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Theorizing Queer Temporalities: A Roundtable Discussion

Carolyn Dinshaw, Lee Edelman, Roderick A. Ferguson, Carla Freccero, Elizabeth Freeman, Judith Halberstam, Annamarie Jagose, Christopher S. Nealon, Tan Hoang Nguyen

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

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*Carolyn Dinshaw (bio), Lee Edelman (bio), Roderick A. Ferguson (bio),
Carla Freccero (bio), Elizabeth Freeman (bio), Judith Halberstam (bio),
Annamarie Jagose (bio), Christopher Nealon (bio), and Nguyen Tan*

This roundtable took place via e-mail in March, April, and May of 2006. Participants wrote in clusters of three, sending their remarks back to me to be collated and sent on to the next cluster for a total of three rounds of comments. I edited the results for continuity, occasionally shifting a remark to an "earlier" or "later" place in the conversation, cutting digressions, or adding transitions. Thus the temporality, polyvocality, and virtual space of this production are quite different than a real-time, face-to-face roundtable would have been: perhaps this is fitting for a special issue on queer temporalities. My deepest gratitude goes to all the scholars and critics who participated and to J. Samaine Lockwood and Kara Thompson for copyediting assistance. — Elizabeth Freeman

Elizabeth Freeman: To begin with, I'd like to ask how and why the rubric of temporality (however you understand that) became important to your thinking as a queer theorist. What scholarly, activist, personal, political, or other concerns motivated the turn toward time for you? What does this turn seem to open up conceptually, institutionally, politically, or otherwise? Does it threaten to limit or shut down particular kinds of analysis or possibilities for social change?

* * *

Carolyn Dinshaw: Working primarily on a period in the distant past—the Middle Ages—I have been concerned since day one of graduate school with the relationship of past to present. "Obsessed" is more like it, really: I felt caught between the **[End Page 177]** scholarly imperative, especially keen at Princeton, to view the past as other and my sense that present concerns could usefully illuminate the past for us now. My dissertation was basically an agon played out between these two positions; by the time of my first book I had developed a moderate

historicist view of the past that allowed for connections with the present via discursive traditions like gender. But I had also stowed away, not just as scholarly resource but also as token of affirmation and desire, Boswell's *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality*, which I—a lesbian graduate student in that desert of normativity, Princeton—had bought as soon as it came out.

Getting Medieval: Sexualities and Communities, Pre- and Postmodern (Duke University Press, 1999), was my attempt to deal directly with such desire—a queer desire for history. I was again trying to negotiate between alteritists (social constructionists) and those who appealed to transhistorical constants of some sort (essentialists), but this time in my analyses I found that even Foucault, the inspiration of social constructionists, connected affectively with the past. I focused on the possibility of touching across time, collapsing time through affective contact between marginalized people now and then, and I suggested that with such queer historical touches we could form communities across time.

This refusal of linear historicism has freed me to think further about multiple temporalities in the present. Postcolonial historians have been most influential in this process, and the turn toward temporality has been thrilling: it opens the way for other modes of consciousness to be considered seriously—those of ghosts, for example, and mystics. But the condition of heterogeneous temporalities can be exploited for destruction as well as expansion: Ernst Bloch recounts chillingly the Nazis' deployment of temporal asynchrony in recruiting Germans who felt backward in the face of an alien modernity.¹ So we must take seriously temporality's tremendous social and political force.

* * *

Christopher Nealon: My book is Foundlings: Lesbian and Gay Historical Emotion before Stonewall (Duke University Press, 2001). I came to graduate school at Cornell in the early 1990s, the moment of the rise of queer theory in the academy. I'd been working as a reporter at *Gay*

Community News, in Boston, where I'd been writing about what turned out to be the heyday of ACT UP's activism; this kept in my mind the idea that the "subjecthood" of social movements was at least as interesting as the vicissitudes of the individual, not...

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2715 North Charles Street
Baltimore, Maryland, USA 21218
[+1 \(410\) 516-6989](tel:+14105166989)
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