

Caucasia's Capital: The Ordinary Presence of Whiteness

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I am interested in the presence of whiteness in the western world, especially on the American social and intellectual landscapes. I do not mean the presence of white people. I mean the form of presence whiteness constitutes in its conjuring power. That form of presence carries an ever expanding white aesthetic regime that teaches us how to see and narrate the true, the good, the beautiful, the intelligent, and the noble around white bodies. Elsewhere, I have reflected on that white aesthetic regime and the racializing pedagogy that emerges from it. That pedagogy continues to discipline fantasies of becoming (becoming human, mature, cultured, civilized, authoritative, and so forth).<sup>1</sup> It is this educative reality of whiteness within its aesthetic disciplinary that gives witness to the density of coloniality's on-going effects.

In this essay I will consider the tacit dimension of whiteness; that is, the way whiteness constitutes a presence that fills the modern body. Indeed the modern body would be impossible to grasp without the ordinary presence of whiteness. Whiteness in this regard is a founding form of modern capital. Capital here is both spatial—productive of centralized body and place—and fiduciary—productive of trust and economic facilitation. This essay considers the capital that is whiteness in relation to one of its crucial sites of biopower, beauty, and beautification. The recent return to beauty in philosophical, literary, and visual culture as well as in theological studies has yet to give an adequate account of the wider horizon of the racial aesthetic energized by the performances of whiteness. At one level this blindness to the racial aesthetic is due to the unease bordering on disdain of the processes of beautification by those who do philosophical aesthetics, which may, as Arthur Danto suggests, reach back to the philosophical distinction between reality and appearance, a distinction laden with the Platonic preference for the Real.<sup>2</sup> Thus many philosophers would not have imagined the practice of aesthetics as in cosmetology a worthy site

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<sup>1</sup> Willie James Jennings, "Changing Eyes: Engaging the Aesthetic Struggle," in *The Contours of Black Practical Theology*, ed. Dale Andrews and Robert L. Smith (Oxford University Press, forthcoming)

<sup>2</sup> Arthur Danto, "Beauty and Beautification," in *Beauty Matters*, ed. Peg Zeglin Brand (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000), 71–72.

for serious contemplation.<sup>3</sup> At another level, however, this blindness is driven by the role that Enlightenment philosophers played in being facilitators and accomplices in the formation of whiteness and the racial aesthetic itself.<sup>4</sup> Western Christian thought has generally followed the sensibilities of philosophers in relation to aesthetics. Moreover Christian thought has not only followed the direction of philosophical aesthetics in relation to racial being and racial attribution, but was also the central progenitor of the logic of racial attribution. These developments have yet to receive the attention they deserve within any comprehensive analysis of the historical deployment of the ideas of truth, goodness, beauty, and intelligence in modernity. While “whiteness studies” is growing in strength in the academy, its presence in the study of aesthetics within philosophy or theology is still embryonic.

Centrally, this essay will reflect on the complexities of aesthetic life for people of color living in what I am calling *Caucasia's capital*, in which whiteness constitutes presence and makes bodies present but also makes bodies absent and engenders a sense of loss, deficit, and defect. What whiteness constantly enacts is a complex performance of agency, especially for people of color, through which self-mastery becomes a profound vacillation between what Houston Baker Jr. once called the mastery of form and the deformation of mastery. I will add to this famous Baker couplet another aspect of that self-mastery that I call the failure of form and the mastery of failure. Baker's original couplet suggested a mode of resistance through which African diaspora peoples learned and manipulated given form, whether we envision form as ways of speaking, writing, comportment, or thinking that would allow the “crafting [of] a voice out of tight places.”<sup>5</sup> That mastery of form often found its most enlivening use in counter-hegemonic actions that challenged the colonial control, organization, and facilitation of bodies, land, and animals. This use of form was an intervention, a disruption in the smooth flow of white racial mastery. This was mastery's deformation.<sup>6</sup> Baker's account of these matters focused on the arts (especially music and literature) as the sites for these heroic executions. This is exactly right,

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<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 72.

<sup>4</sup> Emmanuel Chukwudi Eze, *Race and the Enlightenment: A Reader* (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1997).

<sup>5</sup> Houston A. Baker, Jr., *Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 33.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 36.

because it is indeed the artistic site that exposes the imperial position of whiteness in western fantasy work.

It will also be the goal of this essay to examine the complexity of agency for African diaspora people affected by the racial aesthetic. What I hope comes into view is the deeper sense of a *productive* melancholic that attends the performance of that agency. “Melancholic” in this sense functions like the blues as a way of making pain and contradiction useful but not purposeful. The blues as musical form has always carried this epistemic density, but it has also served historically as a template for a variety of other musical forms as they carried forward its harmonic, lyrical, and melodic architectures.<sup>7</sup> Blues agency is burdened agency as black peoples came to understand what it meant to inhabit modern bodies—that is, racialized bodies. By blues agency I am not suggesting a romanticized or essentialized “blues essence” for black diaspora peoples.<sup>8</sup> Blues agency here is a modality of reflexivity characterized by its mobility, flexibility, and adaptability that can weave continuity of life across injury, insult, racist micro-aggression, and violence.

Equally important, blues agency is a site of redemptive fantasy work that delivers subjectivity into new psychic spaces inside of old spaces. Here we must hold together the work of racial fantasy that is emancipatory dreaming and imagining with the hegemonic operations of whiteness without collapsing them into each other. Racial fantasy is not the same as racializing fantasy, yet black diaspora people have to deal with both.. Racializing fantasy is fantasy captured in the normalizing gaze of whiteness and leads inextricably toward white veneration. Racial fantasy in contradistinction plays in whiteness, as one plays with objects that can harm but turns them toward producing life and pleasure. So I am concerned then with the possibilities of agency in full view of whiteness. Black diaspora peoples have learned to live within this full view.

### Suggesting a Full View

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<sup>7</sup> Steven C. Tracy, *Langston Hughes and the Blues* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2001), 59–140; George E. Lewis, *A Power Stronger Than Itself: The AACM and American Experimental Music* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 29–50.

<sup>8</sup> Guthrie P. Ramsey, Jr., *Race Music: Black Cultures from Bebop to Hip-Hop* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 44–75.

Lupita Nyong'o became a household name in 2014. She is the Kenyan actor who won an American academy award for her searing depiction of Patsey, a female slave, in the movie rendition of the classic text, *Twelve Years a Slave* (which is also a text of great literary beauty and stunning insight in and of itself).<sup>9</sup> Her accomplishment came at the familiar nexus for such achievement for black actors: when black artists perform blackness and thereby confirm their approved forms of humanity. We yet wait for the true artistic breakthrough when black actors are awarded this highest honor for acting the human just as white actors. At the *Essence Black Women in Hollywood Award* banquet, Lupita Nyong'o told a story that many people of dark skin in this world would have anticipated she could and would tell. She told the story of her awakening to racial trauma.<sup>10</sup>



Lupita Nyong'o at the Essence Awards, 2014<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Solomon Northup, *Twelve Years a Slave* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1996).

<sup>10</sup> <http://www.essence.com/2014/02/28/lupita-nyongos-bwih-acceptance-speech/>

<sup>11</sup> Image taken from google images: <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/tvshowbiz/article-2570526/Actress-Lupita-Nyong-gives-moving-speech-tells-prayed-God-lighten-skin-child.html>

She prefaced her story by reading a letter she had received from a little dark-skinned girl who told Nyong'o how proud she was on her accomplishment of achieving recognition and fame, and that she too (this little dark-skinned girl) hopes now for a better future for dark-skinned girls. This little girl was in the process of buying skin-lightening cream in order to transform her body when Nyong'o image appeared and, as she said, "saved her." Nyong'o then told the story that many of her listeners I am sure knew was coming. It was of the time when she too, like the little-dark skinned girl, wished desperately to be light skinned. She prayed and bargained with God, the good and merciful God (as she called God) that she would be a better person morally if this God would alter her physically, thereby making her a better person in the flesh.

The camera scanning the audience of listeners showed well-known African and African American celebrities, some with eyes closed, some looking directly at her, others with head bowed or nodding, all seemingly possessed of the intimate knowledge of this Morrisonque *Bluest-Eye* story being told by Nyong'o. Indeed, this was shared knowledge that was not rooted in shared dark skin but a shared reality of presence. The image to which Nyong'o (like the little dark-skinned girl) has to reconcile was no specific image but a reality of presence. Whiteness at that moment was powerfully present even as Nyong'o spoke of her own black body. Whiteness is both a way of seeing and a way of being seen and in this moment its dual modality intertwined in the logic of her speech. This familiar story of black flesh she resolved in characteristic fashion by telling of how she learned that beauty is fleeting, and that we should make ourselves beautiful inside. Applause followed.

Lupita Nyong'o's speech was in fact about self-making through a powerful act of self-narration against the backdrop of the fetishizing of her image. Her success should be read inside the spectral calculus that often accompanies the stardom of dark bodies. On the one hand, Nyong'o—like many others—has been read inside exoticism, through which black women's bodies appear as embodiments of stunningly overwhelming beauty that reaches past civilization and rationality and into the primal eroticism of the earth creature. In this regard, her beauty becomes captivating to such an extent that the specifics of her life—her real history, education, experiences, philosophy of life and so forth—are inconsequential for grasping her

personhood. On the other hand, Nyong'o is being read inside the logics of social uplift and achievement that render her simply another Americanized citizen who has overcome the racial barriers to success, both external and internal. Her dark body suggests its inconsequentiality even as its signifying power makes such an American reading fully an illusion. To what extent Lupita Nyong'o is actively manipulating this spectral calculus would be an interesting question that we could not answer at this point. Yet what is crucial for our analysis is the ways in which she exposes blues agency in her rhetorical improvisation.

### The Blues in Beauty

Her improvisation helps us see what many people of color can sense all around them, knowing that they must actively enact fantasies of agency against the racial given of whiteness. This enacting of racial fantasy is what I wish to register as a wider reality of beautification. This is a much broader use of the idea of beautification than cosmetological practices, although it certainly includes such practices. This broader idea of beautification connects bodies and space, land and animals, mobility and habitation in complex love work that allows us to claim ourselves in self presentation and self giving.<sup>12</sup> Such an idea encompasses cosmetological, theatrical, rhetorical, somatic, and spiritual practices. It also includes architectural practice as well as the body's relation to and manipulation of inanimate objects. How does one enact a redemptive aesthetic inside the operations of white aesthetic hegemony? This is a question acutely felt by people of color living against the backdrop of the ubiquitous white body that covers western mediascapes.<sup>13</sup>

Anne Anlin Cheng in her reflection on the racial performance of Josephine Baker identified Baker as someone gesturing toward such an aesthetic. Although neither Cheng nor Baker would probably give it the kind of theological weight I am conceptualizing here. Baker's art and life however does suggest an effort in subjectivity that exists outside what Cheng terms

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<sup>12</sup> Elizabeth A. Povinelli, *The Empire of Love: Toward a Theory of Intimacy, Genealogy, and Carnality* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006), 175–236.

<sup>13</sup> Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 27–47.

“the burdens of racial legibility and epidermal inscription.”<sup>14</sup> Cheng’s brilliant meditation on Baker highlights the conundrums of racial visibility bequeathed to us by the colonial racial matrix. Visibility has been collapsed into a readability that haunts racialized subjects. Josephine Baker’s art seemed to play in, with, and against that readability and thereby drew attention to the surface as the site of a theatrical racial interiority that was never an essence. This is what Cheng calls the dream of a second skin.<sup>15</sup>



Josephine Baker<sup>16</sup>

I would like to extend this metaphor of a second skin to capture what is at play in a redemptive aesthetic exercised in processes of beautification engaged in and through blues agency. Such work negotiates the condition constituted by whiteness by manipulating a stereotypical racial interiority at the surface. Yet this negotiation is not the real handling of something that is false or the authentic playing with illusion. It is as Cheng suggests, “a complicated and unceasing negotiation between the two.”<sup>17</sup> This is in effect the spectacular work

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<sup>14</sup> Anne Anlin Cheng, *Second Skin: Josephine Baker and the Modern Surface* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), Kindle: Location 240 of 3861 (6%).

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, Kindle: Location 956 of 3861 (25%).

<sup>16</sup> Image taken from Google images: [http://live.drjays.com/wp-content/uploads/2010/02/annex-baker-josephine\\_02.jpg](http://live.drjays.com/wp-content/uploads/2010/02/annex-baker-josephine_02.jpg)

<sup>17</sup> Cheng, *Second Skin*, Kindle” Location 1932 of 3861 (50%). Cheng is referring specifically to Baker, but the wider implications she draws soon after this point where she states, “[H]ow racialized skin responds to relentless corporealization and objectification may take unexpected forms. The desire to

of performing the mystery of the visible through which objectification becomes a means of concealment, protest, and self-making. Yet the effects of objectification are never perfectly contained or resisted; they seep through in the processes of beautification, making the work of subjectivity torturous pleasure and pleasurably torturous—that is, bluesy. Additionally, processes of beautification are implicated in processes of governmentality and imperialist western economic practices.

Mini Thi Nguyen notes the ways beauty work is imbricated in nation-building and war-making in an essay that reflects on the efforts of the NGO (non-governmental organization) *Beauty without Borders* in building the *Kabul Beauty School* in Kabul, Afghanistan.<sup>18</sup> This humanitarian work at one level was intended to empower Afghan women by creating space for them to reclaim their bodies, through processes of beautification. Cosmetological practices were interlocked with American statecraft and capitalism as a way to give Afghan women voice and self-determination within a context of relentless sexual violence and tyranny. The Kabul school gave sight to the private spaces where Afghan women could literally and metaphorically unveil themselves and claim their agency in the work of makeup and makeovers. Nguyen is not questioning the agential possibilities of such processes of beautification. She draws attention, however, to the biopower at work in this emancipatory operation.




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remake oneself as object can be shared by those we think would be most allergic to such transformation” (ibid.).

<sup>18</sup> Mini Thi Nguyen, “The Biopower of Beauty: Humanitarian Imperialisms and Global Feminisms in an Age of Terror,” *Signs* 36.2 (Winter 2011): 359–83.

Images from the Kabul Beauty School<sup>19</sup>

Thus at another level, these processes of beautification are held inside processes of formation—national, economic, and racial—and, most importantly for our analysis, inside whiteness, again as both a way of seeing and a way of being seen. This humanitarian effort framed “a potential liberal feminist subject who seeks to esteem herself in collaboration with development regimes that represent women in the global South as needing modernization.”<sup>20</sup> That potential liberal feminist subject is not only one that exists against the ubiquitous backdrop of whiteness but one energized by images of white bodies performing the good, the true, the beautiful, the intelligent, and the modern. Projects of governmentality are executed in and through whiteness as a production plant or plantation of signifiers. Thus processes of beautification exist within the long centuries of colonialism and imperial control in which the organization of morality, beauty, and the social order are made the quotidian work of colonized subjects. As Nguyen notes:

Through instruction on the proper care of the self, this makeover imperative produces normative notions about what counts as healthy versus pathological bodies, converting social and moral statements into truth statements about the self—for instance, that your beauty choices necessarily reveal something about your character or competency—validated then by the signs of parascientific expertise.<sup>21</sup>

Nguyen’s comments on the complexities of beauty work for Afghan women help frame the historical dilemma of self-reflexivity for people of color. That self-reflexivity is always crowded. Cheng is surely correct when she argues that cultural theorists and others attuned to the aesthetic struggle today have “few tools and little language for addressing ... [what she calls] ... visual pleasure in the contaminated zones: those uneasy places of visual exchange where pleasure, law,

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<sup>19</sup> Images taken from Google images:

[https://www.google.com/search?um=1&noj=1&hl=en&tbm=isch&sa=1&q=The+Kabul+beauty+school&oq=The+Kabul+beauty+school&gs\\_l=img.3..0j0i24i3.557610.568114.2.568768.39.20.11.8.8.0.193.1986.5j12.17.0....0...1c.1.47.img..9.77.5268.tlE-LhOdjS8#imgdii=\\_](https://www.google.com/search?um=1&noj=1&hl=en&tbm=isch&sa=1&q=The+Kabul+beauty+school&oq=The+Kabul+beauty+school&gs_l=img.3..0j0i24i3.557610.568114.2.568768.39.20.11.8.8.0.193.1986.5j12.17.0....0...1c.1.47.img..9.77.5268.tlE-LhOdjS8#imgdii=_)

<sup>20</sup> Mini Thi Nguyen, “The Biopower of Beauty,” 374.

<sup>21</sup> Nguyen, “The Biopower of Beauty,” 375.

and resistance converge.”<sup>22</sup> However, Cheng underestimates the permeability, multiplicity, and fragmentation of the visual. The work of making visible is always on the one hand a shared work and on the other hand work that is always being intercepted, anticipated, and redirected in whiteness. This is due in part to the historical modes of creation that merged with whiteness. They were the modes of becoming, universalizing, and managing.

### Modes of Whiteness

I have articulated these modes extensively in another place, but it is important to review briefly their contours.<sup>23</sup> These three mutual interlocking modes co-opted by whiteness constituted a self-colluding racial anthropology that produced nonwhite raced subjects while simultaneously making white subjects who are also rendered invisible through its operation. The mode of becoming was transformed through the historic work of assimilation of European immigrants in America who were able to shed themselves of the density of their ethnic past and perform a cleansing whiteness. This trajectory of assimilation has been flexible enough to capture those immigrants who followed the archetypical work of the European and made possible for them an abiding mimeticism that extends far beyond the possibilities of looking white, that is, passing as white. This mimetic reality enables minority immigrants to gesture whiteness that pivots on stripping away a *determinative* ethnic past. Their ethnicity becomes a past, an inconsequential appendage to their American existence. This stripping away was coordinated with the work of self-development and training in and toward civilized existence. Self-development collaborated with the development of land and the domestication of space in America and other colonial sites.<sup>24</sup> This meant that civilized bodies were coordinated with the spaces of civilization, and both mutually enforced the transformation of each.

The mode of universalizing grew out of the manipulation of a Christian matrix through which the European took over the vicarious position of the scriptural people, the Jews, as the

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<sup>22</sup> Cheng, *Second Skin*, Kindle: Location 1958 of 3861 (51%).

<sup>23</sup> See nn. 1 and 20 above.

<sup>24</sup> Willie James Jennings, *The Christian Imagination: Theology and the Origins of Race* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010); David R. Roediger, *Working Toward Whiteness: How America's Immigrants Became White* (New York: Basic Books, 2005).

exemplars of the human in its full anthropological range. This allowed the European to speak not only of the human didactically but also for the human imperially. Whiteness became the signified and the signifier of human essence and existence.<sup>25</sup> This performance of the universal was not simply conceptual but also material as Europeans enclosed multiple peoples of the world in an evaluative universe that sought to school them in a shared sense of the value of objects, both natural and manufactured. Through this mode objects and peoples came to inhabit various scales that moved from beautiful to ugly, perfect to imperfect, elegant to grotesque, and so forth. Europeans were not the progenitors of practices of evaluation especially on their colonial sites. Rather this new evaluative universe had—and has—three abiding characteristics: (a) its global or colonizing effect that allows it to incorporate and manipulate existing evaluative systems; (b) its ability to conceal the speaking white subject; and (c) its ability to produce native subjects who know themselves and gauge themselves through this new evaluative universe.<sup>26</sup>

The managerial mode grew out of a distorted sense of ownership and a diseased reality of fraternity and manifest destiny through which white men imagined themselves as bequeathed by God with stewardship of the planet and the peoples of the world. Such imagining was also a constitutive element in becoming and being recognized as a man, as one ready to handle the affairs of men and take the world stage as a global leader.<sup>27</sup> This managerial mode was fundamentally a kind of secular gendered asceticism through which peoples (men and women) could show mastery of themselves and control over nonwhite bodies through claiming institutional identities. Institution building (e.g., hacienda, plantation, company, church, school, etc.) emerged as crucial sites for forming the distinction between white and nonwhite people in the performance of duties associated with the maintenance and promotion of the aims and

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<sup>25</sup> Julian B. Carter, *The Heart of Whiteness: Normal Sexuality and Race in America, 1880–1940* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007); Paula Fredriksen, *Augustine and the Jews: A Christian Defense of Jews and Judaism* (New York: Doubleday, 2008), 260–89; Eric L. Goldstein, *The Price of Whiteness: Jews, Race, and American Identity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006).

<sup>26</sup> Nguyen, “The Biopower of Beauty,” 376. Nguyen notes that “the ultimate aim of colonial mimicry,” which, as Parama Roy observes, “is not simply to constitute natives as objects to be studied; it must also produce natives as self-reflective subjects, who know themselves as others (the colonizers) know them.”

<sup>27</sup> Dana D. Nelson, *National Manhood: Capitalist Citizenship and the Imagined Fraternity of White Men* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1998); Marilyn Lake and Henry Reynolds, *Drawing the Global Colour Line: White Men's Countries and the International Challenge of Racial Equality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

interests of the institution. Thus racial formation and institutionalization have always worked together in this mode.

### The Failure of Form and the Mastery of Failure

These modes expose a more complex picture for self reflexivity than is currently at play in much cultural theory or critical race theory concerned with aesthetics. This tangled picture does not negate the crucial interventions being done through processes of beautification, but only sharpens the work of blues agency as people of color have sought to make themselves visible. That tangled picture requires analyses that grasp the ordinary presence of whiteness in the ways it has constituted and continues to constitute the aesthetic forest that multiple peoples must move through, groping for light and life. Whiteness in this regard will always constitute for people of color a failure of form. The failure in this sense is not the failure of anti-racist aesthetic practice, nor is it the failure of art, or media, or artistic practice. The failure of form in this regard is the relentless return of aesthetic form to gesture whiteness as both the definitive source of pleasure and knowledge. Both pleasure and knowledge in this regard are matters of circulation through which white bodies remain the critical sites of intersection of the production and consumption of goods and services and fantasy.

This failure of form means that artistic work and performance, aesthetic practice, and processes of beautification do not simply exist in contaminated zones as Cheng suggests, but are caught irreversibly in a racial drift toward whiteness through which any anti-racist, anti-white supremacist artistic work may be drawn into new possibilities for signifying whiteness, either by packaging the ethnic progenitors of that art and the art itself in commodity and cultural form, or by drawing art and progenitor into an imagined community that shares in the production and consumption of goods and fantasy and thereby shares in both knowledge and pleasure. This failure of form is not immutable or eternal. It has however been with us since the dawning of the colonial modern and the modern body formed in the crucible of stolen land and altered spaces, and enslaved bodies.

Processes of beautification have challenged and continue to challenge that failure of form not by its denial, but by its mastery. This mastery of failure is a contingent, always vulnerable work of blues agency that recognizes that self-reflexivity is always a crowded activity filled with welcome and unwelcome guests speaking at us in the mirror, haunting us even as we imagine with and against the imagistic machine that greets us through ubiquitous media. How does one imagine self with and against the tide of whiteness? This is a question that touches on desire and pleasure, but also on the daily rituals and routines through which black peoples gauge their appearance, measure their effect, and daily launch their improvisational performances into their social worlds. There is a haunting scene from the 2009 movie, *Precious* based on the novel *Push* by Sapphire. This scene finds Precious, an African American woman (the main character) preparing for the day after dressing herself and gauging her appearance in the mirror. The camera moves from the image of Precious looking at herself to the image of herself that she sees reflected back through the mirror. To the viewer's surprise the image is of a young white woman looking back at Precious.



Scene from the movie, *Precious* (2009)<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Image taken from Google images

[https://www.google.com/search?um=1&noj=1&hl=en&tbm=isch&sa=1&q=Mirror+scence+from+the+movie+precious&oq=Mirror+scence+from+the+movie+precious&gs\\_l=img.3...7931.55376.0.56110.53.43.7.2.2.0.251.4187.22j16j1.39.0....0...1c.1.47.img..41.12.729.MDPR2jTMI5o#facrc=\\_&imgrc=8uw80ce0b](https://www.google.com/search?um=1&noj=1&hl=en&tbm=isch&sa=1&q=Mirror+scence+from+the+movie+precious&oq=Mirror+scence+from+the+movie+precious&gs_l=img.3...7931.55376.0.56110.53.43.7.2.2.0.251.4187.22j16j1.39.0....0...1c.1.47.img..41.12.729.MDPR2jTMI5o#facrc=_&imgrc=8uw80ce0b)

I am not suggesting an overdetermination of white image, fantasy, and dream for people of color by invoking this scene from the movie. Rather I call on it as a metaphor for grasping the contours of this work of mastering failure. The situation in which people of color must do their love work requires an improvisational dexterity and an artistic nimbleness that allows for the cultivation of nothing less than an evangelistic posture toward the social world. Writer Marita Golden in her powerful memoir, *Don't Play in the Sun: One Woman's Journey through the Color Complex*, offers us insight into this evangelistic posture within her own sense of blues agency.

Writing is one of the most rebellious, incendiary acts that an individual can perform.... It did not always seem inevitable that I should write ... For if I wrote, and wrote with steely determination and imagination, I would have to write my way out of the hold of the racist and colorist assumptions about brown to black Black women that I'd inherited ... I would have to write myself into being visible to a world dedicated to turning me into a phantom ... I write to be heard. And I write to be loved. I write seeking congregants who will attend the church of my specific beliefs, adherents to my assertion of reality, converts to my vision.<sup>29</sup>

Golden's comments point to what is needed for strengthening the processes of beautification. What is needed is conversion for all those comfortably at home in whiteness. Processes of beautification enter more deeply into the zone of a redemptive aesthetic once they are shared across racial, gendered, and cultural lines of difference. That sharing would entail not only a recognition of the presence conjured by whiteness, a presence that constantly establishes a normalizing aesthetic power, but also a kind of renunciation and turning away from that power in its exploitive modes of production and consumption. The turning away requires a turning toward relationships and friendships that imagine possibilities of life together that continuously engage

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<sup>29</sup> Marita Golden, *Don't Play in the Sun: One Woman's Journey through the Color Complex* (New York: Anchor Books, 2004), 184–85.

in aesthetic play with, in, and against whiteness. Such play is finally the most challenging and costly aspect of the mastery of failure, because the white aesthetic regime is not imagined as a problem by a significant number of people in the world. Indeed, some have taken as their task its defense and further dissemination without ever recognizing its existence.<sup>30</sup> Whiteness is a tacit power because it is productive of life, albeit false life. It is parasite on bare life and the creative energies of human existence. Most importantly, it is advantageous to groups of people in the world for whom images of the true, the good, the beautiful, the intelligent, the noble, and the powerful flow around their white or white-like bodies without having to touch them directly. This means that like theological conversion, this conversion with its renunciation and turning away from whiteness will not be for everyone but only for those seeking to live a better life in *Caucasia's capital*.

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<sup>30</sup> Alexander Nehamas, "The Return of the Beautiful: Morality, Pleasure, and the Value of Uncertainty:" *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 58.4 (Autumn, 2000): 393–403 (the article is a review of *On Beauty and Being Just* by Elaine Scarry; *Air Guitar* by Dave Hickey; and *The Invisible Dragon: Four Essays on Beauty* by Dave Hickey); Gregory Jusdanis, "Two Cheers for Aesthetic Autonomy," *Cultural Critique* 61 (Autumn, 2005): 22–54.