

Lauren Berlant

Thanks to Gayatri Gopinath and the Center Staff for Inviting me.

Untitled, Untilted¹

ABSTRACT

The phrase “white lady tears” walks around with me among jokes that weren’t jokes that José and I would slip to each other when we encountered an individual’s melodrama of self-importance dressed in politically compassionate drag. This epithet didn’t mean we weren’t feeling *like* or *with* the person of too-muchness, but that we noticed and felt jostled by this specific aesthetic. Joking from below, like all performance, has a way of slowing things down enough that, as he shows in *Cruising Utopia*, we might see something’s place in what he called the “whole of our masses” of our community, “the politically enabling whole”² Sometimes the joke attempted to scrape some pleasure and critical analysis from a situation; sometimes it sought to interrupt power, plus inducing a launching pad for a more bearable shared ongoingness. What did he mean, though, by the “politically enabling whole”? Is that what became the brown commons? And apart from homophonic puns, what does it mean to link a politically enabling whole to a sexual avant-garde? What *is* a sexual avant-garde anyway, in this book, and these days?³ What

¹ “Untitled, Untilted” because nothing can be slanted or opened sufficiently to capture everything. See Appendix.

² José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The There and Then of Queer Futurity* (New York: NYU Press, 2009): 62, 64. All future citations will be in the text.

³ The vast work of this essay focuses on Chapter 3 of *Cruising Utopia*, “The Future is in the Present: Sexual Avant-Gardes and the Performance of Utopia”: 49-64. The phrase “sexual avant-

do we think about the desire for it? The paper to follow pursues these questions with an aspiration to add weight to them, not to resolve them.

The night I was told that José had passed, I ferociously read without absorbing a thing in Ed Cohen's by then familiar and beautiful immunity book, *A Body Worth Defending*.⁴ It was as though I could find there a story about my friend's heartbreaking vulnerability, a story that would make more sense than the mystery embedded in obituarial phrases like "complications related to."

José loved the world of "complications related to," and would have thought it was funny to be included in a riff about it. I could not write this talk without thinking about immunity and vulnerability, his and in general, and what it takes to be able to live life and live well, which is to say, open, interested and attracted to the surprises that confirm not only that things can be otherwise, as Adorno puts it, but that the queer good life is already sensually available in episodes and pop-up utopias, as Muñoz would put it.⁵ So I decided to Google my friend's name along with the word "immune." I discovered a few things. One was that, in Brazil, there's an immunology scientist who works on T cells named Julián Esteban Muñoz and another that there are two Spanish

gardes (Queer AG) appears throughout this essay, taken from the title but, I notice, distorted a little.

⁴ Ed Cohen, *A Body Worth Defending: Immunity, Biopolitics, and the Apotheosis of the Modern Body* (Durham NC: Duke UP, 2009).

⁵ Theodor Adorno, "Commitment," *New Left Review* I.87-88 (September-December 1974); reprinted in *Aesthetics and Politics*, Theodor Adorno, et al., (London: Verso, 1977), 177–195.

AIDS researchers who work together called M. Esteban and P.A. Muñoz. It's as though he's been redistributed.

Then I searched *Cruising Utopia* to see whether he had been thinking about immunity: in a sense, of course he had, as Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome as a scene for queer world-building and straight white-world unmaking is a crucial context for his work. But was immunity a concept for him?

The only place in *Cruising Utopia* immunity is mentioned outside of its contraction into AIDS is in chapter three, "The Future is in the Present: Sexual Avant-Gardes and the Performance of Utopia" (49-64).

I turned to it to see what immunity there had to do with futurity, cruising, and seeing the world in movements and gestures that scream for the non-place to become a sustainable collective space.⁶ Then I was embarrassed to see my own name in the first paragraph instigating his pursuit of sexually live citizenship, which is what this chapter means by "sexual avant-garde." There is sex in the chapter, as we shall see, but in the set of queer exempla he makes for it, involving club culture, protest, and white-paste resistance projects, the *sexual avant-garde* appears as another name for an affective utopia where sex acts might be happening, but that's not the point. The sexually-organized alt-real is apprehensible in the present of the writing as an episode that envisions and tries to induce what he would then call a non-"majoritarian" mode of life (56). "Sexual avant-garde," in other words, is not a snob concept here, *not* a self-fluffing phrase that points to the antinormative pose an especially willful sensibility can strike. In José's hands, the

⁶ Marc Augé, *Non-Places: Introduction to the Anthropology of Supermodernity*, trans. John Howe (1992; London and New York: Verso, 1995).

sexual avant-garde is a conflation of avant- and alter- action and orientation that prefigures of the leap of queer collective life beyond the normate's reproduction:⁷ its work is to gather whatever erotic energy it takes to punch a hole in the present, so that we can live some untapped freedoms.

I'd like to spend the rest of my time explaining how this chapter of *Cruising Utopia* locates the sexual avant-garde in the future's present to make powerful tools for the queer work we continue to have to do. I keep thinking of Maxine Waters' (D-CA) phrase, "Reclaiming my time": in this chapter, the Queer avant-garde body (Queer AG) Muñoz invents offers "reclaiming my space" on behalf of the time to come.⁸ Three tactical spatial practices structure the chapter: these are: 1) Muñoz's gifted verbal description of sex, from the section on sex clubs; 2) his delineation of what he calls the "performing object" like a sticker, a poster, and public tone of voice (61); and 3) the staging of public resistance to the grinding protocols of supremacist state surveillance as a means for repressing the queer access to "the whole of 'our masses'" that helps us live on (55). His examples of the Queer AG are, as they often are, derived from thinking with

⁷ José was an enthusiastic co-thinker. He also cites his frequent collaborator and friend Lisa Duggan in this chapter, on the topic of resisting what felt like a growing "homonormativity." See *The Twilight of Equality?: Neoliberalism, Cultural Politics, and the Attack on Democracy* (Boston: Beacon, 2003), cited in this chapter of *Cruising Utopia* on pp. 54, 197. I'm placing this note here because I learned the word "normate" from her.

⁸ Maxine Waters uses this phrase a lot but most famously against Steven Mnuchin, Treasury Secretary under Donald Trump: see <https://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/post-partisan/wp/2017/08/01/reclaiming-my-time-is-bigger-than-maxine-waters/>

Adorno, Bloch, Delaney and Allen Kaprow, the coiner of the performance genre “the happening.” Muñoz’s use of the case and the episode derives from the generative energy of “the happening” (55). Like many avant-garde thinkers, he derives the Queer AG’s materiality from the ordinary. The Queer AG ordinary here is where queers cruise to perform folds and cuts in the atmosphere of majoritarian hetero-homogeneity so that it is possible to build up an affective and institutional immunity to it—a homo-homeopathy. Antinormative immunity is not just resistance to something, though. It’s the ground from which “the mass” can together throw itself at what Muñoz calls, via Ernst Bloch, the “anticipatory illumination” of a queer life to come. (64). The concept of immunity works in multiple registers, too, as we will see.

The first entry in the cluster here paints a diptych of two gay bars, The Gaiety and The Magic Touch, which he jokes was also called The Tragic Touch, although it’s not tragic in this chapter except in its vulnerability to erotophobic neoliberal state rezoning strategies. Muñoz writes winkingly that he goes to the bars for “research”: “As the clock ticks and the world of New York’s culture of public sex faces extinction, I have made a point of soaking up as much of it as possible” (57). The genre of the jeremiad dramatically narrates the crisis of the end of a form of life that supports a world that someone wants and needs, and it is central to the political sphere from *all* sides these days. In those days the rezoning of New York toward what Muñoz called “late Disneyfication” in the form of tourism and shiny vacant office skyscrapers produced many *sex* jeremiads, those queer classic militant the-world-is-ending manifestos of the Giuliani era against the class-brutal securitization of urban streets and in defense of an increasingly beaten-down public sex life (53). The Gaiety was a Manhattan burlesque club where beautiful white gay men struck expensive poses that played lightly with the law’s boundaries and so displayed a hygienic erotics at an intimate distance. To Muñoz, however, The Magic Touch was

still touching, a brown commons racially and gender diverse but also just welcoming. I want to attend here to his description of its Queer AG sex scene, which he compares explicitly to the archive of public sex and intimacy architectures documented by Samuel Delaney's *Times Square Red, Times Square Blue*.⁹

Filipino queens sat next to older white daddy types who were across the bar from beeper-wielding Latino hustlers who seemed to know the group of black men clustered around the jukebox. Some folks were Manhattanites braving the outer boroughs; others hailed from even deeper in Queens. The performers came out in uniforms—military garb, loose-fitting hip-hop fashions, snug-fitting gay club wear, blue-collar flannel drag—and stripped to a G-string. They were instantly disqualified if they showed anything that might be tucked inside the G-string. Their dancing styles varied: some let their bodies do all the work; other boys were quite acrobatic. Hip-hop dance moves dominated the performers' routines. The movements were often described as a highly sexualized break dancing. As soon as the contest was over and the winner was crowned, the boys would mingle with the audience for an hour or so. Tips were stuffed in bikinis and boots, deals were brokered, conversations ensued (58).

Ekphrasis is Greek for description. A genre spanning any interpretive discipline, its aim is to use intensely focused writing to orchestrate the becoming-present of an obscured or distant scene or object, like a painting. Achilles' shield in the *Iliad* is its first example, and W. J. T. Mitchell writes that Percy Shelley's Medusa poem is its primal scene, melding metaphoric and material descriptive action so that one feels that one has been visually and sensually present to the power

⁹ Samuel R. Delaney, *Times Square Red, Times Square Blue* (New York: NYU Press, 1999).

of an object about which one has only read.¹⁰ After the end of canons, and as remediators of the present, we critics have no choice but to build our ekphrastic skills.

Sexphrasis, then, would be the ekphrasis of sex, a performative writing that's not identical to written pornography, but surely a technique within it: it's a key feature of queer work in any discipline, at least the queer work that still makes vibrant scenarios for sex. I propose this term to you now with some sense of irony, since Muñoz's whole project requires using such an aesthetics of presence to undermine the historical present. His version of the Queer AG's presentist affects, involving intensified, performative, descriptions of what's sensed, seeks to disturb the violent ordinary of the historical present and model pedagogies to recast an episodically shared affective commons as a directive from a possible future. I coin the word "sexphrasis," then, to focus not only on how the writer or maker describes sex, but also uses adaptation across media to generate experience that mimes being in the room together with the object-world of the future, whatever or wherever it is.

Muñoz's paragraph is *sexphrastic*: what is it doing? You'll note that the first three lines perform the intensity of the Magic Touch environment not in an Edward Hopper "Nighthawks" at the diner way, but more in the mode of Glenn Ligon's intense but fading writing in "Untitled (I Feel Most Colored When I Am Thrown Against a Sharp White Background)." In the first barely punctuated sentence, everyone is linked to everyone by proximity in a convivial space, and one can feel through the mode of description the pressure of the patrons' eyes on each other

¹⁰ W.J.T. Mitchell, "Ekphrasis and the Other," *Picture Theory* (Chicago: U Chicago Press, 1994), 151-18.

even if there's no manifest exchange. This tableau's accelerated accumulation of figures says a lot about how things on the page can become visibly scenic and dynamically atmospheric: the writing performs a still life of the Queer AG caught in a moment of waiting for the thing that will make the space breathe narrative. The strippers in Muñoz's description are less interesting than the first group, though. This is the point of their conventional dress in uniforms and creative movement under legal and aesthetic conditions of constraint: nothing surprising is supposed to happen so that the object does not risk their own and everyone's collective freedom from the vice police who still harass at will. After the stripper competition winner is pronounced the intensity of the scene dissipates further in the description, as the groups of people become individuals and the concept of desire is extended to the prospect of encounter, whether in sex, conversation or both. From the intense spatial extension of the first sentence to the loitering and privatization of contact in the last, the paragraph uses sexphrasis to generate a concept of how the utopian operates in the present, and it's really complicated as it moves from adjacent bodies to abstractions of action for which other spaces are necessary.

I just took a long time to describe all this and there's much more that could be said about the various tableaux of utopian cruising in the book's instance here of the Queer AG: I note that in my own writing about Muñoz's writing I am not performing sexphrasis unless we decide that writing about writing about it dilates the moment and extends the sex to where we are now. Maybe it can also include staying near a body who at this point is a referent, concept, and memory and whose voice, which is part of the body after all, still chatters away in my and many of our heads. Maybe that's stretching it, or maybe stretching is one of the things we do. Regardless, the very length of the time it takes to describe a description in the presence of this written work, and the slow transition from a tableau to a world confident enough about itself to dissipate

its location in the closet of the minor, says a lot to me about the forceful lift Muñoz's prose makes to turn the non-place of cruised utopia into a durational atmosphere that stands for the present fracked by a future more worthy of us.

Paul St. Amour, in his difficult and terrific essay, "The Literary Present," actually nominates *Cruising Utopia* as an exemplary contemporary performance of a literary present that undercuts its solidity as a referent by becoming a temporal and spatial palimpsest before our eyes.¹¹ St. Amour cruises the text the way we are all fated to cruise, for evidence that it shares his interest so he won't feel alone in the present, but he does not take for granted what the present is. Muñoz, he writes, is most fully theoretical when he speaks in the gnomic present, saying phrases that land somewhere between being a proposition and a judgment whose very wobble is what cruising is about, looking for something to pull you in, looking for something to take you out, ambiguously wanting to be in the room but maybe more, maybe less, free to be uncommitted. The gnomic in *Cruising Utopia* is a made space bodies can imagine living in largely because of Muñoz's deft manipulation of sexphrasis.

The queer sexual avant-garde here is a space, relevant to acts but not literal-minded about their accretion into identity or other effects. It's like a lounge where you return to your body as it shifts registers, unfurling and therefore never quite existing.

If the first exemplum involved Muñoz standing in front of a scene as though it were a painting in order to document a queer sexual AG atmosphere that at once maintains and dissolves the boundaries of people comfortable with the pace and form of their non-sovereignty, the

¹¹ Paul K. Saint-Amour, "The Literary Present," in *ELH* 85, 2, (Summer 2018), 367-392. The *Cruising Utopia* work is on pp. 378-387.

next case Muñoz lays out is relational but not interpersonal. It begins with a sticker that catches the corner of his eye while he's walking one day. It involves a sexuality that's still Queer AG but represents no sex or sexy erotics (60). This next phase of being here and now comes from the lenticular perspective of the after, the alter, and the avant.

It seems that a working group is white-pasting Manhattan with little stickers. This group changes its name all the time to avoid the surveillance state and because, as Jonathan Flatley would say, the name is a placeholder for now, awaiting another revolutionary mood to make its initial grounding in oppression archaic.¹² Sometimes the sticker activist group is called f.a.g, sometimes SADD (Muñoz writes, not students against drunk driving, but sex activists against demonization), sometimes r.h.q (resist the heterosexualization of queerness) (60-61). To have a rolling name suggests that they've managed to be beyond the pride of public self-branding to do work without reproducing the widely held view that only the privileged can call your name in recognition. They paste small stickers all over the place with little disturbances on them: One captions a Mickey Mouse with "It's a beautiful day. . . 'Crime is down.' Police brutality is up. . . . What are you doing outside?"; "Heteronormativity: Fall into the trap" is another, punning on the Gap slogan and captioning an image of that year's version of the "gay clone" white neoliberal stereotype (60). Another is a flat statement, "I Nushawn Williams," asserting solidarity with the HIV-spreading sex-offender whom Muñoz calls the "Typhoid Mary" monster of contemporary white erotophobic imaginaries (61).

¹² Jonathan Flatley, "Refreshments of Revolutionary Mood," in eds. Corrinne Harrol and Mark Simpson, *Literary/Liberal Entanglements: Toward a Century Literary History for the Twenty-First Century* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2017), 102-147.

This set of sticky images and captions doesn't add up to anything, if by "add up" we're looking for a cocked-fist revolutionary social movement or a grand political gesture: Muñoz noticed the stickers, that's all. He sought out the collective and talked to its members. He discovered that they're not aspiring to Gran Fury status or consumable cartoon adorables on the side of busses. The group's stated aim is a pedagogy intersectional and generational. It's trying to remake the tone of political capture. It is sentimental about its desire but has nostalgia for nothing. It's a politics of the procedural asterisk, a comedy insisting on the sexy beyond of the finitude of tragedy.¹³ A comedy like the surprise of a little air making its way into the stuffy room. It's a turn of the screw, not the manic genre of the screwball, so that we can turn away from, as Muñoz states, "the corrupt mediatized public sphere" (61). I note that he includes no pictures of the objects. The artists say they see their work not as monologue or performative but as prompts. This is why Muñoz calls the things that catch his eye "performing objects" (61). To see your work as a prompt is to force it to go beyond you, be out of your control as you counter whatever's controlling you—in this case the surveillance state. Their phrases are failed performatives, offered in the mode Muñoz loved and promoted, the "ontologically humble" (28) that allows for "us to bear witness to a new formation, a future in the present" (62).

The first two segments of Muñoz's fifteen-page essay were about bars and walls and telephone poles, distributing into autopoetic atmospheres a magnetic, charismatic sexuality involving sex and the senses and utopias in the form of episodic heterotopias that are both flashes from

¹³ On tragedy as comforting finitude, see Simon Critchley, "Comedy and Finitude: Displacing the Tragic-Heroic Paradigm in Philosophy and Psychoanalysis," in *Constellations* 6, 1 (1999): 108-122.

the future and performative in the present. The essay's third section locates Queer AG sexuality in the sudden efflorescence of a queer protest.

The scene is a vigil for Matthew Shepard that spontaneously shifts tone from witnessing to "withnessing," Bracha Ettinger's term for staying alive in sync with a situation of loss.¹⁴ It's both organized and spontaneous, an act of loose solidarity and spontaneous aggressive self-defense insisting on the right to the version of the city it wants. It can be wrenching now to return to the moment of Matthew Shepard's murder, which dates this piece. Have we ever really theorized the phrase "that piece is dated?" What makes a piece dated, which is a stronger negative statement than "that piece speaks from a particular historical moment?" Does the example always wrench us out of the present? When people say "Occupy" now, does it seem like a galaxy far far away, or yesterday? Does it seem "so over" or defined by unfinished business? Who gets to say when something is "so over"? Can we stay close to what's utopian in the concept of unfinished business? Are there publics that justify a "we" anymore, and do we want them? What's the difference between the mass on the street being for itself and the the concept of a body commonly held by virtue of its desire to be commonly held? The protest Muñoz narrates was against so many motivated deaths but prompted by the murder of Shepard. He narrates what happens there in explicit tribute to our newly departed Douglas Crimp's "Mourning and Militancy."¹⁵

¹⁴ Bracha Lichtenberg Ettinger, "Trans-subjective Transferential Borderspace," In Brian Massumi, ed. *A Shock to Thought: Expression after Deleuze and Guattari*, (London: Routledge, 2002), 215-239.

¹⁵ Douglas Crimp, "Mourning and Militancy," *October* 51 (Winter 1989): 3-18.

Muñoz is irritated that Shepard, a “pretty white boy,” becomes the organizing force for the public gathering of a counterpublic. But he considers also that the protest participants extend the mourning and militancy to unheralded queer deaths (63). Muñoz gives an eye-witness account: the visuals are completely simple.

The New York City Police Department responded to the outpouring of activism by calling in the troops. Marchers during this rebellion attempted to take to the streets, but the police insisted that this massive group walk exclusively on the sidewalk. A rupture came, and people surged onto the streets. Violence ensued, horses were brought out, billy clubs were brandished, activists were pushed and knocked down. The protest’s marshalls, its leadership, were the first people arrested. I saw friends taken away, loaded on MTA busses commandeered by the police. (63)

Welcome to the Thunderdome of the ordinary. The American city has become a mall, a zone that seems like a public space but only if we understand public now to mean a condition of limited-permission trespassing allowed for by the owners of property and protected by the police and private security. CCTV is everywhere in the city, serving the rights of property over those of live being. People are supposed to behave like good citizens on the city sidewalk but stay out of the streets, which belong to capital’s flows. Protests have a way of leaking and spreading. Joshua Clover documents at length in *Riot. Strike. Riot* that it’s the police who are the usual instigators of riot¹⁶: to exemplify we can point to the 1917 silent Harlem NY march against lynching,

¹⁶ Joshua Clover, *Riot. Strike. Riot: The New Era of Uprisings* (London: Verso, 2016).

where the discipline of silence drove the police into a grotesque life-disaffirming frenzy.¹⁷ In this protest too, the police moved in to create the violence as they often do, claiming that mass resistance to violence initiated it, constructing the present as an antagonism in which the cops merely play defense. Then the usual happened: people minding their own business in all sorts of tones were homogenized by state violence into criminals deserving arrest. The police theatre scenario Muñoz constructs is completely predictable, as usual as a missing person or pet printout posted in the city in which anonymity is both a beautifully available blessing and many kinds of curse. What's especially gorgeous, haunting, prefigurative and hovering is his reading of the security state's motives.

It is not just that the usual friction between the state and its minoritarian publics was represented in a new incident. It is also that Muñoz reads the state as having a specifically aesthetic ambition to annihilate capacities of Queer AG consciousness.

The police responded by breaking up the group, fractioning off segments of our groupings, obscuring our mass.

The state understands the need to keep us from knowing ourselves, knowing our masses. It is ready, at the drop of the proverbial dime, to transform public transportation into policing machines, to call to call out thousands of cops to match thousands of activists, to wield clubs and fists. The state, like Delany, understands the power of our masses, a power that can be realized only by surpassing the solitary pervert model and accessing

¹⁷ To see the original documents for organizing this protest, see: <https://nationalhumanities-center.org/pds/maai2/forward/text4/silentprotest.pdf>.

group identity. Doing so entails resisting the privatization of queer culture for which the gay pragmatists such as Andrew Sullivan, Gabriel Rotello, and Bruce Bauer clamor. The next day the *New York Post* headline read, “Gay Riot.” It was more nearly a queer riot, where queer energies manifested themselves and the state responded with calculated force and brutal protocols. (64)

Muñoz goes on to say that the state is frightened of the “idea of queers making contact in a mass uprising,” as “those assembled in rage glean a queer future within a repressive heteronormative present” (64). But the point he returns to multiple times is the implication of the state strategy to block an ongoing aesthetic sense of the collective. The state tries to create “a fragmenting darkness” that blocks the figure of the “politically enabling whole” (64). It’s a project he insists on repeatedly: “to map our [state-induced] repression, our fragmentation, and our alienation” (55). To know and walk inside of the queer tableaux vivant of a sexual avant-garde involves “knowing our masses” in a way that flings our bodies toward the future glimpsed in the present. To see violence as the suppression not just of a community but of a figure and form of the totality that we need to carry in our heads to continue to be fueled for collective commonsolidarity and action is to understand the difference between a fragment and a metonym, which figures and performs the power of an image to go beyond itself to a context we have to envision and construct in the here and now that comes from a there and then. This is what Bloch meant by the “anticipatory illumination” of the utopian imaginary: the light so powerful to Muñoz that he embedded it in his eye to form the eye he wants to transmit to us.

One more thing: the sentence about immunity that brought me to this chapter was from the theatre of the riot, in reference to the random vigil participants carted off by the police:

“Many people on antiviral drugs missed dosages and risked building up immunity to these precious drugs.” (63). It’s a stunning use of the concept of immunity. Immunity here isn’t a defense against the impacts of the world or germs. It isn’t a defense against prosecution, self-incrimination. Here, in the micro-context his sentence makes, immunity is a life-threatening defense against being affected by what you want. It’s a missing that makes the body vulnerable to being invulnerable to what it desires to let in. Immunity here is dangerous, against the precious potential not for one more day, but for a stretch of days in which we can receive each other, and the world. This dangerous version of it is not what he would have lived for, but in another register it’s also what he couldn’t live without. As though life were a hierarchy of immunities—the ones you can choose and the ones you can’t, the ones you want and the ones that close you off from acknowledging something utopian.

Undelivered and unfinished END

You might notice this paper has no title.

Some Alternative Titles to This Paper on the Tenth Anniversary of *Cruising Utopia*

Cruising Immunity
 The Immunosuppressive Hypothesis
 Immune to his charms
 Not Immune to His Charms
 Cruising Heterotopia
 Immuñoz
 Theory as Immunotherapy
 Theory as Immunosuppressant
 On Flinging Your Body at Life
 On Flinging Your Body at Utopia
 On being a little too open
 On being unintentionally open
 On being ontologically open
 Immunity After Passivity
 Broken-hearted Utopians