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Gossip, the Common Denominator

One of the many facets of José Esteban Muñoz's work that has repeatedly proved significant for my writing and thinking is the articulation of an essential yet anti-essentialist communitarian politics underpinning the primary theoretical concepts for which he's widely known. Whether it's Muñoz's appraisal of minoritarian disidentifications with dominant cultural ideologies or the not-yet-here utopian promise of queer futurity, such influential critical frameworks are invariably bolstered by an astute assessment of how subjugated groups, through a range of expressive forms, articulate practices of collectivity that necessarily push against the grain of normative understandings of community and antirelational modes of being. In "The Brown Commons," the first chapter of his posthumously published book *The Sense of Brown* (2020), Muñoz extends his earlier desire to put forward a "version of queer social relations" that is at once "critical of the communitarian as an absolute value and of its negation as an alternative all-encompassing value."¹ "Brown commons," he asserts, "is the commons of brown people, places, feelings, sounds, animals, minerals, flora, and other objects."² And just as he stakes claims for provisional notions of solidarity and belonging in his earlier work, Muñoz makes clear that the "brown" in brown commons is not a fixed identity category but rather a capacious signifier encompassing those who "have been devalued by the world outside their commons."³ Furthermore, 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 subjectivity and the individualized subjectivities."⁴ In short, the establishment of a brown commons materializes not as a wholly formed cooperative based on assimilation or coexistence vis-à-vis individuation; rather, it is premised on the knowledge of a sense of brownness—an affective approximation more than a rigid racialized inscription, a shared feeling of collectiveness that is both historically anchored and persistently in flux—"that is our commonality."⁵

1. José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York: New York University Press, 2009), 10.

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

3. Muñoz, *The Sense of Brown*, 2.

4. Muñoz, *The Sense of Brown*, 2.

5. Muñoz, *The Sense of Brown*, 2.



IMAGE 1. Still from *Mi Pollo Loco* (1995) by Andrew Durham.

While I cannot claim to have belonged to Muñoz’s close-knit social circle, I do regard myself as part of a brown commons that he helped facilitate for many Latinx and queer (and queer Latinx) scholars. The last time I encountered him before his untimely passing was in October 2012 at the University of Texas at Austin for a symposium titled “Sexing the Borderlands: From the Midwest Corridor and Beyond,” which he keynoted and at which I presented. At one moment during the two-day event, he pulled me aside to ask about my well-being and the status of my second book. Although I had grown accustomed to his “check-ins” whenever I ran into him at conferences, our interaction in Austin was different. Later he invited me out for drinks and we took an Uber to a bar suggested by a Texas colleague, ordered cocktails, and proceeded to gossip about colleagues at my university and within the profession in general. Our exchange of deep gossip had not only made me feel more connected to him, but it also concretized the sense of brownness that congealed “our commonality.”

Queer literary studies scholar Henry Ablove, in explicating Allen Ginsberg’s elegy for Frank O’Hara titled “City Midnight Junk Strains” (1968), reads the Beat poet’s phrase “our deep gossip” as referencing “illicit speculation, information, knowledge.”⁶ For Ablove, “deep gossip” operates as “an indispensable resource for those who are in any sense or measure disempowered, as those who experience funny emotions may be, and it is deep whenever it circulates in subterranean ways and touches on matters hard to grasp and of crucial concern.”⁷ The circulation of deep gossip “in subterranean ways,” I argue, is akin to the way “our commonality” manifests as the brown commons. Taking a cue from Muñoz’s erudite engagement with video art (most notably in 1999’s *Disidentifications*:

6. Henry Ablove, *Deep Gossip* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), xii.

7. Ablove, *Deep Gossip*, xii.



IMAGE 2. Still from *Mi Pollo Loco* (1995) by Andrew Durham.

*Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics*⁸), I wish to further expound upon the power of gossip “as an indispensable resource for those who are in any sense or measure disempowered” in charting a brown commons by turning to Andrew Durham’s 1995 queer cult video classic *Mi Pollo Loco*. The video—a spoof of Allison Anders’s 1993 film *Mi Vida Loca* (My Crazy Life) about Chicana Echo Park gang members and riffing on the fast-food Mexican grilled chicken chain restaurant El Pollo Loco—casts a group of cholas (played by gay male actors in drag) from Los Angeles’s Silver Lake neighborhood who struggle to find their place in the barrio and beyond. The narrative pivots on a rumor spread by Lupe, a hairdresser who works out of her kitchen, that one of the homegirls, Misty, is having an affair with her friend Cha-Cha’s husband Tito. Finding support from (despite occasional conflicts with) Blanca and Pinky, Misty’s aspirations to become a supermodel in the face of urban destitution are nourished by a brown commons within a barrio culture that is as ruthless as it is sustaining. Although the rumor of Misty’s sexual trysts with Tito is initially false—indeed, a mere fabrication by Lupe in her role as the notorious neighborhood *chismosa*—it ultimately becomes true, at first dividing the girls but ultimately functioning as the catalyst to unite them after Cha-cha’s untimely death in a drive-by shooting.

Satire and humor might grant *Mi Pollo Loco* its distinct queer character, but the gossip initiated by Lupe is what propels the narrative, serving also as the primary element by which the girls establish a brown commons (in spite of how this gossip also holds the power to sever their frequently acknowledged family-like ties). Gavin Butt’s pathfinding 2005 book *Between You and Me: Queer Disclosures in the New York Art World*,

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

1948–1963 maintains that gossip simultaneously functions “both as object of study and as form of knowledge.”⁹ Thus, gossip works as the central object and allows one to assess *Mi Pollo Loco*’s plot while its utility within the video operates as a form of knowledge that wields the potential to bring together marginalized people to forge a brown commons. A common denominator to be sure, the deep gossip I shared with Muñoz is not unlike the way Lupe’s gossip serves as a vehicle for mapping “our commonality.”

I first caught wind of *Mi Pollo Loco*—not unlike how one sometimes overhears a rumor—in the late 1990s from an ex-boyfriend whose best friend’s friend had seen the video in a film festival years earlier in Los Angeles. At the time, I was a graduate student in the Bay Area preparing a dissertation chapter on representations of the family in Chicano/a film and video. Thanks to UCLA professor Chon Noriega, whom I emailed for film and video suggestions to consider for my chapter, I was accorded a second referral to the film. In an email message dated Thursday, August 20, 1998, Noriega wrote: “For something more perverse, there is always *Mi Pollo Loco*” (and this was after he listed a number of titles he called “Chicano queer media on the family”). Fortunately, I was able to track down director Durham, who kindly mailed me a VHS copy of *Mi Pollo Loco*. Twenty-one years later, I embrace Noriega’s identification of the video as “something more perverse,” in large part because *Mi Pollo Loco*’s engagement with gossip indeed helps make its kinship politics more generative. After all, the VHS tape box cover declares: “Blood is thicker than water but not as thick as liquid eyeliner.” This recalls Muñoz when he writes: “Brown commons are queer ecologies insofar as they are not ecologies depending on nature, which does not mean that they exclude nature. The queer ecology, which is the brown commons, includes the organic and the inorganic.”¹⁰

Along with the tape, Durham sent me press materials that helped contextualize the video. As the press release notes:

Conceived on a Tuesday, then shot the following weekend, *Mi Pollo Loco* broke some of the cardinal rules of practical filmmaking. There were no rehearsals, no second takes, and for the most part, all dialogue was improvised. Shot in 102-degree weather, the actors would enter make-up at five a.m. and continue to shoot until 1 a.m. The next morning would follow suit. Due to the nature of a small crew, actors were responsible for their own make-up and costuming for continuity purposes; with the exception of Mr. Vargas.

According to the Los Angeles-based lesbian magazine *Female FYI*, “Despite grueling weather conditions (those wigs can be so hot), the film produces several knock-out performances, most notably Victor Vargas as Misty and the always wonderful Jackie Beat as a hairdresser with a penchant for big hair.”¹¹ Additionally, the press materials note how “*Mi Pollo Loco* is a success story in its own right, having been made for such little money,

9. Gavin Butt, *Between You and Me: Queer Disclosures in the New York Art World, 1948–1963* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005), 4.

10. Muñoz, *The Sense of Brown*, 4.

11. This is from a photocopy of the article that Durham sent me. Unfortunately, it does not include the date of the publication or page numbers.

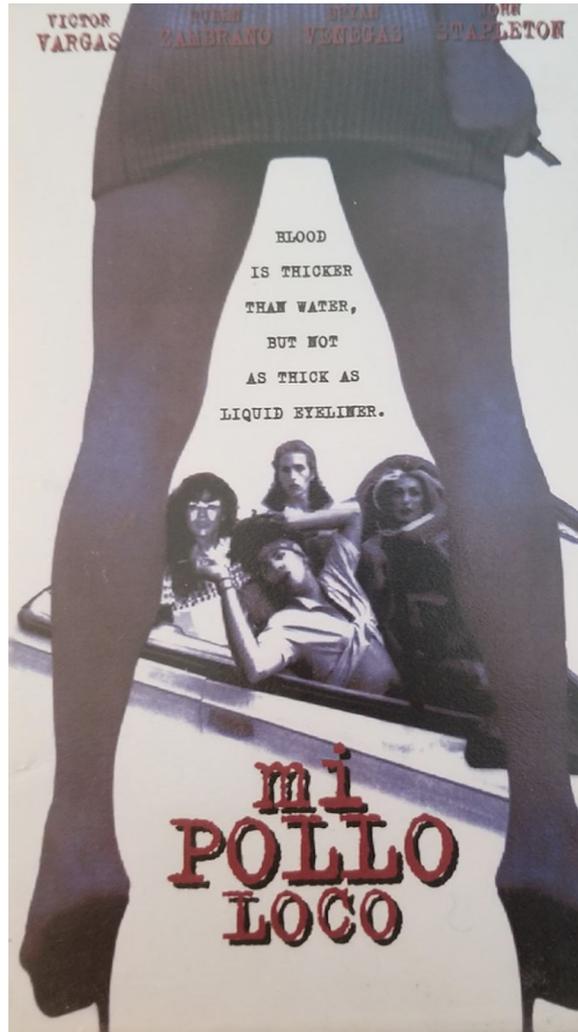


IMAGE 3. VHS box cover for *Mi Pollo Loco* (1995) by Andrew Durham.

it continues to grow, gaining its own cult status on the festival circuit.” This included festivals such as Frameline in San Francisco and Out on the Screen in Los Angeles, as well as assorted screenings in France, Italy, and London.

Mi Pollo Loco's emergence in the mid-1990s links it to other Chicano/a queer video productions of this historical moment. In his email, Noriega mentioned Danny Acosta's 1991 *A History of Violence*; but there's also the work of Eugene Rodríguez (1985's *Straight, No Chaser*), Laura Aguilar (1995's *Talking About Depression*, and *The Knife* and *The Body*, both from 1996), Osa Hidalgo-de la Riva (1991's *The Olmeca Rap*, 1992's *Primitive and Proud*, and 1998's *Zone 4*), Augie Robles (1993's *Cholo Joto*), and Robles and Tina Valentín Aguirre (*iViva 16!* from 1994). Michael Renov and Erika Suderburg's introduction to their edited collection *Resolutions: Contemporary Video Practices* (1996)

details the need to spotlight “marginalized work, videomaking that has been forced to build its audience in ever more diverse venues with little institutional support.”¹² For Renov and Suderburg, “these works and the cultural practices that subtend them are deserving of our collective investigation; the work needs to be looked at critically, given a space in which to serve as a catalyst for debate and as an alternative to the exclusionary canons of avant-garde film and video.”¹³ But it’s not only “the exclusionary canons of avant-garde film and video” to which one might want alternatives. Given the incessant demand for mainstream, Hollywood-financed feature films that proffer so-called affirmative representations of Latinx and queer communities, alternatives to what often counts as “positive” might better serve us for greater representational complexity. When Muñoz asserts that the “task at hand is not to enact a commons, but to touch an actually existing commons,”¹⁴ we might see this as an indispensable recommendation to not force some romanticized notion of the positive but rather represent the quotidian lives—as does *Mi Pollo Loco*—of those occupying the brown commons.

Years later, as a faculty member at UC Riverside in the Department of Media and Cultural Studies, I decided to transfer a number of titles I acquired on VHS to DVD. *Mi Pollo Loco* was one of them. As I had always loved the VHS box’s cover image, I took a photo of it and posted it on Instagram. A number of friends, many of them queer Latinxs, commented that they had heard rumors of this film’s existence and asked how they could obtain a copy. Some commented that an excerpt of *Mi Pollo Loco* was available on YouTube, but they wanted to see the entire video. With the recirculation of the video through various means (including teaching it in a course titled “Queer of Color Cultural Critique”), *Mi Pollo Loco*’s previously rumored status has in turn helped form more recent commons of spectators. Moreover, its standing as a devalued cultural form—that is, video, and one that has been supplanted by digital technology in recent years—allows us to imagine alternative representations in contrast to what we often assume are our only available options as evidence to stake argumentative and historical claims. But in order to document “the relations that bring this commons into existence,” we must be willing to circulate these texts in ways that we circulate our deep gossip—spreading the word “in subterranean ways,” to call upon Abelow once more, to “[touch] on matters hard to grasp and of crucial concern.”¹⁵

Mi Pollo Loco precisely illustrates Abelow’s claim that gossip “circulates in subterranean ways and touches on matters hard to grasp and of crucial concern.” That is, while gossip is routinely dismissed as inconsequential or lacking in factual substantiation, I want to insist, along with Abelow, that gossip holds considerable weight, especially for those grasping for a sense of belonging within disempowered, “subterranean” communities. This is one of many ways the brown commons manifests and takes hold. While gossips are routinely loathed as malevolent busybodies—not minding their own business or not

12. Michael Renov and Erika Suderburg, “Introduction: Resolving Video,” in *Resolutions: Contemporary Video Practices*, ed. Michael Renov and Erika Suderburg (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), xvii.

13. Renov and Suderburg, “Introduction: Resolving Video,” xvii.

14. Muñoz, *The Sense of Brown*, 6.

15. Muñoz, *The Sense of Brown*, 7; Abelow, *Deep Gossip*, xii.

having anything better to do than talk shit—and the “matters” broached by the gossip they produce may be difficult to register as constructive within the terms of respectability, the crucial concerns generated by gossip extend beyond the speech act to manifest as a material sense of belonging. I’m interested, then, in how the force and utility of gossip lies in its incompatibility with categories like “fact” or “fiction” to instead view its status as a “lie” imbued with the potential to bind. Thus, as Ablove’s reading of “deep gossip” serves as a motivating force, I also want to emphasize his unpacking of Ginsberg’s “our.” He writes: “But who are the ‘we’ that make up the antecedent of ‘our’—the ‘we’ to whom the deep gossip belongs? No ‘we’ is defined or specified here. Nor is even mentioned. So the antecedent of ‘our’ is left suggestively indefinite, unfixed, open.”¹⁶

While Ablove maintains that “our” is “left suggestively indefinite, unfixed, open,” I wish to make the case that “our”—or “we”—connects back to the brown commons impulse that is part and parcel of deep gossip. Patricia Meyer Spacks, in her foundational study *Gossip* (1985), notes how in the novels *Vanity Fair* (1848, by William Thackeray), *What Masie Knew* (1897, by Henry James), and *The Great Gatsby* (1925, by F. Scott Fitzgerald), gossip “speaks for a community: not for a social class, but for a smaller group implicitly concerned with its own collective power.”¹⁷ Read alongside Spacks, “our deep gossip,” therefore, is contoured by the desire to belong by cultivating a network of like-minded, similarly situated individuals with whom one strives to keep company. And even the subject on whom gossip focuses is implicated in this process of collective bonding. After all, gossip commands a multidirectional interpellative force that affectively enfolds an array of individuals into its discursive orbit, or rather its brown commons. As Muñoz puts it, “Brown affect traverses the rhythmic spacing between those singularities that compose the plurality of a brown commons.”¹⁸

In his 2015 essay “What’s the Tea: Gossip and the Production of Black Gay Social History,” historian Kwame Holmes ascertains “an opportunity to ask if gossip could function as an archive of experience even as it resists recognition and institutionalization.”¹⁹ In Holmes’s work, gossip is pivotal for charting the lives and activism of black gay subjects elided by official histories, mainstream institutions, and “an intersecting matrix of structural and quotidian oppression.”²⁰ Like Butt, who writes, “I flirt with the dangers of not being taken seriously by the guardians of those who would claim to know the value of ‘proper’ historical work,”²¹ I want to insist on flirting with the dangers of being maligned just like any good gossip (just like *Mi Pollo Loco*’s Lupe). Carefully listening to gossip—pursuing its possible leads, fleshing out the significance behind it—might lead us to a more capacious field of cultural expression and critical analysis such as that comprising Muñoz’s archive and theoretical toolkit while also

16. Ablove, *Deep Gossip*, xii.

17. Patricia Meyer Spacks, *Gossip* (New York: Knopf, 1985), 226.

18. Muñoz, *The Sense of Brown*, 3.

19. Kwame Holmes, “What’s the Tea: Gossip and the Production of Black Gay Social History,” *Radical History Review* 122 (May 2015): 55–69.

20. Kwame Holmes, “What’s the Tea,” 67.

21. Butt, *Between You and Me*, 4.

thinking about the field's capacity to acknowledge the brown commons constituted thereby and therein. Indeed, we must move beyond the surface to dig deep for evidence of the brown commons—retrievable through our deep gossip—that will point the way to what's yet to come. Or, as Muñoz memorably maintains, on the horizon. ■

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