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Dis/Embodiment in Pop Culture

Global capital is constantly moving across borders. As the borders of the nation state shift in accordance to the flows of capitalism, the boundaries of what constitutes humanity and personhood are dislocated as well. The turn away from embodiment to disembodiment marks a historical moment in which political, economical, and social factors have converged to create a late-capitalist hellscape that is challenged through attempts to transcend it.

However, I argue that the complete disavowal of studying our material realities in favor of post-humanism is premature. At a time when artists such as Grimes are releasing albums like *Miss Anthropocene*, an album based upon Grimes's titular sci-fi fantasy persona, it is imperative that we question the material work that disembodiment does (or fails to do). Its co-optation by celebrity capital culture speaks to the ease with which the ruling class is able to cloak their culpability in creating climate change, the exploitation of workers through capitalism, and most pertinent to this work, systems of surveillance. Our bodies, one of the most fundamental aspects of our material realities, are inherently shaped by the raced, sexed, gendered, classed, (etc) perceptions already inscribed upon our physical features.

Through an analysis of pop culture, I attempt to examine the ideological underpinnings of the visual and audio material in our everyday lives. Specifically examining pop culture is valuable to this work for the ways in which pop culture reveals the tacitly accepted racism and heterosexism upheld as fact in the process of cultural production and demarcates the limits of

capitalism's ability to seduce. Following Stuart Hall's theory of reception, I am interested in how visual culture is negotiated by audiences and how such negotiations are influenced by our positions in hierarchies of race, gender, and so forth. It is this subjectivity that we are in danger of erasing when we insist on the objectivity of disembodiment. This is not to disavow the important work a framework of post-humanism performs; post-humanism's ability to question the binaries presented as natural truths and constructions of what is and isn't human is fruitful in generating new political identities and coalitions. As Donna Haraway suggests in her essay *A Cyborg Manifesto*, cybernetic vision is the ability to imagine a society without gender, where there are no second-class citizens. However, as N. Katherine Hayles writes in *How We Became Posthuman*, the separation of information from the body falls into the same fallacy as Cartesian mind/body dualism and runs the risk of objective knowledge.

I look first to Instagram as an example of the tensions between dis/embodiment, particularly in regards to the role dis/embodiment plays in the surveillance state. In May 2018, Instagram rolled out face filters for its in-app camera. With a swipe to either side of the phone, users can cycle through different effects that can smooth and brighten skin, overlay "retro" lighting, or give users cat ears. Just one out of many other social media platforms which have introduced face filters for its user base, Instagram is particularly interesting when considering the fact that it is owned by Facebook, a Big Tech company infamous for its numerous data breaches, and that the two apps share users' data together. Additionally, the visuality of Instagram lends itself to the ease with which anyone can identify where you live, what products you buy, and most importantly, what you look like. Our faces are a form of biometric data, a form that we cannot hide (at least, not on an everyday basis). As such, the implementation of face filters into

Instagram's in-app camera is not so much a harmless and amusing application update, but a part of the long history of surveillance and attempts to normalize said surveillance.

The ability of some user-generated face filters to warp faces to look more racially "exotic" (e.g. big lips, upturned eyes, tanned skin tone, etc.) speaks to the popularity of racially ambiguous faces that are popular on Instagram. It is no longer only the purview of the rich to artificially wear Blackness/Browness/Yellowness/etc through cosmetic surgery, but anyone who has access to a smartphone can do so through their digital avatars. This ability to "embody" Otherness is an erasure of the history of racism that has long been embedded in the technology of surveillance, particularly at a juncture in time when surveillance reifies the re-biologicalization of race. At its core, facial recognition technology begins with the camera. As a product of European enlightenment thought, cameras have been a tool of empire to categorize, classify, and divide. When it was first released in the mid-19th century, cameras grew popular through their use by colonial administrators to document their conquests and to emphasize phenotypic differences in the fields of anthropology, ethnography, the medical field, etc. It is important to note that cameras, then and now, operate by prioritizing light information and by giving less priority to dark surfaces/spaces. In the early days of photography, this meant granting humanity to white subjects and homogenizing anyone with dark skin. Despite advances in camera technology today, cameras are still inherently biased against dark skin; in terms of facial recognition technology today, this inability to recognize dark skin impacts how facial recognition technology is deployed. Facial recognition technology operates through a variety of methods (algorithms that measure the distance of facial features in relation to each other, three dimensional facial recognition, skin analysis, a combination of all three methods or more), but

the technique used most often in daily life is three dimensional facial recognition. Three dimensional facial recognition entails using a sensor that reads the light reflected from faces to create a three dimensional face mesh. However, because lighter surfaces tend to reflect more light while darker surfaces tend to absorb it, the face mesh created from dark skin is inaccurate. The result of white-centric technology is the hyper-surveillance of Black people and the criminalization of their Blackness.

The convergence of white-centric technology and the private interests that fund such technology create what Safiya Noble calls algorithms of oppression[1], which creates, maintains, and disseminates the racial projects of tech companies. It is for this reason the ability of surveillance technology to aestheticize through appealing to white society's desire to embody the Other must be countermeasures by a politics of embodiment. As the U.S. governments more frequently turns to the private sector to solve the ills of society and tech giants like Amazon and Google gain more control over not only the production of technology used in our everyday lives but other spheres of influence, the embodied knowledge of people of color who have been historically surveilled is essential to anti-surveillance praxis.

In response to the mainstreaming of racially ambiguous (yet still normative) beauty, subcultures (comprised mostly by people of color and/or queer people) promote an intentionally ugly aesthetic that pushes the boundaries of what is considered "beautiful". This ugly aesthetic is an embrace of the monstrous, alien, robot. Many face filters or picture edits on Instagram feature body modifications such as tentacles, slanted eyes, porcelain-smooth, almost cyborg-esque skin , flashing HUDs, grids and other pieces of flashy superimposed vector art that hint at a digital

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mode of existence. However, the promotion of post-humanist beauty is also problematic when people of color have long been associated with monstrosity, alien-ness, roboticism. Moreover, post-human embodiment raises concerns regarding the uneven-ness of our material realities. Post-humanist face filters perpetuate ideas that the body is a blank canvas, ready to be stylized any way we choose. In actuality, however, our bodies are already over-determined by multiple axes of race, gender, class, ability, sexuality, and so forth. Many people of color are already read as alien/robotic. This embodiment of post-humanity runs the risk of collapsing subjective experiences into a single objective experience, when in reality, the way our bodies move through the world affect our material realities. Simply put, people of color are already read as alien and/or robotic.

The rapacious nature of the surveillance state demands more covert, more insidious methods for manufacturing consent to give away our biometric data. As such, social media platforms' deployment of face filters, particularly Instagram face filters, must be read through a critical lens. Instagram collects information on what we look like, but how is this process of biometric data acquisition being aestheticized? Instagram face filters feed into desires to shape our appearances and the perception that our appearances are simply externalized versions of our inner selves. As capitalism continues to retool itself even in the face of its demise, the extraction of labor and raw material continues. These economic flows are inevitably followed by the uprooting of cultures and aesthetics, which shift and mix in new geographies and under different social and political contexts. However, this is by no means a justification for the elisions of racialized histories through the consumption of culture as commodity. Particularly at a time when biometric data is being extracted through different platforms, at faster frequencies, and

through more insidious means, the embodiment of the Other through employing deterritorialized aesthetics simultaneously places people of color under more surveillance and invisibility. This invisibility is not an invisibility from state control, but an invisibility attached to life deemed ungrievable. Instead of attempting to embody Otherness, it is imperative that we find points of solidarity, not similarity.

Rather than reproduce the pain marginalized people are subjected to through this essay, I would like this work to be generative and thus examine re-embodiment through techno music. Through techno music's radical history, I examine the genre's ability to address structures that shape how marginalized bodies are perceived. How are systems of oppression disciplining and punishing those with bodies determined as "marginal" in such violent ways that we wish to escape corporeality as a way to evade pain? For non-cis male, non-white people in particular, what are the specific circumstances that push us into self-abnegation?

In contemporary times, neoliberal ideology has produced the body as individual, divorced from the communities we inhabit. In regards to mental health, this looks like the conceptualization of mental health as an individual problem that finds its solutions in individual courses of action. The conceptualization of mental health as such is a political project that works towards capitalist ends: mental "abnormalities" are recognized only as they pertain to one's (in)ability to labor. For example, ADHD and depression are discrete categorizations of mental abnormalities because of the ways in which they affect the extent to which the body can labor; the solution to such mental disorders is medication or therapy. But how else can mental illness be eradicated in ways that tackle the root of why mental illness exists in the first place, which is to say, capitalism and how it sentences us to premature death? This project deals particularly with

trauma and seeks to eradicate the structures that engender such trauma in the first place. I find that mainstream forms of treatment (medication, therapy) still fit into neoliberal discourse of the body. I do not make the argument that therapy is bad; rather, I recognize the importance of therapy as a stop-gap measure, but aim to imagine a world where therapy is not needed. Drawing from my personal experiences, I have trauma because of the ways in which men have exploited power imbalances to fulfill their desires at my expense; other individuals have trauma because of other individuals exploiting power imbalances created by capitalism to fulfill their own desires at others' expense. What, then, does healing with the intent of disrupting systems of domination look like?

This project is a multi-channel video art installation that aims to answer this question. The first channel, displayed on a television monitor, plays a looping essay video to examine my own experiences with the ways in which the state manufactures trauma and how pleasure can be used to counteract this. Through techno music and found footage, the second channel aims to expose the politics underlying how our bodies and desires are shaped and disseminated. Techno is a form of embodied knowledge that addresses the specifics of working-class Black experiences in 1980s-1990s Detroit, Michigan through the integration of Afrofuturist thought with electrically synthesized sound to imagine a better future out of the de-industrialized ghost town created by capitalism. Although the material conditions of this history is different from the history implicated in the problems I address in my installation, both histories locate capitalism as the nexus of these interlocking issues. As such, I find techno productive in critiquing the capitalist construction and dissemination of bodies in the mass media market. This project will be showcased in a gallery setting. However, because I believe it is important that my project be

accessible, I intend to have an online version that can be accessed by others outside of the institution.

Thus far, my artistic practice has largely been concerned with questions of identity. This project serves as an opportunity to move past simplistic representations of Asian American-ness, and instead engage with the political and economic conditions that shape our material realities. As it is today, I believe that the mainstream Asian American media landscape is saturated with ideas of representation that fail to address the critique that such representations of Asian America make us more visible to the state and thus, make us open us up to more opportunities for surveillance. My intention in creating this project is to move past a politics of representation and add to the history of leftist Asian Americans working to end capitalism and its legacy of colonialism and imperialism.

In talking about the body and how we have been made to feel removed from it by systems of power, I do not reference the body in a Cartesian sense. Cartesian views of the body and mind posit the two as separate and distinct entities fixed into a body/mind binary; however, I argue that the body and mind are intricately linked. What affects the body (material damage from living in a late-capitalist social-scape) affects the mind as well, and vice versa. Disabilities scholar Sami Schalk draws connections from systems of oppression (race, gender, ability, etc.) to their material effects on bodyminds; the psychic stress that oppression engenders creates lasting harm to not only the mind, but the body as well. This often manifests as a litany of bodily pains: insomnia, headaches, stomach aches, nausea; the list is innumerable, with many of these symptoms leading to premature death.

Further complicating these conceptions of mental health, however, is the conception of what a "normal" body is to begin with. How do we determine bodies as dis/abled or mentally ill if the basis for a normal body is that of an upper class, cis-gender heterosexual white man? I question the pathologization of mental illness as solely the result of atypical brain chemistry. Rather than read marginalized people as mentally ill, this installation asks viewers to read marginalized people as people reacting to the extreme measures in which our bodies are disciplined. Embedded in my project is a critique of the ways in which the state places the burden of mental health on individuals rather than systems, and how this has become aestheticized to the point where mental health is seen as an individual problem rather than a systemic one.

Drawing from Michel Foucault's theorization of the body and biopolitics, I focus on how structures of race, gender, and sexuality under late-capitalism conceal mechanisms of discipline under the guise of social practices. I am interested in looking at how docile bodies are produced and how late capitalism extracts our labor in violent ways. Foucault also writes about the deployment of sexuality in order to control people and coerce us into heterosexuality; this deployment of sexuality is necessarily related to capitalism and its inner machinations, as heterosexuality is imperative in maintaining a labor force and capitalism actively exploits the power imbalances in the gender binary. Importantly, Foucault notes that the most powerful way states are able to control our bodies is not through direct physical force, but through aestheticizing our own oppression so that we self-discipline and regulate our own bodies. How then, can we resist the seduction of capitalism and our own role in engendering our premature deaths? I return to Foucault's body of work and look to his framework of pleasure to work

against this aestheticization and address how specifically non-cis men (and more specifically,

racialized non-cis men) are subjected to gendered and racialized violence. Like Foucault, I

believe that any attempt to control bodies necessarily intimates the recognition of the fact that

bodies are inherently intractable. Foucault looks to our capacity to experience pleasure as part of

this inherent intractability; if we aim to "counter the grips of power with the claims of bodies,

pleasures, and knowledges" what "multiplicities and possibilities of resistance" do specifically

non-cis men's bodies hold? (Foucault 157)

My treatment of non-cis men's bodies will necessarily be occupied with corporeality;

more specifically, I will be looking at skin through Toni Morrison's concept of skin memory, or

the "body's recollection of pleasure" (Freedman 66) combined with the skin's ability to "index

historical moments as well as personal encounters" and Didier Anzieu's conception of the skin

as a psychic envelope that is increasingly under attack from "capitalist accelerations of

commodity production and consumption" (Mehuron 75). As a literal and figurative protective

surface that interfaces between the self and the outside world, how does skin remember pain as

well as pleasure? I draw from Anzieu and Morrison to lay the foundations for an analysis of the

body that is as cathartic as it is generative. In thinking about the skin in the context of non-cis

men, I refer specifically to trauma engendered by sexual violence.

By remixing images of pleasure and intimacy with unsynchronized sound to create a dissonant

composite image/soundscape, I aim to challenge the passive ease with which men gaze at

women's bodies and violently objectify them. This also serves to function as a reworking of

memories of touch that are traumatic into memories of touch that are reflective of Foucault's

ideas of embodied pleasure that work to to supersede the logics of power.

Because I view pain and violence as inherently political, I will also draw from Eileen Scarry's work in *The Body in Pain* for her theorization of the politics of pain. Scarry introduces the concept of "the language of agency," which is the power to either occlude the corporeal violence enacted upon bodies (thus allowing such violence to continue) or make visible the pain that is inflicted on others and eliminate it. Questions such as, "Whose pain gets to be visibilized, and for what purpose?" as well as "Whose pain is objectified, and what are the political ramifications?" will be guiding concepts that I seek to address in my project. Scarry asks, how can pain and violence be countered by the act of creation? Oftentimes, media advocating for marginalized people depict their suffering in order to highlight systemic injustice. However, I argue such tactics objectify the pain of marginalized people; pain becomes an object of consumption. As I am cautious of producing images in a media landscape already saturated with images of marginalized bodies in pain, I am interested in using Scarry's concept of the language of agency to create a set of aesthetics that uses pain and pleasure as tools to upend systems of domination, rather than reinforce them.

METHODOLOGY

My methodology in producing these images of the body is a necessarily post-Marxist one that takes into account the gendered and racial implications of how the body functions in a capitalist society. In the context of my installation, I look at the violent artifacts left by capitalism on our bodies. How are the power imbalances imbricated in the gender binary exploited by capitalism and what are the resulting corporeal and psychic scars left on our bodies? How do we heal these scars in ways that avoid reproducing the systems that produce said scars, and instead, deconstruct these systems?

The first channel of my installation follows in the tradition of essay film, the significance of which can be drawn from its structure. The potency of film essays lies in its ability to blur fiction and nonfiction in order to create a more "real" reality; because non cis-men's bodies are sites of contestation where dominant histories and ideologies threaten to overwrite it, I find it important to utilize fiction as a method to challenge the idea of what is "real" to our subjective experiences. Moreover, I find the method of juxtaposing words and images a powerful tool in interrogating images; because the reception of images of non-cis male, non-white bodies are already so heavily underwritten by dominant ideologies of race, gender, and sexuality, I find it necessary to confront these ideologies through unexpected contrasts of disparate sounds and sights. The intent of these dislocations is to move past a politics of representation and to engage with the audience to form new political agencies.

This essay film focuses on faces, hands, and lips. My intent in using shots of hands and lips is not to reproduce the butchering of women's bodies so often found in mainstream Hollywood cinema; rather, I aim to ask how does the body remember touch and what does it mean for memories of touch to linger in certain body parts? Referring back to Eileen Scarry's work on the politics of pain and her usage of creation as a countermeasure to violence, I view hands and lips as body parts that are capable of inflicting and receiving violence that I aim to rework into sites of creation. I employ surrealist aesthetics in my depiction of my body in order to generate possibilities of healing the bodily and psychic scars inflicted by capitalism . Time flows non-linearly, bodies flicker on and off screen arbitrarily, reality and reflection are muddled through the use of mirrors. I find surrealist aesthetics fruitful in reimagining a more just reality outside the bounds of social constraints; the ability of surrealism to question what constitutes the

Real makes this aesthetic useful in deconstructing the aestheticization of our oppression through what David Eng terms "dream work," or "radical new methods of looking. . . in order to see something else." (Eng 81).

I used a camcorder to record on Hi-8 tape. I am interested in Hito Stereyl's conception of the "poor image" and the re-emergence of home video aesthetics. The poor image is one that is transmitted, transmuted, chopped and screwed and dispersed through the circuits of audiovisual capitalism. It is an image that is born out of and into a neoliberal, commercialized media market; however, it is also this degradation of the image that gives it its subversive capacities. The poor image, as a compressed file, is able to circulate in a network that works to build shared points of interest among marginalized people and and alternative histories. As it relates to home video, I am interested in how the aesthetic of the poor image (grain, distorted color, disruptions in the tape) is experiencing a revival of interest, particularly in mainstream media. I see the aesthetic of the poor image as contested ground in which I wish to make an intervention, recuperating the aesthetic to transmit messages that challenge normative discourse of the body. Additionally, I see the circulation of the poor image in my project as part of a larger circulation, that of Third World Cinema. In the words of Glauber Rocha, cinema that has grown out of the politics of hunger is an "evolving complex of films that will ultimately make the public aware of its own misery." The political urgency of the poor image is further underscored through its relation to the body. The deterioration of the poor image echoes the "loss of coherence" (Marks 91) of the human body. Returning again to the work of Scarry and Foucault, whose bodies are subjected to more violence and whose pain is made legible? These are the questions implicit in the visual and aural content of my installation.

The second channel of my installation is comprised of a montage of found images overlayed with techno music, drawing from Einstein's Montage Theory as well as the anti-capitalist and Afrofuturist roots of techno music. I view my use of techno music as a form of embodied knowledge; rather than defer to the concept that knowledge can only be produced in institutions through written words, I find it important to look at how practices of the self generate new ways of being.

The found footage includes images gleaned from mainstream as well as alternative cinema, advertisements, educational videos, and pop culture in general. I look to these sources as opportunities for engaging with material created under varying social, political, and economical circumstances in order to stitch together a sequence that examines the connections between desire and its political underpinnings across different spaces and time. From the air of innocence with which the camera captures white heterosexual love to its licentious gaze when directed at young Korean women kissing, this blending of found footage defies easy categorizations and explanations of bodies and demands closer inspection of the material condition from which they were produced. As images of meat and artificial limbs blip across the screen, viewers are encouraged to confront the pleasure gleaned from viewing such images and the reasons why such images are produced. However, rather than castigate this pleasure, my intent in stitching together these images in unexpected ways is to create moments of subversive pleasure. This subversive pleasure is found in an alternative reading of these images that necessarily acknowledges the historical moment that produced these images and disrupts its linkage to ideology. By syncing the images with techno music, each clip will flash across the screen for a fraction of a moment,

leaving viewers to scrutinize not simply the body itself but the traces it leaves, including the connotations viewers attach to certain bodies.

My use of specifically techno music serves as a method for creating what Laura Marks terms "haptic vision". This haptic vision privileges the "material presence of the image" rather than the "representational power" of the image (citation). The juxtaposition of the repeating flashing images and the repeating beat of the music forms a tangible tension within viewers that pulls them in to experience the "texture" of the installation; this tension arises from the ability of techno to induce ego death in its listeners and the undeniable subjectivity of the images disappearing and reappearing on screen with every pulse of the bass. In viewing this installation, I find that embodied perception is critical in not only generating a certain atmosphere, but in keeping with the thematic intentions of the installation. Just as the installation is not something to be "analyzed and deciphered in order to deliver forth meaning" but is something that "means in itself", the body is also not a "passive object 'inscribed' with meaning but are sources of meaning themselves". Acknowledging the body as a source of creation itself is an acknowledgement of its embodied knowledge, and thus, embodied knowledge of resistance.

This project was realized over a period of several months. Conceptualization and a comprehensive shot list were completed by the end of September. Location scouting was finished by mid-October; filming took place from the latter half of October to the first week of November. Scenes were re-shot when deemed necessary throughout the editing process. Editing, soundtrack composition, and narration was completed by the end of November. The last week of November and first week of December were dedicated to installation.

REFLECTION

            Throughout the process of creating my project, my ideas for how my installation should look and what the content should be changed a number of times. Initially, I began with a conceptualization of the project that mirrored Nam June Paik's *TV Garden* in style. However, I think the final format of my project mirrors my themes much more accurately. My project, as it is now, can be drawn into two parts: the video essay, which is set up to be viewed in an intimate manner (audio is limited to a single pair of headphones); and the projection with found images and techno music, which is displayed in a more external manner. The intimacy of the video essay emphasizes the interiority of the trauma caused by capitalism while the projection serves as a more tactile approach for understanding embodied pleasure. However, the ostensible duality of my project isn't a reproduction of Cartesian conceptions of the body; rather, I believe the interweaving experiences created by the mixing of audiovisual elements from both parts of the installation emphasizes my point that the body informs the mind and the mind informs the body.

            Additionally, I also grappled with my own limits and how these limits in turn affected the goals of this project. As someone with class privilege creating an installation in the setting of a private, liberal arts college, I acknowledge that project that the project is limited in its aim to end capitalism and the trauma it produces. As much as I centered this project around the cessation of pain and the production of pleasure, it ultimately has no material impact on dismantling systems of oppression that continue to harm the people surrounding me. Admittedly, no single person, project, art piece, or otherwise can immediately result in the dissolution of capitalism, but I struggled with justifying its relevance to society at large. Ideally, this installation would be tied to community organizing efforts and function in ways similar to the radical activist rave spaces

held by art collectives such as Yellow Jackets Collective or By Us For Us in New York, New York. By this, I mean that the installation would be part of a larger rave space functioning as a safe space for marginalized people to celebrate their bodies, with donations being distributed to communities affected by capitalist violence. As it is now, however, such an undertaking is outside the scope of my project, and (for the time being) I intend to create an online version that would at the very least make this installation more accessible and aid in political consciousness raising for a wider audience.

CONCLUSION

Trauma clings to the skin. In contemporary times, the body is constantly subjected to new forms of discipline, new methods of control, for end goals that have remained unchanged since capitalism's inception: to accumulate wealth for an elite few at the expense of a working class arbitrarily constructed as "lesser". Instead of searching for solutions externally, however, I build upon the body of literature that suggests for a radical departure inward--looking to ourselves as the ultimate form of resistance against a state trying to control us.

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