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## Emergent Bodies: Rethinking Race and Racialization Through Materialities

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## COMMENTARY

# Emergent Bodies: Rethinking Race and Racialization Through Materialities

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### Introduction

**A**ccording to Saldanha (2010), “all politics ultimately seek ways of reorganizing the social for there to be justice and peace, however defined” (p. 283). Recently, the National Art Education Association (NAEA) has harnessed the energy surrounding collective organizing and protesting into conversations about racism that are part of producing socially just possibilities using art and education. NAEA highlights racism as discriminatory and exclusionary, as well as a practice that is normalized, institutionalized, and systematized for the benefit of one group over another, with narratives and images that support its painful fictions (Rolling, 2020a; Rolling & Bey, 2016). Critical race theory is the main framework associated with these conversations. Introduced in the 1970s, critical race theory was developed by legal scholars and others to further understand why race-based oppression and White privilege continue to exist, and how the law could serve emancipatory actions and change. They point to how race is socially constructed, made normal, used to exploit and oppress people of color, and functions to create inequities (Price, 2010). Moreover, they address intersectionality, structural injustices, hate crimes, and voting rights, among other issues, and how placing people in racial categories has material effects in relation to power and wealth (Nash, 2003). In using critical race theory for insights into racism, scholars connect race to diverse discursive concepts with cultural representations of race, and they use narrative or counterstory to question the status quo and rework racialized injustice. They also encourage teachers and students, among others, to be aware of their privileges, biases, beliefs, values, stories, and the stereotypes that they hold, so they can understand how this affects the work that they do and how they interact in the world (Desai, 2010; Kraehe et al., 2018; Lee & Lutz, 2005; Rolling, 2020a, 2020b; Rolling & Bey, 2016).

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Moreover, within critical race theory there has been an emphasis on characterizing racism and racialization around a Black and White binary, which has since been problematized (Alcoff, 2006; Sundstrom, 2008). Blackness exists only by what it is not; difference is thought of in terms of self versus other (Saldanha, 2006). The binary itself does not capture the different experiences of race and racialization among African Americans, Latin Americans, Native Americans, and Asian Americans in the United States, where some groups have been conceptualized as outsiders, foreigners, and model minorities. Further, according to Alcoff (2006), the binary has also disempowered a variety of racial groups to define their own identity, and proposes that all conflicts between groups can be understood through the discourses of anti-Blackness and White supremacy, which is used as an obstacle for coalition building. The Black-White binary does not encompass my experiences in relation to my racialization as I connect to others and with concepts of race, care, immigration, citizenship, language, and assimilation. The binary organizes an uncritical and stratified social world (Franklin-Phipps, 2017); in addition, it fails to capture the complexity of racial realities and the lives of diasporic practices and creative modes of being and continues to envision us in opposition to Whiteness. Last, Blackness or Whiteness itself presumes a type of solidarity across differences (Ahmed, 2012).

As Franklin-Phipps and Rath (2019) noted, thinking about race and racialization and how to teach about them is never truly finished. They critically analyze the situation by claiming that teachers conceive of themselves as “being” antiracist allies with little to no discomfort in analyzing their complicity, instead of “as becoming” racially literate and using a never-ending set of practices responding to spaces, places, and racial structures individuals encounter (p. 145). We should not act just because we are now

informed about what is needed, but also perform because we enter in relations with one another. This resonates with the philosophical approach I wish to examine in this piece, one that is connected to the relational, processual, and transformative force of the material, and to Deleuze and Guatarri’s (1987) notion of becoming as a space of in-between with emphasis on relations and connections.

### **New Materialist Race Studies**

Bennett (2010) reminded us that thinking from the middle moves the emphasis from an anthropocentric agency and will, to “affective bodies forming assemblages... a theory of action and responsibility that crosses the human-nonhuman divide” (p. 24). In new materialist race studies, these ideas have been taken up by Jackson (2020), who “furthers [B]lack studies’ interrogation of humanism by identifying our shared being with the nonhuman without suggesting that some members of humanity bear the burden of ‘the animal’” (p. 12). Jackson observed established forms of Black dissidence that “articulate being (human) in a manner that neither relies on animal abjection nor reestablishes liberal humanism as the authority on being (human)” (2020, p. 2). She moves beyond individualizing notions of the human and the centrality of the human toward a more complex and relational perspective. For Jackson, the posthumanist critique of anthropocentrism is to question humanization and its emancipatory promise, and as such of the human condition of African diaspora peoples as a “failed praxis of being” (2020, p. 15) that “presume[s] a humanity... secure within the logic of liberal humanism rather than engage[s] with a humanity that is often cast as debatable or contingent” (2020, p. 16). From this perspective, humans may not even be human; they are expressions of ongoing entanglements, which challenges us to think

about what it means to be part of an assemblage.

Bringing the argument closer to education, what I seek to explore here is how posthuman experimentations in art education may constitute ways of composing, tinkering, and patching (Edwards, 2015) together affective assemblages around race, Blackness, and more-than-racializing experiences. Posthuman new materialist approaches undo binaries, and foster knowledge-making practices where what is to be known does not precede action. Knowledge is made in experiences of being in relation and in connection, where knowing is onto-epistemological (Barad, 2007). Knowing occurs in processes of attuning to movements and relations, rather than substances and identities. As such, study, research, and education involve processes of rendering oneself susceptible and vulnerable to the ongoing change, variation, and contingency of material-affective assemblages (Rosiek, 2018). In this context, artmaking, or study, is not a representation but an experiment in sensations across bodies and movements toward new ways of relating to the world (Trafi-Prats & Castro-Varela, 2022).

Scholars in education are currently engaging in race and racial literacies with a focus on materiality, affect, and process (Franklin-Phipps & Rath, 2019; Nxumalo, 2020; Saldanha, 2006, 2010) where race is conceived as an assemblage or event, and bodies are emergent in ontological encounter and affect. In my own research as an art educator, I follow and further posthuman and new materialists approaches to race and Blackness (Little & Cobb, 2022). More specifically, I turn to the work of artist Folayemi Wilson, and her *Eliza's Peculiar Cabinet of Curiosities* (2016–present), an ongoing project at the Lynden Sculpture Garden in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, for an example of how race can be an assemblage where bodies emerge in ontological encounter and affect. Here art functions as an affective experiment where

different entities are brought together as an event—as a becoming. Further, the work is Afrofuturist.

*Eliza's Peculiar Cabinet of Curiosities* is partly a slave cabin and *wunderkammer* that imagines what a 19th-century Black woman might collect, catalog, and display in her house (Figure 1). We cannot see Eliza, as she is shaped through her collections and writings. Looking at them, we know that she is a time traveler collecting objects from the past, present, and future; an artist who makes things; a musician who plays; and a scientist who researches and writes about nature and culture. Things come into existence through arrangement, relation, and connection. According to the Lynden Sculpture Garden Virtual Hub website (n.d.),

Wilson positions the Black imagination as an essential element in Black survival and self-determination. The fictional Eliza not only assumes the role of collector, anthropologist and naturalist; as curator of her *wunderkammer* she asserts her right to creative and artistic forms of social commentary about her time. Through Eliza—and the materialization of her interior world—participants have the opportunity to experience history from the point of view of the “other,” as well as through the eyes of an artist who takes history as one of her materials and employs contemporary media and installation strategies to disrupt the viewer’s assumptions about the institution of slavery. (para. 2)

Eliza is an imaginary character and an invention of the artist. We “see” Eliza through her things, including the Emancipation Proclamation on the ceiling; shells on the floor; preserved birds and fragments of bones on shelves; a digital image of water in a pail; books; images; statues; dolls from the past, present, and future; boxing gloves; musical instruments; writing utensils and a desk; a



Figure 1. Folayemi Wilson, *Eliza's Peculiar Cabinet of Curiosities* (2016–present). Image courtesy of the Lynden Sculpture Garden. Photo credit: Jim Wildeman.

field guide of observations; and so on, all of which function as a cabinet of curiosities (Figure 2). These cabinets represented the owners' intellect, study, wealth, and taste and acted as displays of wonder and affect (Greenblatt, 1990). Eliza's house is full of

wonders to be seen, affecting bodies to produce a reconfiguring of the imaginary and collective memory. This imaginary has been made and developed through Afrofuturism. As part of the radical Black imagination, Afrofuturism<sup>1</sup> is "something that can transform



Figure 2. Folayemi Wilson, *Eliza's Peculiar Cabinet of Curiosities* (2016–present). Image courtesy of the Lynden Sculpture Garden. Photo credit: Jim Wildeman.

the world and produce conditions that support” (Little & Cobb, 2022, p. 8) postcolonial futures with Africa at its center (Acuff, 2020).

The house in which Eliza lives intersects with the past, present, and future to tell stories that offer up something different for a Black woman who is enslaved (Little & Cobb,

2022). And, in the process, she arouses wonder and asks those who visit to engage in a form of study enabling “the capacity to feel through others, for others to feel through you, for you to feel them feeling you” (Harney & Moten, 2013, p. 56). Eliza is made visible via her collection and her writing; she is a slave

given voice via her journaling. But the space is also of silence. Seshadri (2012) discussed how silence is not identical to not speaking. Speech itself includes moments of speaking and silence. Here, the silence regulates the space for other discourses—as a space of possibility for something other than, as a political realm, a site of contestation, a disruption (Jackson, 2013). We not only make sense out of her collection of things, but also concoct specific worldly (re)configurations. We come to understand that knowledge is more than making facts. It is making worlds out of matters. Eliza performs representation in a manner that (un)makes worlds (Jackson, 2013). She is more than in opposition to Whiteness.

Wilson experiments with presence by intervening and tinkering and patching together (Edwards, 2015) through the assemblage of objects, images, writings, and ideas displayed for creative and political intervention. Eliza is not fixed, bounded, and made transparent by the usual discourses that produce her. The materiality of signs, bodies, and spaces matters and exceeds what we think we know. There are, of course, the memories of the conditions of slavery that charge the space, but race here is a “whole event, much more than just a statement, important though that statement may be in the emergence of the event” (Saldanha, 2006, p. 12). Race is treated as a spatial and embodied practice through presencing. This presencing interrupts marginalization where the potential of stories and other creative acts refigures a presence that always already existed and attends to tensions and relationalities of particular spaces (Nxumalo, 2019; Nxumalo & Bozalek, 2022). It offers a way of seeing and imagining Black futurities in response to settler colonialism, anti-Blackness, and Black erasure (Little & Cobb, 2022).

Further, refiguring presences through making visible does not assume that all

involved are in equitable relations. Such encounters are not cognitive knowledge and knowing, but material connections that register as affective experiences. Because life exceeds representation, we must be attuned to affect, sensation, and emotion to describe how we are involved and intertwined. Moreover, representations are not what they seem; they are always contingent, reflecting the world, but also distinct from that which they seek to represent. They hold the world at a distance. By placing objects side by side, Wilson makes us curious about what they do together and what immanent connections can be made through affect. Our own histories, identities, memories, texts, and ideas are also part of the assemblage and affect. We study the movement between her body past, present, and future; her things; and her environment where fragments temporarily cohere through slow looking, and what we thought was natural and normal to her becomes disrupted. Wilson also presents modes of testifying to, and witnessing, through encountering and relating that disrupt erasures and deficits while opening up possibilities. Taking inspiration from the teachings of Black feminists, Nxumalo (2020) discussed how testifying reaches back to the places ancestors created to open themselves up to one another and make themselves visible: “Testifying-witnessing make visible the complexities of (in this case) Black geographies, beyond stories of damaged place relations, surveillance, and absence” (p. 14). This approach incorporates experiential and affective processes with the aim of generating affirmation through restorying while attending to discriminatory practices. Recreating spatial configurations in response to erasure offers a way of seeing and imagining the various ways in which Black lives are lived and can be lived. Eliza is an intellect who is connected to art, culture, and nature. Wilson’s work invites unexpected responses to racism, colonialism, and erasure

as an assemblage that disturbs and makes us imagine differently.

How can encounter transform us as a part of an assemblage of racialization? First, those using new materialisms have shifted focus to matters and material bodies, where questions of who matters and what matters take center stage, while critical geographies have led to the understanding that racialized processes are spatialized. Race involves notions of belonging and displacement, making some visible and others invisible through types of encounters, including incarceration, (im)mobility, reservations, genocide, and deportation (Price, 2010). In new materialisms, matter and material bodies are not just objects upon which powerful discourses act but are assemblages that come into being through active processes. According to Barad (2007), matter is actively involved in the becoming of the world and intra-acts with it; matter is entangled in “ongoing responsiveness” (p. 394). People, animals, plants, and objects do not exist in isolation but act, react, and become with one another (Caniglia, 2018; Little & Cobb, 2022). Further, Bennett (2010) discussed matter as alive, as a vitality at work, and as a web of interconnections where to harm one part would harm another. Such entanglements require one to be bound to or obligated to the other. Here, there are no foundational dichotomies, such as mind-matter, Black-White, nature, and human-nonhuman, opening us up to multiplicities that exceed the dichotomies replaced (Braidotti, 2011, 2013). Race here is not a thing, but an event—intra-actions of different material, affective, and discursive elements that can come together in an encounter. According to Saldanha (2006), racialized bodies do not preexist but materialize through intra-action. Language as an intra-action can also be used to circumscribe what the body is capable of doing in spaces, tying it to particular discourses. Bodies, however, need to also be

thought of as productive, combining with words and other things, connecting to histories, geographies, and potentialities.

Race must ... be conceived as a chain of contingency, in which the connections between its constituent components are not given, but are made viscous through local attractions. ... The concept of race is not for taxonomic ordering, but for studying the movements between human bodies, things, and their changing environment. (Saldanha, 2006, pp. 18–19)

Material bodies, as assemblages, can also break with their entanglements and enter into other relations (Pacini-Ketchabaw et al., 2011). This stance on race allows engaging productively with human and nonhuman and the wider environment of inanimate matter (Fox & Alldred, 2018).

Race as an emergent ontological encounter—an event—suggests that what happens can change as settings shift and holds potential for “ethical engagement with otherness” to rework what is possible as new imaginings (Saldanha, 2006, p. 14). As a result, as Saldanha (2006) suggested, we should also ask “what immanent connections” can bodies “forge with things and places, how they work, travel, fight, write, love—how these bodies become viscous, slow down, get into certain habits, into certain collectivities, like city, social stratum, or racial formation” (p. 19). Additionally, such a sociomaterialist approach to race, according to Pacini-Ketchabaw et al. (2011), “considers how different physical forces come together (such as other material objects, surroundings, and phenotypes) with discursive, systemic forces to *make race matter* in each encounter with difference,” transforming “connections to create and recreate a subject-in-process” (p. 23), versus one that is fixed.



## Conclusion

This article focuses on the scholarship that informs the material dimension of race. Although the categories of Black and White are central to racializing processes involved in othering, they do not speak to all experiences. The relational, processual, and transformative force of the material and Deleuze and Guattari's (1987) notion of becoming as a space of in-between enable an understanding of race as an event, as an encounter, as movement beyond binaries. Racialized bodies do not preexist but materialize through intra-action, such as the example of Fodayemi Wilson's Eliza, who becomes through an assemblage of objects, images, writings, and ideas, and is productive as a creative and political intervention. Instead of treating race as already recognizable categories, the concept of becoming can be used to transform subjectivities from the known into the dynamic and relational. Because becomings can happen in unforeseen ways, it is impossible to fully know what Blackness and Whiteness are.

As I consider this sociomaterial approach, I think of race as a series of practices instead of a thing and how these practices are sites where subjects and objects acquire shape (Pacini-Ketchabaw et al., 2011). Talking about race as an event versus a thing moves us away from social construction to production. Race as practice allows for multiplicities and uncertainties as well as different ways to construct and reconstruct presence through testifying–witnessing that disrupts and forms the subject in process versus fixed, possibly enabling change and expanding our vision of what could be. Education here is not about learning through mastery, but learning via experimentation—learning through creative entanglements where multiple worlds are enacted through material and social practices (Edwards, 2015). According to Jackson (2016), “The approach here diverges from one that evaluates representation exclusively based on a representation's supposed accuracy or inaccuracy, in other words, its ability to re-present the real thing.... [Instead it] performs representation in a speculative mode” (p. 9).

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## ENDNOTE

- <sup>1</sup> Afrofuturism is a type of speculative fabulation that addresses concerns shaped by the African diaspora and (re)envision Black futures. It combines science fiction with history to explore experiences and contemporary conversations about race, technology, and culture. Artists traverse many disciplines and include Ellen Gallagher, Wangechi Mutu, Jean-Michel Basquiat, Nick Cave, Mickalene Thomas, Octavia Butler, Sun Ra, and George Clinton, just to name a few. The movie *Black Panther* is a popular example of Afrofuturism, in which the story imagines a Black protagonist who plays a leading role in a battle for leadership and self-determination, and who is both the Black Panther who gained superhuman powers by eating an indigenous herb, and king of Wakanda, an African nation rich in resources and scientific accomplishments. The character and his country have the power to change the world but face internal and external threats to their autonomy and sovereignty.