The Aesthetics of Frustration: Diversity and the ASA

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As I began to write a more standard aesthetics paper on an entirely different topic, my thoughts turned to several episodes in which scholars of color presented their work at ASA meetings with receptions ranging from chilly to hostile. Some have stated that they will not likely return to the ASA due to these experiences. Because I believe the resources of aesthetics can shed considerable light on social and political dynamics, I will examine some aesthetic elements of this situation and use them to inform a schematic proposal about how we might move forward.

I don’t have the answers—finding them is not a task for one person, and scholars belonging to the communities that have been marginalized and excluded in our professional spaces must be centrally involved. But serious discussion of these matters, which have been personally and professionally painful for me and far more so for others, is badly needed, and I hope this contribution will renew a discussion that was engaged by A.W. Eaton, Charles Peterson, and Paul C. Taylor in the Aesthetics for Birds blog in late 2017.

1.

In 2010, the distinguished legal scholar and Yavapai Supreme Court justice Rebecca Tsosie was plenary speaker at the ASA annual meeting. I was struck not only by the critical Indigenous perspective she brought to her discussion of the collection of Native American cultural objects in non-Native museums, but also by her gender presentation. Tsosie, who is Yaqui, wore long dark hair, makeup, Zuni turquoise jewelry, a pencil skirt and stiletto heels. Even her voice had a more feminine register than I am accustomed to hearing in academic contexts. Caught by surprise, I realized how rarely I have encountered this sort of femme presentation during my career as a woman philosopher. While I have no preference for femme presentation over the myriad other ways a person might live their gender, I found it refreshing to see a scholar who unapologetically combined feminine gender presentation with intellectual power.

And then the question period started. A white male philosopher occupying a prominent position in the ASA stood up—a choice neither typical nor necessary—to accuse Tsosie of an elementary blunder that, he suggested, undermined her entire project: a confusion between something’s being believed by a group of people and its being true. He stated that she had clearly never taken Philosophy 101. She responded, graciously, “Tell me what your test for truth is, and I’ll engage it.” He replied, condescendingly, “That’s just silly.” The question period went on as though nothing had happened. This highly accomplished scholar, whom the ASA had invited to offer a perspective from another discipline, was treated as though she was utterly incompetent. This dynamic occurs frequently enough for women of color that it is explored in two prominent anthologies. (Gutiérrez y Muhs et al. 2012; Flores Niemann et al. 2020)

I am using evaluative terms (such as ‘condescending’) that I take to be appropriate to what I observed. These evaluations are grounded in both what was said and how it was said. As Yuriko Saito (2016, 226) argues, how we deploy our bodies, including “tone of voice, facial expressions, and bodily movements,” is an aesthetic matter that deeply informs the moral quality of our actions. The point, to state the obvious, is not that one should refrain from critical discourse with a scholar because she is a person of color. There are respectful and valuable ways to engage a seeming clash of epistemic assumptions, but the exchange that actually occurred was a failure both morally and intellectually, since the questioner refused to delve into the epistemic substance after delivering his insult.

In 2017, I was present when a prominent white male philosopher rudely interrupted a speaker on a panel consisting mostly of women of color to complain about how time was being managed in the session. Having noted the little time that remained, he proceeded to ask an extremely long question in which he mischaracterized the speaker’s central thesis, continuing along the same trajectory even after she corrected him. In Taylor’s (2017) characterization, which I endorse, the questioner
languorously ... mansplained and whitesplained her, in a long, obtuse question that displayed not just near-total ignorance of the theoretical resources that animated the paper, but also nearer-total indifference to the possibility that his in comprehensjon might reflect his own misunderstanding rather than the author's mistakes.

Here, women of color are presumed incompetent to organize their own session or identify the thesis of their own research.

At the same meeting, artist Fahamu Pecou discussed his work and related conceptual matters, only to face white philosophers asking questions about the logistics of sagging pants: wouldn’t it be hard to run from the police? These episodes were discussed by A.W. Eaton (2017) and Paul Taylor (2017) in the Aesthetics for Birds blog, followed by Charles Peterson’s (2017) reflections on the need for organizational transformation. I commend these posts to you as essential though painful reading. Taylor gives this searing description of the question period after Pecou’s talk:

And there we were, chattering away in front of the Urban Negro exhibit at an old world’s fair, with question after question inviting the speaker to reveal the exotic mysteries behind what we were seeing.... What are those creatures doing? What might they have been thinking?

Just as Taylor describes in his post, I personally know philosophers of color who may never return to ASA meetings because of their experiences receiving chilly and ignorant responses to their own work and watching the same happen to others.

2.

Our evaluations often seem to us to be direct, appropriate responses to the content of what we are encountering. We are occasionally conscious of the distorting effects of, say, anger, hunger, or dislike. But evidence suggests that filters distorting what we perceive and how we evaluate it are pervasive and often invisible to us. A 1997 analysis by Goldin and Rouse established that the practice of masking the identity of musicians during auditions accounted for a large increase in the number of women hired into major orchestras. Why would this be? Of course, overt gender bias played a part: some evaluators rated women unfavorably because they just didn’t want women in the orchestra. But evidence suggests an additional phenomenon: knowledge of the performer’s gender serves as a filter that affects how we hear the sound the performer produces. The filter itself is invisible to us: we think we are hearing the sound and its aesthetic qualities directly. But it may be that the music sounds more powerful, more dynamic, when it issues from a body we understand as male; and it sounds a bit too delicate, tentative, when it issues from a body we understand as female.¹

How a performance strikes us—be it a musical performance or a philosophy talk—may be shaped by filters we are unaware of. The implicit bias literature establishes that race and gender serve as filters in just this way, leading to diminished ratings of the credentials and achievements of women and people of color.² Importantly, belonging to the group that is targeted does not inoculate you against acting on these forms of bias.³

Implicit bias is often treated as a largely cognitive phenomenon, a matter of associations among concepts. But when we are in embodied encounters, our responses span the cognitive, emotional, physical, behavioral, aesthetic and ethical. Moreover, the context of the encounter may shape our expectations about who and what we will and should find there. These matters—how we encounter each other as embodied persons, the filters through which we perceive each other, how our perception and imagination inform our interpretation and treatment of each other—are deeply relevant to aesthetics.

Wittgenstein (1966) suggested that a central concept in aesthetics is the matter of what strikes us as right or fitting in a context. Our aesthetic sense is active in detecting violations of our sense of fittingness: a door hung a bit too high, a suit cut too short. One of our aesthetic impulses is to make adjustments until things seem right to us, until they seem to fit. This is a matter of feel, of sensibility, not of rationality or objective criteria.

We can bring these ideas together in a consideration of the situation involving Prof. Tsosie. As I mentioned, I was struck by how her embodied presence upended my expectations about who I would find at the ASA. It stands to reason that others, too, registered this. Moreover, this form of raced and gendered embodiment is not neutral, as the research on implicit bias tells us: it tends to activate distorting filters that lead to underrating the performance of the person thus embodied. The seeming—indeed, the actual—lack of fit may have triggered a corrective mechanism: something feels wrong, especially given that this speaker is on the plenary stage; something
doesn’t fit; we (“we”) need to fix it. We need to convey to the speaker and all here present that neither she nor her work belongs in that position.

The panel including multiple women of color supports a similar analysis. Something about this situation feels wrong. It violates expectations about who will be present and what will and should occur at the ASA. Not only was the composition of the panel surprising, but the form of discourse was out of place, tending toward the postcolonial and continental. The participants did not even manage time in the session in the way we understand to be right and fitting. Corrective action was required: to restore the sense that things are right and fitting, the participants and all present needed to be informed or reminded of how ASA participants should comport themselves. The need for corrective action was especially urgent given that more and more of these kinds of people and kinds of events have been cropping up: the 2017 meeting featured several events involving scholars and artists of color who did not travel within the channels that have been carved in the intellectual terrain by longstanding participants.

Obviously, the white men whose interventions I have described would reject my analysis. And my project here is not psychiatric: the point is not to defend the attribution of a particular mental landscape to a particular actor. But at the same time, one may not know one’s own mind. The mechanisms I am discussing are deeply self-concealing. The situation is shrouded in plausible deniability: the actors can claim that it is merely incidental that those targeted happened to be women of color. If we accept that narrative without further consideration, we will remain stuck.

3.
A number of things need to be made visible. I’m trying to start that project here by creating what José Medina (2013) describes as epistemic friction; I’m offering an analysis of events that rubs up against and calls into question alternative understandings. Epistemic friction is a corrective to epistemic insensitivity, a state of being lulled into uncritical acceptance of a narrative that an empowered or dominant group might wish us to buy into, such as the narrative that we’ve been doing all we reasonably can about diversity and everything is mostly fine.

What else needs to be made visible? In Black Is Beautiful: A Philosophy of Black Aesthetics (2016), Paul Taylor describes four kinds of cultural invisibility for Black people: invisibility of presence, where there is a sheer absence of Black people in a context; invisibility of personhood, where Black people are present but their status as persons goes unrecognized; invisibility of perspective, where the bare moral personhood of Black people may be acknowledged but their distinct and legitimate perspectives on things are not; and invisibility of plurality, when the distinctiveness of a Black perspective may be recognized but that perspective is assumed to be monolithic, such that there is only one or a very small stock catalogue of Black ways of being.

Fahamu Pecou was, literally, visible, and the fact that he had been invited to speak suggests acknowledgement of his personhood and perspective. His work and discussion made visible a Black youth subculture and its participants, acknowledging Black personhood, perspective, and plurality. But despite the fact that Blackness and Black people were, in a sense, visible in all the ways Taylor describes, visibility is a matter not only of presentation but of uptake. Whether something is visible to me depends on whether I have the resources to process it. And the discussion following Pecou’s presentation suggests that many did not possess those resources: as Taylor describes, some of the discussion seemed scarcely to acknowledge Black personhood, much less perspectives and plurality.

We are, then, in a situation where people are present and things are happening, but what we need to see is not always visible to us because we lack the resources: conceptual, perceptual, cognitive, even emotional. I don’t except myself: I have been called out by a member of the ASA for a lack of attention to racial plurality beyond Blackness, and I no doubt have many other limitations that I’m unaware of.

This gives us a hint about what is needed. Rendering the invisible visible is a communal epistemic project, for it involves conceptual and perceptual resources that some already have and must be empowered to impart to others. Crucially, the very people who have been targeted by exclusionary activity are the ones most likely to possess these resources. The historic and contemporary absence and invisibility of people of color in the ASA is why so many of us lack the resources to see what is presented. This is also true of queer people, fat people, and disabled people: so few are present in our meetings that the resources for noticing exclusionary dynamics are grossly underdeveloped. This absence, like the absence of people of color, is a tremendous loss from every possible perspective, not least the epistemic. Scholars working in other disciplines, including Sara Ahmed, Jack Halberstam, Tobin Siebers, and Rosemarie Garland-
Thomson, have offered analyses of aesthetic aspects of queerness and disability that could tremendously enrich the discourse of philosophical aesthetics, but their work remains largely unknown here... invisible.

As may be obvious, this situation creates a vicious cycle in which exclusionary dynamics are reinforced by multiple factors. When scholars from communities largely absent from the ASA’s intellectual spaces submit their work, it may be rejected because those tasked with evaluating it do not see that the topics are a “good fit” for our conference or journal or feel that the work is lacking in “quality” because they do not recognize the legitimacy of the methods or sources employed—which is itself a function of prior conditions of exclusion and absence. When these scholars’ work is included through an alternate mechanism, such as a keynote lecture or panel presentation, hostile or ignorant audience responses actively reinforce the exclusionary dynamics that prevented these scholars and their work from being better represented in the ASA from the start, communicating to all present that the exclusion was and remains appropriate: these scholars and their work do not belong here. Nominal or token inclusion that doesn’t directly address these exclusionary conditions makes the situation worse.

We need a communal project of nurturing the development of conceptual resources, creating epistemic friction, holding each other accountable and learning to be accountable when others help us to see, however uncomfortable that may be. The key to all of this is to find ways to center, support, and provide opportunities for community for scholars currently subject to forces of invisibility, including absence and isolation. A collective that does not include, invite, support and celebrate the contributions of people of color, queer people, fat people, and disabled people cannot think, intend, or will itself into true inclusiveness. As Charles Peterson (2017) has written,

To open up the ASA as a space of inclusivity, a real struggle must be waged. This struggle cannot be thrust exclusively on the shoulders of marginalized members and their allies and must be waged by all members of the organization. This is a programmatic struggle, a discursive struggle and it is an internal struggle that necessarily must be waged by the majority members.

The community we need must be built consciously, intentionally, with commitment and energy, with intellectual and administrative labor. This is an architectural project, and it cannot be haphazard. We need to think actively, creatively, and collectively about how to build organizational infrastructure that supports true community, true valuing not just of racialized bodies in the room but of the kinds of intellectual contributions that have long been absent—especially contributions on topics and employing methods and paradigms that violate settled expectations. We need to move away from defending what feels right and fitting and toward a different set of aesthetic values, perhaps complexity, complication, excitement, uncertainty.

This must be a project of care, first and foremost because of wounds that have been inflicted on many people of color in the events I described; not to mention the wounds of isolation, frustration, and disappointment for those who have attended ASA meetings without finding supportive community. We need to create opportunities of welcome and social bonding that foreground the needs, interests and concerns of people who have not usually found an intellectual home in our academic spaces.

Interestingly, the 2020 Annual Meeting of the ASA, which was held virtually due to the COVID-19 pandemic, offers some clues about how this might be done. The program committee, led by C. Thi Nguyen, devised carefully-structured opportunities for social interaction, including a variety of activities where people could participate in ways of their choosing or try out ideas in a supportive, low-stakes environment. Perhaps the fact that each person took up an equal amount of real estate within their own little Zoom rectangle helped break down the clustering together of people who already know each other and diminish some of the usual power dynamics. Scholars from historically excluded communities made presentations about topics that have not been much discussed at the ASA, and in my observation these were warmly received with lively discussion and a supportive tone. It is interesting to consider whether the fact that many presenters and audience members were participating from visible domestic spaces may have subtly humanized us for each other, reminding us that we are whole people with lives, not philosophy machines that need to have our programming continually honed through aggressive questioning. Also, of course, the prospects for virtual participation with a low registration fee made possible the participation of disabled scholars, fat scholars, economically marginalized scholars, scholars with family care responsibilities, and others for whom travel is an obstacle to attendance at in-person meetings.

Because the 2020 meeting was so successful, I hope the ASA will consider revising or rescinding the policy adopted January 29, 2020, that prohibits video presentation at ASA Annual Meetings (in all but exceptional circumstances) on the grounds that it “significantly reduces opportunities for dialogue and discussion, reduces registration revenues, and presents expensive technology challenges.” Leaving aside the fact that the prospects for an in-person meeting in Montréal look tenuous as of this writing in early August 2021 due to a surge in the
Delta variant of COVID-19, we now know (through many months of experience and experimentation) that there are great prospects for meaningful and even improved forms of intellectual contact via videoconferencing. In-person engagement—not to mention a few days of excused absence from the normal circumstances of work and life—can be enjoyable and intellectually stimulating for some, but it “reduces opportunities for dialogue and discussion” to zero for those for whom travel is prohibitive for a wide variety of reasons. Members of communities that tend to be absent from our meetings are disproportionately likely to experience one or more financial, health or life circumstances that prevent them from traveling. Why not think creatively about how to design opportunities for effective intellectual and social engagement between in-person and remote participants?

More broadly, we need an ethicoaesthetics of community that involves intentional design of opportunities for participation and effective engagement. In our design process, we should not just acknowledge but foreground the needs, interests, and concerns of those who have not historically found an intellectual home within the ASA – for without such foregrounding, it will come more naturally to prioritize the needs of those who already find the ASA to be a welcoming space. We need not just nominal inclusion, but active welcoming of people and competent uptake of perspectives that have been historically marginalized or excluded.5

In her book Staring: How We Look, disability theorist Rosemarie Garland-Thomson (2009) notes that some kinds of looks, even between strangers, create relationship, acknowledge our common humanity, suggest that we are here for each other. These forms of looking can be critical in our ongoing sense of ourselves as persons. But when we encounter someone who is, in Garland-Thomson’s terms, “unusually embodied,” we often fail in acknowledgement: we either stare or look away. Staring treats a person as an exotic other. But as Garland-Thomson powerfully argues, looking away, too, is damaging: it makes a person invisible. Truly seeing, and seeing truly, consists in finding a way to look with acknowledgement and appreciation, without the exoticizing and objectifying stare, and finding a way to hear what is being said without a distorting filter that impugns its validity. Looking and listening in these ways is the mechanism through which personhood, perspectives, and plurality are revealed. We must support each other in developing the capacity and resources to look, and to see.

References


Notes

1. Similar evaluative effects are found in other contexts: for instance, numerous studies have shown that letters of recommendation describe women “as less confident and forceful, and more nurturing and helpful than men,” and women “receiv[e] fewer ‘standout’ adjectives such as superb and brilliant, and more ‘grindstone’ adjectives such as hardworking and diligent” (Dutt et al. 2016, 805).

2. Banaji and Greenwald 2016 provides an accessible overview of research on implicit bias and its practical implications.


4. <https://cdn.ymaws.com/aesthetics-online.org/resource/resmgr/files/Policy_on_Use_of_Video_Pres.pdf> The policy has been relaxed slightly for the 2021 Annual Meeting, allowing that up to two members of a panel may participate via video while still prohibiting any individual speaker from doing so.

5. Dotson (2011, 245 ff.) discusses conditions for competent listening, particularly when the speaker is from a marginalized community. These include the ability to understand most of what one is hearing and recognize when one does not understand (while acknowledging that one’s lack of understanding need not be due to a failure on the speaker’s part), and actively conveying to the speaker that one is tracking the content the speaker is offering.

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