



# Between Pop and Expressionism: Beauchamp's 'Hieroglyphics of the Flesh'

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## Abstract

Satire is meant to problematise the way we see things. If it doesn't, it risks re-enforcing what it set out to critique. In 2019, Athi Mongezeleli Joja raised this concern, arguing that despite Vusi Beauchamp's desire to 'take away the power' that racial stereotypes have 'over black Africans,' his use of such iconography ultimately 'ends up misnaming, if not underestimating the power of the thing he thinks he's undermining.' While doubtful that Beauchamp underestimates the power of such tropes, I want to foreground the possibility that he is not being heard in the way he wants to be, drawing on the understanding that his art came about as 'sort of

regurgitating something that [he] always knew but never had words for.' It is within this corporeal vein—this space of no words—that I'd like to discuss Beauchamp's work, for while much attention has been paid to his iconography, it is the specificity of his experience and his treatment thereof that is often overlooked, if only by virtue of the sheer toxicity of his subject matter. Here Elizabeth Alexander's paper "Can you be BLACK and look at this?" is particularly instructive, suggesting that experience 'can be taken into the body via witnessing and recorded in muscle memory as knowledge,' or what Hortense Spillers calls 'a kind of hieroglyphics of the flesh.'

'People are trapped in history and history is trapped in them.'

— James Baldwin, 'Stranger in the Village,' 1955.

Satire is meant to problematise the way we see things. If it doesn't, it risks re-enforcing what it set out to critique. Richard Pryor – the comedian said to have popularised the n-word's use in contemporary culture (Henry and Henry, 2014: 150) – realised this quite late in his career following a trip to Kenya. 'I've been there three weeks and I haven't even said it, I haven't even thought it, and it made me say, "Oh, my God, I've been wrong, I've been wrong. I got to regroup my shit."'

Pryor only began using the word in his sets following his political awakening in the 1970s while living in Berkeley, where he met Huey Newton and deep-dived into the writings of Malcolm X. He seized upon the word with much enthusiasm, adamant that in doing so he would empty it of all meaning. 'It gave him strength,' wrote biographers David and Joe Henry, 'It robbed the word of its wretchedness and made him feel free.' Yet, as observed by Richard Iton, Pryor later felt that 'his intentions in using the word had been misinterpreted' and that 'his efforts were in vain: "They didn't get what I was talking about. Neither did I."'

In 2019, Athi Mongezeleli Joja raised a similar concern about Vusi Beauchamp's art, arguing that despite the artist's self-expressed desire to 'take away the power' that racial stereotypes have 'over black Africans,' his use of such iconography ultimately 'ends up misnaming, if not underestimating the power of the thing he thinks he's undermining' (2019: 32). Drawing on a range of examples – from the works of Irma Stern, Zapiro, and Brett Murray, to H&M's controversial advert, the Penny Sparrow saga, and the #SaveSA march – Joja makes a compelling argument for racial signification as an 'itinerant, elastic, and common ersatz,' able to mediate 'between hard boundaries of every social strata' (2019: 20).

While many of the examples that appear in Joja's paper were met with outrage, he observes how public backlash has not managed to stamp racist attitudes out, but instead drives them underground, only to resurface in a different guise. For this reason, he writes that racism is "'beyond" the stereotypes it produces,' arguing that it cannot 'sufficiently hold sway without recurrently manipulating the gap these stereotypes

offer' (2019: 22). The result, he writes, is that racism 'always reaches unto the social screen memory to reconstitute racial boundaries' (2019: 22). Consequently, he writes that despite Beauchamp's attempts at subversion, the artist's reliance on such tropes may serve to inadvertently regenerate 'myths about blacks' and assuage 'white culpability' (2019: 20).

Part of the problem might be that satire's efficacy is reliant on a 'stable set of values from which to judge behaviour' (Colletta, 2009: 859); a set of values which enable artists to hold human folly to ridicule. In a racist society, the use of racial stereotypes, intended as satire, may simply reinforce or affirm racial prejudice. Another might be that in our postmodern age of pastiche – defined by Frederic Jameson as 'a neutral practice of mimicry, without satirical impulse, without laughter' (Colletta, 2009: 857) – it has become that much harder to distinguish between what is real and what is not, to the point where 'unity' is replaced with 'multiplicity,' 'meaning' with the 'appearance of meaning,' 'depth' with 'surface' (Colletta, 2009: 856). In short, to the point where everything becomes noise, open to interpretation and misunderstanding.

This might explain Beauchamp's preoccupation with popular culture, in particular the media. It might also explain his preoccupation with surface, sign, and symbol; with stereotypes, brands, politicians, movie characters, celebrities, and the like. My intention here is not to debate the efficacy of Beauchamp's work as satire – or, for that matter, whether it *is* satire – but to try to better understand his motivation. If he is not being

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heard in the way he wants to be, how does he want to be heard? If he is aware of the risks involved when reproducing racial stereotypes, then why continue to produce the work he does? Is he simply exploiting the art market's appetite for such tropes – for spectacle, shock, and awe, as Joja suggests – or is there more to the work than meets the eye? If an artwork is always, to some extent, a self-portrait of the artist (and here I'm not only talking about the artist as an individual, but everything that they bring to the work from the world outside), then where is Beauchamp in his work?

Premised on the understanding that his art is caught up in – and reflective of – a pervasive racial imago, I want to think about the relationship between the artist and the source of his imagery – what he is seeing in the world, how these images are internalised, and how they pass through the body to arrive in their present form.

### Muscle Memory

Thinking through these questions, I turn to a paper written by Elizabeth Alexander in 1994, titled 'Can you be BLACK and look at this?'. It centred around George Holiday's videotape of the beating of Rodney King at the hands of four white Los Angeles police officers, in particular the video's distortion during the trial, the attendant narratives which circulated it, and how the video was publicly staged and consumed. By no means an isolated incident, her paper sought to articulate 'the ways in which a practical memory exists and crucially informs African-Americans about the lived realities of how violence and its potential informs our understanding of our individual selves as a larger group' (1994: 79), highlighting that although the historical spectacle of racially-informed violence has been primarily staged and consumed by white men, 'in one way or another, black people have been looking, too, forging a traumatized collective historical memory' which is 'reinvoked...at contemporary sites of conflict' (1994: 79).<sup>2</sup>

Her essay draws on a number of witness accounts, from Frederick Douglass' and Harriet Jacobs' 19<sup>th</sup>-century recollections to those which followed the lynching of Emmett Till in 1955. Whether or not experienced first-hand, Alexander observes how the act of bearing witness is often physically inculcated, to the point where witness often becomes participant. Thus, when

Douglass recounts the whipping of his aunt Hester, he describes the sight of her blood as 'warm' (1994: 82). Similarly, when watching the 'not guilty' verdict of King's trial on TV, one individual reported 'a pain that went from the top of [his] head to the tip of [his] toes' (1994: 85). Alexander describes this as a 'synesthetic response' (1994: 82) to an experience that has been imbibed – recorded in what Hortense Spillers calls 'a kind of hieroglyphics of the flesh' (Alexander, 1994: 86). For Alexander, such 'corporeal images of terror suggest that "experience" can be taken into the body via witnessing and recorded in muscle memory as knowledge'; a knowledge which she deems necessary to those who believe themselves to be next (1994: 83).

In this way, Alexander demonstrates how such incidents inform one's sense of self as part of a larger group, highlighting how this awareness is passed down from one generation to the next, 'so that everyone knows the parameters in which their bodies move' (1994: 85). Here, it is not only the actualisation of violence but its *potential* – the understanding that violence can arrive at your doorstep, unannounced and unprovoked – that leaves in its wake the uncomfortable (yet necessary) knowledge of one's own vulnerability. At the same time, she observes how the public spectacularisation of such violence and the narratives used to justify it – such as the repeated freeze-framing used to manipulate evidence in the King video and the defence's description of King as a 'bear-like,' 'probable ex-con' (1994: 80) – stand at odds with those histories recorded in muscle-memory and passed down from one generation to the next. Consequently, she writes that 'if any one aphorism can characterize the experience of black people in [the United States], it might be that the white-authored national narrative deliberately contradicts the histories our bodies know' (1994: 80), arguing that 'the American way with regard to the actual lived experience of African-Americans has been to write a counter-narrative' which erases 'bodily information,' substituting it with a self-justifying text that often becomes 'a version of national memory' (1994: 80).

Although Alexander's essay is rooted in the particular – yet varied – experiences of African-Americans, it is all too familiar here in South Africa. One need only recall the testimony of Hawa Timol (2012), who instinctively knew that the policeman in her living room was lying when he said that her son had jumped from

the tenth floor while in custody; or how the police responsible for Steve Biko's death initially claimed that he'd died in prison from a hunger strike. Later the story changed: there was a 'scuffle'; Biko had gone 'berserk'; Biko had fallen and 'bumped his head.' No doubt, Biko too felt the acute sense that he might be next, having joked to his wife Nontsikelo Biko that she would be 'a widow at the age of thirty' (South African Press Association, 1997), but for Biko, overcoming 'the personal fear of death' was a necessary step along the road to liberation.

In an interview, first printed in *The New Republic* a year after his death, he said that even 'your method of death can itself be a politicizing thing' (2005a: 152). To be sure, Biko didn't intend to be a martyr. He valued life. But it was precisely for this reason that he was prepared to die. Much like Alexander, who writes of 'a desire to find a language to talk about "my people"' – one which is 'claimed rather than merely received' (1994: 78) – Biko's Black Consciousness sought 'to talk to the black man in a language that is his own,' to 'make the black man come to himself; to pump back life into his empty shell; to infuse him with pride and dignity, to remind him of his complicity in the crime of allowing himself to be misused and therefore letting evil reign supreme in the county of his birth' (2005a: 30).

Turning to Beauchamp's artist blurb for *People from the Sun* (2020), I come across a line by Publius Terence that seems apposite: 'I am human, and I think nothing human is alien to me.' It sounds like a straightforward declaration, but to 'think' is also to doubt. Where 'I am human' is a statement of fact, he cannot be completely sure that the way he inhabits the world is the same for others. The hesitation exists as an inconsolable gap; an unease about the placement of 'I' and its relation to the collective that in some sense echoes both Alexander and Biko's desire to find a language through which to identify; a language that is 'claimed rather than merely received' (Alexander, 1994: 80). It is here, I believe, that we may begin to understand Beauchamp's motivation, for while much attention has been paid to his iconography, in particular the repeated use of blackface and its potential efficacy as satire, it is the specificity of his experience and his treatment thereof that is often overlooked, if only by virtue of the sheer toxicity of his subject matter.

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In an interview with Mmutle Arthur Kgokong (2015), Beauchamp recounted his earliest memory. It is 1985. He is six years old, and has just arrived home in Mamelodi from primary school. He and his one-year-old brother are playing outside when they hear the sound of 'gun shots from everywhere...loud and very close' (Beauchamp and Kgokong, 2015). His mother comes running out of the house, dressed in her gown, picks up his brother and takes them both inside, placing a lappie over their faces to mask the tear gas. 'I never saw my mother in the state she was in. I remember looking out through the big windows wondering what is going on. Go iragalang? And at the same time there was this feeling, a scary feeling that I'd never felt before' (Beauchamp and Kgokong, 2015). A little later on, he talks about how his art came about, as 'sort of regurgitating something that I always knew but never had words for' (2015).

It is here, in this mute space – this space of no words – that I'd like to consider Beauchamp's work. What interests me is that although Joja is making a case for why Beauchamp's work fails in its intent to empty such stereotypes of their meaning, I cannot help but feel that Beauchamp would agree; that in some sense, the reasoning behind Joja's criticism is also the reason why Beauchamp continues to hold such tropes, in all their grotesquery, on the surface of his canvases – not to let them disappear from view, but to keep that undercurrent in plain sight. When, for example, Joja writes that 'the spatio-temporal afterlives of racial stereotypes always seem contingent on the perpetual non-events of freedom, aporias of

redress, and endless rebirths of Capital' (2019: 22), or that 'neoliberalism has accelerated privatization' and 'symbolically disaggregated "race"—as its definitive agent—from state politics, but without dissolving the conditions that give rise to racism and its practices,' instead making 'racial tropes appear denuded of their historical profanities, and reinvented as capacious forms floating innocently in the visual field' (2019: 22), I cannot help but think that he is also in some sense describing the compositional make-up of Beauchamp's work.

That the artist might fail in his intent simply underscores the extent of the bind he finds himself in – if he paints what he paints, he is trapped in its reductive logic; if he is forced to self-censor, equally so. While Beauchamp's use of racial stereotypes and their effect on audiences is important, the idea of entrapment — of being caught in a perpetual loop — deserves greater attention. In Joja's description of Beauchamp's *Congress* (2014), for example, we read:

'Through repeated recourse to plantation visuality, whether in its inflammatory or empathetic forms, Beauchamp repurposes these ventriloquizing postures with apolitical enthusiasm and a jingoistic acquiescence to their incendiary conclusions. In the painting entitled *Congress*, this gleeful recourse to the most proverbial of tropes, that is, "the heart of darkness." Through this seemingly impenetrable and esoteric forest, a figure resembling the young Nelson Mandela abstractedly appears in the background. Over him an emblem or ribbon hovers above like a halo, and the word "king" is inscribed across it. The punchline seems clear: Mandela is the "king of the jungle." Across the middle of the image, the word "cooning" is inscribed in cursive red Coca-Cola typographic style. Below, towards the edge of the painting, in black, is written CONGRESS. Suppose the prominent blackface figures, with their thick red lips, gaping mouths and big eyes, in shock or jubilation, are his "comrades." In archetypal neo-Tarzanist specular visuality, we encounter the traditional Hollywood image of the pop-eyed African in the jungle.' (2019: 30–31)

While in agreement that the painting, in its dark and muted tones, evokes Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, something that appears to have been overlooked is

that this 'seemingly impenetrable and esoteric forest' is made solely of Venus flytraps, which are recurring motifs in much of Beauchamp's work. The idea of entrapment — which also invokes Achille Mbembe's description of 'power in the postcolony' as 'carnivorous' (2001: 200) and bound up with capital exploitation — is evident, not only through Beauchamp's repeated use of the Venus flytrap or the shackle and chain, but his continued use of the title of his initial exhibition at the Pretoria Art Museum in 2015, *Paradise of the Damned*. The repeated use of this title invokes a difficulty — the inability to *move beyond*, to get *past*.

Granted, this does not discount Joja's argument that racism is 'beyond the stereotypes it produces,' or the risk that his work might inadvertently reinforce what he sets out to critique. Nor can one discount the multitude of ways in which other artists have addressed this bind without mimicking and potentially perpetuating its stranglehold. Glenn Ligon's series *Runaways* (1993) is a case in point, as is *Self-Portrait Exaggerating My Black Features/Self-Portrait Exaggerating My White Features* (1998). Both implicate the viewer, whilst offering the artist a way out of the logic that would have his being reduced to a 'type'. Beauchamp's work offers no such reprieve. As alluded to by Joja, and articulated by Ashraf Jamal in a recent conversation, Beauchamp presents the 'Disneyfication of black life.' His optic is 'caught inside a fabric of pastiche that is macabre, a fabric that he is trying to puncture,' but which nevertheless continues to mutate and stitch itself back together again (Jamal, 2021, personal conversation, Observatory, Cape Town).

The fabric in question here is markedly Pop. Much like the artists of the '50s and '60s who worked within this idiom – Jasper Johns, Andy Warhol, Mark Rauschenberg *et al* – Beauchamp's sources come readymade. The flatness of his early work carries the depersonalised hallmark of the production line. It is, perhaps, to this aspect of Beauchamp's work that I would attribute those elements described by Joja as 'apolitical' and 'gleeful,' yet for me the work is far from passive. I see no 'jingoistic acquiescence' on the part of the artist. No reluctant acceptance of the status quo. Unlike Warhol, my hunch is that Beauchamp does not *want* to be a machine.<sup>3</sup> On the contrary, the blend of Pop and Expressionism – a mode outlawed by Pop artists for being too self-absorbed, for bringing to the fore an 'existential anxiety' (Livingstone, 1990: 15) – suggests an artist trying to navigate that precarious strait between

the self and a world that has consistently attempted to exploit and commodify the black body. His approach is not unlike that of Jasper Johns, who employed and re-employed the image of the American flag in order to re-articulate its meaning (Livingstone, 1990: 16). That Beauchamp might fail in the attempt simply underscores the nightmare he finds himself in. Yet, as notes Johns, 'the painting of a flag is always about a flag, but it is no more about a flag than it is about a brush-stroke or about a color or about the physicality of the paint' (Livingstone, 1990: 16). The acknowledgement is particularly instructive. By straddling the worlds of Pop and Expressionism – flatness and depth – Beauchamp reveals a world of voracious consumption, as well as its toxic fallout.

In three of his most recent series – *Prisoners of War* (2020), *People from the Sun* (2020), and *Debunking: The Interpretation of a Dream* (2021) – it is the latter which appears to take centre stage. Once bright, clean-cut, and legible, his colours have gradually begun to bleed, his contours have become muddier, his words more opaque. This shift from the world of Pop to Expressionism – from what Jamal describes as 'statement art' to something more 'enigmatic' (Jamal, 2021, personal conversation, Observatory, Cape Town) – has also been accompanied by a clear mutation in sign, from over-determined brands, stereotypes, and icons to Venus flytraps, unknown figures, and sunflowers, all of which were present in his earlier work, but which now occupy a more prominent position. Where signs and symbols once floated alongside or were superimposed on top of one another, here they appear to have been imbibed – a sickly residue at the back of the throat. The question for me is what to make of this new sticky conglomerate, because although the chemistry has always been there – buried deep beneath a cool and powerful veneer – for me his more recent work registers closer to the person.

Does this shift indicate that he's found a way through, a way out, or is the artist simply responding to the criticisms levelled against his work? Is this shift a sign of health, akin to Richard Pryor's breakthrough realisation, or is the artist simply playing up the inner turmoil such iconography provokes? Bringing it back to Pryor, I am drawn to a particular instant in which the comedian was probed by a journalist to respond to those who initially criticised him for using the n-word 'on stage, in his albums, and got rich doing it,' to which he replied: 'I'd

say to them, "Allow me to grow"' (Comedy Hype, 2020).

## Notes

1. The title is a nod to Pat Ward Williams' mixed-media work *Accused/Blowtorch/Padlock* (1986), in which the artist, in her own handwriting, 'reinscribes an African-American narrative onto a photograph of a man being lynched' (Alexander, 1994: 93).
2. This understanding is also echoed in Joja's paper, where he reflects on the explosive reaction to the H&M advert, which 'left some H&M stores in a wreck, and the company's public image tainted' (2019: 19).
3. 'Machines have less problems. I'd like to be a machine, wouldn't you?'

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