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THE POTENTIALITY OF BROWN

Ariana Ruíz

A Review of *The Sense of Brown*
by José Esteban Muñoz. Durham:
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paper.

In *Cruising Utopia* (2009), José Esteban Muñoz proposes a strategy of critical hope that is actively practiced in response to a “here and now” that is not enough, especially for minoritarian subjects.¹ Muñoz draws on this concept from the work on concrete utopia by Marxist philosopher Ernest Bloch to describe a type of hope that is indeterminate, anticipatory, and revolutionary. It is what Muñoz would later describe as “not announcing the way things *ought* to be, but, instead, imagining the way things *could be*.”² The practice and potentiality of critical hope (also referred to as “educated desire”) underpins many of Muñoz’s theoretical projects, including his final work, *The Sense of Brown* (2020). Published seven years after the untimely passing of the distinguished scholar of performance studies, queer theory, and Latinx studies, José Esteban Muñoz’s *The Sense of Brown* delves into a theorization of “Brownness” and “Brown commons” that is driven by this type of utopian hope. That is, he explores a desire to know Brownness and what a Brown commons *could be*. While Muñoz does not explicitly engage Bloch here as fully as in *Cruising Utopia*, the two nevertheless continue to be linked in thought and theory.

As the editors of *The Sense of Brown*, Joshua Chambers-Letson and Tavia Nyong’o tell us, the manuscript was produced concurrently

with *Cruising Utopia*. In fact, Muñoz had already started to develop and present on this project before the publication of his first book, *Disidentifications* (1999).³ With Muñoz's passing, Chambers-Letson and Nyong'o were tasked in finalizing a draft still in development that drew from about fifteen years of Muñoz's writing. Many of the chapters included in *The Sense of Brown* are revised and sometimes expanded versions of previously published journal articles and chapters in edited collections. And while the editors did not omit any of the chapters from Muñoz's draft and kept his initial sequence, they did add six chapters not originally included to help frame the narrative. The result is a manuscript made up of thirteen chapters organized in two parts. The first section of the book focuses on affect and Brown feelings, whereas the second section explores the concept of Brown commons.

Given the strong connection among Muñoz's scholarship, those familiar with his earlier work will recognize many of the scholars he engages here, including (among others) Raymond Williams, W. E. B. Du Bois, Frantz Fanon, Norma Alarcón, and Jean-Luc Nancy. This theoretical range—from performance studies and postcolonial theory to ethnic studies and continental philosophy—provides Muñoz the foundation from which to consider the relationship between affect and

U.S. ethnoracialization of minoritarian subjects that runs throughout. Taken together with his earlier writing, what sets this project apart is the substantial attention to the field of Latinx studies by way of Brownness. The Brownness that Muñoz posits is of the present moment and, further, urges readers to not only recognize but also act on its utopian possibilities.

The question then is, what is Brownness? Indeed, Brown takes many forms in Muñoz's analysis by way of Brownness, Brown feelings, sense of Brown, Brown commons, and Brown worldings. Each of the proposed variations work to describe a sense of belonging among subjects deemed at odds with normative national affect. In other words, building from the work of May Joseph, Muñoz maintains that the United States has established unofficial affective norms that are impressed in everyday performances of (White) citizenship. The failure of subjects to correctly perform these standards marks them as Brown. This is perhaps best illustrated and complicated in the fifth chapter of Muñoz's monograph titled, "Chico, What Does It Feel Like to Be a Problem?" The "Transmission of Brownness." The question, derived from W. E. B. Du Bois, addresses the way subjects can affectively recognize they are seen as problematic. Muñoz believes that this offers the opportunity to form a group identification and mobilize

with others who share in this problematic nature. Muñoz ultimately defines “feeling like a problem” as the experience of Brown.

Muñoz’s views on Brownness and Latinidad are influenced by and in conversation not only with Black studies but also with Asian American studies. As such, Muñoz is keen to the different uses of Brown as they intersect with his own analysis. For example, he notes another variation to the Du Boisian question of “feeling like a problem” in Vijay Prashad’s 2001 *The Karma of Brown Folk*.⁴ Prashad examines the model minority myth and the South Asian community to ask, “[H]ow does it feel to be a solution?”⁵ While Prashad and Muñoz essentially differ in their meaning of Brown, they share in a discussion of Brownness that is up against a normative national affect. Undoubtedly, links, overlaps, and divergences like this will lead to important conversations about the fluctuating definitions of Brown—a discussion that is itself bound in politics of race, ethnicity, and skin color that Brownness invokes. Certainly, given the necessary and ongoing work to address racism and racial bias in the humanities, a study of Brownness is sure to elicit important dialogue.

Muñoz perceptively counters the potential criticism that he lets Brownness stand in exclusively for Latinidad by underscoring an expanded notion of the term away

from the visual and pointing to the affective. If Brownness results from what Muñoz (after John Dewey) refers to as a shared sense of harm, then it is not strictly fixed to the experience of U.S. Latinxs and is instead more broadly discerned in the experiences of minoritarian subjects at large. As Muñoz writes, “Brownness is coexistent, affiliates, and intermeshes with Blackness, Asianness, indigenously, and other terms that manifest descriptive force” (138). Moreover, the congruency between experiences of minoritarian subjects has the potential to extend beyond a state of affliction, as Muñoz sees in it an opportunity for collectivity and resistance. Significantly, Muñoz does “not suggest that people are equally Brown, but that they can productively be conceptualized as being besides each other” (121). It is a commonality in Brownness that Muñoz (following Jean-Luc Nancy) describes as being simultaneously singular and plural. Such inferences are distinctly expressed in his analysis of Wu Tsang’s *Wildness* (2012), which is a documentary about an immigrant gay bar in Los Angeles, the Silver Platter. Muñoz’s reading of a “Brownness that beckons” Tsang to the bar and its patrons epitomizes the enigmatic properties of Brown. It is a being with, a togetherness in difference that cannot be explained but is rather sensed throughout the queer community that Tsang documents.

Still, even with this broadening, the project remains strongly located in a Latinx Brownness with particular attention to the Cuban American experience. It is important to note that Muñoz was writing before the rise of the now more generally accepted, gender-inclusive term, Latinx. Nevertheless, the turn to Brown is partially a response to what Muñoz contends is the incoherence of Latino. This term he tells us in the opening chapter, “The Brown Commons,” is supposed to enable coalition but fails “to actualize embodied politics that contest the various antagonisms within the social that challenge Latino and Latina citizen-subjects” (8). One such challenge is the inability of Latinx citizen-subjects to access or correctly perform normative U.S. citizenship partly because of a stereotypical understanding of Latinx affect as excessive—and therefore not White. The result is a Browning of Latinidad by the majoritarian public sphere and, in the process, an opening toward contact with a Brown(ed) collective. Knowing and being in this type of commonality returns the term Brown to a more ambiguous and thus malleable group identification that Muñoz harkens to the Brown-power movement of the late 1960s and 1970s. And like the youth-led social and political movements of that time, the Brownness of a Brown

common “captures a certain political utopian aspiration” (39). In short, Muñoz sees the Brown commons as a recognition of difference to U.S. affective norms and a persistent commitment to social transformation.

Additionally important to this discussion of Brownness and group collectivity is Muñoz’s coupling of ethnicity and performance. In the second chapter titled “Feeling Brown,” Muñoz introduces affective difference(s) as “the ways in which various historically coherent groups feel differently and navigate the material world on a different emotional register” (12). This approach ultimately detaches ethnicity from something you *are* to something you *do*—it is performative. And as performance, the excessive affect that is habitually cast on Latinx people can be used to negotiate and upend national affect with the purpose of liberatory ends.

Muñoz asserts that some of the most distinct sites to observe this negotiation of “excess” along race and ethnicity are in the cultural expressions of Latinx artists like the ones under consideration in *The Sense of Brown*. Among the most prominent of these artists referenced throughout the book is the Cuban American playwright María Irene Fornés. Muñoz closes chapter 11, “Brown Worldings,” by suggesting a reading of Brownness in the language of Fornés’s creative work

as evidenced in her 1983 play, *Mud*. An assessment of the language in the play's story and the lines of the lead female character show how to see and perceive Brown means "an attunement not only to . . . [brown] striving . . . [and brown] protest . . . but also to the suffering of brownness and the ways in which persistence can and does falter" (127). Another artist who Muñoz similarly takes up throughout the text is Cuban national artist Tania Bruguera, who speaks of communal guilt (chapter 9) and creates performance projects that model an awareness of and the potential for a Brown world (chapter 11). Along with Fornés and Bruguera, Muñoz considers the reparative potential in the work of artist Nao Bustamante in chapter 6, "The Vulnerability Artist," and chapter 10, "Wise Latinas." Where Bustamante's performance pieces are routinely labeled antinormative and excessive, Muñoz suggests the way that they center negative affect offers a reparative opportunity through a refusal to conform. As evidenced by these and his treatment of other artistic works that make up the monograph, Muñoz anchors the theoretical conception of Brown in performance.

New and familiar readers of Muñoz will welcome this intellectually engaging collection that certainly compliments the theoretical rigor of earlier projects. Readers can proceed linearly through

the book with the through line of Brownness across chapters or engage with individual chapters of particular interest without an overdependence on preceding or proceeding sections. Poignantly, the book closes with Muñoz's last published piece, "Vitalism's Afterburn," which examines the work of late artist Ana Mendieta. Describing the indentations that foreground her *Siluetas* series, Muñoz writes,

We might be seeing . . . the after trail of a vital force of brownness encountering the actual multiplicities of studio walls, caves, beaches, fields, and other mounds of earth and world. Mendieta's work stages encounters with the actualities of a corresponding virtuality . . . and this is exactly the possibility of change signaled in the work. (146)

To my mind, José Esteban Muñoz's *The Sense of Brown* similarly functions as an after trail that we momentarily encounter on the way to a Brown commons.

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NOTES

1. José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*, Sexual Cultures, 13 (New York: New York University Press, 2009).
2. Lisa Duggan and José Esteban Muñoz, "Hope and Hopelessness: A Dialogue," *Women & Performance: A Journal of Feminist Theory* 19, no. 2 (2009): 275–83, quotation on 278.
3. José Esteban Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics*, Cultural Studies of the Americas (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999).
4. Vijay Prashad, *The Karma of Brown Folk* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001).
5. *Ibid.*, 6.