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Queer Enfleshment

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SEXUAL
DISORIENTATIONS

Queer Temporalities,
Affects, Theologies

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EDITORS

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❖ Response: Queer Enfleshment

MARY-JANE RUBENSTEIN

On numerous occasions, I have had the chance to respond to Karmen MacKendrick's challenging and beautiful work, or to respond to her response to something I have written (often under the influence of her challenging and beautiful work). In the face of this complex and perennial entanglement, I admit to feeling both prideful and indulgent. Steeped in such sinful affect, I would like to think for a nonlinear moment within some of the possibilities MacKendrick's thinking opens, most recently in the preceding essay "Remember—When?" for something like a queer-incarnational apophysis.

Mashing up the inexhaustible *Confessions* of Saint Augustine with the rabbinical riot of Edmond Jabès, MacKendrick draws our attention to the oddball spatiality of a God who dwells in the placeless place of memory, both within and beyond the human self. The timing is off, too: God dwells both within and beyond us from "before" the beginning, and has therefore never yet been where God "is" when we go about remembering God. The God we remember is a God we haven't seen, whose traces are not particularly clear, who has never presented Godself, and whose presence therefore remains tantalizingly, frustratingly futural. Remembering God, we remember that which never was—for us, at least—and, in MacKendrick's words, "This never-was, only remembered (or already forgotten), always promising, offers us a distinctly queer temporality."

As modes of this queer temporality, MacKendrick offers the work of mourning, the mess of melancholia, and the hovering of haunting. In each of these modes, a past that never was—and as such one that always risks obliteration—opens out as possibility, specifically, as the possibility of a different kind of future. Here Nicholas of Cusa begins to rattle his chains: God may be *posse ipsum*, or possibility itself. This divine possibility entices MacKendrick, raveling her with Catherine Keller in an interdetermined effort to relate the nonre-

lational and en flesh the apophatic.¹ It is this "strange flesh" I would like briefly to pursue here, in order to ask, on the one hand, what is queer about this theological temporality and, on the other, what might be theological about queer temporality. These are effectively the same question posed from two different directions so that we might home in on the elusive figure of divine enfleshment.

In MacKendrick's rendering, the possible becomes a ghostly not-yet: a might-yet-be that haunts as a past-that-never-was to disturb a self-satisfied present. The possible is not here, not now, and as such remains possible, portending an undecidable terrain of transformation or devastation that has never been—and so is never quite—present. In its very gesture of negation, however, apophysis collides with the incarnate: "It is important," MacKendrick reminds us, "that divine otherwiseness might unfold in the flesh." Examples of this divine unfolding include the gift of the Torah, the memory of a temple, the memory of another temple, the infinite in the face of the other, and of course, for some, the Nazarene. But what is the mode of this enfleshment? Does it remain, well, modal? Granted the importance that divinity might fleshily unfold, is it also important that it does? Or that it has? Or that it will? Does the possible give way, in other words, to the actual? Or perhaps more subtly, might the possible—or does it, has it, will it—appear in and through the actual, and if so, in what kind of actual?

In an essay titled "Promiscuous Incarnation," Laurel Schneider suggests that the history of Christian thought is one of the "gradual and inexorable erosion" of its central profession.² The "good news," to put it bluntly, is that God has shown up, that divinity is right here in the flesh, that the kingdom—as Nietzsche reminds us with mounting frustration³—is not in some inaccessible realm, but "at hand." And yet the moment the councils and fathers acknowledge such enfleshment, they rein it back in: God is there, yes, but only "there": only in that one man, born to a girl in a barn in occupied Palestine, a perfect sacrifice for the whole world. So he lived for a while and then died for us all, even "us" in our not-yet-ness, and as such remains the only site—the only-ever site—of incarnation.

For Schneider, Christianity's recoiling from the incarnate is a function of the West's long-lived enchantment with abstract singularity and immutable oneness. By virtue of the nature of bodies, she argues, incarnation disrupts everything an imperial power might want from its God: "The coming to flesh of divinity disrupts the smooth otherness of the divine, its separateness from the changeable stuff of earth, its abhorrence of rot, its innocence of death, and its ignorance of life or desire."⁴ Flesh, moreover, "is indiscriminate in its porous interconnection with everything,"⁵ so insofar as divinity becomes

flesh, it becomes the permanent disruption of godly abstraction and sovereign singularity. The scandal of particularity, then, is that the particular can't hold: The porosity of flesh means incarnation can only be promiscuous.

Glimpsing this danger, the very tradition that proclaims incarnation denies it in the same breath, producing theologies, liturgies, and ecclesiologies that "honor incarnation in terms of the body of Jesus but force actual bodies in the church, and outside of it, onto the bottom rungs of a tortured hierarchy of being."⁶ In its predictable privileges of light over dark, male over female, solvent over unemployed, monogamous over promiscuous, and reproductive over perverse, this "tortured hierarchy" manages to undo all the work even a narrowly construed incarnation might have done, what with its small, despised, and colonized divinity, conceived by an unwed teenager.

Divinity was supposed to have been of and for the marginalized. What sort of queer temporality is that?

Faced with the never-was on the one hand and the incarnate on the other, I am reminded of José Muñoz's *Cruising Utopia*, which opens by appealing to the queer as a figure of radical alterity. "Queerness is not yet here," Muñoz begins; queerness, in fact, would be the tireless critique of the "here" in its unlivability for minoritarian subjects.⁷ Queerness would be the tireless rejection of the here and now for the sake of a utopian future. Like MacKendrick, then, Muñoz appeals to a Derridean-inflected "hauntology as a powerful mechanism" for queer history and queer futures.⁸ Attending as it does to the never-present and perennially disavowed, spectrality might help us listen for that which never quite is: the racially subordinated, the sexually marginalized, the racially sexualized, the economically invisible, the juridically unrecognizable.

Like ghosts, queer subjects aren't, quite. And yet of course they aren't not. Complicating our negativity, queer desires and practices do not exactly have the status of "never-was"; rather, they occupy all sorts of spookier dream-scape modalities like "almost was," or "would-have-been," or "no-longer-conscious," or "was, -ish; you know, in a what-the-hell-was-that sort of way." For MacKendrick as for Muñoz, queerness is both not-yet and enfleshed, and this "both" makes the enfleshment fall irremediably short of a full-out, bells-and-whistles ontology. Or it exposes such ontologies as puffed-up, uninteresting, plodding . . . straight and minivanned.

It is this sort of queer enfleshment that Muñoz allows us to glimpse in his reading of Frank O'Hara's "Having a Coke with You."⁹ For Muñoz, the poem testifies to a not-here, not-now that is also right in the middle of the ordinary: a "concrete utopia."¹⁰ Nothing dramatic happens in this poem; there are no angels or trumpets or statues. In fact, the statues in particular seem ridiculous in the midst of mortal lovers walking, barely touching, breathing together before the dried paint and the chiseled stone, sharing a drink that more serious

types would reject as too lowbrow, too corporate, or too corrosive of septic systems. Queer art, for Muñoz, performs a kind of "future in the present,"¹¹ enacting queer temporality in its fleeting actualization of a modest utopia. So we are not yet queer, and yet there it just was, *as not-quite*, in its odd apophatic enfleshment. Right there.

Incarnation has not yet been what it was. The kingdom is not what it is. The poor, perverse, and persecuted have yet to be what they already are, and yet somehow—we know this—divinity shows up where it is most denied, at the bottom ranks of that undead Great Chain. So to mourn the dead God is one thing. It is, in fact, to mourn one thing, which *was* back then and is no more and, yes, may be, but who would want him back? Enfleshment is different, I think. To be haunted by incarnation would be to live on the lookout for that which never really was, which calls all that is into question and remains in the realm of the possible, and which precisely *as possible*, in its promiscuous not-quiteness, just might be all over the place.

NOTES

1. See Karmen MacKendrick, *Divine Enticement: Theological Seductions* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2012), 209, 17; Catherine Keller, *The Cloud of the Impossible: Negative Theology and Planetary Entanglement* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014), 87–126.
2. Laurel C. Schneider, "Promiscuous Incarnation," in *The Embrace of Eros: Bodies, Desires, and Sexuality in Christianity*, ed. Margaret D. Kamitsuka (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2010), 232; cf. Laurel C. Schneider, *Beyond Monotheism: A Theology of Multiplicity* (New York: Routledge, 2008).
3. Friedrich Nietzsche, "The Anti-Christ," in *The Twilight of the Idols and the Anti-Christ; or, How to Philosophize with a Hammer*, ed. Michael Tanner (New York: Penguin, 1990), 153.
4. Schneider, "Promiscuous Incarnation," 232.
5. *Ibid.*, 241–42.
6. *Ibid.*, 232.
7. José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York: New York University Press, 2009), 1, 27.
8. *Ibid.*, 42.
9. *Ibid.*, 5–9.
10. *Ibid.*, 3.
11. *Ibid.*, 49.