

HOMAY KING

## The Brown Commons in the Time of Pandemic

*Reflections on Zoom and Livestreamed Performance*

I first met José Esteban Muñoz through his writing in the collection *Pop Out: Queer Warhol* (1996), which he co-edited with Jennifer Doyle and Jonathan Flatley while still a graduate student. At the time I was writing a dissertation chapter on Warhol's films that read the Factory and Warhol's production methods as examples of collective, non-singular authorship. Like Warhol, Muñoz strikes me as first and foremost an artist of the social, a person working in the social as if it were a medium. And while Muñoz's *The Sense of Brown* (2020) is in some ways a book about Latinx art and culture, it is not a book about identity or an identity group—nor any other notion of discrete, disconnected personhood that the terms “author” and “artist” can evoke. The term “brown commons” is carefully chosen in Muñoz's final book to suggest something less proprietary than identity, less proprietary even than community, people, or collectivity, the first two of which suggest implicit membership criteria and the idea that different groups might be set against one another (“my” community, “my” people), the last of which conveys the sense of individuals coming together and sharing resources according to a system of apportionment (a collectively run business). The phrase “my commons” would be an oxymoron, the exclusionary vibe of the first-person possessive rendering the idea absurd. Nor is it easy to imagine a business run on the principles of “commons decision-making” or “commons profit-sharing.” The commons is that which by definition cannot be privatized or individuated—not even in democratic or equitable ways. The commons resists division. It is a magic circle that anyone can walk or drop into and out of, where animals can graze and gather to play, a resource that is not used up, but instead increases its bounty the more times it is accessed and spread around.

What would Muñoz have made of the era of global pandemic with its lockdowns and quarantined isolation, all of its remote and socially distanced work, education, art, and socializing? What happens to the commons under these conditions? As an artist of the social, he would certainly have come up with ingenious ways to create and participate in a virtual commons, as so many did. The remainder of this essay will provide some reflections on the challenges to creating a virtual commons during the COVID-19 pandemic, and on two livestreamed performances that did so, approached through the lens of the brown commons. By virtual commons, I don't just mean an online or digital gathering, nor do I mean a digital commons in the sense it is sometimes used to refer to

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an open-access repository of texts. I mean it in the expansive, Muñozian sense of “an impulse to move beyond singular subjectivity . . . a being with, being alongside . . . the endeavor of knowing a brownness that is our commonality.”<sup>1</sup>

One register in which Zoom and other teleconferencing platforms are notably depleted is the sensory: *sense* as in touch, smell, taste, and proprioceptivity, the sense of one’s existence as a body in dimensional space and time. Zoom interaction is limited to the optical and the auditory, and these registers are in turn restricted along a linear, one-directional axis. In Zoom there are no three-dimensional sensory cues to let one know where a given person is sitting in the room, to the left or the right. All audio emanates from the same speakers; the technology lacks binaural capacity. There is no peripheral vision; no periphery, just a grid. We cannot see much of what people are wearing, nor share a sense of the weather conditions that day (or even what time of day it is there in the other boxes), nor note the smell of chalk dust or ambient noise from outside a shared room. Indeed there is no room for ambient noise or even room tone on Zoom; it disrupts and requires muting. As a result, everything on Zoom appears to take place in a timeless vacuum, in the same grid formation. I suspect that this is one of the factors behind “pandemic fog” or difficulty concentrating and forming short-term memories. I remember events that take place in real time and space because of the Proustian details that stitch them into durational time: we met at such-and-such a restaurant, during a specific season and day of weather, we tasted specific flavors, I wore certain shoes, I walked on certain streets to meet you, and a given popular song played on the radio. All of these details coalesce together to create a durable memory image. My Zoom classes and events, by contrast, tended to blend together such that I couldn’t remember whether a gathering had taken place in July or September, nor who exactly had been present and what we had discussed. I noticed that I and others began to tell the same stories over and over again, having forgotten whether we had already had that conversation with this person, given that all conversations looked and felt the same. Every meeting, every event, every conference, seminar, book party, and birthday celebration took place in the same location: my apartment.

One would think that livestreamed performance risked succumbing to the same forces of mnemonic erasure—that it would represent the triumph of the Apollonian theatrical mode that Friedrich Nietzsche decries in *The Birth of Tragedy* (first published in 1866).<sup>2</sup> In the Apollonian mode, or epic theater, the audience is physically and optically separated from the performers, at a distance both spatially and emotionally. In the Dionysian mode of tragic theater, by contrast, the performers, chorus, and spectators breathe together as one: they are co-“revelers.”<sup>3</sup> The types of performance of which Muñoz writes in *The Sense of Brown* are Dionysian: excessive, exuberant, wet and muddy, a hungry “communion of empty mouths.”<sup>4</sup> Streaming video performance, by contrast, could be

1. José Esteban Muñoz, *The Sense of Brown*, ed. Joshua Chambers-Letson and Tavia Nyong’o (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2020), 2.

2. Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy and The Genealogy of Morals*, trans. Francis Golffing (New York: Doubleday, 1956), 56–57.

3. Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, 56.

4. Muñoz, *The Sense of Brown*, 98.

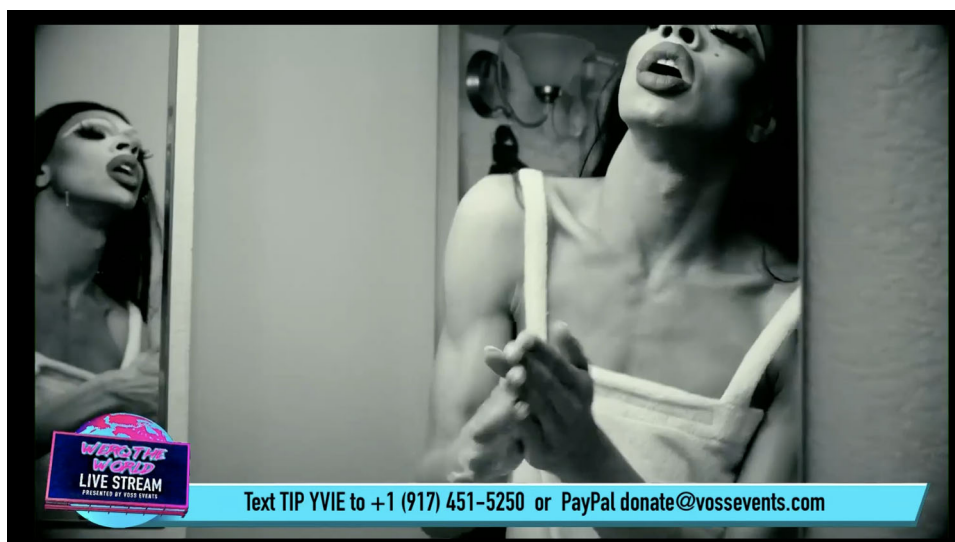


IMAGE 1. Screenshot of *Werq the World: Live Stream*, April 4, 2020, featuring Yvie Oddly.

said to take the Apollonian epic theater to the next level, widening the sterile remove between stage and gallery, making it more streamlined, more uni-directional, adding another layer of emotional distance, converting festival and ritual alike into dry, highly optical spectacles. In the pandemic era, the orchestra pit and floodlights separating spectators from performers would seem to become fully uncrossable, with the audience now scattered across unknown physical and temporal distances, “there” only as a number in a corner of the screen.

That said, some of my most memorable art encounters of 2020—the ones during which I most felt a “communion of empty mouths”—were livestreamed performances that I experienced on a computer. An early example was *Werq the World: Live Stream* on April 4, 2020, a fundraiser produced by Voss Events to benefit “local” drag performers affected by COVID-19 shutdowns, featuring internationally known drag performers who had gained fame as contestants on *RuPaul’s Drag Race*.<sup>5</sup> The livestream format was vaguely reminiscent of old TV telethons, with hosts Bianca Del Rio and Lady Bunny appealing directly to the cameras for cash tips with a phone number to text donations to on a crawler at the bottom of the screen. They bantered with one another in split screen between variety show numbers, some of which had been pre-recorded. One of the most timely and memorable of these featured the lithe Yvie Oddly lip-synching to Rihanna’s “Work” in her kitchen, only to be comically interrupted every few verses by a cartoonish version of the song “Happy Birthday,” at which cue she would run over to the sink to furiously wash her hands (this song, as one was frequently reminded at that time, is the proper length for thorough hand-washing). For their part, Del Rio and Lady Bunny inadvertently put the lag into drag: a noticeable delay in the live feed created awkward

5. See *Werq the World: Live Stream*, <https://vossevents.com/werq-the-world-live-stream/werq-the-world-live-stream>.

pauses between the delivery of a punchline and the reaction of laughter, making it seem as if jokes had not landed. Due to the same lag, the hosts occasionally stepped on one another's bits. In light of the show's otherwise slick production values, the imperfections were what made it feel intimate and present tense. The call back to the old-fashioned format of live telethon fundraisers, as well as to television variety series like *The Lawrence Welk Show*, also contributed to the sense of being in the same space and time as the performers. Seeing the queens in this way, at home or in home-like spaces, fractured the glass screen wall and created a sense of being alone together and together in aloneness.

The Bearded Ladies Cabaret's *Late Night Snacks: FEAST*, a twelve-hour livestream performance hosted by John Jarboe and local artists and directed by Sally Ollove, was performed October 17 and 18, 2020.<sup>6</sup> A durational feat along the lines of Taylor Mac's *A 24-Decade History of Popular Music*, the cabaret "festival" began with a curated set of performances from Paris, then proceeded around the world to livestreamed acts from London, Berlin, New York, Mexico City, Philadelphia, Seattle, New Zealand, and finally Australia, where it was already the next day. As Jarboe put it,

Cabaret is a different-strokes-for-different-folks kind of art form. It means very different things in different cultures, geographies and socio-political contexts. At its best, cabaret is a toolbox for clever resistance and subversion. It's also a marginalized artform practiced by marginalized artists—queerdos, misfits, artists who work in the liminal spaces among more established, resourced forms. By bringing artists from so many backgrounds together we are pooling our resources, getting better at resistance, finding joy, healing and at the same time building community among artists and audiences who may never have connected before.<sup>7</sup>

According to this definition, it would not be a stretch to call *FEAST* "brown" in the Muñozian sense, not simply because it featured queer BIPOC performers, but because it showcased art forms that "suffer and strive together . . . [and] the commonality of their ability to flourish under duress and pressure."<sup>8</sup> As Muñoz puts it elsewhere in the book, *FEAST* was an example of "weird brilliance under duress."<sup>9</sup>

Le Gateau Chocolat, whose stage name participates in the art-as-food metaphor of *Late Night Snacks*, demonstrated another way in which the production was brown: its mixture of traditionally high and low art forms, the celestial and the refuse bin. For his number, the trained opera singer projected an improbably gorgeous baritone from a tiny bathroom in London, in drag. From Philadelphia, Daniel de Jesús, a queer Latinx classical cellist with a voice like an angelic Andy Bell, performed a cover of Robyn's "Dancing on My Own," the song taking on an added poignancy in the context of pandemic lockdown.

6. The *Late Night Snacks: FEAST* brochure and program are available here: <https://issuu.com/beardedladiescabaret/docs/feastmenu>.

7. Brandon Schultz, "Only In 2020: How To Catch An International Marathon Of Queer Cabaret From 11 Cities For Free Without Leaving Home," *Forbes* online, October 14, 2020, [www.forbes.com/sites/brandonschultz/2020/10/14/only-in-2020-how-to-catch-an-international-marathon-of-queer-cabaret-from-11-cities-for-free-without-leaving-home/?sh=a4082523db5a](http://www.forbes.com/sites/brandonschultz/2020/10/14/only-in-2020-how-to-catch-an-international-marathon-of-queer-cabaret-from-11-cities-for-free-without-leaving-home/?sh=a4082523db5a).

8. Muñoz, *The Sense of Brown*, 2.

9. Muñoz, *The Sense of Brown*, 108.



IMAGE 2. Screenshot of the *Late Night Snacks: FEAST* livestream, featuring Daniel de Jesús, October 17, 2020.

Meanwhile, from New York, Raven O revealed the surprisingly lascivious aspects of Jerry Lee Lewis’s “Great Balls of Fire,” which once exposed can’t be unheard. Raven O performed the song from what looked like the narrow, dark hallway of a New York City loft-style apartment, with a strobe effect created by a manically waving flashlight. It was an extremely bare-bones *mise-en-scène* that nevertheless managed to convey a supremely eerie, bizarre, even supernatural sensation akin to a David Lynch dream sequence. These performances involve “brown reading” of their borrowed underlying materials, an attunement to a brownness that is there but concealed. In this way, they participate in the same gesture that Muñoz sees at work in Luis Alfaro’s use of Petula Clark’s “Downtown” as ironic elegy to an ideal that never existed: they are re-performances that uncover the brown stratum that was already there, hidden in plain sight or latent in compositions that could easily be mistaken for anodyne ones.<sup>10</sup>

Another aspect of the Bearded Ladies Cabaret’s twelve-hour *FEAST* cabaret that merits attention is its long duration, which created a kind of temporal commons into which viewers could drop in and out, or attempt to remain present for the entire performance. Having attended Mac’s *24-Decade History of Popular Music* nearly in its entirety in its Philadelphia iteration in June 2018, I let the livestream run for the full duration in hopes of recreating a facsimile of that magic bubble-like experience. As with Mac, Jarboe as Jarbeaux occupied the “stage” of the hosting screen for nearly the entirety of the show, with several costume and set changes, providing transitions and handing off to the local hosts who introduced their cities’ respective performers. The show was free to all, but those who donated at the \$35 level received a box in the mail containing party favors meant to allow viewers to simulate a nightlife experience at home (a candle, a shot glass, bubbles, condoms, a bag of microwave popcorn, a paper ticket, etc.). These tangible

10. Muñoz, *The Sense of Brown*, 61.

objects were occasionally referenced in Jarboe's between-act monologues, lending the experience an interactive theater element à la *Rocky Horror Picture Show*, even if slightly sad while experienced from home. These aspects were what lent the show its feeling of togetherness, and what made it a temporary commons. Through the minor duress of that endurance test of theater, a sense of a shared experience of being under pressure emerged, and a flourishing and weird brilliance in the face of it. The long-duration format in fact perfectly complemented the experience of pandemic lockdown, the perseverance and tenacity required to get through it. While a chat sidebar created a channel for audience commentary, this was not the primary source, for me, of the feeling of commonality. It was the grounding in shared time and specific cities around the world, the sense of emplacement in both duration and space, marked by a processional phantasmagoria of particular and glittering sensory details articulating each act, each curated group, each time zone. This is why, I believe, I recall so clearly each segment of that twelve-hour performance, why I remember which cities performed in which order, why I remember their names and costumes and music so vividly, even as I fail to distinguish one Zoom faculty meeting from another across the span of over a year. As Muñoz might have put it, the Bearded Ladies Cabaret's *FEAST* was not a multicultural rainbow, but instead a "whole enchilada": a communion of hungry empty mouths.<sup>11</sup> As Jarboe shared, "Our vision is to curate and offer work by cabaret artists that are made with the virtual form in mind, that is watchable, and that has sustenance, that is made with the intention to feed, heal, and sate."<sup>12</sup> Whereas the *Werg the World* livestream was made more real by the cracks exposed in its otherwise polished façade, the *FEAST* impressed in the opposite way, through its more or less seamless stitching together of dozens of acts across massive hurdles of time and space, creating continuity out of a digital form that tends toward disjunction and atomization, making of it a substantial "whole." ■

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HOMAY KING is a professor and Eugenia Chase Guild Chair in the Department of History of Art at Bryn Mawr College, and co-founder of Bryn Mawr's Program in Film Studies. She is the author of *Virtual Memory: Time-based Art and the Dream of Digitality* (2015), which won the Anne Friedberg Innovative Scholarship Award of Distinction from the Society for Cinema and Media Studies, and *Lost in Translation: Orientalism, Cinema, and the Enigmatic Signifier* (2010). She is a member of the *Camera Obscura* editorial collective.

11. Muñoz, *The Sense of Brown*, 76.

12. A. D. Amorosi, "From Noon until Midnight, the Bearded Ladies Cabaret Works It," October 16, 2020, [www.dosagemagazine.com/from-noon-until-midnight-the-bearded-ladies-cabaret-works-it-october-17s-late-night-snacks-2020-feast](http://www.dosagemagazine.com/from-noon-until-midnight-the-bearded-ladies-cabaret-works-it-october-17s-late-night-snacks-2020-feast).