

# Brown and Queer Futurities in José Esteban Muñoz's *Sense of Brown*

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Muñoz, José Esteban. *The Sense of Brown*. Duke University Press, 2020.

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From performance studies to queer theory and critical race theory (among countless other disciplines), José Esteban Muñoz is a celebrated name, renowned for his utopian theorizations of queerness. Beginning with *Disidentifications* (1999), Muñoz developed a field-defining approach to queer-of-color performances, which he imbued with the potential(ity) to fashion queer worlds in excess of the present world's hegemonic ideology (excessive both in the sense of "more extravagant than" and also, therefore, as "outside" of our present world). In *Cruising Utopia* (2009), Muñoz effectively redefined the temporal turn in queer theory, by arguing that queerness beckons a utopian future that is not-yet-here in the heteronormative confines of the "prison house of the present," but that may be ephemerally glimpsed through queer(-of-color) performances and pasts that are no-longer-here (Muñoz 2009: 1). In *The Sense of Brown* (published, posthumously, in 2020), Muñoz extends his queer utopian thinking to Brownness, which he understands less as a category of (Latinx) identity than as a racially minoritized affect, commons, or modality of belonging that "is coexistent, affiliates, and intermeshes with blackness, Asianness, indigenusness, and other terms that manifest descriptive force to render the particularities of various modes of striving in the world" (Muñoz 2020: 138). Like (Muñozian) queerness, Brownness is a capacious name for liminal ways of being in the world, often manifested in queer-of-color performances, that open onto alternative futures, shared worlds that cannot be fully grasped within the racist, heteronormative limitations of present understanding. Like Muñozian queerness, "brownness is a value through negation," in this case "the negation projected onto it by a racist public sphere that devalues the particularity of non-Anglo Americans. This negation," Muñoz writes, "underwrites racialized poverty supporting other asymmetries within the social. Owning the negation that is brownness is owning an understanding of self and group as problem in relation to a dominant order, a normative national affect. Brown feelings are the glue that coheres group identifications" (40).

Questions of negativity, (dis)identity, and futurity are strong through lines in Muñoz's work on Brownness and queerness, as is his faith in the aesthetic as the realm in which these subjects are performed. In each chapter, Muñoz brings queer-of-color and especially Latinx art into dialogue with a wide array of philosophers in order to affirm Brownness/queerness as negations of negations, negating the racist/heteronormative worlds which in turn negate their alternative world-making potentialities. Muñoz's close readings, which are far too numerous and varied to summarize individually here, are refreshingly playful, creative, and at times nothing short of brilliant. To take just one example, the eleventh chapter of *The Sense of Brown* illustrates the intersection of race and sexuality, of Brownness and queerness, through a beautiful analysis of *LBJ*, a performance by José Rodríguez-Soltero. Muñoz reads *LBJ*'s "shambolic queer spectacle" of American flag burning as "a moment of chaotic queer

experimentation, the staging of an alternative contestatory being in the world. It's an experiment in unrepentant pinko-fag ridiculousness that is not content to think about atomized and provincial sexualities and instead enacts vaster commons that are insurrectionist in their orientation and aspirations" (119-120). Muñoz's often over-the-top readings of queer/Brown excess in such works might just be enough to make one hopeful again, hopeful at least in the "concrete utopian" sense that *Cruising Utopia* defined as the political commitment to building better — queerer, Browner — futures. Both futurities are thus aligned with a commitment to an almost universally capacious "commons" that would be shared, if only through affect, well beyond the strictures of hegemonic categorizations of identity (whether such categorizations concern race, sex, or sexuality).

The affinities between Brownness and queerness demand critical reflection. As Muñoz is the first to admit, "the ways in which my sense of brownness converges with what I have defined in *Cruising Utopia* as a queerness that is not ontologically fixed are many" (121). However, he insists that Brownness and queerness index different temporalities: while both are futural in their orientation toward Brown/queer commons that are not yet fully here, Brownness remains much more present, or "already here." In Muñoz's words: "Brownness is vast, present, and vital. It is the onto-poetic state not only of people who live in the United States under the sign of *latinidad*, but of a majority of those who exist, strive, and flourish within the vast trajectory of multiple and intersecting regimes of colonial violence" (122). Yet the "onto-poetic state" of Brownness, as Muñoz insists elsewhere, remains illegible, unknowable, within the ontology/epistemology of the present. In this sense, the "presence" of Brownness is no more knowable, exhaustive, or "already here" than queerness, and it is telling that Muñoz turns to the vanishing "ephemera" of performance pieces to trace the potentialities of both (Brownness/queerness). While the racialized specificity of Brownness is critical, there seem to be few, if any, essential conceptual differences between the ways in which Muñoz thinks through the utopian potentialities of Brownness and queerness.

This queer alliance could be considered the greatest strength of *The Sense of Brown*, as much as its greatest weakness. On the one hand, I have already gestured at some of the innovative, exciting ways in which the text spins out the creative, futural capacities of Brownness as well as queerness. On the other hand, and for much the same reason, Brownness could be said to inherit some of the methodological and conceptual snafus which have dogged Muñozian queerness in the wake of *Cruising Utopia*. For instance, the characteristically motley cast of characters whom Muñoz assembles to theorize queerness and Brownness span new materialisms and animal studies, historical materialisms and Marxism, deconstruction, psychoanalysis, (Deleuzian) assemblage theory, queer studies, Black studies, and Sartrean existentialism, to name just a few of his influences. While the heterogeneity of this philosophical smorgasbord is inspiring, it is not always clear how consistently or rigorously Muñoz's arguments can be supported in light of the deep, often-unresolved contradictions between these premises upon which they are based. In the second chapter, for example, Muñoz thinks Brownness through Sartre's philosophy of emotion so as to "[refuse] the individualistic bent of Freudian psychoanalysis and [attempt] to describe emotions as emotions" (12); yet in the fifth chapter, he takes a much more affirmative view of (Lacanian) psychoanalysis, thinking Brownness as "being instantiated as lacking" through the psychoanalytic writings of Antonio Viegó (42). Is Brownness, then, an emotion proper to the subject(s) (as in the second chapter on Sartre), or is it a Symbolic lack that preexists individual subjects and emotions (as in the fifth chapter on Viegó/Lacan)? Is Brownness an emotion, affect, representation, or something else altogether (particularly in the absence of any sustained dialogue with affect theory)? As in *Cruising Utopia*'s account of queerness, many of these finer points tend to be left unanswered in *The Sense of Brown*. The issue is no doubt compounded by the posthumous circumstances of the manuscript's publication — the text was assembled from a hodgepodge of drafts, conference papers, and notes on Muñoz's computer by his editors and students, Joshua Chambers-Letson and Tavia

Nyong'o. The unfinished nature of the work, it must be said, suits the open nature of Muñoz's queer theorizing quite well. At the same time, though, it may also leave readers wanting more; what *is* Brownness, at the end of the day, if we hold together all these theoretical tensions within its various definitions? What becomes of its purported utopian potentiality when some of its philosophical forebears might not believe in utopia at all, insisting instead that the trace of present violence is no less inextricable from any imaginary of the future than futural potentialities remain bound to the present? Worse, does the all-encompassing nature of Brownness risk flattening the complexities of non-Latinx racialized experience that are also covered under its umbrella, from Blackness to "Asianness" to indigeneity (Muñoz 2020: 138)? These are among the important questions that *The Sense of Brown* leaves open, and which I sincerely hope to see taken up by Muñoz's many followers.

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