



Jordan (Pamela Rooke) outside the SEX shop owned by Vivienne Westwood and Malcolm McLaren.
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Do You Want Queer Theory (or Do You Want the Truth)? Intersections of Punk and Queer in the 1970s

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In a May 11, 1978, interview on NBC television's late-night talk show *Tomorrow*, the punk poet Patti Smith assured her interviewer, Tom Snyder, that the kids were alright. Smith—whose first single, “Hey Joe/Piss Factory,” had been financed by her friend and former lover, Robert Mapplethorpe—told Snyder:

I want the future to be like, I mean, I just want it to be like an open space for children. I mean, for me the future is children, and I feel like, you know, when I was younger first I wanted to be a missionary, then I wanted to be a schoolteacher, it's like, you know, I couldn't, I couldn't, uh, get through all the dogma, and I couldn't really integrate all of the rules and regulations of those professions into like my lifestyle and into the, into the generation that I was part of. And the really great thing about, umm, doing the work that I'm doing now, I have like all the ideals that I ever had to like communicate, you know, to, to, to children, or to people in general, to everybody, and to communicate with my creator, I, I can do everything all the perverse ends of it, and also, you know, all the innocence. It's all inherent in the form that I'm doing.¹

In 1978, Snyder was one of the few cultural arbiters offering a platform to the insolent and snotty punk rockers who had sprung themselves on a surprised public in the

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preceding years. One invited punk set fire to a car live in Snyder's studio, but that stunt was hardly as jolting as Smith's unexpected paean to family values. The punk diva's statement seems to confirm the ideological hold of what the queer theorist Lee Edelman calls "reproductive futurity" even among radical misfits and rebels.² Scholars such as Edelman and Lauren Berlant have called attention to the role that reproductive futurity plays in the infantilization of politics, turning citizenship, as Berlant puts it, into something "made of and for children."³ Because both the nation and its future belong to the child, who is never grown, we are led to believe that we must sacrifice our adult needs and desires on the altar of perpetual infancy. Edelman, in his widely discussed book *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive*, identified this ideology of reproductive futurity as specifically antiqueer and called on queers to "accede" to our status as a flagrant threat to the future as "an open space for children," a future that excludes those who are deliberately nonreproductive. Identifying the "homosexual" with the "death drive"—that is, with the principle that is antagonistic to the very idea of society, politics, or the future—Edelman's book serves ultimately as a polemic against increasingly popular forms of lesbian and gay normativity such as marriage, parenting, and military service.

Edelman's polemic extends and expands on an older strand of gay male critique that is sometimes referred to as "antisocial" or "antirelational," a project with roots in the gay liberationist writings of Guy Hocquenghem in the 1970s.⁴ The antirelational thesis locates the power of sexuality in its negativity rather than in any alternative community it may give rise to. As Hocquenghem argued in *Homosexual Desire*, which was first published in France in 1972, "the gay movement is thus not seeking recognition as a new political power on par with others; its own existence contradicts the system of political thought, because it relates to a different problematic."⁵ In a similar vein, Leo Bersani noted in 1987 that "to want sex with another man is not exactly a credential for political radicalism," and instead valorized homosexuality as an example of "the inestimable value of sex as—at least in certain of its ineradicable aspects—anticommunal, antiegalitarian, antinurturing, antiloving."⁶ Tactically embracing the seemingly homophobic charge that "homosexual desire" subverts the reproduction of the social order, Hocquenghem and Bersani propose what one of Edelman's critics has labeled a "queer post-politics."⁷ Rejecting proposals to articulate alternative models of queer sociality, community, and utopia, these theorists of antirelationality aim to liberate queers from the normalizing effects of all such progressive and inclusionary ambitions and to instead proclaim a queer radicalism located outside politics as conventionally conceived, perhaps even outside of politics. As Edelman has put it: "Not that we are, or ever could be, outside the Symbolic ourselves but we can, nonetheless, make the choice to accede to our cultural production as figures—*within* the dominant logic of narrative, *within* Symbolic reality—for the dismantling of such a logic and thus for the death drive it harbors within."⁸

In the light of this approach, Patti Smith's comment to Snyder may seem so conventional as to preclude or, at the very least, warn against any retrospective affiliation between punk and queer feelings. Such a precluded affiliation would have less to do with obvious differences in gender, sexual orientation, or parental status than with Smith's choice to figure her rebellion into the dominant logic of symbolic reality. Despite her professed inability to fit into "the dogma" and "the rules" of society, Smith represents her outsidership as even more faithful to the fantasy of reproductive futurity than a conventional career, such as that of a missionary or schoolteacher, would have been. Retaining "all the ideals that I ever had," Smith finds in punk rock and countercultural poetry precisely the connection that permits her to speak *to*—and perhaps even *through* and *for*—children.

Although Smith's utopian views on reproductive futurity are hardly unusual in themselves, they are startling coming from her. Like Mapplethorpe, Smith was a gifted *provocateuse* and malcontent whose lyrics and stage presence rejected both mainstream and countercultural stereotypes of femininity. On her single "Hey Joe" (1974), Smith fantasized about "Patty Hearst . . . standing there in front of the Symbionese Liberation Army flag with your legs spread . . . wondering will you get it every night from a black revolutionary man and his women." On the single's flip side, "Piss Factory," she sang about wiling away the time on a factory line and thinking that she "would rather smell the way boys smell . . . that odor rising roses and ammonia, and way their dicks droop like lilacs. . . . But no I got, I got pink clammy lady in my nostril." Such deviant and aggressive thoughts did not add up, in Smith's own view, to a thoroughgoing antisocial negativity. On Snyder's couch, Smith's rage, perversion and wild-child persona would paradoxically form the most pure and innocent grounds for preserving the future as "an open space for children." Rather than challenge reproductive futurity, then, punk rebellion could seem to confirm and sustain it.

Smith is an interesting figure with which to open an exploration of the affinities and discontinuities between punk and queer feelings. I argue that Smith produces both punk and queer affect *through* her perverse narration of reproductive futurity, not despite it. Indeed, the spirit Smith embodies is ultimately one that is inhospitable to the heteronormativity queer theorists censure. In embracing naive futurity, Smith remakes the subject position of "antisocial rebel" and its associated death drive; and, rather than accept the guilt with which the pervert and the rebel are saddled by the social order, she asserts her radical innocence. The innocence Smith extols cannot be fully subsumed into the reproductive futurity that Edelman and others lament, for what is most remarkable about Smith's comment is her suggestion that childlike innocence can be "inherent in the form" of adult perversity. She suggests that, once one abandons the hope of following all the rules and regulations of straight society, the future becomes an open *space* rather than the disciplinary, delayed *temporality* of generational, Oedipal succession. In this heterotopic space

of punk feelings, child and adult, pervert and innocent encounter and communicate back and forth continuously. The future is not a disciplinary ideal for Smith so much as it is that most queer of spatial tropes, an ambience.

Studies of queer temporality have reached a new threshold with recent books and essays by Edelman, Judith Halberstam, and Elizabeth Freeman, among others, as well as the appearance of special issues on the topic in journals such as *GLQ* and the present issue of *Radical History Review*.⁹ In this essay, I seek to contribute to this conversation through a discussion of one historical intersection or switch point between queer and other subjects: the punk moment of the mid- to late 1970s. At stake in such a crossing of the subject of queer studies is a form of political work that I will associate, following Edelman, with the Lacanian trope of the *sinthome*.¹⁰ Looking back to the cultural politics of the 1970s from which both antirelational theory and punk rock originate, I employ a reading of punk to qualify some of the claims made on exclusive behalf of queer antirelationality. I argue that the figure through which the dismantling of the social is narrated—in a word, the *sinthome*—is more historically multiform and thus both more dangerous and more useful than Edelman's limning of "sinthomosexuality" might suggest.

The critique of reproductive futurity connects compulsory heterosexuality and parenthood with a future-oriented, progressive politics. If one rejects the former, antirelational theory suggests, one must reject the other. This argument has raised a host of objections from within queer studies. Does politics as such require a utopian future orientation that is necessarily disciplined by the tyrannical obligation to reproduce the social? Halberstam, in one published forum on the question, has complained that antirelational theorists "cast material political concerns as crude and pedestrian," leaving little room, in their rush to critique dominant modes of conceptualizing politics, for subaltern and resistant modes of political engagement. She calls for a more expansive archive that includes a robust range of punk, feminist, antiracist, and postcolonial negativities that also subvert the fantasy of reproductive futurity and its sanctified innocent child.¹¹ Giving up on the future, politics, or both, critics argue, might actually serve a symbolic order if it subsumes the subject that much more securely in the social totality.

This debate about the prospects of a political negativity have understandably gravitated toward a discussion by Edelman, Halberstam, and José Esteban Muñoz, among others, over a series of felt echoes between queer theory and punk rock. But what does punk have to do with either the future or with politics? To answer this question, I want to pursue Halberstam's suggestion that the antirelational call to "accede to our cultural production as figures . . . for the death drive" borrows significant aspects of its affective appeal from punk subcultural formations. On the surface, this suggestion might appear implausible. In one presentation of this essay, a respondent politely inquired into my pursuit of "archival specters" such as the Smith interview, asking whether or not there was a risk of both anachronism and a loss of

focus in the pursuit of such an expansive historical archive. I hope to answer such doubts by hewing to a fairly specific switch point between punk and queer: the queer content of the punk moment of the mid- to late 1970s and its postpunk aftermath. My principle contention, following Halberstam's lead, will be that the antisociality of punk subculture, while not identical to the antisociality of deviant sexuality, nonetheless emerged within a context in which queer and punk affect were continuously and productively confused and conflated by both outsiders and participants. It is the fundamental and productive misprision between punk and queer, even their potential chiasmus, that constitutes grounds for moving queer politics beyond the "binary stalemate" of having to choose between resisting the hegemonic fantasy of the homosexual or acceding to it.¹²

No Future . . . for You!

A plausible starting point for exploring the relationship between punk and queer is the shared vocabulary of "rough trade," the phrase denoting the easily recognized casual and sometimes commoditized sexual exchanges found in both subcultures. In Rob Young's excellent new history of the germinal punk music store and record label Rough Trade, he reprints a cartoon that economically summarizes that relation. In it, a cherubic, London-born Geoff Travis hitching through North America pauses to think: "Toronto was pretty cool . . . that band 'Rough Trade' must know the phrase means gay hustlers. That's even trashier than 'Velvet Underground.'" ¹³ This particular origin story for the label and store's name begs the question: does its founder Travis know that the same etymology of the phrase *rough trade* is also true of the word *punk*? As James Chance bluntly informs viewers of Don Letts's recent documentary *Punk: Attitude* (2003), "originally punk meant, you know, a guy in prison who got fucked up the ass. And that's still what it means to people in prison."¹⁴ At one level, then, queer is to punk as john is to hustler, with both words referencing an established if underground economy of sexual favors and exchanges between men. That Chance could announce his definition as a ribald revelation suggests, however, that the subterranean linkages between punk and queer are as frequently disavowed as they are recognized. This suggests that alongside the "frozen dialectic" between black and white culture that Dick Hebdige famously noticed in British punk, there is also a less frequently noticed but equally furtive set of transactions between queer and punk that is hidden, like Poe's purloined letter, in plain sight.¹⁵

Punk may be literally impossible to imagine without gender and sexual dissidence. But the secret history, as Chance's comment suggests, also records a history of antagonisms between punk attitude and a male homosexual desire variously cast as predatory and pitiable. In a recent interview, for example, the journalist and author Jon Savage responded to the query about whether or not punk was "a sexy time" by arguing, "No. I thought punk was quite puritan, really. I didn't have a very good time during punk. I spent a lot of time feeling I was worthless . . . it still wasn't

great to be gay in the late Seventies.”¹⁶ The phrasing of the question, and the whiff of pathos in Savage’s response, suggests both a queer eagerness to identify with punk, as well as the hostility with which this desire was frequently met. We might consider as another example of this “53rd and 3rd” (1976) by the New York punk rockers the Ramones, in which Dee Dee Ramone recounts his hustling days at that notorious intersection on the east side of Manhattan and asks his audience, “Don’t it make you feel sick?”¹⁷ That line, ironically, is rhymed with “You’re the one they never pick,” suggesting Ramone’s doubled abjection of failing even at being rough trade. But by contrast, Cynthia Fuchs, Mary Kearney, and Halberstam have argued that the affinities between lesbian, feminist, trans, and gay people and the punk subculture was immediate, definitive, and far more enduring.¹⁸

In a 2006 exchange with Edelman, Halberstam observed that his provocative title, *No Future*, was also the original title for the 1977 Sex Pistols’ single, the one known more commonly today as “God Save the Queen.” In the chorus to that song, the band front man, Johnny Rotten, snarled that there was “no future in England’s dreaming,” a line from which Savage drew the title for his celebrated history of British punk.¹⁹ In Halberstam’s opinion, Edelman’s queer polemic does not stand up well in light of its unacknowledged punk predecessor. “While the Sex Pistols used the refrain ‘no future’ to reject a formulaic union of nation, monarchy, and fantasy,” she argues, “Edelman tends to cast material political concerns as crude and pedestrian, as already a part of the conjuring of futurity that his project must foreclose.”²⁰ Edelman, like Oscar Wilde with his rent boys, stands accused of using punks and then snubbing them as “crude and pedestrian,” like the waiter whom Wilde famously, at his trial, denied kissing, dismissing him as “peculiarly plain” and “unfortunately, extremely ugly.”²¹

Halberstam’s comparison between the political stakes of “No Future” 1977 versus *No Future* 2004 bears some discussion. While rock stars may seem unlikely objects on which to pin our hopes for the expression of material political concerns, historians like Savage and Greil Marcus have situated “God Save the Queen” in a context of political, economic, and cultural crisis, one in which both conventional politics and the countercultural ethos of the sixties appeared exhausted and a time during which the anarchic antipolitics of punk therefore signaled something new.²² Marcus in particular persuasively susses out the resonances, real and feigned, between anarchism proper and the anarchist poses and iconography of punk shock tactics. The offensive gestures of bands such as the Sex Pistols, the Clash, and Siouxsie and the Banshees, documented in films like Don Letts’s *The Punk Rock Movie* (1978) and Julien Temple’s *The Filth and the Fury* (2000), sometimes communicated a rejection of political action as traditionally conceived on the left. But their very popularity inspired attempts, by both the Right and the Left, to appropriate punk attitude for political purposes. Paul Gilroy has given perhaps the definitive account of the contradictions involved in such attempts to incorporate punk, reggae, dance-

hall, dub, and other genres associated with alterity into a new cultural front in the late 1970s.²³ The absence of formal political incorporation, Gilroy notes, does not immediately negate the possibility of a political reception or deployment.

Furthermore, cultural critiques of the political meanings ascribed to punk often elide the class context of British punk, a component of the subculture that is often missed in the United States where the *sub* in *subculture* seems to stand more often for “suburban” than “subaltern” and where punk is typically read as a mode of middle-class youth alienation. The submerged context of class struggle for British punk, however, comes to the fore in *The Filth and the Fury*'s astonishing footage of Rotten, Sid Vicious, and their bandmates smiling and serving cake to the children of striking firemen in Huddersfield, England, in 1977. Amid the moral panic, physical assaults, and public bans that had followed their incendiary early performances and record releases, the Sex Pistols played a Christmas benefit for the strikers and families. In the film, the Pistols are seen smearing themselves and the children with cake, and then performing, almost unbelievably, “Bodies” — an intensely graphic song about an illegal abortion — as the children and their parents bop around deliriously. Such a truly shocking conflation of the sentimental and the obscene, the perverse and the innocent, produced a moment of saturnalia that served as an outright rejection of the manufactured consensual fantasy of the queen's jubilee year. That moment was political in spite of, or even because of, the absence of a formalized politics among the callow, gangly lads that the pop Svengali Malcolm McLaren had cannily spun into cultural terrorists. Like Patti Smith, the Pistols in Huddersfield did not outright reject the mainstream scenarios of family, child rearing, and working-class politics. Rather, they insinuated themselves into the very space that their rebellious stance ostensibly foreclosed to them. In both cases, Smith's and that of the Pistols, there is a countersymbolic charge to such a performative enactment that cannot simply be subsumed as antisocial behavior.

For Edelman, however, such a countersymbolic charge goes mostly unappreciated. Edelman has objected that the Pistols' “God Save the Queen” “does not really dissent from reproductive futurism,” and he has argued that punk rebellion is merely caught up in the Oedipal dynamic of the young claiming the future from their corrupt and complicit elders: “No future . . . for you!” Instead of with the *sinthome*, Edelman associates punk anarchy with the derisive category of kitsch, ever the mandarin's term for that which the masses take seriously but which is intellectually or politically puerile. “Taken as political statement,” Edelman argues, “God Save the Queen” is “little more than Oedipal kitsch. For violence, shock, assassination, and rage aren't negative or radical in themselves.” While Edelman concedes that “punk negativity” may succeed “on the level of style,” he takes such success to reinforce rather than undermine his position on the grounds that stylistic revolt is best achievable through the “chiasmic inversions” of his erudite polemic. Edelman warrants that the punks — and Halberstam in her critique — have confused

“the abiding negativity that accounts for political negativism with the simpler act of negating particular political positions.” We cannot preserve its negativity by making “the swing of the hammer an end in itself,” as Edelman puts it, but only if we “face up to political antagonism with the negativity of critical thought.”²⁴ Johnny Rotten, meet Theodor Adorno.

Punk as a mode of revolt indeed begins in fairly blunt affects such as stropiness and rage. But to reduce its message to the negation of particular political positions (such as repudiating the queen’s jubilee) means that Edelman accounts for the Pistols’ song only at the level of the lyrics and neglects a consideration of punk in the context of performance. This is a shame, as punk performers are highly cognizant of precisely the challenge of abiding negativism that Edelman raises. In the case of the Pistols, this challenge emerges at least in part from the original negation of musical skill and technical virtuosity that had occasioned punk’s three-chord breakthroughs in the mid-1970s. Letts’s documentary *Punk: Attitude* reflects retrospectively on the problematic prospect of a virtuoso punk rebellion. If punk rock dissented in part by rejecting musical virtuosity for pure attitude and ecstatic amateurism, how precisely could it sustain that stance? The more committed to punk one was, the quicker one acquired precisely the expressive fluency the genre ostensibly disdains. Either that, or one transforms into a cynical parody of adolescent fumbling such as that exhibited by former Bromley Contingent member Billy Idol, the bottle blond who transformed Vicious’s wild snarl into the knowing smirk of eighties megastardom. Punk, like adolescence, quickly becomes its own archival specter, and for many purists, the moment was over almost as soon as the first punk singles were released. Simon Reynolds explores the extremely fruitful terrain of “postpunk” music (some of which preceded punk proper, or developed adjacent to it) that rose to prominence almost as soon as the style of punk had congealed into a recognizable, repeatable form.²⁵ The challenge of an abiding negativism, whether or not one agrees with the various solutions proposed, is a core feature of punk performance. Punk and postpunk styles are anything but the static, generational revolt caricatured by Edelman’s analysis. The punk spirit cannot be decoded from a single lyric, song, or band, no matter how iconic the text or performer seems to be.

Part of this spirit, of course, is the traceable charge of erotic frisson detectable in much of the seemingly hostile overlap between punks and queers, which are often mirrored in the social and economic dynamics that crystallize the relationship between john and hustler. Those dynamics derive from a history of attitudes toward male homosexuality; but it strikes me that 1970s punk represents the moment at which those specifically male homosexual associations lose their exclusivity and punk becomes a role and an affect accessible to people within a range of gendered embodiments who deploy punk for a variety of erotic, aesthetic, and political purposes. The asymmetric, hostile, and desirous relations preserved in punk from the dynamics of rough trade do not always produce an open, inclusive punk commu-

nity. But the forms of exclusivity punk has historically produced tend to fail abjectly at the reproduction of hegemonic and identitarian logics, even when they seek to engage in it.

For this reason it may prove useful to acknowledge and meditate further on the historical switch points between punk and queer. Let me offer two that would bear a more extensive analysis than I have space for here: a 1975 photo session of the Sex Pistols done by Peter Christopherson, a member of the legendary performance art and music group Throbbing Gristle, and Derek Jarman's 1977 film *Jubilee*. Christopherson, whose early work, by his own description, was "of white trash kids, a bit like Larry Clark's work," was contracted in the summer of 1975 by McLaren to photograph the Sex Pistols. This was at a time when McLaren and his partner, Vivienne Westwood, ran a shop called SEX on Kings Road in London that featured men's and women's street fashions inspired by S-M, gay porn, and various fetishes, like bondage trousers, that were both intentionally shocking and knowingly Warholian. But wearing the iconography or style of the homosexual—such as the gay cowboy T-shirts the Pistols would sometimes sport in concert—was apparently not the same thing as subjecting oneself to the stigma of being perceived as homosexual, or willingly identified as "gay for pay." When Christopherson posed the Pistols to resemble rent boys in a YMCA toilet, McLaren was apparently shocked and threatened by the explicitly homoerotic images, and he turned down the pictures.²⁶ The photos nevertheless reside as one archival switch point between the queer and punk seventies.

Similarly, Jarman's *Jubilee* is considered by some the first punk movie, and to make it he recruited a number of nonprofessional actors from the punk scene, including Jordan (Pamela Rooke), Adam Ant, and (in a cameo) Siouxsie Sioux. According to Chuck Warner, the punk Steve Treatment guided Jarman through the punk scene, vouching for the gay outsider when necessary.²⁷ The film, originally intended as an impressionistic documentary of punk London, evolved into a powerful depiction of urban dystopia as seen from the fantastic vantage point of a time-traveling Queen Elizabeth I. A historically and theatrically erudite iteration of the Pistols' "God Save the Queen," *Jubilee* literalized the disjunction between present-day reality and an anachronistic monarchy by juxtaposing Elizabeth with the anarchic punks. The film proved prophetic in a number of ways, but it was not universally well received at first, with Westwood delivering her review on (where else?) a T-shirt: "The most boring and therefore disgusting film . . . a gay boy jerk off through the titillation of his masochistic tremblings. You pointed your nose in the right direction then you wanked."²⁸ Westwood's rhetorical condensation of Jarman's camera—first onto his nose, then onto his penis—made particularly explicit the structures of cruising and slumming that made the production of the film possible. And yet to freeze the queen/queer at the other end of a voyeuristic lens would prematurely foreclose the transmissions of desire and affect that were clearly at play in both directions, and

to which *Jubilee* stands as an important testament. As Peter Hitchcock notes, while “slumming is an ideologeme of class discourse . . . the slummer also fantasizes what the culture must otherwise hide, the ways in which the porous conditions of class augur the concrete possibilities of change.”²⁹ Rough no doubt, but trade no less.

The Three-Chord *Sinthome*

Chiasmus is a good term with which to capture the relationship between antirelational theory and punk. As a rhetorical figure, chiasmus highlights our entrapment within language, from which neither the future nor the past affords any exit. It is this entrapment within language that belligerent punks want to bust out of. Chiasmus is also the rhetorical instantiation of “sexual inversion,” perverting the end of linguistic meaning in the same manner as homosexuality perverts the end of sexuality. The inverted elements of chiasmus are apparent in such formulations as Edelman’s Wildean description of homosexuality as that which “leads to no good and has no other end than an end to the good as such.” Edelman names the socially and sexually inverted subject of queer theory the “sinthomosexual.” This word is a condensation of the word *sinthome*, an archaic way of writing the word *symptom* that Lacan began to use in the course of a seminar on James Joyce (primarily because it seems to offer so many opportunities to make his beloved puns), and the word *homosexual*. Edelman’s call for us to “accede” to or “embrace” our social role as “sinthomosexuals” contains more than echo, I would warrant, of Wilde’s famous comment, as recorded by Neil Bartlett, about how delicious the accusations made against him at trial would be if he himself were the one who was making them.³⁰ In other words, in making sense of affinities and disjunctions between the punk and the queer, it may be useful to unlock this condensation of the *sinthome* and the homosexual and, in so doing, restore greater historical specificity and political pertinence to the discourse of political negativity they both augur.

Without seeking to recuperate the death drive for some dialectically positive and progressive project, I take issue with Edelman’s conflation of the homosexual with the *sinthome*, that is, with antisocial, countersymbolic *jouissance* as such. As has repeatedly been suggested, the “queer” in queer theory is most supple when it does not take as its sole referent the homosexual desire of classical psychoanalysis. “Queer” bears at least the potential to name a series of historical intersections at which the body and its potential deviations from the social have been assimilated to the figure of the *sinthome*, and several of those intersections seem to connect with the social imaginary of mid- and late 1970s punk, as we have already seen. But if this is the case, then antirelationality is in part a new articulation of deviancy theory and bears an unspoken debt to the literature emerging from radical sociology and cultural studies. This observation is not in itself a criticism, but it does suggest an expanded purview and deeper historical genealogy than that provided by the presentist and ultimately identitarian basis on which Edelman erects sinthomosexuality.

Antirelational theorists argue that the pursuit of *jouissance* is a quest for self-shattering, not for ego stabilization, and that all attempts to domesticate homosexual desire, rendering it socially productive, are therefore quixotic. Calling this approach to homosexual desire “antirelational” is somewhat misleading, insofar as it is in fact a theory of relationality, albeit not the preferred fantasy of social relations most of us possess. It depends rather on the Lacanian assertion that “there’s no such thing as a sexual relationship,” by which is meant that we do not relate to each other, but to a third term—the other—and to the other’s desire.³¹ There is, in other words, a relationship, but just not the one we believe there to be. I make this point to clarify that the virtues and faults of antirelationality lie in nothing so simple as the metaphysical question of whether society, the future, or relationality “exists” but, rather, in what the theory enables us to grasp of a reality that can never truly be grasped. In Lacan’s presentation, symptom (*sinthome*) and symbol interlock with each other and provide the joint tether between the real and the imaginary. Not dialectical opposites, they are instead two loops in a complex topology of the psyche and the social. Strictly speaking, the *sinthome* is neither within nor without the symbolic order, neither negating nor sustaining it. If we associate the symbolic with closure and ideology, it might be helpful to associate the *sinthome* with flows of affect such as those Edelman identifies with an embrace of the death drive, and which I wish to extend to certain forms of punk performativity.

Edelman’s condensation of *sinthome* and homosexuality, I should note, departs from conventional interpretations of Lacan, who did not originally deploy the term to explain homosexual desire. Rather, as Christine Wertheim writes in an economical summary:

In Lacan’s original knotty model, the psyche is (re)presented as a space bounded by the three interlocked rings of the Real, Symbolic, and Imaginary. However . . . Lacan felt compelled to add a fourth ring to the configuration, turning it from a link into a lock. Called the *sinthome* . . . this fourth element—the symptom—is what keeps a psyche locked up. From this perspective, the aim of Lacanian analysis is to unlock the link by breaking the *sinthome*’s hold. . . . Analysis then, as a practice, rather than a theory, is for Lacan simply the operation of this unlocking—the separation of the *sinthome* from the body of the psychic link.³²

The *sinthome*, however, holds chiasmic properties that are elided by this therapeutic reading insofar as the separation of the *sinthome* from the psyche can also be thought of as the production of the *sinthome* by the psyche. Unlocking can be a matter not merely of “getting rid” of the *sinthome* but, more ambiguously, of “making” the *sinthome*, as is evident in Lacan’s observation that *Ulysses* was Joyce’s *sinthome*. Insofar as Lacan and Edelman alike associate the *sinthome* with writing, it is subject to the indefinite deferral of meaning to which deconstruction calls our

attention. But if the *sinthome* can include countersymbolic writing or inscription such as that ostensibly represented by Joyce's prose, it is also worth asking whether it can be thought of in relation to expressive forms of creativity, such as music and performance, that are not primarily linguistic in structure. And furthermore, if the *sinthome* is a problem, it may also be, perversely, a solution. Hence Edelman's ambiguous instructions to "accede" and "embrace," which sound like a kind of resignation, of letting homophobia have its way, but which alternately can be figured as instructions for queer world making. Edelman's term *reproductive futurity* is helpful to the degree that it highlights a central grievance of the homophobic imaginary: that it is society that is obliged to undergo the labor of reproducing itself so that the homosexual may emerge from within it, while the homosexual is a freeloader under no obligation to reproduce society in turn. Edelman's call for queers to accede to this position is persuasive insofar as it girds us to resist the double blackmail of gay marriage and parenting as homonormative sacrifices to the altar of family values. Only by embracing the antagonism we create by our presence can we bring into view the actual labor of queerness in the processes of world making. Queerness is our *Ulysses*, our *sinthome*.

But queerness was also punk's *sinthome* insofar as punk's most powerful affects were employed in unknotting the body from its psychic link to the social. Here Lacan is especially helpful in moving our analysis beyond semiotic readings of punk subcultures by scholars like Hebdige. The emphasis on reading the symbols of punk, we can now see, elides the complex relationship between symbol and symptom. Here I evoke and diverge from the Chicago School sociologist Ned Polsky's admonition that "the researcher should forget about imputing beliefs, feelings, or motives (conscious or otherwise) to deviants on the basis of the origins of words in their argot."³³ From Polsky's perspective, Chance's connecting of the word *punk* with situational homosexuality would be as illegitimate as reading a junkie's slang for heroin ("shit" and "garbage") as signaling unconscious guilt or internalized inferiority. Even Geoff Travis's conscious borrowing of a phrase like *rough trade* for his record label cannot be read, in such a paradigm, as linking punk and queer, because his motivation was primarily to find a name even trashier than the Velvet Underground. But just because the word does not function symbolically does not prevent it from serving as a *sinthome*, and thinking of queer as punk's *sinthome* gets us further down the road of understanding the frozen dialectic between them.

In conducting my research for this project, I have had repeatedly to explain that I am not seeking to prove or disprove that 1970s punk was gay. Although such information would indeed delight me, my principal interest has been in the transmission of affect, specifically a bad or rebellious attitude, through the paraphernalia and symbols of various queer subcultures. Approaching the circulation of homosexuality or queerness as a symptom of culture has proved enormously helpful for making sense of a late 1970s group like the Homosexuals, who were mostly taking the piss

out of the predictability of punk, already visible by 1978. In taking punk's flirtation with overt gay symbols to a switch point with the symptom within punk itself, they ended up serving "as figures—within [punk] for the dismantling of [punk] and thus for the death drive it harbors within."³⁴

While my reading so far has accepted much of Edelman's argument, I part ways at his ahistorical presentation of the sinthomosexual. There is a fair amount of nostalgia in Edelman's chiasmic description of homosexuality as that which "leads to no good and has no other end than an end to the good as such." In the era of popular and openly gay musical acts like the Scissors Sisters, television programs like *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy*, and even networks like Logo TV, it stretches credulity to maintain that "the homosexual" as a figure always stands in the cultural imagination for pure and uncompromising complicity with the death drive. To the contrary, it seems that Halberstam is persuasive in arguing that queer theory's bad attitude is a secret sharer of the immature, kitschy, and revolting behavior of punks and other uppity antisocial types.

Historicism gets a bad rap, especially from psychoanalytic and deconstructionist critics. Some of this rap is deserved, and it may even be, as with Edelman, necessary to reiterate the fiction of a "motionless 'movement' of historical procession obedient to origins, intentions, and ends whose authority rules over all."³⁵ The *sinthome* may indeed obey the logic of repetition (the death drive) that undoes such a fantasy of progressive, developmental time, as Edelman argues; but that atemporal kernel of *jouissance* does not obviate historical time as such. Without historical perspective, we are insufficiently defended from the nostalgic impulse to exaggerate the radical negativity of a given symbol such as queer or homosexual desire. The problem of enduring political negativity is only whisked away by an overreliance on a by now hypostatized moment in queer theory.

A more productive response can be found in a recent album by the Soft Pink Truth, the name of which I have paraphrased for the title of this essay. This self-described "comparative analysis of ideological positions in English punk rock and American hardcore songwriting" provided the sonic ambience that enabled me to complete this essay. The title pays homage to a track from the Minutemen's opus, *Double Nickels on the Dime* (1984), a declaration of hard-core purism that serves as an ironic counterpoint to the Soft Pink Truth's musical hybridizations, and consists of ten cover versions produced out of what is described, in the CD cover art, as a "circular rationale vortex": "Reversing time . . . stopping time . . . street credibility . . . distraction from political misery . . . escapist nostalgia . . . dissertation avoidance . . . suspended dialectics . . . regressive fantasy . . . sweating to the oldies."³⁶ Such self-parody and free association is suggestive rather than definitive in making a connection between historicist and rhetorical approaches. The Soft Pink Truth's cover versions canvas the range of sometimes ugly feelings that survive in the punk archive, from Nervous Gender's jittery "sex worker rant" ("Confession") to the Angry Samo-

ans' "quasi-parodic hate speech" ("Homo-Sexual"). Like Patti Smith, the Soft Pink Truth performs not so much an ideology as an ambience, one in which the question of political negativity is raised but never definitively answered. The album instead constructs what Josh Kun has called an "audiotopia," a space within sound that both mirrors and negates the world that produced it.³⁷

I persist in locating such efforts to produce a usable past between punk and queer, both as a political negativity and an emotive, affective unity. In this, it seems, the songs are more faithful to Hocquenghem's Freudo-Marxian synthesis of the early 1970s than are the antirelational theorists. In chapter 6 of *Homosexual Desire*, "The Homosexual Struggle," Hocquenghem leaves open the space for the delinking of the homosexual and the *sinthome* in a revolutionary praxis founded on a transgressive "subject group," a term he adopts in contrast to the ordinary condition of being a "subjected group": "In the subject group, the opposition between the collective and the individual is transcended; the subject group is stronger than death because the institutions appear to it to be mortal. The homosexual subject group—circular and horizontal, annular and with no signifier—knows that civilization alone is mortal."³⁸

"Homosexual desire," he adds in what amounts to a preemptive riposte to Edelman's identification of queer theory with the death drive some three decades later, "is neither on the side of death nor on the side of life; it is the killer of civilized egos."³⁹ Rather than opposing politics, relationality, and the future *in toto*, Hocquenghem merely rejected their expression prior to revolutionary transformation.

It is important to remember the original historical context of Hocquenghem's homosexual antirelationality because when it is invoked—especially in the early twenty-first century when the possibility of socialist revolution appears to be off the table, to put it mildly—it gives queer theory's rejection of reformist and utopian politics an entirely different meaning. We seem to succumb very easily to a disorienting left melancholy that attempts to substitute a radical critical negativity for the absence of a robust radical politics. In saying this I am not advocating Hocquenghem's particular vision of emancipation. But we may well begin to think about the relations between punk and queer outside of Hocquenghem's own limited horizons of the gay Western male. Chiasmus does such important work in both the Sex Pistols' and Edelman's iterations of "no future" because it apparently stabilizes the infinite play of inversions into a neat paradox to which, as Edelman repeatedly argues, we might ultimately accede. The verbs *accede* and *embrace* constitute critical pivots in Edelman's polemic insofar as they appear to ground his radicalism in something we can do while ensuring that this thing we can do retains its grammatical radicalism only *within* chiasmus. *Accession* and *embrace* serve as potentially positive terms for Edelman only as long as they remain fully reversible. But accession is itself a chiasmic inversion insofar as it can lead *either* to participation in the

fantasy of reproductive futurity or the embrace of its stigmatized core of negativity, variously labeled the *sinthome*, the death drive, *jouissance*, and homosexuality itself. By rethinking the grouping or networking expressed across the social figurations of punk and queer in a nonidentitarian way, we may be able to uncouple the *sinthome*-homosexual metonymy, which compels us to see social negativity in an unnecessarily limited frame. Expanding the networks and linkages that produce collective subjects in the present is neither a return to a 1970s-style revolution à la Patty Hearst nor a dewy-eyed faith in perpetual progress. It is a politics of a quite different sort than that which Edelman both rightly disparages and wrongly associates with politics as such.

Notes

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1. *The Tomorrow Show with Tom Snyder: Punk and New Wave* (Shout! Factory, 2006), DVD.
2. Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004).
3. Lauren Berlant, *The Queen of America Goes to Washington City: Essays on Sex and Citizenship* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1997), 262.
4. Guy Hocquenghem, *Homosexual Desire* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1993); Leo Bersani, *Homos* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995).
5. Hocquenghem, *Homosexual Desire*, 137. The English translation of this work contains a useful preface by Jeffrey Weeks that places Hocquenghem within the political and cultural context of his day. For more of an assessment of his relation to queer theory, see the introduction to Tim Dean and Christopher Lane, eds., *Homosexuality and Psychoanalysis* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 3–42.
6. Leo Bersani, “Is the Rectum a Grave?” *October* 43 (1987): 205–15.
7. John Brenkman, “Queer Post-politics,” *Narrative* 10 (2002): 174–80.
8. Edelman, *No Future*, 22; emphasis original.
9. Elizabeth Freeman, ed., “Queer Temporalities,” special issue, *GLQ* 12 (2007).
10. The *sinthome* was the topic of Lacan’s Seminar 23, given in 1975–76. Jacques Lacan, *Livre XXIII: Le sinthome; 1975–1976*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, *Le Séminaire de Jacques Lacan* (Paris: Seuil, 2005). In deference to readers unfamiliar with psychoanalysis, I present the concept here with the aid of (undoubtedly simplified) English-language exegesis, rather than through a direct reading of Lacan.
11. Robert Caserio et al., “Forum: Conference Debates; The Antisocial Thesis in Queer Theory,” *Proceedings of the Modern Language Studies Association* 121 (2006): 824. In a comparable vein, in the *GLQ* forum on queer temporality, Annamarie Jagose recommends that we “acknowledge the intellectual traditions in which time has also been influentially thought and experienced as cyclical, interrupted, multilayered, reversible, stalled—and not always in contexts easily recuperated as queer.” Carolyn Dinshaw et al., “Theorizing Queer Temporalities: A Roundtable Discussion,” *GLQ* 13 (2007): 186–87.
12. José Estaban Muñoz has written about the intersections between punk and queer subcultural spaces in the photographs of Kevin McCarty. See José Estaban Muñoz, “Impossible Spaces: Kevin McCarty’s *The Chameleon Club*,” *GLQ* 11 (2005): 427–36.

13. Rob Young, *Rough Trade: Labels Unlimited* (London: Black Dog, 2006), 11.
14. For more on *punk* as a keyword, see Tavia Nyong'o, "Punk'd Theory," *Social Text* 23 (2005): 19–34.
15. "For, at the heart of the punk subculture, forever arrested, lies this frozen dialectic between black and white cultures—a dialectic which beyond a certain point (i.e. ethnicity) is incapable of renewal, trapped, as it is, within its own history, imprisoned within its own irreducible antinomies." Dick Hebdige, *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* (London: Routledge, 1979), 70.
16. Alex Needham, "Jon Savage," *Butt*, Winter 2006, 62.
17. The Ramones, "53rd and 3rd," on *The Ramones* (1976), Audio CD, Sire.
18. Judith Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives* (New York: New York University Press, 2005); Mary Celeste Kearney, "The Missing Links: Riot Grrrl—Feminism—Lesbian Culture," in *Sexing the Groove: Popular Music and Gender*, ed. Sheila Whiteley (New York: Routledge, 1997) 207–29; Cynthia Fuchs, "If I Had a Dick: Queers, Punks, and Alternative Acts," in *Mapping the Beat: Popular Music and Contemporary Theory*, ed. Thomas Swiss, John Sloop, and Andrew Herman (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1998) 101–18.
19. Jon Savage, *England's Dreaming: Anarchy, Sex Pistols, Punk Rock, and Beyond* (New York: St. Martin's, 2002).
20. Caserio et al., "Forum," 824.
21. Michael S. Foldy, *The Trials of Oscar Wilde: Deviance, Morality, and Late-Victorian Society* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1997), 17.
22. Greil Marcus, *Lipstick Traces: A Secret History of the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989).
23. Paul Gilroy, *"There Ain't No Black in the Union Jack": The Cultural Politics of Race and Nation* (London: Hutchinson, 1987).
24. Caserio et al., "Forum," 822.
25. Simon Reynolds, *Rip It Up and Start Again: Postpunk, 1978–1984* (New York: Penguin, 2006).
26. Simon Ford, *Wreckers of Civilisation: The Story of Coum Transmissions and Throbbing Gristle* (London: Black Dog, 2000), 4–10, 5–13. Some of the photos are reproduced in Savage, *England's Dreaming*.
27. Chuck Warner, personal conversation with author, August 13, 2005.
28. Quoted by Tony Peake in "Jubilee," an essay accompanying the Criterion Collection release of *Jubilee*, www.criterion.com (accessed May 10, 2007).
29. Peter Hitchcock, "Slumming," in *Passing: Identity and Interpretation in Sexuality, Race, and Religion*, ed. María C. Sánchez and Linda Schlossberg (New York: New York University Press, 2001), 184–85.
30. Neil Bartlett, *Who Was That Man? A Present for Mr. Oscar Wilde* (London: Serpent's Tail, 1988).
31. Bruce Fink, *The Lacanian Subject: Between Language and Jouissance* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995), 104–25.
32. Christine Wertheim, "To Be or a Knot to Be," *Cabinet* 22 (2006): 35.
33. Ned Polsky, "Research Method, Morality, and Criminology," 1967, in *The Subcultures Reader*, ed. Ken Gelder (New York: Routledge, 2005), 64.
34. The Homosexuals, *Astral Glamour* (Messthetics, 2004), audio CD.
35. Dinshaw et al., "Theorizing Queer Temporalities," 180.

36. The Soft Pink Truth, *Do You Want New Wave or Do You Want the Soft Pink Truth?* (Tigerbeat6, 2004), audio CD.
37. Josh Kun, *Audiotopia: Music, Race, and America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005).
38. Hocquenghem, *Homosexual Desire*, 147.
39. *Ibid.*, 15.

