Article

Thinking the future otherwise: Queer futures and queer utopias

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Abstract
Discussions within queer time studies often hinge upon a simplistic binary division between Lee Edelman's anti-futurism and José Esteban Muñoz's queer utopianism. This article aims to reframe this discourse, acknowledging its limitations and proposing alternative approaches to conceptualizing the future through a queer lens. Beginning with a brief overview of both the queer anti-social thesis and future-oriented utopias, this article explores alternative, critical frameworks for future-making praxis such as Jussi Parikka's 'counter-futuring' and Bahar Noorizadeh's 'weird-futuring'. Leveraging these frameworks and Muñoz's suggestion to investigate novel queer epistemologies within queer art, the article then examines Zach Blas' 'xeno-telos' and micha cárdenas' 'queer prototyping', as paradigmatic examples of queer future-making beyond the referred dichotomy. In conclusion, this article argues for a diversification of queer time/future politics, advocating for partial, precarious and open-ended approaches to future-oriented thinking; approaches that embrace the unknown, trial and error and unexpected possibilities, thus fostering, new, diversified and radically engaged queer temporal politics.

Keywords
future, temporalities, time, queer, utopia

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Introduction

Queer theory encompasses a multitude of perspectives, one of which is its critical examination of temporalities (Yekani et al., 2013). While queer theories have expanded temporal thinking to encompass various proposals and possibilities, a recurring and oversimplified dichotomy persists in much of the discourse: the 'pro-' vs. 'anti-' future debate. Therefore, this paper begins with a critical reevaluation of the current simplistic framing of queer time theories as a binary choice between 'yes vs. no' future – a framework often employed to delineate the genealogy of queer temporalities or position newer interventions within one of these stances.

The 'yes vs. no future' dichotomy is commonly exemplified through references to Muñoz's (2009) 'cruised utopia' juxtaposed with Edelman's (2007) 'no future'. Consequently, a persistent 'Muñoz vs. Edelman' discourse pervades many works on temporalities within queer theories. Within the diverse definitions of 'future', queer theories frequently adopt a shared understanding of the 'future' as a time frame following the present – a moment yet to come, spanning a range of periods from the immediate to the distant future. Accordingly, the concept of the 'future' within this article adheres to this definition. On the one hand, rejecting the future in favour of a focus on the present has been criticized for disregarding those queer individuals facing precarious and violent circumstances in the present. On the other hand, future-oriented, utopian thinking has been critiqued as naïf, homonormative and potentially proto-totalitarian. However, it is crucial to recognize that neither Edelman nor Muñoz reduced their contributions to a simple 'yes' or 'no' stance regarding the future. Post-Edelman, post-Muñoz queer temporalities have at times oversimplified their contributions to a binary debate, yet both scholars complicated this framework through more nuanced perspectives.

The primary objective of this article is to propose novel frameworks for the study of queer temporalities; frameworks that, while acknowledging the contributions of Muñoz and Edelman, aim to (1) move beyond their omnipresence within the field, and (2) transcend dichotomous 'yes vs. no future' paradigms by simultaneously embracing Edelman's critical anti-sociality and Muñoz's hopeful futurism. To achieve this goal, the paper begins by delving into Muñoz and Edelman's theories, and their circulation within work on queer temporalities. It then engages with various critical genealogies of future and utopian thinking, including critical utopias, critical design or counter-futuring. Finally, attention is drawn to critical futuring approaches within contemporary queer art, specifically micha cárdenas' (2010, 2012) 'queer prototyping', and Zach Blas (2021) 'xeno-telos'. Both the critical futuring traditions referenced, and cárdenas and Blas' theory-practice projects serve as novel frameworks within queer temporality studies, *queering* the 'yes vs. no future' discourse.

Discussing queer futures

The modern language association panel and Lee Edelman's no future

During the U.S.A-based Annual Convention of the Modern Language Association (henceforth, MLA) on December 27, 2005, a panel title 'The anti-social thesis in queer theory' convened. Moderated by Caserío, the panel featured Lee Edelman, Jack Halberstam, José Esteban Muñoz and Tim Dean, who engaged in discussions of queer scholar Bersani. Bersani's (1987) fundamental article 'Is the rectum a grave?' and his book *Homos* (1995) were instrumental in anti-assimilationist queer propositions. Queer anti-assimilationism is an umbrella term which brings together queer statements rejecting the current social orders. This rejection stems from the analysis of cis-heterosexuality as a normative force that sanctions queer bodies and subjectivities while perpetuating social violence and injustice, as articulated by Rich's (1980) 'compulsory heterosexuality', Wittig's (1992) 'heterosexual contract' and Butler's (1990) 'heterosexual matrix'. Against this situation, Bersani suggests disengaging from the cis-heteronormative society.

Bersani's anti-social stance also critiqued the increased trend of institutional and citizenship integration within gay and lesbian activism, epitomized by the push for legal marriage and inclusion in national armed forces. This critique anticipates later analysis of homonormativity (Duggan, 2002) and homonationalism (Puar, 2007). Ultimately, Bersani provocatively questioned 'Should a homosexual be a good citizen?' (1995: 113), offering a resounding negative answer and contributing to the notion of 'queer unbelonging' (Caserío et al., 2006: 819).

This critique against respectability and integration politics is commonly referred to as the 'queer antisocial thesis' (Bernini, 2017), often linked to discussions on queer temporality, particularly queer futures politics. The MLA panel exemplifies this connection, evolving from a discussion of Bersani's anti-social proposal to a broader debate on queer temporality politics – the 'temporal turn' within the framework of the queer anti-social thesis.[1]

The primary catalyst for the 'temporal turn' is Lee Edelman's *No Future* (2007). In essence, *No Future* revolves around 'The Child', which Edelman considers the metaphorical embodiment of heteronormative temporal, reproductive politics. 'The Child', Edelman suggests, symbolizes the epitome of the heterosexual 'Futurchurch'. Through 'The Child', and its fervent protection, the heterosexual society perpetuates itself towards the future. A quintessential example lies in the 'pro-family', 'child protection' movement, a transnational backlash against recently acquired LGBT+ rights (Bayramoğlu, 2021). Hence, Edelman's (2007) negative turn entails both a literal and abstract rejection of 'The Child': forsaking reproduction but also renouncing the future, as implied by his book's title. It signifies a refusal of heterosexual reproductive politics and, simultaneously, the

relinquishment of any queer endeavours to envision and construct a future because, as suggested by Edelman, any future-oriented thought will inevitably be tethered to normative social reproduction.

During the aforementioned MLA panel, Edelman steadfastly upheld his anti-future principles. He denounced queer future politics as 'liberal utopianism' (in Caserío et al., 2006: 823), which, according to him, is a deception – a ploy perpetuated by the normative regime to ensure its own continuance. Halberstam also aligns with anti-social presentism during the panel, albeit from the point of cultural studies. Halberstam's anti-social proposal is particularly attuned to anything that unsettles the cis-heteronormative system. Queer negativity, he posits, encompasses 'to fail, to make a mess, to fuck shit up, to be loud, unruly, impolite, to breed resentment, to bash back, to speak up and out, to disrupt, assassinate, shock, and annihilate' (in Caserío et al., 2006: 824). He further expounds on this notion in his fundamental work *The Queer Art of Failure* (Halberstam, 2011), a cornerstone of queer theory.

On the opposite side of the panel's discussion, we encounter Dean, who links the negative anti-social thesis and Edelman's anti-future proposition to far-right, reactionary rhetoric. Dean posits that directly aligning queer theory with the destabilization and 'elimination' of 'The Child' implies either agreement with or at least a shared argumentation with 'right-wing fantasies about how 'the homosexual agenda' undermines the social fabric' (in Caserío et al., 2006: 826).

José Esteban Muñoz's cruised utopia

Queer genealogies often situate José Esteban Muñoz as the primary counterpoint to Edelman's 'no future' thesis. During the MLA panel, Muñoz articulated his pro-future arguments, which he later expanded upon in his influential work *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (2009). Muñoz contends that anti-future stances are a-critical pursuit of 'extremity, righteousness, or affirmation of newness' (in Caserío et al., 2006: 825), rather than offering a viable solution to queerphobic violence. His critique also takes on a gendered and racialized dimension: Muñoz characterizes queer anti-futurism, or presentism, as 'the white man's last stand' (in Caserío et al., 2006: 825). He supports his argument with a simple assertion: for many queer individuals, especially BIPOC queers, trans individuals, migrants, neurodiverse individuals, disabled queers or the undocumented, radically embracing presentism's 'right now' is an impossibility given their everyday experiences of violence. For them, a conceivable alternative lies in a time beyond the present – namely, the future. Here lies Muñoz's radical utopian optimism, an outlook that he acknowledges may invite critiques of 'naivete, impracticality, or lack of rigor' (in Caserío et al., 2006: 825), yet remains inexorable.

In Muñoz's oeuvre, queer futurity attains ontological significance: in *Cruising Utopia* (Muñoz, 2009) he posits that queerness inherently embodies a future, a state that has yet to materialize. The opening lines of the book encapsulate this perspective: 'Queerness is not yet here. Queerness is an ideality. Put another way, we are not yet queer, but we can feel it as the warm illumination of a horizon imbued with potentiality' (Muñoz, 2009: 1). From this premise, *Cruising Utopia* examines various artworks across diverse artistic mediums, conceptualizing them as utopian performances that offer glimpses of a conceivable future – a future worth striving for. Consequently, these artistic expressions unlock possibilities wherein a queer utopia, or multiple queer utopias, can manifest – therefore, they function as tools of 'queer world-making'. Initially introduced by Berlant and Warner (1998), 'queer world-making' described the construction of material and symbolic micro-cultures outside the norm, particularly centered around non-normative sexual practices. However, Muñoz re-conceptualizes the term to signify the active imagination of alternatives to the heterosexual status quo, fostered by queer individuals. This nexus between utopian optimism and queer world-making, epitomized in Muñoz's work, has become so explicit that scholars like Bayramoğlu (2022) reinterpret discussion on queer futures in terms of 'queer negativity' versus 'queer world-making'.

Anti-social queer scholars have critiqued Muñoz's utopian optimism, which they perceive as naive, as well as dangerously proto-totalitarian (Lancaster, 2000). Muñoz addresses these accusations directly in *Cruising Utopia*, aligning his work with the tradition of 'critical utopias' (Ashcroft, 2007), notably drawing from Ernst Bloch's *The Principle of Hope* (1995) – and, to a lesser extent, the theories of Jameson (2007). Bloch's political commitment lies with idealism and hope, yet he distinguishes between abstract and concrete utopias. On the one hand, Bloch (1995) defined abstract utopias as genuine, wishful imaginings that are de-contextualized from the historical conditions within which they emerge. For him, abstract utopias, removed from their sociopolitical context, are deemed ineffective. Conversely, Bloch and Muñoz emphasize concrete utopias, which engage with present social struggles and communities, fostering what Bloch (1995) terms 'educated hope', which Muñoz (2009) contrasts with pragmatic politics. The concept of 'critical utopias', as developed by Moylan (1986), involves hopeful, idealistic imaginings of emancipation while avoiding simplistic slogans and totalizing visions. Moylan's utopias prioritize 'process over system, autonomous and marginal activity over the imposed order of a center, human liberation over white/phallocratic control and the interrelationships of nature over human chauvinism' (Moylan, 1986: 211). Muñoz agrees with Moylan's utopia as a process, aligning, simultaneously, with Ruth Levitas' idea of 'utopia as a method' (Levitas, 2013).

In Muñoz's endeavour to *cruise* utopia, the aforementioned scholarship on critical utopias can engage with critical analyses of discourses surrounding

progress and optimism – a task that is already inherent in Muñoz's work. Berlant (2011), for example, exposes the 'progress tale' as a form of 'cruel optimism', whereby hopeful aspirations postpone the attainment of what Butler (2004) has called a 'livable' present, through ('*cruelly optimistic*') narratives of 'everything will be alright', or 'it will happen when it is supposed to happen'. While it is crucial to critique hegemonic discourses of progress for their role in perpetuating social reproduction, research on 'everyday utopias' (Cooper, 2014) underscores how tangible, small-scale utopian initiatives actively engage in utopian practices. By envisioning better futures, these projects exert a direct influence on the present, thereby challenging the artificial dichotomy between the present and the future.

Returning to critical examinations of hegemonic 'optimism' or 'progress', Ahmed's scholarship is foundational (2006, 2010, 2011). Ahmed analyzes the concept of 'happiness', arguing that normative systems prescribe certain 'orientations' towards predefined goals coded as desirable and happiness-inducing. These goals, which are often gendered, classed and racialized, include milestones such as marriage, employment and reproduction; and exclude individuals who do not conform to these normative standards – such as feminists, queer, BIPOC individuals or anti-establishment groups. When applied to a rigid conception of utopia – viewed as an 'orientation' towards a specific, desirable 'milestone' (such as a new social contract or a perfect city) – Ahmed's work serves as a reminder of the potential pitfalls of adhering to 'perfect', singular and static *proto-totalitarian* utopian frameworks. Just as hegemonic discourses of 'happiness' may function as exclusionary practices, uncritical future-oriented utopian thinking may also engender rigid 'orientations' or unchangeable 'goals'. It is important to note that not all scholarly and practical engagements with utopia are *proto-totalitarian*, as evidenced by research on critical and everyday utopias, and likewise, Muñoz's *cruised* utopia. Nevertheless, Ahmed's insights prompt us to critically examine and refine our future-oriented thinking.

Utopia may represent an idealized realm – a perfect place. Yet, a perfect place is inherently resistant to change, as any deviation from its ideal state would constitute imperfection. My contention is that when this approach to utopia is mobilized, we risk envisioning a biased, exclusionary and closed-off version of it. While utopian studies have approached utopia from diverse perspectives, and their idea of utopia explicitly diverges from static perfection, I believe that within queer studies, we run the risk of relying on a simplified reading of utopia as the described above: utopia as 'the' perfect aspiration. In this sense, while alternative futures can emerge through processes of direct and radical democracy, embracing diversity and inclusivity and championing social justice, future-making endeavours are often dictated by the will of individuals or microcollectives. This imposition of a desired future carries echoes of history's violent imposition of societal perfection, often at the expense of dissenting voices or those deemed incompatible with prevailing notions of 'excellence'. Just as

Edelman faced criticism for his proto-fascist entanglement of negativity and anti-social ideologies, similar scrutiny can be applied to hermetic, strict utopian visions, which risk veering into totalitarianism. For instance, 19th-century feminist literary utopias depicted all-female, paradisical worlds, only to later face criticism for their xenophobic and racist societal imaginings (Roberts, 1993).

This is not to suggest, in any way, that Muñoz advocated for the imposition of a single, immutable queer future. From the title of his work, *Cruising Utopia*, Muñoz intimates a future characterized by fluidity and openness to infinite possibilities. Nonetheless, I find it worthwhile to assess queer future politics from a pluralistic standpoint, especially those politics that grapple with the concept of 'utopia'. This is particularly pressing given the ubiquity of the 'queer utopia' as an almost obligatory reference point in queer studies, especially within the realms of queer cultural and art studies.

Moving beyond the 'Edelman vs. Muñoz' frame

The 'Edelman vs. Muñoz' framework permeates queer studies across various disciplines, framing the engagement of queer theories with future-oriented thinking as either a rejection of the future (Edelman) or viewing the future as the ontological possibility of queerness (Muñoz). This framework also underscores the distinction between anti-social presentism and utopian futurism. Limiting the discussion to these two terms exclusively perpetuates a binary mode of thinking that strays far from queer epistemologies. Therefore, it is imperative to consider alternative approaches to the issue of queer futures and to reconcile existing positions. For instance, if we view Muñoz's cruised utopias as endeavours that disrupt and subvert normative optimism and social happiness, then paradoxically, Muñoz's future-making can be seen as an act of anti-social radicalism akin to Edelman's perspective. Similarly, if we conceive Edelman's negativity as a stance positioned outside the heterosexual society, then the manifestations of this positionality may offer glimpses into alternative, emancipated spaces and times, echoing Muñoz's proposals.

Consequently, it is unnecessary to pit these two positions against each other, compelling scholars and activist to align with one side or the other. Rejecting cis-heteronormative conventions constitutes an anti-assimilationist, anti-integrationist stance, considered negative. However, when we envision a realm beyond societal norms, devoid of compulsory assimilation or integration, we also adopt a positive approach that may entail imagining alternative futures. Viewing Muñoz's and Edelman's proposals as coexisting in productive tension gives rise to new questions and ideas. How can we construct livable futures that are pluralistic, adaptable to change, yet imbued with the robustness necessary to foster active optimism in the present, rooted in the rejection of cis-heteronormativity? Or, perhaps more succinctly: How can we *future* (queerly) otherwise?

To *future*, otherwise

In the following pages, my primary objective is to present some preliminary and incomplete responses to the question 'How can we *future* otherwise?' These proposals aim to serve as initial points for further elaboration and engagement within queer temporalities. My intention is to seek out and share visions of queer futures that maintain the mobilizing power of striving for a better future while ensuring that this vision remains grounded in a critical, anti-normative present, steering clear of naivety and totalitarianism.

Drawing inspiration from Muñoz's (2009) inquiry into contemporary art as a rich arena for contemplating queer theories and time-oriented thinking, I turn to the works of two artists who offer alternative perspectives on queer futures. Specifically, I will highlight the contributions of Blas and micha cárdenas. From Blas (2021), I will focus on the concept of 'xeno-telos', while with cárdenas (2010), I will examine her reimagining of the term 'queer world-making' as 'queer prototyping' – a concept she has put into practice in various of her 'transreal' performances (cárdenas, 2012). However, before delving deeper into these two approaches, I will contextualize them within two broader conceptual frameworks: Parikka's (2018, 2022) 'counter-futuring' and Noorizadeh's (2022) 'weird-futuring'.

Counter-futuring

My introduction to the concept of 'counter-futuring' occurred during the namesake symposium organized by Özgün Eylül İşcen and Shintaro Miyazaki and held on September 22, 2022, at Berlin's Institute for Cultural Inquiry. The term initially emerged in Jussi Parikka's concept of 'counterfuturism' (2018), which draws attention to contemporary artistic productions rooted in decolonial or anti-colonial perspectives – for instance, Gulf Futurism (Balsom, 2020), Arab Futurism (Nazif, 2018), Sinofuturism (Remy-Handfield, 2020) and Black Quantum Futurism (Phillips, 2015, 2021). Nonetheless, counterfuturism extends beyond artistic categorization, addressing the epistemological, philosophical and geopolitical implications of these practices. It challenges Western temporal norms – referred to as 'chrono-normativity' (Freeman, 2010), 'reproductive time' (Halberstam, 2005) and 'straight time' (Boellstorff, 2007) – rejecting linear narratives of progress while also critiquing Orientalist, colonial and imperialist time-related ideas, such as Black culture as belonging to a prehistoric era (sic.), or colonial imaginings of fantastic/futuristic civilizations awaiting discovery in exploited lands (sic.). Furthermore, counterfuturism envisions futures that 'are not explicitly or easily resolved as either utopia or dystopia' (Parikka, 2018: 54), instead embracing 'temporal complications' (Parikka, 2018: 55).

Parikka further developed the concept 'counterfuturism' during discussions within the 'Counter-N' research and publication project. Directed by Miyazaki

and İşcen and funded by the Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin, the 'Counter-N' project focuses on critical approaches to contemporary technology, challenging its extractivist, colonial, racist and patriarchal logics. Within this frame, Parikka reconceptualized his term into 'counter-futuring', utilizing the '-ing' gerund to emphasize ongoing critique, performativity and dynamism. This approach acknowledges the fluidity and multiplicity of alternative timelines, rejecting fixed and monolithic understandings of the future in favour of dynamic, open-ended possibilities (Parikka, 2022: 1). To this, he adds:

> '(…) futuring as a suitably open-ended and yet crucial ethico-political, even ethico-aesthetic horizon of an action: to refuse the bitterness we face on a daily basis as a weight that would limit futures and to refuse the work of futuring done for us (whether in terms of calculated futures of prediction machines, or the narrative futures that either say there is no future or that the future is what is already being prescribed)'. (Parikka, 2022: 1)

In this definition, there is a clear connection between Parikka's and Muñoz's proposals. They both challenge anti-futurism by acknowledging that the 'no future' reality is already the present of many marginalized individuals. This underscores the urgency of imagining a better tomorrow. While Muñoz approaches this alternative imagining through the concept of utopia, Parikka's counter-futuring proposal involves future-oriented thinking that encompasses a broader spectrum of temporal creation practices. This allows for the consideration of futures beyond the confines of utopian models. Such considerations may involve envisioning worse futures, reevaluating past narrating, engaging in present interventions without futuristic aspirations and deconstructing the linear, progressive narrative of white, cis-masculine and colonial history to reveals its artificiality – all these practices are counter-futuring practices.

Weird-futuring

Parikka's comprehensive understanding of what (counter)future-making entails is also shared by Noorizadeh. Noorizadeh (2022) was also interviewed as part of the 'Counter-N' project, where she coined the term 'weird-futuring'. She questions the prevailing conceptualization of contemporary futuring practices, which is often framed in binary terms: (1) 'the western variant that's happily techno-solutionist and content with quick ahistorical fixes', and (2) 'the emergence of supposedly global southern variations on sci-fi – in various types of ethnic, non-western futurisms' (Noorizadeh, 2022). Noorizadeh argues that both visions perpetuate the same Western, colonial idea of the future, which hyper-technological cities serving as the emblem of this temporal epistemology.

The normative future described by Noorizadeh is also shaped by the latest prediction technologies, involving massive data processing and investments by venture capital enterprises. Speculation, investment, algorithms, 3D renders and data prediction, they all contribute to this normative vision of the future, which relies in discovery, calculation and imposition of future events. This situation restricts the ability to intervene in the future, or to *future-make*, to those who control materially and epistemologically the instruments of prediction.

As these future-making praxes are based on what is knowable, predictable or calculable, Noorizadeh proposes disarticulating them by embracing 'the weirdness'. This approach might engage with 'weird fiction' (Lovecraft, 2008), a literary horror genre devoted to the uncanny, the strange, the supernatural or the anti-natural. Therefore, 'weird-futuring' disrupts the paradigm of futuring prediction by fostering the unexpected, the unknowable, and the surprising as essential elements in future-making processes. This approach liberates futures from preconceived notions imposed by power, predetermined by algorithms or inscribed within the linear narrative of Western progress. Therefore, weird-futuring momentarily or permanently destabilizes the existing system by embracing the unexpected. In Noorizadeh's words:

> 'Weird-Futuring', which I think resonates with the activity of speculation, as another word for non-essentializing a matter of experience to allow the expectation to unbound itself from experience and become open-ended. In a way, to reclaim the state of unknowability that the concept of future is referring to from the politics of time. When we are at 'risk' (literally a 'society of risk') we give in to the comfort and the insurance provided by positivist knowledge, by what's known to us in advance. But at the extremes of some collective modes of risk-taking – revolution and the rave being two prime examples – we let go of knowledge. Weirding for me, in this sense, has something to do with revolution'. (Noorizadeh, 2022: 1)

As indicated by Noorizadeh, while positivism offers predetermined paths in the face of uncertainty, there exists revolutionary, critical potential in futures that remain unknown. Weird-futuring precisely fosters that 'not knowing in advance', 'risky' futuring, because, as the author suggests, hegemonic, 'close-ended' futures perpetuate systematic, modernist epistemologies.

Therefore, on the one hand, counter-futuring proposes a futurism that diverges from normative constructions of Western, colonial, white, cis-male thinking. On the other hand, weird-futuring embraces the unexpected, the surprising and even the *queer*, as tools for constructing futures in a broader, less monolithic and more liberated manner. In opposition to a radical rejection of the future and, concurrently, a monolithic notion of utopia, both counter-futuring and weird-futuring work as alternatives where future is neither abandoned nor reduced to a singular, immutable scenario. Drawing upon counter-futuring as an alternative model of

temporal thinking and weird-futuring as an active practice of destabilizing normative narratives, particularly cis-heterosexual ones, we can examine two artistic practices that have contemplated *futuring* precisely in these broad, diverse and open terms. These practices are, as mentioned earlier, Blas (2021) 'xeno-telos', and cárdenas' (2010) 'queer prototyping'.

Xeno-telos and queer prototyping

Xeno-telos

Blas is a contemporary queer artist known for his multimedia artworks that delve into themes such as technology, digital culture, international power dynamics, geopolitics, surveillance capitalism, gender, identity and resistance in our hypermediated world. In 2021, Stenberg Press released the first comprehensive book of Blas' work, titled *Unknown ideals* (2021). The book features critical analysis of his key pieces, contextualized within theoretical frameworks by various authors engaging with Blas' art. Within the book, Blas penned a reflective text on his life's work, elucidating the conceptual threads that have underpinned his artistic practice over the years. Notably, one of these conceptual threads in the notion of 'xeno-telos'.

Blas' artistic oeuvre exhibits a preoccupation with temporality, particularly the future. For instance, his short film *Jubilee 2033* (2018) envisions a future where feminist and queer guerrillas seize control of Silicon Valley, incarcerating its executives and disrupting the internet as we know it. Similarly, his mixed-media installation *Icosahedron* (2019) features a 'prediction magic ball' containing a 3D-rendered elf serving as an 'oracle' capable of making technological prophecies based on influential texts from Silicon Valley ideology. Through works like these, Blas interrogates the future, particularly the technologically mediated future shaped by the economical and ideological dominance of Silicon Valley companies and their venture capital enterprises.

Blas (2021) critiques this prevailing narrative of an unidimensional future propagated by Silicon Valley – what philosopher Hui (2022) calls 'mono-technology'. According to Blas, Silicon Valley entrepreneurs, thinkers, *gurus* and communicators disseminate ideologies, epistemologies and other discourses about the technologically mediated future. These narratives are then assimilated into social commonplaces, while significant investments are made to ensure their actualization, through a clear performance of intervened path-dependency routes (Mahoney and Schensul, 2009). Blas argues for a more expansive and diverse conception of the future – Hui's 'cosmotechnics' (Hui and Lemmens, 2021) – : 'I perceive the future, like the horizon, as expansive and multiple: the very condition of potentiality', he states (Blas, 2021: 26). In proposing 'xeno-teloses', Blas seeks to foster alternative futures beyond the constraints of Silicon Valley's techno-capitalist paradigm.

The term 'telos' denotes the endpoint, goal or purpose towards which futuristic thinking tends. In path-dependency theory, multiple events over time are interconnected in complex, accumulative cause–effect linear trajectories that lead to a particular endpoint or 'telos' (Mahoney and Schensul, 2009). In utopian thinking, 'the utopia' is the corresponding 'telos'. Blas acknowledges the pitfalls of 'teleological' thinking, likening it to a potentially totalitarian exercise wherein a select few impose their vision of utopia onto society. Similarly, in a path-dependency teleological analysis, the 'telos' – the 'utopia' – may be viewed as the culmination of a linear, unidirectional thread, one that disregards unexpectedness or change. In response to this 'cocksureness' (Blas, 2021: 29), or dogmatism, Blas queries: 'What are the alternatives to teleology?' (Blas, 2021: 29). His response does not advocate for the abandonment of all future-oriented aspirations, as Edelman would (2007). Rather, his approach entails 'queering' the future, an exercise akin to Noorizadeh's (2022) 'weird-futuring'. This is where the notion of 'xeno-telos' emerges:

> 'Etymologically, 'xeno-' stems from the ancient Greek τέλος, meaning strange, foreign, alien, and unknown. Xeno-teloses, then, describe ends that are obscure and obscured, incalculable, clandestine, not yet identified, absent, and impossible. A thing's telos may be indeterminable fuel to its state of being, or a telos may be deliberately or unintentionally hidden: both are xeno-teloses. Whether ontologically opaque or kept secret, or both, a thing's purpose can be deemed a xeno-telos if its unable to be known'. (Blas, 2021: 26)

A xeno-telos represents a future that remains radically open. It is impossible to predict exactly what will occur within a xeno-telos. Moreover, that makes xeno-teloses particularly intriguing is their explicit acknowledgement that in the imagined future, there will be unexpected, unfamiliar encounters – xeno-encounters.

In this regards, it is captivating to juxtapose Blas' concept of 'xeno-teloses' with Ahmed's queer phenomenology (2006). As briefly mentioned earlier, Ahmed's queer phenomenology conceptualizes orientation as a normative system. Social discourses, common language and shared epistemologies often associate non-normative sexualities to 'disorientation' or 'aimlessness'. On the contrary, 'oriented' society is constructed normatively, with cis-heteronormativity and white supremacy as its primary shaping forces. According to Ahmed, 'oriented', normative society relies on a set of 'objects' – broadly defined to include concepts such as marriage and motherhood – which work as the 'endpoints' or desirable 'teloses'. Therefore, they prescribe mandatory paths and directions, while stigmatizing as 'deviant', 'disoriented', any paths or individuals that diverge from these trajectories.

By integrating Ahmed's spatial perspective – where objects in space dictate our paths, generating both straight tracks and oblique deviations – with Blas'

temporal perspective, we can discern that teloses represent the culmination of predetermined life or societal sequences, ostensibly deemed natural or true, but shaped by artificial power structures. These spatial and temporal performances exert violence on those who exist outside these teloses, or those who reject orientating themselves towards these objects or futures. However, Ahmed posits that 'if orientations point us to the future, (…) then they also keep open the possibility of changing directions and of finding other paths' (Ahmed, 2006: 178). Therefore, xeno-teloses become these oblique, queer directions, diverging from the prescribed track and leading to spaces where 'accidental or chance encounters do happen, and they redirect us and open up new worlds' (Ahmed, 2006: 19). Moreover, these deviations from socially prescribed trajectories may arise either spontaneously or as deliberate actions spurred by social movements and struggles. As Blas articulates:

> '(…) social movements do not claim to know a priori end goal of humanity, nor to speak for humanity as a whole. Their directional desires are situated, historical, and amenable to multiple political systems, whether socialism, communism, or a reformed democracy. Social movements for decolonization and environmental and racial justice desire an equitable world, in which oppressed peoples are liberated and the environment is cared for and respected. These movements do not require a preordained ultimate purpose, or even a belief that human have a telos. They struggle, experiment, organize, and negotiate, aware that their desired outcomes are conditional'. (Blas, 2021: 28-19)

In the examples presented by Blas, we observe how progressive social movements can envision the future without necessarily relying on a predetermined idea of what that future should entail. Consequently, these consciously motivated xeno-teloses embody intricate, varied and tumultuous visions and enactments of futures that veer away from the calm, secure or one-dimensional modeling of a utopia.

Therefore, what can xeno-teloses offer to transcend the dichotomy 'no-future vs. utopia' within queer theories? First, xeno-teloses prompt us to recognize that queer social struggle inherently contribute to shaping the future. By striving to make life more livable for marginalized communities, queer movements inherently construct alternative futures in time and space, diverging from the present where violence persists. They, whether conscious or unconscious, engender various xeno-teloses that envision the future as an indeterminate realm, replete with unforeseen encounters yet driven by emancipatory politics. Consequently, is Edelman's radical presentism a viable option, or merely a philosophical unattainable ideal? Is it possible for queer performances to avoid *futuring*? Explicitly designing the future is not essential to *futuring* political actions. Simultaneously, we need not have a clear vision of the future to commence

dismantling present injustices. This act of dismantling initiates a transformative movement, irrespective of whether we possess a blueprint for the post-revolutionary world. Returning to Ahmed, merely stepping out established norms of orientation sets us on a path whose destination remains uncertain. Yet, this uncertainty should not defer us from deviating from the establish course: 'the hope of changing directions is that we don't always know where some paths may take us' (Ahmed, 2006: 21).

Despite individual or micro-collective endeavours in orientation and prognostication, xeno-teloses aid in envisioning a future-making process that is emancipated, adaptable to change and cognizant of potential future violence, without forgoing efforts to overcome present-day oppressions. What makes this discussion intriguing is that xeno-teloses relinquish the notion of a utopia without relinquishing the pursuit of a better future. As Blas articulates, the 'horizon of possibility and the future are not fated or locked into a monolithic trajectory. With a shock, an enigma or a weird rupture, these xeno-teloses perpetually point to unceasing fluctuations of desire, materiality and intention, actuality and potentiality' (Blas, 2021: 30).

In conclusion, Blas' xeno-teloses represent attempts to imagine the future that diverge from closed-ended visions of what it should be. They suggest that social struggles, including queer, embark on a path of future-making that is ontologically open to the unknown, yet possesses the capacity to interrupt social injustices. Therefore, they enable us to *future* without an explicit idea of the future, fostering fluidity, change and unexpectedness – qualities akin to queer perspectives.

Queer prototyping

One approach to encourage and promote xeno-teloses involves testing alternatives. This entails the process of making, testing, erring and refining conceptions of how the present and the future should unfold. micha cárdenas coined the term 'queer prototyping' to describe this method, which she exemplifies in one of her most recognized performances: *Becoming dragon* (2008), which originally took place at the Center for Research in Computing and the Arts (CRCA), at the University of California San Diego.

Becoming dragon is a performance rich in complexity. At its core, it questions the requirement imposed on trans individuals to undergo a one-year 'Real Life Experience' in their self-determined gender before gaining access to gender-affirming surgeries and, in some cases, hormone therapy. cárdenas proposes an alternative to this requirement by suggesting that the one-year 'Real Life Experience' could be replaced with a 365-h experience within a virtual reality simulator, such as *Second Life*. Furthermore, this alternative is not confined to gender alone (i.e., experiencing the gender one self-determines); it extends to inhabiting a species other than human. Notable, cárdenas chooses to inhabit a

fantasy species: a dragon. Therefore, cárdenas assumed the avatar of a dragon for 365-h within the virtual realm of *Second Life*, utilizing a virtual reality head-mounted display and a motion capture suit to transpose her physical presence into the digital environment. At the conclusion of the performance, she posed the provocative question: 'Under the gaze of the normative system, can I now become a dragon?' While this question serves as an artistic provocation, its social, political and epistemological implications transcend mere eccentricity.

By embodying the performative body of a dragon, cárdenas illustrates that the experiences of trans individuals and their hormonal and surgical needs cannot be reduced to a mandatory period of 'living in the correct gender'. As emphasized by trans activists (Serano, 2016), examinations and assessments aimed at verifying whether an individual's perceived gender identity aligns with their self-determined identity perpetuate the gender binary system and disproportionally impact trans individuals. This is because trans individuals are compelled to conform to exaggeratedly hyper-feminine or hyper-masculine expressions of their gender identity to gain validations from medical and legal authorities, which often do not correspond to their true gender expression. Non-binary trans individuals, as well as those with diverse expressions of masculinity and femininity, are marginalized within this medical-bureaucratic validation process and are forced into narrow definitions of trans femininity and masculinity.

Another notable aspect of cárdenas' performance is her utilization of virtual reality as an artistic medium:

'With *Becoming dragon*, I sought to explore two distinct material strata of technology, virtual worlds and biotechnology, both of which can be seen as technologies of transformation. From this perspective, one can consider new similarities and progressions or unfoldings, distinct from historical, temporal analysis, or analysis that is centred on technological developments. Considering various components of becoming – embodied experiences, social experiences, psychological experiences, sexual experiences – virtual worlds and biotechnology have both unique and shared resonances and forces'. (cárdenas, 2010)

Consequently, the work of micha cárdenas converges transformative technologies with trans epistemologies of becoming to interrogate the entrenched, obligatory and temporally and corporeally codified criteria for trans experiences.

Reframing cárdenas' proposition within the framework discussed in this article, we can perceive hormone treatments and gender-affirming surgeries as the 'telos', or endpoints, of trans lives. From a cis-heteronormative perspective, which subsequently becomes trans-normative (Bradford and Syed, 2019; Johnson, 2016), it appears that the ultimate aspiration of trans individuals is to assimilate seamlessly into the binary framework of gender, eradicating any traces that might reveal their trans identity. Hormone treatments and surgeries

thus become coveted objectives within the heteronormative and trans-normative realm, while the mandated 'Real Life Experiences' year serves as the prescribed trajectory, the *straight* timeline, leading inevitably towards the 'telos' – commonly referred to as 'passing'.

Cárdenas' intervention, both technological and artistic, disrupts this temporal and spatial configuration by exposing its artificiality, arbitrariness and normative hegemony – through science-fiction and provocation. *Becoming dragon*, thus, emerges as a departure from the established path, an oblique trajectory that deviates from predetermined orientations and presents an alternative avenue – an alternative avenue aimed to a more viable present and future for trans individuals.

Becoming dragon is an example of cárdenas' 'queer prototyping'. Rather than explicitly envisioning or designing a utopia, cárdenas draws inspiration from DIY (Do It Yourself), DIWO (Do It with Others), and hacker cultures to suggest the practices of 'prototyping'. As cárdenas employs the term (cárdenas, 2010), prototyping denotes specific interventions in hardware, software, code, algorithms or their epistemological interconnections, aimed at probing new ways of utilizing, executing or understanding technologies. Typically, these prototypings are not motivated by a markedly futuristic or utopian agenda; indeed, they sometimes stem from unintended errors. In the realm of critical design (Dunne and Raby, 2013; Malpass, 2019), prototyping is commonly characterized as an open, creative and inquiry-oriented practice, diverging from conventional problem-solving design approaches or the pursuit of a final product. Instead, prototyping in critical design actively generates and refines ideas or proposals, thus engendering new possibilities and cultivating alternative modes of thinking through design. Notably, prototyping eschews the assumption of absolute knowledge and avoids the demand for an omniscient, arrogant understanding of current and future events, particularly of what constitutes the ideal outcome – the perfect utopia.

According do cárdenas, virtual worlds like *Second Life* offer a novel epistemological prospect, 'not a ridging of what Sedgwick calls the brute incommensurability (…) of the unknowability of the future', but a 'kind of rapid prototyping, a limited knowledge. Prototyping opens a space of knowledge, creating a test version which provides some information about the thing being prototyped, but not a complete knowledge of it' (cárdenas, 2010).

In the debates explored in this article, cárdenas' prototyping emerges as a significant point of dialogue with Muñoz's concept of queer world-making. Initially conceived to delineate the formation of LGBTIQA+ communities and subcultures on the fringes of cis-heteronormative society, queer world-making has evolved to encompass a broader spectrum, including sexual subcultures, as well as other queer imaginings and performances. Within art theory and criticism, queer world-making has become a standard reference for works that construct unmistakably queer universes. However, cárdenas' approach to prototyping

diverges from explicit notions of world or future design, favouring a more uncertain, error-prone and fluid approach to *futuring*. Perhaps we can update the notion of 'building the world we want' by crossing out, putting it under erasure and replacing it with prototyping: 'prototyping the world we want' (cárdenas, 2010).

This reconfiguration of the concept of making or building stems from an anti-omniscient and anti-totalitarian stance towards improving reality. The path to a better present/future is not entirely clear or certain. To achieve it, we must experiment, make mistakes and iterate until better solutions emerge. However, even these solutions may prove temporary, subject to replacement by newer prototypes. Instead of attempting to model or construct the world, prototyping a queer world or future allows room for failure, adaptation and ongoing experimentation.

> 'In this way we can remember that while the goal is to build this new world, there is a great deal of testing and experimentation to be done to get there. A prototype is different than a model as it is a space between a model and an actual implementation; a prototype realizes some of the qualities of the actual object to be created. This strategy is better suited to the constantly changing conditions of postmodern global capitalism and accounts for uncertainty. Maybe we don't know what the world we want looks like'. (cárdenas, 2010)

Through cárdenas' queer prototyping, we can cultivate a spectrum of nuanced approaches to future-making practices, distinct from those previously explored. Prototyping theory presents an avenue for transcending Edelman's negative presentism by actively intervening in the current moment with the explicit goal of bettering it and fostering more viable future trajectories. Simultaneously, prototyping offers a departure from utopian vision, as it accommodates doubt and error as integral elements within any political initiative oriented towards the future. Halberstam's influential work, *The Queer Art of Failure* (Halberstam, 2011) stands as a pivotal work in this regards, emphasizing a future that remains ontologically uncertain. In this context, queer prototyping emerges as a powerful tool for advancing Blas' notion of xeno-teloses. Within these conceptual frameworks, exercises in futurism unavoidably assume a stance of partiality and precariousness. While they may not guarantee utopian outcomes, they remain firmly rooted in a commitment to diversity, with a resolute aim of fostering more livable and inclusive futures.

Conclusions

The queer discourse surrounding the future has been framed within excessively dualistic terms. On one hand, there exists an anti-futuristic stance, associated with queer negativity and anti-sociality, predominantly advocated by Edelman

(2007). According to this viewpoint, the future is inherently cis-heteronormative, rendering any queer politic concerning time as futile and advocating a complete embrace of presentism. Conversely, we encounter a utopian-futuristic perspective, aligned with the notion of queer world-making and chiefly articulated by Muñoz (2009). Within this utopian paradigm, the present is rife with queer antagonism and racial violence that must be transcended, propelling queer politics unequivocally towards future-oriented endeavours – often articulated in terms of utopia.

The main approach of this essay aimed to transcend the dualistic discourse, striving to reconcile both propositions. I am drawn to the rejection of any totalitarian conception of the future espoused by Edelman's work while concurrently acknowledging the significance of viewing the future as a fruitful ground for emancipatory politics, thereby rejecting presentism. Nonetheless, while Muñoz's utopia is 'cruised' (2009), its pervasive overrepresentation in analysis of queer temporalities necessitates a fresh critical perceptive. In other words, there is a need to explore alternative approaches to conceptualizing queer futures.

Malaby cautions against utopian 'exceptionalism' (2007: 97), a concern that underpins the proposal presented in this essay as well. Perfect and promising utopias lead to uncritical and stagnant interpretations, harboring an omniscient totalitarianism under the guise of claiming to envision the ideal future. Muñoz (2009) was already cognizant of these proto-totalitarian interpretations of utopias, queering or cruising their utopian ethos. However, as I have consistently suggested throughout this text, static and oversimplified readings of Muñoz's propositions are pervasive within queer studies, particularly in cultural studies. Within these interpretations, Muñoz's utopia is often depicted as a mere 'imagining of a perfect future', particularly in contrast to Edelman's anti-futurism. In this regards, one of the main contributions of this article is to advocate for Muñoz's future-oriented perspective while eschewing overly simplistic utopian frameworks, considering diverse scholarship. Following Malaby's utopian exceptionalism, Lanier posits 'that space of closure, of imaginative accomplishment, does not necessarily imply the imagination of a concrete future state. Such concrete imaginings are anti-thetical to the open yearning for alternative ways of being implicit in utopian imaginings' (Lanier, 2022: 51). Building upon these critiques, Moylan suggests that, rather than singular utopia, we should embrace the idea of plural utopias, asserting that 'utopia will consist of utopias' (Moylan, 2000: 2017).

In this article, while retaining a commitment to utopian thought, I propose reconfiguring it in pluralistic terms and radically opening it to change. This essay also offers ideas for transcending the dichotomy between pro- and anti-future stances in queer theories, promoting a critical engagement with the present that forges a better future, without predetermining its specific contours. Instead of normative futurism, I advocate for incorporating Parikka's (2018, 2022) concept of counter-futuring into queer temporal politics. Counter-futuring

aims to destabilize the normative trajectory of Western, white, cis-heteronormative temporality and progress, by embracing diverse temporalities, multiple futures and alternative, non-Western, temporal configurations. Additionally, this article proposes drawing insights from Noorizadeh's (2022) notion of weird-futuring. The *weird* and que *queer* share undeniable affinities, both celebrating strangeness, unpredictability and surprise. Any futuristic discourse that seeks to suppress these elements not only veers towards totalitarianism but also falls short in its predictive capacity.

Blas' concept of 'xeno-telos' precisely aligns with this approach (Blas, 2021). The xeno-encounters happening in the future render it a terrain of the unknown. While we may speculate, design and intervene in the future, we must acknowledge the inherent uncertainness of what lies ahead. Moreover, any attempt to erase the *xeno* is inherently anti-queer. The unexpected, the marginal, the queer and the unknown have historically been and continue to be political categories central to our emancipatory struggle, deserving both protection and nurturing.

Finally, cárdenas' 'queer prototyping' (cárdenas, 2010) offers a departure from close, unchangeable, pseudo-omniscient future designs. In prototyping, we embrace dynamics of trial and error, unexpected successes and serendipitous results. In essence, queer prototyping embraces precarity as a fertile ground for the emergence of emancipatory politics. Through future prototyping, uncertainty and xeno-teloses are prioritized over normative, linear trajectories, and we are reoriented towards the unfamiliar and the unknown. These endeavours in counter- and weird-futuring open avenues for diverse, pluralistic and multifaceted engagements with the future, diversifying the binary debate between antisociality and queer world-making. In navigating the present and envisioning the future, xeno-teloses and queer prototyping may serve as invaluable tools in diversifying our queer politics of temporalities.

While this article is primarily theoretical in nature, its contributions transcend mere discourse. Its primary contribution, as emphasized throughout this text, lies in its endeavour to transcend the dichotomous debates surrounding the affirmation or negation of the future within queer theories. Consequently, it broadens the spectrum of ways to conceptualize and envisage the (queer) future, and, more broadly, it enriches and delves deeper into various ideas and proposals within the realm of queer temporalities. Additionally, the array of possibilities offered by queer future-making can also inform curricular, cultural, artistic and even activist practices. Drawing from the premises of xeno-telos or queer prototyping, creators and collectives are empowered to initiate – indeed, many are already doing so, albeit unconsciously – the construction of open, fluid futures. These futures are politically committed to emancipation, yet they run the risk of promoting a rigid conception of what such futures may involve. In this regards, the proposition put forth in this article, I contend, possesses the

capacity to emancipate future-making endeavours from the *burden* of *exemplarity* – or the pursuit of perfection. The diverse theoretical and practical pathways outlined in these pages illustrate how, without the need to meticulously outline the world we envision, we can prefigure and activate it across the diverse temporal landscapes of the future and the utopia.

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Note

1. The emergence of the queer anti-social thesis and the subsequent 'temporal turn' in queer studies can be traced back to a shared pivotal experience: the HIV/AIDS pandemic. The societal rejection of queer bodies during the pandemic, compounded by homophobia, serophobia and institutional violence, catalyzed anti-social perspectives within queer theories and activism. Concurrently, queered experiences of time during the pandemic – such as the temporalities of diagnosis, 'remaining time' and grief – further fuelled interest in temporalities among queer activists and scholars (Dean, 2011; Sedgwick, 1993).

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