

# Curatorial Essay

## *Queer Futurities: holding area*

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“Queerness is essentially about the rejection of a here and now and an insistence on potentiality or concrete possibility for another world.”

—José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*

“Care is a disruptive thing because it frees the analytic of the world from a state that is overdetermined.”

—Billy-Ray Belcourt, *A History of My Brief Body*

How do we want to hold and be held? What do we want our communities to feel like?

These are questions that time and time again have come up in my conversations over the past two years. As the insufficiencies and violence of our hegemonic systems became collectively more palpable, we looked to one another for care and hope. Near the beginning of the pandemic, I was gifted a copy of Black feminist writer Octavia Butler’s 1993 *Parable of the Sower*, a sci-fi novel situated in our now-near future of 2023. In a post-apocalyptic world of climate disaster and state-sanctioned violence, it is networks of care and interdependence which promise survival. The desire for other, better worlds and ways of being resonates as a rallying call through Butler’s writing, and into *Queer Futurities*.

Many beautiful books have influenced this project. As I began to consider desire and care as queer modalities, I was oriented toward José Esteban Muñoz’ seminal text *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*. I was lent a well-underlined copy by a friend, the kind with soft edges and notes penned in the margins. Writing this now, I see how the sentiment of lending a book is reflected in this exhibition, where works are lent in order to come together temporarily, both sharing and producing knowledge. While common threads are revealed through a layered, collective underlining, new conversations flourish in relationship to another’s notes.

In *Cruising Utopia*, Muñoz posits queerness as future-bound, as in, “We have never been queer, yet queerness exists for us as an ideality that can be distilled from the past and used to imagine a future.”<sup>1</sup> What can be detected in this queer temporality is the feeling of utopia, of hope and desire for that which is not yet here.<sup>2</sup> Muñoz clarifies his application of utopia here as drawing from philosopher Ernst Bloch’s distinction concrete utopia.<sup>3</sup> Contrary to the “ungrounded” optimism of “abstract utopia” concrete utopias are inextricable from the criticism of a historically-bound and sociopolitical reality.<sup>4</sup> While they both desire for alternative worlds, concrete utopias can be understood as the activation of collective and alternative ways of being. While I do not wholly agree with a binary distinction or hierarchy between modes of desiring, a concrete utopia in relation to queerness does offer us “a structuring and educated mode of desiring that allows us to see and feel beyond the quagmire of the present.”<sup>5</sup> I want to build upon

Muñoz’ affective methodologies and consider care as a relational enactment of hope, a mode of desiring that is both utopic and imbued with what Sarah Hunt and Cindy Holmes call “a decolonial queer politic.”<sup>6</sup> Beyond an identity marker of gender or sexuality, they invoke queerness as an intersectional way of *doing*; a non-normative and anti-colonial verb.<sup>7</sup>

In his fiercely tender memoir, *A History of My Brief Body*, Billy-Ray Belcourt reaches for a relational care that is messy and world-making in its ambivalence,<sup>8</sup> “where everything is a potential site of severance and constitution.”<sup>9</sup> Just like hope, utopia and queerness, care can and will fail, it is the risk of being and doing beyond the confines of our present which holds the potential of disruption.<sup>10</sup> This collective risk<sup>11</sup> is woven throughout the group exhibition, *holding area*, where everyday processes are queered through relationship. Having curated *Queer Futurities* through an open call, I was inspired by the proportion of collaborative submissions. As Belcourt writes, “...in a late-capitalist world in which individuality is a fetish...what remains queer about queerness is that it entices us to gamble with the “I” in the name of love, sex, friendship, art, and so forth.”<sup>12</sup>

In *holding area*, the artists’ works come together in the gallery to create a temporary yet affective space which holds queer collective knowledge. As well as reflecting the temporary nature of exhibitions, ‘holding areas’ are also associated with waiting and bureaucratic processes which range from tedious to oppressive. Materials deemed “valuable enough” to archive often go through holding areas for inspection before a more permanent transfer, and are then categorized within archival holdings. Drawing upon the etymological root of utopia, which translates to “no place” from Greek,<sup>13</sup> *holding area* embodies a formlessness which seeks to queer fixed time and space. In queering the holding area, we transform waiting into anticipation—shapeshifting in order to slip between the cracks of classification. The artists of *holding area* embrace the affective traces<sup>14</sup> and tender gestures of ‘holding’ and ‘queerness’ through alternative forms of care, commemoration, storytelling and place/space-making, offering us glimpses of the queer futurities to-come.

As we consider the archive in relation to queerness, we must interrogate its structural inequity. In **Florence Yee’s *PROOF* series**, they contemplate how the form of the archive continues to fail queer and racialized communities as its history of dictating who or what is “worth” remembering continues through an over-reliance on structures of Whiteness, including those of legibility and classification.<sup>15</sup> The *PROOF* series is a set of images on printed fabric, hand-embroidered with “PROOF” watermarks. Considering the function of a watermark—to protect ownership by rendering images unusable—I understand Yee’s watermarks as protection from conventional consumption, marking them as perpetually unfinished and unreadable. When I look at the two *PROOF* pieces in *holding area* — *Please Help Yourself* and *Bedroom in Scarborough* — I can only speculate. I wonder how long the sharp scent of citrus permeated the air around its peeler, whether the tangerines were appreciated for their segments, so sweetly designed for sharing, and if the feet were beginning or ending their day tangled in bed. These images desire and enact commemoration of the everyday, with each piece holding the affective trace of relationship. I find Muñoz’ discussion on “what counts as proof” relevant here: by understanding queer evidence through ephemera, we can consider these obstructed images “as trace, the remains, the things that are left, hanging in the air like a rumor.”<sup>16</sup> **Florence Yee’s collaborative piece with Arezu Salamzadeh, *Please Help Yourself***, also lends to this notion of trace. The glazed ceramic

tangerine peels draw on the Cantonese practice of offering tangerines as a way of welcoming guests into their homes. As a collaborative project during the pandemic, the artists mailed clay and instructions to friends and relatives, inviting them to “share a tangerine.” As the material of clay invites the imprint of the hands that mold it, the peels remain as traces of touch, care, and connection.<sup>17</sup>

Using sound and movement as modes of observation, **Edzi’u’s *the wind carries their names*** explores their relation to place as a Tahltan and Tlingit, 2-Spirit person living on lands that are not theirs.<sup>18</sup> In learning that Edzi’u follows four generations of storytellers, I understood their work as a sonic archive which holds past, present and future narratives. Created from audio recordings of three parks on Musqueam, Squamish and Tsleil-Waututh territories, Edzi’u generates a richly textured sound and video work which bears indications of place and emotion, parallel to the notion of trace. We might consider these traces in both senses of the term, as “the remains that are often embedded in queer acts, in both stories we tell one another and communicative physical gestures...”<sup>19</sup> Edzi’u’s gestures, intended for their community, “slowly reveal their spirits to the land around them, introducing themselves to and calling forth the Indigiqueer voices before them.”<sup>20</sup> *the wind carries their names* enacts a form of storytelling and memory which decolonizes the static form of the archive, and holds space for Indigiqueer embodiment and joy both now and to-come.

Gestures of mutual care are explored by artists **Romi Kim (Skim)** and **Kendell Yan (Maiden China)** in ***FEED CUT PEEL FEED***, an experimental, dual channel video installation. The artists feed one another in drag, chewing slowly and deliberately as they each relish in both the food and the other’s implied presence. The video then warps in form as they begin to remove each other’s makeup, their faces superimposed and mask-like over top of their own archival performance footage. Installed facing one another, the space in-between is charged with intimacy as hands reach beyond the spatial confines of the screen and into the other’s. If we understand care as an enactment of the hope that is so central to utopia, the ritualistic gestures of ***FEED CUT PEEL FEED*** become a “utopian performativity...a manifestation of a ‘doing’ that is on the horizon.”<sup>21</sup> Through fragmented archive and subjective performance, the artists distort the spatial-temporal realm to generate a queer world infused with potentiality.

**Margaret August and Nicole Mandryk’s *Raven’s mating call*** similarly embraces queer relationality. A collaborative work consisting of a drum painted by August and a drumstick beaded by Mandryk, *Raven’s mating call* is a love story. Reaching into the past, they center the drum and raven’s call as the sonic sites upon which their love grew. The artists explained to me that the drum is integral not only in connecting them to one another, but to their cultures (August is Coast Salish from Shíshálh First Nation and Mandryk is Anishinaabe, Irish and Ukrainian). After meeting at a drum group, Raven showed up in three consecutive circumstances; one of these times, Raven made a sound which Margaret had never heard before, only to find out later that this sound was Raven’s mating call.<sup>22</sup> I’d like to think of this call as a sonic disruption of the “straight present,”<sup>23</sup> an anticipatory signal of the queer relationality to-come. In being painted onto this drum and becoming a symbol of queer love, perhaps Raven, a notorious shapeshifter, is also an “avatar of queer futurity.”<sup>24</sup>

**Cassia Powell's *comforter*** explores the more ambivalent side of care and relationship. A mixed media installation consisting of an oil painting and quilt, the work is equal parts tender and uneasy. Two figures hold one another in a tangle of green-hued limbs, as a web-like quilt extends beyond them and embraces their visitor. Saturated with intimate gestures and soft fabrics, I think of the necessity for spaces of comfort beyond the confines of heteronormativity, and of the labour involved in this form of worldbuilding. By stitching together the utopic desire for queer relationality with ambivalent affect, Powell constructs a non-place which shapeshifts from spiderweb to safety net, depending on how one interprets the ambiguous relationship of the figures. It is through an “affective excess,”<sup>25</sup> that *comforter* both critiques the heteronormative present and hints at something ‘extra’ beyond the everyday.<sup>26</sup> In holding contradiction so tenderly, Powell creates “an affective enclave in the present that staves off the sense of ‘bad feelings’ that mark the disjuncture of being queer in straight time.”<sup>27</sup>

Returning to my initial discussion on the archive’s insistence on legibility, and queerness’ denial of finitude, **Kitt Peacock’s *Näckenswell*** refuses to be storied through text. Taking the form of a ritual around a wishing well, the artist’s performance draws on tales of the *nixie*, “a water-dwelling, shape-shifting creature from Scandinavian and North English folklore.”<sup>28</sup> By engaging the tradition of oral folk retellings through the well’s visitors, *Näckenswell* enacts a queered form of collective memory, an ephemeral story that may shift according to who you ask. In coming across the well, you might consider the intangibility of its tale, and like Belcourt, I must ask, “what is it to anticipate or to notice a world congealing just below the threshold of visibility?”<sup>29</sup>

Thinking of these anticipatory worlds as queer non-places, I hope you feel held by the spatial pockets and passageways within and amongst the works which both suggest and refuse place. Although I hope for this ‘holding area’ to hold as many as it can, I acknowledge that galleries, like the archive, are inaccessible to many. As a way of decentralizing the collective knowledge of queerness, decoloniality, and utopic potentiality, the second part of the *Queer Futurities* project, *gathering place*, takes the form of community skill-sharing and relationship-building in public spaces. Through a weaving workshop by **Estraven Lupino-Smith**, a workshop on mutual aid by the **Victoria Community Fridge**, and a Community Calisthenics performance by **keiko Hart**, *gathering place* and *holding area* weave a spatial-temporal braid of care, knowledge, and community.

In the words of Muñoz, “utopia is not prescriptive,”<sup>30</sup> and neither is queerness or its many potential futurities. Although the artists of *holding area* vary in positionality, medium and process, the undercurrent of futurity reveals itself among the works as the care and knowledge that is generated from queer relationality. These networks of relationality are what I consider polyvocality; this framework extends beyond the artists and into all of our communities. *Queer Futurities* does not intend to be exhaustive or all-encompassing of queer experiences, knowledges or desires, but aims to create entry-points and fissures in the systems which fail us, revealing “blueprints”<sup>31</sup> of potential worlds and ways of being. I hope that the remnants of this project — affective and lingering formlessly through rumour and retelling— will mobilize a form of knowledge and care that is “forward-bearing,”<sup>32</sup> inextricable from queerness and a decolonial function which disrupts the “here and now.”<sup>33</sup> Like Octavia Butler’s speculative writing, to be forward-bearing is ultimately about desiring for and building a world which holds *all* of our bodies.

## NOTES

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- <sup>1</sup> Jose Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*, (New York: New York University Press, 2009), 1.
- <sup>2</sup> Muñoz, 26
- <sup>3</sup> Ernst Bloch, *The Principle of Hope*, 3 vols., trans. Neville Plaice, Stephen Plaice, and Paul Knight (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1995) Referenced in *ibid*, 3.
- <sup>4</sup> Muñoz, 3.
- <sup>5</sup> *Ibid*, 1.
- <sup>6</sup> Sarah Hunt, and Cindy Holmes, “Everyday Decolonization: Living a Decolonizing Queer Politics.” *Journal of Lesbian Studies*, 19, no. 2 (2015), 156.
- <sup>7</sup> *Ibid*.
- <sup>8</sup> Billy-Ray Belcourt, *A History of My Brief Body*. (Toronto: Hamish Hamilton, an Imprint of Penguin Canada, 2020), 116. Here, Belcourt draws from Maria Puig de la Bellacasa’s notion of care in María Puig de la Bellacasa, *Matters of Care: Speculative Ethics in More than Human Worlds* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017).
- <sup>9</sup> Belcourt, *A History*, 124.
- <sup>10</sup> Bloch as quoted in Joshua Chambers-Letson et al., “Foreword: Before and After,” in Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*, (New York: New York University Press, 2009), xiv.
- <sup>11</sup> I am referring here to the risk of queerness, that which comes with both being and desiring beyond the present and its interlocking systems of oppression.
- <sup>12</sup> Belcourt, *A History*, 127-128.
- <sup>13</sup> Chambers-Letson, et al., xii.
- <sup>14</sup> Muñoz, 65. (See: Jacques Derrida’s concept of trace in Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, corrected ed. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998), 24-65.
- <sup>15</sup> Florence Yee, Artist Statement: *PROOF*, 2021.
- <sup>16</sup> Muñoz, 65.
- <sup>17</sup> Yee and Arezu Salamzadeh, Artist Statement: *Please Help Yourself*, 2019-ongoing.
- <sup>18</sup> Edzi’u, Artist Statement: *the wind carries their names*, 2022.
- <sup>19</sup> Muñoz, 65.
- <sup>20</sup> Edzi’u.
- <sup>21</sup> Muñoz, 98-99.
- <sup>22</sup> Margaret August and Nicole Mandryk, Artist Statement: *Raven’s mating call*, 2022.
- <sup>23</sup> Muñoz, 185.
- <sup>24</sup> *Ibid*, 22.
- <sup>25</sup> *Ibid*, 23.
- <sup>26</sup> *Ibid*, 22.
- <sup>27</sup> *Ibid*, 24.
- <sup>28</sup> Kitt Peacock, Artist Statement: *Näckenswell*, 2022.
- <sup>29</sup> Billy-Ray Belcourt, ‘The Conspiracy of NDN Joy: Essays on Violence, Care, and Possibility’, PhD thesis, University of Alberta, Department of English and Film Studies, 2020, 12.
- <sup>30</sup> Muñoz, 97.
- <sup>31</sup> *Ibid*.
- <sup>32</sup> Billy Ray Belcourt, “Introduction,” 20.
- <sup>33</sup> Muñoz, 1.

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