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WHEN MARRIAGE FALLS

Queer Coincidences in Straight Time

Tom Boellstorff

I proffer this essay to a specific audience—those, like myself, with a commitment to both “queer theory” in some sense of the term and a critique of marriage that draws on concerns with its politics of recognition (and disrecognition of the unmarried), the place of marriage in capitalist production, and the inequalities and violences so often found within marriage and so often linked to hierarchies of gender, race, and class.¹ I pitch this essay in an exploratory register, resisting a framework that would equate “offering solutions” with the horizon of relevance and political efficacy. Proscription is not the same thing as critique. While I do suggest an alternative mode of conceptualizing time, this suggestion is an invitation to conversation and debate. I am interested in questions like the one posed by Geeta Patel: “How can we think subjectivity through other possible times, given that subjectivities in the ‘modern’ are inseparable from particular ways of narrating time?”²

This essay considers the possibility of a queer theory not necessarily opposed to marriage. This is a tricky proposition, because some prominent arguments in favor of “same-sex marriage” claim it will “civilize” gay and lesbian persons into upholding “traditional” norms of monogamy and propriety. As the Gay Shame collective has noted in their “End Marriage” statement: “If you look at the rhetoric of the freedom to marry movement and the Republican Party their similarities are frighteningly apparent. In their ideal world we would all be monogamously coupled, instead of rethinking the practice of ‘coupling.’”³ Granted, some working for what they term “marriage equality” are careful to note that marriage may not work for everyone.⁴ But the Gay Shame statement is accurate in that “same-sex marriage” rhetoric commonly celebrates that possibility as a means to normalize queer sexuality and elides the relationship between marriage and “the reproduction of patriarchal relations,” a relationship long demonstrated by

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feminist scholarship.⁵ A prominent example of an author aligned with this rhetoric is Andrew Sullivan, whose writings have been astutely critiqued by a number of scholars, including Michael Warner and Lisa Duggan.⁶

I explore the possibility of a queer theory that does not foreclose the support of what I provisionally term same-sex marriage. Such a stance remains aligned with scholars like Warner and Duggan in terms of an attention to how marriage has been deployed in the service of normalization, in linked symbolic and political economic registers. But many queer theoretical positions *against* same-sex marriage share a temporal horizon with both the Right and “pro-gay” arguments for same-sex marriage. This conceptual, practical, and ultimately political horizon is at its core the linear, millenarian framework of apocalypse that I name “straight time.” This is not just a pun: straight time is an emically salient, socially efficacious, and experientially real cultural construction of temporality across a wide range of political and social positions. I hypothesize that straight time is shaped by linked discourses of heteronormativity, capitalism, modernity, and apocalypse, and that naming this temporality and speculating on possible alternatives might productively inform discussions of same-sex marriage.

I focus on the United States, where millenarianism has a particular historical and contemporary reference.⁷ In unpacking this implicit millenarian temporality, I suggest a queer time of coincidence as one possible alternative, a queer time in which time falls rather than passes, a queer meantime that embraces contamination and imbrication.⁸ From this standpoint, supporting same-sex marriage might be thinkable in terms of a time that “falls” in coincidence with (and thus “queers”) straight time, in the sense that we say “May 23rd ‘falls’ on a Tuesday.” In its coincidental engagement with straight time, such a queer temporality might contribute to the “fall” of marriage itself.

I thus hope to use the question of queer time as a point of *entrée*, to inquire about the possibility of a queer theoretical argument that neither participates in normalization nor renders itself averse to the dynamics of complicity and derivation that are, after all, central to most articulations of queer politics, analytics, and ethics. Note that I have purposely chosen queer theory as the critical object here, leaving to the side the political institutions, cultural norms, and forms of commodity capitalism that sustain marriage’s hegemony. In the wake of legal recognition of (in Massachusetts) and state constitutional amendments against same-sex marriage, such a focus might seem surprising. Yet it is precisely in such moments of felt urgency that it is crucial to sustain a space of critique and theoretical conversation.

I come to this essay from a scholarly and activist background that has focused on questions of sexuality and nation in Indonesia.⁹ I have long been

interested in how these questions intersect with both temporality and marriage.¹⁰ While I continue to do research and activism in Indonesia, I live primarily in the United States. As national debates over same-sex marriage have taken form in the United States in recent years, I have been struck by their parochial character and how the discussion has been organized around forms specific to concepts of sexuality, kinship, and recognition dominant in the United States.¹¹ This is quite different from other national contexts such as Belgium, Canada, the Netherlands, and Spain, where same-sex marriage (as opposed to civil union) has been legalized—or from places like Indonesia, where the idea of same-sex marriage brings forth from *gay* and *lesbi* Indonesians a range of reactions, many of which reflect a sense that recognizing same-sex marriage would fundamentally destabilize, not retrench, dominant notions of marriage, sexuality, and gender.¹² For instance, the most common pattern in contemporary Indonesia is for *gay*-identified men to also marry women. Typically these men see *gay* and what they term *normal* sexuality as additive, not supplanting, and say they support the idea of marriage between men and women as key to being an adult member of society, regardless of their religion. Yet I have heard many of these same *gay* men say that were it possible to marry another man in Indonesia, they might not marry a woman and would rethink what it means to be a “good citizen” of the Indonesian nation. While I obviously share the view that such national variations on how same-sex marriage is understood are interesting, in this essay I focus on the United States, which in Indonesia and elsewhere is seen as a key location for both queer theory and same-sex marriage debates themselves.

Straight Time and Queer Time

The question of “queer time” has become quite prominent in U.S. queer theoretical debates since the early 2000s.¹³ The most fundamental and consequential limitation of conceptions (and thus practices) of queer time to date is that they share with dominant, heteronormative temporalities the assumption that time is ultimately linear—indeed, that it is “straight.” Their intervention lies in slowing down, stopping, or reversing that linear trajectory, rather than calling it into question. For instance, Judith Halberstam notes the domination of “the time of inheritance,” a “generational time within which values, wealth, goods, and morals are passed through family ties from one generation to the next.”¹⁴ These values, wealth, goods, and morals are never returned cyclically to the earlier generations, since their members have died: this is straight time. Her counter to “reproductive temporality” is framed in terms of a “stretched-out adolescence”: delay, not abandonment, of the

linear trajectory (153). Similarly, Lee Edelman speaks of “reproductive futurism” against which the queer subject represents “no future,” and Elizabeth Freeman speaks of “‘temporal drag,’ with all of the associations that the word ‘drag’ has with retrogression, delay, and the pull of the past upon the present.” At a disciplinary level, David L. Eng, Halberstam, and José Esteban Muñoz note how queer studies “in the present,” which is linked to “a younger generation of queer scholars,” “offers important insights” relative to “queer studies in the past.”¹⁵

These varied and important engagements with queer time differ in many ways, and I do not mean to reduce them to each other or diminish their significance. Rather, I want to raise the possibility that despite their much-needed interventions, the queer alternatives they pose remain situated within straight time’s linear framework. Nor is this state of affairs limited to queer theory: for instance, these debates share emphases and genealogies with debates over temporality in feminism. One of the most insightful analyses of these debates is provided by Robyn Wiegman in her essay “Feminism’s Apocalyptic Futures.”¹⁶ Wiegman notes elsewhere that she organizes her investigation of “the agonized conversations about feminism’s generational transmission” in terms of apocalypse,¹⁷

to capture the way that contemporary academic feminist political attachment is motivated less by an overwhelming sense of past loss than by a fear about the failure of the future. The apocalyptic as a term is intended to highlight this temporal disorientation: the hyperbolic anxiety that the future may now be unattainable because the present fails to bring the past to utopic completion.¹⁸

In her analysis, this apocalyptic temporality “is attached to the time that has not yet been lived, which writes the present as the failure of the future . . . the present is the locus of temporal disorder; it cannot be inhabited without undoing the possibility of revolutionary time” (807). This temporality’s uninhabitability is predicated on its straight character: it is as if only one object can take its place at any point along its linear trajectory. In the United States, “conservative” and “progressive” political positions are complex. Progressive positions are often predicated on forms of coalitional affiliation and also often work to “conserve” (e.g., the welfare state), and conservatives are often spectacular innovators (and form coalitions of their own). Yet both positions work within straight time, distinguishing themselves in terms of the pole to which they orient themselves. The time of the conservative often takes the form of a future created by moving the past into the present: a “morning in America,” to use the rhetoric of Ronald Reagan, in which tradition

provides the model for the future itself. In contrast, the time of the progressive often takes the form of a present created by moving the future into the present: a claim that we should see “progress,” and thus efficacy, in terms of what Jacques Lacan and Jacques Derrida, among others, would call a future anterior temporality—a time within which we “will have been” successful in our political aims.¹⁹ These temporal displacements, once again, are produced by a straight time that does not allow two “times,” and thus two objects in time, to co-occur. This is the temporality that Michel Foucault termed “a linear time whose moments are integrated, one upon another, and which is orientated towards a terminal, stable point; in short, an ‘evolutive’ time. . . . ‘Evolutive’ historicity, [which] is still self-evident for many today—is bound up with a mode of functioning of power.”²⁰ For queer theory, working within the horizon of straight time produces a temporality in which the present is regressive: the “presence” of the “present” is, in this implicit understanding and the practices based on it, hopelessly compromised by its copresence with systems of domination. The inability of straight time to provide a framework for theorizing co-incidence founds the “paranoid imperative” with which Sedgwick sees queer studies as having “a distinctive history of intimacy.”²¹ The future anterior orientation of straight time is revealed in that

paranoia is anticipatory. . . . The unidirectionally future-oriented vigilance of paranoia generates, paradoxically, a complex relation to temporality that burrows both backward and forward: because there must be no bad surprises, and because learning of the possibility of a bad surprise would itself constitute a bad surprise, paranoia requires that bad news be always already known. (130)

Thus the paranoid stance is fundamentally linked to a unidirectional, straight framework that is complex in that it can burrow both backward and forward—but not laterally, in a circle, up or down. Its complexity thus meets its limit within its linear trajectory: leaving that trajectory is not a thinkable option.

Evolutive, teleological, apocalyptic, paranoid: straight time is nothing less than a millenarian temporality, “its time line a record of eruptions and disruptions of genuinely world-historical proportions. . . . [Millenarian temporality is] the indexical resolution of apocalypse. . . . as the temporality of climactic crisis, millenarian temporality still leaves history sufficient length for events to unfold along their fateful and final course. Its here and now are not immediacies.”²² Because co-incidence is seemingly impossible on this linear course (not a field or network, for instance), the presence of the present of straight time—its “here and

now”—is depoliticized, not an immediacy. In this framework, the heteronormative moment and the queer moment cannot coexist unless the former is copresent with and thus—it is assumed—incorporating of the latter. Straight time cannot conceive of copresence without incorporation. Agency must thereby inhere in a cataclysm to come, a moment of “liberation” that Foucault critiqued for assuming that power has “only an external hold on desire.”²³ In other words, the inability to conceive of copresence without incorporation compels the conclusion that the moment of the political must be a moment that not only is oppositional but bears no traces of that which it seeks to change through time.

The Time of Marriage

Queer theoretical arguments against same-sex marriage still work within the temporal assumptions of straight time, including the paranoid, millenarian framework it presupposes. Straight time also shapes both gay-lesbian arguments favoring same-sex marriage and conservative arguments against same-sex marriage. I do not think everyone should marry, and I emphasize that discourses of marriage in the contemporary United States typically stigmatize in some way the unmarried. Yet alignments of queer theory and the progressive will prove complex and cannot be assumed in this analysis, since both conservative and progressive are not only organized by but also mutually defining within straight time.

I am not saying that same-sex marriage is inevitably a good thing, only that the current parameters of the debate are limited and that this limitation is linked to the apocalyptic regime of temporality I identify as straight time. If queer people marry, we don't know what will happen, and I'm not necessarily saying they should. But behind the “wills” and “shoulds” that structure sentences like the previous one lie regimes of temporality that are more than conceptual fields. They constitute not just a semantics but a pragmatics—not just ways of thinking but ways of doing—and reconfiguring them has consequences for embodied sociality and politics. It has consequences for what counts as an “event,” not just forms of reckoning the time of events.

Queer theoretical arguments against same-sex marriage typically found that stance in two linked sets of legitimate concerns. One is that same-sex marriage takes heteronormative marriage as a model (indeed, an ideal) for sexual and affective relations. Another is that same-sex marriage concedes the state may properly authorize these forms of sexual and affective relations, thereby colluding in the collapse of the welfare state with the substitution of marriage as a specifi-

cally civil institution. Same-sex marriage is thus seen to participate in an inevitable logic of exclusion with two key negative consequences: first, the creation of a class of denigrated sexual and affective relations (e.g., the single, the promiscuous, those who sell or pay for sex, the polyamorous);²⁴ and second, the associated assumption that same-sex marriage inevitably authorizes the monogamous, cohabiting couple with children, the nuclear family that, in this view, is preferred by the logic of contemporary capitalism.

Regardless of the degree to which queer critiques of marriage in the United States emphasize (economic) distribution versus (symbolic) recognition, they typically work within the apocalyptic framework of straight time. In her essay “Is Kinship Always Already Heterosexual?” Judith Butler offers the following as one justification for a stance against same-sex marriage: “To be legitimated by the state is to enter into the terms of legitimation offered there and to find that one’s public and recognizable sense of personhood is fundamentally dependent on the lexicon of that legitimation.”²⁵ This is a sweeping claim of apocalyptic inevitability, a “failure of the future.”²⁶ No sense here of reverse discourse, counterhegemony, cyborg admixture, in short, of queering the dominant. Warner carries the sense of apocalypse even further:

As long as people marry, the state will continue to regulate the sexual lives of those who do not marry. . . . It will criminalize our consensual sex. It will stipulate at what age and in what kind of space we can have sex. It will send the police to harass sex workers and cruisers. It will restrict our access to sexually explicit materials. All this and more the state will justify because these sexual relations take place outside of marriage.²⁷

Through this chain of assertions, Warner, like Butler, constructs *through straight time* an apocalyptic future for marriage (e.g., via the claim that recognizing same-sex marriage will be used by the state to justify restricting access to sexually explicit materials). Warner here is not just conceptualizing straight time but doing straight time. He is invested in sustaining its apocalyptic aversion to complicity and contamination: “Buying commodities sustains the culture of commodities whether the buyers like it or not. That is the power of a system. Just so, marrying consolidates and sustains the normativity of marriage. And it does so despite what may be the best intentions of those who marry” (109). But is it really “just so”? Note that while Warner has of course critiqued the linkages between homosexuality and capitalism, in this analysis he does not offer as a solution to capitalism’s ills the recommendation that we stop buying commodities.²⁸ There are

many ways to buy commodities (purchasing from fair-trade organizations, limiting consumption, choosing items made from recycled components, purchasing commodities collectively) that can act, loosely speaking, to reconfigure “the power of a system” from within, just as queer identities reconfigure the power of a discourse of sexuality on which they nonetheless depend for their discursive coherence.²⁹ Thus the question in regard to marriage should not be the binary “should people do it or not?” but “in what ways can our acts from within a system of power do more than sustain or not sustain that system?” as Warner implies. How might their temporal coincidence rework a hegemony without participating in the apocalyptic logic of a total break, a logic that plays no small role in the resilience of hegemonies themselves?

The apocalyptic inevitability evinced by scholars like Warner is shared by conservative writers against same-sex marriage—which should not be surprising, given their shared investment in straight time. Compare the quotation from Warner above with Glenn Stanton and Bill Maier’s conservative missive against same-sex marriage:

The same-sex proposal permanently alters the definition of marriage for everyone, forever. . . . When it is established that gay marriage is a “fundamental human right,” it is reasonable that it will be taught as normal in every public school. Pictures and story lines in textbooks will be changed to reflect this dramatic social change.³⁰

In both cases, the linear structure of straight time is also a causal structure: one thing leads to another along a “slippery slope” trajectory of apocalypse that for conservatives will culminate in polygamy, marrying one’s pets, and other imagined horrors, and for progressives will culminate in things like gentrification. The taken-for-granted character of this temporality can be seen in that it also undergirds gay and lesbian arguments *in favor* of same-sex marriage. As Warner notes, “Nothing but the customary story of the life course grounds Sullivan’s claim that marriage represents progress.”³¹ This temporality is quite clearly framed in “evolutive” terms of progress and civilization: for instance, William Eskridge, an apologist for same-sex marriage, claims that “lesbian and gay skeptics fear that civilizing gays would domesticate and tame us . . . [but] a greater degree of domestication should not be rejected out of hand.”³² Lisa Duggan has noted how a publication of the gay-lesbian organizations Lambda Legal Defense and Education Fund and Marriage Equality California recycles this temporality when it claims that “denying marriage rights to lesbian and gay couples keeps them in a state of

permanent adolescence”—the same temporal logic as Halberstam’s “stretched-out adolescence,” with the political valence reversed.³³

Since theorizations of queer time to date work within straight time, their interventions are limited to a slowing down, a stopping, or a reversal of its linear, apocalyptic trajectory. Within such a framework, it is hard to imagine how same-sex marriage would not put queerness on a time “line” fundamentally complicit with heteronormative structures of power. Yet such engagements sell queer theory short in several ways.

First, they are functionalist, seeking to explain a social phenomenon (the desire for same-sex marriage) through a function it is said to fulfill (extending capitalism and state power) but failing to explain why some other phenomenon could not just as easily fulfill the function.³⁴ After all, it is possible to argue that marriage is a feudal holdover that impedes the recirculation of capital along market and state channels—and it is also possible to argue that there is no inherently destabilizing essence to singlehood, promiscuity, sex work, polyamory, even queerness itself; all can serve to further the capitalist state’s reach. In *The End of Capitalism (as We Knew It): A Feminist Critique of Political Economy*, J. K. Gibson-Graham questions—as the book’s temporal title suggests—narratives of capitalism that presume such unitary domination. Noting that “unlike many concepts associated with radical politics today, most prominently perhaps race, gender, and sexuality, the concept of capitalism . . . is not at the moment subject to general contestation and redefinition,”³⁵ Gibson-Graham contends that a characteristic of capitalism

is its tendency to present itself as the social totality. . . . Noncapitalist forms of production . . . are seen as somehow taking place within capitalism. . . . Our lives are dripping with Capitalism. We cannot get outside Capitalism; it has no outside. . . . Calling the economy “capitalist” denies . . . diverse economic and class processes, precluding economic diversity in the present and thus making it unlikely in the proximate future. (258, 262)

Calling capitalist temporality into question is, therefore, central to denaturalizing capitalism itself: as Nigel Thrift emphasizes, “capitalist firms may be able to mobilize power and enroll allies, but they are as uncertain about the future as we all are because the future unfolds as a virtuality.”³⁶

Second, a significant implication of queer theoretical and political arguments against same-sex marriage is their convergence with conservative arguments against same-sex marriage, arguments that have been actualized in the defense

of marriage amendments passed in a number of states in the last ten years. Why would queer theorists want to be in agreement with George W. Bush about anything, including the idea that same-sex marriage is fundamentally problematic? This convergence, reminiscent of antipornography alliances between feminists and conservatives, has thus far received but incidental mention in queer theoretical arguments against same-sex marriage. That the straight time shared between progressive and conservative arguments against same-sex marriage has a Christian metaphysics plays no small part in this convergence.

Third, queer theoretical and political arguments against same-sex marriage have difficulty explaining the desire for same-sex marriage, most often portraying it as the result of lobbying by elite gay and lesbian organizations (echoing the conservative claim that gay men and lesbians are wealthy elites) or false consciousness. Thus Warner identifies “a will to naiveté in the implication that false consciousness cannot exist. . . . False consciousness is an undeniable force throughout history. . . . Why should gay people be immune to similar mistakes about their interests?”³⁷ This dichotomy he and others set up between false and true consciousness leaves no room for the messy middle ground of reverse discourse, counterhegemony, and all those ways of thinking and being that work within a system of power. It is in such spaces that subjects transform or rework that system of power in ways those who dominate could never have predicted. Significantly, it is within this messy middle ground of complicity and imbrication, where the politics of truth become linked to questions of cultural and historical specificity, that the notion of queering is intelligible. As discussed below, there is a crucial link between claims of truth and the possibility of coincidence. Could it be in this link, not the straight temporal logic of progress, that the theoretical and political potential of a truly queer time lies?

Fourth, queer theoretical and political arguments against same-sex marriage do not address why the forces of conservatism identify it as a fundamental threat. Such forces see same-sex marriage as setting in place a framework of tolerance and pluralism that undermines their proprietary claim to the natural, holy, and proper. How are we to understand this significance if we share with them a stance of denigration toward same-sex marriage? Given the etymology of radical as “going to the root,” one could argue that same-sex marriage is radical, since it appears to threaten aspects of the gender norms that help constitute at least some heteronormative discourses (and has been blocked in some cases by changes to state “constitutions” themselves). I am struck by the failure of queer theory to account for the threat same-sex marriage is taken to pose, and the concurrent manner in which forms of sexuality termed radical or queer are often quite leg-

ible and unthreatening to conservatives. It is interesting, for instance, to consider how few queer critiques there are of the extension of legal recognition for marriage regardless of ethnicity or race, culminating in the United States in the 1967 *Loving v. Virginia* Supreme Court decision. That decision extended the reach of state legitimation of sexual relationships by including interracial marriages under its purview, yet it is not treated with the same theoretical apparatus as the legal recognition of same-sex marriage. While conflating these two forms of marriage via a “miscegenation analogy” can elide their historical imbrication, that history is one in which marriage between persons of different races was seen as more threatening to the social order than sex between persons of different races, and was accordingly subject to greater legal prohibition.³⁸

What seems significant is the strictness by which queer theoretical arguments against same-sex marriage work to set themselves apart from marriage, and thus the absence of any theory of complicity or imbrication. What we find instead are theories of queer *liberation* from marriage. Foucault disliked the notion of liberation and offered the concept of resistance in its place. In his analysis, “liberation” implied the fantasy of transcending one’s own historicity. Resistance, for instance, is what Foucault associated with “reverse discourse”:

The appearance in [the] nineteenth century . . . of a whole series of discourses on the species and subspecies of homosexuality . . . also made possible the formation of a “reverse” discourse: homosexuality began to speak on its own behalf, to demand that its legitimacy or “naturalness” be acknowledged, often in the same vocabulary, using the same categories by which it was medically disqualified.³⁹

As Kath Weston has noted, “Change and continuity are more closely related than many people tend to think. No search is more fruitless than the one that seeks revolutionary forms of social relations which remain ‘uncontaminated’ by existing social conditions.”⁴⁰ However, with regard to marriage the linear structure of straight time seems to render the possibility of complicity or transformation, indeed “queering,” inaccessible.

Coincidences of Queer Times

Given that I have identified straight time—with its strict linearity, its evolutionary and millenarian connotations, and its paranoid relationship to futurity—as a key factor in disturbing convergences between queer and “conservative” understand-

ings of same-sex marriage, what other ways of doing queer time might exist? This is a question of the utmost importance: as Christopher Castiglia and Christopher Reed emphasize in their discussion of the relationship between memory and queer culture, “Not only what we remember, but *how* we remember—with pleasure or pain, generosity or anxiety—shapes the futures we will enjoy (or endure) as communities or as individuals.”⁴¹ Is there a “how” for queer memory other than that suggested by the apocalyptic futures of straight time?

That straight time should prove so persistent should not be surprising, for conceptions of time are taught to us from our earliest days and in articulation with every conceivable cultural domain, including categories of subjectivity, community, and power. For instance, that I (and others) refer to straight time as apocalyptic or millenarian reflects that it is a fundamentally Christian metaphysics of time. Such a “messianic time” differs, for instance, from Greek notions of oscillating time that were quite prevalent in the pre-Christian West.⁴² Straight time also shapes disciplinary uses of time, such as what Johannes Fabian termed the “allochronism” or “denial of coevalness” by which traditional anthropology located its object of study—the “primitive”—as a “temporally distanced group,” or the temporal assumptions of orientalism in the humanities.⁴³

To chart out at least the beginnings of an alternative temporality, “oscillating in time, like alternating current in an electric wire,” one that might allow a queer theoretical stance in support of same-sex marriage, I turn to an example from Indonesia that I have encountered in my own fieldwork.⁴⁴ This is coincidental time, examples of which can be found in several parts of Indonesia, including Java and Bali, as summarized by Jeff Dreyfuss:

The calendric systems of Java and Bali are marked by weeks of varying lengths that run simultaneously. On Java, for example, the seven-day week is in general used together with a five-day market week (*pasaran*). Each day, therefore, has two names, one taken from the western seven-day week and another taken from the Javanese five-day week. Every thirty-five days a coincidence of the same combination of names occurs. Such coincidences are particularly important for punctuating one’s life as a Javanese or Balinese. For example, when a child is born on Java, no name is chosen for a *selapan hari*, or the thirty-five days until the coincidence of days on which the child was born recurs. In Bali, there is, in addition to a seven-day and five-day week, a six-day week. Anniversaries of Balinese village temples are celebrated every two hundred and ten days, a triple coincidence of a seven-day, six-day, and five-day week.⁴⁵

Clifford Geertz adds:

The nature of time-reckoning this sort of calendar facilitates is clearly not durational but punctual. That is, it is not used (and could only with much awkwardness and the addition of some ancillary devices be used) to measure the rate at which time passes, the amount which has passed since the occurrence of some event, or the amount which remains within which to complete some project: it is adapted to and used for distinguishing and classifying discrete, self-subsistent particles of time—“days.” The cycles . . . do not accumulate, they do not build, and they are not consumed. They don’t tell you what time it is; they tell you what kind of time it is.⁴⁶

In this coincidental time, cycles define intersectional meaning. For instance, the “anniversary” of a Balinese temple village noted by Dreyfuss is not the same as a wedding anniversary or birthday in the contemporary West, because it is not enlisted into a linear time line. The temple village celebration is not a fifth anniversary or twenty-fifth birthday, but simply the *coincidence* of three cycles of time, just as “Friday the thirteenth” is the coincidence of two cycles of time. Christmas happens every year, but it is enlisted into a linear trajectory; it is, for instance, the 2006th since the event it temporally indexes. In the West, such trajectories were historically linked to state power (the years of kingly rule) and the divine, so that Christian holidays (Christmas, Easter, etc.) largely replaced more coincidental holidays like celebrations of solstices and harvests.⁴⁷ Only much later did these kinds of holidays take on secular manifestation and constitute events like birthdays and anniversaries: for instance, birthdays were not celebrated in parts of Europe until the late nineteenth century.⁴⁸ In contrast, events in coincidental time are not enlisted into such trajectories: when a Friday the thirteenth occurs, we do not say “this is Friday the thirteenth number 1,245”—the coincidence has simply recurred.

Dreyfuss emphasizes a crucial implication of coincidental time: “It is relevant to note . . . that *kebenaran* (the word in Indonesian and Javanese that may be translated as ‘coincidence’) may also be translated as ‘truth.’ . . . [in coincidental time] there is no ‘mere coincidence.’”⁴⁹ Truth, in this temporal framework, inheres neither in an apocalyptic future Day of Judgment nor in an authorizing past. It inheres, instead, in coincidence, intersection, admixture, in what we could term queer moments. Such moments recall not realist narratives of progress but a surrealist aesthetic “that values fragments, curious collections, unexpected juxtapositions.”⁵⁰ It bears noting that James Clifford describes this condition as

“ethnographic surrealism” and Walter Benjamin, in reference to the “profane illumination” of surrealism, as “anthropological inspiration.”⁵¹ An ethnographic sensibility may have something to contribute to elucidating how emergent intersections of temporality might make possible contingent, ironic, and above all imbricated stances toward structures of domination.

Consider, for instance, how coincidental time could be used to “queer” the straight time that underwrites the selfsame dominant Western narratives of capitalism and globalization that disseminate and reinforce particular notions of (heterosexual, child-bearing, companionate) marriage. When the “Western” seven-day week “globalized” to Java, it entered a context where coincidental time was already widely understood: it did not supersede other temporalities like the five-day week but was incorporated as another regime of time, adding even more complexity to the existing temporal framework. How might this coincidental model of globalization and capitalism challenge the totalizing truth narratives of straight time, narratives shared by much contemporary queer theory? How might this help queer theory grapple with, for instance, the fact that the push for same-sex marriage has come primarily not from the state but *from the market*, in the form of benefits packages, nondiscrimination policies, and other acts aimed at increasing both productivity and inclusion?

In bringing up coincidental time as an alternative to straight time, I recall the classic anthropological move of deploying the Other to make strange the familiar. Such a binary mode of argumentation is undermined by the existence of Western practices of time in the examples from Java and Bali above. It can also be undermined by indicating that a kind of coincidental time does exist in the West, in the shadow of straight time and its linear, evolutive, reproductive, apocalyptic connotations. In English, this coincidental time is marked by the shift in verb from “time passes” to “time falls.” It can be seen in the difference between “three weeks have passed” and “my birthday falls on the fourteenth.” Coincidental time rarely carries meaning in the contemporary West, the best-known example being Friday the thirteenth.⁵² Since coincidental time does not “accumulate” or “build,” it is always in a kind of meantime and does not line up on an apocalyptic trajectory. How might queer theory make of such times of coincidence a temporal regime to challenge the truths of straight time?

Coincidental time does not represent a temporal panacea; it surely brings its own assumptions and silences. As noted at the outset, I am not interested in conflating critique with proscription: I bring up coincidental time to set forth one of many possible examples of alternate temporalities that could be used to destabilize straight time—to queer it, in fact.⁵³ Coincidental temporality is so radically

different from the dominant temporality in the West that even as an anthropologist, I have a hard time imagining a world where it was the default modality for embodied social life. How would calendars work differently? How would it shift understandings and practices with regard to everything from deadlines to careers to notions of anticipation, climax, and resolution? It would represent a truly radical queering of time. Capitalism and the modern forms of the state have often proven themselves highly adaptive and might harmonize with such a temporality without great difficulty. Given capitalism's deeply embedded linear logics of wage labor and production and the reproductive logics of modern governmentality, another possibility is of substantial transformation. It would be a time in which dragging, lagging, futurism, nostalgia, and a host of other temporally inflected categories would be fundamentally reconfigured. It might be a time in which same-sex marriage could "fall" in a heteronormative context like Friday sometimes "falls" on the thirteenth: just as that conjunction gives that particular Friday a different meaning, so the conjunction of same-sex marriage and a heteronormative context might transform both.

I am not claiming that anyone should chuck straight time to the wind, or that such a move would even be possible. As exemplified by the quotation from Weston above, queer scholarship has long noted that the fantasy of liberation, that one can jump out of an oppressive system, is politically and theoretically problematic. The term *queer* itself marks this stance of being always already within, in bed with, complicit and contaminated by, the normative with which it engages.⁵⁴ I ask rather why this insight seems to be lost by those queer theoretical voices arguing against same-sex marriage by claiming, as Warner does, that "in the face of all these layers of history, it is facile to say that gay people should 'appropriate' marriage, or create their own meaning for it."⁵⁵ It is, I argue, the temporal assumptions of straight time, hidden in phrases like "in the face of all these layers of history," that lead queer theorists to reject categorically same-sex marriage. Thus, while a wholesale switch to coincidental time is obviously not possible and not the goal of my argument, denaturalizing straight time and its evolutive, apocalyptic, linear entailments might have politically and theoretically significant ramifications. Substituting, as an experiment, "queer" for "feminist" in an eloquent statement by Wiegman, we could see a queer theory that called straight time into question as working "to interrupt generational time, which operates to foreclose the possibility that [queer theory] might be nonidentical to past representations, present deployments, and/or future uses of 'itself' . . . [to answer] the apocalyptic narrative by affirming its most anxious belief: that [queer theory] will exceed its contemporary emplotment as the critical container of US [queer] activist subjectivity."⁵⁶

Conclusion: Compromising Positions

I ask, then, after the possibility of a queer critical temporality that might permit a stance not categorically opposed to same-sex marriage. Warner notes that “it is possible, at least in theory, to imagine a politics in which sex-neutral marriage is seen as a step toward the more fundamental goals of sexual justice . . . a substantive justice that would target sexual domination, making possible a democratic cultivation of alternative sexualities.”⁵⁷ I see the apocalyptic temporal imaginary that current theorizations of queer time share with straight time as the foundational stumbling block that makes it so difficult to imagine this politics, much less bring it into being.

Speaking of the imagination: Warner adds elsewhere that he can “at least imagine a principled response . . . that would include ending the discriminatory ban on same-sex marriage” but that “*in the meantime*, the triumphalist narrative . . . goes almost unchallenged” (146, emphasis added). In alternative temporalities like a queer time of coincidence, I see a meantime that can challenge heteronormativity’s truth without subscribing to the liberationist fantasy of avoiding all complicity and imbrication. Warner later adds that “perhaps some readers will object that marriage, with all its flaws, might itself be a step toward further progress. How can we decide what the future is likely to hold? . . . The question is a real one; the situation is one of profound historical dynamism” (126–27). This historical dynamism, I argue, can take the form of destabilizing not just the *motion* of the queer subject along the linear trajectory of straight time—its burrowing forward and backward, lagging, dragging, or stretching out—but destabilizing straight time itself. At stake are the temporality of the time line, the analytics of paranoia, and the metaphysics of apocalypse. Perhaps truths of coincidence could stand at least partially in their place.

Thus same-sex marriage is not necessarily an assimilationist act reinscribing monogamy and the nuclear family, any more than queer subjectivity necessarily inscribes a medicalized discourse of deviant homosexuality. Intersecting coincidentally with straight time, queer time can unask the question of what time must pass before the progressive end-time where oppression no longer exists; it can, instead, instigate a temporal coincidence in which marriage “falls” through its contamination by, and reconfiguration through, same-sex marriage. Note how straight time undergirds even Butler’s astute analysis of same-sex marriage:

The sexual agents who function outside the purview of the marriage bond . . . constitute sexual possibilities that will never be eligible for a translation into legitimacy. . . . This is an illegitimacy whose temporal condition is to

be foreclosed from any possible future transformation. It is not only not yet legitimate, but it is, we might say, the irrecoverable and irreversible past of legitimacy: the never will be, the never was.⁵⁸

This is not just an epistemology of the closet but a temporality of the closet.⁵⁹ It is a temporal vision of apocalypse, a vision that takes straight time at its word. It concedes history: the past is irrecoverable and irreversible. But Friday the thirteenth will happen again: coincidental time need not traffic in a millenarian logic of linearity. It is this logic of linearity that leads to the problem of what Fabian termed coevalness. Within straight time, it is impossible to imagine two entities in the same temporality: this denial of coevalness, this “allochronism,”⁶⁰ shapes everything from traditional anthropology’s inability to place the “anthropologist” and “primitive” in the same time to the queer theorist’s inability to place opposite-sex marriage and same-sex marriage in the same time without assuming the always already abjected state of the queer subject. Again: straight time cannot conceive of copresence without incorporation.

Obviously, the points I raise need not prevent a critique of the problems of marriage as a concept, norm, or institution. However, queer liberalism need not inhere only in the call for same-sex marriage, however hedged and contextualized: it can inhere as well in an aspiration to be already in the future, framed in terms of a straight time that seeks purity in the absence of complicity. One need not accept the viewpoint of those like Andrew Sullivan to ask how same-sex marriage might participate in a discourse of redistribution and recognition that presents a radical challenge to the status quo. The rejection of same-sex marriage, then, sells short its coincidental possibilities. Warner notes that “the gay movement came into being only when the assumption that ‘homosexuality’ was pathological was suddenly resisted—by people who kept the idea but challenged its connotations. The same thing has happened with ‘queer.’”⁶¹ And, I would add, the same thing could happen with “marriage,” if only we could find a temporality that does not render impossible the potential of a coeval relationship between same-sex marriage and opposite-sex marriage. To recall language I have used in speaking of *gay* and *lesbi* Indonesians and marriage, there is no “perfect path” for same-sex marriage in the United States.⁶² There is no need for a path at all, for the paranoid, apocalyptic temporality of a straight time averse to complicity and fearful of compromising positions. My analysis in this essay leads us to a quite different queer temporal problematic: when—more precisely, in what “when”—will marriage “fall?”

Notes

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1. See Martine Spensky, "Producers of Legitimacy: Homes for Unmarried Mothers in the 1950s," in *Regulating Womanhood: Historical Essays on Marriage, Motherhood, and Sexuality*, ed. Carol Smart (London: Routledge, 1992), 100–118.
2. Geeta Patel, "Ghostly Appearances: Time Tales Tallied Up," special issue, *Social Text*, no. 64 (2000): 47.
3. Gay Shame collective, "End Marriage" statement, www.gayshamesf.org/endmarriage.html (accessed June 20, 2006).
4. See, for instance, Evan Wolfson, *Why Marriage Matters: America, Equality, and Gay People's Right to Marry* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2004), 6; and Dan Savage, *The Commitment: Love, Sex, Marriage, and My Family* (New York: Dutton, 2005), 23.
5. See Carol Smart, *The Ties That Bind: Law, Marriage, and the Reproduction of Patriarchal Relations* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1984). Smart's call for emphasizing notions of "household" over "family" can be read as a kind of coincidental analysis that reframes the domestic in a nonlinear manner.
6. See Andrew Sullivan, *Virtually Normal* (New York: Knopf, 1995); Michael Warner, *The Trouble with Normal: Sex, Politics, and the Ethics of Queer Life* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999); Lisa Duggan, *The Twilight of Equality? Neoliberalism, Cultural Politics, and the Attack on Democracy* (Boston: Beacon, 2003); Duggan, "Holy Matrimony!" *Nation*, March 15, 2004, www.thenation.com/doc/20040315/duggan; and Lisa Duggan and Richard Kim, "Beyond Gay Marriage," *Nation*, July 18, 2005, www.thenation.com/doc/20050718/kim.
7. James Faubion, *The Shadows and Lights of Waco: Millennialism Today* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001).
8. With the use of terms like *apocalypse* and *meantime*, I draw on arguments presented by Robyn Wiegman in "Feminism's Apocalyptic Futures," *New Literary History* 31 (2000): 805–25.
9. See my *The Gay Archipelago: Sexuality and Nation in Indonesia* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005).
10. See my "The Perfect Path: Gay Men, Marriage, Indonesia," *GLQ* 5 (1999): 475–510.

11. Some excellent historical analyses of these notions of marriage include Elizabeth Freeman, *The Wedding Complex: Forms of Belonging in Modern American Culture* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002); George Chauncey, *Why Marriage? The History Shaping Today's Debate over Gay Equality* (New York: Basic Books, 2004); Stephanie Coontz, *Marriage, a History: From Obedience to Intimacy, or How Love Conquered Marriage* (New York: Viking, 2005).
12. See, for instance, Ruth Vanita, *Love's Rite: Same-Sex Marriage in India and the West* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005). There are, of course, persons in the United States—queer and otherwise—who share this view of same-sex marriage.
13. My phrasing glosses over the fact that the “United States” is in many ways a transnational entity. See, e.g., Inderpal Grewal, *Transnational America: Feminisms, Diasporas, Neoliberalisms* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005). However, despite the fact that there are many non-U.S. queer scholars read and cited within the United States, and despite the global economic and cultural reach of the United States, national boundaries obviously remain consequential in the United States as they do elsewhere, not only in spite of but precisely because of contemporary dynamics of globalization. See Boellstorff, *Gay Archipelago*. The prominence of these debates can be seen directly in works like Judith Halberstam's *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives* (New York: New York University Press, 2005) and Lee Edelman's *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004). It can also be seen indirectly in works like Warner's *Trouble with Normal* and Duggan's *Twilight of Equality?* as well as Judith Butler's “Is Kinship Always Already Heterosexual?” *differences* 13, no. 1 (2002): 14–44, and many contributions to “What's Queer about Queer Studies Now?” ed. David L. Eng, Judith Halberstam, and José Esteban Muñoz, special issue, *Social Text*, no. 23, nos. 3–4 (2005). See also my *A Coincidence of Desires: Anthropology, Queer Studies, Indonesia* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007).
14. Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place*, 5.
15. Edelman, *No Future*, 3; Elizabeth Freeman, “Packing History, Count(er)ing Generations,” *New Literary History* 31 (2000): 727–44; David L. Eng, Judith Halberstam, and José Esteban Muñoz, “Introduction: What's Queer about Queer Studies Now?” special issue, *Social Text*, no. 23 (2005): 1–17. For further discussion, see Boellstorff, *A Coincidence of Desires*.
16. See note 8.
17. Robyn Wiegman, “On Being in Time with Feminism,” *Modern Language Quarterly* 65 (2004): 164.
18. Wiegman, “Feminism's Apocalyptic Futures,” 807.
19. See Jacques Derrida, “At This Very Moment in This Work Here I Am,” in *Re-Reading Levinas*, ed. Robert Bernasconi and Simon Critchley (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), 11–48; and Jacques Lacan, *Écrits: A Selection* (New York: Norton,

- 1977). There are cases in which progressives take conservative stances; for instance, there is a call for a return to the radicalism of the 1960s in the United States.
20. Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (New York: Vintage, 1977), 160–61.
 21. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004), 130.
 22. Faubion, *Shadows and Lights of Waco*, 104–5.
 23. Michel Foucault, *An Introduction*, vol. 1 of *The History of Sexuality* (New York: Vintage Books, 1978), 83.
 24. See, for instance, Warner, *Trouble with Normal*, 88.
 25. Butler, “Is Kinship Always Already Heterosexual?” 17.
 26. Wiegman, “Feminism’s Apocalyptic Futures,” 807.
 27. Warner, *Trouble with Normal*, 96.
 28. See Michael Warner, introduction to *Fear of a Queer Planet: Queer Politics and Social Theory*, ed. Michael Warner (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), vii–xxxii.
 29. See, for instance, Vanita, *Love’s Rite*, 18.
 30. Glenn T. Stanton and Bill Maier, *Marriage on Trial: The Case against Same-Sex Marriage and Parenting* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2004), 90–92.
 31. Warner, *Trouble with Normal*, 136.
 32. William N. Eskridge Jr., *The Case for Same-Sex Marriage: From Sexual Liberty to Civilized Commitment* (New York: Free Press, 1996), 9.
 33. Duggan, “Holy Matrimony!”; Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place*, 153.
 34. See Jane F. Collier, Michelle Z. Rosaldo, and Sylvia Yanagisako, “Is There a Family? New Anthropological Views,” in *The Gender/Sexuality Reader: Culture, History, Political Economy*, ed. Roger N. Lancaster and Michaela di Leonardo (New York: Routledge, 1997), 71–81.
 35. J. K. Gibson-Graham, *The End of Capitalism (as We Knew It): A Feminist Critique of Political Economy* (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1996), 252.
 36. Nigel Thrift, *Knowing Capitalism* (London: Sage, 2005), 3–4.
 37. Warner, *Trouble with Normal*, 105.
 38. See Katherine M. Franke, “Becoming a Citizen: Reconstruction Era Regulation of African American Marriages,” *Yale Journal of Law and the Humanities* 11 (1999): 251–310; and Siobhan B. Somerville, “Queer Loving,” *GLQ* 11 (2005): 335–70.
 39. Foucault, *An Introduction*, 101.
 40. Kath Weston, *Families We Choose: Lesbians, Gays, Kinship* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), 210.
 41. Christopher Castiglia and Christopher Reed, “‘Ah, Yes, I Remember It Well’: Memory and Queer Culture in *Will and Grace*,” *Cultural Critique* 56 (2004): 174. Similarly, Weston notes that “as a term of art, ‘historical memory’ encompasses the devices people use to conceptualize the past . . . the processes through which they come to

- believe that they *have* a past: a past which they claim and which they imagine in turn exerts its claims upon them. In the United States, gender is constituted—partially, but significantly—from such time claims” (*Gender in Real Time: Power and Transience in a Visual Age* [New York: Routledge, 2002], 92).
42. See Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1955), 253–64; Edmund Leach, *Rethinking Anthropology* (London: Althone, 1961), 124–36.
 43. Matti Bunzl, foreword to *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes Its Object*, 2nd ed., by Johannes Fabian (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), ix–xxxiv. See also Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Pantheon, 1978). I consciously place “traditional anthropology” in the past, using the same temporal devices that anthropology used to construct the category of the primitive. As John Borneman has argued, this temporal structure predominant in anthropology shaped views of marriage as well, so that it is assumed that “birth, marriage, and death constitute a serial trinity at the center of the human life course” (“Until Death Do Us Part: Marriage/Death in Anthropological Discourse,” *American Ethnologist* 23 [1996]: 215–34). Linkages among heteronormativity, marriage, and temporality were solidified by, for instance, anthropological diagrams of kinship that used circles, triangles, and lines to represent families over time. As a result, in Borneman’s view, cultural analysis creates a temporal framework in which marriage “signals the security of a death to all possibilities for an unexpected history, an end to all histories outside the marriage, as if history thereafter were containable within the consanguinal and affinal relations of the kinship chart” (228). Borneman adds, however, that “occasions where marriage is symbolized need not always be reiterations of exclusionary practices” (228).
 44. Bill Maurer, *Mutual Life, Limited: Islamic Banking, Alternative Currencies, Lateral Reason* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 50.
 45. Jeff Dreyfuss, “A Coincidence of Metaphors: Notes on Two Modes of Text Building in the Indonesian Novel ‘Surabaya,’” *Journal of Asian Studies* 44 (1985): 755–63.
 46. Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 392–93.
 47. For instance, the Easter holiday is not within coincidental time even though it is linked to the lunar calendar; it is no longer seen as marking the vernal equinox but the Resurrection, a single event in a historical time understood as linear.
 48. Jonas Frykman and Orvar Löfgren, *Culture Builders: A Historical Anthropology of Middle-Class Life* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1987), 32.
 49. Dreyfuss, “Coincidence of Metaphors,” 762.
 50. James Clifford, “On Ethnographic Surrealism,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 23 (1981): 540.
 51. Walter Benjamin, *Reflections: Essays, Aphorisms, Autobiographical Writings* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1978), 180.
 52. The notion of Friday the thirteenth as a day of bad luck probably originates in medi-

- eval times and has a Christian origin; see en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Friday_the_13th (accessed February 27, 2006).
53. For further anthropological discussions of cultural conceptions of time, see, among others, Alfred Gell, *The Anthropology of Time: Cultural Constructions of Temporal Maps and Images* (Oxford: Berg, 1992); Carol J. Greenhouse, *A Moment's Notice: Time Politics across Cultures* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996).
 54. See Teresa de Lauretis, "Queer Theory: Lesbian and Gay Sexualities. An Introduction," *differences* 3, no. 2 (1991): iii–xviii.
 55. Warner, *Trouble with Normal*, 130–31.
 56. Wiegman, "Feminism's Apocalyptic Futures," 820–22.
 57. Warner, *Trouble with Normal*, 90.
 58. Butler, "Is Kinship Always Already Heterosexual?" 18.
 59. See Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* (London: Harvester/Wheat-sheaf, 1991).
 60. See Bunzl, foreword, xi.
 61. Warner, *Trouble with Normal*, 137.
 62. See Boellstorff, "Perfect Path."