

Failure, queer utopia or resistance? Reading keys for thinking about the arts of sexual and gender dissidences in Brazil

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Abstract | The text points out differences between the ideas of queer art of failure (Jack Halberstam) and queer utopia (José Esteban Muñoz) placing them in relation to the “antisocial theory” of queer studies. Finally, the article focuses on the resistance and ability to think about certain productions in the artistic scene of sexual and gender dissidences in Brazil today.

KEYWORDS: Failure, queer utopia, resistance.

Fracasso, utopia queer ou resistência? Chaves de leitura para pensar as artes das dissidências sexuais e de gênero no Brasil

Resumo | O texto aponta as diferenças entre as ideias de arte queer do fracasso (Jack Halberstam) e utopia queer (José Esteban Muñoz) situando-as em relação à “teoria antissocial” dos estudos queer. Por fim, aposta na resistência como possibilidade de pensar determinadas produções da cena artística das dissidências sexuais e de gênero do Brasil da atualidade.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Fracasso, utopia queer, resistência.

¿Fracaso, utopía queer o resistencia? Claves de lectura para pensar las artes de la disidencia sexual y de género en Brasil

Resumen | El texto señala las diferencias entre las ideas del arte queer del fracaso (Jack Halberstam) y la utopía queer (José Esteban Muñoz) situándolas en relación con la “teoría antisocial” de los estudios queer. Finalmente, apuesta por la resistencia como posibilidad de pensar en determinadas producciones en el escenario artístico de las disidencias sexuales y de género en el Brasil de hoy.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Fracaso, utopia queer, resistencia.

Submitted: 02/12/2021
Accepted: 08/03/2021
Published: 08/12/2021

The recent Brazilian translation of Jack Halberstam's book *The Queer Art of Failure*, released by the Pernambuco publisher Cepe, provides Brazilian audiences with a good opportunity to learn about yet another long and controversial debate on what has been called "antisocial thesis" or "theory"¹ within queer studies, especially in the United States. In Brazil, the most familiar and widely used queer perspective is that propounded by Judith Butler, for reasons that are beside the point here². It may seem, therefore, that not many differences distinguish researchers linked to queer perspectives³. This paper intends to contribute to prove such an impression wrong.

Moreover, it aims to situate the books by Jack Halberstam (2018) and Sara Ahmed (2019) within "antisocial theory," introduce the differences within the "thesis" or "theory" itself and address an important counterpoint to this knowledge through a work by José Esteban Muñoz (2020a), another researcher still poorly known and translated in Brazil⁴. Muñoz sets his sights on queer utopia and views the idea of failure as the biggest obstacle to hope (2020b). To demonstrate how the theoretical differences between Halberstam (2018) and Muñoz (2020a) lead to very different analyses, I next show how each of them analyzed images that portray empty LGBT social spaces.

In doing so, over and above pointing out the differences in the analysis of these images, my goal is to think about possible ways of using these reflections to analyze works of art currently produced in Brazil. In other words, to what extent might the antisocial, failure or queer utopia perspectives be useful to reflect on current Brazilian art of sexual and gender dissidences? Does the Brazilian artistic and academic scene have no other more powerful reading keys that question the antisocial and failure reflections?

Antisocial, no future and death drive

Jack Halberstam did not create the "antisocial thesis" or "theory" within queer studies. Before him, the works of researchers such as Leo Bersani (1998) and Lee Edelman (2014) were known for building up those reflections on the antisocial and negativity. Bersani attacked what he considered a "*mainstream queer theory*" that drew on Michel Foucault and was continued through the work of Judith Butler. For Bersani, the works of Foucault and Butler, among others, ended up *desexualizing* or *de-gaying* homosexual experiences, which also

¹ I make a point of using quotation marks because, in my opinion, this is not a theory but a set of scattered reflections which do not always engage with each other and have differences and some features in common. I aim to present here just a few of those nuances. One of the authors linking Leo Bersani and Lee Edelman to what he calls "antisocial theory" is Lorenzo Bernini (2015). He was responsible for raising to the status of theory what had hitherto been called "antisocial thesis in queer theory," the subject of a heated debate held on December 27, 2005, at the annual conference of the Modern Language Association (MLA), with the guest appearances by Robert L. Caserio, Lee Edelman, Jack Halberstam, José Esteban Muñoz and Tim Dean. The reports of this debate by people who attended the event are available at https://www.jstor.org/stable/25486357?seq=1#metadata_info_tab_contents – Visited on Feb. 4, 2021.

² On the introduction of queer studies in Brazil I suggest the texts by Richard Miskolci (2012) and Fábio Feltrin Souza and Fernando José Benetti (2016).

³ There are already Brazilian studies which also relate in many ways to the "antisocial theory" of queer studies, but I will not address them here.

⁴ Contrasting the reflections of Halberstam (2018) and Muñoz (2020a) poses its difficulties. Contrary to what I intend to argue here, the researcher Adriana Azevedo (2016), for example, understands that both authors think alike. I indicate a few points in common and focus much strongly on their differences.

happened in the social movement, including among queer activist groups such as Queer Nation and ACT-UP.

Even recent attempts in queer theory to make sexuality “a primary category for social analysis” has merely added another category to the analysis of social institutions (making explicit the prescriptive assumptions about sexuality embedded within institutions) rather than trying to trace the political productivity of the sexual. (BERSANI, 1998, p. 18)

Regarding the gay social movement, Bersani criticized the assimilationist perspective of its policies and argued that, “never before in the history of minority groups struggling for recognition and equal treatment has there been an analogous attempt, on the part of any of such group, to make itself unidentifiable even as it demands to be recognized” (BERSANI, 1998, p. 45). Despite affirming that he was not proposing a return to immobilizing definitions of identity, he argued that “there is a gay specificity that does not commit us to the notion of homosexual essence” (BERSANI, 1998, p. 88-89). However, at the same time, he said that

[. . .] by rejecting the whole concept of identity we risk participating in the homophobic project that wants to annihilate us. Only an emphasis on the specifics of sameness can help us avoid collaborating in the disciplinary tactics that would make us invisible. In other words, there is a “we.” But in our anxiety to convince straight society that we are only some malevolent invention and that we can be, like you, good soldiers, good parents, and good citizens, we seem bent on suicide. By erasing our identity we do little more than reconfirm its inferior position within a homophobic system of differences (BERSANI, 1998, P. 55).

In his criticism of Judith Butler, Bersani said that the book *Gender Trouble* viewed drag parody as subversive, thus attacking all kinds of coherent identity and precluding the possibility of a gay or lesbian specificity. Moreover, according to him, “resistance to the heterosexual matrix is reduced to more or less daring imitations of that matrix.” (BERSANI, 1998, p. 61)⁵. Regarding Foucault, besides criticizing the work *The History of Sexuality: The Will to Knowledge*, Bersani gave great attention to the interviews published a few years before the Frenchman’s death, in which he addressed sadomasochism and claimed that society fears more the possibility of gays waking up happy in the morning than the sex they had in the bedroom the night before. Bersani argued at length that rather than constituting a new form of sexuality, as Foucault believed, sadomasochistic relationships, despite a few subversive traits, were based on “deeply conservative” assumptions (BERSANI, 1998, p. 107).

In the last chapter of his book, Bersani identified in his analysis of books by Gide, Proust and Genet the way in which they drew on the anti-community and antisocial drives they discovered in homosexual desire. In the reading of the Italian researcher Lorenzo Bernini (2015, p.33), who undertook an extensive study of authors of what he called “antisocial theory,” the apolitical mission of queer studies,

⁵ For more about this and other types of criticisms and how Butler responded to them, see Leandro Colling, Murilo Souza Arruda and Murillo Nascimento Nonato (2019).

for Bersani, should consist of embracing the death drive, in celebrating it as what gives perversions their most precious value, the negative value of unproductiveness, abjection and asociality.

Although he rarely mentions Bersani, Lee Edelman (2014) recognizes⁶ and is considered the continuator, in his own way and alongside other theoretical references, of so-called “antisocial theory.” In his famous 2004 book *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive*, Edelman, based on the Freudian death drive reinterpreted by Lacanian psychoanalysis and its concepts of Imaginary, Symbolic and Real, among various other reflections, established the bases for a supposed politics of queer negativity, a radical breach of the contract of what he called “reproductive futurism,” based on a certain discourse about children and reproduction. Edelman rejected the insistence on hope:

[...] my project stakes its claim to the very space that “politics” makes unthinkable: the space outside the framework within which politics as we know it appears and so outside the conflict of visions that share as their presupposition that the body politic must survive (EDELMAN, 2014, P. 20).

Edelman defined as *queer* those people who were stigmatized for not conforming to heteronormative canons, but stressed that they may also be psychically committed to the task of upholding the family narrative of reproductive futurism. For him, adopting the politics of queerness does not mean becoming the death drive itself, as that would not really matter, since it is all about acceding to a figural position:

Acceding to that figural position means recognizing and refusing the consequences of grounding reality in denial of the drive. As the death drive dissolves those congealments of identity that permit us to know and survive *ourselves*, so the queer must insist on disturbing, on queering, social organization as such – on disturbing, therefore, and on queering *ourselves* and our investment in such organization. For queerness can never define an identity; it can only ever disturb one. And so. . . the burden of queerness is to be located less in the assertion of an oppositional political identity than in opposition to politics as the governing fantasy of realizing, in an always indefinite future. . . (EDELMAN, 2014, p. 39)

Drawing on the idea of the death drive would be justified by the fact that it also rejects identity, forever attached to an object that is never able to satisfy it. Queerness “embodies the remainder of the Real internal to the Symbolic order” (EDELMAN, 2014, p. 48) and a possible name for this unnameable remainder is Lacan’s *jouissance*, sometimes translated as enjoyment. “[...] *jouissance* evokes the death drive that always insists as the void in and of the subject, beyond its fantasy of self-realization, beyond the pleasure principle” (EDELMAN, 2014, p. 49). After explaining these and other conceptual foundations of his proposal, in the last chapter of the book he analyzed Alfred Hitchcock’s movie *The Birds*. In this work he found

⁶ Edelman recognized this affiliation in the controversial 2005 debate of the Modern Language Association (MLA). See https://www.jstor.org/stable/25486357?seq=1#metadata_info_tab_contents – Visited on Feb 4, 2021.

harmony with his proposal. Here is one of the conclusions: “The birds gesture toward the death drive that lives within reproductive futurism, scorning domestication in the form of romance, which is always the romance of the Child” (EDELMAN, 2014, p. 207).

Failure and unhappiness

Jack Halberstam also analyzed certain cultural productions and placed them within the reading *key of failure*⁷. The researcher’s goal was to bring apart the logics of society’s success and failure, since, for him, failing, losing, forgetting, not becoming and not knowing can offer ways of being in the world that are more creative, more cooperative and surprising. For Halberstam, failing is something queer people do and have always done very well. “Let’s leave success and its achievements to the Republicans, the corporate managers of the world, to the winners of reality TV shows, to married couples, to SUV drivers” (HALBERSTAM, 2018, 131).

Following a queer perspective of affirming or redefining insults, Halberstam also intended to give another meaning to failure. We LGBTI+ people are indeed often seen as failures with regard to various normativities, such as compulsory heterosexuality, heteronormativity and cisgenderism⁸. And Halberstam then asks what kinds of reward failure can offer us.

Perhaps most obviously, failure allows us to escape the punishing norms that discipline behavior and manage human development with the goal of delivering us from unruly childhoods to orderly and predictable adulthoods. Failure preserves some of the wondrous anarchy of childhood and disturbs the supposedly clean boundaries between adults and children, winners and losers. And while failure certainly comes accompanied by a host of negative affects, such as disappointment, disillusionment, and despair, it also provides the opportunity to use these negative affects to poke holes in the toxic positivity of contemporary life (HALBERSTAM, 2018, p.15).

Halberstam stressed, albeit with criticism, the affinity between his and Edelman’s ideas (2014). This is clear in several passages of his book, as will be seen below, and was also evident in the debate at the Modern Language Association (MLA) convention in 2005, which was attended by Robert L. Caserio, Lee Edelman, Jack Halberstam, José Esteban Muñoz and Tim Dean. At the time Halberstam had not yet released his book, but he offered arguments from it and said that his recent work is deeply influenced by this particular strand of queer theory (HALBERSTAM, 2006). At the same conference Muñoz (2006) stressed his differences in relation to the antisocial thesis, anticipating reflections that would appear in his book on queer utopia, as we will see later on.

Like Bersani (1998), Edelman and Halberstam wrote with the purpose of questioning the festive and/or assimilationist trends of most of the policies for respecting sexual and gender diversity, which adhere to heteronormativity. It is in this sense that their works should be read⁹. In the analysis of works of art, Halberstam

⁷ Halberstam analyzes several works from different art forms and countries, including the film *Finding Nemo*. However, in the chapter that names the book, the author analyzes in particular the works of Irvine Welsh, Tracey Moffat, Quentin Crisp, Monica Majoli, Judie Bamber and Cabello/Carceller.

⁸ For a reflection on the concept of cisgenderism, see Viviane Vergueiro (2015).

⁹ As we will see later, Muñoz’s work (2020a) should also be read in this context and perspective, but his

looks for what he calls an aesthetic of failure, marked by negativity, gloom, lack of progress, sadness, melancholy, unproductivity, void, ineffectiveness and sterility. Analyzing Judie Bamber's works, Halberstam concluded that the artist and Edelman seem to be writing queer failure in time and space.

While for Bamber the seascapes drain nature of its romance and its sense of eternity, for Edelman the queer is always and inevitably linked to the death drive; indeed death and finitude are the very meaning of queerness, if it has meaning at all, and Edelman uses this sense of the queer in order to propose a relentless form of negativity in place of the forward-looking, reproductive, and heteronormative politics of hope that animates all too many political projects (HALBERSTAM, 2018, p. 117-118).

Shortly afterwards Halberstam made it clear that his proposal of linking queerness with the logic of failure engages with Edelman's proposal of separating queerness from the humanistic and optimistic activity of creating meaning. Then Halberstam himself adheres to the "antisocial thesis" or "theory," repeating what he said at the 2005 MLA conference. For example, he considers Valerie Solanas "an extraordinary antisocial feminist" (p.120) and says that the problem with the antisocial trend in queer studies is working with a canonical archive of artists and writers. So he proposes another group of people ranging from Solanas to SpongeBob and Toni Morrison. "In this other archive we can identify, for example, rage, rudeness, anger, spite, impatience, intensity, mania, sincerity, earnestness, overinvestment, incivility, discourtesy, brutal honesty, and disappointment" (HALBERSTAM, 2018, p. 120). And he goes on.

If we want to make the antisocial turn in queer theory we must be willing to turn away from the comfort zone of polite exchange in order to embrace a truly political negativity, one that promises, this time, to fail, to make a mess, to fuck shit up, to be loud, unruly, impolite, to breed resentment, to bash back, to speak up and out, to disrupt, murder, shock, and annihilate (HALBERSTAM, 2018, p. 117-118).

Nevertheless, Halberstam also said he wished to engage critically with Edelman's work so as to propose a more explicitly political framing for the antisocial project, "a framing that usefully encloses failure" (HALBERSTAM, 2018, p. 118).

Edelman was severely criticized for the apolitical nature of his work. One of such critics was the researcher and activist Douglas Crimp (2005). In *Mourning and Militancy*, he criticized another text by Edelman published in 1989 in which he deconstructed the main motto of ACT UP, Silence=Death. ACT UP was one of the first groups that came to constitute what we know as queer activism. The group was created to raise awareness on the death of HIV-AIDS victims in the United States at a time when Ronald Reagan's conservative government declined to talk about the epidemic and refused to create policies to fight the spread of the virus and treat infected and sick people.

Through Derrida, Edelman said that the ACT UP slogan drew on Western logical binarism that contributes to an ideologically motivated confusion between the literal and the figural, the proper and the improper, the inside and the outside. Douglas

reflections point to very different directions and solutions.

Crimp (2005) did not contest the Derridean basis of the analysis, but argued that Edelman did not know what the emblem signified to the group's activists. And he asked for whom, politically, was Edelman's text intended:

First, it is precisely as a figure that it does its work: as a striking image appearing on posters, placards, buttons, stickers, and T-shirts, its appeal is primarily graphic, and hardly therefore to be assimilated to a privileging of the logos. Second, it desires not a discourse of facts but direct action, the organized, militant enunciation of demands within a discursive field of *contested* facts. And finally, a question of address: for whom is this application of literary theory intended other than those within the academy who will find it, simply, interesting? Silence=Death was produced and is employed for collective political struggle, and it entails altogether different problems for the community of AIDS activists. Taking our symbol literally holds for us a danger that goes unnoticed in Edelman's textual analysis: we ourselves are silent precisely on the subject of death, on how deeply it affects us. (CRIMP, 2005, p. 99-100)

Returning to Halberstam's text, he accused Edelman of having omitted the most obvious reference to the idea of his book's title, citing the Sex Pistols's song "God Save the Queen," and further considered that the author risked linking heteronormativity (through the idea of the child and the reproductive system) with women.

[. . .] perhaps unwittingly, woman becomes the site of que unqueer: she offers life, while queerness links up with the death drive; she is sentimentally aligned with the child and with "goodness," while the gay man in particular leads the way to "something better" while "promising absolutely nothing." [. . .] Edelman's negativity has a profoundly apolitical tone to it (HALBERSTAM, 2018, p.129).

Although she did not directly engage with Edelman and Halberstam, Sara Ahmed (2019) is another author who wrote a book with an antisocial and negativity perspective. In *La promesa de la felicidad – una crítica cultural al imperativo de la alegría*, originally published in 2010, she intended, among other things, to produce an "archive of unhappiness" from the viewpoint of feminism (and the *aguafiesta* feminists), unhappy queers and melancholy immigrants. Drawing on a series of authors, notably from philosophy, various fiction books, movies and television series and her own experiences, she said that the main goal of the book was to "*aguar la fiesta*," i.e., to spoil the party (AHMED, 2019, p. 50).

The highlights of the book are the passages in which she shows how happiness is linked to possessing certain objects, to marriage, to motherhood, to the typical housewife life. For her, the word feminism, for example, is loaded with unhappiness. For Ahmed, by merely self-identifying as a feminist, a woman is viewed as someone bent on destroying what other women consider good and a source of happiness. Therefore, the *aguafiesta* feminist wrecks other peoples' happiness, ruins the mood, is bad-tempered. So Ahmed calls for a serious reflection about this figure whose role is to lay bare the negative feelings that are hidden, marginalized, denied in the public signs of happiness.

Just as Edelman argued that adopting the politics of queerness does not mean becoming the death drive itself, Ahmed says that opposing different forms of power and violence that hide behind signs of happiness does not mean turning

into an unhappy person. However, Edelman, Halberstam and Ahmed know and make explicit that such political outlooks imply dealing with feelings related to hopelessness, sadness, melancholy, and depression, all of which are difficult to bear. Therefore, despite the reservations they make, the trio did not answer the question of how someone might deal with all these negative feelings without being overwhelmed by the actual death drive or not being unhappy and unsuccessful in all dimensions of life, not just in the figurative sense.

But what seems to me even more awkward is the way they engage, oddly enough, with opposing and excluding dichotomies and pairs: life drive or death drive¹⁰, happiness and unhappiness, negativity and positivity. And ultimately the first poles are heteronormative and the second are queer. For example, Halberstam says the following:

As Lee Edelman, Heather Love, and others have argued, to simply repudiate the connections between queerness and negativity is to commit to an unbearably positivist and progressive understanding of the queer, one that results in the perky depictions of lesbians in *The L Word* or the reduction of gay men in film and on TV to impossibly good-looking arbiters of taste (HALBERSTAM, 2018, p. 108).

For authors so deeply engaged with and influenced by queer perspectives, this is quite a surprise. As argued by Adriana Azevedo (2016, p. 129), José Esteban Muñoz's criticism (2020a) of the antirelational turn considered that the celebration of denial is based on a binary logic of opposition.

Queer Utopia

And one of the most incisive criticisms of Edelman's book came precisely from Muñoz (2020a). In *Cruising Utopia: The Then and Now of Queer Futurity*, released in 2009 and translated in 2020 into Spanish under the title *Utopía queer – el entonces y allí de la futuridad antinormativa*, he insisted that we do not yet live in a queer era, as queerness remains an unrealized potential. Early in the book he explained the influence of Ernest Bloch's thought on his reflections on utopia.

He (Bloch) makes a critical distinction between abstract utopias and concrete utopias, valuing abstract utopias only insofar as they pose a critique function that fuels a critical and potentially transformative political imagination. Abstract utopias falter for Bloch because they are untethered from any historical consciousness. Concrete utopias are relational to historically situated struggles, a collectivity that is actualized or potential. In our everyday life, abstract utopias are akin to banal optimism. (Recent calls for gay our queer optimism seem to close to elite homosexual evasion of politics.) Concrete utopias can also be daydream-like, but they are the hopes of a collective, an emergent group, or even the solitary oddball who is the one who dreams for many (MUÑOZ, 2020a, p. 32).

Unlike the anti-future theorists, Muñoz thought about a future that is not the future of the nation, or of reproductive logic, but the "not quite conscious" future.

¹⁰ Especially in this case, it would be worth discussing how in psychoanalysis these very "categories" are not addressed in such a contrasting and dichotomous way. On this see Joel Birman (2009), for example.

For him, we must insist on this potential, looking beyond the pragmatics of the here and now, the “void of the present.” Muñoz exemplified such pragmatism in the political agenda of upper-middle-class white gays, more focused on equal marriage rights and struggles for the acceptance of gays and lesbians in the US military, for example. Muñoz shared the idea that many gays and lesbians want to be “ordinary” and married. The problem is that such desires never imagine a “not-quite-conscious” and are viewed by Muñoz as a symptom of a “political anemia of the present.”

To develop his thesis, Muñoz engaged with a number of authors and a long list of artists¹¹ who inspired him to think about queer utopia. As the researcher said: “The time has come to turn to failed visionaries, oddballs, and freaks who remind queers that indeed they always live out of step with straight time” (MUÑOZ, 2020a, p. 254). In the works of the artists, including those who performed failure, Muñoz saw elements of the present that point to a *queer to come*, a certain form of virtuosity. Negative feelings, argued the author, can provoke the ability to transcend hope, contain the potentiality¹² of new modes of collectivity, a belonging in difference and dissent (MUÑOZ, 2020a, p. 295).

Among the various works and artists Muñoz engaged with are the life and work of Fred Herko, an actor, performer and dancer who worked with Andy Warhol and supposedly committed suicide performing for his friend Johnny Dodd. After dancing naked to Mozart in Dodd’s apartment, the artist would have thrown himself out of the window.

Herko’s presence in/absence from queerness’s history functions as a Blochian no-longer-conscious, which is to say a play and time in which potentiality flourished and was extinguished. Yet its example nonetheless promises a return, a reanimation, in a future time and place, a not-yet-here. There is no more appropriate example of extinguished yet animated queer potentiality than the case of this neoromantic dead gay speed freak and his inscrutable aura. (MUÑOZ, 2020a, p. 255)

In analyzing Warhol’s movie *Thirteen Most Beautiful Boys*, starred by Herko a year before his death, Muñoz said:

Herko cruises the camera and the spectator; he flirts with it, not able to sit, wanting to display himself beyond the limits of Warhol’s portraiture. Herko wants us, his future – a future he will choose not to meet – to see him as a desiring subject, in all its uneasy embodiment. (MUNÖZ, 2020a, p. 272)

In my view, in developing his ideas, i.e., analyzing and reflecting on artistic

¹¹ These artists include: Frank O’Hara (poet), Andy Warhol (drawings, installations and movies), James Schuyler (poet), John Giorno (writer), Tony Just (photographer), Samuel R. Delany (writer), Kevin Aviance (performer and dancer), Elisabeth Bishop (poet), Leroi Jones/Amiri Baraka (playwright), Kevin McCarty (photographer), Ray Johnson (writer), Fred Herko (performer and dancer), Dynasty Handbag, Jack Smith and My Barbarian (performers).

¹² Muñoz used the concept of potentialities according to Giorgio Agamben, who differentiates possibilities from potentialities. The former exist within a logical, possible reality, which is in the present and relates to presence. The latter are different since, without actually being present, do not exist in present things.

works, Muñoz does not draw on the dichotomies present in the works of Edelman, Halberstam and Ahmed. However, a close reading of the four works in the order in which they were published makes it possible to clearly see the different theoretical and political perspectives between Bersani/Edelman/Halberstam/Ahmed and Muñoz. The first four explore the death drive, anti-utopianism, no future, failure, hopelessness, negativity, unhappiness. Muñoz defended queer utopia and futurity, hope and virtuosity. He did so also in the 2005 MLA debate, in the presence of Edelman and Halberstam. He said:

I have chosen to counter polemics that argue for antirelationality by insisting on the essential need for an understanding of queerness as collectivity. At the 2005 MLA panel, in recent essays, and in my forthcoming book *Cruising Utopia*, I respond to the assertion that there is no future for the queer by arguing that queerness is primarily about futurity. Queerness is always on the horizon. (MUÑOZ, 2006, p. 825)

Although he considered Edelman's work "brilliant and nothing short of inspiring polemic" (MUÑOZ, 2020a, p.45), the author criticized at various times the book *No Future*. For example, he suggested that Edelman's text was part of works that believed that studying race and gender and other particularities "would taint the purity of sexuality as a singular trope of difference" (idem). The same could be said, in my view, of Bersani's reflections (1998). In other words, what Muñoz was calling antirelational works are those that do not address phenomena from an intersectional perspective either¹³.

Edelman's blindness to race, said Muñoz, led him to criticize a text by Cornel West, an important philosopher and researcher on relations between race, gender and class, without considering that the author was therein addressing blackness (MUÑOZ, 2020a, p.177). For Muñoz, Edelman's theory implies a denial of afrofuturism. "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" (MUÑOZ, 2020a, p. 178). Before Edelman, at the 2005 MLA congress, he stated: "It has been clear to many of us, for quite a while now, that the antirelational in queer studies was the white gay man's last stand." (MUÑOZ, 2006, p. 825)

About hope, Muñoz said:

Political hope fails queers because, like signification, it was not originally made for us. [. . .] Instead, Edelman recommends that queers give up hope and embrace a certain negation endemic to our abjection within the symbolic. [. . .] But as strongly as I reject reproductive futurity, I nonetheless refuse to give on concepts such as politics, hope, and a future that is not kid stuff. (MUÑOZ, 2020a, p.174)

The proposal, therefore, is of a queer utopia to come. He ended thus his book:

¹³ Halberstam (2018) did not make the same mistake and addressed racial issues in his book.

Cruising Utopia can ultimately be read as an invitation, a performative provocation. Manifesto-like and ardent, it is a call to think about our lives and times differently, to look beyond a narrow version of the here and now on which so many around us who are bent on the normative count. Utopia in this book has been about an insistence on something else, something better, something dawning. I offer this book as a resource for the political imagination. This text is meant to serve as something of a flight plan for a collective political becoming. These pages have described aesthetic and political practices that need to be seen as necessary modes of stepping out of this place and time to something fuller, vaster, more sensual, and brighter. From shared critical dissatisfaction we arrive at collective potentiality. (MUÑOZ, 2020a, p. 312)

Despite all this, in *The Queer Art of Failure*, when Halberstam quoted Muñoz, he said that, up to then, he was the friend who had taken the analysis of failure further. In my view, however, Muñoz didn't exactly do that. He spoke of failure, but as a criticism of the reading key to failure and everything that, in one way or another, accompanies it (death drive, negativity, hopelessness, anti-utopianism, antirelationality, lack of future, apolitics). In addressing failure or reflecting on artists who could be read through failure, such as Dynasty Handbag, Muñoz also saw in it utopianism, potentiality, virtuosity and "an active political rejection" (MUÑOZ, 2020a, p. 204).

Halberstam himself at times makes explicit his differences with Muñoz. In speaking of Judie Bamber's works, he said that "while Muñoz casts queerness as a kind of horizon for political aspiration, Bamber's horizons remind us that possibility and disappointment often live side by side" (HALBERSTAM, 2018, p. 117). Bamber's works, he continues, speak to a queer temporality and a queer spatiality that are opposed to a notion of art as something capable of seeing beyond, a core aspect of Muñoz's analysis through the idea of a queer utopia to come. In my reading, even though Halberstam argues that failure is not necessarily apolitical, with which Muñoz would probably agree, from what I have explained above, it was the US-based Cuban that gave us a more political dimension for art and, moreover, offered us a utopia).

One of the few texts by Muñoz (2017) translated in Brazil was published by *Periódicus* magazine. It is a chapter of the book *Cruising Utopia* in which he thought about sex in public. Among other things, he analyzed an excerpt from John Giorno's memoirs in which the author narrated, in an exhilarating manner, having sex with another young man in a public restroom in New York in 1982, therefore before the advent of all the policies that virtually wiped out the city's public cruising sites. Let's see how Muñoz analyzed this scene:

This, I want to suggest, is certainly a casting of a picture of sex, but, in the same instance, it is also a picture of utopian transport and reconfiguration of the social, a reimagining of our actual conditions of possibility, all of this in the face of a global epidemic. The picture rendered through Giorno's performative writing is one of a good life that both was and never was, that has been lost and is still to come. It performs a desire for a perfect dissolution into a "primordially pure empty space." (MUÑOZ, 2020a, p. 90)

Distinct analyses

As we have seen, the researchers herein mentioned analyzed works of art and/or artistic products. To exemplify how the perspective of two of them influenced their reading of certain works of art, I will explain how Halberstam and Muñoz analyzed photographs of empty LGBT social spaces. I believe that this way the differences between them will be made even clearer.

Halberstam (2018) dedicated a considerable amount of space to two series of photographs by the Cabello/Carceller duo in the late 1990s. One of these series was produced during a trip that the artists, who reside in Madrid, took to California in 1996-1997. Despite the name of the series – *Sin título (Utopia)* – Halberstam (2018, p. 122) said that the pictures “document the empty promises of utopia.” Two images especially analyzed by the researcher depict empty swimming pools that, for him,

[. . .] signify the gulf between fantasy and reality, the subjects and the spaces onto which they project their dreams and desires. [. . .] When the pool is no longer signifies as a marker of wealth and success it becomes available to queer signification as a symbolic site of failure, loss, rupture, disorder, incipient chaos, and the desire animated by these states nonetheless. (HALBERSTAM, 2018, p. 122-123).

Three other photographs by the same pair, from the 2000 *Alguna Parte* series, were also analyzed by Halberstam within the reading key of failure. The images are part of a series of photographs taken by the artists of LGBT bars and nightclubs. But rather than photographing these places at night when crowded, they photographed them while empty.

The photographers lead their viewers to the site of dispersal and then leave us there, alone, to contemplate all that has been lost and what remains to be seen. These images of the desolate bars, however, represent, almost heroically, not only queer community, but also what it leaves behind. (HALBERSTAM, 2018, p. 124).

Curiously, Muñoz also analyzed a series of photographs about empty LGBT social spaces by the artist Kevin McCarty. *The Chameleon Club* series comprised portraits of various clubs in Los Angeles such as *Spaceland* and *Catch One*. The latter, according to the author, is a predominantly black and gay space, but also frequented by lesbians and trans people. For Muñoz, McCarty produced images of subculture spaces that generate what he called *utopian performativity*. The researcher said that he showed the photographs at several of his lectures and that, on more than one occasion, black people looked him up after the event to say they recognized the places. One of these images was of an empty stage where artists performed.

What I have learned from these encounters is that seeing this space of black queer belonging framed by McCarty’s meticulous attention helps us see our connectedness outside of the actual temporality of club life. The utopian performative charge of this image allows one to see the past, the moment before the actual performance, the moment of potentiality; and the viewer gains access to the affective particularity of that moment of hope and potential transformation that is also the temporality of the performance.

(MUÑOZ, 2020a, p. 190).
 (...)

Utopian performativity is often fueled by the past. The past, or at least the narratives of the past, enable utopian imaginings of another time and place that is not yet here but nonetheless functions as a doing for futurity, a conjuring of both future and past to critique presentness. (MUÑOZ, 2020a, p. 196)

In short, Halberstam read the empty queer space as failure, melancholy, Muñoz read it as queer potentiality. Although these are obviously pictures taken by different artists, both series portrayed LGBT social sites. Halberstam looked to the past to value what has been lost, Muñoz to enable utopian imaginings.

And the Brazilian artistic scene?

To publicize the release of Halberstam's book in Brazil, Editora Cepe produced a five-minute video with statements by several trans people (SUPLEMENTO PERNAMBUCO, 2020). Some of them are artists like Wally, a voguing dancer, and Maria Lucas (whose drag name is Ma.ma horn and who self-defines as artist and activist) that can be linked with the "artist scene of sexual and gender dissidences" (COLLING, 2019). Rather than an identity, the idea of activism has been used in Brazil as a category of analysis that is sometimes claimed by the artists themselves to describe their work (COLLING, 2019 and TRÓI, 2019). The term sexual and gender dissidences, in turn, aims to mark a distinction in relation to the idea of sexual and gender diversity, which conceals the production of differences (TADEU DA SILVA, 2007) and is linked to a festive and neoliberal perspective (HALL, 2003). As argued by the Chilean artist and activist Felipe Rivas San Martín, the term sexual diversity has become too institutional and normalized, too close to the discourse of tolerance, too multicultural and neoliberal.

The concept of sexual dissidence extracts us from this innocuous multiculturalist logic, by now so close to the state discourse, and, moreover, it is not a mere repetition of a US queer discourse, of a hegemonic metropolitan discourse. At the same time, dissent is post-identity because it does not speak of any particular identity, but emphasizes criticism and a political and critical stance. (SAN MARTIN apud COLLING, 2015, p. 151)

This activist scene of sexual and gender dissidences comprises a fairly diverse group of artists who, in the last 10/15 years, have gained visibility and questioned gender and sexuality norms in Brazil through various artistic forms. Could we analyze these artistic productions according to "antisocial theory" and, in particular, the reading key of failure, as suggested by the video to publicize Halberstam's book?

Although some productions might engage with the idea of failure, I suggest we avoid hasty associations and do what Halberstam himself (2018, p. 23) argued at the beginning of his book: in applying a set of preconceived ideas to a field of study and research, we risk creating obstacles to the discovery process, which blocks our ability to learn from our frame of reference.

In my reading, many people and collectives that make up this activist scene of sexual and gender dissidences in Brazil today say no to the death drive, to failure and to unhappiness. In this scene, to disobey (OLIVEIRA, 2017), sometimes even

joyfully¹⁴, is a much more adequate verb than to fail. In music alone¹⁵ we have artists that rapidly became household names in Brazil, such as Pablllo Vittar, Johnny Hooker, Liniker, Jaloo, Caio Prado, Rico Dalasam, MC Xuxu, Linn da Quebrada, As Bahias e a Cozinha Mineira, Gloria Groove. One of Brazil's most famous singers, Daniela Mercury, soon realized the force of this scene and also started embracing some of the ideas dear to those artists, raising her voice against religious fundamentalism and conservatism in Brazil and playing an important role in the protests led by the movement *Ele não* (Not Him) in opposition to current president Jair Bolsonaro's candidacy in 2018. One of her recent compositions, for example, is entitled "Queen of Mayhem" in reference to a statement by former Education Minister Abraham Weintraub, who said, upon taking office, that Brazilian universities provoke mayhem.

But there is also a large number of lesser-known names in music, such as Luana Hansen, Simone Magalhães, Lineker, Verônica Decide Morrer, Rosa Luz, Transnitta, Hiran, Majur, Tiely Queen, Quebrada Queer, Danna Lisboa, Lulu Monamour, Triz, Ctrl+N, Lia Clark, Alice Guél, Danny Bond, Jup do Bairro, Mc Dellacroix, Urias, MEL (Candy Mel, Mel Gonçalves), Teto preto, Rap Plus Size, Horrorosas desprezíveis, BATEKOO, Monna Brutal, Bia Ferreira, Getúlio Abelha. These artist people have different styles, aesthetics and ways of performing, but all question, to some extent, gender and sexuality norms, often intersected with ethnic/racial issues and/or other social markers of differences.

A possible reading key that emerges from this scene is the idea of resistance, a word frequently used by many artists and of which I would merely like to raise a few initial reflections, with no pretension to being conclusive. Halberstam also viewed failure as a kind of resistance,¹⁶ but the Brazilian resistance I wish to highlight here seems to be removed from what is linked to its reading key and is being built with music and people dancing, or rather, to use a common expression in this scene, "*balançando a raba*" (swinging their ass), as suggested by Linn da Quebrada's lyrics (2016):

But it has nothing to do with liking cocks or not / Come on, get together, you
trans and dykes / Fag it up until you drag your ass on the floor / But then the
bitches went mad / And slapped their ass behind their neck / But then the
bitches went mad / And slapped their ass behind their neck

Even in more critical lyrics, refuting failure and facing death involves resistance, as in the song "*Corpo sem juízo*" [Mindless Body] by Jup do Bairro (2019), Linn's partner: "It's like facing death and remaining immortal / It's like casting your own die and not having equal rights / But I resist, I insist, I exist / I don't want control over this whole mindless body".

In producing and/or dancing funk music with lyrics that talk explicitly of sex, many artists aim to resist death. Pêdra Costa, in the performance *de_colon_isation*

¹⁴ As a sequel to the reflections in this article, I intend to write a text exclusively about resistance through joy in artistic productions.

¹⁵ This scene can also be found in theater, plastic arts, performance, graffiti, film and literature. See, for example, Blanca (2011), Ferreira (2016), Rojas (2017) and Colling (2019).

¹⁶ "[. . .] the queer aesthetics I trace here as a catalogue of resistance through failure." (HALBERSTAM, 2018, p. 108)

*part III: the bum bum cream – part III*¹⁷, questions colonization and also the crimes committed by the Catholic Church against sodomites during the Inquisition dancing to the sound of the funk song “Vai balançando o bumbum” [Shake on that Butt] (COLLING, 2021). In *Gente de lá* [Folk from There], a choreographic performance by Wellington Gadelha, an artist and activist who lives in the outskirts of Fortaleza, Ceará, in which he denounces the extermination of young black people, the sound of “dirty funk” is also present. In reflecting on Gadelha’s performance, Costa and Greiner (2020) recall a text by Luiz Antonio Simas and Luiz Rufino (2019) about an itan that relates how the Ibejis overcame death (iku) by making it dance to exhaustion, which they consider a “creative power to hunt for solutions in the face of the threat of disenchantment” (SIMAS; RUFINO, 2019, p. 45). Costa and Greiner (2020) understood that Gadelha produced a fold in death.

Gadelha (like the slam poets who follow him) is one of those artists who delve into death to make it dance and narrate, thus causing the displacement of its effects. That is exactly how he answered us when asked about how the process of creating “Gente de Lá”: “I needed to make death dance – death should dance.” (COSTA; GREINER, 2020, p. 17)

However, Costa and Greiner (2020) forgot to say that the *Ibejis* love to dance, but they are also deities of joy. In other words, the fold in death is achieved by dancing and with joy and pleasure. For these and other reasons I believe that the in-depth study of black cultures and arts in Brazil can provide us with much more powerful reading keys to think about the Brazilian artistic scene of sexual and gender dissidences¹⁸.

Resistance emerges in certain productions not only as song lyrics or the slogan of an advertising campaign starring Linn da Quebrada and As Bahia e a Cozinha Mineira.¹⁹ I believe that such resistance, accompanied by a series of feelings and affections, in Spinoza’s sense, reread by Deleuze (2013), also translates into several other dimensions. Resistance to the logic of competitiveness through partnership productions, resistance to cisheteronormativity through the presence of trans bodies that disobey gender and sexuality norms, resistance to identity purity by valuing various ways of identification and recombination of identities, such as “*bixa travesty*” [shemale fag], resistance to the purity of artistic forms, since in this scene many artists produce a mixture of forms compatible with their criticisms of identity essentialisms. All these elements need to be better investigated and thought through; my interest here is merely to encourage the debate so that more people can join it.

In this sense, it is essential to engage with other academic and artistic works that have already developed the category of resistance as a very powerful reading

¹⁷ The full performance can be seen at <https://repositori.macba.cat/handle/11350/44427> - Visited on Apr. 4, 2020.

¹⁸ I intend to contribute to this debate in future papers.

¹⁹ In 2017, Absolut vodka launched the Art Resists campaign, which featured a clip and the production of a huge mural in a building in downtown São Paulo. This and other similar materials could also render a good debate about how capitalism appropriates these dissident artistic expressions. See <https://www1.folha.uol.com.br/mercado/2018/04/vodca-faz-anuncio-artistico-em-defesa-da-diversidade.shtml> and https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uunqc97qexU&feature=emb_title - Visited on Feb 5, 2021.

key to think about Brazilian artistic lives and production²⁰. As Luciana Gruppelli Loponte says (2020, p. 83):

I also think it is important that we get engage with artistic productions that, in some way, propose a shift from this more naturalized gaze on female images, stimulating ideas that go far beyond any kind of victimism or denunciation, but that inscribe these images in a game of power and resistance relations.

Carlos Henrique Lucas Lima (2017), in a thesis on what he called “pajubeyra languages,” argues that they make up a “cultural resistance to subvert heteronormativity”.

As they concern the subjectivities of those people who dare to stand up to heteronormativity and other regimes of subjection, of self-deprecation, pajubeyra languages are constituted as poetics, more specifically as queer poetics, poetics of resistance per se. Not only the pajubeyra words, understood as ways of “laughing in the face of serious categories” (BUTLER, 2003, p. 8) – I refer to the parts of speech, but also the expressions and the entire body performance involved in the act of articulating such languages concern queer poetics. Laughter, the rejection of the norm, is also a way of resisting it. (LIMA, 2017, p.106 – emphasis added). (LIMA, 2017, p.106 – emphasis added).

Lima said that Pajubá sprung from the African Yorubá and Nagô dialects used by practitioners of Afro-Brazilian religions such as Candomblé and Umbanda. It is a repertoire of terms used by LGBT communities.

But that’s not all: beyond the long list of funny and “exotic” words, Pajubá is a constant reinvention that supposedly produces or gives rise to – and this is my working hypothesis – solidarity networks among gays. (LIMA, 2017, p.33).

Linn da Quebrada’s album *Pajubá* (2017) is in tune with Lima’s work (2017). *Pajubá* is a political manifesto that, like the thesis, produces many fissures. In my view, João Manuel de Oliveira’s (2019) synthesis of Lima’s book also applies perfectly to Linn’s album. Let’s see:

- fissure in the national language, in the belief of nation as a linguistic homogeneity that the existence of Pajubá and other languages questions as pure difference and continuous proliferation of these differences. So Pajubá is viewed as a critical discourse that indicates this multiplicity of ways of saying and being.
- fissure in the colonizing dimorphism of gender; gender as a binary sexual difference and a hallmark of colonial thought is challenged by the multiple genders and their fluidity. As an opposing model to subjectivation, Pajubá enables the spread of parodic and critical

²⁰ In this sense, it would also be interesting to research how resistance appears in works that do not necessarily address issues of sexual and gender dissidence, such as the video performance *Aiku’è* (R-exist), by Zahy Guajajara, an artist of the Guajajara/Tenetehara ethnic group of Maranhão, which Costa and Greiner analyzed (2020).

discourses of binarism.

– fissure in conventional forms of social interaction; Pajubá introduces other forms of relationality beyond that centered on the bourgeois and Eurocentric family model, precisely for offering a lifestyle possibility. Thus, Pajubá is also a way of enabling certain alliances and solidarities, thought of as a way of building political possibilities. (OLIVEIRA, 2019, p. 2)

Paraphrasing Oliveira, we could substitute resistance for fissure and see what it gives us: resistance to national language, to colonizing gender dimorphism, to conventional forms of social interaction. But it is obvious that the work of all these persons and collectives in this scene is widely diverse and should be analyzed separately and closely, and that some of them may engage, to a greater or lesser extent, with the reflections of Edelman (2014), Halberstam (2018) and Ahmed (2019). What I wish to highlight here is that, taken as a whole with their political force, repercussion²¹ and social impact, they can be more readily understood as resistance against conservatism, religious fundamentalism and cisheteronormativity, which perhaps relates much more to a *queer to come* produced and in production, to a large extent, by trans, lesbian, non-binary, black people and/or people who strongly reject the image of an assimilated, white, bourgeois and heteronormative gay.

This refusal of failure does not mean uncritical adherence to the logic of success, happiness, the reproductive model or hetero time. It is about refusing opposing pairs (failure vs. success, happiness vs. unhappiness, etc.). The goal of many of these artists never seems to be just to entertain and amuse the audience, but joy, lack of melancholy, hope for the future seem to speak louder in many productions. Entertainment may even be present at times, but never alone. In Lima's words (2017, p. 17): "[...] they want to see us sad, withered, the image of the eighties in the throes of AIDS. No. We are here to stay and we are more dangerous than ever. With pajubeyra razors and cocktails to expand our lives." In this sense, I resort once again to Linn da Quebrada. While watching her concerts in Salvador, I asked myself: how come we dance, engage and celebrate to the sound of such harsh and cruel lyrics about gender, sexuality and race prejudices? I believe that herein lies an important issue.

Black, born in the outskirts of São Paulo and deliberately derisive. With a musicality that mixes funk and rap and an aesthetic that exploits hyper-colored outfits, hairdos and makeup, as well as irreverent dancing and performance, Linn da Quebrada has been strongly contesting the "alpha male" and the "discreet gay" by combining musical styles dominated by singers who value their masculinity or femininity in bodies with genders deemed coherent with their genitals. (COLLING; SOUSA; SENA, 2017, p. 210).

Didi-Huberman (2017), in thinking about images of protests in various parts

²¹ This repercussion is backed by plenty of data. Several artists, for example, have thousands of views on their clips and social media. *Intimidade* [Intimacy], by Liniker and Linn da Quebrada, was seen by more than a million people in just four months. Such success caught the attention of the largest television network in Brazil, which, in 2018, created the show *Amor e Sexo* [Love and Sex] with only a few of the artists listed in this paper.

of the world displayed at the *Levantes* exhibition, at a certain point draws on writings by Georges Bataille that help him reflect on the power of insubordination and transgression. In *Pure Happiness* Bataille said that “infringement is the only thing that counts.” And Didi-Huberman (2017, p. 322) adds: “The happiness of transgressing, therefore.” This is what I see in part of this Brazilian artist scene, perhaps with more intensity in music than in other art forms: a happiness in transgressing and/or a pleasure in transgressing that goes beyond the sadness/joy dichotomy because feelings are continually mixed and remixed. Maybe the force of this scene is “not quite conscious,” in the words of Muñoz (2020a), perhaps not for the artists, who seem highly aware of what they are doing, but for society at large and for the critics.

Anyone who looks up the profile of the people and collectives listed above will notice the protagonism of trans people or people who, to some degree, break with gender binary norms. This reflects the emergence of these diverse identities in Brazil in the past few years. Interestingly (or not), it is precisely these trans or non-binary people, “*fechativas*,” “*lacradoras*,” masculine dykes, effeminate fags that make up the majority of artists in the sexual and gender dissidences scene in Brazil today. “*Lacração*” and “*fechação*” are two terms used by certain Brazilian people, artists or not, to refer to gender performativities that question gender binary. In most cases, these are effeminate people, trans or non-binary and other forms of identification, such as fags and queens who insist on wearing ornaments and outfits and using gestures deemed to belong to the female world. In Brazil, the “*lacre*” generation engages a lot with racial issues and with the “*tombamento*” generation, which is linked to struggles for the empowerment of black people. And many of these people are black and/or produce their artistic work thinking about the intersectionality (AKOTIRENE, 2018) between issues of sexuality, gender and race, which indicates a relational stance, strongly community-based and political. This is not a mere detail; it is key to any analysis of this scene in Brazil.

In short, in “*lacração*,” in “*fechação*,” in “*tombamento*” there seems to be no room for the idea of failure, or even for unhappiness or refusal of the future. But there is de-gaying, because homosexuality or gay identity has long failed to account for our diversity. These artists, rather than gays, claim the identities of fags, “*bixas travestys*,”²² queens, trans in their bodies in various transits and combinations. And that doesn’t mean they’ve stopped talking about sex, on the contrary. And when there is pain, it is always accompanied by resistance that, as a poem by Lima (2017, p. 156) says, *dances samba facetiously in society’s face*.

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²² Reference to the song “Bixa Travesty” and the eponymous film by Linn da Quebrada.

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