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Trading Futures: Queer Theory's Anti-antirelational Turn

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TRADING FUTURES: QUEER THEORY'S ANTI-ANTI- RELATIONAL TURN Drew Daniel

Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity by José Esteban Muñoz. Sexual Cultures series. New York City: New York University Press, 2009. Pp. 240, 29 illustrations. \$19.00 paper.

José Esteban Muñoz's new book fights for the future of a field—queer theory—arguably defined by the differences between two works from its recent past: Muñoz's own *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (1999) and Lee Edelman's *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (2004).¹ Insofar as *Cruising Utopia* marries an argument of crankily counterintuitive originality to whipsmart readings of both familiar and underground queer artworks, it more than succeeds in living up to the high standard set by his previous book. Just as *Disidentifications* broke with then-prevailing critical orthodoxies of gay affirmation and belonging in its evocation of the anti-identitarian political complexities lurking in an eclectic archive comprising everything from Mapplethorpe photos to the performances of Ela Troyano to the lyrics of the punk band X, so too *Cruising Utopia* gate-crashes the queer theory conversation via readings of a dazzling array of poems, visual artworks, performances, and collective political actions. Specifically, *Cruising Utopia* attempts to reorient queer studies away from the antirelational turn exemplified by the work of Leo Bersani and Lee Edelman, advocating instead a politically idealist utopian vision of queerness as the futurity of the "not yet here." If Lee Edelman's *No Future* is on its way to being the

most widely read and passionately debated work of queer theory of the decade that followed *Disidentifications*, then *Cruising Utopia* not only continues Muñoz's own evolving critical trajectory, but also constitutes a suitably un-timely rejoinder to Edelman's apocalyptic endgame. I'd like to first describe Muñoz's book on its own terms and then evaluate it as a response to Edelman's argument.

Muñoz's book is marked by an ongoing dialectical tension between collectivity and individuality, between a political desire to desubjectivize queerness on behalf of the collective and an art-historical and literary-critical practice of close reading—beautifully—the work of particular poets, painters, photographers, and performance artists. Muñoz wears this elasticity on his sleeve, as in his early formulation that “[c]oncrete utopias. . . are the hopes of a collective, an emergent group, or even the solitary oddball who is the one who dreams for many” (3, italics mine). This “even” is something of a tell, for Muñoz's heart belongs to the oddballs, and it is his historically extended cabal of isolated queer provocateurs who constitute the true collectivity that organizes this book. In ten chapters teeming with sharp close readings and inspired theoretical and artistic odd couples (John Giorno and Theodor Adorno! Felix Gonzalez-Torres and Darby Crash!), *Cruising Utopia's* great strength is the passionate critical

advocacy that drives this wildly heterogeneous mixtape of queer utopians into unforeseen alignment. In a dizzying series of cross-fades and chemtrails, the antilandlord rants of radical filmmaker Jack Smith sound different when aligned with the scribbled curriculum vitae of tragic speed-freak dancer Fred Herko, whose manic energy finds itself complemented and countered by the frantic performance work of Jibz Cameron (Dynasty Handbag), whose antivirtuosity seems anticipated and interlocked with the hermetic deadpan of collageist Ray Johnson. For all its rich insight into the often tense affective networks of queer friendships and communal working groups (from the collaborators on the underground literary journal *The Floating Bear* to the Judson Memorial Church to the agitprop sticker campaigners “f.a.g.” [feminist action group]), Muñoz's book is at its most arresting when he focuses in on particular artworks with these cross-pollinations in mind and finds the impulse towards collective futurity crystallized in an isolated aesthetic gesture.

Such collectivity can emerge in startling places. A case in point is Muñoz's response to Andy Warhol's *Silver Clouds*, a set design of metallic balloons first fabricated for Leo Castelli in 1966 and immortalized in press photos for the Velvet Underground. Pushing off from the account of Narcissus in Herbert Marcuse's *Eros and Civili-*

zation (written in 1955; published in 1956), Muñoz thinks these shimmering balloons as works of portraiture freed of the celebrity image, open to all comers, promiscuous, permissive, and radically pleasurable: “[T]o gaze into the pillows’ reflective surface is to participate in the modality of contemplation that is an interruption in the mandates to labor, toil, and sacrifice that the performance principle prescribes” (137). The sheerest of surfaces becomes a doorway to deindividualizing merger and revolt. Recalibrating ready-to-hand clichés about Warhol as the high priest(ess) of fashionable slickness and android cool, it’s a reading that adroitly pulls Warhol towards the philosophical and political orbit of Muñoz’s chosen constellation of Frankfurt school thinkers. Much of the book is taken up with a salutary reintroduction of the writings of Ernst Bloch—in particular, *The Principle of Hope* (1938–47)—to the contemporary theoretical landscape, but in the tenderness of his engagement with minute, telling details Muñoz’s work recalls the celebrated reading of “An Old Pitcher” at the beginning of Bloch’s *The Spirit of Utopia* (1918). Whether he is transmitting John Giorno and Samuel R. Delany’s piquant anecdotes of public sex, or describing the “sick camp” of Kiki & Herb (Justin Bond and Kenny Mellman), or transcribing the ephemeral movements of dancer and nightclub performer Kevin Avi-

ance, Muñoz movingly captures the way that a queer collective experience (an orgy, a “riot,” a nightclub audience, a punk-show parking lot, a sweaty dance floor) becomes a site in which queer utopian feelings are in transit across and between multiple bodies. The unity of “the mass” is pluralized by an imaginative claiming of “our masses.”

Sometimes, the very star power of the particular artists, artworks, and examples marshaled by *Cruising Utopia* accidentally overwhelms the very fragility Muñoz hopes to celebrate. A case in point: John Giorno’s narration of an orgy featuring Keith Haring veers towards name-dropping rather than a communal blur of anonymous sex. Muñoz is aware of this issue within his chosen sources, but I wonder whether there isn’t a second-order version of this problem within the book itself, given the very star-studded syllabus that he has convened. There is a powerfully estranging strength to Muñoz’s gaze as it turns to James Schuyler’s “A photograph” (1974), Frank O’Hara’s “Having a Coke with You” (1960), and Elizabeth Bishop’s “One Art” (1975) in search of futurity, ecstasy, and emergence. Even so, I was prodded to wonder if there might not be other ways of trying to construct a social ontology of queer utopian collectivity through a blurring of particular responsibility rather than through a tour of the pantheon, however

genuinely risky and novel. To be sure, these more canonically familiar figures are counterbalanced with more underground exemplars of queer futurity: if performance artist Kalup Linzy has by now achieved a richly deserved art-star apotheosis, that fate still awaits Dynasty Handbag and My Barbarian. But is there an alternative to the name game itself? Pushing off from Kevin McCarty's (gorgeously reproduced) color photographs of the depopulated stages of gay bars and punk clubs, are there ways to trace collective experiences and behaviors and affects that treat "the scene" rather than "the person" as the essential level of description? Are there queer forms that already formally enact the collectivity and ephemerality that Muñoz stakes his hopes upon? Whether uptown or downtown, aren't there more genuinely "humble" forms than these great works of art? The explosion of online Tumblr blogs (Brief Magazine, CTRL W33D, Argonaut, etc.), queer assemblages, and queer data collages that randomly pull together nonsequenced clusters of images, files, videos, and screen grabs of found/unattributed text-messaged conversations seems to me to model a dislocated future-present that is deliberately de-authorized, antihierarchical, and anonymous, and it would be fascinating to know what Muñoz makes of such acephalous formations.

Nowadays, keeping it positive is hard work. Given the harm endured and damage done to queers while living under the normative rigors of "straight time," the dark glamour of antirelational negativity is undeniably tempting. Accordingly, the manic pace of *Cruising Utopia's* attempts to achieve escape velocity from that very negativity risks looking like sublation or reaction rather than a real alternative. At times, the processual and tentative emergence of the utopian spark threatens to collapse under the weight of the latent virulence of Muñoz's own exemplary material: if the suicides of Ray Johnson and Fred Herko constitute melancholy slippages into the "nothing" that adjoins the utopian position, the group gay-bashing of Kevin Aviance offers a threatening vision of collective action's darker side. As his pilgrimage to the site of Herko's fatal leap out of a building quietly demonstrates, Muñoz grants the difficulty and pain that dog some of his subjects, what Bloch termed "the comprehended darkness of the lived moment."² But he refuses to quietly surrender the living example of their work to these biographical logics of tragic closure. Again, the reading of Warhol's *Silver Clouds* is exemplary. Muñoz's avoidance of the psychoanalytic critique of narcissism in favor of Marcuse's mythological reading is an index of a basic affiliation (generous, reparative, tenaciously hopeful) that drives

his project, and his project's response to Lee Edelman's project—but it also symptomatically expresses the vanishing point of any shared critical conversation between them.

Over the course of *Cruising Utopia*, Muñoz's response to the provocation of Edelman's *No Future* alternates between sincere admiration, begrudging concession, and impassioned rebuttal. However heartfelt, Muñoz's grumpy observation that babystrollers constitute annoying urban obstacles of straight privilege seems less conciliatory than satirical of Edelman's denunciation of the stubbornly exclusive politics of reproductive futurism. But his chapter "Cruising the Toilet: LeRoi Jones/Amiri Baraka, Radical Black Traditions, and Queer Futurity" launches a more serious objection to the seductive weightlessness of Edelman's vision of "queerness as a singular abstraction that can be subtracted and isolated from a larger cultural matrix" (94). Citing the structural disparity in acts of violence that threaten youth of color, and LGBT youth of color in particular, Muñoz denies that all children qua children are equally subject to regimes of protection and status, thus disrupting the conceptual stability of "the child" upon which Edelman's account arguably relies. For Muñoz, the consequence of Edelman's leveling down of difference on behalf of immaculate abstractions (the child-as-such, the queer-as-such) is a corresponding loss of precisely

the temporal dimension through which their political expression and transformation might be realized:

Theories of queer temporality that fail to factor in the relational relevance of race or class merely reproduce a crypto-universal white gay subject that is weirdly atemporal—which is to say a subject whose time is a restricted and restricting hollowed-out present free of the need for imagining a futurity that exists beyond the self or the here and now. (94)

In the wake of the tragic murders of queer youth of color that Muñoz recounts as evidence of a childhood-which-is-not-one, the point hits home. And yet, from a purely theoretical perspective, one rather doubts that Edelman would dispute the core of Muñoz's claim; indeed, the repetitions of the death drive are nothing if not constitutively defined by just such a "weird atemporality," and so the allegation that should be damning seems simply apt.

Whether Muñoz's critique of Edelman constitutes a redirection or a palpable hit will be a function of your theoretical optic and your attraction to the purity of theoretical positions as such. Indeed the contretemps between these books risks collapsing into a parody of their respective guilds: if Jacques

Lacan is to Lee Edelman as Ernst Bloch is to José Muñoz, then the mischievously absolute theoretical commandments of the former and the stridently lyrical close readings of the latter form a romance of star-crossed methodological commitments, and the stage is set for a false choice between theories of the subject and theories of the social. Full disclosure: as a partisan of psychoanalysis, I must demur. Given the current superabundance of critical work explicitly formulated as Lacanian-Hegelian (Žižek, Dollar, Zupancic, Copjec, to name four), we are surely past the point when the bugbear of an inherent impasse between psychoanalysis and politics is credible. Homing in on race, in the wake of the work of Anne Cheng and Hortense Spillers (to isolate just two examples from a burgeoning field), we already know that race does not await complex, politically savvy psychoanalytic readings. Accordingly, the pageant of antirelationality between the psychoanalytic tradition and the Marxist tradition rehearsed by the lingering disjunction between Edelman and Muñoz induces a queer feeling curiously at odds with their shared subject of the future itself: *déjà vu*. Whether we take queer theory to be a Freud-or-Marx chessboard or a Freud-and-Marx dance floor, from their separate vantage points both Muñoz and Edelman are simply too productive of queer theory's own lived present for a simple choice of

critical allegiance between their positions to be sufficient. If neither is complete on their own, the "parallax view" generated by their mutually incongruous evaluations of the political stakes of futurity might yet produce a future worth sticking around for.

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NOTES

1. Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004).
2. Ernst Bloch, *The Spirit of Utopia*, trans. Anthony A. Nassar (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2000), 3.