

“What Has Brown Done for Me Lately?”

The (Im)possibilities of Recuperating Brownness after 9/11

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To concern oneself with the founding concepts of the entire history of philosophy, to deconstitute them, is not to undertake the work of the philologist or of the classic historian of philosophy. Despite appearances, it is probably the most daring way of making the beginnings of a step outside of philosophy.

—Jacques Derrida, “Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences”

Linking the notion of friendship to the history of South Asian migration in the United States, Punjabi American rapper Heems (Himanshu Suri)—formerly of the hip-hop group Das Racist, which also included Victor Vazquez (Kool A.D.), of Afro-Cuban and Italian descent—cryptically intones in his stream-of-consciousness lyrical style, “Friend, my friend, you don’t call me, ‘my friend!’ / I call you, ‘my friend,’ my friend” (Heems 2012). These paradoxical lines are then immediately followed by allusions to the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965 and the controversial New York Police Department policy that once forbade Sikh police officers from wearing full turbans. Evoking both the paradoxical address attributed to Aristotle, “O my friends, there is no friend,” as well as the racist caricature of the servile South Asian merchant (for example, *The Simpsons’* Apu), Heems’s tone is accusatory and combative in addressing the audience, presumably, as friend.¹ Friendship thus operates here as a means of sustaining distance and enmity rather than denoting intimacy and affection, in part highlighting, in the faux quaintness that even late capitalism is capable of

assuming, the artificial but seemingly necessary performance of intimate relationality between merchant and consumer.² And yet, the racial specificity of the speaker—who in the same song above refers to his own “hellish views of life as a Telegu,” an ethnolinguistic group located in northern India—compels us to consider the particularity of the relationship between friendship and race. It is specifically the brown subject after all, figured here as a perpetual foreigner, who insists upon sustaining antagonism via friendship, rejecting our hospitality (*xenia*) as audience.³

Years prior to Heems’s antinomic depiction of friendship, Das Racist (2008–12) had attempted to playfully retheorize and perform a post-9/11 experience of brown identity across ethnicities and nationalities, gesturing in a *jouissance* of brownness toward new possibilities of affiliation. Albeit prefacing, somewhat critically after the fact, that “in Das Racist we were kind of hiding behind humor,” Heems later recounted in an interview on National Public Radio’s *Morning Edition* that Das Racist was about “unity between Victor [Vazquez] as a Latino and me as a South Asian, and this idea of brown” (NPR Staff 2015). Ultimately, despite the originality of their jovial yet biting performance of identity encompassed in “this idea of brown” (NPR Staff 2015), Das Racist disbanded at the height of their popularity and commercial success due to the members’ conflicting views on the direction of the group (Flanary 2012). However, as subsequent interviews would reveal, the dissolution reflected the fracturing of Suri and Vazquez’s formative friendship as well.⁴ Notably, then, from Suri’s work with Das Racist to his solo career, we can see a decisive shift, a disillusionment, in the conceptualization of brownness and its capacity for friendship. Yet, as a group often regarded as capturing the zeitgeist, Das Racist’s disintegration also reflects a larger cultural shift in the conceptualization of brownness in the contemporary moment.⁵

Thinking alongside recent efforts to contextualize and/or theorize brownness, I am interested in a fleeting moment of brown identity beyond the hemispheric that ultimately fails to deliver on its promise of concretizing global affiliations and ruptures:⁶ brownness’s February Revolution, its

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1848.⁷ This failure of friendship will provide the occasion to explore the methodological use of brownness as an analytic category in Latinx studies, especially in relation to recent efforts to further globalize the field. A central category in Western political philosophy, the notion of friendship (*philia* or the substantive, *philos*) has been shaped in great part by Aristotle's distinct formulation of the concept (Derrida 1997, 6). Generally, however, *philos* denotes a "voluntary bond of affection and good will, and normally excludes both close kin and more distant acquaintances, whether neighbors or fellow-citizens" (Konstan 1997, 53). In indicating a form of relationality fundamentally distinct from that of kin and immediate community, the notion of friendship—especially when, as discussed below, the term is reconceptualized in the wake of Aristotle—offers the field of Latinx studies a distinct yet underutilized paradigmatic lens for understanding how to situate brownness in an era that witnessed its proliferation, and thus (re)turn, into a globalized category. *Philos* will also allow us to ask whether relationalities that are not mediated through the state in the first instance are still possible today.

The notion of friendship in the Western tradition—which already in its origins, in the depiction of both Hippothales and Lysis as unrequited lovers, emerges as queerness—first appears in Plato's curious early dialogue *Lysis*. Largely regarded as a philosophical failure (Penner and Rowe 2005, xi), this peculiar text concludes not with a decisive definition of the operative term (that is, *friendship*) as its denouement but with Socrates's admission of ignorance after a series of circuitous digressions and recalibrations. The lesson is, tellingly, interrupted by Menexenus's and Lysis's attendants—who reveal, in summoning the boys home, "traces of their foreign accents" (2005, 223a)—but even so, Socrates is no closer to postulating the notion of friendship in positive terms. Thus, the dialogue closes with an unsatisfactory narrative and logical irresoluteness, with Socrates famously remarking, "We've not yet been able to discover what it is to be a friend" (Plato 2005, 223b). Operating in the space of utmost intimacy, in *Lysis* with *eros* and not strictly *philia*, friendship in this dialogue occupies a liminal zone, crossing over and then retreating in reticence, between the private and the public, between the social and the political. However, in the first instance friendship comprises here a negative relation to the *polis*, constituting the limit and thus conditioning the possibility of the political order itself. The scene of Plato's dialogue, after all, occurs at the Lyceum, located outside the city walls but still quite literally under its shadow: "Right under the wall" (Plato 2005, 203b).

By Aristotle's *Eudemean Ethics*, friendship—which, he makes explicit, human beings have a natural inclination toward and yet is only accessible

to men in particular (2014, 1237a)—has become standardized and divested of eroticism in an attempt to stabilize the unruly category. For example, distinguishing between three “species” of friendship based on virtue, utility, or pleasure (or pleasantness), Aristotle prioritizes virtuous friendship as the primary form on which the others are based. Significantly, political friendship is categorized as utility-based, suggesting that this form of relationality is not indicative of “the best men,” that is, the virtuous, whose conduct is above (and thus not determined by) the *polis* (1236b). In addition, political friendship is strictly premised upon a relationality of sameness (of identity) as opposed to difference (1239b); upon the “equality” of age, status, etc., of participants (1239a); and upon an agreement of political objectives that he equates to legality, even if left uncoded in practice (1242b). Thus, for Aristotle, political friendship equates to a hegemonic relationality that sustains the *polis*, rather than functioning, as in Plato, in potential productive tension with the state. In fact, if friendship as such, with its origins in the household, constitutes the foundation of justice and of the state (Aristotle 2014, 1242a), then political friendship itself functions as the very foundation of the *polis*. Yet, Aristotle reminds us repeatedly that friendship as an expression of a natural tendency toward affiliation precedes and exceeds the state: “Nor is a man a solitary animal but one with a special tendency to association with those to whom he is by nature akin. There would, then, be association and a kind of justice, even if there were no State” (1242a). Ultimately, then, rather than operating as the site of production of friendship, the *polis*, desiring a center, constitutes friendship in its absolute presence as its origin, its primal scene, which must be necessarily rehearsed and restaged ad infinitum.

Over two millennia after Plato, in the immediate aftermath of September 11, 2001, distinct ethnic and national identities became increasingly conflated, in a kind of forced intimacy, into an amalgamation of a generalized brownness—a purely “social surface” (Fetta 2018, xviii), “one soul dwelling in two bodies” (Laertius 5.1.20), figured as a potential if not an actualized terrorist—in the Western political discourse surrounding the War on Terror.⁸ Distinct from earlier, more organic performances of brown identity, such as those that were premised upon notions of kinship and were constructed by Latinx groups struggling for self-determination in the United States, the iteration of brownness that emerges in this period is conceptualized in advance and from above as enemy—which, as in Carl Schmitt’s formulation of the concept of the political, is always and everywhere a public enemy (1932, 28). That is, from the simple act of defying

city loitering ordinances, to suicide bombings, to open displays of mutilated bodies (in the case of drug cartels), this emergent amalgamation of brownness is conceptualized in the first instance as a public terror capable of rending the very notion of the public itself. In this way, brownness becomes the exclusive purview of the public (imagination) in its status as consumable, and consumptive, public enemy and therefore must be “purified of all other dimensions—especially of everything opposed to the political or the public, beginning with the private” (Derrida 1997, 86–87). Thus, while US citizens overwhelmingly relinquished their expectations of privacy in the name of national security, for these domestic and international brown (typically male) subjects themselves, the effects of the War on Terror entailed not simply the policing but also an attempt to deny the very possibility of the private sphere, of intimacy as such. This is made glaringly explicit in the seeming necessity of the raids and capture of both Joaquín “El Chapo” Guzmán Loera and Osama bin Mohammed bin Awad bin Laden in their respective bedrooms, surrounded by their family members.

And yet, the emergence of this reactionary discourse and juridical practice also unwittingly engendered—opening up, even if only fleetingly—new opportunities for reconceptualizing interethnic and international solidarities and affiliations on a global scale by reclaiming a brownness figured as public enemy and reconstituting it as friendship. Indeed, at the turn of the twentieth century, US writers and theorists had already begun to reconceptualize brownness beyond previous geographic parameters, seeking new affinities beyond nationalist paradigms, including the work of Cuban American theorist José Esteban Muñoz that came to compose his treatise *The Sense of Brown* (2020), the writings of Indian Marxist historian Vijay Prashad (2000), and the work of controversial Mexican American essayist Richard Rodriguez (2002). As Swati Rana (2015) points out, these works were responding at least in part to a “millennial discourse on race” in the United States that vacillated between postracial ideology, on the one hand, and racial hybridity, on the other. In various and even competing ways, then, these writers attempted to resist brown erasure—in the case of Rodriguez (2002), by homogenizing and universalizing brownness—which, in this country at the time, constituted the price of inclusion into the *polis*.⁹ However, the attacks on September 11 led to a renewed and unambiguous racial animus, as well as to the codification of anti-brownness into international law and policy, eliding the “millennial discourse on race” by making unimaginable even the remote possibility of a postracial society and the veneer of inclusion into the *polis*.

Paradoxically, however, the inherent racial animus structuring the War on Terror simultaneously extends brownness's geographic field of possibility as terrorism gets framed as a "global terror network," requiring an equally global military response. In addressing a joint session of Congress just nine days after the attacks, President George W. Bush (2001) stated, "This is not, however, just America's fight. And what is at stake is not just America's freedom. This is the world's fight." Furthermore, national security campaigns such as "If You See Something, Say Something"—which became a "global phenomenon," appearing in public security campaigns not only across the United States but also in Australia and Canada (Fernandez 2010)—led to brownness's ubiquity in the public consciousness. Suddenly hypervisible, brownness becomes further diffused; more than merely intercontinental, it is entirely unsettled, becoming *atopos*. Thus, in a perversion of Levinasian ethics, brownness is bequeathed a world—certainly a world of securitization, but the "world" in its geographic totality nonetheless—in the encounter and attempt to eradicate it from the world in its entirety.¹⁰

The story of Das Racist is intertwined with their critical reception, specifically the difficulty of situating them within a larger hip-hop tradition. Rising to internet notoriety with a song titled "Combination Pizza Hut and Taco Bell"—haphazardly recorded in one take with both Vazquez and Suri sharing a single microphone (ShineTravis 2010)—many critics initially labeled the group "joke rap" and dismissed them as a novelty act that would quickly fade into obscurity. Leaning into this ambiguity as their career progressed, Das Racist purposely became increasingly reticent to clear contextualization with each subsequent release. Their lyrics, for example, often contained a multitude of academic and literary references, including to postcolonial critics Gayatri Spivak and Edward Said; to literary figures such as W. E. B. Du Bois, Aimé Césaire, and Gary Soto; and to philosophers Friedrich Nietzsche, Michel Foucault, and Albert Camus, among others. These references, however, were tempered by a style of lyricism that bordered on sloppiness, including the repetition of lyrics within and across songs, deliberately singing off-key, free association, and intentionally unsophisticated rhymes. Here the more immediate point of reference in the history of hip-hop includes a subgenre exemplified by pioneering MC "the Rappin' Duke" (Shawn Brown) and labeled "parody rap." However, what effectively distinguished Das Racist from "parody rap" was the way that Suri and Vazquez transitioned between insightful social critique and frivolity. Indeed, they seemed intent on undermining the seriousness of their message with parody and their levity with biting critique, in the

process obfuscating their true intentions as artists. This ambiguity is made explicit in the chorus to “hahahaha jk?” (2010): “We’re not joking; just joking. / We are joking; just joking, we’re not joking.” Ultimately, and even though Heems would later acknowledge that this lack of orientation caused the members of the group to “los[e] the sense of our own identities” (NPR Staff 2015), intentional obfuscation of convention became a part of the message itself.

The group’s lyrics nonetheless clearly reflect a reckoning with the conflation of brownness and the denial of (romantic) intimacy inherent in the post-9/11 construction of brownness as a public terror. In fact, with continual references to Lockheed Martin, Guantánamo Bay, drones, the Taliban, and even in the embarrassingly (yet deliberately) simplistic rhyme “Twin Towers, Colin Powers” (“Selena,” 2010), the War on Terror is a central frame of reference for Das Racist. In “Fashion Party” (2010), a song detailing the artificiality of the fashion industry and the group’s outsider status in it, one that exploited their popularity by fetishizing them as the latest trend, Heems depicts the War on Terror’s personal toll by satirizing his style of dress: “Yes, I’m tan, and Taliban chic. / Shorty said I look like a Taliban freak.” In contrasting the speaker’s satirical association with Shorty’s denigrating connotation—being misidentified by a love interest is a common refrain across their oeuvre—the end-rhyme in these lines brings into relief how brownness shifts from a fashionable and commodifiable identity (“Taliban chic”) to an increasingly exotic and dangerous performance, with “freak” connoting both sexual proclivity and grotesqueness. In addition, the chorus, vocalized in breathy tones by pop singer Caroline Polachek, emphasizes brownness’s inscrutability by calling into question the intentions of the MCs as suitors: “I can’t tell if you want to hit me or want to dance.” Overall, with a female vocalist who repeatedly claims to see the speakers at multiple trendy events, “Fashion Party” conveys a hypervisibility that attaches itself to brownness, an already suspicious courting of the unrecognizable that fetishizes in advance, thereby foreclosing intimacy. Similarly, “Shorty Said” (2010) depicts a lover who misidentifies the ethnicity of each MC or speaker. However, in stereotyping the MCs by dictating who or what they “look like,” the song also conveys brownness’s unlocalizability in either geographic or historical terms. Heems, a South Asian, recounts how Shorty has mistaken him for Mexican and Honduran American comedian Carlos Mencia (Ned Holness), the Mexican American television personality Mario Lopez, a bevy of contemporary and former Indian actors (including Aditya Pancholi,

John Abraham, and Kader Khan), and most egregiously as a Paleolithic era “Cro-Mag.” In addition to being mistaken for a “Cro-Mag,” the Afro-Cuban Kool A.D. recounts how Shorty has misidentified him as Venezuelan American artist Devendra Banhart, Mexican American musician Ritchie Valens (Richard Valenzuela), African American rappers “Egyptian Lover” (Gregory Broussard) and “Swizz Beatz” (Kasseem Daoud Dean), Osama bin Laden, and Barack Obama. Even in contesting Shorty’s associations, however, the speakers themselves are seemingly only capable of providing approximations of their own identities (however imprecise). In one verse, Heems challenges Shorty: “I said, ‘Take notice, and Ma, please focus. / I look like him [Carlos Mencia] but mixed with George Lopez.’” In another verse, he counters that he looks like a Latino police officer, whom he fails to identify, on the television drama *CSI: Crime Scene Investigation*. Notably, in both instances it is only indirectly, in similes and only by building upon Shorty’s own associations, that Heems can at best approximate, through substitutions, his own brown identity.

However, if the flattening of brownness after 9/11 forecloses intimacy, it simultaneously disrupts the possibility of constructing global brown affiliations premised upon kinship. The song “Puerto Rican Cousins” (2010) depicts how the speakers are often misidentified as kin although Vazquez and Suri are neither related nor of Puerto Rican descent. The chorus, riffing on Sister Sledge’s disco hit “We Are Family” (1979), a song about kinship as racial solidarity, satirizes how brownness across ethnicities and nationalities in the post-9/11 era can merely give the illusion of, and thus functions as a poor substitute for, kinship. Although both MCs play on their own tokenization throughout the song, Kool A.D.’s verses in particular highlight a paradoxical desire for individuality—figured here as difference and distinction in the speaker’s desire to “ride” on his own and to single-handedly save the world—and collectivity. However, these contradictions cannot be resolved in and through kinship, as signaled by Kool A.D.’s resignation to tokenization at the end of the song: “We alright, type man. / We get along (like Puerto Rican cousins).” Ultimately, through the notion of typecasting as a central motif, “Puerto Rican Cousins” links the insistence on kinship as a melancholic longing for a center in an era of utter dispersion and defamiliarization.

Instead, *Das Racist* offers the possibility of countering the construction of brownness as public enemy through a globalized brownness that is figured as friendship, not as a means to return to the city center but as a perpetual wandering or wondering. Both inside and outside of the *polis* simultaneously (as its object and objective) and premised upon difference rather than

sameness as well as upon agonism, *Das Racist* reconceptualizes normative (that is, Aristotelian) friendship as a radical form of public intimacy. Assuming surveillance in advance, and thus the interpellation of intimacy into the biopolitical order (Puar 2007, 164), *Das Racist* playfully tropes the decentering of brownness by further decentering it, abandoning the desire for locus and origins, that which brownness as kinship cannot achieve. Hence, even the examples that they provide of “brown[ing] everything” throughout their oeuvre are intentionally absurd. *Kool A.D.*, for instance, presents as a “new” version of brownness: “Brown Elvis, I can’t help it. / Brown Larry Bird on the ’97 Celtics. / All brown everything, better than you’ve ever seen. / Never have you ever seen anything like it” (“Who’s That? Brooown!” 2010). If the irony in these verses is that we have seen both the white Elvis and Larry Bird in the form of African American musicians and athletes in popular culture, there is a further irony in that globalized brownness can only ever function as a copy of a copy. This denaturalization of brownness as a category is both a way of contesting the flattening of brownness after 9/11, on the one hand, and brownness’s own inherent tendency toward universalization and totality (Guzmán 2017), on the other. Furthermore, directly addressing the audience, *Kool A.D.* outlines in “People Are Strange” (2010): “The only consistence is change, my friend. / Use your brain, my friend. It’s a game, friend.” Thus, play, as an insistence on absolute immanence and on unrecognizability, constitutes the foundation—that is, lack of foundation—on which brown relationality as friendship is premised, and in this way it refuses in advance to found a new center to the *polis* as a global order. In the end, the fundamental questions that *Das Racist* raises as a project—for instance, in “Who’s That? Brooown!”: “What can brown do for you? What has brown done for me lately?”—shift the discourse on brownness toward absolute relationality itself, that is, toward ethics.

However, this reconceptualization of brownness as friendship in the final instance was never enough. Brownness is, after all, a serious matter. As Heems recounts, “My community is Indian, Pakistani, Indo-Caribbean, Guyanese, Trinidadian—and when I was in *Das Racist* I was really removed from the community” (NPR Staff 2015). We are left, then, with having to contend with this failure of friendship in our own use of brownness as a category of relationality going forward because after the “event” of 9/11, as *Das Racist* reveals, brownness as such can never again be “axiomatic,” to borrow Rana’s phrasing (2015, 299). For Latina/o/x studies, the same challenge confronts us as we reexamine the operative terms that have inaugurated, anchored, and propelled the field to the current conjunctural moment.

Notes

1. For an in-depth discussion of the politics of South Asian representation in the United States, see the documentary *The Problem with Apu* (2017). Comedian Hari Kondabolu, who wrote and stars in the film, is the older sibling of the third member of Das Racist, Heems's childhood friend and the group's hype man, Dapwell (Ashok Kondabolu).

2. David Konstan points out that friendship in ancient Greek and Latin contexts has traditionally been read as comprising a purely instrumental relationship (1997, 2). However, Konstan outrightly rejects this reading of ancient friendship.

3. Often translated as “guest-friendship,” or simply as hospitality, *xenia* traditionally refers to friendship between foreigners (Konstan 1997, 6).

4. Significantly, this fracturing of their friendship was evident in many of their statements regarding the breakup. For example, before officially announcing their separation, Heems lamented in a profile: “We were better friends when we started. . . . We lived together, worked together and toured together. You need space after that, with anyone. I wish it didn’t take a toll on that side of things” (Vozick-Levinson 2012, 42). For his part, Kool A.D. commented to *Rolling Stone* that the members of the group remained “more or less friends” but simultaneously opined: “Like, why are we even going through the motions of another album that’s going to be a whole ‘nother year of having to hang out with each other?” (Flanary 2012). Finally, Dapwell told *Fader*, “In the beginning, it was just us. We’d all hang out all the time, we all lived in this apartment together. Not that we were super friends, but sort of, you know?” (Zeichner 2012).

5. In his review of Das Racist’s album *Relax* (2011), music critic Zachary Houle accuses the group of “zeitgeist baiting” (Houle 2011).

6. This includes the work of Hiram Perez (2005), Swati Rana (2015), Armando García (2015), Kumarini Silva (2016), Joshua Javier Guzmán (2017), Stephanie Fetta (2018), and José Esteban Muñoz (2020).

7. As A. J. P. Taylor writes of the failed revolution in Germany in 1848: “German history reached its turning-point and failed to turn. This was the fateful essence of 1848” ([1945] 2005, 71). This sentiment, the failed promise of radical political possibility, informs leftist readings of the Revolutions of 1848, haunting Karl Marx and the Marxist tradition.

8. Among US citizens, those targeted as terrorists have ranged from Latino youth in street gangs, in the case of Edgar Morales, to sixteen-year-old Yemeni American Abdulrahman Aal-Awlaki, the target of a drone strike in Yemen. However, as Ben V. Oluḡin points out: “September 11 introduced not only a new enemy—the dark-skinned Muslim male—but a new way of understanding the old racial minority ‘menace to society’ who, historically, has been figured as a Black male and/or, with increasing frequency, a Latino male. Today, the two villains—the international and the domestic—have become indistinguishable” (2010, 3).

9. Armando García, for instance, points out: “Brownness stems from the experiences of minoritarian exile from official markers of citizenship where

Latinas/os register as citizen-subjects endowed with legal status but are nonetheless denied access to official political ontology” (2015, 103).

10. Emmanuel Levinas writes of worldhood and the Other: “The relationship with the Other is not produced outside of the world, but puts in question the world possessed. The relationship with the Other, transcendence, consists in speaking the world to the Other. . . . The analyses of language that tend to present it as one meaningful action among others fail to recognize this offering of the world, this offering of contents which answers to the face of the Other or which questions him, and first opens the perspective of the meaningful. . . . To see the face is to speak of the world. Transcendence is not an optics, but the first ethical gesture” (1969, 173–74, emphasis in original).

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