Editorial

The Unwatchability of Whiteness: A New Imperative of Representation

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The historical moment of whiteness is totally unwatchable. As artists, writers, and theorists of colour, we are looking elsewhere from whiteness. That elsewhere, we maintain, exists beyond its sequestering view. Recall Teresa de Lauretis’s classic formulation of elsewhere:

For, if that view is nowhere to be seen, not given in a single text, not recognizable as a representation, it is not that we—feminists, women—have not yet succeeded in producing it. It is, rather, that what we have produced is not recognizable, precisely, as a representation. For that “elsewhere” is not some mythic distant past or some utopian future history; it is the elsewhere of discourse here and now, the blind spots, or the space-off, of its representations.¹

The "elsewhere" that occupies our attention in this special issue is not an imagined world—a spectral ideal of a distant colourblind humanity—but the racial mise-en-scène that we already inhabit "here and now." Mise-en-scène describes everything within the frame of a movie: props, locations, lighting, and the choreography of people. In identifying a racial mise-en-scène, we contend that all spaces are touched by racialization and people of colour. Confronted by the discursive absence, neglect, and diminishment that presumes our view is nowhere to be seen, we look at fellow people of colour and those resolutely anchored in the space-off of whiteness, whether or not this space is obscured by current and historical socio-cultural and political regimes. Rather than prioritize the critique of whiteness (which whiteness studies scholars do, unintentionally or not) as the customary entry and exit points of racial analysis, we propose foregrounding a racial mise-en-scène that is neither in resistance (or response) to whiteness, nor invested in infiltrating whiteness so as to understand and undermine its narcissistic logic. In the racial mise-en-scène, "we can't imagine ever wanting to be white."  

The term "people of colour" functions as a counterpoint to the concept of "whiteness." An appropriation and revaluation of the North American pejorative for Black people as "coloured," "people of colour"—or "poc"—has since come to refer to a political solidarity among non-white people, in the US and globally. In this sense, poc does not signify a fixed identification available to racial, ethnic and Indigenous communities but an open-ended attendance to interrelated structures of exclusionary whiteness. The impetus is to rethink the presumption of automatic solidarity between non-white image-makers, spectators, and scholars—and thereby an implicit demand for inclusivity—to instead ask how we understand one another's roles in creating representations. In so doing, we solicit, rather than subsume the differences within and among non-white identifications. Thus, the category "people of colour" becomes recast as more than a mere placeholder for an aspirational collective, serving instead as the enticement of non-white interracial cultural scenes, cross-identifications, and sexual desires beyond the ostensibly prevailing force of white-centered mediation. How do we concede the always already present whiteness without having to answer to its demands, or define ourselves in relation or distinction to it? Is it possible to snub whiteness while simultaneously

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2 We borrow this proclamation from the admission museum tags created by Chicano conceptual artist Daniel J. Martinez, which were handed out at the 1993 Whitney Biennial. Curated by Elizabeth Sussman, Thelma Golden, John G. Hanhardt, and Lisa Phillips, this edition of the biennial was disparaged by white male critics who were the most vocal about the exhibition being an attack on white artists.