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AGAINST CHRONONORMATIVITY: HOW MAY A CONCEPT OF QUEER TIME

Challenge Traditional Ideas of Historical Progress?

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'someone will remember us I say even in another time'
- If not, Winter: Fragments of Sappho (Carson, 2002)

Poignant words such as these written by Sappho remind us of the conspicuous queer attachment to memory, history, and time. Whether a sobering, bittersweet, or comforting attachment, queer histories, experiences, and theories are tied to the concept of time and progress. If we, in modernity, define time as the standard by which we measure and organise the expected life course, as 'linear, ordered, progressive, and teleological' (Luciano, 2007:2), then queer discourse and experience can be seen to exist as oppositional to it. Historical progress is marked by heteronormative assumptions of the life course - regarding factors such as bodies, achievements, goals, and productivity - assumptions that queer communities may not always assimilate to. This essay aims to discuss how a concept of 'queer time', borne from this alienation and difference, can be seen to challenge traditional, heteronormative, and 'western' ideas of historical progress. To do so, it is important to consider further concepts, such as chrononormativity, grief, and activism, through contesting queer theories on futurity. Additionally, all arguments should contemplate intersectional applications, as what we define as 'the queer experience' continues to adapt and diversify.

Chrononormativity (Freeman, 2010) is the theory that time normalises life, plotting expected benchmarks of progress throughout culturally defined sequences of age categories, otherwise known as the life course. In the process of normalisation, chrononormativity becomes weaponized as it not only outlines but enforces predetermined norms onto mass populations. An example of this can be seen throughout puberty, a culturally defined category through which society measures a young person's physical and mental development because they have reached a certain age. In the Global North – specifically Euro-American epistemologies – it is usual and even encouraged to observe the growth and development of children's bodies, with specific attention paid to assumed binary gender differences, such as the presence or absence of breasts or facial hair. When the passing of time does not align with such benchmarks, an individual becomes 'abnormal'. By not conforming to so-called time-sensitive expectations, intervention often occurs – medical or otherwise - reinforcing normative time, sex, and gender expression expectations. This process becomes normalized within schools, families, and political arenas. The reality that not all conform to these benchmarks - for example, intersex, transgender, disabled or queer bodies – often leads to some being perceived as the deviant 'other', or else ignored entirely because of the diversity they display. As such, recent legislation in England restricts hormonal healthcare for trans youth, banning the prescription of hormone blockers for those under 16. Policies limiting or disallowing this sort of care are an example of both the enactment and danger of chrononormative ideas of progress. Examples such as this political intervention contributes to 'chrono-biopolitics' (Luciano, 2007), the idea that time helps elevate certain bodies, while others are left to 'wear out'. This is especially pertinent in recent years, and given such restrictive

legislation, as these ‘others’ are not only being left to wear out but are doing so with little to no help or care.

If chrono and heteronormative time is defined through processes such as ‘expected’ stages of puberty, finding a monogamous, opposite-sex partner, having children, and so on, then queer time is surely anything that counteracts such strict organisation. As Eve Sedgwick writes, queer ‘designates [an] open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning’ (Sedgwick, 1993:8). Foucault, too, approaches queerness less as a category of sexual identification, rather as a way of defining and developing a way of life outwith heteronormative institutions (Foucault, 1996 cited in Halberstam, 2005:1). Queer time can then be defined as the open mesh of possibilities along the life course, as queer people and communities often do not fit the chrononormative mould, thus challenging traditional ideas of progress. A more tangible example of this can be seen in queer relationships, where benchmarks such as marriage, reproduction, or even monogamy are not automatically norms by which relationships are negotiated.

This concept may be less arbitrary in reality, as the rise of homonormative practices in queer communities creates a somewhat grey area. Homonormativity is the prioritisation of heteronormative ideals and norms within LGBTQ+ communities and within social policy (Duggan, 2002). One central example is marriage equality for same-sex couples. Whilst a landmark moment around the world, marriage equality assumes that queer couples should want the same structure to their relationships as heterosexual couples; that after a certain amount of time marriage is the natural relational progression. This is not to say some queer people do not want this, rather it highlights how time is used to normalise life even within queer communities. Many queer people do get married, have children, work until retirement and so on, suggesting that the distinction made between chrononormative and queer time is exaggerated. As Judith Halberstam importantly highlights, not all LGBTQ+ people live radically different lives from their heterosexual counterparts, and this is evident in recent decades as queerness becomes more accepted and usual in day-to-day contexts. What is compelling about queerness, though, is its ability to open new ‘life narratives’ and ‘alternative relations’ to time and thus to progress (Halberstam, 2005:2). The complex and individualised experience of queerness makes chrono normativity and queer time core concepts with complicated definitions. While we may agree with Sedgwick, or Foucault or Halberstam, each is elaborating on the central idea that queerness is essentially ‘other’, regardless of nuance that may align queer lifestyles with the majority, or its entanglement with neo-liberal capitalism or state sponsored scripts for progress. Muñoz (2009) highlights how awareness of this duality within queer lives is integral to building a queer future, speaking to variation within queer communities.

Having summarised some of the key ideas associated with queer time, its definitions and its complexities, I now move to discuss its relationship to historical progress and its potential to redefine our understandings of it. Historical progress can be defined as the desire or supposed need to move on, making clear distinctions between the past and the present so as to measure development. This drive to keep moving forward can be explained in consumer cultures by the power of neo-liberal capitalism and the global state of competition and advancement. Importantly, chrononormative concepts of progress insist that negative aspects of the past – death, trauma, regret – should be subject to closure. While they may be learnt from, these elements should be forgotten in order to make way for what comes next,

to continue production, profit and success. In opposition to this, queer time is punctuated by these supposedly negative aspects; remembrance, shared grief, and activism remain central to queer communities and are historically notorious for their longevity. One striking example is the HIV and AIDS crisis of the end of the 20th Century, a period that underpins queer discourse and activism worldwide, where other communities – namely mainstream voices of the global North - have moved beyond it. As discussed in Arranging Grief (2007), Dana Luciano explains how the process of grieving is seen as a luxury in the modernity of linear & organisational time. In Euro-American cultures directed by labour, grieving is an act often relegated to a specific time scale, within a funeral, a limited number of personal days afforded by a workplace, or merely something to 'get over' in time. Queer time challenged this following the AIDS crisis, as the expression of grief was infamously loud and painful, disrupting time's supposed desire to move on, to admit closure and, ultimately, to forget (Luciano, 2007). Furthermore, the collective nature of mourning that fuelled queer communities redefined what it was to grieve. As well as expressions of sadness and heartache, grief became a space for enthusiasm, anger, and a powerful longing for change. This shift in politicised grief is what Douglas Crimp refers to as militancy (Crimp, 1989), the way in which the refusal to grieve in a chrononormative period is in itself an activist undertaking. In other words, as summarised by Luciano, queer rejection of imposed timelines resists the 'tendency to consider grief as always exceptional but instead positing its very ordinariness as a ground of political action' (Luciano, 2007:24). The trauma of the 1980s and 90s is not the only example of queer melancholia, - for example, events such as the 2016 Orlando shooting, or the murder of Brainna Ghey are characterised by similarly collective mourning. Both bore witness to mass vigils, fundraisers for LGTBQ+ charities, and reinvigorated conversations on social media and in the news. These acts of remembrance embedded throughout queer histories prove how queer time challenges traditional ideas of historical progress because the clear distinction between that which has been and what is becomes difficult to make. Both the politicisation of grief, and the large communal expressions of it interrupt chrononormative time, and they demand to be acknowledged. If 'the fading of intense grief...constructs the difference between the immediate past and the more distant past of memory' (Luciano, 2007:13) then one could argue that queer time is more fluid, transcending across this chrononormative structure of past, present, and future to honour those neglected, mistreated, and otherwise forgotten.

As well as exploring the concept of a queer present incorporated with the implications of the past, theorists consider how the possibility of queer futures challenges traditional ideas of historical progress. Within a chrononormative society, queer has been historically positioned as the enemy of the future - as a 'death drive' (Edelman, 2004) – because queer does not contribute to hetero, chrono and capitalist norms of production and progression. Such conversations introduce the idea of queer futures, how they would look, who they would involve and the way in which a queer future would operate. Theorists such as Lee Edelman take a radical stance on queer futurity. They argue queer communities should embrace the radical negativity of queerness, adopting a mindset of anti-futurity (Edelman, 2004) by way of further challenging traditional historical progress. This mindset centres on the stance that queer people should accept the label of the future's 'death drive' and use it to further distance themselves from hetero and homonormativity. Edelman argues that if queerness is to be the undoing of society, it should do so radically, not by disappearing within normative practices such as marriage (Edelman, 2004).

Furthermore, this is because such practices are seen by some as devaluing essentially queer life courses; by assimilating within normative cultures, queerness and an understanding of queer time becomes extinct. Thus, Edelman's stance, while somewhat extreme, is understandable. As a queer person confronted with negativity, violence and feelings of worthlessness when questioned about 'what's next' from a heterosexual majority, the idea of complete rejection may seem appealing, especially if as a form of radical activism.

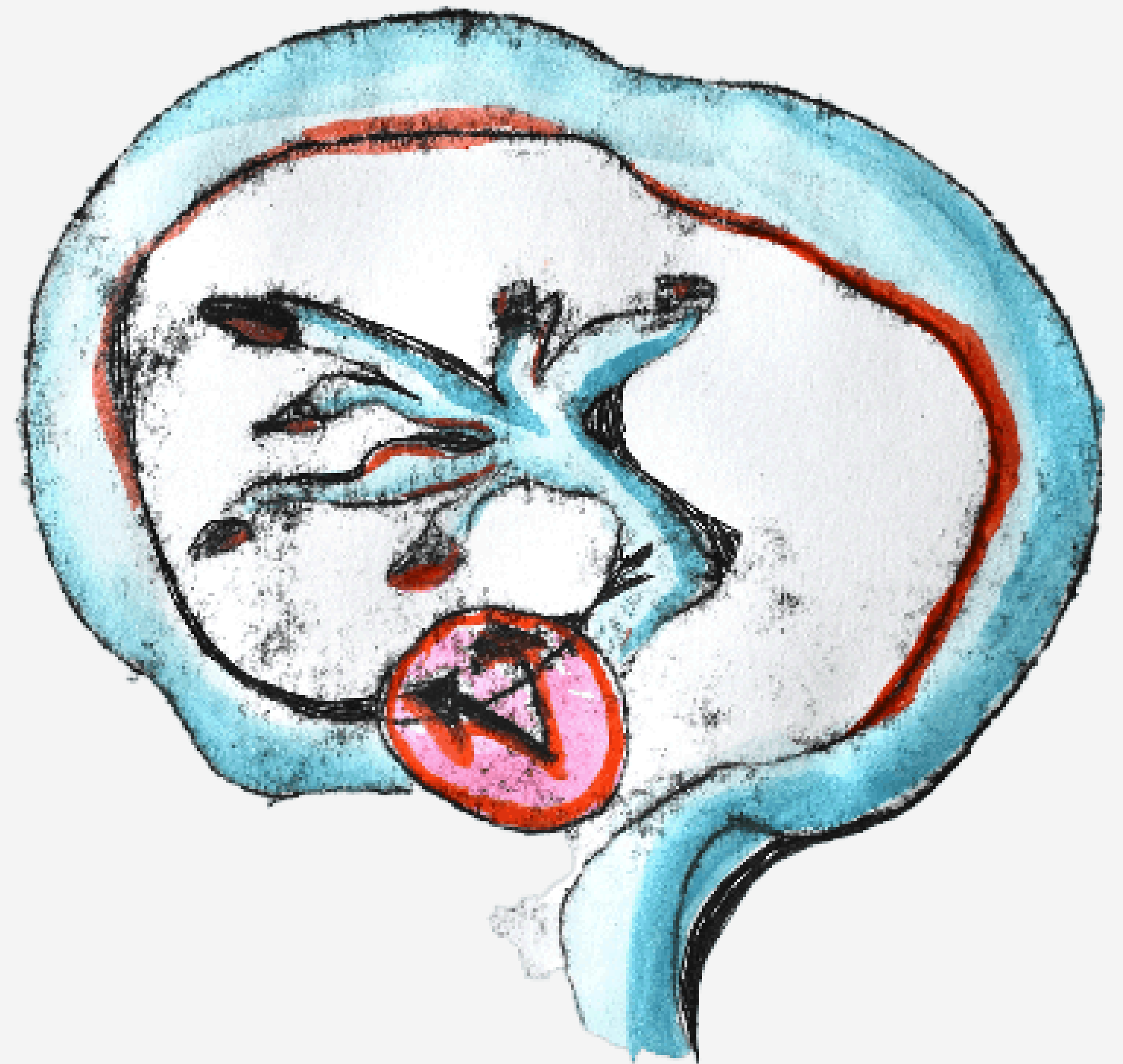
Critical thinker José Muñoz's (2009) writings find fault with Edelman's in two particular areas. First, despite the influence of Edelman's contribution to future-based politics, it is unrealistic to assume it is applicable to all queer groups. Lives rendered unstable due to factors such as class, race, or disability, may not have the freedom to adopt such radical behaviours (Muñoz, 2009). Muñoz describes these marginalised groups as nearer to 'social death', the combination of prejudice and alienation that leaves many without the ability to reject futurity and still survive. Just as during the AIDS crisis, when activism was called out for a lack of inclusion and intersectionality, modern theories must recognise the array of identities and expressions that exist within the term 'queer'. This highlights faults with EuroAmerican queer studies and neoliberal capitalism broadly, more than Edelman specifically; however, it is important to consider such criticism in order to facilitate intersectional discussion. Secondly, Muñoz disagrees that LGBTQ+ people should accept their proposed status as oppositional to the future, suggesting instead that queer potential is, in fact, situated within it. Muñoz summarises his argument for futurity as 'queer as horizon' (Muñoz, 2009), as something that has not yet occurred. Muñoz states that 'seeing queerness as horizon rescues and emboldens concepts such as freedom that have been withered by the touch of neoliberal thought and gay assimilationist politics' (Muñoz, 2009, p.32). Essentially, the present is not the end of queerness, just as the past was not. Queer as Horizon argues that while there is a potential for queerness, the present is ephemeral under the threat of normative time. In other words, 'we are not quite queer yet' (Muñoz, 2009, p.22) and so must recognise the potential of a queer future, and the way in which queer time can continue to challenge traditional historical progress rather than succumb to it. Just as in Sappho's writing, where the poet could be understood as referring to a collective 'us', Muñoz refers to 'we' as an entity that exists across time. Queer time challenges traditional ideas of historical progress because it is a concept that cannot be confined within years or months or days, and a collective that is 'not yet conscious' (Muñoz, 2009:20) and not yet complete.

In addition to analogues of sobering queer history, and sharing Muñoz's desire for a queer future, Elizabeth Freeman (2010) argues queer time can be explored through experiences of pleasure, measuring it within the good as well as the bad. This theory of Eroto-historiography (Freeman, 2010) suggests that the body can act as an historical method beyond the pain and suffering of queer communities, and instead (or additionally) have a consciousness of queer pleasure and enjoyment. By historicising only through pain, it is argued that acts such as homonormativity, imitating norms of gender and sexuality, are really a mirroring of the past. This is a concept Freeman refers to as 'temporal drag', the process of pulling the past along with us, whether consciously or otherwise, and thus limiting the possibility of freedom and fulfilment. Rather beautifully, Luciano concludes that this constant entanglement with our past is the only way of perpetuating love which we do not want to relinquish (Luciano, 2007, p.16). Summarizing the queer and rebellious act of refusing to forget, as well as speaking to the defiant act of finding pleasure in queer histories. Freeman's critique of the often-sole focus on melancholy is important to consider as we

move to develop queer time as something also celebratory and positive. This is not to say queer remembrance and trauma should be neglected, but perhaps these varying historiographies should work in consort, as both challenge traditional concepts of historical progress. Through a rewriting of queer pasts, theories such as Freeman's allow us to consider queer futures, perhaps constructing a clearer image of the future Muñoz describes. The intermingling of love and pain, pleasure and tragedy are components central to concepts of queer future; the idea that peoples and communities can live by standards they themselves have set – whether in relation to biological progress or personal life courses.

A core aspect of queerness, particularly as I understand it in my own life, is the remarkable ability it has to deconstruct binaries. We see this largely in discussions of gender, sex, relationships and sexualities, but these examples of grief, pleasure, pasts, and futures reflect the very same thing. Queerness disrupts frameworks of chrononormativity by destabilising the distinction between melancholic narratives of the past and pleasurable, hopeful ideas of the future, seeing both as interconnected and interdependent. Not only does this hold personal potential to experience life, relationships, pain, and love in a more fluid way, queer time holds the political potential to unsettle underlying structures of society as it undermines the artifice of the binary upon which chrononormativity rests.

To conclude, I refer to the opening of this essay quoting Sappho: 'someone will remember us...even in another time' (Sappho translated in Carson, 2002). This simple line of poetry encapsulates the queer desire or even need to remember, to recognise the way in which queer time transcends the normative rigidity of traditional historical progress. In a modern age of neoliberal capitalism, time is defined by its chrononormative organisation and structure, from controlling individual bodies to determining the production and development of entire countries. Queerness is, by definition, whatever is at odds with the norm or the dominant (Halperin, 1995) and so it makes sense that queer time counteracts hegemonic understandings of time and progress across it. Through exploring the relatedness of concepts such as chrono and homonormativity, collective queer experiences of grief, and the debate over queer futurity, this essay has explored how queer time challenges traditional ideas of historical progress, and the potential it has to continue to do so. Queerness scrambles and interrupts the structured analogues of historical progress because it is not confinable to such rigidity; by its nature queerness is fluid, and queer time is no exception to this phenomenon.



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