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Queerchronotopia: Queerness in the (Post-) Historical World

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**Abstract**

This paper joins the debate of a still-expanding literature on queer temporalities that, among other things, raises the question of a queer-specific construction of time. This specific temporality is what I call *queerchronotopia*. By setting the description of the historical worldview (as described by Reinhart Koselleck, Sepp Gumbrecht, and François Hartog) against queer methodologies developed by scholars like Paul B. Preciado and Jack J. Halberstam, this article claims that, since the last decades of the nineteenth century, definitions and embodiments of queerness and a queer-specific temporality are constantly revised in light of the temporal shift between two paradigmatic social constructions of time—the historical worldview and “our broad present”. First, we summarize how homosexuality goes from an ahistorical aberration at the end of the 19th century to the emergence of the historical *homos* at the beginning of the gay liberation movement in the 1970s. Second, we try to demonstrate how the appearance of identity temporalities as an aftereffect of identity politics in the 1970s unveils some of the fractures in the temporal experience anchored in the historical worldview. Lastly, we discuss how the latent “broad present” that had already shown some of its aspects in the aftermath of the gay liberation movement and civil rights era in the United States became more evident in the 1980s when the AIDS epidemic becomes increasingly intertwined with a concern with the health of the planet. Without dismissing the pessimist tone that has permeated the academic and intellectual discussions about the future of the planet and the catastrophic threats to human and nonhuman entities living in the Anthropocene, this article concludes by suggesting that the queer community and its activism, particularly in response to the AIDS epidemic, could teach us some lessons about how to live “with the trouble” in our present.

Keywords

Queer Studies, Temporalities, Historical Culture

El tiempo está cambiando de piel.

Paul B. Preciado,
Dysphoria Mundi (2022, p. 76)

Identity Politics, Identity Temporalities, Queer Temporalities

After the civil rights era, the advent of identity politics in the United States gave way to new academic disciplines and critical approaches to gender, race, sexuality, and colonialism, which undoubtedly led to a period of great democratization in many American universities (EGGINTON, 2018). Therefore, it should not come as a surprise that, after identity politics, scholars would start pursuing the question of *identity temporalities*—the idea that different identities are constituted under a specific temporal regime in opposition to a dominant temporality. This essay will explore some aspects of *queer temporality*, or what I am choosing to call *queerchronotopia*: a queer-specific construction of time.

The temporal turn in Queer Studies emerged in the early twentieth-first century. It was originally marked by fierce efforts to destabilize a deeply-rooted and naturalized idea in our culture – the notion of heteronormative temporality as the only possible or correct way of understanding time. Two divergent theses dominated the early discussions in this field. On the one hand, scholars like Lee Edelman emphasized that the future was no place for queerness. In contrast, scholars like the late José Esteban Muñoz relentlessly claimed the future as a queer domain (EDELMAN, 2004; MUÑOZ, 2009). In a 2013 article, Carla Freccero observed that the initial discussions regarding the role of the future on queer temporality had departed from traditional understandings of temporal linearity to include other experiences such as recursive or repetitive, nostalgia’s backward-looking melancholy, temporality’s effects in the present, and the sheer queerness of non-progressive time (FRECCERO, 2013; HALBERSTAM, 2005; FREEMAN *et al*, 2007; FREEMAN, 2010). Over the last few years, discussions on queer temporality have assumed an intersectional and interdisciplinary nature, which welcomes even the most pressing issues affecting our collective everyday life. For example, the latest appearance of queer ecocriticism as a new trend in Queer Studies invites us to imagine new models of temporality from a queer perspective in the face of existential threats such as climate change (KREISEL, 2019).

The constitution of a queer-specific construction of time opposes not only the normative rules of institutions like family, heterosexuality, and reproduction but also the classic methods of traditional disciplinary fields like history (FIGARI, 2014, p. 621). Considering the great transformations that have affected our contemporary world over the last decades, it is symptomatic that many professional historians have chosen to dodge the question of new ways to engage with the past and alternative temporalities. After all, as Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht points out, “Historians, much more than colleagues from neighboring disciplines, have isolated themselves from any doubts about their institutional standards.” They have done so, Gumbrecht argues, by elevating the *historical worldview* “to the level of the one, only, and ultimate way of relating past, present, and future” (GUMBRECHT, 2022, p. 37).

Scholars like Michel Foucault and Reinhart Koselleck convincingly described the rise of the historical worldview as it established itself around 1800 (KOSELLECK, 2004; FOUCAULT, 1994). As Koselleck explored throughout his work, I will summarize Gumbrecht’s proposal of the main characteristics that marked the temporal shift that led to the appearance of the historical worldview. First, the historical worldview presented the future as an open horizon of possibilities from which humans could choose and thus create different new worlds. Second, the past seemed to increasingly recede behind the present and lose its authority as its distance from the present was growing. Third, between the new past and the new future, the present began to be



perceived as shrinking or, as Charles Baudelaire described, “an imperceptible short moment of transition”. Fourth, *time* started to appear as an inevitable agent of change, which implies that no phenomenon could escape such transformation and that rules could be extracted to predict the future (GUMBRECHT, 2022, p. 38-39). According to Gumbrecht, this historical worldview dominated the Western experience of history and time with great success until the first half of the twentieth century, when signs of its disintegration started to become evident.

So far, I am trying to suggest that the appearance of queer temporality as an aftereffect of identity politics, followed by its recent approach to other subfields such as ecocriticism, can be interpreted as part of a generalized reaction from some areas in the Humanities to an interpretation of time anchored in the historical worldview. Although there continue to be sectors of our present society and culture that still cling to the historical worldview, I would like to argue that the development of identity politics and temporalities over the last decades is a symptom of a different historical sensibility inspired by a new chronotope, i.e., a social construction of time that started to emerge after the Second World War, which some scholars have defined as “*our broad present*” or “*presentism*” (GUMBRECHT, 2014; HARTOG, 2017).

Under this new temporal regime, the past no longer recedes behind the present. As investigations of queer and other identity temporalities reclaim neglected or forgotten stories, the past seems to continuously invade our present under the headings of reparations and historical justice. Therefore, the present abandons its embodiment as a short moment of transition to become a space inhabited by the simultaneity of multiple identities and their temporalities. Additionally, theoretical approaches like queer ecocriticism denounce the future as a space of existential and physical threat and no more as a horizon of open possibilities. As the expectations of a different and better future disappear, the present becomes a central dimension in our culture where solutions must be provided to slow down what seems an inevitable march towards the extinction of human beings and the material world surrounding them.

This essay is an early stage (one could say preliminary) investigation of how queerness and queer temporalities can be understood as symptoms and reactions to the historical worldview, its disintegration, and the emergence of the new chronotope of “*our broad present*.” First, I will try to understand how the “*invention*” of the clinical definition of homosexuality in the last decades of the nineteenth century relates to a process of historicization of all things in the world supported by the historical worldview and helped to sidestep, if not obliterate, queer experiences from the historical worldview. If evolutionary narrative schemes excluded homosexuality from a normative form of sexuality, I argue that it would take almost a century for homosexuality to shift from a scientific object into a historical subject. The historical *homos* appeared for the first time when the

gay liberation movement in the 1970s started to reclaim layers of queer existence from the past that were suppressed and thus forgotten.

If past experiences of queer lives were supposed to inspire gay activists to envision a different and better future, therefore bringing queerness into the frames of the historical worldview, the expectations of a perfect future reality soon started to disintegrate. With the rise of the AIDS crisis in the early 1980s, uncertainty toward the future became even more prominent as thousands of lives affected by the disease were cut short. By analyzing literary texts like Tony Kushner's *Angels in America*, I try to demonstrate how this threatening future cannot inspire actions for change, thus transforming the present into a dimension dominated by feelings of stagnation and disorientation. Consequently, I argue, the present also begins to be understood as an unconventional dimension that infuses all kinds of temporalities and materialities.

In this essay, I use the words *gay* and *homosexual* interchangeably with *queer*. I do so for some reasons I would like to clarify. Lately, the word *queer* encompasses most (if not all) forms of identification of genderqueer within the LGBTQIA+ spectrum. By focusing on the experiences of cis gay men, I acknowledge that my approach to queer temporality is incomplete, especially because a complete account of queer temporality can only come to life if we take into consideration the multispectral experience of queerness. By using words such as *homosexual* and *gay* interchangeably with *queer*, it is not my intention to exclude other ways of identification within the LGBTQIA+ from then and now. Rather, I deliberately choose to speak from a gay/homosexual male perspective not only because it is my own personal experience but also because I felt that the historical and literary sources I have chosen will illuminate some (not all) aspects of a *queerchronotopia* I tried to conjure in this essay.

Although queerness is a shared destiny that defies borders, as Paul B. Preciado said, my geographical focus will be the United States. The appearance of the gay liberation movement in the United States in the 1970s, followed by the emergence of identity politics in the same period (and later by identity temporalities), appears to establish the blueprint not only for queer community-organized activism in countries across the globe but also through the inauguration of *Queer Theory* as an academic discipline. I have made the conscious decision not to discuss Latin America in this essay. I believe that a serious study of the gay liberation movement in countries like Brazil and Argentina (just to mention a few) from the 1960s through the 1980s demands more time, effort, and materials that were not immediately available to me at the time I wrote this essay. In addition, the development of queer activism in Latin America needs to take into account not only the fight against mainstream heterosexuality but also the emergence of bloody dictatorships (PERLONGHER, 2018). However, it is worth mentioning that one of the goals of my agenda of



investigation is to expand this analysis into an inter-American perspective. In the great scope of my future intellectual and academic endeavors, this essay is only a prelude.

Historical Homos

I begin this section by pointing to a specific moment in the last decades of the nineteenth century when the modern clinical definition of homosexuality was, for lack of a better word, invented. It is not my intention here to summarize the debates and discussions that framed this invention since other scholars have already meticulously done so (GREENBERG, 1988; HALPERIN, 1990). Instead, I will try to understand the formulation of homosexuality as it relates to the constitution of the historical worldview. I am interested in exploring how the process of historicization of all things in the world that began in the nineteenth century is intertwined with the appearance of the regime of sexual difference that defined homosexuality—among other different embodiments of sexuality—as a scientific object. As Paul B. Preciado has pointed out, the regime of sexual difference promulgated by psychoanalysis is “neither a nature nor a symbolic order, but an epistemological politics of the body and that, as such, it is historical and changing” (PRECIADO, 2021, p. 52).

Michel Foucault was one of the first scholars in the twentieth century to analyze the implications of this historicization process for the invention of homosexuality. In the first volume of his *History of Sexuality* from 1976, Foucault alludes to a conceptual shift that shaped the meaning of homosexuality in the late nineteenth century when he said: “the sodomite had been a temporary aberration; the homosexual was now a species” (FOUCAULT, 1994, p. 43). *Aberration, monster, degenerate, species* – the concepts involving the definition of homosexuality in the regime of sexual difference evoke the constitution of evolutionary schemes à la Darwin that emerged as a response to the increasing historicization of things in the world driven by the historical worldview. Such systems were founded upon a history whose new dynamism demanded temporal categories of movement (KOSELLECK, 2004, p. 246).

As Reinhart Koselleck had indicated, one criterion for this temporalization was the theorem of the non-contemporaneousness of diverse but simultaneous histories in a chronological sense. In other words, this fundamental experience of progress was rooted in the knowledge of non-contemporaneity that exists at a chronologically uniform time. This temporal axiom emerged out of the geographical opening of the globe through the colonial process of overseas expansion when various but coexisting cultural levels were first brought to light and were ordered through a process of synchronous comparison diachronically. A constant impulse leading to a progressive comparison was drawn from the fact that individual peoples or states, parts of the planet, or classes

were found to be in advance of the others. From the eighteenth century on, it became possible to formulate the postulate of acceleration or, from the point of view of those left behind, the postulate of catching up or surpassing. This philosophy of history inspired the constitution of the modern historical narrative, which ultimate goal was to describe the total image (one could say singular identity) of all things through time (KOSELLECK, 2004, p. 236-238).

The historical system of knowledge and representation that began with the opening of the globe also came to represent a specific political and economic order that crystallized in the second half of the nineteenth century: the heterocolonial patriarchy (PRECIADO, 2021, p. 55). Consequently, the clinical interpretation of sexuality placed homosexuality, along with other different embodiments of sexuality, at a barbaric stage in the scale of an advanced sexual civilization. The discovery of various embodiments of sexualities coexisting as non-contemporaneous yet chronologically simultaneous led to the realization that different perspectives of apprehending the world existed besides heterosexuality. A series of strategies from various fields – medical, legal, political, and academic – elevated white/male/heterosexuality to a dominant discursive and institutional power position within an evolutionary, hierarchical narrative of sexuality (PRECIADO, 2021, p. 65).

Nevertheless, Paul B. Preciado has pointed out that since the 1940s, the discovery of new data (morphological, chromosomal, and biochemical) has started to challenge traditional definitions of sex and gender assignment. Consequently, this has initiated a crisis in the hierarchical/evolutionary epistemic binary regime, which coincides with the first signs of disintegration of the historical worldview (PRECIADO, 2021, p. 52). However, the historical worldview's influence could still be felt when minority dissidents in the 1960s and 1970s finally started to reclaim layers of their past existence. For example, in the wake of the gay liberation movement in the early 1970s, homosexuality left behind its status as a scientific object to a position as a historical subject—the historical *homos*. To answer the question “What is homosexuality?” it became necessary to tell the history of homosexuality through time.

According to historian John D’Emilio, when the gay liberation movement began, “Gay men and lesbians had no history that we could use to fashion our goals and strategy” (D’EMILIO, 1993, p. 467-468). To D’Emilio, before the liberation era, the coming of age of gay people usually happened in isolation; they were unaware of each other and had no resources for naming and understanding who they were. In the 1970s, the existence of a gay-specific community and its history became a topic of dispute in scientific/academic circles. The debate on whether a definition of queer identity should start by considering the dispersive nature of homosexuality or not – since most lesbian and gay history supposedly had to do with non-community – would still echo years



later with the appearance of the “anti-social thesis in Queer Theory” in the 1990s (BERSANI, 1995; WARNER, 1993; CASERIO et al, 2006). In an article from 1979, anthropologist Stephen O. Murray defended applying the term “community” to the growing number of gay men living in large urban settings like Toronto, New York City, and San Francisco. To Murray, one of the principal features of a community was its history:

despite the lack of primary socialization into gay communities, distinctive gay areas, institutions, lifestyles, terms and folklore have existed for decades in urban centers. Recovering a proud past is typically important in the formation of a group identity, as the most superficial examination of the emergence of nation-states reveals. In recent years efforts to learn about the history of subordinate groups have gained momentum. The quest for forerunner heroes [...] has been supplemented by serious historical research on everyday life of oppression and on suppressed gay history including incidents of rebellion. Historical narratives have always served as a rationale by emerging peoples for the independence they seek (MURRAY, 1979, p. 171-172).

Historical Time in the Age of (Gay) Revolution

The emergence of the gay liberation movement in the wake of the civil rights and antiwar era was marked by unprecedented intersectionality with other historically oppressed groups in the United States. In his *Gay Manifesto* from 1970, gay activist and writer Carl Wittman indicated that a collective effort, rather than an isolated queer initiative, should drive the fight against gay oppression. “Many of us,” he suggested, “have mixed identities and have ties with other liberation movements: women, blacks, other minority groups; we may also have taken on an identity which is vital to us: ecology, dope, ideology” (WITTMAN, 1970, p. 7). This sentiment echoes the manifesto of the *Third World Gay Revolution* from 1969, which begins by stating, “We each organize our people about different issues, but our struggles are the same against oppression, and we will defend it together” (GAY FLAMES, 1970, p. 4).

In the early 1970s, a global movement of historically oppressed groups began to form a coalition to fight common enemies – capitalism, sexism, and heterosexuality, to name a few. In the United States, this alliance was forged between oppressed minorities such as the gay liberation movement, radical feminists, Latinx, and the Black Panther Party, among others. In September 1970, members of this coalition met in Philadelphia during the *Revolutionary People’s Constitutional Convention*. Sponsored by the Black Panther Party, the symbolism of this event should not go unnoticed: its goal was to create a new Constitution for the United States in the

same place where, almost two hundred years before, another convention gave birth to the original Constitution of the United States.

In this historical moment in 1970, both past and present versions of the U.S. Constitution stood under America's idea of community. What set them apart was the claim that this community was incomplete without equal representation for African Americans, Women, Queers, and other minorities. If the historical worldview presented the future as endless possibilities from which humans could choose and thus create different, better worlds, the historically oppressed minorities in the 1970s saw an opportunity to seize the moment and envision the future they wanted to make for themselves. As the liberation movements tried to speed up a historical process that would leave behind a past of oppression, it became necessary to create new languages and concepts (or new meanings for old ones) that could reflect their future expectations. For example, the proposal of a new version of the United States Constitution by the Revolutionary People's Constitutional Convention demonstrates how this temporalization affected traditional political vocabulary. In this scenario, the original American Constitution increasingly became synonymous with a past that lost its authority over the present and must be left behind.

The efforts of the coalition of historically oppressed groups to create a new world free of oppression sometimes had an opposite, undesirable effect to what was primarily intended. As each identity of this coalition started to reclaim layers of existence, the present – instead of a short moment of transition between the oppressed past and the promising future – became increasingly experienced as a crowded space populated with multiple identities that seemed to lead nowhere. The dissolution of the Gay Liberation Front and the Black Panther Party in the late 1970s illustrates how the liberationist mood that emerged in the early 1970s soon began to show signs of exhaustion.

Confidence in the future as a horizon of open possibilities quickly started to be replaced by feelings of uncertainty. According to a newsletter of the *Gay Liberation Front* celebrating the first anniversary of the Stonewall Riots, "What it will all come to no one can tell. It is our hope that the day will come when homosexuals will be an integral part of society – being treated as human beings. But this will not come overnight." The mixed feeling of uncertainty and excitement about the future is also apparent in the essays of James Baldwin's *No name in the streets* from 1972. According to Baldwin, his book had been "much delayed by trials, assassinations, funerals, and despair." If his book could not have arrived sooner, he said,

nor is the American crisis, which is part of a global, historical crisis, likely to resolve itself soon. An old world is dying, and a new one, kicking the belly of its mother, time,



announces that it is ready to be born. This birth will not be easy, and many of us are doomed to discover that we are exceedingly clumsy midwives. No matter, so long as we accept that our responsibility is to the newborn: the acceptance of responsibility contains the key to the necessary evolving skill. This book is not finished – can never be finished, by me [...].

As to the effect of all this – and so much more! – on the Black Panther leadership and on black or non-white people, in this country, and all over the world, time will give a sufficiently authoritative answer (BALDWIN, 1972, p. 196-197).

Since the end of the Second World War, a global sentiment that the world was engulfed in intermittent crises – for which no one seemed to have a definitive solution – became increasingly evident. Feelings of uncertainty about the future quickly overcame the euphoria of the gay liberationists' early days, even if time occasionally appeared as an inevitable agent of transformation – as we can see at the end of Baldwin's passage above. A growing concern with ecology and the planet, as Carl Wittman had already declared as a new form of identity in his *Gay Manifesto*, only added to the uncertain feelings about the future. The consequences of human's unlimited exploration of the planet's resources were starting to give rise to a pessimist mood marked by the alarming news that humankind was marching towards catastrophic ecological consequences. With the advent of the AIDS crisis in the early 1980s, a latent feeling that there was no future left became even more evident as a deadly outcome for the queer community.

No Future Left (but empathy)

For queer folks, no other event contributed more to a departure from the historical worldview as a paradigmatic experience of time and history than the emergence of the AIDS crisis at the beginning of the 1980s. As J. Jack Halberstam points out, one of the most consequential effects of this crisis on the gay community was the increasing disappearance of the horizons of possibility for those affected by the disease, which forced them to rethink a conventional emphasis on longevity and futurity (HALBERSTAM, 2005). To French writer Hervé Guibert, who died from complications of AIDS in 1991, his illness became a unique apprenticeship about time: "It was the disease that gave death time to live and its victims time to die, time to discover time, and in the end to discover life, so in a way those green monkeys of Africa have provided us with a brilliant modern invention" (GUIBERT, 2020, p. 172).

Few works portraying the AIDS crisis encapsulate the impact of a temporal shift caused by this crisis as Tony Kushner's 1993 play *Angels in America: A Gay Fantasia on National*

Themes. This play focuses on the early years of the epidemic when an effective treatment had not yet been discovered. Each character in this play must constantly re-evaluate their future based on, for example, how much time they have left. Prior, a gay man from New York was infected with the disease in the early days of the epidemic. Because there is no effective treatment, his body is rapidly overtaken by the disease. But it is Louis, his seronegative boyfriend, who undergoes one of the biggest transformations throughout the play. Despite all the prognostics that point to a threatening future, Louis still wants to believe that the world is constantly moving forward toward a state of perfectibility. However, the lurking threat of death triggers a chain of disappointments about his belief in a better future. In an act that can only be described as cowardice, Louis eventually leaves Prior, dropping him unconscious in a hospital in the middle of the night after his boyfriend collapsed on their apartment floor. Before making the decision to leave, Louis asked for a rabbi's advice at his grandmother's funeral:

LOUIS: Rabbi, what does the Holy Writ say about someone who abandons someone he loves at a time of great need?

RABBI ISIDOR CHEMELWITZ: Why should a person do such a thing?

LOUIS: Because he has to. Maybe because this person's sense of the world, that it will change for the better with struggle, maybe a person who has this neo-Hegelian positivist sense of constant historical progress towards happiness or perfection or something, who feels very powerful because he feels connected to those forces, moving uphill all the time... Maybe that person can't, um, incorporate sickness into his sense of how things are supposed to go. Maybe vomit and sores and disease really frighten him, maybe... he isn't so good with death (KUSHNER, 1993, p. 25).

The seropositivity status and the progressive deterioration of his partner's body challenge Louis's belief in a constant historical progress towards happiness or perfection, moving uphill all the time. But after leaving Prior, he starts a process of undoing this worldview and becomes open, not without struggle, to reconcile with the fact that there is no perfect reality in the future. To fully embrace this new perspective, at one point in the play, he attempts to infect himself with HIV by having anonymous bareback sex (anal sex without a condom) with strangers in Central Park in the middle of the night. As Tim Dean puts it in his article "Bareback Time", participants in the bareback subculture also experiment with temporal relations, which ultimately means "to self-consciously expose oneself to temporal contingency and finitude" (DEAN, 2011, p. 76).

Angels in America is a play about, among other things, how to reconcile with the imperfectability of the world when the world is falling apart. In the play, the physical integrity of



the planet is also in danger; the threat of a climate catastrophe caused by a hole in the ozone layer haunts Harper – the depressed wife of a closeted gay Mormon and Republican – throughout most of the play:

HARPER: People who are lonely, people left alone, sit talking nonsense to the air, imagining...beautiful systems dying, old fixed orders spiraling apart.

When you look at the ozone layer, from outside, from a spaceship, it looks like a pale blue halo, a gentle, shimmering aureole encircling the atmosphere encircling the earth. Thirty miles above our heads, a thin layer of three-atom oxygen molecules, product of photosynthesis, which explains the fussy vegetable preference for visible light, its rejection of darker rays and emanations. Danger from without. It's a kind of a gift, from God, the crowning touch to the creation of the world: guardian angels, hands linked, make a spherical net, a blue-green nesting orb, a shell of safety for life itself. But everywhere, things are collapsing, lies surfacing, systems of defense giving way. This is why, Joe, this is why I shouldn't be left alone (KUSHNER, 1993, p. 16).

In Kushner's play, the immune system of gay men is not the only one under attack. The planet is interpreted as the ultimate immune system, which has been dangerously compromised: humans and the material world surrounding them are all sick (SLOTERDIJK, 2013). Harper copes with her failed marriage and fear of the future by taking extra doses of Valium while she sits most days unmoving in her apartment. Too many pills, so little time: one of the characteristics of the *pharmacopornographic* regime, as Paul. B. Preciado has extensively explored in his body of work, is to perpetuate the belief that things can get better in the future, even at a molecular level. Harper's constant consumption of lab-made pills fights anxiety triggered by reality (PRECIADO, 2013). But the use of such medication can backfire. Harper's depression and her fears prevent her from taking any action. Between an imminent collapse of the planet and a past that aggressively invades the present, the present becomes a place where no change can take effect, leading to feelings of stagnation. In the "broad present," the threatening future creates barriers that stop one from moving forward, thus creating feelings of immobility and disorientation. During her episodes, Harper dwells in the space between the sad reality of her life in Brooklyn and a happy, delirious fantasy in Antarctica that will never materialize.

Nevertheless, Harper also desires to return to her life in Utah, when her marriage still seemed perfect. Her religious faith as a Mormon represented an alternative for a future as a safe space filled with images of atonement, salvation, and redemption. However, this past could no longer be physically accessed, nor could its memories make sense through narrative devices. In

the “broad present,” one of the ways to access the past is through unmoved structures of stasis. In the play’s last scene, Prior and Louis (who had reconciled) sit with two friends by the Bethesda Fountain in Central Park. It is winter, and the statue of the Angel in the fountain simultaneously conjures memories of past summers when the water flowed freely and the lives of those taken by the AIDS crisis:

PRIOR: The fountain’s not flowing right now; they turn it off in the winter, ice in the pipes. But in the summer it’s a sight to see. I want to be around to see it. I plan to be. I hope to be. This disease will be the end of many of us, but not nearly all, and the dead will be commemorated and will struggle on with the living, and we are not going away (KUSHNER, 1993, p. 290).

This shift in ways of engaging with a queer past had already begun to be formulated by gay writers before the appearance of the AIDS epidemic. In Larry Mitchell’s novel *The Faggots and their Friends Between Revolutions* from 1977, the narrator says, “There still exists a faint memory of the past when the faggots and their friends were free. The memory lives in the faggot’s bones. The memory appears at night when the bones are quietest. In darkness the faggots remember that once they lived in harmony with each other and their world” (MITCHEL, 1977, p. 8). Unlike “Angel in America,” but very much like “Angel of History” from Walter Benjamin’s *IX Thesis on History*, the “faggots” in Mitchell’s novel are propelled into the future by strong and almost irresistible historical forces. However, they cannot resist fixing their gaze on a past that has accumulated behind them as a pile of debris. In Mitchell’s novel, this almost irresistible historical force toward the future coincides with the appearance of a disease:

suddenly and strangely, some of the faggots began to show a dis-ease. First they cut down the trees which protected the other faggots from the wind and rain. Then they burned the earth which fed the other faggots. Then they killed the young animals and ate them themselves. Then they began to enslave the women – all the women. As the dis-ease advanced, they stopped touching the other faggots and at that moment they became the men. They attacked the unsuspecting women who loved women. Bloodshed and devastation entered the bones of the faggots and began to drive the memory of harmony away. The women who love women and the faggots were the only ones who knew the cure for the men’s dis-ease. But the men did not want to be cured. Their crimes against the others became more numerous and more demonic. More of the faggots became men and so more became implicated in self-loathing, *a disease of other-ness* [...] (MITCHEL, 1977, p. 8)



In *Faggots and their friends*, the past of the oppressed and defeated encourages an approach of empathy instead of being analyzed as sequences of action that may trigger questions about causality. However, this empathy should not be understood only in the sense of the traditional relation of identification (as imagining oneself “in the place of the victims”) but, as Gumbrecht suggests, an approach of compassion and pity in the literal meaning of the German word “Mitleid” – physically suffering with the victims of the past (GUMBRECHT, 2020). A statement from the narrator in *Faggots* exemplifies the sense of compassion we are trying to evoke here: “The destruction of witty faggots and the militancy of beaten faggots are constantly and lovingly made flesh again. And so, these parts of the past are never lost. They are imprinted in the bodies of the faggots where the men cannot go” (MITCHEL, 1977, p. 13).

The empathetic attitude we just described, which could help to envision new ways of engaging with the past, demands a subversion, if not a complete abandonment of the notion of progressive linearity of time. After all, how can the presence of the past in the present be explained? This empathetic approach to the past is probably what Carolyn Dinshaw had in mind when she suggested we interpret the relationship between the past and the present as “touching across time” or, in other words, the collapse of time “through affective contact between marginalized people now and then” (FREEMAN *et al*, 2007, p. 178; DINSHAW, 1999). The fluid temporality that allows for this experience of “touching across time” neutralizes the tenacity of a modernist temporality that emphasizes progress toward the future. As some communities are excluded from this temporality, Dinshaw argues, “Asynchrony, in the form of restless ghosts haunting the present, can be the means of calling for justice for past exclusions and injustice” (DINSHAW, 2012, p. 34).

Staying With Trouble

In 2009, the late queer theorist José Esteban Muñoz proclaimed the future as a queerness domain. In addition, he said, “Queerness is a longing that propels us onward. [It is] that thing that lets us feel that this world is not enough, that indeed something is missing” (MUÑOZ, 2019, p. 1). Muñoz traced the genealogy of his thesis on queerness and futurity to the Third World Gay Revolution manifesto written forty years prior. Then and now, any project of queer liberation can only have the future as its primordial dimension of full realization because, then and now, queers and other minorities have never been safe. The *patriarcha(l)ism* that has dominated politics and fundamentalist sects of religions for many years – supported by hegemonic and global economic forces – turns the already precarious lives of queers into utterly disposable bodies (FIOL-MATTA, 2018). The Reagan’s Administration delay in responding to the AIDS crisis in the 1980s is just

one example, among many others, of the conjunction of forces that have enabled necropolitics in the world we live in. As Mexican trans-philosopher Sayak Valencia puts it, death has become the most profitable business in existence (VALENCIA, 2018).

Nevertheless, how can one be hopeful about the future when living under the existential and physical threats of gore capitalism and the Anthropocene? In the post-historical world, the present assumes characteristics embodied by a space-temporal regime that Donna Haraway defined as *Chthulucene* (HARAWAY, 2016). Seen as an unconventional present that infuses all kinds of temporalities and materialities available on the planet, *Chthulucene* can also help us understand the unexpected mechanisms and companionships that humans create in moments of uncertainty about the future, a scenario that Lauren Berlant probably had in mind when she coined the term "*Cruel Optimism*" (BERLANT, 2011). The AIDS epidemic, its uneven and catastrophic impact on queer communities across the globe, and the solutions created and shared among its members to learn how to live with this disease demonstrate how queer activism can teach us to "stay with the trouble." I agree with Muñoz when he said that the future is a queerness domain. By subverting traditional experiences of time, queerness also shows us that the future can be now.

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