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Citation for final published version:

Brigstocke, Julian and Gassner, Gunter 2021. Materiality, race and speculative aesthetics. *Geohumanities* 7 (2) , pp. 359-369. 10.1080/2373566X.2021.1977163

Publishers page: <https://doi.org/10.1080/2373566X.2021.1977163>

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Materiality, Race, and Speculative Aesthetics

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Pre-print version of the paper published in *GeoHumanities* 7(2), 2021.

Materiality, Race, and Speculative Aesthetics

The papers in this forum share a concern with analysing relationships between politics and aesthetics in ways that question humanist, anthropocentric logics underpinning dominant aesthetic regimes of power. They do so by foregrounding more-than-human materialities and critical analyses of race and colonial power. In this introduction, we begin by routing debates around spaces and politics of aesthetics through post-humanist, new-materialist, and post-colonial trajectories, and briefly highlight theoretical reference points that animate many of the contributions to this forum, focusing on the aesthetics of disruption in Glissant, Rancière, and Benjamin. We then move on to guide the reader along two different routes through the collection, focusing first on material aesthetics, and then on aesthetic regimes of race.

Spaces and Politics of Aesthetics

Politics is an enterprise that is generative, imaginative, sensuous, and dependent on judgments about what is shared, common, and valued. For this reason politics has an irreducibly aesthetic element, as its possibilities are conditioned by structures governing how the world presents itself to sensory experience and solicits embodied judgments, values, and orientations. The geohumanities have engaged widely with aesthetics (for a review, see the Introduction in Hawkins & Straughan, 2015). Much of this work challenges regimes of power that reinforce human-centred conceptions of the world, conceptualising the aesthetic as a heterogeneous field of sense, sensation and judgment that is shaped by numerous forces and agencies, both organic and inorganic. Such work emphasizes the *political* importance of more-than-human aesthetics. For example, Yusoff's (2010) work on climate change argues for an aesthetics that is both playful and politically engaged, with a capacity to politicize ecologies and to structure what ecologies enter politics (2010: 72). Dixon (2009) shows how forms of art play a political role in commenting upon and challenging distributions of spaces and agency, by contesting political, economic, cultural and ethical contexts within which human and more-than-human entanglements operate (see also Dixon, Hawkins & Straughan 2012). Other work has theorized elemental materiality as contributing to an improved understanding of 'the material ontology of Earth, world, and life' (Engelman & McCormack, 2018: 243; see also Clarke 2015; McHugh & Kitson, 2018).

However, several writers worry that post-humanist analyses often ignore or marginalize issues of race and colonialism, and, in so doing, may reproduce racialized ontologies (e.g. Gilroy, 2018; Kinkaid, 2020). Appeals have been made for a 'post-humanist humanism' (Gilroy 2018: 16) that distances itself from dominant colonial modes of humanism as well as from anthropocentrism, but without renouncing the humanist vision of a world in which all people are able to fully develop their capacities. Wynter (2000) evokes a 're-enchanted humanism', or what Erasmus (2020) describes as a 'counter-humanism', that opposes itself to the scientific reductionism of modern racist humanisms. Relatedly, Chuh (2019) outlines a vision of an 'illiberal humanism' that mobilizes the capacity of the

aesthetic to disassociate from the order in which racism, dispossession, and impoverishment become part of a liberal 'common sense'. Such an illiberal humanism seeks aesthetic forms that challenge the rationalizations of the modern racist liberal order, for example through forms of 'decolonial aesthetics' (Cravey & Petit 2018).

Our suggestion is that, whilst occupying positions that are mutually disrupting, post-humanist, post-colonial and de-colonial ontologies also connect in ways that can usefully contribute to intersectional analyses of spaces and politics of aesthetics. The papers in this forum are all guided by an interest in establishing productive points of connection between post-humanist, feminist, and post-colonial / de-colonial critiques of the modern figure of Man (see also, for example, Amin 2012; Chen, 2012; Jackson 2018a; Mawani 2019; Saldanha 2007; Singh 2017; Swanton, 2010; Sundberg 2014; Yusoff 2018). Each contribution explores relations between materialist ontologies and decolonial, feminist, and anti-capitalist politics through a focus on aesthetics. Such a focus, we suggest, enables a generative recasting of critique, away from a negotiation of limits of experience and cognition, towards more speculative geographies that open up new channels of thought, experience, and practice, aspiring to 'forms of invention, experimentation, commitment, possibility, and vitality [that] can cultivate flourishing in terms of how worlds and their resonant domains are variously and differentially bound together' (Jackson 2017b:14). A post-humanist materialist geo-aesthetics, we suggest, can contribute to an evaluation not only of human-earth relations, but also to the multiple asymmetries within those relations (Last 2017), thereby reaching towards a politics of egalitarian, hybrid, more-than-human commons (Kirwan, Dawney & Brigstocke, 2015; Hoover 2021b).

Aesthetics of Disruption: Glissant, Rancière, Benjamin

Before introducing the contributions to this forum, we wish briefly to mention three theoretical influences that animate many of the included discussions. Edouard Glissant, Jacques Rancière, and Walter Benjamin all theorize the politics of aesthetics in ways that disrupt humanist accounts of the human and of political community, and they do so in distinctive but related ways.

Too much theorising on the politics of aesthetics is situated within the bounds of European modernity. By contrast, many contributions to this forum articulate alternative geographies and genealogies. One key reference point is the work of Edouard Glissant (1997), who, in *Poetics of Relation*, situates aesthetics in the colonial traumas of the Caribbean archipelago, cultivating a 'thinking from the shoreline'. As a geographical site of thinking, he frames the Caribbean archipelago – steeped in histories of colonisation, slavery, the middle passage, plantations, and continuing neo-colonial exploitation – as a nomadic space that simultaneously disassembles and assembles through its multiplicity of languages, origins, histories, traumas, and memories. Adopting a principle of creolisation – a continual movement of mixing and interpenetration – Glissant insists on a 'right to opacity' as a necessary correlate to genuinely embracing diversity. He articulates a revived aesthetic connection with the earth in ways that are invested in errancy, and in the flux and rhythms of sea, sand, silt, and blood. The result is a fragmented aesthetics of disruption, rupture, and connection (1997: 151) that is formed in relation to

a materiality of place that eschews any kind of grounding in territory, identity, roots, or filiation. It asserts itself without reference to what precedes, but through movement and ceaseless knowing-as-becoming (Drabinski, 2019:17).

With poetic force, Glissant's work dramatizes the possibilities for theorizing the politics of aesthetics through a deep engagement with intersecting spatial dynamics of colonialism, capitalism, materiality, reason, and experience. In this respect, Glissant's philosophy can be counterposed with the work of Jacques Rancière, another important resource for papers in this forum. For both, an aesthetics of disruption is central to a politics of change, but while Glissant sites his theorization of the politics aesthetics in a specific place, Rancière's account is more universalizing and less geographically contextualized, viewing aesthetics as always disruptive and, as a result, linked to (democratic) politics. In *Disagreement* (1999) and *The Politics of Aesthetics* (2014), Rancière explores politics from the perspective of the 'distribution of the sensible', which refers to 'the implicit law governing the sensible order' that produces a system of 'self-evident facts of perception based on the set horizons and modalities of what is visible and audible as well as what can be said, thought, made, or done' (Rockhill 2014: 89). This order – which is the result of multiple and antagonistic institutionalized as well as normalized practices and which formulates horizons and modalities that frame what is evident, purposeful, and practical – is the 'site' in which politics intervenes by means of declarations of a 'wrong', i.e. through events that disrupt conditioned ways of knowing the world, making something appear that could not previously be recognized. In so doing, divisions between 'speech' and utterances that are merely registered as 'noise' are broken down and distributions of value and agency and the ways in which they are materialized, legitimized, and contested can be revealed. For Rancière, aesthetics and politics are therefore linked by their disruptive nature. Aesthetics is a 'sensible mode of being' and politics is a permanent possibility of reframing material and symbolic space. Such a perspective emphasizes the constitutive role of space in politics, which always requires setting a stage for the manifestation of dissensus (Dikec, 2015). It has proved generative for diverse analyses from the perspectives of post-colonial theory (e.g. Tolia-Kelly, 2019; Millner 2013), as well as more-than-human political aesthetics (e.g. Dixon 2009).

A third reference point is Walter Benjamin's aesthetics of destruction and ruination, which shares with Rancière the conviction that the assertion of its aesthetic dimension is inherent in any radical emancipatory politics as well as the idea that destruction implies a simultaneous act of construction (see Gassner 2019). Benjamin's 'destructive character' sees 'nothing permanent' and therefore sees 'ways everywhere' (2005: 541). However, whereas Rancière conceptualizes the aesthetico-political subject in terms of self-awareness and self-reflection, disconnected from the objects that constitute what is experienced, Benjamin offers a radically materialist reading of the speculative moment where experience moves beyond the boundaries of the subject to encompass new kinds of embodiment, materiality, and technologically-mediated collective experience. A Benjaminian aesthetics strives to move beyond the limits of experience, reaching out towards new modes of subjectivity, consciousness, and relationality. It evokes the speculative figure of 'experience without a subject' as Benjamin looks to the redemptive

power of the 'inhuman' and 'creaturely' (Hanssen 1998) to establish forms of critique that destabilise space, subjectivity, and representation (Dubow 2004). In his early work, language is the privileged model of experience, which is expressed in Benjamin's suggestion that there 'is no event or thing in either animate or inanimate nature that does not in some way partake of language' (2004: 62-63). This implies the radically post-humanist stance that all matter is linguistic and expressive, and conversely, that all language and representation is material. Benjamin's arguments thus anticipate more recent work exploring material agency and speculative aesthetics, but does so in ways that foreground a highly politicised, anti-capitalist, and anti-racist critique of modern subjectivity. His work offers resources for a feminist and decolonial 'minor politics' of aesthetics that occupies spaces of betweenness and works towards the decomposition of structures, new configurations, and new connections (Secor and Linz 2017).

The papers in this forum engage with these and other theories of the politics of aesthetics, inhabiting the tensions between political aesthetics, non-human materialities, and decolonial critique. Each contribution foregrounds the entanglement of more-than-human materialities with aesthetic regimes of race, gender, and class. Each elaborates an aesthetic dimension that is inherent in a politics that intervenes – symbolically and structurally – in a concrete situation in a specific place and that introduces something new. In the final two sections of this introduction, we guide the reader along two routes through the collection, focusing first on material aesthetics, and then on aesthetic regimes of race.

Material Aesthetics

Our first route through the forum emphasizes the papers' engagement with material aesthetics. The importance of non-human materiality for relationships between aesthetics and politics involves several dimensions, including corporeality, sensation, agency, and speculation. Above, we mentioned the limitations of defining the aesthetico-political subject as an active, self-aware and self-reflective agent, separate from the objects that constitute what is experienced. Feminist materialisms offer important ways of conceptualizing sensation as something that is neither rational, nor captured in the 'lived experience' of the organic, bounded body. Rather, experience, sense, and sensation are constituted across multiple interconnecting surfaces, practices, technologies, embodiments, and borders (Dixon et al., 2012). The challenge here is articulating a way of thinking experience in ways that do not presuppose an ontological divide between subjects and objects of experience. This is an important task because such a dualism supports other distinctions between nature and culture, and primitive and civilised, which underpin aesthetic regimes of racial capitalism (Lloyd, 2019). Here, there is much to learn from work that refuses to think through the body as a coherent organic totality (Ahmed and Stacey, 2001). Engaging with post-humanist material and speculative aesthetics, we suggest, has potential to reveal how political structures are reproduced through provisional syntheses of disparate and mobile materials and practices. This expands configurations of the 'geo' by offering new vocabularies for understanding 'the flows of materials that cut across borders, bodies, species, and systems' (Dixon, 2015: 52).

In various different ways, the contributions to this forum think with forms of materiality that are not immediately subsumed within the realm of representation, and hence open out new possibilities for *speculative* experience, i.e. experience that troubles or crosses the threshold of sense, intelligibility, and legibility – as with Glissant’s ‘opacity’, Rancière’s ‘dissensus’, or Benjamin’s ‘experience without a subject’. This is central to Brigstocke’s (2021) historical account of colonial power in Hong Kong, which asks what a speculative form of thinking with, and even *as*, sand – a key infrastructural material of modernity – might reveal about the aesthetics of colonial urbanism. Brigstocke’s paper owes a debt to Benjaminian ruination, but departs from Benjamin’s approach by decomposing the city into a ‘sandy *heap*’ rather than a pile of rubble. Drawing on Glissant’s ‘thinking from the shoreline’ and Michel Serres’ atomistic philosophy of matter, Brigstocke explores the implications of recognizing that Hong Kong’s prosperity during and beyond the colonial era was enabled by land reclamation projects that involved consumption of vast quantities of sand. This sand was dug up from the land of indigenous villagers, destroying natural flood defences, despoiling agricultural land, and leaving villagers destitute. Writing with and as sand (a material that is defined only by size, and hence its granular properties, rather than through any essential elemental qualities), and deploying a playful anthropomorphism, Brigstocke’s engagement with materiality aims to unsettle Hong Kong’s apparently solid colonial foundations, by thinking with the mixtures, displacements, suspensions and absences that co-compose the drift of sense and sensation in colonial Hong Kong.

Inspired by Glissant’s aesthetics of disruption and intrusion, Nassar (2021) storytells postcolonial Cairo through the city’s elemental materialities. Focusing on dust, fire, mud, and concrete, Nassar’s account of the city lingers at the intersection of words, aesthetics, and materiality. Fire is explored as both destructive and creative of the materiality of the city. Dust is recognized not merely as a banal and irritating feature but as a ‘perfect archive’. The space it makes, the space it invades, where it settles – dust is her ‘excellent unravelling traveller.’ While mud conjures up alternative histories of Cairo’s development, concrete is exposed as a critical material for modernist architectural and urban planning fantasies of erasing the past and building anew. Attending to the materiality of space, she suggests, opens up an analytics of slippages, absences, and contradictions: in the archive, in the urban fabric, and in the formation of the postcolonial subject.

Hoover (2021) also draws inspiration from Glissant’s framing of aesthetics as an art of materially-embedded practices that cultivate imagination and action. Focusing on concrete environments in Paris and London, Hoover offers concrete as a material metaphor to ground the entangled coming together of current dynamics that are at the heart of colonialism, including neoliberal and late liberal modes of governance, globalized capitalist economies, exploitation of people and the earth, climate change, inequality, migration, displacement, and dislocation. The political project of centring on the harshness of concrete environments is not limited to concrete as a material metaphor, though. Hoover discusses concrete as a material environment for radical urban commoning practices in Les Grands Voisin in Paris and The Commons in London and their

response to these entangled dynamics and the possibility of nurturing ethical relations. As the second material most used on earth after water, as Hoover reminds us, concrete is politically moulded as well as unevenly cared for, opening up questions about more-than-human ethical relations in urban environments.

In Millner's (2021) paper, Glissant's call for a specifically postcolonial aesthetics of the earth is usefully juxtaposed with a reinterpretation of Rancière's politics of aesthetics, as read through decolonial theory. Millner focuses on the figure of 'Madre Terra' (Mother Earth) and the work it does in political-aesthetic terms for agrarian movements and practitioners in Central America. Through this figure, she argues, attention is being called to the presence of both human and non-human actors who have been exploited and silenced in the making of global capitalism. A decolonial articulation of Mother Earth, she suggests, implies 'the practice of reconnecting the mother with her earthliness' as well as 'excavating lineages and inheritances that have become disassociated through colonial and racist violence.' As Millner shows, this figure does not offer a stable visual presentation, but it encapsulates a consistent political-aesthetic dimension of her composition: an 'ethos' that translates experiences of dispossession and resistance into practices of translocal witnessing of environmental healing. The soil speaks: for example in performances of sociodramas. And it speaks up against the destruction of soils and biodiversity.

Blencowe's (2021) discussion of neoliberal authoritarianism connects a story of abusive education of indigenous children in 19th century residential Indian Schools to the family separation and detention policies of recent US bordering practices. Blencowe emphasises how forms of settler colonial sovereignty and biopolitical authority function through forms of structural violence that target material capacities, not just of individual bodies, but of *relational* bodies such as families, communities, and nations. In this context, race and racism are constituted not only through the organisation of financial hierarchies and vulnerability, but through 'a *material metaphysics*, distributing the meaning, order and value of life, which is always also the control of ecologies and land'. The continuity between the two scenes is that the US remains a settler colony that must perpetually generate spectacles and suppress indigenous peoples' capacities to claim rights to justify its sovereignty. In both instances a biopolitical authority is generated 'for a state whose legitimacy is placed radically in question as it oversees the dispossession and destruction of the peoples, land, and lives of its jurisdiction.'

Gassner's (2021) contribution to the forum expands on Benjamin's (2006) argument that capitalist aesthetics effectively displaces desires for socio-economic transformation and substitutes them for an alienated will for racist violence. Bringing this idea into contact with Deleuze and Guattari's (2016) conceptualization of micro-fascism, Gassner works through the materialities of glass, steel, and stone in London's built environment. He offers a series of line drawings that reappropriate the practice, common within professional urban development, of making cities legible through 'representative' representations on the city's skyline. The reduction of the city to highly abstract lines, Gassner suggests, tends to reinforce a commodified and spectacularized aesthetic regime

that is fascistic, not in the sense of reproducing a distinctively fascistic architecture or urban layout, but in the Benjaminian sense of diverting desires for change towards de-politicised, spectacular performances of creativity and violence. The lines that Gassner draws and speculates about, by contrast, exemplify a different kind of deviation: a speculative aesthetic where lines that draw commodifying categories can deviate into lines that creatively produce urban alternatives.

Aesthetic regimes of race

Our second route through the forum highlights the papers' critical engagement with race as a central category in aesthetics. In a provocative challenge to theorizing the politics of aesthetics, Lloyd (2019) recalls the central importance of aesthetics to the colonial logics that contrast 'civil' (or 'civilised') human beings against undeveloped racial others. In the Enlightenment philosophy of writers such as Kant and Schiller, this logic separates pathological racialized subjects – tied to their materiality and subject to mere presentation of stimuli – from 'aesthetic' subjects endowed with the faculty of representation to order, structure and make sense of stimuli (Lloyd, 2019:43; see also Jackson 2016). Implicit here, Lloyd argues, is an ontological division between the Civilized subject (capable of ordering sensation through representations, judgment, and 'common sense') and the Savage, Primitive, Negro, or Black (figures of pathological affectability, falling short of these capacities). Race and materiality are tied together in this aesthetic regime of representation through a dualism between the Primitive, locked into sheer affective materiality, and the Civilized, capable of taking a distance from materiality and hence shaping and ordering it. However, other theorists prefer to work with and subvert these problematic genealogies that tie the aesthetic to the production of the Enlightenment ideal of the human (white, male, bourgeois, heterosexual). Spivak, for example, calls for work carrying out a 'productive undoing' of the aesthetic (2012:1) through a 'sabotaging' of Enlightenment ideals of 'aesthetic education'. Spivak reappropriates the colonial idea of aesthetic education in her post-colonial project of theorising pedagogies which foster non-coercive rearrangements of desire and can train the imagination of everyone.

The papers in this forum are offered in a similar spirit of deploying the theoretical framework of aesthetics in an act of sabotage that disassembles the Enlightenment ideal of a racialized, classed, and gendered human subject, developing analyses that expose and undermine the cultural metaphysics of race in its intersections with class, gender, and sexuality. Blencowe (2021) argues that a gendered aesthetic regime focusing on the capacity to care for children bolsters a metaphysics of race wherein indigenous and migrant lives are made visible as incompetent, dangerous, and unfit to care for their children. Such a gendered and racialized political aesthetics is key to the generation of forms of biopolitical forms of authority and sovereignty that justify an ever-intensifying investment in security and control, driving the desire for authoritarian rule and state violence.

Whereas Blencowe's work exposes the inner logics underlying dominant aesthetic regimes of power, Gassner's (2021) creative contribution offers an attempt to draw *against* the nationalist, racist, and capitalist city. He investigates a form of capitalist urban aesthetics that operates within a static and exclusionary framing of urban and national identity and which is inherently defined by a logic of drawing lines between 'us' and 'them'. Alternative practices of drawing lines, he suggests, can imply the crossing of boundary-fixing representations of objects with the result of disrupting institutionalized and normalized urban categories. It can also involve not a disruption but an escape from these representations in an attempt to turn drawing into an ethico-political practice that opposes speculative urbanization as a means to profit gain by creating mutually enhancing and life-affirming connections.

Hoover's (2021) discussion of radical urban commoning practices extends recent scholarship on the politics of the commons, reading it in conjunction with eco-feminist, post-colonial and Indigenous scholarship. Drawing on poetic practices in her fieldwork that cultivate aesthetic relations with the earth, through practices such as listening, recording sounds, sampling, composing, sketching, and writing, Hoover puts Glissant's work into conversation with feminist conceptions of 'poethics' (da Silva, 2014), seizing the power of poetic form to provide ethical and political critique.

Nassar's (2021) geopoetic exploration of postcolonial Cairo, in turn, aims to disclose the world in ways that resist the colonial demand to constitute a masterful self or to 'master' or 'capture' the domain under investigation. Her fragmentary essay cultivates discomfort as a 'politically fertile affect' (Singh, 2018: 152) that resists the colonial will to master its object of investigation. The essay's reflexive form, stressing gaps, fragments and misplaced documents in the archive, articulates a form of postcolonial narrative that story-tells the city 'without scripting it into predetermined forms that fit into established racialised imaginaries of the Third World city, Orientalized city, or a city of the Arab Spring'.

Brigstocke (2021) connects the contemporary crisis of the global sand commons to a history of sand conflict that goes back to the earliest years of the colony and thinks with sand as a colonial archive that is mixed, uncatalogued, undervalued, and yet a window onto the foundations of colonial urbanism. This enables Brigstocke to reach for a form of post-colonial critique that resurfaces and reclaims an urban landscape that has long relied on land reclamation (pouring concrete into the sea) as its most reliable spatial fix. In doing so, he opens up a way of writing history that disrupts the aesthetics of colonialism's ordered archives and regimes of knowledge.

Finally, Millner (2021) suggests that the figure of Mother Earth testifies to a shared experience of colonial violence and forms of exclusion. Thinking everyday practices of activism through Latinx and Chicax theories of queer kinship and black womanism allows her to foreground radical and specifically decolonial visions. This figure structures practical forms of soil repair, as mentioned above, as well as discursive modalities for international witnessing, despite always being in danger of reduction to existing binaries

and boundaries such as gender and nature/culture. This is why '[t]o truly witness Madre Tierra is therefore not to recognise her; it is to change how we see and sense the world.'

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank all the participants of the Spaces and Politics of Aesthetics Symposium at Cardiff University in 2019, where the ideas for this forum were discussed and developed. Thanks also to Deborah Dixon for her support throughout the project, to Jennifer Cassidanto, and to the peer reviewers and the Taylor & Francis editorial and production team.

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