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SM Rodriguez

Chriss Sneed

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Editorial:

## Racialization.Spectacle.Liberation

**S.M. Rodriguez, Chriss Sneed**

Editors - Special Issue

### CONTACT:

S.M. Rodriguez, London School of Economics and Political Science, London  
s.rodriguez9@lse.ac.uk

Chriss Sneed, University of Connecticut, Storrs, CT.  
Chriss.sneed@uconn.edu

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This special issue navigates the complexity of racialization, experiences related to identity, social structure, and inequality, and that which emerges when one/many embark on journeys towards liberation. “racialization.spectacle.liberation” is an intentional provocation; in both punctuating each word and leaving them affixed, we gesture towards the curious amalgamations that are produced at the intersections of where each project begins and ends. Such processes are not benign. Since the inception of this editorial project, innumerable manifestations occurred, from the global reach of COVID-19 and its reproduction of hyper-marginalization to the racial brutalities and organizing that took place across the world in

the summer of 2020. They demonstrate an urgent need to lend gendered analysis to the residues of racialization, critically engage with spectacle, and build viable pathways for liberation from necropolitical systems.

## Deploying Racialization, Spectacle, and Liberation

*Racial Formation in the United States* (Omi and Winant, 1986), offered a novel interjection into wider discourses that either reified essentialist definitions of race or minimized its existence by codifying racial dynamics as biproducts of other social structures. In the text, Omi and Winant describe the processes by which society ascribes racial meaning to “previously racially unclassified relationship, social practice, or group” (p. 111). The analytic enables us to interrogate the definition of race, as well as the utility and reproduction of racism in society (Gonzalez-Sobrinio and Goss, 2019). Now in its third edition, *Racial Formation in the United States* (2014) employs racialization to underscore our understanding of racial projects, their emergence, and impact on the organization of society writ large. Rather than understanding race as a static concept or natural phenomenon, racialization reminds us that the social construction informs economic, political and interpersonal relations. As such, the complex, contextual, and descriptive qualities of racialization exist as residual fragments of distinctly unequal power relations which materialize across the globe.

These relations – co-constituted by interpretations of sexuality, gender, class, region, territory, and more – are embedded in and re-inscribed at structural and institutional levels. They are demanding, consequential, and often contradictory in nature. Racial meaning morphs at each intersection. Race permutates through institutions that define and then redefine it according to the contexts of

hierarchies of power. Individual nation-states, courts, or even political crises can create or recreate race. In this process, individuals can move through various racialized codes just by entering and exiting social spaces or crossing borders (Etoroma, 2010; Slate, 2014). At times, this re-racialization – the invention of a new racialized understanding – occurs through spectacle.

Spectacle is a multiply-defined thing: an event, a performance, a *something* of “curiosity or contempt.” A spectacle is also that which makes something *else* visible. In this way, even the process of understanding racialization or racialized violence may *necessitate* spectacle. Take, for example, the 1968 slogan “I AM A MAN” popularized by striking sanitation workers in Memphis, Tennessee. Beyond this example, scholars working at the intersections of identity and social movements have demonstrated how the spectacle and consolidation of identity can rally communities around issues, build power, and create coalitions (Desai, 2010; Collins and Bilge, 2016). Yet, to complicate matters further, scholars and activists alike have called the utility of racial spectacle into question.

Through an analysis of human rights imagery and discourse, Hesford (2011) reveals productive capacities of ‘the spectacle,’ which often reify unequal power dynamics on national and international levels, racial schemas, and empower carceral institutions at the expense of the actual lived experiences of communities marginalized across different axes of identity. Noble (2014) has also affirmed this, writing that “the spectacle delivers to us a version of race and race relations, in many ways divorced from our own lived realities” (Noble, 2014, p. 13). Noble then goes on to suggest that mass media coverage of the Trayvon Martin case transformed the tragic murder and subsequent racial justice organizing for Black lives into “commodities – stories for consumption, including the way in which their stories proliferated and were consumed” (p. 14). In a Cé-

saireian fashion, such “thingification,” could be seen as a filtrate of wider processes of colonization (Césaire, 2000, 42; Tairako, 2018). The commodification and static rendering of identity can also be connected to other essentialized spectacles.

Take, for example, popularized cases of identity, self-definition, and performance. Recent exposés of “Blackfishing” – or the attempt at appropriating Black identity or aesthetics in order to increase cultural capital – led society to question when self-determination runs counter to liberation (Bullock and S., 2019). As Blackfishing exists as a practice embraced by a range of actors, from academics to social media influencers, it shows us that the meanings of racialization cannot be rendered flatly to merely an oppressed subject status, but rather one that is celebrated when objectified and adorned by non-Black actors (Noor, 2020). The spectacle of racial labeling reveals the slippages of the ongoing process of understanding, containing, rejecting and/or celebrating race.

Relatedly, Nkechi Amare Diallo (born Rachel Dolezal) reveals the spectacle surrounding an otherwise un-spectacular event: a person whose childhood trauma led to an attempt at self-determining identity as an adult. The spectacle created of her social identity as Black vis-à-vis her white familial lineage arose only as a result of heightened surveillance and silencing while her (Black) adopted sister attempted to testify against her alleged (white) rapist (Mack, 2015). The public debate on racial identity that ensued did not question racialization in relation to liberation from sexual violence and political suppression, but rather to what extent individuals can choose their racial identity. Ever-mushrooming events of racialized spectacle, and spectacular racialization, lead societies to question if and when liberation follows.

Therefore, **liberation** is a word in transition – a noun defined only through reference to the process of setting something *else* free.

But much harm has been done in the name of liberating: pinkwashing, imperial conquest, Christian supremacy. And, often, this external, savior-oriented production of liberation has resulted in vectors of violence and erasure (Abu-Lughod, 2013; Spivak, 1988; Mohanty, 1984). Conversely, when grounded in communities of struggle, liberation can be a rallying cry directing action and shedding light on hope. Following the iterative disturbances of individual and communal access to humanity, that is, the basic dignity and regard that produces what Butler has elsewhere codified as “livable life and a grievable death” (Butler, 2004, p. xv), this issue invites both author and reader to ruminate on the connections between each of these three terms.

## Overview of Articles

This curatorial endeavor holds intellectual and creative space for interrogation and critique of three interwoven processes. The articles center racialized spectacle in or against liberation movements; the liberation from the spectacle of racialization; and the spectacular liberties of race-making in a growingly multicultural society. The authors map the curious entanglements of identity, inequality, and claims to social rights and grapple with the ruptures that racialized matterings reveal, inspire, historicize, and/or make undone.

Relying on theorists like Wynter, Sharpe, and Quashie to shape autoethnographic reflections, Andrea Baldwin examines how the academy produces the spectacle of being “non-human.” In “Presumed Non-Human,” Baldwin puts forward a case that ultimately supports her argument that the racialization of her labor as contingent, non-human and therefore exploitable faculty, ultimately rendered her disposable. She demonstrates that while the academy invisibilizes its containment, punishment, and exploitation of Black

women faculty, it simultaneously supports the creation of spectacle of Black women's resistance to exploitation. Their attempts to "become human" – to refashion their position as agentic subjects rather than extractable objects – become the "wake" created by the spectacularization of resistance. Baldwin argues that Black women must navigate this wake in service of liberation or wholeness.

In "Dreaming with a Future," Cynthia Meléndez elaborates on and critiques the process of memory-making within Peruvian art – itself a process of creating spectacle. Analyzing the works of artists Christian Bendayán, Juan Jose Barboza-Gubo & Andrew Mroczek, Meléndez questions the processes of memorializing *travesti* death and anti-queer travesty. The analysis locates the tensions of silencing versus sanctifying while spectacularizing violence. Particularly, she puts forward that the *cisgender gaze* that occurs to portray anti-queer and travesti violence may reproduce oppressions, rather than create space for liberation. Meléndez questions if spectacle may ultimately objectify and dehumanize those killed by removing their subjectivity – their races and identities (outside of gender) – from the instances of their deaths.

"Black Queer Times at Riis," by Jah Elyse Sayers, tells a story of queer and trans of color alternative placemaking during the New York City Pride Parade. Using survey and interview data, Sayers invites readers to rethink the relationship of queerness to the spectacle made of gay pride. By entangling this data with historical and contemporary research on the political and spatial geographies within New York City, and Neponsit, specifically, Sayers both critiques NYC Gay Pride as violently exclusionary and generates compelling evidence of how QTBIPOC people create their forms of redress on the far shore of "The People's Beach" at Jacob Riis Park. In doing so, the article queers the notion of time, place and belonging with an Afrofuturist and speculative orientation.

Elena Shih offers the case of anti-trafficking campaigns in the United States. Shih argues that the campaigns imagine the “modern-day slavery” and forced migration of Asian women without any analytical connection to the historical trauma experienced by African peoples trafficked to the United States. In this invisibilization, those who campaign against “sex slavery” ultimately mobilize with anti-Black methods, such as bolstering a surveillance and punitive-based carceral state that disproportionately harms people of color.

Roksana Badruddoja offers a poetic and hauntological exploration into the construction of home in a time of “sexual racism,” dislocation, and nationalist policing. Badruddoja uses autoethnography to interrogate the individual and collective orientations of meaning-making and memory. Badruddoja puts forward an analysis of *Embodied Tender Rage* as a way to heal from trauma while actively engaging and resisting oppression.

Read together, Andrea Baldwin, Roksana Badruddoja and Jah Elyse Sayers show us different embodied refusals that may be required to reclaim self and community in the midst of active displacement from national imagination and “home” (Badruddoja), local space and Pride events (Sayers), and institutions of employment (Baldwin). By centering the inherent outcasting from a “*human race*” due to racialization, Baldwin autoethnographically brings us to understand how personal removal and regrouping may honor Black wholeness and serve a restorative and therefore liberatory process. Similarly, Sayers positions this remaking-cum-removal as “the Afrofuturist place”; the place where one escapes spectacle for the *mundane spectacular* made through communal connection and embodied antiviolence. What we see as the *mundane spectacular* is beautifully explored in Badruddojas’s reflection when writing, because what “should” be mundane – the claiming of “home” – becomes an epic spiritual quest for those of us labeled, displaced and



invisibilized for the liberties of the white citizen. In many ways, these states of exclusion arise through neglect. Invisibilization, rather than being the inverse of creating spectacle, actually exists in the residual of the process. In fact, we see that within failed attempts at memory, at memorialization, much harm can be rendered. Both Shih and Melendez offer us conscious critiques of the *makers* of spectacle: those who create spectacle for liberation, but ultimately reproduce racial oppressions.

Ultimately, the authors explore the nuanced and messy concatenations of racialization.spectacle.liberation. Rather than imagine a formulaic connection between the three, we can understand when racialized spectacle does not produce liberation or progress (Shih, Baldwin), when an attempt at the liberatory spectacular may fail racialized people (Sayers, Melendez). Importantly, we also see that attempts at liberation of racialized people may be wholly invisibilized or peripheral, and that what is made spectacle is instead the coping mechanisms and survival strategies of those harmed (Badruddoja). By merging consideration of the three processes, these works explore the oversimplified binaries that hinder transformative change.

## Final Comments

Due to the complex dependencies within and tensions between racialization.spectacle.liberation, people cannot simply *be* saviors or victims, knowledgeable or ignorant actors, allies or foes. Instead, the ongoing and situational nature of the three, when connected, reveal to us the inherent need for humility and constant growth. Beloved speculative fiction author Octavia Butler reminds us that the “only lasting truth is change” (*Parable of the Sower*). All living people are changing. Our relationships to society – to privilege or oppression – exist in flux and, like many of our racial interpretations, do not

necessarily cross borders. Therefore, we all need reflexivity, work, critique and reformulation in order to move toward liberation. The authors and artists featured in this issue attest to this need and this work in the following pieces.

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