

# Encountering the Other: Aesthetics, Race and Relationality

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## ABSTRACT

*This essay examines the links between aesthetics and race through the lenses of accepted distinctions between Western and non-Western, colonial and postcolonial, national and transnational aesthetics, and questions the validity of the claim that there is an inherent and incommensurable difficulty in translating non-Western aesthetic thought into Western aesthetic thought. First, I argue that Manichean models are insufficient to understand the dynamics of the encounter between Western and non-Western aesthetics. Second, I illustrate the complexity of non-Western and Western aesthetics relations through the example of the encounter between Aimé Césaire's Negritude and André Breton's surrealism. I argue that this encounter exemplifies non-ideal translation, the temporary rendering from one framework into the other, and instantiates relationality. Third, I argue that it is possible to understand and accommodate various aesthetic experiences and different aesthetic frameworks by exploring modes of discerning between different kinds of others and different kinds of selves, and that cosmopolitanism could, but does not, provide the necessary conditions for such reversal.*

## KEY WORDS

*Césaire, colonial aesthetics, cosmopolitanism, negritude, postcolonial aesthetics, race relationality, surrealism, trans-nationalism*

## 1. Introduction

Historically regarded as a branch of philosophy dealing essentially with the nature of beauty, art, and taste, aesthetics has evolved to encompass a variety of concerns that are interdisciplinary in nature, but racialization [\[1\]](#) [\[#N1\]](#) is far from being systematically debated. In this article I seek to specify the meaning of encountering Otherness within the realm of aesthetics. I examine how race and aesthetics have been historically interrelated within a network of political, social, and ethical concerns, and how issues of taste are related to culture and to race.

It is my contention that in today's cosmopolitan, transnational world, race, aesthetics, and otherness must be understood as interconnected. In our global era I see an inflation of otherness, a rise of the quality of being different and excluded from the making of standards, values, and judgments, including aesthetic standards. Ways of establishing a demarcation line between *self* and *other*, between *ours* and *theirs* may vary, but the tendency to regard the Other as a stranger and his or her culture as fundamentally foreign remains a constant. Furthermore, the tendency to reject otherness by projecting it exclusively onto outsiders, and to refuse to acknowledge ourselves as others, appears invariable.

Before being able to draw any conclusion, this essay will first examine the links between non-Western aesthetics, both colonial and national aesthetics, and race while questioning the validity of the claim that there is an inherent difficulty in translating non-Western aesthetics thought into Western thought. Second, the essay continues with

an illustration of the complexity of the relation between non-Western and Western aesthetics through the example of the encounter between Aimé Césaire's Negritude poetry and André Breton's surrealism. Third, I argue that it is possible to understand and accommodate our experience of otherness, and to explore modes of distinguishing between different kinds of others and different kinds of selves and of discerning how they relate to each other. Cosmopolitanism can provide conditions for such a reversal. I insist, however, that cosmopolitanism can also create the conditions for new racial categories, and I explore how the discourse of cosmopolitanism shapes questions of aesthetics without eliminating the pervasiveness of racism.

## 2. Western and non-Western Aesthetics: Does Race Matter?

“And in vain I swallow seven mouthfuls of water  
Three or four times in every twenty-four hours  
My childhood returns to me  
In a hiccup shaking  
My instinct  
Like a cop shaking a hooligan  
Disaster  
Tell me about disaster  
Tell me about it  
...  
I understand that once again  
You missed your vi-o-lin lesson  
A banjo  
You said  
A banjo  
No sir  
You must know that we do not allow in this house  
Nor ban  
Nor jo  
Nor gui  
Nor tar  
Mulattos don't do that  
Leave that for black people”  
Léon Gontran Dama, *Pigments*, “Hiccup”

I find it useful to start my inquiry with a quotation from “Hiccup” (Hocquet), a famous poem by Léon-Gontran Damas (one of the founders of the Negritude movement). [2][#N2] This poem is, in my view, an example of a non-Western literary work that expresses a network of political, social, ethical, and aesthetic concerns determined by race and colonialism. In this poem—published in 1937 and compared by Césaire to Sartre’s *Nausea*—Léon-Gontran Damas criticizes cultural assimilation and, with irony, describes both a mother’s snobbism through her various attempts to make a young boy develop a taste for Western culture and the boy’s resistance. The mother’s efforts manifest a specific conception of beauty and taste, a particular understanding of what should be pleasing to her son’s senses on the basis of his racial and social identity.

Beyond the question of beauty and taste, this poem and the mother-son relationship it describes speak of the relation between different and hierarchically ordered cultures—Western and non-Western—within a French colonial context. In this poem Damas articulates his grief regarding the “disaster” of racism and the taboo of interracial relationships. He also articulates the shaping of identities—including his own—and the formation of knowledge. I see constructions of identity and geopolitics of knowledge as strongly connected and I try, as Enrique Dussel does, to take the “geopolitical space seriously.” [3][#N3] I also think Walter Mignolo is right to argue that “knowledge is always geo-historically and geo-politically located across the epistemic colonial difference.” [4][#N4] In my view Damas articulates how, in the context of a French colonial society, legitimate knowledge—encompassing both value and purpose—is measured against Western (French) standards, and how identities are shaped by such dynamics. In a strict historical perspective, non-Western poetry, such as Damas’s, can be understood as part of colonial aesthetics, namely aesthetics produced under colonial rule, as opposed to ‘national or postcolonial aesthetics’ produced after the end of colonial rule and regarded as authentic and considered likely to be immune to racism. In such a historical perspective both colonial and postcolonial aesthetics are defined as non-Western.

One way to think about non-Western aesthetics is to regard it as a colonial invention. [5][#N5] Following the “colonial encounter,” [6][#N6] “non-Western aesthetics” are defined as opposed to Western-aesthetics, which are aesthetics *par excellence*. In this sense the phrase “non-Western aesthetics” refers to the Other of Western aesthetics and designates, I would argue, not only what is simply not the same but what is different in a threatening or disturbing way; not only the Other that relates to another place but the Other that differs in nature or character to the point of incompatibility. Interestingly enough, while distinguishing between two different aesthetics, such categorization also expresses what precisely makes the categorization possible, namely the encounter itself, the coming together. But the use of the category assumes that there is an object —non-Western aesthetics—that is different in nature from Western aesthetics and does not account for the *relation* that makes the category possible, that is, the encounter.

The encounter disturbs the canon of Western aesthetics and new categories such as “Western” and “non-Western aesthetics” are created to communicate the difference without accounting for comparisons, associations, and contrasts. As Gene Blocker rightly noted, “The first thing we must realize in this undertaking is that the world does not come conveniently prepackaged for us into neat compartments of “Chinese aesthetics,” “Indian Aesthetics,” “African Aesthetics,” “Polynesian aesthetics,” “Native American Aesthetics,” and so on. Any discussion of non-Western Aesthetics must be (and can only be) a cross-cultural comparison.” [7][#N7] This cross-cultural comparison echoes what I called *relation* above. Our understanding of Western and non-Western aesthetics depends upon our ability to think across boundaries and requires willingness to first acknowledge and exhibit the links, and second to attempt to understand them.

I am not suggesting here that the debate about non-Western aesthetics is to be limited to the encounter with Western aesthetics; it certainly also exhibits tensions within colonial and postcolonial societies between colonial non-Western aesthetics and national/postcolonial non-Western aesthetics. However, I argue that there are two levels of analysis. The first level pertains to the encounter and what it produces, namely a discourse about

another aesthetics regarded as the other of aesthetics, as well as practices generated in response to the encounter and the discourse. The second level of analysis pertains to the various aesthetic productions and practices that are not determined by the encounter but exist in parallel and can go unnoticed by the dominant discourse. My contention is that these two levels are not to be considered historically as successively ordered. There are arguably authentic Indian, African, Polynesian, Caribbean, Native American aesthetics (the list being necessarily non-exhaustive) but I want to suggest that being postcolonial is not a sufficient condition for the authenticity of these aesthetics as much as being colonial is not a sufficient condition for their inauthenticity. Taking seriously the two levels of analysis is of special interest to the author of this article because by examining them carefully we can make visible relations with an “Other within” in ways that are left out by the binary Western/non-Western, and which therefore invite the examination of relations and negotiations between individuals and communities both locally and globally.

It has been argued that “colonial aesthetics” and particularly colonial literary work ought to be regarded as organized chronologically. Fanon, for instance, describes three phases: “In the first phase, the native intellectual gives proof that he has assimilated the culture of the occupying power. This is the period of unqualified assimilation.... In the second phase we find the native is disturbed; he decides to remember what he is.... Finally in the third phase, which is called the fighting phase, the native, after having tried to lose himself in the people and with the people, will on the contrary shake the people.” [\[8\]](#) [\[#N8\]](#)

This position is not atypical. In fact, as Welleck and Warren have argued, most histories of literature have arranged literary works “in more or less chronological order.” [\[9\]](#) [\[#N9\]](#) Applied to colonial literature and in particular to Caribbean literature, such fixed literary phases produce a periodization determined by ideologies where authenticity and commitment are necessarily associated with national aesthetics and the postcolonial era, while mimicking and assimilation are related to colonial time. On this reading colonial aesthetics—including literary works such as Damas’s “Hiccup” cited at the beginning of this section—is articulated in reaction to racism and to racial relationships under colonial rule, and is regarded as a historical period that will—immediately or ultimately—be followed by a period of authentic national or postcolonial aesthetics necessarily exempt of racism. It is my contention that such periodicity does not account for the various and complex relationships between individuals and communities or with the variety of configurations of power. Taking the various forms of negotiations with and resistance to the norms of Western aesthetics seriously, I argue that colonial aesthetics needs not be regarded as necessarily disingenuous and that authentic national and postcolonial aesthetics not only are not immune of racism but also are often racialized.

As Michael Dash pointed out in the case of modern literary history “Such rigorously applied periods do not take into account the possibility of simultaneity, coexistence or crosscurrents that indicate that the individual imagination cannot be fixed in terms of a neat diachronic model. For instance, it is not all that difficult to demonstrate that authenticity can be a calculated strategy, that apparent imitateness can conceal a deep concern with genuine creativity or that commitment and preciosity can sometimes be found together.” [\[10\]](#) [\[#N10\]](#)

To apply a strict model of history composed of successive periods manifesting some progress of reason in aesthetics is to ignore the possibility of taking steps back and simply to discount the possibility for individuals to manifest disagreement with the supposed project of each period. Opposed currents coexist in a given period. For instance, the colonial period can coincide with both “colonial aesthetics”—characterized by apparent mimicking—and “postcolonial aesthetics” defined by commitments to authenticity and genuine creativity. In my view Damas’s “Hiccup” certainly qualifies as “postcolonial aesthetics” to the extent that Damas was committed to authenticity and that he demonstrated genuine creativity. Likewise it seems unreasonable to consider that a postcolonial period cannot exhibit both postcolonial aesthetics and colonial aesthetics given the definitions described above. In addition, I argue that “apparent imitateness” can be a form of resistance to norms of (Western) aesthetics, that imitateness can be a tool to more complex ends, and that ‘authenticity’ can be a form of negotiation. As a result, references to strict periodicity can be misleading.

“Colonial aesthetics” [11] [#N11] is at the intersection of aesthetic, social, political, and racial concerns and in that respect requires further analysis. It is important to distinguish between colonialist aesthetics and colonial aesthetics given the politics of domination, exploitation, and disenfranchisement involved in colonialism and despite the occasional commonality of space and time. Colonialist aesthetics is the aesthetics that promotes colonialism while colonial aesthetics encompasses aesthetics produced under colonial rule both by the colonizers and by the colonized. While it is possible to consider both colonized and colonizer as “colonial subjects,” [12] [#N12] it remains essential to insist on the power dynamics between them. It is crucial to study the links between colonialist and colonial aesthetics to the extent that such relationships inform the validity and/or invalidity of representations and meanings attached to non-Western aesthetics. I will return to this point at the end of this section.

Although my inquiry in this paper is limited to colonial aesthetics it is not futile to recall the function of racial difference in colonialist aesthetics. I side on that issue with JanMohamed who argued a propos colonialist literature that

We can better understand colonialist discourse ... through an analysis that maps its ideological function in relation to actual imperialist practices. Such an examination reveals that any evident ‘ambivalence’ is in fact a product of deliberate, if at times subconscious, imperialist duplicity, operating very efficiently through the economy of its central trope, the Manichean allegory. This economy in turn, is based on a transformation of racial difference into moral and even metaphysical difference. [13] [#N13]

Here JanMohamed emphasizes how important it is to focus on the political context and the centrality of the Manichean allegory in any attempt to critically assess colonialist literature. JanMohamed rejects Homi Bhabha’s concepts of an “ambivalence of colonial discourse” and of the “unity of the colonial subject.” He finds these experiences “inadequately problematized” and insists on the need to study colonialist discourse in light of the relation between colonized and colonizer determined by a “Manichean struggle,” or what Fanon called a “mutual frame of mind [in which] both protagonists begin the struggle.” [14] [#N14] To recognize this Manichean struggle is to recognize the colonial world as a divided world where there is no neutral standpoint since every position is affected in some ways by the colonial system. The colonial order imposes binary, dualist thinking, and I want to emphasize here that Fanon did appreciate the centrality of this Manicheism, even if he should not, in my view, be regarded as a Manichean philosopher . [15] [#N15]

For JanMohamed, this relation between colonized and colonizer cannot be conceptualized as if it happens in a vacuum because it is determined by the political context. According to him, if there is ambivalence such ambivalence must be the result of intentional duplicity on the part of the imperial power. This position is far from Bhabha’s argument according to which “[c]olonial mimicry is the desire for a reformed, recognizable Other, *as a subject of a difference that is almost the same but not quite*. Which is to say that the discourse of mimicry is constructed around an ambivalence.” [16] [#N16] Indeed, for Bhabha, “[m]imicry conceals no presence or identity behind its mask: it is not what Césaire describes as “colonization-thingification” [17] [#N17] behind which there stands the essence of the *présence Africaine*. The *menace* of mimicry is its *double* vision, which in disclosing the ambivalence of colonial discourse also disrupts authority.” [18] [#N18] I would not argue against the ‘ambivalence’ of colonial discourse but I side with JanMohamed that such ambivalence must be understood in relation to the political context and its corollary racial difference.

Taking actual aesthetic practices and politics of culture seriously in relation to the ideological function of colonial and postcolonial practices can significantly improve our understanding of aesthetics in general and of the relations between Western and non-Western aesthetics in particular. The “Manichean allegory” is a useful tool; it

is a prism through which racial difference has been validated and interpreted. Fanon and Memmi, among others, used it to symbolize the colonial experience. Fanon argues that the colonial world is “[a] world compartmentalized, Manichean and petrified, a world of statues....A world cocksure of itself, crushing with its stoniness the backbones of those scarred by the whip.” [19] [#N19] Albert Memmi emphasizes that colonialism creates a dualism between the colonized and the colonizer where understanding the parts becomes a necessary condition of understanding the whole. [20] [#N20] But I think it is important to also emphasize that this allegory has its limits; it cannot account for the variety of possible relations between the two ‘opposites’ or the diversity of positions on the part of colonized subjects forced to reinvent their positions.

In my view, Memmi’s portraits of the colonized and of the colonizer, while useful, do not account for this diversity and are not sufficient to think about resistance, ambiguity, or multiplicity on the part of the colonized. Agency and creativity under oppression are not central to Memmi’s analysis and his dualism does not require thinking the possible variations of the roles or the influence of other factors on the two opposites. It is my contention that thinking these variants is a necessary condition for understanding the colonized, the colonizer, and their various encounters and that race plays an important role in defining what counts as a significant variant and what does not.

Focusing on race within the web of relations between colonial, postcolonial, and Western aesthetics, I will now examine the idea of indigenous non-Western aesthetics in relation to Western aesthetics and analyze the value of discussing European colonial aesthetics of race in relation to racialized postcolonial aesthetics. Here I must repeat that I depart from the idea of a unity of the colonial subject and recognize the diversity within non-Western aesthetics as well as the diversity of forms of colonization. However, I would argue that despite this diversity, a case can be made for an analysis of the relationships between Western and non-Western aesthetics that integrates an assessment of the concept of race.

Non-Western aesthetics can be regarded as a ‘colonial invention’ and it can be argued, as Blocker does, that “[b]ecause of the history of European military, scientific and economic domination of the world since the seventeenth century, *it has been primarily Europeans who initiated the discussion using their intellectual framework to analyze and judge non-Western thought systems.*” [21] [#N21] But the ontological question has been progressively replaced by a pragmatic one and the question is no longer whether or not “non-Western aesthetics” exists—or even what such an object would be if it was to exist—but whether or not it is desirable to create it. Blocker, for instance, pointed out that “it is not so much a matter of fact whether there are or not non-Western aesthetics as it is a pragmatic decision whether such a thing is desirable and worth constructing.” So to say that “non-Western aesthetics” exists is not so much to recognize that it is present and to describe it but to express a choice and to posit such choice as desirable. This pragmatist position, in my view, is also an evaluative statement. It is a statement about what ought to be in the light of what one decides is desirable for society. And the questions of *who* decides, *why* and *how* one decides are overlooked for the benefit of the question of what is desirable for society—the only question that seems to deserve consideration.

It is helpful to note that such a pragmatist concern has been voiced in critical race theory. For instance, in the context of the epistemologies of ignorance, Harvey Cormier argues that given that all truths are creations of human beings attempting to satisfy their desires, instead of focusing on the dichotomy between racist reality and racist beliefs, critical theorists should focus on the struggle to achieve an anti-racist society positing that such a society is desirable and worth constructing. [22] [#N22] By the same token, it can be argued that in a postcolonial, multicultural world, non-Western postcolonial aesthetics is desirable. But what makes a postcolonial multicultural world a world of intrinsic value? Would the mere construction of non-Western aesthetics be desirable? Would any construction be acceptable? What would the parameters be and who would decide what they would be? Wouldn’t such construction allow for the reproduction of the unsatisfactory Manichean allegory? It seems that the pragmatist approach would satisfy the justification of the construction of non-Western aesthetics but would leave unresolved the question of the nature of the construction itself. Indeed, it does not



follow from the decision that the construction of the object “non-Western aesthetics” is desirable that there will be agreement on or even clear understanding of what that object is to be, or what the best construction would be.

As I mentioned earlier, non-Western aesthetics as a colonial invention was informed by a racist order that made non-Western aesthetics the Other of Western aesthetics, that is, what (Western) aesthetics was not. The notion of “non-Western” suggested an essentialist—racialist if not racist—division of the world population and a significant difference, if not a necessary hierarchy between Western and non-Western aesthetics. This is one reason why the translation from one framework to another has been regarded as remarkably difficult. As Blocker noted,

This [‘any discussion of non-Western aesthetics initiated from within Western aesthetics’] is therefore basically a problem of translation, but what we might call ‘deep translation,’ where we are not just looking for equivalences (or near equivalences) among words of different languages for the same concept, but where it is not at all clear that there is a shared concept in the first place. [23]

[#N23]

In his account, the two entities are so fundamentally different that it becomes difficult to find correspondences between them given the lack of a shared concept, and nothing seems to be able to reconcile two inherently different systems of beliefs or of truth creation. If that is the case then it seems difficult to make any empirical statement about non-Western aesthetics; it will be arduous to state matters of facts about non-Western aesthetics given the problem of deep translation. And so we are left with the only possibility of making assertions of value pertaining to the desirability of non-Western aesthetics to postcolonial multicultural societies. But such a construction does not guarantee a nonracist, nonessentialist division of the world and certainly does not attempt to truly connect Western and non-Western aesthetics, given the assumed incommunicability. I see a significant difficulty associated with the pragmatic answer. On this view, the statement about non-Western aesthetics will become nothing but an evaluative statement which in turn depends on an empirical statement about the state of most societies in the world today, a statement that describes them as postcolonial and multicultural. But how postcolonial and multicultural our societies are today is not only a matter of reality and truth of existence—today’s societies are societies where multiculturalism and postcolonialism obtain—it is also a matter of choice—the decision to adhere to the value of such society and make it a goal of various policies. As a result, the evaluative claim about non-Western aesthetics may ultimately appear as a hybrid assertion of values and facts. Ultimately, despite the difficulty of “deep translation” and the strong justification for the construction of non-Western aesthetics, and perhaps because of the difficulties associated with ‘inventing’ non-Western aesthetics, attempts at translating are still very much in order.

Blocker emphasizes that translating non-Western aesthetic frameworks presents advantages and inconveniences:

On the plus side, these thought systems [of non-Western aesthetics] are able to enter, as they otherwise could not, the mainstream of international aesthetics discussion. On the negative side, much of the integrity of the original thought may be lost. For such a translation to succeed it must clearly be a cooperative effort among Western-trained and non-Western scholars. Nonetheless, insofar as it is Western scholars who initiate the discussion and into whose system non-Western thought is translated, it remains a Western construction and invention. [24] [#N24]

I take issue with the idea that the result of this discussion is yet another Western invention. It certainly could be the case, but I would disagree that it is. Perhaps the difficulty resides in the idea of translation itself. Blocker describes a process of rendering contents from one thought system to another system through some rule of replacement. But it seems to me that one can imagine a different result if the process is a process of expressing

rather than translating and if it involves understanding. When there may be loss in translation it is very likely that gain will come from understanding. I am not arguing that this “understanding” will necessarily be complete or that the expression of such understanding will necessarily be free of misinterpretations but at least it requires a discussion of the narrativity of meaning and a consideration of power dynamics—power to acknowledge, and to give or to limit access to a given non-Western aesthetics within international discussions. In the end, the object may appear foreign to a given framework but may very well be understandable; it could induce changes in both systems of thought but this requires a commitment to value pluralism. [25][#N25] In Blocker’s account, gains and losses are regarded as pertaining to non-Western aesthetics only since they will gain access to the “mainstream of international aesthetics” and may lose “integrity.”

But the question of what is there for Western aesthetics to gain and to lose remains unanswered or even unconsidered and I would argue that as long as this will be the case, what is at issue remains a strict translation decided by Western scholars that does not require cooperative effort. A collective effort even if it concerns a translation requires an exchange leading to some agreement about the validity and correlative authority of the result. Blocker’s translation does not suggest any attempt at agreeing on the terms of the translation, or any discussion of what the translation would look like. Under such auspices the final product simply restates a hierarchical order where Western scholars decide how to translate non-Western aesthetics thought system and where they risk “los[ing] the integrity of the original thought” while pretend[ing] to open the international aesthetics scene to non-Western aesthetics. I subscribe to Blocker’s idea of a collective effort but I see it as a prospective claim not as a descriptive one, and a fortiori not necessarily realized when Western scholars encounter non-Western aesthetics. A further point that I find troublesome in Blocker’s view is the idea that it is necessarily the Western scholar or Western-trained scholar who will ‘initiate’ the discussion.

I would not claim that it does not often appear that way—as in the case of Césaire and Breton that I shall discuss in the next section—but I want to examine and discuss what qualifies as initiation. I must say that in my view the context of the discussion is as important as (if not more important than) the identity of the initiator. Why is the discussion to be framed on a binary model as an encounter between Western and non-Western aesthetics? Why can’t we think of a discussion that would recognize pluralism in aesthetics and would include the possibility of a discussion among types of non-Western aesthetics? Considering the diversity of non-Western aesthetics (Native Indian, Indian, African-American, Caribbean, African and so on) how can the equality of treatment among translations and among discussions be insured? It may well be that the invention of non-Western aesthetics is desirable in multicultural societies but it is my contention that such an invention is far from a sufficient condition for a real equality of treatment. These inventions can undoubtedly be racialized, if not racist, and will not guarantee any movement toward nonracist societies. The pragmatist goal discussed earlier is not satisfactory unless normative concerns are seriously considered. It is required that the invention becomes more than just another Western invention; that non-Western frameworks contribute to redefining Western aesthetics and aesthetics in general; that Western aesthetics be also an object of translation by others, that Western aesthetics be also conceived as another.

I will now turn to examining the relations between Césaire’s Negritude—through some of his writings and interviews—and Surrealist aesthetics—through Breton’s work—as an example of the interplay of race and Western/non-Western aesthetics. In my view, the exchange between the two men is an attempt at understanding what they have in common once they both recognize a common ground, and does not simply result in another Western invention.

### **3. A Case Study: Césaire’s Negritude and Surrealist Aesthetics**

“My Negritude is not a stone, its deafness dashed against



the clamor of the day  
 my Negritude is not an opaque spot of dead water  
 on the dead eye of the earth  
 my Negritude is neither a tower nor a cathedral  
 it plunges into the red flesh of the soil  
 it plunges into the ardent flesh of the sky  
 it pierces opaque prostration with its upright patience”  
 Aimé Césaire, *Notebook of a Return to the Native Land*

I must first explain why I single out Césaire and Breton when both men belong to movements that other members contributed to define. Indeed Negritude was a collective movement that included Léon-Gontran Damas and Léopold Sédar Senghor and Surrealism was a collective enterprise that included, among others, Louis Aragon, Paul Eluard, Antonin Artaud, Joan Miro, and Salvador Dali. I believe that there are several forms of Negritude. Both Damas’s negritude and Senghor’s negritude undoubtedly present their own sets of particularities and deserve analysis. Nevertheless I limit my investigation here to Césaire because I seek to carefully examine both the literary encounter between Negritude and Surrealism and the encounters between Césaire and Breton as colonial subjects. [26][#N26] I am interested in surrealism as an aesthetic-political movement—as explicitly described by Breton—a movement that emphasizes the critical and imaginative powers of consciousness.

Breton provided a brief report of his very first encounter with Césaire. [27][#N27] In 1941, on his way to New York to escape the Vichy regime in France, Breton made a stop in Martinique and discovered, by accident, a copy of the first issue of the journal *Tropiques* that Césaire, his wife Suzanne, and René Ménil, had just launched. Immediately impressed by the writings he asked to meet with the author and met Césaire the following morning. Obviously Breton solicited the meeting with Césaire so it could easily be argued that he initiated the discussion. As obvious as this may seem, I will defend the position that the discussion started with Césaire’s writings capturing Breton’s attention. In other words, in my view, the discussion starts with the encounter with a thought-provoking object. Césaire did not conceive of this encounter as initiated by Breton. Asked in 1969 to describe his encounter with Breton and to explain whether or not he thought he was then unwittingly surrealist, Césaire replied: “I knew very little about surrealism but I must say that my research was leading to the same direction and when I met Breton—and surrealism, it was not so much a discovery for me, it was more of a justification. There was a complete convergence between the surrealist research and mine; in other words it confirmed me and made me bolder.” [28][#N28] I think that what Césaire meant was that it was not a discovery in the sense that he was not obtaining knowledge of surrealism for the first time, although he knew very little about it. This encounter was a justification to the extent that Césaire was shown to be right in that he was presented with additional reasons to proceed as he was already doing. It is reasonable to believe that for Breton it was not a discovery either and that it was also some type of justification or recognition that prompted him to meet with Césaire.

For Césaire this encounter was a process of coming together from different origins. In another interview he emphasized that for him Surrealism was more a technique than anything else. Identity was the focus of his inquiry since, as he put it, he was incessantly seeking the “fundamental Negro.” His concern with Africa and what he called his “Negro being” was never defeated by his interest in Surrealism. Therefore, in my view, Césaire was never a disciple of surrealism and there was no “period of discipleship” even in the strictest sense elaborated by Daniel Scott who discusses the encounter. [29][#N29] Césaire was fascinated by Breton’s personality but he saw a danger in the apparent universalism of Surrealism and considered it in relation to his identity—what he sometimes called his “particularism.” As a result, he feared becoming a disciple [30][#N30] and consented to use

surrealism as a weapon only to remain true to negritude. The following quotation emphasizes this point. “And then there was my encounter with Breton and the crush. *But keep in mind that I owe my first true revelation to Senghor. He brought me a continent, Africa. It was fantastic since for an Antillean Africa had always been occulted.*” [31][#N31] Breton, however, recognized in Césaire a “great Black poet” and regarded the notebook as “the biggest lyrical monument” of his time. [32][#N32] He found it necessary to insist both on Césaire’s blackness and on his humanity. “And it is a Black who guides us today into the unexplored...And it is a Black who is not only a Black but all men, who expresses all interrogations, all distresses, all hopes and all ecstasies and who will become more and more who I regard as the prototype of humanity.” [33][#N33]

It seems obvious that racial considerations were part of the encounter, given both Breton’s categorization of Césaire as a “great Black poet” and Césaire’s affirmed commitment to negritude and the latter’s determination to make surrealism only a tool at its service. But how exactly does race play a role in this encounter and in the recognition that follows? Should Césaire’s commitment to negritude be regarded as a commitment to himself, to his culture or to his race? Lastly, what does this encounter tell us about the links between aesthetics and otherness and how does race matter in rethinking these links?

Surely it can be argued that the compliment “a great Black poet” echoes the racial prejudice of the time, which would make Breton determined by his epoch. But I argue that there is more to it. Not only is Césaire described as a Black poet but he is categorized as a “guide to the unexplored”; he is therefore regarded as a depository who has the power to initiate others by leading the way. Breton also says that this particular Black man exemplifies all men and expresses their hopes and anxieties. In Breton’s view Césaire’s particularism is compatible with universality to the point that he could become a prototype of humanity, someone who exhibits the essential features of what humanity is becoming. Breton creates connections between particularism and universalism, between Césaire’s racial identity and his poetry, between Negritude and Surrealist aesthetics seen as universal. Breton is not simply attempting to translate one framework into the other; he expresses his understanding of Césaire’s aesthetics in relation to Surrealism. The frameworks of Negritude and Surrealism become related to each other. I do not intend to describe an idealization here; certainly Breton’s reading of Césaire’s work is determined by what he regards as universal, namely, Western aesthetics in general and surrealism in particular. However, while he is asserting meaning from his Western location and while part of Césaire’s original thought may be misunderstood and lost—with the possibility of being recaptured later, surrealism does not remain untouched.

Is this understanding (of surrealism from a negritude perspective and of negritude from a surrealist perspective) a mere result of the encounter or does it require intent on Breton’s part? If we were to conclude that there must be intent on Breton’s part—and not on Césaire’s part—we may have to conclude that indeed the Western aesthetics scholar/artist, in this case Breton, is the initiator of the discussion. Trying to determine Breton’s intent with certainty is likely to be a vain attempt but one can certainly examine the broader project of Surrealist aesthetics to find out the possible links between Surrealism and otherness and illuminate how this relation is exemplified by Breton’s encounter with Césaire while unquestionably shaped by race.

According to Scott, the underlining project of Surrealism is marked by the idea of conquest. He argues that:

As part of the dominating European ideology of racial difference and cultural superiority derived from the era of imperialism expansion and anthropological/archaeological inquiry, surrealism must be examined for its own collusion in the colonial enterprise. In fact, it practices—in its limitation and celebration of Other—an aesthetics founded on European constructions of the primitive and the marvelous which place the movement in a contradictory position vis-à-vis the Other it so often celebrated.” [34][#N34]

On this reading, Surrealism ought to be examined within the larger colonial project. If Scott is right, the encounter between Césaire and Breton can and perhaps must be regarded as a colonial encounter. The encounter between the founder of surrealism and Césaire's writings would then be an encounter of Western aesthetics encountering with otherness. In my view there are other forces mediated by race that need to be considered, and with this in mind I will examine Scott's claims carefully.

Scott argues first that "the relationship between Césaire and Breton can be considered as a product of the dominating European ideology of cultural acquisition and second that the acquisitiveness can precipitate a process of inspiration, imitation, rejection, and innovation that enriches Surrealism, its contexts, and postcolonial writings since Césaire." [35] [N35] I will argue that the first claim is more complex than it appears if the function of race is taken as seriously as it should be, and that the second is challenged when race is regarded as a key element of this relationship.

Why is the encounter a *product* of the "dominating European ideology of cultural acquisition" and how much of a *product* is it? Surely the encounter between Césaire and Breton can be regarded as made possible by the set of conditions put in place by Western colonialism; indeed in 1941 the status of Martinique was unequivocally that of a French colony. [36] [N36] By the same token, there is little controversy as to whether or not this colonial structure was justified by a "dominating European ideology." However, it is more difficult to make this dominating ideology or the idea of a *de facto* colonial subject a sufficient condition for not only the encounter but also the discussion between Césaire and Breton. It does not follow from the existence of a dominating European ideology that the encounter ought to be only a product of this ideology. In my view the encounter is complicated by Césaire's own strategy and the Manichean prism cannot satisfactorily account for it. It is precisely the intricacy of the encounter that makes possible the "inspiration, imitation, rejection and innovation" mentioned by Scott that "enriches [both] Surrealism and postcolonial writings since Césaire."

As Breton stated in the manifestoes, Surrealism seeks to arrive at a "mental vantage-point from which life and death, the real and the imaginary, past and future, communicable and incommunicable, high and low, will no longer be perceived as contradictions." [37] [N37] One can see why this approach would be appealing to Césaire whose objective was to escape from the exclusionary nature of Western thought and Western reason and to reconcile with African culture. In this sense Césaire found confirmation—rather than revelation—in Surrealism, which proposes a framework where exclusive binaries are questioned and where the reign of the Western rational logic is not considered the only truth. Surrealism could be a *tool* for Césaire. But Césaire did not become a disciple, and I disagree with Scott here. Although Césaire regarded Surrealism as a liberating factor he was not simply a follower. There was perhaps something fascinating to him about identifying common references between Surrealist thinking and his own thinking and to find what he regarded as a significant tool to challenge the French language—the language that in his experience was used to exclude other discourses and experiences and that he will use to make these experiences visible—but at no point did Césaire depart from his own project.

Encountering Surrealism was for Césaire the confirmation that Western rationalism could be and needed to be scrutinized; it was not the discovery of potential reasons for a revolt against Western rationalism. And although Scott is right to point out that Césaire's Negritude and Breton's Surrealism conceived of the possibilities of moving beyond the binaries from very different standpoints it is important to remember that this is precisely what the idea of convergence implies. To emphasize the idea of convergence is not to deny that the surrealist idea of support for oppressed and primitive people was compatible with the idea of conquest and could provide a justification for defining these people as eminently foreign and for dominating them by imposing structures of liberation on them. But if Surrealism does not account for any agency on the part of the colonized it does not follow that the colonized cannot manifest such agency.

I want to suggest that the fact that the encounter generates changes for both Césaire and Breton is a sign that this encounter cannot be limited to an act of conquest. There was indeed gain on both sides but these gains were not

victories per se in the sense that neither gained mastery over the other. Negritude remains different from Surrealism and vice versa, while both gained from the encounter and as a result changed. There is for Césaire the recognition of a tool that he can use to his own purpose and for Breton the recognition of something familiar and yet not the same. The encounter remains an encounter with the Other and it is mediated by race in the context of colonial, imperialist, and racial ideology. I want to suggest that encountering is not limited to meeting the Other as an adversary. It can also capture an act of coming together, an act of converging, and it is of special interest to consider this possibility in the context of colonialism. Indeed encountering the Other is a complex moment that makes invention possible along with mimicking and rejection. Certainly part of the process must be considered in relation to the “European ideology of cultural acquisition,” but the multiple aspects of the process including mimicry, rejection, and invention do not result only from unilateral “acquisitiveness,” but also from exchange and from a collective effort to understand and this is why Scott’s second claim can be challenged.

Finally, how does race help rethink the links between aesthetics and otherness? In my view, the current order of international aesthetics discussions is best understood if regarded as a racial order in a sense close to what María Lugones called “racial state.” [\[38\]\[#N38\]](#) According to Lugones, in the “racial state” no subject escapes the racial ideologies and there exist two different kinds of subjects—unmarked and marked racial subjects—namely “oppressed” and “oppressors.” However, as Lugones insists, the oppressed are not simply victims, there is always agency and resistance on the part of the racially marked subjects:

My sense is that one of the factors that makes oppression inescapable in many theories that portray oppression as inescapable is the inability to form liberatory syllogism in the world of the oppressor given the logic of oppression. ... So the connection between the practical syllogism, ontological plurality, and liberatory oppression theory resides in the fact that the oppressed know themselves in realities in which they are able to form intentions that are not among the alternatives that are possible in the world in which they are brutalized and oppressed.” [\[39\]\[#N39\]](#)

Lugones rightly emphasizes the idea of a norm, of a default position—in this case whiteness—which corresponds with the unmarked category, the non-racial category. In this reading, race is usually only specified when it is nonwhite although it is not necessarily named as such. Race operates within a system of binary oppositions and ideas about race determine hierarchies within this structure.

As the lover of purity, the impartial reasoner is outside history, outside culture. He occupies the privileged vantage point with others like him, all characterized by the ‘possession’ of reason. All occupants of this vantage point are homogeneous in their ability to comprehend and communicate. So ‘culture’ which marks radical differences in conceptions of people and things, cannot be something they have. They are instead ‘postcultural’ or ‘culturally transparent.’ [\[40\]\[#N40\]](#)

As the “racial state” classifies people according to physical characteristics, racial and racialized aesthetics classify art and artistic conceptions according to cultural characteristics. Indeed, to believe that non-Western aesthetic thought and frameworks are radically different—so different that it is a matter of “deep translation”—or that translation is unattainable, is to mark other aesthetics as culturally different while having Western aesthetics escape the mark of culture. These classifications are not overtly associated with race but I believe that they are about race.

Likewise the binary between Western and non-Western aesthetics expresses a hierarchy and distinguishes between peoples and between cultures on the basis of racial signifiers. Here the default position is “Western.” It is the unmarked category; aesthetics is Western aesthetics and vice versa, and the qualifier is added mainly to

specify what is non-Western, what requires translation to be accessible. The hierarchy within international aesthetics discussion is determined by race but is not explicitly formulated in such terms.

So whether the crucial danger is the unawareness of one's position within the racial state, as Lugones argues, or the unawareness of forms of racism, as Gloria Yamato claims, [\[41\]](#) everyone is a subject within the structure of the racial state. We must identify the pretension to universality, comprehended as an unmarked racial category, as precisely a sign of the racial state if we are to work against the construction of racial inequalities.

Aesthetic concepts are created along with racial constructions. These concepts ultimately exclude works of art and conceptions of aesthetics that do not fit Western norms or do not seem to be possibly translated into such norms, which are defined arbitrarily but are regarded as natural. On my reading, the failure to recognize the pervasiveness of racial categories in aesthetics and in other disciplines is a main obstacle to the construction of any form of relationality. How a certain discourse on cosmopolitanism can produce such unawareness and amount to a failure to recognize the ordinariness of racial(ized) aesthetic categories is what I shall now examine.

## 4. Aesthetics, Cosmopolitanism, Relationality: Why Does Race Still Matter?

Thought of the Other is the moral generosity disposing me to accept the principle of alterity..., but [it] can dwell within me...without 'prizing me open,' without changing me within myself. As an ethical principle, it is enough that I not violate it.

The other of Thought is precisely this altering. Then I have to act [and] change my thought...I change, and I exchange. This is an aesthetics of turbulence whose corresponding ethics is not provided in advance.

Edouard Glissant, *Poetics*, 154-55

In what follows I seek to show that today's global context often referred to as "transnational" or "cosmopolitan" is not inconsistent with the pervasiveness of racial categories in politics of culture. I will then argue that a relational order that would allow for unprejudiced politics of culture and aesthetics is still to be invented and that rethinking aesthetics through race is a critical step towards this achievement.

The term 'cosmopolitanism' has come to appear more satisfactory than the term globalization which refers primarily to marketing strategies. Laudatory analysis of globalization has been challenged on the basis of evidence of extreme forms of inequalities generated by processes of globalization. [\[42\]](#) Cosmopolitanism, to the contrary, has been regarded as encompassing obligations to strangers—on the basis of a shared world citizenship—and a genuine interest in practices and beliefs that have significance to them. [\[43\]](#) But cosmopolitanism is not immune to hierarchy or inequality. The absence of state boundaries can also create privileges. Indeed, feminist scholarship has emphasized some of the possible consequences of the absence of boundaries, such as a lack of duty, which creates power, generates an ability to see or not see, to recognize or not to recognize, and moreover, to see and not be seen [\[44\]](#) or, I would add, to recognize and not have to be recognized. Another questionable aspect of cosmopolitanism is that it is not exempt from marketing concerns; capital itself can become more and more cosmopolitan. [\[45\]](#) In that respect it seems fair to say that "there is a sense in which cosmopolitanism is the name not of a solution but of a challenge." [\[46\]](#)

The moral credentials of cosmopolitanism have been rightly questioned and it is critical to clarify current configurations of power and to carefully examine the motivations and consequences of its implicit classification of populations. States have not become irrelevant and nation-states along with multicultural states continue to



define and regulate populations, practices, and beliefs. National standards of aesthetics and international aesthetic discussions constitute examples of how populations, aesthetic practices, and beliefs can be classified and consequently included or excluded. When classified as “impossible to translate” or as “non-Western aesthetics translated,” the aesthetics that are not Western or not Westernized are de facto excluded from international discussion and this exclusion varies in degrees. In a cosmopolitan and multicultural world it seems undoubtedly desirable to have exchanges among various aesthetic frameworks and to regard them as equal. But this is far from everyday practices and the irony is that cosmopolitanism can contribute to the pervasiveness of racialized categories by promoting the false idea of genuine interest in strangers’ beliefs and conditions.

Even if we resist the reduction of cosmopolitanism to the privilege of a person who is in a position to claim to be a “citizen of the world’ by virtue of independent means, high-tech tastes, and globe-trotting ability,” [47] [N47] we still have to acknowledge that the sense of being a citizen of the world does not necessarily translate into a strong sense of obligations towards strangers or a genuine interest in their practices and beliefs. Despite its promises, the era of cosmopolitanism remains an era of privilege, exclusion, and racialization of subjects. In my view, at the center of cosmopolitanism resides the question of the location of power and privilege, and of the power to define, to represent and regulate others/strangers along with their practices and beliefs. The idea that the power of national boundaries is declining should not hide the reaffirmation of boundaries determined by membership that goes beyond the nation and marks differences such as colonialism and imperialism. On that reading the world today is a place where most citizens have to cross “colonial and imperial differences” to use Mignolo’s phrase. [48] [N48] Colonial and imperial differences constitute boundaries that reveal that strangers’ beliefs and practices are not necessarily taken seriously and that obligations are not extended to all strangers equally which make relationality or any form of dialogic bond extremely difficult, if not impossible. The world of aesthetics is not immune to these boundaries symbolizing difference and in aesthetics as elsewhere there is always the potential for difference to become a proxy for inequality.

A main objection to my view would be that—as a body of scholarship emphasizes— there are ways in which individuals and communities challenge and successfully weaken the hegemony of the global political economy and the cultural marketplace. On that account individuals are, or can be, actors in global processes that will ultimately benefit them. I would respond that while it is true that individuals, families, and communities attempt to create new boundaries for themselves in the contemporary era and sometimes succeed, it is also true that older parameters through which difference has been characterized resurface to reactivate racial and ethnic hierarchies. Hierarchies of power and knowledge certainly change over time, but they remain influenced by the legacy of earlier periods.

Despite cosmopolitan optimism in the present world, relations of authority continue to be defined along racial lines that still determine the construction of signifier and signified. As I stated earlier, transnationalism is about geopolitical power differentials where race, along with gender and class, function as powerful categories. The world of aesthetics does not escape the risks associated with the praise of cosmopolitanism, namely a hidden lack of responsibility, a lack of obligations towards strangers, a lack of genuine interest in strangers’ practices and beliefs, and exclusions on the basis of racialized colonial and imperial differences, or what is perceived as such. A dialogue is much needed and it requires relationality or reciprocal exchange over and above translation.

Before explaining what I mean by relationality and why I think it is desirable, I need to exemplify how the world of aesthetics is affected by racialized differences. In the second section of this paper I showed how Breton’s surrealism in its relation with Césaire’s negritude was an example of a colonial encounter that manifested more than the expected dualism Western-non-Western, namely a discussion and a strategy of resistance on Césaire’s part. I now want to turn more generally to the discussion of Black/African/Africana aesthetics.

Examining key aesthetic concepts in Yoruba culture, Rowland Abiodun argues:



The study of African art having begun within the discipline of anthropology, inherited some pertinent and vexing questions, among which is the false assumption that Western scholars can fully understand and interpret the cultures of other peoples by using only Western cultural notions, values and standards—a claim that cannot be divorced from Western imperialistic involvement in Africa. [\[49\]](#) [\[#N49\]](#)

However, the demarcation line between what ought to be used to interpret and understand is far from being easy to draw and Abiodun insists here on historicism. He notes that: “While it may have been useful to utilize only Western theoretical paradigms in the study of African art history and aesthetics early in the twentieth century, it has now become imperative to search carefully within the African cultures in which the art forms originate, and to use internally derived conceptual frameworks in any critical discourse on African Art.” In other words, using a Western theoretical framework may have been a lesser evil, and Abiodun suggests that it is now time to refer to an authentic African conceptual framework. He calls for a new methodology in the study of African aesthetics or of the aesthetics of African art. As he puts it:

[t]he recognition of how important African languages and literatures are to the understanding of African Art will lead to a reconsideration of a number of ‘closed’ issues, theoretical frameworks, and artistic concepts; a redefinition of much terminology; and a reappraisal of the present style and techniques of displaying African art objects in museums and exhibition halls. [\[50\]](#) [\[#N50\]](#)

The difficulty here again seems to reside in the translation of such a theoretical stance into practice and in the translation of one conceptual framework into another. But perhaps translation can’t be satisfying and is not required; perhaps relationality is more satisfying to the extent that it requires reciprocal understanding or at least recognition of different understandings and the possibility of exchanges on the construction of meanings. Relationality would make it possible to transcend inequality, hierarchy, and cultural imperialism, to the extent that it allows multiplicity. But relationality needs first to be regarded as possible. This imperative demands that we rethink the dichotomies, question power and privilege, analyze dualism to promote what is at the intersection of these various worlds, as well as what is far from the point of contact or point of convergence. A frontier or a boundary is obviously what separates, what indicates the limits of a territory; it is a line of division between opposites or different things but it is also the zone where two different entities meet. As a result, the demarcation both affirms the difference and manifests the point of encounter. In aesthetics this demarcation between Western aesthetics and non-Western aesthetics—on the basis of arbitrary norms of aesthetics standards regarded as universal—has been used to reinforce the frontier between what have been regarded as two necessary opposites. As Warren D’Azevedo puts it: “The apparent absence of these factors [i.e., formal aesthetic standards], as well as the lack of clearly explicated concepts equivalent to *art* or *aesthetics* in most non-Western cultures, has caused us to suspect that the expression of artistry may be somehow fundamentally different from our own.” [\[51\]](#) [\[#N51\]](#)

Here again the focus is on the ability to translate, not so much to communicate, to concentrate on making an object that is judged to be fundamentally different somehow recognizable by one’s own framework and to create a possible fit in accordance with one’s own categories and standards. As I stated earlier, the focus on translation is misleading, as is the idea of translation. What matters is the possibility of expression and communication, of exchanging ideas about aesthetics that maybe different. But this attitude requires transcending the barriers of colonialism and imperialism. It requires that “those who possess both power and the categorical eye,” to use Lugones’s phrase, [\[52\]](#) [\[#N52\]](#) take note that various forms of resistance are at play, and that the Manichean allegory might no longer be very useful. Lugones’s *mestizaje* as a metaphor for impurity and resistance is very helpful in understanding the multiplicity of social beings. The concept of *mestizaje* permits the identification of norms that pretend to be universal by attempting to *separate in pure parts* and it ultimately makes classifications

impossible. Lugones writes: “[When I think of mestizaje] ... I think of the attempt at control exercised by those who possess both power and the categorical eye and who attempt to split everything impure, breaking it down into pure elements (as in egg white and egg yolk) for the purpose of control. Control over creativity.” [\[53\] \[#N53\]](#)

While resistance is required precisely because of the power of the “categorical eye,” such resistance can remain unseen by the “categorical eye” precisely because it has the power to decide what must be seen or not. Given the distinction between Western and non-Western aesthetics where Western aesthetics is the unmarked category, to think seriously about an antiracist order is not only to be aware of the forms of racism but also to recognize that the norm is only one of the many possible forms of aesthetics. It has been argued that in a cosmopolitan multicultural world it is desirable to have non-Western aesthetics. I would suggest that it is crucial to stop regarding Western aesthetics as central and other aesthetics as peripheral. It is essential that Western aesthetics looks at itself as another namely the other of non-Western aesthetics.

## 5. Conclusion

Aesthetics, I hope to have shown, would benefit from integrating race as a constant element of analysis at least as long as the desirable antiracist world order has not been realized. Despite the universal pretension of aesthetic standards it remains an open question whether aesthetics as a discipline can encompass a serious examination of the influence of race and an analysis of the application of racial meaning to (foreign) aesthetics practices and beliefs. Care must be taken in differentiating between two different periods and two different strategies of exclusion. The earlier period concerns the aesthetics of race and racism and scholarship has focused on exhibiting or countering scientific racism and racialism. Today, in the era of cosmopolitanism, transnationalism, and new racialism, the task is to establish that a lack of boundaries and recognized differences can also constitute occasions to create and attribute a new racial status to individuals, community, practices, and beliefs. Politics of culture often convert into politics of marginalization and politics of oppression on the basis of difference transformed into inequality and dominance validated by a nonbiological conception of race.

My goal in this essay has therefore been to explore the links between aesthetics and race through the lenses of the accepted distinctions between the Western and non-Western, the colonial and postcolonial, the national and transnational. I have attempted to describe for further reflection the strengths and the weaknesses of a discourse that looks upon non-Western aesthetics as a colonial invention as well as the pragmatist concern attached to the belief that it is indeed desirable in multicultural societies to have and therefore construct non-Western aesthetics. I have also sought to highlight the difficulties of a historicist approach that defines a period where the Western aesthetic framework was useful to understanding non-Western aesthetics as opposed to a time where it is no longer useful. My aim has been to suggest ways in which thinking about race and racialization can help thinking about aesthetics in relation to postcolonial and global concerns.

In my view, the way forward lies in defining aesthetics in a way that progressively includes non-Western aesthetics and in encouraging dialogues between structures rather than divides between Western and non-Western aesthetics. My project is not an ideal one and I believe that tensions and conflicts will necessarily arise. What is expected here is not a total disappearance of relations of authority between worlds of aesthetics but rather a strong recognition of the power dynamics leading to an empowerment of non-Western aesthetics through increasing development of transformative knowledge. And as I argued, I do not believe this to be yet another Western invention. Change will be made possible by the various forms of resistance of non-Western aesthetics and will undoubtedly reveal negotiations between structure and agency. As Frederick Douglass put it “[p]ower concedes nothing without a demand. It never did, and it never will.” [\[54\] \[#N54\]](#)

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## Notes

1. For a definition and discussion of 'racialization' see Michael Omi and Howard Winant, *Racial Formation in The United States: from the 1960's to the 1980's* (New-York: Routledge, 1994). See in particular p. 203: "The concept of racialization signifies the extension of racial meaning to a previously racially unclassified relationship, social practice or group." [\[#N1-pt1\]](#)
2. Léon-Gontran Damas, "Hocquet," [Hiccup] in *Pigments* (Paris, Présence Africaine, 1962). For a translation see *The Negritude Poets, An Anthology of Translations from the French*, ed. and trans. Ellen C. Kennedy (NY: Thunder's Mouth Press, 1989), pp. 45-61. [\[#N2-pt1\]](#)
3. Enrique Dussel, *Philosophy of Liberation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1985), p. 2. [\[#N3-pt1\]](#)
4. Walter D. Mignolo, *The Idea of Latin America* (Malden, MA, Oxford: Blackwell, 2005), p. 43. [\[#N4-pt1\]](#)
5. Gene H. Blocker, "Non-Western Aesthetics as a Colonial Invention," *Journal of Aesthetic Education*, 35.4 (2001), 3-13; ref. on 5. [\[#N5-pt1\]](#)
6. This is the title of a book by Molly Maureen Mahood, *The Colonial Encounter: A Reading of Six Novels* (London: Collins, 1977). [\[#N6-pt1\]](#)
7. Gene H. Blocker, *op. cit.*, p. 3. [\[#N7-pt1\]](#)
8. Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (New York: Grove Press, 2004), pp. 158 and 159. [\[#N8-pt1\]](#)
9. René Welleck, and Austin Warren, *Theory of Literature* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1976), p. 252. For a broader discussion of "space/time borders" see Susan S. Friedman, "Periodizing Modernism; Postcolonial Modernities and the Space/Time Borders of Modernist Studies," *Modernism/Modernity*, volume 13, no. 3, Sept. 2006, pp. 425-443. [\[#N9-pt1\]](#)
10. Michael J. Dash, "The World and The Word: French Caribbean Writing in The Twentieth Century," *Calaloo*, 34 (1988), 112-130; ref. on 114. [\[#N10-pt1\]](#)
11. The focus here is not on the nature of meaning, on how meaning is created/transmitted, or on if and how it is distorted by human understanding, by power or by authority but rather on an understanding of 'colonial aesthetics' that acknowledges the conflicts and difficulties related to the creation and transmission of such meaning given the colonial order. [\[#N11-pt1\]](#)
12. Homi K. Bhabha, "The Other Question—The Stereotype and Colonial Discourse," *Screen*, 24 (1983), 18-36, ref. on 25, 19. [\[#N12-pt1\]](#)
13. Abdul R. JanMohamed, "The Economy of Manichean Allegory: The Function of Racial Difference in Colonialist Literature," *Critical Inquiry*, 12 (Autumn, 1985), 59-87, ref. on 61. See also JanMohamed, *Manichean Aesthetics, The Politics of Literature in Colonial Africa* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1983). [\[#N13-pt1\]](#)
14. Frantz Fanon, *op. cit.*, p. 43. [\[#N14-pt1\]](#)
15. I am well aware of the debate among Fanon scholars between those who see him as a dialectical philosopher and those who see him as a Manicheist philosopher but it is not my intent to assess such questions here. For further discussion of this issue see for instance Nigel Gibson, "Janmmin' The Airwaves and Tuning into the Revolution: The dialectics of the Radio in L'An V de la Révolution Algérienne," in *Fanon: A Critical Reader*, eds. Lewis R. Gordon, T. Denean Sharpley-Whiting, Renée T. White (Oxford: Cambridge, Mass.: Blackwell Publishers,

1996), pp. 273-282. [\[#N15-pt1\]](#)

16. Homi K. Bhabha, "Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse," *October*, Vol. 28, Discipleship: A special Issue on Psychoanalysis (Spring, 1984), 125-133, ref. on 126. [\[#N16-pt1\]](#)

17. Aimé Césaire, *Discourse on Colonialism* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1972), p. 21. [\[#N17-pt1\]](#)

18. Homi, K. Bhabha, Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse," *October*, Vol. 28, *Discipleship: A special Issue on Psychoanalysis* (Spring, 1984), 125-133, ref. on 129. [\[#N18-pt1\]](#)

19. Fanon, Frantz, *op. cit.*, p. 15. [\[#N19-pt1\]](#)

20. Albert, Memmi, *The Colonized and the Colonizer*, translated by Howard Greenfeld (Boston: Beacon Press, 1970). [\[#N20-pt1\]](#)

21. Gene H. Blocker, *op. cit.*, p. 4, emphasis is mine. [\[#N21-pt1\]](#)

22. Harvey Cormier, "Ever Not Quite: Unfinished Theories, Unfinished Societies, and Pragmatism," in *Race and the Epistemologies of Ignorance*, eds. Shannon Sullivan and Nancy Tuana (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2007), pp. 59-76. [\[#N22-pt1\]](#)

23. Gene H. Blocker, *op. cit.*, p. 1. [\[#N23-pt1\]](#)

24. Gene H. Blocker, *op. cit.*, p. 6. [\[#N24-pt1\]](#)

25. By 'value pluralism' I mean a doctrine that takes the plurality of aesthetic activities to be crucial and given my stated interest in the 'other within' I take it that such pluralism exists within every culture and consequently within every system of aesthetics. I am not making an idealist claim here. I am pointing to a non-ideal practical side of our knowledge about aesthetics. I am not claiming that value pluralism is a sufficient condition for satisfactory translations of non-Western aesthetics into international aesthetic discourse and for satisfactory relations between Western and non-Western aesthetics. But I am suggesting that it is a necessary condition. Moreover, I am not arguing for attempting to find one and single satisfactory translation; it seems to me that various translations will conflict with each other. The translations I am advocating here will necessarily and inevitably be plural, concrete and provisional; they will manifest a commitment to finding knowledge in the particulars of experience. [\[#N25-pt1\]](#)

26. André Breton (1896-1966) was a French poet and essayist who founded surrealism with Paul Eluard and Salvador Dali among others. [\[#N26-pt1\]](#)

27. In André Breton, "Martinique Charmeuse de Serpents - Un Grand Poète Noir," translated as *Martinique: Snake Charmer*, by David W. Seaman (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2008). This text served as the preface to the French and to the bilingual edition of Césaire's *Notebook to my Native Land* and was initially published in *Tropiques*, no. 11, Martinique, 1944. [\[#N27-pt1\]](#)

28. Excerpts of the 1969 interview where republished after Césaire's death in April 2008. See [www.magazine-litteraire.com/content/Homepage/article.html?id=8774](http://www.magazine-litteraire.com/content/Homepage/article.html?id=8774) [<http://www.magazine-litteraire.com/content/Homepage/article/html?id=8774>]. [\[#N28-pt1\]](#)

29. Daniel Scott, "Dreaming the Other: Breton, Césaire, and the Problematics of Influence," *Romance Quarterly*, 42.1 (1995), 28-39, ref. on 37. [\[#N29-pt1\]](#)

30. See "Le long cri d'Aimé Césaire" [Aimé Césaire's long cry], the 1994 interview with Gilles Anquetil for the *Nouvel Observateur* available at <http://bibliobs.nouvelobs.com/2008/04/17/le-long-cri-daime-cesaire>. [\[#N30-pt1\]](#)

31. *Ibid.* Emphasis mine. [\[#N31-pt1\]](#)

32. André Breton, *Martinique: Snake Charmer*. "... [A]nd that poem [*Notebook of a Return to My Native Land*] is nothing less than the greatest lyrical monument of our times. It brought me the rarest of certainties, one that can never be attained by oneself: its author had gambled on everything that I had ever believed in and he had, unquestionably, won. The stakes—taking into account Césaire's specific genius—were our common conception of life." In Aimé Césaire, *Notebook of a Return to The Native Land*, preface by André Breton, trans. Clayton Eshelman, Annette Smith, (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 2001), pp. xiii-xiv. [\[#N32-pt1\]](#)
33. André Breton, cited in "Césaire," *Europe*, 832-833 (August-September 1998), 3-7. [\[#N33-pt1\]](#)
34. Daniel Scott, *op. cit.* , p. 29. [\[#N34-pt1\]](#)
35. *Ibid.* [\[#N35-pt1\]](#)
36. Had the encounter occurred after 1946, the structure could have been interpreted as colonial or not depending on whether the status of "French overseas department" would have been regarded as (neo)colonial or on the contrary as postcolonial. I argue elsewhere that decolonization does not necessarily imply the construction of a new state on the vestige of a colonial territory and so I would regard the post-1946 period in this context as a postcolonial period. See Mickaella Perina, "Martinique," *African-Caribbeans: A Reference Guide*, ed. Alan West-Durand (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 2003), pp. 127-139. [\[#N36-pt1\]](#)
37. André Breton, *Manifestoes of Surrealism*, trans. Richard Seaver and Helen K. Lane (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1969). [\[#N37-pt1\]](#)
38. María Lugones, *Pilgrimage/Peregrinajes: Theorizing Coalition against Multiple Oppressions* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2003), p. 240. Lugones argues that we must regard oppressed subjects as individuals and communities resisting systems designed to discipline and erase them instead of regarding them as victims consumed by state systems of oppression. I extend her notion here and use it to describe the state of the world as opposed to situations of oppression within states. [\[#N38-pt1\]](#)
39. See María Lugones, "Structure/Antistructure and Agency Under Oppression," *The Journal of Philosophy* 87, 10 (1990), 500-507, ref. on 505. [\[#N39-pt1\]](#)
40. See María Lugones, "Purity, Impurity, and Separation," *Signs*, Vol. 19, No. 2 (Winter, 1994), 458-479, ref. on 466. [\[#N40-pt1\]](#)
41. Gloria Yamato, "Racism: Something about the subject makes it hard to Name" in *Race, Class and Gender: An Anthology*, eds. Margareth L. Anderson, and Patricia Hill Collins (Belmont, CA.: Wadsworth, 2004), pp. 99-103. Yamato distinguishes between four types of racism: 1) aware/blatant racism, 2) aware/overt racism, 3) unaware/unintentional racism and 4) unaware/self-righteous racism. [\[#N41-pt1\]](#)
42. There is much literature on the inequalities generated by globalization. See for instance Richard Falk, "Resisting 'Globalization-from-Above' through 'Globalization-from-Below'" in Richard, Falk *Predatory Globalization: A Critique* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 1999), pp. 127-136, 232; Immanuel Wallerstein, "Crises: the World –Economy, the Movements and the Ideologies," in *Crises in the World System*, ed. Albert Bergesen (Beverly Hills, CA: Sage, 1983), pp. 21-36; Brian Wallis, "Selling Nations: International exhibitions and cultural diplomacy" in *Art in America*, Sept. 1991, pp. 84-91. [\[#N42-pt1\]](#)
43. For more on this issue of equality in the global era, see: Seyla Benhabib, *The Claims of Culture: Equality and Diversity in the Global Era* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2002), *The Rights of Others, Aliens, Residents and Citizens* (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004), and *Another Cosmopolitanism* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2006); Richard W. Miller, "Cosmopolitan Respect and Patriotic Concern," *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 27, 1998: 209; Martha C. Nussbaum, "Human Capabilities" in *Women, Culture, and Development: A Study of Human Capabilities*, eds. Martha C. Nussbaum



and Jonathan Glover (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), p. 72. [\[#N43-ptr1\]](#)

44. See Donna Haraway, "Situated Knowledge: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective", in *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women* (London: Free Association Books, 1990), pp. 183-202, 288. [\[#N44-ptr1\]](#)

45. In 1848 John Stuart Mill stated "Capital is becoming more and more cosmopolitan" in *Political Economy*. [\[#N45-ptr1\]](#)

46. Kwame, A. Appiah, *Cosmopolitanism, Ethics in a World of Strangers*, (NY: Norton, 2006), p. xv. [\[#N46-ptr1\]](#)

47. Bruce Robbins, "Comparative Cosmopolitanism," *Social Text*, 31/32 (1992), ref. on 171. [\[#N47-ptr1\]](#)

48. Walter Mignolo, "The Many Faces of Cosmo-Polis: Border Thinking and Critical Cosmopolitanism," *Public Culture*, 2000, 12(3), 721-748, ref. on 731. For further discussion see also Mignolo, "The Geopolitics of Knowledge and the Colonial Difference," *South Atlantic Quarterly*, 2002, 101(1), 57-96. [\[#N48-ptr1\]](#)

49. Rowland Abiodun, "African Aesthetics," *Journal of Aesthetic Education*, 35, 4 (2001), 15-24, ref. on 1. [\[#N49-ptr1\]](#)

50. *Ibid.* See also, *Yoruba, Nine Centuries of African Art and Thought*, eds. Henry John Drewal, John III Pemberton, Rowland Abiodun and Allen Wardwell (New York: Center for African Art and H. N. Abrams, 1989); and Rowland Abiodun, *The Yoruba Artist: New Theoretical Perspectives on African Art* (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1994). Abiodun's position corresponds more broadly to a current known as ethnoaesthetics. On ethnoaesthetics see for instance Daniel Crowley, *I Could Talk Old-Story Good: Creativity in Bahamian Folklore* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1966); Robert Farris Thompson, "Aesthetics in Traditional Africa," *Art and Aesthetics in Primitive Societies: A Critical Anthology*, ed. Carol Jopling (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1971); Harry R. Silver, "Beauty and "I" of the Beholder: Identity, Aesthetics, And Social Change Among the Ashanti," *Journal of Anthropological Research*, vol. 35, No. 2, 1979, pp. 191-207. [\[#N50-ptr1\]](#)

51. Warren, D'Azevedo, *The Traditional Artist in African Societies* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1973), p. 7. [\[#N51-ptr1\]](#)

52. Lugones, "Purity, Impurity, and Separation," p. 460. [\[#N52-ptr1\]](#)

53. Lugones, *Ibid.* [\[#N53-ptr1\]](#)

54. Frederick Douglass, "Speech before the West Indian Emancipation Society (August 4, 1857)," in Philip S. Foner, *The Life and Writings of Frederick Douglass*, Volume II (New York: International Publishers, 1950), p. 426. [\[#N54-ptr1\]](#)

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