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Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity
José Esteban Muñoz
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Queer Principles of Hope

Kevin Floyd

If you listen closely, you can hear queer studies bearing witness to Marxism's continuing vitality and, indeed, contributing to it. To the extent that Marxist intellectuals remain unaware of the way in which capital has become one of queer studies' fundamental interpretive horizons, and Marxism one of its increasingly apparent touchstones, this is surely because in order to be aware of this development, one would have to follow journals like *GLQ*, the special queer studies issues of journals like *Social Text*, and book series like Duke's "Series Q" and NYU's "Sexual Cultures."¹ And so if what looks like a kind of ongoing intellectual convergence also seems one-sided, if it also throws into relief a simultaneous and persistent divergence, this is a divergence operating much more clearly, today, at the level of academic marketing than at the level of ideas. Occasional, scattered exceptions have appeared in journals like *Science and Society* and *Rethinking Marxism*, and this review is another. Such exceptions are important: sustained engagements with the Marxist tradition within the domain of queer studies carry a potential to invigorate and extend Marxian analysis itself. That potential is abundantly evident in José Muñoz's *Cruising Utopia*, a book one could argue is most centrally about potentiality as such.

In the course of an introduction, a conclusion, and the ten lush chapters in between, *Cruising Utopia* elaborates an archive of queer aesthetic practices from the present and the recent past — the book reaches back as far as the fifties — practices we can certainly characterize as socially "marginal," but which the identitarian, privatizing, and spatial logics of neoliberalism have made more so. The book reads these practices through a utopian, dialectical lens that will be familiar to readers of *Mediations*. But the lens itself is also made less familiar, turned to a potentially startling angle. More

on this below. What is evident most immediately is the sheer range of material under examination. Utopia makes rich, telling appearances here in lots of places, including the denaturalizing figuration of nature in Warhol; the ironic commodity-love of Frank O'Hara; the tender, redemptive homoeroticism of a play by Amiri Baraka; Jack Smith's doomed Atlantis; and what we need to call, as Muñoz suggests, the totality thinking of Samuel Delany.

Though a range of aesthetic genres are on display, a primary focus throughout is the utopian significance of gesture, of physical movement in performance art broadly defined, from theater to drag to dance. So in a brilliant, moving examination of Baraka's *The Toilet*, Muñoz locates a redemptive utopian longing in the most ephemeral gestures of intimacy and affection between two young men who form what we can at best tentatively call an interracial male "couple," gestures to be discovered in a play that most spectacularly portrays racialized and heterosexist violence. Utopian performance is registered less fleetingly in the work of the late dancer Fred Herko, whose ornamental, stuttering, flamboyant gestures — in the context of postmodern dance norms that prioritized the representation of quotidian movement — interfere with what Muñoz calls "straight time," with normalized rhythms and tempos. Indeed much of the book places special emphasis on performance that disrupts that form of routinized, instrumental enactment, in both work and leisure, that Marcuse called the performance principle. The book centrally traces movements that interrupt "the coercive choreography of a here and now that is scored to naturalize and validate dominant cultural logics such as capitalism and heterosexuality" (162).

In one respect the book considers its own analytic method less important than its archive. *Cruising Utopia* has a tendency to draw on whatever interpretive model it finds useful at the moment. Thinkers as varied as Agamben, C.L.R. James, Raymond Williams, and Derrida make important appearances. But the priority on archive over conceptual apparatus is also paradoxically consistent with the work of the book's most obvious theoretical influence, Ernst Bloch, thinker par excellence of that capacity to see utopian wish, utopian longing, utopian affect in cultural narratives, objects, and fragments all around us. I would note that Marcuse is only slightly less central, and for all the suggestion that Marcuse's thought travels into a contemporary setting less smoothly than, say, Adorno's or Benjamin's, that some of his most influential work can seem difficult to disentangle from its moment — e.g. the ostensibly "fifties" (or is it "sixties"?) cast of *Eros and Civilization* — he continues to be crucial for queer utopians. And in this respect, *Cruising Utopia* is very much in the grain of earlier work by Lauren Berlant and Laura Kipnis, for example.

But it is Bloch who provides the crucial dialectical articulation of the "no longer conscious" with the "not yet": Muñoz archives what has been lost, and what we are continuing to lose, in the long, sad shift from the sexually revolutionary energies of the fifties and sixties to their neoliberal neutralization. So John Giorno's description of his encounter with Keith Haring in a subway men's room makes a heteronormalized

present suddenly unfamiliar, providing an “afterimage” of a characteristically seventies/eighties gay “promiscuity.” But the scare quotes around this latter term are crucial, because the utopianism at work here is not simply Dionysian or pornotopic. It is inherent in collective practices every bit as social as they are sexual, practices queer studies has persistently and cogently read as forms of *worldmaking*, that crucial term for the labor of producing and sustaining social/sexual practices from which immanently critical forms of knowledge, affect, and belonging emerge. Men’s rooms, after all, were part of a network as emphatically social as it was covert, and as basic to the labor of collective formation as “physique pictorials” were in earlier decades. And this is a worldmaking now threatened as powerfully by the privacy fetish driving arguments for gay marriage as it was in the eighties by the “gay plague.” So if “queer world-making, then, hinges on the possibility to map a world where one is allowed to cast pictures of utopia and to include such pictures in any map of the social” (40), this scene of Giorno and Haring’s tearoom entanglement becomes indispensable precisely in its pastness. This corroboration of the “no longer conscious” with the “not yet” locates resources for utopian imagination in past moments, past spaces, providing critical leverage on “the coercive choreography of [the] here and now,” a present naturalized as ahistorical, as that pure temporal repetition Benjamin called empty, homogenous. Here, as in Marcuse, as in certain moments in Adorno, and indeed as in Lukacs, a less airtight past, a past providing some breathing room — a past Muñoz refuses to deny may be “willfully idealized” (86) — becomes a kind of repository for utopian speculation, memory assuming its critical power in the face of a contemporary moment in which “there is no alternative” seems if anything an even more potent alibi than it was twenty-five or thirty years ago. To the extent that this archive is “no longer conscious,” the labor of remembering can begin to disclose the limits, the contradictions, of a present experienced as fully positive, as self-identical. “Queer cultural production is both an acknowledgement of the lack that is endemic to any heteronormative rendering of the world and a building, a ‘world making,’ in the face of that lack” (118). As the dialogue on utopia between Bloch and Adorno puts it, in a formulation crucial for Muñoz, “something’s missing.”²

The book’s introduction is called “Feeling Utopia”: transformational imagination emerges here from embodied practice, including the gestural interruptions to which I have already referred, but also from affect, sensation, the immediate experience of wishing, longing. Muñoz emphasizes practices of utopian beauty and warmth over what queer studies sometimes likes to call “negative affect,” “paranoid reading.” We could be struck by the sheer boldness of drawing on Bloch in a conjuncture as politically neutralized as the present can appear to be. Or we could conclude instead that Bloch is ready-to-wear if one’s objective is to locate utopian anything in the present. Muñoz rightly points out that actually realized utopian enclaves are a history of failure; and so “astonishment,” a radical affective openness to unpredictable newness is joined here, as Bloch’s terms insist it must, with the possibility of disappointment. This is

a Blochian “concrete” utopianism in which the affective indeed trumps the purely conceptual or epistemological, what Bloch calls those “abstract” utopias ungrounded in any historically specific or practical consciousness. It would seem that *Cruising Utopia* strongly prefers concrete, wishful utopianism to a Jamesonian articulation of utopia, for example — which, though I would argue that it is not exactly “abstract” in Bloch’s sense, would nonetheless most centrally signify our very incapacity to imagine a break with the present at all. Muñoz is less ready to affirm the claim that contemporary political imagination is so thoroughly atrophied. If one of *Cruising Utopia*’s implications is that something’s missing, another is that we can at least catch inchoate glimpses of what that something might be — as in a wonderfully suggestive chapter called “Utopia’s Seating Chart,” which examines the “mail art” that traveled through the postal service courtesy of an early seventies art collective called the New York Correspondence School. Right around the time a movement called gay liberation was taking shape, this group of artists exploited the postal service in an effort to imagine a network, to “cognitively map” a form of social connection, to project a kind of aesthetic blueprint for queer collectivity as such.

But these concrete practices are also, again, “willfully idealized,” the book embracing a kind of paradoxical concrete idealism in the face of the hopelessly pragmatic contemporary “politics” embodied by lobbying groups like the Human Rights Campaign. So in this sense, utopia does indeed seem, even here, to signify its own material impossibility, and indeed Muñoz has more recently remarked that his book is about “performing impossibility in the face of the pragmatic.”³ If this framing of the analysis by the opposition between a gay pragmatism and a critical idealism necessarily raises the question of politics, the emphasis, again, is on potentiality: “queer idealism may be the only way to usher in a new mode of radicalism that can perhaps release queer politics from its current death grip” (172); the book elaborates and encourages utopian imaginings from which “a generative politics can potentially be distilled” (173). What the book’s insistence that utopia can still be imagined shares in common with Jameson’s suggestion that it can’t is then what can only be called a sobriety about the contemporary political landscape. To a limited extent, the aesthetic seems here again to be what Marcuse calls “affirmative.” While for Muñoz the aesthetic by no means merely affirms the social as it is, it explicitly critiques the present from the vantage of the ideal: as in Marcuse’s account of affirmative culture, idealism is the means of maintaining some kind of radical critique of a politically unpromising now. Aesthetic critique becomes the inevitable substitute for an activist critique hardly imaginable beyond the terms of the immediately practical. To this extent, at least, the book’s implication is consistent with one of the most familiar themes from Marxian cultural analysis: art has a capacity to perform (or at least intimate) what politics too rarely can.

But an impossible utopian worldmaking must nonetheless be practiced — immediately — because the stakes are high. Here is where the book’s autobiographical

dimension becomes important, a dimension operating most powerfully when the emphasis is on those utopian performances the book associates with queer youth of color. Indeed, the “astonishment” the book recounts is often childish in the best sense, Muñoz explicitly identifying with queer youth of color and eloquently reminding us that he used to be one himself. This astonishment is not only a response to utopian beauty and warmth, but also to the social violence from which it is inseparable. Add Adorno, then, to the list of this book’s influences: *Cruising Utopia* consistently elucidates utopian gestures formed through and through by damaged life. The chapter on Baraka’s play, where queer, racialized hope is inseparable from queer, racialized violence and loss, is one example. And this chapter concludes with Muñoz’s now famous response to Lee Edelman’s very different take on childishness and futurity: Edelman can only refuse the future and the transcendent Child he sees as currently figuring that future because, in his account, “queer” is irreducibly white. Muñoz’s already widely cited response: “Racialized kids, queer kids” — unlike the fantasized Child we encounter in Edelman — “are not the sovereign princes of futurity” (95). They are, in fact, under threat; so we have to continue to seek “a ‘not-yet’ where queer youths of color actually get to grow up” (96).

Such urgency grounds the book’s discussion of Kevin Aviance, a black drag performer whose gestures unmistakably reference the racialized performances of “the pier queen” (74). His performances evoke, that is, not only a gay flamboyance which may well have always been legible as utopian in Bloch’s sense of the term. These movements also necessarily register those areas near the piers at the end of Christopher Street which were famous as a site of gay promiscuity in the seventies and eighties; where, in the wake of Reagan’s “morning in America,” queer youth of color gathered and performed voguing and dancing contests; and where those same youth are now harder to find, as condominiums and private security forces have appeared, precisely in order to capitalize on the area’s storied queer history. We can locate not only “celebration” in Aviance’s movements, then, but also “the strong trace of black and queer racialized survival” (80). Aviance’s moves register this fabulousness, moreover, in the damaged present of those sweaty, glamorous, decidedly nonmarginal spaces catering to white gay men. On a stage high above a dancing mass of machismo, Aviance performs “gestures [that] connote the worlds of queer suffering that these huddled men attempt to block out but cannot escape, and the pleasures of being swish and queenly that they cannot admit to in their quotidian lives” (79). The longings of concrete utopian practice are here flamboyant and damaged all at once. What this performance seems to conjure — to refuse to allow to vanish — are worlds confined to the least visible spaces in the neoliberal city, spaces defined fundamentally in relation to a dynamic of privatizing violence.

So if everyday queer life is flamboyant, or at least aspires to be, if the performative suggests the inseparability of the aesthetic from the practical, what kind of twist do we find, here, on the Marxian account of art’s capacity to do what politics so often

can't? The book ultimately maintains a kind of richly suggestive unease about the very boundary separating aesthetic performance from politics. This comes across most powerfully in the book's return to the violence of Giuliani's New York City, where the constellation of zoning ordinances, real estate speculation, and his infamous police force managed to eviscerate whatever delicate infrastructure of queer worldmaking the city had provided. Queer worlds of color included bars like the Magic Touch in Jackson Heights (now closed), where performers mixed with patrons, a site of social connection and collectivity, of cross-race and cross-class "contact," in the simultaneously sexual, affective, and critical sense Samuel Delany gives this term in his elegy for the pre-Disney Times Square.⁴ This, Muñoz suggests, was a space where the line between the stage and the audience could vanish, where the fourth wall was routinely shattered. Muñoz then links the Magic Touch's blurring of the aesthetic and the practical to a mass demonstration in Washington Square Park, to which the police responded exactly as we would expect, with dispersal: "the state understands the need to keep us from knowing ourselves, knowing our masses" (64). If this collective action was political, it was also necessarily performative, aesthetic; it was action which refuses this distinction, as anyone who has participated in a mass action worth the name can surely appreciate. Muñoz recounts the way in which a neoliberal urbanization atomizes collective queer worlds even as it creates, in the process, the very conditions for glimpses of other possibilities, other practices of sociality, other futures.

The book is at its most powerful in this refusal to separate the aesthetic from the political, in its emphasis on performative gestures that bleed into sociopolitical reality, that exceed the bounds of the static aesthetic object. What performance can perform, Muñoz shows, is a dialectical thinking and feeling beyond those ways of differentiating the aesthetic from the political that we encounter in so much of the dialectical tradition on which he draws.

Notes

1. As I write this, a special issue of *GLQ*, “Queer Studies and the Crises of Capitalism” (173 [2011]), is going to press.
2. Ernst Bloch and Theodor Adorno, “Something’s Missing: A Discussion between Ernst Bloch and Theodor W. Adorno on the Contradictions of Utopian Longing,” in Bloch, *The Utopian Function of Art and Literature*, trans. Jack Zipes and Frank Mecklenburg (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1996).
3. <http://www.socialtextjournal.org/periscope/2010/06/response.php#more>. Accessed December 15, 2010.
4. Samuel R. Delany, *Times Square Red, Times Square Blue* (New York: New York University Press, 1999).