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Race-ing Aesthetic Theory

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Part VI

AESTHETICS
Introduction

Aesthetics has long been embroiled in problematic racial theories and activities. Contemporary scholars and artists push back against this tradition of thought and practice. The racial heritage in aesthetics calls for revisions of key concepts in aesthetics, such as notions of experience, the body, normativity, value, culture, and the nation. Post- and decolonial theorists along with philosophers of race and critical race feminists have commenced this work, as have artists and other makers of cultural productions. First offering a quick glimpse of the troubled theoretical history these critical voices challenge, this chapter goes on to describe the new philosophical outlooks they open up. I will continue with a sample of the many other themes and approaches that surface in the sharply contested area where aesthetics and race are mutually determinative of each other. We will examine, in particular, the topics of aesthetic sustenance and pleasure, appropriation, everyday aesthetics, and the categories philosophers call aesthetic concepts.

Aesthetic Histories and Canons

Racial conceptions historically permeate aesthetic theory. Readers of Immanuel Kant will recall his view that black persons are incapable of fine feeling, an important condition for aesthetic perception, and they will also remember his comments about the relatively deficient apprehensive propensities of Native Americans, Caribbeans, and other non-Europeans (Kant 1951; Eze 1997). Before Kant voiced these ideas, David Hume had already notified his readers of his denial of original thought to black people (Eze 1997). Edmund Burke (1990) had advanced as a legitimate instance of aesthetic perception the case of a young, white boy’s horror at the sight of a black woman. Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, for his part, added the persuasion that Africa is located outside of world history (Eze 1997). These are examples of a broader racial heritage in aesthetics. Ideas about the racial grounds for aesthetic practices are far from new, as are observations on the aesthetic dimensions of racial constellations. In point of fact, for several centuries, philosophers have embedded suppositions about hierarchically conceived white, black, Amerindian, African, Arab, Jewish, and Asian identities—among
many others—in their accounts of aesthetic qualities and experience. They have structurally given aesthetic meanings to racial differences, associating racialized attributes with disparate capacities to realize aesthetic value in the spheres of art, bodily appearance and comportment, and cultural practice generally. This line of thought is not confined to a small corner of the Western philosophical canon or an incidental site of inattention, but reaches into the core of European aesthetic visions.

Indeed, major eighteenth- and nineteenth-century figures in Western aesthetics have built pernicious racial tenets into their understandings of fundamental mechanisms of art and culture, assumptions that continue to reverberate in contemporary conceptual frameworks (West 1982; Wynter 1992; Eze 1994, 1997; Armstrong 1996; Bernasconi 1998; Korsmeyer 1998; Gooding-Williams 2006; James 2010; Roelofs 2014). These philosophers endorse problematic, aesthetically supported and aesthetically productive segments of institutionally embedded racialization as well as racially supported and racially productive strata of structurally emplaced aesthetic activity. Trajectories of what I call \textit{aesthetic racialization}, a term that refers to the ways in which aesthetic elements support racializing processes, thereby, go in tandem with itineraries of what I dub \textit{racialized aestheticization}, a term that denotes the contributions that racial constellations make to aesthetic phenomena (Roelofs 2014). Patterns of aesthetic racialization and racialized aestheticization are complicit in aesthetically legitimated and aesthetically generative forms of violence and injustice. Both at the level of aesthetic practice and scholarship, much work has happened to transform these structures.

\textbf{Critical Frameworks}

Challenging formations of aesthetic racialization and racialized aestheticization, theorists and artists have begun to develop alternative cultural and conceptual itineraries. I will sketch four avenues of reflection on and engagement with these formations. These include post- and decolonial perspectives, the approaches of canonical philosophers of race W.E.B. Du Bois and Frantz Fanon, the agenda of what I call critical race feminist aesthetics, and a painting and installation by Kara Walker, whose work puts pressure on racial positions and understandings.

\textbf{Post- and Decolonial Theory: Alternative Traditions, Critiques of Modernity, and Counternarratives of Cultural Difference}

Along with artists, art critics, curators, and activists, theorists are critically rethinking elements of the vexed Anglo-European heritage in philosophical aesthetics. This agenda encompasses the two-tiered, interconnected project of revising our understanding of the aesthetic and rhetorical underpinnings of modernity and the modern subject, phenomena that have racism and racialization at their basis (Gilroy 1993; Mignolo 2007), and of uncovering alternative philosophical and artistic traditions, ones that take a distance from problematic collaborations between aesthetics and race, as intersecting with factors such as coloniality.

Meanwhile central categories of analysis undergo shifts in meaning. Moving away from perspectives that reify notions of tradition and modernity, nation and empire, the global North and South, postcolonial theorists Stuart Hall, Gayatri Spivak, and Homi
Bhabha complicate received inside-outside oppositions informing these concepts, such as the distinctions between the subject of Western civilization and its disavowed Other, or between the contemporary nation and its alleged historical origins. Race, in these approaches, acquires an unstable place in encounters between historical pedagogies of culture and current symbolic iterations. Cultural difference thereby remains under production. Forms of critical agency are found in subjects’ negotiations of heterogeneous conditions of enunciation, of ambivalent, disjunctive sites of cultural translation, and of double binds (Hall 1994; Bhabha 1994; Spivak 1999, 2012). Contemporary artworks both inform and resonate with these kinds of destabilization and navigation. A second line of critical approach to the intersection of aesthetic and race surfaces within the philosophy of race.

**Du Bois’s and Fanon’s Views of Aesthetic Experience:**

Major philosophers of race have explored aesthetic meaning and agency. W.E.B. Du Bois’s and Frantz Fanon’s views have implications for crucial concepts in aesthetics, namely, for notions of the body, experience, culture, value, and normativity that lie at the center of accounts of the aesthetic.

Discussing various types of art and craft, such as ironwork, dress, and poetry, Du Bois (1971a, 1971b, 1971c, 1986a, 1986c) and Fanon (1963, 1967) situate aesthetic objects in dynamic cultural processes. Both theorists indicate how the work of white culture makers generally benefits from forms of sponsorship, training, and approbation that are withheld from that of black cultural producers, which meets with prevailing patterns of devalorization and neglect. This view contains three important philosophical insights about aesthetic experience. First, in recognizing discrepancies between the modes of apprehension subjects direct at objects created by black and white cultural agents, Du Bois and Fanon understand aesthetic experience as a markedly racial phenomenon: racial conditions affect the ways in which we apprehend or engage art and artifacts, the possibilities for creation we enjoy, the meanings and significance we ascribe to cultural productions, and the level of excellence these entities can attain in our eyes.

Second, given that aesthetic experience, according to Du Bois and Fanon, derives its contents substantially from the racialized social matrix in which we enjoy it, it amounts to a moral, political and economic phenomenon as does race. Indeed, in their views, the political economy of race is incontrovertibly at work in the plane of the aesthetic. Both philosophers, at the same time, emphatically valorize aesthetic phenomena for the aesthetic productions they are. Thus, we find in both theorists’ writings a principled recognition of the moral, political, and economic facets of aesthetic life and of the aesthetic dimensions of morality, politics, and economics. Meanwhile, neither side of these equations exhaustively constitutes or encompasses the other side. Du Bois and Fanon, in other words, acknowledge the workings of the aesthetic as a component of political economy and of our ethical comportment, and attest to the role of morality and political economy as determinants of aesthetic existence, without, however, reducing either of these two domains to the other.

A third and practical consequence of Du Bois’s and Fanon’s approaches is that ethical, political, economic, and aesthetic concerns, in their accounts, prescribe rigorous changes in our aesthetic conduct. Both theorists work to counter racial subjugation at
the level of aesthetic norms and forms. We must thoroughly reorganize the conditions for the production and reception of cultural artifacts so as to permit aesthetic experience to flourish on new terms. This, then, promises to result in positive transformations in the existential circumstances of black people. Du Bois writes,

until the art of the black folk compells recognition they will not be rated as human. And when through art they compell recognition then let the world discover if it will that their art is as new as it is old and as old as new.

(1986a: 1002)

The practical shift Du Bois envisages reverberates in the theoretical field in which we ruminate on aesthetic normativity, value, and criteria of evaluation. According to Du Bois, we must acquire the norms and values that we should bring to our experience and interpretation of black art, in the course of a historical process of cultural amelioration. Blacks as well as whites, in Du Bois’s view, need to enlarge their judgment of black work, albeit for different reasons: he tells the former to prepare themselves to measure their creations by their own standards, and urges the latter to bring themselves to a place where they can adequately appreciate the artistic values and qualities realized in black art.

Du Bois’s consistent praise of beauty and of the aesthetic merits of productions by black artists, artisans, and laborers goes in tandem with observations on cultural, material, and artistic possibilities that fall short of ideals of civilization and remain yet to be realized. Like Du Bois, Fanon offers an ambivalent picture of the value of aesthetic experience. Fanon regards aesthetic elements such as stories and anecdotes as participants in the formation of a racialized corporeal image shaping bodily experience (1963: 111). Media productions including film, radio, and magazines, in his view, can support black and white lifeworlds. Poetry and music, as interpreted within actual racial conditions of apprehension and circulation, supply the terms in which established patterns of relationships among blacks and whites play out and run into blockages (1963). Fanon gives aesthetic experiences (e.g., those of singing, dancing, games, dinner parties, myths, clothing, housing, buildings, cars, bouquets) a role in the workings of colonization, processes of anticolonial resistance, and the institution of neocolonial hierarchies (1967). On simultaneously social, moral, political, epistemic, and aesthetic grounds, aesthetic experience, thus, is an ambivalent good for Fanon. On behalf of desirable traditions of art and craft, and with the aim of forging suitable grounds for social justice and the production of knowledge, we must channel aesthetic experience into liberatory directions. Indeed, according to Fanon, we must fashion it in ways that help us to engender adequately human forms of aesthetically modulated cultural life.

The notion of culture holds center stage in Du Bois’s and Fanon’s aesthetics. Both philosophers comprehend culture and cultures as racialized forms of collectivity. Approaching aesthetic elements as ingredients of more encompassing cultural flows, they forge a framework for critically appraising and reshaping our investments in these elements and flows. They indicate how procedures of cultural transmission and engagement, as a matter of empirical fact, rally institutional arrangements and organizations of labor, such as empire, coloniality, slavery, white supremacy, the nation-state, and schooling (Du Bois 1904, 1971a, 1971b, 1971c, 1986a, 1986c, 1986d; Fanon 1963, 1967). Culture and cultures, for Du Bois and Fanon, thus, are not stagnant or completed realities, but comprise malleable material productions.
Prominent aspects of Du Bois’s and Fanon’s accounts, such as their views of gender, sexual desire, communalism, and cultural politics, have come under critique (see, e.g., Chow 1998; Gooding-Williams 2009; Alston 2011; Roelofs 2014). The contemporary viability of Du Bois’s and Fanon’s analyses runs into drastic limits in these areas. It is not necessary to be on the whole in accord with their stances, however, to see that their conceptions of experience, normativity, value, the body, and culture yield vital insights into points of aesthetic method and into the grounds for aesthetic meaning that we actually and potentially have available to us. In both philosophers’ cases, astute analyses of racial existence are of a piece with perspicacious views of aesthetic life. What these philosophers say about race is germane, in part, because of what it tells us about aesthetics. Likewise, their remarks on aesthetics are illuminating, in part, by virtue of the racial perspectives they thereby elaborate. Pressing problems with their accounts reverberate widely in their aesthetics and race theory. Nonetheless, the basic constituents of Du Bois’s and Fanon’s positions distilled here remain pertinent to critical work in both areas (see, e.g., Gooding-Williams 2006, 2009).

The themes Du Bois and Fanon foreground have also been broached by others, including Anna Julia Cooper (1998). She brings to the topics of culture building and aesthetic experience and standards an intersectional outlook, a stance that has been further developed by contemporary theorists of intersectionality in aesthetics.

**Critical Race Feminist Aesthetics**

Writers such as Cooper, Audre Lorde (1984), Gloria Anzaldúa (1987), and Angela Davis (1998) approach the entwinements of aesthetics and race from an intersectional perspective, that is, from a standpoint that takes note of the ways in which categories of race are inflected by other categories of difference, such as gender, class, sexuality, coloniality, ethnicity, nation, and ability, categories that they also qualify in turn. Twenty-first-century philosophers who understand the aesthetic functioning of race and the racial operations of aesthetics as fundamentally entangled with other categories of difference include Gooding-Williams (2006), James (2010), Roelofs (2014), and Taylor (2016). Given the pervasive operations of racialized aestheticization and aesthetic racialization, which also involve gendered, and class- and nation-modulated and modulating aestheticization and racialization (Roelofs 2014), a major theoretical program arises here. Highlighting a specific area of the broad field called critical race feminism, I want to signal explicitly the possibilities of and need for a critical race feminist aesthetics. By this I mean a line of investigation, at once practical and theoretical, that not only recognizes the troubled workings of the aesthetic in the areas of race, gender, and attendant orbits of social functioning, but also affirms the central role that aesthetic activities can and do play as elements of a simultaneously inventive and critical, collective engagement with modalities of race and gender, and with the registers of difference that intersect with these modalities, such as class and sexuality. This description offers a necessary, even if clearly not sufficient, condition for a critical race feminist aesthetics, a stance committed to thinking through the ties between aesthetics and race in their potential implications for a wide range of topics in the fields of culture and the arts, the humanities, and the sciences. As any practical and theoretical project of critique, the scope of this program is not circumscribable in the abstract, or apart from concrete historical moments and cultural or aesthetic locations, although, as my description
suggests, we can identify a variety of themes and perspectives that arise, as I will do in the following.

**Kara Walker: Aesthetic “Subtleties” as Racial “Subtleties”; Racial “Subtleties” as Aesthetic “Subtleties”**

The complexity of our positioning in historical structures of racialized aestheticization and aesthetic racialization stands out clearly in the art of Kara Walker. Walker’s work typically probes the ambivalences attendant on our racialized and racializing aesthetic positioning within historical matrices of culture, sexuality, and race (see Tang 2010) and, given the dual, practical, and theoretical aspirations of critical race feminist aesthetics, is fruitfully seen under this rubric. A recent example is the sculptural installation *A Subtlety, or the Marvelous Sugar Baby, an Homage to the unpaid and overworked Artisans who have refined our Sweet tastes from the cane fields to the Kitchens of the New World on the Occasion of the demolition of the Domino Sugar Refining Plant*, which Walker exhibited in the decommissioned Domino Sugar Refinery in Brooklyn, New York, in the summer of 2014 (Figures 26.1 and 26.2).

![Image of the sculpture](image_url)

**Figure 26.1** Kara Walker, Installation view: At the behest of Creative Time Kara E. Walker has confected: *A Subtlety, or the Marvelous Sugar Baby, an Homage to the unpaid and overworked Artisans who have refined our Sweet tastes from the cane fields to the Kitchens of the New World on the Occasion of the demolition of the Domino Sugar Refining Plant*, 2014. A project of Creative Time, Domino Sugar Refinery, Brooklyn, NY, May 10–July 6, 2014. © Kara Walker, courtesy of Sikkema Jenkins & Co., New York.

Photo: Jason Wyche.
The piece consisted of a gigantic sugar-covered sphinx along with several far smaller, young, male attendants, made of dark-brown candy and resin. Donned with a kerchief, the statue prominently exposed her breasts and vulva for the viewer. The work played with the tensions and proximities between the cultivated and the uncultivated, white and brown, sexuality and work.

Walker’s installation situated the viewer in an involved temporal web, marking the presence of historical labor routines in contemporary configurations of racialized and sexualized consumer taste. Not surprisingly, frictions arose as spectators’ desires for mourning and protest came into conflict with their wish to craft their own forms of closeness to the spectacle and join the sculpture in a live performance partially of their own making, memorialized in selfies. Invoking an awareness of the violation and pain attendant on histories of economic commodification and sexual exploitation, and surrounding these feelings with elements of playfulness, satire, and humor, Walker’s work underscores the intricate, or “subtle,” spirals of meaning that we enact in the plane where aesthetics and race are mutually determinative of each other. Her art probes the images, emotional scenarios, and paths of identification informing sensuous economies of aesthetic racialization (gendering and class construction) and racialized (gendered and colonially inflected) aestheticization. She squarely situates the contemporary spectator within the historical regimes she investigates.
Our racial and aesthetic positions thereby take shape around highly charged signs, whose contemporary significance Walker holds up for reflection. In her 2010 graphite drawing *The moral arc of history ideally bends towards justice but just as soon as not curves back around toward barbarism, sadism, and unrestrained chaos* (Figure 26.3), Walker represents a public arena riddled with cruelty. Images of a burning cross, a rally of hooded KKK members, and a lynching crowd throng together with the figure of a black woman forced to perform fellatio on a white man, while holding the hand of another black woman. Amid this pandemonium, president Barack Obama stands in front of a lectern, delivering a speech.

Following Walker’s comments on the work (Boucher 2012), the speech in question may be presumed to be the address on race Obama gave in Philadelphia in the spring of 2008. We can simultaneously see it as overlaid with themes found in other orations, however, especially in the presidential election victory speech made in Chicago, later that year, in which Obama used Martin Luther King Jr.’s famous metaphor of the arc of history, the trope on which Walker’s title riffs, and that itself invokes the words of a nineteenth-century abolitionist.

Spatially, the drawing situates Obama in the very political sphere that he, as noted in the 2008 Philadelphia speech, has sought to move in the direction of a more perfect union. The work confronts the spectator with the sheer degree of brutality that renders the realization of social justice urgent. At the same time, the drawing points to the erosion of hopes for historical improvement centered on black icons such as Obama and King. The very forces that cry out for change come into play vehemently to quell the political efforts intended to achieve such change. Walker's work positions the viewer in a setting in which restrictions on the efficacy of official political action in a contemporary neoliberal state become visible. The drawing speaks to the power of iconic forms in
the political field—images of terror as well as images on which we stake our hopes for moral progress and our aspirations for ethical modes of address that will put an end to injustice. Highlighting the visual and affective dynamics of black iconicity (see Fleetwood 2011), Walker stresses their limits. She incites us to ponder society’s investment in these images, while disturbing the binarism of ideal order and actual disorder informing aesthetic and political discourse.

Further Topics and Areas in Critical Race Feminist Aesthetics

The richness of critical race feminist aesthetics, in its practical and theoretical dimensions, stands out in Kara Walker’s art. To further highlight the generativity of critical race feminist aesthetics, I will discuss several themes and areas within its scope.

Aesthetic Sustenance and Pleasure

Interconnected trajectories of racialized aestheticization and aesthetic racialization in many ways comprise vital kinds of well-being and sustenance, as Alice Walker makes clear in her famous essay, “In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens” (Walker 1983). Asking what it meant “for a black woman to be an artist in our grandmothers’ time” (233), Walker celebrates a form of creativity that sustained her mother as she labored and raised a family in the US South at the beginning of the twentieth century. Working to keep her family afloat and to nourish her children under economically and emotionally exacting conditions, the mother was an avid storyteller, who told stories with an urgency that infected her daughter. In addition to this, the mother planted flowers, beautiful flowers, of many kinds, regardless of how shabby the house was that the family had to live in and no matter how rocky the soil turned out to be. Sunflowers would cover the holes in the walls. Accordingly, “even [Walker’s] memories of poverty are seen through a screen of blooms—sunflowers, petunias, roses, dahlias, forsythia, spirea, delphiniums, verbena . . . and on and on. And I remember people coming to my mother’s yard to be given cuttings from her flowers; I hear again the praise showered on her” (241). Explicitly reading her mother’s creativity as a racialized practice, one that is shaped by gender and class, Walker describes a form of racialized aestheticization. This is a valuable tradition, one of which African American women, in Walker’s view, should take explicit cognizance: knowing the socially grounded, personally and collectively vital creative capacities in question amounts to understanding “who, and of what, we black American women are” (235). Walker also emphasizes that it is necessary for black women artists of her own generation to identify with the “living creativity” they have inherited (237). This ability, she notes, is the creative spirit sustaining Phillis Wheatley, the anonymous quilters whose work is on display in the Smithsonian, as well as women who sing in church—makers who work in materials available to them (237–239). Walker, thus, outlines a valuable form of racialized aestheticization. This practice feeds into a process of aesthetic racialization.

Walker notes how her mother’s habits of storytelling and gardening vitally nourished the mother’s resilience and zeal for life. These aesthetic customs, accordingly, amount to a vibrant, indispensable form of aesthetic racialization: the mother’s everyday artistic creativity has helped to render life livable to her. Further, the mother has passed on the
creative impulse to her daughter. Walker recognizes her mother’s creative capacity as a force within her own narrative art. Both daughter and mother, in Walker’s narrative, participate in and propel a crucial strand of aesthetic racialization, carrying out a kind of intergenerational work that has linked together black women for a long time.

Given the social significance and economic power concentrated in processes of racialized aestheticization and aesthetic racialization these forces are subject to vehement debate. Kara Walker’s works *The moral arc of history* and *A Subtlety* have occasioned intense polemics. Another set of controversies surrounds the dynamics of cultural appropriation.

**Appropriation and Transculturation**

In view of the widespread exchanges occurring across the bounds ordinarily ascribed to cultural traditions, the question arises: to what extent and under what conditions can ethically, politically, and aesthetically justifiable or even desirable forms of aesthetic racialization and racialized aestheticization traverse widely recognized cultural boundaries?

White Australian hip-hop celebrity Iggy Azalea (Amethyst Amelia Kelly) sings in what in common parlance is called a “blaccent.” Adopting inflections and pronunciations connoting African American speech in the US South, she assumes for herself and her music a sound coded as black. Though her vocal style indexes some closeness to black lifeworlds, the sonic appearance she achieves does not necessarily register as black in a prosaically lived, richly experiential sense. Rather, she auditorily signals blackness as a corporately figured racial identity that is imagined to float freely from people’s histories and bodies. By casting her lyrics in a transcultured black aesthetic form, Azalea participates in a mode of racialized aestheticization and invites her audience to do the same, namely, to draw for the public’s self-fashioning on a repertoire of black idioms the global market makes available. Azalea’s strategy of racialized aestheticization fuels a process of aesthetic racialization. As she infuses her music and persona with her black language, Azalea showcases an apparent proximity to black lifeworlds. The “blaccent’s” racial connotations transfer to some extent to the star's artistic persona, investing it with positive, stereotyped features distilled from commercial images of US urban blackness, such as a sense of resilience, struggle, amicability, street-smarts, restraint, and cool, while filtering out a series of negative connotations.

Commentators accuse the star of co-opting blackness and appropriating a place that does not belong to her. They find fault with Azalea for failing to critique white privilege, and for a commercial exploitation of black women’s “cultural performativity and forms of survival” in a system that side-rails their creativity, work, and needs (Cooper 2014). In view of the contemporary and historical abundance of contact across cultural boundaries (Hall 1994, 1996; Rogers 2006), the shifting and variable conditions for artistic production (Tate 2003), the for a select group highly lucrative institutionalization of hip-hop performances of black authenticity (Fleetwood 2011), and the relevance of multiple values and grounds for appeals to authenticity by which we can appraise putative cases of appropriation (Taylor 2016), proprietary notions of cultural registers reveal their limits in adjudicating the tenability of Azalea’s vocal style. Indeed, we cannot straightforwardly assess procedures and sources of racialized aestheticization and aesthetic racialization in terms of conceptions of cultures as bounded entities. Azalea,
furthermore, may be participating in a musical order in which claims to authentic enactments of aesthetic and racial subjectivity have come into question, a system that itself can be productive of new forms of critical cultural agency. Nonetheless, Azalea’s strategy in several respects would appear to forego a commitment to an aesthetic politics purporting to critically transform invidious conditions of racialization and gendered imbalances of power on which she relies.

Noting that it is considered acceptable for the Rolling Stones to perform “‘black’ blues music” and implying that she should be given the same moral and aesthetic leeway that we supposedly unquestioningly grant to Keith Richards and Mick Jagger (Monroe 2013), Azalea indicates that she sees hip-hop as an art that is open to everyone, regardless of a person’s racial background. Even if Azalea is correct that what it is fine for other whites to do, it is okay for her to do, the mere fact that others do it, or somehow escape being under fire for it (though this is debatable in the Stones’ case [see Taylor 2016: 177–178]), of course, doesn’t mean it really is right.

A contradiction in the star’s position is that she combines a narrowly racialized notion of rap as demanding an African American vocal style (“it feels weird” to rap with an Australian accent [Monroe 2013]) with a pragmatic, self-serving notion of her own participation in the art. Azalea claims that as an artist she should have the “creative rein” to do whatever she wishes with her voice. Race, clearly, both does and does not count for her.

Fluidly shifting between racialized and postracial notions of music, Azalea downplays hip-hop’s political dimension (“This is the entertainment industry. It’s not politics” [Monroe 2013]). Her aesthetic politics of expedience serves herself, rather than (also) being conspicuously other-directed, targeting objectionable social structures, and seeking to answer to the needs and aspirations of the communities on whose cultural repertoires her transculturating modes are drawing.

And yet, the opportunistic aesthetic of Azalea’s music doesn’t supply the full story of the politics of her work, because uptake and context are indispensable ingredients of aesthetically engendered political meaning. The notions of racialized aestheticization and aesthetic racialization enable us to recognize moral, aesthetic, and political possibilities inherent in the deployment of what are considered others’ cultural forms, while simultaneously acknowledging the complex, granular cultural forces, stances, and developments shaping given situations.

Aesthetics, Race, and the Everyday

Interlinked processes of aesthetic racialization and racialized aestheticization, as I have indicated, take shape around quotidian phenomena, including dress, architecture, design, narration, adornment, sugar, iconic images, and vocal styles. In contemplating the scope of collaborations and tensions between aesthetics and race and in thinking through their ethical, political, aesthetic, and economic potentialities, it is important to work with an adequately broad notion of the aesthetic.

The aesthetic is at work in all cultural arenas, as well as in our environments, both natural and humanly produced. Situating art in everyday life, the philosopher John Dewey (1934) underscored the encompassing reach of aesthetic matters. But broad conceptions of the aesthetic have been gaining traction among philosophers (Korsmeyer 1999; Saito 2007; Roelofs 2009, 2014; Kelly 2014; Taylor 2016) and cultural and
literary theorists (Anzaldúa 1987; Jameson 1998; Johnson 1998; Moten 2003; Felski 2005). The aesthetic brings its manifold, sweeping presence to the realm of race. Given the ample, heterogeneous scope of aesthetic phenomena, we can expect them to encapsulate myriad racializing impulses.

Our conception of racial existence, likewise, will have to be adequately expansive and comprehensive to lend recognition to the fine-grained and wide-ranging ways in which aesthetic elements shape and are shaped by racial meanings, experiences, values, and forms.

The work by Kara Walker, Alice Walker, and Iggy Azalea I have discussed, along with the theoretical approaches by post- and decolonial theorists, philosophers of race, and critical race feminist aestheticians testify to the breadth and the intricacy of the entwinements of aesthetics and race in the planes of art, culture, and the quotidian organization of our lifeworlds.

**Toward a Revised Repertoire of Aesthetic Concepts**

Everyday social and material practices draw on aesthetic concepts. In other words, these practices deploy value-laden, sensory/experiential categories that structure aesthetic apprehension and meaning. Two aesthetic concepts that have received a good deal of attention for their operations within stratagems of racial perception and embodiment are beauty (West 1982; Du Bois 1986a; Johnson 1998; Taylor 1999, 2016; Cheng 2000; Roelofs 2014) and the sublime (Armstrong 1996; Gooding-Williams 2009). However, looking closely at strategies of bodily performance, forms of cultural engagement, and the multiple kinds of pleasure, invention, and critique that these modes introduce to our aesthetically mediated relationships with people and things, scholars have recently proposed new understandings of a range of aesthetic concepts, including those of the excessive, the comical, shine, the superficial, the zany, the cute, and the interesting (Cheng 2011a, 2011b; Fleetwood 2011; Ngai 2012). These theorists (to varying degrees, and at different levels of explicitness) have given these concepts a role in organizing the mutual imbrications of aesthetic and racial experiences, actions, and pleasures. Alerting us to qualities featured in non-Western traditions, including Japanese canons, and in artforms marginalized in the West, including Chicana visual art, scholars, further highlight the potentialities of categories such as those of the imperfect, the transient (Saito 2007), and the ephemeral (Pérez 2007). Given the hand that variable and evolving sets of aesthetic concepts have in trajectories of racialized aestheticization and aesthetic racialization, the organization these processes involve may be expected to shift from context to context, though, given the reach that aesthetic concepts, and especially vernacular ones, typically have across artforms, genres, and traditions (see Ngai 2012), unsuspected correspondences can also be anticipated.

We uphold racial constellations in the form of architectural infrastructures, stratagems of bodily and national policing, regimes of literacy, divisions of labor, patterns of environmental destruction and adjustment to climate change, artistic and theoretical canons, and curatorial and performance practices. As we explore how aesthetic routines participate in these and other racial formations, quite likely, additional pertinent aesthetic concepts and different kinds of sensory/experiential schemes undergirding modes of aesthetic creation, reception, and interaction will come to light.
Conclusion

The conception of interlinking processes of racialized aestheticization and aesthetic racialization I have elaborated in several cases and contexts illuminates the simultaneously aesthetic and racial dynamics of subject and culture formation. This view helps us to uncover the ways in which current entanglements of aesthetics and race take shape against the background of already existing interconnections. It elucidates how contemporary forms may channel or redirect historical forces, while also giving rise to new constellations. Not in the least, this outlook clarifies the depth and complexity with which aesthetic modalities fashion race, and race shapes the aesthetic.

Work on the entwinements of aesthetics and race sheds philosophical light on facets of experience, normativity, embodiment, and value. Exploring these dimensions, artists and theorists offer new conceptions of cultural life. Repertoires of aesthetic concepts are in motion. Interactions and overlaps between aesthetic and racial phenomena occur persistently across a host of divergent areas of analysis and praxis. This situation calls for the open-ended projects of a critical race feminist aesthetics, an agenda that remains on the lookout for the unpredictable, historically contingent, epistemic, political, and ethical forms that aesthetic meanings may give to race and that race can give to aesthetic existence.

Related Topics
Framing Intersectionality, Phenomenology and Race

References


