, migrants must be permitted to remain in the country while their asylum claims work their way through the immigration-court system” and the Trump administration does not want them to reside in the country for any period of time (Montes). Tomi Lahren, a Fox News host, tweeted that “watching the USA FINALLY defend our border was the HIGHLIGHT of my Thanksgiving weekend” in response to a tweet by actress and activist Alyssa Milano directly stating that children were affected by the tear gas (@TomiLahren). Reluctantly passing over the morbid fittingness of a white woman enjoying violence against people of color on Thanksgiving, in this instance Lahren is celebrating the suffering of those children, because to her the fact that they have attempted to cross the border negates their status as children. Here, the rhetoric suggests that the state must defend itself from the Child of Color, whereas the Child is always that which must be defended and not that which must be defended from.

Edelman asks, “Who *would* destroy the Child”, implying the impossibility of taking that stance (Edelman 16). Yet, Lahren publicly and boldly celebrates the danger imposed upon

asylum-seeking children. Lahren is able to escape the mark of that which advocates the destruction of the Child because the immigrant child of color does not imply the Child whose destruction is unthinkable. Though Lahren is not a direct representative of the state, she is a voice of the channel sanctioned by the president as ‘not fake news’, and so she does serve as a voice speaking what the administration supports but does not directly say. By disidentifying these children as children and identifying them first as illegal, immigrant, and Other, Lahren and the state are able to present the abuse of children as protection of those that the state includes in its self-replicating vision of the population. Just as children of color cannot be permitted childhood, the Child of Color cannot be envisioned as the Child, because that would make the state an agent opposed to the Child, rather than something verified and even immortalized by the Child.

To turn our attention back to Edelman now that we have established the threat of the Child of Color to the state, let us analyze here his thoughts on Dickens’ *A Christmas Carol*. Scrooge, indifferent to the sufferings of the world, balks when he is made to see the death of Tiny Tim in the Christmas yet to come, and as a result reintegrates into society in order to save Tiny Tim. Here, Edelman gives compelling analysis of how Scrooge, figured as a representative of the concept of *sinthomosexuality* (sexuality that interacts with the *sinthome*, the knot of the Symbolic, Real, and Imaginary of identity, and thus creates *jouissance*), is redeemed within the text through his new commitment to the survival of Tiny Tim, not simply a child, but the Child (see *No Future* chapter 2, “*Sinthomosexuality*”, especially pages 41-47). Here, let us imagine an alternate version of *A Christmas Carol*, in which Tiny Tim is not white, but instead a child of color (the Child of Color), and in which Scrooge, committed capitalist moneylender, is read as a stand in for the capitalist state rather than a stand in for the *sinthomosexual*. In this scenario, does

our new Scrooge still save Tiny Tim? Does the suffering of this new Tiny Tim create in Scrooge “an interest he had never felt before” (Dickens 91)? Is the “Spirit of Tiny Tim” still a “childish essence... from God” (136)? Can this State-Scrooge work to become a “second father” to the Child of Color Tiny Tim? Most importantly, does this Tiny Tim “NOT die” (152)? There can of course be no conclusive answers to these questions when we imagine an alternative text which does not exist to be analyzed, but I am using the questions here as a prodding point to introduce the general question: the Child can call the *sinthomosexual* away from its negativity and reconnect him to the future, but can the Child of Color redeem the capitalist state by connecting it to the future while the state does not see its future in the Child of Color? I would be inclined to answer generally in the negative, and, ironically, a work in which the Child of Color *does* redeem and enliven a capitalist state proves my point.

*The Children of Men* by P.D. James depicts a future in which humans seem to have “lost for ever the power to reproduce,” the last birth of a human having taken place over 25 years prior (James 3). This leads to widespread societal issues including ritual “suicides” called Quietus to limit the elderly population, import of the younger population of poorer countries as laborers, followed by the deportation these laborers at the age of sixty, to name only a few. The state fractured in the absence of the Child speaks to Edelman’s claims that the Child and the future it represents are the stitch that holds together the fabric of meaning and thus the social order (Edelman 11-13). Of course, a child is born at the end of the narrative, renewing the hope for a future, for meaning. The film adaptation *Children of Men* is interesting because Julian, the white British woman who gives birth in the novel, is replaced as child-bearer with Kee, a black refugee, in the film. Kee gives birth to her child in the midst of a war-torn Britain and in the film’s pivotal scene she walks through both rebel and state soldiers with her crying daughter in

her arms (Cuarón). People smile, look on in disbelief, cry, and some even kneel before mother and infant. This baby is clearly the Child: she provides these people with hope by renewing the possibility of a future in the face of the end of humanity, symbolically renewing the meaning which the population perceives to have lost in a present without a future. While this may seem at first glance antithetical to my argument— Kee’s baby is obviously the Child and obviously black— it actually affirms it. The Child of Color can only fulfill the role of the Child in the absence of the Child it threatens. The Child of Color can only be the future of the state when there is literally nothing else on which the state can build a future. The Child of Color can only build the social order when the social order has already imploded.

With this conclusion in mind— that the Child of Color cannot complete the mission of the symbolic Child that creates a future for parent, state, and social order, a future in which the hope for meaning persists— how do we proceed? The first step is to take Edelman’s argument and have the willingness to view it through more than just the scope of sexuality, to extend it to be seen through the lenses of race, gender, economic oppression, etc. From doing this we can create many rich areas of thought and discussion, acknowledging at once the brilliance and the incompleteness of *No Future*. To name a few of these questions: How does the image of the Child affect queer people of color— who are doubly dangerous to the Child because of their skin tone and sexuality— differently than it affects white queer people? What is the relationship between the Child and people who are infertile, especially women, who are historically defined by motherhood? Similarly, are queer women differently impacted by the symbolic Child than queer men?

The fact that these tantalizing questions are implied by *No Future*, yet never allowed to breathe and present themselves as questions to be explored— as questions worthy of

exploration— illuminates the complication of antirelational queer theory which hopes to isolate the queer as a topic of analysis divorced from modes of otherness outside of queerness. Theory examining queerness (especially theory commenting on the oppression of queer people) as unconnected to other modes of oppression is theory that may still resonate with the lives of queer people, yet only partially. Queer theory should acknowledge that the experience of the cis white gay man, the trans black lesbian, and the genderfluid Asian pansexual are not totally the same experience. This is not to say that queer theory must with every word examine the relationship of queer oppression to other oppressions, queerness to other markers of identity. Rather, this is to say that queer theory must at least be willing to allow these issues their place at the figurative table— to consider them and engage with them, rather than take a purposeful stance of isolating queerness within theory. After all, “the primary systems of oppression are interlocking. The synthesis of these oppressions creates the conditions of our lives”— all of our lives, because our lives are still shaped by the systems of oppression that do not oppress us specifically (Combahee River Collective 292).

In *Cruising Utopia*, Muñoz argues for a queer turn toward futurity, a turn toward a queer utopia founded on collectivity, in contrast to Edelman’s position that queerness is destructive to the future and that the queer should embrace this radical negativity. Muñoz succinctly summarizes the position of this utopianism in relation specifically to Edelman’s theory in “Cruising the Toilet”:

It is important not to hand over futurity to normative white reproductive futurity. That dominant mode of futurity is indeed “winning,” but that is all the more reason to call on a utopian political imagination that will enable us to glimpse another time and place: a “not-yet” where queer youths of color actually get to grow up. Utopian and willfully

idealistic practices of thought are in order if we are to resist the perils of heteronormative pragmatism and Anglo-normative pessimism. (365)

I echo Muñoz in this, the idea that children of color, queer or not, must be allowed to grow up—that they must in material life be given the benefits bestowed upon the symbolic Child. Children of color must be allowed to be children and must be defended with all the vigor that politics bends in the name of the symbolic Child who is not— who cannot be, as I have argued— the Child of Color. Indeed, as there must be a queer utopian futurism characterized by “an insistence on potentiality or concrete possibility for another world”, there must also be a utopianism that imagines and attempts to create another world, a “not-yet”, in which children of color have a place and a life (*Cruising Utopia* 1).



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<sup>1</sup> I follow Edelman in capitalizing the word “Child” when referring to the figurative symbol of futurity, rather than any material child. Similarly, I capitalize terms like Child of Color or White Child when I am discussing them as symbols in response to Edelman.

<sup>2</sup> Edelman build his arguments on Lacan’s concepts of the Real and the Symbolic. Edelman defines the Symbolic as “the register of the speaking subject and the order of the law” comprised of “a network of signifying relations” entangled in language (Edelman 7). The Real is “the hole in the Symbolic,” a pre-lingual register which by nature resists comprehension through the signification of the language of the Symbolic (Edelman 15).

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