

From Handover to Leftover: Tatming, Umbrellas, and the Postcolonial Ruins of Hong Kong

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Abstract

In September 2014, thousands of people started occupying different areas of Hong Kong, demanding “true democracy,” ushering in what was known as the “Umbrella Movement.” Two years earlier, Tatming Pair, an influential electronic formation, in a series of concerts, vented their worries, frustrations, and anger over the future of the city, giving voice to a deafening sense of disquiet. This article reads this performance as foreboding these upcoming political protests, attesting to the close alliance between the cultural and the political. It shows how popular music, in word, sound and image, both reflects, as well as impacts on, the city of Hong Kong.

Keywords: Hong Kong, popular music, postcolonial, politics, Umbrella movement, handover, Tatming

Introduction

“We must vacate the here and now for a then and there. Individual transports are insufficient. We need to engage in a collective temporal distortion.”

- José Esteban Muñoz¹

In September 2014, thousands of people started occupying different areas of Hong Kong, demanding “true democracy,” ushering in what was known as the “Umbrella Movement.”² The popular protest might have taken the world by surprise; for us, it presents a logical outcome of a much longer process of postcolonial anxiety. Prior to the Umbrella Movement, Hong Kong’s anxiety was marked by another tumultuous occasion: the rainy Tuesday of 1 July 1997, when Hong Kong was handed over from London to Beijing. Since then, every year on that very same day, Hong Kong citizens have occupied the streets to express their discontent. For example, on July 1, 2012, the 15th anniversary of the handover, more than 400,000 people took to the streets of Hong Kong. Participants shouted slogans and waved banners denouncing increasing official corruption, unaffordable housing, and Beijing intervention in local affairs, as well as urging more democracy and freedom in Hong Kong and in Mainland China.

These issues are not new; nor are they necessarily connected to Beijing rule. For decades, Hong Kong has been a city with serious class and income inequalities, staggering real estate prices, limited respect for cultural heritage sites, and a lack of democracy, to list the most contentious issues. In many ways, Hong Kong is a city that is ruled more by real estate developers and business tycoons than by politicians.³ The handover does, however, mark a crucial point in the history of the city; it propelled a fear of disappearance, a fear that paradoxically stimulated an appearance of a “local” Hong Kong culture in the decades prior to the handover.

In his reflections on the cosmopolitanism of Hong Kong, Ackbar Abbas describes how in the period after the Joint Declaration, something called “Hong Kong culture” appeared. Hong Kong culture “was a hothouse plant that appeared at the moment when something was



Figure 1. The Umbrella Movement in Hong Kong, October 18, 2014

disappearing: a case of love at last sight, a culture of disappearance.”⁴ This disappearance, however, does not signify the end of an appearance. In Hong Kong culture, attention was directed back to the city’s local peculiarities, in order to reinvent the city one last time even as it disappeared. Filmmakers for instance focused on local issues and settings, “but in such a way that the local was dislocated.”⁵ Hence, rather than indicating the end of an appearance, Abbas’ notion of disappearance refers to a different appearance, a “dis-appearance,” i.e., a transformed, dislocated, and disfigured appearance of the city of Hong Kong. And indeed, the city did not disappear after the handover. But the years after witnessed this continuous struggle over the identity of Hong Kong. As Stephen Chu argues, in the post-handover period, Hong Kong’s culture is “lost in transition” as Hong Kong tried to affirm its international visibility and retain its status quo. According to Chu, this struggle is reflected in popular culture.⁶ The struggle is also testified by the yearly July 1 demonstrations, by the Umbrella Movement, and by Hong Kong popular music.

Hong Kong’s struggle gained global attention with the “Umbrella” protests. On August 31, 2014, the Standing Committee of the National People’s Congress (NPCSC) announced its decision on electoral reforms in Hong Kong. Disallowing civil nominations, the NPCSC stated that Beijing would vet candidates for the 2017 Chief Executive elections

in the city before the general public can vote. Following this decision, thousands of students boycotted classes. Feeling deprived of “true democracy,” they protested outside the government headquarters and occupied several major city intersections. As other citizens joined them, a massive protest claimed the streets of Admiralty, Central, Mong Kok, Tsim Sha Tsui, and Causeway Bay. Protestors demanded universal suffrage, the resignation of Chief Executive C.Y. Leung, the withdrawal of the NPCSC’s decision, and a new electoral reform plan that includes civil nominations. The Umbrella Movement lasted until December 15, when the last site was cleared. By then, the protests had outlasted the 1989 occupation of Tiananmen Square, Occupy Wall Street, and Taiwan’s Sunflower Movement of Spring 2014. In February 2016, on the first day of the Lunar New Year, a violent confrontation between police and protesters took place in Mong Kok. It prompted the police to fire shots in the air and led to the arrests of 61 people. Initial blame for the riots was placed on the radical localist group Hong Kong Indigenous. Although they themselves denied taking part in the protests, they suggested that Leung’s leadership style was the root cause behind the radicalism among people who felt frustrated.⁷

The protests contradict the stereotype of Hong Kong as a highly commercialised and depoliticised place. Rather than analysing the protests themselves,⁸ this article explores how popular culture serves as a domain for articulating a sense of discontent with Hong Kong’s political status quo. It constitutes a platform that has inspired the street politics that took over Hong Kong in 2014. We draw on a Gramscian understanding of popular culture as dynamic and political, as a site of constant struggle between the resistance of subordinate groups and the forces of incorporation that operate in the interests of dominant groups.⁹ As John Frow and Meaghan Morris note, popular culture is not an imposed culture, nor a spontaneous oppositional culture of the people, but rather a terrain of negotiation and interaction between the two. It is “a contested and conflictual set of practices of representation bound up with the processes of formation and re-formation of social groups.”¹⁰ The popular cultural field is marked by a struggle to “articulate and disarticulate” specific meanings, ideologies, and politics.¹¹ For us,

popular culture is thus a political practice because it reflects and operates within broader socio-political conditions, transports political ideas that support or contest ideologies, and forms a space where identities are imagined, negotiated, and contested.

In 2012, two years before the Umbrella protests, Tatming Pair, an influential Hong Kong-based electronic music duo, vented their worries and frustrations over the future of the city. Two concerts, entitled “Round and Round and Round,” were initially announced for April. When they sold out almost immediately, two more concerts were added, with equal commercial success.¹² The concerts were lauded with critical acclaim. Calling the concerts “stunning,” two commentators noted that “from social media to newspaper columns, everyone is reading the concerts in their own ways. And what struck a common chord among us is that the songs miraculously correspond to what’s happening now.”¹³ Another columnist referred to the concerts as “the theme song of the city.”¹⁴

Pointing at the concerts’ “almost reckless way” of confronting the “collapses” in Hong Kong, a poet-writer described the “shocked” state in which he remained long after the concerts and concluded: “We don’t want to stay unchanged for 50 years. We must change, for the better.”¹⁵ Tatming fans reacted similarly. Spark’s blog posting was typical of the kind of sentiments invoked by the concerts: “In this city where the principle of ‘one country, two systems’ no longer applies, where white terror and self-censorship reign, such a concert, especially in the mainstream music industry, is so precious.”¹⁶ In their comments on the concerts, Liu and Spark both refer to the promises made in the Sino-British Joint Declaration, which was signed in 1984. This declaration stated that Hong Kong would revert to Chinese rule on July 1, 1997, and the city would become a Special Administrative Region, under the special arrangement of “One Country, Two Systems.” Hong Kong was promised that things would “remain unchanged for 50 years.”¹⁷ These post-concerts writings articulated a sense of empowerment amidst the fear of disappearance.

We therefore shift our eyes and ears from the tumultuous and politically explicit street protests to the aestheticized show of popular sentiments: the 2012 Tatming pop concerts. How does Tatming’s

performance imagine the postcolonial city?¹⁸ How does it negotiate Hong Kong's current socio-historical moment? And what kinds of futures does it fantasise for Hong Kong? Three songs are analysed: "Today Could Have Been a Happy Day," "Tonight the Stars are Bright," and "It's My Party."¹⁹ These three songs present different articulations of temporality, the first reflecting on the colonial history of Hong Kong, the second offering an exaggeration of its present-day predicament, while the third gestures towards the future. These three temporalities are always already implicated in one another. They allow us to study how the constructs of the history, present, and possible futures of the city, are woven into the fibre of the concerts. The songs also occupy a special position in the duo's repertoire; while the former two hit songs have become classics cherished for their sharp insights into pre-handover Hong Kong, the third song is one created specifically for the concerts, for the post-handover Hong Kong of now. As if to underline their significance, they were staged during the concerts with very elaborately designed visual supports.

To analyse these three songs, we conduct a close reading of the song lyrics and a visual analysis of the graphics that were shown on a large screen behind Tatming during the performance.²⁰ Visual analysis takes the image as its primary object of study. It studies "the functions of a world [...] through pictures, images, and visualisations, rather than through texts and words."²¹ As a method, it lays bare how "the visual" constructs and conveys meaning. "The visual" is here always seen as polluted by "the non-visual": by power structures, beliefs, cultural sensibilities, discourses, and ideologies. Visual analysis unpacks these processes, interrogates the image, and shows how the image is a socio-culturally specific construction enmeshed with power. Finally, as Shin, Mori and Ho point out: "East Asia has been an almost forgotten area in the academic study of the popular music of the English-language sphere."²² Focusing on Tatming and the entanglement of Hong Kong and mainland China, this article is part of an on-going project of redressing the underrepresentation of East Asian popular music in international popular music studies.

Hong Kong Pop

Hong Kong's colonial history is embedded in trade and warfare. When the Qing Imperial Court decided to put an end to the influx of opium in China, the British government retaliated with military force. The First Opium War and China's defeat led to the Treaty of Nanking, which ceded the Hong Kong Island to the United Kingdom in 1842. Now a city of 7 million residents, it was then a fishing village of 5-7,000.²³ The Island, however, forms only part of the current geography of Hong Kong. Two decades later, Kowloon was ceded, following defeat in the Second Opium War. It was the third part of Hong Kong, the New Territories, which started the issue of political sovereignty.²⁴ In 1898, the United Kingdom obtained a lease for the New Territories; the lease would last for 99 years, i.e., until July 1, 1997.

In the late 1970s, negotiations started between Beijing and London over the colonial city's future. Its population, hitherto basking in increased economic growth, was jolted by the realization that the status quo was no longer possible. Hong Kong's postcolonial destiny was unique in the sense that it could not declare independence as other British colonies in the area such as Malaysia and Singapore had done. The final decision was agreed between two central governments—a predicament referred to by Rey Chow as “Between Colonizers.”²⁵ The Sino-British Joint Declaration was signed in 1984. Hong Kong would revert to Chinese rule on July 1, 1997, and the city would become a Special Administrative Region.

During the 2014 Umbrella protests, campaigners demanded Beijing to honour its promises of “One Country, Two Systems” and “one person, one vote” for the Chief Executive elections. The unprecedented mobilization in favour of genuine universal suffrage reflects the growing sense of alienation of Hong Kong residents from their government and an increasing anxiety about how long Hong Kongers would be able to maintain their livelihood.²⁶

One year after the signing of the Joint Declaration, Tats Lau and Anthony Wong Yiu-ming formed a duo, and released their debut in 1986 under the name Tatming Pair. In 1990, they parted ways and continued their musical careers as solo artists. Apart from 2012, they also organized

“reunion” concerts in 1996 and 2004. Despite their affiliation to the mainstream label Polygram and their commercial success, Tatming has always been characterized as “alternative” in the local music scene. They were seen as daring in their aesthetics, partly because of their collaboration with the local avant-garde theatre group Zuni Icosahedron. They also articulated responses to a wide array of social and political issues in their music—from nuclear energy, environment, gender and sexuality, to the political future of Hong Kong and the Tiananmen crackdown in China.

In her book on Hong Kong popular culture, Lok Fung devoted a chapter to Tatming’s social consciousness, noting that the sense of uncertainty and melancholia of their music was evocative of living in pre-handover Hong Kong, or what the author calls, “the fin de siècle city.”²⁷ Esther Cheung deploys the term “end of the world” to refer to the feelings of anxiety in Tatming’s music.²⁸ Stephen Chu discusses how Tatming connects to local culture.²⁹ According to Chu, with the commencement of the Sino-British negotiations, songs concerning Hong Kong’s future started to appear and their number increased substantially.³⁰ While Tatming should not be considered the exception in this wave of making politically engaging pop, the duo became exceptional in its persistence in doing so during their occasional reunion projects.

After an extended period of dominance of love songs, in recent years more pop music artists have begun to deliver songs that are more explicitly politically engaged. In the year 2012, for instance, when Tatming staged their reunion concerts, four such songs reached number one on Commercial Radio 2’s 903 chart.³¹ Prior to the 1 July anniversary in 2014, mainstream singer Kay Tse released a song titled “Eggs and Lambs,” which was understood as encouraging local residents not to give up their political yearnings. The independent music scene has been thriving on the resurging political anxiety in the city. In 2009, the indie folk duo My Little Airport released the highly controversial “Donald Tsang [the then Chief Executive of Hong Kong] Please Die.” This shows how the articulation between Hong Kong pop music and politics finds a wider resonance in the city and is not restricted to Tatming only.³²

History: Geopolitics and the Everyday

The song “Today Could Have Been a Happy Day,” originally released in 1988, is drenched in a nostalgia for a past when families and friends still lived in Hong Kong to celebrate Christmas together. That it is Christmas, and not Chinese New Year, already hints at a nostalgia written in colonial times, in 1988, when Hong Kong was on the verge of disappearance. Driven by an anxiety over Hong Kong’s post-handover future, many people migrated. Or, as the lyrics, written by Calvin Poon, go, “Wai-yip is now in the USA, on his own, making many plans, Mary is living in Australia, where it is warm everyday. When I look at our old photos, memories rush back. That particular cozy Christmas Eve reappears.” Consequently, families as well as friends became increasingly dispersed all over the globe, triggering even stronger feelings of anxiety and loneliness among those who stayed behind in Hong Kong. The above-cited lyrics and the song’s title refers to that anxiety. In a city that is on the verge of disappearance, we hear Anthony Wong sing: “Today could have been a happy day. Today could have been a cosy day. As long as we are willing to imagine that we are still together. I look at those old photos, on my own, remembering those years.”

In 2012, the personal narrative of the song is linked to a grander construction of the geopolitical history of Hong Kong. The version of history now inscribed in the song is a version that does not express an anxiety over the handover as such, which, after all, is a *fait accompli*; instead, it articulates an anxiety over the rise of China. This anxiety, furthermore, is linked to a critique of the erstwhile imperialist expansion of the UK. In the opening scene of the video projected onto a huge screen at the back of the stage, the world is caught between two forces—on the one side, that of China, symbolized by the face of Mao Zedong onto which the sign for the Chinese currency, the Yuan, is projected; on the other side, that of Queen Elizabeth, with the English pound sign. Slowly this world is taken over by the English pound, pointing at the imperialist expansion of the UK, and more generally of the West, in the 19th century (Figure 2). Simultaneously, a brief historical account is projected, starting with the First Opium War in 1842. What follows is an abstract overview of numbers and years, in which the rise of China and the changes of Hong

Kong are translated into numbers of people migrating to and from Hong Kong, numbers of babies from the mainland born in Hong Kong, and so on (Figure 3).

The video showed that the population in Hong Kong increased from 1.86 million in 1949 to 5.1 million in 1980, that 300.000 mainland Chinese fled to Hong Kong during the Cultural Revolution, that 10% of its population migrated in the years around the handover and that in 2012, 4.8 million Chinese on the mainland planned to migrate. The constant flow of figures performs the steady global rise of China. At the same time, it shows the rise of Hong Kong and the flows of its people in and out the city since the 1980s. At one particular point, the flag of the United States morphs into the Chinese flag (Figure 4). By the end of the song, Chairman Mao and Queen Elizabeth appear again, but now it is the Chinese Yuan that starts to take over the world (Figure 5).

We are thus presented with an arguably modernist construction of the history of Hong Kong, from imperialism to the (alleged) rise of China. The modernism of this construction is further accentuated

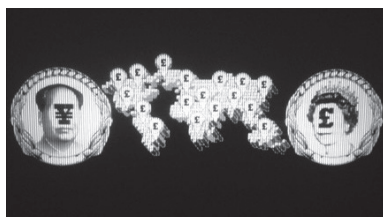


Figure 2. The world as controlled by the British Pound

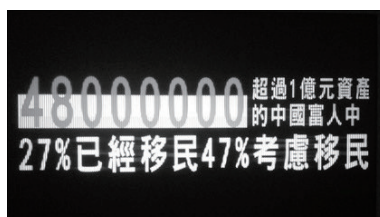


Figure 3. Numbers and flowcharts on the rise of China and the movements of Chinese people

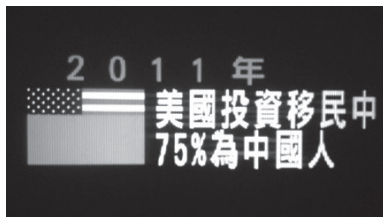


Figure 4. The Chinese flag supplanting the US flag

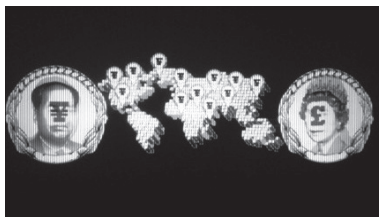


Figure 5. The world as controlled by the Chinese Yuan

through the abundant use of numbers and figures. The numbers project a world in flux, in which fears over the loss of the postcolonial city are reflected. The fears as expressed through numbers are related not only to a global rise of China, but also to the takeover of Hong Kong by China, invoking a fear of Sinification and a fear of losing its impurity. The latter does run the danger of conflating with the increasingly anti-mainlander sentiments that we witness in the past years, resulting at times in violent clashes on the street. This influx does cause real problems for Hong Kong, as Veg remarks, “with over 50 million visitors a year in 2013, comparable to 29 million for a city like Paris, Hong Kong’s infrastructure is stretched to breaking point.”³³ But these infrastructural problems are mapped onto a civilizational discourse in which the mainlander is portrayed as the Other that lacks manners.

What is more interesting than the actual numbers being on display is the juxtaposition of a nostalgic, personal song about migration with crude facts, years, numbers, and flow charts. The history as constructed during the show tells a story of both western colonial aggression and Chinese regional and global expansion. It does so in a modernist, neoliberal, quantitative language, in which people are reduced to numbers and historical changes are projected as flow charts and fancy moving figures. This is a language of global capitalism, in which people are abstracted into numbers, and inequalities are transformed into neat and colourful graphs.

What the audience is confronted with is nostalgic, melancholic musings over lost friendships as vividly as reflections on, and, above all, a *performance* of global geopolitics. In combining the histories of nineteenth century colonial expansion and twenty-first century global Sinification, and translating both to the abstracted *lingua franca* of global capitalism—numbers—the song forges a connection between everyday life and the rise and fall of Empire—be it British or Chinese. It contrasts the global geopolitics with a much smaller, more personal story of loneliness in a time when people are always on the move.

Rather than condemning a century of humiliation and celebrating the subsequent rise of China, “Today could have been a happy day” interrogates any claim on global hegemony and directs our gaze back

to the lived, everyday implications of such geopolitics. The schism between a nostalgic song—nostalgic in its lyrics as well as its sound—and the question of imperialism and expansion not only poses questions concerning the current rise of China, but also refuses to univocally celebrate its colonial past. The nostalgia is as cosy as ambivalent, when situated in the wider context of British imperialism, acknowledging that the Christmas tree is after all a hegemonic object.

The Present: City of Postcolonial Ruins

The song “Tonight the Stars Are Bright,” written by Chan Siu Kee and composed by Tats Lau, was first released in 1987, three years after the signing of the Joint Declaration, at a moment when life in pre-handover Hong Kong was marked by fears of disappearance and feelings of uncertainty, powerlessness, and melancholia. The annual protests on the anniversary of the handover and the Umbrella demonstrations of 2014 show that these narratives are still present in Hong Kong. In what follows, we suggest that in Tatming’s 2012 performance of “Tonight the Stars Are Bright,” these past but persistent (post)colonial narratives of the city are resituated in the present, questioning and (re)constructing the postcolonial city. In doing so, the performance alludes to Walter Benjamin’s idea of history as fragmented.

In the *Passagen-Werk*, Benjamin analyses the arcades of nineteenth century Paris to critique the bourgeois experience and reveal the history hidden under its ideological mask.³⁴ Benjamin’s aim is to “destroy the mythic immediacy of the present, not by inserting it into a cultural continuum that affirms the present as its culmination, but by discovering that constellation of historical origins which has the power to explode history’s continuum.”³⁵ For Benjamin, it is thus dangerous to see the past as a narrative that is whole. Instead, we should see the past as fragmented. Fragments of the past must be resituated within the present.

The first fragment is embodied by the song itself. The song, produced in the late 1980s, inevitably carries traces of that historical moment. In Tatming’s 2012 performance the meanings that the song constructed in the past are rearranged in the present. In the performance, the pre-

handover narrative of the fear of disappearance and the desire to reinvent the city—through which the city ultimately “dis-appears”—is first constructed through its lyrics. The song tells the story of an electrifying nocturnal exploration of Hong Kong. As Tatming sings in the opening lines: “Neon lights have made a bright night, a bright city. Hesitating on the road, we just want to find a new way to go, in this midnight. In the park where the Queen’s statue stands, lights gather. On the other side of the harbour, thousands of lights, beautiful and tragic.” In the song, this encounter with the city is constructed as if it were a passionate encounter with a lover, as Tatming continues: “Following the street lights, she is getting closer to me, no need to ask her name, I just want her to abandon herself, with me, in the starry night.” This encounter is marked by a zealous desire to love and take in the city, coupled to the fear that Hong Kong is disappearing, as Tatming sings: “Dashing through the bright lights are the lost children. Please take a look at this bright city. Dash again, and I wonder, I fear, that the brightness of this city stops, now.” Tatming’s nocturnal venture through Hong Kong is thus an attempt not only to take in, but also to reinvent the city one last time before it disappears.

As suggested earlier, this narrative of the fear of disappearance is still present in postcolonial Hong Kong. Hence, this fragment of the past is (still) part of the construct(ion) of the present and as such defines how the history of the present (city) is written. Tatming’s 2012 performance, however, takes up this narrative of the fear of disappearance and ends it remorselessly. In this endeavour, the performance also imagines taking down two other powerful and dominant narratives underwriting Hong Kong’s present: Chinese capitalist authoritarianism and global neoliberalism. Under British rule, Hong Kong was recognized not simply as a neoliberal capitalist economy, but as one of the freest market economies in the world. The Joint Declaration called for Hong Kong as a Special Administrative Region to retain its capitalist system and a measure of political autonomy for a period of 50 years.³⁶ Today, within this special zone where a private market is endorsed, the Chinese government operates effectively through state enterprises. Major state-owned companies, such as the Bank of China and China Travel Service

have appropriated Hong Kong's free market system to enhance their status as super firms exactly as neoliberals expected them to.³⁷ Global neoliberalism and Chinese capitalist authoritarianism are in effect heavily entangled with each other.

"Tonight the Stars Are Bright" imagines ruining these three narratives through the use of the large video screen behind Tatming. The visuals shown on this screen construct a bipartite tale of the city. At the start of the performance Hong Kong's iconic skyline as seen by night from across Victoria Harbour appears on the screen (Figure 6). Anthony Wong holds up his hand as if to cover his eyes from the city's brightness (Figure 7). The skyscrapers' contours are demarcated by colourful lights that cheerfully start to dance to the song's tunes while lasers beams light up the sky, creating a visual spectacle that resembles Hong Kong's Symphony of Lights show. Simultaneously, with animation effects, the city is flying towards a bright light as stars from a vivid centre-point are passing by at high speed (Figure 8). In this way, an optimistic tale of the city is constructed. This part of the performance must then be read as representing the period before the declaration when Hong Kong's population was enjoying increasing economic growth and self-confidence. What is ignored or downplayed in this imagery are the grave income inequalities that characterise the Hong Kong of past decades.

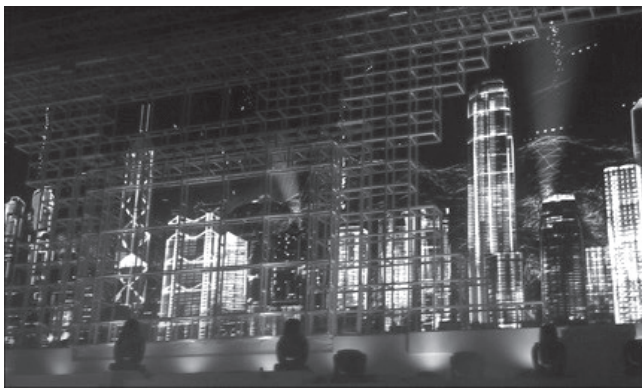


Figure 6. A video screen displaying Hong Kong's skyline (photo by authors, April 21, 2012)



Figure 7. Anthony Wong's pose at the beginning of the performance

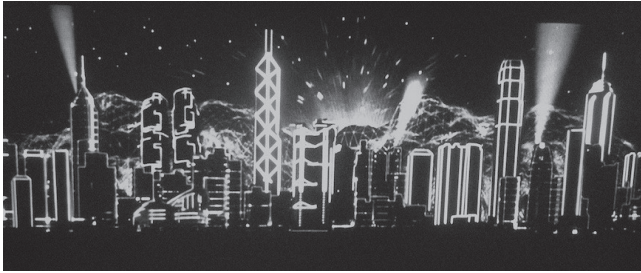


Figure 8. The Backdrop to the Performance

The optimistic tale is challenged, however, by the second half in which Hong Kong turns dystopian. On-screen fireworks start to light up the sky (Figure 9). Although the fireworks seem to add to the celebratory atmosphere, it soon transpires that Hong Kong's skyscrapers are starting, one by one, to collapse (Figure 10). At the end of the performance, the only thing left are the ruins of the city (Figure 11). These leftovers are then blown toward the audience (Figures 12 and 13). It is here that the performance ends the narrative of "the fear of the disappearance of the city"; it finishes this past but persistent narrative by finally letting the city disappear in its totality.



Figure 9. The fireworks light up the dark sky

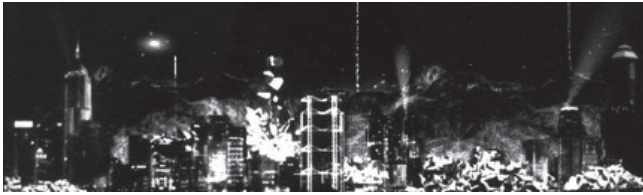


Figure 10. The skyscrapers begin to collapse



Figure 11. The city is left in ruins



Figure 12. And the leftovers start to fragment

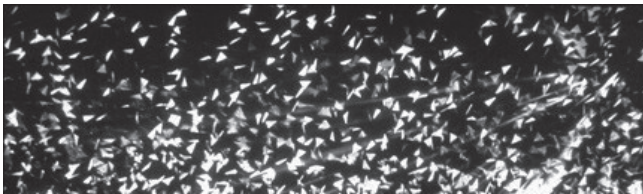


Figure 13. The fragments disappear as they are blown towards the spectators

In the way the city is disappearing the performance manages to dismantle two other “truths” of Hong Kong’s present—global neoliberalism and Chinese capitalist authoritarianism. As Figures 9 to 13 show, it is through the demolition of a myriad of skyscrapers—the ultimate symbols of both “truths”—that postcolonial Hong Kong collapses. What in the end is left over from the handover are the city’s ruins. Although these leftovers point to an apocalyptic end for Hong Kong, they also clear the ground for some new and different beginnings. Tatming’s performance (re)constructs the history of Hong Kong. This history starts in optimistic pre-declaration Hong Kong, moves to an anxious pre-handover Hong Kong, and ends in a present dystopian postcolonial city. At the same time, the performance shatters this history; it ruins three powerful (post)colonial narratives that are part of the construct(ion) of Hong Kong’s present. The result of their decay is a fragmented history and a precarious present of Hong Kong, which opens up the possibility for the performance to fantasise more histories and different futures for the postcolonial city.

The Future: It’s My Party

It is this insistence on the possibility of more histories and futures, that Tatming iterates when Anthony Wong sings, repeatedly, the last couplet of another song: “Dust from the past is yet to settle, we must continue our party/For years and months, I dance what I dance, it’s called life.” If Hong Kong has become a dystopian postcolonial city, Tatming’s concert sends out not so much a call to arms, but a call to feet: the utopian act in town is to party, to dance in this landscape of ruins. Composed by Tats Lau and lyrics written by co-author Chow Yiu Fai, “It’s My Party” is the only single Tatming released before the concerts were staged. While major parts of the lyrics are written in Cantonese Chinese, the title is in English and whenever the same line appears in the song, it is also performed in English. Playing on the double meaning of the English word “party,” the performance cues us to the politics and poetics of partying in Hong Kong’s current historical juncture. For all the enactments of the festive and the subversive in this popular performance,

Mikhail Bakhtin's understanding of one particular manifestation of folk culture is helpful: the carnival.³⁸

In *Rabelais and His World*, Bakhtin connects Rabelais' Renaissance novels to the attitude toward laughter in the Middle Ages—laughter as therapeutic power and as freedom of speech and freedom of spirit.³⁹ Tracking this medieval tradition of folk humour, Bakhtin conceptualizes the carnival and the carnivalesque literature as means to create a world-upside-down where everyday hierarchies and official truths are, albeit temporarily, mocked, disrupted, and overturned by an eruption of laughter, of fun, of voices, of energy normally contained by fear and authority.⁴⁰ As a form of resistance admittedly licensed by that very fear and authority, the carnival actualizes, according to Bakhtin, “a victory of laughter over fear [...] a defeat of divine and human power, of authoritarian commandments and prohibitions, of death and punishment after death.”⁴¹

Bakhtin's work must be read in dialogue with the specific circumstances of his time. Bakhtin was writing in Stalin's Russia where authoritarian commandments and prohibitions were imposed on writers. The satiric genres of fun and laughter were particularly rejected. In other words, if Rabelais' novels enact the medieval carnival to initiate a power struggle with the state and the church, Bakhtin's study of Rabelais is doing nothing less. As formulated by Michael Holquist, “Bakhtin, like Rabelais, explores throughout his book the interface between a stasis imposed from above and a desire for change from below, between old and new, official and unofficial.”⁴²

Like Bakhtin's writing on Rabelais, Tatming's concerts took place precisely in this interface between above and below, between heightened national control from Beijing and intensified local, popular longing to break free.⁴³ Mobilising the global form of entertainment called partying—note the use of the global tongue of English in the song—the Tatming concerts evoked, in Bakhtin's terminology, a generally popular-festive atmosphere, during which the performance of “It's My Party” was one of the loudest and queerest proclamations of laughter and freedom. In the song's opening couplets, Tatming sings: “The mad makes a date with the mute. To take over the mission of the entire city. You dance a

striptease, I dance naked. Come come come, let's shout once more what we shouted then. [...] Join the party with a different biography. You wear the costume of the big bird, I that of a rabbit. Let the grown-ups take control of all the beasts, but youth belongs to me." Semantically, the song is thus a call to join the party—"Come come come"—and those who are called may be socially undesirable or morally dubious, but they share one thing in common: they are not the "grown-ups" who would spend their time and energy to control "the beasts." Those who party are the young ones who would rather be beasts themselves, by wearing animal costumes or dancing naked. Or, they are "fairies" who look for each other to "continue the revolution," as Tatming continues: "We continue to look for fairies to continue our revolution. Simply because we want to be happy. Jump into the empty city, and the streets will promise." If the Beijing regime that seeks to intensify its control over the postcolonial city is a fact, the dancing party interrupts with a fantasy; if their identity is increasingly a top-down campaign, the party is a bottom-up invention of the people, of self-determination.

On stage we saw Anthony Wong and Tats Lau dressed in outlandish silver outfits with protrusions from their back resembling broken wings or multiple legs. Their eyes were adorned with large oval-shaped patches of heavy black mascara (Figure 14). Such travesty is an indispensable element of the feast of fools described by Bakhtin. "The renewal of clothes and of social image," is intimately connected to 'a reversal of hierarchical levels' where jesters are proclaimed kings and clowns elected abbots.⁴⁴

Such an interruption of authority is not only semantic, sartorial, and symbolic; freedom is actualized, on at least two levels: freedom of speech and freedom of spirit. First, freedom of speech. During the entire performance of "It's My Party," short messages were projected behind the duo. Written in a satirical manner, these



Figure 14. Anthony Wong in costume

messages poked fun at institutions and persons in power, including political parties (“Communist Party, how are you?”), leaders (“Is C.Y. Leung a comrade?”—Leung was widely perceived as a puppet leader installed by the Beijing authorities), God (“God loves Hong Kong”—a sarcastic gesture to the colonial anthem “God Saves the Queen,” and a grim reference to the increasing influence of certain fundamental Christian faiths in the city), and Tatming themselves (“God loves Tats Lau”—Tats is a self-proclaimed Christian). While the Chinese characters continued flashing in red and white, what they were articulating became less spectacular than the performance of the very possibility of doing so. In the fifteenth year of the handover, the postcolonial city was increasingly concerned about losing its freedoms, and increasingly fearful of Beijing’s influence and intervention in local affairs. But there, despite all these doubts and fears, in demonstratively huge messages spanning the whole breadth of the stage like an electronic banner, Tatming and their fellow Hong Kong people were still able to express themselves, to assert once again the freedom of speech they were used to and guaranteed under the “one country two systems” principle (Figure 15).



Figure 15. “God loves Hong Kong”

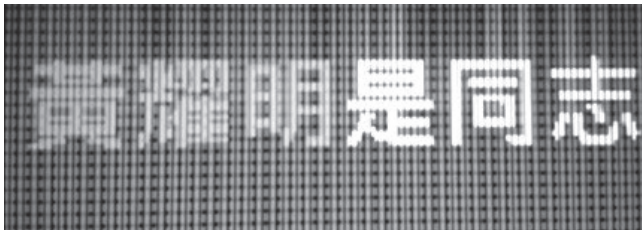


Figure 16. “Anthony Wong is tongzhi”

Second, freedom of spirit. A party will never truly become a party if it is not a collective and collaborative affair. While Tatming was performing and the messages were flashing, the audience cheered and clapped their hands. Among the messages that elicited the loudest response was: “Is Anthony Wong a comrade?” (Figure 16). Given the Communist deployment of the term “comrade,” this is a question about the performer’s allegiance to the Beijing regime, a question constantly posed to the local population ever since the Handover in 1997. Next to its Communist deployment, the Chinese word “comrade” has long been appropriated by the gay population to refer to themselves. The message was a queer allusion to Anthony’s political and personal connection with something revolutionary, subversive, but not exactly of the Communist kind. Although gay practices are legal in Hong Kong, society remains by and large hostile towards homosexuality. The audience, aware of the rumours, if not anticipation of Anthony’s homosexuality, obviously enjoyed it; they applauded in high spirits. During the final concert, Anthony Wong came out. It was hardly coincidental that Helene Iswolsky actually used the English word “gay” in her translation of Bakhtin’s carnivalesque: for instance “gay parody of truth.”⁴⁵ In a party, everyone should be gay, should be a comrade, should be joining a revolution to laugh at the authoritarian voice and set their spirits free—like the beasts or fairies.

The performance of “It’s My Party” constituted the quintessential carnivalesque moment, when those who answered the call and stood up to dance, to party, experienced themselves in a collectivity that defied the dominant boundaries of the powerful and the powerless, above and below, national and local. At that moment in the Hong Kong Coliseum they were ready to “take over the mission of the entire city” and occupy the Central District (where the Hong Kong administration is), the Western District (where the Beijing representative office is), and wherever else they want, as Tatming sings in the third couplet: “Central district is mine, Western district is mine. They are all mine, they are all I want.” It was during the party, as in the medieval feast, that “[f]or a short time life came out of its usual, legalized and consecrated furrows and entered the sphere of utopian freedom.”⁴⁶ Such freedom, however

ephemeral, was actualized and experienced by all those partying in the Coliseum; it was possible now and it must still be possible in the future. To paraphrase Holquist, Tatming's performance "carnivalizes the present because it is a hope for the future."⁴⁷

Ruminating On the Ruins: Tatming's Postcolonial Urban Politics

In *The Future as Cultural Fact*, Arjun Appadurai moves from seeing the social world as an informational space towards a more pressing concern with time.⁴⁸ Appadurai's book, and also our analysis, can be seen as replying to Jane Guyer's call for an anthropology of the futures that people posit, fantasize, fear, await, or dissolve.⁴⁹ Appadurai puts an "ethics of possibility" in stark contrast with an "ethics of probability". In the former, a diversity of collective goods is imagined. The latter is the ethic of the contemporary financialized economy and its impulse is instead to control and manage risks. Both ethics work simultaneously in popular culture. On the one hand, popular cultural products give way to an ethics of possibility, providing tools to imagine, fantasize, and stimulate the coming into being of a desired future for Hong Kong. On the other hand, these constructions are never free from relations of power. They are subject to an "ethics of probability," which works to diminish risks and which seeks to control what kinds of future are envisioned as right and wrong.

Tatming's performance demonstrates how popular culture gives way to an "ethics of possibility."⁵⁰ But in their performance of numbers about the rise of China (in "Today Could Have Been a Happy Day") and the influx of mainlanders coming to Hong Kong, in their quite uncritical celebration of the economic prosperity of Hong Kong before the handover (in "Tonight the Stars are Bright"), they also articulate an ethics of probability. They do so by mobilizing numbers, graphs, and ideas of growth and prosperity, presenting the influx of mainlanders as a risk, a flow that demands control. This not only attests to popular culture's alliance with power; it also runs the danger of siding uncomfortably with rising anti-mainlander sentiments that characterize today's Hong Kong.

The queerness of Tatming and the performance puts into sharper

relief their articulation of an ethics of possibility. It is a queerness that resembles that of the Pet Shop Boys, with fluid gender and sexuality performances, spectacular visual aesthetics and a continuous change of costumes. Following José Esteban Muñoz, such performances and aesthetics gesture towards a potentiality, a utopian longing.⁵¹ In his words, “we may never touch queerness, but we can feel it as the warm illumination of a horizon imbued with potentiality. We have never been queer, yet queerness exists for us as an ideality that can be distilled from the past and used to imagine a future.”⁵² When Tatming celebrates the banality of the everyday in “Today Could Have Been a Happy Day,” when they cheerfully turn the city into ruins in ‘Tonight the Stars are Bright’ and end up with a call to party beyond the regulations set by the Party, what they do is, to paraphrase Muñoz, “dreaming and enacting better pleasures, other ways of being in the world, and ultimately [imagining] new worlds.”⁵³

The queer aesthetic “frequently contains blueprints and schemata of a forward-dawning futurity.”⁵⁴ The performance of “It’s My Party” and the politics of Tatming were not only symbolic. During the concert, authority was interrupted and freedom of speech and freedom of spirit were momentarily actualised. Two years after the concerts, this potentiality transformed, if not exploded, into a carnivalesque street protest, when students, workers, and older Hong Kong citizens took over the streets. Their claim is a claim to the right of the city, of its present and above all its future. In its aesthetics with yellow umbrellas, protest songs, and street lectures, in its cheerful atmosphere, it is as if Tatming’s call for a party has been heard widely. Anthony Wong became one of the important public figures of the Umbrella Movement. Together with Denise Ho and other pop stars, he recorded a protest song (lyrics written by Pan & Lin Xi) titled “Holding up an Umbrella.” His scheduled performances in the mainland have since been cancelled. Meanwhile he sings:

Together holding up an umbrella,
Bravely fighting for what should be ours
Are you afraid?
Whatever violent rain may fall

Our determination will not fade
 Umbrellas are like flowers
 They neither wither nor disappear.

Notes

¹ José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York and London: New York University Press, 2009), 185.

² The term was inspired by protesters using umbrellas against police pepper spray and later tear gas.

³ Alice Poon, *Land and the Ruling Class in Hong Kong* (Hong Kong, People's Republic of China: Enrich Professional Publishing, 2010).

⁴ Ackbar Abbas, "Cosmopolitan De-Descriptions: Shanghai and Hong Kong," *Public Culture* 12, no. 2 (2000): 769-86.

⁵ Ibid., 777-78.

⁶ Stephen Yiu-wai Chow, *Lost in Transition: Hong Kong Culture in the Age of China* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2013), 15.

⁷ Stuart Lau, Danny Lee, Joyce Ng, Clifford Lo, Nikki Sun, and Chris Lau, "Shots Fired and Bricks Thrown: Hong Kong Tense after Mong Kok Mob Violence on First Day of Lunar New Year," *South China Morning Post*, February 9, 2016, accessed February 26, 2016, <http://www.scmp.com/news/hong-kong/law-crime/article/1910845/shots-fired-and-bricks-thrown-hong-kong-tense-after-mong>.

⁸ See Sebastian Veg, "Legalistic and Utopian-Hong Kong's Umbrella Movement," *New Left Review* 92, no. March-April (2015): 55-73, and the special issue (no. 4, 2015) of the *Chinese Journal of Communication*.

⁹ Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci* (New York: International Publishers, 1971).

¹⁰ John Frow and Meaghan Morris, "Australian Cultural Studies," in *What is Cultural Studies: A Reader*, ed. John Storey (London & New York: Arnold, 1996), 356.

¹¹ Chantal Mouffe, "Hegemony and Ideology in Gramsci," *Culture, Ideology, and Social Process*, ed. Tony Bennett, Graham Martin, Colin Mercer, and Janet Woollacott (Milton Keynes: Open University Press, 1981), 231.

¹² Subsequently, the organizer announced two more concerts. Another concert was held a year later in Guangzhou, China. This article, however, is based on the first series of concerts.

¹³ K. Au and K. Ho, "TATMING CONCERT SUBSEQUENCE." [達明演唱會後續]. *Hong Kong Economic Journal*, May 8, 2012.

¹⁴ Wai Sze Leung, "Tatming Party: There Comes the Theme Song of a City" [達明—

派對：一座城市的主題曲飄然奏起], *Wenweipo* [文匯報], May 18, 2012, A30.

¹⁵ Liu, 2012.

¹⁶ Spark, 2012.

¹⁷ *Sino-British Joint Declaration* (1984), accessed July 15, 2015, http://english.gov.cn/200706/14/content_649468.htm.

¹⁸ It is surely not our intention to dichotomize or hierarchize street protests and stage performances as forms of politics. In fact, it will be interesting but beyond the scope of this inquiry, to examine their imbrications. For our purposes here, we just want to take note of two points. First, despite their highly political contents and popularity, Tatming's songs are seldom used during street protests, quite unlike their contemporary rock band Beyond, whose number 'Under the Vast Sky' is frequently mobilized, also during the Umbrella Movement; see Jonathan Wong, "Music of the Umbrella Revolution," Hong Kong Stories, accessed July 15, 2016, <http://hkstories.jmsc.hku.hk/2014/11/27/music-of-the-umbrella-revolution/>. Second, while Tatming's physical and musical presence is largely missing in street protests, Anthony Wong, the other half of Tatming and in his capacity as solo pop artist, has become increasingly involved in public rallies. He did not only participate, but was also instrumental in creating a 'theme song' for the Umbrella Movement; see Wong, "Music of the Umbrella Revolution."

¹⁹ All Chinese texts were translated to English by the authors.

²⁰ Nicholas Mirzoeff, *An Introduction to Visual Culture* (London: Taylor & Francis, 1999).

²¹ *Ibid.*, 8.

²² Hyunjoon Shin, Yoshitaka Mori, and Tunghung Ho, "Introduction: Special Issue—East Asian Popular Music and Its (Dis)Contents," *Popular Music* 32, no. 1 (2013): 1-5.

²³ Linda Pomerantz-Zhang, *Wu Tingfang (1842–1922): Reform and Modernization in Modern Chinese History* (Hong Kong, People's Republic of China: Hong Kong University Press, 1992), 8.

²⁴ Kowloon and the New Territories, a peninsula across the harbour from the Hong Kong Island, are geographically attached to the Chinese mainland.

²⁵ Rey Chow, "Between Colonizers: Hong Kong's Postcolonial Self-Writing in the 1990s," *Diaspora* 2, no. 2 (1992): 151-70.

²⁶ Nicholas Bequelin, "What's Wrong with Hong Kong," *Foreign Policy*, September 19, 2014, accessed September 22, 2014, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2014/09/19/whats-wrong-with-hong-kong/>.

²⁷ Fung Lok, *The Fin de Siecle City: A Study of Hong Kong Pop Lyrics* (Hong Kong, People's Republic of China: Oxford University Press, 1995).

²⁸ Esther M. K. Cheung, "The Return Trip: Sentiments of Home and Nation in Hong Kong Pop Music Since the 1980s" [回歸之旅：八十年代以來香港流行曲中的家國情], in *The Practice of Affect: Studies in Hong Kong Popular Song Lyrics*. [情感的實踐：香港流

行歌詞研究], ed. Stephen C.K. Chan (Hong Kong, People's Republic of China: Oxford University Press, 1997). 45-74.

²⁹ Stephen Yiu-wai Chow, *The Days of Glory: A Study of Hong Kong Popular Bands/Groups (1984-1990)*. [光輝歲月：香港流行樂隊組合研究] (Hong Kong, People's Republic of China: Infolink Publishing, 2000).

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 238.

³¹ CR2's 903 chart, based entirely on airplays, is generally considered the most reliable chart in Hong Kong. The four number 1 songs were "Occupy," "Companion," "Red, Black, Red, Red, Black," and "First Row." While the first song was inspired by the Occupy Movement, the other three were primarily calls to the "people" to unite and stand up. Tatming's own reached the highest position of number 2.

³² For more systemic and historical examinations on the intersections between pop music and politics in Hong Kong, see Wai-Chung Ho, "The Political Meaning of Hong Kong Popular Music: A Review of Sociopolitical Relations between Hong Kong and the People's Republic of China Since the 1980s," *Popular Music* 19, no. 3 (2000): 341-53; Bryce T. McIntyre, Christine Wai Sum Cheng, and Zhang Weiyu, "Cantopop: The Voice of Hong Kong," *Journal of Asian Pacific Communication* 12, no. 2 (2002): 217-43; Yiu Fai Chow, "Me and the Dragon: A Lyrical Engagement with the Politics of Chineseness," *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies* 10, no. 4 (2009): 544-64; Stephen Yiu-wai Chow, *Lost in Transition: Hong Kong Culture in the Age of China* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2013).

³³ Veg, "Legalistic and Utopian-Hong Kong's Umbrella Movement," 68.

³⁴ Walter Benjamin. *The Arcades Project*, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999 [1982]).

³⁵ Susan Buck-Morrs, *The Dialectics of Seeing: Walter Benjamin and the Arcades Project* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1989), 10.

³⁶ Hai Ren, *Neoliberalism and Culture in China and Hong Kong: The Countdown of Time* (London: Routledge, 2010), 5.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 15.

³⁸ Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rebelais and His World* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984).

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ Peter Stallybass and Allon White, *The Politics and Poetic of Transgression* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1986).

⁴¹ Bakhtin, *Rebelais and His World*, 90-91.

⁴² Michael Holquist, prologue to *Rebelais and His World*, xvi.

⁴³ A quick search over the political news in Hong Kong during the months before the concerts would suffice to indicate the kind of jittery state the city has been going through. For instance, in March 2012 an essay penned by a veteran political commentator Lau Yui-siu was found to be doctored and its stance changed to be supportive of the government. Lau protested

and shortly his column was scrapped. This incident took place when the local government was accused of appeasing Beijing and rushing through a new legislation ostensibly in protection of copyrights but widely seen as undermining local people's possibilities of running political commentaries not to the liking of the authorities. Earlier on, alarm over Hong Kong's long cherished freedom of speech and of news was raised when two critical talk shows of Radio Television Hong Kong were "re-organized." This unanticipated change took place just months after Tang Yan-kwong was appointed to head the government-funded but traditionally independent media organization. An administrative officer himself, Tang's appointment was widely perceived as another step Beijing took to tighten its control over RTHK.

⁴⁴ Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, 81.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 95.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 89.

⁴⁷ Ibid., xxii.

⁴⁸ Arjun Appadurai, *The Future as Cultural Fact: Essays on the Global Condition* (New York: Verso, 2013).

⁴⁹ Jane I. Guyer, "Prophecy and the Near Future: Thoughts on Macroeconomic, Evangelical, and Punctuated Time," *American Ethnologist* 34, no. 3 (2007): 410.

⁵⁰ Appadurai, *The Future as Cultural Fact*, 188.

⁵¹ Muñoz quite likely would have disagreed with Appadurai using the term possibility, as in his view, drawing on Agamben, "unlike a possibility, a thing that simply might happen, a potentiality is a certain mode of nonbeing that is eminent, a thing that is present but not actually existing in the present tense."; see Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*, 9.

⁵² Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 1.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Ibid.