

# The racial regime of aesthetics

## On David Lloyd's *Under Representation*

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One of the persistent difficulties of attending to race in the history of philosophy is the equivocal nature of this object. Long ignored by philosophers, 'race' has no clear status or obvious place in the history of philosophy, cutting across different areas of philosophical inquiry. Although in recent years historians of philosophy have been increasingly interested in the question of race, they hold the effects of their discoveries in check by narrowing down its concept to the extreme. In particular, with a few notable exceptions, they tend to keep the problem within tight limits by restricting their analyses to those *texts* by Leibniz, Kant, Fichte or Hegel in which the concept of 'race' – whether the scientific notion or the word – actually *appears*.

A different strand of reflections on the historico-philosophical underpinnings of race has emerged from cultural studies and literary scholars. While for historians of philosophy the notion of 'race' tends to detach itself from the problem it is supposed to register through an extreme historical segmentation of its concept, for the latter 'race' often becomes ubiquitous through an uncheckable proliferation of its effects and root causes. Less concerned with the crisis faced by philosophy as a discipline, they tend thus to view philosophical writings as part of a generalisable *discursive production* which, following the Foucauldian quandary, can hardly be kept within bounds. Consequently, we find ourselves in the paradoxical situation that, although the constitutive bind between Enlightenment philosophy and racialism is understood as irrevocable, the precise nature of their articulation remains hard to determine, as if race and racism were either deemed too foreign to philosophical

discourse, or as too germane to it, without ever being able to strike the right balance between the two.

Here as in other matters, the scholarship on Kant proves exemplary, for in Kant the presence-absence of 'race' comports immense architectonic subtleties, in particular regarding the relationship between the critical works and the less 'noble' corpus constituted by the historical, geographical and anthropological writings. Moreover, in the micrology of each of the *Critiques* and in every essay, this relationship may always be questioned anew.

David Lloyd's last book *Under Representation: the Racial Regime of Aesthetics* (2018) invites us to confront the question of race in Kant's philosophy – and in the *Critique of the Power of Judgement* in particular – not directly but through a mediating term, that is, through the problem of representation.\* The five essays that comprise the book constitute neither a denunciation of Kant's racism, nor a philological investigation into the historico-textual underpinnings of the Third Critique, but a reflection on the *unrepresentability* of race and racialised subjects which emerges from the aesthetic paradigm set up by Kant's *Critique of the Power of Judgement*. The problem of representation has long been a crucial one in black studies and postcolonial theory, but it takes an unusual turn here: rather than borrowing its terminology from post-structuralism, Lloyd's critique of representation stems from a long-standing engagement with Marxist cultural theory, and especially from a reflection on the hidden links between political representation and aesthetic 'culture'.

\* David Lloyd, *Under Representation: The Racial Regime of Aesthetics* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2018). 240pp., £79.00 hb., £21.99 pb., 978 0 82328 238 8 hb., 978 0 82328 237 1 pb.

## Abolishing culture?

The book comprises five essays, the composition of which span from the early 1990s to the present. As he states in the Preface, Lloyd's project emerged in the midst of the so-called culture wars of the 1980s, and expands on the theses previously developed with Paul Thomas in a first book, *Culture and the State* (1999), which investigated the rapport between culture and state in the writings of the English romantics. Looking at the advent of the figure of the 'citizen-subject' in nineteenth-century England, *Culture and the State* emphasised the fundamental role played by pedagogy and education in the process of consolidation of the state, developing an account of the emergence of governmentality that could function as an alternative to what they criticised as Foucault's 'virtual positivism', and asking instead: 'how do state institutions come to seem evident within the common sense of a population?'<sup>1</sup> The concept of representation was already at the crux of this project, since the state was analysed as an engine of cultural *assimilation*: 'It is within the concept of representation that we trace the manner in which an apparent parallelism between state and cultural theory gives way to a relationship of substitution or supplementation in which culture comes to mediate between a disenfranchised populace and a state to which they must in time be assimilated.'<sup>2</sup>

As Lloyd investigates the entanglements of race and aesthetics in *Under Representation*, the concept of 'culture' remains similarly central. Importantly, and against its recodification in various strands of cultural studies, 'culture' is to be taken in its largely polysemic, nineteenth-century sense, of 'formation' or 'education', 'civilisation' or 'civility', but also art and refinement. In other words, Lloyd reads Kant through a decidedly Schillerian lens, by emphasising the idea that common sense is the 'foundation equally of the aesthetic and the public sphere',<sup>3</sup> a conception that would be taken up and shared by the likes of Wordsworth, Coleridge and Matthew Arnold. At the crossing point of a critical history of 'culture' and the problematic of race, *Under Representation* performs, then, a critique of both so-called 'Left aesthetics' and postcolonial theory. For Lloyd, neither field has sufficiently taken stock of the constitutive link binding together state violence and aesthetic culture, a link

that stretches from nineteenth-century European nationalisms to postcolonial nationalisms. Any hasty recovery of the 'emancipatory' power of aesthetic philosophy thus skips over a critique of *Bildung* philosophy that hasn't yet been completed, especially in institutions that are still seamlessly reproducing its underlying model, such as the university.

Put otherwise, *Under Representation* grapples with one of the enduring heritages of Enlightenment philosophy: the assumption that aesthetics constitutes a domain of authentic freedom, the persisting bind between aesthetics and emancipation. By focusing on the political subtext of the Third Critique, Lloyd occupies a similar terrain to Hannah Arendt's late *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy*,<sup>4</sup> but his perspective is diametrically opposed. If paragraphs §39 and §40 of the *Critique of the Power of Judgement*, where the concept of 'sensus communis' appears, are indeed a key to Kant's political philosophy, it is this that enables us to understand the fundamentally exclusionary dimension of aesthetics and politics, not their democratic foundation. Furthermore, Lloyd interprets this political subtext *simultaneously* at the level of the formation of the 'citizen-subject' and at the level of 'race'. In this way, he grounds the analysis of the passages in which Kant's racialism emerges (for example, the evanescent figures of 'New Hollanders and inhabitants of Tierra de Fuego', the Savage and the Savoyards) in a systemic reflection on the racial politics of aesthetics. Or, in other words, he offers a systemic analysis of what Spivak, for one, has addressed as 'casual remarks' and 'foreclosures' in the textual economy of the Critique.<sup>5</sup> For Lloyd, 'Kant's work is saturated with politics even, and perhaps especially where it is ostensibly not at all political' (33).

To speak of a 'regime' rather than a 'discourse' or 'apparatus' precisely serves to highlight that 'the aesthetic' has a constitutively masked political dimension. Indeed, Lloyd goes back to Marx's description of German philosophy as *forestalled* politics: aesthetic philosophy would have both realised and closed off the potentialities of political revolution, translating its representational stance into pedagogical institutions (34–35). 'In the process of translation, the terms of aesthetic culture established by writers like Kant and Schiller continue to work as a template, allowing one to formalise in general terms the continuing relationship of the aesthetic to the

political through the longer history of liberal cultural formations' (35). In turn, race is nested in this representational structure, whereby the subject's freedom is deferred into the ideal of 'free aesthetic judgements'.

Paradoxically, then, it is what seems least 'interested' that is in fact most *interested* – since for Lloyd there is no distinction anymore between the formalism of Kant's move to *sensus communis* and the need to root the aesthetic domain outside of, and yet in constant rapport with, politics. The culture of disinterest becomes the emblem of a typically liberal versatility in politics. As Lloyd writes, '[t]he aesthetic sphere is held to transcend all contingent differences, and, with less paradox than might at first appear, it is in defining this domain as beyond political interest that the formal terms of bourgeois or liberal ideology are constituted' (24).



### The logic of exemplarity

Lloyd seeks nothing less than a redefinition of *race* through this aesthetic regime of representation, arguing that 'aesthetic culture itself constitutes the formal principles of racist discourse, that the indices of difference on which racism relies gain their meaning from a distri-

bution of values determined by an aesthetic philosophy that founds the idea of a universal common sense and its space of articulation, the public sphere' (91). The originality of his project lies in its attempt at grasping race in neither a sociological, phenomenological or psychoanalytical register, but in a typically *critical* and post-critical register in which the logical defines the categories of experience. It is precisely *because* of Kant's puzzlement with regard to the (possible) formalisation of aesthetic experience and the elaboration on 'reflective judgement' that the Third Critique is a particularly interesting place to start. Indeed, this uncertainty would manifest the presence of concurrent or competing movements of generalisation / universalisation, between the formal equality of judgement and the empirical diversity of the human. At the heart of this conflict lies the empirico-transcendental doubling that captivated Foucault, but which the latter failed to investigate from the standpoint of racial difference. Like Denise Ferreira da Silva, who draws abundantly on the Kantian corpus,<sup>6</sup> Lloyd understands that it is on such a hypothesis that our ability to offer an analysis of the representation mechanisms at the root of racialisation and racial judgement depends. Focusing on the various movements of universalisation and generalisation at play in the Third Critique, the difficulty for Lloyd is to correlate the process of 'formalisation' taking place in the communal (*Gemeinschaftlich*) foundation of aesthetic judgement with the production of racial(ised) subjects, i.e. with the production of subjects that are coded at once anthropologically and historically.

The key is to divide 'the Kantian universal in order to analyse the working of different modes of generalisation, universalisation and formalisation but also the related literary tropes of metaphor and analogy at stake in the Third Critique. Here, as in a previous article,<sup>7</sup> Lloyd discusses, in particular, the crucial importance of Kant's use of examples and the dynamics of *exemplarity*. Unlike subsumption, exemplarity has a temporal logic attached to it:<sup>8</sup> an 'exemplary' case, by virtue of being a 'model' (*Muster*), turns into a law of development. This means that the passage from the example to the model or the exemplary, although it seems formal, immediately harbours historical and political dimensions. Exemplarity turns out to be a pivotal element in the articulation of the racial problematic with the broader question of representation. Indeed, it is because the temporality of

the formation of the aesthetic subject becomes a model for cultural progress at the level of world-history, and communication through the *sensus communis* becomes a model of 'lawful sociability' (§60), that racial hierarchy re-emerges at the heart of Kant's Third Critique. *Under Representation* points to the importance of further unpacking this temporality of universalisation, which, unlike Hegel, Kant didn't fully explicate.

Lloyd's project demonstrates the inadequacy of some recent attacks on the 'postcolonial' made in the name of universalism. For the point is not to oppose universalism and particularism or singularity *in abstracto*, but first and foremost to unpack the variety of universalisation processes, in theory and in practice, that have grounded, and reproduced, the logics of race. This is a larger project to which Lloyd provides an important contribution. However, the relationship between the formal, on the one hand, and the historical, on the other, is not as fully fleshed out as we might hope, for Lloyd doesn't venture into the Kantian texts devoted to history and progress, nor into Kant's *Anthropology*, and instead draws mainly on a notion of progress analysed through the prism of pedagogy and via other authors such as Schiller.

At the level of methodology, Lloyd's undertaking shows that thinking 'representation', race and aesthetics within a single theoretical figure requires us to move quickly through various steps of generalisation, starting with the general term 'aesthetic' itself. By nominalising aesthetic into 'the aesthetic', Lloyd chooses to bypass some pivotal moments in the history of post-Kantian aesthetics, preferring to assume the continuity of a tradition running from Schiller to Rancière over discontinuities brought about in this history by Romanticism and the Frankfurt School, under the heading of art theory. (Spivak's own reflections on 'aesthetic education',<sup>9</sup> though so wonderfully at odds with Lloyd's argumentative trajectory, are also strangely absent from this book.) Whilst Lloyd strives to distinguish the notion of 'regime' from that of 'discourse', we might wonder whether the former does not encounter the same methodological difficulties as the latter, when it seeks to offer itself as a coherent theory. For although Lloyd is adamant that we should bring back the 'aesthetic regime' to regulations and forms of subjection emanating from the *state*, and thus to its material underpinnings, such a 'regime' also depends on the epistemological naturalisation of repres-

entation by aesthetics, that is, on the generalisation and systematisation of the activity of representation, 'from the most fundamental acts of perception and reflection to the relation of the subject to the political and the economic, or to the social as a whole' (7). However, to show that aesthetic discourse, or that philosophical aesthetics, is permeated by the operations of race does not require us to account for the singularity of 'aesthetic' over other Enlightenment discourses about the 'human'. Unfortunately, a justification as to why this all-encompassing matrix of representation is *aesthetic* – rather than anthropological or historical, or a particular constellation of these different theoretical fields – is missing from Lloyd's book.

### **Whiteness of the citizen-subject: Kant/Fanon**

While Kant may be the central reference of *Under Representation*, it is Frantz Fanon who remains Lloyd's principal (if sometimes implicit) interlocutor, thus generating an unusual dialogue between Kant(-ianisms) and Fanon(-isms). The triumph of representation in the aesthetic sphere is contrasted here to what Fanon analyses as the failure of the anticolonial claims to representativity. In targeting the 'racism of culture' (70), Lloyd pursues an early Fanonian, typically post-war line. Indeed, in the 1950s one of the difficulties of theoretical anti-colonialism was precisely to demonstrate that claims to cultural or civilisational development would do nothing to emancipate the people subjected to colonial violence. As Fanon famously explained during the First Congress of Black Writers and Artists (1956), any claim to culture is suspicious and contains a half-masked racism.<sup>10</sup> At the crux of this debate lay the thorny question of the role of the intellectual in decolonisation, since the intellectual vanguard was also the most 'assimilated' section among the colonised population, and hence, in David Lloyd's conception, those who were most integrated within the state mechanisms of representation.

In the central and best-known chapter of the book, 'Race Under Representation', it is the notion of 'assimilation' that operates as the conceptual connexion between *Bildung* philosophies and Fanon's theory of racial subjection. Lloyd thereby establishes an unusual bridge between the nineteenth-century figure of the citizen-



subject and the production of colonised subjects in the 'French Imperial nation-state' (Gary Wilder); a connexion that, we may hypothesise, probably emerged through Lloyd's work on Ireland, since the Irish case was uniquely structured by an ensemble of pedagogic and institutional measures, on the one hand, and by a singular racial order, on the other.<sup>11</sup> As is well-known, the nineteenth-century ideologies of European emerging nation-states were carried over into anticolonial discourse. Contrasting with this 'black Bildung', or what Pheng Cheah has described as the 'organismic' narratives of anticolonial nationalism,<sup>12</sup> the end of Fanon's Bildung is 'not identity but the discovery of the culturally constitutive function of racism; it reveals the insistence of a splitting rather than the fulfillment of a developed subject' (91). Importantly, Lloyd claims that the persistence of racial formations to this day indicates the state's failure to 'totalise the domain of the subject', be it under the umbrella of assimilation or multiculturalism. Without fully thematising it, he develops a theory of the split S/subject. The chapter's pivotal contention is that the existence of the Subject as the ideal-type subject of aesthetic judgement and citizen-subject of a unified public sphere irremediably gives rise to its twin figure; that is, the subject of race. In other words, the regime of representation, by instituting the Subject, institutes itself immediately as a regime of assimilation, and thus as an essentially racial regime. This racial regime does not only prevent certain populations from being *adequately* represented (*vertreten*, *Vertretbarkeit*), it also bars their access to representation itself (*vorstellen*).

Lloyd reinterprets Fanon's own analysis of the pathological subject (of race) through the prism of representation. Throughout *Black Skin White Masks*, Fanon describes various ways in which the white or the coloniser, for the black subject, functions as a *third* person, an observer, a fictional eye. This is for instance the case in Fanon's rewriting of Adler's theory in chapter 7 of *Black Skin White Masks*. Drawing on Adler's analysis of the inferiority complex as the root of neurosis, Fanon emphatically claims that 'Antillean society is a neurotic society'.<sup>13</sup> In the Antilles, one needs to supplement Adler's comparison mechanism with a third term, the 'White', which constitutes the fiction of self-identity and mastery, and the projected locus of the black's judgement. Whiteness, then, doesn't simply designate a 'Subject without

properties', but encapsulates the very capacity of representation (*Vorstellung*), that capacity for inscribing a difference within the human. Lloyd's theorem is that 'it is impossible for the racialised individual to enter the domain of representation except as that Subject that negates difference and therefore the racialised subject itself. Assimilation is self-negation, "renunciation" as Fanon puts it' (92). This is one of the senses in which race is *under* representation: it lies underneath the threshold of representation, because it is constitutive of its regime. In this sense there can be no 'racial democracy' (12–13). This is Lloyd's radical way of intervening within the debates on multiculturalism and curricula transformation in the university, which, as he explains, provides the political backdrop for the book as a whole.

Lloyd underscores the fact that both Kantian aesthetics and racialism posit 'indifference' and the 'un-marked', but also dis-interest and impartiality as the high point of the civilisational scale and the telos of human development. Furthermore the very idea of *sensus communis*, by establishing as norm a 'subject without properties', a purely formal and exchangeable subject, produces whiteness: 'The white assumes the position of universally representative man within the narrative of representation itself. That is not to say that the white man is (yet) identical with the position of pure, universal identity that is the Subject without properties but rather that he stands as its representative' (89). Crucially, Lloyd holds that race is no 'ontological or essential quality but is constructed in differential relation to the normative culture of the state' (93). What separates the positions of whiteness and blackness, then, cannot be 'difference', but instead the chasm between self-identity (through representability), on the one hand, and non-identity, on the other.

For Lloyd, the typically aesthetic 'as if' judgement, the possibility of a common sense, determines the logical and ethical foundation of social relations in the civic-bourgeois order. By drawing an itinerary from the production of the citizen-subject to the problematic of race, Lloyd interestingly follows a similar thought trajectory to that of Étienne Balibar in his work on anthropological differences. But whereas Balibar considers 'anthropological differences' to be the unavoidable excess of civic-bourgeois universality and the irresolvable consequence of political modernity,<sup>14</sup> Lloyd's suggestion is

that the mechanisms of racialisation are intrinsic to the very category of the subject. Indeed, while Balibar seeks to maintain the philosophical polysemy and political ambivalence of the modern concept of subject, Lloyd's notion of S/subject is embedded in *representation* in a fundamental way, ideologically and materially, through what he describes as the 'normative culture of the state'. Their bifurcation highlights the difference between a critique of racial violence that saves the integrity of philosophical conceptuality, and one which understands philosophy as yet another mechanism of representation, directly sustaining, and sustained by, the mechanisms of racial violence.

The final chapters of the book, 'Representation's Coup' and 'The Aesthetic Taboo: Aura, Magic, and the Primitive', explore two figures that stand beyond, or outside of, the regime of representation: the subaltern (in Spivak's account) and the work of art (in Adorno's). They constitute not so much upbeat conclusions or resolutions to the quandary of representation, as aporetic developments of the problem set in place. Although Lloyd is sympathetic to Spivak's arguments in 'Can the Subaltern Speak?', he highlights the consternation and paralysis, or even the aura of melancholia, that surround her figure of the Subaltern (96). Lloyd's qualm about Spivak, then, is that by characterising the Subaltern as the very limit of representation, by making of the Subaltern subject an unrepresentable figure, she transforms it into an ethical dilemma. Such 'partial analysis of the system of representation has the unintended effect of positing the unrepresentability of the Subaltern as a problem of the individual positioning of the intellectual and therefore as an ethical or an epistemological rather than a political matter' (118). Instead, Lloyd advocates an examination of the intellectual's constitutive role in the 'representative formations against which the subaltern emerges differentially' (ibid.). Likewise, Lloyd remains ambivalent about Adorno's considerations on the artwork, arguing that his theory is at once embedded within the racial regime of aesthetics when it comes to his dismissal of 'magic', but also provides a way out of it, through his analysis of the non-identity of the work of art as a materiality that resists formalisation (156). These aporetic endings indicate that such theoretical attempts to move outside

representation remain, as 'countermovement within the system of representation' (158), bound up with what they negate. For Lloyd, our task continues to be to adopt the standpoint of these excessive figures, and to 'think again the history of the present from the place of the subaltern subject of affectability and with the irreducible element of art that is its abundance even in the poverty of means' (158). Nonetheless, assessing the possibility of redemptory art forms beyond the racial regime of aesthetics is not a central concern of this volume. Instead, the book's main virtue is to keep us in this zone of discomfort, where the racial problematic springs out from the very core of 'our' Western philosophical and political modernity, that is, in the genealogy of the 'subject'.

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## Notes

1. David Lloyd and Paul Thomas, *Culture and the State* (New York: Routledge, 1998), 4.
2. Ibid., 5.
3. Ibid., 5.
4. Hannah Arendt, *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992).
5. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason: Toward a History of the Vanishing Present* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 26–35.
6. Denise Ferreira da Silva, *Toward a Global Idea of Race* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007).
7. David Lloyd, 'Kant's Examples', *Representations* 28 (Autumn 1988), 34–54.
8. Ibid.
9. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *An Aesthetic Education in the Era of Globalization* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013).
10. Frantz Fanon, 'Racism and Culture', in *Towards the African Revolution: Political Essays* (New York: Grove Press, [1956] 1988), 31–44.
11. See David Lloyd, *Irish Culture and Colonial Modernity 1800-2000: The Transformation of Oral Space* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).
12. Pheng Cheah, *Spectral Nationality: Passages of Freedom from Kant to Postcolonial Literatures of Liberation* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013).
13. Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin White Masks*, trans. Richard Philcox (New York: Grove Press, 2008), 188.
14. See Étienne Balibar, *Citizen Subject: Foundations for Philosophical Anthropology*, trans. Steven Miller (New York: Fordham University Press, 2017), 275–302.