

Love Spirals

NOTES ON BROWN FEELINGS

J Molina-Garcia

J Molina-Garcia is a Salvadoran American media artist, professor, and writer. A graduate of the Photography and Media Program at CalArts, Molina-Garcia's visual and rhetorical output constructs assemblages of fiction, cultural criticism, and queer critical race theory to reanimate the dead (ancient knowledge and brown ghosts).

Family ruptures of the type characterizing contemporary mass death have created erratic unities between the body, self, and environment. Brown people are dying in high-def. Everywhere you look; it's panoramic and immersive.

Forty-nine people killed at Pulse, twenty-three at the Walmart shooting in El Paso, and an unknown number of child deaths at detention centers, under the oversight of a decentralized prison system run amuck, unregulated.

Something approaching the idea of national feelings has festered in my mind since the Pulse shootings occurred in the summer of 2016.¹ Living on the West Coast at the time, the distance between Orlando and me seemed entirely phantasmatic; the world had turned small, without borders. I turned to my friend and said, that could have been us.

Measurement foreclosed that day—a distance that grew small not only in spatial distance but in proximity to my body's politics. I saw only mirror copies in their wake. These names that sounded like mine: Almodovar, Torres, Martinez.

A news video appeared on my Facebook feed of Aurelia Martínez, the mother of one of the victims, speaking from Hidalgo, Mexico, in anguish

on the first take: “Cuanto sufren las mamas para mantener sus hijos / How much do mothers suffer to tend/abide by/support/sustain/hold their children.”² So many worlds were collapsing, and I thought, this must be what José Esteban Muñoz was talking about when he spoke of nationalized Brown feelings, Brown feelings felt on a mass scale. For if there is mass consumerism and viral action, there must also be mass feelings, operating on a mass scale, virulently. Other children and offspring of the Latin American diaspora would have understood these reactions—people for whom I wouldn’t have to deliver the multiplicity of meaning that *mantener* holds. The word simply would have been felt, *en masse*.

Six years before his death in 2013, Muñoz had been writing on the outsized misery and politicized tears of the Brown subject in his quippy essay “Feeling Brown, Feeling Down,” where the *feminized, racial* position of tears took central stage, boldly rejecting the generically or universally melancholic for the historically situated.³ Reading now, I think he thought there was artfulness to *how* a Brown woman grieves (the methods *and recovery*).

If he were here now, I would ask him, *under the scale of violence* of Brown death (because it is truly a spectacle), what affective responses do I have in light of a nation intent on driving me to suicide? Muñoz hypothesized on how culturally bound vulnerabilities could battle conglomerates—dominant culture and the like—and how they might provide escape and liberation for minority identities or, as he might have said, the *minoritarian*; a word that remains foreign to my word editing application’s spell checker because the idea of a minority identity holding a degree of control (-tarian) remains an unfulfilled syntactical promise.

The geographic shrinkage I felt at Pulse is but one very visible example of what I’m referring to, but it’s not the exclusive domain of trauma, like some afterimage of violence that makes you feel as if you’re next. There is a subtexture of closeness that keeps all disenfranchised populations affiliated. Had Muñoz lived, there is no timeline that would have prevented our inevitable kinship; one benefit of the subjection of a tyrannical sovereign is that it creates predestined pathways of overlap for the impoverished.

Is this not the same experience of relating to the dead, queer mentors of the AIDS epidemic? All that mythical gay life of creation and creative accomplishment banished. Black life in America must understand this as well. We go throughout our day communing with ghosts more than living ancestors because of systematic wipeouts of inherited knowledge and legacy. Does the *minoritarian* subject simply grieve like no other? Is this why the death of a known stranger feels like a deprivation, regardless of the distance that separates us across time and space? Hurt for the other remains.

In his works and case studies, Muñoz exhibited an effervescent thinking around belonging, companionship, and resistance, with a palette and taste for the particular radicality of cultural artifacts to intervene in the everyday. These are the seeds that inform my own research as an artist—how suffering stretches us closer across space and dissimilar temporalities—and why something like the misspelling of the word *minoritarian* appears like a margin of opportunity to blast open the rhetoric of violence deployed through official language.



J Molina-Garcia,
Superpasaporte (digital
reconstruction of anti-theft
patterns), 2017. Adobe
Illustrator file, 4.75 × 3.5 in,
7.5 × 5.25 in.

Most of the processes I employ are shelled within their own respective box of depressive labor, directly outputted from a melancholic need to repair.

I spent hours illustrating digital copies of the antitheft patterns that appear on passports, so that I could print infinite copies of my Salvadoran passport, whose internal language I amended to translate a phrase in Spanish that is left curiously untranslated in English: “Este registro tiene por objeto facilitar la protección legal debida a los Salvadoreños en el extranjero / The purpose of this document is to facilitate the legal protection *owed* to Salvadorans in the foreign land” (my italics). I grew up to become a forgery artist, making counterfeits to catalog the range of Brown feelings reacting against state control. In an unfair game, the local pickpockets, petty thieves, and criminals will have the best methods of analysis. Looking to artifice and reassembly, you find: the doctored deceptions, the pickpocket’s nimbleness, the border-crosser’s survival tactics. People cheating to survive.

Muñoz writes that tragedy begets a rip, a breakdown in the revolutionary imaginary, making us feel helpless or out of ideas. These outsized events get so big that they can't be contained or managed. Our hearts stop, we are speechless; we are made senseless. Rationality (common sense) fatigues.

Muñoz's theory is no longer speculative; anyone surviving the COVID era will know the immobilizing mannerisms of national feelings; they have become embodied; we are paralyzed. Why are we so fatigued in the days following the mass spectacle of Black death in America? Do you remember your tired body the summer George Floyd died? You can barely stand it because collective anguish must work like an incantatory contagion, like internal screams amplifying a Wi-Fi signal, so that we're all in misery, en masse.

(Brownness, Muñoz notes, in its use and deployment of depressive positions, is a mode of attentiveness *to the self for others*. *To the self for others*. This idea/concept never made sense to me until after I understood the pain of self-love.)

Here's the short of it. Depression suspends thought. Ethics emerges out of it, providing greater insight into psychic reality. The depressive condition interjects obsessive attachment that can clog the emotional sores left by Capital. Obsession (which can take the form of an attachment behaving like a spiral; fractal and exponential) can become self-destructive because it is a deluge: however unpredictable, it holds its own quiet, efficient agency. Love does this as well. You want to do its bidding, but it might kill you in the process.

Optimistically, Muñoz thought the deluge could be leveraged to drive our civic interactions with the state, creating pools of nationalized Brown feelings held together through membership in near disintegration ("Brownness is a kind of uncanny persistence in the face of *distressed* conditions of possibility").⁴

Of the ashes, we take the anger and the hurt and metabolize it as an external spectacle that cauterizes the wound. Aesthetics are crucial here. Jordan Peele does something Muñoz would have heralded—a truly dis-identificatory response to the genre of horror; Peele constructs cinematic representations of the nightmares of the Black mind, demonstrating the merit of publishing the terrors of the subaltern and their origin, *for they are shared* among more than one.

Brown feelings are not destiny—not a dogma or ideology that would bind Latinx subjects to any predetermined course of action or a space of belonging (like a cookie cutter mold), although maybe you'll cry harder, *together*, when you finally see yourself represented in culture or suffer

the death of your worshipped idol. Selena's death was Brown feelings maximized.

Muñoz said it like this: "Communal mourning by its very nature, is an immensely complicated text to read, for we do not mourn just one lost object or other, but we also mourn as a 'whole.'"⁵

Affective attachment made possible through racial conditioning doesn't create mechanical (unfeeling) clones, but it certainly provides a matrix of induction whereby racialized subjects understand each other at the level of the material, which can make way for a stronger, coalition-based politics. It's about weaponizing our shared *affinities*.

Brown feelings make possible the physical vibration of matter, making things appear as if in a circuit, where one injury inevitably reverberates along the net. It's not about knowing; it's about quaking and turbulence—the feeling, unspoken, that you and I are vibrating on a genealogical wavelength.⁶

Love Spirals, Act II

It's 2016—I'm watching that VICE documentary interviewing a white supremacist at the Charlottesville rally who tells the correspondent he's readying for a war, and immediately, I go to my pull-up bar and do ten pull-ups.

It's 2020—video of unmarked vehicles driven by federal agents kidnapping protesters in broad daylight, cleaving them from indignant and helpless friends and bystanders, and later in the news, a seventeen-year-old shoots two protesters in Wisconsin. I keep my mouth closed, but mournfully, I think we've already entered a new stage of civil war in America.

Inside, you start miming warfare, playing out fears and gothic spectacles of capture in your head. All that I see on social media, whether real or artificial, tells me something about something I already knew: I Hate America and America Hates Me.⁷

An ongoing project begun in 2016 involved making mechanical camouflage and invisibility uniforms for border crossers. I started miming warfare, calling my mother about ICE stopping points for her to avoid. I sank into despair, and out of it, I brainstormed artful deceptions: mechanical camouflage suits changing their spots in response to their environment. What criminal methods are these? Mimicry is one of the most curious artifacts of fiction and fantasy: a product of decorative forgery and yet fully operational, particularly in realms of zoology, it functions to hide the threatened or *threatening* organism from death and danger.

Imitation, however, can come too close to the real thing, like when an insect mistakes its own kin, killing it: “with the imitation of the leaf serving as an incitement to cannibalism in this particular kind of totemic feast.” Caillois called it a collective masochism⁸—groups deciding to trend toward their collective death, toward an abyss. What the surrealist French philosopher hoped to uncover were these pathologies of perception: those moments of sick sight (ill perception) that could express certain truths about our social topos and metaphysics.

Visual mimicry can only happen in light. It requires vision to be functional, and the patterns of nature in which it is observable, particularly those moments when anthropomorphic projection takes flight—like when humans look at butterflies and see eyes—demonstrate a fundamental seduction of lighted space. Mimicry emerges out of the organism’s enchanted desire to disappear in light—a photo frenzy.

The utility of mimicry or its instrumentalization by the artist, the writer, the philosopher-engineer is truly apotropaic magic, the “oculus indiviosus, the evil eye that not only harms but can also protect once it has been turned against the evil powers to which it naturally belongs, as an organ of fascination par excellence.”⁹

Idealistically, or naively, I thought COVID-19 would make the digital more personable, a better conduit and interface for feeling, and media artists would helm the movement toward a new leviathan: a novel, networked reality of human and nonhuman compact.

Do you know what I mean? The accelerated union of flesh and metal holds the promise of cyborg transcendence; we camouflage in the mystique of the lighted screen to disappear and become anew. Napster would let you curate the everyday with songs for free, turning a generation into pirates. The digital represented an outsized field of potential precisely because there was nothing behind it; it was all light show, phantasmagoria, and empty masquerade.

When Byung-Chul Han talks about the fickle social organizing of online forums, he says, “the digital inhabitants of the Net do not assemble. They lack the interiority of assembly that would bring forth a *we*. They form a gathering without assembly—a crowd without interiority, without a soul or spirit” (my italics).¹⁰ One feels the need to interject from the sides of Generation Z and their free-form anarcho-primitivistic approaches to technology. Hellfire will be raised by their kind, and this is a source of both great

(opposite) J Molina-Garcia, *Girl's Tactical Camosuit* (a prototype), 2019. Wearable custom inkjet-printed canvas and silk, dimensions variable. Photo: May Makki.



fear and awe. What affliction of sick sight will possess the lost children of detention centers? How evil will their eyes be?

When the child concentration camps worsened and family separation policies were introduced into law, it seemed obvious that my suits should be worn by children, so I employed two of my nieces to model the first set of prototypes. After a live, outdoor performance at a sculpture park in Dallas, the words of a friend echoed from months earlier: “the children are already invisible,” he said, in response to my project, while admiring its speculative, world-building angle.

A live performance of hidden Brown girls intimated one level of invisibility, but represented like this, they were virtual to the point that they might already not exist. Muñoz was clear that there was a necessary distinction: a difference between engaging in clinical depression (its paranoid-schizophrenic representations that continue the numb repetition of the negative) and a war of provisional positions that deliberate on the sacred boundaries that keep us connected. The second is a habitual and daily praxis of love: a *spiral of doing love* that sharpens hope, instead of dulling it.

“Representation is an anthropocentric demand,” Jasbir Puar writes—a way of saying that the merit of having an identity in the first place is a political privilege of the capable, adult, speaking population.¹¹ No condition of visibility improves what regulated national feelings do, that is, what they deem capable of being retrieved, represented.

I sought to stage a new set of disappearances of the child inside machines, turning them into digital-point clouds, and thus into crude avatars (poor imitators). Massive is a Hollywood FX software built to generate virtual crowds, conceived for the epic battle scenes that awed audiences in the *Lord of the Rings* film trilogy. The program uses an intricate node system of if/then statements to control the “brains of computer-generated crowds,” variegating responses to the environment without the human worker having to rig the skeletal framework of individual figures.

The dark winter of AI research—a period spanning the 1970s and ’80s in which AI funding and research halted—was in large part resolved by the mathematics underpinning the “fuzzy” logic at the heart of the Massive software, which outputs values outside of the confining true/false dichotomy provided by Boolean logic. The nonlinear functions behind modern-day algorithms, moreover, perform in such a way as to imitate imprecision and human randomness, nurturing an intelligence by introducing decimals, where before there were only totalizing integers.

The circuitry of artificial life is therefore built on the introduction of difference and multitude. The more diversified data you feed the artificial neurons of generative algorithms, the more perfected the digital copy be-

comes; the imitation is granular, down to its defects. The imperfections are in fact greater proof of its efficacy. The artificial neurons evolve because they cannot know the other, and this difference (the incommensurability of the other) is constitutive of their own wholeness in the world. “To touch something is to make contact with it even while remaining separate from it because entities that touch do not fuse together. To touch is to caress a surface . . . but to never master and consume it.”¹² These are the spiral gifts of love, regenerating past, present, and futures: assembling respect, recognition, and a blueprint forward.

I’ve fantasized about a child army redrawing the Texas southern border, little soldiers chiseling the earth to liberate an Indigenous past, renaming and resettling land according to lines drawn by Native nations. Their maps are camouflaged too. Surveillance is a solar project, with no taste for the subdermal, subterranean, occluded/occult; a fear of it, perhaps. Indigeneity is its adversary.

Perhaps by methods of walking and dragging, the child schools (not an army, but schools, like those of fish) erode hills with tiny footsteps, this blind swarm simply feeling, erasing their way down, jumping into a void of trust. Or is it suicide? What’s the difference? It’s not collective masochism as Caillois would have called it, when the organ sees itself indistinctly from the organism; this is not a pathology of sight, it is mutual salvation—a *convergence*. Buddhists might call it devotional, abiding love.¹³

A photographic grid of victim portraits becomes hypercamouflaged within a sea of complacency when there aren’t enough tears shed. The destitution of sight happens when we regard the dissolved mass without a beginning or end (a numb repetition): Almodovar, Ayala, Chevez, Carrillo, Fernandez, Ortiz, and the forty-two other names at Pulse that night keep repeating, making their hollow presence known each time another mass shooting occurs, but they appear as ghostly droplets without an aesthetic vessel to receive them, mediate their afterimage, much less purge the grief unto the world. This spectacle of consumption is only an ouroboros of paranoia-schizophrenia.

What affective responses do I have in light of the rot of Western civilization? Well, how many ways can one conceive to enlarge a given social reality, the onto-particularities that make up the ethics of Brown feeling, so that it occupies the entire screen of affect and sensation? We have far more depressives with imaginative truths than con-men delivering the same rote, scripted lies of corpo-neo-liberalism.

Nationalized Whiteness reproduces clinical depression in the world, and it is the true criminal of democracy, regulating body orientation, spinning you, craning your neck, establishing how you mourn with how many

tears. The State is already looking the other way, enforcing you to do the same. They're dragging us away from the funeral by the neck.

The simulation—and the larger project of browning the world—is akin to the dark mirror of the screen or renegade maps redrawn by the crowded footsteps of a serpentine and virtual intelligence. Simulations don't own the Master's tools; they undo them.

Brown feelings suspend your breath, provide relief, and anticipate something better to come; performed and worked over, they become an “educated-desire” or a “critical hope”—“an active refusal and a salient demand for something else.”¹⁴ To touch, to quake, to reverberate, to vibrate, like a Wi-Fi signal in harmony: *to do love*. Is there a word for that?

Collectively, we must craft a war of positions (love) to command forfeitures, seizures, and wholesale desistance. A *we* that could be a *one* (because, it is, after all, an option to participate), or a *one* that is infinitely a *we*.

Notes

1. If you go on Wikipedia right now, take note of this: in the summer of 2016, just a few months shy of the Trump presidential victory, a twenty-nine-year-old American-born man demolished a total of 102 people at Pulse, a gay nightclub in Florida that was hosting its weekly Latino Night; he would claim the murder spree for ISIS amid speculation of his own repressed sexuality. He killed forty-nine people. Counting them is important. Fifty-three were wounded. One hundred and two families were ruptured (killed) that summer day.

2. Univision Noticias, “Historia de una de las víctimas mexicanas de la masacre de Orlando,” June 13, 2016, YouTube video, 1:47, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VChgNNNx-sk>.

3. José Esteban Muñoz, “Feeling Brown, Feeling Down: Latina Affect, the Performativity of Race, and the Depressive Position,” *Signs* 31, no. 3 (2006): 675–88. He remains criminally underrepresented in collections of other white authors writing on the subject of what ultimately became a somewhat trendy philosophical discourse known as affect theory, germinations of which can be seen in Baruch Spinoza's *Ethics* or the oral traditions and metaphysics of Indigenous women of the Global South, if we are to be completely honest to the historical record. Affective chants, affective fire, vaporous body schema, and the vitality of touch for transference of spirit are all present in Mayan cosmology—hallmarks, too, of the studies undertaken by affect scholars. See Timothy W. Knowlton, “Flame, Icons, and Healing: A Colonial Maya Ontology,” *Colonial Latin American Review* 27, no. 3 (2018): 392–412.

4. José Esteban Muñoz, “The Brown Commons,” in *The Sense of Brown* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2020), 4.

5. José Esteban Muñoz, “Photographies of Mourning: Melancholia and Ambivalence in Van Der Zee, Mapplethorpe, and *Looking for Langston*,” in *Disiden-*

tifications: *Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 73.

6. “What has been derided for centuries as ‘primitive superstition’ has only recently been ‘discovered’ by Western scientists and academics as ‘valid’ knowledge. Nevertheless, knowledge alone has never ended imperialism.” Nick Estes, “Prologue: Prophets,” in *Our History Is the Future: Standing Rock versus the Dakota Access Pipeline, and the Long Tradition of Indigenous Resistance* (London: Verso, 2019), 9.

7. I borrow this elegant epithet with the permission of performance artist Vicente Ugartechea, who coined it for a 2017 processional flag-burning performance.

8. Roger Caillois, “Mimicry and Legendary Psychasthenia,” in *The Edge of Surrealism*, ed. Claudine Frank (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 97.

9. Caillois, “Mimicry,” 93.

10. Byung-Chul Han, “In the Swarm,” in *In the Swarm: Digital Prospects* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2017), 11.

11. Jasbir Puar, “Introduction: The Cost of Getting Better,” in *The Right to Maim: Debility, Capacity, Disability* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017), 27.

12. Graham Harman, “On Interface; Nancy’s Weights and Masses,” in *Jean Luc Nancy and Plural Thinking*, ed. Peter Gratton and Marie-Eve Morin (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2012), 98, quoted from José Esteban Muñoz, *The Sense of Brown*, 7.

13. “When thus your mind is even with regard to all, / Then just as you would wish / That your own mother meet with happiness, / Think the same for all embodied beings. / All living beings thus become the object of your love, / The form of which consists / In wanting, in the immediate term, / That beings have the happiness of gods and humankind . . . / Beginning with a single being, / Train yourself to embrace all . . .”

Longchenpa, “7. The Four Unbounded Attitudes,” in *Finding Rest in the Nature of the Mind: The Trilogy of Rest*, vol. 1, trans. Padmakara Translation Group (Boulder, CO: Shambala, 2017), 78.

14. Muñoz, “The Brown Commons,” 6.