

JAN-THERESE MENDES

The Familiarly Grotesque

The Afterlife of Colonial Fantasy

Ominous music permeates a dimly lit gallery space as accompaniment to an extensive collection of largescale sculptures, moving images, and stop-motion videos. Spatial installations of animals, plants, and quasi-human characters with exaggerated proportions often in sinister scenarios penetrate through the shadow, glowing vividly under spotlights. Such is our introduction to the solo exhibition *A Journey through Mud and Confusion with Small Glimpses of Air (A Journey)* by white Swedish artist duo Nathalie Djurberg and Hans Berg on view at Stockholm's Moderna Museet throughout the summer months of 2018 (June 16–September 9). Interpretive descriptions of the exhibition offered both by Moderna Museet (2018) and verbosely articulated in an appendant catalogue essay by curator Lena Essling (2018) are mirrored in their emphasis that the artworks toy with a range of antithetical feelings, states of being, and unuttered or unrealized urges. For instance, *A Journey* is said to mingle revulsion with the draw of desire (Moderna Museet 2018); occupy the elusive space between shame and innocence; parallel humour with a perverse darkness; and visualize the unfettering of “daydreams” or “repressed memories” (Essling 2018, para 1). The visceral tumult that is at once imagined and provoked by the work is thus said to be the “chaos and confusion” (Moderna 2018, para 5) of the subconscious, which is given license — free of “any moral laws” (Essling 2018, para 1) — to pursue the inner self without censor (see Rooney 2012). In many respects the unencumbering of the “ego” (Moderna 2018, para 5) for the art viewer

replicates the allowances that the artists have permitted themselves in the realizing of the work. The creative process of rendering the pieces of the exhibition is thus described as “intuitiv[e],” “without a storyboard or predetermined dramatic curve,” and with unhindered “channels open to a subconscious level” (Essling 2018, para 13). To put it otherwise, the exhibition germinates from *and* showcases the extremity of the unbound subconscious, the result of which is stated to be “our deepest darkness and greatest euphoria” (Moderna 2018, para 1). Given that this is the intended capacity of *A Journey*, I ponder what can be said of such an uninhibited self when this intensity of feeling is publicly visualized through and upon the body of the naked and tormented Black female figure that dramatizes some of the most obscene renderings of the colonial imagination. What daydreams unbridle, what suppressed memories unfurl, and how do shame and innocence coalesce upon the Black altar of grotesque desire? And further still: who is meant to be looking and be titillated by what they see?

Deceiving Looks (2011)¹ is the first of five stop-motion videos on display in *A Journey* and comprises the focus of this essay. In the work, the artists introduce us to a naked animated clay figure with: highly polished jet-black skin, enormous red lips that overwhelm the entire lower half of her² visage, bulging eyes dominated by the white of the sclera, a misshapen afro of dark kinky hair, enlarged breasts that distend full and erect from the body (accentuated by pointed red nipples), a wide and heavy buttocks,

and stick thin limbs. Even as Djurberg and Berg claim an intuitive creative process sans storyboard, there is little about this character that does not simply mimic the image of minstrelized Blackness popularized during the U.S. apartheid era (i.e., Jim Crow) or openly reproduce European colonial representations that conjure the Black female body as a “site of abject sexual and racial difference”, to borrow from Black art historian Charmaine Nelson (2010, 2). In other words, the script through which this character is imagined is most plainly the script of colonial domination and the contemporary anti-Black racist imagination that continues to inform our postcolonial present. As the video unfolds, we watch the figure dig holes in a vibrantly yellow yet barren terrain that is seemingly evacuated of all other life. Although our strange figure is initially siloed in a strange wilderness “masked snake-like creatures” begin to surface from the hollowed depths of the luminescent earth (Rooney 2012). Shifting swiftly from the role of assailant to suicidal subject these undefined animals first frighten, prod, outwit and fondle the main character, and then start to enact forms of self-immolation in her captured presence (Rooney 2012). The thick flow of the animals’ brightly coloured secretions are unceremoniously discharged onto (or near to) the sometimes-supine body of the Black female figure who lies in the overflow. As the animals alternate between slithering across her body, entangling and restraining her limbs, belligerently projecting themselves towards her face and seeking (and receiving) her comfort, the gore continues to seep onto the figure’s bare breasts or beneath her crawling person. The revulsion of the scene and the racially formulaic distortions of the Black female form decline any Edenic connotations the desolate landscape might provoke. This is not, I argue, a genesis of the human but rather the intercourse of Blackness with the phallic beast in whose midst the Black female subject is revealed as a conquerable and fuckable animal among animals.

In his seminal work on “postcolonial melancholia”, Paul Gilroy (2005) conveys that the mere prospect of “repairing th[e] aching loss” felt in the aftermath of white national homogeneity at once “comfort[s]” the Euro-

pean subject³ who anticipates the “recovery or preservation of endangered whiteness” (75) and animates the citizenry through the thrill of mastery “over chaos and strangeness” (75). In their own pertinent examination of “melancholic whiteness”, Tobias Hübinette and Lenart E.H. Räterlinck (2014) explain that the narcissism that permeates acts of “race performativity” (i.e., white people performing as nonwhite people (503)) in Sweden fetishizes the Other in an attempt to “fill a perceived lack in the white subject” (509). Gleaning from these analyses, I argue that *Deceiving Looks* participates in the reparative work of racial reversal that operates on behalf of a collective consciousness. The grotesque display of the conquerable and violable Black female figure — whose intimate proximity to animals allows for the slippage of Blackness into the animalistic — simultaneously conjures and relieves the “chaos” of a white Swedish imagination that is inundated with the heterogeneity of a changing populace and the “de-civilizing danger of blackness” (Woods 2019, 227). The figure offers a graphic representation of Blackness as 1) familiarly exiled from human communion, 2) anatomically and sexually confirmed in its absolute difference, and 3) disposed to violence and thus commonsensically visualized in the vicinity of violent acts — all of which point less to a “lack” in the white subject and more to the intolerable excess of Blackness in a white world. By reproducing images that directly borrow from European colonial fantasies of the Black body, *repressed memories* of subjugation are resurrected through contemporary *daydreams* that refuse a Black presence by denying a Black temporal present. As such, the unfettered subconscious performs an imaginative reversal that despatializes and detemporalizes Blackness (Chambers-Letson 2020; McKittrick 2006) from current Swedish space and time through the racist perversity of the antiquated scene.

Reproducing the Colonial: Imagining with Impunity

As art historians who engage critical race theory have long made clear, art and the visual image — as cultural domains — remain deeply entangled in colonial processes of racial

signification and representation (Engmann 2012; Nelson 2010). Employed from the 19th century as a utilitarian tool to capture colonial encounters and circulate renderings of Africans or “native life” to European metropolises (Engmann 2012, 53), paintings and photographs were paramount to projects of “visual[izing] racial difference” (Nelson 2010, 4).⁴ As a vehicle for the germination, manipulation, and retention of racial logics, “western visual culture” is thus contended to be a “colonial discourse” in itself, critical to both the justification of foreign conquer and the fabrication of Blackness as antithetical to whiteness (Nelson 2010, 12; see also Engmann 2012, 46, 55). In this regard, the arrest of the Black body through the manipulated visual image ideologically prefigures the work that Blackness would be made to do in the flesh as objects of servitude and the “monstrous” subjects of a human/animal liminality (Hunt-Kennedy 2020, 14). It is notable that, within the context of Sweden, reproducing the likeness of nonwhite persons also persists as an embodied affair since Swedes customarily masqueraded as racial Others well into the 20th century (Hübinette and Räterlinck 2014). Cloaking their whiteness in the garments and mannerisms imagined to signify the strangers of a colonial elsewhere,⁵ inhabiting the essentialized attributes of difference was endemic to the racist theatre of everyday social life — thus defining “a more or less permanent feature of Swedish culture” (Hübinette and Räterlinck 2014, 502-3).

Although performing as the Other continues to entice a contemporary white Swedish public, I propose that *Deceiving Looks* gives an audience something that the donning of blackface or brownface cannot.⁶ To put it briefly, Djurberg and Berg have done the labour of imagining for the viewer. As such, a looking public does not need to realize the racial fantasy through the costumes of imitation since the artists offer a vivid rendering. Yet, unlike the paintings or photographs of Europe’s colonial era, the video animation does not directly transmit the novelty and exploitability of the earliest foreign encounter. The image of Blackness that *Deceiving Looks* showcases is instead conceived at a time that racial imaginations are at

once 1) accustomed to Black alienation and highly trained in the supremacy of whiteness and, 2) irately grappling with the crisis of a not-so-white Sweden (see Hübinette and Lundström 2014). In either instance, the artwork becomes a deeply sentimental or nostalgic racist display that reaches backwards towards an exhibition of a Blackness that was once fantastical and controllable. And yet, this pacifying image is uncomfortably irreconcilable with the living Black subjects who have permanently (and, alarmingly) settled in Sweden and are encountered in the quotidian sites of the city-nation.⁷

Returning to the essay Essling (2018, para 10) prepared for the catalogue to *A Journey*, we find this statement on art’s relation to domination, parody, and the obscene: “What gives one the right to represent a group or person different from oneself? Then again, what else could one do as an artist?” Here the curator rhetorically queries into the potential limits of representation and then nullifies these boundaries through the prerogatives of art as that which can be socially unhindered and unaccountable in the pursuit of creative expression. Even so, I argue that the very desire to represent the Other and the “seduction” that is said to overcome the spectator in the wake of Djurberg and Berg’s work is neither an apparition of feeling nor exterior to the social-political conditions that faintly whisper beneath the surface of Essling’s flippant call-and-response. The legacy of colonial discourses are what make the representation of Blackness in *Deceiving Looks* possible and familiar. In other words, the coloniality of western visual culture legitimizes the artists’ license to depict this kind of Black subject with absolutism, as the words of the curator implicitly affirm (see Habel 2012). Moreover, the invitation to arouse one’s inner self through the pleasure and revulsion of looking is a seduction that is caressed by contemporary permutations of anti-Black racism where violent scenes of violated Blackness are consumable as public theatre (see Alexander 2020; see also Hartman 1997). Nelson’s words of exasperation are immensely apt here: “As an art historian [...] I have become painfully aware of the depth and weight of the west’s ever self-perpetuating colonial vis-

ual archive of blackness” (2010, 10). Understanding that *Deceiving Looks* is indeed a part of this visual archive, we can then ask: what is being preserved and thus rearticulated through this imagining of the Black female body on view at a major Swedish art institution?

Animalism and Bestiality: The Pleasures of Sexual Deviance

[T]he represented black female body stands at the border between art and pornography, breeching the arbitrary boundaries of socio-sexual propriety [...] blackness has afforded artists the license to invest an overdetermined sexuality in the represented body, what is offensive or pornographic for the white body being deemed natural and essential to the black. (Nelson 1995, 99)

The central figure in *Deceiving Looks* does not explicitly perform deviant acts nor does she appear to actively solicit the unfettering of deviant white desires. And yet, as the exaggerated voluptuousness of her dark form variably twists, crawls, and sprawls on the ground in the peculiar company of peculiar beasts, the “essentially deviant nature” (Nelson 1995, 11) of the Black female subject is implied. The excesses of her implausibly shapely and ever-naked body allow us to envision her sexual prowess and anticipate the licentiousness already affixed to Black women’s bodies (Collins 2004; Nelson 2010). The bare body thus lays bare the primordial eroticism of the sexually overdetermined subject. In this way, the Black figure’s isolation in a vividly exotic environment sharpens our apprehension of her most primal attributes. To put it differently, the figure’s removal from any semblance of human contact or society and aloneness in a near desolate natural environment reduces the wildly erotic character to the absoluteness of her own carnal nature. In this wasteland there is nothing but nature and she is nothing *but* her nature. It is therefore notable that the character’s crude sexualization is manifested through her communion with the brutalizing beasts. Extending

my cursory suggestion that the Black figure displays a slippage between the animal and the animalistic, I would add that racist imaginings of the Black female subject’s “untamed” eroticism (Collins 2004, 27) presupposes a proclivity for sex that is not only “insatiable” (Nelson 1995, 105) but also feral, with immoderate procreative results (Mendes 2020). The Black figure fraternizes with animals, can be speculated to proliferate like an animal, and is thus either akin to an animal or an earlier stage of human evolution. Even so, the figure who is essentialized by nature is also depicted as being overcome by it.

Unlike the infamously naked figure in Édouard Manet’s *Olympia* (1863) – who outraged 19th-century European moralist sensibilities through the female impropriety of being “actively aware of, and in control of (hand over vagina), her own sexuality” (Nelson 1995, 100) – the naked Black figure in Djurberg and Berg’s work does not “do” but is done to. Because the Black female subject is always wanton and her body already pornographic, I argue that what we see in the stop-motion video is not an active doing by which the character controls or directs her sexuality but instead a vulgar state of being. It is then from this condition of innate and thus passive sexual depravity that the figure is harassed and pinioned by the snake-like creatures that eventually discharge their bodily fluids onto her black form. The gapping mouth and protruding eyes of this primal figure emphasize the idiocy or buffoonery of she who is at the mercy and whim of animals that arrest her in the spectacle of the suicidal scene and use her body as a receptacle for their gory ejaculations. The limitless sexual propensity of the witless Black figure warrants her subjection to limitless displays of violence at the same time that she is used by the artists to appeal to the uncensored sexual intrigue of the artwork’s voyeuristic audience. The allusion to sexual contact between the figure and the animals is ever present throughout the video. The phallic bodies of the creatures and their semen-like oozing arguably insinuate the prospect of intercourse by rape or as a result of the depraved inclinations of the Black protagonist. In either case, the viewer is ushered towards fantasies of bestiality through

which, I propose, the snakes function as a substitute or extension for the white self (see Boggs 2010) and thus liberate “daydreams” of penetrating and gaining mastery over Blackness. The fact that such a seductively vile Black subject is a historically familiar character within racist tropes reminds us that the sadism and animality of the preoccupation is *meant* to be familiar. As such, the art enables the white viewer to revisit and refresh these coddled fantasies and continue to gain gratification from them. The visual and cultural constancy of this fuckable Black creature eases the affective turmoil felt amid Sweden’s changing racial demographic in ways that I briefly unpack below.

Refusing the Present through the Racist Imaginary

Djurberg and Berg resurrect the travelling “human zoo,” reproduce Sarah Baartman’s *Hottentot Venus*, and revive the minstrel show through a visual display that speaks so palpably to racist pathology and white nationalist melancholia (Gilroy 2005) that I am left to ponder whether such art participates in racial vigilantism. As I have conveyed, the portrayal of the Black female body in *Deceiving Looks* performs the imaginative work of conjuring the absolute Other and fosters the unbridling of deviant sexual fantasies of racial domination. And yet, the Black subject of the video bears no resemblance to the living Black subjects that populate the wider social landscape of Stockholm, Sweden in which Moderna Museet is situated and the artists are a part of. In other words, the deviant Blackness crafted for the voyeur only truly lives in the racist imagination (see Rankine 2015). Turning to the scholarship of Ylva Habel (2012, 108), we find this reflection: “regardless of the fact that the Black minority is visible in everyday Sweden society, it is rarely named, or historically situated as such by dominant society.” In short, I understand the artwork to be a public instrument of the historical dislocation and social despatialization of Afro-Swedes that Habel laments. If “white collective amnesia or nostalgia” allows for forms of “revisionist remembering” and “performance[s] of forgetting” in the

uncomfortable wake of slavery (Dagbovie-Mullins 2019, 483-84; see Sharpe 2016), we can infer that *Deceiving Looks* stages a racist remembering in order to wilfully forget a racial present. As the artwork revels in a nostalgia of the Black grotesque, Blackness is detemporalized from a Swedish “Now” (see Chambers-Letson 2020, 273). Afro-Swedish pasts, presents, and futures are negated through the aggression of an image that places Blackness into temporal and spatial arrest by recycling and circulating colonial representations (see McKittrick 2006).

NOTES

- 1 *Deceiving Looks* (2011). 5:58 minutes. Nathalie Djurberg with music by Hans Berg.
- 2 An exaggerated anatomy and exploitable sexuality indicate that the artists imagine this figure through female gender norms.
- 3 Gilroy refers here to the British, and later to Germans.
- 4 Produced, commissioned, and/or disseminated by colonial functionaries, artists, travelers, and collectors (see Engmann 2012, 53).
- 5 Hübinette and Räterlinck specify that the colonial Others of the “race performance” were “Turks, Arabs, American Indians, Africans, Persians, Asian Indians, Chinese or Japanese” as well as “more familiar minorities... such as Saamis, Jews, and Roma” (2014, 503).
- 6 I refer here to both publicized instances of blackface, such as the Lünd University student’s “slave auction” in 2011, as well as private racial performances, which Hübinette and Räterlinck describe as being common at children’s parties and indulged in by the Swedish monarchy (2014, 504).
- 7 Borrowing from Katherine McKittrick’s (2006, 101-102) analysis of Black people’s social-historical invisibility and hypervisibility, I use “city-nation” to refer to the ways Blackness is exiled from recognized Swedish national belonging and to anti-Black anxieties that react against an unwanted and suspect Black presence within the everyday sites of the metropolis (i.e., Stockholm).

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