

“I Am the Wild Machinist . . . Reconstructing the Present”:
The Flâneur-Cruiser in Samuel R. Delany’s *Dhalgren*

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ABSTRACT

“I Am the Wild Machinist, Reconstructing the Present”: The Flâneur-Cruiser in Samuel R. Delany’s *Dhalgren*

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This thesis aims to better understand queer theories of time and space in relation to the experiences of those who loiter, who lounge, who fuck against the rush of straight time and space. The project does so via an investigation of the related figures of the flâneur and the cruiser, considering what latent potentials they hold for queer futurity. This research examines these themes in the science fiction novel *Dhalgren* by Samuel R. Delany, as well as Delany’s autobiographical writings. I posit that, through a total rejection of straight and capitalist time, *Dhalgren*’s fictional city of Bellona and its residents effectively put into practice a queer world that theorists such as José Esteban Muñoz conceive as impossible in our own here and now. Moreover, by way of this imaginative turn, Delany crystalizes a clear image of the world that cruisers and flâneurs alike are striving towards – a world where all are free to wander idly and to desire publicly without legal or moral consequence.

KEYWORDS: cruising, flâneur, queer time, science-fiction, *Dhalgren*.

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This research could not have been undertaken if it were not for my supervisor, Jesse Arseneault, who has been supporting me and encouraging me throughout most of my tumultuous university experience. It is no secret that academia is, at best, ignorant of and, at worst, hostile to the needs of marginalized students: as a Syrian, refugee, disabled, transsexual and gay student, I have experienced, and continue to experience, this ignorance and hostility firsthand. Professor Arseneault, however, has consistently worked to uplift and assist me as I have ultimately worked towards this research — it is, in large part, because of him that I have been able to create of this research what I need to, without compromise.

I acknowledge, too, the support and contributions of my close friends and peers, namely Nahrin, Naja, and Rex: our conversations, our friendships, and our collaborations are scattered throughout this project and have helped to fuel my own hope in a queered future.

DEDICATIONS

Above all, this work is dedicated to the cruisers, the faggots, the لواط, the flâneurs, the dandies, the pigs, the barebackers, the cum dumps, the deviant and inappropriate maximalists and freaks who take after my own heart, and who embody queer futurity in their own inarticulable ways.

A NOTE:

When I first read *Dhalgren*, it took me a year to finish: I read it only late at night, and only on public transport when I was on my way home. At the time, I lived with my family and it took me at least an hour and a half to get to and from the city. My living situation was not conducive to my personal growth or health: without getting into too much detail, my family is not accepting of who I am in a lot of different ways. So, every time I took the long trip back home – usually from the warm and comforting spaces of my friends’ homes –, I was teeming with dread and anxiety about where I was returning to, and where I would be returning to every night for the foreseeable future. That is why I saved reading *Dhalgren* for those trips alone: I needed the openly messy, queer, freaky world of the novel in those moments most of all. At the time, I thought of it as an escape – now, as I write from a safe home that I have made fully mine, I realize this novel provided me with the fluid, sticky, unashamed structure which I did not know I have always needed for my life.

I mention this as a means of explaining the following request I make of you, the reader: please read this paper in public where you are surrounded by motion, preferably on public transport. *Dhalgren*, as a novel, will always keep you moving within its pages; a movement that is rarely ever clear or linear. Reading *Dhalgren*, the orange line of the STM metro became infinite; I delayed the unfortunate reality of my life and, instead, indulged in a city (un)defined by queer time. Thus, Bellona as queered city helped pave the way for me towards an unrelenting embrace of who I am and of the sublime incoherence of living, towards medical transition and surgeries, towards cultivating my own families and my own home, towards reveling in the unexplainable and slippery rhythms that I did not even know I could live by.

I want you to rewrite the world around you in this queer way. I want you to live – even if only while reading this paper – according to rhythms other than the ones imposed upon us in this world: rhythms other than those of work, respectability, metro schedules, linearity, expectation, coherence. I want you to engage in flânerie.

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No matter what boundaries I had crossed, desire ... might still erupt anywhere, to create new silences, new divisions, between the speakable and the unspeakable, the articulate and the inarticulate.

- Samuel R. Delany, *The Motion of Light in Water*

The cruiser and the flâneur are both figures characterized by appetites and curiosities played out in public, in different ways. The cruiser is, historically, a queer man who seeks out other queer men to have sex with in public spaces such as secluded alleys, darkened corners of parks, bathroom stalls, porn theaters, and abandoned industrial buildings and docks; the flâneur is a loitering observer who situates themselves in modern, urban cities, where they can better bear witness to its people and its streets. Beyond their shared environments, I argue that the flâneur and the cruiser both take on practices that defy and queer normative understandings and experiences of time and place, and that they are similarly based in an understanding of and appreciation for all that is evanescent.

Drawing on queer theories of time and place, I link these two practices and look at how they are enacted in Samuel R. Delany’s science-fiction novel, *Dhalgren*, and his autobiographical reflections on cruising. The novel tells of an excursion into a previously metropolitan city, Bellona – now destroyed by some unknown, catastrophic event – by the protagonist, Kid, a name he is given by the city’s residents, on account of not remembering his own name. The plot of the novel is non-linear and unconventional: it focuses on his observations of and experiences moving through the city and encountering its (sometimes odd) residents, which makes him comparable to the flâneur. Unlike figurations of the flâneur and flânerie by writers such as Charles Baudelaire and Walter Benjamin (which feature little queerness or sexuality), the experiences of Bellona's

residents and of Delany's are steeped in sex and explicit queerness, and this is why the cruiser figure is of particular importance for understanding these works. I will consider how the science fiction genre and the unconventional form of the novel – the text is circular rather than linear; the perspective is multistable rather than singularly focused; the language is often in disarray – further attest to the destabilization of time and space carried out by both cruising and flânerie.

This destabilization is important to a queer politics that hopes to disorient normative (capitalist, straight) notions of time and space: queer theorist Jose Estaban Muñoz's work on queer futurity and Marxist theorist Henri Lefebvre's work on everyday life will be particularly helpful in understanding how capitalism and heteronormativity regulate our spatial and temporal experiences through straight time, nine-to-five work days, and the policing of public space. As a science fiction novel situated in queered spatiotemporality, *Dhalgren* offers ways to consider how sexuality interacts with time and space by imagining a city that has wholly deviated from normative time. The time and space of Bellona thus runs contrary to our current quotidian reality in which queer experience is frequently only possible from the vantage of isolated and temporary spaces within a larger, normative city. I posit that Bellona, as a queered city, influences not only the individual sexuality of each inhabitant, but also reflects on the predominant structures that traditionally govern public and private behaviors, and that, thus, determine who is and is not allowed citizenship and belonging within broader normative socialities. For this analysis, the figure of the cruiser—as represented by Delany's own cruising experiences and research dictated in *Times Square Red*, *Times Square Blue* and in *The Motion of Light in Water*—is of particular significance, as it provides an apt historical comparison for understanding the behaviors and status of those in the fictional city.

Firstly, I want to establish a foundational understanding for both cruising and flânerie, emphasizing the parallels between them in terms of how they navigate urban time and space. In his essay “The Painter of Modern Life”, Charles Baudelaire inaugurates the figure of the flâneur:

His passion, and profession, is to *espouse the crowd*. For the perfect *flâneur* (*saunterer*), for the passionate observer, it is an immense joy to take up one’s dwelling among the multitude, ... to view the world, to be at the heart of the world, and yet hidden from the world, such are some of the least pleasures of those independent spirits, passionate and impartial, that language can only inadequately define. ... He is an ‘I’, insatiable in his appetite for the ‘not-I’, who at every instance renders it, and expresses it in images more vibrant than life itself, which is forever unstable and fugitive. (9-10)

Baudelaire’s description lays down a foundation for the flâneur as a person characterized by an immense sense of curiosity, a desire to stroll and to observe, and who perpetually seeks out transitory images and experiences.¹ The flâneur, for Baudelaire, is primarily located in the industrialized, European city, marking them as a figure fascinated by the modern notion of the crowd, one searching for themselves – the individualized Self being a modern, evolving concept – and for what is outside of themselves in a changing world. In being an “I” seeking out the “not-I”, the flâneur yearns for intersubjectivity, for looking beyond the temporality of their present self and toward the potentiality of interaction with that which is in their midst.

As for cruising, the cruiser is a queer man who intentionally seeks out other queer men with whom to have (often anonymous) sex in certain public spaces, often abandoned or empty spaces, spaces within the margins. The margins are necessary because queer men who engage in

¹ While Baudelaire and many other writers refer to the flâneur only as a man, the flânerie practice has found a home beyond these gender restrictions amongst more contemporary writers. Some examples: Lauren Elkin’s *Flâneuse*; Dianne Chisholm’s *Queer Constellations*; and Sally Munt’s *Heroic Desire*. Although quotes used throughout this paper will often use male pronouns to refer to the flâneur, I will be using gender-neutral pronouns.

cruising have historically been, and continue to be, subject to police violence and arrests, and their spaces subject to shutdowns, increased surveillance, and gentrification.² In his book *Cruising: An Intimate History of a Radical Pastime*, Alex Espinoza writes on his cruising experiences saying,

Nobody wanted or needed me the way men in the restrooms, parks, and back alleys did. ... These unmapped geographies became my domain, my territory, the places I turned to at the low points in my life, in those moments when I felt the most alone, the most undesirable. ... My dick showed me the way, and I eagerly followed. ... Cruising gave me purpose. This “deviant” act strengthened my awareness of myself in relation to my body. (27)

Cruising, as a public yet hidden act, reimagines and repurposes the topography of the city; the “unmapped geographies” that cruisers slip in and out of exist as queer, intimate pockets in otherwise normative and hostile public spaces. By engaging in this radical use of urban spaces, the cruiser reaffirms and satisfies their desire for queer connection: despite the anonymity and the transitory nature of the act, cruising offers queer men like Espinoza a way to make themselves at home within the city. We can already see similarities here in how the cruiser and the flâneur mediate their curiosities, desires, and bodies through the temporal, spatial and inter-social nodes of urban life.

Walter Benjamin’s *The Arcades Project* and José Esteban Muñoz’s *Cruising Utopia*, in their analyses of flânerie and cruising, respectively, each take up the question of time to imagine alternate ways of moving through their own worlds. Benjamin situates his notions of time in the shopping arcades of nineteenth-century, industrial Europe, continuing on from the foundational

² I return to the policing and gentrification of cruisers and their spaces later on, with a particular focus on Delany’s own experiences and criticisms of these processes.

readings of the flâneur carried out by Baudelaire, while Muñoz's queer time is found in the more contemporary world of the gay art and social scenes of New York and Cuba. I posit that the practice of flânerie about which Benjamin writes can be read alongside Muñoz's divergence from "straight" time. Both theorists, I suggest, foreground practices that actively resist normative functions and processes of time and production – both the literal production of commodities under capitalism and the reproduction of the obedient, heteronormative citizen – and thus both offer up potentially recusant modes of living.

Walter Benjamin's flâneur (a rethinking of Baudelaire's flâneur, to whom Benjamin is indebted) engages in a practice of walking around a city and among its people, and this practice is characterized by an idle pace and a keen sense of observation, allowing the flâneur to bear witness to the world and people around him. The idle pace of the flâneur is of particular significance: Benjamin writes that the flâneur's "nonchalance" is "an unconscious protest against the tempo of the production process" (338). Here, the insouciance with which the flâneur strolls through the world is in direct contrast to the paces of those around him, especially in the shopping arcades where he is more readily aware of and surrounded by the production and consumption processes foundational to industrial capitalism. The flâneur is surrounded by commodities and their consumers, as well as by the workers who sell and serve them in shops and cafes.³ I liken this tempo of the production process to Muñoz's notion of "straight time": "Straight time tells us that there is no future but the here and now of our everyday life. The only futurity promised is that of reproductive majoritarian heterosexuality, the spectacle of the state refurbishing its ranks through overt and subsidized acts of reproduction" (Muñoz 22). Straight

³ Henri Lefebvre, the French Marxist who is considered one of the first modern writers to critique capitalism from the vantage point of everyday life, is of particular importance here. In *Henri Lefebvre: A Critical Introduction*, Andy Merrifield writes on Lefebvre's theory of how capitalism colonizes our everyday time and space saying, "All consumable time and space is raw material for new products, for new commodities. Marx's 'estranged labor' now generalized into an 'estranged life'" (11).

time is the path laid out by heteronormativity: monogamy, marriage, reproduction and the nuclear family. Both of these notions of time evoke a temporal and spatial understanding/movement that is informed by conformity, as both capitalism and heteronormativity construct and abide by a linear time and space that is expected and enforced by larger systems of power.⁴

Both Benjamin and Muñoz effectively see past these normative modes of experience, and recognize the past as a pervasive and integral part of their present. Muñoz reflects on the past through his analyses of what he calls the “ghosts of public sex” left over from the HIV/AIDS crisis:

To see these ghosts we must certainly read the "specific dealings, specific rhythms" that bring to life a lost experience, a temporally situated picture of social experience, that needs to be read in photo images, gaps, auras, residues, and negations. Due to the obstacles imposed by certain preconceptions of materiality, ... one cannot actually see the ghost of public sex ... But if the eye is sensitized in a certain way, if it can catch other visual frequencies that render specific distillations of lived experience and ground-level history accessible, it can potentially see the ghostly presence of a certain structure of feeling. (41-42)

⁴ Other queer theorists are worth noting here: Lee Edelman's *No Future* argues that heteronormativity utilizes “reproductive futurism” and the symbolic Child to enforce the notion that heterosexual, monogamous marriage and reproduction works to maintain and protect both the nuclear family and nationhood. Jack Halberstam's *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives* posits queerness as “an outcome of strange temporalities, imaginative life schedules, and eccentric economic practices” that exist in direct contrast to “institutions of family, heterosexuality, and reproduction” (1). Lisa Duggan's work on homonormativity also parallels the (re)productive orientation of “straight time”. Arguing that a neo-liberal “homonormativity” has emerged, she notes “a politics that does not contest dominant heteronormative assumptions and institutions ... upholds and sustains them while promising the possibility of a ... depoliticized gay culture anchored in domesticity and consumption” (179).

Here, Muñoz speaks to an experience of sensing the past within our present – not necessarily visually, but by being attuned to certain histories and affects that have or could have previously occurred within the same spaces or types of spaces. When Muñoz invokes “ghosts” and “auras,” he gestures towards a domain of seeing that goes beyond the everyday: a domain that cannot be contained in the apparent or obvious, where queer histories become visible. On the past as present, Benjamin similarly notes, “That anamnestic intoxication in which the flâneur goes about the city not only feeds on the sensory data taking shape before his eyes but often possesses itself of abstract knowledge—indeed, of dead facts—as something experienced and lived through. This felt knowledge travels from one person to another, especially by word of mouth” (417). Similarly to Muñoz, Benjamin describes the present-past using the language of feeling and sensation: this historical knowledge is not necessarily an “official” or factual knowledge, but a more embodied knowledge (one of feeling and experience). Essentially, in both works, we get the image of a reality that is transfused with a past (both factual and imagined) that, in distinct moments, vividly ‘bleeds’ through into our present, marked by sites of concentrated affect and sensation.

Turning to the abstract evidence that each evokes when sensing the past in the present, we can see both authors sharpening their focus on a certain type of experience or observation, ascribed with an evanescent yet lasting quality, which both describe as “trace(s).” For Benjamin, “trace” is what the flâneur can (uniquely) detect and analyze: “Trace and aura. The trace is appearance of a nearness, however far removed the thing that left it behind may be. The aura is appearance of a distance, however close the thing that calls it forth. In the trace, we gain possession of the thing; in the aura, it takes possession of us” (447). Here, the “trace” is the observed residue of the past — as we observe it, we attempt to possess it —, and its “aura” is

what draws the observer closer into it — as we move towards it, it possesses us. The language of “possession” is significant here: the flâneur is necessarily overtaken by what they observe, and thus they become a type of living archive of the world around them. So, although these traces manifest as momentary flashes or appearances, they plant their own traces within the flâneur that resonate beyond the encounter.

On traces, Muñoz similarly writes, “These ephemeral traces, flickering illuminations from other times and places, are sites that may indeed appear merely romantic, even to themselves. Nonetheless, they assist those of us who wish to follow queerness’s promise, its still unrealized potential, to see something else” (28). The ephemeral trace is, again, evidence of other times and other ways of living. Muñoz rejects the notion that this evidence is idealistically nostalgic, and insists that we can use these traces to realize latent potentials. Constantly, there is the future encoded in the ever-present past. Muñoz’s rejection of ‘straight time’ requires a recognition of this futurity: “I point to a queer feeling of hope in the free of hopeless heteronormative maps of the present where futurity is indeed the province of normative reproduction. This hope takes on the philosophical contours of idealism” (28).⁵ Here, Muñoz resists a queer thinking that writes off the future/futurity as inherently hopeless: it may be idealistic, but he argues that we can detect queer moments of potential — such as these traces — in the myopic heteronormative present of our surroundings, and that we can store these moments as a sense of queer hope for the future.⁶

⁵ Muñoz’ turn to “a queer feeling of hope in the free of hopeless heteronormative maps of the present” is essentially an abstraction of cruising: the cruiser looks for sites of queer desire amongst the everyday “heteronormative maps”. Espinoza writes on this queer vision as it pertains to cruising saying, “It takes time to learn how to identify the cracks, to see the openings, to recognize the breaks and tears that exist in the ordinary” (11).

⁶ This is where Muñoz departs from other queer theorists of his time, notably Lee Edelman who argues for a queer “anti-relational” turn with regards to the future. Edelman rejects the “communal fantasy” that is reproductive futurism (the heteronormative notion that the future must be secured for a symbolic Child; a future and symbolic figure that the queer poses a threat to). To Edelman, the future is inherently

In his conclusion, Muñoz makes it clear that a queer futurity is something we must actively and constantly engage in. He states,

We need to engage in a collective temporal distortion. We need to step out of the rigid conceptualization that is a straight present. ... Queerness is not yet here; thus, we must always be future bound in our desires and designs. ... What we need to know is that queerness is not yet here but it approaches like a crashing wave of potentiality. ...

Willingly we let ourselves feel queerness's pull, knowing it as something else that we can feel, that we must feel. We must take ecstasy. (185)

This is a call to transcend normative time and space, and it necessitates an intentional surrender to queer possibilities. Essentially, queerness as futurity is a queerness that we are continuously hoping and working towards: a "horizon". I posit that this queer futurity is one inherent to the practice of *flânerie*. Benjamin writes,

With each step, the walk takes on greater momentum; ever weaker grow the temptations of shops, of bistros, of smiling women, ever more irresistible the magnetism of the next street-corner, of a distant mass of foliage, of a street name. Then comes hunger. Our man wants nothing to do with the myriad possibilities offered to sate his appetite. Like an ascetic animal, he flits through unknown districts. (417)

This exploration is feverish, relentless. The *flâneur* is not moving towards a particular object to satiate themselves with, it is the practice of walking that they surrender themselves to. Here, the streets become sites of queer possibility precisely because the *flâneur* gives in to the aimlessness

invested in erasing queers. Muñoz explicitly opposes Edelman's arguments in *Cruising Utopia*, stating that anti-relationality works to "reproduce a crypto-universal white gay subject that is weirdly atemporal— ... free of the need for the challenge of imagining a futurity that exists beyond the self or the here and now" (94). Instead, Muñoz calls for a renewed and collective hope in the future: time not as death sentence, but as queer potential.

that propels them through these streets — flânerie is ultimately a practice of walking towards a horizon, just as Muñoz' queer futurity is.

What is missing from Benjamin's writing on the flâneur, however, is his sexuality. The traditional flâneur, as he is described by European writers like Baudelaire and Benjamin, is a de-sexualized figure – sexual encounters are not a part of his practice, and he is not shown to be explicitly hetero or homosexual. The more contemporary flâneur we see in works like Edmund White's *The Flâneur* and Samuel Delany's *The Motion of Light in Water*, however, maintains cruising as an integral part of their expressly queer flânerie: “To be gay and cruise is perhaps an extension of the flâneur's very essence, or at least its most successful application” (White, 81). If we are to understand cruising as being the “most successful application” of flânerie, we must first understand what it is about flânerie that opens up the practice easily to cruising.

We can read Delany's autobiographical writing on cruising alongside Baudelaire's writing on the flâneur, finding parallels in how both are negotiating with and moving through urban space, effectively making a home for themselves in masses of other human bodies. Baudelaire writes, “For the perfect flâneur, for the passionate observer, it's an immense pleasure to take up residence in multiplicity, in whatever is seething, moving, evanescent and infinite: you're not at home, but you feel at home everywhere; you see everyone, you're at the centre of everything ... The amateur of life enters into the crowd as into an immense reservoir of electricity” (Baudelaire translated by White in *The Flâneur*, 19). This particular description of the flâneur can be read in the way Delany describes his own cruising experiences:

To step between the waist-high tires and make your way between the smooth or ribbed walls was to invade a space at a libidinal saturation impossible to describe to someone who has not known it. ... [It] is hugely ordered, highly social, attentive, silent, and

grounded in a certain care, if not community. At those times, within those van-walled alleys, now between the trucks, now in the back of the open loaders, cock passed from mouth to mouth to hand to ass to mouth without ever breaking contact with other flesh for more than seconds; mouth, hand, ass passed over whatever you held out to them, sans interstice; when one cock left, finding a replacement – mouth, rectum, another cock – required moving only the head, the hip, the hand no more than an inch, three inches.

(265)

Like Baudelaire's flâneur who finds a home in urban city crowds — “whatever is seething, moving, evanescent and infinite” —, the cruiser as flâneur takes up residence in the multiplicity of other queer men, whose bodies are infinitely, enthusiastically, and immediately available to him in the moment. The cruiser as flâneur expands on Baudelaire's idea as a way to experience sex as a relational and ecstatic co-practice that links the mass of seething, moving bodies. There is a sense here of a paradoxical closeness: the cruising experience described here is lasting and intimate, while still being technically fleeting and mostly anonymous. At one point, Delany recalls a man he picked up in Central Park in the 1970's who had mentioned a certain book to him. Later, he notes, “More than a decade later, when, in England, I purchased a copy of *The Decline of the West* for myself and read it through ... it was very much with the memory of that March afternoon under the blowing branches above the wall by Central Park” (542). Here, again, we get the sense that these singular and transitory experiences manage to make an impact lasting beyond their own temporality. Essentially, cruising manages to disrupt the normative notion that for a relationship to have lasting and meaningful effect, it must be deeply involved and long-lasting and, instead, it offers potentially enduring experiences despite being anonymous and temporary.

This sense of storing and reliving memory through cruising is reminiscent of my earlier discussion of how the flâneur experiences the present-past. In a description of a usual cruising spot, Delany perfectly portrays the present-past:

At the Second Avenue station (a few years later the D would be rerouted), I walked up from track level and stopped into the men's john on the concourse level, where, for the past couple of years, most of my casual homosexual encounters had taken place in the odd ten or twenty minutes on my way back home from wherever I might be coming from. The soiled incandescent bulbs in their wire cages lit the dirty yellow walls and the foul washbasins. The night-green metal partitions stood between the three toilet bowls. (649)

Here, Delany situates his homosexual desires and encounters in a now-vanished location (the rerouted D subway line), and integral to these desires and encounters is all that came before them (all the dirt and foulness that is layered into the men's bathrooms). White, similarly, recalls his own cruising experiences, in how he used to "prowl (illegally) the moonlit pathways between ancient and modern statues or circle the mammoth round pond in which prehistoric carp doze in the ooze and surface in a feeding frenzy only when someone scatters breadcrumbs" (White 82). There is in this sexual practice a temporal collapse, a collision between the past (prehistoric, ancient) and the present (modern, contemporary) that seems to satiate more than a sexual hunger.

In terms of hunger, cruising and flânerie share similar desires. White locates within the flâneur: "The private Proustian touchstone – the madeleine, the tilting paving stone – that the flâneur is tracking down . . . The weathered threshold, the old tile . . . as Benjamin explains, the flâneur is in search of experience, not knowledge. Most experience ends up interpreted as – and replaced by – knowledge, but for the flâneur the experience remains somehow pure, useless, raw" (31). Here, White riffs on Benjamin's emphasis on the aimlessness of the flâneur's

strolling: it is not necessarily a concrete and factual history that the flâneur is searching for in his city, it is experience itself – the flâneur as attempting to touch upon a raw, “useless” encounter or sense. I would posit that while technically cruising is not aimless in the sense that one is aiming to engage in or observe sexual encounters, it is aimless in the sense that the practice inherently means offering oneself up to chance – the chance that you will be rejected, the chance that you will find a willing participant where you did not expect to, the chance that you will unexpectedly have the best (or the worst) fuck of your life.

To give oneself up to chance, to spontaneity, as the cruiser does inherently requires taking on a rhythm unlike that of capitalism and of straight time: cruising as a sort of possibility generator, untethered from rigid understandings of what the future could or should constitute. In Delany’s autobiography, he glimpses this future specifically in his cruising experiences of “massed bodies”:

The first direct sense of political power comes from the apprehension of massed bodies. ... The myth said we, as isolated perverts, were only beings of desire, manifestations of the subject ... But what this experience said was that there was a population ... not of hundreds, not of thousands, but rather of millions of gay men, and that history had, actively and already, created for us whole galleries of institutions, good and bad, to accommodate our sex. (349)

This moment in particular speaks to a sort of queer world-building: rather than being “isolated perverts”, cruisers have inserted — penetrated, even — themselves into being in the face of dominant ideologies that seek to erase, repress, and isolate them. Rather than taking on an anti-relational stance, — dooming the queer to live futureless, alone, rejected — the cruiser instead scavenges in urban cities, in writhing crowds for ways to keep living. Similarly, Muñoz

recognizes Delany's account of "massed bodies" as an example of what he calls "a future in the present":

We crucially need to map our repression, our fragmentation, and our alienation—the ways in which the state does not permit us to say "the whole" of our masses. ... To cut through the institutional and legislative barriers that outlaw contact relations and obscure glimpses of the whole. These glimpses and moments of contact have a decidedly utopian function that permits us to imagine and potentially make a queer world, ... by allowing us to see "the future in the present". (55)

Both Muñoz and Delany, thus, experience and find radical potential in queerness as temporal shift: the future as an ongoing project that queerness undertakes in the present. This entails, for both, identifying and 'mapping' what and who has been made hidden by normative modes of interpreting and experiencing the city and its people.

Similarly to how Muñoz and Delany understand queer time as a persistent and underlying current being hidden beneath normative spatiotemporalities, Kara Keeling, in her seminal text *Queer Times, Black Futures*, argues that,

"Queer temporality," ... names a dimension of time that produces risk. In terms of financial management, it is well known that "time" itself produces risk. Here, "queer temporality" names that dimension of the unpredictable and the unknowable in time that governs errant, eccentric, promiscuous, and unexpected organizations of social life. The complex equations for managing risk in stock investment profiles attempt to contain risk, accounting for it through calculations and algorithms devised to predict and control for randomness. In relationship to queer temporality, these calculations' efforts to anchor the future to the knowable present miss the ways "queer" remains here and now in both

recognizable and imperceptible forms. ... Yet, even imperceptibly, queer stubbornly persists in present relations. Now. (19-20)

Keeling, here, highlights the perceived 'risk' of queer temporality to straight times and futures: queer time unsettles a rigid present and yields unreliable futures, making it useless for the purposes of capital and heteronormativity.⁷ Queer temporality makes no promises: instead, invites us to explore, to seek what was previously imperceptible or thought to be impossible. To seek out what is hidden, Espinoza suggests, is exactly how one cruises: "It takes time to learn how to identify the cracks, to see the openings, to recognize the breaks and tears that exist in the ordinary. ... [Cruising] is a moment that captures something unnamable but feels crucial for survival. It's an impulse so strong it boils the blood, alters time and reality and sense" (Espinoza, 11). To cruise is to queer time: to stroll through the passage of time in a way that heightens our senses, to extend the cruising "moment" into a lasting and crucial practice that sustains us, and to tap into what is concealed within ordinary, straight time and space.

Accordingly, Samuel R. Delany's *Dhalgren* takes place in a city running on queer time: Bellona, supposedly once an American metropolis, has become undone by unknown catastrophes, and functions on deviant rhythms. Henri Lefebvre argues that, under capitalism, our lives and our time are subject to a collective rhythm that aims to extract, fully, our labor for the purposes of increased production. He writes, "The everyday is simultaneously the site of, the theater for, and what is at stake in a conflict between great indestructible rhythms and the processes imposed by the socio-economic organization of production, consumption, circulation and habitat" (Lefebvre 73). Essentially, our daily lives and behaviors are entirely controlled but

⁷ Similarly, in a 1999 interview, Delany notes that it is the riskiness, the volatility of the future which science fiction writers must deal in: "The only thing SF writers are apt to know about the future that the ordinary woman or man on the street does not is that it's really unpredictable. That alone is what allows our genre to be" (299).

they are what we must aim to regain, as they can also be the site of rapturous moments: when this mechanical routine is interrupted, we can break free from linear, controlled capitalistic time. This is essentially what has happened in Bellona.

Bellona as a ruined metropolis has abandoned a capitalistic economy and its infrastructures. The city's inhabitants do not use money (instead, they trade, steal or simply give things away for free), and there is no established transit system, nor are there cars. Here, the ways that capitalism typically orders or restricts our mobility — in terms of physical movement throughout the world, and in terms of financial and social class — are no longer imposed. This also means that the usual ways people move, as well as the ways they provide for themselves or supply others, can no longer be relied upon. At one point, one of the long-time Bellona residents, Tak, points out that there are no people in Bellona who need certain things like drugs or cigarettes because they cannot find a steady supply:

Now did you ever think what a specialized city Bellona is? ... All the chewing gum is gone from all the candy-stores' racks. Gum chewers can't live in Bellona. Not to mention cigarettes, cigars, pipes: ... You never see a smoker in Bellona. ... Oh, we have a pretty complicated social structure ... but we have no economy. *The illusion of an ordered social matrix is complete, but it's spitted through on all these cross-cultural attelets. It is a vulnerable city. It is a saprophytic city-* (667-8, emphasis mine)

The usual modes of producing, supplying, purchasing, and consuming are stopped short in this queered city. Its inhabitants cannot depend on finding any specific thing in any particular place, cannot maintain any particular consumptive habit. Thus, it is a city that requires constant adaptation from its inhabitants, ensuring that they too are as fluid as the place they live in, that they too give themselves up to the same unpredictability that the practices of cruising and

flânerie rely on. It is of particular significance that Tak refers to social order as an “illusion”: any regimented mode of social organization is fleeting, unstable, even deceptive.

In this sense, Bellona establishes an abnormal norm wherein none of the inhabitants can rely on these previously normative ways of existing. For example, the Richards’ family proves how unsustainable it is to live by straight time in a queered space. Mrs. Richards adamantly refuses to let go of ‘normalcy’, choosing to remain inside her apartment building so as not to ever experience the city’s queer reality, and her husband, attempting to appease her, continues to go to work as if there is actually work for him to go to. In her analysis of *Dhalgren* as a work of flânerie, Alla Ivanchikova suggests that an inability to return to ‘normalcy’ here is because a space that is “perfectly queered” would reject any attempt to live this way:

Queering space ... would entail creating an event, consciously or unconsciously, that explodes this space from within and creates possibilities for the new. Queering space as a practice would thus involve creating and sustaining the dissonant quality of space, emphasizing contradictions and multiple opposing programs that coexist in space. A perfectly queered space thus would be a difficult place to settle in, but perhaps an exciting place to move through. (36)

The Richards, as a straight, nuclear family, are at odds with the queer city. The family, Mrs. Richards in particular, engages in a delusion that continually fails them. One of their children runs away and joins a violent gang in the city (the Scorpions), another of their children dies brutally falling down an empty elevator shaft, and the novel implies that their daughter pushes him on purpose so he will not tell her parents that she had sex with a Black man. We can see here that the Richards’ dedication to straight time is eroded by the non-normative city around them. The patriarch of the family, Mr. Richards, is aware of this erosion and states, “In this house, I

almost have the feeling that none of it's real? ... A man's home is supposed to be—well, a place where everything is real, solid, and he can grab hold. In our home, I just don't know. I come in from that terrible world, and I'm in some neverland I just don't believe in" (173). As Ivanchikova points out, Bellona as a queered city is not a place to settle in; the city actively resists "settling", at least insofar as the term relates to easing into the structure of the nuclear family. The Richards' family, as exemplar of straight time, cannot adapt, nor can they move with ease in the ways that a queer city requires its residents to.

Beyond the city itself, we can think about how a queer time and space influences the relationship that Bellona and its inhabitants have with the rest of the nation. Within the city, all connection with the outside is severed: radios and satellite dishes do not work, which means that those in Bellona cannot contact anyone outside the city and they do not see any news from outside. The city newspaper, *The Bellona Times*, encourages this disconnection by refusing to print the actual date: instead, editor Calkins chooses the dates at random. As a whole, this establishes Bellona as a place outside of linear, quantified time. More significantly, as the protagonist, Kid, first makes his way into the city, he notes that Bellona is no longer talked about by anyone outside of it: "Very few suspect the existence of this city. It is as if not only the media but the laws of perspective themselves have redesigned knowledge and perception to pass it by. ... It is a city of inner discordances and retinal distortions" (14). We can see, here, that the city is outside of 'official' history as well as time, and it, along with its residents, are thus willfully forgotten by the rest of the nation. This erasure even manages to ignore major, astrological and supernatural events. Another new resident, Kamp, when asked about the ball of light that took over the sky during the course of the novel, says, "About this time yesterday – I was in Dallas. And if that thing was as big as it looked and really some sort of body in the sky, a comet or a sun,

I suspect it would have been seen a long way off coming, with telescopes. And nobody told me about it. . . . I'm afraid nobody outside of Bellona saw that one" (450). Essentially, the queer city and its inhabitants are separated (and even, as I will argue later, intentionally excluded) from the rest of the nation: since they are outside of straight time and history, they cannot be a part of any statehood, the people of Bellona become non-citizens in any official, national sense.

Considering the city of Bellona as one that is enveloped in queer time and space, how do its alternative geographies reflect on the practice of *flânerie*? I posit that this makes Bellona the ideal space for the *flâneur*: everything about the city of Bellona rejects linearity and embraces a sense of queer time and space. Even physically, the city appears in constant flux. Tak and Kid discuss the way the city shifts at one point, with Tak saying, "I go down a street: buildings are burning. I go down the same street the next day. They're still burning. Two weeks later, I go down the same street and nothing looks like it's been burned at all. Maybe time is just running backward here. Or sideways. But that's impossible too". Kid responds, "Sometimes the morning light starts over here . . . Sometimes it starts over there" (377). Here, physical sites like buildings, streets, the movement of the sun — once solid and dependable structures, paths, and recurrences — are made unstable. Thus, Benjamin's description above of the *flâneur*'s experience walking through the streets ("like an ascetic animal") is mirrored in the streets of Bellona. If we consider Bellona as a city made up of ever-changing streets (both in terms of street names as well as the physical street paths), then it offers to the *flâneur* infinite possibilities for this type of curious, feverish walking. Additionally, Benjamin's *flâneur* is homed in the arcades of Paris, where he passes by shops, bistros, a plethora of places which explicitly offer up satisfaction for his desires: in contrast, Kid as a *flâneur* in Bellona is not surrounded by open storefronts and cafes. As a space which de-centers the commodity, the city manages to reveal all that the commodity

signifies (status, desire), as well as all that the commodity works to erase (the reality of capitalist production and exploitation that the commodity is born from). In this sense, Tak's description of the city as "saprophytic" is especially relevant as it imagines the city as an organism that nourishes itself on decaying or dead organic matter: rather than browsing through a market, the inhabitants of Bellona instead engage in scavenging for what they need or want.

Furthermore, the ways in which Kid's memory and self are seemingly affected by the city further intensifies his *flânerie* practice: if the observer themselves is constantly changing, constantly becoming an "unknown district" in their own right, then their self is as fragmented, as alien and as infinitely explorable as the city they are in. The city essentially becomes a mirror for Kid, and he becomes a mirror for the city. He contemplates how to make sense of himself within the city, saying, "From this play of night, light, and leather, can I let myself take identity? How can I recreate this roast park in some meaningful matrix? Equipped with contradictory visions, an ugly hand caged in pretty metal, I observe a new mechanics. I am the wild machinist, past destroyed, reconstructing the present" (Delany 24). Kid scavenges for himself, for meaning within the fragmented city. This type of scavenging is reminiscent of Benjamin's descriptions of the *flâneur*: "That anamnestic intoxication in which the *flâneur* goes about the city not only feeds on the sensory data taking shape before his eyes but often possesses itself of abstract knowledge – indeed, of dead facts – as something experienced and lived through" (417). Both Delany and Benjamin's *flâneurs* focus on that which is ephemeral, abstract, ruptured into pieces, in order to make sense of it, to have it "take shape", to animate "dead facts". We can return, here, to Muñoz, as this fragment-weaving practice is evocative of what he says about the future in the present: "We crucially need to map our repression, our fragmentation, and our alienation—the ways in which the state does not permit us to say 'the whole' of our masses" (55). The *flâneur*

recognizes what is hidden and fragmented, utilizes it, creates their own queer history and topography from it.

Such a topography easily becomes a fertile space for queer potentiality. Bellona's residents experience the city as a space of erotic possibility, a phenomenon that residents describe as having been foreclosed when they reflect on their lives before arriving in the city. For example, towards the end of the novel, a new inhabitant, Jack, recalls his first day in the city,

When I first got here, I knew things weren't going to be like every where else. ... Tak?

The guy I met with you, here? Now he's a pretty all right person. And when I was staying with him, I tried to be nice. He wants to suck on my dick, I'd say: "Go ahead, man, suck on my fuckin dick." And, man, I ain't never done *nothin'* like that before...I mean not serious, like he was, you know? Now, I done it. I ain't sorry I done it. I don't got nothin' against it. (688)

Jack identifies Bellona as a place unlike everywhere else, and he responds to the city accordingly by experimenting sexually with another man, something he emphasizes he has never done before. We can see the boundaries that seem to traditionally divide homo- and hetero- sexualities are not as rigid in the city's queer temporality. Jack's experience of the queer possibility of cruising openly in Bellona, counter to an earlier time and space in which this is not possible, illuminates how sex and sexuality are shaped by particular times and spaces. His affirmation of the above encounter, coupled with its impossibility prior to arriving in Bellona, foregrounds how cruising as a practice, fundamentally, concerns the interaction of bodies and space: specifically, marginal bodies in marginal spaces (corners, alleys, or abandoned, closed off, and industrial areas of a city). It is worth noting that the above exchange does not happen in a marginal space, it happens instead in the open space of the queered city.

Kid also experiences a moment of sexual possibility, finding desire in the deviant and grotesque violence of blood as he pulls Bobby's dead body from the elevator shaft. He ponders, "Is this what turns on blood and blade freaks? He ... hunted in himself for any idle sexuality: he found it, disconcertingly, a small warmth above the loins that, as he bared his teeth and the rope slid through his sticky hand, went out. ... He had found it before in auto wrecks, in blue plush, in roots, in wet wood with the bark just stripped" (232). Here, the queer city offers a space and opportunity for Kid to reach within himself for deviant desire, desire that would typically be met with shame and moral risk in normative spatiotemporalities. The novel thus envisions the possibilities of sexual exploration in a context where queer and deviant sex is not relegated to the margins, neither to the margins of the city nor a repressive interiority within the characters produced by a homophobic and constrictive social order.

In this way, Bellona as a queer city brings to life an imaginative vision of what Delany glimpses in his personal experiences in real-world cruising spaces. In *Times Square Red*, *Times Square Blue*, he writes on the removal of sexual spaces (like porn theaters) and on stricter policing of public sex on Forty-Second street in New York in the mid-1990's. He notes,

Were the porn theaters romantic? Not at all. But because of the people who used them, they were humane and functional, fulfilling needs that most of our society does not yet know how to acknowledge. The easy argument already in place to catch up these anecdotes is that social institutions such as the porn movies take up, then, a certain social excess—are even, perhaps, socially beneficial to some small part of it (a margin outside the margin). But that is the same argument that allows them to be dismissed—and physically smashed and flattened: They are relevant only to that margin. No one else cares. (90)

Here, Delany reflects on cruising spaces (specifically, porn theaters) as marginal spaces created for marginalized bodies, meaning they are more easily destroyed through heteronormative projects like gentrification, repressive public health discourse and policies of safe sex, and targeted policing. It is important to note that the margin he is writing about is not homogenous: throughout the first part of the novel, he recounts some of his experiences with the men he befriended and fucked in these spaces, and they are varied in their income status, race, ability/disability, and kinks. He even recounts a straight man he would often see in one of the theaters who would masturbate to the straight porn on-screen, putting on a show for the gay men around him who would be simultaneously masturbating themselves. At one point, Delany describes the unnamed man speaking to him:

“I’m gettin’ off on her up there – ...and you guys are all gettin’ off on me . . . ? That’s funny, huh? That guy there – ...he always comes the same time I do. Don’t you? Didn’t you? Come on – didn’t you?” He looked back at me. “He always does that. Every time. I shoot – he shoots. Ain’t that a trip?”

Looking over, he laughed. (22)

Similar to Jack’s experience in *Bellona*, the sexuality of this unnamed masturbator is more fluid in the erotically charged, queer space of the porn theater: queer space thus generates alternate possibilities than the normative, disciplined taxonomies of sexual identity and experience that permeate straight time and space.

Returning to the margins-within-margins, Delany highlights the intimate interclass contact that the porn theaters allowed. He directly ties the destruction of these homoerotic spaces with capitalism’s economically stratified social organization:

Given the mode of capitalism under which we live, life is at its most rewarding, productive, and pleasant when large numbers of people understand, appreciate, and seek out interclass contact and communication conducted in a mode of good will. The class war raging constantly and often silently in the comparatively stabilized societies of the developed world perpetually works for the erosion of the social practices through which interclass communication takes place and of the institutions holding those practices stable, so that new institutions must always be conceived and set in place to take over the jobs of those that are battered again and again till they are destroyed. (121)

Essentially, Delany understands the closure of these spaces as a way to deter interclass contact: the porn theaters allowed for exchanges between men of all classes—exchanges that were based on mutual pleasure and enjoyment, exchanges that he believes could re-shape the ways that capitalism actively functioned to destroy and alienate people (especially working-class people). At one point, Delany writes on these encounters saying that, “These were not love relationships. The few hustlers excepted, they were not business relationships. They were encounters whose most important aspect was that mutual pleasure was exchanged. . . . Most were affable but brief because, beyond pleasure, these were people you had little in common with. Yet what greater field and force than pleasure can human beings share?” (56). Here, again, he emphasizes the aspect of casual, mutual pleasure made possible in these spaces because the other spaces available to the theater visitors — commercial districts where they buy or sell things, residential areas, work spaces — enforce such a strict divide between classes, precluding genuine or free interclass contact. But pleasure, understood here as a strong and affirming bond between people, resists capitalism’s restriction of contact, instead allowing for the creation of bonds that are more fluid, that unabashedly flout the norms of heteroreproductive, capitalistic futurity. Thus, we can

understand the cruising margin as a breeding ground for modes of being that diverge from heteronormativity as well as from capitalism.

When all spaces in the city (marginal or otherwise) are themselves queered (in terms of sexuality, but also in terms of interclass contact), as in *Bellona*, how are cruising practices affected? The novel's cruising practices erase the distinction between public and private. Not relegated to peripheral "private" spaces of the city, sex remains resolutely social, both in terms of its public occurrence and its investment in mutual care for those who participate in public sex. At one point, when Kid is running his own Scorpion nest, he stumbles into an orgy between some of the Scorpions and a woman, Risa, who visited the nest during a gathering. The scene is frenzied and, at times, confusing. The text is unclear about which of the Scorpions is fucking Risa or who is even being addressed at times during the sporadic conversation:

His foot coming down, knocked D-t's shoulder (Copperhead: "Hey-sorry!") who looked up and said, "You ain't doin' so bad yourself," and dropped his face back into his arm. Copperhead grinned, pushed his works, glistening like wet leather, into his fly and buttoned the top button. ... Re-reading this, it occurs to me that the written words don't let you know whether Copperhead meant Risa or Glass. (676)

But at one point, amidst the messy, charged, and often rough fucking, there is a clear moment of care:

I stood up while California clambered over her ankles. "Hey, Copperhead? Man, she's drunk enough already! She's gonna to be sick if you-"

"Get out of here," Copperhead said: "This is water. She asked me for a fucking drink of water before, that's all."

"Oh." California slid his hands up Risa's legs. A tendon in her thigh shook. California

bent.

... Glass sucked in his breath and watched her drink till Copperhead lowered the jug. Water ran down Risa's cheek. She got out, "...thank you..."

"You're welcome," California said, muffled in her crotch. (678)

I liken this encounter to cruising because Kid stumbles into it in a communal (albeit not “public” because it happens where they all live, a “Scorpion nest”) space, because most of those involved are strangers to one another in the same ways Delany has described being strangers with the men he has fucked in cruising spaces, and because there is a similar intermingling of desire and fear that we see in Delany’s recounting of his own experiences. A description from his memoir *The Motion of Light in Water* particularly resonates with this scene: “The actuality of such a situation, with thirty-five, fifty, a hundred all-but-strangers is hugely ordered, highly social, attentive, silent, and grounded in a certain care, if not community” (265). Similar to the tender moment in the Scorpion nest’s orgy, Delany describes here a sense of care being exchanged between the people involved: while they are all involved in an act that holds and caters to unrestricted pleasure at its center, there is still an underlying and inherent sense of attentiveness shared between them. Returning to cruising, we can see that as the traditionally resolute lines between public and private space are disrupted and blurred, cruising as a practice is re-invented: what causes this disruption is a lack of heteronormative policing that allows for public fucking without a fear of persecution and an investment in socially conscious acts of care disallowed in “private” sex.

From here, we can think about how queered time and space influences notions of citizenship. As a gay man who lived and cruised in New York from the 1960’s through to the mid-1990’s, Delany had experienced the ostracism, policing, and eventual closure of homoerotic

public spaces. The men in these spaces were harassed, imprisoned, and often physically attacked (both by the NYPD and by homophobic citizens) on the basis that they were “immoral” or “indecent”. Officially, they would be charged with crimes of “disorderly conduct”; informally, the police labeled this charge “degeneracy” (Ryan, 2017; Chauncey, 2019). The message to gay men was clear: in order to be good and moral citizens — morality and citizenship being intrinsically tied to assimilation into straight time: heterosexual, monogamous, private sex — they could not act out their queer desires. Delany takes up this question of citizenship and queer morality saying,

Over the last decade and a half, ... a notion of safety has arisen, a notion that runs from safe sex ... to safe neighborhoods, safe cities, and committed (i.e., safe) relationships. ... As, in the name of “safety,” society dismantles the various institutions that promote interclass communication, attempts to critique the way such institutions functioned in the past to promote their happier sides are often seen as, at best, nostalgia for an outmoded past and, at worst, a pernicious glorification of everything dangerous: unsafe sex, neighborhoods filled with undesirables (read “unsafe characters”), promiscuity, an attack on the family and the stable social structure, and dangerous, noncommitted, “unsafe” relationships — that is, psychologically “dangerous” relations, though the danger is rarely specified in any way other than to suggest its failure to conform to the ideal bourgeois marriage. (*Times Square Red, Times Square Blue* 121-22)

Here, Delany outlines the fine print in the “unsafe” designation of cruising: the “ideal bourgeois marriage” is a heterosexual and monogamous one where sex is reserved for private spaces, and has the potential to reproduce. Essentially, the nuclear family model thrives on a heteronormativity that conforms to these ideals of “proper” sex and relational dynamics. As

homoerotic spaces that center sex for pleasure, group sex (or, at least, sex surrounded by others who are involved in their own sex), and sex in an open public space, these theaters and cruising spaces in general have to be disavowed and, ultimately, destroyed by a heteronormative state. In order to exist, spaces and citizens under this authority must be wholly ‘sanitized’ of their queerness and assimilated into straight-time.

Similarly, Bellona and its inhabitants are essentially disowned and abandoned by any state authority. The protagonist explains to another inhabitant, “We’re in a city, an abandoned city. It’s burning, see. All the power’s out. They can’t get television cameras and radios in here, right? So everybody outside’s forgotten about it. No word comes out. No word comes in” (64); another newcomer to the city, Captain Kamp, notes, “I don’t think I’ve ever met anyone who’s actually gone and come back from here. ... Once they stopped trying to cover it on TV, people stopped talking, ... People don’t talk about it now” (457). Bellona and its residents are wilfully forgotten by and disconnected from the rest of the nation. The media and the populace no longer talk about them, and the city’s residents do not have access to the outside world, either via radio, phones, television, or newspapers. The policing and gentrification of New York’s porn theaters, thus, is a microcosm of what happens to Bellona and its residents: the city in its entirety is marginalized and discarded because it cannot abide by straight morality and time. Nonetheless, the exclusion of Bellona from state authority and from official legibility/legitimacy is a source of possibility for the cruiser. It paradoxically creates a space for the possibility of fucking — fucking that would be, anywhere else, deemed depraved, hedonistic, inappropriate — without the risk of legal recourse or moral condemnation.

Returning to the question of how cruising works in a city that is itself situated in the margin (in terms of economy, citizenship, and quantified/linear time), reading Delany’s fictional

Dhalgren alongside his autobiographical *Times Square Red*, *Times Square Blue* offers us a way to understand both worlds (the fictional world of the novel and the real world of Delany's experiences) as interconnected. Where the cruising spaces in 1990's New York were destroyed by gentrification and homophobic policing, the fictional city of Bellona thrives as a wholly libidinally charged space, free from straight time. Delany, as a gay man who has witnessed in real-time the destruction of these erotic spaces, can thus turn to science fiction in order to create this alternate, queer spacetime where cruising is more accessible and normalized, where it is even thriving in the "ruins" of a metropolis. In *Dhalgren*, unlike in the author's reality where the city is actively attempting to destroy cruising, the metropolis itself is destroyed and, through its destruction, becomes a comprehensively fertile space for cruising.

For Keeling, this type of artistic creation is indicative of what Marx calls "poetry from the future": works (Keeling focuses on queer works) that utilize a destabilizing creative force that can help imagine and create previously unimaginable visions of the future. Affect, then, can become revolutionary. She writes,

[Affect] points toward the ways that whatever escapes recognition, whatever escapes meaning and valuation, *exists as an impossible possibility within our shared reality, however one theoretically describes that reality, and therefore threatens to unsettle, if not destroy, the common senses on which that reality relies for its coherence.* Marx's phrase "poetry from the future" marks just such an impossible possibility. It is a formal ("poetry," with its associated lyricism, fragmentation, and logics) and temporal ("from the future") disruption, which functions primarily on the level of affect to resist narration and qualitative description. *It is a felt presence of the unknowable, the content of which*

exceeds its expression and therefore points toward a different epistemological, if not ontological and empirical, regime. (83, emphasis mine)

For Keeling, to write futures previously thought impossible means engaging with the “felt presence of the unknowable” from our here and now: queerness subverts what is acceptable and what is reliable because it disrupts straight, hegemonic notions of what the present and the future ‘should be’. In this sense, queer “poetry from the future” is an atemporal force: like Muñoz, Keeling is interested in a queerness that rewrites the hidden past back into the present, and that births a future out of this illuminated present.⁸ This way of moving and creating through our present is akin to the scavenging of the flâneur and to the generating of erotic possibility carried out by the cruiser.

Delany’s own writing ethos and practice are explicitly invested in future-creation. In a 1969 essay, he observes,

Whether [the writer] is writing about what she thinks could, should, or might someday exist or might have once existed, or whether he is dallying with some future fantasia so far away all subjunctive connection with the here and now is severed or is writing about the most nitty-gritty of recognizable landscapes, the writer has still become entranced with and dedicated her or himself to the realization of what is not. And all the “socially beneficial functions of art” are minimal before this aesthetic one: it allows the present meaning; it allows the future to exist. (82-3)

⁸ Within the novel itself, Kid is a similar sort of atemporal writer. The final chapter is seemingly lifted from the character’s personal journal, riddled with annotations, strikethroughs and random interjections, so that he reasserts himself into his own narrative over and over, at ‘different times’. “Reading over my journal, I find it difficult to decide even which incidents occurred first. I have hysterical moments when I think finding that out is my only possible hope/salvation. But it is more memorable unfixed. And to me, that’s important. (Only while I’m actually writing, for an instant it is actually more vivid...)” (700-1). His writing and his memories are displaced from normative time, displaced even from his own chronological memory because he cannot identify exactly when anything happened. Kid undergoes—by the end of the novel, even personifies—a total disruption of normative time and space.

The act of writing such worlds into existence effectively collapses time in order to construct worlds beyond it: “it allows the present meaning; it allows the future to exist”. Writing—in particular, science fiction writing which, as quoted previously, Delany believes is especially invested in the unpredictability of the future—offers imaginative potentials, allowing the creation of worlds that are thought to be impossible within our own quotidian and oppressive real. I say “thought to be impossible” because to write what is not can disrupt what we think is possible, so that such futures are a matter of *not yet*.

Dhalgren reads as testimony to this *not yet*: the novel begins and ends in the middle of the same sentence (or, at least, what is potentially the same sentence), perpetuating itself as aeonic circle. The “final” scene of the novel propels us forward:

Leaving it. Twigs, leaves, bark bits along the shoulder, the hissing hills and the smoke, the long country cut with summer and no where to begin. In the direction, then, Broadway and train tracks, limping in the in the all the dark blots till the rocks, running with rusty water, following beside the broken mud gleaming on the ditch edge, with the trees so over so I went into them. . . . This hand full of crumpled leaves. It would be better than here. Just in the like that. . . . I still hear them walking in the trees; not speaking. Waiting here, away from the terrifying weaponry, out of the halls of vapor and light, beyond holland and into the hills, I have come to (801)

What it propels us forward to is unidentified, unknowable — I recall, here, Delany’s observation that the science fiction writer necessarily deals with the unpredictability of the future — and the language becomes more abstract, untethered to normative form. Potentially, there is an implication here that Kid, with his queered sense of time, space and self, is moving forward to queer other spaces the way Bellona has been. He is going towards Broadway, the train tracks,

along the water, into the hills: he is queerness and possibility becoming mobile. As the novel feeds back into itself, that is where Kid will “come to” over and over. As he and the narrative move into the next city, looping back into the beginning of the novel, each city has the potential to *become* Bellona; with Kid as the ultimate flâneur-cruiser, hauling this present-past into what we know to be an inevitably queer future.

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