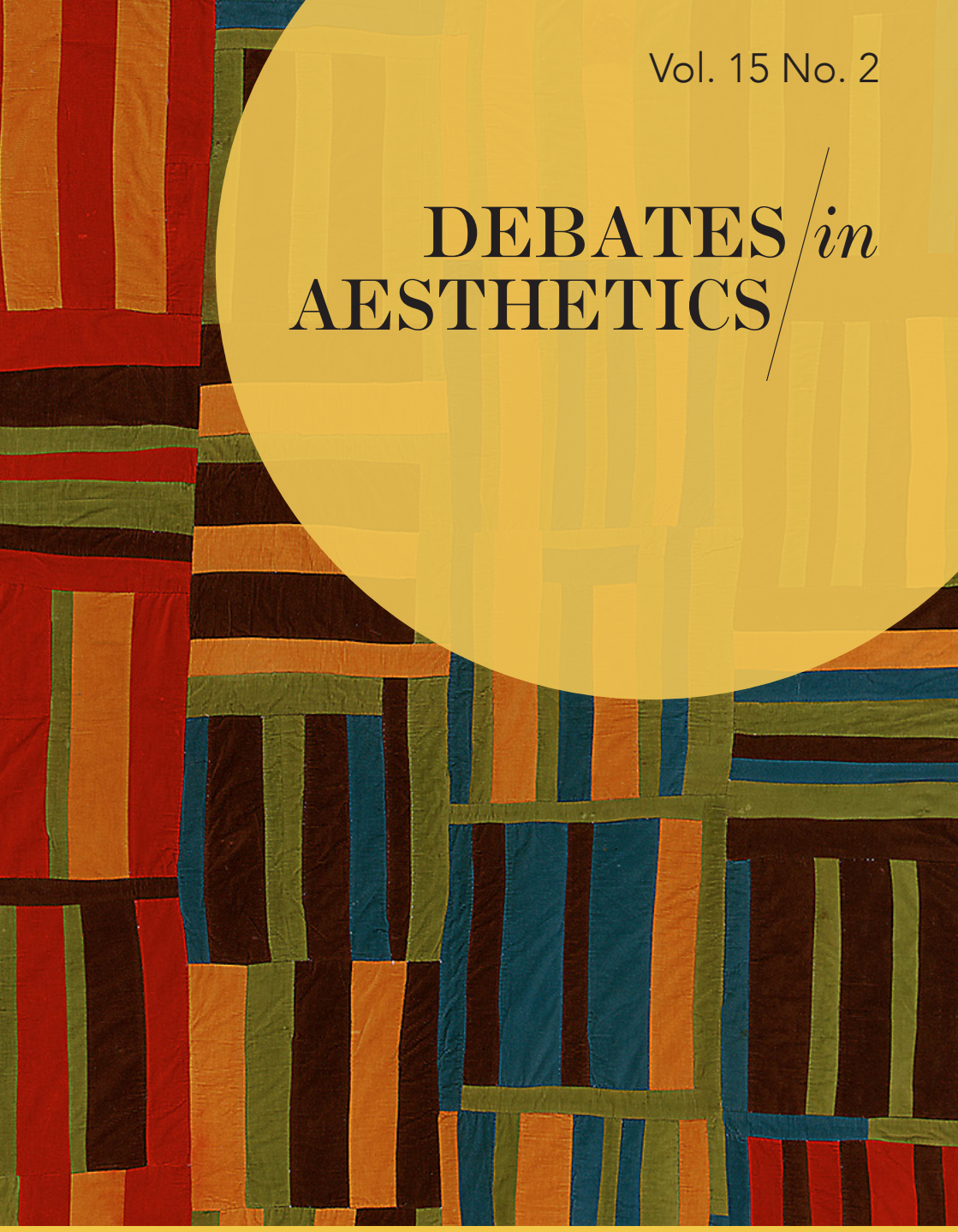
Vol. 15 No. 2

DEBATES *in* AESTHETICS



Debates in Aesthetics is a peer-reviewed, open-access journal for articles, interviews and book reviews. The journal's principal aim is to provide the philosophical community with a dedicated venue for debate in aesthetics and the philosophy of art.

BSA BRITISH SOCIETY OF AESTHETICS

BSA BRITISH SOCIETY OF AESTHETICS

Vol. 15 No. 2
August 2020

Edited by
Claire Anscomb and Eleen M. Deprez

Published by
The British Society of Aesthetics

Typesetting
Eleen M Deprez

Proofreading
Laura Harris

Typeface
The Brill, designed by John Hudson
Avenir, designed by Adrian Frutiger

Cover
Willie "Ma Willie" Abrams, *'Roman Stripes' Variation* (c. 1975)
In the collection of The Metropolitan Museum of Art, gift of the Souls Grown Deep Foundation.
Photo: Stephen Pitkin/Pitkin Studio
Reproduced here with DACS license

Contact
www.debatesinaesthetics.org
editor@debatesinaesthetics.org

ISSN 2514-6637

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-habituation" (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 comportments 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 aesthesis" (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-habituation 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 Ventizslavov'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.[1]

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.

BSA BRITISH SOCIETY OF AESTHETICS

DEBATES in AESTHETICS