1
Assembly, Not Birth

It is 1790, and you are at a seaport in South America. The port is part of the Dutch colony that has since become the country of Suriname, and it is a vital part, if the amount of traffic you see is any indication. One of the many ships here has just docked, and the crew is busy hustling its cargo above deck. The cargo is, in point of fact, hustling itself above deck. The ship, it turns out, is a slave vessel, just arrived from the Dutch Gold Coast, in what is now Ghana.

The forty or so people who make their way up from the cargo hold appear much the way you would have expected, had you expected them. They are dark-skinned and slender, and some give the appearance of being quite ill. They are solemn, apparently resigned to their new fates in their new world. Some have difficulty standing, and most are blinking in the sunlight.

These new African Americans surprise you in only one respect. They have stars in their hair.

Not real stars, of course. The new arrivals have had their heads shaved, leaving patches of hair shaped like stars and half-moons. Just as you begin to wonder how the ship's crew settled on this way of torturing their captives or entertaining themselves, you receive a second surprise. Not far from where you are standing, a man who seems to be the ship's captain is speaking with a man who seems to have some financial interest in the ship's cargo. The capitalist asks the captain why he cut the niggers' hair like that, and the captain disclaims all responsibility. "They did it themselves," he says, "the one to the other, by the help of a broken bottle and without soap."

1 Introduction

The story of slaves with stars in their hair comes from a groundbreaking anthropological study called *The Birth of African American Culture*.[1] The authors of the study, Sidney Mintz and Richard Price, report an eyewitness account

Black is Beautiful: A Philosophy of Black Aesthetics, First Edition. Paul C. Taylor.

of something like the events described above, and use it to support one of their key arguments. They mean to reject and correct certain received ideas about the pace at which Africans became Americans. They hold that distinctly African American cultures emerged quite early on, as enslaved Africans built wholly new practices and life-worlds out of the various old worlds – from different parts of Africa, as well as from Europe and the Americas – that collided in modern slave-holding societies. In the case of the new Americans in this story, the process of cultural blending began before they even reached shore, with an act of "irrepressible cultural vitality" that bridged their different ethnic backgrounds, and that transcended their presumably divergent ideas about adorning the body.

Mintz and Price might have made a slightly different and in some ways broader point, a point not about the birth of African American culture but about the birth of black aesthetics. The uprooted Africans in the story were positioned to become African Americans because they had first been seen and treated as blacks. They put stars in their hair in response to this forced insertion into the crucible of racialization. Having been stripped as much as was possible of their preexisting cultural armament, they had to replace it with something, to put some stylized barrier between themselves and the new social forces with which they would be forced to contend. Instead of entering the new world in the manner of the animals they were thought to be, unadorned, unmarked by the self-conscious creation of meaning, they found common cause in the essentially human act of aesthetic self-fashioning.

This sort of activity, I will want to say, is at the heart of the enterprise that has come to be known by the name "black aesthetics." Insisting on agency, beauty, and meaning in the face of oppression, despair, and death is obviously central to a tradition, if it is that, that counts people like Toni Morrison, Aaron Douglas, and Zora Neale Hurston among its participants. And reflecting on this activity is central, I will also want to say, to the philosophical study of black aesthetics.

We might start toward the philosophy of black aesthetics by rethinking the metaphor that organizes the Mintz–Price study. They speak of birth, a notion that could lead careless readers to overlook the amount of artifice and improvisation that people put into making a shared life. But think of what you saw at that South American port. A group of uprooted Africans engaged in an act of *bricolage*: they used what was at hand, both culturally and materially, to cobble together the beginnings of an African American culture. It appears that these cultures are not so much born as assembled.

The philosophical study of black aesthetics also involves a kind of assembly, in a sense that I will soon explain. I stress the philosophic nature of this enterprise because black aesthetics has been developed in many different ways, but

none, as far as I know, involve a sustained examination from the standpoint of post-analytic philosophy. This book will, I hope, correct for this oversight.

My aim in this introduction is to answer some preliminary questions concerning the project, and to gesture at what the other chapters will bring. The preliminary questions I have in mind emerge rather directly from the basic framing that I've given the project so far. First, to paraphrase cultural theorist and sociologist Stuart Hall: what is the "black" in "black aesthetics"? Second, in the same spirit: what is the "aesthetic" in "black aesthetics"? Third: what good is a philosophy of black aesthetics? And fourth: why discuss any of this in terms of assembly?

2 Inquiry and Assembly

In an essay on the Black Arts Movement in 1980s Britain, Stuart Hall introduces the sense of "assembly" that I'll use here. He writes:

> This paper tries to frame a provisional answer to the question, How might we begin to 'assemble' [our subject] as an object of critical knowledge? It does not aspire to a definitive interpretation.... What I try to do ... is 'map' the black arts ... as part of a wider cultural/political moment, tracking some of the impulses that went into their making and suggesting some interconnections between them. I 'assemble' these elements, not as a unity, but in all their contradictory dispersion. In adopting this genealogical approach, the artwork itself appears, not in its fullness as an aesthetic object, but as a constitutive element in the fabric of the wider world of ideas, movements, and events.[2]

On this approach, assembly refuses the quest for a "definitive interpretation" – think here of necessary and sufficient conditions, or of static, trans-historical essences. It aspires instead to identify, gather together, and explore the linked contextual factors in virtue of which we might productively and provisionally comprehend various phenomena under a single heading. And it takes seriously the degree to which these contextual factors involve the historical, cultural, political, and, in the eighteenth-century sense of the term, *moral* dimensions of human social affairs.

The method of assembly makes it easier to credit the complexity of historically emergent social phenomena – what Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci encourages Hall and others to call "conjunctures." A conjuncture is "a fusion of contradictory forces that nevertheless cohere enough to constitute a definite configuration."[3] Assembly is the mode of inquiry that allows us to see and account for the coherence of the configuration without glossing over the respects in which it remains, in a sense, incoherent.

Complexity and relative incoherence are important aspects of dealing with the historical dimensions of social phenomena. In dealing with movements or cultural epochs it is often tempting to fetishize temporal landmarks or origin points. But, Hall points out, "[t]he forces operative in a conjuncture have no single origin, time scale, or determination.... [They] are defined by their articulation, not their chronology."[4] That is, conjunctural moments come into view when otherwise independent factors converge in ways that it pays us to think of as constituting something new.[5] For example, the period that we know as The Sixties doesn't begin on January 1, 1960; it begins when the forces that make The Sixties matter come together enough to warrant our attention – which is why it begins at different moments for different people, and why historians sometimes talk about the late fifties part of the Sixties. So one consequence of adopting the method of assembly is that it reminds us to avoid "giving [the conjunctural subjects of our inquiries] a sequential form and imaginary unity they never possessed." Instead, we should define them the way we define generations: "not by simple chronology but by the fact that their members frame the same sorts of questions and try to work through them within the same ... horizon or ... problem-space."[6]

These lessons of the method of assembly are particularly useful for a study of black aesthetics. Like Hall's study of the Black Arts Movement in the UK, this book will need to assemble its subject as an object of knowledge, not least because variations in idiom and in regional and national practice have created "a series of overlapping, interlocking, but non-corresponding histories" that defeat any appeal to a single origin or time scale.[7] (As a pragmatist, I think we always assemble objects of knowledge; but I mean here to invoke the specifically Gramscian resonances of Hall's use of the idea, and to credit the distinctive challenges of trying to tell a single story about several centuries of transnational black expressive culture.) The only way to think responsibly and all at once about something called "black aesthetics" is, as Hall puts it, to comprehend under one concept, albeit provisionally, the "condensation of dissimilar currents" that just is the history of black expressive practice.[8]

This Gramscian approach has its limits, in just the places Hall suggests. There are of course the intrinsic dissatisfactions that come with the inability to index a social fact to definite temporal beginnings and endings. And the expressive objects and practices that give this book its subject matter will not appear here, as Hall says, in their fullness as aesthetic objects, due to the relative weight I'll have to place on considerations apart from the work of criticism. To the first point: the study of complex, unruly phenomena can also be intrinsically satisfying, not to mention that reality just is unruly, no matter what we'd prefer. And to the second point: a different sort of book

would spend more time on criticism – on accounting for and evaluating the experiences that expressive objects underwrite in terms of the relevant features of the objects – and less on theory – on elucidating some of the wider contexts that should inform the critic's work. But this is not a work of criticism, in part because one basic conceit of the book is that the most productive way to think of black aesthetics is not centrally concerned with finding a unitary system of norms for producing or evaluating artworks.

It should be clear, then, that I think of the limits on a conjunctural approach as parameters, not as failings. Instead of, say, providing a definitive catalogue of the aesthetic norms that have governed every black community since the fifteenth century, I aim to assemble the interest in such norms, and much else, into the subject for academic philosophy that similar inquiries have never managed, or cared, to create. I hope to flesh out the familiar thought that there are philosophic continuities linking Edwidge Danticat to W. E. B. Du Bois, The Last Poets to the Suriname barbers. I want to map the philosophic dimensions of black aesthetic practice, by connecting them explicitly to the wider problematic of racial formation under white supremacy.

The vision of a unified black aesthetic – the vision I am refusing – is not unfamiliar. Practically every account of black expressive practice either endorses or contends with some version of it. Until recently, though, most versions of the idea relied on the problematic assumptions of classical racialism, in both white supremacist and black vindicationist forms. And the work that has gotten past these difficulties has often given up the ambition of thinking black aesthetics all at once, and focuses instead on particular disciplines, time periods, locations, or figures. There is considerable value in this narrower, more specialized work. But there is also some value in taking a more expansive view, provided that we can find a theoretically respectable unifying principle.

To my mind, the best short statement of an acceptably expansive approach comes from art historian Richard Powell. In *Black Art: A Cultural History*, he explains that the concept of the black aesthetic does not pick out the "singular and unrealistically all-inclusive" cultural monolith that Shelby's cultural nationalists want to find;[9] instead it denotes "a collection of philosophical theories about the arts of the African diaspora."[10] Where Powell says "theories," I would say "arguments" or "registers of inquiry." Where he invokes "the African diaspora" I would instead invoke the collection of life-worlds created by and primarily identified with people racialized as black. And while he ultimately focuses on the essentially post-liberation and postcolonial standpoint of the Black Power era, I would cast the net somewhat wider and attempt to locate the poets and dramatists of Black Power on a wider field of thought and action, alongside Barbara Smith, the Suriname barbers, and many others.

These differences aside, though, Powell outlines the basic strategy of this book. I aim to save and develop the intuition that there is a single thing worth calling "black aesthetics." And I mean to do this by appealing not to the fictive unity of monolithic, supernaturally harmonious, racially distinct culture groups, but to the essentially philosophic preoccupations that routinely animate and surround the culture work of black peoples.

As I'll use the expression, then, based on the foregoing argument for epistemic assembly, to do "black aesthetics" is to use art, criticism, or analysis to explore the role that expressive objects and practices play in creating and maintaining black life-worlds. The appeal to exploration here is more expansive than it may appear. One can explore something by trying to give an account of it, in the manner of a scientist. But one can also explore something by poking around, in the manner of an explorer. In this sense artists explore the roles that expressive objects can play by trying to make them play one role or another, or by participating in and commenting on previous attempts to do this. (I think here of Glenn Ligon's appropriation of slave narrative frontispieces.)[11] The idea to refer to something as a black aesthetic comes down to us only from the 1960s, when some of the people formerly known as Negroes decided that self-identifying as black would help turn the page on the historic failures and ideological limitations of the past.[12] But the work itself began long before the name caught on. The work began whenever and wherever the creation, analysis, and criticism of expressive objects first became crucial to the racial formation processes that produce and sustain the social phenomena that we think of as black people.

3 On Blackness

The idea of assembling black aesthetics presupposes that there is a responsible way of appealing to racial blackness. So the next question to take up is perhaps the most obvious one: what is the black in black aesthetics? It is possible, I suppose, to remain unmoved by this question, or to think that the answer is obvious. There is however no shortage of "obvious" conceptions of blackness, and some of these pretty quickly reveal themselves to be problematic. For these reasons, it is important to be clear about how this book will use "blackness" and "race" and all their cognate terms.[13] On the way to settling the meanings of these terms, we will also have to clarify some other issues, including the role that the idea of modernity will play here.

The first thing to say is that 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.[14] 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."[15] 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.[16]

The distinction between critical and classical race theory is not fine-grained enough to capture all of 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. The key for current purposes is just that some version of racialism is in play for students and practitioners of black aesthetics, and that this racialism can be critical rather than a form of racism or invidious essentialism.

This open-ended appeal to critical racialism is consistent with a broad consensus that has recently emerged in philosophical race theory.[17] Most race theorists now understand race *critically*, as a human *artifact* that is interestingly linked to European *modernity*, importantly *political* in its conditions and consequences, unavoidably *social* in its reach and structure, and essentially *synecdotal* in its operations. Each element of this consensus requires some elaboration.

To approach race critically is to refuse classical racialism. This means to refuse a picture of hierarchically ranked, naturally distinct human populations, reliably defined by clusters of physical and non-physical traits. For the critical racialist, race, whatever it is, is not what Samuel George Morton and Thomas Jefferson – and, for that matter, Marcus Garvey – thought it was.

To approach race as an artifact is to accept that our race-talk refers to the products of human agency. To say this is *not* yet to say that there can be no biological or evolutionary component to raciogenesis. It is simply to cast one's lot with the sort of view one finds in standard formulations of racial formation theory: that racial phenomena are products and records of human activities rather than prefabricated features of the universe.

To insist on the political significance of race is to insist not just on the standard racial controversies. It is also, and more importantly, to highlight the robust relationship between race-thinking and the modern world's basic political structures, from the growth of capitalism to the development of liberal ideas of freedom and democracy. Race has been central to the

conceptions of citizenship, justice, individuality, and more that define the modern project, and it remains central to contemporary elaborations and emanations of this project.

To stress the modernity of the race concept is to accept that the world's most influential racial practices are importantly, but of course not totally, discontinuous from their antecedents in the pre-modern world. This is not an especially controversial point, though people quibble over where to draw the relevant temporal boundaries and over what counts as a modern race concept. But the basic point is clear: after the fifteenth century or so, ideas about the structure, character, and capacities of different human types came to shape human affairs on a scale never seen before. And this massive project of social engineering – involving imperial and colonial adventures, massive forced and voluntary migrations, the extermination of astounding numbers of people, and the making and unmaking of entire civilizations – called into being massive schemes of knowledge production that purported to refine our knowledge of human diversity. All of this led to the quintochromatic racial schema – involving black, brown, red, yellow, and white races (if it helps, see all of those color terms in scare quotes) – that has played so powerful a role in world affairs for so long. It led to other things too, like the racialization of internal national populations in places like Japan and Rwanda by appeal to other schemas. But the putative differences between the four or five modern races have, especially in places like South Africa and Brazil, played a much larger role in world affairs than any conception of race (or, I would say, proto-racialism) that we find in, say, ancient Greece or Egypt.

To focus on modernity in this way, though, is to invoke a picture of the human social life and history that requires some development, and some clarity about its relationship to another picture. I claimed above that race is central to the modern project, but the point should actually be stronger: modernity was, in significant ways, a racial project. What we think of as the modern world brought itself into being in part by crafting and acting out narratives about who and what counted as civilized, or human. This narrative was anchored in the conflation of certain European cultural practices with the idea of the human as such, and with a profound myopia about the actual depth, meaning, and interdependence of the various forms of human practice. And it resulted, at its worst, in a simplistic, self-aggrandizing vision of human social progress, according to which some peoples, mostly in (certain bits of) Europe, had figured out how to lift themselves above a barbaric world of uncivilized, non-western darkness. They had become, in a word, modern. And they were, in general, white.

In contrast with this ideological sense of modernity, a sense that still animates contemporary ideas about "modernizing" and "developing" societies, I will use "modern" and its cognate terms in a more critical, descriptive

way. My use of these terms should be recognizable, as it largely tracks the standard practice of denoting the social formation that emerged from the intertwining of (certain) European cultures with particular approaches to such things as markets, technology, reason, democracy, individuality, and social identity. But I'll join many other students of these issues in holding also that European or North Atlantic modernity is not the only modernity; that the line between modern and "pre-modern" is harder to draw than we typically think, and does not neatly separate human history into civilized and un-; that the history of European modernity is not hermetically sealed off from the histories of "non-western" cultures; and that this history is not the seamless upward march (until World War I, at least) that it is often thought to be.[18] As I'll use the term, "modernity" refers to a constellation of social conditions that *includes* the practices of white supremacy, and that made those practices possible and intelligible. It does *not* refer to the world of whitely racial mythology, somehow considered in isolation from and in opposition to the benighted Others of white supremacist self-justifications.

To insist on the social significance of race is to insist that an agent's prospects in racialized settings are shaped to some degree by racializing structures not of his or her individual making. Our prospects are shaped by much else, of course, and all of these factors intertwine to produce our particular paths through life. But – and this is the key point – race is one of these social factors: it cannot be reduced to personal whims or choices about individual identity.

Finally, to claim that race is synecdotal is to highlight the central, semantic-relational mechanism of racialization. There are stronger and weaker ways to make the relevant point here, but the main idea is the same on both approaches, and is evident in the strong version that we get from David Theo Goldberg. In *Racist Culture* Goldberg explains that the concept of race "is almost but not quite completely vacuous," and borrows whatever meaning it has from prevailing social dynamics.[19] Race-thinking, he says,

> classifies … people in virtue of their sharing some purported and purportedly significant characteristic(s). The prevailing form of the grouping in question … assumes content influenced by established political, economic, legal, cultural, scientific and social scientific factors and relations, but is not reducible to them.[20]

That is to say: race-thinking is a way of assigning social meanings to human differences, and of assigning significance to the characteristics that enable us to mark people as different from each other. What "purportedly significant characteristics" distinguish races? It depends on what the society that invokes racial discourse cares about at the time, and on how that society structures

its reflections on issues like social stratification and human diversity. Goldberg suggests that, "it could be, or could have been, that exclusion of women was defined as racism, if women were … defined as a race."[21]

Why is a concept this loose not completely vacuous? Because there is a kind of grammar or logic to invocations of the race concept:

> race serves to naturalize the groupings it identifies in its own name.… In this way, race gives to social relations the veneer of fixedness, of long duration, and invokes … the tendency to characterize assent relations in the language of descent.[22]

This business of assigning meanings, and of borrowing the resources for this process from prevailing discursive, sociopolitical, and epistemic currents, is what I mean to signal by referring to race as synecdotal. The persistence of a kind of core logic or grammar seems to me to pull against the strong form of the view that Goldberg and others[23] have adopted – to show, in other words, that we have good reasons not to describe the exclusion of women as racism, *even if the perpetrators did so on the assumption that women and men constitute separate races*. But this is not the place to debate that point, not least synecdotalism in either form offers the same lesson to critical race theorists: that societies use racial discourse to assign social meanings to various aspects of human being, and that this process is importantly bound up with efforts to create and manage social and political differences.

This process of sociopolitical meaning-assignment takes familiar forms in relation to modernity's five color-coded races, though these forms change and diverge over time. Classical racialism assumed that the book of nature was written in, among other places, the superficial facts of human bodies and bloodlines, that this book would explain social, political, and cultural differences as well, and that the race theorist's job was to figure out how to decipher the script. Critical race theory, by contrast, recognizes that centuries of classical racialist practice in fact created the code that made bodies and bloodlines into symbols of social meaning and location, and it assigns race theory the job of properly explaining the roots, content, and implications of this code. Racialized bodies and bloodlines cease to function as symbols of natural capacity and value, and instead become signs of sedimented mechanisms for asymmetrically distributing the benefits and burdens of social cooperation.

This limited consensus in race theory has several implications that will be of particular concern to students of black aesthetics. First, accepting the sociopolitical significance of race positions us to understand the abiding interest in ethics and social amelioration that we find in the black aesthetic tradition. Black aesthetics has not, usually, been a matter of art for art's sake

(though, to be fair, Europe's aestheticism had deeply ethical underpinnings too, however its slogan has since been interpreted). It could not afford to be.

Second, accepting the synecdotal dimension of race, assigning social meaning to human differences, and noting the routine deployment of these racializing mechanisms in settings that insisted on differences in things like skin color and bodily morphology, forces us to attend to the uses of the human body, both as it is represented and as it lives and moves. This positions us to connect the familiar concerns of critical race theory – racial justice, racist terror, racial identity, and so on – to the concerns of cultural studies and performance theory, and to join scholars of those fields in attending with care to the somatic and the phenomenological.

Third, accepting the artifactual dimension of race, its rootedness in human processes of creative activity, forces us to attend to the historicity and dynamism of racial phenomena. This means accepting the contingency and constructedness of the categories and conditions that result from these dynamic struggles, and getting on with the hard work of inquiry. I mean here to address one of the most common stumbling blocks to the critical reappropriation of racial discourse. It is tempting to think that many racial practices presuppose indefensible accounts of human diversity, and to conclude from this that the content of the practices is immaterial – once we have pointed out that the practices are misguided, little more need be said. But this is surely too quick. Whatever one thinks of the advisability of taking race seriously, it is clear that many people have done so, and have as a result shaped human affairs in ways that are worth attending to. Some of these racial projects – like chattel slavery, or apartheid, or the Black Consciousness Movement, or Black prophetic thought – have received a fair bit of attention from philosophers. Others – like the ones related to invocations of "the black aesthetic" – have received less, and are due for more.

With this race-theoretic consensus and its implications in hand, we can return to the questions that motivate this section. Blackness is a racial condition, and we can predicate it of definite people and practices in just the ways that inform the best – least incoherent – versions of garden-variety racial discourse. So the "black" in black aesthetics has more or less the same extension as its counterpart in commonsense race-talk. It refers to people who have been racially positioned as black, and to the life-worlds that these people have constructed. This racial positioning occurs differently in different places. But in the modern world these local practices are informed by global currents of meaning. In most places blacks will be people who are descended in the right sorts of ways from an indigenous population in early modern sub-Saharan Africa. But in some places – in the UK, for example, or in Australia – that sort of African descent is not the entire story. In all these settings, though, certain mechanisms of social

stratification track what used to be called "complexional distinctions," and certain resources for subject formation and social mobilization invite "blacks" to orient themselves to certain expressive practices in ways that implicate an expansive conception of the black aesthetic.

4 On the Black Aesthetic Tradition

Now that we know what "black" means, we can turn to the two remaining questions. One of these asks why the student of black aesthetics should bother with what many of us have been encouraged to think of as proper philosophy – and, for that matter, why philosophers should care about black aesthetics. The other question asks about the meaning of the "aesthetic" in "black aesthetics." The answers to these questions are intertwined, with each other and with a rich and varied history of cultural practice. For that reason, it is important to take a step back and consider what the traditions of black aesthetics have been and done.

I've defined "black aesthetics" as the practice of using art, criticism, or analysis to explore the role that expressive objects and practices play in creating and maintaining black life-worlds. It is important to distinguish between first-order and second-order versions of the black aesthetic enterprise. The first-order version emerged as soon as black people did – as soon as Africans and others began to seek and create beauty and meaning from within the cauldron of racial formation. The second-order version emerged some time later, when artists, critics, and other thinkers started to approach their expressive practices specifically from the standpoint of modern race-thinking. First-order work has gone on as long as black people have reflected on and revised things that *we* can look back on and recognize as black practices. Second-order work, by contrast, began within the last hundred and fifty years or so, when people began to think systematically about their practices *from a racialist perspective* – which is also to say, from a transnational and trans-ethnic perspective. (Modern races, whatever else they are, are not local populations.)

The distinction between first- and second-order enterprises allows us to distinguish also between practices and traditions, and to say that despite the longevity of black aesthetics as a set of practices, it emerged as a proper *tradition* only quite recently. 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.[24]

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 medieval 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. 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 and their persistence across space and time, 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.

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 preexisting traditions. This process occurred wherever racial formation processes 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 – though members of formally colonized communities typically had to do less of this than peoples who were uprooted and resettled.[25] 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.[26] 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.

Civilizationism

The second key development in the black aesthetic tradition saw the themes of racial vindication and Eurocentric civilizationism[27] 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 skeptical 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 (1817–1895); the emergence of the slave narrative (from about 1760); and the worldwide travels of the Fisk Jubilee Singers (beginning in 1871).

Counter-modernity

By the end of the next stage of development, trans-ethnic 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,[28] 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.[29] 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 metropoles. 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's pioneering text, *The Souls of Black Folk*.[30]

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 counseling 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.[31]

Decolonization

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, fueled 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 Léopold 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've 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."[32] 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.[33] At the same time,

popular musical performers like Bob Marley, Miriam Makeba, and James Brown undertook quite public shifts toward 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 anticolonial 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 artworld's most prestigious institutions and biennial exhibitions.[34]

Engendering and queering

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 phallocentric 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 neo-colonial projects.[35] 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.[36]

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."[37] 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.

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.[38] The most prominent of the older approaches to blackness – civilizationist, counter-modern, 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. Skepticism 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 Kwame Anthony Appiah 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."[39] As Ellis's "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 Black Aesthetics as/and Philosophy

The previous section introduced the idea of a black aesthetic tradition by providing a quick survey of some relevant history. A striking feature of this history is that academic philosophy has played almost no role in it. Better put: the figures whose work informs the practice of academic philosophy have, as individuals, played almost no role, which is to say that they have not been personally engaged in the projects that drive this history. John Dewey's work indirectly underwrote a great deal of the cultural work of the interwar black radical tradition in the United States, and some of the Harlem Renaissance. In a similar way, work in the Marxian tradition underwrote much of the Black Arts Movement and the cultural dimensions of various revolutionary nationalisms. But this had little to do with the interests and activities of practicing professional philosophers. People have been doing black aesthetics, in one way or another, since black people came into being. But for the overwhelming bulk of this time, black aesthetics and traditional western philosophy have either been indifferent or hostile to each other, the lonely efforts of the small black philosophical professoriate before the late twentieth century notwithstanding.[40]

Pointing to the distance between the traditions of philosophy and of black aesthetics helps to clarify the stakes behind the remaining questions for my project. Why – apart from my own needs as a thinker – bother offering a *philosophy* of black aesthetics? And in what sense is the project about aesthetics at all?

Philosophy and the black aesthetic

In addition to its role in a project of retroactive self-provisioning, this study can provide some benefit to the traditions that it aspires to bring together. The benefits to black aesthetics may be more elusive than the benefits to philosophy, since that tradition – as evidenced in the work of people like Fred Moten, Michele Wallace, and Houston Baker – has had fewer qualms about entering into conversation with the western philosophical canon. One benefit might derive from contemporary philosophy's familiar posturing about clarity. As recent work on Frederick Douglass, Anna Julia Cooper, T. Thomas Fortune, Ida B. Wells, and others has shown, philosophy can help us make sense of what goes on, and what's at stake, in the misleadingly familiar arguments of canonical black thinkers. So if nothing else, perhaps this book can clear away some underbrush around key notions like "black" and "aesthetics," as well as around the notions that endeavor to knit those two together, like "identity," "appropriation," and "invisibility." And in doing this perhaps it can shrink the distance that seems to stretch between these two traditions, and help create new spaces for intellectual exchange and professional collaboration.

The benefits of this sort of intellectual bridgework for philosophy are somewhat clearer. One consideration is that philosophy is its context comprehended in thought, and that the philosophical contexts in which many of us find ourselves have yet to develop a vocabulary for the important and influential aspect of western culture that people like Baraka and Morrison represent. To put the point differently: academic philosophy has not yet fully come to terms with the diversity of the communities it seeks to serve and understand, though it is doing better. To put the point still differently, and more cynically than I mean it: as an academic discipline in the age of corporatization and declining state support for higher education, philosophers need all the constituents and allies we can get. Learning to talk responsibly about, say, Sun Ra and ring shouts can only help get us more, and more diverse, students, and better alliances across disciplines and units. (Something like this might also be a motivation for outreach by aestheticians in black studies, whose programs and departments are too often under attack or under-resourced.)

A more important consideration emerges from a moment's reflection on the way race works. As we saw above, race-thinking has to do with assigning meaning to human bodies and bloodlines – call this "racialization." In the mode of racialization most relevant to this book, to have dark skin, tightly curled hair, and full lips, or to be descended from people who look like that, or from a place full of people who look like that, is to have certain claims more likely to be true of you. Nineteenth-century westerners thought that

the relevant claims had to do with moral worth and capacity for civilization. Now we know that the widespread assent to nineteenth-century racialism instantiated the truth conditions for other kinds of racial claims, claims having to do with the vulnerability to state surveillance and police brutality, with relative stores of net financial assets, with proximity of domicile to environmental hazards, and so on.

The assignments of meaning that constitute racialization are often bound up with aesthetic phenomena, in a variety of ways involving both mediated and immediate experience. I call this "the race–aesthetics nexus," and take inspiration for the idea in this passage from Monique Roelofs:

> Racial formations are aesthetic phenomena and aesthetic practices are racialized structures. A theory of the nature of race and racism … must address the place of the aesthetic in processes of racialization. Correlatively, a theory of the aesthetic as a philosophical category … must account for the ways in which structures of aesthetic exchange channel racial passions and perceptions.[41]

To say that aesthetic practices in the modern West are racialized structures – to speak, as Roelofs does, of racialized aestheticization – is to highlight the role of race-thinking in shaping the boundaries and trajectories of these practices. This shaping occurs, very broadly speaking, on two levels. First, it shapes the exclusions and openings that define individual relationships to opportunity structures. In the grip of an idea like this, Du Bois worries about the color bar keeping African American sculptors in his time from undertaking formal study; the dancers in The Urban Bush Women point out that the training mechanisms of European classical dance, obsessed with hegemonic visions of white femininity, systematically weed out women with bodies like theirs; art historian Sidney Kasfir reveals that deeply ingrained ideas about "the Dark Continent" lead curators and collectors to prefer old, putatively anonymous "tribal" art to the work of contemporary African artists;[42] and director Robert Townsend launches his career with a caustically funny complaint about the limited roles available to blacks in Hollywood. (This has of course changed, to some degree, though more for men than for women. We will return to this.)

In addition, though, aesthetics gets racialized not just at the level of managing access to specific practices, but also at the level of imagining the structure, meaning, and content of the human endeavors that the practices constitute. The ideas of race and of the aesthetic came into being more or less together, along with modern ideas of humanity and civilization; and all of these ideas implicated each other in deep ways.[43] We see this at work in each component of "the modern system of the arts." The primitivism of modern painting, the orientalism of nineteenth-century opera, the uses of literature

and literacy in modern nation-building projects, and the conscription of Greek sculpture and of the burgeoning technologies of photography into the projects of white supremacist racial anthropometry all show the concepts of race, of art, and of modern civilization getting worked out together. Aesthetics as such, Roelofs wants to say (echoing Clyde Taylor[44] and others), is itself a kind of racial project.

In addition to claiming that aesthetic practices are racialized structures, Roelofs claims also that racial formations are aesthetic phenomena. In this spirit she introduces the idea of aesthetic racialization, in order to insist on the role of embodiment and aesthetic stylization in the processes of racial formation. We see one aspect of this aesthetic racialization in the ideological functioning of racial meaning-assignments. I invoke "ideology" here in the Althusserian sense, to say that race belongs to the manifold of social reality, and helps structure our experience, our immediate experience, of the world. Often enough, we directly perceive racial phenomena: we just see race, the way we see just see home runs and rude gestures. Because of this, the differential modes of treatment that mark the boundaries between racial populations can be reliably underwritten by aesthetic perceptions – by the affectively and symbolically loaded workings of immediate experience. Black people *look* dangerous, or unreliable, or like bad credit risks, which is why studies keep showing, for example, that similarly situated – identically situated – black and white job-seekers or apartment hunters (or loan applicants, or, or) will have rather different experiences in their respective markets. (Some would argue that this is also why an unarmed Amadou Diallo seemed dangerous enough to warrant forty-two bullets from the NYPD in 1999, and why, more recently, an unarmed Trayvon Martin seemed so out of place to his killer, and why, even more recently, Eric Garner and Michael Brown seemed to their killers, and to the citizens charged with reviewing the circumstances of their deaths, somehow impervious to, and therefore permissibly available for, the exercise of lethal violence.)

A second dimension of aesthetic racialization becomes evident in the work of Saidiya Hartman, who insists on the importance of performance and performativity.[45] To fashion and inhabit a racial identity is to undertake a kind of performance, and to create by dint of that performance an identity that would otherwise not exist. This effective enactment of blackness can unfold by appeal to certain self-consciously expressive styles, and can provide the kind of enjoyment that can attend any successful performance. Think here of the way in which people of all races, all over the world, link blackness to a particular hip-hop aesthetic. (I think in particular of Joe Wood's essay on Japanese blackfacers, from the late 1990s.)[46]

The race–aesthetics nexus, with its various manifestations and implications, points to the key reason for linking black aesthetics and philosophy. Race,

racism, and blackness have become thriving areas of philosophical inquiry, and the study of these fields is incomplete without an account of the robust links between aesthetic practice, aesthetic ideologies, and racial formation processes. A study of black aesthetics will not exhaust those inquiries, not least because racialization comes in modes other than the ones that eventuate in blackness. But it will provide a starting point, one that will benefit from the substantial inroads into philosophy made by Africana philosophy, and from the long experience with black expressive culture in other fields of inquiry.

What is the "aesthetic" in "black aesthetics"?

If professional philosophy has done its work at a sufficient distance from black aesthetics to require reassuring words at the outset of this project, the position of specifically philosophical aesthetics is even worse. The discussions of art and expressive culture that have unfolded in places like the *British Journal of Aesthetics* and the *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* since 1950 or so have focused on questions that are difficult even to motivate from the perspectives adopted by the central approaches to black aesthetics. Where philosophers tried to define "art" and domesticate its ontology, black aestheticians argued that the concept of art was an expression of western parochialism, and that African cultures tended not to lock creative expression away in museums, concert halls, and galleries, separated from the rest of life. Where philosophers interrogated the basic structures of aesthetic judgment and criticism, black aestheticians pointed out that appeals to generically human capacities for judgment are often in fact appeals to particularistic prejudices based on some specific and contingent set of cultural practices. People on both sides of this divide have of course explored many questions other than the very broad ones indicated here. But the basic point remains apt, and is simply a refinement of the broader point about philosophy that we saw above: black aestheticians and philosophical aestheticians have done their work, for the last several decades at least, at some remove from each other.

In light of this additional distance between philosophy and the relevant black intellectual traditions, it is important to be clear about how the idea of the aesthetic functions in this study. We might begin by borrowing a model from ethical theory and distinguishing descriptive, normative, and metatheoretical approaches to aesthetics. Descriptive aesthetics is what anthropologists, art historians, and others do when they report that some particular set of norms regulates the production, reception, and evaluation of expressive objects. Normative aesthetics is what people like Henry Louis Gates and Samuel Floyd do when they *prescribe* sets of principles for understanding and evaluating expressive objects.[47] And aesthetic theory is 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?"

The role of descriptive and normative work in black aesthetics should be clear. For an example of descriptive approaches we can look to contemporary students of African art, who work diligently to get very clear on the precise nature of the aesthetic practices in particular settings, and on the norms and conventions that govern those practices. This is a vital counterweight to generations of commentary that sees an undifferentiated racial spirit at work behind the art. For an example of normative inquiry, we can look to writers in the US Black Arts Movement, who argued vehemently for a Copernican revolution in normative aesthetics, and insisted that the work of black poets should not be evaluated by appeal to the norms of the New Critics.

The relationship between mainstream aesthetic theory and black aesthetics may be less clear, but two possibilities have recommended themselves to me. The first is a kind of comparative meta-aesthetics. The other is a kind of immediatist phenomenology of aesthetic experience. This study will rely here and there on views about descriptive and normative issues, but it will do the bulk of its work in the theoretical register.

The comparative approach takes its cues from the tradition that equates aesthetic inquiry with the philosophy of art. From this perspective, we can bring new resources to bear on the familiar questions of mainstream analytic aesthetics. One might ask about the ontology of art in light of the fact that many cultures in Africa and elsewhere decline to distinguish rigidly between what we think of as separate disciplines, like the performance of poetry, storytelling, or music-making.[48] Or one could give the old question "What is literature?" new life by subjecting the question itself to genealogical scrutiny in light of racialized assumptions about the relationship between literacy, literature, modernity, and civilization.[49] This study will adopt the comparative approach mainly by exploring the way familiar mainstream aesthetic concepts function in studies of black expressive culture. This will yield discussions of authenticity, beauty, and ethical criticism, among other things.

A second possibility for using philosophy to inform the "aesthetic" in "black aesthetics" builds on the appeal to immediate experience, introduced above in the discussion of the race–aesthetics nexus. Where the comparative approach considers the questions of mainstream analytic aesthetics in light of data gleaned from "black" contexts, the immediatist approach asks the kinds of questions we find in continental traditions of ideology critique and in continental and American naturalist traditions of phenomenological inquiry. Arthur Danto and John Dewey provide me with the starting points for this sort of inquiry in their germinal reflections, offered many decades apart, on new directions for aesthetic inquiry (drawing on old arguments that we can trace back to Baumgarten and Kant).[50]

Dewey famously argues that experience has what he calls "aesthetic quality." He means here to denote the felt sense of connection and wholeness that registers the fashioning of a proper experience out of the fugitive elements of our encounters with the world. Through pragmatic and interpretive processes of inquiry, agents assign meanings to the phenomena they encounter, and these interpretations order the world in a way that renders it intelligible and navigable. When an interpretation "fits," we feel a sense of its appropriateness and of the harmony of its elements – think of the "ah-ha" moment that one experiences upon finally seeing the solution to a mathematical problem. The point of all this for Dewey is to track aesthetic experience to its phenomenological roots, and to use this deeper vantage point to reframe – and, to some degree, to deflate – the study of art.

Arthur Danto echoes this turn to experience when he invites philosophers to accept that "aesthetics … penetrates our experience of the world to such a degree … that we cannot seriously address cognition without reference to it."[51] He has in mind the way that aesthetic considerations shape the way we see, represent, and understand the world, as exemplified, in Danto's piece, by the stylized and semantically rich images produced by early modern scientific illustrators. Danto provides a remarkable critical reading of illustrations by Leeuwenhoek and others, but he could as easily have chosen more mundane examples. Consider, for example, the studies suggesting that people systematically benefit from being attractive: handsome teachers get better evaluations, pretty lawyers make partner sooner, and so on. This happens not because the relevant authorities are trying to curry favor, but because they unconsciously respond to surface features that have no intrinsic bearing on the attributes that are putatively being assessed.[52] This phenomenon, sometimes called "sensory transference," is not limited to human encounters. It is in fact well known and widely relied upon by market researchers, who use focus groups to determine, for example, which stylized containers will "improve" the taste of their beverages. This cognitive overreaction to superficial traits is relevant to Danto's project because it dovetails with his broader agenda. Where Dewey wants to return the study of aesthetics to its roots in experience, Danto wants to link aesthetics to other ways of studying experience – to complement epistemology and the philosophy of mind by enriching their accounts of human cognition.

Dewey and Danto are interested, in slightly different ways, in the aesthetic dimensions of what is sometimes called "rapid cognition." It is a truism that concepts streamline our journeys through the world, helping to reduce the dynamic flux of experience. It is less commonly recognized that immediate judgments about which concepts to apply, and when to apply them, enable even further streamlining. This process has at least four

features that we routinely associate with more narrowly aesthetic judgments. First, rapid cognitions unfold swiftly and intuitively, without recourse to consciously managed processes of reflection. Second, the judging agent is often unable to account for the judgments that he or she makes, and has to work to find words for them. Third, the judgments register certain immediately recognized constellations of meaning, each of which can be as directly meaningful and affectively charged as a work of art, ritual artifact, cultural symbol, or other expressive object. And fourth, the constellations of meaning are sometimes informed by sedimented commitments to principles of aesthetic merit, as in the case of lookism.

The relevance of immediatist phenomenology – or *aesthesis* – to black aesthetics should be apparent. We saw above that race is an aesthetic phenomenon, which means in part that immediate and affectively loaded perceptions help racial formation processes do their work. Danto and Dewey remind us that interrogating these aesthetic experiences, that scrutinizing their conditions and consequences, might be part of the work of aesthetics. This interrogation is all the more valuable in racialized contexts. If the perception that a thing is superficially beautiful or ugly can prompt immediate, unexcavated judgments about that thing's deeper traits; if, in the case of humans, judgments about surface beauty have for several centuries been indexed to ideas about physiognomically distinct human types; if these racialized judgments of beauty feel immediately to "fit" in ways that immunize them from critical introspection; and, finally, if this fittingness holds the key to the distribution of social goods up to and including the ability to survive routine encounters with the state; if all of that is right, then understanding aesthetic racialization is an indispensable step toward understanding what Frantz Fanon calls "the fact of blackness."

6 Conclusion

The burden of this chapter has been to explain the basic parameters of this study, and to circumscribe the topic. I've explained that as I'll use the expression, following Hall, Powell, and Gramsci, to do "black aesthetics" is to use art, criticism, or analysis to explore the role that expressive objects and practices play in the creation and maintenance of black lifeworlds. The appeal to blackness in "black aesthetics" gets its content from the sorts of insights that racial formation theory marshals and mobilizes, and that Du Bois channels with his line about the Jim Crow car. The appeal to aesthetics gets cashed out by appeal to two forms of meta-theoretical inquiry, one extending more or less traditional questions in art theory

into untraditional domains, and the other using the insights of immediatist phenomenology to motivate deep interpretation and criticism of our habitual aesthetic judgments. And all of this is a fit subject for philosophy for several reasons, the most banal of which is that black aesthetics and philosophy are both social practices that are driven by their participants, and some of their participants, like me, are interested in ring shouts as well as in Twin-Earth arguments (though in one of these much more than in the other).

It should now be clear just how enormous a field of inquiry black aesthetics represents. There are many things one might do under this heading that I will not do. I will not examine any empirical claims about the precise degree to which some diasporic practice is indebted to its African sources. I will not provide a state of the art guide to any "black" practices, say, to explain which hip-hop artists are worth attending to now and which should be ignored for the good of the tradition or of our children. And I will not provide close critical readings of any particular aesthetic objects. This is an exercise in theory, not in criticism or curating, and its burden henceforth will be to identify the themes that organize some of the problem-spaces in the black aesthetic tradition. My organizing thought, borrowed from Hall and Powell, is that the recurring interrogation of these themes across time and space gives black aesthetics whatever unity it has, and all the unity it can responsibly aspire to have.

The chapters to come will consider the following themes, and examine the registers of inquiry, reflection, and argument that have grown up around them.

1. The relationship between visibility, invisibility, and recognition.
2. The burdens and limits of ethicopolitical criticism.
3. The seductions of authenticity and complications of mobility.
4. The complexities of somatic aesthetics in anti-black contexts.
5. The meaning of black music for the body and the soul.
6. The dialectic of aversion and attraction in contexts of interracial exchange.

These themes provide only a partial window onto the tradition of black aesthetics. They are a provisional point of entry, not an exhaustive list of philosophic problems. A different selection and arrangement of themes could do the work that I mean to do here, and could perhaps do it while teasing out issues that I leave underdeveloped. My hope is that this selection and arrangement successfully reveals to the reader the basic shape and most prominent elements of black aesthetics as a philosophic phenomenon. Once that's done, the rest is a matter for the detail work of more specialized study.

Notes

1 Sidney Mintz and Richard Price, *The Birth of African American Culture* (Boston: Beacon, 1976), citing John Gabriel Stedman, *The Journal of John Gabriel Stedman, 1744–1797, Soldier and Author, Including an Authentic Account of his Expedition to Surinam, in 1772*, ed. Stanbury Thompson (London: Mitre Press, 1962). "All the Slaves are led upon deck … their hair shaved in different figures of Stars. half-moons, &c. / which they generally do the one to the other (having no Razors) by the help of a broken bottle and without Soap" (48). The authors comment: "It is hard to imagine a more impressive example of irrepressible cultural vitality than this image of slaves decorating one another's hair in the midst of one of the most dehumanizing experiences in all of history" (48).

2 Stuart Hall, "Assembling the 80s – The Deluge and After," in David A. Bailey, Ian Baucom, and Sonia Boyce, eds., *Shades of Black* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005), 1.

3 Hall 4.

4 Hall 4.

5 As Hall uses it, "articulation" is a double-barreled term, denoting both a process of clarifying production – like articulating a statement – and a structure with linked but semi-independent elements – like an articulated bus. This is a Marxian version of an idea that we can find in many post-Enlightenment traditions, from romanticism to Hegelianism and pragmatism, though it registers in these other traditions under other descriptions.

6 Hall 4.

7 Hall 4.

8 Hall 4. He goes on to say that his subject – the 1980s – represents a conjunctural *shift*, a point at which the problematic that defined black art could be seen to "fracture decisively." Here I will part company with him, as I am less interested, for now, in the fractures than in coherence, and in depicting this coherence philosophically.

9 Tommie Shelby, *We Who Are Dark* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005).

10 Richard J. Powell, *Black Art: A Cultural History*, 2nd ed. (New York: Thames and Hudson, 2003), 15.

11 Glenn Ligon, *Some Changes* (Toronto: The Power Plant, 2009).

12 See Addison Gayle, ed., *The Black Aesthetic* (New York: Anchor-Doubleday, 1971); Houston A. Baker, *Afro-American Poetics: Revisions of Harlem and the Black Aesthetic* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1988); James Smethurst, *The Black Arts Movement: Literary Nationalism in the 1960s and 1970s* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005).

13 To the extent that this book offers an argument in race theory, it draws heavily on an account that I work out in more detail elsewhere. See Paul C. Taylor, *Race: A Philosophical Introduction*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Polity, 2013), especially Chapters 1–3.

14 W. E. B. Du Bois, *Dusk of Dawn: Autobiography of a Race Concept* (1940; New York: Transaction, 1982), 153.

15 This is a slightly non-standard usage of "racialism," based on a principled objection to the standard approach championed by Appiah, Mallon, and others. For details on this objection see Paul C. Taylor, "Introduction," *The Philosophy of Race (Critical Concepts in Philosophy)* (New York: Routledge, 2011).

16 On this approach to the idea of racialism, and the distinction between its classical and critical forms, see Taylor, *Race* 11, 38, 72.

17 I discuss the emerging consensus in philosophical race theory in slightly more detail at Taylor, *Race* 87–88, drawing on Ron Mallon, "'Race': Normative, Not Metaphysical or Semantic," *Ethics* 116:3 (2006), 525–551; and Larry Blum, "Racialized Groups: The Socio-Historical Consensus," *Monist* 93:2 (2010), 298–320.

18 See Dilip Parameshwar Gaonkar, *Alternative Modernities* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2001). The account here is heavily informed by Stuart Hall, David Held, Don Hubert, and Kenneth Thompson, eds., *Modernity: An Introduction to Modern Societies* (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1997).

19 David Theo Goldberg, *Racist Culture: Philosophy and the Politics of Meaning* (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1993), 81.

20 Goldberg 82.

21 Goldberg 82.

22 Goldberg 81.

23 See Quayshawn Spencer, "A Radical Solution to the Race Problem," *Philosophy of Science* 81:5 (2014), 1025–1038; Ron Mallon, "Passing, Traveling and Reality: Social Constructionism and the Metaphysics of Race," *Noûs* 38:4 (2004), 644–673.

24 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'll 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.

25 K. Anthony Appiah, *In My Father's House* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 7–9.

26 Mintz and Price 18.

27 I have borrowed this term from Wilson Moses, 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." Wilson Moses, *The Golden Age of Black Nationalism: 1850–1925* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 229.

28 Raymond Williams, "When was Modernism?" *New Left Review* 175 (1989), 48–52, 48–49.

29 Baker 4.

30 On the transnational connections between the Paris intellectuals and the New Yorkers, see Eileen Julien, "Négritude," in Colin A. Palmer, ed., *Encyclopedia of African-American Culture and History*, vol. 4, 2nd ed. (Detroit: Macmillan Reference USA, 2006), 1633–1635; and T. Denean Sharpley-Whiting, *Negritude Women* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002).

31 On the overlooked contributions of the "Negritude women," see Sharpley-Whiting. On the "blues feminism" of the 1920s singers, see Angela Davis, *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism* (New York: Knopf, Doubleday, 2011).

32 Elsa Honig Fine, "Mainstream, Blackstream and the Black Art Movement," *Art Journal* 30:4 (1971), 374–375, 374.

33 Mphutlane wa Bofelo, "The Influences and Representations of Biko and Black Consciousness in Poetry in Apartheid and Postapartheid South Africa/Azania," in Andile Mngxitama, Amanda Alexander, and Nigel C. Gibson, eds., *Biko Lives!* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 191–212, 193.

34 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.

35 M. Jacqui Alexander and Chandra Talpade Mohanty, "Introduction: Genealogies, Legacies, Movements," in M. Jacqui Alexander and Chandra Talpade Mohanty, eds., *Feminist Genealogies, Colonial Legacies, Democratic Futures* (New York: Routledge, 1997), xiii–xlii, xxviii.

36 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.

37 Cherise A. Pollard, "Lorde, Audre 1934–1992," in Fedwa Malti-Douglas, ed., *Encyclopedia of Sex and Gender*, vol. 3 (Detroit: Macmillan Reference USA, 2007), 907–909, 908–909. Gale Virtual Reference Library, Gale, Temple University, http://libproxy.temple.edu:2284/ps/start.do?p=GVRL&u=temple_main (accessed July 19, 2009).

38 Thelma Golden, "Introduction," in Christine Kim and Franklin Sirmans, eds., *Freestyle* (New York: Studio Museum of Harlem, 2001), 14–15, 14.

39 Trey Ellis, "The New Black Aesthetic," *Callaloo* 38 (1989), 233–243, 234.

40 There is a story to tell about the difficult relationship between philosophy and its "underrepresented populations." People like Lou Outlaw, Susan Bordo, Kathryn Gines, and John McClendon have told and are telling this story more effectively than I ever could.

41 Monique Roelofs, "Racialization as an Aesthetic Production," in George Yancy, ed., *White on White/Black on Black* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2005), 83–124, 83.

42 Susan Bordo, *UnbearableWeight* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004); Janell Hobson, "The Batty Politic," *Hypatia* 18:4 (2003), 87–105; Sidney Kasfir, "African Art and Authenticity," in Olu Oguibe and Okwui Enwezor, eds., *Reading the Contemporary* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2000).

43 Roelofs 83.

44 Clyde R. Taylor, *The Mask of Art: Breaking the Aesthetic Contract* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1998).

45 Saidiya Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).

46 Joe Wood, "The Yellow Negro," *Transition* 73 (1997), 40–66.

47 Henry Louis Gates, *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of Afro-American Literary Criticism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988); Samuel A. Floyd, *The Power of Black Music: Interpreting Its History from Africa to the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995).

48 Kofi Agawu, "Aesthetic Inquiry and the Music of Africa," in Kwasi Wiredu, ed., *A Companion to African Philosophy* (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 2005), 404–414.

49 Ngugi wa Thiong'o, *Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature* (Nairobi, Kenya: Heinemann, 1986).

50 Think here of Baumgarten's identification of aesthetics with the study of sensuous cognition, and of what this becomes in Kant's hands. In the Transcendental Aesthetic section of the First Critique, Kant explores "the doctrine of sensibility," the point of which is to discover the forms of sensible intuition by means of which knowledge "is in immediate relation" to objects. *Immanuel Kant's Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Norman Kemp Smith (New York: St. Martin's Press, Macmillan, 1929), 65–67, 65 (A21–22/B35–36).

51 Arthur Danto, "A Future for Aesthetics," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 51:2 (1993), 271–277, 275.

52 Gabriela Montell, "Do Good Looks Equal Good Evaluations?" *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, Wednesday, October 15, 2003, http://chronicle.com/jobs/2003/10/2003101501c.htm (accessed May 23, 2007); Kate Lorenz, "Do Pretty People Earn More?" Monday, July 11, 2005, http://www.cnn.com/2005/US/Careers/07/08/looks/ (accessed May 25, 2007).