

Black Aesthetics

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Abstract

This article introduces the preoccupations and themes that define the study and practice of black aesthetics. It presents a provisional sketch of a field that has long been recognized in other humanities disciplines, but that is only now gaining wide notice in academic philosophy. This sketch emphasizes the aspects of the field that invite specifically philosophic scrutiny, while touching lightly on specific artworks, critical literatures and historical developments. Among the topics that receive attention are the following: race, aesthetic politics, creolization, nationalism, modernity, white supremacy and the blues.

1. Introduction

'Black aesthetics' is a relatively new name for an old form of intellectual and cultural work. The work began the first time someone wondered just how aesthetic practices might help or hinder those seeking to create, maintain, navigate and understand the life-worlds and experiences of black peoples. The new name emerged in the middle of the twentieth century, after a wide array of artists, critics, activists and intellectuals began to theorize about the work in newly systematic, self-consciously racialized and insistently oppositional ways. Now, with the benefit of historical perspective, we can apply the name a trifle anachronistically to the broader tradition in which the mid-twentieth figures are embedded.

This usage of 'black aesthetics' is anachronistic because the expression rose to prominence, for most people, with a much narrower meaning. In one of the foundational twentieth-century texts, literary critic and essayist Addison Gayle (44) writes, 'the proponents of a Black Aesthetic ... call for a set of rules by which Black literature and art [are] to be judged and evaluated'. Here, Gayle commits himself to the common idea that black aesthetics is a regulative enterprise, properly subsumed under, or placed alongside, the broader or parallel enterprise of artistic production (and performance, and so on) known as the Black Arts Movement.¹ I mention Gayle's approach here, at the outset, to distinguish it from the approach I mean to take. The word 'aesthetic' is ambiguous, in ways we will soon explore further. We do often use it in the way Gayle suggests, to indicate an interest in the norms that govern artistic production and evaluation. But we also use it to indicate a willingness to pursue broader, philosophical questions about art, beauty and expression. I am interested in the broader questions, not least because they help to locate, motivate and clarify the questions about norms and rules. In this broader sense, one can do the work of black aesthetics not just by searching for Gayle's rules, but also – among other things – by making art in accordance with the rules, by exploring the metaphysical, phenomenological or ethical implications of the search, or by stepping outside the art-world altogether, to consider, for example, the way that judgements of bodily beauty have shaped and been shaped by racialized practices of colonial domination.

As I will use the expression, to do black aesthetics is to use art, analysis or criticism to explore the role that expressive objects and practices play in creating and maintaining black life-worlds. Critics do this when they sift through the history of black expressive culture to tease out the norms that they want to recommend to artists and other critics. Theorists do this when they construct and defend their accounts of the roles that art and expression should play in black life-worlds. And artists do this when they draw on the resources of black expressive culture in their work, or when they examine the challenges and pleasures of blackness using their work. (Two points are worth making in passing. First, if it seems odd to talk about art-making as a form of exploration, I take it that one way to explore the way something plays a role is by trying to make it play that role. And second, the same individual can of course pass back and forth across the artificial barriers that I've erected, for the sake of analysis, between artist, critic and theorist.)

If 'black aesthetics' names a way of exploring the expressive – or, henceforth, aesthetic – dimensions of black life, then at least three fairly straightforward questions follow. The first question obviously sets the agenda for this entry: What does it mean to examine black aesthetics philosophically? The two remaining questions emerge with a moment's consideration of the name of the enterprise: What is the 'black' in 'black aesthetics,' and what is the 'aesthetic'? It would be impossible to do justice to either of these questions while also doing justice to the designated subject matter of this entry. So after some brief gestures at the controversies bound up in invoking blackness and the complexities that attend the idea of the aesthetic, I will explore the history, preoccupations and philosophic import of the black aesthetic tradition.

2. *Black Aesthetics?*

The 'black' in 'black aesthetics' is obviously a racial category, and only slightly less obviously a category that picks out, as W. E. B. Du Bois once said, the people who would have had to ride Jim Crow in 1940s Georgia (Du Bois, *Dusk* 153). This may seem to put the matter rather too simply, in light of all the ethical and conceptual difficulties that attend the practices of racial ascription and identification. But there are many different ways to commit oneself to understanding and using racial categories – a commitment that I will indicate with the term 'racialism'. And some of these ways have been crafted precisely to avoid or respond to these difficulties. The classical race theory made famous by white supremacists, anti-Semites and neo-Nazis is what worries most of the people who fear and avoid race-talk. But anti-racists, social theorists and social justice advocates have developed forms of critical race theory that use race-talk to understand and grapple with the social, ethical and psychocultural conditions that classical racialism helped bring into being.²

The distinction between critical and classical race theory does not exhaust the varieties of racialism, each with its distinctive ontological and ethical commitments. Deciding which of these commitments is or ought to be in play has historically been one of the tasks that frames the enterprise of black aesthetics. So it is sufficient for now to note that some version of racialism is in play for the student of black aesthetics, and that this racialism can be critical rather than a form of racism or invidious essentialism.

To say that 'black' is a racial category is to explain what kind of notion we are dealing with, and what kind of analysis that notion invites. It does not yet tell us what things in the world the notion picks out. This taxonomic question may seem an especially knotty one after the collapse of classical racialism. That old regime of race-thinking in its most

ambitious and damaging forms promised firm links between appearance and behaviour (and moral worth, and intelligence, and so on), and firm boundaries between distinct races. We now know that this project is a non-starter. Distinct human populations, such as they are, shade into each other. 'Black' people can come in all colours, and can participate in any form of life or regime of cultural practice. This leaves us with the question that led Du Bois to his remark about the 'Jim Crow car': *what is this group, and how can you call it black when you admit that it is not (literally, naturally) black?*

The short answer, though not as short as the one Du Bois gave, is that black is not a colour but a condition. It is the condition of being positioned in certain specific ways – of being racialized – by social and cultural forces. Racialization in this sense is not a function of racial essences, biological or otherwise, but of contingent dynamics that have linked human appearance and ancestry to distinctive social, semiotic and psychocultural locations. These dynamics are contingent but not arbitrary, which is to say that they are sociohistorically *specific*, and that they have done their work in definite and patterned ways. In this spirit, we might say with Charles Mills (76) that race is 'a politically constructed categorization ... the marker of locations of privilege and disadvantage in a set of power relationships'.

Approaching race as a political category puts us well on the way to recognizing the motivation for Du Bois' remark, and to realizing who and what counts as black. The black people whose lives black aesthetics means to study are members of a population that has been brought into being by the political, economic and social dynamics of modernity. This population consists largely, but not entirely, of people 'of African descent': of people who are descended in the right sorts of ways from an indigenous population in early modern sub-Saharan Africa. What counts as the right sort of descent, and hence who counts as black, depends on the context of utterance, which is why 'black' picks out certain people in the United States and other people, or additional people, in Australia, the United Kingdom or Brazil. But across all these contexts, to have the kind of body or ancestry (again, as these are specified by appeal to local norms and criteria) that certifies one as black is to be more likely than people who are not so certified to undergo certain experiences and to occupy certain social locations. Many of these distinctive experiences and locations have involved some version of Du Bois' Jim Crow car: some dehumanizing exclusion or stigma, thought appropriate for creatures on or below the bottom rung of a colour-coded ladder of human kinds. But many other experiences have involved the distinctive life-worlds and expressive practices that black peoples created for themselves, to make meaning under the disorienting and dehumanizing conditions of racial modernity. These life-worlds provide important raw materials, contexts, and, often enough, subjects for the art, criticism and analysis that define the black aesthetic tradition.

3. *Black Aesthetics?*

So much for blackness: what about the 'aesthetic' in 'black aesthetics'? What kinds of questions, concerns and aims do participants in the black aesthetic tradition bring to their encounters with expressive culture? The main answers to this question are unlikely to surprise, but there are enough different answers, pointing in enough related but distinct directions, to justify the attempt to be clear about them. (I will in what follows distinguish the answers, and the kinds of people who might give the answers, much more rigidly than they would ever be distinguished in reality. This is an idealization, for ease of analysis and exposition.)

One of the tasks of black aesthetics has been straightforwardly empirical: to identify the norms that in fact guide the creation and evaluation of expressive objects in black life-worlds. Some people come to this descriptive task in the spirit of disciplines like anthropology and ethnomusicology, whereas others come to it looking for ways to ground an argument about political or ontological solidarity within the race. In either case, the motivation is clear enough. Black life-worlds are creative responses to the burdens of self-creation under the pressures of modern politics, with its constitutive commitments to anti-black racism and white supremacy. Modernity has been built in part on the myth that black peoples have no culture or civilization, and on the related myth – embraced in different forms by anti-black racists and by anti-racists, of all colours – that whatever practices black people have are primitive, timeless and homogenous. Careful descriptive work to identify the norms that black peoples in fact use to manage and evaluate their expressive practices has been an essential resource for responding to one or both of these myths.

Although descriptive approaches to black aesthetics have been and remain prominent, the most influential achievements in the tradition have emerged from a commitment to prescriptive work. Going beyond the recognition that certain systems of norms are operative among black peoples, prescriptively oriented work uses and recommends certain norms as ways of achieving and accounting for aesthetic merit. This approach is the province of people acting not as empirically minded social scientists but as critics, curators, artists and political activists. The historic high points of the tradition – in the New Negro movement of the twenties and thirties and in the Black Arts movement of the sixties and seventies – owe their coherence as movements in part to the probity and persistence with which people like Amiri Baraka and Alain Locke argued for specific visions about what black artists *should* do (based, to be sure, on firm ideas about what they *had* done, and were doing). Work in the prescriptive mode may of course have multiple motivations, but the aim has often been to advance a broader political struggle beyond the boundaries of the aesthetic. During the cultural nationalist ferment of the sixties and seventies, for example, many people argued that the overriding norm for black art was social utility – that black art, like African art (they typically argued, in the descriptive mode), should serve a social function, and work to meet the distinctive needs of black subjects in an anti-black world.

Closely related to the prescriptive project are various forms of explicitly theoretical work. This approach goes beyond cataloguing and deploying norms for expressive practice, and takes up the distinctly philosophic questions that mark the boundaries, limits and peculiarities of those practices. Aesthetic theory, so construed, takes different forms, and the different forms have very different relationships to the work of black aesthetics.

The forms of aesthetic theory that one finds in analytic philosophy have played rather a small role in the tradition of black aesthetics. The reasons for this are not obscure, and have largely to do with certain features of the tradition in question. The questions that have long-defined analytic aesthetics, questions about such things as the nature of art and of taste, pursued in certain ways and in conversation with specific historic figures, have taken their most refined forms in English-language professional philosophy since 1950. And the leading sites for this work are in places like the United Kingdom, the United States and Australia, all of which have for most of their histories effectively insulated their institutions of knowledge production from black expressive cultures and from the people who might take those cultures seriously. To make matters worse, the leading representatives of this kind of theory have not been particularly likely to influence the academic fields and non-academic sites for intellectual work that do take black theorists and cultures seriously.

The limited role of English-language professional philosophy notwithstanding, a broader and more explicitly political form of aesthetic theory has been extremely important to the black aesthetic tradition. This approach dovetails with, and in many cases explicitly engages, the arguments that one finds among literary critics, cultural studies theorists, continental philosophers and radical political activists. The crucial questions here have less to do with the nature of art and taste than with the relations between ideas about art and taste, the practices and institutions that embody and express those ideas and the broader cultural, political, existential and phenomenological questions that those ideas and practices raise (Carvalho, para. 3). This broader theoretical orientation has played a prominent role in the history of black aesthetics, with figures in the major twentieth-century movements developing and deploying detailed theories about the relationships between expressive culture, oppression, justice and freedom – sometimes in conversation with philosophical thinkers from the Western canon, and sometimes not. More recently, this orientation has developed in a couple of important directions in and near the academy. It has led some professional philosophers, like Nkiru Nzegwu and Kofi Agawu, to engage critically with analytic aesthetics, for example to reframe questions about the nature of art and taste by appealing to examples from Africa. And it has led many critics and theorists to explore and join the debates in cultural studies, post-colonial theory and subaltern studies, all of which promise more direct engagements with black life-worlds than professional philosophy has typically encouraged or allowed.

4. *The Tradition*

There is of course much more to say about the prescriptive and philosophic tasks that students of black aesthetics might undertake. It will be easier to say some of what remains after a brief discussion of black aesthetics as an historical tradition. I have referred to it in this way throughout, without saying much, except in passing, about what this tradition is, or who has done what in it. Now that some of the necessary ideas and background are available, it is possible to say a bit more, and in the process to assemble still more resources for discussing the specifically philosophic preoccupations and burdens that mark the study of black aesthetics.

Despite its longevity as a practice, Black aesthetics emerged as a proper tradition only quite recently. Intellectual traditions have institutional conditions, including shared criteria for achievement or success, and canons of recognized achievement on which to build. Nothing like this materialized on a wide scale in Black aesthetics until the 1920s or so, when the ‘New Negro’ and Negritude movements emerged. At this point Africans on the continent and in the diaspora began to create networks of cooperative inquiry and exchange, to find reliable support for these networks, and promulgate their work in journals and books. Even prior to this moment, though, there were important developments that we can plot against a backdrop of evolving ambitions. It may go without saying that this plotting will be idealized, incomplete, and highly provisional.³

4.1. PRE-MODERNITY

As an empirical matter, there are continuities between black African and diasporal expressive practices, both at the level of cultural practice and at the level of philosophic orientation to the tasks of expression. And these continuities may well reach into mediaeval and ancient African cultures. That said, the idea of race in play here is an essentially modern idea: the idea that something called blackness could interestingly distinguish some people

from others in multiple dimensions made little sense before the fifteenth century or so.⁴ So to ask about the role of pre-modern Africa in black aesthetics is to invite a great number of detailed, empirical answers about aesthetic and philosophic commitments, none of which tell us anything yet about how to translate African norms into specifically *black* life-worlds. The imperatives of this cultural translation provide the occasion for philosophizing about black aesthetics in the idiom of critical race theory, which properly locates questions about ancient African cultures in the modern settings that seek to put these cultures to use. That is, there are philosophical questions to ask about the role of *the idea* of pre-modern Africa, construed either as the birthplace of classical African civilizations or as a site for savagery and barbarism. But these are questions not about ancient polities but about the development of *modern* racist or cultural nationalist ideologies.

4.2. CREOLIZATION

The first phase in the development of the black aesthetic tradition as a modern phenomenon begins with creolization, or the emergence of new cultural forms from the collision of pre-existing traditions. This process occurred wherever modern forces changed the conditions of African life, and required people to make meaning and order their lives in pan-ethnic settings. The most familiar version of this process is the one that grew out of the transatlantic slave trade and that shaped the African-descended cultures that we find throughout the Americas. But Africans elsewhere, including on the continent, managed similar processes of cultural change and blending – although members of formally colonized communities typically had to do less of this than peoples who were uprooted and resettled (Appiah 7–9). In all these settings, ‘heterogeneous crowds’ of uprooted Africans made themselves into less heterogeneous (but still of course not homogeneous) communities by creating shared practices and expressive cultures (Mintz and Price 18). The results of this process in the Americas come down to us in such familiar forms as the religious rituals of Vodun and Santeria, musical forms like *rara* and reggae and the multimodal performances of capoeira. Like all practices, these creolizations occasioned ongoing reflection about guiding norms and values. We can confidently assume that they also occasioned some broader reflection on the cultural blending that was taking place – on its nature, on the conditions that required it and on its value in adjusting to and altering the conditions.

4.3. CIVILIZATIONISM

The second key development in the black aesthetic tradition saw the themes of racial vindication and Eurocentric civilizationism⁵ added to the primary goal of cultural self-fashioning. At this stage, stretching more or less from the late eighteenth century to the late nineteenth, African-descended people used performances and aesthetic objects in European styles and settings not just to make meaning, but also to demonstrate to a sceptical world their capacity for culture and, hence, for civilization. Following in the footsteps of figures like Alexander Crummell, many people in this period uncritically accepted European ideas about African savagery, and were convinced that the benighted dark masses had to be ‘improved’ – that is, *civilized* – by the better, more cultured, more ‘Europeanized’ (or modern, or Christianized) members of the group. This period includes the poetry of Phyllis Wheatley (1753–1784); the speeches and writings of Frederick Douglass (1817–95); the emergence of the slave narrative (from about 1760); and the worldwide travels of the Fisk Jubilee Singers (beginning in 1871).

4.4. COUNTER-MODERNITY

By the end of the next stage of development, transethnic and transnational traditions of black cultural work were fully in development, and civilizationist ideas were beginning, slowly, to retreat. We can call this the ‘counter-modern’ stage, for a handful of reasons. The developments and figures in question fall within the chronological window usually reserved for artistic modernism, from roughly 1890 to 1940 (Williams 48–9), and often enjoyed sustained, mutually beneficial encounters with the techniques and canonical figures of mainstream modernism. In addition, the aspirations of the best-known figures during this period were vitally concerned with helping black folks achieve the condition of modernity – ‘with removing the ... black population from ... poverty, illiteracy, and degradation’ by, among other things, cultivating an urban, western-educated bourgeoisie to stand alongside, or guide, or replace, the black peasant and villager (Baker 4). At the same time, this black modernity was to be modernity with a difference – a *counter-modernity* infused with the distinctive ‘gifts’ of black people, uncorrupted, as yet, by the alienating forces of the Eurocentric civilization that had excluded them for so long. And the black modernist pursuit of modernity was itself often at odds with mainstream modernism, which often used an image of the primitive, uncorrupted black person as an inspiration for rejecting the bourgeois, industrial society that many blacks sought to repair and join.

The New Negro and Negritude movements are the most prominent and historically influential instances of this stage. In a process that crystallized in the 1920s and 1930s, figures like Aimé and Suzanne Césaire, W. E. B. Du Bois, Zora Neale Hurston and Alain Locke used art and criticism to cultivate new approaches to black identity, politics and culture. These artists, activists, critics and theorists had a great deal in common. They faced similar conditions, including the increasing virulence and ambitions of anti-black racism and the social ferment of the increasingly multicultural colonial metropolises. And they used similar resources, including Pan-African ideas, western educations, and, more systematically than ever before, the work of their peers and predecessors – including Locke’s path-breaking anthology, *The New Negro* and Du Bois’ pioneering text, *The Souls of Black Folk*.⁶

These counter-modern thinkers shared three basic goals. First, they accepted the old goal of racial vindication: they believed expressive practices could demonstrate the humanity, and human excellence, of African peoples. This conviction moved such strange bedfellows as Du Bois and Garvey, who agreed on little else, to stage lavish spectacles – historical pageants for the one, massive pomp-filled marches for the other – to reveal the depth and richness of African personhood. Second, they tempered their civilizationist impulses and undertook to develop Africa’s distinctive cultural ‘gift’ to the world (though they typically imagined this project in European terms). And third, they called for a reorientation of African consciousness, to be effected by recognizing the value, coherence, and uniqueness of ‘negro’ expressive culture. This exercise in consciousness-raising involved what later thinkers would call ‘decolonizing’ African minds: rooting out the white supremacist assumptions that led black people themselves to think of themselves as ugly and of black practices as unworthy of attention.

The aesthetic forms of black counter-modernity that we now associate with Harlem and Paris were the dominant forms, but of course not the only ones. In addition to the versions, sources, and counterparts of these movements in Cuba, Haiti and elsewhere in the diaspora, it is important to mention a distinctively feminist black aesthetic that emerged in the United States and spread its influence through the new media of

audio recording and transmission. While the black bourgeois pursuit of counter-modernity was driven by a politics of respectability, seeking (among other things) to disprove assumptions about black lasciviousness by counselling sexual temperance and feminine domesticity, blues singers like Bessie Smith and Gertrude 'Ma' Rainey openly asserted their independence and embraced the demands of sexual desire. In doing so, they subordinated bourgeois values to values drawn from poor and working-class communities; they broke with the patriarchal conventions that pushed female culture workers, like Jessie Fauset and Paulette Nardal, into the background, behind the more celebrated men, like Du Bois and Césaire, with whom they worked; and they provided a model of black feminist assertiveness, self-possession, and autonomy that was in some ways ahead of its time.⁷

4.5. DECOLONIZATION I.O (NATIONALISM)

The fourth stage in the development of Black aesthetics explicitly took up the task of cultural and psychological decolonization, in three basic ways. Fourth-wave Black aestheticians completely broke with civilizationism; they collapsed the externally oriented goal of racial vindication entirely into the inner-directed goal of consciousness-raising and they turned the commitment to expressive authenticity into a full-fledged cultural nationalist project, fuelled by the same political and cultural currents that drove mid-twentieth century liberation and anticolonial movements worldwide. This project found expression in the work of artists and critics like Amiri Baraka, Sonia Sanchez and Addison Gayle in the United States, and of heads of state like Leopold Senghor (a third-wave holdover) in Senegal and Kwame Nkrumah in Ghana.

This is the point at which the tradition of black aesthetics becomes fully self-conscious, and takes the name that I have been using for it. People like Addison Gayle and Larry Neal insisted on the self-conscious creation of non-European or non-white aesthetic principles, authentically Black principles that were meant to be more consonant with Black practices. Hence, these lines from writer Etheridge Knight: 'Unless the Black artist establishes a "Black aesthetic" he will have no future at all. To accept the white aesthetic is to accept and validate a society that will not allow him to live' (Fine 374). Hence, also the best known refrain from this era, revalorizing black bodies with the words, 'Black is Beautiful'. And just as texts and figures from the counter-modern moment circulated through the black world of the 1920s and 1930s, products and figures from this moment circulated through different sites of struggle against white supremacy. Figures in South Africa's Black Consciousness movement took inspiration from the counter-modern figures as well as from later figures like Nikki Giovanni and The Last Poets (Bofelo 193). At the same time, popular musical performers like Bob Marley, Miriam Makeba and James Brown undertook quite public shifts towards greater black or Pan-African consciousness.

There was a concrete, institutional counterpart to the psychocultural decolonization that the fourth wave of black aestheticians called for. Liberation movements actually achieved some of their goals, with the result that black artists, analysts and critics began to receive the attention, the positions and the rewards that had previously been reserved, in western societies, principally for white people. As a result, one consequence of the political and cultural shifts that included the black aesthetics, black power and anti-colonial movements was the opening of elite institutional spaces to writers like Toni Morrison and Wole Soyinka, both Nobel laureates; to scholars like Henry Louis Gates and Valerie Smith, both ensconced at elite US institutions; and to curators like Thelma Golden and

Okwui Enwezor, both charged in recent years with guiding some of the Western art-world's most prestigious institutions and biennial exhibitions.⁸

4.6. DECOLONIZATION 2.0 (FEMINISM AND QUEER THEORY)

In modern expressive culture as in modern politics, the imperatives of decolonization can easily get bound up with the imperatives of masculine self-aggrandizement. The twentieth-century struggle for black emancipation, whether waged by reformists or revolutionaries, remained for too many a struggle for black heterosexual manhood, with emancipation imagined as both condition and consequence of the black man assuming his rightful place at the head of the black family and/or nation. This patriarchal and phallogocentric stunting of black liberatory aspirations notwithstanding, decolonization is, in part, a matter of uprooting the structures of 'objectification and dehumanization' that inform and sustain the colonial and neocolonial projects (Alexander and Mohanty xxviii). To the extent that hegemonic conceptions of sex and gender are among these structures, the convergence of nationalism and patriarchy thus indicates the incompleteness of the decolonizing project.

The next stage of the black aesthetic tradition stepped into the gendered, sexualized gap between the aspirations and the achievements of the decolonization effort. Figures like Morrison, Alice Walker, Toni Cade Bambara, Michele Wallace, Audre Lorde, Ntozake Shange, Howardena Pindell and Bettye Saar were central to this stage in the United States, and achieved worldwide influence (Morrison and Walker, especially). These women produced art, literature, scholarship and criticism that reclaimed the legacy of 1920s blues feminism, with its embrace of sexuality. They moved beyond the nineteenth century's 'double-bind' argument about the dual impact of racism and sexism, to develop intersectional analyses of the mutually constitutive relationships between race, gender, class and sexuality. And they escaped the margins of the white feminist and male-dominated black-liberation movements, to create alternate spaces for cultural work by black women.⁹

Poet-writer-essayist(-lesbian-mother-warrior, she would add) Audre Lorde is a crucial figure here, not just because she 'made a significant contribution to the development of feminist theory,' but also because one key to that contribution was the way she 'actively resisted categorization' and 'consistently challenged all definitions of identity' (Pollard 908–9). She was in this way a progenitor of black queer theory, which combines queer theory's thoroughgoing repudiation of stable, discrete identity categories – beginning, historically and theoretically, with sex and gender – with an emphasis on the issues that arise from the racialization of some people as black. Artists and critics have been pivotal figures in this phase of the tradition, from reclaimed historical figures like Billie Holiday and Countee Cullen, to prescient forebears like James Baldwin, to recent figures like filmmakers Isaac Julien and Marlon Riggs, writer Cheryl Clarke and critic/scholar Kobena Mercer.

4.7. POST-BLACKNESS

We might think of the latest stage in the history of black aesthetics as the slightly sanitized translation of the black feminist and queer moment into the commodified sphere of popular and 'high' culture. The post-black moment, as curator Thelma Golden has inspired many to call it, is marked by the widespread sense that racial conditions have taken on novel configurations, and that old conceptions of a stable black identity cannot

countenance or illuminate this novelty (Golden 14). The most prominent of the older approaches to blackness – civilizationist, countermodern and nationalist – differed substantially, but usually began with assumptions about a stable black personality, culture or subject. At this last stage, though, blackness ceases to be a foundation and becomes a question, an object of scrutiny, a provisional resource at best, and, for some, a burden. Scepticism of and suspicion about blackness, even among cultural analysts and workers most committed to it, did not originate during this period: Alain Locke's pluralism and Ralph Ellison's cosmopolitanism make this clear. And the flowering of black feminism and queer theory in the 1970s and 1980s helped prepare the way for this last stage by insisting on intersectional analyses. But during this period the suspicion becomes widespread, as does the sense that racial conditions have shifted in ways that call the fact of racial identification into question.

Along with Golden, other important architects of this moment include philosophers Appiah 1992 and Lewis Gordon, artist Kara Walker and writer Trey Ellis. In a 1989 essay, Ellis signifies on and repudiates the previous era's call for a Black Aesthetic by describing the emergence of 'an open-ended *New Black Aesthetic* ... that shamelessly borrows and reassembles across both race and class lines' (Ellis 234). As Ellis' 'shameless borrowing' suggests, the thinkers in this period chafe at the constraints of the Black Arts movement's narrow nationalism, and seek an approach to expressive culture that reflects their experiences of a world in which racial boundaries are blurry, racial hierarchies have been (to some degree) subverted and single-minded forms of racial politics seem to have run out of steam. For post-black thinkers, nationalist ideas about cultural self-determination and about a unique African personality have been supplanted by individualist and often apolitical aspirations, and by appeals to intra-racial diversity and interracial commonalities (that is to say, by appeals to the fact that races comprise people who differ with respect to the other axes of social differentiation, and that these people are as a consequence interestingly connected to members of other races). Instead of aiming to vindicate black humanity or to express African ideals authentically, post-black aesthetics treats blackness not as its source but as its subject.

5. *Preoccupations and Themes*

The discussion to this point has already suggested some of the preoccupations of the black aesthetic tradition. Participants in this tradition have obviously been concerned with questions about the nature and limits of racial identity, relationship between art and politics, the prospects for black beauty and self-hood in an anti-black world and much else besides. Unlike the empirical questions of cultural continuities and retentions across the phases and migrations of the African diaspora, questions like these make room for contributions by philosophers *qua* philosophers.

Focusing on these broad philosophic preoccupations allows us to endorse a view that is similar to but subtly different from the view offered by art historian Richard Powell. Powell (15) says that the concept of the black aesthetic does not pick out the 'singular and unrealistically all-inclusive' cultural monolith that certain Pan-Africanists wanted to find; instead it denotes 'a collection of philosophical theories about the arts of the African diaspora ...'. Where he says 'theories', I would say 'arguments' or 'registers of inquiry'. And where he aims to cash out the essentially post-liberation and post-colonial standpoint of the black power era theorists, I want to provide a more expansive, thematically oriented perspective that allows us to locate the poets and dramatists of black power, along with much else, on a wider field of thought and action. In this section, then, I will attend

somewhat more carefully to some of the philosophic themes that emerge from the various moments in the black aesthetic tradition.

The first recurring theme has to do with the way racial conditions inflect the general existential considerations of despair, joy, meaningfulness and absurdity. These thoughts about existential joy and pain often take shape in light of questions like this: How is it possible to live under conditions of racial terror, exclusion and oppression? If the prospect of life's meaninglessness is terrifying, how much more terrifying is it to be enslaved, and stripped (as much as possible) even of the feeble existential armaments – religion, language, ties to one's ancestors and descendants – with which humans try to ward off despair? If, as Sartre says, hell is other people, what is it to face the threat of lynching, of other people treating the breaking and burning of your body as an occasion for celebration? The existential challenges of life under white supremacy have famously been the subject of black aesthetic production, from Countee Cullen's 'Yet Do I Marvel' and Billie Holiday's 'Strange Fruit' to the entire idiom of blues composition and performance. But it has also been the subject of aesthetic criticism and theory, from studies of black music by Angela Davis and Leroi Jones to Saidaya Hartman's remarkable study of slaves being forced to dance for their masters, to 'demonstrate' their contentment with their condition.

A second theme follows closely on the heels of the existential considerations raised before, and insists on the connections between the body and the questions of human existence. In light of the ineliminable connections between human consciousness and embodiment, we might ask how black people have borne up under the long-standing white supremacist injunction to demonize, brutalize and objectify black bodies. This question, call it the question of black beauty, becomes pressing because of the tight connection between race-thinking and the body. Race-thinking works by assigning social meanings to human bodies, by using the body as a metonym for broader social conflicts and dynamics. In this spirit, classical racialists treated black bodies as standing signifiers of disease, depravity and barbarism, and encapsulated this view in general judgements about black ugliness. Insisting on black beauty, and on the ideological and political dimensions of the stigmatization of black bodies, has been and remains a vital part of the work of black aesthetics. We might think in this connection of Cornel West's discussion of the modern recuperation of Greek aesthetics in 'A Genealogy of Modern Racism', or of Toni Morrison's novel, *The Bluest Eye*, which highlights and contests the hegemony of Eurocentric conceptions of bodily beauty, and poignantly delineates the links between race-related unease with one's own body image and broader forms of self-hatred. We might think also of the more recent discussions of the aesthetics of the female buttocks. From the tragic decline and death of the so-called Hottentot Venus at the beginning of the nineteenth century to the meteoric rise of Jennifer Lopez in the twentieth, what some forms of Spanish slang refer to as the *culo* has long been an overdetermined marker of racial difference. The rapper Sir Mix-a Lot famously took this phenomenon as the subject for his most popular tune, 'Baby Got Back'; while scholars like Janell Hobson and journalistic cultural critics like Erin Aubrey have taken up the same topic, while attending much more responsibly to the interpenetration of race with gender, colonial status and other axes of social differentiation.

A final theme has to do with racial politics, and with questions like this: how should considerations of racial solidarity affect the practices of cultural and individual artistic expression? This question, call it the question of racial piety and politics, clearly animates Du Bois' famous address, 'Criteria of Negro Art', which unashamedly calls for art to function as racial 'propaganda' on the grounds that 'all art is propaganda, and ever must be' (Du Bois, 'Criteria' 1000). The question even more clearly drives much of the art,

theory and criticism of the Black Power era – much of which tracked Maulana Karenga's (32) argument that 'Black art must expose the enemy, praise the people, and support the revolution'. Post-black artists, in contrast, reject these political imperatives, in part because they tend to obscure the complex intra-racial divisions and extra-racial relations, involving gender, class and the like, that nationalist campaigns too often bury beneath masculinist rhetoric and posturing, and that feminist and queer thinkers have helped bring to light.

6. Conclusion

The point of the previous section – and, by extension, of all the other sections, which prepared the way – was to provide a provisional point of entry to the philosophical study of black aesthetics. I have tried to define the subject not by setting out an exhaustive list of philosophic problems, but motivating and suggesting an open-ended set of themes. These themes mark areas of inquiry that have emerged over the last five centuries or so, as artists, critics and theorists have sought to understand and navigate the aesthetic conditions and consequences of being racialized as black.

A different selection and arrangement of themes could do this work just as well, and might also illuminate issues that I left unexplored. Several omissions are particularly noteworthy. I have said nothing about the theme of migration and mobility, attended to by people as different as M.I.A. and Paul Gilroy, or about the theme of black invisibility or visibility, as discussed most famously by Ralph Ellison. I have sidestepped the achievements of figures like Edouard Glissant and Augusta Savage, who either fell into the gaps of my idealized history or suffered from my almost total inattention to the visual arts. And I have said next to nothing about the gradual opening of contemporary philosophical aesthetics to critical race theory and black expressive culture, as evidenced by the work of people like Tommy Lott, Dan Flory and Monique Roelofs.

This last omission betrays my own orientation to the subject, about which I have also said very little. My sense is that the greatest philosophic contributions of the black aesthetic tradition, and its best opportunities for continued relevance, derive from its commitment to various forms of social criticism. Because of their typically fraught and oppositional relationship to the mainstream expressive cultures of modernity, and because of their recognition of the role that expressive culture plays in reflecting and reinforcing the ruling ideas of a society, early black aestheticians anticipated the kind of genealogical, archaeological and self-excavating analyses later championed by Michel Foucault. An interest in black bodies and cultures in an anti-black world leads directly, in my view, to this sort of critical analysis, in at least two forms. Cultural criticism, informed by the interpretive techniques of the art critic, lays bare the public meanings that aesthetic objects deploy and exploit. And ethico-political self-criticism highlights and contests the insidious workings of these dominant cultural meanings on the individual psyche. This double-barrelled criticism is where the action is for black aesthetics, as far as I am concerned, not least because it is where the greatest need is. Large swaths of the contemporary world are saturated with cultural images, many of them drawn from archives of old racial symbols. These symbols shape our perceptions of the real world, leading global policy-makers to treat dark people displaced by civil war or natural disaster as savages from the opening scenes of 'King Kong', and encouraging police officers to see unarmed black men as dangerous thugs from 'Dirty Harry'. Examining and undermining the links between expressive culture and the volitional/perceptual bases of social stratification is as important now as it was in the fifties, when Ellison's *Invisible Man* explored the way com-

plex human individuals get obscured in the public mind by figments of the public imagination.

My own preoccupations aside, I hope to have suggested the basic shape and most prominent elements of black aesthetics as a philosophic phenomenon. The tradition has not been and is not likely to become a site for the kind of philosophic work that has sustained the field of analytic aesthetics. But it does raise questions of deep and abiding philosophic import. Recognizing this fact may help to overcome the mutual indifference, and occasional hostility, that has historically marked the relationship between English-language philosophy and black aesthetic criticism, analysis and expression.

Short Biography

Paul C. Taylor is an associate professor of philosophy at Temple University, and a founding member of the Jamestown Project at Harvard Law School. He received his bachelor's degree in philosophy from Morehouse College and his PhD in philosophy from Rutgers University. He writes on aesthetics, race theory, Africana philosophy, pragmatism and social philosophy and is the author of the book *Race: A Philosophical Introduction* (Polity, 2004). His recent writings include a co-authored piece on video model Vida Guerra, and he is working on a book called *Black is Beautiful: A Philosophy of Black Aesthetics*.

Notes

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¹ The *Encyclopedia of African American Society*, for example, defines the Black Aesthetic as '[o]ne of the basic ideas within the Black Arts movement' (Jaynes 102). The approach that I have described as anachronistic has become more common as scholars have grown increasingly interested in the continuities between the sixties and earlier eras. See Smethurst and Sell.

² On this approach to the idea of racialism, and the distinction between its classical and critical forms, see Taylor (11, 38, 72).

³ The attempt to break history into periods requires idealization and, to some degree, distortion. Three forms of distortion are worth mentioning at the outset. First, I will say little about the years of reaction that the key moments below spawned, or about the numerous interracial connections that enabled and enriched much of this history. Second, the story I will tell takes place against the backdrop of monumental political and economic changes, from imperial warfare through cold wars to terror wars, from mercantilist globalization through struggles over industrial democracy to post-industrial globalization. All of this must be kept in mind, but for now also kept in the background, for reasons of space. And third: agency and resistance are ever-present, though not omnipresent, features of the history to follow. Black peoples brought themselves into being, albeit under the pressures of white supremacy. They were not the passive creations of others, and their agency was at points in every stage devoted to the project of emancipatory struggle. Having thus registered the centrality of the fight for justice to this history, I will not insist on it in the text.

⁴ Or so I, and many others, have argued. See Taylor and Smedley.

⁵ I have borrowed this term from Wilson Moses (229), who uses it to indicate a commitment to the idea that social progress requires development along a path 'that replicates, or at least resembles, the history of Western Europe ...'.

⁶ On the transnational connections between the Paris intellectuals and the New Yorkers, see Julien ('Negritude') and Sharpley-Whiting.

⁷ On the overlooked contributions of the 'Negritude women', see Sharpley-Whiting. On the 'blues feminism' of the 1920s singers, see Davis and Tillet.

⁸ Enwezor curated Documenta 11 (2002) and Seville 2006, while Golden heads the Studio Museum of Harlem and was on the curatorial team for the 1993 Whitney Biennial.

⁹ Perhaps the best-known emblem of this moment is Aretha Franklin's cover of Otis Redding's 'Respect', which turned it into an anthem of female sexual assertiveness. At around the same time, Franklin would release an album of traditional black Christian music – with a picture of herself in African garb on the cover.

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