History's Tears

Michael O'Rourke

To be offered, or to receive the offer of the future, is to be historical. (Nancy, 1993, p. 164)

In a 2005 issue of *PMLA*, Jonathan Goldberg and Madhavi Menon revisited some of the terrain charted in Goldberg’s groundbreaking *Queering the Renaissance* (1994) in an effort to alter the ways in which we do the history of sexuality. The challenges they pose to historiography in that article will have, or ought to have, if they have not already, serious ramifications, both within and beyond the field of early modern or Renaissance queer studies. I also have no doubt that the methodological propositions Goldberg and Menon make will be enormously productive for those historians who seek to queer the past, and to undo the history of homosexuality. My worry, and it is a major concern, is that the kind of anti-teleological project they propose may only be useful for queering the past and challenging ‘the notion of a determinate and knowable identity, past and present’ (Goldberg and Menon, 2005, p. 1609, my emphasis). That is to say, Goldberg and Menon’s essay closes off the future, refuses an ethical opening onto the queer future, says fuck the future in much the same way that Lee Edelman does in his polemical book *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (2004). What I wish to argue is that Goldberg and Menon have fallen under the sway of Edelman’s anti-social thesis and that this move represents a dangerous turn not just for queer historiography, but for queer ethico-political thought more generally. Because, from its very ‘beginnings’, queer theory has, like deconstruction, been turned towards the future, a theory permanently open to its own recitation, resignification and revisability, it has always been a hopeful theory. From its earliest incarnations in the AIDS activism of ACT UP and Queer Nation, both of
which are privileged by the utopian political thought of Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri in *Multitude* (2004) as promising an unmasterable future, and the ‘foundational’ theorizations of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and Judith Butler (among others), queer theory has *always already* been of, for and promised, given over to, the future, to futurity as such. It has curved ‘endlessly toward the realization that its realization remains impossible’ (Edelman, 1995, p. 346). In the early 1990s, Edelman himself was able to celebrate the utopic negativity and asymptotic, incalculable futurity of queer thinking as a site of permanent becoming. But what his *No Future* has almost single-handedly instaurated is a turn away from the future, or what he more recently has called the ‘Futurch’ (Edelman, 2006, p. 821), embodied in the figure of the Child. In the wake of Edelman’s book, there has been an almost universal rejection of, a resounding fuck you to, the future, and what has come to be called the ‘anti-social thesis’ now dominates the post-political, post-futural, anti-relational landscape of queer studies. On the one side, the side of anti-utopianism and hopelessness, you have figures like Edelman, Goldberg and Menon, and Judith Halberstam (2006), for whom hope is imbued with and undislodgeable from a heteronormative logic. Theirs is a project calculated to give up on hope and by extension to refuse both the political and the futural. On the other side, the side of affirmation, utopianism and socio-political hope, we have figures such as Tim Dean (2009), Michael Snediker (2009), Sara Ahmed (2006) and José Esteban Muñoz (2009). These theorists, a little bit in love with queer theory as lure, return us to the affirmative, revolutionary potential of queer studies, and seek to reimagine a hopeful, forward-reaching, world-making queer theory that matters as the future, as the telepoietic queer event, as the always already not-yet of the democracy to-come and the justice to-come.

To refuse queer theory as future-dawning promise is to refuse a certain spirit of Derridean deconstruction that has always animated queer thought, to give up on a Derridean understanding of the event as prospective and to remain in thrall to an onto-chrono-temporality. This chapter suggests that we need to avoid this wrong turn by mobilizing a Derridean–Caputoan understanding of historicity, temporality, relationality and the event, as that which ruptures onto-chrono-phenomenological temporality and is faithful to, or welcomes, that which arrives but which cannot be known or grasped in advance. This theoretical gesture, a reparative one, is in the service of queer theory as a weak force, queer theory as revolt. Julia Kristeva in *Revolt, She Said* (2002) understands the event as revolutionary, emphasizing there the etymological roots