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“*Dead White: Notes on the Whiteness of the New Queer Cinema,*”
by José Esteban Muñoz. *GLQ* 4.1 (1998).

During the first semester of my last year as an undergraduate at the University of California at Berkeley, I enrolled in a course titled Queer(y)ing the Canon, in which we read literary texts like *The Canterbury Tales*, *The Book of Margery Kempe*, and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* alongside critical writings of Michel Foucault, Stephen Orgel, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, and Derek Jarman. I also clearly remember viewing Gus Van Sant’s 1991 film *My Own Private Idaho* in conjunction with reading Shakespeare’s *Henry IV*. The instructor of that course was Professor Carolyn Dinshaw, one of the two founding editors of *GLQ: A Gay and Lesbian Quarterly*. Toward the end of the term, Professor Dinshaw distributed postcards to fill out if we wished to receive by mail the inaugural issue of *GLQ*. As a budding bibliophile, academic journal hoarder, and queer studies scholar, I happily complied.

While taking this course, I was also preparing an undergraduate thesis on representations of Latino gay men in literature and visual culture. Given that my nascent academic interests stood at the intersection of Chicano/a studies and the emergent project of queer theory, I searched high and low for critical work that would assist in establishing an interpretive framework for my thesis. By then, Teresa de Lauretis’s edited special issue of *differences* titled “Queer Theory: Lesbian and Gay Sexualities” had been out for about a year, and it featured Tomás Almaguer’s groundbreaking essay “Chicano Men: A Cartography of Homosexual Identity and Behavior.” While Almaguer’s piece was enormously insightful and generative, I longed for additional work to help me make sense of Latino gay male identity and sexuality.

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Five years after the first issue of *GLQ*, I encountered as a graduate student an essay in the pages of that very journal which I had longed for while writing my thesis: José Esteban Muñoz's "Dead White: Notes on the Whiteness of the New Queer Cinema."¹ Appearing in the first issue of volume 4, Muñoz's short but powerful piece was part of the "Film/Video Review" section. The essay investigates, as he puts it, "three queer films by white men that chronicle the lives of white people" (128). Indeed, by examining *Jeffrey* (dir. Christopher Ashley, 1995), *Frisk* (dir. Todd Verow, 1995), and *Safe* (dir. Todd Haynes, 1995), Muñoz brilliantly elucidates how whiteness and death are intimately intertwined in these films that, he insists, pass the torch of what the feminist film critic B. Ruby Rich in 1992 coined "the New Queer Cinema." Despite some critics' insistence that this film movement had quickly come and gone or should not account for mainstream gay productions (in one of the essay's footnotes, Muñoz (1998: 138) himself concedes that "it is safe now to say that the initial wave has passed; the New Queer Cinema, as it was commonly understood, is over"), he nonetheless holds on to the phrase "not in its strictest sense but instead in an attempt to do [his] own periodizing around the white normativity of queer film." And while the essay's dedication to gay Latino representation was not its sole focus (namely, Muñoz's critique of Wally White's 1995 film *Lay Down with Dogs*), the overall ardent appraisal and takedown of the whiteness seemingly part and parcel of the New Queer Cinema served as a model for my own work in graduate school and currently motivates my recent book project.

That project, titled "Undocumented Desires: Film Fantasies of Latino Male Sexuality," critically assesses an array of representations of Latino sexuality in recent queer cinema while tracking the ways Latino men in particular are cast within the terms of fantasy.² In many ways, Muñoz's reading of *Lay Down with Dogs* matches my assessment of many of the films I write about. The film, he maintains, is "a disturbing example of the way in which white fags eroticize difference" whereby "the racist dynamics that are usually somewhat camouflaged are made explicit." Categorizing it as "boring, meandering, and aesthetically weak," Muñoz identifies a "racist aura that envelops the Latino body" within White's film, as well as in Terrence McNally's play *Love! Valor! Compassion!* Avoiding the well-rehearsed charge of fetishism, Muñoz instead reveals how white gay male fantasies materializing as film and theater tend to rely on casting racial difference as an advantageous aberration. Thus it's not simply a problem that the Latino body is the object of white gay male desire; rather, the problem exists in how the Latino body conveniently serves as a conduit for harnessing racial (and class) hierarchies in the articulation of this desire. Using the white actor Randy Becker, who appears as a Latino in both White's film and McNally's play, as an example, Muñoz (1998: 129)

maintains that Becker's performances as "a shifty, brainless, oversexed Latino" and "a brainless dancer whose body is traded between white men" ultimately affirm "white-supremacist culture."

Like Muñoz, I am compelled to discuss films like *Testosterone* (dir. David Morton, 2003), *Quinceañera* (dir. Richard Glatzer and Wash Westmoreland, 2006), and *Longhorns* (dir. David Lewis, 2011) not only for the way New Queer Cinema's persistence is predicated on its firm grasp on "white normativity" but also for its clichéd deployment of how the "Latino body, like other racialized bodies, functions as an exotic kink for dominant gay male culture" (Muñoz 1998: 129). While these films, like the ones Muñoz writes about, are also "queer films by white men that chronicle the lives of white people," I also focus on films by Latinos and white women—such as Lane Shefter Bishop's *The Day Laborers* (2003), Carlos Portugal's *East Side Story* (2006), and Peter Bratt's *La Mission* (2009)—that chronicle the lives of both queer white people *and* queer people of color but, in due course, deploy the Latino body—and its attendant exotic sexual kink—in ways that hinge on and normalize whiteness.

Similar to how Muñoz must explain his "expanded use of the 'New Queer Cinema'" to those who "would most object to the inclusion of *Jeffrey*, a film that many serious gay and lesbian critics dismissed as multiplex trash" (ibid.: 138), I have had to clarify why I have elected to write about such "bad" films.³ In her essay "What's a Good Gay Film?" Rich (2013: 44) writes that she wants—as most likely the answer to the question her title poses—"a post-coming-out, post-get-it-together kind of movie, something full of sex, romance, tragedy and life outside The Relationship." Who doesn't want this? But more often than not the films I'm drawn to—sometimes against my will and other times not—conform to the clichés Rich is clearly over. Without a doubt, the films I find myself committed to for this project are habitually troubling with respect to the politics they tender, just like those films about which Muñoz writes. And while they may have received ample praise for indelibly contributing to the meager offering of films representing queers, Latinos, and queer Latinos just as they've been relegated to the trash bin for their failures from both politicized spectators and those only in search of satisfying entertainment, the films constituting my archive for this study also function as crucial texts for ascertaining the politics of fantasy mirrored from everyday life practices and the ideologies of whiteness that interminably circumscribe them.

The title of Muñoz's essay, he explains, recycles the discarded titled proposed by Mandy Merck, former managing editor of *Screen*, for the British film journal's now famous special issue edited by Isaac Julien and Kobena Mercer titled "The Last Special Issue on Race." For Muñoz, the title's coupling of "dead" and

“white” helps signal the rigid join of death and whiteness in the New Queer Cinema. Furthermore, it’s also a way to register how the New Queer Cinema is always relentlessly, and insufferably, dead white. Yet, given the persistent multicultural window dressing of this unfolding cinematic genealogy, the violence perpetuated by these films leaves one with no other option—as the title might be said to do—than to call for the death of New Queer Cinema’s vampire-like undead whiteness. Following Muñoz’s lead, our goal to expose whiteness’s incessant ambition to pass as common sense persists. With “Dead White” as our critical compendium, we will continue to throw light (and no doubt shade) on whiteness, exposing its flaws while strategizing how to drive a wooden stake into its callous heart.

Notes

1. I hope this piece makes clear that Muñoz’s essay stands as an enduring model for film and media studies scholars working at the intersection of race, sexuality, and representation. Moreover, the elegance, argumentation, and biting critique of the essay is representative of Muñoz’s deep and incisive thinking, crystallized one year later in the publication of his groundbreaking first book, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (1999).
2. I am thankful to Professor Muñoz for his valuable feedback on an early version of one of the chapters, “Gentrify My Love,” presented at the symposium “Sexing the Borderlands: From the Midwest Corridor and Beyond” at the University of Texas at Austin (October 12–13, 2012) and for which he was the keynote speaker.
3. “Dead White” made such an impact on me that after watching Jim Fall’s *Trick* (1999) in a Berkeley cinema, I went home and wrote a scathing analysis of the film’s overt and covert racism with respect to Latino men (despite the fact that I was in the throes of writing my dissertation). I sent the piece to *GLQ* for consideration in the “Film/Video Review” section, but it was turned down. I was told by the editor that readers of the journal would most likely not be interested in the piece since *Trick* was, at best, “queer-lite.”

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