

The Importance of Being Childish: Queer Utopians and Historical Contradiction¹

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for Kathryne Lindberg

One of the intended implications of this essay will be that a properly dialectical response to the ostensible opposition between Marxism and queer studies is to be found, today, in the very place where Marxist intellectuals may least expect to find it: within queer thought itself. But we need to underscore the word “ostensible”: whether this opposition can even be said to persist is increasingly open to question. This seems to me to be one of the dialectical lessons of contemporary queer studies, as I will suggest in what follows. But I suppose, then, that I will also necessarily be suggesting that one would have to be in the habit of following queer studies in order to know this: the publication venues for scholarship in these two fields seem, still, to remain largely separate. Whether these two analytic paradigms can be said to be any longer at odds is then much more in question, at least in my view, than the segregation of the venues in which they do their work. In this respect we seem to be in a moment in which Marxism and queer studies remain separate, but on the other hand don’t. It will be up to the reader, in any case, to judge whether the appearance in *Cultural Logic* of an essay like this one is something like an effort to bridge what remains unbridgeable.

I have sketched elsewhere some of the ways in which queer thought has been centrally constituted by a fundamental ambivalence about that widely maligned category which is also basic to Marxian analysis, the category of totality. On the one hand, critiques (or dismissals) of conceptual “totalization” remain as characteristic of queer thought as of other paradigms with which Marxism might be said to “compete”; on the other, queer thought has been centrally characterized by its own variation on what Lukács called the “aspiration to totality,” by an effort to think broadly defined social relations

¹ This essay has gone through several different versions. For helpful engagement with those earlier versions, I want to thank audiences at Carnegie Mellon University, Wayne State University, the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, and the University of Illinois at Chicago.

from a queer point of view.² The modeling of feminist standpoint theory on Lukács' pivotal articulation of a proletarian standpoint was, I would suggest, only the initial move in a proliferation of "knowledges from below" marked by a reflexive, dialectical self-awareness.³

And it is now roughly a decade since prominently published and increasingly frequent interventions in queer thought began taking the vocabulary of Marxism with a renewed and explicit seriousness. Queer studies has, for example, developed its own account of the recent directions taken by a global capitalism the United States seems less and less able to dominate to its own advantage. Lisa Duggan's examination of "the new homonormativity" can be seen from a distance of almost ten years to have articulated, as had Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner a few years earlier, a queer perspective on that freeing of market forces, on that ever more pervasive privatization of social life, that we call neoliberalism – up to and including the assimilation of rights, including gay rights, to the logic of value, to private property and consumption, to what Berlant influentially called dead citizenship.⁴ This apparent contemporary restriction of any broadly held notion of antiheteronormative or queer "politics" to the logic of value is also an assimilation of any such politics to a distinctly neoliberal temporality: a time of pure repetition to which "there is no alternative," a normative organization and experience of time which is also the familiar temporality of what Benjamin called homogeneous, empty "progress." There sometimes seems, indeed, to be no alternative: when are gay rights ever *not* represented as something one can only be for or against?

But queer scholarship since the appearance of interventions like Duggan's has also scrutinized the contemporary state violence that gives the lie to this temporality, that discloses the brutality its enforcement requires. Work by scholars including Martin Manalansan, Chandan Reddy, Jasbir Puar, and Anna Agathangelou has developed a

² Kevin Floyd, *The Reification of Desire: Toward a Queer Marxism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), 4-16.

³ For one of the most suggestive accounts of this internal differentiation, see Fredric Jameson's brilliant rereading of Lukács in "History and Class Consciousness as an Unfinished Project," in *Valences of the Dialectic* (London: Verso, 2009), 201-22.

⁴ Lisa Duggan, "The New Homonormativity: The Sexual Politics of Neoliberalism," in *Materializing Democracy*, ed. Russ Castronovo and Dana D. Nelson (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002), 175-94; Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner, "Sex in Public," *Critical Inquiry* 24 (1998); Lauren Berlant, *The Queen of America Goes to Washington City* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997).

distinctly queer perspective on militarized “homeland security,” for example,⁵ the post-9/11 extension of the already neoliberal logic of “global lockdown,” that overt and routinely racist criminalization of “surplus populations.” Here queer studies throws into relief not a contemporary temporality of repetition, but those forms of neoliberal violence which are also variations on a very old theme, that history of enclosure that both produces and is mystified by the repetitive logic of “progress.”

Time and history, the violent enforcement of so-called inevitability: this is the context in which this essay considers the prominent recent engagement in queer studies with utopia, which is also an engagement with childishness. This prominence is evident most of all in the discussion surrounding Lee Edelman’s book *No Future*, and the more recent appearance of José Muñoz’s book *Cruising Utopia*, which is in part a direct response to Edelman. While *No Future* is, among other things, an overt polemic against utopian thinking, Muñoz has been arguing for more than a decade for the continuing indispensability of the category of utopia for queer studies, explicitly drawing on elaborations of utopia in a range of Marxist thinkers, including Bloch, Marcuse, and C.L.R. James.⁶ But *No Future* remains an indispensable volume, in my view, because it turns out to be a crypto-utopian polemic, a secretly utopian polemic, dressed up in the Lacanian drag of an anti-utopian polemic. If these accounts are opposed to each other – and this has certainly been the implication of their reception – they themselves also provide the means for a dialectical reading of this same opposition, means we can initially gloss as the Adornian character of both arguments. This essay will mediate these ostensibly opposed accounts with Adorno’s thought on utopia, then, which is also, as we would expect, a thinking of non-identity. I will propose that the sudden foregrounding of

⁵ Martin F. Manalansan IV, “Race, Violence, and Neoliberal Spatial Politics in the Global City,” *Social Text* 84-85 (2005): 141-55; Chandan Reddy, “Asian Diasporas, Neoliberalism, and Family: Reviewing the Case for Homosexual Asylum in the Context of Family Rights,” *Social Text* 84-85 (2005): 101-119; Jasbir K. Puar, *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007); Anna M. Agathangelou, M. Daniel Bassichis, and Tamara L. Spira, “Intimate Investments: Homonormativity, Global Lockdown, and the Seductions of Empire,” *Radical History Review* 100 (2008): 120-43.

⁶ Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004), subsequent references cited parenthetically in the text as *NF*; José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York: New York University Press, 2009), subsequent references cited parenthetically in the text as *CU*; see also Robert L. Caserio, Tim Dean, Lee Edelman, Judith Halberstam, and José Esteban Muñoz, “The Antisocial Thesis in Queer Theory,” *PMLA* 121.3 (2006): 819–28.

the question of utopia in queer studies is indicative of a defining contradiction of our current moment, that it is symptomatic of a conjuncture in which capital's domination of the future seems both inevitable and, at the same time, transparently violent in a way that would suggest the opposite of inevitability, the future's irreducible openness.

Time, Utopia, Stasis

Edelman repeatedly cites Adorno in support of his own refusal of utopian thinking. For me this is both a point of incoherence, and the point at which Edelman's analysis becomes especially revealing. In both Edelman and Adorno (specifically, the Adorno of *Minima Moralia*, as I will emphasize), our encounter with the category of utopia is an encounter with the figure of childhood; and in both thinkers childhood also figures our experience and understanding of time. In Edelman, childhood figures a certain utopian understanding of the future; in Adorno, childhood figures a certain utopian understanding of the past. Considering the implications of these simultaneously convergent and divergent figurations of utopia as childhood, my contention in this first section – before I go on subsequently to triangulate Muñoz with Adorno and Edelman – will be that, by way of his central engagement with Adorno, Edelman's analysis begins to diverge from itself. I want, in Marxian terms, to take seriously an argument that, from a Marxian perspective, may seem especially difficult to take seriously. Edelman provides a kind of queer construal of a contemporary situation in which the future seems largely identified with the present, seems largely colonized by capital, even or especially as that colonization of the future by financial speculation has, of late, loudly and dramatically stumbled.

But how, in Marxian terms, to take this book seriously? Edelman's polemic, for starters, is against politics as such. Limiting the concrete political references he obliquely offers to what readers of this journal would be more inclined to call liberal politics, his conception of politics is, at best, what the *Grundrisse*'s introductory section on method would call “chaotic.” But this doesn't mean one cannot productively read as historically specific a claim he tries to make absolute, that politics are by definition oriented toward the future – which means, here, that politics are always inevitably implicated in a

heteronormative futurism, a deeply ideological understanding of time which holds out the promise of a different future, a promise that always turns out to be false. This futurism is in fact narcissistic, as he suggestively puts it: heteronormative futurism is a reproductive futurism, a futurism that only ever reproduces the actual as it is. This narcissistic reproduction of the actual has as its most salient representative the figure of the Child – the Child on whose behalf we want to achieve a better future, the Child who must be protected from harm, the Child who must, in particular, be cradled securely in the warmth of sexual normativity, the Child with which we are to identify: this is a representation of the future which, covertly, amounts only to an identification of the future with the present. This narcissistic futurism then figures the death of the social as it reproduces itself, the death of that future figured by the Child, as a peculiarly queer threat. “Queer” signifies here the murder of the institution of marriage, of the family, of the Child that figures the future, the destruction of the so-called bedrock of our social order. Edelman provocatively contends that to identify as queer is to embrace one’s social figuration as a killer of this heteronormative state of things – rather than, say, falling back into the logic of marriage rights.

To be killers in this way is also, here, to figure the death drive, and Edelman’s central theoretical touchstone, as always, is Lacan. An ahistorical symbolic provides Edelman with a way of understanding time as pure repetition. But into this Lacanian logic Edelman also draws – fatally, I can’t resist adding – Adorno’s opposition between identity and non-identity, his response to capital’s imposition of value, of a relation of equivalence or identification on irreducibly distinct phenomena. Citing *Negative Dialectics* early on – taking issue with what Adorno calls “the immediately sure and substantial” (*NF* 5), leaning on his insistence that thinking “must also be a thinking against itself” (*NF* 156) – Edelman embraces an Adornian articulation of negativity. And the convergence of his reading of Lacanian repetition with Adorno’s conception of time is if anything even more explicit in an important and telling essay that extended the argument of *No Future*:⁷ here he assimilates narcissistic, reproductive futurism with Adorno’s understanding of the abstract, quantified time of capital, an understanding of

⁷ Lee Edelman, “Ever After: History, Negativity, and the Social,” *South Atlantic Quarterly* 106 (2007), 469-76. Subsequent references cited parenthetically in the text as “EA.”

time that accounts for change only as innovation, for example, a time that can never offer anything other than more equivalence, more value, more identity, more capital. In this temporality as well, the future is identical to the present. Benjamin and Adorno give this temporality the same name: progress. Progress and reproductive futurism in this way become interchangeably narcissistic in Edelman's analysis.⁸

But given this identification of reproductive futurism with the abstract time of capital, what then becomes especially striking are the diametrically opposed ways in which Edelman and Adorno understand utopia. Edelman situates any utopian politics squarely within the time of reproductive futurism. In this account, utopian aspiration consists of just another variation on a narcissistic identification of the future with the present. This identification, as Edelman puts it, "perpetuates the hope of a fully unified community, a fully realized social order, that's imagined as always available in the fullness of the future to come." What queer negativity threatens is precisely "the coherence, and so the identity, of the social itself and with it the utopian fantasy of a collectivity, a general will" ("EA" 473, 471). This is a utopianism that identifies with the figure of the Child; this is a childish utopianism.

But for Adorno utopia is fully aligned with an absolute break with the present – and a break which is anything but "always available." Adorno calls utopia "the determined negation of that which merely is."⁹ But then this "determined negation" begins to sound a lot like Edelman's version of queer negativity, the death drive – and indeed one of the persistent dilemmas of utopian thinking is the possibility that utopia can only be rigorously *thought* as pure negativity, as the death of the present, the destruction of the actual. Because the future is unrepresentable, any representation of the future – figuring that future in terms of a vulnerable Child, for example – does indeed take the form of a narcissistic identification of the future with the present, as Edelman maintains. As Nicholas Brown has put it, "the future, insofar as this word is used in a nontrivial way, cannot be represented except as lack. . . . Positive utopias – like Plato's *Republic*, the

⁸ See Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, trans. A.B. Ashton (New York: Continuum, 1995); and Adorno, "Progress," in *Critical Models*, trans. Henry W. Pickford (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998).

⁹ "Something's Missing: A Discussion between Ernst Bloch and Theodor W. Adorno on the Contradictions of Utopian Longing," in Bloch, *The Utopian Function of Art and Literature*, trans. Jack Zipes and Frank Mecklenburg (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1996), 12. Subsequent references cited parenthetically in the text as "SM."

cyber-utopias of our own recent past, or the popular futurisms of the 1950s – cannot think the future; they can only rearticulate the actual in futuristic form.”¹⁰ Because utopian thinking is always also ideological thinking, thinking conditioned by and expressive of the present, the utopian break with the present can only be thought as stasis, as a break from the movement of time itself, a state without change; this is another way of saying that this utopian break can only be thought as death.¹¹ Adorno remarks elsewhere that “the identification with death is that which goes beyond the identification of people with the existing social conditions”; “where the threshold of death is not at the same time considered, there can actually be no utopia” (“SM” 8, 10). We might not be able to imagine a positive utopian future, but we can at least imagine, in our rage, the destruction of the present. In this respect utopia and death are, contra Edelman, identical rather than opposed. Against Adorno, Edelman’s argument identifies utopia exclusively with positive plenitude.

So Edelman’s argument is on the one hand explicitly aligned with Adorno’s, and on the other hand unmistakably at odds with it. Utopia is for Adorno precisely what the death drive is for Edelman: a halting of reproductive futurism, a break with the mere temporal expansion of identity, of equivalence, of exchange. And this tension internal to Edelman’s analysis suggests the possibility, even the inevitability, of reading that analysis against itself. In Edelman’s construal of Adorno’s identification of death and utopia as an absolute structural opposition between death and utopia, his formulation of the death drive itself threatens to veer into utopia, to morph into its ostensible other.

Time, Utopia, Contradiction

But what if we read the pure temporal repetition upon which Edelman’s analysis insists as a symptom of our own historical present, and especially of the difficulty of a certain kind of historical thinking in our own historical present? As Gopal Balakrishnan has recently put it, the inability of contemporary global capital “to employ the workforces

¹⁰ Nicholas Brown, *Utopian Generations: The Political Horizon Twentieth-Century Literature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 22-3.

¹¹ Jameson’s discussion of Platonov in *The Seeds of Time* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994) remains a powerful elaboration of this point.

it is in the protracted process of shedding is also undercutting the power of these populations to respond collectively to and therefore experience this self-destructive contradiction as a coherent historical process.”¹² Adorno’s thinking of utopia turns on this very question – as does his own deployment, it turns out, of a certain childish figure.¹³ Repeatedly in *Minima Moralia*, images of childhood are associated with utopia; indeed, one of the book’s most frankly utopian moments is figured in this way:

To a child returning from a holiday, home seems new, fresh, festive. Yet nothing has changed there since he left. Only because duty has now been forgotten, of which each piece of furniture, window, lamp, was otherwise a reminder, is the house given back this sabbath peace, and for minutes one is at home in a never-returning world of rooms, nooks and corridors in a way that makes the rest of life there a lie. No differently will the world one day appear, almost unchanged, in its constant feast-day light, when it stands no longer under the law of labor, and when for home-comers duty has the lightness of holiday play.¹⁴

Here the future is associated with a past figured as childhood, as an immaturity which is somehow also a critical consciousness utterly lost to ostensibly wiser adults. Elsewhere in *Minima Moralia*, Adorno responds directly to the routine suggestion that childish immaturity prevents any capacity to see truth, to see the way the world really works. He turns that claim on its head: children, he writes, are not so much “subject to illusions . . . as still aware, in their spontaneous perception, of the contradiction between phenomena and fungibility that the resigned adult no longer sees, and they shun it.” “The little trucks” with which the child plays “travel nowhere and the tiny barrels on them are empty; yet they remain true to their destiny by not . . . participating in the process of abstraction that levels down that destiny, but instead abide as allegories of what they are specifically for” (*MM* 228): the child reads toys, objects, use values *as* use values, as

¹² Gopal Balakrishnan, “The Coming Contradiction,” *New Left Review* 66 (Nov-Dec 2010), 47-8.

¹³ I want to acknowledge the paper Nicholas Brown presented on the figure of childhood in *Minima Moralia* at the Marxist Literary Group Institute on Culture and Society in Milwaukee in June 2008. Brown examined this figure in relation to Adorno’s thinking on capital and aesthetics. Hearing this paper, it occurred to me that it might be useful to consider Adorno’s figuration of childhood in relation to Edelman’s.

¹⁴ Theodor Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflections from Damaged Life*, trans. E.F.N. Jephcott (London: Verso, 1974), 112. Subsequent references cited parenthetically in the text as *MM*.

immediately sensory objects distinguishable from the movement of capital as value. But this is an allegorical reading, because the only purpose of these use values is to bear value, use value's opposite. The sensory quality value attenuates is precisely what children, unlike adults, can see. The immature vantage here takes the form of a fleeting, doomed awareness of capital's defining contradictions. With maturity, "the 'equivalent form' mars all perceptions." But "in his purposeless activity the child, by subterfuge, sides with use value against exchange value" (*MM* 227-8). This childish perspective is *Minima Moralia's* figure for an atrophied consciousness of capitalism's historical, radically unnatural character.

Adorno's deployment of the image of childhood is also more consistent with the way this image operates in Muñoz, as I will propose below. But it is necessary first to underscore what any reader of Adorno would expect, that *Minima Moralia's* figuring of utopia quickly begins to look rather more complicated than this. This text also represents utopia in a way that has less to do with a childish experience of happiness than with impulses Adorno calls "archaic," impulses that push beyond the limits of experience itself. In this instance a no-longer-critical maturity finds its figural opposite in something only superficially similar to childhood:

To happiness the same applies as to truth: one does not have it, but is in it. Indeed, happiness is nothing other than being encompassed, an after-image of the original shelter within the mother. But for this reason no-one who is happy can know that he is so. To see happiness, he would have to pass out of it: to be as if already born. (*MM* 112)

Here, childhood has its own prehistory, a prehistory which is also a location for utopia. This is a utopia that breaks out of the very distinction between maturity and immaturity, transcending the individual life span itself. Utopia is in this case, we might say, external to that life span. Pleasure, utopia, and something other than life converge into the archaic, static prehistory of the individual life, a prehistory which negates that life. This is utopia, in other words, as death. As *Minima Moralia* puts it elsewhere, "Nihilistic revulsion is the objective condition of humanism as utopia": "To hate destructiveness, one must hate life as well: only death is an image of undistorted life" (*MM* 78).

We can begin to understand *Minima Moralia*'s juxtaposition of these divergent figurations of utopia, of happiness as early life and happiness as non-life, by returning to the question of progress. Adorno's elaboration of the concept of progress references Benjamin's theses on history; and before returning to Adorno, I want to consider a striking, perhaps unexpected convergence between Edelman's argument and those theses. Benjamin's alternative to progress as empty time, as "one single catastrophe," is of course messianic time. He identifies the successful revolutionary break with "a messianic arrest of happening" which redeems earlier, unsuccessful efforts at such a break.¹⁵ A constant "state of emergency," Benjamin writes (and the scare quotes are his) should be confronted with a real one ("OCH" 392). This rupture in homogeneous temporality is situated in a structural relation with that temporality, crossing it, we might say, at a perpendicular angle: "every second [is] the small gateway in time through which the Messiah might enter" ("OCH" 397). Benjamin elaborates, in other words, an ongoing confrontation between two forms of repetition, opposed as these forms may be: that repetition of empty time, of the mere technological innovation with which, for Benjamin, Social Democracy identifies to its shame; and the repetition of the revolutionary effort. "History is the subject of a construction whose site is not homogeneous, empty time, but time filled full by now-time" ("OCH" 395). The immanent stasis of empty time is confronted by the transcendent stasis of messianic *Jetztzeit*.

History as such, in other words, appears here as a static, structural deadlock not unlike the one we noted in Edelman's account of social relations as they are organized around a narcissistic futurism. Benjamin does not acknowledge the historical situation of this homogeneous, empty time itself, the historically conditioned character of the distinct temporality of exchange society. Any conception of the historical as itself conditioning or even exceeding this bourgeois temporality may be glimpsed, at best, in the radical unknowability of the future. A less structural, more dynamic and qualitative conception of history is registered here, implicitly if at all, as the product of a messianic break with what Marx would call pre-history. But Benjamin's eye is kept steadily on pre-history, his face, like the angel's, turned resolutely away from the future. The theses only think the

¹⁵ Walter Benjamin, "On the Concept of History," in *Selected Writings*, vol. 4, trans. Edmund Jephcott et al. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003), 396. Subsequent references cited parenthetically in the text as "OCH."

future in terms of the past's potential redemption. And to this extent history – identified with the unknowable, unrepresentable future – becomes, along with it, what cannot be thought at all. As Habermas puts it, Benjamin's "anamnesis constitutes the decentering counterpoise to the dangerous concentration of responsibility that modern time-consciousness, oriented exclusively toward the future, has laid on the shoulders of a problematic present that has, as it were, been tied in knots."¹⁶ There would seem to be, here, no historically specific circumstances that would condition (limit, but also facilitate) the ways in which humans make history – as if to suggest that they will, after all, make it "just as they please" if they are to make it at all. We can certainly grant that the future may be radically unknowable for Benjamin because of his own bleak historical situation, in which there are so clearly no viable political options, caught as he is, quite literally and horribly, it will turn out, between fascists and social democrats. But in underscoring "the high price our customary mode of thought will have to pay for a conception of history that avoids any complicity with the concept of history to which those politicians still adhere," Benjamin acknowledges that his turn toward theology is a turn toward transcendence, away from immanent history, as when he compares his own ideas to those of friars who turn away from the world ("OCH" 393).

Edelman and Benjamin share a common refusal of the idea that revolutionary struggle is waged on behalf of "our" children and grandchildren ("OCH" 394), but the convergence does not end there. Something of this convergence is further suggested by Žižek's Lacanian reading of Benjamin, a reading facilitated not only by Žižek's Lacanian reading of capital itself as purely repetitive and ultimately ahistorical, but also by the lack of any distinction in Benjamin between history and time. In this reading, messianic transcendence explicitly becomes the death drive, and history itself entirely textual, a matter of fighting over which of two contending classes will control the meanings of the past. For Edelman, the death drive is the Lacanian "pure signifier" that disrupts the narrative significations of futurism. In Žižek's reading of Benjamin, the death drive is likewise this same signifier, which imposes its synchrony on the (false) diachrony of textualization/symbolization/history. But for Žižek, this pure signifier is also the

¹⁶ Jürgen Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity: Twelve Lectures*, trans. Frederick G. Lawrence (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1995), 15-16.

messianic/revolutionary break itself. The death drive becomes history's "degree zero"; history itself presupposes this "non-historical place," "the real-traumatic kernel in the midst of symbolic order."¹⁷ The symbolic, for Žižek, is precisely what eliminates any meaningful distinction between history and temporality. The revolution is "a strictly *creationist* act, a radical intrusion of the 'death drive': erasure of the reigning Text, creation *ex nihilo* of a new Text by means of which the stifled past 'will have been.'"¹⁸ Here again, neither the repetition of homogeneous time, nor the repetition of the revolutionary break can be understood in relation to conditions of possibility we might want to call historical.

The contradictory figures of utopia as childhood and as death we found in *Minima Moralia*, by contrast, need to be understood in relation to what Adorno insists is a non-identity that structures the concept of progress itself, an unreconciled contradiction internal to that concept. Adorno writes that "progress occurs where it comes to an end"; he also writes that "the progress engendered by eternal sameness is that at long last progress can begin, at any moment."¹⁹ How can progress signify both dynamism and stasis, both a beginning and an ending? Progress represents for Adorno a genuinely historical, dynamic, social movement forward; but it also represents a revolutionary break in time that interrupts the constant repetition of that which merely is. If Benjamin contends that progress has been a story of constant catastrophe, Adorno proposes that progress signifies "the prevention and avoidance of total catastrophe" (*HF* 143). This is a dialectically opposed variation on Benjamin's famous image of the revolutionary break as the pulling of the runaway train's emergency cord. Adorno contends that neither of these dimensions of the concept of progress can exist without the other. But they also cannot exist *in* each other; they cannot be reconciled with each other. "If progress is as much a myth as the idea of . . . fate . . . , the idea of progress itself is the anti-mythological idea par excellence. It disrupts the circle of which it formed a part" (*HF* 151). Though Adorno does not explicitly take Benjamin to task on this, he does reject the choice with which we are faced in Benjamin: the choice between progress as a

¹⁷ Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (London: Verso, 1989), 136, 135.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 143-44, emphasis in original.

¹⁹ Theodor W. Adorno, *History and Freedom: Lectures 1964-1965*, trans. Rodney Livingstone (Cambridge, U.K.: Polity, 2006), 152, 151. Pages 133-74 of this text elaborate the argument of the "Progress" essay, cited above, in a more extended form. Subsequent references cited parenthetically in the text as *HF*.

“conformist confirmation of existence as it is” (*HF* 147), and “redemption as the transcendental intervention par excellence” – because for Adorno this latter, transcendent dimension “forfeits . . . all intelligible meaning and evaporates into ahistorical theology” (*HF* 148). Adorno identifies the messianic transcendence Benjamin explicitly opposes to progress as an irreducible dimension of the concept of progress itself. Actual progress can be reduced neither to immanent social reality nor to a transcendent ideal: it is structured by their contradiction.

And it is precisely this unreconciled contradiction that throws into relief the distinction between history and time. Adorno adds that “the devastation wrought by progress can be mended if at all only by its own resources, never through the restoration of the previous conditions that were its victim” (*HF* 160). Here he reminds us that the notion of progress has its origins in the revolutionary situation that developed in the late eighteenth century and which was only resolved on behalf of capital in the second half of the nineteenth century. This notion can be traced back to a collective break with, a breaking out of, feudal social relations into the dynamism of historical movement. Adorno traces this concept back to a moment before the progress unleashed by 1789 congealed, decades later, into value’s repetitive, empty time. Reminding us, perhaps surprisingly, of the account of the nineteenth century provided by Lukács in *The Historical Novel* – in the wake of 1789, history for the first time becomes “a mass experience”²⁰ – Adorno suggests that one of the conditions of our idea of progress is what we might call the unfinished revolutionary “business” of the nineteenth century. Both this revolutionary break and its defeat are conditions of possibility for the time of capital. Wherever we locate capital’s triumph over the most radical collective energies of two centuries ago – 1848? 1871? the revolution in San Domingue and Haiti’s subsequent punishment by Europe and the U.S.? – the continuity of repetitive, narcissistic time as well as the discontinuity of its utopian destruction are, for Adorno, irreducible dimensions of progress itself. Even revolutionary breaks, after all, have their own historical conditions; they do not enter from the ether like Benjamin’s messiah.

We then grasp the way in which the idea of progress is not reducible to narcissistic repetition by recalling that earlier historical moment which was one of empty

²⁰ Georg Lukács, *The Historical Novel* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1983), 23.

time's conditions of possibility. In *Minima Moralia*, death figures a utopian break with empty time; but childhood figures the conditions inherited from the past that condition such a break. Childhood figures a critical perspective on the lie of formal equivalence, the lie of identity, an ability to see the naked violence of capital, the sheer strangeness of it. One of the reasons *Minima Moralia* is a distinctive text for Adorno is its well-known, explicit, personal standpoint: its famous subtitle is "reflections from damaged life" – reflections from the individual damaged life. In *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Horkheimer and Adorno write that "reification is always a forgetting"; in *Minima Moralia*, Adorno responds with a refusal to forget – even if all that can be remembered is childhood's not-yet-damaged life, even if a stumbling glimpse of history through the prism of metaphor is the closest one can come to thinking history, to comprehending the historical character of a mode of production that presents itself to us as mere nature. *Minima Moralia* suggests that "damaged" life is damaged in its very inability to conceive of this history; it also suggests that the critique of this inability has somehow to emerge from within that same damage. This proposal is reiterated in *Cruising Utopia*, as my final section will suggest.

Something's Missing

I have suggested that Edelman's argument that "queer" should identify itself with the negativity of the death drive is a secretly utopian argument, that to embrace reproductive futurism's figuration of "queer" as the destruction of the actual is also to embrace a figuration of utopia. But this brings us back to the relation between utopia and politics. The opposition in Edelman's analysis between the signifier "queer" and the signifier "politics" could not be more absolute; for Edelman, "queer" and "politics" are in structural and irreconcilable contradiction with each other. We might critique Edelman's argument for a kind of formalism, for abstracting both "queer" and "politics" in the mutual exclusivity he posits between them (a formalism Marxist intellectuals, it needs to be said, sometimes seem to replicate, as dismissive of queer thought as they imagine queer thought to be of Marxism). Or, recalling Balakrishnan's remark quoted above, we might instead construe this radically ahistorical argument as a symptom of the damaged

life we still inhabit, of an historical situation the time of capital makes difficult even to grasp as an historical situation.

Thinking the death of the social, thinking utopia, is of course a radically totalizing way of thinking. The difficulty of the delicate balance between totalization and non-totalization in Adorno is that he refuses the subjective capacity to grasp totality fully in thought, even while insisting that value, “the lattice of socialization,” as *Minima Moralia* puts it, represents an objectively and violently total system which threatens to erase individual particularity altogether. One of *Minima Moralia*’s best-known formulations, “the whole is the false,” to this extent carries two meanings: subjectively, the conceptual whole is false; but the objective totality of capital is also false (*MM* 50). Edelman’s performance of totalization, in contrast, presumes omniscience, transcendence, the very vantage Adorno programmatically rejects (even as he also insists that it can never be entirely eluded).²¹ What Edelman claims for his analysis is an unproblematized bird’s-eye-view of the social as such (which only Lacan, apparently, can throw into relief), a clear, anything but individual vantage on its defining logic, as if his own analysis were not situated within that same totality – much less conditioned and limited by history which, as far as he is concerned, can hardly be said to exist. For Edelman, the structural totality oriented toward a narcissistic future is false, but the conceptual totality is true.

And it is precisely this presumption of omniscience in Edelman which sets his claims apart most emphatically from Muñoz’s, where, to the contrary, utopia takes the form not of pure, abstract negativity, but of performative and aesthetic gestures from within urban spaces in which the historical, he suggests, can still be glimpsed, spaces increasingly erased by neoliberalism’s temporal and spatial logics. Muñoz returns us to earth – though the political implications of this return are less clear than the historical ones, as I will suggest. His book is nothing if not an archive of those sexual and social practices that have begun to vanish from view as the sexually revolutionary energies of the fifties and sixties have given way to their containment by privatization and the fetish of gay rights. He elaborates a contemporary urban terrain of practice at once aesthetic and social, a practice of queer world making, which he reads in Blochian terms as “laden with potentiality,” underscoring the socioeconomic, governmental, and racist violence

²¹ Theodor W. Adorno, “Cultural Criticism and Society,” in *Prisms* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1997), 17-34.

routinely visited on those practices within the neoliberal city. Here the utopian is anything but abstract and conceptual; it emerges practically, “from below,” and under threat. Muñoz’s critique of Edelman turns precisely on the abstract character of Edelman’s analysis. In *No Future*, as Muñoz puts it, queerness is “a singular abstraction that can be subtracted and isolated from a larger social matrix;” specifically, “queer” is in Edelman both white and “crypto-universal” (CU 94). Pointing out, in what has become one of the most widely referenced formulations in recent queer studies, that “racialized kids, queer kids, are not the sovereign princes of futurity” (CU 95), Muñoz finds in everyday queer practices glimpses of a Blochian “‘not-yet’ where queer youths of color actually get to grow up” (CU 96). He explicitly identifies with queer youth of color – informing us that he was once one himself – and unfolds a critique of neoliberal urbanism from this point of view. His explicitly Blochian analysis is in this respect also implicitly Adornian: the child is most salient here as a figure not for an airtight, utterly predictable future, but for a precarious standpoint from which that future might begin to look less predictable.

The violence of Giuliani’s New York City manifests itself in this account in a range of ways – in the infamous zoning ordinances, for example, which, serving the interests of real estate speculators, have also begun to shred the delicate social infrastructure of queer world making. It is also exemplified, of course, by the police: Muñoz recounts a demonstration in Washington Square Park, in the wake of Matthew Shepard’s murder, to which the state responded, as usual, with one of neoliberal urbanism’s defining imperatives, dispersal: “the state understands the need to keep us from knowing ourselves, knowing our masses” (CU 64). Utopian practices emerge in this account from within economically, infrastructurally precarious queer worlds of color in particular, bars like the now defunct Magic Touch in Jackson Heights, in which Muñoz locates those indispensable practices of interracial and interclass “contact” eloquently described by Samuel Delany.²² It is not too strong, in this context, to refer to this contemporary governmental dispersal of forms of queer sociality as “disappearance” – the verb as well as the noun – with all its brutal implications. Writing of the period in

²² Samuel R. Delany, *Times Square Red, Times Square Blue* (New York: New York University Press, 1999).

which Giuliani claimed credit for a drop in crime rates, Muñoz writes that “walking through the East or West Village, Chelsea, Brooklyn, or neighborhoods in Queens, queers have become very accustomed to seeing posters with the pictures of some queer person, often a queer person of color, who has been murdered or has ‘disappeared’” (CU 63).

The utopian is defined here not by its abstract negativity, but by its practical inseparability from damaged life. In a discussion of Kevin Aviance, Muñoz proposes the ways in which this famous black drag performer “affirms the racialized ontology of the pier queen” (CU 74). Aviance’s flamboyant gestures evoke, that is, not only the homo fabulousness that has always been legible as a utopian gesture in Bloch’s sense; these gestures also evoke those voguing contests one could once discover near the piers at the end of Christopher Street, where queer youth of color have tried to create a world for themselves – spaces that have begun to vanish in the last ten to fifteen years, as new condominiums and security forces have appeared in their place, explicitly appealing to gay clients and effacing the storied queer history of the piers, even as it has turned that history into yet another marketing ploy.²³ (Progress!) Muñoz proposes seeing not only “celebration” in Aviance’s movements, but also “the strong trace of black and queer racialized survival” (CU 80). Again we encounter the indispensability of childish imagination; Aviance’s utopian enactments register a damaged present. Aviance, indeed, evokes the marginal sociality of the piers in those significantly less marginal spaces that cater to white gay men: on a stage high above a sweaty, dancing, largely white and tenaciously macho all-male crowd, he performs “gestures [which] connote the worlds of queer suffering that these huddled men attempt to block out but cannot escape, and the pleasures of being swish and queenly that they cannot admit to in their quotidian lives” (CU 79). Muñoz’s archive is one of utopian practices which carry positive content and which have also learned to be fully prepared for disappointment, for failure. Here, as in Bloch, hope is the practical consciousness of a relationship to the future which is inseparable from anxiety, from danger.²⁴

²³ On these developments, see also Manalansan, “Race, Violence, and Neoliberal Spatial Politics in the Global City.”

²⁴ See Ernst Bloch, “Can Hope Be Disappointed?” in *Literary Essays* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), 345.

Muñoz in this way defamiliarizes Edelman’s temporality of repetition, following an Adornian logic, insisting on the discontinuity that conditions continuity, on the indeterminacy and irreducibly historical character of the “not yet.” Utopia is exclusively the death of the present only if that present is fully positive, self-identical; but for Muñoz, the present, which we may well *apprehend* as self-identical, we are nonetheless to *comprehend* in terms of lack: “Queer cultural production is both an acknowledgement of the lack that is endemic to any heteronormative rendering of the world and a building, a ‘world making’ in the face of that lack” (CU 118). In Muñoz, “something’s missing”²⁵ – something we can catch Blochian glimpses of if we attend to damaged, utopian practices the spatial and temporal logics of neoliberalism threaten to make “no longer conscious.” Edelman, by contrast, would have us believe that nothing is missing, that there really is no alternative: what is missing is precisely nothing, what is missing is only the abstract negativity of the actual’s total destruction. And if this abstract destruction is the point at which Edelman’s Lacan seems to absorb Edelman’s Adorno – negativity once again made equivalent to deconstruction, Adorno once again pulled into the service of deconstruction – this same death drive is also Edelman’s utopia, in spite of his efforts to contain the latter within a logic of sameness. This is also the point, as I have argued, at which Adorno will not be absorbed, the point at which the restless dialectic turns *No Future’s* identification of Lacan and Adorno into its non-identification with itself.

Muñoz, meanwhile, highlights what Edelman manages in spite of himself to miss, that the future’s mere repetition of the present is anything but inevitable, that the future promised by a certain neoliberal temporality, a certain enforcement of more of the same, of speculation as such (about the future value of marriage licenses, for example), is a future that erases history, a future to which that temporality wants to take only some of us, those of us it wouldn’t just rather lock up. It is a future that “disappears” the history Muñoz wants us to remember, as it “disappears” the children he wants us to remember. This is the ultimate importance of Bloch for Muñoz: he shares with Bloch a willful insistence on the “not yet,” a determination to see an apparently neutralized political present as “laden with potentiality,” to find political hope in the face of abundant evidence of its absence, in the face of privatization, lockdown, “security.” If the queer

²⁵ See note 9, above.

youth of color with which Muñoz identifies can be construed as potential points of resistance, these points of resistance are also, he suggests, already vanishing. Muñoz may then seem, finally, as pessimistic about the political as Edelman; he insists that “queer idealism may be the only way to usher in a new mode of radicalism that can perhaps release queer politics from its current death grip” (*CU* 172) – the historically specific death grip, for example, of the Human Rights Campaign. We might even say that a pessimism about political practice, and a preference for the critical potential of idealism, is something else he shares with Adorno. But if queer politics are impossible here as well, they are also indispensable, and so vanishing points of resistance will be retained urgently as memory, as ideal, as a way of thinking the history that cannot be experienced. If Muñoz’s forthright idealism seems on the one hand to grant Edelman’s formal separation of “queer” from “politics,” he also insists that this separation is the product of a history we are by no means doomed to repeat.

This engagement with childish utopianism in queer studies seems symptomatic of a moment in which capital’s colonization of the future appears both unassailable – in, for example, the narrative of “no alternative” Edelman would critique with such forceful abstraction that he seems to reinscribe it – and concretely violent in a way that suggests the opposite: accumulation’s radical fragility, a fragility evident in the spectacularly stumbling contemporary efforts to make yet more money from money, to eliminate any mediation of this M-M’ “circuit” by those “workforces [capital] is in the protracted process of shedding,” to invoke Balakrishnan once again. Marxism has read crisis both ways: as the moment par excellence of capital’s revitalization, its power to continue producing more of the same; and as a violent and telling manifestation of capital’s volatile non-identity with itself. This non-identity is where Adorno and Muñoz, unlike Edelman, childishly locate not only the temporality imposed by the logic of value, but the history that conditions it. To the extent that this disagreement between *No Future* and *Cruising Utopia* tells us something about queer studies generally, queer studies would appear to be reading neoliberalism in much the same way Marxism has read capital: as a continually unfolding crisis which is also an opening of, an opening toward, contradictory futures.