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Racism and Culture in the Age of Techno-Aesthetic Supremacy

Preface

A society has race prejudice or it has not.
There are no degrees of prejudice.

Fanon 1988, 41

In other words, high time for the retrieval
of the space of the political.

Spillers 2006, 20

For the 2019 Edition of the Investec Cape Town Art Fair, Lebohang Motaung's *Formation* presents the viewer with a piece that used synthetic hair on canvas. Long single lines of hair and pencil traces give shape to female figures seen from the back, at an angle that offers only a glimpse of their faces. Three canvases are placed in a pyramidal shape and linked together via meters of hair twisted in braids that unify and tie these women up in a formation. The title of Motaung's piece recalls American singer Beyoncé's single *Formation*, which won the Grammy Award for best music video in 2016 and was performed in front of millions of spectators for the half time of the Super Bowl that year. For the show, Beyoncé wore a bandolier of bullets,

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similar to Michael Jackson in his *Dangerous World Tour*, and her back-up dancers were dressed in black with berets and afros in homage to the revolutionary Black Panther Party of the 1960s. *Formation* references the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement and hurricane Katrina, which killed nearly 2000 people in the poorest and most segregated neighborhoods of New Orleans in the United States in 2005. The video starts with a parental advisory for “explicit lyrics,” quickly followed by a voice-over asking “what happened, at the New Orleans,” while Beyoncé is seen on top of a sinking police car. Accused of being anti-police in her video and too political at the Super Bowl, Beyoncé forced the audience to see the event, paradigmatic of American culture, from a radically different perspective. The Super Bowl is the championship game of the National Football League (NFL), one of the most watched television broadcasts of the year with over 100 million viewers. It is also the time when new commercial advertisements are released, with an average cost of \$ 5.2 million for 30 seconds of air time. The Super Bowl is also statistically the worst day for domestic violence in the United States.

In this performance, Beyoncé blurred distinctions between the cultural object as entertainment and the embodied art object as a form of political action. The live spectacle turned into a cultural critique that positioned violence over racialized bodies at its center. It confronted white supremacy by disrupting the means through which this event could become, through her performance, a million-viewer platform to advocate for social change. As a living expression of white supremacy, the critiques of Beyoncé’s *Formation* as anti-police are symptomatic of American society’s refusal “to take anything very seriously,” as James Baldwin would say, or more importantly perhaps, the incapacity of the American people to “bear very much reality” (Baldwin 2010, 23). If the function of art was to disturb the status quo, as Coco Fusco and Guillermo Gómez-Peña’s satirical performance on Western concepts of the primitive Other brilliantly embodies, white supremacist mass culture in the United States, as exemplified by the Super Bowl, sustains a certain ignorance of the reality from which protest and critiques emerge. The fact that one event of mass culture can decide what is appropriate and what is not is a new form of dictatorship in the realm of freedom of expression. When American football star Colin Kaepernick took a knee during the national anthem in 2016, he did so in solidarity with the many black lives that are taken by police brutality in the US. His protests against racial injustice during the national anthem of NFL games sparked wide protest against the players for being “anti-American,” while little was said about the urgency of their political statements. It was okay for Kaepernick to be a black player

for the NFL but not a player advocating for black lives. After the Kaepernick case, players were not only advised not to take a knee, but the President of the United States advised the NFL to fire any players that were “disrespectful” during the national anthem. Taking a knee became an insult to white mass culture supremacy and the killing of black people by police just something to keep out of the field, out of the sport industry, out of any platform that links mass entertainment and multi-million-dollar companies. Kaepernick, much like Beyoncé, advocated for social change and in doing so disturbed the function of mass cultural events: their actions were perceived as “disrespectful,” as an affront, because techno-cultural supremacy is geared toward dictating where, how, and by whom reality can be addressed, exposed and challenged.

After her single *Formation* came out, Beyoncé and her life-long partner Jay-Z recorded *Apeshit*, the lead single of their studio album *Everything is love* from 2018. The video for *Apeshit* received eight nominations at the 2018 MTV music video awards and a Grammy nomination for best video. Set in the Louvre museum in France, the video uses the superposition of pop culture and what is still understood as “high culture” to address the very specific political nexus that such an encounter produces. The Louvre not only houses some of the most economically valuable works of art; it is also one of the most important examples of cultural appropriation. The museum maps out entire civilizations that France’s colonial empire subjugated for the sake of its own supremacist enlightenment. Tombs, stolen from Egypt, are placed in the lower level of the world’s largest art museum and former residence of French kings. In the video, Beyoncé reclaims a place of Afrointelligibility by paying tribute to figures that are usually left in the shadow of white portraits. These portraits, as the Guerilla Girls have pointed out, are usually ones made by white male painters. In their poster “Do woman have to be naked to get into the Met. Museum?,” the anonymous group of feminists and female artists hijacked the image of Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres’ *La Grande Odalisque*, a painting on display in the Louvre Museum. They appropriated the visual language of advertising to create thirty posters that expose both sexual and racial discrimination in the art world. Portraits in museums such as the Met and the Louvre, as the Guerilla Girls reveal, are about 95% made by white male painters, while 85% of nudes are female. In their poster campaign, the Guerilla Girls, like *Apeshit*, challenge the hierarchies of cultural values that shape the curatorial politics of these institutions. But in the case of Beyoncé, a new emphasis is made on Black beauty, on Black goddesses, on Black bodies, envisioned as works of art in their own rights by Black artists.

To return to Motaung's *Formation*, the artist, like Beyoncé, both reclaims an Afrocentric aesthetic that challenges the supremacist tendencies imposed by Western colonial values. In her work, Motaung embraces the past and makes visible a link with the future through the pyramidal structure of the triptych. The central piece stands much higher than the two other canvases even though the three frames are linked together by the longer braid of hair. If a person were actually wearing the braids, they would probably reach the floor. And yet, the braids are suspended in a formation above the ground, inviting the viewer to look at these anonymous figures through the arrangement of their linkage. Through these linking braids, artist and hairstylist Lebohang Motaung reclaims the beauty of her practice by exposing the technique of braiding hair as a work of art in and of itself. By grounding technique and aesthetic as Afropoliticism, Motaung's work challenges assumptions about beauty and blurs the distinction between the cultural object as aesthetics and the embodied art object as a form of political action. Afrocentrism, as Molefi Asante suggests in *Afrocentric Idea*, is about positioning African ideals "at the center of any analysis that involves African culture and behavior" (Asante 1987, 6).¹ In the age of mass cultural phenomena and technological supremacy, Afrocentrism is as much about drawing new paradigms from the past, such as locating African cultural heritage in the Kemel/Egyptian, as opposed to the Roman/Greek canon, as it is about projecting a path toward a future where mass culture can account for and create new reflections that engages societal changes. If white supremacy grounds its neo-colonial devices in Western mass entertainment, it is now time to unleash the potential of newly-forged political platforms where culture ignites critical awareness of urgent and needed social change.

A long-standing effort has been made by critical race theorists to bring awareness to the reciprocal operations of culture and racism. In *Toward the African Revolution*, Frantz Fanon interrogates racism as the "most visible" and "crudest element of a given structure," underlining the importance of studying the normative values that continue to dictate the ways in which cultures cultivate racism. The video of *Apeshit*, as much as Motaung's *Formation*, are forms of cultural production that subvert the doctrine of cultural hierarchy and seek to undo the colonial enterprise of deculturation. For Fanon, such enterprise points out the logical consequences of cultural oppression in terms of closure and fixation. He uses the term "mummification" to highlight the ways in which native cultures are forced to be present as past

¹ Cited by Spillers 2006, 9.

instead of becoming in the future. The imposed cultural values of a dominant system seek the appropriation of the native culture *as* past. In that moment the native is cast as the exotic other, a “thing” or “curiosity,” and not a structure in which new formations, new operations can be cultivated and cared for (Fanon 1988, 35). Exoticism has no dynamism, but rather embodies the fetishist tendencies that colonizing nations create to sustain their own systems of cultural dominance. On that theme, the 1992–1993 performance of Coco Fusco and Guillermo Gómez-Peña titled *The Couple in a Cage: Two Amerindians Visit the West* is insightful. The artists had planned to “live in a golden cage for three days” and present themselves as “undiscovered Amerindians from an island in the Gulf of Mexico that had somehow been overlooked by Europeans for five centuries” (Fusco 2011, 39). They called themselves “Guatinauis” from “Guatinau” and performed “‘traditional tasks,’ which ranged from sewing voodoo dolls and lifting weights to watching television and working on laptop computers” (Fusco 2011, 39). The performers had a donation box in front of the cage, and for a small fee, Coco Fusco “would dance (to rap music)” and “Guillermo would tell authentic Amerindian stories (in a nonsensical language)” (Fusco 2011, 39). Two “zoo guards” were also part of the performance, acting as interpreters, speaking to visitors, and taking the performers to the bathroom on leashes. The performance was shown internationally and was intentionally presented at institutions that have historically shaped the landscape of “colonial fantasies” (Fusco 2011, 44), such as Covent Gardens in London, the Smithsonian’s Museum of Natural History in Washington D.C., the Australian Museum of Natural History in Sydney, the Field Museum in Chicago, and the Fundación Banco Patricios in Buenos Aires, among other venues. In their performance, the cage becomes the metaphor for their condition, “linking the racism implicit in ethnographic paradigms of discovery with the exoticizing rhetoric of ‘world beat’ multiculturalism” (Fusco 2011, 39).

Fusco and Guillermo’s performance reenacts the setting of human zoos, which were instrumental in legitimizing Eurocentric aesthetic, cultural, and intellectual values. The performance highlights the fact that the history of human exhibitions is the history of both colonial and cultural empire. Since Christopher Columbus and the six human samples he brought back to King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella as living proof of the success of his discoveries, humans are the means through which more funding was granted to the colonial explorer, paving the way for the cultural and aesthetic category of the “exotic,” which shapes the imperial contours of Otherness. Throughout the year-long tour of their performance, Coco Fusco and Guillermo Gómez-

-Peña's cage was the "blank screen onto which audiences projected their fantasies of who and what" they were (Fusco 2011, 47). The critical importance of the performance was not so much about what they were doing in their cage but about how the audience reacted to the conditions in which they performed, conditions that unleashed a strong "colonial unconscious" from within the visitors and the institutions that agreed to host them. The performers had created a highly self-conscious work; they did not anticipate that members of the audience would actually take their work literally, sparking the imagination of so many "colonialist perverts."² While the original goal of the performance was to reveal the "construction of ethnic Otherness as essentially performative" (Fusco 2011, 44), the performers quickly shifted their attention to their audience's behaviors. Taken seriously, the setting of the cage gave credibility to stereotypes of "primitive peoples" that are alive in the colonial unconscious of many visitors. Reinforced in their assumptions of white supremacy, they looked at the cage as a means through which "the living expressions of colonial fantasies" (Fusco 2011, 44) could be embodied.

The work of Guillermo and Fusco's performance, like Beyoncé ongoing political engagement, calls for an awareness of the precarious and uncertain line between spectator and witness. In *Scenes of Subjection*, Saidiya V. Hartman draws on "the spectacular character of black suffering" in nineteenth-century America to address the "corporeal politics spanning the divide between slavery and freedom" (Hartman 1997, 3–9). In her book, Hartman accounts for forms of violence in representations of oppression such as public practices of slavery and other cultural strategies of domination. Her approach provides an opportunity to recognize the performative power of history outside of dominant documents, official archives, and other imposed accounts that shape the politics of representation. Hartman refuses to exploit the "shocking spectacle" (Hartman 1997, 4) of slavery, aiming instead to highlight the staging of black suffering as a performative tool that trans-

² Coco Fusco glosses the term "colonialist pervert" when she tells a story about "an internationally known French ethnographic filmmaker" who took her to the nearly abandoned house he had grown up in after she had previously arranged to meet in a public place, for safety purposes. The filmmaker had told her that he had work for her and they had to leave to go "meet with the producer for a reading of the script." When they arrived, he removed all his clothes except his underwear and started to mow his lawn. He told her he wished he could film her naked here and that she should take a basket and go "gather nuts and berries." As she realized that he was completely immersed in his fantasy world, she waited for him to finish and asked for a ride to the closest train station. He did take her, "but not without grabbing (her) and ripping (her) shirt as (she) got out of the car" (Fusco 2011, 59).

formed racist crime into spectacle and allowed the dominant order of white supremacy to be sustained beyond slavery. Together, Hartman's work and Fusco and Guillermo's performance reexamine the fine line between spectator and witness to better account for the cultural orchestration of violence in the staging of Otherness.

The technical implementation of cultural racism has reached a new level of domination through newly engendered forms of communication. Racism relies on the technical implementations of representational settings, from the reenactment of the power dynamics of chattel slavery to how images of minorities are structured and presented as "self-evident truths" in the cinema (Akomfrah 2015, 58). The relation between racism and culture should be investigated from the technological revolutions that shape the social fabric of society. The very substance of racism is ruled by the implementation of cultural hierarchies supported by technological means that produce visibility and reinforce discriminatory practices of invisibility. The supremacy of the mass culture industry that brought about the advancement of digital platforms of production has added a new layer of complexity to Fanon's critique of industrialization as that which imposes a "new attitude upon the occupant" (Fanon 1988, 35). For Fanon, the imbalance of power between occupant and occupied culture is located in the perfectibility of the means of production, which camouflages "the very techniques by which man is exploited, hence of the forms of racism" (Fanon 1988, 35). The occupying culture not only assimilates native techniques for the sake of its own knowledge advancement, as Gayatri Spivak highlights with her term "native informant," it also forces the Afro-Latin-Native cultures to become the assimilating whole where racist culture dumps its values. Cultural assimilation is thus a double-edged sword that sculpts the methods of a racist culture never far from reinventing itself through technologically imposed supremacy. As such, racism in the age of techno-aesthetic supremacy, a supremacy that relies on both technological devices and aesthetics values, is made both of cultural and economic elements that are sustained by ever evolving means of oppression. The increasing imbalances of cultural systems of values and the world-scale dominance of Western-centric cultural industries, is sustained by the central position that technique holds in subjugating some cultures to others in the name of scientific advancement and economic independence. The more perfect the means of technical production appears, the subtler the camouflage of inequalities that is performed. Racism thus becomes a question of modes of technical existence.

Acknowledgments

I acknowledge the Centre for Humanities Research (CHR) of the University of the Western Cape for the Andrew W. Mellon Postdoctoral fellowship award that facilitated the writing of the present article. All credit for DHET purposes for this article is attributed to the CHR at UWC. This work was also supported by the National Institute for the Humanities and Social Sciences.

I would like to thank Erika Weiberg for her helpful comments and careful edits on this piece.

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