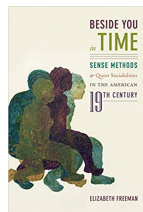




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BESIDE YOU IN TIME: SENSE METHODS AND QUEER SOCIABILITIES IN THE AMERICAN 19TH CENTURY [O'Hara Review]



By **Elizabeth Freeman**
 (Duke, 2019), xii + 228 pp.
 Reviewed by **Daniel T. O'Hara** on 2020-04-08.

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EDITOR'S NOTE: This book is also reviewed by **Jamie Parra**.

The jacket copy for *Beside You in Time* explains that its author

expands biopolitical and queer theory by outlining a temporal view of the long nineteenth century. Drawing on Foucauldian notions of discipline as a regime that yoked the human body to time, Freeman shows how time became a social and sensory means by which people assembled into groups in ways that resisted disciplinary forces. She tracks temporalized bodies across many entangled regimes--religion, secularity, race, historiography, health, and sexuality--and examines how those bodies act in relation to those regimes. . . . Freeman makes the case for the body as an instrument of what she calls queer hypersociality. As a mode of being in which bodies are connected to others and their histories across and throughout time, queer hypersociality, Freeman contends, provides the means for subjugated bodies to escape disciplinary regimes of time and to create new social worlds.

I have quoted this statement to show the wide scope and significance to which this book--the third by this author from Duke University Press--aspires. The statement also previews the book's knotty skein of arguments.

Let us pull on one thread displayed in the subtitle: "sense methods." The phrase itself sounds neither methodical nor sensible, but that is clearly its point. As a lure, it hooked me. The chapter on the Shakers, whose name derives from their group dancing, gives a good sense of what Freeman intends by the term. Being steeped in modern American canonical literature, I was reminded of the original ending (now stanza seven) of **Wallace Stevens's "Sunday Morning,"** in which a ring of men dance on a Sunday morn in order to worship the sun, not as a god we know, but as what a god in this Utopian future might be. Equally derived from Whitman and from journalistic articles on the native American phenomenon of the ghost dance, which eventually drew D. H. Lawrence to New Mexico after World War I, the imagery of Stevens's stanza suggests that a sense method is a social practice, perhaps a new ritual, at odds with established or conventional society and its stuffy or bourgeois values and rules:

Their chant shall be a chant of paradise,
 Out of their blood, returning to the sky;
 And in their chant shall enter, voice by voice,
 The windy lake wherein their lord delights,
 The trees, like serafin, and echoing hills,
 That choir among themselves long afterward.
 They shall know well the heavenly fellowship
 Of men that perish and of summer morn.
 And whence they came and whither they shall go
 The dew upon their feet shall manifest.

Similarly, we can tease out the meaning of "sense method" from the other chapters referred to in the statement quoted above. A sense method is a practice, a technique, or a ritual adopted by a group in imaginative or creative opposition to ruling conventions. The latter aim to discipline would-be unruly subjects into established lifestyles, forming them by making them conform to the law and modern values of social life, as Foucault suggests in books such as *Discipline and Punish* (1975) and *The History of Sexuality* (1976). Queering such norms and values, turning them into oppositional critiques but with a positive spin--as in the dance moves of Shakers--is what the full subtitle of this book suggests for a rather long nineteenth American century, stretching from the late 1700s to the early 1900s. Though literature holds an important place in this epic story, it participates in an array of alternative methods, practices, and lifestyles, with their own nuanced significances and evaluations by as wide an array of groups as can be envisioned.

The titles and subtitles of the five main chapters (four of which have been published previously) exemplify the scope of the book:

1. Shake It Off: The Physiopolitics of Shaker Dance, 1774-1856
2. The Gift of Constant Escape: Playing Dead in African American Literature, 1849-1900
3. Feeling Historicisms: Libidinal History in Twain and [Pauline Elizabeth] Hopkins

4. The Sense of Unending: Defective Chronicity in "Bartleby, the Scrivener" and [Gertrude Stein's] "Melantha"
5. Sacra/Mentality in Djuna Barnes's *Nightwood*.

The book ends with a coda titled "Rhythm Travel," a riffing on what feels like a new turn of mind to come, a jazz take on American cultural studies.

As Freeman puts it in chapter five, "ecstatically embodied belief practices in the United States" (159) include new forms of relationality that incorporate but also transcend race, class, and sexual differences, aspiring as they do to a new vision of human becoming and belonging, incorporating literary and other artistic forms of expression. "Queer Sociabilities," she argues, do not disavow and exclude but affirm and incorporate, not on any hierarchical model of personhood and society but as a radically democratic and open *socius*.

In this crucial respect, Freeman takes a strong stand against Lee Edelman and Leo Bersani, who have identified "queerness" with the Lacanian take on the Freudian "death drive": a "no future" prospect rather than one that is either liberal progressive or purely Utopian or visionary:

[T]he fantasy of being unrepresentable, about an iconoclasm that is . . . the basis of this queer antisocial thesis [is one] in which anal sex serves as a rite of penance for the sin of selfhood, shattering the *imago*. We can see it in Edelman's *sinthomosexual*, which denotes a fundamental resistance to meaning and intelligibility. But as alluring and intellectually rigorous as these formulations are, I find them somewhat unsatisfying in that they are merely the flip side of the same coin: they are part of the complex of renunciation, asceticism, sadomasochism, and transgression of the limits of selfhood that Foucault sometimes suggests as modes of resistance to the regime of sexuality. Ultimately, this complex too depends on the rite of confession--which is to say on the linchpin of the regime of sexuality--for its meaning. It is not that one must confess before having, say, anal sex. Rather, confession has worked, historically, to produce the very ideal of personhood *necessary* for the queerly impersonal self-unmaking, death-seeking drive to do its work. It is not possible to have the second without the first. (170)

To me, this recalls the poetics of anal sex that D. H. Lawrence and his followers put into play from *Women in Love* (1920) and *Lady Chatterley's Lover* (1928) onward.

Instead, however, I like to think that Freeman's position does not just underscore what she calls the antithetical nature of the antisocial thesis in queer theory, which cancels itself out as the negative to the ruling regime's normative vision it would explode. I think, in fact, of [Pieter Bruegel the Elder's *Children's Games* \(1560\)](#), which shows five boys playing "buck-buck" in the bottom right hand corner of the painting (see below), even as the rest of the scene depicts other related games involving boys and girls--as well as girls and girls--riding, wrestling, and collapsing into ecstatic piles of joy.



Peter Brueghel the Elder, *Children's Games* (1560), detail

This book makes an important contribution to queer theory as well as to American literary and cultural studies in the long nineteenth century, as Elizabeth Freeman frames the field.

[Daniel T. O'Hara](#) is Professor of English and Inaugural Andrew W. Mellon Term Professor in the Humanities Emeritus, Temple University.

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