



UvA-DARE (Digital Academic Repository)

Decoloniality, Identity, and Aesthetic Publicity

Roelofs, M.

Publication date

2022

Document Version

Other version

Published in

Contemporary Aesthetics

License

CC BY-NC

[Link to publication](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

Roelofs, M. (2022). Decoloniality, Identity, and Aesthetic Publicity. *Contemporary Aesthetics, Special 10*. <https://contempaesthetics.org/2022/11/29/decoloniality-identity-and-aesthetic-publicity/>

General rights

It is not permitted to download or to forward/distribute the text or part of it without the consent of the author(s) and/or copyright holder(s), other than for strictly personal, individual use, unless the work is under an open content license (like Creative Commons).

Disclaimer/Complaints regulations

If you believe that digital publication of certain material infringes any of your rights or (privacy) interests, please let the Library know, stating your reasons. In case of a legitimate complaint, the Library will make the material inaccessible and/or remove it from the website. Please Ask the Library: <https://uba.uva.nl/en/contact>, or a letter to: Library of the University of Amsterdam, Secretariat, Singel 425, 1012 WP Amsterdam, The Netherlands. You will be contacted as soon as possible.



[Home](#)

Volume: Special Volume 10 (2022), Special Volumes

[The Journal](#)

Decoloniality, Identity, and Aesthetic Publicity

[About CA](#)

Monique Roelofs

[Submissions](#)

[Ethics Statement](#)

Abstract

This essay explores how the decolonial practices of Latina poet Alicia Borinsky in *Frivolous Women and Other Sinners* (2009) and British filmmaker and installation artist Isaac Julien in *Lessons of the Hour* (2019) occasion open-ended conceptions of the public that engage economic and technological developments in tandem with questions of individual encounters, objects, and values. Their figurations point beyond the domain of *aesthesis* to a view of aesthetic publicity on which unprecedented social identities emerge through interactions among multiple, often mutually opposed platforms and assemblies. The essay offers working definitions of aesthetic publicity and decolonial aesthetics and continues by scrutinizing the functions of aesthetic norms and public spaces in Stuart Hall's decolonial cultural theory. Investigating these functions in Borinsky and Julien and signaling how publicity produces mobilities and consolidations, tensions, impurities, and interminglings, the essay underscores how a decolonial account that aims to acknowledge the complexities of identity should ascribe a central role to the operations of aesthetic publicity.

[Contact CA](#)

[Editorial Board](#)

[Subscribe](#)

[Browse Archive](#)

[Donate to CA](#)

Search

[Search Archive](#)

Search

Key Words

aesthetic normativity; audiences; decolonial aesthetics; identity; public space; race

1. Introduction

Decolonial cultural theory has paid much attention to questions of power, embodiment, subjectivity, language,

affect, epistemology, and ontology, but less so to the topic of aesthetic publicity.[1] By aesthetic publicity I mean the aesthetically suffused structural organization shaping the encounters among artists, cultural artifacts, and audiences and marking modes of cultural production and reception. How do a sonic collage, a mural, switching pronouns, or a movie's framing of bodies gear themselves toward a public? In thinking about this, we need to avoid overly close pairings between art and identity that pass over the myriad modes in which aesthetic forms can touch and incite experience. Moreover, we should consider the role of asymmetries between first-world publics and constituencies in the Global South, whose lateral interactions in many ways lack the institutional scaffolding supporting cultural production in the Global North. What kinds of aesthetic forms and infrastructures foster necessary and desirable orientations toward publics? In light of the need to collectively gather around architectural sites, image flows, archives, and sound repertoires, how do publics bring themselves into being by building on multivalent and disjointed histories? These are questions that point to the territory of aesthetic publicity and the manifold practices of publicity we undertake in it.

The field I am sketching encompasses social forces and technological developments surrounding the ways in which art-audience relations take shape and presuppose or contribute to the engendering of artistic stances and audience identities. Aesthetic publicity pertains to the platforms or forums in which aesthetic encounters and experiences take form. Besides the historical production and emergence of different kinds of publics, it concerns the workings of aesthetic norms, codes, and strategies in the culture, within and beyond the artwork. At issue are the ways in which artworks reach into such structural and normative elements and also give them form.[2]

Postcolonial and decolonial scholarship has influentially disputed philosophical notions of aesthetic publicity as theorist have debunked unwarranted universalisms, scrutinized aesthetic traditions that have contended with historical neglect and destruction, and pushed back against the Eurocentrism of Enlightenment thought. This literature has brought to the fore experiences and subjectivities occluded by mainstream alignments of publicity centering the positionalities of a class of white, well-educated males. It has uncovered mechanisms of domination and exclusion responsible for these impediments and elaborated strategies of cultural production that run athwart these mechanisms. The intellectual heritage that has given rise to the aesthetic in its modern manifestations has come upon

limits previously unsuspected, as its far-reaching imbrications with coloniality stand out with increasing clarity. Aesthetics as a discipline, a globalizing, institutionalized cultural practice, and a field of normativity crisply distinguished from epistemology and ethics has undergone a sea-change, meeting lived realities with sharpened methods of critical participation, reading, and analysis. While the *aesthesis*-component of aesthetics has made a powerful comeback over the last decades, whether in cultural analyses attentive to imagination, affect, and perception or in political inquiries exposing shifting arrangements between different facets of aesthesis, including thinking and reasoning, this cannot be said of the publicity part.[3]

Filed away, aesthetic publicity makes its appearance in the sidelines, as a problematic arrangement that is somehow assumed or perhaps implicitly rewritten as we participate in cultural interactions. But what if we look directly into this messy, complex reality? Aesthetic publicity is a disconcerting, even agonizing condition. It is hemmed in by a marketplace that partially fuels it. It countenances pressures from different sides: from legitimate demands for a reckoning with colonial legacies to less justifiable demands for aesthetic purity, and conservative impulses to preserve principles of cultural valorization whose heinous biases and partialities are being exposed. The algorithms of Big Tech mediate these sundry influences, channeled more massively by routinized legal and political procedures aligned with short-term economic gain than by geopolitical visions of the ways data flows can support worlds of cross-racial human and cross-species flourishing. And yet, aesthetic publicity commands new interest in the arts, political theory, and curatorial practice.[4] The phenomenon appears to be deeply cherished. By exploring it, we can expect to strengthen the conceptual frameworks of a decolonial aesthetics.

In this essay, I hope to advance this project. I will start off with a working definition of decolonial aesthetics. Then I highlight the question of aesthetic publicity via Stuart Hall's postcolonial work on culture and identity. Turning to the arts, I consider the art-audience relation by way of poems in the 2009 collection *Frivolous Women and Other Sinners / Frívolas y pecadoras* by the Argentine-American poet-scholar Alicia Borinsky, which investigate the position of the woman poet as a public actor who locates herself ambivalently inside and outside lettered culture and within and beyond the strictures of cultural capital. My other informant will be filmmaker Isaac Julien, whose multi-screen installation *Lessons of the Hour* (2019) foregrounds a plurinational,

cross-racial, and transhistorical platform for aesthetic publicity, as it examines Frederick Douglass's view of photography in a contemporary light.

2. Decolonial aesthetics

By a decolonial aesthetics, I mean a critical engagement in art, aesthetic/art theory, and other cultural practices with coloniality.[5] Coloniality consists of a matrix of ongoing, modern historical formations of space and time in which structures of race, gender, sexuality, and nation, among other social positions, intersect with each other.[6] Further, coloniality is marked by reciprocal mediations between local situations, such as a nation's music education system, and global arrangements, including the demands of the capitalist marketplace and patterns of environmental destruction.[7] As a set of practices that crisscross the domains of theory, institutional existence, and the everyday, decolonial aesthetics contests these formations at all three levels, which interact with each other. Part of a decolonial aesthetics is then also a critical, self-reflexive engagement with the relationships between theory, ongoing institutional histories, and day-to-day life.[8] In the realm of contemporary artistic and cultural production, a decolonial aesthetics creates objects, forms, norms, performances, experiences, traditions, and collaborations that unsettle or take a measure of distance from neocolonial modalities of power and sociality. In the theoretical domain, a decolonial aesthetics calls into question and rethinks socially entrenched conceptual structures that support (neo)colonial conditions of aesthetic meaning and normativity.

Decolonial agendas in aesthetics need not be self-consciously apprehended in the lexicon of aesthetics, decoloniality, intersectionality, or the mediation between the global and local by its practitioners in order to qualify as such. For example, Clarice Lispector's novella *The Hour of the Star* invites being read as an instance of a decolonial critical race feminist aesthetics, although its author did not explicitly conceptualize her work in these specific terms.[9] If we wish to do justice to the novel, we have to recognize this critical aspect, despite the fact that this language exceeds the self-descriptions informing the relevant cultural practices at the time.

Decolonial projects in aesthetics, as already indicated, are critical ventures. We can acknowledge their critiques as strengths, even if they go hand in hand with uncritical gestures. These projects should not be regarded as practices of cultural purity, to be located unambivalently on the "right" side of history, a point Stuart Hall underscores in his

reflections on the politics of black cultural productions, which we will soon consider in greater detail.[10] *The Hour of the Star* refrains from problematizing racial configurations that we need to challenge. Whereas the novel is far from untroubled in moral and political respects, it develops valuable decolonial aesthetic strategies that we must recognize as components of its aesthetic character.[11] The language of right and wrong, good and bad, and internal and external to coloniality is not sufficiently nuanced to capture the moral, political, and aesthetic work to be done in the field of culture. We can affirm that *The Hour of the Star* gives a significant twist to our understanding of the aesthetic dynamics of global racial capitalism and gendered modern/colonial sociality without unqualifiedly valorizing the novel's stances.

Neither indexing an endpoint in a process of interpretation or making, nor on a quest for unblemished moral and political excellence, a decolonial aesthetics tasks itself with a complex cultural agenda that affirms elements of uncertainty and opacity. In short, it amounts to a multivalent, critical cultural politics of reading and making that incites further readings and rereadings, further makings and remakings.[12] With this understanding in place, I turn to sociologist and cultural theorist Stuart Hall's postcolonial account of cultural politics, which gestures toward important aspects of aesthetic publicity.

3. Identity, culture, and normativity: Reading Stuart Hall on the question of the public

Facets of aesthetic publicity come to the surface via several angles in Hall's views of cultural politics and identity. Because he stops short of developing these dimensions, I will make them explicit in a synthetic and interpretive spirit.

Writing in the late 1980s and early 1990s, Hall outlines what he describes as a new cultural politics of difference.[13] He envisions a politics of cultural production, reception, and interaction. Critically engaging patterns of social difference, this politics "works with and through" intersectional formations of difference and identity encoded in the culture.[14] Black films and music enter into the creation of black subjectivities, by which he means social positions (in other words, locations within "discourse") that function as points of identification and address (or, as he puts it frequently, "enunciation").[15] In his view, identities are characterized by the dual aspects of persons' identifications, memories, desires, fantasies, imaginings, and experiences, and the discursive conditions of possibility that yield contingent sites within which these persons' subjective lives

take form.[16] Citing Judith Butler's notion of feminism as a political stance that refuses to take the category "woman" as foundational, he regards identities, so conceived, as products, rather than grounds, of a cultural politics.[17]

For Hall, cultural productions play a significant part in these politics, not only in the form of the subjective workings already touched on but also specifically, and relatedly, in virtue of their contributions to liberatory social struggles and processes of coalition making across lines of social difference.[18] He observes that the categories of aesthetic value that inform the relevant critical politics arise as elements within these practices, in contrast to transcendental normative criteria.[19] I see here a distinctive task for philosophical aesthetics: we need to theorize the operations of contingently emerging aesthetic norms. Such norms are not one-sided constructions belonging to either the artwork's or the audience's side of aesthetic interactions, and neither do they just bubble up in aesthetic contexts. I propose to see them as items that are immanent in structurally efficacious public spaces, namely, in sites where aesthetic publics meet with artworks.

Indeed, public spaces come to the assistance of several central factors that Hall associates with identity. They are important settings where the kinds of "enunciative strategies" unfold that he considers productive of identities.[20] On top of that, they must be counted among the types of "historical and institutional sites" in which he notes identities arise.[21] Public spaces are also key to crucial facets of culture he emphasizes: they are formations that harbor the sorts of dialogical modes and encounters that, in his view, culture comprises.[22] In terms I elaborate elsewhere, the contingent aesthetic norms Hall hypothesizes arise and function as elements in structures of address encompassing cultural makers, recipients, and works—three entities that address and are addressed by each other.[23] So enplaced, the relevant norms, I would argue, draw for their workings on the mechanisms of address that go to produce frameworks of aesthetic publicity. Philosophical notions of aesthetic normativity and exchange need to take cognizance of these dynamical processes.

Another angle of inquiry driving Hall's account concerns the impact of capital on global culture. Hall holds the capitalist marketplace partially responsible for the contradictory and impure features of black popular culture, factors he at the same time attributes to the diasporic underpinnings of black aesthetic repertoires.[24] Moreover, he points to cultural and performative spaces and institutions as settings where

the new cultural politics of difference is happening.[25] Putting these two ideas together, I see a further philosophical task arise: How do the aesthetic tensions and impurities Hall discerns play out within the public sites that take market constellations as their terrain of operation, even if partially? What happens in the encounters between the forces exercised by the marketplace and the aesthetic work that is occurring in the spaces and institutions where we are enacting a critical cultural politics? Philosophy faces the challenge to recognize the ambivalences and frictions that arise here.[26]

Hall offers a subtle account of what I like to describe as aesthetically produced identity.[27] His inquiry into the ideological and discursive dimensions of identity alerts us, in fairly abstract terms, to modalities of cultural power, embodiment, and unconscious psychic functioning that bear on our identities.[28] More concretely, in the context of his larger aim to dispel monolithic conceptions of the popular and counter the weight of single-axis constructions of identity, he stresses the significance of a variety of local cultural and aesthetic phenomena. He makes mention of people's locally unfolding everyday practices and experiences, which include modes of bodily comportment, such as hair styles and styles of walking, and ways of nourishing companionship and community.[29] Offering further qualifications for the notions of identity and culture by registering an interchange between so-called high and low cultural forms and dismissing binaries of resistance and incorporation, the authentic and inauthentic, the experiential and formal, he attests to the "ordering of different aesthetic morals, social aesthetics, the orderings of culture that open up culture to the play of power." [30] This move, even if quite general and cryptic, is philosophically consequential. I will offer some decoding before running with it.

With this gesture, Hall theorizes culture as a domain of normative orderings where apparent categorial polarities (such as black and British, masculine and feminine, middle and lower class, mainstream and alternative sexualities) and their attendant cultural stances are operative within each other. The resulting cultural grid displays a mobile interchange between inside and outside, or, in other words, between subjectivities that are included in given categories and ones that are left out. Positions in the culture shift; boundary lines undergo destabilization.[31] Additionally, the normative orderings making up culture, as Hall's quick gloss of them intimates, establish aesthetic orders, although we are not told how this exactly transpires. Offering a bit more

specificity, I would argue that they deploy aesthetic norms, values, and codes. Pushing this suggestion further, we can infer that the new politics of difference takes effect in a realm of aesthetic meanings and practices circumscribed by the relevant orderings.

Aesthetic publicity, I propose, is among these aesthetically efficacious orderings. It helps to shape the rich, evolving patterns of experience hinted at only provisionally by way of normative oppositions such as the contrast between elite and subaltern, top and bottom, cooptation and liberation, the concretely experiential and the formally abstract. As a structural formation, aesthetic publicity contributes forces of solidification and stabilization to the mobile play of difference Hall emphasizes. An embrace of publicity, meanwhile, is compatible with an insistence on change. Neither all-out liberatory nor wholly oppressive, partially transparent and partially nontransparent, it is capable of affirming interiorities and opacities that elude mainstream cultural norms.[32] Indeed, the idea of publicity attests to points of possible intervention where mobility and traction can take new form, where new dislocations can arise alongside new consolidations. Thus, by bringing the notion of aesthetic publicity to Hall's account and to decolonial aesthetics more generally, we can advance our insight into the normative and structural dimensions of aesthetically produced identity and culture.

In poems and a film installation, Alicia Borinsky and Isaac Julien reflect on aspects of aesthetic publicity revolving around aesthetic norms and desires and on the ambivalences and multiplicities suffusing institutions. By examining these artworks, I hope to sharpen our understanding of the decolonial significance of aesthetic publicity. My reading will be partial: I will stress these writers' critical engagement with the limits and possibilities of public life having to do with aesthetic regimes of colonialist and capitalist modernity and its concomitant racial and gendered social and political order. Aesthetic publicity, as we live it, is rattled. It is in a state of agitation. Borinsky and Julien recognize our simultaneous desires for and struggles with this disquiet. They highlight dimensions of public aesthetic experience that ought to be cherished. Aesthetic publicity proves to be a prized collaborative work in progress.

4. The Latina poet as a public actor

Several poems in *Frivolous Women and Other Sinners* comment on the nature of poetry. They investigate the poet's relation to her own writings as well as to other writers' stories. Evidently, narration dwells in the territory of

publicity: a domain where authors create texts for readers and read one another. Economic as well as literary desiderata bound to intertwining canonical practices and commodifying plans exert their influence in this domain. The frivolous reader-poet of Borinsky's collection sidelines these demands by means of an artful form of address.

Poetry, as the narrator divulges in "on poetry," has been telling us "lie after lie." It imprisons. At the same time, it voices desires that hint at voyages we can make to "another world."^[33] The reader-poet delights in this space of ambivalence. Yet, as we will see, she needs an addressee, an interlocutor, to make her address. Enter the audience, often personified in the form of a general "they" and invested in principles of profit, expediency, and status.

In "why does she read and write," the "they" are the "everybody" who have impressed on the poet that nothing is for free. They are the "all" who are aware she's in debt, thus giving her an outsider position with respect to the marketplace and the society, whose stated rules she flouts. In "poetry de luxe," they encompass the unnamed representatives of established literature who have removed the poet from the street and locked her into a gilded cage built by the official culture.

Kicking the poet out of her "useless" domicile in the city subway, where she was in the habit of spending her days "begging for / change smiles stories games," the anonymous overseers of the literary world make her over into a cultural trophy.^[34] The narrator-poet and her "gang of us" strike back:

[. . .] we yank out her eyelashes

we frighten her with shrieks we splotch her books

WE MAKE READY A VOICE HOWL ONLY

A GARDEN SUDDENLY JUNGLE

What deep silence awaits us my poor dear sparrows

Furiously messing up the poet's proprietary cultural demeanor, the gang restores poetry's alliance with the

sparrows, whose home is the city. Aesthetic norms and desires require this habitat. Literate culture is the end of poetry, commanding howling, sounds gone rogue. Corralled nature turns wild. Silence rings from the gang of poets and their companions, the city birds. In an important way unaddressed, the poet stops addressing. Words just cease. A period is not even necessary to mark the end of the poem.

Caving in to the fear that the poet's tales have instilled in her ("your stories made me fear the daytime"), the narrator in "i care for you as if you were my own" accommodates the poet as an outsider into her own, the narrator's, aesthetic phantasmagoria. The "i" herself, having donned a mask, sits out the time by playing cards with her friends. We fathom that the players have given up hope of creating social change. They entertain themselves with already given games. The narrator cares for the poet, whose stories have hit home, by keeping her at a distance.

let's not keep watch over the dream of that woman

she is an imposter

a fortune teller from the carnival

a dirty joke

a caramel stuck in the middle of the soul

The poet's dreams and visions for the future are to be held off, not watched over. Unlike the excessively sweet tea the narrator serves her friends, the poet's sweetness and low-blow humor are undigestible. The poet is othered yet absorbed as an outsider whose presence jams up the psyche. The notion of aesthetic autonomy, which I take to be invoked by the aspect of distance, channels a care that doubles as a dismissal, a form of belief that is simultaneously disavowed. It legitimates a half-desired, half-refused incorporation ("as if you were my own").^[35] The reader narrating the poem — at once a reader and poet — refuses to recognize this ambivalence. She has already crammed too much inside for things to go smoothly, however. And so it is by her own doing that she can't swallow the caramel she has ingested. It blocks the flow of overly sweet tea.

The distancing reader returns in "believe it there is poetry here too." Internalized vigilance on the poet's part conforms to the wishes of this reader, who enjoys seeing the poet in her "well-starved" outfit. Such self-abnegation, the poem suggests, is no less damning to the poet than being watched

over by the custodians of entertainment or the administrators of literate culture. Hence, the predicament of the poet-character in this poem, whom we encounter enamored of artifice and ambivalently adored and addressed as “my star my decked out austere watch” (mi estrella mi adornada austera vigía). Coupling the decorative and the austere, the watchful woman artist takes on an “enchanted” aesthetic comportment. But this guarded stance, which condemns the self-bracing poet to reduced interiority, won’t do for the poet-narrator, even if the reader, gullibly, may detect poetry in this unlikely arrangement. The vigilant artistic posture delimits the pleasure and shine predicated of it: “everything is delight / brilliance of painted wood.” The paradoxical role of the poet who plays it safe by seeking to please her audience is perilously close to that of a commodity. Watchfulness comes at the price of self-denial, the overwriting of her own by others’ aesthetic values and wishes.

Cautious self-restraint surrenders the lively creativity Borinsky celebrates in “why does she read and write.” Unafraid to ask for what she needs, blithely unhampered by the obligation to pay back her debts, and unconcerned about what others think of her, the poet-reader looks turmoil into the face.

they’re aware she’s crafty
admire her barefaced manner
this gesture in the storm

Reading and writing, the poet goes barefaced, unaided by phantasmagorias and masks. Outrageously, she asks more from her audience than they know she is entitled to. They count on the storm she has called on herself to overpower her gesture. But the poet doesn’t even need to cover up in order to keep getting things for free, outright cheater that she is. Borinsky’s sly, desirous woman poet takes over from Benjamin’s paralyzed angel of history as the inventor of a social conscience.[36]

This is not to say that “engaged literature” is what she is after, as we learn in the poem by that name. The engaged writer has left the revolution, visited by dental pain. Relieved from his pain and infatuated with a woman who is after his money, he settles on a tranquilized poetics, pledging to “cultivate his garden and make poems with instructions that would be followed by poor boys here and there, teeth still perfect, sparkling piss and unselfish sweethearts (novias

desinteresadas).” Our woman poet refuses this sanitized public with its impeccable, risk-averse, supposedly disinterested aesthetic experience. She needs a sullied audience, muddled, adventurous, no less on the edge than she, an audience that bites at its peril.

The frivolous poet craves and summons this public in “the show starts when you arrive.” Unlike those who return home when the performance is over (“they” who politely wish each other “good-bye”), she finds her inspiration underneath the chairs in the theater, in the dust, the spider webs, and perfumes she releases by “scratch[ing] in the carpet.” The show commences only once “you” arrive—you, whom she takes as her addressee for less stilted communications:

I write you insulting letters

tell you my secrets

we laugh at ourselves without reaching the exact
note

without fuss

without rhyme or

reason

Aesthetic intimacy and self-reflection take place within an institutionalized public forum, yet outside the constraints of culturally authorized performance. The direct address to this public carries the untempered possibilities — in their ambivalence, their full promise and threat, their normative abundance — of aesthetic exchange.[37]

Publicity is vital, in Borinsky’s poetry. The city streets, the theater, and the collective space of joint reading and writing are the habitats of aesthetic production. This public space, moreover, is a realm where we can work to throw off modern, colonial, and gendered demands for marketability. Here, we can seek to enact liberatory relations between self and other, intrepidly facing our needs for public forms of intimacy and delight. Yielding to these longings and their attendant aggressions, we can enact aesthetic norms that we set for ourselves in contrast to what is imposed by authorized cultural normativity. This doesn’t mean a jettisoning of institutionality, but implies a recognition of its multiplicity, two aspects of aesthetic publicity that Borinsky’s figure of the theater, its chairs, and its carpet ingeniously brings together. Public connectedness, as desired and incompletely engendered by the frivolous poet-reader, eludes marketable modalities of (self)-distancing and

proximity. It circumvents purified and dulled modes of address among artist and audience, whether defanged through the mediations of presumed artistic autonomy or the desiderata of engagement. Cultural agency in the public realm cannot offer the security of having the right in hand. Poetry, which has “told us lie after lie,” is not about to stop lying.[38] Cultural agency needs to face up to a normative ambivalence even as we do our utmost to dispel the lies we inherit and to create liberatory identities and coalitions across difference. The aesthetic, as a sphere of publicity, is fundamentally polyvalent, no matter how determinedly we attempt to bring about a better, more sustainable world. Indeed, aesthetic publicity, Borinsky’s poems suggest, is critical to our ability to collectively inhabit the tensions, antagonisms, intimacies, and visions that we long to give aesthetic form — with a freeing laughter “at ourselves” to supplant the “exact note” as a sign that the show has started.

5. Publicity in Isaac Julien’s *Lessons of the Hour*

In his ten-screen film installation, *Lessons of the Hour* (2019), Isaac Julien investigates Frederick Douglass’s theory of photography, both in its own right and in view of twenty-first-century racial conflicts. The work features multiple audiences, from the attendees at Douglass’s orations and the visitors of his Washington D.C. home, preserved as a museum, to the onlookers at Fourth of July parades and the (potential) beholders of surveillance footage documenting Black Lives Matter protests, or, in other words, a global media audience.[39] The installation weaves lines of connection between the natural landscape and a past of racial violence, between Douglass’s political work and his first and second wives Anna Murray Douglass’s and Helen Pitts Douglass’s activist labor,[40] and between human and non-human animals, the latter exemplified by the watchful eye of Douglass’s horse.[41] *Lessons* thus elaborates an ample notion of aesthetic publicity that informs our experiences of nature, living beings, domesticity, and institutional spaces alike.

The manifold dimensions marking the contents of what occurs within public frames stand out marvelously as we take in and bring together the at once complementary and disjunctive images lighting up from panels larger and smaller, more central and more peripheral. The installation critically examines patterns of publicity. At the same time, it celebrates aesthetic publicity as a condition for the realization of cultural memory and for the work of critical reflection on history and the present. Thus, Julien stresses the centrality of aesthetic publicity to the struggle for racial,

gender, and environmental justice.

A citation from a lynching scene in an Oscar Micheaux film locates memories of racial violence in an idyllic wooded landscape where Frederick Douglass (Ray Fearon), walking toward the audience, had remarked just moments ago on the importance of the point of view from which things are seen (fig. 1).[42] Ominously, he had found himself surrounded by the “eyes, legs, and ears” of “wild beasts.” Altering his perception, however, a perspective from up close had him amid the knots and broken limbs of trees instead.[43] Audiences multiply: we become conscious of different historical and present-day publics for acts of racial terrorization, which accompany our sense of Micheaux’s audience and, by extension, the audience of Julien’s installation, which includes the viewer.

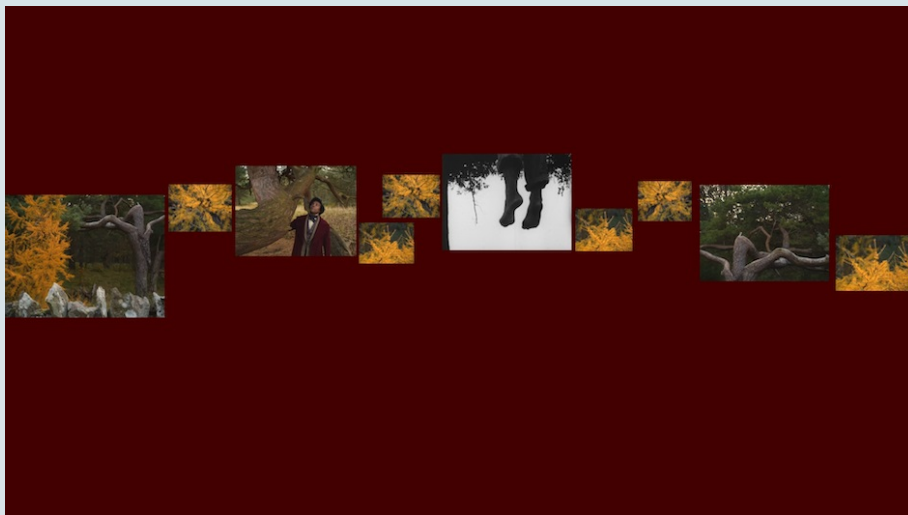


Figure 1. Isaac Julien, *Lessons of the Hour*, 2019. Courtesy of the artist.

Douglass’s observation about point of view morphs into questions for the spectator: What is her point of view? What audience does she belong to? At stake is the spectator’s experience: What can she perceive? Can she recognize the effects of racist terror? These questions concern our collective abilities for seeing. In one go, they interrogate aesthetic experience and the public spaces where it occurs. The spectator wonders whether the sphere of publicity she occupies can open up aesthetic experience to its full richness. Is she capable of apprehending the expansive aesthetic, epistemic, social, political, historical, and corporeal meanings that our experience can encode if we, in effect, attune it to actual circumstances? Or does her point of view occlude realities that need acknowledgment? Providing resources for a reply — yet one that, in the end, it is left up to the audience to provide — the installation brings to the observer’s awareness several audiences.

Julien’s ten-screen design, hanging in a semicircle, is

reminiscent of nineteenth-century picture galleries and panoramas (fig. 2).[44] And so, the viewer can imagine herself as a member of a transhistorical gathering rallied around these exhibition venues. Historical sites of aesthetic publicity, the work insists, can support aesthetic forms, contents, and publics unforeseeable at the time these sites emerged, including the ones realized and beckoned by the installation. These sites can harbor bodies, images, and collectives to come.



Figure 2. Isaac Julien, *Lessons of the Hour*, installation view McEvoy Foundation for the Arts, San Francisco 2020 (photo: Henrik Kam). Courtesy of the artist.

The installation enacts in this regard a notion of aesthetic publicity that is close to its protagonist's vision. For Douglass, photography forges an expanded site of aesthetic publicity. He invests the medium with a democratizing power. Lecturing in front of a transhistorical, cross-racial audience gathered in an auditorium, the activist, theorist, and performer observes that photography "has brought us all within range of the Daguerrean apparatus." [45] Technologies of the image create platforms of aesthetic publicity and shape the publics frequenting them, a point the installation illustrates by showing sequences in a picture salon where Douglass and his friends, family, and colleagues join up to look at photographs and talk about them (fig. 3). Intermittently, other screens show images of photographic portraits, characters peering through viewing devices, and shots of J. P. Ball's studio, which Douglass and his first wife visit to have their pictures taken, making for resplendent contemporary photos on which Julien dwells in luminous detail. Intimacy appears to spread to larger settings. The thrilling ensemble of images is also intercut with shots of the auditorium where Douglass is lecturing on photography: Douglass's own audience is a product of the at once centripetal and dispersive powers that he celebrates (fig. 4). The "social force" of Douglass's ideas about photography, Julien reveals, depends on the social force of photography on which he comments.[46]



Figure 3. Isaac Julien, *Lessons of the Hour*, 2019. Courtesy of the artist.



Figure 4. Isaac Julien, *Lessons of the Hour*, 2019. Courtesy of the artist.

Douglass tells his audience that photography allows people “of all conditions” to “see themselves as others see them.”[47] Exemplifying this process in idealized fashion through the auditorium scenes, *Lessons of the Hour* presents what ideally amounts to a universal forum for aesthetic publicity as the very platform where Douglass makes his oratorical address. Critical aesthetic self-perception is mediated by others’ perception of the self. He envisions a collective, reciprocal seeing. Aesthetic publicity is to support this seeing, as Julien’s montage underscores. But the gaze is inscribed with racial power-differentials. Some gazes wield an institutional power that other gazes do not. More than that, seeing selves and seeing others involve intractable aesthetic mediations that Douglass’s formulation passes over. These structural complexities become visible in the contrast between the utopian auditorium setting and sites of publicity marked by their exclusionary roles.



Figure 5. Isaac Julien, *Lessons of the Hour*, 2019. Courtesy of the artist.

We witness a paradoxical, zero-degree point of publicity as the ten screens go dark against their red backdrop (fig. 5). Douglass's voiceover states that his reading proficiency at times felt like a "curse" rather than a "blessing." He explains, also paradoxically, that at those moments, he at all cost wanted to "get rid of thinking." Commencing with a small black-and-white panel, the screens begin to light up again, accompanied by the whizzing of drones and helicopters. We watch color images of the present-day Baltimore cityscape and harbor by night, including a Domino Sugar factory and Transamerica Corporation office building (fig. 6). And in a different tonality, an old slave ship. These images are accompanied by surveillance footage of a Black Lives Matter protest in Baltimore following the Freddie Gray trial in 2017 (figs 7 and 8). Publicity's difficulties stand out. In the auditorium, Douglass proceeds with his lectures on the wounds effected by slavery, inflicted in part in the slave ships that in his youth he saw lay in waiting in the Baltimore harbor, and on the hypocrisy of the Fourth of July holiday.

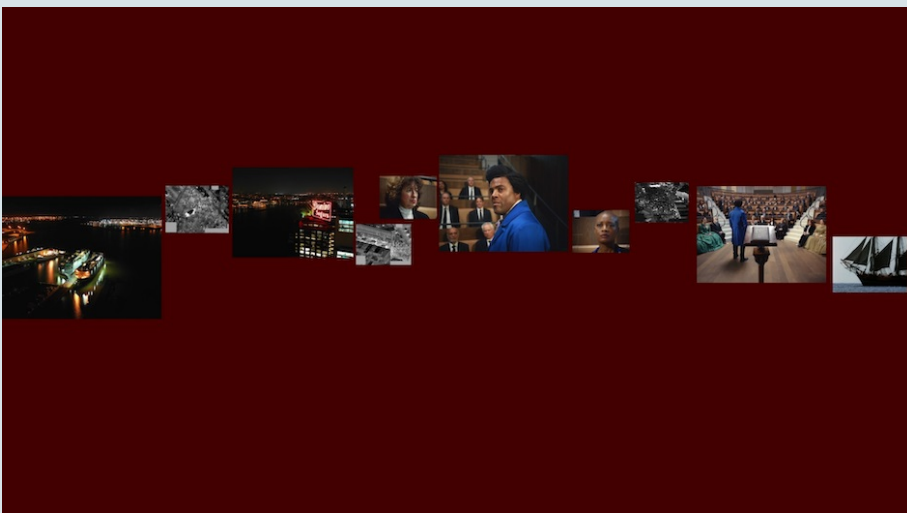


Figure 6. Isaac Julien, *Lessons of the Hour*, 2019. Courtesy of the artist.



Figure 7. Isaac Julien, *Lessons of the Hour*, 2019. Courtesy of the artist.



Figure 8. Isaac Julien, *Lessons of the Hour*, 2019. Courtesy of the artist.

The contemporary Baltimore imagery, taken from up high above and depopulated, brings home the coloniality of the contemporary marketplace and its abstract instrumental calculus. No less reductive than economic rationality in its transcoding of human bodies into blips, the surveillance footage exhibits photography as a tool of racial oppression. The viewer is alerted to the pitfalls of the collective photographic project of seeing the self as it is seen by others. This endeavor perpetuates exclusions and violence, depending on the powers invested in particular practices of gazing.[48] And the gazes exercised by a white supremacist public for a lynching, the nationalist public for a supposedly patriotic holiday, a historical public for a Micheaux film, and a society constellated around surveillance footage, to consider some of the audiences indexed by the installation, carry different kinds of weight. This implies a public calling, made explicit in the earlier picture salon scenes: When Douglass's words on consciousness's dormancy in the face of war and slavery resound in the auditorium, he and his

companions, with whom he has been looking at and conversing about photographs (fig. 3), turn their gaze toward the camera. Their direct address to the installation viewer summons the viewer to the responsibility she exercises in her use of the power of the gaze.

As Douglass continues to address the temporally disjunctive public that has assembled in front of his lectern and that the installation extends to its own audience (fig. 9), Julien plays out photography's democratizing capabilities against its repressive force. Highlighting the question of aesthetic experience, he leaves the viewer with the job to synthesize the public forums, public assemblies, and public callings with which she is confronted and to integrate the ambivalent and tense multiplicities on display on the ten screens and in the soundtrack.



Figure 9. Isaac Julien, *Lessons of the Hour*, 2019. Courtesy of the artist.

While further articulating Douglass's view that photographs can be "good" and "bad," carry democratizing leverage as well as induce political slumbering, *Lessons* enacts this double-edged power of image-making in a critical manner. Thus, the installation establishes aesthetic publicity, in a positive sense, both as a reality and as a summons to the inclusive public it joins Douglass in fancying. Julien explores racial conflict and aesthetic meaning from the perspective of the platforms for aesthetic publicity hosting philosophical aesthetics, cultural debates, performances, objects, and interlocutors.[49] He offers the transhistorical and cross-racial forum of the auditorium as a site of aesthetic publicity on which we rely to shape aesthetic experience in a manner that engages its polyvalence and tensions and to countenance the question of how we wish to build the points of view we bring to art, society, and the natural environment.

6. Conclusion

Outlining a decolonial aesthetics, Stuart Hall regards public spaces and institutions as sites where our identities and cultures take form, a process he notes should be informed by contingently emerging aesthetic norms. Nodding toward the contributions of such norms to cultural orderings, he creates room where we can see public facets of aesthetic interaction take effect. Indeed, as I have argued, by considering the functioning of forums of aesthetic publicity and the roles of different kinds of aesthetic publics, we bring to light factors of coagulation as well as mobility that bear on the intersectional dynamics of social difference and identity that Hall tracks. Zeroing in on publicity, we become acquainted with the contours of critical cultural agency: we discern ways in which artists and other aesthetic producers make breaks with or move aslant racial terrorization, routines of colonialist capitalism, and stifling narratives.[50] The lens of aesthetic publicity acknowledges the mediations between transparency and opacity and inner and outer worlds that Douglass implicitly recognizes with his notion of “the mental atmosphere surrounding us,” which he takes to be acutely sensitive to photography, and with his famed vision of the “whole soul of man” as “a sort of picture gallery, a grand panorama” scrutinized so meticulously by Julien.[51] Aesthetic publicity nourishes the production of relationships among social identities and fuels relationally inflected self-perception. It supports the creation of manifold, life-affirming forms of aesthetic interconnectedness that inspire new ways of being together, of construing selves, and engaging in the ordering of cultures. We need to bring the perspective of publicity to the field of contemporary art as well as to its philosophy.

Insisting on poetry’s ambivalent moral and political standing, Alicia Borinsky indicates how the frivolous Latina poet, in collaboration with the audience she craves, resists the demands of commodified cultural practice and crafts a public space of address where aesthetic intimacy and self-reflection can occur. Isaac Julien offers Frederick Douglass the inclusive public platform he envisions for photography, thereby countering violent and exclusionary regimes of technologically and commercially mediated racial existence. By investigating the registers of publicity invoked by the poet and film/installation maker, I have shown how the more or less mobile, more or less consolidated aesthetic interminglings, impurities, and frictions suffusing our identifications and cultural stances take shape in an array of public forums and assemblies. Borinsky and Julien probe what aesthetically mediated public life amounts to. They help us grapple with what it has been and can yet become.

Aesthetic publicity, these artists' work reveals, holds a firm place on the agendas of a decolonial aesthetics.[52]

Monique Roelofs
m.roelofs@uva.nl

Monique Roelofs is Professor of Philosophy of Art and Culture at the University of Amsterdam. Her main research areas include aesthetics, feminist philosophy, and critical race and decolonial theory. She has special interests in the aesthetics-politics relation, the notion of the aesthetic, and black and Latinx/Latin American aesthetics. Roelofs is the author of *Arts of Address: Being Alive to Language and The World* (Columbia University Press, 2020) and *The Cultural Promise of the Aesthetic* (Bloomsbury, 2014).

Published on November 29, 2022.

Cite this article: Monique Roelofs, "Decoloniality, Identity, and Aesthetic Publicity," *Contemporary Aesthetics*, Special Volume 10 (2022), *Twenty Years of Contemporary Aesthetics*, (accessed date).

Endnotes

[1] Achille Mbembe, *Out of the Dark Night: Essays on Decolonization* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2021); Anne Anlin Cheng, *Ornamentalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019); Gayatri Gopinath, *Unruly Visions: The Aesthetic Practices of Queer Diaspora* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018); Denise Ferreira da Silva, "1 (life) ÷ 0 (blackness) = $\infty - \infty$ or ∞ / ∞ : On Matter Beyond the Equation of Value," *E-flux journal* 79 (February 2017); Denise Ferreira da Silva, "How," *E-flux journal* 105 (December 2019); Alejandro Arturo Vallega, "Fecund Undercurrents: On the Aesthetic Dimension of Latin American and Decolonial Thought," in *Latin American Philosophy From Identity to Radical Exteriority* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2014), 196-217; Gayatri Chakravorti Spivak, *An Aesthetic Education in the Era of Globalization* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012); Okwui Enwezor, "The Postcolonial Constellation: Contemporary Art in a State of Permanent Transition," in *Antinomies of Art and Culture: Modernity, Postmodernity, Contemporaneity*, ed. Terry Smith, Okwui Enwezor, and Nancy Condee (Durham, NC, Duke University Press, 2008), 207-34; Walter D. Mignolo, "Delinking: The Rhetoric of Modernity, the Logic of Coloniality and the Grammar of De-Coloniality," *Cultural Studies* 21, 2-3

(2007): 449-515; Sylvia Wynter, "Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom: Towards the Human, After Man, Its Overrepresentation—An Argument," *The New Centennial Review* 3, no. 3 (2003): 257-337, and Sylvia Wynter, "Rethinking 'Aesthetics': Notes Towards a Deciphering Practice," in *Ex-Iles: Essays on Caribbean Cinema*, ed. Mbye Cham (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 1992), 237-279; Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1994); Édouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, trans. Betsy Wing (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997); Gloria E. Anzaldúa, "Border Arte: Napatla, el lugar de la frontera," in Gloria E. Anzaldúa, *The Gloria Anzaldúa Reader*, ed. AnaLouise Keating (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2009), 176-86; Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (San Francisco: Spinsters/Aunt Lute, 1987); Audre Lorde, "Poetry is Not a Luxury," in *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (Freedom, CA: The Crossing Press, 1984).

[2] On negotiations of public space and the public-private opposition by contemporary Latin American women writers, see Jean Franco, "Going Public: Reinhabiting the Private," in *On Edge: The Crisis of Contemporary Latin American Culture*, ed. George Yúdice, Juan Flores, and Jean Franco (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1992), 65-84. For a reading of the historical emergence of certain cinematic publics informed by Benjamin's notion of experience, see Miriam Hansen, *Babel and Babylon: Spectatorship in American Silent Film* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991). Hume and Kant also theorize different kinds of publics, namely historical as well as universally accessible ones. On their interplay, see Monique Roelofs, *Arts of Address: Being Alive to Language and the World* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2020), 66-86. For an approach to the cultural workings of aesthetic norms and codes, see Sianne Ngai, *Our Aesthetic Categories: Zany, Cute, Interesting* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012).

[3] A short sample of work that enlists the notion of aesthesis includes Walter Mignolo and Rolando Vázquez, "Decolonial AestheSis: Colonial Wounds/Decolonial Healings," *Social Text/Periscope* (2013) https://socialtextjournal.org/periscope_article/decolonial-aesthesis-colonial-woundsdecolonial-healings/; Jacques Rancière, *Aesthesis: Scenes from the Aesthetic Regime of the Arts*, trans. Zakir Paul (London: Verso, 2013) and *The Politics of Aesthetics*, trans. Gabriel Rockhill (New York: Continuum, 2004); Mariana Ortega, "Bodies of Color, Bodies of Sorrow: On Resistant Sorrow, Aesthetic Unsettling, and

Becoming-With," *Critical Philosophy of Race* 7, no. 1 (2019): 124-43; Elspeth Probyn, "In the Interest of Taste and Place: Economies of Attachment," in *The Global and The Intimate: Feminism in Our Time*, ed. Geraldine Pratt & Victoria Rosner (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), 57-84.

Investigation of registers of publicity in postcolonial and decolonial scholarship has been sparser. Representative critical inquiries into publicity in the field are Franco, "Going Public" and José Esteban Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999). Drawing on Muñoz, among others, Gayatri Gopinath offers illuminating cultural analyses that home in on public cultures and eschew neocolonial public-private divides and their attendant dynamics of inclusion and exclusion, visibility and invisibility. See her *Impossible Desires: Queer Diasporas and South Asian Public Cultures* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005), 20-23, 30, 188; and Gopinath, *Unruly Visions*, 33, 65, 78. While I appreciate these approaches, the aesthetic and the public are more expansively entangled than Franco recognizes, necessitating further exploration of aesthetic publicity (Monique Roelofs, *The Cultural Promise of the Aesthetic* [New York: Bloomsbury, 2014] and Roelofs, *Arts of Address*). Furthermore, aesthetic publicity is marked by aesthetic and social structures that elude Muñoz's (and Gopinath's) analytic of majoritarian and counter-public spheres (see, e.g., *Disidentifications*, 147-48).

[4] In political theory, Bonnie Honig's view of public things is worth noting, which include the cinema. Bonnie Honig *Public Things: Democracy in Disrepair* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2017). A curatorial example is Okwui Enwezor's artistic forum the "Parliament of Forms" created at the Venice Biennale in 2015. On Theaster Gates' *Dorchester Projects* as a critical practice that "not only house[s] collections but also collect[s] publics" and reconstitutes "the neighborhood as a public sphere," see Mabel O. Wilson, "Collecting Publics: The Spatial Politics of *Dorchester Projects*," in *Entry Points: The Vera List Center Field Guide on Art and Social Justice No. 1*, ed. Carin Kuoni and Chelsea Haines (Duke University Press, 2015), 230-39, ref. on 234.

[5] Instances of this include the approaches listed in note 1 of this paper in addition to Mignolo and Vázquez, "Decolonial AestheSis;" and Ortega, "Bodies of Color, Bodies of Sorrow"; see also Roelofs, *Arts of Address*, 20-21.

[6] Aníbal Quijano, "Coloniality and Modernity/Rationality," trans. Sonia Therborn, *Cultural Studies* 21, nos. 2-3 (2007): 168-78; María Lugones, "Toward a Decolonial Feminism,"

Hypatia 25, no. 4 (2010): 742-59.

[7] On this imbrication, see , for example, Anzaldúa, *Borderlands*; Walter D. Mignolo, *Local Histories, Global Designs: Coloniality, Subaltern Knowledges, and Border Thinking* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000); Gopinath, *Unruly Visions*, 8-10, 16-17, and 169-70; and Linda Martín Alcoff, "Decolonizing Feminist Theory: Latina Contributions to the Debate," in *Theories of the Flesh: Latinx and Latin American Feminisms, Transformation, and Resistance*, ed. Andrea J. Pitts, Mariana Ortega, and José Medina (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020), 11-28, refs on 18, 26.

[8] As we can find exemplified, notably, in Anzaldúa, *Borderlands*. A recent example is Paula M. L. Moya, "'Remaking Human Being': Loving, Kaleidoscopic Consciousness in Helena María Viramontes's *Their Dogs Came with Them*," in Pitts, Ortega, and Medina, eds., *Theories of the Flesh*, 135-56, refs on 135-39.

[9] Clarice Lispector, *The Hour of the Star*, trans. Benjamin Moser (New York: New Directions, 2011). Through its famed figure of Macabéa, the novella's aesthetically astute, impoverished protagonist, and notions such as beauty and ugliness, this work challenges mainstream Western, white, masculinist aesthetic constructions of social and lettered existence. See also note 11.

[10] Stuart Hall, "What is this 'Black' in Black Popular Culture?," in *Stuart Hall: Critical Dialogues in Cultural Studies*, ed. David Morley and Kuan-Hsing Chen (New York: Routledge, 1996), 465-475, ref. on 468, 471-72.

[11] *The Hour of the Star* challenges aspects of racial inequity and colonial modernity. Roelofs, *Arts of Address*, 216-21; *The Cultural Promise of the Aesthetic*, 89-93, 178-86. See also Jean Franco, "Going Public," 75-76. At the same time, it leaves aside forms of foundational violence colonial power structures inflicted on indigenous and black people.

[12] On a black cultural politics, see Stuart Hall, "New Ethnicities," in *Stuart Hall*, 441-49. On uncertainty and opacity, see María Lugones, *Pilgrimages/Peregrinajes: Theorizing Coalition Against Multiple Oppressions* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2003), and "On Complex Communication," *Hypatia* 21, no. 3 (2006): 75-85. On opacity, see also Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*. On an intersectional feminist politics of (re)reading, see Ellen Rooney, "Feminists Reading Novels, Now, and Again, and Again," *Novel: A Forum on Fiction* 50, no. 3 (2017): 441-51. On reading, see also Spivak, *Aesthetic Education* and Bhabha, *Location of Culture*.

The intersectionally refiguring dimensions that I am signaling are also a component of José Esteban Muñoz's notion of a disidentificatory performative politics of identity. Muñoz, *Disidentifications*.

[13] Hall, "New Ethnicities," 446; "What is this 'Black,'" 467.

[14] Hall, "New Ethnicities," 444.

[15] Stuart Hall, "Introduction: Who Needs 'Identity?'," in Stuart Hall and Paul du Gay, *Questions of Cultural Identity* (London: Sage, 1996): 3-17, refs on 4, 10; Stuart Hall, "Cultural Identity and Diaspora," in *Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory: A Reader*, ed. Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 392-403, refs on 392, 395-98, 402; Hall, "New Ethnicities," 446; "What is this 'Black'," 470, 472-73.

[16] Hall, "Who Needs 'Identity?'," 4-6, 12-15; "What is this 'Black'," 473-74; "Cultural Identity and Diaspora," 395.

[17] Hall, "Who Needs 'Identity?'," 15-16; See also, "Cultural Identity and Diaspora," 395; "What is this 'Black,'" 474.

[18] Hall, "New Ethnicities," 444.

[19] *Ibid.*, 446, 448.

[20] Hall, "Who Needs 'Identity?'," 4.

[21] *Ibid.*, 4.

[22] Hall, "What is this 'Black,'" 472, 474-75. See also, "Cultural Identity and Diaspora," 400.

[23] Roelofs, *Arts of Address*.

[24] Hall, "What is this 'Black.'" 469-71, 474; "Cultural Identity and Diaspora," 400-402.

[25] Hall, "What is this 'Black,'" 467, 471, 474. Hall specifically emphasizes the role of black popular cultural spaces and repertoires (471).

[26] These kinds of ambivalences and frictions are endemic to the aesthetic, as I indicate in *The Cultural Promise of the Aesthetic*. Although they take distinctive forms under specific conditions, they are not altogether unique to the aesthetics-economics relation.

[27] For a range of cases and explorations of aesthetically produced identity, see Roelofs, *The Cultural Promise of the Aesthetic*.

[28] Hall, "Who Needs 'Identity?'," 6-17.

[29] Hall, "What is this 'Black,'" 469, 471-72.

[30] *Ibid.*, 469-70. See also Hall, "Cultural Identity and Diaspora," 396.

[31] Hall, "What is this 'Black,'" 472-74; "Who Needs 'Identity?'" 5, 15.

[32] Aesthetic publicity, as I understand it, is multivalent in its effects. It neither commits us to a transparent organization of collective existence governed by white masculinist norms nor to a rigorous antithesis between publicity and interiority or the private. The forms of power aesthetic publicity wields require critical analysis, as Hall recognizes when he speaks of "changing the dispositions and the configurations of cultural power, not getting out of it" (Hall, "What is this 'Black?,'" 468). I appreciate the challenges posed for racialized regimes of publicity by theorists such as Lugones, in *Pilgrimages* and "On Complex Communication," and Kevin Quashie, in *The Sovereignty of Quiet: Beyond Resistance in Black Culture* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2012). At the same time, the notion of aesthetic publicity I am developing here can recognize the significance of interiority and opacity rather than valorizing only what is public in a narrow sense, positing transparency, or severing publicity from interiority.

[33] Alicia Borinsky, *Frivolous Women and Other Sinners / Frívolas y pecadoras*, trans. Cola Franzen with the author (Chicago: Swan Isle Press, 2009).

[34] The city, in the collection, is the city of her childhood, Buenos Aires — home of tangos, boleros, Argentine writers, theaters, movies, and nightlife — and at the same time stands for many other, very alive cities, where women writers create space to tell their stories and seek out their desires.

[35] I'm not claiming that the notion of aesthetic autonomy inevitably produces these impasses or produces them on its own, and neither do I want to imply that Borinsky's poems suggest this. Rather, through her tropes of artistic freedom, self-determining exploration, uselessness, and distancing, she explores both the capabilities and pitfalls of aesthetic autonomy and investigates the nature of this concept as an element of aesthetic practices under current colonialist and capitalist conditions.

[36] Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," Thesis ix, in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken, 1968), 257-58.

[37] In embracing this ambivalence and the undiminished promises and threats it implies, Borinsky recognizes what, in

The Cultural Promise of the Aesthetic, I describe as a crucial component of the aesthetic. She shows how the public is a central participant in aesthetically mediated constellations of promises and threats.

[38] Borinsky, "On Poetry," in *Frivolous Women and Other Sinners*.

[39] On Julien's view of the pertinence of Douglass's philosophical and political aesthetics to current racial politics and mechanisms of disinformation, see his Acknowledgments in *Lessons of the Hour: Frederick Douglass*, ed. Isaac Julien and Cora Gilroy-Ware with Vladimir Seput (New York: DelMonico, 2022), 22-23, ref. on 22; and Jennifer A. Gonzáles, "Poetics of Attention: An Interview with Isaac Julien," in *Lessons of the Hour*, 241-53, refs. on 241-48.

[40] Kenneth B. Morris, Jr., Preface to *Lessons of the Hour*, 16-17, ref. on 16; Celeste-Marie Bernier, "'Ten Thousand Agonies': Isaac Julien's Frederick and Anna Murray Douglass Paint Pictures of 'War and Slavery,'" in *Lessons of the Hour*, 33-49, ref. on 41-46.

[41] On the installation's interest in Douglass's ecological and democratic vision and his universalist conception of humanity, see Paul Gilroy, "'To See Ourselves as Others See Us,'" in *Lessons of the Hour*, 133-43.

[42] On this quotation from Oscar Micheaux's film *Within Our Gates* (1919), see Kass Banning and Warren Crichlow, "A Grand Panorama: Isaac Julien, Frederick Douglass, and *Lessons of the Hour*," *Film Quarterly* 73, no. 4 (2000): 11-24, ref. on 13.

[43] For a reading of this sequence in terms of Douglass's and Julien's development of a visual and linguistic idiom for the expression of trauma and resistance, see Bernier, "'Ten Thousand Agonies,'" 36-41. On its significance for the installation's interest in "embodied perspective," see Banning and Crichlow, "A Grand Panorama," 15, 17-18.

[44] Banning and Crichlow, "A Grand Panorama," 15-16, 18; John G. Hahnhart, "Curator's Note," in *Lessons of the Hour*, 18-19, ref. on 19; Gonzáles, "Poetics of Attention," 252-53; Bernier, "'Ten Thousand Agonies,'" 36.

[45] Roy Fearon as Frederick Douglass in Julien, *Lessons of the Hour*, Frederick Douglass, "Lecture on Pictures," in John Stauffer, Zoe Trodd, and Celeste-Marie Bernier, *Picturing Frederick Douglass: An Illustrated Biography of the Nineteenth Century's Most Photographed American* (New York: Liveright Publishing, 2015), 126-141, ref. on 128.

[46] Pictures, for Douglass, are "social forces" in the sense

that they affect the heart through the eye. Douglass, "Lecture on Pictures," 129.

[47] Roy Fearon as Frederick Douglass in Julien, *Lessons of the Hour*, Douglass, "Lecture on Pictures," 127.

[48] Henry Louis Gates discusses Douglass's view of the racist as well as critical political uses of photography in Henry Louis Gates, Jr. "Frederick Douglass' Camera Obscura: Representing the Antislave 'Clothed and in Their Own Form,'" in *Lessons of the Hour*, 109-123, refs on 119-121, 123. Similarly, Bernier documents Douglass's insistence on the medium's egalitarian as well as persecutory dimensions ("Ten Thousand Agonies," 46-48), yet in her illuminating interpretation of Douglass's writings and Julien's installation, these works adopt a more skeptical view of language's and photography's capacities to give expression to the horrors of slavery and anti-black racial oppression (49) than in the reading I develop in this essay. Further complexities of the effort to see the self as others see it have to do with the workings of formal and stylistic mediation and bodily performativity. Photography, after all, well exceeds its workings as an indexical medium, and realist modes represent only a sliver of its meaning-making capabilities. To my mind, Julien's invocation of publicity signals such other dimensions, which is one of the reasons why his installation asks to be read in this optic — a perspective that, to my knowledge, has not yet been pursued in the critical literature. See also Gates's "Frederick Douglass' Camera Obscura" for an account of the critical rhetorical and visual strategies with which Douglass meets the cultural imaginary at his time, in short, for an analysis of the strategies of address informing his view of photography's subjective and objective powers; and Banning and Crichlow on Julien's uptake of this approach ("A Grand Panorama," 15-18).

[49] On Douglass's philosophy of art and philosophical aesthetics, see Michael Kelly, "Frederick Douglass's Prospective Aesthetic Theory," *Critical Philosophy of Race* 9, no. 2 (2021): 240-69; Bernier, "Ten Thousand Agonies;" Gonzáles, "Poetics of Attention."

[50] Similarly, we discern the powers that accrue to these factors within formations of cultural agency.

[51] Douglass, "Lecture on Pictures," 130-31. On Julien's take on Douglass's expansive panoramic vision, see Banning and Crichlow, "A Grand Panorama."

[52] Special thanks for inspired discussions to the participants of the "Excavating the Image" seminar on *Lessons of the Hour* at Smith College's Kahn Institute and

the Smith College Museum of Art in June 2021, and to Emma Chubb and Alex Keller for organizing the seminar. I'm also grateful to Norm Holland for his thoughtful comments on this essay and to the Isaac Julien Studio for permission to reproduce images from Julien's film and installation.

Volume: Special Volume 10 (2022), Special Volumes |
Author: Monique Roelofs

[Publisher](#) | [Permission to Reprint](#) | [Links](#) | [Privacy](#) | [Donate](#)

The author retains copyright for the article.
Downloading, copying in whole or in part, and distribution for scholarly or educational purposes are encouraged,
provided full acknowledgement is made to *Contemporary Aesthetics* and to the authors of articles.

© 2023 *Contemporary Aesthetics*
ISSN 1932-8478