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Hope and hopelessness: A dialogue

Lisa Duggan^a and José Esteban Muñoz^{b*}

^a*Social and Cultural Analysis, New York University, New York, USA;*

^b*Performance Studies, New York University, New York, USA*

This article is a critical dialogue between Lisa Duggan and José Esteban Muñoz that meditates on questions of public feelings and politics. The authors approach hope and hopelessness as a dialectical formation, ultimately calling for both a critical modality of hope and insisting on the political necessity of engaging feelings of hopelessness that do not simply lead to complacency. The essay melds social theory with concepts from the psychological.

Keywords: hope; hopelessness; public feelings; complacency; paranoid/schizoid position; depressive position; Ernst Bloch; Melanie Klein; Paolo Virno; W.R. Bion

Lisa: The therapist of a friend of mine told her, “Hope is the worst thing.” I was interested in this proclamation, which I took to mean that hope in the present is a projection forward of a wish for repair of the past. Since the past cannot be repaired, hope is a wish for that which never was and cannot be. However illuminating this notion might or might not be for an individual’s romantic life (the context within which the statement was made), does it resonate for us in thinking about the relationship between history, politics in the present, and our affective relationship to a desired future? What is the temporal register of political hope? Is it the worst thing? The best thing? Or just a necessary thing for a leftist in neoliberal America?

I have to say I’m confused about hope, about how it feels and what it can do. Most calls to progressive left organizing stress the importance of finding and sustaining hope. But the political right manufactures and circulates hope in the most noxious ways – from Reagan’s Morning in America to Bush’s Democracy in the Middle East, American political hope has been premised on nostalgia in false histories, complacency about brutal presents, and desires for an idealized future of unchallenged domination. Such political hopes are what we, on the left, organize to demolish.

Can political hope on the left be “the worst thing” too? Certainly the answer is yes. There are forms of authoritarian communism based on “scientific” teleological histories, borne through violent presents into fully rationalized futures. And there are varieties of “common dreams” universalizing, supposedly populist left-liberal politics (Tom Frank 2004; Todd Gitlin 1995) based on a falsely unified past, a call for the

*Corresponding author. Email: jose.munoz@nyu.edu

commonsense priority of “economic” interests over “cultural” issues, and a vision of a homogenizing political future somehow always best represented by straight, white guys. Such hope suppresses the messy vitality of political longings emanating from an elsewhere that is always already marginalized. But what about “us”? What about *our* political hope – or the political hope we might wish for? Is it “the worst thing”? Or might the question be better asked as... Is political hope *ever* the best thing? Or consistently a good thing, or a necessary thing, in the ways we often assume?

As a queer feminist anti-imperialist and utterly contrary and cranky leftist, I have my doubts about the political valences of hope. I’m suspicious of it. I associate it with normative prescriptions about the future I *ought* to want, with coercive groupthink, with compulsory cheerfulness, with subtly coercive blandness. I find a lot of pleasure in bitterness, cynicism, depressiveness and bitchiness. I raise my defenses against earnest optimism and its normative compulsions. It is within this framework of temperament and politics that I defend myself as a specifically *queer* leftist.

When I think about *hope*, I set it alongside *happiness* and *optimism*, which I immediately associate with race and class privilege, with imperial hubris, with gender and sexual conventions, with maldistributed forms of security both national and personal.¹ They can operate as the affective reward for conformity, the privatized emotional bonus for the right kind of investments in the family, private property and the state. They are bestowed upon the normotic – those who (according to psychoanalyst Christopher Bollas) conform excessively to social norms, those who endorse domination and call it freedom.² Such happiness and optimism calls out for ruin – an insurgency! a stock market crash! a flaming pervert next door!

But must hope be made of these materials? If happiness and optimism appear too often as individual, psychological, overbearing and annoying to those excluded from their complacent joys, doesn’t hope sometimes arrive in collective, political and insurgent forms? Those around the globe who welcome the election of Barack Obama to the US presidency are often represented as hopeful, as enthusiastic about the possibilities for change, but could not accurately be described as simply happy or securely optimistic. Obama mania may ignite collective hopes, but without guarantees. Though Obama the politician will surely disappoint every part of the left, what might the impact of mobilized hopefulness nonetheless be? That is the animating question for the political present. Can collective hope without delusion or guarantees generate future possibilities beyond any present expectation? Can those of us without happiness or optimism (however otherwise ecstatic we might nonetheless be) generate collective hope now? Or can such hope be a sop, a con, a misdirection of collective energies?

This all makes me wonder what political hope is made of – what kinds of feeling, or emotion, or collections of beliefs constitute it? What relationship to past, present and future might be defined by different varieties of it? What notions of sociality and collectivity are mobilized by it? What kinds of practices, what forms of labor, what manifestations of energy are organized through it? Though we know it can make us feel bad, as the political hopes of our opponents necessarily do, can it make “us” feel

simply “good”? Might the political hope of some necessarily obstruct, exclude or otherwise trample others? For answers I turn to . . .

José: I have been writing about political hope for quite some time.³ When Lisa points out the salient contradiction between political hope and the set of bad sentiments, like bitterness, cynicism, depressiveness and bitchiness, I stop in my tracks. I can give a talk on the Principle of Hope as necessary at this particular moment then go out to dinner and perform all those bad or negative sentiments with great gusto. The contrast between theorizing a critical modality of hope and the pleasures of being bitchy, depressed, jaded, cranky or “over it,” does seem striking.

To make this point I turn to a particular moment in Paolo Virno’s *A Grammar of the Multitude* that speaks of the emotional situation of the Post-Fordist moment as one characterized by a certain mode of ambivalence. This ambivalence leads to “bad sentiments.” As Virno puts it, the emotional situation of the multitude today is that of these “bad sentiments” that include “Opportunism, cynicism, social integration, inexhaustible recanting, cheerful resignation” (Virno 2004, 84). Virno imagines the ways in which the laborer may call on restructured opportunism and cynicism as a sort of escape or exit from late capitalism’s mandate to work and be productive. Negative sentiments like cynicism, opportunism, depression, bitchiness are often seen as solipsistic, individualistic and anti-communal affective stances associated with an emotional tonality of hopelessness. Yet these bad sentiments can signal the capacity to transcend hopelessness. These **sentiments associated with despondence contain the potentiality for new modes of collectivity, belonging in difference and dissent.** The worker can potentially redirect cynicism and it may lead to a criticality that does not collapse into a post-Fordist standard mode of alienation.

Virno, like other writers associated with the Italian proponents of *Operaismo* (workerism) and the Autonomia movement, makes an argument against work itself. Operistas understand that capitalism is not simply the problem because workers are exploited, but because work has become the dominating condition of human life (Virno 2004, 12). Operistas do not want to take over the means of production, instead they plan on reducing it. What would it mean, on an emotional level, to make work not the defining feature of our lives? How could such a procedure be carried out?

The strategy at the center of *Operaismo* is described as Exodus – a strategy of refusal or defection. This mode of resistance as refusal or escape resonates with many patterns of minoritarian resistance to structures of social command. Examples could include the trope of escapology that Daphne Brooks has recently described in her book *Dissident Bodies* or various acts of illegal border crossing (Brooks 2006). Real or symbolic “escapes” from chattel slavery, xenophobic immigration laws are examples of a certain mode of exodus, which is political action that does not automatically vector into a fixed counter discourse of resistance.

Cynicism, Opportunism, and other bad sentiments can be responses to the current emotional situation, one that many of us interested in the project of radical politics understand as hopelessness. Virno’s re-imagining of bad sentiments helps us understand them as something the worker can use to escape. “Bad sentiments” can

be critically redeployed and function as refusals of social control mandates that become transformative behaviors.

If these negative feelings can be reworked we can also get out of a trap presented by a certain non-critical modality of hope. While a certain type of hope may in fact, as Lisa explicated, never be the right thing to do, another mode of hope, a *docta spes* (educated hope), might be the only thing to do. Invoking this notion of an educated hope may sound like it is participating in both the laddling out of accusations of false consciousness and the prescribing of what our futures ought to be. Here I risk setting up a rather strangling binary between good hope and bad hope. That is not my intention. Instead, after Bloch and in a certain tradition of both idealist and materialist thought, I am making a distinction between a mode of hope that simply keeps one in place within an emotional situation predicated on control, and, instead, a certain practice of hope that helps escape from a script in which human existence is reduced. Utopia has often been described as the education of desire. To want something else, to want beside and beyond the matrix of social controls that is our life in late Capitalism, is to participate in this other form of desiring. (Thus the connection between queerness and utopia is most salient at this precise point – **the desire for a new world despite an emotional/world situation that attempts to render such desiring impossible.**) What Bloch would go on to call Concrete Hope is a mode of feeling in the world that can potentially help us move beyond the emotional situation that characterizes our moment within Late Capitalism (see Bloch 1995).

This utopian mode of Hope is not the disenchantment of Tom Frank, Todd Gittlin, Eli Zaretsky and other white male agents of resentment who romanticize a radical past, bemoaning a present that has faltered due to the demands of varied racial and sexual particularities and prescribing a future that stands as a universalized good life. It is not the ludicrous mockery of hope that the Right has used over last few decades as a justification for corrosive domestic policies and the new imperialism of today's US foreign policy. It is not the naive hope that tells us "everything is going to work out fine, don't worry be happy." So what is this educated or concrete hope that not only resists the various problematic depictions of Hope but can also help us image and enact real transformation?

It is not abstract hope. Abstract hope is ungrounded. It is a manifestation of Utopianism that is detached from what Bloch would understand as revolutionary consciousness. It is difficult to hold onto a phrase like "revolutionary consciousness." It seems stark, out-moded, universalizing and prescriptive. Yet I nonetheless deploy it because I want to link it specifically to the world of affect and feeling. Feeling Revolutionary is feeling that our current situation is not enough, that something is indeed missing and we cannot live without it. Feeling revolutionary opens up the space to imagine a collective escape, an exodus, a "going-off script" together. Practicing educated hope, participating in a mode of revolutionary consciousness, is not simply conforming to one group's *doxa* at the expense of another's. Practicing educated hope is the enactment of a critique function. It is not about announcing the way things *ought* to be, but, instead, imagining what things *could* be. It is thinking beyond the narrative of what stands for the world today by seeing it as not enough. Concrete Utopianism is rooted in a kind of

objective possibility. This is the most generative moment in the utopian function. Concrete Utopia is Bloch's reformulation of Marx's notion of praxis, the unity of theory and practice. It is the goal of enacting a world, the actual creation of that goal and the actual movement towards that goal. The concept of *docta spes* (educated hope) is the intellectual and material force that potentially produces concrete utopian thought. We need hope to counter a climate of hopelessness that immobilizes us both on the level of thought and transformative behaviors. None of this is to say that hope is easy to find or never misleading or potentially appropriated by reactionary agents and movements. Hope is a risk. But if the point is to change the world we must risk hope.

Lisa: Indeed. Hope is a risk. But I worry that we understate the full effects and meaning of that little word, risk. The hope we invest in our experimental forms, when bad sentiments lead us out of the ossified structures that constrain us, offers us no guarantee. Our experimental forms fail. We experiment under the conditions of life now – the material conditions of housing, health care and work and the emotional conditions of our own past and present intimacies created and broken. How do we transform and escape the conditions of neoliberal privatization and our own “family” histories?

What happens to educated hope and concrete utopian thinking when we discover we've fucked up, we've been wrong, we've failed to cope with what we must deal with? What happens when we take the risk of hope and land flat on our faces, alone, abandoned and lost? Especially those of us who seek meaningful work outside the corporate form, or live beyond the limits of the normative couple? Those among us who forsake ossified modes of security, or who simply cannot enlist them for ourselves, take terrifying risks every day. Bad sentiments, pursued as escape, can lead to isolation, poverty and death.

So there is fear attached to hope – hope understood as a risky reaching out for something else that *will* fail, in some if not all ways.

What are the resources, then, for an educated hope that comprehends inherent risk and fear? What are the most reliable building blocks for, and the sturdiest bridges to, concrete utopias? I think these might be found in modes of expansive sociality that generate energy from shared collectivity. Expansive, innovative socialities produce energy for alternative, cooperative economies and participatory politics – because as we know, these can be *exhausting* even if not defined as “work.” Particularly as a basis for *queer* hope, loving, fucking and socializing otherwise constitute a practice that moves us toward Feeling Revolutionary, in our economic and political as well as (overlapping) intimate lives. Surely gay respectability politics and the sentimentality of the citizen who only wants to be “good,” now dominant on the US political landscape, do not lead us anywhere *else*, but only into the moribund institutions that deaden the body politic (marriage, the military).

So bad sentiments can lead us (instead) *out* of dominant, alienating social forms, like alienated labor and the gendered family, and into a collectivity of the cynical, bitter, hostile, despairing and hopeless. This is how I find my people! Can these communities of the politically embittered then lead us, not necessarily down the slippery slope to entropy, but into a generatively energetic revolutionary force?

Well, can they? If we cling to what Melanie Klein calls the paranoid schizoid position, perhaps not (see Klein 1975). In that infantile place, we reject the bad breast/world for frustrating us and cling to our impossible wishes for oral/political fulfillment, delivered under conditions we can control. One way of grasping the basis for embittered community is to see it as the political solidarity of the paranoid schizoid. And that's not a bad thing. Regression to infantile intensities and demands can be vitalizing, can help us throw off the moribund maturities demanded by conventional social forms. Such regressions can operate as queer temporalities of anti-development and refusals of normative, Oedipal maturity.

The paranoid schizoid pleasures can be considerable, and productive. But they can also lead to forms of anti-relationality, to anti-sociality, to queer refusals that go nowhere *else* in the world. Klein's depressive position, if understood *not* as an achievement of developmental maturity, but as a *sideways* move out of an impasse (thank you to Kathryn Stockton), can lead (perhaps) to educated hope, to concrete utopia within the social realm.⁴ From the depressive position we accept the uncontrollable nature of political reality, we critique the social world but still engage it, we take the risk of hope with full knowledge of the possibility, even the certainty, of failure. We repair our relation to the social and political world that we have also wished to mutilate, explode, destroy. We campaign for Obama, then organize to pressure and transform the political institutions that disappoint or harm us.

It hurts me to write a sentence as conventional as the previous one, as if I were an advocate of Rorty-style pragmatism, when my Facebook page describes me as an anti-normotic anarcho-socialist! This is the point at which I find the sideways move so crucial. Queer vitality, Feeling Revolutionary, may require that we straddle the Kleinian paranoid schizoid and depressive positions, escaping and re-entering the scene of educated hope in a contrapuntal dance, moving always sideways, never growing "up."

Can we summarize so far by simply and clearly pointing out that the neoliberal state and economy organize compulsory sociality through alienating institutions of work and politics? Noting that the related institutions of marriage and the family organize intimacy and sociality into domesticity and competitive consumption by regulating and constraining our intimate and social energies. Breaking out requires negative energetic force. That force threatens isolation, pain, poverty, prison and death, and it can also lock an embittered community into a romanticized embrace of the negative, a version of the paranoid schizoid position, producing (among other things) versions of what has been called the queer anti-social thesis.⁵ But that force can also lay the basis for a sideways step into political engagement in a disappointing world, via the educated hope, the concrete utopia, about which José has been so eloquent.

This all leads me to postulate that hope and hopelessness exist in a dialectical rather than oppositional relation, and that the opposite of hope is *complacency* – a form of happiness that will not risk the consequences of its own suppressed hostility and pain.⁶ And complacency is the affect of homonormativity. Engaged anti-normative left queer politics is powered by the pleasures of bitterness, cynicism and pain, as well as by ecstasy, empathy and solidarity. But it gestures always

necessarily through hope to the concrete utopias forged in our experimental intimacies and social forms. Hope is the primary way we bring ourselves to take the risk of breaking out of the constraints of present conditions. Hope is the energy we use to smash, not depression (grief, sadness, despair, hostility, anger and bitterness) but complacency in all its protean disguises.

José: When we talk about this dialectical tension between hope and hopelessness we must account for the force of the negative. But we don't mean the negative in some grandiose subjectivity-shattering way. We mean living with the negative and that, first and foremost, means living with failure. This is to say that hopelessness and hope converge at a certain point. And we must then face reality in the form of an oftentimes disappointing world. Here is where we depart from some other queer writers and thinkers who write about abandonment to the negative and a subsequent rejection or evasion of politics. Queerness might signal a certain belonging through and with negativity. Often experimental intimacies falter. But those failures and efforts to fail have a certain value despite their ends. In this way we are calling for a politics oriented towards means and not ends.

Klein described the depressive position as the only ethical one. But as Lisa indicates we cannot discount the importance of the paranoid schizoid positions and its pleasures – its negative force as an anti-normative resource for queer existence. Klein's substitution of positions for Freud's developmentally rigid stages lets us imagine the queer temporal choreography that Lisa describes. W.R. Bion's notion of valence might also be useful to understand how a belonging in and through affective negativity works for an anti-normative politics (see Bion 1991). Valency, borrowed from chemistry, is the concept that describes the capacity for spontaneous and instinctive emotional combination, between two individuals or a group. Bion's concept provides a provisional and partial account of how emotions cement social groups as guiding basic assumptions (what he calls *bas*). Thus as a group or a pair we share happiness and grief, ecstasy and sorrow, and so forth. This affective commonality is a site for commonality and even sociality.

When we started this writing project it seemed like most folks assumed that we would be writing about “hope vs hopelessness” or at the very least “hope or hopelessness.” But as this collaborative project progressed it became clear to us that the most important word in our title was the conjunction “and.” Lisa began this dialogue by recounting a story a friend told her. In many ways friendship is the condition of possibility for this writing. Lisa and I share a certain emotional valency and we are part of a larger circuit of friends who also share shifting basic assumptions (for our purposes here, queer feelings). We write for and from an “and” in the hopes to better describe actually existing and potential queer worlds that thrive with, through and because of the negative.

Notes on contributors

Lisa Duggan is Professor of Social and Cultural Analysis at New York University. She is the author of *Sapphic Slashes: Sex, Violence and American Modernity* and *Twilight of Equality: Neoliberalism, Cultural Politics and the Attack on Democracy*, co-author with Nan Hunter of

Sex Wars: Sexual Dissent and Political Culture, and co-editor with Lauren Berlant of *Our Monica, Ourselves: The Clinton Affair and National Interest*.

José Esteban Muñoz is associate professor and department chair of performance studies at New York University. He is the author of *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (1999), *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (2009) and the forthcoming *Feeling Brown*. He has edited and co-edited several volumes, including an issue of *Women & Performance* titled *Queer Acts*. His articles have appeared in various journals and books.

Notes

1. The subject of “happiness studies,” with all the definitional problems that attach to that field and to concepts such as happiness, optimism and hope, is critically analyzed in Sara Ahmed, ed., *Happiness*, special issue of *New Formations* 63 (winter 2007/2008). See especially Ahmed’s introduction, “The Happiness Turn,” pp. 7–14, and Lauren Berlant, “Cruel Optimism” (2008), pp. 33–50.
2. Christopher Bollas coined the term “normotic.” See Bollas, *The Shadow of the Object* (1987), p. 135.
3. The culmination of this writing is my book, *Cruising Utopia* (Muñoz 2009).
4. I owe this eye opening notion of “growing sideways” to Kathryn Stockton in her book, *The Queer Child, or Growing Sideways in the Twentieth Century* (2009).
5. I draw much of my understanding of the “anti social thesis” in queer theory from Richard Kim’s unpublished essay on this topic. The most widely cited current example of advocacy for a queer embrace of the death drive, as a form of opposition to social “happiness” as reproductive futurity, is Lee Edelman, *No Future* (2004).
6. For a concurring opinion on the close, non oppositional relationship between hope and hopelessness, or utopianism and depression, see Ann Cvetkovich, “Public Feelings” (2007), p. 46.

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