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BLACK “RECONSTRUCTION”; OR THE AFROCENTRIC HOME REPAIR MANUAL

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

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

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

— Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man* (1994)

1 Introduction

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

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

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

2 The Blackness of Blackness

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

what he intends. He writes:

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"reassembly" of the "term".

3 Conclusion: Reconstructing the House of Being?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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