

Response: Queering Time

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There was an extraordinarily strong throughline to the papers at the 2017 NAVSA Conference in Banff. Perhaps it was due partly to the conference theme, “Victorian Preserves,” partly to the breathtaking natural setting, and partly to our political moment that many of the presentations clustered around environmental and ecocritical themes. This striking thematic coherence made the job of a “NAVSA scout” with ecocritical interests both easy and difficult: easy in the sense that one could almost choose three papers at random and make a strong case for their interconnection, and difficult in the sense that it was very hard to choose from among the many excellent presentations on offer.¹ In the end I selected the three papers in this cluster particularly because of the ways they speak to each other about a topic that has become of central interest to environmentalist criticism: the problem of futurity.

While Fredric Jameson may be right that “Time and Space are at war in a Homeric combat,” for literary critics it’s hardly a fair fight (698). Every few years literature scholars are exhorted to execute a dialectical do-si-do and supplement their predominant way of reading with the putatively missing term: to reinvigorate their work with fresh approaches drawn from, for example, the study of geography, architecture, urban landscapes, and domestic interiors, or from the study of factory time, geological history, evolutionary biology, or classic narratological theory. Yet as that theory—from the Russian formalists to the work of Gérard Genette and Paul Ricoeur—has long shown, narrative is

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fundamentally structured by time, is inherently a chronological, not a spatial, phenomenon. For Ricoeur, for example, “time becomes human time to the extent that it is organized after the manner of a narrative; narrative, in turn, is meaningful to the extent that it portrays the features of temporal experience” (3). While Jameson may have announced the “end of temporality” back in 2003, he did so by way of lamenting the eclipsing of literature by other art forms: “the rise of the intellectual stock of architecture accompanied the decline of *belles lettres* like a lengthening shadow” (696). But in the realm of the literary, space doesn’t stand a chance.

It is with some ambivalence, then, that I ask the readers of this cluster of papers to attend to questions of temporality before the most recent spatial turn has even completed its circuit around the dance floor. But Time, for better or worse, has bullied its way back into the spotlight—thanks in part to the efflorescence of ecocriticism, whose political project is both urgent and time-bound (from the vast temporal scales of geological change to the focus on our collective dys/utopian future as a planet), and in part to the extraordinary richness of the recent “temporal turn” in queer theory (particularly the work of Lee Edelman, Valerie Rohy, Jose Muñoz, Claire Colebrook, and Elizabeth Freeman). Two strains of this latter turn are particularly salient to the papers gathered here: the well-established interrogation of reproductive futurity and the more recent critique, from a queer perspective, of the regimentation of time under modernity. Dana Luciano has termed “chronobiopolitics” (9) the orchestrations of time through which people come to feel part of a collective, and Elizabeth Freeman has coined the term “chrononormativity” to refer to “the use of time to organize individual human bodies toward maximum productivity” (3). While only two of the three papers in this cluster are explicitly about queerness, and only one is about ecocriticism in a narrow sense, all three papers take fresh, surprising, and generative looks at the phenomenal and phenomenological category of time in ways that I think ultimately bear on ecocritical concerns, and thus pull together a significant thematic sub-thread of an already beautifully coherent conference.

In her paper, “Saving Time: Nineteenth-Century Time Travel and the Temporal Logic of Late Capitalism,” Sarah C. Alexander examines late-Victorian time travel narratives that describe temporal paradoxes, wherein a character travels to the past and alters events in a way that then affects the past, present, and future. Alexander focuses on the 1891 novel *Tourmalin’s Time Cheques* by F. Anstey, one of the first narratives to describe such a paradox—but what is particularly fascinating about this text is the way that it “associates time travel with interest-bearing capital” (209). The protagonist of the novel learns that

the time he “gains” when crossing the International Date Line on his travels between England and Australia can be deposited in a Time Bank, where it will earn compound interest. When he withdraws his extra time, he travels to the past—but because he writes his time-cheques out of order, he returns to different chronological moments, thereby confusing his personal timeline and creating a temporal paradox wherein he prevents his future marriage.

Alexander persuasively argues that Anstey, and other late-Victorian time travel novelists, “used temporal paradoxes to affirm anachronistic thinking as a countermeasure to capitalist temporality” (209). In doing so, she takes aim at the standard Marxian narrative that late capitalism is uniquely characterized both by radical abstraction—represented by the derivative and similar speculative financial instruments—and, somewhat paradoxically, by a sense of perpetual present. As Alexander claims, the narratives she examines here belie the notion that such features are recent phenomena: speculative financial instruments that traded in futurity were familiar enough to the late Victorians to spawn satirical takes in the form of time travel narratives. More importantly, as she notes, “while time travel seeks origins (and reveals the impossibility of recovering origins), capital intimates a concealed origin and creates a logic of self-generation”; the time travel narrative “exposes the way in which capital produces longing for origins” (214).

While Alexander does not do so explicitly, one might read *Tourmalin’s Time Cheques* as engaging in a queering of time, in the sense described by Freeman in *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories* (2010). The protagonist’s attempt to gain extra time is born of the logic of speculative capitalism, but his desire to spend it is born of his desire to escape the stultifying boredom of domesticity. His contravention of the strictures of chrononormativity is depicted as a contravention of chronology itself; his time travel quite literally undoes the hetero-reproductive romantic plot—his shenanigans result in his bigamous involvement with two women simultaneously—and thereby exposes not only a longing for origins but also a longing for an escape from history.

Thomas M. Stuart’s paper, “Out of Time: Queer Temporality and Eugenic Monstrosity,” makes the queer potential of anti-chronology more explicit. He examines the topos of stopped time in two late-Victorian Gothic narratives, Richard Marsh’s *The Beetle* and Bram Stoker’s *Dracula* (both published in 1897), and argues that the novels’ titular characters challenge the logic of reproductive futurity through their manipulations of time. Extending criticism of the novels that focuses on the queerness of the Beetle and the vampire, he argues that it is specifically their status as trans- that underwrites both their

supernatural abilities and, thus, their challenge to the hetero-reproductive marriage plot.

While criticism of both novels has extensively discussed the creatures' degeneracy, Stuart argues persuasively that this reading is ultimately limited, and fails to capture important aspects of their relationship to futurity. The creatures are both clearly successful as predators, yet belong to genetic lines that thousands of years ago diverged from reproductively successful lineages. (Stuart does not mention this, but I would also point out the oddly low number of vampires in *Dracula*.) Both novels thus create a "Gothic temporality" that challenges the prevailing productive linearity of Victorian time: "Dracula and the Beetle stand apparently outside of such linearity—at once embattled vestiges of a deep past and terrifying forerunners of human obsolescence—not monsters of degeneracy, but rather of stopped time, their existence emphasizing humanity's failure to progress in evolutionary competition" (223).

As Stuart argues, in the logic of these novels, to be transgender is to be transtemporal: "within a eugenic context the uncanny ability to metamorphose—to draw upon the defining characteristics of whatever gender, sex, or species may be advantageous—is to be freed from time" (223). Both creatures are outside of chronology in the sense that they do not progress, develop, or change; they do not evolve; and they reproduce only through a kind of sterile parthenogenesis: "the trans-coding of Dracula and the Beetle boldly repudiates the generational expectations of the heteronormative" (224). Stuart's analysis insightfully tethers the temporally disruptive force at the heart of both novels to the trans-character of their titular creatures, thereby extending the range of contexts in which we can locate Victorian queerings of the chrononormative.

Kathleen Frederickson's paper, "Queer Speciation: Or, Darwin On and Off the Farm," brings together the themes of reproduction and queer time in a more explicitly ecocritical context. Frederickson's starting point (well, her second starting point—after an eye-opening description of agricultural exceptions to U. S. anti-bestiality law) is an interrogation of Michel Foucault's famous dictum, in *The History of Sexuality, Volume I* (1980), that as of 1870, "the homosexual was now a species" (43). Frederickson takes the word "species" seriously, and thinks through the meanings of Foucault's pronouncement in the context of Darwinian theories of speciation and industrial agricultural practice.

Frederickson implies that a return to Foucault can help complicate and nuance recent queer theory about (anti)sociality since the species form has an "ambivalent relationship to futurity": "On the one hand, species invoke extinction-scapes. . . . On the other, the curious readings of Darwin in which

evolution looks like progress risk seeing species as future-oriented through development and increased complexity” (231). Darwin repeatedly invokes one queer result of artificial breeding, the sterile domesticate—what we might think of as the avatar of non-reproductive futurity. Returning to Darwin thus reminds us that speciation theory is deeply entangled with the history of domestication and agricultural breeding practice: reproduction is inseparable from production.

Yet Frederickson urges us not to over-read Darwin’s interest in the role of domestication: for her, queer speciation complicates pat distinctions between the wild and the domestic: “the industrial farm produces a domestication that is radically distinct from that associated with the home” (233). The farm becomes, then, one in a series of liminal spaces that are implicated in the creation of sexual types through such “eco-legal” practices as “zoning, density, noise complaints, rural/urban split, and gayborhoodification” (232).

Frederickson’s genealogy of the Foucaultian “species” by way of literal (re) production helps to complicate recent discussion of reproductive futurity in queer theory, and underscores the importance of that theory for ecocriticism more generally. Her analysis of queer sterility in Darwinian speciation theory also speaks to Stuart’s discussion of (the lack of) reproduction in *The Beetle* and *Dracula*. Both analyses push beyond the mere recognition that sterility is associated with degeneracy and queerness, and instead highlight the oddly generative possibilities of non-regeneration.

There has been a wealth of writing in recent years that seeks to complicate and nuance ecocriticism with insights drawn from queer theory; as Catriona Sandilands outlines in the entry for “Queer Ecology” in NYU’s Keywords for Environmental Studies series, these approaches attempt to “disrupt prevailing heterosexist discursive and institutional articulations of sexuality and nature, and also to reimagine evolutionary processes, ecological interactions, and environmental politics in light of queer theory” (n. p.). Yet the question of how (or why, or whether) to commingle queer theory and ecocriticism has become a more urgent concern for many theorists writing in the wake of Timothy Morton’s 2010 *PMLA* essay, “Queer Ecology.” While Greg Garrard, for example, thinks that queer theory needs ecocriticism in order to avoid theoretical bankruptcy and irrelevance, Jordy Rosenberg argues exactly the opposite, warning that certain versions of eco-theory are guilty of promulgating “a primitivist fantasy that hinges on the violent erasure of the social: the conjuring of a realm—an ‘ancestral realm’—that exists in the present, but in parallax to historical time” (n. p.). (In other words, ecocriticism needs queer theory much more than the other way around.)

One of the most pressing reasons for a new queer ecology is the need for new models of temporality in light of anthropogenic climate change, work that queer theorists have been doing for over a decade. The exigencies of the Anthropocene have required new ways of thinking critically about time—from deep time (Wai Chee Dimock) to slow violence (Rob Nixon) to the *longue durée* of geological epochs. As Dipesh Chakrabarty has noted, “the climate crisis . . . produces problems that we ponder on very different and incompatible scales of time” (3). Victorianist and Romanticist ecocritics, because of their training in the history of geological and evolutionary thought, have been particularly attuned to the vast time scales involved in conceptualizing the Anthropocene; as Benjamin Morgan recently noted, “climate change is now commonly understood as a Victorian problem” (610).

Because the nineteenth century witnessed both the emergence of the high realist novel and the intensification of industrial-colonial capitalism, it is tempting to read the former through the lens of the latter. Does the 200-year-old history of industrial growth and environmental degradation—with its beginning-middle-and-end structure of exploration, development, and exhaustion—constitute a narrative formation or chronotope? If so, from what vantage point? To what degree was there a (conscious or unconscious) understanding among Victorians about the ultimate exhaustibility of natural resources, and how did this understanding find its way into imaginative literature, and vice versa? Can we read a melancholic anxiety about planetary futurity in the Victorian fascination with time travel narratives (including, of course, the ending of H. G. Wells’s *The Time Machine* [1895]) and futuristic dystopian climate-disaster novels (for example, Richard Jefferies’s *After London or Wild England* [1885] and M. P. Shiel’s *The Purple Cloud* [1901])? Finally, how can the fruitful conversation about futurity, reproduction, utopia, kinship, and melancholy that has been taking place among queer theorists in the past decade complicate and enrich the ecocritical fascination with temporality? The three papers gathered here, I believe, can help us begin to think through these potential connections by complicating (and queering) our understanding of Victorian futurity.

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NOTES

1. I would like to mention several other stellar papers that I considered including in this cluster as well: Erica Kenesaka Kalnay’s “Beatrix Potter’s Mycological Aesthetics”; Katherine Magyarody’s “The ‘Natural’ Magic of Unwanted Children in *Silas Marner* and *The Secret Garden*”; and Daniel Williams’s “‘Down the Slant Towards the Eye’: Hopkins and Ecological Perception.”

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