

# *Whatever Will Be Will Be: Queering Disabled Subjects' Temporality*

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*Abstract: Normative time is disciplined through what Freeman calls chrononormativity, and this disciplining is particularly evident in the experiences of disabled children. Despite the constant regimenting of the present reality for disabled children in time, they are essentially denied a future, the future generally being figured without people with disabilities. Exploring Muñoz's critiques of Edelman, we emphasize the importance of futurity for children with disabilities, particularly one which they get to construct themselves rather than being constructed for them. We turn to Foucault's discussion of the Ship of Fools in order to begin to imagine an alternative, queer time that is "steered" by children (and adults) with disabilities towards their own ends and goals.*

## **Introduction**

Queer theory has traditionally been about the study of sexual identity, placing sexual identity within a historical context, and challenging traditional conceptions of binary sexuality and gender. However, recent scholars in queer theory have moved beyond merely looking at subject formation and sexual identity, with recent scholarship exploring the idea of queer temporality and futurism (Freeman, 2005; Halberstam, 2005; Edelman, 2004; Muñoz, 2009). While these works do not have as their focus disability, they offer useful concepts for considering disability. One such concept we use in this article is reproductive futurism, Edelman's (2004) notion that everyone is expected to follow a heteronormative timeline focused around reproduction and the figure of the Child. Edelman critiques reproductive futurity and argues that queers and the queer should reject futurity altogether and embrace "no future." Muñoz (2009), in turn, contests Edelman's argument, asserting that for the most marginalized queers, rejecting futurity altogether is not a livable option. Muñoz introduces the idea of cruising utopias as a queer relation to futurity. Additional useful concepts related to queer temporality come from Freeman's (2005) work, which features the concepts of chrononormativity and chronobiopolitics. Chrononormativity consists of the ways in which time is organized along normative lines; chronobiopolitics entails the ways in which time controls bodies on a collective level. Building on the work of Mollow (2012) and Kafer (2013), two renowned theorists whose work takes these concepts seriously in relation to disability, we examine how queer temporality and utopia intersect with disability in schools.

As classroom teachers ourselves, we wish to invite our fellow teachers into the queer temporality that we build in this article. We recognize that many of the theories we talk about might be unfamiliar, and we seek to explain and discuss these theories in ways to do not presuppose prior knowledge of the field. With that said, we also hope that this work will speak to education researchers, disability studies scholars, and queer theory scholars as well insofar as it builds upon existing frameworks for understanding the way in which disabled<sup>1</sup> children's lives are disciplined and regulated.

## Reproductive Futurity and Disability

We will start this section with a practical example of what it means to do a queer critique of reproductive futurism, and will flesh the theory out further in the following section. The example we want to begin with is a Thai remake of Doris Day's classic song that presents the stages of heteronormative futurity, "Que Sera Sera." The Thai remake of the song was performed by a choir of disabled Thai kids as a commercial for a health insurance company. "Best Commercial Ever – Que Sera Sera (Disabled children from Thailand)," promised the headline that we saw on the YouTube channel *MaiThaiEnterprises*. This video, watched 474,335 times (as of April 2, 2016), opens with a young Thai girl with visible disabilities overenunciating the opening lines of the famous Doris Day Song, "When I was just a little girl." The next line, "I asked my mother, what will I be," is directed at the mothers, attentively listening in the audience, with one even taking photographs of the children. "Will I be pretty? Will I be rich?" The chorus of "Que sera sera / Whatever will be will be / The future's not ours to see / Que sera sera" then alternates between the children and the mothers singing.

The second verse, though, is where things go in a direction that we found particularly unexpected. Doris Day's second verse from her solo version, "When I grew up and fell in love," instead becomes "When I was just a little boy" in the Thai version. We should note here that in the movie *The Man Who Knew Too Much*, where this song first appears, Doris Day sings the little girl verse and then her son sings the little boy verse. In the Thai version, the chorus of children sing first the little girl verse and then the little boy verse, with "handsome" substituted for "pretty" and without alternating between the girls and boys; the same set of children sing both verses. As in the duet between mother and son, girls must be pretty and boys must be handsome, but neither fall in love or reproduce; the third verse from Doris Day's solo version, in which Doris Day sings about having "children of my own," is entirely eliminated as well in both the duet and the Thai version. Thus, both the duet and the Thai version foreclose any possibility of accessing a heteronormative future. As queer and disabled individuals, we have often felt shut out of heteronormative timelines ourselves, and so we were particularly dismayed to see the way in which the disabled children are presented in the Thai version as never growing up, falling in love, or having children of their own.

A song that is supposed to be about heteronormative reproduction and life cycles instead becomes a song that freezes the disabled children permanently at the stage of a child, foreclosing the possibility of attaining full subjecthood and instead freezing them as children permanently. The video then shows some shots of grey clouds, foreshadowing a not so bright future, followed by the parents looking

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<sup>1</sup> When we use the word disabled as an adjective in front of "children" or "people" we use it not as a characteristic, but rather to mean that the children or people in question have been disabled by society and the built environment. Our goal in using this phrasing is to seek to change and modify that relationship.

daunted at this prospect of caring for the children for a lifetime, before closing with a final shot of a pregnant woman holding her belly. The commercial offers a cautionary tale to this woman or others in similar situations. Being a health insurance advertisement, the message is clear: the future looks grim, you or someone you know might become disabled, and you better have economic measures like health insurance in the face of such a grim future. And yet, if these kids can be happy even in the midst of it all, you (as an able-bodied/able-minded person) do not have the right to complain or be dissatisfied with your circumstances and challenges.

### **Reproductive Futurism, Rehabilitative Futurism, and Reclaiming Utopia**

The future of the disabled Thai children in the last section seemed pretty bleak; they are denied access to reproductive timetables and became a mere cautionary, moralistic tale to the able-bodied rather than having any agency of their own. What would a queer take on this situation look like? Perhaps we need to embrace this lack of a future? To explore this idea further, we started by reading Edelman's (2004) seminal work, *No Future*. Edelman argued that futurity becomes synonymous with the figure of the Child, in a symbolic sense, and that figure of the queer "comes to figure the bar to every realization of futurity, the resistance, internal to the social, to every social structure or form" (p. 4). This argument, known as the antisocial thesis, proposes that the queer challenges social structures, challenges the hegemony of the Child, and challenges even the notion of futurity itself. This brand of anarchistic radical gay politics is in contrast to more mainstream liberal gay and lesbian politics, which propose that we disavow "this ascription of negativity to the queer" (p. 4). Edelman believed that instead we should "consider accepting and even embracing" queer's resistance to reproductive futurity, and perhaps even futurity itself. In one of the most infamous lines in his book, Edelman offered the following proposition:

Fuck the social order and the Child in whose name we're collectively terrorized; fuck Annie; fuck the waif from Les Mis; fuck the poor, innocent kid on the net; fuck Laws with both capital Ls and small; fuck the whole network of Symbolic relations and the future that serves as its prop." (p. 29)

Thus, he proposed rejecting the Symbolic, rejecting the social order, and rejecting futurity all together.

Edelman's anti-futurist arguments were helpful to us as we attempted to imagine a new queer temporality, but we wondered where the actual children were amidst his arguments about rejecting the symbol of the Child. We found ourselves wanting to offer a new positive temporality, not merely to reject what was already given to us. So we decided to draw upon Muñoz's (2009) book *Cruising Utopia* to help us imagine a different future, not just for the Thai children but for all disabled children.

Muñoz (2009) proposed that Edelman's anti-futurist arguments, in claiming to universally represent all queer subjects, actually only address the situation of the white, gay male subject. Muñoz argued that attempting to write a theory of queer temporality without addressing the relationality of race and class "merely reproduce[s] a crypto-universal white gay subject that is weirdly atemporal." In other words, the time of this subject "is a restricted and restricting hollowed-out present free of the need for the challenge of imagining a futurity that exists beyond the self or the here and now" (p. 94). Perhaps for a privileged white gay male, rejecting the future and asserting the primacy of the present is all that is

needed. But in a world in which so many additional obstacles confront those marginalized based on race and class (and disability?), we need more than this; we need to be able to envision, and then work to enact, a world without this marginalization.

Muñoz, in contrast to Edelman's anti-futurism, contended that "minoritarian subjects are cast as hopeless in a world without utopia" (2009, p. 97); in other worlds, without utopia, there is no hope for minoritarian subjects, and the terrible conditions they find themselves in cannot be transformed, altered, changed, or improved. Muñoz, following Ernst Bloch (1995), differentiated between abstract utopias and concrete utopias. While abstract utopias tend to take the form of "banal optimism," concrete utopias relate to actual historically situated struggles and to a "collectivity that is actualized or potential" (p. 3). Queer utopia is a "structuring and educated mode of desiring that allows us to feel beyond the quagmire of the present" (p. 1). Queer utopia allows us to strive, "in the face of here and now's totalizing rendering of reality, to think and feel a then and there" (p. 1). Often it can seem like what is now is the only way things can be. Queer utopia serves to envision a futurity that is different. While Muñoz did not address disability in *Cruising Utopia*, his conceptualization of queer utopia is useful in addressing the relation between disability and futurity.

We want to be careful in invoking utopia here in our vision; when many people imagine utopia, they erase disability and disabled subjects altogether. We will examine several examples: the logic of the telethon, eugenics tendencies in recent times, and critique of a particularly salient feminist utopia explored by Kafer (2013).

When we consider Muñoz in relation to disability, we would like to imagine a world without barriers to access. Our fear, though, is that most people, when they imagine a utopian world in regards to disability, imagine a world not without barriers to access, but a world without disability or disabled subjects at all! For disabled subjects, utopian futures are usually written without them. Mollow argued that "futurity is habitually imagined in terms that fantasize the eradication of disability" (2012, p. 288). Mollow calls this ideology "rehabilitative futurism," or the idea of a future in which disability has been cured or edited out. Like reproductive futurism, rehabilitative futurism erases the future of certain people. The futurity of the telethon, for example, is a world in which disability has been cured and where there is no longer a need for a politics of disability. The organization Autism Speaks follows this logic (Brown, 2013; Yergeau, n.d.). For example, in 2006 its then-vice president stated in a that she considered driving her autistic child off a bridge and that the only reason she didn't do so was because of her non-autistic daughter (Brown, 2013). Linking the heteronormative timelines of reproductive futurism with rehabilitative futurism, Autism Speaks also produced a public service announcement in 2009 that claimed that autism destroys marriages, along with leading to other calamities. Until recently, the mission statement of Autism Speaks included the following: "We are dedicated to funding global biomedical research into the causes, prevention, treatments and cure for autism" (as cited in Brown, 2013, para. 8). Moreover, one of the founders, Suzanne Wright, said that the goal of Autism Speaks is to "eradicate autism for the sake of future generations" (as cited in Brown, 2013, para. 8).

This erasure of disability often manifests within feminist discourses; think of contemporary calls for prenatal screening or the use of abortion to prevent congenital disabilities. Kafer, in her seminal work *Feminist, Queer, Crip* (2013), used a critique of a classic feminist novel as a way of unpacking many of these ideologies that still pervade our modern era. In her critique of Piercy's 1976 novel *Woman on the Edge of Time*, she wrote that she "finds the novel troubling for its erasure of disability and disabled bodies, an erasure that is never debated or discussed in the novel" (p. 70). Although the novel models

participatory democracy and democratic debate, its characters have used genetic technology to screen out and prevent all congenital disabilities. In the world portrayed in the novel, physical disabilities are nonexistent, and even mental disabilities require you to drop out from society until you've returned to normal. Kafer wrote:

In both the novel and interpretation of the novel, it is assumed that disability has no place in feminist visions of the future, and that such an assumption is so natural, so given, that it does not merit public debate.” (p. 73)

One of us had the opportunity to present this research at the 10th International Somatechnics Conference and met Fiona Campbell, a scholar who writes about disability and queer utopia. She recommended one of her articles (2013) for further reading on this topic, and we found it particularly edifying. In this article, she wrote about the lack of a future for disability, arguing that, “[f]or disability, utopianism is a conflicted zone. There is no future existence, crip dreaming is expunged and the utopian drive is a device of promise (of curability), hence extinction. Disability is the unwelcome guest at the table of liberalism” (p. 220). Nonetheless, she is insistent on the need to dream a crip horizon.

In envisioning such a crip horizon, we want to clarify here that even though many futures are written without disability, this does not necessarily mean that disabled subjects have to give up on futurity all together. Although Muñoz did not directly address disability in *Cruising Utopia*, his concept of queer utopia is useful for considering utopia in ways that do not erase disability and disabled subjects. Muñoz, following Bloch (2009) described utopia as being “primarily a critique of the here and now” (2009, p. 99), a way of contesting the inevitability of the present, to insist on the possibility of a different future. This is definitely something that we (as disabled persons) can endorse, as long as it is done carefully. We propose (much like Muñoz) that we need to seize futurity and claim it for our own purposes, rather than cede it to those wishing to solely promote reproductive and rehabilitative futurism.

The disability rights movement is one particularly salient example of this theory of crip futurity. In special education classrooms, disabled students tend to be isolated from the broader narratives and discourses of disability justice that adults with disabilities are exposed to. Special education, in our experience, while paying lip service to the idea of empowerment for disabled students, often perpetuates dynamics of oppression. In the next section, we will elaborate on these oppressive dynamics by elucidating the ways in which heteronormative temporality binds students with disabilities to the logics of capital.

### **Chrononormativity and Chronobiopolitics**

In this section, we dig deeper into recent theories of queer temporality in an attempt to uncover some of the ways in which disabled bodies are disciplined. As queer, disabled persons ourselves, we have found Freeman (2010)'s theories particularly revealing in our attempts to understand our own contextualized experiences of coercive norms of gender, sexuality, and ability. One of the things that we see as necessary in order to fashion a better future for queer/disabled subjects is to consider how queer/disabled bodies are bound temporally to heteronormative and rehabilitative timetables and the

process by which these bodies are measured, regulated, and disciplined. Freeman, in her appropriately named book *Time Binds*, coined the term chrononormativity, which refers to how “the naked flesh is bound into socially meaningful embodiment through temporal regulation” in order to “organize individual human bodies towards maximum productivity” (p.3). This temporal binding, Freeman argued, “shape[s] flesh into legible, acceptable embodiment” (p. 4). Chrononormativity makes individual bodies intelligible through their conformity to heteronormative and ableist molds, but this process does not stop just at the individual. When these individual timelines are synchronized with wider, ideological timelines that serve the interests of the state, it is called chronobiopolitics. Chronobiopolitics operates in parallel with Foucault’s notion of biopolitics, the “interventions and regulatory controls” that monitor and manage things such as “birth and mortality, level of health, life expectancy, and longevity” (1978, p. 139).

As we struggled to make sense of the idea of biopolitics, we consulted with a mentor who recommended Lemke (2011)’s introductory monograph. Lemke explained that the focus of biopolitics is not the individual but the collective; “not singular human beings but their biological features measured and aggregated on the level of populations” (p. 5). Biopolitics still applies to and regulates individuals, though; Lemke clarified that biopolitics governs both individuals and collectives through “practices of correction, exclusion, normalization, discipling, therapeutics, and optimization” (p.5). Lemke argued that Foucault differentiated between the process of “supervis[ing] and control[ing] the individual body” and the process of managing the population, with the former originating in the seventeenth century and the latter in the second half of the eighteenth (p. 36). Both individual and collective regulation happen with queer/disabled individuals, but what we explore here in particular is how this relates to temporality.

Chronobiopolitics is where Foucault meets queer temporality, and where individual and collective time are bound up with bodies and subjects and become yet another mechanism of control and management. Heteronormative timetables become enforced not just for individuals but for the entire population, and are just one of the many ways in which queers and the disabled are controlled and regimented.

What do we mean by heteronormative timetables, though? Heteronormative timetables, such as the three-verse childhood-lover-children model offered by the original version of the Doris Day song, bind people<sup>2</sup> temporally, and give them meaning and subjecthood. The disabled children in the Thai insurance company’s rendition fail to carry out those heteronormative imperatives of falling in love and having their own children, and thus fail to achieve full subjecthood, but they are no less bound by temporality. Instead of reproductive timetables, though, disabled children (and adults, as we explored in Rands and Sheldon, 2016) instead are subject to the temporal logics of intervention(s), which we explore further in the next section.

## Ideological State Apparatuses and the Temporal Logics of Intervention

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<sup>2</sup> When we say people here, we want to note that the original Doris Day Version of the song is sung by a woman, and that heteronormative timetables affect women and men differently. In the version of the song with the children singing, however, they effectively de-gender the song by having both the boys and girls sing “when I was just a little girl” and then “when I was just a little boy” unlike the original song where it said “boy” when the little boy was singing it and “girl” when Doris Day was singing it.

Another way of approaching the chronobiopolitics of special education is to look at it through the lens of identity construction. One of us (Sheldon, 2013) used Althusser's (1971/n.d.) concept of hailing to discuss how the process of identity construction works in children with disabilities. Hailing, or interpellation, is the way in which the ideological state apparatuses construct an individual's identity. Rather than this being an identity voluntarily chosen, a disabled identity is something imposed by the administrative apparatuses which identify, classify, sort, and treat students with disabilities. One of us explained this process as follows:

The apparatus of special education (from the legislature to the administrative bureaucracies down to the principals and teachers) interpellates these children as a particular kind of subject, a disabled subject. That is, the apparatus tells the children they are disabled, and the kids look at themselves and see in themselves what they are told, and thus became what they were told they are. Louis Althusser (1971) described this process as "hailing"; he used the example of how a policeman sees someone he thinks is a criminal and shouts out "Hey You!" and in that moment the person realizes he is a criminal and turns around, both actively accepting that identity but also having no choice in doing so. In that moment, the criminal is constructed as a particular kind of a subject. In this case, the children are interpellated as disabled, and come to recognize themselves as such in the process of negotiating that identity. (Sheldon, 2013)

Althusser's hailing seems at first glance to be temporal in nature and to have a direct cause-and-effect relationship, but the actual process of being hailed by an ideological state apparatus, we argue, is sort of always happening and yet never quite happens, as there is no one moment in time when the child is hailed, but rather it happens on the micro and macro level through every interaction the child has with others, through the media, and through the curriculum and pedagogy within the schools. In the case of disabled students who are in special education, time binds them not to heteronormativity, but to the temporal logic of intervention. In our experiences as educators, disabled students in our classrooms were sent off to specialists and pulled out of class on rigid, clock-time schedules, always having liminal status in comparison to the not-labelled-as-disabled general education students

For the students with Individualized Education Plans (IEPs), their time is structured and quantified. Services provided to them are divvied out in minutes per day, week, month, or year. They are always either in general education or in special education (at least in a legal sense); this is codified in one number, a percentage of time in general education, which determines what type of placement they are in and what sort of support they are to receive.

These disabled students have no choice in the first place about whether to be labelled as disabled, and then are bound temporally to the time-frame and logics of the apparatus of special education. Thus, we argue, this situation constitutes the chronobiopolitics of special education, enacted through the rituals, mechanisms, and structures of the logics of intervention.

### **Imagining Schools as Ships of Fools**

The way in which society constructs disabled children as being frozen in (reproductive) time is a form of what Foucault calls heterochrony, or a "absolute break with their traditional time" (1986, p. 26). Time is used by broader societal logics to construct disability and to ensnare students within the broader biopolitical regimes.

We want to suggest the possibility of constructing alternate temporal structures, ones that are “steered” by people with disabilities rather than by the regime of experts. A particularly poignant metaphor for this project is that of the Ship of Fools. The Ship of Fools is a classical philosophical allegory that first appears in the works of Plato; he originally used it to illustrate the problems of democracy, in that the madmen seize control of the ship and steer it not in the proper direction as would be dictated by the philosopher but rather subject to the whims of the mob. This allegorical ship later became part of a legendary panoply of ships; Foucault (1965) described this panoply, “whose crew of imaginary heroes, ethical models, or social types embarked on a great symbolic voyage which would bring them, if not fortune, at least the figure of their destiny or their truth” (p. 8). Foucault argued, though, that unlike the other legendary ships, the Ship of Fools alone had an actual material existence, “for they did exist, these boats that conveyed their insane cargo from town to town” (p. 8). On the level of metaphor, “the Ship of Fools sails through a landscape of delights, where all is offered to desire, a sort of renewed paradise” (p. 22), and creates a space in which the mad, having been expelled from civilization, can maintain a vagabondish existence in pursuit of their own desires.<sup>3</sup>

These literal Ships of Fools, although they were not necessarily steered by the mad in the way that the allegorical Ship of Fools is, served to fulfill the needs and desires of the mad. Furthermore, in the philosophical allegory, the Ship of Fools represents the seizure of the ship by the madmen towards their own ends. The Ship of Fools, we argue, constructs an alternative temporality, freed from the imperatives of reproduction and domesticity, offering liberation from the shackles of reason and truth, and constructing a heterochronic existence. The Ship of Fools contains deviance, but not in the same way as the asylum or the hospital; it offers a temporality that allows for at least a partial freedom and pursuit of one’s own desires, a “heterochronia of crisis” rather than “heterochronia of deviance” in that it provides a temporality for those that do not fit into the normal structures of society. We contend here that crisis heterochronias subject their participants to less biopolitical regulation than a “heterochronia of deviance.”

What might it mean to offer this same sort of freedom to students who are confined within the realm of special education? We want to offer the possibility of constructing a temporality in which students do their own steering of the “ship” and create their own futurity. One of us was trained as a special education teacher and was taught about how to give students options for their own future, but paradoxically we were expected to empower students when in fact empowerment has to come from the students themselves. These futures were also for individual students, as exemplified by the legal document of the “transition plan”<sup>4</sup>; the collective futurity of the disabled student both excluding them from heteronormative narratives of futurity but also condemning them to a permanent childhood, as exemplified by the song with which we introduced this paper. If biopolitics and chronobiopolitics

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<sup>3</sup> Our reading of the Ship of Fools is quite different from that of Rhodes (1976), who sees this as a forced exile; we view it more as a space with liberatory potentials far greater than the present system of teacher-driven instruction.

<sup>4</sup> The Transition Plan is a legal document that spells out a disabled student’s self-chosen goals, as assessed through interviews and other validated transition planning instruments. These goals are often aspirational, and the plan spells out specific, concrete, measurable steps that are often not (we have found) implemented in actuality. There is a certain paradox here of a professional writing a plan and goals *for* a student, supposedly based on their input, but that really ought to be written by the student themselves... except that actually it cannot because it legally has to be written by an expert, based on their expert ways of assessing the situation.



operate on the level of the collective and the population, then our students' futures need to be considered on the same level, not merely as individuals.

There needs, we insist, to be a future in which the disabled are not merely given access to reproductive futurity but are able to create alternative, queer futures; those in which disability occupies a central role. Much as how Baynton says that "disability is everywhere in history once you begin looking for it" (as cited in Kafer, 2013, p. 149), disability can be everywhere in the future if we are willing to take up the challenge of creating such a future.

## Conclusion

Revisiting our "Que Sera Sera" example from the beginning of this article, we want to invite the reader to consider what temporality looks without heteronormative and reproductive futurism, constructing a temporality that centers the agency of disabled people at its core. In moving beyond a politics of "squeezing in" or "insertion" (Campbell, 2013, p. 222) to the freedom we see in the metaphor of the Ship of Fools, we offer a new verse to the song:

Now we lift our voice in song,  
We ask each other, where will we be?  
Let's build a system, piece by piece,  
Here is our sole decree:

Que sera sera  
We can make, what will be,  
The future is ours to see  
Que sera sera

It is time for disabled subjects to create their own queer time. We offer the ideas and frameworks in this paper, and rather than lamenting "Whatever will be will be," it is time to claim time for ourselves and create schools and pedagogies that reflect counterhegemonic visions of (queer/disabled) temporality and spatiality.

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