“Oh your hair is beautiful
Oh, tonight
Atomic.”
— Blondie, Atomic (1979)

Introduction: From the Spa to the Grave

Essays that begin with definitions are nearly always tiresome. It is pedantic, and implies a logocentrism by which a word’s origin dictates its usage in the world. Bear with me, please. The first entry in the Oxford English Dictionary and the most common definition of treatment is, “Conduct, behaviour; action or behaviour towards a person, etc.” (What, I wonder, constitutes the “etc.”? after a person?) There is also the pathological definition, “Management in the application of remedies; medical or surgical application or service.” Kindred to this definition is a similarly sinister one, “Subjection to the action of a chemical agent.” Finally, in the arts, we have two potential meanings, “Action or manner of dealing with something in literature or art; literary or artistic handling, esp. in reference to style” and “A preparatory version of a screenplay, including descriptions of sets and of the camerawork required.”

If one were to glean an ethos from these surprisingly varied definitions, one might see treatment as a manner of transformation—the transformation that occurs when one regards another human being, heals a sick body, or develops an aesthetic scaffolding from the formless stuff of the intellect. I recall the painter and sculptor Leidy Churchman’s Painting Treatments, a series of video performances from 2009 and 2010 in which he and his colleague Anna Rosen covered motionless, anonymous bodies with paint and a parade of ephemera: coffee grounds, twigs, books, and toilet seats. In Churchman’s performances, as with the definitions I listed, there is a sense of action with unknown consent or purpose—a glamorous treatment with mud and cucumbers slides seamlessly into the treatment of embalming. What is different here is that the white men rendered by Toyin Ojih Odutola as “black” via her precise ink drawings have a different relationship to the life-threatening denotations of treatment.

Ojih Odutola requires us to acknowledge this fact in her material choices, by which blackness is mapped onto white bodies, not as an act of imposed masquerade, but rather simply because of the ink’s color. Whiteness, which has always fought to stand apart from color, is suddenly awash in color (copper black, to be precise), and moreover flattened into a type. In The Treatment, whiteness does not gaze upon itself, for it has been “colored,” condensed, and gridded. The power of whiteness has...
always been its deeply held presumption that it can create types separate and lesser than itself. Carrie Mae Weems made this clear in From Here I Saw What Happened and I Cried (1995), in which she, like Ojih Odutola, re-contextualizes the Western ethnographic/imperialist project exactly as an imposed contextualization, not what was (and often still is) considered truth. At the same time, The Treatment is reminiscent of Lorna Simpson’s re-contextualized collages of advertisements from Ebony and Jet, which suggest that seriality can be a source of radical self-empowerment for women of color. Ojih Odutola’s project is different because it directs our attention toward whiteness. One might say that, following Weems’s lyrical texts, Ojih Odutola’s figures, too, become a “scientific profile” when history affords them the ability to escape such a degrading designation. One cannot overstate the impact of this reversal, as it not only interrogates whiteness, but more generally raises questions about the self-protecting absence of whiteness, that is, its inability to understand itself as a subject of critical inquiry. Whiteness projects itself outward in a panicked need to turn questions of truth away from itself.

Interlude: The Skin Sac

Ojih Odutola’s drawings invite projection, to be sure. After all, how dare portraits of Famous White Men not come with the story of their achievements, lest we misidentify them? For instance, Ojih Odutola renders hair as white formlessness given existence only by a few lines, whereas the faces are formed of meticulously drafted, ropey masses, like a throbbing muscle. Whiteness requires constant self-affirmation, and here it is denied. The Treatment, as a site of reluctant identification, represents the extraordinary anxiety of whiteness qua whiteness as something that is performed on a normalized stage of its own making (to use Ojih Odutola’s metaphor). So, what might white viewers see when they see themselves, or perhaps misrecognize themselves, in The Treatment? It is as if Narcissus looks into the pool, expecting with characteristic vanity to see himself, but is greeted instead by someone else. Nothing could be more embarrassing, I expect.

As Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick writes in her meditation on Andy Warhol’s obsession with his complexion (Warhol was rejected for The Treatment, which I only discovered after drafting this section), whiteness and shame are inextricably linked, as shame “definitionally functions doubly as both florid contagion across the skin sac and florid self-consciousness as delimited by the skin sac: to that extent, whatever a person’s ideological politics of race might be, that person, even if ‘white,’ if shame-prone, is likely to inhabit a self at least partially constituted as a self by shame of the skin.” Whiteness is always shame-prone, and when it is identified as something in itself—not just that which is not black—the white imagination becomes overwhelmed by its own precariousness. Toni Morrison argued after the 2016 presidential election that white supremacy insistently staves off the truth of white mediocrity.4

One need not look any further than the pictures of white supremacists spreading the light of the master race with cheap tiki torches they got at Home Depot. All whiteness is plagued by a fervent (albeit shoddily executed) desire to quell self-hatred.

Intellect and Excess

The roots of Ojih Odutola’s push and pull of self-effacement and self-aggrandize-ment, representation and dissolution, the individual and the collective, the detail and history, are all intrinsically art-historical questions, especially if we consider art to be the privileged realm of vision. After all, vision is the locus of (white) shame. Color and line have been at odds in the academic discourse on painting since the seventeenth century, and indeed, the theorization of this distinction is essential to the development of a self-conscious, and therefore “modern,” art history. In response to an impassioned defense of color by Louis Gabriel Blanchard at the Royal Academy in 1671, Charles Le Brun argues, “It is this latter, practical side of design that with the help of a pencil gives form and proportion and which imitates all visible things, even expressing the passions of the soul without the need for colour except for showing blushing and pallor. We may add here that design imitates everything that is real whereas colour only represents what is accidental.” Line is intellectual and proper and masculine. Color is everything that is deemed excessive or flamboyant or incidental; it is feminine, queer, subordinate, and prone to deception. Color must be, to use Julia Kristeva’s term, “abjected” into a place of strict control; despite being constitutive of the image, it must be held in a place of constant scrutiny. This is because color is exactly what must be perennially hidden in plain sight as a threat to the unity of the hegemonic, white rationalism that solidified in the modern period.

In this vein, landscape, a term Ojih Odutola uses to describe her “portraits,” occupied the bottom of the Salon’s hierarchical hanging practices, in part because of its sensuousness and ambiguous morality in relation to history painting. We thus return to treatment as both a conceptual scaffolding and an affective arrangement. To say that Ojih Odutola radically depicts whiteness with the same magic pencil Le Brun describes would be simplistic and facile academic posturing. It is not an ironic deployment of oppressive tools, but rather a wholesale opening of the Western aesthetic binary and its shielding of whiteness from critical inquiry. Ojih Odutola recalls, “It seemed as if everyone I spoke to about such matters [her desire to differentiate among individual pens and the unique marks they make] thought I was a bit obsessive, possibly nuts, or worse, over-exaggerating the importance of my rudimentary tools in order to get away with a class assignment or justify a studio critique.” The Treatment is thus a personal statement of the connection between the mark, the intellect, the imagination, and sociopolitical consequence.

Imagination is the key word, for whiteness allows itself alone to dream, and, contrary to Le Brun, it dreams in color. Toni Morrison argues in her landmark book
Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination

That whiteness requires blackness for its definition. It is in sweeping generalization (informed, in part and paradoxically, by the specificity of allegedly scientific treatments) that whiteness announces and forecloses itself. According to Morrison, in her analysis of a story by Marie Cardinal:

Neither blackness nor “people of color” stimulates in me notions of excessive, limitless love, anarchy, or routine dread. I cannot rely on these metaphorical shortcuts because I am a black writer struggling with and through a language that can powerfully evoke and enforce hidden signs of racial superiority, cultural hegemony, and dismissive “othering” of people and language which are by no means marginal or already completely known and knowable in my work.9

These hackneyed images associated with black bodies provide the darkness by which whiteness establishes its boundaries. It is important that Morrison poses her investigation not as a dichotomy of racist and not-racist, which it certainly is, but rather as an interplay of intelligibility. Morrison is not only stating that stereotypes are wrong; it is rather that she, as a black female intellectual, cannot and will not incorporate them into her own imaginary because she has no use for them. Ojih Odutola likewise points to the almost comic drudgery of *The Treatment* and insists that “blackness” is a formal device delivered by her pen. There is no utility to these images of white men. They cannot define themselves. They do not recognize themselves, and, with nowhere to go, they become that which is abjected even as they stand before us in precise linearity. Morrison goes on to describe the shift in consciousness promised by the imperialist dream of the New World in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries: “One could be released from a useless, binding, repulsive past into a kind of history-lessness, a blank page waiting to be inscribed.”9 It is that original line on the page of a dream that concerns Ojih Odutola—certainly in questioning who made it, but also why it is “original” and therefore un-re-mark-able.

Conclusion: Make it Magnificent

The line, with all its implications, will always be there, but we might work constantly to modify and historicize it. If I have attempted to position *The Treatment* in affective-historical terms, to end in 2017 would be a disservice, and I therefore wonder how this series will be received fifty or a hundred years from now. I wonder in what ways that world will be crueler, and in what ways it will be more empathetic. Who will be here and who will have left? I wonder if, decades hence, we will still require black artists to ceaselessly announce their blackness in their work, as if they are only legible by way of their difference or through traumatic images. Do you think you will continue to tie non-normative artists to content and neglect their formal adroitness?

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NOTES

2 For Toyin Ojih Odutola on her stage metaphor, see the interview with Claudia Rankine in this volume.
6 See the interview with Claudia Rankine in this volume.
9 Ibid., 18.