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# **[Review of] Dead Letters Sent: Queer Literary Transmission Old Futures: Speculative Fiction and Queer Possibility Circulating Queerness: Before the Gay and Lesbian Novel Melodrama: An Aesthetics of Impossibility**

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*Circulating Queerness: Before the Gay and Lesbian Novel.* By Natasha Hurley. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press. 2018. 320. Cloth \$108.00; paper \$27.00; e-book \$18.12.

*Dead Letters Sent: Queer Literary Transmission.* By Kevin Ohi. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press. 2015. 326. Cloth \$96.50; paper \$27.50; e-book \$27.14.

*Melodrama: An Aesthetics of Impossibility.* By Jonathan Goldberg. Durham: Duke University Press. 2016. 205. Cloth \$99.95; paper \$25.96; e-book \$23.99.

*Old Futures: Speculative Fiction and Queer Possibility.* By Alexis Lothian. New York: New York University Press. 2018. 352. Cloth \$89.00; paper \$30.00; e-book \$20.86.

In Garth Greenwell's critically celebrated gay novel *What Belongs to You* (2016), the first-person narrator, who grew up in the era of unpreventable and untreatable HIV, struggles to distinguish between sex and suicide in his early years and as a result finds in later adult life his most thrilling erotic experiences tinged by memories and impulses of dangerous abandon. Gay autobiography as elegy, *What Belongs to You* aestheticizes a nonnormative relationship to time that has been a primary focus of queer studies for nearly fifteen years, from Lee Edelman's massively influential *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (2004) on to Jack Halberstam's *In a Queer Time and Place* (2005), Jose Muñoz's *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (2009), and Elizabeth Freeman's *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories* (2010), to name only a prominent few. The four recent books visited briefly here aver that much remains to be said about how queer people experience time differently—nonlinearly, unpredictably, precariously, often unpromisingly—and about how time itself is rendered queer through imaginative experimentation.

Kevin Ohi engages queer posterity and futurity through an examination of “queer literary transmission” in and across works by Swinburne, Pater, Wilde, James, Faulkner, and Carson.

Although these writers are concerned, Ohi acknowledges, with transmitting queer knowledge, their texts thematize and perform the difficulty of doing so, collectively constituting a canon of “thwarted transmission” (1) to which readers are both invited and denied easy access. At a time when “surface reading” is piquing the interests of a postcritical ensemble, Ohi makes a fittingly untimely plea for close reading, drawing upon D.A. Miller’s notion of “implicative writing . . . that inspires one to “perfect” it or make it something else” (25) and Agamben’s thinking on potentiality to argue that “close reading offers a way to access the potentiality of the literary work—not to settle it, once and for all, in a meaning that masters it, but to rewrite it, perpetually” (29). In his discussion of “erotic bafflement” in Wilde’s *De Profundis*, for example, Ohi shows how, on the one hand, the lengthy prison letter offers lessons to and demands a reckoning of its imaginatively insensitive addressee (Lord Alfred Douglas but also, potentially, us) while, on the other hand, repeatedly demonstrating that Wilde’s sublime suffering can never be adequately appreciated. Wilde’s pedagogy is what Halberstam calls, in his book of the same name, *The Queer Art of Failure* (2011), but on Ohi’s *gorgeous* reading—he reopens the throats of these texts to listen to their potential sing again—this failure is the point. What Wilde teaches us, contra the “objectification of knowledge” (22) enshrined in our contemporary obsession with learning outcomes, is that we cannot make him, despite our deepest recuperative desires, the sure foundation of our queer selves but must instead, through intimate reading that is at once ethical and erotic, re-potentialize the pleasures and perils of his uncertain address (139).

Failure and frustration can be very rich, as Alexis Lothian further shows in her study of speculative fictions including neglected feminist utopian and dystopian writing of the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, Afrofuturism, queer film, and new media fan-fiction. Lothian opens a can of speculative worms (the end of Part II is called “wormhole”) with which she goes fishing

not for utopias and dystopias yet to arrive but for visions of the future already out there in works by women, queers, people of color, geeks, fans, and others for whom the threadbare material of the normative present has never been enough to survive. She sounds a lot like Ohi when discussing Ann Weinstone's review of Samuel Delany's *Dhalgren*: "the text's radical inconclusivity, the "pleasure of not making sense it provided," enabled [Weinstone] to envisage a future in which making sense would not be required" (148). Delany figures prominently in the book, because "sexual pleasure in his work links the past and present and lets a different future feel conceivable, even when it takes place within structuring limitations—for queer pleasure does not always mean the absence of violence, pain, and negativity" (162). In formulations like these, Lothian demonstrates powerfully that some marginalized groups never needed persuading that the future was not for them; they already knew it and out of necessity invented alternative possibilities inclusive of both their nutritive fantasies and their weighty histories. That all "old futures" ultimately fail to break decisively with the norms of the period in which they were imagined—a variant of "thwarted transmission"—can be frustrating but also fruitful, for each failure provides opportunities for future audiences, like fans and critics, to re-potentialize its speculative energies, as Lothian argues for the uptake of Lizzie Borden's *Born in Flames* by the "queer and queer of color politics and temporalities" (205) that came after it. To be thwarted, the book concurs with Ohi, is not to go unrewarded.

Like Lothian, Natasha Hurley treats her objects of analysis—works by Melville, Stoddard, Sedgwick, Jewett, James, and many others—as active agents of queer world making. Breaking with the idea that the queer novel depended first upon the sexological consolidation of a homosexual identity figured as a "mode of interiority or a property of the self" (xiv), Hurley argues that queerness appeared in literature beforehand as "a mode of located sociability" that

“invite(s) us to see identity as determined from the outside in, not from the inside out” (14). Putative precursors of the gay and lesbian novel—*The Bostonians*, *Typee*, “A New England Nun,” *The Country of the Pointed Firs*, *For the Pleasure of His Company: An Affair of the Misty City*—all have place names in their titles, and many of them are “underwritten by homophobic racism, where fantasies and ideologies of race as encoded in place types are central to the imagination of sexuality” (17). In other words, Hurley examines sexuality’s site-specificity and its circulation in and across sites—including global ones of eroticized racial investment—before it contracted into the truth of an individualized self. Tracing the social and market networks through which these primarily American texts circulated, Hurley further demonstrates that their queerness was “acquired” later as they were taken up by new readers and given, a la Latour, new associations (emphasis less on thwart than *athwart*). To attend to these concrete locations and particular moments of uncertain circulation is to revalue a “minoritization” (227) of sexuality sometimes given a bad name in queer studies, and Hurley’s comprehensive study moves nimbly back and forth between unpacking aspects of these texts that became available for later use and emphasizing elements that have, by and large, become untranslatable into contemporary sexual idioms.

Thwarted transmission, difficult circulation, unrealized old futures: all might be viewed as examples of what Eve Sedgwick regarded, Jonathan Goldberg reminds us, as “the resources queer inquiry finds when things—and persons—do not line up to mean one thing” (xv). Goldberg trumpets such variable value in melodrama, and across virtuoso readings of music by Beethoven, films by Sirk, Fassbinder, Haynes, and Hitchcock, and fiction by Highsmith and Cather, he argues for melodrama as a theatricalized site of impossibility from which the takeaway is not “moral clarity” (ix) but rather an aesthetic excess and irresolution gesturing to

extravagant possibilities. He points to Thoreau as “Sirk’s model for the aesthetic project of an identification with nature in which the self is reflected in something that exceeds oneself, something that refuses to reflect back oneself as a self, that instead embraces us (if it does) only insofar as we are part of something that is not us” (54). Melodrama’s excessiveness is akin to the queer pedagogy described by Ohi—it provides neither solace nor affirmative recognition but rather self-shattering release from the identitarian constraints of “bounded life” (138). If Cather recollects her earlier life only as “a bundle of enthusiasms and physical sensations” (154), it is because she was always brimming with (now old) futures and becoming imprinted by circulating queer knowledge that could never, thank god, settle (into) a person. Perhaps queer temporality’s slogan should be “do be so melodramatic!”

Benjamin Bateman is Lecturer in English Literature at The University of Edinburgh and author of *The Modernist Art of Queer Survival* (Oxford UP, 2017).