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Lee Edelman (2004) *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive*. Durham and London: Duke University Press.

Given our strange and dangerous times, the mobilization of everyday productions of disciplinary regimes of the normal and the pathological serve to organize affective responses, channeling desire toward governmental objectives, intensifying normalizing regimes and installing insecurity and fear as a kind of operant conditioning for political imaginations. Lee Edelman's *No Future* (2004), attempts to diagnose the contemporary constitutive effects of authoritarian governance, subjectivity and neoliberalism. His work lends itself to a consideration of the practical and affective constitution of autonomous relations as a form of contemporary, local anti-capitalist resistance to modern regimes of power and its effects on subjectivity and social space. I believe his work does this by alerting us to the lineaments of fascist desire constitutive of the solemn parade of normativity that is always already embedded in volatilized formations of childhood and contemporary images of the child as infinitely vulnerable. His work offers potential escape routes from the house of mirrors and flying daggers that represent the intensified collisions between the child and the queer as a site of social regulation and authoritarian and/or fascist desire.

In *No Future*, Edelman suggests that the symbolic force of the figure of the Child in contemporary western culture is a fundamental dividing practice akin to racism and anti-Semitism that particularly impacts queers. Edelman uncovers the totalizing narratives embedded in the image of the Child and suggests its imbrication with social and political formations as "reproductive futurism." The logic of reproductive futurism, as Edelman terms it, locks the image of the Child to specific forms of identity-formation, social and political practices, and the self-perpetuating logic of heteronormative communal or family life. "The Child," Edelman writes, "has come to embody for us the telos of the social order and came to be seen as the one

for whom that order is held in perpetual trust” (Edelman 2004: 11). Breaking that trust in the image of the Child means attending to other social and political logics, other practices and other embodiments that children present to the world, thus *queering* the child. The ‘queering’ of the image of childhood means resisting the reification of the future as an order of the same, resisting the violent attempts to domesticate the present in order to secure a future in the image of the Child. This prospect is both more dangerous and more radical than we may assume at first, since the image of the Child, like that of the Nation, always secures its own longevity and sovereign repetition through a violent ordering of the present. Edelman writes:

That Child, immured in an innocence seen as continually under siege, condenses a fantasy of vulnerability to the queerness of queer sexualities precisely insofar as that Child enshrines, in its form as sublimation, the very value for which queerness regularly finds itself condemned: an insistence on sameness that intends to restore an Imaginary past. The Child, that is, marks the fetishistic fixation of heteronormativity: an erotically charged investment in the rigid sameness of identity that is central to the compulsory narrative of reproductive futurism. (Edelman 2004: 21).

The Child is the mini-State in formation. Desire for the Child is becoming indistinguishable from the utter imperative to protect and defend its ultra-normative borders. These ordering practices exist at the level of solemn state rituals and everyday life, such that the well-governed family prefigures the order of the nation. The image of the hegemonic Child is generative of nationalist and familial order as twin process cemented by the stress laid on the unimpeachable value of childhood innocence. This hegemonic image of the Child is in lock-step formation with other forms of racism, catalyzing fascist desire. Clearly there is much riding on the Child. It has become fascist desire made domestic and consolable, indeed, as Edelman writes, “this fascism of the baby’s face” (75) is a compassion we can’t refuse.

For queers, feminists and anti-capitalist activists creating new spaces for the practice of autonomy and self-determination, this critique can be an important tool in understanding the social and symbolic force behind the violence and hate promulgated by right-wing Christian activists and their insistent focus on the protection of children and systems of erotic and

gendered normalization. Right-wing Christian discourse attempts to preempt a relational and intimate politics of bodily autonomy which link together the overlapping struggles around practices of reproductive choice to the expansion and revaluation of pleasure in unique and unforeseen combinations. For those invested in political struggles around issues of gender, sexuality and the body, Edelman's book is a difficult and provocative aid to thinking through the force field of affect produced by the heightened social regulatory practices that exploit the image of the normative child and the family.

Edelman's analysis is a powerful denaturalizing perspective on the shape of desire and its libidinal configurations in identity constructions. If, as Judith Butler (1993, 2004) suggests, the social force of a symbolic is related to its continual repetition in discourses and practices that lend it the appearance of a natural process, constitutive of patterns of disavowal, then uncovering the ways social power and inequitable systems produce the lineaments of desire provoke fault lines in the social fabric that locate other ways of becoming intelligible as human. Edelman attempts to exploit these fault lines by locating practices of desire and the signifying systems that compose identificatory structures as mobile assemblages—heterodox desiring practices—as multiple, unstable and not locked into the hegemonic order of sameness and static identity. Edelman's text anatomizes the social force of symbolic relations and the production of subjects whose affective dispositions serve to subjugate them to specific intelligibilities amenable to normalizing regimes. As a diagnostician of incipient micro-fascisms, Edelman's critical polemic ferrets out the way fascist subjectivities are tied to circuits of enjoyment, the nostrum of compassion, and the constrained productions of disfiguring and self-satisfied authoritarian identities. This is especially important in our age of the production of neoliberal subjectivities combined with the inducement to enjoyment that is nowhere tied more intensely, I think, to a nexus of nationalist, capitalist and totalitarian practices as, for instance, the recent spectacle of the 2008 Beijing Olympics demonstrates.¹

Edelman's work represents a new direction for queer theory and a needed development of its critical themes with respect to psychoanalysis. I think *No Future* is a critical development in

¹ On this point it is interesting to note what Guy Debord (2004) wrote a few years before his death in 1994: "The pleasures of existence have recently been redefined in an authoritarian way—first in their priorities and then in their entire substance" (65).

queer theory in two respects. First, by submitting the cultural and political work performed by the maintenance of an image of the child in need of protection as its primary object of analysis, Edelman mobilizes a space for queering the relations of childhood. Second, Edelman focuses on themes of negativity via the death-drive that has been neglected by the psychoanalytic critique, giving queer theory its analytical purchase on theories of subjectivity and social power.

In the first case we can point to the emergence of the critical figure of the “queer child” within queer theory primarily through Steven Bruhm and Natasha Hurley’s (2004) landmark collection, *Curiouser: On the Queerness of Children*. Critical scholarship in the area of the queer child enables a new focus on the space of childhood as culturally strategic narratives, unmasking the multiple dimensions of normalized relations in which children and the space of childhood are regulated. Edelman’s work on the child in queer theory is equipped to pose questions pertaining to the way stories of childhood, the stories told by the ‘psy’ discourses, and the retrospective narrative framing performed by queer adults speaking/writing about their own queer childhood past, both inform and problematize a persistent binary thematic of threatening adults and vulnerable children. It is posed to uncover a greater terrain of experiences that give the lie to monolithic constructions of what adult and child identities signify. Given the fact that the child’s primary caretakers and storytellers insist on making child queerness into a story that will not be, narrating other stories of the child, effects a twist and a turn in the cultural narratives of childhood sexuality and casts light on the production and circulation of cultural narratives and the position of the storyteller (Probyn 1996).

Yet there is another issue that is not dissociable from the queer critique of how childhood identities and sexualities are produced and narrated. Edelman does not address this directly in *No Future*, but future work could benefit from his powerful critique. I am referring to the concomitant production of the figure of threat represented by the paedophile, a figure that has become especially important in understanding a new turn of the screw in the threatened and threatening discourses of the hegemonic normalized family. Edelman’s analysis can be developed by attempting to understand why the figure of the paedophile is given a tremendous valence today in light of the sacralization of the image of the Child. The social, political and psychic ‘work’ done to figure the image of the paedophile buttresses a fantasized political space

with multiple dimensions and material effects. This threatening figure is constituted by and produces a set of cascading effects in social life regulating, in part, child and adult identities and their ontologies, the space of the family, parental relations and authority, and the practice of sexuality as (queer) pedagogy. In light of critical psychoanalytic accounts of infantile sexuality, family drama, and the Lacanian and post-Lacanian work in the accession to subjectivity and language, queer theory can call the figure of the paedophile and the incessant compulsion to repeat its disfiguring cultural narrative to account. Critical psychoanalysis can help elucidate why our cultural stories about intergenerational sex remain highly vituperative and vitriolic; why they remain, as child psychologist Adam Phillips writes, a “stuck narrative” (Phillips quoted in Bruhm and Hurley 2004: xxii).²

It may be that the figure of the paedophile, like the negative figuration of the ‘queer’ that Edelman pursues as a toxic dissolving substance on Child-centred futurity, is the limit of the Western nation-state and of liberal politics more generally. It is hard to say if the public for the hatred of homosexuality has increased or not of late, but its lineaments of radical refusal is tied to a fear of destruction so fundamental that its imaginary fuses proper sexual conduct, the sacred Child, marriage, the family and the fear of permissiveness into a tight conceptual tangle. Moreover, these affective and social responses to what is deemed radically unintelligible are nested within overlapping governmental sites that link the family, the nation and empire. The horror of incest and paedophilia is aligned with the horror that homosexuality still engenders in some quarters, especially when alternative or permissive kinship relations become alchemized as “private” family freedoms in which children set the stage for what is deemed an all-too-risky social laboratory. If the figure of the queer, torqued as “anti-social” fails to cement fascist desire, then the figure of the paedophile is more than exploitable in this regard.³

How Edelman takes up Lacan is both a novel turn of events in queer theory but it is not without its problems. Queer theory has largely marshaled a critical perspective on psychoanalysis that describes a social process of the attainment of sexuality and ego formation as a constitution of norms produced through power arrangements. Queer theory has also developed

² Sheila L. Cavanagh (2007) has also written about the cultural disfigurations produced through the panic over the figure of the female predator or “pedophile” in student-teacher sex scandals and their impact on queer pedagogies.

³ My analysis in this paragraph has been informed by Michael Cobb (2005) and Lauren Berlant (2004).

a sustained examination of the production of heteronormative identity constructions as a process of othering that disavows homosexual attachments. What is missing from queer theory is the negativity afforded by the focus on the death-drive and *jouissance*. Queer theory is too sanguine, Tim Dean suggests, about the proliferation of pleasures and tends toward a utopian account of the body and its pleasures. However, as Tim Dean explains, the pressure of the unconscious and the partial drives, (these are central categories for Lacan) signals a space of infinitude that potentially undermines the subject's capacity for living. This aspect of Lacan's thought is not properly explored by Edelman, as he neglects to envision the implications of the death drive and the pursuit of pleasure as a limit on *jouissance* itself.⁴ Moreover, in a series of exchanges, John Brenkman⁵ has also criticized Edelman for totalizing the symbolic constructions of the child, albeit important, in his vision of how the social effects of heteronormativity clinches queer oppression. I tend to agree with Brenkman on this point, yet also think he fails to get at the substance of Edelman's critique. Following Brenkman, Edelman's text can be troubled for failing to account for how innumerable inequitable practices form the template of stratification in the social order. Edelman's account neglects to specify the disfiguring effects of gendered, racialized and class stratification and its implications in the mobilization of heteronormative discourses centred around the production of the child as a regulatory force. The present moment in the mobilization of the endangered child is, after all, largely a North American phenomenon, (albeit undergoing globalization) and the bodies under acute concern are usually white and bourgeois.

No Future tantalizingly presents important affinities with contemporary theory and practice relevant to the creation of queer autonomous spaces. Yet, works of "high theory" are always difficult to translate into the kinds of critical, cognitive and emotional resources suitable for contemporary activists who are interested in anti-capitalist resistance and the development of autonomous spaces. A work like *No Future*, with its challenge to the notion of the political,

⁴ I refer the reader to a thought provoking article on this issue that tackles Lacanian concepts and queer theory: Tim Dean, "Lacan and queer theory" in Jean-Michel Rabaté, *The Cambridge Companion to Lacan* (London: Cambridge University Press, 2003): 238-252.

⁵ For Brenkman's critical appraisal of Edelman's chapter "The Future is Kid Stuff" as a previous article included in the book, *No Future* and Edelman's response see: John Brenkman, "Queer Post-Politics" *Narrative* 10(2): (May 2002): 174-180. Edelman, "Post-Partum" *Narrative* 10(2):181-185 and Brenkman, "Politics, Mortal and Natal: An Arendtian Rejoinder" *Narrative* 10(2): 186-192.

presents special problems. As in any theoretical work that draws from a radical or critical tradition, we are invited to think through what activism means, broadening its aims, its practices and objects of thought.⁶ A series of questions follow from this. What is the place of critical discursive interventions in a field of thought and its relationship to individual and/or collective capacities to act? What does it mean for texts written in the grammar of specialist knowledge that exist in rarefied channels of distribution and oriented toward a specific audience have to say to community inspired visions of radical social transformation? *Should* it be directly applicable to practical action? Can its translation into ‘common sense’ or common parlance also revoke its critical thrust? I think that this problem has multiple dimensions. One is a problem of translation. Another may be a problem of the scale, scope and tactics envisioned for social change. Yet another problem resides in the understanding of the dynamics of power, subjectivity and affect and the place of reflexivity in social movement building and/or radical world building.

At first blush a text like *No Future* extends and develops the radical deconstructive thrust of queer theory as thoroughgoing negativity, positioning itself as anti-political, if not apolitical. Yet there is also a sense that it undoes its own manifest theoretical aims. What Edelman does not consider, as a kind of ‘unbecoming’ performative contradiction immanent to queer theory, is that all acts, (and act we must), contain both a utopian moment that contests norms, potentiating a becoming-other, and a line of power that recapitulates hegemonic teleologies. Both moments exist in the logic of practice. A poststructuralist elaboration of subjectivity tied to a contemporary anti-capitalist critique of hierarchy and normalizing power has the potential to make such moments more visible and potentially practicable. Thus, a text like Edelman’s can provoke further theoretical developments and bridge the emerging literature on poststructuralist anarchism, or ‘postanarchism’ with the literature of affect and social space (see Lim 2007; May 1994; Day 2005; Newman 2007).

The relevance and power of a text like Edelman’s is its ability to convey how our subjectivity is produced through power dynamics at the level of the unconscious and our libidinal investments. *No Future* reminds us that there is an historical process to who and what we are, to

⁶ For a reflection on the limitations of certain notions of what constitutes “activism” see: *Do or Die! Collective*, “Give up Activism” (2001). Available online at, www.eco-action.org/dod/no9/index.html

who we think we are or what we may become. It helps us understand and recognize that the passionate attachments we make to our loves, lusts, desires and repugnancies have histories and are shaped by specific configurations of power. It can help us recognize, diagnose and hopefully thwart, what Gilles Deleuze warned against: that societies of control require an alignment of micro-fascisms that exist first or primarily within the interstices of daily life. Contemporary neoliberal governance requires the transformation of subjectivity, and the participation of subjects into a series that articulate and enforce the norm in new and powerful ways. The normal has always been a category of terror. This terror becomes diffuse, distant and constitutive of our politically organized subjectivities, our *habitus* channeling desire and recrafting memory to erase histories of intimate violence and degradations that are potentially enabling of resistance. This is why anti-normative practices can, at times, manifest in the body as extreme anxiety, a certain buzzing, even faint and somatic experiences akin to schizoid manifestations, producing its own violent ruptures. This is also why, in the often-described “intense” experiences of creating and sustaining queer autonomous spaces, that volatile passions, displacements of desire and ego-defenses attend the ego-shattering proximity in which individual identities are brought up against possibilities for change and becoming-other that radical spaces can sometimes produce.

In the contemporary practice of creating temporary (and sustainable!) queer autonomous spaces, we find a redefinition of the space of politics different from what Judith Halberstam (2008) has recently identified as a danger of fascism stemming from a negativity manifested as anti-political. Halberstam outlines how some German queer anti-communitarian groups in the pre-Nazi years, with a commitment to transcend the failing Enlightenment project of liberalism, took on disturbing fascist sensibilities, invested in part, with a cult of masculinity that predominated throughout the period as the rising tides of authoritarian nationalism culminated in the Nazi state. Halberstam describes a complicated topography of queer and gender politics in the era, with a complex array of groups who variously take up the question of queer emancipation, legal reform, and gender freedom. National socialism both played on and repudiated homoerotic social bonds, and thus some homosexual groups variously accommodated themselves to the cult of masculinity and the promotion of a fraternity of masculine homosexuals that resonated with some tendencies in the national socialist movement. We can uncover

evidence of nationalism, eugenicist thought, anti-Semitism and male supremacy in some of the Wilhemian and Weimar era's homosexual activist and cultural groups. However, Halberstam's précis of that era's homosexual emancipation movements obscures other tendencies and figures whose emancipatory visions were drawn from a wider canvas that links their social, aesthetic and political thought to a line of thinkers drawn from classical antiquity to the individualist anarchism and libertarian philosophy of Max Stirner (1806-1856) and Nietzsche. Those German writers and activists that are deemed central to a queer anarchism of the past have been Benedikt Friedländer (1866-1908), John Henry Mackay (1864-1933) and Gustav Wyneken (1875-1964). Their work leaves an unmistakable residue of anti-statist politics that is anti-social, or anti-communitarian but not apolitical, with marked anti-fascist tendencies. Although the routing of radical groups and their archives by the power of Nazism is a tragedy of immense proportions, careful and patient genealogies has again begun to uncover the panoply of tendencies and groups that helped lay the groundwork for the post-war social movements for queer liberation and their ties to an anarchism of the past.⁷

Rerouting a failed liberal humanism vies with fascist lineaments of power in the contestation of modernity at specific moments in history, but it also contends with the production of radical autonomous anti-capitalist and non-hierarchical practices that have been and are again precariously emerging in local spaces throughout western countries. Thus today, we can witness a contemporary form of queer "anti-social" politics that is organized around the theory and practice of autonomy inspired by anti-capitalist networks and an organizational ethos that is guided by the anti-capitalist anarchist principles of voluntary association, non-hierarchical relations and decentralization. I mention here the yearly gatherings since 1998 of anti-capitalist queers in various cities known as Queeruption; the various social living experiments and squatting practices that define queer spaces in cities like Barcelona and Amsterdam; Gay Shame in the US and Montréal's Les Panthères Roses and the Anti-Capitalist Ass Pirates are all examples of this tendency to remap queer desire, identities, practices and social space as a mode of living that mounts a resistance to neoliberalism and the heteronormative systems it

⁷ For more on the lives and politics of Friedländer, Mackay and Wyneken consult: Bauer 2005; Laqueur 1962; Kennedy and Oosterhuis 1991; Steakley 1975; Lauritsen and Thorstad 1974. French queer anarchist author and activist Daniel Guérin (1994) has left us an account of the youth movement in the Weimar and Early Nazi era. For a history of the US queer liberation movement's ties to an anarchism of the past see Kissack 2008.

instantiates.⁸ These practical experiments in queer autonomy are precarious collective embodiments of forms of resistance and they exist at a remove from social relations that can stabilize them as an archive, thus making them not readily available for academics and other activists not directly involved in these events. These events are practices of negativity and a form of anti-politics that is itself redefining the space of politics by insisting on holding subjectivities and the spaces for their realization in suspension. These forms of spontaneous organization reflect a utopianism tempered by the radical realities of negotiating power by individuals, collectives and small affinity groups and the inevitable affective dimension to the everyday proximity of living, loving and conflict that this process inevitably faces. These precarious and contingent queer practices of collective resistance participate in a redefinition of political praxis, reflecting in practical terms the theoretical space marked out by the emerging literature on poststructuralist anarchism. Poststructuralist anarchism, in part, can be seen as a space for rethinking and reenacting new configurations of identities aware of the immanence of power to these exchanges as crucial to the interactions and relations constitutive of micro-political practices. A text like *No Future*, which creates a space for thinking through desire, power and subjectivity can enable new productive exchanges with the ‘postanarchism’ literature by politicizing the dimension of affect imminent to the creation of autonomous spaces.⁹

In *No Future*, Edelman is mapping the queer as affect, and as politically invested affective practices which inquire into the libidinally-charged configurations of what we take as real: our very identities and our emotional investments. The lineaments of order that embeds itself into the production of social imaginaries delimit identities and the collective moves one is compelled to undertake in its name. Edelman’s challenge is to continually examine the norms that enclose and enfold our acts and collective organizing efforts within transformational

⁸ Extant literature on these movements are sparse, and reflect what Halberstam (2008) refers to as “tiny archives” (151). Most participants experience these spaces as emotionally and intensely life-changing events, an “archive of feelings” as Ann Cvetkovich (2003) calls them. These remain precarious spaces in radical queer world building and the patterns of symbolic and material regulation that prohibit and deter their emergence and development is breathtaking. Some sources to consult are: Vanelander 2007; Brown 2007a, 2007b; Mattilda 2004. For personal accounts of Queeruption, see: <http://ovl.indymedia.org> and <http://indymedia.nl>. For the Montréal scene check out: www.lespantheresroses.org.

⁹ My brief comments on the conjunction of ‘postanarchism,’ sexuality and queer autonomy should be supplemented by the extended account provided by Heckert 2005. Available online at: <http://sexualorientation.info>. For a critical account of the postanarchist literature see: Cohn and Wilbur (2003).

horizons and to recognize the inevitable consequences on our work for social change that obtain from organizing a structure of reality around the disavowal of a drive. If there is a definitive message for queer activists in *No Future*, it entails submitting the lineaments of our desire and the passionate attachments we invariably have to our identities as stable, complete and *necessary* as part of our radical praxis. In fucking against the future, as it were, we begin to imagine ourselves otherwise, to provoke an embodied pedagogy of resistance to what we think we are, and what we think we are capable of doing. Foucault has mentioned that one of the most urgent tasks today may be not to seek to know who we are, but to refuse who we are. Becoming otherwise, and attending to the embodied practices of affinity-based movement work is a crucial task for practicing queer autonomy. It may be that the ‘queering’ of the theory and practice of autonomy itself will enable new ways of working through collective social transformation that doesn’t neglect how our passionate attachments and emotional investments set the stage for charting collective moves. *No Future* can lead us toward fundamental questions about the kind of social order we want to affirm and what possibilities for becoming we enable and foreclose when we produce specific intelligibilities about who we think we are and what we are capable of doing.

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