Be.Bop 2012. Black Europe Body Politics

Robbie Shilliam

Forthcoming in Social Text/Periscope

How do decolonial aestheSis accord with but also depart from a “post-” sensibility, be it modern, structural or, perhaps, even colonial? Édouard Glissant is instructive in this respect, when he comments upon the metropolitan poststructural heritage as a French citizen of the département d’outre-mer:

I experience at the same time a feeling of the ridiculous and a feeling of the extreme importance of these ideas … We need to develop a poetics of the “subject” if only because we have been too long “objectified” or rather “objected to” … The text must for us (in our lived experience) be destabilized, because it must belong to a shared reality, and it is perhaps at this point that we actually relate to these ideas that have emerged elsewhere. The author must be demythified, certainly, because he must be integrated into a common resolve. The collective “We” becomes the site of the generative system, and the true subject.¹

Glissant affirms that the ethical and political challenge of difference is foundational of – rather than post to – the colonial-modern condition. However, it seems that for Glissant difference is neither the end of ethics nor the limit of politics. Rather, one sojourns through difference in order to retrieve a relational personhood other-wise to the objectification and dehumanization of European colonial-modern rule. It is important to note the alternative temporality at play in Glissant’s statement. Difference is not a state of being that follows the death of the modern subject or the pretension of humanism. Rather, colonial-modernity instantiates a difference that legally, spiritually, economically and psychically segregates humanity into humans and sub-humans.² Here, Chinua Achebe’s critique of Joseph Conrad’s Heart of Darkness is also instructive:

[Y]ou cannot compromise my humanity in order that you explore your own ambiguity. I cannot accept that. My humanity is not to be debated, nor is it to be used simply to illustrate European problems.³

To my mind, decolonial aestheSis resides less with Derrida or Foucault and dwells much more in Glissant and Achebe. These aestheSis are cultivated by a constructive relationship between writers and artists, which unites them as “worker-artists”. Worker-artists, to follow Walter Mignolo’s argument above, are those who think to make the world. And rather than making a new – original – world, they seek to renew the world by retrieving and redeeming aestheSis that have been dismissed by colonial masters as superstition,

irrational, ugly and primitive. Often relegated to “romanticism” by (post-)moderns who patrol the boundaries of high art and social science, these decolonial aestheSis are not grounded here; they proceed, rather, from intention and intuition. Decolonial aestheSis must be intentionally apprehended for the same reasons that the Martiniquean poets of Négritude effectively broke with French Surrealism after Andre Breton’s second manifesto. While Breton called for the “free play” of poetic signification as a method to liberate the libido, free play made no sense for a poetics designed by Césaire and company to liberate the collective self from the legacies of enslavement. But these poetics must also be intuitively cast. And intuition has its own sciences. AestheSis that have been cast out of the public realm of national and/or imperial imagining can pulse through the profane and sublime realms of the personal to be delivered in ancestral memories, stories and the unexplained practices of peculiar family members. Via acts of subterfuge, these sensibilities inform illegitimate art forms of so-called sub-cultures etc. Their ecology of affect is therefore broad yet subterranean, and this is why worker-artists can sometimes appear to conjure up aestheSis and ancestors from out of nowhere.

Intention and intuition are what guided much of the collective deliberations and apprehensions at Be.Bop 2012. I had three reactions to the artistic works presented at Be.Bop 2012. In what now follows I shall recount these overlapping reactions and then use them as the basis for articulating more fully my apprehension of decolonial aestheSis.

The first reaction I personally had to the art work and exhibits at Be.Bop was a scream in my head. This arrived quite strongly with the works of Ingridmwigiroberthutter, especially Neger and Wild Life. Actually, what arrived was more like a cadence of scream and grunt: the first, a horror of being racially interpolated; the second, a gut response to this in the form of caricatures of violence visited upon the self through dehumanization. Similar to Fanon’s famous experience of being challenged by “Look, a Negro!” these art works invoke what I would call an aestheSis of outrage. This aestheSis is often mobilized to challenge the sanctioned ignorance of white publics and to compel them to recognize their complicity in the coloniality of power.

The second reaction was a quickening and thumping of the heart. I felt this in Tracey Moffatt’s work. At first, I thought that her video, Other, was a cerebral presentation of the orientalist “self”/”other” trope, cutting together a collage of Hollywood scenes of exotic encounter. However the music intonated otherwise and by the end of the video I was ready for war! After the screening, Quincy Gario – poet and public intellectual in Holland -

7 Frantz Fanon, Black Skin, White Masks (London: Pluto Press, 1986), 112.
mentioned that the music score was taken from the famous film, *The Battle of Algiers*. And then I realised that Fanon had infiltrated the Ballhause wherein Be.Bop 2012 was being staged. I also felt this quickening and thumping with Teresa Maria Díaz Nerio’s installation, *Hommage à Sara Bartman*. The video witnessed various onlookers and interlopers passing by Teresa who was standing stifled in a huge grotesquely-sexualised costume. I wanted to run into the room and help her out of that suit. I am not sure if there was not some paternalism in that reaction, but I am sure that I felt that the conclusion to the installation had to be to escape it entirely. Finally, I felt the quickening and thumping in Jeannette Ehler’s videos, especially *Black Magic at the White House*. Jeannette draws a vevé on the floor, invoking the spirits to exorcise the whiteness that makes slavery invisible.

These art works quicken a resistance to colonial rule, objectification and dehumanization. They are not concerned with speaking truth to power so that power must listen; instead, they seek to cultivate another modality of power, a Black Power in the sense articulated by Steve Biko⁹ and expressed in the famous posters of Emory Douglass, culture minister of the Oakland Black Panther Party.¹⁰ The aestheSis of resistance refuses to engage the coloniality of power in its own public space but defends Black publics wherein the sensibilities of personhoods can be cultivated other-wise.

However, *Black Magic at the White House* made me feel something else too. This third reaction was a different kind of saneness, reconciliation, a renewal. I only ever felt it in combination with my second reaction, sometimes fleetingly. But it was there. For example, when Jeannette draws the vevé of Papa Legba - the keeper of the crossroads between the slaving lands of the dead and the African lands of the living - she opens the gate for healing agencies to enter where there were none provided by the colonial masters. The counter-sensibility would be melancholy, which I think William Kentridge invoked on the part of the German colonizer over the Herero and Nama genocides in South West Africa (present day Namibia). Melancholy guards against the entrance of healing agencies into white publics and facilitates the deferral of responsibility for historical injustices.

Having worked through my experience of Be.Bop 2012, I will now use my reflections to inform a general apprehension of decolonial aestheSis. For this purpose, I define the three aestheSis outlined above as 1) the shock and outrage of realising a colonial wound; 2) collective resistance to the harmer; 3) collective self-healing. Postcolonial studies has been very useful for attending to the first two. But the third aestheSis is avoided by most scholarship in Western academia and with good reason: its living genealogies cannot be disciplined by the pedagogical superiority and narcissistic self-referentiality of the colonial-modern episteme including those whose authority is sanctioned by it.¹¹ As John La Rose (Trinidadian migrant to the UK and co-founder of the Caribbean Artists Movement) was wont to say: “We didn't come alive in Britain.”¹² In short, the aestheSis of healing cultivates knowledge that is other-wise to (if unavoidably entangled with) the modern subject – i.e. the subject of violence.

---

¹⁰ http://www.itsabouttimebpp.com/emory_art/Emory_Douglas_Art.html During Be.Bop 2012, this Black Power sensibility was often expressed through the contributions of Simmi Dullay.
We must not reconcile these three aesthetic moments into a developmentalist psychology. We must not imagine, as Freud did, that some aestheSis are “savage” and will inevitably be superseded by more adult - or more accurately, paternalistic - sensibilities. This would be to repeat the Kantian move identified by Mignolo and others that allows for some works-of-art to reflect the sublime and beautiful, and others to be sub-art and hence sub-human expressions. I would prefer, instead, to use Fanon’s sociogenic approach to understand the relationship between the three aestheSis. Fanon’s critique of psychoanalysis is targeted specifically at the dependency complex that Octave Mannoni attributes to the colonized Caliban. Mannoni repackages Freud’s developmentalism with a Lacanian skein of the nuclear bourgeois family. Crucially, Fanon disputes the assumption that it is the father-child relationship that frames the becoming of the colonial subject. Rather, it is the colonial-colonized relationship that through affective, symbolic and narrational media (all at once) outlaws any self-becoming for Caliban. Caliban can only remain Caliban. Fanon strips bare the father of bourgeois modernity to reveal the slave-master skein of colonial modernity.

I submit, therefore, that there is no path towards a true humanity that can be charted through the immanent contradictions of colonial modernity; instead, the cultivation of a “new humanism” must be outrageous, resistant and restorative all at the same time. Thus, rather than apprehending shock/outrage, resistance and healing as elements in a dialectical relationship, I hold them as threads that weave diverse works of art intentionally and intuitively into a decolonial aestheSis. The first thread is the shocking wound of colonial shame, the suffering of which demands recognition and attendance in white publics (begrudging or otherwise). There can be no cover up and no complicity in the liberal fantasy of a-historical equality. This principled refusal is especially important in the current climate of Western countries, wherein principles of general accountability and the common good are being eviscerated by a new moral, political and economic segregation. Based on neo-liberal articulations of community, “representative politics” allows the poor to be damned and the privileged to remain unaccountable. And here, James Baldwin’s precept comes to mind: “[i]t is not permissible that the authors of devastation should also be innocent. It is the innocence which constitutes the crime.”

The second thread is Biko’s Black consciousness. Justice and reconciliation cannot wait upon the enlightenment of the privileged. The aestheSis of resistance illuminates a space of self-determination that must be defended. As I have intonated, white supremacy has no internal dialectic of reconciliation, only a logic of dehumanisation. We can, instead, take some inspiration from Marcus Garvey’s humanistic vision:

---

14 Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 141–145.
Whilst our God has no colour, yet it is human to see everything through one’s own spectacles, and since the white people have seen their God through white spectacles, we have only now started out (late though it be) to see our God through our own spectacles … we shall worship Him through the spectacles of Ethiopia.\textsuperscript{19}

Could it be that the aestheSis of Black Power might even inspire a retrieval of the recessive humanistic traits of white publics, themselves long colonized through the naturalization of a racial supremacist gaze?\textsuperscript{20}

The third thread, and, to my mind, a golden one,\textsuperscript{21} requires greatest care in weaving through the other two. For it is certainly the case that outrage and resistance do not necessarily require an aestheSis of healing. However, the absence of healing can make outrage ineffectual, and can metastasise the masculinity of resistance into the oppression of hyper-masculinity. It is perhaps not a coincidence that Minna Salami’s presentation at Be.Bop 2012 examined how fashion movements of African women cultivated in colonial-modern times seem to work precisely as “illegitimate” art forms with subversive, healing fabrics. Above all, though, healing is an aestheSis of intention - an intention to transcend the coloniality of power. As such, this aestheSis manifests with a special self-confidence of the senses, wherein outrage and resistance can be pursued with all seriousness without fixing them upon a governable subject that finds its place neatly either inside or outside of civil society. Healing requires strength to follow the intuitions of personal ancestral memories (hidden or otherwise) that are sparked off when “illegitimate” art forms suddenly reveal themselves to be acts of subterfuge. Healing also demands trust that there is something that can be creatively and critically redeemed from this magical matter without having to follow the codes of reformer or rebel.\textsuperscript{22} In other words, even if entangled with colonial-modernity, such redemptive works-of-art do not follow the logic of inside or outside society/modernity: their logic is other-wise. And looks can be deceiving.

On this note, I would like to finish by recounting one such moment that occurred at Be Bop 2012. Jeannette Ehlers displayed her photo sequence of a group of people walking from a Ghanaian beach into the Atlantic waters. However, Ehlers innovative technique leaves only their reflections in the water visible. A debate ensued at the roundtable with regards to whether Ehlers’ aestheSis rendered these people invisible or simulacra. I mentioned that the pictures could be comprehended by way of an aspect of many African cosmologies in the Americas whereby Guinea is the land of ancestors and spirits that lies under the sea.\textsuperscript{23} Comprehended thus, Ehler’s sequence renews the world of those whose descendents were enslaved. The one-way passage of dehumanization across the Atlantic, navigated by the coloniality of power and the beacon of “progress”, can be apprehended other-wise as a two-way conduit for re-humanisation. Might we even freely imagine the people in Ehler’s sequence to be walking out of plantation inhumanity into an African humanity? Later on,

\textsuperscript{19} Marcus Garvey, Philosophy and Opinions of Marcus Garvey or Africa for the Africans; Two Vols in One, ed. Amy Jacques Garvey (London: Frank Cass, 1967), 34 vol.1.
\textsuperscript{22} In this respect I acknowledge the insights and critique the limits of Subaltern Studies. See Robbie Shilliam, The Black Pacific: Anticolonial Struggles and Oceanic Connections (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2014).
\textsuperscript{23} For a general overview see Monica Schuler, ‘Enslavement, the Slave Voyage, and Astral and Aquatic Journeys in African Diaspora Discourse’, in Africa and the Americas: Interconnections During the Slave Trade, ed. J.C. Curto and R. Soulodre-La France (New Jersey: Africa World Press, Inc., 2005), 185–214.
Alanna Lockward – the wonderful curator of Be.Bop 2012 - commented that she was well versed in such aquamarine cosmologies and yet she had not immediately made that connection. I am no genius. And Alanna is significantly more versed in these cosmologies than I am. But quite simply, I had been researching the aestheSis of redemptive waters before the conference, for intellectual and personal reasons. They were in the front of my head. The net had already been cast. This episode demonstrates that we worker-artists must continue to cultivate our decolonial aestheSis so that they become more intuitive, intentional, inter-woven and free flowing.