REVIEW ARTICLE

Locating hope and futurity in the anticipatory illumination of queer performance

José Esteban Muñoz (2009), Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity, NYU Press, New York.

Elisavet Pakis
Independent Scholar

In Cruising Utopia José Muñoz develops a critical methodology of hope to question a stultifying, deadening, capitalist present, and to open up the future. He draws on Ernst Bloch’s Marxist inspired analysis of hope, temporality and utopia, and looks at inspirational moments from the past in order to (re)imagine the future, and rekindle the political imagination. Cruising Utopia visits a number of queer art works from the past and present alongside each other and elicits their visions of potentiality, forward-dawning illumination, their affective force and futurity. Muñoz develops a hermeneutics of trace and residue to read the mattering of these works, their influence and world-making capacity.

José Muñoz is a performance studies professor at Tisch NYU, whose areas of interest lie across queer theory, critical race theory/comparative ethnic studies, performance art and Marxism. In Cruising Utopia, Muñoz visits queer artistic and social sites and moments from the past and present, and, drawing on Ernst Bloch’s Marxist-inspired analysis (Bloch 1995), in acts he calls ‘cruising utopia’, develops an argument about queerness as horizon, hope and futurity. His engagement with temporality, utopia and futurity, his critical methodology of hope as ‘a backward glance that enacts a future vision’ (Muñoz 2009, p. 4), and his hermeneutic of ephemeral gesture, traces, and residue, make this book resonate with the themes of the present publication on haunting and futurity.
Muñoz, in this very rich, complex, varied book argues that we need to see queerness as a horizon of potentiality, a not yet here, which however gives us an anticipatory illumination of another horizon of possibility. Muñoz is concerned to break away from the constraints of a pressing, totalizing, capitalist, heteronormative present, that stifles the political imagination and imposes itself as the only possibility and horizon. He wants to disrupt a deeply confining, deadening, lethal here and now, ‘a version of reality that naturalizes cultural logics such as capitalism and heteronormativity’ (2009, p. 12) and that suggests that there is nothing outside of this current moment. He argues that present gay and lesbian pragmatic politics, whose political goal is gay rights, marriage, gays in the military, might be trapped within this limiting normative time and stifling present (see chapter one, ‘Queerness as Horizon’).

As a remedy he suggests turning to the anticipatory illumination and queer world-making that one can glimpse in works of art, performances and social movements in the past and present, as an aid in breaking through the boundaries and ‘quagmire’ of the present. In this work he is inspired and assisted by Block’s major work, The Principle of Hope (Bloch 1995), and by other Marxist Frankfurt school inspired idealist thinkers Adorno and Marcuse, to rethink utopia, and the way queer aesthetics might map blueprints for the future. ‘Queerness’ he writes, ‘is essentially about a rejection of a here and now and an insistence on potentiality or concrete possibility for another world’ (Muñoz 2009, p. 1). Queer works of art reject the impasse of the present and give us glimpses of this other world of possibility and future horizon.

Muñoz has addressed a similar theme of the world-making capacity of queer of colour (autobiographical) performance in his previous book, Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics (1999). In that book he argues that queer of colour cultural performances work to disidentify with the normative scripts of whiteness, heteronormativity, misogyny, and with a relentless, deadening system of capitalism that underwrites these. Such normative scripts are lethal and devastating, and render queer of colour subjects and lives impossible, elided, and banned from the realm of the social. These cultural workers strive to disrupt these social scripts that shut down possibility, and to produce instead visions of other worlds, mapping different, utopian social relations. Their (often autobiographical) work opens up possibility. Muñoz suggests that such work is vital for queer of colour subject survival and possibility, and calls this function the world-making capacity of queer, and queer of colour performance. In Cruising Utopia Muñoz continues to pursue some of the themes of world-making and the re-animation of the political imagination. ‘At the centre of Cruising Utopia is the idea of hope, which is both critical affect and methodology’, he stresses (2009, p. 4). He assembles a hermeneutic lens of hope and utopia to approach his material.
As part of this strategy of locating hope and utopia, Muñoz makes a double gesture of going back to the past, to explode the limits of the stultifying present moment, and to imagine the future. Muñoz draws strategically on Bloch's concepts of the 'no-longer-conscious', and 'the-not-yet-here' (Bloch 1995). The 'no-longer-conscious' involves animating the past, conjuring a moment and trace from the past that holds illumination and promise, and using it affectively to reach beyond the imprisoning, deadening present, to imagine the 'not-yet-here' (2009, p. 4), a future possibility and 'forward-dawning', utopian horizon. Muñoz conjures and draws on the 'no longer conscious', queer moments from the past that herald the future, to imagine the 'not yet here', a utopian possibility. For example, he draws on a constellation of NY queer cultural works emergent around the effervescence of social movements of the 60s, before, around and a little after the Stonewall rebellion, to conjure up potentialities and energies that no longer seem visible in the present. He draws on the queer work of Frank O'Hara, Andy Warhol, Fred Herko, LeRoi Jones, Ray Johnson, Jill Johnston, Jack Smith, James Schuyler, Elizabeth Bishop, the Judson Memorial Church Dance School, the New York School of Poetry. He also draws on Samuel Delany's and Eileen Myles' queer memoirs of the 60s and 70s. Muñoz brings past art works together in discussion with present ones, (and with moments of autobiography) making them resonate alongside each other as interruptions of normative time and as archives of queer potentiality, relationality, hope, futurity. He calls this use of past moments alongside present ones and autobiography, an associative mode of analysis (Muñoz 2009, pp. 3-4), and uses it in order to disrupt a normative order of straight temporality.

Muñoz juxtaposes very different sites and materials, from high art to seedy, underground club spaces, from poems, paintings, visual art and photography to club performances, pop art, acts of cruising, and a forgotten, underground world of public sex; from moments of autobiography to queer archives and Marxist theory. This juxtaposition (as performed in his work, or in the work of the artists he engages with) disrupts the hierarchies of value and boundaries that order these different sites and economies allowing revolutionary queer traffic between them. For example, Muñoz recounts how in Delany’s memoir from the 60s (Delany 2004), Kaprow’s groundbreaking, avant-garde ‘Eighteen Happenings in Six Parts’ (inaugurating the concept of ‘happening’) is set side by side with another kind of experimental ‘happening’: Delany witnesses a collective mass of queer bodies meeting in the NY piers in the dark for sex, or moving together under the blue light of St Mark’s baths. In this, as in multiple examples in the book, the artistic ‘happening’ experimenting with form is set side by side with the experiments of queer bodies, sex and lives in a more underground economy (see chapter three, 'The Future Is in the Present').

Muñoz by himself, or through encounters with artists’ memoirs or photographic work, visits seedy, underground, queer worlds of sex and nightlife in acts of theoretical cruising, to trace the visions and
potentialities that these alternative economies might hold. He visits an unruly, (mostly) queer of colour bar, the Magic Touch in Queens NY, where there are queer fashion shows, hustlers and johns, banter and sexual exchanges, and an escape from sex-policing (see chapter three). He revisits the (disappeared) public sex economy and interclass, inter-race ‘contact relations’ of a pre-gentrified Times Square as recounted in Delany’s memoir (Delany 1999) (chapter three). He argues that these contact relations formed very different, richer social interactions from the ‘networking’ that takes place in the more stratified, ‘Disneyfied’, commercialized and corporate post Guliani Times Square, which has eliminated the former public sex economy. Muñoz conjures the traces and ‘structures of feeling’ (Williams 1977) of a now lost world and ghostly underground culture of T-rooms and public sex, as evoked in Giorno’s memoir and in Just’s haunting photography of empty urinals/public toilets (see chapter two, ‘Ghosts of Public Sex’). He looks at the suggestive, illuminated, empty stages of mostly Latino or black queer clubs in LA, and punk stages, as photographed by McCarty, and discusses the potentiality and promise these empty stages hold (see chapter six, ‘Stages’). ‘Salvation’ reads an illuminated neon sign hanging over one of these ‘seedy’ stages. Queer culture, in its music and iconography often references salvation ... There is indeed something about the transformative powers of nightlife that queers and people of color have always clung to’ explains Muñoz (2009, p. 108). In these acts of theoretical cruising, Muñoz assembles an optic to read the transformative powers of these stages, the ephemeral ‘structures of feeling’, visions of hope and possibility that inhabit and animate them. For minoritarian subjects, these might be stages of self-enactment and possibility, opening up a door of relationality and futurity.

Muñoz assembles a hermeneutic to read the residue and traces of performances, and to account for their mattering and futurity. ‘Think of ephemera as trace, the remains, the things that are left, hanging in the air like a rumor’ he says (Muñoz 2009, p. 65). He is concerned to develop a lens that can read the queer traces and ephemeral evidence left behind by queer (and racialised) lives that the normative culture elides and discounts. In normative accounts of ‘evidence’ and facts, these ‘ephemera’ disappear, they are invisible and illegible.

This residual trace is particularly important for those subjects whose histories and lives systematically disappear in the majoritarian public sphere, who may access shared ‘structures of feeling’, modes of subject survival and becoming, memory and belonging through these performances. Performances and gestures ‘transmit ephemeral knowledge of lost queer histories and possibilities within a phobic majoritarian public culture’ argues Muñoz (2009, p. 67), they are ‘vast storehouses of queer [and queer of colour] history and futurity’ (p. 81). As such they are vital sites for queer and racialised subject survival, possibility, and becoming.
How can one tune in again to hear this alternative, ephemeral evidence, trace, gesture and queer affect and know them as significant knowledge, history, futurity? These are the questions Muñoz addresses in chapter four, entitled ‘Gesture, Ephemera, and Queer Feeling’. He draws on personal history, on a moment of shaming in his Cuban-American childhood, when his gestures were singled out by his assembled male relatives as not manly enough, as ‘feminine’ and girly, and he became an object of derision and contempt. He becomes acutely aware of his gender as queer, as not quite normal or appropriate, as something he has to hide and dissimulate. Growing up he tries to ‘butch up’, to carefully hide his difference. He grows up feeling like an outlaw, a ‘spy in the house of gender normativity’ (2009, p. 68).

This personal feeling of queerness is put into affinity with another queer affect emanating as a trace from a poem by Elizabeth Bishop, ‘One Art’ (Bishop 1983). ‘The art of losing’s not too hard to master, though it may look like (Write it!) like disaster’ writes Bishop (in Muñoz 2009, pp. 71-2), perhaps referencing the unspeakable loss of her lesbian lover, or a more general, constitutive feeling of queer loss in a heteronormative world (2009, p. 72). Muñoz reads her (parenthetical) writing as a powerful queer gesture, as a signing, which, in between the lines, makes queer loss and pain very tangible for those reading through the lens of queer sensibility. When one reads the poem through a queer lens, tuning in to its affective tonalities, ‘queer energies and lives are laid bare’ (p. 72).

These queer, and queer of colour sensitivities are also used to tune in to the work and significance of Kevin Aviance, an African-American transgender performer in nightclubs, and to get a lived sense of why his gestures are about hope and futurity (chapter four). Aviance’s performances ‘matter worlds’ to his audiences claims Muñoz. In his performances Aviance channels ‘worlds of queer pain and pleasure’ and queer affective experience (2009, pp. 73-4). Aviance performs his gender queerly, he is effeminate but does not try to hide his masculinity and produce an illusion, he performs femininity while his male body remains visible. He resists the masculinist gender normativity of gay dance floors, and refunctions their abjection of effeminacy.

Aviance also resists the whiteness and racism of the spaces. In his space costumes and looks, he references a genealogy and glamorous Afro-Futurist look of 70s black soul divas like LaBelle (2009, p. 76). He draws on ‘vogueing practices’, ‘affirming the racialised ontology of the pier queen’ (p. 74), but resisting becoming a fetish. In multiple ways, he resists performing a drag and a fetish role that would let people ‘be fabulous’ without ‘being progressive about gender, race, sexuality’ (p. 78). Muñoz describes Aviance as standing ‘luminous’ above the dance floor because in his performance, he transforms the more regular dynamics of the more mainstream, popular gay dance floor, its gender normativity and its whiteness, and opens up hope and
futurity (particularly for those who stand on the margins of the crowd, such as racialised subjects). ‘Vogueing’ might on a superficial level appear like an uncritical appropriation of ‘high fashion or other aspects of commodity culture’, but for those looking more attentively, beyond the celebratory glamour, there is ‘the strong trace of black and queer racialised survival’ (p. 80). Through such an attentive look, one can ‘see/hear another tune, one of racialised self-enactment in the face of overarching oppression’ argues Muñoz (p. 80). Aviance in performance becomes a beacon for queer and racialised possibility and survival.

Peggy Phelan, in a really famous and influential argument in performance studies, has argued that the ontology of performance lies in its disappearance (Phelan 1993). Muñoz parts company with that argument that confines performance to a narrow present moment. He suggests that though live performance seems to exist ephemerally and then vanish, it does not disappear completely after its expiry. Rather, it changes form, like energy, and lives on, as very important trace and residue in the hearts and minds of those who witnessed it. ‘Queer dance [and performance], after the live act, does not just expire. The ephemeral does not equal unmateriality. It is more nearly about another understanding of what matters’ he argues. ‘But it matters and takes on a vast material weight for those of us ... who draw sustenance from performance’ (Muñoz 2009, p. 81).

Aviance’s queer performances ‘matter worlds’ to those who stand on the edges of the crowd, whose history and life-possibility disappears in the majoritarian world. Aviance’s performances illuminate these other possibilities for self-enactment and becoming that the normative culture would shut down. So, when his live performance expires, its energy and promise lives on as a transformed materiality, ephemera, hope and futurity. For those for whom these traces matter for their lives, this and other performances open up hope and futurity. So does the rest of Muñoz’s book, with its multiple, rich sites and analyses.

Elisavet Pakis holds a PhD from the Centre for Gender and Women’s Studies, and Theatre Studies at Lancaster University, UK. Her work deals with performance & performance studies, queer, feminist and postcolonial theory, borders, (un)belonging, memory, subjectivity. She has written about Julie Tolentino’s autobiographical Mestiza performance (US) and Sphere’s Dreamz, a collective art project by LBTQ women of South Asian descent in Manchester (UK). She is currently involved in projects with refugees and asylum seekers in Manchester.
References


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