DOSSIER

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With and Without, Wise and Otherwise, José and *José*

Attempting to articulate the divergent methodological orientations of performance studies and of cinema and media studies in an exchange with Iván Ramos, the best I could come up with was to suggest that whereas performance studies at times *thinks with* media, cinema and media studies *thinks about* media themselves. I was not consciously invoking José Esteban Muñoz's work with this formulation, but in retrospect it should have been obvious. Muñoz invokes *with* in his theories of how disidentifications, queerness, and brownness are affectively performed as he draws on television, video art, film, installation, art, theater, and performance—media that he approaches more as expressive than as representational.

I begin from this question of disciplinarity guided by the invitation to this dossier, which asked contributors to consider Muñoz's engagement with media and art. As someone based in cinema and media studies but who at times looks out from there, I often come up against the fact that, to riff on Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, disciplines "are different from each other."[1] We know this axiomatically but too rarely actually engage in exploring its possibilities. Although queer theory has multiple genealogies,[2] one strand that seems to have fallen out of sight is the momentary centrality of film and art as objects in foundational publications such as *How Do I Look?* and *Inside/Out*—as well as in the work of Teresa de Lauretis, who is generally credited with coining the term "queer theory."[3] Queer theory continues to occasionally think *with* media texts but rarely seems to think *about* them in the sense of engaging cinema and media studies, such that the multidisciplinarity[4] of queer studies seems to have moved on from film studies. But rather

1. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 22–27.

2. Perhaps the most canonical version looks to the contemporaneous publication of Sedgwick's *Epistemology of the Closet* and Judith Buter's *Gender Trouble* (1990), or to Michel Foucault's *The History of Sexuality* (the first volume of which was published in French in 1976) and Gayle Rubin's "Thinking Sex" (1984) as forerunners. Equally important genealogies look to women of color feminists, such as Audre Lorde, the Combahee River Collective, Gloria Anzaldúa, and Cherríe Moraga as foundational to queer theory's emergence or to the AIDS crisis' incitement to activism and critical thinking, exemplified by the *AIDS: Cultural Analysis/Cultural Activism* special issue of *October* (Winter 1987) edited by Douglas Crimp, or, later, Cathy J. Cohen's work. My first formative encounter with queer theory was likely Michael Warner's introduction to *Fear of a Queer Planet: Queer Politics and Social Theory* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993).

3. Bad Object-Choices, ed., *How Do I Look?: Queer Film and Video* (Seattle: Bay Press, 1991); Diana Fuss, *Inside/Out: Lesbian Theories, Gay Theories* (New York: Routledge, 1991); Teresa de Lauretis, ed., "Queer Theory: Lesbian and Gay Sexualities" Special Issue, *Differences* 3, no. 2 (Summer 1991).

4. My colleague Kristen Hatch has astutely taken to saying, "Interdisciplinarity is actually multidisciplinarity."

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than turn this into a harangue (or, perhaps more urgently, questioning why cinema and media studies doesn't seem relevant beyond its borders), I want to take this opportunity to look to Muñoz's work as a model for capaciously working across media and beyond disciplinarity. Thinking conditions of possibility by introducing new frameworks is what Muñoz does, from disidentification[5] to brown.

Muñoz's work has been worldmaking for scholars and artists because of its generosity and its generativity. He not only thinks across mediums and schools of thought, but he has importantly mediated in what were often understood as acrid academic disputes.[6] In his essay "Wise Latinas," wherein he advances the "'otherwiseness' of brownness" (100), Muñoz effectively negotiates between essays by white art historian Douglas Crimp and Puerto Rican Hispanic/Caribbean Studies scholar Lawrence La Fountain-Stokes on Mario Montez's performance in Andy Warhol's film *Screen Test #2* (1965). Crimp uses the film to theorize queer shame without primarily articulating this affect through a racial lens; La Fountain-Stokes seeks queer of color affirmation and invokes righteous anger against racist exploitation. These readings reflect the respective scholars' own subject positions and also demonstrate that different disciplines ask different questions, see different stakes, and come to different conclusions.[7] Muñoz deftly models how to find the validity and value of each respective reading while also introducing his own. Midway through a paragraph and literally interjected in between grappling with these oppositional positions, Muñoz articulates,

> What I am calling brownness includes the ways in which brown people endure, strive, and flourish in relation to systemic harm. Brownness's conditions of possibility are the ways in which brown folks harness the shame directed at them, at one moment rejecting it in favor of shamelessness, and at different moments occupying shame as a copious and generative affective register.[8]

Advancing his own reading of Montez, Muñoz elegantly complicates his reparative reading: "Mario performs a kind of affective otherwiseness that is conveyed as a mimesis that resists the coercive strictures of normative gender, and in doing so allows the viewer to consider the performativity of the performance. . . ."[9] Muñoz finds agency in Montez's performance if not quite affirmation; he vividly compares Montez's performance to "a transgender working girl who tolerates her exasperating john."[10] Brilliantly seeing beyond the debate, Muñoz suggests,

5. "A disidentification is neither an identification nor a counteridentification; it is a working on, with, and against a form at a simultaneous moment." José Esteban Muñoz, *The Sense of Brown*, ed. Joshua Chambers-Letson and Tavia Nyong'o (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2020), 11. See also Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999).

6. For instance, Muñoz was always more generous toward Lee Edelman's *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004) than the other academics who used Muñoz's *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York: New York University Press, 2009) to refute and reject Edelman.

7. Muñoz, *The Sense of Brown*, 107–110.

8. Muñoz, *The Sense of Brown*, 108.

9. Muñoz, *The Sense of Brown*, 110.

10. Muñoz, *The Sense of Brown*, 106.

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> What I think is being resisted in these avant-garde films by these odd queer men is the kind of compulsory performances of sex and race that annihilate people every day. What the films and the performances show us, in part, is how to live and feel these scripts differently. We can view *Screen Test #2* now and see it as a counternarrative for being and feeling brown, both in the face of whiteness and on its own terms.[11]

This ambivalent duality, "in the face of whiteness and on its own terms," importantly articulates both structural racial critique and productive self-determination.

Before continuing with a discussion of methods for reading films, I want to point to what I find to be the most incisive passages in Muñoz's theorization of *brown*. In "The Brown Commons," Muñoz communicates brown's complexity and viscerality:

> First and foremost, I mean "brown" as in brown people in a very immediate way, in this sense, people who are rendered brown by their personal and familial participation in South-to-North migration patterns. I am also thinking of people who are brown by way of accents and linguistic orientations that convey a certain difference. I mean a brownness that is conferred by the ways in which one's spatial coordinates are contested, and the ways in which one's right to residency is challenged by those who make false claims to nativity. Also, I think of brownness in relation to everyday customs and everyday styles of living that connote a sense of illegitimacy. Brown indexes a certain vulnerability to the violence of property, finance, and to capital's overarching mechanisms of domination.[12]

That his final book remained unfinished means that it demonstrates various stages of thought on the concept of brown rather than a unified articulation that had been revised into alignment. In "Feeling Brown," Muñoz otherwise explains,

> The inquiry I am undertaking here suggests that we move beyond notions of ethnicity as fixed (something that people are) and instead understand it as performative (what people do) . . . In lieu of viewing racial or ethnic difference as solely cultural, I aim to describe how they can be understood as affective difference(s), that is, the ways in which various historically coherent groups feel differently and navigate the material world on a different emotional register.[13]

As in his previous work, Muñoz embraces the ephemeral[14] over the fixed.

Brownness is not essential and innate but rather dynamic and deeply social and political. I persistently read Muñoz's work on brown in dialogue with and building upon Stuart Hall's essay "New Ethnicities" (which Muñoz does not reference), in which Hall thought with the new meanings and potentials of *black* in late 1980s Britain:

> Politically, this is the moment when the term "black" was coined as a way of referencing the common experience of racism and marginalization in Britain and came

11. Muñoz, *The Sense of Brown*, 111.
12. Muñoz, *The Sense of Brown*, 3.
13. Muñoz, *The Sense of Brown*, 12.
14. José Esteban Muñoz, "Ephemera as Evidence: Introductory Notes to Queer Acts," *Women & Performance* 8, no 2 (1996): 5–16.

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> to provide the organizing category of a new politics of resistance, amongst groups and communities with, in fact, very different histories, traditions and ethnic identities.[15]

Whereas Muñoz thinks with performance and affect, Hall worked from representations, which for him "play a *constitutive,* and not merely a reflexive . . . role."[16] From my perspective, we must think with *both* affect and representation, recognizing both as products of broader structures of power. My own graduate training came at a time when questions of representation were viewed as passé. Yet I recognize for my students—and if I'm honest, for myself—that many people still crave identitarian representations, even if we understand that representations in and of themselves are not enough to fix the world—and may give the mistaken impression that lived conditions have changed simply because we now have the illusion of heartwarming representations.[17] As Joshua Javier Guzmán writes elsewhere, "brownness reminds us that this world is never really enough."[18]

IMAGE 1. José (Enrique Salanic, left) and Luis (Manolo Herrera) share casual public intimacy in *José* (2018) by Li Cheng; courtesy YQ Studio.

15. Stuart Hall, "New Ethnicities" (1988), in *Selected Writings on Race and Difference*, ed. Paul Gilroy and Ruth Wilson Gilmore (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2021), 246.

16. Hall, "New Ethnicities," 248. I continue with a lengthy quotation for its useful clarity: "If the black subject and black experience are not stabilized by Nature or by some other essential guarantee, then it must be the case that they are constituted historically, culturally, politically—and the concept which refers to this is 'ethnicity.' The term ethnicity acknowledges the place of history, language and culture in the construction of subjectivity and identity, as well as the fact that all discourse is placed, positioned, situated, and all knowledge is contextual. Representation is possible only because enunciation is always produced within codes which have a history, a position within the discursive formations of a particular space and time," 252.

17. My favorite work of Muñoz's on representation is his chapter "Pedro Zamora's *Real World* of Counterpublicity: Performing an Ethics of the Self," *Disidentifications*, 143–60. My favorite essay I have read grappling with the turn away from representation and its persistent draw is Summer Kim Lee, "Too Close, Too Compromised: *Killing Eve* and the Promise of Sandra Oh," *Los Angeles Review of Books,* December 4, 2018: https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/close-compromised-killing-eve-promise-sandra-oh.

18. Joshua Javier Guzmán, "Brown," in *Keywords for Latina/o Studies*, ed. Deborah R. Vargas, Nancy Raquel Mirabal, and Lawrence La Fountain-Stokes (New York: New York University Press, 2017), 26.

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I turn now to another José, the 2018 film *José*, shot in Guatemala (but ambiguously "Guatemalan"), to briefly consider different ways of thinking about *and* with this film.[19] The film was cowritten by internationally nomadic filmmakers Li Cheng and George F. Roberson following a tour of Latin America during which they interviewed young men to find a story for their project.[20] They settled on a story set in Guatemala City focusing on a young man named José who is working poor, lives with his fundamentalist Christian single mother, and has unabashed sex with other men. José develops a tender relationship with a hookup, Luis, who came to the capital from the coast and who asks José to leave the city with him. José wants to be with him but does not initially feel it possible to leave his mother. The film continues on after Luis's departure, leaving the viewer as uncertain as José is about where the protagonist is going.

The film is frank in its nudity and sexual encounters but is not politically gay in the sense that the characters neither claim gay identities nor directly suffer homophobic violence. The film expresses sexuality as a range of affective encounters—transactional, affectionate, estranging—but never reduces its representation to shame or simplistic affirmation. *José* is affectively queer in capturing the feeling of particular moments and conditions of queer intimacies: recognizing a trick from a hookup app in person for the first time, toweling off after sex with a stranger, paying for an extra hour at a cheap hotel so that an encounter doesn't have to end yet, exploring a crush's blemishes that make him more beautiful, feeling him tickling your ear or kissing your neck from behind, and stealing moments of public touch without saying anything. Perhaps Muñoz wouldn't be so romantic as to dwell in *these* instances, but the film is comprised of a structure of feelings more than exposition of self or narrative.

Economic precarity and class difference, histories of war and aspirations to migration, protective mothers and absent fathers, and imperial religious laws all structure the characters' affective experience as brown in *José.* Yet, much like Muñoz argues about Montez's performance in *Screen Test #2,* the film *José* and Enrique Salanic's performance in it present moments of agency within the fissures of conditions that would otherwise seem to preclude queer brown life. José's mother witnesses him zoom off with Luis on a borrowed motorcycle, and the film shows her praying for José; nonetheless, what she knows remains only obliquely spoken, and José does not seem to intuit or internalize her judgment. At times, José skips out on an unrewarding restaurant job to find a Wi-Fi signal to go on cruising apps or to have a tryst. Notably, whereas the camera is repeatedly positioned to look down at José from a distance in shots where he exists within the confines of his daily life, the sex scenes and public displays of affection are framed to bring the viewer into proximity to José, framed at his level. The film details a place and an economic structure in which the only way to imagine the future is to have sex or to

19. I acknowledge that Muñoz's work focuses on thinking through *brown* in United States contexts rather than Pan-American ones, but this is the film to which I kept returning as a demonstration of the performance of brownness as affect. If *brown* resists identity categories, might it also refuse nationality?

20. *José* Q&A with Brendan Lucas, Li Cheng, and Enrique Salanic for Outfest On-Demand, www.youtube.com/watch?v=v_Wa80YoPlo.

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leave—queerness as horizon—though, strikingly, this film does not present the United States as the goal.[21]

The fact of *José*'s audiovisual existence makes the film representational and likely to be reduced to a portrait of queer Guatemalan life. Still, the film deflects both the conventional coming-out story and narrative closure via the formation of the couple. The film remains open to audience identification with the characters because viewers will project what they will, but the film does not give a didactic explanation of José's inner life. Rather, *José* operates primarily in the mode of neo-neorealism, a now decades-long set of formal conventions that evoke the look and feel of observational documentaries but that are fictional narratives; these films offer seemingly minor moments and slice-of-life representation—typically of socially marginalized characters—and for added authenticity are shot on location rather than on soundstages.[22] Neo-neorealism intersects with what has come to be called "slow cinema," which also focuses on minor and gestural unfoldings in durational narratives largely evacuated of action.[23] The film represents not identity categories but ways of being in the world, the momentary highs and lingering disappointments of a crush, social relations structured by affective indifference, and the in-between moments of being in transit or waiting. The viewer spends the film *being with* José.

A traditional cinema studies approach to *José* would likely analyze it in relation to questions of representation, position it in terms of genre and mode (neo-neorealism, slow cinema, art cinema), examine its deviations from Hollywood-style narrative norms and closure, theorize how it ideologically positions it spectators, recount its production history, situate the film in terms of national and/or global cinemas, or trace the film's circulation via film festivals.[24] These are all important in understanding the conditions of the film's production and the meanings it produces as it circulates. But Muñoz's method of thinking with the affective conditions and performances of brownness, of queerness, of ephemerality, and of futurity in the face of structures antagonistic to their existence

21. In contrast, the film *I Carry You with Me* (Te Llevo Conmigo, 2020, directed by Heidi Ewing) presents a comparatively romantic film that does present immigration to the US. What's most striking about this film, however, is that it appears to start as a drama that transitions into a documentary, though its production history started as a documentary. Its genre hybridity presents a different take on the neo-neorealisms I reference.

22. Originally associated with post-World War II Italian cinema, neorealism has become a pervasive contemporary aesthetic in recent work by such directors as Chloé Zhao (2020's *Nomadland*; 2017's *The Rider*) and Sean Baker (2017's *The Florida Project*; 2015's *Tangerine*) in the US, as well as numerous examples in contemporary international cinema.

23. Tiago de Luca and Nuno Barradas Jorge write, "these film-makers . . . refuse to offer facile, schematic or ready-made interpretations, opting instead to observe, with attention and patience, all kinds of significant as well as insignificant realities. In so doing, slowness not only interrogates and reconfigures well-established notions of aesthetic and cultural worthiness—what is worthy of being shown, for how long it is worth being shown—but also what is worthy of our attention and patience." "Introduction: From Slow Cinema to Slow Cinemas," in *Slow Cinema*, ed. Tiago de Luca and Nuno Barradas Jorge (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016), 14.

24. Rosalind Galt and Karl Schoonover stand out from the more traditional methods of cinema studies to argue for queer cinema's worlding and worldliness in *Queer Cinema in the World* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016). *José* traveled to more than one hundred film festivals in fifty countries and had a limited theatrical release in the US in early 2020; its Asian director was able to tour with the film, but the US repeatedly denied the leading actor a visa to enter the country to promote the film, marking him as brown as the film crossed borders. Salanic had previously studied in the US and did promote the film in Europe. *José* Q&A with Brendan Lucas, Li Cheng, and Enrique Salanic for Outfest On-Demand, www.youtube.com/watch?v=v_Wa80Y0Plo.

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reveals another method of being with this film. Muñoz's book begins and ends with essays that claim, respectively, "Brownness is a being with, being alongside" and "As a concept, even a method, it offers us a sense of the world."[25] Muñoz models how to see both the annihilating conditions of José's life and that the character nonetheless endures on his own terms. This is an empathic lens that enriches how we might see the film, and how we might imagine with and beyond it. ■

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25. Muñoz, *The Sense of Brown,* 2; 149.