Highlighting the work taking place at the crossroads of sociology, sexuality studies, gender studies, cultural studies, and performance studies, this series offers a platform for scholars pushing the boundaries of gender and sexuality studies substantively, theoretically, and stylistically. The authors draw on insights from diverse scholarship and research in popular culture, ethnography, history, cinema, religion, performance, new media studies, and technoscience studies to render visible the complex manner in which gender and sexuality intersect and can, at times, create tensions and fissures between one another. Encouraging breadth in terms of both scope and theme, the series editors seek works that explore the multifaceted domain of gender and sexuality in a manner that challenges the taken-for-granted. On one hand, the series foregrounds the pleasure, pain, politics, and aesthetics at the nexus of sexual practice and gendered expression. On the other, it explores new sites for the expression of gender and sexuality, the new geographies of intimacy being constituted at both the local and global scales.

Series Editors:

PATRICIA T. CLOUGH is Professor of Sociology and Women’s Studies at Queens College and the Graduate Center, CUNY. Clough is on the editorial boards of Women’s Studies Quarterly, Body and Society, Subjectivity, Cultural Studies/Critical Method, Qualitative Inquiry, and Women and Performance. Clough is the coeditor of Beyond Biopolitics: Essays in the Governance of Life and Death (with Craig Willse, 2011), author of The Affective Turn: Theorizing the Social (with Jean Halley, 2007), Autoaffection: Unconscious Thought in the Age of Teletechnology (2000), The End(s) of Ethnography: From Realism to Social Criticism (1998), Feminist Thought: Desire, Power and Academic Discourse (1994), and The End(s) of Ethnography: From Realism to Social Criticism (1992).

R. DANIELLE EGAN is Professor and Chair of the Gender and Sexuality Studies Program at St. Lawrence University. Egan is the author of Dancing for Dollars and Paying for Love: The Relationships between Exotic Dancers and Their Regulars (2006) and coauthor of Theorizing the Sexual Child in Modernity (with Gail Hawkes, 2010), both with Palgrave Macmillan. She is also the coeditor of Flesh for Fantasy: Producing and Consuming Exotic Dance (with Katherine Frank and Merri Lisa Johnson, 2006). She is on the editorial board of Sexuality and Culture.

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Introduction: Queer Utopias, Queer Futurity, and Potentiality in Quotidian Practice

Angela Jones

Queerness is not yet here. Queerness is an ideality. Put another way, we are not yet queer. We may never touch queerness, but we can feel it as the warm illumination of a horizon imbued with potentiality. We have never been queer, yet queerness exists for us as an ideality that can be distilled from the past and used to imagine a future. The future is queerness’s domain. Queerness is a structuring and educated mode of desiring that allows us to see and feel beyond the quagmire of the present. There here and now is a prison house...we must dream and enact new and better pleasures, other ways of being in the world, and ultimately new worlds...Queerness is essentially about the rejection of a here and now and an insistence on potentiality for another world.

—José Esteban Muñoz

Introduction

This anthology is a symposium on the inchoate debates about queer futurity and queer utopias. Through the empirical work by contemporary queer theorists, this book aims to create a critical dialogue about the emergence of queer spaces and the ways in which these spaces aim to further queer futurity. This cutting-edge volume pushes current debates about the future of queer-identified individuals out of the purely theoretical realm, and demonstrates how queer futurity is currently being shaped by individual behavior in praxis; its focus is the quotidian practices that demonstrate the potential for queer futurity. This book brings academic rigor and empiricism to a field generally dominated by polemics and albeit intriguing but often less than rigorous cultural analysis, which is generally delivered in sesquipedalian loquaciousness that masquerades as academic nuance and complexity. This book makes a distinct and felicitous methodological contribution to the field; truly interdisciplinary, the chapters compiled in this text utilize archival research and
historiography, cultural analysis, discourse analysis, interview methods, ethnography, autoethnography, social cartographies, and reflective topical autobiography to explore the quotidian practices that buttress the promise of hope for queer futurity.

This text celebrates the possibility that individuals are in fact attempting to craft queer spaces where hegemonic heterosexist discourses cease to regulate bodies. This book rejects the notion that social and political organization cannot lead to emancipatory possibilities in the future, as found in Lee Edelman’s *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive*; instead this text explores, as did José Esteban Muñoz in *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*, the ways in which identifying the potential for crafting utopic spaces is not just intellectually rewarding, but can transform the lives of individuals and society at large.

A worthwhile read, *A Critical Inquiry into Queer Utopias* is a rejection of the antisocial turn in queer theory—an idea that has been widely contested by contemporary queer theorists. The authors do not offer a linear or predetermined program for the establishment of queer utopic spaces but rather focus on the everyday acts of resistance and affective forces that create the potentiality for pockets or cleavages of queer utopian spaces. As Muñoz suggests, these spaces then create the potential to “free” minoritarian individuals from the “here and now” of heteronormative space and time or from the “majoritarian public sphere.” These chapters provide glimpses into what is on the horizon.

As Lauren Berlant posits, we must abandon our obsession with and attachment to the “fantasy of the good life” or unachievable aspirations dictated by liberal democratic and capitalist visions of acquiring wealth and “becoming somebody.” Instead we must imagine how we might reconstitute the present by examining the events of ordinary life. Sara Ahmed has forced us to question either our compulsive need to find happiness, or the very notion that we need happiness at all. Drawing from Ahmed, we recognize that queer futurity is not so much about crafting prescriptions for a utopian society—in which everyone is happy and life is ideal—but by making life more bearable in the present because in doing so we create the potential for a better future. She astutely notes:

We need to think more about the relationship between the queer struggle for a bearable life and aspirational hopes for a good life. Maybe the point is that it is hard to struggle without aspirations, and aspirations are hard to have without giving them some form. We could remember that the Latin root of the word *aspiration* means “to breathe.” I think the struggle for a bearable life is the struggle for queers to have spaces to breathe…with breathe comes imagination. With breathe come possibility. If queer politics is about freedom, it might simply mean the freedom to breathe.
For far too long, utopias have been understood as ideal or perfect places or societies—a telos. Traditionally, advocates of utopias have articulated a platform for societies, in which queers are not only free, but are also happy and living the “good life.” This is not the vision of queer utopias proposed in this volume. Rather, the authors examine the creation of spaces in the present that do not necessarily allow for complete emancipation or even happiness, but are suggestive of the potentiality for the future; they give hope. Given that happiness is a normative and regulatory construct, it seems fitting here that the construction of queer utopian spaces does not hinge upon happiness, but rather are simply autonomous spaces in which to breathe.

This book synthesizes the existing literature on queer space and queer futurity. There are exceptional accounts of the emergence of queer space such as *Queer Diasporas* (2000) edited by Cindy Patton and Benigno Sanchez-Eppler, and *Queers in Space: Communities, Public Places, and Sites of Resistance* (1997) edited by Gordon Brent Ingram, Anne-Marie Bouthillette, and Yolanda Retter. However, given that these books predate recent debates in queer theory, they do not grapple with issues of utopia and queer futurity. While also writing prior to the literature on queer futurity and queer utopia, scholars have sought to locate queer utopia in cyberspace, and have pinned their hopes for queer futurity on the hybridization of the body and technology.\(^5\)

Attempting to escape the trap of utopia, or the negative connotations of utopia as naive and passé, I previously suggested that we perhaps not utilize the term queer utopia and instead utilize the Foucauldian term queer heterotopias.

Drawing from the work of Michel Foucault, I argue that queer heterotopias are places where individuals can challenge the heteronormative regime... , in “Of Other Spaces,” Foucault (1986) noted that in everyday life escaping repression requires the creation of heterotopic spaces, where individuals can celebrate their difference. Unlike utopias, heterotopic spaces can be created in reality... They are sites where actors, whether academics or activists, engage in what we might call a radical *politics of subversion*, where individuals attempt to dislocate the normative configurations of sex, gender, and sexuality through daily exploration and experimentation with crafting a queer identity.\(^6\)

Here, we resist the desire to quibble over the appropriate terminology for these spaces and hope that the reader can move past the connotations of utopia as antiquated teleological naiveté. Here, taking our cue from the literature noted briefly above, our goal is to explore how individuals are attempting to queer space in emancipatory ways that do not necessarily realize a fixed utopia, but create potential for a queer future.
Finally, taking a cue from Judith Halberstam’s most recent book, *The Queer Art of Failure*, we also recognize that queerness requires failure. “To live is to fail, to bungle, to disappoint, and ultimately to die; rather than searching for ways around death and disappointment, the queer art of failure involves the acceptance of the finite . . . rather than resisting endings and limits, let us instead revel in and cleave to all of our own inevitable fantastic failures.” None of the queer spaces and temporalities examined in this book represents static spaces or times; they do not represent the realization of a complete fixed utopia in the here and now. We recognize that many of the queer spaces explored in this book may fail, perhaps even before the book is published. In fact, the more they fail, the more it pushes queer folk into collective action, to try again to create new spaces for themselves—spaces that represent the potentiality and hope for queer futurity.

**No Future**

Leo Bersani, particularly in *Homos*, laid the foundation for what is now commonly referred to as the antisocial turn in queer theory. Bersani asked, “Should the homosexual be a good citizen?” For Bersani, theories of sexuality must rebuke identity-based notions of community. According to Bersani, homosexuality threatens the social order because of homosexuals’ inability to literally reproduce that very social order; queers should embrace this space of abjection. Theories of sexuality tend to seek out redemptive possibilities by postulating formulas for collective action based in identity politics. For Bersani, concerns with queer futurity cannot be the basis of queer theory; the antisocial turn in queer theory was an antiutopian move away from idealism and humanistic notions of community. While he astutely critiques the teleological forces at work within redemptive theoretical projects, his focus on negativity ignores at worst and neglects at best the necessity of emancipatory politics for many queers whose material conditions make embracing the negative a political privilege or luxury. While it was in fact Bersani who originally sparked debates over antisociality or antirelationality and the embrace of the negative, one text, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* by Lee Edelman, caused these debates to explode.

Lee Edelman’s book *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* is an overtly polemical if not solipsistic critique of queer theory, Gay and Lesbian studies, and queer people’s political aims. Edelman asserts that queer activists and individuals have adopted a homonormative political platform that is plagued by the politics of respectability and that ultimately reproduces heteronormativity. In *The Twilight of Equality: Neoliberalism, Cultural Politics, and the Attack on Democracy*, Lisa
Duggan posited that lesbian and gay politics had succumbed to what she conceptualized as homonormativity. She said, “It is a politics that does not contest dominant heteronormative assumptions and institutions, but upholds and sustains them, while promising the possibility of a demobilized gay constituency and a privatized, depoliticized gay culture anchored in domesticity and consumption.” In other words, gay and lesbian politics has been reduced to the struggle for marriage and custody rights, which are heteronormative goals. Gay and lesbian politics has become an occlusive regime that marginalizes queers not seeking political recognition, namely legal marriage.

Edelman’s critiques are incredibly reminiscent of Michael Warner’s arguments in *The Trouble With Normal,* the current dominant lesbian and gay political project bastardizes those queers with no interest in monogamy, marriage, and/or children. In fact, both Edelman and Warner posit that queers should celebrate and continue all of the behaviors that many conservative heterosexuals find deplorable, such as public sex with strangers. However, Warner imagines a future in which these “misbehaving” queers exist, and interrogate and reformulate the political policies meant to shame and stigmatize them; in Edelman’s phlegmatic critique there is no future.

Edelman argues that queer politics has fallen victim to “reproductive futurism.” This suggests that these political campaigns are driven by the compulsion to make our world better for future generations of innocent children. If you want people to donate money to homeless shelters, tell them that children are dying and sprawl pictures of emaciated children across posters and television ads. If you want marriage equality, focus on how the legal protections afforded by a legally legitimized marriage will protect children. For Edelman, this focus on children reproduces heteronormative logic. According to Edelman, this strategic turn undermines the subversive quality of queer identity. In order to elucidate his arguments, Edelman turns to Charles Dickens.

In *A Christmas Carol,* the villain-turned-hero, Ebenezer Scrooge, is visited by his deceased business partner Jacob Marley, who warns him—a cold-hearted and avarice-driven bachelor—to change his ways. In order to facilitate this change, Scrooge is visited by three other ghosts. The ghost of Christmas past takes Scrooge back to his youth to remind him of the innocent child he once was. The ghost of Christmas present takes him to the home of his employee, Bob Cratchit. There Scrooge sees Tiny Tim, Cratchit’s youngest son, who is sick. Tiny Tim will succumb to his illness because his family lives in poverty due to Scrooge’s refusal to pay Cratchit a living wage. The ghost of Christmas future shows Scrooge that Tiny Tim dies and that Scrooge will be left in abjection and lowliness. When Scrooge awakes, he has changed; he is now kind, generous, and
compassionate. Most importantly, for Edelman’s analysis, his transformation saves the child. This classic story forces the reader to empathize with Tiny Tim and despise Scrooge. Edelman analyzes Dickens’s plot; the life and future of the child hinges upon the miser’s great awakening.

Make no mistake, then: Tiny Tim survives at our expense in a culture that always sustains itself on the threat that he might die. And we, the sinthomosexuals who, however often we try to assert that we’re “more” than what we do with our genitals, are nonetheless convicted from the outset of stealing his childhood, endangering his welfare, and, ultimately, destroying his life, must respond by insisting that Tiny Tim is always already dead, mortified into a fetish animated only by the collective fantasy wherein he doesn’t rise up and ask in reproach, “Father, don’t you see I’m burning?” Because there isn’t now, and never has been, much doubt about who killed him, because his death can always be traced to the sinthomosexual’s jouissance, why not acknowledge our kinship at last with the Scrooge who, unregenerate, refuses the social imperative to grasp futurity in the form of the Child, for the sake of whom, as the token of accession to imaginary wholeness, everything else in the world, by force if needed, must give way?  

This is queer politics; we must make the world a kinder, safer, and more just place for future queer children. By saving a child you are granted a future. Edelman says we identify with Tim and not Scrooge, but why? Scrooge represents the self-centered Id, which we gladly agree to sublimate in the best interests of humanity. Edelman says the politically incorrect: screw the dying child.

For Edelman, the problem is that queer politics draws from what he calls reproductive futurism. As the Dickens example suggests, reproductive futurism refers to the Enlightenment-inspired ideal that there is a future that can be achieved—a telos. Moreover, the primary goal of such efforts is to make a better future for children. The late Whitney Houston’s classic, I Believe the Children Are the Future, is an exemplar of reproductive futurism. Think of Daddy Warbucks in the classic Annie, making a better life for a little orphan girl. Worse yet, think of the song, We Are the World; Michael Jackson released this song featuring many American music artists to raise money for children in Africa. The video showed American artists with compassion in their eyes singing about how the Western world must help the children of the non-Western world and make them have better days. This song is ostensibly about helping others, but it reveals human narcissism, which for Edelman is part of the human condition. The video for this song is absent of the hungry Black bodies that these philanthropists aim to save and make a better world for. Race, which is completely and unjustifiably ignored in Edelman’s book, then also shapes reproductive futurism. The song and video contained
a chorus of American celebrities chanting “we” are the world; the song was plagued by both racism and colonialism. The song suggests there is a choice to be made, to sacrifice for those less fortunate children.

Reproductive futurism underpins both conservative movements and modern gay and lesbian movements. Conservatives remind us that to be right-to-life is to protect children; to oppose gay marriage is also to protect children. Interestingly, the same logic is followed by gay and lesbian activists. Access to birth control and abortion helps women refrain from having unwanted children, in turn protecting unborn children. Legalized marriage for gays and lesbians means custody rights and benefits, which will protect children. Either way, for Edelman, both reproduce heteronormativity.

Edelman questions the utility of campaigns that propose to make a better future. Edelman draws from other classics, namely Alfred Hitchcock films. In his assessment of *North by Northwest*, he posits that the future relies heavily upon the idea that individuals must have compassion for others—that we can sympathize with others and feel their pain. It is this empathy that springs individuals into collective action. In this Hitchcock masterpiece, an advertising executive named Roger Thornhill is mistaken for George Kaplan (who we find out later does not exist). He is chased across the United States by a spy named Philip Vandamm and his murderous henchman named Leonard. The spies are not able to kill Thornhill and instead he is framed for murder. Thornhill now finds himself running from the police. He meets Eve with whom he escapes and later learns is a spy who is also in danger. The film culminates in a shocking scene on Mount Rushmore that is the focal point of Edelman’s analysis. This chase sequence leaves Eve hanging from the side of mountain. Thornhill grabs Eve by one hand and, not able to hold on to her, desperately calls out to Leonard (who has now arrived on the side of the mountain) for help. Rather than aiding in their rescue and pulling them both up to safety, Leonard steps on Thornhill’s hand.

[Thornhill] calls upon Leonard, *sinthomosexual* and director surrogate, to step right up to the challenge and answer Thornhill’s call for compassion by putting his best foot forward and helping Thornhill learn to let go…Thornhill’s initial entreaty, “Help,” becomes, almost at once, “Help me,” suggests neither lack of commitment to Eve nor the limits of his compassion. Thornhill’s anguished suspense, after all, like that of the spectator as well, speaks to his identification with Eve, suspended as she is from the face of the cliff and pulling him into danger as he tries to pull her out…Leonard, the *sinthomosexual*, by pressing his foot onto Thornhill’s hand, attempts to impress upon Thornhill the fact that by breaking his hold on the cliff Leonard gives him the break for which he’s been asking: the neighborly love sufficient to break him open with jouissance and launch him into the void around and against which the subject congeals.
In earnestness of Thornhill’s cry, Leonard hears... a request, beyond what the subject knows, for something beyond his desire... But Leonard, by going beyond transgression and so beyond the law, engages jouissance that is unconstrained by fantasy or desire.\textsuperscript{14}

Edelman reads Leonard’s act as radical; he is able to do what Thornhill—who is too socialized within society’s morality and gendered norms regarding women (who, of course, are the fragile carriers of children)—cannot do. Leonard allows his “pure” naked desires to guide his behavior.

Lee Edelman’s problem with reproductive futurism and queer futurity is that all political movements require compassion for others. It requires that we feel the pain of others, that we are both sympathetic and empathetic. Edelman suggests that Leonard reveals a secret as he stomps his foot on Thornhill’s hand; humans do not and should not be forced to have compassion for one another. Here, we can begin to unpack Edelman’s main arguments.

Here, drawing astutely from Freud’s \textit{Civilization and Its Discontents}, Edelman argues that mandating compassion acts as tyrannical force. Queer theory commands that we align ourselves with other queers. If I am a queer woman of color, I must empathize with Bears,\textsuperscript{15} and Sadomasochistic Leatherdykes alike. Edelman says Thornhill’s machinations demonstrate that this ostensible unity is an illusion. This is also the basis of Edelman’s vitriolic critiques of Judith Butler. While agency in Butler is constrained by her devotion to poststructuralism, Butler still sees hope for the future in the subversive behaviors of queers.\textsuperscript{16}

This is the primary foundation or criticism of the antirelational school of queer theory as found in Leo Bersani’s \textit{Hosos} and “Is the Rectum a Grave?” The antirelational strain of queer theory condemns relationality and the idea that individuals—who are driven by empathy—will come together in collective action. To insist on a queer future is to force a community of resistance to emerge, one that becomes homogenous and is buttressed by an imaginary collectivity. It is imaginary because you cannot force people to align themselves with others. This future does not meet the needs of the individual; it does not allow individuals to experience Lacanian jouissance, or pure enjoyment and pleasure. Edelman seems to suggest that to experience jouissance—particularly sexual pleasure—we must throw people off cliffs or must nurture every self-centered whim of the Id.

In its origins, the calling for a queer subject was supposed to disrupt stable categories, namely the binary constructions of sex, gender, and sexuality. However, Edelman posits that in calling for a queer future—particularly the assimilationist homonormative gay rights projects of the modern period—we attempt to create stability. Originally, the power of queer theory was that it fostered instability. Edelman insists that queers
should embrace negativity and instability. He promulgates that it is the *sinthomosexual* who accomplishes this.

[T]he defining mark of futurism, [is] inscribing the faith that temporal duration will result in the realization of meaning by way of a “final signifier” that will make meaning whole at last. *Sinthomosexuality*, by contrast, scorns such belief in a final signifier, reducing every signifier to the status of the letter and insisting on access to jouissance in place of access to sense, on identification with one’s sinthome instead of belief in its meaning...I am calling *sinthomosexuality*, then, the site where the fantasy of futurism confronts the insistence of a jouissance that renders it precisely by rendering it in relation to that drive.17

Edelman posits that queer futurity hopefuls, like brainwashed cult members, believe that salvation is imminent. Leonard from *North by Northwest* is a *sinthomosexual*. He eschews that which is ostensibly right, and does what is right for him. The future is not the answer. There need be no future. Who needs a future if we can stay here, fuck, screw people, and cater to our carnal desires right here and right now? Queers can escape the banality that has come to dominate their lives by embracing negativity.

Homosexuality has been equated with death; it is not procreative, and as Edelman documents, reporters have even noted that there is a correlation between homosexuality and death. For example, in the 1980s HIV/AIDS became a plague. Moreover, homosexuality is linked to death because queer sex acts do not ensure genetic fitness and ergo are unnecessary. Edelman says embrace this death! The *sinthomosexual* rejects reproductive futurism, has no political program, and is both resolved and quite happy to live in abjection. The *sinthomosexual* has no interest in recognition and/or what we may call *heterosexual-mimesis*—integration into the heteronormative social order.

In order for a political movement to gain its objectives, it must be visible, recognized, and legitimized. Therefore, a queer political platform then forces queers to be signified, recognized, and queer subjectivity becomes ossified as an identity. By asserting that queers are normal, too, queers seek to be marked within the symbolic order, which seems to be antithetical to queer theory’s original goals. Recognition in the symbolic order requires acquiescence to its logic and ideals. Edelman says that modern queer politics asks queers to reject what is primal or what is negative. This requirement assuages if not completely negates the subversive quality of querness.

My polemic thus stakes its fortunes on a truly hopeless wager: that the Symbolic’s negativity to the very letter of the law, that attending to the
persistence of something internal to reason that reason refutes, that turning the force of queerness against all subjects, however queer, can afford an access to the jouissance that at once defines and negates us. Or better: can expose the constancy, the inescapability, of such access to jouissance in the social order itself, even if that order can access its constant access to jouissance only in the process of abjecting that constancy onto the queer.\textsuperscript{18}

To be clear, Edelman imagines no future, no ethics, no justice, no compassion, and certainly no hope. The authors in this text do not welcome Edelman’s vision.

There are many problems with Edelman’s polemic. Perhaps it was his intention, but Edelman does not make any meaningful connection between the \textit{sinthomosexual} and gendered or sexualized subjectivities. Edelman’s examples from Dickens’s books to Hitchcock’s films \textit{North by Northwest} and the \textit{Birds} are culled from the world of fiction; who are these \textit{sinthomosexuals} in the “real world”? I suppose the lack of empiricism here may have been intentional as to render any political utility of text impossible. Tim Dean has offered an instructive critique of Edelman that mirrors the critiques and goals of this text:

According to this argument, queerness is structurally antisocial, not empirically so. By construing the sociopolitical order primarily in imaginary and symbolic terms, while simultaneously invoking the queer as real to undermine that order, Edelman’s account offers a too monochromatic a vision of the symbolic; it furnishes too narrow a conception of the social; and it paints an unimaginative picture of the future.\textsuperscript{19}

Tim Dean cautions us that Edelman misses the ways in which culture opens up spaces for new forms of relationality that create potential for queer futures.\textsuperscript{20}

The problem with Edelman is that in all of his nihilism he is optimistic. Drawing from Michel Foucault, who is curiously absent from Edelman’s text, we can understand that what we might call the “hope for resistance” is an inevitable part of the human condition. Foucault said, “There are no societies which do not regulate sex, and thus all societies create the hope of escaping from such regulations.”\textsuperscript{21} The idea that you can get human beings, queers specifically (in all of their variance), to abandon the hope of a future that ceases to marginalize their bodies and desires is downright naive. Edelman ignores that, for many—such as queers of color or poor queers of color—their current material conditions make the potential for the experience of jouissance harder to achieve. Diana Fuss’s words are insightful: “Any misplaced nostalgia for or romantization of the outside as a privileged site of radicality immediately gives us away, for in order to idealize the outside we must already be, to some degree, comfortably
entrenched on the inside.” For many people, particularly the queer futurity hopefu
l in this text, we have no desire to throw people off cliffs (metaphorically or literally), let poor children die, live in a void as a parasitic element of society, or worse, die Antigone’s death. While some, including Edelman and his followers, may find this embrace of the negative empower-
ing, we hold tight to the idea that most will not and cannot!

Queer Futurity: What’s on the Horizon?

In *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*, José Esteban Muñoz draws primarily from Ernst Bloch in his analysis of queer aesthetics. Muñoz examines the poems of James Schulyer and Elizabeth Bishop to showcase the potential for queer futurity. He explores the autobiographical texts of John Giorno and Samuel Delany in order to utilize queer utopian memory of public sex to locate the utopian. He does the same with the play *The Toilet* by Amiri Baraka, the artwork of Kevin McCarty and Andy Warhol, the choreography and performances of Fred Herko, and the performance art and drag performances of Kevin Aviance, Kalup Linzy, and Dynasty Handbag. Muñoz also reflects on his own autobiographical experiences as a queer kid of color attending bars and clubs such as Magic Touch and Club Fire and Ice. These examples represent utopian aesthetics; Muñoz explores how acts in the “no longer conscious” (the past) can be read now in the present and utilized to depict the potential of queer futurity, or in the “not yet here” (the future).

This book aims to study in depth what Muñoz calls “queer-world-making.” “I see world-making here as functioning and coming into play through the performance of queer utopian memory, that is, a utopia that understands its time as reaching beyond some nostalgic past that perhaps never was or some future whose arrival is continuously belated—a utopia in the present.” We locate queer-world-making at the theater, in political activism, in sexual subcultures such as Barebacking and BDSM, in schools, in queer communities, and in queer families.

*A Critical Inquiry into Queer Utopias* examines the quotidian ways that individuals interrupt straight time. We examine what Muñoz calls “an anticipatory illumination of a queer world.” We are committed to envisaging the vicissitudes of quotidian queer world-making. We see “a sign of an actually existing queer reality, a kernel of political possibility within a stultifying heterosexual present.” We assent with Muñoz; what we describe are “not an end but an opening or horizon. Queer utopia is a modality of critique that speaks to quotidian gestures as laden with potentiality.” Our goal is not teleological; we offer no prescriptive for a queer planet. What we offer is a glimpse into what might be; we offer hope to minoritarian people, who are marginalized because of their racial, ethnic, class, sex, gender, sexuality, and/or ability status.
The queer utopic spaces crafted here suggest there is reason to hope for a better future, a future not constructed by the dictates of American neoliberalism, but by the needs and desires of queer people.

Here, we aim to see potentiality for the future. Muñoz makes an astute distinction between possibilities and potentialities. “Possibilities exist, or more nearly, they exist within a logical real, the possible, which is within the present and is linked to presence. Potentialities are different in that although they are present, they do not exist in present things. Thus, potentialities have a temporality that is not in the present but, more nearly, in the horizon, which we can understand as futurity.”

Thus, in this anthology, the contributors do not posit that they have located fully functioning utopias, nor do they offer a roadmap for queers seeking utopic space.

Muñoz draws from Marcuse and Bloch in order to explore the utopian power of aesthetics. These German idealists utilize utopia not to refer to a predetermined and/or prescribed vision of a telos, but as critique of the here and now. To refuse to acquiesce to the heterosexist and racist hegemonic discourses that buttress the status quo is to signal utopia. As with queerness, queerness is not limited to the domain of sexual orientation or gender subversion. Queerness is a refusal; it is a dismissal of binaries, categorical, and essentialist modalities of thought and living. Queerness is always being made, remade, being done, being redone, and being undone. It is the quotidian refusal to play by the rules, if those rules stifle the spirit of queers who, like caged birds, cannot sing.

What Muñoz understands that Edelman clearly does not is that while much of lesbian and gay politics has been overrun by homonormativity, it does not mean that all queer politics and relational behavior is assimilationist. Clearly answering Edelman, Muñoz says, “Queer futurity does not underplay desire. In fact it is all about desire, desire for both larger semiaabstractions such as a better world or freedom but also more immediately, better relations within the social that include sex and more pleasure.” He agrees that homonormativity has impacted LGBTQ politics, in ways that has diminished its earlier subversive quality. However, to dismiss all relational collective action that might improve queers’ lives is problematic. Edelman’s conclusions probably result largely from his treatment of LGBTQ politics as a white middle-class project. He neglects to acknowledge that there are queer bodies of color, poor queers, disabled bodies, and other marginalized queers, who still fuck in bushes, who still live in abjection—who are either marginalized or intentionally refuse membership in the system to which he objects.

While we take our cue directly from Muñoz, our method is quite different. First, Muñoz’s project was centered on the examination of the furtive no longer conscious. In the past he finds moments of jouissance
hidden in queer aesthetics. Here, the authors are more focused on the here and now and what the present can reveal to us about the future. Second, Muñoz offers analysis by way of cultural analysis, which at present dominates queer theory. In recent years, queer theorists have been able to postulate grandiose claims with little to no evidence to support their claims. We are attempting to inoculate the queer body of scholarship with a dose of empiricism.

A Critical Inquiry into Queer Utopias contains five sections: Theater and Performance, Eroticized Spaces, Queer Counterpublics, Queer Political Activism, and Family. Part I of the book examines the theater. The spirit of this section, as in the entire book, is much like Jill Dolan’s in Utopia in Performance: Finding Hope at the Theatre. Dolan explores what she calls utopian performatives, or small spaces and moments when theater performances can allow an audience, even if for only a moment, to imagine a better world. Dolan, like the authors in this anthology, agree that individuals can create temporal nonfixed utopian spaces. Dolan astutely demonstrates through careful analysis of solo performances, monologues performance poetry, and dance how audiences actualize feelings of hope and promise through the consumption of these performances. This book will expand on Dolan’s work, hence contributing to the field. In chapter 1, David Gorshein examines the Israeli film The Bubble and the strategic depiction of the play Bent within the film. Gorshein utilizes archival research, cultural analysis, and interviews with the directors of the play Bent to analyze how the film constructs queer utopia in ways that reify homonormativity. He pays acute attention to the ways in which Tel Aviv itself has been positioned as utopia both for Jews and queers. In chapter 2, Stephen Farrier analyzes theater performances, specifically Dickie Beau’s Blackout (Twilight of the Idols) and Front Room. He explores the ways in which these performances create the potentiality for queer futurity and disrupt straight time.

Part II explores eroticized spaces as sites of resistance that indicate the potential for queer futurity. In chapter 3, Brandy L. Simula’s rich ethnography explores the world of BDSM. With precision she notes the intricate ways that participants queer gender, and in turn craft spaces in which her respondents attempt to disrupt heteronormativity and the binary sex/gender system, and in turn are attempting to craft utopic space. In chapter 4, Brandon Andrew Robinson researches the subcultural lives of “Barebackers,” or men who consciously have unprotected sex with other men. Through his careful discourse analysis of online barebacking communities, he finds that these men are guided by a desire for jouissance that for them is found in the danger of unprotected sex. Their rejection of AIDS discourse and other hegemonic discourses that seek to control their bodies and sex lives signals a queer utopian potentiality.
Part III examines the emergence of queer counterpublics. In chapter 5, Sarah M. Steele utilizes ethnography to document and analyze the contribution of a non-for-profit organization called Southerners on New Ground (SONG). She places specific emphasis on an event they organize called Campouts. Steele posits that these events are strategic and conscious efforts to craft queer utopian space. In chapter 6, Kat Rands, Jess McDonald, and Lauren Clapp study the way in which the pedagogical practice of queer landscaping in classrooms are attempts at crafting queer counterpublics that seek to challenge the hegemonic style of classroom design. They utilize Geertzian thick description to create social cartographies that demonstrate the ways in which students and faculty at the University of Focus are attempting to craft queer space; these attempts are glimpses at what may be on the horizon.

Part IV analyzes queer political activism. In chapter 7, Pawel Leszkowicz and Tomasz Kitlinski explore the ways in which LGBTQ visibility campaigns in Europe have been constrained by homonormativity while simultaneously seeking to challenge heteronormativity in ways that provide hope for queer futurity. In chapter 8, Hilary Malatino utilizes historiographical methods and a textual analysis of Queer UltraViolence to study the contribution of Bash Back!, a network for queer activists that formed to challenge the homonormativity and subsequent secondary marginalization experienced by queers within the larger LGBTQ movement.

Finally, in Part V, Family, Jane Ward and Laura V. Heston have the arduous task of exploring queer futurity and the family. In chapter 9, Ward utilizes archival methods, particularly books written for parents of gender fluid children, television news specials, and print media. In addition, Ward, draws from interviews with parents, and (auto)ethnographic material from experiences in a genderqueer parenting group. In this data, Ward astutely finds a place for children in queer futurity. In chapter 10, Heston utilizes interviews and participant observations with queer families in Massachusetts to document the ways in which parents engaged in queer parenting are simultaneously involved in queer-worldmaking.

This section on family hopes to disrupt and complicate the far too often myopic critiques of gay marriage and homonormativity. Edelman and Muñoz, along with other queer theorists such as Lisa Duggan, critique queers whose ostensible aim is assimilation into heteronormative institutions such as family and the military. But we would ask, in what ways does a black trans single parent upset and not conform to a heteronormative mode of doing family? To hear modern queer scholars tell it, one cannot be radical and desire marriage. While the leatherdyke anal fisting her life-size doll might be far sexier than two genderqueer adults raising a child, why does this render all queer parents liberal assimilationists? As Michael
Warner originally suggested, queer politics must come to celebrate and allow space for those who desire to live on the fringe engaged in the most “diabolical” and “esoteric” sexual desires documented and those who chose a more so-called vanilla path. In response to the conservative logic of assimilationist LGBT organizations, many queers have adopted a reactionary and exclusionary stance whereby to live in negativity is the only path to queerness. Warner wrote, “In too many ways, it [Lesbian and Gay movements] has chosen to articulate the politics of identity rather than to become a broader movement targeting the politics of shame.” Should heteronormative society have the right to shame those who desire that which does not fit into their narrow worldview? But conversely, should ostensibly radical queers have the right to shame those queers who do not fit their vision of radical sex?

On the horizon are an infinite amount of queer possibilities; unfortunately, some visions are currently marginalized. This book aims to begin to give insight into the quotidian ways in which a diverse range of queer utopic visions are emerging without casting judgment or launching a pseudo-scientific evaluation aimed at qualifying, categorizing, judging, and/or punishing those who do not measure up to our own desires and choices. We resist the temptation to normalize one vision of queer utopic potentiality over another. We hope that the diversity that springs from this text provides hope for the many queers who have not abandoned the promise of queer futurity.

Notes

2. A reviewer suggested that I clarify my aims here; to be clear, the use of language here was intended to be ironic.
   Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham wrote about what she conceptualized as the politics of respectability. Higginbotham examined the role that black Baptist women played in black liberation struggles and women’s rights activism. She posited that these black women’s strategic approach to gaining equality was conservative; they advanced the idea that, in order to foster equality, black people needed to adhere to Victorian, middle-class, and white cultural values. These churchwomen denounced patronizing dance halls and the consumption of popular music such as jazz. These black churchwomen insisted that women refrain from wearing modern revealing fashions and strongly advocated the adoption of a conservative aesthetic. Their strategic approach was this: through moral reform, cultural reform, and a refinement of aesthetics, black people would demonstrate to whites and those in power that black people, particularly black women, were worthy of rights. Here, many have argued that lesbian and gay political reform has adopted a similar strategy. If gays and lesbians can show that they are respectable, monogamous, and just like “straight” people, homophobic people will begin to be more acceptable, and society will grant Gays and Lesbians legitimacy through the acquisition of civil rights.
11. For an additional discussion of homonormativity, politics, and utopia see Jones 2009.
13. Due to the prohibitive costs of acquiring copyright permissions for the chorus of the song, it has not been reprinted here. However, the whole video is available at [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=M9BNoNFKCBI](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=M9BNoNFKCBI)
15. Bears are gay men who adopt a hypermasculine aesthetic and have formalized a subculture that rejects feminized notions of gay subjectivity. See Peter Hennen, “Bear Bodies, Bear Masculinity: Recuperation, Resistance, or Retreat?” *Gender and Society* 19, no. 1 (2005): 25–43.
24. Muñoz, 49.
27. Muñoz, 30.
Part I

Theater and Performance
Chapter 1

The Play Within the Film: Tel Aviv, History, and the Queer Utopia

David Gorshein

It was kind of raw, the way theater always is: good or bad. Real people in front of you, wanting something, showing their desire. I think that’s why theater has a better reputation than it deserves. The people who make it are so vulnerable. Their desire is so palpable. Their lives are filled with struggle. Almost no one gets rich on the theater. That’s why we think of it as a place for progressive ideas, as a progressive force on the culture at large, something hopeful and somewhat pure.

—Sarah Schulman

Performance was always, for me, a way of experiencing in imagination and desire what I couldn’t even name in a daily experience that was very much about denying the longings I felt.

—Jill Dolan

Eytan Fox’s 2006 Israeli film The Bubble (The Bubble) stages a gay affair between an Israeli and a Palestinian in Tel Aviv. The Bubble has traveled LGBT film festivals throughout the world and received abundant scholarly and critical attention. In disciplines including film studies and comparative literature, The Bubble has been cited for its representation of the Israeli-Palestinian “conflict” in terms of sexual identification. But theories of performance have only partially documented the artistic merit of the movie. The film’s treatments of “live” performance and the philosophical implications of staging the Holocaust in the utopic context have remained unexplored in critical accounts.

The specificity of the Jewish Holocaust is particularly vital in the context of gay Israeli identity, even as The Bubble critiques the inevitability of historicization in a moment of staged “liveness.” My argument centers on The Bubble’s incorporation of a “live” scene from Martin Sherman’s Bent (1979). Bent is an American play about the forbidden relationship of two
male prisoners in a Nazi concentration camp in Dachau. In addition to the film’s inclusion of a scene from the play, the cinematography in The Bubble replicates some of Bent’s codified imagery.

Sherman’s play has been vilified by theater and literary critics for its depiction of gay suffering during World War II. Adapted into a Hollywood film in 1997, Bent achieved famed status despite attacks for supposed participation in “oppression olympics,” discourses seeking an answer to the question of who, historically, suffered more. Debates on the play’s significance have remained in the Euro-American context; here, I address the controversies surrounding Bent’s legacy in a consideration of queer utopic transnationalism. In my close analysis of select scenes from the film I call upon archival research to establish the Israeli reception of Martin Sherman’s play. My analysis is supported by newspaper reviews of the Israeli premiere of Bent (בדנה) on the Haifa Theater’s “national stage” in 1983, and in a revival in 2003 staged by Beit Zvi in Ramat Gan, a Tel Aviv suburb. Critical accounts suggest that the legacy of Bent and the implications of Holocaust performance resound with exceptional nuance in the Israeli context. Funding from the UCLA Mellon Program on the Holocaust in American and World Culture sponsored my archival research at the Israeli Documentation Center for the Performing Arts at Tel Aviv University, where I gathered reviews and playbills. In Tel Aviv, I also interviewed actors and filmmakers, including Gal Uchovsky, coproducer of The Bubble and the film’s screenwriter.

One of the most fascinating and unexplored aspects of The Bubble is the metatheatrical subversion of the play Bent in the film’s farcical “passing” of Ashraf, Noam’s object of affection. Ashraf, a Muslim character, “passes” as the Jewish Israeli named Shimi in order to have an openly gay affair in Tel Aviv. Israeli characters in the film “pass” as French in the Palestinian territories. The theatrical strategy of “passing” alludes to the “passing” of a gay character in Bent as Jewish in an earlier interpretation of the utopic motif of “star-crossed lovers.”

The film depicts a hegemonic, American queerness, whose liberalism is defined by idealized visions of interethnic gay love that ignore political conditions of disparity. Anthropologist Rebecca L. Stein asserts in the article “Explosive: Scenes from Israel’s Gay Occupation” that the film The Bubble suggests “queer desire and sociality can bridge the divide between Israelis and Palestinians…in ways that traditional political processes cannot.” Stein astutely points to the filmmaker’s “Romeo and Juliet template” of forbidden love, but Stein does not go as far as to identify the utopic underpinnings of the mythology. In fact, queer theory’s philosophical preoccupation with utopia provides a lens through which to discuss the implications of the play within the film.

My critical assessment of Fox’s film engages theorizations of the Jewish, utopic nation-state, as well as theorizations of utopia from
within queer studies. The queer utopia outlined in my discussion synthesizes three theoretical articulations of utopic possibility. The first utopic framework emerges from the historical prescriptions of Israel as the Jewish homeland. The second concept, in the words of scholar Jill Dolan, is the “utopian performative” achieved in theater collaboration and spectatorship. The third definition of utopia may be found in hopeful futurity, the “collective potentiality” of queerness as described by scholar José Esteban Muñoz; one is never fully queer, and queerness is not yet here, but always possible. These three imaginative treatments accommodate the national specificity of The Bubble’s fantasy, while hinting at the universalized underpinnings of the cultural object (and of utopic theorization).

Discourses in and about Israel often define the nation as a Jewish utopia in an otherwise hostile, anti-Semitic world. The Bubble’s representation of the Jewish haven historicizes the nation-state in relation to the Shoah, “the Hebrew word connoting ‘widespread, even cosmic disaster,’ waste, and desolation” during the attempted Jewish genocide at the hands of the Nazis. Since Israel’s proclaimed independence in May 1948, dominant national discourses have deployed the Holocaust as the definitive mark of a collective, secular society. Within the nationalizing project, the Holocaust “became one of the symbols granting a secular identity” to the Israelis. The critical force of the Holocaust as the secular symbol of national separatism in The Bubble must be understood as utopic, in other words, collective.

Jewish and queer theories often insist on collectivism in articulations of utopia. In Israel, the Shoah remains a launch pad for nationalism, a foundation upon which is constructed a “collective memory of the public.” For Muñoz, as noted above, queerness offers “a flight plan for a collective political becoming,” a transcendent “collective potentiality.” In The Chosen Body: The Politics of the Body in Israeli Society, sociologist Meira Weiss describes “collectivism” as “the ‘civil religion’ of Israel, the larger frame of reference through which other issues and problems—such as militarization, the melting pot of immigration, the relations with the diaspora Jews and the Palestinians—are all defined and…connected to the military threat Israel faces on a daily basis.” The Holocaust is regarded as a memory of collective significance, integral to national identification. While The Bubble essentializes homonormative identity in its representation of utopic love, the film’s metatheatrical comment provides historiographic subtext.

The Bubble and Queer Utopia

In the first scene of the film, Palestinian Ashraf meets Israeli Noam at a military checkpoint. Noam stands idly at the border, fulfilling national
duty as guard and restricting Ashraf’s access into the country. As Ashraf waits to enter Israel, the film highlights the impositions placed on his mobility as an Arab in an Israeli state. We see surveillance and institutionalized control personified by the gatekeepers (in the words of scholar Nir Cohen, “the Establishment”). At the military checkpoint, national differences are pronounced most divisively. Noam stands listlessly in camouflage, rebuking some amateur photographers who are documenting perceived injustices by the Israeli soldiers. After trying to dissuade the watchdog photographers from filming, Noam asserts in resignation, “Go ahead and film, what do I care?!” The aesthetics suggest the unfortunate reality of political restrictions. The cinematography aims to present the actuality of the scripted moment. The scene depicts off-the-cuff “authenticity,” as the film dabbles in the visual codes of documentary and surveillance, with a black-and-white color scheme, and a blinking red recording signal. These visual codes are dropped when Noam leaves the military compound for the urban paradise of Tel Aviv, shielded from the violent reality of geopolitical struggles.

Ashraf’s entrance into the national sphere is hypersexualized as the film sets up its utopic parameters. Noam represents, in the words of scholar Adi Kuntsman, “the figure of the soldier as a gay icon.” The borders standing between Noam and Ashraf may be viewed, circumstantially, as a site of cruising for gay sex; the men met anonymously in a fit of danger, among strangers. The film underscores this possibility by continued sexualization of the social disparity. The Arab men are asked by the Jewish soldiers to raise their shirts, in order to guarantee no Palestinians have concealed explosives. An Israeli guard demands from the line of men, “I said, slowly! So that I’ll be able to see!” Speaking in Hebrew, Ashraf asks Noam for help, when a pregnant Palestinian woman goes into labor at the checkpoint. Though a doctor arrives and aids in the delivery, the baby is stillborn and the mother weeps over the premature death. A crude reading of the miscarriage suggests that military occupation and border control engender stunted politics. This dead-end also accommodates the abject queer subject articulated by theorist Lee Edelman’s opposition to “reproductive futurism” in *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive*. Edelman’s polemic validates queerness as a rejection of naturalized heterosocial reproduction. In the film’s first scene, the battlefield is a cruisy place where failed fertility is linked with queerness. The character Jihad, whom we will later meet as Ashraf’s brother-in-law, indicts the Israeli soldier in Arabic, “You killed the baby!” The scene progresses as the Palestinian mother cries in horror. Smeared with blood on his forehead, Noam looks at Ashraf longingly before walking solo into the landscape.

As the cued soundtrack surfaces, the men’s encounter sets in motion the narrative of forbidden love, utopic in its fantastical depiction of erotic desire between men from two separatist camps. As an alternative to the
dead-end national frontline, *The Bubble*’s spatial utopia privileges queer sex. The film depicts Tel Aviv as the place where Noam can disavow mandatory military service and sleep with the enemy. The following scene opens, no longer in the guise of documentary film, with Noam sitting in the backseat of a cab. The acoustic and cinematographic aesthetics have drastically changed. En route to his insular city, Noam listens on an iPod to American indie folk band Bright Eyes, singing, “*This is the first day of my life. / Swear I was born right in the doorway.*”¹⁷ Noam’s rebirth is not as a child, the doomed figure in Edelman’s formulation of the abject, apolitical queer subject. Instead Noam is reborn as an adult into a new set of “politics, hope, and a future that is not kid stuff,” as offered in a rebuttal by scholar José Esteban Muñoz in *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity.*¹⁸ In the character’s embrace of queer urbanism, Noam embodies Muñoz’s disavowal of the death drive, a sore tenet of Edelman’s credo. While the baby died at the border checkpoint, the film resumes when Noam exits the national framework. The lyrics of the song suggest that upon entering *The Bubble* of Tel Aviv, Noam is reborn in the *doorway*. He “exits” the national sphere, and enters the cosmopolitan alienation of the city. As Nir Cohen reminds,

in all of Fox’s films the use of music in the soundtrack is paramount…carry[ing] a special meaning…For Fox, music is the ‘excess’ that the lush Technicolor and mise-en-scène of the melodrama were for Douglas Sirk, namely a tool to imply that the film is reaching beyond dominant normative structures…to hint at a different reality.”¹⁹

Noam announces his return to a different reality, the urban utopia, via text messages to Lulu, his straight female roommate, and Yali, Noam’s gay male roommate. Both are eager to greet Noam, asking for details, including whether or not he met any cute suicide bombers while serving in the army. On a rooftop in Tel Aviv, smoking pot and making campy jokes, Noam vows never to “go back” to the military compound. According to Adi Kuntsman, “research on Israeli gay and lesbian identities and culture…shows that most Ashkenazi Israeli gay men adopt and/or subvert the figure of the soldier, but seldom reject it,” portraying military service as a way to both “prove their national belonging, and at the same time challenge the exclusive heteronormativity of the army experience.”²⁰ Noam adopts both these strategies in utopic identification, while escaping from military duty.

Noam is able to “rework” the national codes both in terms of cruising, and as material for conversation about queer desires. An “off duty” soldier, Noam counters military discourse, whose self-proclaimed mission is “to defend the existence, territorial integrity and sovereignty of the state of Israel, and to protect the inhabitants of Israel and to combat
all forms of terrorism which threaten daily life.”

Noam’s desire for the enemy suggests that national ideology’s time and place are mutually exclusive from the delayed time and place of “queer futurity” or “collective potentiality.”

Queer utopia is invoked in contemporary Tel Aviv, when Ashraf arrives at Noam’s apartment unannounced to return the Israeli passport the soldier dropped at the military checkpoint. Ashraf’s arrival simultaneously reenacts and subverts the initial cruising encounter at the border, as if Ashraf now possesses the key that eluded him earlier. An(other’s) Israeli identity is represented as the prerequisite to the promise of liberation held by the utopic Tel Aviv. The film stages the queer potentiality of the city as a bubble where Arabness cannot exist openly. Discomforted but intrigued, Noam invites Ashraf upstairs to the rooftop where the Israeli roommates earlier celebrated the soldier’s return. Above the city, in a fit of nerves, Noam tells Ashraf that the Europeans who designed Tel Aviv in the 1920s blocked off the beach breeze by constructing tall buildings on the shore. As the men reflect on the stifled air, Noam sweats anxiously, and Ashraf kisses him.

“Passing” Through

Arab-Israeli tensions are not absent in the utopic promise held by the two men’s kiss, only closeted therein. In the film’s construction of Tel Aviv, national identifications are subverted for Noam and patently assumed by Ashraf. Echoing the enforced creation of Ashraf’s Israeli identity, Tel Aviv is the imaginary bubble. The closet displays the fallibility of a universalized queer utopia. The Bubble portrays the intangible utopia in the very tangible materiality of Israel’s second-most populated city. Tel Aviv is depicted as an incubator for seemingly “progressive” sexual politics. However, the localization of queer potentiality in the urban landscape is established in a bubble, a city like Tel Aviv, rather than in the city of Tel Aviv. More than “liberal,” the city is portrayed as a locale that is as nationally specific as it is modeled on Americanized concepts of social progress, sexual diversity, and human rights.

Identity in the film peers through the Israeli construction of gay male subjectivity; queerness overshadows the “other’s” ethnic alterity. For Ashraf, Tel Aviv’s queer utopia demands challenging performances of “passing” as Israeli and “passing” as straight. When Ashraf comes out of one closet, he steps into another. Without official permits, Ashraf must hide his Palestinian identity for fear of arrest. Ashraf performs Israeli through acting and costume, directed by the Israeli experts. The utopia emerges in Tel Aviv, then, only to the extent that queerness makes the other invisible. Scholar Raz Yosef describes the invisibility of difference
as a trend in Israeli cinema where “queer visions of gay (Ashkenazi) filmmakers are marked by an absence of any political awareness of ethnicity.”

The Bubble ignores the political implications of this invisibility. Noam dis-identifies with remarkable ease, exhibiting little tension at the intersection of queer and Israeli identification. In the “other” national context, Ashraf must stay closeted in the Arab village, fearing for his life. For example, when Ashraf “comes out” to his sister, the disclosure is seemingly illegible to her; we watch her struggle to comprehend the unfathomable, to make sense of the devastating news of her brother’s homosexuality.

In the important book Identity Politics on the Israeli Screen, scholar Yosefa Loshitzky analyzes the theme of forbidden love pervasive in Israeli films, an archetypal trope borrowed from the likes of Romeo & Juliet and Pygmalion. Loshitzky argues that Israeli films that depict “forbidden” romantic relationships borrow the motif from “the world of legend and mythology.” Through cinematic framing, such narratives lend a fantastical (i.e. utopic) quality to the story that relegates Israeli-Palestinian politics to an other-worldly realm. Loshitzky claims that Palestinian self-representation in “forbidden love” narratives is constrained by the Israeli leftist imagination.

Ashraf’s “passing” performance as Israeli in the liberal urban center reifies this claim; the Arab non-Jew’s representational agency is in the hands of the Jewish filmmaker and, within the world of the film, of the “expert” Israeli characters. Further, Loshitzky notes the problematic surrounding the representation of women in films depicting forbidden love, when women are not entirely absent; “only the heterosexual and male homosexual options exist, with the notable absence of lesbian love.” The dearth of women as characters in Israeli-Palestinian forbidden love films reflects the patriarchy of both domestic regimes. Loshitzky suggests that the most taboo depiction would be of “interracial” lesbian visibility, the coupling that has been mostly absent in Israeli cinema.

While Loshitzky and others point to the gendered imbalance of national fantasies in popular films, some critics dismiss tropes of forbidden love altogether for exploiting geopolitical conflict. Scholar Carol Bardenstein, in the article “Cross/Cast: Passing in Israeli and Palestinian Cinema,” characterizes depictions of utopic love as “liberal fantasies of the collapse of boundaries dividing the binarisms of Arab/Jew and Israeli/Palestinian.” Bardenstein dismisses the possibility of any transformative narrative, asserting that contemporary films feature “no play whatsoever” and only the “most common enactments of passing…Israelis passing in undercover units long enough to commit extrajudicial assassinations of Palestinians, and Palestinians passing long enough to detonate themselves and Israelis around them in suicide bombings.” Scholar Hoda El Shakry elaborates on a similar critique in a published review that discusses
The Bubble and Parvez Sharma’s documentary film A Jihad for Love (2007). Both films are faulted for “fall[ing] prey to the same predictable tropes: celebration of Israel’s progressive stance toward gays, the intolerance of Islam, and the ability of sexuality to single-handedly subvert political oppression.”

This description of The Bubble captures a widespread attitude toward the film’s construction of queer utopia. If the film’s depiction reaffirms nationalist tropes of superiority, the queer utopia is fashioned as homonormative. Noam and Ashraf practice safe, monogamous sex, stemming from a romantic attraction between the men. The aesthetics of their first sex scene normalize gay identity by interspersing cinematic shots of gay sex acts with shots of straight sex. The filmic montage of hetero- and homosexual oral and penetrative sex (between Ashraf and Noam, and between Lulu and the editor of TimeOut Tel Aviv, actor Oded Leopold) hints at the universalized sexual politics of The Bubble, while still transgressing some representational conventions.

The film’s sex scenes are localized in Tel Aviv. As the camera fades over Ashraf and Noam, a graffiti slogan on the wall becomes increasingly visible, tendentiously proclaiming in English, “i love love tel aviv.” Scholar Liora Moriel writes, for some Hebrew- and Arabic-speakers… the English language has taken on the allure of international inclusion, sophistication, and style. Thus, in the Israeli LGBT community the use of English has the added attraction of making them harmonize with what they perceive to be an international “family” of like minded, like-speaking LGBTs who may also include non-native speakers who use only a more limited subset of the English lexicon that they believe to be a worldly gay English.

The idealization of English accommodates the utopic representation of gay cosmopolitanism in the film, almost doubly, as in the imperfect tagline, “i love love tel aviv.” The queer utopia conjured by Noam and Ashraf, on a Tel Aviv rooftop, is limited in its liberating potentiality. A mirror image and hetero-role-model have fixed the queer representation.

Noam’s roommate Lulu, an aspiring fashionista, designed the logo tagged on the wall; the heterosexual female character tags the symbolic space where the homosexual characters stage their consummation. The gay sex act is presented in this scene not as a defiant or transgressive affair (in Edelman’s formulation, an apolitical site of “No Future”), but rather it is an afterthought modeled on heteronormativity. Superimposed on the wall, the signification of the tagged utopia cannot escape its referents. The slogan is painted onto a bare, industrial wall, which undoubtedly is modeled after the official “wall” meant to separate Israel from the West Bank and the Palestinian territories. The wall is officially known in Hebrew
rhetoric as the separation fence. Alternatively, the wall is referred to as a “border,” or “boundary,” revealing the impact of naming on our perceptions of this contested issue.

The divisive wall has been theorized as a major issues obstructing the promise of peace in the region; the divider is seen as an architecture of segregation and an eyesore in the landscape. The incomplete project stands at the heels of global critique. A marker of Israeli territorialism, the wall stands as the scrim in the film’s depiction of queer utopia. As they cannot escape homonormative visual assimilation, Noam and Ashraf cannot ignore the signification of geopolitical crisis. At night, as the men lie together, the graffiti on the wall is visible in the dark, and in the morning the letters are clearer.

_The Bubble’s_ queer vision is set against “the wall” even as the film’s representation of Tel Aviv transcends the specificity of national borders. Tel Aviv is depicted not only as a safe queer space, but also as a space decidedly “Western,” not continentally Asian or even geographically in the Middle East. _The Bubble’s_ portrayal of Tel Aviv reveals a particular historical trajectory of “non-Eastern” representation. In the book _In Spite of Partition: Jews, Arabs, and the Limits of Separatist Imagination_, scholar Gil Hochberg describes how,

> Inspired by other European national movements, early Zionism replaced the Jewish Enlightenment’s (Haskalah) integrationist project with a settlement ideology, which can be summed up as follows: if Jews cannot become European in Europe, they might as well become European in their own country, whether this is to be established in Latin America, East Africa, or the Middle East. 33

Historically, Israel staged an identity of the citizen as a figure of “Western” cultural and social practices. Hochberg’s theatrical metaphors describe the current crisis in Israel-Palestine as “the drama of identification.” 34 By drama, Hochberg means the institutionalized staging of conflict in terms of “two semi-independent narratives of oppression: that of anti-Semitism and that of modern colonialism. Thus, if for Jews the establishment of Israel was, to a certain degree, a ‘response’ to centuries of anti-Semitic persecution, primarily in Europe, for the Palestinians it was a manifestation of yet another European-modeled colonial occupation; in fact, the harshest Palestine has ever known.” 35 In recuperation, Hochberg’s comparative literary project argues that a national forgetting of this “shared history” coincided with the creation of the Zionist ideal, a figure that emerged in response to the stigmatized representation of the Jew in Europe. Theater scholar Yael Feiler describes the gendered politics of the stereotypes that Zionist ideology resisted. Feiler writes, “Within the European context, throughout the decades before the state of Israel, Jews were considered
as others. Along with other colonized others, they were also regarded as 'feminine': weak, passive, unreliable, and hence inferior.”

The inclusion of a “shared history” in the film’s portrayal of utopia accommodates Hochberg’s insistence on “the historical link between the Jewish question and the question of Palestine, or between the history of anti-Semitism and that of colonialism.” The Bubble queers the shared history by flashing back to childhood memories of Ashraf and Noam playing together in the same Jerusalem neighborhood, Al-Issawiya. The Bubble’s dream montage of coexistence reveals the ways in which Israeli and Palestinian separatist mythologies are actually connected. Shared histories are doomed to be forgotten when Ashraf renounces his Israeli citizenship the day his family and other Arabs are expelled from the area, their property seized and demolished. Ashraf’s family then moves to Nabulus, divided over the pros and cons of renouncing Israeli citizenship.

In an interesting twist of Edelman’s formulation in No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive, the children who figure in a blast from the past (not the future) are nonetheless the bearers of utopic signification for their outstanding empathy and desire for one another. As Edelman points out, “we are no more able to conceive of a politics without a fantasy of the future than we are able to conceive a future without the figure of a the Child,” even if the symbol of a utopic future is a couple of children situated in the past.

The nostalgic dream sequence appears in the film following another sex scene. The morning after their first sexual encounter in Tel Aviv, Noam praises Ashraf’s sexual prowess, framing the gay penetrative sex act as the most promising indicator of possible coexistence: “the jouissance,” as Edelman writes, “that at once defines and negates us.” Noam ironically describes the sex as “an explosion” ( ליווה, Hebrew slang for “wonderful”), a sarcastic term Noam has to explain to Ashraf. The two men avoid political discussion, silent when national separatism surfaces during a candid conversation. Recounting the fateful day they met at the checkpoint, Noam and Ashraf return to the memory of the miscarriage catastrophe. They stand naked on the rooftop, facing the camera; this physical positioning will reappear on stage at the theater (figure 1.1). The blocking (physical arrangement of the actors) cites the “canonical” gay artifact, Bent. As tension grows between the two men, their conversation becomes more forceful. The characters’ national “sides” emerge from the accumulating signifiers behind their naked bodies, the wall, and the graffiti:

Noam. But you know why there are checkpoints? They weren’t always there.
Ashraf: Spare me all your propaganda. Forget about politics right now.
Upholding Edelman’s rejection of the politicization of queer theory, the characters in the film can perform only a queering of their shared origin without discussing national affiliations.

In the article “The Soldier and the Terrorist: Sexy Nationalism, Queer Violence,” Adi Kuntsman writes, “masculinities become synecdoches of nation and homosex comes to embody attachment to one’s nation and hatred towards its enemies.”40 The depiction of the gay relationship between Ashraf and Noam remains without sufficient critical subversion, abounding with rather than destabilizing referents. The men’s dialogue suggests queerness might superficially perform an alternative to “politics” and “propaganda,” a fantastical vision of utopia where heated discourses may be subverted. Ultimately, however, The Bubble demonstrates that in the imaginary, utopic space is rife with signification, and is utopic only for some. Noam and Ashraf’s drastically different experiences, geographically contiguous but nationally bifurcated, attest to the underlying premise of The Bubble’s queer utopian dialectic. Noam’s insistent soapbox guides the film as Ashraf’s subjectivity is intrinsic to and yet foreclosed by Tel Aviv’s rubric.

The most provocative of The Bubble’s national signifiers is the Holocaust, whose imagery shatters the film’s idealized representation of the urban bubble. The male editor of TimeOut Tel Aviv, who later “outs” Ashraf, tells a leading actor (the star of the play within the film) that the “Holocaust is not sexy” enough to sell magazines. To the contrary, The Bubble’s ideological treatment of the Holocaust citation, via the staging of the play Bent, is indeed a sexualized treatment. On the one hand,
The Bubble’s investment in the Holocaust remains within the conventions of Jewish representation. On the other hand, The Bubble attempts to liberate the “Jewish” specificity of the Holocaust by considering the issue of gay suffering as a history to which Ashraf could relate.

The Play Within the Film

An entire scene from Bent (Act II, scene II) is staged intact in the film The Bubble when Noam and Ashraf go on a date to Habima National Theater in Tel Aviv. The two watch a production of the play starring Lior Ashkenazi, whom critics have called “the Israeli equivalent of Brad Pitt,” with enough sex appeal to convince both men to attend. Ashraf notes he’s never seen a play in Hebrew. By including the play in the film, the narrative depicts gay suffering during the Holocaust as a universalized issue with which both gay men can identify. The film seems to suggest that as a gay man, Ashraf can relate to the suffering of homosexuals during World War II, even if Ashraf cannot identify with Jewish suffering. The scene from Bent that is featured as The Bubble’s climactic moment of “liveness” is precipitated by a live moment nodding to an earlier gay icon. Noam and Ashraf receive an invitation to the theater at a cabaret performance by “out” musician Ivri Lider. In a Tel Aviv bar, Lider covers George and Ira Gershwin’s standard “The Man I Love” (1924). The song choice, as screenwriter Gal Uchovsky revealed in an interview, stemmed from the song’s iconic gay status and its popularity in the American songbook. Furthermore, as I informed Uchovsky, rumors that George Gershwin was gay “still swirl, though there’s hardly a whiff of it in his reverential biographies,” as one satirist notes. The Israeli cabaret performance appropriates the canonical object as it builds on established codes of American gay culture. The lyrics of the song evoke the delayed gratification of queer futurity, captured in the words of José Esteban Muñoz, who writes that “queerness is not quite here” but on the horizon. Lider sings,

I know I shall meet him Sunday,  
maybe Monday, maybe not.  
But still I’m sure I’ll meet him someday,  
maybe Tuesday will be my good news day.

Both depictions of “live” performance in the film cite US Jewish/gay male artifacts that represent delayed gratification, precisely the qualifier of utopic potentiality as described above. The coincidence is indicative of the neoliberal framing of queerness in The Bubble: political, but intangible, available but evasive.
The scene in which Ashraf and Noam receive an invitation to the play is notable for a metatheatrical quality in its choice of performer. Ivri Lider sings “The Man I Love” in the film; he also composed its score. One of Israel’s foremost musicians, Lider is a recipient of numerous industry awards, and a financial and critical success. In 2001, with the release of an album, Lider “came out” in an interview published in the Israeli newspaper *Maariv*. The son of a Holocaust survivor, Lider was the first Israeli musician of such popularity to “come out.” Successful since, Lider signed a US recording contract and has toured internationally as an Israeli ambassador through Europe, Canada, and the United States. Such official endorsement inadvertently deterritorializes queer identity in Israel; official sponsorship also normalizes gay desires in the national sphere. Lider’s live cameo in *The Bubble* and the film’s inclusion of the scene from *Bent* must be seen within this wider “field of cultural production” that determines possible meanings of the film.  

An entire scene from *Bent* is staged intact in *The Bubble*. While the play’s characters Max and Horst stand onstage facing outward, the film’s characters Noam and Ashraf watch from their seats in the crowd. *The Bubble* shows the performance on stage, interspersed with close-up shots of Ashraf and Noam’s faces among the audience. The scene depicts the apparatus of the stage and the familiar picture associated with *Bent*. As Noam and Ashraf observe the sex-talk scene, the film viewer watches the audience’s restrained reactions. Noam’s hand reaches over to hold Ashraf’s, tightening his grip with the growing intensity of the rehearsed sexual encounter. Noam and Ashraf lock hands over the armrest, touching, defying the prohibitive restrictions of the stage’s mise-en-scène. Horst proclaims in Hebrew, “We made love. We were real. We made love. They can’t kill us.” The words speak to the inner monologue of the men as they sit in the audience. In this way, the theatrical dialogue scripted by Sherman is presented as the inner monologue of *The Bubble*’s characters (figure 1.2).

*The Bubble* places *Bent* on stage, situating “the gay play” within the larger narrative of Ashraf’s passing as Jewish in Tel Aviv and the forbidden affair with Noam. In its inclusion of the play, *The Bubble* imbues “the live” moment with the power to transform, or, alternatively, with the power to reinforce dominant national narratives. The scene comments, in the words of scholar Vivian Patraka, on the “dangers of the visual in staging the theatre of the Holocaust,” by remaining open to competing interpretations. It is possible that *The Bubble*’s inclusion of *Bent* as a gay citation unhinges the Holocaust’s Jewish specificity.

Persistent emphasis on the accuracy of Sherman’s depiction of camp prisoners’ suffering has shadowed the work’s theatrical history. In the article “Bent Straight: The Destruction of Self in Martin Sherman’s
Bent,” scholar Eric Sterling suggests homophobia and a lack of information explain why little has been written about gays during the Holocaust, underscoring Bent’s significance as a piece of witness literature. Sterling writes, Sherman

never denies, minimizes or trivializes the cruelty inflicted upon the Jews during the Holocaust (…the playwright himself is not only a gay, [sic] but also a Jew), but rather [Sherman] chooses to focus on the malevolent treatment of homosexuals and to include the historical fact—documented by eyewitnesses in the camps—that some homosexuals tried to obtain Jewish stars because of Nazi cruelty toward gays.47

Although statistics vary with regard to the number of homosexual victims, an online exhibition of the US Holocaust Memorial Museum suggests that “more than 100,000 men were arrested under a broadly interpreted law against homosexuality,” known as Paragraph 175 of the German code, which criminalized homosexuals for participation in “lewd and lascivious acts.”48 The legal measure banned homosexual “indecency,” which was said to undermine the “Aryan race.” In addition to those arrested under Paragraph 175, about “50,000 men served prison terms as convicted homosexuals, while an unknown number were institutionalized in mental hospitals.” Possibly hundreds of homosexuals were castrated. Fragmentary historical records suggest that “between 5,000 and 15,000” gay men were sent to concentration camps, only to die of “starvation, disease, exhaustion, beatings, and murder.” Several historians argue that Paragraph 175 continued to silence “gay Holocaust literature” well after
World War II, since the ban remained in practice, and “homosexuals who survived the camps refrained from relating their experiences” for fear of prosecution.  

While the exact number of homosexual victims of the Nazis is impossible to calculate, and difficult to determine in terms of the definition of homosexual, historians have documented the conditions of imprisonment. Geoffrey Giles argues in “A Gray Zone among the Field Gray Men: Confusion in the Discrimination Against Homosexuals in the Wehrmacht” that there were multiple badges denoting the status of homosexual prisoners in the concentration camps. The Nazi paramilitary sought to eradicate homosexuals most determinedly after 1942, when most of Europe’s Jews were already concentrated and killed. Giles suggests that there were several badges identifying gays in the camps, not only the notorious upside down pink triangle, the symbol featured in Bent. Giles’ research describes three kinds of symbols, triangles and tattoos that distinguished between repeating offenders, prisoners in punishment battalions, and homosexual Jews. Giles’ historiographic correction complicates Bent’s overdetermined iconography.

If The Bubble’s characters create queer space within urban confines, the characters in Bent subvert their own setting, the Dachau concentration camp. Bent’s two male prisoners talk sex and transcend the limits of the camp, without moving or touching. On stage, in a temporary act of utopic resistance, Max and Horst turn each other on with words. They cannot look at one another or make contact. The scene enacts the consummation of their relationship through words to ejaculation. Unlike the unbridled, corporeal queerness depicted in the graphic montages of The Bubble, Bent’s notorious sex scenes are comprised of spoken dialogue and still movement. Max and Horst stand at attention, facing the audience as, in the words of Jill Dolan, “the possibility of a physical union remains eternally deferred by the watchful eyes of the guards.” To simulate sex under mimetic restrictions, Sherman scripts theatrical blocking at a minimum: idle, shoulder-to-shoulder, faces forward, and arms down. The stillness, as Sherman writes, “at attention, staring straight ahead,” establishes the stage picture that has since become iconic. The men’s positioning is replicated in The Bubble by Ashraf and Noam the morning after they have sex, in the postcoital scene described above when “explosive” slang fails to signify.

While The Bubble incorporates familiar imagery from the play, the film does not attempt to contain the “liveness” suggested by the utopic staging. Instead, the cinematography offers a close-up of the Israeli actor playing the Nazi guard, swastika on his bicep and machine gun in hand. The guard is obviously wearing a costume, not an official uniform. The set elements are stylized as well. Rocks pile up to the left and right of
the stage. Barbed wire hangs behind the actors. Stage right, Max wears a yellow star on his tattered camp uniform, and stage left, Horst wears an upside down pink triangle. As Horst seduces Max, who’s afraid to "go there" in the presence of the guard, Horst says, "Come on, no one can hear us." To offer some representational assurance, the camera pans to a view of the oblivious guard who cannot hear the inmates (figure 1.3).

Filmic techniques of alienation showcasing the actor and the audience emphasize the parallel between Ashraf’s performance as an Israeli and Max’s assumed role as a Jew, the characters’ actual selves behind the utopic facade. After the theatrical climax, individual close-ups reveal teary-eyed Noam and Ashraf charged with emotion. They identify with the struggle of the characters presented in the live performance. The portrayal of the audience’s reaction in the film is consistent with critical descriptions of performances of Bent. Scholar John M. Clum writes, "seeing various productions of this play with various audiences, the response to this scene is usually enthusiastic applause. The audience is won over by the erotically charged dialogue and the virtuosity of acting the scene requires." The Bubble seduces audiences by representing the Holocaust in such emotional metatheatrics. The scene from Sherman’s play included in the film suggests that in the mediatized genre of digital video, the depiction of the stage, and specifically of the Holocaust on stage, brings history into the realm of visibility. The theater is the place where historical connections are depicted graphically, though a celebration of performance.

Figure 1.3  Left to Right, Max (Lior Ashkenazi) and Horst (Yossi Marshek) in a scene from Bent, featured in The Bubble. Courtesy of Strand Releasing.
The Bubble’s characters are represented as living under similar circumstances as characters in Bent, with whom they identify. This parallel is made explicit in a discussion between Noam and Ashraf regarding the scene in which Horst tells Max, “It’s my secret. And I have a signal. No one knows it. When I rub my left eyebrow at you, like this . . . it means I love you.” Ashraf adopts this gesture in the Tel Aviv battlefield, embodying the citation of the Holocaust as prescribed by Bent. In incorporating the theatrical gesture in reaction to the “live” performance, the film echoes theories of utopic potentiality described by Muñoz, who writes that physical gestures contain “forward-dawning significance.” Gestures index delayed gratification, a crucial part of “utopian hermeneutics like those invoked in the project of queer futurity.” Ashraf’s gesture nods to a fantastical future that is not of the present, and could never be.

In celebrating closeted desires, Martin Sherman’s play earned transnational significance as a gay text. Its Jewish specificity is heightened in the Israeli context, where the aesthetic couples with the ethical in the staging of Holocaust performances. As scholar Freddie Rokem writes in “Refractions of the Shoah on Israeli Stages: Theatre and Survival,” Israeli plays must be seen as part of larger cultural and social processes to “mourn” and “work through” the collective memory of the Holocaust.

While Bent is an American play, it is featured in the film as an appropriated text, especially for Ashraf, who, as mentioned earlier, has never attended a Hebrew-language play. In the book Performing History: Theatrical Representations of the Past in Contemporary Theatre, Rokem suggests Israelis regard themselves as direct descendents of those who died at the hands of Nazis. Anthropologist Don Handelman captures this notion in his statement, “the dead are the ancestors of the living.” For Rokem, this genealogy means theatrical events about the Holocaust create “a very direct and intimate relationship with the spectators.” The play within the film is represented in such intimate terms.

Starting in the 1980s, the Shoah and the Palestinian “question” became related in public discourse, especially among members of the Israeli Left. According to Rokem, “One of the questions raised by some of the performances about the Shoah . . . is how the sufferings of the Palestinians as a result of the foundation of the state of Israel are related to the extermination of six million Jews during the Second World War.” The author continues to ask, “Can all the actions carried out by the Israelis be justified on the basis of that threat; or should Israelis, on the basis of the ‘Holocaust experience’ be more sensitive to the sufferings of others?” Is geopolitical domination by Israel buoyed by dominant discourse? Should Israelis be held more accountable, due to a specific Jewish legacy of oppression? Does Ashraf’s presence at the play unhinge the representation of gay Holocaust suffering from its Jewish specificity?
Critic Sarit Fox points to the nuances of the play in the Israeli context, writing of her paralyzed reaction to the Israeli premiere of *Bent* (בנט). In an article dated May 5, 1983, Fox reviewed the original production of the Haifa National Theater, directed by Elan Ronen. Fox describes, as an Israeli audience member, how she was placed in the unwitting position of spectator, reflecting on the atrocities of the Holocaust presented onstage. The critic describes feeling similar to those World War II intellectuals who fled Europe and did not speak against Nazism; she understood the moral predicament of the countries that refused entry to many Jewish exiles arriving by boat. Fox writes, “At the end of the performance, I was so preoccupied with breathing deeply—Jewish air in my dear country, with my people who are oh-so-kind, everyone suddenly so great—that I was not aware of the experiment they conducted in me during the play’s performance.” While the critic’s reaction is loaded with irony, she attributes the effectiveness of the performance to theatricality. The critic praises the moment of live encounter at the theater, in her words, “the eye of the actor against the eye of the spectator.” Fox’s cathartic relief points to the particularized resonance of *Bent* in this national paradigm. The Israeli comments also champion the theater as utopic a space as the queer world presented in it, a place providing for audiences, in the words of Jill Dolan, “if not expressly political then usefully emotional, expressions of what utopia might feel like.”

While *Bent*’s hyperrealism proved theatrically effective for some critics, the same realist strategies proved ineffective for other prominent Israeli voices. Michael Handelzletz reviewed the same production on June 5, 1983, in *Haaretz*, a competing news outlet. Handelzletz describes a different reaction, recalling the stage rocks that Max and Horst are made to move, one at a time, in a fit of Nazi torture that somehow hints at the aesthetic codes of performance art. Piles of rocks, which symbolize enforced labor in the camps, are significant not only metaphorically. For Handelzletz, the rocks and the stage props “are real.” He writes, “When Horst’s hat is thrown onto the electric fence, the hat goes up in flames. From the excessive, naturalistic theatricality on stage, it seems the human experience in the play is deceptive.” Handelzletz argues that in the theater naturalism is incapable of “representing atrocities that are so devious in their power.” Realist representation, a goal for many contemporary performances, here cannot sufficiently accommodate the content of the play or the historical perspective of the reviewer.

In such an interpretation, “almost any performance about the subject of the Holocaust is doomed to fail” within the parameters of realism. Still, as suggested by the scene included in the film, and as articulated
most notably by scholar Judith Halberstam in *The Queer Art of Failure*, “Under certain circumstances failing . . . may in fact offer more creative, more cooperative, more surprising ways of being in the world.” In this light, theatrical failure to depict the Real becomes a useful tool in promoting critique of the Real. In the case of *The Bubble*, the failure of representational inaccuracy alerts Ashraf to his own reality. The audience member’s alternative reading is thus validated by theatrical abstraction.

In 2003, two decades after the original production, Michael Handelzletz reviews *Bent* again when it is performed in a suburb of Tel Aviv, Ramat Gan, at Hasifryia Theater founded by Beit Zvi (figure 1.4). In a review of the revival, Handelzletz asserts that homophobia has become less pervasive in the Israeli public; the implications of Sherman’s play evolved alongside changes in the culture. When *Bent* premiered, the critic suggests, Sherman “confronted the subject” of homosexuality through the taboo of the Holocaust, “the Jews’ terrible and singular source of suffering.” In 2003, the gay play resonates differently with the critic, who stresses the broad appeal of the story. Handelzletz takes “for granted” the fact that *Bent* is performed and argues that its controversy is lost in the eyes of today’s audiences, for whom the subject is no longer taboo.

Figure 1.4  Left to Right, Max (Omer Atzion) and Horst (Tal Weiss) in the production of *Bent* at Hasifryia Theater founded by Beit Zvi, Ramat Gan, Israel. Photo by Eyal Landsman.
With the exception of the infamous sex scene, the play’s aesthetic “harshness” is less appealing 20 years later. The production directed by Ido Ricklin is described as intimate, in a venue smaller than the original theater in which *Bent* premiered. The limited spatial conditions emphasize “not the content, but the quality of the theatrical doing, the acting.” Critic Elyakim Yaron of *Maariv* praises the later performance for the acting skills of Tal Weiss in the role of Horst and Omer Atzion as Max. The critic suggests that the same scene performed in *The Bubble* features a remarkable feat by “two young actors at the height of their emotional power and talent, an image that is hard to forget.”

Michael Handelzletz contradicts his distrust of the effective stage realism of the earlier production, whose violent imagery convincingly re-created a sense of horror. The later production dissolves theatrical strategies of spectacle to rely on bold acting choices and minimalist design elements.

Overcome by the production’s minimalism, Handelzletz concludes, “ultimately, the play states that homosexuality means death, first for Horst who’s executed, and then for Max, who wears the pink triangle and marches toward the electrocuted fence.” Handelzletz does not expand on the disturbing final action of the play. Nonetheless, the critic’s insistence on homosexuality as a sign of death reaffirms *Bent*’s destiny in the Israeli imaginary to be regarded as a “gay play,” rather than as a play whose significance is overwhelmingly Jewish. The Israeli critic’s equation of homosexuality with death also symbolizes the relationship between the Freudian death drive and the Lacanian Real, as formulated ominously by Lee Edelman, who writes, “Those queered by the social order that projects its death drive onto them are no doubt positioned to recognize the structuring fantasy that so defines them.”

After Horst is killed and Max assumes a “true” gay identity (relinquishing the Jewish star), Max has no option but to throw himself at the electric fence. The lethal proclamation of Max’s Real gay identity is typically regarded as “an act of transcendent self-immolation.” While the historical circumstances are drastically different, Ashraf and Max are depicted in *The Bubble* as similarly bound by queer fates of self-sacrifice.

These dynamic accounts of performances of *Bent* in the Israeli press lead to competing conclusions about the theater scene in *The Bubble*. First, it is possible to read *The Bubble*’s inclusion of a “live” moment as an allusion to the visceral “Truth” of the Shoah’s signification, its intense raw historicity. The alternative perspective on *Bent*’s realism in *The Bubble* is suspicious of the filmic critique of hypertheatrical national narratives. Either way, the artifice of the theater and the apparatus of the stage are on display.

The live theater moment ruptures *The Bubble*’s utopic aspirations in any interpretation of the scene’s significance. The protagonists’ downfall
resumes rapidly after the visit to the theater. Ashraf’s life in Tel Aviv becomes more difficult and eventually he is “outed” as a Muslim Arab by a Jewish Israeli journalist. When he finds himself trapped in Tel Aviv, Ashraf must look at Noam only from afar. Separated by distance and the conditions of impossibility, Ashraf anonymously watches Noam at work, through the window of the Third Ear, a popular Tel Aviv music store where Noam works. Helpless, Ashraf enacts the same secret gesture featured in Bent. To communicate gay desire under surveillance, Ashraf rubs his finger on his left eyebrow, embodying failure with a gesture of “forward-dawning significance (figure 1.5).” 70 Noam does not see the hidden move by Ashraf. Now that “the live” has penetrated the fantasy, the men are disconnected.

Bent’s depiction of a gay prisoner who pretends to be a Jew “set off a firestorm of criticism and debate among critics, historians, and members of the Jewish and gay communities.” 71 Statements against Sherman’s dramatization stemmed from discomfort with the play’s perceived hierarchy of Holocaust victims, in which the suffering of gays in concentration camps is represented as worse than the suffering of Jews. Critics point to the plot: Max secures a Jewish star by “passing” as heterosexual in a vicious performance. To save himself, Max kills Rudy before arriving at the camps, and Max is forced to rape “the body of a recently killed pubescent girl” in order to demonstrate his straight masculinity to the Nazi guards. 72 Once imprisoned in Dachau, Horst, a fellow inmate with

Figure 1.5 Ashraf (Yousef Sweid) and the secret gesture borrowed from Bent, in The Bubble. Courtesy of Strand Releasing.
whom an affair develops later, reveals to Max that the pink triangle is the badge of the lowest rank at the camp “because the other prisoners hate us [gays] so much.”

The play premiered on Broadway on December 2, 1979, with Richard Gere in the role of Max. In Theatre Journal, Alvin Goldfarb called Bent “historically inaccurate,” clichéd, and composed of “structural and formal hodgepogdges,” concluding it is “a poor Holocaust drama and a poor play.” Goldfarb’s claim that Bent is historically inaccurate is refuted by research I have included above and by scholar Edward Isser in the book Stages of Annihilation: Theatrical Representations of the Holocaust. Isser claims Martin Sherman’s work is “historically valid” and yet “inherently limited” in scope. At a basic level, Bent introduces the idea that homosexuals constituted some of the victims of the Nazis, a fact that remains somewhat unknown.

While Isser considers Max’s final act of suicide “shocking,” historically, critics of Bent found the drama’s depictions of homosexuality equally shocking. In the least, the play’s emphasis on homosexuality was initially met with disinterest. Theater critic Elinor Fuchs criticizes the championing of Bent in “the gay studies professoriate,” suggesting issues in the play, such as gay sex and “coming out,” are irrelevant to Holocaust literature. Fuchs asks about the importance of gay identification, “even in the camps?” Fuchs’ book review in Theater deems the question irrelevant to the purview of the field, and her dismissal unabashedly rejects the play in the name of those “who care about Holocaust literature as a form of witnessing.” Fuchs’ words fail to acknowledge the possibility that the utopia conjured in Bent provides for the audience a collective act of witnessing. Bent stages the humanity of homosexual victims who have gone without full historic recognition. Despite the play’s significance, Fuchs dismisses Bent as “two scenes of phone sex [that] don’t get less banal when set at Bergen-Belsen.” Her perspective reifies hierarchies of suffering, in which gay encampment during the Holocaust is seen as milder and less important to the dominant narrative. Elinor Fuchs’ dismissal of Bent recapitulates critiques misguidedly leveled at playwright Martin Sherman.

Fuchs’ critique also raises philosophical questions about performance and historical material that are relevant to a consideration of the play within the film. The assertion that the most famous parts of Bent represent “two scenes of phone sex” is prematurely misinformed. Rough, sexual dialogue constitutes for Max and Horst their humanity. As the characters embody the legacy of homosexual suffering during the Holocaust, Max and Horst’s sex is tactically radical. This is literalized in their postcoital conversation:

Horst. We did it. How about that—fucking guards, fucking camp, we did it.
Max. Don’t shout.
**Horst.** O.K. But I’m shouting inside. We did it. They’re not going to kill us. We made love. We were real. We were human. We made love. They’re not going to kill us.  

They were as “real” as Noam and Ashraf are in Tel Aviv. Horst makes clear that his survival hinges on the gay sex act. Further, in both the play and the film, gay sex is represented as transcendental and utopic. Horst seems to suggest that even if he and Max are killed in Dachau, their act of resistance is eternal as it will survive metaphysically. Elinor Fuchs’ critique in *Theater* negates the unmistakable potential of forbidden queer love, focusing as Fuchs does on the language through which the men communicate their homosexuality.

If for Fuchs the two scenes of “phone sex” are irrelevant to “Holocaust literature as a form of witnessing,” for the queer critic the scenes fall short in a utopic vacillation between presence and absence. In the pioneering article “Practicing Cultural Disruptions: Gay and Lesbian Representation and Sexuality,” Jill Dolan argues that “sex is exiled to a nonphysical plane” in the theatrical strategies of *Bent*’s “incipient realism.” Dolan regards the sex scene in the play as not radical enough. The defiant act is not transgressive, since Max and Horst do not touch but only connect verbally. Nonetheless, Dolan attributes to performance a utopic power: *Bent* can break conventions of representation by showing gay sex, despite the fact that the characters must only speak what they would do. Dolan argues that “queer performance can tell ‘us’ ( . . . in the most exclusive and inclusive human ways, simultaneously) something different about how our material, emotional, and sexual lives might be led.” By confronting *Bent*, Noam and Ashraf (and Max and Horst) are offered a “queer” perspective on state oppression, making visible the failures of neoliberalism to ensure their material and psychic survival.

Still, in a utopia, there are no dress rehearsals. The show must go on.

**Notes**

3. The legacy of *Bent* was often reduced to the question of which group of Nazi victims endured worse treatment: homosexual or Jewish prisoners. I thank Jasmine Johnson for provoking me with this term, “oppression olympics,” during a discussion held when we were among the participants of the 2010 Summer Institute in Performance Studies at Northwestern University.
5. Ibid., 526.
11. Ibid.
24. When Ashraf “comes out” to his sister, she asks him if he has gone mad. For a discussion of Muslim/queer identities, see the 2010 special issue of *GLQ* on “Queer Politics and the Question of Palestine/Israel,” edited by Gil Z. Hochberg.
26. Ibid., 163.
27. This trend is changing. One recent example is the film ḥalāla, *Round Trip* (2003), which depicts an affair in Haifa between an Israeli woman and a Nigerian woman.
31. Ibid., 617–618.
34. Ibid., 9.
35. Ibid., 7.
39. Ibid., 5.
42. Personal interview with Gal Uchovsky in Tel Aviv, September 2008.
59. Ibid., 30.
60. Ibid., 27.
61. Translation mine.
63. Translation mine.
66. Translation mine.
70. Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 93.
72. Ibid., 153.
77. Ibid., 127.
80. Ibid., 340.
Chapter 2

It’s about Time: Queer Utopias and Theater Performance

Stephen Farrier

Theater Is Always Already a Queer Space

There are many antecedent manifestations and representations of nascent LGBT people in theater before gays were “out.”¹ Direct, indirect and oblique, or heavily codified representations of what now are called LGBT people have been on the UK and US stage for over a century.² Of course, not all these representations have been positive; indeed lots of historical representations of LGBT people are deeply offensive and problematic, yet some plays do represent a “warm illumination” that might mirror José Muñoz’s description of queer utopia.³ Yet, not all warm glows are the same as the horizontal image that Muñoz uses; rather the glow from such utopic representations are not the refusal of the present, which is an index for Muñoz of a utopic impulse; rather they can be read as the warm glow of queer romance. That is, direct representations of onstage queer utopias often seem to fall into what Lisa Duggan might call homonormative, the progressive fight for individualized rights-based agendas.⁴

Plays that call for a homonormative place at the table are not without their drama and do not present homonormative characters in a wholly positive or simplistic light.⁵ However, there are other forms of representing utopias that resist such an uncritical call for enfranchisement. Where there are more critical representations of queer identities in theater, these works are often dark, dystopic, and work on LGBT representation at a symbolic level. For instance, in Mark Ravenhill’s Shopping and Fucking (first performed in 1996) that serves as a critical representation, characters are drawn as disjointed from politics, treating each other and intimacy within the terms of consumption and exchange value.⁶ Such critical representations are themselves important both at the historical time of their writing and their subsequent revival. Indeed in a stratum of
UK theater culture in the mid-1990s, such representations were critically engaging with gay communities and presented the community as steeped in a mode of identity commodified through consumption. Yet, in such works there is a refusal of the now, a moment where through the representation of a metaphorically bankrupt present a future is seen that is better, utopic, even when the image of engaging that future is condensed into the sharing of a microwave dinner.7

The direct representation of LGBT people on stage is then not as simple as looking for representations of utopia. Rather it is as easy to see the dystopic in plays and performances that leave the audience with a warm glow as it can be to see a utopic impulse in highly critical apparently pessimistic performances or plays. Even plays that refuse a future or that might show an embodied representation of “embracing negativity,” showing a wholehearted acceptance of queer’s negative, can function as positive as Lee Edelman notes, “if [its] justification requires it to reinforce some positive social value.”8 Rather than argue one particular reading over another, ranking them in their ability to produce or contain a reading of queer utopia, a look to the stuff or the substance of theater opens another seam in utopic space, a space that has the potential to be present almost regardless of the content of the performance being offered.

When looking at utopic representations in theater there is an encouragement in the form of the production to experience the show within the frame, or world, represented. That is, a production’s “issues” or “messages” are to be dealt with within the sphere of the play. Most normative productions extend this vision in the frame on stage to the outside world of the theater, where audiences are encouraged to engage with the play’s issues in terms of how they might comment on current political or social issues at the time of the production. In dominant forms of theater there is less encouragement to ponder the “mechanics” of the theater itself—that is, what the theater does at the moment it is experienced.9 The effort and the labor of the performer are not often thought of as part of the meanings produced by the internal world of the production, and to a certain extent spectators are encouraged to ignore the performer and engage with character. Certainly, audiences might marvel at a performer’s skill, craft, or artfulness, but not often the reality of the work of the theater. This process of ignoring the reality of the effort of the performer, which is commonly thought of in terms of the suspension of disbelief, is a space opened within which there is queer utopic potential. At once on stage there is the “virtual” present in the character as well as a “not-virtual” performer playing (this performer is ignored as demanded by the suspension of disbelief). This virtual/not-virtual copresence is a site of queer utopia because it offers utopic structures that momentarily
propose a resolution to the problem of queer and its relation to identity politics and queer agency.

The definitions of queer that position it as “not quite here”\textsuperscript{10} or a “place holder” where sexuality “will not or cannot signify monolithically”\textsuperscript{11} have presented a problem for agency. Through a tacit declaration of the death of identity politics that queer enacted, the extent to which change could be effected by groups of people who identify with particular modes of identity or who are marked by the culture in which they live with indelible social markers (of race, class, sex, etc.) was eroded, or rejected by queer’s impulse for the deferral of solidity in identity and, therefore, it also rejected collectivity, which served as a mode of organizing people with such solid identifications.\textsuperscript{12} Although in queer communities such delineation was not as clearly drawn, Cathy J. Cohen, for example, in 2005 notes an interest in how to “construct a new political identity . . . inclusive of all those who stand on the outside of the dominant constructed norm of state-sanctioned white middle- and upper-class heterosexuality.” Cohen comments on the restrictive limits of queer’s ability to cope with race; however, Richard Thompson Ford, notes at around the same time that “queer theory . . . offered a new theoretical frame within which to understand the severely coercive aspects of left liberal racial identity politics”\textsuperscript{14} and that it offered a resistance to “the supersizing of identity politics at a moment when it seems at its most preeminent.”\textsuperscript{15} According to these positions both identity politics and queer fluidity apparently moved toward either dogma or fringe hegemonies. As such queer’s homonormativity, or homohegemony, settled on a restricted set of identity positions that were already ranked highly in terms of power and had an underacknowledged or tacit relationship with privilege. Forms of identity that had more of a stake in identity politics started to be erased from queer’s landscape in that identity politics was “old,” “done,” and has not worked. This happened, for example, particularly through the concentration in queer thinking on gender fluidity, which may have put the focus of queer in places where performance might happen.\textsuperscript{16} This moment, also apparently erased the lesbian feminist in queer culture; in terms of direct representations, when she did exist she would be seen as old fashioned and irrelevant to the future. Queer thinking celebrated fluidity in identity and the lesbian feminist can be seen as nonfluid; it is an identity that has a commitment to collective political movements, Sue-Ellen Case notes at this period, “the materialist class critique had disappeared along with the lesbian/feminist voice.”\textsuperscript{17}

In this simplified version of queer’s problems and its inability to be inclusive, there is an echo of the dynamic that theater presents to the audience, that is, in the interests of engaging with the character,
a virtual being, there is a level of ignoring the performer (in this instance, standing in as the personification of the solidity of identity politics). Within theater the virtuality of the character is seen as having some agency in that it can form part of an effort toward change. And although the performer’s body and its agency are encouraged to be erased through the suspension of disbelief, it still enacts a pressure on the virtual. As such, through a recalibration of the way theater encourages certain erasures means that a focus on the body of the performer might, in some way, enable the holding of the solidity of the performer alongside a simultaneous holding of the virtual character. Bringing the virtual-queer and the body-political into a space where they do not cancel each other out, but work to produce something else, is a utopian queer move. Theater in its fibre holds the virtual and the actual, the character and the body simultaneously in a way that can serve as a model for the problematic of queer agency and its relation to homonormativity. However, it is not implied here that in the moment of queer agency there is complete control over a body or an identity. Judith Butler reminds us when speaking of the “name” queer, that queer agency is related to power and a chain of historicity, both of which “avow a set of constraints on the past and the future that mark at once the limits of agency and its most enabling conditions.”

Nor, in the readings of performance below, is there a claim that the performers consciously “work toward” agency as total freedom. Rather, that the problem of agency in queer, a problem that exists because of queer’s virtuality, is momentarily annulled when focus is drawn to the performer’s body. This moment, and it is only a moment, is a flash of the utopic, its effect is potential change; and change connotes agency. In this configuration, theater serves as the stage upon which a queer utopic vision of the possible can be enacted. For the discussion in hand, the particular mechanism by which the utopic can be presented is the notion of a queer temporality.

Queer Time

Queer visions of temporalities and history have a deep role to play in queer utopic moves. Muñoz notes that “queer restaging of the past helps us imagine new temporalities that interrupt straight time,” crucial here for this discussion is the idea of staging, given its relation to the theater stage and its ability to hold polytemporalities and open a utopic space for the momentary quelling of the virtual-political queer problematic. Muñoz continues to note that “queerness is not yet here; thus, we must always be future bound in our desires and designs. The future is a spatial and temporal destination.” As such queerness, at least as it is envisioned
by Muñoz, is never present; in a virtual sense it is horizontal, temporally bound to be somewhere else and as such is as much a way of temporally existing as it is a critique of the now as not good enough.

Informing queerness and utopic space is Elizabeth Freeman’s work on temporalities. Freeman’s work, particularly her ideas of temporal drag and erotohistoriography, point to a porosity of temporality that refigures queer in a way that emphasizes the idea of time. Theater, even in its straightest, dominant, manifestation is about time in a way that can be a very queer experience. Time, tempo, rhythm, and the historical all have a fundamental place in the making, rehearsal, performance, and experience of theater. Likewise outside the space of the theater temporalities have a deep-rooted relationship with normativity. Judith Halberstam uses

the concept of queer time to make clear how respectability, and notions of the normal on which it depends, may be upheld by middle-class logic of reproductive temporality. And so, in Western cultures, we chart the emergence of the adult from the dangerous and unruly period of adolescence as a desired process of maturation; and we create longevity as the most desirable future, applaud the pursuit of long life (under any circumstances), and pathologize modes of living that show little or no respect for longevity.

Halberstam’s argument describes temporality, time, and futurity as enmeshed with a power play of normativity. According to this way of thinking, time is mapped across a life in such a way that it serves as a form of normativity that emphasizes productivity. In so doing, such normativity regulates through a number of apparatuses those who do not adhere to such temporal normativity. Temporalities service the normative if they are thought of in terms of the a priori good that a long, productive life brings. Such normative temporalities are built on deep-rooted generational and heritable familial metaphors. Queer temporalities are those that are out of alignment with the flow of “straight time,” the time of reproductive futurism, which forms one of the energies of Edelman’s work on futurity against which he writes.

However, out-of-line temporalities are vital to theater’s functioning, given that often a historical moment is represented on stage and that plays often jump around, temporally speaking, while the time of the performer flows differently from the character. Also, compounding this is the way that time has an impact through rehearsal, the timing of delivery, the time of the play in the present, and the plethora of other temporalities at play in the theater. Temporalities function in such contexts in that plays showing a historical moment or set in the past bring about an affect driven knowledge. Freeman notes that to know the past in terms
of high-ranking knowledge is to know of it in the sense that one might read history:

As the winners of the battle between sensory and cognitive modes of apprehending history declared it, history should be understood rather than felt, and written in a genre as clearly separable from fiction (if not from narrative) as possible.  

To know the past in this powerful, high-ranking sense is to apprehend it in a way that is valued by the historical structure or moment within which it is understood. However, there is power at work in this moment as there are other, lower-ranking knowledges that may bring about the past through the present in a particular way that does not repeat the problems of straight time; these minor understandings are bought about by lower-ranking knowledges and are a form of knowing accessible through bodily affect. These knowledges are affect driven and everyday in form. Freeman defines such a structure of knowing as erotohistoriography:

Erotohistoriography is distinct from the desire for a fully present past, a restoration of bygone times. Erotohistoriography does not write the lost object into the present so much as encounter it already in the present, by treating the present itself as hybrid.

Erotohistoriography as an idea, a practice, an orientation, or attitude to the present has an impact on the tendencies in normative theater when representing the past, not least of all the form of the production, the structure of the project, and most significantly how it facilitates a bringing about of temporalities and everyday affect in/on/with the body. Freeman continues:

And it [erotohistoriography] uses the body as a tool to effect, figure, or perform that encounter. Erotohistoriography admits that contact with historical materials can be precipitated by particular bodily dispositions, and that these connections may elicit bodily responses, even pleasurable ones, that are themselves a form of understanding. It sees the body as method, and historical consciousness as something intimately involved in corporeal sensations.

It seems that theater, often representing the past with a focus on body and highly valuing affect, is ideally placed for such forms of understanding to be played out. As erotohistoriography admits the past to the present through the assumption of the porosity of the time of the present performance, the knowledge of the past or object of the past as Freeman notes is accessed through the body in its affect modality. Queer time, especially
in theater, has the potential to develop a way of exchanging knowledges and objects that do not rely on generational passing or straight time, but as a “process that exceeds, in innovative ways, the heterosexual kinship/reproductive model.” Theater is a place of multitemporality in that the past is being accessed through the present, while also acknowledging that to know in the theater, or to have knowledge of what is happening, is in some part sense-making through affect. In this way audiences might be able to form what Sara Ahmed refers to as “affect communities.” In her formulation Ahmed notes that “to be affected in a good way by objects that are already evaluated as good is a way of belonging to an affect community.” Although I would strike a note of caution about the “already good” aspect of theater and its part in generating affect, the idea of a temporary community that is formed through affect belies a utopian “togetherness” that is present in theater across its manifestations that are momentary, reflecting the fleeting nature of queer and utopia in its queer mode. In addition, in performance work, there is a very present sense that the performance itself is temporally ephemeral, there is no easy way of making a solid object of its experience; an audience is present to watch it vanish, which reflects a queer-like resistance to commodity form, even when it is presenting the past in high-ranking apprehensibility.

Yet, theater can as easily play out queer utopia as it can create very stringent heteronormative familial fantasy. Representations in theater are more often of the straight generational variety, but the body of the performer still creates a friction on the virtuality of character and has the potential to disrupt hermetic straight readings of representations. From this position or attitude, queer temporalities are disruptive in the theater regardless of the apparent intention of the representation. By looking to the use of time for the maintenance of normativity as well as a focus on the body and its affect modality, queer time can undo a straight flow of time that supports a restrictive normativity, and in so doing can be seen as a utopic impulse.

At this point, queer time seemingly appears as a reading strategy for normative theater, which in itself is a useful tool. However, below there are descriptions of moments of queer performance where queer temporalities and their relation to utopia are embedded in actual resistive practice. Before examining moments of practice here, we turn to another of Freeman’s ideas that offers a complementary approach along with erotohistoriography; the idea of temporal drag. We turn to temporal drag because it enables a discussion of utopias manifest in a number of performances and that utopically itself, it enables a revision of the position of the lesbian feminist and presents her as a presence in queerness. Equally the idea of temporal drag also usefully references the performance traditions of drag.
Beginning with the way that queer’s rejection of the solidity of identity politics enacted a turn from identities such as the lesbian feminist, Freeman notes how such a turn did not in fact erase the lesbian feminist, or identity politics. Rather, for Freeman the lesbian feminist becomes a productive drag:

I’d like to call this “temporal drag” with all the associations that the word “drag” has with retrogression, delay, and the pull of the past on the present. This kind of drag, an under discussed corollary to the queenier kind celebrated in an early 1990s queer studies influenced by deconstruction, suggests a bind for lesbians committed to feminism: the gravitational pull that “lesbian” and even more so “lesbian feminist” sometimes seems to exert on “queer.”

Temporal drag notes a move where the past of queer, a past that turned away from politics that made use of the foreclosure of identity, exerts a pressure on the celebrated fluidity of identity that is most often associated with queerness. Crucially for this discussion, the bringing about of the fluidity, or virtuality, of identity that queer represents did not at the same time enact a vanishing of identities that use foreclosure as part of the way that they are lived and experienced; they were present virtually if not actually. Temporal drag reflects the virtual-actual coexistence that is a mirror of the character-performer in normative theater. The drag in temporal drag is the friction of the past on the present, a present that is itself temporally porous, the friction in theater, that connotes queer utopia, is enacted between the performer-character dynamic.

Temporal drag offers the opportunity to bring into relation the modes of queer that have been seen as sitting in differing camps. Freeman notes these two camps:

Ludic queer theory has not always concerned itself with history understood as a collective consciousness of the significance, singularity and sheer pain of exploitation, or as a collective agency towards relief from that pain. A more sombre queer theory, on the other hand, tends to align itself with Marxism, with social conflict and sufferings inflicted by powerful groups, with a politics attuned to need—with stories and even with history. But this version of queer theory has not always attended to the vagaries of temporalities, as practice and embodied, that make new conceptions of “this historical” possible.

Thus what might, utopically, present a quelling of the two arms of queer theory is also a mirror of the virtual-actual, character-performer coexistence so far explored. What conjoins these coexistences is the body, which is the site of their mutual dependency, a body that points to other temporalities and utopic modes.
The body, theater’s affect modality, and performers’ abilities (neces-
sity?) to be out of joint with time certainly seems queer in temporal
terms. However, it is salient to note that not all out-of-sync temporalities
are necessarily queer and it can be hard to think of the body outside of
temporal linearity.32 Annamarie Jagose strikes a note of caution in this
respect and asks that the “credentialing of asynchrony, multi-tempo-
rality and nonlinearity” be questioned because they are thought of “as
if they were automatically in the service of queer political projects and
aspirations.”33 This is an important point in that it highlights that the
texture of out-of-joint temporality may operate differently for different
social constituents. Halberstam notes that there is a politics of ascription
of nonlinear temporalities, where those temporalities are used in the
sense of “being behind” or “stuck in time” especially when strong iden-
tifications are manifest and where there is a presumption in asynchrony
of “a white subject” that “cast[s] anachronism onto communities of
color—for example, as white middle-class scurry into gender and sexual
flexibility, communities bound by butch-fem, perhaps working-class,
Latina, or some black communities seem to be behind.”34 However,
such “casting” of anachronism to specific groups cannot happen in the-
ter practice when thinking about queer temporalities. In the theater,
admittedly a place that in the UK has a number of issues attracting a
diverse audience, such temporal fluidity is germane to its presentation.35
A condition of normative theater’s appearance is dependent on a non-
linear queer temporality, especially as bodies portray moments as if they
were happening for the first time in the present, which they are in some
respects and not in others; such a moment is experienced as historical
repetition and temporal repetition across the life of the play, the his-
tory of its production, and the rehearsal process (to say nothing of the
performers’ training). Thus temporality or asynchrony is a condition of
normative theater’s functioning, and normative/diachronic time then
are not the domain of particular social constituents or groups in the
theater.36

Performance Utopias

To turn to moments of performance to examine how the theater space
opens up the possibility of utopia is in some ways to describe the ephem-
eral, as performance has been said to exist in its utterance after which it
vanishes. This explication of the ontology of performance manifest in
vanishing is one pervasive explication of performance’s peculiarities; it is
a popular description, rooted in the 1990s in part due to Peggy Phelan’s
work, and reflects the momentary nature of queer utopia.37 Theater is
ideally placed to explore the possibilities of queer utopia, as it uses a simi-
lar tongue, “speaks the same language” as queer utopia.
Jill Dolan’s influential book *Utopia in Performance* makes the connectedness of the theater to queer ideas through what she calls utopian performatives:

Utopian performatives describe small but profound moments in which performance calls the attention of the audience in a way that lifts everyone slightly above the present, into a hopeful feeling of what worlds might be like if every moment of our lives were as emotionally voluminous, generous, aesthetically striking, and intersubjectively intense.  

When Dolan comes to consider time in relation to utopia, she too sees it in a similar way to Muñoz, in that utopia becomes a possibility although not proscriptive and is processual. Dolan, like Muñoz, makes sense of the utopic as refusal of the now, seeing utopia:

As an index to the possible, to the “what if” rather than a more restrictive, finite image of “what should be,” allows performance a hopeful cast, one that can experiment with the possibilities of the future in ways that shine back usefully on a present that’s always, itself, in process.  

Muñoz also uses the idea of utopian performatives in his work on utopia, although without an explication of Dolan’s work; he notes them in a way that emphasizes the doing in a “mode of possibility.” Like Dolan, Muñoz also notes the way that thought about utopia “allows us to see different worlds and realities. And this conjured reality instructs us that the “here and now” is simply not enough.”

Although not all refusals of the present need be positive utopic assertions, as the work of Edelman attests, a response to the refusal of a present might be to embrace a jouissance, to reject such a future (manifest in the symbol of the child) or to see queerness “never as a matter of being or becoming, but rather of embodying.” Such embracing sees “the burden of queerness is to be located less in the assertion of an oppositional political identity than in opposition to politics as the governing fantasy of realizing . . . imaginary identities.”

To bring a positive refusal of the present to actual moments of performance in such a way that they potentially provide a moment of queer utopia is to counter the sense that theater perpetuates sameness through its representation. Certainly a look to normative theater is to see representations that are apparently reproducing sameness, often quite narrowly present in terms of race, class, and gender. Yet, even with such representations, as has been mentioned, a refiguring of the focus that reads such conservative elements is to see engaged with such representation another body, that of the performer who “rubs up” against
The clean representation of sameness. The utopic in this sense is that the virtual and the solid come together to create a space where both have affect and agency and that they point in some sense to other possibilities. Theater work that emphasizes such a gap opens a clearer space where the virtual and the actual interact and produce a queer utopic space where heteronormative discourses are not the presiding energy. Dickie Beau’s *Blackout (Twilight of The Idols)*, a piece about popular female icons, and *Front Room*, a production made by Outbox LGB Theatre company as part of an LGBT intergenerational theater project, highlight the duality of queer as actual and virtual and thus the utopic can be explored.

**Beau’s Garland**

Dickie Beau’s show *Blackout (Twilight of The Idols)* features a segment that temporally speaking mixes up the smooth flow of straight time. In the show Beau “undoes” queer icons, showing audiences another narrative about their popular representation. Of particular note is a sequence in which Beau lip-syncs the recorded testimony of Judy Garland as she is apparently getting more intoxicated, desperate, and upset. The performance, which is very moving, in some way brackets off Judy Garland the film star and gay icon from Judy Garland the person in that the recordings to which Beau lip-syncs are personally revealing and painful to hear.

Beau’s performance of the icon is well observed; he mimics the body shape and gestural vocabulary of Garland in a way that shows great skill. However, Beau’s movement is exaggerated and grotesque, which emphasizes its artifice as performance. The audience in a queer club venue are watching what is supposedly a gay icon being broken down (actually breaking down as well as being unconstructed) in such a way that emphasizes how she is constructed whilst Beau uses a mode of performance that emphasizes too its constructedness. In the moment of the performance there is no disavowal of the historical construction of Garland, there is, rather, recognition of Garland as “gone.”

Thus Garland is undone through a production of her artifice (in that she is constructed as a “star”) and in so doing an enactment of the social nature of gender is also presented. This note of gender in the performance reflects the way that gender can be said to undo a sense of self, in a way that reflects a question asked by Butler; “does it turn out that the ‘I’ who ought to be bearing its gender is undone by being a gender, that gender is always coming from a source that is elsewhere and directed toward something that is beyond me, constituted in a sociality I do not fully author?” Beau’s Garland performs the pain of being authored by
others while also avowing a gap between the representation of a star and an enactment in the performance space in which that star does not temporally exist in the same way as the assembled audience.

The temporal distance between Beau and Garland, as well as the distance between Garland the person and Garland the product, is made plain through the performance, which itself is constructed in a way to show that it is in the process of “making.” That is, the performance is porous; it encourages the audience to see it as constructed while also listening to a recording that appears real. Garland as icon gets undone in the sense that the audience is encouraged to witness her as a person pained by her situation. There is a palpability that the person of Garland is being presented and rubbed up against her iconic image (Beau wears costume that nods to a drag queen version of Garland) and she is accessed through an acknowledged performance of Beau’s body. The way the performance encourages the audience to experience and reflect on Garland’s situation has the potential to shift her from iconic status to the status of individual. All this is apparent through the virtual presentation of a character, which lays open the utopic in the performance moment.

Beau’s body is clothed in such a way that he “nearly” looks like a traditional comic UK drag queen. There are overemphasized elements in his appearance (such as his grotesque makeup and bright red hair) that push an audience toward undoing the often uncritically accepted performance of drag. The drag here works not only in the costume but also in and through the flux in temporalities. There is a complex of the temporal at play on the stage in that the audience is hearing the actual speaking body of an icon in an apparently unguarded moment at a point where the audience is probably aware of her demise, her relation to gay politics, and her icon status. This knot of temporality is further complicated through Beau’s exaggerated imitation of her body, which appears as a live body replicating a dead one, in such a way that the audience is encouraged to see the construction of the performer Beau as well as how he brings about the icon of Garland. Such temporal complexity opens up the utopic space that starts to momentarily resolve the queer tension between the virtual as a mode of being and its relation to the agency that is present through having an identity that is foreclosed in some sense. Thus, Beau’s work not only recasts how Garland is constructed in a way that her nonicon person is in some sense revealed; it also activates something in the room that moves an audience to see Garland in a different way. This movement in reading a person is a “real” action that takes place in the “real world” but yet is in some way brought about by the virtual.

Blackout (Twilight of The Idols) is a performance that generates a queer utopic space in that it presents a possible momentary resolution to the
problem of queer agency. Even though Beau is present as a performer in drag (a kind of drag that is made up of references to other traditions of drag) the performance is not wholly about gender fluidity. Rather, using Freeman as a route to think about the performance, it is the temporal transitivity that drags up/draggs back a character from history that is present in the room virtually through the solid body of the performer. Freeman notes that temporal drag has a cognate relationship to drag as a performance:

We might think of it [drag] as a non-narrative history written on the body, in which the performer channels another body… and making this body available to a context unforeseen in its bearer’s lived historical moment. There, belonging is a matter of pleasurable cathexis across historical time as well as across the space between the stage and audience. What takes place between the performer and the object of her performance or between the audience member and the performer/her alter ego, can be some mixture of identification, disidentification, arousal, contempt, longing — but cannot be reduced to common belonging under the sign of “gay.”

Beau’s temporal drag enacts a complex of actual-virtual coexistence. On the one hand, Garland is virtually present, but it is a recording of her voice that is heard, so there is a direct link to her body—the physical Garland in the past. On the other hand, the audience can see Garland’s virtual presence because Beau is not hiding the cracks in his production of her. Yet there is an almost tangible sense of Garland, in the past, enacting a drag, a demand to be seen as a body in the world. So, Beau’s erotohistoriographic moment exists through his body and the audience sense her past, in the past, accessed through a bodily present.

Temporal resistances are utopic in that they refuse dominant modes of temporality. As such it is through affect that an audience can connect with the icon of Garland because affect is low ranking and quotidian and as such can be seen as resistive to the higher ranking knowledges about historical figures. Such access would not be present, however, if it were not for the way that it rubs against the body of the skilled performer. Beau’s work in its utopic mode can also be read as a refusal of the modality of gayness’ relation to market economies. In a particularly moving moment of the Garland segment, she rages about the pain of being the product of an audience. Beau plays the painfulness of her being brought about as a product of consumption; he plays to an audience that might have been part of such consumption. This pain of being brought about by and through consumption is also a critique of gay economies that have been part of queer’s critique of gay culture from its beginnings.

By bringing about an icon to show her vulnerabilities in a manner not sensationalizing, dehumanizing, or adding to her commodification is a
resistance to the normative modes of her representation. Beau’s performance is a far more sophisticated and nuanced than the cookie cutter versions of Garland so often seen in drag shows. Beau manages to represent an icon who herself has not made it to the end of the rainbow (as Garland says in her recorded testimony) in such a way that opens up the space for critique not only of the normative modes of dragging up Garland, but also a critique of the dehumanizing effects of a market-driven model of community. Beau is able to produce such critiques through the porosity of the temporal, and such refusal of the present is an index of a utopic impulse.

Through the porosity of temporalities Beau brings about the “object” of history in the way that Freeman speaks of in that he produces the historical object; rather than brought about as an object of knowledge from the past to the present, the audience are able to interact with Garland as if she is present, given temporality’s hybridity. Garland is brought about through her gestural lexicon, her torch song status, and her undoing through intoxication. This bucking of straight linear time opens up the utopic space so that the practice on stage of Beau is not about him playing a female (although this is present and cannot be erased) it is the uncanny presence of Garland recast as individual that moves an audience. This kind of performance when it comes to temporality is not playing by the rules and reforms linearity in queer ways.

Considering that Beau’s Garland is a dead person it can feel a bit of a stretch to think of this as utopic. Muñoz notes this in his description of the death of Fred Herko but the tenets of futurity through which utopic space emerges still stand in the face of death. That is, the warm illumination on the horizon that Muñoz uses as an image for the future, which is always just about in reach, could easily be the dusk as much as the dawn; utopias connote possible ends as well possible beginnings. Beau, through his performance of Garland, refuses the now as a point toward the future, while celebrating an icon and critiquing a commodification culture, a culture that sets up normalized temporalities that align bodies toward “maximum productivity.” Thus he presents a person, not heteronormatively produced; rather Garland is virtual, a trace, enacted through gesture and affect. And in some sense Beau’s enactment of Garland can be read as a link in a chain of associations that Butler notes about Garland—that Garland’s image has been used to reinforce a “mid-’50s” normativity, but that also “inadvertently produced a string of “Judys”, whose latter appropriations and derailments could not be predicted.” Beau’s Garland is a derailment that looks back to a real body while bringing about through affect and gesture a disturbance, or rerouting, of her normative representation in gay performance culture.
There are other performances that use testimony in ways that are temporally out of joint but that are directly aimed toward futurity and utopias. Turning now to an intergenerational performance that happened in London in 2011, which involved a group of young and elder LGBT people, the potential for queer time as an index of the possibility of utopic space is extended into a project that is about time itself. In intergenerational theater projects temporality is paramount and perhaps because “so few intergenerational tropes exist,” and there exists an overarching reliance on the passing of generational material lest its lack “hamstrings individuals in both age groups.”

The production called *Front Room* presented under the auspices of Outbox LGBT theater company saw younger participants along with a creative team, devise and present a piece of theater developed from historical research, which included interviews with the elder gay people and their own responses to gay history. The performance first played in a London venue that is known for its support of queer theater work, in a space that nevertheless looks and feels like a regular medium-sized studio theater. Unlike Beau’s club-based performance, the performance space is much straighter in that it was arranged such that the audience is seated and there is much less crossover between the stage and audience spaces as there might be at club performance.

The performance saw the younger people make a play about recent UK gay history. The performance consisted of several scenes that were drawn either directly from the recorded interviews with gay elders, or research about particular time periods. There were scenes that were clearly set in particular historical periods interspersed with moments when there was no particular time represented, but were played by characters from different time periods. The performance represented UK gay history not in a linear fashion, but in a way that jumped about chronologically. What remained static in the performance was the setting of the play in a front room.

The significance of the setting of the front room as a place played a fundamental part in the explication of the temporal stories in the performance. Generally the front room in UK parlance is a room that is historically a place where special events happened; it is often a room that would not be used for “normal life” and in some cases locked and kept empty for the most part even when the house was overcrowded. The public nature of the front room, even if its character changed over the 40–50 years of the setting of the play, served as a place in the production where a doctor visits to cure a young gay man in the 1940s, as a radical commune like squat for the Gay Liberation Front (GLF) in the 1970s, as the rented flat of two lovers, pre-1967, who have a nosy
homophbic landlady, and the space in which a lesbian woman in the 1950s caught by heterosexual marriage, tells her young children she is leaving the marriage and taking them with her. The front room served the performance as a space that has temporal echoes across the time zones represented, while also providing a space to play out stories of the participants.

Sometimes characters in the play were direct translations of stories that the younger people recorded in their interviews with the older participants. Through the everyday exchange of narratives for the project and via the performance of the production there was a very clear sense of the affect modality of knowledge being in operation. Not only was there a sense that the stories were in some sense “heroic” (especially one personal narrative from one of the older participants about being sent in the 1940s for aversion therapy for homosexuality, where he met a number of gay nurses) but that the disruption of the flow of time and the exertion of the drag of the past at once brought about the possibility of understanding that the participants can connect through temporal fluidity rather than community bridge-building, which indicates a generational metaphoric.

The production presented temporal complexities in that the younger people played “versions” of some of the older people’s stories. The exchange between the older and the younger groups was produced in a way that resisted the usual driving force of intergenerational theater projects manifest in bridge-building across generations. Rather, through a porous temporality there was a sense that the day-to-day exchange already made sense to both groups. That is, projects that start with the idea of a broken community, in that the community does not have a proper exchange across generations, are already placing the participants in an orientation that seems to be about generational passing. Generational passing, temporally speaking, is a restrictively straight affair given that it relies on tropes of heritability. The Front Room was a production that resisted such exchange across time as manifest in generationality. Rather, the project took an erotohistoriographic approach.

The production resisted the sense that is often present in intergenerational performance work where the elders are expected to pass “down” their cultural knowledge and the younger people are to properly “receive” it. Such structures of passing from older to younger can set the tone of intergenerational work in a way that often seems to deny the agency of both groups to communicate in a way that is not predetermined by age. Such passing on is often presented as important and vital in that it seemingly shows a dysfunction in the community that needs mending, addressing, or changing and that the participants engaging in the processes of exchange should be transformed by it. Such pressures to
fix generational passing and bring about transformation can normalize temporalities into linear reproductive time.

Such fixing and “disciplining and normalizing queer” mirrors the way that intergenerational projects tend to be described. The particular attachment to transformative experiences as a way of making productive exchanges is of particular note. The seductive nature of transformation through exchange is perhaps a particular structure that fuels the justification of intergenerational work, but one that can follow a normalizing impulse. Such attraction to the revelatory or transformative is in part because of the perceived needs of the younger people in such projects but it is also because of the sensibilities of the people who work, fund, and participate in such projects in the UK context.

The *Front Room* as a project resisted the transformational impulse as well as the matter of passing around historical cultural material. In the performance two particular characters embodied the way that the production upset the temporality of older passing to younger and the younger person being in some way edified or transformed by the process. These two characters were named Phyllis and Mick. Phyllis is a character who is played by a young gay man and is a drag queen in the 1970s in a GLF squat. Also in the squat is the character Mick, played by a lesbian performer, who is butch identified. These two characters are hybrids of interview and research material, and are performed by people in 2011 playing to a contemporary audience contained within which are the elders who provided some of the testimony. As such the characters exemplified Freeman’s temporal drag in that the relation between drag and temporality is marked by noncontiguity; Phyllis was played by a younger performer to an older participant about a fictional GLF squat (based on research material) in such a way that the passing of material between them did not happen in such a clean way. Likewise with the character of Mick who was also made of research material was present in a queer space as a reminder of a different kind of temporal drag, that of the lesbian feminist that Freeman notes exerts a pressure on the modern queer. Mick’s commitment to gender nonconformity in the early 1970s alongside Phyllis’ drag persona switched on, as it were, the extant connections across the age groups. The younger people understood in a low-ranking sense the characters of Mick and Phyllis and as such they shared an understanding of a historical moment through which the older people had lived. Such cross-generational understanding was not generated through a heritability metaphor, rather it was present through an erotohistoriographic hybrid present. This brings about a challenge to Edelman’s vision of futurity. Although there is a sense of passing from one generation to another in the play, this did not happen through an evocation of the future but an enactment of the past through a hybrid present (and in some cases
it was the younger generation passing “back” through the body the elders’ stories).

It is through the operations of queer utopia that such understanding was generated. It is certainly possible to see the representation on stage of the GLF in a drama as the representation of gay utopia, albeit one that apparently failed because of its problematic relationship to gender. But this is not the issue here, rather that the relationship between virtuality of character and the solidity of embodied identities opens up a space that is queerly utopic in that it momentarily resolves the problem of agency in queerness. The Front Room played out this utopia in such a way that it brought about a real story of real people in a way that “virtualized” them, yet they do not lose their agency. The elders in the audience recognized themselves (indeed some of their testimony was played over loudspeakers during the performance) in a virtual sense; it was them, and then again not quite them. Such shifting from the real to the virtual is possible through hybrid temporality. In the show there was recognition that the elders were being represented but in such a way that the bodies of the performers, in this case the younger people, resisted simply being a vessel for the passing on of material. Rather the younger people were demonstrating through the erotohistoriographic quotidian an understanding of the elders, their history, and the relation of gay history to the young people’s individual stories. As such there was a utopic moment presented in the performance through the friction of the virtual and the actual. Thus heteronormative temporalities based around reproductive futurity were not present or passed through generations; rather the project and performance engaged extant day-to-day connections across time that resist, ignore, or disregard dominant heteronormative dynamics manifest in normative theater.

These two exemplar performances both resist straight time and in so doing open a possibility of a moment of the utopic through temporalities. Both represent a space where bodies enact agency and offer resistances to the normalizing space of normative theater to disguise or hide the solidity of the performers’ embodied identity. It is important to note that in the productions presented here, temporal transitivity is more striking than gender transitivity (to use Freeman’s terms). It could be that in an earlier time it would be the gender fluidity of the performers that may have caught a critical eye, rather at this moment it seems that gender fluidity is less an index of radical or resistive queerness than it is perhaps part of a recuperated queer. Temporal fluidity offers other profound openings for utopic moments in that it is more sensitive to the material that might be invisible to a queer position, those of race, class, and nationality because these operate as a drag on normalized privileged versions of queer.

Here there is no desire to characterize queer readings of gender, especially when related to analyses of drag queens, as somehow out of date. Rather,
although the last chapter of Butler’s *Gender Trouble* gave rise to potential misreading between gender performativity and gender as/in performance, Butler notes that in *Gender Trouble* “the turn to drag performance was, in part, a way to think not only about how gender is performed, but how it is resignified through collective terms.”  

Such resignification can itself be an effort toward the utopic in that it can simultaneously sign possible futurity, while refusing a present by way of a performance that shows current temporality as not solidly set but a play of power. In such audiences, recognition of performances’ resonance in a particular way, for a particular community, engenders, as Butler notes, such performances as the cultural life of fantasy that not only organizes the material conditions of life, but which also produces sustaining bonds of community where recognition becomes possible, and which works as well to ward off violence, racism, homophobia, and transphobia.  

Yet, the performance work presented here is striking in its cross-temporality and how it offers a resistance to straight time and in so doing also offers an alternative to the regular queer approach to reading performance through a sensitivity to the regulation and normalization of gender and sexuality.  

Temporal fluidity exists in some sense in all performance. It is perhaps this temporal fluidity that allows Dolan to see utopian performatives across the theater landscape from the straightest renditions of theater, to the queerest. In the dominant mode, Western theater is often thought of as reinforcing norms, which is a legitimate reading of its representations. However, noting the way that temporalities operate even in this dominant mode opens queer space so that temporal drag and erotohistoriography too can be seen to operate in normative theater. If the performer’s embodied identity is taken into account when reading straight renditions of historical characters, for instance, the utopic moment is made possible in that it momentarily resolves the problem of queer agency. Theater is a place of the possible as it meets the actual, character-body, and is a profoundly queer place. A focus on queer temporalities holds the potential to undo straight theater, and queer effort can be used, and is used, for making performance that bucks heteronormativity and produces queer utopias.  

**Notes**


6. Ravenhill’s and others’ plays engaged with gay life in ways that were not always positively celebrating cultural and social gains made by the gay movement. Rather his work at this point indicated how such gains have been at the expense of a political movement, that gays have been (or were in the process of being) folded into neoliberal politics, which quieted gay’s radicalism or political engagement.

7. Here I refer to the last image of: Mark Ravenhill *Shopping and Fucking* (London: Methuen, 1996). This image of sharing can be seen as hopeful, but is tinged with pathos because the image uses a doleful consumer object, the microwave dinner, as the site of kindness—one of the few moments in the play where one character does not objectify another.


9. In this discussion, “dominant forms” are forms of theater that follow heteronormative patterns, are realist in genre, causal in structure and where “the human” appears unproblematically. Dominant theater is a fluid form, yet one might think of it as a place where a stage separates audience from performer, and where audience sit in the dark and performers speak and move in order to tell a logical, coherent, causal narrative.


20. Ibid., 185.
21. Specifically her works on time written from 2000 to 2012.
25. Ibid., 95.
26. Ibid., 95–96.
27. Ibid., 95.
31. Ibid., 9.
36. However, plays can ascribe negative attributes of backwardness to the social constituents that Halberstam notes. Theater, like all sites of cultural production, is guilty of such ascription and projection of backwardness onto societal others.
41. Ibid., 171.
42. Jouissance as it is used here stems from Lacan. Edelman describes jouissance as a pleasure that evokes the death drive, as something beyond identity and meaning, but that it both “defines and negates us”; Edelman, *No Future*, 5.
43. Ibid., 25.
44. Ibid., 16.
47. Freeman, “Introduction,” 164.


54. Outbox LGBT theater, funded by the national lottery scheme, performed *Front Room* as part of a four-year project of works. *Front Room* was the second in the program of works.


56. The GLF was a movement in the late 1960s and early 1970s; it sought to undo the repressive gender system and focused on “challenging and overcoming the roots of homosexual oppression: the normative family, deeply enmeshed in advanced capitalism and the institutionalised nature of heterosexuality.” Jeffery Weeks, *The World We Have Won* (London and New York: Routledge, 2007), 81.


59. See Morrison Thompson, “Are We There Yet?”.

60. For a description of the range of intergenerational work in UK LGBT communities, their funders, and types of projects, see International Longevity Centre—UK (ILCUK) reports, *Bridging the Gap Exploring the Potential for Bringing Older and Younger LGBT People Together* (2011); *Intergenerational Projects for the LGBT community, a Toolkit to Inspire and Inform* (2011); *Celebrating Intergenerational Diversity among LGBT People, Executive Summary* (2011).


63. Ibid., 216. Here Butler is specifically speaking of the film *Paris Is Burning* and indicates that the community it represents is likely to be against transphobia. It is worth noting that in all the communities in which drag might be present, not all will be so inclined to resist such phobic responses.

64. Dolan, *The Utopian*, 15.

65. I would like to acknowledge with thanks Theatre Applied, the Centre for Research in Performance and Social Practice, for the opportunity to workshop these ideas and for members’ offers to engage with the work.
Part II

Eroticized Spaces
In this chapter, I join other queer theorists in arguing that the antisocial/antirelational turn in queer theory obscures the horizons of queer utopian beyonds that exist in everyday practices of resistance to heteronormativity and gender regulation. Taking the practices of people who participate in Bondage, Discipline, Dominance, Submission, Sadism, and/or Masochism (BDSM) as an exemplar case, I analyze the interrelational methods of resistance that participants create and utilize in the context of BDSM play, also referred to by some participants as scenes. A glossary of terms utilized throughout this chapter has been included at the end of this chapter in Appendix A. I argue that these methods and moments of resistance allow participants to glimpse the horizons of queer utopian beyonds that they are collectively seeking to create through interactions with one another.

Drawing on Muñoz’s reworking of the concept of queer futurity and conceptualization of queer utopia as temporal disorganization—“a moment when the here and the now is transcended by a then and a there that could be and indeed should be,” I examine the shifting temporality of BDSM scenes and suggest that the fluid temporality of scene space enables participants to experience what Muñoz calls “ecstatic time.” I demonstrate that the ecstatic time of scene space enables participants to resist, transgress, and transcend heteronormativity and gender regulation in ways that they feel able to do only in the context of the ecstatic moments they experience in the context of BDSM spaces. Finally, I argue that such ecstatic moments that facilitate resistance to gender regulation
and heteronormativity are moments that “ask for, desire, and imagine another time and place” and in so doing “perform a desire that is both utopian and queer.”

Following Muñoz, my analysis begins from the premise that queerness is “essentially about the rejection of a here and now and an insistence on potentiality or concrete possibility for another world” and focuses on the specific insistence of BDSM participants on the concrete possibility of a world or space in which heteronormativity and gender regulation are absent. (Focusing on resistance to heteronormativity and gender regulation rather than on queer identification per se, I conceptualize “queer” broadly as practices and interactions that resist gendered regulation of bodies, pleasures, desires, and experiences. Because the logic of heteronormativity relies on normative gender, resistance to gender regulation by extension functions to resist heteronormativity. Thus, the participants whose experiences I analyze here do not all identify as queer or LGBT, yet all actively and intentionally use BDSM spaces to resist gender regulation and normativity and, either implicitly or explicitly, heteronormativity as well.

**Background**

BDSM is an umbrella term that encompasses a variety of practices, roles, identities, and relationships (e.g., kink, leather, D/s [dominance and submission], SM [sadomasochism], bondage, discipline, M/s [master-slave relationships]). While various studies have defined BDSM in slightly differing ways over the past three decades, most share in common the following definitional criteria: (1) consensuality; (2) some form of power exchange; (3) mutual definition of the situation; and (4) a frequent but not necessary sexual context and/or meaning. Terms that are used to describe roles or identities are sometimes used synonymously, yet are often also used to mark significant differences among roles and identities. A note on the varieties and complexities of BDSM roles and identities is included in Appendix B.

BDSM is a particularly interesting context for examining how individuals resist gender regulation and heteronormativity because BDSM negotiations and interactions frequently require explicit discussion of and reflection on how social norms and regulation related to gender and sexuality will be negotiated in the context of a particular scene or play. In addition, because gender, power, and sexuality are linked through a heteronormative matrix that associates sexual dominance with “appropriate” performances of (heterosexual) masculinity and sexual submission with “appropriate” performances of (heterosexual) femininity, participants must also navigate this heteronormative matrix in the context of
interactions in which these normative associations are often not reflected in individual’s actual interactions.

Previous work has begun to examine how participants perceive BDSM in relation to the categories and norms associated with gender and—to a lesser extent—sexuality. Hale, for example, argues that BDSM creates a “culture of two” in which gender performances that would in other spaces be unintelligible become intelligible to the individuals involved. Hale explains that in the culture of two created by BDSM leatherplay, gender operates differently than in other social contexts:

When I was a boy with my dyke daddy, in that culture of two I was a boy. I was not an adult woman playing a boy’s role or playing a boy, nor was I an adult woman doing boy in some other way... I was a boy with her by engaging in a gender performativity that made sense to both of us as a boy’s gender performativity.

Participants such as Hale view BDSM as creating a space in which the normative gendered regulation of bodies is suspended and participants can instead choose which gender(s) to perform and indeed whether to perform gender at all.

Several recent empirical studies of BDSM provide support for the idea that participants experience BDSM settings as spaces in which gender regulation—and, by extension, heteronormativity—are reduced compared with other social settings. For example, Bauer interviewed 50 dyke-, trans-, and/or queer-identified BDSM participants from the United States and Western Europe, focusing on transgressive gender practices. Bauer found that for most participants in the dyke and/or queer BDSM communities studied, BDSM functions as a “playground for exploring gender,” allowing participants to use role play in the context of a social space that is constructed as a “safe” space for experimenting with gender. Bauer argues that this process is made possible by BDSM because “within the [BDSM] community, the sexed and gendered body is generally perceived as more performative than in mainstream culture, its boundaries not necessarily restricted by its own skin (for example, when ‘dildos’ become ‘dicks’).”

Similarly, based on focus group data collected from women, BDSM participants who self-identify as feminists, Ritchie and Barker argue that many participants experience BDSM interactions in ways that subvert traditional gendered dynamics. They argue that BDSM “challenge[s] the [radical feminist] perception that SM reproduces conventional gender hierarchies,” noting that participants frequently describe “their experience of subverting these roles,” including, for instance, enabling men to cry and experience vulnerability, ensuring physical control over male
partners, and redressing the orgasm gap. Ritchie and Barker conclude that the experiences of BDSM participants they analyze offer some challenge to the assumptions that underpin the feminist condemnation of SM... The women SMers whose voices we share in this paper are freely choosing subject positions which they suggest have the potential to recognise, challenge, subvert, parody and transgress these hierarchies of power.

Yet the notion that individuals are “freely choosing” gendered subject positions and performances or that individuals can choose whether or not to perform gender at all, as is suggested in Hale’s account, has been heavily critiqued by both queer and feminist theorists. For example, Butler argues that “to enter into the repetitive practices of this terrain of signification [gender] is not a choice, for the ‘I’ that might enter is always already inside: there is no possibility of agency or reality outside of the discursive practices that give those terms the intelligibility that they have. The task is not whether to repeat, but how to repeat.”

The present study builds on and extends this work by focusing on resistance to heteronormativity in conjunction with resistance to gender regulation. At the same time, however, it also problematizes previous empirical work that has treated gender performances in BDSM contexts as “freely chosen.” Rather than treating gender performances as a question of free choice, I explore how participants understand their own and others’ performances of gender in interactions that attempt to resist both gender regulation and heteronormativity.

**Methodology**

The qualitative data upon which the analyses presented here are based include 32 semistructured, in-depth interviews; thousands of pages of discussion board data collected from bondage.com, one of the largest BDSM community websites in the world; and over a decade of informal conversations with BDSM participants and observations in public physical and cyber BDSM communities (primarily in the Southeast and West coast). I selected these sources because they provide information about what BDSM experiences mean to the people who have them, to create diversity in terms of demographics as well as BDSM-related variables, such as role preferences and length of time participating in BDSM (see table 3.1) as well as experiences and perceptions, and in order to check the findings from each data source against others to ensure that the themes that emerged were not simply a product of the method of data collection. The study was endorsed by the Community-Academic Research...
Consortium on Alternative Sexualities and received IRB approval from Emory University.

Based on themes that emerged in the archival data and in early interviews, I searched public Internet discussion boards on one of the largest and oldest BDSM community websites in the world for themes related to the key topics of the study. The threads I collected span from 2002—the year the discussion section of the site was created—to late 2010. In total, I collected 344 discussion board threads, averaging 32 replies per thread and representing more than 1,000 users. Because few individuals who posted to discussion boards self-identified in terms of demographic and/or BDSM-related variables, a demographic overview of these participants is not possible.

Interview participants were recruited through cyber and physical BDSM community sites across the United States, both to create a geographically diverse sample and to include participants who would not be comfortable participating in an in-person interview, I offered participants the choice of interview setting: face-to-face, phone, Skype, or instant messenger; most interviews were conducted over the phone or by Skype. Interviews focused on topics related to gender, power, and sexuality, as well as participants’ physical, mental, and emotional experiences of BDSM interactions and relationships. Demographic questions were saved until the end of the interview to avoid cueing normative responses. With the exception of age, which I asked participants to respond to with a ten-year range, all demographic questions were open-ended and participants created their own response categories. While my interview partners identified in relatively complex ways in terms of gender during the course of interviews (e.g., as “nongendered,” as “a sissy maid,” as “a tomboy with a little bit of a girlish thing,” as “a female gay leatherman”), when asked demographic questions at the conclusion of the interview, nearly all interviewees self-identified in terms of dichotomous sex categories—giving the impression that the sample is more gender-normative than is actually the case: 15 interviewees identified as female, 15 identified as male, 1 as trans, and 1 as nongender. Because I anticipated that being asked a series of demographic questions might cue normative responses, I saved the demographic questions until the conclusion of the interview. I interpret participants’ relatively dichotomous self-identifications in terms of sex/gender at the conclusion of the interview to be an effect of being asked a series of relatively standard questions, particularly because my interview partners described their gender(s) in more nuanced, complex ways during the course of the interview itself. Given participants’ frequently fluid, genderqueer, and/or nongendered performances in the context of BDSM spaces, I use the gender-neutral pronouns ze and zir throughout this chapter.
Table 3.1  Interview sample characteristics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interview</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Age range</th>
<th>Sexual orientation</th>
<th>Race/ethnicity</th>
<th>Region</th>
<th>BDSM role (General)</th>
<th>Years of BDSM participation</th>
<th>Interview setting</th>
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<td>White*</td>
<td>West coast</td>
<td>Top</td>
<td>6–10</td>
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<td>Bottom</td>
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<td>Phone</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>Missing</td>
<td>Southeast</td>
<td>Switch</td>
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<td>Phone</td>
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<tr>
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<td>Heterosexual+</td>
<td>White*</td>
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</tr>
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+ Includes interviewees who self-identified as either “heterosexual” or “straight.”
* Includes interviewees who self-identified as either “white” or “Caucasian.”
^ Includes interviewees who self-identified as either gay or who identified as both male and homosexual.
Interviewees self-identified in terms of sexual orientation in diverse ways and the sample includes participants with a wide variety of sexual orientations (e.g., gay, bicurious, heteroflexible, heterosexual, pansexual, queer, gay, etc.). Interestingly, while many of my interview partners reported monosexual orientations (e.g., heterosexual, gay), the majority reported engaging in what they define as sexual BDSM with partners of any gender. Drawing on Freccero’s definition of queer as “a certain unsettling in relation to heteronormativity,” I argue that while these participants do not all identify as queer but choose to engage in sexual play with partners regardless of gender, their interactions can be conceptualized as queer interactions because such choices resist heteronormative configurations of sexuality and gender. Later in this chapter, I analyze the specific ways in which such interactions resist heteronormativity and gender normativity.

Seventy-eight percent of interviewees identified as white. It is difficult to gauge whether my sample is significantly whiter than the BDSM population in general, because very few studies of BDSM report demographic information and those that do usually do not include race/ethnicity. The only two studies, to my knowledge, which report race/ethnicity of participants also obtained primarily white samples. Weiss obtained a sample of BDSM participants in the San Francisco Bay area that was 87 percent white. Bauer reports a sample that is primarily white, but does not give specific demographic information.

Participants ranged in age from early twenties to early seventies and most interviewees had participated in BDSM for more than a decade. I used purposive sampling to create a sample divided evenly in thirds in terms of BDSM role participants most often take and/or identify with: bottom (including submissives, slaves, and/or masochists), top (including dominants, masters, and/or sadists) and switch (people who take different roles at different times and/or with different partners).

**Findings**

Several interrelated themes emerged in the data in relation to resistance to heteronormativity and gender regulation. First, participants frame BDSM scenes as interruptions to everyday or “vanilla” life and describe experiencing moments of what Muñoz calls “ecstatic time,” which create temporal disruptions between the here and now and the then and there of past and future utopian beyonds. Second, participants experience these queer moments of ecstatic time as presenting opportunities for resisting heteronormativity and gender regulation in ways they perceive as unavailable to them in other social settings. Participants take advantage of these opportunities by using a variety of strategies of resistance.
including creating and supporting genderqueer and nongendered selves, rejecting (gendered) sexual orientation in favor of BDSM role as a method of organizing desires, experiences, and orientations. Third, participants experience these collective strategies of resistance as serving a utopian function, differentiating BDSM social spaces from other social spaces in which they participate. I argue that these experiences work to reveal to participants the horizons of the queer utopian beyonds they are collectively working to create through interactions with one another.

The Ecstatic, Nonsequential Queer Time of Scene Space

In his argument about the temporal futurity of queer utopias, Muñoz writes:

To see queerness as a horizon is to perceive it as a modality of ecstatic time in which the temporal stranglehold...[of] straight time is interrupted or stepped out of. Ecstatic time is signaled at the moment one feels ecstasy, announced perhaps in a scream or grunt of pleasure, and more importantly during moments of contemplation when one looks back at a scene from one’s past, present, or future.18

Ecstatic time, the time of queerness, is a time of intense pleasure. BDSM scenes,19 which occur in settings that are spatially and temporally demarcated from everyday experiences or what participants refer to as “vanilla life,” facilitate the experience of ecstatic time. In the context of the ecstatic time of scene space, participants experience intense mental and emotional sensations through interactions with their BDSM partner(s). Harper,20 for example, describes scenes as creating “a huge mental high that is unique to BDSM” and goes on to explain that ze has “found that BDSM specifically creates a mental high that really has no other comparison because [of] the level of mental exhilaration and joy that really just there’s no comparison.” For Harper and most other participants included in this study, the moments of ecstasy they experience during interactions with others in the context of BDSM have no parallel with any other experiences they have had in non-BDSM settings.

Some participants, such as Tracy, explicitly note the greater intensity of the emotions they experience in BDSM compared with other forms of sexual interactions. Tracy explains that BDSM is

almost a mystical experience. It can almost reach that level. Not in the way that some stupid people talk about sex being mystical. But just because the way all this negative thinking, all these problems get transformed and you get this incredible bliss. It’s really something. It’s about this escape and just being at peace.
For Tracy and others like zir, the moments of ecstatic time ze experiences in BDSM create intense sensations of bliss and escape from negative thinking and the problems of zir everyday life. As such, these moments are and interruptions of the here and now. For many, these interruptions are tied especially closely to gender regulation. Reese, for example, explains that in the ecstatic moments ze experiences in BDSM play, ze is able to “express other aspects of my gender identity maybe that I don’t get to express ordinarily. So it’s about relaxing in a lot of ways. It’s about transgressing. Transcending.” Transgressing and transcending the regulatory functions of heteronormativity and gender normativity are key to participants’ ability to experience these moments of ecstasy, since participants often define these moments of transgression and transcendence as moments of “freedom” from those normative regulations.

Some participants also mark these moments of transgression and transcendence as moments in which they can transgress and transcend the temporality of the here and now. Chris, for instance, explains that scenes allow one’s conscious to go somewhere else. You hit this meditational phase where everything disappears around you, you do not feel bound to the moment. Time does not matter. Where you are doesn’t matter, how you are doesn’t matter. Free, that’s the real key. You feel free.

Feeling not “bound to the moment,” feeling that time “does not matter,” allows participants to escape the temporality of the here and now and to experience (again) the then and there of other interrelationally produced moments of ecstatic time.

Similarly, Devore, describing zir mental and emotional experiences during a scene, suggests a nonsequential structure of time in scene space:

[While scening] sometimes- a lot of times, actually, I go back to my very beginnings in the 80s because I used to do that [anal fisting] in the back rooms of gay men’s bars. In the 80s and even the 90s. And sometimes I’ll go back to thoughts of that. You know of a man in a sling. You know you can hear people mumbling, talking to each other. But in my head you know sometimes I can see men smoking cigars over here and people watching and things like that. I’m closing my eyes. It’s like floating maybe. And it’s just very euphoric. And it’s a real high to engage in that. Yeah. Floaty and euphoric. It’s just the highest of the high that you’ll ever get.

In the context of the interrelationally created ecstatic time of a BDSM scene, Devore and others like zir experience moments of “stepping out of the linearity of straight time.”

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We can make sense of the ecstatic time of Devore’s scenes—time in which Devore is simultaneously experiencing a private fisting scene in zir home in the Midwest in the 2000s and a public fisting scene in a gay leatherbar in San Francisco in the 1980s or 1990s—through Freeman’s description of queer time as “nonsequential time,” time that “elongates and twists chronology.” Freeman argues that the point of queer may not be to be “always ahead of actually existing social possibilities” but instead “to trail behind actually existing social possibilities: to be interested in the tail end of things” Given the collapse of the gay leatherbar scene and the more general destruction of the leather scene South of Market, Devore’s focus on the no-longer extant San Francisco gay leatherbar of the 1980s and 1990s is certainly one such instance of a queer trailing behind.

Freeman’s own analysis of S/M, based on her reading of Isaac Julien’s short film *The Attendant* (1992) focuses on the temporal fluidity of S/M in terms of moving “back and forth between some kind of horrific *then* in the past [Freeman gives examples of personal and cultural trauma such as sexual violence, slavery, and the Holocaust] and some kind of redemptive *now* in the present.” The experiences of the participants included in this study suggest a wider range of *thens* and *nows*, however. Specifically, not all participants, including those who participate in S&M, enact roles that draw on cultural or personal trauma. Indeed, as Devore’s account of zir experiences in scene space demonstrate, the then [the San Francisco gay leatherbar of the 1980s and 1990s] is no more horrific than the now [the private fisting scene in the 2000s] is redemptive. In other words, while the temporal traveling of BDSM may include traveling between a horrific then and a redemptive now, these are not the only kinds of *then* and *now* that participants experience in the context of the nonsequential time of scene space.

In Muñoz’s account, interrelationality is key to the achievement and experience of ecstatic time and to the then and there that can be reached through that time. Muñoz argues:

> Queerness’s time is the time of ecstasy. Ecstasy is queerness’s way... Taking ecstasy with one another, in as many ways as possible, can perhaps be our best way of enacting a queer time that is not yet here but nonetheless always potentially dawning.

The importance of taking ecstasy with one another to the project of enacting a utopian queer beyond is also reflected in BDSM participants’ accounts of the importance of interrelational connectedness to creating and experiencing moments of ecstasy. Chris, quoted above, for instance, whose account of sensations of “freedom” and of experiencing time as
not mattering during scenes quoted above, goes on to explain that zir sensations of freedom and perception that “time does not matter” are created through a sense of deep connection and trust with zir BDSM partner. Ze says, “You have to—the trust is first and through the trust—because if you don’t trust the person the whole feeling of where you feel released, you feel free, you feel like you are not bound to the time and moment, you can’t do that.” Chris goes on to explain that ze is able to experience intense pleasure in the context of scene space, “but that it only works because we are paying attention to each other, we’re connecting on a pretty intense level.” As Chris makes clear, stepping out of the here and now, and the freedom that accompanies that stepping out of that temporality requires an intense connection and sense of trust with one’s partner.

Drew also emphasizes the importance of connection with a partner for the experience of ecstatic moments in the context of BDSM scenes. When I asked Drew to reflect on what aspects of scenes facilitated the intense emotions and mental experiences ze described, ze responded, “the connection was really there with the dom, which is crucial to me.” Similarly, Pat explains the joint role of feelings of transcendence and connection to zir partner: “It was almost transcendental. I was just not there at all. Floating. And feeling. And there’s no words. No verbal reason going on whatsoever. I was just floating. I was really connected to [zir partner].” Lee’s description nearly echoes Pat’s. Ze says of zir experiences of scene space, “It feels like I’m floating. I am within the experience and yet I am not. So connected with [zir partner].” Reese also explains a strong sense of connectedness during scenes, “I feel really present and really connected to my partner.” Without that connection, the intense pleasures of scene space, made possible through the experience of ecstatic time, would not be possible. Connectedness and interrelational experiences not only facilitate the experience of ecstatic time, ecstatic time in turn can lead participants to experience a sense of connectedness that often extends beyond the particular individuals present in the scene. This broader sense of connectedness also gestures toward the communal aspects of utopia, a point to which I return later in the chapter.

As opposed to Edelman’s argument that “what is queerest about us, queer within us, and queerest despite us is this willingness to...insist that the future stop here,” we might instead consider that what is queerest about and within us is the willingness to insist on disrupting the temporalities that separate the here and now from the past and future, then and there of the queer utopian beyond. If, as Muñoz compellingly argues, queerness’ time is not the time of no future, but instead an “ecstatic and horizontal temporality [that] is a path and a movement to a greater openness to the world,” we can find evidence of pockets of that
ecstatic temporality in current everyday practices of individuals resisting the hegemony of the temporality of the here and now, including the practices of the BDSM participants whose experiences I have analyzed here.  

**Resisting the Gendered Regulation of Bodies**

In these moments of ecstatic, nonsequential time, participants repeatedly describe experiencing sensations of freedom, particularly from the heteronormative and gender regulative discourses that they perceive as ubiquitous in other aspects of their lives. The absence of heteronormativity and gender regulation in these spaces allow participants to glimpse the horizon of queerness—a horizon beyond which gender and heteronormativity have ceased to regulate bodies, lives, and experiences—and to experience a sense of the then and there that lies beyond that horizon. Participants actively resist gender regulation by creating, supporting, and facilitating one another’s enactments of genderqueer and nongendered selves. Participants also resist gender regulation, as well as heteronormativity, by refusing to use gender as a criterion when selecting play partners and framing BDSM roles as a more important identity category than (gendered) sexual orientation. In so doing, participants simultaneously resist the binary, heteronormative construction of heterosexuality and highlight the fluidity of sexual desires and experiences.

Many participants perceive BDSM as the only social context in which their genderqueer and/or nongendered performances are recognized and supported by others and/or in which normative gender regulation is suspended. Sydney, for example, says of zir gender identity and performance: “I can’t think of a way other to be. And others have accepted me in the community. I identify as like a around ten years old kind of a tomboy but with a little girl kind of thing.” Later in the interview, Sydney emphasizes that BDSM scenes are the only spaces in which ze feels support for and acceptance of zir genderqueer performance. Similarly, Devore says:

> My gender...I very much identify with gay men in their thinking. And maybe that goes back to that how I came out as an adult, with all gay men. I’ve been told that I think like a gay man. And I feel that even though I know I’m a physical woman, I think like a gay man. There’s just a connection there. I’ve been told we kind of have our own language when we talk to each other.

And later in the interview, Devore again referenced identifying as part of the gay male community while talking about the strong bonds among community members: “I think it’s the way with the gay men’s
community…You know. We tend to stick together.” Devore’s identification as a gay leatherman, ze explains, is intelligible only in BDSM contexts. In all other aspects of zir life, Devore says that people perceive zir as “just a female.” In BDSM contexts, however, Devore’s identification with gay leathermen is both intelligible to and supported by other participants.

While participants such as Sydney and Devore report BDSM contexts as the only social settings in which they experience support for their performances of genderqueer selves, other participants report experiencing freedom from gender regulation in the context of BDSM interactions, which facilitates their enactment of nongendered selves in those settings. Reese, for instance, told me:

I’ve always really been aware of the ways in which I don’t really jive with masculinity in quotes…Almost all my long-term relationships have been sort of hindered by really traditional male-female gender roles and the ways in which I don’t relate to them. And in the BDSM contexts it’s been a lot more comfortable in that way. [So that sense of transgressing gender is something specific to BDSM for you?] Oh yeah. Absolutely. Absolutely. You know the culture is so gendered at every level… I guess the real difference is that in a BDSM context it’s an area where I just don’t have to think about it. Where fluidity ideally is allowed and sort of a given part of it. And I guess that’s sort of what I was getting at and didn’t even realize it. By talking about relaxing a little bit that way. [And do you mean fluidity specifically in terms of like gender stereotypes and gender norms?] Yeah. Yeah.

For Reese, BDSM creates a context in which gender regulation is virtually absent, which in turn allows zir to transgress gender in ways that ze is unable to do in other contexts.

Similarly, Harper says of BDSM scenes:

…there’s an ability to transcend my gender. Both from my perspective and from the person that I’m playing [with]. Allows us both to have a successful scene. Without having to worry about whether or not we’re female. Whether or not we’re male. It’s like once we get into it what our gender is doesn’t matter anymore. And it’s more about enjoying the scene with another person. And seeing that person on a level of something other than a physical body.

During a BDSM scene, Harper experiences a drastic decrease in both sex category and gender regulation for both zirself and zir partner(s). Both the sex category of the participants and the gendered selves they usually otherwise enact become irrelevant to the experience. For participants like Reese and Harper, BDSM becomes a space in which gender regulation is
Participants like these perceive a significant difference in gender regulation across BDSM and other social contexts. Dominique, for example, explicitly contrasts gender regulation across BDSM play and “everyday life.” When I asked if there had ever been any time when ze felt like zir own sense of zir gender or genders either clashed with or matched with something that happened during BDSM, ze responded:

No. Not during play. I mean I’ve had that happen in like the real world. Everyday life. Like my job and stuff like that. And people would expect me to be one way and I’m just not that way. And I’ve had clashes there. Like I said earlier. Diesel mechanic, which is traditionally a male job and a male role. And you know, here I am this little woman with pigtails in those days. And I’d crawl out from underneath a truck and people are literally shocked by it… What bothered me is they assumed I automatically had no idea what I was doing… And when people would question and ask ridiculous things like “oh do you know what a slack adjuster is sweetheart?” I just—Like if you’re a mechanic and you don’t know what a slack adjuster is you’ve got some big issues. Things like, “does your husband mind if you have his tools?” [So it sounds like you’ve had those experiences frequently at work and in non-BDSM contexts but you’re saying that hasn’t been the case in BDSM. Is that right?] That is absolutely correct. Yeah. Yeah. I can be more of myself because I don’t have to sit there and explain anything.

Dominique explains being treated according to gender stereotypes in the “real world” and “everyday life,” explaining that people often assumed ze “had no idea what I was doing.” Ze contrasts these experiences of being treated in highly gender stereotypical ways in non-BDSM contexts with how ze is treated in BDSM contexts, explaining that ze can “be more of myself” in BDSM contexts, where zir performance of a nongendered self is accepted and support and ze doesn’t “have to explain anything.”

Participants like Reese, Harper, Dominique, and others like them perceive gender regulation as significantly reduced in BDSM compared with other settings. The lack of gender regulation in BDSM settings is associated with their perceptions that others are less likely to treat them according to gender stereotypes and more likely to understand and actively support and facilitate their own performances of genderqueer and/or nongendered selves. Importantly, participants’ resistance to gender regulation allows them to engage in both personal and community transformation by creating a social world in which alternative and nongendered presentations of self are intelligible to others. Warner explains that this kind of “transforming oneself, and at the same time helping to establish a commonly accessible world” is how queer spaces and cultures
are created. By rejecting the normative “here and now” gendered regulation of bodies and selves, these interactions contribute to the queerness Muñoz describes as insisting on a “concrete possibility for another world.” BDSM scenes function for many participants as windows onto a queer utopian “then and there” in which gender regulation is altogether absent. Because for many participants the absence of gender regulation is one of the primary pleasures of BDSM, the very absence of gender regulation is itself often experienced as a moment of ecstasy, achieved interrelationally when others recognize and support their genderqueer and/or nongendered performances of selves. These narratives emphasize the importance of relationality to queer projects of creating alternative worlds and, as such, challenge the antirelation or antisocial turn within certain versions of queer theorizing, a point to which I return later in the chapter.

Resisting (Gendered) Sexual Orientation and the Homo/Hetero Binary

In addition to creating and supporting genderqueer and nongendered selves and performances, participants resist gender regulation and heteronormativity by resisting gender as a criterion for selecting and interacting with BDSM partners. Participants included in this study overwhelmingly resist sexual orientation as an identity category and schema for organizing bodies, desires, and experiences. Instead, they frame BDSM roles as the primary category through which sexual experiences can be and are organized and interpreted. This method of resisting the gendered homo/hetero binary that undergirds heteronormativity was particularly evident in debates concerning the relative importance of a potential partner’s gender compared with BDSM role. For example, on a 2004 discussion thread titled “Gender or D/s role—which trumps the other?” many participants explained that for them, BDSM role “trumps” gender when it comes to choosing BDSM partners. Perhaps referencing Califia’s infamous assertion “if I had a choice between being shipwrecked on a desert island with a vanilla lesbian and a hot male masochist, I’d pick the boy,” the initial poster writes:

My mostly straight master once made the casual comment that he’d rather be stranded on a desert island with a male submissive than a female non-submissive, and that’s where the idea came from. If you could only have one erotic partner for the rest of your life, would you prefer one who was compatible in terms of D/s role or in terms of gender? When does gender trump D/s role? When does D/s role trump gender? For example, would you prefer to be stranded on a desert island with a member of your less-preferred gender but more-preferred BDSM role or vice versa? For
example: for straightish dommes, would you prefer a submissive female, or a nonsubmissive male?

The first person to respond answers, “For me, D/s compatibility almost always trumps gender completely. So give me a good dominant of either gender over any kind of nondominant.” The next poster agrees, “what she said.” The following poster agrees as well, “I’d rather have a submissive male than a nonsubmissive female. I agree… it’s all about the D/s compatibility vs. gender. ALWAYS.” And another writes, “it would have to be Dom—male or female for me.” Similarly, a different poster writes, “In my case, I’d pick D/s over gender.” For these participants, like for many others, BDSM creates a context in which the categories upon which heteronormativity relies can be resisted in favor of social identity categories specific to BDSM.

This theme also appeared repeatedly in conversations with my interview partners. Alex, for example, told me:

It’s not whether I’m gay or straight. And with Christina, she’s a female. She was a straight woman. And she was the one that first started me in this. I had no problem submitting to her any more than I do with Sir [Alex’s current, gay male-identified dominant]. Because it’s more about the connection than the gender of who it is.

Likewise, when asked, “Does gender matter when you are considering a potential BDSM partner?” Pat said, “It isn’t really much difference… So I play with women and men.” Similarly, Cody said:

I really don’t think that gender had anything or has anything to do with what I do because I play with men and women. So I really don’t think gender would have anything to do with it. At all. Because I’ve played with some really rugged lesbians and some straight men have bottomed to me. And gay men as well. I’m a gay male. I’ve actually owned a female slave. You know. So gender doesn’t have anything to do with it at all.

For Cody, gender is irrelevant to zir choice of BDSM partners. Cody emphasizes that ze has “actually owned a female slave,” indicating that zir indifference to the gender of zir BDSM partners is not restricted to casual or time-limited scenes but extends to long-term relationships as well.

Harper also views gender as irrelevant to zir choice of partners. Ze says:

I enjoy playing with male, female, TG [transgender], TS, [transsexual], and everything in between. It really makes no difference to me. To me
the importance is the mental connection and enjoying the play. So what
gender I play with is not an issue at all.

For Harper, it’s about the mental connection with another person—a
connection that exists with partners regardless of gender. Harper explains
that for zir, gender doesn’t influence why or how ze cares for someone. Similarly, Shawn says, “I’ll play with a guy as much as I’ll play with a
girl... For me it doesn’t matter if you’re a female or male or something in
between, making your transition.” Likewise, Jamie says, “I mean I know
some people play only with females or only with males. I don’t think it
matters to me.” And Robin says, “I play with women and men. [And
does it involve that sexual energy exchange with both women and men?] Yes, absolutely.” Participants such as Alex, Pat, Cody, Harper, Shawn,
Jamie, Robin, and many others like them refuse the logics of heteronor-
mativity and gender regulation, which normatively organize desires and
experiences according to the gender-based homo/hetero binary. These
participants instead emphasize the importance of BDSM role to their
choice of partners and to how they interact with those partners.

As a result of decentering the homo/hetero binary in the context of
BDSM, many participants who identify their overall or broader sexual
orientation as monosexual (e.g., gay, heterosexual) nonetheless engage in
what they construct as sexual BDSM scenes or play with partners of any
gender(s). In my interview sample, for instance, the majority of my inter-
view partners reported engaging in BDSM with partners of any gender,
yet less than half identified their sexual orientation in responses to demo-
graphic questions with categories that include partners of more than one
gender (such as pansexual, heteroflexible, bicurious, and bisexual). Eleven
of my interview partners identified as heterosexual, six as bisexual, four as
gay or homosexual (and male), three as heteroflexible, two as pansexual,
one as straight with bicurious, one as queer, and one responded, “I like
everybody”; sexual orientation data are missing for three interviewees.
As with questions about gender identification, I believe that participants’
more frequent use of fixed categories of sexual orientation in the demo-
graphic section than in the rest of the interview suggests that standard
demographic questions may cue standard responses that may fail to ade-
quately capture the complexity of lived experiences. While my interview
partners classified their sexual experiences according to normative sexual
orientation categories when asked demographic questions at the conclu-
sion of the interview, the relative absence of those categories in their nar-
ratives about their experiences in BDSM contexts underscores the point
that many BDSM participants do not draw on the normative hetero/
homo binary to interpret or guide their experiences in BDSM contexts.
In addition, the disjunction between the sexual orientations participants
reported in the demographic section at the end of the interview and the range of genders of partners with whom they reported engaging in sexual BDSM play illustrates that participants resist applying normative sexual orientation categories to their BDSM experiences.

Participants’ perceptions of BDSM spaces as (often the only) spaces in which they can express sexual interests, identities, and desires outside and/or beyond the homo/hetero binary work to facilitate resistance to that very binary.

As with resistance to gender regulation, resistance to regulation of experiences and desires according to the cultural logic of the homo/hetero binary in the context of BDSM play allows participants to experience interruptions of that logic that enable them to glimpse the utopian then and there of a world and time in which pleasures are not organized according to current normative logics including heteronormativity. Practices such as these, what Muñoz calls “utopian and willfully idealistic practices of thought,” allow participants to collectively imagine and enact interruptions that reveal the horizons of the queer utopias they are working to create. And, as with resistance to gender regulation, these practices are successful precisely because they establish a “commonly accessible world” by collectively creating and relying on alternative schemas for organizing bodies, pleasures, and experiences.

**BDSM and/as Queer Utopian Beyond**

As is already evident in the previous sections, participants frequently frame BDSM as a unique social context, particularly in relation to resistance to and rejection of heteronormativity and gender regulation. Drawing on Muñoz’s argument that “utopia lets us imagine a space outside of heteronormativity…utopia offers us a critique of the present, of what is, by casting a picture of what can and perhaps will be,” I argue that by allowing participants to imagine and enact spaces outside of heteronormativity and gender regulation, BDSM contexts serve this utopian function. They do so by allowing participants to envision and enact—even if only within the temporal and spatial boundaries of scenes—alternative arrangements of what can and perhaps will be in relation to the organization of bodies, experiences, desires, and pleasures.

While I did not ask any questions about BDSM communities, the majority of interviewees independently brought up differences between BDSM and other social communities in which they participated. Without prompting, a third of my interview partners identified the BDSM community at large and/or the specific communities in which they as being much more diverse in terms of gender and/or sexual orientation compared with other social communities. Reese, for instance, when talking
about zir experiences of having zir gender performance(s) supported in BDSM contexts told me, “it’s a place where there’s more fluidity allowed than in most of the public sphere and even most of the private spheres as well.” Similarly, Chris says of zir local BDSM community, “people of any race, gender, sexual orientation, anyone was accepted and welcome.” And Robin explains being drawn to BDSM in part because, “there are a lot of varied gender expressions in my local community.” Likewise, Ryan says, “there is a lot more acceptance of experimentation with gender roles in the BDSM community than I’ve found in any other community.” For participants such as these, the acceptance and even encouragement of gender fluidity and antinormativity is one of the most important and unique features of BDSM communities.

Harper similarly identifies the acceptance of gender diversity as an important aspect of the BDSM community in which ze participates:

I would definitely say that BDSM has created a very open and understanding sort of culture in that respect [gender diversity]. And I have gotten that sort of feeling from most people in the lifestyle. They tend to be much more open and accepting of gender. Gender play. Gender fluidity.

Importantly, Harper notes that not just gender play—a particular type of BDSM play that involves explicitly playing with and often transgressing or subverting gender roles and stereotypes—but also gender fluidity is accepted. While gender play is temporally and spatially limited by the boundaries of scene space and time, gender fluidity extends beyond the boundaries of a particular scene or set of interactions. That participants accept gender fluidity outside the boundaries of scene/play settings suggests that gender fluidity need not be viewed as play to be accepted by participants. In other words, gender subversiveness, transgression, and resistance to regulation are often not marked as temporally bounded moments of play, but are instead constructed as “real” and ongoing ways of being by many participants.

Several participants reflected specifically on the community acceptance of nonnormative gender expressions, including transgender identifications and performances, explaining that because of the general culture of acceptance of gender diversity and fluidity, participants often feel more comfortable enacting their “real” or “true” gendered selves in BDSM contexts than they do in other settings. Indeed, for many participants, BDSM is the only context in which they feel comfortable enacting these nonconforming gendered selves. Christian, for example, says of zir gender identification, “I can’t think of a way other to be. Because I identify as like a around ten years old kind of a tomboy but with a little girl kind of thing . . . And others have accepted me in the community. [Is that only in BDSM?] Right.” Similarly, Dana explains feeling for a long
time—up until zir recent retirement—that BDSM was the only context in which ze could enact zir preferred gender expression. Ze says:

You know as far as gender I identify as a female even though my voice doesn’t sound that female. I’d say all of the people in the community in the Scene who I come in contact with can identify me as that. As a matter for fact they all call me [feminine name]. But when I go to see a colleague from work—like actually I’m going tomorrow for lunch with someone, a very good friend. I’ll go dressed as a man…there’s no need to upset the cart there. But otherwise I identify as transgendered woman. Primarily as a sissy maid.

In BDSM contexts, Dana doesn’t worry that zir gender presentation will “upset the applecart.” Equally importantly, Dana’s gender presentation is accepted and reinforced by others in the community, who signal their support for zir gender presentation and identification by referring to zir by zir preferred name and gender pronouns. What is especially significant in this account is that Dana feels compelled to dress and act “as a man” even with “a very good [non-BDSM] friend.” In contrast, Dana explains that everyone with whom ze comes into contact with in zir local Scene/community “can identify me” as zir preferred gender. Dana feels more acceptance and support for zir gender identification and presentation from casual acquaintances in BDSM contexts than ze does even with very good friends, underscoring the point that ze experiences significantly less normative gender regulation in BDSM compared with other social settings.

The importance of the social, communal, and relational aspects of BDSM experiences to participants’ perceptions of BDSM as spaces in which the queer utopian horizon can be glimpsed provide a powerful critique of the antirelational turn in queer theory and support for the notion of “queerness as collectivity” forwarded by Muñoz. Indeed, rather than queerness being profoundly antirelational or antisocial, as some queer theorists would have it, the experiences of BDSM participants suggest that queerness, and in particular the visibility of the horizon of the queer utopian beyond, is a profoundly interrelational, interactional experience. The queerness of the BDSM practices analyzed here suggests a threat to the social that cannot accurately be understood as antisocial. In the normative social order, risk of harm is carefully policed and avoided because the very possibility of that risk disrupts that normative order. The threat to the normative social order posed by the queerness of the kinds of BDSM practices discussed in this chapter is the threat of undoing that normative order in favor of a different understanding of sociality and relationality. On that different understanding of relationality, the risk of harm itself is what constitutes the framework for intense experiences,
what both makes possible and is called up by BDSM practices. Rather than failing to reproduce the social—as proposed in antisocial versions of queer theory developed by queer theorists such as Bersani and Edelman, among others—this particular form of queerness serves to rework it.

Participating in BDSM allows the participants described here to experience interruptions to the gender regulation and heteronormativity that predominate the other social settings in which they participate. Entering BDSM space functions to reveal to these participants the queer horizon, the utopian beyond toward which they are collectively reaching. Muñoz argues that “queerness is essentially about the rejection of a here and now and an insistence on potentiality or concrete possibility for another world.” By rejecting the here and now of “everyday” or “vanilla” life and collectively insisting on the possibility of another world through interactions with one another, participants use BDSM spaces as lenses onto a queer utopian beyond in which the freedom from gender regulation and heteronormativity they enact within scene spaces extends beyond the spatial and temporal limits of those scenes. In this way, BDSM scenes and spaces form a bridge between the “vanilla” here and now of heteronormativity and gender regulation and the queer utopian then and there of nonheteronormative, nongender regulative worlds and insist upon the concrete possibilities for achieving those worlds. By insisting on using BDSM to “dream and enact new and better pleasures, other ways of being in the new world, and ultimately new worlds,” BDSM participants are engaged in the collective task not only of envisioning but also of creating a queer utopian beyond.

Conclusion

As Muñoz reminds us, “the distinctions between here and there, and the world that the here and now organizes, are not fixed—they are already becoming undone in relation to a forward-dawning futurity.” I have argued that BDSM scenes function to undo those very distinctions in the process of reaching toward the horizon of a queer utopian beyond. The horizon of that beyond is, as Muñoz emphasizes, always a shifting horizon. Even as participants feel themselves drawing nearer to the particular horizon they are attempting to reach—a horizon beyond which lies a queer utopia free from gender regulation and the heteronormativity that both accompanies and supports that regulation—the horizon will necessarily shift if it is to retain its queerness. Drawing nearer to that horizon, participants will realize that the horizon is neither what nor where they believed. The impossibility of reaching the horizon, however, does not deter participants from continuing to reach toward it. Instead, participants frequently frame reaching toward an impossible
horizon as one of the pleasures, one of the moments of ecstasy, available in BDSM play.

It is the attempt to reach the horizon itself despite the certainty of failure that is the truly queer practice. As Halberstam argues, failure “may in fact offer more creative, more cooperative, more surprising ways of being in the world.”40 The participants whose experiences I have analyzed here use the certainty of failure in one such surprising way to interrupt the heteronormative and gender regulative discourses of everyday life to carve out ecstatic moments that offer alternative ways of being in the world by disrupting the temporal and spatial distinctions between the here and now and the then and there. The more creative, more cooperative, more surprising ways of being in the world that are achieved through failure are ways of being that are made possible in scene space—a space in which participants recognize that they will be working toward an always and inherently out-of-reach horizon. The interrelational striving for that queer utopian horizon despite the certainty of failure that occurs in some forms of BDSM play represents a more creative way of being in the world, a way of being in the world that embraces failure and proceeds regardless. Choosing to engage cooperatively, interrelationally, and collectively with others in the face of certain failure requires an intense commitment to those others and to working through the certainty of that failure together. The very attempt to reach that horizon despite the certainty of failure is an interrelational process and an interrelational striving. The horizon is visible and becomes a point toward which participants can reach only in the context of interrelationally produced scene space.

It is important to note, however, that not all BDSM participants view BDSM scenes and spaces in this way or are interested in resisting gender regulation and/or heteronormativity. For some participants—a minority in this study—BDSM spaces function much as other social spaces in which hegemonic heterosexist and gender regulative discourses govern and organize bodies, desires, and experiences. It is thus not BDSM practices in and of themselves, but a certain form of creating, organizing, and interpreting those experiences that has the potential to both create and reveal the horizon of the forms of queer utopian beyonds many participants describe.

In addition, practical constraints limit this sample to participants who have at least minimal contact (e.g., reading BDSM community website discussion boards or newsletters) with at least one BDSM community. The experiences of people who participate in BDSM without any form of community contact or involvement (e.g., those who buy BDSM manuals and equipment from mainstream adult stores and experiment with BDSM practices with a partner who also has no contact with a BDSM community) are likely to be significantly different from those who have
some level of community engagement. The insistence of participants in this study on the importance of the collective and communal nature of resistance to heteronormativity and gender regulation in BDSM settings suggests that those who do not participate in such communities may have significantly different experiences and perceptions of resistance (or lack thereof) to heteronormativity and gender regulation. Their emphasis on the importance of communal and relational resistance also functions as a call for a reconsideration of the antirelational turn in queer theory and lends support to queer theorists such as Muñoz who argues that horizon of the queer utopian beyond can be glimpsed only through collective, interrelational moments of becoming.

Lee Edelman characterizes proponents of queer utopianism as “delightfully drugged by the harmony, the freedom from harm, that their harmonies promise… induc[ing] us all to nod along, persuaded that we . . . shall also eventually overcome, for knowledge, understanding, and progress must, in the fullness of time, set us free.” Yet the queer utopian beyond toward which BDSM participants are reaching promises neither harmony nor freedom from harm—nor do participants perceive these qualities as integral to that queer utopian beyond. Instead, participants perceive the queer utopian beyond that scene space creates and allows glimpses of as a beyond centered on intense moments of interrelationality. They conceptualize that interrelationality as about the complex messiness of working through experiences with one another rather than some idealistic form of interrelational harmony free from conflict and chaos. It is not the desire for freedom from harm, but rather the decision to engage with one another in forms of play that risk significant harm that characterizes the horizon of the queer utopian beyond that is constructed by and revealed to participants in the context of interrelationally created scene space.

Notes

3. Ibid., 26.
4. Ibid., 1.


7. Ibid., 229; original italics.


10. Ze is a gender neutral pronoun that replaces she or he.


13. Ibid., 237.


16. I posted recruitment materials to several racially/ethnically specific cyber BDSM community groups, but I do not know whether participants of color are more likely to join racially/ethnically specific communities, mixed communities, or both. My sampling strategy itself may have also contributed to the relative whiteness of my sample for at least two reasons. First, the community sites from which I recruited have mostly white members, paralleling the apparent overall whiteness of the BDSM community. Second, because some of my interviewees were referred to me by other interviewees and most of my interviewees were white, if their BDSM networks primarily included other whites, people of color would have had a lesser chance of being referred for an interview.

17. Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*.

18. Ibid., 32.
19. While the term “scene” is used to refer specifically to BDSM play or activities that happens in public settings (e.g., at a dungeon or play party), it is most frequently used to refer generally to BDSM play or activities regardless of setting and I preserve the broader sense of the term here.

20. Pseudonyms have been assigned to all interviewees to protect their privacy.


22. Freeman, Time Binds, ix.

23. Ibid., xiii.


25. Freeman, Time Binds, 143.


30. Muñoz, Cruising Utopia, 1.

31. Bersani, Homos; Edelman, “No Future.”

32. Pat Califia, Public Sex: The Culture of Radical Sex, 2nd ed. (San Francisco: Cleis Press, 2000), 159.

33. Muñoz, Cruising Utopia, 95.

34. Ibid., 35, italics in the original.

35. Here, “Scene” refers to the broader BDSM community, as opposed to a specific scene or set of BDSM interactions.


37. Muñoz, Cruising Utopia, 1.

38. Ibid., 1.

39. Ibid., 29.


Appendix A: Glossary

**BDSM:** An umbrella term that encompasses a variety of terms used interchangeably both in the academic literature and by participants to refer to a range of consensual practices/activities desires, communities/subcultures, identities/roles, and meanings that involve power exchange, pain, or both.

**Bondage:** Practices that involve physical restraint, such as rope bondage, straight jackets.

**Discipline:** Discipline or punishment administered to modify behavior in ways agreed upon by both/all parties to the interaction; discipline may be physical and/or emotional/mental.

**Dominance and submission (D/s):** Practices involving exchanges of power.

**Kink:** A general term for nonnormative sexuality. Like the term BDSM, the term kink is often used as an umbrella term, but it is a much broader category than BDSM and includes sexual interests like fetishes, cross-dressing, strap-on sex, and/or voyeurism that do not necessarily fall under the umbrella of BDSM.

**Leather:** A term that originated in gay male communities in the 1960s and subsequently spread to lesbian s/m communities in the 1970s. Leather retains a strong association with gay and lesbian BDSM but is also used as a synonym for BDSM regardless of sexual orientation. Leather is most often used to indicate personal identification and/or community affiliation, but is also used to refer to BDSM practices and relationships.

**Leatherman:** A leather-identified man usually but not always, identifies as gay. Note that the term leatherman does not indicate a particular role preference or identification (e.g., top, bottom, dominant, submissive); it indicates participation in and identification with the leather community.

**Leatherplay:** Leatherplay refers to BDSM play that involves one or more leather-identified participants and is often used interchangeably with the terms “scene” and “play.”
**Master/slave (M/s)** refers to a Master/slave relationship—a relationship in which the participants have agreed that one person will control the other either for a given period of time or indefinitely (for some this control is limited to BDSM interactions, while for others it includes all interactions between the participants; the latter is known as 24/7 and/or Total Power Exchange [TPE]).

**Play:** A temporally and spatially bounded set of BDSM interactions and activities that includes one or more elements of D/s, S&M, bondage, and/or discipline. Often used interchangeably with “scene.” Some participants use “play” to refer to activities that take place in private and “scene” to refer to activities that take place in public play spaces (such as at play parties).

**Sadomasochism (S&M, S/M, SM):** Practices that involve physical (e.g., whipping, flogging, cutting) and/or emotional (e.g., humiliation, degradation) pain.

**Scene:** The term “scene” has multiple meanings for BDSM participants, including (1) a noun that refers to the BDSM social scene or community, either generally or in a specific locale (e.g., “The Houston scene is really happening.”); (2) a noun that refers to one or more temporally and/or spatially bounded BDSM interactions (e.g., “We were in the middle of a cutting scene.”); and (3) a verb that refers to engaging in BDSM activities (e.g., “I’m going to scene with her tomorrow;” “we were sceneing last night”). In written conversations, BDSM participants often mark these distinctions by using “Scene” to refer to BDSM communities (meaning 1) and “scene” to refer specific interactions or the process of engaging in those interactions (meanings 2 and 3). The term “scene” is often used interchangeably with “play.”

**Notes**

1. Distinctive capitalization, particularly in names, titles, and roles, is one way that BDSM participants convey the meaning of their relationships and identities in writing (the capital letter marks the top dominant/sadist/master/mistress role, while the noncapitalized letter marks the bottom/submissive/masochist/slave role; BDSM participants often use differentiated capitalization in scene names to indicate role/identity and to signal the nature of their relationship—Chris and ben, for example).
Appendix B: A Note on Roles and Identities

Terms that are used to describe roles or identities are sometimes used synonymously, yet are often used to mark significant differences among roles and identities. Top, dominant, master, and sadist, for example, can have significantly different meanings for some participants and in some contexts, yet are also used interchangeably often, as are the corresponding terms bottom, submissive, slave, and masochist. A top is someone who leads in a given interaction, while a bottom is someone who follows in that interaction. In comparison with other roles, top and bottom are least often understood as identities and are more frequently understood by participants as roles that can vary across interactions. Importantly, top and bottom are terms often used by people who switch (take different roles in different settings or with different partners), which also underscores the more frequent construction of “top” and “bottom” as roles (variable) than identities (fixed). Other frequent role/identity terms—dominant/submissive, master/slave, and sadist/masochist—are much more often used by participants to describe a sense of an innate identity and people who identify in these ways rarely, if ever, switch (e.g., a dominant rarely takes on a submissive role). Dominant generally refers to someone who enjoys exercising power in BDSM contexts, while submissive generally refers to someone who enjoys giving up power in BDSM contexts. Master and slave generally refer to specific participants in an M/s (Master/slave) power exchange relationship, but are also sometimes used by participants as identifications that indicate a stronger BDSM identification than is generally denoted by the terms dominant and submissive. In a BDSM context, a sadist is someone who enjoys inflicting pain and a masochist is someone who enjoys receiving pain. This list of roles/identifications is far from exhaustive; participants use these roles as starting points for developing an extremely wide array of identities and roles, including some created specifically for a particular scene.

Although these terms are sometimes used interchangeably, when distinctions among these roles/identities exist in a given community or for
a specific participant, they are often critically important. For example, someone might identify as a submissive (someone who enjoys consensual submission and power exchange) but not as a masochist (someone who enjoys receiving pain). Given the often important distinctions among these terms, when describing individual participants, I use the terminology each participant uses to describe zirself. When describing multiple participants with different identifications in the same category (e.g., bottom/submissive/slave/masochist) I use the terms top and bottom, because these are the broadest, least exclusionary terms.
Chapter 4

The Queer Potentiality of Barebacking: Charging, Whoring, and Breeding as Utopian Practices

Brandon Andrew Robinson

Barebacking is generally defined as “raw” sex, or as having sex without a condom. For people who take on the identity of barebacking, it is the intentional act of engaging in unprotected anal intercourse. It is a “contemporary ‘subculture’ of male homosexual risk,” where the act of engaging in unprotected sex is premeditated and eroticized.

Within the barebacking community, there are also some who identify as bug chasers. Bug chasers desire to contract HIV in order to not constantly have to fear getting infected. HIV discourses about safe-sex practices and condom use have allowed this new identity around “cum swapping” to exist because gay sexual health under these discourses is constructed around one’s HIV status and the type of (risky) sexual behaviors one engages in. Because bug chasers are trying to contract HIV, they have an increased desire to engage in risky sexual behaviors and to participate in a wider array of sexual activities.

In this chapter, I set out to explore the queer potentiality of barebacking. Barebacking has become an important and divisive issue among public health and social science researchers. However, I will not take an acrimonious stance on the issue, but rather, I explore the potentialities of the discourses used by barebackers. In these homonormative times of gay respectability, gay men should be just like their heterosexual counterparts (i.e., monogamous, married, and raising children) except being partnered with someone of the same sex. Barebackers’ discourses then could offer alternative insights into thinking about new possibilities outside of the hetero- and homonormative regimes of family, reproduction, and marriage. By heeding José Esteban Muñoz’s call for (re)examining relational quotidian practices, I investigate the potentiality of barebacking, which
is “outside of heteronormativity...[and] permits us to conceptualize new worlds and realities that are not irrevocably constrained by the HIV/AIDS pandemic and institutionalized state homophobia.”

To understand this formation of barebacking though, one must first examine the recent history of HIV/AIDS and public health in the United States. With the onset of the HIV/AIDS pandemic in the early 1980s, public health and the Reagan administration did not act to respond to the disease because of its association with gay men and drug users. It was not until much pressure from HIV/AIDS activist organizations and movements that public health institutions eventually responded and took control over the pandemic. HIV surveillance became constructed as necessary in order to deal with HIV, which was “seen as a scourge laying waste to human life.” Health promotion, and specifically sexual health promotion, became seen as the dominant paradigm that could adequately address and deal with the HIV/AIDS pandemic.

This sexual health paradigm, created by public health institutions in conjunction with gay organizations, began its campaign against HIV by aggressively sending out public health messages to gay men. Public health under capitalism wants its citizens to live long, productive lives in order to maximize society’s profits; therefore, contracting a deadly virus is an antithesis to capitalism’s goal for its workers. In the sexual health framework, gay men are seen as responsible actors who should act to avoid HIV infection, because no one would rationally seek death. Sexual health promotes the subordination of sexual instincts and desire to reason, and they send the message that condom use and personal risk reduction is the proper and normal way to have sex. One has a personal responsibility and moral duty to one’s self, their intimate partner, and the larger society to practice safe sex and to avoid getting HIV. Because of this “death” virus, “homosexual behavior becomes a problem needing the state or the HIV/AIDS apparatus and its effort at surveillance, systematic containment, and behavioral transformation.”

This public sexual health discourse is centered on repressing sexual urges through creating fear of attracting HIV, and health authorities become seen as hierarchal and paternalistic in trying to tell people how to rationally have sex. For example, the Center for Disease Control and Prevention conducts surveillance of HIV infection by recommending routine HIV testing, and then requires medical reporting to the CDC if a diagnosis of infection is confirmed. HIV screening becomes constructed as a normal part of health care for gay men, where knowing one’s HIV status is the right and socially responsible thing to do. Responsible sexual behavior is to do no harm to others or to society, so one must regularly get screened, and if one is positive, one should always disclose one’s status.
According to Octavio Gonzalez, this discourse around HIV creates a particular normative homosexual figure.\textsuperscript{28} Health promotions construct who is the proper, normal (gay) citizen, and therefore, it lays the norms for what each person must \textit{do} and \textit{be}.\textsuperscript{29} As Peter Keogh states, “By contributing to the production of knowledge about gay men and the generation of normative ways of being, health promotion is instrumental in actualizing ideals of gay citizenship.”\textsuperscript{30} The hygienic vision in society is the uninfected gay male body that is produced through monogamy, or at least, the unthreatening safe-sex behavior.\textsuperscript{31}

This proper gay male subject is created discursively through the improper or irrational gay man. One who engages in unprotected anal intercourse is seen as an irrational risk taker, who is acting uncontrollably and who is inflicting public and self-harm.\textsuperscript{52} To act irrationally in this manner is seen as deviant and as defective.\textsuperscript{33} This behavior is constructed as reckless and irrational because the HIV positive person within this discourse is seen as “The Other.”\textsuperscript{34} Someone who has HIV becomes constructed as an irrational actor at some point in one’s life and is thus abject within a sexual health discourse and its normative gay male uninfected subject.

Given this context, gay men have turned to barebacking because they are experiencing condom or safe-sex fatigue.\textsuperscript{35} Condom fatigue stems from being incessantly inundated with hegemonic discourses surrounding safe-sex practices within the gay community, and from the realization that wearing condoms is an imperative under the HIV/AIDS pandemic—one’s sex life, especially if one wants to be promiscuous, will always be restrained.\textsuperscript{56} Likewise, safe sex is cited as being detached, without emotion or devotion, and also just physically less satisfying.\textsuperscript{37} Condoms are seen as unnatural, and for that matter, safe sex is viewed as pretend sex or as not “real” or natural.\textsuperscript{38}

In addition, another turn toward barebacking was the resistance against social norms, and specifically, the dominant sexual health discourses. Gay men feel that their sex lives have become completely disciplined.\textsuperscript{39} Through barebacking, they are resisting the social health forces and the behavioral norms that public health seeks to impose.\textsuperscript{40} Their reaction to the absolutist HIV prevention messages is subversion to its hegemony.\textsuperscript{41} Here, barebacking gains its momentum in resisting sexual health discourses and the disciplining that such discourses try to produce upon the gay male body.

Furthermore, barebackers also want to find relief from the specter of HIV that is so pervasive throughout gay communities.\textsuperscript{42} Health, according to Tim Dean, is a precarious state that constantly needs monitoring, and “our increased knowledge about nutrition, disease, and medicine has not produced a greater sense of security but, on the contrary, a heightened
sense of risk." Barebackers believe that living in this state of terror of getting HIV is more unhealthy than just engaging in risking sex, and if one possibly gets HIV, he has escaped the omnipresent threat of this disease. For barebackers, and definitely for bug chasers, there becomes a relief in contracting HIV, as the fear of infection that inhibited one’s behavior is gone, and the threat of HIV has no power over one’s life anymore. In having nothing to lose in engaging in unprotected sex anymore, barebackers, and especially those who have a positive serostatus, feel that they have (re)gained control over their sex lives and from HIV that has dominated their sexual relations for so long.

This engagement in risky sexual behavior has also become a form of eroticism and a new form of intimacy for barebackers. As Dave Holmes and colleagues state, “the risk [limit] experience offers an escape to a sensual universe of emotional intensity and self-determination.” Barebackers enjoy the increase feelings of intimacy of engaging in “natural” sex, and they find a sense of thrill and eroticism in engaging in risky behavior and possibly contracting the virus. In eroticizing risky behavior and even a deadly virus, barebackers, and specifically bug chasers, find pleasure in transvaluing the norms of society. However, this risky behavior creates freedom in giving intimate pleasure and in meeting other more important needs (emotional, psychological) that could be seen as more valuable than physical health. Ultimately, barebackers are seeking something more when engaging in risky sex, and those things are “connectedness, the abandonment of responsibilities, feelings of completion regarding sexual intercourse, and finally, the naturalness of the sex act.” Barebackers believe that the benefits from engaging in risky sex—that of pleasure and intimacy—outweighs the threats of HIV and sexual health.

For barebackers, engaging in risky behavior and possibly contracting HIV allows for new modes of being to arise. By exploring one’s uninhibited natural feelings, barebackers find a sense of freedom and empowerment in their sexual practices outside of the threat of HIV. In inventing new sexual practices, barebackers are also building new relational forms, where sharing HIV can be seen as building new alliances and kinships. As Dean asks, “What would it mean for a young gay man today to be able to trace his virus back to, say, Michel Foucault? By thinking in genealogical terms, we start to appreciate how HIV can become a basis of authority and pride rather than of merely stigma and shame.” Barebacking reclaims gay sex as sexuality and relegates HIV concerns to secondary status. In doing this, alternative modalities of sexualities emerge, fostering new identities, behaviors, and, ultimately, kinships and communities.

This chapter will expand on these ideas regarding barebacking, situating the discourse around barebacking within this HIV/AIDS context.
As Sharif Mowlabocus points out, this historical context is crucial in understanding barebacking as a new (sexual) modality and act within this public health and HIV/AIDS environment. I draw on the discourses around barebacking from an online forum to see how these modalities are being discussed and presented. First, I situate this discussion within a queer theoretical framework around space and counterpublics to locate barebacking as a potential queer act. From there, I move briefly to my methods and the importance of Internet research. I then present my major findings around being a “slut” and getting “bred” with “charged” loads. I conclude with a discussion of these discourses as potential queer utopian practices.

### Queer(ing) Space

Queer theory takes as its axiom that sex is always political, and, therefore, it situates sexuality as its analytical foundation to critique heteronormative discourses and structures within society. Sexuality is seen as a product of power, and heteronormativity constructs heterosexuality as the norm within these systems of power. Queer theory attempts to challenge dominant heteronormative institutions in society, and in that, queerness is constructed as the site to resist these (hetero)norms. Queer theory studies how identities are produced in society, in hopes of subverting these (hetero)norms through the subject.

One theoretical undertaking of queer theory is queer space and the public/private dichotomy. In her seminal work on the charmed circle, Gayle Rubin argues that sexuality is politically divided between normal and abnormal forms. Within this circle, sex in private is revered as natural, where sex in public is pushed to the outer limits, and, therefore, it is seen as damned or unnatural. For Rubin, sexuality in the private sphere is intricately tied with monogamy, reproduction, marriage, and heterosexuality, making the privatization of sexuality crucial for the maintenance of heteronormativity.

Within this new era of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) rights, heteronormativity has also produced homonormativity. Under neoliberalism’s call for privacy and individual rights, Lisa Duggan argues that homonormativity “does not contest dominant heteronormative assumptions and institutions but upholds and sustains them.” In not disrupting dominant heteronormative ideologies, homonormative LGBT individuals assert their status to citizenship through claiming their rights to the family and reproduction—they just want to be like their heterosexual counterparts (i.e., monogamy, marriage, and children).

Queer spaces though are counterpublics in direct opposition to hetero- and homonormative constructs—the family, heterosexuality, and
Lee Edelman believes these counterpublics should be antirelational and refuse to engage in politics; they instead should just find pure jouissance in the present. However, queer counterpublics do not have to be antirelational or about the “here and now.” They can actually imagine different futures outside of the hetero- and homonormative institutional arrangements of society, but they are shaped by and shape the publics in which they are in opposition. Queerness though and its counterpublics are in and of itself about the future—a utopia—where quotidian performative acts in the present, which rely on ephemeral traces of the past, can potentially produce hope for an antinormative future. Situating sex(uality) as political and queer spaces as relational counterpublics, I examine discourses around sex acts within an online space as a place that has these queer potentials.

It should be noted, however, that one intriguing critique of online spaces and their subversiveness is that these spaces may reify the privatization of (nonnormative) sexualities. In the past, many sexually “deviant” men would seek sexual encounters in tearooms, theaters, parks, and other public spaces. Nonnormative sexualities were being enacted in the public sphere, where a variety of men could have sex with other men rather anonymously and without commitment to a relationship. However, gentrification (e.g., zoning laws and “quality of life” campaigns) led to the closing of many adult bookstores, peep shows, and other public cruising arenas, where corporations and “family friendly” places replaced these public sex spaces. With many of these public cruising spaces being destroyed, (queer) people of color and individuals who participated in public sex culture were forced out of these urban areas and pushed into the private (online) sphere.

Dean goes on to argue that cruising online reifies the privatization of sexuality through erasing the interclass and interracial contacts that were prevalent in these past urban cruising areas. Online cruising allows one to commodify others’ identities by choosing whom to interact with in these cyberspaces and through consciously picking whom to meet offline for sexual encounters. Here, Dean claims that there is no contact with a stranger; one just shops online for another person to have sex with (often, a person of one’s own race), making these “strangers” basically a sex toy. Race-based search engines on dating and hookup sites allow people to choose to only search for particular racialized people within these spaces, never having to view a person of another race if one does not desire to. The Internet may well serve to privatize nonnormative sexualities while erasing intimate cross-contact with strangers and reifying heteronormativity in the public sphere.

Through examining threads on the Bareback.com forum—“the original bareback site”—I will argue that this online space is a counterpublic.
where counternarratives to hetero- and homonormativity are being circulated. Likewise, in thinking through Rubin’s charmed circle, I will also explicate how this “outer limit” space queers discourses from the circle (e.g., “breeding”), in order to make meaning for their own practices. I will also draw from Pat Califia, Samuel Delany, and Dean to (re)think about cross-contact with the stranger who appears to be happening through the identification with the “slut” on this website. Ultimately, I will show how this space is a counterpublic where discourses around mundane acts can have queer utopian potential outside of the hetero- and homonormative regimes of the “here and now.”

Methodological Note

Like all media forums, the Internet is definitely a space where individuals are forging their identities. In cyberspace, people can examine how others construct their identities, and with the anonymity that the Internet affords, individuals can play with the construction of their own identity based on how they see themselves or how they want to be seen within a certain online space. The discourses circulated through this new media are lending to how people are conceiving of and constructing their identity categories. Although researchers may not be able to know if people are presenting their “real” sexual-self online, Jane Ward notes that the representation and discourse of one’s self can be a way of performing the real, and if these cultural constructions are always performed, then “we might view the identities claimed online as equally ‘revealing’ or ‘reliable’ sources of knowledge.”

I implemented the methodological approach of textual analysis, exploring the discourses being used on this site. As cultural meanings are encoded within language, discourse analysis allows one to examine how power is functioning within the texts of this forum’s threads. Discourse analysis enables one to understand the constructive content of texts and their relation to the meaning-making within a space and within the larger social order. If the manifestations of discourses online are likely to be indicative of offline reality, then analyzing these discourses can reveal not only meaning within this cyberspace but also meaning within the larger bareback culture. Utilizing textual and discourse analysis can provide illuminating insights about this space and its relation to queerness and utopia.

In September of 2012, I analyzed the first 150 out of 297 threads (50.5 percent) in the specific “Bareback Community Forum.” I perused the entire threads, trying to elicit the embedded meanings within these extant texts. I followed a grounded theory approach to coding, where my codes were reflective of the data as close as possible, while also
examining the action that was emerging within this forum. Through this approach, I allowed the data to speak for itself, while minimizing my own preconceived notions of the data or this community. All in all, several themes clearly emerged within this barebacking forum that are discussed and analyzed below.

It must be noted that there are limitations to this research method, which future lines of inquiry around barebacking should explore. As this project is an analysis of discourses within a forum, one does not know how these discourses are being enacted in one’s own offline encounters. Likewise, one does not know the actual age, race, gender, and other social categories of the forum users; one can just analyze how these posters present their online selves. Nonetheless, the Bareback.com forums do have sections for offline personal encounters, where one can find another barebacker in his country, state, and/or city. The presence of this offline encounter portion of the forum does suggest that these men are seeking to engage in offline barebacking behaviors. Future research should seek to interview these men in order to see if they are actually enacting these behaviors offline, and how these men are taking up these online discourses within their everyday (sexual) lives. Despite these limitations though, a discourse around barebacking is happening online, in which many barebackers are partaking in—either by reading the posts or commenting themselves. As counterpublic discourses are important to study in order to realize alternative modes of being outside of hegemonic structures, these discourses can illuminate queer potentialities outside of the hetero- and homonormative constraints of the here and now.

**Positively Charged**

I’m a bugchaser and I am turned on by taking charged loads but I’m not having any luck to get HIV poz guys to knock me up any ideas.

The first interesting theme found within this forum is the attraction toward HIV positive men. Many men on this forum were actively seeking to be “bred” (a theme taken up later) by men with a positive serostatus; they were seeking “poz” loads. Some men desired conversion through being “bred,” while others were just attracted to the idea of taking these “charged” loads. A couple of examples need to be presented here.

Im a fuckin neg bareback btm guy and i always actively seek and look for guys who are hiv poz... Id really love to get my ass fucked by a fullblown dude with aids... i so fuckin want to test poz.

Older bottom in southern california looking for small group of three to five guys to work with me and make it happen, [...] all are welcome to plant their charged load in me.
Here, one begins to see a discourse around positive loads emerging within this space. The notion of these loads being “charged” is intriguing itself and its explanation can be seen as twofold. Clearly, “charged” is a reference to protons, a subatomic particle with a positive electric charge, or here, a load that is HIV positive. However, according to Merriam-Webster Dictionary, “charged” means “capable of arousing strong emotion; exciting.” This load is thus positive, but this positivity is also exciting and arousing strong emotions. Other examples further explicate this point:

**GO FOR IT . . . erotic and hot. Something very intimate about a conversation**

Hay i dont disagree i think you should take the poz loads next weekend im going to take as much poz loads i can take a day for two weeks because i want to be infected and be hiv poz and the others on here dont know how to take a risk and get poz loads it hot and so erotic to take poz loads good luck and i hope you are hiv poz soon.

“Charged” loads become eroticized and desirable within this space. Men find it intimate to take these loads, and they experience a sense of camaraderie with the men whose loads they are taking. This discourse around the excitement and eroticism of HIV positive loads challenges the larger hetero- and homonormative discourses of the current time. These men are not attempting to actualize the proper gay citizen, but rather, they are completely challenging this discourse. They do not view safe sex and HIV negativity as the way to achieve respectability. Instead, they find excitement away from these discourses. In not disciplining their bodies, these men seek “poz” loads and the excitement that comes from taking these loads. One last example explicates this point:

I really dislike condoms. They taste terrible and are uncomfortable to feel in my ass. I can tell when a guy wears one. I can’t get as excited. Plus there is something exciting, as stupid as it sounds, about sharing your poz loads. Its like saying we are in this together, I know, I understand.

HIV and its discourse become disrupted in these accounts. HIV positivity becomes exciting and erotic, dislodged from its larger stigmatization. This disruption challenges the larger (homophobic) discourses around getting HIV/AIDS, and the disciplining effects this regime has had on gay males. Foucault argues that power and discipline now function through controlling people’s time, space, and bodies. For Foucault, “discipline produces subjected and practised bodies,” and through exercise, bodies are repetitively working toward progress. Society measures and examines individuals and their lives in order to rank them according to the norms of a society. Individuals constantly believe that they are
under surveillance and are being measured against these normalizing societal judgments. Through the power of normalizing judgments and the fear of surveillance, power works to discipline people’s lives and their bodies in order to make them conform to hegemonic societies’ ways of being, which, in turn, maximizes societies’ own profit. Homonormative discourses tell gay men to be monogamous and to be HIV negative in order to be the “proper” citizen, who will live a long life and produce goods for the capitalistic society. Barebackers appear though to not be self-disciplining their bodies from contracting HIV, but rather, they are seeking the virus. An analysis of Clifford Geertz’s concept of deep play may further help one to disentangle how barebackers are challenging the (self-)disciplining mechanisms of society.

For barebackers, I argue, “charged” loads serve much the same purpose as the “cock” and cockfighting do for the Balinese in Geertz’s concept of deep play. For Geertz (and borrowing from Jeremy Bentham), deep play is engaging in an action “in which the stakes are so high that it is...irrational for men to engage in it at all.” Through deep play, participants search for pleasure, will actually yield a net pain collectively, constructing those who engage in deep play to be irrational and immoral. However, Geertz illuminates how engaging in deep play is about producing meaningfulness about human existence, which is greater than any other loss that may occur while playing the game. Through risk, loss, and pleasure, deep play is “saying something of something” about the everyday human experience and the subjectivities of those involved in playing the game.

For this matter, to construct barebackers as just irrational actors is not a fruitful analysis of their discourse and behavior. Barebackers are clearly engaging in deep play. The stakes of getting HIV are extremely high, especially for those seeking conversion. However, what meaningful discourses about the human experience are being produced through this deep play? How are barebacking discourses saying something of something? This excitement over the “charged” loads serves several deep play purposes.

First, the “charged” load seeks to redefine HIV—to offer a counter-discourse within this counterpublic. As Foucault stated, discourses are disciplining effects of power; however, they offer points of resistance as well. The public health discourse that has constructed safe sex as rational, and in turn, people with HIV as irrational actors, creates a stigmatization around HIV positivity. In this discourse, HIV represents death. Here, though, HIV is not about death, but about excitement—about getting “charged.” HIV becomes a new source of life and arousal for these barebackers. In redefining HIV positivity as positive, barebackers on this forum disrupt the larger phobic discourses around being HIV positive, and instead offer the virus a new life. For barebackers, they refuse
to discipline their bodies to be “docile”\textsuperscript{107} to homonormative demands of the valuation of HIV negativity, and through this deep play, they offer an alternative mode of being in one’s everyday life, which is outside of public health’s demands for safe-sex practices and its link of HIV positive serostatus to death.

Accordingly, this notion of the loads being positive also challenges the larger discourse of HIV positivity or negativity as an identity. As Muñoz shows, the binary created between HIV positive and negative identities, and the discourse for men to “come out” as one or the other, often reifies the stigmatization of people living with HIV.\textsuperscript{108} On this site though, HIV positivity is not located within an identity but within the load. In engaging in this deep play of barebacking, discourses reshift to push one to think about HIV as something biological, and not as part of an individual’s sense of self. It does not view HIV positive men as irrational or reckless actors for participating in this act where the stakes are high, because HIV positivity is not a part of one’s core being. The virus is located just in the load, not in the person.

Likewise, this arousal of excitement seems to elicit an affective, excessive force. Gauthier and Forsyth showed that the act of risk taking was often eroticized for barebackers,\textsuperscript{109} but here it is not the risk taking so much, but the “charged” load itself that is exciting. These men find something “very intimate” about taking loads and “can’t get as excited” when using condoms. The “charge” these men feel from partaking in the deep play of taking “poz” loads offers affective forces “beyond the painful barriers of the AIDS pandemic.”\textsuperscript{110} Discussions of HIV/AIDS are prevalent within these discourses; however, the painful barriers are washed away by this new force of excitement and arousal of “charged” loads. The fear of disease and death are eclipsed by “being turned on by” the “erotic and hot” and “exciting” “charged” loads. These affective feelings move these men beyond the pain of the pandemic to feelings of excitement—to being (re)“charged” by “poz” loads. Therefore, if men can move beyond the barriers of this time by reexamining what HIV positivity may mean, new forms of intimacy and excitement through engaging in these notions of deep play seem to be able to emerge. These meanings that emerge are outside of the (self-)disciplining demands from public health and homonormative discourses, and they offer a more humane understanding of one’s existence.

The potentiality of “charged” loads and their deep play meanings are evident. This counterdiscourse and the meanings produced through partaking in this deep play challenges the larger disciplining public health homonormative discourses around being a “proper” gay citizen. It sees excitement in HIV positivity that is beyond the barriers, which the HIV pandemic has instilled in most gay men’s lives. An affective force of intimacy and excitement comes to the forefront, where gay men can enjoy
having sex again and feel the energies of this relational contact. It also challenges the disciplining mechanisms of adopting a HIV status as an identity by relocating HIV within the load itself. This deep play of taking “charged” loads begins to offer potential new ways of thinking about HIV, sex, nonidentities, and one’s own existence outside of the larger hetero- and homonormative discourses, especially those discourses around public health and the HIV/AIDS pandemic.

The Slut and the Stranger

At minimum (even if you can’t find ANYTHING else) you can always appreciate at least a penis and a pulse. But then again I am just a hooker.

Another prevalent theme within this forum was the identity of the “slut.” Many men on here identified as being a “slut” and reaffirmed the concept away from its own stigmatizing label. Some examples are:

I have an inner slut that is longing to get out. My ass is tighter and more fuckable than it has ever been.

love bareback for long time, but not dare to do much

but bareback really turn me on, i guess i step by step to be a real bareback slut.

Make me a POZ’d slut. Virgin ass for the wanting.

Here, users implement the word “slut” as a positive identity. They see being a “slut” as part of barebacking and something that reaffirms their sex lives. This “slut” discourse is outside of the larger homonormative discourse of monogamy and marriage, and it challenges the mainstream LGBT push for “respectability.” As Dean noted, in this desexualizing of gayness within the mainstream institutionalized LGBT movement, “You could feel better about being gay as long as you felt worse about being a slut.” Homonormativity requires that the gay subject uphold the heteronormative values of society, which forces the gay subject into desexualization. Gay men should be monogamous and keep their sexuality in the private sphere (i.e., the home). The “slut” in this forum though is a positive identity outside of homonormativity’s grasp that seeks to disrupt these larger discourses around “respectable” (gay) sexuality by bringing sex and sexuality back to one’s identity, behaviors, and the public sphere.

Interestingly though, this notion of being a “slut” also appears to break down social barriers and allows for a renewed contact with the stranger:

BB vers/btm here—when i’m feeling the whore-bitch in heat any and all are welcum!
I am a real bareback slut: I take every cock in my mouth and butthole, often during a session a lot of them. Size doesn’t matter.

Being a bareback “slut” means “all are welcum” and “I take every cock.” There is no explicit desire for a certain body size, race, age, or other social categories. If one has a dick, the “slut” wants his load. This point is further shown by this post:

Total pig bottom here, when I am at the baths I am there to get fucked and bred by as many men as I can, I take on all CUMMERS, thats what I am there for, if I wanted to be picky I would go to the bars, and play the game.

A shift happens, where barebacking “sluts” just want penises and loads. “Sluts” love loads; it does not matter who one is or what one looks like. A transcendence of social categories happens in this space, where sex and genitals are more important than social constructs around identities. Similar to the linking of HIV to the load and not to a person’s identity, all other social identities appear to be nonexistent or extraneous for the “slut.” The “slut” wants penises; nothing else matters.

In line with this breakdown of the “slut” and the stranger, Califia felt that whoring (and for her, prostituting) could allow multiple contact with strangers, where feelings of the erotic, compassion, and excitement could be explored. Yet, through the gentrification of Times Square, Delany saw the cross-contact (interclass and interrace) among strangers who publicly cruised for sex as being demolished. Taking from Delany, Dean believes that cruising online has furthered the privatization of sexuality, and it has commodified individuals. People go online and can just choose who they want to have sex with, thus diminishing even further this cross-contact among strangers that was happening in public sex places. In line with Dean, Patrick Wilson and colleagues did find race-based sexual stereotyping among barebackers. In their study, Wilson and his team interviewed a racially diverse group of barebackers, and through their interviews, they discovered that racial stereotypes about nonwhite barebackers were commonplace for both white men and men of color.

However, these studies theorize and examine men who actively select other men based on these racialized sexual stereotypes, and there is no mention of a “slut” discourse or men who take every cock within these scholarly works. The “slut” on Bareback.com is not using race-based search engines to find particular individuals, nor are they really discussing social categories. They are addressing “any and all” to have sex with. I argue then that the “slut” discourse prevailing within the Bareback.com forum represents a (re)emergence of contact with the stranger, outside of commodified and racialized sexual stereotypes. As a caveat, I do
not suggest that the commodification of people of color is not happening among certain barebackers or that race-based sexual stereotypes are not rampant. Rather, through this claiming of being a “slut,” the commodification and stereotyping of people of color is nonexistent within these particular forums.

There is a desire for penises and cum, but these are devoid of any social identities. “Sluts” are people who accept all penises, they “take on all cummers, that’s what I am there for.” By being a “slut,” one is potentially bringing back this cross-contact with the stranger or the “other.” As Dean noted himself, impersonal intimacy can involve exposure to the other, where one is vulnerable and must trust the stranger whom one is having sex with. The “slut” on this site appears to be seeking these impersonal intimacies and exposure to the other by seeking “to get fucked and bred by as many men as I can.” For queers of color, this embracement of a “slut” discourse could mean potentially different things. White “sluts” are not commodifying queers of color; yet, queers of color become sexually viable only outside of race-based sexual stereotypes within a community that is predicated on having sex without a condom. Although I do not think that queers of color should just seek “sluts” to have sex with in order to not be stereotyped, I do hope through this examination of the “slut” discourse that other modes of sexualities can be engendered that also eclipse race and other social categories within the sexual encounters.

Furthermore, while this discourse is happening online (a space that is often accessed in private), I also argue that this forum is not about the privatization of sexuality. First, more people can access these forums and partake in these discourses who might not have been able to migrate to urban areas, where public cruising had been most noted. The “slut” then can potentially be talking with and possibly meet people from rural and suburban areas as well. Likewise, these discourses online do not exist in a cyberspace vacuum. People often experiment with sexualities and desires online that subsequently affect their offline identities and behaviors. With the presence of Bareback.com forums specifically tailored to meeting men offline, one might assume that these online discourses are truly affecting one’s offline identities and behaviors. If so, this “slut” discourse may have potential effects for offline cross-contact with strangers, where the internal contact of body parts and fluids appear to be making the external (e.g., race, age, and body size) of an individual irrelevant.

The “slut” and the stranger serve two potentialities. Embracing the “slut” challenges the “tyranny of the homonormative.” It is a strange ideology outside of demanding rights, which troubles the constitution of a “respectable” gay citizen. It refuses to assimilate, refuses to
be monogamous, refuses to be desexualized. It embraces the outer limits of Rubin’s charmed circle, forcing one to (re)imagine the political and discursive power of those in the sexual peripheries. The potentiality outside of the hetero- and homonormative structures and discourses of society are prevalent within this “slut” identification.

Here, the potentiality of the “slut” is its embrace of a positive marginal identity. Positive marginality—choosing to embrace one’s marginal identity—allows those in marginal positions to see the positive value of their identity. In choosing one’s identity, one can seek to define part of the identity for one’s self, and realize that these marginal identities are part of larger social structures, not one’s own personal shortcomings.

There is risk involved in choosing a positive marginal identity, as one gives up privileges and opportunities that could be afforded to someone if one chose not to embrace the marginal identity. For example, in choosing not to give into homonormative demands of monogamy, the “slut” gives up the privileges associated with assimilating and the rights that monogamy and marriage afford to individuals. Positive marginality, though, allows one to live outside of the bounds of preinscribed social categories. By taking on a “slut” identity, barebackers assign their own meaning to this category, where they refuse the demands of gay respectability and break down borders between strangers. Positive marginal identity works to destabilize the oppressive structures of society and it draws attention to their fissures. It reveals how these structures are oppressive toward those in the peripheries, and it provides alternative ways to embrace these identities in order to disrupt hegemonic ideologies. The “slut,” as a positive marginal identity, calls into question gay “respectability,” the true meaning of HIV in gay men’s lives, and how these homonormative demands reinscribe social categories around race, age, and body size, which the “slut” erases.

Likewise, the online bareback “slut” identity appears to have ephemeral traces of the “sluts” who used to cruise for sex in public. The no-longer-conscious that Muñoz borrows from Bloch is evident here, where cross-contact is conjured up yet again to challenge larger sexual normative discourses. There is no desire to be selective; the “slut” wants all penises, which erases social markers, and allows for this potential cross-contact. The “slut” challenges society’s demands to end cross-contact encounters, utilizing the Internet to seek bareback sex with any and all men. Like Califia’s analysis of whoring as providing multiple contacts with strangers and Delany’s trace of public sex as a space where these cross-contacts were happening, the “slut” returns to these past times to make contact with strangers in the present. The “slut” whores with all, and like those cruising for public sex in the past, the “slut” wants penises from whomever.
Breeding to Freedom

After a while poz guys seemed sexier to me. Its a mind game. It felt so free and uncomplicated. Your poz, I’m poz skip the condoms and lets trade loads.

The last topic that I will explore are (notions around) “breeding” and explanations for why men on Bareback.com want to be “bred.” The larger societal discourse around being “bred” is clearly heteronormative and about (re)producing for the future—something that Edelman believes queers should refuse to do. However, on this site, being “bred” is dislodged from its heteronormative reproduction imperative. Examples include

Well . . . I am not that experienced either, but I was bred about 3 times deep inside and just thinking about makes me horny man.
As a long time bottom . . . it feels so awesome to get bred.
Being bred is an amazing experience that I cannot get enough of it.
Oh the feeling of getting bred is incredible!

Getting “bred” is clearly not about heteronormative or biological reproduction. It is about men taking loads from other men. This “breeding” is “amazing,” “awesome,” “incredible,” and “makes me horny man.” In revisiting Rubin’s charmed circle, this discourse by barebackers truly complicates “normal” versus “abnormal” sex. As being nonprocreative, barebackers are in the outer limits; however, they borrow from the charmed circle’s heterosexual, procreative discourses in order to constitute their own understandings of taking another man’s load. In this counterdiscourse, barebackers use again discourses as points of resistance to the disciplining affects of homonormativity in order for them to make sense of their own “unnatural” behaviors. Barebackers are “breeding,” but for their own purposes.

In thinking through “breeding,” one should not see this act as just about excitement or death. For instance, Edelman argues that queers should not engage in “reproductive futurism,” and, therefore, they should refuse to “breed” and produce offspring. Queers should embody the death drive, and just have sex, refusing to produce for the future of society. However, being “bred” on this site is not about death or pure jouissance, especially when they are being “bred” by “poz” men:

Love to be breed by Hot poz men, but all stiff boners are accepted. Love to go to slammers and be a fucking whore.

Notions of being “bred” are about taking (positive) loads. In line with a great deal of the literature though getting positively “bred” is about
finding freedom. One man ponders the freedom he might experience if he contracts HIV:

I am getting tired of the fear, the worry and the lack of feeling raw. So far I am still HIV negative. The stress of it all just makes me wanna just say fuck it and find a huge hot top to unload multiple charged loads over a few days and hopefully be done with it.

While another man who has now contracted HIV feels that he can truly live out his ultimate fantasies since he has contracted the virus:

After years of dodging the bullet, I finally ended up with HIV a few months ago. […]

But, I can’t stop thinking and dreaming of my ultimate fantasy which is to be blind folded and gang banged by as many guys as possible (yeah, just like the TIM video!). I can’t get it out of my mind since the big risk that has always kept me from doing it, getting HIV, isn’t a factor for me. I know there are some other risks, but they seem pretty minor in comparison, and the fantasy is so incredibly hot!.

I argue, in line with Rubin, that sex is always political, and, therefore, these discourses and the barebacking counterpublic can never be read as embodying the death drive of just having sex in the “here and now” for pleasure. Gauthier and Forsyth found that some barebackers do engage in barebacking for political purposes; however, the political purposes of this online forum and its users are unknown. Nonetheless, discourses about sex and freedom are always political, regardless of an individual’s intent, because these discourses take place within a larger heteronormative society, and they challenge hegemonic modes of disciplined bodies. A transformation definitely takes place within the discourses on this forum. As positive loads are exchanged within their engagement of deep play, barebackers produce psychological and emotional freedom. Being “tired of the fear” and “stress,” barebackers play deeply in order to find freedom from the “mind game.” No longer living with fear and anxiety, barebackers (whether positive or negative) have unprotected sex in order to escape from being “caught within a psychological epidemic.” They argue against the disciplining of public health and homonormative discourses. They seek to find new life and freedoms outside of the HIV/AIDS pandemic and safe-sex practices. They “refuse to go quietly into the ghetto of desexualized quarantine.”

Likewise, this discourse relies on the past when sex was (psychologically) free from the worries of the HIV/AIDS pandemic. With sex being “uncomplicated” before HIV, barebackers’ discourses trouble the linearity of straight time, where sex acts and behaviors have not progressed,
but are viewed as being more damaging under this pandemic and the response of the heteronormative public health to it. Muñoz argues that the past is performative, that it does things to us in the present. These men—many of whom probably did not even live before the pandemic—imagine a freer sexual past of gay men whom they seek to find for themselves in the present. Barebacking becomes an autonomous place for these men to breathe in the “here and now” outside of the worry and fear of HIV/AIDS.

In a twist of irony, public health, which is supposed to help citizens live better lives, gets eclipsed by mental and emotional health. Trading in on valuing longevity (and hence, being productive and proper citizens for capitalism), barebackers value psychological and emotional health more. “Breeding,” and especially getting “bred” by “poz” loads, does (re)produce a new person—a person who is free from the psychological and emotional scars of the pandemic. This new person finds a new life (a new “charge”) through this form of “breeding” (and dare I say reproduction?). Thinking back to Geertz’s deep play again, the engagement in breeding provides a greater meaning for (gay) human existence; new emotional feelings of excitement, eroticism, and emotional connection are found within these acts, where new freedoms are also obtained. “Breeding” allows for other values outside of public health to be centered, where barebackers may not be irrational for engaging in this “irrational” act, but rather new meanings of life and their own sense of rationality are produced through this act of deep play. Going against public health’s imperatives of being healthy for one’s own personal good and for the greater good of capitalistic society’s call for productive members, barebackers enact alternative behaviors outside of the deficit HIV/AIDS public health discourses. They refuse to self-discipline themselves for the capitalistic, heteronormative society, and they offer alternative discourses and modalities, which challenge being “docile” bodies.

Likewise, Dean argues that having sex without condoms is “sex at its most mundane.” If this fact is the case, one can begin to see the potentiality of the quotidian practice of barebacking. In having “raw” or “natural” sex, barebackers engage in the sex act that most people have engaged in everyday for centuries, and which everyone in society is a product from (and that “reproductive futurism” calls for)—unprotected sex. However, this quotidian act has alternative meaning, especially when partaking in the deep play of contracting a virus in this time of HIV/AIDS. This quotidian practice challenges heteronormative notions of “breeding,” by taking loads in order to find freedom, not children. It is within this quotidian practice of bareback sex within a time of HIV/AIDS that the larger discourse and structures of society are challenged. Being “bred” generates similar affective forces as “charged” loads, while
also allowing these men to experience (psychology and emotional) freedom. These men find new meanings for life that help one imagine new acts and modalities in the “then and there,” which are outside of the psychologically damaging HIV/AIDS pandemic. The sex in the future will never be like it was before the pandemic but ephemeral traces of enjoying sex without the psychological and emotional HIV/AIDS barriers can be carried forward. This mundane, “raw” sex is a practice that has queer utopian potentialities.

In being free from the “here and now” of heteronormativity, homonormativity, and HIV/AIDS discursive regimes, barebackers make life more bearable in the present, and in turn, these practices create the potential for a better tomorrow. Barebacking is a quotidian act and as an erotic relation it “free[s] [individuals] from the cold skeleton hands of rational orders, just as completely as from the banality of everyday routine.” Outside of the rationality of public health, barebackers find new creative practices that conjure up affective forces that can point toward utopian practices. By reimagining “breeding” and through thinking back to sex before the HIV/AIDS pandemic, barebackers engage in the mundane, yet deep play, act of unprotected sex in order to find emotional and psychological freedom, here, in the present.

**The Queer Utopian Potentiality of Barebacking**

Could it be possible, then, to perceive of barebackers as human beings desperate to live a life outside the violence of order, and determined to live fully (although excessively)? Through the **limit experience** [emphasis theirs] of unsafe anal sex with anonymous partners of unknown (HIV) serological status, barebackers are engaged in a revolution against the constraints of everyday life.

The above quote from Holmes and colleagues definitely begins to capture the queer potentialities that I located within this online barebacking forum. The barebackers on this site were engaging in discourses about acts and behaviors that were outside of the violent discursive regimes and that produced excessive feelings. In engaging in the mundane act of having “raw” sex, barebackers are revolting against the everyday. In the end, I do not argue for or against barebacking; however, there are discourses about barebacking that clearly offer glimpses of potentiality for a queer utopia. In these discourses, there is a great deal that queer scholars can learn about the power of this counterpublic in challenging hegemonic hetero- and homonormative discourses.

The discourse around “charged” loads offers potentialities beyond the public health HIV/AIDS discourse and the ensuing stigmatization of people living with HIV. On this forum, HIV positivity gets dislodged
from an identity-based disease to being located within the load. This load also offers the affective forces of excitement and arousal outside of the painful barriers of the HIV/AIDS pandemic, which Muñoz argues is desperately needed in order to challenge homonormative regimes in the “here and now.” In shifting the discourse away from the disciplining mechanisms of HIV as being an identity and as part of someone who is reckless and irrational, the deep play of barebacking gives a new breath of life in the meaning and act of taking “poz” loads. This counterdiscourse can help us all to see alternative ways of thinking about HIV positivity outside of a stigmatizing and identity-based lens, and it allows us to explore alternative potentialities in talking about the virus. In locating the virus back within the semen, barebackers participate in a practice that is outside of the hetero- and homonormative public health demands of this time.

Likewise, discourses around being a “slut” and the potential of this identity in making cross-contacts with strangers were also prevalent on this forum. The “slut” discourse challenges larger homonormative regimes of monogamy, where these men on Bareback.com are actually looking to sleep with anyone with “a penis and a pulse.” The embrace of this positive marginal identity disrupts notions of gay “respectability,” and it draws attention to how homonormativity marginalizes other queer individuals. Furthermore, this “slut” discourse also erases social categories as these men do not have any preferences for body size, race, age, and so forth. In harking back to Califia, Delany, and Dean, it appears that this space allows for the potential contact with the “other.” Identities are not commodified within this specific online space; “sluts” will take any load. Through this embrace of the “slut,” there is queer potential to not only subvert homonormativity but to also allow for contacts between and across other social categories and identities. Racialized discourses are nonexistent within the “slut” discourse, where queers of color could be free from their stereotypes and fetishization within this desire for anatomy.

“Breeding” and finding freedom through barebacking were also discourses that offer queer potentiality. Being “bred” for the men on this site was not about producing children but about producing feelings of freedom. These men strategically use a heteronormative term and yet challenge it by not enacting the “proper” ways of “breeding.” Accordingly, engaging in this quotidian act of “breeding,” these barebackers imagine a past before HIV/AIDS in order to find emotional and psychological freedom in the present. They literally draw on the “then” in order to construct a “there” that is outside of public health and homonormative discourses. The no-longer-conscious that Muñoz saw emerging in queer potentialities is clearly present in this merging of
the past in hopes of a better future.\textsuperscript{146} Contrary to the ideas espoused by Edelman,\textsuperscript{147} these discourses around “breeding” begin to show that barebacking may not be about death, but actually may be about finding life outside of disciplining, hegemonic norms. They can rediscover the emotional and intimate excitement of sex without worrying about the virus any longer. Here, queer potentialities for a utopia outside of the pandemic is uncovered.

To conclude, there are queer potentiality discourses and practices happening among barebackers on this website, which cannot be ignored. In dislodging HIV from identity and in valuing HIV positivity, barebackers challenge larger stigmatizing discourses around the virus. In embracing the “slut” identity, barebackers disrupt homonormative discourses around gay respectability while also building relations with the stranger. Through “breeding,” barebackers push one to see a new life outside of the fear that the pandemic has instilled in gay men’s lives. All of these discourses and practices can push us to see utopian visions outside of hetero- and homonormative hegemonic discourses and practices of the “here and now.” Again, in heeding Muñoz’s call to find queer potentialities outside of heteronormativity and the constraints of HIV/AIDS,\textsuperscript{148} I believe that some of this potentiality can be located in the barebacking discourses around taking “charged” loads, being a “slut,” and “breeding” to find psychological and emotional freedom. It is here that I call on queer scholars to truly imagine what type of utopias we can conjure up through these barebacking discourses.

**Glossary**

*Barebacking* refers to the intentional sex act of not using condoms.

*Bottom* refers to taking the sexually penetrated position during intercourse.

*Breeding* refers to depositing one’s semen in another man’s anus.

*Bug chasing* refers to the practice of barebacking in order to contract HIV.

*Charged* refers to one’s semen carrying the HIV positive virus.

*Conversion* refers to a HIV negative person becoming HIV positive.

*Cum* refers to semen.

*Cum swapping* refers to the exchange of semen between two or more partners.

*Load* refers to semen.

*Pig* refers to an alternative way of identifying as a slut.

*Poz* refers to one being HIV positive or one’s semen being HIV positive.
Raw refers to having sex without a condom.

Slut refers to having sex with as many men as possible and having them ejaculate inside.

Top refers to taking the sexually penetrator position during intercourse.

Notes

1. See Glossary for a list of barebacking colloquial terms and their definitions.
12. Ibid., 82.
16. Even today, public health still basically links HIV infection to men who have sex with men (MSM), stigmatizing unprotected homosexual sex as a public health threat, but unprotected heterosexual sex, especially within marriage despite the fact that infidelity can occur, as an unthreatening norm. See, for instance, Douglas Crimp, “How to Have Promiscuity in an Epidemic,” AIDS: Cultural Analysis/Cultural Activism 43 (1987): 237–271; DeAnn K. Gauthier and Craig J. Forsyth, “Bareback Sex,


27. Ibid., 285–289.


30. Ibid., 584.


39. Dean, *Unlimited Intimacy*, 10–11


42. Dean, *Unlimited Intimacy*, 140.
43. Ibid., 62.
46. Dean, *Unlimited Intimacy*, 73.
47. Holmes, O’Byrne, and Gastaldo, “Raw Sex,” 320.
49. Gonzalez, “Tracking the Bugchaser,” 86.
51. Holmes, O’Byrne, and Gastaldo, “Raw Sex,” 324.
53. Holmes, O’Byrne, and Gastaldo, “Raw Sex,” 324.
56. Ibid., 89.
57. Ibid., 89.
64. Ibid., 13.
65. Ibid., 13.
68. Nancy Fraser coined the term counterpublic in response to Jürgen Habermas’s failure to view how private spheres are always working in relation with public spheres. For Fraser, counterpublics “parallel discursive arenas where members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counterdiscourses, which in turn permit them to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs.” In taking up Fraser, Michael Warner claims that counterpublics and the


71. See Muñoz, Cruising Utopia.

72. Ibid., 16.


74. See Muñoz, Cruising Utopia.


76. Delany, Times Square Red, Times Square Blue; Humphreys, Tearoom Trade.

77. Muñoz, Cruising Utopia, 52–54.

78. Delany, Times Square Red, Times Square Blue, 167.


81. Ibid., 194.

82. Ibid., 194.


84. This website was last accessed on September 26, 2012.


87. Gray, Out in the Country, 95.


93. All misspellings, wrong grammar, and bad punctuation are left in its original presentation.

94. Merriam-Webster.com was last accessed on September 26, 2012.


97. Ibid., 183.

98. Ibid., 184.

99. Ibid., 135–228.


101. Ibid., 15.

102. Ibid., 15.

103. Ibid., 16.

104. Ibid., 26–29.


106. See also Dean, *Unlimited Intimacy* for another look at HIV becoming a life source.

107. Foucault refers to docile bodies as those bodies that can be analyzed and studied, as well as, manipulated for the economic and political demands of the society. See Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 135–169.


113. See Delany, *Times Square Red, Times Square Blue*.


115. Patrick A. Wilson, Pamela Valera, Ana Ventuneac, Ivan Balan, Matt Rowe, and Alex Carballo-Díéguez, “Race-Based Sexual Stereotyping and Sexual Partnering among Men Who Use the Internet to Identify Other Men for Bareback Sex,” *Journal of Sex Research* 46 (2009): 399–413.

116. Wilson, Race-Based Sexual Stereotyping.”


118. See Ross, “Typing, Doing, and Being,” 342–352.

119. Although the author only analyzed the general “Bareback Community Forum,” there are forums on the website devoted to meeting men in each specific US state, as well as many countries outside of the United States. Many of these forums also appear to be active, and similar discourses within the general forum are discussed within these forums as well. An analysis of these various casual encounter forums could yield interesting results too. As my limitations stated earlier, my own project
does not “know” if these discourses are being enacted offline, though the presence of these offline encounter forms do suggest that people are engaging in these behaviors with other men in their local city, state, or country.

120. Dean, Unlimited Intimacy, 26.
126. The no-longer-conscious is the utilization of the past and the future in order to challenge the “here and now,” or that nothing exist outside of one’s current moment. See Muñoz, Cruising Utopia, 12.
127. Muñoz, Cruising Utopia, 26–32.
130. See Foucault, The History of Sexuality, 100–102.
132. Ibid.
133. For example, Carballo-Diéguez and Bauermeister, “Barebacking,” 8; Dean, Unlimited Intimacy, 28, 55, 67; Gauthier and Forsyth, “Bareback Sex, Bug Chasers, and the Gift of Death,” 93.
136. Muñoz, Cruising Utopia, 47.
140. Dean, Unlimited Intimacy, 47.
141. I am referring to Sara Ahmed, The Promise of Happiness (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 120. Here, Ahmed argues the queer struggle for a bearable life is to have these spaces in the present to breathe. Breathing can bring imaginations, possibilities, and freedom for a queer politics.
143. Holmes, O’Byrne, and Gastaldo, “Raw Sex,” 332.
144. Muñoz, Cruising Utopia.
Part III

Queer Counterpublics
Chapter 5
Performing Utopia: Queer Counterpublics and Southerners on New Ground

Sarah M. Steele

Queer social movement actors use a variety of tools and tactics to work toward change. This chapter presents empirical research on contemporary social movement actors and their creation and use of queer utopian spaces as a social movement tactic. The study focuses on Southerners on New Ground (SONG), a group of Southern regional community organizers working to build, connect, and nurture individuals in the South who believe in liberation “across all lines of race, class, abilities, age, culture, gender, and sexuality.” Since 1993, SONG has functioned as a “membership-based organization that consists of working class, people of color, immigrants, and rural LGBTQ people.” Two codirectors currently run the organization, which has an office in Atlanta, Georgia, and a strong affiliate program in Durham, North Carolina. SONG is a 501(c)3 nonprofit organization funded through membership dues (starting at a US$15 sliding scale annual membership), fundraising events, and grants from foundations. SONG describes its over 700 members as “people committed to building freedom movements rooted in southern traditions like non-violent social justice activism, storytelling, music, breaking bread, resistance, humor, performance, critical thinking, and celebration.” This unique group of individuals working for social change provides the basis for this study.

SONG utilizes a social movement strategy of intentionally creating spaces and places where members can live whole and self-determined lives. One SONG event in particular, the CampOut, exemplifies this use of space when examined through Michael Warner’s notion of “queer counterpublics.” In his book Publics and Counterpublics, Warner analyzes notions of public and private and conceptualizes “queer counterpublics.” Counterpublics are demarcated from the distinctly dominant public and...
characterized by their shared membership and discourse. Counterpublics
of sexuality and gender, or queer counterpublics, offer an alternative to
heteronormativity and an altered discourse of acceptable sexual stan-

dards. The contemporary need for queer counterpublics becomes clear
through the experiences and longing expressed by SONG members.

SONG creates counterpublic space to combat the exclusion and iso-
lation from the heteronormative public sphere. CampOuts are organized
around a policy of open attendance. Typically a call for registration is
posted and passed through networks of Southern queers calling for inter-
ested people to “join us for a weekend of SONG Kin rest, renewal, fun,
and political conversation.” It opens up space for minoritarian people,
particularly racial, gender, and sexual minorities. This building block—
what Warner calls stranger sociability—begins the event, but participants
do not stay strangers for long. People who gather for a CampOut become
part of a space where their queer sensibility creates an immediate sense
of belonging. SONG members speak to this belonging and the ways in
which it allows for the potential of transformation. From within this space,
acting out and practicing alternative modes of gender and sexual identity
formation allows participants to envision and create new ways to express
themselves and relate to others.

These spaces also offer participants the opportunity to envision a future
that is not yet here. This envisioning of a queer utopia is based in a politics
of emotion, particularly hope. In Cruising Utopia, José Esteban Muñoz
conceptualizes queerness as “essentially about the rejection of a here and
now and an insistence on potentiality or concrete possibility for another
world.” Hope is not only key to Muñoz’s argument for the potential-
ity of queerness but also an emotion at the center of SONG’s thinking
and political work. For example, one of SONG’s community organiz-
ing exercises, Studio, asks participants to envision a future not limited to
the present and provides an example of how hope plays a key role in the
spaces they create. These spaces create literal moments of queer potenti-
ality through queer performativity. They allow participants to not only
envision another world, but also live in it temporarily and carry that feel-
ing with them even after an event is over. In this way, SONG’s intentional
creation of queer space, the Campout, sustains and rejuvenates their work
toward a larger queer utopia, not yet present in their everyday lives.

SONG’s intentional creation of counterpublics and investment in
performativity of queer utopian spaces can be situated within the queer
theoretical debate of the antisocial thesis, of which Lee Edelman “makes
perhaps the most powerful and controversial recent contribution.” In his
book No Future, Edelman proposes a turn that queer theory, and perhaps
practice, should take toward embracing negativity. Edelman argues that
the homosexual is excluded from the social and the Symbolic because
homosexual relationships negate the possibility of practicing what he
calls “reproductive futurism,” or an investment in the “figural Child.”"⁹ He offers us a vision of a queer world that is a “radical challenge to the very value of the social itself,”¹⁰ where striving toward hope, fantasy, and embracing futurity are not queering our reality but locking our identities into a reality in which queers will never achieve freedom. He instead suggests that we should not “intend a new politics, a better society, a brighter tomorrow, since all of these fantasies reproduce the past, through displacement, in the form of the future.”¹¹ Instead, “what is the queerest about us, queerest within us, and queerest despite us is the willingness to insist intransitively—to insist that the future stops here.”¹² On the other, and arguably opposite side of queer theory’s antirelational debate, is most notably the work of Muñoz and his investment in concepts of queer utopia. Muñoz critiques the antisocial theory arguing, “denouncing relationality first and foremost distances queerness from what some theorists seem to think of as contamination by race, gender, or other particularities that taint the purity of sexuality as a singular trope of difference.”¹³ Muñoz pushes for “the essential need for an understanding of queerness as collectivity” and argues that queerness is in fact “primarily about futurity.”¹⁴ This chapter’s examination of SONG and their political investment in hope, utopia, and futurity serves as a practical example of queer social movement actors rejecting the antisocial thesis of queer theory and instead, engaging and organizing around notions of hope, futurity, and collectivity. SONG’s work enhances our understanding of how, particularly in our current political climate, queer political actors continue an investment in futurity. Instead of accepting the ways in which queers exist in our world or rejecting queer participation in building community, SONG actively works to create spaces and communities that fulfill their vision of a queer utopia. This creation sustains the potentiality of that future while they continue to work toward it.

**Methodology**

This research comes from a larger project that aimed to examine the state of contemporary queer activism and the practice of creating utopian space as a social movement tactic. SONG provides one example of a current queer social movement organization embracing queer futurity and creating spaces in which participants perform and envision utopia.

Due to my interest in the group, I contacted SONG and began collecting data when SONG leaders invited me to attend the 2010 United States Social Forum in Detroit, Michigan, to meet the group and observe their organizing methods. The United States Social Forum is described as “a movement building process.”¹⁵ It is not a conference in the traditional sense, but rather a “space to come up with the peoples’ solutions to the ‘economic and ecological crisis.’”¹⁶ It is part of a larger “struggle to
build a powerful multi-racial, multi-sectoral, inter-generational, diverse, inclusive, internationalist movement that transforms this country and changes history.” The goal of the forum is to support social movement building. In 2010, when I attended the forum, these groups were truly a representation of many ages, races, ethnicities, and genders. Groups and individuals from throughout the United States were working on a wide variety of social movement issues (labor, climate, sexuality, education, and health, etc.) and were remarkably diverse. As a regional organization, SONG represented queer and transgender people from the South at the Forum.

Prior to traveling, I sought and received permission from the University of Florida Institutional Review Board to conduct interviews at the Forum. The project, entitled, “Examining the Practical Manifestations of Intersectional Queer Community Organizing,” described my interview intent and included the informed consent document that I would use. While at the USSF, I participated in multiple workshops hosted or sponsored by SONG and conducted interviews onsite at the conference with members active in SONG. The group also allowed me to post a call for participants on both their website and their Facebook page to gather more participants. Overall, I conducted both personal and telephone interviews with seven SONG members, including the two current leaders of the organization. The interviews were unstructured and varied based on the participants’ answers. However, generally I asked questions about the organization’s history, personal experiences, and feelings toward SONG, and community organizing strategies. I inquired about the group’s use of space in their organizing work and whether or not the group was “queer.” All interviews lasted between 12 and 65 minutes. Most (5 of 7) of those interviewed were women of color, and all were between 21 and 30 years of age, queer-identified, with ties to the South. I was limited in the number of SONG members I could formally interview; however, the sample and my interactions reveal the racial and ethnic diversity of the group and the typical age range of active members. Taken alongside my participant observations and analysis of primary sources, these interviews illustrate how members and leaders see themselves, the organization, and the relationship between the two, in their own words. To maintain the confidentiality of participants, I have substituted pseudonyms for all participants and removed all identifying information from quoted text.

After completing all of the interviews, I was intrigued by one of SONG’s regular events, the CampOut, because it was regularly mentioned in my interviews. With the encouragement of SONG members, I registered for and attended the Fall CampOut on the Gulf Coast of Florida as a participant observer. The event consisted of approximately 15 attendees (including myself) and lasted for 3 days and 2 nights. Over
the course of three days, participants relaxed on the beach, swam in the ocean, played games, cooked food together, and talked about their personal and political lives. Generally the group was inviting and encouraging of one another’s participation.

Participants in the CampOut were made aware of my research through our personal conversations and interactions. All participants took an opportunity to inquire about each other’s lives and interests and I explained my research to each person. I made no attempts, however, to solicit information for this study. Rather, I participated/observed as any member of SONG might. The event was primarily attended by queer and Southern identified people of color but was mixed in regard to gender. Some participants identified with traditional male and female genders, while others identified as genderqueer, transgender, or fairies. Participants preferred a variety of pronouns, with some matching their gender identity and others varying. The performance of gender also varied with female identified people dressing in traditionally masculine ways and vice versa. While not all who attended formally self-identified their race, most were people of color, including being black, African American, Latina/Chicana, Asian, and mixed race. Throughout the weekend and after the event, I took notes on the overall environment, the way in which the event was coordinated, and how it felt to participate in this type of event.

I supplemented the data from my interviews and participant observation with an examination of a variety of documents published by the group, including those found on the organizational website and print documents available to all members. I also followed their online social networking media, specifically their Facebook™ site. These online sources and organization documents provided information on how the group began, the philosophies on which their organizing is built, and how they communicate with and present themselves to their members and the public.

Throughout my research I employed a feminist theoretical perspective, particularly in interviewing and participatory research. In doing so, I pay attention specifically to inequalities in gender and sexuality and strive to give voice to Southern organizers working for change. This research is a contribution to our understanding of current models of social change using mixed methods. My analysis of interview data gives readers a better understanding of the experiences of Southern queer activists and their values through the use of my respondents’ voices throughout. I have attempted to use the words and experiences of SONG’s members to articulate the group’s ideologies while consistently examining my role as a researcher and the power dynamics involved in conducting research.  

While interviews were semistructured in nature, participants were free to take the conversation where they saw fit and define themselves in
demographic categorization. My overall research philosophy fits with the history of feminist methodology. This mixed method, feminist process allowed me to identify key themes within the data including SONG’s use of queer utopian space and queer futurity as a social movement tactic.

Counterpublics as Social Movement Space

Scholars have offered a variety of ways to examine the use of space in a cultural and political context. Recently this includes the notable work of Anne Enke in Finding the Movement. Enke demonstrates the centrality of space to the analysis of social movements: movements can be shaped by space, space can shape movement participants, and conflicts are mediated through space. From this view, social movement organizations, such as SONG, create space both within a movement context and in the larger society. Ideas and strategies around space are in fact at the forefront of SONG’s political work. However, I believe the examples in this study more closely resemble the ephemeral and transformational nature of what Michael Warner calls a “counterpublic.” In Publics and Counterpublics, Michael Warner provides an analysis of public and private life and a conceptualization of “queer counterpublics” in the United States. Through the critical discussion of gender and sexuality in public and private culture, Warner examines the possibility of a world where “publicness and privacy are equally accessible to all.” This leads him to formulate the notion of “queer counterpublics” and the ways in which they differ from our traditional ideas around space. Enke’s notion of space relies heavily on the negotiation and creation of longer-lasting and even institutional spaces within social movements. While the examples I use are a part of SONG’s larger goal to create sustainable spaces on a regional and national level, I contend that the idea of a “queer counterpublic” offers a more accurate basis for understanding some of SONG’s work and their current queer political practices. Counterpublics maintain a particular relationship to space and place within queer culture and provide a better framework for the analysis of SONG’s social movement work.

A counterpublic is discursively defined by its relation to “the cultural horizon against which it marks itself off” from the dominant public domain. Participants in counterpublics are forcibly “marked off from persons or citizens in general” indicating not only a difference but also an inferior status. A counterpublic always “maintains at some level, conscious or not, an awareness of its subordinate status” because discourse within the counterpublic often conflicts with the rules of the dominant public discourse. It is “structured by alternative dispositions or protocols, making different assumptions about what can be said or what goes without saying.” In queer counterpublics, more
specifically, the cultural assumptions and discourses of heteronormativity are not present. These alternative conceptions within counter-publics are “by definition, formed by their conflict with the norms and contexts of their cultural environment.” This conflict comes in the form of discourse because publics, and counterpublics, are by definition organized by the circulation of discourse. “The discourse that constitutes it is not merely a different or alternate idiom but one that in other contexts would be regarded with hostility or with a sense of indecorousness.” The willingness to create and/or join a queer counterpublic, then, means to reject heteronormativity and the acceptable standards of public action that go along with it. While “like all publics, a counterpublic comes into being through an address to indefinite strangers . . . counterpublic discourse also addresses those strangers as being not just anybody.” This is precisely because of the conflicting discourse presented in counterpublics. Participants are marked by their participation because there is an assumption that “ordinary people would not want to be mistaken . . . for the kind of person who would participate in this kind of talk or be present in this kind of scene.”

Examining the current work of SONG, and the queer counterpublic that they create offers an example of the transformative nature of queer counterpublics. It is a practical example of the ways in which Warner’s theoretical framework manifests in contemporary queer culture. They also show the creative nature of counterpublic space particularly in terms of gender and sexuality counternormativity. As Warner comments, “what remains, then, is a need for both concrete and theoretical understandings of the conditions that currently mediate the transformative and creative work of counterpublics.” The work of SONG begins to fill that need.

The Need for Queer Counterpublics

Counterpublics, particularly queer counterpublics, are necessary for many reasons. Historically, while a public discourse suggests that it is open to everyone, a subtext of exclusion exists. As Warner notes, “not all sexualities are public or private in the same way.” Public displays of sexuality are seen as appropriate only when they follow heteronormative scripts, while alternative forms of sexuality are excluded or deemed inappropriate for the public sphere. Certain people, specific forms of expression, and certain types of expressive content are all regulated in a public. This exclusion can create “a kind of political depressiveness, a blockage in activity and optimism, a disintegration of politics towards isolation, frustration, anomie, [and] forgetfulness.” This is true to the stories told by
SONG members. The desire and even need for counterpublics becomes clear through this understanding of public exclusion.

To this end, SONG works to combat this isolation and cynicism through the creation of intentional space. Being queer in the South poses particular challenges that go hand-in-hand with exclusion from a public. SONG members regularly speak of these challenges and the need for alternatives.

Kim: I think it’s necessary in the South because generally speaking, the South is really under-resourced in terms of queer folk so there is a scarcity and a lot of isolation. This happens to queer people all around the country but it’s particularly true in the South where the religious right has such a strong hold and where real violence is being perpetuated on our bodies and our spirits on a very regular basis. We need each other and it’s hard to find each other.

Angel: One of the conditions that people talk about all the time is the heart break of what it means to break away from your family or just isolation, issues of depression in our community, the really high rate of suicide in our community and this constant thread of both heart break and heartache but also resiliency on the other side of that.33

Jesse: We just really talk about... working together almost out of need and I think that that type of organizing doesn’t come from a place so much of want, but it comes from a place of need.34

SONG brings Southern queers together by creating what I identify as a queer counterpublic that is open to a certain type of stranger and that offers a space, and sometimes a place, for developing an alternate form of citizenry, one that the SONG members above explain as something they “need.” While it might be argued that many parts of SONG’s work contribute to creating this counterpublic, I focus particularly on a gathering that is part of this counterpublic: the CampOut.

The CampOut as Queer Counterpublic

According to Warner, while some counterpublics happen by chance, others are intentionally created for their ability to alter power and transform individuals. The work of SONG and the space created at a CampOut is an example of an intentional creation of space. CampOuts are seasonal gatherings of queer people from across the South. While members of SONG typically coordinate CampOuts, they are open to anyone interested in registering and attending. They work from a philosophy of counterpublics that Warner calls stranger sociability. In the Fall 2010 CampOut on the Gulf Coast, only 5 of the 15 attendees were members of SONG. While a few were friends or acquaintances, most had heard
about the gathering and traveled to meet other new Southern queers from across the region. As Warner explains, “counterpublics are ‘counter’ to the extent that they try to supply different ways of imagining stranger sociability and its reflexivity; as publics they remain oriented to stranger circulation in a way that is not just strategic but constitutive of membership and its affects.” Strangers who gather for a CampOut become part of the space where their queer sensibility creates an immediate sense of belonging. Riley explains, “when I go back to the South to say a CampOut...it is an illuminating experience. You’re felt and appreciated and respected and regarded [in] ways that I don’t have to explain myself.” There is an assumption present in this space, as in all counter-publics, that participants share a discourse and that an individual’s presence signifies a specific type of belonging.

Participation and belonging in SONG’s space is not simply based on an identity or discourse but contains the potential for transformation from within. SONG creates spaces in which people, who are often isolated or discriminated against on a regular basis, can feel like their “whole selves” during participation. Despite the resistance in queer theory to essentializing language in identity politics, SONG employs the phrase “whole selves” to mean something different. In the spaces created by SONG, the politics of identity are never final and rarely privileged. While SONG is committed to centering the experiences of people of color, the organization actively works to create a space where participants can explore the fluidity of identity and bring all parts of their identities to the table. SONG members often use this discourse of “whole selves” but in a way that challenges the essentializing and permanent nature of identity categories. One SONG member, Avery, described the concept when I asked about how he got involved in the group:

Avery: It’s totally incredible, the people, and I think that’s what really drew me in and kept me in, was the amazing people and the whole self deal, the intersectional politics of everything that you’re bringing with you and you don’t have to leave something behind just because you’re in an organization that’s focusing on one issue...[with] SONG, [there is] the idea of taking everything that you have and bringing that all together because it influences everything that you do, that’s what kept me.  

SONG defines the concept of “whole selves” on their webpage as an Essential Concept of SONG. They state, “SONG creates spaces in which all of a person’s identities are honored and affirmed—no one is asked to prioritize one over the other, and no one is left behind. We believe in building, renewing, and supporting Southern activists.” Many organizers who now work with SONG have previous experience working in
other organizations and on issues that may not be considered “queer” issues. These members often express a relief and excitement upon joining SONG. Kim, a very active member, expressed a surprised excitement upon finding SONG. She explains, “oh my god there is this place that I can be my full self that actually invites all of the different pieces of who I am, like black, daughter of immigrants, partnered with a man, nonmonogamous, all of these things in one.” This possibility was expressed and thoroughly valued by many of the members who spoke with me throughout this project. This concept is also a very intentional creation of SONG.

The concept and this feeling expressed by members is framed as “valuing people’s self-determination” or personal sovereignty. On their website, SONG defines “self-determination” by stating, “SONG creates spaces in which people can grow and be challenged, and are expected to strive to be their best whole selves. SONG expects that members will not hinder the self-determination of others through acts of racism, sexism, classism, homophobia, hatred, and intolerance.” Jamie, a leader in the organization, further explains this notion:

*Jamie:* We really started to think and talk about gender and sexual sovereignty. Being the idea that, gender and sexual self-determination is to an individual what sovereignty is to a community and drawing from really profound work and amazing work in indigenous communities all over the world about sovereignty. But the idea is that what’s crucial to SONG space, is that folks get to decide who they are, who they love, and how they live their lives. That’s what’s important to us.

This intentional move is one that is clearly felt by members of the organization. As one member explains, “SONG has really incredible values that are very explicitly put [forward]…a lot of that is valuing people’s self-determination to be able to define who they are and trusting that we know our own experience better than anyone else does.” Kim offered the example, “if I’m in a tutu and tiara and I say I go by male pronouns and I go by ‘he’ and ‘his,’ then I expect to be held up and honored in that way and to determine my own identity in that way.” People, in SONG’s view, define themselves and each definition is equally valued and respected.

This intentional creation is highly valued for SONG members. “One of the most common things that groups and members say about why SONG is crucial in their lives is the way that SONG can create a space for conversation and community that makes people feel whole, connected, and courageous.” This space allows people to develop a sense of themselves that is not possible within the larger public, but which can be
carried into it. According to Warner, this relationship is “very different indeed from the bourgeois public sphere,” as theorized by Habermas and which “consists of private persons whose identity is formed in the privacy of conjugal domestic family…Counterpublics of sexuality and gender, on the other hand, are scenes of association and identity that transform the private lives they mediate.”

SONG specifically develops “spaces—of mind, body, and spirit—and practices that welcome each person’s whole self and identities, create a culture of hope, encourage the development of one’s best self.” This development of “one’s best self” speaks to the ways in which “participation in such a public is one of the ways by which its members’ identities are formed and transformed.” SONG members speak of the CampOuts as welcoming to that transformation. “You’re kind of secluded out in the woods so there is not outside influences and distractions. It’s just looking at people and being real. It just blew me away.” One key feature of this ability for identity formation that was regularly discussed by CampOut attendees was the initial introductions that take place at the beginning of each weekend. Each person has a chance to say, among other things, which gender pronouns they prefer to be addressed by. This simple self-naming allows participants to develop, explore, and expand their gender identities in any way they choose. During my experience at the Fall 2010 CampOut, these introductions pushed some participants to think about gender in a new way. Participants commented about these introductions as offering them a different way to view gender. Some shared a larger description of their personal experiences with notions of gender identity. It is, as one member notes, a “little bit of intentionality for how you want to be addressed and for what feels most comfortable for you.” This intentionality allows for a wide variety of expressions, all of which are valued. “You have the right to express your gender however you want to and to be respected for whatever you want to call that.” Thus, CampOuts can be understood as counterpublics in the way that they “can work to elaborate new worlds of culture and social relations in which gender and sexuality can be lived…[and] can therefore make possible new forms of gendered and sexual citizenship—meaning active participation in collective world making through publics of sex and gender.” SONG’s intentional creation of a space involving an alternate politic of gender and sexuality relies on participant’s active participation in and envisioning of a queer utopian world.

Envisioning Queer Utopia through Counterpublics

Queer counterpublics not only provide a space for transformation, both personal and collective, but also allow participants a space to envision
a future not restricted to the present. In *Cruising Utopia*, José Esteban Muñoz pushes readers to invest in the notion of utopia. He argues that queerness is not something that has arrived yet, but something that allows us to hope for a future. “Queerness is that thing that lets us feel that this world is not enough, that indeed something is missing.”\(^5\) That missing thing is not just absent, but something queers can and should strive for. “Queerness is also a performative because it is not simply a being but a doing for and toward the future. Queerness is essentially about the rejection of a here and now and an insistence on potentiality or concrete possibility for another world.”\(^5\) Different spaces and times allow us glimpses of this future world that sustains our investment in it. This future, this utopia, is not a proscriptive one, but it does “render potential blueprints of a world not quite here, a horizon of possibility, not a fixed schema.”\(^5\) Based on my observations and interviews, I feel that this potentiality exists within the world of queer counterpublics and particularly within the work of SONG. *CampOuts* allow queerness to flourish and provide a necessary glimpse of the future that sustains queer activists today.

Muñoz’s discussion of queer stages and utopian performances suggests that “on some level utopia is about a politics of emotion.”\(^5\) Emotion, particularly hope, is the mode through which queers are able to access futurity. He also states, “it is my belief that minoritarian subjects are cast hopeless in a world without utopia.”\(^5\) SONG embraces a similar notion of hope and utopia. In their Core Leadership Agreement, SONG acknowledges that they “put hope, desire, and longing at the center of our thinking and work, instead of and before working out of fear.”\(^5\) They use this hope to imagine futures not yet here. “Our work is about transformation to a just, fair and liberated society that meets the needs of its people.”\(^5\) The transformation is difficult without the notion of hope. By working from a place of desire and hope, SONG can envision a world in tune with Muñoz’s queer utopia.

The centrality of hope and a utopian vision in SONG’s work can be seen in a particular exercise SONG uses in their traveling organizing school. This exercise, which they call a Studio, involves a concept called Third Space. According to SONG organizing literature, Third Space is an idea developed and evolved by black revolutionary thinkers. The concept involves three types of space that can be inhabited in our world. The First Space is the “the space of capitalism, the space of McDonalds, the space of trade and stealing within this country.”\(^5\) The First Space is the world often struggled against by activists and members of SONG. These members “as activists, . . . often also live in the Second Space: the space of resisting and pushing back on oppression—the space where we do anti-racist work, anti-sexist work—the space where we oppose something.”\(^5\)
Both the First and the Second Space are regularly inhabited in our world. The Third Space pushes individuals to think into the future.

The third space is the space of creation, invention, innovation, and birth. It is the space where we dream a new world, with new words that are shaky on our tongues. It is an exhilarating and scary space. Some would liken it to standing on the edge of a great cliff.

This Third Space allows people to envision a utopia. A place not yet here but that is often hoped or longed for. Given the work many queer activists do fighting the oppression of the First Space, the Third Space asks, as one SONG leader did, “in lieu of not having that, what is it that we would want?” This idea allows people to fantasize about a different world. “Queer fantasy is linked to utopian longing, and together the two can become contributing conditions of possibility for political transformation.” While SONG recognized that “it is easier to not go to this space,” they believe, like Muñoz, that “it is the space that we need to survive.” It is central to SONG’s queer counterpublic. CampOuts are a version of this Third Space, a practical example of Warner’s queer counterpublics, and exhibit the potentiality for queer futurity.

Performing Utopia

Returning to Muñoz’s idea of queer performativity, we can examine how this utopian longing and a vision of the future not yet here can lead to spaces of utopian potentiality through performativity. Similar to his notion of stages, CampOuts are spaces that remind participants “that there is something missing, that the present and the presence…is not enough.” Queer performativity creates literal moments or times of utopian potentiality. It experiments with notions of queer temporality theorized by Elizabeth Freeman in Time Binds that “invent possibilities for moving through and with time, encountering pasts, speculating futures, and interpreting the two in ways that counter the common sense of the present tense.” CampOuts serve as “actual utopian rehearsal rooms, where we work on a self that does not conform to the mandates of cultural logics.” That space provides comfort for people working through and working against the hegemonic order of society. This work allows people to connect with each other in a different way and feel connections that are not present outside of these queer spaces.

Riley: I think going to the CampOut was just amazing for me. It was a breath of fresh air because [before that], I had not had a chance to connect with my people in that way. It was just really a chance to not be ‘the only lonely’ but to be really connected through other people.
Utopian feelings of hope and belonging are also associated with these spaces. Riley further explains, “when I come into space with SONG people, my spirit is just lifted by the fact that there are other queer people, there are other Southern people, there are people of color, and there is just real love.”  These connections last beyond the experience of camping and provide a potentiality for future community. In these spaces, this potentiality is “always on the horizon and, like performance, never completely disappears but instead, lingers and serves as a conduit for knowing and feeling other people.”  With *CampOuts*, the connections do not end with the weekend but as one member noted,

*Riley*: I feel like those connections have really stayed strong. So even if it was just meeting [someone] at a camp out, we’ve crossed paths at other places and it’s been just like real love and support…that came just through that experience of going to the *CampOut*.  

This continuation, this building, and this potentiality help members physically understand, even in small ways, a vision of queer utopia.

The feelings that these spaces create, like the stages in Muñoz’s text, remain with the participants even after the event is over. The resonance of these feelings “at performance’s end, if it is situated historically and materially, it is never just the duration of the event” but rather they “linger in our memory, haunt our present, and illuminate our future.”  *CampOuts* serve not only as rejuvenating and welcoming spaces, but as fuel for futures and visions of utopia that stay with the participants:

*Riley*: It just seeds ideas for me; it’s given a boost in terms of the work that I am doing to know that I’m struggling with other people. It’s not just me in this community or the handful of us that exist in this community doing it, there are people struggling in other ways. It gives you that boost to want to stick with it.  

In this way, *CampOuts* inspire queers to keep working toward their vision of a queer utopia. In Muñoz’s words, their “utopian performativity suggests another modality of doing and being that is in process, unfinished.”  This disruption of temporality signals queer utopic potentiality. They act as “forms of interruption…points of resistance to [the] temporal order that, in turn, propose other possibilities for living in relation to indeterminately past, present, and future others.”  This new mode of being in the world allows queers to maintain a utopian vision while the world around them challenges that ideal.

**Conclusion**

SONG are developing queer counterpublics as livable and rejuvenating social movement spaces. These spaces can be theorized, as Warner does,
as being based on stranger sociability, queer sensibility, and relationality. For SONG members who participate in identity formation through queer counterpublics, the alternate discourse on gender and sexuality combats the sense of isolation often felt by Southern queers. This longing for an alternate form of community is expressed as a true need for alternate discourses and relationships in our world. Rather than rejecting the value of the social, SONG members embrace and long for a new queer relationality.

Through the creation of these counterpublics, or CampOuts, SONG is developing a space, though fleeting, where a queer utopia is being envisioned and practiced. The potentiality of these counterpublics allows for both personal and political transformation, which was regularly noted by members during and after the event. They allow for queer connection and illuminate the potentiality of a personal and political future not confined to the present. CampOuts function as a utopian space that is grounded in participant’s emotions of both longing and hope. This utopian vision contributes to our understanding of how, through the creation of counterpublics, queer political actors can support their investment in a futurity that is challenged in their everyday lives. SONG is actively working to create spaces and communities that fulfill their vision of a queer utopia while sustaining the potentiality of that future while they work toward it.

Notes

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2. Ibid.
10. Ibid., 6.
11. Ibid., 31.
12. Ibid., 31.
16. Ibid.
17. Ibid.
18. After I completed the interview phase of this study, one additional person contacted me and was interested in participating. This person was not interviewed due to time constraints.
22. Ibid., 119.
23. Ibid., 56.
24. Ibid., 56.
25. Ibid., 56.
26. Ibid., 119.
27. Ibid., 119.
28. Ibid., 120.
29. Ibid., 120.
30. Ibid., 62.
31. Ibid., 24.
32. Ibid., 70.
33. Telephone interview with Angel, September 1, 2010.
34. Telephone interview with Jesse, September 27, 2010.
37. Interview with Avery, June 25, 2010.
38. S.O.N.G.—About SONG.
40. S.O.N.G.—About SONG.
41. Telephone interview with Jamie, August 13, 2010.
42. Telephone interview with Kim, June 25, 2010.
44. Warner, Publics and Counterpublics, 57.
46. Warner, Publics and Counterpublics, 57.
47. Interview with Avery, June 25, 2010.
48. Ibid.
49. Ibid.
50. Warner, Publics and Counterpublics, 57.
51. Muñoz, Cruising Utopia, 1.
52. Ibid., 1.
53. Ibid., 1.
54. Ibid., 97.
55. Ibid., 97.
57. SONG, Beliefs Our Work Is Based On.
59. Ibid.
60. Ibid.
61. Muñoz, Cruising Utopia, 127.
62. “SONG Organizing School-Facilitator’s Agenda.”
63. Muñoz, Cruising Utopia, 127.
64. Elizabeth Freeman, Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), xv.
65. Muñoz, Cruising Utopia, 111.
68. Muñoz, Cruising Utopia, 113.
70. Muñoz, Cruising Utopia, 99.
71. Ibid., 104.
73. Muñoz, Cruising Utopia, 99.
74. Freeman, Time Binds, xxii.
Chapter 6
Landscaping Classrooms toward Queer Utopias

Kat Rands, Jess McDonald, and Lauren Clapp

While the education field has addressed classroom design and queer theorists have addressed the notion of landscaping, scholars have yet to critique classroom spaces from a queer theoretical perspective. The concept of queer landscaping, as theorized by Jill Casid, offers a particularly powerful concept for exploring the ways in which physical and discursive classroom spaces are performatively produced and the ways in which this production can trouble the boundary between “interior” and “exterior” spaces.  

Theoretical justification for queer classroom landscapes can be found at the intersections of queer theories of pedagogy and theories of classroom design, two areas of scholarship that rarely, if ever, overlap. As Beth Ferri, participating in a study by Elizabeth Sierra-Zarella, succinctly explains, queer pedagogy

is disruptive of normative assumptions, troubles taken-for-granted assumptions, and is critical of binary thinking. Queer pedagogy confounds and confronts knowledge and power, exclusions, and erasures. It shifts the center and makes the familiar strange.  

One of us writes about “mathematical inqu[ee]ry” in much the same way, describing it as a theoretical approach that “goes beyond mere inclusion of queer students and issues into extant frameworks and allows...teachers and students to deconstruct educational norms as well as imagine new possibilities in mathematics and the world.” However, the literature on queer pedagogy is notably sparse when it comes to queering classroom landscapes. For example, Beth Ferri in the article cited above, G. D. Shlasko in “Queer (v.) Pedagogy,” and Judith/Jack Halberstam in “Reflections on Queer Studies and Queer Pedagogy” all touch on queer classrooms but do not address queer classroom spaces themselves.
Classroom design is the scholarly study of classroom elements and their configurations. Generally, work in this field is concerned with organizing the elements of classrooms to enhance learning rather than using elements of a classroom as a source of learning itself. Classroom design rarely challenges student learning in the ways that queer pedagogy hopes to do. In this chapter, we attempt to fill this gap in scholarly literature by considering what it might mean to queer classroom landscapes. To do so, we not only discuss queering classroom landscapes, but also queerly discuss queering classroom landscapes. If queering is taken as a verb, then what is said is only as important as how one says it—that is, style matters. Stylistically, our chapter uses three different registers: (1) a theoretical register; (2) a descriptive register; and (3) a “visions of the possible” register. In contrast to the more common way of organizing academic writing (especially in the field of education and social sciences) in which these three registers are compartmentalized into separate sections such as “theoretical/conceptual framework,” “findings,” and “discussion/implications,” our chapter interweaves these registers throughout, often using more than one register within one section.

The first section of the chapter provides descriptive context about the institution of focus and how the project came about. The section entitled “Queering Classrooms and Campus Spaces” is organized into subsections that interweave insights from recent queer theory scholarship with description of the classroom landscaping process at the institution of focus. Through this description, the subsections also hint at “visions of the possible”—possibilities for landscaping differently in ways that summon queer in-process utopias in classroom spaces. The final section, “A User’s Guide to Queering Classroom Landscapes,” shifts the register to emphasize the “visions of the possible” by compiling practical suggestions for educators who are interested in queering their own classroom landscapes.

**Context**

The university of focus in this chapter is a small, relatively well-endowed, private one in the southeastern United States. This university has a historical Protestant Christian religious affiliation, competitive sports teams, a strong performing arts program, and esteemed academics. Student enrollment has tripled since 1970, and now it counts near 6,000, 88 percent of whom are undergraduate students. The university draws students from across the country. Only 33 percent of students come from the local state, with students originating from 48 states and the District of Columbia. Although located in the South, the university has a large population of students hailing from Massachusetts and New Jersey. The student body is predominantly young and white. About 92 percent of all
students (graduate and undergraduate) are under age 25. Approximately 80 percent of the undergraduate students identify as white, 6.5 percent as African American or black, 4 percent as Latin@, and less than 2 percent identify as Asian American, American Indian, international, and Hawaiian/Pacific Islander. The racial/ethnic demographics are similar for faculty. A large percentage of undergraduate students study abroad, participate in internships, and are involved in service learning, examples of the university’s emphasis on engaged learning.

There is considerable privilege implicit within this campus context, as well as the authors’ personal backgrounds and identities. Our experiences with classrooms and campus spaces are fundamentally shaped by these privileges. As white, able-bodied, upper middle class US citizens, our privileges undergird the way we exist in the world, including classrooms, and shape our interactions with students, faculty, staff, and other community members. Furthermore, the economic privileges associated with being at a relatively well-endowed private university allow for physical resources that are unavailable in other higher education settings. Throughout this chapter, we have tried to be conscious of these privileges and the way they shape our perspectives on classroom landscaping. We remain steadfast in the belief that queering classroom landscapes is not about purchasing physical resources but rather using the resources available in unexpected ways.

The groundwork for this project began in a women’s and gender studies course in which two of the authors, Lauren Clapp and Jess McDonald, were enrolled. The course was unconventional in that the students had a great deal of autonomy over the organization of the course. Lauren and Jess coauthored a final paper for this course on the topic of queering classroom landscapes. Kat Rands became involved through an “open class” on queer theory in which the students invited members of the greater campus community to join in conversations about the materials being read in the class. The methodology in this project entailed combining a queer theory framework with Geertzian thick description of spaces on the campus of the university of focus, which produced rich data for social cartographies of the classrooms and interactions within space at the university of focus.8 Social cartographies do not need to be literal maps. Here, the vivid use of thick description helps to describe spatial arrangements and their impact on space, human interaction, agency, and power dynamics, and so on.

**Queering Classrooms and Campus Spaces**

**Landscaping Classrooms**

Recent scholarship using queer theory has much to offer on analysis of classroom design. Improvising on W. J. T. Mitchell’s theses on landscape
and imperialism, Casid uses a queer lens to think about the idea of “landscape.” Although “landscape” is often thought of as a noun, Casid conceptualizes landscaping as a verb. Considering the noun and verb uses of “landscape” in juxtaposition challenges the illusion that a landscape is something static, unchanging, and given. Casid’s first thesis is the simple statement that “landscape is.” Combining the noun form of landscape with the verb “is” begins to hint at the process behind the landscape’s production. As Casid writes, “Landscape’s isness . . . should be understood as an effect of what landscape does.” In acknowledging that “landscape’s isness” is an effect of a process, Casid points out that landscaping functions performatively in the sense introduced by J. L. Austin’s *How to Do Things with Words* and mobilized by Judith Butler in relation to gender. Casid points this out in the thesis, “Landscape is landscaping.” That is, landscape as effect comes into being only because of the landscaping process, a “doing” that brings it into existence. The “effect,” the apparent noun of landscape, is really something that is “changing in and over time without final outcome.” The effect of landscaping, however, comes to be taken for granted not simply as one of multiple possible ways to landscape but as the right and only way to landscape. Just as repetition of gendered ways of being produce normative forms of gender (as explained by Butler), the repetition of certain ways of landscaping produces normative ways to landscape, as indicated in Casid’s seventh thesis, “Landscape. Landscape period. Or, to put landscape in the imperative more strongly: landscape!” Yet, just as gender norms can be challenged through the failure to repeat gender as expected, acknowledging that landscaping is a performative process opens possibilities for failing to landscape in taken-for-granted ways, to unlandscape or to landscape differently.

Like other spaces, classrooms are landscaped in normative ways that come to be thought of as common sense, if thought of at all. Considering how classrooms are landscaped raises questions such as the following: What is a classroom? How do classroom landscapes shape learning? Do students and instructors learn *within* classroom landscapes or *as a result* of classroom landscapes? As new pedagogies have developed over time, classroom landscapes have become increasingly varied. While “traditional” lecture-hall-style rooms continue to exist in higher education, increasing experimentation in classroom design is producing more and more flexible “nontraditional” classrooms. Even within these nontraditional classrooms, however, hegemonic forms of power and the norms they generate often persist. As the evolution of classroom landscapes continues, this power and the dynamics it generates will need to be addressed.

In many institutions of higher education, the traditional classroom landscape consists of large lecture halls that use tiered seating arrangements and are meant to hold a large number of students. For example, a
study in the late 1970s found that 90 percent of university classrooms were landscaped into matrices of rows and columns. Additional indications that this style had become the norm were that instructors “never thought of changing the furniture arrangements because they were not used to different settings” and that custodial staff sometimes became angry if instructors arranged the furniture differently. The “open classroom” movement of the 1970s and the popularization of cooperative learning in the 1980s initiated exploration of other ways to arrange classrooms. Currently, within the traditional style of classroom, landscape varies between tables or individual desks and mobile or fixed chairs. There is typically an instructor station, whiteboard, and projection screen on the lowest tier, which is commonly referred to as the front of the room by the instructor and students. As Elisabeth Goldstein explains, this configuration is meant to ensure unbroken sightlines between tiered students and the instructor and is also spatially efficient.

These traditional classroom arrangements have shortcomings, however. Organizing desks or tables into rows also limits the accessibility of the room for those using wheelchairs or other mobility assistants (such as crutches or a cane), and this is particularly true in tiered lecture halls. In addition, students who are d/Deaf or hard of hearing may have a more difficult time communicating with their classmates if they are sitting in rows rather than facing one another. As a classroom landscape, the traditional row-style arrangement limits pedagogical methods and ignores the diversity of learning styles of students, constricting the classroom experience for all except for those learning styles conducive to this arrangement. Classroom landscapes privilege certain ways of teaching, which in turn privileges certain ways of learning.

In addition to physical space, the regulation of time also shapes classroom landscapes. Queering time involves a critique of chrononormativity, “the use of time to organize individual human bodies toward maximum productivity.” Chrononormativity takes place through the regulation of time in “schedules, calendars, times zones, and even wristwatches,” which “inculcate . . forms of temporal experience that seem natural to those whom they privilege.” The traditional classroom designed to maximize spatial efficiency is landscaped in order to most efficiently allow transmission from instructor to student in time. In other words, such a landscape addresses a public who expects not only the spatial normativity of a traditional classroom arrangement, but also chrononormativity, a “mode of implantation, a technique by which institutional forces seem like somatic facts.” This spatial configuration suggests that students will enter the classroom on time, take their seats, remain stationary throughout the class so the knowledge imagined to reside in the instructor can follow the sight lines from teacher to student in a timely fashion into the minds of the students, and finally leave class at the designated moment.
Classroom design at the university of focus is shaped by university classroom standards. Here, a classroom is defined as an indoor space that is rectangular or square in shape with an instructor’s station, whiteboard, and projection screen on one wall facing the “seating area,” a space that might be used in varied ways. Given these guidelines, instructors and administrators at this university have employed the use of both traditional and nontraditional classroom arrangements. In some buildings on campus, individual desks with hard seats are bolted to the floor facing the instructor’s station. In others, the tiered seating area consists of tables and movable chairs, sometimes including cushioned chairs on wheels. However, the majority of classrooms at this university are less rigidly designed; the seating area is nontiered and typically includes tables or desks with chairs that are intended to be relatively easy to rearrange. Still, the majority of classrooms are arranged into rows facing the instructor’s station. In all cases, classrooms are used by multiple instructors who employ a variety of pedagogical styles, so flexibility is a key factor of design.

While the average classrooms at this university are certainly more flexible than traditional lecture-hall-style classrooms, both designs have limitations. Whether or not chairs are tiered or bolted in place, many professors expect students to sit in rows facing the instructor at the front of the room. Frank Harris and Jaime Lester describe this kind of instructor-focused, passive learning as a “traditional, male-dominated course.” This type of classroom landscape discourages discussion, classroom community, and democratic learning because it is impractical for students to communicate with one another. Arbitrary rules about food, drinks, assigned seats, and wearing hats reinforce the instructor’s control of the classroom landscape, placing him, her, or hir as the single authority figure in the classroom.

Queering classroom landscapes has the potential to call into question what has come to be taken for granted about classroom spaces. Such questioning, in turn, creates openings to the future for landscaping classrooms in new ways, in queer ways. In short, queering classroom landscapes work toward queer utopias.

Queer Futurity and Queer Utopia in Classroom Landscaping

Recent scholarship in queer theory has introduced debates concerning the relation between queerness and time. In No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive, Lee Edelman argues that the figure of “the Child” permeates all intelligible politics with reproductive futurism—that is, the idea that the Child is the future and we must fight “for the children.”
Edelman conceptualizes the queer as opposed to or outside of reproductive futurism, and, therefore, “for” no future. By way of Lacanian psychoanalytic theory, Edelman suggests that queers reject “the structuring optimism of politics to which the order of meaning commits us, installing as it does the perpetual hope of reading meaning through signification,” and instead accept and embrace the “ascriptive negativity to the queer.” Lacanian psychoanalytic theory allows Edelman to reject the possibility of reaching meaning through signification in the future, relationality in general, and communication in one fell swoop: “Lacan’s notorious assertion that ‘there is no sexual relation’: sex, in opposing itself to sense, is also, by definition, opposed to relation, to communication”—a claim that has been called the antirelational thesis. For Edelman, any hope for the future is misguided in that it is hope for a conservation and reproduction of the status quo. Edelman suggests that queerness offers in place of the “good” promised in reproductive futurism something “better”; namely, in place of access to sense in the future (which, according to Edelman’s reading of Lacan, is impossible in any case), access to jouissance in the present. From this perspective, queerness, futurity, and classroom landscaping have no meaningful relationship to one another. Following the antirelational thesis, the role of the queer in an antirelational queer classroom would be to provide access to jouissance in the present—a process whose method of accomplishment is up for debate, though not within the realm of this chapter.

José Esteban Muñoz, to the contrary, contests the antirelational thesis and argues for a queer conception of futurity as an alternative to reproductive futurism. He responds to Edelman’s “assertion that the future is the province of the child and therefore not for the queers by arguing that queerness is primarily about futurity and hope” and that understanding queerness as collectivity, and hence relationally, is essential. Muñoz challenges notions of queer temporalities that “fail to factor in the relational relevance of race or class.” He points out that racialized and queer kids are not positioned in society as inheritors of the future in the same way as Edelman’s monolithic figure of the child unmarked in terms of race, gender, and sexuality (and, therefore, always already white, male, and straight in our society that privileges these categories). Rather than negate the future all together, Muñoz argues that the fact that the dominant mode of futurity mired in reproductive futurism is “winning” 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.” Queer futurity hinges on a conception of queerness as “a structuring... mode of desiring that allows us to see and feel beyond the quagmire of the present.” The present, according to Muñoz, is a “prison house.” Queerness is what prompts us
to “strive, in the face of the here and now’s totalizing rendering of reality, to think and feel a then and there.”

Muñoz builds on Ernest Bloch’s concept of concrete utopias as those that are “relational to historically situated struggles, a collectivity that is actualized or potential” in contrast to abstract notions of utopias. Throughout Cruising Utopia, Muñoz describes various types of performances and artistic representations as queer concrete utopias that exemplify such collectivities in the process of actualizing queerness. As an example, Muñoz examines the way in which a poem entitled “Having a Coke with You” by O’Hare tells of an everyday act (having a coke) that “signifies a vast lifeworld of queer relationality...and a utopian potentiality.” The poem is, according to Muñoz, clearly about the present, but “in its queer relationality promises a future.” In another example, Muñoz analyzes John Giorno’s mixed media text You Got to Burn to Shine. Muñoz describes Giorno’s work as “a rich mosaic of poetry, performance text, activist mission statements, and autobiographical prose...the uncanny testimony of a man who has survived various risky lifestyles.” In exploring this work, Muñoz writes, “I see [queer] world-making here as functioning and coming into play through the performance of queer utopian memory that is a utopia that understands its time as reaching beyond some nostalgic past that perhaps never was or some future whose arrival is continuously belated—a utopia in the present.” Similarly, the performative process of landscaping classroom spaces in ways that challenge normativity can be seen as hinting at the hope of queer futurity.

The resistance many university instructors and students have to classroom formations other than the row-and-column matrix illustrate the way the “here and now” of classroom landscaping can come to seem unchangeable and become a “prison house.” As an instructor, one of us (Kat) has found it interesting that when ze enters a classroom before a class, it is almost always arranged in this row and column formation. Often, if another class has just finished, the class has situated the chairs in an alternative formation during class time but are busy putting them “back” into the matrix. Students and instructors alike seem to perceive the matrix format as the proper or standard formation in which classrooms must be left, even if they use different formations throughout the class time and the next class may be just as (or perhaps more) likely to use a nonmatrix formation. Kat has purposely left classrooms in nonmatrix formations upon leaving the classroom, but always with an uneasy feeling that “the public” (the students and instructors who will enter for the next class) will perceive this as rudely leaving the room messy. Another of us (Jess) has arrived in a classroom early to rearrange desks deliberately from a traditional row-style matrix to a nontiered circle and watched as students entered and then went out of their way to rearrange the desks into
rows—in some cases, very awkwardly, exerting themselves to separate desks that Jess had wedged together in the back of the room, outside of the circle. Note that this occurred in a classroom where the professor had acknowledged the intentionality of the circle arrangement earlier in the semester but became less deliberate about the arrangement as the semester continued. (Jess was sad to see the circle go; hence the rearrangement experiment.) Yet, in this scene the “prison house” of the present referred to by Muñoz and the “isness” of landscape as a noun referred to by Casid are interrupted by flows of energy instigated by Jess and the disequilibrium of seeming disarray, unveiling the performative verb “landscaping” behind the noun “classroom landscape.” 43 As members of the “public” enter the classroom, they are forced to interpret the classroom landscape as unexpected text, a queered text, one that positions them as part of a “counterpublic.” 44 These sorts of small movements in the “here and now” of concrete classroom landscapes, while by no means enacting a finished utopia in the present, can allow professors and students to move outside of the “prison house,” toward a queer utopia, to “think and feel a then and there.” 45

As illustrated in Kat’s and Jess’s stories above, individuals (within a broader social context) can prompt small movements toward queer utopias. On a larger scale, the architectural design of classrooms themselves can intentionally challenge notions of how classrooms should be landscaped and open possibilities for queer futurity. For example, two classrooms at the university of focus were intentionally designed to have neither a front nor a back, making the landscape more flexible. 46 The women’s and gender studies course mentioned previously used one of the rooms. This room includes trapezoidal tables that can be paired to create tables of six for small group work. The classroom also includes three projector screens with two on one wall and one on the opposite wall that descends over the whiteboard. In addition, the classroom is outfitted with cameras in each corner that are controllable from the video room next door, which also contains wireless tabletop microphones to be used in the classroom. There is a technology station but no instructor’s station. 47 Choices of technology reflect both intentional flexible design and an example of the way economic privilege has shaped the landscaping of classroom spaces. The classroom was constructed to feel different to both students and instructors and foster more creativity in the classroom. 48

The landscape of the second classroom was created with similar intentions, and flexibility is particularly key in that room. The room is about twice the size of an average classroom at the university and includes rectangular desks, chairs on wheels, four large white boards on wheels, a projection screen across from the main entrance, and a wireless projector cart on wheels. The room is deliberately designed to be “too big,” forcing instructors and students to decide how they want to set up the room
every time they enter; some classes utilize the moveable whiteboards in order to shape the space, creating more intimate settings when desired.\textsuperscript{49} The architects of the building were so skeptical of the room’s size that they insisted on wiring the room into two halves in case the university decided to extend the hallway and divide the classroom into two.\textsuperscript{50}

Changes in classroom design continue to landscape classrooms in new ways as “paddle desks” are progressively phased out across campus. The redesign of one classroom is based on a newly released desk with wheels that is intended to make classroom rearrangement easier and thus facilitate learning.\textsuperscript{51} Possible arrangements include several large circles of students or numerous smaller circles, fostering interaction and collaboration. The redesign of another classroom will include built-in benches along the side of the classroom, pullout cushions, and tables with wheels. Holly Hodge, the university’s Interior Designer, explains that the tables can be pushed to the sides of the classroom and the cushions placed on the floor to create a nontraditional learning environment.\textsuperscript{52} The ways in which several classrooms have been redesigned or are in the process of being redesigned reveals that classroom landscaping is an ongoing process that shapes pedagogical practices. Choices of objects to include in a classroom, how to arrange them, and the extent to which they can move can follow traditional norms or can challenge such norms and open up new possibilities for teaching and learning.

As illustrated in the women’s and gender studies course, students as well as architects, administrators, and instructors can landscape and relandscape classroom spaces. The class met in the first redesigned rooms described above. Students in the class, including Jess and Lauren, consciously transformed the classroom landscape every Wednesday shortly before the class began. This transformation included opening the blinds to let more natural light in, rearranging tables into a circle in the center of the space, ensuring that each table had two chairs at it, and keeping a table or two aside for coffee and snacks. On days when people were absent from class, excess tables were removed from the space to tighten the circle. As a result of this circular arrangement, the “front” of the classroom often ceased to exist, especially when we used both projection screens. The designated “instructor” sat at a table alongside designated “students.”

This physical manipulation of classroom landscape was an integral component of the classroom experience. Lauren and Jess felt more ownership over the class and course material through the process of physically altering the classroom space. The mutual sense of responsibility to arrive early to class to ensure that the classroom was landscaped to fit the needs of the class added to this feeling of ownership of classroom elements. Such a feeling is rare in more traditional classroom settings where the instructor is the one in control. This sense of ownership carried over
into other aspects of the class for Lauren and Jess, including participation in coauthorship with other classmates on the course syllabus and a horizontally organized group dynamic that expected participation by all.

The classroom landscape in this class was also unique in that the seating arrangement was designed to allow students freedom to move around the classroom from minute to minute and week to week. Jess and Lauren noticed that most students switched seats throughout the semester, which was much less common in their other classes. Class participants were free to stand or to walk around the room if they chose to do so. The circular configuration of tables provided an easy exit for students who needed to move during class, whether they were getting a snack or leaving to use the bathroom. In more normative classroom settings, students may be discouraged from leaving class to use the restroom or to take an important phone call because they have to break other students’ line of vision, as well as cause disruption when navigating narrow pathways. The women’s and gender studies class demonstrated the mutual understanding that class participants have needs and responsibilities outside that of “student” and “teacher” by reconfiguring the elements inside the classroom so as to make it easier and less awkward to leave the room than it would be in a traditional classroom.

While the women’s and gender studies class was intentional in landscaping this particular classroom, their reconceptualization was limited in many ways. This was partially a result of students’ long-term conditioning to exist passively in classroom landscapes rather than critically engage with them. While students and the instructor were intentional about creating a somewhat nontraditional space at the beginning of the semester, there was no intentionality to further this process as the semester progressed. Once the landscape was loosely determined, it was no longer a site of critical engagement. Once again, classroom landscape slid over into a noun, an effect produced by repeating the same actions, putting in place a new norm that might easily come to be taken for granted as well.

Still, landscaping was at play throughout the entire semester—often outside of the “regular” classroom—whether students realized it or not at the time. In addition to meeting as a static group each week, the class participants organized “open classes” and invited the campus community and friends. Open classes occurred in a different space (which was intentionally landscaped as well), and new ways of thinking shaped the discourse. Conversations about queer theory became more practical when guests entered the room in an activist mindset rather than an academic mindset; mothering became a more personal topic when visitors shared their firsthand parenting experiences. The process of landscaping continued as the classroom reached past the walls of the room.
The “classroom” expanded beyond open classes as well. Class participants also met weekly in smaller groups to work on activist projects such as increasing awareness around issues of disability and accessibility. As the semester progressed, the larger campus was landscaped into a place of learning and engagement for activist project groups. Parking lots became a space to study accessible parking signs and road paint; an empty theater on campus turned into a place to host a film showing and talk back reconfiguring (dis)ability; hallways and stairwells were transformed into photo displays that challenged people to recognize “invisible” disabilities as they went about their daily business. The wider campus was landscaped into sites of critical engagement not just for those registered in the women’s and gender studies class but for the larger campus community as well. “The classroom” became a limitless space open to a much broader community than the women’s and gender studies class realized it would be at the start of the semester. This example of intentional classroom landscaping highlights the tension between landscape as a noun and the potential for critical engagement inherent in landscape as verb, and the ways in which classroom landscaping is a performative process.

Participants in the women’s and gender studies class queered the classroom landscape to some extent, but the queer potential of classroom landscaping suggests that additional forms of landscaping queerly have the potential to emerge in the future. As Muñoz notes, “queerness is a longing that propels us onward…. Queerness is that thing that lets us feel that this world is not enough, that indeed something is missing.”

Potential ways of queering classroom landscapes in the future are explored in the following “User’s Guide.”

**User’s Guide to Queering Classroom Landscapes**

Previous sections of our chapter have interwoven analyses of classrooms and campus spaces at the university of focus with theoretical insights from recent scholarship in queer theory. We turn now to practical suggestions for instructors for queering classroom landscapes in the form of a “User’s Guide.” The suggestions included in the User’s Guide should not be taken as directions for the one and only correct way to queer classroom landscapes, but rather as possible ways of experimenting with classroom landscapes toward stimulating queer critique and working toward queer utopias. Before moving forward, it is important to note that queering will look different in different contexts and for different people, and that the traditional or normative classroom type looks different at different schools. For example, queering a classroom at a military academy will look different from queering an art studio. Keeping in mind the greater context of your school’s culture is crucial when designing queer classroom
landscapes. As previously noted, our perspectives on queering classroom landscapes are shaped in part by the private university setting of the institution of focus, including considerable economic privilege. The suggestions in the User’s Guide are intended to be more generally applicable but are, of course, influenced by the authors’ experiences. The intended audience of the User’s Guide consists of college-level instructors.

1. Be upfront about queering the classroom landscape

Be transparent about classroom design and landscape. Explain to students that the classroom is not only the physical setting of learning and discussion but a source of learning as well. Explain to students that they will be expected to deconstruct that classroom’s configuration and design and that they should consider the classroom an additional text. A different approach might entail allowing students to arrange themselves around the classroom without instruction from the instructor, and afterward deconstructing students’ seating choices. In what ways have they challenged normative assumptions of how students should be in classrooms? How have they perpetuated them?

Another way to involve students in landscaping the classroom queerly might be to begin by directing attention away from the objects themselves and toward a broader sense of “doing.” For example, on the first day of class, students might brainstorm responses to the question, “What do you envision doing in class this semester—try to think outside of the box?” After discussing what students envision doing, they can then discuss what type of space and what types of objects in the space would allow them to do the types of activities they envisioned. Throughout the process, the instructor can also prompt students to think about the types of assumptions they are making about the classroom landscaping, the content of the course, themselves, and others. Students and instructors could continue the process by actually landscaping the space as envisioned to the extent possible. Finally, the class could discuss some of the key ideas in this chapter, such as landscape as noun versus verb and queer utopias, as a framework for thinking about queerly landscaping the classroom throughout the semester.

It is important to note that not all educators will have equal resources available in order to provide alternative classroom environments. Some educators have much more rigid classrooms, much tighter budgets, or much more restrictive administrations on campus, which makes queering classroom landscapes more difficult. Educators must learn to meet not only students where they are in terms of queerness, but also their greater campus community where it is as well. In some cases, educators may wish to challenge administrators and the greater campus community by
working outside traditional systems that operate on campus. In other cases, educators may choose to work from within existing systems.

2. Meet students where they are and acknowledge students’ investments in more traditional landscapes (In addition, consider your own similar investments.)

For many students in your class, this may be their first introduction to nontraditional classroom design. For these students, radically unfamiliar classroom landscapes may be intimidating and inhibit classroom participation or discourage enrollment in the class. It is important to make no assumptions about your students and where they are in their educational experiences, even if they are students who have taken classes with you before. Instead of throwing students into unfamiliar classrooms suddenly, give your students a heads up. This might be accomplished by an explanation in the syllabus, in presemester communication, or on the first day of class on which the classroom design will be queered.

Some of the ideas above about how to be “up front” about queerness might be ways to introduce queering classroom landscapes. Another way to meet students where they are is to get progressively queerer throughout the semester. For example, like in the women’s and gender studies course at the university of focus, you might begin with shifting from a row-and-column matrix to a circle configuration within a classroom. Later in the semester, you might blur the boundary of the classroom walls either by organizing “open classes” and inviting the broader community to class sessions or expanding your class sessions outside the classroom walls in another way, such as the activist projects described in this chapter. Taking this idea a step further, your class could expand beyond the “walls” of your university and invite local community members into your classroom or take your class sessions outside of campus spaces into the broader community. Kat has begun organizing a course focused on queer and trans* activism that will connect classroom, campus, and community spaces in this way. The future course illustrates the hope embedded in building queer collectivities across time and space, the hope of queer utopias and queer futurity.

3. Follow Kate Bornstein’s suggestion to be “radically welcoming”

Rather than just being tolerant of difference (difference of genders, sexualities, abilities, ethnicities, religions, etc.), the practice of radical welcoming encourages people to be actively appreciative, welcoming, and loving of difference. As students and as educators, it is our responsibility
to not only be accepting of difference but also actively appreciate it. As someone educating queerly, it is crucial to be aware of multiple oppressions and “challeng[e] the many norms that marginalize different groups or simply different ways of being.” It is thus necessary to make sure that your teaching is accessible for all. Queer classrooms are landscapes where power and oppression are challenged. It would be at odds with the purposes of queering classrooms to do so in a way that rendered them inaccessible to students of differing abilities. If queer classroom landscapes are to provide students with a lens through which to analyze sources of knowledge and power, interrogate their own assumptions, and challenge various forms of oppression, it is necessary that the spaces are radically inclusive and welcoming for all.

Don’t assume that all students can hear you if you stand behind them when speaking. Don’t assume that students sitting further away from whatever surface you are writing notes on can read what you are writing. Become an advocate for universal design on your campus. As defined by Goff and Higbee, universal design is an architectural framework that “promotes consideration of the needs of all potential users in the planning and development of a space.” Universal design eliminates the segregation many students (and faculty/staff) with disabilities may face by going about their daily business, such as using alternative accessible entrances. Universal design challenges this segregation and advocates for spaces that are accessible to all, such as building entrances with ramps for everyone to use rather than stairs for some and ramps for others.

Remember that accessible learning can happen in many ways. The women’s and gender studies course described in this chapter developed a classroom procedure to aid in consensus-style decision making adapted from those used in the Occupy Wall Street movement, as displayed in the following excerpt from the course syllabus:

- **Up-sparkles** (wiggling fingers in the upward direction)—These will be used to express overall agreement or consent with a previously said statement or suggestion/proposal.
- **Down-sparkles** (wiggling fingers in the downward direction)—These will be used to express disagreement, dissent or dislike with a previously said statement or suggestion/proposal.
- **Middle-sparkles** (fingers wiggle straight in front)—These will be used to express the “inbetween-ness” feeling in or of a situation or statement.
- **Finger point**—This will be used in instances of either a clarifying remark of a previously made statement or suggestion/proposal. This will also be used in times of urgent points that the individual feels must be made at that moment.
- **Triangle**—This will be used as a way of kindly bringing to attention disrespect of class conduct.
While it was not the class’s explicit intention to use hand motions to try and make the classroom more accessible, using visual modes of communication can be extremely helpful for students who have neuroatypicalities that include difficulty reading emotions. By visually displaying approval or disapproval of a decision at hand, it became much easier for those in the room to read the general group mood. In this way, landscaping the classroom space to ensure that all the students could see one another was crucial. This method has limitations, however. Most obviously, it would not have been accessible to a student who was visually impaired. It is important to work with the various abilities of students in your class to make sure that no one is excluded from the learning process.

4. *Queer the walls!*

**Artwork and visual representations**

While art can be one of the easiest ways to maintain heteronormativity, it can also be one of the easiest and most straightforward (no pun intended!) ways to queer your classroom. For example, Eric (Rico) Gutstein engaged students in analyzing map projections such as Mercator projection, the traditional map used in US schools, which distorts the size of land masses so that Europe appears relatively larger and South America and Africa appear relatively smaller than they actually are, and other projections such as the Peters projection that more accurately represents the relative size of land masses. Another way to challenge norms through representation choices on maps is to change the orientation of cardinal directions. For example, South rather than North can be placed at the top of the map. Such choices of map representations queer traditional world maps and make great pedagogical tools, especially for a professor of history or geography. How would your students react if your typical lesson included this map instead of the one that is “right side up”? Assuming that your students are from Western countries, how does this visual help them (re)conceptualize imperialism or Orientalism? How might such images influence student thinking over time or with repeated exposure?

**Get out of the classroom**

Perhaps one of the most necessary questions we should ask when queering classroom landscape is, “what is a classroom?” Educators and learners are often limited by the physical spaces to which they are arbitrarily confined. Go on a field trip, conduct class at a coffee shop or a park; hold class outside. Reconceptualize the classroom outside of four walls. If your campus is located in an urban area, explore alternative uses of public property—sidewalks, public parks, bus stops, libraries, and so on. If it
is not possible to leave your classroom space, consider bringing outside objects into the room, such as a plant, flowers, sand, or soil (although be mindful of the potential inconvenience this may pose to students who have allergies, and especially to the extra work this could potentially create for those who are responsible for cleaning your classrooms and other members of your campus community who use this space).

5. Get queer!

Queering involves challenging what has come to be considered “the norm.” Here are some other ways to queer classroom spaces.

Kinesthetic learning
Use the space differently: try having class in motion one day. Encourage students to discuss their weekly readings as they wander around campus on a nice day (or not—what lessons could be learned by spending time with your students outside when it is raining?). Visit a walking labyrinth or a meditative path if there is one nearby. Kinesthetic learning within the classroom can also stimulate new insights, especially if you use the vertical space of the classroom as well as the horizontal space (but keep in mind safety).

(Literal) Self-reflection
How would your students react if they were expected to interact with mirrors in class? What if students faced the “back” of a classroom and interacted with the professor behind them through a mirror? What sort of lessons could this teach students? Mirrors could serve as a pedagogical tool in a queered classroom landscape if they encourage students to think more critically about beauty, for example. They could facilitate students’ critical engagement with various perspectives and points of view as students looked at their classroom, classmates, campus, and selves differently.

Engage with chrononormativity
As explained earlier, chrononormativity is “the use of time to organize individual human bodies toward maximum productivity.” In general, students in the United States have been socialized since kindergarten to associate September with the beginning of a new school year, daytime as when school takes place, and evenings and weekends as time to do homework (some exceptions are, of course, home schooled students and students enrolled in night classes). What if educators chose to have classes at an unusual time, such as 6 am or 11 pm? What if classes met at
different times each day or for different lengths of time each class? What could students learn in regard to time management, organization, or student/teacher expectations if classes related to time nonchrononormatively? In what ways would and wouldn’t this clash with “straight time” aspects of each person’s life? Raising these questions with students is another way to be upfront about queerness—this time questioning time-related norm. Queering classroom landscapes involves queering spaces in time.

6. Think beyond your classroom

While an individual instructor is capable of queering even the more traditional spaces, building queerer classrooms from the foundation-up is the responsibility of the larger institution. While building an entire campus of queer classrooms using similar designs would diminish their queerness, institutions can intentionally create a diverse array of queer spaces across campus. It is unlikely that this will happen without advocacy, however. While laboratories, offices, and conference rooms generally have advocacy groups responsible for them, classrooms are often left without advocates. Because they are viewed as everyone’s responsibility, no one particular group advocates for them, and they become no one’s responsibility. Become a classroom advocate! Allen et al. suggest organizing a permanent classroom advocacy committee that includes “facilities planners and administrators, faculty, students, media support personnel, physical plant staff, and administrators who are concerned about the quality of instructional space on campus.” Assuming that (1) one of the main purposes of institutions of higher education is to teach students and (2) classrooms are the locations where this teaching occurs, it makes sense for institutions to dedicate resources and personnel toward thinking more deeply about these spaces. If forming a permanent committee is not possible currently, consider writing up a memo on classroom design and circulating it to the aforementioned parties. Anthony Weston created and circulated such a memo entitled “The Maximally Flexible Classroom.” He describes one example of a queer space at his institution, and explains its current uses and basic design principles, noting that it is spacious, open, has adjacent storage, and utilizes carefully selected furniture. In his memo, he suggested creating a classroom in which all of the walls were writable (e.g., by covering all surfaces with whiteboards or writable windows), locating it in an area that was immediately accessible to the outdoors, and including varied furniture. He also made suggestions related to classroom shape, window size, and inclusion of less common college classroom objects such as potted plants and terrariums.
7. Landscape creatively!

What else can you imagine in your classroom or on your campus? Brainstorm with other instructors and students to think about how you can make classroom landscapes a valuable part of your pedagogy—not just as a space for learning but a source of learning in and of itself.

Moving Forward

Muñoz writes that to “live inside straight time and ask for, desire and imagine another time and place is to represent and perform a desire that is both utopian and queer.” In this chapter, we described some of the ways in which the authors experienced this phenomenon at the university of focus through queering classroom and campus landscapes. However, the distinctions between the “here and there, and the world that the here and now organizes, are not fixed—they are already becoming undone in relation to forward-dawning futurity.” In other words, Muñoz explains, “queerness is still forming,” and, therefore, the form of queerness is utopian in that it always points toward a future form.

The queer landscaping process that began in this project points toward future forms for each of us. Kat is in the process of planning an interdisciplinary course that builds on insights from this project. Like this chapter itself, the course will interweave theoretical, practical, and “visions of the possible” registers. The course will examine queer and trans* activism from multiple interdisciplinary perspectives and blur the boundaries of the classroom/campus by inviting members of local activist groups onto the campus and moving class sessions into community spaces. Jess is considering graduate programs and careers related to higher education administration and/or social justice education, both of which present opportunities to challenge educational norms and queer classroom landscapes in the future. Lauren is still enrolled at the university of focus, ever conscious of the educational norms being disrupted or perpetuated by her fellow students and professors, both inside and outside the classroom. Her future aspirations include addressing health disparities affecting LGBTQ people through public health services and interventions.

We hope that the conversations started in this chapter will expand beyond ourselves as individuals and into a collective web of queer landscaping efforts. In reference to a manifesto by a group called the Third World Gay Revolution entitled “What We Want, What We Believe,” Muñoz highlights the role of the collective pronoun “we” in calling forth a queer collectivity in the making: “The ‘we’ speaks to a ‘we’ that is ‘not yet conscious,’ the future society that is being invoked and addressed at the same moment. The ‘we’ is not content to describe who the collective is but more nearly describes what the collective and the
larger social order could be, what it should be.” We wrote this chapter in an effort to begin a conversation at the intersection of queer pedagogy and classroom design, deconstructing educational norms and envisioning new possibilities. We hope that readers find our ideas worthwhile and engaging, worthy of further thought and mindful action. In an effort to encourage continued dialogue, to invoke the collectivity that will continue the queer landscaping process across time and spaces, we have created an online platform for discussing questions, ideas, and experiences at http://queerclassroomlandscaping.tumblr.com/. The authors may also be reached at queerclassroomlandscaping@gmail.com. We welcome critiques and look forward to hearing from you.

Notes

6. We would like to thank Stephen Bloch-Shulman for pointing out these three registers in our chapter and for suggesting the term “visions of the possible.”
7. Latin@ is used as a gender inclusive form of Latino/Latina.

8. We would like to thank the many people who made this book chapter possible. First and foremost, we would like to thank Dr. Stephen Bloch-Shulman, whose pedagogical choices set in motion a series of actions that resulted in this chapter. Without his willingness to trouble the distinctions between teacher/student, mind/body, and other taken-for-granted binaries, this chapter would not have been possible. We are further indebted to Dr. Stephen Bloch-Shulman, as well as Dr. Kirsten Ringelberg and Jenna Zirbel, for their insightful and invaluable feedback on drafts of this chapter. Several people have contributed to the chapter through personal communication including Holly Hodge, Dr. Peter Felten, Dr. Anthony Weston, Dr. Tony Crider, Dr. Mary Jo Festle, and Dr. Kirstin Ringelberg. We have also been sustained by the encouragement from Dr. Elizabeth Nelson and Dr. Rich Mihans. We feel extremely fortunate to be part of a critical community that supports us and our work.


11. Ibid.


20. Ibid.

21. Ibid.

22. While some courses (especially those in science fields) meet outside some or most of the time, each course also has a designated indoor classroom as well.


25. Ibid., 5.

26. Ibid., 4.

27. Ibid., 108.

28. Ibid., 5.


30. Ibid.

31. Ibid., 94.

32. Ibid., 95–96.

33. Ibid., 1.

34. Ibid.

35. Ibid., emphasis in the original.

36. Ibid., 3; Ernst Bloch, *Das Prinzip Hoffnung* (Berlin, Germany: Aufbau-Verlag, 1954).


38. Ibid., 6.

39. Ibid., 35–36.

40. Ibid., 37.

41. Ibid., 1.

42. We debated at length about whether to use the gender-neutral pronouns “ze” and “hir” throughout the chapter as generic pronouns for everyone. After discussion among ourselves as well as eliciting feedback from people of a variety of gender identities, we decided to use individually preferred pronouns (to the best of our knowledge). The purpose of using
gender-neutral pronouns as generics for everyone would be to increase readers’ familiarity with them with the hopes that gender-neutral pronouns would become more commonly used. In other words, the hope would be to participate in the performative production of a subpublic that uses gender-neutral pronouns on a regular basis, which would hopefully expand language to address greater gender diversity. However, we decided that the risks of this approach outweighed its positive potential. By using gender-neutral pronouns for everyone, we would be instituting a new generic pronoun, which could have the effect of difference blindness. This contrasts with the practice of using each person’s preferred gender pronoun, which focuses on using specific pronouns for each person based on the person’s expressed preference, and in that way acknowledges difference. Using gender-neutral pronouns for everyone overlooks both individual preference or identity and erases difference in another way: gender conforming and gender nonconforming people are positioned differently in relation to gender as a power system. Using gender-neutral pronouns both for people who can and do move unthinkingly and unquestioningly through the gendered world and for those for whom the gendered world currently in place is in some way problematic could also erase this important difference.

47. However, if one looks closely, there is a plug for an instructor’s station on the carpet to the right side of the white board. The architects insisted on including this in case the university wanted to install an instructor’s station at a later time.
48. Felten, interview by McDonald.
49. Ibid.
50. Ibid.
51. Holly Hodge, interview by Lauren Clapp and Jess McDonald, Elon, NC, May 9, 2012.
52. Ibid.; Note that the university of focus has the economic resources to fund an interior designer position, another reflection of economic privilege.
53. Ibid.
54. This example comes from Kirstin Ringelberg, personal communication.
55. During a speaking engagement at the university, Kate Bornstein visited the women’s and gender studies course of focus. She used this phrase with our class and we would like to acknowledge her as the source of this idea. We would also like to acknowledge, again, the privileges associated with attending a university that has the economic resources to bring such a speaker to campus and to the women’s and gender studies classroom.
57. Emily Goff and Jeanne Higbee, Pedagogy and Student Services for Institutional Transformation: Implementing Universal Design in Higher Education (Minneapolis, MN: Reagents of the University of Minnesota, Center for Research on Developmental Education and Urban Literacy, College of Education and Human Development, University of Minnesota, 2008).
58. Screenshot is from the women’s and gender studies course syllabus, Spring 2012. The hand motions described in this section of the syllabus are adapted by those used by the Occupy Wall Street movement, which several students in the class learned when they visited Occupy Wall Street in New York City. These hand motions have been adapted by those used by other feminist/collective movements throughout history. More information can be found here: http://www.nycga.net/resources/general-assembly-guide/.
59. Kirstin Ringelberg, personal communication.
61. Freeman, Time Binds, 3.
63. Ibid., 1–2.
67. Ibid., 29.
68. Ibid.
69. Ibid., 20.
Part IV

Queer Political Activism
Chapter 7

The Utopia of Europe’s LGBTQ Visibility Campaigns in the Politics of Everyday Life: The Utopic of Social Hope in the Images of Queer Spaces

Pawel Leszkowicz and Tomasz Kitlinski

This chapter attempts to analyze Europe’s gay and lesbian visibility campaigns as places of utopian hope, acting for social change. We will scrutinize the social and political aspects of these community-based performative representations that project the utopic vision of the empowerment, celebration, and flourishing of queer intersubjectivities in public spaces. To examine this phenomenon of a new queer hope in utopianism, we dialogue with the ideas of Lee Edelman and draw on recent books by Laurent Berlant, José Esteban Muñoz, and Judith Halberstam while the philosophical work of Ernst Bloch and Hannah Arendt provides an inspiration for our thinking on utopias. Consequently, we interpret gay and lesbian visibility campaigns as taking action and as utopic making history and promise in futurity. By visibility campaigns we understand public images produced by a variety of queer organizations and displayed to foster lesbian and gay rights.

Gay and lesbian visibility campaigns constitute utopian representations of queer “intentional communities” throughout the continent and our aim is to investigate these actions from the point of view of gender, sexuality, race, and class. We conduct an analysis of the visibility campaigns and of the current discussions on LGBTQ rights in Europe within the framework of the EU’s human rights legislation. Queer rights visual campaigns create a utopian queer space that aims to transform the complex system of inequalities and prejudices that exist in various European countries. It is a vision of an imagined equal society of sexual diversities that tries to deal with and change the homophobic reality. In the discussion here we are asking: how successful has this been in a
Europe divided by different attitudes toward LGBTQ rights, and what mode of queer ideal do these posters set forth when applied in particular geographical contexts?

Cultural context in various parts of the continent conditions differences across countries. Throughout the member states of the European Union, antidiscriminatory legislation is in force, which, however, does not mean that the culture of equality is universal; same-sex partnership legislation (or a lack thereof) varies significantly. Within the EU only 11 countries have no recognition of same-sex partnership at all: Greece, Italy, Cyprus, Malta, Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia, Romania, Bulgaria, Slovakia, Poland. Moreover the constitutions of Bulgaria, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, and Poland restrictively define marriage as a union between a man and a woman. Twenty-first-century Europe is not a world center of toleration and democracy for all; in many places LGBTQ issues are still an issue—controversial, repressed, and marginalized.

In this text we primarily focus on one aspect of contemporary queer politics that deals with the recognition of same-sex partnerships. We realize that it is only one small and often contested element among the diversity of queer concerns. Yet, as we will see, the main European visual campaigns are preoccupied mainly with this issue as the pan-European same-sex relationships mutual recognition has been recently a hotly debated subject and an important part of the dream for a more equal and just Europe. An analysis of other crucial and current aspects of queer European policy such as transgender rights and LGBTQ refugees and migrants would require a separate (and very necessary!) text.

Queer utopia does not exist in European reality but rather in utopian images and projects that evoke hope. Through the examples of visual campaigns from such diverse countries as Britain, Italy, Croatia, Poland, the Czech Republic, Romania, and Ireland, we will explore how the visual representation of queer utopia is used as a form of political activism, while also playing an important role in the dominant image-based civilization. Exploring the European example of several queer rights visual campaigns focused on gay and lesbian couples, we would like to pose a transcontinental question: how do the utopic loci work as a visual representation of queerness and love?

**The Art of Imagining the Future**

Participation in visibility campaigns has become the first-person narrative of more and more queers; it is also our personal story. Having been engaged with queer academic ideas, as well as in creating real queer spaces and utopias through activist art, we are combining both theoretical and empirical perspectives, namely incorporating the methodological
approaches of reflective topical autobiography and critical cultural analysis to collect and analyze data for this chapter. As a couple, we participated in two visibility campaigns in Poland: *Let Us Be Seen* (2003) and *Equal in Europe* (2009) (coordinated by the NGO Campaign against Homophobia, with whom we still collaborate), both of which played a prominent part in sparking a debate about queerness in Poland. Moreover, as art curators we have organized three international art exhibitions in Poland and the UK that displayed a selection of gay and lesbian rights visual campaigns and placed them in the context of contemporary queer art. *Love is Love. Art as LGBTQ Activism: From Britain to Belarus* (2011) was held at the City Gallery Labirynt in Lublin, Poland, as part of the pan-European Transeuropa Festival. And the art show *Civil Partnerships: Queer and Feminist Art and Activism* (2012) was mounted at the University of Brighton in collaboration with Lara Perry’s Feminist Curatorial Network. Both exhibitions, through the display of these campaigns, tried to create queer spaces of learning, exchange, and affirmation that parallel, but also compare the utopian visions encoded in the posters.

These shows pose a separate issue related to the queer art exhibit as a utopian queer space, recently amplified by the *Ars Homo Erotica* (2010) exhibition at the National Museum of Poland in Warsaw authored by Pawel Leszkowicz. As Nicola Ashmore comments in *Journal of Curatorial Studies*, “[t]his curatorial approach effectively queered the Museum’s entire holding, moving queerness from the margins to the centre within the National Museum while subverting existing dominant narratives [. . .] the exhibition was part of a larger set of changes, instigated by the new director Piotr Piotrowski (2009–2011), to locate the National Museum as an agent of cultural and political change.” During the three months in which *Ars Homo Erotica* took place, the Museum was turned into a queer utopia. It was an embodied vision of the national museum that grapples with burning social issues—such as queer rights in new postcommunist incomplete democracies. In the past 15 years, queer art has unleashed the power of the image—that visual representation is at the very center of social and political struggle for democratic rights. *Ars Homo Erotica* was directly engaged in queer rights campaigns in Central and Eastern Europe as evidenced in *the Art Newspaper*, where Julia Michalska wrote, “Poland’s National Museum champions gay rights.”

The exhibition *Ars Homo Erotica* presented over two hundred artworks from antiquity to the twenty-first century, offering a homoerotic perspective on the entire collection of the National Museum in Warsaw, and on the art of Central and Eastern Europe more broadly. Works from the collection of the Museum, as well as works by specially invited contemporary artists, surveyed the cultural history and contemporary
politics of this region from a queer perspective. Examples of visual campaigns were strategically displayed alongside works of art and placed in the very center of the exhibition. The contemporary utopia of same-sex love depicted on the posters corresponded with the utopian history of male and female homoeroticism reflected in the history of art. As influential media outlet Deutsche Welle observes, “[p]arts of the show are addressed to young gay visitors who are still grappling with their identity.” 9 The posters of the visibility campaigns were presented in the first section of the exhibition entitled The Time of Struggle that reflected upon the world of turbulent contemporary sexual politics in Central and Eastern Europe and art that deals with it. 10

We argue for an understanding of these visual campaigns as an art form with its own aesthetic and political imagery and sense of performativity. Here we follow ideas proposed by José Esteban Muñoz in Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity (2009), concerning the political potential of performative gestures and aesthetic works for queer futurity. Whereas Muñoz concentrates on the transgressive potential of individual edgy artists, we argue that LGBTQ posters and advertisements created within the framework of human rights/queer activism “do” the similar work of opening, via visual/aesthetic means, a window toward the future of queer equality and presence. Although these visual campaigns tend to be identified with the simplistic and assimilationist politics of earlier emancipation movements, they successfully project a utopian space of queer happiness that disrupts heteronormative reality, opposes right-wing “moral” politics, and mobilizes queer collectivity. Reminiscent of Muñoz’s call for queer collectivity, these activists and designers collaborate to create performative and visual scenes that express a longing for a queer utopia that arises from the unjust reality of their struggle.

Utopia is always historically and geographically specific. Some campaigns focus on the sheer visibility of LGBTQ subjects in cultures where they are totally invisible and covered by a heterosexist filter. The projected utopia in the campaigns analyzed here depicts a pluralistic reality of straight and queer coexistence. Other campaigns that portray gay and lesbian loving couples are calling for the legalization of same-sex partnership in countries where these kinds of legal provisions are absent and treated as a utopian queer future and a new form of “world making,” not as an inclusion into the current heteronormative order, which would be totally disrupted by this new legal and cultural framework of partnerships. This seems to be one of the many possibilities provided by the queer utopian optimism envisioned by Muñoz, and the transgressive artistic dimension of these activists and aesthetic projects. We recognize that the achievement of so-called same-sex marriage is not a universally
acknowledged queer utopia and that it has been criticized by some queer academics.11 We are aware that this is the subject of heated debate within queer circles, but it is our conviction that the legal recognition of same-sex partnership is one of many that disrupt and change the heteronormative system that was traditionally founded on the exclusion or the acknowledgment of this mode of love. The legal recognition of same-sex marriage is subversive because it gives people rights that were previously denied to them.

We would like to approach the artistic and aesthetic dimension of visibility campaigns from the perspective of “low theory” used by Judith Halberstam in *The Queer Art of Failure* (2011). These posters are often treated as mere agitprop images positioned lower than art and closer to advertisements. Yet, in fact they are subvertisements! Their alleged artistic or aesthetic failure does not impinge on the power of their visibility in the political/public space, and the mobilization of social debates on queer futurity taking place around them, as well as opposition against it. To add to that, they bring back the experience of visual HIV/AIDS activist projects from the 1980s, updated for current emancipatory or dissident agendas tailored for local contexts in the twenty-first century. They are an example of public art at its most effective, powerful, and provocative.

We would like to begin by looking at the utopian, intimate, and political geography set forth in some of these campaigns. Their iconography will shine some light on the understanding of queer space and queer utopia in this form of visual activism. We will focus on the queer utopia of love, diversity, and childhood.

### The Queer Utopia of Love

The social campaign of photography for lesbian and gay rights *Civilità Prodotto Tipico Friulano* (2010) was coordinated by the main Italian LGBTQ organization Arcigay, active since 1985. This campaign was set up in the autonomous region of Friuli-Venezia Giulia in Northern Italy and, in the antidiscriminatory spirit of the European Union, was supported by local municipalities in the cities of Pordenone and Udine, where posters were displayed on the streets and in many public institutions. The motto *Tolerance—Local Tradition* refers to the culinary specialties of the region—wine, cheese, and ham—that are represented in the foreground of the image. Portraits of kissing lesbian and gay couples sitting at a table among these local goodies are depicted as a part of the local tradition of good food and life. Like many Italian campaigns, the photograph has the lush quality and sexiness characteristic of fashion advertisements. The same-sex couples are model-like, young, attractive,
gender normative, and embraced in a passionate kiss. The poster emanates an aura of sensuality, comfort, and luxury. One immediately wants to be in this Italian restaurant on a happy date in such a tolerant place. More than that, the lower caption reads “Pordenone contro l’omofobia” (Pordenone against homophobia). 

Undoubtedly, it is an image of romantic and geographical utopia, one certainly experienced by some well-off and young same-sex couples in the more affluent and liberal northern Italy, yet hardly in accord with its poor legal record in LGBTQ rights. Italy remains one of the very few Western (non-former-communist) European countries that still lack any recognition of same-sex unions. The homophobic influence of the Catholic Church there permeates many levels of society, and politics in general remain traditional and strongly patriarchal. Italy, the ancient hub of homosexual civilization, is hardly a contemporary queer utopia. It has for years rejected every proposed law that would have made life better for LGBTQ citizens. Yet, these posters visualize this specific region as a gay and lesbian commercial and romantic paradise where same-sex love flourishes and homophobia does not exist. The well-intended message of the image is ambivalent: it is unclear if it represents the reality of the moment or an ideal that one wants to achieve in the future. For many outsiders, it definitely projects a false image of Italy as a land of homosexual dreams and enforces the seemingly timeless Mediterranean myth. It is, at the same time, a serious gay and lesbian rights campaign in a country that needs change—and a tourist commercial for gay and lesbian magazines.

The Italian campaign, like many others of this type, is based on same-sex romance, love, kissing, touching, the so-called tactful (albeit tactile) representation of blissful and cheerful relationships that are supposed to appeal to “straight hearts.” The images are never too sexual but almost always personal and warm. The intimate happiness of gay and lesbian couples showing their togetherness to the world constitutes the foundation of a queer utopia of love that dominates gay and lesbian visibility campaigns. This visual and emotional activist strategy has often been criticized, especially from the position of queer theory, for being oversimplified, predictable, and normative. To some these campaigns may stand out for their normative quality and an attachment to gender normative, youth-normative, and homonormative representations, erasing the differences of class, age, and race in the process. We appreciate these criticisms but simultaneously try to defend their value despite this weakness.

The most powerful criticism of these types of campaigns is that they are homonormative. Lisa Duggan posits that some gay and lesbian rights organizations and queer consumers do not contest the dominant heteronormative rules but sustain them working within—and not against—the contemporary economic and political systems of power.
organizations are too close to social and neoliberal conservatives endorsing family-oriented structures such as the binary gender system, domestic partnership, marriage, and adoption. Moreover, the homonormative gay and lesbian identity and politics tends to exclude and marginalize the BTQ—constituencies of LGBTQ.

We agree that according to this line of thinking many of the European gay and lesbian visibility and same-sex partnership campaigns may seem homonormative. Yet, they still have positive value because they foster human rights, equality, and champion gay and lesbian love and life in the public sphere. These campaigns are not useless but they should be supplemented by more diverse and -BTQ campaigns (a process that is already, as we will see, happening). Moreover, these gay and lesbian campaigns are national, and grounded in local languages, customs, cultures, and codes of behaviors and communication. They are designed as grassroots representations aimed at domestic audiences and cultures with their own national values. They are produced to communicate with the national public in a particular country, and sometimes even region or city. They are homonational but not nationalistic! They don’t promulgate nationalistic values but aim to foster changes within particular national cultural and legal context; these campaigns are buttressed by this political and geographical reality.

It is discomforting to judge these campaigns and activists—real struggling people—by the critical ideas produced within the national academic context of American queer theory. We appreciate the validity and necessity of some of the homonormative line of criticism, which in fact needs to be embraced by the activist agenda in order to broaden its vision. Nevertheless, we would like to defend the general strategy of picturing the tenderness, coziness, and sensuality of same-sex love between two people as queer utopia with a political and social effect that pushes toward democracy because it strives to give more rights and equality. In the sophisticated and often very academic queer agenda there should also be a place and tolerance for this type of simple but effective activist approach. It is precisely the value and presence of same-sex love that has been rejected in homophobic discourse and hate speech obsessed with images of queer abjection, including sexual abjection. It is love against hate, which indeed is a very utopian approach, but also one that demands respect and recognition.

Some contemporary queer artist movements and theorists have already sought the disruptive power of abjection to confront oppressive heteronormative cultural and social norms. Wallowing in abjection is a late twentieth-century strategy of subversion that, at one point, almost became a queer and feminist norm, exemplified by the international movement of abject art in the 1990s but also by the affirmation of some radical sexual practices and the recent antisocial turn in queer studies.
that embraces the death drive. This gripping type of queer agenda tends to present itself as cutting edge and very contemporary, but in fact it is part of an old, important, and very noble tradition of gay and lesbian expression, subversion, and thinking that incorporates transgressions and negative attitudes to negotiate and make use of them for the purpose of comic, political, or erotic emancipation. From this perspective, refined and sophisticated abjection became its own version of queer utopia, especially in a strongly homophobic culture. The works of the French writer Jean Genet are now almost a timeless archetype of this method of revolt. For example, analyzing the history of homosexuality in American art from the twentieth century, Richard Meyer demonstrated how gay artists incorporated censorship, negative stereotypes, and other signs of oppression to create confrontational and groundbreaking queer art. This tradition of negativity will always have a seductive artistic and intellectual potential but it is the product of a very homophobic past, and as we are moving away in many parts of the world from homophobic regimes toward heteronormative culture, more and more things are possible and a variety of strategies are needed.

Thus there is an alternative path of subversion through the political and therapeutic power of sublimation, aesthetics, and love. We would like to argue that since queerness in a homophobic society, including its pop/visual culture, is already identified with taboo, repulsion, and death, there is no need to confirm this already debased status through any creative activist, academic, or artistic work. Hence some artists and almost all activists have been searching for a way out from this dark pit. Lesbian and gay visual campaigns that depend on collaboration between artists and activists strategically play with the queer utopia of love to foster human rights in the democratic agora. Their figuration manipulates visual seduction, bodily delight, glamour, and intimacy. The subversive factor is brought to life through an aesthetic affirmation of gay and lesbian intimacies and lives and the centrality of the same-sex pair, to counter the heterosexist models of relationships and love that still permeate popular culture almost everywhere, from Hollywood to Bollywood. The dominant visual culture in its romantic and erotic allure is still globally heteronormative, with some rare gay or lesbian cameos; that is why the sentimental and “normative” queer utopia of love in gay and lesbian visual campaigns is still visually and socially disruptive in the everyday context.

Moreover, organizations and activists who construct queer love campaigns have increasingly been embracing the idea of diversification. From Italy we would like to move to the Czech Republic, the most liberal and secular country in the former Eastern Bloc. The organization Gay a Lesbicka Liga (GLL), which functioned from 2003 to 2010 before becoming the Platform for Recognition of Equality and Diversity (PROUD),
organized another social campaign of photography for lesbian and gay rights. The project started in 2005, just before the acceptance of same-sex domestic partnership in the Czech Republic. To encourage these new legislative changes, photographs of senior-citizen same-sex couples were distributed across cities and in the subway in Prague.

A casually dressed male couple is sitting on the park bench in the summer. They look into each other’s eyes, smile, and are engaged in a cheerful conversation. They sit close enough to suggest they are in a relationship; their hands are not touching, but there is a hint of an embrace, as the arm of one of the partners stretches behind the other’s back. The caption above the couple reads: “They have told each other everything in life. Except one thing: ‘I do.’” The second photograph presents two nicely dressed senior women sitting at a table and drinking tea from a beautiful pot. They are smiling at each other and holding one another’s hands, which are placed on a table covered by a pristine white cloth. There are pink flowers in the background and the caption above states: “Together they have so much in common, but together they can own nothing.” These images are different from other campaigns because they portray senior citizens in the scenery of romance and leisure. But like in the Italian campaign we do not know if the individuals are real couples or actors. However, the Czech campaign counters both legal discrimination of same-sex couples and ageism, embracing a more inclusive approach.21

The representations of happy couples in these projects are set up to advance and promote legalizing gay marriages or partnerships at a time when they are being hotly discussed in parliament and the media. Thus they envisage a queer utopia of fulfilled coupledom that might fully happen only after the demanded legal changes. Though EU regulations demand a clear antidiscriminatory policy on all grounds from every member state, they cannot intervene in the national family law concerning marriage. In Articles 10 and 19 the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union makes provisions for combating discrimination on the grounds of sexual orientation; the provisions were enacted by the 1999 Treaty of Amsterdam. Moreover, the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights in its Article 21 states that “any discrimination based on any ground such as […] sexual orientation shall be prohibited.” This Charter was agreed on in 2000 and became legally binding in 2009.22 Regrettably, the Charter of Fundamental Rights says that “the right to marry and the right to found a family shall be guaranteed in accordance with the national laws governing the exercise of these rights.” Thus the fight for partnership recognition is taking place on the national level and hence has a national character, which is visible also in the campaigns. In the EU same-sex partnership or even a mutual recognition of national civil contracts are still on the level of a political utopia.
Another case of topicality and inclusiveness, but also of the distinction of queer rights on a national level, is characteristic in one of the current Scottish campaigns, occurring at a time when Scotland is debating independence and desires to redefine itself as the most progressive and liberal country in the UK. To distinguish itself from England, the ruling Scottish National Party (SNP) supports marriage equality. The proposed new legal system would allow marriage and civil partnerships for all, regardless of gender or sexuality. Same-sex marriage and heterosexual civil partnerships would be possible, unlike in Britain where they are prohibited and strictly divided. This proposed reform is perfectly represented by Liberal Youth Scotland’s campaign, as it reflects a redefinition of marriage.

Their poster campaign queerly uses the cartoonist trope of wedding figures on top of a wedding cake. The traditional bride-and-groom images are dismantled and these rigid gender roles are complicated or even impossible to recognize. The scattered shapes and gender signs suggest a fragmentation and reordering of the idea of marriage and gender. The pink caption reads: “Equal Should Mean Equal. Separate Is Not Equal Make Marriage Gender Neutral.” Many queer ideas are combined in this poster, which tackles not only new, diverse concepts of marriage and partnership for all, but also hints at transgender identity—thus highlighting the issue of forced divorce for couples where one partner is transitioning gender.

In Croatia the lesbian organization LORI launched a visual campaign for queer rights, Love Is Love, in 2002. A monumental photograph of two young women hugging was placed on billboards with the caption: “Love Is Love” (figure 7.1).

**Figure 7.1** Lori, Love Is Love, 2002, Croatia © Lčzbijska organizacija Rijeka (LORI)
A real couple of lesbian activists (not actors/models) from LORI from the city of Rijeka sat for the photo. The images were displayed for a year in the streets while passers-by inscribed comments about same-sex unions on them. After the campaign was over, a special photographic exhibition in Zagreb documented all the friendly and aggressive inscriptions on the posters. This campaign was bravely organized in a country, formerly a part Yugoslavia, just few years after the end of a genocidal war in which sexualized hatred and violence against women played such a crucial and tragic role. On the poster, two young, smart looking, attractive, and openly lesbian women with short hair pose cheek to cheek, hugging each other. They smile, looking warmly and intelligently at the viewers. The optimism emanating from the image is persuasive. The fact that the posters were not destroyed but rather functioned as a blackboard to express varied opinions testifies to the amazing success in pioneering this campaign, especially in such a particularly troubled geographical context. But a similar campaign in Eastern Europe ignited a violent social conflict, which is not resolved to this day.

In 2003, a year before Poland joined the EU, 30 Polish gay and lesbian couples volunteered to participate in Let Us Be Seen, a series of photographs by the woman artist Karolina Bręgula. This social and visual campaign was organized by an NGO, Campaign against Homophobia, established in 2001. The couples were portrayed standing, smiling, and holding hands in the streets of Poland in the Winter (figure 7.2). The project was initially planned as a public art campaign to be displayed on city billboards. In this way, same-sex couples holding hands would inhabit the streets with straight couples as an equal part of society. This was the first coming-out of this scale in the country’s history. However, the billboards were left up only for two weeks. Although the photos were deliberately hung high enough to deter vandals, paint was splashed on them in hostile attempts to destroy the campaign; the commercial company that owns the billboard sites withdrew from the project, and some conservative city mayors opposed it. The campaign proved to be too brave and too utopian for the Polish streets at the time because queer couples holding hands were completely absent from the reality of urban spaces.

Since the streets proved inhospitable, art galleries functioned as alternative platforms for exposure, as a utopian queer space in the homophobic everyday reality. However, the Far-Right militia All-Polish Youth threatened gallery openings with violence, and members of the group were responsible for a fear campaign directed at the campaign. Events organized around the project required police protection. This reaction toward Let Us Be Seen began a two-year (2004–2006) period of banning and bashing queer parades in Poland. Let Us Be Seen provoked not only a
Figure 7.2  Karolina Bregula and the Campaign against Homophobia, *Let Us Be Seen*, 2003, Poland © Karolina Bregula.
hostile response, but also positive social and media reaction. There was a
dynamic and open public debate, which abolished the status quo of invis-
ibility and the taboo of “homosexuality” and prepared the background
for discussions on legislation for same-sex partnership. These so far futile negotiations are still taking place in 2012.

Projects like *Let Us Be Seen* look to place real same-sex couples via
visual representation into a public space normally unwelcoming toward
queer affection. The visual substitute stands in/substitutes for the real
presence or rather absence. Hence, considering the iconographic impor-
tance that the gesture of holding hands has, inhabiting the streets as
same-sex couples next to all the straight pairs safely displaying their bond
in public, has an empowering effect. The paradox is that in many urban
contexts gay and lesbian couples are totally absent from the streets or risk
their lives being themselves there. Thus these campaigns try to create a
utopian public space of amorous diversity that is impossible in reality.
Not only newly democratic Eastern Europe struggles with this menac-
ing urban heteronormativity, homophobic violence also happens on the
streets of Western European metropolises.

In 2009, in Britain, David Watkins initiated the social and performa-
tive campaign *A Day in Hand*, a day of holding hands by same-sex cou-
ples. Great Britain likes to present itself as the European beacon of queer
rights and culture, but in fact in terms of the northwestern European
framework it is a late bloomer. Rapid and progressive changes started to
happen only quite recently, since the civil partnership was introduced in
2004. The censorious antigay Section 28 that stated that a local author-
ity shall not promote homosexuality in the media and in education was
repealed only in 2003. What is more, major British cities, including
London, still struggle with notorious incidents of gay bashing. After the
traumatic experience of being bashed in London, Watkins started the
project. His aim is to encourage same-sex couples to hold hands in public
places collectively so as to pluralize public life and counteract hate crimes
and fear. The participants in this action perform on the streets and then
send photographs to www.adayinhand.com; in this way, the campaign is
taking place both in the city and on the Internet via visual representa-
tion. *A Day In Hand* has now taken on a transnational character, with
organizations in different parts of the world.

Initiatives like this inspire people to think about the potential of the
everyday urban sphere as a queer place, besides the usual gay ghettos or
the transitory spaces of Gay Prides. One might consider the enclosed and
temporary oasis of some clubs or museums/galleries during queer exhibi-
tions as territories of queer utopias, but gay and lesbian visual campaigns
located or acted out in public spaces try to transform the entire city into
a queer land of love or gender and sexual diversity. In this way, they are
agents not only of queerness and queer rights but foremost of democracy in its meaning as a public sphere of plurality and equality. Thus we would like to propose an understanding of queerness as democracy in the amorous realm, the realization of a queer utopia of diversity.

The Queer Utopia of Diversity?

In general the visibility campaigns anticipate two kinds of queer paradise: the queer utopia of love and the queer utopia of diversity. Queer culture and politics constantly struggle with inclusiveness, to embrace all the gender, sexual, racial and ethnic identities that make up the LGBTQ. On the practical level, it is almost impossible to encompass them all in one visual representation that would make sense and be convincing at the same time. Therefore, some designers decide to use cartoon-like signage instead of photographs of people, for example, the colorful posters produced by the Romanian organization Accept for the campaign *Stop Homophobia* (2007) (figure 7.3).

Accept Association is the most prominent LGBT organization in Romania, a country that decriminalized homosexuality very late in the year 2000, and only under strong pressure from the European Council. In 2007 Accept held an information campaign in Bucharest on homophobia to combat discrimination on the grounds of sexual orientation and gender identity. The posters that called for the “Acceptance of Diversity” used a range of figurines in different colors and genders to signify human diversity. They have a simple illustrative, almost childish character—friendly and nonconfrontational for the general public—as they were prominently displayed in the center of Bucharest.

The International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans, and Intersex Association (ILGA) is an international organization that exerts a great deal of effort to strongly represent the full diversity of identities, signified by the acronym LGBTQI. ILGA brings together hundreds of LGBTQI groups from around the world and has continental branches. ILGA-Europe is an international nongovernmental umbrella organization that brings together 360 other organizations from Europe. It was established as a separate region of Global ILGA, founded in 1978; ILGA-Europe became an independent legal entity in 1996, and has since become the largest organization pushing for common laws across Europe on LGBTQI issues ([www.ilga-europe.org](http://www.ilga-europe.org)). Its visual campaigns are mainly made up of photographs featuring diverse queer individuals, couples, or groups juxtaposed with informative captions in English about LGBTQI rights or their violation. Because EU law is clearly antidiscriminatory, the campaigns investigate and represent how it is abused or not implemented on the national level. The textual information accompanies the
photographic portraiture. The people portrayed in these educational campaigns represent a variety of races, ethnicities, ages, classes, and genders. Regrettably many of the national gay and lesbian campaigns are predominantly “white,” and are not inclusive enough for the racial and ethnic differences that constitute contemporary Europe. This lack of racial diversity and the marginalization of the transgender people do constitute a problem with these campaigns; they fail to embrace the multiplicity of ethnicity and queernesses.

**Figure 7.3** Accept, *Stop Homophobia*, 2007, Romania, poster designer Lucian David © ACCEPT Association.
ILGA in its visuals eliminated all the usual exclusion by reflecting the complexities of contemporary Europe. Many campaigns deal with specific issues concerning employment, housing, education, health care, emigration, partnership law, and social benefits. ILGA-Europe has a good record in campaigning for transgender rights. In 2009 it produced two posters, “Discrimination against transsexual employees is illegal” (figure 7.4) and “Transgender people are not mentally ill.” The clear captions were put next to photographs of posing transgender workers. ILGA’s campaigns are not particularly visually imaginative or artistic because they focus more on the educational message to give it a human face that reflects the full spectrum of humanity. Though only ILGA campaigns represent full diversity of the queer community, their weakness is that they tend to be in English; therefore, the national character/language is erased and they don’t have good placement in the urban space—they are mainly visible on websites or at ILGA’s events. The national campaigns that were presented as billboards and city-lights on the streets are the most effective and communicative, especially because they used the local languages.

The fact that the campaigns are not erotically provocative is essential in constructing visual campaigns coordinated by queer rights organizations. Because “homosexuality” is already such a provoking and polarizing issue throughout many cultural contexts, the images utilized in political campaigns tend to be tame and polite. Though inspired by commercials, campaigns employed as social ads rather avoid sexual and bodily provocations in order to depict people as “normal” and everyday as possible. This superficial and strategic normality in representing queer individuals tends to enrage queer theorists, who criticize the simplicity and banality of the form. But in fact these campaigns function in reality as a Trojan horse that hides content that, though concealed, queers the institutions of society; when realized, this utopia will totally dismantle the heteronormative construction of society. They advocate legal reforms unprecedented in the many national histories of justice related to gender and sexuality. They stand for a truly utopian dream of civilization without inequality, hatred, and discrimination.

Therefore, the designers of these campaigns struggle with iconography that has to be simple, iconic, informative, and friendly. The sensitive issue is how to represent people, how to give a face to a diversity of queer identities, how to use and at the same time avoid stereotypes, how not to put individuals who may risk their safety for participating in the campaigns in danger?

Faced with the complex problem of overrepresentation, some artists and critics opt out in favor of a nonrepresentational approach to queerness, suggesting that as a disruptive category it is beyond any single figuration of identity.28 Responding to the ethical and aesthetic discussions
concerning the vicissitudes of the depiction of people, some campaigns have resorted to plain typography and the use of mottos and captions only. The most celebrated and successful example of this type is the Stonewall campaign, *Some People Are Gay* (2007). Formed in 1989, Stonewall UK is the biggest LGBTQ organization in the UK and one of the most important in Europe. Stonewall prepared this poster and caption in collaboration with pupils and teachers at secondary schools.
The aim of the campaign is to oppose the bullying of lesbians and gays at schools. A number of British politicians and celebrities supported the action wearing T-shirts with the motto: “Some people are gay. Get over it!” which has since 2007 appeared on many posters, billboards, T-shirts, and badges. The poster is based on a simple typography with big block letters in white and black on top of a red background. It is also one of the least utopian campaigns, as it does not visualize some queer dream of love and diversity but simply states an obvious and transhistorical fact; that is why it breaks piercingly through the homophobic utopia of all heterosexual humanity.

The Queer Utopia of Childhood

A poster campaign against homophobia by the Tuscan Regional Government in Italy in 2007 featured a rosy-cheeked newborn baby with the word “Homosexual” on its hospital wristband. The accompanying caption reads: “Sexual Orientation Is Not a Choice.” The poster was distributed on city walls and in public offices throughout the region but sparked controversy with the Vatican, conservative politicians, as well as some queer activists who felt the image was too “biology-centric.”

For Catholics to suggest that homosexual tendencies were innate was misleading, shameful, and strange. The gay activist and philosopher Gianni Vattimo was not satisfied either; for him the ad risked suggesting gays and lesbians were a race apart. Yet, Italy’s main gay rights group Arcigay considered the ad to be at the vanguard of the struggle for equal rights and supported it. The controversial campaign, invented by the Canadian foundation Emergence, had been successfully used previously in Quebec. A consultant of the regional government, Agostino Fragai, who picked the campaign for the wealthy and historically progressive Tuscany region, said that the image is provocative but strong and tender and, therefore, it is good for raising awareness. The purpose of the campaign was to effectively curb discrimination rather than engage in the unresolved academic debate over whether sexual orientation is a product of nature or nurture. But what concerns us here is not this already tired debate, but the image and function of childhood for the queer agenda.

Lee Edelman argues that the figure of the child in the dominant political discourse expresses “reproductive futurism,” confirming the heteronormative order and excluding many queer subjects in the process. He brilliantly demonstrates how in film, literature, and politics heterosexual culture manipulates the child as a weapon against queer sexuality, where the protection of innocent children is a pretext for discrimination. As an alternative he proposes embracing queer negativity and a definitive
“no” to the oppressive futurity-centered culture embodied in the figure of the child. But as the Canadian and Italian campaigns testify, queer agenda and history have had a much more complicated relationship with childhood. And this not only concerns the inborn understanding of homosexuality. The Sexual Orientation Is Not a Choice campaign with the sweet baby is indeed provocative. There is also a more subversive tradition of conceptualizing childhood preciously as a place of original queerness and subversion, which goes back to the psychoanalytic belief, proposed by Sigmund Freud in *Three Contributions to the Sexual Theory* (1910), that a child’s sexuality is polymorphously perverse. Thus childhood might function as another radical queer utopia, a new place from which we might imagine a different kind of psychosomatic and social futurity—a psychosocial order that acknowledges the queerness of childhood and thus a system where the needs of child would not be inimical to the interests of queers.

This vision of psychoanalysis is radical indeed, but many programs, posters, and campaigns promoting gay and lesbian rights use the figure of the child in a totally different and less controversial way to advocate a better queer future or the right to a queer existence. They focus on the new queer family unit where children are happily reared in “gay marriages.” Representations of gay and lesbian mothers and fathers abound in the contemporary landscape of LGBTQ activism and in the West in general. *We Are Family* (2010) from Ireland is one of numerous examples.

It is a national poster campaign that gives visibility to same-sex families living in Ireland. The posters depict real couples, some with children, showing that these families exist in Ireland and calling on members of the public to help secure equal rights for them. *We Are Family* illustrates that lesbian and gay families are already part of the diverse family fabric of society. In Ireland, lesbian and gay families have no legal rights and protections currently because only a family based on marriage is recognized as a legal family unit.

The project was set up by the organization Marriage Equality, which works for civil marriage for gay and lesbian people and has been campaigning since February 2008 for the equality of same-sex couples, “our families and our children” ([http://www.marriagequality.ie/](http://www.marriagequality.ie/)). This focus on children is quite significant as an argument against the insufficiency of civil partnership law, which does not extend all the same rights to same-sex couples as marriage would, including rights in relation to children. From this agenda it is now clear that queer rights and the queer lifestyle include not only queer sex, but also rights for the children of queer people. Childhood is located within this framework, not outside. The face of the child is then essential for queer futurity and the rethinking thereof. For queer theorists like Lee Edelman this represents an
assimilationist position, but one may easily argue that the inclusion of childhood into queerness completely dismantles heteronormativity on many levels psychoanalytically and socially—for it places the figure of the child within the psychological and social space of queerness and not against it. The child becomes part of the LGBTQ community. In the twenty-first century childhood is no longer defined only by right-wing politics and culture, but has been reclaimed for the queer utopia. And this work continues.

Toward a Philosophy of Queer Utopia

Wayne Hudson identifies four functions of utopia: cognitive, educative, anticipatory, and causal. “Its cognitive function as a mode of operation for constructive reason, its educative function as a mythography which instructs men [sic] to will and desire more and better, its anticipatory function as a futurology of possibilities which later become actual, and its causal function as an agent of historical change.” Ruth Levitas adds a fifth function of utopia, “which precedes all of these: utopia’s expressive function, as an articulation of dissatisfaction.”

Queer visibility campaigns reflect all of these functions. They are set up to overcome the unsatisfactory state of human rights in many local contexts, and produce new knowledges about the LGBTQ situation. They teach about the possibilities for a better future and show how it might be possible to achieve it. Visibility campaigns are avenues within which political change can happen as they have a transformative power in ideas-images (Denkbilder). At the same time, the posters under discussion represent feeling-images (Gefühlsbilder), more often than not images of tenderness (Zärtlichkeitsbilder). They project a utopic Futurum and make history. These images are installed in public space, creating a new public realm. They are utopian per se as they visualize the reality that might come only by participating actively in the social transformation toward a more inclusive democracy.

Gay and lesbian visibility campaigns reclaim, reinvent, and queer the public sphere. Thus queer visibility campaigns could be interpreted in terms of Hannah Arendt’s philosophy of the public realm and of action; in fact queer visibility campaigns could be regarded as representative of neo-Arendtian action. Philosopher Richard J. Bernstein demonstrates how Arendt’s notion of action parallels the artistic phenomenon of action painting,33 likewise, we attempt to account action in visual culture, and consider these campaigns as art in a public sphere. In an Arendtian way, visibility campaigns endeavor action as (when Hannah Arendt was developing Augustine) a new beginning and as (when she was diagnosing the American Revolution) constitutio libertatis; herein, in our view, lies hope for democracies in crisis. Arendt prioritizes promise as action that
depends “on plurality, on the presence and acting of others.” Visibility campaigns are actions of promise.

Arendtian action brings a new existential beginning and entails political agency. As Margaret Canovan comments, for Arendt “human beings are creatures who act in the sense of starting things and setting off trains of events.” Julia Kristeva goes further to arrive at an interpretation of “Arendt’s concept of human life as a political action.” Seyla Benhabib emphasizes “the radical discovery of the link between action, narration, and interpretation” in the philosophy of Hannah Arendt. Hers is then a narrative, interpretative, and existential concept of action. Life itself is action—or to paraphrase Socrates, life worth living is activist life. Action constitutes a communicative, transforming interaction that produces social change. Action stands for “this acted narrative—often called living word” in the apt phrase of Julia Kristeva or “agonistic performance” in the reading of Dana Villa.

Hannah Arendt dubs action “the one miracle-working faculty of man, as Jesus of Nazareth, whose insights into this faculty can be compared in their originality and unprecedentedness with Socrates’ insights into the possibilities of thought, must have known very well.” Action evokes hope. For Arendt, action combines with her notion of natality and plurality. As to the latter, Arendt herself writes that “[a]ction, the only activity that goes on directly between men without the intermediary of things or matter, corresponds to the human condition of plurality.” Natality implies that everybody is a unique newcomer to the earth and hence, as Kristeva comments, “a political action that would be the equivalent of a birth and would offer shelter for our strangeness.” In our opinion action would offer shelter for queerness; more, action would throw a bomb of queerness. In action Arendt includes speech, theater, and politics. We regard images as action: visibility campaigns act; they are riots. The campaigns for social justice represent formidable political action. These visibility actions belong in participatory, direct democracy, the ideal of Hannah Arendt. Alongside the Occupy Movement, Indignados/Indignadas, Pussy Riot and Femen, the visibility campaigns aim to change the world. They embody hopefulness, an intimate democracy to come. Currently, democracy in Europe, particularly in Central-Eastern Europe, is majoritarian, incomplete, or “unfulfilled,” as Piotr Piotrowski calls it adequately. Images under discussion here healingly touch upon our continent’s deepest ailment, transgress discrimination, and create hope for a better future. This is an art in which aesthetics, love, ethics, and politics combine. That is why art of the intimate democracy might lead the art of democracy as a praxis of self-governing a pluralistic society, a Kristevan “confederation of strangenesses.” Lesbian and gay campaigning in visuality has contributed to the global culture of human rights. Being seen, imaging in the public imagination, becoming part
of European social imagery build a necessary utopia of action here and now. This is a reparation of the globe, a repair, “mending the world” (tikkun olam). We are speaking from experience because participation in two campaigns has made us realize how important visibility action is. Images of action—images in action make a difference, make our future. The campaigns equaled our coming out and directed our trajectories toward LGBTQ activism, our own vita activa. Subjectively, our subjectivity, has become agency; objectively, intersubjectivities represented in the images have turned into polities of futurity. In miniature, our life is before Let Us Be Seen and after it; with us or without, the history of Poland’s lesbian and gay rights is before and after the campaign; this is Eastern Europe’s Stonewall. Action here brings a new beginning. Arendtian action is unexpected, unpredictable, and queer indeed. In an Occupy e-magazine, Anthony Boese writes that “action is counter-normal.”

Visibility campaigns help bring forth a critique of hegemony and represent an alternative public. Queer utopia requires one to think and act toward new societies: from an “epistemology of the closet” to the political and visual representation of queers in the public sphere. Visibility campaigns attempt to construct new subjectivities and intersubjectivities of love and family. Etymologically, utopia means “no place”: ὅντοπος. In selected contexts, Europe is trying to implement these “no places,” but as queers we are still atopos (“out of place,” as Socrates defined it himself). Therefore, there is an urgent need to produce an alternative space, a queer eutopia.

Like Muñoz’s Cruising Utopia, the work of Ernst Bloch is an inspiration for our thinking about utopias. Here we are developing Bloch’s ideas from The Spirit of Utopia for our queer reading of visibility campaigning. His work propounds powerful theories about making history in futurity. In queer studies there has been too much emphasis on the past, and not enough on the future. This is also what Bloch claimed in postulating a futurity of utopianism. Utopia can serve as a new form of solidarity, as well as opposition, contestation, dissidence. It can assume “a hope-filled wrath on a note of a satis est (that’s enough), which in the LGBTQ movement may be exemplified through activism. Queer visibility campaigns are part of the spirit and body of utopia; they project the idea of a polity and an intentional body politic. They bring an anticipatory consciousness, as well as the Blochian Not-Yet-Conscious. Therefore, utopia evokes the new (novum), which is an alternative to the dominant order. Utopia thus works toward social change.

Generally, utopia and life drive are linked. According to Bloch, utopia and hope are inseparable. Utopianism produces a picture of a better world emerging out of hope. In this vein, LGBTQ visibility campaigns
reimage, reimagine, rethink innovative existence; they represent hope for a new model of life. They reinvent the future and create new history; utopian visibility campaigns constitute a push toward democracy. Queer visibility campaigns encapsulate the principle of utopian hope in the visual culture of today, representing the futurity of a LGBT polis; therefore, they belong to the social turn in the queer paradigm. At the same time these campaigns have an epistemological value, as they follow a Blochian process of hope in search of understanding (spes quaerens intellectum), producing a learned hope (docta spes); this resembles the Engelsian shift from utopia to scholarship (von der Utopie Zur Wissenschaft). At the same time, and importantly, utopia contains social criticism, prophetic ire foundering.

Following in the footsteps of his mentor Georg Simmel, Ernst Bloch explores the everyday; so does José Esteban Muñoz. Europe’s gay and lesbian visibility campaigns are characterized by the quotidian; at the same time, they belong to a Muñozian “performance of utopia.” In his oracular style Ernst Bloch could call the utopic spaces of visibility campaigns “anticipatory illumination” (Vor-Schein); they represent the Blochian “something better.” Such utopian experimentation points toward and looks forward to freedom. A fairer polity is won through the communal action of visuality. These images, with many participating and thousands to see, work for a better future.

At stake are images of love and life that promise a democracy to come. A new reality of our fulfilled utopia will cultivate a caring LGBTQ community of love. The vision of social betterment represented in visibility campaigns inspires revolt against the status quo. The images enable us to feel and think through our discontent with the unjust present and author a futurity. Visibility campaigns strive for an actualization of queer utopia. As vehicles of political transformation, the utopic images evoke an approach, expect and begin an overthrow of the current dystopia, creating a new polity. An alternative model of society is being envisioned now in queer visual culture; this vision is crucial to the questions of political and artistic representation in calling for more participation; visibility campaigns invite participation and argue for participatory democracy. Rejecting a homeland as origin (and the principle of nationalism), queers look for a Blochian “homeland” in the future as a goal of their utopian quest. Visibility campaigns contain the future in the here and now.

Visibility actions postulate subjectivities and intersubjectivities, the Blochian Self-encounters and We-encounters; they project both the free individual and the free LGBTQ community. Visibility campaigns belong to “utopian longing” (the subtitle of an exchange between Bloch and Adorno). Times of crisis such as the current economic (and ethical!)
one necessitate utopias. Utopia places queer hope at the heart of sexual politics. Desire and artistic sublimation for a better future unfold in the images of social protest and political proposal.

LGBTQ subjectivities-in-love and subjectivities-in-diversity are in the process of constructing a new world. Their/our images are introducing a futurity of fulfillment, solidarity, social justice. Blochian glimpses of a fairer world are being created in the images of queer hope. This utopia raises questions about the repressive past and the oppressive present, and looks forward to a new beginning.

Queer visibility campaigns develop sociality and publics. Marx and Engels, in their eleventh thesis on Feuerbach, not only interpret but also change the world. They argue for a much-needed new social turn in queer studies as they are powerfully committed to social change. Let us dare to create spaces of utopia, made by LGBTQ people for a more truly human existence. Let us dare life. Our rights, aspirations, and dreams evoke images that mobilize others into action. Queer visibility campaigns are messages from the future that make us visualize, see, and act now. They are transformative interventions into today’s society, politics, and everyday life. Not death drive, but hope (this nondeath!) is at work in queer visibility actions; Blochian “militant optimism” and Berlantian “cruel optimism” drives the images under discussion here. Queering and utopinizing images create new spaces of hope. Only life matters. Human existence is announced truly in LGBTQ visibility campaigns. Through action, through images of action, the Blochian “unalienated humanum” is yet to come. Building a futurity through visual culture, queer dreams may be realized.

Visibility campaigns, like art, constitute laboratories that allow for experimentation by innovative queer communities, which are only just beginning or never even existed before. European approaches to queer-ness still leave much to be desired—socially and politically; that is why the phrase of the utopian philosopher Ernst Bloch “Not Yet” (Noch Nicht), recalled and developed by José Esteban Muñoz, is becoming ever more pertinent. Europe is not a utopia—from structural homophobia and police brutality toward queers in Russia and Belarus, and right-wing heterosexist supremacy in Poland and Hungary, to illegal gay bashing in Britain and France. That is why it badly needs utopian visibility campaigns. In our work we continue to investigate two sides of Europe: the EU as a promoter of antidiscrimination legislation and a beacon of queer rights and culture versus the Old Continent as a place of prejudices that often lead to violence.

Today utopia is new (again!) and brings much-needed solidarity. Poland’s lesbian and gay visibility campaign Let Us Be Seen (2003) offered an alternative to the status quo and projected a new modality; this action was opposed by hate speech and vandalism, which testifies
to the significant message, political and affective charge of the project. A cause célèbre across Central and Eastern Europe, *Let Us Be Seen* has contributed to changes in this part of the continent. Eastern Europe is a very special case because communism often drew upon utopian thinking. In other words, communism aimed to forge the future. “[A]lthough the Communist regimes, in their positive content, were mostly a dismal failure, generating terror and misery, they simultaneously opened up a certain space, the space of utopian expectations which, among other things, enabled us to measure the failure of actually existing Socialism itself.”47 Even dissidents adopted this utopian thinking. In the end, the failure of communism is the failure of utopia. The postcommunist transition that was to bring another version of utopia—this time a capitalist utopia—has also failed. Postcommunism saw the reemergence of Far-Right utopianized thinking, which is attempting to realize the concept of a conservative revolution.

We do not omit the constraints of utopia; having lived through the late-communist era of the 1980s, we are aware of the false consciousness of utopia created in the attempt to realize it. Yet, we are aware that a new utopianism is badly needed today. We certainly need a new beginning, establishing utopian thought and projecting an imaginary ideal society in the new Europe. Let us dare an imagining, imaging, and thinking, promising a queer utopia to create a new social space. Europe’s gay and lesbian visibility campaigns are a call to action—to bring about social change.

In the current temporality of Europe, the crucial question is an ethical one; how to be hospitable, live together, caring for each other, respecting identity and difference alike? How to enhance our common humanity—shared with refugees dying at the borders of the EU and with women-, people-of-“subaltern”-ethnicities-, migrants-turned-slaves of austerity, Jews, Roma, homeless, unemployed, transgender, and queers, including LGBT asylum seekers deported from this continent.48 Excessive, if not pathological, cultivation of strict belonging to a “norm” (dominant nation, heteronormativity, privileged race, or class) to the detriment of those who do not should discontinue. Moreover, we should all share and participate in democracy. We badly need an eutopia in the EU. We dream of equal rights, visibility, good life, and a futurity of self- and community development. That’s why we badly need campaigns calling for a queer utopia, effective and affective as they have been presented in this contribution but more diverse than them.

**Notes**


8. “Ars Homo Erotica” is a survey of homoerotic imagery from antiquity to the present. The majority of the exhibition will feature classical works from the National Museum’s collection, juxtaposed with contemporary art. The director, Piotr Piotrowski, said its emphasis will lie on Eastern Central European art because “here the battle for equal rights for homosexuals continues.” There have been a number of voices speaking out against the show. At the end of 2009, Stanislaw Pieta, an MP for the Conservative Law and Justice Party, declared that, just as paedophilic and zoophilic art does not exist, “neither does homosexual art.” More recently, an “Open Letter in Defence of the Good Name of the National Museum in Warsaw” was published in right-wing publications. The signatories included artists, journalists, historians, and politicians”; Julia Michalska, “Poland’s National Museum Champions Gay Rights,” *Art Newspaper* 214 (June 2010); http://www.theartnewspaper.com/articles/Poland-s-National-Museum-champions-gay-rights/20962 (Accessed November 4, 2012).


12. The image of the Arcigay campaigns can be found on page 15 of the electronic version of the catalogue of an exhibition *Civil Partnerships: Queer and Feminist Art and Activism*, curated by Lara Perry and Pawel Leszkowicz at the University of Brighton in May 2012: http://arts.brighton.ac.uk/__data/assets/pdf_file/0009/65385/CivilP_Booklet_FINAL_email.pdf

Lesley Hall, and Gert Hekma (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press 1999), 134–135.


17. European scholars benefit from and contribute to US queer theory. Here is an example of the East European development of this: Robert Kulpa and Joanna Mizielinska, ed., De-Centring Western Sexualities Central and Eastern European Perspectives (London: Ashgate, 2011). With our East Europeanness queerness, we joined forces with an American scholar Joe Lockard to write “Monica Dreyfus” in Our Monica, Ourselves: The Clinton Affair and the National Interest (Sexual Cultures) edited by Lauren Berlant and Lisa Duggan (New York: New York University Press, 2001).


21. The image of Gay a Lesbicka Liga campaign can be found on page 13 of the electronic version of the catalogue of an exhibition Civil Partnerships. Queer and Feminist Art and Activism, curated by Lara Perry and Pawel Leszkowicz at the University of Brighton in May 2012: http://arts.brighton.ac.uk/__data/assets/pdf_file/0009/65385/CivilP_Booklet_FINAL_email.pdf


24. This is our first-person account: “Pawel moderated a town hall meeting about gay and lesbian rights set up by the director of a large public art gallery in Poland to welcome the exhibit of “Let Us Be Seen.” There was an unexpectedly high turnout of activists and academics. The All-Polish Youth also came. We asked for police protection. There was a crowd of passive, neutral, or friendly people there, plus a small hostile group which was very active, outspoken, and visible. Pawel had to control a small but militant group of skinheads and religious fundamentalists from the All-Polish Youth and the League of Polish Families. These men wanted to speak the most, voicing their prejudices against gay men. The rest of the participants—around one hundred people, mostly students and some local journalists—occasionally stood up to the attackers. Pawel managed to calm the members of the All-Polish Youth by allowing each person to speak, if only once. Miraculously, this somehow worked and many opinions were presented. Our face-to-face meeting with far-right fundamentalists confirmed for us that postcommunist nationalism in Eastern and Central Europe is carved from “racialized, sexualized, masculinist hatreds” [Zillah R. Eisenstein] and that, in a context of limited visibility and political power for marginalized groups, coming together to talk is an even more pressing need. Instead of excluding women and sexual minorities from discussion, there is an urgent need for openness and political hospitality.” Tomasz Kitlinski and Pawel Leszkowicz, “Let Us Be Seen: Gay Visibility in Homophobic Poland,” in Men Speak Out: Views on Gender, Sex, and Power, edited by Shira Tarrant. (London and New York: Routledge, 2008).


43. Kristeva, *Life Is a Narrative*, 89.
Futurity and Negation

*When you are a transsexual, you look for your future, and you can’t see it.*
—Lea T., the face of Givenchy, *New York Times*¹

*Racialized kids, queer kids, are not the sovereign princes of futurity.*
—José Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*²

Is there anything at all radical about queer sex? I want to use this question to situate the relatively recent antisocial turn in queer theory—exemplified by Lee Edelman’s theorization of *sinthomosexuality* in *No Future*, and taken to task by a number of theorists quite compellingly, among them José Esteban Muñoz in the tome *Cruising Utopia*, whose subtitle provides a hint to the contestatory terrain the work stakes out in relation to Edelman’s work: *The Then and There of Queer Futurity*. Muñoz seems to think we’ve got a future. Edelman thinks we don’t. Edelman seeks to think the negative, destructive force of queerness; Muñoz, rather, is in search of a certain queer positivity, a queer capacity to remake the world. Edelman seems, at first blush, to theorize the act of queer sex as a future-destroying force. Muñoz attempts, alternatively, to consider queer sex acts, and the modes of sociality constructed around and in conjunction with them, as part of a repertoire of practices that work in the service of producing utopic visions that imbue queer collectivities with the sense of having a future. In both of these works, however, the answer to this initial question—is there something radical about queer sex in itself?—seems to be yes. For Edelman, queer sex destroys the future; for Muñoz, it aids in building alternative ones.

Queers are thus confronted with the question of futurity: do we have a future or don’t we? Are we consigned to an anamnetic repetition of our
current conjuncture, that which Ernst Bloch (the German leftist utopist
whom Muñoz has resuscitated for the purposes of thinking queer world-
building) has theorized, following Nietzsche, as an eternal return of the
same, a constant, redundant retreading of the worn circuits of everyday
life in a milieu determined by the hegemonic, co-constitutive logics of
racist, misogynist, heterosexist, neoimperial capital? Are our conditions of
existence totally subsumed—that is, fully done over, exhausted—by these
logics, or do we have some space for intervention, and thus for invention?
Is negation, the destruction of these conditions of existence, the only
possibility? Are destruction and invention—and, by extension, the force
of negation and the force of positivity—necessarily incommensurable?

I hope to develop a thorough response to these questions over the
course of this chapter, particularly in dialogue with the various com-
muniqués and affiliated or influential theoretical texts developed by
and through the rhizomatically³ organized set of collective tendencies
indexed by the phrase Bash Back! But first, what is the future?

In Edelman’s theorization of futurity, the phenomenon of reproduc-
tion—and its concomitant valorization of the Child, who functions as the
figure to which social reality remains subordinate to the whims of, a sort
of tyrannical Violet Beauregard on steroids⁴—is central in constructing
the fantasy of a future. The future is, like all things that don’t exist (yet
or ever), a fantasy, although this does not mean it is not material and, in
fact, very real in its effects. In articulating the structural logic of futural
fantasy as explicitly reproductive, Edelman opens some space to consider
the ways in which a vested belief in what he calls “reproductive futurism”
operates as a hegemonic force of social structuration. It’s worth quoting
him at length on this relation between fantasy, futurity, and sociality, as
it is key to understanding the negative force of sinthomosexuality. He
asserts that

fantasy alone endows reality with fictional coherence and stability, which
seem to guarantee that such reality, the social world in which we take our
place, will still survive when we do not. It thus compels us to identify
ourselves with what’s to come by way of haven or defense against the ego’s
certain end…his name, that is, his surrogate, must take the subject’s place;
it must survive, if only in fantasy, because fantasy names the only place
where the desiring subject can live. The sheltering office of fantasy, in
concert with desire, absorbs us into scenic space until we seem to become
it, until we seem so fully at one with the setting of our fantasy, the frame
wherein we get to see what is where we are not, that the subject of fantasy,
Lacan asserts, where this fantasy space is concerned, though “frequently
unperceived…is always there….” To be there always, though unperceived,
to inhabit the space of perception as such and thus to become the wit-
ess to one’s absence, one’s disembodiment: such fantasy presumes real-
ity guaranteed, not threatened, by time, sustained by the certainty that a
What is detailed, here, is what Jacques Derrida has called “phallogocentrism” at its finest, although Edelman does not name it as such. If we follow the cues—the masculine gendering of this desiring subject, the central importance of passing down of a name—it becomes clear that the subject of this futural fantasy bears a distinct relation to the archetypal seed-sowing patriarch, ensconced so firmly in the tissue of familial—and, of course, Oedipal—reproductive logic that his fantasy has merged seamlessly with reality, thus rendering being-in-the-world an experience of “scenic space” entirely subsumed by the “sheltering office” of the eternal return of the patriarchal present. In order for this world, this “scenic space” to have meaning, consistency, “coherence and stability,” this subject invests heavily in the logic of repetitious reproduction, the creation of Mini-me progeny with ethical, political, economic, and erotic commitments to this very same fantasy, this heterosexist, seemingly consensual hallucination that structures wholesale the “social world in which we take our place.” All the world, in this account of futural fantasy, is a stage for this phallogocentric script; the rest of us—even those who actively disidentify with it—seem to just live on it, cast as supporting characters moving in and out of the scenic space of fantasy that has become coterminous with reality. The endless reiteration of this script guarantees the continuation of a “course of events” premeditated by this desiring subject. In order to have a future, the desiring subject must have progeny, in order that the anamnetic cycle of heterofamilial reproduction be repeated—this is, in short, what Edelman means by “reproductive futurism.”

This rendering of the desiring subject’s investment in the figure of the Child is what allows the subject to avoid engaging the great void, the absence of meaning, or the foundational lack that undergirds the futural fantasy that allows the social to cohere. The Child, in other words, fills in the Big Nothing that, in Lacanian psychoanalysis, operates under the name of sinthome. Edelman writes that this desiring subject is shaped by “a blindness to the arbitrary fixation of enjoyment [jouissance] responsible for its consistency,” and moreover it disavows “the meaningless fiat” of the sinthome and rather “misreads its identity as a metaphor instead, one that names its relation to an Other whose positivity seems to guarantee Symbolic reality itself.” Here, we must understand “enjoyment” as jouissance, which in Lacanian parlance denotes a specifically sexual kind of pleasure. The sinthome, relatedly, is the unanalyzable phenomenon that allows jouissance to occur. For Lacan—and for Edelman—jouissance is not about relation to the person, persons, or objects one is erotically involved with; rather, it is fundamentally arelational, and occurs
because of the *sinthome*, that “meaningless” dictator that is beyond psychoanalytic understanding. But, Edelman writes, the subject experiencing jouissance often gets confused about its nonrelational nature, and begins to believe jouissance is intricately linked to an Other that one experiences jouissance in the presence of. It is in this way that the subject begins to “believe in” the sinthome, to believe, to be clear, in the meaningfulness of orgasm. The maintenance of this belief is infinitely easier, in Edelman’s purview, for folks who engage in sex that contains the possibility of pro-creation, wherein the creation of the Child operates as the positivity that supplants the foundational lack that jouissance risks exposing. To put it reductively, perhaps, heterosexuals can convince themselves that there is a *telos*—evolutionarily, spiritually, whatever—to their fucking. Homosexuals, it seems, don’t, or can’t. The estrangement of homosexuals from reproductive futurism is what forces them to carry what Edelman calls:

> the burden of sexuality’s demeaning relation to the sinthome, the burden of what Lacan describes as the *absence* of a sexual relation: the absence, that is, of a complementarity to naturalize relations between the sexes insofar as all sexuality suffers the mark of the signifier as lack.  

Homosexuals, through engaging in “unnatural” sex acts, fuck in the *absence* of a sexual relation, or, in Lacanian terms, expose the notion that there is no such thing as a sexual relationship. It is in this way that they develop an ostensibly unmediated relationship to the meaningfulness of jouissance—in their estrangement from reproductive futurism, they become *narcissistic, dumb fuckers*. This is how homosexuals become a threat—in their eschewal of reproductive futurism, they “threaten a shutdown of life’s vital machinery by exposing it as machinery, by denying the spiritualization that would bathe it in the warmth of Symbolic meaning and deliver it to the midwives we’re compelled to become in the order of reproduction.”

Edelman articulates, and claims as desirable, this burden-become-threat that queers both bear and pose to reproductive futurism, through their ostensibly antisocial (i.e., nonrelational) sexualities focused on unrepentant and repeated access to jouissance. The embrace of this threat can be thought as a response to the neoliberal enfolding of certain privileged queer subjects into futural promises of the good life, a good life undergirded, largely, by the logic of reproductive futurism (marriage, inheritance, unfettered familial formation)—that which Lisa Duggan has termed *homonormativity*. The antisocial turn, through its valorization of the threat of the *sinthomosexual* and its reclamation of perverse sex as central to queer subjectivity, is also a refusal of the phenomenon of homonormativity. The embrace of the antisocial turn is interested,
by extension, in making queerness a threat again, in responding to the neoliberal assimilation of nonheterosexuality enabled by a caricature of tamed, desexualized, nonperverse, and consumer-oriented understandings of queer difference with a fierce declamation of the negative force of queer sex.

What’s so objectionable about that? To put it simply, it confuses a particular, hegemonic fantasy of the future with futurity full-stop. As Muñoz writes succinctly, “it is important not to hand over futurity to normative white reproductive futurity.” This raises several important questions: in what ways is Edelman’s notion of reproductive futurism tacitly coded as both white and overwhelmingly masculinist? To what extent is the neoliberal enfolding of “good” queers reliant on already extant classed, racial, and gendered privileges? Finally, following through on some of the implicated responses to these questions, it becomes integral to consider whether or not the antisocial thesis is an effective conceptual tool in theorizing resistance to both reproductive futurism as well as the lure of the homonormative.

As indexed by the epigraphs to this section, many minoritarian queers—trans folk, folks of color, economically disenfranchised, gender nonconforming queers—have never had the privilege of refusing the social contract of reproductive futurism, of deciding to embrace an alternative lifestyle modeled on what are quite obviously gay-male-specific sexual practices of asocial hook-ups. We never had to negate a future offered to us; we never felt we had one to begin with. To paraphrase translady model Lea T., we looked to the future and couldn’t see it. We had no horizon of possibility—this was, of course, in part on account of a sensed estrangement from the promised land of reproductive futurism, but not at all reducible to it. For some of us, it was on account of barely being able to navigate the everyday—it is difficult to imagine a future if you’re otherwise committed to the difficult work of having to scratch together enough money to eat, stay housed, and avoid collections; or gather together the emotional reserves necessary to inure oneself to repetitive quotidian violence. It is hard to invest in the promise of the Child when the promise of the next day is often nearly betrayed.

There is a reductive quality to Edelman’s coupled theorization of reproductive futurism and sinthomosexuality, wherein a thinly veiled white, heteronormative, overwhelmingly patriarchal conception of futurity is understood as exhaustive of the field of futural imaginaries at work in the construction of social collectivities, and, by contrast, the antisocial sexual practices of homos are posited as the unique, sole locus of threat, destabilization, or challenge to this figuration of futurity. A profoundly dyadic schema is set up, one that conflates reproductive futurism with the positive, active, engaged construction of social worlds, on the one hand, and unites queer sex and negation, on the other. This schematic
renders practices of queer world-making, countermemory, and utopian imagining unthinkable, as it flattens the meanings and potentialities of queer sexual practices at the same time as it refuses to consider a social and temporal field infinitely more complex than that accounted for by reproductive futurism.

Another way of putting this is as follows: for Edelman, there can only be one fantasy of the future, and it is reproductive. This means that the productive force of other futural fantasies is either ignored or negated within a strict understanding of reproductive futurism. The future is a one-(wedding)-ring-to-rule-them-all situation, wherein reproductive futurism is the only game in town, and the only way out is through the negation of the social bonds underwritten by this futural fantasy. Over and against this account of futurity, Muñoz proposes that in order to resist the violent banality of a present shaped by the ascendancy of racist homonationalism, assimilationist gay and lesbian realpolitik, and the increasing impossibility of carving out a livable future within the collapsing folds of neoimperial capital, we must glean resources from covered-over, partially forgotten, no-longer-conscious queer pasts to develop tools and skills—both conceptual and practical—that will allow us “to push beyond the impasse of the present.”\(^{15}\) He terms this project a “utopian hermeneutics” that is “queer in its aim to look for queer relational formations within the social,” and in terms of its temporality, shaped by what he calls an “idealist trajectory” characterized by “the work of not settling for the present, of asking and looking beyond the here and now.”\(^{16}\) He goes on to flesh out the temporal and ethical implications of this hermeneutic, positing it as

\(\textit{epistemologically and ontologically humble}\) in that it would not claim the epistemological certitude of a queerness we simply “know” but, instead, strain to activate the no-longer-conscious and to extend a glance toward that which is forward-dawning, anticipatory illuminations of the not-yet-conscious. The purpose of such temporal maneuvers is to wrest ourselves from the present’s stultifying hold, to know our queerness as a belonging in particularity that is not dictated or organized around the spirit of political impasse that characterizes the present.\(^{17}\)

In place of the future-negating \textit{sinthomosexual}, we have instead an epistemologically uncertain queerness \textit{a venir} that refuses fixity without sacrificing futural hope. Queerness is reconfigured here as a “belonging in particularity”—what he alternatively references, following Jean-Luc Nancy, as a queered iteration of “being singular plural”\(^{18}\)—that is fundamentally (though nonpredictably) social, rather than hermetically enclosed and solipsistically nonrelational. For Muñoz, queerness indexes a way of inhabiting the present differently, fueled by alternative sources
of imaginative sustenance that reconfigure hegemonic histories and aid in the construction of tentative, always-revisable blueprints in the service of constructing more livable futures for minoritarian folks, livable futures beyond the political horizons of neoliberalism. The threat of queerness, here, is not at all reducible to the self-shattering moments of jouissance in queer sex; fucking is not the privileged locus of resistance—rather, it is the counterpublics that cohere around queer sex acts that hold promise. It is the bonds, relationships, affinities, and crews that subsist, and are sustained—though only in part—through queer sex that are loci of resistance and transformation, not sex in itself. To put it differently, Muñoz thinks queerness in a register that outstrips and exceeds the merely sexual, and is instead considered as an ensemble of practices, epistememes, and affective orientations that are simultaneously resistant and visionary, both negating and productive of alternative imaginaries.

It is on account of this simultaneity of negation and production that the idea of utopia, in this understanding of queerness, serves as a means to critique the present. Queer utopias are ways of constructing a fantasy of what is possible through a recursive reference to counterhistories, to near-forgotten or obscured modes of being and acts of resistance, as well a way of sourcing and elaborating already existing forms-of-life that signify—or rather, don’t signify—as unintelligible, illegal, or unworkable according to hegemonic logics. As Ernst Bloch writes (and Muñoz cites), “the essential function of utopia is a critique of what is present. If we had not already gone beyond the barriers, we could not even perceive them as barriers.”

**Making Total Destroy: Inventive Destruction**

“A book that declares NO FUTURE offers only words. A riot that declares the same demonstrates a step towards insurrection. Death to the Academy!”

Tegan Eanelli, from the conclusion to *Queer UltraViolence: Bash Back! Anthology*

It is at this juncture of negation and radical inventiveness that the political work of Bash Back! can be located. Given Bash Back!’s commitment to a distinctly antiacademic, anti-institutional, and insurrectionary model of queer resistance, an engagement with the legacy, afterlives, and textual production of the collective tendency that travels under this moniker offers a way out of the worn circuits that constitute the insular and often circular debates of academic queer theory. Rather than framing the debate around the antisocial turn in queer theory as a mere rehearsal of the arguments that focus on the incompossibility of negation and futurity, engaging the work of Bash Back! offers another possibility. This
work is deeply involved in thinking the *copresence* of movements toward the utopic that are simultaneously negative, destructive, and violent. This engagement allows us to avoid reifying the notion that the construction of utopian imaginaries and the force of negation are somehow incomparable, or mutually exclusive.

Bash Back! has become a bit infamous for a series of compelling anti-homonormative demonstrations—for instance, their “glamdalization” of the Human Rights Campaign’s DC headquarters on the eve of their Presidential Dinner, where they bombed the building with glitter and pink and black spray paint, scralling “Quit Leaving Queers Behind” on the wall; or their infiltration of and subsequent action inside the notoriously homophobic Mt. Hope Church in Lansing, MI, wherein a banner reading “It’s Okay to Be Gay” was unfurled and proqueer flyers were released to flutter over the congregation.

We should not confuse Bash Back! with a distinct set of political organizations. There were certain “chapters” (for lack of a better word) of Bash Back! that formed between the years of 2008 and 2011, particularly following the formation of queer/trans* protest blocs at the 2008 Republican National Convention. These chapters, geographically speaking, were initially clustered in the Midwest (Chicago, Lansing, Milwaukee); however, by the 2009 Bash Back! convergence held in Chicago, folks from all corners of the United States, including both coasts, were present. However, there was no grand unified action plan to follow, no party line or official statement of position that was intended to operate monolithically to streamline these different articulations of Bash Back! For this reason, it is more appropriate to think of Bash Back! as an ensemble of everyday practices of resistance; a set of tendencies that both preexisted extant Bash Back! collectives and actions, and also, importantly, outlives the dissolution of these collectives.

It is for this reason that I’m more concerned with the textual theoretical productions affiliated with Bash Back! than I am with developing a critical analysis of certain well-known Bash Back! actions. These essays and communiqués, collected in the 2011 volume *Queer UltraViolence*, edited by Tegan Eanelli and Fray Baroque, provide a deeper sense of the forms-of-life being developed by contemporary queer anarchist crews. I think that these forms-of-life are the fount of the spectacular instances of resistance and protest that they enable, and are thus a rich site of inquiry, one that is important to consider as we develop collaborative tactics for radical queer world-making.

What one witnesses across the textual productions gathered under the name Bash Back! is a commitment to thinking the conditions of foreclosure, violence, blockage, and shunt in which queer lives, nevertheless, persist and flourish. The working understanding of what queerness itself
is both marks this commitment and points up the sometimes resonant, sometimes distinct differences between this understanding of queerness and operative understandings of the term in the often-rarefied realms of queer theory. The following quotation, taken from the introduction to *Queer UltraViolence*, is a useful place to begin to parse this difference:

The term *queer* in this book is used both loosely and inclusively. We view queer as the blurring of sexual and gender identities. *Queer* is the refusal of fixed identities. It is a war on all identity. In line with the Bash Back! tendency, for the uses of this anthology *queer* is *trans* because the gender binary is inherently oppressive. More often than not, our use of the term *queer* is interchangeable with our use of *trans*, though it is not necessarily true of the way in which *trans*whatever is used. We acknowledge that society ensures *Queer* is an oppressed identity. Anti-Queer oppression is the systematic violence encountered by people who fall outside of traditional sexual or gender categories.20

Although there is a certain carryover from iterations of queer theory that posit queerness as a site of destabilization or difference from the normative, there are nevertheless important distinctions to be made. While queerness has been posited, perhaps most famously by Michael Warner, as an identity without an essence, 21 Bash Back! revises the concept to indicate something more than an identity with the capacity to destabilize essentialist categorizations of gender identity and sexuality. Rather, queerness declares a “war on all identity,” an absolute refutation of identitarian logic full-stop. This refutation hinges on cognizing the fundamental complicity of all identity categories with regimes of biopolitical regulation.22 The target is not the unilateral, essentializing tendencies of identity, but the very phenomena of being identifiable itself. In keeping with this logic, it seems not to matter whether one claims a specific, single locus identity—lesbian, for instance—or an entirely more complex, intersectional one: homosexual biromantic, or transmasculine butch bottom. The proliferation of identitarian points enhances the capacities of biopolitical control; refusing to identify, actively blurring and rendering difficult the act of assigning substantive identitarian characteristics becomes the practice of queerness. Here, *queer* becomes something more than a big-tent umbrella term that names and collects together the various discontents of heteronormativity, which is arguably the manner in which it has come to function in dominant use. While it does name a certain difference from heteronormativity that has the capacity to coalesce or develop coalition between the different constituencies named by those ever growing acronyms (LGBTQQIA, QUILTBAG, whatever), this revised understanding of queerness more importantly marks a certain attitude, a certain existential comportment,
a certain mode of life organized over and against identitarian logic, and all the regimes of subjective and social control such logic supports. It names a posture of resistant negation, an inassimilable mode of being-in-the-world. Bash Back!’s revision of the meaning of “queer” refuses the collectivist logic of the acronym that seeks to map out shared interests across a field composed of “stakeholders” with distinct identities; it also refuses the obscuring of internal hegemony that such acronyms—and social justice efforts, institutions, and nonprofit organizations that claim them to their constituencies—often mask.

Relatedly, this parsing of queerness renders it impossible for queer to be utilized as a synonym for homosexual, which is exactly the move Edelman makes. Indeed, the whole apparatus that supports Edelman’s theorization of sinthomosexuality hinges on a hetero/homo dyad. Rather than privileging same-sex acts as the locus of queerness, Bash Back! foregrounds a certain estrangement from binary gender. In doing so, Bash Back! figures queerness as cohering at least one step back on the developmental course charted by what Butler has famously called the heterosexual matrix, and in doing so places the systemic oppressions that attend trans* subjectivities and existential practices primary, inverting the oft-taken-for-granted hierarchy within queer activist practices that relegates trans* concerns to afterthought, inessential status. This revisionary tack is of a piece with the general Bash Back! tendency to foreground the oppressive existential conditions of minoritarian queers, those furthest away from inhabiting the warm embrace of the homonormative; it is these queer subjects that, simultaneously, inhabit existential circumstances characterized by immense tension as well as produce the most tension in their interfurings with institutional and intersubjective realms dictated by normative logics.

The Mary Nardini Gang, an anonymous collective affiliated with Bash Back! and responsible for authoring a handful of texts that initially cropped up in Milwaukee, WI, circa 2009-ish, speak to this relation between tension and queerness in “Toward the Queerest Insurrection,” writing that

queer is a territory of tension, defined against the dominant narrative of white-hetero-monogamous-patriarchy, but also by an affinity with all who are marginalized, otherized, and oppressed. Queer is the abnormal, the strange, the dangerous. Queer involves our sexuality and our gender, but so much more. It is our desire and fantasies and more still. Queer is the cohesion of everything in conflict with the heterosexual capitalist world. Queer is a total rejection of the regime of the Normal.  

There are multiple paths out of or beyond tension—pacification, compromise, assimilation, the development of coping skills—but each of
these routes is summarily dismissed here, in favor of refusing the resolution of tension and instead amplifying the conflict that produces said tension in the first place. This amplification of conflict is a refusal of a politics of piecemeal compromise, a refusal of partisan politics, indeed a refusal of any concept of the political that relies on state collusion. It is for this reason that Bash Back! is better described not as a set of political collectivities but rather as an explicitly antipolitical force, a force of resistance through negation. In developing a critique and praxis that coheres around the total rejection of the nonconsensual hallucinatory reality underwritten by reproductive futurism, and all of the class-privileged and racialized baggage, which attends that reality, Bash Back!-affiliated texts and actions have served as the most public, most eloquent articulations of contemporary queer nihilism.

This style of queer nihilism should not be confused wholesale with Edelman’s writing on jouissance, self-shattering, and arelationality; while both are concerned with a certain destruction of reproductive futurism, Edelman’s formulation tends toward a certain kind of passive nihilism, whereas the queer nihilism fomented by the persons and collectivities affiliated with Bash Back! in recent years is anything but passive. Gender Mutiny, the collective responsible for authoring a text entitled “Preliminary Notes on Modes of Reproduction,” offers an important and influential synopsis of the nihilism at work in contemporary radical queer action: it is primarily concerned with illuminating and destroying what we can think of broadly as apparatuses of social reproduction that ensure queer subjugation. While these apparatuses work, in part, by and through the valorization of the Child so central to reproductive futurism, they do not begin nor end there. Reproduction is not mere pro-creation, with all of the generative myths about gender difference, familialism, domesticity, and the productivity of the couple who are embroidered thereupon. Reproduction indexes a much wider-ranging set of phenomena, referring not just to the familialist, Oedipalized production of subjectivities—Edelman’s prime targets of critique—but also to the proliferative production of identities altogether. Identities operate as so many interchangeable, commodifiable, and commodified memes in this line of thought. Gender Mutiny puts it:

The ability of capitalism to reach new markets, now that geographical and material expansion are complete, is based on its ability to reach ever-new identities. Thus identities must be produced, and produced as commodities. Identification—that is, the process of re-creationism—is the apparatus that produces these identities. Each new identity is a new tower to which consumers can flock to escape the passé nature of old ones. Eventually—that is, soon and very soon—there will have to be a tower for each person (“you know, there could be as many genders as there are people”).
Re-creationism is the phrase Gender Mutiny utilizes to place the apparatuses that ensure the reproduction of the social as derivative of, and intimately linked to, ideologies of pro-creation—with their strictly dichotomous and essentialized understandings of gender—as well as the fundamentally patriarchal concept of Western creationism, with its monist, masculinist valorization of Man as the only entity possessed of full, legitimate, and rational being. On the trajectory from creationism to pro-creationism, and from pro-creationism to re-creationism sketched by them, we see the multiplication of intelligible, taxonomic ontologies: the monism of Man entailed by creationism, the binarism of Man/Woman entailed by pro-creationism, and the arborescent multiplication of identity entailed by re-creationism, their shorthand for the production of legible beings enacted by contemporary capitalism. These proliferating, expanding taxonomies begin to produce something along the lines of “an identity for everyone, and every identity in its place!” Gender Mutiny subjects that oft-heard refrain, resounding in gender studies classrooms and among certain queer folks aiming to exhibit their understanding of gender nonconformance through a neoliberal embrace of diversity and ontological plurality, that there are “as many genders as there are people” to extreme criticism, pointing at the connections between re-creationism and current popular discourses on gender pluralism. Gender Mutiny asks, tacitly, what’s the point in investing a life’s work toward the production of a substantive, legible identity? What’s the point of endless consumption toward the end of producing a discrete, unique self? This is not a practice of freedom, but rather precisely what we’re conditioned to desire, a process of self-objectification that produces only nonthreatening differences, differences that don’t, in actuality, make any destructive or resistant difference to the ongoing work of capitalist commodification, but instead operate as the very motor that makes it run. Commodity logic is a difference engine; identity is its fuel.

In addition, these notions of gender plurality still maintain—in the notion of the poles between which a continuum is strung—the dyad of male/female. While no longer conceived as mutually exclusive, firmly bound, and determined entities, they have nevertheless not ceased to be the force that orchestrates the intelligibility—and, thus, the livability, the life chances—of bodies. What we end up with, if we keep to these notions of gender plurality, is a sort of kinder, gentler regime of gender binarism, willing to admit some mixity, some fluidity, but without sacrificing the all-important assignation of gender to morphology.

What Gender Mutiny proposes is this: rather than critiquing old identities in the service of constructing new ones, we destroy the apparatus of identitarian production instead. We have seen, now, how the invention of new identities quickly folds into the logic of assimilatory inclusion;
thus, queer nihilist inventiveness cannot cohere around this locus of the production of new, better, more subversive, more transgressive selves. Lamenting the fact that “on the stage set by the present order, the queer force is making itself busy with the proliferation of identities rather than the utter negation of them,” they theorize a counterforce to this positivity, proposing that “the negative queer project entails the negation of the existent, of the existent’s reproductive apparatuses, and of itself.” Queer nihilism is dedicated to the destruction of the present order, which means—in a way—a dedication to a certain identitarian suicide, an offing of the selves we’ve become under the current social order. For the destruction of the present hegemonic order of things is also the destruction of that which produces the constitutive criteria for queerness, perversion, and abnormality; with its negation comes the negation of the queer itself. This negation is borne “from an entire world of despair” and seeks “to destroy this world, render impotent its apparatuses of reproduction, and bring to an end its sense of the Future.”

In addition to these acts of negation, the texts affiliated with Bash Back! also develop an alternative futural fantasy capable of laying waste to the sense of the future ensured by the admixture of creationism, pro-creationism, and re-creationism. This is why the brand of queer nihilism developed across this corpus should be understood as an active nihilism. It is a nihilism composed of practices of liberatory destruction, advocating a set of destructive acts that work to amplify a deadness (i.e., a lack of vivacity, creativity, experimentation, and invention) ensured by contemporary apparatuses of social reproduction. This queer, active nihilism entails processes of resistant world-making that take place among the walking dead. Queer nihilism is a prefigurative politics intent on building new forms-of-life through practices of negation. Thus, even in a situation wherein the fabric of everyday life is entirely dominated by these merged logics of pro- and re-creationism, there is nevertheless the possibility of creative subversion through which new modes of being can be articulated, through which new collectivities can emerge, through which bonds are forged. On this point, some words from the Mary Nardini gang are appropriate:

In our revolt, we are developing a form of play. These are our experiments with autonomy, power, and force. We haven’t paid for anything we’re wearing and we rarely pay for food. We steal from our jobs and turn tricks to get by. We fuck in public and have never come harder. We swap tips and scams amid gossip and foreplay. We’ve looted the shit out of places and delight in sharing the booty. We wreck things at night and hold hands and skip all the way home. We are ever growing our informal support structures and we’ll always have each other’s backs. In our orgies,
riots, and heists, we are articulating the collectivity of, and deepening, these ruptures.²⁹

This laundry list of practices is, of course, not complete—but it does give some idea of the pragmatics of queer nihilism. These actions undertaken in projects of anarchist queer world-making—theft, vandalism, criminalized sex (it is worth remembering, here, that Lawrence and Garner vs. Texas made only domesticated and privatized iterations of queer sex legal) are all part of the practical toolbox; these practices coexist alongside other, more conventional practices of communization, like networks of mutual aid, squatted or otherwise collective housing, and the quotidian enactment of perverse, polyamorous affections, be they carnal, romantic, or otherwise. This ensemble of practices form the tentacles of a counterassemblage that exists within and against apparatuses of reproduction, in the fissures, ruptures, and cracks available in a highly regulated, deeply normative, censorious, and heavily policed present. They are a sort of utopian pragmatics that operates through what has been called crew logic—a way of understanding the development of resistant collectivities that is radically estranged from the institutionalized and commodified modes of communal coherence that so profoundly shape gaystream forms-of-life. The writings assembled within Queer UltraViolence trace the logic of these utopian pragmatics. If there is a legacy left to contemporary leftist and post-leftist queers by the work of Bash Back!, it is the ongoing enactment of these infrapolitical, communitarian actions that, committed to the negation of the neoliberal, homonormative present, help carve out spaces for living otherwise.

**Crew Logic: Cellular Nonstructures of Resistance**

*First things first, find some wild ass queers who just wanna run amok.*

From “I-Don’t-Bash-Back-I-Shoot-First”

What seem to be the nodes around which contemporary gaystream lifestyles cohere? The bar, perhaps; the network of sites associated with bourgeois gay and lesbian domesticity, many of which are niche-marketed to this particular demographic in pursuit of the pink dollar; popular gay and lesbian tourist destinations or events; mass demos and endless social networking memes concerned with limited, polite agitation for institutional inclusion. While it is quite apparent that these nodes are rather pointedly organized around consumptive practices, they are also structured around certain feelings, or at least the *promise* of particular feelings. Comfort, security, safety, contentedness, domestic bliss,
relaxation—there is something staid, sedentary, and static about these much-sought after, heavily marketed emotions, but also something absolutely unstable insofar as any one of us is able to wrangle and inhabit these feelings for any substantive length of time. This failure to attain the stability offered by the feelings that structure homonormative modes of life points out the idea that an attachment to them operates as a kind of cruel optimism. Lauren Berlant, in her eponymous book, offers up a useful synopsis of cruel optimism, writing that it names a relation of attachment to compromised conditions of possibility whose realization is discovered either to be impossible, sheer fantasy, or too possible, and toxic. What’s cruel about these attachments, and not merely inconvenient or tragic, is that the subjects who have x in their lives might not well endure the loss of their object/scene of desire, even though its presence threatens their well-being, because whatever the content of the attachment is, the continuity of its form provides something of the continuity of the subject’s sense of what it means to keep on living on and to look forward to being in the world.  

With Berlant in mind, I want to consider the impossibility of contemporary homonormative futural fantasies. What precarious assumptions do they rely upon? Economic stability, for one, in an era of massive recession, ever-increasing debt, and what some might argue is the inevitable and imminent collapse of transnational capital. For another, the likelihood of inhabiting a fulfilling long-term partnership in a milieu wherein erotic engagement and interest is mistakenly conceived as a likely bedfellow to long-term, quotidian commitment. Nevertheless, this gaystream romance with the notion of settling down persists in conditions radically hostile to its realization; the myth of bourgeois queer domesticity is made to seem desirable through its incessant reification, and the production of this lure of security, stability, and comfort in a deeply precarious time produces an ever-more entrenched embrace of the false promises on offer. Minoritarian queers are consistently let down by these promises; their attachment to homonormative futural fantasies, and the structures of feeling engendered by them, is often radically disappointed. This reliable disappointment is precisely that which renders an attachment to this mode of queer optimism, the putting-on of lavender-tinted lenses with which to perceive future possibilities for access to only-barely modified normative conceptions of the “good life,” entirely cruel.

Bash Back! affiliated demos, acts of sabotage, gangs, social scenes, and texts urge a refusal of this cruel optimism, and the concomitant attachment to staid, static, and conservative structures of feeling. Rather than cohering around comfort, they cohere around rage. An embrace of the
promise of comfort is entirely compatible with modes of assimilatory political organization that seek codified inclusion over the long-term, on the level of civic, state, and federal law—that is, to use Deleuzo-Guattarian terminology, a sedimented, molar form of politics that is resistant to change, and often persists in operation long after it has ceased to contribute to processes of social transformation. Molar politics can be understood as a type of political organization based on identitarian logic, founded in demographic understandings of difference, that utilizes equal rights claims in order to argue for the full civic inclusion of minorities. The Human Rights Campaign is one solid exemplar of a molar political organization, proffering an assimilatory, gaystream political agenda focused exclusively on issues of LGBT institutional inclusion and civil rights. Bash Back! deliberately rejects molar politics, and the comforting myths of inclusivity and tolerance that subtend these politics, in favor of a politics of rage.

What is the mode of operation proper to an (anti)politics organized around the feeling of rage? Rather than molar, it is molecular; rather than sedimented and resistant to change, it is rhizomatic and mutable. Rather than following conventional logics of political organization, it moves by and through the crew, the gang, the pack. Pack logic—as worked out by Deleuze and Guattari in the second plateau of *A Thousand Plateaus*—is resonant, perhaps even isomorphic with, the notion of crew logic worked out by the anonymous authors of “I-Don’t-Bash-Back-I-Shoot-First.” Packs are distinct kinds of collectivities, insofar as they maintain an intimate relationship with reaction and response on an intuitive, nearly pre-cognitive level. Packs don’t huddle in order to strategize and develop five-year plans; they don’t roundtable ideas and push paperwork through preordained bureaucratic channels; they move, act, and react utilizing only impromptu, often nonverbal processes of consensus; they don’t have laws, but rather operative rules of thumb based on prior experiential knowledges, and these rules of thumb are perennially up for revision, dependant as they are on shifts in milieu and pack constitution. Pack participants roam autonomously sometimes, while at others they gather collectively; the organization of the pack is never fixed, though it can be hierarchical—that is, there can be leaders, but there can never be only one, permanent leader. Packs are feral, untamed, and wild but are, for all that—or rather, precisely because of that—possessed of enormous, non-alienated collective intelligence. This pack logic is that which underlies the concrete processes of crew logic outlined in “I-Don’t-Bash-Back-I Shoot-First”:

Learn each other’s strengths and interests by hanging out together. Go everywhere with each other. Dance/sex parties like every week. Share your
shit. Free time spent and carved out with each other might be the most important element in starting to speak to each other. Egg each other on, support your friends—slowly, you will grow comfortable acting with each other, and responding to each other’s needs quickly—speaking means a few minutes till acting. Our coming together looks fly, and builds a common feeling along our sense of moving through this world. It’s this endearment to each other that builds trust, that teaches us to say what we need, and get angry enough to go get it. Our bonds put us out of the grasp of people wanting to direct us away from each other, away from our needs and wants, trying to manage, regulate, and make useful our hatred for everything. Instead, this bond puts us in a position to build our own power and autonomy.  

Crew logic, thought of as a process of developing rhizomatic collectivity, develops empathically and on the level of the molecular, through a slow and perhaps imperceptible process of gradually learning each other, which can ever happen only informally, not through corporatized team-building exercises or retreats. Intuitive collective (anti)political action is based upon this intuitional, empathic learning, what we can think of as a process of becoming integral to one another without arrogation or assimilation, beyond a demand for unitary sameness of desire or goal as well as beyond a banal, surface level valorization of identitarian difference. While an ongoing process, learning each other enables the avoidance of interminable discussion—for instance, the roundtable, consensus-based processing of idealized iterations of democratic governance so heavily fetishized by nonprofit organizations and statist leftists—and instead engenders movement into action—“speaking means a few minutes till acting.” Beyond providing a groundwork for direct action, crew building also redevelops the networks of support that fall out upon estrangement from those networks underwritten by the cruelly optimistic futural fantasies of both hetero- and homonormativity; knowing a queer crew has your back in terms of basic material and emotional existential support allows one to amplify and enhance autonomous potentials otherwise squelched, ignored, or left undeveloped. And best of all, one need not seek out corporate donors or file for 501(c)(3) status in order to propagate this collectivized autonomy.

**Beyond the Barricades: Building Insurrectionary Queer Histories of the Present**

The task laid out (and at least partially fulfilled) by Bash Back! is the negation of certain hegemonic futural fantasies so that minoritarian queers can have a future. There are certain tactics and rules of thumb that pragmatically guide these efforts in the service of realizing these
futures, tactics and rules of thumb that, together, compose a praxis of queer insurrectionary communization underwritten by a utopian imaginary. This imaginary insists on affirming that lives are possible in the ruptures of contemporary neoimperial capital, and that the forms-of-life developed in these ruptures are also prefigurative ways of working out more just, more autonomous, ultimately more livable queer lives than those gaystream identitarian lifestyle choices offered us.

In developing these prefigurative queer forms-of-life, there is a certain kind of historical sourcework that is developed, one that is very dissimilar from more conventional histories of the development of queer identity or LGBT activism. The point of most conventional historiographies of queer identity chart a (sometimes progressivist, sometimes not) evolution of identity—say, from bugger to pederast to sissy to uranian to homosexual—in such a way that insists on the dissimilarities between these identitarian constructions. Hegemonic historiographies of LGBT activism trace a progressivist, increasingly assimilationist path as well. A typical account begins with Mattachine Society and the Daughters of Bilitis, moves on to tamed accounts of Stonewall that place the integral participation of trans* folk and queers of color under erasure, proceeds on through to the formation of the Gay Men’s Health Crisis and ACT UP (often construed as a sort of Ur-moment of direct action wherein bourgeois white gay men marshaled considerable resources to bring pressure to bear on the pharmaceutical industry, the NIH, and local, state, and federal governments) and trucks forward to the legalization of privatized sodomy, the repeal of Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell, and partial state-level gains in relation to employment nondiscrimination, hate crimes legislation, adoption rights, and marriage rights.

The historiographical method that fuels queer anarchist action is estranged, in fact counterposed, to, two central components of conventional queer historiography. On the one hand, the project of developing a historical narrative of identitarian vicissitudes, one that renders identity an epistemic object as well as a historical artifact, is refused. On the other, the task of providing a progressivist account of ostensible gains made by and through gaystream LGBT activism is discarded. The kind of queer anarchist historiography undertaken in the service of developing a utopian pragmatics is rather that of constructing what Michel Foucault has termed a “history of the present.”

To write a history of the present is to work with a past that is not artifactual, unified, or sedimented, and thus not objectively knowable and explainable in terms of a fully given, understood, and transparent present. Rather, as Michael Roth summarizes pithily in his important essay on the concept, one writes a history of the present “in order to make that present into a past.” This occurs through uncovering ignored or
devalorized pasts that work to “rupture the present into a future that will leave the very function of history behind it.” Thus, histories of the present work to undo the tendency to cognize history as that to which a person or peoples clings tightly to provide coherent, legible, and reductively sensible understandings of the present. If a history of the present works to rupture that present in order to make metamorphosis and change (rather than linearized understandings of “progress”) possible, then it becomes necessary to concern oneself with the relationship between historical *a priori* and lines of flight. In order to do this, we must consider the relationship between the power/knowledge regimes that give forceful shape, structure, and legibility to an historical moment and those parallel lives shaped by efforts to rework and exceed those regimes, those efforts to make sense otherwise. To uncover those traces is to undertake a genealogical endeavor concerned with producing countermemories that rupture the sutures of hegemonic historical accounts.

Histories of the present can be thought of as tools that allow us to move beyond the political impasses of the present moment through documenting, to paraphrase Ernst Bloch, the barriers that have already been broken through. This historiographical method involves not the valorization of famous queer subjects or instances of moderate-left state collusion, but rather the recounting of near-forgotten, no-longer-conscious moments of insurrection. Some of these moments are large-scale, some smaller, more molecular instances of insurrection. They are not organized around the garnering of rights, but rather around articulating the linkages between the violence of the state, the violence of patriarchal rule under regimes of reproductive futurism, and the violence that attends biopolitical regulation of gender nonconformance and queer perversity. Thus, we see in *Queer UltraViolence* the inclusion of a timeline authored by Gender Mutiny, entitled “Hell Hath No Fury: A Chronology of Genderfuck Insurrection.” Transnational in scope, ranging back to Ancient Greece and surging forward to formation of Street Transvestite Action Revolutionaries (STAR) in 1970, this timeline establishes resonances between wildly diverse moments of insurrection that feature, as a primary component, practices of gender transgression deployed as a radical tactic. For instance, take the following entry:

17th century: Urban carnivals throughout Europe integrated cross-dressing and masks as key elements. The festivals were organized by societies of unmarried ‘men’ with trans personalities. They were called the Abbeys of Mistrule, Abbots of Unreason, Mère Folle and her children, etc. During festival, they would “hold court” with mock marriages, and issue coins to the crowds. They made fun of the government, critiqued the clergy, and protested war and the high cost of bread.36
Gender transgression, and the enactment of perverse, nonnormative sexualities, are historically important not for what they tell us about the telos of “modern” gay or lesbian identity, but for the ways in which they function as liberatory practices, the ways in which they demonstrate a commitment to uncivil disobedience and an embrace of modes of being at once subversive, threatening, and autonomous, and the ways in which they link into other insurrectionary movements. A radical queer history of the present, then, has a very different sense of political and theoretical legacies; the influences, the inherited conceptual and practical tools, are heteroclite, ranging well beyond a recuperation of specifically queer pasts and embracing many activists, thinkers, and movements not typically understood as “queer.”

For instance, the work of Deleuze and Guattari, the Situationists, the Black Panthers, STAR, FIERCE!, and autonomist feminists affiliated with the Italian workerist movement are much more profoundly influential for the development of contemporary queer utopian pragmatics than, say, the work of Larry Kramer, the Human Rights Campaign, and the National Center for Lesbian Rights. These latter figures and organizations—supernovas within the constellation of dominant narratives of the history of US-based LGBT political organization—have each advocated molar forms of political organization bent on inclusion within otherwise unchanged social and political apparatuses. The former figures and collectivities each, in their own way, contribute to a queer utopic pragmatism through stressing a revolutionary politic committed to tactics of negation in the name of developing liberatory futures, while at the same time emphasizing the importance of a prefigurative politics that makes space for resistant inhabitations of the present. Not all of these collectivities cohere around queer identity; the resonance between them is located in the simultaneity of negation and liberatory invention they advocate for. What is integral for a queer nihilist history of the present is researching the failures, successes, and alternative modes of being developed by thinkers and activists committed to negation, to the overturning of the present order of things, the amplification of conflict and the explosion of the sutures that hold together neoliberal, progressivist rewritings of history. We learn from these past insurrectionary efforts and instances of fugitive thought how to move beyond the anamnetic impasse of the present, how to destroy in the service of inventing another future, a queerer world. We may substantively lack hope—conceived as a firm belief in a better future—as we engage this project, but we operate, instead, in a situation of exhilarated despair.

Who needs hope, after all, when you’ve got a crew?
Notes


3. Here, the term “rhizomatically” is taken from the work of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari in *A Thousand Plateaus* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1987). For these thinkers, the rhizome is a metaphor developed in order to theorize nonhierarchical, nonofficial modes of political and social organization. These types of organization are characterized by their changeable, nonrigid nature. A rhizomatic organization is not predetermined, but develops organically through the connections and coalitions those beings involved make with one another; it can be ruptured, only to start up again utilizing a former part of a given rhizome. They respond easily to change within a milieu. Rhizomes work through continual generation and continual connection between unlikely participants; they are, in a way, the antithesis of the political party, the labor union, the nuclear family, the bureaucratic workplace, or any other highly stratified, rigidly organized type of political or social organization.

4. Violet Beauregarde is the infamously bratty, demanding, and intensely competitive character from Roald Dahl’s novel-turned-film *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*.


6. Ibid., 34.


8. Ibid., 36.

9. Ibid., 39.

10. Ibid., 44.


15. Ibid., 31.

16. Ibid., 28.

17. Ibid., 28.

18. Ibid., 10.
19. Ibid., 37.
22. One of the more systematic accounts of this concept is provided in the closing pages of Michel Foucault’s *Society Must Be Defended* (New York: Picador, 2003), the English translation of his lectures at the College de France in the academic year 1975–1976. He makes an initial distinction between biopolitics and disciplinary power, the form of power that targets individual bodies in order to regularize their operations, routinize their habits, and maximize their productive force. This disciplinarization of bodies was enacted through a series of dispositifs (apparatuses) that utilized “a whole system of surveillance, hierarchies, inspections, bookkeeping, and reports” (242); these dispositifs were utilized within, indeed formed the very fabric of, the sorts of disciplinary institutions Foucault spent much of his academic career investigating——prisons, schools, clinics. Much of his conceptual corpus is based upon careful investigation of the material traces of these systems of surveillance, hierarchization, and inspection——legal documents, case reports, and so on. Foucault locates the emergence of disciplinary power at the close of the seventeenth century, marking it as coterminous with the emergence of what we tend to gloss over as “modernity.” He submits that it develops its ganglia throughout the eighteenth century, and dovetails, in the midst of this century, with another emergent technology of power that begins to “[embed] itself in existing disciplinary techniques” (242). This new technology of power, unlike disciplinary power, is “applied not to man-as-body but to the living man, to man-as-living-being; ultimately…to man-as-species” (242). In other words, while disciplinary power is individuating, focused on the regulation of specific bodies, this emergent technology of power is massifying, concerned with populations, the regulation of exponentially increasing human agglomerations, and ultimately with the monitoring, tailoring, and control of the human-as-species. Foucault, in a telling figuration, posits disciplinary power as an “anatomo-politics of the human body” that begins to be gradually combined with this new technology of power that Foucault tentatively submits he “would like to call a ‘biopolitics’ of the human race” (243). Biopolitical regulation, then, refers to operations that mold human bodies and subjectivities with an eye toward massified social regulation.
23. Here, the term trans* is used intentionally, rather than “transgendered” or “transsexual,” as a deliberately inclusive umbrella term, with the asterisk marking a space of subjective variance and diversity.
26. Ibid., 313.
27. Ibid., 312.
28. Ibid., 313.
33. Ibid., 394.
34. The Mattachine Society and the Daughters of Bilitis were two early and influential, homophile organizations that advocated for gay and lesbian rights in the United States during the 1950s and 1960s. The Gay Men’s Health Crisis and ACT UP are later activist organizations borne out of the AIDS crisis of the 1980s. For more on these organizations, consult the wide-ranging and engaging history of LGBT political movement in the United States that is Vicki L. Eaklor’s *Queer America: A People’s LGBT History of the United States* (New York: New Press, 2011).
Part V

Family
Chapter 9

Radical Experiments Involving Innocent Children: Locating Parenthood in Queer Utopia

Jane Ward

We never thought about how we might parent a child for whom there is no future... Our parenting plans, our lists, the advice I read before Ronan’s birth make little sense now. No matter what we do for Ronan—choose organic or non-organic food; cloth diapers or disposable; attachment parenting or sleep training—he will die... I have abandoned the future... We’re not waiting for Ronan to make us proud. We don’t expect future returns on our investment. But the day-to-day is often peaceful... Our experiences have taught us how to parent for the here and now, for the sake of parenting, for the humanity implicit in the act itself.

Emily Rapp, poet and mother to a two-year-old son dying with Tay-Sachs disorder. “Notes From a Dragon Mom,” New York Times, October 15, 2011.1

Contemporary parenthood is a condition bound up with heteronormative futurity. The child symbolizes the future itself, with its ostensibly limitless and unknowable possibilities. The child’s future can go “either way,” good or bad, normal or queer, gratifying or terrifying. Following in the traditions of their time and place, parents set the stage for a future they hope will be healthy and prosperous, offering them a return on their investment. As sociologist Sharon Hays has suggested, social expectations regarding adult investments in children proliferated in the late twentieth century as the ideology of “intensive mothering” took hold. Current generations of parents are taught by parenting experts that adult/child relationships must be child-centered, expert-guided, emotionally absorbing, labor-intensive, and financially expensive in order to ensure children’s future success.2

But what happens to parenthood when it is severed from the future and forcibly anchored to the present?
As Rapp describes so poignantly in the epigraph, to abandon the future is to turn parenting fundamentally upside down. It is to settle in to the embodied, indulgent, heartbreaking, blissful, and human quality—to use Rapp’s term—of offering pleasure (and not discipline, structure, or guidance) to a child. Rapp’s account, though it has nothing to do with “gay and lesbian parenting,” arguably offers us one model of queered parenting, in which parenting comes unhinged from what Lee Edelman terms “reproductive futurism.” Rapp’s son Ronan is a child for whom there is no future, and it is in abandoning hope for Ronan’s future—for his capacity to make his mother proud, or for Rapp’s capacity to save him—that Rapp finds her parental love manifested in a kind of queer presentism—a rebellious indulgence in the pleasures of the present.

I am a parent of a child who is Ronan’s age and perhaps it is for this reason that I continue to return to Rapp’s essay, struggling to grasp the possibilities for parenting without hope. Rapp’s story is an account of a mother who abandons the conventions of good parenting when these conventions pale in comparison to the urgency of a dying child’s pleasures. Though my child is healthy, something in this narrative is familiar to me. Something in Rapp’s story speaks to my queerness, and it is this: I, too, have refused normative, celebrated, and “appropriate” modes of parenting, not only for the sake of the queer pleasure it brings, but also for the sake of the work that my child and I are doing, as comrades, to live together queerly.

Before our child was born, my partner and I agreed not to impose the gender binary on the new person we would soon be living alongside. We do not use the words “boy” and “girl” to refer to our child, or to anyone else’s children (unless they have shared their gender identification with us already). We provide our child with clothing and toys marketed to both girls and boys. As we read books to our child, we change many words and sentences in order to imagine their characters and plot narratives in more feminist, queer, and genderqueer ways. We frequently change “he” to “she,” as the former is terribly overused in kids’ books as a universal pronoun to describe all animals and most people. We change man/woman and boy/girl to “person,” “friend,” “kid,” “the narrator,” “the soccer player,” and so on (e.g., we have a book that we call “Frosty the Snow Friend”). To introduce genderqueerness where there never is any, we sometimes refer to as “daddies” the people who appear to be mothers in a given story, and vice versa. When strangers ask us the gender of our child, we typically answer with “that’s Yarrow” (our child’s name). Yarrow is perceived by strangers as both a girl and a boy, each with nearly equal frequency. We wait to see which pronouns others will choose to describe our child, and we roll with it. Three times I personally have buckled under the pressure to answer the question “boy or girl?,” but I suspect that my answer was relatively insignificant to Yarrow, whose own
vocabulary, although extensive, does not include the words “boy” and “girl” because we have not used these words in our home.

To our minds, our practices flow logically from the fact that my partner and I don’t know anything about our child’s gender or sexual subjectivity. Our child has not articulated a gender identity to us. To do anything else would be to guess about our child’s future identifications based on anatomy and the weight of heteronormativity, so instead we stay present with what we know. As for us, we follow our own gender preferences. We call one of us “mom” and the other “dad,” even as we both have vaginas. What effect will parenting in this way have on our child? What liberation or damage may result? Of course, we cannot know. What we know is that we have staged our child’s world with queer scenes, imagery, objects, and sensations—because these are the cultural material of our own lives—and that our child is making use of them in ways that, in turn, are “growing” my partner and I, expanding the reaches of our own queer critique.

Paradoxically, to be queerly present in an adult/child relationship—to bear witness to what Kathryn Bond Stockton has called the “sideways growth” of both children and adults—is to forge a utopian space in which queer social experiments and adult/child camaraderie take the place of possessive investments in children. To parent queerly is to abandon hope in the cult of the child, with its normative future, while forging new and experimental forms of queer intimacy between adults and children. It is to be present with the unpredictability and fluidity of children’s genders and sexualities, to be curious but not stuck, to facilitate without investment. It is to humbly recognize that adults—with our inevitable gender damage and concomitant blindness and constraint—may not always be the queerest people in the room.

I spend much of my time imagining how I might apply the insights of queer theory to the work of parenting, but I also find myself nearly alone in this endeavor. Queer approaches to children are not those that are taking hold in liberal gay and lesbian circles, including among LGBT advocates for “gender nonconforming children.” As I demonstrate below, even the ostensibly progressive take on children’s gender fluidity is one focused on diagnosis, or “looking for the signs” of children’s core gender constitutions—whether normative, fluid, or transgender. Most adults, including gay and lesbian adults, want to get to the heart of who children “really are,” and to do so as soon as possible. They want to declare young children “girls” and “boys,” “gay” and “straight,” “trans” and “cisgender,” because doing so offers adults a predictable and knowable child, one with a heteronormative, homonormative, or otherwise respectable future.

In this chapter I argue against the work of diagnosing children, and offer as alternative the utopian work of “queer experiments” in parenting, which emerge from present states of queer humility and unknowing.
To make my arguments, I draw from a diverse archive of cultural materials, from books written for parents of gender fluid children, to television news specials, print media, interviews with parents, and (auto) ethnographic material from “Los Angeles Genderqueer Parenting,” a group with nearly 400 members that I founded in Los Angeles in 2009. I demonstrate that within the paradoxical logic of heteronormativity, to recognize that you don’t know anything about a young child’s gender and sexuality, or to refuse to teach/impose the gender binary, is viewed as committing a selfish and deceitful act of aggression, or a dangerous social experiment that risks the future of an innocent child. In contrast, from a queer perspective, experimenting with nonintervention and self-determination are precisely the seeds planted in the present with the hope of building a more just and nonviolent world. Before turning to this discussion, I briefly introduce its theoretical context, or queer debates about the place of the child within the queer utopian imagination.

**The Child in Queer Theory, the Child in Queer Life**

Children have played a central, though almost exclusively symbolic, role in queer conversations about futurity and utopia. In *No Future*, Lee Edelman famously posited that the figure of the child represents the hopeful, reproductive, heteronormative future against which queer ways of life are measured as narcissistic and destructive. Edelman makes the persuasive case that the vulnerability of fetuses and children has become a centerpiece of American political discourse, a “crisis” to which all politically responsible adults are compelled to respond. On both the right and the left, the urgency of protecting “the Child”—and securing the future—is presumed so self-evident that it is nearly impossible to imagine a politics that sits outside of these terms.

But for Edelman, “queerness names the side of those not ‘fighting for the children,’ the side outside the consensus by which all politics confirms the absolute value of reproductive futurism.” In making this argument, Edelman has little to say about actual children; instead he takes aim at the symbolic function of the figure of the Child, and at the symbolic order itself. Drawing on numerous literary and cultural texts, he argues that while the Child symbolizes identification with the future and the repetition and survival of heterosexuality, queerness, by contrast, is the symbolic manifestation of the death drive, the destructive and unnameable force that refuses the future through acts of antisociality and “corrosive enjoyment.” Rather than object to this antisocial, anti-futurity construction of queerness, Edelman advocates for its embrace, suggesting that queers proudly locate their alterity and transgression in the self-indulgent and nonreproductive present.
Edelman also has little to say about actual queer-identified adults, focusing instead on the symbolic figures—including the birds in Hitchcock’s 1963 film *The Birds*—upon whom queerness is projected. Hitchcock’s birds are queered, for instance, by their representation of “the violent undoing of meaning, the loss of identity and coherence, the unnatural access to jouissance.” 8 Hence, in Edelman’s analysis, birds may well be queerer than queer-identified people, including and especially the growing ranks of LGBT parents, many of whom are “themselves also psychically invested in preserving the familiar familial narrativity of reproductive futurism.” 9 Ironically, through Edelman’s lens, what queerness seems ultimately to be is a political aspiration—a hope, as it were—that queers learn from the murderous birds, among other figures, to “fuck the social order and the Child in whose name we’re collectively terrorized.” 10

By illuminating the relationship between the death drive and queer resistance, Edelman’s analysis gives revitalized, political meaning to what has often been perceived as the senseless and apolitical behavior of gay men (sex without condoms, circuit parties, drug use, etc.). And yet, in telling a story that is almost exclusively about gay men—and white gay men at that—Edelman’s arguments have been subject to considerable criticism by queer scholars of color. Some note that Edelman fails to engage the now voluminous body of theorizing by queer feminists of color, wherein political resistance is deeply tied to futurity, or to the politics of “not yet.” 11

The importance of hope and futurity for queers of color is given extended consideration by José Esteban Muñoz in his 2009 book *Cruising Utopia*, which responds directly to Edelman. In contrast with Edelman, Muñoz sees “pragmatic presentism” as an anchor of neoliberal politics, exemplified by the mainstream lesbian and gay movement’s obsessive focus on instant political gratification, cultural legitimacy, and access to heteronormative institutions. Rejecting Edelman’s antifuturity, Muñoz urges queers to embrace projects that plant the seeds for a radically expanded future, or that express “desire for a thing, or a way, that is not here but is nonetheless desirable, something worth striving for.” 12 For Muñoz, queer utopianism is particularly necessary for queer men of color and others most affected by state violence:

Queer politics, in my understanding, needs a real dose of utopianism. Utopia lets us imagine a space outside of heteronormativity. It permits us to conceptualize new worlds and realities that are not irrevocably constrained by the HIV/AIDS pandemic and institutionalized state homophobia. More important, utopia offers us a critique of the present of what is, by casting a picture of what *can and perhaps will be*. 13
Muñoz traces the queer utopian imagination through queer bars and performance spaces, public sex venues, and in the work of (largely male) queer artists and writers.

Muñoz states that his favorite part of Edelman’s polemic is its “disdain for the culture of the child,” so it comes as little surprise that the future he offers to queers of color is one in which “the Child” drops almost entirely out of view. One can presume that the culture of the child is antithetical or irrelevant to the queer erotic spaces and underground art scenes in which Muñoz locates the queer of color imagination.

But given Muñoz’s somewhat empirical engagement with queer space and subculture as sites for resisting state violence, the invisibility of the queered adult/child relationship in Muñoz analysis is troubling, especially given the greater prevalence of children in the lives of queer people of color. A 2011 study published by the Williams’ Institute reports that “childrearing is substantially higher among racial/ethnic minorities. Also, among individuals in same-sex couples who did not finish high school, 43% are raising children, and 20% of children raised by same-sex couples live in poverty.” In many cases, these adult/child relationships are queered by their invisibility and illegibility vis-à-vis homonormative narratives about “two mommy” and “two daddy” families produced via adoption or costly reproductive technology. Instead, many queers of color are raising their brothers’ and sisters’ children, children from a partner’s previous heterosexual marriage, or queer kids in need of care and shelter. In other words, queer subjects arguably most constrained by state violence are those who are also most likely to be caring for children, who themselves are living at the margins of safety and respectability. Hence, to the extent that queers of color—especially queer women of color—are engaged in the utopian work of queer world-making, they are doing so alongside children (of color).

But perhaps more to the point at hand, Muñoz’s formulation overlooks the central place of children within the erotic imagination. As Kathryn Bond Stockton has illuminated, film and literary representations of children reveal a broad-based cultural panic around the dangerous queerness of childhood, wherein children operate as seducers, masochists, and the polymorphously perverse. And indeed, if you spend much time with children, you know that many of them—beyond the fictional and in real life—are quite skilled at public sex, public masturbation, genderfuck performances, defiant identifications, risk taking, and radical reconfigurations of public and private. In sum, if we are to imagine the radical potential of queerness to remake the future, children arguably have a contribution to make, even within the kinds of projects of interest to Muñoz.

Though I acknowledge here the distinction between actual children and “the culture of the child,” I want to argue that queer reconfigurations of actual adult/child relationships may well be the starting place
for disentangling actual children from the heteronormative investments that adults are making in their name. Though Muñoz himself seems not particularly interested in children, his analysis—particularly his queer reworking of “the stage”—is rich with possibilities for undoing the heteronormative culture of the child and instead, staging children’s worlds with queer potential. Examining Kevin McCartney’s photographs of illuminated stages in gay bars and punk venues, Muñoz subverts the paternalistic and developmental associations with psychological “stages” (i.e., queer kids are “just in a stage”) and opts instead for the material stage, the space that is “set up” in anticipation of queer performance:

This reminds one of the way in which worried parents deal with wild queer children, how they sometimes protect themselves from the fact of queerness by making it a “stage”… I consider the idea of queerness as a “stage” in a way that rescues that term from delusional parents and others who attempt to manage and contain the potentiality that is queer youth… I continue this writing, then, by readjusting my opening question—“How do we stage utopia?”—by suggesting that utopia is a stage, like a phase, but also a spatial one.18

To parent queerly is to stage children’s worlds—in the utopian sense described by Muñoz—with queer scenes, imagery, objects, and sensations. It is to “set up” their worlds differently—sometimes through active practices of queering (e.g., a December ritual that bypasses “Santa Claus” and looks instead like children sitting on the laps on the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence, reveling together in their naughtiness), and sometimes through radical acts of nonintervention and self-determination (e.g., refraining from diagnosing children’s genders and sexualities). To parent queerly is to desire something far, far queerer than our own childhoods could offer—something not here yet and almost unimaginable, but nonetheless, worth striving for.

**Letting Children Be Who They Are**

Queer theory, for all it has to say about the symbolic figure of the child, has had little impact on how adults are conceptualizing the queerness of actual children. Instead, it is largely the discipline of psychology that is shaping how LGBT organizations and child advocates are giving name and voice to what they imagine is a special band of children they call “gender creative,” “gender fluid,” or “gender independent” (the vocabulary varies somewhat by region in North America). For instance, Diane Ehrensaft is the leading psychologist working with gender nonconforming children in the United States. Ehrensaft is a pioneering proponent of affirming children’s gender creativity, an approach viewed as cutting
edge within a discipline that still embraces reparative therapy, or training children to conform to the norms associated with their sex assignment. Ehrensaft explains in her book *Gender Born, Gender Made* that the model that informs her work is the Native American conceptualization of two-spirits. She explains:

The two-spirits show up in early childhood...Since it [is] in the child’s nature, Native American parents knew not to try to change the child. This is exactly the model that informs my work with gender nonconforming children and their families. [My model] assumes that the child most likely comes to us with his or her gender creativity intact, rather than being shaped after birth by hapless parents who have some gender-skewed agenda.  

Ehransaft uses the term “gender creative” to refer to the full spectrum of children’s fluid and cross-gender identifications, which she outlines in a typology of gender creative children she has developed. These include transgender children (“children who declare that the gender they are is not the one they were born with”); gender-noncomforming children (“children who do not abide by the prescribed gender norms of their culture”); gender-fluid children (“children who defy the norms of binary gender and either slide along a gender spectrum or weave their own intricate individual patterns along the gender web”); gender hybrids (“children who experience themselves as a combination of girl/boy”); gender smoothies (“children and youth who take all aspects of gender, mix them up, and come up with a blended sense of gender”); genderqueer youth (“children and youth who reject binary gender categories altogether and focus on establishing their own unique gender identity, neither male nor female”); protogay children (“children who play along the margins of gender in the context of their journey toward a gay identity”); and prototransgender children (“youth who first declare themselves as gay or lesbian and then discover...that they are actually transgender, and had used sexual identity as a stepping stone toward their transgender true gender self”).  

Ehransaft believes that making the distinction between these categories is essential; otherwise practitioners risk misrecognizing children’s “true selves.”

Ehransaft’s work, along with a small but growing number of books written for parents of gender fluid kids, a growing number of conferences centered on childhood “gender creativity,” and new organizational programs/camps for children have forged a supportive, but remarkably essentialist, psychotherapeutic approach based on some well-worn assumptions about gender. First, children have a core, hardwired gender identity that constitutes who they are. Despite over four decades of feminist and queer scholarship pointing to the social and historical
construction of gender, the notion that children are born with an innate gender constitution has become a central premise of the “progressive” approach to childhood gender nonconformity. This should come as little surprise, however, given the push by the mainstream lesbian and gay movement to link support for gay rights with support for biological theories of sexual orientation (consider, for instance, the widespread popularity of Lady Gaga’s 2011 gay pride anthem “Born This Way”). Here, this immensely popular and politically motivated logic is extended to childhood gender nonconformity, which is framed similarly as an inherent trait that must be embraced because it simply cannot be changed.

A second presumption of the progressive approach to childhood gender nonconformity is that the vast majority of children are, by nature, cis-gendered and gender normative, with “gender creative” children being a special group—akin to Native American two-spirits—who are born with the gift of gender blending or cross-identification. Here we see very little departure from the traditional psychiatric model: the gender binary is naturalized, the cultural construction of gender roles unexamined, and the sex/gender distinction reinforced. What has shifted in this model is that gender nonconforming children are depathologized, a vital improvement to be sure. And yet, as I discuss below, this view offers no guidance for how adults might relate to that presumed vast majority of children who—for whatever complex set of reasons—do not seem to “show the signs” of innate gender creativity. For these children, the gender status quo is imagined to be the natural and sufficient order of things. Indeed, when I first read Ehrensaft’s book, I was thrilled to discover a chapter titled “The Gender Creative Parent,” and then equally disappointed to find that Ehrensaft has nothing to say to queer and genderqueer parents, or to any parent interested in introducing children to the pleasures of gender creativity. Instead, she speaks only to those apparently disappointed and confused parents who find themselves unwittingly raising a gender creative child, teaching them how to grieve their losses and then creatively unleash their child’s true gender essence.

The third presumption made by practitioners following this approach to childhood gender nonconformity is that it is the role of adults to look for the emergent signs of innate gender creativity or cross-identification, to do this with an open heart and mind, and then provide these children with the vocabulary and resources to make sense of their gender constitution and to fashion themselves and their bodies in a way that honors it. A primary refrain in this approach is that adults need to “let children be who they are” by waiting to see who they become. This means honoring gender creativity if it emerges naturally, but not cultivating it in children who, ultimately, must learn to live in a gender binary world. Again, while this approach invites adults to celebrate innate gender nonconformity in children, it nonetheless rehearses old and essentializing logics about
the fixed, biological foundations of gender expression. More, it places “progressive” adults—both therapists and parents—in the capacity of diagnosing children by giving weight to their own assessments of what it means to be gender normative, and conversely, what it means to be “nonconforming” or “creative.” In the Foucauldian sense, children who “show the signs” of gender creativity frequently find themselves compelled to confess/account for/narrate their gender identities for adults, often in a psychotherapist’s office. For instance, Ehrensaft offers numerous examples of distressed parents who sought psychotherapeutic help when their children began wearing cross-gender clothing or cross-gender identifying; with help, these parents ultimately learned to embrace their children’s “true” gender identities. But from a queer perspective, these parental and psychotherapeutic evaluations of a gender always already constitute their own forms of discipline, as they compel children to have some form—even if a transgender form—of knowable and manageable gender subjectivity (i.e., a “true gender self”).

Clearly approaches like Ehrensaft’s are a necessary improvement on reparative therapy, but they also miss the basic premise of queer theory that “who we are” is not essential but is mediated by the cultural and structural conditions of the time and place in which we live. Ehrensaft’s approach elides the normative and coercive function of the gender binary, which leaves very few children with the possibility of choosing gender creativity, and provides only a medical model for those who do. Even social constructionist approaches that sit outside of queer theory, like the now ubiquitous “doing gender” framework in sociology, would also have us recognize that gender is something children are doing interactively more than it is something that they are.

And yet, remarkably, much of the work being done to support gender nonconforming kids sidesteps queer and feminist arguments about gender and sexuality, producing a liberal master narrative about gender nonconformity in children. In this narrative, normal and pragmatic parents do everything in their power to offer children a gender normative environment and they respond compassionately when their child declares themselves to be a special kind of person, born gender fluid or transgender, which is often medicalized in this discourse. What good parents should not do, according to this narrative, is impose a queer or feminist utopian agenda on children that would deprive them the more practical experience of finding their essential selves, and of settling in to the world as it is.

As examples of this liberal master narrative, let us contrast three high profile stories that ran in the national and international media in 2011 and 2012, starting with the case of baby Storm and the criticism that Ehrensaft and other trans-positive psychologists and commentators...
directed at Storm’s parents. Storm was born in 2011 to parents in Toronto who decided not to assign a sex or gender to Storm, but to let Storm determine, when ready, how to sex and gender identify. Despite attempts to make clear to the media that they were not imposing genderlessness on Storm, but we were providing an array of gendered options for Storm to choose from, their decision was depicted by reporters as a denial of Storm’s very selfhood, and Storm’s parents Kathy and David came under vitriolic attack. Expert psychologists quoted by ABC News, the Daily Mail, and the Toronto Star described them as selfish, deceitful, impulsive, and manipulative radicals using their child to enact a damaging social experiment. They were reported to a Canadian child welfare organization, and when Kathy and Storm were recognized in parks and supermarkets, strangers would scream angrily at them, “I know that’s a boy!” or “I know that’s a girl!” Kathy and her husband David were shocked that it seemed no one could hear them saying, “We expect that Storm will probably have a gender of some kind someday; we’re just not going to be the one’s who decide what it is!”

Storm’s parents were also surprised when advocates for trans and gender nonconforming children, like Ehrensaft, publically declared their concern about ten-month-old Storm’s mental health. Ehrensaft told the Toronto Star: “I believe this baby is not being given an opportunity to find their true gender self, based on what’s inside them.”

The coverage of Storm stands in stark contrast with far more sympathetic coverage of transgender children and their parents. In 2011, the Boston Globe covered the story of Nicole, a transgendered child of initially heartbroken parents. Nicole’s parents now embrace Nicole’s gender identity and are her outspoken advocates, their transformation due in large part to the guidance of a pediatric physician at Children’s Hospital in Boston who helped them to see that, “the issue is a medical one and…early intervention makes sense.” Similarly, in May of 2012, New York Magazine ran a story about the parents of four trans children, but focused primarily on Molly, who was assigned male at birth and began telling her parents that she was a girl at age three. In both the Globe and the New York Magazine articles, readers are presented with a story of conservative parents who ultimately responded with compassion to their children’s medical conditions. Nicole’s father is described as an “Air Force veteran and former Republican grieving the loss of a son,” and Molly’s father is quoted identifying as a “conservative business person who just wanted a normal life.” Both sets of parents are portrayed sympathetically, as rational people having the expected response to such a disappointing outcome. They attempted a normative socialization for their children, but when faced with their child’s medical condition, they come to accept what could be helped.
Also noteworthy in these stories is the near exclusive focus on white children and families. One possible explanation is that this is due to the higher stakes of such exposure for people of color, who may be less willing to share stories about their “queered” children with the national media (a theory supported by the popular presumption that people of color come from communities with elevated levels of homophobia and transphobia). But another and I think more likely possibility is that whiteness strengthens the case for the normalization of these families. They are sympathetic figures in part because they seem to be “average Americans”: conservative, normal, middle-class, and white.

In contrast, Storm’s parents, though also white, were described—fairly accurately—by the Toronto Star as radicals and activists who practice unschooling and cosleeping, who have lived among the Zapatistas in Mexico and have spent time in Cuba learning about the revolution with their children. David, Storm’s father, is a teacher in a social justice program; Kathy, Storm’s mother, worked in violence prevention until she became a full-time parent. These details appear in the coverage of Storm as if to paint the picture of precisely the kind of people we would expect to enact a radical social experiment at the expense of innocent children: white hippie radicals who have lived in Mexico and Cuba. The term “social experiment” was used frequently in the media coverage of Storm, in every case as if it were utterly self-evident that social experiments are terrible and dangerous, and that they certainly should not involve children.

**Parenting Queerly as a Utopian Practice**

Like Emily Rapp, who I introduced at the outset of this chapter, Kathy and David’s parenting represents another model of parenting queerly, one that reconfigures the dualities of passive/active and present/future that sit at the heart of the modern construction of parenting. Kathy and David do not act on/against Storm’s gender expression by diagnosing it with little or no information and they do not look for signs of Storm’s gendered essence or “true self.” But as their critics point out, this “inaction” is a radical action, one rooted in recognition that genders are social, cultural, and historical creations, and as such, parents play an immeasurable role in the production of children’s gender identities. To parent queerly is to offer children an array of gendered objects, colors, and narratives—including queer and cross-gender narratives—and then invite children to interact with this expanded field of possibilities. It is to relinquish a possessive investment in children’s choices or future gender subjectivity, our hope for who they will become (queer or straight), because we are invested in future in which gender is a self-determined
rather than compulsory feature of social life. This “inaction” lays the foundation for a queer future.

When children are not invited into queer worlds, the gender binary—with its limiting and often violent effects—is the default, the presumably natural terrain in which children and their bodies automatically locate themselves unless they have a congenital abnormality. Parenting queerly, in contrast, means viewing children’s gender practices as something they (and we) do rather than something they are, and avoiding the temptation to concretize those practices into a special gendered selfhood. This means no gendered color, no toy, no gesture, and no self-proclaimed identity is off limits in the present, but neither is it taken as predictive of the child’s future or mistaken for the child’s essence. It means actively providing all children with genderqueer possibilities to offset coercive gender normativity. It means, in Muñoz’s terms, that sharing with children our sense that the gendered present is remarkably unfinished and underdeveloped, and that we, as children and adults, have a lot of social experiments to enact together in order to imagine it differently.

Notes

5. L. A. Genderqueer Parenting states its purpose as follows: “We are a community in L.A. of genderqueer people who have close relationships with kids—as parents, partners of parents, aunt/uncles, friends, etc., or people who are planning to someday have kids. We’ve found that the resources available for lesbian and gay parents in L.A. presume a ‘two moms’ or ‘two dads’ arrangement and are generally very gender-normative in their conceptualization of both parents and children. But what about queer/genderqueer parenting (dyke dads, fag moms, and all the other possibilities . . . )? Sometimes we get together for playdates in the park; other times we hold meetings to discuss issues related to gender and parenting. At our meetings, we have talked about how the children in our lives conceptualize gender and queerness, the difference between queer and lesbian/gay parenting (is there one? what is it?), how to relate to children in differently and cross-gendered ways, queer pregnancy and birth options, communal and queer childcare, and how to parent or care for children without being totally integrated into private, consumer-based and homonormative domestic relations, and how to help create sustained space for children to explore gender, desire, and their own embodiment without imposing our own favorite gender systems on them (whatever they may be). We hope you’ll join us!”
7. Edelman distinguishes between two types of jouissance, “the corrosive enjoyment intrinsic to queer (non)identity” and “the fetishistic jouissance that works to consolidate identity,” 30.

8. Ibid., 132.

9. Ibid., 17.

10. Ibid., 29.


12. Munoz, Cruising Utopia, 121.

13. Ibid, 35, emphasis in original.


16. see Moore, Invisible Families.


19. Ehrensaft, Gender Born, Gender Made, 11.

20. Ibid., 9.

21. West and Zimmerman, Doing Gender.


25. Unschooling is a homeschooling pedagogy focused on child-directed learning that emerges from the organic rhythm of children’s homes and communities. It is based on the principle that children are naturally inquisitive and compelled to pursue knowledge and discovery. Cosleeping, also known as “family bed,” is a traditional practice in which parents and children sleep together in the same room or bed so as to nurture children’s sense of closeness and safety.
Chapter 10

Utopian Kinship?: The Possibilities of Queer Parenting

Laura V. Heston

_The sacrilization of the Child thus necessitates the sacrifice of the queer._

—Lee Edelman, _No Future_¹

_Querernity is not yet here._

—José Esteban Muñoz, _Cruising Utopia_²

**Introduction**

I begin with two quotes on queerness and futurity. The epigraphic quotes above concisely summarize the tension between Edelman’s “here and now” of querness—querness as it is lived, exiled from normality, the family, and the future as imagined through heterosexual procreation—and Muñoz’s “then and there” of a querness not yet realized. The figure of the Child lies at the heart of both perspectives though it is only clearly articulated in Edelman’s critique of so-called “reproductive futurism.” While Muñoz’s theory posits that “querness is not yet here,” the unspoken but necessary component of his theory is the Child, or a future realized through procreation. Though, with medical advances, creative conception practices, and chosen parenting, procreation and childrearing have ceased to be limited to heterosexual sex,³ and Census figures indicate that around 110,000 gay and lesbian couples are currently parenting.⁴ For these reasons, any theory of querness and futurity, or querness and utopia, must consider the place of the Child within it. While some theorists address the Child’s queer potentialities,⁵ a more holistic approach considers the role of parents, in particular queer parents, in the fostering of a queer future.

In what follows, I discuss some preliminary results from an ongoing interview-based study with LGBTQ parents who, I argue, parent queerly.
These parents, a small group in the Pioneer Valley of Massachusetts, have created a queer parenting space in which they are working toward a collective queer future. However, they also find their parenting practices limited by state and legal frameworks not yet capable of honoring the complexities of their queer family relations. Through my interviews with and participant observations of LGBTQ parents who engage in queer parenting, I find evidence of the kind of queer world-making projects in which Muñoz finds hope and queer futurity. In these families, children become vehicles for imagining new familial relations and ways of being.

Theoretical Framing and Literature Review

This work contributes to two conversations within queer studies. The first stems from the groundbreaking study by Kath Weston on “chosen families” that claimed gays and lesbians do family differently—through relations of choice rather than biology—than heterosexuals, thereby potentially reimagining the family and freeing it from heterosexual scripts. The second connects with Leo Bersani’s controversial “antisocial thesis” of queer theory, elaborated by Lee Edelman to specifically address the presence of children—which proposes an end to relationality altogether—and its detractors, namely Muñoz who suggests relations among queers are necessary for imagining utopia. By way of definition of, I offer a quote from Muñoz:

The queer utopian project addressed here turns to the fringe of political and cultural production to offset the tyranny of the homonormative. It is drawn to tastes, ideologies, and aesthetics that can only seem odd, strange, or indeed queer next to the muted striving of the practical and normalcy-desiring homosexual.

In what follows, I use the term “queer” to specifically refer to those persons, ideas, and practices that push the boundaries of normalcy.

While Weston argues that nonbiological families among gays and lesbians redefine kinship, Bersani, Edelman, and others reject the very idea of family in gay existence. Even critics of the antirelational thesis, like Muñoz or Jack Halberstam, do not go so far as to support the social construct of family, but do affirm a place for relationality in queer life. I begin by addressing the possibilities of queer family and parenting (or lack thereof) within the contexts of these theories and provide empirical evidence from the literature to support theoretical claims. In doing so, I address the following questions: Can children function as articulations of chosen kin? Is the future which LGBTQ people with children represent necessarily an assimilationist one? And, finally, what is the place for reproductive relations within imaginative queer world-making projects?
Children and Chosen Kinship

Certainly, extended kin networks are not unique to queer kinship. Communities of color, particularly working-class African American communities, have a long history of forging extended kin (integrating relatives outside the nuclear family) and fictive kin (nonrelated individuals becoming kin) ties to facilitate childrearing and survival. Extended and fictive kin share emotional, financial, and/or housing support and often comprise networks of care for children, the sick, and the elderly. Often described as “alternative,” nonnuclear families have become rather commonplace in lived experience, though the ideology of the standard North American family (SNAF)—which includes two married, monogamous heterosexual parents and their biologically related children sharing a home—reigns supreme in the popular imagination and public policy. Though, for gays and lesbians, historically thought antithetical to the very idea of family, all of their families, like their sexualities, are deemed “alternative.”

In Families We Choose, Kath Weston’s monumental study of queer kinship, the author showed that many gays and lesbians, after having been cast out of families of origin, created “chosen families” of their own. As a consequence of exclusion from the heteronormative idea of family, queer kinship forms appropriated the language of traditional kinship (e.g., “family” or “kin”) to describe deep and enduring friendships that were often more stable than relations with families of origin. While Families We Choose has long remained the siren song of alternative family forms for queer studies, the presence of gay and lesbian parents, with and without biological connections to their children, is commonly overlooked in Weston’s piece. While the sample of parents was small (nine in all), the existence of parents within chosen families, and Weston’s inclusion of gay adoptive parents and gay sperm donors under the umbrella of “families we choose” is significant in that procreating does not, in and of itself, produce gay and lesbian nuclear families isolated from queer modes of kinship.

Weston notes that sperm donors, among her subjects, had no assumed parenting relationship with the children they helped to create, often acting as uncles or godfathers. She also shows how chosen kin, gay men and lesbians, can create children in a ways completely outside the heteronormative model of reproduction, for instance by a gay man donating sperm to impregnate a lesbian. Several of Weston’s subjects knew of and strove for such alternative parenting possibilities which she summarizes as “the irony and the ecstasy of two persons culturally defined as nonprocreative beings uniting for the specific purpose of procreation.” Whether or not this is a desirable outcome, the significance of such acts is noteworthy in that they combine the heteronormative act of
reproduction with the queering of kinship. In these families, providing sperm does not necessarily make someone a “father” nor does giving birth constitute a “mother.” It is ironic that although the parlance of heterofamilial signifiers is adopted in cases of nonbiological relations (e.g., a birth mother’s partner easily becomes a “mother”), they are often shed in cases of actual biological connection (e.g., a sperm donor not being a “father”). Thus, children can, and do, articulate with chosen families in a number of ways: children themselves become chosen family to parents who adopt them as children (legally or not) and nieces and nephews to their parents’ close friends and/or sperm and egg donors. However, some detractors of queer kinship see chosen families, or any families, as essentially unqueer.

Reproductive Futurism and Homonormativity

In the beautifully written and controversial polemic No Future, Lee Edelman writes that the figure of the Child is antithetic to queer existence. Because heterosexual sex is sanctified for its reproductive function, queer sexuality is, therefore, sexuality without a stake in the future. The figure of the queer, in political discourse and popular culture, signifies selfishness, frivolity, lack, and death, for instance, finding its manifestation in the well-dressed, villain bachelors of Hitchcock films. Social life, with continual gesturing toward a utopian future “for the children” is guided (or “terrorized” in Edelman’s terms) by the mandate of reproductive futurism from which the queer is, by lack of a reproductive sexuality and by his very queerness, excluded. But, in this, Edelman sees an opportunity:

Rather than rejecting, with liberal discourse, this ascription of negativity to the queer, we might, as I argue, do better to consider accepting and even embracing it…Fuck the social order and the Child in whose name we’re collectively terrorized.

Instead of taking offense to hostile characterizations of queer life, such as queers are too focused on sex and not invested in a collective future, Edelman wants us to embrace them. Edelman advocates giving up the ghost of liberal, rights-based political activism because the future in which we are all equal is a future without queers in it. Queers stand outside the social order guided by heteroreproduction. Thus, as expressed in the epigraph above, the Child and the queer have a mutually exclusive, yet mutually constitutive, relationship to one another. To align one’s self with the queer is to be antichild, and to advocate for reproductive futurism means abandoning the here and now in which queers live.
Edelman’s theory builds on the so-called antisocial thesis of queer theory, which privileges the “here and now” over and above the “then and there,” first articulated by Leo Bersani. The antisocial thesis questions a homosexual’s (in Bersani’s parlance) place in society and the goals of “good citizenship” in heterosexual terms through parenting, military service, and so on. The purpose of his interrogation is to offer alternatives: sex without intimacy, life without community, identity without collectivity. Bersani’s thoughts on the family are clearly articulated in reference to drag ball houses in communities of color in New York City, as depicted in the film *Paris Is Burning*, wherein members take on the same last name and the designations of “house mother,” “house father,” and the like. Bersani states,

The loving and loyal “families” they constituted could, I suppose, be thought of as an implicit critique of the frequent lack of love and loyalty in the heterosexually institutionalized family, but they remain tributes to the heterosexual ideal of family itself.

Since the affiliations created in these communities use the language of heterosexual family, Bersani sees them as misguided heteronormative throwbacks rather than revolutionary modes of kinship. Jack Halberstam, though critical of the antisocial thesis generally, makes a related point about the family.

As a kind of false narrative of continuity, as a construction that makes connection and succession seem organic and natural, family also gets in the way of all sorts of other alliances and coalitions. An ideology of family pushes gays and lesbians toward marriage politics and erases other modes of kinship in the process.

While Bersani denies the actors in drag balls and other queer communities the ability to name their own experiences, Halberstam writes off the potential for families like these, as families, to actually facilitate, “all sorts of other alliances and coalitions,” though drag ball houses are simultaneously examples of coalitions outside the heteronormative idea of family. It’s true, most of the empirical literature on gay families with children attests to their “being no different” than straight ones. In fact, the question of whether gay and lesbian parents are different from straight parents has thoroughly preoccupied the literature in gay and lesbian family studies. Much of the empirical work on parenting by gays and lesbians has been oriented toward disproving conservative and religiously motivated stereotypes about these parents as pedophiles, narcissists, and overall damaging to children. Psychologists and sociologists, in
particular, have collected an impressive amount of data on the subject of gay and lesbian parenting. The basic story is that gay and lesbian parents do not harm their children physically or psychologically, at least not any more than straight parents do. In sum, gay and lesbian parents are “just as good as” straight parents, which is to say, “just as bad” in their tendency toward unequal care giving.

Interview studies find that birthmothers, versus stepmothers or nonbirth mothers, more often than not, are responsible for more than their share of childrearing and legal responsibility and are, in effect, the ones “figuratively and literally left holding the baby” even when coparenting. It is possible that lesbian mothers are more likely to strive for egalitarian childrearing than straight couples, though this rarely happens in practice, just as gay couples strive to equally share housework though the empirical data suggests unequal housework is the reality. We can see similar trends in research among straight parents with egalitarian ideals of parenting, where what parents practice is quite different from what they preach. The proposed difference in egalitarianism between gay and lesbian parents and straight parents, or the dream that the simple fact of being raised by two parents of the same gender revolutionizes parenting, turns out to be not so different after all.

The fear of queer assimilation underlies many critiques of the gay family and has coalesced in the term “homonormativity.” Lisa Duggan defines homonormativity as

a politics that does not contest dominant heteronormative assumptions and institutions, but upholds and sustains them, while promising the possibility of a demobilized gay constituency and a privatized, depoliticized gay culture anchored in domesticity and consumption.

Though it is unclear that participating in the institution of the family in and of itself contributes to this slide into homonormativity (as queer people were affiliating in families in the 1970s, the heyday of radical queer politics, as they do today), the literature on homonormativity has crystallized around the queer critique of gay marriage. Michael Warner, whose The Trouble with Normal predates Duggan, inspires much of her argument about gay marriage. In that text, Warner levels a comprehensive and devastating critique to the fight for gay marriage, kindly recently nuanced and updated by Jack Halberstam. One of the most convincing lines of reasoning in this critique asserts that in addition to being an exclusionary and privileged relational form, access to marriage would also produce “good gays”: those who do not question State policies that perpetuate inequalities. A chief consequence of some gays—namely white, gender-conforming, middle-class gays and lesbians who practice monogamy and have full citizenship rights—being given a place at the
proverbial table is the reinforced exclusion of the poor, people of color, trans and genderqueer people, the polyamorous, the undocumented, and those practicing any form of sexual kink that might challenge the sanctity of marriage or its purpose as an institution bestowing rights and privileges to a particular relationship between adults. Ergo, gays and lesbians uniting for access to marriage reproduce the exact consequence, civil exclusion, which they are presumably fighting against. Such actions can lead to strange bedfellows; witness the unsettling irony of gay and lesbian progay marriage activists’ appropriation of the rhetoric of “child protection” (since, if married, parents would have greater custody and other legal protections) that was once used to keep the same individuals from being school teachers or foster parents. While expansions of civil-rights-based protections, including marriage, are improving the lives of “good gays” who practice homonormativity, queers’ lives remain invalid, despised, and marginalized.

**Queer World-Making and the Utopian**

Before we declare the end of queerness, killed by the twin evils of domesticity and consumption, José Esteban Muñoz reminds us, “Queerness is not yet here.” For Muñoz, queerness is always on the horizon and the principal benefit of queerness is its potential for the future. Relationality is a key component of queerness primarily because queerness itself exists only in the future and necessitates relationality—between people and between generations—in order to be realized. Muñoz offers a ruinous critique that undermines the premises of both Edelman and Bersani’s antirelational arguments:

Yet I nonetheless contend that most of the work with which I disagree under the provisional title of “antirelational thesis” moves 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 purity of sexuality as a singular trope of difference. In other words, antirelational approaches to queer theory are romances of the negative, wishful thinking, and investments in deferring various dreams of difference.

Essentially, Muñoz suggests antirelational arguments come from the presumption of a White and masculine gay subject free of any other “difference” beyond sexuality. Edelman and Bersani see no need for collective action because they imagine all queers are middle class, White men with no sources of oppression other than that based on their sexualities. Similarly, Halberstam notes that in Edelman’s rant against reproduction, “woman becomes the site of the unqueer” in his analysis. Women, by
the very fact of their birthing potential (not to mention the cultural associations of their care giving), come off as inherently more heteronormative and invested in reproductive futurism. Although Muñoz sidesteps a discussion of reproduction or childrearing per se, he does say, “I respond to Edelman’s assertion that the future is the province of the [C]hild and therefore not for queers by arguing that queerness is primarily about futurity and hope.” Thus, although Muñoz does not address the question of children, he does gesture toward their necessity in a queerness “primarily about futurity.”

Muñoz proposes a queerness not only about futurity, but also utopia. The act of visualizing a utopian future is itself an act of resistance and a key part of any politics dedicated to social change. But, Muñoz doesn’t just want us to think utopia, or dream utopia, but to feel utopia. It is easy to feel cynical, what is more difficult is to put one’s emotions and energies behind realizing alternatives to how things are already lived. Muñoz quotes Oscar Wilde when he says, “A map of the world that does not include utopia is not worth glancing at.” Similarly, to Muñoz, a social theory that does not include the possibility of utopia is not worth considering. If queerness lies on the fringes of legality, morality, respectability, and normativity, let it also lie on the fringes of possibility, futurity, and the utopian. We haven’t realized utopia, just as we haven’t realized queerness. What we can do is strive for utopia in the future and look for glimpses of utopia in the present.

While the literature on LGBTQ parenting is not a triumphal narrative of utopian realization, it is filled with moments of potential. For instance, sociologists Judith Stacey and Timothy Biblarz investigated claims in the psychological literature that pointed to gay parent and straight parent sameness and found that actually, in some studies, differences were buried in the reporting of the findings for fear of misinterpretation. By reevaluating the data, these authors found that the children of lesbian parents in particular were actually more likely to be engaged in a wider range of gender nonconforming activities and that their daughters aspired to higher and more masculine-typed career goals than the daughters of straight parents. These and other findings have led some to believe gay and lesbian parenting is rather revolutionary, especially in how these parents challenge the naturalness of heterosexuality and gender role expectations. Under this utopian ideal, gay and lesbian parents are thought to have the potential to be (1) more egalitarian in their divisions of labor and (2) unmoored from the archetypes of “mother” and “father” in their parenting practices and identities.

How do we rectify the utopian potential of these families’ challenges to heteronormative family models with other studies that show very conventional practices and outcomes? I would like to suggest a fairly simple
explanation: so far we’ve been looking at the wrong families. Essentially, researchers expect gay and lesbian families to revolutionize parenting, but, for the most part, these studies all look at the same kinds of gay families: partnered parents. If we looked beyond nuclear families, we might see parents who do things differently. Just as family forms vary among heterosexuals from more conventional to radical, a similar variety of family forms and practices can be found among LGBTQ parents. If we returned to the study of chosen families and considered the children raised among them, we might find queer families with children that resist homonormativity and symbolize queer futurity. My study considers those families. Though no families I met were perfect models of problem-free, antinormative, queer kinship, the practices they engage in gesture toward a queer future and inject some empirical hope into the theory of queer utopia.

**Methods**

I conducted 20, in-depth interviews with self-identified gay, lesbian, bi, trans, and queer parents in the Massachusetts Pioneer Valley as part of a larger research project that also samples LGBTQ parents in New York City. The data I include in this study focus on the families in the Pioneer Valley of Western Massachusetts, a region of the state more rural than the Boston metropolitan area. This area of Massachusetts includes the towns of Amherst and Northampton as well as the outlying towns of Greenfield, Easthampton, Montague, South Hadley, and Leverett, among others. Perhaps because the location houses five colleges, two of which are historically all-women’s colleges (Smith College and Mount Holyoke) this relatively small area of Massachusetts is considered especially politically liberal. For instance, in the 2012 presidential election 82 percent of votes in the town of Northampton, and 83 percent of votes cast in Amherst went to Barack Obama—both of which were much higher than the 61 percent of votes for Obama reported in the state overall. The area also contains a high concentration of residents identifying as lesbian, gay, trans, and queer. Northampton, dubbed “Lesbianville, USA” by news outlets has the most projected lesbian couples per capita of any city in the United States as well as numerous local events and support groups catering toward LGBTQ-identified people and families. Nationally, lesbians, compared to gay men, are more likely to have children. Thus, it stands to reason that many of these households, in Northampton and surrounding areas, also have children.

Several of my interview subjects have commented that the area is welcoming to lesbian and gay parent families. For instance, Dominic, a known sperm donor parenting two children with two separate lesbian
couples and who has spent over 20 years in and out of the area, comments that when his kids were born they were certainly not the first children of gay parents he knew:

When [my] kids were born anyway, it wasn’t like they were the pioneer families that were doing this, or they were the pioneer children of gay and lesbian people, there was already such an awareness already, in this area anyway, that it was just kind of a normal thing.

Carson, a queer-identified adoptive mother of four, comments on the general queer-positive nature of the community,

There’s kind of a moral high ground of even if you’re homophobic, you know that the moral high ground is not to be homophobic, and that’s really rare . . . In the Amherst/Northampton/hill town community, it’s like kind of a given that everybody knows gay people live here, that they make families here, that they have homes here, that they need services that don’t have anything to do with their sexuality, but they would prefer to be open about their families and their partnerships in those contexts. The hospital—you go to the hospital and it’s no issue. You just say “my partner’s here,” or “I’m visiting my partner,” or whatever it is, or “my partner’s going to tag-team with taking care of our kid.” You don’t have to explain it and that’s amazing.

Many of my other participants expressed a similar sense of the area being “different” in its acceptance of queer sexualities and families. Carson puts this in terms of the “moral high ground,” and implicitly contrasts the Pioneer Valley with parts of the country more representative of American cultural beliefs, which tend to be more Christian and conservative.

Although sexually diverse, the area is rather homogenous racially and economically. According to the 2010 census, the town of Northampton itself is 90 percent white with close to 50 percent of residents holding Bachelor’s degrees or higher. Though income numbers are below the national median, with residents earning a median household income of US$41,808, it’s hard to see the average Northamptonite—white, educated, and living comfortably—as anything but privileged. As a consequence, this sample should not be taken as generalizable to or representative of gay and lesbian parenting generally.66

When I set out to find research subjects in an area dense with LGBTQ parents, I was especially interested in parents who were part of alternative family structures (read: nonnuclear) and/or approached becoming parents and childrearing with a knowledge and application of critical, queer politics. I did not talk to the “average gay parent,” but intentionally sought out those parents who saw their parenting as different from
heterosexual models. I made contacts through friends, colleagues, and by attending local events addressing the issues of gay/lesbian and trans parenting. Respondents also frequently referred me to friends or contacts they thought might be of interest to this study. Interviews averaged over two hours in length and were predominantly conducted in participants’ homes, though a few took place in coffee shops.

**Routes to Parenthood**

From my sample of 20 parents, I focus here on 4 cases that illustrate both the breadth of interventions into the structure of “the family” and their limits. Each case (summarized in table 10.1) represents the four different routes to becoming parents my participants engaged in, which can be split into two basic categories: those with biological connections to children and those without. Biological relations for my participants include in vitro fertilization, gestation and birth, and known gamete (sperm or egg) donation. Parents with no biological connections to their children either participated in foster care and adoption, or completely chosen parenting. I use the term “chosen parenting” to designate those parents with no biological or legal connection to children and no romantic connection to their child’s other parents. As Paul, a chosen dad to Sally along with her lesbian parents Jackie and Laurie, puts it,

> If I look at things and don’t complicate things with legality and, “Well, I am not a biological parent, da da da,” you know, she’s my daughter and she loves being my daughter. She’s my daughter, and she’s Jackie’s daughter, and she’s Laurie’s daughter, and it’s a happy family.

In addition, I split the sample (and the case studies presented) based on legal rights. While those people who give birth, foster, and adopt children have legal protections and legal custody over those children (unless challenged), completely chosen parents have no such legal protections and sperm and egg donors tend to sign their legal rights away even if they continue to be informally considered, and consider themselves, parents. For example, Dominic, a known sperm donor and father to two kids being raised in two different lesbian couple households, explains:

> So, for the moms to be able to adopt then, you know, legally I had to give up my legal standing as a parent basically too, which was fine, because that’s what we talked about originally in the donor agreements... But, that [legal standing as a parent] doesn’t matter to me too much anyway. The kids know.
It is common for couples using known donors to draw up donor contracts to ensure that the donor, as a biological relation, has given up their rights to the child and will not pursue them in the future. This is especially true for gay couples since their custody rights are notoriously fragile in the US court system. Thus, any visitation or relationship donors develop with the resulting children has to be negotiated outside the courtroom and donors rely on the parents of their progeny to allow them continued contact.

In what follows, I use four key respondents as case studies of different modes of LGBTQ parenting: Abby, Dominic, Carson, and Paul. Abby is a birth mother raising two children with her partner Tucker, a trans man; Abby and Tucker each gave birth to one of their children using a shared sperm donor, Barry. They each have both biological and/or legal connections to their children as parents and consider Barry an engaged uncle. Dominic, whose rather complicated situation I have already alluded to, is a self-proclaimed “donor dad” to two children being raised in two separate households by a blended family of four lesbian mothers in one case and a lesbian couple in the other. Dominic has surrendered his legal claims to his children, but is biologically related to them and considers himself an active father. Carson—and her partner Susan—are the legally adoptive parents of four children; though Carson has no biological connection to her kids, three of them are biologically related to each other as siblings. Finally, Paul is a chosen parent of one, who he is raising collectively in the household he shares with his daughter’s lesbian moms. Each of these cases illustrates a nonnuclear family in which all adult participants are identified as LGBTQ and whose practices and family arrangements queer normative ideas of family and kinship.

**Results and Discussion**

Below, I catalog the most common themes across my interview subjects that also point to LGBTQ parents’ investments in queer family relations.
and queer futurity. Practices of collective rearing, Do-It-Yourself (DYI) reproduction and documentation, and maintaining family bonds in the absence of legal and/or biological relatedness, though not unique to queer kinship per se, do signify investments in different approaches to family found among LGBTQ parents. The participants in this study queer approaches to parenting found in dominant society—those ideas that families are confined to nuclear households, legal obligation, and biorelatedness—and resist the pull of homonormativity in the process.

**Collective Rearing**

The first way I heard my participants articulate queer parenting is through the process of raising children in queer kinship collectivities. I met families practicing queer kinship in various ways: a couple raising kids with their sperm donor, family friends turning into parents, and chosen family acting as involved aunts and uncles are just some examples. Dominic is a white, 49-year-old union organizer and office worker. A father of two, Dominic parents with three different sets of lesbian couples. He’s also partnered and his partner, Cliff, has acted as a sperm donor to two more sets of lesbian couples, though he doesn’t consider himself a father. Dominic explains all the parents in his daughter Becky’s life:

> While Leila, the birth mom, was pregnant... Sarah, who was her partner at the time was involved in another relationship [with Gertrude]... and they split up... they had one daughter, who was three years old, Emma, and Leila was six months pregnant [with Becky] and then got involved with another woman, with Alice. So then, my daughter’s moms are Alice and Leila, and Sarah and Gertrude... So, there’s basically four moms and then me and my partner, Cliff, so, and two dads. So, that’s kind of the arrangement.

Thus, Becky has five parents including Dominic. Her half-sister, Emma, shares Becky’s four moms, has a separate donor dad, and sees Dominic and Cliff as uncles. Add to this mix Dominic’s son, Jasper, with two more moms, and Cliff’s two offspring raised by four other moms and that makes five kids being raised by thirteen adults in one big complicated family that will likely get even larger, and more complex, as time goes on. This complexity, though quite normal for Dominic, is exactly what makes his family queer. When asked who, other than the people already mentioned, was in his family, Dominic found it difficult to answer.

> Wow. Who else is in my family? Right now? At this particular moment in time? Oh my gosh, wow. That’s a good question... But yeah, family, you
know I lived on a couple different communes, so I guess my concept of family is pretty fluid.

Dominic’s comment suggests that who he considers family is fluid and ever-evolving rather than known and static. He suggests this has to do with having lived on two communes—one exclusively gay—where he still has chosen family years after he moved away. Dominic’s political commitments to progressive causes in labor and gay rights lead him into communal living situations, and, once there, his ideas of family connection shifted. Though Dominic now just lives with Cliff, his family arrangement remains influenced by communal living practices and fluid conceptions of family. Helping to raise children, in this case, complicates homonormative expectations of families with kids for Dominic, his coparents, his kids, and the many people to whom he daily explains his unique family structure. By serving as a living example of queering families for more than 12 years, Dominic has inspired other gay male friends to donate sperm and participate in childrearing, thereby shaping not only his queer present but a queer future.

Paul, a white, 41-year-old gay architect, met his daughter, Sally, when she was 3 years old and her two moms moved in to an attached, but separate, part of Paul’s house. Sally’s moms were more than happy to have Paul increasingly involved in their daughter’s life, and Paul still feels like a dad even without a biological or legal connection to Sally. Paul says,

If I look at things and don’t complicate things with legality and ‘well, I am not a biological parent, da da da’ you know, she’s my daughter and she loves being my daughter. She’s my daughter and she’s Jackie’s daughter and she’s Laurie’s daughter and um, it’s a happy family.

Over the past three years, the separate parts of Paul’s house have become less demarcated and the three parents live more communally, eating together and sharing time with their daughter. He goes on to say that it isn’t just their sexualities that made an alternative parenting arrangement possible, but their shared commitment to a progressive vision of family.

But I did want to stress the idea that I don’t think this situation happens with every gay man and two women that happen to share a house together. I think that they’re as…I don’t want to call us “visionary”, but they have as much vision as I do in the sense that they’re amazing and forward-thinking, in the sense that they opened their own family and Sally to me and accepted me as part of their family.

The LGBTQ parents with an investment in alternative family forms I interviewed have fluid and open ideas about who is or could be family.
On the expansive nature of her family, Abby told me, “we just feel like anybody who wants to have input, who’s in our lives in some way, then sure, if they want to help us support these kids, grow them into beautiful human beings...[they’re family].” That gay parents are raising children in, not just collectivities, but collectivities dominated by other LGBTQ people is one way in which they invest in queer futures. They engage in queer world-making by embracing relationality and giving it new meanings, transforming chosen families into spaces for communal child rearing. Their kids are exposed to numerous alternatives to heteronormative ways of being with more open ideas of sexuality and kinship. These ideas are not only fostered in the teachings of the primary parents, but a whole community who supports them.

**DIY Kinship**

Due to lack of institutional support for LGBTQ people creating families, the participants in my study embraced do-it-yourself approaches to insemination, birth, and documentation. When Abby, a White queer woman and mother of two, wanted to get pregnant with her first child, here’s what she did,

I was reading a ’zine *Ginger* and it was about doing your own inseminations at home. I said to my friends, “I can’t believe it costs a thousand dollars a pop to try to buy sperm!” So...this friend of mine said, “Please don’t ever pay for sperm, I throw it away every day, I will just give it to you.”

After she decided to have a child, Abby did not consult her relatives, friends, or doctors, she read a ’zine; and when she needed sperm, she didn’t go to a fertility clinic, she asked a friend. When she wanted a second child, Abby was equally creative. Although in a polyamorous relationship with a live-in partner, a trans guy named Max, Abby was raising her first child on her own. Her partner didn’t want kids and didn’t want to be responsible for hers, and Abby, seeing no necessary connection between a romantic relationship and coparenting, was happy to accommodate him. When she met Tucker, her current partner, he was casually dating Max. Tucker, also a trans guy, talked to her about wanting to get pregnant; Abby wanted more siblings for her daughter, Ember, but didn’t want to give birth a second time. Having recently helped another trans guy through a pregnancy, here’s her solution,

I was like, “Okay, so maybe my partner’s boyfriend could carry my kid’s sibling. Maybe as friends, I can hook him up with some sperm and I could support him through pregnancy.” I just finished supporting Jack through
his pregnancy and felt really good about being able to help be an ally... for pregnant trans guys. So, I was like “Yeah, I could totally support another trans guy in the valley though a pregnancy and get a sibling for Ember.”

So that’s exactly what they did, but both Tucker and Abby split from Max and became a couple. They moved in together and married, though they both express political opposition to marriage, before the birth of their son so both parents could be listed on the birth certificate. The two planned it weeks before the birth: Tucker would have a home birth and Abby would take their son, Ray, into the records office and say she was the mother (which, she reminds me, she is) and then she said to the clerk, “here’s my marriage license, so put my husband’s name on [the birth certificate].” The result is that a birthing trans man is officially (though not without some creative legal maneuvering) listed as his son’s father on Ray’s birth certificate, an outcome that could not have happened without their marriage. Abby told me the effort to list Tucker as Ray’s father was incredibly important to Tucker and being married, though heteronormative, has allowed for some unintended queer consequences.

Within this heteronormative model where we get to like put [Tucker’s] name on the birth certificate, I also get to like totally queer people’s minds in these conversations, talking about my “husband.” And that carried a much different image for people then me saying “my partner.”

Abby got to tell people her husband was pregnant, which started conversations educating straight people on trans bodies and queer families. Many straight people (and many gay people for that matter) don’t imagine that some trans men could, or would want to, be pregnant. In this way, Abby incorporates her own parenting into her activism that also includes advocating for other queer families. Since we spoke, Abby has successfully started a monthly support group for trans and queer parents in the area. Once a prominent activist for feminist and antiglobalization causes, Abby says that her parenting is “where my life has brought my activism.”

Dominic also sees parenting with lesbian couples as a political act in that it eliminates the need for heterosexual sex, and, therefore, heterosexuals, as a fundamental part of reproduction.

So it seemed like it was really sort of a political move to [donate sperm to lesbians]. It was like taking control as gays and lesbians and creating kids and having families... The gay men that I knew that had kids were men that were married to women... and then came out later in life. So, there was nothing particularly deliberate in the same way as through our identities as
Coming of age as a gay man in the 1980s, Dominic’s only conception of “gay father” were those men who had become parents in the context of heterosexual relationships. Gay men have traditionally faced hostile treatment in foster care and adoption markets, and surrogacy is often prohibitively expensive. But, for Dominic, conceiving a child with a lesbian friend was not a last resort but his preferred method of becoming a parent. Bringing a child into being with another gay person also had political implications for him as it allowed two presumably nonprocreative sexual beings to “take control” of creating kids without any external assistance from hetero-oriented institutions like assisted reproduction facilities or adoption markets.

By having kids by themselves and for themselves, LGBTQ people take reproduction into their own hands and engage in it on their own terms. Lesbians and gay men having children together makes us question the taken-for-granted heterosexuality of reproduction. In addition, more nonnormative ideas of family open up possibilities for creating and raising children outside the nuclear family, inviting friends into a typically closed connection between romantic partners, or forging family by sharing sperm donors and helping other LGBTQ people through the process of pregnancy and birth. The legal system may not recognize the queer families being forged, but queer families find creative ways of being recognized and accessing services from which they have been previously excluded. These innovations outside legal and culturally normative boundaries show that people raising children aren’t waiting for permission to queer their families, they are doing it and forging a queer future in the process.

Maintaining Nonlegal/Nonbio Bonds

The truth is that children of color, due to discriminatory welfare policies and child protection policing, are overrepresented in foster care in the United States. Black children are particularly overrepresented and hard to place with nonrelatives such that they are routinely classified as with older children and children with disabilities as “special needs” garnering (mostly white) adopters thousands of dollars in tax breaks under some legislation. Researchers suggest that white couples, usually preferring a white infant adoptee, go to great lengths and great cost to avoid adopting black children and that the ones that do adopt them raise them in an atmosphere of “color-blind” racism in which they grow up relatively unprepared to deal with being black in a racist culture. There are some
white, LGBTQ parents, like Carson, who are unafraid of fostering to adopt children of color while remaining conscious of the injustices of foster care, adoption markets, and racism.

Carson, a white, self-identified queer woman in her early forties, holds a realistic, yet sobering view of how her four children, all black and all adopted through the foster care system, came to be adoptable in the first place.

DSS stood for Department of Social Services; DCF, Department of Children and Families. Which I think is a terrible name, like “social services” is a little more accurate. It’s certainly not about all children and all families. And, it’s about a very contentious situation where you are removing children from their birth families contentiously because of violence or drugs, most of which is about poverty and the stress of poverty and the cycles of racism and classism and poverty… Deciding to do adoption, in some ways, involves accepting the difficulty of it and accepting that it isn’t a pristine process, it isn’t a very clear process, it isn’t a process where you can necessarily feel like it’s a good thing that these kids are now in [your] home.

Carson prides herself on holding complex ideas of family, forged from her experiences as a foster and adoptive parent, parenting children sometimes for months before they return to their birth families but continuing to see them as family. She also recognizes that her kids had a life, however brief, before she and her partner, Susan, adopted them and that it’s important to speak of birth parents respectfully.

You have to acknowledge where [foster and adoptive kids] came from, you have to acknowledge the difficulty of their birth story, you have to acknowledge their birth parents, and you have to acknowledge them respectfully, you can’t like say, “Oh, your birth mother was an asshole and that’s why you’re here,” you know?

Although these adoptions are closed, that is, neither Carson nor Susan have met the birth families of their children, they maintain that connection in their kids’ lives and recognize these people as extended members of their own family. Three out of four of Carson’s children share a birth mother, known in their household as “Mama Rose.” The first two biological siblings were adopted together as a sibling group. A couple of years later, Rose gave birth and surrendered custody and Carson and Susan adopted her.

Fairly recently, Rose had another child and the social worker called Carson and Susan again to ask if they would take him into their home. Although they declined, they are in communication with the boy’s
adoptive parents and plan on forming relationships with them so their kids can know their biological brother. Carson explains how this new baby adds complexity to their already complex family,

Rose had another baby this past December whose name is David and they called us and we said, “No, four is definitely our limit.” So, he was placed with a family in Pittsfield and we are actually emailing with that family…so we’ll probably get together with them at some point which adds a whole ‘nother layer to [questions of] “What is our family?” “Who is our family?” “And how do we do family?” ’Cause certainly the kids all know about him and they already consider him their brother.

Carson has taught her children that family extends beyond the walls of their home, encompassing people they once knew (in the case of former foster children) and those they have not met (their birth mother and new brother). She openly questions what and who is family and acknowledges that the answer keeps changing.

While Carson’s is a story of maintaining bio, but not legal, bonds, Paul is in a particularly precarious place, from a legal standpoint, being a dad without a biological or legal connection to his child. Paul constantly finds himself explaining his connection to Sally and her moms to friends, family, and strangers. Sally attends parties, birthdays, and holiday celebrations with Paul, and at these occasions, Paul finds his relationship to her called into account. He recalls one incident in which a mother of one of Sally’s friends overheard Sally call Paul “Paul-dad,” her name for him, but has only known Sally as the daughter of a lesbian couple. Although Paul explained his relationship with Sally as chosen, the party-goer makes up her own story to make sense of him,

And then, later I find out…that the mom was absolutely convinced that I was [Sally’s] biological dad and there was some…through scandal and deceit, I somehow re-formed this family and I’m like, “That’s really interesting that you have to make it traditional for you to understand, like there’s got to be some sort of traditional connection, like, if I wasn’t the biological father, then why would I be doing this?”

Paul explained to me that the woman assumed he was an anonymous sperm donor who, without Jackie and Laurie’s knowledge, reconstituted his (biological) family by getting them to move in with him. Continually, Paul’s place in Sally’s life is called into question. In a culture in which many dads run from their responsibilities to biological children, Paul’s story sounds too good to be true to a straight mother. Without a legal imperative or a biological connection to a child, the assumption is that no man would want to be a parent. So, the only possible explanation, for
this stranger, is that there must be some other, biological or legal, motivation keeping him in Sally’s life.

It’s possible that Paul was more open to having Sally as his daughter because of his identity as a gay man. He explains that he had never expected to have biological children and was always committed to adoption,

The idea of children has always been something very interesting to me and, being a gay man, I have never been interested in having a biological child, in the sense that I have a, have and had, a pretty big commitment to adoption...I don’t necessarily find the biology part of it as important as giving a child a place to grow up and have a safe home and have a supporting home.

So, for Paul, adopting is not a “last resort” or “second-best” option as it is for many straight parents; Paul expected that if he did have children in his life they would be adopted. He recognizes the precarious place he is in legally, as there is no imperative for Jackie and Laurie to share custody of their daughter with him. This requires a lot of trust on Paul’s part, but he says he doesn’t need any legal guarantees; he simply is Sally’s parent.

Laurie was talking about...finding other legal ways to make me more of [Sally’s] parent and I’m like, “I am her parent” and I’m fine with that...Like I don’t need some sort of guarantee.

Both Carson and Paul exemplify maintaining chosen family connections and how children can foster, rather than stifle, chosen families. In Carson’s case, she considers her children’s birth mother, Rose, a family member even though she has never met her and believes that this connection is important too for her children’s growth and identities as adopted children of color. Paul has no obligation to serve as a father to Sally other than his own volition, investment, and love for her. In the cases of adoption and completely chosen parenting, there is reason to believe that a gay identity makes it easier for parents to see nonbiologically related children as their own. They have not come into adulthood with the same expectations or entitlements to biological children that heterosexuals have and are much less likely to see adopted children as “not quite as good as having your own.” LGBTQ people uniting in chosen families show us that biology is not the highest imperative for everyone and it shouldn’t surprise us that there might be more openness to adopting and choosing children as well. For parents like Carson and Paul, raising chosen children, they wouldn’t have it any other way.
Conclusion

This chapter makes two major interventions in the current theorizing on queer families. First, that families with children be considered under the rubric of queer kinship; that we understand that childrearing does not automatically mean homonormativity, heteronormative familial assimilation, and conformity. Second, that, beyond this, the reproduction of children by gay, lesbian, trans, and queer folks can contribute to queer world-making and fundamentally shape a queer future. Parents do this by refusing to parent in dominant ways, whether by conceiving through friends rather than fertility clinics, bringing children into alternative family structures of chosen kin, or practicing parenting in ways that teach against conformity in gender, sexuality, or political ideology. In a fundamental way, parenting by gays and lesbians never truly fulfills American culture’s reproductive imperative. Because reproduction in queer families cannot be confined to two married partners, it will always fail. Some parents do not see this as a weakness in their sexuality or an unfortunate reality, but embrace this failure in all its potentialities. As Halberstam recently noted, failure is full of more potential than success: failure allows us to access worlds we hadn’t considered. I would like to consider the actions of parents who intentionally queer parenting exercises in intentional and spectacular failure. Failure that produces modes of relating we hadn’t imagined and failure that leads us in the direction of a queer future.

For this reason, queer parenting guarantees a future of antagonism with homonormativity. This utopia contains neither full recognition nor harmonious acceptance. What it does signal is a continued struggle toward a queerness still on the horizon. While Sedgwick predicted that more investment in the psychology of child gender identity would be used to eliminate gender queerness with the hope of also eliminating sexual queerness, she did not predict the counterforce, people actually trying to bring their kids up gay (or, queer), questioning gender norms and thinking critically about social justice and family normativity. Fighting annihilation does not only mean standing up to bigoted psychologists, but by investing in alternatives and a queer future. Rather than embracing antirelationality, we can always discover new forms of relating in collectivities that are nonoedipal, nonbiological, and queer.

Notes

15. Ibid.
16. Ibid.
17. Ibid.
18. Ibid.: 176.
20. Ibid.
21. Ibid.
23. Ibid.
24. Ibid.
26. Ibid.
27. Livingston 1990.
29. See Halberstam 2011.
30. Ibid.: 71.
31. See Stacey and Biblarz 2001; Goldberg 2011.
32. Ibid.
33. See Goldberg 2011 for a comprehensive review of this work.
36. Ibid.: 169.
41. Ibid.; Halberstam 2012.
42. Warner 1999.
43. Ibid.
44. McCreery 2008.
46. Ibid.
47. Ibid.: 11.
49. Ibid.
51. Ibid.
52. Ibid.
53. Ibid.: 18.
54. Ibid.
56. Ibid.
60. Though the sample size seems small, it is drawn from a subset of a traditionally hard-to-reach population. Beyond that, I further specify my sample for theoretical purposes and focus on families that are atypical. This chapter represents the insights gleaned from 20 participants, but is part of a larger study of 60–80 respondents. A possible limitation of this small set is a lack of generalizability to the larger sample or population.
63. City Data: http://www.city-data.com/top2/c15.html
64. Gates 2011.
65. All names used are pseudonyms.
66. Sampling for diversity is of primary importance in future rounds of data collection.
68. Watkins n.d.
70. Ortiz and Briggs 2002.
71. Ibid.
74. Halberstam 2011.
75. Sedgwick 1993.


Milosc i demokracja. Rozwazania o kwestii homoseksualnej w Polsce
[Love and Democracy. Reflections on the Queer Question in Poland],


Wilson, Patrick A., Pamela Valera, Ana Ventuneac, Ivan Balan, Matt Rowe, and Alex Carbollo-Diéguez. “Race-Based Sexual Stereotyping and Sexual Partnering among Men Who Use the Internet to Identify Other Men for Bareback Sex.” *Journal of Sex Research* 46 (2009): 399–413.


Contributors

Lauren Clapp is a fourth-year student at a liberal arts university in North Carolina. She is studying public health, human services, and women and gender studies. Clapp is originally from Norwood, Massachusetts.

Stephen Farrier is senior lecturer and course leader of the BA (hons.) drama, applied theater, and education degree at the Central School of Speech and Drama, University of London. His research focuses on identity, gender, and queer studies in relation to theater and performance. Of particular interest in his work is the relationship between theatrical form and politics, with a particular focus on how form can be a site of queerness as well as a site of the generation of normativity. He has written and presented papers on queerness and soap opera; queer and Sarah Kane; Ibsen and gayness; queer and new cabaret; queer and intergenerational projects; and queer and postdrag performances. He supervises PhD candidates in a number of related areas including projects focused on sissiness, queer movement, queer autobiography in performance, and gender, comedy, and burlesque.

David Gorshein holds a PhD from the UCLA School of Theater, Film & Television, and a BA from the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor. With his husband, he was nominated for a GLAAD Media Award in 2012 (for the first televised same-sex marriage on late-night TV, officiated by Conan O’Brien on TBS). Gorshein’s research has been supported by the Mellon Foundation and by the Association for Theatre in Higher Education. His writing is published in the Huffington Post and is forthcoming in Theatre Journal. He lives and teaches in Los Angeles.

Laura V. Heston is a PhD candidate in sociology at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst. Heston has taught several courses in sociology and women, gender, and sexuality studies. She currently serves as a managing editor for the journal Gender & Society and as an occasional book reviewer for Lambda Literary. Her research interests include the sociology of gender, sexualities, families, queer theory, feminist theory,
intersectionality, and pedagogy. Her dissertation focuses on the radical family and parenting practices found in local queer communities. She lives in Brooklyn, New York.

**Angela Jones** is assistant professor of sociology at Farmingdale State College, State University of New York. She is the director of Women, Gender, and Sexuality Studies program. Jones obtained her PhD from the New School for Social Research. Her research interests include African American history, gender, sexuality, and social movements. Jones is the author of two books: *African American Civil Rights: Early Activism and the Niagara Movement* (2011) and *The Modern African American Political Thought Reader: From David Walker to Barack Obama* (2012). She is also the author of numerous scholarly articles, which have been published in peer-reviewed journals such as *Interalia: A Journal of Queer Studies* and the *Journal of Historical Sociology*. She has also published book reviews in the *Journal of African American Studies*, the *Journal of African American History*, and *MobMobilization*.

**Tomasz Kitlinski and Pawel Leszkowicz**, an openly gay couple in Eastern Europe, have collaborated for 18 years as authors, academics, artistic, and social activists. As students, they joined the alternative theater movement in Poland and later curated numerous queer and feminist projects, including an international exhibition *Ars Homo Erotica* at Warsaw’s National Museum. They lecture at the University of Lublin and of Poznan, Poland. Kitlinski did research with H. Cixous and J. Kristeva; Leszkowicz did postgraduate work at the Courtauld Institute. They were both Fulbright scholars at the New School for Social Research and are currently Marie Curie Fellows at the University of Sussex and of Brighton. Together they have authored a Polish-language book *Love and Democracy, Reflections on the Queer Question in Poland* as well as other books (*Art Pride, Gay Art from Poland*, *The Naked Man: The Male Nude in Poland’s Post-1945* [with art by Leszkowicz], *The Stranger Is in Ourselves*) and articles, including a contribution (with J. Lockard) “Monica Dreyfus” to *Our Monica, Ourselves: The Clinton Affair and the National Interest*, edited by Lauren Berlant and Lisa Duggan (2001). Kitlinski has also published *To Love According to Julia Kristeva* (2001). Leszkowicz curated an exhibition *Love Is Love, Art as LGBTQ Activism* at Lublin’s Labirynt Gallery and (cocrated with Lara Perry) *Civil Partnerships, Queer & Feminist Art & Activism* at the University of Brighton.

**Hilary Malatino** is currently a postdoctoral fellow in the department of gender studies at Indiana University Bloomington. Trained in philosophy, with years of research and pedagogical experience in gender
and sexuality studies, she is mostly preoccupied with queering bioethics, feminist studies of science and technology, and critical trans studies. She teaches courses on embodiment, feminist and queer theory, the politics of representation, feminist science studies, and trans studies, and has also been known to run the occasional course in ethics or early modern philosophy. Published widely in the fields of continental and feminist philosophy, disability studies, and queer theory, her work has appeared in *Rhizomes*, the *Journal of Medical Humanities*, and the proceedings of the American Philosophical Association, as well as in the edited volumes *Critical Intersex* (2009) and *The Imperfect Historian: Disability Histories in Europe* (2012).

**Jess McDonald** is the media, communications, and programs manager for Campus Pride, the leading national nonprofit organization for student leaders and campus groups working to create a safer college environment for LGBTQ students. McDonald graduated from a university in North Carolina in 2012 with degrees in history and sociology and a minor in women’s/gender studies. McDonald’s research interests include queer history and LGBTQ inclusion in higher education.

**Kat Rands** is assistant professor of education at a university in North Carolina, where ze teaches teacher education courses among others. Hir research interests include mathematics education, queer and transgender studies in education, critical and postcritical multicultural education, language studies in education, teacher education, and Deleuze studies in education. Ze is active in trans and queer community and activist groups.

**Brandon Andrew Robinson** is a doctoral student in the department of sociology at the University of Texas at Austin. His research interests include gender and sexualities, race and ethnicities, and qualitative methodologies and queer spatialities. His past projects have examined homonormativity in the Netherlands and the construction of the “down low” on Craigslist.org. His current thesis focuses on investigating the role of cyberspace in shaping sexualities for men, seeking men online for sexual purposes, as well as their sexual health negotiations within these online spaces. Furthermore, Robinson is exploring how online race-based sexual stereotypes and race-based search engines are lending to normative notions of desirability through these acts of racial cleansing among men seeking men in this digital era.

**Brandy L. Simula** received her PhD in women, gender, and sexuality studies with a disciplinary concentration in sociology from Emory University in 2012. She is currently visiting assistant professor of sociology at Emory University, where she teaches in social psychology and
sociology of gender. Her research explores the intersections of gender, power, and sexuality in social interactions.

Sarah M. Steele received her Masters in women and gender studies from the University of Florida. She is engaged in ongoing research on queer community organizing in the South. Her research interests include contemporary social movements, sexuality, and queer theory. Steele currently teaches courses in sociology and sexualities.

Jane Ward is associate professor of women’s studies at the University of California Riverside. She is the author of Respectably Queer (2008), and has also published several articles on queer politics, heterosexuality, and, most recently, queer motherhood. She teaches courses in feminist and queer studies, and is also an amateur parent, an angry low-femme, and a baker of pies.