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Now and Always: A Utopian Retort to Political Pessimism

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Abstract
This essay proposes the concept of *utopian pragmatism* as a synthesis of queer theorist José Esteban Muñoz's utopian hermeneutic and John Dewey's philosophical pragmatism, arguing that together these frameworks constitute a more adequate response to political pessimism than either offers alone. Drawing on Muñoz's *Cruising Utopia*, Dewey's *Human Nature and Conduct*, and Mariame Kaba's *We Do This Till We Free Us*, the essay argues that assimilation—understood as the foreclosure of political imagination in favor of access to existing hierarchies—is not only ethically insufficient but pragmatically impoverished. Against this, utopian pragmatism insists that imagination is itself a moral faculty, one whose proper exercise is grounded in the conditions of the present rather than divorced from them. Historically, this capacity is illustrated through the student and labor uprisings of May 1968. In the contemporary moment, it finds expression in the prison abolition movement and the transformative justice framework articulated by Kaba. The essay contends that utopian pragmatism names a practice already operative in these movements, and a practice whose theoretical articulation may assist in clarifying its stakes and broadening its appeal.

Keywords: utopian pragmatism, José Esteban Muñoz, John Dewey, assimilation, prison abolition, transformative justice, queer theory, political pessimism

1. Introduction

Today we are faced with challenges in our social and material world of an astonishing complexity. These include the shaping of our identities and relationships by technological platforms, social expectations to value personal achievements and productivity, and continuous pressure to maintain one's own viability in the job market through ongoing self-education. At the same time, we are provided, in real time, visceral updates of wars, acts of state violence, ripple effects of the climate crisis, and visions of global economic insecurity. Now, more than ever, to be human is to be exhausted and overwhelmed. This is not to discount the toll taken by previous historical movements—the abolitionists, the labor movement, and the anticolonial struggles each have tested the limits of human capacity, creativity, and endurance. Our present moment is distinguished by the form of its crisis rather than its magnitude. We are situated between untethered technological advancement, the disruption of tradition, and (in the case of the current US administration) the blatant assault on truth as a category, which has devastating consequences for the psyche. Unfettered access to mediated images of horrific acts, without communal structures that gave the crisis its meaning, produces a specific kind of exhaustion. Exhaustion today is not due to the weight of one struggle, but rather the demand to respond to all of them, individually, in real time as they are delivered to our devices. Real-time news delivery creates a leveling effect in which the identical nature of the form produces an equalization of its content's value.[1] The omnipresence of this form means that even the best of news leaves us without any capacity to reflect on our world. The demands of modern life on the psyche situate pessimism as a legitimate response to things, if one is able to respond at all.

Such conditions inspire queer theorist José Esteban Muñoz's description of our social world as a "prisonhouse of the present" ever demanding another ounce of energy.[2] In *Cruising Utopia*, Muñoz argues that modern life encourages assimilation as a way of being without room for reflection on the past or consideration of potential

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[1] Sloterdijk identifies this leveling mechanism in *Critique of Cynical Reason*, 313–314, where he analyzes the "And" of mass media. He refers to the practice of indifferently conjoining disparate events that produces a false equivalency of value, what he calls the elision of "And" into "Is-equal-to." Sloterdijk explicitly connects this to Marx's analysis of the kind of false equivalence characteristic of the commodity form. What he identifies in the newspaper has become the structural logic of social media and real-time news delivery. The form is unchanged but its reach and velocity are radically transformed.

[2] José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York University Press, 2009), 21.

futures. Muñoz recalls the work of 20th century LGBTQ movements to articulate a utopian hermeneutic that lauds the efficacy of revolutionary impulses en masse. While Muñoz criticizes the claim that assimilationist ideas could be rooted in pragmatic thought, this essay argues that philosophical pragmatism, properly understood, holds a radical potential in resisting assimilation.

Muñoz's utopian hermeneutic draws its philosophical lineage, in part, from Ernst Bloch's distinction between *abstract* and *concrete* utopia. Abstract utopia refers to mere fantasy, to a compensatory dream that leaves existing conditions untouched. Conversely, concrete utopia is latent within the present, discoverable through an attentive receptiveness toward what is already straining toward something better.[3] This distinction is essential to the argument developed here, for it immunizes utopian pragmatism against the familiar charge of impracticality. To think utopically, on this account, is not to flee the world but to read it with particular care. The synthesis of Muñoz and Dewey proposed in this essay has not yet been developed in existing scholarship, though recent work in queer pragmatism has begun to map adjacent terrain.[4] In naming and theorizing this convergence, the essay offers a framework that is both philosophically grounded and politically operative. From this vista, the work of utopian pragmatism is best apprehended. It does not embark from a blueprint in search of its realization. Rather, it relies on an attuned reading of the unmet demands generated within present conditions. The content of utopian possibility is a continued discovery-through-praxis, not a set of conditions that equate to liberation. Liberation is an activity, a disposition, and an orientation towards the world. This is what distinguishes concrete utopia from abstract utopia in Bloch's terms. Furthermore, it is what also separates utopian pragmatism from a political program or mere wishful thinking.

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[3] Ernst Bloch, *The Principle of Hope*, trans. Neville Plaice, Stephen Plaice, and Paul Knight (MIT Press, 1986), 3-4. Bloch's distinction between abstract and concrete utopia is essential to Muñoz's project. The latter explicitly credits Bloch as the enabling inspiration for his own utopian hermeneutic. See Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 3.

[4]The closest exploration of this idea is Mark Tschaepe's essay, "Cruising Uncertainty: Queering Dewey Against Heteronormativity," *Education and Culture* 38, no. 1 (2023): 1–18. Tschaepe situates Dewey's criticism of certainty against the work of Muñoz, Halberstam, and Stockton. He argues that Dewey's criticisms should extend to heteronormativity. Tschaepe's work "provides a view of his work as a form of queering that coheres with Muñoz's utopian concept of queer futurity." The present essay shifts this conversation in a distinct direction. Rather than queering Dewey, it synthesizes his pragmatist philosophy with Muñoz's utopian hermeneutic. The result of this move is a politically operative concept, utopian pragmatism. From there, it deploys that concept against assimilation and political pessimism through the case studies of May 1968 and the prison abolition movement. The difference is both of argumentative aim and scope.

This essay draws from Muñoz's notion of a utopian hermeneutic to conceive of a utopian pragmatism. We will begin by studying his explanation of assimilation as both pessimistic and impractical. We will see how assimilation functions as an alibi to harmful systems of economic distribution and social organization. In *Human Nature and Conduct*, John Dewey's articulation of a philosophical pragmatism coheres with the principles of utopian thought. Both describe a flexible form of imagination that is derived from responding to life in motion. Dewey's pragmatism is a clearing whereby the radical insights of Muñoz find kinship in the experiences of a more general audience. It is the insistence on imagination against assimilation that charters pragmatism as a utopian philosophy. Finally, this essay will demonstrate how utopian pragmatism responds more effectively to the calamities of the day.

2. Assimilation in Practice

During its earlier stages, the LGBTQ movement in the United States was unflinchingly radical. In 1971, an article titled "What We Want, What We Believe" in the publication *Gay Flames* cited 16 demands held by the Third World Gay Revolution movement for society's future: "We want . . . a revolutionary socialist society . . . [including the] liberation of humanity, free food, free shelter, free clothing, free transportation, free health care . . . [among others]."[5] Muñoz notes the temptation by some to scoff dismissively at these sorts of statements, to consider them "impractical, or merely utopian." However, he responds with conviction of the need to make space for the lessons of history in our present moment. Remarkably, since the publication of his book, variations of these demands have come to pass in various countries across Europe and Latin America. As such, they sidestep claims of impracticality, even in areas of the world where they are not yet in place. These are concrete utopian movements which demand a reinterpretation of our belief about what is possible. Muñoz is seeking to call into question what we mean by utopia. For him, not only is utopia an "elsewhere" and "elsewhen," it is found in those projects where "multiple forms of belonging in difference adhere to a being in collectivity."[6] Not only does this metric align with the demands listed by the *Gay Flames* article, it also gives inspiration to other possible futures that bend toward utopia. Utopia may remain perpetually

[5] Third World Gay Revolution, "What We Want, What We Believe," *Gay Flames* 7 (1971), reprinted in Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 20–21.
[6] Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 20.

elusive but, for Muñoz, it is certainly cosmopolitan because of its propensity to acknowledge and respond to individual or group differences within a larger collective.

Muñoz's critique of what he calls the Gay Pragmatist Movement is reflected well against this backdrop. He takes Evan Wolfson, a gay marriage advocate, as emblematic of this movement. Wolfson argued that the LGBTQ movement should give its full attention to the legalization of gay marriage as an entryway for gay people into legitimate standing with the dominant culture. Muñoz terms this approach as "gay pragmatism in the vernacular sense…not referring to the American philosophical tradition."[7] For Muñoz, Wolfson's platform encourages a level of assimilation beyond collaborative necessity. The implication of Wolfson's approach is that thinning the movement's goals to prioritize gay marriage will produce a more palatable form of gayness for the dominant culture. It requests access to social hierarchies rather than rejecting their insufficiency to account for alternate ways of being. Gayness then becomes a path into economic participation without addressing the gaps produced by such participation in the first place. It naturalizes and accepts the established hierarchies in the world, and strays far away from the idea of reconstructing them. As such, it is a pessimistic viewpoint that lends itself as a technique of crowd control, rather than a true response to existing needs and desires. It is worth clarifying that for Muñoz and this essay, the argument against gay pragmatism is not intended to spurn activism that works within existing institutions as such. Indeed, action within existing structures that pushes their composition is a necessary component of a well-developed political strategy. The most pressing concern is the principle guiding this vein of action. Wolfson seeks legal recognition for good reason: the material benefits are real and immediate. However, he stops short of exposing the insufficiency of the hierarchies that make such recognition necessary in the first place. The distinction here is whether institutions are an instrument for mass transformation or whether access to these institutions alone is itself conceived as sufficient transformation. This distinction becomes clearer through Dewey's account of aims and their environmental embeddedness, explored in the next section.

Muñoz then shares a sophisticated apology for utopian hermeneutics. He claims the vista of a utopian hermeneutics challenges us to greatly stretch our sense of the possible in direct relation to the actual. His utopian hermeneutic implores readers to reject assimilationism which ultimately erases their essential differences of desire in exchange for subtler symbols of second-class citizenship. Muñoz references bathing culture, drag, and other institutions of queer community as worth defending as

[7] Ibid., 24.

legitimate means to continue relating with one another. Bathing culture (and cruising generally) is a formation of sexual self-expression that cannot sufficiently be accounted for by a culture that dominates through heterosexuality. Dominant heterosexuality views courtship as preparation for the bonding of sexuality to economic agency. It thus ensures a steady supply of invested labor as parents seek to further their own family's advantages within an existing system of social hierarchies. Bathing culture utterly rejects this premise by seeking connection for its own sake; the joys of which may include the ephemerality of the encounter. It is inherently unpredictable and it need not serve a higher purpose outside of its own enjoyment—a quality that is deeply disruptive to the dominant culture.

There is a similar case that can be made for the work of drag as an artform. Drag may be somewhat less controversial than bathing culture but it holds an equally subversive potential. At its core, drag is a form of gender bending. It speaks to an insufficiency in the concept of gender to express the experiences and needs of the people to whom gender is assigned. Moreover, it does so in a highly performative, irreverent fashion. Drag is an intentionally obnoxious middle finger to the coercive features of the expectations of a gender binary. The question of whether such practices constitute real political agency or reflect a pleasurable distraction is integral to the theme of this essay. The answer is a matter of refutation, rather than a proposal. Neither bathing culture nor drag offer a political program and they do not seek to develop one. What both practices do is sustain, under antagonistic conditions, the imaginative and embodied practice of a social world grounded in radically different principles. They are certainly not sufficient conditions for political transformation, but they are deeply necessary. They preserve an embodied knowledge that another way of being is possible, without which a demand for social transformation has no lived content. Their radicalism lives in the refusal to accept the dominant culture's account of what is natural, necessary, and possible go unchallenged. For Muñoz, assimilation is a pessimistic act that ignores actually-existing utopian forms of being-in-community. Bathing culture and drag came into existence within a violently unreceptive culture. Their continued resistance to social prohibitions indicates their connection to a vital need that has so far been left unattended. This lack of receptivity towards humans in their natural environment is the starting point for Dewey's philosophical pragmatism and reveals pragmatism as an inherently utopian enterprise.

3. Pragmatism Responds

Renowned educator and pragmatist philosopher John Dewey thought deeply on this subject, albeit under different terms. He opens the book *Human Nature and Conduct*, by questioning traditional morality's historical record of responding to the human condition. Dewey notes that traditional morality governs human behavior in the spaces where we gather most, such as the church, the state, industry, and through conventionality. He ponders that these institutions have come to "enforce a moral code that seems directly opposed to human nature."[8] The church pushes virtues in an unfortunately strict Platonic sense, where they are represented as ideals that stand in opposition to the particularities of a situation. Here we can think of the Christian adage to unconditionally "turn the other cheek" and, indeed, Dewey points to religious extremists who, through piety, consider themselves separate from the world in a form of shallow spiritual egotism. Similarly, the morality of many offices and workspaces are fueled by the corporate virtues of productivity, agreeability, and competition. He observes astutely that the role models of morality, the so-called "good people have been those who do what they are told to do, [while] a lack of eager compliance is [conceived as] something flawed about their character."[9] Dewey argues that conventional morality sacrifices personal autonomy for a stable social environment. It conditions people to be accustomed to ignoring their own circumstances and desires for the sake of convention. In this way, assimilationist practices have the potential to become deeply unhealthy influences in society.

In order to engage in this kind of behavior, one must ignore the world around us in favor of the world we have been instructed to seek. Modern capitalist culture in the United States is the pinnacle of such a conventional morality. It defines freedom as the choice to disavow one's reliance on community for a chance at class mobility. Dewey counters this by arguing that part of the challenge of becoming free is to see how freedom is achieved only in the inclusion of the other. For Dewey, freedom is unquestionably bonded with civic engagement. He observes that it is only by making space with and for the other that we have the possibility to understand or even enjoy our own freedom.

It is worth pausing to consider the stakes of this move. Dewey's critique of conventional morality extends beyond a simple warning against social conformity. More fundamentally, he is making a claim about the nature of imagination itself.

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[8] John Dewey, *Human Nature and Conduct: An Introduction to Social Psychology* (Henry Holt, 1922), 61.
[9] Ibid., 62.

Dewey does not conceive imagination as a form of escapism. Imagination instead is the faculty through which we perceive possibilities housed within present historical conditions. Conventional morality attempts to excise aims from their environmental context. It treats them as fixed ideals to be replicated rather than discovered. As a result, conventional morality does not simply restrict behavior. It atrophies the imaginative capacity necessary for genuine moral agency to occur. In this sense, Dewey's quarrel with assimilationism is identical in structure to Muñoz's: both identify the foreclosure of imagination as the defining feature of a politics that, however pragmatic it appears, is in fact deeply impractical. Wolfson's gay pragmatism is not impractical because it is too modest in its ambitions. The issue is that Wolfson's pragmatism misunderstands what practice requires. Genuine practice demands that one remain open to the world's unfinished character. The challenge then is to learn to act from within that openness rather than in spite of it. This is the pivot on which utopian pragmatism turns, and it is one that neither thinker fully articulates without the other.

To comprehend the significance of conventional morality's present formulation, Dewey charges us to reconsider how we conceptualize the nature of goals or aims. He points out a handful of elements of the human condition that conventional morality is unable to register. The most critical of these are that the nature of goals and aims themselves are always already tied to the environment that inspired them. He gives the example of a mariner whose craft does not involve her "sailing towards the stars, but by noting the stars [s]he is aided in conducting h[er] craft." Described this way, aims become activated as *an aiming*, as our aims become available only in contact with our environment, and thus remain in motion.[10] Dewey conceives the completion of each aim not as an ending but rather a pivoting in activity towards a new aim. His description of the *aim as activity* involves both past memories and future possibilities in our perception of, and negotiation with, the present. For this reason, the excision of aims from inspiration or consequence by conventional morality warps one's agency tangibly. We need experimentation with aspirations and outcomes to measure the degree to which we are actually able to experience freedom.

The resonance between this account and Muñoz's utopian hermeneutic is not incidental. Dewey insists that aims are never terminal, that they are always an act of a pivoting rather than a status as 'arrived'. To a similar effect, Muñoz insists that utopia is never a fixed destination but a directional pull. He describes the utopian mode as a "striving" whose value lies precisely in its ability to orient a perspective rather than

[10] Ibid., 72.

provide concrete answers. For both Dewey and Muñoz the political and moral life is understood as fundamentally open-ended: neither thinker permits the imagination to rest in the accomplished. The resonance of their works is made possible by Muñoz's influence from the works of Ernst Bloch. Bloch develops the notion of a "vor-schein," or "forward dawning," to name the unrealized potential within the present that political imagination frees us to realize. Muñoz uses Bloch as a means to better articulate queer life. In contrast, Dewey arrives at a structurally identical position through his own methods of inquiry, found in his insistence that aims are always environmentally embedded and never complete.[11] To sever aims from the environment that gives them meaning, or to capitulate to the prisonhouse of the present, is, for both thinkers, a form of political and moral failure. The concept of utopian pragmatism names a convergence between two already existing traditions, evident in both texts, awaiting articulation.

Dewey's insistence on this point distances him from the popular reactionary notion of freedom in today's political discourse. Reactionary freedom involves a severing of ties from the other to a conceptual freedom from social restriction. Dewey describes this concept as a "general freedom abstracted away from any positive abilities." He calls this freedom pointless because it acknowledges human agency in an abstract sense but it does not account for how humans actually engage with one another in the world.[12] Such a notion of freedom disregards the idea that progress has been achieved through collaborative efforts which can only occur by the sacrifice of certain freedoms. Dewey's focus remains on the freedom that comes from living in a way that individuals can flourish while still responding to collective need. Responding to the needs of one's civic and social world occurs in tandem with an attendance to one's own needs. But Dewey is explicit: responding to the world in no way gives the world a supremacy over the mind or imagination. It simply recognizes that civic institutions are best positioned to make social improvements en masse. As such, pragmatism avoids the assimilationist tendencies that concern Muñoz.

From this vantage point, we can study Evan Wolfson's work with fresh eyes. Keeping Dewey at the forefront, Wolfson's drive towards marriage equality is seen as one option for engaging in the larger struggle for social freedom. It is clear that

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[11] Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 97. Muñoz's invocation of Bloch's concept of *Vor-Schein*, or "forward dawning," appears in his discussion of utopia as a horizon of potentiality that is neither fully present nor entirely absent. For Bloch, the "not yet conscious" is the forward-reaching dimension of the present, the unrealized latency that political imagination can make available for action. Muñoz inherits this structure and applies it to queer life: the "striving" of queer futurity is the affective counterpart to Bloch's anticipatory illumination. See Bloch, *The Principle of Hope*, 11–18.

[12]Dewey, *Human Nature and Conduct*, 82, 84.

Western society provides meaningful benefits, incentives, and privileges to those who participate in the institution of marriage. Prioritizing access to these already existing social benefits is sensible; it has the potential to produce immediate and meaningful improvements in people's lives. But it does not account for the fact that marriage equality is insufficient to satisfy the ongoing needs of gay people (or anyone else for that matter). It is by coming to terms with the shortcomings of the existing world seen against the backdrop of human need that the latent possibilities underwriting our world present themselves. Imagination as the faculty through which we understand our present is thus attuned to the discovering of possibilities housed within worldly conditions. It is worth addressing the choice to term Dewey's philosophy as utopian rather than optimistic. Optimism is appropriate where one looks at the world and is and remains satisfied with its trajectory. Dewey's reliance on creativity and imagination—drawing from a space neither actualized in nor divorced from the present—is a utopian move. Conceived as such, utopianism continues to evade criticisms of impracticality. Utopianism cannot be mere escapism or fantasy because its realm is within the possibilities contained by the present state of affairs.

The ploys of political pessimism are readily apparent. The root effect of such a perspective contributes to assimilationist behaviors that do not permit the fullest apprehension of worldly events. More importantly, it does not account for the ways that we are always encountering and navigating our environment anyway. Pessimism involves giving a fixed interpretation to changing events, regardless of the consequences of doing so. Within modern life, pessimism requires adherence to the fixed ideals of capital accumulation and a paucity of disruptive behaviors. In turn, our ability to apprehend and respond to our environment diminishes. As does the chance of engaging in a kind of opportunism that will find in our environment those strategic moves that may better humanity.

4. Utopian Pragmatism in Practice: Two Cases

To understand what utopian pragmatism looks like in practice, it is useful to begin with a historical example before turning to the present. The student and labor uprisings of May 1968 in France are among the most frequently cited instances of mass revolutionary action in the twentieth century, and for good reason: they illustrate with unusual clarity the movement from concrete conditions to radical imagination and back again. The protests began at the Sorbonne, where students organized around specific, material grievances: university policies restricting sexual autonomy in

dormitories, inadequate teaching standards, the government's direction of university funding, and the de Gaulle regime's tight control of media outlets. These were not abstract demands; they arose directly from the environment that produced them, in precisely the Deweyan sense.

The government's heavy-handed response, however, transformed what might have remained a campus dispute into a national crisis. Solidarity strikes spread rapidly through the French labor movement, and at the movement's peak, roughly one-third of the French population had joined the work stoppage. To use Dewey's terms, the students' concrete concerns became a *clearing* through which a far wider set of social aspirations became expressible: demands for wage reform, challenges to emerging consumer culture, and critiques of class hierarchy that had long been suppressed in the postwar economic consensus. The momentum was such that Charles de Gaulle briefly fled the country, fearing civil war. This led to some of the immediate demands being met including a move toward dormitory autonomy and a raise in the national minimum wage. Consequently, the broader political imaginary of the French left was fundamentally transformed. Indeed, the artwork, slogans, and organizational courage of May '68 can be traced directly into the wave of feminist and gay liberation movements that followed, including those referenced by Muñoz.[13]

May '68 thus exemplifies utopian pragmatism as a historical practice. The students did not begin with a vision of utopia and then seek to impose it; they began with their actual circumstances and, through the exercise of the kind of attentive, environmentally embedded imagination Dewey describes, discovered within those circumstances a demand for something that did not yet exist. The "not yet" was latent in the "already," and the movement made it legible. To use Bloch's terms, this concretizing from the abstract is the defining feature of the practice this essay seeks to name. It is also, importantly, a practice with a historical record of partial success; its demands need not be assigned to the register of the merely wishful.

The lesson of May '68, however, belongs to a resolved historical cycle. The question of what utopian pragmatism demands of us now is more urgent and less settled. Pessimism itself is not a difficult position to understand. Anyone who spends time immersed in the larger political conversations of the day will recognize it as a rhetorical tool among their neighbors and elected leaders alike. It has even come to be

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[13] Kristin Ross, *May '68 and Its Afterlives* (University of Chicago Press, 2002). Ross's account is essential reading for a critical treatment of the events. Her central argument is that the official memory of May '68 was systematically depoliticized in the decades that followed, stripping it of its egalitarian and anti-imperialist dimensions. Such depoliticizing is itself a demonstration of the assimilationist dynamic this essay references.

used as a deflective response by those less interested in sharing their political perspective than yelling it. Its status as a deflective tool leaves people in the employ of pessimism much more often than they realize. The prison abolition movement offers a contemporary instance of utopian pragmatism actively contending with precisely this dynamic.

The US prison abolition movement has been active since the 1980s but was reinvigorated in recent years by the Black Lives Matter protests. At times, the public reception of these protests has been as incendiary as the events inspiring them. Systemic critiques about police brutality are commonly met with the sentiment that the murder of innocent civilians is, at best, an unfortunate necessity of retaining a police force. Furthermore, the concept of abolishing the prison system entirely remains heavily divisive. To some, police accountability is unmanageable in its own right, let alone conceptualizing the idea of eliminating mass incarceration as a whole. The underlying premise of such responses is that state interference with police behaviors will negatively impact "law abiding citizens" and remove the only safety against criminality that the public has been exposed to. These sentiments mirror the pessimistic attitudes critiqued by Muñoz in the gay pragmatist movement. Their narrative acts as a stop-gap in the conversation that serves to shorten the transition time between crises back to social equilibrium by avoiding any critical examination of the causes of criminality or state violence. Moreover, none of these attitudes accounts sufficiently for the horror entailed by the loss of innocent life and the irreparable damage done to families and communities. The public is thus positioned to view the prison-industrial complex as only preventing future miseries, rather than being recognized as a major factor in our present circumstances.

The prison abolition movement is frequently charged as being abstract, politically irresponsible, and impossible to bring into fruition. However, these claims conflate the registers of abstract and concrete utopia. Abstract utopias are compensatory acts that, at best, shield us from taking to task our existing conditions and finding a pathway to an alternative future. Prison abolition, as theorized by its most serious practitioners, is entirely different. It begins with an analysis of the material conditions, specifically the interplay between land surpluses, capital, labor, and state power so deftly articulated by Ruth Wilson Gilmore as the vehicle of the carceral state.[14] It then derives a practice from this analysis. That is, building, within and despite present conditions, new institutions of care, accountability, and community that would

[14] Ruth Wilson Gilmore, *Golden Gulag: Prisons, Surplus, Crisis, and Opposition in Globalizing California* (University of California Press, 2007).

make mass incarceration unnecessary. This is Bloch's concrete utopia in a most precise form, as the "not yet" that is present within the already, to be found in attunement to what present conditions generate as an unmet demand. The question is not whether a world without prisons is possible, but whether the conditions mandating it can be transformed. Abolition is the name for that practice of transformation.

Mariame Kaba's *We Do This Till We Free Us* is perhaps the most sustained recent example of utopian pragmatism in action on the question of mass incarceration.[15] Kaba does not qualify as a utopian in the abstract sense. She is, above all, a practitioner and an organizer, and her work reflects a consistent preoccupation with what can be built now, using the conditions in front of us. This is precisely what makes her work such a productive instance of utopian pragmatism. While Muñoz provides the hermeneutic and Dewey the philosophical architecture, Kaba provides praxis.

Kaba's work is deeply in conversation with the transformative justice tradition. At its core is a refusal of the carceral system's account of what safety means or requires. The transformative justice movement rejects the logic of the prison as a means for organizing responses to harm around punishment and containment. Instead, the transformative justice tradition identifies conditions giving rise to the harm. From there, it clarifies what relationships and structures would need to change for harm not to recur. From Dewey's perspective, this amounts to an insistence on reading aims in their environment rather than treating punishment as a fixed moral ideal outside of its context. This would amount to, using Muñoz's terms, a refusal of the "prisonhouse of the present": a refusal to accept the present state of things as inevitable.

Kaba's notion of prefigurative politics is where the utopian leanings in her work become most palpable. For her, prefigurative politics involves an injunction to continue building the world one wants to live in now, within and despite present conditions. Waiting for a revolutionary threshold to be crossed misrecognizes the conditions which create action. If one is always waiting for the revolution, one might be missing the chance for it to become materialized. From this vantage point, community accountability processes, mutual aid networks, and violence interruption programs are not merely stopgap measures. To the contrary, they are the embryonic forms of a social world organized around care rather than punishment. This is Bloch's concrete utopia in operation: the "not yet" recognized within the "already," and acted upon. Kaba's work does not shy away from the real difficulties of this project. She

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[15] Mariame Kaba, *We Do This 'Till We Free Us: Abolitionist Organizing and Transforming Justice*, ed. Tamara K. Nopper (Haymarket Books, 2021).

acknowledges that abolishing prisons will not lead to a world without conflict or harm. She also acknowledges that the road from here to there is neither clear nor easy. This candor does not undercut the utopian dimension of her work. Rather, it makes her work philosophically pragmatic. She insists on imagination against assimilation, undertaken with full acceptance of the world as it is.

It is worth noting that the sophistication of Kaba's work does not rely on a theoretical vocabulary in the same manner that Muñoz and Dewey do. The synthesis performed in this essay seeks to name the theoretical structure of a practice that is already underway. The hope in doing so is to sharpen its articulation and, as Dewey would have it, expand its communal appeal. Utopian pragmatism is not a framework imposed on the prison abolition movement. It is, rather, the name for what that movement is already doing when it is at its most intellectually serious.

5. Conclusion

Thinking of a utopian hermeneutic alongside utopian pragmatics is a practice which can offer guidance on many issues. Pragmatism injects an awareness of contingency and a re-prioritization of the social environment into public discourse. Individually and collectively, it prepares us for adaptation to human needs (for shelter, health, meaningful work, community, and the conditions of genuine self-determination) that express themselves at every level of social life. This is not to say that pragmatism will provide rapid solutions to the complications of living in a community. Rather, it is a paradigm through which the unwritten nature of the future is both accounted for and celebrated. Pragmatism is, in this sense, utopian as it relies on the creative responsiveness a person brings to their world. Furthermore, it encourages attending to one's personal needs as they are linked to the collective world. Utopian pragmatism could never be reconciled with the modern choice to allow capital accumulation to supplant human flourishing as the organizing principle of social life. There are enough existing examples of progressive societies, e.g., Scandinavian social democracy, the cooperative economies of the Basque Country, or the participatory budgeting experiments of Porto Alegre, to demonstrate that a road to deprioritizing capital accumulation in favor of human flourishing is both possible and historically actual. These are examples which prove the longstanding efficacy of collective action and the influence utopian pragmatism can provide.

The concept of utopian pragmatism developed in this essay seeks to engage the ongoing conversations at the intersection of queer theory, hermeneutics, and

pragmatist philosophy. Viewing Muñoz's utopian hermeneutic and Dewey's philosophical pragmatism as not merely compatible but structurally convergent allows the essay to offer a perspective that is both theoretically grounded and politically operative. Each supplies what the other leaves unnamed and both are indebted to Bloch's anticipatory logic. Utopian pragmatism names a practice with a history, visible in the movements of May 1968 and in the ongoing work of prison abolition. It also names a disposition that insists on the exercise of imagination as a condition of genuine political agency. Against the twin temptations of assimilationist pragmatism and abstract utopianism, it proposes a third path: one that is attentive to the actual, oriented toward the possible, and unwilling to mistake the two.