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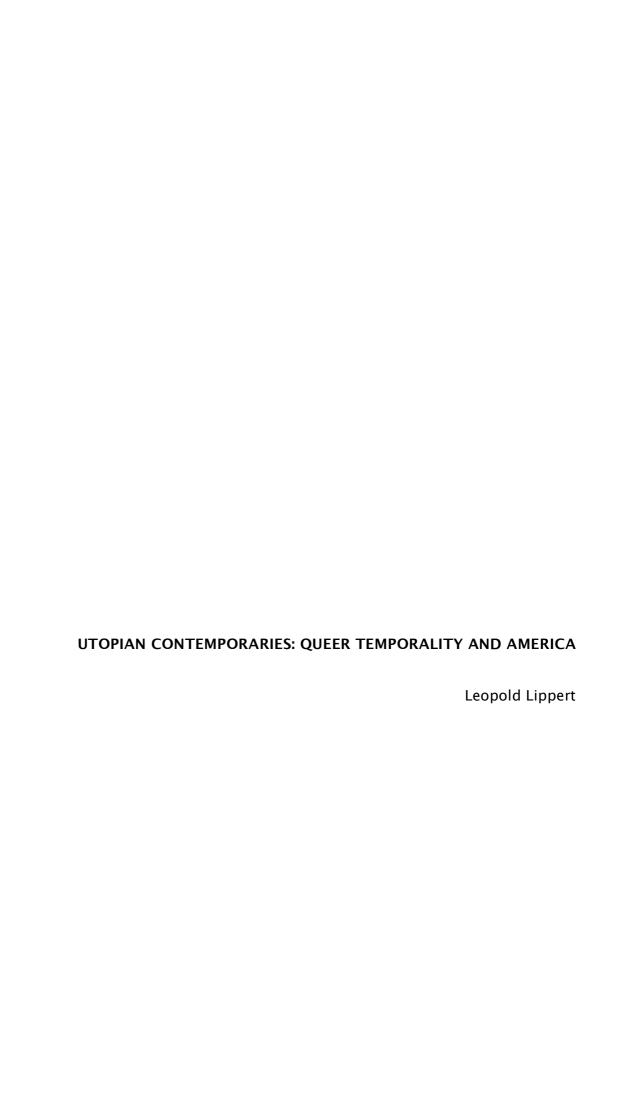
UTOPIAN CONTEMPORARIES: QUEER TEMPORALITY AND AMERICA

Leopold Lippert

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A map of the world that does not include utopia is not even worth glancing at.
Oscar Wilde

In the time of your life, live – so that in that good time there shall be no ugliness or death for yourself or for any life your life touches. Seek goodness everywhere, and when it is found, bring it out of its hiding-place and let it be free and unashamed.
William Saroyan

INTRODUCTION

...and the home of the brave? With the forceful invocation of the great concluding question of the American national anthem[1], rock singer Melissa Etheridge took the stage of the sellout *Equality Rocks* concert in Washington, D.C., on April 29, 2000.[2] The show constitutes a centerpiece of

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[1] Throughout my argument, I come to understand "America" as a cultural concept, not as a physical place. Working in cultural studies, I am always interested in the America that is a culturally mediated representation of national imaginings and cultural figures, not the United States that is the concrete landscape inhabited by actual human beings. It goes without saying, however, that these representations of America profoundly impact and often conflate with the lives of citizens of the United States and people around the globe. For a theoretical underpinning to this stance, see Anderson, 5-7, Berlant, *Anatomy*, 20-21, and the first chapter of this thesis.

[2] As I did not have the opportunity to participate in this concert, I rely on a *YouTube*-copy of the VH1 broadcast of *Equality Rocks* for documentation. The show was originally aired on October 27, 2000, and was also hosted by Melissa Etheridge. For more details on this VH1 program, see URL: <http://www.inbaseline.com/project.aspx?project_id=46745>. For the *YouTube*-copy of "Scarecrow", see URL: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=g2_b8Cqv-Dc>. Both links were accessed on October 14, 2008.

the three-day *Millennium March on Washington*, a political rally that brought hundreds of thousands of GLBTQ activists to the capital, celebrating, as a *New York Times* report has it, "the gains of the gay rights movement in recent years and vowing redoubled efforts on issues like hate crime legislation" (Toner, n.p.). Almost immediately, Etheridge's rendering of the Star-Spangled Banner blends into her 1999 song "Scarecrow", a touching commemoration of the brutal murder of Matthew Shepard, a gay student at the University of Wyoming who was severely beaten and left to die by two local homophobes in October 1998. But Etheridge's song not only honors the deceased: she accuses the American nation of "thinly veiled intolerance, bigotry and hate" ("Scarecrow"), and uncovers the systematic pervasion of homophobic sentiment in the setup of the "imagined community" (Anderson, 6). The "monsters" ("Scarecrow") that crucified the gay student, she argues, need not hide in America; instead, they are "rocking in our cradles, [...] preaching in our churches, and eating at our tables" ("Scarecrow"). For Etheridge, the murder of Matthew Shepard is a sad but foreseeable symptom of an all too ordinary homophobia, a discursive undercurrent that is allowed plenty of space to flourish in the imaginings of the American nation.

In the moment that is created by the performance of the song, however, Melissa Etheridge engages in a particular substitution. In the first two choruses of the song, she merely reiterates the despondent resignation of Matthew Shepard, already comatose and, like a scarecrow, tied to a fence in the outskirts of Laramie, Wyoming, where he is incredulously bearing the deadly repercussions of a homophobic hate crime. Onto an eight-bar musical structure, Etheridge heaves the lines, "scarecrow crying, waiting to die, wondering why" ("Scarecrow"), and aptly summarizes the unfortunate realization that queers, in the futurist regime that constitutes America, have no future. Halfway through the song, though, the same musical phrase is invested with new, and more hopeful, meaning. In the very evanescence of the musical performance, the figure of the crying scarecrow, heavily burdened with homophobia, is substituted with a more imaginative vision of communal relations. The bruised body is lifted and replaced by "love, love, love, love, rising above, all in the name of love" ("Scarecrow"). During this brief and ephemeral period of time, filled with the buoyancy of performed

music, the cultural boundaries of the nation are renegotiated. It is no coincidence that, in the context of the *Millennium March on Washington*, "Scarecrow" is introduced by the national anthem, since the very definition of the American imagined community is reconfigured through Etheridge's song. For a moment, new possibilities of belonging, kinship, and identity become thinkable; for a moment, a social open and welcome to queer lives of all kinds is being present.

Even more so, the way "Scarecrow" is composed allows for the moment to linger. In fact, the eight-bar structure of the chorus only provides enough space for the words "love, love, love, love, rising above, all in the name of" ("Scarecrow"), thereby displacing the final "love" to the first bar of yet another round of the chorus. The coincidence of the initial and final "love" in one bar enables the phrase to enter a loop, a convolution of temporality that is always anticipatory, yet always firmly rooted in the now. The loop structure of Etheridge's queer moment permits it to prevail indefinitely, and opens up a space in which the future and the present can converge and anticipate the utopian: a vision of a more imaginative, more tolerant, and more humanist America.

Having entered the temporal loop of the final lines of the song, Etheridge withdraws her voice, realizing that the bodies of thousands of people in the audience have already joined her anticipatory moment, vocally transforming the cultural landscape into one of *love* rather than homophobia. In and through their temporary communion, they create a utopian moment, a utopian contemporary that generates a more inclusive understanding of American citizenship. Imagining a future in the present that manages to include queer lives in the design of the nation, Melissa Etheridge and her audience become *utopian contemporaries* as well. As cultural figures that divest of the deadly social negativity commonly attached to queerness, they inhabit the utopian now and vigorously propose alternative cultural memories. For utopian contemporaries, the fleetingness of the moment becomes the locus of cultural re-collection, the ludic space where the death of a gay man is remembered differently: as the conjuration of a "wiser humanism" (Dolan, 22), a way of conceptualizing community that makes queer lives not only probable, but also worthwhile.

My subsequent argument sets out to explore utopian contemporaries, both as cultural figures and as the temporal realms that these "representative characters" (Baty, 8) inhabit.[3] In the course of this study, I attempt to locate utopian contemporaries in America and investigate the ways in which these figures exercise the substitutive powers of the now. Just as Melissa Etheridge and her audience replace a homophobic sentiment with the humanist message of love, just as they envisage a *better* future in the indefinite present of the song's performance, all the utopian contemporaries that populate this thesis seize the moment in one way or another in order to renegotiate the boundaries of citizenship in America.

In order to grasp the utopian capacities of the present, I employ the vernacular of performance. Performance studies, mostly due to the ephemeral nature of its object of study, has long theorized fleeting temporal realms in which "one can experiment with the possibilities of the future in ways that shine back usefully on a present that's always, itself, in process" (Dolan, 13). Essentially a rehearsal space for these potentialities, the moment, thus, may evoke utopia, a fictional non-place that still remains an "index to the possible" (Dolan, 13). In the following study, I will probe the change processes that *index* the possible, expose utopian contemporaries, and sketch a more inclusive landscape of cultural and social belonging. Analyzing various case studies that all engage with prominent debates on American citizenship in one way or another, I will reveal the utopian practices that make queer lives imaginable, and show the creative potential of a cultural complex that acknowledges the contemporary, not merely the promise of posterity.

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[3] I borrow the notion of "representative characters" from S. Paige Baty's book *American Monroe: The Making of a Body Politic*. Referring to Ralph Waldo Emerson in turn, Baty defines a "representative character" as "a cultural figure through whom the character of political life is articulated" (8). She continues to argue that the "influence and expression of the representative characters are not limited to their immediate lifetimes: these figures become sites of recollection after their deaths" (9). Throughout my thesis, I frame *utopian contemporaries* in these terms. They must be understood as *cultural figures*, not as actual people. Since a representative character "operates as a site on which American political culture is written and exchanged" (10), her or his discursive constructions necessarily affect the lives of actual people. As I said earlier, there might even be coincidence, for, as Baty claims, in "mass-mediated culture […] the literal and figurative roles of memory are conflated" (19).

The first chapter, THE WILLINGNESS TO INSIST THAT THE FUTURE START HERE, offers a theoretical framework that enables us, as cultural critics, to recognize and appreciate utopian contemporaries. Essentially a critique of what I will come to call the *futurist regime*, this chapter provides the analytical tools to understand the transformative powers of utopian contemporaries and their embrace of the hopeful inspiration that the moment incites. Engaging with the latest trends in queer theory and performance studies, this chapter elucidates strategies not only to make queerness visible in futurist America, but also to show how contemporary queer creativity and social positivity can enhance and enliven the imagined community. Contesting queer theorist Lee Edelman's claim that queers have no future and that they define their queerness by their "willingness [...] to insist that the future stop here" (*Future*, 31), I develop a frame of analysis that insists otherwise: As I already illustrated in the *Equality Rocks*–moment, utopian contemporaries essentially demand that the futureless temporality of the present be the place where the future may *start*, and where *better* futures are being imagined.

Chapter two, LIFE IN THE MEMORY OF ONE WHO NO LONGER LIVES, is the first of the three case studies that constitute the analytical part of my argument. This chapter taps into a cultural reservoir that is similar to the one already referred to in my introductory illustration. Advancing a detailed survey of the events following the murder of Matthew Shepard, this section will enrich the understanding of Melissa Etheridge's performance in Washington, D.C., as well. In the main part of chapter two, however, I shall turn to *The Laramie Project*, a play produced collaboratively by the New York–based playwright Moisés Kaufman and his Tectonic Theater Project. In three acts, *The Laramie Project* showcases the climate of opinion that prevails in the Wyoming town of Laramie, and gives voice to its residents who in one way or another cope with the consequences of the brutal homicide.[4] In this dramatic text, and in the numerous performances of the play that have proliferated in the United States since its premiere in February 2000, I claim to find three utopian contemporaries who exploit the

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[4] Although I will spend more time on this issue in chapter two, I want to recall Baty's notion of "representative characters" (8). The people I refer to throughout this chapter, and throughout this study, are not actual persons, but discursive representations, cultural figures channeled through the generic conventions of, say, a dramatic text, or a media report.

creative and transformative capacities of particular moments, of temporary presents that offer a glimpse of a more humanist community. Confronted with the brutal hate crime, Jedadiah Schultz, Romaine Patterson, and Dennis Shepard each create and experience a moment of change, an ephemeral contemporary that allows them to imagine citizenship more inclusively, and that permits them to conceptualize alternative ways of living in the memory of Matthew Shepard, sadly one who no longer lives.

The third chapter, TRANSCENDING THE DISCIPLINE OF THE SERVICE, investigates the utopian potential of the Internet platform *YouTube*, a hybrid space where video material can be consumed in a streaming format, in an ongoing present full of creative impulse. Specifically, this chapter will analyze the *YouTube* video *Broke Trek*, a parody of the 2005 Hollywood movie *Brokeback Mountain*, itself a film that is considered the most significant representation of gay men in mainstream cinema. In this parody, the social negativity that surrounds the queerness of the two gay cowboys in *Brokeback Mountain* clashes with the expansive futurism that is embodied in the two *Star Trek* characters of Captain Kirk and Mr. Spock. The staunch soldiers of American futurity find themselves romantically entangled in the contemporary of *Broke Trek*. Contrary to the gay cowboys' fatal recognition that they have no future, however, *Broke Trek* offers a glimpse of a queer future in the present. For, as Mr. Spock claims in the clip, "there are some things which transcend even the discipline of the service", some things which reshape the heteronormative design of the futurist regime, and some things which make queer lives imaginable in contemporary America.

Chapter four, BLACKOUT: UTOPIAN CONTEMPORARIES, focuses on John Cameron Mitchell's 2006 film *Shortbus*, a cinematic experience that acquired a certain notoriety due to its explicit portrayal of sex acts. My reading of *Shortbus* accounts for the queer possibilities of the retarded temporal space in which the film is set, a Brooklyn sex club named "Shortbus" that enables its temporary visitors to evade what Judith Halberstam calls the "time of reproduction" (5). In the final scenes of the movie, a blackout that affects New York City creates a peculiar contemporary that capitalizes on the momentary suspension of the established economics of power. During the blackout moment, I argue, new

forms of belonging and kinship manifest, and an alternative vision of American citizenship is imagined. Enveloped by the soothing light of candles, acoustic music, and the tender caresses of each other, the contemporary community created in the *Shortbus* moment is living a utopian future in the present, intensely experiencing the tangible anticipation of a more humanist environment and gladly welcoming the energetic spirit of queer creativity.

Utopian Contemporaries: Queer Temporality and America believes in the cultural powers of the now. The following argument is determined to elucidate the uplifting potential of queer moments, for I strongly believe that, as David Román argues, "a stronger engagement with the present moment can only enhance the futures that the contemporary will produce" (*America*, 259). My thesis is committed to locate and promote utopian contemporaries, representative figures who expand and enrich the American imagined community, who, like Melissa Etheridge and her audience, momentarily substitute deadly homophobia with all-encompassing love, and who have the greatest confidence that these moments may transcend into a future more receptive to the multifarious prospects of queer lives.

1. THE WILLINGNESS TO INSIST THAT THE FUTURE START HERE

In many ways, *Utopian Contemporaries* argues for a better world. The theoretical and analytical endeavor that constitutes this study is an attempt to intervene profoundly in the routines American studies scholars conventionally perform to comprehend and interpret American culture. As this chapter progresses, I advance a theory of culture that accommodates an epistemological shift towards what I call *utopian contemporaries*, a sociotemporal model that enables a hopeful proliferation of imaginable sexualities, kinship structures, and citizenship designs in America. Utopian contemporaries linger, as Ernst Bloch put it so aptly, "on the horizon of every reality" (*Hope*, 223): they render an alternative yet anticipatory perspective on the American cultural landscape and concomitantly sketch the contours of a radically unorthodox social.

At the very beginning of this daunting voyage, I find it useful to pose the following questions: How do utopian contemporaries differ from the prevalent discourses that have emerged around American culture? What might be gained, both methodically and politically, by situating utopian contemporaries at the center of the intellectual debates that strive to explain America? And in what ways can utopian contemporaries shape and influence the struggles over legitimate subjectivity within the American nation?[5] In order to go about answering these questions, I emphasize the notion of *temporality* – the way we conceptualize time – as a critical term central to the subsequent argument. Although likely to be dismissed as a mere abstraction with immediate currency only to equally abstract erudite circles, temporality has in fact been essential to the manufacturing of American culture. As this study will show, it is only through temporality that we can understand the particularities of the American community, for it is temporality that shapes the intricate social processes of reproduction, procreation, sustainability, and cultural memory. Every scrutiny of America, thus, must recognize the fundamental dependency of the origination and maintenance of cultural practices on certain understandings of the temporal. The following deliberations aim to highlight and explicate the importance of temporality in America, and they point to an idiosyncrasy in timing that permits the establishment of what I call the *futurist regime*, an ideologically consolidated set of temporal routines which, in José Muñoz' words, "invests in a version of the future that justifies all manner of fascism in the present by the invocation of the children who are the future" ("Superheroes", 400). Before I turn to my survey of temporality in America proper, however, it is indispensable to offer two preliminaries of a more general nature: First, a reflection on the indisputable cultural constructedness of what is usually called America; and second, an active positioning of my thesis within the disciplinary context of American studies.

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[5] As already suggested, I understand "America" as a notion that is always culturally constructed, mediated, and imagined. "America", as a cultural rather than political entity, is contingent on, as Berlant argues, "a collective consciousness or national subjectivity" (*Anatomy*, 20). America, thus, emerges as an identity discourse, or, in Berlant's words, a "pseudo-genetic condition" which "not only affects profoundly the citizen's subjective experience of her/his political rights, but also of civil life, private life, the life of the body itself" (*Anatomy*, 20).

The question is fundamental: What exactly do we mean when we so offhandedly speak of "America?" What is this most elusive object of study that I purport to rethink, to reinvent, and to reorganize? As a concept employed in cultural studies, America is hardly ever coterminous with the physical landscape delineated by the borders of the United States. Rather, I regard it, as the novelist Richard Brautigan did, as "often only a place in the mind" (72), or more precisely, as *always only a place in the mind*. A more traditionally scientific articulation of Brautigan's proposition may be found in Benedict Anderson's seminal study on nationalism, *Imagined Communities*. Embarking on a global and transhistorical tour de force, Anderson advances his "definition of the nation: it is an imagined political community – and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign" (6). we Considering a nation as imagined instead of material, as *a place in the mind* instead of a physical space, the examination of national bodies is relocated to the domain of cultural analysis and representation. Emphasizing the conventional wisdom that "the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members" (6), Anderson recognizes that national coherence is seldom achieved through genuine communal interaction, but almost exclusively through the cultural representation of nationality. In the following, I regard America, in Michael Warner's words, as a "relation among strangers" ("Publics", 55), that is "always in excess of its known social basis" ("Publics", 55). That being the case, what becomes relevant to my conception of America is the "*image* of [the] communion" (Anderson, 6, my emphasis), not the actual connections of bodies of all kinds. The object of this study is therefore the *image* of America, a national representation that, as Anderson points out, draws its distinctiveness from "the style in which [it is] imagined" (6).

Lauren Berlant, in *The Anatomy of a Fantasy*, has called the "National Symbolic" (20) what Anderson describes as "style" (6). An "order of discursive practices whose reign […] transforms individuals into subjects of a collectively-held history" (Berlant, *Anatomy*, 20), the National Symbolic is contingent on its "traditional icons, its metaphors, its heroes, its rituals, and its narratives" (Berlant, *Anatomy*, 20). Although anticipatory, my utopian contemporaries actively engage the National Symbolic and attempt to gain entrance into what Berlant calls "collective consciousness or national

subjectivity" (*Anatomy*, 20). Exploring the boundaries of the imagined community, they operate, in Baty's words, as "representative characters" (8), cultural figures through whom "American political culture is written an exchanged" (10). As a researcher of American culture, then, I scrutinize the *style* of an *imagined community*, I try to decipher the *National Symbolic*, and I attempt to scrutinize the temporal and social consequences of the appearance of particular *representative characters*.

In order to consider the disciplinary context of my thesis, I want to draw attention to a recent work that has been extraordinarily influential in American studies. In 2002, Donald E. Pease and Robyn Wiegman published a book on *The Futures of American Studies*, a collection of essays in which leading academics in the field communicated their viewpoints on both the current condition of the discipline and possible directions for future scholarship.[6] Pease and Wiegman, in their introductory commentary on "Futures", acknowledge the legacy of Gene Wise and exhaustively engage with an article he wrote for *American Quarterly* in 1979. In "'Paradigm Dramas' in American Studies: A Cultural and Institutional History of the Movement", Wise uses a theatrical metaphor to argue that "historical ideas" appear "as a sequence of dramatic acts – acts which play on wider cultural scenes, or historical stages" (296). Wise's sequential stage play, a linear and progressive account of the *paradigm dramas in American studies* is accompanied by a lament over the disintegration of the discipline, the production of alternative and specialized knowledges and, as Pease and Wiegman assert, deep "anxieties over the recognition that the field would not reproduce any of the paradigms that [Wise] characterized as representative of the American studies movement" (3). More than twenty years after "'Paradigm Dramas'", though, the *futures of American studies* must be found in exactly that disintegration. For Pease and Wiegman, American studies is no longer a "sequence of dramatic acts" (Wise, 296), but a proliferation of "untimely passages, [...] disruptive temporalities [that] are productive of altogether different futures at the sites of their emergence" (Pease and Wiegman, 20). As an academic field, they maintain, American studies has brought forth a heterogeneous abundance of conceivable

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[6] At Dartmouth College, Donald Pease also set up a Futures of American Studies Institute that has convened leading scholars in the field once a year since 1998. See URL: <http://www.dartmouth.edu/~futures>. The site was accessed November 20, 2008.

futures and applies a multiplicity of paradigms concurrently rather than chronologically.

As will become evident, my thesis explores these *disruptive temporalities* in American studies in highly intricate ways, as it puts forward a scrutiny of *untimely passages* in America as a cultural concept itself. In *Utopian Contemporaries*, academic theory and cultural practice begin to intermingle: I vigorously participate in the exuberant production of contemporary paradigms in American studies by proposing a paradigm of that very contemporary. Accordingly, it would be hypocritical if I claimed my argument to be apolitical or merely circumstantial. On the contrary, I want to contribute to the long-standing "struggle over the control of the productive and reproductive functions of American studies and, by implication, over the legitimate definition of U.S. society" (Pease and Wiegman, 19). Following the pragmatic assertion that there is no "distinction between finding and making" (Rorty, xxi) and that "all science, like politics, is problem-solving" (Rorty, xxi), I recognize the political imperative in any theory of the utopian. My study, then, fashions the contemporary as an alternative, and perhaps *better*, vision of American culture, an epistemological scheme that provokes an actively political rethinking of the sociotemporal realm that is America.

Having established the intellectual context out of which this project emerges, I shall now return to the principal concern of this chapter, temporality, and survey how America has always been discursivized into existence through a peculiar conception of time. In the following paragraphs, I characterize the American enterprise as a long-standing teleological quest for futurity, and consequently, posterity. Realizing that the futurism-paradigm has permeated America across history, and across political ideologies, I will expose its normative impact on the structuring of social relations and its forceful exclusionary practices that make certain lives unthinkable in the American context. It is vital to understand that the *futurist regime* that makes up America may serve as an antithesis to what I will later typify as utopian contemporaries; indeed, it encapsulates the obstinate belief in reproductive time lines that my own framework seeks to undo.

In "The Great Nation of Futurity", a classic American civilization text written in 1839, John L. O'Sullivan argues that the American "national birth was the beginning of a new history, the formation and progress of an untried political system, which separates us from the past and connects us with the future only" (386). An unabashed paean to futurism, O'Sullivan's expectant salutation of the new epitomizes the spirit of the American project. With providential certainty, he adds that the "country is destined to be *the great nation* of futurity" (386, emphasis in the original), and establishes the notion of an apparently preordained progress that feeds into the manufacturing of a nation contingent on reproduction. If, as O'Sullivan maintains, "[t]he expansive future is our arena" (386), then "we" have to structure our social relations accordingly. For to carry America across the ostensibly immaculate continent, social networks and kinship patterns must center on reproductive growth, on the *national birth* of a mythical child that guarantees the fulfillment of the country's manifest destiny. The incessant yearning for the future warrants a social that relies on the sequential makeup of reproductive progress. The American desire is expansionist, not multiplicative: it demands more of the same, and it installs a social order that advocates chronological reproduction, not contemporary proliferation.

O'Sullivan's accolade on perpetual expansion, reproductive growth and predestined futurity is echoed in John Gast's canonized painting "American Progress", which is, as an explanatory paragraph has it, "illustrating at a glance the grand drama of Progress [sic!] in the civilization, settlement, and history of this country" (410).[7] Also in Gast's reflection on "American Progress", the project of futurity intermingles with the project of "civilization". Utilizing the already familiar theatrical metaphor, America's *grand drama* portrays the futurism of the frontiersman, or, as historian Frederick Jackson Turner argues, the "steady growth of independence on American lines" (416). Turner, who declares the *frontier* the quintessential symbol of Americanness, fathoms it as the site of "perennial rebirth" (415) that plays a decisive role in "American social development" (415). *Birth* and *rebirth* seem to be the phenomena obligatory for the constitution of the communal image that is America. The temporal axis that organizes the

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[7] It is uncertain whether it was Gast himself or George Crofutt, the editor of the tourist guide in which the painting first appeared, who actually wrote the explanatory paragraph. In this thesis, the bibliographical entry to this quote can be found under Gast's name.

dominant and historically legitimized American discourses is futurity. Enacting the *grand drama of progress*, America desires its children, real and imaginary, it desperately craves for posterity, and it justifies its very existence on the grounds of expansive reproduction.

A speech by the Democratic presidential candidate Barack Obama provides a more recent example of the discursive practices of the futurist regime.[8] In early 2008, more than a century after the closing of the frontier, Democratic presidential candidate Barack Obama faced a drawback in his pre-election campaign. Obama's former pastor, Jeremiah Wright, had publicly used what Obama himself described as "incendiary language" (n.p.), an evocative assortment of racist slurs. The controversy that followed Wright's remarks pressured Obama to address a topic he had carefully avoided throughout his run for office: race. Delivering a speech on "A More Perfect Union" in Philadelphia on March 18, Obama brought up the debate that had emerged around Wright's *incendiary language* and argued, "race is an issue that I believe this nation cannot afford to ignore right now" (n.p.). Although tackling a potentially divisive issue, Obama's performance conjures the impression of unity, of a post-racial politics that strives for higher aims than the seemingly insignificant complications of race and ethnicity. "I believe deeply that we cannot solve the challenges of our time unless we solve them together" (n.p.), Obama claims and optimistically contrives a nation united despite its internal differences. The unifying principle, Obama suggests, is that "we hold common hopes; that we may not look the same and we may not have come from the same place, but we all want to move in the same direction" (n.p.).

The same direction, this grandiloquent rhetorical flourish, is what connects a liberal presidential candidate of the twenty-first century with the expansionist fantasies of the frontiersman; *the same direction* is the overarching umbrella that has shaped the imaginings of the American community for centuries; this *same direction*, as the avid reader may already have guessed, must inevitably lead, says Obama, "towards a better future for our children and our grandchildren" (n.p.).

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[8] Obama's speech was transcribed for his website, yet without pagination. URL: <http://my.-barackobama.com/page/content/hisownwords>. The site was accessed on November 18, 2008.
Barack Obama was eventually elected 44th President of the United States in early November 2008.

If this aspiration sounds like a viable proposition for a united nation, for *change we can believe in*, as the incessant mantra of the Obama campaign boosts, it only demonstrates the normative powers of the futurist regime. Existentially dependent on expansionist reproduction, the *great nation of futurity* must always defend its inherent heterosexuality, and set up its knowledge systems accordingly. To produce a *future for our children and our grandchildren*, America has to insist that "humanity and heterosexuality are synonymous" (Warner, "Introduction", xxiii), and it has to practice what Berlant and Warner call "heteronormativity", a system of "institutions, structures of understanding, and practical orientations that make heterosexuality seem not only coherent – that is, organized as sexuality – but also privileged" ("Sex", 548).

Of course, the concept of heteronormativity has been invoked for more than a decade to describe the exclusionary practices that render queer lives – ways of being that do not comply with heterosexual norms – unthinkable within the symbolic network of relations that demarcates American citizenship; my survey of the American futurist regime, however, has accentuated the temporal thread that underlies heteronormative social formations. It is, in the end, the reproductive fantasy of futurity that makes possible a representational system that privileges heterosexuality while ostracizing queer existence.

Lee Edelman's seditious polemic, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (2004), has taken up the issue of what he calls "reproductive futurism" (*Future*, 2), a process "preserving the absolute privilege of heteronormativity" (*Future*, 2) by positioning queer sexualities outside the expansionist quest for the child, for posterity. As a corollary, evidently, queerness is also imagined outside socially feasible forms of belonging, kinship, and citizenship. Queer lives, as Edelman puts it, are lived "outside the political domain" (*Future*, 2) of the futurist regime altogether. A fierce attack on the futurist practices of mainstream society, Edelman's book comes out of the tradition of queer theory, an interdisciplinary endeavor in cultural analysis (and, for some, in cultural politics) that has been a vibrant field of study since the early 1990s. Queer theory tries to "dramatize incoherencies in the allegedly stable relations between chromosomal sex,

gender and sexual desire" (Jagose, 3) and attempts "the deconstruction of normative models of gender" (Jagose, 83). Having already recognized the links between temporality and social relations in the broadest sense, a deconstructive exercise must also involve a questioning of the normative functions of futurism, a project which Edelman undertakes, but which leads him, as will turn out in a moment, to conclusions that have stirred up impassioned debate ever since the publication of *No Future*.

Edelman opens his book with what he modestly terms "a simple provocation" (*Future*, 3), and what encapsulates the futility of an affirmative and assimilationist queer politics. He argues "that *queerness* names [...] the side outside the consensus by which all politics confirms the absolute value of reproductive futurism" (*Future*, 3), and reveals the implicitly homophobic discourse of all the Obamas and O'Sullivans who are fighting for *the future of our children and our grandchildren*. The futurist bias towards heteronormativity has been fueled, as Judith Butler points out, by "fears about reproductive relations" ("Kinship", 21), by uncanny anxieties over the prospect that queer citizenship may interfere with a nation "imagined for fetuses and children" (Berlant, *Queen*, 1), and by the fundamental antithesis that the queer and the child embody. The principal concern of futurist America, then, is the fate of its offspring, expressed in a fearful inquiry: "What happens to the child, the child, the poor child, the martyred figure of an ostensibly selfish or dogged social progressivism?" (Butler, "Kinship", 21). Edelman recognizes that the mythical child – as the epitome of a heteronormative future-oriented social – can only be saved by a "marriage of identity to futurity in order to realize the social subject" (*Future*, 14), which leads him to the ensuing claim that only the linear temporal process of "*ever* aftering" ("After", 476, emphasis in the original) can keep "society alive" ("After", 476). Heteronormative America, accordingly, is constituted through its own posterity, through a temporal operation to which queerness is inherently antagonistic. In an imagined community that relies on futurism as its life-giving engine, then, "the queer comes to figure the bar to every realization of futurity, the resistance, internal to the social, to every social structure or form" (Edelman, *Future*, 4).

In Edelman's critique of culture, queerness occupies a temporality that extends *no future*. On the contrary, queer times are firmly stuck in the

contemporary, a childless realm that harbors only "sterile, narcissistic enjoyments understood as inherently destructive of meaning and therefore as responsible for the undoing of social organization, collective reality, and, inevitably, life itself" (Edelman, *Future*, 13). Detrimental to the futurist regime and its accompanying principle of social structuring, heteronormativity, the *contemporary* becomes the quintessential queer temporality, an odd time axis that opposes chronology and teleology, and that seems to have, says Edelman, no social purpose whatsoever.

I will return to the negativist and antagonistic claims that *No Future* makes, but, having described the contemporary – an eponymous notion of this thesis – as queer temporality, I find it indispensable to survey recent intellectual debates on this issue. Over the last five years, queer temporality has gained enormous academic currency. Despite heated arguments over its exact typology, queer temporality seems to be set apart by its repudiation of *straight* – linear, sequential, and reproductive – time frames and its resistance to teleological cultural narratives. Elizabeth Freeman, for instance, suggests that the "sensation of asynchrony" ("Introduction", 159) may be reminiscent of queer time, while Carla Freccero creates an "alternative temporal model" (489), which she outlines as "[q]ueer spectrality – ghostly returns suffused with affective materiality" (489). For Nguyen Tan Hoang, "a sense of belatedness" (Dinshaw et al., 183) is a crucial attribute of queer temporality, while Kate Thomas finds her sociotemporal solution in the "*prepositional* quality of queer" (619, emphasis in the original), which is, as she reminds us, "relational rather than teleological" (619). Tom Boellstorff, in his analysis of the "United States, where millenarianism has a particular historical and contemporary reference" (228), postulates that queer temporality is coincidental, a "time in which time falls rather than passes, a queer meantime that embraces contamination and imbrication (228). Judith Halberstam, in a more political argument that will be prominent later in this thesis, claims that "queer subcultures produce alternative temporalities [...] that lie outside of those paradigmatic markers of life experience – namely birth, marriage, reproduction, and death" (2) and finds queer temporality in opposition to these temporal paradigms, in what she calls a "stretched-out adolescence" (153). Elizabeth Freeman, in yet another article, strikes a similar chord. She

also analyzes the normative powers of everyday temporal organization and argues that "[n]eoliberalism describes the needs of everyone else, everyone it exploits, as simply, generically, deferred" ("Binds", 58). Queer temporality, all these theoreticians assert, resists a *dramatic* conception of time. Instead, it is contemporary: coincidental, asynchronous, belated, or deferred, hopelessly lagging behind an aggressive futurism that denies any possibility for queer existence.

Such a temporality, for Edelman, is "responsible for the undoing of social organization, collective reality, and, inevitably, life itself" (*Future*, 13); it destroys not only futurity, but, because meaning is always already conditioned by the reproductive cycles of the futurist regime, social identity as well. The queer contemporary thus poses an existential threat to a social order built on the futurist imperative and comes to function as the primary marker of a disastrous antisocial. The queer embrace of social negativity that provides the theoretical breeding ground for Edelman's thesis goes back to the 1980s, when the AIDS crisis firmly installed the discursive association of homosexuality with the deadly HI virus. As a cultural metaphor, Susan Sontag points out, AIDS is "linked to an imputation of guilt" (112). Affecting a relatively high number of homosexual men, the disease has been regarded as "punishment for living unhealthy lives" (113), and as, "plague-like, a moral judgment on society" (148). A prototypically queer illness, says Sontag, AIDS poses a severe threat to the futurism of the imagined community: it turns the "vision of linear progress […] into a vision of disaster" (177). AIDS deprives queerness of its future and relocates it to a premortal contemporary, imbued with death and immanently damaging to the reproductive fantasies of the American social. Also, Leo Bersani, in an article published at the peak of the AIDS crisis in the United States, inquires, "Is the Rectum a Grave?", and observes the "heterosexual association of anal sex with […] self-annihilation" (222). Already in the late 1980s, he recognizes the death drive with which queerness has been equated ever since. For Bersani, the rectum displays a "potential for death" (222) and violently shatters the "sacrosanct value of selfhood" (222) to the American imaginings. AIDS, as a queer prop, symbolizes the deadly stop sign that threatens to bring the future to a halt, and with it the whole teleological venture that strives to constitute America.

This short excursion into the intellectual origins of queer negativity leads me back to Edelman's polemic, and motivates a closer scrutiny of the political project that underlies *No Future*. The *simple provocation* that the social order incessantly perpetuates "the Child, the absolutism of identity, the fixity of what is" ("After", 471), and that *queerness* must always pose as the internal antagonist to that system, occasions Edelman to sound a call to arms. Queer politics, he suggests, should "consider accepting and even embracing" (*Future,* 4) the "ascription of negativity to the queer" (*Future*, 4). Contrary to the recent "political use of the endangered child by advocates of same-sex marriage" (McCreery, 187), and the appropriation of "the rhetoric of child protectionism" (McCreery, 186) by gay and lesbian activists, Edelman candidly recommends to "[f]uck the social order and the Child in whose name we're collectively terrorized" (*Future*, 29), and to take an active stance against any kind of sociality. For Edelman, the queer inhabitants of a futureless contemporary should welcome the fact that "queerness undoes the identities through which we experience ourselves as subjects" (*Future*, 24) and take perverse pleasure from the fatal clasp of the death drive. In the hermeneutics of queer negativity, no one "can escape the insistence of the antisocial in social organization" (Edelman, "Antagonism", 821). Rather than "putting the puppet of humanism through its passion play once again" ("Antagonism", 821), Edelman suggests that queers endorse social negativity and bravely function as "advocates of abortion" (*Future*, 31). What is "queerest" (*Future*, 31) about queers, Edelman insinuates, is their antisocial urge to file for divorce, to seek the acrimonious destruction of a futurist social, to luxuriate in the contemporary, and to savor the promiscuous hedonism of amoral self-indulgence; what is *queerest* about queers, then, is their "willingness […] to insist that the future stop here" (*Future*, 31).

Edelman's celebratory account of queer negativity has been linked to what Robert Caserio calls the "'antisocial thesis' in contemporary queer theory" (819). Vehemently discussed at a panel at the 2005 Annual Convention of the Modern Language Association, the antisocial thesis adopts "the viciously homophobic representation of homosexuality as sterile, unproductive, antifamily, and death-driven" (Dean, 827), and fashions the contemporary as essentially negative temporality.

Acknowledging it as both an academic and political problem, the critical engagement with the antisocial thesis has produced two opposed patterns of response: On the one hand, critics participate in a sometimes bizarre eulogizing of social negativity, a way of reasoning that, as Gregory Tomso does in his article "Viral Sex and the Politics of Life", may read the deadly practices of "intentionally unsafe sex" (265) as powerful – yet suicidal – resistance against the health imperative of our "neoliberal, biopolitical regime" (270). Likewise, Lee Edelman never fails to dismiss "liberal inclusionism" ("Antagonism", 821), and instead stresses "sociality's self-resistance, […] its structurally determinative violence, and […] the inescapable antagonism that no utopianism transcends" ("Antagonism", 821), a theoretical maneuver that renders queer negativity an always already indispensable constituent of the social. On the other hand, cultural commentators attempt to break the bond between queer temporality and social negativity, a connection so dear to antisocial theorists. They show a renewed interest in the temporality of utopia, and insist, as José Muñoz claims, "on the essential need for an understanding of queerness as collectivity" ("Beyond", 825).

My notion of utopian contemporaries aligns itself with the latter argument: I strongly believe in the possibility of a queer positivity, in a utopian temporality that displays creative rather than merely destructive qualities, and in the practicability of a futurity that still remains deeply rooted in the contemporary. In the following paragraphs, thus, I attempt to do two things: First, I will develop a notion of utopia that stresses the multiplicative, rather than reproductive, facets of humanity, and second, I will undertake to outline a theoretical framework that allows for utopia, and utopian contemporaries, to be implemented in a temporality that is always anticipatory, yet always firmly present.

Halfway through this chapter, an intellectual endeavor to theorize utopian contemporaries, I have introduced the contemporary as a critical temporality that resists reproductive time lines and that, revealing its amorphous indeterminacy, actively queers the *dramatic* futurism which constitutes the American imagined community. According to the antisocial thesis, however, the contemporary is not at all utopian: on the contrary, it is

invested with the dystopian powers to undo identities, to destroy the social, and to tirelessly poison any future with negativity. This ingenious correlation between the contemporary and queer negativity leads me to further interrogation, invoking the following questions: May not the contemporary, despite the queer demand that *the future stop here*, also function as a critical temporal domain to originate new, other futures? Is not the contemporary, precisely because of its queer indeterminacy, an ideal testing ground for alternative futurities, or for a reconfiguration of temporality on the whole? And might not a queer social that prefers the contemporary to the future child be a truly utopian prospect? In the remainder of this chapter, I want to investigate these issues and try to answer the above questions in the affirmative. It is my ambitious aim to illustrate that, following David Román, "the power of the contemporary [lies] precisely in its nowness" (*America*, 15), and that its indecisive temporal existence furthers the profuse origination of *other*, and *better* futures. As this study will show, the contemporary is not necessarily socially negative: it may also extend the buoyant positivity of utopia.

What, then, does utopia mean? Where do we locate a notion that is literally *nowhere*? And how can we conjoin it with the now-here of the contemporary? The term *utopia*, a non-place that is, because of its homophone *eutopia*, at the same time a good place, first appeared in Thomas More's book of the same title. First published in 1516, and written in Latin, More's *Utopia* provides an account of a fictional island located somewhere in the Americas. Essentially a blueprint for a different community, the book contrasts, as Paul Turner puts it, "the unhappy state of European society with conditions in an ideal country" (xv). Ever since More's initial attempt, the concept of *utopia* has been employed to imagine and conceptualize *better* societies, more hopeful systems of kinship and community, and a more desirable understanding of citizenship and nation.

It was the German philosopher Ernst Bloch who saw in temporality a crucial notion to grasp utopia. For Bloch, any utopian function is characterized by its capability to grant "anticipatory illumination" (*Utopian*, 141), the promise of an anticipated future that is still in the making, and that still remains contemporary. Anticipation, as a temporal concept that connects the future and the present, becomes the defining feature of the

utopian: its very nowness points to infinity, to an uncertain but optimistic future. Utopian communities, as literary critic Phillip Wegner puts it, are built on the "foreshadowing of emergent aspects of such a radically other future" (21): they are not imagined, but *imaginary*, and they ideate alternative ways of being and becoming at the same time. In this constellation, the contemporary is no longer antithetical to futurity. Instead, both time axes intermingle and develop an increasingly interdependent temporal economy that relies on the reciprocal exchange of utopian ideas. Postmodern critic Fredric Jameson describes this process as "the utopian arrangements of [an] imaginary future" (38) which come back "upon our present to play a diagnostic and critical-substantive role" (38). The utopian contemporary, then, demands more future, yet it insists on a future that does not strive towards a later goal, but that is always already there.

Having outlined the historical origins and the temporality of utopia, I draw my utopian vision from the philosophical ambitions of pragmatism. Despite the seeming contradiction, my concept of utopian contemporaries is heavily indebted to pragmatism. Indeed, the often naïve idealism of utopia appears to foreclose much of pragmatism's political practicability. On closer inspection, however, it becomes evident that both traditions actively work towards a *better* world and – idiosyncratic as they may be – formulate blueprints for a more hopeful society. Pragmatism's temporal concept, as Richard Rorty understands it, also bears obvious resemblance to the framework in which I attempt to embed utopian contemporaries. Rorty argues that the pragmatic hope "is not that the future will conform to a plan, will fulfil an immanent teleology, but rather that the future will astonish and exhilarate" (28). The pragmatic way of reasoning is also opposed to a futurity dependent on reproduction and posterity, and as an alternative opts for the constant reworking of the future. Pragmatism intends to discard the reproductive certainties of futurism and rather anticipate the astonishing, the new. As Richard Rorty points out, "one should replace knowledge by hope" (34), or in a wider political context, reject the normative functions of knowledge regimes and come up with utopian prospects instead. For Rorty, "one should stop worrying about whether what one believes is well grounded" (34), dismiss certainty, and "start worrying about whether one has been imaginative enough to think up

interesting alternatives to one's present beliefs" (34). Rorty's salutation of utopian anticipation embraces *interesting alternatives*: he promotes conceptual growth as moral imperative and encourages multiplicative proliferation in place of self-assuring reproduction.

My concept of utopian contemporaries takes up the pragmatic incentive to grow imaginatively. The profuse origination of utopian futures in the contemporary is also an attempt to think more creatively. Augmenting the heteronormative constraints of futurism, utopian contemporaries may devise unprecedented and manifold futures that explode the valorization systems that have regulated the spheres where the intimate and the public meet: sexuality, desire, and belonging. Utopian contemporaries create *interesting alternatives* to dominant understandings of kinship and citizenship, and remove the heavy lid of futurism from the steaming American social pot. Furthermore, I understand the utopian as a queer concept in the sense that, as Berlant and Warner argue, "almost everything that can be called queer theory has been radically anticipatory, trying to bring a world into being" ("X", 344). Queer theory's markedly political stance has always been aimed at *interesting alternatives*, at queer futures already imagined in the present, and it has furthered interpretations of sexuality that grow rapidly beyond the binaries of heteronormative systems.

An academic tradition that I find particularly helpful for the theoretical implementation of these *interesting alternatives*, so profusely developed by utopian contemporaries, is performance studies. Although only one of my subsequent examples, *The Laramie Project*, may be considered a *performance*, I believe that the *vernacular* of performance can help understand the momentary renegotiation of culture that utopian contemporaries undertake. The discipline, or, as theater historian Marvin Carlson puts it, "antidiscipline" (*Performance*, 189), of performance studies has also a long-standing interest in the contemporary, for it is the ephemeral present in which all performance must necessarily take place. Confronting the fleetingness of the now, performance studies scholars have investigated the world-making potential of performance, and have attempted to explore its impact in the wider political, cultural, and temporal realms. Every scrutiny of performance must also be perceived as a scrutiny

of the contemporary, and every discovery of imaginative futures in performance helps approaching the utopian function of the contemporary. In the following sections, I want to survey the writings of José Muñoz, Jill Dolan, and Joseph Roach, and see how their theories of performance can contribute to an awareness of utopian contemporaries.

In an article published in the aforementioned volume, *The Futures of American Studies*, José Muñoz argues for "the enactment of what I call, following C. L. R. James, a future in the present" ("Future", 93). Acknowledging the teleological futurism of heteronormative America, Muñoz asks, "[c]an the future stop being a fantasy of heterosexual reproduction?" ("Future", 93). He then purports to analyze performances that contain an "anticipatory illumination of a queer world, a sign of an actually existing queer reality, [and] a kernel of political possibility" ("Future", 93). For Muñoz, the contemporary of performance points towards an *other* future, a time that neither reproduces heterosexuality nor justifies itself solely on the grounds of a mythical child. The contemporary, as a temporality in which utopian contemporaries can thrive, rather, represents a "coterminous time where we witness new formations within the present and the future" (Muñoz, "Future", 100), and where we jubilantly welcome the discursive multiplication of the social. Through the conflation of the future and the present, then, I believe that we can approximate the utopian *anticipatory illumination* that, as Muñoz claims, "will provide us with access to a world that should be, that could be, that will be" ("Future", 108).

In her book-length study on *Utopia in Performance*, Jill Dolan also recognizes that performance is always contemporary. Embarking on her pursuit of what she labels "utopian performatives" (5), Dolan concedes that at "the base of the utopian performative's constitution is the inevitability of its disappearance; its efficacy is premised on its evanescence" (8). Much like utopian contemporaries, Dolan's utopian performative also remains deeply embedded in the present. Both performance and the contemporary, however, also point towards a future in the making. As Marvin Carlson claims, performance "constantly oscillates between the fleeting present and the stillness of infinity" ("Auto/Archive", 211). Jill Dolan's utopian performatives entail "the promise of a present that gestures toward a better later" (7), that transcends the seeming negativity of the moment, and that

conceives of an alternative version of futurity. "Performance", Dolan writes, can be used "as a forum for rehearsing the practice of politics" (114), and it is the idea of the contemporary rehearsal of additional futures that is so compelling about her argument. Throughout her case studies that range from autobiographical solo performance to *Def Poetry Jam*, an attempt to bring political poetry to Broadway, Dolan invests this anticipatory perspective with a "reenvisioned humanism [that] is contextual, situational, and specific" (22). She focuses on the contemporary's cultural powers to "experiment with the possibilities of the future in ways that shine back usefully on a present that's always, itself, in process (13) and reveals the reciprocal relationship of present and future on which the utopian always depends. Dolan's utopian performatives "might empower people to engage civically in participatory democracy" (28), they further a social characterized by communal participation, not antagonism, and they promote a "wiser humanism" (22) that is "multiple, respecting the complexities and ambiguities of identity" (22). What might be gained, then, from Dolan's eponymous search for "hope at the theater"? How can we adopt her humanist perspectives for a more thorough understanding of utopian contemporaries? As David Román argues, performance possesses the "capacity to shape daily life" (*America*, 5). Utopian contemporaries, as cultural figures who inhabit the temporality of performance, I insist, possess that capacity as well: their anticipatory futures mitigate an amelioration of the contemporary, which is no longer stigmatized by queer negativity, but acclaimed for its abundant productivity.

Joseph Roach's monumental *Cities of the Dead* also notices the productive powers of performance, powers that also inform my notion of utopian contemporaries. Investigating the "three-sided relationship of memory, performance and substitution" (2), Roach claims that "to perform in this sense means to bring forth, to make manifest, and to transmit" (xi). Roach's analytical journey through the "geohistorical matrix of the circum-Atlantic world" (xi) provides an important key to the decisive role that performance, and with it, around it, and in it, the contemporary play in the cultural process. In order to illustrate the power of performance to reinvent, to renegotiate, and to reconfigure cultural memory, Roach develops the notion of "surrogation" (2), a process that involves both translation and

substitution. Following Pierre Nora's definition of memory as "perpetually actual phenomenon" that is "open to the dialectic of remembering and forgetting" (8), Roach positions his idea of surrogation in the *perpetual actuality* of the contemporary. Surrogation, he argues, is the "attempt to fit satisfactory alternates" (2) into cultural voids, into "the cavities created by loss through death or other forms of departure" (2). Culture, says Roach, is contingent on the "social processes of memory and forgetting" (xi); accordingly, new memories may emerge out of ephemeral performance, whereas older ones are consigned to oblivion. In this affair, the contemporary plays a vital part: it is only from the vortex of this particular temporality that new memories, and indeed, new futures can emerge. For utopian contemporaries, these *satisfactory alternates* will only prove satisfactory if they proliferate into indeterminacy. Only satisfied with unpredictable growth of a future in the present, utopian contemporaries demand an active enlargement of culture that makes lives imaginable outside a heteronormative social.

In the previous paragraphs, I have outlined the ways in which utopian contemporaries can be theorized by the critical apparatus of performance studies. The theorists I have engaged with all stress the creative aspect of performance, the world-making capacities inherent in the ephemeral fleetingness of the contemporary. They reveal viable spaces for the manifestation of futures that are multiplicative rather than merely reproductive. The abandoning of teleological reproduction in order to construct utopian contemporaries, however, throws up the following questions: How can we achieve subjectivity constitution if we step out of the live-giving light of posterity? How can we imagine a social without the figure of the child? And what might replace the futurist obsession with our descendants, with *our children and our grandchildren*, if we remain queered into the time of the contemporary? To answer these questions, and to cast a profoundly humanist shadow on the remainder of this chapter, I shall incorporate Judith Butler's ruminations on the precariousness of life into my thesis. In her account of the ethical considerations of identity formation, Butler "pursues the problem of a primary vulnerability to others" (*Precarious*, xiv) and provokes me to make explicit the social consequences of what Jill Dolan has identified as "wiser humanism" (22). As representative characters,

utopian contemporaries, I argue, substitute the child, and the reproductive genealogies the child epitomizes, with the awareness that identities are necessarily intersubjective and relational. Bearing that in mind, I recognize the contemporary, not the child, as the primary supporter of a queer social. I claim, finally, that the queer temporality I have described as a future in the now makes necessary a fundamental social responsibility for one's contemporaries, not for posterity.

In *Precarious Life*, Judith Butler interrogates nothing less than "the question of the human" (20). Beginning to sketch what I would call, in Jill Dolan's words, a *reenvisioned humanism*, Butler recognizes a "condition of primary vulnerability, [...] a primary helplessness and need, one to which every society must attend" (*Precarious*, 31–32). Because identities are always socially constructed, Butler claims that "each of us is constituted politically in part by virtue of the social vulnerability of our bodies (*Precarious*, 20). We are, says Butler, "by definition, physically dependent on one another, physically vulnerable to one another" (*Precarious*, 27). Out of that fundamental dependency on other human beings the following corollary ensues: Rather than merely focusing on our seeming subjective autonomy, we ought to subscribe to "another way of imagining community" (*Precarious*, 27), a way in which identities come into being through a principal relationality, through a primary bond that connects the self with the other. It is Butler's conviction that we should acknowledge the ties that bind humanity together, and realize that "[w]e're undone by each other. And if we're not, we're missing something" (*Precarious*, 23). The primary vulnerability of each human being invokes us to strive for a social that dismisses Edelman's aforementioned "inescapable antagonism that no utopianism transcends" ("Antagonism", 821). Instead, we may theorize a community that is alert to the "precariousness of life itself" (Butler, *Precarious*, 134) and that justifies its existence through a primary relationship with the other. For Butler, it is the contemporary, the immediate other, who, by definition, "adress[es] moral demands to us, ones that we do not ask for, ones that we are not free to refuse" (*Precarious*, 131). It is the contemporary, then, who lies at the heart of the *question of the human*, for it is that moment of address by the contemporary that makes humanity manifest.

I have included Judith Butler's humanist plea into my theory because I believe that utopian contemporaries can only be accurately represented within a social that puts relationality at its center. A theory of culture that focuses on the *precariousness* of the moment, on the fleetingness of the now, depends on that very momentary recognition of the self and the other. It must rely on the social networks that human beings seek to build in the fragile temporality of the now, since only from these transient relationships utopian futurities can spring. The contemporary alliance cannot adhere to the permanence of posterity, but it must take its inspiration from the immediate presence of the other. Utopian contemporaries, thus, stand for the human beings with whom, for whom, and by virtue of whom, we may imagine the buoyant proliferation of futurities that utopianism demands. We *are*, after all, undone by each other, and it is only that undoing that prevents us from continuous reproduction, and rather invites the imaginative creation of the new.

The next three chapters provide exemplary accounts of utopian contemporaries. These reports are intended to highlight the practicability of a future that is always already encapsulated in the moment. I have carefully assembled these cultural productions, and they add up to an optimistic and confident ensemble, entertaining social hopes for the inclusion of queer lives into the American imagined community. The utopian contemporaries of this study courageously reveal their potential to *re-member* America, to originate novel futures, alternative memories, and imaginative options of sexual expression, kinship, and citizenship. In the subsequent voyage through contemporary America, I will encounter more than a handful of these utopian contemporaries: in Laramie, Wyoming, I will discover Romaine Patterson, Jedadiah Schultz, and Dennis Shepard; in the amorphous venues of cyberspace, I will uncover the passionate romance of Captain Kirk and Mr. Spock; and in the dense thicket of Brooklyn, New York, I will describe a blackout that catalyzes the refreshingly multiplicative proliferation of social relationships in a moment of powerlessness.

The subsequent chapter, LIFE IN THE MEMORY OF ONE WHO NO LONGER LIVES, which opens the analytical part of this study, deals with *The Laramie Project*, a documentary play collaboratively written by Moisés Kaufman and his Tectonic Theater Company. As the first of the three

cultural texts under scrutiny in this thesis, *The Laramie Project* not only shares its commitment to utopian contemporaries with the examples that follow, but also espouses an intricate relationship with recent discourses of sexuality, kinship, and citizenship in the United States. Although the primary link between *The Laramie Project*, *Broke Trek*, and *Shortbus* must be their imaginative creation of alternative, or utopian, futures in the present, they are also connected through their focus on the political issues relevant to queer citizenship during the last decade. If playwright Moisés Kaufman claims the murder of Matthew Shepard to be a "lightning rod" ("West", 17) that "brings the various ideologies and beliefs prevailing in a culture into sharp focus" ("West", 17), *The Laramie Project* is indubitably roped around that antenna. But also the examples dealt with in chapters three and four can be traced back to formative events through which ideological systems were canalized in an exceptional way: Whereas *Broke Trek* capitalizes on the surprising success of *Brokeback Mountain*, compellingly addressing the pressing issues of queer visibility in mainstream media, John Cameron Mitchell's *Shortbus* may be regarded as a *posthumous* exorcising of the specter of AIDS. Effectively positioning themselves at the centers of these discursive clusters, my examples capture a broad range of contemporary debates and offer solutions for the seemingly fatal clash between the futurist regime and queer negativity. A theatrical piece, an online video, and a feature film, the following representations of contemporary America possess no generic similarities; rather, they share their yet unclassified readiness to grow imaginatively.

Utopian contemporaries do *fuck the child*, but they refuse to subscribe to a destructive antagonism, and embrace the human contemporary instead; they actively queer the teleological futurism of dominant American culture, and attempt to inaugurate a future in the present; they salute the *anticipatory illumination* of utopianism, and recognize the intricate and fruitful relationship of the utopian *nowhere* with the here and now of the present; eventually, they celebrate their queerness with all-encompassing creativity, not ferocious destruction, and find the queer's ultimate desire in the realization that there is no *ultimate* desire, only, reversing Edelman's sententious claim, the unbroken willingness to insist that the future *start* here.

2. LIFE IN THE MEMORY OF ONE WHO NO LONGER LIVES

For Matthew Shepard, the future stopped in the early hours of October 12, 1998. A week before, the student from the University of Wyoming in Laramie had been severely beaten, tied to a split-rail fence in the outskirts of the town, and left to die. Although Shepard was discovered barely breathing several hours after the incident, he did not survive the next couple of days. When he died that October morning, Shepard tragically literalized Edelman's claim that queerness presents *no future*. Because Matthew Shepard, twenty-one, was gay. He had no place in a nation silhouetted by the paradigm of reproductive futurism, a behavioral pattern so pervasive that even his mother Judy did not hesitate to perpetuate it. Issuing a statement after Matthew's death, Judy Shepard urged the American public to "give your kids a hug and don't let a day go by without

telling them that you love them" (CNN, n.p.)[9]. Edelman, briefly glancing over this puzzling statement, rightly claims that Judy's entreaty "even on the occasion of a gay man's murder defined the *proper* mourners as those who had children to go home to and hug" (*Future*, 116, emphasis in the original). Her words, he argues, "specified the mourning it encouraged as mourning for a threatened familial futurity" (*Future*, 116), an alleged menace to posterity that the very person mourned in fact posed. Despite the maelstrom of social negativity associated with the gruesome murder, however, I believe that it helped create moments out of which utopian contemporaries have grown. In the following chapter, I will show that the futureless void left by Matthew Shepard's death has been filled profusely with alternative futurities, imaginative visions that make queer lives in America possible, and not absurd. The utopian contemporaries that will accompany us through the subsequent pages seize the present, divest it of its queer negativity, and envisage what Jill Dolan labels a "wiser humanism" (22), a social dependent on the fruitful relationships between tolerant and multiplicatively diverse human beings. Indeed, the following paragraphs will illustrate that despite the termination the fatal murder occasioned, the future may start *here*, and give *life in the memory of one who no longer lives*.

In particular, I shall analyze *The Laramie Project* in this chapter, a play collaboratively written by Moisés Kaufman and the members of his New York-based Tectonic Theater Project. Premiering on February 19, 2000, in Denver, *The Laramie Project* is based on interviews with residents of Laramie, Wyoming. Although the voices that can be heard in the play assume an air of authenticity, we must nevertheless be aware that heavy editing preceded their incorporation into the theatrical text. Stephen Wangh, one of the play's co-writers, for example, retrospectively contemplates the blank spaces in the piece and points out that "perhaps we playwrights of *The Laramie Project* should have asked ourselves if we were avoiding something uncomfortable" (13). Likewise, theater critic Debby Thompson reports of an audience talkback where Moisés Kaufman and head writer Leigh Fondakowski claimed that necessarily, "some stories were more

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[9] Judy Shepard's statement was widely quoted in the aftermath of the attack. It was reported, for instance, in a CNN online article. URL: <http://edition.cnn.com/US/9810/12/wyoming.-attack.03/index.html>. The site was accessed on October 29, 2008.

relevant than others" (644). What these comments emphasize is the conventional wisdom that even the most *authentic* representation still remains a *representation*, a culturally and socially mediated portrayal of actual events. *The Laramie Project*, thus, figures as a representation of America, just as its dramatis personae constitute *representative characters* for the American imagined community. Some of these characters, I argue, may be labeled utopian contemporaries, as they engage in a momentary renegotiation of the futurist regime – a revision of the American project that makes queer existence thinkable within the political and cultural domains.

My critical interpretation of *The Laramie Project*, thus, must provide answers to the following questions: Where can we locate utopian contemporaries in this specific representation of America, and how do they materialize? In what ways can a play that deals with both the brutal murder of a gay man and the homophobic sentiment of a Wyoming community search for imaginative futures in the present? And how does the play commit to a renegotiation of the discursive boundaries that delineate American citizenship? If we want to answer these questions, and if we want to grasp the extraordinary cultural work *The Laramie Project* accomplishes, it is necessary to spend some time dissecting the tragic event that prompted the creation of the play. In order to understand Moisés Kaufman's play, undoubtedly, we need to understand the murder of Matthew Shepard.

In the subsequent paragraphs, I will first recount the horrendous circumstances that prompted the creation of *The Laramie Project*. After a brief overview, I will proceed to frame the *national* discourses and debates that were triggered by the murder, and that addressed issues crucial to the current assessment of the imagined community. I will then concern myself with *The Laramie Project* itself, with its gestation process, its critical reception, and its culturally revitalizing function as a platform for communities to discuss. Having established the cultural importance and pervasiveness of the play, I will spend the remainder of the chapter on anatomizing three cultural figures represented in and through *The Laramie Project*, *national* personae that I view as utopian contemporaries. These three characters, I claim, remember the murder of Matthew Shepard differently. They take hold of particular moments in order to deliberate a social in which a gay man's existence is not deemed impossible, a social in

which queerness enriches the imagined community, and a social in which the memory of a gay student literally spawns life. In the following chapter, then, I shall elucidate how *The Laramie Project* engenders these particular presents, fleeting moments in which utopian contemporaries may thrive.

The incident happened on the night of October 6, 1998, in Laramie, Wyoming, a city with a population of approximately 27,000, and the state's only university town. Under circumstances never completely resolved, University of Wyoming freshman Matthew Shepard, 21, left a local bar with two longtime residents of Laramie, Russell Henderson and Aaron McKinney. In their car, Henderson and McKinney began to beat and pistol-whip the student, and eventually tied the brutally assaulted man to a split-rail fence on the outskirts of Laramie, where they abandoned him. The bicyclist who found Shepard about eighteen hours later initially thought, as *New York Times* reporter James Brooke recalls, that "the crumpled form lashed to a ranch fence was a scarecrow" ("Beaten", n.p.). Comatose for almost a week, Matthew Shepard eventually died on October 12 in Poudre Valley Hospital in Fort Collins, Colorado.

The first trial following the attack in April 1999 ended with a guilty plea: Russell Henderson confessed "both premeditated first-degree murder and felony murder" (Loffreda, 105) and was sentenced to life-long imprisonment. Aaron McKinney was scheduled to appear before the court in October 1999, at a time when the first anniversary of Matthew Shepard's death amplified the emotions aroused by the violent crime. When the jury ultimately found the defendant guilty of two counts of felony murder, McKinney faced the death penalty. Shepard's parents, however, approached by the defense team, chose to strike a plea bargain: If spared death, McKinney would waive his right to appeal the verdict and receive two consecutive life sentences. In a final address to the court, Matthew Shepard's father Dennis announced the agreement and effectively concluded the legal proceedings concerned with the murder of his son.[10]

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[10] The murder of Matthew Shepard was greeted by intensive press coverage. For succinct accounts, see James Brooke's reporting for the *New York Times*, especially "Gay Man Beaten and Left for Dead; 2 Are Charged" on October 10, 1998 (URL: <http://query.nytimes.com/-gst/fullpage.html?res=9F00E1D7113BF933A25753C1A96E958260&sec=&spon=&pagewanted=print>) and his October 13 article "Gay Man Dies From Attack, Fanning Outrage and Debate" (URL: <http://query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html?res=9F04E7DB173AF930A25-

As Matthew Shepard was a gay man, and the attack commonly considered a hate crime, the murder garnered nationwide media attention and impassioned public response. Playwright Moisés Kaufman observed that "the nation launched into a dialogue" ("Introduction", vi) and undertook a critical assessment of the image of America and its ways of conceptualizing "homosexuality, sexual politics, education, class, violence, privileges and rights, and the difference between tolerance and acceptance" ("Introduction", vi). The public sphere created around the murder even included the American President: In the midst of the Lewinsky-scandal, Bill Clinton addressed the nation and urged "our standing together against intolerance, prejudice and violent bigotry" (qtd. in Brooke, "Attitudes", n.p.). As Beth Loffreda puts it, Shepard "underwent a strange, American transubstantiation, seized, filtered, and fixed as an icon" (x), which was discursively loaded with the sexual and citizenship politics of diverse interest groups. Matthew Shepard's murder happened, as *Time* reporter Howard Chua-Eoan argues, "at a time when the U.S. [was] buzzing with a dissonant debate over sexual orientation" (n.p.), and consequently, over the boundaries of full citizenship in America. Indeed, it is no coincidence that *Time* magazine's coverage of the Shepard case not only included reporting on the murder itself, but also an extensive feature about a seemingly remote topic: gay marriage in Hawaii. In said article, published on October 26, 1998, John Cloud claims that the immediate concerns instigated by the murder of Matthew Shepard, those of hate crime legislation, represent only "the oldest and easiest part of the gay agenda" (n.p.). He proceeds to point out that there are much more radical issues to be taken up, for instance "the idea that same-sex relationships should not be morally, religiously or legally any different from opposite-sex ones" (n.p.). The murder of Matthew Shepard, then, developed into much more than a ferocious assault on a gay man: it became a starting point for the discursive enterprise that aims to

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753C1A96E958260&sec=&spon=&pagewanted=print>). *Time* magazine's Howard Chua-Eoan also summarized the events in his "That's Not a Scarecrow" on October 19, 1998 (URL: <http://www.time.com/time/printout/0,8816,989342,00.html>). All sites were accessed on October 30, 2008.

For a more comprehensive and elaborate account, see University of Wyoming English professor Beth Loffreda's 2000 book *Losing Matt Shepard: Life and Politics in the Aftermath of Anti-Gay Murder*.

explain America, its imaginative *style*, and the exclusionary practices that demarcate American citizenship.

I have included this survey of the national debates provoked by the murder not only to illustrate that the discourse that sprang from Shepard's death operated on a national and wide-ranging scale, but also to elucidate the social negativity associated with gay life in America. With every blow, Henderson and McKinney reified a cultural script that denied any possibility of queer existence inside the futurist regime. In heteronormative America, to be gay, to embody necessarily alternative forms of belonging and kinship means having to face the vicious logic of homophobic hatred and fear. In such a climate, Matthew Shepard's mere existence posed a socially negative threat to the future-driven American community, a threat that was eliminated with the utmost brutality by two young men in the vicinity of Laramie.

As Richard Lacayo argues, Shepard "was stretched along a Wyoming fence not just as a dying young man but as a signpost" (n.p.) that warns future intruders and graphically demonstrates the improbability of gay life in the West. "The world's arguments reached him with deadly force and printed their worst conclusions across him" (n.p.), Lacayo continues and makes painfully visible the cultural inevitability of the murder. The two perpetrators, he seems to insist, only executed *the world's arguments*; guilty nevertheless, they simply made manifest the rationale of the futurist regime and its inherently homophobic knowledge structures. The wider cultural implications of queer negativity are also recognized by David Leavitt, who, in a commentary for the *New York Times*, argues that "hatred of gay men in this country is an epidemic" (n.p.), a disease prevalent on all levels of society. What Leavitt fails to recognize is that the American social landscape is in fact *dependent* on this epidemic, as it almost ritually cleanses futurist America of its queer contemporaries. The *epidemic*, then, is what actually constitutes *this country*; it plays a vital role in the normative politics of heterosexuality, and it functions as a primary indicator of the boundaries of American citizenship. For Donna Minkowitz, a contributor to *The Nation*, it is only consequential that Shepard was tied to a fence, the quintessential marker of a border. Although the actual fence outside Laramie was "too tiny to keep out even a baby deer" (n.p.), Minkowitz claims

that "it is purely symbolic, like a gold cross on a chain. It is the idea of a fence, and that's enough" (n.p.). Tied to such a fence and abandoned to die, Matthew Shepard represents the symbolic abject in the hegemonic network of the futurist regime. Essentially based on the antagonism of the queer contemporary, futurist America simultaneously casts them outside the domain of discourse, outside the realms of the possible, and outside the confines of *civilization*. Matthew Shepard, then, had to realize that for him, the *realms of the possible* ended in the bleak twilight of a cold Wyoming autumn night.

As this brief overview has shown, the incidents that happened in Laramie have informed the ongoing negotiations of what it means to be American. Shepard's death has become a vortex through which quintessentially American discourses have been channeled. Fascinated by the "lightning rod of sorts" (Kaufman, "West", 17) that the murder of Matthew Shepard represented, New York-based writer and director Moisés Kaufman and his Tectonic Theater Project traveled to Laramie in the immediate aftermath of the attack. Born in Venezuela, Kaufman had already achieved critical success on the New York stage with his 1997 play *Gross Indecency*, a documentary piece about the sodomy trials of Oscar Wilde that had been edited from the original court transcripts.[11] Already in this earlier play, Kaufman had addressed questions that also inform the play under scrutiny in my thesis, *The Laramie Project*. Most importantly for my argument, he inquires, "[h]ow can we redefine our theatrical language as our understanding of knowledge and communication changes?" (Kaufman, *Indecency*, 6).

The Laramie Project, a play based on interviews Kaufman's theater company conducted with residents of Laramie, Wyoming in the months following the murder of Matthew Shepard, strives "to explore theatrical language and form" (Kaufman, "Introduction", vi) as well. In this process, Kaufman developed a technique he called "moment work" (Kaufman et al., xiv), an approach to theater that rejects the conventional scenic structure of drama and introduces *moments* instead, units of "theatrical time […]

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[11] In his review, "Oscar Wilde, Stung by His Own Tongue", *New York Times* chief theater critic Ben Brantley finds *Gross Indecency* "absolutely gripping" (n.p.). The article, originally published on March 19, 1997, can be found at URL: <http://theater2.nytimes.com-/mem/theater/treview.html?pagewanted=print&res=9A06EFDB1038F93AA25750C0A96195-8260&scp=1&sq=gross%20indecency&st=cse>. The site was accessed on October 30, 2008.

juxtaposed with other units to convey meaning" (Kaufman et al., xiv). Within its already ephemeral theatrical presence, the play introduces an additional layer of contemporariness, a theatrical now embedded in the larger now of performance. Utopian contemporaries, thus, are doubly integrated into the dramatic narrative of *The Laramie Project*. They seize their particular *moments*, just as these moments revel within the overarching moment of the play's performance.

Through *moment work*, *The Laramie Project* attempts to unravel not only the murder and its consequences, but also the evident contradictions that manufacture Laramie itself. Much more than a documentation of the attack only, *The Laramie Project* functions as a documentation of an all-American town, of public sentiment, and of national discourse condensed in the *lightning rod* of a community of 27,000. What is more, *The Laramie Project* opens up a contemporary space in which utopian possibilities of alternative sexuality, kinship, and belonging can be imagined. Despite its apparent examination of homophobia, queer negativity, and gruesome murder, the play acknowledges the potential of the contemporary for change. It celebrates particular presents that encompass more imaginative futurities and, as will become evident in the subsequent analysis, serves as a vital rehearsal space for utopian contemporaries, who, following Richard Rorty's incentive, passionately strive to install "hope in place of knowledge" (21). "The whole thing, you see", as one character in the play puts it so aptly, then, "the whole thing ropes around hope, H-O-P-E" (Kaufman et al., 72).

Before I continue my examination of *The Laramie Project*, I find it important to indicate that the play is only one among numerous cultural artifacts that commemorate the murder. The theatrical piece itself, for instance, was adapted for the television screen by the private channel HBO in 2002. Directed by Moisés Kaufman, the movie embedded the theatrical script in the *real* setting of Laramie and enhanced the play's seeming authenticity by using as a backdrop the actual environment of the murder. HBO's *The Laramie Project* was rivaled by NBC's *The Matthew Shepard Story*, a film that puts additional emphasis on Matthew Shepard's life and attempts to recount the emotional struggles of his parents dealing with the murder. The politics of the latter movie were considered problematic, as *The*

Matthew Shepard Story, according to critic John Lynch, "bolster[s] and sustain[s] current forms of heteronormativity" (223) because it "demonizes McKinney and Henderson, placing the blame squarely on them and absolving the larger community of responsibility for the murder" (227).

The assault also informed the reception of Terrence McNally's already controversial off-Broadway play *Corpus Christi*, which tells the story of a gay Jesus Christ figure growing up in the Texas town of Corpus Christi. As *Corpus Christi* opened at City Center on October 13, 1998, one day after Shepard's death, the fates of Jesus Christ and Matthew Shepard became immediately intertwined in the critical discourse.[12] In the preface to the printed version of *Corpus Christi*, thus, playwright McNally claims that Shepard "died as agonizing a death as another young man who had been tortured and nailed to a wooden cross at a desolate spot outside Jerusalem known as Golgotha some 1,998 years earlier" (vi). For McNally, "Jesus Christ died again when Matthew Shepard did" (vii).

Elton John, the British pop singer, also commemorates Matthew Shepard in one of his musical pieces. On his album *Songs From the West Coast*, he includes the song "American Triangle", where he mourns "the scarecrow wrapped in wire, left to die on a high ridge fence" over an unceasing chromatic *lamento* motif. I acknowledge that each of these creative productions may serve as a discussion platform concerning the characteristics of American citizenship, and that each of these compositions can indeed be a *lightning rod* that canalizes public discourse; however, I find none of these narratives as compellingly hopeful as the utopian moments framed by *The Laramie Project*. It is Kaufman's play, then, that will function as the point of departure for a further examination of the utopian potential brought forth by the contemporary moment.

In their readings of *The Laramie Project*, critics and scholars of theater instantly recognized a certain genealogy of performance. Ben

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[12] Ben Brantley, who reviewed the original production of *Corpus Christi* at City Center, makes a clear link between the play and the incidents in Laramie, Wyoming and argues that the play's "central and inarguably worthy message is that no one should be persecuted for being different. That the message is still tragically in need of reiteration is evidenced by the death this week of a gay student in Wyoming who had been tortured and beaten" ("Nice", n.p.). It is surely no coincidence that in October 2008, around the time of the tenth anniversary of the murder, *Corpus Christi* was revived in New York at Rattlestick Playwrights Theater. Jason Zinoman, who reviewed the revival for the *New York Times*, again establishes a cultural connection between McNally's play and the murder of Matthew Shepard. He argues that the lead actor in *Corpus Christi* "seems to invite comparisons" (n.p.) to Shepard.

Brantley, chief theater critic of the *New York Times*, is one among many reviewers of the play who find *The Laramie Project*'s direct predecessor in Thornton Wilder's 1938 classic *Our Town*. Whereas Brantley explains that "this play is 'Our Town' with a question mark, as in 'Could this be our town?'" ("Brutal", n.p.), Don Shewey, established critic of gay theater, claims the play to be an "*Our Town 2000*" ("Mirror", 15). Indeed, the funeral scene in the third act of *The Laramie Project*, and in particular the obvious use of black umbrellas, bears close resemblance to a corresponding section of *Our Town*.[13] As a conspicuous nod to these similarities, Kaufman set a scene in the film version of *The Laramie Project* against the backdrop of a local rehearsal of the umbrella scene in *Our Town*. *The Laramie Project*'s close relationship, both formally and thematically, to a canonized American drama, only underlines the play's active engagement with national discourse and, certainly, with the critique of the American futurism that Wilder undertakes. His study of Grover's Corners, a conservative New Hampshire town, revolves around the story of Emily Webb, a young woman who died "in childbirth" (93), who perished from the futile attempt at reproduction, and who in her death resisted the linear progression of adolescence, marriage, and motherhood. While the people of Grover's Corners submit to that futurist imperative, Emily probes the contemporary and inquires in her post-mortem appearance, "[d]o any human beings ever realize life while they live it? – every, every minute?" (108). A proto-utopian contemporary, Emily is an oblique but eerie presence in *The Laramie Project*, as she examines similar issues of deadly negativity and the creation of futures in the present.

Generally, critical response to *The Laramie Project* was overwhelmingly positive. Ben Brantley, for instance, lauded the first New York production of the play at Union Square Theater in May 2000 and speaks of a "stately procession through which swims a stirring medley of emotions: anger, sorrow, bewilderment and, most poignantly, a defiant glimmer of hope" ("Brutal", n.p.). There were, however, two lines of criticism leveled against the play. First, the seemingly authentic air conveyed by *The Laramie Project* has come increasingly under attack. Terry Stoller, for

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[13] The scene referred to is the opening of the third act in *Our Town*; see Wilder, 85–97. The use of umbrellas in Wilder is so pronounced that they are even anthropomorphized in a stage direction that says, "The umbrellas leave the stage" (97).

instance, makes the case that "the writing team" (24) distorted reality by their choice "to emphasize for the most part that the members of the community are good-natured" (24). Stoller also puzzles over the fact that many characters in the play have an unacknowledged relationship to the University of Wyoming, and claims "that the university affiliation of a number of characters was either downplayed or omitted so that the play would not be weighted too heavily with university types and thus not be perceived to be about the 'townspeople'" (29). For Stoller, then, certain problems arise in connection with *The Laramie Project*, as it is *perceived* as an authentic documentation of facts when it is actually an artificially constructed work of art. It is this understanding of the play that also informs my work: A narrative must always be culturally mediated, and its dramatic impact does not stand in direct connection to any notion of authenticity.

Second, theatre scholar Jill Dolan argues that *The Laramie Project*, notwithstanding its hopeful potentiality, gives too much room to homophobic sentiment. She claims that "[i]mplicitly, the play blames Shepard by giving Laramie's homophobes so many chances to express their disdain for him and by giving their speech so much credence" (124f). A particular striking example of overt homophobia, also quoted in Dolan's book, is the narrative of Murdock Cooper, who claims that the attack "was partially Matthew Shepard's fault and partially the guys who did it… you know, maybe it's fifty-fifty" (Kaufman et al., 58). For Dolan, it is highly troublesome that these kinds of speech remain uncontested in the play. A strategy that also contributes to the depoliticizing of *The Laramie Project* is the casting of the town as foreign. Dolan holds that "the play inadvertently exoticizes Laramie – sometimes belittling it and sometimes romanticizing it" (118), a narrative maneuver that displaces the homophobia from the larger imagined community to the Wyoming university town only.

Despite, or maybe because of the nonexistent radicalism in *The Laramie Project*, the play has become what theater critic Don Shewey calls "a catalyst for communities to discuss" ("Stage", n.p.). Shewey highlights the cultural pervasiveness of the play and argues that *The Laramie Project* "has entered the mainstream of American culture in a way few plays do" ("Stage", n.p.). Also due to a practical asset, the enormous number of available roles,

The Laramie Project has indubitably become an almost ubiquitous event on the stages of school and community theaters all over the nation. In countless stagings, the play has practiced what Moisés Kaufman describes as theatrical ideal, "a community talking to itself" (qtd. in Zoglin, n.p.). At Georgetown University, I myself participated in such a dialogue, when I was involved in one production of Kaufman's play in December 2007.[14] A staged reading, this production regarded itself as an appropriate response to homophobic attacks that had happened on campus earlier in the semester. Just like all the other performances, our production created, in Jill Dolan's words, "a conversation among people who might not otherwise have spoken to each other" (113). *The Laramie Project*, thus, reifies a particular kind of public communication, one that involves "speaking tough truths and listening respectfully" (Shewey, "Stage", n.p.), and one that actively negotiates the boundaries of American citizenship.

Having established the *lightning rod*-qualities of both the dramatic text and the performed play, I will proceed with my analysis of the utopian contemporaries that are enabled and celebrated by *The Laramie Project*. My foregoing ruminations on the colossal cultural enterprise that has emerged around *Laramie* only accentuate the significance of these utopian figures. Their ongoing presence on American stages helps initiate a sustainable vision of *a better later*, of a future in the present that remembers not the homophobic sentiment of a community, but the broad-minded and all-embracing creativity of the queer moment. In the following, I want to introduce Jedadiah Schultz, Romaine Patterson, and Dennis Shepard, three representative characters whom I consider utopian contemporaries, since each of them uses seemingly futureless moments in order to anticipate a more hopeful vision of American communal relations, belonging, and kinship. As will become evident, all three attempt to invest the reproductive script of American culture with new, and more multiplicative, meaning.

Jedadiah Schultz, a theater student at the University of Wyoming in Laramie has "lived in Wyoming [his] whole life" (Kaufman et al., 11). His

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[14] On December 6, 2007, Grace Erdmann published an article on this particular Georgetown production in the campus newspaper *The Georgetown Voice*. The text, entitled "Performing LGBTQ Awareness" can be found at URL: <http://www.georgetownvoice.com/2007/12/06/-performing-lgbtq-awareness>. The site was last accessed on October 31, 2008.

appearance in the play is framed by two moments, both entitled "Moment: *Angels in America*" (Kaufman et al., 11 and 84). Through the prism of Tony Kushner's award-winning play *Angels in America: A Gay Fantasia on National Themes*, Jedadiah's character evolves and begins to deliberate more utopian concepts of social belonging. For Jedadiah Schultz, *Angels in America* becomes the starting point for a renegotiation of the knowledge systems of the futurist regime: He seizes the contemporary created by the play's performance in order to literally perform away his initial suspicion of homosexuality and to replace it with a discourse of tolerance, with a utopian humanism that addresses "something we might call our common humanity" (Dolan, 22). In the course of the play, and essentially in the temporal space delineated by the *Angels in America*-moments, Jedadiah Schultz engages in what Patricia O'Connor calls an "epistemic frame break" (118), a reflexive reevaluation of his beliefs and convictions. In Jedadiah's newly inaugurated future in the present, homophobia is consigned to oblivion, and a more inclusive understanding of citizenship is remembered.

In his first longer appearance on stage, Jedadiah imparts a bygone story that relates his first encounter with *Angels in America*. In order to win a theater scholarship, Schultz decided to participate in a high school acting competition. Lacking economic wealth, Jedadiah's parents unfortunately "couldn't afford to send [him] to college" (Kaufman et al., 11). Searching for "a killer scene" (Kaufman et al., 12), Schultz is recommended Tony Kushner's play by a university professor. Mesmerized by a particular yet unspecified scene, Jedadiah tells the audience that he "knew that [he] could win best scene if [he] did a good enough job" (Kaufman et al., 12). As his narration progresses, we learn that his aspirations are fulfilled: *Angels in America* becomes Jedadiah's entrance ticket to college education, and it is only "because of that scene" (Kaufman et al., 12) that he can "afford to be here at the university" (Kaufman et al., 12). Hence, for Schultz, the play serves as a vehicle that drives him from a family who believed that "homosexuality is wrong" (Kaufman et al., 12) to the upwardly mobile promises of a college education. It is a moment of gay theatricality that enables Jedadiah to envision a more prosperous future in the present.

There is, however, an important caveat to this story. Jedadiah's opposition to his parents does not stem from an outburst of tolerance, but

from simple egotism. Schultz chose to perform the scene from *Angels in America* because he "wanted to win" (Kaufman et al., 13). For him, "it was like the best scene" (Kaufman et al., 13), and consequently, he chose to ignore the play's gay content in order to achieve personal triumph. The first *Angels in America*-moment, then, must only be considered the starting point for Jedadiah's endeavor towards queer utopianism. The thinking processes incited by the play, however, gradually lead him towards a more inclusive understanding of citizenship.

As the play continues, Schultz cautiously begins to reassess his earlier positions and, at one point, acknowledges that he is "going through changes" (Kaufman et al., 57). Slowly, Jedadiah reevaluates the simplicity of his former principles and suddenly hesitates to disclose a decided stance on homosexuality. "I don't feel like I know enough about certain things to make a decision" (Kaufman et al., 57), he tentatively remarks at one point. The confrontation with the murder of Matthew Shepard, it seems, has provoked Schultz to reflect on his perceptions, and to consider new ways of understanding America. By the time the second *Angels in America*-moment has arrived, Jedadiah takes advantage of the opportunity to contemplate his previous statements regarding homosexuality. "I just – I just feel bad" (Kaufman et al., 98), he declares and apologizes "for the person [he] used to be" (Kaufman et al., 98). Celebrating the success of his performance as Prior Walter[15] in a university theater production of *Angels in America*, Schultz concedes, "I just can't believe I ever said that stuff about homosexuals, you know. How did I ever let that stuff make me think that you were different from me?" (Kaufman et al., 98). Through his performance in *Angels in America*, Schultz develops a new understanding of community, a concept in which queer existence is welcome. Eventually materializing as utopian contemporary, he seizes the theatrical and ephemeral moment of *Angels in America* and envisions an alternative future in the present, a temporality in which other, and more imaginative forms of social belonging become thinkable.

In this respect, it is important to understand that *Angels in America*, Tony Kushner's two–part American fantasy, is deeply engaged with the

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[15] In the play, Jedadiah's performance in *Angels in America* is only referred to indirectly. The film adaptation of *The Laramie Project*, however, includes a scene in which Schultz recites parts of Prior's final speech.

nation and, consequently, its temporality as well. Kushner puts forth his particular and ambivalently queer notion of American progress, a concept that rejects "this neo-Hegelian positivist sense of constant historical progress towards happiness or perfection or something" (31) and demands "more life" (266) instead. *More life*, in *Angels in America*, is not more of the same, but "a leap into the unknown" (278). Kushner's progress refuses to subscribe to the politics of reproductive futurism, and anticipates a "world that only spins forward" (280) and a world in which queer people "will be citizens" (280). In *Angels in America*, the "time has come" (280), a time which is filled, according to the German philosopher Walter Benjamin, "by the presence of the now" (261), and a time in which queer citizenship has finally become imaginable.

Performing the politics of *Angels in America*, Jedadiah profusely fills the void created by the death of Matthew Shepard with *more life*, a life that encompasses queerness and a life that salutes utopian humanism. For Schultz, homosexuality is no longer inconceivable, and his vision of America has broadened as a result. Revitalizing and augmenting the rigid structures of the heteronormative futurist regime, Jedadiah comes to stand as a utopian contemporary, a cultural figure who uses the queer temporality of the now to endeavor an ambitious reassessment of what the imagined community of America may signify.

Romaine Patterson's moment is related to angels as well. Through the contemporary space of a political demonstration, a street performance, Romaine imagines a social different from the homophobic discourses of rightist Christian groups. Patterson's utopian empowerment materializes in her idea of *Angel Action*, a protest march that prevents Westboro Baptist Church minister Fred Phelps from disturbing Matthew Shepard's funeral with hateful slander. Although the rally only lasts for a brief span of time, the contemporary it creates anticipates a future in the making, a *better later* in which each and every homophobic insult is drowned out by the peaceful tranquility of utopian contemporaries dressed up as white angels. For Romaine Patterson, the power of this moment encourages her to embark on a "career in political activism" (Kaufman et al., 98) and enthusiastically work towards a more inclusive concept of citizenship in America.

"Lesbian, twenty-one years old" (Kaufman et al., 13), is the sparse information the list of characters featured in *The Laramie Project* provides about Romaine. And indeed, for a relatively long time, her presence in the play seems to be merely functional: As Patterson and Matthew Shepard were intimates, her primary role is to supply particulars and obscure trivia about the assaulted friend. "We never called him Matthew, actually" (Kaufman et al., 19), Romaine states and adds, "most of the time we called him Choo-choo" (Kaufman et al., 19). In a similar vein, she proceeds to laud Shepard's "incredible beaming smile" (Kaufman et al., 19) and asserts that he was "really smart in political affairs, but not too smart on like commonsense things" (Kaufman et al., 20). Initially, thus, Romaine's close relationship with Matthew serves as the sole justification for her narrative. Through her, the audience is acquainted with Matthew, and through her, we begin to process the deadly negativity that surrounded Shepard's murder on a cold October night. As a cultural figure, Romaine herself has not yet discovered any viable strategy to oppose the heteronormative discourses of her hometown, just as she is not yet capable of imagining a better, and more utopian future.

Romaine's moment of recognition arrives when she is confronted with the aforementioned homophobic protest of Fred Phelps and his followers during Matthew Shepard's funeral. Phelps, a defrocked minister and self-proclaimed spiritual leader of the Kansas-based Westboro Baptist church, has acquired certain notoriety because of the unrelenting promotion of his extremist political agenda. The Westboro Baptist Church is responsible for the website *Godhatesfags.com* and believes that a gay "lifestyle" (79), as the Fred Phelps character puts it in *The Laramie Project*, is "[b]arren and sterile" (79), which is why, says Phelps, "God's hatred is pure" (79). Shocked by the unrestrained hate, Romaine Patterson advances a scheme for political action. "I decided that someone needed to stand toe-to-toe with this guy" (Kaufman et al., 79), she states and finally realizes that she must seize the initiative herself. Patterson's idea is "to dress up like angels" (Kaufman et al., 79) and, because of the sheer size of the angels' wings, to "com-plete-ly block" (Kaufman et al., 79) the loathsome minister. Passionately, she insists that "this twenty-one-year-old little lesbian is ready to walk the line with him" (Kaufman et al., 80).

Angel Action, then, becomes a moment in which the hateful discourses of homophobia are *com-plete-ly* inhibited and replaced with a biblical yet hermaphroditical image of a more tolerant and loving community. In the ephemeral present of the demonstration, a new, and almost angelic, understanding of kinship and belonging is imagined. In her autobiography *The Whole World Was Watching*, a text that corroborates the construction of Patterson's public persona in *The Laramie Project*, Romaine remembers "that moment as being completely silent. It was a serene, profound, life-changing moment" (Patterson and Hinds, 212). The contemporary created on the occasion of a murdered gay man's funeral becomes truly utopian. "I felt life in that moment" (Patterson and Hinds, 212), Romaine continues and adds, "I understood who I was as a human being and the kind of person I wanted to be in the world. I believed in what Matthew had so earnestly tried to explain during our last conversation, that one person can make a difference" (Patterson and Hinds, 212).

Through the moment of *Angel Action*, Romaine emerges as a utopian contemporary. She fills the vacuum opened up by Matthew Shepard's death with the *life* she felt in that fleeting moment. In the ephemeral contemporary of the street performance, Patterson anticipates a more humanist future, a future in which brutal beating, anti-gay murder, and homophobic vilification are consigned to oblivion, while another social is remembered, one that gives queerness a place to exist. Romaine's quiet demonstration populates the void created by the loss of Matthew Shepard with utopian contemporaries, and with, as Jill Dolan puts it, "the fragile, necessary wish for a better future" (137).

Finally, Dennis Shepard, Matthew's father, engages in a monumental renegotiation of life and citizenship in America. The cultural figure that is mediated through *The Laramie Project* grabs the moment of Matthew's death, a fatal consequence of the futurist reasoning, and creates life out of it. Dennis Shepard, while vividly reassembling the death of his son, concocts a discourse of hope, manifest in the moribund body of Matthew. Addressing Aaron McKinney, the murderer of his son, in court, Shepard feels that "this is the time to begin the healing process" (Kaufman et al., 96). Instead of demanding retribution, Dennis opts for mercy, and eventually gives

McKinney "life in the memory of one who no longer lives" (Kaufman et al., 96).

Matthew's father only appears once in *The Laramie Project*. By the end of the third act, in November 1999, a jury had convicted Aaron McKinney "of second-degree murder, robbery and kidnapping, a combination of charges that made him eligible for execution, which is by lethal injection in Wyoming" (Janofsky, n.p.). Approached by McKinney's defense team, however, the Shepard parents agreed to accept two consecutive life sentences if McKinney waived his right to appeal. Announcing the deal in *The Laramie Project*, Dennis Shepard appears on stage and commences an emotional address to the court. In his statement, Dennis vividly but inaccurately remembers the moment of his son's death. For his father, Matthew did not die "in a hospital in Colorado" (Kaufman et al., 95), but "on the outskirts of Laramie, tied to a fence" (Kaufman et al., 95). Although the exact circumstances of Matthew Shepard's abandonment were never completely made transparent, Dennis undertakes to infuse the gaps with an implausible yet empowering story. He re-describes the queer moment of solitary death as one of community and belonging and insists that his son "wasn't alone. There were" (Kaufman et al., 95), Dennis claims, "his lifelong friends with him, friends that he had grown up with" (Kaufman et al., 95). The company that Shepard is alluding to turns out to be "the beautiful night sky […] the daylight and the sun […] the scent of pine trees from the snowy range" (Kaufman et al., 95) and even "the ever-present Wyoming wind" (Kaufman et al., 95). Recounting, and re-counting, the moment of Matthew's death, and the queer communion that attended it, Dennis finally admits that he feels "better knowing [Matthew] wasn't alone" (Kaufman et al., 95).

Capitalizing on the momentum of that fleeting contemporary space, Shepard finds that "[g]ood is coming out of evil" (Kaufman et al., 96), since the death of his son has "focused world-wide attention on hate" (Kaufman et al., 96). Despite the queer negativity and social anger that surrounded the murder of Matthew Shepard, Dennis claims that it is time to "show mercy to someone who refused to show mercy" (Kaufman et al., 96). Encouraged by the queer community of *lifelong friends* that escorted Matthew Shepard to the afterlife, his father states, "Mr. McKinney, I give you life in the memory

of one who no longer lives. May you have a long life, and may you thank Matthew every day for it" (Kaufman et al., 96). For Shepard, the moment of death becomes the starting point for new futures. Through his speech, he engages in what Joseph Roach calls "surrogation" (2), the process in which "the cavities created by loss through death or other forms of departure" (2) are filled with "satisfactory alternates" (2). When Shepard grants survival, he substitutes the living for the dead, mercy for torture, and hope for the injustices of hate. He gives life in the memory of one who, according to the rationale of the futurist regime, has never existed at all. Being remembered actively, though, Matthew Shepard is sustaining a community, and his queer presence in the surviving body of his homophobic murderer indicates an ongoing reinterpretation of kinship and belonging, and indeed life, in America.

For Matthew Shepard, I stated at the beginning of this chapter, the future stopped in the early hours of October 12, 1998. His death represented a particularly gruesome ramification of the cultural logic of reproductive futurism. His death, however, also marked the starting point for the imaginings of more tolerant, more inclusive, and more colorful ways of social belonging and citizenship. As I have attempted to illustrate in this chapter, the utopian contemporaries that have emerged out of Moisés Kaufman's play *The Laramie Project* embark on such an endeavor. Seizing their respective moments, Jedadiah Schultz, Romaine Patterson, and Dennis Shepard all advocate stories of hope and humanism in the midst of homophobic violence. They directly address the issue of anti-gay hate crime and seize the queer moment, impermanent and brief as it may be, in order to "experiment with the possibilities of the future" (Dolan, 13). Their present readiness to rehearse for alternative futurities proves truly utopian, as these contemporaries show their unrestrained willingness to begin the *healing process*, to salute our common humanity, and, eventually, to *give life in the memory of one who no longer lives*.

3. TRANSCENDING THE DISCIPLINE OF THE SERVICE

In the December 20, 1986, installment of the popular comedy program *Saturday Night Live*, the Canadian-born actor William Shatner surprised television audiences with a particular Christmas present. The performer, famous for playing *Star Trek*'s lead, Captain Kirk, participated in an infamous sketch that satirized what had become an abundant phenomenon since its first occurrence in 1972: a *Star Trek* fan convention.[16] In the three-minute scene, Shatner plays himself and appears at such a convention. He is scheduled to deliver a speech to an artfully adorned assembly of *Trekkies*, as the show's most adamantine followers are typically referred to. Inventively equipped with Federation uniforms, pointed ears, and other merchandise the flourishing franchise has produced, the *Star Trek*

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[16] For additional information on the singularity of the 1972 convention, an "event unique in television history" (Alexander, 392), see David Alexander's *Star Trek Creator*, 392–395.

aficionados are in no way prepared for Shatner's address, an angry diatribe that betrays his contempt for the *Trekkies'* misapprehension of the series.[17]

Irritated with the precise triviality of the questions posed to him by several audience members, Shatner eventually claims that he would "just like to say: Get a life, will you, people?" ("Get a Life"). Repeatedly arguing that *Star Trek* was "just a TV show" ("Get a Life") that has been turned into "a colossal waste of time" ("Get a Life") by its admirers, he continues to outline what *getting a life*, to him, encompasses. Almost desperately, Shatner fabulates that "there is a whole world out there" ("Get a Life"), and he entreats his devotees, "Move out of your parents' basements, and get your own apartments, and grow the hell up!" ("Get a Life"). Full of incredulity and derision, Shatner finally turns to a young man who wears pointed ears and a *Star Trek* shirt. "You, you must be almost thirty" ("Get a Life"), he addresses the fan and inquires, "Have you ever kissed a girl?" ("Get a Life"). Embarrassedly, the man hangs his head, and, to the mocking laughter of the *Saturday Night Live* studio audience, Shatner quips, "I didn't think so" ("Get a Life").

Shatner's appearance in the comedy sketch bespeaks his ignorance of the cultural and political leverage that *Star Trek* has obtained during the decades since it was first broadcast on September 8, 1966.[18] Contrary to Shatner's assertion, *Star Trek* has turned into far more than "just a TV show" ("Get a Life"), but, as film historian Rick Worland argues, into "an immensely popular text [that] has thrived through nearly thirty years of rapid, often tumultuous changes in the society that originally produced it" (19).[19] For Worland, *Star Trek*'s significance for the production and mediation of national knowledges must not be underestimated. "The enduring popularity of *Star Trek*", he argues, "is illuminated through the varied sources of American historical and cultural mythology it evokes and negotiates" (19).

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[17] The sketch can be accessed via the Internet platform *MyVideo*, URL: <http://www.myvideo.de/watch/2366523/Get_A_Life_Full_Version_William_Shatner>. There exists, in addition, an online transcript of "Get a Life", which can be found at URL: <http://snltranscripts.jt.org/86/86hgetalife.phtml>. Both websites were accessed on October 18, 2008.

[18] For an account of the 1966 months when *Star Trek* was first aired, see Alexander, 237–265.

[19] Worland's text was published in 1994. I would make the case that the same has been true for more than forty years now.

Shatner's appeal to *get* a life, therefore, constitutes a futile entreaty: *Star Trek* has already evolved as a prominent rumination on the American way of life, and it has spoken actively to central discourses of the imagined community.

There is, however, another subtext that permeates Shatner's comedic rant. Confronted with the social negativity manifest in the prolonged adolescence of his *Trekkie* audience, he urges them to participate in a heteronormative conception of time, in a quest for futurity and posterity that *Star Trek* itself has promoted throughout its televised voyages of exploration. To *get a life*, to secure their very existence within the futurist regime, his supporters should, says Shatner, "move out of [their] parents' basements" ("Get a Life"), kiss girls and eventually enter what Judith Halberstam calls the "time of reproduction" (5). To Shatner, the *Trekkies* must seem blatantly queer: they inhabit a temporality that deviates from the expansionist fantasies of futurity that *Star Trek* advocates and "challenge", as Halberstam would suggest of queerness, "conventional logics of development, maturity, adulthood, and responsibility" (13). Shatner's admirers develop alternative narratives of community and kinship, and deliberately misconceive the futurist imperative of *Star Trek*.

I have paid a fair amount of attention to William Shatner's *Saturday Night Live* skit, since, by way of introduction, it confronts the same issues of futurity and social negativity that will accompany us through this chapter. In the subsequent paragraphs, I will provide a critical reading of *Broke Trek*, a *YouTube* video that fabricates a noteworthy juxtaposition of *Star Trek* and the controversial Ang Lee film *Brokeback Mountain* (2005), which relates the lives of two gay men in the American West. Through this metamorphosing of the gay shepherds on a Wyoming mountain into the stalwart soldiers of futurity, Captain Kirk and Mr. Spock, a queer temporal sphere is made manifest. In the contemporary of the *YouTube* stream, I hold, the *national* bodies of the four men converge and embark on a renegotiation of the boundaries of American citizenship. Contrary to the cultural logic of queer negativity that is perpetuated in *Brokeback Mountain*, however, the temporary romance between Captain Kirk and Mr. Spock harbors a more utopian prospect. In *Broke Trek*, the queer relationship of Kirk and Spock seems possible: they emerge as utopian contemporaries, since, as Mr.

Spock claims in the video, "there are some things which transcend even the discipline of the service"[20] (*Broke Trek*); some things which open up a momentary space for queer lives in the imagined community that is America.

In order to fully understand the cultural import of *Broke Trek*, I will spend a large portion of this chapter dissecting the sociotemporal politics of *Star Trek*, on the one hand, and *Brokeback Mountain*, on the other. At first, I will elucidate the ways in which *Star Trek* has engaged with the discourses that silhouette the imagined landscape of America and illustrate how it has audaciously extended the futurism of the frontier into space. I will corroborate and conclude these ruminations with a closer inspection of the 1991 film *Star Trek VI: The Undiscovered Country*, a cultural text that to me represents the most candid futurist portrayal of American (post)-Cold War politics. My ensuing examination of *Brokeback Mountain* focuses on what Scott Herring labels a "prosthetic politicization" (94). Posing as an ostensibly gay-friendly movie and a seemingly revolutionary representation of gay men in mainstream cinema, *Brokeback Mountain*, says Herring, in fact "invites nothing but pure escapism" (94). When Lee Edelman, in the already mentioned *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive*, illuminates the cultural "connection [...] between practices of gay sexuality and the undoing of futurity," (*Future*, 19) he unknowingly and foresightedly delivers an appallingly accurate analysis of Ang Lee's film. *Brokeback Mountain*, I argue, is a Hollywood treatise on queer negativity and the destructive powers ascribed to it.

Broke Trek, however, infuses the futureless scenario of *Brokeback Mountain* with the futurist obligations presented in *Star Trek*. In addition, it must be situated at the crossroads of *Slash* and *Brokeback Mountain Parody*, both already generic attempts to reread the discursive politics of *Star Trek* and *Brokeback Mountain* respectively. As will become evident, the result of that creative encounter in the contemporary of the *YouTube* temporality inaugurates a more hopeful future in the present, a utopian prospect of queer citizenship and belonging that may transcend "the discipline of the

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[20] The video, provided by a user named Zebonka, can be found at the URL: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7xSOuLky3n0>. All direct quotations from the clip refer to this link. By October 19, 2008, when the site was accessed, *Broke Trek* has been viewed 165,141 times.

service" (*Broke Trek*), the heteronormative politics of the futurist regime and the teleological enterprise that constitutes America. The momentary intervention of *Broke Trek*, this chapter will clarify, makes room for utopian contemporaries, cultural figures that creatively anticipate the plurality of communal imaginings in the precarious yet rewarding fleetingness of the now.

In their attempt to read the identity politics of *Star Trek*, Brian Ott and Eric Aoki boldly claim "that *Star Trek* is more than just a cultural icon, that it is a cultural agent, [and] that it actively and aggressively structures our socio-cultural landscape" (393). Ott and Aoki's assertion is daring, but it speaks to the ubiquity of *Star Trek* in the American mainstream. "By any measure of cultural iconicity – innovation, scope, resilience, recognizability, representativeness", they point out, "*Star Trek* is truly a touchstone of U.S. popular culture" (392). Indeed, *Star Trek* constitutes a franchise that has originated a still expanding catalogue of six television series, ten feature films (and an eleventh expected to premiere in May 2009), thousands of novels, comics and even technical handbooks, replicas of almost every prop that is used by *Star Trek* characters, such as uniforms, tricorders, or phasers, a confusing multitude of other merchandise like playing cards, mugs, starship model kits, and a well-attended circuit of fan conventions and exhibitions all over the globe.[21] Probably the most outlandish excrescence of *Star Trek*'s flourishing merchandise is Klingon, "the fictional language of a fictional race" (38), as Volker Gentejohann proclaims. Amusedly, he adds that the fact that Klingon is learnt by thousands of *Trekkies* as a foreign language "should have the inventors of Esperanto turning green with envy" (39). Critics have labeled *Star Trek* a "culturally revealing document" (Worland, 31) that sustains the futurist expansionism of the American project, as it, according to the American studies scholar H. Bruce Franklin, assumes "a future in which the aptly named starship U.S.S. *Enterprise* embodie[s] an ordered, self-contained society capable of making traditional American values and images triumphant throughout the galaxy"

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[21] As a port of entry to the *Star Trek* phenomenon, see the franchise's official site, at URL: <http://www.startrek.com/startrek/view/index.html>. The link was accessed October 19, 2008.

(36). *Star Trek*, it seems, is far more than popular entertainment: it actively intervenes in the debates on what may constitute America.

Perpetuating the futurist regime, *Star Trek* explicitly draws on the vocabulary of American myths. "Myth", Lincoln Geraghty claims in a reading of the legendary qualities of American science fiction, "serves as a mode of national identity-making" (192). In his argument, he acknowledges the hegemonic capital of myth and concludes that "[c]ountries thrive on myths to create, substantiate, and preserve their national identity" (192). In the case of *Star Trek*, most scholars agree that the American myths evoked most frequently and most notably are the doctrine of Manifest Destiny and the idea of the frontier.[22] Both cultural concepts, which I already discussed in greater detail in the first chapter of this thesis, fashion America as a *nation of futurity*, and they install an ideological framework that makes reproductive expansion its central objective. Indeed, each episode of the original series begins with the assertion that space is "the final frontier" (qtd. In Alexander, 253), and that the imperative of the starship *Enterprise* and its crew is "to seek out new life and new civilizations" (qtd. In Alexander, 253). The famous aspiration "to boldly go where no man has gone before" (qtd. In Alexander, 253), then, locates the series at the heart of the mythical futurist regime and "endows", as Geraghty points out, "*Star Trek* with numerous inherent culturally sanctioned meanings and ideological interpretations linked to westward expansion" (192).

The *Enterprise* itself, Daniel Bernardi maintains, "is drawn from and extends the history of the American wagon train" (77). In the futurist recapitulation of the expansionist settler spirit, the *Enterprise* becomes the paramount vessel of the reproductive venture into the unknown. Reifying the bold claims of Manifest Destiny, both the wagon train and the *Enterprise* "enable", as Bernardi argues, "their occupants to dominate and domesticate the frontier" (77). Both serve as vehicles that expand a particularly "American" vision of communal relations, on the one hand, and of specific temporal formations, on the other, as both "secure, in the form of the future", as Edelman would put it, "the order of the same" (*Future*, 151).

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[22] For a concise overview of how frontier politics may be linked to *Star Trek*, see Gentejohann, 63–66.

Star Trek's original outlook is also heavily indebted to John F. Kennedy's idea of the *New Frontier*, a rhetorical amalgamation that includes "activist foreign policy aimed at challenging Communism in the Third World, and […] a massive effort to advance national prestige through the manned space program" (Worland, 20). A virtual reincarnation of Jack Kennedy, Jim Kirk capitalizes on the 1960s' obsession with the technological exploration of outer space – which at the same represented a violent compulsion to contain the influence of the Soviet Union – and positions his crew at the center of the American futurist project. Just like John F. Kennedy, *Star Trek* displayed great expertise in, as Rick Worland argues, "re-conceptualiz[ing] traditional frontier symbolism in ways meaningful to modern people" (22). In *Star Trek*, the *New Frontier* and the *Final Frontier* coincide: the common project they engage in is reproductive futurism.

The frontier politics in *Star Trek* are even intensified by the fundamental expectation that every foreign "civilization" encountered must follow temporal assumptions that are identical to those of Federation culture. "When Americans venture into space, they seem to expect to find themselves" (152), Volker Gentejohann declares and fittingly summarizes the goal behind *Star Trek*'s exploration narrative. In a reading of several episodes of the original series, Gentejohann makes the point that the "crew's conception of history obviously involves a projection of their own culture onto other cultures" (100). In *Star Trek*, every alien society must follow the same developmental path towards technological advancement, and every foreign culture must eventually mirror the American understanding of "civilization": a narrative that eternalizes expansion and reproductive progress. As Gentejohann rightly points out, "this concept of history implies that there is a goal towards which all cultures steer" (100), a futurist *telos* that goes by the name of posterity, and a final frontier that, despite its incentive to grow, only embraces more of the same.

Reproductive projection into the future also permeates the internal generational structure of *Star Trek*. Discussing the elliptic title of *Star Trek: The Next Generation*'s series finale, "All Good Things…", Ilsa Bick recognizes that "an 'end' is not in *Star Trek*'s vocabulary" (204) and that *Star Trek*'s "master narrative promotes unchangeability even as it circulates between times, probing its own origins and insisting on seamless

continuity" (204). The most striking example of *Star Trek*'s futurist rendering of Edelman's *order of the same* may be the seventh feature film, *Star Trek: Generations*, a movie that bridges the eighty years between Captain Kirk's future and Captain Picard's future. Despite the different temporal realms they inhabit, and despite their often contradicting character traits, the film reassures the viewer that both captains engage in the same *master narrative*: the expansion of the *final frontier*. As an additional marker of reproductive continuation, Bick argues that *Star Trek: Generations* "attempts to displace Kirk and Spock's relationship to Picard and Lt. Commander Data's relationship" (206). The latter begin to form a bond that will even suffer from similar misfortune, as Data's eventual sacrificial death and resurrection in a surrogate body in *Star Trek: Nemesis* closely mirrors Mr. Spock's heroic dying and eventual resurrection in the surrogate Dr. McCoy in the interwoven narratives of *Star Trek II: The Wrath of Khan* and *Star Trek III: The Search for Spock*. As becomes evident, even the social scaffolding of the fictional *Star Trek* dramatis personae follows the reproductive politics that the franchise promotes in the American imagined community at large.

Having established the cultural work that *Star Trek* accomplishes as a frank perpetuation of the futurist regime and its reproductive implications, I find it only consequential that, as Bernardi observes, "nowhere in the Trek imagination does a sexuality other than heterosexuality exist" (117). Indeed, in the almost two hundred installments of *Star Trek: The Next Generation*, Ott and Aoki find only two episodes which address different expressions of sexuality. In both episodes, however, they conclude, nothing is undertaken "to challenge the heteronormative present" (409).[23] On the contrary, the "absence of same-sex couples and gay characters invites viewers to imagine a future in which homosexuality is nonexistent" (Ott and Aoki, 407). For my subsequent reading of *Broke Trek*, it is important to understand that the politics of future-oriented heteronomativity profoundly inform the clip and are at the same time actively transgressed. *Transcending the discipline of the service*, as the title of this chapter suggests, must therefore also involve a transcendence of the disciplinary discourses that the futurist regime

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[23] Their reflections on homosexuality in the *Star Trek* universe can be found in Ott and Aoki, 406–409.

maintains. In order for utopian contemporaries to emerge, *Broke Trek* must seize the moment and presently renegotiate the future in *Star Trek*, and by extension, in America.

To conclude my ruminations on the pervasiveness of the futurist imperative in *Star Trek*, I want to supply an example in which, I believe, the close connections between *Star Trek*'s and the American enterprise become visible. Exceptionally candid, *Star Trek VI: The Undiscovered Country*, released in 1991, furnishes a thinly veiled deliberation of American geopolitics in the disguise of fictionalized futurity. The film openly draws on the demise of the Soviet Union, which coincided with *Star Trek VI*'s production and reception. At the outset of the movie's plot, we witness the explosion of "Praxis", a Klingon moon that evaporates, as Bernardi claims, "like a Chernobyl due to over-mining and poor safety procedures" (100). The disintegration of the antique industrialism of the Klingon Empire furthers the emergence of the peace-loving chancellor Gorkon, who, like his Russian alter ego Gorbachev, endorses nonviolence and ruefully attempts to negotiate peace with Captain Kirk's Federation. It turns out that Federation officials intend to send the notorious Klingon-hater and political *hawk* Kirk, despite his vehement protests, on the perilous peace mission. The intertextual interlacement of Cold War discourse with the plot of *Star Trek VI* reaches a first climax when Federation ambassador Spock explains that the reason for nominating Kirk was that, as an old Vulcan proverb says, "only Nixon could go to China" (*Star Trek VI*).[24]

The customary assemblage of hazardous situations that constitutes the remainder of *Star Trek VI: The Undiscovered Country* is accompanied by the frequent evocation of plays by the English bard William Shakespeare. In the final battle scene between the Klingon General Chang's *Bird of Prey* and Captain Kirk's *Enterprise* alone, Shakespeare is recalled more than half a dozen times. In the five-minute sequence, Chang recites from Henry V's rallying speech, "Once more unto the breach, dear friends" (*Star Trek VI*)[25],

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[24] There is also a racist undertone to the Cold War rhetoric endorsed by the film in general. As Klingons are traditionally fashioned along the lines of African American stereotypes, the conflict assumes another dimension that is not addressed here. An argument on black stereotyping can be found in Ott and Aoki, 399–403, and, as part of a discussion of *Star Trek VI*, in Bernardi 100–102.

[25] The line is from Shakespeare, *Henry V*, 3.1.1.

he quotes a version of Shylock's discourse in *The Merchant of Venice*, "Tickle us, do we not laugh? Prick us, do we not bleed? Wrong us, shall we not revenge?" (*Star Trek VI*)[26], he returns to Henry V's speech and claims, "the game's afoot" (*Star Trek VI*)[27], he delivers Prospero's line in *The Tempest*, "Our revels now are ended" (*Star Trek VI*)[28], he invokes Antony in *Julius Caesar* and shouts, "Cry 'Havoc!' and let slip the dogs of war" (*Star Trek VI*)[29], he cites Julius Caesar in the same play, "I am constant as the Northern star" (*Star Trek VI*)[30], and he concludes his litany (and his life) with Hamlet's famous "To be or not to be" (*Star Trek VI*)[31].

The importance of Shakespeare to the cultural text of *Star Trek VI* is most evident in the quoted title of the film that also turns out to be its structuring metaphor. *The Undiscovered Country*, which in the deliberations of Hamlet, a proto-queer Shakespearean hero, represents "the dread of something after death" (*Hamlet*, 3.1.79) and the place "from whose bourn / No traveller returns" (*Hamlet*, 3.1.80–81), is remembered otherwise into the futurist regime of *Star Trek*. In the final scene of *Star Trek VI*, Captain Kirk tells audiences that the *Enterprise* "will shortly become the care of another crew" (*Star Trek VI*). Necessarily following the politics of reproductive futurism, he adds that to "them and their posterity we will commit our future" (*Star Trek VI*). In a great closing gesture, Captain Kirk finally promises, "They will continue the voyages that we have begun and journey to all the undiscovered countries, boldly going where no man, where no one, has gone before" (*Star Trek VI*)[32]. Death, as a futureless marker of queer social negativity, therefore, is simply eradicated by the futurist logic of *Star Trek*, and Hamlet's self-destructive uncertainty is reconfigured as

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[26] The original quote goes, "If you prick us, do we not bleed? If you tickle us, do we not laugh? If you poison us, do we not die? And if you wrong us, shall we not revenge?", and is from Shakespeare, *Merchant*, 3.1.50–52.

[27] The line is from Shakespeare, *Henry V*, 3.1.32.

[28] The line is from Shakespeare, *The Tempest*, 4.1.165.

[29] The line is from Shakespeare, *Julius Caesar*, 3.1.299.

[30] The line is from Shakespeare, *Julius Caesar*, 3.1.66.

[31] The line is from Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, 3.1.57.

[32] Kirk self-conscious correction shows that *Star Trek* has not only been informed by the Cold War, but also by the feminist struggles of the previous decades.

the exhilarating promise of reproductive expansionism. In the *Star Trek* universe, just as in the American imagined community, queer negativity is rendered outside of what is thinkable; it is omitted from discourse and relocated to the unimaginable realm wherefrom *no traveler returns.*

Having outlined the ways in which *Star Trek* intervenes in the formation of the American cultural landscape, I shall now turn to the second cluster of discourses that informs *Broke Trek*, the *YouTube* clip in which I profess to locate utopian contemporaries. In order to fully realize the momentary renegotiation of America in the short video, and in order to recognize *Broke Trek*'s powerful anticipation of more humanist futures in the present, it is vital to scrutinize the temporal and social politics invoked by *Brokeback Mountain*, a 2005 Hollywood film that introduced the love story of two gay cowboys to American mainstream audiences. Extensive press coverage launched "the tag 'the gay cowboy movie' into the American vernacular" (Rich, 44) and turned *Brokeback Mountain* into a virtually ubiquitous phenomenon.

The film, directed by Ang Lee, is an adaptation of Annie Proulx' short story of the same title and recounts the lives of Jack Twist and Ennis del Mar, two young men who fall in love with each other in the seclusion of a summer spent herding sheep on a Wyoming mountain. Elaborating on the common narrative trope that unravels the tragic fates of two star-crossed lovers, *Brokeback Mountain* presents the gay men's struggle with the heteronormative forces of the society that surrounds them. Set in the American West between 1960 and 1980, Jack and Ennis find little time and space for themselves, as the pressures of job, wives and children interfere with their precarious relationship. When Jack finally dies in a mysterious car accident, Ennis finds himself mourning incessantly and ruefully dreaming of a life they never had. But, the sad conclusion of Annie Proulx' text informs us, "nothing could be done about it, and if you can't fix it you've got to stand it" (318).

The discursive distance between the Wyoming Brokeback Mountain and the aforementioned Wyoming town of Laramie is almost negligible. Set in the same mythical landscape, both cultural texts betray the virtual impossibility of queer existence within the futurist regime and serve as

unfortunate reminders of the social negativity that surrounds queer lives. Despite the precipitate acclaim for *Brokeback Mountain* as empowering representation of homosexuality in mainstream cinema, the cultural logic of mass-mediated expression advanced a different rationale. The film, and the promotional efforts that surrounded it, engages in a determined de-politicization of its gay content. Advertised as a "universal love story" (Mendelsohn, 12) or as a "tragic and universal study of tabooed passion and unrealized dreams" (Kitses, 23), *Brokeback Mountain* removes attention from the queerness of its main characters and incorporates their fictional fates into seemingly "universal" cultural conceptions of unrealized love. The obvious alignment of the film's promotional poster with that of the 1997 blockbuster *Titanic*, a three-hour contemplation of the star-crossed – and heterosexual – love of Jack and Rose, partakes of a similar strategy. The "campaign to orchestrate a more open reception" (Kitses, 23), finally, also repeatedly accentuated the heterosexuality of *Brokeback Mountain*'s lead actors, Jake Gyllenhaal and Heath Ledger, and further downplayed the queer potential of *Brokeback Mountain*.[33]

The movie's plot itself, then, also fails to take advantage of the opportunity to queer the classic American figure of the cowboy, and by extension, his habitat, the frontier. Clover and Nealon rightly argue that *Brokeback Mountain* consciously emasculates Jack and Ennis so as not to interfere with the myth of rugged cowboy masculinity. "[T]he movie makes it clear that sheepherding is an abject rung on the cowboy ladder" (63), they stress and reveal the film's insistence that "neither Jack nor Ennis is seen as fully masculine" (63). Another attempt to minimize the cultural disturbance the film might have provoked is what D. A. Miller labels the "de-eroticization" (50) of gay love. In *Brokeback Mountain*, audiences do not really *see* gay sex, as it is either rendered invisible in the darkness of an unlit tent in the wilderness, or eclipsed by the fading of the screen. In an accusatory tone, queer studies scholar John Howard comments on the invisibility of gay lovemaking in *Brokeback Mountain* and claims that Diana Ossana and Larry McMurtry, the film's screenwriters, "can't imagine gay sex

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[33] For a decidedly dismissive stance on the choice of two heterosexual actors for gay roles, see Ellenzweig's review of *Brokeback Mountain*, a text in which he claims that "GLBT folks usually don't get to represent themselves on film – or, for that matter, to live openly in Hollywood" (15).

in the nation" (101), just as author Annie Proulx "can't imagine a sustainable gay relationship in the country" (101). Analyzing the technical devices and strategies employed in the shooting of *Brokeback Mountain*, D. A. Miller maintains that even the film's gaze contributes to the *de-politicization* of its content. Miller argues that "at key moments of narrative expectancy", the way the movie is shot installs the audience "in a comfort zone *outside* the narrative" (58). In many ways, therefore, the expected representation of queerness in *Brokeback Mountain* is obscured, eclipsed or incorporated into already existing mainstream tropes of universal love. The film's politics, it seems, refuse to be queer at all.

Of course, despite its palliative undertakings, the *gay cowboy movie* must in some way address issues of homosexuality, delicate as they might be for mainstream cinema. *Brokeback Mountain*'s narrative, however, is a thinly veiled reiteration of almost routine cultural codifications of queer negativity. Critic John Howard puzzles over the "sense of newness" (101) that has been ascribed to the movie and polemically asserts that *Brokeback Mountain*'s "[c]lunky closet metaphors, shadowy street cruising, homosexual homicide narratives [and] unhappy endings" (101) merely retell long-established accounts of queerness in Hollywood cinema. D. A. Miller as well recognizes that *Brokeback Mountain* only stylizes the irresolvable tension between queer existence and the exigencies of the futurist regime. He argues that, in the movie, "[w]hat we are asked to accept about the Homosexual [sic!] is not his sexuality, but his agonized attempts to fight it – touching proof of a certain devotion to normality after all" (50). Indeed, much of the narrative thrill in *Brokeback Mountain* stems from the incompatibility of gay love with the needs of family, the raising of children, and eventually, the prospect of futurity and posterity. Daniel Mendelsohn considers the film a "psychological tragedy" (11), in which homosexuality is associated with the "unhealthy, hateful, and deadly" (11), an assumption that is reified by the mysterious and potentially murderous death of Jack Twist at the end of the film. *Brokeback Mountain*, as Clover and Nealon hold, is representative of a moralistic rendering of "a discomfitingly familiar trope, wherein queer love must be punished by fatal violence" (62). What we see in *Brokeback Mountain*, if we see it at all, is an almost classic cinematic demonstration of the cultural belief that queers, as Lee Edelman contends,

have *no future*. Ennis's neglect of his family, the perpetual conflicting of his romantic adventures with his ability to keep a job and earn money, and Jack's eventual death serve as a cautionary tale about the anti-futurity queerness proffers. Contrary to the reproductive imperative of *Star Trek*, *Brokeback Mountain* portrays the sad consequences of a queer love that ultimately fails to participate in the expansionist futurism of the American imagined community.

Despite the almost diametrically opposed depiction of American frontier politics in *Brokeback Mountain* and *Star Trek* respectively, their cultural pervasiveness has turned both the would-be cowboys Jack Twist and Ennis del Mar, and the futurist settlers Captain Kirk and Mr. Spock, riding their wagon spaceship, into "representative characters" (Baty, 8). They serve as cultural figures "through whom the character of political life is articulated" (Baty, 8) and they participate in the discursive policing of the boundaries of American citizenship. Their prominent appearance on screens all over the country fashions them into national bodies politic that regulate the expressions of social belonging, kinship, and community that are imaginable in America.

On May 27, 2007, a user named Zebonka uploaded a two-minute video clip to the Internet platform *YouTube*. In a barely innovative gesture named *Broke Trek: A Star Trek Brokeback Mountain Parody*, the piece combines music from *Brokeback Mountain* with a scintillating sequence of aural and visual fragments from *Star Trek*, implying a promising sexual relationship between Captain Kirk and Mr. Spock. Employing the fades and textual inserts characteristic of the *Brokeback Mountain* trailer, *Broke Trek* is an amalgamation of obscure gazes and ambivalent dialogue, reassembled into an insinuating appetizer for a nonexistent movie. In the remainder of this chapter, I will concern myself with the utopian prospects inherent in such a clip. The creative coalescence of *Star Trek* and *Brokeback Mountain* into a fictional film trailer poses the following questions: What might be gained from an integration of these *representative characters*, from a merging of queer negativity with the futurist regime? How can a short online video profoundly reinterpret the ways in which the social in America is imagined? And how does the clip's uncertain existence in a queer

contemporary extend the promise of a utopian future in the present? In order to begin answering these questions, I want to survey two phenomena that may be considered intellectual precursors of *Broke Trek*. The resistant readings offered by both the *Slash* subculture and the genre of *Brokeback Mountain Parody* have been challenging the dominant semiotic loadings of my representative characters for quite a while. *Broke Trek*, therefore, must be situated at the crossroads of these two potent genealogies of pop cultural production.

In the subsequent paragraph, I provide a review of *Slash*, a vibrant *Star Trek* subculture that has emerged in the early 1970s. In the course of this survey, I come to consider *Slash* a pop culture phenomenon that, read along the lines of John Fiske's important work *Understanding Popular Culture*, capitalizes on the "everyday resistances and evasions" (21) inherent in the popular and actively produces a counter-canonical interpretation of the *Trek* narrative. A particularly striking component of *Star Trek* fandom, *Slash* is, as Henry Jenkins puts it "a genre of fan writing" (187) that suggests, "however timidly, that Kirk and Spock cared more deeply for each other than for any of the many female secondary characters who brush past them in the original episodes" (187). An early attempt to invest the bodies of Captain Kirk and Mr. Spock with alternative memory, *Slash* produces democratic resistance to the euphoric yet heteronormative futurity of the *final frontier*. The stories of "Kirk slash Spock", or "K/S", are, according to P. J. Falzone, "a flagship for the slash genre" (244), which has not restricted itself to *Star Trek*, but deals with all kinds of "same sex characters that in the parent narrative are avowedly or assumedly heterosexual" (Falzone, 244). *Slash*'s resistant cultural work is accomplished by its liberation of "the characters, and indeed the character archetypes, from the heterosexist norms of commercial media production" (Falzone, 249). Over the years, and expedited by the advent of the Internet, *Slash* has developed into a productive communal enterprise bridging the realms of romance and pornography. In harmless versions, "Spock stood up and holding Jim's face, brushed his lips against Kirk's in a fleeting kiss" (AtieJen, n.p.), whereas more graphic slash stories contemplate Kirk's "fascination with Spocks [sic!] balls" and proclaim that it "was more than simple curiosity" ("Job", n.p.). Both scenarios outline the potential to obscure the futurity of *Star Trek* with

the negativity of the queer, a prospect that also informs *Broke Trek* and that offers a confident glimpse of queer discursive existence within the futurist regime of the *Trek* universe.

Shortly after the release of *Brokeback Mountain*, a popular phenomenon capitalized on the momentum of the newly emerging website *YouTube.com*, an Internet platform that enables every registered user to upload video data and make it available to the virtual community. The vast number of videos suddenly surfacing on *YouTube*, generically categorized as *Brokeback Mountain Parody*, all attempt to invest the cowboys of *Brokeback Mountain*, representative characters that invoke the Western landscapes of American myths, with new meaning. The blueprint for a *Brokeback Mountain Parody* is simple: Each clip utilizes music from Gustavo Santaolalla's soundtrack for *Brokeback Mountain* and combines it with visual, and sometimes aural, material from American mainstream movies in order to fashion a two-minute trailer for a non-existent gay film. Thus, clips named *Star Wars: The Empire Brokeback*, *Brokeback Harbor*, *Brokeback Rocky Mountain*, or *Brokeback Hogwarts*,[34] recast, as *Newsweek* reporter Nick Summers argues, "existing movies as tales of forbidden male love" (16). Fabricated from scattered scenes extracted from the blockbuster movies *Star Wars*, *Pearl Harbor*, *Rocky*, or *Harry Potter*, these parodies all encapsulate the potential for resistant readings of Ang Lee's depiction of queer negativity. Most trailers, however, feature unsubstantial plot lines and relocate *Brokeback Mountain* into the area of innocuous amusement. These parodies depoliticize the film and fashion, as Corey Creekmur claims, "genuine homoeroticism [as] sheer folly" (106). Even worse, he observes that "[s]eemingly despite itself, *Brokeback Mountain* has sanctioned the widespread revival of the publicly spoken fag joke" (106). Creekmur's remarks highlight that the light-hearted and humorous exploitation of the

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[34] All clips can be found on *YouTube* and were uploaded by different users. *Star Wars: The Empire Brokeback* assumes that the famous droids, R2-D2 and C3PO, are gay. The clip was supplied February 14, 2006, by SLC 17 and can be found at URL: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=omB18oRsBYg>. *Brokeback Harbor* is a parody of the 2001 Oscar-winning *Pearl Harbor* and was uploaded by eldusto84 on September 15, 2006. It can be found at URL: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=25uqLSVRNzM>. *Brokeback Rocky Mountain*, uploaded by dawgpop on April 3, 2006, is a parody of Sylvester Stallone's *Rocky* movies. It can be found at URL: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=slOQw3EYXoQ>. *Brokeback Hogwarts*, finally, was supplied by Slagkick on March 5, 2006, and is a particular version of the Harry Potter movies. It can be found at URL: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PmtP5AzppO4>. All websites were accessed on October 27, 2008.

film's queer potential does in fact suppress its transgressive facets and only reinforces its depiction of queerness as socially destructive. It was for that reason, arguably, that the American "National Gay and Lesbian Task Force denounced the trailers as homophobic, and distracting from real-world civil-rights issues" (Summers, 16). *Brokeback Mountain Parodies*, then, not necessarily entertain hopeful visions of queer creativity. Their oftentimes effortless foolishness, rather, obscures the political capacities of pop cultural resistance. In most cases, the parody engages in simple repression, and fulfils a cultural fantasy, that, as Creekmur asserts, prefers "funny fags [to] tragic homosexuals" (107).

Emerging not only at the crossroads of *Star Trek* and *Brokeback Mountain*, but also at the junction of *Slash* and *Brokeback Mountain Parody*, *Broke Trek* represents a confrontation of the queer and America, creatively coalescing the identity-constituting desire of an imagined community with the ostensible negativity of queer existence. In *Broke Trek*, a clash of truly national bodies takes place. Amalgamating the bodies politic of Captain Kirk and Mr. Spock with those of the gay cowboys Jack Twist and Ennis del Mar, *Broke Trek* conflates the futurist project, the "exploration imperative" (Geraghty, 192), and queer negativity. Concomitantly, of course, it renegotiates the landscape of American myths. The result is a momentary temporal space in which queer lives become imaginable and the understanding of the American social is multiplicatively enlarged.

Notwithstanding the fact that *Broke Trek* also revels in the trope of star-crossed lovers, its rationale differs markedly from that of *Brokeback Mountain*. Although the initial scenes of the clip suggest tension and conflict, the romance of Captain Kirk and Mr. Spock soon obtains a more optimistic outlook. Rather than despairingly accepting the discursive aporia of homosexual love, Captain Kirk claims, "It's a risk I'll have to take" (*Broke Trek*), and later, Mr. Spock contends, "For the first time in my life, I was happy" (*Broke Trek*). *Broke Trek*'s more open reception of queer belonging and kinship, incorporated into the national bodies of Kirk and Spock, culminates in the ultimate scene of the video, when Mr. Spock claims, "there are some things which transcend even the discipline of the service" (*Broke Trek*). Contrary to Ennis del Mar's notorious assertion that "nothing could be done about it, and if you can't fix it you've got to stand it" (Proulx, 318),

Spock's call for transcendence reveals a space in which a gay relationship becomes thinkable. In *Broke Trek*, it seems, the cowboys can be gay without being fatally punished for it. In *Broke Trek*, the discipline of the futurist service, and the disciplinary constraints of American heteronormativity are transcended, and a more inclusive understanding of community and belonging is imagined.

This powerful revision of the reproductive imperative seizes the moment in order to succeed. Appearing exclusively in the ephemeral stream of *YouTube* consciousness, *Broke Trek*'s utopian conception of a creatively queer social is a contemporary phenomenon. Technically, a *YouTube* video appears in a streaming format and cannot be downloaded and stored as a static file. Rather, it is designated for consumption in the impermanent fleetingness of the now. *Broke Trek* has a short-lived presence, and is confronted with the inherent danger of being removed by the uploading user, leaving behind only a sparse notification that commemorates its purely temporary existence.

Representing a cultural product that is only momentarily streamed into discourse, it is useful to conceptualize *Broke Trek* in the vernacular of performance theory, an intellectual tradition that has always been preoccupied with the moment. Performance studies scholar Joseph Roach compellingly reminds us that "to perform also means […] to reinvent" (xi), and it is for that reason that David Román, for instance, finds "the potential for great joy and profound pleasure in such an ephemeral temporality" (*America*, 308). Likewise, Jill Dolan claims that performance's "fleetingness leaves us melancholy yet cheered" (8). Her argument recognizes the contemporary's potential for change, since, "for however brief a moment, we [can feel] something of what […] humanism could really mean, of how powerful might be a world in which our commonalities would hail us over our differences" (8).

And yet, despite its temporal brevity, the alternative experience of the present, the renegotiation of the futurist project, and the eventual inclusion of queer love into the design of the American imagined community is something that may proliferate among our contemporaries. At the end of *Broke Trek*, *YouTube* offers a "Share"–button that enables the user to multiply the clip's hopeful temporality, and to offer it to other

Internet users all over the globe. *Broke Trek*, then, can transcend its immediate existence, and almost indefinitely prolong its evanescent but hopeful appearance.

With a short click on the "Share"-button, users not only send around the world the hopeful contemporary of the clip, but also its utopian anticipation of *better* futurities. *Broke Trek*'s humanist and non-heteronormative understanding of America presently yearns for a more elaborate later. The clip resembles a movie trailer, a medium whose exclusive function is to stimulate a desire for the alternative vision of the completed film. A consummate teaser, the piece gestures towards a full-length feature, towards a future in the present in which gay cowboys vigorously claim their right of discursive existence within the imagined community, and towards the anticipation of a time in which queer creativity may enrich and intensify the mythical landscape of America.

Broke Trek's queer utopian critique of the social negativity commonly ascribed to queerness, then, is set apart by its remarkable take on postmodernity. Exclusively fashioned from the gigantic superabundance of mass cultural production, heavily burdened by multiple practices of signification, *Broke Trek* comes to us as a reassembled pastiche, an intertextual parody that capitalizes on the free play of shifting signifiers. In doing so, however, it promotes naively old-fashioned humanist ideals. Wasteful as it may be, *Broke Trek* nonetheless advocates nondiscriminatory forms of community, kinship, and social belonging. It reifies the creative energy set free by queer social positivity and, seizing the moment, ardently rehearses an imagined community that appreciates the fruitful productivity of queer existence.

The transitory juxtaposition of American national bodies on *YouTube* remembers the futurity of *Star Trek* in a different way. Rather than perpetuating the heteronormative futurist regime, *Broke Trek*'s present-tenseness installs alternative economies of memory and forgetting. Through and in the moment, the boundaries of American citizenship are renegotiated, as a gay relationship is inventively remembered into the imagined community, while the merely reproductive logic of *Star Trek* fades into oblivion. Lingering on the virtual *horizon of reality*, *Broke Trek* champions and anticipates a utopian future in which the discourses that

have emerged around the notion of America are permitted to grow imaginatively. If my understanding of utopia follows Richard Rorty's incentive to "replace knowledge by hope" (34), then the Captain Kirk and Mr. Spock of *Broke Trek* certainly count as utopian contemporaries. Their relationship transcends the knowledge regimes that avow the social negativity of queerness. Indeed, it transcends *the discipline of the service* and poses more imaginative questions. "How would it be?" (*Broke Trek*), Captain Kirk asks at one point in the clip and it is the lasting reverberation of that inquiry that inaugurates a future in the present, that allows queerness to *get a life*, and that does not cease to insist that new and alternative futures must start presently, and that they must start here.

Both the chapter on *The Laramie Project* and this chapter have tapped into the mythical reservoir of the American West. Both drew their cultural powers from the notion of the frontier, from the expansionist fantasies of the American project, from the idea of open range, or open space respectively, and from a blatantly heterosexual cowboy masculinity. At the same time, however, I have addressed issues that resonate around the nation and that pose questions crucial to the present understanding of queer citizenship in America. *The Laramie Project*, for that matter, is essentially a play about a hate crime, while *Broke Trek*, through its reinterpretation of *Brokeback Mountain*, effectively challenges the role of queer representation in mainstream media. The last chapter of this thesis will relocate my analysis to a more urban space, as *Shortbus* is set in Brooklyn, New York. As will become evident, though, the mythical symbolism haunts the film just the same. The following chapter will elucidate how the utopian contemporaries of *Shortbus* engage in a compelling yet nostalgic revision of both the capitalist-individualist space of New York City and the deadly specter of the AIDS crisis that is still disturbing the imagined community.

4. BLACKOUT: UTOPIAN CONTEMPORARIES

In the summer of 2007, the New York-based Hungry March Band released their fourth album, *Portable Soundtracks for Temporary Utopias*. A radiant collection of thirteen brass band pieces, the album inquires, as the liner notes have it, "what magic combination will lift the moment out of its ordinary context just long enough to make the wedding stick, or bury the old friend, or change the attitude at a demonstration, meanwhile always seduce the audience?" (n.p.).[35] Through their musical evocation of utopias that are only ephemeral, or temporary, the Hungry March Band poses questions of temporal transcendence as well. With every deep groan of the tuba, with every little rattle of the percussion instruments, in short, with every passionately creative moment, they anticipate a future that may

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[35] The liner notes can be found, for example, at *CDBaby*, an online store that sells the album, see URL: <http://cdbaby.com/cd/hungrymarch4>. The site was accessed November 7, 2008.

exhilarate, seduce, and astonish. With every of their *portable soundtracks*, they conjure up a utopian contemporary, a critical temporality in which a plurality of humanities can thrive.

A year earlier, the Hungry March Band had a prominent appearance in the final sequence of John Cameron Mitchell's film *Shortbus*, cheerfully entertaining a queer gathering of sorts. Assembling for a particular party, the utopian contemporaries of *Shortbus* also explore and experiment with that *magic combination*, an imaginative code that unlocks a generous contemporary space through which abundant alternative futures are transmitted. In *Shortbus*, this chapter aims to elucidate, utopian contemporaries embark on an excitingly unpredictable voyage to such *temporary utopias*. Starting their innovatory engines, they fill the moment with the expectation of *better* futures, they envisage alternative economies of kinship and social belonging, and participate in a monumental re-arrangement of the fastidiously regulated urban space that is New York City. In the following pages, I shall provide a utopian reading of *Shortbus*, an interpretation that permits cultural commentators to expand the vision of America beyond the confines of the futurist regime, and to imagine a multiplication of futures in the present, futures that divest of social negativity and affirm the hopeful communal assets of queer existence.

In her 2005 book *Utopia in Performance: Finding Hope at the Theater*, performance scholar Jill Dolan issues a call for a "more radical democracy" (21). Living in and writing about the early twenty-first century, a time in which, according to her, humanism has been "driven to disrepair and disrepute by the cynicism of late capitalist globalism" (21), Dolan finds it utterly necessary to imagine more inclusive forms of sociality. Arguing for an unconcealed acknowledgment of common human values, she insists that a "desire to revitalize humanism or democracy doesn't have to be seen as naïve and idealistic" (21). Dolan's humanism, however, ventures beyond nostalgic repetition and involves a determined revision of earlier concepts. Resolutely, she refutes an "omniscient and omnipotent" (22) understanding of culture, and instead demands a "reenvisioned humanism [that] is contextual, situational, and specific, nothing at all like the totalizing signifier it once described" (22). Dolan's idea of humanity cherishes the multiplicities, the ruptures, the complexities, and the irrationalities of

identity, and unceasingly attempts to establish a human connectivity that transcends the logic of reproductive futurism.

My concept of utopian contemporaries is heavily indebted to Dolan's work, as the futures in the present that I analyze engage in a comparable *reenvisioning* of humanity. My understanding of the present as a queer temporality, however, puts a more pronounced focus on the affective benefits of queer cultural existence. Flourishing in queer temporality, utopian contemporaries entertain, as Judith Halberstam claims, "the potentiality of a life unscripted by the conventions of family, inheritance, and child rearing" (2). Their cultural and social desires are not exclusively directed towards the construction of posterity, but towards the human beings they connect with in the fleeting time of the now. In my exploration of *Shortbus*, then, I seek to investigate the cultural prospects of a connectivity that is contingent on the *immediate* presence of others. Such queer human bonds, necessarily, redefine the futurist project, as they challenge the primacy of posterity in the design of the imagined community. Rather, they introduce alternative, and decidedly utopian, cultural memory, different systems of knowledge that obtain their forcefulness from their concentration on the contemporary, both as a temporality and as a social actor.

My subsequent examination of *Shortbus*, an independent film set in the metropolitan space of contemporary New York City, relates to the previous chapters due to its analytical focus on the industrious renegotiation of *national* discourses. Nick Davis, who reviewed the movie for *GLQ*, recognizes the decidedly American scope of *Shortbus* and fittingly claims that "rhetorics of statehood and the outward ripples of particular national agons give shape to the film" (629). And indeed, the vision of *Shortbus* is a remarkable vision of America: It assembles and informs current discourses of a post–9/11, post–capitalist, post–AIDS, and post–identity citizenship, and represents a proposition that infuses the nation with more imaginative perspectives of community than those of mere reproduction. *Shortbus* speaks to the construction of the American imagined community in ways comparable to those of my previous examples, and concomitantly enhances the broad range of current issues dealt with in this thesis. In the second chapter, I already addressed such topics as anti–

gay hate crime, homophobic violence, and hate speech, while in the third chapter, I confronted the discourses of cowboy masculinity, American expansionism, and queer visibility in mainstream media. This fourth chapter, then, provides yet another space in which America can be rethought, and yet another space for utopian contemporaries to emerge.

In BLACKOUT: UTOPIAN CONTEMPORARIES, I attempt to capture the moment of a blackout in New York City, a temporary shutdown of electricity that literally interrupts the normative power structures of the futurist regime, and that reveals viable interstices for the origination of multiplicative queer communities. For director John Cameron Mitchell, the power outage that affected large parts of the Northeast of the United States in August 2003 is central to the politics of *Shortbus*. In an interview in *Village Voice*, he stated that *Shortbus* was "all about the spirit of the blackout – that feeling we had that night is what I wanted to show. You turn off your cell phone and look into each other's eyes and realize you're alive and you're in New York" (qtd. in Romano, 94). Through a cinematic rendering of the 2003 blackout, thus, *Shortbus* makes an effort to fill these interstices with alternative memory of American citizenship, with queer social positivity, and, finally, with a *portable soundtrack* for that utopian contemporary, exuberantly performed by the musicians of the Hungry March Band.

The following sections provide an approximation to *Shortbus*, and a spearheading attempt to examine the cultural impact of the film. A relatively recent movie, *Shortbus* has received little to no attention in academic discourse so far. Nick Davis's "The View From the *Shortbus*, or All Those Fucking Movies", published in the *Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* in late 2008, stands as the only article-length examination of the film.[36] Due to the extremely meager body of academic writing on *Shortbus*, I want to begin my analysis with an overview of the plot lines, gestation process and immediate critical appraisal of John Cameron Mitchell's film. This survey-like part of chapter four will be followed by a theorization of what I will come to call *Shortbus*-temporality, a conception of time through which the narrative is filtered. The *Shortbus*-temporality, my argument goes, has a general

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[36] Davis ponders over whether or not *Shortbus* may create a "counterpublic" (623) in Michael Warner's sense, and over whether the removal of sex to the public sphere may already count as a *queer* act. For the outlook of his review of *Shortbus*, see Davis 623–626.

tendency toward retardation, delays linear narratives of progress, and offensively lags behind the futurism of heteronormative America. I will then proceed to investigate two moments through which the film rearticulates cultural memory and divests it of its queer negativity. First, I will argue that in *Shortbus*, the specter of AIDS, a paragon of the social devastation that has been associated with queerness, is exorcised through an intergenerational kiss, a momentary sign of affection and solidarity that marks the symbolic exoneration of a traumatized generation. Second, I shall address the blackout moment that concludes the film. In this brief time span that transcends the rigid boundaries of American citizenship and nationhood, a "permeable" (*Shortbus*) conception of community becomes apparent. In the momentary suspension of power, I argue, an "ethic of permeability" (Williams, 49) is proposed, an idea of sociality that dismisses any negativity. Instead, the blackout produces utopian contemporaries who come to anticipate modes of belonging that are humanist, permeable, and multiplicative.

The narrative of *Shortbus* unfolds in a New York City ravaged but also reinvigorated by the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. A "classic ensemble movie" (Curlovich, 49), *Shortbus* introduces its audience to the strangely intertwined lives of an array of central characters. Connected through their frequenting of the Brooklyn sex club *Shortbus*, they all strive to solve their particular sexual problems, difficulties that turn out to be complications concerning emotional sensitivity as well. Sofia (Sook-Yin Lee) and Rob (Raphael Barker), a married couple with a stylish flat in midtown Manhattan, find themselves unable to connect sexually, as Sofia remains "pre-orgasmic" (*Shortbus*) despite her desperate attempts to experience sexual climax. James (Paul Dawson) and Jamie (PJ DeBoy), partners for five years, want to open up their relationship and begin a sexual liaison with boyish Ceth (Jay Brannan). James, who is suicidal and in the process of fabricating a farewell tape for his boyfriend, is also plagued by his inability to let himself be penetrated sexually. Dominatrix Severin (Lindsay Beamish), a professional sex worker, although fluent in her sadistic craft, is despairingly craving for "real human interaction" (*Shortbus*). And a peculiar senior citizen (Alan Mandell) who claims that he "used to be the mayor of

New York" (*Shortbus*), still worries about his unfit response to the 1980s AIDS crisis and finds that "home can be very unforgiving" (*Shortbus*).

All these characters eagerly seek and gradually find relief in Justin Bond's *Shortbus*, a Brooklyn sex club that is, as one reviewer puts it, "home to the damaged souls, flaming creatures, and assorted sexpot superfreaks of the post-gay New York City bohemia" (Lee, 71). Cautiously, the people of *Shortbus* begin to build a hopeful community of pervious creatures, and slowly turn their meeting place, as Linda Williams argues, not only into a spot "for pleasure but for understanding, permeability, and even forgiveness (49). During a final gathering set against the backdrop of the aforementioned blackout in New York City, the plot lines are resolved: To the soothing acoustic sounds of an improvised string orchestra and the solemn voice of host Justin Bond, everybody begins to touch each other gently and lovingly, tenderly engaging in a soft caressing of their immediate contemporaries. While Bond croons, "we all get it in the end" (*Shortbus*), his audience revels in the peaceful atmosphere, touchingly seizing the power vacuum in order to imagine new forms of community and belonging. Eventually, the Hungry March Band joins the exuberant festivities and, as Linda Williams claims, "everyone becomes permeable, if not literally penetrated then at least open and available" (49). The film ends as Sofia reaches her first orgasm, an immediate consequence of the benevolent powers of the emerging queer community, and a moment so overflowing with creative energy that the lights go back on in the city.

Premiering in late 2006, *Shortbus* achieved immediate notoriety for its sexual explicitness. Largely due to the frank and matter-of-fact depiction of unsimulated sex scenes, *Shortbus* has made, as Williams maintains, "a breakthrough worth noting" (47). Although European filmmakers have been industriously creating "hard-core art cinema" (Williams, 47) for years, Williams claims that American mainstream film has yet to recognize the potential of explicit sex on screen. Quite remarkably, however, *Shortbus* is not imbued with "European angst" (Williams, 47), but contains a more optimistic and pleasurable representation of sexuality. It would, however, be misleading to read the incorporation of *authentic* sex into *Shortbus* as gratifying or pornographic. Refuting that claim, several reviewers have insisted on the non-pornographic nature of the filmic

material. Nick Davis, for instance, argues that "the camera often opts for wide panoramas over voyeuristic close-ups" (628), while Linda Williams holds that the film is "too playful, too witty, and too little intent on engendering arousal to be porn" (48). Alice O'Keeffe, finally, announces that the "sex is messy, absurd, and far too real to be fantasy material" (43). Sex, in *Shortbus*, it seems, is not captured for immediate satisfaction, but functions as a metaphor for community and emotional trust.

The production of *Shortbus* appears to follow communal logics as well. For the movie, which was originally entitled *The Sex Film Project*, director John Cameron Mitchell found his cast outside the professional circuit of performing artists. Advertising in alternative magazines and on the Internet, Mitchell assembled a group of actors before he had a script. As a community of artists, all performers then developed the plot in a creative collaboration. The process of making *Shortbus* took four years, a time during which, as actor Jay Brannan recounts, its cast has "become like a family, or what a family could or should be" (qtd. in O'Keeffe, 44).[37] A movie about New York in which the famous cityscape only appears as a fancy digital animation, *Shortbus* was largely shot at New York's fringes. Most scenes were filmed in Brooklyn's DUMBO district, but cinematic material was also produced at such unexpected venues as the home of queer theorist and American studies scholar Michael Warner. "[W]hen Sofia and Rob holler out their reciprocal yawp of domestic frustration" (627), Nick Davis relates with a nod to Walt Whitman, an author on whose work Warner has published extensively, "they inhabit Warner's own living room" (627). As becomes evident, *Shortbus* ostentatiously evades the commercial spaces of mainstream filmmaking. Indeed, the movie was originated through alternative economic routes, creative mechanisms that construct different, and more imaginative, communities of exchange.

When *Shortbus* was released in 2006, film critics instantly acknowledged its pioneering cultural work and its innovative exploration of queer identities. Nathan Lee, for instance, raves about the "hotties of indeterminate gender" (71) and claims that "[n]o movie has illustrated a broader spectrum of contemporary sexual identity" (71). In a similar vein, sociologist James Joseph Dean ascribes a "queer sensibility" (381) to the film

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[37] For more on the development of *Shortbus*, see O'Keeffe, 44.

and regards it a specimen of queer cinema, a film genre whose narratives "create new ways for envisaging sexualities and for troubling normative heterosexuality" (381). Likewise, Todd McCarthy, writing for the entertainment industry magazine *Variety*, attests a "vibrant vibe" (34) to *Shortbus*, and finds that the film displays an "intense curiosity and generous spirit" (34). Other critics, however, have not been so generous with their appraisal of *Shortbus*. *Village Voice* reviewer Jim Ridley, for example, denounces the movie's "limited idea of seriousness" (78) and declares that the "boisterous happy ending that administers sexual healing has the contrived insistence of a public service announcement" (78). John Curlovich's critique of *Shortbus* is even more pronounced: He discredits the movie's plot and declares that "the writing isn't exactly focused" (49), while the characters are, "to the last one, so superficial that it's hard to describe" (49). Curlovich finds *Shortbus* "preposterous" (49) and eventually claims that the film "deserves special recognition for making sex and love seem just plain silly" (49). Although I agree with Curlovich's account of the evident stupidity in *Shortbus*, my subsequent argument capitalizes on the culturally refreshing capacities of that silliness. In the next couple of paragraphs, I will refuse to find the foolishness of the movie *preposterous*, and rather acknowledge its naively hopeful expectations.

Embarking on a search for utopian contemporaries, I will continue and frame my analysis of *Shortbus* with an account of the temporality of stupidity,[38] a queer and retarded time that lags behind the future-driven economies of reproduction and progress. The socially revitalizing potential of *Shortbus*, I claim, resides in its very stupidity, in its retarded but imaginative stretching of the "conventional logics of development, maturity, adulthood, and responsibility" (Halberstam, 13). *Shortbus*, my argument goes, introduces a queer temporality to American cinema, a time of delay and arrested development, yet a time of present immediacy and confident social potentiality.

Already the film's title is symptomatic of the queer understanding of time that permeates *Shortbus*. The name of a sex club in Brooklyn, *Shortbus*

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[38] "Stupidity" here is entirely free of its usually negative connotations. Instead, I regard it as a refreshingly naïve mode of thinking that may challenge *adult* seriousness and *adult* life temporalities.

is, as host Justin Bond tells newcomer Sofia when they first meet, "a salon for the gifted and challenged" (*Shortbus*). In the American vernacular, a *shortbus* designates a smaller type of the conventional yellow school bus, which is typically used to bring physically or mentally challenged children to class. The *Shortbus* of the movie, then, materializes as a salon for the *retarded*, an establishment that deliberately falls behind the normative temporality of American teleological futurism, and, with substantial delay, opens up a queer contemporary space instead.

For Judith Halberstam, such "a queer time and space" (2) represents a convenient framework "for academic and nonacademic considerations of life, location, and transformation" (2). In my reading of *Shortbus*, I want to take up Halberstam's impetus and develop the idea of a *Shortbus*-temporality, an essentially contemporary realm of retardation and stupidity, in order to consider citizenship and social belonging in America. My *consideration*, however, encompasses an imperative of social renewal and probes the utopian. I claim, essentially, that in the non-heteronormative and retarded "queer time and space" (Halberstam, 2) of *Shortbus*, novel and alternative forms of life and community are being conceived of, patterns of communal interaction and bonding that inventively reanimate the narrowly futurist constitution of the American imagined community.

Reifying Judith Halberstam's ruminations on queer temporality and spatiality, the time of *Shortbus* epitomizes "an outcome of strange temporalities, imaginative life schedules, and eccentric economic practices" (Halberstam, 2). The contemporary of *Shortbus*, thus, may function as a creative enhancement of the reproductive timetable of futurity. The guests of *Shortbus*, it seems, adamantly decline to grow up and refuse, in William Shatner's words, to *get a life* and participate in the repetitive rationality of adulthood. The queer *Shortbus*-temporality enables its inhabitants to experience what Halberstam calls a "stretched-out adolescence" (153), a concept of age and life cycles that challenges the "obvious transition out of childish dependency through marriage into adult responsibility through reproduction" (153). Savoring queer delay, the people of *Shortbus* boldly dare the rationale of the futurist regime. Their queer existence "on the edges of logics of labor and production" (10), their lives as sex workers, performance artists, musicians, and filmmakers reject the itineraries of

expansionist America, and fashion a more imaginative understanding of sociality.

Consequently, *Shortbus* is set on the edges of the city as well. Situated in Brooklyn rather than Manhattan, the *Shortbus* eschews, as Nathan Lee argues, "the pro-business, pro-family, hideously elitist 'quality of life' policies of the Giuliani and Bloomberg administrations" (71), which have turned Manhattan into "a playground for moneyed dullards" (71). Queer lives and contemporaries, then, emerge on the fringes of reproductive futurism, and occupy the "space of the 'not yet,' the not fully realized" (Halberstam, 177). Fashioning an alternative playground, one for invigoratingly creative stupidity, they actively use that liminal sphere of social indeterminacy for the contemplation of the utopian. As they voyage through the time of *Shortbus*, its guests conjure up a foolishness that inventively reassembles the ways in which kinship and citizenship in America is conceptualized.

In the following section, I want to isolate and scrutinize two moments, embedded in the *Shortbus*-temporality, in which particularly pronounced renegotiations of the imagined community take place. Out of these peculiar instants, I claim, utopian contemporaries emerge, cultural figures who are entertaining their social hopes in the retarded realms of the Brooklyn sex club and eagerly anticipate a *better later*. Through these moments, the denizens of *Shortbus* intervene in central discourses of American community and the place queerness has therein. The first of the two utopian moments happens relatively early in the film, and illustrates an attempt to remember AIDS differently. In the moment of a kiss, a brief sign of emotional affection, I claim, the deadly disease that has been affecting the United States since the early 1980s, and that has profoundly influenced the representation of queerness in public discourse, is relieved of its social negativity and its highly destructive associations with homosexuality.

A preliminary to the first utopian moment is an encounter between boyish Ceth (Jay Brannan) and an older gentleman (Alan Mandell), who claims that he "used to be the mayor of New York" (*Shortbus*). A thinly veiled fictional doppelganger, the old man brings to mind the personality and historical legacy of Ed Koch, mayor of New York from 1978 to 1989. As

Koch was in charge of the city during most of the 1980s, his time in office coincided with the apex of the AIDS crisis in America. The ex-mayor's appearance in *Shortbus*, perplexing as it may be at first glance, in fact employs an established performance device. Koch's double reifies Joseph Roach's idea of the "effigy" (36), a mechanism that may "produce memory through surrogation" (36).[39] For Roach, the effigy "fills by means of surrogation a vacancy created by the absence of an original. Beyond ostensibly inanimate effigies fashioned from wood or cloth" (36), Roach continues, "there are more elusive but more powerful effigies fashioned from flesh" (36). As effigies, says Roach, "hold open a place in memory into which many different people may step according to circumstances and occasions" (36), they harbor an enormous potential for cultural transformation. Stepping into the empty space left by Ed Koch, his replica certainly functions as an effigy in the flesh. Appearing in the elusive time and space of *Shortbus*, the Koch doppelganger is "not fully realized" (Halberstam, 177) and thrives in queer amorphousness, while creatively pouring out new memories.

Performing Ed Koch in effigy, the mayor of *Shortbus* begins a thoughtful conversation with Ceth. They sit down on a sofa and, after a crackling overture of double entendres, the mayor begins to relate the story of his search for absolution. "New York is where everyone comes to be forgiven" (*Shortbus*), he affirms poignantly and supports his belief by the observation that "New Yorkers are permeable. Therefore, we're sane" (*Shortbus*). Despondently, however, he informs his young companion that "consequently, we're the target of the impermeable, and the insane" (*Shortbus*). Having been attacked fiercely in the course of his political life, the mayor had to realize that "home can be very unforgiving" (*Shortbus*). With a sometime cracking voice, he continues to recount the sad role he played during the peak of AIDS in New York in the 1980s. "People said that I didn't do enough to help prevent the AIDS crisis because I was in the closet" (*Shortbus*), the Koch effigy tells Ceth, and yet he insists, "that's not true. I did the best I could" (*Shortbus*). As the mayor confesses that he "was scared, and impermeable" (*Shortbus*), the film's lightning insinuates the

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[39] As I have already explained earlier, "surrogation" (Roach, 2) may be conceptualized as a process that involves cultural substitution through performance, and that makes transparent "how culture reproduces and re-creates itself" (Roach, 2).

American dimension of that impermeability, conveyed by, as Nick Davis argues, "the red, white, and blue spots that flood these shots of faux Koch speaking to Ceth" (630). With a concluding sigh of resignation, the Koch effigy finally admits that "everybody knew so little then. I know even less now" (*Shortbus*).

The mayor's remarkable evocation of AIDS acknowledges the cultural need to still remember the disease and its societal ramifications. His monologue seems particularly significant, since, as David Román points out in his *Performance in America*, "after the 1996 international AIDS conference in Vancouver" (49), a new discourse began to accompany the epidemic.[40] "There was", Román continues, "a great deal of talk in the United States about the end of AIDS, and much of it implied that the need to talk about AIDS had ended as well" (49). Analyzing the sudden ubiquity of "end-of-AIDS pronouncements" (56), Román observes a discourse that "seems to have rendered invisible the social, cultural, and medical problems that structured this moment in the late 1990s in AIDS history" (56). Confronted with the cultural obscuration of the epidemic, Román argues for renewed remembering, for a resumed valorization of AIDS memory, and for what Foucault would have called an "incitement to discourse" (*Sexuality*, 17). Román, who understands "memory as an active agent of creating meaning" ("Remembering", 283), calls for a revision of "the past so that we might generate both new understandings of what has transpired and what still yet needs to be done ("Remembering", 283). When the *Shortbus*-mayor begins to talk about AIDS, thus, he participates in that project, insistently reanimating a contagion that has been temporarily consigned to oblivion.

The conversation between Ceth and the mayor, despite its references to AIDS in the past tense, sets out to remember the disease, to rework mainstream AIDS knowledges, and to create alternative meaning in this process. When the mayor in effigy describes AIDS as a "crisis" (*Shortbus*), he is evoking a heavily ideological set of discourses that associates AIDS with queer negativity and its socially destructive, even lethal, powers. For Susan Sontag, whose influential *AIDS and Its Metaphors* supplies a succinct

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[40] Román, whose 1998 book *Acts of Intervention: Performance, Gay Culture, and AIDS* already investigated how AIDS has shaped public memory, devotes a whole chapter of his *Performance in America*, ironically entitled "Not about AIDS", to recent AIDS (non)-discourses.

account of the cultural symbolism that has surrounded the disease since the 1980s, "AIDS is understood in a premodern way, as a disease incurred by people both as individuals and as members of a 'risk group'" (134). AIDS, thus, "revives the archaic idea of a tainted community" (134), a group of people that consists, for Ed Koch, of the male homosexual population of New York. Craving for political success, necessarily, Koch painstakingly avoided any contact with such a *tainted community*, so as not to appear contaminated in any sense. Alluding to the "crisis" (*Shortbus*), the mayor of *Shortbus* brings to mind an ideology that regards AIDS as "a moral judgement on society" (Sontag, 148), and as a "visitation specially aimed at (and deservedly incurred by) Western homosexuals" (Sontag, 149).

For Joan Comaroff, the repercussions of AIDS are even more far-reaching, as she regards the disease inextricably linked with postmodernity. In a 2007 article for the journal *Public Culture*, Comaroff states that "AIDS also casts a premodern pall over the emancipated pleasures, the amoral, free-wheeling desires that animated advanced consumer societies" (197). Essentially recognizing the queerness of the postmodern condition, she realizes how AIDS, because of its queer negativity, interferes with the familial futurity of the American project. "If "family values" are the all-purpose glue meant to ensure social and moral reproduction under these conditions" (199), Comaroff argues, then "AIDS has been read as a quintessential sign of all that imperils a civilized future-in-the-world, an iconic social pathology" (199). When Koch the double is referring to the "crisis" (*Shortbus*), he conjures up the fatal ramifications of a queer negativity that has turned "the look into the future, which was once tied to a vision of linear progress […] into a vision of disaster (Sontag, 177).

For the "original"[41] Koch, any association with such discourses interfered with his political ambitions. The dilemma he was faced with is summed up very aptly in a play by Larry Kramer, vocal AIDS activist and playwright. In *The Normal Heart*, a character called Emma announces that New York has "a mayor who's a bachelor and I assume afraid of being

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[41] Roach is well aware of the illusions of originality, as he extensively quotes from Foucault's essay "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History", a text in which the French philosopher claims that "[w]hat is found at the historical beginning of things is not the inviolable identity of their origin; it is the dissension of other things. It is disparity" (142). When Roach talks about vacancies that may be filled by effigies, thus, he speaks of them as "actual or perceived" (2), calling attention to the socially constructed nature of any idea of origin.

perceived as too friendly to anyone gay. And who is also out to protect a billion-dollar-a-year tourist industry. He's not about to tell the world there's an epidemic menacing his city" (24). For Koch, the only viable strategy was silence, a disastrous speechlessness that only intensified the discursive explosion that equaled queer negativity and AIDS.

Through the body of his effigy, however, Ed Koch attempts to re-member and reassemble AIDS discourse. Entering negotiations with Ceth, certainly a member of the, to use a term as misleading as it is potentially dangerous, *post*-AIDS generation, the Koch double undertakes a creation of new meaning, new contemporaries, and new futurities. As the mayor finishes his remarks, which I have quoted extensively above, Ceth reaches over and briefly kisses him on the mouth, momentarily vindicating him of guilt and thereby altering AIDS memory. The ephemeral fleetingness of the kiss is then juxtaposed with scenes from an orgy in the nearby *Sex not Bombs*-room. This cinematic amalgamation creatively establishes a link between Koch's absolution from queer negativity and the joyful sexual acts next door. Sex and erotic pleasure, in *Shortbus*, are no longer regarded as unhealthy or detrimental, but as intensely pleasurable implements for the design and practice of community.

Still displaying the need to talk about AIDS, the film refuses to consign to oblivion the disease and the people still bearing its devastating consequences. What *Shortbus* chooses to forget, however, are the discursive clusters that have loaded AIDS with social negativity and queer destruction. In the moment of their kiss, Ceth and the faux mayor emerge as utopian contemporaries: They become cultural figures who actively use their immediate presence in the *Shortbus*-temporality to reimagine America and the AIDS epidemic that has ravaged it. Ed Koch's sins are kissed away in effigy, while queer sex is related to social positivity and community, not to destruction and death. Seizing the contemporary, Koch and Ceth gather new meaning, as they invent more inclusive understandings of citizenship, do away with queer negativity, and install a community of love, pleasure, and forgiveness.

The second contemporary I want to analyze is the moment of the blackout, a short-lived suspension of power that makes possible a

renegotiation of the public space that is New York. During the blackout, I will argue, utopian contemporaries fill the social interstices of American urbanity with alternative possibilities of life and kinship. As the blackout-moment concludes the film, I find it necessary to first survey the sociality of *Shortbus*, and the problems of community that affect the characters in the movie. A particularly striking example, the opening sequence of the film may work as an antithesis to the utopian convention during the blackout. By way of contrast, therefore, I want to juxtapose the first scenes of *Shortbus* with its conclusion, and concomitantly reveal the ways in which utopian contemporaries alter the film's sociotemporal scope.

At the outset of *Shortbus*, most of the film's characters lack in permeability, in a social openness that would enable them to bond satisfactorily with other people. Instead, they have opted for lives of solitary unease, for ridiculous attempts to achieve sexual pleasure, and for antisocial desires that destroy any sense of community and sustainability. As *Shortbus* opens, its characters contemplate their place in America. Nevertheless, they put themselves in opposition to futurity, sociality, and, most tragically, life itself.

The film starts with extreme close-ups of the hands and feet of a digitally animated Statue of Liberty, a symbolic figure located on the boundary of the American imagined community. Certainly a gatekeeper to America, the statue embodies the hopes and aspirations of millions of immigrants who have entered the nation and have subsequently contributed to its imaginings of citizenship. Just as the camera passes Lady Liberty's lips, jazz singer Anita O'Day, on the movie's soundtrack, begins to perform a song that, tongue-in-cheek, seems to reiterate the great question posed by the statue. To a smooth jazz accompaniment, she inquires, "Is you is, or is you ain't my baby?" (*Shortbus*). The query that opens *Shortbus*, thus, is one about citizenship and its exclusionary practices. Heavily loaded with national symbolism, the film ponders over whether the queer community of *Shortbus* may become a respected and indispensable part of America.

Slowly, and gently floating with the airy pulse of Anita O'Day's singing, the camera moves into the digital animation of New York City and begins to introduce the dramatis personae of *Shortbus*, wittily revealing character through sexual acts. First, the audience is acquainted with James

(Paul Dawson), who is sitting naked on the living room floor of his Brooklyn flat and is acrobatically contorting his body. James, it appears, is desperately trying to give himself a blowjob. The arduous curling makes, as reviewer Nathan Lee remarks, "a wonderfully blunt metaphor of self-involvement" (70) and solitariness. Indeed, when James finally orgasms, he immediately starts to cry, finding himself emotionally empty and, in the mayor's words, *impermeable*. As he will later tell an acquaintance, James sees love "all around" (*Shortbus*), yet he confesses, "it stops at my skin. I can't let it inside" (*Shortbus*). The antisocial dimensions of his auto-fellatio are increased by the fact that James has been staging this scene for a suicide tape. Recording himself on video, he is in the process of creating memory, a material trace to leave behind for his lover Jamie (PJ DeBoy). That same Jamie suddenly interrupts James's solitary sobbing as he enters the apartment and apologizes for being late. "Somebody threw themselves in front of the L train" (*Shortbus*), Jamie states and once more evokes the antisocial trope that will structure *Shortbus*. Swinging along with Anita O'Day's borderland song, queer negativity materializes in the body of James, who is suicidal and selfish. James, this introductory sequence seems to convey, represents a fatal detriment to the futurist regime, so vigilantly watched over by the Statue of Liberty.

James's sad blowjob is intercut with a sequence of scenes that presents dominatrix Severin,[42] a professional sex worker who is entertaining a client. In a high-rise building adjacent to New York's Ground Zero, the steady cracking of Severin's whip sexually arouses a young man. For the dominatrix, who lives in a cold and sterile basement, her desensitizing job "*is* real life" (*Shortbus*, emphasis in the original). Asked by the client about her "thoughts on procreation" (*Shortbus*), Severin insists, "I wanna do it by myself, in the dark, like a worm" (*Shortbus*). An egocentric threat to the futurist regime, Severin's anti-sociality mirrors that of James. Although they both feel the need to have, as Severin puts it, "a real human interaction sometimes" (*Shortbus*), they prove unable to commit emotionally and impede the utopian project of a queer community.

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[42] Severin is the name of the main character in Leopold von Sacher-Masoch's 1870 novella *Venus in Furs*, a book in which masochistic sexual fantasies are celebrated. The fact that von Sacher-Masoch's Severin is a man who derives pleasure from being treated degradingly, while the Severin of *Shortbus* is a female dominatrix, only adds to the film's queer playing with signifiers.

Still zigzagging over the digital replica of New York City, the camera finally settles down to the house of Sofia (Sook-Yin Lee) and Rob (Raphael Barker), a married couple that lives in a fashionable flat in midtown Manhattan, right next to Central Park. Sofia and Rob are having sex, and their attempts at lovemaking seem particularly acrobatic and inventive. Their spectacular contortions, however, turn out to be ridiculously meaningless attempts to connect with each other. Despite their numerous pathetic undertakings, Sofia has never had an orgasm with Rob; in fact, she has never had an orgasm at all. For Sofia, as she will tell a group of lesbians later, sex is "a great workout" (*Shortbus*), but, she has to admit, it sometimes "feels like [...] somebody is gonna kill me and I just have to, you know, smile and pretend to enjoy it, yeah, and that way I can survive" (*Shortbus*). Sofia and Rob's initial intercourse is symptomatic of Sofia's hopeless project to achieve an orgasm, by all means an innovative endeavor. Unable to be *permeated* emotionally, however, Sofia's sexual enterprise falls short of its audacious objectives. Instead, she partakes in the social negativity that surrounds the queerness of the film's characters. The sequence, framed with the *national* symbolism of the American imagined community highlights the queer inability to build sustainable relationships. At the outset of *Shortbus*, its main characters are solitary and emotionally reclusive, regrettably incapable of connecting with their urban contemporaries.

In the following, I want to contrast the apathetic opening of *Shortbus* with the final sequence of the film, which portrays a queer moment that allows utopian contemporaries to linger, and that is capable of transforming social negativity into an imaginative blueprint of community. Responding to the Statue of Liberty with the cheerful musical assertion that "we all get it in the end" (*Shortbus*), the representative characters of *Shortbus* creatively reassemble America in the moment of blackout. Performing acoustically in the candlelit *Shortbus*, mistress Justin Bond leads a string ensemble and a brass marching band in a final eruption of joy and community, an exuberant celebration that eventually relights even Lady Liberty's torch.

At a crucial point in the narrative, the social negativity of the characters escalates so rapidly that it causes an overload of negative feeling, a superabundance that is eventually literalized by an overload of New York's

electrical grid. The power outage leaves behind an empty city space, a precariously vulnerable tabula rasa from which new circuits of community and citizenship may emanate. The blackout moment in *Shortbus* is, as director John Cameron Mitchell points out in a comment I already quoted above, a direct reference to an actual power failure that affected New York City in the summer of 2003. On August 14, an outage "left 50 million people in eight states and Canada in the dark" (Belson and Wald, n.p.), and briefly altered the futurist economies of New York. In the momentary suspension of power, new and unforeseen forms of community erupted.

The *New York Times*, for instance, quotes one "Mr. Ruffalo, 33" (Kilgannon, n.p.), who seemed unusually happy about the interruption of his regular schedule. Relieved, Ruffalo "said that the power failure had prevented him from getting home to his wife and three children in Chester, N.Y." (Kilgannon, n.p.). For the overburdened father, "[i]t would be a welcome break from his paternal duties, his first in months" (Kilgannon, n.p.). Instead, Mr. Ruffalo participated in an alternative community that spontaneously formed in the amiable darkness of a bar, the "Limerick House on West 23rd Street" (Kilgannon, n.p.), where he spent the night drinking and socializing. Another imaginative urban congregation gathered on 47th street, where "[r]esidents of an apartment building […] brought a barbecue grill out to the sidewalk" (Kilgannon, n.p.). Adapting public space, the barbecue conceives of an unexpected form of communal interaction. "I've done a lot of things, but I've never barbecued on 47th street" (Kilgannon, n.p.), Peter Chernin, who enjoyed the scene, told the *New York Times*. The same article finally reports of a Gerard Dis, owner of a restaurant in the Hell's Kitchen district, who "was letting his customers run bar tabs and pay by I.O.U." (Kilgannon, n.p.). As becomes evident, the blackout temporarily revised the conventional economies of New York, and briefly troubled the social, financial, and futurist imperatives of the city. The powerless moment, it seems, revealed interstices in the urban fabric in which new forms of belonging and citizenship could be rehearsed.

The finale of *Shortbus* tries to capture, as Mitchell affirms, the "spirit of the blackout" (qtd. in Romano, 94). In the concluding sequence, this moment of queer possibility is reiterated, while the social negativity that has accumulated throughout the movie is dispersed. When the lights go out in

Shortbus, all cast members assemble in the Brooklyn sex club for one last time. Justin Bond has already lit the house with candles, and gleefully welcomes his community with the calm and soothing sounds of a small and improvised string orchestra. In the warm glimmer of myriad candles, Bond begins his peaceful chant. "We all bear the scars [and] we all feign a laugh" (*Shortbus*), he intones, as the club is gradually filling with visitors. As the song progresses, more and more people revel in the gentle atmosphere of the *Shortbus*, and when Bond finally sings that "we all get it in the end" (*Shortbus*), the utopian powers of the contemporary begin to work.

Slowly, and without any signs of hurry, the *Shortbus* community turns to one another. Lovingly, they start to touch, hug, embrace, and kiss. Consciously ignoring the heteronormative directives regarding gender or sexual orientation, the people of *Shortbus* show their all-embracing love without restrictions. Jamie, who has luckily survived his suicide attempt, is reunited with James, and they kiss passionately; Ceth finds a momentary partner in Caleb (Peter Stickles), the man who saved James's life, and they also start to caress each other; Severin, although sitting alone, seems to enjoy the delightful company as well; Justin Bond, despite being preoccupied with singing, finds time to lasciviously lick the mayor's face; and Sofia, eventually, becomes intimate with the particular heterosexual couple she has envied throughout the film.

For a last merry-go-round, the musicians of the Hungry March Band suddenly enter the *Shortbus*, repeating the chorus of Justin Bond's song, providing the *portable soundtrack* for the utopian gathering, and luring everyone into an exuberant celebration of community. In the hopeful buzz of music, dance, and love, Sofia finally achieves an orgasm, and, in the end, it is the orgasmic energy of all her utopian contemporaries that brings back electricity to New York. Reveling in their queer moment, the community of *Shortbus* fills the blank spaces of the darkened city with a new understanding of kinship and citizenship. Materializing as utopian contemporaries, Sofia, Severin, James, Jamie, Ceth, Justin Bond, the mayor in effigy, and many others anticipate the utopian promise of a queer family, a non-heteronormative mode of belonging that is imaginative, multiple, and permeable. Their momentary gathering extends no promise of posterity or futurity, yet not because it is imbued with social negativity, but by reason of

its queer insistence that the future may already commence in the here and now.

When the lights go back on in New York City, *Shortbus* has literalized my theoretical claims of the creative energy of utopian contemporaries. In the previous chapters, I have set out to theorize and explore these remarkable cultural figures, representative characters that dare to challenge the heteronormative futurism of the American imagined community. Drawing their imaginative powers from the immediacy of the moment, the utopian contemporaries of this thesis have shed a particularly bright light on America, a colorful luminosity that makes visible novel, and alternative, patterns of sexuality, kinship, and citizenship in the nation. In this last chapter, I have illuminated two utopian moments in which America has been reimagined, that of a kiss and that of a blackout. Celebrating their joyful nowness, however, the utopian contemporaries of *Shortbus*, just like their counterparts in *The Laramie Project* and *Broke Trek*, refuse to act socially destructive, and form new anatomies of social belonging instead.

CONCLUSION

"Life goes on" (*Wedding*), George (Rupert Everett) tells Julianne, or Jules, as she is usually called, at the end of the 1997 box office hit *My Best Friend's Wedding*. For almost two hours, P. J. Hogan's film has chronicled the futile attempts of Julianne (Julia Roberts) to get back her former boyfriend Michael (Dermot Mulroney). Eventually, all of Jules's schemes have proved unsuccessful: Michael has married the girlish and overemotional Kimmy (Cameron Diaz), and both have already departed for their honeymoon, leaving behind the dispirited Julianne at the wedding reception. A melancholy bridesmaid in a beautiful lavender dress, Jules is surprised by the appearance of George, her gay editor and mentor, who has come to the party in order to brighten up her spirits. Asking her to dance, George immediately manages to enchant Jules, and to provide the film with a lovely and cheerful ending. "Maybe there won't be marriage, maybe there won't be

sex" (*Wedding*), he claims as he twirls Julianne across the dance floor, "but by God, there'll be dancing" (*Wedding*).

"The beautiful heroine doesn't get her man; she gets a dance with her gay male editor. *That*", philosopher Susan Bordo puzzles, "was the happy ending of one of 1997's biggest hits" (160, emphasis in the original). And indeed, in the concluding rationale of the film, the momentary pleasure George and Jules derive from a dance, the ephemeral and temporary movement of their bodies in space, seems to outweigh the promises of marriage, and consequently, of posterity. As utopian contemporaries, Julianne and George dance away the reproductive politics of the futurist regime and concomitantly imagine new forms of social belonging. Their bond endures, the film seems to suggest, and although their communion is confirmed in the fleeting contemporary of a dance, their anticipation of futures in the present is depicted as a vital enrichment of sociality in America.

I want to conclude my thesis with the image of this queer wedding dance. An archetypal ritual of the futurist regime and its promises of posterity, the wedding dance sums up the expansionist and reproductive politics of the American imagined community. And yet, George and Julianne's dance is different. They derive the greatest pleasure from its immediacy, not from the futurity it entails. Whirling around, they seize the moment to dismiss all negativity and celebrate *their* form of kinship, a social bond between a heterosexual woman and a gay man that is viable, imaginative, and worthwhile.

While Julianne and George are anticipating a utopian imagined community in which queer lives and relationships have access to discursive existence, I want, for a final encore, to assemble at the analytical dance floor of this thesis the utopian contemporaries I have dealt with in my study. They all have engaged the queer temporality of the now, and they all have repudiated social negativity in order to imagine a more inclusive and pluralist social. They all have remembered America differently, and they all have supplied more humanist contributions to current debates around American citizenship and social belonging.

In Washington, D.C., Melissa Etheridge and her audience have created a musical moment that relentlessly perpetuates a message of love, and that

confines the anti-gay murder of Matthew Shepard to oblivion. In Laramie, Wyoming, and on theatrical stages across the nation, Jedadiah Schultz has used the contemporary originated through his performance in *Angels in America* to reflect on his understanding of the American imagined community. Inspired by the queer moment, he ultimately comes up with a more imaginative conception of kinship and sociality. Likewise, Romaine Patterson has reveled in the nowness of a street demonstration in order to substitute the homophobic vilifications of the religious fanatic Fred Phelps with an idea of community that provides plenty of living space for an openly gay man. Dennis Shepard, finally, has dramatically reinterpreted the moment of his gay son's death and has given his perpetrator Aaron McKinney the utopian prospect of life while at the same time upholding the living memory of Matthew.

Inhabiting the fluid landscapes of cyberspace, Captain Kirk and Mr. Spock have expanded a different frontier: In the momentary presence of the *YouTube* video *Broke Trek*, they have divested the representation of gay men in *Brokeback Mountain* of its social negativity and fashioned a novel, more *transcending* understanding of community in America. And in the retarded temporal space of the *Shortbus*, eventually, a multifaceted community of New Yorkers has inhabited the powerless present generated by a blackout in order to remember the nation differently, and to celebrate a utopian community that is more inclusive, more caring, and more imaginative. They all symbolically join Julianne and George in their joyful wedding dance, as they all invest the fleeting contemporary with the creative and innovatory powers of queerness. As they dance, they reassemble America, and opt for new, and more hopeful ways of representing sociality.

In this thesis, I have attempted to develop an analytical framework that enables us, as American cultural studies scholars, to represent America differently, and perhaps, more accurately. Through my quest for utopian contemporaries, cultural figures that celebrate their nowness and reclaim a more humanist imagined community, I have vigorously participated in the endeavor to define and delineate America. I have taken my theoretical stimuli from queer theory and performance studies, as I strongly believe that these systems of knowledge can speak to each other profitably. With a

little help from performance theory, I have modified the so-called *antisocial thesis* in queer theory, a set of beliefs that associates queerness with the destruction of a social contingent on longevity and posterity, and entrusts it with *no future*.

Taking a vital incentive from performance studies, then, *Utopian Contemporaries: Queer Temporality and America* has affirmed the creative and only seemingly futureless powers of the moment, a liminal temporality in which monumental processes of cultural substitution may happen. My thesis has every confidence in the culturally revitalizing capacities of the queer present, and imagines a community that cordially welcomes more imaginative forms of being and belonging. This study, both theoretically and analytically, has made an effort to join together queer temporality and America, to fuse the fleeting but powerfully immediate moment with the futurist regime, and to make clear that a more hopeful, more multiplicative and more inclusive vision of America must necessarily start in the queerest of times: NOW.

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ABSTRACT

My thesis may serve as a queer pamphlet about the present. Renouncing the "reproductive futurism" (Lee Edelman) that dominates so much of "American" discourse, I propose an alternative framework for the study of American culture. *Utopian Contemporaries* emphasizes the critical temporality of the queer now and analyzes its cultural potential to manifest alternative economies of memory and forgetting. In my argument, I hold that the seemingly futureless present may function as a performative rehearsal space to prepare and eventually communicate a new utopian social. I make the case that only the queer temporality of the moment can help renegotiate our understanding of community and sociality in America. Recognizing utopian contemporaries as representative characters, the formerly heteronormative lines of belonging, kinship, and citizenship must be redrawn as a consequence.

My analysis focuses on three "moments" of cultural representation in the United States that have taken place within the last decade. I investigate the utopianism in Moisés Kaufman's play *The Laramie Project* (2000), a documentary answer to the Matthew Shepard murder that is still sparking debates in theatrical venues all over the country. My second moment is happening on the Internet platform *YouTube*, where the streaming utopian vision of "Broke Trek" (2007) conflates the futurism of *Star Trek* with the queer negativity of the political prosthesis *Brokeback Mountain*. Finally, I state that the "retarded" sexualities displayed in John Cameron Mitchell's *Shortbus* (2006) exorcize the deadly specter of AIDS and, in the moment of a blackout, install a hopeful plurality of human relationships in America.

ZUSAMMENFASSUNG

Meine Diplomarbeit entwickelt einen epistemologischen Rahmen, der den doppelten Wortsinn von *contemporary* als Grundlage für ein kombiniertes Verständnis von Zeitvorstellung und sozialem Miteinander nimmt, und der die *queer temporality* des Augenblicks ins Zentrum unseres Begreifens von Partnerschaft, Beziehung, Gemeinschaft und gesellschaftlichem Zusammenhalt stellt. Meine Arbeit fokussiert die Linse, durch die US-amerikanische kulturelle Repräsentationen betrachtet werden können, auf *utopian contemporaries*, und schärft dadurch den Blick auf eine Zeitebene, in der queere Partnerschaften und Lebensgemeinschaften eher als Bereicherung denn als Hindernis auf dem Weg zur *Zukunft eines Landes* verstanden werden. Die Gegenwart wird damit als ein nur temporär existierender Zwischenraum verstanden, der trotzdem den *Vorschein* einer hoffnungsvollen und weitherzigen Zukunft in sich trägt und damit die Gelegenheit zur Neuerfindung von gesellschaftlichen Strukturen gibt.

Meine Analyse beschäftigt sich mit drei „Momenten" kultureller Repräsentation in den Vereinigten Staaten. Alle drei Beispiele stammen aus dem vergangenen Jahrzehnt und setzen sich mit aktuellen Debatten rund um *queer citizenship* in „Amerika" auseinander. Ich betrachte zuerst Moisés Kaufmans Theaterstück *The Laramie Project* (2000), eine zuversichtliche dramatische Antwort auf den Mord des schwulen Studenten Matthew Shepard. Mein zweiter Moment findet auf der Internetplattform *YouTube* statt, wo in *Broke Trek* (2007) eine Verknüpfung der kulturellen Logik von *Star Trek* und *Brokeback Mountain* passiert. Schließlich analysiere ich John Cameron Mitchells Film *Shortbus* (2006), wo zu einer Neuverhandlung von AIDS angesetzt wird, und im finalen Moment des Stromausfalls schließlich die hoffnungsvolle Vielfalt von Sexualität und Gemeinschaft zelebriert wird.

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