

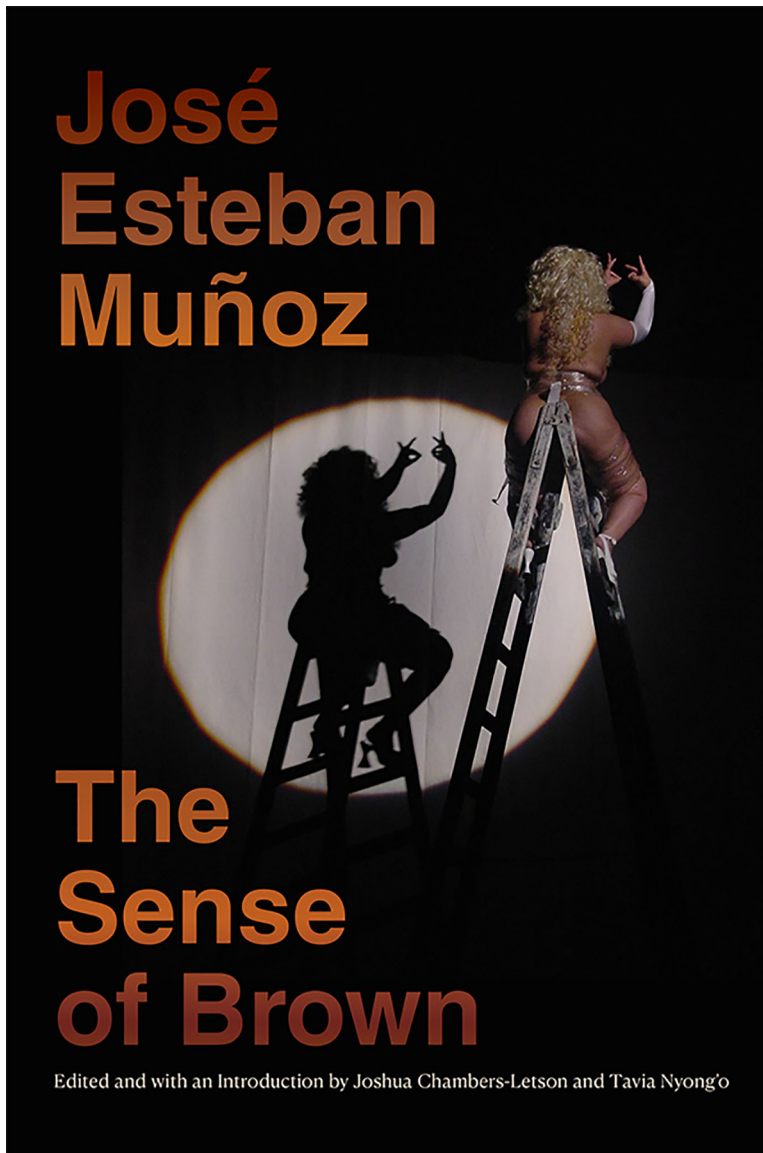
Mediated Identifications

José Esteban Muñoz and Visual Studies

The cover image for José Esteban Muñoz's posthumously published book *The Sense of Brown* (2020) shows a moment from Nao Bustamante's 2002 performance piece *America the Beautiful*. In the photograph, taken by feminist photographer Lorie Novak, Bustamante sits on top of an impossibly tall ladder, her back turned to us, a spotlight reproducing her body and the ladder in the form of a shadow against a white backdrop. In the piece, Bustamante dons various accoutrements of white womanhood, most prominently a blond wig that the artist uses to great effect to illustrate the ways in which minoritarian subjects inevitably fail to meet the demands to assimilate into what Muñoz once called the normatively white "cultural logics that . . . work to undergird state power."¹ This image can't help but strikingly recall the cover of Muñoz's first monograph, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (1999), which features a photograph of multidisciplinary artist Vaginal Davis by the gay Chicano photographer Rick Castro. Although here Davis sits closer to the frame, her body turned toward us while she delicately glances away from our gaze, another blond wig directs our attention, resting on the artist's head in contrast to her Black skin. As in Bustamante's piece, the blondness of the wig offers an almost ironic commentary on the ways in which minoritarian subjects (and artists) must constantly negotiate their existence and work within a white majoritarian public (and aesthetic) sphere.

These two images demonstrate how the medium of photography necessarily relies on the performance of the photographed object, whether through posing, as in Davis's ironic "ornamentalism" (to borrow Anne Cheng's term), or Novak's capturing of Bustamante at the "decisive moment" in her performance at the third Encuentro of the Hemispheric Institute of Performance and Politics in Lima, Peru, in July 2002. Indeed, both images enact Muñoz's theory of disidentification and call forth a timely, however unlikely, discussion in the introduction where the author explicates disidentification's resistance to "monocausal protocols," not unlike the way performance undermines monothematic, photographic content. One such example Muñoz finds for us is in a footnote of Franz Fanon's 1952 *Black Skin, White Masks*, where the anticolonial thinker makes the

1. José Esteban Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 5.



normativizing claim that he had “no opportunity to establish the overt presence of homosexuality in Martinique [due to] the absence of the Oedipus complex in the Antilles.”² In effect, the normativizing argument that homosexuality is essentially a colonial construct (as homophobic as that may sound to a contemporary reader) still leaves room for Muñoz to engage Fanon’s anticolonial paradigm *despite* Fanon’s (well documented) misogyny and homophobia: “Disidentification offers a Fanon, for that queer

2. Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* (New York: Grove Press, 1967), 180; qtd. in Muñoz, *Disidentifications*, 8.

and feminist reader who would not be sanitized; instead his homophobia and misogyny would be interrogated while his anticolonial discourse was engaged as *still* valuable yet mediated identification.³ We are interested in Muñoz's phrasing of disidentification as both a "mediated identification" and immediate identification that dialectically enacts a form of politics.

A mediated identification is an identification exposed to contradiction, effectively *captured* in the two covers of Muñoz's books. In Novak's photograph, the white gaze and the black objectification of Bustamante's shadow are mediated through Bustamante's body, making both present and absent the blondness of normative American citizenship. Meanwhile, Davis's own play with whiteness, as a queer black Chicana from Los Angeles, anticipates Muñoz's discussion in *The Sense of Brown* where he meditates on W. E. B. Du Bois's structure of address in *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903). Here, Muñoz concedes first that Du Bois is indeed calling for "white sympathy" since *The Souls of Black Folk* "addresses a white liberal subject who is potentially receptive to the idea that the color line is indeed the structuring antagonism of the twentieth century."⁴ We wonder: Is not Davis's posture inviting white sympathy in all its absurd and ironic pleas? Or perhaps Davis mimics the "white liberal subject who is potentially receptive to the idea [of] the color line."⁵ Yet, Muñoz makes a secondary argument about how Du Bois is not simply calling for interracial sympathy but in fact "intra-racial empathy." This is key for Muñoz since Latina/os are situated as a sociological problem in the United States where mass culture and media, such as television broadcasting in the case of his examination of the 1970s sitcom *Chico and the Man*, provide opportunities to transmit historical consciousness around the sentiment of nonbelonging in a similar way as the sorrow songs of chattel slavery confer their meaning to Du Bois, yet not through content but affect.

For Muñoz, the sense belonging to brownness certainly mirrors the work of disidentification yet is divorced from its "linearity of direct alignments" (what makes it a form of mediated identification). Meanwhile, brownness describes at once an approach to objects (a method) while retaining its own use-value as a mediated object. In other words, what Davis enacts in and through the photograph is the mimetic violence of white, normative citizenship through the apparatus of the copy-image. And what makes her ornamental performance (indeed the face, if you will, of disidentification) ironic stems from the origin of this copy-image—another imperfect copy. Indeed, both covers cut up identification, mediate it simultaneously through a continuum of differing standpoints, thereby yielding something like a transmedial form of identification, not unlike the way Muñoz theorizes "sense." This point gives further credence to Rey Chow's claim, in her 2012 monograph *Entanglements, or Transmedial Thinking about Capture*, that the Brechtian mode of deflating the dramatic event that in turn obstructs easy audience identification, also disrupts the "illusionism" of aesthetic unity:

3. Muñoz, *Disidentifications*, 9. Emphasis original.

4. José Esteban Muñoz, *The Sense of Brown*, ed. Joshua Chambers-Letson and Tavia Nyong'o (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2020), 41–42.

5. Muñoz, *The Sense of Brown*, 41–42.



[S]uch programmatic dismantling of identification, and with it the conscious disengagement from binding emotions such as empathy and compassion, has become instrumental not only to subsequent innovations in the modern theater and cinema but also the ongoing, contemporary politicization of identities by way of class, gender, race, culture, sexual orientations, and other social partitions and divisions.⁶

In short, it appears to us that disidentification attends to the dispersal of media in mass culture and the subsequent queer desire to attain recognition from objects that

6. Rey Chow, *Entanglements, or Transmedial Thinking about Capture* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012), 6.

refuse such easy equivalency. While brownness—as sense—shares in this distribution a *transmedial* thinking of difference, to borrow Chow’s phrasing. Thus, one cannot think about *Dissidentifications* without *The Sense of Brown* and vice versa; in fact, they might be said to be extensions of the same problem made visible in their respective cover images—namely, the queer racialized aesthetics of identifying with a contradiction.

Meanwhile, the echoes between these two covers, bookends to Muñoz’s tragically shortened life and career, also serve to remind us of the deep and loving commitment that Muñoz possessed toward artists (and subjects) of color. Although centrally located in the fields of performance studies and queer theory, and a major influence in both, Muñoz’s objects were essential to expanding the kinds of cultural artifacts recognized at the intersections of these domains of inquiry. He embraced a notion of performance that extended beyond performance studies’ originary insistence on the power of liveness, and worked to include not only specific media objects (like his chapter in *Dissidentifications* on Pedro Zamora and MTV’s *The Real World*), but also artists of color who make use of a wide range of media and aesthetic practices. Indeed, his wide repertoire of artists in *The Sense of Brown* includes Bustamante, Isaac Julien, Ana Mendieta, Carmelita Tropicana, and Wu Tsang, among many others. Muñoz’s investment in understanding how minoritarian subjects survive, negotiate, and challenge a white majoritarian world demands that we continue to turn to an expansive definition of performance that understands that artists (and subjects) of color deploy something we can call performance in multiple registers, from everyday experience to the way a body moves in a photograph or a video, to the ostensible ephemerality of a stage.

The influence of Muñoz’s work has been essential to the generations of scholars of performance and queer theory (again, fields that he made inseparable) who came after him and who have built aesthetically diverse archives that encompass a wide range of aesthetic strategies and practices. This is in part because those of us working in queer of color critique indeed recognize that the minoritarian artists and cultural objects central to our fields of inquiry must move across a wide range of genres and media in order to grapple with the many complexities of minoritarian experience. Additionally, the historical inequalities of the mainstream art world have meant that Brown and Black artists must define their work in broad terms in order to gain legibility for multiple audiences and venues, and perhaps just as importantly, to tap into multiple (and limited) funding opportunities. For us as scholars of performance ourselves who write across objects and genres, Muñoz’s influence continues to shape our understanding of the collaborative ground between media and performance studies, which for us also inevitably invokes something we have come to call “the aesthetic.”

We decided to approach *Afterimage* with this short dossier, however, because in spite of Muñoz’s towering influence on queer theory and performance studies, and the ways in which these fields have increasingly turned to objects found in contemporary art and media, our own interdisciplinary moves have left us with the realization that the late queer scholar’s contributions have been met with relative silence in the more disciplinary fields of art history and media studies. Indeed, our own encounters with these fields have often left us feeling like outsiders and interlopers in large part because of our ongoing

commitment to deploying performance as a heuristic interchangeable with the aesthetic. The recent publication of *The Sense of Brown* provides us with an ideal opportunity to reflect upon the conversations that Muñoz's work might still enable in these more disciplinary and inevitably rigid worlds. We invited four scholars who work in different registers across and at the intersections of media studies, queer theory/queer of color critique, and contemporary art to contribute. Lucas Hilderbrand considers the disciplinary break between media studies and performance studies as the difference between thinking *about* media objects and thinking *with*, exploring the tensions and possibilities in this break. Homa King turns to queer virtual gatherings on Zoom to explore how these media environments urgently sustain a sense of the commons, one of the central concepts Muñoz develops in *The Sense of Brown*. Amber Jamilla Musser focuses on a 2020 photography series entitled *Dark Matter* by Maureen Catbagan, a Filipinx American multimedia artist, to help elucidate the relationship between photography, brownness, and Muñoz's use of sound and the voice. Richard T. Rodriguez expounds on the importance of gossip as a binding queer trait articulated in Muñoz's work and specifically how it serves as a vehicle by which to encounter underground media such as Andrew Durham's 1995 queer cult classic film *Mi Pollo Loco*. The dossier concludes with a short postscript from Nao Bustamante.

Ultimately, we offer this short introduction to the dossier and the rigorous and exciting pieces our contributors have gifted us, inviting readers to think with *The Sense of Brown* about media, and Muñoz's larger oeuvre, in hopes of fostering lines of inquiry that perhaps have yet to be explored. ■

JOSHUA JAVIER GUZMAN is an assistant professor in the Department of Gender Studies at UCLA, and the author of *Dissatisfactions: Queer Latinidad and the Politics of Style*, forthcoming from New York University Press. IVÁN A. RAMOS is an assistant professor in the Department of Theater Arts and Performance Studies at Brown University and author of *Sonic Negations: Unbelonging Subjects, Inauthentic Objects, and Sound between Mexico and the United States*, forthcoming from New York University Press.