

# Being with José

## *An Introduction*

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It is far too soon to be publishing a tribute issue to the life and work of José Esteban Muñoz (1967–2013). Not only did he die tragically young, but the reflections and original artwork that appear here were gathered over the winter of 2013–14 to meet a self-imposed, ambitiously early publication deadline. Why the rush? Certainly not to complete the consideration of his work's impact, an ongoing and multivalent labor of many minds and hearts.<sup>1</sup> Perhaps it is to punctuate that consideration with a substantive contribution in a medium—print—that José immensely valued, and in a venue—*Social Text*—in which he was immensely valued. Without him, the collective endeavor that *Social Text* represents would be quite different, arguably lesser. And as it must be without him now, perhaps by publishing this issue we can honor and extol a sense of the enlivening ways of knowing and being that characterize José, as a colleague and friend, and José Esteban Muñoz, the scholar and critic.

This issue has been the joint effort of the “Being With” *Social Text* research cluster composed of Jonathan Beller, Kandice Chuh, Ana Dopico, David Eng, Licia Fiol-Matta, Joshua Guzmán, Eng-Beng Lim, Tavia Nyong'o, Alex Pittman, and Robert Reid-Pharr. Members of the cluster contributed their time and spirit to this project in various ways, including writing, reviewing, and soliciting artwork and essays. The research cluster model has allowed us to experiment with both the forms of academic writing—as exemplified in this issue—and the modes of intellectual engagement and collaboration. Our editorial process has been less oriented toward producing a unified vision of Muñoz or his work and more toward occasioning dialogue and even dissent, much in the spirit of José's work.

We have therefore omitted the chapter summaries ordinarily found in introductory essays, instead, leaving open a more aleatory encounter for the reader. Although the “cluster” form is itself an open one, and future research clusters will necessarily take different shapes, *Being With* has provided an opportunity to open out the work of the collective to engage many others for whom José was also irreplaceable.

We intend the essays and artwork collected here to illuminate and evoke at least a little of the vast impact that his ways of knowing, being, and thinking both facilitated and modeled. We especially seek to register his commitments to art and art makers; to vulnerable and vibrant brown and queer bodies (who were sometimes one and the same); to teaching and students; to colleagues and friends; to knowing and desiring *otherwise*; to working actively toward better worlds, better futurities; and to collaboration and critical theory. These commitments and allegiances are reflected in this issue. As befits the range and variance in our professional and affectional relationships with each other and with José, we sought to avoid imposing any singular model of address across the issue: some contributors speak of José, some of Muñoz; some reflect critically upon the “Muñozian” (and that individual choice in each case reflects more factors than personal familiarity). The intimacy of the first name is sometimes balanced by the respect accorded the last name, the professional title, or even the adjectival form of his name. The public consequences of according either intimacy or respect (or both) to a scholar of color, and a queer scholar, are not to be minimized. But nor are they easily subject to a single rule. Rather than consistency, we have opted to allow for a multiplicity of stances within the content of this issue.

José Muñoz joined the *Social Text* collective in 1994, as part of a critical mass of new members who would come to play a defining role in the directions this journal has since taken. As long-time collective member Stefano Harney noted, “It is not too much to say that the very form of the contemporary collective, its size, richness, and dissensus, is due to the influence of José. . . . Benefiting from the continuity and wisdom of Randy Martin, José and others of that cohort . . . generated an almost entirely new journal. . . . [They led] a kind of exodus to a new future for the journal. In other words, José’s utopia was in effect even then.”<sup>2</sup> Muñoz published repeatedly in this journal, on topics ranging from the queer poetics at the heart of *Social Text*’s history to, most recently, a short engagement with Fred Moten’s poetry.<sup>3</sup> He also coedited two special issues focused on elaborating the histories, stakes, and complexities of queer theory.<sup>4</sup>

At the same time that *Being With* has been spurred by the central role José played in the *Social Text* collective (he was, together with Randy Martin, its longest-serving active member), we remain acutely aware that this issue cannot but in some ways enact failure. We do not expect that it

will ameliorate grief, nor do we think that it can offer comforting narrative closure to mourning. And it will not return him to us. Taking Muñoz's lead, we embrace this inevitable failure and recognize it as an unavoidable part of thinking and teaching and living the impossible. This, too, is a theme that punctuates this collection of essays—the necessity of living with the impossibility that José is actually no longer in this present. As his work reminds us, failure is an unavoidable part of teaching minoritarian knowledge, not least because so much of institutional life is stacked against its production and support. But he teaches us that it is out of love and necessity that one persists in the effort to cultivate spaces and practices of minoritarian production, through methods that emphasize a sustaining playfulness and irony in learning to navigate “the larger economy that is pedagogy's here and now.”<sup>5</sup> In this regard, we can take from Muñoz the crucial reminder that the task at hand is, through teaching, aesthetic expression, hard thinking, active labor, and loud living, to short-circuit the systems that require the failure of many in the service of the success of a few.

As the pieces collected here suggest, Muñoz's impact resonates strongly and in multiple ways. Though he himself was decidedly without attachment to normative ideals of success, José was nonetheless deeply and actively invested in the success of his students. His mentoring, Alexandra T. Vazquez writes in her contribution to this issue, was nothing short of witchcraft: he taught how to craft livable worlds from intellectual activity, never shying away from acknowledging the difficult labor and experiences of vulnerability that attend to identifying the academy as a horizon of success. Citing Ernst Bloch in *Cruising Utopia*, José expounds upon “an anticipatory illumination,” a horizon of thought, a thing we cannot prescribe, and “a surplus of affect and meaning within the aesthetic” that many also came to know through his pedagogy.<sup>6</sup> It was this kind of engagement with a horizon that he taught to his students. His meditations on performance and the ways he lingered on small scenes and gestures demonstrated a way into an idea, a beginning, and an unimagined politics. He modeled a form of thinking that encouraged the engagement with the labor of writing as a means to imagine futures. His students learned not only how to see moments of potential in their objects of study but also how to sit with these moments—to refuse to bear them out in simplified or singular ways—as itself a political act of survival.

Several of the contributors to this issue were formally his students and address his mentoring directly. All were touched by Muñoz's capacity to elicit better thinking and deeper engagement and to offer sharp, generous guidance and crucial support regardless of status or stature—and this despite and sometimes because of the impossibility of flourishing in the present. His mentorship also materialized in his role as an editorial adviser to *Women and Performance*, a journal that, like *Social Text*, is edited by a collective and forges space for emerging and established scholars to work

collectively; he published a special issue of that journal on queer acts and another on the relationship between psychoanalysis and affect.<sup>7</sup> This issue is likewise pervaded by some of the many and differing ways in which José touched and transformed the thinking and living and means of survival of those who encountered him, of those whom he encountered. This is part of what “being with” attempts to evoke.

The title of this special issue, “Being With: A Special Issue on the Work of José Esteban Muñoz,” we hope is self-explanatory. But it also registers Muñoz’s career-long and creative encounter with the Marxist tradition and, in particular, his deep engagement with the work of Jean-Luc Nancy, who reworks being-with as an ontological category when he writes, “being cannot *be* anything but being-with-one-another, circulating in the *with* and as the *with* of this singularly plural coexistence.”<sup>8</sup> Being-with certainly describes how Muñoz lived with theory, as Jonathan Beller discusses in this issue. His appetite for theory was as voracious as it was discerning. work in the interdisciplinary field of performance studies. As he worked within and around the interdisciplinary field of performance studies, Muñoz drew both from Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari’s writings on “minor literature” and from the work of Gloria Anzaldúa and Cherrie Moraga on women-of-color feminism to theorize minoritarian performance.<sup>9</sup> In *Disidentifications*, Muñoz also drew from the work of Michel Pêcheux, Louis Althusser, and Frantz Fanon.<sup>10</sup> In *Cruising Utopia* he built upon the work of Ernst Bloch to argue for a queer insistence on “concrete utopias [that] are relational to historically situated struggles, [and constitutive of a queer] collectivity that is actualized or potential.”<sup>11</sup> In the book that he was completing at the time of his death, *The Sense of Brown*, Muñoz had turned to the work of Nancy to theorize what he described as the “sense of brown” and the political necessity of the “sharing out” of the incalculable experience of a minor way of sensing the world by queer and brown bodies.

Arguably, José’s last turn to sense and sharing was a way of teaching us about the obligation to be together now in spite of the incommunicability of his loss, to share out with and for each other, and him. “Death is indissociable from community,” Nancy writes in *The Inoperative Community*, “for it is through death that the community reveals itself—and reciprocally.”<sup>12</sup> If the loss of José, both the scholar and the friend, was the dimming of a horizon for so many, this final lesson illuminates a future in which he is with us, stitched into all of us, because it seems that when we are together, sharing and recognizing this communion of the incommunicable, we are the closest to him. As Jack Halberstam observes, “Just one of the many contradictions that José’s death leaves us with is that we are now a community of mourners, united in our loss while we remain

disconnected in all kinds of other ways. . . . [To accept] that he is gone is the task we have all agreed to here and whether that means that we rage against loss or think it through the concept of ‘queer temporality,’ we are nonetheless, all of us, in this, in this loss, loose in the forest, encircling the city and unable to find our way out.” In this sense, we imagine this issue to be less a map out of the forest as much as an offering of options for surviving in the wilderness.

Many authors in this volume take up Nancy’s work, directly and in dialogue with Muñoz. And we were heartened to have received a contribution from Nancy himself (made possible through another friend and colleague, Avital Ronell). If being-with recognizes plurality as and at the heart of singularity, then it speaks to the simultaneity of seemingly contradictory conditions of being. This issue necessarily reflects those contradictions, in part because they make up both what José’s bewitching pedagogies understood and the ground from which they took flight: as much as in his inhabiting of collaboration in teaching and writing as from his engagements in other projects, like *Social Text*, and in his intimate and critical appreciation of methexis and the undercommons. In a distinctly Muñozian fashion, then, this issue performs being-with to evince the plural singularity of worlds and the mind-growing pathways of thinking and living that are set aflight by, with, and through him.

Perhaps most obvious, this issue responds to the poignant question Joshua Chambers-Letson raises in his contribution: “José Muñoz should not have died, but how do we continue to think and live with him (and each other) in spite of this loss?” Indeed, the inescapable, hard fact is that this issue exists because of this loss. The responses to this question have different textual and artistic manifestations, both in this issue and in many other venues online and in print. Some authors write out of mourning, some out of melancholy, while others resist either term and instead imagine alternative modes of feeling and thinking through loss. The responses to this question have manifested in other ways, as well, for instance, in the many performances staged and screenings held in celebration of his life. These responses collected in this issue must also fail to be adequate to those who have yet to find a way to respond. The project of Being With extends beyond the publication of this special issue to include additional essays and artwork available on the editorial collective’s website ([social-textjournal.org](http://social-textjournal.org)). But its extent is still finite. Presence here or elsewhere is not a certain index of intimacy or depth of mourning, but one among the many instances of being-with.

A selection of images populates this special issue. While the artists represented here are a few of the people who inspired him, the collection was curated less as a historical documentation of the lives and perfor-

mances that coursed throughout José's scholarship and more as a set of illuminating gestures in the visual field. These are images that speak to contact, intimacy, and queer possibility. José recently read and enthusiastically recommended Jean-Luc Nancy's *The Pleasure in Drawing*. In this text, Nancy examines pleasure, via Adorno and Hegel, as a mode of apprehension in which the viewer of art subjects her objects of interest to continued contemplation rather than a possessive and consumptive knowing. He writes, "Contemplation does not consume what it contemplates—through contemplation, it renews its hunger and thirst."<sup>13</sup> In this vein, the images demand contemplation. Following our devastating loss, many of us will recognize our teacher, mentor, and friend in that which is presented. Perhaps the images will conjure for us a sense of the horizon and the utopian potential so expertly rendered for us by José's engagement with the artists. Yet, in doing so, the art refuses to be fully known according to any language of expert understanding, no matter how persuasive the arguments. In this sense, the works we present should not be seen as a certain kind of archival gesture in which the objects of inspiration are entombed within the memorial project. Rather, the art has been collected in hopes that all those who encounter the images will be driven to contemplate, continually renewing in themselves a hunger and thirst for that which José and these artists make possible.

Indeed, José's commitment to contemplation, to opening or sharing out, as a social and aesthetic practice can be seen as well in the piece that closes the print publication of this issue. In his poetic contribution, Jorge Ignacio Cortiñas creates out of José's informally published words—drawn from text messages, e-mails, and other miscellaneous writings—what we might rightly call "José-ness." It is a piece that captures the sense of being with José that this introduction has sought to convey—the ways in which otherwise disparate and sometimes conflicting persons and groups were, as in this issue, brought together by his way of being in the world, his way of being-with. Part of what Cortiñas's poem evokes is the way in which José could be startlingly frank, an incisive honesty that, informed by his fundamental kindness and massive intellect, coupled with a hefty dose of irony and humor, made it possible to work toward and for better truths—about selves and others but, foremost, about the worlds that we inhabit and how we might change or invent new ones. In this spirit, we hope this issue will encourage readers to accept his invitation to "demand more and more from the world and . . . not be content to settle."<sup>14</sup>

## Notes

1. For only a few of such considerations of his work, see, e.g., Jennifer Doyle and Tavia Nyong'o, "José Esteban Muñoz (1967–2013)," *Artforum*, 14 March 2014, [artforum.com/passages/id=45540](http://artforum.com/passages/id=45540); "José Esteban Muñoz (1967–2013): A Collage," *Boundary 2*, 14 March 2014, [boundary2.org/2014/03/14/jose-esteban-munoz-1967-2013-a-collage/](http://boundary2.org/2014/03/14/jose-esteban-munoz-1967-2013-a-collage/); "José Esteban Muñoz—1967–2013," *Bully Bloggers*, 6 December 2013, [bullybloggers.wordpress.com/2013/12/06/jose-esteban-munoz-1966-2013](http://bullybloggers.wordpress.com/2013/12/06/jose-esteban-munoz-1966-2013).

2. Stefano Harney, personal communication, 20 April 2014.

3. Most recently, Muñoz published "The Event of the Poem: 'the gramsci monument'" in *Social Text* 32, no. 1 (2014): 119–21. For a list of his other written contributions to *Social Text*, see the bibliography collected on the editorial collective's website: "Remembering José Esteban Muñoz," 7 December 2013, [socialtextjournal.org/remembering-jose-munoz/](http://socialtextjournal.org/remembering-jose-munoz/).

4. See José Esteban Muñoz, Phillip Brian Harper, Anne McClintock, and Trish Rosen, eds. "Queer Transexions of Race, Nation and Gender," special issue, *Social Text* (1997); and José Esteban Muñoz, David L. Eng, and Judith Halberstam, eds. "What's Queer about Queer Studies Now?," special issue, *Social Text* 23, nos. 3–4 (2005).

5. José Esteban Muñoz, "Teaching, Minoritarian Knowledge, and Love," *Women and Performance* 14, no. 2 (2005): 119.

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

7. Those special issues are "Queer Acts," *Women and Performance* 8, no. 2 (1996); and "Between Psychoanalysis and Affect: A Public Feelings Project," *Women and Performance* 19, no. 2 (2009).

8. Jean-Luc Nancy, *Being Singular Plural* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2000), 3; see also Nancy, "The Being-with of Being-there," *Continental Philosophy Review* 41 (2008): 1–15.

9. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*, trans. Dana Polan (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986); Gloria Anzaldúa and Cherríe Moraga, eds., *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color* (New York: Kitchen Table/Women of Color Press, 1983).

10. José Esteban Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 11.

11. Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 3.

12. Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*, ed. Peter Connor (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), 14.

13. Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Pleasure in Drawing*, trans. Philip Armstrong (New York: Fordham University Press, 2013), 18.

14. José Esteban Muñoz, "'Gimme Gimme This . . . Gimme Gimme That': Annihilation and Innovation in the Punk Rock Commons," *Social Text* 31, no. 3 (2013): 107.

