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## INTRODUCTION

Claire Anscomb & Eleen M Deprez

We are proud to introduce the third special issue of *Debates in Aesthetics*. For this edition, Paul C. Taylor wrote a target article to which the philosophical community was invited to respond. We have published here four of those responses, alongside a reply by Taylor.

Taylor's article, 'Black Reconstruction in Aesthetics', can be seen as an extension of his earlier work, notably *Black is Beautiful* (2016). In the article, he seeks to take the concept of reconstruction as a "resource worth mining, representing a reality worth confronting" (2020, 15). Reconstruction, as a historical term, refers to the period after the American Civil War in which the Confederate states re-joined the union. Through constitutional amendments and numerous political and social initiatives, attempts were made to redress racial inequities in society. The gains of the Reconstruction Era lasted less than a generation however, and were countermanded until the civil rights era. For Taylor, reconstruction is also a significant philosophical concept. John Dewey's *Reconstruction in Philosophy* (1920), calls for rethinking the nature and point of philosophy. It served as a "rhetorical point of entry" for Taylor when he first started thinking about black aesthetics (2020, 12). Despite his work with NAACP, Dewey does not acknowledge the racial politics that surround the term and thus remains "utterly disinterested in the fact of white supremacy" (2020, 23). How is this possible, Taylor asks, considering that he wrote in a time so close to extreme forms of racist violence? Taylor does not want to explain or absolve Dewey's mistake, but emphasises we should learn from its example. Because, Taylor

argues, the connection Dewey missed is still being overlooked by many philosophers and aestheticians today. For example, we have neglected to examine the ways in which xenophobic racist developments deploy aesthetic strategies, nor have we fully interrogated the institutional conditions that lend influence to dominant ways of thinking. In short, Taylor calls for aestheticians, and philosophers more generally, to take reconstruction seriously: “If the exclusions and silences of accepted modes of inquiry are among the residues of a racist culture, then reconstructing the culture will mean reconstructing those modes of inquiry, and shifting the boundaries of the acceptable” (2020, 30). In his article, Taylor does just that, by reframing his own work in Black aesthetics to put reconstruction at the very centre.

In his response to Taylor’s article, Joshua M. Hall argues that aesthetic practices of southern Black women—including storytelling and gardening—have been influential in shaping Black artworks. This has often been ignored, negated or forgotten; either by misogyny or simply because the practices themselves are not considered worthy of aesthetic attention. As an example, Hall looks at *Cane*, the 1923 novel by Harlem Renaissance author Jean Toomer, and Alice Walker’s work, including her experience of *Cane* as recounted in *In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens*. Walker reminisces on the manifold things her mother did around the house: sewing, cooking, quilting. As Hall remarks, Walker’s mother did not receive recognition for these aesthetically-suffused activities but their influence on Walker’s work is significant. Similarly, Jean Toomer draws in his writing on the stories told by his grandmother, and, Hall illustrates, in many other ways can the influence of aesthetic practices by women be seen in his work. Taylor’s call for reconstruction in Black aesthetics, Hall concludes, should thus bring with it due regard for the aesthetic practices of southern Black women. This is a conclusion that Taylor concurs with in his reply. Hall’s article demonstrates that we need to take seriously “the kind of vernacular aesthetic activity that tends not to show up when philosophers map their rarefied artworlds”

(Taylor 2020, 123) and to devote serious philosophical attention to aesthetic figures and activities who have traditionally been excluded from the field.

James Haile III carefully analyses Taylor's article and pushes to further understand the connection between racialization and blackness. He takes as his starting point Taylor's frustration at Dewey's ignorance of the racial and racist dimension to reconstruction as a term. Haile asks Taylor how aesthetics, and Black aesthetics in particular, can offer to bridge the gap? Does Taylor want to claim that there is something unique about blackness enacted through and with aesthetics that it can have the capacity to change one's theoretical imagination to the extent that it can render "the old world anew by simply reassembling the parts into a new language, and a new stylized barrier" (Haile 2020, 71)? Taylor sympathizes with Haile's worries in his reply, but clarifies that his main concern lies with "helping to create the conditions for self-interrogation and counter-habituating" (2020, 121). While "black aesthetic theory and practice can advance" this work and that of epistemic resistance, Taylor maintains that his "argument does not require that they be unique or exceptional in this regard" (2020, 122). This does not rule out the possibility, Taylor concedes, of something unique going on here, given a "proper account of the way blackness conditions the context of racialization" (2020, 122).

Falguni A. Sheth presses on the political groundwork in Taylor's article and his earlier publications. What, she asks, is the prior political-ethical work that needs to be done in order for Black aesthetics to achieve its goal? Unreconstructed racial aesthetics are not only persistent (she mentions for example the idealized aesthetic compartments faculty of colour are expected to conform to), but also forms of institutional violence that "destroy the psychic coherence or existence" of the Black or Brown person (2020, 91). Sheth presses Taylor to consider if reconstruction can occur "simply through audiences that are Black and Brown,

without having to resort to the necessity of white viewers/consumers?” (2020, 93). In his reply, Taylor acknowledges it is reasonable to question “how to locate, motivate, cultivate, and operationalize the political sensibility” hovering over his analysis (2020, 114). Given the broad commitment to black humanity that Taylor’s approach implicates, he suggests that this ethical standard “can be reconciled with any number of more comprehensive or otherwise narrower political views” (2020, 115). His greater interest, he writes, is in a kind of political or critical phenomenology, given the “idea that political life depends at crucial points on various forms of immediate experience” (2020, 115). As such, Taylor clarifies that he is recommending “that we acknowledge the political role of aesthetics” (2020, 118) and that “we, philosophers and people like us, take responsibility for the opportunity [...] to turn the institutional and intellectual resources we’ve cultivated into public resources that can help support the work of counter-habitation and self-interrogation” (2020, 118). The case has certainly started to be made for how aesthetic tools can help to publicly achieve this work. Of no doubt further value, would be an investigation into how those in this field can develop and publicize philosophical and institutional tools to further support this cause.

Lastly, Rossen Ventzislavov takes up Taylor’s call for philosophers to engage with Black aesthetics and uses a scene in *Black Panther* to engage with the discussion about practicing Black aesthetics and, ultimately, the restitution of African art objects. He describes an early scene in *Black Panther* where the supervillain Killmonger has an exchange with a white museum worker. Racial tensions are laid bare in this scene as the short conversation between the characters contains rich allusions to the museum’s illegal methods of acquiring artefacts, unwelcoming attitudes to non-white visitors, and the dissolution of African authenticity. But it is especially the aesthetic dimensions of the scene, notably costume and set design, that make it such a good example of “how easily the aesthetic can become political” (2020, 103). In his reply, Taylor eagerly endorses Ventzislavov’s “reconstruction through resocialization”,

pointing to the fact that it demonstrates how historical analysis and demystification of cultural paradigms “might usefully anchor a valuable administrative practice of cultural reconstruction” (2020, 118). Further research into this area can expose valuable links between aesthetic and political phenomena to aid the reconstructionist cause at a range of different levels.

As Taylor writes in the target article, he received our invitation not long after the Unite the Right rally in Charlottesville where white supremacists, neo-Nazi, and other alt-right groups protested—carrying weapons and chanting racist and anti-Semitic slogans—the removal of Confederate monuments. The Charlottesville rally reminded Taylor of the violent protests against reconstruction laws and policies. As we are now rounding off this issue, different kinds of marches, protests, and demonstrations are ongoing. Ones that have seen statues to the Confederate States in the US, memorials to people involved in the Atlantic slave trade in the UK, sculptures of Leopold II in Belgium or Cecil Rhodes in South Africa, toppled, destroyed or successfully removed after petition. Reconstruction is now, as before, a pressing issue and one that professional philosophy should not evade. Let reading this issue be your invitation to take up Taylor’s call for reconstruction in aesthetics, as it was ours.<sup>1</sup>

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1 The editors wish to thank the anonymous reviewers and the authors for giving us the opportunity to work closely on a topic as interesting and relevant as this. The capitalisation of Black when referring to racial groups in this issue has, in line with our style guide, been left to the discretion of the individual authors.



# BLACK RECONSTRUCTION IN AESTHETICS

Paul C. Taylor  
Vanderbilt University

*This essay uses the concept of reconstruction to make an argument and an intervention in relation to the practice and study of black aesthetics. The argument will have to do with the parochialism of John Dewey, the institutional inertia of professional philosophy, the aesthetic dimensions of the US politics of reconstruction, the centrality of reconstructionist politics to the black aesthetic tradition, and the staging of a reconstructionist argument in the film, Black Panther (Coogler 2018). The intervention aims to address the fact that arguments like these tend not to register properly because of certain reflexive and customary limits on some common forms of philosophical inquiry. The sort of professional philosophy I was raised to practise and value tends not to be particularly inclusive and open-minded, especially when it comes to subjects that bear directly on the thoughts, lives, and practices of people racialized as black. black aesthetics, by contrast, is an inherently ecumenical enterprise, reaching across disciplinary and demographic boundaries to build communities of practice and exchange. Hence the need for an intervention: to create the space for arguments and the people who work with them to function across disciplinary and demographic contexts.*

What is the object of writing the history of Reconstruction? Is it to wipe out the disgrace of a people which fought to make slaves of Negroes?

— W.E.B. Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction in America* (1935/2014, xxviii)

The freedom movement has now reached the most decisive moment in our history, more ripe with possibilities [...] than any period since the overthrow of the first Reconstruction.

— Jack O'Dell, *The Threshold of a New Reconstruction* (1965/2010, 110)

## 1 Introduction: Moten's Toys

In a recent interview with Stefano Harney, Fred Moten offers an intriguing picture of the spirit in which theorists may offer terms of art to their readers (Harney and Moten 2013). Refusing the familiar metaphor of stocking a conceptual toolbox, he turns instead to the image of children sharing a toy box. He explains the merits of this image:

With my kids, most of what they do with toys is turn them into props.... They don't play with them the right way – a sword is what you hit a ball with and a bat is what you make music with. I feel that way about these terms. In the end what's most important is that the thing is put in play.... [T]here are these props, these toys, and if you pick them up you can move into... a new set of relations, a new way of being together, thinking together. (Harney and Moten 201, 105-06)

Moten expands on the point a bit later, focusing now on the work of writerly reflection:

[A] text is a *social* space.... [P]eople, things, are meeting there and interacting, rubbing off one another, brushing against one another.... [T]he terms are important insofar as they allow you, or invite you, or propel you, or require you, to enter into that social space. But once you enter into that social space, terms are just one part of it... (Harney and Moten 2013, 108; emphasis added)

To offer a concept is to put something in play, to invite others to play along with you and see how far it takes them. At some point the standard of success must be something other than enjoyment or satisfaction, something like truth or warranted assertibility. But attempting to meet the standard can still involve shared experimentation. And this sharing will come burdened and enriched by the complexities of human relationships, just as it does when children share, or decline to share, their

toys.

I've started with Moten's reflections because I mean for this essay to enact, encourage, and embody the kind of ludic "thinking together" that he describes. The editors have generously offered me some space to extend my recent reflections on black aesthetics. I propose to do this by deepening my engagement with a concept that has heretofore remained on the margins of these reflections. I started thinking in earnest about black aesthetics many years ago, and used John Dewey's notion of reconstructing philosophy as a rhetorical point of entry. But it has since become clear to me that this notion can do more work, both for Dewey and for me.

I propose, then, to put the concept of reconstruction in play, to signal a determination to make an argument *and* an intervention. The argument will have to do with the parochialism of John Dewey, the institutional inertia of professional philosophy, the aesthetic dimensions of the US politics of reconstruction, the centrality of reconstructionist politics to the black aesthetic tradition, and the staging of a reconstructionist argument in the film, *Black Panther* (Coogler 2018). But arguments like these tend not to register properly because of certain reflexive and customary limits on some common forms of philosophical inquiry. The sort of professional philosophy I was raised to practice and value, and that largely underwrites forums like this one, tends not to be particularly inclusive and open-minded, especially when it comes to subjects that bear directly on the thoughts, lives, and practices of people racialized as black. Black aesthetics, by contrast, is an inherently ecumenical enterprise, reaching across disciplinary and demographic boundaries to build communities of practice and exchange. Hence the need for an intervention: to create the space for arguments in the latter sphere to do work in the former, and for people to make the arguments across contexts.

The sense of reconstruction that animates this essay, then, maps directly onto Moten's sense of playful intellectual engagement. It aims

to use this sort of engagement to expand the self-conception of the community of inquiry to open it to new members, subjects, methods, and perspectives. The burden of the essay will be to explain this transformation, but I wanted to start, to some degree, by modeling it. This is why I began with Fred Moten rather than with an authorising nod to one of philosophy's mighty dead. Dewey has already started to push toward center stage, so the dead will have their say. But to start with Moten is to subject myself to the discipline that I'm demanding of the profession. A contemporary stalwart of Black Studies and related fields, Moten is a capacious thinker, as likely to reference Cavell and Wittgenstein as Coltrane and Wynter. He is also a challenging prose writer (in addition to being a celebrated poet), whose style can provoke in the unwary analytic philosopher the same dismay that led to Heidegger's long banishment from (our part of) the canon. But he is, most of all, a tremendous resource for the study of black aesthetics (and much else). I do not know of any better evidence of the need for reconstruction than my own recently defeated willingness to remain silent about his work. The analogy to play has the additional benefit of reinforcing the need for ground rules. In this spirit, it's worth making a couple of comments here at the outset.

First, I will assume in what follows that it is possible to talk coherently about racial phenomena. Race is not, as far as this essay is concerned, an illusion or a lie. It may be a myth, depending on what one thinks myths are; and it is surely not the motive force behind all human history or the most salient variable in every human interaction. But it is, for all that, in a suitably complicated sense of the term that will not get fleshed out here, real enough. Anyone needing argument on the point can consult the growing literature on the topic and return to this discussion at a more convenient time.<sup>1</sup> For current purposes I will simply help myself to concepts like the "black" in "black aesthetics," fully confident

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1 For a guided introduction to this literature see Taylor (2013).

that sufficient backing is available should the need arise.

Second, nothing in what follows entails or requires that one accept blackness as the only racial position with aesthetic dimensions worth exploring. Nor is it the only one that has animated a venerable and vibrant tradition of such explorations. It just happens to be the one I am interested in right now, and it happens, like the others, to repay attention to its specific and distinctive manifestations.

There is of course a great deal to say about the way different modes of racialization interact, just as there is a great deal to say about the way racialization intersects with the forces that animate other social identity categories. But one cannot say everything at once. As the study of these topics is in its infancy in philosophical aesthetics, a provisional narrowing of the subject seems in order. Added to which, as we will see, part of the point of developing a philosophy of black aesthetics is to connect to a pre-existing field of inquiry and practice that goes by that name and insists, much of the time, on this focus.

## 2 The Wars of Reconstruction

I have not argued for the thought that putting concepts in play is interestingly and productively different from what one might otherwise do with concepts. I have simply appealed to the authority of Moten and Harney, or, better, to the intuitive plausibility of their account of this activity. I do not propose to argue for it—not, at least, in any way other than trying it out and tallying up the results. But granting for now that there is something to this approach, it is worth explaining why I want to put this particular notion in play. Why *reconstruction*? Why take up reconstruction in relation to aesthetics?

One reason to take up a concept is, of course, that working with the notion in question might be instructive or otherwise illuminating. I will soon offer a reason like this for my approach here. Working through the concept of reconstruction can deepen my account of black aesthetics,

instructively complicate the legacy of John Dewey, and highlight the tensions between philosophy as a practice and philosophy as a profession. But pointing to a concept's uses does not explain how its potential for use became apparent.

Two factors put the notion of reconstruction in my path so that it might occur to me to work through it in the way I have proposed here. The first factor has to do with the accidents of history and biography that led to my interest in black aesthetics, and that led me to the peculiar thought that Dewey could help me nurture that interest. This will, to some degree, be the topic of a later section.

The second factor is the state of racial politics in the US and beyond—or, perhaps better, the convergence of racial politics with politics full stop, for people who need these things to be separated. I chose to put the notion of reconstruction in play in part because the world did it first, and I found myself fairly confronted with the thought that this concept was a resource worth mining, representing a reality worth confronting. That will be the topic of this section.

I received the commission for this essay a few short months after the first, now-infamous “Unite the Right” rally in Charlottesville, Virginia. A group of alt-right supporters gathered on the University of Virginia campus the day before the rally, galvanized by plans to remove a statue of Confederate general Robert E. Lee. The mostly young, mostly male protestors “proudly proclaimed their loyalty to a white-nationalist ideology,” (Wallace-Wells 2017) shouted “white lives matter,” “blood and soil,” and “Jews will not replace us,” while marching in “a torchlight procession—a symbolic gathering meant to evoke similar marches of the Hitler Youth and other ultra-right nationalist organizations of the past century” (Helm 2017). The rally on the next day then devolved into violent conflicts with counter-protestors, one of whom died when an alt-right sympathiser aimed his car into a crowd.

The events in Charlottesville were striking for several reasons. The

killing of Heather Heyer was tragic, and the apparent fragility of civility and order was sobering. But homicide and antisocial criminality are, sadly, not that unusual. This instance of antisocial and homicidal criminality was striking in part because it came during the latest in a series of increasingly brazen attempts to recuperate and mobilise white supremacist discursive machinery. The torchlight march, the cries of blood and soil, the defense of a Confederate monument in the name of a putatively shared American heritage, and the vocal refusal—which is to say, announcement, then refusal—of a Jewish conspiracy: all of these gestures manipulate familiar racist rhetoric and symbols in support of a white nationalist agenda.

One way to register the familiarity of the Charlottesville conflict is to think of it as another front in what historian Douglas Egerton calls “the wars of reconstruction” (Egerton 2014, 5971, 5863-5864). “Reconstruction” here names the period that followed the US Civil War and the process of rebuilding and recreating the social and political order that the war had destroyed. This process took multiple forms. Some involved straightforward political and policy initiatives, backed by military and police power. Others involved cultural and ethical projects backed by softer and more dispersed forms of power and influence, as we will see in the next section. All were viciously and vigorously contested, in the bitter struggles that give Egerton his animating metaphor and organising theme.

Charlottesville can represent a new front in these wars because these conflicts far outlasted the formal hostilities between the United States and the renegade Confederacy. The war was simply the most concentrated eruption of the violent contradictions that lay at the core of the American project, a project rooted, to put it only a little too crudely, in the valorization and pursuit of freedom by an expansionist, slaveholding, settler colonial state. These contradictions defined the project from the beginning, and committed its architects and managers

to periodically renegotiating the basic terms of cooperation to avoid open conflict. In this sense the three-fifths clause of the Constitution, the Fugitive Slave Act, and the Missouri Compromise were all ways of managing tensions that finally erupted in the Civil War. The end of the war did not resolve the tensions and contradictions, although some of the more ambitious advocates for the Reconstruction project imagined that it might. Some people thought that the post-war rebuilding might also be a second founding, serving to re-establish the American project on a new, more secure footing. But what actually happened was that the same cycle of periodic renegotiation resumed, only with new stakes. Before the Civil War the question had been whether the union would hold. After the war, after reconstruction, the question had to do with the prospects for reconciling American democracy with racial justice; or, put differently, for comprehensively rooting out the social, political, and ethical conditions for the persistence of white supremacy. Charlottesville showed that the question has yet to receive a satisfactory answer.

### **3 The Aesthetics of Reconstruction**

Once one notes the persistence of the wars of reconstruction, it is easy to credit the aesthetic implications of this state of affairs. Warfare is always bound up with expressive culture, most clearly in the narratives and symbols that combatants use to cultivate patriotic fervor and to galvanize hatred for the enemy. The wars of reconstruction are no different. The domain of the aesthetic is one of the fronts in these wars, in ways it will pay for us to consider in relation to the broader history of reconstruction politics.

The Reconstruction era got its name from a constellation of programs launched by the US federal government in the wake of the Civil War. These programs aimed mainly to restore order in the vanquished southern states, while also, to varying degrees, uprooting the white supremacist, anti-democratic, and secessionist practices that defined the erstwhile Confederacy. This federal initiative came to an end in 1877, when

the provisional consensus of pro-Union and anti-slavery political forces that supported it splintered under the pressures of fatigue and of white supremacist recalcitrance.

The basic reconstructionist impulse—aimed at rooting out the conditions for the persistence of white supremacist and anti-democratic practices—survived the demise of the federal initiative, and worked on multiple levels to animate a variety of activities and projects. There was, for example, a constellation of local and regional movements, policies, and initiatives, many of which began with federal support but continued without it as long as they could manage in the face of lethal and terroristic violence. Underwriting many of these efforts was an ideological commitment to a general cultural reorientation, organized around revised understandings of freedom, equality, community, democracy, and citizenship. And underwriting this ideological program was a project of ethical counter-habitation, calling individual citizens to locate and cultivate the better angels of their natures and repudiate their “unreconstructed” anti-democratic sentiments.

The ethical and cultural dimensions of the broader Reconstruction program point toward the relevance of this program, and of its prehistory, for the work of black aesthetics. Whatever black aesthetics is—a topic we have not come to yet, I realize—it will have to involve the work of people like the great abolitionist Frederick Douglass, whose greatness is constituted in large part by his determination to use culture work to clarify the contradictions and injustices of a slaveholding democratic republic. Douglass’ speeches, writings, and visual culture strategies deserve pride of place here,<sup>2</sup> but there are many other examples of aesthetic strategies being brought to bear on the work of vindicating black humanity and imagining political transformation. Harriet Beecher Stowe’s massively influential novel, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, is just one example, albeit one that also does us the service of raising thorny

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2 See Stauffer et al (2015).

questions about, for example, the limits of didactic art and the relationship between ethical and aesthetic criticism.

These transformational aesthetic interventions continued into the Reconstruction era proper, and well beyond. Culture workers continued to use visual art, song, oratory, drama, literature, and other forms to insist on black humanity, to reimagine racially oppressive and exploitative social arrangements, and to call attention to the damage that white supremacy was doing to black life and to the causes of democracy and justice. This work did not stop when the federal program ended in 1877, any more than the local struggles for institutional transformation ended. In this spirit one might think of the “New Negro” movement usually associated with the Harlem Renaissance as a continuation of this Reconstructionist cultural program.

Despite the steady persistence of Reconstructionist efforts after 1877, the demise of the federal Reconstruction program did mark a real change in the prospects for transformation. From this point on the US state declined to enforce the new dispensation and then, to varying degrees in various places, threw itself fully into the work of restoring, or “redeeming,” something very much like the old dispensation.<sup>3</sup> Violence flowed into the breach created by the “Redemption” of the political and cultural forces that animated the old south, as lynching and “white riots” became routine methods of reining back in the labour power and political aspirations of the nominally free African American population. Until the passage of federal civil rights legislation in the 1960s, white supremacy reasserted itself and clung assiduously to its cultural importance and political influence.

Then, after the Second World War, the Reconstructionist program found

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3 For ease of exposition, I am using “the state” as a placeholder for a handful of different governmental-administrative structures, operating on different geographic and administrative scales. Attending to the details here would take us too far afield of the topic.

new openings. This was the beginning of what activist and organizer Jack O'Dell calls "the new reconstruction" (2010), and what Manning Marable (1984) calls "the Second Reconstruction". In the 1950s and 1960s the ongoing struggles of what some scholars call "the long Civil Rights Movement," reaching all the way back to the 1920s and 1930s, gained new traction with governmental authorities and with US popular opinion. Thanks to the efforts of people like O'Dell, Fannie Lou Hamer, Ella Baker, and Martin Luther King, Jr., and to the organizations they helped lead and build, the nation now seemed to be returning to the Reconstructionist project nearly a century after the premature end of the project's first iteration.

As with the first Reconstruction, the twentieth century US black freedom movement accepted aesthetic experience as an appropriate and promising arena for political engagement. Public memories of the movement's accepted political heroes are bound up with specific styles of oratory, dress, and bodily comportment, though the resulting focus on middle class, Christian, heterosexual black men is in tension with at least some of the movement's stated goals. In addition, culture workers practicing in a variety of idioms, in various relationships to elite and popular artworld communities, took the movement's priorities as inspiration and as subject. Think here of everyone from Gwendolyn Brooks and Joan Baez to James Brown and Max Roach. Finally, many of the more controversial inhabitants of this cultural moment, like Malcolm X, Huey Newton, and Angela Davis, found their substantive contributions to the elimination of racial (and other forms of) injustice bound up with their stylistic innovations. Angela Davis has spoken eloquently and poignantly to this phenomenon in a wonderful essay about the reduction of her historical legacy to a hairstyle (1994).

#### **4 The Ironies of American Philosophy**

The opening of a new front in the US wars of reconstruction—or, one might say, the revival of Redemptionism as a broadly viable political

and cultural force—encouraged me to put the notion of reconstruction in play. But the notion may not have struck me as a potential resource for specifically *philosophical* reflection, had John Dewey not tried to mobilize it for this purpose first. What really did the trick was the realization that I had tried to use Dewey's use of reconstruction to build the bridge between professional philosophy and black aesthetics, while mostly ignoring Dewey's own inattention to the deeper meanings of the concept. This layering of oversights or evasions—layered because Dewey's came first, to be compounded by mine—interests me now not as an occasion to take the canon down a peg, but as a cautionary tale about the dangers that await and the ironies that attend superficial invocations of the idea of reconstruction.

Almost a hundred years ago, in 1920, Dewey published a little book of lectures called *Reconstruction in Philosophy* (1948). The book's organizing theme animated most of his mature work in one way or another: society's needs and capacities have outgrown its practices and assumptions, he argued, and something must be done. He chose to use the idea of reconstruction to help make this point, but somehow failed, or declined, to notice that this choice points in the direction of an even richer and more challenging philosophical practice than he imagined.

Dewey thought that liberal democratic society (in its industrial, capitalist, and managerial form, we would now add) needed reconstructing, and a reconstructed philosophy was essential to meeting this need. This meant, among other things, uprooting some familiar but damaging intellectual and professional habits in philosophy, and using the newly liberated practice of inquiry to root out similarly damaging habits in the wider society. These bad philosophical habits involved broad misconceptions of experience, knowledge, history, truth, and other such things, all wrapped up in a general inattention to historical and phenomenological context. But the details of this worry are less important right now than the punchline: recovering philosophy from these mis-

takes would enable it to embrace a vital social role, a role Dewey would describe later as a “criticism of the influential beliefs that underlie culture” (1985).

Equipped with this philosophical model of cultural criticism, Dewey spent much of his career reinterpreting concepts at the heart of vital social institutions and practices. He argues in *Individualism Old and New* (1930) that the most influential strains of twentieth century political thought are rooted in flawed conceptions of freedom and of the individual, conceptions forged in the fires of earlier social conflicts and carried over without appropriate adjustment (which is to say, it makes sense to demand liberty or death in response to King George in a way that it probably doesn't in response to the New Deal.) Similarly, he argues in *Art as Experience* (1934) that the dominant conceptions of art are rooted in flawed conceptions of aesthesis and expression, misconceptions directly traceable to misunderstandings of experience as such.

Dewey's emphasis on historically informed, phenomenologically responsible, reconstructive cultural criticism comes with several strange ironies in tow. Some are tangentially related to the topic of this essay, but need not detain us. Think here of the way Dewey's appeals to cultural criticism look rather little like anything a contemporary reader would assign that name. Or think of the way he declines to subject the concept of reconstruction to the sort genealogical scrutiny that he gives concepts like “art,” “individualism,” and “experience”.

The principal irony is that Dewey's uses of “reconstruction” maintain a distressing distance from the racial politics that surround the term in US contexts. He seems to have employed the notion largely as an allusion to World War I, and to the need for the sort of postwar restoration that the term “reconstruction” broadly signifies. But, as we have seen, this term happens also to name a project that is intimately bound up with the afterlife of the US Civil War and with the bitter and lethally violent racial politics that drove and dominated this war. The struggles

over this project cast a deep shadow over US social life during Dewey's lifetime. Even worse, the shadow fell rather directly across Dewey's own life—he was born in 1859, and his father fought in the Civil War—and, if Louis Menand is right, across his philosophical commitments (Menand 2001).<sup>4</sup> But it somehow manages not to fall over the *Reconstruction* lectures, which remain utterly disinterested in the fact of white supremacy, much as the rest of Dewey's work would lead one to expect.

The irony of a child of the Reconstruction era remaining silent on the persistence of that era's conflicts is particularly striking if one considers the extremely public forms that the conflicts had taken in the years leading up to 1920. Lynching, which is to say, lethal and extra-legal violence overwhelmingly visited on black people as a terroristic method of social control, had by that time become a thriving social practice. It had also become, among people who fancied themselves more enlightened than the residents of the unreconstructed south, something of a national scandal. In 1918, Leonidas Dyer introduced legislation in the US House of Representatives to stop the scandalous practice, spurred by the vigorous public advocacy of Ida B. Wells-Barnett and, somewhat later, others (including the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People [NAACP], an organization that Dewey helped create). The Dyer Bill immediately became a source of intense controversy and remained unsuccessfully on the legislative horizon for years. Similarly, there was the so-called "Red Summer" of 1919, when US veterans of colour returned from fighting overseas only to find their freedoms still radically, violently, and infamously curtailed by deadly "white riots" at home.

Perhaps the best example (for an essay in aesthetics, anyway) of the ongoing struggle between reconstruction and redemption might be the

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4 Menand argues that American pragmatism's core commitments derive in part from the experience that its architects had with the divisions of the US Civil War.

bitter cultural debate over works like D.W. Griffith's landmark film, *Birth of a Nation*. Released in 1915, this cinematic re-telling of a sensationalist racist novel affirmed a number of troubling racist and sexist propositions. It depicted black people as unfit for democratic self-government and as threats to law and order. The sense of law and order it relied on was rigidly gendered and racialized. It rendered black men as rapacious and predatory threats to white womanhood, and by extension to the political order that required white male authority over and access to all female sexuality. Similarly, it rendered black women as licentious and predatory temptresses, whose wicked influence over white men could, as one of the film's title cards put it, "blight a nation". The film motivated its narrative by affirming and amplifying the racist and sexist myths that were at that very moment being used to justify lethal terroristic violence. In these ways and others, it justified mass disfranchisement and extra-legal violence in support of white supremacist modes of social organization. (It is also, as is well known, a landmark in the history of cinema. As one writer puts it, the worst thing about the movie is how good it is (Brody 2013). It is therefore grist for the mill of reflection on the relationship between aesthetic criticism and moral criticism. That is not my topic here.)

The film struck many observers and activists as scandalous and dangerous from the start. It inspired nationwide protests and boycotts, and led to an abortive NAACP campaign to produce a response film, to fight the fire of cinematic propaganda with fire. Nevertheless, the film, along with a great many similar creative works in print, on stage, and on screen, prospered and enjoyed great popularity. Figures like filmmaker Oscar Micheaux and journalist William Monroe Trotter worked tirelessly to dispel the myths that animated these aesthetic products. But their efforts ran aground on considerations that Egerton puts like this: "elegantly written monographs [like Du Bois's *Black Reconstruction* (1935), written to counter the pseudo-scholarly version of Griffith's narrative then current among US historians] were no match for romantic

fiction” (like *Gone With the Wind* (1939)), and “reasoned editorials about the truth of Reconstruction were no match for popular media” like film (Egerton 2014, 5971, 5863-5864).<sup>5</sup>

These glimpses of the state of racial politics in the early twentieth century should sharpen the tensions I have tried to tease out of Dewey’s *Reconstruction* lectures. If the point of the broad reconstructionist program was to renew the prospects for American democracy and to subdue white supremacy as a political force, then this work was very much still ongoing, with its outcome still hanging in the balance. This work had, moreover, become a matter of national controversy, fueled by extremely high-profile contests over federal legislation, popular art, and appropriate uses of political violence. And while all this was happening, Dewey actively recommended, without irony, something that made almost no contact with any aspect of this wider situation, but that he nevertheless described as “reconstruction”.

## 5 Missed Connections: Ideas and Institutions

I have read Dewey in a way that opens the door to a number of interesting questions, but the work I have in mind for this essay requires closing the door on most of them. One might ask, for example, what led Dewey to use the idea of reconstruction in 1920 and then to abandon it soon after? How could he fail to notice the rhetorical and potentially substantive alignments between his philosophical program and the challenges of the Jim Crow era?

Answering these questions would require scholarly excursions that, however fascinating, would lead away from the subject of this essay. Insights surely await in the historical record—in Dewey’s correspondence, say. Engaging the literature on Dewey and race would also be instructive, especially since that literature has grown considerably in scope and sophistication in recent years. But my aim in highlighting

<sup>5</sup> On Trotter’s dissent see Brody 2017.

Dewey's apparent indifference to the historical baggage of Reconstruction is not to work toward explaining these missteps, if that's what they are, or toward reconciling them with his considered philosophical views.

(One short digression may not be amiss, though, since it takes on an issue that, if left untended, may distract from the work of this essay. One easy way to account for Dewey's indifference is to credit the profundity of the world-historical shift that came with the First World War. The sixty-year-old Dewey can surely be forgiven, one might think, for letting this devastating cataclysm that was not really about race turn his attention away from a race-related conflict that happened when he was a baby. Unfortunately, this move just pushes the worry back, or perhaps up, a step. For one thing, and as noted above, the white supremacist commitments that animated the US Civil War also spawned bitter controversies on the domestic front both during and after the war years. For another, and as Du Bois ably argues in "The African Roots of the War," these same commitments were also very much at work *in* World War I. We tend not to notice because we falsely think of the war as a contest only involving white people, and because foregrounding the agency of white people routinely discourages people from applying race-theoretic analyses. But race-thinking was central to the evolving conceptions of civilization and progress, and to the great power machinations, that both led to "The Great War" and were undone by it. So: tracing Dewey's race- and reconstruction-blindness to the greater gravity of a World War somehow purified of racial politics only deepens the problem.)

Dewey's decontextual lapse is instructive here because it shows him missing connections that philosophical aestheticians are still missing today, connections with important resonances for our current practices. Worse, it shows him apparently failing even to notice that the connections are there. We can learn from his example and work harder to notice these opportunities and to take advantage of them.

First, we see him missing opportunities to bring powerful philosophical tools to bear on important social conditions. His failure to subject the culture of white supremacy to philosophical criticism is in part a failure of theoretical imagination, as is his tardy and partial recognition that cultural criticism might productively involve a robust, sustained engagement with particular artifacts in popular culture and in everyday life.

Contemporary philosophical aestheticians are in danger of a similar failure. We are witnessing the second redemption of exclusionary white identitarianism in the US and the revival and growth of xenophobic right populism in Europe. Both of these developments rely heavily on aesthetic strategies, and so far we have had little to say about them. Taking on board the questions and resources of critical social theories—like critical race theory and decolonial feminism—would be one way to deepen our engagement with these pressing and aesthetically rich phenomena.

A second missed connection involves the institutional conditions that enable the aforementioned failure of theoretical imagination. If we think of Dewey's indifference to the legacies of Reconstruction as the deliverance of a whitely epistemology of ignorance, it behooves us to consider the social conditions that produce and enable this ignorance (Sullivan and Tuana 2007; Mills 1997). José Medina might say at this point that the conditions for an epistemology of *resistance* were not sufficiently developed: Dewey was not enmeshed in the circuits of exchange and communities of inquiry that would have pushed back against—resisted—the easy ignorance of racial conditions that white supremacy cultivates even in well-meaning moral agents (Medina 2012). There is an easy story to tell about how this happened to Dewey, working as he did in a rigidly segregated academy. But once again, I mean to bracket the question of whether and how much this historical figure could have fought the constraints of his social environment. I am more interested in learning from his example and actively working to build

more responsibly constructed communities of inquiry.

Undertaking philosophical reconstruction in this critical spirit means working on at least two levels. One level involves the sort of work professional philosophers usually do and are most comfortable doing: appealing to theoretical and conceptual considerations to recommend different ways of thinking. But a second level involves the sort of work we do too infrequently and too haphazardly: interrogating and grappling with the institutional conditions under which dominant ways of thinking attain their influence. This takes us back to Moten and Harney's focus on ways of thinking and being together. Philosophy happens in social contexts, and some of these contexts happen to be curated by professional associations and scholarly societies. We often treat these associations like low-stakes social clubs, charged simply with organizing the next meeting in deference to whatever traditions and customs have governed every other meeting we can remember. But history sometimes brings us to crucial points at which the leaders of these organizations have to take seriously the burdens and opportunities of leadership and organizational design. We have reached one of those points, both because of general challenges facing humanistic scholarship in the higher education sector and because of the broader political challenges of the moment.

I could continue here in a disapproving spirit. I could draw on recent events in the profession to suggest some of the dangers that await if we decline to attend with sufficient care to evolving social conditions and to the institutional work that these conditions require. But some of us have already done this in a series of complaints about the 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary meeting of the American Society for Aesthetics (an organization that I value and have had the privilege of serving in a leadership role, which is to offer some reassurance that I am not simply venting

hostility).<sup>6</sup> So I will simply drop those grievances into the background and turn instead to some positive suggestions about ways to build the connections that went missing in Dewey's work.

The key to learning from Dewey's oversights is to gain clarity on just what he overlooked. He missed, or evaded, possible connections between his concrete sociohistorical context and his abstract call for social and philosophical reconstruction. This evasion was possible and perhaps necessary, one might think, because Dewey declined to challenge certain artificial constraints on his philosophical aspirations, and on the community of inquirers that helped form his aspirations. This returns us once more to the idea of putting concepts in play in order to do what Moten describes in our opening quotations as moving into a new set of relations. Dewey did not follow the concept of reconstruction into a social space that furnished him with interlocutors who could push him in new directions. Or, better: he was *already* in a promising social space—as noted above, he was one of the founders of the NAACP, and with varying degrees of openness and vigour supported causes we would now think of as part of a civil rights or racial justice agenda. But somehow this social intercourse failed to reach the core of his sense of himself as a philosopher, even though he was at that very moment demanding a reconsideration of philosophy's relationship to social life.

I have suggested that Dewey's recovery of philosophy fell short because he declined to push the boundaries of an artificially constrained community of inquirers. To say this is to offer a provisional diagnosis for a fairly narrow purpose. I will say again: the aim is not to make a definitive contribution to Dewey scholarship; it is rather to continue and advance the round of discursive play that began with the appeal to reconstruction.

6 .....  
The pieces I have in mind here appeared in a series published by the blog *Aesthetics for Birds* (Taylor 2017; Eaton 2017; Peterson 2017).

The point of this diagnosis is to raise questions like these: What happens if we accept the provocation that comes with the rise of expressive white supremacy, and we interrogate the aesthetic dimensions of racialist habits and racist cultures? What happens if we examine the work of philosophical aesthetics from the wider perspective that results from reconsidering the social dimensions of philosophy as a professional practice? That is: what happens if we take Reconstruction seriously as an historical reality in relation to philosophy?

## 6 Assembling Black Aesthetics

One way to take reconstruction seriously is to do the work that unreconstructed intellectual and professional habits rule out. If the exclusions and silences of accepted modes of inquiry are among the residues of a racist culture, then reconstructing the culture will mean reconstructing those modes of inquiry, and shifting the boundaries of the acceptable. In philosophical aesthetics, this might mean taking up the challenges of critical race aesthetics, or, more narrowly, of black aesthetics.

The burden of this section will be to summarize and slightly reframe my own philosophy of black aesthetics in order to put reconstruction at the centre of the project. This move will clarify both the critical impulses that animate the tradition and the nature of the topics that constitute the tradition's subject matter. It will also bring into relief some respects in which the approach I recommend raises some interesting questions.

People who know nothing or nearly nothing about black aesthetics—which is to say, most professional philosophers, at least until recently—tend to take the name of the enterprise as an occasion for worry. It seems like shorthand for a view about some tight link between racial identity and the norms that govern the way black people produce, evaluate, or engage aesthetic objects. The view might be that black people do, as an empirical matter, tend to have and enjoy certain kinds of aesthetic experiences. Or it might be that black people *should* have and enjoy certain experiences, and that if they do something else

then they're wrong or broken. But either way the view is at least a trifle worrisome. Any empirical generalizations that reach across the various contexts in which black people can be found—different ethnicities, national origins, languages, and so on—are bound to be weak or philosophically uninteresting. And any norms that aspire to bind these same people across contexts are likely to be oppressive or rooted in a bankrupt mode of essentialism.

The most prominent sources for the idea of a black aesthetic, many of them, did their part to contribute to this worrisome perception. For the architects of the US Black Arts and Black Aesthetic movements in the 1960s and 1970s, as for their cultural nationalist heirs in the 1980s, the articulation of norms that were binding on all black people was often part of the mission. There were various ways to arrive at this commitment. Some involved the sort of dubious metaphysical claims—about, say, the nature of black “soul”—that raise worries about invidious essentialism. But there were other paths, including psychological claims about the conditions for mental health under white supremacy, and political claims about the prerequisites for cultivating an appropriately revolutionary anticolonial consciousness. Whatever the argument, a variety of people in a variety of spheres found themselves drawn to the idea of distinctively black norms for the production and evaluation of aesthetic objects.

Interestingly, though, the people who articulated ideas related to the black aesthetic explicitly located themselves in wider circuits of exchange and debate. People like Larry Neal, Addison Gayle, and Alice Walker knew that they were carrying forward vital traditions of culture work. For this reason, Gayle and Neal reprinted people like Alain Locke, Langston Hughes, and W.E.B. Du Bois in their anthologies, while Walker devotes much of her groundbreaking book of essays, *In Search of Our Mother's Gardens*, to reckoning with the legacies of Zora Neale Hurston and Flannery O'Connor. (Yes, O'Connor. Wait.) At the same time, they

knew they were enmeshed in arguments with contemporaries and near-contemporaries like Ralph Ellison, whose cosmopolitan liberalism put him at odds with the nationalism of Baraka and others (Baraka and Neal 1968; Walker 1983).

These links between the self-described black aestheticians and the figures that they both drew from and debated suggests a way of linking the mid-century movements to a broader enterprise. The broader enterprise connects New Negro or Harlem Renaissance figures like Locke and Jessie Fauset to later figures like Baraka and Gwendolyn Brooks, and to even later figures like Skip Gates and Thelma Golden, both of whom launch vital critical and curatorial projects by explicitly orienting themselves to these predecessors. It also forges synchronic and transnational links connecting these same figures to their contemporaries around the world. Think here of the way Du Bois and Locke circulated—both physically and by way of their writings—in communities of artists, theorists, and critics in Europe, the Caribbean, and Africa.

For these reasons and others, it struck me as an unfortunate waste of conceptual resources to limit the idea of the black aesthetic to the moment and the figures that simply got around to naming it explicitly. The promise of the idea had to do with the way it connected these people and the products of their work across time and space, *and* across their various disagreements and debates. Ellison had little use for what Baraka thought of as “black art,” but they nevertheless shared something—something rooted precisely in the occasions for their disagreement. And they shared this something also with Toni Morrison, Miriam Makeba, Jean Toomer, Phyllis Wheatley, Edouard Glissant, and Frederick Douglass.

Here was the solution to the worry about the parochialism or worrisome particularism of “the” black aesthetic: expand the reference of the label so that it covers both the self-described black aestheticians *and* the other participants in the tradition that informed and challenged them.

Understood in this way, the unity of the enterprise does not require agreement on a set of claims about what black art requires or involves. It requires only a shared willingness to explore the kinds of issues and to grapple with the kinds of questions that lead to claims about things like the requirements of black art.

Understood in this wide-ranging, dynamic way, the black aesthetic enterprise is best thought of as a thematic tradition. I use the term “tradition” in the way Jeff Stout counsels us to, to denote “a discursive practice considered in the dimension of history” (2004, 135). A tradition is not reducible to a theory or a set of claims and practices; it is instead constituted by an ongoing conversation *about* the theories, claims, and practices that jostle for pride of place at the core of an enterprise. The black aesthetic tradition, then, is the ongoing, transgenerational, discursive practice of arguing about, theorising about, and otherwise engaging with the questions that routinely arise in relation to the aesthetic dimensions of racialization-as-black. These questions inform the themes or, following Stuart Hall, the “problem-spaces,” that animate the tradition (2005).

Once we adopt this approach, the problem-spaces that define the black aesthetic tradition come readily into view. A look back over the accomplishments that are typically regarded as the pinnacle of black cultural achievement reveals some recurring themes. To take just three examples, culture workers across idioms, eras, and forms routinely take up questions about invisibility, authenticity, and appropriation.

The question of invisibility involves the condition of having one’s presence and complex personhood denied or effaced on racial grounds. Towering achievements like Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye* (1970), Michele Wallace’s *Invisibility Blues* (1990), and Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man* (1952) are among the clearest encounters with this question. But critiques of the idea of invisibility, or of the determination to put it at the center of black life, are also part of the tradition. Consider for exam-

ple the Black Arts movement critiques of Ellison's iconic novel, some of which held, in essence, that if the novelist or his characters felt invisible, then they must have been hanging out with the wrong people. Or consider the line of black feminist and queer argument that insists on the distinctive forms of invisibility that result from the common conflation of blackness with cisgender, heterosexual, masculine blackness.

The question of authenticity involves the thought that certain practices, attitudes, and so on are in some sense more appropriate than others to the bearers of particular racial identities. This was clearly one of the questions at the core of the US Black Arts movement. It was just as clearly an occasion for vigorous contestation at that moment and long before. There is, for example, the disagreement between Ellison and Baraka, brought to a head in Ellison's famous review of Baraka's germinal text, *Blues People* (1963). There's also the similar disagreement between the older and the younger figures in the Harlem Renaissance over the relative merits of jazz and of "folk" culture. Or consider the arguments about producing literature in the coloniser's language, arguments prominently featuring figures like Kenyan writer N'gugi Wa Thiongo.

The question of appropriation may be the most familiar of the core questions that animate the Black Aesthetic tradition. The issue here usually gets rendered—too simply, Lewis Gordon (1997) reminds us—as a matter of people in one ethnoracial group borrowing or stealing artifacts or practices from another.<sup>7</sup> Think here about the arguments people used to have about Elvis Presley and black music, or about white jazz or blues musicians. These debates routinely arise now in relation to hip-hop culture, though the most prominent recent example may come

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7 See Taylor (2016, 182-85) for a gesture at these debates and some resources related to them.

from the artworld controversy around Dana Schutz's *Open Casket*.<sup>8</sup>

There are other recurring questions and debates in the black aesthetic tradition, but these few should provide enough of a backdrop to make sense of the core thought: that a productive way to approach black aesthetics philosophically is as a tradition of engagement with the aesthetic dimensions of black life. This engagement unfolds by appeal not (or not just) to the long memory of specific cultural norms and practices reaching across generations and geographic distances, but to questions, arguments, and debates that reach not just across generations and geography but also across norms and creative idioms. No particular norm or practice is sufficiently consistent across space and time to give the tradition the philosophical depth (as opposed, say, to anthropological depth) that has been claimed for it. But this depth has been claimed rightly, as we can see when we relocate it from the domain of the empirical and the prescriptive to the domain of the theoretical and critical.

Having motivated the problem-space approach, which supports the thought that "black aesthetics" names a dynamic tradition rather than a static set of norms or practices, we are finally in position to put the idea of reconstruction in play once more. I have suggested that the way to think of (people like) Phyllis Wheatley, Suzanne Cesaire, Derek Walcott, and Ava DuVernay as participants in a unitary enterprise is to root the enterprise in an ongoing series of thematically organized dialogic exchanges. What makes these exchanges part of a single enterprise is their shared interest in the aesthetic dimensions of black life-worlds, or of racialization-as-black. Invoking racial blackness in this way implicates the entire apparatus of modern racialization, since that

8 Curators Christopher Lew and Mia Locks included Dana Schutz's painting, "Open Casket," in the 78th Whitney Biennial in the spring of 2017. The abstracted image of Emmett Till in his coffin struck them as a sincere effort to engage with complex questions of racial justice, racist violence, and historical trauma. It struck others as an unethical leveraging of black experience and trauma for individual artistic gain. Protests ensued, with Afro-US artist Parker Bright and Afro-British artist Hannah Black lodging perhaps the most prominent objections. See Haslett (2017); Kennedy (2017).

is the context in which this mode of racialization takes shape and does its work. And to invoke that apparatus is to invoke the conditions that make reconstruction necessary.

I am making my way to the thought that the question of reconstruction, like the questions of authenticity, invisibility, and appropriation, anchors one of the core problem-spaces in the black aesthetic tradition. For black people in the modern world, navigating a racialized social landscape has meant, among other things, coming to grips with white supremacy. It means other things too, because black people are still people, and have all the challenges and possibilities that people have *qua* people, which is in part to say that, common misconceptions notwithstanding, whiteness is not at the center of black life. But for racialized subjects in a world profoundly shaped by white supremacy, the contents and consequences of whiteness and whiteness are among the important conditions to be monitored and managed. And the prospect of uprooting the conditions that enable white supremacy has often been at the forefront of black aesthetic cultural production, theory, and criticism.

Examples of work in this reconstructionist problem-space abound. Think of the traditions of abolitionist writing and oratory in the nineteenth century US, or of James Baldwin's remarkable reflection on the limits and costs of racist culture, *The Fire Next Time* (1963). Or consider the possibility that the entire black aesthetic tradition, with its sometimes explicit, usually implicit insistence on the human depth and dimensions of black life, is an exercise in reconstructionist politics.

## 7 Black Life/Art/Identity Matters

I've suggested that "black aesthetics" names a dynamic tradition of taking up the recurring questions and inhabiting the central problem-spaces that emerge in relation to the aesthetic dimensions of black life. I've suggested further that the question of reconstruction—of whether and how to uproot the conditions that enable white suprem-

acy, and to rebuild a formerly racist culture on racially egalitarian grounds—is at the core of one of these problem-spaces. These suggestions position us to consider some questions and cases that will help to clarify both the idea of a black aesthetic tradition and the way contemporary work in the tradition undertakes the work of reconstruction.

The first question begins with a worry about how to draw the line between reconstructionist and redemptionist projects. Put differently, in the way I have heard it raised in relation to the kinds of arguments I have rehearsed here: is it possible to have an *anti-black* black aesthetic? If the field is constituted by problem-spaces, and these are defined not by the answers to recurring questions but by the willingness to take up the questions, then why is redemptionism not part of the conversation of black aesthetics? Why isn't D.W. Griffith an icon of the black aesthetic tradition?<sup>9</sup>

The answer to the question of anti-black black aesthetics lies in the formulation of the enterprise and of the question itself. If the aim of the work is to explore the aesthetic dimensions of black life, then a precondition of the work is taking black life seriously. Griffith clearly did not do this. His aim was to explore the aesthetic properties (and political uses) of anti-black stereotypes, and his work was, as a result, not only *not* about black life at all but actively damaging to the prospect of black survival.

The thought of an anti-black black aesthetic might seem to derive some warrant from the related but ultimately distinguishable possibility of an *anti-racialist* black aesthetic. There are various routes to this possibility, each running through one of the core problem-spaces of the tradition. Questions about racial authenticity can lead to skepticism about race as such, as can questions about the value and limits of racial solidarity

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9 Aaron Meskin formulated the version of this question that I've found most challenging. Aaron Meskin, "What is Black Aesthetics," unpublished manuscript, delivered at the annual meeting of the American Society for Aesthetics, November 17, 2016.

(think *Do the Right Thing*, directed by Spike Lee (1989)) and about the inevitable hybridity and multiplicity of racial phenomena in a world of migration, mobility, and mixture (think of Twain's *Pudd'nhead Wilson* (1894), and yes, that puts Twain in the tradition). But these examples just show that a serious examination of key dynamics in black life can lead one to doubt the utility of race-thinking. This is a far cry from finding that a serious commitment to white supremacy leads one to doubt, question, or deny the *value of the lives of people racialized as black*. So perhaps we can take a cue from contemporary activists in answering the question of anti-black black aesthetics: black lives have to matter for an engagement to count as black aesthetics. If they do not, then it does not.

The invocation of Mark Twain and D.W. Griffith above, and of Flannery O'Connor some time ago, leads to a second question: should black identity not be a condition of participation in the tradition? Can Twain and O'Connor really count, while Griffith loses out not on principle but just because of the nature of his work? Should there not be a racial identity prerequisite for black aestheticians?

The first thing to do with respect to the possibility of an identity test for participation in the tradition is detach persons from work products. I named three individuals above because their status as individuals helped with ease of exposition and with presenting the problem in an accessible form. But it is one thing to ask what kind of person O'Connor is, and a very different thing to ask whether this person has, with respect to any particular piece or body of work, advanced or retarded the conversation of black aesthetics. One is a question of character, to which aesthetic theory and criticism is connected in ways that may be distant and that are surely complicated. The other, though, is a question of evaluating works or a pattern of practice, and is more squarely a matter for critical evaluation.

With this clarification in place, the question of a racial identity prereq-

uisite gets even easier to answer. On my account, racial identity is not a condition of participation in the tradition, nor should it be. People of all races can participate in the work of black aesthetics, though works like *Open Casket* show the perils that attend this possibility. People of all races in fact *have* participated in the circuits of interaction and exchange that encouraged me to approach black aesthetics as a tradition, as we can see from the history of the Harlem Renaissance and of musical idioms like blues, jazz, rhythm and blues, and hip-hop. The relationships between creative traditions and the black aesthetic tradition are complicated, not least because the putatively racial coding of these and other traditions—like rock and country music—is itself a tool and product of racial formation processes (Hughes 2015). But the story of how these different traditions intersect and overlap is too long to take up here. Suffice it to say that the tradition of black aesthetics has to account for people like Eminem, Stevie Ray Vaughan, the Muscle Shoals studio musicians, and Charlotte Osgood Mason. Whatever pressures seem to recommend keeping these people out can be accommodated in other ways, like attending with care to the ethical questions about how a performer's relationship to the mechanisms of cultural production affects the performer's remunerative prospects.

The refusal to make black identity a necessary condition for participating in the tradition opens onto one more point worth making in this context. Black aesthetics need not be a parochially racial project in a way that screens off intersectional considerations. The idea is not that race is the deepest or most important aspect of human affairs, just that it is *one of several* important aspects. And the only way to explore its importance properly is to examine its relationships to other social identity categories. Examinations like these, reflecting variations on Stuart Hall's famous line about race being "the modality in which class is lived," (1980) in fact constitute one of the tradition's problem-spaces, with works like Barry Jenkin's *Moonlight* (2016) and Ava DuVernay's *Queen Sugar* (2016) series at its heart.

## 8 Black Reconstruction, *Black Panther*

There are other questions to ask about this approach to black aesthetics. But the space I have left can accommodate only one more, and it is a question that lies in the background of this entire essay. What does a reconstructionist black aesthetic look like now? I have argued that this cultural moment in the US, with its open revival of redemptionist politics, puts the prospect of reconstruction on the table in a way that we have not seen in several decades. So what kind of culture work is engaging with this moment, animated by the imperatives and preoccupations of the black aesthetic tradition?

I will answer this question by gesturing at one hopefully instructive case. I do not propose to work through all the salient details and interesting questions that distinguish this case. I offer it here as a gesture at the kind of work that black aesthetic imperatives call forth today, and at the kind of impact this work can have.

On 16 February 2018, a Walt Disney film called *Black Panther* went into wide release in the US. The film was an episode in the “Marvel Cinematic Universe” (MCU) franchise, which brings to the big screen certain characters and stories from Marvel Comics. This film chronicles the exploits of T’Challa, leader of the fictional African kingdom of Wakanda. T’Challa is also, of course, a superhero, imbued, like all of Wakanda’s rulers, with the power and the weapons to protect his subjects. Wakanda is a technologically advanced, multi-ethnic state that escaped the ravages of colonialism by dint of a muscular and strategic isolationism. The burden of the narrative is to determine the proper disposition of Wakanda’s remarkable technological resources. Should they be kept hidden, obscured by the façade of a backward nation dominated, as one character says, by sheep and goat herders? Should they be given over to the power-mad, black nationalist mercenary Killmonger (T’Challa’s long-lost cousin, it turns out), who means to give black people worldwide the means to protect themselves from their enemies?

Or should they be slowly integrated into a kind of new world order, as T'Challa methodically leads Wakanda out of its isolation?

*Black Panther* was a cultural and a business breakthrough. It had the distinction of being the only MCU film with a black person in the lead role, and one of the very few big-budget films ever with a black director (Oscar-nominated director Ryan Coogler) and significantly black crew. It quickly earned more at the domestic box office than any previous superhero movie, and more than all but two other movies of any kind.

The film achieved this level of success because it spoke to a long-simmering demand for cinematic experiences that foreground black characters and life-worlds. Screenings of the film quickly became known for an unusually ludic, playfully Afrocentric atmosphere, sometimes even involving pop-up markets and performance spaces providing street food and African-inspired music at theatres effectively commandeered by groups of black moviegoers.<sup>10</sup> This atmosphere reflected the multimodal appeal of the production. The narrative of course spoke with unusual directness to black life, and made the unusual move of putting black characters at the center of the action. But the film's production design, under the direction of an African American woman named Hannah Beachler, also signaled an abiding interest in black life. A variety of African-inspired stylistic references, from flying ships modeled on central African masks to clothing modeled on west African textile arts, embodied a commitment to a kind of Afro-futurist sensibility. In this spirit, many commentators noted that the final appearance of T'Challa's airship seemed to echo the appearance of the "mothership" in the iconic recordings and performances of the musical group, Parliament-Funkadelic.

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10 I don't know of any scholarly studies of this phenomenon yet, but an internet search will turn up plenty of popular references to, among other things, African American groups sponsoring watch parties, taking schoolchildren *en masse* to screenings at theatres rented for this purpose, and otherwise building activities around this film. See Bolekaja (2018).

*Black Panther* explores several of the core problem-spaces of the black aesthetic tradition. For example, a sophisticated cloaking technology makes Wakanda, or the most interesting bits of it, quite literally invisible to the outside world, a conceit that nicely invokes and inverts Ellison's problematic of racialized erasure. Similarly, what I described above as "African-inspired" design elements raise in a rather stark form—and, I would argue, a fairly sophisticated form—the same questions of authenticity that await every attempt to turn the products of particular African cultures into something broadly "African" for primarily non-African consumers. Think here of the way strip woven fabrics (primarily) from the Akan people—Kente—made their way around the world, going from complicated bearers of recondite local meanings to empty silk-screened patterns emblazoned on American t-shirts and hats.

For current purposes, though, the film's most interesting exploration of a core theme from the black aesthetic tradition is its engagement with the question of reconstruction. One way to read the film is as a staged encounter, like a Platonic dialogue, between three broad approaches to the prospect of undoing the legacies of white supremacy. T'Challa begins the film convinced (or uncritically accepting) of his father's isolationism, which seems to follow from a basic assumption that it is either impossible or not worth the trouble to redeem a world that was once and still may be resolutely anti-black. (The point is probably that it is not worth the trouble, since the category of blackness does not mean much to either of them at the start.) His mercenary cousin, by contrast, agrees that the forces of anti-blackness are irredeemable, but insists that the proper response involves meeting force with force. The world can be reconstructed, but by fire and blood. Finally, T'Challa emerges from his struggle with Killmonger to find a middle ground: he commits himself to a kind of Afro-futurist vision for (piecemeal) racial uplift, whereby the king of Wakanda, playing the part of an African Tony Stark or Bruce Wayne, contributes his riches and his technology to the task of

reconstructing the communities that a world structured in racial dominance has left behind. (T'Challa never quite endorses his cousin's racialized assignment of blame for black suffering; in this way he models the vaguely virtuous intentions appropriate to the hero in a mass culture entertainment.)

## 9 Conclusion: “Here and now and in your own hands”

If we think of philosophical aesthetics as a craft that one hones in the context of real-world institutions and relationships, we can come to see the philosophical depth and significance of phenomena that might otherwise strike us as frivolous or irrelevant. W.E.B. Du Bois had something like this in mind when he closed his “Criteria of Negro Art” address by insisting on the aesthetic significance of everyday black lives. On his way to urging “Negro” culture workers to take black life seriously as a subject and “face our own past as a people,” he said this:

We are remembering that the romance of the world did not die and lie forgotten in the Middle Age[s]; that if you want romance to deal with you must have it here and now and in your own hands.

I once knew a man and woman. They had two children, a daughter who was white and a daughter who was brown; the daughter who was white married a white man; and when her wedding was preparing the daughter who was brown prepared to go and celebrate. But the mother said, “No!” and the brown daughter went into her room and turned on the gas and died. Do you want Greek tragedy swifter than that? (Du Bois 1926, § 12-13)

After two more stories in this spirit, he presses the point home:

Such is the true and stirring stuff of which Romance is born and from this stuff come the stirrings of men [sic] who are beginning

to remember that this kind of material is theirs; and this vital life of their own kind is beckoning them on. (Du Bois 1926, § 16)

Here as elsewhere, Du Bois's gender politics are woven deeply into his argument. But this fact should deepen the point at issue here. Critical intellectual work must involve an ongoing struggle to widen the circle of interlocutors, to create the conditions under which an epistemology of resistance can push back against the epistemology of ignorance. Du Bois actively worked to obscure the influence of black women like Jessie Fauset and Anna Julia Cooper on his work, and to limit their influence elsewhere. But we can take his words as a provocation to avoid his mistake.

What is the object of writing an aesthetic of reconstruction? One objective is to widen the circle of interlocutors. This might inspire us to build a shared social space, a community of inquiry that is more inviting to people who are in conversation with Fred Moten, Michele Wallace, Ryan Coogler, and Hannah Beachler. It can remind philosophical aestheticians that the things that interest these people can count as part of the "vital life of their own kind". It widens the scope of our studies, enriches our reflections, and increases and clarifies our relevance to the world around us. This kind of material is *ours*, and the vital life of critical race aesthetics is beckoning us on.

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# SOUTHERN BLACK WOMEN'S CANEBRAKE GARDENS

*Responding to Taylor's Call for Aesthetic Reconstruction*

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*In this response, I suggest that Black southern women in the U.S. have always been central to the “reconstruction” that Taylor identifies as a central theme of Black aesthetics. Building on his allusions to Alice Walker and Jean Toomer, I explore Walker’s tearful response (in *In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens: Womanist Prose* (1983) to Toomer’s *Cane* (2011). Walker identifies their mothers’ and grandmothers’ informal arts of storytelling and gardening as the hidden roots of both her and Toomer’s work. I suggest that Walker’s tears function to water her mother’s (and othermothers’) gardens, thereby sustaining southern Black women’s foundational work in reconstruction. Through telling their stories and planting gardens, along with crafting meals, designing clothes, and designing and decorating homes, southern Black women have always been necessary to Black aesthetics—filling worlds with aesthetically-rich and energetic artworks that Black formal artists such as Walker channel and transfigure into their formal artistic productions.*

## 1 Introduction: Black Women's Self-Representations in Popular Culture

From the first time I heard Paul C. Taylor speak, what I admired most was his willingness to engage with aesthetic self-representations by women of colour in popular culture. As a then-graduate student, what stuck with me was a playful and humorous remark he made about his research on self-representation in internet models of colour. And now, in Taylor's present article, what sticks out most are his references to Ana DuVernay and her television series *Queen Sugar* (on the Oprah Network, 2016-Present), featuring two Black sisters who inherit their father's sugarcane farm in Louisiana. That series also resonates, moreover, with two major Black artworks that similarly foreground both women and the Deep South, and to which Taylor pays tribute, namely Jean Toomer's *Cane* (2011) and Alice Walker's *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose* (1983).<sup>1</sup> This is in part because *Cane* is set in the Deep South of rural Georgia, where Walker was born and raised.

This is precisely what moved me to attempt to a response to Taylor's timely call, picking up on two notes I hear, not just in this article, but in his work generally. To wit, a specific gender and region—women and the Deep South—have always constituted the ground floor of Black aesthetic reconstruction, albeit largely invisibly (another central theme in Taylor's Black aesthetics) to most who live elsewhere or are embodied differently. To flesh out this response, I will retrace Walker's account, in *Gardens*, of Toomer's *Cane*, its effect on her, and the largely-invisible roots that she identifies in both his work and hers: namely, the informal arts of southern Black women, especially storytelling and gardening. More precisely, Walker repeatedly emphasizes that she cries in response to formal Black artworks such as *Cane*, which she interprets as improvisations on the informal Black artworks of the formal artists' mothers, grandmothers, and othermothers. In this way, such works preserve

1 Hereafter *Gardens*.

these otherwise-erased southern Black women's courage.

By 'informal artworks' here, I mean aesthetically-invested productions (including gardening, cooking at home, sewing, and quilting) that are not typically identified (by, for example, philosophers of art) as belonging to formal artistic traditions. Such productions deserve to be called 'artworks' in part because they are mindful creations, infused with aesthetic values, expressing their creators' inwardness, and belonging to traditions that are transmitted from masters to novices and that are at least unconsciously modified and transformed thereby. Moreover, such productions—when stolen from the historical and geographical edges of colonial empires—have long been identified as artworks, and proudly displayed at the prestigious museums at the centre of the art-world. When created within those empires, however, such productions are typically excluded from the pantheon of 'the arts'.

The reason for this exclusion, arguably, is that these productions are the work of members of disempowered groups whose work in general (and indeed whose very life and being) receives on average very little respect from the surrounding society. Put more simply, if a work is created mainly by women, especially Black women, and most especially southern Black women, then many gatekeepers of the artworld (including philosophers of art) assume that the work could not possess the seriousness and dignity they associate with 'art'. And the 'southern' part of this phrase tracks the institutional conservatism of the South, which still pressures women to work exclusively as homemakers and mothers, extorting as much unpaid labour from them as possible while violently restricting their outlets for potentially lucrative and recognized artistic work outside their homes.

Returning to my thesis, southern Black women tell stories to future Black formal artists, mostly men and some women; and when a southern Black woman formal artist like Walker recognizes those hidden origins in a given southern Black woman's artwork—like "the stories

told to Toomer by his grandmother, she of the ‘dark blood’ to whom the book is dedicated” (1983, 65)—then she cries. And these tears, finally, water the still-observed roots of subsequent women’s literal and figurative gardens. This, I suggest, is the heart, devalued by misogyny and regional prejudice, of Taylor’s Black aesthetic reconstruction, like the canebrake farms of DuVernay’s *Queen Sugar* (2016-Present).

What, the reader might wonder, does ‘reconstruction’ mean here, for me and for Taylor? Though unable to locate a clear definition in his essay for the broader philosophical concept (as opposed to the political era), the closest thing I can find there is the following quote: “The basic reconstructionist impulse,” Taylor writes, is “aimed at rooting out the conditions for the persistence of white supremacist and anti-democratic practices” (2020, 18). This tells us what reconstruction wants to do, and what it negates, but it does not capture positively what it is. So, I suggest we turn to the powers of language for a moment.

Reconstruction’s root, obviously, is ‘construction’, which in philosophy is most often presented (though usually implicitly) in formal terms, as in an architect’s placement of lines and shapes in abstract graphing space. Sometimes, however, ‘construction’ is instead articulated in philosophy in terms of the raw materials that are gathered and reformed into these formal designs. To raise the point of a neglected alternative meaning—the one that is, in fact, the dominant sense in my own Deep South home state—‘construction’ can also mean the gruelling manual labour that is still performed disproportionately in the US by people of colour.

It is this third sense that I will try to sing in response to Taylor, by considering who exactly is doing the necessary work of transforming raw materials into the shapely edifices of racial justice. I wish to consider those who are reconstructing the gardens and canebrake fields of Black aesthetics; and they are, disproportionately, anonymous southern Black informal women artists (such as Toomer’s grandmother and Walker’s mother). To help raise the visibility of these vital reconstructions, shin-

ing a bit of light on their songs, I now turn in my second section to an analysis, by the foremost tender of these gardens today, of one of the gardens' brightest illuminators.

## 2 Walker on the Southern Black Women of Toomer's *Cane*

In an interview collected in *Gardens*, Walker praises *Cane* so highly that the word 'praise' begins to seem inadequate:

I did not read *Cane* until 1967, but it has been reverberating in me to an astonishing degree. *I love it passionately*; could not possibly exist without it. *Cane* and *Their Eyes Were Watching God* are probably my favorite [sic] books by black American writers (Walker 1983, 259, her emphasis).

Anyone familiar with Walker's text knows that there is no one higher in her personal pantheon than Zora Neale Hurston, so for *Cane* to be paired with Hurston's masterpiece, already constitutes an enormous affirmation. But she goes further here. She "could not possibly exist without it".

As Walker reveals a bit earlier in the same interview, she is not only this vulnerable with her interviewer on the subject of *Cane*. Apparently, she is even more vulnerable on that subject in the classroom with her students, and on a regular basis. She describes this experience as follows:

It is clear from the first line of *Cane* that Jean Toomer is a poet, blessed with a soul that is surprised by nothing. It is not unusual to weep when reading [Gwendolyn] Brooks, just as when reading Toomer's *Song of the Sun* it is not unusual to comprehend—in a flash—what a dozen books on black history fail to illuminate. I have embarrassed my classes occasionally by standing in front of them in tears as Toomer's poem about "some genius from the South" flew through my body like a swarm of golden butterflies on their way toward a destructive sun. Like [W. E. B.] Du Bois,

Toomer was capable of comprehending the black soul. It is not “soul” that *can* become a cliché, but something to be illuminated rather than explained (Walker 1983, 258, her emphasis).

The most germane point from this passage, vis-à-vis Taylor’s essay, is Walker’s deployment of “the black soul”. Taylor uses exactly this phrase to identify a problematic strategy, historically, for coalescing a Black aesthetic canon (2020, 31). Problematic, he explains, because such strategies “raise worries about invidious essentialism” (ibid).

Though Taylor’s point is of course well-taken, the fact that Walker also talks in this same quoted passage about Du Bois—author of *The Souls of Black Folk* (1996), whom Taylor praises similarly highly—suggests that what Walker is describing with “soul” is less likely to be “invidious essentialism” (ibid). More precisely, whatever this “soul” is for Walker, she makes it clear that it would be a “category mistake” to even attempt to render it clichéd, in part because (unlike a cliché) her soul is inherently inexplicable (albeit “comprehensible”) (1983, 258). Instead, this soul is illuminable, and apparently *Cane* throws onto it one adequate light. This raises the question, then: What must something be to be non-understandable but comprehensible in the light? It appears one cannot (as it were) “stand under” Walker’s Black soul, so it seems to have no foundation. What one *can* do, however, as *Cane* does, is put one’s arms around that soul, provided there is enough light, as indeed there is thanks to *Cane*—comparable, for Walker, to the flight of a swarm of golden butterflies through her body as they prepare to perish in the sun.

It sounds like it is time, in search of further illumination, for more poetry. In *Cane*’s poem, *Song of the Sun*, to which Walker alludes by name in the above quote, Toomer writes that, “though the sun is setting on / A song-lit race of slaves, it has not set” (Toomer 2011, 11). Note the twin sources of illumination here: the sun and song. There is a perpetual setting of the star and, by implication, an equally perpetual rising of Black music. *Cane*’s subsequent poem, *Georgia Dusk* (which contains

the line that Walker references, “some genius of the South”), begins on a similar note (Toomer 2011, 19). With the “setting sun,” the sky is apparently “too indolent to hold / A lengthened tournament for flashing gold” (ibid). Instead, the sky “passively darkens for the night’s barbecue” during which feast the abovementioned Southern “genius” is “making folks-songs from soul sounds” (ibid). In this poem, too, therefore, the literal light fades, creating a problematic absence for the Black community beneath it; the absence is then addressed by the figurative light of song, which speeds from Black souls to their own rescue, and survival till the next sun.

Returning to the above block quote, its most important point vis-à-vis my reply to Taylor is Walker’s freely admitting to having wept openly while rereading *Cane* to her students (for the presumably umpteenth time). In addition to registering the power and truth of Toomer’s work (in Taylor’s terms, its reconstructive power), Walker’s tears also constitute a significant motif in her collection, both within the text and in her readers’ responses (mine included). “Many women wept, they later told me, as I read it” Walker relates, in reference to the speech version of *Gardens’* titular essay, delivered at a 1973 symposium at Radcliff College (Walker 1983, 316).

A second instance of this motif can be found in Walker’s subsequent description of the same conference. Sitting in the audience with her friend, the celebrated poet and activist June Jordan, Walker felt shocked that there “was *no* response whatsoever” from the rest of the audience “to the increased suicide rate among young women of colour” (which a speaker mentioned) (Walker 1983, 316-317). “I burst,” Walker writes of her immediate response,

into the loudest tears I’ve ever shed. And though I soon dried my face, I didn’t stop crying inside for...Maybe I haven’t stopped crying yet. But that’s okay; what I’m crying for is worth it (Walker 1983, 317).

Seeing her tears, some of the other women at the conference chastised Walker, admonishing her that she was “trying to ‘carry’ my mother”, even though (in their view) “the weight is too heavy” (Walker 1983, 318). Her friend Jordan, however, reassured her with a question: “But why shouldn’t you carry your mother; she carried you didn’t she?” (1983, 319). Remembering this challenge, Walker summarizes it as “perfection in a short response” (1983, 319). Though it is relatively clear what motivated the tears in this instance, in the case of *Cane* a closer reading of Toomer’s text might help, also to illuminate the connection between the tears and the gardens.

### 3 Southern Black Women as Reconstruction-Artists in *Cane*

The two passages in *Cane* that Walker references in the above block quote belong to a larger motif in Toomer’s text, in which I locate its strongest tone of Taylor’s reconstruction. In this motif, Black women, sometimes metaphorized as buildings, literally or figuratively sing, in response to the fading sun or rising moon. The effect of said songs is to protect and sustain the Black world. In short, Black women compensate for the fading visual light with the auditory light of their soul-songs. The first instance of this motif, found in the short story *Carma* is as follows:

Dusk takes the polish from the rails. Lights twinkle in scattered houses. From far away, a sad strong song. Pungent and composite, the smell of farmyards is the fragrance of the woman. She does not sing; her body is a song (Toomer 2011, 15).

Here the sun fades, named as “dusk,” in response to which the houses put forth replacement lights, which are soon accompanied by the figurative song of a Black woman engaged in the constructive work of tending her farm.

The second instance of this motif is found in the story *Blood-Burning Moon* which begins as follows: “Up from the dusk the full moon came.

Glowing like a fired pine-knot, it illuminated the great door and soft showered the Negro shanties...Negro women improvised songs against its spell" (Toomer 2011, 39). Shortly thereafter, Toomer elaborates on this event. "The women sang lustily at the rising moon," he repeats, adding that "their songs were cotton-wads to stop their ears" (2011, 40). Again, the Black women's song is a response, in this case to the noisy call of dogs, chickens and roosters on the farm "as if heralding some weird dawn or awakening" (ibid). This weird dawn refers to the moon's rising, which Toomer describes at the story's end as "an evil thing, an omen" to which the farm animals are responding in fear, and which is overcome by the song of brave southern Black women (2011, 49).

The third instance of this motif is found in the story *Theater*. Its metaphorizing of women as buildings is not only stated explicitly, but implicitly affirmed by the fact that the houses are described as singing (like the literal women in the first two instances of the motif). Moreover, they are singing for a similar goal. The passage reads as follows:

Dorris dances. She forgets her tricks. She dances. Glorious songs are the muscles of her limbs. And her singing is of canebrake loves and mangrove feastings. The walls press in, singing. Flesh of a throbbing body, they press close to John and Dorris. They close them in. John's heart beats tensely against her dancing body. Walls press his mind within his heart. And then, the shaft of light goes out the window high above him (Toomer 2011, 71).

As with the first instance, a different part of the Black woman's body (other than her voice) is described as doing the singing (in this case, that part is her musculature). And this singing is linked directly to the constructive work of the sugarcane fields. Then, as the dancing woman is reconstructed into a building, she emits a light (like that of the second instance of the motif) in the form of song.

The fourth instance of the motif, from the story *Box Seat*, elaborates on

Toomer's woman-building metaphor. The story's first sentence claims that "Houses are shy girls whose eyes shine reticently upon the dusk body of the street," in response to which metaphorical shining "dark swaying forms of Negroes are street songs that woo virginal houses" (which, as the next sentence clarifies, is a specific young Black man) (Toomer 2011, 76). As in the previous three instances of the motif, the time in question is again dusk; and again, a different aspect of a southern Black woman's body responds to the fading sunlight with her own figurative light, which inspires song.<sup>2</sup>

To clarify, as promised, the relationship between this motif in *Cane* and Walker's reconstructed *Gardens*, I now conclude this penultimate section with a look at her speech-turned-essay, *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens* (1973). For starters, its second sentence begins with Toomer. "When the poet Jean Toomer walked through the South in the early twenties, he discovered a curious thing: black women whose spirituality was so intense, so deep, so *unconscious*, that they were themselves unaware of the richness they held" (Walker 1983, 232). Some of them, Walker continues "were our mothers and grandmothers," who "seemed to Jean Toomer: exquisite butterflies trapped in an evil honey" (1983, 232). For Walker, though, they were "artists; driven to a numb and bleeding madness by the springs of creativity in them for which there was no release. Creators, who lived lives of spiritual waste" then "died with their real gifts stifled within them" (1983, 233). But part of their gifts survived. Walker's mother, for example,

made all the clothes we wore, even my brother's overalls. She made all the towels and sheets we used. She spent the summers

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<sup>2</sup> The final instance of this motif, from the final novella, entitled *Kabnis*, modifies the motif slightly, in the following opening sentence to section 5: "Night, soft belly of a pregnant Negress, throbs evenly against the torso of the South" (Toomer 2011, 142). That night "throbs a womb-song to the South," and "set" the "cane-fields" "singing" (2011, 142). Meanwhile, "White paint on the wealthier houses has the chill blue glitter of distant stars" (2011, 142).

canning vegetables and fruits. She spent the winter evening making quilts enough to cover all our beds (Walker 1983, 238).

These subaltern arts, sewing, culinary arts, and quilting, are key elements of many southern Black women's stifled and cramped artistry. Though Walker's mother never achieved recognition for this buried artistry, and though "no song or poem will bear my mother's name" nevertheless "so many of the stories that I write, that we all write, are my mother's stories" (Walker 1983, 240).

Her mother's greatest art was even more directly impactful. She "adorned with flowers", Walker remembers of her mother, "whatever shabby house we were forced to live in" (Walker 1983, 241). She planted "ambitious gardens—and still does—with over fifty different varieties of plants that bloom profusely from early March until late November" (1983, 241). In fact, whatever "she planted grew as if by magic, and her fame as a grower of flowers spread over three counties" (1983, 241). Walker observes fondly that "it is only when my mother is working in her flowers that she is radiant, almost to the point of being invisible—except as Creator: hand and eye" (1983, 241). This, finally, is where the link lies: "Guided by the heritage of a love of beauty and a respect for strength," Walker summarizes, "in search of my mother's garden, I found my own" (1983, 243). As she notes elsewhere in this collection, "I have, myself, always required an absolutely quiet and private place to work (preferably with a view of a garden)" (1983, 70). This, it seems to me, is the oft-hidden heart of Black aesthetic reconstruction, in southern Black women's canebrake gardens.

#### 4 Conclusion

Taylor, in my view, also deserves the praise that Walker lavishes on Toomer, namely that he "is both feminine and masculine in his perceptions, unlike most black male writers. He loved women" (Walker 1983, 259). Now, of course, it is not enough to simply love women, as

love can easily be accompanied by abuse and neglect (for which Taylor rightly criticizes Du Bois). But such loving is a good start, and a trait that Walker also justifiably ascribes to herself. In fact, this trait is so important to her self-perception that she plants it in the subtitle of *Gardens*, namely “Womanist Prose”. In the book’s front matter, the second of four definitions she provides for “womanist” is “a woman who loves other women, sexually and/or nonsexually”, and who “values tears as a natural counterbalance of laughter” (1983, xi). Recognizing these loving gifts in Taylor, I am inspired by, and offer this humble response to, his beautiful reconstructive call.

It seems only right, though, to close my response to Taylor with a reminder that his call is simultaneously a response to the call of (formal) Black artists in this reconstructive tradition. And on the view presented here, those artists’ call, in turn, is also a response to the implicit call of informal Black artists such as the southern Black mothers and othermothers weaving tales and kneading earth. When Walker formally acknowledges her mother’s artistry, she is not merely deigning to note something objectively inferior to her own work. On the contrary, Walker is an artist, working in an array of formal genres, giving proper citational respect to a fellow artist working in an array of more foundational genres. The vegetables in the garden, artfully formed and transformed, sustain Black bodies. The stories in the community, artfully formed and transformed for each child, sustain Black heart-minds. There would be no Black aesthetics of reconstruction, and indeed no Black formal artists, without the unjustly-obscured works of the master artists who are southern Black women.

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# BLACK “RECONSTRUCTION”; OR THE AFROCENTRIC HOME REPAIR MANUAL

*Philosophical Reflections on Paul C. Taylor’s “Black Reconstruction in Aesthetics”*

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*Paul C. Taylor’s essay, *Black Reconstruction in Aesthetics*, is concerned with the relationship between language—in particular, what Taylor refers to as “terms”—and how we construct and live in the world. Following theorist Fred Moten, Taylor argues that “terms” are the “tools” through which we put ourselves and things into “play”. That is, “terms” help to shape how, when, and why we enter into social space with others. The “term” that Taylor is concerned with is “reconstruction”. In particular, Taylor is concerned with how philosopher John Dewey utilizes the “term”, and the social space enacted through his usage. Taylor queries what is missing in Dewey’s “term”—namely, “race” and the history of “racialization”—and what this might imply about the social space that Dewey’s “term” invites us to enter. Taylor utilizes “reconstruction” to “signal a determination to make an argument and an intervention”, not only in Dewey’s philosophical project, but in his own project of “reconstructing philosophy” through Black aesthetics. In a similar fashion, this essay puts into “play” Taylor’s analysis of Dewey’s usage of “reconstruction” to think about the possible role of Black aesthetics in “reconstructing philosophy”. It will be argued that while Taylor claims there to be a missing element in Dewey’s theorizing of “reconstruction” there is also a missing element in Taylor’s own analysis—namely “blackness”. It will be argued that beneath “race” and the history of “racialization” central to Taylor’s critique, “blackness” functions as an invisible “term” that at once “allow[s] you, or invite[s] you, or propel[s] you, or require[s] you, to enter into that social space”. In other words, as Taylor’s essay is a meditation on making “arguments across contexts” with “reconstruction” as its test case, this essay is a meditation on the transcendental condition for Taylor’s meditation, with “blackness” as its central organizing loci.*

That night I found myself hearing not only in time, but in space as well. I not only entered the music but *descended*, like Dante, into its depths. And *beneath* the swiftness of the hot tempo there was slower temp and a cave and I entered it and looked around and...heard someone shout: "Brothers and sisters, my text this morning is the 'Blackness of Blackness'.

— Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man* (1994)

## 1 Introduction

Paul C. Taylor begins his essay, *Black Reconstruction in Aesthetics* (2020), with a discussion of a Fred Moten interview where Moten lays out his theory of language and his theory of meaning through the idea of “play” (Taylor 2020, 11). Language is filled with “terms”, which Moten argues are like “props” (ibid) that can be used to create reality by affirming or subverting sets of relations. Like “a sword”, which can be used as a *sword*, but can also be used to “hit a ball”, terms, for Moten, can be picked up and moved around to create new “text” or new social spaces where we can think either apart or together (ibid). In other words, “terms” are the “tools” through which we put ourselves and things into “play” (ibid). As Moten instructs, “terms” “are important insofar as they allow you, or invite you, or propel you, or require you, to enter into that social space” (ibid). Meaning, they are that through which we join ourselves, things in the world and others into shared “social space” (ibid); they are, in short, living texts through which and in which we feel our own existences.

The “term” or the text in “play” in Taylor’s essay is “reconstruction”. Following Taylor’s concern for the social, historical, and aesthetic elements of the “term”; and, following Taylor’s example of putting philosopher John Dewey’s usage of the “concept [term] of reconstruction in play... to make an argument *and* an intervention” in thinking “US politics of reconstruction, the centrality of reconstructionist politics to the Black aesthetic tradition” (2020, 12), I want to take this opportunity to “playfully”, that is, philosophically, engage Taylor’s own analysis. In the way that Taylor suggests that Dewey’s usage of “term” underscores aestheticized racial elements of America’s reconstructionist past and present, I want to argue that Taylor’s own usage of the “term” is underscored by another, unfortold aestheticized “term”, namely “blackness”. In doing so, I will put into “play” one of Taylor’s chosen intellectual sources—the film *Black Panther* (2018)—to highlight the ways in which “blackness” underscores both Dewey and Taylor’s usage, and allows us “to enter into

that social space” that is America (Taylor 2020, 11).

## 2 The Blackness of Blackness

Taylor does not foreground “blackness” in his evaluation of the history of “reconstruction” in American aesthetics or politics; rather, for Taylor, “reconstruction” was and is concerned with “race”—that is, the history of US *racialization* and the concomitant aesthetic dimensions. As Taylor notes

“Reconstruction” here names the period that followed the US Civil War and the *process* of rebuilding and recreating the social and political order that the war had destroyed. This process took multiple forms. Some involved straightforward political and policy initiatives, backed by military and police power. Others involved cultural and ethical projects backed by softer and more dispersed forms of power and influence. (Taylor 2020, 16)

Taylor is interested in exploring the influence the cultural and ethical projects had on the more overt forms of political power. An example of this *process*, Taylor argues, is the 1915 film *Birth of Nation*. This film not only captured its historic moment, but, in a sense, helped to produce the moment itself, creating both the “terms” and the social space of exchange. But, Taylor argues, these racialized sentiments of “rebuilding and recreating” of which *Birth* is an exemplar, did not end in this historical period, but carried forward into our contemporary culture wars in, for example, the 2017 “Unite the Right” rally in Charlottesville, Virginia (2020, 15). In other words, Taylor suggests that while “reconstruction” as a political strategy might have come to an end, the social space of exchange out of which it emerged remained and was transformed into different aesthetic projects.

Central to Taylor’s essay is his confusion as to how philosopher John Dewey could have missed the racialized aesthetic elements of the

"term" "reconstruction" for an explicitly aesthetically neutral project. That is, as a philosopher, Taylor argues that Dewey should have understood the pervasiveness of racialized sentiments in the production of aesthetic, historical objects. To support his general confusion and concern, Taylor reminds us that Dewey was "one of the founders of the NAACP" leaving us to surmise that Dewey should have understood the racialized aspects of "reconstruction" (2020, 29). Taylor's challenge, then, is to make sense of the fact that Dewey *appears* to "remain utterly disinterested in the fact of white supremacy" in relation to "reconstruction" and "the racial politics that surround the term in US contexts" all-the-while "demanding a reconsideration of philosophy's relationship to social life" (2020, 22-23). That is, Taylor is left to reconcile the theoretical and practical question: If Dewey's philosophy is supposed to be engaged in social life, how could Dewey ignore the racialized social aspect of 'reconstruction'?

While I take Taylor to be implicitly asking here—to Dewey, the reader, and to himself—*why* "race" is seemingly invisible in Dewey's discussion of US politics and aesthetic production in the "term" itself, Dewey is not really the target of Taylor's essay. That is, Dewey is a proxy for a question to the academy, and to society at large. Taylor writes:

I mean to bracket the question of whether and how much this historical figure could have fought the constraints of his social environment. I am more interested in learning from his example and actively working to build more responsible constructed communities of inquiry. (Taylor, 2020, 27-28)

Given that this is the mystery at the heart of Taylor's essay, and the source of his deployment of "play" as a way of gesturing towards an answer, I am left wondering about what seems to be an implicit question at the heart of Taylor's essay, and his potential solution to the problem of constructing said communities. Namely: If the problem—

Dewey's problem—is the erasure of the racialized aspects of “terms”—in this case, “reconstruction”—and, thus, the erasure of the history and meaning of the social spaces enacted by the “term,” how does Taylor's solution—the enactment of *Black* aesthetics tradition—help to correct said blind spot?

It seems that Taylor is arguing that if Dewey “missed, or evaded, possible connections between his concrete sociohistorical context and his abstract call for social and philosophical reconstruction” (2020, 29) one possible solution is to reopen this world that Dewey inhabited. This seems to be Moten's role in Taylor's essay—to offer conceptual tools for understanding how worlds are formed, and, thus, can be reformed. But, it must be asked: How does *Black* aesthetics do this work of “interrogating and grappling with the institutional conditions under which dominant ways of thinking attain their influence” so necessary in the construction of shared spaces of exchange (2020, 28)? What is there about *Black* aesthetics that can do this—not only reopening, but bridging the parochial worlds of Dewey and philosophy in general to the more inclusive world of Taylor's imagination? It seems that Taylor is asking us to do a little more than “examine the work of philosophical aesthetics from a wider perspective that results from reconsidering the social dimensions of philosophy as a professional practice” (2020, 30) for he knows, and has acknowledged its more-than-likely outcomes in the case Dewey—he was in the right social space to challenge his perspective, keeping company with the NAACP, but “somehow this social intercourse failed to reach the core of his sense of himself as a philosopher” (2020, 29). If Dewey was unable or unwilling to inhabit another world, then Taylor must be arguing that there is something unique about *blackness* enacted through the theoretical apparatus of aesthetics, which gives it this capacity and strength for rejuvenating the “theoretical imagination” (2020, 27). But, what is it?

Taylor does not directly answer this question, but gives some hints as to

what he intends. He writes:

People who know nothing or nearly nothing about Black aesthetics...tend to take the name of the enterprise as an occasion for worry. It seems like shorthand for a view about some tight link between racial identity and the norms that govern the way Black people produce, evaluate, or engage aesthetic objects. (2020, 30)

What Taylor gives us is a quick history of Black aesthetics within the world, those "synchronic and transnational links connecting these same figures to their contemporaries around the world" (2020, 32). But, I am looking for more, and Taylor has more to give—it is a matter of putting the pieces together.

I gather that what Taylor is interested in is not so much "race" or even the context of "racialization" but that which conditions the context itself. As such, it is not "race" or the context of "racialization" that is missing, or is the key to creating a more inclusive community; and it is not an awareness of the context of race/racialization that could address "philosophy's relationship to social life", but that which conditions social life—the *something* that is located within the context, but is other *to it*; that which lies *underneath* the historical and aesthetic construct of "race". This is what *blackness* enacted through Black aesthetics offers Taylor.

This is what I take Taylor to be up to when he writes:

I have suggested that the way to think of (people like) Phyllis Wheatley, Suzanne Césaire, Derek Walcott, and Ava DuVernay as participants in a unitary enterprise is to root the enterprise in an ongoing series of thematically organized dialogic exchanges. What makes these exchanges part of a single enterprise is their shared interest in the *aesthetic dimensions of black life-worlds*, or of racialization-as-black. Invoking racial blackness in this way implicates the entire apparatus of modern racialization, since

that is *the context* in which this mode of racialization takes shape and does its work. And to invoke that apparatus is to invoke the conditions that make reconstruction necessary (2020, 35-36, my emphasis).

Here, it sounds like Taylor is at once arguing that blackness can be understood as a convergence of global dialogues of folks who share interests in the “aesthetic dimensions of black life-worlds” but also folks who, through their exchange, help to shape, curate, and construct it. It is here that Taylor’s ideas need further consideration. While it might appear that Taylor may be equivocating “blackness” and “racialization”, making it unclear what “context” he means, and what is providing the context, I want to argue that Taylor is not equivocating “terms”, rather he is arguing that beneath racialization is a “blackness” “navigating a racialized social landscape” (2020, 26).

To further explain what I think Taylor is up to, let me take us off-site for a moment. In his book, *Black is Beautiful: A Philosophy of Black Aesthetics* (2016), Taylor gives us a rich description of the blackness he intends. He begins chapter one with this scene setting: The year is a 1790. You are aboard a slaving vessel. You make it to port, and begin to empty the cargo, above and below deck. First the rum and the sugar, then, the people. Taylor writes, “They are dark-skinned and slender, and some give the appearance of being quite ill” (2016, 1). But, this is the glimpse of racialization—the transformation of man to chattel property—but not the glimpse Taylor intends. Taylor continues: “These new African Americans surprise in only one respect. They have stars in their hair. Not real stars, of course...[but] patches of hair shaped like stars and half-moons” (Ibid). This is the glimpse that I believe Taylor intends to give us. He announces these *new* persons, those newly minted African *Americans*, not as a temporal or geographical fact or the result of extant circumstances, but as the result of a “stylized barrier” of “aesthetic self-fashioning” marking the “complexity and relative incoherence” of “the histori-

cal dimensions of social phenomena” (2016, 3-4).

This is the part of Taylor’s argument that I want to reflect on for our purposes here. What Taylor describes as the *complexity* and *incoherence* of “social phenomena” is what undergirds what we see and experience as given reality—that which is neither given nor born, but “assembled” (Ibid).

Let us return to Taylor’s usage of Moten at the beginning of his essay, and to his usage of “terms”. They are “props,” Moten tells us, “if you pick them up you can move into...a new set of relations”. Taken with Taylor’s example above, it seems that Moten’s “toys” are akin to the “stars in their hair”: they are both moments of “assembling,” moments of revealing the complexity and incoherence of the world around you. For Moten, there are already words and meanings out there that we have to engage in as we construct our own meanings; for Taylor, there is the context of the slave ship and the New World that the enslaved encountered in altering their bodies. But, in each case, Taylor is telling us that “blackness” is that which navigates this reality to make of it something other than what it is. It is *this* that the black of Black aesthetics can offer to Dewey and to philosophy generally—a way of rendering the old world anew by simply reassembling the parts into a new language, and a new stylized barrier.

While this might give one a sense of hope—that blackness can save—Taylor is also keenly aware that though this “stylized barrier”, which creates the context in which and through which our understanding of these persons as “new”, as an aesthetic approximation and rearticulation of space and time, he also reminds us that if this moment is “read” incorrectly or not at all—as Dewey might have—it will register as insignificant, and, thus, invisible.

It is this glimpse into blackness that helps us understand Taylor’s analysis of *Black Panther* (2018) as “black” but not necessarily racialized. Taylor is engaging in the struggle inherent in the film, but also inherent in dealing with Africana philosophy and black aesthetic practice and

theory: understanding the circumstance without reducing the expressive form to the circumstance, and vice versa. That is to say, the internal struggle of the film—at once disentangled from chattel enslavement and the history of racialization, yet at the heart of it, being a film about the “blackness” of self-articulation—is also at play in Taylor’s own essay. This film also allows us to understand what Taylor means when he writes in his essay:

For black people in the modern world, navigating a racialized social landscape has meant, among other things, coming to grips with white supremacy. It means other things, too...which is in part to say, that...whiteness is not at the center of black life (2020, 36).

This film is critical to Taylor’s argument, but also for understanding what is motivating the argument itself: It captured the imagination of so many persons racialized throughout the world because it gave, like Moten’s “terms” and Taylor’s “assembly”, a way of seeing oneself as the grounding of one’s own world. This is what the *black* of Black aesthetics can do.

This is the condition that *Black Panther* (2018) alerts us to, and what Dewey might not have been able to capture in his understanding of “reconstruction”—that there was, in fact, a life-world undergirding a social reality he had rendered invisible. But, as Taylor alerts us to, it is also this element that must remain invisible so that Dewey and the discipline of philosophy—and white supremacy writ large—can operate within a certain historical and intellectual continuity: a seemingly racially neutral context in which one can deal with *just* aesthetic projects absent of social reality as a way of engaging by a specific form of disengagement. As such, it seems that what Dewey is missing, and does not understand about the “term” “reconstruction” is what is not allowing him or the discipline itself to enter into the space of Taylor’s *black*

"reassembly" of the "term".

### 3 Conclusion: Reconstructing the House of Being?

Taylor begins his essay with what seems to be an implicit question for the reader, and for Africana philosophy and black aesthetic theory and practice by way of Dewey and the profession of academic philosophy: "Can black aesthetics save, as it were, Dewey and philosophy in general from its lack inclusivity and open-mindedness" (6)? That is, can Black aesthetics as theory and practice, "an inherently ecumenical enterprise, *reaching across* disciplinary and demographic boundaries to build communities of practice and exchange" rescue Dewey and philosophy writ large from their own "parochialism" and "institutional inertia" that preclude them from registering "subjects that bear directly on the thoughts, lives, and practices of people racialized as black" (2020, 12)?

In my concluding remarks on this question, I would like to reflect on James Baldwin's seminal essay *Stranger in a Village* (1955) and *playfully* imagine Taylor as Baldwin, and Dewey as the villagers inhabiting a small village at the foot of the Alps. In his story, Baldwin tells us that it seems as if "no black man had ever set foot in this tiny Swiss village" (1955, 159). He becomes something of a spectacle, from the fascination over his hair—"some thought...the color of tar...the texture of wire, or the texture of cotton"—to the fascination over his skin—some questioned if when touching his skin, its colour would rub off (1955, 162). Yet, Baldwin came to discover that there *had* been a "custom in the village...of 'buying' African natives for the purpose of converting them to Christianity" and, that he, and the villagers lived in the shadow of this social practice (1955, 163). Within this context, it can be said that no African person ever really visited the village; it was only the enslaved that had set foot there, not people. And, as such, when Baldwin makes his opening claim, that "no black man had ever set foot in this tiny Swiss village" (1955, 159), his statement is both true and untrue. No villager *had* ever *seen* a black man, but villagers had seen those men racialized as black. As a result,

when Baldwin arrived in the village, he was met with *and* as a ghost of history—an already calcified set of “terms” already “assembled” into a given reality. Baldwin, then, came to the conclusion that James Joyce “is right about history being a nightmare—but it may be a nightmare from which no one *can* awaken” (1955, 162-163).

Baldwin’s absent presence in the village carried with(in) it the “terms” of this specific history—the collective entry points into social space, and into “sets of relations” and ways of “being together, thinking together” as Swiss villagers to which Baldwin did not belong (Taylor 2019, 5). But, for Baldwin it is more than a simple not belonging:

This village, even if it incomparably more remote and incredibly more primitive, is the West, the West onto which I have been so strangely grafted. These people cannot be, from the point of view of power, strangers anywhere in the world; they have made the modern world, in effect, even if they do not know it (1955, 165).

The nightmare, for Baldwin, was not the racism inherent in the modern West—from Dante to Shakespeare, Michelangelo, Aeschylus, Da Vinci, Rembrandt, Racine, the cathedral at Chartres...New York’s Empire State Building (1955, 165); it is *just* not that these spoke to the villagers in a way that they did not speak to him—this is a given that most black people recognize. The nightmare, for Baldwin, was these people *did not know* in what ways they participated in this larger cultural ethos and were shaped by it—and, if they did not know it, then what chances did they have, or Baldwin himself, from escaping it?

This is what Baldwin encountered as he walked through the village, and heard the children playfully called to him as “Neger”. Baldwin notes that they could not have known the “echoes this sound raises in me” (1955, 162). And, though they were:

brimming with good humor and the more daring swell with pride when I stop to speak with them. Just the same, there are days when I cannot pause and smile, when I have no heart to play with them; when, indeed, I mutter sourly to myself, exactly as I muttered on the streets of a city these children have never seen, when I was no bigger than these children are now: *Your mother was a nigger.* (1955, 162)

You see, in this moment of good will and the innocent gesturing of children, Baldwin realized that they were both trapped: that there was not a way out for them to reconstitute the world. Baldwin, the writer, the assembler of "terms" was giving himself—and his very life—to reordering reality, to *attempting* at "a new set of relations, a new way of being together, thinking together" (Taylor 2019, 5). And, yet, in this moment, he was thrown back on himself by the innocent gesturing of children. These children had no way of seeing the "term" as Baldwin saw it, no way of entering into the social space that it opened up *for* Baldwin and *in* Baldwin. And, as such, Baldwin concluded, "people are trapped in history and history is trapped in them" (1955, 163).

What does this have to do with Taylor's essay? And Dewey and the practice of academic philosophy? It seems that the struggle and the challenge that Taylor is facing with Dewey and the discipline is akin to the one Baldwin discovered—a kind of opacity that only reveals itself as an obstruction to real engagement. Throughout his essay, Taylor seems to be aware of this struggle of opacity—it is inherent in his selection of Moten as an intellectual interlocuter to his selection of examples from Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* (1994) and Marvel's *Black Panther* (2018).

By the end of his essay, though, the question that seemed implicit in the beginning—"can Dewey or philosophy in general be saved from parochialism?"—seems to have morphed into another question altogether: "*should* Africana philosophy and black aesthetic theory/practice attempt to do so?"

Taylor's estimation of Africana philosophical aesthetics' capacity "to inspire us to build a shared social space, a community of inquiry" to widen "the scope of our studies, enrich[s] our reflections, and increase and clarify our relevance to the world around us" (2020, 44) seems to have left Taylor straddling between blackness and race, between context and content, trying to hold them together as "an argument *and* an intervention" with the flourish of an Ellisonian infinite jest:

One night I accidentally bumped into a man, and perhaps because of the near darkness he saw me and called me an insulting name. I sprang at him, seized his coat lapels and demanded that he apologize. He was a tall blond man, and as my face came close to his he looked insolently out of his blue eyes and cursed me, his breath hot in my face as he struggled...he continued to curse and struggle, and I butted him again and again until he went down heavily, on his knees, profusely bleeding...And in my outrage I got out my knife and prepared to slit his throat, right there beneath the lamplight in the deserted street, holding him by the collar with one hand, and opening the knife with my teeth -- when it occurred to me that the man had not seen me, actually... It unnerved me... Then I was amused. Something in this man's thick head had sprung out and beaten him within an inch of his life. I began to laugh at this crazy discovery. *Would he have awakened at the point of death? Would Death himself have freed him for wakeful living?...*The next day I saw his picture in the Daily News, beneath a caption stating that he had been "mugged". Poor fool, poor blind fool, I thought with sincere compassion, mugged by an invisible man! (Ellison 1994, 4-5, my emphasis).

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# RECONSTRUCTION OR DECOLONISATION?

*Paul Taylor's 'Black Reconstruction in Ethics'*

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*Paul Taylor's essay 'Black Reconstruction in Aesthetics,' explores the questions of what reconstruction in aesthetics means. He asks how reconstruction, as a program for the post-bellum Southern United States, took up certain kinds of racially inclusive agendas even as it remained myopic to fundamental, seemingly insurmountable racial, racist, sentiments. I turn to his book to illuminate some of the myopias and seemingly intractable racisms that he seems to refer to in the essay, and then return to his essay, where he answers some of those questions. I argue that he is correct in his analysis. I turn to several critics' responses of the film *Moonlight*, which received rave reviews, to illustrate the point that there are similar sentiments in other current seemingly progressive contexts.*

Paul Taylor's essay 'Black Reconstruction in Aesthetics', like his book *Black is Beautiful* (2016), is a deliberate, luxurious, meditation on the normalized aesthetics of white supremacy. Taylor's essay explores the questions of what reconstruction in aesthetics means. He asks how reconstruction, as a program for the post-bellum Southern United States, took up certain kinds of racially inclusive agendas even as it remained myopic to fundamental, seemingly insurmountable racial, racist, sentiments. Taylor's work illuminates, on a number of fronts, the homogenisation, the invisibility, the reduction of Blackness to certain tropes, images, monodimensional readings of Black men and women, groups of Black men and women. In order to respond to his larger provocation in the essay, namely how reconstruction takes up certain kinds of racially inclusive agendas even as it accommodates other racist sentiments, I will first turn to his book to illuminate some of the myopias and seemingly intractable racisms that he seems to refer to in the essay, and then return to his essay, where he answers some of those questions.

On the first page of Taylor's book, quoting Mince and Price, he recounts the reception of Africans in 1790 Suriname. As he quotes: "The [new arrivals] have stars in their hair...have had their heads shaved, leaving patches of hair shaped like stars and half-moons" (Taylor 2016, 1). Taylor refers to this group as African Americans, following the practice of the authors who recount the story:

They mean to reject and correct certain received ideas about the pace at which Africans become Americans. They hold that distinctly African American cultures emerged quite early on, as newly enslaved Africans built wholly new practices and life-worlds out of the various old words... (Taylor 2016, 2).

Yet, for Taylor, the use of the term appears to reflect a subtle insistence that naming matters. Indeed, even as he recounts the captain's description of how they did it—"themselves...the one to the other, by the help

of a broken bottle and without soap”—one is immediately struck by the tone of the quote as the synecdoche for his book, *Black is Beautiful*: subtle, insistent, forceful, requiring you/me, the reader to see; to see what one has not seen, not been able to see despite her confident reliance on her racial awareness, complicated theoretical frameworks, and iconoclastic resistance to popular discussions of race or aesthetics; to see that often, the most subtle readings require a guided re-orientation that takes one step-by-step through one’s standard misreadings in order to, as it were, be able to come back out of the cave into light.

Taylor suggests that to approach race critically—to “insist on the political significance of race”—“is ...to highlight the robust relationship between race-thinking and the modern world’s basic political structures, from the growth of capitalism to the development of liberal ideas of freedom and democracy” (Taylor 2016, 7). So what does that look like in the context of, for example, a 1950s pre-civil rights imagination?

In response, Taylor gives a notable example, from Todd Haynes’s 2002 film *Far From Heaven*. He begins his second chapter, entitled ‘No Negroes in Connecticut: Seers, Seen’, with an excerpt from the screenplay that includes the first part of his title in the dialogue precisely at a moment the speaker of that line is in close proximity with two Black servants—Taylor points to the layers of invisibility, as he calls it, “the willfulness of racialized misperception, the refusal to see what is manifestly and indispensably present” (2016, 33). But in fact, as he points out, that scene lays bare who is hyperconspicuous, at least to us—the viewers—at precisely a moment of not being seen by those who are in even closer proximity.

Taylor argues that invisibility or hypervisibility is susceptible to deper-

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1 In the endnotes, Taylor describes exactly this tone in a quote from Sidney Mintz and Richard Price, the authors of the book *The Birth of African American Culture* (1976), from which he draws the example of first Africans: “It is hard to imagine a more impressive example of irrepressible cultural vitality than this image of slaves decorating one one’s hair in the midst of the most dehumanizing experiences in all of history” (Taylor 2016, 1).

sonalising treatment: from Level 1, that of stereotypes and stock figures; to Level 2: mirrors, fetishes, and deviants; to Level 3, anti-racist depersonalization (2016, 55-58). Indeed, from his charged and unflinching, astute analysis of the selection of the lighter-skinned Zoe Saldana to play the role of the forceful, blunt Nina Simone, to his discussion of Dave Chappelle, as a post-Black thinker for whom parodies of ‘racial Blackness’ allow “anti-Black and whitely sentiments to effectively expose themselves” (2016, 57). Yet, from his approach, I surmise that these levels appear at the level of the author, the director, the writer. Is the viewer complicit, or culpable, as well in understanding the production of anti-Black depersonalisation?

I wonder here if we might build on Taylor’s approach and consider the contrast of invisibility and hypervisibility in relation to the film *Moonlight*, which debuted in 2016 to rave reviews by film critics in the *New York Times* (Scott 2016), *The New Yorker* (Brody 2016), and elsewhere (see below)? The film, directed by Barry Jenkins, features a young Black man growing up in Miami during the 1980s. Chiron is, we learn eventually, gay. He is bullied by his male classmates, also Black; cherished and mentored by an adult Black man and his Black female partner; exists in a tenuous relationship with his mother; and through a series of events is eventually sent to prison and released some years later only to renew his acquaintance with an old classmate with whom he had a sexual encounter during his school years.

Every review by white reviewers praises the luminescence of the film, the quality of the light, the simple ‘authenticity’ of Chiron:

From Roger Ebert:

We can see the sad eyes of Chiron as a boy reflected in Chiron as a man... Jenkins [the director] deeply understands that it is human connection that forms us, that changes our trajectory and makes us who we are (2016).

From A.O. Scott in *the New York Times*:

*Moonlight* dwells on the dignity, beauty and terrible vulnerability of black bodies, on the existential and physical matter of black lives (2016).

From Richard Brody in *The New Yorker*:

Yet the subject of “Moonlight” isn’t Blackness or gayness; it’s one man whose many qualities include being Black and being gay—and whose own keen awareness of his place in the world, and of its implications, is the high-pressure, high-heat forge of his densely solid, relentlessly opaque, yet terrifyingly vulnerable and fragile character. *Blasting aside conventions, archetypes, and stereotypes*, Jenkins conjures the birth of an individual’s consciousness, the forging of a complex and multifaceted identity; he restores complexity to the very idea of identity, of the multiplicity as well as the singularity of being oneself—and he conveys his own primordial sense of wonder that art itself can conjure it [My emphasis] (2016).

Brody’s insistence that Jenkins has explosively pushed past stereotypes raises questions about Brody’s own reliance on those stereotypes. He unknowingly reveals his worldview when he says:

Without ever losing sight of the political phenomena that make Chiron who he is—including racism, homophobia, mass incarceration, government neglect, and poverty, in their immediate power as well as their long-term effects—Jenkins films them not as issues to be pinned to the screen in search of a rapid and ready response but as the crystallization of individual experience in all its impacted gain and ongoing struggle (Brody 2016).

Who is Brody informing of this backdrop? Presumably, most African

Americans are well-versed in the background conditions that produce the hypervisible Black man, an overdetermined rich, contoured character that is produced as well as perceived by an outside observer. Brody is writing, not to a general audience, but to a white elite audience—the consumers of ‘diversity’ and of ‘black cinema.’

By contrast, Hilton Als, also a staffwriter at *The New Yorker* who also decidedly loves the film, for very good reason, points to the story of Chiron as one version of his own story (2016). But the theme of his review is to focus, ultimately, on the found and fleeting subject of desire or love or intimacy: “Jenkins knows that in this study of black male closeness the point isn’t to show fucking; it’s to show the stops and starts, the hesitation, and the rush that comes when one black male body finds pleasure and something like liberation in another...” (Als 2016). While Als also acknowledges that Jenkins avoids ‘Negro hyperbole’ (those details that over-illuminate Blackness for the viewers), his review explores the minute details that amplifies its singularity. He describes, for example, a scene between Chiron and Juan, the drug dealer who takes on the role of the surrogate father: “Inside, in a dark, silent space, the kid stares at Juan, and Juan stares at the kid. There’s a kind of mirroring going on...” (Als 2016). Perhaps uncoincidentally, this more fine-tuned, granular assessment comes from a Black queer writer.

The possibility of nuances in the themes of the film seems muted despite the glowing comments of all the reviews. As two of the three white reviewers mention, the film has no white figures whatsoever (one Scott (2016) seemingly proudly confesses that he didn’t notice this fact until “a European acquaintance” named it for him on his third viewing). The same reviewer refers to the stereotyped character of Juan, as the drug dealer who acts unpredictably. All the white reviewers point to the shattering of stereotypes of the drug dealer—the person whose product ruins Chiron’s homelife even as the dealer himself becomes a paternal figure. Yet, I wonder whether the stereotypes are actually shattered, or if

the reviewers construct an archetype of certain tropes only in order to insist that they are shattered in their eyes.

For example, all of essays appear to miss—or neglect—the complex relationship between Chiron and Juan’s girlfriend, Teresa, or even between Teresa and Juan, or between Chiron and his mother. Is it possible to see the nuances of visibility when every one of these reviewers must resort to tropes to point to the ‘blasting’ of stereotypes? Is it whiteness, white supremacy, or masculinity—or those who are the beneficiaries of any of these—which govern the modes of visibility?

Even as they insist that stereotypes are being shattered, none of the reviewers, Black or white, comments on the symbolism of Chiron’s name: a reference to the Centaur in Greek mythology—half-man/half-horse—whose mother, Phyllira, is repulsed by her son and begs the gods to become something other than human in order to avoid having to see him. Chiron becomes known as a superior centaur who becomes a nurturing teacher who educates various famous figures: Asclepius, Achille, Perseus, and others.

In their excitement to show that they understand that Chiron is not a stereotype, the reviewers do not turn to his namesake to understand the subtleties of his character, or to ponder why his mother might have named him this—perhaps suggesting, yet again, their imperviousness to nuance in relation to Blackness, another stereotype which, in spite of their modestly self-congratulatory racial awareness, persists: Was it about the scarcity of time or is it about the murkier conditions of knowledge-production? Is it that Chiron appears to be a ‘Black’ name, rather than a name that invokes hopes, dreams, hidden knowledge that may reveal something new about this character’s existence, his relationship? They point to the vulnerability of Black men, their fragility, their susceptibility to brutality, which—as Taylor says at the very beginning of his book—are reflections of the political world in which the aesthetics are produced. Perhaps I’m asking too much of the reviewers—but

certainly, one would think that in *The New Yorker*, that scion of high culture, one of the reviewers, white or Black, might make reference to the symbolism of Chiron.

How do the director, the reader, the critic learn to see? To see what is hyperconspicuous, what is visible, what is invisible? After all, this is the challenge to classical aesthetics frameworks leveled by more contemporary philosophers of aesthetics, including Taylor and others such as Monique Roelofs whose framework of racial address unsettles classical aesthetics through a 'relational' framework (2005). Roelofs argues that the way in a subject is made visible or legible racially is through a complex framework that interrogates race and gender in relation to objects, people, and places. All of this to say, or perhaps this is the same question: How is invisibility/plurality/hypervisibility produced? Elsewhere, Roelofs has offered an important answer through her discussion of racial address and "aesthetic relationality":

A relational theory of the aesthetic postulates a layered texture of interconnections among aesthetic forms of signification and modalities of cultural positioning such as blackness, whiteness, gender, ethnicity, colonial background, and class. More generally it brings into view ways in which subjectivity, identity, and culture implicate aesthetic structures, and in which aesthetic structures implicate modalities of cultural positioning. At the same time, a theory of aesthetic relationality draws out possibilities for alternative constellations of aesthetic and racialized subjectivity. It exposes the aesthetic as a social technology that must be retooled, an art of constructing and deconstructing formations of whiteness and blackness, that reaches into the minutiae as well as the broader outlines of our racialized, gendered and classed lives (Roelofs 2005, 84-85).

Taylor acknowledges this perspective of Roelofs from the beginning of his book (2016, 21-22). At the time, I wondered if it might not be help-

ful—as fantastic a survey of Black aesthetics as his book is—to ‘cash’ one of the cheques that he has promised to write, by honing in on what the politics of the viewer ought to be in terms of seeing the nuances that he lays out for us. Thus, is it possible to be white, or brown, or a foreigner, and step outside of one’s frame in order to understand the ways in which visibility/hypervisibility is deployed, a kind of ‘critical aesthetic studies,’ along the lines of ‘critical media studies,’ as it were. How does one guard against the seduction of wanting to see nuance to the point of the failure—that is to the point of being myopic or tone-deaf to one’s inflated hopes, and instead moving past the conventionally anti-Black objection that Taylor sought to crack open?

I suppose another way to ask the question that emerged for me, chapter after beautiful chapter of Taylor’s book, was: How does one see the world in the way that Taylor sees? Is this a problem of political ontology? Or is it a problem of method and approach? Is it possible to escape the supremacy of whiteness, even as one is—as I am—neither white nor Black, though certainly beneficiary of one, while simultaneously—though less frequently—subject to the similar forms of homogenisation/objectification as the other?

A slightly different question emerged for me from his third chapter, namely ‘Beauty to Set the World Right: The Politics of Black Aesthetics’ (Taylor 2016, 77-104). There, Taylor describes Louis Armstrong’s status as an American ambassador to Kenya, as a politically astute jazz musician who is keenly aware of how race politics plays out. As Taylor suggests, “Armstrong was a worldwide phenomenon: a continent-hopping cultural agent of such global import that ‘first world’ governments and multinational corporations alike sought to wrap themselves in his mantle’ (2016, 79). He draws on the example of Armstrong in order to raise the question of whether/how ethical concerns should shape our approach to the practice of cultural expression, i.e., the question of the scope and range of ‘aesthetic autonomy’ as Taylor calls it. What is the

role of politics to aesthetics—precisely in the challenge to the notion that aesthetics is purely about the sublime? How does—or simply, can—one develop an approach that can reflect an aesthetics that is politically/racially sensitive—whether as a cultural worker, or again as a director, viewer, or critic? This is the work of reconstruction to which he returns: How does one engage in aesthetic racial reconstruction?

Finally, I had a simple, technical question: Taylor introduces a relation between *sarx* and *soma*, that is, as the relation between the sensuous natures of the body and the treatment of the body as an object with aesthetic value (or at least this is one part of the definition of *somaesthetics*) (2016, 107). *Sarkaesthetics*, for Taylor, is “the body as experienced from a third-person perspective, through the external senses” (2016, 108). He uses this term to discuss a range of cases, from Black hair as understood by Black women themselves—as a reflection of racial politics (akin to Dr. Kenneth and Mamie Clark’s studies of Black children’s relationship to whiteness as revealing their preferences for white versus black dolls)—to Thomas Jefferson’s understanding of racial aesthetics in both his discussions of the aversion to Black bodies while also simultaneously evincing a fascination with them, as expressed through his sexual ‘relationship’ (if that is the correct term) with Sally Hemmings. The question is this: How should we understand the politics surrounding these cases in relation to the analysis that he gives? Could there have been other outcomes given the politics of the day? Is there a clear relationship between politics and racial aesthetics that guides his analysis?

At a meta-level, I wanted to know the impetus and approach behind Taylor’s book: Why did he choose the examples that he does, the concepts that he wants to develop further, the frame of the book as something that begins a conversation on several fronts—from films, to actors, to cultural ambassadors, to the authenticity (or not) of hair or clothes? Taylor, in this essay, seems to cash in some of the earlier

cheques he wrote in the book, by turning to the question of reconstruction as a political, programmatic, institutional problem in the program to change some of the dynamics of white supremacy:

The basic reconstructionist impulse – aimed at rooting out the conditions for the persistence of white supremacist and anti-democratic practices – survived the demise of the federal initiative, and worked on multiple levels to animate a variety of activities and projects. There was, for example, a constellation of local and regional movements, policies, and initiatives, many of which began with federal support but continued without it as long as they could manage in the face of lethal and terroristic violence. Underwriting many of these efforts was an ideological commitment to a general cultural reorientation, organized around revised understandings of freedom, equality, community, democracy, and citizenship. And underwriting this ideological program was a project of ethical counter-habitation, calling individual citizens to locate and cultivate the better angels of their natures and repudiate their “unreconstructed” anti-democratic sentiments. [My emphasis] (2020, 18)

Taylor does not explicitly address whether he believes this program has been successful; however, given the topic of his essay, it seems safe to say that he believes we still have a long way to go. He traces out the history of explicit violence in the face of challenges of white supremacy: lynchings; the Dyer bill which attempted to outlaw this ‘terroristic’ practice; and visual, cultural, and filmic endorsements of white supremacy in movies such as D.W. Griffiths’s *Birth of a Nation*. Taylor gestures to the continued need to grapple with “institutional conditions under which dominant ways of thinking attain their influence” (2020, 28). Although he does not name this as violence, I will take the liberty of doing so. Let me explain why.

Over some period of time, I have had conversations with faculty of col-

our—Black and Brown faculty—who have discussed with me the sheer hostility of the university departments in which they hold full-time faculty appointments. Most of the stories that I have heard have come from United States-based faculty who were untenured. Some of these stories come from my own campus. The common features of those stories continue to resonate with me. For example, I have heard multiple (i.e. more than one or two) stories of the sheer vitriol of department evaluations of junior faculty, couched in ‘neutral’ vocabulary, pointing to incidental or even laudable features of a faculty member’s professional engagement—but framed *as criticisms* of their pedagogy or professional work. These evaluations refer to features of a classroom environment (such as the unusually large number of women students of colour in a male faculty member’s class), their minimal response on email (because they have prioritized other parts of their professional obligations). Faculty of colour have shared with me the hostile response of their institutions to comments they have made raising attention to the cultural or ‘whiteness’ of their colleagues—in other words, a reference to the power their white colleagues hold in being able to casually offend, insult, or demean them, but which have been construed as ‘racist remarks’ against their white colleagues, which have in turn forced punitive consequences against the same faculty of colour, while rewarding the white faculty in question (by allowing them to continue to hold their positions). Stories that faculty of colour have relayed to me include being told that they were not intended to be hired, that they were chosen as a ‘compromise’ or as a punishment to the department for not having worked hard enough to recruit and hire Black faculty previously (yes, this is correctly worded), or that they were quietly told that graduate students found them too harsh, too angry, and subsequently neglected to work with them out of fear for their careers. These perceptions were sustained and nourished by their white faculty colleagues, leading to the amplification of an already racially alienating environment.

These are continued forms of unreconstructed racial aesthetics—

the idealized aesthetic compartments to which faculty of colour are expected to conform. They are also forms of institutional violence that continue to work subterraneously—through winks, nods, whisper campaigns, studious silences. Through their subtlety, ubiquity, and casualness, they erode the self-confidence, the ability to work unimpeded, to think quietly and research, to write articles—*they slowly destroy the necessary ability to consider oneself a valued intellectual member of one's profession*, let alone the department. These institutional forms of violence can destroy the psychic coherence or existence of the Black or Brown intellectual.

Simultaneously, the neutrality, the quotidian proceduralism of these institutional forms of racial violence are disseminated and exponentially reproduced: by colleagues, our students, through popular or scholarly articles in which Black aesthetics are denigrated explicitly or through the wholesale exotic evaluation of the aesthetic in question—yes, such as in the reviews I cite above from the *New York Times* and *The New Yorker*. How then do we continue with the project of reconstruction in the face of seemingly intractable, continual injury?

Taylor points to the reconstructive project of Black aesthetics: Black lives have to matter for an engagement to count as Black aesthetics (2020, 38). In so affirming this, Taylor models the pragmatist approach to a messy problem: Authenticity, anti-Blackness, and Black identity - none of these are necessary for a Black aesthetics. Moreover, as he points out:

Black aesthetics need not be a parochially racial project in a way that screens off intersectional considerations. The idea is not that race is the deepest or most important aspect of human affairs, just that it is *one of several* important aspect (2020, 39).

Reconstruction requires decolonisation—a popular catchphrase these days—if such a thing is possible. But decolonising requires a focus not

on identity per se, but on the dynamics of power embedded and reproduced in relationships, whether between Black existence and colonialism (what is being induced, demanded, obliged from ‘the Black’ or the Black work of art?), or between or among Black subjects themselves. In the case of *Moonlight*, if we can return to its assessments by *The New Yorker* and the *New York Times*, the materiality of the Black body is being consumed (remember Scott’s emphasis on the “‘matter’ of Black lives” (2016)); the fact of its vulnerability (Scott and Brody), its fragility (Brody), its susceptibility to violence, but not the dynamics of that vulnerability or the violence. What makes Chiron vulnerable, susceptible, fragile? Why is his position as a target of violence (‘fragility’) regurgitated by the reviewers in hushed, revering tones? Only Als seems to do the work of digging, of thinking through the dynamics: ‘stops and starts, the hesitation...pleasure...liberation’ (2016). These descriptors are not about the body, but about the links, the dynamics that connect Chiron with his lover. Only Als moves past the obsession with the Blackness of Chiron’s body to consider his engagements, his singularity, his persona in relation with the world.

Why must the complete absence of white characters be raised by the white reviewers? I suspect the answers to these questions are located in the very structures of white dominance that induce the enlightened white reviewers to reproduce their own myopias unwittingly: the absence of white characters must be mentioned precisely because it is a rarity for a film, unless it is billed as a “Black” film, to have none. The impossibility of a (Black) drug dealer to be both good and bad reveals a distance from the white reviewers to Blacks, from the knowability of Blacks who live outside of their refined worlds. It is, as Kristie Dotson describes, the distance from hypervisibility to invisibility (2017).

The hypervisibility of Chiron and his relationships to other Black bodies seems to loom larger than the relations, the dynamic, the fluidity of the emotions of those Black subjects against the unnamed, but equally

hypervisible world of white supremacy against which those relationships play out. And yet, the non-naming of it, visible to many others, including Als, appears to render the backdrop invisible, allowing the reviewers to breathe a sigh of relief that they are not forced to confront it because the director has left it unnamed, at least explicitly.

And so I return to the question of what it means to ‘reconstruct’ productively and yet successfully? Does it mean continuing to hear Black and Brown colleagues recount their stories of institutional violence in hushed tones, afraid of offending, of being punished yet again by merely recounting the relentless reproduction of white supremacy? Does it mean the silent acceptance of the racism of the white reviewers who believe they are progressive/ enlightened/ unracist—by returning to the materiality, the commodifying, of the bodies that they then consume in order to declare their seemingly progressive proclivities in print?

Taylor has indeed cashed in his cheque: He turns to the question of politics as an essential counterpart of reconstruction in ethics. It is possible to reconstruct aesthetics through a frame such as the instantiation, the insistence, that Black lives must matter in art. But can reconstruction occur simply through audiences that are Black and Brown, without having to resort to the necessity of white viewers/consumers? Can it engage the change we need to see in the world?

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# BLACK AESTHETICS: RECONSTRUCTION THROUGH RESOCIALISATION

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*My response to Paul C. Taylor's "Black Reconstruction in Aesthetics" follows his example in engaging different disciplinary and thematic contexts. I start with an account of a scene in the 2018 movie Black Panther and explore its relevance to recent discussions about the restitution of African art objects. I then attend to some productive similarities between Taylor's intervention into contemporary aesthetics and a prominent argument in favour of restitution. I finish by suggesting that the reconstruction Taylor calls for can be achieved only if philosophers resocialize along a renewed commitment to engage Black aesthetics and Black lives in all their richness and importance.*

When the last time you did somethin' for the first time?

Drake, *Own It* (2013)

We would like to live as we once lived, but history will not permit  
it.

John F. Kennedy

## 1 Introduction

In his article “Black Reconstruction in Aesthetics” Paul C. Taylor offers an “argument and an intervention in relation to the practice and study of Black aesthetics” (Taylor 2020, 9). Taylor’s study straddles three dichotomies—between Reconstruction as a discrete historical era and as a concept, between Black aesthetics as a lived practice and as a branch of philosophical aesthetics, and, finally, between argument and intervention. These dichotomies and their interrelations form a rich terrain, which Taylor prospects with great care. But his most important contribution is that he pays equal attention to how insight is philosophically derived and how it is socialized. It is the latter aspect of philosophizing that necessitates his intervention. From the blind spot of Dewey’s “parochialism” to contemporary analytic philosophy’s indifference to “the thoughts, lives, and practices of people racialized as black,” Taylor detects a failure not only of topical engagement, but also of social availability (Ibid.) It bears testimony to Taylor’s generosity that he frames his intervention as an invitation for other philosophers to join into the “inherently ecumenical enterprise” of Black aesthetics (Ibid.) The issues Taylor broaches, philosophical and meta-philosophical alike, are ripe for much lengthier discussion than he could have possibly managed in the space of an article. But instead of staking this territory for a possible project of his own, Taylor opens it up as a friendly challenge to other philosophers.

What follows is my attempt to accept Taylor’s invitation and follow his example in making what he calls “arguments across contexts” (Taylor 2020, 12). I start with an account of a scene in Ryan Coogler’s 2018 movie *Black Panther*, adding to Taylor’s use of the movie as an example of practicing Black aesthetics and of what reconstruction might look like in the present day. The particular scene is one Taylor does not discuss, but I focus on it because of its numerous implications for our relationship with art, and especially for cases where art perceivers and/

or art objects are racialized. And, since the scene in question has galvanized various initiatives for the restitution of African art, I also attend to a similarity between Taylor's intervention and the arguments in some of the recent literature on restitution. I finish by reinforcing Taylor's call for philosophical "counter-habituations," which I understand as the only adequate response to contemporary analytic philosophy's relative indifference to the urgency and intricacy of Black aesthetics.

## 2 A Borrowed Muse

One of the most culturally loaded scenes in *Black Panther* comes fairly early and unfolds at a fictional art museum. It involves the character Erik "Killmonger" Stevens—ostensibly an African American—arguing with a female Caucasian museum director about the provenance of an African war hammer on exhibit. After he offers to "take it off her hands," she stiffly informs him that the object is not for sale. Killmonger responds to her with a barrage of rhetorical questions: "How do you think your ancestors got these? Do you think they paid a fair price? Or did they take it... like they took everything else?" Before she has had a chance to answer, the director falls on the ground and it becomes clear that she has been poisoned in Killmonger's heist (Cascone 2018)

The scene is so rich in its recognition of racialized tension—its structure, its origins, and its aesthetics—that for students of this tension the movie might just as well end with it. In terms of structure, the framing of the scene as a polite conversation in a polite institution is the only concession to threadbare civility. In an external shot the place is identified as the "Museum of Great Britain". This contextualizes the scene within a broader colonial narrative even before the characters have said a word. What tightens the screws even further is the fact that the actual building is recognizable as that of the High Museum of Art in Atlanta. The gratification of recognizing "the South's leading art institution" is compounded, and instantly undermined by, the tension between the High Museum's geographical association with the cultural flourishing

of Black America on the one hand, and its institutional complicity with white privilege on the other.<sup>1</sup>

The quick-fire exchange between Killmonger and the museum director dramatizes this tension and its historical origins. The question about the hammer's provenance, for example, is a reference to the systematic dissolution and diminution of African authenticity. Killmonger's next question, about the price Europeans paid for the object, exposes a centuries-long collapse of global fairness. His last one, about the means of procurement, is an implicit judgment on the racialized violence that has underwritten various 'civilizational' crusades and the museums they benignly culminate in.

It is, however, the aesthetic dimension—costume, choreography, set design, acting, and *mise-en-scène*—that makes the moment cinematically indelible. The sharp contrast between Killmonger's slouchy clothing and the genteel 'museumwear' of everyone around him sets the tone of visual incongruence. That he might not be welcome in her domain is also subtly signaled by the museum director's accent—equal parts British and International Art English.<sup>2</sup> By the time Killmonger acknowledges "all this security out here watching me ever since I walked in," the viewer has grown used to the sinister ballet of museum guards gliding in and out of the frame. In the pristine surroundings of the proverbial white box, Killmonger's presence and implied intrusion is a prime example of what Greg Tate has called a "fly boy in the butter-milk"<sup>3</sup>.

In a magazine interview, the costume designer Ruth E. Carter admits

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1 The High Museum of Art has been criticized for the racial homogeneity of its board and for programming that does little to represent the richness of the local art scene. See Blau (2015).

2 The term International Art English was introduced by Alix Rule and David Levine in their study of the techniques of discursive obfuscation and alienation art writers systematically employ. See Rule and Levine (2011).

3 This expression is the title of Tate's 1992 collection of essays on American culture and politics. See Tate (1992).

that the sartorial contrast was intentional. Carter had first imagined Killmonger “in a suit with a briefcase” but the visual concept changed course after director Ryan Coogler expressed his preference that the character “look like an everyday black man—an everyday urban male” (Sanders 2018). The interviewer notes that Killmonger’s urban aesthetic makes it much easier for the filmmakers to provoke the audience’s “racialized presumptions” about the characters (Sanders 2018). That this was Coogler’s intention is also clear from an interview in which he reveals that the scene was inspired by a visit he had made to the *real* British Museum during the movie’s gestation period. Coogler reports his elation at witnessing the richness of world art and, as a counter-weight, his unease with the complicated role such a collection plays in the history of colonization (Travis 2018). And, even though he does not dwell on the personal dimensions of his own ‘fly boy in the butter-milk’ moment at the British Museum, one is free to imagine that some version of the incongruities explored in the movie scene would readily apply to *any* “everyday black man” perusing the displays at such an august institution. Coogler’s deeper point, of course, is that the connection between the aesthetics of racialized difference and the practice of racialized violence is disturbingly strong.

Considering the movie’s plot, the museum scene cannot be regarded as a straightforward critique of artefact despoilment. Killmonger is, after all, participating in a heist and his partner in crime is a German arms dealer with colonial ambitions of his own. But still, regardless of its place in the story, Killmonger’s conversation with the museum director retains the uncomfortable plausibility of good social critique; so much so that it has become an unlikely point of reference in recent real-world debates about African art restitution (Cascone 2018). This probably also has to do with the fact that both the making of *Black Panther* and the intensifying art world conversations about decolonization and restitution are driven by the same social upheavals—the increased incidence and visibility of racialized incarceration and police violence in the

United States, the global resurgence of far-right politics, and the various forms of resistance and activism these changes have been met with. While *Black Panther* serves as a reminder of how easily the aesthetic can become political, the restitution issue shows how swiftly the political can become aesthetic.

### 3 An Untenable Past

In 2018 French President Emmanuel Macron commissioned an exhaustive report titled “The Restitution of African Heritage. Towards a Relational Ethics”. The report’s authors are economist Felwine Saar and historian Bénédicte Savoy and it explores the thorny issue of restitution from every possible angle—legal, historical, pragmatic, aesthetic, political, philosophical etc. In a section titled “Re-socializing Objects of Cultural Heritage,” Saar and Savoy propose that, instead of being seen as material tokens for the repayment of colonial debt, returned artefacts should be regarded as integral elements in the reconstruction of African memories and African self-reinvention. In order to achieve these noble goals, culturally significant objects need to be re-semanticized and re-socialized. The latter is a transformation as radical as it sounds—a patient and sensitive re-inscription of long-displaced objects into the social ecologies of their places of origin. To do this in an “open and nuanced” manner, Saar and Savoy suggest that “the potential return of objects should take into account the wealth and multiplicity of [these] alternative conceptions of cultural heritage,” as well as intentionally “*demystify* Western notions of cultural heritage and preservation” (Saar and Savoy 2018, 320).

This part of the Sarr-Savoy report has a special resonance with Taylor’s “Black Reconstruction in Aesthetics”. If we think of Taylor’s intervention as an example of actionable insight, the action his study calls for relates to philosophers in a way very similar to the one in which Sarr and Savoy’s approach to restitution relates to art objects. In both cases it is through historical analysis, demystification of cultural paradigms,

and re-socialization that the respective interventions are activated. Taylor's historical example is that of John Dewey's selective handling of the concept of reconstruction. While Dewey invoked the concept with reference to philosophical reform and postwar restoration, he never even broached its racial aspect. This would have been a matter of honest omission, had Dewey not been one of the founders of the NAACP and "with varying degrees of openness and vigour supported causes we would now think of as part of a civil rights or racial justice agenda" (Taylor 2020, 29).

Taylor demystifies Dewey's "superficial invocations" of reconstruction as a paradigm case of philosophical parochialism (Taylor 2020, 21). This parochialism affects philosophy both as a practice and as a profession. In terms of professional milieu, philosophy in Dewey's time was a fairly exclusive enterprise—not many people got to make their living as philosophers and, of those who did, a negligible few were anything but white, financially privileged, and male. The way this demographic limitation affected the practice of philosophy was that it helped perpetuate what Taylor calls a "whitely epistemology of ignorance" (Taylor 2020, 27). There are two reasons for worry here—one is that philosophers would remain innocent to the ways in which their professional context delimits the tenor and scope of their inquiry, and the other that the same blindness would persist from Dewey's time until the present day.

The first worry echoes Sarr and Savoy's concern about the dominant Western approach to heritage and preservation. Philosophers are just like the objects of world art that have been spliced into the politically oblivious phantasmagoria of Western museums—they are socialized within a civilizational script that, in Taylor's words, "tends not to be particularly inclusive and open-minded" (Taylor 2020, 12). These structures are all the more harmful for being hidden in plain sight. The main reason the museum scene in *Black Panther*—a scene to which Sarr and Savoy refer in their report—is aesthetically and cinematically legible

as a comment on white supremacy is that we are already burdened by “racialized presumptions”. This makes white supremacy the default Western position, but it is less like an overt ideology than something closer to what Wittgenstein would have called a “form of life”<sup>4</sup>. The movie scene presents Black aesthetics as a counterweight—equally foundational and, if practiced and studied in the sensible and ecumenical manner Taylor suggests, unencumbered by the limitations of ideology.

If Dewey had engaged the civil rights aspect of reconstruction in his philosophy, he would have come closer to the advice Malcolm X gave white allies: “Where the really sincere white people have got to do their “proving” of themselves is not among the black *victims*, but out of the battle lines of where America’s racism really *is*—and that’s in their own home communities”(Malcolm X 1964, 383). Considering that Dewey’s home community as a thinker was primarily the rarefied whitely world of professional philosophy, it is there that his impact as a sincere ally would have been of the greatest consequence. This is what the re-socializing Sarr and Savoy write about and the counter-habitation Taylor calls for would have amounted to in Dewey’s case.

As to the worry about philosophical inheritance, Taylor makes it clear that Dewey is not an exception but the norm in the history of professional philosophy. And while one might not be in the position to neatly trace current philosophy’s failures back to Dewey and/or any other particular intellectual progenitor, the continuity of neglect towards Black lives and Black aesthetics suggests a genetic flaw in the discipline. It is clear also that when tracing such tectonic continuities, we should be looking for repeating patterns instead of direct references and attributions. One example in the lineage of twentieth century Black aesthetics illustrates the subtle way in which these continuities function. In Lang-

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4 In paragraphs 19, 23, and 241 of the *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein’s notion of “form of life” is presented as an often inscrutable epistemological expedient that grounds propositional meaning and truth. See Wittgenstein (1958).

ston Hughes's story "Passing" from the 1930's, the treacherous sliding scale of racialized visibility is illustrated in a fictional letter of apology from a lighter-skinned son to his darker-skinned mother (Hughes 1990, 51-56). Adrian Piper's "Passing for White, Passing for Black" is a highly personal essay in the genre of philosophical autobiography written six decades after Hughes's story was published (Piper 1996, 275-309). And even though Piper does not mention Hughes's work, the shared subject and socio-cultural context suggest a powerful connection between the two—their treatments of the manifestations of self-consciousness, guilt, and defiance in successfully 'passing' are mutually comprehensible and the more poignant for it. But, if it is perfectly sensible to recognize and capitalize on the genetic connection between Hughes and Piper, it is to be expected that such unannounced and often unrealized connections would exist between Dewey and his intellectual heirs. Indeed, Taylor's cautionary tale is his way of addressing his own blind inheritance of Dewey's blindness.

#### 4 A Possible Future

Despite possible implications of return and recovery, notions like reconstruction and restitution do not have to suggest a past available or worth going back to. The initial understanding of historical Reconstruction as "the process of rebuilding and recreating the social and political order that the war had destroyed" could make it seem as if nineteenth century politicians and lawmakers had idealized a pre-Civil War past (Taylor 2020, 16). And, yet, as Taylor notes, in their recognition of the need for a radical reimagining of the American project, Reconstruction's progressive early adopters regarded it as "a second founding" (Taylor 2020, 17). In a similar manner, today's proponents of the restitution of art objects are not burdened by fantasies of a literal return. In a recent conversation on restitution in the *New York Times*, Nigerian-American artist Toyin Ojih Odutola contends that the concept of 'return' is undermined by the fact that, in the places of geographical origin of African

art objects, “the context is completely altered” (Farago 2019).

The recovery of a prior state of affairs is also not what Taylor’s call for philosophical reconstruction entails. If contemporary philosophy should evolve to a place where Black aesthetics is given its due attention, this will be a matter of shedding two different pasts—one of narrow topical interest and one of social and institutional exclusivity. Taylor leads by example in this by striving to expand both his field of inquiry and his source book.<sup>5</sup> It is refreshing to see an analytic philosopher grapple with modes of rigor and insight that fall outside the perennial boundaries of the tradition he belongs to. This openness plays a reflexive role for Taylor. On the one hand, it helps him make the argument that Dewey’s parochialism is a failure *for* philosophy. On the other, it helps him undermine the social and discursive conditionings that have prevented philosophers, Taylor included, to engage Black lives and Black aesthetics in all their richness and importance.<sup>6</sup>

One instance in Sarah Thornton’s book *Seven Days in the Art World* illustrates the urgency of an intervention like Taylor’s. In a chapter on the Turner Prize, jury member Matthew Higgs volunteers that the prize rewards “an individual’s radically idiosyncratic interpretation of the world” because “we’re inherently fascinated by other people” (Thornton 2009, 131-132). When Taylor tries to parse out the subtle distinction between proper reconstruction and inexpensive redemptionism, it is precisely such attitudes to human difference that he seems to be battling. Higgs does not address race, but his fixation with otherness is consistent with the glibness of a whitely difference fetish and, in turn,

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5 Taylor cites his “own recently defeated willingness to remain silent” about the work of Fred Moten as an example of the kind of ideological transformation analytic philosophers could and should undergo. See Taylor (2020, 7).

6 Taylor’s commitment to overcoming his own social and discursive conditioning is evident in his book *Black is Beautiful: A Philosophy of Black Aesthetics*. In her review of the book Jeanette Bicknell claims that Taylor’s work remains “squarely” in the analytic tradition, but also credits his attempts to engage a broader range of voices. See Bicknell (2017, 173).

with the politics of Western exclusivity. Our unhealthy fascination with “other people” is the first and necessary step towards “racialized presumption”. And while the former fills Western museums with world art artefacts, the latter makes it uncomfortable to meet someone who looks like Killmonger in “a space which does not even welcome those whose culture it displays”(Haughin 2018).

Since racialized optics is the bastard child of ethics and aesthetics, it is a matter of philosophical exigency to go beyond mere appearances. This is why Taylor counters essentialist tendencies—for him there is not one identity that qualifies a person as Black as there is not one identity that qualifies one as a contributor to the study of Black aesthetics. His approach coheres with some recent philosophical readings of *Black Panther* as representative of “ecological blackness”—an aesthetics of inclusion that favors the collective over the individual and the relational over the exclusionary.<sup>7</sup> The Sarr-Savoy report, whose title includes the expression ‘relational ethics,’ recommends the same approach in the context of restitution. As Taylor shows, these are not untenable ideals but actionable strategies. In philosophy, they involve something Taylor not only urges but also generously models—a reconstruction through resocialization.

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7 See Haile (2018); Ekstrand (2018).

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# DISCIPLINE, DETERMINATION, DISCERNMENT: IN REPLY

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I appreciate the care and the time that professors Sheth, Ventzislavov, Haile, and Hall have devoted to my essay.<sup>1</sup> I am particularly grateful for their willingness not just to engage my work, but also to find a mode of engagement that goes beyond simply producing objections and provoking replies. The ritual of objections and replies can be edifying and illuminating, as for example, the debates around Descartes' *Meditations* and the back and forth between Henry Louis Gates and Joyce A. Joyce over Baldwin make clear. But there is value also in other modes of engagement, like the invitation to joint exploration that my "Reconstruction" essay extends and the commentators graciously and generously accept.

Accepting the invitation to explore sends the commentators off in two different but complementary directions. Hall and Ventzislavov sound certain of the themes that structure the invitation—Hall describes this as "picking up on [some] notes" that he hears in my work (2020, 50)—while Haile and Sheth inspect the terms of the invitation by asking, and tentatively answering, certain foundational questions. As it happens, each of the soundings pairs up nicely with one of the inspections, so I'll take them in pairs, more or less, below.

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<sup>1</sup> I also appreciate, more than I can say, the patience and thoughtfulness of the editors. Dr. Anscomb and Dr. Deprez have been a delight, and it has been an honour to work with them.

## 1 Politics and Counter-Habituation (Sheth and Ventzislavov)

Professor Sheth mainly presses the thought that there is a kind of opacity—or worse, a hole—in my account where a politics should be. She puts it more gently than that, but she has put it (a bit) less gently in other settings, and found my responses unsatisfying. Professor Ventzislavov’s generous and generative meditation on the theme that unlocks my work for him—counter-habituation—gives me the opportunity to say more clearly what I tried to say on those other occasions. Sheth prepares the way for this thought by asking related questions from at least three different directions.

1. “[H]ow does one see the world in the way that Taylor sees? Is this a problem of political ontology? Or is it a problem of method and approach?” (2020, 87)
2. “How does - or simply, can - one develop an approach that can reflect an aesthetics that is politically/racially sensitive - whether as a cultural worker, or again as a director, viewer, or critic... How does one engage in aesthetic racial reconstruction?” (2020, 88)
3. “Is there a clear relationship between politics and racial aesthetics that guides his analysis?” (2020, 88)

I read these as questions about how to locate, motivate, cultivate, and operationalize the political sensibility that hovers over my analyses. That is to say: my readings of cultural phenomena have pretty clear normative implications, so it’s fair to wonder how these norms get baked into my analysis and how someone who doesn’t already feel their appeal might come to do so.

I’ll have little to say here about the nature and implications of the relevant norms, precisely because they are so clear. As I say in my essay, black aesthetics as I understand it begins with a commitment to black

humanity, which is a commitment so broad as to seem empty until one considers the world's continual failure to live up to it. I'm happy to credit the simultaneous obviousness and difficulty of this ethical standard by treating it the way the Black Lives Matter movement does: as a public political conception that can be reconciled with any number of more comprehensive or otherwise narrower political views. (I'm thinking here of the actual movement, not of any of the organisations or tendencies that periodically claim something like ownership of the movement.) This move has the shape of a down payment on a more detailed argument that I might give later, but it is important to note that the more detailed argument can, in my view, unfold in a different theoretical register. The reconstructive work of critical race aesthetics, as I'm thinking of it, is consistent with a variety of political-theoretic and social-theoretic refinements. I will surely have my preferred ways of doing this additional work, but telling that story is an exercise in political theory rather than in the (in a sense) prior work that attends whatever this aesthetics is.

What is this prior political-ethical work? This is the root of Sheth's question about method and approach, which leads her to wonder if I'm raising a question of political ontology. This is an intriguing option, one that I'd want to consider in the light of her forthcoming book to see more clearly what she means by it. But I think I'm more interested in a kind of political or critical *phenomenology*.

I use the label of political phenomenology to capture an approach that I've cobbled together from figures like Dewey, Du Bois, Cavell, Susan Bordo, and Stuart Hall. Put crudely and swiftly, the idea is that political life depends at crucial points on various forms of immediate experience, and that the responsible conduct of political life requires highlighting, reflecting on, and, where appropriate, reorienting oneself to this immediacy. Aesthetics is one name for one way to do this work. (Philosophy of culture is another. There are still more.) This is why

*Birth of a Nation* was so powerful: it consolidated, confirmed, reproduced, and *expressed* a white supremacist vision of blackness-as-threat and whiteness-as-imperilled-virtue (with the nature of the respective threats and virtues varying importantly by gender), and did so in ways that were immediately affecting for adherents and critics alike.

I have hesitated in the past to appeal to the idea of critical phenomenology because that expression tends to pick out the heirs of Merleau-Ponty and Heidegger rather than of American naturalists like Dewey, Alain Locke, Emerson, and William James. But Professor Sheth's clarifying questions are encouraging me to be less fastidious about these questions of intellectual heritage. My recommendation, then, is for an exercise in *perfectionist phenomenology*—perfectionist, to be clear, in the spirit of Cavell's Emersonian perfectionism—that aims to model and recommend a kind of critical distance from the cultural forces that propose to mobilize our aversions and enjoyments. It counsels a continual openness to self-interrogation and to the prospect of reorienting oneself to one's affections and judgments, both informed by something like José Medina's epistemology of resistance (to whom we'll return).

Professor Sheth's questions may derive in part from anticipating this appeal to critical phenomenology and worrying where and how the criticism gets traction with individual agents. When this worry comes into view, we're left to ask: What about the consumers of politically charged aesthetic objects (or aesthetically charged political objects) who are perfectly content with their aversions and enjoyments, and unwilling to engage in self-interrogation? Where does the call for reconstruction get its purchase on us then?

We are now peering down the rabbit hole of a great many very complicated questions. These questions implicate issues like moral motivation, weakness of the will, the possibility of resistance for encultured human subjects, and the relationship between discourse, deliberation, and political agency. I don't pretend to have answers to any of those

questions, nor do I have much interest in asking them right now. Sheth might be interested in them, but I rather doubt it. I suspect that, like me, she's after something nearer to hand and narrower, something that I'll address by saying (everything I've already said, and then, in summary) things like this:

1. I'm no more concerned with getting (for example) the rabid and unreconstructed racist to engage in self-interrogation than I am in trying to persuade Hitler that he's got the Jewish people wrong. One of the lessons of politics, I think, is that persuasion is not the only game in town, and that the people you don't persuade have to be dealt with in other ways. (This is not yet a paean to revolutionary, or normal, violence. In part because...)
2. ...I'm much more interested in how we deal with the people whose political views lack Hitler's definiteness of intention, and who have unwittingly and uncritically accepted the psycho-emotional habits that societies structured in dominance have baked into them. How many of those people there are and how movable they are is a question for empirical inquirers to take up. I aver simply that there are some, enough to be bothered with; that they are awash in cultural currents that most of them have not thought much about; and that it is a good thing to give those people the tools to think harder and better. (Even if people like me most often do so mediately, for example by equipping the university students who will become journalists or HR officers or marketing professionals).
3. To the extent that I am interested in the unreconstructed racist, I'm interested in mobilising societal resources to make the development of people like that less likely than it currently is. Dewey, especially after his Aristotelian turn, encourages me to say that this happens prior to persuasion, in some ways priming the pump for persuasion, in systems of public education, both formal and informal.

4. Aesthesis is a crucial feature of human experience, a powerful aspect of social life, and an underappreciated political tool. I mean to be recommending that we acknowledge the political role of aesthesis, that individual agents take responsibility for the habits of perception, attention, and valuation that our cultures routinely attempt to download into us, and that we, philosophers and people like us, take responsibility for the opportunity we've been given: the opportunity to turn the institutional and intellectual resources we've cultivated into public resources that can help support the work of counter-habituation and self-interrogation.

A final thought, addressing a final facet of Sheth's question: How do people do this? What exactly are people supposed to do with the critical race aesthetician's analysis?

One answer to this question involves what appears in my black aesthetics book as a kind of substitution test. Taking one's experience seriously in a society structured in dominance means seriously asking how tinkering with the vectors of stratification might affect an experience. Which is to say things like this: would the visual codes that govern the depiction of Wonder Woman make sense if applied to Batman? Would the experience of the images scan easily if the governing codes were transposed?

Another way to answer this question is simply to point to Ventzislavov's wonderful study of the museum scene in *Black Panther*. This scene efficiently dramatizes and highlights the ethico-political complexities that swirl around cultural institutions and practices in post-colonial contexts. And it can, in the right hands, activate a process of, as he puts it, "historical analysis, demystification of cultural paradigms, and re-socialization" (Ventzislavov 2020, 103). He goes on to suggest, rightly, I think, that this process that might usefully anchor a valuable administrative practice of cultural reconstruction, as exemplified, perhaps, by the recommendations of the Sarr-Savoy Report. He calls it "reconstruction

through resocialization,” which may be a better name than anything I’ve come up with.

## 2 The Priority of Blackness to Race? (Haile)

While Sheth and Ventzislavov draw out, in different ways, my interest in counter-habituation, Haile and Hall draw out, in different directions, the theme of blackness. Hall is interested in a particular form of black life, in ways we’ll return to. Haile is interested in blackness as a phenomenon or condition, in ways it will take some work to get (close to getting) clear on.

Haile worries that my turn to black aesthetics corrects for Dewey’s “erasure of the racialized aspects” of reconstruction (and of the US, and of philosophy) only if “there is something unique about *blackness* enacted through the theoretical apparatus of aesthetics...” (Haile 2020, 68).

Something unique has to be put in play here, Haile notes, because part of my criticism of Dewey is precisely that he failed to resist a whitely epistemology of ignorance despite being superbly well-positioned to do so. He had plenty of resources that could have helped him know and do better, to accept the claims that race might make on his thought, and *he still declined to take race seriously*.

Haile is asking, in essence, how the invocation of black aesthetics might challenge philosophy’s sense of itself, thereby deepening its relationship to the rest of the social world, when Dewey’s leadership role in the NAACP didn’t inspire him to take up this challenge in his own life. Given the shape of my argument, he says, something has to fill the gap between the practice of philosophy and the racialized social world. He thinks I’ve left some clues about this here and there, but worries that I never quite get clear on it.

I appreciate Haile’s effort to gather these clues and offer a patch for this apparent hole in my argument. I only wish I understood his suggestion better. The broad idea is that blackness is doing more work, and has to

do more work, in my account than I've let on. My concern, he thinks,

is not so much “race” or even the context of “racialization” but that which conditions the context itself.... the *something* that is located within the context, but is other *to* it; that which lies *underneath* the historical and aesthetic construct of “race”. This is what *blackness* enacted through black aesthetics offers Taylor. (Haile 2020, 69)

But what does it mean to say that blackness “conditions the context” of racialization? The way I read the relevant literatures in this area, it might signal, at a minimum, one or more of four states of affairs. It might be that blackness is ontologically prior to race, or empirically weightier, or phenomenologically deeper, or culturally richer.

Working out what these options mean and which of them matter to Haile would require more work than I have space for here. The first possibility alone is sufficiently deep and interesting to occupy us for some time (if we let it, which we won't), not least because the best way to explore it is to submit to the tutelage of thinkers—like Frank Wilderson, Saidaiya Hartman, and Fred Moten—who say things like this:

to be committed to the anti- and ante-categorical predication of blackness [...] is to subordinate, by a measure so small that it constitutes measure's eclipse, the critical analysis of anti-blackness to the celebratory analysis of blackness (Moten 2017, viii)

There are riches here, and, as Haile points out, I've already noted with dismay how long it took me to give Moten's work the attention it deserves. But not only is there insufficient space here to explore these thoughts; there's also insufficient motivation to do so if the aim is to solve the problem that Haile points out.

The claim about blackness conditioning the context of racialization,

whatever it comes to, is supposed to answer a question that I'm supposed to have left open: how is it that black aesthetics can do the work I assign it in my critique of Dewey and of the practice of philosophy? Haile marks the opening with language like this: "If Dewey was unable or unwilling to inhabit another world, then Taylor must be arguing that there is something unique about *blackness* enacted through the theoretical apparatus of aesthetics... that gives it this capacity..." (Haile 2020, 68).

But I don't have to assume that "blackness enacted through aesthetics" has some unique capacity or import. I just have to assume that explicit and sustained restoration of philosophical reflection to its social context can promote, inspire, and provoke the kind of epistemic resistance that José Medina calls for in his work on epistemologies of resistance.<sup>2</sup> The key is to create the conditions under which epistemic agents are routinely confronted, can routinely confront themselves, with states of affairs that challenge their biases and prejudices, and that encourage them to hold themselves accountable to the ongoing refinement and cultivation of their sensibility and character as knowers and as ethical beings. None of which is yet to say that the existence of these conditions is sufficient for successful reconstruction. The conditions are jointly necessary, in some combination; but they require something more, something more closely related to the individualized burdens of ethical life. I'll mark these burdens for now with words like "discernment" and "determination," and pledge to return to them at the end of this piece.

I am interested in helping to create the conditions for self-interrogation and counter-habitation—for reconstruction through resocialization. Creating these conditions is not a solitary ethical undertaking, though it has clear ethical stakes and challenges. It is a socio-political project that requires the ongoing critique and reinvention of social institutions and

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<sup>2</sup> See Medina (2013).

practices—of professional and scholarly associations, voluntary civic associations, schools, and wider cultural matrices for the production of knowledge and culture. (This is precisely the point of Ventzislavov’s appeal to the Sarr-Savoy Report.) Dewey was in one of the right spaces—the NAACP crowd—but whatever dispositions this space bred in him were not reinforced by his philosophical training or by the rest of his life as a citizen. Dewey’s contemporary heirs face a different mix of societal and ethical conditions, and one element in this new mix, or one key to making the difference matter, is to do the sort of thing I tried to do and call for in my essay.

Black aesthetic theory and practice can advance the work of counter-habitation and of epistemic resistance, but my argument does not require that they be unique or exceptional in this regard. That said, the fact that my argument can get by with less doesn’t mean that less is all there is. Perhaps a proper account of the way blackness conditions the context of racialization will show that there is something unique going on here. Perhaps Wilderson’s description of blackness as a “space of negation” that underwrites the unity and solidarity of the white/Human world holds the key here (2003, 187).<sup>3</sup> Or maybe the essence of it lies in Moten’s claim, offered while resisting Wilderson’s brand of Afropessimism, that “blackness mobilizes predication not only against but also before itself” (Moten 2017, viii). These represent stronger and weaker readings of the ontological priority claim, both of which ultimately pull in the direction of other kinds of claims—empirical, phenomenological, or cultural—about the workings of race and of blackness, or in the direction of broader claims about experience (or subjectivity, or identity, or concepts) as such. These claims may be true, but they seem not to bear interestingly on the work that my “Reconstruction” essay attempts to do.

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3 See Wilderson (2020).

### 3 Conclusion (Hall)

The blackness of black aesthetics may not serve as the theoretical linchpin of my account in the way that Haile suggests, but it's easy to see why he thought it might. A particular vision of black life animates my approach to these issues, and does so in ways that might seem orthogonal to the standard concerns of philosophical race theory. Hall's thoughtful sounding of some notes from my "Reconstruction" essay highlights this fact in a way that helps me bring these reflections to a close.

Hall highlights and clarifies my longstanding interest in "aesthetic self-representations by women of colour in popular culture" (Hall 2020, 50). My reference to the TV show *Queen Sugar* (among other things) suggests to him an abiding interest specifically in black women in the southern US, and a corresponding interest in the way these women are the beating heart of an aesthetically vibrant social world. The key to this social world, he says, is the role it assigns to the kind of vernacular aesthetic activity that tends not to show up when philosophers map their rarefied artworlds. This activity registers in the work of towering figures like Walker and Toomer both as subject matter and as the context for their artistic practice. In a similar way, with more pedestrian results, it models, underwrites, and advances the aesthetic-reconstructive work that I studied and attempted in my essay.

Hall's reading clarifies a picture of my work that I've sketched elsewhere.<sup>4</sup> Anyone who knows me or my work on black aesthetics knows that my interest in that topic was sparked less by the artworlds of Dickie and Danto than by a black college in a black city in the U.S. south. Unfortunately, anyone who knows me or my work also knows that my introduction to the topic left me in dire need of instruction on what people typically refer to now as intersectionality. (There are other ways

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4 See Taylor (2002); Taylor (2016).

to refer to it, and debates over this one now threaten to generate more heat than light.) What these past sketches have probably not indicated clearly enough is something that Hall seems to see clearly: how much of my early instruction came from black women in and of the south—from teachers and students at Spelman College (including, to begin with, the sociology of women class my sister taught there), and, later, from poets like Nikki Finney and Kelly Norman Ellis, whose work meditates beautifully on the vernacular worlds that Hall prizes.

I am still working to put this instruction to proper use, and the wonderful exchange I'm now bringing to a close has given me the opportunity to see and say more clearly what that requires. It requires, first of all, accepting that it may be misleading to speak of "needing instruction" on intersectionality. Unless one deviates from standard ways of using the relevant words (in the manner, say, of Emerson), putting it that way makes it sound as if there were simply facts I had yet to encounter or theories I had yet to comprehend. One likes to have more facts and better theories, to be sure; but what I needed most was the discipline and determination to think harder about the facts and theories I either already knew or should have known, and the discernment to think responsibly about when and how to put this harder thinking to work in my life.

Discipline, determination, and discernment: these are among the virtues and values that aesthetic reconstruction requires. They mark the stakes and the conditions of the perfectionist political phenomenology that just is, I think, the way I propose to do the work of critical race aesthetics. There is more to this sort of project, as Ventzislavov's reference to reconstruction through resocialization helps make clear. As I say above, facts and theories matter. The wider cultural matrices also matter, and must be targets of critique and intervention. But what also matters is the relationship one establishes between these facts and theories and matrices on the one hand, and one's immediate experience

on the other. This relationship is the domain of the aesthetic, and building it is the burden of the kind of prophetic aesthetic that animates the greatest works of the black aesthetic tradition.

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