Imagining queer futures to ensure queer survival

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Imagining queer futures to ensure queer survival

Abstract
For Lee Edelman, queen's lack of future is a, extension or the dominant social narrative that, thanks to reproductive futurism, reduces queerness to same-sex object-choice. That narrative renders queers strictly non-reproductive and children only accomplishable through the consummation of heterosexual pairings. Since queers cannot contribute life to the future in the form of children, queerness and queer life become aligned instead with death. This is a complex narrative that figures children as the stuff the future is made of and queer as a threat to both children and the symbolic Child. The stakes of this language is high because such biopolitical social narratives circularly facilitate queers' actual, premature deaths. The quality of queer lives are shaped by how queer futures are collectivity imagined so it takes a collective re imagination to ensure queer survival. Children represent only one material contribution to the future and queer survival may hinge on the concession of non-material queer contributions futurity. In social contributions to the future, I call on two literary figures, Moll Cutpurse, antihero of Thomas Dekker and Thomas Middleton's The Roaring Girl (1611) and Jess Goldberg, protagonist of Leslie Feinberg's Stone Butch Blues (1993). As Moll and Jess deviate from social norms they also reshape what constitutes deviation making room for queerness to manifest in new more visible, and more identitarian ways in the future. The ways they stretch possibilities for embodiment and desire represent the non-biological ways queers reproduce, thereby building queer futures.

Degree Type
Open Access Senior Honors Thesis

Department
Women's and Gender Studies

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Keywords
queer futurity, reproductive futurism, no future, queer survival, queer imaginaries, biopolitics

Subject Categories
Feminist, Gender, and Sexuality Studies

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IMAGINING QUEER FUTURES TO ENSURE QUEER SURVIVAL

By
Leah A. Minadeo

A Senior Thesis Submitted to the
Eastern Michigan University
Honors College
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for Graduation
with Honors in Women’s and Gender Studies

Approved at Ypsilanti, Michigan, on this date August 14, 2018
My life amounts to no more than one drop in a limitless ocean. Yet what is any ocean but a multitude of drops?

David Mitchell, *Cloud Atlas*

Very often history is a means of denying the past. Denying the past is to refuse to recognise its integrity. To fit it, force it, function it, to suck out the spirit until it looks the way you think it should. We are all historians in our small way.

Jeanette Winterson, *Oranges are Not the Only Fruit*
INTRODUCTION

Lee Edelman’s *No Future* is brilliant for what it reveals about the limitations reproductive futurity confers our imaginations for the future of queers and troubling for what Edelman suggests we do about their precarity. *No Future* is a canonical text in the futurity corner of queer theory, wherein Edelman identifies queerness as a refusal of the future linked directly to the reproductive incapacity of same-sex couples. For Edelman, queers’ lack of future is an extension of the dominant social narrative that, thanks to reproductive futurism, reduces queerness to same-sex object-choice. That narrative renders queers strictly non-reproductive, and children only accomplishable through the consummation of heterosexual pairings. Since queers cannot contribute life to the future in the form of children, queerness and queer life become aligned instead with death.

This is a complex narrative that figures children as the stuff the future is made of, and queer as a threat to both children and the symbolic Child. The stakes of this language is high because such biopolitical social narratives circularly facilitate queers’ actual, premature deaths. The quality of queer lives are shaped by how queer futures are collectivity imagined, so it takes a collective reimagination to ensure queer survival. Edelman may not exactly intend to ensure survivability with his theory, but it perhaps inadvertently instigates an already present queer suicidality and necropolitics in the process. Queers take their own lives at an alarming rate, and particularly for queers of color or who fail to convincingly pass as heterosexual or cisgender, their lives are too often taken from them. Children represent only one material contribution to the future, and a queer survival that pushes against Edelman’s notion of *No Future* may hinge on the concession of non-material queer contributions to futurity.
Edelman’s declaration of no future is not meant to be interpreted literally—after all, anyone who has a present and a past has had a future of some kind. Having no future stands in for queers having no stakes in tomorrow, at least symbolically, but as far as this symbolism is rooted in reproductive capacity, it has some actual implications. He suggests that queers revel in freedom from the tremendous responsibility of ensuring a future through children instead of mourning the inevitable loss of their futures. Without responsibility for the future, they are free to pursue pleasure in a way only those with no future may. The symbolic future that depends on the symbol of the Child depends in turn on imagining queer as risky, viral, immoral, and otherwise leading to premature death. That imaginary extends from actual rhetoric and threats to queer lives, so there is a real danger in the symbols that inform the imaginary worlds that shape real social structures. The insistence that there is no future embraced by Edelman is exactly what continually denies queers their futures; it is self-fulfilling.

Edelman does not account for the more and more frequent occasions when queers demonstrate that they can reproduce or otherwise parent. He also does not ponder what it might mean for queers to claim responsibility for the future through parenthood by whatever means, particularly amidst a neoliberal present when the parenthood of only certain queers (white and wealthy with neoliberal commitments) is a political investment. This is, in part, because Edelman’s ability to theorize queer futurity is limited by the social and technological world that includes this “dominant fantasy” wherein queers simply cannot reproduce. This is, indeed, a fantasy meant to protect children from being preyed on by queers, genetically inheriting queerness, and the symbol of the Child from tarnishing. A world constructed to be hostile for queers inspires both their suicides and
their murders, and I am afraid Edelman’s title contention of no future taunts queers’ already precarious livelihoods. Articulated best by queer theorist José Esteban Muñoz, the ability to imagine not just a future, but a future that differs from an imperfect present is critical for the survival of those whose futures are quite literally in peril.¹ No Future deals with dense symbolism, and Edelman is not always skilled at differentiating between the symbolic and the actual, or articulating what they might mean for one another. What goes unsaid is that the symbolic and the actual inform one another. Edelman’s call to reject the future, however symbolic, contributes to the actual denial of the imagination Muñoz identifies as crucial to survival.

In Undoing Gender, queer theorist Judith Butler argues that “theory is itself transformative,”² and I am working within a similar assumption that theory does not just seek to arrive at truths or closer approximations of truth, but that it may additionally intervene to reshape what is true, or even possible. Edelman’s theory is so abstract, it can be difficult to derive any meaning for our world from it, much less transform anything. His revelation is that orientation toward death is simply a truth of the queer condition, and since it is true, his intervention is only that we might as well embrace it for the unique and individualistic privileges queer carries. This is far more complacent than it is

transformation, settling for the status quo that turns a blind eye or an intentional hand to queer demise. It reinforces the morbid and melancholic symbols queers are bound up with. Symbols signify the social, so queers suffer actual consequences by extension of the symbols affixed to what it means to be queer. Transformation requires locating the ways queers shape and reshape the social and interpreting this effect on the social as future-building—transform the symbolic to transform the actual.

In consideration of queer social contributions to the future, I want to call on two literary figures: Moll Cutpurse, antihero of Thomas Dekker and Thomas Middleton’s *The Roaring Girl* (1611), and Jess Goldberg, protagonist of Leslie Feinberg’s *Stone Butch Blues* (1993). A Renaissance crossdresser and a mid-century butch dyke, each of these characters of near and distant pasts bear some undeniable familiarity, resembling versions of queerness our society grapples to understand today, but nonetheless recognizes. Each represent threads that meet at some node from which emerges what is understood today as transgender. Moll was based on Mary Frith (1583-1659), an infamous cross-dressing pickpocket in London at the time *The Roaring Girl* was penned (1607-1610). Frith was very much alive at the time, and it is not out of the realm of possibility that she was an audience member to an early performance. Jess is not pure fiction either, as far as she appears to be rather autobiographical. Jess occupies a similar queer in-between as her author, Leslie Feinberg (1949-2014), even coming of age in the same time and place as Feinberg, the Buffalo-area of New York in the mid-twentieth century. They are far from mythical creatures. In retrospect, they are recognizable, which makes it easy to project ourselves onto (or into) the past, but their own eras have little context for them beyond their failure of norms. Insofar as children represent future, and the sinthomosexual, the
death-driven queer figure Edelman deals with, can be interpreted as a suspended childhood or Peter Pan syndrome, queer is future. Queer is not a site of limitation, but a site of possibility. Queer escapes definition, but if it is nothing else, it is a deviation. As Moll and Jess deviate from social norms, they also reshape what constitutes deviation, making room for queerness to manifest in new, more visible, and more identitarian ways in the future. The ways they stretch possibilities for embodiment and desire represent the non-biological ways queers reproduce, thereby building queer futures.

QUEER TEMPORALITIES, QUEER HISTORIES

Mapping routes to queer futures requires a framework through which time and transmission between temporal reference points should be understood for its purposes. Different and rearranged reference points mark queer lives. Queers experience their movement through time according to different tempos, and next to temporal norms, those differences are accentuated. Elizabeth Freeman, a prolific author on queer temporalities, sums up temporal norms as “chrononormativity.” Freeman defines chrononormativity as “the use of time to organize individual human bodies toward maximum productivity.”³ Queer becomes implicated here because normative markers of life, particularly marriage and children, are economically productive. Chrononormativity is very much at work in reproductive futurism. It describes individual queer anachronism, but mostly accounts for

the present, while the past disappears into the background. For looking back in time, historicism employs a linear model that splices time into enormously broad categories like premodern, modern, and postmodern to describe ideologies that cannot possibly emerge and disappear at such concrete and singular moments. Madhavi Menon, a scholar of Renaissance English, offers an approach to history better suited to situate something as ephemeral queerness in time. She names homohistory and heterohistory—ways of doing history that are based on notions of either sameness or difference. Though the terms themselves only refer to their prefixes meaning same (homo) and different (hetero), homohistory is a queer temporality.

Heterohistory, the framework of historicism, marks the past and present as categorically different, and the future will be similarly cordoned off in what Menon calls "an absolute schism between past and present." Within this framework, it is difficult to imagine how queer figures of the past—represented here by two literary figures—might shape queer imaginaries today. Homohistory instead organizes time through an acknowledgement that the present is a seamless continuation of the past. The framework recognizes the melding of time and the long arm of the past that is constantly reaching into the present to rearrange it (as we too reach into the past) and the futures we have yet to arrive in. The project of heterohistory that touts progress suggests that, because the present is the most advanced period in linear time, what we now collectively accept as truths must be the closest to the truth we have ever been; our compounded learning must

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accumulate in a progressive and improving manner. Homohistory rejects progress claimed by heterohistory’s linear time and credits the past with what it may know better than the present and the possibility that we have surpassed truths, may return to them, or have yet to arrive at them entirely. Questions of what futures we are building and what pasts built this present are questions that simply cannot be raised in a heterohistorical model. Further, the rigid categorical stability of historicism matches a rigidly categorized conceptualization of queerness in a framework of identity that only appears endlessly open to possibility. Such rigidity denies queerness its uncertainty, thereby denying it amorphous transmission between past, present, and future.

The purpose of homohistory is not to imagine time without consecution and chronology or to deny the order in which we experience the world unfolding. What historicism and linear time fail to capture is a compounding nature, and while the clock does not adequately demonstrate this, we do have other implements of time that better approximate it: the hourglass. Imagine the top bulb is full of possibilities awaiting their realization, and they fall into the bottom bulb as they are realized where they join other possibilities made real. They fall in a certain order that is affected by the realization of surrounding possibilities, but that some fell long ago does not render them obsolete. They accumulate, reorganize, compound, and reshape as a result of their interaction with each other. This is the relationship between the past and the future that Menon describes. It has chronology, but it accumulates and compounds, intermingling with and changing the meaning of everything that has unfolded before and will unfold later. Philosopher Walter
Benjamin calls this “time filled by the presence of now.”\textsuperscript{5} Benjamin sees a chronology that forgets the past, is forward-moving, and progress-oriented as an oppressive tactic of fascism.\textsuperscript{6} It wipes our memories and presents us with a clean slate so it cannot be held accountable for what it did in the past or what it will do about it in the future. Homohistory holds accountability; heterohistory dodges it. In \textit{No Future}, Edelman pulls queerness from its context to freeze it in time, as if it touches nothing and is touched by nothing. \textit{Stone Butch Blues} begins in 1950s Buffalo, New York, and this time and place involves implications about what it means to be queer that seem rudimentary within heterohistory; it might figure Jess as some sort of proto-queer. But homohistorical assumptions allow me to consider how queer pasts, presents, and futures are all bound up in one another.

\textbf{STONE BUTCH BLUES: A DISAPPEARING ACT}

\textit{Stone Butch Blues} follows its queer protagonist through several decades, making it particularly useful for imagining the futures queers might create. Over the course of the text, Jess Goldberg goes from butch dyke, to man, and back to butch dyke again, and this arc helps to reveal a route to and from a version of queerness only recently recognizable in our culture: transgender. Jess enacts a queerness that is not yet legible while she waits on a future safe enough to visibly inhabit a butch body. Her enaction of an alternative

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queerness makes way for a future where it will be legible and accommodated within our language and imaginations to be transgender. Imagining transmasculinity as a fork that splits off from butch lesbianism figures to it as a social reproduction, an alternative to reproduction of children as the means to build a future. Further, the way anticipated threats to Jess’ life drive the ways she enacts her queerness during different periods of time highlights just how precarious queer futures can be.

Queer theorist Judith/Jack Halberstam helps make sense of Jess’ evolution through an assertion that “while it is true that transgender and transsexual men have been wrongly folded into lesbian history, is it also true that the distinctions between some transsexuals and lesbians may at times become quite blurry.” Jess straddles an uncertain line between butch lesbianism and transmasculinity, revealing rather unstable boundaries drawn between the two. Transgender is generally understood as an umbrella term describing any deviation of gender from biological sex, roughly encompassing anything not cisgender. Such a generous definition places butch squarely beneath the umbrella, figuring butch as trans-lesbianism. Figured this way, transgender, and specifically transmasculinity, seems like far less of a leap from butch lesbianism. Though it may eclipse her actual desires, Jess embodies a certain queerness of trans manhood that was not quite legible. The illegibility of transness during Jess’ moment in time is evident in Feinberg’s vocabulary (or void of) to describe it—the descriptor closest to transgender in

the text is "he-she." As far as Jess resembles forms of queer that are familiar today, Jess seems to counter Edelman’s implication that a queer body may inhabit the world without making contributions to future. What she contributes takes the form of social reproduction, and she reproduces it through negation.

By proxy of her girlfriend Theresa, Jess drifts from bar culture and stumbles onto the college campuses of the 1960s where women’s lib and its Lavender Menace are unfolding. She finds that her masculinity that was once desired at the bar is seen as emblematic of patriarchy on campus, despite occupying a version of womanhood herself. It is during this period of political upheaval that Jess begins to toy with the possibility of passing as a man, confiding in Theresa, “I’m telling you, it’s getting worse out there.” I choose the word “passing” carefully and specifically. While female masculinity might constitute a certain transgenderism under that generous umbrella, transgender or man do not really seem to constitute an identity for Jess. The language Jess uses to describe her decision to transition indicates that it is a decision driven by the safety passing as a man provides her, rather than one driven by identity. Moments when Jess describes feeling that she is not a woman, or feeling like she is neither a man or a woman create the initial sense that an internal-external discordance drives her desire to transition. This is consistent with how transgenderism in its most legible form is generally conceptualized today: to transition is to alleviate that discordance, to whatever degree is medically, socially, and legally possible. However, other interjections suggest survival motivates her to transition more than an internal need to externally satisfy or realize some identity that

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is essential to her. This is indicated as Jess mulls over the possibility of manhood, telling a group of friends, “I can’t help thinking maybe I’d be safe, you know?” This language is markedly different than feeling unlike a woman, and more indicative of someone who needs to take shelter than of someone who will feel relieved by the form the shelter takes.

Although some forms of passing may be inadvertent or unwanted, passing is often an intentional disappearing act so one can go safely unnoticed. Halberstam would identify passing to disappear not as an act of retreat, but an act of resistance. Halberstam calls this resistance of negation “shadow feminism,” described as “a shadow archive of resistance, one that does not speak in the language of action and momentum but instead articulates itself in terms of evacuation, refusal, passivity, unbecoming, unbeing.”

Halberstam’s insistence that negation “is not choosing between action and passivity, freedom and death, but survival and desire” seems apt, articulating not only Jess’ sacrifice, but also her gain: she sacrifices lesbianism and any desires attached, but by doing so, she makes it out of a dangerous present alive. If the choice is between survival and desire, then Jess’ sacrifice to survive does not meet Edelman’s criteria for the death drive, an embracement of desire at the expense of life. Jess expresses a roughly opposite drive: an embracement of life at the expense of desire. Her ability to choose between

9  Ibid.
11  Ibid., 137.
survival and desire is undermined by the severe imbalance of the options available, so she picks survival and postpones desire.

Jess' decision to seek sanctuary by passing ultimately leads to her breakup with Theresa, who is unable to reconcile the loss of a lesbian identity she holds tightly should her girlfriend become her boyfriend. Jess asks her in a last effort to save their relationship, "what if I don’t take the hormones and pass?" Theresa responds, "then you’ll probably be killed on the street or take your own life out of madness, I don’t know."\(^{12}\) It seems quietly understood throughout the text that butch lives are in danger, but rarely is it so explicitly acknowledged. Jess’ destiny as a butch dyke is her demise, whether she is killed or driven to kill herself, and this is an unspoken agreement among Jess’ community of working class butches and femmes. She draws less attention to herself as a man than as a butch, and if she hopes to arrive in a different and better future, she needs to go unseen until she arrives in such a future. Edelman might scoff at this exchange, but Jess eventually arrives in a future where she can revert back to butch dyke.

In an exchange among friends, Jess asks “does it just last for a little while? I mean can you go back to being a butch later, when it’s safe to come out?”\(^{13}\) This dialogue again points to passing as a temporary refuge until a safer social landscape presents itself. Perhaps with hopes that her future will be created by other means, she contributes to a different future in which it is possible to pursue gender transition as an act of *positive* resistance, rather than an act of negative resistance driven by necessity to disappear. In


\(^{13}\) Ibid.
other words, Jess' resistance of negation (Halberstam's shadow feminism) paves the way for a future transgenderism that is positively pursued, visible, and named. Jess' journey is non-linear and non-progressive, which challenges essential renderings of what it means to be queer, and her movement between whatever space divides butch lesbianism and transgenderism contributes to future queer possibilities. Her enactment of manhood is, at best, an approximation, or what Butler calls mimicry. It is precisely this inevitable failure to fully enact manhood—maleness—that is the stuff queer futures are made of. Negation is very much affixed to queer in *No Future*, but Halberstam's resistance of negation dislodges queer negation from death, figuring it as one route to the future.

**QUEER IDENTITY AND LINGUISTIC POSSIBILITY**

Halberstam describes being confronted with resistance to the observation that transmasculinity seems to grow out of butch, and I too find it to be a quickly and flatly rejected argument that has to be delicately delivered. It is easily misinterpreted as a reduction of butch lesbians to trans men in denial, and trans men to former or evolved lesbians. This is indeed a reduction, but because concepts of transgender emerge and are popularized at a particular moment following concepts of butch lesbianism, there seems to be a time during which the closest approximation to transmasculinity and masculine transsexuality *is* butch lesbianism. To insist otherwise is a projection of the self onto the past—Benjamin's "time filled with the presence of now."  

In the case of transgender, the existence of transgender bodies and identities are written into a history that would not recognize them. If it can be established that a certain queer existence runs deep through history, that there is some precedent for us, it can be claimed our queerness has always existed, and therefore must be real and true. Locating ourselves in the past functions to combat religious and conservative rhetoric that describes queerness as confusion, an illness, a perversion, or some sort of passing phase. However, Halberstam asserts that, "the category of the transsexual emerged out of a very different nexus of gender variance, embodiment, and sexual subjectivity," indicating that transsexuality is a concept that emerges in a particular time and place at the onset of its possibility. Because dominant cultural understandings of transgender emphasize a discordance of body and mind and efforts to correct that discordance, it is a queerness bizarrely dependent on medicine. For this reason, the onset of possibility would seem to correspond with its medical possibility. Without a recognized diagnosis of Gender Identity Disorder and the availability of hormone replacement therapy and sex-corrective/gender-affirming surgeries, transgender is near-unimaginable.

As such, it is not particularly sensible or useful to apply "transgender" to refer to seemingly similar deviations of sex and gender in a period before their linguistic emergence, or otherwise become possible. One could argue that transgenderism has always existed and was merely named, but what I mean to suggest is that the naming has shaped a different categorization entirely, not at all present prior to a naming: a fork in

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possibilities, not simply a new vocabulary for old possibilities. If there is nothing that eventually culminates to transmasculinity, then it seems that transgenderism appeared suddenly as it is, and only in the last half century or so with no traces of its prior existence; this is a conceptualization of heterohistory. To trace transgender back in time as ancestry or genealogy is to do homohistory—to eliminate false and rigid boundaries. This opens up the space to imagine queer pasts building a queer present in which transsexuality is both conceptualized and recognized as its own, solitary category dislodged from sexuality, and where it is increasingly possible and acceptable to pursue medical masculinization. Butches clear a path for female masculinity, and eventually a path for female masculinity to more closely resemble not just manhood, but maleness. Thresholds of norms of acceptability are rarely shattered in broad and significant ways, but are rather slowly tested and provoked, the boundaries gently nudged out of place. The unwillingness to entertain the possibility that trans men are a cultural outgrowth of butch lesbianism makes it seem as if trans men appeared suddenly, doing the work of heterohistory that places sharp barriers between time, people, and ideologies. Jess reveals the false rigidity of the boundaries between butch and trans.

Perhaps a homohistorical assertion is that butch lesbians who do female masculinity contribute to a future in which it is possible for women to be men. For transgender people today, this is a meaningful mechanism. Though Jess’ transition back to butch lesbianism later in the text suggests that butch better constitutes what Jess really is as far as identity is conceptualized as essential to the self, the tension she expresses between butch lesbianism and a non-woman identity make it difficult to ascertain whether she can better be reduced to butch dyke or trans man. Ultimately, it is moot, and
making sense of her changing queerness requires reimagining queer as far more malleable than essential. Essential to the self is only one way to make sense of queerness, and it is a relatively new (and currently dominant) way to conceptualize it. How “born that way” became the dominant narrative should be obvious, as it better justifies queer rights than if queer is only a matter of misbehavior. In *History of Sexuality*, philosopher Michel Foucault describes a juridical divide in which the nature of queer punishment changes at the onset of modern psychiatry, coinciding more or less with the dawn of the modern era. Psychiatry’s coinage of “homosexuality” circa 1869 caused a linguistic shift making it possible to declare that one is a homosexual, instead of merely that they do something against sexual mores. Before this shift, according to Foucault, sexual deviance was punished on a basis of actions—actually committing sodomy or buggery. Modern psychiatry implemented additional or supportive punishment on a basis of something more essential and intrinsic—what we might say evolved into queer identity, but specifically figured as pre-determined, or born. It is this conceptualization that makes it tempting to speculate as to what Jess really is.

Queer theorist David Halperin argues that Foucault’s juridical distinction has since been misinterpreted to mean that there was no sense of queer identity until modern psychiatry. Insisting this is a mistake, Halperin says, “*it is not an empirical claim about the historical existence or nonexistence of sexually deviant individuals*” (no emphasis
added). On Halperin’s clarification, Carla Freccero, scholar of Literature, History, and Women’s Studies, says:

“Forgetting Foucault” is an essay...that admonishes the tendency in histories of sexuality to reduce Foucault’s discussion of the nineteenth-century “invention” of the homosexual to the declaration that premodernity defined sex acts juridically, whereas modernity ascribes to the individual something called a sexuality, an identity or orientation that is sexually defined and that, when examined, is thought to reveal the truth of the individual.

Freccero agrees with Halperin that Foucault’s distinction is juridical, but she seems to disagree that it is a mistake to employ it as evidence against a premodern concept of queer identity. Her assertion that a shift toward an essentialism we might think of as identity indeed occurred with the invention of homosexuality goes like this:

“[h]omosexuality appeared as one of the forms of sexuality when it was transposed from the practice of sodomy onto a kind of interior androgyny, a hermaphroditism of the soul.

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The sodomite was a temporary aberration; the homosexual is now a species."¹⁸ ¹⁹

Rhetoric around transgender identity that attributes transgenderism to a biological mistake suggests that a similar speciation has occurred in the construction of transgender, and speciation is not a far leap from diagnosis. This speciation both of homosexuality and transgender make Jess seem anomalous, even among queers, in her ability to occupy seemingly quite different versions of queerness, interrupting neoliberal narratives around the nature of queer identity as essential.

Freccero’s essay, “Undoing the History of Homosexuality,” is presumably a riff off of Halperin’s “How to Do the History of Male Homosexuality.” In that essay, Halperin employs a similar argument as in “Forgetting Foucault,” asserting that versions of identity have been formulated on the basis of same-sex object-choice across time. He lists four externalized or observable items of the premodern era that were thought to indicate something essential about the self: effeminacy, pederasty, friendship, and inversion.²⁰ Halperin seems sure something resembling identity existed in the premodern era. However, the identities he describes are more imposed from outside the self on the basis of the observable characteristics listed, something more akin to diagnosis than

¹⁸ Ibid., 34.

¹⁹ “Interior androgyne” and “hermaphroditism of the soul” might also have been summed up as “inversion,” a conflation of gender and sexuality according to definitions of today.

identity. The imposition is what the external is thought to mean about the internal. Conversely, Freccero seems to be describing identities that are not imposed, but self-assumed, which I interpret to be an internalization of externally observable criteria as essential. This difference suggests a linguistic shift enabled by the coinage of homosexuality (from do to is) facilitates an internalization of essentialism. At the risk of drawing a heterohistorical line, this would position identity of the premodern era as imposed, and identity of the modern/postmodern eras as assumed, shifting approximately at the institutionalized diagnosis/invention of homosexuality around 1869. In the mid-twentieth century, Jess occupies a period of time in between this linguistic possibility and what I interpret to be a growing emphasis on an ever-more-granular identitarian taxonomy within queer culture today. Queer identity is figured as essential and born today, making it difficult to understand Jess’ movement between different versions of queerness.

Since the coinage of homosexuality—the declaration that one is—is a coinage of psychiatry, efforts to correct and cure it rather than simply to punish its enaction follow its coinage. No longer a need to actually enact anything to earn a punishment, the suspicion that one might just want it amounts to the suspicion that one might be it, and this is enough to intervene. Literary critic Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick says that inherent in this effort is “the wish that gay people not exist,” an effort toward a more pure, less queer future. Such ideologies have become quite fringe in the medical community, and

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major medical associations no longer endorse the treatment of homosexuality, but remnants of the diagnosis that once justified treatment persist in conceptualization of identity that, like psychiatry, figures homosexuality as a matter of *is*. Queer identity, figured as essential, born, and intrinsic, takes the side of diagnostic homosexuality that is psychological, biological, and even genetic or hereditary. An uncomfortable consequence of this conceptualization is the way it creates opportunity for necropolitical-eugenic motivations. Though desire and identity are similarly internal understandings of the self—as opposed to action, which is externalized and observable—Freccero’s shift to desire over identity avoids the essentialism identity shares with medicine. Perhaps it also alleviates the dependence of transgender on medicine as a means to correct what is described as a biological mistake.

Though Freccero works within an arguably heterohistorical dichotomy, she does not work within the dichotomy of *do* and *is* (action and identity) that makes up the Foucaultian divide which Halperin insists is purely juridical. The assertion that queer is about what one does, rather than what one is, has the potential to support Edelman’s contention that queerness is antithetical to the Child, and therefore to children, by suggesting that children cannot be queer because they (arguably) seldom act on it. Instead, Freccero works in a dichotomy of *is* and *want* (identity and desire). Desire is not an action or matter of *do* itself, but may of course be acted on; identity remains a matter of the essential *is*. Freccero’s shift from action to desire alleviates the suggestion that children are not queer. It also alleviates similar implications we cease to be queer in periods of sexual abstinence, that queer requires a certain physical capacity to *do*, and that queerness does not encompass asexuality, a queerness of void: not of what we do,
but what we do not do. Muñoz says, “queerness is...in many crucial ways formless,” which is precisely what makes it futuristic. Its amorphousness makes it possible to project hopes and dreams onto it and to realize them through queerness’ malleability. Identity renders queer more static than possible, however many sub-categories of identity we generate to reflect queer’s hallmark formlessness.

This tension between identity and desire also appears in Menon’s theory of homohistory, as Menon names desire homohistorical, but names sexual identity heterohistorical. This indicates that the ever-more-granular identitarian taxonomy within queer culture is a project of heterohistory. The development of seemingly both endless and trivial terminology to describe queer identity as an essential truth of the self appears, at first glance, to be a practice of justice in the form of legibility. In other words, identitarian taxonomy seems to be how we are trying to fix the problem of our possibility by giving language to what previously had none. However, I am concerned that the framework of identity, and the categories which follow, only seem endlessly open to possibility because of their seemingly endless granularity. Muñoz believes that if queerness “is to have any political resonance,” it “needs to be more than an identitarian marker and to articulate a forward-dawning futurity.” Though Muñoz does not necessarily situate identitarian markers at odds with futurity, the suggestion seems to occupy the negative space, in which case it is a feeling that I share. Further, because queer identity is figured as serious and essential, desire and pleasure are consequently relegated to the realm of frivolity. Frivolity is Edelman’s territory wherein the future is

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22 Ibid., 29.

23 Muñoz, “Cruising the Toilet,” 87.
both inherently contradictory to desire and pleasure, and actively rejected via pursuit of them.

Edelman’s *No Future* begins with a figure comprised of Freud’s death drive and Lacan’s sinthome. The death drive describes a human drive toward death and self-destruction; the sinthome is a subject experiencing jouissance, a French term employed by Lacan that translates roughly to “enjoyment,” but bears a suggestion of sexual pleasure that does not survive the translation. Edelman’s queer conglomerate sinthomosexual, then, is a figure whose selfish pursuit of pleasure situates it as against the future, against life, and against the pragmatism that sustains them. He describes the sinthomosexual as having:

> the privilege of refusing the responsibilities that come with collective life, the privilege, that is, of sexual license, political disengagement, and thus, most important, the privilege of remaining indifferent to the vulnerabilities of others…[t]he sinthomosexual…gets denounced for affirming a jouissance indulgently fixed on the self, while those who merit recognition as good, as communally minded, as properly social, address the suffering of the other for which the Child is our dominant trope.²⁴

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Pleasure is well-affixed to queerness precisely because the non-procreativity narrative necessarily figures queer sex as purely for pleasure by virtue of its non-procreative potential. Queer sex has no greater purpose than pleasure. Pleasure is exactly contrary to responsibility in *No Future*, and because queers never assume the responsibility for the future through pregnancy, birth, and parenthood, they remain in a sort of suspended childhood free of responsibility. Queer is in the realm of pleasure, but death is the trade-off; heterosexuality is in the realm of responsibility, but life is the reward. However, another literary figure suggests that pleasure and life are not mutually exclusive, but that queer pursuit of pleasure is what mobilizes queers toward the future.

**THE ROARING GIRL AND RESISTANCE TO EXISTENTIAL DENIAL**

Moll Cutpurse of *The Roaring Girl* is a gender-bending pick-pocket in seventeenth century London, based on the real Mary Frith. Some century and a half before the coinage of homosexuality, Moll enacts queerness as positive resistance. Moll is repeatedly described as a monster in the text, and this descriptor is linked with no uncertainty to her transgressive gender. The refusal to recognize the existence or reality of certain bodies is an effective oppressive tactic, and another way to describe this refusal is to deny their possibility. This interpellation functions as a form of gas-lighting in which a subject faces the insistence of a different truth than what the subject understands to be true until they internalize it so much as to believe it. A form of gas-lighting, this is designed to cause queers to question the validity or reality of their queerness in order to inspire at least one of two doubts in queer minds: the possibility that their own queerness is false or the possibility that their own existence does not actually resemble human
existence, if not both. In other words, it suggests the possibility that they are impossible. Both doubts may be effectively oppressive enough to cause queers to self-select out of the dominant culture, or even out of life itself. This is precisely the purpose of naming Moll’s queerness a monstrosity: to drive her away and out of sight by all means necessary. Queers often end up dead or maimed in literature and life alike. Were *The Roaring Girl* a different genre and Moll a less resilient figure, it is not a stretch to imagine the play ending instead with a monster conquered.25

Suicidality butts into the death drive here, but it would not be fair to substitute being death-driven for being suicidal; the death drive is marked by an experience of pleasure, while suicidality is marked by a void of it. The violence historically wielded onto queer bodies as a means of persecution and correction are very real threats to futurity that quite literally end queer lives. The inspiration of suicidality in queers is one removed mechanism to accomplish their deaths. The father of Moll’s sham fiancé, Sir Alexander, pursues an indirect attack on Moll’s life, but one Butler would nonetheless characterize as “not only a means of social control but a form of dehumanizing violence.” 26 To foil what he believes to be a legitimate marriage arrangement between Moll and Sebastian, Sir Alexander plots Moll’s public humiliation.

The plan to humiliate Moll involves framing her with marked currency to later be identified as stolen, and with these he says, “will I make induction to her ruin, and rid

25 *The Roaring Girl* is known as a city comedy, often staged in pubs for a working-class audience, and with a crass and low-brow sense of humor—smut.

shame from my house, grief from my heart." While his plan to trap Moll in her own craft of thievery and have her arrested takes advantage of her criminal transgressions, it is Moll's violations of gender that ultimately fuel his desires to humiliate her. This may additionally serve the purpose of embarrassing his son so much as to convince him the marriage is undesirable, but it is his desire to punish Moll by causing her to internalize the possibility that she is not real by any human standards that is the dehumanizing violence described by Butler. It seems that he intends to inspire what Butler calls a "pervasive sense of [her] own unreality," using humiliation to reveal and instill her unreality to herself. Butler goes on to say that this internalized unreality can morph into suicidality, and this is a queer feeling that can be still be located today as queers take their own lives in a world they presumably find uninhabitable. It also appears in stone Butter, "Social Transformation," 219. Repeated reference to Moll as something inhuman, mythical even, further serves to deny her existence. When Sir Alexander—the father of Moll's sham fiancéé,
Sebastian—poses the pointed question, "[w]hat, will he marry a monster with two trinkets," he makes clear that it is Moll’s gendered transgression that calls her humanness into question. The implication in his question is that any answer in the affirmative is perfectly absurd. Gender, sex, and even same-sex desire are not particularly distinct in seventeenth century Europe, as is somewhat evident in how they seem conflated to a modern ear throughout the text. Queer, like anything else, must be considered in its spatial and temporal context. In translations of Lacan, “jouissance” remains untranslated because no English word accurately captures both its denotative and connotative meanings, and a similar disservice happens when language is used outside of its temporal context. As such, there is no meaningful way to understand Moll in her spatial and temporal location as simply a social deviant. The implication in Sir Alexander’s sexed accusation, which he presumably forms on a gendered basis in a modern reading, is that it is only humanly possible to be either male or female; there is no social deviation from this that is not in some way also conceptualized as a deviation from biological sex. Moll straddles some line between woman- and manhood, and because of what this border is thought to mean about the body, the in-between Moll occupies brands her an anomaly or a sideshow attraction—something impossible yet embodied and standing before us.


Butler says "[i]t is the inhuman, the beyond the human, the less than human, the border that secures the human in its ostensible reality." Exceptional, anomalous genders and bodies like Moll's serve to justify the realness and reify the normalcy of normative genders and bodies. However, Butler says they also stretch the boundaries of what is possible, explaining that it is "appropriation of the terms of domination that turns them toward a more enabling future." It is precisely the failure of queers to adequately appropriate those terms of domination that reifies them as the norm. What Butler suggests is when queers inevitably and necessarily fail to convincingly mimic normal genders and bodies, a fracture forms wherein social transformation occurs. For Edelman, negation is on the side of death and past, but Butler's imagination of the formation of possibility out of failure redirects negation toward future instead of away from it.

For all his efforts, there is nothing in the text that would suggest that Moll internalizes the existential doubt Sir Alexander imposes on her to any meaningful degree. Never when she faces an insult does she hang her head in shame; rather, she tends to fire back unapologetically in a way that does not rely on out-insulting an opponent but elevates her. For instance, she exclaims that Sir Alexander "[s]hould be proud of such a daughter: As good a man, as your son!" In the same exchange, she says, "[y]ou do not know the benefits I bring with me: No cheat dares work upon you, with thumb or knife,

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34 Middleton and Dekker, "The Roaring Girl," 304.
While you've a roaring girl to your son's wife." Moll navigates a public world performing a transgressive gender but does so with an unapologetic confidence that she uses to fend off attempts to insult her and deny her humanity. However, gender is not Moll's only transgression. The society in which she violates gender norms is a world she rejects in favor of one divorced from the laws of decency and respectability.

Moll's working and criminal classes grant her freedoms a middle or noble class cannot. Any power imbued in Sir Alexander’s attempted humiliation wilts when Moll fails to internalize her inhumanity as an essential truth—the accusation that a monster is what she is—thereby rendering her a possibility. The success of Sir Alexander's attempt to render Moll a crude sideshow depends on whether she internalizes gender as a binary and herself as inhuman. Her ability to resist this is supported by her underclass context that supports bent and broken rules. By maintaining such confidence in her queerness and its unseen advantages, she effectively broadens gendered possibilities, and it is possibilities that make up the future she carves out for herself that existential doubt is meant to withhold from queers. She does this even as she rejects responsibility that is opposed to future in No Future. A pickpocket, Moll is already a somewhat of a pariah, and she lives by a different set of rules. Lack of recognized rules defines her class, and its embrace of informal rules directly contradicts those designed to maintain the dominant social order. Not only is she unconstrained by demands of womanhood like marriage and subordination, but also unconstrained by the responsibility to uphold a

35 "Roaring girl" is a play on “roaring boy,” a seventeenth century term applied to boisterous, disruptive, or rowdy men.; Ibid., 305.
familial reputation demanded by a class like Sebastian’s, whose marriage to Moll is objectionable at least somewhat because it threatens family reputation. These are the sort of responsibilities queers may be free from should they accept Edelman’s challenge. Moll seems to be both rejecting responsibility and experiencing pleasure, but she constitutes the queer suspended childhood without necessarily constituting the death drive.

Butler raises questions around who is entitled to “the good life,” a question of necropolitics. Despite attempts to dehumanize her, Moll seems certain her queerness offers her a good life that a normative one simply cannot. Without the responsibilities or possibilities of marriage or children, queers have enjoyed the freedom to prioritize pleasure first and foremost, something Edelman hopes to hang onto. While Edelman fails to entertain the possibility that there are ways to contribute to the future that do not take the form of children, Butler hints at queer futurity through a discussion of existential possibility. Future hinges on the chance to be possible, to not have humanity or reality denied, but Moll is not waiting for possibility to be granted to her. She declares, “I please myself, and care not else who loves me,” a declaration suited for Edelman’s individualistic call for queers to pursue their desires, and arguably evident of “the privilege of remaining indifferent to the vulnerabilities of others.” However, the pleasure that Moll lays claim to in the present is not situated at odds with the future—any effort to deny Moll her future is her impetus to exist. For Edelman, it is either laboring


now for the future later, or pleasure now with no future to speak of. Quite contrary, it is
Moll’s entitlement to pleasure that creates her future and builds other possibilities of
queer futures. Butler says, “[t]he thought of a possible life is only an indulgence for those
who already know themselves to be possible. For those who are still looking to become
possible, possibility is a necessity.”39 Jess forgoes her desire in exchange to live a little
longer in hopes that a different future is not too far off, while Moll exists now without
having to sacrifice desire. Moll seems to be a figure who embodies Edelman’s hedonism,
while her recognizability in queerness today contradicts his contention that pleasure goes
against the grain of the future. A possibility is necessarily futuristic, and Moll’s
embodiment of what seems impossible in the present establishes a possibility that she—
or future queer manifestations of her—will continue to be possible.

It is so undesirable to visibly inhabit a non-normative body in this world that
people like Moll may simply disappear instead, as Jess does, thereby remaining unusual.
Butler asserts such non-normative ways of being “have not been admitted in to the terms
that govern within reality,”40 and this is in large part because they are so thoroughly
discouraged, suppressed, and killed through denial of existence and humanity. But Moll
lives with no regard for the terms that govern reality, and it is this that allows her to exist
anyway by enacting her gender and pursuing her pleasures, thereby establishing a queer
existence and a queer possibility to exist in the future. Insofar as subjectivity hinges on
recognition, highly visible queerness like Moll’s has an urgent power to transform. While

40 Ibid.
there may be a certain romanticized heroism in dying before living at the expense of desires, an authenticity Edelman seems willing to die for, *someone* must resist by living life if it is ever going to be possible to live without the constant threat of death. Jess and Moll are both nudging queer possibilities into being through different modes of resistance. Jess refuses to accept that there is no future, only that there is no present. The truth is that Jess' future really does only exist in the future, while men have always had a present, so she seeks to live convincing as a man so that she may too. Moll disregards the denial of her life and lives unapologetically now. I want to imagine that Moll and Jess facilitate the future possibilities being realized in the present and constitute this as a meaningful and uniquely queer contribution to future. Like how versions of transgenderism might emerge from butches like Jess, perhaps versions of female masculinity like butch emerge from the likes of Moll. The possibility that Jess may return to her butch roots in a safer future is a rather optimistic outlook, an unlikely outlook on Edelman's part.

Though even Edelman might agree that Jess' disappearance into the dominant landscape constitutes action, as "the void can never appear as itself in the form of pure negativity,"\(^{41}\) it is unlikely he would file this under death-driven negativity, and I would not either. Choosing survival over desire should indicate that first and foremost, as Edelman's death drive prioritizes desire at the expense of life. Instead of accepting and reveling in this destiny, Jess forgoes certain lesbian desires, approximating freedom while surviving with hopes for a fuller freedom in a future more prepared for her existence. As

Butler would say, the problem is Jess is not yet possible, and in a world of her impossibility, her choices are disappearing into something possible (like manhood) or death. Jess' picks disappearance, only to reemerge in an era wherein she finds herself more possible. This is an inversion of Moll, yet Jess still appears to represent some creation of possibility. Moll takes the risk of active and visible queerness. Moll's life is still in danger, perhaps to a greater degree than Jess' because of her unabashed visibility and disinterest in passing, but while she risks her life, she provokes new possibilities by claiming hers. Moll's resistance to the denial of her queer existence is enabled by the unique freedoms of her criminal class, and as she claims her queer existence, humanity, and reality, she effectively makes herself possible.

ACCUMULATION

Possibility is necessarily futuristic. Butler figures survival as a matter of what is possible: “[t]he thought of a possible life is only an indulgence for those who already know themselves to be possible. For those who are still looking to become possible, possibility is a necessity.” 42 Whether we are possible is a question of subjectivity directly linked to the necropolitical question of “[w]hose life is counted as life,” 43 which might be answered more efficiently by first identifying whose life is not marked for death in some direct or indirect way. Among criticisms of No Future is Edelman’s failure to evaluate exactly who might be guaranteed future, granted possibility, or withheld both. As Muñoz

43 Ibid.
explains, Edelman’s life, as a white gay man, is already more or less counted as life. He is already possible, and will presumably remain possible, so he has the luxury of rejecting a future that is already guaranteed to him. Rejecting it is an exercise an entitlement. In other words, Edelman has been conferred some permission to exist in the form—albeit queer—he takes that is white and male. He is onto something in his contention that queers have no future, but it is not because they fail to replicate themselves into the future through reproduction, only that queers are not unquestionably awarded possibility.

Deciding what queer is about, and by extension, on what basis queer might be possible is contentious and political, but it requires that we validate queerness nonetheless whether it is possible on a basis of identity (is), action (do), or desire (want). Queer future may hinge on the concession that queer is possible, on whatever basis it is possible, though I find that identitarian bases cannot provide the ample room queer really occupies and benefits from.

Queers have not always existed in terms recognizable today, but something interpretable as queer always has existed. Instead of replicating itself into the future through reproduction, the queer future is in approximations and failures. The nature of the Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV) makes a fine metaphor for the queer failures that seem to compel new ways to be queer and, as I have attempted to demonstrate, seem temporally mappable. HIV is a rapidly mutating virus, meaning it makes many copies of itself very quickly, each copy a slightly imperfect version of the last. This is confusing to an immune system trying to mobilize an immune response, but these mutations occur at a predictable rate, making it possible to follow the path of the virus from body to body. It is
in imperfect copies, Butler's failures to reproduce norms, that queer carves paths to its own possibilities.

For Edelman, pleasure is a balm for the affliction of a present. Pleasure and death are conspiring for Edelman, but not so for Muñoz. Muñoz supposes that while pleasure might be a balm, the queer drive toward pleasure also mobilizes us out of an imperfect present and toward a more perfect future. His rebuttal to *No Future*—a theory which, like me, Muñoz finds simultaneously brilliant and troubling—is to suggest we imagine queer as a horizon. The horizon recedes as it is approached, always out of reach. So, too, does the future, folding seamlessly into the present and getting rolled up in the past before it can be arrived at. Horizons are unreachable because they are imaginary, making it apt for the imagination it takes to ensure queer lives. Not only does queer have a future, but queer is futuristic in and of itself. Muñoz says the horizon "rescues and emboldens concepts such as freedom that have been withered by the touch of neoliberal thought and gay assimilationist politics."\(^{44}\) While he admits the naivety of utopian aspirations, he also stands firmly by them, firing back that it is the constraining pragmatism of neoliberal politics "that present themselves as rational and ultimately more doable"\(^{45}\) that figures utopian aspirations as unrealistic. Perhaps utopianism is yet another horizon: something we may pursue but might do well to suspend any expectation to achieve. Queer's lack of finality makes it a site unlimited and changing possibility, and its amorphousness makes


\(^{45}\) Ibid.
the pursuit of the future more life-giving than an essential basis of possibility. Edelman does not see queer for all the opportunity it is imbued with, but how we conceptualize the future and its possibilities sets the standard for quality of the future for queers. Imagining queer as a site of possibility instead of a site of death is precisely the difference between granting entry to a future and withholding it.

While in the early stages of this research, a friend experienced a tremendous amount of loss within her extended queer community over a short period of time. Several took their own lives. Several others disappeared, their bodies later found maimed and lifeless in alleyways with other disposables. She was approaching 40, and at a time when news of queer death was frequent, some evidence of queer survival became crucial to her own survival. She had no example of what it looked like to be a queer at 40. What troubled her was queer futures. Seeking friendships with older queers became how she coped with the enormous uncertainty of queer life, how she reassured herself that queers do make it. The past informs and explains the present, and it reassures us that there is, to borrow from poet Buddy Wakefield, “life after survival.”

It is important that we see the future as something that can be built, something we can touch, rearrange, and effect, so a future where queer deaths are precedent and imminent may be replaced with the world of our wildest dreams.

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Bibliography


