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Sensing Brownness

On Racialization, Perception, and Method

Maureen Catbagan's *Dark Matter* (2020) photography series invites us into sensing brownness. In these images of museum passages and stairwells, silhouettes of museum guards, and evocative shadows, Catbagan presents the landscape of the museum. However, this may not be immediately recognizable because the photographs draw focus to the parts of museums to which we rarely pay attention. In particular, Catbagan's attention to the presence of guards allows us to perceive dynamics of racialized and gendered labor and laborers who, in an echo of their architectural focus on minor, peripheral spaces and shadows, hover between the underrecognized and oft-neglected, thereby allowing viewers to sense the ways that the modern museum has acted as an instrument of discipline and racial hierarchization.¹ Often these places, this labor, and these laborers are described as invisible, but this is not actually true. This visibility comes down to a question of valuation. In this way, Catbagan reminds us that our experience of art, museums, and even knowledge production more broadly is framed by work, people, and spaces that are often marginalized.²

While photography has historically been understood as a medium sutured to scientific objectivity and surveillance, Catbagan's swerves around conventional representations of objects emplace viewers affectively within these landscapes. This method of soliciting an embodied response from viewers augments the photographs' performative qualities, enabling a particular conversation with José Esteban Muñoz's theorizations of relational embodiment as it pertains to brownness and performance in *The Sense of Brown*.

One layer of this brownness can, as Josh Chambers-Letson and Tavia Nyong'o note, quoting Muñoz, in their introduction to *The Sense of Brown*, be theorized "in relationship to 'the people who are rendered brown by their personal and familial participation in

1. Nicole Fleetwood makes an incisive critique of the museum space as an instrument of discipline when she positions its birth alongside that of the prison. Nicole Fleetwood, *Marking Time: Art in the Age of Mass Incarceration* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2020). I also offer a critique of the museum in relation to the subject/object divide in "Sweat, Display, and Blackness: The Promises of Liquidity," *Feminist Media Histories* 7, no. 2 (Spring 2021): 92–109.

2. I discuss this aspect of Catbagan's work more extensively in "Architectures of Blue: Race, Representation, and Black and Brown Abstraction," *Brooklyn Rail*, October 2017, <https://brooklynrail.org/2017/10/art/Architectures-of-Blue-Race-Representation-and-Black-and-Brown-Abstraction>.

South-to-North migration patterns.”³ While Muñoz most extensively theorizes this brownness in relation to the Latinx category, he offers that it does include other racial formations. However, Muñoz’s version of brownness is not exactly a set of stable racial designations as much as a relational category. Describing parallels between his investigations and those of Vijay Prashad vis-à-vis South Asians, he writes, “While these brownnesses mean radically different things on the register of difference, they both do the work of shoring up normative national affect through their deviations.”⁴ What we see in the comparison that Muñoz draws is the way that brownness, through its multiple and various marginalizations, is used to consolidate a racialized implicitly white norm. This version of brownness is capacious because the historic and geographic forms of marginalization are vast.

In its omission of conventional identitarian markers, Catbagan’s work highlights this relational aspect of brownness. *Dark Matter* is not about the representational quandaries of being Filipinx; instead, viewers are made to feel the overlapping colonial and neoliberal infrastructures of the museum. We feel it without having to be told. This is to say that brownness as the experience of being minoritized forces a reckoning with dominance. In this context, Catbagan’s attention to the minor and peripheral offers an echo of the way that (former) United States colonies such as the Philippines, where they were born, often linger on the edge of US consciousness even as their geographies, economies, and politics continue to be determined by the aftermaths of US military intervention—including and especially in regard to migrations. It is not incidental that many of those who work as guards at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, for example, arrived in the US because of these migrations. By bringing our attention to the critical function that the labor of guarding provides, then, Catbagan allows us to see how this racialized labor, this brownness, is integral to the various norms—of whiteness, of imperialism, of national affect that the museum produces—and not merely because “Flipinos are the Latinos of Asia.”⁵ While rendered minor, brownness, here, helps to understand the structure of the dominant.⁶ This is also where one can dwell in the dark matter that Catbagan summons—it is what structures and yet is unacknowledged.

Returning to Muñoz’s insight that brownness “do[es] the work of shoring up normative national affect through their deviations,” we see that brownness not only exposes the normative, the unremarkable dominant, but it unites *and* irritates—it is what he calls, citing W. E. B. Du Bois, “a problem.”⁷ Following Sianne Ngai we can understand

3. Joshua Chambers-Letson and Tavia Nyong’o, “The Aesthetic Resonance of Brown,” Editors’ Introduction, in José Esteban Muñoz, José Esteban Muñoz, *The Sense of Brown*, ed. Joshua Chambers-Letson and Tavia Nyong’o (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2020), ix–xxxiii; x.

4. José Esteban Muñoz, “Chico, What Does it Feel Like to Be a Problem?”: The Transmission of Brownness,” *The Sense of Brown*, 36–46; 41.

5. Although there are definitely many profitable explorations to be made around this convergence. For more on this argument see Anthony Ocampo, *The Latinos of Asia: How Filipino Americans Break the Rules of Race* (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 2016).

6. Notably, this is just one possible way to theorize the minor; for a more capacious version of the minor see Hentyle Yapp, *Minor China: Method, Materialisms, and the Aesthetic* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2021).

7. Muñoz, “Chico, What Does it Feel Like to Be a Problem?,” 41.



IMAGE 1. *Dark Matter* (2020) by Maureen Catbagan; courtesy the artist.

irritation as a minor feeling, the chaffing produced by the residue of persistent violence.⁸ On the one hand, this irritation provides a sense in common—allowing for people to unite under a banner of brownness, which we see in relation to these expansive possibilities for mobilizing an analytics of brownness. However, Muñoz also argues that the

8. Sianne Ngai, *Ugly Feelings* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007).



IMAGE 2. Installation view of *Lights, Tunnels, Passages & Shadows* by Maureen Catbagan, Center for Book Arts, 2021; courtesy the artist.

presence of brownness perpetually threatens the cobbled together façade of dominance. Embedded in this sense of irritation is the displeasure brought on by nonconformity and its durational quality because this unhappiness is brought about by being.

Muñoz uses two sonic performances of José Feliciano to illustrate these conjoined arguments—the theme song for the 1970s sitcom *Chico and the Man* and a 1968 televised performance of the national anthem. Feliciano’s performance of the anthem, which was “slow and plaintive” incited audience derision in its “browning of the national anthem, which is to say the manifesting of sorrow and disappointment that the minoritarian subject feels in relation to the normative affective protocols that make one feel brown.”⁹ Here, we see brownness as irritant because it reminds listeners of the enduring problems in the nation called the United States. The television theme song, by contrast, does not sow broader discontent, but invites the young Muñoz into a sense of brown camaraderie. In both scenes of performance Muñoz describes feeling the disjunction between the lyrics and Feliciano’s “spare and haunting” delivery, writing, “In my own memory, and in the here and now, I do not hear Feliciano’s song as one of uplift, but instead as something else. I hear something that I want to identify as akin to brown feeling, this commonality in feeling like a problem.”¹⁰ Here, we also see how the sense of marginalization forges a commonality that might itself lead to a shared politics. In part, this is through the insight of the durative quality of these brown feelings-in-common.

These multiple dimensions of relationality give us further insight into brownness as an affective, sensational, and psychological entity. I mark these differences because it is not just that brownness offers a way to understand the dominant, but it is also an embodied

9. Muñoz, “Chico, What Does it Feel Like to Be a Problem?,” 41.

10. Muñoz, “Chico, What Does it Feel Like to Be a Problem?,” 45.

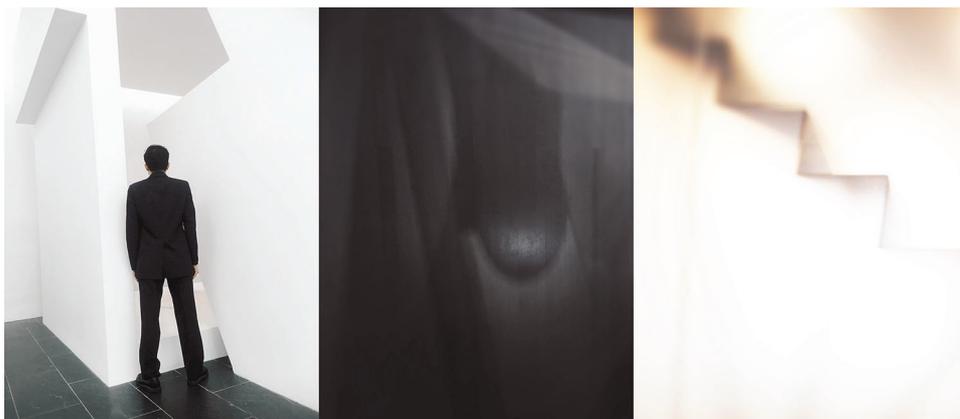


IMAGE 3. Folio I, unfolded, of *Dark Matter* (2020) by Maureen Catbagan; courtesy the artist.

politics, whose terms shift depending on context. First, the psychological, to which Muñoz alludes explicitly in describing the task of *The Sense of Brown*: “This project [*The Sense of Brown*] then calls upon some psychological stratagems to offer a heuristic that is attuned to the place and particularity of minoritarian subjects within the social.”¹¹ What feels important about psychology is its ability to reflect the dynamics of the social. In that reading, feeling brown means being attuned to the dynamics that have produced one as minoritarian. In Feliciano’s performances, this means attending to the resonances between the premise of the television show—“a sly Latino who charmed a constantly irritated white racist”—and Feliciano’s downbeat delivery.¹² This feeling of being a problem, Muñoz suggests, is part and parcel of the means by which the external social scene has been internalized—psychology.

The affective topologies of brownness are more nebulous. Muñoz writes, “Brownness registers as a mode of affective particularity that a subject feels in herself or recognizes in others.”¹³ Here, the emphasis shifts away from sociologic problematics to recognition, but more than its psychological dynamics, Muñoz invests in its aftermath—what does belonging feel like? This feeling, in turn, permits commonality and is, Muñoz argues, reliant on empathy: “There is something innately empathic about this shared affective construct that I am calling brownness, this response to a certain negation within the social that corresponds to this question of feeling like a problem.”¹⁴ We can, I think, take note of the difficulties surrounding empathy as a concept and understand how it forms an important building block for the politics of brownness.¹⁵ In addition to Muñoz’s explicit naming of the concept, we feel it in his description of Feliciano’s performances—

11. Muñoz, “Chico, What Does it Feel Like to Be a Problem?,” 40.

12. Muñoz, “Chico, What Does it Feel Like to Be a Problem?,” 44.

13. Muñoz, “Chico, What Does it Feel Like to Be a Problem?,” 40.

14. Muñoz, “Chico, What Does it Feel Like to Be a Problem?,” 41.

15. Saidiya V. Hartman has an extensive and useful critique of empathy as working to erase subjectivities through these projections. See Saidiya V. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).

he projects himself into the scene of both Feliciano and, implicitly, Chico, to think with their vulnerabilities and to align himself alongside them. On the one hand, this is not a phenomenon divested from the psychological, but in Muñoz's description we see the way that it plays out in relation to the idea of belonging, itself nebulous—especially when forged through negation. He writes, "Owning the negation that is brownness is owning an understanding of self and group as a problem in relation to a dominant order, a normative national affect. Brown feelings are the glue that coheres group identifications."¹⁶ This is to say that the being in common has to do with a shared feeling of un-belonging to a national public sphere.

But I think Muñoz stresses affect here in order to make sense of its ability to be contagious—its ability to transmit, or rather our ability to register its transmission even if/when there is no access to psychology. It is notable here that Muñoz is working with Teresa Brennan's theorization of affect, which "travels through other routes, like smell or sound."¹⁷ This, in turn, brings us toward the sensational and the ways that the materiality of bodies is compelled by these forms of projection and becoming-communal in difference. I dwell on the embodied aspect of Muñoz's intervention and its related swerves between "feeling brown," "sensing brown," and "the brown commons" to articulate several important moments of difference between affect, psychology, and sensation, which it is tempting to collapse into the communal or critical even as each offers its own analytic insight.

In Catbagan's work, I see the transmission of brownness in their photographs' solicitation of affective and sensorial engagement. By showing the effects of marginalization but not its processes, Catbagan's projects ask viewers to sense, to feel, to use their bodies to think with the experience of marginalization. This is the psychological, affective, and sensational work that Muñoz argues that brownness can produce. The most recent installation of *Dark Matter* was in Spring 2021 at the Center for Book Arts in Manhattan. There, Catbagan assembled the series into three books, which were, in turn, hung next to each other on the gallery wall, so that they each unfolded vertically into three panels, producing an interactive grid of images. This complex geometry means that viewers can either see one large image of shadows—*The Met Museum Shadow* (2020)—or can fold any of the books vertically to reveal individual photographs. Catbagan emphasizes the multiple ways one can orient oneself through space, especially when one pays attention to what exists alongside the objects on which one is often told to focus—here we arrive at the shadows, architecture of infrastructure, and labor of the guards. This project is an immersive engagement with marginalization enacted through the activation of a spatial sense of being peripheral—affect, sensation, and psychology combined.

Crucially, what we find in Catbagan's work is an emphasis on perceiving brownness rather than representing it or performing it—note that this echoes Muñoz's focus on his responses to Feliciano's performance. This is the true import of Muñoz's sense of brown:

16. Muñoz, "Chico, What Does it Feel Like to Be a Problem?," 41.

17. Muñoz, "Chico, What Does it Feel Like to Be a Problem?," 45.



IMAGE 4. Folio 2, unfolded, of *Dark Matter* (2020) by Maureen Catbagan; courtesy the artist.

it allows us to feel and sense the dynamics that undergird racialization rather than imagine that race coalesces neatly into individuals or populations. Through Muñoz we can sense racialization as a relational structure whose impacts are not only sociological but that unfurl into more nebulous realms.

Like Muñoz, I also write about brownness, embodiment, and sensation. Although I use brownness to mark the possibilities for being-in-common, I route it through an

expansive reading of Hortense Spillers’s discussion of “pornotroping,” the processes of projection and violence that objectify and eroticize.¹⁸ While Spillers is most overtly concerned with the transatlantic slave trade’s production of Black flesh, read through the projects of colonization and settler colonialism, continuities in gendered labor and violence emerge, despite historical and geographic differences.¹⁹ To me, brown signals the possibility of solidarity—a brown commons, perhaps?—while also engaging productively with the opacities that these differences yield—an affective field that I move away from irritation toward *jouissance*. But it is important that the register of the sensational is what allows us to perceive these unknowns. This is a very different sense of brown; it revels in the excesses afforded by materiality. But, it, too, moves us to think beyond what are imagined to be straightforward formations of race and representation toward methods of perceiving, transmitting, and grappling with racialization. ■

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18. Hortense J. Spillers, “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book,” *Diacritics* 17, no. 2 (Summer 1987): 64–81.

19. For a more extended discussion of brownness and brown *jouissance*, see Amber Jamilla Musser, *Sensual Excess: Queer Femininity and Brown Jouissance* (New York: New York University Press, 2018).