Reading Between the Lines: Searching for Epistemologies of Healing

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WE two boys together clinging… Power enjoying… Fulfilling our foray.

-WALT WHITMAN

My paper visualizes a space of healing that departs from current politics within LGBTQ movements that function under a Euro-American grid of intelligibility. I wish to construct a methodology that brings forth marginalized LGBTQ people who have yet to tell their stories by challenging what queer thought means and rendering it visible through the practice and literary logic of gay cruising. Furthermore, through close reading analyses and archival research, I explain how gay cruising as a practice and an epistemic metaphor reveals itself in literature, such as Walt Whitman’s poetry, David Wojnarowicz’s memoirs, and John Rechy’s manifesto with the purpose of interrogating the Colonial education of erotic desire by understanding the sexual activities in these spaces rather than simply focusing on sexual identities. Thus, I argue that reading between the lines is the epistemic metaphor of gay cruising that tacitly performs within the fissures of the heterosexist public. Rather than leaving behind traces of discarded condoms and semen stained sidewalks and bathroom stalls, reading between the lines of the literature leaves prints of narrative that not only challenges a sexual globalization within the U.S. but also allows sexually marginalized people to claim visibility— even if it means finding such visibility between the lines. This mode of thinking works in tandem with an epistemology of healing by acknowledging the presence of marginalized subjects who have had to contain their desires and stories. Although I utilize several theorists to uncover this overarching argument, my point of departure is Jose E. Muñoz’s concept of a queer utopia—a radical strategy that critically questions current LGBTQ politics within U.S. culture.
Cruising Away From Straight Time

Joe E. Muñoz suggests that queerness is not yet here. These powerful words contest the notion that the dominant culture has finally accepted LGBTQ communities as part of their kin. Social issues such as the “don’t ask, don’t tell policy” and same-sex marriage rights overtake the fact that it is still in order. His book Cruising Utopia encourages us to imagine a world that escapes the social confines produced by capitalism and mainstream culture. But how can we imagine a world that strays from these systems of oppression found in society? Gay cruising as a practice (I will explain this more thoroughly later in my paper) helps find a way of thinking outside this rigid and oppressive box—an escape from what is also understood as “straight time.”

Jack Halberstam defines straight time as the “temporal frames of bourgeois reproduction and family, longevity, risk/safety, and inheritance” in his text in A Queer Time & Place. Straight time also functions under what Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner describe as a heterosexual culture in their manuscript called “Sex in Public.” According to Berlant and Warner, this heterosexual culture and its material practices are not explicitly sexual. In other words, society follows a form of time, explicitly real on the white middle-class heterosexual body, which elides queer subjects. This socially constructed form of time is visible when the heterosexual subject gives up and follows the requirements heterosexual culture advocates for: forming a family, building a career for oneself, and paying taxes to the nation like any other docile American subject.

The implicitness of heterosexual culture leaves queer spaces in very fragile conditions. Berlant and Warner provide readers with an example about Rudy Giuliani’s zoning law that restricted the proliferation of any type of “counter public sexual culture by regulating its economic conditions.” They argue that by removing sex shop businesses the status quo decrees decent, the streets became less queer and less accessible for people to function under a subculture. This heterosexual logic of space antagonizes people who do not function under its apparatus. It advocates for family reproduction, trans-generational inheritance, and capital investment—the aphorism “time is money” applies to this logic. Straight time also functions as a social order that produces linear and static ontological processes manifested by privatized institutions such as religion, the media, and the state. Unfortunately, these structures of time and space efface groups of people who do not follow similar systems of order.

According to Muñoz, many LGBTQ people try adapting to this form of time, he calls the phenomenon “the measures of homonormative codes.” He continues to write about the processes of assimilation that historically persecuted groups commit themselves to follow. Thus, the practice and literary methodology of gay cruising is an important component that counter these structures. This subcultural practice challenges family order as well as the desire to assimilate by unapologetically creating a space that embodies the stigma of erotic desire, as well as disrupting social identities such as class, race, and citizenship. But why is this important? According to Halberstam, “queer subcultures represent one of the clearest manifestations of heteromaturity which was always implicit in queer life.” This alternative space queers the issues affecting society by visualizing hope. For the sake of clarity, I will explain the concept of cruising and why it serves as a circuit for coping with trauma and the violence of invisibility present in dominant culture.

Cruising Through the Margins

Gay cruising has historically been a subculture in which male-identified people acknowledge their sexual desires. These men meet in bathrooms (AKA tea rooms), dark alleys, bathhouses, and any other space that gives them the opportunity to fulfill their erotic desires. For John Rechy, a notorious gay cruiser who documented his sexual encounters, it is a myriad of feelings: “His mind explodes with outlaw images: "They stop the car, he carries me away, his hands pull me into his arms, the car starts, he kisses me hypnotically, driven by desire.” His body contracts, feeling his own cum flowing into the other’s throat… both men still coming, as if the universe itself were gathered into their bodies, their mouths, their cocks.” In this moment Rechy successfully escapes straight time. He describes this sensation as ecstatic—as if the universe were gathering into their bodies. Before this sexual interaction, he explains the arduous task of finding the perfect location where the two men can cruise, since police surveillance was (and still is) very common in Griffith Park. Eventually he finds a location and within that ephemeral moment he distorts the socially constructed form of time that functions under institutions such as the imprisonment of monogamy and the white cock-oriented heterosexual family in the seventies. This counterpractice functions as a political performance as well as a critically engaging logic that multi-tasks with complex issues regarding mainstream representations of desire, which Rebecca Schneider writes about in her book, The Body Politic in Performance.

Rebecca Schneider’s work on the political performance of bodies helps articulate my argument on the practice of gay cruising. Her book The Body Politic in Performance describes the political performance of a group of feminist artists/activists from NYC called The Guerrilla Girls. This radical group began posting political messages near SoHo art galleries that read: “ONLY FOUR COMMERCIAL GALLERIES IN NEW YORK SHOW BLACK WOMEN. ONLY ONE SHOWS MORE THAN ONE.” Schneider does a close reading by analyzing the way they choose to perform their politics. These women wear Gorilla masks for several reasons: to remain anonymous, to avoid publicly for any one of the artists, and to “quote the social primitivism at the heart of colonialism.” In other words, these gorilla masks “make explicit a social contract which has historically marked women and people of color as less evolved, more ‘primitives,’ than the implicitly higher rhetoric, white (men).” Schneider’s concept on the “explicit body” is relevant to my discourse on gay cruising because both examples exceed the act (the practice) and in doing so allow the performances to be read “between the lines.” Through their political performance, the Guerrilla Girls work with complex subjects, such as the genealogy of colonialism and racist science. These masks work with anonymity and expose the functions of racist ideologies by the activity rather than the identity. Gay cruising also grapples with complex issues, such as covert principles of manage that address the amorphousness of heterosexual culture visible in the social constructing of time and space in tandem with erotic desire.

Gay cruising is a practice that goes against public order. I argue that by understanding the logic behind this activity, one learns that it does exactly what the Guerrilla Girls do with their activism: it calls into question straight time and the hopes that follow this social construct. Cruising redefines public spaces that allow people to “fuck and suck in every street corner,” alley, or bathroom stall. In other words, cruising is not only understood as a sexual practice, it also reclaims desire within a realm understood as predominantly heterosexual by avoiding the use of such fictitious identities. This logic is also relevant in literature. I argue that cruising in literature forms an alternative space meant to heal marginalized folks as they read their untold stories between the lines. The next portion of this paper explains the experience literature provides readers and how such an experience is affiliated with an epistemic metaphor of cruising.

The Cruising Experience of Literature

I use the idea of cruising as an epistemic metaphor, as a form of thought that mirrors the ways gay cruising is there but not there. According to Wallace Bacon, a pioneer of Performance theory, “reading literature is a common experience. He is interested in the “relationship between the writer’s manuscript and the reader” by focusing on the performance of writing, an incalculable space develops within this relationship, which sparks magic and has the potential to heal marginalized people whose history is rendered invisible. This metaphysical space has the potential to imagine another world other than the one we live in. Bacon writes that those “who believe that literature provides a memorable experience, who take the printed page sexually as an opportunity to enjoy a significant experience, are thought of as fools.” But why should this be foolish? Bacon understands that this experience gives folks the opportunity to reimagine their world, to cope with traumatic experiences found in hostile environments. This is precisely what Rechy provides readers—a literary experience that gives sanctuary to an epistemology of healing through the literary methodology of cruising. This kind of reading is necessary for people who fall outside of the mainstream culture and whose sexual activity does not correlate with society’s definition of sexual identity. Rechy’s writing allows men who have sex with men to identify with a sexual activity, rather than the assimilation of a current LGBT culture dominated by heterosexism.
When one thinks of gay cruising they may think of the following: desire, euphoria, constant motion, playfulness, ecstasy and mischief. These ideas all fall under queerness — thoughts blending together to form an array of words and meanings that describe a doing rather than a being. The quotidian task of cruising brings forth the possibility for an alternative to queerness with these flexible thoughts. Múnciz argues that “performativity and utopia both call into question what is epistemologically there and signal a highly ephemeral ontological field that can be characterized as a doing in the future.” He claims that critically engaging, short-lived performances, in this case the practice of cruising in both corporeal and incarcerated spaces, ultimately break away from straight time through doing that avoids identities produced by the historical formations of Colonialism, along with the imposition of compulsory heterosexuality. He believes that queer thought is “not simply a being but a doing for and toward the future.” His references to utopian ideas parallel with my thoughts on a metaphysical interpretation of gay cruising seeing as both ideas trying to find an alternative to queer thought by avoiding assimilationist labels. However, it is immensely important to keep in mind that such an alternative to queerness is a process, which is only possible by critically thinking about issues found in the present.

“The Present is so Poisonous”

Same-sex marriage supporters argue for an inclusive we are just like you except for who we sleep with rhetoric, which neglects past struggles. Múnciz calls into question a text written by Evan Wolfson called “All Together Now (A Blueprint for the Movement),” which forms a single-minded argument about the topic of marriage in the LGBT community. He thoroughly criticizes this manifesto by arguing that Wolfson fails to understand anything more than the “social recognition and financial advantages offered by traditional marriage pacts as the key to what he calls ‘freedom’” (20). Jasbir Puar’s book, Terrorist Assemblages, analyzes the assimilation of gays in popular culture. She brings up the risk gays face when they join institutions, such as the military, that have ostracized them in the past with the “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” policy. Puar argues that certain queer subjects identify with the status quo, which creates a divide between good subjects versus bad subjects. The dominant culture ultimately decides which queer subjects live and which ones die. This depends on whether the queer subject embraces reproduction, assimilation, and capital (ideas that fall under a Western grid of intelligibility). She focuses on the issue with gays in the military and the universal goal to assimilate the bad gays everyone can count on being — marginalized people such as queer of color folks and trans-folks. She argues that this structured feeling of hate encourages white middle-class gays to unite with the status quo, which queer men can heal from the violent experiences of the heterosexist present by reading between the lines. The 1833 collection of Leaves of Grass illustrates a letter Whitman wrote to an intimate friend of his by the name of Peter Doyle. The letter and the poem have many ambiguous overlaps of erotic desires. In the letter he describes, “great long jovial walks [they] had at times for years…often midnight walks (1866–72).” He continues to write about the times they would keep each other company and nurse each other back to health when one of them was feeling ill. This letter and “We Two Boys Together Clinging” describes the doing of homoerotic content rather than explicitly writing about their sexual identities. This literary way of cruising allows readers to understand the context hidden within the traditional U.S. literary canon of Whitman’s writing (AABS straight time). Múnciz calls this “performance writing,” the ability to illustrate pictures of utopia in a society that antagonizes queer subjects. These boys are cruising past the heterosexist present, empowering themselves with an unstoppable force of mischief and play. Whitman’s poem is controversial and refreshing, he assigns these boys agency as they cruise alongside each other.

This letter also pokes fun at the taboo subject of child sexuality by welcoming a homoerotic space where these two boys can fulfill their “fancy” on a homoerotic basis. It contrasts with queer theorist Lee Edelman’s piece No Future and his antirelational interpretation of “The Child.” His interpretation considers the child a threat to queer subjects. Edelman argues that there is no hope for us because “The Child” follows the heteronormative codes present in the dominant culture such as stability, security, and stagnancy. Contrary to Edelman’s argument, the two children are enjoying each other’s company—the homoerotic space reflects the context of the homoerotic. By incorporating the literary figure of the child, Whitman’s poem challenges the taboo subject of sexuality and responds to Edelman’s argument, proving that the child holds a message of hope rather than an “us versus them” problem. Thus, rather than understanding gay cruising as an anti-relational strategy, one should take into account that much more is at stake. Readers are encouraged to analyze this poem as more than a text about cruising, but also as a way of welcoming an epistemology of healing that breaks from anti-relational polemics and strategies of assimilation. The poem also uses the power of play, a queer and innovative idea Ben Shepard argues for in his text Queer Political Performance and Protest, “an important and frequent phenomenon that contributes to the epistemic metaphor of gay cruising by embracing erotic desires of playful activities and political statements.

Playing Politics

Shepard’s theorizing of the performance of “play” converts with my argument on spaces of healing. He understands that play is necessary in queer politics; it pushes away the oppressive ideologies in society and works to help folks recuperate emotionally, spiritually and even physically. He argues that “play is viewed as a distinct tactical tool” and that such a strategy “has been particularly important for queers who have had to reject antivice statutes, psychiatric classifications, and published health recriminations, which render nonprocreative sexual practices as acts of illness. “. The moment I read this passage, I immediately thought of David Wojnarowicz’s memoir Close to the Knives,
which addresses the ways public institutions discriminated gay, male-identified folks during the AIDS crisis. He describes the traumas people faced during the epidemic crisis in the 80’s, along with the scenario of public health policies that bureaucratically discriminated against men who have sex with men (MSM). There were absurd campaigns suggesting that folks be quarantined or killed outright. The dominant culture hid behind science and federal bureaucracy in order to achieve its goal of discrimination. This shared structure of feeling, produced by fear and ignorance, created chaos and drove many marginalized queer men into a state of depression and internalized homophobia. Shepard believes that strategizing with the performance of play can exceed straight time in order to heal from the hegemonic forces of institutions. Wojnarowicz’s memoir reminiscence on the past as a therapeutic tool to fight off the aftermath left by society’s ideologies and engages with Muñoz’s work on queer utopian memories.

Reimagining Corporal Activism and Abstractions

Muñoz’s chapter “Ghosts of Public Sex: Utopian Longings, Queen Memories” found in Cruising Utopia and Shepard’s thoughts on play see past the oppressive ideologies that entangled marginalized folks by taking a moment to reimagine their reality. In other words they visualize a space of healing— Muñoz through his argument of the utopia and Shepard through his politics on play. Both writers understand that survival depends on imagining an alternative. Shepard’s chapter, “Play as Pleasure,” chronicles an interview Allen Ginsberg conducted in response to the 1968 Democratic National Convention held in Chicago. The convention immediately broke into a riot led by the Youth International Party, a counterculture youth group fighting for free speech and anti-war movements of the starring 60’s. Ginsberg wished the riot would have been a “glow of thousands of naked bodies intertwined, making love,” or so a public orgy. Shepard writes about Ginsberg’s vision in order to describe how the politics of play work “as a resource, a sign of social vitality, an investment in passion that serves as a reminder that there is sometimes more to life than productivity.” He recognizes the importance in building spaces that rejuvenate the soul while advocating for social justice. Ginsberg’s orgy and my argument on cruising are proof that politics of play reimagine social as a reminder that there is sometimes more to life than productivity.” He recognizes the importance in building spaces that rejuvenate the soul while advocating for social justice. Ginsberg’s orgy and my argument on cruising are proof that politics of play reimagine social vitality, an investment in passion that serves as a reminder that there is sometimes more to life than productivity. He recognizes the importance in building spaces that rejuvenate the soul while advocating for social justice. Ginsberg’s orgy and my argument on cruising are proof that politics of play reimagine social vitality, an investment in passion that serves as a reminder that there is sometimes more to life than productivity.

Muñoz’s concept of queer utopian memories also works to break away from the present by recollecting the past as a source of hope, thus drawing from a talk by Douglas Crimp titled, “ Mourning and Militancy.” Crimp’s piece addresses the issues with the HIV/AIDS crisis in the 80’s. This conference took place during that moment in history. Crimp’s talk responds to the crisis by recollecting a pre-AIDS world as a way of imagining a space of healing. He mentions Sigmund Freud’s argument that explains how the mourning a loved one is also the mourning of an abstraction. “Freud tells us that mourning is the reaction not only to the death of a loved person, but also “to the loss of some abstraction which has taken the place of one, such as a fatherland, liberty, and ideal.” Crimp is not only mourning folks who have died at the hands of AIDS, he is also mourning the death of a time when sex did not come with a death sentence. He humbly adds the “ideal of perverse sexual pleasure” to the list of abstractions Freud mentions, such as fatherland, liberty and even love. After I read this section of the chapter, I could not help but imagine the conference as a forum. I am of a younger queer generation fortunate enough to not have witnessed the pain and loss through which people suffered, however, after understanding Muñoz’s concept of queer utopian memories, I see the past in a way of dealing with the present AIDS scare. Although he mourns the death of an abstraction, he also mourns the death of an abstraction which has taken the place of one, such as a fatherland, liberty, and ideal.

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Bill Rechy finds a space of healing— even though critics may read it as violent, radical and even passé, his piece reads as an epitaphology of healing from all the pain and violence he has experienced. The pleasures he experiences through his sexual encounters reflects Ben Shepard’s politics on play since both writers recognize that pleasure with politics is a source that helps them get through the turmoil.

David Wojnarowicz’s Close to the Knives also shares an epitaphology of healing through the politics of cruising by resisting the fear and shame associated with HIV/AIDS. He boldly faces the stigma and fear of living with AIDS and condemns the political injustices the American government commits against folks who have contracted the virus. He calls out the social injustices he faces: “I want to trope away because we’re supposed to quell and politely make house in this killing machine called America and pay taxes to support our own slow murder and I’m amazed we’re not running amok in the streets, and that we can still be capable of gestures of loving after lifetimes of all this.”

He is amazed folks did not burn down cities when the government refused to fund research for vaccines, or when they approved legislation that allowed employers and government institutions to discriminate against HIV positive citizens. For him, this is something more than theory could ever provide; he is living theory in the flesh. His writing also finds utopian pictures in his confinement to straight time; in writing this all down on paper, he is inscribing his soul on the pages, hopeful that all these stories were not written in vain. All these writers—Whitman, Rechy, and Muñoz—understand why an epitaphology of healing is essential for marginalized folks. They all strive to find that fountain of healing many of us have forgotten as we cruise along the yellow brick road in the land of straight time—ceased to face heterosexism and the politics of sexual globalization functioning under a Western grid of intelligibility.

I conclude with an essay by Robin D.G. Kelley titled “Finding the Strength to Love and Dream.” Kelley chronicles his academic career and reflects on where twenty years of activism and theory took him. He describes that marginalized and excluded folks “have done the
most to make democracy work in America; however, he also recognizes that many radical movements have done terrible things by work-
ing under the premise that the ends justify the means.12 But he adds: “to draw on about how oppressed we are so to merely chronicle the crimes of radical movements doesn’t seem very useful... my main point is that we must tap the well of our own collective imaginations, that we do what earlier generations have done: Dream.” By tapping into our collective imaginations, we have the opportunity to inhabit a

**Endnotes**

2. I am aware that gay cruising is a broad topic. I will eventually expand this work by critically addressing what gay cruis-
ing looks like for people of color grappling with the precarious balance of homonormative desire and race.
3. I use the term “WE” to describe queer identifying folks from all backgrounds (e.g. academia, activism, etc.).
4. Jack Halberstam consists this term. Straight time is the concept that understands the tropes found in dominant culture
which are as follows: marriage, reproduction, capital, anything that is understood as heteronormative.
5. J. Halberstam, In a Queer Time and Place (New York: UP, 2005).
8. Muñoz, Cruising Utopia.
10. Halberstam, Queer Time and Race, 154.
11. I feel bring up Reddy again later in the paper.
17. Bacon, Literature as Experience.
18. Quoted from José E. Muñoz.
20. Emphasis is mine.
23. “Powerful fiction” is a phrase I borrowed from Mass Lipman to describe the phenomenon of race, gender, and sexuality constructed in the 19th century by institutions such as racist science and colonial projects.
24. I found this letter while I was doing archival research at the Bancroft Library in UC Berkeley.
25. Walt Whitman, Leaves of Grass (Bancroft Library, 1883), April 17, 2012.
26. Anti-relational theory constructs a model of “US versus THEM” binary that reinforces the violence queer folks live with by
disregarding a critical analysis of intersecting structures such as race and class. This theory is particularly neglecting of the experiences queer people of color face.
28. Benjamin Sirens, an assistant professor at New York School of Technology City University of New York. He wrote Queer Political Performance and Protest, a book I am using for this paper.
31. I reference Raymond Williams’ “structured feeling” theory to describe the discourse on affect, specifically calling out

the feeling of social fear with the crisis on AIDS/HIV.
32. Allen Ginsberg was a queer American poet and a prominent figure of the Beat Generation in the 1950’s.
33. Douglas Crimp is a professor at the University of Rochester. His talk was held at the second national Lesbian and Gay
Studios conference at Yale in 1989.
35. Cherrie Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa coined this phrase.
38. José Esteban Muñoz, Disidentifications.
39. David Wojnarowicz was a performance artist, activist, writer and filmmaker who took the New York City streets by
storm with his political art and personal experiences in living with AIDS.
40. Wojnarowicz, Close to the Knives, 108.
41. Robin D.G. Kelley is a professor of American studies and Ethnicity and History at UC Los Angeles.