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The Difference that Art Makes

Mariana Ortega

Abstract

In the following essay I discuss Monique Roelofs's *The Cultural Promise of the Aesthetic*. I show that Roelofs's rich and complex notion of the aesthetic, informed by promises, modes of address, and aesthetic relationality, offers an important and novel way of understanding the aesthetic within a context attuned to questions of difference. I point out that Roelofs's analysis may be enhanced by notions theorized by Audre Lorde, Gloria Anzaldúa, and María Lugones. Moreover, I raise a question regarding the intricate link between Roelofs's notion of the aesthetic and morality.

Key Words

art, difference, in-betweenness, morality, racism, the erotic

1. Introduction

At a time when the promises arising from the election of an African American United States President seem to have melted in the air as we hear of more senseless murders of black men and women at the hands of police, as calls of "Black Lives Matter" are turned into the clueless "All Lives Matter," and as Latinos die crossing the perilous U.S. border without their deaths making the news, we can hear or ignore the call for critical assessment of how our aesthetic practices are subtly or jarringly linked to oppression. With Roelofs's pen, the aesthetic is intertwined with various modes of living informed by a vast web of relationships of being-in-the-world that ultimately make our life and our world livable, enjoyable, and pleasurable or miserable, painful, and deadly, a world filled with promises and threats. Her incredibly rich and promising book, *The Cultural Promise of the Aesthetic*, offers a flesh, blood, and bone aesthetic that resists categorization by lovers or critics of the notion.

Roelofs offers a way of thinking, doing, and feeling aesthetics that defies simple dichotomies and takes into consideration the complexity, multiplicity, and multi-layeredness of not only our lives and interactions with objects and each other in specific socio-historical contexts, but also of the ways the aesthetic shifts and morphs in a multiplicity of crisscrossing promises, modes of address, and relations, those elements she takes as constituting the aesthetic. In her view, the aesthetics is not "a pillar of moral order," "a disposition to bring integration to a world of division," or a path towards integration, civilization and cultivation.^[1] In the very midst of cultivation, and even in the disinterestedness of aesthetic judgment, lurks a certain brutality produced by homogenization, standardization, racism, sexism, and classism. Such brutality is the mark of the Western white male that, while claiming neutrality and disinterestedness, is thoroughly interested in elevating his own race, gender, class, and country.

2. The cultural promise of the aesthetic

In Chapter 1, "The Aesthetic, the Public, and the Promise of Culture," Roelofs offers a beautiful reading of Neruda's also beautiful odes that illustrates her multimodal vision of an aesthetic that is suffused with promises and threats, modes of address, and aesthetic relationality. In her reading, Neruda's odes illustrate Kant's and Hume's connection between the aesthetic and the public. That is, she finds in the poems a series of quotidian intersubjective connections that open up a number of patterns of address between people and objects. Such a web of interconnectedness points to shared culture and hence to the cultural promise of the aesthetic. Yet it is also flawed. After all, we need to consider not just the objects but who makes them, and who gets to have them; not all of us will get a spoon and be allowed to sit at the table. Lovingly, Roelofs describes the beauty with which, in a few verses, Neruda can remind us of the possibility of shedding light where once there was darkness and of "a total mobilization of spoons," as Neruda puts it, of food for all.[2] Nevertheless, Roelofs also recognizes the arrogance of the poet who may have seen himself as the voice of the people, as a universal voice, when in reality he may be merely lifting up his own voice. This is an unsurprising arrogance, since the history of aesthetic theory is filled with such instances, Kant being but one example, even as he appealed to the *sensus communis*, and Hume another classic example, as his art critic remains a Western white male.

Not long after reminding us of the complexity of Neruda's odes in their ambiguous giving and taking away, Roelofs brings us to what I consider the crucial question in her text:

I have proposed that we consider Neruda's poems emblematic of the cultural promise of the aesthetic. This reading produces a corollary: besides the promise of culture, the odes epitomize the philosophical quandary of what, in the face of social difference, is to be made of this promise.[3]

While there are numerous rich discussions in Roelofs's text, including commentaries on Addison, Baumgarten, Schiller, Hegel, Nietzsche, Adorno, and Arendt, I would like to concentrate on the crucial question of what to make of the cultural promise of the aesthetic in the face of difference. It is this aspect of the book that moves me for it discloses the link between the aesthetic, politics, and morality, a link that too many aestheticians continually ignore. It also discloses the nefarious connection between the aesthetic and racism. In Chapters 2, 6, 7, and 8, Roelofs reminds us of what so many who study the history of philosophy wish to forget, that our wonderful theories are deeply connected to the production of racism, in both the ontological and epistemic realms. In other words, the aesthetic has had its share in the production of racialized "others" as inferior.

Here, we need simply consider the role of photography in assisting the new nineteenth-century "sciences" in creating, as Barthes would say, "desirable" or "detestable" bodies and "knowledge" or, better yet, ignorance of these bodies.[4] In Chapter 2, "Whiteness and Blackness as Aesthetic Productions," Roelofs adroitly discusses the operations of

aesthetic racialization, that is, aesthetic strategies that support racial registers, along with racialized aesthetization or racial templates that support aesthetic modalities. These are operations that are at the heart of the cultivation of whiteness as an aesthetic promise and blackness as an aesthetic threat, which reveals the racial exclusiveness of taste.

In this chapter, her discussions of Kincaid, Varda, and Fanon do not go deep enough but do attempt to disclose the paradoxical way this diverse group of artists and theorists enlist the quotidian in order to propose alternative relational structures, while failing to register the complex ties between the aesthetic and race. In this early explanation of the aesthetic production of whiteness and blackness, Roelofs would benefit from integrating Audre Lorde's vision of the erotic into her short analysis of how writers, such as Davis, Walker, Marshall, and Lorde, employ and produce transformative aesthetic forms in a context of quotidian experience that is violent and repressive.

Engaging Lorde's notion of the erotic in this discussion would both (1) provide a more explicit intersectional analysis, in which the question of race is always understood as intimately connected to gender and to the fact that the perception derived from a female source has traditionally been seen as a threat, and (2) enlist the erotic as a promise necessary for self-making and for a more complex understanding that, as Lorde would say, "lessens the threat of difference."^[5] This vital force that can be considered a bridge between the spiritual and the political can be seen animating all the women that Roelofs takes as "giving the aesthetic a prominent role in enabling survival, sustenance, community, meaning, critique, pleasure and creativity in the face of racial, gender, and economic oppression, while also locating aesthetic forms in racialized cultural histories that help to shape them."^[6]

3. Aesthetics and race

While her discussion in Chapter 2 on the aesthetic production of whiteness and blackness could be strengthened, her analysis in Chapter 6 of the racist columnist in the confined but loaded and relationally expansive space of the taxicab, "An Aesthetics Confrontation," her discussion of the racialized aesthetic homeland as she analyzes Botero's Abu Ghraib series in Chapter 7, "Racialized Aesthetic Nationalism," and her interpretation of Lispector's *Hour of the Star* in Chapter 8, "Aesthetic Promises and Threats," are revealing, convincing, and moving. They uncover different strands of the interweaving of the aesthetic and race. Her explanation of the racist Dutch columnist is a spot-on illustration of the complexity of the vision of the aesthetic that holds such promises and threats for Roelofs. Her discussion engages the body in all of its senses, including sound, light, smell, and touch, all colluding to disclose a space that for the taxi rider should be his but is not. The discussion points to the columnist's temporality in which the present is dominated by a distasteful "other" that poses a threat to his future and to his nation's future. Roelofs shows how the aesthetic "confrontation" leads the columnist to use the aesthetic "to move away from the aesthetically repulsive other."^[7] Here, the aesthetic carries promises for the columnist and threats to

the so-called "other."

Yet, Roelofs does not leave us within a simplistic dichotomy, or on the side of the promise or the threat or the norm or deviancy. Given her view, it is not impossible to regulate aesthetic relationality. For her, the aesthetic stands in a unique position "to counteract the hierarchical and differentiating functioning of the relevant dualities."[\[8\]](#) In other words, aesthetic experience occupies a middle ground between traditional enlightenment dichotomies, such as mind/body, reason/affect, sensation/imagination, public/private, and general/particular. In effect, the taxicab proves to be a liminal space, an in-between space in which it is possible, as Gloria Anzaldúa would say, to see from both shores at once.[\[9\]](#)

Here, I would like to take the opportunity to show how Anzaldúa and another Latina theorist, María Lugones, could enhance Roelofs's analysis. Anzaldúa explains liminality as a space bearing possibilities for resistance and transformation precisely because those occupying such a space are not tied normatively or affectively to only one way of being-in-the-world. Instead, those on the margin are, as I like to put it, being-in-worlds and between-worlds, and are capable of understanding various worlds from different perspectives.

While such an experience may cause anxiety and lead to moments of indecision and fear because the self occupies an in-between space and experiences many contradictions and ambiguities, Anzaldúa claims that it is precisely because of this experience that the self can attain not only a more complex understanding of lived experience but also a creative impetus. She states, "Living in a state of psychic unrest, in a borderland, is what makes poets write and artists create. It is like a cactus needle embedded in the flesh."[\[10\]](#) Here, Anzaldúa reveals the promises and threats of the life of in-betweenness that is itself a complex web of embodied, linguistic, spatial, temporal, individual, and communal interactions between land, nation, people, objects, and borders.

Additionally, Lugones's understanding of active subjectivity as oppressing/oppressed and also resisting would aid Roelofs's analysis of the fact that neither taxi driver nor taxi rider is easily placed on one side.[\[11\]](#) As Roelofs states:

What the taxicab case...demonstrates are not the operations of a generalized aesthetic integrationism within a fundamentally binary system, but a pattern of experience in which specific, differentially available connections and disconnections among mutually implicated registers of mind and body, individuality and sociality, generality and particularity, and privacy and publicity give rise to an array of forms of aesthetic positioning and power....Taste's unruliness as well as its orderly routines take effect in the large field of material possibilities in which we participate on a daily basis.[\[12\]](#)

4. The promises and threats of the aesthetic

Finally, I would like to take up Roelofs's points in her vital last chapter on aesthetic promises and threats. Roelofs gives an interesting interpretation of the manner in which Lispector's text, *The Hour of the Star*, points to a wide array of aesthetic systems that cannot be simply read as aesthetic promises, the brutality of the aesthetic, or the failure of aesthetic promises in general.^[13] While doing so, Roelofs discusses both Nietzsche's and Arendt's notion of promises.

In her analysis of Nietzsche, Roelofs explains that there are two types of co-constitutive cultural orders tied to promises, two orders that be seen at work in Lispector's text: (1) regularization, which is connected to stability and normativity, and to having to fulfill the promise, and (2) becoming, which allows room for play and the possibility of rethinking, reconfiguring, and improvising promises, or, as she also shows in an example of Damián Ortega's art, what can look as organized and ready to be assembled neatly also engenders risks/threats. Here, Roelofs is reminding us of the complexity of her vision and of how the aesthetic refuses to be categorized, organized, or tamed. But she is also reminding us that, following Arendt, she takes the aesthetic as fundamentally tied to morality, to our will to live together in the mode of acting and speaking. As Roelofs states:

Promises, as I conceive of them, share the relational character of Arendt's promising and aspects of the grounding of such promising in plurality. They are among the elements that realize our relations to others and the world of objects. What they do not engender with the steadfastness posited by Arendt is the predictability that looms so large in her account of the form's utility.^[14]

Ultimately, following both Nietzsche and Arendt, Roelofs proposes that we see promises as "grounds of aesthetic community formation"^[15] and the cultural promise of the aesthetic as embodying a multiplicity of promises along with threats that stand in need of our revision and reconfiguration, depending on our specific social locations, whether they are race, gender, class, sexuality, nationality, and so on, or a loose configuration of these. Thus we return to the question of difference that I highlighted at the beginning of this essay. In the face of social difference, what is to be made of the cultural promise of the aesthetic? Roelofs's answer is that the aesthetic is itself polyvalent. The achievements and failures of the aesthetic can be seen especially if we are attuned to the aesthetic, in its tripartite mode of promise, address, and relationality. Difference is to be understood within this complex, unstable, and intersectional matrix or web that cannot be simply categorized by its productive or destructive parameters.

Nevertheless, Roelofs states, "The preceding list of aesthetic cultures and forms of collectivity [national, postcolonial, queer, black, feminist, green, etc.] demonstrates that, like the promise part, the culture- and the aesthetics part of 'the cultural promise of the aesthetic,' stand in need of pluralization."^[16] My question is, given that difference is the elephant in the room of traditional aesthetics (note that

Roelofs's cover art refers to the lack of gender representation in art) and that difference has been oppressed, marginalized, and deemed childlike, stupid, and ugly, and that, as Roelofs is well aware, the aesthetic has provided grounds for this marginalization and categorization, should we require more of the cultural promise of the aesthetic given its deep connection to morality? In others words, should we expect more predictability in our relations, despite our recognition of their complexity and multiplicity? Has the order of becoming discussed above taken over so that there is no room for regularization? Shouldn't a mode of aesthetic address and relationality that discloses the unjust, brutal murder of those marked by difference—black bodies, brown bodies crossing dangerous borders—be always denounced, even in the context of complex views that reject simple universals? Or does denouncing them always lead to yet another threat?

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Endnotes

[1] Monique Roelofs, *The Cultural Promise of the Aesthetic* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), p. 210.

[2] *Ibid.*, p. 14.

[3] *Ibid.*, p. 11.

[4] Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida* (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 1981), pp. 77, 115.

[5] Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider* (Freedom: Crossing Press, 1984), p. 56. I would like to note here that for Lorde one of the functions of the erotic is its role in helping us share our pursuits with others. Lorde believes that through this sharing that is attuned to the erotic we have more possibility for deep engagement with others and, thus there is a lessening of the "threat" of our differences. Lorde is not attempting to erase differences; rather, she is proposing that an erotic engagement with others involves a certain comfort with difference.

[6] Monique Roelofs, *The Cultural Promise of the Aesthetic* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), p. 52.

[7] *Ibid.*, p. 145.

[8] *Ibid.*, p. 146.

[9] Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 1987).

[10] *Ibid.*, p. 73.

[11] María Lugones, *Pilgrimages/Peregrinajes: Theorizing Coalitions Against Multiple Oppressions* (New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 2003). As Lugones explains, she writes while being informed by the tension between oppressing and resistance (p. 31). For her, a subject cannot be merely described as occupying one side of the oppressor/oppressed dichotomy. Instead, all selves are oppressed, oppressing and resisting in different contexts.

[12] Monique Roelofs, *The Cultural Promise of the Aesthetic* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), p. 147.

[13] In *The Hour of the Star*, Macabéa's life is miserable, given the way she looks, but she can perceive the beautiful; Rodrigo can see her beauty despite her looks; in the end capitalism and entrenched gendered norms of beauty prevail.

[14] Monique Roelofs, *The Cultural Promise of the Aesthetic* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), pp. 202-3.

[15] *Ibid.*, p. 203.

[16] *Ibid.*, p. 204.
