

Michael J. Lecker

AAA 2011- FUTURE-FOCUSED PANEL

mlecker@gmu.edu

Faerie Futurity: The Social and Material Production of Queer Communalism

I am indebted joyfully to queer theory; it has illuminated possibilities and exposed the limitations produced through our ways of being and knowing. However, many queer theorists seem stuck in negation and stuck in saying no. One of the most powerful, beautiful, and disturbing pieces to come out of this strain of queer theory is Lee Edelman's *No Future*. Edelman exposes that "the future is kid stuff" and that politics always references a future belonging to the child, an innocent child; a child that could never actually exist; a child that is the product of heterosexual copulation; a child that could never be the product of whatever queers are calling sex. This negation of the future by Edelman and others becomes a sole investment in the now coupled with the negation of the fictitious past. This extreme ahistorical stance leaves nothing for those wishing to create stability, a life, or an identity; it creates a way of being that could not exist. It leaves queers vulnerable and refuses to recognize the labor and networks that have created a better world for queers. This negation of the past and future permeates queer theory. For example, Michael Warner and Lauren Berlant in their now canonical piece "Sex in Public" define queer worlds in terms of immediacy: they exist momentarily and are untraceable, "mobile," "fragile," and "ephemeral." This conception of space, while sounding transgressive, denies the existence and importance of established queer practices and spaces and the life-sustaining relations and meanings they provide. It does not acknowledge the precedence and communal labor involved in creating such spaces.

While I agree with Edelman that we must question the role of the future-fetus in our politics, we must also not abstain from politics or thinking about the future, for the sake of older versions of ourselves and for the sake of future fags, queens, sissyboys, butches, and transfolk. In order to build a better future, we must say “yes” to something and build a queer culture and a temporal position. We must create something that is stable, yet volatile in that it allows us to trouble ourselves and not follow prescriptive identities.

This move into the future and into saying “yes” must be grounded in present, and in the material and the social. It is with this that I move into the subject of my own research. My dissertation is an ethnographic examination of the Radical Faeries, who began in the 1970s as a predominately white, male queer social group. The term “Radical Faerie” first appeared in print in an informational advertisement for a spiritual conference for gay men in the twentieth issue (1979) of *RFD*, “a reader-written journal for country faggots.” Harry Hay, John Burnside, Don Kilhefner, and Mitch Walker organized this conference to practice gay male consciousness-raising in an attempt to uncover an oppressed and repressed gay spiritual and political “essence.” This queer spirit was depicted as an androgynous and just-oriented position that has always existed within humanity (in roles such as caretaker, shaman, teacher, philosopher, and critic). Their first meeting in Arizona catalyzed a national movement that lasted for three years. The Radical Faeries then divided into numerous smaller, more manageable bioregional groups. These groups quickly spread throughout the nation, creating rural sanctuaries as places of gathering, healing, and celebration, and, if needed, a shelter or space to practice separatism. Concurrently, urban communities formed through household collectives or a loose-network of Faeries coming together regularly to create culture and an alternative

sense of community. Remarkably, this group continues to attract new numbers, including non-gay and non-male bodied people, who form new collectives and communities, and commune in cities, rural spaces, and nations that previously lacked a Faerie presence. It is with this growth and expansion in mind that I begin to explore the possibility of a queer future.

If the invalidation of queer politics is through their inability to reproduce then perhaps what needs to occur is an alternative articulation of the future alongside rethinking the idea of kinship. Since the twentieth century, gay men, lesbians, bisexuals, transfolk, and queer people created families of choice. As documented by Peter Nardi's *Gay Men's Friendships*, these families of choice take on the roles and responsibilities that are supposedly provided by the imagined nuclear family. Families of choice tend to be small and homogenous in age. This family has no history and no future beyond their interactions and lives; their homosocial relationship may be part of a long history of homosocial friendships, but this is most likely not a felt experience. In becoming a member of the Radical Faerie tribe one does not signify the entering into a family of choice, although this might occur, but a genealogy of choice. This entrance could be, but is not exclusively, marked by the taking of a Faerie name, such as Jezabelle Justice, Purrfessor Glitterbox, Otterly, or Pan. Their ancestry is not established, but created by each Radical Faerie. On the East Coast, Walt Whitman, a US poet who through codes spoke of same-sex love, and Edward Carpenter, a British socialist and homosexual who promoted the "simple life," are claimed to be proto-faeries. These two do not resonate with everyone. Other Faeries claim figures such as Quentin Crisp and Oscar Wilde and incorporate the many Faeries who have passed into the list of their own ancestry, whether

or not their names are known. What is being done here is the creation of a people, a Radical Faerie tribe. It is a claim that these people are a distinct group, a tribe who in some form or another has always existed in this world. The essentialism within this is apparent to some, but this is shoved a way for a bit, placed aside because it is important to assert that you are not a mistake. I am still working out how this differs from the mainstream GLBT movement's use of an ethnic identity model to make claims for rights, so please excuse my skirting of this issue. What feels different though is that gay culture at large has no interest in the past, beyond Harvey Milk, who entered the cultural repertoire when Gus Van Sant's Oscar Nominated film *Milk* was released. The past simply becomes a tool to illustrate the long march and progression to civil rights for gays and lesbians. The past is not felt, but evidence.

At the 2011 Samhain Gathering of Radical Faeries in Oregon, Blossom stood up at the fire on Samhain evening and said, "I just want us to remember." He then paused and discussed at length his desire for us to remember that this community has not always been so joyous, and he paused and took that back. There was joy, but behind that joy was the ever-present specter of death. He told of the ashes, the ashes of the dead that kept being brought to the land and an uncertainty about what to do with these ashes. The ashes were eventually placed in a vase and the names of the deceased were written on the lid... until the lid was full, and then a circular piece of cardboard was written on and placed on top of the vase with the lid...until that was full. The names were then kept on a piece of paper. This paper was accidently discarded and the names were lost. An altar to these unknown ancestors was built and the ashes of those passed were placed under it, alongside rocks in the amount of people estimated to be in the vase. The rocks were

arranged in a spiral. A spiral that should it continue would reach out and envelop the land. He concluded by saying again, "I just want us to remember." This speech was a reminder to the community of the countless Faeries who have died without being remembered. And by invoking them, there is at least an attempt to remember. The AIDS crisis becomes not a distant crisis, which can be ignored, but instead a part of the Radical Faerie ancestral tree that is thin. But this remembrance is not just filled with sadness. He reminds the crowd and me later that he was younger, he was more interested in sex and having fun than listening to stories, so this tale might not be 100% accurate. Several Faeries spoke about their connection to this altar and how they spend time at it, sitting with the ancestors and tending to their altar. The past becomes part of the Radical Faeries identity in a personal way, unlike in gay and lesbian culture, which uses it, or queer culture, which outright refuses it.

Being part of the Radical Faerie family tree, a queer genealogy, as constructed as it is, allows for an avenue into the future. What if the future is constructed, not with the image of the impossible and never actualized product of heterosexual copulation, but with instead an older version of you or a neo-faerie? Queer people have few images and models of what it means to grow old. The existing models are the lecherous old man predatorily seeking young men and the de-sexualized stoic lesbian. I do not want to discount either path, instead suggest that there could be more. Lady Bartlett of the Philly Faeries claims "I think we've found a way to mentor... our community's intergenerationality allows people to see what their future looks like. This is what I could be as a Faerie." She, Lady Bartlett is a man, but when referring to Faeries you usually say she, unless she is trans and then you ask or guess, apologize if wrong and move on (I

have seen this numerous times and no offense is outwardly shown), anyway, she elaborates that this is not an attempt to create a new regulating structure, very few faeries take on active mentoring. Instead it reveals that there are many paths to growing older. Lady Bartlett later continues, “It was a huge relief for me when I was 20, knowing that I wasn’t going to become completely invisible as I grew older. These guys were sexual and wise. You know, I’ve seen different models of growing older in the faeries, you know these bad boy faeries in their sixties, who have sex with young guys and I don’t have a problem with that. Needs are being met on both sides. I think some of the younger guys like that, and that’s how they envision themselves in their sixties or fifties.” In addition to these models, Portland Faerie community members have established Faerie houses, some with the intended purpose of housing faeries as they become elderly or sick. People rally around these people because they see themselves as part of the same community. Faeries engage in the future not through a prescriptive lens, but with knowing that there is a future for them.

The position of being aware of the past, present, and future allows for a deeper connection with this tribe. The future is not a place where they must settle for the neoliberal heterosexist dreams of the good life. They can continue to be the castaways who choose to live on the island of misfit toys. Fellow Faeries validate the choice to continually struggle to be the person you want to be and be troubled by the challenges and questions that the group asks around intention and life choices. These risks and explorations of self are not without a safety net. Radical Faeries value heartfelt expression and listening. Caring for each other and compassion are ideas that create stable relations, despite the volatile and undefinable identity shared.

I am not the only queer frustrated by the state of queer theory. In *Cruising Utopia*, José Esteban Muñoz writes that queerness is on the horizon; it allows an imagining of a different and better time and place beyond the present situation. Muñoz's utopian politics come from critiquing "the now" through the past and future; subjects can argue against the present conditions through arguing that this is not how it always was and this is not how it has to be. Political possibilities lie within queer negation and then queer world building. Michael Snedicker writes along the same line of thinking but writes about queer optimism, a futurity that does not promise, that is embedded in the now and interested in a better and queerer world. Queer optimism moves forward without Utopia's prescriptive threat. It is with queer optimism that I move forward. It should be noted that both Muñoz and Snedicker stay in the realm of art, film, and literature. I believe the Radical Faeries allow us an entrance point to discuss queer optimism and future within the social and the material.

By saying "yes" to Radical Faerie, they participate, create, and sustain a community for individuals frustrate by mainstream LGBT culture and culture at large. A common identity and institutions such as faerie coffee, sanctuaries, gatherings, and collectives allow people to feel a sense of belonging, without stifling individual expression, and hold this tribe together. Radical Faerie serves as a platform for people to explore what feels *authentic* for them and to imagine and build the future of faeriedom while being plugged into a queer genealogy that build upon a legacy and remember queer people who have passed and celebrate their lives. The future does not bleak because Faeries can imagine a queer future for themselves within this community; their annual gatherings, rituals, and the kinship provide stability and a trajectory. This trajectory does

not become utopian; there is no end fixed goal, except for the constant creation and processing of what is to come next.