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RECONSTRUCTION OR DECOLONISATION?

Paul Taylor's 'Black Reconstruction in Ethics'

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*Paul Taylor's essay 'Black Reconstruction in Aesthetics,' explores the questions of what reconstruction in aesthetics means. He asks how reconstruction, as a program for the post-bellum Southern United States, took up certain kinds of racially inclusive agendas even as it remained myopic to fundamental, seemingly insurmountable racial, racist, sentiments. I turn to his book to illuminate some of the myopias and seemingly intractable racisms that he seems to refer to in the essay, and then return to his essay, where he answers some of those questions. I argue that he is correct in his analysis. I turn to several critics' responses of the film *Moonlight*, which received rave reviews, to illustrate the point that there are similar sentiments in other current seemingly progressive contexts.*

Paul Taylor's essay 'Black Reconstruction in Aesthetics', like his book *Black is Beautiful* (2016), is a deliberate, luxurious, meditation on the normalized aesthetics of white supremacy. Taylor's essay explores the questions of what reconstruction in aesthetics means. He asks how reconstruction, as a program for the post-bellum Southern United States, took up certain kinds of racially inclusive agendas even as it remained myopic to fundamental, seemingly insurmountable racial, racist, sentiments. Taylor's work illuminates, on a number of fronts, the homogenisation, the invisibility, the reduction of Blackness to certain tropes, images, monodimensional readings of Black men and women, groups of Black men and women. In order to respond to his larger provocation in the essay, namely how reconstruction takes up certain kinds of racially inclusive agendas even as it accommodates other racist sentiments, I will first turn to his book to illuminate some of the myopias and seemingly intractable racisms that he seems to refer to in the essay, and then return to his essay, where he answers some of those questions.

On the first page of Taylor's book, quoting Mince and Price, he recounts the reception of Africans in 1790 Suriname. As he quotes: "The [new arrivals] have stars in their hair...have had their heads shaved, leaving patches of hair shaped like stars and half-moons" (Taylor 2016, 1). Taylor refers to this group as African Americans, following the practice of the authors who recount the story:

They mean to reject and correct certain received ideas about the pace at which Africans become Americans. They hold that distinctly African American cultures emerged quite early on, as newly enslaved Africans built wholly new practices and life-worlds out of the various old words... (Taylor 2016, 2).

Yet, for Taylor, the use of the term appears to reflect a subtle insistence that naming matters. Indeed, even as he recounts the captain's description of how they did it—"themselves...the one to the other, by the help

of a broken bottle and without soap”—one is immediately struck by the tone of the quote as the synecdoche for his book, *Black is Beautiful*: subtle, insistent, forceful, requiring you/me, the reader to see; to see what one has not seen, not been able to see despite her confident reliance on her racial awareness, complicated theoretical frameworks, and iconoclastic resistance to popular discussions of race or aesthetics; to see that often, the most subtle readings require a guided re-orientation that takes one step-by-step through one’s standard misreadings in order to, as it were, be able to come back out of the cave into light.

Taylor suggests that to approach race critically—to “insist on the political significance of race”—“is ...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” (Taylor 2016, 7). So what does that look like in the context of, for example, a 1950s pre-civil rights imagination?

In response, Taylor gives a notable example, from Todd Haynes’s 2002 film *Far From Heaven*. He begins his second chapter, entitled ‘No Negroes in Connecticut: Seers, Seen’, with an excerpt from the screenplay that includes the first part of his title in the dialogue precisely at a moment the speaker of that line is in close proximity with two Black servants—Taylor points to the layers of invisibility, as he calls it, “the willfulness of racialized misperception, the refusal to see what is manifestly and indispensably present” (2016, 33). But in fact, as he points out, that scene lays bare who is hyperconspicuous, at least to us—the viewers—at precisely a moment of not being seen by those who are in even closer proximity.

Taylor argues that invisibility or hypervisibility is susceptible to deper-

1 In the endnotes, Taylor describes exactly this tone in a quote from Sidney Mintz and Richard Price, the authors of the book *The Birth of African American Culture* (1976), from which he draws the example of first Africans: “It is hard to imagine a more impressive example of irrepressible cultural vitality than this image of slaves decorating one one’s hair in the midst of the most dehumanizing experiences in all of history” (Taylor 2016, 1).

sonalising treatment: from Level 1, that of stereotypes and stock figures; to Level 2: mirrors, fetishes, and deviants; to Level 3, anti-racist depersonalization (2016, 55-58). Indeed, from his charged and unflinching, astute analysis of the selection of the lighter-skinned Zoe Saldana to play the role of the forceful, blunt Nina Simone, to his discussion of Dave Chappelle, as a post-Black thinker for whom parodies of ‘racial Blackness’ allow “anti-Black and whitely sentiments to effectively expose themselves” (2016, 57). Yet, from his approach, I surmise that these levels appear at the level of the author, the director, the writer. Is the viewer complicit, or culpable, as well in understanding the production of anti-Black depersonalisation?

I wonder here if we might build on Taylor’s approach and consider the contrast of invisibility and hypervisibility in relation to the film *Moonlight*, which debuted in 2016 to rave reviews by film critics in the *New York Times* (Scott 2016), *The New Yorker* (Brody 2016), and elsewhere (see below)? The film, directed by Barry Jenkins, features a young Black man growing up in Miami during the 1980s. Chiron is, we learn eventually, gay. He is bullied by his male classmates, also Black; cherished and mentored by an adult Black man and his Black female partner; exists in a tenuous relationship with his mother; and through a series of events is eventually sent to prison and released some years later only to renew his acquaintance with an old classmate with whom he had a sexual encounter during his school years.

Every review by white reviewers praises the luminescence of the film, the quality of the light, the simple ‘authenticity’ of Chiron:

From Roger Ebert:

We can see the sad eyes of Chiron as a boy reflected in Chiron as a man... Jenkins [the director] deeply understands that it is human connection that forms us, that changes our trajectory and makes us who we are (2016).

From A.O. Scott in *the New York Times*:

Moonlight dwells on the dignity, beauty and terrible vulnerability of black bodies, on the existential and physical matter of black lives (2016).

From Richard Brody in *The New Yorker*:

Yet the subject of “Moonlight” isn’t Blackness or gayness; it’s one man whose many qualities include being Black and being gay—and whose own keen awareness of his place in the world, and of its implications, is the high-pressure, high-heat forge of his densely solid, relentlessly opaque, yet terrifyingly vulnerable and fragile character. *Blasting aside conventions, archetypes, and stereotypes*, Jenkins conjures the birth of an individual’s consciousness, the forging of a complex and multifaceted identity; he restores complexity to the very idea of identity, of the multiplicity as well as the singularity of being oneself—and he conveys his own primordial sense of wonder that art itself can conjure it [My emphasis] (2016).

Brody’s insistence that Jenkins has explosively pushed past stereotypes raises questions about Brody’s own reliance on those stereotypes. He unknowingly reveals his worldview when he says:

Without ever losing sight of the political phenomena that make Chiron who he is—including racism, homophobia, mass incarceration, government neglect, and poverty, in their immediate power as well as their long-term effects—Jenkins films them not as issues to be pinned to the screen in search of a rapid and ready response but as the crystallization of individual experience in all its impacted gain and ongoing struggle (Brody 2016).

Who is Brody informing of this backdrop? Presumably, most African

Americans are well-versed in the background conditions that produce the hypervisible Black man, an overdetermined rich, contoured character that is produced as well as perceived by an outside observer. Brody is writing, not to a general audience, but to a white elite audience—the consumers of ‘diversity’ and of ‘black cinema.’

By contrast, Hilton Als, also a staffwriter at *The New Yorker* who also decidedly loves the film, for very good reason, points to the story of Chiron as one version of his own story (2016). But the theme of his review is to focus, ultimately, on the found and fleeting subject of desire or love or intimacy: “Jenkins knows that in this study of black male closeness the point isn’t to show fucking; it’s to show the stops and starts, the hesitation, and the rush that comes when one black male body finds pleasure and something like liberation in another...” (Als 2016). While Als also acknowledges that Jenkins avoids ‘Negro hyperbole’ (those details that over-illuminate Blackness for the viewers), his review explores the minute details that amplifies its singularity. He describes, for example, a scene between Chiron and Juan, the drug dealer who takes on the role of the surrogate father: “Inside, in a dark, silent space, the kid stares at Juan, and Juan stares at the kid. There’s a kind of mirroring going on...” (Als 2016). Perhaps uncoincidentally, this more fine-tuned, granular assessment comes from a Black queer writer.

The possibility of nuances in the themes of the film seems muted despite the glowing comments of all the reviews. As two of the three white reviewers mention, the film has no white figures whatsoever (one Scott (2016) seemingly proudly confesses that he didn’t notice this fact until “a European acquaintance” named it for him on his third viewing). The same reviewer refers to the stereotyped character of Juan, as the drug dealer who acts unpredictably. All the white reviewers point to the shattering of stereotypes of the drug dealer—the person whose product ruins Chiron’s homelife even as the dealer himself becomes a paternal figure. Yet, I wonder whether the stereotypes are actually shattered, or if

the reviewers construct an archetype of certain tropes only in order to insist that they are shattered in their eyes.

For example, all of essays appear to miss—or neglect—the complex relationship between Chiron and Juan’s girlfriend, Teresa, or even between Teresa and Juan, or between Chiron and his mother. Is it possible to see the nuances of visibility when every one of these reviewers must resort to tropes to point to the ‘blasting’ of stereotypes? Is it whiteness, white supremacy, or masculinity—or those who are the beneficiaries of any of these—which govern the modes of visibility?

Even as they insist that stereotypes are being shattered, none of the reviewers, Black or white, comments on the symbolism of Chiron’s name: a reference to the Centaur in Greek mythology—half-man/half-horse—whose mother, Phyllira, is repulsed by her son and begs the gods to become something other than human in order to avoid having to see him. Chiron becomes known as a superior centaur who becomes a nurturing teacher who educates various famous figures: Asclepius, Achille, Perseus, and others.

In their excitement to show that they understand that Chiron is not a stereotype, the reviewers do not turn to his namesake to understand the subtleties of his character, or to ponder why his mother might have named him this—perhaps suggesting, yet again, their imperviousness to nuance in relation to Blackness, another stereotype which, in spite of their modestly self-congratulatory racial awareness, persists: Was it about the scarcity of time or is it about the murkier conditions of knowledge-production? Is it that Chiron appears to be a ‘Black’ name, rather than a name that invokes hopes, dreams, hidden knowledge that may reveal something new about this character’s existence, his relationship? They point to the vulnerability of Black men, their fragility, their susceptibility to brutality, which—as Taylor says at the very beginning of his book—are reflections of the political world in which the aesthetics are produced. Perhaps I’m asking too much of the reviewers—but

certainly, one would think that in *The New Yorker*, that scion of high culture, one of the reviewers, white or Black, might make reference to the symbolism of Chiron.

How do the director, the reader, the critic learn to see? To see what is hyperconspicuous, what is visible, what is invisible? After all, this is the challenge to classical aesthetics frameworks leveled by more contemporary philosophers of aesthetics, including Taylor and others such as Monique Roelofs whose framework of racial address unsettles classical aesthetics through a 'relational' framework (2005). Roelofs argues that the way in a subject is made visible or legible racially is through a complex framework that interrogates race and gender in relation to objects, people, and places. All of this to say, or perhaps this is the same question: How is invisibility/plurality/hypervisibility produced? Elsewhere, Roelofs has offered an important answer through her discussion of racial address and "aesthetic relationality":

A relational theory of the aesthetic postulates a layered texture of interconnections among aesthetic forms of signification and modalities of cultural positioning such as blackness, whiteness, gender, ethnicity, colonial background, and class. More generally it brings into view ways in which subjectivity, identity, and culture implicate aesthetic structures, and in which aesthetic structures implicate modalities of cultural positioning. At the same time, a theory of aesthetic relationality draws out possibilities for alternative constellations of aesthetic and racialized subjectivity. It exposes the aesthetic as a social technology that must be retooled, an art of constructing and deconstructing formations of whiteness and blackness, that reaches into the minutiae as well as the broader outlines of our racialized, gendered and classed lives (Roelofs 2005, 84-85).

Taylor acknowledges this perspective of Roelofs from the beginning of his book (2016, 21-22). At the time, I wondered if it might not be help-

ful—as fantastic a survey of Black aesthetics as his book is—to ‘cash’ one of the cheques that he has promised to write, by honing in on what the politics of the viewer ought to be in terms of seeing the nuances that he lays out for us. Thus, is it possible to be white, or brown, or a foreigner, and step outside of one’s frame in order to understand the ways in which visibility/hypervisibility is deployed, a kind of ‘critical aesthetic studies,’ along the lines of ‘critical media studies,’ as it were. How does one guard against the seduction of wanting to see nuance to the point of the failure—that is to the point of being myopic or tone-deaf to one’s inflated hopes, and instead moving past the conventionally anti-Black objection that Taylor sought to crack open?

I suppose another way to ask the question that emerged for me, chapter after beautiful chapter of Taylor’s book, was: How 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? Is it possible to escape the supremacy of whiteness, even as one is—as I am—neither white nor Black, though certainly beneficiary of one, while simultaneously—though less frequently—subject to the similar forms of homogenisation/objectification as the other?

A slightly different question emerged for me from his third chapter, namely ‘Beauty to Set the World Right: The Politics of Black Aesthetics’ (Taylor 2016, 77-104). There, Taylor describes Louis Armstrong’s status as an American ambassador to Kenya, as a politically astute jazz musician who is keenly aware of how race politics plays out. As Taylor suggests, “Armstrong was a worldwide phenomenon: a continent-hopping cultural agent of such global import that ‘first world’ governments and multinational corporations alike sought to wrap themselves in his mantle’ (2016, 79). He draws on the example of Armstrong in order to raise the question of whether/how ethical concerns should shape our approach to the practice of cultural expression, i.e., the question of the scope and range of ‘aesthetic autonomy’ as Taylor calls it. What is the

role of politics to aesthetics—precisely in the challenge to the notion that aesthetics is purely about the sublime? 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? This is the work of reconstruction to which he returns: How does one engage in aesthetic racial reconstruction?

Finally, I had a simple, technical question: Taylor introduces a relation between *sarx* and *soma*, that is, as the relation between the sensuous natures of the body and the treatment of the body as an object with aesthetic value (or at least this is one part of the definition of *somaesthetics*) (2016, 107). *Sarkaesthetics*, for Taylor, is “the body as experienced from a third-person perspective, through the external senses” (2016, 108). He uses this term to discuss a range of cases, from Black hair as understood by Black women themselves—as a reflection of racial politics (akin to Dr. Kenneth and Mamie Clark’s studies of Black children’s relationship to whiteness as revealing their preferences for white versus black dolls)—to Thomas Jefferson’s understanding of racial aesthetics in both his discussions of the aversion to Black bodies while also simultaneously evincing a fascination with them, as expressed through his sexual ‘relationship’ (if that is the correct term) with Sally Hemmings. The question is this: How should we understand the politics surrounding these cases in relation to the analysis that he gives? Could there have been other outcomes given the politics of the day? Is there a clear relationship between politics and racial aesthetics that guides his analysis?

At a meta-level, I wanted to know the impetus and approach behind Taylor’s book: Why did he choose the examples that he does, the concepts that he wants to develop further, the frame of the book as something that begins a conversation on several fronts—from films, to actors, to cultural ambassadors, to the authenticity (or not) of hair or clothes? Taylor, in this essay, seems to cash in some of the earlier

cheques he wrote in the book, by turning to the question of reconstruction as a political, programmatic, institutional problem in the program to change some of the dynamics of white supremacy:

The basic reconstructionist impulse – aimed at rooting out the conditions for the persistence of white supremacist and anti-democratic practices – survived the demise of the federal initiative, and worked on multiple levels to animate a variety of activities and projects. There was, for example, a constellation of local and regional movements, policies, and initiatives, many of which began with federal support but continued without it as long as they could manage in the face of lethal and terroristic violence. Underwriting many of these efforts was an ideological commitment to a general cultural reorientation, organized around revised understandings of freedom, equality, community, democracy, and citizenship. And underwriting this ideological program was a project of ethical counter-habitation, calling individual citizens to locate and cultivate the better angels of their natures and repudiate their “unreconstructed” anti-democratic sentiments. [My emphasis] (2020, 18)

Taylor does not explicitly address whether he believes this program has been successful; however, given the topic of his essay, it seems safe to say that he believes we still have a long way to go. He traces out the history of explicit violence in the face of challenges of white supremacy: lynchings; the Dyer bill which attempted to outlaw this ‘terroristic’ practice; and visual, cultural, and filmic endorsements of white supremacy in movies such as D.W. Griffiths’s *Birth of a Nation*. Taylor gestures to the continued need to grapple with “institutional conditions under which dominant ways of thinking attain their influence” (2020, 28). Although he does not name this as violence, I will take the liberty of doing so. Let me explain why.

Over some period of time, I have had conversations with faculty of col-

our—Black and Brown faculty—who have discussed with me the sheer hostility of the university departments in which they hold full-time faculty appointments. Most of the stories that I have heard have come from United States-based faculty who were untenured. Some of these stories come from my own campus. The common features of those stories continue to resonate with me. For example, I have heard multiple (i.e. more than one or two) stories of the sheer vitriol of department evaluations of junior faculty, couched in ‘neutral’ vocabulary, pointing to incidental or even laudable features of a faculty member’s professional engagement—but framed *as criticisms* of their pedagogy or professional work. These evaluations refer to features of a classroom environment (such as the unusually large number of women students of colour in a male faculty member’s class), their minimal response on email (because they have prioritized other parts of their professional obligations). Faculty of colour have shared with me the hostile response of their institutions to comments they have made raising attention to the cultural or ‘whiteness’ of their colleagues—in other words, a reference to the power their white colleagues hold in being able to casually offend, insult, or demean them, but which have been construed as ‘racist remarks’ against their white colleagues, which have in turn forced punitive consequences against the same faculty of colour, while rewarding the white faculty in question (by allowing them to continue to hold their positions). Stories that faculty of colour have relayed to me include being told that they were not intended to be hired, that they were chosen as a ‘compromise’ or as a punishment to the department for not having worked hard enough to recruit and hire Black faculty previously (yes, this is correctly worded), or that they were quietly told that graduate students found them too harsh, too angry, and subsequently neglected to work with them out of fear for their careers. These perceptions were sustained and nourished by their white faculty colleagues, leading to the amplification of an already racially alienating environment.

These are continued forms of unreconstructed racial aesthetics—

the idealized aesthetic compartments to which faculty of colour are expected to conform. They are also forms of institutional violence that continue to work subterraneously—through winks, nods, whisper campaigns, studious silences. Through their subtlety, ubiquity, and casualness, they erode the self-confidence, the ability to work unimpeded, to think quietly and research, to write articles—*they slowly destroy the necessary ability to consider oneself a valued intellectual member of one's profession*, let alone the department. These institutional forms of violence can destroy the psychic coherence or existence of the Black or Brown intellectual.

Simultaneously, the neutrality, the quotidian proceduralism of these institutional forms of racial violence are disseminated and exponentially reproduced: by colleagues, our students, through popular or scholarly articles in which Black aesthetics are denigrated explicitly or through the wholesale exotic evaluation of the aesthetic in question—yes, such as in the reviews I cite above from the *New York Times* and *The New Yorker*. How then do we continue with the project of reconstruction in the face of seemingly intractable, continual injury?

Taylor points to the reconstructive project of Black aesthetics: Black lives have to matter for an engagement to count as Black aesthetics (2020, 38). In so affirming this, Taylor models the pragmatist approach to a messy problem: Authenticity, anti-Blackness, and Black identity - none of these are necessary for a Black aesthetics. Moreover, as he points out:

Black aesthetics need not be a parochially racial project in a way that screens off intersectional considerations. The idea is not that race is the deepest or most important aspect of human affairs, just that it is *one of several* important aspect (2020, 39).

Reconstruction requires decolonisation—a popular catchphrase these days—if such a thing is possible. But decolonising requires a focus not

on identity per se, but on the dynamics of power embedded and reproduced in relationships, whether between Black existence and colonialism (what is being induced, demanded, obliged from ‘the Black’ or the Black work of art?), or between or among Black subjects themselves. In the case of *Moonlight*, if we can return to its assessments by *The New Yorker* and the *New York Times*, the materiality of the Black body is being consumed (remember Scott’s emphasis on the “‘matter’ of Black lives” (2016)); the fact of its vulnerability (Scott and Brody), its fragility (Brody), its susceptibility to violence, but not the dynamics of that vulnerability or the violence. What makes Chiron vulnerable, susceptible, fragile? Why is his position as a target of violence (‘fragility’) regurgitated by the reviewers in hushed, revering tones? Only Als seems to do the work of digging, of thinking through the dynamics: ‘stops and starts, the hesitation...pleasure...liberation’ (2016). These descriptors are not about the body, but about the links, the dynamics that connect Chiron with his lover. Only Als moves past the obsession with the Blackness of Chiron’s body to consider his engagements, his singularity, his persona in relation with the world.

Why must the complete absence of white characters be raised by the white reviewers? I suspect the answers to these questions are located in the very structures of white dominance that induce the enlightened white reviewers to reproduce their own myopias unwittingly: the absence of white characters must be mentioned precisely because it is a rarity for a film, unless it is billed as a “Black” film, to have none. The impossibility of a (Black) drug dealer to be both good and bad reveals a distance from the white reviewers to Blacks, from the knowability of Blacks who live outside of their refined worlds. It is, as Kristie Dotson describes, the distance from hypervisibility to invisibility (2017).

The hypervisibility of Chiron and his relationships to other Black bodies seems to loom larger than the relations, the dynamic, the fluidity of the emotions of those Black subjects against the unnamed, but equally

hypervisible world of white supremacy against which those relationships play out. And yet, the non-naming of it, visible to many others, including Als, appears to render the backdrop invisible, allowing the reviewers to breathe a sigh of relief that they are not forced to confront it because the director has left it unnamed, at least explicitly.

And so I return to the question of what it means to ‘reconstruct’ productively and yet successfully? Does it mean continuing to hear Black and Brown colleagues recount their stories of institutional violence in hushed tones, afraid of offending, of being punished yet again by merely recounting the relentless reproduction of white supremacy? Does it mean the silent acceptance of the racism of the white reviewers who believe they are progressive/ enlightened/ unracist—by returning to the materiality, the commodifying, of the bodies that they then consume in order to declare their seemingly progressive proclivities in print?

Taylor has indeed cashed in his cheque: He turns to the question of politics as an essential counterpart of reconstruction in ethics. It is possible to reconstruct aesthetics through a frame such as the instantiation, the insistence, that Black lives must matter in art. But can reconstruction occur simply through audiences that are Black and Brown, without having to resort to the necessity of white viewers/consumers? Can it engage the change we need to see in the world?

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