On the first weekend of October, I attended an interdisciplinary conference at Oberlin College. This conference, organized by Charles Peterson, represents an active attempt to bring the field of aesthetics into the 21st century in dealing with its distinctly “behind-the-times” Eurocentric habit. The praise for Professor Peterson’s work was constant. Bringing together academics from many fields to speak to a glaringly under-addressed issue in philosophy, Peterson drew attention to lines of inquiry that have been notoriously marginalized. The speakers and attendants were glowing.

The conference kicked off with an especially fresh topic: fashion. Siobhan Carter-David, a public historian and cross-disciplinary faculty member at Southern Connecticut State University, was an inspirational first speaker. She works in History, Women’s studies, African American and African Diasporic studies, and on the topic of fashion, making her a perfect representation of an academic cross pollinator. Her presentation explored the history of fashion for African-American women through the medium of magazines. In doing so she exposed the way that beauty standards for white women treated black bodies as deviant—something to be corrected. Further, while the rise of African American magazines like Essence provided a space for black women to see themselves as beautiful, they also set up new beauty standards for black women to strive to attain. In eschewing white beauty standards, these magazines created new standards that came with their own exclusions. Carter-David’s paper touched on a web of connected issues including racial pride, body aesthetics, and cultural standards, eventually landing on a space ripe for questions about the cultural appropriation of body aesthetics.

In a later conversation, I asked Carter-David about her starting point for such a wide-reaching project. While working on the history of African American fashion, magazines seemed a good candidate for narrowing the scope of her project. Black fashion is intimately related to black bodies, and consideration of such fashion makrs evident the oppression of the Eurocentric lens through which black bodies are seen. Her current projects focus on how we read black consciousness in film, and black women’s fashion in the Nation of Islam.

Luvell Anderson shared an interesting paper on black humor, considering its nature, its audience, and its sometimes spurious appeal to white audiences. Humor is a social practice, and without the right social context, the audience can misunderstand. White audiences can wrongly appreciate black humor, humor made for black audiences attuned to black cultural standards of humor. Often black humor has layers of irony, playing on the stereotypes created by white culture, flouting and enlarging them. For white audiences, some of these layers maybe missed, positioning them to be entertained by their own stereotypes, and not in the way that a black audience would understand them. The ways in which white audiences appreciate art and humor by black authors was a common thread through many of the talks. One of the speakers in the theatre panel, Harvey Young, described issues with “the spectacle of black death.” He started by highlighting a practice of photographing and creating postcards of lynchings for sale to white audiences. In contrast, when black playwrights and directors address the same subject, the deaths...
of black people, they do not celebrate the spectacle, and often leave it offstage. Young contrasted the negative white reaction to images of Emmett Till’s open casket with the white acceptance of images of his lynched body. When are portrayals of black death “acceptable”? When do these portrayals confront racism, and when do they seem to glorify it?

Similarly, in a talk entitled “I Am Not Entertained,” Denise James examined this same issue in conjunction with movies about slavery. In viewing these movies, white audiences seemingly come away entertained by vivid depictions of “the spectacle of black death.” The lack of agency given to the characters whose suffering is so intense is telling. Audiences are given the opportunity to voyeur into a gruesome moment, with no call to recognize the full-fledged humanity of the body on display. James is not entertained by films offering of a kind of violence pornography with black bodies as victims.

The conference presented a crucial call-to-action for philosophers in aesthetics: We must recognize the tools that interdisciplinary work has to offer good philosophy. We must actively seek to look through lenses other than the default Eurocentric lens. We must share these tools and lenses with our students and colleagues through teaching and collaborating. We must humbly seek the work of experts already involved in this work. But this conference makes it clear that though it requires active seeking—and even hunting and digging—this work is compelling and fruitful.

I spoke with Peterson about his vision for the conference. The idea originated from work he had seen and people he had met at ASA conferences. He wanted to put these into conversation with each other, bringing discussions on these topics together purposefully. When he was hired at Oberlin, Peterson already had a form of this project in the works, and the college offered to support the conference. Conversations with his colleagues at Oberlin (within and outside of philosophy) were also influential in putting this idea into action. The interdisciplinarity of the conference was intentional and strategic. Bringing together academics of Literature, History, Cultural Studies, Philosophy, Art History, and Musicology, the conference reached a broad audience, while still honing in on race and aesthetics.

The final panel in the conference provided an apt ending: pedagogy. While the examinations of culture and its products highlighted the ways that black life is paradoxically invisible and hypervisible, next steps began to present themselves. Our pedagogical practices must encourage actively anti-racist frameworks. Mei Lin Chinn, whose research focuses on aesthetics, Chinese Philosophy, and cross-cultural philosophy, created an analogy by way of a fable: the frog and the well. Chinese philosopher Zhuangzi provides a useful illustration. A frog in a well may boast about how well it knows its domain, but in comparison to the turtle who has explored the ocean, it knows nothing. When western philosophers assume that all there is to know is found in the western philosophical tradition, they are mistakenly ignoring all the rich philosophical work done outside of their own context. Chinn and the other philosophers on this panel received grants from the ASA to develop diverse annotated bibliographies for curriculum.

The analogy presents an invitation to explore beyond the historically Eurocentric well of philosophy. Expanding into the ocean of philosophy outside the well may be difficult and disorienting at times, but this is to be expected; anti-racism is active, not passive.

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Notes

1 See the LA Times article “#philosophysowhite,” by Myisha Cherry and Eric Schwitzgebel: <http://www.latimes.com/opinion/op-ed/la-oe-0306-schwitzgebel-cherry-philosophy-so-white-20160306-story.html>

2 The fruits of their labor are available on the ASA website: <http://aesthetics-online.org/?CurriculumGrants>