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Re-Placing Race in Historical Images of Knitting: The Multimodal Embodied Rhetoric of “Knitting While Black”

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The cover of the Winter 2021/22 issue of *Vogue Knitting* featured former first lady Michelle Obama, and the issue included an interview about her journey to become a knitter during the Covid-19 pandemic. This cover was unusual in that it featured a notable person rather than a knitwear model and that the notable person happened to be a Black woman. Typically, the cover of each issue of *Vogue Knitting* features one model (occasionally two), usually a young white woman. This representational pattern is generally true of other knitting magazine covers as well. Although the last few years have seen a shift in the public’s perception of knitting from a “little old lady” pastime to a young and hip craft with activist potential, with the covers of these magazines portraying a more youthful and stylish vision of the craft, these representations are overwhelmingly lacking in ethnic diversity, not to mention other kinds of bodily diversity (age, gender, size, disability, etc.). In fact, the craft of knitting has, for the last several centuries, been almost exclusively represented in art and culture through depictions of white women and girls.

Darci Kern, @darcidoesit on Instagram, is using her multimodal composing skills and social media platform to challenge this hegemony of representation. In her portrait series “Knitting While Black,” Kern has produced a series of texts that individually and collectively seek to address systemic racism in the fiber arts community by interrogating the visuals that shape the American popular imagination of what knitting is and who knits. She deploys sophisticated multimodal composing skills to reveal that knitting is a rhetorical act embedded within social-economic systems that construct embodied, gendered, and racialized contexts for a range of literacy practices. The awareness of the relationships between embodied literacy practices and racialized and gendered representations of those practices, combined with a consideration of the role of social media platforms in supporting, maintaining, and evolving those practices can help the field better understand the multimodal and embodied nature of rhetoric.

A speech language pathologist by occupation, Kern is a self-proclaimed “crafter of yarn and justice” who is “rewriting the knitting stereotype of little ladies sitting quietly with their knitting in a corner” and is “inspired by the legacy of my foremothers in the struggle for civil rights” (Be Seen Project, 2020). Her “Knitting While Black” project began as a grant-funded artistic installation on her Instagram feed and was intended to be a series of 12 images but turned into an ongoing project that as of this writing includes over 40 images. The project came about after

a Google Arts & Culture search for images of knitting returned 1,400 items, but only two were images of Black people. Kern says her “goal in this project is to lay bare the deliberate obscuration of Black people and stories in the fiber world. The Black American experience is inextricably linked to fiber. However, we are all but completely missing in the canon of art depicting people knitting” (Be Seen Project, 2020). She goes on to explain how Black labor has been historically linked to fiber practices:

For centuries enslaved people tended flocks of sheep, sheared, and spun yarn to be sold for the benefit of their enslavers—among them many founders of the United States. My ancestors toiled in the cotton fields of Mississippi to produce the fiber that put the fledgling United States on the map of the world economy. Without us and our labor there is no United States. In this project we are front and center, just as we always have been. I’m learning from these recreations that justice feels like representing and sharing the history white supremacy has sought to hide for so long. We have been here. We gonna be here. Get used to it. (Be Seen Project, 2020)

In this statement, Kern explicitly connects visual historical representation to anti-racist activism and both of the former to not only the practice but also the materials of knitting (as well as to the entire global textile industry).

Besides being connected to the production of textiles, the materials and practices of knitting can also be read as a set of embodied literacy practices that shape individuals’ relationships with each other, to the State, to the economy, and to a variety of forms of textual production. With the now well-established “visual turn” in rhetorical studies and composition theory/pedagogy, which expands the definition of text from word-centered to multimodal, comes a recognition that literacy practices are also multimodal and can include embodied elements beyond written and even spoken language, such as gestures, facial expressions, dress, hairstyles, and more. Inasmuch as these non-verbal, non-linguistic modes are semiotic constructs and thus modes of communication, they consequently require knowledge of their conventions to understand (“read”) and deploy (“write”) effectively (see Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2001; Selfe & Hawisher, 2004; Wysocki, et al. 2004; Yancey, 2004).

Such an understanding of embodied literacy practices draws heavily upon work in feminist rhetorical studies (Goggin & Rose, 2021; Goggin & Tobin, 2009a, 2009b, 2009c), which posits that the study of embodied practices and bodies themselves must be an integral part of rhetoric because, as Maureen Johnson, Daisy Levy, Katie Manthey, and Maria Novotny (2015) reason, “by recognizing the inherent relationship between embodiment and rhetoric, we can make *all bodies* and the power dynamics invested in their (in)visibility visible, thereby strengthening the commitment to feminist rhetorical work” (p. 39). Additionally, they argue that the body has rhetorical power *beyond* language because “*all bodies* do rhetoric through texture, shape, color, consistency, movement, and function” (p. 39), suggesting that bodies are integral to making meaning and making all kinds of languaged and non-languaged representations (or “texts”). Furthermore, differences in embodiment influence the meanings and representations or texts that can be made. Within this framework, the body can be understood as a multimodal text, the act of knitting can be understood as a set of embodied

literacy practices, and knitted items can be understood as texts to be read and interpreted within discourse communities. The body takes instructions written in specialized notation and turns it into a knitted item that can be used; this production draws upon both individual and communal knowledge of knitting practices. Furthermore, the act of knitting and use of knitting implements to communicate an identity in public (as opposed to domestic) spheres has the potential to challenge the nature and usage of public spaces, to insert feminist and activist potential into those spaces, and to make visible transformative visions of society's structures.

When read through these lenses, "Knitting While Black" performs embodied feminist rhetoric by making visible the invisibility of Blackness in historical images of knitting. Furthermore, Catherine Knight Steele's *Digital Black Feminism* (2021) provides a lens for analyzing Kern's project as part of a tradition of Black feminist rhetorical practice that combines a variety of forms of textual production in technology-mediated spaces and utilizing the affordances of different media specifically toward the goal of restorative racial justice. I will first read "Knitting While Black" through the lenses of embodied feminist rhetoric and multimodal literacies to better understand the ways that embodied literacies (particularly knitting and other forms of material production) help to shape what we "know" about our world and our collective histories, and to better understand how race is implicated in/by/through those material knowledge-making practices. Then, I will apply Steele's concept of "threading" to note the multiple layers of meanings Kern creates in "Knitting While Black," and show how she uses multiple communicative modes throughout the project to explore the relationships between racial justice and the themes of visibility/invisibility, past/present, personal/public.

Richly Textured Compositions: Knitting as Embodied Multimodal Rhetoric

Kern's composing process begins by posting two images in her Instagram stories and allowing followers to vote for which one she will recreate. She then uses items she already owns to recreate the image with herself as the subject. She says, "I take some liberties here and there, but the essence in each image is preserved in my recreations" (Be Seen Project, 2020). With the exception of the first image, a recreation of a photograph of Sojourner Truth, all of the images chosen for recreation feature white women and girls. The set-up of each post is a carousel including a split screen of Kern's recreation with the original image plus several bonus images and at least one video of Kern setting up the image or putting on her costume. Bonus images could include the recreated image on its own, the original image on its own, additional images of Kern in costume, or images of individuals or places she mentions in the accompanying caption or image description.

The term caption or image description does not capture the richly textured compositions that Kern shares in this space, which include information about the image she has recreated as well as Black History lessons that relate to each image, such as stories of notable Black persons who were alive or events that happened during the time period when the piece of art was created, as well as emojis and hashtags, plus questions to spark discussion in the comments. Her

commentary is often pointed and engages in deliberate critique of the practices of historical and artistic representation, as well as of the enduring residue of white supremacy in the fiber arts community and the US political stage.

In her first photo recreation, a famous photograph of Sojourner Truth with her knitting, Kern posts that there is a “LARGE cannon” [sic] of art depicting white women knitting and that when she searched the Google Arts and Culture catalog with the keyword “knitting” only two of 1,400 images returned depicted a Black woman. Thus, her project was inspired as she explains:

In the catalog black knitters represent .001%. That is why I am doing this project and please don't bother telling me to search something else or try some different keywords ☹️. That's the whole point. I should not have to look at 700 listings before I find a photo of a black person y'all. This is not a chance for you to point out the few photos that exist—that's not what this is about either. White people don't have to struggle or add the word “white” to find photos and paintings of themselves crafting and neither should we. This is a commentary on why no one made us into art in the first place. (Kern, 2020, July 12)

Kern addresses multiple audiences in this post, recognizing that her Instagram followers are diverse and some of them are likely to be rankled by “political” postings in what they perceive as a space for the discussion of knitting. But her directness in countering those objections, her use of the eyeroll emoji, and her explicit announcing of her rhetorical purposes set the tone for the project and advance her ethos as an unapologetic racial justice craftivist.

Kern began with Truth's image intentionally, and the first post in the series ties together many of the threads of the project. In the caption to this image, Kern (2020, July 12) writes of Truth, “While she was enslaved one of her forced labor duties was spinning fleece into yarn,” explicitly tying the material history of knitting to the enslavement of Black women. Of course, it was not only Black *women* who were enslaved, but Kern's project also has a particularly feminist slant to it, elevating images and recuperating stories of Black women, specifically, in order to revise the narrative about knitting from a (white) feminine practice to an intersectional feminist practice.

It is especially fitting that Kern begins with this particular image, which Truth sold to raise money for her speaking tours. In this image, and several others like it that she also sold copies of, Truth deliberately inserts herself into the prevailing vision of “the feminine” in the 1860s. As Elizabeth Hutchinson (n.d.) writes,

It is tempting to look at this portrait of Truth as a reliable likeness of a notable woman. However, what strikes me each time I look at this photograph is the degree to which it has been staged. In Ohio¹, Truth called attention to her powerful arm, which could plow and plant as well as a man's. But here she is presented as the epitome of middle-class femininity, in a neat gown and a demure white shawl and cap, posed next to a table

¹ During her famous “Ain't I a Woman?” speech at the Ohio Women's Rights Convention in 1851.

bearing a vase of flowers. Her right hand, crippled in an accident decades before, holds the yarn for the half-knit stocking in her left one.

In addition to rhetorically designing her own image, Truth also re-mediate the technologies of knitting in her promotional photographs. When enslaved, she had labored to create knitting materials for white women. As a free woman, she takes up the yarn as a symbol to re-situate herself in relation to that labor. The image of Truth with the materials of knitting thus serves as a political act, a statement about representation, and a statement about race and gender, an extension of assertions she made during her speaking tours and in her writings, emphasizing her arguments in favor of racial and gender equality.

Over 150 years later, the arguments have not changed all that much. Like Truth, Kern is compelled because of her race to argue for her place at the table; she uses images to make arguments about the intersections of race, gender, history, representation, and social change; and she uses the available technologies to reach her multifaceted audiences through multiple modes of discourse. Furthermore, she uses multimodal composing to demonstrate the ways that Black women have always been a part of the fiber community and to reveal the ways that their involvement has been rendered invisible by a variety of representational and rhetorical practices. Her project also speaks to the inherently multimodal nature of rhetoric and public discourse. Both Truth and Kern leverage the available composing technologies of their respective times—*carte-de-visite*, allowing the fast printing and distribution of images on card stock, for Truth; and digital photography and social media for Kern—to combine written and spoken language with gestures and images in order to craft agency in public discourse and to write themselves into social narratives that had excluded them.

Implicit in Kern's project is a critique of the assumptions of what is considered "fine art" and who can be considered an "artist." She breaks down the fine art/pop art binary through several composition choices, including the images she chooses to recreate, her process of recreating them, and her use of Instagram for dissemination. My purpose here is not to contribute to the multiple and varied conversations in Art and Museum fields about what counts/should count as art, how fine art is defined, or issues about curatorial choices for museums. Instead, my purpose is to focus on Kern's use of her platform to critique the visual hegemony of whiteness and recenter Blackness in ways that call attention to the complicity of "neutral" technologies in the rhetorical construction of cultural memory and history.

A choice that might be easily glossed over because she mentions it just once is Kern's decision to focus on images from the Google Arts & Culture collection. In her introductory post, she explains that she searched this catalog, which returned only two images of Black women knitting. A search in the standard Google Image search engine returns more; however, that engine is not curated in the ways the Google Arts & Culture database is. This is important because the Google Arts & Culture collection represents deliberate choices by people (or machines programmed by people) about the inclusion and exclusion of images, most of which have been chosen because they already exist in a museum collection, which represents another layer of choice about inclusion. Therefore, the Google Arts & Culture collection represents

multiple deliberate decisions of defining what counts as art and whose images are included in artistic representation.

Although most of the images Kern has recreated are painted portraits, a mainstay of fine art, she has also recreated drawings, photographs (including both posed studio portraits and snapshots), and advertisements. Her project construes all of these as Art and posits all of them as equally complicit in the creation of a visual canon of cultural representation that erases Blackness. The rhetorical effect of this choice amounts to deconstructing the lines between fine and pop art, classical and modern art, painting and photography. It's all art, it's all cultural representation, and it's all constructed in ways that at the very least marginalize if not completely erase Blackness from our culture's visual history and memory.

Her process and the materials used for these compositions further deconstruct cultural and rhetorical categories that tend to compartmentalize process and product, writer and non-writer, professional and amateur, and thinking and doing. She has made the deliberate choice to use materials she already has for her recreations, rather than buying new items that might look more like the original elements of a particular image. Additionally, she has not invested in specialized technology or artistic tools for her recreations, again using what she already has on hand. Finally, the act itself of recreation by a lay person, not an "artist" by profession or training, reinforces the deconstruction of these categories. The ultimate rhetorical effect of her choices is to advance the argument that anybody can create art, that art is both a process and a product, and that art can and should be created by and for everyone.

Kern's project thus reveals art as a material practice with rhetorical dimensions that influences how we see the world and our place in it. Furthermore, her project disrupts the art/craft binary that delegitimizes "craft," particularly fiber crafts that have historically been associated with women and the domestic sphere. Implicit in this view of art and craft is that knitting is art as well as craft because artistic production involves craft, in the form of specialized practical knowledge, or literacy. In other words, both knitting and art involve embodied knowledge production; artistic production has shaped what we "know" about knitting and who knits; race is heavily implicated, while also (often deliberately) concealed, throughout these moments of knowledge-shaping; and, as the next section will address, schools are complicit in concealing Black histories and cultural/artistic production.

Multimodal Threading: Reading & Writing "Between the Lines" of Representation

Kern's multimodal composing practices fluidly weave together cultural histories, personal experiences, artistic representations of knitting, and admonitions to white allies to do better. In her post on September 6, 2020, she recreates "Knitting Girl," painted by Archibald Motley in 1920. Her post begins, "You could have knocked me over with a feather when I learned the artist of this painting was a Black man." The rest of her post briefly describes Motley's life, but it also touches on interracial identity labels of the 19th century, global colorism, the Harlem

Renaissance, and the lack of education about Black artists in schools. Her critique of school/curricular policy is encapsulated in her comment: “I do know one thing. I was required to take an art history class in high school to graduate and I never heard anything about Archibald Motley and that is a damn shame.”

Her critique of schooling continues in other posts. Focusing on the erasure of Black involvement in the Underground Railroad (UR) from history classes, for instance, she writes:

Almost as often as I hear the word slavery in a school setting the UR is mentioned in the same breath. But somehow the heroes were always the white allies. Other than Harriet Tubman, I have never known a named conductor of the UR, much less heard about historic Black communities that were also safe havens and very important to the success of people fleeing enslavement. (2020, October 4)

She continues, telling stories of some of the Black communities and Black conductors on the Underground Railroad. Furthermore, she chastises schools for erasing that history, pointing to a pattern of erasure that undermines making connections between the past and present.

In contrast, Kern’s posts display a pattern of connecting historical stories to present-day conversations about race. With her recreation of a photograph in a location in St. Louis that had been used for the 1904 World’s Fair, she tells the story of Ota Benga, an adult man who was kidnapped from the Congo, exhibited at the fair, and then imprisoned in the Bronx Zoo’s monkey house before being sent to an orphanage in Brooklyn. Kern tells this story to dispel the myth that slavery ended in America at the conclusion of the Civil War and to reclaim the space on her own terms, writing:

By knowing the truth—the whole truth—we dismantle the lie of white supremacy. Armed with this knowledge, the Forest Park of my childhood had a different look to it. With this shameful history on my mind and the dirt under my feet, I did something revolutionary. I reclaimed this land once used to denigrate and dehumanize Black people. I took up space on it. I filled it with the joy of my existence. I stood there of my own free will in these hot ass clothes, sweating, bc that’s my business 😊 and that was my revolutionary act of the day! I have the CHOICE to come to this park because of so much good trouble that’s happened between then and now. (Kern, 2020, July 26)

Kern’s multimodal composing in this post demonstrates Leigh Gruwell’s (2022) concept of craft agency, which refers to the process of rhetorical agency emerging from “intra-actions” among multiple agents that include “a wide variety of material things and processes, including, but not limited to (human and other organic) bodies, technologies, places, economic resources, and histories” (p. 30). Gruwell argues that craft agency provides a theoretical construct for new materialist rhetorics to account for power and social change, noting that “those material things and processes produce, maintain, and disrupt power relations” (p. 30). In the post, Kern’s body interacts with the environment and its histories, as well as with several technologies, including knitting, photography, and social media, to produce agency both in the moment of making the photograph and through the dissemination of the photograph, which carries the potential to help create further social change in the knitting community, in the form of destabilizing unequal

power relations based on gender and race and creating more diverse and inclusive shared spaces for knitters.

To reveal and disrupt the racialized power relations that influence American culture, Kern weaves together patterns of injustice, making multiple posts about omitting Black history from public education, including posts focused on the history of voting rights struggles, the presentation of whitewashed versions of historical events, and the role of schools in failing to adequately teach students about the ways that racism has historically been and continues to be codified in policies and the U.S. justice system. Throughout the project, Kern employs the Black feminist practice of “threading,” theorized by Steele (2021), who uses the term both to reference threads on Twitter and to refer to the compositional practice of connecting or stitching together personal and public writing lives. Steele (2021) writes about Ida B. Wells-Barnett using threading in 1895 to connect multiple stories of lynching to provide the public with the impression that they were not individual cases but a pattern of violence, hoping that action would follow: “[Wells-Barnett] creates a thread for readers to witness the horrors of lynching by seeing it as a persistent, insidious, intentional pattern of terror enacted upon the Black community” (p. 116). Providing additional examples of threading by contemporary Black feminists, Steele builds her argument that threading is a Black feminist praxis that gives writers agency on social media to “curate life on their own terms” (p. 109).

Kern threads similarly to the ways Steele argues that Wells-Barnett did, connecting numerous stories of individual cases and circumstances that demonstrate two patterns: one of suppression of images of Black women knitting and another of suppression of stories about Black Americans throughout history, both of which are patterns pertaining to the violence of white supremacy. Besides revealing omitted or untaught histories and “forgotten” individuals, many of Kern’s posts explicitly tie historical events to current events in order to draw parallels and expose the ways that U.S. political structures perpetuate racist outcomes. In one post, Kern connects the Third Force Act, designed to prevent widespread physical intimidation of Black voters, particularly in the South, to a 2020 federal case alleging conspiracy between the city of St. Louis and the police union to impede an investigation of officer-involved shootings of Black men, to illustrate the enduring collusion of lawmakers and police to disenfranchise Black voters across the US (2020, October 11). In another post, she connects the Atlanta Massacre of 1906, in which 10,000 Black residents were beaten and killed in response to a report of 4 sexual assaults of white women, allegedly by Black men, to the 6 January 2021 white supremacist attack on the US Capitol, which sought to prevent the peaceful transition of power and certification of the presidential election results naming Biden as the president-elect (2020, January 10). Additionally, she addresses the internment of Asian-Americans during WWII, connecting it to the US travel ban against people from certain Muslim countries (2021, January 31); white perpetrators of violence against Black bodies being tried by all-white juries, a practice that was deemed unconstitutional in 1935 yet still continues (2020, November 8; 2020, November 22; 2021, February 14; 2021, March 28; 2021, April 11; 2021, April 25; 2021, May 2; 2021, May 9); the history of Tignon laws, which required women of color to cover their hair, and their connection to modern-day hair-based discrimination in school and workplace dress-code policies (2020, October 18); to name a few issues.

By multimodally combining the two threads of suppressed histories and suppressed images in a medium where the words and images interact, Kern demonstrates the ways that being left out of the visual historical record of knitting is a kind of white supremacist violence that parallels more active forms of violence like lynching and voter suppression, which both seek to remove Black people from participation in the historical record and American culture. In these two intertwining threads, Kern seeks to make present what white supremacy would keep absent, while also suggesting that the knitting community is implicated in the concealment of these voices, both in person and in mediated contexts. Because of this suppression of voices and images, we must look in different ways to find Black women in the histories of knitting, specifically, and in embodied craft contexts (including writing and the technologies of writing) more generally. As Steele (2021) explains, history intentionally excluded multiple and varied voices, and particularly Black oral history: “Without a written record kept and maintained by Black women, we must examine their use of technology between the lines of the historical record” (p. 24).

Kern performs this kind of reading between the lines when she reflects on what she has learned about Black history, especially the labor of Black women, and re-reads the artistic images through the lens of her new understanding. In her caption for “The Spinner,” she writes:

I think back on all of the portraits of white ladies knitting or sewing and now I think— was it slave labor that made that cotton? That spun that yarn? For The Spinner, probably not, as the woman Millet painted worked her own land in France. But in America, my ancestors worked those fields, picked that cotton. I started this project thinking that we weren’t represented in fine art, but we were there all along. In the fiber. (2020, August 2)

In the following week’s post, Kern tells the story of Eliza Whitmire, who had walked the Trail of Tears when she was only five years old because she and her parents were enslaved by a Cherokee man: “While enslaved, Whitmire’s forced labor on the plantation included caring for the sheep, spinning wool, cultivating and picking cotton, and dyeing fibers for garments. She described the many barks, indigo and other natural dyes that they used to dye the fibers and process it to make clothing, thread, and yarn. There we are again. In the fiber.” She adds: “I was not able to find a photo of Eliza Whitmire. Her image is lost to history but her story is not forgotten. You can find her full narrative in my bio” (2020, August 9). Although Eliza’s image and the images of many of the individuals whose stories Kern tells are “lost to history,” the material results of their labor remain a part of the historical record and can be recuperated with careful “reading between the lines.”

Just as Black women “were intentionally written out of history” (Steele, 2021, p. 152) and their involvement in technology usage and development rendered invisible by the repetition (in schools, in art, in media) of that inaccurate/incomplete history, so has Black women’s involvement in the fiber arts been obscured and rendered invisible by historical and cultural narratives that ignore or exclude them. Throughout her project, Kern uses multimodal composing to resituate the narrative of Black women’s relationships with the technologies of knitting, revealing the incompleteness and inaccuracy of those narratives. In reconstructing

those narratives and connecting them using multimodal threading, she makes the absence of Black histories and individuals present visually, through inserting herself into those images, and verbally, through storytelling about unknowable as well as named individuals. Furthermore, her project demonstrates the multimodal nature of Steele's (2021) concept of threading.

Conclusion

Kern's "Knitting While Black" reminds us that technology of any kind – whether it be knitting, writing, or social media – is not neutral. Her project demonstrates Gruwell's (2022) contention that agency emerges not only from individual agents but rather from the "intra-actions" among rhetors and things, including technologies, and that craft provides a robust framework for a nuanced consideration of the ways that power circulates in online discourse. Indeed, "Knitting While Black" takes as one of its premises that the circulation of images in various technological manifestations, while not ultimately connected to one individual "agent" nevertheless creates agency for white women knitters while limiting agency for Black women knitters, which creates a ripple effect throughout American culture.

Furthermore, Kern deploys sophisticated visual, rhetorical, and compositional skills to reveal the ways that knitting itself is a rhetorical act embedded within social-economic systems that construct embodied, gendered, and racialized contexts for a range of literacy practices. As such, "Knitting While Black" helps us better understand the ways that embodied literacies (particularly knitting and other forms of material production) help to shape what we "know" about our world and our collective histories, and to better understand how race and gender are implicated in/by/through those material knowledge-making practices, which in turn can help the field move further toward a definition of rhetoric that emphasizes its embodied and multimodal nature.

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