Cruising Utopia

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AMIRI BARAKA DENOUNCED much of the life of LeRoi Jones, a writer, editor, and bon vivant in the bohemia of New York City’s Greenwich Village during the late 1950s and early 1960s. A difficult play by LeRoi Jones (Baraka), *The Toilet*, is emblematic of the life that Baraka eschews with hardly a backward glance.¹ *The Toilet* was produced in 1964, on a double bill with a play by Frank O’Hara, one of the members of the demimonde that Jones inhabited. Though I read the play as a narrative of violence and negation, it does nonetheless generate the possibility of a critical and utopian practice of hope in the face of loss. *The Toilet* signals a queer past with which Baraka, through tragedy in his own life, must reconcile. Following Ernst Bloch’s *Principle of Hope*, I am interested in the socially symbolic performative dimension of certain aesthetic processes that promote a modality of political idealism.² I see myself participating in a counternarrative to political nihilism, a form of inquiry that promotes what I am calling queer futurity. Previous aesthetic and cultural production—such as this somewhat minor play that was performed within a now-expired artistic enclave—offers a powerful critique via counterexample of the political impasse of the present. This temporal operation is enabled by a Blochian investment in both the not-yet-here (the future) and the no-longer-conscious (the past). *The Toilet* represents a violent and tragic queer past that, when seen through the optic of queer utopia, becomes a source for a critique of a limited and problematic straight time. I suggest that the performative force of the gesture interrupts straight time and the temporal strictures it enacts.

This chapter takes its lead from Fred Moten’s brilliant *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition*.³ Moten describes the conterminous relationship between black radical politics and improvisational
aesthetic practices associated with blackness. Looking at the racial blind spots in Sally Banes’s historiography of New York’s historical downtown bohemia, *Greenwich Village 1963: Avant-Garde Performance and the Effervescent Body,* Moten counters Banes’s now almost canonical rendering of a downtown art scene that excludes black artists such as LeRoi Jones, Cecil Taylor, and Samuel Delany. Here I am interested in casting light on not only those important historical figures but also others such as Mario Montez (the Warhol screen superstar who played Juanita Castro) or Dorothy Dean (the black woman who was the acknowledged ultimate fag hag of the day and worked as the sharp-tongued bouncer at Max’s Kansas City). These characters inhabit what Moten calls the B-side of this avant-garde’s history, in which Banes is uninterested. Although I am not proposing an alternative canon of what is an already existing, and in some ways already “alternative,” canon of the American avant-garde, I do want to look at these minoritized historical players because they disrupt dominant historiographies of queer avant-gardism and radical aesthetics and politics. Gloria Anzaldúa famously indicated that *jotería* (queers) could be found at the base of every liberationist social movement. And while tales of social movements in the United States continue to ignore *jotería,* to an even larger degree disciplinary accounts of avant-garde aesthetics underplay both explicitly queer presences and (perhaps especially) racialized participation, labor, and influence. Anzaldúa’s injunction to look for *jotería* is a call to deploy a narrative of the past to enable better understanding and critiquing of a faltering present. In this sense her call for mestiza consciousness is a looking back to a fecund no-longer-conscious in the service of a futurity that resists the various violent asymmetries that dominate the present.

*The Toilet* holds a pivotal place in Jones/Baraka’s history of artistic production. It has been called the most homoerotic play in a spate of other homoerotic or queerly valenced works by Jones/Baraka, such as *The Baptism,* mostly produced during the early 1960s. My project here, however, is not to “bring out” Jones or Baraka. Any such gesture would be reductive. Instead, I want to discuss the negotiation of animating queer energies in *The Toilet* to consider what queerness might tell us about the temporal particularity of the Greenwich Village lifeworld of the 1960s and what its resonances might mean today. When I refer to the animating force of queerness I specifically want to discuss a mode of queer performativity—that is, not the fact of a queer identity but the force of a kind of queer doing. My methodological concern at this point is an attentiveness to the
productive and counterproductive deployments of the past. Jones himself has been outed at different intervals by former acquaintances. His former lover and the mother of two of his children, the poet Diane di Prima, in her memoir *My Life as a Woman* has more than intimated that whereas she was not overly threatened by the other women with whom Jones spent time, she was afraid that she would ultimately lose her lover to a man. She also characterized the federal government’s crackdown of their important literary journal of the scene, *The Floating Bear*, as having to do with an essay by William Burroughs and a “homosexual play” by Jones. An outing that seems especially bitter and vindictive is by Joe LeSueur, Frank O’Hara’s roommate. In his autobiographical text *Digressions on Some Poems by Frank O’Hara*, LeSueur indulges in some especially spiteful prose that I cite at some length because I feel it is especially illuminating when one considers Jones’s place in this downtown milieu:

Neat, compact, physically appealing, conservatively dressed, clearly intelligent, obviously gifted, son of a New Jersey postman—here was a young black man who seemed to harbor no anger or resentment, so that his easy smile, sparkling eyes, and courtly manners quickly won over everyone he met in the downtown art and poetry community of the late fifties, which was when Frank became friends with him and he would drop by, first when we were living at 90 University Place, later at East 9th street, sometimes staying over and sharing Frank’s bed, while I, the very soul of discretion, was in my own bed, minding my own business, never asking questions, never saying a word to anyone later about what I thought might be going on Roi being a married man, father, a stud, a heterosexual! And how am I repaid for that discretion, keeping to myself what I could dine out on? Almost twenty years after Frank’s death, I picked up a copy of *The Autobiography of LeRoi Jones/Amiri Baraka* and found my answer when I came upon a passage [referring] to me as Frank O’Hara’s boyfriend with a compliment thrown in about my movie star good looks, which by no means assuaged my pique. The passage, which I’m unable to quote, smacked of a veiled homophobia and was utterly disingenuous, inasmuch as he knew that Frank and I weren’t lovers.

LeSueur’s invocation of Jones is explicitly racist, as evidenced by his descriptive language, which includes his condescending reference to the “clearly intelligent, obviously gifted” artist; his reliance on clichés used to
describe black people, including the phrases “easy smile” and “sparkling eyes”; and the fetishistic deployment of the word “stud.” LeSueur felt rage toward what he experienced as a personal betrayal. This quotation is more than a minor poet’s sense of interpersonal slight and general bitterness. Many members of that scene registered Jones’s passage from token insider to angry militant outsider in memoirs and diaries. In LeSueur’s chronicle we see another fairly standard move: the response to Jones’s “veiled homophobia” feels like full-fledged homophobia, conveyed via a language of racism, articulating a feeble complaint of hypocrisy. The charge of homosexuality and its entwinement with homophobia has not only been a tactic deployed by white writers. In Jerry Gafio Watts’s biography, Amiri Baraka: The Politics and Art of a Black Intellectual, the author comments on Baraka’s performances of hypermasculinity.10 According to Watts’s racial stereotypes of black hypermasculinity, that included justifications for the rape of white women and violent bursts of homophobic rhetoric that “masked Jones’s homosexual past.”11 The performance of calling out Jones’s queer past is a temporal move to which I would like to return in this chapter. But I wish to do so while resisting the moralizing impulse that drives LeSueur and Watts. Moten’s characterization of Jones’s hazy queerness is the most useful description I have encountered. His take on the Baraka of the early 1960s describes the narration of a “homosexual, interracial seizure” and its concomitant disavowal. Seizure means both arrogation and fit in this instance. I am also interested in another aspect of this queerness, which does not line up with most contemporary understandings of the term. I mean to describe this moment, the time and place of this relational field, where Jones, along with di Prima, the Judson dancer Fred Herko, and the jazz musician Cecil Taylor, sat together in di Prima’s apartment and staked together The Floating Bear. That pivotal journal included poems by Frank O’Hara, collages by the enigmatic Ray Johnson, and an essay by William S. Burroughs. Much of the work published there signals a kind of queer potentiality that existed before the stultifying effects of some identititarian narratives installed after the modern gay movement took hold.12 A Blochian understanding of temporality, especially its emphasis on the power of futurity, is key to understanding Baraka and his place. As Bloch makes clear, the past, even a willfully idealized one such as the one I rehearse in this chapter, tells us something about the present. It tells us that something is missing, or something is not yet here. Bloch’s unorthodox and messianic Marxism resonates alongside the black radical tradition that Moten invokes after Cedric Robinson. Robinson’s temporal mapping
of black resistance and endurance to capitalism predates Karl Marx and is reminiscent of the temporal work that Bloch advocates. If the condition of possibility for blackness is a certain radicalness in relation to capitalism’s naturalizing temporal logic, the black radical tradition is engaged in a maneuver that helps elucidate queer futurity. I wish to look at one particular moment of that tradition, exemplified in *The Toilet*, that intimated another way of being within both blackness and homosexualness—precisely at the point of what Moten describes as the homosexual-interracial seizure.

For Bloch, aesthetic production does more than socially symbolic work. Indeed, there is a performance of futurity embedded in the aesthetic. Bloch’s protocols of aesthetic analysis directed an eye toward what he called the anticipatory illumination of art. Queerness in my formulation is also not quite here and no longer conscious. Queerness, if it is to have any political resonance, needs to be more than an identitarian marker and to articulate a forward-dawning futurity. The dialectical movement that I am attempting to explicate is the interface between an engagement with the no-longer-conscious and the not-yet-here. This Blochian hermeneutic is especially felicitous when considering the queer residue and simultaneous potentiality that lay at the center of the example that Jones/Baraka and *The Toilet* generate.

*The Toilet* is a one-act play set in a high school restroom. At the end of the school day a group of black students enters the lavatory. They are expecting some event, which is revealed to be a fight between two young men, one black and one white. The would-be combatants—Ray, known by his schoolmates as Foots, and Jerry Karolis, who is described as a “paddy”—do not appear until about the middle of the play. The action that dominates the first half of the drama is the playful badgering and verbal taunting of Foots’s assembled friends. It is clear from the dialogue that Foots, who is described as small and compact, is nonetheless the unofficial leader of this cohort. He is also the only member who is described as a good student. Another dominant member is Ora, a violent bully who threatens the other young men in an extremely menacing fashion. His name connotes the oral of sexuality but also the question of aural that, for Moten, plays an indexical role in a black radical tradition. Moreover, there is the oral threat of the secret, either open or not, that is always relational to the question of sex, secrets, and disclosure.

While the boys verbally joust, there is a manhunt for Karolis under way in the halls. When two other boys, one black and one white, enter the restroom, the white one, Donald Farrell, soon discovers that the point
of this gathering is a gang assault on Karolis. Ora does not permit Farrell to defend Karolis verbally by revealing what might be a floating truth, the open secret of Karolis and Ray’s relationship.

Ora punches Farrell in the stomach, and Farrell falls, doubled over in pain, his lips temporarily sealed. Then Karolis is dragged into the restroom by Knowles and Skippy, the two young men sent to fetch him. His face is bloody. He has already been severely beaten. Ora taunts Karolis, telling him that he has a nice sausage for him. The verbal play hums somewhere between a taunt and the threat of sexual violation. At this point Foots makes his appearance. Once Foots enters, there is a shift in the play’s text, and scene direction becomes as important as dialogue. Here is the moment in the text when Foots first notices his intended opponent.

foots: Yeah somebody told him Knowles said he was gonna kick Karolis’ ass. (Seeing karolis in the corner for the first time. His reaction is horror and disgust . . . but he keeps it controlled as is his style, and merely half whistles.) Goddamn! What the fuck happened to him? (He goes over to Karolis and kneels near him, threatening to stay too long. He controls the impulse and gets up and walks back to where he was. He is talking throughout his action.) Damn, what you guys do? Kill the cat? (T, 52)

Scene direction is the play’s choreography of the gestural that is especially attuned to the temporality of reading the play along the provisionally parallel lines of the black radical tradition and the project of queer futurity. Moten’s analysis has also pointed to the emphasis on movement in the play. He is especially astute about Foots’s relation to movement, how his feet are indeed always moving and running, like his mouth. Of course he is also running from the force field of queer desire, the threat that animates the open secret, a secret that threatens to keep him hovering above Karolis for too long, a force he needs to resist, an impulse that needs to be controlled. (This is the secret that LeSueur supposedly kept to himself, that the jilted lover di Prima puts forth in her memoir, and that Watts blurts out in his three-hundred-plus-page condemnation of Baraka.) What happens at this moment in the play can be seen as a choreography, a dance macabre, scored by the death drive, a tune that is, as Lee Edelman argues, endemic to queerness. The dance is also the choreography of childhood violence and brutality, another queer past that haunts queers in the present, much in the same way that the past of The Toilet haunted the black nationalist Baraka.
Foots wants to put an end to this dance, not wanting to perform it for an audience. He tells his friends that Karolis was supposed to be beaten by him and that the after-school rumble has been ruined for him. Ora tells Foots to drag Karolis on his feet so that he can knock Karolis down again. Ora insists that the fight go on as promised, despite Karolis’s pathetic state. Farrell then gets up. Foots suggests that he get out, that he has no business there. Farrell asks to take Karolis with him and asks why he is about to be beaten. Ora reveals that Karolis sent a letter to Foots in which he exclaimed that Ray/Foots was beautiful and that he wanted to give him a blowjob. Farrell protests this impending attack and is about to suggest, it would seem, that there is more to the relationship between the two than the story of Karolis’s writing a mash note out of the blue would indicate. It would seem that this relationship has the status of what can be called semipublic knowledge. There is, of course, another reading to be made about letters, purloined and otherwise. But this is not the moment to make an argument for what “remains of the signifier when it has no more signification,” as Barbara Johnson argued in the case of Poe’s purloined letter. Instead, signification abounds, potentiality cloaked as innuendo. Before Farrell is finally ejected by Ora, Karolis stares at Foots and addresses him by his other name: “Oh Ray, come on. Why don’t you come off it?”

The not-so-unspeakable is almost spoken at this moment. And, on that cue, just when it seems as if further carnage has been averted, Karolis, Lazarus-like, rises from the corner where he has been slumped. He exclaims, “Nobody has to leave. I want to fight you Ray. (He begins to pull himself up. He is unsteady on his feet, but determined to get up . . . and to fight.) I want to fight you.” “Want” is the word emphasized through italics in the text, and thus desire is transposed. Karolis pushes “himself off the wall slightly and [wipes] his face with his sleeve” (T, 57). He calls out to Foots but modifies the structure of address, in the same way Farrell did a beat earlier: “No, Ray. Don’t have them leave. I want to fight you.” One onlooker calls out, “Get it on fellas.” The scene’s narration speeds up:

karolis: Yeh! That’s why we’re here, huh? I’ll fight you, Foots! (Spits the name.) I’ll fight you. Right here in this same place where you said your name was Ray. (Screaming he lunges at Foots and manages to grab him in a choke hold.) Ray, you said your name was. You said Ray. Right here in this filthy toilet. You said Ray. (He is choking Foots and screaming. Foots struggles and is punching Karolis in the back and...
stomach, but he cannot get out of the hold.) You put your hand on me said Ray! (T, 58)

Karolis has the upper hand in the fight, but the gang joins in and saves Foots. Karolis is beaten down and lies in the center of the room, limp. Ora drapes him in wet toilet paper, and the rest of the group keeps him from sticking the beaten boy’s head in the toilet. Foots is mocked by his friends, a leader deposed. Before exiting, Ora takes a paper cup, dips it in the commode, and throws it in Foots’s face. He leaves the room as well. Karolis struggles to get up but collapses on the dirty floor. Turning from paraphrase to Jones’s actual stage notes, we see that the play’s last moment is completely gestural:

After a minute or so Karolis moves his hand. Then his head moves and he tries to look up. He draws his legs up under him and pushes his head off the floor. Finally he manages to get to his hands and knees. He crawls over to one of the commodes, pulls himself up, then falls backward awkwardly and heavily. At this point, the door is pushed open slightly, then it opens completely and Foots comes in. He stares at Karolis’ body for a second, looks quickly over his shoulder, then runs and kneels before the body, weeping and cradling the head in his arms. (T, 58–59)

The play’s final moment is worth dwelling on, although I do not want to cast the gesture of tenderness as redemptive. I am not interested in cleansing the violence that saturates almost every utterance and move in the play. But I nonetheless want to consider how we might read this ending within the nexus of the historical moment, relational to an author’s status as outsider among outsiders in a lost bohemia, an expired avant-garde. Baraka renounces queerness a few years later. He even shouts down the play’s set designer, Larry Rivers, the straight painter who was also Frank O’Hara’s art-boy, semi-rough-trade lover, in a public forum.15 This moment nonetheless tells a story that suggests some kind of futurity, a relational potentiality worth holding on to. Battered and bruised, shattered by internal and external frenzies of homophobic violence, the combatant lovers nonetheless have this moment of wounded recognition that tells us that this moment in time and in this place, the moment of a pain-riddled youth, is not all there is, that indeed something is missing. The gestural speaks to that which is, to use Bloch’s phrase, the not-yet-here. The gesture is not
the coherence or totality of movement. Gesture for Giorgio Agamben is exemplary of the politics of a “means without ends.” The gestural exists as an idealist manifestation and not as a monolithic act directed toward an “end”: “What characterizes gesture is that in it nothing is being produced or acted, but something is being endured and supported.”16 The gesture interrupts the normative flow of time and movement. The image of the lover holding/enduring/supporting the other’s battered body is poignant when we recall that Foots, who is always doing/running his mouth or his feet, is finally still, living within the queer temporality of the gestural, a temporality that sidesteps straight time’s heteronormative bent. The politics of queer utopia are similarly not based on prescriptive ends but, instead, on the significance of a critical function that resonates like the temporal interruption of the gesture. Bloch rejected what he called “abstract utopias” that, within the frame of Agamben’s writing, would indeed be a prescriptive “end.”17 The queer futurity that I am describing is not an end but an opening or horizon. Queer utopia is a modality of critique that speaks to quotidian gestures as laden with potentiality. The queerness of queer futurity, like the blackness of a black radical tradition, is a relational and collective modality of endurance and support. The gesture of cradling the head of one’s lover, a lover one has betrayed, is therefore not an act of redemption that mitigates violence; it is instead a future being within the present that is both a utopian kernel and an anticipatory illumination. It is a being in, toward, and for futurity.

Lee Edelman, in his powerful polemic No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive, wishes to alert his readers to the fact that “the structuring optimism of politics of which the order of meaning commits us, installing as it does the perpetual hope of reaching meaning through signification, is always, I would argue, a negation of this primal, constitutive and negative act.”18 Political hope fails queers because, like signification, it was not originally made for us. It resonates only on the level of reproductive futurity. Instead, Edelman recommends that queers give up hope and embrace a certain negation endemic to our abjection within the symbolic. What we get, in exchange for giving up on futurity, abandoning politics and hope, is a certain jouissance that at once defines and negates us. Edelman’s psychoanalytic optic reveals that the social is inoperable for the always already shattered queer subject.19

I have attempted to outline this polemic in a fashion that displays some of my admiration for it. I agree with and feel hailed by much of No Future. Indeed, when I negotiate the ever-increasing sidewalk obstacles produced
by oversized baby strollers on parade in the city in which I live, the sheer magnitude of the vehicles that flaunt the incredible mandate of reproduction as world-historical virtue, I could not be more hailed with a statement such as, “Queerness names the side of ‘not fighting for the children,’ the side of outside the consensus by which all politics confirms the value of reproductive futurism.” But as strongly as I reject reproductive futurity, I nonetheless refuse to give up on concepts such as politics, hope, and a future that is not kid stuff. Maybe there are moments after the frenzy of negation that is symbolized as extreme violence in The Toilet, such as Karolis cradling Foots’s head, that might display an ethics of embracing one’s constituting negation. Perhaps that gesture is a manifestation of queerness’s jouissance. It certainly reads like a smoldering moment in a Jean Genet text. Edelman’s emphasis on queer jouissance, his charge that we take up our abjection within the social, is calibrated on embracing the necessary failure within the symbolic and within the protocols of reason. A reading aligned with this polemic would reject an understanding of this bloodied embrace between men as indicating any notion of a principle of hope. Thus, Jones’s only justification for the play’s ending would be rebuffed by an Edelman-inspired reading. In a 1978 interview, well after the heyday of his nationalist separatism and his immersion in a particular Marxist-Stalinist configuration, Baraka described the end of the play as tacked on, explaining that it was meant to end with the fight.

I sat there for a while thinking, was this really the way it had to end? The whole thing needed some kind of rapprochement—there was a question of wanting to offer that kind of friendship that existed across traditional social lines. At the time I was married to a white woman, and most of the friends I had were white, on the Lower East Side. I didn’t go around thinking in my mind this is the case, but I think that is why that kind of ending seemed more appropriate to me at the time.

We know that many of these white friends on the Lower East Side, such as O’Hara and Allen Ginsberg, were also a little lavender. The interview works as a mild disavowal of the play’s ending, a display of ambivalence that ignores its queer affect and tenor. The author’s need to justify his end as the appeasement of his immediate social world needs further scrutiny. A turn to Hegel via Judith Butler’s recent meditation on the longing for recognition can further explicate the stakes in this moment of contact
and interracial intimacy. Butler tells a tale of recognition, made famous by G. W. F. Hegel in *The Phenomenology of Spirit*. It is a representative moment that signals the spirit of German philosophical idealism in which Bloch and other utopian thinkers participate, and it further illuminates the play’s ending. Reflecting on the paradigm of the master and the bondsman, Butler outlines the relation to self and other:

The moment in “Lordship and Bondage” when the two self-consciousnesses come to recognize one another is, accordingly, in the “life and death struggle,” the moment in which they each see the shared power they have to annihilate the Other and, thereby, destroy the condition of their own self-reflection. Thus, it is as a moment of fundamental vulnerability that recognition becomes possible, and need becomes self-conscious. What recognition does at such a moment is, to be sure, to hold destruction in check.

The Hegelian narrative is enriched when we insert Frantz Fanon’s contribution to the very central philosophical thematic of self/other and the drama of recognition. If we consider the vicissitudes of the fact of blackness, the radical contingency that is epidermalization, the narrative fills out further and the tale of vulnerability is fleshed out. Recognition, across antagonisms within the social such as sex, race, and still other modalities of difference, is often more than simply a tacit admission of vulnerability. Indeed, it is often a moment of being wounded. In this sense I offer *The Toilet* as a tale of wounded recognition. It marks and narrativizes the frenzy of violence that characterizes our cross-identificatory recognition. *The Toilet* teaches us that the practice of recognition is a brutal choreography, scored to the discordant sounds of desire and hate. With that stated, its semidisowned ending speaks to the sticky interface between the interracial and the queer. The interracial and the queer coanimate each other, and that coanimation, which is not only about homosexuality but about blackness and how the two touch across space and time, takes the form of not only the amalgamation of movements that rate a seizure but also the fragmented gesture that signals an endurance/support, queerness’s being in, toward, and for futurity. Utopian hermeneutics like those invoked in the project of queer futurity consider the forward-dawning significance of the gesture.

Thus, the play’s dramatic conclusion is not an end but, more nearly, an Agambenian means without an end. Recognition of this order challenges
theories of antirelationality that dominate queer criticism, such as Edelman’s and the Leo Bersani of “Is the Rectum a Grave?” and, to a lesser degree, *Homos.* The act of accepting no future is dependent on renouncing politics and various principles of hope that are, by their very nature, relational. By finishing on a note not of reconciliation but of the refusal of total repudiation—a gestural enduring/supporting—*The Toilet* shows us that relationality is not pretty, but the option of simply opting out of it, or describing it as something that has never been available to us, is imaginable only if one can frame queerness as a singular abstraction that can be subtracted and isolated from a larger social matrix.

In *No Future* Edelman takes on Cornel West’s referencing of futurity in an op-ed for the *Boston Globe* that he wrote with Sylvia Ann Hewitt titled “A Parent’s Bill of Rights.” The title is disturbingly smug (as if biological parents of the middle class did not already have uncontested rights to their children!), and the editorial is a neoliberal screed on behalf of the culture of the child. But Edelman’s critique never considers the topic of race that is central to the actual editorial. West’s pro-children agenda aligns with his other concerns about the crises of African American youth.

Edelman’s critique of the editorial, with which for the most part I am deeply sympathetic, is flawed insofar as it decontextualizes West’s work from the topic that has been so central to his critical interventions: blackness. In the same way all queers are not the stealth-universal-white-gay-man invoked in queer antirelational formulations, all children are not the privileged white babies to whom contemporary society caters. Again, there is for me a lot to like in this critique of antireproductive futurism, but in Edelman’s theory it is enacted by the active disavowal of a crisis in afrofuturism. Theories of queer temporality that fail to factor in the relational relevance of race or class merely reproduce a crypto-universal white gay subject that is weirdly atemporal—which is to say a subject whose time is a restricted and restricting hollowed-out present free of the need for the challenge of imagining a futurity that exists beyond the self or the here and now.

The question of children hangs heavily when one considers Baraka’s present. On August 12, 2003, one of his daughters, Shani Baraka, and her female lover, Rayshon Holmes, were killed by the estranged husband of Wanda Pasha, who is also one of Baraka’s daughters. The thirty-one- and thirty-year-old women’s murders were preceded a few months earlier by another hate crime in Newark, the killing of fifteen-year-old Sakia Gunn. Gunn was a black transgendered youth who traveled from Hoboken to
Greenwich Village and the Christopher Street piers to hang out with other young queers of color. Baraka and his wife, Amina, have in part dealt with the tragic loss of their daughter by turning to activism. The violent fate of their child has alerted them to the systemic violence that faces queer people (and especially young people) of color. The Barakas have both become ardent antiviolence activists speaking out directly on LGBT issues. Real violence has ironically brought Baraka back to a queer world that he had renounced so many years ago. Through his tremendous loss he has decided to further diversify his consistent commitment to activism and social justice to include what can only be understood as queer politics. In the world of *The Toilet* there are no hate crimes, no lexicon that identifies homophobia per se, but there is the fact of an aggression constantly on the verge of brutal actualization. The mimetic violence resonates across time and to the scene of the loss that the author will endure decades later. This story from real life is not meant to serve as the proof for my argument. Indeed, the play’s highly homoerotic violence is in crucial ways nothing like the misogynist violence against women that befell the dramatist’s family or the transgenderphobic violence that ended Gunn’s young life. I mention these tragedies because it makes one simple point. The future is only the stuff of some kids. Racialized kids, queer kids, are not the sovereign princes of futurity. Although Edelman does indicate that the future of the child as futurity is different from the future of actual children, his framing nonetheless accepts and reproduces this monolithic figure of the child that is indeed always already white. He all but ignores the point that other modes of particularity within the social are constitutive of subjecthood beyond the kind of jouissance that refuses both narratological meaning and what he understands as the fantasy of futurity. He anticipates and bristles against his future critics with a precognitive paranoia in footnote 19 of his first chapter. He rightly predicts that some identitarian critics (I suppose that would be me in this instance, despite my ambivalent relation to the concept of identity) would dismiss his polemic by saying it is determined by his middle-class white gay male positionality. This attempt to inoculate himself from those who engage his polemic does not do the job. In the final analysis, white gay male crypto-identity politics (the restaging of whiteness as universal norm via the imaginary negation of all other identities that position themselves as not white) is beside the point. The deeper point is indeed “political,” as, but certainly not more, political than Edelman’s argument. It is important not to hand over futurity to normative white reproductive futurity. That dominant mode of futurity is
indeed “winning,” but that is all the more reason to call on a utopian political imagination that will enable us to glimpse another time and place: a “not-yet” where queer youths of color actually get to grow up. Utopian and willfully idealistic practices of thought are in order if we are to resist the perils of heteronormative pragmatism and Anglo-normative pessimism. Imagining a queer subject who is abstracted from the sensuous intersectionalities that mark our experience is an ineffectual way out. Such an escape via singularity is a ticket whose price most cannot afford. The way to deal with the asymmetries and violent frenzies that mark the present is not to forget the future. The here and now is simply not enough. Queerness should and could be about a desire for another way of being in both the world and time, a desire that resists mandates to accept that which is not enough.