

Racial Tasting: On the Performance of Sugar

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»I dream of the sugar woman. Again.« (Danticat 1998: 130)

Invited to create an artwork that would mark the impending demolition of a factory

»at the behest of Creative Time Kara E. Walker confectioned: *A Subtlety or the Marvelous Sugar Baby: an Homage to the unpaid and overworked Artisans who have refined our Sweet tastes from the cane fields to the Kitchens of the New World on the Occasion of the demolition of the Domino Sugar Refining Plant*« (Creative Time 2014).

A Subtlety, manifested into a 35 by 75 foot phenotypically black, voluptuous, nude feminine figure in the shape of a sphinx with breasts, buttocks, and vulva prominently on display, adorned with mammy kerchief, all coated in white sugar and accompanied by life-size »pickaninny« attendants dripping in molasses – arousing sentiments that drew widely publicized controversy, attention, and praise (Boucher 2017).

As the general public waited in exceedingly long lines to enter the public art event of the summer, the first thing that they would have encountered, elegantly scripted on the decrepit factory wall, was the title providing a moment to contemplate how the *Homage* might appear (McDonald 2014). While many who attended were likely aware that the work centered those enslaved in sugar's production, and that the provocative antebellum imagery deployed was a reflection/critique on how blackness has been aestheticized and consumed in the U.S., several attendees were observed taking comedic selfies while simulating sexualizing acts of either touching or metaphorically licking/tasting the denuded sugar-coated sphinx (Ioanes 2018). Such simulations were so unsettling, for some, that they energized a group of artists/activists to hold vigil by wearing name tags proclaiming »WE ARE HERE« to underscore the presence of those marked by the anti-black legacy of such »sweet« consumption (Goodman 2015).

The polarizing reception detailed above opens inquiries into the contradictory ways that the *Marvelous Sugar Baby* was perceived/experienced. Was the »spectacular« nature

of the exhibit the only thing generating such animated and animating responses? How were perceptions of sweetness and blackness contributing to the way the work acquired its distinctive form? How, for example, were gustatory and aesthetic orientations contributing to the way the *Sugar Baby* was produced and consumed? Walker's site-specific installation in Williamsburg/Brooklyn provides an opening to unpack how the sweet taste of and for sugar created the conditions of possibility for the fabrication, (re)production, and pleasurable consumption of a racial myth. By exploring how sugar, refined from sugarcane, is represented, I foreground how taste(s) – a sensory experience that unleashes the desire to consume more – have engendered depictions of a sugar woman to ›sweetly‹ (re)appear. Paying close sensorial attention to the material/gustatory and symbolic/aesthetic traces of sugar, I interrogate how this ›tastemaker‹ has fed the racial imagination (Rankine/Lofferda 2019).

A sugar woman appears

In a recurring dream/nightmare, a chimerical sugar woman materializes as an ancestral ghost and foreshadowing presence in Edwidge Danticat's *The Farming of Bones* (1998). The historical fiction depicts how Amabelle Desir, a young domestic worker, barely escapes from the genocidal massacre of those presumed to be Haitian, a euphemism for Black, in the Dominican Republic of 1937 (Danticat 1998: 312–313). The title alludes to the gruesome labor conditions experienced by cane cutters, a labor force consisting primarily of Haitian migrants, who often worked twelve-hour shifts, seven days a week during the *zafra* (harvesting period) with machetes that crudely cut seven-foot-high cane in the scorching heat (Danticat 2014). The farming of cane meant being worked to the bone. The title also conjures the mass graves of the hastily discarded bodies produced by the massacre that in Spanish is referred to as *el corte*, the cutting, and in creole *kout kouto-a*, the stabbing. ›The cutting‹ literally/metaphorically exemplifies the way people, of all ages, were indiscriminately murdered and ›cut‹ in the same manner as the cane. The novel depicts the production, excavation, and memorialization of those discarded bones.

In the dream, Amabelle encounters a »sugar woman« dressed in a ballooned dress wearing a shiny silver muzzle that she telepathically communicates is harnessed onto her face to keep her from eating the sugarcane she's harvested (1839; see PBS [undated]). Addressing Amabelle, she dances coquettishly while shackled, and Amabelle, frightened, thinks that the sugar woman has been summoned by her boyfriend, a cane cutter who will soon meet his untimely death. Just before de-materializing, she tells Amabelle »told you before [...] I am the sugar woman. You, my eternity« (Danticat 1998: 131). Although muzzled – as she is not permitted to speak nor taste/experience the sweetness of the cane – the sugar woman's haunting (re)materialization is there to remind and warn us of the bitter history of sugar. Ayiti, imperially marked and gendered as Hispaniola, became the first site where sugarcane was planted in the Americas, an introduction that initiated the transportation of enslaved Africans to the ›New World‹. While sugar began to dramatically modify global tastes, it simultaneously fueled a practice of visually marking those condemned to toil and die on cane fields to satiate ever increasing profit demands (Mintz 1986; Robinson 2005). Prohibited from the sweet pleasure or material rewards of

the cane, the sugar woman carries with her shackles and her muzzle the legacy of black racialized slavery and sugar production – she is a ghostly presence that appears, back from the future, to predict the violence of a catastrophic assemblage.

A sugar woman re(appears) as the favored child of capitalism

Cuban Counterpoint: Tobacco and Sugar (Ortiz 1995 [1940]) contains an allegorical comparative description of the two most important national products of Cuba. Applying a poetic historical methodology to distinguish sugar (a foreign ingredient, for foreign consumption and profit) with Cuban tobacco (a potent symbol of masculinity, indigeneity, and pride) Fernando Ortiz provides a frame of analysis to consider these products as primary actors in a material history of social relations. Throughout the text the main characters are emphatically gendered, »sugar is *she*; tobacco is *he*« (6; emphasis in the original). The following passage is indicative of the counterpoint structure

»Tobacco requires delicate care, sugar can look after itself; [...] the immigration of whites on the one hand, the slave trade on the other; liberty and slavery; skilled and unskilled labor; [...]. Commercially the whole world is the market for our tobacco, while our sugar has only a single market [...]. The native versus the foreigner. National sovereignty as against colonial status. The proud cigar band as against the lowly sack« (6f.).

Sugar, with its ties to capitalist interventions (the single market referenced in the text is that of the U.S.), is both the modernizing and enslaving force that is associated with foreign domination and the racial categories through which productive relations emerge. In sugar, Ortiz finds a history of colonial and imperial penetration while potent tobacco exudes sovereignty and national pride. Sugar, therefore, is by ›nature‹ open and willing to the exploits of *Sir Capital*. This is telling as it reveals how, while there is an urgent need to address the increasing infringement of U.S. backed sugar interests on the economic sovereignty of Cuba, black and generally male labor is depicted as feminine, passive, and in need of patronage from potent *Don Tobacco*, hence his marriage to *Doña Azucar* to break out of such enslavement. Ultimately the attributes that Ortiz assigns to sugar conflate the nefarious practices of a historically exploitative industry with the workers associated with its production. The visual descriptors deployed are a metonym for a ›problem‹ that is sexualized, gendered, raced, and in need of fixing, while *Doña Azucar*'s perceived sweetness is an indication of her willing compliance.

A sugar woman (re)materializes at an impending demolition

Ideas for how *A Subtlety* might appear came to Walker after reading Sidney Mintz's *Sweetness and Power* (1986). Mintz offers an anthropological, social history of sucrose consumption (in the ›West‹) beginning with the earliest periods of significant availability (after the growth of colonial sugar plantations in the Caribbean) up to its ubiquity and into

the late 20th century. As sugar production moved closer to European kingdoms in the 16th and 17th centuries, it began to be used for opulent decorations called subtleties, sculptures molded out of sugar that adorned tables attended to by the highest echelon of society. Due to its cost and difficulty to attain, it was a symbol of status for men in power. Mintz writes: »By eating these strange symbols of his power, his guests validated that power« (90). The sucrose-sculpted centerpiece that dominated the exhibit at the Domino factory, in evoking the memory of a mammy monument almost erected in 1923 in Washington D.C., in turn, monumentalizes the mass consumption of a symbol of status and power produced by those attempting to validate their roles as masters.¹

Walker's *Subtlety* – that conjures Danticat's sugar woman but materializes like Ortiz' *Doña Azucar* – divulges how Black bodies have been linked to consumable commodities while unsettling the abstraction of labor that Marx identified as key to the commodity fetish and workings of capitalism (1977: 163f.). *The Marvelous Sugar Baby*, rendered as a black feminized domestic figure in refined white sugar, brings one specific group of the overworked and under-paid artisans who produced sugar to the fore.² As homage, the exhibit draws attention to a racially demarcated labor force integral in the production of sugar while also showcasing how that labor has been repeatedly/reductively visually represented and consumed. *A Subtlety*, in epic proportions, exemplifies a charged history of the taste for imagery that represents the refined ›sweet‹ qualities of those ›black(ened)‹ for the (re)production of sugar.³

Some defining elements of Walker's work include her use of narrative imagery that augments and evokes racist as well as violently sexual content and often features a character known as *the Negress*. Christina Sharpe (2009) delves into Walker's repeated and controversial use of the *Negress* as mammy, to argue that it is this mythological archetype that ›shores up racial divides and intimate intra- and interracial familial dynamics, at the same time that she, in her place, secures all the other subjects in their positions in the social fabric« (25). In other words, it is the mammy, surrounded in Walker's work by stereotypically figured slave boys – a portrayal underscoring the depiction of children who weren't meant to be taken care of but rather crafted to attend to the needs of others, who serves an important function in (re)producing Ortiz' favored child of capitalism. The mammy is concocted to provide sustenance not for her own but solely for the reproduction of the relations of production. And her affective sweetness? An indication of contentment, of pleasure as she assumes the (re)productive role she's been assigned?

Walker, however, offers a riddle in the Janus-faced mammy/jezebel whose spectacular caricatured qualities reflect depictions of feminized blackness in the antebellum and postbellum United States. As Sarah Haley (2016) excavates, black women's aberrant

1 Designs included the ›Mammie‹ cradling a white child while her own children clung to her skirt for attention/affection. Located in RG 66 General Files, 1910–1954 (National Archives Identifier (4685889)) (cited according to Matthews 2013).

2 Producers of sugar included indentured servants from China and Europe (Hu-DeHart 1994).

3 Throughout I use Zakiyyah Jackson's term ›black(ened)‹ as a verb, a technique of social stratification where blackness becomes the ground by which that hierarchy is established (Jackson 2020).

qualities as perceived by the white dominant class defined the gender ambiguity of black women as either the masculinized, unsexed caretaker, i.e., the mammy or the sexualized, bestial, sin-filled jezebel. These racial tropes, or more precisely symbolic gestures that render material effects, uncover dimensions of how the black female body was deemed knowable and subsequently valued. Walker employs these ambiguities to the physical traits of the sugar sculpture, that – like the bestial Sphinx and her riddles – both entraps because of her recognizable form(s), while also twisting those forms and conventions.

The simultaneous ambiguity and recognizability of the Sphinx could also allude to the liminality of blackness critically addressed by Zakiyyah Jackson (2020). Jackson, in her critique of posthumanism's romance with ontological slippage, discusses the inherent problems of »plasticity«. Her argument centers around the predicament of blackness as limitless form – under the regime of liberal humanism – as constant malleability is demanded of the black figure that can be any type of form at will, and on command (22). *A Subtlety*, in absurdist/sense-disrupting proportions, reflects the economic, social, cultural, and political formations that derived value from a phantasmic invention that was trans-formable, i.e., there to contort to the master's wishes. A shape-shifting fabrication that Hortense Spillers (1987) poignantly addresses:

»Let's face it. I am a marked woman, but not everybody knows my name. ›Peaches‹ and ›Brown Sugar‹, ›Sapphire‹ and ›Earth Mother‹ [...]: I describe a locus of confounded identities, a meeting ground of investments and privations in the national treasury of rhetorical wealth. My country needs me, and if I were not here, I would have to be invented« (65).

In Walker's 2014 rendition, »Brown Sugar«, this time reified into a ›refined‹ white *Sugar Baby* to make crystal clear the national fantasy of those who have profited, benefited, and been *entertained* by such an invention, reflects how she is ›marked‹ with race, sexuality, and gender. But for such markings to be easily consumable/pleasurable – to inspire even greater amounts of consumption – she is also made to be sweet. Walker's *Sugar Baby* begs the question if the fabrication of the ›sweet‹ feminized black laboring body, that is malleable like sugar, is the preferred object/thing/commodity of capitalist reproduction and insatiable consumption.

The sugar women depicted in these scenes of historical fiction – a novel that takes place in the Dominican Republic and Haiti, a poetic material history in Cuba, and a temporary figurative monument at the Domino Refinery in the U.S. – with wide-ranging valences embody histories of the production and consumption of blackness and sweetness since the arrival of sugar cane to the Americas. The atemporal nature of their conceptions allows us to look at what sugar performs as a social actor in a racialized material history that is contingent upon but also far exceeds the specificity of national origin. Although historically incongruent, as the scenes represent shifting accounts of how Black bodies have been tethered to sugar, Danticat, Ortiz, and Walker present allegories that in their poetic registers encapsulate past, present, and allude to a future where the representation of black(ened) bodies for the (re)production and consumption of sugar take not only a similar figurative form but, some, also acquire ›sweet‹ characteristics. While Danticat's

sugar woman, as spirit sensed, tells us of her inevitable (re)materialization within a logic that alchemizes bitterness into sweetness, the essentializing ›sweet‹ qualities of Ortiz's sugar woman draw attention to the conditions of possibility for the reification of her fabrication. Walker's super charged *Sugar Baby*, in laying bare the product of that ›thingification‹ process, provides an opening to experience her historically easy/pleasurable consumption. However, by exaggerating the *Sugar Baby*'s ›sweet‹ features the work also unsettles her reification, gesturing towards the myth of her (re)production while sensorially disrupting the naturalized ›sweetness‹ of her consumption.

With these depictions I'm interested to explore what they indicate about the performativity of race in relation to sugar, and what this unearths about that relation that resonates today. In other words, what do these representations tell us, what do they perform, and how do they matter? As Jackson (2016) further elaborates the fraught relationship between blackness and representation:

»Moreover, one could argue that the longstanding black feminist preoccupation with representation, in particular the seemingly inescapable burden of paradoxical modes of visibility/invisibility, do not primarily gesture towards the (in)accuracy of representations but rather toward the performative labor representation does in worlding processes« (9).

What is Amabelle's sugar woman telling us about this »worlding process« when she telepathically proclaims »You, my eternity?« Why does she return, why is she bound to re(appear)?

The sugar woman, in varying versions, materializes as an embodiment of a political economy, immersed in a political ontology, that has marked bodies with raciality (Wynter 2003). A raciality that, as Cedric Robinson (2005) rigorously excavates, precedes anti-black racism. As Robinson tells us capitalism was racial because that form of social stratification was already long practiced in Europe and alludes to the inevitability of racialities' visual reduction: »As an enduring principle of European social order, the effects of racialism were *bound to appear* in the social expression of every strata of every European society no matter the structures upon which they were formed. None was immune« (44; emphasis mine). Huey Copeland, who takes the title of his book *Bound to Appear: Art, Slavery, and the Site of Blackness in Multicultural America* (2013) from the passage above, elucidates Robinson's remarks stating that for racial hegemony to continue, »the black body, as a locus of discipline, disrespect, and disempowerment, must be pictured« (11). The depictions above encapsulate a history of visual/signifying practices that materially marked certain bodies for sugar's (re)production, while also gesturing towards other perceptive faculties that escape hegemonic descriptive systems, like the sense of taste.

To further interrogate ›that which appears‹, the *phainómenon* of sugar as more than a visually deductive/reductive practice, I consider its perceptual qualities as an encounter that manifests on the tongue and as a faculty of discernment and preference. If taste as sense (i.e., a faculty by which the body perceives an external stimulus; one of the faculties of sight, smell, hearing, taste, and touch) and sensibility (the ability to appreciate and respond to complex emotional or aesthetic influences) (OED 1986) are entangled, how is

that sense-ability informed by and informing perceptions of sugar that appear ›black‹ and ›sweet‹? Conceptualizing the ways sugar's perceived sweetness has conditioned taste(s), I focus on how such taste(s) are conditioned by the way sugar is encountered. What kinds of sense-making does/can the taste of sugar (re)produce?

A distinctive perceptual quality of sugar is its sweet taste, a biological disposition that has enabled us to discern between foods that are edible/rich in calories/sweet or inedible/toxic/bitter – hence our seemingly ›natural‹ inclination for sugar. The direct experience of sweetness is generally regarded as pleasurable, except in cases of excess (Drewnowski et al. 2012). A sugar-related gustatory experience, however, might also bring about abstract concepts, images, memories, or bodily feelings that guide moods, emotions, and affects as well as aesthetic judgments. Such experiences entail insights into the sensations, perceptions, thoughts, and feelings of specific subjects (Sutton 2010). Yet such insights are not as direct as they might first appear. Vivian Sobchack (2010) argues that however direct an experience might seem, they are not solely mediated by our lived bodies but that our lived bodies as well as our experiences of them are always also mediated and qualified by our engagements with other bodies and things. »Thus, our experiences are mediated and qualified not only through the various transformative technologies of perception and expression but also by historical and cultural systems that constrain both the inner limits of our perception and the outer limits of our world« (4). Perhaps this gets to the essence of what Maurice Merleau-Ponty meant when he stated:

»If indeed we place ourselves within being, it must necessarily be the case that our actions must have their origin outside us, and if we revert to constituting consciousness, they must originate within. But we have learnt precisely to recognize the order of phenomena. We are involved in the world and with others in an inextricable tangle« (2005: 528).

This inextricable tangle is important when considering how taste(s) factor into the way objects appear to us – how they emerge – and how that encounter is experienced. For example, as one reviewer noted about a sensory experience aroused at the Walker exhibit:

»At first, we smell the scent of sugar familiar as confectioned sweets [...] One visitor puts her nose to one of the figures. ›At least it smells good‹, she says. But it only takes a few minutes to whiff the acrid stench of old sugar, a smell like that of meat or flesh rotting in the trashcan in the back of a restaurant on a hot afternoon [...] Suddenly, we're lost characters in a Grimm tale« (Loichot 2014).

Sugar, like its taste, is meant to smell/look/feel sweet, an expectation cultivated by past consumption. However, as noted by the reviewer, as one immerses themselves further in the details of the site, perceptions of sweetness quickly turn to something more sinister.

Walker in an artist talk discusses elements of some of the sinister/dark qualities the reviewer sensed. Drawn to the project after visiting the abandoned Domino Refinery, Walker elaborates how the residue of molasses that was sticking everywhere made it appear as if »the walls were weeping«. Such contemplations kept leading her to thoughts of ruins, bodies that were ruined throughout its production, »black ruins«, »having one's

identity ruined«, »dietary ruins«, but also »ruins that offer potential«, remarking that she wanted to »conceptually create a space where people wanted to deal with neglect«. She further elaborates that she didn't know how to make a piece about death and destruction, so she ended up creating the inverse, stating »I wanted to make something people wanted to see«, that incorporated elements of »anxiety and doom« (Walker 2014). Through her artistic, historical research *and* her site-specific sensorial immersions, a sugar woman began to take form.

The sweet materiality *of* and hence the desire *for* sugar, which is posited on the notion of pleasure, are essential elements of the *Sugar Baby*'s production. Her look, her bare ›delicious‹ curvature, her seductive smell, her literal/figurative sweetness are all attributes of what makes her irresistible to consume. In coating the phenotypically black *Sugar Baby* in refined white sugar, Walker also implicates a historical investment in the taste for refined whiteness, that myth of purity that enables the innocent consumption of an ingredient that was/is produced through the exploitation/destruction of black(ened) bodies, while displaying how blackness in such an ›innocent‹ world does/should taste/appear. The sugar boy attendants – the nine out of twelve that shattered and melted into pools of molasses (Ibid.) – as by-products of the ›whitening‹ process serve as tragic examples of such investments. Walker, in other words, intimates how gustatory and aesthetic orientations historically have turned acts of racial violence into sweet products for mass consumption because, at whatever cost, the taste *of* and *for* sugar should *feel* good. Yet, the subtlety of the oversized, larger-than-life *Sugar Baby* both gestures towards an insatiable desire to consume more while underscoring the inability of sustaining her pleasurable consumption – any attempt would nauseatingly exhaust or destroy. Sugar is not only a medium of oppression, but an avenging force. By monumentalizing the materiality *of* and desire *for* sugar Walker created a ruin that like Danticat's sugar woman is there to remind and warn us, telling us to pay attention to the taste(s) that have fueled the demand for her ›sweet‹ (re)production.

While historically conditioned taste(s) contributed to the work's formal qualities, expressions of taste(s) also animated the ways the exhibit was contemporaneously perceived and consumed. Other than the title, there were no museum texts to contextualize the exhibit only signs that actively encouraged visitors to post their pictures. As Jamilah King noted, »Nearly everyone had their phone out and the Instagram hashtag #KaraWalkerDomino was filled with images of the exhibit [...]. In that way, it was a deeply interactive exhibit, one as much about the present as the past« (King 2015). Viewers were confronted with what was on display and how they and other members of the public were interacting with the exhibit. The work offered a platform on social media and on the factory floor for a display of those reactions.

Much has been written about the fraught social drama that unfolded: Who was the audience? Who was the work intended for? Who was looking? How were they looking? How should they be looking? (Miranda 2014). While some found the *Sugar Baby* ›tasty‹, to the point of gustatory simulation, some found such simulations ›taste-less‹ and painful to witness, with many, perhaps, oscillating in between. What I'm interested in interrogating here is not the (in)appropriate way people were interacting with the work but rather how gustatory and aesthetic orientations were animated by and animated expressions

of taste(s) that in turn contributed to the way the exhibit was sensed/felt/experienced. There was an encounter by a group of youth that underscores the charged and contradictory sentiments on display. One member by the name of Malik wrote a personal essay, excerpts which I quote here:

»One of the worst things about my experience with the Kara Walker exhibit [...] was the lack of space available for me to neither mourn the devastation of Blackness, nor appreciate its power. There were white bodies everywhere I turned; white bodies laughing, white bodies posing for pictures, white bodies giving me strange looks as I solemnly shuffled around the warehouse, white bodies overflowing the space, white bodies spilling into my physical and mental space« (T. 2014).

What Malik addresses here is how his experience of the work felt out of place amidst the reaction that other attendees were having, attributing the jovial, lighthearted consumption of the homage with the perceived whiteness of the audience. Reactions to the work that elicited strong expressions of unease, frustration, and anger ranged from the lighthearted/jovial to the objectifying/sexualizing. As Nicolas Powers wrote »I strode to the front, turned around and yelled at the crowd that when they objectify the sculpture's sexual parts and pose in front of it like tourists, they are recreating the very racism the art was supposed to critique« (2014). Encounters that many others experienced and expressed, sparking the »WE ARE HERE« campaign noted in the introduction. Malik goes on to discuss how such reactions were infringing upon the way he would have preferred to experience the exhibit. He could not avoid how the materiality *of* and desire *for* sugar had dictated a visually reductive practice of consumption, a kind of racial tasting that the work on several levels reflected/critiqued *and* evoked/elicited amongst its viewers. We could attribute the perceived whiteness of the audience with the behavior that was on display. When members of the public (un)consciously reenacted the easy/pleasurable consumption of a symbol/product designed to profit from and substantiate the racial hierarchy of matter, racial meaning making was not only on display it also reinscribed who and what historically has mattered.

Malik's feelings of infringement, of not having the space to respond to the work without being subsumed by the behavior on display, led to his own assertion of preference when he suggested to his friends to pose in front of the mammy sphinx holding up the Black Power fist. As Malik recounts: »And as we stood there, with our fists defiantly raised to the ceiling, the mostly white people in front of us became much quieter, they seemed offended even. Khadijah says she heard people whispering, »It's not about that [...]« (T. 2014). Malik was not only distracted by people's expressions of taste, but also by the responses to his expression. What was it he was sensing/expressing that elicited such a dismissal? By stating that »it's not about that« someone was asserting that their direct experience of the exhibit was universal, i.e., they were negating other ways of perceiving.

What other methods could be explored to interrogate sensorial orientations towards matter that don't assume a universalist positionality? How can we consider the relations, the »inextricable tangle« that enable phenomena to appear? Sara Ahmed (2007) proposes that we examine the indirect ways that phenomena are experienced by asking what it

would mean to orient ourselves not to ›the thing-in-itself‹ but to that which must take place for something to appear, underscoring how the ›the thing-in-itself‹ appears only if we erase the relations that produce the phenomena. Ahmed posits that by attending to backgrounds and arrivals, both spatially and temporally, it might do so by looking at the conditions of an object's emergence, a method she coins »ethno-phenomenology«. An ethno-phenomenology opens paths to trace and assemble varying accounts of how sugar appears, i.e., how it is tasted/sensed/felt throughout different phases of its production and consumption.

If, for example, I were to trace the background of the eighty tons of sugar donated by Domino that was metaphorically ›tasted‹ at Walker's exhibit, it might take me to areas surrounding Lake Okeechobee in Florida, where the owners of Domino Sugar harvest a majority of the cane produced in the U.S. and where every fall the smell of burning cane affects the ability of the mostly Black residents living in the area to smell and taste, and more essentially, to breath (Mothers & Others for Clean Air). Or the sugar could have come and been refined in St. Bernard Parish, Louisiana, where Domino's largest operating refinery is located (Domino Sugar 2018). Here, the sight of sugar cane crops that should have been harvested earlier in the season are associated with the dwindling number of Black cane farmers in the area who, as a result of generational discriminatory practices, are unable to harvest their crops in time, yielding cane that tastes less sweet, and enabling a myth that Black farmers just can't harvest high-quality cane (Hannah-Jones et al. 2019).

Or we could consider the arrival of Walker's homage at a site that at one point in its operation refined 98% of the sugar consumed in the U.S. (Novelty Theater). The taste for too much sugar is habituated by the options of foods that are made available, are in proximity (SugarScience 2018). By itself, sugar is not a factor that causes metabolic disorders like obesity and diabetes – conditions that overwhelmingly affect black(ened) bodies – but rather when over-consumed it is a component of unhealthy dietary trends.⁴ As large, unregulated quantities of sugar-saturated foods have detrimentally entered bloodstreams, historically exploitative practices surrounding the production of sugar haunt the consumption of such catastrophic abundance (Hatch 2019: 595–607). While the direct experience of sugar, for some, might appear to be sweet, and while sweetness is considered one of the five basic flavor components universally experienced, attending to the material and symbolic traces of sugar could unearth opposing accounts (Drewnowski 2012). Sugar might also induce a sense of bitterness for those in its proximity – deemed exploitable, expendable, dismissible – who have yet to reap its sweet rewards.

By attending to backgrounds and arrivals as Ahmed proposes, we can address the conditions of possibility for perceptual orientations that condition our sense-making capacities. It ›makes sense‹ that the appearance of the *Sugar Baby* was both informed by and elicited jovial/salacious/objectifying acts of tasting as the work strikingly reflects a world where the sweet taste *of* and *for* sugar is made possible by the ordering of materiality based on anti-black logics (Jackson 2016). The work reflects the sense-abilities of a self-affirming system. If the mass (re)production of sugar continues to disproportionately perform varying forms of violence on black(ened) bodies, the aestheticization of sweetness

4 For info on the diabetes epidemic in sugar producing regions see: Wikkeling-Scott 2012; Healy 2011.

and blackness will be *cultivated by* and will continue *to cultivate* the way racial subjugation is so easily/deliciously consumed.

But there is another sort of sense-making that occurred at the exhibit of an *Homage [...] on the occasion of an impending demolition*. Several attendees who foregrounded the *unpaid and overworked Artisans who have refined our sweet tastes* felt the larger-than-life presence of the sugar woman, a spirit sensed that exceeds/escapes/disturbs visually reductive markings. A spirit whose haunting (re)materialization reminds and warns us of the bitter materialities of sugar's gustatory/aesthetic (re)production and who arouses/awakens other sense-abilities not dependent on subjugating practices. Attuning our senses to the ways materials alert us to the textures of Black life, the multimodal and indirect ways that we taste have the potential of disrupting the tyranny of the visual, opening sensory modes like touch – the haptic quality of taste(s) – that reroute expectations and alter preferences.

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