BRILL
ASIAN DIASPORIC VISUAL CULTURES AND THE AMERICAS
4 (2018) 235-243
ADVA
brill.com/adva

Editorial

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The Unwatchability of Whiteness: A New Imperative of Representation

J. Reid Miller
Haverford College, Haverford, PA, USA
jmiller@haverford.edu

Richard T. Rodríguez
University of California at Riverside, Riverside, CA, USA
richard.rodriguez@ucr.edu

Celine Parreñas Shimizu
San Francisco State University, San Francisco, CA, USA
shimizu@sfsu.edu

The historical moment of whiteness is totally unwatchable. As artists, writers, and theorists of colour, we are looking elsewhere from whiteness. That elsewhere, we maintain, exists beyond its sequestering view. Recall Teresa de Lauretis's classic formulation of elsewhere:

> For, if that view is nowhere to be seen, not given in a single text, not recognizable as a representation, it is not that we—feminists, women—have not yet succeeded in producing it. It is, rather, that what we have produced is not recognizable, precisely, as a representation. For that "elsewhere" is not some mythic distant past or some utopian future history; it is the elsewhere of discourse here and now, the blind spots, or the space-off, of its representations.[1]

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[1] Teresa de Lauretis, "The Technology of Gender," in *Technologies of Gender: Essays on Theory, Film, and Fiction* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), 25.

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The "elsewhere" that occupies our attention in this special issue is not an imagined world—a spectral ideal of a distant colourblind humanity—but the *racial mise-en-scène* that we already inhabit "here and now." Mise-en-scène describes everything within the frame of a movie: props, locations, lighting, and the choreography of people. In identifying a racial mise-en-scène, we contend that all spaces are touched by racialization and people of colour. Confronted by the discursive absence, neglect, and diminishment that presumes our view is nowhere to be seen, we look at fellow people of colour and those resolutely anchored in the space-off of whiteness, whether or not this space is obscured by current and historical socio-cultural and political regimes. Rather than prioritize the critique of whiteness (which whiteness studies scholars do, unintentionally or not) as the customary entry and exit points of racial analysis, we propose foregrounding a racial mise-en-scène that is neither in resistance (or response) to whiteness, nor invested in infiltrating whiteness so as to understand and undermine its narcissistic logic. In the racial mise-en-scène, "we can't imagine ever wanting to be white."[2]

The term "people of colour" functions as a counterpoint to the concept of "whiteness." An appropriation and revaluation of the North American pejorative for Black people as "coloured," "people of colour"—or "POC"—has since come to refer to a political solidarity among non-white people, in the US and globally. In this sense, POC does not signify a fixed identification available to racial, ethnic and Indigenous communities but an open-ended attendance to interrelated structures of exclusionary whiteness. The impetus is to rethink the presumption of automatic solidarity between non-white image-makers, spectators, and scholars—and thereby an implicit demand for inclusivity—to instead ask how we understand one another's roles in creating representations. In so doing, we solicit, rather than subsume the differences within and among non-white identifications. Thus, the category "people of colour" becomes recast as more than a mere placeholder for an aspirational collective, serving instead as the enticement of non-white interracial cultural scenes, cross-identifications, and sexual desires beyond the ostensibly prevailing force of white-centered mediation. How do we concede the always already present whiteness without having to answer to its demands, or define ourselves in relation or distinction to it? Is it possible to snub whiteness while simultaneously upstaging its conceit as primary? We think so because this is precisely what makes whiteness unwatchable.

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[2] We borrow this proclamation from the admission museum tags created by Chicano conceptual artist Daniel J. Martinez, which were handed out at the 1993 Whitney Biennial. Curated by Elizabeth Sussman, Thelma Golden, John G. Hanhardt, and Lisa Phillips, this edition of the biennial was disparaged by white male critics who were the most vocal about the exhibition being an attack on white artists.

How Can I Look?

In many ways, this question—a playful take on *How Do I Look?*, a seminal 1991 collection of essays on queer film and video—animates our adoption of the term *unwatchable*. Edited by Bad Object-Choices, a collective of media activists and scholars, *How Do I Look?* deliberately expanded critical ways to view queer visual representation. However, "*How can I look?*" has a dual function in relation to the unwatchable. How has it become impossible to continue looking at the tried and tired demands made by whiteness? Also, how is the imperative to look *differently* unwatchable when framed by essentialist claims of white-produced media that fails to go beyond clichéd perceptions of resistance?

Unwatchable whiteness and its one-dimensional alternatives challenge our ability to remain attentive; the mind cannot but drift elsewhere during its endless soliloquy. Its patterns, increasingly transparent, no longer fascinate but unfold with robotic predictability. It is from this predictability that racial critique becomes routine, as *watching* whiteness and its binding responses—attending to it, studying it, dissecting it—can devolve into a tedious and perfunctory, if obligatory, labour. In looking elsewhere, then, we alter the default approach of "racial critique" to one that, while retaining yet subordinating this labour, privileges analysis of the racial mise-en-scène. In other words, "racial critique" becomes a site for productive contemplation of "people of colour" as other than a rote representational politics of the disenfranchised or an inchoate transnational political coalition; instead, it presents as a mobile assemblage, configured through intricate nexuses of watchable and unwatchable. As the articles in this themed issue of *ADVA* journal illustrate, unwatchability can take several forms, including aversion, indifference, absence, embarrassment, and incredulity. These affective responses offer other ways of how we can look that are not about merely looking away or relying on prescripted or prescribed responses. To acknowledge each other within the racial mise-en-scène helps foster unanticipated and transformative moments of watchability.

What Are You Looking At?

The racial mise-en-scène at the heart of this special issue relieves white spaces and communities as representative of national and global social bodies.

"Middle America," for example, scored by scenes in Ferguson, Missouri, and Standing Rock Reservation, no longer signifies the de-ethnicized "everywhere" that has made it the favoured locale for American teen movies and town halls; instead, such spaces consolidate with "progressive" locations like Silicon Valley and Lower Manhattan as racially diagrammed built environments.[3] In consequence, films with settings and casts that relapse into a mise-en-scène of whiteness must immediately forfeit any pretense to verisimilitude.[4] Such films register as unwatchable not as a strategized stance the viewer takes against homogenized casting but because such racial monotony instantly rings false. *La La Land* (2016), for instance, neither disguises nor narratively explains its racially distortive diegesis, its "modern-day Los Angeles" stretching credulity far beyond what suspended disbelief can sustain. Indeed, its whitewashed history of jazz raises the stakes of imagining both the past and the present in monochromatic fashion.

Yet the question is not of reality versus fantasy, for there is nowhere that the racial mise-en-scène does not extend—even the realm of adult entertainment must reckon with the undeniability of the racial mise-en-scène that it has previously rebuffed. In an aptly titled article, Danny Addice captures the motivating sentiment: "Gay porn is so white. This is nothing new."[5] He subsequently blames the porn studios for their "lack of willingness to hire people of color" and charges the gay adult film industry's awards ceremony (and "the media" in general) with "failing to represent or highlight people of color already performing in the industry," noting that a number of performers declined their nominations to protest the consignment of all nominees of colour to the "Best Ethnic Scene" category.[6] One of those performers—Armond Rizzo, a Mexican American actor from Aurora, Illinois—took to Twitter to substantiate Addice's point, writing that he is continually made to feel "never good enough" for consideration in delivering equally award-worthy performances as his white peers.[7]

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[3] One might consider the bamboo ceiling facing Asian American workers in Silicon Valley, or the recent incident involving lawyer Aaron Schlossberg demanding that two Latinas stop speaking Spanish in a Manhattan deli.

[4] Such films may also deploy a "rainbow multiculturalism" that strategically positions a handful of non-white "props" (actors, objects, or metaphors) within its mise-en-scène. These signifiers are easily identifiable in being stripped of the very normative contexts (e.g., communal networks) by which their racial performance could be credible. Such racial props, rather than break up the uniformity of a white mise-en-scène, reaffirm it as what can fully absorb all difference without remainder or disruption.

[5] Danny Addice, "The Nominees for the 2018 GayVN Awards Are White AF, With a Segregated 'Best Ethnic Scene,'" hornet, 25 November 2017, https://hornet.com/stories/2018-gayvn-awards-white-af/.

[6] Ibid.

This example shows that contesting whiteness is not simply an act of pleading with its purveyors for inclusion but rather calling out how whiteness usurps difference when it sees fit and, in turn, repudiates that difference when it does not bolster its presumed commonsense status. Taking our cue from Rizzo and the other fed-up porn stars of colour, we decline our nomination as "Best Ethnic or Race Scholar" called upon to right the wrongs imposed by whiteness to instead reflect on, as Shizu Saldamando maintains in her artist statement in this issue, "what we love outside of it." While we inevitably find ourselves engaged with whiteness in circumstantial or desirable situations (such as the porn stars of colour who perform with white actors), we refuse to be absorbed by the normative tenets of white hegemony which aspire to downplay or disregard our existence and our critique.

This refusal no longer necessitates direct confrontation but is often accomplished with a nonchalant pivot, for whiteness is already in decline, its reach no longer extending to the furthest corners of our psychic lives. Thus while the conceit of the porn industry is a vision of desire in which whiteness remains the centrepiece, its every fantasy inevitably invokes a racial mise-en-scène arrayed through what it deems acceptable and what it tries to exclude with enduring failure. As Rizzo and his peers make clear, the reign is over. Such a statement is not a vow but a pragmatic and indisputable fact of our current condition. The "new" imperative of which we speak then is not that of producing or certifying this decline—or flatly rendering whiteness unwatchable (for this it has done to itself)—but to understand this looking away as a looking *towards* something new. In casting our eyes elsewhere, out of boredom, embarrassment, annoyance, and disbelief, we ask what new forms of connection might emerge.

The relations this special issue of *ADVA* seeks to investigate between and among people of colour are driven by objectives other than the defeat of whiteness. This is not to say that the creative production and reception of the visual across race do not have political effects but that these relations are not reducible to political solidarities. As para-political, the looking relations among people of colour operate astride but not in deference to whiteness. Examining spectatorship in the Filipinx diaspora, Kathleen DeGuzman assesses the viewership of difficult images to reframe the unwatchable as what generates "unexpected practices of beholding," those that can surprisingly generate pleasure through shared "humour and distress." Linh Nguyen sets aside the unwatchability of Ken Burns's recent 18-hour documentary on the Vietnam War with a different kind of unwatchability that the 2012 film *Viette* carves, one located at the violent intersection of the legacy of the Vietnam War and the lived, embodied experience of a contemporary Vietnamese American woman. Shelley Lee examines the figure of the Korean American small-business entrepreneur within the historical context of the white fabrication of a Korean-Black conflict. In so doing, she explores the ways in which Blacks, Latin@s, and Korean Americans relate to each other as essentially watchable in contrast to the unwatchable repetitious images bolstered by dominant media institutions. Jian Chen evaluates the legacy of trans filmmaker and curator Christopher Lee, focusing on the different social and affective relationships represented in their trans of colour representations in light of the dominant culture's simultaneously unwatchable assimilation and denigration of trans subjects. Interviews with Erica Cho and Chi-ming Yang chart alternative perspectives and ways of looking away from whiteness in their discussion of queer desire and independent art practice, while Shizu Saldamando grounds her work in the aesthetics and social practices of queer people of colour in Los Angeles. Lastly, Ellen Scott interviews the filmmaker Anaiis Cisco, whose situatedness in contemporary queer Black life involves everyday negotiations and relationships with other people of colour in Brooklyn, New York. All these works attest to a racial mise-en-scène that spans widely different scenarios. Within this context these authors illustrate how unwatchability is already codifying and contesting new pleasures and problems among people of colour. Cutting away from the normative fantasy of whiteness, their contributions negate and consign it to the back row of the theatre.

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[7] "The @gayvn are a fucken joke 5 years in this industry and I have seen this bullshit from every award show feeling never good enough to be put up with every other performer because I am not white. Discrimination has always existed in this industry." Armand Rizzo, Twitter post, 27 November 2017, 11:26 am, https://twitter.com/ArmondRizzoXXX/status/935228460632383488.

The Flight from White

Why is the regime of whiteness less acceptable than it used to be? As a regime of representation it has reached such transparency that its unwatchability has a name and a movement in #oscarssowhite. But how does this come about? Thinking about the 1980s movies of our American teenhoods, we recognize how we were forced to be white in our spectatorships and fantasies—*you have to be white to be in this!* If we wanted (or imagined ourselves) to be white, we were exposed to the incapability of being white. Then there is how you decreasingly want to be white or experience an increasing inability to take up the limited spectatorial position available. *I don't know if I can watch this anymore* or *I am sick of being ignored* or *I am sick of being in the position of having to be grateful that I am allowed to watch.* Yet the struggle with whiteness—as it charges our subjectivities as viewers and participants in the cinema, in our chosen subcultural scenes, and in the assorted scenarios where we stake our sexual claims—shifts with our racial consciousness of how we relate to one another, given that we can't imagine ever wanting to be white (again). The unwatchable is precisely that in which one cannot (or refuses to) enter the space of fantasy not corroborated by one's own terms.

In the 1980s gay clubs of San Francisco's Castro District, the aura identified by Marlon Riggs in his film *Tongues Untied* (1989) found the visibility of gay men of colour blanketed by the Castro's white "snow." Riggs describes a dazzling enchantment with whiteness—an "immersion in vanilla"—that led to his ignoring not only the gaze of other men of colour but to seek the love of white men, a futile search within the context of a gay culture that simultaneously craves and vilifies blackness. Riggs encourages looking away from whiteness towards other Black men, not only for affirmation but recognition of shared alienation. And while white men still predominantly occupy social spaces like the gay bar, their command of these spaces no longer holds; that is, they can no longer presume that everyone within those contexts are predominantly occupied with *them*. We now refuse the terms established by these "privileged" patrons. While our refusal to meet their gaze or desire to engage in anticipatory small talk existed back in the day, we wish to remember how we learned from Riggs by hanging out and organizing with other people of colour within those mostly white spaces. We recall those moments when white men would come over to flirt—tired of waiting to be picked up, because, after all, we couldn't possibly be there without wanting them! We'd wave them away, possessed of ulterior motives. Our presence was for our crew—friends we planned to see who brought their friends. We'd exchange numbers, an orchestration not unlike Anaiis Cisco's film crew and cast, a diverse multi-racial composition, unpredictably generating a bracingly collaborative vision with little interest in who within the mise-en-scène might be anticipating our adoration. As if a brusque reply to audacious and presumptuous whites demanding to be watched, we are not interested in justifying the company with whom we've decided to keep or in endorsements of how to look or at whom.

The declaration of whiteness as unwatchable emerges not as a rallying cry but as a felt inability to engage these racial performances: Thanks, but no thanks. In the past, we would have scrutinized these spectacles as part of our dutiful attendance to shifts in racial representation; now, however, that imperative feels underwhelming and the spectacles irritatingly dull. The urgency to short-circuit the spotlight of whiteness seems to have flagged, given its banal surfacing as either absurd hollowed-out nostalgia (as in Donald Trump's 2016 US presidential campaign slogan, "Make America Great Again") or an aspirational fantasy bound to fail in its desire to suspend disbelief. A few decades ago, calling out the historical mechanisms of "patriarchal, heteronormative whiteness" was largely the province of academics facing social and institutional blitheness; today, the same critiques can be found in an Instagram meme, circulated through a public that comfortably traffics in "isms." Accordingly, while cultural critics like Norma Alarcón, Gloria Anzaldúa, Angela Davis, Richard Fung, Stuart Hall, Audre Lorde, and Trinh T. Minh-ha remain essential for grasping the complex structures of racial subjugation, their theoretical concepts and language already inform our common sociopolitical discourse. Accordingly, if bloggers, activists, and multiple "woke" others stand ready to parse scenes of whiteness, logging those investments in racial and gender supremacy, how, as scholars of race, do we interpret the demand being made of *us* in this moment? If the critique of whiteness has become mainstream via successful authors like Sara Ahmed, Viet Thanh Nguyen, Ta-Nehisi Coates, and Roxane Gay, are we not, in a productive way, relieved of the imperative to monitor and dissect these racial enactments?

The historical moment of whiteness in its manifold historical and regional specificities seems totally unwatchable. Yet this special issue aims to capture the new relations of ethics and pleasure between people of colour that this unbearability incites. We wish to explore other ways of connecting with figures of racial others not dependent upon an inextricable linkage to whiteness. Intent on considering how "positive" images or claims to self-representation do not always solve the problem of whiteness's seemingly indelible imprint or the messiness of spectatorial visual pleasure, we also ask if we can theorize the aesthetically disreputable as outwardly unwatchable while theorizing representations that are inwardly impossible to watch due to the political traumas they induce and the inadequate satisfaction they supply. How is the refusal of whiteness crucial, yet hardly a guarantee for alternative representations that channel our ethics and desires and enable versatile and "happier" spectatorial positions? We hope to formulate a practice of the unwatchable that turns away from the screen and scene of whiteness but does not turn away from new opportunities for spectatorship, critique, and desire in this era of looking relations.

J. Reid Miller

is Associate Professor of Philosophy and Comparative Literature at Haverford College. He received his PhD in History of Consciousness at the University of California Santa Cruz, where he was a University of California President's Postdoctoral Fellow as well as a Ford Fellow. He is the author of *Stain Removal: Ethics and Race* (Oxford University Press, 2016). He specializes in ethics, the philosophy of race, poststructuralism, and African American intellectual history.

Richard T. Rodríguez

is Associate Professor of Media and Cultural Studies at the University of California, Riverside. The author of *Next of Kin: The Family in Chicano/a Cultural Politics* (Duke University Press, 2009), which won the 2011 National Association for Chicana and Chicano Studies Book Award, he specializes in Latina/o literary and cultural studies, film and visual culture, and queer studies, with additional interests in transnational cultural studies, popular music studies, and comparative ethnic studies.

Celine Parreñas Shimizu

is an award-winning filmmaker and Professor of Cinema Studies at San Francisco State University. She specializes in Film and Performance Theory and Production, Sexuality and Race, and Social Theories of Power and Inequality. Her books are *The Feminist Porn Book* (The Feminist Press, 2013), *Straitjacket Sexualities* (Stanford University Press, 2012) and *The Hypersexuality of Race* (Duke University Press, 2007), winner of the Cultural Studies Book Award from the Association for Asian American Studies.