

## A Queer State of Existence: No Future, No Time

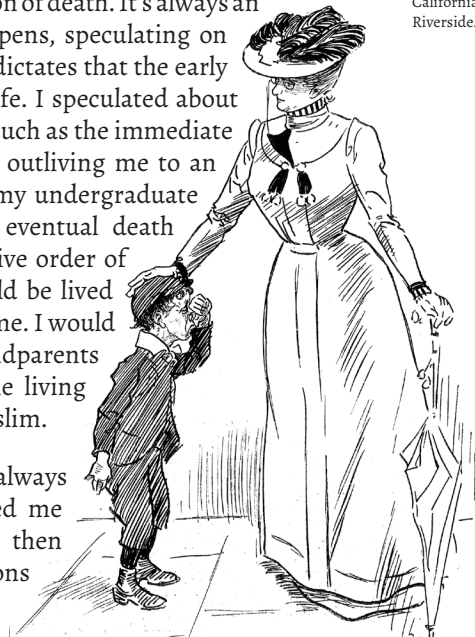
Jan Rodil

I am probably going to die in the next few years, aren't I?"

The one question that I always often pop with an air of irony and stilted seriousness is the question of death. It's always an internal spectacle when it happens, speculating on dying before as the normative dictates that the early 20s is the beginning of adult life. I speculated about my death through conjectures such as the immediate older generation of my family outliving me to an eventual death not long after my undergraduate degree. I always framed my eventual death as one that resists the normative order of death. My entire lifespan would be lived entirely within my Aunt's lifetime. I would likely die even before my grandparents passed, and the chances of me living through a graduate degree are slim.

Questions of health always percolated as friends reassured me that I had a bright future. I then realized, putting bodily functions

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My da, he's... old!

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aside, there was something queer about thinking of the inevitability of death in such an absolute way. As a queer, gay Filipino man living in Riverside, California with career prospects stereotypically dim and a family that is in continual denial that their oldest son may not be able to support them; one can say that my entire existence is predisposed to a continual resistance to normative time. In an age where the future is in doubt, where Trumpian discourses are at root presupposing both a future of despair and hope, it's no surprise that it's nothing but the dogma of the script of normative time. But I live in queer time, a seeming errata of temporality that hegemonic language cannot articulate. As a gay man, I knew that my existence would not be subscribed to a script, but the extent of queer time that I lived in would not be realized until I became comfortable in discussing the notions of an early death.

Birth.

Childhood.

Adolescence.

Adulthood.

Death.

Clichéd, but these are the concepts that are ingrained as the script of human time. Lee Edelman identifies this, in the context of the child as the figure of the future, as “the absolute value of reproductive futurism”.<sup>1</sup> I cannot reproduce, nor do I hold any interest in rearing children. Additionally, the chances of my being in a relationship in politically strained times are slim. The politics of respectability are



1. Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004), p.3.

One day our Charlie will grow up to  
condescend to women of his own!

abound in discourses over what it means to be queer. There are fears in which queer is becoming a monolithic form of convergence, one in which queer is no longer diverse. A traverse through the other side of the political binary finds that the deep-seated rage against queerness is ever present. Thus, I turn to what Edelman terms as the death drive to begin to articulate the particular kind of queerness that I exist in.

Of course, I do not mean to suppose that queerness leads to an early death (if queerness is death, then arguably so can immortality). However, the state of being queer can almost feel like death in an era of constant resistance and surveillance, in which the fear of a queer existence lodges the constant question of survival. Within the constancy of survival and surveillance is the impulse of the death drive, in which I, as a queer subject, am on borrowed time and must survive insofar as the surveillance state wills it. Edelman defines this death drive as “the inarticulable surplus that dismantles the subject from within”.<sup>2</sup> What I dismantle then is heteronormative time, the very subject which reproduces a false futurism that begets false reassurance. The impulse is internal, taken from statements of surveillance that remind us to ‘set ourselves straight’ lest we risk punishment for existing. Thus, the death drive is a step further than mere rebellion against the subject. It is the fundamental resistance of the normative insofar as we work within the framework of the heteronormative subject. The trappings of Edelman’s definition of the death drive is that the queer agent works from within the heteronormative fortress. Could the queer agent be working outside of the confines of heteronormativity’s impulse to impose order? Absolutely, but even working from the outside, it is a double bind of constant re-negotiations of refusing normative futurism. It’s tempting to fall into the trap of believing in the framework, but to negotiate what is queer is to reject the dogma of such a script.

2. Edelman, *No Future*, p.9.

Children are a tempting hope. As I thought of Edelman’s polemic work on queer theory as I percolated where I stand on the eventual fate of my life, I began to understand for a brief moment the temptation to rear children. With the biological and financial implications in mind, children are a legacy born out of human flesh. We are survived by our children in the often called forth idiomatic

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phrase that our essences live in the flesh and blood that we create. The concept of adoption makes percolating on the blood ties of children more difficult, but the intention is the same. In children, we see our futures continued, and the possibility of a future and a potential immortality of memory. Yet, this immortality through child-rearing is an illusion. This is no more encapsulated when Edelman writes:

*That future is nothing but kid stuff, reborn each day to screen out the grave that gapes from within the lifeless letter, luring us into, ensnaring us in, reality's gossamer web. Those queered by the social order that projects its death drive onto them are no doubt positioned as well to recognize the irreducibility of that fantasy and the cost of construing it as contingent to the logic of social organization as such.<sup>3</sup>*

3. Edelman, *No Future*, p.30.

There is an eeriness to Edelman's configuration of hopelessness, especially of a future consigned to innocence. Yet, that is precisely what the heteronormative functions as, it is indeed the performance of innocence in which it looks towards the future with the child as its articulated image of its sign. Even in my family life in a largely Filipino household, kid stuff is the script that is followed faithfully. Grandfather always reassured me that not only would I get a girlfriend, my eventual goal was to indeed, perform the kid stuff, and turn my Father into a new Grandfather and so on and so forth. It is a crude way to articulate such a crude cycle, but for a script so ingrained in performance, it is indeed a fantasy that is irreducible. The heteronormative is complex precisely because it seeks a future that knows it is temporary. The kid stuff lasts for only as long as the child lives and is able to rear their children. For so long as reproductive futurism is performed, there is no death drive to speak of. This hope of the lack of a death drive is the fundamental drive that not only my family has, but any family seeking to continue a legacy. One can also think historically as well, tracing reproductive futurism's impulses through the structure of the royal family and how they conduct the process of dictating a heir to the creation of family businesses and their respective importance of the child of the shop owner to maintain the business. A future exists in heteronormativity, but it is dictated for you before you were even born.

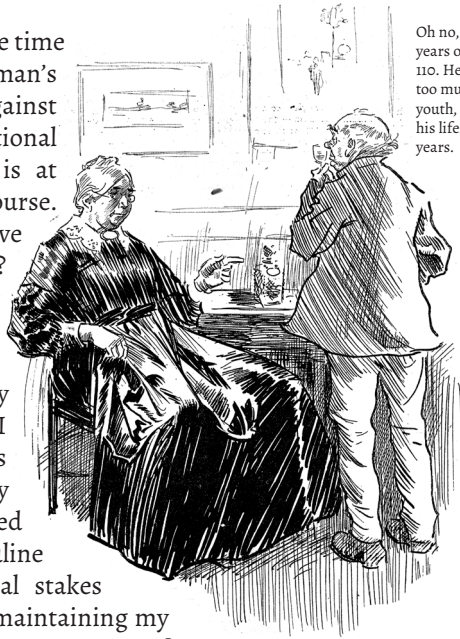
What happens when normative time is disrupted by a queer man? Edelman's theoretical praxis is resistance against the child, but I posit an additional dimension in which the child is at the center of this queer discourse.

What happens when normative time is disrupted by the child?

And if that child happens to be queer, gay, and Filipino? I, as the child, seem to represent the futurisms that dictate my family's survival in the world. I become the man of the house as my grandfather would constantly dictate for me. What appeared to be a construction of masculine dominance turned into financial stakes and the unsaid responsibility of maintaining my family's welfare when my grandparents are to face the inevitable fate of death. Before I could articulate my queerness,

I was groomed to be heteronormative from the very beginning. In my particular case, I was raised to be a good Catholic boy who knew what his gender role was. I was to be strong, I was to make good money for my family and that my actions are to remain honorable to prevent embarrassment. The greatest irony in this process was in my articulation of my queerness in the realization that I was gay. I realized that even in heteronormativity, I had 'no future' in which to speak of. That future belonged to my grandparents, my stewards. What stake I had in building my future was lost before I was born. Before I knew it, the next 20 years of my life seemed to be planned at age 10.

In a place like California, especially in the trenches of the Inland Empire, the articulation of a queer identity is both engendering a threat and yet at the same time also welcoming. In immigrant communities, the pressure to preserve a future is paramount to continued survival. My articulation of queerness to my family,



Oh no, I'm 112 years old and he's 110. He smoked too much in his youth, cut back his lifespan by two years.

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who have more fiscal concerns in their eyes and are also more than willing to toe the line of the normative, would prove to be a null value. As I played a pretend game for my family to prove my straightness, it did not feel genuine. It was not real. Thus, a shift to a queer state of existence was gradual. It was in that painful transition process was where I realized that I could not give my family the future that they so desired. I could not bear children, I would not marry a woman, and nor would I live out their irreducible fantasies of being a patriarch that would carry forth their legacy. In their eyes, I had no future to which they could stake survival in. However, this is a double bind. As I mentioned earlier, I saw no future in heteronormativity, as the future that was laid out for me prior to my articulation and realization of queerness was no future either. What good would a future hold for me if all it was controlled by intricately by a family in which the survival of their legacy was at stake?



I survive through resistance, active and passive. I survive despite my family's hatred and distrust toward queer folk through learning to re-negotiate with their desires, over and over. This negotiation came with the mutual realization in which the futures that we hold are not intimately tied to each other. At the moment I hit queer time, in which I saw that as the moment where I would begin to realize that my grandfather's constant motion towards the heteronormative was folly in my eyes. The script that I was bound to had been broken. I was free to write my own, queer script, and the options were both limitless and limited. I could fall in love with a gay man and forget about my old existence, but that brushes up against the reality of the death drive. The drive of limitless optimism is broached by that time-old realization, death. However, death itself



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also has a script, being the last stage in the human timeline. Death's heteronormative dogma is tied to the notions of a permanent end of a legacy of the individuated person. To put it in other terms, the heteronormative dogma of death is the omniscient threat of death that drives the impulse towards reproductive futurism. Of course, I exist in resistance to that dogma and partake in the death drive. Yet I do not see that death drive as the hopelessness of being queer. I find a queer optimism in the drive, a strange liberation in constantly asking myself the possibility of an early death.

Under the auspices of queer time, the moment of death does not matter. Whatever timeline that I lived no longer applied to where I stand. I realized queerness on the still end of adolescence, but I had the option to either follow dogma or to write my own script at the beginning of my college career. In jest, I followed the script by having the privilege to go to my local University of California campus. However, unfortunate habits took the best of me as I lived out my college career. It's not queerness that will kill me, it is a can of Spam every week served warmly by my controlling but well-meaning Lola. It is sedentary nights in a Scottish-themed but unkempt apartment whose rates are a steal in the local area. It is the inability to maintain a consistency in diet, eating only once in some days but gorging out in others when I'm overtaken by college-caused sorrow. That's not even getting into a lifestyle largely caused by living in a sedentary Filipino household. If romance wasn't in my available toolset to seek acceptance from my family, it would be through food.

I am a diabetic man and no amount of sticking to the script would be able to save me from my eventual fate. My eventual worldview is largely fatalistic and can be dangerous to its applications on queer theory, but the possibility of an early death is indeed real. If food does not kill me, then politics will. If politics does not kill me, then anxiety will. If anxiety does not, then living will kill me. Thus, the only possibility in which I could articulate my existence was through a queer state. My death may well be premature, but there is something queer, something peculiar, about being the subject of the time-old statement: he had so much to live for.