

Queering the Pitch of “The Fate Machine”: Harry Kondoleon’s *Zero Positive**

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Abstract

Zeroing in on Harry Kondoleon’s 1989 play *Zero Positive*, this article aims to explore the play’s neglected political potentials which remobilize the theatrical stage as a site of resistance. It argues that the play implements queer spatio-temporality as an alternative for normative understanding of time and space under which queer and minoritarian PLHIV (People Living with HIV/AIDS) are stigmatized. The play carves out an alternative reality, one which resists the trivializing interventions of institutions such as the family and the hospital. Recasting hope in the face of pathologizing processes of medicalization and infantilizing heterofamilial imperatives that limn an ideal life and death narrative (“The Fate Machine”), Kondoleon’s theatre topples spatio-temporal oppressions. It celebrates non-normative bondings and offers remedial possibilities. The play’s metadramatic elements, especially, not only mock the familial formation of reality but also remodel the hospital clinic, turning it into a hospitable space.

Keywords: HIV/AIDS Theatre, Harry Kondoleon, Time and Space, Queer Studies, Theatre and Performance, Literature and Medicine

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“Kader Makinesini” Kürlenmek: Harry Kondoleon’un *Zero Positive* Adlı Oyunu

Öz

Harry Kondoleon’un *Zero Positive* (1989) oyununa odaklanan bu makale, tiyatro sahnesini bir direniş alanı olarak yeniden mobilize eden oyunun gözden kaçan politik potansiyellerini araştırmayı amaçlamaktadır. Makale, Kondoleon’un oyununun HIV/AIDS’le yaşayan queer bireylerin ve azınlıkların damgalanma altında olduğu normatif zaman ve mekan anlayışına alternatif olarak queer bir zaman ve mekansallığı uyguladığını gösterir. Oyun, aile ve hastane gibi kurumların önemsizleştirici müdahalelerine direnen alternatif bir gerçekliği ortaya çıkarır. İdeal bir yaşam ve ölüm anlatısı (“Kader Makinesi”) çizerek patolojikleştiren medikalizasyon süreçleri ve çocuklaştıran hetero-ailesel zorunluluklar karşısında umudu yeni bir biçime sokan Kondoleon’un tiyatrosu, zaman ve mekansal baskıları devirir. Böylece normatif olmayan bağlılıkları kutlar ve iyileştirici olanaklar sunar. Oyunun metadramatik unsurları gerçekliğin ailesel oluşumuyla alay etmekle kalmaz, aynı zamanda kliniği de daha misafirperver bir alan olarak yeniden imler.

Anahtar Kelimeler: HIV/AIDS Tiyatrosu, Harry Kondoleon, Zaman ve Mekan, Queer Çalışmaları, Tiyatro ve Performans, Edebiyat ve Tıp

“I got some credit in the straight world
I lost a leg, I lost an eye
Go for credit in the real world
You won’t die.”

—Young Marble Giants, “Credit in the Straight World”

“But is it too late to avert the scourge?”

—Antonin Artaud, *The Theatre and Its Double*

Introduction

Zero Positive (1989) was first produced by Joseph Papp and directed by Kenneth Elliott (“Zero Positive,” n.d.). It premiered at the New York Shakespeare Festival’s Public Theatre in 1988 (Nel-

son, 2003, p.231). The play is different from other HIV/AIDS plays produced around the same time. As Therese Jones notes, first-generation HIV/AIDS plays are different from the second-generation of plays. Whereas the first-generation of HIV/AIDS plays and performances are “traditional in form, sentimental in tone, and assimilationist in aim,” the second generation of plays “represent a radical shift in theatrical representations of AIDS [...] Unlike first generation plays, humor is not incidental but essential in second generation theatre, an entire spectrum of comedic drama: satire, farce, romance, slapstick, and burlesque” (Jones, 1994, p.x; xi). Indeed, Kondoleon’s portrayal of the epidemic is subtle, ironic and playful. It also recurrently and sarcastically adds intertextual dimensions to its narrative.

Like the protagonist of William Shakespeare’s well-known tragedy *Hamlet*, Kondoleon’s protagonist, Himmer, is a mercurial, introspective, maladjusted, and suicidal spirit. Himmer tests positive for HIV along with his close female friend Samantha. Having lost his mother, he looks after his delusional father, Jacob Blank, who consistently interpellates Himmer into “the right path” which unmistakably is none other than a heterosexual life. In the course of the play Himmer decides to perform one of his mother’s old plays, titled “The Ruins of Athens”, and this play-within-the-play eventually becomes nothing but a half-joking tragic allegory of HIV/AIDS. Staging the play at an AIDS research center, Himmer casts himself and his discontented friends as well as family members to play the roles. However, Himmer proclaims that he is planning to replace the hemlock-drinking scene with real poison, implying his self-immolation. He renders his friends discombobulated by this radical decision. No longer succumbing to futile futuristic hopes, Himmer aims to disrupt “the fate machine” by killing himself (Kondoleon, 1993, p.226).

Zero Positive highlights astringent queer kinship, an acerbic critique of Oedipal spatio-temporalities, porous sexualities and vulnerable resistive practices in the face of a normative heterosexual order within which queers and queer PLHIV (People Living with HIV/AIDS) are infantilized, reduced to non-citizens, and in short, locked into heteronormative spatio-temporalities. What is more, the play’s metatheatricality, in the form of the hospital play, as well as its

self-referentiality, function as a way of transforming the hospital by overthrowing the very clinic in which spatio-temporal oppressions are perpetually created for PLHIV and replacing it with a queer spatio-temporality. By so doing, Kondoleon's play, I would also propose, queers the notion of death and decentralizes the pervasive desolation and duplicitous nature of the clinic. *Zero Positive* denounces hope-ridden futurity and plays with the idea of the radicality of the death drive, while celebrating queer kinship against heterosexual familiarity. At the same time, however, despite his effervescent anger and suicidal tendencies, the play's nonconformist protagonist Himmer also gives in to the restorative power of hope, validating constructive self-doubt and self-respect at the end of the play. Freud, in his seminal work *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, as to the conflicting life instincts and death instincts, writes "[o]ne group of instincts rushes forward so as to reach the final aim of life as swiftly as possible; but when a particular stage in the advance has been reached, the other group jerks back to a certain point to make a fresh start and so prolong the journey." (1990, p. 35). It would not be wrong to say that Himmer "move[s] with a vacillating rhythm" between these opposing drives, eventually giving in to his life instinct (Freud, 1990, p.35). As such, *Zero Positive* could be considered as a remedial theatrical intervention or an example of utopian theatre. As Jose Esteban Muñoz underlines, theatrical spatio-temporality can provide a liberating potentiality. Utopian theater could repudiate the prison-like "here and now," and gesture towards "then and there" instead¹ (Muñoz, 2009, p.1). *Zero Positive* harbors this utopian potentiality as it renders the stage as an atemporal space. Himmer's father, in a very playful way and at an arguably lackluster yet important cathartic turn, drinks the hemlock instead of him and dies at the end of the play. Kondoleon, by turning Himmer away from his planned self-destruction, heralds the survival of hope, emphasizing its vital importance for queers and queer PLHIV.

¹ Utopia for Muñoz is "a horizon of possibility," it is "a temporal disorganization, as a moment when the here and the now is transcended by a then and a there" (Muñoz, 2009, p.97). Similarly, Jill Dolan, contends that theatre allows for a possibility of "imagin[ing] a utopia, that boundless 'no place' where the social scourges that currently plague us [...] might be ameliorated, cured, redressed, solved, never to haunt us again" (2005, p.37).

My primary aim in this essay, by way of a thorough textual analysis and theoretical assistance, is to reconsider Kondoleon’s play, unearthing the queer spatio-temporal potentials and politics of theatre. *Zero Positive* is a call to arms for political action to intervene in the ideologically (re)produced, marked, and stigmatized statuses of the bodies living with HIV/AIDS. The play’s main characters are dissident figures, “affect aliens” as well as *bad citizens*² (Ahmed, 2010; Bersani, 1995). Himmer, especially, posits himself against this misguided affective economy as he proclaims that “the happy answers have been removed from the deck”³ (Kondoleon, 1993, p.217).

Furthermore, we could say that Kondoleon’s play manifests what Judith Butler describes as “theatrical rage.” In other words, rousing theatrical practices against the “interpellation of shame” (Butler, 1993, p.233). Butler stresses the vital necessity of this type of rage as it aims to transform the notion of death which is misguidedly deemed central to the lives of queer and queer PLHIV: “[m]obilised by the injuries of homophobia, theatrical rage reiterates those injuries precisely through an ‘acting out,’ one that does not merely repeat or recite those injuries, but that also deploys a hyperbolic display of death and injury to overwhelm the epistemic resistance to AIDS” (1993, p.233). The play-within-a-play gesture, especially, which includes unexpected moments of death and survival, helps Kondoleon flesh out the urgency of “theatrical rage” in the face of spatio-temporal persecution of PLHIV.

Kondoleon elaborates on *Zero Positive* in a rare interview, noting that, “this play isn’t really about AIDS, it’s about death, and knowing your ‘due date’ is stamped on you” (H. Kondoleon, interviewed by J. Brown, April 20, 1990). Despite this disclaimer, however, he underlines the fact that AIDS is used to specify an expira-

² Sarah Ahmed writes about “the significance of queer pessimism as an alien affect” in *The Promise of Happiness*, which effectively contests “the labor of staying on the right path” (Ahmed, 2010, p.162; 48). “The right path,” as Ahmed notes, points to familial happiness securely placed within the regimen of heterosexuality.

³ This brings to mind Ahmed’s redeployment of pessimism as an “alien affect,” or in other words, it’s a “queer pessimism” (2010, p. 162). It gestures toward “a queer politics which refuses to organize its hope for happiness around the figure of the child or other tropes for reproductivity” as Ahmed contends (2010, p.162).

tion date for non-normative bodies. His remark, I believe, gravitates towards the idea that normative temporal politics render HIV/AIDS as a determinant factor in the life-death binary of queers. At its core, the discourse of HIV/AIDS merely consolidates already established norms of death. The breakout of the AIDS crisis in the United States in the 80s demonstrated the blatant trivialization of queer people. As Seidman notes, queer people were seen as the paradigmatic disease-spreaders and potential threats, began to be “fired from their jobs, evicted from their homes, ejected from public spaces,” and completely pushed to the margins of society in the name of the sanitization of the public sphere and the securitization of the general public (Seidman, 1998, p.52). Ronald Reagan’s notorious silence on the epidemic, too, was integral to the HIV/AIDS discourse. Reagan spoke publicly about AIDS for the first time in September 1985, almost five years from its outset (Grover, 1987 p.23). This, as Grover suggests, was because “the Administration did not perceive AIDS as a problem” (Grover, 1987 p.23). Reagan’s belated address indicated that PLHIV were intentionally left in a temporal abeyance. Indeed, HIV/AIDS was allowed to disproportionately impact marginalized and vulnerable communities. Further, queer spaces across the country continued to face the threat of closure by public health officials due to their supposed impurity and high-risk state (Grover, 1987 p.28). Also, quite a few American people became proponents of quarantining PLHIV according to a Los Angeles Times poll (Balzar, 1985). The spatio-temporal stigmatization of PLHIV was embedded in the historical development of HIV/AIDS in the United States. They were deep-rooted in these state-sanctioned regulations, implementing sexual, racial and medical impossibilities for the sake of supposedly synchronous and safe heterosexual family and home, while stalling queers and queer PLHIV. This was the tumultuous political environment within which Kondoleon’s *Zero Positive* took stage.

I would like to take Kondoleon’s remark as my starting point with which I would like to elaborate on Himmer’s decision to take his own life as well as his latter self-doubt. His self-doubt coincides with Kondoleon’s tragicomic decision to destroy Himmer’s father by letting him drink the poison instead. His desire to kill himself, his

fervent death drive, can be seen as a voluntary dissociation in the face of normative spatio-temporal restraints, namely, the systematic necessitation and prolongation of preset spatio-temporalities (like that of the hospital’s or familial home) in the control of non-normative people. Therefore, he wishes to go back to “the inanimate state” which is ideally exempted from stigmas; an attempt to despatialize and detemporalize himself from the historical stigmas visited upon queer bodies (Freud, 1990, p. 32). In that sense, Himmer plans his suicide so that he would no longer feel the burden of linear temporality, and live up to the sanitized, futile future(s) which are imagined at the expense of queers and queer PLHIV.

However, the main reason why Himmer is edged by this death drive is that he does not want to give in to the notion of death itself. That is to say, he wants to impede this normative idealization/centralization of death in which queers, specifically queer PLHIV, hold a privileged place. Himmer, at first, has only this drive to hold onto because it remains as one of the most consistent and radical ways of resisting the existing spatio-temporal norms. The notion of suicide, thus, is a way of disassociating from reality, which is nothing but a normativizing heterosexual fantasy. Himmer’s suicide, as a notion, is understandable in the sense that he decidedly wants to disrupt “the fate machine” which gestures towards pre-established standards, certainties and necessitations, all of which sustain and strengthen spatio-temporal subjugation of queer PLHIV. “The fate machine,” stipulates three equivalents: heterosexuality, health, and happiness. Himmer specifically, but also and inevitably his close friends such as Samantha, a fellow HIV-positive friend, and Prentice, an anxious and fear-ridden queer who is against testing, all have their own concerns as to this exclusionary mold.

Kondoleon portrays a non-white HIV-positive woman, thus showing an ethnic diversity in the presence of the predominantly white male characters of HIV/AIDS theatre. Yet this HIV-positive character, named Samantha, is specified as: “attractive, perhaps Black or Oriental and Hispanic” (Kondoleon, 1993, p. 210). As this nebulous and somewhat careless stage direction indicates, Kondoleon’s play does not really formulate an effective racial politics of

being a minoritarian woman living with HIV/AIDS. We are given that Samantha is having an affair with a married man whose name is Johnny (Kondoleon, 1993, p. 214). Samantha sarcastically implies that she has contracted HIV from him: “[s]o it turns out one of my married men spent some of his time off with other married men” (Kondoleon, 1993, p. 248). Yet, Kondoleon does not provide the resources with which the sinister white (male) temporality could be fully exposed. We do not have clear access to the privileges Johnny shares “with other married men.” Thus, the play gets in the way of identifying circumstances that deprive Samantha. It is within this one-sided order that Samantha’s struggle, as a woman of color living with HIV/AIDS, remains insufficiently explored. Samantha is an important character, yet appears to have been added for the sake of diversity as her backstory is significantly absent. It could be said that Kondoleon’s blind spots are race and gender. Still, there are a couple of instances in which we could explore temporality’s relation to women, especially women of color living with HIV/AIDS, which I will talk about shortly.

Kondoleon’s use of metatheatricality in *Zero Positive* function more than as a comedic allegorical commentary on the HIV/AIDS epidemic. These formal choices help cement the point he wishes to make about the possibility of alternative spatio-temporalities. It contributes to Kondoleon’s desire to narrate Himmer’s symbolic suicide, thus obviating the temporal coercion. In addition, it transforms the inhospitable and unwelcoming clinic into a welcoming and hospitable space. This indicates that his theatre functions as a remedy as opposed to the rather detrimental reality that is full of spatio-temporal codifications. At the same time, in mirroring many of the thematic nodes present in Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, Kondoleon’s theatre is a celebratory nod to Shakespearean theatre and metatheatricality in general: for example, Kondoleon questions the Oedipalized dimensions of family and concomitant demarcations between adulthood and childhood, resembling the controversial Oedipal measures of *Hamlet*. As Lee Edelman writes, *Hamlet* allows for a queer reading in relation to futurity as “Hamlet [...] belongs to the universe in which the Child has become the guarantor of futurity: a fantasy figure pro-

duced as the promise of secular temporal closure intended to restore an imaginary past in a future endlessly deferred” (2011, p. 148). Formally, too, the play echoes *Hamlet*. For instance, the play-within-a-play gesture brings to mind Shakespeare’s famous mousetrap. And Kondoleon’s play anticipates a ravaging scourge in the decadent city of Athens and features deadly potions. Shakespeare, similarly, portrays Denmark as a city with doomed future and prioritizes poisonous potions in *Hamlet*. In these respects, the play’s metatheatricity is further enhanced by its intertextual scope.

“The Fate Machine”

Kondoleon’s protagonist wants to break the habit of living according to, what he names, “the fate machine.” The machine signifies synchronous lives lived within pre-established spaces; a supposedly ideal life in its inevitable participation to the capitalistic formation of reality. In that sense, the cogs of this machine are heterosexuals who are repetitively deemed healthy and happy. It is through this machine that queer and minoritarian PLHIV are systemically controlled, disenfranchised and expected to live (or, indeed, die). Himmer wants to actualize himself outside of this reductive and stultifying experience, which, as Muñoz notes, points to “straight time” which is “the only futurity promised is that of reproductive majoritarian heterosexuality” (2009, p.22). “Straight time,” Muñoz underlines, “naturalizes cultural logics such as capitalism and heteronormativity” (2009, p.12). This experience is unilateral because the future, as Lee Edelman suggests is imagined as such: a supposedly immutable and stable hereafter which is politicized in the name of, and in the hands of reproduction (2004). Edelman problematizes the idea of the future, criticizing the “political discourse” that resolutely depends on the inimitable “figure of the child” (2004, p.11). This seemingly ceaseless anticipation, which he calls “reproductive futurism,” ossifies “the absolute privilege of heteronormativity” by correlating the future with (hetero)reproduction (Edelman, 2004, p.2). Going a little bit further, Edelman offers to embrace the notion of “the death drive” against the politicization and sanctification of the future in the name of the figure of

the child. As such, drawing from Lacan's concept of "the sinthome," Edelman, in his critique of the "constraining mandate of futurism," develops a neologism, namely, "sinthomosexuality," which "den[ies] the appeal of fantasy, refusing the promise of futurity" and "accedes to no equivalent, to no translation, and thus to no meaning" (2004, p. 4; 35; 36). In this insurmountable rupture that queers/queerness disclose against the futile promise of futurity, Edelman identifies the sinthomosexual's "senseless jouissance" (Edelman, 2004, p.36). This is the basic premise of his anti-social / non-relational thesis.

Confronting a similar "reproductive" future-landscape, of course Himmer's anti-relationality and fervent death drive become his bedrock. When faced with a future that he does not believe in, Himmer's refusal of "the fate machine" is directly related to his "disidentification from the promise of futurity" (Edelman, 2004, p.27):

HIMMER: What a drag it was clinging to whatever little shred of sanity's the minimum daily requirement to pass as a sane. If it had some payoff—a good job, high salary, marriage, children, vivid love affairs, new clothes, travel, cars, what have you — it would all seem worth it. And it does, I suppose, for a while. Anyway, I never had much investment in that world, I was only pretending, playacting. (Kondoleon, 1993, p.249)

In the passage above, Himmer shows no belonging to the capitalistic and consumerist world. He is in need of adopting another since the world, to him, is merely available to particular spatio-temporalizations. The world, which Himmer voluntarily repudiates, is laced with frustrating capitalistic necessitations, "reproductive futurism," emptied out measures of sanity and health, all included in the normative spatio-temporal order. It is a world that maintains and endorses purely and simply capitalistic spatio-temporalizations. These are, of course, allocated for the privileged normal. Queers and queer PLHIV are, then, spatio-temporal others. This goal-oriented, teleological structure posits queers and queer PLHIV as redundant, "senseless" subjects. Bodily integrity and systematic control and organization need to be perpetually repeated through "the fate machine." Himmer considers himself as a "playacting" non-subject in such a world. Thus,

he comes off as a figure of “sinthomosexuality,” aiming to disturb “re-productive futurism.” Hence, Himmer’s voluntary disassociation, and his complete refusal of the “responsibilities that burden each day with suffocating banality” (Kondoleon, 1993, p. 250).

For Himmer then, killing the self, albeit ideologically, remains as the only valid action which, paradoxically, performs self-actualization. While *this world* wants/expects his death, the idea of suicide grants him a healing self, a self in the making, a self that rejects submission. *This world* expects acquiescence and unceasing stagnancy from the queer and minoritarian PLHIV, while imagining a death that would be the one perfect culmination of their alleged wretchedness. Himmer wants to circumvent this ill fantasy:

HIMMER: [W]e’ve all become terribly suspicious of action, of any action to take to effect a change, especially for the better. After all these centuries we still fundamentally believe in the fate machine. We don’t have to move, we don’t even have to get up, the fate machine will do it all. (Kondoleon, 1993, p.226)

Action, in the excerpt above, denotes how “the fate machine,” regards some bodies as active, while locking others into stasis. Himmer, as one of these others, wants to act, and questions the ostensible unstopability of this machine. What is followed by Himmer’s unexpected declamation is Samantha’s claim, in which it is clear that “the fate machine,” is, indeed, something hard to break especially for a woman of color. Samantha says she does not “want to be on the side of chaos” (Kondoleon, 1993, p.226). “Chaos” points to other alternatives, perhaps, non-capitalistic and non-hierarchical spatio-temporalities, not driven by a normative impetus. “Chaos” is the spatio-temporality of an outlier, of queers, of minoritarian women PLHIV. Although Kondoleon does not elaborate on Samantha’s claim further, it can be said that, as a minoritarian woman living with HIV, she is perfectly aware that she will be ostracized if she chooses not to be on the side of order: “In the United States when you are out of the game you are out of the game” (Kondoleon, 1993, p.246). Samantha knows that she is “out of the game”: “[s]o I die, I tell myself, so what, everyone’s scheduled to die” (Kondoleon, 1993, p.248).

Pertinent to these concerns, recent scholarship on queer studies has demonstrated the need to discard queer theory's elitist tendencies as they block the inclusive, relational and politically sound passages, which are what it actually needs (Penney, 2013; Lewis, 2016; Brim 2020). Edelman's anti-social stance is criticized because it eventually fails to address the impact of capitalism on racialized queers and women, becoming only available to particular subjects. I argue that Himmer's transformation, his reclaimed hope is tempted by this kind of necessity. His failed suicide, his recantation illustrates the necessity of a more inclusive and relational notion of queerness.

Medicalization and Symbolic Suicide: Hope Regained

Ivan Illich, in his seminal book *Medical Nemesis: The Expropriation of Health*, argues that medicine is “the most rapidly spreading epidemic of our time” (1976, p.26). Illich also notes that medicine not only “labels the handicapped as unfit and breeds ever new categories of patients” (1976, p. 43), it also “creates a new group of outsiders each time it makes a new diagnosis stick,” emphasizing that “morality is as implicit in sickness as it is in crime or in sin” (1976, p. 46). Illich wrote his influential book prior to HIV/AIDS's occurrence, nevertheless, his ideas are quite useful when thinking about medicine's large share in the configuration and consolidation of the HIV/AIDS discourse. These ingrained medical methods render queer and minoritarian PLHIV as outsiders while prolonging their (mis)treatment with an ever-regressive approach and finally, guaranteeing a standardized death as the only escape. That is, again as Illich aptly puts, “the dominant image of death determines the prevalent concept of death,” and that, “the culturally conditioned anticipation of a certain event at an uncertain date is shaped by institutional structures, deep-seated myths, and the social characters that predominate” (1976, p. 174). The prevalent spectacle of death designates a notion of death that has to come naturally, and this bespeaks of a death that should only come by way of maturing heterosexually and this is the reason why queer and minoritarian PLHIV are, first and

foremost, sentenced to a temporal death, prior to their actual death; a premature conceptual death that destroys the present.

In *Zero Positive*, Kondoleon criticizes this most normativizing, stigmatizing and pathologizing aspect of the HIV/AIDS discourse. Medical (mis)treatments perpetuate the stigma, rendering PLHIV paranoia-ridden, and suspicious of their bodies. Samantha summarizes the medical approach’s futility when she, regarding doctors and medical (mis)treatments, says “you sense everyone’s faithlessness in their own attempts” (Kondoleon, 1993, p. 245). She further mulls over how medical (mal)practices inevitably add to the burden of the normative imagination that PLHIV – women of color in particular – are conceptually dead when they are diagnosed with HIV. As such, medical practices are nowhere near free from stigmatization and pathologization. They force PLHIV to “embrace the incurable” through media outlets while skirting around care and treatment (Kondoleon, 1993, p.245-6). As Susan Sontag remarks, in *AIDS and Its Metaphors*, medical discourses shaped around HIV/AIDS are misleading in the sense that they specify AIDS as “an inexorable, invariably fatal disease” (1989, p.32). Samantha underlines the fact that giving in to medicine is nothing but a lost cause since it never fails to be specious, attributing its own failure to the subjects while claiming their withdrawal: “we’ve donated ourselves to experimentation” (Kondoleon, 1993, p.250).

Like Samantha, Prentice is also fed up with the centralization of death for queers, a process which is exacerbated by the normative regimen of life. The presumption here is that queers need to perform sexual abstinence, otherwise, they are basically self-destructive murderers. He notes: “the whole romance angle of life has been drained out of everyday experience. Everyone meets everyone else and suspects they’re meeting their executioner, it makes the most casual overtures seem [...] extinctive [...]” such that everyone should interact with others “at arm’s distance” (Kondoleon, 1993, p.247). Prentice has this fear of interaction and hysteria because he does not want to stay in this controlled stasis aggravated by both medical and societal oppressions, which further disallows him from sociability. When Samantha and Himmer talk about testing Prentice, too, says

that he is against testing, thinking that he would not ever become seropositive. He is fearful, anxious, obsessive (“disorder is too terrible for him,”) and avoids people as well as interaction, mainly because he does not want to worsen his isolation (Kondoleon, 1993, p. 222). Being seropositive, after all, would characterize him even more untimely and non-spatial because it would make him more visible; he, too, does not want to be, in Samantha’s words, on the side of *chaos*.

Himmer is no exception with the ever-pathologizing, hope-ridden futility of prognosis. He also says that the drugs he’s been taking are making him queasy and, as a result, he feels sicker. When Prentice asks whether there is any good news from his doctor, Himmer answers, “good news/bad news, it’s become a ferocious bore” (Kondoleon, 1993, p. 248). As such, he considers suicide. Considering symbolic suicide is a necessary “action” in the face of permeating stasis (Kondoleon, 1993, p. 226). Himmer’s suicide, especially in light of Illich’s following comments, can be posited as a resistive practice of self-actualization. Illich notes:

Socially approved death happens when man has become useless not only as a producer but also as a consumer. It is the point at which a consumer, trained at great expense, must finally be written off as a total loss. Dying has become the ultimate form of consumer resistance [...] Authority might be challenged if he took his life before the appointed hour. The medicalization of society has brought the epoch of natural death to an end. (1976, p.206-7)

Himmer epitomizes what Illich describes as “consumer resistance.” He wants to disentangle his “appointed hour” with suicide, since death itself has become a “commodity” (Illich, 1976, p. 174). Perhaps this is why the play also transforms the medical term *seropositive* to *zeropositive*. This gesture can be thought of as, again, shaking the shackles of medical parlance, thus its emblematic discrimination practices that are solidified by language. When Samantha reveals that her test results are positive, Himmer underscores the term’s highly problematic connotations. Seropositivity amounts to how medical temporality makes PLHIV closer to the idea of a “death sentence:”

SAMANTHA: Seropositive, what else is there to say?

HIMMER: Zero positive? The zero for infinite nothingness and the plus sign like a cross in a grave.

SAMANTHA: The word is sero not zero.

PRENTICE: It doesn’t mean anything.

HIMMER: It’s a death sentence. (Kondoleon, 1993, p. 228)

This dialogue comes relatively early in the play, however, it further emphasizes how Himmer, later, will disrupt this imposed death sentence, and thus hampering his victimization ordered by medical dictums. Consequently, Himmer entreats the hemlock which is called the “elixir of life” in “The Ruins of Athens.” This elixir can be perceived as a queer substitution for the ineffective treatments and drugs. If Himmer’s death symbolizes the death of a queer PL-HIV’s compliance and his futilely hopeful self, then, surely, it is more beneficial than the prognosis-imposing, ever-pathologizing medical barriers of drugs and treatments. In that sense, the elixir is nothing but a cure. That is to say, Himmer’s proposed suicide can be seen as an antithetical cure. It would allow him to disassociate from the spatio-temporal constraints by way of a symbolic death, which is a radical resistance. Rather than giving in to an institutionalized death at the hands of medicine, he considers suicide to break this pattern.

This is, however, a symbolic death; Himmer does not commit suicide. Yet, this does not make such an act inefficient and/or not radical enough. The fact that Himmer has reservations and that he desists from committing suicide makes his symbolic death even more important. Symbolic suicide indicates medicine’s malice control of temporality. The anticlimactic turn, that is his self-doubt and eventual renunciation, becomes an essential impetus with which, I believe, Kondoleon emphasizes the fact that one needs not to commit suicide, and that perhaps, the idea, albeit unactualized, itself is resistive enough to make a point. In that sense, hope is significant; an armor against allegedly salutary medical practices. Himmer disqualifies medical hope, replacing it with his own idiosyncratic, unalloyed idea of hope. Jacob Blank’s drinking the hemlock in “The Ruins of Athens” provides an anticlimactic catharsis since it qualifies Himmer’s non-death and his reclaimed hope. Prior to the play-within-

a-play gesture Himmer demonstrates a turning point in his motives, which can be seen from the following excerpt:

HIMMER: The truth is I'm not so sure I'd like to slurp down my final brew. I keep thinking what if there really is a soul, some filament only vacationing in you for a time, wouldn't it be a terrible pity then to find out you'd muffed its smooth flight with your unhappy interventions. What if impatience really is somehow punished after life as it is so often punished in life, wouldn't that be awful? (Kondoleon, 1993, p.262)

In this passage, Himmer displays a self-questioning that leads him to an essential realization. He wants to reactivate his patience and hope which are not taught and/or induced by medicine but perform a hope of his own. Then, he realizes the fact that it has always been there, that it lies in his powerful connection to his friends with whom he shares the same forced destiny. This becomes another cure against the spatio-temporal constraints aggravated by the medical control of PLHIV.

Queer Kinships, Familial Burden and Recuperation

Kondoleon points out the recuperative nature of the friendship between Himmer, Samantha and Prentice by way of theatre. His theatre, which is potentially an enabling medium free from the normative spatio-temporal structures, functions like a home. As Bersani highlights, the American media (especially TV) not only designates a specific role to the family but also divides the family as a biological and a cultural unit (1987, p. 203). Thus, Kondoleon's theatre, as an artistic intervention to the normative media, becomes more apparent in the presence of an exclusionary unit: the family. Unlike a traditional home with constraining rules, a theatrical home paves the way for alternative spatio-temporalities. What is more, Kondoleon, through his metatheatrical formulations, brings the group together, showing that these friends are performing for one another. This is why queer kinship is extremely vital and can be considered recuperative. The fact that Himmer is ready to separate himself also from his chosen family by committing suicide demonstrates Himmer's

radical wish to disrupt the traditional HIV/AIDS narrative once and for all. Paradoxically, his wish to die at the risk of losing his chosen family redeems him from actually doing it. Thus, it is a type of kinship allowing Himmer to break familinear narratives that only make room for “reproductive futurism.” In that regard, Himmer’s chosen family and/or his nonbiological kinship, and, above all, the relationality he builds with his friends, help him regain the life impulse he has lost. With this recognition, Himmer recalibrates the cardinal necessity of living (performing) for his peers, altering the course of the traditional life-death narrative PLHIV are locked into. Kondoleon uses Himmer’s gestural suicide to interrupt heteronormative spatio-temporality.

The group’s friendship, just like Himmer’s renunciation of suicide, becomes a recuperation in the presence of the punitive proceedings that PLHIV have to face. A specific scene, placed right before the denouement, signals the importance of this recuperation. In it, these friends apologize to each other. This collective apology occurs between the members of this newly discovered family, as they express love and forgive each other for any adverse thing they may have said or done. This moment further emphasizes the fact that the love and forgiveness between this family will not be invalidated by any kind of dominant precept. It is a moment of embracing togetherness in defiance of predominant intolerance, lack of compassion, and virulent discrimination:

HIMMER: I’m sorry.

PRENTICE: And I’m sorry for anything I said to you bitter or envious or angry. But because we may not be here tomorrow—no, let me finish—we may not be here tomorrow and I want to say I’m sorry to everyone before it’s too late.

SAMANTHA: I’m sorry too.

[...]

HIMMER: Let’s promise to always have some love for each other even after we’ve gone. (Kondoleon, 1993, p. 263)

Certainly, the trio’s friendship is actually conspicuously striking from the outset of the play. Yet, after this scene, it becomes quite vital since it evinces solidarity through their kinship, freeing them from

the spatio-temporal constraints. Himmer used to have no place in his head “for love hopes” and was thinking that “the happy answers have been removed from the deck” (Kondoleon, 1993, p. 253; p. 217). He was thinking that he “can’t wait until tomorrow[s]” (1993, p. 50). Chiefly, this is because of the fact that Himmer once was married before acknowledging the radicality of his homosexual identity: “[...] in the back of my mind I thought, oh, I’ll have a child, that’ll be nice, a nice little girl or boy to take on this long walk through harsh weather” (Kondoleon, 1993, p.220). He, in hindsight, can see the pitfalls of normative heterosexuality’s relation to power structures, its biased spatio-temporalizations. Once he realizes the significant resistance of the powerful kinship they share, however, he seems to understand the salutary necessity of a recalibrated love and hope. This is exactly why Himmer implies an idea of love that even overbears death.

Elizabeth Freeman effectively demonstrates how queer belonging functions. Freeman writes, “to want to belong, let us say, is to long to be bigger not only spatially, but also temporally, to ‘hold out’ a hand across time and touch the dead or those not born yet, to offer oneself beyond one’s own time” (2007, p. 299). As Freeman propounds, this kind of belonging heralds the nullification of the spatio-temporal controlling of the past, the present and, more importantly, the future. It is cross-temporal since it transforms the control, restructuring it and turning it into something positive, renewing the connection over and over again, always resituating oneself in relation to the temporal others, thus sidestepping the stigmas in the process. Freeman also writes that queer kinship points to “forms of alliance with and inheritance from bygone or not-yet eras and discarded bodily dispositions” (2007, p. 311). It is with this kind of resistive affiliation that Himmer plans to recalibrate love and hope, which queers the notion of death as well. The affective heaviness that compels these characters gives way to a very necessary relief after this moment. Kondoleon’s formal choices, in that respect, make room for alternative spatio-temporalities in which different types of relationalities, apart from the Oedipal ones, come to light and fully function.

In *Zero Positive*, the overbearing heterofamilial burden is represented by Himmer’s father, Jacob Blank. Kondoleon uses this figure

to debunk the recursive production of normative spatio-temporalizations. By so doing, I believe, the vital importance of the kinship between Himmer, Samantha and Prentice becomes further manifested. In "Is Kinship Always Already Heterosexual?" Judith Butler argues that "kinship does not work, or does not qualify as kinship, unless it assumes a recognizable family form" (2002, p. 14). Butler points out how capitalism and the figure of the heterosexual family designate spatio-temporal codifications and their spurious appearance as normal and/or natural. The heterofamilial burden is sustained through the maintenance of an Oedipal temporality. Himmer problematizes the centralization of Oedipal temporality after being harangued by his father, who maintains his never-ending infantilizations by strictly demarcating his prioritized adulthood from Himmer's still continuing childhood. Himmer says:

HIMMER: I spoke to Doctor Anger. He wanted me to go on at length about my childhood. He had his heart set on understanding all my bad attitudes and bad fortune in terms of my upbringing, I have total recall of any given situation from the past so I let his little ears fasten to my rather lengthy list of what by now must be to all twentieth century psychologists a rather commonplace harangue of baffled infancy, estranged toddler days, wounding adolescence, and stultifying adulthood. (Kondoleon, 1993, p. 256)

Normative familiarity is sustained through the centralization of the Oedipal cycle, an upbringing which is contingent upon the idea that children are "baffled," subjects who should act with a sense of mission to eventually become a stultified adult. Himmer, due to his previously married state, thoroughly understands this problematic process. As such, he questions what Jack Halberstam refers to as the "reproductive logics of Oedipal temporality" (2007, p.318).

Kondoleon, again, plays with this regimented separation, in other words this linear upbringing. In so doing, he grants Himmer a "backward birth" as an adult. Kathryn Bond Stockton proposes this concept to draw attention to the distinctive and decisive segregation between childhood and adulthood. Stockton emphasizes that the fantasy of becoming an adult, in other words, the notion that the phase of adulthood which unmistakably must follow one's child-

hood, is problematic because this betokens the regimental process of “growing up toward full stature, marriage, work, reproduction and the loss of childishness” (2009, p.4). Therefore, it is the act of looking backward that matters, a process to which she refers to as “a gay child’s backward birth,” which means to realize one’s queerness as a child and thus, simultaneously signifying the straight adults’ death” (Stockton, 2009, p.16). Stockton puts forward another way of growing up, namely, a “sideways growth” which is “something related but not reducible to the death drive; something that locates energy, pleasure, vitality, and (e)motion in the back-and-forth of connections and extensions that are not reproductive. These [Stockton] theorize[s] as moving suspensions and shadows of growth” (Stockton, 2009, p. 13). I would argue that Himmer actualizes his “backward birth” by first exhibiting a radical suicidal drive, which is later interrupted, and which enables him to regain his hope through a newfound familiarity (kinship). He not only evades his father’s incessant infantilizations, but also completes his very “sideways growth.” The kinship represented in this play stands against monolithic Oedipal temporality, which enforces linear progress in an ostensibly synchronous life.

Jacob Blank operates as the absurd purveyor of this kind of synchronous life. He considers Himmer as a “rascal” or a “little boy” and repeatedly infantilizes him, his friends and their friendship (Kondoleon, 1993, p. 256; p. 221). He does not think that “children mix well with adults in social functions” and admonishes Himmer to find himself a spouse when he’s “old enough” (Kondoleon, 1993, p. 256; p. 257). Here, Blank’s reference to “children” is a metonym for queers, queer and minoritarian PLHIV, people with non-normative sexual practices and a sex-positive woman, underlining the connection between these figures and an idea of infantile time. As Muñoz notes:

Queers [...] especially those who do not choose to be biologically reproductive, a people without children, are, within the dominant culture, people without a future. They are cast as people who are developmentally stalled, forsaken, who do not have the complete life promised by heterosexual temporality. (2009, p. 98)

In Jacob Blank's view, Himmer, and his friends are immature agents without future. Jacob Blank demarcates between and justifies heterosexual temporality, which is promising and foreseeably safe, and the trio's infantile temporality, which is developmentally arrested, lacking and unpromising. In the play, this contrast is further amplified through Jacob Blank's absurd relationship with Debbie Fine, a young and discernibly gullible heiress who is infatuated with Himmer's father. Jacob Blank and Debbie Fine's relationship serve as a model. The following excerpt demonstrates their absurd timeliness:

JACOB BLANK: Darling, am I terribly late?

DEBBIE FINE: Just on time.

Debbie Fine and Jacob Blank kiss.

JACOB BLANK: Let's live in the present ... it's all we've got. (Kondoleon, 1993, p. 257)

Here, Kondoleon satirizes heterosexual temporality's immaculately operating state. This dynamic is further emphasized in the scene in which Jacob Blank boasts about how he would get flowers for Debbie and garnish their bedroom with them:

JACOB BLANK: I'll buy you some darling. I'll spread them on our bed.

HIMMER: You're indecent; keep your sex life to yourself and private. (Kondoleon, 1993, p. 260)

In the passage above, Kondoleon mocks the sacralization of the bed, which purportedly is the one and only consummatory space. Jacob Blank does not shy away from publicizing his justified privacy, thus reaffirming compulsory heterosexuality's perfectly arranged spatio-temporalization.

The ideal state of Jacob Blank and Debbie Fine's heterosexuality contrasts with Prentice's idea of home. In an earlier scene, Prentice says: "[A] large expanse of homelessness sits at home waiting for me, it's always at home. I'm homesick in and out of home" (Kondoleon, 1993, p. 251). This striking contrast demonstrates how the idea of home is tenuous for queers and queer PLHIV. Lauren Berlant contends that there is "no privacy protection for any non-reproductive sexual practice or identity," emphasizing that protected privacy is

available only to heterosexuals (Berlant, 1997, p. 18). Berlant names this as “heterofamilial citizenship” (Berlant, 1997, p. 18). Queer people and queer PLHIV are kept out of this entitlement. They, as Berlant underlines, are where the “logic of the national future comes into crisis” (1997, p. 18). Viewed in this way, it would not be wrong to say that Jacob Blank represents “heterofamilial citizenship.”

Kondoleon nevertheless disrupts Jacob Blank’s celebrated heterofamilial privilege. His depiction of Jacob Blank is not only self-destructive but also downright infantilized. Kondoleon locks up Jacob Blanks in an infantile temporality. Earlier in the play, Jacob Blank plays with his train set, cries out loud, rushes about and knocks things over like a fidgety child. Indeed, Himmer, Prentice and Samantha appear as his parental figures (Kondoleon, 1994, p. 222). Jacob Blank, in these scenes, seem quite disconnected from the real world, primarily because he grieves for his late wife. Yet, things are quirkier and beyond mere grief. Kondoleon intentionally renders these familial figures as spatio-temporal others:

PRENTICE: It seems he’s gone into some time warp where he’s still married to your mother or maybe they’re just dating. Anyway, he was calling for her. He hasn’t seen her in twenty years so I guess the funeral really threw him right? (Kondoleon, 1993, p. 224)

And in another:

HIMMER: He has sort of lost his mind a bit. He’s sort of skipped to another place in time, with my mother apparently. (Kondoleon, 1993, p. 233)

Himmer further aims at his family’s pitfalls and ironically infantile state, thinking that the marriage of his father and mother was a complete “horror-show” (Kondoleon, 1993, p. 217). He also thinks that his mother was “in a state of arrested development [...] pickling her teenagerness in solitude,” and that his father, now, is acting as a “cut-free adult [...] living in his head like a teenager” (Kondoleon, 1993, p. 250). All of these factors blur the line between adulthood and childhood.

This is one of the most striking trademarks of *Zero Positive*. By reverse infantilization, Kondoleon locates adults as non-temporal and non-spatial. Therefore, it is possible to say that this reversal queers the very heterosexual enclave, displaying how it is structurally meagre and preposterous. In that respect, Kondoleon epitomizes Jacob Blank as a “dead citizen,” not a living identity “but dead, frozen, fixed at rest” (Berlant, 1997, p. 60). Berlant argues that, “healthy heterosexual identity (the straight and undiseased body) is a prerequisite to citizenship” (Berlant, 1997, p. 80). Kondoleon turns Jacob Blank’s “healthy heterosexual identity” upside down by depicting him as a demented and dysfunctional heteropatriarchal fool. To this end, it is possible to say that he becomes the victim of the spatio-temporal constraints he forces upon the trio. On account of this, his function disappears, and Kondoleon spares him, putting an end to his long-standing heterosexual burden. In “The Ruins of Athens,” while Himmer and Prentice arm-wrestle for the elixir, Jacob Blank enters and drinks it at a moment’s notice. This cannot be reckoned as a selfless fatherly move, but rather a move that strengthens his prolonged burden, which is what Kondoleon tries to emphasize from the very outset of *Zero Positive*. Jacob Blank becomes the one who is overwhelmed by this burden and eventually kills himself in the following pseudo-cathartic scene:

JACOB BLANK: Athletes, I toast your Olympian triumph! (He drinks)
PRENTICE: It is the King
 And he drinks the poison.
HIMMER: . It is poison
.....It is poison
.....It is poison
HIMMER: Dear Father, it isn’t elixir you’ve drunk but poison I intended for myself, if we don’t hurry you will die. (Kondoleon, 1993, p. 277-78)

This necessary death of Jacob Blank is provided by a play-within-a-play, “The Ruins of Athens,” which allows me to move to Kondoleon’s crucial theatrical interventions.

A Dramatic Cure: The play-within-a-play

In one of the earlier scenes of the play, and in the thick of a discussion about how suffocating “the fate machine” is, Kondoleon uses interesting set of stage directions that draws attention to the trio’s (Himmer, Samantha and Prentice) disjointed status in relation to temporality:

After a slight pause—they are as still as Beckett’s characters caught in urns, almost without movement—Himmer reaches for an envelope on the end table nearest him. (Kondoleon, 1993, p. 226)

Kondoleon, here, suddenly alludes to the absurdist aesthetics of a Samuel Beckett play. This sudden theatrical move underlines how these outsider characters, like the absurd figures scripted by the twentieth century playwright, are on the margins of society. They seem to be unable to continue, almost immobile, as this short break suggests. Kondoleon, here, deliberately draws attention to the theatrical stage’s spatio-temporality, showing that it is asynchronous with the normative spatio-temporalities.

The play’s intertwined relation between performance and performativity further accentuates its metatheatrical scope. With reference to performance, these actors act according to a role and with reference to performativity, they act according to norms situated in this dire heterosexual fantasy. This amounts to the unsettling possibility that acting might serve both as a role and a norm. This intertwinement further complicates the question of the playacting.

Indeed, disjointed theatrical temporality is reflected even more so in the dénouement of the highly dramatic second act, which commences in a hospital room. Led by Himmer and accompanied by his friends, “The Ruins of Athens” is enacted within the hospital environment. The play is written by Himmer’s mother and is a comically vitriolic allegory of HIV/AIDS, which resembles Shakespearean dramatic verse. It takes place in a derelict, war-stricken Athens, an “Acropolis in disarray from the war” that resembles rather a modern necropolis, New York City, as noted in the stage directions (Kondoleon, 1993, p. 264). Kondoleon provides a metatheatrical in-

tervention through this half-serious Greek play. Metatheatricality draws further attention to the realities that queer and minoritarian PLHIV face. In that sense, the characters’ awareness of their theatricality reminds us of the fact that they are the real players in the real world who are facing the spatio-temporal control. If this is the sole reality, then, theatre and theatricality remain as the provider of truth, and thus can be perceived as a functioning cure. For instance, in the hemlock-drinking scene of “The Ruins of Athens,” medical dead-ends are even more emphasized and criticized. The elixir, as an antidotal drug that actually functions as opposed to inoperative medical drugs, kills the figurehead of heterosexuality, Jacob Blank. Kondoleon establishes a working cure that interrupts the normative spatio-temporal order, giving hope back to the hands of Himmer. Hope lasts because of this manoeuvre. Metadramatic elements enhance the spectators’ empathy as well. They underline the harmful logic behind the spatio-temporal control and accentuate their toxic transmittability.

Kondoleon reimagines the hospital space, turning it into a hospitable space. With this he deinstitutionalizes PLHIV, giving them the freedom and potentiality of theatrical spatio-temporality; a safe and operating hereness and nowness, the effects of which become even more cathartic when Himmer’s suicide is stalled and hope is regained. By rendering the clinic interchangeable with the theatrical stage, Kondoleon destigmatizes the PLHIV. That is, the playwright’s characters are never more alive and exempted from stigmas than they are when they act as acting actors in a hospital space. This disrupts traditional hospital spatio-temporality. The rigidly coded and death-obsessed spatio-temporality of the clinic gives way to a sense of aliveness enacted by Kondoleon’s acting actors. This gesture also queers the notion of death. Playing “The Ruins of Athens,” and thus *Zero Positive*, itself becomes the “foolproof medicine” (Kondoleon, 1993, p. 274).

Zero Positive is a virulent artistic intervention, tackling HIV/AIDS as a product of discourse rather than of a medical condition. It

draws its strength from unsettling the spatio-temporal cage in which queer and minoritarian PLHIV are left to die. Its protagonist Himmer, indeed, embraces the negativity of his queerness and the radicality of the death drive. Yet, this gives way to the recalibration of the notion of hope over the course of the play. Himmer's symbolic suicide, and his later reclamation of hope and alternative forms of bonding that go beyond the enclosures of the institution of family, which indicates different spatio-temporal planes and opens him up to relational possibilities rather than merely reaffirming his negativity and/or anti-sociality, can be seen as curative actions and practices. Kondoleon's use of metadramatic elements, especially, derail heteronormative spatio-temporalities, exposing their malicious formation, control and diffusion.

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