

# RACIAL PRESENCE VERSUS RACIAL JUSTICE

## *The Affective Power of an Aesthetic Condition*

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### **Abstract**

In the realm of electoral politics, a growing number of women, African Americans, and Latinos now serve at the highest levels of government. For many Americans, the bipartisan presence of representatives who are people of color and/or women is proof that we live in a “post-feminist” and “postracial” era in which institutions are now fundamentally fair and accessible. Rather than assuming that racial presence is synonymous with racial justice, this essay turns to aesthetic theory to advocate for a new understanding of presence—not as proof that racial or gender justice has been achieved but as a kind of beauty that is experienced as a form of visible certitude. Drawing on the work of Hannah Pitkin, alongside writings on descriptive representation for Latinos and African Americans, this essay stresses the importance of judgment, arguing that on questions of social justice, a racially diverse elite is simultaneously ethically valuable *and* politically indeterminate.

**Keywords:** Aesthetics, Postracial, Latinos, African Americans, Representation, Judgment

### **INTRODUCTION**

Making sense of race in America today requires a tolerance for paradox. Yes, advocates of racial justice and equality can point to visible tangible progress with enhanced opportunities in many areas of life for historically marginalized and underrepresented populations. Today’s public realm exhibits more racial and gender diversity than ever before, with a growing number of women, African Americans, and Latinos serving at the highest levels of government.<sup>1</sup>

But racism and xenophobia continue to shape America’s political landscape, from virulent anti-immigrant rhetoric, laws, and statues to racially charged slurs depicting President Obama as a “foreign-born” socialist, and/or secret Muslim.<sup>2</sup> More significantly, persistent racial disparities related to issues of incarceration, education, public health, and poverty all speak to the ongoing existence of inequality conditioned by forms of structural racism that continue to plague American society.<sup>3</sup>

Thus, the paradox: Despite increased diversity in the halls of power, the vast majority of people of color continue to struggle with entrenched power dynamics that place real constraints on individuals’ and communities’ lived opportunities and future possibilities. The growing presence of a diverse elite whose enhanced opportunities

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exist alongside widespread and deepening inequality has important implications for how we understand the dynamics of identity and racial politics today.

In politics, minorities' heightened presence on the public stage is a very recent occurrence, yet its novelty is blunted by a liberal logic that, despite its historic exclusions, continually reframes equality and inclusion as something familiar and commonplace. Rather than acknowledging the discriminatory racial and sexual histories that led to current political disenfranchisement, today's public rhetoric affirms a universal commitment to equality by emphasizing our increasingly diverse body of elected and appointed representatives. The celebratory (and self-congratulatory) rhetoric surrounding Barack Obama's election as the nation's first Black president is the most vivid example of this phenomenon, but recent discussions of presidential hopeful Hillary Clinton as U.S. secretary of state, Eric Holder as attorney general, and the Elena Kagan and Sonia Sotomayor as Supreme Court justices also illustrate this dynamic.<sup>4</sup> In all these cases, the relative novelty of such gender and racial diversity, articulated through liberal narratives of progress, often works to shut down (rather than open up) opportunities to reflect on the longstanding forms of inequality and exclusion that have led to the unaccustomed diversity of our present. For many Americans, such enhanced presence is proof that we have collectively moved beyond prejudice and inequality and now live in a "post-feminist" and "postracial" era with institutions that are now fundamentally fair and accessible. In all these examples, racial presence is quickly presumed to signify not only racial progress but racial justice.

While I am in no way persuaded that "postracial" language captures our current political condition, I do want to suggest that some assertions of the postracial reflect the public's inability to make sense of today's complex racial present and our need to creatively consider the civic moment we find ourselves in. For example, it is becoming increasingly difficult to speak of either African Americans or Latinos as easily generalizable communities, as diversity continues to expand by region, education, ethnic sub-group, religion, immigration status, language, class, age, gender, and sexual orientation. Such distinctions have a huge impact on subjects' political priorities, interests, and practices. And while moments of mass political agreement certainly occur (e.g., Black voters' overwhelming support for Obama or widespread Latino opposition to immigrant-bashing), these communities are regularly experienced as a series of publics and counter-publics that exist in cooperation, conflict, and competition with one another. So while we are in no way "after race," I would argue that the growth and heterogeneity of these populations—combined with our current paradoxical state of inclusion, inequality, and opportunity—require scholars to build on past insights while working to rethink the politics of racial justice anew.

In an effort to consider our paradoxical present, this essay draws on aesthetic theory to examine the relationship between racial justice, racial presence, and the politics of visibility. By engaging questions of race and the visual, I take seriously Mark Reinhardt's (2007) insight that political science often "downplays the political construction of the visual field and wholly overlooks what might be called the visual construction of the political arena" (p. 34). In my own effort to make sense of what Reinhardt refers to as "visual public spheres," this essay focuses on the politics of race and representation, particularly elite electoral representation. Turning first to Hanna Pitkin's seminal political work *The Concept of Representation* (1967), the article then moves to examine recent scholarship regarding Latino descriptive representation: Matt Barreto's 2010 book *Ethnic Cues* and the 2009 book *Políticas* by Sonia García and her colleagues. Wary that talk of substantive representation is an implicit denial of the importance of racial presence, the authors of *Políticas* and *Ethnic Cues* assume that the value of racial presence requires demonstrating that descriptive representation

is essentially congruent with substantive representation. This research relies on the belief (or the voter's belief) that subjects from marginalized populations inherently make unique contributions to the public realm. Here, the beauty of racial correspondence is treated as synonymous with justice; this scholarship often presumes that the enhanced presence of Latinos and other underrepresented groups in our political institutions will inevitably lead to more just outcomes. Ironically, by naturalizing and conflating the relationship between racial presence and racial justice, this scholarship ends up echoing the postracial logic that uses elite visibility to argue that racial justice has been achieved. In both cases, the presence of racially marked subjects is used as a problematic form of evidence.

While acknowledging that the presence of representatives from historically marginalized groups is a crucial component of justice, this essay argues for a new understanding of racial presence—not as proof that racial justice has been achieved but as an aesthetically meaningful aspect of democratic politics characterized by multiplicitous interpretations and outcomes. Drawing on the work of Crispin Sartwell (2010), Kennan Ferguson (1999), Elaine Scarry (1999), and Frank Ankersmit (1996), the paper argues for the value in attending to the aesthetic and affective dimensions of political judgment within the sensorium of racial/ethnic politics. Engaging works of aesthetic theory, supplemented by scholarship analyzing the impact of descriptive representation on Latinos and African Americans, the essay concludes by discussing how attending to descriptive representation's aesthetic and affective dimensions helps deepen our understanding of enhanced racial presence in an era of widening social inequality. Put another way, the insights of aesthetic theory help us understand that when it comes to questions of social justice, a racially diverse elite is both ethically valuable *and* politically indeterminate.

## WHY AESTHETICS? JUDGMENT AND THE POLITICS OF REPRESENTATION

In this essay, I seek to build on Sartwell's (2010) insight that the connections between politics and aesthetics "are too rarely appreciated, and can be exploited toward new forms of political understanding" (p. 49). For example, in both politics and the arts, representation can be understood as "a process of depiction" (Ankersmit 1996, p. 45). Yet as Ankersmit (1996) rightly notes, "the interest of art lies in the fact that there are no fixed and generally accepted rules to link the represented and its artistic representation" (p. xiv). And while the realm of politics does not (at first glance) seem to involve quite so much variability, the familiar "mandate-independence" controversy regarding whether elected representatives should serve as the proxy of their constituents (doing what voters would do) or instead act based on their own best judgment of the common good lends credibility to Ankersmit's larger point that "there are no algorithms that link the represented to its representation" (p. xiv).

Yet in highlighting the aesthetic underpinnings of our political desires and arrangements, I also take seriously Sartwell's (2010) claim that while "there is no politics without aesthetics, there is also no politics that can thoroughly dominate or domesticate aesthetics" (p. 81). The aesthetic is "not exhausted by or thoroughly annexed by the political; they are orthogonal even as they are always correlated" (p. 81). So while there are obvious differences "between beauty and justice," this essay is interested in how political and aesthetic values "cut across each other, infest each other, and exceed each other" (p. 11). Understood in the context of race and representation, our aesthetic responses to racial presence are related to the histories, political practices, and experiences that give them resonance.

Sartwell's insights into the connections between politics and aesthetics bring me to a central reason why I find aesthetic theory useful in understanding the complex dynamics of racial presence: that aesthetics is one of the few spaces where theorists attend to the distinction between values and feelings. For it is through our aesthetic responses that we become most aware of the dissonance between our sensory pleasures and our ethical values. Questions of aesthetics and politics have a popular resonance because *everyone* can recall moments of political-aesthetic dissonance: being emotionally stirred by a film whose worldview you find reprehensible, feeling attracted to someone you dislike, or enjoying a song whose lyrics you find offensive. Or conversely, we might appreciate the political intentions of a song or film (or person) while finding them aesthetically unmoving and/or unappealing. In other words, because judgments of beauty are simultaneously sensory, emotional, and intellectual, it is in the realm of aesthetics where individuals most self-consciously encounter and debate the dissonance (and congruence) of our sensory preferences and our ethical values. Given this, it is my contention that aesthetic theory can help us make judgments regarding descriptive representatives, particularly since the growing diversity of our representatives is likely to increase our feelings of political-aesthetic dissonance.

Approaching racial presence through the lens of aesthetics reorients our gaze—rather than reflecting some self-evident truth, aesthetic considerations highlight the need for *judgment* when trying to assess the value and meaning of racial presence and visibility. As Ferguson (1999) notes, aesthetics pertains to “the process of collective and contested judgments established by cultures, sub-cultures, and specific groups” (p. xii). Echoing Immanuel Kant, Ferguson emphasizes the political and public nature of judgment:

Aesthetic judgments are political by their very nature because they involve the contestation between individuals and groups over the ways the world is understood . . . judgments are not democratic; taste cannot, it is said, be legislated . . . (who can *make* someone find an object beautiful, after all?) . . . Yet decisions about aesthetics do take place between people . . . Criticism, discussion, explanation: all these are the social forms that aesthetics takes. And these forms are, by definition, contentious (p. viii).

Judgment is the mental faculty “by which we situate ourselves in the political world without relying upon explicit rules and methods” (Beiner 1984, p. 3). Related to the world of appearance, judgments about both art and politics represent deeply *collective* practices. Moreover, because aesthetic judgments are made on the basis of taste as opposed to interest, they are contingent but not random. As such, our judgment is always subject to change and critique. In other words, rather than an inherent ability, good judgment is something we are capable of cultivating. Yet there is no guarantee that this capacity will be acquired and developed.

In stressing the political quality of aesthetic judgment, my argument builds on the claim that aesthetics is critically connected to “modern conceptions of knowledge” and central to “the constitution of modern identities” (Ferguson 1999, xiii). As Ferguson notes, “the racial, the performative, and the aesthetic complement one another: it is in the complex interplay of these that communal identities arise” (p. 44). And while Ferguson does not focus his attention on the growing ideological and partisan heterogeneity of raced subjects, his emphasis on judgment helps us rethink the dynamics of racial presence as we come to grips with the increasing visibility of Latino conservatives and other conservative representatives from historically marginalized populations.<sup>5</sup>

For example, in the 2010 midterm elections, for the first time ever, three Latino candidates—all of them Republicans and two of them Mexican Americans—won top statewide office. New Mexico voters elected the nation's first Latina governor, Susana Martinez. In Nevada, Brian Sandoval became Nevada's first Hispanic governor. And in Florida, Marco Rubio won the U.S. Senate race and serious consideration to be Mitt Romney's running mate (Lopez 2010).<sup>6</sup> More recently in Texas, Ted Cruz—a Tea Party-backed Latino candidate—pulled a surprising electoral upset by winning the state's Republican nomination in July 2012 and was then elected to the U.S. Senate (Fox News Latino 2012). All four were given prominent speaking slots at the 2012 Republican National Convention.

For advocates of descriptive representation, the growing presence of conservative Latino elected officials such as Rubio, Martinez, and Cruz complicates the accepted wisdom that increased racial presence correlates with more liberal (and therefore more racially just) policy outcomes. Yet there is an additional element at play here. For even as the meaning of presence becomes increasingly unsettled, the visible presence of racialized subjects on the public stage continues to stir our emotions. And this is true across the racial divide—whether enthralled or repelled, participants in the visual public sphere *feel* something when racial subjects appear on the public stage and claim political authority. The existence of such reactions is a reminder that the aesthetic dimensions of politics always demand a simultaneous engagement with questions of affect. For our affective responses are inevitably intertwined with our aesthetic reactions. And as Sartwell (2010) rightly notes, “a politics or political system that does not satisfy people emotionally or at least arouse or mobilize them in some way is unlikely to prosper or endure” (p. 50). In other words, the corporeal and aesthetic significance of how subjects appear—how they look, sound, and move—produces reactions and responses that theorists of democracy would do well to address.

Thinking more deeply about the aesthetic and affective effects of presence allows us to move beyond claims that descriptive representation is merely symbolic and therefore unimportant. Such arguments often dismiss the significance of presence, arguing that descriptive representation distracts voters from more important substantive issues of interest and ideology (Swain 1993). In this paper, I argue that these criticisms echo earlier debates regarding the dangers of aestheticizing politics. Such denunciations characterize the aesthetic appeal of a subject's appearance as a kind of concealing ornamentation for problematic political positions. Here, substantive representation is portrayed as a kind of rational anti-aesthetic, while descriptive representation is characterized as an aestheticized politics that deceives voters through its visually appealing surface.

Rather than try to prove which type of representation has the normative edge, I want to suggest that such arguments can be read as undertheorized responses to the aesthetic and affective experience of race. Put another way, while racial presence and diversity are clearly important elements of a just regime of representation, a more self-conscious consideration of affect and aesthetic judgment might allow us to challenge both aversive and essentialist arguments regarding descriptive representation.

To do this, I approach the affective and aesthetic significance of racial embodiment neither as proof of its true value nor as a kind of concealing disguise or diversion. Instead, I argue that racial presence and co-racial correspondence can be productively understood as a form of beauty and a type of aesthetic pleasure. As I show in the following pages, for many citizens, descriptive representation has a kind of beauty that *feels* and *looks* like a form of justice. Here, I consider the ways in which beauty can be understood as what Scarry (1999) describes as “the experience of conviction” (p. 52). Yet while acknowledging beauty's persuasive power, I want to distinguish between the

affective force of aesthetics and claims to equality and social justice. In attending to this mix of rupture and relatedness, I take seriously a central claim of recent aesthetic theory: that aesthetic values (such as beauty) are in fact *connected* to questions of justice, goodness, and truth. Yet this claim is a limited one—the argument is *not* that aesthetic values are identical or interchangeable with our political values but that they have a complex *relationship* that we need to evaluate and make judgments about.

Rather than cultivating an anti-aesthetic that sees the “aesthetic embodiment of political power as a set of manipulative or affective tropes overlaying/expressing/falsifying a set of political ideas” (Sartwell 2010, p. 18), I seek to build on Sartwell’s (2010) claim that “the aesthetic is inherent in and necessary to the ethical, the political, and the epistemic, without exhausting those spheres of value” (p. 49). In a similar vein, I read racial presence as a necessary and inherent aspect of a just system of political representation. Yet the importance of presence does not overshadow or exhaust other spheres of value. Sensitive to the possibilities and political ambiguities of racial presence, thinking aesthetically about race and representation shifts our focus from *evidence* to *judgment*. Rather than try to legitimate the value of racial presence by anchoring it to a particular set of civic outcomes, my approach untethers presence from justice, inviting exploration of its multiple effects, ranging from its capacity to educate the public to its ability to legitimate injustice by seducing and misleading voters. Thinking aesthetically about racial presence’s affective and persuasive elements encourages public practices of judgment—that is, evaluative practices help citizens give an account of their interpretations of the various modes of racial embodiment occurring in the visible public sphere.

## PORTRAITS, MAPS, AND MINIATURES: AESTHETIC CONSIDERATIONS AND THE LURE OF COMMON SENSE

Recognized as a seminal work in political science, *The Concept of Representation* (1967) is less well known for its use of aesthetics to analyze the varied logics of representation. Throughout the book, Hanna Pitkin draws on aesthetic theory to clarify and complicate the reader’s understanding of representation. Drawing on ordinary language philosophy of J. L. Austin (1961) and influenced by the work of Stanley Cavell (1958), Pitkin (1967) asserts that “we learn what representation is, not merely from the history of representative government, but also from knowing about representational art, knowing how to pick out a representative example, knowing how an actor represents a character on stage, knowing how contract law treats the making of representations” (p. 7).

According to Pitkin, the etymological origin of the word *representation* indicates a *re-presentation*, a concept that implies “a making present again . . . representation, taken generally, means the making present *in some sense* of something which is nevertheless *not* present literally or in fact . . . something not literally present is considered as present in a nonliteral sense” (pp. 8–9). Aesthetic theorist Frank Ankersmit (1996) echoes Pitkin by noting that political representation is often understood as “making something present that is absent”:

The thought and actions of the people not present are made present by the representative body. In the political representation process, a depiction of a political will that exists in one medium (the people) is made visible and present in another medium (the representative body) (p. 45).

Here, although the people themselves are not present, their political will is made visible through the medium of representation.

In her work, Pitkin identifies a wide variety of representative forms, including formalistic and accountability views of representation, descriptive representation, symbolic representation, and substantive representation. Among scholars of race, representation, and identity, the focus has traditionally centered on the distinction (and potential relationship) between substantive and descriptive representation.

For Pitkin (1967), the difference between these two forms of representation can best be understood in term of the distinction between “acting for” versus “standing for” (p. 111). Substantive representation is defined as “acting in the interest of the represented, in a manner responsive to them” (p. 232) while descriptive representation is the process by which a person or thing stands for others “by being sufficiently like them” (p. 80). According to Pitkin, the “major features of this view are most clearly developed among advocates of proportional representation” (p. 61). For proportionalists, “resemblance, reflection, accurate correspondence are vitally necessary in a legislature precisely because these things are what representation means. Without it, no true representation is possible” (p. 62).

Pitkin uses a number of metaphors and analogies to help illustrate the logic of descriptive representation. The most familiar of these include analogies regarding portraits, mirrors, maps, and miniatures. Pitkin (1967) quotes John Adams’ description of one characterization of the ideal representative legislature:

A representative legislature, John Adams argues in the American Revolutionary period, “should be an exact portrait, in miniature, of the people at large, as it should think, feel, reason, and act like them” (p. 60).

For Adams (1787), the representative assembly is like the portrait, and “as in art, ‘the perfection of the portrait consists in its likeness’” (p. 61). Here, use of the term “miniature” implies a “condensation of the original, or a part of the original that can be used to stand for the rest” (Pitkin 1967, p. 73). For proportionalists, “a legislature should be a miniature in the sense that it should have members to correspond to each feature of the national landscape” (p. 73). In a similar vein, the Anti-Federalist Melancton Smith argued that representatives “should be a true picture of the people; possess the knowledge of their circumstances and their wants; sympathize in all their distresses, and be disposed to seek their true interests” (Storing 1981, p. 17). According to Herbert Storing, the Anti-Federalists believed that “[e]ffective and thoroughgoing responsibility is to found only in likeness between the representative body and the citizens at large” (p. 17). Full and equal representation requires representatives who “possesses the same interests, feelings, opinions, and views the people themselves would were they all assembled” (p. 17). As Pitkin (1967) notes, such arguments for descriptive representation almost always implicitly assume that descriptiveness is related to substantive representation: “Of course even the proportionalists are interested in what the legislature does; they care about its composition precisely because they expect the composition to determine the activities” (p. 63).

In all of these analogies and examples, advocates of proportionalism presume that the sharing of particular descriptive characteristics will allow representatives to not only “reason and act” like the people, but to “think” and “feel” like them as well. Such practices of identification are assumed to shape voters as well. Describing this process, Pitkin (1967) quotes Harold Foote Gosnell as he describes the affective pull of citizens who see in their representatives a likeness of themselves:

A person may . . . see a remarkable similarity to himself in the physiognomy and social characteristics of his representative. In fact, he sees a mirroring of himself.

He will feel as though he himself were present in the seat of power (Gosnell quoted in Pitkin, p. 78).

For Adams and Gosnell, descriptive representation is characterized as creating a multidirectional affective relationship capable of moving both voter and representative. In seeing the similar physiognomy of the representative, the citizen is portrayed as feeling as if he himself occupies a seat of power.

Yet alongside this rhetoric of likeness and identification, Pitkin notes that, “a replication is never a replica . . . artistic representation has always been a matter of style and convention, as well as skill” (p. 66). Because there is “always a question of which characteristics are politically relevant for reproduction,” Pitkin’s insight helps us to understand how the Founders could simultaneously defend the idea of “likeness” (p. 87) and accurate party-by-part correspondence, while also creating an exclusionary design scheme that included the three-fifths compromise and the denial of voting rights to Blacks and women. Social and political conventions based on patriarchy and White supremacy led the Founders to cultivate a style of representation that reflected certain assumptions regarding which subjects were seen as politically relevant and worthy of full and equal representation and reproduction—after all, “a replication is never a replica.”

According to Pitkin, in addition to portraits and miniatures, many proportional theories of representation draw on analogies of maps and mirrors. In the mirror analogy, representative government should be an “accurate reflection” of the community—in terms of accurately reflecting either the demographics of a community, “the general opinion of the nation,” or the “variety of interests in society” (p. 61). Yet although mirrors reflect an ideal of “perfect accuracy” that unerringly displays “the changing scene before it at each moment,” the mirror nevertheless “can reproduce only visual features; it cannot show structure as a blueprint can, or abstract relationships as on a map” (p. 72). In a 1798 speech before the Estates of Provence, Honoré Gabriel Riquetti Mirabeau stated that a representative body “is for the nation what a map drawn to scale is for the physical configuration of its land; in part or in whole the copy must always have the same proportions as the original” (Mirabeau quoted in Pitkin, p. 62). Like the portrait or the miniature, the map is understood here as a condensation of the original—one that shares a likeness with the original based on its corresponding proportions. Yet unlike mirrors, miniatures, and portraits, maps have a different relationship to appearance. As Pitkin notes, maps are not evaluated based on whether they resemble what they depict. Instead, a map “is judged by its accuracy” (Pitkin 1967, p. 71). In this way, a map is something that needs to be read and deciphered. A map “conveys information only to someone who knows the ‘style’” (p. 72).

By emphasizing familiar metaphors such as portraits, miniatures, and maps, Pitkin’s analysis reveals how a commonsense understanding of representational art helps to sustain a belief in the rightness of descriptive representation. Here, Pitkin’s analysis lends support to Ankersmit’s (1996) claim that great political ideas (like great art) have a kind of accessibility that makes them appealing and widely understood:

Like great art, the great ideas in the history of political thought are not very complicated and abstract insights; they do not require the highest effort of the mind in order to be properly understood . . . [M]eaningful political philosophy is necessarily “democratic” as great art is “democratic” in the sense of being accessible even to the artistically unsophisticated (p. 17).

According to Ankersmit, because political ideas “can only be effective on condition that most people can understand them, assess them, and pronounce on the way they



have been put into practice,” the most difficult challenge is to find “that narrow optimum between concreteness, abstraction, and efficacy that will show them the way to the citizen’s mind and heart” (p. 17).

For Pitkin, one of the problems of descriptive representation is that it’s a political concept whose aesthetic implications render it *excessively* appealing. For example, Pitkin (1967) notes that even those who challenge the proportionalist view often leave unchallenged the presumption that “to represent means to resemble or reflect accurately” (p. 64). According to Pitkin, “once it has been articulated . . . [t]here is something so compelling about the view that representation means accurate reflection . . . that critics have accepted it unchallenged” (p. 65). Even when insisting that we ought to privilege *other* aspects of representation, critics of proportionalism nevertheless refer to “sacrificing ‘accurate representative’ for the sake of effective government” (p. 64). For Pitkin, characterizing the loss of accurate reflection as a “sacrifice” represents the power of this definition of representation. Described as loss, this admission of remorse concedes that under certain circumstances “representation must be sacrificed—for something more important . . . but sacrificed nonetheless” (pp. 64–65). According to Pitkin, the proportionalist definition is “so compelling” precisely because its logics affirm the epistemic power of the visible. As Linda Schlossberg (2001) notes, “[t]heories and practices of identity and subject formation in Western culture are largely structured around a logic of visibility . . . At the most basic level, we are subjects constituted by our visions of ourselves and others, and we trust that our ability to see and read carries with it a certain degree of epistemic certainty” (p. 1). Like Pitkin and Ankersmit, Schlossberg acknowledges that the “seemingly intimate relationship between the visual and the known” (p. 1) surrounds particular practices of visibility.

As Pitkin (1967) argues, “critics accept the proportionalists’ definition because it strikes them as correct and convincing, as it may strike us unless we have thought of other definitions or counterexamples” (p. 65). Rather than accepting this commonsense understanding of representation as resemblance and accurate reflection, Pitkin warns her readers that “perhaps we should not assume too readily that we know . . . what the word means in such a context” (p. 66). Offering her own counterexample, Pitkin notes that “accuracy of depiction has not always been seen as the goal or measure of art” and that “[e]ven in paintings of the most painstaking accuracy . . . the artist does not reproduce reality, but combines paint in complex ways on canvas. This is something an artist has to learn to do, and a viewer has to learn to read” (p. 66). Because the self-evident power of the visible obscures the necessity of interpretation and judgment, Pitkin calls for challenging what initially appears “correct and convincing.”

While granting that descriptive representation is “obviously relevant to political life” (p. 89), the overall thrust of Pitkin’s critique is that advocates of proportionalism too quickly presume the existence of a transparent relationship between one’s identity and one’s actions. Pitkin writes:

We tend to assume that people’s characteristics are a guide to the actions they will take, and we are concerned with the characteristics of our legislators for just this reason. But it is no simple correlation; the best descriptive representation is not necessarily the best representative for activity or government (p. 89).

Behind all the applications of the descriptive view to political life hovers the recurrent ideal of the perfect replica, the flawless image, the map which contains everything . . . But that ideal may well be chimerical, and therefore dangerous. Perfect accuracy of correspondence is impossible (pp. 86–87).

While Pitkin is correct in asserting that there is “no simple correlation” between “people’s characteristics” and “the actions they will take,” Pitkin’s analysis underestimates the affective power that drives the desire for proportional representation. More specifically, the historic absence of representatives from particular populations has intensified the political meaning we ascribe to descriptive representation in general and racial presence in particular. Seen from this perspective, the classic definition of political representation in which “something absent is made present” (p. 81) takes on new affective dimensions when absence itself is saturated with significance. Rather than serving as an innocuous concept, absence is understood to be the result of exclusionary policies and the unjust denial of political rights.

In the field of American politics, scholarship in the field of race and representation is fairly unanimous in its belief that racial presence is a key element of justice and that the absence of particular racial groups is clearly unjust. However, the recognition that racial absence is a form of injustice has sometimes resulted in the problematic corollary that the *presence* of such subjects will put right our dysfunctional representative system. By this logic, representatives from marginalized populations bring unique cultural attributes to their positions that make them *better* representatives. By bringing their distinctive experiences and approaches into our representative institutions, their presence promises an improved politics.

I turn now to two recent works in Latino politics that illustrate this tendency to collapse the distinction between racial presence and racial justice. In *Políticas: Latina Public Officials in Texas* (2008), the authors conflate descriptive representation with substantive representation, arguing that Latinas govern *better* than other political representatives. By contrast, Barreto’s *Ethnic Cues: The Role of Shared Ethnicity in Latino Political Participation* (2010) shifts the focus away from the actual content or quality of representation and instead focuses on the affective experience of descriptive representation. In both works, practices of judgment and contestation are overlooked and undervalued while the power of aesthetics is overstated yet undertheorized.

### **Presence as Justice: Latinas Governing Differently**

In *Políticas*, Sonia García and her colleagues (2008) seek to “examine the complexity and contributions of Latina leadership in the American political context” (p. 1). Their research does this by presenting case studies of the first elected and appointed Latina public officials in various levels of offices in the state of Texas. In approaching this research, the authors ask: “As elected leaders, do [Latinas] have unique political perspectives and/or skills gleaned from their cultural background or life experiences?” (p. 1):

Why is it important to have more Latinas in office? Many would argue that the reason we would want more Latinas in public office is to advocate for the issues that most affect Latinas and the larger Latino community . . . Latinas clearly play a role in representing and advocating for their communities. Electing more Latinas also brings this country closer to a true representative democracy (pp. 13–14).

Like Adams and his claim that a representative body should be “an exact portrait, in miniature, of the people at large,” the authors of *Políticas* share the view that “true” representation means to resemble or reflect accurately. Understood as a form of racial and gender correspondence between voter and representative, the authors’ assumption is that Latinas in public office will “advocate for the issues that most affect Latinas”

because their shared likeness allows them to “think, feel, reason and act like them” (Pitkin 1967, p. 61).

In her foreword to *Políticas*, former New Mexico Attorney General Patricia Madrid echoes the authors’ proportionalist logic, writing:

The leaders who are heard in these corridors determine policy for the rest of America—rich and poor, brown and white alike. Until we close this economic divide *and elect more leaders who look like America, we will be a nation beholden to the interests of the few* (2008, pp. x-xi, italics mine).

In both passages, descriptive representation is made synonymous with substantive representation. Madrid’s foreword conflates a political problem (the need to “close this economic divide”) with a design proposal (electing more leaders who “look like America”). Here, the solution to the problem of being a nation “beholden to the interests of the few” is shifted from institutional structures of government to the visual composition of bodies. And while Madrid and the authors are certainly right to argue that democratic institutions’ racial and gender composition is a key component of those institutions’ legitimacy, conflating presence and policy works to displace analysis of larger structural problems in our electoral/representative process (the role of money in politics, political corruption, civic alienation, etc.). Instead, the assumption is that the enhanced presence of new racial subjects will produce political change.

Throughout *Políticas*, the logic expressed is that more Latinas in public office means more people advocating for Latina issues and interests. Yet the question of what constitutes Latino issues and interests remains vague. Part of this might have to do with the fact that the authors simultaneously speak of “Latina interests” while also acknowledging the diversity of Latinos and their representatives. Describing their research methodology, the authors write: “We fully recognize the limitations of our research design . . . our conclusions are thus limited to these individual women” (p. 15). Delving into some of the more significant distinctions among Latinas, the authors write:

Although Latinas share certain experiences as women of color, it is also important to note that they are not homogenous. There are various differences among Latina candidates and public officials that are based on many factors. Some of these cleavages are common among all people in politics, such as educational levels, class ideological differences, feminist orientation, religion, partisanship, marital status, gender, motherhood, and sexuality. Other differences, however, impact Latinos and Latinas specifically, such as language, immigrant status, ancestry, cultural orientations, degree of assimilation, historical experience, and regional backgrounds. These differences highlight the importance of coalition and compromise within the larger Latino community. Coalitions are especially important today, given the increasing concern for immigrant rights within the Latino community (p. 11).

In describing the many differences that exist between Latina candidates and public officials, the authors admit that they are “unable to generalize to all Latina public officials, or even Latina public officials in Texas” (p. 15). Yet following this acknowledgement, the book goes on to make a number of sweeping claims regarding the gender and cultural practices of Latinas and how they shape the political behavior of this group of elected officials. A few examples:

The sense of a strong Mexican cultural identity, with its traditions and ties to religion and spirituality, is also important to Latinas in politics (p. 10).

Latinas are also likely to retain their traditional gender roles while advocating for their community . . . Latinas manifest abilities to bridge traditional and community motivations for their political involvement (p. 10).

[W]omen are more likely to practice “integrative” leadership, while men are more likely to practice “aggregative or distributive” leadership . . . [I]ntegrative leadership involves sharing power and empowering others, being noncompetitive and inclusive, seeking consensus and mutuality in relationships, and inviting participation rather than imposing dominance (p. 10).

In terms of leadership . . . Vela, Flores, and Serna share a style that is distinctly Latina; that is, they believe in serving the community before self (p. 105).

Citing the 2006 immigrant rights marches, the book concludes with this claim:

Because Latina leaders prioritize serving the interests of these marginalized groups, because their prior experiences and socialization typically keep Latinas well connected to the people and needs of local communities, and finally, because Latina leadership styles are best suited for building consensus and forming coalitions, their increased presence at every level of the policymaking process is needed now more than ever (p. 134).

*Políticas* provides readers with an immensely useful account of how Latina representatives in Texas have been socialized into politics and the factors that have thus far influenced their decision to run for office. Such state-centered research is tremendously valuable. However, in trying to develop “an encompassing theoretical framework for the study of Latina politics” (p. 132), *Políticas* overreaches the limits of its methodology, exaggerating the implications of presence by claiming that the value of Latina representatives lies in their capacity to govern *better* and *differently* than other representatives. Such an assertion reflects an anxiety that without such claims, arguments for descriptive representation and racial presence will have no value. Anxious that arguments for substantive representation will be used to deny the importance of racial presence, advocates of proportionalism feel compelled to justify presence with the claim that representatives from particular populations are not just good but *superior*. Yet as Latina political representatives grow in number and display increased ideological diversity, such claims regarding racial/gender presence will become increasingly untenable.

### **Presence as Justice: Latinos *Feeling Differently***

In contrast to the direct assertion that Latina/os govern better or differently than other representatives, Matt Barreto in *Ethnic Cues: The Role of Shared Ethnicity in Latino Political Participation* (2010) shifts his focus to the impact that descriptive representation has on those being represented. Interviewing political elites and analyzing exit surveys, voting records, and demographic data, Barreto builds on “broader studies of identity politics and in-group identification” to show how ethnic minorities “are often persuaded by ethnic appeals and vote as a bloc for ethnic candidates” (p. 3). According to Barreto, over the past fifty years, several factors have led to shared ethnicity emerging as an important element of voter preference. These include:

(1) the diminishing role of political parties; (2) the rise of candidate-centered elections; (3) candidate appeals for groups of voters; (4) media focus on ethnicity of candidates; and (5) the continuing lack of minority representation (p. 31).

In contrast to *Políticas'* all-inclusive claims regarding Latina elected officials, Barreto distinguishes between Latinos who possess a strong sense of group affiliation and a collectivist orientation toward group empowerment, and those Latinos who display less ethnic-group consciousness. According to Barreto (2010), "Latinos with a higher degree of ethnic attachment are more likely to prefer Latino candidates, absent party labels" (p. 87). For Latinos with "higher levels of ethnic identification, co-ethnic candidates increase the level of political awareness and interest in the election, increase the opportunity to be contacted and asked to vote, generate a sense of psychological engagement with the political system and strengthen feelings of shared group consciousness" (p. 7). Put somewhat differently, Latinos who strongly identify racially display an affective orientation that makes them more likely to be politically mobilized. Similarly, ethnic identification also impacts the behavior of Latino representatives: Latino candidates with an ethnic-specific strategy are the most likely to have a mobilizing effect among Latino voters. According to Barreto, "the presence of a viable Latino candidate uniformly results in increased voter turnout among Latinos" (p. 158). Moreover, when Latino candidates run for office, "they are much more likely to view Latino voters as part of their base and to conduct voter mobilization in Latino communities" (p. 29).

Here, Barreto's analysis echoes Katherine Tate's (2003) analysis of race and representation in *Black Faces in the Mirror: African Americans and Their Representatives in Congress*. Tate, like Barreto, shifts the question away from trying to prove whether or not descriptive representation is synonymous with substantive representation. Instead, Tate expands the question to examine the effects of descriptive representation on Black public opinion. Beyond this, Tate (2003) argues that political representation "consists of three forms: substantive, descriptive, and symbolic" (p. 4). By adding the symbolic into her measure of African American interests, Tate is able to explore how symbolic practices matter.

According to Tate, one reason descriptive representation is important is because African American voters perceive they are "better" (p. 122) represented by African American members of Congress:

There is a strong correlation between descriptive representation and turnout in congressional elections. Blacks represented by Blacks were about ten percentage points more likely to report having voted in contrast to Blacks represented by Whites in Congress. . . . Blacks represented by Blacks in Congress are considerably more knowledgeable, more interested, and more active than Blacks represented by Whites (pp. 137–138).

For both Barreto and Tate, racial presence is related to justice less in terms of the quality of representation than in terms of how racial presence produces attentiveness and trust. When representatives of color are present, Black and Latino-identified voters feel they are better represented and are more likely to take an interest and pay attention. Looking at the impact of Latino mayoral candidates, Barreto's (2010) study shows that "the presence of a viable Latino candidate uniformly results in increased voter turnout" (p. 117). Here we are reminded of Pitkin's quote of Harold Foote Gosnell and his claim that descriptive representation can make a certain type of individual feel "as though he himself were present in the seat of power" (Gosnell in Pitkin 1967, p. 78).

In thinking about the relationship between political views and Latino identity, *Ethnic Cues* opens with two conflicting claims. Like the authors of *Políticas*, Barreto states that: (1) Latinos are deeply heterogeneous, and (2) that shared cultural characteristics make them fundamentally the same. Noting that when it comes to Latinos “no single historical event, institution, or migration creates a shared group experience” (p. 24), Barreto (2010) makes a very different claim at the start of his book. Writing in his introductory chapter, he states the following:

This volume considers the extent to which Latinos act congruently on political issues. Four characteristics describe the roots of all Hispanic Americans regardless of their background: (1) Latin American heritage; (2) the immigrant experience; (3) Spanish language; and (4) Spanish colonial influence. For some Latinos, these traits may be stronger; in other cases, they may be altogether dormant. In any event, their existence cannot be easily refuted. In addition, the experience of ethnic discrimination augments the relationship of these four characteristics. When any one of these components of ethnic identity comes under cultural attack, Latinos are likely to draw together around their common heritage. This argument about shared ethnic identification provides the foundation for this book—that is, the idea that ethnicity is an important component of Latino political behavior, especially given the current state of underrepresentation of Latinos and the growing discrimination against Latino immigrants. Although distinct differences exist between Latinos of Mexican, Puerto Rican, Cuban, Dominican, and Salvadoran ancestry, they share a common Latin American heritage that brings them together (p. 9).

I quote Barreto’s introduction at length here because the construction of this passage is telling. He begins by asking whether or not Latinos “act congruently on political issues” then *immediately* shifts the discussion to the “four characteristics” that “describe the roots of all Hispanic Americans regardless of their background” (p. 9). It’s interesting that the structure of this passage moves from questions regarding political congruence to an assertion of shared characteristics, while admitting that such “roots” may in fact be “altogether dormant” in many Latinos. The paragraph then slides from a discussion about the growing discrimination against Latinos (when one’s ethnic identity is “under cultural attack”) to claims regarding the current state of Latino underrepresentation. Finally, although the paragraph concludes by noting “distinct differences” of various Latino subgroups, it concludes with the assertion that “they share a common Latin American heritage that brings them together.” Overall, a strong principal unity undergirds Barreto’s analysis. Despite acknowledging Latino diversity, Barreto’s narrative conveys the impression that Latinos share a distinct political perspective based on a shared sense of civic *Latinidad*. As I have argued elsewhere, this approach takes as its starting point the presumption that shared cultural characteristics have an intrinsic connection to a shared political perspective.<sup>7</sup> Yet like *Políticas*, *Ethnic Cues* is often vague about which political issues Latinos will act congruently on. Nevertheless, because strong ethnic identification is synonymous with higher levels of political interest and engagement, *Ethnic Cues* tends to extol those political subjects whose strong racial identification exceeds party affiliation. Understood as a sign of political literacy, Latino pan-ethnic identification is conflated with proper political socialization: “subjects who identify with their fellow Latinos are often characterized as displaying civic agency and voice, while those who lack such a perspective are depicted as disempowered and politically ineffectual” (Beltrán 2010, p. 101).

Moreover, by emphasizing attention and participation, Barreto’s analysis shifts the focus away from an explicit analysis of the *quality* of Latino political representatives

and instead highlights the affective impact generated by particular candidates. This finding of increased interest and attention speaks to the complexities of racial presence and its relationship to racial justice. On the one hand, Tate's and Barreto's emphasis on the symbolic helps us see the possible relationship between affect and action. Yet as Pitkin rightly notes, the realm of the symbolic is indeterminate. Describing the power of the symbol to evoke "feelings or attitudes" (p. 97), Pitkin (1967) writes:

Even when a symbol represents rather than symbolizes, it does so in a somewhat different way from an artistic representation or other instances of descriptive representing . . . the point of its representing is different. A symbol is not a source of information about what it represents; it does not allege anything about what it represents . . . . Rather than as a source of information, the symbol seems to be the recipient or object of feelings, expressions of feelings, or actions intended for what it represents (p. 99).

A version of such representational practices is apparent in the use of symbols by Latino candidates in a technique Barreto (2010) refers to as "*nuestra comunidad* (our community)" (p. 63). According to Barreto, *nuestra comunidad* represents a unique campaign approach whereby Latino candidates "cultivated a strong sense of shared community and linked fate with Latino voters" (p. 57). Some of the ways in which Latino candidates seek to connect with Latino voters include "highlighting their shared ethnicity . . . moving back and forth between English and Spanish" and demonstrating that "they are either from *la comunidad* . . . or part of *la comunidad*" (p. 62). According to Barreto, the idea of *nuestra comunidad* "implies a sense of shared issue agenda" (p. 63). Use of these practices in stump speeches "creates an underlying sense of solidarity on the issues. Latino candidates have the opportunity of make a stronger personal and ethnic connection with Latino audiences through *nuestra* politics" (p. 63). Here, the symbolism of moving between Spanish and English or invoking Latino cultural practices is a way for Latino candidates to highlight the importance of their own racial presence in order to provide voters with a satisfying aesthetic and affective experience.

According to Pitkin (1967), it would be tempting to use the logic of symbolic representation to see representation as "co-extensive with satisfying, being-accepted-by the constituent," to believe that "representation exists only where someone believes that it exists" (p. 109). It is the "vagueness, looseness, and partial quality of the reference" that renders the symbolic a *kind* of representation, but of a limited type (p. 97). Here, the crucial test of political representation "is an existential one: Is the representative believed in?" (p. 102). And indeed, this is the criteria that both Tate and Barreto emphasize. But for Pitkin, this way of thinking about representation "would be a mistake" (p. 109). In part, this "mistake" is related to the fact that symbolic representation "seems to rest on emotional, affective, irrational psychological responses rather than on rationally justifiable criteria" (p. 100). For Pitkin, this affective response to racial presence is characterized as irrational and lacking in legitimate criteria.

According to Barreto (2010), Latino politics "requires a new perspective in the twenty-first century," one that acknowledges a new political reality in which "Latinos continue to face discrimination and underrepresentation" alongside the commonplace occurrence of "prominent Latino candidates" running for public office (p. 6). I agree. But to my mind, this paradoxical condition of increased presence and widespread racial and economic injustice requires practices of *judgment* lacking in Barreto's analysis. The affective response to presence that he wants Latino voters to have relies on voters sharing the fallacious assumption of *Políticas*: that Latino representatives do indeed provide *better* representation and that descriptive representation is synonymous with

substantive representation. Put another way, in focusing exclusively on mobilizing potential of shared ethnicity, Barreto's logic of representation and political empowerment relies on Latino voters' continuing tendency to take the aesthetic and affective power of race at face value (so to speak). Rather than stress the need for Latino voters to use their judgment to interpret how these uncertain aesthetic and affective encounters relate to political representation, Barreto celebrates practices of identification that lead voters to conflate symbolic, descriptive, and substantive representation. For example, while Latino candidates often seem to prioritize targeting and mobilizing Latino voters by invoking the logic of *nuestra comunidad*, this approach tells us nothing about the *quality* of representation being offered. For while claims to *nuestra comunidad* may *imply* a shared agenda, it may not actually *be* a shared agenda. And here lies the fundamental problem with *Ethnic Cues*: it celebrates racial responsiveness while underemphasizing political judgment. And while racial presence can encourage interest and attention, political values must nevertheless be anchored to practices of judgment and assessment.

Scholars studying race and representation in the field of American government often seem to regard the aesthetic and affective power of racial presence in two distinct ways: either positively as *proof* of its close relationship to justice (as in *Políticas* or *Ethnic Cues*), or negatively as a kind of concealing ornamentation for destructive political practices (as Pitkin does in her discussion of symbolic representation). In the realm of race politics, another important example of this more negative critique is Carol Swain's 1993 book, *Black Faces, Black Interests: The Representation of African Americans in Congress*. Because this view is also significant to this analysis, I want to briefly turn to Swain's work.

### Presence as Distraction or Deception: Faces versus Interests

In *Black Faces, Black Interests*, Swain argues that advancing Black interests in Congress does not primarily hinge on increasing the number of Black representatives in the House. In fact, Swain argues that efforts to maximize descriptive representation can actually have a negative impact on the substantive representation of Black interests in Congress. Examining the political careers of thirteen members of Congress (nine Black, four White) who represent substantial Black populations, Swain analyzed the representational styles of these individuals using the participant-observation approach congressional scholar Richard Fenno used in his 1978 book *Home Style: House Members in Their Districts*.

Dividing Black representatives into four types of congressional districts (historically Black, newly Black, heterogeneous, and majority White) and looking at White representatives of minority-Black and majority-Black districts, Swain highlights the diversity of African American members of Congress, showing how their representational styles vary by region, interests, and priorities. In addition to participant observation, she uses multivariate regression analyses to analyze the voting behavior of the House of Representatives in the 100th Congress, concluding that party and region are the best determinants of voting behavior. Swain (1993) writes: "On every indicator, Republicans are less responsive to Black interests than are Democrats" (p. 19).

Swain's most controversial claim is that the substantive representation of African Americans might be improved through having *fewer* "majority-minority" Black districts (p. 189). Arguing against racial gerrymandering to increase the number of Black faces in Congress, Swain argues that such districts have a number of normative and



material drawbacks. To create districts in which African Americans were the majority, Blacks were taken out of surrounding districts, creating heavily White districts that increased the likelihood of electing Republicans (who provide far less substantive representation to Black interests). For Swain, such practices risk “isolating Black voters in overwhelmingly Black districts places them in a situation where their policy preferences can be more easily ignored” (p. 198). According to Swain, “Republicans give African Americans the opportunity to increase their descriptive representation, but, quite possibly, at the expense of their substantive representation” (p. 205).

While Swain insists that “White representatives . . . are a further source of Black representation,” she also observes that “White representatives of Blacks will never replace Black representation.... The presence of Black representatives in Congress, regardless of their political party, fulfills a host of psychological needs that are no less important for being intangible” (p. 217). Yet despite this acknowledgement, the overall tone of Swain’s argument implies that the desire for racial presence serves a kind of dangerous distraction. The longing for presence is understood as a psychological state that often hurts the subjects who seek it. Here, racial presence represents a mode of politics that deceives voters through its visually appealing surface. For Swain, what is needed is a de-aestheticized politics in which racial symmetry is disregarded in favor of a more rational and ideological approach to representation. And while I agree with Swain that we should avoid equating racial presence and justice, I approach racial presence not as inherently deceptive or distracting but, rather, as a form of beauty whose relationship to justice is as deep as it is uncertain.

## A FEELING OF TRUTH: THE BEAUTY OF JUSTICE AND THE AESTHETIC PLEASURE OF PRESENCE

Swain, García et al., Tate, and Barreto all believe that *every* American should have equal opportunity and access to our representative system and that such access is critical to any definition of justice. This is why scholars of race and representation rightly emphasize the historical and political context that has led to the absence (or presence) of people of color as political representatives. What is less understood, however, is how racial presence (and its absence) is experienced as a *visual* event. Yet attending to the aesthetic elements of racial presence provides us with a deeper appreciation of how visibility helps satisfy our political and affective desires. With this in mind, I want to explore how racial diversity and co-racial correspondence in the public sphere are often experienced as a kind of beauty and a form of aesthetic pleasure. For many race-conscious citizens, descriptive representation has a kind of beauty that *feels* and *looks* like a form of justice. Such feelings have an uncertain relationship to justice—they can serve as affective *resources* that can be used in the service of justice, but such feelings can *also* be used to manipulate and seduce citizens in ways that undercut justice. So while racial presence can be understood as a kind of beauty that gives us pleasure, its relationship to a more politically just society is uncertain. As with other types of aesthetic value, racial presence invites interpretation, and is subject to collective and public judgment.

Drawing on Sartwell’s (2010) insight that “[b]eauty has rhetorical or persuasive affects” (p. 30), I want to consider racial presence as exhibiting a kind of persuasive power. More specifically, I want to explore the relationship between beauty and justice and the affective experience of beauty as a form of conviction. In emphasizing the aesthetic components of justice, I am not saying that the aesthetic dimensions

of race *trump* ethics, history, or legal claims for justice. Rather, as Sartwell argues, “it only insists that we acknowledge the aesthetic dimensions of ethics and politics, and take them seriously as, among other things, pertinent to moral description and evaluation” (p. 62).

In *On Beauty and Being Just*, Elaine Scarry (1999) argues that “beauty really is allied with truth” (p. 52) and that “beauty assists us in getting to justice” (p. 94). Yet in making this claim, she is not arguing that “what is beautiful is also true” (p. 52). Instead, Scarry argues that beauty and justice are “analogous to one another in that they both share the feature of balance and symmetry—the weighing of both sides” (p. 94). Citing John Rawls’s *A Theory of Justice*, Scarry notes that Rawls characterizes the condition of fairness in the original position as “the symmetry of everyone’s relations to each another” (Rawls 1971, p. 12). That a Rawlsian notion of fairness can be understood as a form of design is indicative of how epistemic standards are often articulated as aesthetic standards. In a similar vein, Sartwell (2010) argues that “the question of political form is also a question of the aesthetic” (p. 67). Given that classical conceptions of beauty often speak of qualities such as order, coherence, and simplicity in variety, we can see how justice itself comes to be experienced as a kind of beauty. Because politics “traffics in transformation” (p. 67), human beings are forever trying to create a political system that satisfies our desires and aspirations. In this way, both beauty and political utopianism represent “the object of longing” (Sartwell 2006, p. 3). Often conceived in terms of ideas such as balance, harmony, simplicity, and symmetry, justice regularly operates as an aesthetic concept:

That all men are created equal introduces or detects a moral and political universe of certain shape...a political system or ideology deploys an aesthetics that could in part be expressed as a series of propositions... (Sartwell 2010, p. 53).

What offends us about an extremely unjust distribution of goods, for example, is its impossibly unbalanced composition. Its arbitrary or irrational quality...is best captured in aesthetic terms... The injunction to treat like cases alike...is at its heart a design concept...the imbalance compromises the wholeness or unity or symmetry and requires revolutionary redress” (Sartwell 2010, p. 62).

Thinking about injustice as a type of extreme imbalance or a failure of symmetry helps us understand why the absence of certain bodies in the public realm can be experienced as injustice, *regardless* of the content and actions of those present. Moreover, as Scarry argues, aesthetic attributes exert a kind of pressure on us—our reactions to what moves us visibly are experienced as a kind of visceral certitude. Describing this aesthetic/affective encounter, Scarry (1999) writes:

[T]he claim throughout these pages that beauty and truth are allied is not a claim that the two are identical. It is not that a poem or a painting or a palm tree or a person is “true,” but rather that *it ignites the desire for truth by giving us, with an electric brightness shared by almost no other uninvited, freely arriving perceptual event, the experience of conviction and the experience, as well, of error* (p. 52, italics mine).

Scarry’s characterization of beauty as an “uninvited, freely arriving perceptual event” highlights the ways in which beauty is experienced not just as a form of pleasure, but as an affective encounter with truth. Moreover, encounters with what we find aesthetically unappealing can also be experienced as “wrong,” a kind of error. For Scarry, one of the ways that beauty “assists us in getting to justice” (p. 94) is that it “creates,

without fulfilling, the aspiration for enduring certitude. It comes to us, with no work of our own; then leaves us prepared to undergo a giant labor” (pp. 52–53). For Scarry, the affective encounter with beauty is capable as serving as a kind preparatory event—it “intensifies the pressure we feel to repair existing injuries” (p. 57).

Thinking about the affective power of aesthetics in the context of racial presence helps us explain why the presence of certain types of bodies is experienced not only as a form of aesthetic pleasure, but as a visible encounter with fairness and justice. As Scarry notes, beauty draws our attention. In a similar vein, Alexander Nehamas (2007) characterizes the experience of attraction as the sense that “my life would be better” if the object of beauty “were to become a part of it” (p. 54). Here we can see parallels to Barreto’s and Tate’s arguments that Latino and African American representatives help encourage higher levels of attentiveness among voters from those same communities. For both Nehamas and Scarry, the affective encounter with beauty is capable of serving as a kind preparatory event—it “intensifies the pressure we feel to repair existing injuries” (Scarry 1999, p. 57).

Citing eighteenth-century philosopher Francis Hutcheson and his definition “a compound ratio of Uniformity and Variety,” Sartwell (2010) notes that “[o]ne of the most traditional definitions of ‘beauty’...is that beauty is unity in variety” (p. 65). Just as in art, political systems also require the “coordination of disparate elements into some sort of unified whole” (p. 65). For many citizens, racial presence reflects a desired form of “unity in variety”—a vision of a multicultural America. Moreover, the aesthetic simplicity of co-racial correspondence is a perceptual event whose beauty *feels* and *looks* like a pleasing symmetry, a form of justice. An example is Barack Obama: his presence on the public stage (and the pleasure that many citizens take in his racial appearance) helps normalize the presence of people of color in highest positions of political power. Intriguingly, the presence of Black Republicans such as Condoleezza Rice and Colin Powell operates in the same manner. In all of these cases, a multiracial government made present by a diverse body of representatives is experienced as a form of aesthetic pleasure that becomes both desired and imaginable. Moreover, just as the absence of racialized and female bodies served to naturalize a representative system composed exclusively of White men, the *presence* of more heterogeneity helps *de-naturalize* all-male, White-only rule, normalizing racial presence and gender diversity on the public stage, regardless of its ideological content.

On the other hand, for those *averse* to racial bodies in the public sphere, racial presence and gender diversity create an affective conviction that something is amiss, a reflexive experience of imbalance, injustice, and error. The attacks by Tea Party activists on President Obama often seem to reflect this conviction that Obama’s very presence on the public stage signifies that something has gone “wrong”—that America is no longer America. In each case, the aesthetic experience of race leaves citizens more prepared “to undergo a giant labor” (Scarry 1999, p. 53) either in the service of White supremacy or in the desire to create a multiracial democracy.

## THE NEED FOR JUDGMENT: BEAUTY’S SEDUCTIVE POWER

While I agree with Scarry that, at times, beauty “assists us in getting to justice,” her reading of beauty fails to adequately acknowledge how the experience of beauty can also lead us toward injustice. For although Scarry is correct in noting that aesthetic values such as beauty are connected to questions of justice, goodness, and truth, other aesthetic theorists argue vehemently *against* conflating our aesthetic values with our political values. These theorists remind us that that which delights us at sensory level

may well have a complicated (and even contradictory) relationship to our political beliefs.

As Nehamas (2007) observes, no matter how alluring the promise of beauty, “it reveals neither what it is that it promises nor what will become of me if I obtain it. Beauty and certainty pull in opposed directions” (p. 131). There is always a politically contingent quality to that which we find aesthetically pleasing. As Sartwell (2010) notes, aesthetics “attracts us to a set of political figures and policies that might otherwise repulse us or arouse our indignation or even resistance” (p. 60). Beauty “is always, among other things, seduction, and in deploying its aesthetic, a vision of beauty can be seductive epistemically, ethically, politically” (p. 67). In this way, beauty “works on us through our pleasures to transform us. This is what makes it potentially evil. But of course it’s also what makes us potentially good. Beauty...always has a seductive power, or carries with it the potential of a loss or intensification of the self” (p. 76).<sup>8</sup> And it is here where we are again reminded that aesthetic judgment represents a capacity to be cultivated. Rather than simply treating our aversive and pleasurable feelings as a simple form of proof, we need to remember that our judgments are not only particular and contingent, they are also subject to correction and amendment. As Leslie Paul Thiele (2000) reminds us, judgment is the ability “to make decisions in the absence of rules that dictate right answers” (p. 566). Moreover, because judgment “cannot be reduced to a deductive exercise” or “rigid procedures” (p. 566), judgments regarding racial presence require citizens to develop criteria they feel is both considered and justifiable.

## CONCLUSION

Thinking about the political indeterminacy of beauty helps us make sense of how we might appreciate the affective and aesthetic appeal of racial presence—not as an encounter that is inherently deceptive (à la Swain) or correct (à la *Políticas* and *Ethnic Cues*) but, instead, as an “uninvited, freely arriving perceptual event” capable of feeling like truth. On the one hand, the distress one might take in the unbalanced racial or gender composition of our political institutions, the pleasure one takes in witnessing the “unity in variety” of diverse subjects occupying the public realm, and the satisfying symmetry of racial correspondence are all examples of beauty’s capacity to intensify “the pressure we feel to repair existing injuries” (Scarry 1999, p. 57). On the other hand, this same desire for symmetry or unity in variety can be used as propaganda, shifting our gaze away from unjust policies and toward that which is visually satisfying. This very uncertainty is why the aesthetic realm requires judgment—a form of insight “informed by reason, common sense, worldly knowledge, and intuition” (Thiele 2000, p. 566). Or as Pitkin (1967) puts it, “a viewer has to learn to read” (p. 66). In a world where justice and equality remain elusive, while a growing multiracial elite is used as evidence of our “postracial” present, how we learn to “read” what we are seeing is more important than ever.

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## NOTES

1. For data on the unprecedented increase in Latino elected officials, see Sanchez (2012). For more on the growing number of young Black professional women, see Marsh (2007). For more on the growth in Latino college enrollment, see Fry (2011).

2. For a discussion of anti-Muslim attacks on Obama, see Corn (2011). In terms of anti-immigrant laws and statutes, one of the most significant is Arizona's SB 1070, which expanded the powers of state police officers to ask about the immigration status of anyone they stop, and to hold those suspected of being undocumented. At its time of passage, SB 1070 was the broadest and strictest measure against the undocumented in recent U.S. history. After SB 1070 passed, two dozen copycat bills were introduced in state legislatures across the country—five passed in Alabama, Georgia, Indiana, South Carolina, and Utah. The ACLU and a coalition of civil rights organizations have filed lawsuits in all six states. See American Civil Liberties (2013).
3. For more on the growing economic and the racial wealth gap, see Lowrey (2013) and Alvarado et al. (2013). For examples of racial disparities related to crime and incarceration, see Alexander (2010).
4. On the Right, a similar dynamic occurred in the celebration of diversity relating to the appointments of Secretary of State Colin Powell, Attorney General Alberto Gonzales, and Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice.
5. The aesthetic and affective dynamics of visibility (alongside ideological diversity) are also powerfully gendered. Today's increasingly diverse body of representatives now includes well-known conservatives such as former Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, vice-presidential candidate Sarah Palin, Rep. Michele Bachmann (R-Minnesota), Sen. Kay Bailey Hutchinson (R-Texas), Gov. Jan Brewer (R-Arizona), and Gov. Nikki Haley (R-South Carolina).
6. Beyond these recent elections of Latino Republicans, we also see the presence of Latino voters willing to support conservative candidates. For example, 35–40% of Latinos voted for George W. Bush in 2004 presidential election and in Texas, Republican Gov. Rick Perry won 40% of the Latino vote in his last election in 2010.
7. I discuss this tendency to treat Latino unity as a quality to be found rather than forged in Beltrán (2010). In particular, see chapter 4, "From Identification to Representation."
8. In the realm of aesthetics, scholars have most fully explored this question of evil in discussions of fascism and the aestheticization of politics in Nazi Germany.

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