Towards A Queer Politics of Pride

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Abstract
Most critical analyses of pride festivals and parades use ‘strong’ theories of the social to link the harmful structural effects of these events (gentrification, depoliticization, and corporatization) to various systems and processes of oppression (neoliberalism, settler colonialism, cosmopolitanism). This paper takes a different approach to pride parades and festivals then those currently offered in critical theory. Turing to ‘weak’ theories of the social this paper aims at mapping the affective topographies of pride. The concepts of the scene, affect, and the emerging event, are mobilized in order to shift the theoretical register and to consider other planes and scales, which it argues, allows us to think more complexly about pride. This emerging event is more than structure; it is the place where the circulation of public affects produces complicated relationships that involve multiplicities, contradiction, and ambivalence. The paper considers whether Lauren Berlant’s relation of cruel optimism best captures queer people’s investment in the promise of pride to be something otherwise, or perhaps to be a truly queer event. The paper ultimately argues that ambivalence is not only a coping mechanism for critical queers to deal with the pressing forces of the past and emerging present, but is also a potentially valuable tool for identifying some of the limits of critical theory. Its goal is to reposition pleasure, desire, and hope as properly political concepts—concepts that critical theorists who are seeking to understand the dynamics and uneven workings of the social must continually grapple with in their striving towards a more ethical and humane world.

Introduction
In the last few decades, feminist and queer scholarship has been documenting the operations of the ‘pink’ economy of the gay dollar. Calling for radical social and political change this scholarship has drawn attention to the complicity of the pink dollar in maintaining and participating in structures of oppression. These critiques have provided us with a new vocabulary (ie. homonormativity and homonationalism) to describe a number of social, political, economic, and cultural shifts occurring in queer communities. These theoretical concepts and frameworks have been mobilized in critical queer communities, inspiring many political queer activists to rally against these “bad” homonormative and homonational processes. Recently, mega pride parades have been
increasingly coming under scrutiny in critical queer communities. Scholars have demonstrated some of the inequitable practices of these mega pride events, including the gentrification of queer space, the transnational mobility of white gay capital, the corporatization and depoliticization of pride parades, and the neocolonial fantasies of gay tourist imaginaries.

This manifesto takes a different approach to pride then those often offered in critical theory. Utilizing weak theories of the social it aims at mapping the affective topographies of WP. In doing so, the manifesto situates itself in what some scholars have termed “the affective turn” in queer theory. This manifesto will mobilize the theoretical frameworks of the scholars enacting this turn in order to explore the affective investments that queers have in systems and structures of power. This will enable a less totalizing reading of pride that makes space for feelings of attachment, ambivalence, and contradiction by positioning queer subjects as complicated humans who often take pleasure in the systems and events that both oppress and liberate them. This manifesto seeks to cultivate a queer politic that enables feelings of love, pleasure, and desire to exist alongside feelings of disgust, hatred, and contempt. In doing so, it posits that privileged queer subjects must come to terms with their emotional investments in oppressive structures like pride before, or as, they critique them.

I am calling this piece a manifesto, but really it is more an assemblage of various modes of writing—self-reflexive, poetic, scholarly, and of course, political. It is less interested in fitting into a particular genre of writing and more interested in addressing a particular audience of scholars and activists in the queer community who identify as ‘critical.’ Brining these members into the conversation, the manifesto tries to convince
this community that criticality does not require that we exclusively focus on the negative. It attempts to open a space, still beholden to critical thinking, where we can begin thinking about, as mentioned above, complicated and contradictory feelings. Ultimately, this manifesto calls for ‘critical’ scholarship to begin seeking out the positive.

Seeking Positive Affects: Speculation, Reparativity, Surprise

Drawing inspiration from Speculate This! this manifesto attempts to open itself to other possible worlds through being receptive to the breakthrough of affect. In Speculate This! the authors argue that firmative speculation seeks to anticipate the future; it produces potentialities, exploits them and then forecloses them. The world operates in this logic of firmative speculation, where the ebbs and flows of capitalism, human bodies, and nature is seen as something that can be predicted, regulated, and controlled, if managed appropriately. Practices of firmative speculation seek to mobilize the unpredictability of current lifeworlds as a way of securing future possible lifeworlds—lifeworlds that are comforting to us as they promise to have a close resemblance to the one we live in now. This type of speculation thereby secures potential futures through the containment of anything otherwise. Affirmative speculation, on the other hand, is the radically open form and practice of seeking the otherwise. Unlike firmative speculation, affirmative speculation does not seek to control and predict the uncertainty of present, or future, times. It embraces change and relies on the faculties of the human, or some would argue organic, sensorial technique of institution to apprehend these possibilities and potentialities. Notice not recognition, apprehension. Practices of affirmative speculation reveal how disparate beings are living-in-commons, or in other words, how all worlds are
in relation and interconnected to one another. To remain open to the Other, the otherwise, and the future, the task of affirmative speculation is to cultivate a living-in-commons that attempts to register the sensations that point towards other possible life worlds. To remain radically open, affirmative speculations never claim to have arrived or to know them yet—hence they do not rely on recognition, but apprehension of the other.

Pride is a site that is often subjected to acts of firmative speculation. While corporations and various other business actors and bodies participate in this practice with complex formulas and algorithms that judge what ads will appear where and what money will fund what, this manifesto is more concerned with what critical scholarship might miss when pride is conceptualized and formulated under the rubric of firmative speculation. These projections often are concerned with how pride in its involvement with oppressive social processes—depoliticization, cosmopolitanism, settler colonialism, etc—will further reify issues of structural oppression—gentrification, neoliberalism, and corporatization. In harmony with Stewart, my reading of pride offered in this manifesto does not deny that the “forces that these systems name are not real or pressing. … Instead, [it is] trying to bring them into view as a scene of immanent force, rather then leave them looking like dead effects imposed on an innocent world” (1). I argue that the indexes used by critical theory to describe and predict the emerging present have constructed a totalized system that does not capture the complexity of the situations people find themselves in. This manifesto sees the distinction between firmative and affirmative speculation as parallel to the distinction between paranoid and reparative reading practices. It is interested moving away from the paranoid to think what a reparative reading practice might offer critical analyses of pride.
In critical theory the paranoid imperative has taken hold as the normative way of reading a text, and I am using text here in the widest sense of the word to refer to reading anything and everything. The paranoid imperative is the demand placed on the critic to be attentive to document how bad things are happening now and imagine how things are always getting worse in order to avoid the pain of being surprised. Paranoia operates under the assumption that if only you knew the horrors of the world you could have anticipated an event happening and thus avoided the pain of being caught off guard, of being surprised when it does occur. Similar to firmative speculation, being a strong theory that seeks to know, paranoia must focus on anticipating the possibility of negative affects in order to protect itself from the pain of bad surprises. In doing so, Sedgwick notes that this “monopolistic strategy of anticipating negative affect can have … the effect of entirely blocking the potentially operative goal of seeking positive affect” (136). Paranoia in its perpetual battle of avoiding bad surprises misses the good ones.

The goal of this paper is to offer to a weak theory of queer people relations to pride, one that refuses to give into the paranoid imperative. According to Sedgwick, reading from a reparative position instead of a paranoid one allows us to be open and actively seek out positive life-affirming affects. A reparative perspective allows us to understand surprises as realistic and necessary experiences. To be opened to being surprised is to “realize that the future may be different than the present” (Sedgwick 146), a view not available to the paranoid skeptic who is actively attempting to anticipate how the terrible present will continue into an even more daunting future. Similar to acts of affirmative speculation, the experience of a surprise can open new ways of imagining relations or affirm existing ones. For example, the breakthrough of affect in the QuAIA
scene that follows surprised me, as it reaffirmed my desire for pride to be a space of and for politics, not just uncritical celebration. Finally, a position open to surprise must also embrace the profoundly painful yet relieving possibility that the past “might have happened differently from the way it actually did” (Sedgwick 146). This revelation humbles us and forces us to assemble the objects found in our past in a way that makes room for the possibility of an other future, hopefully a better one. Thus, in opening ourselves to surprise we make space for the possibility for something otherwise to arrive.

**Surprising Breakthroughs**

*It was the third time I was attending Toronto’s pride parade. I was standing in a sea of queers who were all jammed up against the barricades laid down Yonge Street. I had clear sight lines of the parade due to my tall lanky stature, a luxury not afforded to many bodies. From a young age I had been interested in politics, and since coming out a few years earlier I had taken up an interest in LGBT politics. Pride did not appear to be a venue conducive for politics, as politics tended to fracture and divide, whereas pride was about positivity and celebration. The crowd, as always, was cheerful—dancing to the blasting music, singing along with the TD bar float performers, whistling and clapping for the queer TDSB teachers. And then I noticed a group approaching with a banner that read “Queers Against Israeli Apartheid” (QuAIA). I must have caught a glimpse of the group before others because along with the groups eventual arrival came a sweeping force of energy. Most of the audience went silent; their bodies turned inward, suspended from the cheerful movement they were participating in and experiencing only moments ago. Others bodies were either overcome with the affects of joy or rage. These affects were externalized and channeled into the bodily practice of cheer, from the former group,
and booing from the latter. An energy had broken through, one that appeared to divide rather than unite bodies. After QuAIA was out of the crowd’s sensory range, those around me turned their attention from the bodies ahead of them in the parade to the bodies surrounding them. Wandering judgmental eyes and gossipy whispers ensued for a few minutes until everyone was swept back up into the noise of another float and the scene had ended. The scene was over but I was not over it.

Affect as conceptualized by Brian Massumi is unlimited potential in its raw form and is the source of all life. He writes, “affects are virtual synesthetic perspectives anchored in (functionally limited by) the actually existing, particular things that embody them. The autonomy of affect is its participation in the virtual. Its autonomy is its openness. Affect is autonomous to the degree to which it escapes confinement in the particular body whose vitality, or potential for interaction, it is” (35, original emphasis). Affect is in the virtual realm to the extent that it is intangible and prediscursive; the virtual permits affect to exist as pure and delimited potential. The arrival of emotion occurs when, Massumi argues, an affect is captured—when the infinite potentials of affect are mined out, vis-à-vis the confinement of particular potentials (35). In this passing from the virtual realm into the actual, from affect into emotion, something always escapes. The something that escapes in this movement from the virtual to the actual occurs precisely because the logic of the actual requires the constraining and blocking the dynamic nature of affect. Massumi notes this ironic relationship, one where the “actually existing, structured things live in and through that which escapes them. Their autonomy is the autonomy of affect” (35, my emphasis). Without the escape of affect there is no uncertainty, no possibility for the otherwise, affect is the autonomous force that breathes
life into structure. In other words, there is no life without affect only dead structures filled with lifeless bodies.

When the escape of affect is not completely successful we gain a glimpse of the otherwise, a breakthrough of potential occurs that disrupts structure. Massumi notes that it is “the edge of the virtual, where it leaks into the actual, that counts. For that seeping edge is where potential, actually, is found” (43). This leaking of affect from the virtual to the actual is key to my understanding of the emergence of what I am terming an affective breakthrough. The affective breakthrough is what we are desperately waiting for as it points us towards other worlds—worlds that exist as real possibilities in the realm of virtual but have yet to cross over into the land of structure. Kathleen Stewart in her autoethnography Ordinary Affects is attempting to document how affect intervenes in the social, either opening up new or affirming existing modes of relating to the bodies around us. Stewart defines ordinary affects as “an animate circuit that conducts force and maps connections, routes, and disjunctions. They are a kind of contact zone where the over determinations of circulations, events, conditions, technologies, and flows of power literally take place” (3). Shifting our attention to the moment of an affective breakthrough can enable us to see pride not just as an event that is bound to corporate agendas, but also as an event filled with the potential for life otherwise.

In the context of the scene above I posit that there was a breakthrough of affect that tore at the seams of the collective body, and for just for a few short minutes, gave permission to those bodies to engage in a dialogue. When QuAIA arrived in plain view it opened up new ways of relating and engaging with the queer bodies around me. The potential for pride to be political had broken through. A paranoid reading of this scene
might argue that this instance is not surprising given the racist settler colonial logics that are part and parcel of the neoliberal pride machine—again only able to register negative affects. For the paranoid reader this scene is simply a symptom of the times, but for the reparative reader it is a scene filled with unrecognized potential. I would argue that the breakthrough of affect in this scene provides the surprising and rare possibility to think and feel otherwise. In this moment of thinking and feeling otherwise I was engaging in an act of affirmative speculation: opening myself up to the uncertainty of the present moment in order to imagine what relations committed to queer politics might look like in future iterations of pride. But as critical queers who seek something other than what pride is now, is the rareness of this breakthrough enough to sustain our relation to pride? The next section explores how our relation to pride is one defined by a desire for it to be queer, or at least a site conducive to queer politics.

The Dream of Queer Pride

Assembling themselves into tightly packed quarters, bodies occupy the backroom of the 519 for a talk on pinkwashing queer tourism in and to Israel. Bodies sit on chairs, spread across the hard concrete floor, and line the cinderblock walls. Bodies are touching and connecting, some by choice others by circumstance of limited space. A certain kind of energy is in the air. It hits me hard, though my body feels light, ready to move. The energy is circulating, buzzing around from body to body. Before and after the event: chatter chatter chatter. The noise is more than chatter. I feel it as a buzz, the stuff of life. My body senses potential, it is actively anticipating the emerging event. After the talk is over, this energy pours out into the park next door. Bodies prepare themselves to
carry this energy down the streets of Toronto, towards the intersection of Yonge and Dundas and then Toronto City Hall. These bodies march under the banner of Queers for Social Justice. After arriving at their final destination these bodies take a few minutes to celebrate. They give speeches, howl cheers, and dance to the beat of drums. Then they disassemble in various directions; some head for home while others gravitate towards bars or alternative social venues. Upon arriving home after a long night these bodies fall hard on their respective sleeping surfaces, drained from all the life that had broken through.

In the spring of 2011, QuAIA received a terrible surprise: Toronto city council threatened to cut pride funding if QuAIA marched in the parade. A few councilors, including Rob Ford, claimed that the term “Israeli apartheid” incites hatred towards Jewish people despite an official report released by the city manager, which concluded that the QuAIA did not violate the City’s Anti-Discrimination Policy. Even though Pride Toronto had similar findings in regard to its mandate and permitted QuAIA to march, the group decided to pull out of the parade and host an alternative event. QuAIA has, however, continued to march in the parade in the years following despite more debate and controversy. Given the increasingly depoliticized and corporate nature of Pride Toronto, the controversy surrounding their group, as well as their often poor reception at the parade one might be inclined to wonder what it is that draws the queers within this group back to pride each year?

One answer might be what Lauren Berlant has termed “cruel optimism.” Berlant defines a relation of cruel optimism as existing “when something you desire is actually an obstacle to your flourishing” (1). She argues that all attachments are optimistic, but it is
only when the object “actively impedes the aim that brought you to it initially” (1) that this optimism becomes cruel. Similar to Stewart using the scene to create a contact zone where we can register ordinary affects, Berlant is using the emerging event to think about relations of cruel optimism. She writes,

Yet while sometimes situations organize into world-shifting events or threaten the present with their devastating latency, mostly they do not. How do we learn to process x happening as an emerging event, and how do the conventional genres of the event potentially foreclose the event taking shape otherwise, as genres y and z, which might over as possibilities but end up being bracketed and stored somewhere until repetitions call them back, if ever? (Berlant, 6).

From this framework we can understand that pride makes a promise of a something other each year; we believe that there will be a rupture and that the genres y and z will finally prevail. Berlant argues that this is because “the affective structure of an optimistic attachment involves a sustaining inclination to return to the scene of fantasy that enables you to expect that this time, nearness to this thing will help you or a world to become different in just the right way” (2, original emphasis). Of course for the most part these potential alternative genres never break through the conventional genre, however, the small ruptures that do occur each year, such as Pride Toronto backing QuAIA in 2011, are what give us hope; they are the good surprises.

I posit that it is precisely these ruptures and breakthrough moments that reignite our hope that pride could be a truly queer event, or perhaps the dream that one day we could finally arrive at a queer utopia. Jose Muñoz describes the connection between queerness and utopia as our desire to bring forth a world that is not here yet, to search for
objects and moments that hint at its possible arrival—events like World Pride that are filled with anticipation and promise. He writes, “Queerness is an ideality. Put another way, we are not yet queer. We may never touch queerness, but we can feel it as the warm illumination of a horizon imbued with potentiality” (1). Each year we anticipate the possibility of a queer pride. We gather all of our energy and attempt to push towards this something or somewhere. But we never seem to arrive; we only gain glimpses of this queer utopia in the breakthrough moments. Nevertheless, we remain loyal to pride with the hope that it will one day fully deliver on its promise and will transport us to the queer utopia we have been so desperately desiring all these years.

In the scene that opens this section the bodies are collectively engaged in sensing out Muñoz’s queer horizon—the buzz they feel is the potentiality of the moment. Life otherwise is unfolding before their eyes. But does the glimpse at life otherwise outweigh the oppressive, sometimes even deadly, costs of sustaining this relation of cruel optimism. We now understand that it is the possibility of pride to be a vehicle for and of queer politics that attracts us to it, but what makes this relation worth pursuing once in possession of the knowledge that it may indeed be an obstacle to our flourishing?

In approaching this question Berlant cautions “the closures of [a] symptomatic reading that would turn the objects of cruel optimism into bad and oppressive things and the subjects of cruel optimism into emblematic symptoms of economic, political, and cultural inequity” (15). This often happens in critiques of pride where the structural over-determinations leave little room for the complexities and uncertainties of social life. For example, a paranoid critic might reduce pride to a corporate event that caters to white gay bodies that have access to capital and transnational mobility. Approaching this question
with a reparative reading practice, Berlant asks, “who can bear the loss of the world, [and] what happens when the loss of what’s not working is more unbearable than the having of it, and vice versa” (27). Giving up on the object is more unbearable than the object’s continual failure to deliver its promise because without it we feel like we have no outlet to channel our desire for a better world. As Berlant saliently notes, “the fear is that the loss of the promising object will defeat the capacity to have hope about anything” (24). The breakthrough of affect is what gives us hope, as it confirms our belief that another world exists but has not yet arrived. Our dream of a queer pride is what sustains this relation of cruel optimism. Each year the object offers the same promise to us, it allows us to get a little closer to the different worlds that exist within its realm of potential, it inevitably fails to deliver this alternative world, but still draws us back the next year as we can not resist taking another glimpse of the dream.

Feeling Queer Futures

Pride has ended and I am once again left feeling underwhelmed, if not completely disappointed, at what has transpired over the weeklong event. I curse myself for giving into my desire for pride to be something it is clearly not—a venue conducive to queer politics. Yet, each year I get caught up in the build up to pride. When the New Year arrives and the community hype begins, my body starts anticipating the moment where there might be the potential for affect to breakthrough. Breakthrough moments in the past have left impressions on my body. They resurface and are felt in my body as a kind of memory without content. A bodily state takes hold. By the time I can consciously process what is going on it is too late, my body has already decided, already in motion it has taken pride as a suitable object.
The short vignettes that open and frame each section in this manifesto have attempted to foreground the feelings and movement of the body as something separate from the mind. In doing so, this manifesto has tried to articulate how the body leans and the mind follows, or sometimes is even left completely dumb founded at where the body has arrived. I have argued that the body feels the affective breakthrough and it is this promise of the object, in our case pride, to deliver this feeling of queerness time and again that keeps the body and the social bodies coming back. Each of these affective moments leaves an impression, one that cannot be applied onto a straightforward linear or temporal map of experience. Instead, these impressions are what undergird the body’s movement towards or away from an object. In the context of pride, which I have argued is often a relation of cruel optimism, what is it that allows the body to cope or bear the prospect, and inevitable outcome, that the object will fail to deliver its promise?

The pursuit of this cruel object is worth the pain of its failure to be all that we had hoped and imagined because of the moment of an affective breakthrough. The moment of a breakthrough gives us a glimpse at the potentialities of pride to be something other than what it is now—a taste of the promise, but one not sufficient to avoid disappointment at the end of the week long celebration. Only upon reflection, are we able to identify these breakthrough moments as what Muñoz terms the *then and there of queer futurity*. In this way, to abandon pride would be giving up on the project of queer utopia. And while we admittedly can never claim to have been truly queer, the arrival of queerness still “exists for us an ideality that can be distilled from the past and used to imagine a future” (1). The then and there of these affective breakthroughs points us toward other possible futures, utopian visions that allow us to think and feel beyond what Muñoz says is the “prison
house” of the here and now. It is the affective breakthrough that makes that failure of the object bearable, without them life exists only within the structured confines of the here and now. Put another way, queer people continue to pursue this relation of cruel optimism because it affirms the (im)possibility of life otherwise.

Pride is speculative. Whether that speculation is concerned with firming up existing relations of power or affirming the possibility of new ones pride is an ongoing project concerned with the future. In its aim to seek out positive life-affirming affects this manifesto used a reparative reading practice to understand queer peoples relation to pride. Reparativity attuned us to ways in which pride provides queer people with the hope for a better world. It also permitted us to view pride an event _where life happens_ and unfolds in complicated and messy ways. In doing so, this manifesto inserted the uncertainty of the human body into previously the dead structures of critical understandings of pride. Critical theory needs to quiet the mind and let the body do the talking more often. Feeling the body at pride should be the task of future endeavors seeking to understand what it is that draws queers back year after year. In this manifesto it was the affective breakthrough that grounded us in the experience of the body at pride. Although rare these embodied moments provide a glimpse of the queer utopia we so desperately desire. It is the body which is the gateway to other, possibly queer, worlds.

The body at pride is political—we know this because queer bodies are usually not permitted to take up that much space in our heterosexist world. It is precisely this collection and concentration of queer bodies that makes pride special, and makes it a particularly useful venue when trying to understand what happens when queer bodies arrive, connect, and begin to move together. _Bodies are experienced at pride_. As the self-
reflexive moments in this manifesto illustrate, there is the potential for the “buzz” to circulate, take hold, and resonate both in the individual and collective body. In these rare moments meaningful contact is made, where impressions are left and the possibility of something otherwise is sensed. The experience of all the life at pride is one the body never forgets.

While I have almost exclusively focused on seeking out positive affects in order to counter the dominance of paranoid readings that privilege negative affects, a queer politics of pride must actively think and feel all affective breakthroughs. To only document the positive would be, in a sense, falling prey to the tempting logic of strong theory—the turn away from strong theory and towards weak theory must remain open to all affects. Of course it is tempting to call for either abandonment or celebration of pride based on these negative and positive affective experiences. Berlant was used in this manifesto to complicate readings of pride currently offered in critical theory. Her concept of cruel optimism was particularly useful in pushing us to think about our attachment to and endurance in the promise of the object, as well as to question if we could bear the loss of this object. Approaching pride from this angle opens us up to both the positive and the negative, in effect complicating any claim of fermented political feelings about pride. Here again enters the theory of a queer politics of pride—cruel optimism forces us to acknowledge our complicated and messy feelings about pride. Most importantly, it requires that we embrace a politics of humility, generosity, and ambivalence towards the texts we are so eager to read and unapologetically critique. Put in the simplest way, this manifesto has argued we must turn towards complexity, not away from it. Simply reading
and critiquing the text is no longer sufficient; we must feel it if we seek to gain a more complete understanding of how the social operates.

**Works Cited**


