

Jacob Breslow. *Ambivalent
Childhoods: Speculative Futures
and the Psychic Life of the Child*.
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In *Ambivalent Childhoods: Speculative Futures and the Psychic Life of the Child*, Jacob Breslow, Assistant Professor of Gender and Sexuality at the London School of Economics, approaches childhood as a contested site in the American imagination.

Breslow engages in a comparative study of disparate American childhoods that draws upon psychoanalysis and queer and feminist theories in his exploration of the “psychic life” of the contemporary child. The book explores “the question of who gets to occupy childhood” in America, paying close attention to the experiences of racialized, queer, and/or migrant children (3). Breslow argues that the child is not a simple metaphor for futurity or progress, but rather that childhood is an ambiguous discursive category that selectively includes or excludes certain individuals or populations for socio-political expediency. The author invokes the psychoanalytic concept of “ambivalence” to describe a new perception of childhood that tolerates its many contradictions and ambiguities. Ultimately, Breslow presents ambivalence as a

productive mode of “reading” the child that disrupts discourses contributing to oppressive power relations, such as anti-Blackness, homophobia, transphobia, or xenophobia. Breslow separates his study into four case studies, or as he describes them: “identity-based sites of contestation over national belonging in the first two decades of the twenty-first century” (4). Throughout his book, Breslow demonstrates that the American children find themselves at the heart of almost every national debate about aspects of identity such as race, gender, or citizenship.

Chapter One concerns the circumstances of and media response to George Zimmerman’s murder of Black teenager Trayvon Martin. Breslow’s powerful argument that Trayvon Martin was denied access to the realm of childhood by virtue of his Blackness is especially resonant in the wake of the 2020 protests against the police killings of Black people including George Floyd, Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor. Here, Breslow identifies the media’s arguably racist contestation of Trayvon’s boyhood as an act of Freudian disavowal, in which “Black humanity, Black citizenship, and Black childhood” are rejected (29).

Chapters Two and Three describe the lives of real and fictional queer girls: Coy, a transgender six-year-old, and Aviva, the protagonist of Todd Solondz’s 2004 film *Palindromes*. Breslow’s discussion of the queer child is more speculative than his previous

chapter on police brutality, focusing on the implications of non-normative sexuality and gender-presentation as embodied by children. Breslow's discussion of contemporary "bathroom bills" is especially nuanced in its exploration of how the queer child has influenced the American state and federal court systems.

Finally, Chapter Four features a discussion of various children impacted by the DREAM Act (The Development, Relief, and Education for Alien Minors Act) as well as multiple art installations by Mexican-American artist Carmen Argote. Breslow highlights intriguing connections between the American Dream, the "innocent" undocumented children of criminalized migrants (colloquially known as "dreamers"), and psychoanalytic dream-work. Breslow's approach to numerous forms of expression, including journalism, film, and visual art allows him to critique successfully these ambivalent representations and evocations of childhood from diverse perspectives.

Indeed, each of Breslow's chapters is anchored in a broad facet of psychoanalytic theory, including (dis)avowal, the Oedipal complex, the death-drive, and dream-work. Breslow's marriage of sociology and psychoanalysis enables him to engage with childhood as a twofold social and psychological phenomenon. His engagement with Freud may come as a surprise to his readers given that queer theory is often regarded as a point of departure

from psychoanalytic understandings of psychosexual development. Nonetheless, Breslow's invocations of Freud, Lacan, and Melanie Klein prove to be illuminating. He asserts "power takes a psychic form, the proliferative life of power must be understood and analyzed at the level of the psyche" (15). Throughout his case studies, Breslow is more interested in spectators' ambivalent psychological *responses* to racialized or queer children, as opposed to the psychology of actual children. Foundational studies of subversive American childhoods such as Kathryn Bond Stockton's *The Queer Child, Or Growing Sideways in the Twentieth Century* (2009, Durham: Duke University Press), and *Erotic Innocence* by James R. Kincaid (1998, Durham: Duke University Press) loom heavily over Breslow's work. *Ambivalent Childhoods* is equally informed by works of queer theory such as *Gender Trouble* (Butler 1990, New York: Routledge), "Infantile Citizenship" (Berlant 1993, Durham: Duke University Press), "How to Bring Your Kids Up Gay" (Sedgwick 1991, Durham: Duke University Press), and *No Future* (Edelman 2004, Durham: Duke University Press), which converge in his analysis of the child as a subject either avowed or disavowed by the dominant culture. Breslow's project is an exercise in theoretical bricolage, in which seemingly incongruous modes of thought find a tenuous unity.

Consider Breslow's opening of Chapter Three, entitled "Desiring the Child" (99). The author begins with an uncomfortable

anecdote that recounts a gay twelve-year-old's unwelcome (and unwitting) provocative dance moves on public display. Rather than immediately intellectualizing or theorizing the young boy's behavior, Breslow pauses to situate himself within his scholarship, remarking:

I find myself caught up in exhilarating waves of memory, identification, and desire: a wish. A wish that I could have been this boy (or that this boy could have been me), a hope that this boy will have and will be all that I desire for him, and a desire for him himself. To be next to him and, maybe, to dance with him. A memory emerges of a past self—myself at twelve: reclusive and closeted—that I longingly place into this moment ... I wish I could have been), and we are two kids dancing together (100).

Here, Breslow enacts the speculative nature of his project, engaging in a reparative reading of his own childhood. The suddenly self-reflexive nature of Breslow's writing gestures towards the ever-shifting boundaries of who is considered a child.

However, this bold authorial move also signals greater issues of discontinuity and equivalence at hand in *Ambivalent Childhoods*. Breslow himself notes "I struggle against the impetus to easily separate out the 'figure of the child' from the 'real' lives of 'actual' children ... I do not assume that 'real children' precede 'the idea' of childhood" (5). The indistinct separation between these two "modes" of childhood appears to contribute to Breslow's arguably discontinuous selection of social injustices. Indeed, the significant leaps between matters of race, gender, sexuality, and migration

drew a (certainly unintentional) false equivalence between each case study. To that end, Breslow's analysis is merely intersectional to the degree that all such issues of identity are included in one book: his chapters, which focus on different degrees of violence and difference, often fail to resonate as a whole. The experience of reading Chapters Two and Three, which focus on queer topics and draw upon queer methodologies, felt as though they were drawn from a separate text entirely when read alongside narratives of anti-Black police violence and the inhumane captivity of migrant children at the US-Mexico border. Breslow's comparative approach fails to provide meaningful linkages between identities; rather, the political urgency of each chapter is diminished by the author's juxtaposition of injustices.

Nonetheless, *Ambivalent Childhoods* successfully delineates the shifting boundaries of childhood in the contemporary United States. Breslow's hope for a speculative future where childhood signifies differently, or not at all, attends to both the discursive and material challenges faced by marginalized American children.

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