Black Aesthetics, Black Value

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A problem with constructing black aesthetics is whether *aesthetics* has been so colonized that its production would be a form of colonizing instead of decolonial practice. This article explores the problem through contextualizing and exploring recent theoretical responses to it.

Since the publication of Addison Gayle Jr.'s classic anthology *The Black Aesthetic* (1972), the titular phrase has been a feature of academic and public intellectual discussions of black arts, or what some prefer to call "black expressive culture." Though much is written about what black people produce—whether as entertainment, as what finds its way into galleries or museums or onto stages of "high society," or as rallying cries for revolt in times of outrage, for solace in those of mourning—interrogation into its peculiarly *philosophical* significance has been rare. Amiri Baraka (1963), Angela Y. Davis (1999), W. E. B. DuBois (1903), Ralph Ellison (2003), and Frantz Fanon (1952; [1991] 1961) produced pioneering work on blues and spirituals that set the stage for much to come, but their considerations were often locked in the goal of other aims. Black aesthetics, *qua aesthetics*, was often left for when time afforded greater luxury of reflection.

This is not to say that there weren't those for whom, when it came to philosophical reflection, there was no more appropriate time than the present. Black philosophical reflections, including those *on being black*, were in no short supply.

Two cases were writings by Alain Locke, compiled by Leonard Harris in *The Philosophy of Alain Locke* (1989), and my book *Fanon and the Crisis of European Man* (Gordon 1995b), where I argued for the aesthetics of everyday life in liberation and revolutionary thought. By the aesthetics of everyday life, I mean the phenomenological insight that everyday existence is an extraordinary achievement. It involves being able to live in a world of the human production of value, including that of the "ordinary." I joined Locke in a basic observation: a livable world for human beings requires more than material, moral, and political conditions. Locke,

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however, didn't develop such thought. An area of research that placed much focus on black aesthetic production and as a consequence could and should have offered more with respect to related philosophical reflection is Black British cultural studies, whose figurehead was and continues to be the late Stuart Hall. The impact of cultural studies, in terms of offering theoretical tools with which to study what black people produce, especially under the rubric of "popular culture" in the groundbreaking work not only of Hall but also of his students Hazel V. Carby (1999), Paul Gilroy (1993), and Kobena Mercer (1994, 2016), is enormous. A full arsenal of tropes from mostly European critical, Marxist, and poststructuralist theory was brought to bear on nearly every dimension of black life as offered in fashion, film, music, theater, and even comportment of the body. Missing in much of this literature, however, is an actual *theory of aesthetics*. A form of epistemic imperialism was at work in which, by way of practice, black life was ultimately devalued as a source of theoretical reflection on itself (see, e.g., Gordon 1995b, 1997, 2000). Aesthetics, if understood as also the theory about what is involved in the study of *aesthesis*, the realm of sensory and symbolic life through which human beings in effect make themselves at home with reality, should be brought to the fore. It is at the core of how human beings live in the world, not only in terms of lives worth living but also in the value of those living it.

Some Recent Challenges

Valuing black life is no small matter. Indeed, a great deal of history was recently made by Alicia Garza, a queer black woman, simply tweeting the hashtag #Black-LivesMatter. That there are now organizations, street protests, and a body of literature studying this phenomenon across the globe attests to the degree to which a good deal of Euromodernity was committed to black lives *not* mattering.

By "Euromodernity," I don't mean "European people." The term simply means the constellation of convictions, arguments, policies, and a worldview promoting the idea that the only way legitimately to belong to the present and as a consequence the future is to be or become European. It places "European" as a necessary condition of belonging, continuation, and selfhood—features of all *Modernities*—which, in effect, relegates those who do not fit either to the past or to kinds of nowhere and no-man's-land, what Fanon (1952) called the "zone of nonbeing." Thus any movement or theory that advances black lives belonging *to the present and future* violates the norms of that enterprise. Their "mattering" becomes a challenge to the secular theodicy of an epoch premised on their *not mattering* or, put simply, their absence. Theodicy is the theological enterprise of accounting for

the compatibility of a benevolent, omnipotent, and omniscient being in a world of evil and injustice. Debates range from whether such a deity is responsible for life's infelicities to whether misery is strong support for atheism. A secularized theodicy addresses similar concerns regarding a system: is the system the source of suffering, and, if so, does that make the system illegitimate? Classic theodicean responses were that (1) human beings don't know a deity's ultimate purpose and (2) the deity's goodness includes free will and nonintervention. The logic places blame on human beings instead of the deity. A secularized theodicy treats a given system as intrinsically good, which means infelicities must be accounted for elsewhere. Returning to black lives, the question shifts to what it is about black people that makes their lives miserable. Worse, if the system is intrinsically good and just, then the appearance of suffering is a violation of its harmony. Something is wrong with the *appearance* of infelicity. Radicalized, as illegitimate, such evil *must not exist.* Black lives, then, are marked by what could be called *illicit appearance.* This observation puts the project of black aesthetics, which calls for the valuing of black life, in a collision course with Euromodern thought. By way of a recent comparison, #BlackLivesMatter placed itself in a semiological battle with governing norms of signification through simply stating, in effect, that black people are human beings and should be afforded the dignity, love, and respect of their fellow human beings. Even if the aims weren't such, the reality of making such a claim is unavoidably political.

Theorizing formal issues of black aesthetics and how they play out in the historical events that produced antiblack racism is a difficult undertaking. Given the impact of historical forces, imagine working through such a task in the current situation of havoc wrought by neoliberal and neoconservative global triumphalism of the past forty years. Though academic discussion tends to focus on neoliberalism, we should also look to its right-wing partner, for a variety of reasons. The first is the historic fact of its role in recent history. There simply was and continues to be a neoconservative movement. Second, its historic role has been to reduce the alternatives available by pulling liberalism so much to the right that genuine "left" alternatives often cease to be part of national and international conversations of power.

An error of most discussions of "right" and "left" is that the terms are placed in a presumed symmetry with each other. Their logic is such, however, that doing so leads to much confusion. To understand both, start with the premise of dissatisfaction with the present. The Right's credo might be summed up in the proverbial phrase "Things aren't what they used to be." Thus the Right often longs for the return of an avowedly better past. In the context of Euromodernity, this means pri-

marily a society committed to capitalism. There is, however, an additional element of the Right. The nostalgia for the past is also a belief, perhaps psychoanalytically motivated, in law, order, and security. Again, appealing to Euromodernity, we could easily trace this line of reasoning back to the English philosopher Thomas Hobbes, whose *Leviathan* ultimately argued for a well-ordered society as one that assures security. The security-oriented society leads inevitably to the question: how many liberties is one willing to give up for one's security?

Liberalism, by contrast, tends to be future-oriented, even as its dissatisfaction with the present also reaches into the past. The basic credo in this case is that even what was done well could be made better. Underlying this is a conviction that the unleashing of liberties creates more opportunities for a better society. This leads to conceptions of the good society as the better society always slightly out of reach. Improvement requires bringing many ideas, even unpopular ones, to the proverbial table. Looking at the conservative, the liberal advocates tolerance. This places liberalism in a handicapped position, since the conservative is under no obligation to adhere to liberal values. Identifying an enemy to security, the conservative is consistent in seeing an enemy to be eliminated. Pulled to the right, liberalism becomes *neo*liberalism through a commitment to capitalism (privatization), with some safeguards for civil liberties. Pushed more to the left, liberalism focuses on liberties to the point of license (libertarianism); ultimately, such a path leads to anarchy.

What both of these philosophies profoundly share is antagonism to blacks. For neoliberalism, antiblack racism is a system directed against a "race" or *group* of people. An ideological system that recognizes only *individuals*, it prevents black people from having rights *as black people*. This becomes frustrating for blacks, since no black person is ever discriminated against *as an individual*. Racism is about a system directed against groups of people made into races, not about John or Mary or, in recent times, Abdul or Fatimah. It is about Abdul or Fatimah as or as *presumed to be Arabs or Muslims*. Under neoliberalism, black people thus become collateral damage of its conceptions of liberties, the person, and rights.

Neoliberal denial of racist histories of illegitimate black appearance, the logic of locked-away blackness, and Manichaean violence are their hallmark. The first is well established in the heavily racialized prison industrial complex of the United States, which is premised on the notion of many legitimately incarcerated *individuals* who have committed crimes instead of on the injustice of targeting the racial groups to which they belong and making them vulnerable to convictions for crimes they did not commit. The second is evinced in the constant stream of police killings of black people in countries with a history of antiblack racism. In

those instances, the process leading to the sentence of death is the judgment of the officer, whose defense is always a denial of racist intent. Detailing the toxic history of law enforcement against black people is beyond the scope of this article, as there are more than one hundred years of scholarship on the subject (e.g., Alexander 2010; Davis 1983; DuBois 1903). The upshot is the secular theodicean thesis of systemic integrity marked by black exclusion.

In my writings on Fanon, I have characterized this problem of black people being structurally outside as characteristic of what racism ultimately aims to achieve. Ethical life, for instance, is premised on a world of selves and others. All selves are also others, and all others are also selves. Racism, however, lays claim to a category of people who are neither selves nor others. They thus stand also outside the realm of ethics. Among those people, there is a lived contradiction. Though neither being self nor being other is imposed on them, they live each day in relation to each other as selves and others. When they look at those imposing the outside status—the zone of nonbeing—on them, they see others doing so, and they impute to those others the lived reality of selves. This is the classic logic of colonialism and racism. Human beings live an interactive world of dialectical possibilities. Colonialism and racism impose a world of contraries, where there is no dialectical interaction but instead simply the demand for universally separate terms. In South Africa, this was called *apartheid*; in the United States, it was Jim Crow. The grammar of such societies demands such separation, which is why, despite their claims of having eliminated it, there is the constant production of separation at institutional levels. Since the separation is presumed just, transgressing it becomes a violation of right. If it were right for there to be the absence of certain people in the social world of self and others, their appearance, their entry into that world, would thus be illicit. They commit, in other words, *the crime of appearing.*

Fanon argued that it was pointless to demonstrate nonviolent commitments when engaged in struggles for social change, because *changing the system is violence*. It is so because of the presumed legitimacy of the system. Why change a just system? This is why he argued that colonization reaches not only epistemic levels (colonization of thought) but also moral ones (the idea of maintaining colonialism on moral grounds). Preserving colonialism as a moral enterprise jeopardizes the legitimacy of morality for those committed to eliminating colonialism. If political work for social transformation receives the charge of being "immoral," then, Fanon argued, so be it. Political commitment supervenes. The question that follows is whether such also emerged at aesthetic levels. The answer of many black revolutionaries, including Fanon, was resolutely yes.

A problem with constructing black aesthetics is, then, as proposed at the outset, whether *aesthetics* has been so colonized that its production would be a form of colonizing instead of decolonial practice.

Not "Just Aesthetics"

I've argued over the years (Gordon 1997, 2000, 2008, 2014) that colonial and racist theory necessitated at least three intellectual responses from those it degrades: (1) critical reflection on what it means to be human, (2) meditations on freedom, and (3) a metacritique of reason. The human world is not, in my view, reducible to a single element but is instead capable of multiple elements manifested in complex, interweaving relationships of meaning. This is because of the human capacity to produce not just worlds but *human* ones. The idea emerges from my work in philosophy of culture, which is connected to my theory of dimensionality. Many physicists, including Albert Einstein, conceived of dimensionality in spatial terms, where time, for instance, as a fourth dimension, is regarded as a "place," in accordance with which one could properly ask at what "location" in time an event occurs. If we understand the conventional interpretation of time as space as a metaphor, however, we should think of dimensions as manifestations of aspects of reality. Thus consciousness, for example, is not simply an emergence but also a dimension through which mind (another dimension) could come about. The technology of mind moving farther is language, and the degree of richness it offers discloses other forms of reality in the way electricity could generate magnetism and light.

A manifestation of reality disclosed through the communicative and symbolic richness of language is culture, which, too, is a dimension. As should be evident, no dimension is self-contained but instead functions as a key to the manifestations, simultaneously, of other aspects of reality. Aesthetic reality is such. It emerges as how human beings live *as deserving value* in its full range, from meaning to absurdity, pleasure to disgust, joy to sadness, and imagination to ritualized repetition. Aesthetics is not, then, the dessert we have after our nutritional needs have been met but instead, as perhaps also dessert should be understood, part of the entire constellation of meeting such needs. It is as central to what it means to live a human life as the various other converging dimensions of human existence.

This means not delinking aesthetics from freedom and metacritical reflections on reason. That aesthetics is connected to both could be illustrated through an example I love to mention at my lectures on the topic. A few years ago I was to address a community of academics and activists in Grahamstown, South Africa.

I had shown up very early for the talk and noticed a piano in the meeting hall. As few people were there, I decided to give it a go. One of my hosts immediately walked up and informed me it was out of tune.

"It doesn't matter," I replied, and then sat down and played some blues and jazz until it was time to speak.

My hosts came over after the audience's applause and voiced, perplexed, that they thought the piano was out of tune.

"It is," I answered.

"It didn't sound so," one answered.

"Yes, it's out of tune. I just played it differently."

What many musical artists from the blues to jazz to R & B to hip-hop know is that the ultimate goal of musical performance is to make music. All "out of tune" means is "tuned to a different frequency." A similar observation could be made about time, rhythm, and other aspects of musical performance. The philosophical message here is that the ability to express music in different ways is a manifestation of freedom and also a metacritical reflection on what constitutes music. Its implications for other forms of human practice—such as building and governing social institutions—are similar. What ultimately is the point of calling for democracy if we cling to models that don't groove—that is, don't exemplify the people's living engagement, participation, and responsibility for institutions of power and their creative transformation?

More recently, Paul C. Taylor (2016), a theorist inspired by cultural studies and whose primary intellectual vocation is philosophical aesthetics, produced a work, *Black Is Beautiful*, that, in my view, pushes such reflections and this field of inquiry into the right direction.

Black Aesthetics

History is not devoid of theoretical study of black aesthetic production. But practitioners have fallen afoul of many of the fallacies involved in the study of things black. These include (1) the presumption of offering legitimacy; (2) the effort to rewrite such study into an orbit of affirmed Eurocentricity, often under the guise of an avowed formalism (in effect, study of black art without black people and positive blackness); and (3) though not exhaustively so, disavowal of black art as anything more than ritual or entertainment. Fanon saw this third problem in his discussion of white critical responses to Louis Armstrong (favorable) versus Charlie Parker (unfavorable) or, in reference to genre, swing blues versus bebop. In *The Damned of the Earth*, Fanon (1991 [1961]) relished the consternation bebop

unleashed among such critics. Blues swing, in his view, relied on racism and white approval, whereas bebop conducted one of the great sins in racist societies: pursuing art in which white approbation is ultimately irrelevant. In *Bad Faith and Antiblack Racism* (Gordon 1995a), I argued that one of the great fears of white supremacy is its irrelevance. Exoticism was one of the great defenses against this, where whiteness relies on being the purveyor of all things legitimate. Such a goal cannot be maintained where the three above-proposed fallacies do not hold.

Taylor declares that as a philosopher of aesthetics and black liberation he has always sought works that combined both. Their meeting as "Black aesthetics" is a more complicated idea, however, than most readers may think. For instance, drawing on an insight from Fanon in *Black Skin, White Masks*, I intentionally placed a capital *B* on the word *Black* in this formulation to signal a subtext of Taylor's meditation. In Fanon's famous fifth chapter, "The Lived-Experience of the Black," the dignity of asserting an intersubjective point of view raised the question of agency in which the black (seen from the outside) becomes the Black (a valued perspective in the world). Though aware, and critical, of the derisive lowercase *b* of *black*, where the humanity of racially designated black subjects is brought into question, Taylor is interested in the lived reality of such people as subjects of value. In effect, then, the aesthetic concern extends beyond the descriptive question of sensory experience and the relations such experience encumbers into the adjudicative and normative questions of the status and evaluation of that experience. Put differently, if black people lack an inner life, a point of view, or an apprehension of "their" condition, there is no evaluative framework or grounding available to them except from the perspective of those who study "them." If, however, Black people emerge where there is in effect a point of view that, in today's parlance, "matters," then aesthetic apprehension, perception, or experience becomes an expression, if we will, of the humanity of the subject experiencing it. The questions of Black aesthetics and Black humanity are, then, symbiotic.

Taylor (2016: 23–24) formulates "aesthetic theory [as] what we do when we ask deeper questions about the status or meaning of the concepts employed in aesthetic inquiry—questions like 'What is art?' and 'Are judgments of human beauty really about beauty, or are they about something else?'" His book is thus *about aesthetics through explorations of problems endemic to this area of aesthetics*, wherein Black aesthetics compels such metatheoretical reflections.

This should come as no surprise for anyone working in Africana thought or on anything black in other proverbial walks of life, since the emergence of blackness always raises an indictment of avowed universalities premised on black absence. If, that is, blackness is part of social reality's repertoire, then its exclusion requires

explanation. The reassertion of the universality of its formal exclusion would in effect be a legitimation of erasure; identifying the illegitimacy of such exclusion raises the problem of the initially avowed universal claims. The avowed universality collapses into a revealed particularity, which shifts the question from an initial theorizing of phenomena to an investment in a proposed model of doing so. The philosophical issues of Black aesthetics, like those of other parts of Africana philosophy, always raise metaphilosophical concerns. Is Black aesthetics legitimately a philosophical enterprise only if it is simply an application of professional philosophy? Recognizing that much of professional philosophy suffers from tunnel vision (i.e., confusing a portion of reality with the larger picture) reveals the fallacy here. If it is not an "application" of what is in effect *white philosophy*, what are the problems and the solutions to those problems it offers? Must the non-application of white philosophy lead, however, to a form of theoretical apartheid in which hegemonic philosophy and Africana philosophy stand as contraries that don't meet?

Taylor explicitly rejects this last possibility, which makes the "To whom is this written?" straightforward: to anyone interested in engaging these questions. And for those who are not? Such people may discover that its reflections turn out to be significant for their own theoretical concerns in aesthetics.

To achieve his task, Taylor draws on Hall's (2005) approach of identifying Black aesthetic works, which Taylor (2016) calls "expressive culture," as "assemblies," which he also describes as "bricolage" and other formulations fashionable in cultural studies. He then adds what he calls an "immediatist phenomenology," which focuses on a crucial issue about blackness in Black aesthetics—namely, the status of its *appearance*.

Since blacks and Blacks emerge out of Euromodernity, Taylor turns to Martin Jay's important discussion of that modernity's ocular fetish, which Jay (1999) calls "ocularcentrism." Recall *Euro*modernity's tendency to treat European cultural practices as culture *tout court*, which leads not only to inflated claims from universal (applying over a particular set of subjects) to *the universal* (that which makes anything become universal) but also to the presumed equivalence of Europeans with, as Sylvia Wynter (2006) and others have argued, modern *man*. As my focus is on Taylor, I won't get into the details of why I disagree with Jay. A short version is that Jay's argument strikes me as confusing technologies of transferring and communicating meaningful experiences, on the one hand, with their limits, on the other. Before the emergence of audio technology, for instance, music could only reach subsequent generations through being performed by those who did the same with previous generations in a chain of events from the past. That is why

the stories eventually codified in the Torah, or the Hebrew Bible, were spoken or why *The Odyssey*, for instance, was sung across generations. Their eventually being written meant that subsequent generations could read them and, if they wish, perform them. Similarly, music was then transferred through written music (a visual connection to at best imagined forms of hearing that were then actually performed). Much is lost in such transfers, but at the same time much is added, as their meaningfulness must "fit" or be comprehensible to contemporary performers and their audience. The eventual emergence of audio technologies such as radios, records, analog tapes, CDs, Wave, and MP3s shifted the focus to recorded performance. Audiovisual technologies, such as television and mobile devices, bring the two worlds together, but the visual aspect is now contingent since music or audio-speech could be enjoyed without seeing the performer or performance. This concept of fit is already aesthetically loaded (in good ways), since it signifies a relationship of being at home or belonging. It also addresses an important subtext of Taylor's meditation, since the black and the Black, as Taylor reflects on his own intellectual training, are differentiated through not belonging in some ways and striving for alternative models of belonging in others. I refer to this phenomenon of blacks not belonging to the world in which they are indigenous—the Euromodern world—as *black melancholia* (Gordon 2012).

Nonbelonging is a challenging feature of Black aesthetics and a major reason behind Taylor's explorations of ocularcentrism. Seeing and being-seen for blacks are, after all, complicated matters posed by the addition of experience, but *as what*? Taylor (2016) identifies four elements of such experience when seeing but especially being seen as "black," and erased: presence, personhood, perspectives, and plurality. Each results in forms of "invisibility" in which nonbeing, nonhuman, non–point of view, and nondiversity derail and yet also produce important theoretical considerations. To these four forms of invisibility I would also add reason. Blacks being seen as anathematic to reason results in presuppositions of intrinsic unjustifiability of blacks, Blacks, and blackness as objects of study. The consequence is also disciplinary, where blacks cannot "fit" into disciplines except as problems or, worse, as failure. There are paradoxes here, such as "fitting through not fitting" or "failing properly to fail." Or, as I have formulated this in my studies of Fanon, including, most recently, *What Fanon Said* (Gordon 2015): *struggling against unreasonable reason reasonably*. Where blacks do not fit, the question becomes: what is wrong with *them*? We see here a form of disciplinary theodicy (Gordon 2006), where the integrity of the discipline or system requires maximizing its internal consistency through rendering blacks *external*. In other words: what does it feel like (which is properly *aesthesis*) and thus mean to be a problem?

Invisibility thus becomes a major theoretical problem for the project of Black aesthetics as a properly intellectual enterprise. Rejecting disappearance, blacks could opt to become what Fanon (1952) calls "actional" (becoming Blacks), even where their conscious aim isn't one of articulating a Black identity but is instead an everyday, uninhibited way of living in the world. A prevailing misrepresentation of black people, for instance, is that of an obsessive preoccupation with becoming white or at least no longer being black. Yet this doesn't match the facts of the lived experience of most black and especially Black people. Antiblack racial awareness tends to come in where racism intrudes on everyday experience, which is why Fanon famously refers to being torn apart and subsequently reassembled when a little white boy pointed to him and shouted, "Look, a *nègre*!" (ibid.).

The consciousness needn't emerge from negative experience. It could emerge when pro-black projects come to the fore, as in group membership, institutions of worship, collective celebrations, play, or partying. The question of agency is also evident through the production of meaning, where internally black symbols (what black people live or practice among each other without reflection) are placed on an activity or mode of appearance (brought to reflection). In debates around phenomena such as "bleaching" or "lightening" the skin, for instance, I do think there are black women and men who aren't lying to themselves when they say they are not trying to be white. We often forget the aesthetic value placed on appearing "mixed" in many black communities and even the blackness of mixture. There are black people critical of Beyoncé about a variety of things, but none, to my knowledge, claim that she is not black. The same applied to the late musician Prince and the late singer Lena Horne.

This question of agency in terms of internal meaning faces an important obstacle, however, at the level of political transformation. However creative the internal production of meaning may be, remaining inward as an expression of agency becomes a form of bad faith when forced. Deciding to remain internal is an expression of power—a key feature of political action—when one could viably turn outward and affect people and institutions beyond one's own group. Moving from theorizing authenticity and music, both of which could be performed exclusively within black communities, to miscegenation and interraciality, which requires black people reaching beyond black communities—that is, moving from analyzing the internal to interaction with the external—requires exploration of the themes of Black thought in the face of Euromodernity. Thinking back to melancholia, the challenge is to assert not an Afromodernity as a mirror of Euromodernity but instead a possibility of belonging to what shatters mimicry and imitation as conditions of possibility.

A central problem of Black thought is antiblack societies' systemic presupposition of legitimate black invisibility and bondage. As supposedly legitimate absence, this makes black efforts at freedom and the concomitant expectations of fully human status a violation of the norms of antiblack societies. Put differently, asymmetrical power relations of white over black mean that the assertion of a Black aesthetic of autonomous Black value—of being valuable and a source or agent of value—is presumed not only illegitimate but also unethical and politically dangerous. The political danger is that such efforts do worse than lead to the demand for equality. That, after all, would keep white supremacist and antiblack standpoints of legitimate sites of value intact. If actually autonomous, such autonomy would render white legitimation or recognition *irrelevant*. This option introduces some important twists into the argument.

Rejecting white recognition offers a conception of equality beyond formal declarations of being so. As most whites don't seek legitimation of their aesthetic life from blacks, blacks ceasing to solicit such from whites (and other groups dominating blacks) would be an act of equality in terms *of what is absent*—that is, the quest for recognition. This breaking out of the dialectics of recognition—of epistemic and aesthetic dependency, so to speak—has political consequences. In rendering white supremacist valuing, legitimation, and recognition irrelevant, the focus shifts to what Blacks can do to build different relations to the society and the self. The political aspect of this aesthetics is, then, the philosophical anthropology of possibility.

Still, as existentialists such as Ellison (2003), Fanon (1979), and even Toni Morrison (1993, 2000) would remind us, transcendence can escape reality only at a high price: madness. It is difficult to think of black people without thinking of saturated embodiment, to the extent that the expression "black bodies" is used so often today that nearly everyone, from critics to everyday people, seems to be forgetting *black people*. Taylor (2016) addresses this problem through what he calls "somatic aesthetics," which delves into negotiations of black embodiment, from stereotypes of steatopygia and macrophalluses to attraction, disgust, and fear. Somatic aesthetics also explores how Black people treat instances of black embodiment as problems as well as cause for celebration. There is political significance in how black people are embodied. Politics, as the social expression and expansion of power, a form of neutralizing, denaturalizing, or even domesticating how black people appear—black embodiment—brings the concerns of invisibility back to the fore. Hair is a case in point. That the presentation of black hair is in most contexts, save arts and entertainment and some areas of the academy, crucial for professional mobility speaks for itself. Debates over the specificity of hair,

body shape, smell, texture, and so on, are quagmires (see, e.g., Roelofs 2014), but Taylor's point, that exclusion of the political significance of racialized modes of presenting beauty renders them incoherent, holds.

We come, then, to two themes of near ubiquitous debate in contemporary Black aesthetics: "authenticity" and its critical bedfellow, "appropriation." I reject both discourses. The first appeals to conceptions of purity and genuineness that ultimately close off the humanity of human subjects. Consider the transformation of the ancient pagan Yuletide celebrations into modern-day Christmas and many instances of giving ancient practices new meanings. Living culture adapts, adopts, and reinterprets; instead of sterilizing itself into self-contained purity, the lived reality of culture is, as Jane Anna Gordon (2014) and Michael Monahan (2017) argue, a creolizing affair of relating, affecting, and being affected by an ever-increasing flow of people, things, and possibilities. Failing to do such, cultural practices stagnate and, in Fanon's (1991 [1961]; 1979) language, become zombified.

The appropriation thesis fails on at least three levels. The first is the refusal of agency to the people whose work is supposedly "appropriated." The second is the confusion of historical erasure with appropriation. And the third is the erasure of the value of what is being appropriated. The third is, in my view, highly relevant to aesthetics because it raises the question of whether a supposedly appropriated work is "worth" appropriating. An argument for worthiness is the joy of participation. The example of confusing an originally Norse celebration with a Christian holiday is simply a case of having history wrong—but only so at the level of origins, not at that of the newly lived meaning. A similar unfortunate reality of antiblack racism is that historic presumptions of whites being sole sources of agency and creativity have concealed the history of many original black and African practices and aesthetic artifacts, though *what* is misrepresented is the birth story of what ultimately belongs to humanity, because everyone enjoys it or at least finds it useful. What is nefarious is not whites' participation in a given aesthetic practice but instead their investment in the erasure of black origins as supposed evidence of black incapability. In other words, returning to the political aesthetics issue, whites playing blues or jazz or performing hip-hop isn't remarkable; the effort to rewrite the history of blues, jazz, or hip-hop as an art form created by whites is what is problematic. This argument suggests that the misrepresentation of history constitutes a form of theft, so to speak, but it's so at a level of the normative aesthetic presupposition of "fit" in historical terms—namely, what is at home with a racist whitewashing of history and, by extension, reality.

The theme of theft can obviously be continued through discussion of black

music and white performance. Ellison (and others) observed, for instance, that Black music is the leitmotif of the Americas and now, at least with popular music, the globe. The normative political aesthetic expectations are such, however, that the music is often preferred (read "considered marketable") in white embodiment beneath blackface. This love for black aesthetic performances and objects with the preference for their appearance through white embodiment brings to the fore the underlying critical question for Black aesthetics, which is the continual encroachment of *invisibilizing* from the white world. The political economy of art, after all, is premised on a world of aesthetic preferences, which are also racial.

Recent developments in Black aesthetics, especially in the work of Taylor, offer an outline for debate and for the production, through such contestation, of an ongoing field of inquiry. Our ideas can have a future if they are attuned to the reality faced by our descendants, who will in turn write our place in history. It is not about who "owns" thought and has the "right" to aesthetic experience but about what needs to be thought, the kind of thinking and experiencing worth fighting for in the quest for aesthetic self-respect.

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