Living Beyond the End Times: An Argument for Queer Utopianism

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More concretely, this refusal that I describe as queerness is not just homosexuality but the rejection of normal love that keeps a repressive social order in place.

– José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia* 134

In the fall of 2020, American politics dominated the news headlines here in Canada; an unavoidable reality, especially given that Canadian politics often takes cues from American campaigns. This year was no exception. President Joe Biden’s website for his transition, for example, is called buildbackbetter.gov, and Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau used the phrases “build back better” and “building back better” a few times in his own speech from the throne (delivered by Governor General Julie Payette) back in September 2020 (Moscrop). This slogan was picked up on immediately by the Canadian Conservative party – their website states that Liberal policy is to “build back better” and contrasts that with their own new motto of “Build Back Stronger” (“Build Back Stronger”). The original “Building Back Better” strategy, however, was not a political slogan but the name for a specific approach adopted by the UN in 2015 in the aftermath of natural disasters such as hurricanes, typhoons, or earthquakes, and was used as early as 2006 during the 2004 Indian Ocean Tsunami relief effort by UN officials. The strategy aims to reduce the risk to communities in the wake of future disasters by integrating disaster risk reduction measures into the restoration of physical infrastructures, social systems, and more (“Sendai Framework”).

Current political discourse has taken the concept of disaster as a natural occurrence and applied it to the realm of sociopolitical relations as a precondition for justifying their campaigns’ focus on the past; for example, the Trump presidency was “a disaster” in many ways, or Liberal policies have been “a disaster” for the Canadian economy, or to elect a Conservative government would be “a disaster.” Regardless of left- or right-leaning political agendas, it is unanimously agreed upon by politicians and journalists alike that a disaster of some sort has occurred—and perhaps is still even unfolding—in the sociopolitical sphere and that the state and the electorate must recover from it. The slogans “Building Back Better” and “Building Back Stronger” are almost identical in their emphasis on building back. It is immediately evident that both of these mottos are ultimately conservative ideas of a future made perfect by either an augmentation or concentration of past social structures and policies in order to achieve an ideal state or utopia. Thomas More’s original *Utopia* was not a new or even progressive social formation (Jameson 229), just one transferred to a distant land where the totalitarian governing system functioned smoothly and without meaningful dissent to disrupt the static social order. This paper argues that since conventional (or ‘abstract’) ideas of utopia uncritically idealize the past and seek to bring about a...
sociopolitical order based on the continuation and rehabilitation of a glorified past, it is necessary to adopt a praxis of queer utopia in order for society to truly move forward.

Queerness as a utopian formation is future-oriented, but with firm roots in the context of the contemporary moment. José Esteban Muñoz grounds queer utopia in a praxis of hope as a critical methodology in his book *Cruising Utopia* and describes queer utopia as “a backward glance that enacts a future vision” (16); by looking to the past, queer utopian dreamers see what can be redeemed but also what can be avoided. The past is not a template, but more a loose collection of guidelines or a ‘moodboard’ that provides inspiration and a target for utopian hopes, which may well be disappointed at times by the events that transpire on the way to the future. But just because hope can be disappointed (and is prone to it) is not, Muñoz writes, a reason to forsake it as a critical thought process. Disappointment needs to be risked in order to resist certain impasses (Muñoz 20), such as the despair induced by the slow-moving but ever-present threat of climate catastrophe, or the long dreadful waiting of coronavirus lockdowns, or the intensification of current political fascisms. Further to this paper’s discussion, Muñoz writes that the strategy of turning “to the past for the purpose of critiquing the present, is propelled by a desire for futurity” (43). Queer utopias are a practice: not a noun, but a verb, always informed by a critical methodology of hope that evaluates the past to make sure that the future is worthwhile.

This paper builds on Muñoz’s discussion of queer utopia as it stands in contrast to conventional ideas of utopia, which Muñoz calls abstract utopias and describes as “dead ends, too often vectoring into the escapist disavowal of our current moment” (43). While *Cruising Utopia* discusses the nature of utopian dreaming in the context of queer politics’ mid-90s obsession with achieving marriage equality, Muñoz’s critical interrogation of the way that utopian dreaming is mobilized politically is useful to apply to the contemporary sociopolitical moment of coronavirus and climate catastrophe. Muñoz explicitly likens the abstract utopian desire for the attainment of marriage equality with what Lauren Berlant calls a “stupid” form of optimism: “the faith that adjustment to certain forms or practices of living and thinking—for example, the prospect of class mobility, the romantic narrative, normalcy, nationality, or a better sexual identity—will secure one’s happiness” (126). Muñoz critiques the desire for marriage equality as an investment in a surface-level issue that grants the appearance of utopian achievement, but is still dictated by the standards set by heteronormativity and does nothing to change the deeply homophobic—often violently so—structuring of society.

I argue that a similar phenomenon can be seen in the way that Canadian and American politicians mobilize their political slogans to present the appearance of utopia through the promise of surface-level policy change that will in fact only strengthen, as opposed to dismantle, the structural inequalities of the status quo. For example, the stupid optimism of a slogan like “Build Back Better” assumes that happiness can be secured for every citizen by a return to a vague, unspecified “Time Before,” that has been altered just slightly by progressive policies that grant a modicum of dignity and humanity to women and minorities. Something like the 1980s, but also post-#MeToo and #BlackLivesMatter and #IdleNoMore, a society that is still built on deeply
embedded structures of racism, classism, and sexism, not to mention its devotion to neoliberal policy and economic gain at the cost of human happiness. The dream of building back better ignores the way that these underlying forces continue to perpetuate the need for campaigns such as #MeToo, uncritically believing that if a society looks diverse and and appears to be thriving on the surface, there is no need for any deeper commitment to dismantling structural oppression. The abstract nature of traditional utopian politics is most evident in the conservative slogan “Build Back Stronger,” where no such augmentation is promised and the promises of liberation for women, queer, and Black folks would be in fact detrimental to the happiness of a lot of conservative voter bases in the Western world (Ahmed “Feminist Killjoys,” “Killing Joy,” and “The Politics of Good Feeling”).

The rhetoric of “building back” is intensely problematic not just for the above reasons, but most significantly for its depiction of an alternate reality that clashes with the bald fact that there is no place for anyone, no matter their identity, to which to return where their pre-climate change way of life can be continued happily and safely. The Anthropocene progresses; climate catastrophe progresses, whether politicians want it to or not (Casselman). Politics as usual deliberately ignores the fact that climate catastrophe is much larger than the concerns of human political campaigns, implicating and affecting all life on the planet (human and non-) and, as Timothy Morton points out, reaching backwards into geological time as well as forward into the future (49-51). Berlant terms the abstract utopic desire for the ‘good life,’ despite the fact that the world as we know it is actively falling apart, as “cruel optimism,” describing it as “the condition of maintaining an attachment to a significantly problematic object” (24), even if that object is what prevents the ‘good life’ in the end—for example, a treasured car whose fossil fuel emissions contribute to the warming of the world that will in turn drive up the price of the fossil fuels the vehicle needs in order to run.

Abstract utopia can be seen most clearly in conservative politicians’ wishful thinking to return to a less complicated time when citizens (aka cismale white heterosettlers) were prospering, the economy was doing well, and climate change was not a thing that existed to be worried about. In contrast to the wishful abstraction of classic utopianism, queer utopia as presented by Muñoz is concrete and actionable, in keeping with present reality—climate catastrophe, racism, homophobia, sexism, transphobia and all—and still dares to hope for the future. Muñoz writes that, while these ‘concrete’ utopias can seem like daydreams, they are “the realm of educated hope” (15) that directly contrast the abstract, uncritical utopia—“utopia’ in its pejorative sense, the good place that is no place” (Alberro 20). This paper could exchange “educated” for “informed” or “radical,” the kind of clear-eyed hope that assesses and understands the past and present in order to inform the future.

Queer utopia relies on a praxis of explicitly radical hope, separating out wishful, uncritical versions of hope from a more concrete, informed, earned hope. Hannah MacGregor, in conversation with Eugenia Zuroski, observes that uncritical expressions of hope “[come] so often packaged in … toxic positivity” that insists that “we are all in this together” and that “we will get through this terrible situation,” yet for many people (especially people of colour and queer people)
“we don’t always get through this” (11:52-12:05). Zuroski therefore posits a “radical hope” as a hope that is earned: the kind of hope that marginalized people such as Black, Indigenous, people of colour, LGBTQ2S+ and disabled people, have been “earning all along … just by living under conditions that are designed to deprive you of … hope for yourself … for your own survival, your own flourishing, and your own future” (13:52-15:25). Radical hope is an outgrowth of a kind of political consciousness that comes from being trapped inside a system that is wholly devoted to a cruelly optimistic promise, of a recognition of that promise of the good life as cruel, denying it, and searching elsewhere for optimism.

The hallmark of the abstract utopia is its foundation upon wishful thinking disguised as hope, which furthers the distortion of past, present, and future reality, instead of the radical hope that brings about concrete change. Zuroski elaborates on the difference between wishing and hoping with the example of someone prefacing their opinion with the phrase “I hope this isn’t racist,” and then going and saying something egregiously racist (17:21). Zuroski identifies how, in this example, the speaker uses the terminology of hope to express the wish that their sentiment were not racist, because they wish that they themselves were not racist. However, that wish is contrary to the reality of the situation and, to quote Zuroski again, “you can’t hope for realities not to exist” (17:21); hope is not an applicable word in this situation. Zuroski goes on to say that in order for marginalized people and their allies to access truly radical hope, it is necessary to dedicate time to “thinking about temporality … your relationship to histories [and] to the present …. and let that inform how you build a relationship to the future, which is what hope is…. hope is the name for relating to a future of some kind” and that “you can’t just hope out of nowhere. Y ou have to do the work of understanding… where we’ve come from, where we all are right now, where you are in the middle of all that, then you can start to…build your hope” (18:03). Change, MacGregor agrees, has to be intrinsically tied to will and to action, not an ephemeral wish for a better future to abstractly happen, somehow.

The ability to access radical hope and queer utopia thus lies in what Sara Ahmed calls “being for being against,” a move that affirms a specific type of negation. Saying yes to a no, or affirming negation, Ahmed writes, is still in the end an affirmation, which could “reinstitute a certain yes as the proper signifier of queer politics, even as a yes to what’s not” (The Promise 162). For example, saying yes to a no could take the form of choosing to celebrate instead of being ashamed of one's queer identity despite pervasive homophobic messaging from one's family and culture. This responds in large part to queer people being defined by the negative and characterized by political or social propagandists as anti-family, anti-heterosexual, anti-woman, anti-man, anti-child, and more.[4] The practice of saying yes to a no, however, does not mean that now the individual can only experience depression and despair. Ahmed makes the point that it is possible to explore “the strange and perverse mixtures of hope and despair … within forms of politics that take as a starting point a critique of the world as it is, and a belief that the world can be different” (The Promise 163). Radical hope can therefore be accessed via saying yes to non-normative ways of
Indigenous scholar Kim Tallbear illustrates how radical hope illuminates a queer utopia in the Anthropocentric present, as she turns to the past with the purpose of envisioning a future despite ongoing catastrophe. Tallbear, who is Dakota, finds hope and what she terms a "hostile joy" in the “implosion of the settler narrative,” (0:20:57) which assumed the inevitable failure of Indigenous lifeways in the United States and Canada. She finds hope in the changes in “mythologies and thinking” and the demise of violent intellectual systems (such as terra nullius, extractivism, and petroculture) as humans are now reckoning with “earthly systems’ agitation against anthropogenic change” (Tallbear, 25:28). For example, Tallbear remembers that after floods in 1997 in Minnesota, the farms were transformed into wetlands and she does not see endings there, but instead the regeneration of the prairies, returning to themselves (26:40). She does not celebrate the devastation of planetary ecosystems or the most vulnerable humans and non-humans, but instead finds a radical hope in “trusting in the collective genius of all the people who have survived these ‘wicked systems’” (Tallbear, 20:57). Her hopefulness is not a narrative, Tallbear emphasizes, of redeeming the colonial empire to make it more inclusive (as a liberal politics wishing to “build back better” would have it), but instead an opportunity to be in relation and to care for each other as relations in the present (22:40). Tallbear’s radical hope is selective in its celebration of certain resurgences of the past—such as land reclamation and rediscovering of kinship and relational modalities—and her deliberate “hostile joy” in the demise of ideologies rooted in the past that are in the process of falling by the wayside of history. The future is as much about what is present as what is absent; queer utopia is deliberate about its inclusions and exclusions.

The ‘failure’ of certain lifeways and political systems is no reason to abandon them to history; in fact, this paper argues that these social systems’ failure is key to keeping them from being cast as wishful thinking and categorized as abstracted utopias that did not work because of their ideological impracticability, instead of deliberate opposition from sociopolitical forces that made these lifeways impossible in the past. Muñoz reads the failure of queer people to conform to heteronormative dictates as a kernel of utopian potentiality, writing that utopia’s rejection of pragmatism is often associated with failure, and that queer utopia represents “most profoundly” a failure to be normal (172). Queer utopia does not dream of the past entirely as an abstracted good that it wishes for the future, but grounds itself in the refusal of oppressive elements of past society as much as it affirms others for inclusion in the utopic future, bringing forward a patchwork of sustainable lifeways that can ensure the flourishing of the queer (and/or Indigenous/feminist/POC) subject despite the present presence of oppression, sociopolitical or otherwise. As feminist philosopher Rosi Braidotti reminds us, affirmation is not banal optimism, but “the process of transforming pain into praxis” (“Self-styling”).

Queer utopia stands in contrast to the slogans of building back better in its fundamental refusal to believe in the inherent good of the sociopolitical structuring of the world before COVID-19. A practice of radical hope, to me, is not wishing for a world in which the same
neoliberal policies, petroculture, patriarchy, and heterosettler society of the Canadian state is restored by way of a vaccine, but instead a fierce sort of hope for a radical restructuring of the status quo that recognizes indigenous sovereignty, tackles climate change as much as possible, and makes a just recovery from the pandemic that recognizes and prioritizes the health and wellbeing of all. Practicing radical hope also means a daily engagement with building the conditions by which certain elements of queer utopia can be made possible: relation-building, advocating for climate policy, standing up for the rights of oppressed peoples, working to undermine capitalist modes of transaction and exchange in favour of communitarian and social endeavours. Braidotti states that it is not enough to be against: the critical dissatisfaction of utopian dreaming that Muñoz describes as queer must always be married to action inspired by radical hope. This hope will be disappointed again and again – as Muñoz reminds us, utopia is always destined to fail. This paper argues that instead of building back, we need to take up the practice of queer utopia, and, in spite of failure, to build forward.

Notes
1. This was a virtual presentation, but the author would like to acknowledge that she lives and works in amiskwciwaskahikan, located on Treaty 6 territory, the traditional lands of First Nations and Metis people and historically a gathering place for diverse indigenous peoples including the Cree, Inuit, Metis, Dene, Anishinaabe, and many others whose culture and history continues to influence this place and inform her thinking as a settler scholar.

2. Each new session of the Canadian Parliament is opened by the speech from the throne, delivered by the Governor General as the Queen’s representative. For more information, please see “2020 Speech”.

3. A DuckDuckGo search of “Trump presidency disaster” performed 16 Feb. 2021 resulted in too many articles to cite. Canadian news headlines are more circumspect: the first page of results returned by searches for “liberal Canadian government disaster” and “conservative Canadian policy disaster” yielded, respectively, a National Post article on fiscal scandals plaguing Justin Trudeau’s liberals, and a Globe and Mail op-ed about healthcare: see Dawson 2020 and Danisch 2021.

4. Please see Lee Edelman for further elaboration of this cultural bias.

Works Cited


Ariel Kroon is a PhD candidate in English Literature, studying narratives of crisis as they can be found in Canadian post-apocalyptic science fiction published between 1948 and 1989 in order to think about how the imagination of disaster and survival has been shaped in North American science fiction throughout the latter half of the twentieth century. Human action is predicated upon the scenarios that can be imagined as possible and, for too long, the imagination of post-apocalyptic survival has operated on the assumption of violence, xenophobia, and an ethic of “might makes right” in the wake of sociopolitical upheaval and environmental destruction. This line of study has become distressingly relevant of late. Her latest publication, on the Anthropocene, solarpunk, and feminist posthumanism, can be found for free online here: https://scholars.wlu.ca/thegoose/vol18/iss1/2/.