

A Discourse of Metalanguage:

Race and Beauty

19 October 2022

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Immense weight is placed on the word *race*. Evelyn Higginbotham's "African-American Women's History and the Metalanguage of Race" set forth a requirement in 1992 for scholars, especially of African American women's history, to focus on race in their "analyses of power."¹ Higginbotham theorizes "metalanguage" as a concept to explain how "Race serves as a 'global sign,' [...] since it speaks about and lends meaning to a host of terms and expressions, to myriad aspects of life that would otherwise fall outside the referential domain of race."² Acknowledging race as intersectional, penetrating ways of thought and knowledge across space and time allows scholars like Stephanie Camp in 2015 to explore its intricacies as it relates to the question of beauty in "Black is Beautiful: An American History." I will argue that Camp builds on and expands our understanding of race as a metalanguage in that its power extends beyond Higginbotham's formulation of the interconnection of race and gender, class, and sexuality.

Race is constructed as a device of power that oppresses and empowers. It is premised upon the "recognition of difference" by "distinguishing the positioning of groups vis-à-vis one another."³ These relations create categories whereby "individuals are identified and identify themselves."⁴ Higginbotham argues, "Whether race is textually omitted or textually privileged, its totalizing effect in obscuring class and gender remains."⁵ Race should always be considered a lens of analysis because it "tends to subsume other sets of social relations."⁶ This pursuit requires recognizing the diversity of the "black community," "black experience," and "voice of the Negro."⁷ Rendering them monolithic would lead to oppression based on race.⁸

¹ Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, "African-American Women's History and the Metalanguage of Race," *The University of Chicago Press* 17, no 2 (1992): 252.

² Higginbotham, 255.

³ Higginbotham, 253.

⁴ Higginbotham, 253.

⁵ Higginbotham, 255.

⁶ Higginbotham, 255.

⁷ Higginbotham, 255-256.

⁸ Higginbotham, 255-256.

To understand race as a metalanguage, Higginbotham refers to M. M. Bakhtin, who explains it as “the power of the word to mean.”⁹ Although words and forms cannot “belong to ‘no one’; language has been completely taken over, shot through with intentions and accents.”¹⁰ Neutrality is, in other words, extinguished.¹¹ Thus, the metalanguage is the mimetic reflection of the body and mind of those who use it – it reflects the socio-political structures of a given time.

Sojourner Truth’s question, “Ar’n’t I a Woman?”¹² demonstrates race’s construction of gender.¹³ Truth was questioning the “cult of the lady” or the “cult of true womanhood” a middle-class ideology spanning the years between 1820 to 1860. Being free from slavery still meant being shackled to class and gendered relationships; being a true woman meant “to be true to the cult’s cardinal tenets of domesticity, submissiveness, piety, and purity.”¹⁴ Failing to adhere was to make one “less than a moral, ‘true’ woman.”¹⁵ Thus, a new gendered, oppressive power was centralized within the concept of race as Black women needed to prove that they were women. Truth highlights the “racialized configuration of gender under a system of class rule.”¹⁶ Black women were not *true women* in the eyes of the courts, proving “‘womanhood’ did not rest on a

⁹ Higginbotham, 256.

¹⁰ Higginbotham, 256.

¹¹ Higginbotham, 256.

¹² In 1851, at a conference in Akron, Ohio, black and white women convened to discuss women’s rights. During the proceedings, male attendees used religious dogma to counter their feminist arguments. However, Sojourner Truth asserted, “Jesus came from ‘God and a woman—*man* had nothing to do with it.” She continued, challenging those in attendance: “Ar’n’t I a Woman?” For an analysis of the conference and the discourses she was undermining, see Paula Giddings, *When and Where I Enter: The Impact of Black Women on Race and Sex in America* (HarperCollins Publishing, 2006), 54-55. See also Elizabeth Stanton, Susan Anthony, and Mathilda Gage, eds., *The History of Woman Suffrage*, Vol. I (Rochester, N.Y.: New York Fowler & Wells, 1881), 115-117.; Eleanor Flexner, *Century of Struggle: The Women’s Rights Movement in the United States* (Cambridge, Balknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1959), 91.

¹³ Higginbotham, 257.

¹⁴ Paula Giddings, *When and Where I Enter*, 47.

¹⁵ Giddings, *When and Where I Enter*, 47.

¹⁶ Higginbotham, 257.

common female essence, shared culture, or mere physical appearance.”¹⁷ Race, ultimately, constructed gender’s “power to mean.”¹⁸

One of the powers of race as a metalanguage is its ability to unite “whites and disparate economic positions against blacks.”¹⁹ In other words, it constructs class. Before the twenty-first century, race placed blacks in a commonplace of “inferiority and subserviency.”²⁰ The system worked against and excluded blacks from membership, especially in economic positions.²¹ Higginbotham terms “segregation in its myriad institutional and customary forms” to be the “most effective tool in the discursive welding of race and class.”²²

In defining what it meant to be a “lady,” race constructed not only gender and class but also sexuality. Sexuality is understood as “an evolving conception applied to the body but given meaning and identity by economic, cultural, and historical context.”²³ Higginbotham draws attention to the differences between white woman’s sexuality that shifted throughout time and black woman’s inability to change because of the western, white, male gaze.²⁴

Violence is also attributed to the racial construction of sexuality. Hazel Carby provides their understanding of the “intersection of strategies of power with lynching and rape.”²⁵ A black male was viewed as a threatening presence to the white female body. White males would enforce violence as a punishment upon the black male body through the form of lynching. The black female body was controlled during slavery for reproduction. The white male continues asserting power over the black female body through rape.

¹⁷ Higginbotham, 257-258.

¹⁸ Higginbotham, 257.

¹⁹ Higginbotham, 258-259.

²⁰ Higginbotham, 259.

²¹ Higginbotham, 259.

²² Higginbotham, 260.

²³ Higginbotham, 263.

²⁴ Higginbotham, 263.

²⁵ Higginbotham, 264.

Blacks people never fully submitted; they resisted. A “culture of dissemblance,” a politics of silence arose among black women.²⁶ This strategy addressed discourses of racism that “developed and reified stereotypes of sexuality” which allowed the state into the private sphere.²⁷ Black people also worked to “dismantle and deconstruct.”²⁸ Higginbotham demonstrates how “the language of race has historically been [...] a double-voiced discourse—serving the voice of black oppression and the voice of black liberation.”²⁹ Blacks took ‘race,’ empowering its language with their “own meaning and intent”—race became a “cultural identity that resisted white hegemonic discourses.”³⁰

Higginbotham’s progressiveness demonstrates how race functions as a metalanguage having access to other prominent discourses such as gender, class, and sexuality. It continues to divide, and the onus of overcoming such division is placed upon black people. This division has painted the black community as “harmonious and monolithic.”³¹ However, although Higginbotham explores how race as a metalanguage was employed against the black community by the white community, she does not research “intragroup social relations as relations of power.”³² An advantage of her analysis is her broad scope, allowing other scholars to contribute to or expand on her research. It can be inferred that the purpose of her writing in 1992 would be to disempower whiteness and foreground black history.

Writing in 2015, Camp examines how race is entangled with beauty. Arguably, race as a metalanguage is expanded to incorporate the nature and aesthetic of the body³³ by exploring the

²⁶ Higginbotham, 266.

²⁷ Higginbotham, 265.

²⁸ Higginbotham, 266.

²⁹ Higginbotham, 267.

³⁰ Higginbotham, 267.

³¹ Higginbotham, 273.

³² Higginbotham, 274.

³³ Camp, 676.

question: “are African black bodies beautiful?”³⁴ Instead of using a thematic approach as utilized by Higginbotham, Camp engages in a “history of the present.”³⁵ It seeks to connect the past to the present. Camp’s purpose is to understand how we conceptualize beauty today by analyzing its evolution throughout U.S. history. A nuanced dynamic to this approach demonstrates how race has evolved throughout time and continues to use its power to oppress the broader discourses of gender, class, and sexuality.

Camp supports the idea that race is a social construct. She asserts that the age of European exploration preceded the “modern ideas of race.”³⁶ Like Higginbotham, Camp attributes the power of race to the expansion of African slavery in the Americas and the Enlightenment which was premised on “knowing through seeing” and “classification.”³⁷ When modern slavery was created, “African black bodies came to be seen as singularly and uniformly ugly.”³⁸ Environmentalism as a viewpoint stated: “Geography, environment, and culture [shapes] human cultures, societies, and even bodies.”³⁹ The defence of slavery eventually shifted to a scientific and anthropological understanding of labelling and categorization “according to physical features” which was used to define “character, aptitude and destiny.”⁴⁰ Accordingly, black people were, by nature, “slavish, laboring, ignorant, and inferior” and had less potential than white people.⁴¹ The importance of this cannot be overstated: “For if race arose from and was reflected in human physiognomy, physical appearance did more than embellish biologically

³⁴ Camp, 677.

³⁵ This methodology was first introduced by Michel Foucault. See Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things; An Archeology of the Human Sciences* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1971). For an explanation of how Foucault writes a “history of the present,” see David Garland, “What is a ‘History of the Present’? On Foucault’s Genealogies and their Critical Preconditions,” *SAGE Publishing* 16, no. 4 (2014): 365-384.

³⁶ Camp, 676.

³⁷ Camp, 681.

³⁸ Camp, 681.

³⁹ Camp, 681.

⁴⁰ Camp, 682.

⁴¹ Camp, 682.

distinct ‘varieties’ of humankind: beauty and ugliness *defined* one way of thinking about the world’s people and human inequality.”⁴² As a result, the “Modern, biological race was made” due to the entanglement of race and beauty.⁴³

An essential aspect of this modern discourse of race is the “idea of racial beauty,” a notion defined by the “racial beauty hegemonic.”⁴⁴ Whiteness enabled the person to achieve such standards, whereas beauty for the black body was unattainable. Therefore, in theory, blackness’s perceived ugliness and savageness could not be overcome.

Nevertheless, beauty’s entanglement with race means it could be used for racism and antiracism. Black writers “rejected the idea of essential racial beauty and ugliness. Instead, they grounded their race-work firmly on social terrain: black bodily inferiority was either the result of environmental circumstances or a product of whites’ limited imaginations.”⁴⁵ Camp used the doll experiment, conducted by Kenneth B. Clark and Mamie Clark, to demonstrate that race was a social construct and a metalanguage. The children regularly attributed positive characteristics to the white doll and negative ones to the black doll.⁴⁶ In the context of a segregated society in the United States, black beauty, gender, class, economic status, and sexuality were defined as lesser. The children conveyed what they were learning about the “prevailing social attitudes and values attached to race and skin color.”⁴⁷

Additionally, Camp appears to adopt Higginbotham’s double-voiced discourse. The racial beauty hegemonic oppressed black beauty and deemed it ugly: one’s blackness became a source of disempowerment. The black pride cultural movement of the late 1960s, “Black is

⁴² Camp, 682.

⁴³ Camp, 682.

⁴⁴ Camp, 682.

⁴⁵ Camp, 684.

⁴⁶ Camp, 684-685.

⁴⁷ Camp, 685.

Beautiful!” sought to change these perceptions by transforming black features into something to be celebrated;⁴⁸ beauty, a source of shame, was transformed into a tool of empowerment by changing its “meaning and intent.”⁴⁹ Thus, “beautification practises [...] deemed more authentically ‘black’” were adopted.⁵⁰ While this is an important step, the reconciliation of race and beauty between whiteness and blackness is a deeply rooted issue that will take time to address.

Both authors contribute knowledge to understanding the history of black women in U.S. history. Higginbotham creates a theoretical framework for conceptualizing race, particularly as a metalanguage. Race is understood to mean more than just one’s skin but rather dictates one’s relationality to others and positionality in society. Race becomes a discourse to understand the black experience in the social contexts of gender, class, and sexuality. Camp arguably heeds Higginbotham’s appeal and examines the power of race in the discourse of beauty. While Higginbotham sets forth a framework for race as a metalanguage, Camp goes one step further by demonstrating that race and beauty are intimately intertwined. Race as a metalanguage has become heavier and more powerful with the efforts of both Higginbotham and Camp.

⁴⁸ Camp, 686.

⁴⁹ Higginbotham, 267.

⁵⁰ Camp, 686.

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