

Untimely Forgetting

MELANCHOLIA, SEXUAL DISPOSSESSION,
AND QUEER FEMININITY

How can forgetting be constitutive of life and action? How can rethinking the relationship between forgetting, unforgetting, and melancholia produce alternative temporalities? I want to ask how queer femme melancholia as both forgetting and unforgetting can offer a politics and ethics of temporality, and an untimely reckoning with sexuality and gender.

I draw here on Kathleen Stewart's theorizations of "unforgetting" as distinct from what is usually called remembering—unforgetting refuses an easy distinction between the subject and object of remembrance. In unforgetting, "the past is never quite past but reverberates in the present, and 'things' are never quite set and contained but reverberate and echo in *signs* and excess signification" (Stewart 75).

One might think that forgetting and unforgetting are mutually exclusive—one either knows or doesn't know that the object is gone. This conventional definition of forgetting would understand the melancholic as lacking knowledge of the object's "real" absence. This definition of forgetting-as-lack, however, fails to take into account the ways that subjectivity is actually reliant upon forgetting as an active project. I want to argue that forgetting is not a passive process, but rather an active venture of tracing the edges of that which must be forgotten in order for subjectivity to be established and maintained. In this way, forgetting is not merely an excision, but is a laborious tending to that which is being forgotten, even while it is being reworked or resisted. Queer femininity exploits the political and ethical potential of this critical forgetting.

Combining unforgetting and forgetting practices can produce a melancholia that is not pathological, but rather politically useful.

Friedrich Nietzsche argues that forgetting is essential for life: “Forgetting is essential to action of any kind...it is altogether impossible to *live* at all without forgetting” (Nietzsche 62). Too much remembering prevents one from creating a life in the present, for it can reduce the present to the past and prevent the creation of new subjectivities, cultures, and embodiments. However, such production must also contend with the continuing presence of past events, for to ignore or erase such histories enacts a violence that also prevents such constructions. The task then is to figure out “the boundary at which the past has to be forgotten if it is not to become the gravedigger of the present” (Nietzsche 62). To forget in this way is not to disregard past invocations of signifiers, but it is to refuse to concede that past uses are the only ones possible. Forgetting then is the labor of analyzing and transforming meaning, a laborious tending to that which has been and the creation of what can be out of the same materials. I want to argue that this labor of forgetting and unforgetting has the potential to queer notions of temporality.

Queering Temporality

As Lee Edelman, Judith Halberstam, and Beth Freeman have pointed out, generational logics solidify heteronormative reproductive futurity. Such a generational timeline sacrifices the present and past for the future, investing in a capitalist logic of accumulation whereby the present is continually asked to “remember the future.” It is for the sake of this projected future that the present is shaped and the past is invoked. As some psychoanalysis understands queerness as a mere developmental stage on the path to properly reproductive heterosexuality, and as heteronormativity is generational and teleological, we might see queerness as disrupting that temporality by refusing to move on and grow out of this “phase.” Unlike homonormative claims for inclusion in neoliberal society and generational time, queerness “forgets” to grow up into heterosexual domesticity and reproduction. As Halberstam puts it, “queer subcultures produce alternative temporalities by allowing their participants to believe that their futures can be imagined according to logics that lie outside of those paradigmatic markers of life experiences—namely, birth, marriage,

reproduction, and death” (Halberstam 2).

As part of this queer forgetting, queer femme “forgets” generationality as an adequate to understand time, community, and affect. Forgetting can be a strategy of resisting the heteronormative narrative, and a means to insist on and create the conditions for the survivability of queer lives not entirely outside of heteronormativity (or even heterosexuality), but also not entirely capturable by its terms. Selective forgetting can function as a queer femme melancholic resistance to teleological temporalities and embodiments, forcing into the present that which is supposed to be excised in order for the time of both heteronormative and homonormative generationality to proceed.

However, it is not just heteronormative and homonormative logics that invest in teleological time. Discourses of queerness that base their radicality on surpassing the past also do so, often through aligning femininity with a past that must be overcome. In such a temporality, what is “past” is often erased or denigrated as not-as-progressive or not-as-queer, where queerness is measured by its distinction from what is rendered “past.” Even when this past is not explicitly disavowed, it is

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often rendered a mere stepping stone on the road to contemporary queerness, valuing the past but only as a necessary (and somewhat shameful) stage through which we had to go to arrive at the fully queer present. As Elizabeth Freeman points out, this conservative understanding of politics and history “consign[s] to the irretrievable past anything that challenges a dominant vision of the future” (Freeman 734).

However, Freeman also draws attention to the ways that those temporalities that insist femininity remember its proper temporal place (in the past) are unsuccessful in fully structuring such history. As she writes, “some bodies, in registering on their very surfaces the co-presence of several historically-specific events, movements, and collective pleasures” articulate “a kind of *temporal* transitivity that does not leave feminism, femininity, or other ‘anachronisms’ behind” (Freeman 729). This eruption into the present of that which is supposed to be past and gone disrupts a presentism that assumes its transgressivity via the disavowal of the past. In this way, queer femininity’s forgetting of such a temporality becomes a way to reckon with “an uncontrol-

lable past, the uncontrollability of the past, its inability to explain the present” (Freeman 741).

The Politics of Queer Femininity

I want to suggest that *femme* can be read as a melancholic refusal to give up certain signifiers of femininity or a forgetting that femininity must signify heterosexuality. If sexed bodies are constructed through heterosexual norms of femininity, queer femininities of multiple genders and sexes can call attention to this construction. They emphasize the queer potentials for inhabiting femininity not as a natural category, and not as a freely chosen identity, but rather as a site of contestation and contradiction, whose pleasures emerge from the friction between such norms and their excess. *Femme* forgetting and unforgetting can resist such heteronormative and homonormative discourses not by simply refusing them (as if it were that easy), but by catachrestically incorporating and transforming them.

If femininity is that which certain discourses of homonormativity (and even certain masculinist dyke cultures) demand that queers let go of, we might read

femme as forgetting to leave femininity behind, as refusing the narratives that would render femininity anachronistic, unfeminist, unqueer, or too flamboyant for “proper” homosexuality. The effort to excise femininity from contemporary queerness, often because of its presumed too problematic history, needs to be understood as grounded in a teleological temporality, where what will be follows inevitably from what was. This type of temporality allows no room for the transformations or productions of new femininities. Critically queer femininities must “forget” this teleology if they are to produce new ways of being in the world.

I also want to point out that such forgetting is intertwined with practices of unforgetting, and must not be understood as erasing genealogies of violence. In fact, the process of forgetting entails an often painful reckoning with such genealogies in its struggle to construct new ways of being. Critically queer femininities cite the violences of both heteronormativity and homonormativity, and “unforget” the ways that both produce and are produced through practices of colonialism, racism, neoliberal capitalist expansion, and state and domestic violence. In fact, queer femininities must contend with such practices

if they are to be critical, for genealogies of femme that excise the co-constitution of racism and heterosexism, whorephobia and femmephobia, and misogyny and classism are complicit in their workings.

In addition to unforgetting that which heteronormativity would like to disregard, queer femme illustrates the ways that homonormative regimes also exclude gendered, raced, and classed bodies that exceed their terms. Homonormativity enacts what Jasbir Puar calls “the ascendancy of whiteness” (Puar 24), upholding rather than critiquing heterosexist and racist norms of monogamy, procreation, a gender binary, whiteness, and upward economic and social mobility. In contrast, critically queer femininities can critique such a will to legitimacy by unforgetting the violences of such desires. Unforgetting such communal violences does not collapse these signifiers into these violent histories, but rather demands an unending interrogation of such genealogies and their undeniably present manifestations. Combining unforgetting and forgetting practices can produce a melancholia that is not pathological, but rather politically useful. Such a melancholia opens up space to examine the ways that unforgetting and forgetting serve not only

as means of establishing subjectivities, but also of destabilizing and undoing them. In this way, melancholia is also a dispossession of identity, revealing how our bodily lives are implicated in and only established through our ties to others.

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