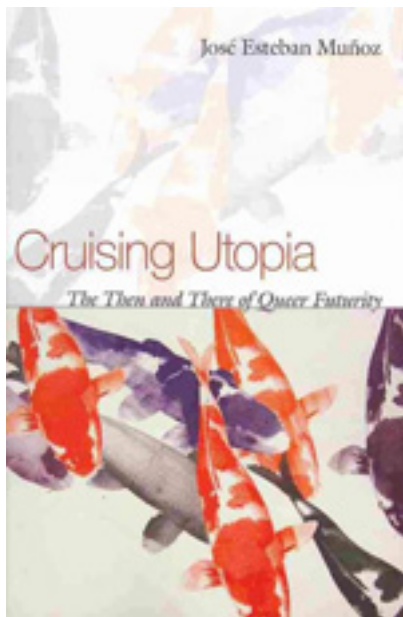


***Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* by José Esteban Muñoz**

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In *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*, José Esteban Muñoz argues that queer criticism should be infused with a “utopian function” that perhaps only a return to political idealism could effect. The book’s main premise is that the current state of the field of Queer Studies, especially its turn to the antirelational mode of criticism, needs some repairing by way of casting light onto queer collectivity.¹ While Muñoz partly subscribes to antirelational critiques of “straight temporality,” and especially its injunctive to reproduce and be productive (as expressed by the “culture of the child”), he nevertheless speaks for a notion of queer futurity by turning to Ernst Bloch’s concept of utopia as a critical and collective longing that is relational to historically situated struggles (22). Far from conceptualizing queer collectivity as a political impossibility—as antirelational readings of queerness would have it—Muñoz argues that an analysis of how queer belonging is performed through aesthetic works actually reveals the political potentiality of queer futurity. Muñoz’s first move then is to reconceptualize “queer” itself as utopia: “Queerness is not yet here. Queerness is an ideality”.¹ Queerness, Muñoz argues, is a “horizon of being” (Husserl 1991) that can be glimpsed in utopian bonds, affiliations, designs, and gestures that exist within the present, “a type of affective excess that presents the enabling force of a forward-dawning futurity” (23). Such excess/surplus is thus the

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historical, material archive from which Muñoz extracts a performance of futurity—a utopian function—from queer aesthetics: at once a negation of “what merely is” and a pointing to what could and should be.

Structured around ten analytical chapters, and framed by an introduction and a conclusion, the book maps out a multiplicity of utopian feelings across aesthetic works of the past and the present. Muñoz follows an associative path of analysis that leaps between the historical site (sometimes the author’s own life history) and the present, as a way to illuminate the potentiality of the future. This temporal dialectic between what Bloch (1995) called the “no-longer-conscious” and the “not-yet-here” is the vortex of *Cruising Utopia*’s methodology. Muñoz approaches queer affect and utopian performativity—the manifestation of a “doing” that is in the horizon—through a myriad of cultural workers and aesthetic performances that cross the fields of writing, visual and conceptual art, film, dance, theater, and nightlife, as well as acts of public sex and political protest.

The memory and ritual retellings of public sex experiences in New York City that are present in the writings of Samuel Delany, Douglas Crimp, and John Giorno, for example, become the “no-longer-conscious,” allowing Muñoz to demand a “not-yet-here” space for actual, living sexual citizenship in New York today (Chapters 2 and 3). It is these same temporal dialectics that enable him to interpret the historically dense queer gestures of Kevin Aviance and voguing performance—like when a queen pats her face with imaginary makeup on a dance floor—as both the archive of lost queer histories (of the violence of gender policing in childhood, for instance) and the repeated re-inauguration of new possibilities of becoming Other within a phobic majoritarian culture (Chapter 4). Gesture in this book is always more than an archive of queer affect and injury. Following Giorgio Agamben’s notion of gesture as endurance and support, Muñoz analyzes how a final gesture of ambiguous sentimentality between interracial male lovers in LeRoi Jones’s play *The Toilet* narrativizes “the violence that characterizes our cross-identificatory recognition” (93)—and especially the interface between race and queerness (Chapter 5). Potentiality is also imprinted in the photographs of empty nightclub stages made by Kevin McCarty, analyzed in Chapter 6. Here, Muñoz investigates how for minoritarian subjects—in this case, queer and punk kids—whose relationship to popular culture is always marked by aesthetic and sexual antagonism, nightlife becomes the actual rehearsal room where one is able to fashion a self that does not conform to the mandates of cultural logics such as neoliberal ideology, heteronormativity, or white supremacy.

In general (and most clearly on chapters 7 and 8) *Cruising Utopia* introduces queerness as an aesthetic protocol that organizes a refusal to accept “objective” reality and its entailing hierarchies. The “queer cultural maker is interested in art-directing the real,” and that means validating one’s reality principle in the aesthetic dimension (126). In a way, this is what dancer Fred Herko chose to do, and to a radical, deadly degree for that matter, as we so painfully read in Chapter 9. Herko’s embodiment of cultural surplus (the queer, speed junky who failed the normative protocols of canonization and value) is read across different

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choreographies and film appearances, as well as through his suicidal *jeté* out the window of a friend's apartment building, as utopian traces of other ways of moving within the world. Failure is a recurring theme as well, and chapter 10 furthers the analysis of queer failure as an aesthetic radicalism that enables queer politics to release itself from the pragmatic prescriptions of capitalist notions of value and propriety.

The book ends with another call for queer collectivity. In a conclusion section entitled "Take Ecstasy with Me," Muñoz contends that individual transports are insufficient, and that we need to engage in utopian criticism taken as a collective temporal distortion. The convergence of past, present, and future is Heidegger's meaning of the ecstatic, and Muñoz believes that "taking ecstasy with one another, in as many ways as possible" can perhaps be a way to enact a utopian hermeneutics, from shared critical dissatisfaction to collective potentiality (189). Here, like in several moments along this inspired book, Muñoz jumps from an act of erotic and toxic transgression to a political summoning. And indeed this is the book's greatest gesture: it bridges mundane acts of intimate and erotic connection to modes of critique and political resistance. Grounding "critique" in utopia and "utopia" in historically situated experiences of minoritarian subjects, Muñoz not only challenges the stagnant political imagination of current queer criticism, but also reframes everyday acts of utopian longing as the labor of (queer) historical materialism.

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Notes

¹ What Muñoz identifies as "antirelational" mode of criticism is inaugurated by Leo Bersani's influential book *Homos*, in which it is argued that homo-ness instances a potentially revolutionary inaptitude—inherent in gay desire—for sociality as it is known (1995). Muñoz will argue that such denouncing of relationality is based on a concept of queerness that distances it from various contaminations by race, gender, class, and other particularities that taint the purity of sexuality as a singular trope of difference.

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