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## Anti-black Racism

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# ANTI-BLACK RACISM

## The Greatest Art Show on Earth

*Janine Jones*

The concept of the aesthetic derives from the concept of taste—often understood in the history of Western philosophy as that which enables us to discern beauty from non-beauty. In *The Cultural Promise of the Aesthetic*, Monique Roelofs understands the aesthetic as “an assembly of conceptually inflected, socially situated, multimodal, embodied practices” (2014: 2). Roelofs argues that Hume’s and Kant’s universalist accounts of aesthetic perception advance a notion of the public that emerges from “the hypothesis of shared appreciative capacities and the universally valid aesthetic judgments they warrant” (2014: 5). I understand the aesthetic, here, as pertaining to the assembly of which Roelofs speaks, anchored in discourses and experiences pertaining to the discernment of the beautiful and the non-beautiful, where such discernment targets the appearance of objects, and understands their deeper reality or meaning (when they are thought to have one) as stemming or inferable from their appearance. On my understanding of the aesthetic, the hypothesis claims that we possess shared capacities for discerning positive and negative aesthetic experiences, and, that the putative fact that these capacities (capacities of taste, we might call them) are universally shared is what warrants the aesthetic judgments that issue forth from them.

The hypothesis is compatible with the following proposition: the aesthetic provides symbolic and sensually responsive material that directs our movement with respect to objects in the world, and thereby assists in sustaining hierarchical structures by enriching our ideas of the ordering of categories and their members. Roelofs observes that evidence for the hypothesis is scant. Her views, in general, suggest that evidence for the proposition is extensive. Agreeing with Roelofs on both counts, I contend, however, that in places where we live, where more often than not we do not theorize our aesthetic experiences with a great deal of awareness—as we might when making an argument or deconstructing a discourse—the empirical conditions under which our racialized aesthetic and aestheticized racial experiences and evaluations take shape often remain concealed. Following Roelofs, I understand aesthetic racialization as occurring when “aesthetic stratagems support racist registers” and racialized aesthetics as occurring when “racial templates support aesthetic modalities” (2014: 29). Empirically observable conditions of systemic and other forms of racism may “disappear” behind aesthetic arrangements, where the latter may present themselves as being for aesthetic perception/appreciation

only. Conversely, empirically perceivable conditions that appear to be solely about aesthetic schema may be grounded in and governed by non-apparent racial arrangements. Both types of disappearing acts are all the more likely to occur in lived experience because of the mutual saturation of race and aesthetics within sensually response-producing imagined materiality, which directs spontaneous somatic movement. Such complementary saturation leads Roelofs to claim that, on the one hand, we must aim to comprehend the workings of the aesthetic, because aesthetic schema and experience create the channels via which we produce and exchange racial passions, perceptions, and value; and that, on the other, we must seek to understand processes of racialization if we are to discern how and where such processes are grafted on to the aesthetic (2014: 29). But such comprehension and understanding often involves forms of theorization that take place within academic or academic-like spaces, where it is supposedly our task to examine our aesthetically racialized and racialized-aesthetic directed movements, even during theorizing.

Arguably, a significant factor in the preponderance of implicit racial bias (and of racial bias that masquerades as implicit, remaining unspoken until triggered, or of racism or racial bias that is not called out as such—see below) has to do with the conveyance of such bias through racialized aesthetic schema or aestheticized racial arrangements in the course of spontaneous, habitual, habit-producing somatic movement. One perspective from which to understand this idea is through an assertion Achille Mbembe makes in *Critique de la Raison Nègre*.

Mbembe understands that in order to operate at its very best, racism must function at the levels of affect, impulsion, and speculum: core elements of the infrastructure of racism. Thus, race must be presented not only through constituents of image, form, surface, and figure, but via a racial imaginary that structures these constituents into dynamic and comprehensible forms (Mbembe 2013: 57). In effect, what Mbembe lays claims to for race is an aestheticized racialization that depends on a type of image analyzed by Susanne Langer in *The Problems of Art*—the dynamic image. A dynamic image is a virtual object (a speculum) that is an apparition of *active* powers (Langer 1957: 5)—an expressive image made active by its sensually perceptible, response-directing materiality.

Race, *like other art forms* (e.g., dance) expresses “an idea of the way feelings, emotions, and all other subjective experience come and go—their rise and growth, their intricate synthesis that gives our inner lives unity” (Langer 1957: 7) and identity around discourses and realities of race. Transported through dynamic images, race structures subjective existence in us in such a way that it can be “conceptually known, reflected on, imagined and symbolically expressed in detail and to a great depth” (Langer 1957: 7–8). Dynamic art images, including racial ones, are public. Third-person accessible, they convey and facilitate inter-subjective communication. Dynamic images of black bodies presented through various processes of racialized aesthetics or aestheticized racialization are directly perceived and felt as threats: they can be as directly perceived and felt by an audience as is a bass played in a jazz club or in a symphony hall. Indirectly but immediately, black people, who have been socially constructed so that their physical bodies correlate in space and time with racist dynamic images, are themselves treated as the threats these images suggest or indicate they are. Social creation of such images takes different paths. Dynamic images have been grounded in purely imaginary structures of thought, such as those that place black people in biological relation to gorillas

or chimpanzees in ways that other members of the biological family, *human being*, are not thought to stand. This type of creation has been effected through repetition of narratives and perceptual images, but also through the socially constructed built reality of segregated space, where black people have been concentrated in small places (slave ships, slave cabins, projects, prison cells, isolation cells within humungous prison complexes) and cut off from vital resources of the greater society. Actual segregated built realities have determined that a significant number of black people will be poorly educated, live in sub-standard conditions, and develop distinct behaviors and disparities in health—which can then be targeted, stigmatized and essentialized to create ready-to-use (tweakable) dynamic images for black people, in general. Racializing imaginaries essentialize their targets. What better way to essentialize black people than to create lived places that provide perceivable, third-person evidence that, for the most part, black people are inferior? Particular black people must *prove* to subjects, whose interaction with them is brokered through perceptions of black dynamic images, that they are innocent of the aspersions cast upon them—that they are the odd book not to be judged by its cover.

Slain Michael Brown may have been thought of as a “gentle giant” by his friends. But when physically positioned within Officer Darren Wilson’s visual-imaginary field, Wilson imaginatively saw and felt a “demon,” a “Hulk Hogan.” A dynamic image appeared, which correlated with Brown’s actual body in physical space. In order to understand anti-black racism, we must take seriously the dynamic image that Darren Wilson perceived and felt.

Hulk Hogan, that’s how big he felt and how small I felt just from grasping his arm.

It looked like he was almost bulking up to run through the shots, like it was making him mad that I’m shooting at him.

[He made] a grunting, like aggravated sound . . . I’ve never seen that. I mean, it was very aggravated . . . aggressive, hostile . . . You could tell he was looking through you. There was nothing he was seeing.

(Bouie)

Let’s also consider Charles Kinsey, the black therapist shot by a police officer in North Miami, in spite of the fact that he was lying on the ground with his hands in the air. When Kinsey asked the officer why he shot him the officer responded, “I don’t know.” Perhaps the officer didn’t have words to express what he imaginatively saw and felt upon being confronted with a dynamic image correlated with Kinsey’s actual body. Possibly a certain degree of cognitive dissonance occurred as the result of perceiving the dynamic image while divining the existence of some real person-body “behind” it. It would seem, however, that the cop went with the dynamic image as the relevant purveyor of reality.

The dynamic image of a black person (wordier, I really mean: the dynamic image of a black body, which through its active powers presents *effects* of the presence of a person), like the dynamic image presented by a dance performance, is given by physical realities: “place, gravity, body, muscular strength, muscular control, and secondary assets such as light, sound, or things . . . All of these are actual” (Langer 1957: 6). But in dance (as in the perception of dynamic images, correlated in space and time with black bodies) these actualities (e.g., an actual black person and her body) are not perceived. The more

perfect the dance (or the more perfect the presentation of blackness in a context—the local or global environment or interaction between the two the less the actualities are perceived.” (Langer 1957: 6).

Through the presentation of dynamic images, artworks succeed in presenting patterns that can be perceived, felt, and communicated. Dynamic images of anti-black racism—arguably Western modernity’s greatest works of art—excel in this regard as narrative is an integral part of the racist art show, supplying fundamental ideas about what is being presented in dynamic forms. The fact that anti-black racist dynamic images can function at deep, non-discursive levels of emotional-cognitive uptake and absorption make it all the more difficult to challenge them discursively *during* episodes of lived experience. Moreover, and significantly, during lived experience some consciously seek strategies to occlude our awareness of the racism that dwells within and around us.

At a philosophy talk, I witnessed a philosopher suggest to a group of students that in order to avoid being the party pooper who points out that someone’s racist assertion about black people or Hispanics *is* racist (e.g., black people are stupid; Hispanics are lazy) they might adopt a strategy that eliminates talk about racism altogether. Rather than maintain that an assertion made by one of the partiers is racist, they should argue that the assertion in question is false, because it is logically false. For example, it is logically false that birds fly, if we understand the statement as making a universal claim about birds, or, say, a generic claim about birds. The audience was taught how to use the logic of universal quantifiers or generics to make their case. I interpreted the speaker as—unwittingly or not—instructing the audience that (and how) we should seek to theorize some *lived experiences of race* in a way that erases race, in order to maintain an aesthetic of orderliness, “friendliness,” and “civility” to name a few aesthetic promises we’re supposed keep in some places. I use scare quotes to problematize the idea that friendliness and civility could be sought in a place where those who are attacked by racist statements are encouraged to pretend they feel nothing more than the misgivings attendant to logical falsehoods, while those who make racist statements are protected and can remain innocent of their own racism by turning their attention to the interesting world of logical fallacies. Per the recommended strategy, black and brown people, who already bear the burden of being a threat to the kind of etiquette mandated in such places by the dynamic images correlated in imaginary-perceived space with their physical bodies, must find ways to protect and nourish the innocence and well-being of white people. Thus, normative aesthetic orderliness, correlated with whiteness, is maintained. Disruption, correlated with blackness, is silenced.

Granted, the theoretical warrant for universally valid aesthetic experiences is thin. Nevertheless, within lived experience—where we spontaneously perceive, act, react, desire, move, and respond—it might *appear* to us that (1) we do in fact possess universally shared negative attitudes about black people, and (2) that our apparent shared aesthetic attitudes may appear to be not so much anti-black as merely *natural*, universal aesthetic responses to what black bodies *naturally* are, where our responses are understood as resulting in negative effects that turn out to work against black people. In the remainder of this chapter, I discuss two cases in which (1) and (2) have arisen within lived experience. Finally, I briefly present an out-of-academy response that struck anti-black racism at its aesthetic core.

## The Opacity of White Light

And God said, Let there be light: and there was light.

A television company is about to shoot a panel discussion before a studio audience. The producer, from the control room, is discussing with the floor manager in the studio how the audience looks in his monitor. The producer says something about the number of black people at the front of the audience. “You’re worried there are not too many whites obviously there?,” asks the floor manager. No, says the producer, it’s nothing like that, a mere technical matter, a question of lighting—“it just looks a bit down.”

(Dyer, 1997: 82)

According to Richard Dyer, the producer’s judgment, given in the epigraph, is purely aesthetic. “If he were to do it the usual way with a white audience, the image would look ‘up’: bright, sparkling” (1977: 82). But the image that looked down would have *looked down* not just to the producer but to almost all Western human perceivers brought up within the conventions of Western film-viewing. This observation provides good material for thinking about how the process of aesthetic racialization in the film industry gave rise to aesthetic judgments that seem to be about aesthetic experience only, and not to be about race at all. Such judgments seem to arise from a natural capacity most of us share. Therefore, such judgments may seem not to be anti-black, but merely judgments that express universal capacities of taste, which, unfortunately, give rise to thoughts and actions that work against black people.

Dyer remarks that lighting in filmmaking is almost always manipulated to make people the most important element in a shot, by focusing on their faces. That some faces are lit while others are not enables important people in a shot to be distinguished from their surroundings.

Dyer explains that in the *development* of lighting in film, whiteness was a monumental problem. Light didn’t just shine a light on white skin. Light troubled *the colors* in white skin. Consider a highlight from Dyer’s recounting of the history of film: “The earliest stock, orthochromatic, was insensitive to red and yellow, rendering both colors dark. Charles Handley, looking back in 1954, noted that with orthochromatic stock, ‘even a reasonably light-red object would photograph black.’ White skin is reasonably light-red” (1997: 91). The problem? White people came out black.

As if black-skinned white people were not problematic enough, lighting for whiteness had to contend with how white people *preferred* whiteness to be perceived. Citing Brian Winston, Dyer writes “it is ‘preferred—a whiter shade of white’”; Dyer added, “Characteristically too, it is a woman’s skin which provides the litmus test” (1997: 93). If white men have been thought to be exemplars of whiteness through their possession of mind, the litmus test suggests that white women are exemplars of whiteness through their bodies, which includes their faces.

In spite of all the problems that surfaced in the history of developing lighting for white skin, we are now compelled to see lighting as inherently non-problematic for white skin, but as particularly problematic for black skin: and of course, *it is!* Lighting was not developed for black skin.



“How does it feel to be a problem?” Apparently, feeling oneself to be a problem is something that white people, *qua* being white, are not supposed or allowed to feel, as we’ve seen above, in the discussion of how to keep parties polite. With a mendacious narrative of the history of film, we are left with the idea that white skin naturally promises an aesthetically pleasing result. Black skin, by contrast, inherently threatens film production. Both aesthetically and economically, great cost is incurred in compensating for the problems black skin poses. Thus, black skin appears to provide a reason *all on its own* against using black people in film. Hence, there is no need for white supremacist, anti-black racism in the film industry: light itself—a natural phenomenon—sheds light on who is aesthetically fair and who is aesthetic anathema. Light indicates what is aesthetically fair game for filming, and what ought to be left out in the dark, at the risk of offending *our* sense of aesthetics. Dyer’s narrative undermines the official story by showing us how it should be recast as a story about aestheticized racialization. However, Dyer’s revealed story is grounded in a larger historical narrative of racialized aesthetics.

“I think the reason they do that is the boys . . . sometimes the boys could be more attracted to the Black girls, especially when it comes to body shape, and they think it’s going to distract the boys, so they do tell the Black girls to cover up, because that’s who the boys are looking at,” Shamika said. “They are looking at the Black girls. They are looking at the White girls [too], but they’re looking at their faces. They’re not finna really cover up the White girls.” It’s notable that Shamika felt boys were attracted to White girls’ faces but to Black girls’ bodies. And that she didn’t pause or skip a beat in explaining as much. “So if they’re not looking at your face, what do you think are they looking at?” I asked. “They’re looking at your butt or your boobs,” Shamika responded.”

(Morris, 2016: 128)

Dyer told us that lighting in filmmaking is almost always manipulated to distinguish the important people from their environment—by way of the face. Mbembe has described the image ontology that reigns in racialized realms as “a regime of visibility that privileges the face. By seeing your face, I am interpellated. I’m expecting you to tell me something meaningful and then I’ll respond: two subjects facing each other” (Mbembe, Rhodes seminar notes, 2014). Within racialized regimes, where faces are privileged as loci of meaning, indicating subjectivity and personhood, black people are reduced to *surfaces*. Surfaces, Mbembe asserts, hide *faces* (Rhodes seminar). But the extract above reminds us of the importance of analyzing racialized realms through multiple lenses of oppression. Black girls’ and women’s faces do not have the aestheticized racial purchase of their white female “counterparts.” The occlusion of their faces is enacted by black males, who perceive them as surfaces, and reinforced by school authorities. Black girls and women are told to cover their offending surfaces in places (e.g., schools) where their surfaces are imaginatively perceived as posing aesthetic-sexual threats. (One cannot but wonder how a black Muslim girl, bearing a butt, boobs, and burkini, would fare in a place that would force her to uncover herself in order to satisfy its notion of feminine freedom while forcing her to cover herself up, in order to satisfy its notion of feminine decency.) In other places, these same surfaces promise some male or other sexual pleasure. As the black girl or woman is not interpellated, in or outside of film, as a person possessing the dignity of bearing a face, she can be raped and denied the

dignity of being *someone* whose rape matters, although the logic for being denied dignity may differ. The logic of black males raping black females and the rape not mattering because the black girl or woman is not valued as a person *with a face*, is different from the logic of black females being raped by men of any race and the rape not mattering because black females are willfully submissive. In the first case, rape is recognized. Its value and meaning to the person raped is not. In the second, there is no recognition of a rape occurring to which value could be accorded. Regardless of the perpetrator or logic employed to deny dignity, given the racialized-gendered aesthetics of patriarchal realms, black girls and women lose face at least twice.

Combining Dyson's and Mbembe's analyses with multiple-lens reasoning, we understand that film developed within a larger racialized-gendered aesthetic realm, where black people's faces had already been differentially obscured depending on other factors, such as gender, class, and color. By reducing black people to surfaces, the wider, racist realm had pre-determined that they were not subjects: those who might have something meaningful to say to us or to each other. Following suit by developing lighting for white skin and white faces only, the film industry replicated the face-surface logic of the wider world. However, in hiding its replication story, it transformed an explicit logic of racializing aesthetics, operative in the wider world, into a logic of aestheticizing race, where light allegedly naturally shows the way to white faces. The narrative tells us that historically we have responded *appropriately* to the promise of aesthetic goods offered by the marriage of light and skin that is white, and to the threat of black skin, black as sin: rejected by light itself.

*And why should one hab de white wife,*

*And me hab only Quangeroo?*

*Me no see reason for me life!*

*No! Quashee hab de white wife too.*

*Huzza, &c.*

*For make all like, let blackee nab*

*De white womans . . . dat be de track!*

*Den Quashee de white wife will hab,*

*And mass Jef. Shall hab de black,*

*Huzza, &c.*

(Lemire 1999: 14)

Even when we begin in a realm that explicitly racializes aesthetics we can be left feeling that, in the final analysis, we share some natural aesthetic capacity that responds to whiteness and rejects blackness. Quashee demands that he "hab de white wife too." Quashee demands a white wife on the grounds that Jefferson had declared all men equal. Using a multiple-lens analyses in our critical race theorizing, perhaps we ought to conclude that black women will only be equal when they can have a white wife too.



Eldridge Cleaver echoed Quashee's claim two centuries later, making a stake for freedom, for black men:

I love white women and hate black women. *It's just in me, so deep that I don't even try to get it out of me anymore.* I'd jump over ten nigger bitches just to get to one white woman. *Ain't no such thing as an ugly white woman.* A white woman is beautiful even if she's baldheaded and only has one tooth. . . . *Sometimes I think that the way I feel about white women, I must have inherited from my father and his father and his father's father—as far as you can go into slavery.* I must have inherited from all those black men part of my desire for the white woman, because I have more love for her than one man should have. . . . They passed on their desire to me, they must have. . . . *But I'm stuck with myself* and I accept my own thoughts about things. For instance, I don't know just how it works, I mean I can't analyze it, but I know that the white man made the black woman the symbol of slavery and the white woman the symbol of freedom. *Every time I embrace a black woman I'm embracing slavery, and when I put my arms around a white woman, well, I'm hugging freedom.* The white man forbade me to have the white woman on pain of death. . . . Men die for freedom, but black men die for white women, who are the symbol of freedom. That was the white man's will, and as long as he has the power to enforce his will upon me. . . . I will not be free. I will not be free until the day I can have a white woman in my bed and a white man minds his own business. Until that day comes, my entire existence is tainted, poisoned, and I will be a slave—and so will the white woman.  
(1968/1991: 187–189, emphasis added)

Cleaver's declaration displays an entanglement of racialized-gendered aesthetics and racialized-gendered politics. For black men who have "inherited" the desire described by Cleaver, having a white woman in their bed—the type of female which, as a matter of racialized, gendered, aesthetic-ontological fact, *cannot* be ugly—is a matter of freedom and unfreedom: a matter of life and death. For a black man to act on such a desire at the time Cleaver wrote this piece (and even now in some places in the United States), was to sign his death warrant. But that's as it should be if it is true, as Cleaver claims, that black men die for white women. Quashee would have agreed with Cleaver: he sees no reason for living if he can hab only Quangeroo. Perhaps Quashee would speak of suicide if he could hab only de black woman with no European (or apparent European) ancestry, as Quangeroo possesses. In any case, Cleaver describes an inheritance he is stuck with. The inheritance determines racialized-gendered aesthetic sexual preferences and desires of some black men. "It's just in me" fosters the idea that Cleaver's desire is as natural as DNA (or as light on white skin). Beauty and ugliness are anchored in race via symbols and embodiments of freedom and unfreedom, thus linking them to the aesthetic via the politics of racial realities. Good evidence supports Cleaver's claim that white men made white women the symbol of freedom and black women the symbol of slavery, not to mention the living, bodily embodiment of its continuance in new forms. One such piece of evidence resides in the arguments of Thomas Jefferson, a beloved founding father and principle author of the US Declaration of Independence.

Jefferson had to explain why freed black people should be removed from the United States since wisdom had it that large numbers of people were the hope of America. In *Notes on the State of Virginia*, Jefferson popularized the rationalization of race as an aesthetic hierarchy of traits “with supposedly built in dynamics of sexual desire” (Lemire 1999: 27). The removal of blacks was supposed to guarantee that black and white people would remain “as distinct as nature has formed them” (1999: 27). How did Jefferson’s argument go?

Jefferson claimed that the beauty of white race traits placed whites on top of a hierarchy of race. This central premise of Jefferson’s argument was thought to be *proved* by the black preference for whites “as uniformly as is the preference of the Oranootan for the black women over those of his own species” (Lemire 1999: 28). The primary “physical distinctions [that] prove . . . a difference or race” (1999: 27) were skin color, hair, and smell. The perception that orangutans desire African women goes back to sixteenth- and seventeenth-century scientific theory. “Jefferson would have been familiar with the frontispiece of an English translation of Linnaeus titled *A Genuine and Universal System of Natural History*, featuring an orangutan snatching an African woman from her human mate” (1999: 28).

To argue for removal in the face of emancipation is, in Jefferson’s view, a moral imperative. . . . “The circumstance of superior beauty, is thought worthy of attention in the propagation of our horses, dogs, and other domestic animals; why not in that of man?”

(1999: 28)

Maintaining that male orangutans desire black females and that black males desire white females (all female desire got lost), Jefferson, in effect, laid out the Chain of Being, which organized species by kind, and where black people and apes reside contiguously on the bottom of the hierarchy. Jefferson reimagined the ontological order of the chain as being epistemically accessed through the lens of racialized-gendered aesthetic evaluations, which were determined by the *natural* responsive capacity of sexual desire.

He imagines that the chain is organized into biological kinds who are knowable as distinct through their relative beauty. And he envisions each race or species desiring to couple with that race or species above it on the chain out of “preference” for its greater beauty.

(Lemire 1999: 28–29)

Thus, members of kinds can know—through third-person observation—the behaviors of members of their own kind and that of other kinds. Men can know—through reasoned observation about their aesthetic preferences mediated by their sexual desire—why different biological kinds are situated on the Chain of Being as they are, and why a kinds’ members belong to the kind they belong to. On this scheme, I suppose that white men should really desire Mary, Mother of God, rather than white women, who are not above them *in any way*. In any case, in accordance with nature or God’s commands, white males should not desire black or orangutan females. However, orangutan males should desire black females and black males should desire white females. Given these natural desires, at least two conclusions follow. Orangutans should try to engage black

females sexually, if possible, and black males should try to engage white females sexually, where possible. Hence, black males are cast as a racial-aesthetic threat, *by nature*, to white women, and to a nation allegedly built by white women's white sons: black men *must* rape white females if they can. Black females—a foundational degenerative force—forcing white men to give in to their “boisterous passions” (Jefferson, Notes, Query XVIII, “On Manners”)—are also racial-aesthetic threats to the nation. Indeed, Jefferson was laid open to accusations of failing to be truly white, because through his relationship with Sally Hemings, he manifested a type of deviance which purportedly augured the death of the foundling nation (Lemire 2009: 30).

What we should keep in mind here is that Jefferson's proof didn't have to mean that white people were enjoined to make discrimination against black people their *aim*. The proof could be understood as making explicit, through reasoned observation, nature or God's commands, and the consequences of not following them. As Lemire observes, significantly, laws were not required for getting people to conform to the logic of the proof. Aesthetic feeling and fear led individuals to conform in the constitution of an institution of anti-miscegenation.

the depictions of inter-racial sex from New York, Pennsylvania, and Massachusetts indicate that many whites there clearly feared social and economic equality would follow political equality, New York, never had laws prohibiting inter-racial marriage, Pennsylvania overturned theirs in 1780, and Massachusetts would overturn theirs in 1843 . . . the numerous depictions of inter-racial couplings that dotted the Northern cultural landscape did the work of prohibiting inter-marriage by teaching whites that blacks are physically and socially inferior and to thereby treat them accordingly.

(Lemire 1999: 2)

When she passes she calls my attention, but her hair, there's no way no. Her *catinga* (body odor) almost caused me to faint. Look. I cannot stand her odor. Look, look, look at her hair! It looks like a scouring pad for cleaning pans. I already told her to wash herself. But she insisted and didn't want to listen to me. This smelly *negra* (Black woman). . . . Stinking animal that smells worse than a skunk.

(Caldwell 2003: 18)

The above extract presents lyrics sung by former circus clown, Tiririca, who is currently a federal deputy for São Paulo, Brazil. In “‘Look at Her Hair’: The Body Politics of Black Womanhood in Brazil,” Kia Caldwell examines ideals of female beauty in Brazil and their impacts on black women's subjective experiences. In the course of her exploration, Caldwell makes several crucial points. Consider a few, relevant to our discussion.

Widespread beliefs regarding the inferiority and undesirability of Blackness have largely caused referential use of the terms *negro(a)* to be viewed as a form of insult and deprecation.

“What is dirty is associated with Black, with color, and with Black men and women.”

(quoted in Caldwell 2003: 20)

Of all Brazilian social groups, Black women are the most profoundly impacted by Brazilian beliefs and prejudices regarding hair texture.

Of all the physical characteristics, it is particularly hair that marks “race” for women. . . . It is in the issue of hair that one sees a distinction between men and women and the differential social coding of race and ethnicity. Thus “race” is gendered.

(quoted in Caldwell 2003:21)

In Brazil, racialized gender hierarchies also classify women by dissecting their bodies and attributing certain physical features either to the category of sex or beauty. This dissection process assigns features such as skin color, hair texture, and the shape and size of the nose and lips (constituents of face) to the category of beauty, while features such as the breasts, hips, and buttocks are assigned to the sexual category. Given the Eurocentric aesthetic standards that prevail in Brazilian society, Black women have traditionally been defined as being sexual, rather than beautiful. Ironically, however, Black and Mulata women’s association with sensuality and sexuality has been lauded as evidence of racial democracy in Brazil (Caldwell 1999; Gilliam 1998).

(Caldwell 2003: 20–21; addition in parenthesis mine)

*Smoothing over*—an aestheticizing process at the heart of *processing* black girls’ and women’s hair—often has a positive phenomenological valence in experience. Natural hairstyles, especially dreads—knotty dreads, as opposed to silky ones—may be experienced as symbols and embodiments of resistance: an unruly dread refusing to be ruled by radiant or chemical heat, which whatever the associated spiritual cost, damages hair *at its roots*. Resistance speaks to the idea of reclaiming one’s roots, one’s ancestors. Smoothing over reveals a great deal about the function of racist jokes (and logic, it would seem from our discussion above) to cover up racism.

“Look at Her Hair” trades in jokes that *smooth over* nexuses of race and aesthetics deployed to attack black girls and women, was not granted the privilege of being dissected in academic-like spaces *only*—allowing whiteness at large to go unscathed. It wasn’t given the protection accorded spaces where racism wears the whiteface of logical fallacy. The song—defended by *the people* as a joke—“created an outcry amongst Black activists” (Caldwell 2003: 19). Their outrage led to a suit against Tiririca and Sony Music for racism.

The Center for the Articulation of Marginalized Populations (CEAP), . . . a non-governmental organization in Rio de Janeiro, requested that the Brazilian Public Ministry prohibit the music on the basis of discrimination against Blacks and women. A formal denouncement of racism was presented in July 1996 on article 20 of the 1989 Cao Law, which declared racism in the Brazilian media to be a crime.

(Caldwell 2003: 19)

My point: whatever might be revealed in academic-type spaces about the marriage between anti-black racism and aesthetics (and politics), black activist *movement*,

understood broadly, is continually required to disrupt the somatic, habit-producing, anti-black racist *movements* of daily life, and make perceptible the fact that anti-black evaluations are not determined by innate, universal capacities of taste and *will not be* universally shared.

### Further Readings

- Cayton, H. R., and Drake, St. Claire. (1945, 1962, 1970) *Black Metropolis: A Study of Negro Life in a Northern City*, London: University of Chicago Press. See for further discussion of the construction of segregated places and their effects.
- Duneier, Mitchell. (2016) *Ghetto: The Invention of a Place, the History of an Idea*, New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux. See for extended discussion of the construction of segregated places and their effects, and a general discussion of the concept of the *ghetto* and historical lived realities of ghettos across historical times and locations.
- Goff, A. (2008) "Not Yet Human: Implicit Knowledge, Historical Dehumanization, and Contemporary Consequences." *Journal of Personality and Psychology* 94, no. 2: 292–306. See for a discussion of the contemporary association between black people and apes.
- Myrdal, Gunnar. (1944) *An American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and Modern Democracy*, New York: Harper and Brothers. See for further discussion of the construction of segregated places and their effects.
- Taylor, P.C. (2016) *Black Is Beautiful: A Philosophy of Black Aesthetics*, London: Wiley Blackwell. See for extended discussions of nexuses between aesthetics, race, and politics, for further discussion of Thomas Jefferson's rendering of an aesthetic hierarchy of race traits and its political implications, and for further discussion of the significance of the aesthetics and politics of hair in anti-black racism, especially against black girls and women.
- Wilderson, F. B., III. (2010) *Red, White, and Black: Cinema and the Structure of U.S. Antagonisms*, Durham: Duke University Press. See for further discussion of the construction of segregated places and their effects.
- Yancy, G. (2008) *Black Bodies, White Gazes: The Continuing Significance of Race*, Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield. See Chapter 6 for Yancy's presentation of Dyer's discussion of how individuals are constructed through the use of light.

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- Roelofs, M. (2014) *The Cultural Promise of the Aesthetic*, New York, London, New Delhi, Sidney: Bloomsbury.