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DISCIPLINE, DETERMINATION, DISCERNMENT: IN REPLY

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I appreciate the care and the time that professors Sheth, Ventzislavov, Haile, and Hall have devoted to my essay.¹ I am particularly grateful for their willingness not just to engage my work, but also to find a mode of engagement that goes beyond simply producing objections and provoking replies. The ritual of objections and replies can be edifying and illuminating, as for example, the debates around Descartes' *Meditations* and the back and forth between Henry Louis Gates and Joyce A. Joyce over Baldwin make clear. But there is value also in other modes of engagement, like the invitation to joint exploration that my "Reconstruction" essay extends and the commentators graciously and generously accept.

Accepting the invitation to explore sends the commentators off in two different but complementary directions. Hall and Ventzislavov sound certain of the themes that structure the invitation—Hall describes this as "picking up on [some] notes" that he hears in my work (2020, 50)—while Haile and Sheth inspect the terms of the invitation by asking, and tentatively answering, certain foundational questions. As it happens, each of the soundings pairs up nicely with one of the inspections, so I'll take them in pairs, more or less, below.

¹ I also appreciate, more than I can say, the patience and thoughtfulness of the editors. Dr. Anscomb and Dr. Deprez have been a delight, and it has been an honour to work with them.

1 Politics and Counter-Habituation (Sheth and Ventzislavov)

Professor Sheth mainly presses the thought that there is a kind of opacity—or worse, a hole—in my account where a politics should be. She puts it more gently than that, but she has put it (a bit) less gently in other settings, and found my responses unsatisfying. Professor Ventzislavov’s generous and generative meditation on the theme that unlocks my work for him—counter-habituation—gives me the opportunity to say more clearly what I tried to say on those other occasions. Sheth prepares the way for this thought by asking related questions from at least three different directions.

1. “[H]ow does one see the world in the way that Taylor sees? Is this a problem of political ontology? Or is it a problem of method and approach?” (2020, 87)
2. “How does - or simply, can - one develop an approach that can reflect an aesthetics that is politically/racially sensitive - whether as a cultural worker, or again as a director, viewer, or critic... How does one engage in aesthetic racial reconstruction?” (2020, 88)
3. “Is there a clear relationship between politics and racial aesthetics that guides his analysis?” (2020, 88)

I read these as questions about how to locate, motivate, cultivate, and operationalize the political sensibility that hovers over my analyses. That is to say: my readings of cultural phenomena have pretty clear normative implications, so it’s fair to wonder how these norms get baked into my analysis and how someone who doesn’t already feel their appeal might come to do so.

I’ll have little to say here about the nature and implications of the relevant norms, precisely because they are so clear. As I say in my essay, black aesthetics as I understand it begins with a commitment to black

humanity, which is a commitment so broad as to seem empty until one considers the world's continual failure to live up to it. I'm happy to credit the simultaneous obviousness and difficulty of this ethical standard by treating it the way the Black Lives Matter movement does: as a public political conception that can be reconciled with any number of more comprehensive or otherwise narrower political views. (I'm thinking here of the actual movement, not of any of the organisations or tendencies that periodically claim something like ownership of the movement.) This move has the shape of a down payment on a more detailed argument that I might give later, but it is important to note that the more detailed argument can, in my view, unfold in a different theoretical register. The reconstructive work of critical race aesthetics, as I'm thinking of it, is consistent with a variety of political-theoretic and social-theoretic refinements. I will surely have my preferred ways of doing this additional work, but telling that story is an exercise in political theory rather than in the (in a sense) prior work that attends whatever this aesthetics is.

What is this prior political-ethical work? This is the root of Sheth's question about method and approach, which leads her to wonder if I'm raising a question of political ontology. This is an intriguing option, one that I'd want to consider in the light of her forthcoming book to see more clearly what she means by it. But I think I'm more interested in a kind of political or critical *phenomenology*.

I use the label of political phenomenology to capture an approach that I've cobbled together from figures like Dewey, Du Bois, Cavell, Susan Bordo, and Stuart Hall. Put crudely and swiftly, the idea is that political life depends at crucial points on various forms of immediate experience, and that the responsible conduct of political life requires highlighting, reflecting on, and, where appropriate, reorienting oneself to this immediacy. Aesthetics is one name for one way to do this work. (Philosophy of culture is another. There are still more.) This is why

Birth of a Nation was so powerful: it consolidated, confirmed, reproduced, and *expressed* a white supremacist vision of blackness-as-threat and whiteness-as-imperilled-virtue (with the nature of the respective threats and virtues varying importantly by gender), and did so in ways that were immediately affecting for adherents and critics alike.

I have hesitated in the past to appeal to the idea of critical phenomenology because that expression tends to pick out the heirs of Merleau-Ponty and Heidegger rather than of American naturalists like Dewey, Alain Locke, Emerson, and William James. But Professor Sheth's clarifying questions are encouraging me to be less fastidious about these questions of intellectual heritage. My recommendation, then, is for an exercise in *perfectionist phenomenology*—perfectionist, to be clear, in the spirit of Cavell's Emersonian perfectionism—that aims to model and recommend a kind of critical distance from the cultural forces that propose to mobilize our aversions and enjoyments. It counsels a continual openness to self-interrogation and to the prospect of reorienting oneself to one's affections and judgments, both informed by something like José Medina's epistemology of resistance (to whom we'll return).

Professor Sheth's questions may derive in part from anticipating this appeal to critical phenomenology and worrying where and how the criticism gets traction with individual agents. When this worry comes into view, we're left to ask: What about the consumers of politically charged aesthetic objects (or aesthetically charged political objects) who are perfectly content with their aversions and enjoyments, and unwilling to engage in self-interrogation? Where does the call for reconstruction get its purchase on us then?

We are now peering down the rabbit hole of a great many very complicated questions. These questions implicate issues like moral motivation, weakness of the will, the possibility of resistance for encultured human subjects, and the relationship between discourse, deliberation, and political agency. I don't pretend to have answers to any of those

questions, nor do I have much interest in asking them right now. Sheth might be interested in them, but I rather doubt it. I suspect that, like me, she's after something nearer to hand and narrower, something that I'll address by saying (everything I've already said, and then, in summary) things like this:

1. I'm no more concerned with getting (for example) the rabid and unreconstructed racist to engage in self-interrogation than I am in trying to persuade Hitler that he's got the Jewish people wrong. One of the lessons of politics, I think, is that persuasion is not the only game in town, and that the people you don't persuade have to be dealt with in other ways. (This is not yet a paean to revolutionary, or normal, violence. In part because...)
2. ...I'm much more interested in how we deal with the people whose political views lack Hitler's definiteness of intention, and who have unwittingly and uncritically accepted the psycho-emotional habits that societies structured in dominance have baked into them. How many of those people there are and how movable they are is a question for empirical inquirers to take up. I aver simply that there are some, enough to be bothered with; that they are awash in cultural currents that most of them have not thought much about; and that it is a good thing to give those people the tools to think harder and better. (Even if people like me most often do so mediately, for example by equipping the university students who will become journalists or HR officers or marketing professionals).
3. To the extent that I am interested in the unreconstructed racist, I'm interested in mobilising societal resources to make the development of people like that less likely than it currently is. Dewey, especially after his Aristotelian turn, encourages me to say that this happens prior to persuasion, in some ways priming the pump for persuasion, in systems of public education, both formal and informal.

4. Aesthesis is a crucial feature of human experience, a powerful aspect of social life, and an underappreciated political tool. I mean to be recommending that we acknowledge the political role of aesthesis, that individual agents take responsibility for the habits of perception, attention, and valuation that our cultures routinely attempt to download into us, and that we, philosophers and people like us, take responsibility for the opportunity we've been given: the opportunity to turn the institutional and intellectual resources we've cultivated into public resources that can help support the work of counter-habitation and self-interrogation.

A final thought, addressing a final facet of Sheth's question: How do people do this? What exactly are people supposed to do with the critical race aesthetician's analysis?

One answer to this question involves what appears in my black aesthetics book as a kind of substitution test. Taking one's experience seriously in a society structured in dominance means seriously asking how tinkering with the vectors of stratification might affect an experience. Which is to say things like this: would the visual codes that govern the depiction of Wonder Woman make sense if applied to Batman? Would the experience of the images scan easily if the governing codes were transposed?

Another way to answer this question is simply to point to Ventzislavov's wonderful study of the museum scene in *Black Panther*. This scene efficiently dramatizes and highlights the ethico-political complexities that swirl around cultural institutions and practices in post-colonial contexts. And it can, in the right hands, activate a process of, as he puts it, "historical analysis, demystification of cultural paradigms, and re-socialization" (Ventzislavov 2020, 103). He goes on to suggest, rightly, I think, that this process that might usefully anchor a valuable administrative practice of cultural reconstruction, as exemplified, perhaps, by the recommendations of the Sarr-Savoy Report. He calls it "reconstruction

through resocialization,” which may be a better name than anything I’ve come up with.

2 The Priority of Blackness to Race? (Haile)

While Sheth and Ventzislavov draw out, in different ways, my interest in counter-habituation, Haile and Hall draw out, in different directions, the theme of blackness. Hall is interested in a particular form of black life, in ways we’ll return to. Haile is interested in blackness as a phenomenon or condition, in ways it will take some work to get (close to getting) clear on.

Haile worries that my turn to black aesthetics corrects for Dewey’s “erasure of the racialized aspects” of reconstruction (and of the US, and of philosophy) only if “there is something unique about *blackness* enacted through the theoretical apparatus of aesthetics...” (Haile 2020, 68).

Something unique has to be put in play here, Haile notes, because part of my criticism of Dewey is precisely that he failed to resist a whitely epistemology of ignorance despite being superbly well-positioned to do so. He had plenty of resources that could have helped him know and do better, to accept the claims that race might make on his thought, and *he still declined to take race seriously*.

Haile is asking, in essence, how the invocation of black aesthetics might challenge philosophy’s sense of itself, thereby deepening its relationship to the rest of the social world, when Dewey’s leadership role in the NAACP didn’t inspire him to take up this challenge in his own life. Given the shape of my argument, he says, something has to fill the gap between the practice of philosophy and the racialized social world. He thinks I’ve left some clues about this here and there, but worries that I never quite get clear on it.

I appreciate Haile’s effort to gather these clues and offer a patch for this apparent hole in my argument. I only wish I understood his suggestion better. The broad idea is that blackness is doing more work, and has to

do more work, in my account than I've let on. My concern, he thinks,

is not so much “race” or even the context of “racialization” but that which conditions the context itself.... 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. (Haile 2020, 69)

But what does it mean to say that blackness “conditions the context” of racialization? The way I read the relevant literatures in this area, it might signal, at a minimum, one or more of four states of affairs. It might be that blackness is ontologically prior to race, or empirically weightier, or phenomenologically deeper, or culturally richer.

Working out what these options mean and which of them matter to Haile would require more work than I have space for here. The first possibility alone is sufficiently deep and interesting to occupy us for some time (if we let it, which we won't), not least because the best way to explore it is to submit to the tutelage of thinkers—like Frank Wilderson, Saidaiya Hartman, and Fred Moten—who say things like this:

to be committed to the anti- and ante-categorical predication of blackness [...] is to subordinate, by a measure so small that it constitutes measure's eclipse, the critical analysis of anti-blackness to the celebratory analysis of blackness (Moten 2017, viii)

There are riches here, and, as Haile points out, I've already noted with dismay how long it took me to give Moten's work the attention it deserves. But not only is there insufficient space here to explore these thoughts; there's also insufficient motivation to do so if the aim is to solve the problem that Haile points out.

The claim about blackness conditioning the context of racialization,

whatever it comes to, is supposed to answer a question that I'm supposed to have left open: how is it that black aesthetics can do the work I assign it in my critique of Dewey and of the practice of philosophy? Haile marks the opening with language like this: "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... that gives it this capacity..." (Haile 2020, 68).

But I don't have to assume that "blackness enacted through aesthetics" has some unique capacity or import. I just have to assume that explicit and sustained restoration of philosophical reflection to its social context can promote, inspire, and provoke the kind of epistemic resistance that José Medina calls for in his work on epistemologies of resistance.² The key is to create the conditions under which epistemic agents are routinely confronted, can routinely confront themselves, with states of affairs that challenge their biases and prejudices, and that encourage them to hold themselves accountable to the ongoing refinement and cultivation of their sensibility and character as knowers and as ethical beings. None of which is yet to say that the existence of these conditions is sufficient for successful reconstruction. The conditions are jointly necessary, in some combination; but they require something more, something more closely related to the individualized burdens of ethical life. I'll mark these burdens for now with words like "discernment" and "determination," and pledge to return to them at the end of this piece.

I am interested in helping to create the conditions for self-interrogation and counter-habitation—for reconstruction through resocialization. Creating these conditions is not a solitary ethical undertaking, though it has clear ethical stakes and challenges. It is a socio-political project that requires the ongoing critique and reinvention of social institutions and

² See Medina (2013).

practices—of professional and scholarly associations, voluntary civic associations, schools, and wider cultural matrices for the production of knowledge and culture. (This is precisely the point of Ventzislavov’s appeal to the Sarr-Savoy Report.) Dewey was in one of the right spaces—the NAACP crowd—but whatever dispositions this space bred in him were not reinforced by his philosophical training or by the rest of his life as a citizen. Dewey’s contemporary heirs face a different mix of societal and ethical conditions, and one element in this new mix, or one key to making the difference matter, is to do the sort of thing I tried to do and call for in my essay.

Black aesthetic theory and practice can advance the work of counter-habitation and of epistemic resistance, but my argument does not require that they be unique or exceptional in this regard. That said, the fact that my argument can get by with less doesn’t mean that less is all there is. Perhaps a proper account of the way blackness conditions the context of racialization will show that there is something unique going on here. Perhaps Wilderson’s description of blackness as a “space of negation” that underwrites the unity and solidarity of the white/Human world holds the key here (2003, 187).³ Or maybe the essence of it lies in Moten’s claim, offered while resisting Wilderson’s brand of Afropessimism, that “blackness mobilizes predication not only against but also before itself” (Moten 2017, viii). These represent stronger and weaker readings of the ontological priority claim, both of which ultimately pull in the direction of other kinds of claims—empirical, phenomenological, or cultural—about the workings of race and of blackness, or in the direction of broader claims about experience (or subjectivity, or identity, or concepts) as such. These claims may be true, but they seem not to bear interestingly on the work that my “Reconstruction” essay attempts to do.

.....
3 See Wilderson (2020).

3 Conclusion (Hall)

The blackness of black aesthetics may not serve as the theoretical linchpin of my account in the way that Haile suggests, but it's easy to see why he thought it might. A particular vision of black life animates my approach to these issues, and does so in ways that might seem orthogonal to the standard concerns of philosophical race theory. Hall's thoughtful sounding of some notes from my "Reconstruction" essay highlights this fact in a way that helps me bring these reflections to a close.

Hall highlights and clarifies my longstanding interest in "aesthetic self-representations by women of colour in popular culture" (Hall 2020, 50). My reference to the TV show *Queen Sugar* (among other things) suggests to him an abiding interest specifically in black women in the southern US, and a corresponding interest in the way these women are the beating heart of an aesthetically vibrant social world. The key to this social world, he says, is the role it assigns to the kind of vernacular aesthetic activity that tends not to show up when philosophers map their rarefied artworlds. This activity registers in the work of towering figures like Walker and Toomer both as subject matter and as the context for their artistic practice. In a similar way, with more pedestrian results, it models, underwrites, and advances the aesthetic-reconstructive work that I studied and attempted in my essay.

Hall's reading clarifies a picture of my work that I've sketched elsewhere.⁴ Anyone who knows me or my work on black aesthetics knows that my interest in that topic was sparked less by the artworlds of Dickie and Danto than by a black college in a black city in the U.S. south. Unfortunately, anyone who knows me or my work also knows that my introduction to the topic left me in dire need of instruction on what people typically refer to now as intersectionality. (There are other ways

4 See Taylor (2002); Taylor (2016).

to refer to it, and debates over this one now threaten to generate more heat than light.) What these past sketches have probably not indicated clearly enough is something that Hall seems to see clearly: how much of my early instruction came from black women in and of the south—from teachers and students at Spelman College (including, to begin with, the sociology of women class my sister taught there), and, later, from poets like Nikki Finney and Kelly Norman Ellis, whose work meditates beautifully on the vernacular worlds that Hall prizes.

I am still working to put this instruction to proper use, and the wonderful exchange I'm now bringing to a close has given me the opportunity to see and say more clearly what that requires. It requires, first of all, accepting that it may be misleading to speak of "needing instruction" on intersectionality. Unless one deviates from standard ways of using the relevant words (in the manner, say, of Emerson), putting it that way makes it sound as if there were simply facts I had yet to encounter or theories I had yet to comprehend. One likes to have more facts and better theories, to be sure; but what I needed most was the discipline and determination to think harder about the facts and theories I either already knew or should have known, and the discernment to think responsibly about when and how to put this harder thinking to work in my life.

Discipline, determination, and discernment: these are among the virtues and values that aesthetic reconstruction requires. They mark the stakes and the conditions of the perfectionist political phenomenology that just is, I think, the way I propose to do the work of critical race aesthetics. There is more to this sort of project, as Ventzislavov's reference to reconstruction through resocialization helps make clear. As I say above, facts and theories matter. The wider cultural matrices also matter, and must be targets of critique and intervention. But what also matters is the relationship one establishes between these facts and theories and matrices on the one hand, and one's immediate experience

on the other. This relationship is the domain of the aesthetic, and building it is the burden of the kind of prophetic aesthetic that animates the greatest works of the black aesthetic tradition.

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