

Solidarity/Susceptibility

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Editor's note: This essay is adapted from remarks delivered by Judith Butler as the Third Annual José Esteban Muñoz Memorial Lecture at Tisch School of the Arts, New York University, 12 February 2018. The lecture series was founded by the Department of Performance Studies in the spring of 2016 to honor scholars whose work in critical theory advances the work and legacy of a long-serving member of the *Social Text* editorial collective, José Esteban Muñoz. We are pleased that Judith Butler has agreed to publish a version of her remarks here, which also represents the first reappearance of her work in these pages since her essay “Merely Cultural” appeared in *Social Text*, nos. 52–53 (1997). For more on the work and legacy of Muñoz, please see “Being With: A Special Issue on the Work of José Esteban Muñoz” in *Social Text*, no. 121 (2014).

José Esteban Muñoz Lecture, 12 February 2018

I am pleased and honored to be here today, although I confess from the start that I am daunted by the task. So many people in this department and this community were close to José Esteban Muñoz and knew him better than I did. It is true that I knew him when he was a graduate student. I met him at Eve Sedgwick’s home, if I remember correctly, and it seemed to me that he was, even then, gossiping, which is to say that he was very excited about knowing what people thought and felt, whom they loved, who had hurt them, and what comes next. He let me know that, just in case there was a rivalry, he belonged to Eve. He had not yet understood that we all belonged to Eve: she was, and remains, the queen. The last encounter I had with José Esteban Muñoz was indirect. He had sent a fuzzy picture to a mutual friend in London; it showed a figure moving

headlong down the street where he presumably lived, in the very early morning. He had exclaimed that this image clearly showed Judith Butler bolting from some exciting night in New York, walking the walk of shame. In only about thirty minutes, the picture was sent to me by my friend in London, together with a question: "What are you up to in NY?!" Indeed, José imagined quite specifically that I was having a fabulous affair with a highly acclaimed British writer, a writer whom, unfortunately, I still have never met in person. Maybe she lived in that neighborhood, or maybe it was a wakeful dream. It did not really matter that his story was infinitely far from a more mundane set of truths, since the gossip was apparently just too good. Indeed, I did not really mind that the speculation was false, since I saw that the embellishment of reality was the thing, his thing. Even his overestimation of my capacity for sexual adventure was somehow gratifying and flattering. For a while I wrongly thought if José gossiped about someone that was a sign that he really did not like them. Of course, that still could be true. And yet, I eventually grasped that gossip was for him a form of sustained attention and investment made highly communicable, if not a contagious a way of saying: "Let's face it, we live through one another all the time." We're saying something about someone to another, and we do not really know if it is true, and it hardly matters, since the pleasure of common imagining exceeds the meager satisfactions of truth. It's a way of living within the terms of a wager: maybe it is true, and wouldn't it be wild if it were true, and who really cares whether or not it is truly true? The gossip asks another to imagine along, build a reality, make it true, if only for the duration of the communication. An excited and excitable communication, a way of passing along an affect that makes it larger, letting it lift off from reality, where the affect is not a discrete bit of excitation, a quantity: it conditions and enters the collective crafting that augments its intensity; it is never quite separable from the scene of address that it transforms.

It was Muñoz who taught us, in *Cruising Utopia*, that it is important not to discount the work of the audience, its productive consumption, its acts of witnessing. He rewrote queer theory with his claim that "the real force of performance is the ability to generate a modality of knowing and recognition among audiences and groups that facilitates modes of belonging, especially minoritarian belonging."¹ The performative will be neither a single act nor a series but something that happens, and not just for one person but for many, taking place through a stage, a staging in time, a staging that may or may not involve a proscenium. Whatever the disorientation in our spatiotemporal world turns out to be, it generates a way of knowing, it makes possible a form of recognition, and it facilitates a mode of belonging, especially for those who have been marginalized or those for whom the future too often appears foreclosed. So queer performativity is

a generative power and a facilitation, two words that belong to the realm of excitability, communicability, and forms of belonging that are passed along and are not reducible to simple identity. There is a temporal stage that disorients the way in which we think about the stages of history, and a spatial stage that allows for a confabulation among those who live on the margins or in subjection and whose furtive persistence can assume forms of collectivity that we sometimes get to call fabulous.

This form of *vicarious* life is a way of being, as it were, susceptible to another, registering each other at a level that is less concerned with establishing truth than with sensing what might be felt over there, with the possibility of being excited by imagining the other's excitation, with the temporary suspension of the distinction between one's own desire and the desire imagined. And speaking of that desire to yet another person gives it the status of shared reality. An implicit compact is made: let us tell a fabulous story to one another, and let the telling endow it with the force of the fabulous; let us craft an untruth whose beautiful result is wrought from our mutual excitation and augments its circulation. The deflating moment arrives when the referent speaks and busts up the tale, and one realizes that one is temporarily shut out from the reality of that other person, maybe still shut out, since gossip happens from the outside looking in and functions as a breaking in, or breaking out, depending on the spatial form of the restriction. It is not a form of outing since it lacks that public dimension; it works through furtive circuits and is preoccupied with minor and major variations of the fabulous at a distance from the regime of truth.

The word *fabulous* comes from *fabula*, originating in Latin, meaning simply characteristic of fables or rich with myths. But in Middle English it came to mean astonishing and exaggerated. Of course, significantly, it referred to fables that, though obviously false, communicated a truth of one kind or another, often through animals giving voice to human perspectives. The *fabula* from which fables hail could be simply the narrative, or the story, or, more broadly, that which is told or related, but it also indicates a form of knowledge about matters that might be graspable only through fabulous forms.

A debate inaugurated by Russian formalists distinguished between the *fabula*, regarded as the actual sequence of events, and the *syuzhet*, the way the story is told. The narrative chronology was said to precede the mode of telling, but Jonathan Culler and Jacques Derrida both called that precedence into question. Enumerating the sequence of events is already, and from the start, a way of *telling* those events, so we can hardly make a clear distinction between articulating a chronology and its story form. In the case of gossip, we might say, it matters not only how the story is told but also to whom, the scene of its telling and the scene described: the first early morning text message that then prompted another to me and

the question about my whereabouts all shot to my phone right before I entered the 14th Street Y (my early morning ritual in New York, by the way). My “walk of shame” was a fiction, and though one could call it a lie, that would deflect from its primary importance as a way of staging hypercommunicability and the spontaneous occasion for confabulating, stoking a pleasure unburdened by the claim to referential truth. Indeed, the longer the truth is suspended, the greater the communicable excitation. Another truth thus emerges in the course of this scene, a truth about who we are when we get caught up in communicable excitation. How do desire and fantasy run through community? How do susceptibility and credulity condition the building of an imagined world through language, image, and sound, through technology and tactility?

In other words, what is meant by a communicable excitation? Is it too easy to call it contagion? How central is this notion to José Esteban Muñoz’s work? My recitation is never solitary: I must have someone, real or imagined, on the other end of the line.² There must be someone about whom I speak. If I am given over to malicious fantasy, I am also clearly seeking an excited connection, soliciting someone, quite suddenly, to come with me to a place that is speculative, exciting, and bad; the other’s actions are bad, and my behavior is bad, and we are all bad subjects in a dispersed queer world; only a miserable morality can stop us now. Over there, where the other person lives, is not here where I am, though I can perhaps bring others close by soliciting them to build a story with me and so seek to close the gaps separating all of us by letting excitation bridge the distance. I am here, but something different is going on over there; I seek to capture and transmit it, break up its secrecy, barge in, call out, if only with the poor-quality image taken by a cell phone camera and transported transatlantically in the urgency of the moment. Of course, one might call this *identification*, but that misses the critical distance from the norm, for how otherwise do we explain the excitement of being bad, catching someone else being bad, or being bad by gossiping, and so being bad together? That is a form of *disidentification*, the exciting venture of departing from protocols of propriety that seek to shame a wide range of desires and to foreclose potential connections or, rather, as we shall see, connections with potentiality. Gossip has its protocols, but it also departs from those that govern privacy and what could be understood as a politics or even an erotics of shame. Was I walking the walk of shame, fearing exposure? And just how exciting would it be if I were? He was, after all, not shaming me but seeking to expose, to break through, a specter of shame he saw walking down the street, and he did so shamelessly, or so I imagine.

I start with this vignette and speculations on communicable excitation in order to open a discussion of what, if anything, constitutes solidarity during these times. How do we think about disidentification, excitable

communicability, and subterranean bonds during times such as these?³ Contemporary solidarities harbor dissonance, disidentification, requiring that gap that cannot be fully closed and without which there is no excitable transmission, no possibility of being lofted into an unreality through a kind of improper behavior that has its political necessity. I will turn to solidarity a bit later in my remarks. But first let's consider why identification proves to be a problem, and why it is distinct from identity, as both Stuart Hall and José Esteban Muñoz have rightly claimed, even though forms of identitarian politics such as nationalism and racism seek to cultivate forms of identification that can indeed be converted into identity. Let us remember that the most prevalent and toxic forms of identity politics during our time are white supremacy and white nationalism.⁴ So for those who blame the current political situation on a left that is supposedly too concerned with identity politics, let us remember that white identity politics is the most virulent form around, and that to be opposed to racism, to misogyny, to homophobia, is to appeal not to a common identity but to an alliance that knows, and opposes, these life-destroying forms of power.

But first, why is identification a misnomer? When we take identification to be possible, to be complete or successful, we negate the very difference that makes it possible. Identification passes through a difference that cannot be denied or overcome. Well, it can be, when we take monolithic ideas of identity to be the site of identification that overrides our differences. But if we approach identification as distinct from identity, it reveals itself to be disidentification from the start. Hence, in conceding that identification is not identity, a difference is introduced that proves essential to the critique of identification as the basis of identity. Another way of saying this is that identification is at the same time disidentification, defined by noncoincidence and difference. But if that is so, at what cost is identification converted into an identity claim?

Stuart Hall writes,

In common sense language, identification is constructed on the back of a recognition of some common origin or shared characteristics with another person or group, or with an ideal, and with the natural closure of solidarity and allegiance established on this foundation. In contrast, . . . identification [is] a process never completed—always “in process.” It is not determined in the sense that it can always be “won” or “lost,” sustained or abandoned. Though not without its determinate conditions of existence, including the material and symbolic resources required to sustain it, identification is in the end conditional, lodged in contingency. Once secured, it does not obliterate difference. The total merging it suggests is, in fact, a fantasy of incorporation. . . . Freud calls [identification] “the earliest expression of an emotional tie with another person.” In the context of the Oedipus complex, however, it takes the parental figures as both love-objects and objects of rivalry, thereby

inserting ambivalence into the very centre of the process. “Identification is, in fact, ambivalent from the very start.”⁵

Muñoz doesn’t follow Hall down the oedipal path but responds to conditions in which the dominant images on offer for political identification are those that seek to secure a future for people who are white, straight, wealthy, and loaded with proof of citizenship. Under such conditions, disidentification becomes a key mode of refusal. Muñoz was for years engaged in that Althusserian problem: how then to become a “bad subject” who fails, emphatically and critically, to align with the subject positions that reproduce the dominant categories of power? The problem is not just that heterosexual normativity invests the child of sexual reproduction with the capacity to open the future; the problem is that for kids of color, the future is too often foreclosed, awash with expectant grief, ruled by carceral powers that clamp down on the body, arresting mobility and expression, stopping breath, knocking one senseless with their pervasive violence and impunity. The embrace of the gay subject, or gay identity politics, or undifferentiated ways of representing gay desire not only marginalized queers of color but also disavowed their existence.

His argument, of course, changed the course of queer theory: we have to ask, who can imagine a future, to whom does the future belong? The march of progressive time that guides the dominant gay human rights campaigns can account neither for the new forms of virulent homophobia nor for the fact that the progressive narrative never brought along all those who remain unrecognized by its dominant racial and property norms. Muñoz wrote, “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). What is weird about that temporality is that it monopolizes the here and now, and yet it defends against any future that veers away from the reproduction of the same. When the now becomes the icon of the future, the future is guaranteed to materialize the reproductive logic of straightness, that is, to reproduce the now as the future, linking the two times in a straight line. At the same time, however, that line forecloses the future, in the sense of the unanticipated deviation. Whatever time could have been open-ended is closed.

When the temporal horizon in which subjects are constituted is the here and now, it is assumed that those subjects find their mirror and their satisfaction in the realm of what already exists. They have a future, to be sure, but it is one that extrapolates the possibilities that are immanent in the here and in the now and so extends their dominion. For Muñoz, the

distinction between potentiality and possibility might be described this way: those for whom the future opens onto a reproduction of the same privilege and power are those who have been endowed with the power to live the future as a future of possibility.⁶ The map of a possible future establishes the spatial and temporal coordinates for those who reproduce the terms of power and who have been appointed to reproduce it. For those whose future is uncertain, or even unimaginable, however, it is potentiality that emerges when the frame breaks apart or, indeed, when some collective tears open the map to see what other pathways are possible. What Muñoz calls the “not here” emerges in the midst of the here; the “not now” emerges at the center of the now. So when he reminded queer theory that kids of color don’t always have or expect a future, he was claiming that both space and time are organized according to a political horizon that establishes not just the reproductive future of whiteness but the whiteness of the future. In one sense, the future is a white thing; in another, that white thing called the future forecloses on another sense of futurity, the one that opens up through the tear or the break, or perhaps, with Fred Moten, *in the break*.⁷ Strictly speaking, within Muñoz’s terms, potentiality is not yet possible, and for it to become possible, a new spatiotemporal organization of the world is required. Who is going to do that organizing work? How do any of us challenge and change the spatiotemporal organization of a world that reserves the future for subjects endowed with the capacity and privilege to claim it, that is to say, for subjects who reproduce that very claim? Through what means are space and time disorganized and remade? It is the stage, or staging, or a utopian potential in staging, that facilitates that mode of world making. This is not a production *ex nihilo*, since it emerges from the interstices of organized time. The *not here yet*, the *could be here* at some point, the *should be*, and the *should have been* all contest the given world, the given way that time and space are organized, showing us why it does not need to be given again, or could be given anew, if only the shards from a broken world could be taken up for the purposes of making aspiration possible. Aspiration is not a single and heroic act; the word *aspiration* can be broken down into “the act of breathing into,” and so it has within it already one body breathing on or into another, a form of resuscitation from a condition that is not yet suffocated, but not yet fully breathing. So aspiration is hardly guaranteed, and it requires body on body, fighting off the chokehold, fighting, for sure, in the name of Eric Garner, whose last breath was expended and vanquished in the utterance “I can’t breathe.” One would think that such an utterance would prompt the police to loosen the chokehold, but they only squeezed tighter, since this speaking person was not entitled to a future, and the police choked it off, effectively declaring that this was no life or that, if it was a life, it was not one with a future. The designation comes in the form

of the kill; the kill reproduces the logic that forecloses futurity, or reserves the future for whiteness. White supremacy reiterates itself in the act that deprives the person of color of breath precisely when what is called for, ethically and politically, what is required to live, is giving the throat air, giving breath to voice, breathing in the breath of the other in order to breathe: this is the relational condition of aspiration itself.⁸

The potentiality in this scene opens only once it is contrasted with what physical proximity should have been or could have been. We make a scenic event, imagining ethical capacity into that lethal embrace where it is absent, seeking to realize the radically unrealized potential. In “Concerning Violence,” Fanon remarks that the colonist substitutes jargon for reality, but the colonized subject gains crucial knowledge in the proximity of bodily combat: there “he discovers that his life, his breathing, and his heartbeat are the same as the colonist’s. He discovers that the skin of the colonist is not worth more than the native’s [*l’indigène*]. In other words, his world receives a fundamental jolt.”⁹ That’s a queer proximity, to be sure, but the queerest critique would perhaps engage a contrapuntal series of frames. For “to take another’s breath away” can be the very phrase of ecstasy: take ecstasy, Muñoz tells us, take my breath away, but to let me live with others, outside this isolated self, flesh on flesh, moving past shame and in solidarity against those who would derealize, diminish, or destroy our lives. Take my breath away, but do it so that I can finally breathe in a way that I never knew a body could breathe, since it is your breath that now enters my lungs, and my breath that is no longer distinguishable from yours. And we are hardly a dyad, since something is always happening on the street, someone else is always passing us by, or passing through us, an occasion for imagining, if not an all-out communicable excitation. Communicable excitation holds the potential for solidarity in the service of a utopia that is not an end to be realized but an open-ended experiment in reconfiguring time and space.

Something remains furtive within the given horizon of racial temporality, refusing the notion that the future is nothing but the seamless extension of the now. The jolt occurs, and it breaks up a world, as, for instance, when the sky is broken open, or the earth exposes its fissures. This is not an apocalypse and surely not a violent explosion, but rather a gesture that grates on its setting until it comes undone. *Gesture* sounds weak; it is barely an act and surely not a collective revolutionary action. But perhaps *gesture* names those forms of power that do not conform to mastery or heroism—weak messianic upheavals, if you will, or potentialities.

Walter Benjamin perhaps described something similar when he described the “scenic events” (*szenisches durchschaut*) in Kafka’s works, where events are dissolved into their gestic components.¹⁰ But these ges-

tures don't belong to the human form as we know it. Benjamin cites Werner Kraft, who claims that the doorbell in Kafka's short piece "A Fratricide" is too loud for any real doorbell; it rings out over the town and up to heaven [*zum Himmel auf*] (121). (*Himmel* means both sky and heaven and so is ambiguously this-worldly and otherworldly: if it is the sky, it is the limit of what we can see; if it is heaven, it is beyond the limit.) That doorbell, like many of Kafka's objects, surely exceeded its function and its expected reach, sounding out beyond the limits of human knowing. Benjamin concludes: "Just as this bell, which is too loud for a doorbell, rings out toward heaven, the gestures of Kafka's figures are too powerful for our accustomed surroundings and break out into wider areas." And then: "The stage on which this drama happens is the World Theatre which opens up toward heaven [*dessen Prospekt der Himmel darstellt*]," which represents the prospect of heaven, or constitutes that prospect. And yet, Benjamin continues, "this heaven is only a background [*Hintergrund*]" (121). Later Benjamin draws the parallel to El Greco. Both Kafka and El Greco are said to "tear open the sky beyond every gesture" (121; *reißt hinter jeder Gebärde—wie Greco—den Himmel auf*; here *Himmel* is translated as sky, but the phrase could be translated "to tear open *the heaven* behind every gesture"). To tear it open in order to let heaven through? Or to tear it open because that heaven was always and only a limit that was never doing us any good? No human tears that heaven or sky open, only a gesture that may or may not conform to what human bodies can do. All we are given to know is that that *Hintergrund*, that setting, no longer provides the points of reference for understanding the gesture that emerges in its midst; that gesture has turned against the setting in order to become its own scenic event. We are, as Benjamin claims, "far away from the continent of man" (122), as animals alone come to speak or enact the truth, much like what happens in fables, in the generic form of the fabulous.

Perhaps this is what Muñoz meant by potential breaks in the background, the forcible character of the taken-for-granted world as it forcibly withholds the possibility of futurity for subjugated peoples. When Mahmoud Darwish asks, "Where shall the birds fly after the last sky?"¹¹ he implies that there have been several skies, perhaps a series; that there never was one sky, one upper limit under which some version of common humanity gathers. All the settled backdrops and frameworks for human action are regulated by forms of power that deny the very possibility of futurity for too many beings who dwell within their coordinates. Occupation is but one example, and because it is linked to the carceral politics of state racism, it resonates far too well where we live: occupation does not precisely extinguish futurity; it generalizes the condition of indefinite detention as a primary mode of temporality. We can say, of course, that

indefinite detention is but one technique of occupation, but all occupation involves waiting endlessly, without freedom, and without the knowledge of when that condition might ever end. Carceral detention is the single fastest-growing sector of prison industries everywhere. (The GEO Group, for instance, is currently making enormous profits on detention centers for people detained and held by ICE [Immigration and Customs Enforcement] in the United States, and we should be tracking those profits.) In indefinite detention, one waits to know the allegation, one waits for one's lawyer, the procedures, the introduction of evidence, due process, the writ of habeas corpus, but one also waits for light, for the faces one knows, for breath, and movement. One is everywhere surrounded and constrained by legal power and its slow and fast forms of violence. One waits for a different version of the law than the one that merely reiterates its force through the procedural regulations that constitute administrative power, or the version that openly mocks rules of evidence and procedures for fair trials in the form of manipulative shows. One waits for a form of justice that is precisely not instantiated in the law and that arrives on no calendar day, and there is no passage that can take one there. Justice becomes an impossible thought that nevertheless breaks up the everyday operation of law; it is, strictly speaking, an impossibility within the given legal horizon but, for that very reason, a potential whose furtive and persistent power might break through the horizon.

With potential, a foreclosed future breaks into present time. The future does not exactly arrive but flashes up in gesture that disturbs the terms of constriction. Toward the end of *Cruising Utopia*, Muñoz cites Tavia Nyong'o's question, "Is there something black about waiting?" This question resonates with the Palestinian experience of waiting for freedom and is surely one reason for the solidarities among movements against antiblack racism and the struggle in Palestine; the horizon of that world is perpetually closing in and shutting down, the ground no longer supports the body, time is at once cut short and without end. In his poem "The Earth Is Closing on Us," Darwish writes:

The earth is closing on us, pushing us through the last passage, and we tear
off our limbs to pass through.

The earth is squeezing us. I wish we were its wheat so we could die and live
again. I wish the earth was our mother

So she'd be kind to us. I wish we were pictures on the rocks for our dreams
to carry

As mirrors. We saw the faces of those to be killed by the last of us in the last
defence of the soul.

We cried over their children's feast. We saw the faces of those who'll throw
our children

Out of the windows of this last space. Our star will hang up mirrors.
Where should we go after the last frontiers? Where should the birds fly after
the last sky?
Where should the plants sleep after the last breath of air? We will write our
names with scarlet steam.
We will cut off the hand of the song to be finished by our flesh.
We will die here, here in the last passage. Here and here our blood will plant
its olive tree.¹²

Hardly a reassuring earth upon which the body freely moves, for the earth closes in, squeezes, and here it is the body that tears apart its own limbs in order to move through the passage. The earth is no one's mother, and yet that remains the longing, and only through the evacuation of human form is the perspective established for the possibility of the renewal of life. And yet in the midst of the vanished and vanishing human form, the poet articulates an impossible wish to become "pictures on the rocks for our dreams to carry as mirrors." "Our star will hang up mirrors": a testimonial act beyond death that takes place outside of human form, one that breaks upon the meanings of earth and sky, that tears the limbs from the human form, precisely because the world or, rather, the earth is allowing no passage, no breath, no movement. Of course, Darwish's poem concludes with a doubling down on the "here." "We will die here, here in the last passage. Here and here our blood will plant its olive tree." The one "here" cannot arrive without the other. One is in exile at home: this is my home, but I am in exile here where I should belong: the "here" that is the place of occupation or incarceration is where one will die; that horizon will close, and there will be no opening. This seems certain. And yet, a second here arrives: "here in the last passage," which could be death, could be the last line of the poem, could be the movement through the checkpoint, or the destruction of the checkpoint that opens up the possibility of free passage. The here that is *here* allows no passage and yet *is* the last passage—this here also opens up a revolutionary passage, one that disorganizes and tears apart the restrictive and restricting spatiotemporal world of oppression. So is the last passage death, or is it revolution? That poetic wager is not yet answerable. In the poem "In Her Absence I Created Her Image," Darwish writes, "No city is in the city. No 'here' except 'there.'" And then (without quotation marks), "no there but here."¹³ But then in his poem "I Belong There," both time and space lose their coordinates: "I have a wave snatched by seagulls, I have a saturated meadow, a panorama of my own. / . . . In the deep horizon of my word, I have a moon, a bird's sustenance, and an immortal olive tree."¹⁴ So now we begin to know where the birds fly after the last sky—into the deep horizon of poetic words. These words become a scenic setting for breaking apart the violent organization of

space and time. They release some kind of potential, perhaps a solidaristic remaking of space and time. But how?

Muñoz writes: “We have been cast out of straight time’s rhythm, and we have made worlds in our temporal and spatial configurations. . . . They are practiced failure and virtuosic” (183). It would seem that we leave a *here* for a *there*, make a passage, but this is no straight passage. The potentialities that appear as rips and tears in the otherwise seamless future of no future for those abandoned by progress are immanent and furtive possibilities within the present, indicating that this time is also another time, and always has been; it opens toward a past and a future even when, politically, the force of oblivion seeks to cover over those very openings. These are neither strictly theological nor phenomenological openings but something more decidedly queer, and they take us back to disidentification and the pleasures of being “bad.” Utopia is not a place to which we can go, but it constitutes a significant distortion of those forms of progressive time that are presupposed as the privilege of the recognizable subject. But who is eligible for an open-ended future? For whom are the ends of the future open to make and pursue?

Under conditions of great hopelessness, humor is essential. So, too, is the embrace and cultivation of failure, as Jack Halberstam has shown.¹⁵ Bad attitude is a crucial resource, as we learn from Muñoz’s conversation with his friend Lisa Duggan.¹⁶ And perhaps Lee Edelman’s “bad education” presents a late-breaking possibility of alliance with Muñoz’s bad attitude.¹⁷ Bad sentiments, Muñoz tells us, can signal the capacity to transcend hopelessness. Not just feeling unwell and out of sorts, which can be telling forms of noncompliance with unjust expectations, but feeling bad things, like anger and rage, or doing bad things, like being rude, can fulfill the editorial function of commenting upon the massive unacceptability of present reality. If bad attitudes depart from the proper attitudes that sustain belief in the way things are, they include cynicism, occasional grandstanding, depression, bitchiness—and also surely a love of gossip, which is, after all, nothing more than imagining in an excited way the exciting transgressions of another and so participating in transgression in the very imagining. Excitability is the name of that game. As we know from many, not all, established philosophy departments, speculation is bad. In gossip, however, speculation traffics in excitation, but only on the condition that it is communicable. I want to return to this question soon, asking whether communicability requires susceptibility and what it has to do with the future, ecstasy, and forms of solidarity that touch upon utopia and its power to tear it up, as in tearing it up the dance floor.

But let us return to Muñoz, or move forward with Muñoz, who is still sounding a call: “We must vacate the here and now for a then and there. Individual transports are insufficient” (185). It has to be a collec-

tive transport, and at times it seems we verge on science fiction: “The future is a spatial and temporal destination” (185). Muñoz tells us that sometimes we actively have to find the utopian, but at other times it comes at us, undeniable. We have to give way to its propulsion. It can carry us, but not alone; we must be willing to give way with others. This voluntary form of giving way or giving ourselves over is not something we can do on our own. In the first instance, it is feeling, but what is its source and range? Second, it is ecstasy, which is precisely a form of standing outside oneself that is also standing with another, and so makes unanswerable the question of whose ecstasy this is. Third, there is collective potential, which is neither a roadmap nor a plan but a way of breaking through the structure of inequality that allocates possibility differentially, deciding in advance whose lives will be possible and whose will not. Potential talks back to radical inequality; it opens up in an unlivable life the prospect of livability not so much as a fixed image of the future but as an open-ended time. This sense of expanse with an uncertain limit is not merely personal liberty but collective movement. Within the very conviction that this is not a life, some sense of living and feeling becomes unexpectedly communicable across communities on the margins or locked into minority status or held under siege and all too often defined by imprisonment and fatal abandonment. This pertains, as Tavia Nyong’o has written, to “an idea of affect as extensible in time and space, of affect as possessing a movement vocabulary and a set of principles for the navigation of a terrain.”¹⁸ The feeling does not precisely come from within: it follows from being moved; it passes over into and through the crowd—neither a fascist frenzy nor a loss of all defining difference, but an awkward, fractious movement that continues by moving and being moved.

Muñoz seems to know that we can capture this kind of movement only through a set of figures: “Queerness,” he tells us, “is not here, but it approaches like a crashing wave of potentiality” (185). That wave figures feeling, the prospect of feeling under conditions where feeling has been mutilated within and by the heteronormative world, or where feeling is internally riven by neoliberal compulsions. For Muñoz, this crashing wave of queer feeling is something that we can and must feel, precisely because feeling is what must be saved from obliteration and appropriation. Queer feeling has been endangered within that relentless rhythm of time and regulated configuration of space. And not just feeling, my feeling or yours, but ecstasy, which is not a single affect but something that comes over us together, even though under its sway we neither melt into a single subject nor lose all contour: “Queerness’s time” he tells us, “is the time of ecstasy” (187). Saying it lets us feel it, lets us believe in it. The descriptive statement becomes a performative, a scenic event. Let us consider his words again: “The real force of performance is the ability to generate a

modality of knowing and recognition among audiences and groups that facilitates modes of belonging, especially minoritarian belonging” (99). Further, it is “a manifestation of a ‘doing’ that is in the horizon” (99). *In*, he writes, not *on*, as if lightly buried or breaking through the surface. Performance, in his terms, opens up a future “imbued with potentiality” (1). Of course, not all performance does that, but it can. And yet, this hardly discounts Muñoz’s assertion, which effectively enters the potential into the declarative. His statement is meant to be that kind of doing, that generative and facilitating inspiration, a form of doing that keeps on doing as it is done to, that outlives the life of the author, carries that trace to which we remain susceptible. And in claiming that this last is true, I am also wishing it to be, calling it up and out, taking inspiration from him, following Fred Moten, who said two years ago that his books are to be breathed, that now we breathe and bear his books and their vibrant afterlife.

So, in that spirit, I propose in the last section of this paper to revisit his claim that sometimes we actively have to find the utopian, but at other times it comes at us, undeniable. Is it not more sober to say that there are conditions under which it is deniable and that people do, in fact, deny it all the time? Don’t we have to be susceptible to utopia? If we are closed off, it can surely be denied. Whoever the “we” who gathered or summoned under that pronoun, we are perhaps already susceptible, given over to the claim. Muñoz’s writing is meant to support and sustain that susceptibility. Perhaps we have the grammar wrong: maybe the structure of that susceptibility is the utopian, and that utopia is neither an object nor an aim. If so, then susceptibility is the capacity to catch the wind that comes from elsewhere, to give way to the protest that arrives damaged and dismissed in advance as impossible. What is deemed impossible within a given horizon turns out to be the potential to break apart the constraining force of that horizon, the constraint on intelligibility that it reiterates within straight time. It is a site of rage, but also of pleasure; it does not ask for recognition within the terms of the existing world; it arrives, unrecognizable, to force a reconfiguration of time and space.

Muñoz read Herbert Marcuse and adopted his language of “the great refusal.” But what was previously seen as a singular moment of revolution turns out to be a recurring feature of the everyday. Marcuse offered, of course, a rather trenchant critique of Freud’s reality principle, but also the performance principle. The latter was understood as the way in which a social order reproduces itself through the containment and ordering of pleasure and so offered to Muñoz another way of reading heteronormativity. That restrictive economy produces an uncontainable excess, a convergence of feeling and knowing, but also refusal and revolt. It is not exactly a hydraulic thesis in which a pleasure repressed becomes a pleasure released

(and the form of the pleasure stays the same); rather, Marcuse elaborates on what Freud called “sentiments of solidarity.”

Marcuse draws on Freud’s late work, which distinguished between Eros and Thanatos. In that late scheme, the forces of love seek to secure and strengthen the bonds of community, and the death drive, or Thanatos, seeks to break those relations apart. Earlier, in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920), it was clear that sexuality could be in the service of the death drive but also that death drive could be in the service of sexuality. (A fuller discussion of this issue might throw new light on some of the debates that pit relationality against negativity in light of the fact that love is structured by ambivalence, but this is not my aim this evening.) For Marcuse, adaptation to reality is a ruse, and we should refuse all those ego psychologists who champion reality without asking what order of reality we are talking about, or what toll on the psyche it takes. He asks about the death drive in the context of war, seeking not only to understand the destructive impulse but also to ask what, if anything, has the power to oppose the drive toward destruction. When Freud operates within this polarity of Eros and Thanatos, he sets aside his earlier claims that love is necessarily ambivalent, including within its own terms love and hatred. So there is love that is distinct from, and opposed to, hatred, and then there is love that is bound up with hatred, and that ambivalent couple ushers in a second sense of love. Freud does not settle this equivocation, and perhaps it is the kind of equivocation in love that cannot be settled at all. Ambivalence matters, of course, for Muñoz as for Stuart Hall, since it is at work in *disidentification*. Freud also considers what happens when communal bonds are nationalistic and become fortified by Thanatos. In this light, one might consider sentiments of solidarity that support quotidian forms of white supremacy. It is not really possible to support communal bonds as such without asking what kind of community is presupposed, and what forms of hatred and practices of expulsion are at work in fortifying those communal ties.

Muñoz is clearly right to call upon Marcuse to ask how a certain excess pleasure is produced by the very ordering of sexuality that seeks to restrict pleasure within the reproductive norms of heterosexuality. That excess veers from the reproductive norm and opens up the possibility of forms of community that are not organized by heteronormative kinship. But if community bonds are ambivalent, wrought from *disidentification*, how do we understand and confront that destructive potential which, Freud tells us, is part of the unconquerable nature of humans? Does utopia overcome ambivalence, hatred, aggression, those death-drivish elements that enter into *disidentification*? If *disidentification* contains the kernel of utopia for Muñoz, does it then follow that utopia retains the trace

of disidentification? Although Freud gave an account of how identification with the leader can hold a community together in *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego* (1921), he also suggested that the power of a community to overthrow a tyrant or authoritarian ruler can give way to a new mode of governance in its wake.¹⁹ This possibility of overthrow can be found in disidentification, in the negativity that every identification seeks to cover. Indeed, Freud's corrective to forms of accelerated nationalist sentiment was precisely ambivalence, which, as the analysis of melancholia shows, is subject to the polar extremes of suicide and mania. Whereas suicide conducts the tyrannical death sentence against the self as its own object of destruction, mania is the unrealistic effort to overthrow the tyrant—unrealistic, yes, but only under conditions where the limits of reality are defined by power. The opposition to those forms of nationalism that stoke war involves “tearing” at those social bonds. This overthrow of tyranny and this opposition to bellicose nationalism cannot then rely on the bonds of community sustaining, and sustained by, tyranny and war. Odd, then, that in a letter to Einstein, Freud writes, “The basis for our common hatred of war . . . is that we cannot do otherwise than to hate it. Pacifists we are because our organic nature wills us thus to be.”²⁰ That is quite a claim by someone who knows full well that many are excited by war, that they prefer that modality of excitation and fortify the bonds that make it possible, so humans *can* do otherwise. If we expose his contradiction, we miss the way he inflects his descriptive claim with a utopian turn: war sensations, he claims, no longer thrill us, only because we have come to see—or to imagine—the destruction of organic life that war implies as something that is unbearable for humans to accept in light of their own organic life. The implication is that organic life makes us pacifists, since apparently we do not will our own destruction (even though he has made clear that, under the sway of the death drive, we most certainly do). Apparently, we come to understand the consequences of the destruction of organic life only through a cultural process that allows us to see and consider this destruction and so to develop a revulsion against destruction itself. The point is rather that through some cultural process, perhaps also an aesthetic one, we become susceptible to revulsion, rejective indignation, radical unbearability. In the end, it is perhaps only that Freud hopes that organic life will have the final say against the death drive, subordinating and limiting its powers of destruction. Most interesting here is that it is because of our status not as human beings but, rather, as living organisms that we stand the chance of refusing destruction. Vacating the received human form, a new kind of ethical relationality becomes possible. Indeed, he is soliciting humans to regard themselves as organisms first in order to find unbearable the thought of the extinction of our own lives, but also of organic life more broadly. Organic life implies relations of interdepen-

dency, including ecological ones, that extend throughout the living world. Odd, indeed, that this mastermind of the human psyche turns at a late date to a politics of and for the living organism, especially when he was the one who told us that the death drive belongs to the organism! Hatred and destruction are not absent; we are asked to dismantle the apparatus of war making, to oppose destruction itself, to act in accord with what Einstein called “militant pacifism.”²¹ Destroying destruction, however, only fortifies and augments destruction unless its second instance swerves from the first and refuses to replicate its logic—in another queer turn from the straight path.

Freud seeks to counter destruction not just by relying on the fortification of the superego, which is, in his words, the culture of the death drive. Mania proves to be the only hope for prevailing against the suicidal and murderous aims of the unbridled superego, which would, unleashed, judge the ego unto death, since only with that power is it possible to break with the tyrant and the blow of the tyrant that has become the self-flagellating structure of subjectification. Mania offers no more than a cipher for understanding those forms of insurrectionary solidarity that turn against authoritarian and tyrannical rule, exceeding and confounding the national frame, building ties across hemispheres, regions, and languages. The tyrant is an anthropomorphism sustained by networks of power, and so the overthrow is both manic and deliberate. His base does not immediately disperse with his overthrow; they go underground as another false narrative of progress takes hold. Of course, one focuses on the one in power when executive privilege has been massively augmented, as has happened in the last years, but that is not the only reason for the anthropomorphic fix. The task is not to wait for the courageous new politician on the ill-defined left who will outwit the present occupant of the White House; rather, there are ways to strengthen solidarities as everyone else is watching that show. Below the radar, networks of solidarity are built among prisoners in solitary confinement in Pelican Bay and in Palestine, who found a way to engage in a hunger strike and oppose solitary confinement at the same time. Networks of solidarities are being formed by and for the people of Puerto Rico, whose colonized status has never been properly recognized and whose claims to financial support to address destroyed infrastructure are ignored, since these are not possible lives. Impossible, they carry on, forming new sources of support, articulating a new movement to overcome colonial rule. Without media attention, Turkish and transnational networks form to support and receive those dissidents who signed their petition for peace, only to be called terrorists and lose their jobs and their mobility and to be imprisoned and tried in show trials. And what about queer migration politics, those who oppose the wall, who oppose Islamophobia, and whose coalitions have

never required that we speak or act in unison, or that antagonisms be fully overcome? What about Ni Una Menos or the feminist and trans opposition to *feminicidio* in Latin America that works through transregional and multilingual solidarities that evade the police and the law, both of which are complicit with the violence? What about activists along the border of Mexico struggling to get food and water to migrants, or Boycott, Sanctions, and Divestment, the nonviolent hope of Palestinian opposition? Or what about Mississippi Action, representing queer and trans people and women struggling against imprisonment, for a living wage, and for health care? And queers of color everywhere who take on homophobia, racism, economic injustice, and the rights of the undocumented? Muñoz not only allied himself with these queers but helped make queer of color critique a field, an art of solidarity. Solidarity is not exactly a form of love, unless we understand ambivalence as constitutive of love. It does require persistence and an openness to connection precisely where it is not expected. We don't need to identify with one another, but we need to converge at the site of our disidentification. The opposition to war, to both state- and non-state-based violence, to carceral violence, and to systematic abandonment requires an impossible and disparaged desire to break free from forms of subjection that are regularly renamed reality. Mania acts as if it were an unconditioned freedom only to return to the problem of a conditioned life. But what decides that condition? What temporal and spatial configuration has decided in advance what counts as reality and whose refusal is a kind of madness? Although no one fully breaks free from all social bonds, especially not the maniac, there are other breaks with reality that are part of the struggle to rearticulate time and space with the materials at hand, often the scattered remains of the former regime. This is what Muñoz called “engag[ing] in a collective temporal distortion” (185). Something tears open the sky, or a jolt from the earth is registered, but not as the exhilaration of immediacy or another vitalist solution. The potential of solidarity opens as a wound in the world that no humanism can repair, dispossessed, at a remove from who we are, out of time together, ek-static. There we find a collective incitement to take in the air and start to aspire; there we take each other's breath away only to let each other breathe more fully and there—or here—consume the furtive potentials of one another's life as a practice of utopian persistence.

Notes

1. Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 99. Henceforth page numbers for this work are given in text.
2. Ronell, *Telephone Book*, 1–44.
3. Moten and Harney, *Undercommons*.

4. See, e.g., the white supremacist appropriation of identity at Identity Evropa's website: www.identityevropa.com.
5. Hall, "Who Needs Identity?," 2–3.
6. Muñoz articulated his idea of potentiality in relation to the work of both Ernst Bloch and Giorgio Agamben. See Bloch, *Principle of Hope*, and Agamben's collection *Potentialities*, esp. 177–84. See also Villarejo, "José's Hope."
7. See Moten, *In the Break*.
8. See Sharpe, *In the Wake*, 130–31.
9. Fanon, *Wretched of the Earth*, 10.
10. See Benjamin, "Franz Kafka." Henceforth page numbers for this work are given in text.
11. Darwish, "Earth Is Closing In on Us."
12. *Ibid.*
13. Darwish, "In Her Absence."
14. Darwish, "I Belong There."
15. Halberstam, *Queer Art of Failure*.
16. Duggan and Muñoz, "Hope and Hopelessness."
17. Edelman, "Learning Nothing."
18. Nyong'o, "Scene of Occupation," 142.
19. Although Freud discusses the primal horde, the pact of the brothers who overthrow the father, in *Group Psychology*, chap. 10, and in *Totem and Taboo*, he also refers to the superego as a tyrant who can be overthrown through mania in "Mourning and Melancholia." Interestingly, he referred to the field of psychology as his tyrant (Freud, *Complete Letters*, 129).
20. The correspondence between Freud and Einstein can be found as "Why War?" In 1931, the Institute for Intellectual Cooperation invited Einstein to engage in a dialogue with a thinker of his choice on the topics of politics and peace, and he chose Freud, whom he had met briefly a few years before.
21. Quoted in Holton and Elkana, *Einstein on Peace*, 377.

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