SEXTANT
Sexualities, Masculinities & Decolonialities

Essay

SEXTANT–Sexualities, Masculinities & Decolonialities
Vol. 2(1) 109-116

Out of (Straight) Time: The Potentiality of Mythical Creatures in *Our Flag Means Death*

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Abstract

The television series *Our Flag Means Death* follows the story of the 'Gentleman Pirate' Stede Bonnet, who leaves his family to become a pirate alongside the infamous Blackbeard. Based on a true story, *Our Flag Means Death* aligns piracy and queerness as one and the same. This essay reads mythical creatures in *Our Flag Means Death* as embodying an alternate space/time that contests the Symbolic and charts a course toward a queer future. Using Lee Edelman's antisocial thesis (2004) in combination with José Esteban Muñoz's queer utopia (2009), this essay combines these seemingly incoherent frameworks to reveal the connection between Symbolic meaning and Straight Time. *Our Flag Means Death,* in rejecting Straight Time, also rejects a rigid adherence to Symbolic meaning to create an antisocial queer utopia.

Keywords: straight time; queer temporality; heteronormativity; utopia; antisocial queer theory

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SEXTANT: www.sextantnotes.com. ISSN: 2990-8124
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What if it's not a death? What if life just… begins again?
-Lucius Spriggs ("Wherever You Go, There You Are," 2022, *9:26)*

If you are like me, you think about gay pirates *constantly.* For me, at least, the reason for this is *Our Flag Means Death* (2022-2023)*,* an HBO Max television series whose two seasons tell the delightfully true(ish) story of Stede Bonnet, an 18th-century aristocrat who ran away from his wife and kids to become a pirate. At sea, Stede meets Ed 'Blackbeard' Teach and they fall in love. *Our Flag* presents queerness and piracy as synonymous; piracy, like queerness, contests heteronormative expectations by resisting assimilation into patriarchal and capitalist power structures. There are two distinct theoretical angles with which to read *Our Flag.* Theorist Lee Edelman (2004) offers a Lacanian read of the antisociality of queerness (piracy) as being that which figures death or anti-futurity. Conversely, José Esteban Muñoz argues that queerness is utopic, perhaps allowing for this historical fiction to orient itself toward the future. I read queerness in *Our Flag* as residing within the inconsistencies between these two theories, expanding the meaning(s) of queerness. The magical realism in *Our Flag* asserts itself against the linguistic and temporal structure that supplies heterosexuality with its meaning. Using both queer antisocial and utopian theories, I argue that mythical creatures in *Our Flag* engender transformation to create an alternate temporality that rejects Straight Time. *Our Flag's* alternate temporality destabilises Symbolic meaning itself to place queerness in a position of radical futurity.

Our Flag Means Death is antisocial in its figuration of queerness/piracy. True to the theoretical framework outlined in Lee Edelman's *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (2004), piracy (queerness) defines itself in connection with the lawlessness of the death drive. The connection between piracy and the death drive is best described by season two episode six, "Calypso's Birthday," when Stede becomes, in the parlance of the show, a 'real pirate'. This joyful and fabricated excuse for a party is disrupted by cannon fire, very reminiscent of violent attacks on queer nightclubs, such as the Orlando shooting. Into the scene walks another notorious pirate, Ned Low, who has arrived to torture the crew. But at a crucial moment, Low's crew abandon him and Stede steps in to make Low walk the plank. Low warns Stede, "You know, once you kill me, you are a real pirate" ("Calypso's Birthday," 2023, 21:48). Stede kills Low and, visibly shaken, retreats to his bedroom. Immediately, Ed goes to check on him, and that night Ed and Stede have sex for the first time. The next day, at the Republic of Pirates (which serves as the home base for seemingly all the pirates in this fictional Caribbean), Stede is suddenly famous. He is now a 'real pirate'. My question then is, do you become a 'real pirate' through murder or gay sex?

In this episode, Stede comes to mean pirate, as it were, but he comes to meaning through two things that Edelman (2004) says *cannot* have meaning: murder and nonreproductive sex. According to Edelman (2004), queerness, in its inability to reproduce, stands against the Symbolic meaning that creates the possibility of a future. Queerness along with death –its figural counterpart– cannot have meaning and, concurrently, cannot have a future. Yet in *Our Flag Means Death,* Stede is allowed to hold the meaning of 'pirate', or rather, queerness. In that case, is it possible for queerness to mean something? To offer up the title of the show itself, *Our Flag Means Death,* can our flag 'mean' death, if death cannot mean? More crucially, can meaning spring from queerness' nonmeaning to create a meaning outside of heterosexuality's web of meaning? Do we even need meaning in a utopia? What if a queer future becomes utopic when there is no meaning? Stede's designation as a 'real pirate' underscores how *Our Flag* challenges Symbolic meaning to create utopia.

In *Our Flag,* the normative heterosexual romance timeline–fall in love, get married, and have children–is supplanted by the following: fall in love, break up, become a mermaid to save the relationship, and then have sex for the first time after murdering someone. Ed and Stede's relationship resists assimilation into heteronormativity through their creation of an alternate timeline for themselves, opening up the possibility of a life outside of Straight Time. This alternate timeline is both antisocial and utopic, as a scene from "The Innkeeper" (season two, episode three) demonstrates. At the end of season one, Ed confesses his love to Stede, causing Stede to panic and run back to his wife and kids. Season two begins with Ed violently raiding a number of ships and then attempting to kill his crew by steering the ship into a storm. The crew retaliates and kills Ed, but instead of fully dying, he ends up on a cliffside beach that he learns is purgatory. In the liminal space of purgatory, Ed finds himself facing a literal choice between life and death. Ed makes the decision to die by falling off a cliff into the water, thinking no one will be there to save him. Despite Ed's insistence that no one loves him, someone *is* there to save him: Stede, who has returned in the form of a glittery mermaid. This is a turning point in the narrative, where Ed and Stede realise their love for each other and figure out how to have a life together. Mermaid Stede rescues Ed by pulling him back into the land of the living, ensuring that Ed's 'death' does not result in literal death.

From an Edelmanian (2004) perspective, Ed's violent death explores piracy/queerness in relation to the death drive. The drive, which heteronormativity must disavow in its effort to maintain the Symbolic,

stands for "the violent undoing of meaning, the loss of identity and coherence, [and] the unnatural access to jouissance" (Edelman, 2004, p. 132). When Ed falls off the cliff, he quite literally comes undone, which is visually shown by a rope coming undone from around his waist as he sinks further down into the ocean ("The Innkeeper," 2023, 29:39). When Stede leaves Ed to return to a future with his nuclear family, Ed remains in the position of anti-futurity, a place that can only be described as death. As Ed sorrowfully sings after Stede leaves him, "Life's a hard, sad death and then you're dead" ("Wherever You Go, There You Are," 2022, 12:30). The purgatory scene of Ed falling to his 'death' insists that there is 'no future' for queerness. The antisocial thesis asserts that Ed's death is a stance against heteronormativity's desire for a future.

Death and queerness are related through their inability to hold meaning within the Symbolic. Mermaid Stede may have saved Ed from death, but the camp aesthetic of the scene suggests that meaning has not been restored. The campiness of mermaid Stede does not assimilate into a larger system of meanings, reinforcing the position of nonmeaning in which Ed's "death" has placed him. Additionally, the hybridity of the mermaid signals nonmeaning in its resistance to singular classification; rather than being a human *or* a fish, the mermaid is a human *and* a fish. The camp practices from which this scene draws and the use of a hybrid creature as the alternative to death roots *Our Flag* firmly within an antisocial thesis in its commitment to reading queerness as nonmeaning.

In contrast to an antisocial read, the mermaid image disrupts a progression toward death to allow Ed the possibility of a future. To read queerness in conjunction with futurity, I turn to José Esteban Muñoz's *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (2009), which describes queerness as being 'not yet here', or rather, as being a gesture toward a future existence that has not yet been realised (p. 1). Muñoz argues that queerness offers a 'potentiality' that resides outside of Straight Time or the way the hetero-patriarchal system normalises time, restricting its subjects to the present (2009, p. 21-22). This 'potentiality' a keyword that I will be returning to throughout my analysis, becomes utopian in its performance of that which seemingly cannot exist within the restrictions of normativity. The real historical pirate Blackbeard upon which the character Ed is based died in 1718. Rather than following the historical timeline of Blackbeard's life and death, *Our Flag* rescues Ed via a 'potentiality' (the mermaid Stede). This 'potentiality' refutes Straight Time and allows for movement, as Muñoz (2009) describes, "beyond death as a finitude" (p. 149). The mermaid Stede refutes the past that condemns Ed to death, instead offering him the possibility of a new kind of future: a queer utopia.

If the mermaid scene is utopic, the camp aesthetic of the scene becomes a site of imagined futurity. In the introduction to *Novel Gazing: Queer Readings in Fiction* (1997)*,* Eve Sedgwick–notable queer theorist and mentor to Muñoz–writes of paranoid and reparative reading practices as they relate to camp. She notes that "the degree to which camping is motivated by love seems often to be understood mainly as the degree of its self-hating complicity with an oppressive status quo" (p. 27). However, viewing camp through the reparative does 'better justice' to the 'excess' that camp displays (p. 28). In other words, camp practices are reparative or utopian in how they move *beyond* what is currently here to an imaginary 'there'. The mythical creature version of Stede bypasses the reality of the present to imagine a queer utopia outside of Straight Time.

Our Flag resides in a liminal space of alternate temporality that complicates the substantiality of death's opposition to the future, placing queerness outside of Straight Time, not with death or even the future, but perhaps alongside it. To return to the end of season one, when Stede leaves Ed brokenhearted on their pirate ship *The Revenge,* Izzy–Ed's right-hand man as well as internalised homophobia personified–notices Ed beginning to embrace his own queerness*.* Izzy finds Ed walking around in Stede's floral dressing gown and remarks: "This, whatever you've become, is a fate worse than death" ("Wherever You Go, There You Are," 2022, 17:22). Izzy categorises Ed's identity as being 'worse than death', in other words, beyond hope, beyond a future. The word 'beyond' is key in this moment. Rather than being squarely aligned with death, as Edelman (2004) would have it, Ed is somewhere else. If, following Muñoz (2009), utopia is outside the boundaries of time, then being 'worse than death' can be both a sign of nonmeaning and a gesture toward an alternate temporality.

In a world that envisions queerness as the antithesis to the future (in that it is opposed to reproduction), *Our Flag's* anachronistic dialogue offers the 'potentiality' of a queer future. After the mermaid scene, Ed must assure the crew that he is no longer trying to kill them. Ed's apology speech immediately brings to mind a celebrity's apology after cancellation and, thus, does the work of bringing us into the present time while Ed is standing on an eighteenth-century ship wearing a jumper made of a burlap sack. With Stede's prompting, Ed promises:

> ED. This here is a ship and it's a space ship.
> STEDE. Safe space.
> ED. It's a safe space ship. ("The Curse of the Seafaring Life," 2023, 2:19)

Beyond the comedy of the line, this exchange manipulates language to position Ed, Stede, and the rest of the crew outside of time. It does this by taking the contemporary understanding of a 'safe space' and bringing it into the past to articulate an idea that is inarticulable at that moment in time; in doing so, a new meaning is created whereby 'safe space ship' becomes 'spaceship', a word that evokes the future. Language is bending time to allow the pirates to place themselves in a future that they can only access *through* logic that is created in the past ('ship') and the present ('safe space'). Muñoz (2009) argues that while heterosexuality creates a relationship to time such that the present is the only moment in which we can exist, queer visions of utopia work outside this strict adherence to the present tense: "This temporal calculus perform[s] and utilise[s] the past and the future as armaments to combat the devastating logic of the world of the here and now…a version of reality that naturalises cultural logics such as capitalism and heteronormativity" (p. 12). Linguistic temporal disruption problematises the linearity of past, present, and future. Temporal disruption through 'safe space ship' also disrupts the meaning that governs Straight Time, the meaning that–according to Edelman (2004)–would bar queerness from the future.

Movement outside of time allows for movement outside of symbolic meaning. In *Our Flag,* this temporal and linguistic movement is figured through mythical creatures. An example is the side character Buttons, who is revealed in the second season to be a sea witch (this is where the show goes full magical realist, so bear with me.) Buttons spends an entire episode looking for a vessel for his avian transmogrification spell because he is intent on turning into a seagull. At no point in Buttons' story arc does he have any interest in the Symbolic reality that dictates the impossibility of this plan. Edelman (2004) insists that queerness' "real strategic value lies in its resistance to a Symbolic reality that only ever invests us as subjects insofar as we invest ourselves in it, clinging to its governing fictions, its persistent sublimations, as reality itself" (p. 18). Buttons' resistance to Symbolic reality exposes the fantasy that the Symbolic relies upon. This lack of care for the meaning created by the social order is exemplified when Buttons' transmogrification spell really does work. Ed, speaking with the voice of Symbolic meaning, reminds Buttons that "people don't change. Not into birds or otherwise" ("Fun and Games," 2023, 27:19). Except, just at that moment, Buttons actually turns into a bird. This change from a pirate to a bird is utopian in and of itself because it is different from the expected outcome when living in a hetero-patriarchal system. In other words, the options set out by Straight Time are to die or bear children, yet Buttons creates a third option: become a bird. This sidestepping of the expected relationship to time is

also a contestation of the Symbolic itself. Transformation into a mythical creature rejects the understanding of time whereby reproduction or death are the only outcomes, allowing for movement outside of Symbolic reality.

The incoherence of the antisocial pirate (queer) with the utopic is precisely what *makes* it a valuable lens through which to view *Our Flag Means Death.* Muñoz (2009) explains that articulating utopia is a survival strategy for queer artists (and queer people in general). He insists, "to live inside Straight Time and ask for, desire, and imagine another time and place is to represent and perform a desire that is both utopian and queer" (p. 26). The anachronisms in *Our Flag* are not only a quirk of this silly pirate series but a manner of rejecting normative timelines to envision queerness within both the past and the future simultaneously. In her book *Tendencies* (1993)*,* Sedgwick posits that in homosexual reading, "we need for there to be sites where the meanings [don't] line up tidily with each other, and we learn to invest those sites with fascination and love" (p. 31). This understanding of how queerness practically functions, by embracing the chaos and inconsistencies in a world that stands for order and coherence, continues through *Our Flag Means Death.* Even as Edelman (2004) assures his readers that queerness is set squarely *against* the future, he creates a loophole that I believe both Muñoz (2009) and the writers of *Our Flag Means Death* utilise. Edelman (2004) writes that queerness refutes the fantasy of utopia and "would assert itself instead against futurity, against its propagation, insofar as it would designate an impasse in the passage to the future and, by doing so, would pass beyond, pass through, the saving fantasy futurity denotes" (p. 33). Having considered the incoherencies that arise when reading *Our Flag* as either antisocial or utopic, new questions emerge. If queerness can 'pass beyond' futurity, where exactly is the 'beyond' to which Edelman (2004) refers? Where does queerness go when it 'passes through' fantasy? This place, or rather non-place, is the place of utopia. It cannot be pinpointed, but based on *Our Flag Means Death,* I would guess it exists somewhere between the golden age of piracy, today, and someplace in the future.

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