

Denise Ferreira da Silva
In the Raw

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e-flux journal #93 — september 2018 [Denise Ferreira da Silva](#)
In the Raw

What is it that a black feminist poethics makes available? What can it offer to the task of unthinking the world, of releasing it from the grips of the abstract forms of modern representation and the violent juridic and economic architectures they support? If it is a practice of imaging and thinking (with/in/for) the world, without separability, determinacy, and sequentiality, then it approaches reflection as a kind of study, or as the play of the imagination without the constraints of the understanding. And, if the task is unthinking this world with a view to its end – that is, decolonization, or the return of the total value expropriated from conquered lands and enslaved bodies – the practice would not aim at providing answers but, instead, would involve raising questions that both expose and undermine the Kantian forms of the subject, that is, the implicit and explicit positions of enunciation – in particular, the loci of decision or judgement or determination – this subject occupies.

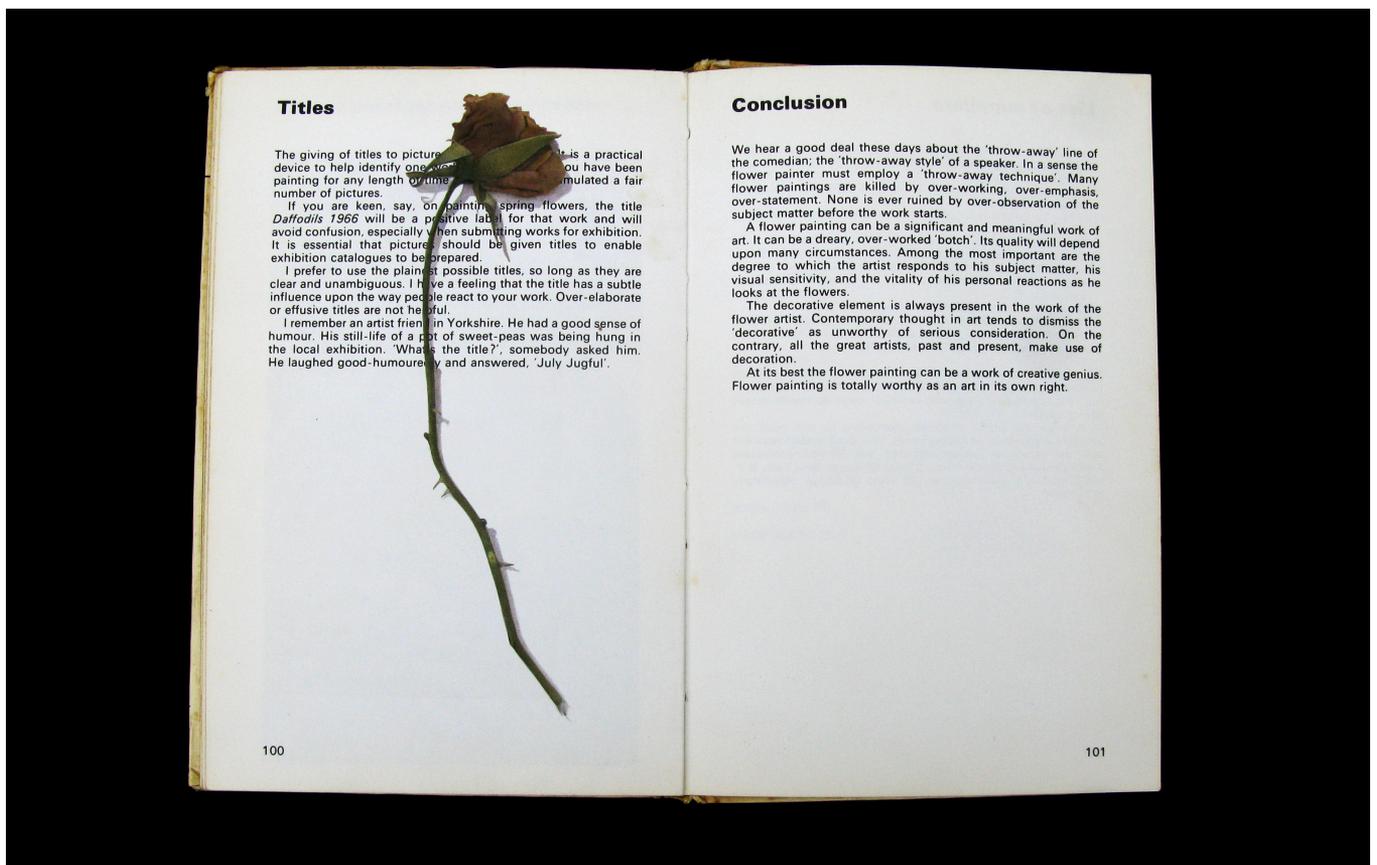
With the following black feminist reading of Madiha Sikander's *Majmua*, I intend a theoretical proposition that focuses on its matter without endowing the *material* with the attributes associated with other causes, such as *finality* or *efficacy*. This poethical reading approaches the artwork, *Majmua*, as a composition, the components of which also include, for instance, the artist's intention, but are not determined by it. For what the reading does is to move to consider whether, and if so, how the components of the artwork, approached *in the raw* – that is, as matter contemplated both as actual and virtual – signal a path for a kind of reflection that avoids the colonial and racial presuppositions inherent to concepts and formulations presupposed in existing strategies for critical commentary on art. Let me say it in another way. Finding refusal (to signify in spacetime) in the matter of the work and not in the forms in the artist's mind, through a poethical (material and decompositional) rather than critical (formal and analytical) reading of the work, this text does no more than to experiment with an approach to artistic practice that seeks to expand its relevance beyond the bounds of criticality – as set up in the Kantian grammar, that is, the dead-ended formalism it has gifted to the critical traditions it has inspired – and considers artistic practice as a generative locus for engaging in radical reflection on modalities of racial (symbolic) and colonial (juridic) subjugation operating in full force in the global present.

I.

A black feminist poethics attends to matter in the raw, that is, as that which has been appropriated (extracted, violated) but not fully obliterated by



Madiha Sikander, *Majmua*, 2017-18. Clove monofilament glass and metal beads. Courtesy of the artist.



Titles

The giving of titles to pictures is a practical device to help identify one's work. You have been painting for any length of time and have formulated a fair number of pictures.

If you are keen, say, on painting spring flowers, the title *Daffodils 1966* will be a positive label for that work and will avoid confusion, especially when submitting works for exhibition. It is essential that pictures should be given titles to enable exhibition catalogues to be prepared.

I prefer to use the plainest possible titles, so long as they are clear and unambiguous. I have a feeling that the title has a subtle influence upon the way people react to your work. Over-elaborate or effusive titles are not helpful.

I remember an artist friend in Yorkshire. He had a good sense of humour. His still-life of a pot of sweet-peas was being hung in the local exhibition. 'What's the title?', somebody asked him. He laughed good-humouredly and answered, 'July Jugful'.

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Conclusion

We hear a good deal these days about the 'throw-away' line of the comedian; the 'throw-away style' of a speaker. In a sense the flower painter must employ a 'throw-away technique'. Many flower paintings are killed by over-working, over-emphasis, over-statement. None is ever ruined by over-observation of the subject matter before the work starts.

A flower painting can be a significant and meaningful work of art. It can be a dreary, over-worked 'botch'. Its quality will depend upon many circumstances. Among the most important are the degree to which the artist responds to his subject matter, his visual sensitivity, and the vitality of his personal reactions as he looks at the flowers.

The decorative element is always present in the work of the flower artist. Contemporary thought in art tends to dismiss the 'decorative' as unworthy of serious consideration. On the contrary, all the great artists, past and present, make use of decoration.

At its best the flower painting can be a work of creative genius. Flower painting is totally worthy as an art in its own right.

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Madiha Sikander, *Inconvenient Truth II*. Gadrung on paper.

the practices and discourses that describe what happens and what exists as determined by form (as abstraction) or law (efficacy), something akin to Hortense Spillers's flesh.¹ In the raw, The Thing, as a referent of undeterminacy (& – &) or materia prima, hails blackness's capacity to release the imagination from the grips of the subject and its forms, which is but a first gesture in regard to a mode of thinking that contemplates virtuality and actuality all and at once.²

What I do in this piece is to experiment with a black feminist poethical reading of an artwork. More precisely, I trace the steps towards a reflective practice that does not, for instance, approach a given artwork as a particular to be subsumed under a, even if subjective, (formal) principle organizing a common (universal) sense. This procedure, as I have offered before, is similar to focusing blacklight.³ Blacklight, or ultraviolet radiation, works *through* that which it makes shine: for example, it has the capacity to transform at the DNA level, that is, it reprograms the code in the living thing exposed to it, and causes mayhem in their self-reproductive capacity at the cellular level. We could think of this process as one of breaking up a modern substance, that is, of separating form (the code, the formula, the algorithm, or the principle) and matter (content, or that of which something is composed). (I use the modifier “modern” because of my interest in dissolving the abstract forms of the understanding. However, there is nothing to prevent us from imaging blacklight breaking through any other abstract or sensible form, even, hopefully, at the atomic level. In any event.)

Once released by blacklight, the matter becomes available for something that can be termed a recoding – which in the case of cells usually means deadly ungoverned reproduction of cells – or to compositional practices that do not hold that which they combine prisoner to the form (figure or shape) with which it apprehends it, such as for instance a tarot spread. In other words, matter becomes available to poethical readings, to the kind of re/de/compositions that do not deploy the onto-epistemological pillars of modern thought, namely separability, determinacy, and sequentiality. To make it possible, at least two intentional steps must precede the reading. First, it is important to avoid presupposing the modern re-arrangement of classical causes – namely, final, formal, efficient, and material – in which the material (that out of which something is made) is but an effect of the end (final), the abstract formula (formal), or the universal law (efficient) that is transparent to none but the subject. Second, while not ignoring that it belongs in this world, a reflection on the material cannot merely move to

treat it as content. For even Adorno's proposition of the artwork as “sedimented” content relies on the very distinction between the empirical and the aesthetic which presumes the empirical as the site of intervention of the understanding – which refers to the position of the subject as the giver or knower of universal laws, in the register of efficacy.⁴ This is crucial because this assumption has consequences for contemporary artworks, which were not even on the radar in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century when, for instance, Gauguin and Picasso, borrowing the “form” of the anthropological “primitive” subject, would demarcate their “genius.”

When attending to the work – the creation or the product – black feminist poethics' first step is to identify and dissolve the workings of separability in the delimitation of the position of the transparent subject. This decompositional step consists primarily in exposing and setting aside the fashionings of the Kantian grammar. In particular, it targets the (explicit or implicit) linking of art and its particular mode of expression to an ideal of humanity. Doing so, it indicates why perspectives such as Rancière's aesthetic regime, which relies on a notion of equality, the emergence of which he locates in the late eighteenth century along with that of Kant's ideal of humanity, offer no entry point for a reflection on artwork that is not immediately taken as an expression of it.⁵ Simultaneously, decomposition, the breaking of the code, also targets later, nineteenth-century refashionings of the Human, that is, the analytics of raciality and its tools (racial difference and cultural difference), the social-scientific reconstructions of Kant's and Hegel's programs, which have embodied and emplaced humanity. In sum, a black feminist poethical reading reflects on the artwork in relation to the arsenal of raciality at the very same time that it also considers how the artwork refuses to simply become an object of empirical anthropology.

II.

Attending to the matter of the artwork, a black feminist poethical commentary moves to release it from the realm of the subject, whose faculty of aesthetic judgement rests on a figuring of the sensible (and the conditions of affectability) mediated by the forms of transcendental reason and a view of the imagination that articulates it as always already in the service of the abstract forms of the understanding.

In the empty gallery, *Majmua* stood as an aggregate of things *known* but unusually combined: clove and beads joined by monofilament in the form of tiny lozenges and larger rectangular stripes. None of its



Madiha Sikander, Home Away from Home. Gadrung on paper.

components afforded a *proper* position for knowing; that is, there was no common “cultural” ground for my familiarity with the form and matter of artwork. The inspiration, Madiha Sikander told me later, came from observing First Nations weavers with the late indigenous (Kwakwaka’wakw) artist Beau Dick while he was in residence at the Department of Art History, Visual Art, and Theory at the University of British Columbia, and from the practice of miniature painting, in which she was trained in Pakistan. Both of which account for her use of beads and cloves, respectively, but not for why I was (pleasantly) surprised to see these familiar materials in her artwork.

How to account for a feeling of pleasure mediated by the knowability of the materials? The “how” of this mediation, I hope, will become evident soon. Let me first comment on two possible ways through which *Majmua* could have appeared “unmediately” familiar (*known*) to me. Both ascribe “immediacy” (familiarity, at the level of cognition) to the subject, but toward distinct formulations of its position. On the one hand, pleasure resulting from *knowing* its components (cloves and beads as matter) would not immediately imply the Kantian aesthetic subject. For knowability in the Kantian formulation of the aesthetic register refers to the transparent I, as a formal entity, the one whose relation to the world – both sensible and intelligible – is mediated, but by forms (intuitions and categories) of the mode of cognition grounded on transcendental reason. Put differently, his account of aesthetic judgement is supported by the assumption that the forms of the object (of art or nature) are compatible (“harmonious” is the term he uses) with the conditions of the subject of determinative (sensibility in the register of the understanding) and aesthetic (sensibility in the moment of imagination) judgements, without a recourse to an empirical (scientific) or practical (moral) ground.⁶ Put differently, Kant’s feeling of the beautiful educes a position of enunciation captured by his notion of “subjective universality,” which, in the case of the aesthetic appreciation of artwork but also of nature, presupposes separability, that is, a delineation of the distinct cognitive faculties of the imagination and its intuitions and of the understanding and its concepts.⁷ Here the transparent I, when judging an artwork beautiful, presumes that it enjoys universality and necessity not because it has reference to a concept but to a feeling (of the beautiful) which is presumed (“as if it were”) universal, because it is grounded on common sense (or the assumption that every human being shares in the cognitive structures and their capacities).⁸ As

such, the feeling of the beautiful is not an effect (or rather affect) of matter (of the object) on the subject but rather of its form (formal intuitions of space and time), which is always already in the subject, since he alone is able to reflect, that is, to consider a representation without referring back to its object, but only to his cognitive faculties (imagination and understanding).

On the other hand, however, the knowability of (familiarity with) the components (cloves and beads) of the work does not escape determinacy. Because in the case of *Majmua*, while reflection remains the play of the imagination and the understanding, the latter has supremacy, for it is always already under capture as ethnographic specimen. This is an immediate consequence of its commentary on Pakistani miniature painting and Coast Salish First Nations weaving practices, which very quickly and effectively prompts the position of the subject of empirical anthropology. In this case, knowability could refer to the position of the appreciator of global contemporary art. However, while the appreciator may occupy the position of transparency, the artist (as well as the forms and the matter of the work) would occupy the position of enunciation of the subject as an affectable I, that is, the racial/global subaltern produced by the tools of raciality (racial and cultural difference). Or, put differently, the artist occupies the position of enunciation Spivak calls the “native-informant,” either in finding in the work a form (social? cultural?) that augments the knowledge of human diversity, or attributing to it the purposeless purpose of expressing other dimensions of what is unified under the idea of the human.⁹ Either way, the artwork becomes a postcolonial object which refers to an ethical relation (an immediacy figured by the presupposition of shared humanity in its diversity) that the artwork itself enables, but only because it is mediated by the tools of the understanding before which the postcolonial subject of artistic production is affectable (as an anthropological object) and the postcolonial subject of aesthetic judgement remains transparent by proxy (as the subject of anthropological knowledge).

When considered in the critical-Kantian framework, in regard to the reflective judgement of the beautiful, *Majmua* exposes something else that is also operational if it is taken as a postcolonial piece, which immediately confines it to being an object of determinative judgement. For while philosophy’s (Kant’s) New Hollander has no appreciation for the sublime (as Spivak notices¹⁰), the analytics of raciality’s Australian aboriginal – much like Kant’s “Negro” – has no appreciation of the beautiful because its “normal idea” of the human does not correspond to the

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“ideal of humanity” that these analytics would later find actualized exclusively by European bodily and social forms.¹¹ This is not Spivak’s “cultural difference,” which she in fact finds foreclosed in Kant’s writings on the sublime.

Recall that, for Kant, the “man in the raw” – under Spivak named, that is, the New Hollander and the man from Tierra del Fuego – provides no basis for considering the figure, Humanity, that organizes his formulation of aesthetic judgement.¹² It was not until the early twentieth century, after the analytics of raciality – through the notion of cultural difference – wrote the “other of Europe,” that these men in the raw could be written as variants of the Human. When they enter the aesthetic register, they do so as products of Kantian tools of the understanding, in two key moments of the analytics of raciality: 1) they are constructed as specific kinds of human beings – subjects of “primitive” or “traditional” cultures – but 2) also as affectable subjects, those whose minds have no access to Reason, which is the cognitive capacity necessary for entertaining the idea of a moral law and the attendant conception of Freedom. For the affectable subject (of cultural difference) – the racial/global subaltern – is marked precisely by its lack of the minimum requirements for the judgement of taste, which is the rational core of Kant’s “ideal of humanity.”¹³ The affectable subject is also marked by its lack of a conception of a *forma finalis*, an idea that underscores Kant’s account of taste and its attribution of a formal purposiveness to the object. The concept of a *forma finalis* is a reference to the subject’s own cognitive capacities, in particular its ability to approach the complexity of the world by reducing the purpose of the latter (which it can never know) to an order (that it alone can understand).¹⁴

Fortunately, however, precisely because of its inability to be taken as a formal-practical aesthetic object, *Majmua* exposes the limits of Kant’s formulation of affectability rooted in (as well as his arresting of the imagination by) an account of the judgement of taste that rests on the transcendental (formal) principle of finality and prefigures efficacy and necessity (that is, the basis of ordering accessible to the understanding).

III.

A black feminist poethical reading deploys blacklight to dissolve determinacy, which grounds the Kantian rendering of aesthetic judgement, shifting the focus to the elusive, the unclear, the uncertain – the scent – thereby making it possible to dislodge sequentiality and expose the deeper (virtual) correspondences comprehended

(but not extinguished) by the abstract forms of modern thought.

At first sight *Majmua* appeared tall, wide, and continuous, though after a few seconds it broke horizontally into smaller brown bands, separated by green strips. A closer look found these brown bands separated by very small red strips, and an even closer look revealed the small lozenges. By then, however, something else had arrested my attention: a known, familiar scent that I could not immediately name. It took a still closer look for me to notice that the lozenges were made of clove sticks. Shapes and colors lost my interest then. Every component of the work would be familiar to most viewers, yet also not, because each component originated from a different faraway place. Each of the components – but in particular the beads and the cloves – have been present in South Asia and South America for such a long time that no one even considers the question of where exactly they are from and how they came to be part of our environment.

Talking with Madiha Sikander about her piece and her training in miniature painting made me think about the need to recall that “form” has at least two meanings – the Aristotelian form as figure (shape or composition) and the Kantian form (as formula or principle). One important aspect of her training in miniature painting in Pakistan, said Sikander, is that students are told to practice until the skill becomes instinct. I am sure that this forgetting plays a part in *Majmua*, as the name (“assemblage”) explicitly indicates. What interests me is what happens when the artist is trained to surrender, to forget, and to yield to all that is involved in the artwork, from materials to conditions. Forgetting a skill because it has become an “instinct” obviously has several consequences for the artist and her work. In *Majmua* we see that forgetting carries a radical potential for artwork as practice, object, and commentary on the global present. What’s so compelling about forgetting, about surrendering the artist’s intentions to the needs of the work? It leads to a loosening of the composition and its materials, which invites them to signify willy-nilly. Each and every decision she has made due to familiarity (but also perhaps to efficiency, curiosity, availability, precarity, abundance, or even patriarchy) with the forms and materials used in the work loses its immediate efficacy in the assemblage. Each piece composing *Majmua* – the cloves, the beads, the monofilament – refigures how current global geopolitical and economic lines have been designed by layers of trade, vanquished imperial powers, and the juridic-economic subject they created. Each lozenge refigures how the lines of the Silk Road and the routes of the Spice Trade

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map the Indian subcontinent, trade routes tracing to the Neolithic and extending to Southern Europe, North and East Africa, Southeast Asia, Central Asia, and East Asia. Each bead recalls the European expropriation of indigenous lands in the Americas and of human beings in the African continent – the “slave trade beads” Europeans used in their dealings with indigenous American groups. Each material component recalls errant and unbounded and deep temporality. The figural time of matter dissolves historical time’s (abstract) closures, thereby exposing the otherwise invisible and yet-so-familiar colonial links that cross oceans and continents. The matter used in *Majmua* raise questions about what happens to the artist’s intention when attending to materials that have become familiar. We forget that they are both iterations of something that has always existed through the depths of spacetime and beyond, and always already commodities, as items of trade and products of labor.

IV.

What blacklight makes available, what it offers to the task of thinking and unthinking the world, is the possibility of considering thinking in some other way: What if what matters in (the) artwork exceeds representation not because of its “why” or “when” or “where” but because of its “how” and its “what”?

By reading the artwork as composition, reflection can attend to its components as raw material. It can also uncover how the artwork’s knowability (to both the artist and appreciator) results from the way this raw material allows for the *traversing* of spacetime¹⁵ – like Dana, the main character in Octavia Butler’s *Kindred* – and the exposure of how the current map of globality (the ontological horizon delimited by raciality) figures all and at once merchant, industrial, and financial capital. Reading the artwork this way corrupts the fixity imposed by concepts and formulations that inform (the abstract forms of) critical commentary. Let me say it another way. By attending to *Majmua*’s cloves and slave beads, it is possible to read, through *raw material*, the colonial as a moment of the creation of capital. It shows that commodities, such as cotton in the colonial past (and copper in its global present), are not a specimen of other (alien or old) social relations or modes of production – which capital must subsume, articulate, or replace. Since the early sixteenth century, when Portuguese merchants began trading in the Indian and Pacific Oceans, commodities (slaves, cloves, cotton) extracted from various colonial sites have been transiting between Europe and its colonies due to the operation of the modern juridic devices of

coloniality.

When blacklight hits the artwork, its *materia prima* (raw material) shines. As such, this method for reflection and thinking is *critical* only to the extent that it acknowledges, *and* seeks not to remain within, the bounds of the world as imaged for the subject. What happens is that attention goes to what in the artwork resists the reductive apprehensions of critical discourses – their request for a subject – and insists on signifying *in the raw*. With this I am not extending the thesis of the autonomy of art to include the matter of the artwork, but rather inviting a certain kind of reflection that unfolds outside the realm of the subject. Put differently, I attend to the artwork as a poethical piece, as a composition which is always already a recomposition and a decomposition of prior and posterior compositions. By doing so, then, I propose that the artwork does not have to come before the appreciator as an “object,” with all the presuppositions and implications this entails. For the object (of science, of discourse, or of art) is nothing more than a concoction of the onto-epistemological pillars of universal reason that support the modes of operation of the subject, in the moments of appreciation, production, and actualization. Extricated from the subject, reflection on the artwork releases the imagination from the grid of signification sustained by separability, determinacy, sequentiality – a crucial step in the dissolution of the mode of knowing that supports state-capital, that is, that grounds an image of the world as that which needs to be conquered (occupied, dominated, seized).

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All images courtesy of Madiha Sikander.

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1
Hortense Spillers, "Mama's
Baby, Papa's Maybe," *Diacritics*
17, no. 2 (Summer 1987): 64–81.

2
For an elaboration of virtuality
see, for instance, Denise Ferreira
da Silva, "Toward a Black
Feminist Poethics: The
Quest(ion) of Blackness Towards
the End of the World," *The Black
Scholar* 44, no. 2 (2014): 81–97.

3
See Denise Ferreira da Silva,
"Blacklight," in *Otobong Nkanga:
Luster and Lucre*, eds. Clare
Molloy and Philippe Pirotte
(Sternberg Press, 2017).

4
Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic
Theory* (Continuum, 1997), 6.

5
Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of
Aesthetics* (Continuum, 2006),
27.

6
Immanuel Kant, *Critique of
Judgement* (Hafner Press, 1951.)

7
For a racial critique of Kant's
common sense, see David Lloyd,
"Race under Representation,"
Oxford Literary Review 13, no. 1
(1991): 62–94.

8
Kant, *Critique of Judgement*, 46.

9
Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak,
Critique of Postcolonial Reason
(Harvard University Press, 1999).

10
Spivak, *Critique of Postcolonial
Reason*, 14.

11
See generally Lloyd, "Race under
Representation."

12
Kant, *Critique of Judgement*, 71.

13
Kant, *Critique of Judgement*, 70.

14
Kant, *Critique of Judgement*, 55.

15
For a setting-up of trasversality,
see Ferreira da Silva, "Toward a
Black Feminist Poethics."

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