Tavia Nyong’o: ’The video is a remembrance within a remembrance: to Pedro Zamora and to José Esteban Muñoz’

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(from left) Malik Gaines, Jade Gordon and Alexandro Segade in My Barbarian’s “Counterpublicity” (2014)

To honor the 25th year of Day With(out) Art on December 1, 2014, Visual AIDS commissioned seven artists/collectives--Rhys Ernst, Glen Fogel, Lyle Ashton Harris, Hi Tiger, Tom Kalin, My Barbarian, and Julie Tolentino/Abigail Severance--to create provocative new short videos that reflect and respond to the ongoing AIDS pandemic for a program titled ALTERNATE ENDINGS.

Here, Tavia Nyong’o considers My Barbarian’s contribution to the video program, “Counterpublicity.”

My Barbarian, “Counterpublicity” (2014) from Visual AIDS on Vimeo.

The work of My Barbarian is like that party you always wanted to be at and for once actually are. It can be fast-paced, filled with bon mots and quick references. Even during its languid moments, when you’ve stepped into the kitchen to refill your drink, or gotten stuck on the stairs while someone you barely know is baring their soul to you, you can still hear the pulse of a backbeat, promising an eventual return to the dance floor. "Counterpublicity,“ the video the artist collective created as a Visual AIDS commission for the 25th Anniversary of Day With(out) Art, begins and ends with the groove in its heart. The video opens with an original song, ”Counterpublicity," whose words are inspired by and adapted from José Esteban Muñoz’s germinal book Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics. Disidentifications is another party you always wanted to be at, as I wrote last year in an essay written in tribute to the late Muñoz, who was my comrade and colleague:

Like many suburban queers of my generation, my point

of entry into the work of José Esteban Muñoz was the chapter of Disidentifications on Pedro Zamora from MTV's Real World. Pedro was my gateway drug to the continual intellectual high provided by José's writings on artists like Jean-Michel Basquiat, Carmelita Tropicana, Vaginal Davis, Jack Smith and Isaac Julien. Whereas Disidentifications as a whole provided entrée behind a magical velvet rope I had scarcely suspected could exist (and which my Midwestern, pre-Internet monoculture made hard to find), "Pedro from the Real World" was at a party I knew.[1]

As I went on to note in that essay, I first experienced "Counterpublicity" as part of a public memorial for Muñoz held at the Whitney Museum of American Art, a sad event co-organized by the artists Miguel Gutierrez and Alex Segade. I experienced, in my grief, a strange sense of wonder that someone else had sought, in that particular book chapter (which is somewhat unusual in Muñoz's oeuvre for its focus on popular culture), a memento from which to retrieve a memorium.

If "Counterpublicity" is about, among other things, all of yesterday's parties, then it is certainly not uncritically affirmative of either popular culture or partying down. Indeed, before the first song opens, we are informed that we are getting a "staged reading" in a didactic deadpan that is a key device in My Barbarian's performative toolkit, a seemingly flattened affect that makes space, within its neutral deskilled phrasing, for an indefinite number of other voices to find a groove into which to settle. The video, as it unfolds, is a remembrance within a remembrance: to Pedro Zamora, a queer Cuban-American who died very publicly of HIV/AIDS in 1994, and to José Esteban Muñoz, a queer Cuban-American who did not. In a longer version of the video, a mediated version of the audience participation that occurred in the live event is followed by repartee in which the three core members of My Barbarian--Malik Gaines, Jade Gordon, and Alex Segade--break character to discuss the degree to which they identified with, or even knew of, Zamora at the time. "Counterpublicity," it turns out, is as much about the labor of bringing the "no-longer conscious" of the recent past back into view as it is about its overt theme: the hazards that media exposure and "inclusion" can bring to the minoritized and excluded subject. The "no-longer

conscious" is an idea that Muñoz, drawing from Marxist philosopher Ernst Bloch, developed in his second book: Cruising Utopia. It refers to a past that is immanent in the present, but somehow unavailable to it, except in a spectral, ephemeral sense. Zamora and the moment in which he lived and died are, it now astonishes me to say, no longer conscious to today's parties and tomorrow's. This despite the fact that so many of us still living, including myself and My Barbarian, lived through that moment in its fear, rage, solidarity and devastation.

What is counterpublicity? Last year, I had the following idea:

> My Barbarian ... often exploits their surface appeal to neoliberal multicultural diversity as a vehicle for agitprop countercoercive mimesis. In "Counterpublicity," they gave the role of Pedro to Segade, and several white roles to Gordon, in what could be read as a nod to mimetic fidelity. But only the laziest of viewers could miss how race, gender, ethnicity and sexuality never aligned perfectly in the piece; My Barbarian steered a politicized path between color-blind casting and coercive mimeticism that foregrounded the work and responsibility of the audience to participate, vivify, and augment their drama. And, in the moment they shared out the two Latina/o roles of Pedro and Rachel to the entire audience, they suggested how the particular can participate in a larger form.[2]

When, in the video version, Segade urges his audience to “Favor particularity, Latinidad, and sexy specificity,” it is a campy line that, as all true devotees of camp know, is a lie that tells the truth. Indirection, disidentity, and historicity rule.

And then, just when you imagine you are getting away from this party with an earful of chatter, a phone full of selfies, and some promising new numbers, that awful moment in the stairwell, where the camera crops tightly on Segade/Zamora, spotlit in a way that drains all color from a face that admits it will probably not live to see thirty, that confesses that there is never a second of its waking life in which its fatal diagnosis is not on the brain, but a face that nevertheless tells you it is determined to pluck every meaning and moment of happiness it can from inside the ticking of the clock. A color wash of nostalgic melody completes the film after that ghastly spectre, and you exit the party through a dance floor playing TLC and Digable Planets. But the face in the stairwell will be staring back at you for a good while to come.

I am proposing that melancholia [Muñoz writes in Disidentification] for blacks, queers, or any queers of color, is not a pathology but an integral part of everyday lives ... it is a mechanism that helps us (re)construct identity and take our dead with us to the various battles we must wage in their names--and in our names.[3]

Tavia Nyong’o is a cultural critic and associate professor of performance studies at New York University. His first book, The Amalgamation Waltz: Race, Performance, and the Ruses of Memory (Minnesota, 2009), won the Errol Hill Award for best book in African-American performance studies. Nyong’o has published in venues such as Radical History Review, Criticism, TDR: The Journal of Performance Studies, Women & Performance: A Journal of Feminist Theory, Women Studies Quarterly, The Nation, The New Inquiry and n+1. He is co-editor of the journal Social Text and a co-founder of Bully Bloggers.

[1]Tavia Nyong’o, “In Finitude: Being with José, Being with Pedro” Social Text 121: 71.

[2]Ibid., 81.

[3]José Esteban Muñoz, Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics (Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press: 1999): 74.

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