Chapter 8

Utopian Pragmatics: Bash Back! and the Temporality of Radical Queer Action

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Futurity and Negation

*When you are a transsexual, you look for your future, and you can’t see it.*
—Lea T., the face of Givenchy, *New York Times*

*Racialized kids, queer kids, are not the sovereign princes of futurity.*
—José Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*

Is there anything at all radical about queer sex? I want to use this question to situate the relatively recent antisocial turn in queer theory—exemplified by Lee Edelman’s theorization of *sinthomosexuality* in *No Future*, and taken to task by a number of theorists quite compellingly, among them José Esteban Muñoz in the tome *Cruising Utopia*, whose subtitle provides a hint to the contestatory terrain the work stakes out in relation to Edelman’s work: *The Then and There of Queer Futurity*. Muñoz seems to think we’ve got a future. Edelman thinks we don’t. Edelman seeks to think the negative, destructive force of queerness; Muñoz, rather, is in search of a certain queer positivity, a queer capacity to remake the world. Edelman seems, at first blush, to theorize the act of queer sex as a future-destroying force. Muñoz attempts, alternatively, to consider queer sex acts, and the modes of sociality constructed around and in conjunction with them, as part of a repertoire of practices that work in the service of producing utopic visions that imbue queer collectivities with the sense of having a future. In both of these works, however, the answer to this initial question—is there something radical about queer sex in itself?—seems to be yes. For Edelman, queer sex destroys the future; for Muñoz, it aids in building alternative ones.

Queers are thus confronted with the question of futurity: do we have a future or don’t we? Are we consigned to an anamnetic repetition of our
current conjuncture, that which Ernst Bloch (the German leftist utopist whom Muñoz has resuscitated for the purposes of thinking queer worldbuilding) has theorized, following Nietzsche, as an eternal return of the same, a constant, redundant retreading of the worn circuits of everyday life in a milieu determined by the hegemonic, co-constitutive logics of racist, misogynist, heterocentric, neoimperial capital? Are our conditions of existence totally subsumed—that is, fully done over, exhausted—by these logics, or do we have some space for intervention, and thus for invention? Is negation, the destruction of these conditions of existence, the only possibility? Are destruction and invention—and, by extension, the force of negation and the force of positivity—necessarily incommensurable?

I hope to develop a thorough response to these questions over the course of this chapter, particularly in dialogue with the various communiqués and affiliated or influential theoretical texts developed by and through the rhizomaticallyorganized set of collective tendencies indexed by the phrase Bash Back! But first, what is the future?

In Edelman’s theorization of futurity, the phenomenon of reproduction—and its concomitant valorization of the Child, who functions as the figure to which social reality remains subordinate to the whims of, a sort of tyrannical Violet Beauregard on steroids—is central in constructing the fantasy of a future. The future is, like all things that don’t exist (yet or ever), a fantasy, although this does not mean it is not material and, in fact, very real in its effects. In articulating the structural logic of futural fantasy as explicitly reproductive, Edelman opens some space to consider the ways in which a vested belief in what he calls “reproductive futurism” operates as a hegemonic force of social structuration. It’s worth quoting him at length on this relation between fantasy, futurity, and sociality, as it is key to understanding the negative force of sinthomosexuality. He asserts that

fantasy alone endows reality with fictional coherence and stability, which seem to guarantee that such reality, the social world in which we take our place, will still survive when we do not. It thus compels us to identify ourselves with what’s to come by way of haven or defense against the ego’s certain end...his name, that is, his surrogate, must take the subject’s place; it must survive, if only in fantasy, because fantasy names the only place where the desiring subject can live. The sheltering office of fantasy, in concert with desire, absorbs us into scenic space until we seem to become it, until we seem so fully at one with the setting of our fantasy, the frame wherein we get to see what is where we are not, that the subject of fantasy, Lacan asserts, where this fantasy space is concerned, though “frequently unperceived...is always there...” To be there always, though unperceived, to inhabit the space of perception as such and thus to become the witness to one’s absence, one’s disembodiment: such fantasy presumes reality guaranteed, not threatened, by time, sustained by the certainty that a
“course of events” is bound to continue its course in due course long after
we are gone.5

What is detailed, here, is what Jacques Derrida has called “phallogocen-
trism” at its finest, although Edelman does not name it as such. If we
follow the cues—the masculine gendering of this desiring subject, the
central importance of passing down of a name—it becomes clear that the
subject of this futural fantasy bears a distinct relation to the archetypal
seed-sowing patriarch, ensconced so firmly in the tissue of familial—and,
of course, Oedipal—reproductive logic that his fantasy has merged
seamlessly with reality, thus rendering being-in-the-world an experience
of “scenic space” entirely subsumed by the “sheltering office” of the
eternal return of the patriarchal present. In order for this world, this
“scenic space” to have meaning, consistency, “coherence and stability,”
this subject invests heavily in the logic of repetitious reproduction, the
creation of Mini-me progeny with ethical, political, economic, and erotic
commitments to this very same fantasy, this heterosexist, seemingly
consensual hallucination that structures wholesale the “social world in
which we take our place.”6 All the world, in this account of futural
fantasy, is a stage for this phallogocentric script; the rest of us—even those
who actively disidentify with it—seem to just live on it, cast as supporting
characters moving in and out of the scenic space of fantasy that has
become coterminal with reality. The endless reiteration of this script
 guarantees the continuation of a “course of events” premeditated by this
desiring subject. In order to have a future, the desiring subject must have
progeny, in order that the anamnetic cycle of heterofamilial reproduction
be repeated—this is, in short, what Edelman means by “reproductive
futurism.”

This rendering of the desiring subject’s investment in the figure of
the Child is what allows the subject to avoid engaging the great void, the
absence of meaning, or the foundational lack that undergirds the futural
fantasy that allows the social to cohere. The Child, in other words, fills
in the Big Nothing that, in Lacanian psychoanalysis, operates under the
name of sinthome.7 Edelman writes that this desiring subject is shaped by
“a blindness to the arbitrary fixation of enjoyment [jouissance] responsible
for its consistency,” and moreover it disavows “the meaningless flat” of
the sinthome and rather “misreads its identity as a metaphor instead,
one that names its relation to an Other whose positivity seems to guar-
antee Symbolic reality itself.”8 Here, we must understand “enjoyment”
as jouissance, which in Lacanian parlance denotes a specifically sexual
kind of pleasure. The sinthome, relatedly, is the unanalyzable phenom-
enon that allows jouissance to occur. For Lacan—and for Edelman—
jouissance is not about relation to the person, persons, or objects one is
erotically involved with, rather, it is fundamentally a relational, and occurs
because of the *sintrohome*, that “meaningless” dictator that is beyond psychoanalytic understanding. But, Edelman writes, the subject experiencing *jouissance* often gets confused about its nonrelational nature, and begins to believe *jouissance* is intricately linked to an *Other* that one experiences *jouissance* in the presence of. It is in this way that the subject begins to “believe in” the *sintrohome*, to believe, to be clear, in the meaningfulness of *orgasm*. The maintenance of this belief is infinitely easier, in Edelman’s purview, for folks who engage in sex that contains the possibility of *pre-creation*, wherein the creation of the *Child* operates as the positivity that supplants the foundational lack that *jouissance* risks exposing. To put it reductively, perhaps, heterosexuals can convince themselves that there is a *telos*—evolutionarily, spiritually, whatever—to their fucking. Homosexuals, it seems, don’t, or can’t. The estrangement of homosexuals from reproductive futurism is what forces them to carry what Edelman calls:

> the burden of sexuality’s demeaning relation to the *sintrohome*, the burden of what Lacan describes as the absence of a sexual relation: the absence, that is, of a complementarity to naturalize relations between the sexes insofar as all sexuality suffers the mark of the signifier as lack.9

Homosexuals, through engaging in “unnatural” sex acts, fuck in the absence of a sexual relation, or, in Lacanian terms, expose the notion that there is no such thing as a sexual relationship. It is in this way that they develop an ostensibly unmediated relationship to the meaningfulness of *jouissance*—in their estrangement from reproductive futurism, they become *narcissistic, dumb fuckers*. This is how homosexuals become a threat—in their eschewal of reproductive futurism, they “threaten a shutdown of life’s vital machinery by exposing it as machinery, by denying the spiritualization that would bathe it in the warmth of Symbolic meaning and deliver it to the midwives we’re compelled to become in the order of reproduction.”10

Edelman articulates, and claims as desirable, this burden—become threat that queers both bear and pose to reproductive futurism, through their ostensibly antisocial (i.e., nonrelational) sexualities focused on unrepentant and repeated access to *jouissance*. The embrace of this threat can be thought as a response to the neoliberal enfolding of certain privileged queer subjects into futural promises of the good life, 11 a good life undergirded, largely, by the logic of reproductive futurism (marriage, inheritance, unfettered familial formation)—that which Lisa Duggan has termed *homonormativity*.12 The antisocial turn, through its valorization of the threat of the *sintrohome* and its reclamation of perverse sex as central to queer subjectivity, is also a refusal of the phenomenon of homonormativity. The embrace of the antisocial turn is interested,
by extension, in making queerness a threat again, in responding to the neoliberal assimilation of nonheterosexuality enabled by a caricature of tamed, desexualized, nonpervasive, and consumer-oriented understandings of queer difference with a fierce declamation of the negative force of queer sex.

What’s so objectionable about that? To put it simply, it confuses a particular, hegemonic fantasy of the future with futurity full-stop. As Muñoz writes succinctly, “it is important not to hand over futurity to normative white reproductive futurity.”13 This raises several important questions: in what ways is Edelman’s notion of reproductive futurism tacitly coded as both white and overwhelmingly masculinist? To what extent is the neoliberal enfolding of “good” queers reliant on already extant classed, racial, and gendered privileges? Finally, following through on some of the implicated responses to these questions, it becomes integral to consider whether or not the antisocial thesis is an effective conceptual tool in theorizing resistance to both reproductive futurism as well as the lure of the homonormative.

As indexed by the epigraphs to this section, many minoritarian queers—trans folk, folks of color, economically disenfranchised, gender nonconforming queers—have never had the privilege of refusing the social contract of reproductive futurism, of deciding to embrace an alternative lifestyle modeled on what are quite obviously gay-male-specific sexual practices of asocial hook-ups. We never had to negate a future offered to us; we never felt we had one to begin with. To paraphrase translady model Lea T., we looked to the future and couldn’t see it.14 We had no horizon of possibility—this was, of course, in part on account of a sensed estrangement from the promised land of reproductive futurism, but not at all reducible to it. For some of us, it was on account of barely being able to navigate the everyday—it is difficult to imagine a future if you’re otherwise committed to the difficult work of having to scratch together enough money to eat, stay housed, and avoid collections; or gather together the emotional reserves necessary to inure oneself to repetitive quotidian violence. It is hard to invest in the promise of the Child when the promise of the next day is often nearly betrayed.

There is a reductive quality to Edelman’s coupled theorization of reproductive futurism and sinbhomosexuality, wherein a thinly veiled white, heteronormative, overwhelmingly patriarchal conception of futurity is understood as exhaustive of the field of futural imaginaries at work in the construction of social collectivities, and, by contrast, the antisocial sexual practices of homos are posited as the unique, sole locus of threat, destabilization, or challenge to this figuration of futurity. A profoundly dyadic schema is set up, one that conflates reproductive futurism with the positive, active, engaged construction of social worlds, on the one hand, and unites queer sex and negation, on the other. This schematic
renders practices of queer world-making, countermemory, and utopian imagining unthinkable, as it flattens the meanings and potentialities of queer sexual practices at the same time as it refuses to consider a social and temporal field infinitely more complex than that accounted for by reproductive futurism.

Another way of putting this is as follows: for Edelman, there can only be one fantasy of the future, and it is reproductive. This means that the productive force of other futural fantasies is either ignored or negated within a strict understanding of reproductive futurism. The future is a one-(wedding)-ring-to-rule-them-all situation, wherein reproductive futurism is the only game in town, and the only way out is through the negation of the social bonds underwritten by this futural fantasy. Over and against this account of futurity, Muñoz proposes that in order to resist the violent banality of a present shaped by the ascendency of racist homonationalism, assimilationist gay and lesbian realpolitik, and the increasing impossibility of carving out a livable future within the collapsing folds of neocolonial capital, we must glean resources from covered-over, partially forgotten, no-longer-conscious queer pasts to develop tools and skills—both conceptual and practical—that will allow us “to push beyond the impasse of the present.”

He terms this project a “utopian hermeneutics” that is “queer in its aim to look for queer relational formations within the social,” and in terms of its temporality, shaped by what he calls an “idealist trajectory” characterized by “the work of not settling for the present, of asking and looking beyond the here and now.” He goes on to flesh out the temporal and ethical implications of this hermeneutic, positing it as

epistemologically and ontologically humble in that it would not claim the epistemological certitude of a queerness we simply “know” but, instead, strain to activate the no-longer-conscious and to extend a glance toward that which is forward-dawning, anticipatory illuminations of the not-yet-conscious. The purpose of such temporal maneuvers is to wrest ourselves from the present’s stultifying hold, to know our queerness as a belonging in particularity that is not dictated or organized around the spirit of political impasse that characterizes the present.

In place of the future-negating sinthomosexual, we have instead an epistemologically uncertain queerness a venir that refuses fixity without sacrificing futural hope. Queerness is reconfigured here as a “belonging in particularity”—what he alternatively references, following Jean-Luc Nancy, as a queered iteration of “being singular plural”—that is fundamentally (though nonpredictably) social, rather than hermatically enclosed and solipsistically nonrelational. For Muñoz, queerness indexes a way of inhabiting the present differently, fueled by alternative sources
of imaginative sustenance that reconfigure hegemonic histories and aid in the construction of tentative, always-revisable blueprints in the service of constructing more livable futures for minoritarian folks, livable futures beyond the political horizons of neoliberalism. The threat of queerness, here, is not at all reducible to the self-shattering moments of jouissance in queer sex, fucking is not the privileged locus of resistance—rather, it is the counterpublics that cohere around queer sex acts that hold promise. It is the bonds, relationships, affinities, and crews that subsist, and are sustained—though only in part—through queer sex that are loci of resistance and transformation, not sex in itself. To put it differently, Muñoz thinks queerness in a register that outstrips and exceeds the merely sexual, and is instead considered as an ensemble of practices, epistemes, and affective orientations that are simultaneously resistant and visionary, both negating and productive of alternative imaginaries.

It is on account of this simultaneity of negation and production that the idea of utopia, in this understanding of queerness, serves as a means to critique the present. Queer utopias are ways of constructing a fantasy of what is possible through a recursive reference to counterhistories, to near-forgotten or obscured modes of being and acts of resistance, as well a way of sourcing and elaborating already existing forms-of-life that signify—or rather, don’t signify—as unintelligible, illegal, or unworkable according to hegemonic logics. As Ernst Bloch writes (and Muñoz cites), “the essential function of utopia is a critique of what is present. If we had not already gone beyond the barriers, we could not even perceive them as barriers.”

Making Total Destroy: Inventive Destruction

“A book that declares NO FUTURE offers only words. A riot that declares the same demonstrates a step towards insurrection. Death to the Academy!”

Tegan Eanelli, from the conclusion to Queer UltraViolence: Bash Back! Anthology

It is at this juncture of negation and radical inventiveness that the political work of Bash Back! can be located. Given Bash Back!’s commitment to a distinctly antiacademic, anti-institutional, and insurrectionary model of queer resistance, an engagement with the legacy, afterlives, and textual production of the collective tendency that travels under this moniker offers a way out of the worn circuits that constitute the insular and often circular debates of academic queer theory. Rather than framing the debate around the antisocial turn in queer theory as a mere rehearsal of the arguments that focus on the incomposibility of negation and futurity, engaging the work of Bash Back! offers another possibility. This
work is deeply involved in thinking the *cappresention* of movements toward the utopic that are simultaneously negative, destructive, and violent. This engagement allows us to avoid reifying the notion that the construction of utopian imaginaries and the force of negation are somehow incompatible, or mutually exclusive.

Bash Back! has become a bit infamous for a series of compelling anti-homonormative demonstrations—for instance, their “glamalization” of the Human Rights Campaign’s DC headquarters on the eve of their Presidential Dinner, where they bombed the building with glitter and pink and black spray paint, scrawling “Quit Leaving Queers Behind” on the wall; or their infiltration of and subsequent action inside the notoriously homophobic Mt. Hope Church in Lansing, MI, wherein a banner reading “It’s Okay to Be Gay” was unfurled and proqueer flyers were released to flutter over the congregation.

We should not confuse Bash Back! with a distinct set of political organizations. There were certain “chapters” (for lack of a better word) of Bash Back! that formed between the years of 2008 and 2011, particularly following the formation of queer/trans* protest blocs at the 2008 Republican National Convention. These chapters, geographically speaking, were initially clustered in the Midwest (Chicago, Lansing, Milwaukee); however, by the 2009 Bash Back! convergence held in Chicago, folks from all corners of the United States, including both coasts, were present. However, there was no grand unified action plan to follow, no party line or official statement of position that was intended to operate monolithically to streamline these different articulations of Bash Back! For this reason, it is more appropriate to think of Bash Back! as an ensemble of everyday practices of resistance; a set of tendencies that both preexisted extant Bash Back! collectives and actions, and also, importantly, outlives the dissolution of these collectives.

It is for this reason that I’m more concerned with the textual theoretical productions affiliated with Bash Back! than I am with developing a critical analysis of certain well-known Bash Back! actions. These essays and communiqués, collected in the 2011 volume *Queer UltraViolence*, edited by Tegan Eanelli and Fray Baroque, provide a deeper sense of the forms-of-life being developed by contemporary queer anarchist crews. I think that these forms-of-life are the fount of the spectacular instances of resistance and protest that they enable, and are thus a rich site of inquiry, one that is important to consider as we develop collaborative tactics for radical queer world-making.

What one witnesses across the textual productions gathered under the name Bash Back! is a commitment to thinking the conditions of foreclosure, violence, blockage, and shunt in which queer lives, nevertheless, persist and flourish. The working understanding of what queerness itself
is both marks this commitment and points up the sometimes resonant, sometimes distinct differences between this understanding of queerness and operative understandings of the term in the often-rarefied realms of queer theory. The following quotation, taken from the introduction to *Queer UltraViolence*, is a useful place to begin to parse this difference:

The term queer in this book is used both loosely and inclusively. We view queer as the blurring of sexual and gender identities. Queer is the refusal of fixed identities. It is a war on all identity. In line with the Bash Back! tendency, for the uses of this anthology queer is trans because the gender binary is inherently oppressive. More often than not, our use of the term queer is interchangeable with our use of trans, though it is not necessarily true of the way in which trans-whatever is used. We acknowledge that society ensures Queer is an oppressed identity. Anti-Queer oppression is the systemic violence encountered by people who fall outside of traditional sexual or gender categories.20

Although there is a certain carryover from iterations of queer theory that posit queerness as a site of destabilization or difference from the normative, there are nevertheless important distinctions to be made. While queerness has been posited, perhaps most famously by Michael Warner, as an identity without an essence,21 Bash Back! revises the concept to indicate something more than an identity with the capacity to destabilize essentialist categorizations of gender identity and sexuality. Rather, queerness declares a “war on all identity,” an absolute refutation of identitarian logic full-stop. This refutation hinges on cogniz- ing the fundamental complicity of all identity categories with regimes of biopolitical regulation.22 The target is not the unilateral, essentializing tendencies of identity, but the very phenomena of being identifiable itself. In keeping with this logic, it seems not to matter whether one claims a specific, single locus identity—lesbian, for instance—or an entirely more complex, intersectional one: homosexual biromantic, or transmasculine butch bottom. The proliferation of identitarian points enhances the capacities of biopolitical control; refusing to identify, actively blurring and rendering difficult the act of assigning substantive identitarian characteristics becomes the practice of queerness. Here, queer becomes something more than a big-tent umbrella term that names and collects together the various discontents of heteronormativity, which is arguably the manner in which it has come to function in dominant use. While it does name a certain difference from heteronormativity that has the capacity to coalesce or develop coalition between the different constituencies named by those ever growing acronyms (LGBTQIA, QUILTBAG, whatever), this revised understanding of queerness more importantly marks a certain attitude, a certain existential comportment,
a certain mode of life organized over and against identitarian logic, and all the regimes of subjective and social control such logic supports. It names a posture of resistant negation, an inassimilable mode of being-in-the-world. Bash Back's revision of the meaning of “queer” refutes the collectivist logic of the acronym that seeks to map out shared interests across a field composed of “stakeholders” with distinct identities; it also refrues the obscuring of internal hegemony that such acronyms—and social justice efforts, institutions, and nonprofit organizations that claim them to their constituencies—often mask.

Relatedly, this parsing of queerness renders it impossible for queer to be utilized as a synonym for homosexual, which is exactly the move Edelman makes. Indeed, the whole apparatus that supports Edelman’s theorization of sinthomosexuality hinges on a hetero/homo dyad. Rather than privileging same-sex acts as the locus of queerness, Bash Back foregrounds a certain estrangement from binary gender. In doing so, Bash Back figures queerness as cohering at least one step back on the developmental course charted by what Butler has famously called the heterosexual matrix, and in doing so places the systemic oppressions that attend trans* subjectivities and existential practices primary, inverting the oft-taken-for-granted hierarchy within queer activist practices that relegates trans* concerns to afterthought, inessential status. This revisionary tack is of a piece with the general Bash Back tendency to foreground the oppressive existential conditions of minoritarian queers, those furthest away from inhabiting the warm embrace of the homonormative; it is these queer subjects that, simultaneously, inhabit existential circumstances characterized by immense tension as well as produce the most tension in their interfaceings with institutional and intersubjective realms dictated by normative logics.

The Mary Nardini Gang, an anonymous collective affiliated with Bash Back! and responsible for authoring a handful of texts that initially cropped up in Milwaukee, WI, circa 2009-ish, speak to this relation between tension and queerness in “Toward the Queerest Insurrection,” writing that

queer is a territory of tension, defined against the dominant narrative of white-hetero-monogamous-patriarchy, but also by an affinity with all who are marginalized, otherized, and oppressed. Queer is the abnormal, the strange, the dangerous. Queer involves our sexuality and our gender, but so much more. It is our desire and fantasies and more still. Queer is the cohesion of everything in conflict with the heterosexual capitalist world. Queer is a total rejection of the regime of the Normal.24

There are multiple paths out of or beyond tension—pacification, compromise, assimilation, the development of coping skills—but each of
these routes is summarily dismissed here, in favor of refusing the resolution of tension and instead amplifying the conflict that produces said tension in the first place. This amplification of conflict is a refusal of a politics of piecemeal compromise, a refusal of partisan politics, indeed a refusal of any concept of the political that relies on state collusion. It is for this reason that Bash Back! is better described not as a set of political collectivities but rather as an explicitly antipolitical force, a force of resistance through negation. In developing a critique and praxis that coheres around the total rejection of the nonconsensual hallucinatory reality underwritten by reproductive futurism, and all of the class-privileged and racialized baggage, which attends that reality, Bash Back!-affiliated texts and actions have served as the most public, most eloquent articulations of contemporary queer nihilism.

This style of queer nihilism should not be confused wholesale with Edelman’s writing on jouissance, self-shattering, andarelationality; while both are concerned with a certain destruction of reproductive futurism, Edelman’s formulation tends toward a certain kind of passive nihilism, whereas the queer nihilism fomented by the persons and collectivities affiliated with Bash Back! in recent years is anything but passive. Gender Mutiny, the collective responsible for authoring a text entitled “Preliminary Notes on Modes of Reproduction,” offers an important and influential synopsis of the nihilism at work in contemporary radical queer action: it is primarily concerned with illuminating and destroying what we can think of broadly as apparatuses of social reproduction that ensure queer subjugation. While these apparatuses work, in part, by and through the valorization of the Child so central to reproductive futurism, they do not begin nor end there. Reproduction is not mere pro-creation, with all of the generative myths about gender difference, familialism, domesticity, and the productivity of the couple who are embroiled thereupon. Reproduction indexes a much wider-ranging set of phenomena, referring not just to the familialist, Oedipalized production of subjectivities—Edelman’s prime targets of critique—but also to the proliferative production of identities altogether. Identities operate as so many interchangeable, commodifiable, and commodified memes in this line of thought. Gender Mutiny puts it:

The ability of capitalism to reach new markets, now that geographical and material expansion are complete, is based on its ability to reach ever-new identities. Thus identities must be produced, and produced as commodities. Identification—that is, the process of re-creation—is the apparatus that produces these identities. Each new identity is a new tower to which consumers can flock to escape the passé nature of old ones. Eventually—that is, soon and very soon—there will have to be a tower for each person (“you know, there could be as many genders as there are people”), 25
Re-creationism is the phrase Gender Mutiny utilizes to place the apparatuses that ensure the reproduction of the social as derivative of, and intimately linked to, ideologies of pro-creation—with their strictly dichotomous and essentialized understandings of gender—as well as the fundamentally patriarchal concept of Western creationism, with it’s monist, masculinist valorization of Man as the only entity possessed of full, legitimate, and rational being. On the trajectory from creationism to pro-creationism, and from pro-creationism to re-creationism sketched by them, we see the multiplication of intelligible, taxonomic ontologies: the monism of Man entailed by creationism, the binarism of Man/Woman entailed by pro-creationism, and the arborescent multiplication of identity entailed by re-creationism, their shorthand for the production of legible beings enacted by contemporary capitalism. These proliferating, expanding taxonomies begin to produce something along the lines of “an identity for everyone, and every identity in its place!” Gender Mutiny subjects that oft-heard refrain, resounding in gender studies classrooms and among certain queer folks aiming to exhibit their understanding of gender nonconformity through a neoliberal embrace of diversity and ontological plurality, that there are “as many genders as there are people” to extreme criticism, pointing at the connections between re-creationism and current popular discourses on gender pluralism. Gender Mutiny asks, tacitly, what’s the point in investing a life’s work toward the production of a substantive, legible identity? What’s the point of endless consumption toward the end of producing a discrete, unique self? This is not a practice of freedom, but rather precisely what we’re conditioned to desire, a process of self-objectification that produces only nonthreatening differences, differences that don’t, in actuality, make any destructive or resistant difference to the ongoing work of capitalist commodification, but instead operate as the very motor that makes it run. Commodity logic is a difference engine; identity is its fuel.

In addition, these notions of gender plurality still maintain—in the notion of the poles between which a continuum is strung—the dyad of male/female. While no longer conceived as mutually exclusive, firmly bound, and determined entities, they have nevertheless not ceased to be the force that orchestrates the intelligibility—and, thus, the livability, the life chances—of bodies. What we end up with, if we keep to these notions of gender plurality, is a sort of kinder, gentler regime of gender binarism, willing to admit some mixity, some fluidity, but without sacrificing the all-important assignation of gender to morphology.

What Gender Mutiny proposes is this: rather than critiquing old identities in the service of constructing new ones, we destroy the apparatus of identitarian production instead. We have seen, now, how the invention of new identities quickly folds into the logic of assimilatory inclusion;
thus, queer nihilist inventiveness cannot cohere around this locus of the production of new, better, more subversive, more transgressive selves. Lamenting the fact that “on the stage set by the present order, the queer force is making itself busy with the proliferation of identities rather than the utter negation of them,” they theorize a counterforce to this positivity, proposing that “the negative queer project entails the negation of the existent, of the existent’s reproductive apparatuses, and of itself.” Queer nihilism is dedicated to the destruction of the present order, which means—in a way—a dedication to a certain identitarian suicide, an offing of the selves we’ve become under the current social order. For the destruction of the present hegemonic order of things is also the destruction of that which produces the constitutive criteria for queerness, perversion, and abnormality, with its negation comes the negation of the queer itself. This negation is borne “from an entire world of despair” and seeks “to destroy this world, render impotent its apparatuses of reproduction, and bring to an end its sense of the Future.”

In addition to these acts of negation, the texts affiliated with Bash Back! also develop an alternative futural fantasy capable of laying waste to the sense of the future ensured by the admixture of creationism, pro-creationism, and re-creationism. This is why the brand of queer nihilism developed across this corpus should be understood as an active nihilism. It is a nihilism composed of practices of liberatory destruction, advocating a set of destructive acts that work to amplify a deadness (i.e., a lack of vivacity, creativity, experimentation, and invention) ensured by contemporary apparatuses of social reproduction. This queer, active nihilism entails processes of resistant world-making that take place among the walking dead. Queer nihilism is a prefigurative politics intent on building new forms-of-life through practices of negation. Thus, even in a situation wherein the fabric of everyday life is entirely dominated by these merged logics of pro- and re-creationism, there is nevertheless the possibility of creative subversion through which new modes of being can be articulated, through which new collectivities can emerge, through which bonds are forged. On this point, some words from the Mary Nardini gang are appropriate:

In our revolt, we are developing a form of play. These are our experiments with autonomy, power, and force. We haven’t paid for anything we’re wearing and we rarely pay for food. We steal from our jobs and turn tricks to get by. We fuck in public and have never come harder. We swap tips and scams amid gossip and foreplay. We’ve looted the shit out of places and delight in sharing the booty. We wreck things at night and hold hands and skip all the way home. We are ever growing our informal support structures and we’ll always have each other’s backs. In our orgies,
riots, and heists, we are articulating the collectivity of, and deepening, these ruptures.29

This laundry list of practices is, of course, not complete—but it does give some idea of the pragmatics of queer nihilism. These actions undertaken in projects of anarchist queer world-making—theft, vandalism, criminalized sex (it is worth remembering, here, that *Lawrence and Garner vs. Texas* made only domesticated and privatized iterations of queer sex legal) are all part of the practical toolbox; these practices coexist alongside other, more conventional practices of communication, like networks of mutual aid, squatted or otherwise collective housing, and the quotidian enactment of perverse, polyamorous affections, be they carnal, romantic, or otherwise. This ensemble of practices forms the tentacles of a counterassemblage that exists *within and against* apparatuses of reproduction, in the fissures, ruptures, and cracks available in a highly regulated, deeply normative, censorious, and heavily policed present. They are a sort of utopian pragmatics that operates through what has been called *crew logic*—a way of understanding the development of resistant collectivities that is radically estranged from the institutionalized and commodified modes of communal coherence that so profoundly shape gaystream forms-of-life. The writings assembled within *Queer UltraViolence* trace the logic of these utopian pragmatics. If there is a legacy left to contemporary leftist and postleftist queers by the work of Bash Back!, it is the ongoing enactment of these infrapolitical, communitarian actions that, committed to the negation of the neoliberal, homonormative present, help carve out spaces for living otherwise.

**Crew Logic: Cellular Nonstructures of Resistance**

*First things first, find some wild ass queers who just wanna run amok.*

From “I Don’t Bash Back I Shoot First”

What seem to be the nodes around which contemporary gaystream lifestyles cohere? The bar, perhaps; the network of sites associated with bourgeois gay and lesbian domesticity, many of which are niche-marketed to this particular demographic in pursuit of the pink dollar; popular gay and lesbian tourist destinations or events; mass demos and endless social networking memes concerned with limited, polite agitation for institutional inclusion. While it is quite apparent that these nodes are rather pointedly organized around consumptive practices, they are also structured around certain feelings, or at least the *promise* of particular feelings. Comfort, security, safety, contentedness, domestic bliss,
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relaxation—there is something staid, sedentary, and static about these much-sought after, heavily marketed emotions, but also something absolutely unstable insofar as any one of us is able to wrangle and inhabit these feelings for any substantive length of time. This failure to attain the stability offered by the feelings that structure homonormative modes of life points out the idea that an attachment to them operates as a kind of cruel optimism. Lauren Berlant, in her eponymous book, offers up a useful synopsis of cruel optimism, writing that it names a

relation of attachment to compromised conditions of possibility whose realization is discovered either to be impossible, sheer fantasy, or too possible, and toxic. What’s cruel about these attachments, and not merely inconvenient or tragic, is that the subjects who have x in their lives might not well endure the loss of their object/scone of desire, even though its presence threatens their well-being, because whatever the content of the attachment is, the continuity of its form provides something of the continuity of the subject’s sense of what it means to keep on living on and to look forward to being in the world.30

With Berlant in mind, I want to consider the impossibility of contemporary homonormative futural fantasies. What precarious assumptions do they rely upon? Economic stability, for one, in an era of massive recession, ever-increasing debt, and what some might argue is the inevitable and imminent collapse of transnational capital. For another, the likelihood of inhabiting a fulfilling long-term partnership in a milieu wherein erotic engagement and interest is mistakenly conceived as a likely bedfellow to long-term, quotidian commitment. Nevertheless, this gauzy stream of romance with the notion of settling down persists in conditions radically hostile to its realization, the myth of bourgeois queer domesticity is made to seem desirable through its incessant reification, and the production of this lure of security, stability, and comfort in a deeply precarious time produces an ever-more entrenched embrace of the false promises on offer. Minoritarian queers are consistently let down by these promises; their attachment to homonormative futural fantasies, and the structures of feeling engendered by them, is often radically disappointed. This reliable disappointment is precisely that which renders an attachment to this mode of queer optimism, the putting-on of lavender-tinted lenses with which to perceive future possibilities for access to only-barely modified normative conceptions of the “good life,” entirely cruel.

Back! affiliated demos, acts of sabotage, gangs, social scenes, and texts urge a refusal of this cruel optimism, and the concomitant attachment to staid, static, and conservative structures of feeling. Rather than cohering around comfort, they cohere around rage. An embrace of the
promise of comfort is entirely compatible with modes of assimilatory political organization that seek codified inclusion over the long-term, on the level of civic, state, and federal law—that is, to use Deleuzo-Guattarian terminology, a sedimeted, molar form of politics that is resistant to change, and often persists in operation long after it has ceased to contribute to processes of social transformation. Molar politics can be understood as a type of political organization based on identitarian logic, founded in demographic understandings of difference, that utilizes equal rights claims in order to argue for the full civic inclusion of minorities. The Human Rights Campaign is one solid exemplar of a molar political organization, proffering an assimilatory, gaystream political agenda focused exclusively on issues of LGBT institutional inclusion and civil rights. Bash Back! deliberately rejects molar politics, and the comforting myths of inclusivity and tolerance that subend these politics, in favor of a politics of rage.

What is the mode of operation proper to an (anti)politics organized around the feeling of rage? Rather than molar, it is molecular, rather than sedimeted and resistant to change, it is rhizomatic and mutable. Rather than following conventional logics of political organization, it moves by and through the crew, the gang, the pack. Pack logic—as worked out by Deleuze and Guattari in the second plateau of A Thousand Plateaus—is resonant, perhaps even isomorphic with, the notion of crew logic worked out by the anonymous authors of “I-Dont'-Bash-Back-1-Shoot-First.” Packs are distinct kinds of collectivities, insofar as they maintain an intimate relationship with reaction and response on an intuitive, nearly pre-cognitive level. Packs don’t huddle in order to strategize and develop five-year plans; they don’t roundtable ideas and push paperwork through preordained bureaucratic channels; they move, act, and react utilizing only impromptu, often nonverbal processes of consensus; they don’t have laws, but rather operative rules of thumb based on prior experiential knowledges, and these rules of thumb are perennially up for revision, dependant as they are on shifts in milieu and pack constitution. Pack participants roam autonomously sometimes, while at others they gather collectively, the organization of the pack is never fixed, though it can be hierarchical—that is, there can be leaders, but there can never be only one, permanent leader. Packs are feral, untamed, and wild but are, for all that—or rather, precisely because of that—possessed of enormous, non-alienated collective intelligence. This pack logic is that which underlies the concrete processes of crew logic outlined in “I-Dont'-Bash-Back-1 Shoot-First”:

Learn each other’s strengths and interests by hanging out together. Go everywhere with each other. Dance/sex parties like every week. Share your
shit. Free time spent and carved out with each other might be the most important element in starting to speak to each other. Egg each other on, support your friends—slowly, you will grow comfortable acting with each other, and responding to each other’s needs quickly—speaking means a few minutes till acting. Our coming together looks fly, and builds a common feeling along our sense of moving through this world. It’s this endearment to each other that builds trust, that teaches us to say what we need, and get angry enough to go get it. Our bonds put us out of the grasp of people wanting to direct us away from each other, away from our needs and wants, trying to manage, regulate, and make useful our hatred for everything. Instead, this bond puts us in a position to build our own power and autonomy.\textsuperscript{42}

Crew logic, thought of as a process of developing rhizomatic collectivity, develops empathically and on the level of the molecular, through a slow and perhaps imperceptible process of gradually learning each other, which can happen only informally, not through corporatized team-building exercises or retreats. Intuitive collective (anti)political action is based upon this intuitional, empathic learning, what we can think of as a process of becoming integral to one another without arrogation or assimilation, beyond a demand for unitary sameness of desire or goal as well as beyond a banal, surface level valorization of identitarian difference. While an ongoing process, learning each other enables the avoidance of interminable discussion—for instance, the roundtable, consensus-based processing of idealized iterations of democratic governance so heavily fetishized by nonprofit organizations and statist leftists—and instead engenders movement into action—"speaking means a few minutes till acting."\textsuperscript{43} Beyond providing a groundwork for direct action, crew building also redevelops the networks of support that fall out upon estrangement from those networks underwritten by the cruelly optimistic futural fantasies of both hetero- and homonormativity; knowing a queer crew has your back in terms of basic material and emotional existential support allows one to amplify and enhance autonomous potentials otherwise squelched, ignored, or left undeveloped. And best of all, one need not seek out corporate donors or file for 501(c)(3) status in order to propagate this collectivized autonomy.

\textbf{Beyond the Barricades: Building Insurrectionary Queer Histories of the Present}

The task lain out (and at least partially fulfilled) by Bash Back! is the negation of certain hegemonic futural fantasies so that minoritarian queers can have a future. There are certain tactics and rules of thumb that pragmatically guide these efforts in the service of realizing these
futures, tactics and rules of thumb that, together, compose a praxis of queer insurrectionary communication underwritten by a utopian imaginary. This imaginary insists on affirming that lives are possible in the ruptures of contemporary neoimperial capital, and that the forms-of-life developed in these ruptures are also prefigurative ways of working out more just, more autonomous, ultimately more livable queer lives than those gaystream identitarian lifestyle choices offered us.

In developing these prefigurative queer forms-of-life, there is a certain kind of historical sourcework that is developed, one that is very dissimilar from more conventional histories of the development of queer identity or LGBT activism. The point of most conventional historiographies of queer identity chart a (sometimes progressivist, sometimes not) evolution of identity—say, from bugger to pederast to sissy to uranian to homosexual—in such a way that insists on the dissimilarities between these identitarian constructions. Hegemonic historiographies of LGBT activism trace a progressivist, increasingly assimilationist path as well. A typical account begins with Mattachine Society and the Daughters of Bilitis, moves on to tamed accounts of Stonewall that place the integral participation of trans folk and queers of color under erasure, proceeds on through to the formation of the Gay Men’s Health Crisis and ACT UP (often construed as a sort of Ur-moment of direct action wherein bourgeois white gay men marshaled considerable resources to bring pressure to bear on the pharmaceutical industry, the NIH, and local, state, and federal governments) and trucks forward to the legalization of privatized sodomy, the repeal of Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell, and partial state-level gains in relation to employment nondiscrimination, hate crimes legislation, adoption rights, and marriage rights.

The historiographical method that fuels queer anarchist action is estranged, in fact counterposed to, two central components of conventional queer historiography. On the one hand, the project of developing a historical narrative of identitarian vicissitudes, one that renders identity an epistemic object as well as a historical artifact, is refused. On the other, the task of providing a progressivist account of ostensible gains made by and through gaystream LGBT activism is discarded. This kind of queer anarchist historiography undertaken in the service of developing a utopian pragmatics is rather that of constructing what Michel Foucault has termed a “history of the present.”

To write a history of the present is to work with a past that is not artifactual, unified, or sedimented, and thus not objectively knowable and explainable in terms of a fully given, understood, and transparent present. Rather, as Michael Roth summarizes pithily in his important essay on the concept, one writes a history of the present “in order to make that present into a past.” This occurs through uncovering ignored or
devalorized pasts that work to “rupture the present into a future that will leave the very function of history behind it.” Thus, histories of the present work to undo the tendency to cognize history as that to which a person or peoples clings tightly to provide coherent, legible, and reductively sensible understandings of the present. If a history of the present works to rupture that present in order to make metamorphosis and change (rather than linearized understandings of “progress”) possible, then it becomes necessary to concern oneself with the relationship between historical *a priori* and lines of flight. In order to do this, we must consider the relationship between the power/knowledge regimes that give forceful shape, structure, and legibility to an historical moment and those parallel lives shaped by efforts to rework and exceed those regimes, those efforts to make sense otherwise. To uncover those traces is to undertake a genealogical endeavor concerned with producing countermemories that rupture the sures of hegemonic historical accounts.

Histories of the present can be thought of as tools that allow us to move beyond the political impasses of the present moment through documenting, to paraphrase Ernst Bloch, the barriers that have already been broken through. This historiographical method involves not the valorization of famous queer subjects or instances of moderate-left state collusion, but rather the recounting of near-forgotten, no-longer-conscious moments of insurrection. Some of these moments are large-scale, some smaller, more molecular instances of insurrection. They are not organized around the garnering of rights, but rather around articulating the linkages between the violence of the state, the violence of patriarchal rule under regimes of reproductive futurism, and the violence that attends biopolitical regulation of gender nonconformance and queer perversity. Thus, we see in *Queer UltraViolence* the inclusion of a timeline authored by Gender Mutiny, entitled “Hell Hath No Fury: A Chronology of Genderfuck Insurrection.” Transnational in scope, ranging back to Ancient Greece and surging forward to formation of Street Transvestite Action Revolutionaries (STAR) in 1970, this timeline establishes resonances between wildly diverse moments of insurrection that feature, as a primary component, practices of gender transgression deployed as a radical tactic. For instance, take the following entry:

17th century: Urban carnivals throughout Europe integrated cross-dressing and masks as key elements. The festivals were organized by societies of unmarried ‘men’ with trans personalities. They were called the Abbeys of Mistrule, Abbots of Unreason, Mère Folle and her children, etc. During festival, they would “hold court” with mock marriages, and issue coins to the crowds. They made fun of the government, critiqued the clergy, and protested war and the high cost of bread.
Gender transgression, and the enactment of perverse, nonnormative sexualities, are historically important not for what they tell us about the telos of "modern" gay or lesbian identity, but for the ways in which they function as liberatory practices, the ways in which they demonstrate a commitment to uncivil disobedience and an embrace of modes of being at once subversive, threatening, and autonomous, and the ways in which they link into other insurrectionary movements. A radical queer history of the present, then, has a very different sense of political and theoretical legacies, the influences, the inherited conceptual and practical tools, are heteroclitic, ranging well beyond a recuperation of specifically queer pasts and embracing many activists, thinkers, and movements not typically understood as "queer."

For instance, the work of Deleuze and Guattari, the Situationists, the Black Panthers, STAR, FIERCE!, and autonomist feminists affiliated with the Italian workerist movement are much more profoundly influential for the development of contemporary queer utopian pragmatics than, say, the work of Larry Kramer, the Human Rights Campaign, and the National Center for Lesbian Rights. These latter figures and organizations—supernovas within the constellation of dominant narratives of the history of US-based LGBT political organization—have each advocated molar forms of political organization bent on inclusion within otherwise unchanged social and political apparatuses. The former figures and collectivities each, in their own way, contribute to a queer utopic pragmatism through stressing a revolutionary politic committed to tactics of negation in the name of developing liberatory futures, while at the same time emphasizing the importance of a prefigurative politics that makes space for resistant inhabitations of the present. Not all of these collectivities cohere around queer identity; the resonance between them is located in the simultaneity of negation and liberatory invention they advocate for. What is integral for a queer nihilist history of the present is researching the failures, successes, and alternative modes of being developed by thinkers and activists committed to negation, to the overturning of the present order of things, the amplification of conflict and the explosion of the suture that holds together neoliberal, progressivist rewritings of history. We learn from these past insurrectionary efforts and instances of fugitive thought how to move beyond the anaemic impasse of the present, how to destroy in the service of inventing another future, a queerer world.

We may substantively lack hope—conceived as a firm belief in a better future—as we engage this project, but we operate, instead, in a situation of exhilarated despair.

Who needs hope, after all, when you’ve got a crew?
Notes

3. Here, the term “rhizomatically” is taken from the work of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari in A Thousand Plateaus (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1987). For these thinkers, the rhizome is a metaphor developed in order to theorize nonhierarchical, nonofficial modes of political and social organization. These types of organization are characterized by their changeable, nonrigid nature. A rhizomatic organization is not predetermined, but develops organically through the connections and coalitions those beings involved make with one another; it can be ruptured, only to start up again utilizing a former part of a given rhizome. They respond easily to change within a milieu. Rhizomes work through continual generation and continual connection between unlikely participants; they are, in a way, the antithesis of the political party, the labor union, the nuclear family, the bureaucratic workplace, or any other highly stratified, rigidly organized type of political or social organization.
4. Violet Beauregarde is the infamously bratty, demanding, and intensely competitive character from Roald Dahl’s novel-turned-film Charlie and the Chocolate Factory.
6. Ibid., 34.
8. Ibid., 36.
9. Ibid., 39.
10. Ibid., 44.
11. For more on the interrelations between queerness, futurity, and the (false) promise of the good life, see both Sara Ahmed’s The Promise of Happiness (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010) and Lauren Berlant’s Cruel Optimism (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011).
15. Ibid., 31.
16. Ibid., 28.
17. Ibid., 28.
18. Ibid., 10.
19. Ibid., 37.
22. One of the more systematic accounts of this concept is provided in the closing pages of Michel Foucault’s *Society Must Be Defended* (New York: Picador, 2003), the English translation of his lectures at the College de France in the academic year 1975–1976. He makes an initial distinction between biopolitics and disciplinary power, the form of power that targets individual bodies in order to regularize their operations, routinize their habits, and maximize their productive force. This disciplinarization of bodies was enacted through a series of dispositifs (apparatuses) that utilized “a whole system of surveillance, hierarchies, inspections, bookkeeping, and reports” (242); these dispositifs were utilized within, indeed formed the very fabric of, the sorts of disciplinary institutions Foucault spent much of his academic career investigating—prisons, schools, clinics. Much of his conceptual corpus is based upon careful investigation of the material traces of these systems of surveillance, hierarchization, and inspection—legal documents, case reports, and so on. Foucault locates the emergence of disciplinary power at the close of the seventeenth century, marking it as coterminous with the emergence of what we tend to gloss over as “modernity.” He submits that it develops its ganglia throughout the eighteenth century, and dovetails, in the midst of this century, with another emergent technology of power that begins to “[embed] itself in existing disciplinary techniques” (242). This new technology of power, unlike disciplinary power, is “applied not to man-as-body but to the living man, to man-as-living-being, ultimately…to man-as-species” (242). In other words, while disciplinary power is individuating, focused on the regulation of specific bodies, this emergent technology of power is massifying, concerned with populations, the regulation of exponentially increasing human agglomerations, and ultimately with the monitoring, tailoring, and control of the human-as-species. Foucault, in a telling figuration, poses disciplinary power as an “anatomo-politics of the human body” that begins to be gradually combined with this new technology of power that Foucault tentatively submits he “would like to call a ‘biopolitics’ of the human race” (243). Biopolitical regulation, then, refers to operations that mold human bodies and subjectivities with an eye toward massified social regulation.
23. Here, the term *trans* is used intentionally, rather than “transgendered” or “transsexual,” as a deliberately inclusive umbrella term, with the asterisk marking a space of subjective variance and diversity.
26. Ibid., 313.
27. Ibid., 312.
28. Ibid., 313.
33. Ibid., 394.
34. The Mattachine Society and the Daughters of Bilitis were two early and influential, homophile organizations that advocated for gay and lesbian rights in the United States during the 1950s and 1960s. The Gay Men's Health Crisis and ACT UP are later activist organizations born out of the AIDS crisis of the 1980s. For more on these organizations, consult the wide-ranging and engaging history of LGBT political movement in the United States that is Vicki L. Eaklor's *Queer America: A People's LGBT History of the United States* (New York: New Press, 2011).