# José Esteban Muñoz

# The Sense of Brown

Edited and with an Introduction by Joshua Chambers-Letson and Tavia Nyong'o

PERVERSE MODERNITIES

*A series edited by Jack Halberstam and Lisa Lowe*

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# Editors' Introduction

## THE AESTHETIC RESONANCE OF BROWN

*Joshua Chambers-Letson and Tavia Nyong'o*

It's late morning on November 3, 2013. He sits across from one of us on his couch, handing over a black binder with a manuscript in it. There were always manuscripts strewn across his apartment. All of them in different states of incompletion, not-yet, and becoming. There were the developing new works by his friends and the myriad projects he reviewed for publication; drafts of his students' unfinished dissertations alongside former students' nascent books; ideas waiting for a place in the world. This manuscript: a series of chapters gathered together. For many years this book traveled under the name *Feeling Brown*, but more recently he'd taken to calling it *The Sense of Brown*. The chapters were winnowed out of a decade and a half of writing that appeared in various forms as talks and essays. Sewn together into sequence in a binder, they approximated something like the first draft of a book. "There's still a lot of work to do," he said (or something like it). He was proud to have it at hand. And he knew, or thought, that he had time to finish it. This would be his final draft.

### From *Feeling Brown* to *The Sense of Brown*

The task of offering an introduction to José Esteban Muñoz's *The Sense of Brown* is complicated by the book's incompletion as much as by the fact that it was a long time in the making. Muñoz was a prominent and well-regarded

scholar of queer studies, Latinx studies, and performance studies. The author of a number of edited collections and monographs, including the influential books *Disidentifications* (1999) and *Cruising Utopia* (2009), Muñoz helped draft the horizons of contemporary queer of color critique, performance theory, and queer utopianism. *The Sense of Brown* is avowedly situated within (or in relationship to) performance studies, black studies, Asian American studies, and queer theory. In many ways it is an extension of concepts and questions that moved across his earlier books. But *The Sense of Brown* is also Muñoz's most direct address to the field of Latino/a studies and the queer intellectual formation that would come to be known, in the years since his death, as Latinx studies.

Theorizing brownness in relationship to "the people who are rendered brown by their personal and familial participation in South-to-North migration patterns," *The Sense of Brown* often looks toward (or back at) Cuba, where Muñoz was born in Havana in 1967. His family migrated to the U.S. mainland six years later, and he grew up in Hialeah, Florida, a predominantly Cuban suburb of Miami. He left his parents' home to attend Sarah Lawrence College before receiving a doctorate from Duke University in 1994 and moving to New York to begin an appointment in the Department of Performance Studies at New York University. He taught and lived in New York until his premature death on December 3, 2013, at the age of forty-six.

Muñoz compiled his draft manuscript for *The Sense of Brown* from pieces composed over a period of fifteen years (approximately 1998 to 2013). The project's extended drafting period meant that his ideas shifted and evolved in subtle, minor, and major ways. This was clearly signified by a revision to this project's long-standing title from *Feeling Brown* to *The Sense of Brown* around 2012. This shift was not so much away from feeling as toward sense, but, as the reader will discover, the manuscripts he left behind had varying degrees of alignment with the book's developing throughlines. In particular, the first half of the text tends to focus on affect, feeling, and brown feelings, which become interarticulated with a turn toward "the sense of brown" and the "brown commons" occupying the later chapters. And although the project's title marked a shift in emphasis from feeling to sense, his concerns with ethnicity and affect and his investments in theorizing black, brown, queer, and minor structures of feeling remained central to the project.

He began presenting material that he would include in the manuscript for *The Sense of Brown* in the late 1990s, shortly before the publication of *Disidentifications* in 1999. In November 1998 he delivered two papers ("Ethnic Feeling" and "This Bridge Called My Crack: Ricardo Bracho's *The Sweet-*

*est Hangover*") that culminated in the publication of his germinal 2000 essay "Feeling Brown: Ethnicity and Affect in Ricardo Bracho's *The Sweetest Hangover (and Other STDs)*." Around this time he contracted a book with Duke University Press under the title *Feeling Brown*. He researched and composed *Feeling Brown/The Sense of Brown* alongside 2009's *Cruising Utopia* (which has been released in an expanded tenth-anniversary edition). The latter text has been read as a key queer of color intervention in debates over the antirelational thesis in queer studies. But those debates, crucial as they were, did not represent Muñoz's full theoretical horizon at the time. One can see anticipatory glimmers of *The Sense of Brown* in both of his earlier books. Indeed, understanding *The Sense of Brown* as concurrently written with *Cruising Utopia* affords a renewed sense of the degree to which questions of race are central to both projects.

You can track the ideas at the center of *The Sense of Brown* throughout his body of work. In a chapter on Felix González-Torres in *Disidentifications*, for example, Muñoz argued that the artist deployed a "strategic obliquity" that eschewed a transparent address to identity, while nonetheless resonating within "a 'structure of feeling' that cuts through certain Latino and queer communities."[1] He drew the notion of a structure of feeling from Marxist critic Raymond Williams, and the concept would appear again in *Cruising Utopia* as Muñoz deployed it in his theorization of queerness. But this notion of queerness was always already relational to black and brown structures of feeling, as is palpably evident in *Cruising Utopia*'s chapters on the work of Samuel Delany, Amiri Baraka, Kevin Aviance, Kalup Linzy, and My Barbarian. In many ways, *The Sense of Brown* stands as a powerful rejoinder for those who would appropriate the pastier passages and ideas from *Cruising Utopia*, whitewashing it by excluding, subordinating, or simply ignoring the analytics of race and racialization that have always been central to Muñoz's work.

In *The Sense of Brown*'s second chapter ("Feeling Brown"), Muñoz insists on the brownness of the utopian impulse. He illustrates his claim via the work of Cherríe Moraga, Gloria Anzaldúa, and Ricardo Bracho, meditating on the relationship between queerness and what he would later call the sense of brown. In chapter 11 ("Brown Worldings") he explicitly addresses this overlapping, yet distinct, theorization of queerness and brownness:

> 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. But there is one crucial difference for me. I suggest queerness

is in the horizon, forward dawning and not-yet-here. Brownness diverges from my definition of queerness. Brownness is already here. Brownness is vast, present, and vital. It is the ontopoetic state not just 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.

To attend to the *sense of brown* is thus to become attuned to the ways in which the world is *already brown*. It is also to sense the ways in which *brownness* was always already presupposed in Muñoz's theorization of queerness and utopia.

Though he describes brownness in various ways throughout *The Sense of Brown* (refusing to let it ossify into anything that might approximate a fixed identity marker), the actual phrase "sense of brown" first appears in chapter 10 ("Wise Latinas"). He began delivering "Wise Latinas" as a talk around 2010, and it evidences the increased influence of Jean-Luc Nancy on Muñoz's thought. In particular, in this essay Muñoz begins to employ the Nancean language of "sense." The turn to sense did not signify a break with his earlier emphasis on feeling and affect. Rather, it allowed him to elaborate on the notion that the affective particularity of brown feelings can serve as a conduit to other ways of knowing and being in the world. For Nancy, sense is, among other things, a conduit between a porous self and the world. Sense and the senses are how we experience, know, and relate interior to exterior worlds, the self to others. The language of sense thus gave Muñoz a way to further describe the politics of being with and being together-in-difference that animated his earlier works: "My aim, through the route of affect, is to chart a provisional de-universalizing of reason for the express purpose of imagining and describing multiple modes of being, feeling, and knowing in the world. This knowing the brownness of the world is, more nearly, participating in a shared sense of brown."[2]

Our preparation of Muñoz's incomplete manuscript for publication has involved the painful, gradual, and always incomplete process of accepting the fact that we will never know how he would have addressed some of the gaps and points of friction between the various manuscripts that make up its whole because he is not here to do that work himself. In some ways, the reader will find that the plurality of chapters that make up *The Sense of Brown* mirrors the structure and form of Muñoz's other monographs. The two earlier books have an accumulative feeling to them, in terms of both form and style of argumentation. Each contains ten to twelve concentrated

case studies that collaboratively, and often elliptically, elaborate upon the book's central thematics. Yet each chapter can be (and in the classroom they often are) broken off from each other into individual monads since most have, each unto itself, the air of a self-contained manifesto. These formal elements are similar to another incomplete text of which Muñoz was fond, and briefly referenced in *Cruising Utopia*: Marx's *1844* manuscripts.[3] But in the case of *Disidentifications* and *Cruising Utopia*, Muñoz was able to revise across the different chapters to bring them into theoretical and conceptual alignment. In the case of *The Sense of Brown*, he did not have the time to do as much.

This introduction cannot make up for this fact. Instead, we present *The Sense of Brown* in relationship to the problem of its incompletion. What follows does not provide an authoritative account of *The Sense of Brown*. That labor must remain permanently unfinished. Though we worked with and alongside Muñoz for many years as colleague, student, and comrades, we have undertaken the task of editing this book in a spirit of intellectual friendship that is still marked by our own incommensurable differences from Muñoz. This includes our position on the outside of Latinx studies via the adjacent fields of black studies, Asian American studies, performance studies, and queer studies. In this respect, our editorial enterprise was animated by the "commons of the incommensurate" he wrote of in an essay on the black queer writer Gary Fisher and his mentor, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick.[4] But there is a degree to which every work of theory, even when it is brought to completion by its author, is a performative utterance whose praxis can only be achieved and realized through its uptake. As such, we offer this elaboration on some of the major and minor themes in *The Sense of Brown* as a speculative engagement with the text, performing one practice (or set of practices) for taking up, working with, and working through the brown density of Muñoz's manuscripts. What follows is less an introduction than a portrait of our own attempt to gain a sense of Muñoz's sense of brown.

## Snapshots of His Exilic Childhood

Let's begin (again) with the picture of a queer little Cuban boy in brown. Except what we're looking at is not a picture, but pictures. Not pictures, in fact, but puzzles. Two jigsaw puzzles displayed next to each other, side by side. One of the puzzles features the photo of the little boy: seated, soft, vulnerable. It has the air of a documentary photograph—for a passport or visa, perhaps. The other puzzle is a statue: some kind of (seemingly nationalist) monument:

erect, hard, domineering. Both puzzles are protected by and held in a plastic archivist's bag. Side by side, they are suspended against a white wall by two white pushpins. Printed above them, in red, are the words "Madrid 1971."

Felix González-Torres first materialized this piece, *"Untitled" (Madrid 1971)*, in 1988. Though the work does not explicitly state as much, the spectator may (correctly) assume that the boy in photograph is the artist himself. The statue's provenance is less clear, although the accompanying wall text might suggest Madrid. A sense of brown radiates from the puzzle/picture of the boy. The picture is itself brown as it is saturated by a pervasive, fading brown tone. But there is also the way that, as Muñoz described it in *Disidentifications*, "this image speaks to exile and ethnicity in a voice that is evocative and suggestive."[5] The "voice" is part of what Muñoz would come to describe as the sense of brown. It is a voice that speaks through its attunement to the sense of a brown world.

The brown tones of the little boy's photograph come into relief against the stark white of the wall on which the puzzle is suspended. In describing it this way, we mean to evoke a phrase by another of Florida's adopted children, Zora Neale Hurston, alongside a painting of the phrase by one of González-Torres's contemporaries, Glenn Ligon. In this painting Ligon appropriates and reproduces Hurston's phrase, "I feel most colored when I am thrown against a sharp white background." It is as if, against the whiteness of the wall, the boy in *"Untitled" (Madrid 1971)* is becoming brown such that the work comes to radiate a sense of immanence and brown becoming.

We'll come back to the boy but pause and linger here on Hurston and Ligon's articulation of a "colored" feeling. The 1928 essay that is the source of the sentence, "How It Feels to Be Colored Me," offers an account of Hurston's experience of becoming raced. From its title to the line that Ligon isolates and reproduces (eventually into blackening abstraction), Hurston underlines the complex affective contours of racial becoming as a deeply felt process.[6] For Hurston, "feeling colored" sometimes resonates with Fanon's description of the scene of racialization as one of shattering negation. Surely, Hurston describes what it is to "feel colored" as an experience of feeling like a problem.

One could imagine a dialogue between Hurston and W. E. B. Du Bois in which Du Bois asks his famous question, "How does it feel to be a problem?," before Hurston replies (though not necessarily to Du Bois), "I feel most colored when I am thrown against a sharp white background."[7] That she describes the feeling of being "most colored" as akin to being "thrown against a sharp white background" frames racialization as a violent and abject nego-

tiation with a stark and seemingly unmoving wall of whiteness. But it is important to emphasize that Hurston's essay describes an attendant plurality of "colored" feelings that refuse to be reduced to mere and abject suffering. She insists on describing a complex archive of transitory feelings including even the absence of feeling racialized, as in, "I do not always feel colored." Throughout the essay, "color comes" and becomes in and on her body in a host of different ways.[8]

To sense a resonance between the mode of becoming brown in the image of a little boy suspended against a sharp white wall, or in the work of Hurston and Ligon, is to be attuned to the brown and black sense of the world that Muñoz describes throughout *The Sense of Brown*. Du Bois's question was one of the animating forces for Muñoz, and in chapter 5 ("'Chico, What Does It Feel Like to Be a Problem?'"), Muñoz opens with a revision and extension of Du Bois's question to frame his theory of brownness and/as brown feelings. As with Hurston, Ligon, González-Torres, and even Fanon, Muñoz's response to the Du Boisian question describes what it means to feel brown or to feel black as emerging in relationship to the clarifying, fragmenting violence of the white background against which one is thrown. But Muñoz also understood brown feelings as the grounds of shared consciousness and even insurgent action. For Muñoz, feeling brown is a conduit to knowing, sharing, and being with others (who have been blackened or browned by the world) in a collective attunement to the revolutionary potentials of what he called the "brown commons."

The little boy in *"Untitled" (Madrid 1971)* is isolated and alone, resonating with the first-person singular "I" that animates Hurston and Ligon's inquiry. In *The Sense of Brown*'s second chapter, "Feeling Brown," Muñoz notes that "feeling like a problem is about feeling apart, feeling separate." But he also insists that this isolating feeling is paradoxically the grounds on which other ways of being with and belonging-in-difference coalesce into a politics of collective relation: "feeling like a problem is also a mode of belonging, a belonging through recognition. Thus feeling like a problem is a mode of minoritarian recognition." Muñoz invites his reader to think "about the problem of feeling like a problem as not simply an impasse but, instead, an opening." If his reading of *"Untitled" (Madrid 1971)* suggests that González-Torres's work resonates with the deeply felt Cuban, brown, and queer of color structures of feelings that flow between the artist, his work, and his spectators, Muñoz also suggests that this is a "commonality [that] is not forged through shared images and fixed identifications but fashioned instead from connotative images that invoke communal structures of feel-

ing. The structures of feeling that are invoked point to a world in which exile and ethnicity are not stigmatized aberrations, but instead everyday aspects of national culture."[9] In *The Sense of Brown* he sought to demonstrate how such structures of feeling are most often experienced and perceptible as a sense. As he did so, he routinely suggested that this sense often comes to us through the aesthetic experience and especially in the always already relational scene of a performance.

One might gain a sense of the brownness of *"Untitled" (Madrid 1971)* by reading it as a narrative of what Muñoz described as "participation in south to north migration patterns." González-Torres was sent to Madrid as an unaccompanied minor in 1971 as part of a broad diaspora of unaccompanied children from postrevolutionary Cuba.[10] For Muñoz, the juxtaposition of the picture of a little boy in brown and of the nationalist statue gives one a sense of the forces of colonialism, political economy, revolution, and nationalism that combined to create the precarious state in which a queer and brown boy was cast out, adrift, to sustain and survive an unknown and unknowing world. The photograph has the air of a documentary photograph (for a visa or passport), lending it a narrative of transport, movement, and becoming—even a process of becoming brown. Despite the lightness of the little boy's skin, and despite the contingent but favored status that has been offered to the Cuban American diaspora by the U.S. state—over and at times against other Latinx, black, Asian, and indigenous people in the U.S.—people like him are nonetheless made to be brown, especially when thrown against a sharp white background. But Muñoz insisted that an attunement to the sense of brown still provides an opening toward practices of collectivity and "shared flourishing": "Brownness as a grounded experience, for a brown commons, is often borne out of what, following John Dewey, we could call a shared sense of harm. But it is not just harm, it is also the shared flourishing that transpires and unfolds despite and in the face of systemic harm."[11]

It's worth noting that *"Untitled" (Madrid 1971)* involves an image of González-Torres's childhood. Muñoz was consistently interested in describing structures of feeling that resonate with and emerge from queer and brown experiences of childhood. One might think of the introduction to *Disidentifications*, which famously opens with an account of comedian Marga Gomez's childhood disidentification with lesbian women on sensationalistic television, or a sequence in *Cruising Utopia* where a young Muñoz comes to sense his queerness as he is teased for his effeminate gestures.[12] In *The Sense of Brown*, too, the reader will find that Muñoz repeatedly returns to the

fraught and fractious structures of feeling that cluster around and emerge from queer and brown childhood. The figure of Elián González appears in several places, and chapter 7, in particular, offers a sustained meditation on a performance by the legendary Luis Alfaro. These meditations on Latinx childhood provided Muñoz with a means for illustrating the complex intersection of sexuality with race that he found lacking in most of the dominant practices of (white and antirelational) queer theories.

Queer of color subjects, and in Muñoz's case the queer Cuban child, don't necessarily have the privilege to choose between the brown structure of feeling performed and offered by the family and the forces of queer shame that are sometimes painfully manifest within the biological family's homophobic social sphere. As Muñoz describes it in chapter 7:

> Family has been much criticized in contemporary queer theory as an oppressive totality. But such a characterization, from the perspective of queers of color, is deeply reductive. On the one hand, it is true that not all families of color affirm their queer sons and daughters. On the other hand, the generalized gay community often feels like a sea of whiteness to queers of color, and thus the imagined ethnic family is often a refuge. It is a space where all those elements of the self that are fetishized, ignored, and rejected in the larger queer world are suddenly revalorized. Alfaro's memory performance attunes us to those enabling characteristics.

Queers of color thus come to feel themselves and each other in part because of the ways in which we, and our families, feel like a problem within "a sea of whiteness" against which the family (in either its real or imagined form) may function as refuge. At the same time, the family offers up a structure of feeling (brown feelings) through which "the problem of feeling like a problem becomes not simply an impasse but, instead, an opening" as the queer of color subject develops ways to incorporate and valorize "all those [brown] elements of the self that are fetishized, ignored, and rejected in the larger queer world."[13]

## Cruising Cuba

These reflections on the place of queer childhood, exile, and ethnos in the early chapters' efforts to theorize brown feelings suggest that the sense of a brown world (or brown worldings) that Muñoz describes in *The Sense of Brown* was deeply influenced by the author's own entanglements with and theorizations of *cubanía*. In the manuscript draft of *The Sense of Brown*,

Muñoz indicated that the lead chapters were to be two essays that he published in 2000: "Feeling Brown: Ethnicity and Affect in Ricardo Bracho's *The Sweetest Hangover (and Other STDs)*" and "The Onus of Seeing Cuba: Nilo Cruz's *Cubanía*."[14] In "Feeling Brown," Muñoz famously describes feeling brown "as a way of being in the world, a path that does not conform to the conventions of a majoritarian public sphere and the national affect it sponsors." In a resonant fashion, his chapter on Cruz describes a particular structure of Cuban feeling to theorize "cubanía as a *manera de ser* (a way of being)" and as "a structure of feeling that supersedes national boundaries and pedagogies." As we undertook the work of assembling *The Sense of Brown* for publication, a key part of the puzzle was coming to grips with the Caribbean nation to which Muñoz had always assumed he would one day return, though his early death meant that he would never get to see Cuba as an adult.

In the spring of 2018, one of us traveled to Havana in search of further clues to the meaning of one of the city's lost and errant sons. The questions that brought us to Cuba were several. Among them were the kinds of idiosyncratic questions that come with missing a lost friend and a hope that his being in the world might have made it back to a place he had, in the later years of his life, spoken of going back to see. Was Muñoz read on the island? Were his work and influence known? More generally, how well known among the island's artists, intellectuals, and activists were the currents of queer theory and critical race theory in which he trafficked?

We also had questions about the scope and reach of the critical vocabulary developed within a U.S.-based Anglophone academic context. Words like "Latinx" and "blacktino" have been coined precisely to name the gendered and racialized experiences of migrants such as Muñoz, yet sit awkwardly on the Cuban tongue. Another English word puzzle particular to Muñoz's diction was "brownness." Finding a sense of brownness in Cuba would, in effect, evince the very dilemma the term names. "The study of brownness," writes Joshua Javier Guzmán, "is always an investigative process into the vital phenomena of mixture and immiscibility."[15] What would brownness mean on this brown island? Beyond the question of direct translation into Spanish, there was the larger and more consequential question of relevance. Would the sense of brown make sense in Cuba and to Cubans? What kind of sense would or could it make? And what, also, of the sense of queerness permeating all of Muñoz's work?

In contemporary Cuba, queerness remains a question mark, even if homosexuality is no longer officially a crime. Where gay men were once sent

to reeducation camps by the regime, now those men meet for sex and sociality in an abandoned fort that lies within eyeshot of the skyline of Havana, the nation's capital. Contemporary Cuban artist Damian Sainz's film *Batería*—a work the artist relates was partially influenced by Muñoz's *Cruising Utopia*—tells a story about gay men cruising in Cuba. In it, shots of discarded condoms scattered inside stone walls hint at the combined and uneven development of urban gay male sexual ecologies. While they have apparent access to HIV prevention education and safer sex prophylactics, these men are on neither Grindr nor PreP. And while the revolutionary disestablishment of organized religion and official support for gender equality might suggest that patriarchal norms are less in force for Cuban men seeking sex with other men, the anonymous subjects who speak in Sainz's film tell a different story. It is a story of enforced male gender conformity, little if any privacy for erotic pursuits in their homes, and the omnipresent threat of violence by homophobes lurking even here, in this queer sanctuary. Gay Cubans may now have an official patron in Mariella Castro, daughter of Raul Castro. But they do not have access to even ordinary rudiments of personal security as they pursue sexual contacts and intimate relationships that remain in shadow.

From the perspective of a North American mainlander, it would be all too easy to view Cuban queerness as backward, along the familiar lines of the underdevelopment thesis. But while *Batería* doesn't hesitate to militate for rights and freedoms comparable to those which U.S. American queers increasingly take for granted, it is not the case that Cuba simply lags behind. To assume this is the case would be to ignore the manner in which the histories of the U.S. and Cuba are thickly entangled with each other.

El Morro, the sixteenth-century fort that stands above the *batéria*, is an iconic landmark of that entanglement, as well as an emblem of Havana harbor's strategic role in world politics over the centuries. In the postrevolutionary period it was a site of queer incarceration, as homosexuals and dissidents including the author Reinaldo Arenas were detained in the prison by the revolutionary state. Today, a cruising ground with obscene graffiti forms an undercommons beneath this popular tourist attraction. A short walk away, the Castillo de San Carlos de la Cabaña draws a crowd every evening for a historical reenactment ceremony, featuring young military conscripts dressed in period garb, in which the firing of a cannon announced the closing of the gates to the city. It is a purely sumptuary display of prowess; all the more incongruous in that it clothes young communist cadres in the costumes of the ancien régime. The contrast between these two uses

of the former military complex is instructive: the one a tourist production designed to showcase historical continuity, the other a subterranean erotic zone that is overlooked at best, policed at worst. The young men who are conscripted into the spectacular military display could be the same young men, cruising for furtive contacts of another variety just meters away. The fort complex is thus what Michel Foucault would call a heterotopia. A social space that has been highly regimented and ordered for one set of purposes, it nonetheless opens itself up for appropriation by another regime of aims and desires. These discrepant uses of social space overlap each other uneasily. Havana's historic gateway to a seafaring world doubles as a home away from home for some of its queer residents, men who seek respite from policing, ironically, in catacombs that were once a military prison.

Moving from Sainz's oceanfront cruising ground to a more familiar setting of cosmopolitan queerness in Havana's gay district, the same trip that produced the encounter with Sainz's film involved spectatorship at a drag show staged for tourists and moneyed locals, yielding an encounter with a performer named Blankita. The ethnomusicologist Matthew Leslie Santana, who was conducting fieldwork on Havana drag at the time, introduced us to Blankita and her audience. Blankita was prominent in the gay scene, appearing on several different stages in a single weekend. She performs a version of drag that draws substantially upon *teatro bufo*, a theatrical tradition that the performance studies scholar Jill Lane has succinctly defined as "Cuban blackface."[16] Her act also resonates as a form of "queer assemblage" that Muñoz discusses in chapter 8 ("Performing the Bestiary"). Herself Afro-descended, Blankita cakes on even darker makeup and comically exaggerates her thick lips, bulging eyes, pronounced breasts, and thick ass. Most shockingly, rather than "tucking" as most drag queens do, she wears a grotesque simulacra of a vagina over her crotch, underscoring the degree to which the performance of femininity that she is staging is a specifically black one, depicted as at once uncontrollably sexual and disturbingly animalized. A piece of physical humor performed on at least two separate occasions seems from other reports to be a comic signature of her act. At a point each night, Blankita frantically scoots around the stage, legs extended, rubbing her ass as she goes, in imitation of a canine in heat. Many foreign visitors, us among them, are shocked by the crude racism and misogyny of this act. Blankita would appear to be a poster child for misogynoir, Moya Bailey's useful term for sexism directed specifically at black women. To some cuban queers, however, and particularly to some white Cuban queers, Blankita is simply Cuban culture.

Watching Blankita perform gave us a deepened sense of Muñoz's early writings on *chusma* and *chusmería*, a particular form of humor associated with Cuban blackness. Muñoz addresses chusma in *Disidentifications* in his discussions of the queer performances of his fellow Cuban exiles, filmmaker Ela Troyano and her performance artist sister, Alina (aka Carmelita Tropicana). "Chusmería" refers to people and behavior that "refuse standards of bourgeois comportment." Chusma, Muñoz notes, operates as "a barely veiled racial slur suggesting that one is too black."[17] Contemporary Anglophone cognates for chusma might thus include "ghetto," "cunty," or "ratchet." The relationship between this excessive and antibourgeois blackness and queerness is definite if complex. While working-class black culture is not necessarily known for its embrace of gays and lesbians—and in some countries, such as Jamaica, is notorious for its homophobia—there is a manner of being to this blackness that is always already queer.

In a similar sense, and as *The Sense of Brown*'s gravitation toward Du Bois's question makes clear, the questions of brownness and blackness were always already entangled in Muñoz's thought. His theory of brownness and brown feelings emerged, as he writes in chapter 5, in "the series of relays between the affective spike of what blackness meant and continues to mean within the historical field of U.S. culture and what brownness might mean today." This, as the trip to Havana made clear, was no less true for Cuban culture. Cuba is, after all, one of the crucial centers of Afro-diasporic religion, culture, and music in the New World. Writers like Lydia Cabrera—whose 1954 book *El Monte* has been declared by literary critic José Quiroga to be "one of the queerest books ever written by a Cuban author"—have made the study of Afrocubanismo central, and world music releases like *Buena Vista Social Club* (1996) have popularized the Afro-Cuban rhythms of son and rumba to a world music marketplace.[18] More recently, the anthropologist Jafari Allen released *Venceremos: The Erotics of Black Self-Making in Cuba* (2011), an ethnography of black queer world making in Cuba during the "special period" on the island that followed the fall of the Soviet Union. Blackness, in other words, remains a fraught matter on an island whose revolutionary ethos proclaims pride in Cuba's African heritage, but an island where black people remain disadvantaged and partly invisible, in part due to the lighter-skinned emigré community that dominates U.S. mainland perceptions of Cuba and *cubanidad*.[19] If the blackness of Cuba remains a perpetual surprise, a secret hidden in plain sight, then this blackness is not separate from, but deeply complicit with, the brownness that we had come to Cuba to begin to make sense of.

We encountered this resonant convergence of a black, brown, and queer sense of the world when we traveled together to Riverside, California, to take in a performance by the Troyano sisters. "Hybrid Alternos" was performed in 2018 at the University of California, Riverside's Culver Center of the Arts on the occasion of the groundbreaking exhibition *Mundos Alternos*. "Hybrid Alternos" began with a particularly vivid instance of queer chusma. Entering the performance space in a rickety, cardboard "spaceship" lined with newspaper held together with tape marked "caution do not enter," Tropicana as the hyena/human hybrid Hye wandered into the audience to ask individual members if they, like her, came from a "shithole country." The joke referenced the obscene term that the sitting U.S. president had recently used to characterize the national origin of refugees and asylum seekers coming to America from Africa, Latin America, and the Middle East. Tropicana's witty disidentification with this abusive epithet served as an early clue to the convergence of blackness and brownness in "Hybrid Alternos." Her chusma turned presidential scorn into an unlikely occasion for Third World solidarity against the arrogance of imperialist white machismo. While impersonating an otherworldly alien creature, Tropicana's chusma performs analogously to Quiroga's appraisal of Cabrera's writings on Santería: "Queerness marks the status of the book as a hybrid that in turn comments on the very queer position of Cuba within Western discourse and Western modernity."[20]

While it would be simple enough to read the science fictional narrative of "Hybrid Alternos" as an allegory of Cuban migrants seeking refuge on North American shores, the Troyano sisters would trouble any such triumphalist reading. The plot concerns Hye's voyage to Nebula, the only planet accepting hybrid, interplanetary refugees. At the performance we saw, a discussion afterward broached the question of whether Nebula, as a stand-in for the United States, was in some sense a queer utopia. The Troyano sisters rebutted this interpretation, pointing out that Nebula, like the U.S., is far from a utopia. Indeed, the opening moments of the performance, with their call to a subaltern "shithole" solidarity, should have provided as much of a reminder as is needed. The dilemma of visibility for the class-race-gender-nonconforming chusma, Muñoz noted, was that "live performance for an audience of elites is the only imaginable mode of survival for minoritarian subjects within the hegemonic order that the chusma live within and in opposition to."[21] It was as a search for the lineaments of a heterotopia not char-

acterized by the surveillance and paranoia of visibility in Trump's U.S. that the brownness of "Hybrid Alternos" operated.

Yet, if Nebula was not the stuff of utopia, Muñoz would be the first to insist that the Troyano sisters' mobilization of performance was itself rich with utopian potential that cannot be extricated from the ways in which, as he writes in *The Sense of Brown*, "performance attunes us to the world" and the world's latent utopian potential. The phrase "performance attunes" appears twice in the book (chapters 7 and 11), and in both cases it gestures to performance's ability to attune us twofold to the utopian potentiality of queer worlds that are not-yet-here and the brownness of a world that is already here. As performance does this, it does so in ways that can aid us in the struggle to overcome, as he writes in chapter 1, "the various blockages that keep us from knowing or being attuned to [the world's] brownness."

Our (re)turn to the work of the Troyano sisters is meant to underscore Muñoz's engagement with the artists about whom he wrote not merely as objects of analysis, but as theorists of brownness and queerness in their own right. Muñoz's interest in the work of the Troyanos, and in the performances of Carmelita Tropicana, spanned his career. Some of his very first writings, as well as one of his very last unpublished essays ("Performing the Bestiary") concerned Tropicana's work. Included here as chapter 8, "Performing the Bestiary" offers insight into the sense of brown that he always located in her work, even if he had not always known that this is what he would call it. Similarly, Nao Bustamante, the subject of chapters 6 and 10 and the artist who appears on the cover of this book, was a recurrent muse and interlocutor. Indeed, Muñoz published one additional essay on her work that was not included in his final manuscript for *Sense of Brown* (and thus is not included here) but that is well worth reading in dialogue with chapter 6.[22]

The manuscript for *The Sense of Brown* includes writings from his entire working career as a critic. They all were tending toward a concept of the sense of brown that he was developing in dialogue with more familiar concepts like latinidad and cubanía. Muñoz issued an outright rejection of the term "Hispanic," but he remained interested in the political utility of the term "Latino." This was in part because of the way the term could be mobilized to describe a concept that was central to Muñoz's work: "identity-in-difference."[23] As he explains in both *Disidentifications* and *The Sense of Brown*, he drew the concept from the work of Norma Alarcón, as much as it owed a debt to woman of color feminists and black feminists including Gloria Anzaldúa, Cherríe Moraga (especially their groundbreaking anthol-

ogy *This Bridge Called My Back*), Chela Sandoval, and Audre Lorde. Muñoz commonly deployed "identities-in-difference" to describe a mode of being-together-in-difference that he understood to be relational to, and in some cases exchangeable with, "queers of color" and the Deleuze/Guattari–inflected "minoritarian subjects."[24] Yet, in *The Sense of Brown*, Muñoz suggests that the framework of "Feeling Brown is [his] attempt to frame the particularity of group identification that temporarily displaces terms like 'Hispanic' or even 'Latina/o.'"[25] Throughout the text he proposes a "capacious sense of brown" that indexes, but is not fixed within, the racial and national contours of latinidad.

If Tropicana's "shithole" solidarity hints at one manner in which brownness might perform a transection of race and nation, that insight is corroborated by Guzmán as he writes:

> To brown America is to bring it down, [to] depress what is notably and nobly understood as White America, thereby staining it and dragging it to its limits. Even the philosopher of colors, Goethe, associated brown, a color he did not necessarily enjoy, with seriousness and melancholy. The sobering intensity of the disenfranchisement of minoritarian people in the United States is nothing less than browning the way we understand the misapplication and abuses of those suspended realities known as justice, democracy, and freedom. Here is the drama within the color brown: it is itself a mixture of yellow, red, and black—the iridescent reminder that we are in brownness and of brownness, here and now.[26]

For Guzmán, brownness holds a political potential insofar as it cannot be reduced to a given identity within neoliberal multiculturalism, but is to the contrary a difference that "stains" the fantasy of a white America.

Questions of ontological consistency and political solidarity form the context in which *The Sense of Brown* will reverberate. The aesthetic sense of brown Muñoz makes the case for militates against conservative national discourses of hybridity. There is a sense of brown, that is to say, that emerges out of the centuries-long process of so-called miscegenation, or the mixing of the races: a violent and coercive process that resulted, in many locations in the Americas and across the colonized world, in distinct castes of brown people wedged between, very often, a black majority population and a ruling white elite. Or, in the case of the U.S., occupying the vanishing middle ground between a white supremacist majoritarian settler society and the oppressed and exploited black minority. While this usage of "brown" often

intersects with discourses of racial mixing and hybridity, it is also compatible, from a structural point of view, with a much more bounded racial hierarchy. In East Africa, for instance, a brown middling class of South Asian descent rose up in the belly of the British Empire in the early twentieth century, even though this class was emphatically not the result of mixing between British colonizers and African subjects. In the West Indies, to give another example, Chinese and South Asian "coolie" labor was brought into British colonies such as Trinidad in the aftermath of the overthrow of colonial slavery. The examples proliferate. Generalizing from such cases, it is again very easy to walk away with a picture of brown minorities, competing with, mediating, and in some cases ruling an oppressed black population, with the long-term interests of white supremacy on a global scale being conveniently perpetuated regardless of the scenario.

Such discourses of mestizaje and miscegenation have of course been rigorously scrutinized, for instance in Jared Sexton's *Amalgamation Schemes: Antiblackness and the Critique of Multiracialism*. This critique bears heavily upon, as he puts it, the "restaging of sexual politics in the name of progressive change."[27] Sexton's critique serves as an exposé of the familiar icon of a future multiracial American whose brownness will encompass all the shades of color, in the orthodox sequence of a nationalist rhetoric whose motto is "Out of many, one." But the temporality of brownness encountered in *The Sense of Brown*, as we have seen, is not quite reducible to the reproductive futurity embedded in discourses of mestizaje and racial mixture. Instead, brownness seems to point to a different phenomenon, more attuned to the negative and the abject within sexuality, highlighting bodies, acts, and desires that have been rejected by the nation and shunted from myths of cosmic destiny. Returning briefly to Damian Sainz's film about cruising in Cuba may help underscore this point.

### *Batería*

In his essay "Ephemera as Evidence" and again in *Cruising Utopia*, Muñoz wrote eloquently about "the ghosts of public sex," detailing how mainstream LGBT culture increasingly scrubbed and sanitized the cultures of public cruising that had sustained gay male sex worlds in New York City during the era of the closet, worlds that were increasingly clamped down upon in the U.S. during the 1980s' moral panic over the spread of HIV/AIDS. As he described a photo by the conceptual artist Tony Just:

> Tony Just visited a run-down public men's room, a tea room where public sex flourishes. He scrubbed and sanitized the space, laboring to make it look pristinely, shimmeringly clean. The result is a photograph that indexes not only the haunted space and spectral bodies of those anonymous sex acts, and Just's performance after them, but also his act of documentation. This extended performance is, in multiple ways, an exemplary "queer act." It accesses a hidden queer history of public sex outside the dominant public sphere's visible historical narratives. It taps into the lifeworld of tea room sex, a space that is usually only shadowed in semi-publicness, and makes this space legible outside of its insular sphere. *But it does this through negation, through a process of erasure that redoubles and marks the systematic erasure of minoritarian histories*.[28]

Muñoz's lifelong interest in the paradoxical power of such acts of negation, that is, in seeming erasures of queer existence that would somehow index and indeed protest the structural exclusion of queerness from the majoritarian frame, is powerfully on view here. As familiar as this move may now be in some circles, however, it is less often brought to bear in the context of the sexual politics of mestizaje, which tend to rest on more heteronormative assumptions regarding reproductive futurity.

What if we can understand brownness, however, not simply as the ideal future outcome of race mixing—the mythic racial democracy ostensibly achieved in official state ideology in Brazil, for instance—but instead by reflecting on the brownness of the stains that Just has carefully scrubbed away in order to produce his haunting image of idealized, abstract whiteness? What if we think of brownness not as the color of the cosmic race, but instead in a more Ellisonian sense of the drop of black that is required to make the most optic white? This sense of brown has less to do with mestizaje and the reproductive futurity that undergirds it, and more to do with the hauntology Muñoz describes here as a "queer act." At one level, then, *Batería* would seem to be a representation of such a hauntology. But to draw a direct equivalence between, say, Muñoz's analysis of a Tony Just photo of a scrubbed, pristine toilet and Sainz's shots of used condoms, dirty walls, and obscene graffiti would be to miss the degree to which the cruising cultures Sainz records are not in the past, but all too present, in the here and now.

We might attenuate our invocation of the brownness of the (missing) stain in Just's photograph with the elaboration on brownness taken up by another of Muñoz's students. In her work on the artist Ryan Rivera, Sandra Ruiz issues a description of "a queer Brown subject that is thrown into the

world to endure the bodily residue of historical violence."[29] Here, brownness surfaces as the stain of enduring historical violence: a stain deeply felt at the level of the body that is subject to the ongoing histories of colonialism and empire, as well as the inherent violence of migration, displacement, refusal, and removal. Akin to Muñoz, Ruiz insists that "brownness is accessed through a shared sense of endurance experienced within various scenographies of waiting" as much as it "transpires within the senses."[30] The encounter with *Batería* similarly suggests that the sensory valences of the aesthetic can be a powerful conduit to the sense of brown. Sainz's lush colors, dramatic swoops of the camera, and interspersed testimony from cruising men all endow the space he investigates with a sensorial thickness and texture somewhat absent from the Tony Just photo. And yet this is, of course, a queer act, albeit one that registers its negation of a majoritarian public sphere through a different set of aesthetic strategies. This difference is key to the manner in which brownness is deployed precisely to disperse the state fantasies of a putatively brown nation.

*Batería*, in other words, is a signal instance of the kind of contemporary queer Cuban cultural production that calls for a transectional analysis, one that moves across the ideological haze that frames U.S.-Cuban relations. Muñoz understood the myriad Cuban and Cuban diasporic artists encountered within *The Sense of Brown* (including the Troyano sisters, Nilo Cruz, Jorge Ignacio Cortiñas, Coco Fusco, Marga Gomez, Felix González-Torres, and Tania Bruguera) to be mobilizing the aesthetic to, as he writes in chapter 3, "negotiate the onus of seeing Cuba, which is again the almost impossible project of looking beyond this vision-obscuring haze to a rich lifeworld of affective particularity." Similarly, *Batería* must be read in terms of the specific place and time that it documents, and the ongoingness of antiblackness in and beyond contemporary Cuba.

Yet it still makes sense to hold *Batería* in dialogue with work like Muñoz's writings about the ghosts of public sex, which were largely concerned with the lifeworld of urban gay men in New York City, rather than Havana (or even Miami). This is another negation, another erasure, that paradoxically redoubles and marks that which it erases. Muñoz wrote in English and at present his work circulates in Cuba only in limited ways (often in digitized files traded on thumb drives like samizdat). Nonetheless, Sainz told us that he had been able to read Muñoz's 2009 book, *Cruising Utopia*, and that Muñoz's analysis had influenced his making of the film. Charting the distance and proximity of Cuba and the U.S. has been the work of a new generation of scholars, including Alexandra Vazquez, Albert Laguna, and Aisha

Beliso-De Jesus.[31] These scholars track flows of music, humor, culture, and commodities across officially interdicted spaces, charting a set of pragmatic negotiations and adaptations to a here and now that is always nonidentical to itself, one in which the distance between state ideology (in both the U.S. and Cuba) and lived reality has never been starker. Turn on the U.S.-based gay social networking app Grindr in Havana, and you are likely to connect with someone in Fort Lauderdale, Florida. Rather than lamenting spaces of queer contact that have been crowded out by gentrification in cities like San Francisco and New York, *Batería* testifies most anxiously to the arrival of a future Havana, asserting a queer right to the city that continues to be proscribed even in the current homonationalist era. As José Quiroga notes in *Tropics of Desire*, "In post–Cold War Cuba, the male homosexual is a cipher. His body stands for an excess of signification, or for *the* Excessive as a category. He is, first of all, a sexual body; as such, at times he promises sex for sale. He foreshadows the impending consumer economy, but also recalls the remnants of revolutionary history. He stands for the precarious sense of the present but also for the untangling of the past—an unfolding that can only be partial, simulated, directed, and mediated by his past victimization and his future despair."[32] Nearly two decades after his writing, Quiroga's sketch of the Cuban male queer still resonates. We hear it, for instance, in the way in which Sainz's informants produce a distinctive polemic over the politics of cruising. This is especially acute in one anonymous cruiser's fantasy of police entering the cruising grounds, not to arrest the *maricónes* and faggots but instead to expose and interdict the men who come there to gay bash. This is of course quite a utopian image of the Cuban police (almost as utopian as Fredric Jameson's ersatz proposal for a universal army in the United States).[33] Like Jameson's soldier, this anonymous queer imagines a role for the policeman that is almost unrecognizable. To imagine the undercover police in the cruising ground, fucking and getting fucked, is quite an astonishing image given the police's actual role, which is to surveil and patrol Havana's urban gay nightlife, ostensibly to monitor and prevent sex work that remains illegal, but also to continue to proscribe and interdict modes of sociality that remain stigmatized. Like the fort itself, which stands proudly as an icon of the island's impenetrability to foreign invasion, even as a constant flow of licit and illicit commerce flows through its walls, the social logic of homosexuality remains indeterminate.[34]

The queer utopia conjured up in *Batería* is not an apologia for policing or the police state, but performs a style of desiring production that at once occupies and transgresses the debased speaking position of the flam-

ing queen, the one who cannot possibly hide the scandal of his homosexuality and gender nonconformity. It is here that the not-yet-hereness of queerness converges with a mode of persistent brownness that is always already here, as described here in chapter 1 ("The Brown Commons") when Muñoz writes, "Brownness is a kind of uncanny persistence in the face of distressed conditions of possibility."

Such queer, black, and brown excess is also on view in the performances of Blankita, who has a particularly cutting routine where she dances with a purse with magnets on the bottom. The trick is that the magnets pick up the coins of the dollarized currency—the so-called convertible peso—while leaving the national currency in the dust. During one performance an international audience threw money of various denominations at her, and her improvised reactions to the variety of bills she received was itself the stuff of high drama and low comedy. The black Cuban *travesti*, figure of all that has been left behind in both revolutionary society and its impending consumer-driven sequel, belies the imperialist nostalgia that often attaches itself to U.S. narratives of "vanishing" Cuba. Her blackness is her brownness insofar as both qualities overlie and intensify her abjection and exclusion, and, through that very same gesture, her vivid and undeniably spectacular presence.

## The Brown Commons

In Juana María Rodríguez's *Sexual Futures, Queer Gestures, and Other Latina Longings*, a text that engages with Muñoz's work to offer a powerful elaboration upon the interarticulation of queer utopia and Latinx sexual world making, Rodríguez describes latinidad in a fashion that casts light on Blankita's queer transection of blackness and brownness: "Latin@ is therefore always already formed through embodiment and context. Yet our proximity to these other racialized forms of identifications inflects how we move in the world. These proximities create the conditions for social and sexual enactments that bring us closer to others touched by the African diaspora, to mixed-raced people everywhere, to the politics and passions of indigenous communities. . . . Through our friendships and sexual encounters, we become fluent in other political and erotic modalities, other gestures that mark ways of caring for each other."[35] Rodríguez here describes something akin to Muñoz's insistence that "brown people's very being is always a being-in-common. The commons is made of feelings, sounds, buildings, neighborhoods, environments, and the nonhuman organic life that might

circulate in such an environment alongside humans, and the inorganic presences that life is very often so attached to."[36] But how to characterize the relationship between such a brown commons and the "brown people" to which Muñoz meant to refer "in a very immediate way"?[37]

Since at least 1970, the year the Nixon administration decided to begin tracking demographic information regarding the Hispanic background of the U.S. population alongside, but distinct from, information about race, blackness and brownness in the American imaginary have been lived in entangled proximity. So far as the U.S. Census Bureau is considered, latinidad is an ethnicity while blackness is a race. A Hispanic or Latino, according to a 1997 notice from the Office of Management and Budget, includes "persons who trace their origin or descent to Mexico, Puerto Rico, Cuba, Central and South America, and other Spanish cultures." Being both black and Hispanic in this sense is as easy as ticking a box or two. But this bureaucratic intersectionality can hardly be said to correspond with the lived experience of U.S. minorities, and in particular it is belied in the very distinctive and difficult struggles faced by Afro-Latin peoples in the U.S., who are often considered betwixt and between. What the state readily admits for classificatory purposes, the fact that one can be both black and brown, is a fact that is only begrudgingly admitted in popular culture, electoral politics, or, indeed, in the academic interdisciplines, all sites in which blackness and brownness are held to possess distinct and discrete sociocultural itineraries. If one does a cursory survey of news reports regarding the immense demographic transition presently underway in the U.S.—with social scientists expecting the nation to be "majority minority" by the year 2043—you will discover that this historic shift is routinely described as "the browning of America" and almost never as "the blackening of America." This journalistic usage reflects the political elite's obsession with the consumer power, social attitudes, and voting behavior of an aggregate imagined to share something like Hispanic values.

Such an aggregate is of course one of the first myths deconstructed in any college-level course in Latinx studies, but its authority over the national imaginary is not diminished but rather probably enhanced by its status as a convenient fiction or shorthand. Certainly, much of Muñoz's work in the area of critical race studies was devoted to being both specific and capacious in his categories, and part of that involved insisting upon the ways in which Cuba and its diaspora was interpellated by both Latinx and African Americanist frames of analysis in the U.S. Although blackness and brownness are regularly cast as competitive with each other within a U.S. frame-

work of ethnic segmentation and competition, and even held discrete and apart within the progressive dynamics of coalition politics, the case of queer Afro-Cuba underscores the insufficiency of this logic of either/or. It is a case that contests the established ways in which black and brown are held out as separate or separable in the mainland imaginary. It is to this intractable problem that Muñoz addresses his sense of a brown world.

*The Sense of Brown*'s penultimate chapter ("The Sense of *Wildness*") offers an expansive vision of the brown commons populating and animating this world. In his analysis of Wu Tsang's film *Wildness*, Muñoz places Paul B. Preciado's *Testo Junkie* in conversation with Gilbert Simondon's concept of transindividuation to "give an account of a being-with that is intrinsic to both trans and brown, consisting of objects, human and otherwise, who are browned by the world, or taken up by the discourse of trans. . . . This is to imagine a brown commons, trans-relationality, and what Simondon would call the real collective." But Muñoz was careful to insist that this notion of a brown commons should not dissolve incommensurability and difference into equivalence. For example, when considering the relationship between Asianness and the sense of brown, Muñoz writes, "I hope I have made it clear that in my deployment of the term, Asian can potentially be [brown]. Not in a way that inhibits 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. Brownness is coexistent, affiliates, and intermeshes with blackness, Asianness, indigenousness, and other terms that manifest descriptive force to render the particularities of various modes of striving in the world." This passage underscores Muñoz's lifelong theorization of minoritarian life as a practice of living in relation to other forms of difference that "touch and contact but do not meld."[38] The brown commons is a sphere of being with, between, across, and alongside each other in various positions of striving, flourishing, and becoming. Such a vision of the brown commons is not a utopian vision for the future, but instead a description of the actually existing reality of the here and now. Or, as Kandice Chuh (whose work Muñoz invokes in *The Sense of Brown*'s tenth chapter) describes it, while "Muñoz's sense of brown emerges in and through the historical specificities that precipitate *latinidad*, including migration, linguistic coding, and the geographies of colonial modernity and Indigenous dispossession, it cannot—like the color brown itself—be isolated or reduced to those specificities. Brownness *is*—full stop; it is not a something, a particular thing, an adjectival appendage or cosmetic artifice; it is a name for minoritarian being and be-

ingness. As a concept, brownness is the mode of knowing, the aesthetic rationality, that correlates with this ontological condition."[39] *The Sense of Brown* invites us to engage the work of removing the blockages that keep us from sensing or being attuned to the brownness of the world. In so doing, it mobilizes Chuh's "ontological condition" and its attendant "aesthetic rationalities" to recognize and re-create the world in and through its brownness.

To prepare *The Sense of Brown* for publication, we followed a process similar to the one that was used during the production of *Cruising Utopia*.[40] We have largely left José's prose as it was at the time of his death, making silent corrections of spelling and occasional minor adjustments for syntactic and grammatical clarity and precision.[41] We did not exclude any of the manuscripts José included in his draft manuscript and have kept his sequence intact. However, we have added a few chapters that were not included in his draft manuscript—inserting them in places we found helpful for framing the project's thematic arc. These chapters include "The Brown Commons," "Performing the Bestiary," "Wise Latinas," "Brown Worldings," "The Sense of *Wildness*," and "Vitalism's Afterburn." "Vitalism's Afterburn" was the last piece of writing that Muñoz published in his lifetime. We have reproduced it here as the concluding text. Its emphasis on "after" offered a fitting conclusion for a book that must remain incomplete in the wake of José's departure. Most of these other chapters were in the process of being drafted at the time of his death, and we largely suspect that José would have included at least some, if not all, of them in some (revised) form.

"Brown Worldings," "The Sense of *Wildness*," and "The Brown Commons" existed in Muñoz's records only as talks. "Brown Worldings" was given at least once as an address at Cal State Los Angeles the spring before his death. He gave "The Sense of Brown" as an address a number of times that same year. "The Brown Commons," in turn, is a poetic fragment that Muñoz delivered at Bard College in the fall of 2013. Though it cannot suffice as an introduction to the project, which Muñoz never had time to write, it does give the reader a sense of how he was introducing the contours of the project to the public. We have included it as an opening statement to the book, though we want to emphasize that Muñoz intended *The Sense of Brown* to open with an introduction, followed by "Feeling Brown" as the lead chapter.

For Muñoz, part of the use value of the aesthetic, and of performance in particular, was its ability to function as a conduit toward this mode of attunement, its ability to function as, in the words of Alexandra T. Vazquez, "a place of fractured togetherness."[42] It was against the majoritarian sphere's

visions of competition and succession, of individual identity and group dynamics, that Muñoz sketched his notion of brownness, offering a sense of the brown commons. And it is with his own description of this vision that we conclude this introduction to *The Sense of Brown*:

> The brown commons is not about the production of the individual but instead about a movement, a flow, and an impulse to move beyond the singular and individualized subjectivities. It is about the swerve of matter, organic and otherwise, the moment of contact, the encounter and all that it can generate. Brownness is about contact and is nothing like continuousness. Brownness is a being with, being alongside. The story I am telling about a sense of brown is not about the formation of atomized brown subjects. It is instead about the task, the endeavor, not of enacting a brown commons but rather about knowing a brownness that is our commonality. Furthermore, the brownness that we share is not knowable in advance. Brownness is not reducible to one object or a thing, so the commons of brownness is not identifiable as any particular thing we have in common. . . . A brown commons as I am attempting to sketch here is an example of a collectivity with and through the incommensurable.

# Notes

Editors' Introduction

1. José Esteban Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 170.

2. Chapter 10, this volume.

3. José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York: NYU Press, 2009), 16.

4. José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*, 10th anniversary ed. (New York: NYU Press, 2019), 203.

5. Muñoz, *Disidentifications*, 174.

6. Zora Neale Hurston, "How It Feels to Be Colored Me," *The World Tomorrow* 11 (May 1928): 215–16.

7. W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (New York: Gramercy, 1994), 3; Hurston, "How It Feels to Be Colored Me," 216.

8. We can thus read Hurston's essay, and Ligon's appropriation of it, as a means of what Amber Musser (drawing on Freud) describes as a practice of "working through the word's affective charge": Amber Jamilla Musser, *Sensational Flesh: Race, Power, and Masochism* (New York: NYU Press, 2014), 115. Hurston's essay is also marked by a difficulty that is underscored by what Huey Copeland describes as its status as "a text larded with stereotypes that seem to fly in the face of its insistence on the contextual character of racial identity": Huey Copeland, *Bound to Appear: Art, Slavery, and the Site of Blackness in Multicultural America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013), 132.

9. Muñoz, *Disidentifications*, 176.

10. The year 1971 would mark the beginning of a long and painful period of family separation for the artist when González-Torres and his sister were sent abroad, unaccompanied by their parents, first to Spain before settling with an uncle in Puerto Rico.

11. Chapter 11, this volume.

12. Muñoz, *Disidentifications*, 4; Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 67–69.

13. Chapter 7, this volume.

14. We have opened the manuscript with the fragment "The Brown Commons" for reasons elaborated on in the unnumbered note to chapter 1.

15. Joshua Javier Guzmán, "Brown," in *Keywords for Latina/o Studies*, ed. Deborah R. Vargas, Lawrence La Fountain-Stokes, and Nancy Raquel Mirabal (New York: NYU Press, 2017), 28.

16. Jill Lane, *Blackface Cuba: 1840–1895* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2005).

17. Muñoz, *Disidentifications*, 182.

18. José Quiroga, *Tropics of Desire: Interventions from Queer Latino America* (New York: NYU Press, 2000), 76.

19. Jafari S. Allen, *¡Venceremos? The Erotics of Black Self-Making in Cuba* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011).

20. Quiroga, *Tropics of Desire*, 90.

21. Muñoz, *Disidentifications*, 187.

22. The other essay on Nao Bustamante is José Esteban Muñoz, "Feeling Brown, Feeling Down: Latina Affect, the Performativity of Race, and the Depressive Position," *Signs* 31, no. 3 (2006): 675–88.

23. Chapter 1, this volume.

24. Muñoz, *Disidentifications*, 7.

25. Chapter 5, this volume.

26. Guzmán, "Brown," 28.

27. Jared Sexton, *Amalgamation Schemes: Antiblackness and the Critique of Multiracialism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008).

28. José Esteban Muñoz, "Ephemera as Evidence: Introductory Notes to Queer Acts," *Women and Performance* 8, no. 2 (1996): 5–6, emphasis added.

29. Sandra Ruiz, "Waiting in the Seat of Sensation: The Brown Existentialism of Ryan Rivera," *Women and Performance: A Journal of Feminist Theory* 25, no. 3 (2015): 342.

30. Ruiz, "Waiting in the Seat of Sensation," 336.

31. Alexandra T. Vazquez, *Listening in Detail: Performances of Cuban Music* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013); Albert Sergio Laguna, *Diversión: Play and Popular Culture in Cuban America* (New York: NYU Press, 2017); Aisha Beliso-De Jesús, *Electric Santería: Racial and Sexual Assemblages of Transnational Religion* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015).

32. Quiroga, *Tropics of Desire*, 124.

33. Fredric Jameson, *An American Utopia: Dual Power and the Universal Army* (New York: Verso, 2016).

34. This is witnessed in classic films like both Tomás Gutiérriez's 1993 film *Fresa y Chocolate* and the more recent Irish/Cuban confection *Viva* (2016)—and our thinking here is guided by the work of Hiram Pérez, *A Taste for Brown Bodies: Gay Modernity and Cosmopolitan Desire* (New York: NYU Press, 2015). Insofar as the latter film was the product of an Irish director and screenwriter, it literalizes the manner in which male homosexuality functions in excess of national and revolutionary culture. The young drag queen protagonist of the

film, who at one point turns to selling sex in order to support his ne'er-do-well ex-prizefighter father, epitomizes this excess logic of the homosexual. Reviewing *Viva* in 2016, critic Glenn Kenny exemplifies this logic when he writes: "The old cars, the record stores stocked with old LPs, the corner drag club providing a den of cheerful and proscribed iniquity in plain sight—the atmosphere carries a weirdly intoxicating quality in spite of its privation. The lifting of the U.S. embargo on trade with Cuba will, no doubt, bring more 100-percent Cuban cinema into the view of U.S. moviegoers. But it shall also, no doubt, change Havana itself. The city seen in 'Viva' may be disappearing even as I write these words." Glenn Kenny, "Viva," Roger Ebert.com, April 29, 2016, https://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/viva-2016. Here, the trope of a vanishing Cuba is deployed symptomatically in this passage to render the drag queen or maricón the "living currency" of a transaction between communism and capitalism, between Cuba and the world, and to perform a particularly triumphal version of what Renato Rosaldo has termed "imperialist nostalgia," or regret for the passage of that which one is actively destroying. Renato Rosaldo, "Imperialist Nostalgia," *Representations*, no. 26 (1989): 107–22.

35. Juana María Rodríguez, *Sexual Futures, Queer Gestures, and Other Latina Longings* (New York: NYU Press, 2014), 18. This discourse of proximity is also resonant with the work of Roy Pérez, "The Glory That Was Wrong: El 'Chino Malo' Approximates Nuyorico," *Women and Performance: A Journal of Feminist Theory* 25, no. 3 (2015): 277–97.

36. Chapter 1, this volume.

37. Chapter 1, this volume.

38. Chapter 12, this volume.

39. Kandice Chuh, *The Difference Aesthetics Makes: On the Humanities "After Man"* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2019), 11.

40. One of us worked as a research assistant to Muñoz during this period and both of us were involved in the development of that project.

41. We have also silently corrected gender pronouns (noted in the text) where appropriate, but have not attempted to systematize his usage of the terms "Latina," "Latino," and "Latina/o," nor have we revised the text to include the usage of "Latinx," which has come into broad circulation since his death.

42. Vazquez, *Listening in Detail*, 206.

### 1. The Brown Commons

Munoz gave a lecture with the title "The Brown Commons" several times, including on April 4, 2012, as the Miranda Joseph Endowed Lecture at the University of Arizona, and October 12, 2012, at the University of Texas, Austin. Largely consisting of a reading of Wu Tsang's film *Wildness*, a version of that lecture appears as chapter 12 of this volume. This chapter comes from his unpublished manuscript, where he was working out the analytic for the project as a whole. An excerpt was previously published in a special issue of *GLQ* (24, no. 4 [2018]: 395–97) on the queer commons.