One could find numerous examples of controversy involving race and the art world in recent years: a metropolitan museum’s decision to hire a white American woman to curate the African arts collection sparks criticism; a white South African man becomes the subject of international controversy while touring scenes of colonial abuse across Europe; two artworks about the Arab Spring are removed from an art festival in India; a museum is criticized for not addressing the racial implications of Latin American modernism in a show of work by one of its leading figures; an image of a black American male artist protesting a white American woman’s painting at a biennial exhibition becomes an emblem in its own right, circulating in and across news and social media.

This list is far from exhaustive and purposefully abstract to avoid rehashing the problems of each instance, but it speaks to an ongoing tendency to frame race within the art world in terms of scandal or crisis. As frames, scandal and crisis produce race as fully knowable, while simultaneously (and paradoxically) precluding a meditation on how race is understood. The pattern of annual controversies surrounding race and representation rotates through predictable debates and formulaic responses. Indeed, this cycle of media coverage and public discourse reconfirms and solidifies how race continues to be understood as a problem of representation and visibility. A set of questions emerges and recurs in meditation: On what grounds was _____ offensive? How does the artist’s identity matter? Is censorship warranted here? What about the artist’s right to free speech? Why aren’t there more people of color at the table to make art and to make decisions about art? The popular logic goes that if only the right representative from a group or a larger plurality of embodied difference were present, then institutions like the museum and the university would be absolved from historic forms of exclusion. However, we know this to not be true, even with the
slow and growing presence of people of color. Further, institutions profit from increased representation. Even if they answer calls for more visibility, they do so without a fundamental reordering of protocols or a dynamic redistribution of resources.

For instance, museums attempt to increase diversity by exhibiting work by and hiring those who have been historically excluded, but we must ask what expectations surround these individuals when they enter an institution. In particular, these subjects often are required to perform and interact in legible ways that are institutionally sanctioned and deemed appropriate. Further, museums often try to expand their global reach by presenting work by non-Western artists, yet the framing of such work often draws from primitivist tropes or overdetermined discourses about the herculean artist resisting the illiberal state. These examples direct us to race as both a national and transnational concern.

Rather than repeating conversations about race and art in terms of good or bad representation—a binary mode of evaluation that tends to obscure or subsume structural questions and concerns—or rehearsing the case for more institutional inclusion, *Saturation: Race, Art, and the Circulation of Value* examines the terms and conditions that frame how we understand race and aesthetics, with a particular focus on global capital. Here, we offer key texts, roundtables, and conversations with artists and theorists to produce different questions and responses regarding race and representation. We use the framework of “saturation” to contend with approaches to and methods of racial representation as well as to signal the messiness of dealing with race as a category that exceeds its saturation point. Through this lens, a different set of questions emerges: How is race constituted in relation to racial capitalism? How might representation be evaluated outside of a liberal paradigm that presumes the eventual eradication of race through the ruse of progress and a mix of “just enough” representation?

As the editors of this collection, we begin our exploration of racial aesthetics and politics by asking, Why do calls for representation often operate without Marxism? Addressing this question brings into view the ways moments of crisis often default into calls for more representation without an account of structural change and the redistribution of resources—what can be called a condition of representation without Marxism. Thus, we rejoin the coeditors of the book that precedes ours in the Critical Anthologies in Art and Culture series, when they argue in *Trap Door: Trans Cultural Production and the Politics of Visibility* that representation should be understood as “less ‘contemporary’ than historically insistent, and less abstract than emphatically concrete.”¹ We name the need to attend to a project that includes race and Marxism, what has come to be known as “racial capital,” as informed by scholars working within queer of color critique and

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¹. The editors of *Trap Door: Trans Cultural Production and the Politics of Visibility* argue that representation should be understood as “less ‘contemporary’ than historically insistent, and less abstract than emphatically concrete.”
black feminisms. Early in his career, José Esteban Muñoz privileged the need for a Marxist notion of “sensuous contemplation” for queer critique. Describing artist and activist Richard Fung’s seminal essay “Looking for My Penis,” Muñoz heralds Fung’s work as privileging a Marxist “sensuous contemplation over abstract thinking,” whereby the former “is a mode of saying and doing that makes one conscious of the actual material conditions of reality, the contingencies that structure the world and organize power. Fung’s work ... represents what queer critique should be about—a sensuous contemplation of the material conditions of possibility that shape and form aspects of the individual, of his or her queerness, and our racialization.” Muñoz emphasizes the need to attend to social difference alongside structural power.

Further, Katherine McKittrick, who draws from Sylvia Wynter, grapples with the logics of racialization as a matter of geography. As McKittrick argues, “Prevailing spatial organization gives a coherency and rationality to uneven geographic processes and arrangements: a city plan, for example, can (and often does) reiterate social class distinctions, racial and gender segregation, and (in)accessibility to and from specific districts; the flows of money, spaces, infrastructure, and people are uneven, in that the built environment privileges, and therefore mirrors, white, heterosexual, capitalist, and patriarchal geopolitical needs.” Through such an attention to structure and subject, we turn to saturation as a framing mechanism with which to push discourses on race and aesthetics in different directions.

ON SATURATION

“Saturation” is the organizing concept for this book as it provides space to think about the scientific, visual, corporeal, and sonic. Put differently, saturation not only describes the sensory but also brings to the fore the methods, approaches, and structures that come to bear on how sensations are felt and embodied—elements of Muñoz’s “sensuous contemplation.” A brief history of the concept of saturation underscores our interest in histories of race as they bear upon matters of interpretation and perception. Color theory is typically narrated as beginning in the eighteenth century following the publication of Isaac Newton’s Opticks: or, A Treatise of the Reflexions, Refractions, Inflexions and Colours of Light (1704). While there is a record of earlier writings on these questions, Newton’s theory of “primitive” colors and his proposal for organizing color in relation to a “wheel” incited much debate among his European
contemporaries. In this instance, as is not uncommon, controversy over a particular text became the foundation for a field of knowledge. Many of his ideas remain influential to color theory, including his conception of saturation, which he understood in terms of the intensity of a color, expressed as the degree to which it differs from white. The centrality of whiteness to Newton’s visual theory parallels an understanding of race as peripheral to whiteness in Western thought. We might consider them different expressions—in intensity, but not in kind—of a neocolonial logic that Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak describes in terms of a “simple chromatism” that characterizes how essentialist notions of race ultimately obscure “international division[s] of labor.”

It is through the scientific that one comes to test and verify the notion of visual saturation. In other words, the institutional and structural shape the sensorial. Scientific methods provide a measure by which something reaches its saturation point or becomes oversaturated. Such measures in turn offer a model for us to understand how not only institutions but also racialized subjects reach and exceed saturation points. The bodies that must represent their minority position are often tasked to navigate institutional demands. However, this book examines at what point such bodies become oversaturated by navigating and existing within the institutions we invest in and yet critique. Oversaturation can manifest in a variety of ways, from further capitulation to exhaustion, indifference, or giving up. Relatedly, saturation indexes the fact that many artists and theorists point us to the limits of representation and call for a destabilization of race, yet their own participation in exhibitions, education, and curation nonetheless furthers the operations of institutional life. We do not mean to place fault; rather, we are interested in tracking how such complicities are enacted to navigate survival or subsistence.

Alongside individual bodies, institutions themselves are changing. We acknowledge that some institutions have added minority bodies at multiple levels: boardrooms, artist exhibitions, and upper management. The numbers are generally still low, and we support the need to strengthen representation. Yet, even with an (admittedly incremental) increase in representation, we wager that how institutions operate and what they demand of their operators have not structurally changed in a substantive way. In other words, even if we saturate institutions with more representation, why do such institutions continue to function in predictable ways? What is it about liberal multiculturalism and its relationship to capitalism that enables institutions to avoid reaching a saturation point in their operations? This tension surrounding greater representation without structural change brings us to a notion of audio saturation that draws from sound-editing practices. Audio saturation coos to a listener in ways that
render a sense of warmth. By saturating sound, we accommodate and welcome a listener. In other words, audio saturation highlights how increased representation can, at times, lead to the entrenchment of norms. Even if we add “more,” this addition may not result in substantive change; in fact, it may allow things to operate with even more comfort and ease. For such reasons, we offer saturation as a capacious frame for thinking through the complexities of race, representation, and institutional life. We thus deploy saturation in both its sensorial and structural capacities to shift away from a liberal and capitalist understanding of racial diversity and representation.

 **INSISTING ON MORE PLEASURE AND OTHER WAYS TO COPE**

Throughout this collection of essays, portfolios, and conversations, artists and theorists direct us to view race as historically contingent and operating both in and beyond visibility and representability. In what follows, we engage different metaphors for race and racialization, such as the “analytics of raciality,” “racial matter,” or “gendered racial capitalism.” These terms are not offered up simply to circulate more specialized academic jargon but are used to further a more precise vocabulary and grammar for making sense of how racialization affects all of modern representation. In this spirit, we offer this book as a way not merely to critique representation, in its visual, sonic, cinematic, and other forms, but to direct us toward the need to attend to a different political project, one that challenges how representation is informed by a modern, liberal tradition. This tradition and political vision presume that the more representative a polity is, the more attuned the state and institutions will be to respond to the public’s needs. However, scholars like Roderick A. Ferguson and Sara Ahmed have highlighted how the diversity and inclusion complex often diminishes the possibility for substantive change. In particular, Ferguson illustrates how institutions like the university operate under a logic similar to that of global capital: “the American academy and global capital adopted and renovated the regulations of representative democracy, how those institutions disciplined the critical formations and subjects that the race and gender movements inspired, and how capital and academy attempted to close the social universes that those movements worked to open up.” Or, put more explicitly, Ferguson highlights that “new liberalism was, therefore, a means of using difference to foster capitalist distribution while curtailing social redistribution for underrepresented folks.” Saturation builds upon such important work to highlight how liberal logics inform the cyclical
debates about representation, whereby liberalism believes that the problem is a lack of representation rather than the organization of the state and institutions themselves.

The state and other institutions existing under this liberal and modern political regime thus extol the virtues of representation, as they continue to uphold the operations of capital reproduction and accumulation. Representation becomes the quick and easy answer to avoid an overhaul of the structures and institutions that maintain our current world order. This order extracts minoritized bodies for their representational difference to further capitalism without a reconsideration of the entire apparatus. The institutional offices that herald “diversity and inclusion” presume that more representation is the answer, allowing institutions to continue on as is. And when there are cadres of properly educated and disciplined minorities, they must be the “right fit” for an institution. Being the “right fit” means that these individuals enable the reproduction of institutional and capitalist logics. These bodies, in other words, are simply institutional operators but for their difference and representation. And when such educated minorities are seen as not good enough as compared to their white compatriots, they must then prove their allegiance or else internalize their “difference” through an inferiority complex. In other words, being the “right fit” means that they either hit their own saturation points (and leave) or else understand the structural norms, navigate accordingly, and stay. Under this formulation, there is little room for institutions to change their norms and operations.

In fact, these logics dominate multiple fields, well beyond the art world, which is why we have focused more on the seemingly abstract notion of “institutions” and ask why representation becomes the oft-presumed answer, even though representation furthers the larger operations of the art world, the Hollywood film industry, and the neoliberalizing university and private college system. All of these institutions presume capital accumulation to be the functioning norm, with those who become representative of difference needing to be the “right fit” precisely because they continue and even enhance institutional operations. We seem to stop to ask for more from our institutions when they simply prop up the right artist or actress of color. Is the answer more Jean-Michel Basquiat retrospectives to remedy the history of exclusion? Or more “well-attuned” and “acclimated” students coming from the coded space known as the “inner city” to solve past discrimination and future job precarity? Asked differently, why is it that the Hollywood film industry, the art world, and universities presume more representation to be the answer while they all continue to funnel massive amounts of capital to the same 1 percent?
As such, our hope for this book is to question liberalism, modern humanism, and capitalism and to imagine other political visions beyond them. We take a pause from the dominance of representation to query and reformulate the assumptions and operations of the very institutions we seek to further access. With a focus on racial capital, this book highlights the need for a Marxist project of redistribution and institutional change through accounts of race.

Although we are wary of providing functionalist answers to this problem, we hope that a focus on such a frame can help us think more broadly about institutional norms rather than repeating them through the constant reliance on representation. Saturation is not a policy prescription to remedy racial capital and ongoing debates on race in the art world. Instead, saturation provides a rubric to ask different questions and to push us to demand more from the ways institutions normatively function and how race has come to be imagined and understood.

Such structural changes, however, are not illusory or merely theoretical. They can be tracked in the cultural labor of the artists, curators, and thinkers in this book. For example, many of the artists offer ways to grapple with the unrepresentability of race. Even artists contending with the presumed dominant locus of racialization, the explicit body, enact such an agenda in their practices. In Amber Jamilla Musser’s engagement with the use of explicit sex by artists Richard Fung, Xandra Ibarra, M. Lamar, and Tourmaline, we find a moment to question not only art institutions but also leftist institutions like activism. In their respective uses of the body, these artists often voice the inability of activism to contend with more expansive notions of race that teeter into terrain beyond proper modes of respectability, specifically explicit sexuality. Art becomes a way for these artists to imagine modes of being that cannot be encompassed by their activist practices. This becomes a moment to reimagine how we structure not just the art world but also political work. Further, at the level of the art market, these artists each help us imagine race in its complexity well beyond representation since they are often not considered “proper” or the “right fit” for most audiences. Thus, we might ask our institutions to redefine “fit” beyond a niche evening on “risqué” art to extend representations of race well beyond legible modes of propriety.

In addition, curators and thinkers working in Indigenous communities offer concrete mechanisms by which to tackle the oversaturation of minority life in institutions. For example, Dylan Robinson points to the monumental shift in the Canadian state’s acknowledgment of Indigenous genocide. This moment reflects a different model that is wrought with problems and possibility. Although Robinson voices critiques of the seemingly simplistic repetition of
land acknowledgments happening in educational and art spaces across Canada, he also asks us to note how such performative practices continually expose the norms of institutional protocols. Along with Robinson, Mark Rifkin, in his essay on the connections between Kent Monkman’s and Kara Walker’s aesthetic practices, points to techniques that do not transparently show the realities of native life. Instead, Robinson and Rifkin each direct us to artists who play with the use of opacity and untranslatability to critique how institutions function and to ask us to restructure their norms.

Lastly, many in this book similarly provide possible avenues to enact a Marxist project that favors redistribution and structural shifts rather than presuming liberal representation and capital accumulation as norms. Both Lisa Lowe and Kandice Chuh point to the limits of academic disciplines to imagine race and the global. They ask us to reformulate the task and goals of scholarship and training. A dialogue between theorists Denise Ferreira da Silva and Phanuel Antwi, moderated by C. Riley Snorton, offers poetics as a means by which to work through the institutional, the structural, and the aesthetic. The openness of the poetic pushes us to reimagine and restructure life outside of pragmatism and solutions—to be guided by a leftist ethics alongside a poetic imaginary.

**STRUCTURE OF THE BOOK**

There are many interested parties on issues of race and the art world—artists, museums, critics—and there have certainly been many vibrant discussions on how race is defined, understood, and theorized. We do not seek to be the sole or final voice in this matter. The essays and conversations here are the result of a shared curiosity over why changes in representational practices (some at very early stages of saturation and others approaching or at oversaturation) have not led to any substantive structural change. Much of this book contends with political economy and racial capital to help grapple with institutional critique. We are also very interested in the need to center these questions in time and space. In this vein, the book is organized in two major sections: (1) The Saturation of Institutional Life: Race, Globality, and the Art Market; and (2) Methods of Racial Matter and Saturation Points. The first section confronts the history of racial difference as it permeates the global; the second section then turns to methods for how we might begin to situate race in its historical changes and shifts from representation. Throughout each of these sections, we have included
artist portfolios—artists being central participants in many of these debates and ideas—that refract, reflect, and engage the questions at hand.

Part I. The Saturation of Institutional Life: Race, Globality, and the Art Market
To contend with race and institutions, this section situates race in relation to globality. Part of this refers to the expansion of the global art market. Race can be understood as not only a US-based concept but also a mode of theorizing difference between and across nations and regions. The global art market is a critical juncture for tracing how racialization, globalization, art production, and consumption converge. Our first section opens with black feminist historian Sarah Haley’s essay on the relationship between carceral landscapes and the gendered dimensions of racial capitalism. Haley unpacks the term “racial capitalism,” an idea popularized in academic and political discourse by Cedric J. Robinson in his noted work *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition* (Zed Press, 1983). Importantly, Haley centralizes sexual violence to the processes of accumulation, aesthetic valuation, and colonization that undergird racial capital.

To further a focus on the racial and global, cultural theorist Lisa Lowe highlights how academic disciplines inform our multiple understandings and metaphors to contend with the magnitude of capital and the transnational. In addition, in a conversation between philosophers Denise Ferreira da Silva and Phanuel Antwi with C. Riley Snorton, these scholars offer modes for thinking race transnationally and in terms of structures—material, poetic, and affective. Artist Candice Lin asks readers to consider the aesthetics of colonization in a discussion on how histories of colonial violence inform her artistic practice. Similarly, artists Jeffrey Gibson and Tina Takemoto each provide artist portfolios that highlight their respective managements of racial saturation and the art market. For Gibson, this entails engaging different epistemological groundings and histories of Indigenous genocide. For Takemoto, it involves illustrating how forms of political critique come to be co-opted and understood as merely aesthetic practices.

This section additionally turns to the varied and sometimes contradictory modes of institutionalizing diversity. Each of these pieces offers a snapshot of the larger tensions surrounding minority representation and global capital. Curator Candice Hopkins questions the ethics surrounding exhibition practices in relation to histories of violence. Writer and historian Sarah Schulman highlights the dynamics of navigating the publishing industry in areas considered “niche,” such as sexuality, race, and gender. Further, media theorist Evelyn Alsultany places pressure on the demand for positive representations of Middle Eastern and Muslim Americans in the media following the events
of September 11, 2001. Meanwhile, feminist disability scholar Aimi Hamraie unpacks how disability cultures can inform institutional accommodations and the management of difference. Hamraie notably questions how race comes to be understood and deployed in disability activism. This section also offers reflections from Ishmael Houston-Jones and Lorraine O’Grady, two artists who have navigated the dance/performance world and the art market, respectively. Houston-Jones meditates on the choreographed placement of bodies from the end of the nineteenth century to today, while O’Grady considers the relationship between form and content.

Part II. Methods of Racial Matter and Saturation Points
The second part of this book contends with the methods available for theorizing race and representation, accounting for different ways race does and does not “appear.” Artists and theorists have directed us to the overdetermined modes in which artworks are read, felt, and seen. Literary critic Kandice Chuh brings to the fore a condition of “aboutness” that renders an artwork by racialized subjects to have to be “about” race. Performance and movement theorist Jasmine Elizabeth Johnson relatedly examines the corporeal, visual, and institutional structures that delimit the legibility of the black body; she then theorizes what she calls “hush acts” by singer Solange Knowles and author Eloise Greenfield that invite audiences to engage at a different vibration and register. Similarly, art theorist Ricardo Montez grapples with the condition of oversaturation as it informs how we have come to understand depictions of racialized bodies alongside white supremacy.

This section additionally turns beyond the impossibility of fully understanding work by racialized artists to imagining the methods and ethics of engaging such work. Artist Byron Kim contemplates his practices and methods as they relate to formalism, which simultaneously is and is not “about” race. As an artist collective, The Anarcha Project examines the ethics surrounding the production of research on the history of disability, enslavement, and gender. Filmmaker and visual artist Gelare Khoshgozaran provides insights into the methodological and ethical stakes of being included in the art world.

From the methods and ethics of racial matter, we shift gears by engaging the disciplines that have informed how we come to understand race. Transnational feminist scholar Gayatri Gopinath offers modes of unruly, decolonized, and queer visual practices that help us reimagine and plot out worlds well beyond disciplinary boundaries that are often framed by area studies. In addition, this section provides insights from scholars who directly manage these questions in their teaching and research. We first gathered a group of art historians to reflect
on the histories and futures of the field. Isolde Brielmaier, Jasmine Nichole Cobb, Homay King, Marci Kwon, Derek Conrad Murray, and Dylan Robinson contend with the complexities of race for and in art history. We then brought together a group of scholars working in performance and visual studies—Joshua Chambers-Letson, Việt Lê, D. Soyini Madison, Tavia Nyong’o, Iván A. Ramos, and Alexandra T. Vazquez—to reflect on these questions.

We continue to make more complex the discussions of racial representation in relation to other forms of difference and embodiment. In this vein, we gathered a group of scholars and artists who have navigated and continue to navigate questions of gender identity and sexuality. Queer theorist Amber Jamilla Musser writes about the artists Richard Fung, Xandra Ibarra, M. Lamar, and Tourmaline, and each of these artists discusses their work as it relates to race, sex, and the aesthetic. Further, literary and visual critic Jay Prosser provides a reflection on the history of photography as it relates to the categories of the transsexual. Performance studies scholar Roy Pérez picks up on these themes to sketch an artist portfolio for Laura Aguilar, who passed away in 2018. Aguilar’s oeuvre works across multiple categories around the human, the body, sex, race, and space. In order to work capacitiously across multiple forms of racialization, geographies, and temporalities, literary critic Mark Rifkin offers a model by which to think with and alongside indigeneity and blackness. Rifkin grounds his analysis in works by artists Kent Monkman and Kara Walker.

This section closes with an essay by cultural theorist Hortense J. Spillers, which details how fantasies of sexuality animate the production of “superotherness” along racial, gender, national, and class lines. In her consideration of the interstitial location of black women in feminist discourse and aesthetics, Spillers calls for a “dialectics of a global new woman” that would precipitate a “global restoration and dispersal of power.” The final contribution, from artist Ralph Lemon, is a meditation on how to think through representations of race that move beyond the body. Lemon, in conversation with Thomas J. Lax, considers what a focus on spaces of historic violence, like the swamp, might offer.

By deploying the framework of saturation, we have not aimed to diagnose or to prescribe a remedy for this condition. We contend here that in the predictable future, when there will certainly be more debates over a given artist, exhibition, or curatorial decision, we must pause and reconsider the liberalist assumptions that form and shape our approaches to race. We hope this collection of essays, roundtables, and artist reflections might bolster conversations that offer other ways to manage (and cope with) the ubiquity of crises in racial representation. In this vein, this book’s ultimate aim is to produce another kind of crisis—a crisis in meaning.
NOTES


5. A New York Times article from 2019 outlines an Andrew W. Mellon Foundation survey that shows minor increases in the number of museum staff members and directors from minority backgrounds. The argument of this book is that, even if there are further increases, we need to ask how to restructure the way institutions operate. Sara Aridi, “Museums Have Grown More Diverse, New Study Says,” New York Times, January 28, 2019, https://www.nytimes.com/2019/01/28/arts/design/mellon-museum-diversity-study.html?fbclid=IwAR2L9jYKVC9rxeGSoavL77zTLLH8adb38CVV1sAs6LWEL6L_1O6ZXdeE.


7. Ibid., 192.

8. Hortense J. Spillers, “/T_h_e Interstices: A Small Drama of Words,” in Black, White, and in Color: Essays on American Literature and Culture (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 175. See also page 349 in this volume.