

The Disruption of Normativity: Queer Desire and Negativity in Morrissey and The Smiths

By Frederic Rukes, Cologne University, Germany

Abstract

Two of the terms most frequently used by scholars and music journalists alike to describe former The Smiths singer Morrissey's persona are *ambiguous* and *ambivalent* – an evaluation that applies among other things to his attitude towards gender and sexuality. While Morrissey refuses to classify himself in any predefined categories of gender and sexuality, his own and his band's musical canon is rife with narratives of queer desire and instances of sexual intimacy, which often allow for both a gay and a straight viewpoint. It is precisely this ambiguity that offers the possibility of an interpretation offside a compulsory heterosexuality and –normativity, therefore opening it to a queer audience. It is furthermore among the reasons why lyrics by Morrissey and The Smiths, as I will argue, qualify as queer texts. In order to establish and defend such a view, this paper will draw on Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's approach of a queer reading and her work on homosocial desire in literature, Harold Beaver's examination of homosexual signs, and Teresa de Lauretis' definition of queer texts. One of the pillars of de Lauretis's classification is that of non-closure of a narrative and is thus closely linked to queer negativity and non-futurity. Morrissey and The Smiths' oeuvre offers a significant set of songs that embrace these ideas. Deriving from Jack Halberstam's concept of the queer art of failure, Lee Edelman's critique of reproductive futurism, Judith Butler's reflections on the term *queer*, and José Esteban Muñoz's conceptualisation of a queer utopia I will show how Morrissey uses different formulas of negativity and longing to generate power from, thus transforming them into critique of regimes of the normal. It is in this diverse and subversive expression of queer negativity and desire that Morrissey disrupts normativity and its underlying stigmatising and discriminating potential.

Introduction: Breaking the Binary

1 Two of the terms most frequently used by scholars and music journalists alike to describe former The Smiths singer Morrissey's persona are *ambiguous* and *ambivalent* (see for example Campbell; Dillane et al.; Hawkins; Hubbs; Manco; Soghomonian). This evaluation of him applies as much to his political stance, national identification and ethical code as to his attitude towards gender and sexuality. Accordingly, Morrissey has always been an artist resistant to easy categorisation, which is reflected especially in his refusal to identify with certain forms of sexuality: "I don't recognise such terms as heterosexual, homosexual, bisexual and I think it's important that there's someone in pop music who's like that. These words do great damage, they confuse people and they make people feel unhappy so I want to do away with them" (152). This statement, made by Morrissey in 1985, reflects his aversion to predefined classifications and normative obligations, as he recognises such labels as

instruments of a practice of exclusion.¹

2 Instead, throughout his career Morrissey has offered several, sometimes contradictory, alternatives to such existing categories that range from celibacy (Hubbs 271), transgender identifications (277) and his proclamation of himself as “a prophet for the fourth gender” (269) to identifying as “humasexual” (Dillane et al. 149).² Nadine Hubbs argues that celibacy, trans affiliations, and fourth gender serve as ideal positions to disrupt the binaries of heterosexuality and homosexuality as well as of female and male (270-71). A similar observation is made by Aileen Dillane, Martin J. Power, and Eoin Devereux on humasexuality, which they describe as a “fluid” approach to the “whole spectrum of sexual experiences” (150) that withstands any coercion into binary categorisation. Precisely the seeming contradiction between such positions as celibacy versus humasexuality, namely the *ambiguity* or *ambivalence* that comprises the insistence upon both concepts, further strengthens the deconstruction of binaries and troubles their significations. Additionally, Pierpalo Martino uses the terms of the *same-other* and the *oxymoronic self*, that have been brought forward by Augusto Ponzio and Gavin Hopps, to contend how Morrissey has been able to achieve an iconic status by performing a faithful “highly recognizable *persona*” (229) that is however always situated in a complex transcending discourse of in-betweenness (237).

3 In their discussion of gender and sexuality in Morrissey and The Smiths, all of these critics agree that the troubling of binaries through ambiguity is constitutive of the lyrical canon of both the band and the solo artist. What is yet missing in these analyses is a comprehensive application of queer theory to the discourse of the songs in form of a thorough identification of their subversive queering strategies. My aim is to fill this gap and to provide a theoretical basis for the discussion of queer issues in Morrissey’s lyrics, which I argue are mediated in a way that not only troubles binaries but also disrupts a compulsory (hetero)normativity. My main theoretical approach will be that of a discourse-analytic, poststructuralist, and deconstructive queer reading as brought forward by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick with her work on homosocial desire in literature, which I will extend to song lyrics. Discarding a normative view, as informed by the dominant culture and its assumptions, I will discuss the lyrics from a queer perspective, thus exposing their erotic subtexts and queer

¹ For a discussion of the oppressive power that is unleashed with the emergence of normalisation as an instrument of measurement and a new form of meaning production, see Michel Foucault’s *Discipline and Punish* (1975), especially page 184.

² Nadine Hubbs states that Morrissey uses the category of the fourth gender as a supplement to the third gender, namely the “gender invert – a female soul in a male body or vice versa” (269). Morrissey adds to his identification as humasexual the explanation “I am attracted to humans” (Dillane et al. 149), thus revealing it to be congruent with pansexuality.

themes and potentials (Kraß 22).

4 With regard to the ambiguity and the clashing ideas presented in Morrissey's lyrics, scholars like Sheila Whiteley and Dillane emphasise that any analysis of a certain text is based on interpretation and assumptions that exist alongside other possibilities that may transcend the intentions of the artist herself (Whiteley 106, Dillane et al. 156). Because of the multiplicity and theoretical boundlessness of text meanings, Hubbs notes that many of Morrissey's lyrics can be interpreted from a gay *and* from a straight viewpoint (269). While I agree with all of these findings, based on Teresa de Lauretis' definition of queer texts, I will argue that, although there is usually a straight viewpoint available in Morrissey's lyrics, they nevertheless qualify as queer texts,³ which are susceptible to such ambiguous positions.

5 Deriving from J. Jack Halberstam's concept of the queer art of failure and Lee Edelman's critique of reproductive futurism, this evaluation will be supported by the localisation of queer negativity in the lyrics, which often deal with liminal characters on the margins of society who struggle to conform to the imposed norms and expectations of their surroundings. Based on Judith Butler's reflections on the term *queer* and José Esteban Muñoz's conceptualisation of a queer utopia, I will show how Morrissey uses this negativity to generate power, which he transforms into a form of critique through resignification of formerly stigmatising and discriminating spaces.

6 In *Fear of a Queer Planet*, editor Michael Warner argues that the term queer "defin[es] itself against the normal rather than the heterosexual" (xxvi). It is precisely that positioning against normalising perspectives of the dominant culture and, instead, the endorsement of diversity and the supposedly strange and divergent, that informs the queer quality of Morrissey's writing and makes it such a potent example of pioneering queer popular music.

The Potentiality for Queer Desire: This Charming Man

7 In her analysis of Morrissey's narratives, Hubbs concludes that to univocally designate his music as 'gay rock' would be "to miss the point completely" (288) since the narratives derive their force precisely from their ambiguity. This evaluation does not contradict her observation that the lyrics are "rife with sex and gender anomalies" (287) and "queer-insider language" (285) which are detected especially by queer listeners and are often overlooked by

³ This evaluation of the lyrics as queer texts adds to my queer reading approach, although it must be stressed that queer reading and queer text are independent of one another: a queer reading can be employed on any text and might be particularly interesting for conservative, heteronormative texts – the text itself does not have to be queer to be approached this way, but in the case of Morrissey's lyrics I argue that it is.

straight ones, partially due to a “mainstream ignorance of queer codes” (285). Hubbs stresses that such ambiguity concerning a gay or straight viewpoint

is not particularly confusing to queer subjects, to whom its utility and indeed necessity is intimately known. Even cultivated sexual ambiguity is not something that tends to jam or erase well-formed “gaydar” readings – to the contrary, it tends to reinforce positive readings. (285)

It is because of this circumstance, which allows for gay *and* a straight viewpoint (as well as multiple other viewpoints), that Morrissey’s work appeals to a queer audience: the fact that the lyrics offer the possibility of an interpretation offside a compulsory heterosexuality and – normativity is among the reasons why they qualify as queer texts. To label them as *gay texts* would prevent other possibilities. The term *queer* is more fitting here because, according to Butler, it is a term of affiliation, one that must remain open, temporal, and under deconstruction in order to extend its range and to constantly include those who are abjected by others (*Bodies* 229-30). Only by occupying such a wide space, it can prevent itself from logics of what is and what is not ‘normal’, as Warner explains: “The preference for ‘queer’ represents, among other things, an aggressive impulse of generalization; it rejects a minoritizing logic of toleration or simple political interest-representation in favor of a more thorough resistance to regimes of the normal” (xxvi). To resist these regimes of the normal means to liberate the discourse from the limitedness of essentialist categorisation and instead open it to a multitude of possibilities.

8 Now, in order to argue for the queerness of a text and to explain the sexual ambiguity that facilitates the richness of possibilities that makes it queer, it is helpful to identify some of its non-normative potential. In the case of Morrissey and The Smiths, there is great homosexual potential, which can be justified with the detection of homosexual signs as well as with instances of absent heterosexual desire. This is different from arguing that the meanings of these texts are essentially homosexual, because I claim that they never lose their ambiguity. This has to do with the arbitrariness of the signs that are dispersed throughout the lyrics, the deliberate voids, and the resistance to declaring a final evaluation of a situation. Even in the instances in which homosexual desire and absent heterosexual desire are plausible possibilities, they are not enunciated in the form of labels but instead remain open to other interpretations. Accordingly, when I will identify these instances in the following, they should in no way suggest a univocal meaning that rules out other viewpoints.⁴

⁴ The reason why, despite my explained above preference for the term *queer*, I will not discard the terms *homosexual*, *gay*, or *same-sex desire* completely, has to do with my understanding of the terms as merely descriptive and my interest in representation. While, on the one hand, as informed and introduced by Michel Foucault’s *The History of Sexuality*, I argue for the constructedness of the concept that today is called *sexuality* (with all its attached labels), which relies primarily on the preferred sex of the sexual partner, and which is under

9 As introduction to her reading of canonical mid-eighteenth to mid-nineteenth novels in her respective monograph *Between Men* (1985), Sedgwick exposes the homophobia towards “social bonds between persons of the same sex” (1). While the term *homosocial* had been coined for same-sex activities beyond the bounds of homosexuality and desire, Sedgwick suggests the therefore oxymoronic term *homosocial desire* to bring back the “potentially erotic” to homosocial bonds and argue for “the potential unbrokenness of a continuum between homosocial and homosexual – a continuum whose visibility, for men, in our society, is radically disrupted” (1-2). As she notes, this continuum is much less disrupted for women than it is for men. The latter are faced with the dichotomy of the rejected “men-loving-men” on the one hand and the accepted “men-promoting-the-interest-of-men” on the other hand – a situation that “suggests that ‘obligatory heterosexuality’ is built into male-dominated kinship systems, or that homophobia is a *necessary* consequence of such patriarchal institutions as heterosexual marriage” (3). As a counterexample for patriarchy’s requirement of homophobia and the “radically discontinuous relation of male homosocial and homosexual bonds” (5), Sedgwick presents the (at that time) culturally accepted case of paederasty in ancient Greece. Here, the bond of mentorship between the adolescent boy and the experienced older man, which was evocative of romantic cross-sexual love and in no way violated ancient notions of masculinity, was structured along the lines of class, age, and role, namely the passivity of the boy as love object and apprentice and his pursuit by the man. However, the assignment of these roles was not permanent, since the boy, growing up, would eventually take on the role of the man for another boy (4).

10 From a modern perspective, the concept is without question highly problematic because of the age difference, but it should be noted that the seamlessness of the male bonds that is demonstrated here is resistant to modern notions of homophobia. This is also reflective of the discourse in Morrissey’s lyrics.⁵ Consequently, the continuum between homosocial and homosexual male bonds is left wide open through the ambiguous or undefined relationships

deconstruction in queer theory’s overall project to oppose normativity, on the other hand I understand that these labels have great social and political consequences for people who construct their own identities around such terms, who get stigmatised, are refused certain political rights, or, in some countries, are even persecuted on the basis of these terms. For such reasons, I do not think that the realities that are caused by the modern concept of sexuality can or should be argued away. (Monique Wittig writes on heterosexuality, which I think is also true for homosexuality: “So we are dealing with an object both imaginary and real” (8). Or as Jonathan Ned Katz puts it: “The idea that heterosexuality and homosexuality are historically constructed seems to many to challenge the reality, profundity, and value of their desires. That perception, I believe, is wrong” (17). I agree.) It is important that these minorities are represented and included in the public discourses of the world’s different cultures, including popular culture, which is my major motivation to examine queer discourses.

⁵ In line with the idea of male homosocial desire, in his biography, Morrissey remarks on the poetry of Patrick MacGill: “Partial disclosures of male closeness fascinate me, because it’s something that is nowhere in the life around me. All males are adversaries in muggy Manchester, and it is now my grim intent to break spells” (97).

the protagonists in Morrissey's narratives share with one another. In these structures, the state of homosexual desire and homosocial affection between men is often either convertible, with both being possible, or sheer undecided. What is striking when it comes to the presentation of desire in Morrissey's work is that, in accordance with the overarching ambiguity of his text, it is usually not one of concrete denotation but one that is composed of signs – therefore leaving much space for a queer reading as encouraged by Sedgwick, in which the strict separation between homosocial activities and desire is eliminated.

11 The effect of Morrissey's composition of signs around homosocial desire is one of denaturalisation and violation of the illusion of essential truths in favour of diverse potentiality. In this, I see strong correlations with Dirk Schulz's observations made in his work on Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway* and Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, in which Schulz attributes to both novels "a queer understanding of the inseparability of life as text and text as life, of the concurrent peril and allure of unequivocal signification, and of the heteronormative ordering of the symbolic stabilised through reiterative performativity" (10). He proceeds to argue that while both novels acknowledge "that there is no 'outside' to the symbolic ordering of human existence", they both find escape in "the possibility to embrace the arbitrariness of signifiers instead of arresting their possible meanings through their naturalisation" (10). I find a similar awareness and strategy in Morrissey's texts in his play with queer signs. Beaver, who like Schulz bases many of his insights on Roland Barthes' work on mythologies, writes on the relation between the natural and the sign:

Whatever the charge, the fundamental ethical problem is this: to recognize signs wherever they are, not to mistake them for natural phenomena, and to proclaim rather than conceal them. It was Ferdinand de Saussure who made the revolutionary pronouncement that although the meaning of many actions may seem natural, they are always founded on shared assumptions or conventions; that what is obvious in the case of linguistic signs is also true of other signs. The social model, or aspiration, is all-pervasive. (100)

When it comes to Morrissey and The Smiths' characters, their dependency on a mutual deciphering of signs is also apparent and becomes an important generator for their acknowledgment of desire. In this it is interesting that the desire is often much more apparent between the male speaker⁶ and the male object of desire than towards the female object.

12 One of the most famous examples of extreme potential for male homosexual desire in The Smiths' early career can be found in their single "This Charming Man" (1984) in which

⁶ Although Morrissey proves of being capable of taking a female perspective in his songs and constantly shifting modes, through his male voice the listener tends to perceive the speaker in the lyrics as male. Accordingly, a male addressee of desire makes an interpretation for a homosexual relation probable. While in fictional literature the narrator and the author are strictly separate entities, in music this differentiation is less clearly defined because the artist's voice automatically functions as a mediator between the speaker in the lyrics and the artist herself. Nevertheless, we cannot assume that the speaker and Morrissey are necessarily the same and thus the gender-relation between speaker and addressee remains always ambiguous.

the charming man in his car picks up the speaker, a younger male, from a lonely scenery:

Punctured bicycle on a hillside desolate / will nature make a man of me yet? / when in this charming car / this charming man // Why pamper life's complexity / when the leather runs smooth / on the passenger seat? // I would go out tonight / but I haven't got a stitch to wear / this man said, "It's gruesome /that someone so handsome should care"⁷

The charming man appears to seduce the seemingly indecisive speaker, who does not feel like he has the appropriate clothes to wear to go out, by passing him the compliment on his looks. However, at this point the speaker has already made up his mind as indicated by the rhetorical question "Why pamper life's complexity?" Hubbs defines this, here more ostensible than actual, conflict as the "mind/body problem" (281), a recurrent theme in Morrissey's lyrics, whereas in this instance the narrator gives in to physical pleasure and chooses body over mind. The hint towards sex in cars is emphasised by the queer-coded allusion to leather fetish and, as Hubbs notes, by the melismatic⁸ way in which Morrissey indulgently lingers on the word *seat*, thus mirroring the erotic subtext of the lyrics in Morrissey's vocal performance (282).

13 Most importantly, in Morrissey's structuring of the encounter between the speaker and the charming man, descriptive elements that could guide the listener/reader through the course of the action are kept at a minimum level. Instead, sentences are left incomplete, e.g. missing verbs, as in "Punctured bicycle / on a hillside desolate" or "when in this charming car / this charming man". What remains mostly, are snippets, images, signs, short interior monologue, and direct speech, all of which make for a sharp impression of fragmentation, which is highly representative of the modernist writing of the early 20th century and its criticism of realism's truth claim for an objective reality and which, in turn, matches both the late Victorian and the modernist novel analysed by Schulz. The blanks that persist in the fragmentary narrative style, that Morrissey displays in "This Charming Man", leave a lot of room for interpretation, which as a result relies more and more on signs that hint at the possibilities of relations between the charming man and the speaker. The homosexual potential that is set free in this opacity,⁹ Beaver further explains in the relation between the homosexual and the sign:

The homosexual is beset by signs, by the urge to interpret whatever transpires, or fails to transpire, between himself and every chance acquaintance. He is a prodigious consumer of signs—of hidden meanings, hidden systems, hidden potentiality. Exclusion from the common code impels the frenzied quest: in the momentary glimpse, the scrambled figure, the sporadic gesture, the chance encounter, the reverse image, the sudden slippage, the lowered guard. In a flash meanings may be disclosed; mysteries wrenched out and betrayed. (104-105)

⁷ All song lyrics are taken from the original CD booklets as listed in the primary sources. A website that lists all Morrissey and The Smiths lyrics as they appear in the booklets is www.passionsjustlikemine.com.

⁸ A melisma is the singing of different notes in a single syllable (Hubbs 293).

⁹ I borrow the term from Nicholas de Villiers' concept of queer opacity through which the closet finds "an opening for the creation of a queer public persona that manages to resist the confessional discourse" (163).

The exclusion of the common code, again, refers to the heteronormative ordering of the symbolic in which the homosexual has no place and which is why she relies on the signs, the potential hidden meanings. This is both true for the two men in the song as well as for the interpreter of the song. Why did they meet on the desolate hillside? Was it coincidence or intent? What exactly happens between them? The hints are rare, but from a queer perspective the scenario, the desolate hillside, could be an agreed upon area of cruising for sex. However, the relationship between the two men could be much more serious than that and one of deep romantic love, as implied by the demand “He said ‘Return the ring’”, which suggests that the man asks the speaker to break off an engagement, perhaps in favour of their love and possible being together. Whatever the men’s background and familiarity, despite the many blanks, they seem to read the signs correctly, as the speaker appears to understand the seduction in the man’s compliment. And, of course, they know much more than the speaker gives away to the listener of the song, for whom the play with signs becomes just as relevant.

Loss and Protest: How Soon is Now?

14 Besides the potentiality for queer desire as exemplified in “This Charming Man”, there is also a concise tone of queer loss, rejection, affliction, and non-conformance in Morrissey’s lyrics which is distinctive of his writing. This queer negativity, that is evocative of the antisocial thesis in queer theory, and particularly of Halberstam’s discussion of the queer art of failure, is less directly linked to physical aspects of sexuality but to the psyche that is a consequence of the conflict of being queer in a heteronormative society. It constitutes another attribute signifying Morrissey’s narratives as precisely queer, thus placing them within the realm of de Lauretis’s definition of queer texts for a number of reasons. De Lauretis defines

queer a text of fiction – be it literary or audiovisual – that not only works against narrativity, the generic pressure of all narrative toward closure and fulfillment of meaning, but also pointedly disrupts the referentiality of language and the referentiality of images, what Pier Paolo Pasolini, speaking of cinema, called “the language of reality.” (244)

Although song lyrics due to their length automatically only depict a very limited segment of a narrative and in this way can never be expected to reach the same level of narrativity as prose texts do, the obstruction of fulfilment and closure as well as the disruption of referentiality applies all the same to Morrissey’s lyrics, as has also been shown above in the example of the fragmentary narrative style of “This Charming Man”.

15 Accordingly, non-fulfilment in the songs is often associated with the impossibility of and a non-response to love, while images remain vague, disguised, and ambivalent, constantly revolting against clarity, definiteness, and essential meaning. In The Smiths’ “How Soon Is

Now?”, the speaker fittingly characterises himself as follows: “I am the son / and the heir / of a shyness that is criminally vulgar / I am the son and the heir / of nothing in particular”. This non-particularity, which is identified as the speaker’s heritage, is precisely what blocks any reference point. It describes a queer legacy that draws the speaker toward negativity as an alternative place of existing as created by rejection and loneliness: “There’s a club, if you’d like to go / you could meet somebody who really loves you / so you go, and you stand on your own / and you leave on your own / and you go home, and you cry / and you want to die”. The hope in the first two lines, both sarcastically and sympathetically referencing the naivety of optimistic notions of love, is shattered by the experienced disappointment of going home alone. As emphasised by the use of the generic *you*, it is a collective and repeated experience which has ascended to a leitmotif eternally inhibiting any closure to the narrative. Inevitably, the non-closure results in pessimism: “see I’ve already waited too long / and all my hope is gone”. As much as this is a declaration to giving oneself up to fate, it is a defeat that does not come without revolt and demand: “You shut your mouth / how can you say / I go about things the wrong way / I am human and I need to be loved / Just like everybody else does”. From a queer perspective it would be hard not to interpret this as a reaction to discrimination against a non-heteronormative lifestyle that has been simply dismissed as ‘wrong’ by others.

16 The themes discussed in “How Soon Is Now?” are, according to Halberstam, paradigmatic for a kind of art he terms the queer art of failure: “I propose that one form of queer art has made failure its centerpiece and has cast queerness as the dark landscape of confusion, loneliness, alienation, impossibility, and awkwardness” (97). It describes a state of mind that has been born out of rejection, condemnation, and a poverty of choices – an embrace of the negative in order to produce alternatives to normative, capitalist, and live-affirmative concepts of compulsory success. Halberstam uses James C. Scott’s wording “the weapons of the weak” (88) to describe this queer strategy as a “way of refusing to acquiesce to dominant logics of power and discipline and as a form of critique” (88). Morrissey draws on this value of losing and therefrom develops different modes of embracing failure as critique. While the speaker in “How Soon Is Now?” acknowledges the impossibility of love for his supposedly different way of living and at the same time calls attention to the inequality that is incorporated therein, the protagonist in Morrissey’s “Dial-A-Cliché” gives his parent a forum for her homophobic requests only to reveal their stereotypical nature and the harm they do to the person addressed this way:

“Do as I do and scrap your fey ways” / (dial-a-cliché) / “grow up, be a man, and close your mealy-mouth!” / (dial-a-cliché) / But the person underneath / where does he go? / does he slide by the wayside? / or... *does he just die?* / when you find that you’ve organized / your feelings,

for people / who didn't like you then / and certainly don't like you now // [...] // "the Safe way is the only way! / there's always time to change, son!" / Yes well I've changed / but I'm in pain! / dial-a-cliché. (emphasis in original)

By giving a direct voice to the cliché reactions to queer forms of being, Morrissey emphasises the destructive force that is released by such utterances. Through contrasting them with the damage they cause, the intensity of the failure ultimately increases. The subtle sarcasm of the rhetorical questions and of the repetition of the title adds a further layer to the handling of the negative: the speaker is aware of the cruelty, he is affected by it, but he also finds a way of dealing with it by means of mockery. In line with Halberstam's understanding of the queer art of failure, this strategy may seem like a passive reaction to the homophobia of the parent, when it is really a quiet but insistent form of protest (88).

17 In recognising the *power* of the negative, Morrissey's usage of it is perhaps most closely connected to Muñoz's concept of queer utopia. Through the seemingly deep pessimism that entrenches Morrissey's lyrics and which is articulated in melancholia, mourning, and self-pity, the narratives find an escape in queer time and utopian desire, as Muñoz explains: "Queerness as utopian formation is a formation based on an economy of desire and desiring. This desire is always directed at that thing that is not yet here, objects and moments that burn with anticipation and promise" (*Cruising Utopia* 26). Again also evocative of the unbound desire as described by de Lauretis, Muñoz sees in the longing for "that thing that is not yet here" a powerful critique of present conditions and the possibility of a queer future:

It is in disappointment and failure that queer utopia emerges as an affective structuring device for implementing or, for that matter, *imagining* transformation. In this respect, queer utopianism is a nonreproductive futurism; it challenges 'straight time,' the parameters of which are 'an autonaturalizing temporality.' (22)

With queer utopia, Muñoz both dismisses Edelman's queer rejection of a future and embraces his critique of compulsory reproduction. To Muñoz, queerness is *precisely* about the future since the present order, for queers, to a great deal offers pain and loss. This is also inscribed in the title "How Soon Is Now?" because, for the queer speaker, the *now* which promises pain relief is not in the present, as in 'straight time', but in the future. Therefore, in the question "How Soon Is Now?" lies an acknowledgement of that queer temporality which queers can use for their own purpose:

To accept loss is to accept the way in which one's queerness will always render one lost to the world of heterosexual imperatives, codes, and laws. To accept loss is to accept queerness—or more accurately, to accept the loss of heteronormativity, authorization, and entitlement. To be lost is not to hide in a closet or to perform a simple (ontological) disappearing act; it is to veer away from heterosexuality's path. [...] Being lost, in this particular queer sense, is to relinquish one's role (and subsequent privilege) in the heteronormative order. (73)

This state of being lost also runs through – but is not limited to – the songs discussed thus far. Here, to accept this state does not mean not being able to protest: “Astonishment helps one surpass the limitations of an alienating presentness and allows one to see a different time and place” (5). Rather, to accept means to acknowledge that the loss is inherent in queerness’s positioning to the heteronormative order. A good example of this is The Smiths’ song “I know It’s Over”:

Oh mother, I can feel the soil falling over my head / and as I climb into an empty bed / Oh well. Enough said / I know it’s over still I cling / I don’t know where else I can go [...] I know it’s over / and it never really began / but in my heart it was so real / and you even spoke to me and said: // “If you’re so funny / then why are you on your own tonight?” [...] Love is natural and real / but not for such as you and I, my love.

Again, the impossible love is mourned by the speaker, a love that is not, a love that is utopia, merely imagined. The queer quality of that love becomes apparent especially in the very last sentence of the quote in the sarcastic statement that “love is natural and real” – except for the imagined lovers. It mocks and critiques an essential belief in love that is only valid for those of the heteronormative order. For those outside of this order, love can only be realised in utopia and so in spite of the despair and hopelessness (“I don’t know where else I can go”) the longing for “that thing that is not yet here” becomes the place of queer possibility. On the B-side “Please, Please, Please, Let Me Get What I Want” the protagonist claims “Haven’t had a dream in a long time / See, the life I’ve had / can make a good man bad // So for once in my life / let me get what I want / Lord knows, it would be the first time”, which again finds escape in its longing in form of a clear demand. On escape and longing Muñoz writes:

Furthermore, escape itself need not be a surrender but, instead, may be more like a refusal of a dominant order and its systematic violence. Queer fantasy is linked to utopian longing, and together the two can become contributing conditions of possibility for political transformation. Utopia’s rejection of pragmatism is often associated with failure. And, indeed, most profoundly, utopianism represents a failure to be normal. (*Cruising Utopia* 172)

In mourning, protesting, acknowledging, even wallowing in pain and failure, songs by Morrissey and The Smiths represent both queer fantasy and utopian longing and, indeed, a failure to be normal, as not belonging to the heteronormative order and therefore lacking something in the world: “Queerness is that thing that lets us feel that this world is not enough, that indeed something is missing” (1). Queerness is therefore not situated in the heteronormative here and now but somewhere on its margin, as Muñoz states, “queerness is always in the horizon” (11). The lyrics reflect that in their embrace of the negative, transforming failure both into hope and protest.

3.2 Owing the Stigma: Keeping the Population Down

18 Morrissey's encompassment of queer negativity does not stop there. He has other modes of using the dark and twisty for his purposes. The characters of the songs discussed in the previous section all indulge in their alienation and grief without forgetting to protest against the masses who do not accept any deviation from their heteronormative behaviour and are partly the reason why those queer characters feel so disconnected from this world. While Morrissey fights this inequality by reevaluating his queers through letting them stand up for themselves and reclaim their power in a melancholic embrace, in the songs I examine in the following the stigma and marginalisation seem to have been completely accepted. Where the speaker in "Dial-A-Cliché" quotes the parent in order to comment on it and raise awareness of the stigmatisation, the commentary in "There's A Place In Hell For Me And My Friends" (1991) is missing:

(we had no choice / we always did) / all that we hope / is that when we go / our skin / and our blood / and our bones / don't get in your way / making you ill / the way they did / when we lived / There is a place / a place in hell / reserved / for me and my friends.

The profound homophobia, literally the fear of being 'contaminated' with homosexuality and HIV, appears to have been entirely internalised in the queer perspective. Even the initial attempt to justify the queer position is shut down immediately by this same queer voice, admitting queer people would have had a chance and would be to blame for their suffering, their 'illness', and their being in the way – hell would be all they can expect for it. There is an outrageous brutality and destructiveness in these words that makes them hard to read or listen to for any approximately open-minded and empathetic person. The tremendous damage of these lines, however, does not stem from the fact that, unfortunately, some people feel that way about people who are different from them – a pathologisation queer people face all over the planet – but, instead, from the very fact that the queer speaker occurs to have adopted this opinion of himself and his friends and transformed it into self-hatred. This effect is amplified by the delicate manner in which Morrissey sings those words, burying the touch of sarcasm deep underneath the speaker's gut-wrenching self-denunciation. It is exactly this scenario of auto-stigmatisation, a place of ultimate negativity against the self, where the song derives its power and its stark audience response from.¹⁰ It is a power that forces the homophobe listener to confront herself with her own violent ideology and the damage it causes, and therefore becomes a form of protest disguised as its opposite which functions much more discursively than to simply state what is wrong with this world. Rather than opposing the homophobia within the heteronormative order, the lyrics oppose the order itself.

¹⁰ Critics describe it for example as a "mature", "heartbreaking", and "haunting" "torch song" (Hogan; Kinney).

19 I argue that, in using this subversive tactic, Morrissey ties in with a queer tradition of reclaiming and reusing a stigma, with the term *queer* itself being one of the best examples.¹¹ Instead of allowing this former “paralyzing slur, a mundane interpellation of pathologized sexuality” (Butler 223), to exercise its destructive force it has been refunctioned by those it was supposed to abject. Butler ascribes this phenomenon to the temporality of a term: “The ‘ever new’ possibilities of resignification are derived from the postulated historical discontinuity of the term” (224). Only through the repeated citation the insult had formerly extracted its force, which illustrates the performativity of a term:

If a performative provisionally succeeds (and I will suggest that “success” is always and only provisional), then it is not because an intention successfully governs action of speech, but only because that action echoes prior actions, and *accumulates the force of authority through the repetition or citation of a prior, authoritative set of practices*. (226-227, emphasis in original)

To repeatedly reuse a term in different contexts then is to change the trajectory of its history, which takes away its authority and eventually prohibits the success of the performative. In Butler’s words: “To recast queer agency in this chain of historicity is thus to arrow a set of constraints on the past and the future that mark at once the *limits* of agency and its most *enabling conditions*” (228, emphasis in original). “There’s A Place In Hell For Me And My Friends” uses these limits and enabling conditions to resort agency. However, there is one important difference to the refunctioning of the term *queer*: the stigmatisation here is not reclaimed in order to turn it into something positive, it is rather used to take the destructive power away from those who asserted it in the first place, leaving them with nothing else left to hurt since that power has already been reused by the abjected themselves. They, by turning this negative power against themselves, become some kind of martyrs who hold up a mirror to those who caused them pain. Nevertheless, it is a negative power that has been reclaimed. The repeated use of “me and my friends” in the song makes it a collective power, again representative of a wider community. It could even be claimed that the resignification, ultimately, turns the narrative from a failure into a success, evoking, again, a queer utopia as imagined by Muñoz.

20 “Ambitious Outsiders” (1997) from the suitably titled album *Maladjusted* combines this strategy of regaining agency over a stigma with an aspect of queer negativity that Halberstam, de Lauretis, and Edelman approach in their texts in contrast to Muñoz’s queer utopia: that of no future and the queer death drive. Unlike the guilty and masochistic tone of the previously analysed song, the mood in the controversial “Ambitious Outsiders” is threatening. Instead of taking the submissive position of the committer of diseases, here the

¹¹ Another example is the slogan “Pits and Perverts” for a benefit concert for the striking British miners, used by the alliance Lesbian and Gays Support the Miners (LGSM) in 1984.

collective “we” adopts the stigma of the child molester and the objector of reproduction and the future in a self-assertive manner:

Bolt-lock your doors / Alarm your cars / And still we move in closer / Every day / Top of the list / Is your smiling kids / But we’ll be smiling too / So that’s OK / Oh, and by the way / Thank you, because you’re / Giving, giving, giving / And we’re receiving – / No, no, we’re taking / Keeping the population down // Your taxes paid, but / Police waylaid / And we knows / When the school bus / Comes and goes / We’re on your street, but / You don’t see us / Or, if you do / You smile and say ‘Hello’.

The warnings in the beginning allude to the image of the homosexual being an invader to the ‘normal’ people’s lives, whose priority is to steal their kids, either to molest them or to use them as substitutes for their own non-reproductivity. The theme of giving and receiving is ambiguous, hinting at both the supposed stealing of the homosexual, while the heterosexual is productive (in terms of offspring), as well as at the ‘abjected’ sexual practices, especially of the male passive gay person (who receives). “Keeping the population down” then quite literally refers to the homosexual’s non-reproductivity, which is purportedly in danger of causing the demographic change of declining birth rates. The crude joke of the pedophile who waits for the school bus plays with the invisible threat that proceeds from the possibility of homosexuality, that – just like being a killer – could apply to any random person on the street. The colloquial usage of the singular verb form of “know” in connection with the plural “we” emphasises the status of the outsider. In a very morbid sense, the ambitiousness in the title can be either understood as the speaker’s willingness to come for the kids, or as a sarcastic comment on what this queer outsider is precisely not, since he does not – like ‘everyone else’ – strive toward reproduction and therefore a future of humankind.

21 Again, the power of Morrissey’s discourse lies in its seeming confirmation of stigmata against homosexuals, this time even going one step further by affirming these in a shocking fashion. The speaker appears to proudly embrace his own, as well as his companions’, non-reproductivity and rejoice over the danger this poses to the nuclear family – a demeanour highly evocative of Edelman’s queer critique of reproductive futurism as a “constraining mandate” of heteronormativity with the “pervasive invocation of the Child as the emblem of futurity’s unquestioned value” (3-4). His project to oppose this mandatory futurism and instead “embrace a figural identification with the death drive as *jouissance*” (de Lauretis *Freud’s Drive* 87) is discussed by both Halberstam and de Lauretis with mingled feelings. For Halberstam, Edelman’s antisocial agenda is not radical and political enough, which Halberstam ascribes to Edelman’s “unnervingly tidy and precise theoretical contractions of futurity” and his claim to “exert a kind of obsessive control over the reception of his own discourse” (107). In contrast, Halberstam praises the “symbolic and literal nihilism” (108) of

films like *Trainspotting* and bands like The Sex Pistols. I would argue that “Ambitious Outsiders” also reflects that kind of attitude, with the speaker even stating, “Well, it’s your own fault / For reproducing” (“Ambitious Outsiders”).

22 Differently, de Lauretis’ issue with Edelman lies in his understanding of a negated future that is both metaphorical and empirical:

The difficulty here is one of hearing two discursive registers at once, the ironic and the literal, the figural and the referential, the literary or speculative register of theory and the empirically or fact-based register of politics. The best illustration of this is Edelman’s figure of the Child as Imaginary that secures the future. When the figure is read referentially, through the political [...], that Child, despite the capital letter that marks its figural being, becomes literally the empirical, living child next door [...]. (258)

A similar statement could be made about “Ambitious Outsiders”: if its critique is directed at heteronormative reproductive futurism, are the kids in the school bus then figural or referential? The answer is that Morrissey’s discourse evades de Lauretis’ evaluation through the nature of its embrace of the negative. That is to say, the embrace is not an actual or at least not a completed one. It is rather evident that the speaker in “Ambitious Outsiders” wears the stigma as a weapon, but does not truly believe in its verification. By pretending to confirm the right-wing populist and homophobic ideas like the stereotype of the homosexual as pedophile or the reproach of homosexuality as the cause for declining birth rates, the song discloses the absurdity of homophobic accusations, makes fun of and intrinsically denounces them. Again, the outrageous embrace of the most vicious forms of stigmata against queers, in the end, is resignified and turned into a protest that is disguised as affirmation.

23 It is questionable if this is the kind of oppositionality “that would oppose itself to the logic of opposition” (Edelman 4) that Edelman had in mind, since the resignification somehow returns the narrative to the value of the social, even if that is in support of a different group outside the heteronormative order: “The embrace of queer negativity, then, can have no justification if justification requires it to reinforce some positive social value; its value, instead, resides in its challenge to value as defined by the social, and thus in its radical challenge to the very value of the social itself” (6). The positive social value in “Ambitious Outsiders” lies in its ultimate longing for a more accepting, respecting, diverse, and inclusive social community that does not stigmatise and thus does not imagine queers as child molesters – the queer utopia is back on the horizon. And yet, because of the sarcastic setup, it is left unclear in how far the song actually indulges in its critique of a mandatory reproductive futurism as proposed by Edelman. After all, the mocking and critique of the parents addressed in the song, who place life’s meaning in reproduction, in their “smiling kids”, while accusing the queers of “keeping the population down”, might as well be genuine. The song therefore

functions on numerous different levels, troubling clear significations and remaining, once more, ambiguous.

Conclusion: Queer Texts, Strange Ways

24 There is much more left to be said on Morrissey and The Smiths with regard to issues of sexuality, gender, and normativity, there are many more song lyrics to be analysed, many more aspects to be considered, and many more perspectives to be adopted in the process. For instance, in addition to my close textual reading of the lyrics, my project would benefit significantly from a musicologist approach that takes into account the way the innovative music and the idiosyncratic singing style of Morrissey affect the queer discourse that he engages in the lyrics. Furthermore, biographical aspects could be consulted and greater detail could be paid to the many instances of queer desire and gender fluidity, the intersections with disability studies and the camp aesthetic that suffuses Morrissey's song writing.

25 However far from being a 'complete' discussion of the queer discourse initiated by band and solo artist, what I have presented in my analysis of the song lyrics, is some evidence for their qualification as queer texts and their significant potential to disrupt, resignify, and denaturalise rigid, limiting, and excluding conditions and practices of the (hetero)normative order. The queering strategies Morrissey uses to oppose the confines of normative assumptions and essential significations include the maintenance of textual ambiguity, especially with regard to the possibilities of queer desire, the disturbance of narrativity and referentiality, the expression of sexuality as unbound drive, as well as the prevalence of queer signs. As a response to the stigmatisation and marginalisation that might be directed at queers and other subjects 'diverging' from the norms of the dominant culture, Morrissey employs diverse counter-strategies that embrace queer negativity in the form of grief, alienation, failure, and loss that are evocative of the antisocial thesis as brought forward by Edelman or Halberstam, and derive their power from protest, subversion, resignification, or a refusal of opposition.

26 At any rate, the songs by Morrissey and The Smiths give queer people a voice, a seat at the table, a sign that they are recognised, and, perhaps, the courage to embrace their queerness, embrace their differences, embrace their negativity, embrace the fact that there are approximately 7.5 billion people on this planet who are all not able to meet the norms. Although this may not always be much of a consolation in situations when one feels alienated, disconnected, marginalised, or even abjected, Morrissey reminds his audience that in their 'strangeness' they can still assert power over themselves and their choices: "So the choice I

have made / May seem strange to you / But who asked you anyway / It's my life to wreck / My own way", asserts the speaker of "Alma Matters". Even if he cannot fit in and may be frowned upon for it, he derives some satisfaction from the circumstance that he alone has the control over his 'strange' ways; and he might as well have some fun with it. In living up to that idea – and to cite the fitting title of the fourth Smiths' studio album – *Strangeways, here we come!*

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