

José Esteban Muñoz's *The Sense of Brown* (2020)

Review

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José Esteban Muñoz was working on what would become *The Sense of Brown* (2020) when he died in 2013. Muñoz, an academic, writer, Cuban American and queer, published *Disidentifications* (1999) and *Cruising Utopia* (2009) during his lifetime. He campaigned for a queer aesthetics that pivoted from the affective position of the minoritarian subject. In *Cruising Utopia*, Muñoz blended personal essay and teen memoir with a loving analysis of queer artists, musicians, and thinkers and/or artists, musicians, and thinkers of colour. The theory Muñoz expounded ran counter to Lee Edelman's queer death drive as elaborated in *No Future* (2004), which posits the queer as a destructive, individualistic foil to heteronormative ideals of reproduction. By contrast, Muñoz and others in his vein campaigned for an affect-led aesthetics that draws on the expansive possibilities of being and feeling queer, a necessarily unquantifiable term.

Muñoz returned to the unquantifiable in *The Sense of Brown*. His affective analysis builds to a crescendo in the idea of a Brown Commons, a space of shared insight and experiential power that emanates from minoritarian subjecthood and is cultivated in the performance work of artists who share a 'sense of brown'. A commons, unlike Edelman's semantic and theoretical nexus, exists in buildings, on peers, under rafters, in theatres, and is a sign of creative and collective wrangling and flourishing. In short: of work.

Though the majority of artworks studied in *The Sense of Brown* are made by artists of Latinidad descent, Muñoz's Brown Commons also includes African American, Chinese, South Asian, and East Asian identities. Throughout the book, terms like 'Hispanic' are referenced and problematised. Muñoz disliked the nominal grouping 'Latinidad' and was personally dissatisfied with the more recent effort 'Latin@'. (At the time of his writing, the gender neutral 'Latinx' had not yet gained traction.) The book unsettles dominant naming cultures and forces the white reader to resist easy markers of identity. This goes for ideas of what performance work is too. In the chapter 'Wise Latinas', Muñoz examines the US Supreme Court Justice Sonia Sotomayor alongside more traditional conceptions of performance. Muñoz sees Sotomayor as performing a brown politics of refusal in her address. He instrumentalises Andy Warhol's short film *Mario Banana* (1964) to portray how femmes of colour have played the white gaze by appearing to read from the script while actually gesturally dismantling the versions of themselves that are being projected onto them.

Muñoz outlined a precursor to this idea of critical performance-entropy in *Cruising Utopia*, in which he situated the truly radical performance work in the parking lot of the club, not on the stage. Or rather, the dangerous, transgressive, faggy 'punk' happenings of his youth would take place in cars and bathrooms, and only sometimes on the stage (2009: 97). The stage was the addendum – or the parking lot to the parking lot, and that week's brown punk band were part of a larger ongoing, overlapping performance. The billed performers were equilateral actors in the shifting night commons, in which the queer audience also operated. In other words: Muñoz is a fan.

I'd like to focus on a chapter in *The Sense of Brown* in which Muñoz returns to one of his perennial obsessions – queer people of colour club culture – and continues his engagement with punk and underground performance. 'Feeling brown: ethnicity and affect in Ricardo Bracho's *The Sweetest Hangover (and Other STDs)*' was written in 1998 concomitantly with Muñoz's work on *Cruising Utopia*, and is useful in lensing the continuing struggles that minoritarian subjects (trans and non-binary people, people of colour) face. The Bracho play analysed is set in a club called Azlantis and features a roster of fabulously named characters, including Miss Thing 1 and Miss Thing 2, a duo who talk in rhyme and whose names are a mash-up of the Dr Seuss characters and the Black trans femme honorific 'miss thing'. For Muñoz, "Nightlife is a zone where the affective dominance of white normativity is weakened" (17). Azlantis is the stage for a type of Brown Commons populated by "different kinds of people of colour" who are not exclusively

Latinx, which suggests to Muñoz that “traditional identitarian logics of group formation and social cohesion are giving way to new models of relationality and interconnectedness” (17).

Norma Alarcón’s theory of ‘identity in difference’ is fundamental to Muñoz’s project throughout the book. Her work enables Muñoz to critically collage a sense of brown: the idea that brownness represents the way ethnicity is performed, and a move away from ethnicity as something we are and towards ethnicity as something *we do*. In this way, different ethnicities can be brown without shifting focus from their individual positionalities. “Asian can potentially be [brown]”, says Muñoz. “Not in a way that inhabits our thinking of a critical Asianness or even a yellowness; but a brownness that is a co-presence with other modes of difference, a choreography of singularities that touch and contact but do not meld” (xxx). Ethnicity as not fixed but rather performed makes sense to me in terms of Muñoz’s interest in theatre and performance. Both are areas that are historically complex and difficult to archive without the intervention of affect, or the affective register of a critic. The live performance is irreplicable. The heart of Muñoz’s project is the formation of an affective archive of the un-shareable.

Muñoz wants the reader to understand that the world is fundamentally brown and painted white. He sees that people of colour encounter more blockages in a society where the normative affect of whiteness is suffocating. Muñoz defines this white affect as a lack that has erroneously coded brownness as an excess. At this juncture, it is worth defining what Muñoz means by ‘chusma’, an important word in the lexicon of the text. “Chusma,” he notes, “operates as a barely veiled racial slur suggesting that one is too black” (xxi). ‘Chusmeria’ refers to people and behaviour that “*refuses* standards of bourgeois comportment” (xxi). In the performance works Muñoz studies, chusma is channelled and the brownness of the world bursts forth as bedrock, as something that is already there (an unresolved thread in Muñoz’s discussion of chusma is whether the Black root goes potentially uncited if Blackness is absorbed – albeit distinctly – into brownness). The characters in Bracho’s play, for example, “are unable to map themselves onto a white and heterosexually normative narrative of the world” (17) and crucially refuse the diktat that recognises normativity as aspirational.

Flicking between stations in my girlfriend’s car recently I heard – through the crackle of white noise – a song making its parts known. A voice was orating over a beat. “Rock ’n’ roll,” they were saying, “is a spirit that carries across time”. Crackle-crackle. “Rock ’n’ roll is the blues, rock ’n’ roll is metal, rock ’n’ roll is R ’n’ B, rock ’n’ roll is jazz, rock ’n’ roll is punk, rock ’n’ roll is hip hop.” I would add

that rock 'n' roll is NO. Rock 'n' roll is resistance. Rock 'n' roll is refusal. Rock 'n' roll is punk and punk is rock 'n' roll in a 'God is love'-style metric.

Muñoz quotes two characters from Bracho's play who are discussing their understanding of the meaning of punk:

Miss Thing 2: The power of being a punk in the world comes from knowing it's your world and the rest of these sad motherfuckers live in it and need to get to your groove. BoyPussy Power!

Miss Thing 1: Yeah but how can you hear your beat with the other wall of sound, white noise...

Miss Thing 2: Change the channel and stop listening to college grunge radio (22).

"The sound of white noise", that which threatens to drown out – or blandify – the chusma of the brown queer, "is the official national affect", says Muñoz (22). The politics of refusal and a commitment to ethnicity as a structure of feeling bash back against white noise. College grunge radio, with its implications of institutionalised voices and white boys with guitars, becomes the harbinger of white noise. I think about William Blake's pied piper and the bard, the instinctual and the learnt respectively, and the written in contrary to the felt. White noise is the curriculum, the sense of brown is the world. White noise modulates Black experience and packages non-white, non-straight artists as 'identity artists'. It's obvious, but this is why a book on brown artists by a brown writer is urgent.

Legacy Russell's book *Glitch Feminism* (2020) considers cyber feminism through the lens of gender and race theory. 'The Glitch', Russell argues, can be thought of as a way of ghosting the binary body. The Glitch is a refusal to work properly. In feminist terms, this means a refusal to produce under capitalism. In trans terms, it is a refusal to be legible to the straight gaze. "Too often we forget that we have the right to leave if we want to," writes Russell. "We have the right to deny our use, and through this close the wounds created by a world fed on the binary rhetoric" (2020: 64). I mention Russell here because her style of criticism interlocks with Muñoz's. Her methodology is affective, and she selects for study the artists, thinkers, and performances she admires. Muñoz does this too, with an anachronism and feel for imaginative connection that is exhilarating to accompany. The artist E Jane and their piece *NOPE (a manifesto)* is discussed by Russell. Jane's

text reflects the punk of both Bracho and Muñoz's work. "I reject the colonial gaze as the primary gaze. I am outside it in the land of NOPE," writes Jane (quoted in Russell, 2020: 16). The speaker's rejection of the colonial gaze recalls Miss Thing 2 turning off the radio and silencing white noise with refusal.

When it was published in 1998, *The Sweetest Hangover* bucked a growing assimilationist gay movement and the values of monogamy and detox therein. Bracho's play is a satirical, supernatural, intertextual, metaleptic foray into brown night-worlds. At one point a character mentions shooting a film called "*Paris is Gagging: A Study in Whiteness and Other Forms of Madness*" (quoted in Muñoz, 2020: 18), an acerbic send up of Jennie Livingston's notorious *Paris is Burning* (1990). Livingston's text is canon in a way that Bracho's play is not. Muñoz, in his selection of artists and performers, resists the canon as much as a book like this – written by an academic, for a university press – can. He is committed to the commons, to fandom. He is committed to the parking lot. To the electricity of the audience. Muñoz sees the physicality of the theatre venue working in tandem with the substance of the play, its actors, their denominations, and the audience to embody an idea of theatre and of the social smashing into life. The performance in the theatre allows the crowd to gather and the commons to shape without blockage. According to Muñoz, *The Sweetest Hangover* reconceptualises the social "from a vista that is not organised in relation to whiteness" (19). One of the play's quotes that Muñoz examines is an assemblage of song lyrics and stream of consciousness interspersed with slang and poetry (20). The quote signifies a brown canon distinct from an affective hegemony of whiteness. We could call this 'brown' or 'queer' noise as opposed to white noise.

It is wrong to conceive of *The Sense of Brown* as 'a book' in any received understanding. It would be more accurate perhaps to describe it as a collection of papers that Muñoz was editing, scribbling on, and populating while working on other texts, a plant or pet he continued to feed and water through the years. In his death, his friends and colleagues Joshua Chambers-Letson and Tavia Nyong'o took on the task of maintaining its life and presenting it to readers. There is a lot of material here, a decade's worth of manuscripts in fact, and some chapters feel more accomplished than others. It is a rich cornucopia that might occasionally verge on the dense to the uninitiated, but Muñoz is adroit at creating a sense of an artwork or performance that should help readers to find anchorage quickly again. In their introduction, Chambers-Letson and Nyong'o argue that brownness and queerness are the speaking parts of this project. In Muñoz's assessment, brownness is *already here* in an ontological sense, and queerness is

a *then and there* that exists on a horizon, and is to this extent imaginative, creative, and utopic. “Brownness,” says Muñoz “is a kind of uncanny persistence in the face of distressed conditions of possibility” (xxix). Blockages in the now include racism, misogyny, forced poverty, and homophobia. Performance, when felt and brown, can decongest the blockages that prevent the individual from being attuned to the brownness of the world (xxiii).

My review has pivoted on Muñoz’s appetite for what Foucault described as a heterotopia, which Chambers-Letson and Nyong’o define as “a social space that has been highly regimented and ordered for one set of purposes, [which] nonetheless opens itself up for appropriation by another regime of aims and desires” (xx). In this way, Muñoz’s parking lot is a heterotopia, a space originally designed for cars that has been repurposed by cruising queers and drug dealers.

Pivot.

I learnt a Spanish term while researching this: ‘LA HOSTIA’. I want to talk about it. It is not a term that belongs to my culture. I am a white, English, middle-class person. But to my mind ‘la hostia’ is a heterotopic term. Its canonical meaning – it is the name for the communion wafer and the representation of the body of Christ – has been highly regimented and ordered for one set of purposes (Catholic dogma), yet it has nonetheless been opened up for appropriation by another regime of aims and desires. I’ll explain these now.

Weeks ago, I went to stay on a shack on the beach with my partner. I liked collecting stones and arranging them on the windowsill. She took a photo of me holding a stone to the camera. I shared the picture. My sister’s partner, who is from Peru and was raised Catholic, commented ‘LA HOSTIA!’ with an emoji of a crucifix. The stone looked like the communion wafer of his upbringing. I asked my sister what ‘la hostia’ meant and she said “It’s not a nice word, it means ‘damn’ or ‘fuck.’” I asked my friend Silver, who is from mainland Spain and was also raised Catholic, and they said it means “‘a slap’. You give someone a hostia, like you are giving them a slap!” I asked Silver how it could mean both Christ’s body and a slap, and they said “Many of us experienced Catholicism as a slap.” La hostia is a heterotopic term. A host for overlapping uses.

In a chapter on the performance artist Tania Bruguera (‘Performing greater Cuba: Tania Bruguera and the burden of guilt’), Muñoz discusses the shame and guilt that denizens of Cuba and what he terms ‘greater Cuba’ have experienced. Greater Cuba stretches to parts of America, including California, where he grew

up. “Cubans ... live in guilt,” (92) he writes. He thinks through guilt via both Bruguera’s work and a heavily caveated Lacanian psychoanalysis. Muñoz uses Bruguera’s artwork *Displacement* to pose the question: “What would it be to hold guilt and not project it?” (94). The artwork features a life-sized model of a person with pins hammered into them, the cultural name for which is a ‘Nkisi Nkonde’. Each pin represents a desire hammered into the skin’s surface. Muñoz describes Bruguera’s work as a type of introjection. He references the psychoanalytic duo Nicolas Abraham and Mária Török, who believed that “introjection first manifests itself when the child discovers the emptiness of her mouth in relation to the presence and then the absence of the breast. The oral void once discovered is filled with language and words” (98). Muñoz elaborates: “only when we acknowledge that our mouths are empty, that neither ideal – here or there – can permanently replace our loss, can we begin the absolutely necessary process of communion” (99).

For me, the heterotopic use of ‘la hostia’ – officially a wafer taken into the mouth at communion, unofficially, *chusmatically*, a swear word or slap – is a metaphor for the success of Muñoz’s criticism. He effectively deinstitutionalises performance and inscribes the social and material into his criticism at every turn. He retains a connection to each piece of work he submits to the commons. The image of the host and the idea of communion then is a useful place to end. Communion means a sharing or exchange of feelings. Emotions, Muñoz states in dialogue with Jean-Luc Nancy, are the un-shareable (147–49). But, as *The Sense of Brown* evidences, the act and the art of the sharing remain.

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