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Appearing occasionally as a feature of the Forum, "Conference Debates" summarizes the discussions that emerged at recent controversial conference sessions. Panel participants are invited to submit brief accounts of their positions in the light of the ensuing conversation. Panels for "Conference Debates" are selected by the *PMLA* Editorial Board.

The Antisocial Thesis in Queer Theory

MLA Annual Convention

27 December 2005, Washington, DC

Program arranged by the Division on Gay Studies in Language and Literature

The Antisocial Thesis in Queer Theory

"Should a homosexual be a good citizen?" Leo Bersani asked in *Homos* in 1995, expressing a gay skepticism that has dogged every upsurge of gay politics. Bersani's doubt results from his diagnosis of "the rage for respectability . . . in gay life today." He locates that rage in postmodern dissolutions of gay identity, in clamors for gay marriage and gay parenting, in queer antiseptic izings of gay sex. "Useful thought," *Homos* suggests, might result from "questioning the compatibility of homosexuality with civic service." And from questioning more: Bersani makes a claim about social being itself. He hypothesizes "that homo-ness . . . necessitates a massive redefining of relationality," that it instances "a potentially revolutionary inaptitude—perhaps inherent in gay desire—for sociality as it is known." If there is anything "politically indispensable" in homosexuality, it is its "politically unacceptable" opposition to community. Thus *Homos* paradoxically formulates what might be called "the antisocial thesis" in contemporary queer theory.

Bersani's formulation and others like it have inspired a decade of explorations of queer unbelonging. Meanwhile, *pace* scholarship, gay rage for normalizing sociability—to judge by the gay-marriage boom alone—has intensified. Given such divergent developments, I suggested to my colleagues on the MLA's Division Executive Committee for Gay Studies in Language and Literature that stocktaking of the antisocial thesis might be in order. An MLA convention panel in Washington could assess scholarship's gains from the thesis and where the thesis might be headed. It might consider whether arguments such as *Homos*'s justly connect suspicion of gay-rights politics

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https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2006.121.3.819 Published online by Cambridge University Press

with subversion of "sociality as it is known." It could ask if the antisocial thesis hedges its bets (consider Bersani's use of "potentially," "perhaps," and "as it is known" in the citations above). It might probe the adequacy of evidence for the antisocial thesis that is drawn from aesthetic artifacts.

Taking on such questions, Tim Dean, Lee Edelman, Judith Halberstam, and José Muñoz signed on to the panel, and delivered strongly thoughtful statements, in fifteen minutes each, to a rapt overflow audience. I would like, as I am sure others would, to see the papers expanded and to see them garner a volume of responses. I take the opportunity of this postconvention print forum to initiate a few possible responses.

Did panelists overidentify the antisocial thesis with Edelman? Doing so perhaps blinkered speculation and produced unintended confirmations of his position. Disagreeing with Edelman's argument in *No Future*, Muñoz inverts it: queers have nothing but a future (albeit they have past poets prophesying Xanadu). The inversion evokes the nineteenth-century fin de siècle idea that gays have a vocation to redeem their erotic pleasures for everyone's future benefit. Heroic queer responsibility to democratic, anticapitalist, and antiimperialist progress informs the pages of Edward Carpenter, J. A. Symonds, Oscar Wilde, Frederick Rolfe, and Ronald Firbank. The literary-political fantasies of those figures engendered the personae of Roger Casement and T. E. Lawrence. In fiction and in fact, at the head of the previous century, one finds an array of citizen queens. But why must a gay beast of burden perennially undertake the work of anticipatory progress? That is Edelman's forceful question and protest; and Muñoz does not fully escape Edelman's force.

The power of Edelman's perspective partly derives from its bearing on a cult of family in the United States that never questions the value of biological reproduction and of children's sensibilities. To harp on children means to harp on parenthood; both emphases leave nonreproductive eros in the lurch. Apparently, what really matters is, as Edelman has written, "a reality guaranteed, not threatened by time, [but] sustained by the certainty" of immortality. *No Future* rewrites Freud's *The Future of an Illusion*: American family and children, and the nation, have become substitutes for religion's promises. The substitutes share an infantile belief in the life to come. In contrast, homos, Edelman makes one think, are grown-up enough to face mortality.

But just how empirical an American reality is *No Future* in touch with? One of Dean's strong contentions is that Edelman, or the antisocial thesis generally, does not distinguish structural claims about the unconscious from empirical claims about culture. Dean also reminds us that children are perversely constituted, hence queer-friendlier than Edelman admits. Is the reminder a side blow, however, because the version of childhood that bullies American queerdom is not Freudian? Dean's most challenging idea—that the antisocial thesis is really a presocial thesis—cries out for supplementation by Dean's *Beyond Sexuality*, in which Dean argues that the aesthetic realm matches queer eros, opening up new relational forms.

The scholarship of all the panelists traverses the aesthetic realm. That realm, perhaps, is the queerest: relational and arelational, stimulating sociability and political ideas yet largely indifferent to realizing them. In the name of aesthetics, I might most have quarreled with Halberstam's intention to discredit Bersani and Edelman's "negativity" on the grounds of the "excessively small archive" they appeal to—those elite white boys Gide and Proust. Halberstam thinks that Jamaica Kincaid, Valerie Solanas, and *Finding Nemo* constitute the rightly broad archive that vouches for queer eros's political and social efficacy. I think Halberstam's archive is only a demotic countersnobbery for the snobbery she opposes. If, however, one takes her advice to extend the archive, what will become clear is that homosexual eros is not more arelational than its alternative. The era of Carpenter and company includes an unparalleled assault on heterosexual institutions—on marriage and children and their insurance of futures—by heterosexuals. Most literary writing from 1890–1945 does not hold a brief for defenses against time and death. An influential popular archive of fictions thus suggests an undeclared straight-gay alliance, founded in agreement about the inaptitude of all eros for sociality. The alliance, however unacknowledged, has undermined conventional models of politics, and it perhaps can locate itself only in the kind of thought that characterizes what

https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2006.121.3.819 Published online by Cambridge University Press

the philosopher Todd May calls poststructuralist anarchism. By invoking this alliance, I mean to suggest that what is at stake in the antisocial thesis in queer theory is of interest not only to homos.

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Antagonism, Negativity, and the Subject of Queer Theory

Last December's MLA panel on the "antisocial thesis in queer theory" featured heated debate about the logic of (hetero)sexual ideology as it shapes our pervasive understandings of politics, temporality, and social relations.[1] Taking as points of reference Leo Bersani's foundational analysis of sexuality's inherent antipastoralism (see *The Freudian Body* and *Homos*) and my own, more recent contribution to the field, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive*, this panel brought together advocates of political negativity (Judith Halberstam and me) and those promoting a practice they defined, instead, as queer utopianism (José Muñoz and Tim Dean). More than a dust-up in the academic enclave allotted to queer theory, this discussion cut to the very core of our profession's relation to politics, history, and the humanistic subject. Though never explicitly framed as such, one question subtended the debate: do our narratives of political efficacy, historicist analysis, and pedagogical practice naturalize what *No Future* designates as "reproductive futurism," thus compelling us all, regardless of political affiliation or critical method, to prostrate ourselves at the altar of what I propose to call the Futurch?

Since spatial limitations preclude my rehearsing and responding to each of the papers, I'll dispense with the queer utopians at once to attend, instead, to the issue I take with my compatriot in negativity—that I take, more precisely, with Judith Halberstam's *account* of negativity. To dispense with the queer utopians, though, is not to dismiss their position but simply to suggest that I've already addressed that position in *No Future* itself. Neither liberal inclusionism, with its ultimate faith in rational comprehension, nor the redemptive hope of producing brave new social collectivities can escape the insistence of the antisocial in social organization. If Freud observes of psychic structures that anxiety strikes only what's organized, we must note as well that organization depends on internal antagonism, on the self-constituting tension of negativity that forms of liberal utopianism, oblivious to their own particular ways of reproducing reproductive futurism, fittingly locate *nowhere*. Thus, proponents of liberal utopianism fail to recognize what Adorno put so well: "Society stays alive, not despite its antagonism, but by means of it" (320). Happy to earn their applause, instead, by putting the puppet of humanism through its passion play once again, they lead it in a hymn to the Futurch even while dressed in heretical drag. Delightfully drugged by the harmony, the freedom from harm, that their harmonies promise, they induce us all to nod along, persuaded that we, like their puppet, on which most humanities teaching depends, shall also eventually overcome, for knowledge, understanding, and progress must, in the fullness of time, set us free.

Judith Halberstam, to her credit, won't buy it. Colleague in arms, she joins me in responding to sociality's self-resistance, to its structurally determinative violence, and so to the inescapable antagonism that no utopianism transcends. In her paper for our MLA panel, as indeed throughout her career, the polemical energy of Halberstam's work refuses the norms that perpetuate the "comfort zone" of dominant cultural forces. Instead, she affirms an angry, uncivil "politics of negativity"—a politics in which what troubles me isn't its negativity but its affirmation.

Take, for example, her invective against what she sweepingly asserts is the "gay male" archive's "neat, clever, chiasmic, punning emphasis on style." Putting aside the considerable emphasis on style that informs her own writing, putting aside the conservative, homophobic agenda that tends to lurk behind most modern denigrations of "style," putting aside the reductive identitarianism of positing a single, coherent "gay male archive," we might ask what policing style has to do with the "politics of negativity." Or rather, and here's the important point: isn't such a policing of style, even

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