

EDITORIAL NOTE

Introduction to “Race and Resistance” Cluster

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For academics, it is often easier to detail the many forms that racism and anti-Blackness take in our societies than it is to imagine effective resistance to them. Indeed, our understanding of the magnitude of the problem risks making us cynical about the possibility of meaningful resistance. Yet the authors of the following four pieces—which make up a found cluster of articles on “Race and Resistance”—take up the question of resistance in intriguing and insightful ways. None of them are naïve, nor do they view any of the resistances they identify as perfect or incorruptible. Nevertheless, each author reminds us in their own fashion of María Lugones’s urgent call (quoted in Mason 2021) to “think of people who are oppressed as not consumed or exhausted by oppression, but also as resisting or sabotaging a system aimed at molding, reducing, violating, or erasing them” (Lugones 2003, 24).

Although the four pieces are quite diverse in style, influences, and specific sites of inquiry, several common threads run through the cluster. Qrescent Mali Mason draws on the work of Kimberlé Crenshaw, Simone de Beauvoir, María Lugones, and José Medina to argue that the social media hashtag #BlackGirlMagic, with which Black women began tagging images and posts of themselves and other Black women in 2013, emerges from and constitutes a guerrilla epistemology. Taylor Rogers also engages the epistemological insights of José Medina and uses the social media hashtag #MeToo in one of her striking examples, but uses Kristie Dotson’s work to focus on the resilience of dominant epistemologies and addresses her work to the perpetrators of epistemic injustice rather than to its victims. Jan-Therese Mendes’s work stands out in several ways as it engages Black Canadian performance and visual artists Camille Turner and Riya Jama and has a particular interest in the Othering and alien status of Black *Muslim* women in Canada; yet her emphasis on art echoes Mason’s interest in resistant imagination and, like Mason, she is most interested in the ways Black women’s resistances speak to other Black women, rather than to the dominant culture. Finally, K. Melchor Quick Hall’s piece is striking for its intimacy and use of personal narrative, but is no less engaged with the pervasive nature of the dominant culture and power systems, using Saidiya Hartman and Dorothy Roberts to chart a path of Black women’s resistance through revolutionary mothering (practices that are also evident in Mason’s discussion of #BlackGirlMagic).

Taken together, the pieces describe distinct but interrelated ways in which dominant structures and social imaginaries exhibit tremendous resilience in the face of resistances, but also illustrate modes of resistance that can interrupt that resilience, even if only for a limited period of time.

For Mason, the site of domination is a social imaginary that operates to devalue Black women and girls both “in real life” and through social media. “As a contouring feature of the contemporary Western social imaginary,” Mason writes, “social media not only reflect everyday lived experiences, but also serve a distinctly imaginative function” (2021, 708). According to Mason, this imaginative function, which not only reinforces, but can also *rearticulate* social scripts, makes social media a site where Black women and girls are able not only to suffer harms, but to contest harmful images and pursue empowerment in virtual community with other Black women and girls. Mason argues that as a form of resistance, #BlackGirlMagic can be understood as a guerrilla epistemology that (1) “centers the epistemological standpoints of Black women, where Black women’s lived experiences of intersectional ambiguity offer them privileged access to the workings of structures of domination and to the social imaginary that attends to their condition in the world”; (2) “posits that this resulting knowledge enables them to survive in hostile conditions—it provides knowledge in the form of resistance strategies and alternative means of thriving”; (3) “serves the function of epistemological transmission of the fact that Black women face unique challenges and that these challenges have been met and exceeded”; and (4) “invokes the legacy of Black women’s resistance to sexism and racism, laying the groundwork for a critical genealogy” (2021, 715). Although Mason acknowledges that such “instruments of counterdiscursive shifts and melioration are never pure nor intended to dominate the social imaginary indefinitely,” she finds their value in reclaiming Black womanhood both “for ourselves and for those future magical subjects” (2021, 719).

For Rogers, the site of domination is epistemological systems, and her particular intervention considers their affective dimension. Offering an account of *affective numbness* reminiscent of the racial empathy gap, Rogers “explores why harmful epistemic practices and resources remain influential even after they have been critically interrogated or rationally demystified” (2021, 725). On Rogers’s account: “Affective numbness is . . . the phenomenon whereby one fails to emotionally or ‘affectively’ engage with non-dominant experiences, rendering one emotionally unavailable or unreachable to those experiences” (2021, 727). Where one is unmoved by the experiences of marginalized others, one will fail to learn from accounts of those experiences, with the upshot that “countering racism and sexism requires taking seriously the epistemic role of affect (or lack thereof) in promoting knowledge and ignorance” (Rogers 2021, 728). Rogers argues that stereotypes about Black and brown people allow for affective numbness, which, among other harms, can result in a failure to fairly consider court testimony or the appropriation of resources developed by nonwhite people to focus almost exclusively on the experiences of white people (as Taylor argues occurred in the #MeToo movement). Having established that not only are the emotions we feel epistemically valuable, but that “the emotions *we do not feel* are also epistemically valuable,” Rogers argues for the cultivation of *affective resistance* (2021, 735, her emphasis). This, she argues, might be attempted by adapting the Kantian notion of *disinterestedness* to refer to “a form of affective engagement that is free of (self-) interest, or, on my less optimistic view, is a form of affective engagement that contains at least less (self-) interest than usual” (Rogers 2021, 735). If not that, however, Rogers urges exploration of other *affective* approaches to improved epistemic practices of resistance.

For Mendes, the site of domination concerns Canada’s promise of ostensible inclusion for nonwhite people in human citizenry despite the ubiquity of Canada’s national anti-Black imaginary. Drawing on Lauren Berlant’s concept of *cruel optimism*, in which something we yearn for impedes our flourishing, Mendes explains how:

[t]he endurance of human citizenry as an object of desire has a deceptively twinned utility since it (1) keeps nonwhite subjects near to the promise as they await its eventual fulfillment, and (2) the interminable eventuality of the promise's realization keeps nonwhite people close enough to maintain the diversity that shrouds Canada's white-supremacist ethos. (2021, 751–52)

In resistance to this never-to-be-fulfilled longing for human citizenry within the Canadian nation, Mendes “contemplates the significance of willfully adopting even more strangeness than an anti-Black national imaginary would have reckoned through the possibilities that abound in visual and performance art” (2021, 750). Mendes explores Black Canadian artist Camille Turner's performance pieces *The Final Frontier* and *The Final Frontier Trailer Version 2*, alongside Somali Canadian artist and storyteller Riya Jama's digital collages “Fanged Gabar” and “Hidden Gabar Yar” (where the latter artist's subjects are both Black and Muslim). Mendes argues that both artists' works can be understood as a “heightening of one's human and national exiles through the body [, which] aggravates the racist binary of harmful outsider/hopeful stranger meant to orient the direction of the will since the alienated subject turns inward and experiments with the surface of the self” (2021, 752). In other words, drawing on the work of Sarah Ahmed, Mendes claims that rather than willing toward Canadian human citizenry, the subjects of these artworks exhibit a willful disobedience to the project of multiculturalism. Or, through the lens of Afro-pessimism: “These figures fully inhabit and visually heighten this site of social death instead of aspiring for a recognition that deceptively promises to bring them into human and national life” (Mendes 2021, 761).

Finally, for Hall, the site of domination is Saidiya Hartman's ongoing “afterlife of slavery,” in which Black motherhood is systematically pathologized and devalued and Black family bonds continue to be “strategically and systematically shattered” (2021, 775). Giving voice to the issue through the complexities of her own experience, Hall explores the shifting relationships (the finding and losing, losing and finding) of four generations of Black mothers and daughters. Central to the piece and what it seeks to resist is the US child welfare system, with its deeply entrenched racism and the power it claims to name, to make and to break “families.” Through an incisive critique of her own path to becoming a pre-adoptive parent, Hall identifies some of the problematic frameworks and assumptions through which the child welfare system causes, in the words of Dorothy Roberts, “serious group-based harms by reinforcing disparaging stereotypes about Black family unfitness and need for white supervision, by destroying a sense of family autonomy and self-determination among many Black Americans, and by weakening Blacks' collective ability to overcome institutionalized discrimination” (Roberts 2002, ix, quoted in Hall 2021, 772). Yet throughout the process, Hall asserts her resistance to the logics of the system, through her written application, her foster/adoption class, and, most strikingly, through her decision to continue to mother, from a relative distance, a black girl living as a “legal orphan” in foster care who decided she did not wish to move into Hall's home. “I am a Black woman, a Black mother, living with/in a system that is targeting Black children,” writes Hall. “That system is creating harm for all Black families. In the same ways that we organize to care for our children as a community, we must organize to destroy this system, to free all of our children” (2021, 775). Or, in verse form:

I wonder whether I can weave together a community of mothers
 A quilt of revolutionary mothers
 Mothers who will refuse to obey

Mothers who will break the rules
 And make new stories
 And face death
 And breathe new life into the afterlives of slavery
 And the violence of the Department (Hall 2021, 778)

It has been my great privilege to usher these four pieces through the review process, and I hope that, taken together, they will provide readers with new insight into practices of resistance, especially as they concern disrupting the Othering and devaluing of Black women in North America in the afterlife of slavery and the enduring state of settler-colonization.

References

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