The Long Awaited: Past Futures of Children’s Rights

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If you can look into the seeds of time,
And say which grain will grow and which will not,
Speak then to me, who neither beg nor fear
Your favours nor your hate.
Macbeth (ca. 1600-08, Act I Scene III)

... for childhood is the greatest of all mysteries, being full of the unknown future, and containing the germ of all that will, or alas! will not, develop itself in us ...
Ernest Legouvé, 1881 (i:8i)

Chimeras
A sleeping boy cradles the huge head of a chimera. Elderly, female and nude, it resembles a dugong genetically crossed with a human. It smiles in its sleep, or perhaps that is just the shape of its enormous mouth. The boy’s cheek is pillowed on the creased and flabby flesh of its shoulder, his hand curled into its thin grey hair. Titled ‘The Long Awaited’, the scene is a life-size installation by Patricia Piccinini (2008). It is troubling. Who would allow a child near such a creature? But it is apparent that he loves it or her and she, or it, loves him. The title, too, is troubling. Who has waited long, for whom? Was she made for him, an experiment gone right or wrong, or was he made for her, the desired child of her strange infirmity? What joins them in their deep content? Were they at first afraid, the monster and the child? In what world could such difference so lovingly co-exist? It is a future world, a science-fiction world, in which genetics craft chimeras and the familiar embraces the strange. It is a world informed in central ways by rights.

If the relationship between Piccinini’s enigmatic figures evokes rights, then it challenges classic liberal thinking in which the rights-holder is envisaged as an able-bodied and autonomous adult male. The relationship reflects a very different way of understanding rights and the subject of rights. Born of injustice, impelled by the horrors of human wrongs and visions of better worlds,
rights diminish fear of the other by acknowledging shared humanity and celebrating difference (McGillivray, 1994, 2012c). As markers of relationships of equality, rights are about love. As nodes in webs of interdependence, rights allow autonomy to flourish. This is not the absurd autonomy of John Wayne fictions and extreme liberty claims. It is the yearning for autonomy inscribed on the child’s heart (McGillivray, 2012b) and limned in the gestalt of the chimera, ‘a vessel to be filled with possibility, with a plurality of autonomous yearnings’ (Williams, 1991:16). Rights are embedded in being. Their codification is short-hand for what it means to be human or, to take another metaphor, the skeletal support structure of the shared enterprise of becoming human. Rights are embodied in children. They are written in children’s nascent neurology, its development so intricate and delicate that wrong touch and hateful words bring illness and mental disorder, reduce intelligence and affect future generations of children. Rights are essential to childhood.

The sculpture’s title – ‘The Long-Awaited’ – is evocative of the present state of children’s rights. With the advent of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, we stand on the threshold of possibility. Imagining the future of children’s rights means imagining new relationships and new ways of being human. Futures are imagined in the present but it is only when the future has melted imperceptibly into the past do we know what our choices will have made of childhood. Will it be the eden we sometimes imagine it anyway to be, or the dystopia of ignorance and exploitation it is for millions now, whose childhood is relegated to corporations or parents or closed communities that abuse children’s bodies or credulity and indoctrinate hate and fear? Wordsworth’s (1802) Child may endlessly father the Man but making rights-respecting futures takes conscious, deliberated action. As Susan Marks (2011:75) observes, ‘history is a social product, not given but made. And if it has been made, it can be remade differently.’ History frames possibilities and ‘change unfolds within a context that includes systematic constraints and pressures’ but there is nothing necessary about the future. To imagine futures is to imagine the societies – utopic, dystopic, edenic – that we fear or desire.

To imagine futures is to scrutinise the past for the cause-and-effect that lets us make the futures we want. The course of human rights for the most part has been a reaction to random events (Marks, 2011). Punishment builds children’s character, so criminal assault is legally justified. Parents own children’s belief, so the law must defer to parents’ religious rights. There is no place for the state in relationships of intimacy, so raising a child is a purely private matter. We believed all this once. Many still do. The relationship between ideology and social reform is tricky. Failure of the imagination – the failure to think beyond the ideological and the practicable to the child’s subjectivity and autonomy – may twist the good intended into hell for its recipients. Reforming childhood may mark a people for generations into the future, as did the ‘civilizing’ regimes