

Brandi McGuinness
WGST 1001
Presentation Essay on José Esteban Muñoz

Slide 1:

José Esteban Muñoz was a Cuban American academic who focused on queer theory, cultural studies, and critical theory— specifically in the context of visual culture and performance studies. He was born in Havana, Cuba in 1967 shortly before he and his family moved to a Cuban Exile enclave in Florida. He studied Comparative Literature at Sarah Lawrence College and received a Ph.D in Literature from Duke University. Muñoz was a professor and Chair of the Department of Performance Studies at NYU Tisch. He was best known for the many revolutionary and monumental concepts he developed and the two books he wrote exploring a few of these ideas— *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (1999) and *Cruising Utopia: the Then and There of Queer Futurity* (2009). He has had many essays and articles published and his theories and writings have inspired many other influential artists. He worked alongside many famous artists, such as Vaginal Davis, Jorge Ignacio Cortiñas, and Andy Warhol, to name a few.

Slide 2:

In *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (1999) Muñoz breaks down the concept of disidentifying as a process of reclamation, identification, and survival. **He emphasizes the significance of public performances of queerness as a means for “minoritarian subjects” (those whose identity renders them a minority— in this case, queer people of color) to gain agency and reclaim harmful stereotypes— which reduces the oppressive capabilities of the stereotypes themselves.** Muñoz argues that the work of queer artists of color is political and will remain political as long as the logic of dominant ideology exists. He describes disidentification as a method of survival. Society excludes and tries to silence and erase minority groups who do not fit into the dominant categories of white-normativity and heteronormativity. Disidentifying is a negotiation between worlds. It allows minority groups to survive in a majoritarian world by finding an identity without having to assimilate or reject the cultural mainstream.

Slide 3:

Muñoz wrote the book *Cruising Utopia: the Then and There of Queer Futurity* (2009). Muñoz thought of queerness as a “projection into the future but also as projection of a certain futurity into and onto the present and the past.” He also believed queerness has a spatial dimension, "insofar as it is located in displacement such as virtual chats, disappearing clubs, gentrified neighborhoods and venues, to name a few.”

Slide 4:

Muñoz developed many other concepts that were revolutionary for their time. Muñoz theorized “chusma” as a form of behavior that is in excess of normative expectations. Chusma can be defined as "a form of behavior that refuses bourgeois

comportment and suggests Latinos should not be too black, too poor, or too sexual, among other characteristics that exceed normativity."

Slide 5:

Muñoz defined counterpublics as "communities and relational chains of resistance that contest the dominant public sphere." He believed that counterpublics have the capacity of world-making through a series of cultural performances that disidentify with the normative scripts of whiteness, heteronormativity, and misogyny.

Slide 6:

Muñoz first introduced his concept of ephemera as evidence in the 1996 issue of *Women & Performance: A Journal of Feminist Theory*. The idea that performance is ephemeral is essential to the field of performance studies. Muñoz believed that "queerness has not been able to exist as 'visible evidence' rather it has had to exist in fleeting moments. Thus, queer performances stand as evidence of queer possibilities and queer worldmaking." He suggested that live performance exists ephemerally but without completely disappearing after it vanishes.

Slide 7:

Questions for the class.