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BLACK AESTHETICS: RECONSTRUCTION THROUGH RESOCIALISATION

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My response to Paul C. Taylor's "Black Reconstruction in Aesthetics" follows his example in engaging different disciplinary and thematic contexts. I start with an account of a scene in the 2018 movie Black Panther and explore its relevance to recent discussions about the restitution of African art objects. I then attend to some productive similarities between Taylor's intervention into contemporary aesthetics and a prominent argument in favour of restitution. I finish by suggesting that the reconstruction Taylor calls for can be achieved only if philosophers resocialize along a renewed commitment to engage Black aesthetics and Black lives in all their richness and importance.

When the last time you did somethin' for the first time?
Drake, *Own It* (2013)

We would like to live as we once lived, but history will not permit it.
John F. Kennedy

1 Introduction

In his article "Black Reconstruction in Aesthetics" Paul C. Taylor offers an "argument and an intervention in relation to the practice and study of Black aesthetics" (Taylor 2020, 9). Taylor's study straddles three dichotomies—between Reconstruction as a discrete historical era and as a concept, between Black aesthetics as a lived practice and as a branch of philosophical aesthetics, and, finally, between argument and intervention. These dichotomies and their interrelations form a rich terrain, which Taylor prospects with great care. But his most important contribution is that he pays equal attention to how insight is philosophically derived and how it is socialized. It is the latter aspect of philosophizing that necessitates his intervention. From the blind spot of Dewey's "parochialism" to contemporary analytic philosophy's indifference to "the thoughts, lives, and practices of people racialized as black," Taylor detects a failure not only of topical engagement, but also of social availability (Ibid.) It bears testimony to Taylor's generosity that he frames his intervention as an invitation for other philosophers to join into the "inherently ecumenical enterprise" of Black aesthetics (Ibid.) The issues Taylor broaches, philosophical and meta-philosophical alike, are ripe for much lengthier discussion than he could have possibly managed in the space of an article. But instead of staking this territory for a possible project of his own, Taylor opens it up as a friendly challenge to other philosophers.

What follows is my attempt to accept Taylor's invitation and follow his example in making what he calls "arguments across contexts" (Taylor 2020, 12). I start with an account of a scene in Ryan Coogler's 2018 movie *Black Panther*, adding to Taylor's use of the movie as an example of practicing Black aesthetics and of what reconstruction might look like in the present day. The particular scene is one Taylor does not discuss, but I focus on it because of its numerous implications for our relationship with art, and especially for cases where art perceivers and/

or art objects are racialized. And, since the scene in question has galvanized various initiatives for the restitution of African art, I also attend to a similarity between Taylor's intervention and the arguments in some of the recent literature on restitution. I finish by reinforcing Taylor's call for philosophical "counter-habituation," which I understand as the only adequate response to contemporary analytic philosophy's relative indifference to the urgency and intricacy of Black aesthetics.

2 A Borrowed Muse

One of the most culturally loaded scenes in *Black Panther* comes fairly early and unfolds at a fictional art museum. It involves the character Erik "Killmonger" Stevens—ostensibly an African American—arguing with a female Caucasian museum director about the provenance of an African war hammer on exhibit. After he offers to "take it off her hands," she stiffly informs him that the object is not for sale. Killmonger responds to her with a barrage of rhetorical questions: "How do you think your ancestors got these? Do you think they paid a fair price? Or did they take it... like they took everything else?" Before she has had a chance to answer, the director falls on the ground and it becomes clear that she has been poisoned in Killmonger's heist (Cascone 2018)

The scene is so rich in its recognition of racialized tension—its structure, its origins, and its aesthetics—that for students of this tension the movie might just as well end with it. In terms of structure, the framing of the scene as a polite conversation in a polite institution is the only concession to threadbare civility. In an external shot the place is identified as the "Museum of Great Britain". This contextualizes the scene within a broader colonial narrative even before the characters have said a word. What tightens the screws even further is the fact that the actual building is recognizable as that of the High Museum of Art in Atlanta. The gratification of recognizing "the South's leading art institution" is compounded, and instantly undermined by, the tension between the High Museum's geographical association with the cultural flourishing

of Black America on the one hand, and its institutional complicity with white privilege on the other.[1]

The quick-fire exchange between Killmonger and the museum director dramatizes this tension and its historical origins. The question about the hammer's provenance, for example, is a reference to the systematic dissolution and diminution of African authenticity. Killmonger's next question, about the price Europeans paid for the object, exposes a centuries-long collapse of global fairness. His last one, about the means of procurement, is an implicit judgment on the racialized violence that has underwritten various 'civilizational' crusades and the museums they benignly culminate in.

It is, however, the aesthetic dimension—costume, choreography, set design, acting, and mise-en-scène—that makes the moment cinematically indelible. The sharp contrast between Killmonger's slouchy clothing and the genteel 'museumwear' of everyone around him sets the tone of visual incongruence. That he might not be welcome in her domain is also subtly signaled by the museum director's accent—equal parts British and International Art English.[2] By the time Killmonger acknowledges "all this security out here watching me ever since I walked in," the viewer has grown used to the sinister ballet of museum guards gliding in and out of the frame. In the pristine surroundings of the proverbial white box, Killmonger's presence and implied intrusion is a prime example of what Greg Tate has called a "fly boy in the butter-milk"[3].

In a magazine interview, the costume designer Ruth E. Carter admits

1   The High Museum of Art has been criticized for the racial homogeneity of its board and for programming that does little to represent the richness of the local art scene. See Blau (2015).

2   The term International Art English was introduced by Alix Rule and David Levine in their study of the techniques of discursive obfuscation and alienation art writers systematically employ. See Rule and Levine (2011).

3   This expression is the title of Tate's 1992 collection of essays on American culture and politics. See Tate (1992).

that the sartorial contrast was intentional. Carter had first imagined Killmonger "in a suit with a briefcase" but the visual concept changed course after director Ryan Coogler expressed his preference that the character "look like an everyday black man—an everyday urban male" (Sanders 2018). The interviewer notes that Killmonger's urban aesthetic makes it much easier for the filmmakers to provoke the audience's "racialized presumptions" about the characters (Sanders 2018). That this was Coogler's intention is also clear from an interview in which he reveals that the scene was inspired by a visit he had made to the *real* British Museum during the movie's gestation period. Coogler reports his elation at witnessing the richness of world art and, as a counter-weight, his unease with the complicated role such a collection plays in the history of colonization (Travis 2018). And, even though he does not dwell on the personal dimensions of his own 'fly boy in the butter-milk' moment at the British Museum, one is free to imagine that some version of the incongruities explored in the movie scene would readily apply to *any* "everyday black man" perusing the displays at such an august institution. Coogler's deeper point, of course, is that the connection between the aesthetics of racialized difference and the practice of racialized violence is disturbingly strong.

Considering the movie's plot, the museum scene cannot be regarded as a straightforward critique of artefact despoilment. Killmonger is, after all, participating in a heist and his partner in crime is a German arms dealer with colonial ambitions of his own. But still, regardless of its place in the story, Killmonger's conversation with the museum director retains the uncomfortable plausibility of good social critique; so much so that it has become an unlikely point of reference in recent real-world debates about African art restitution (Cascone 2018). This probably also has to do with the fact that both the making of *Black Panther* and the intensifying art world conversations about decolonization and restitution are driven by the same social upheavals—the increased incidence and visibility of racialized incarceration and police violence in the

United States, the global resurgence of far-right politics, and the various forms of resistance and activism these changes have been met with. While *Black Panther* serves as a reminder of how easily the aesthetic can become political, the restitution issue shows how swiftly the political can become aesthetic.

3 An Untenable Past

In 2018 French President Emmanuel Macron commissioned an exhaustive report titled "The Restitution of African Heritage. Towards a Relational Ethics". The report's authors are economist Felwine Saar and historian Bénédicte Savoy and it explores the thorny issue of restitution from every possible angle—legal, historical, pragmatic, aesthetic, political, philosophical etc. In a section titled "Re-socializing Objects of Cultural Heritage," Saar and Savoy propose that, instead of being seen as material tokens for the repayment of colonial debt, returned artefacts should be regarded as integral elements in the reconstruction of African memories and African self-reinvention. In order to achieve these noble goals, culturally significant objects need to be re-semantisized and re-socialized. The latter is a transformation as radical as it sounds—a patient and sensitive re-inscription of long-displaced objects into the social ecologies of their places of origin. To do this in an "open and nuanced" manner, Saar and Savoy suggest that "the potential return of objects should take into account the wealth and multiplicity of [these] alternative conceptions of cultural heritage," as well as intentionally "*demystify* Western notions of cultural heritage and preservation" (Saar and Savoy 2018, 320).

This part of the Sarr-Savoy report has a special resonance with Taylor's "Black Reconstruction in Aesthetics". If we think of Taylor's intervention as an example of actionable insight, the action his study calls for relates to philosophers in a way very similar to the one in which Sarr and Savoy's approach to restitution relates to art objects. In both cases it is through historical analysis, demystification of cultural paradigms,

and re-socialization that the respective interventions are activated. Taylor's historical example is that of John Dewey's selective handling of the concept of reconstruction. While Dewey invoked the concept with reference to philosophical reform and postwar restoration, he never even broached its racial aspect. This would have been a matter of honest omission, had Dewey not been one of the founders of the NAACP and "with varying degrees of openness and vigour supported causes we would now think of as part of a civil rights or racial justice agenda" (Taylor 2020, 29).

Taylor demystifies Dewey's "superficial invocations" of reconstruction as a paradigm case of philosophical parochialism (Taylor 2020, 21). This parochialism affects philosophy both as a practice and as a profession. In terms of professional milieu, philosophy in Dewey's time was a fairly exclusive enterprise—not many people got to make their living as philosophers and, of those who did, a negligible few were anything but white, financially privileged, and male. The way this demographic limitation affected the practice of philosophy was that it helped perpetuate what Taylor calls a "whitely epistemology of ignorance" (Taylor 2020, 27). There are two reasons for worry here—one is that philosophers would remain innocent to the ways in which their professional context delimits the tenor and scope of their inquiry, and the other that the same blindness would persist from Dewey's time until the present day.

The first worry echoes Sarr and Savoy's concern about the dominant Western approach to heritage and preservation. Philosophers are just like the objects of world art that have been spliced into the politically oblivious phantasmagoria of Western museums—they are socialized within a civilizational script that, in Taylor's words, "tends not to be particularly inclusive and open-minded" (Taylor 2020, 12). These structures are all the more harmful for being hidden in plain sight. The main reason the museum scene in *Black Panther*—a scene to which Sarr and Savoy refer in their report—is aesthetically and cinematically legible

as a comment on white supremacy is that we are already burdened by "racialized presumptions". This makes white supremacy the default Western position, but it is less like an overt ideology than something closer to what Wittgenstein would have called a "form of life"[4]. The movie scene presents Black aesthetics as a counterweight—equally foundational and, if practiced and studied in the sensible and ecumenical manner Taylor suggests, unencumbered by the limitations of ideology.

If Dewey had engaged the civil rights aspect of reconstruction in his philosophy, he would have come closer to the advice Malcolm X gave white allies: "Where the really sincere white people have got to do their "proving" of themselves is not among the black *victims*, but out of the battle lines of where America's racism really *is*—and that's in their own home communities"(Malcolm X 1964, 383). Considering that Dewey's home community as a thinker was primarily the rarefied whitely world of professional philosophy, it is there that his impact as a sincere ally would have been of the greatest consequence. This is what the re-socializing Sarr and Savoy write about and the counter-habituation Taylor calls for would have amounted to in Dewey's case.

As to the worry about philosophical inheritance, Taylor makes it clear that Dewey is not an exception but the norm in the history of professional philosophy. And while one might not be in the position to neatly trace current philosophy's failures back to Dewey and/or any other particular intellectual progenitor, the continuity of neglect towards Black lives and Black aesthetics suggests a genetic flaw in the discipline. It is clear also that when tracing such tectonic continuities, we should be looking for repeating patterns instead of direct references and attributions. One example in the lineage of twentieth century Black aesthetics illustrates the subtle way in which these continuities function. In Lang-

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4   In paragraphs 19, 23, and 241 of the *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein's notion of "form of life" is presented as an often inscrutable epistemological expedient that grounds propositional meaning and truth. See Wittgenstein (1958).

ston Hughes's story "Passing" from the 1930's, the treacherous sliding scale of racialized visibility is illustrated in a fictional letter of apology from a lighter-skinned son to his darker-skinned mother (Hughes 1990, 51-56). Adrian Piper's "Passing for White, Passing for Black" is a highly personal essay in the genre of philosophical autobiography written six decades after Hughes's story was published (Piper 1996, 275-309). And even though Piper does not mention Hughes's work, the shared subject and socio-cultural context suggest a powerful connection between the two—their treatments of the manifestations of self-consciousness, guilt, and defiance in successfully 'passing' are mutually comprehensible and the more poignant for it. But, if it is perfectly sensible to recognize and capitalize on the genetic connection between Hughes and Piper, it is to be expected that such unannounced and often unrealized connections would exist between Dewey and his intellectual heirs. Indeed, Taylor's cautionary tale is his way of addressing his own blind inheritance of Dewey's blindness.

4 A Possible Future

Despite possible implications of return and recovery, notions like reconstruction and restitution do not have to suggest a past available or worth going back to. The initial understanding of historical Reconstruction as "the process of rebuilding and recreating the social and political order that the war had destroyed" could make it seem as if nineteenth century politicians and lawmakers had idealized a pre-Civil War past (Taylor 2020, 16). And, yet, as Taylor notes, in their recognition of the need for a radical reimagining of the American project, Reconstruction's progressive early adopters regarded it as "a second founding" (Taylor 2020, 17). In a similar manner, today's proponents of the restitution of art objects are not burdened by fantasies of a literal return. In a recent conversation on restitution in the New York Times, Nigerian-American artist Toyin Ojih Odutola contends that the concept of 'return' is undermined by the fact that, in the places of geographical origin of African

art objects, "the context is completely altered" (Farago 2019).

The recovery of a prior state of affairs is also not what Taylor's call for philosophical reconstruction entails. If contemporary philosophy should evolve to a place where Black aesthetics is given its due attention, this will be a matter of shedding two different pasts—one of narrow topical interest and one of social and institutional exclusivity. Taylor leads by example in this by striving to expand both his field of inquiry and his source book.[5] It is refreshing to see an analytic philosopher grapple with modes of rigor and insight that fall outside the perennial boundaries of the tradition he belongs to. This openness plays a reflexive role for Taylor. On the one hand, it helps him make the argument that Dewey's parochialism is a failure *for* philosophy. On the other, it helps him undermine the social and discursive conditionings that have prevented philosophers, Taylor included, to engage Black lives and Black aesthetics in all their richness and importance.[6]

One instance in Sarah Thornton's book *Seven Days in the Art World* illustrates the urgency of an intervention like Taylor's. In a chapter on the Turner Prize, jury member Matthew Higgs volunteers that the prize rewards "an individual's radically idiosyncratic interpretation of the world" because "we're inherently fascinated by other people" (Thornton 2009, 131-132). When Taylor tries to parse out the subtle distinction between proper reconstruction and inexpensive redemptionism, it is precisely such attitudes to human difference that he seems to be battling. Higgs does not address race, but his fixation with otherness is consistent with the glibness of a whitely difference fetish and, in turn,

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5   Taylor cites his "own recently defeated willingness to remain silent" about the work of Fred Moten as an example of the kind of ideological transformation analytic philosophers could and should undergo. See Taylor (2020, 7).

6   Taylor's commitment to overcoming his own social and discursive conditioning is evident in his book *Black is Beautiful: A Philosophy of Black Aesthetics*. In her review of the book Jeanette Bicknell claims that Taylor's work remains "squarely" in the analytic tradition, but also credits his attempts to engage a broader range of voices. See Bicknell (2017, 173).

with the politics of Western exclusivity. Our unhealthy fascination with "other people" is the first and necessary step towards "racialized presumption". And while the former fills Western museums with world art artefacts, the latter makes it uncomfortable to meet someone who looks like Killmonger in "a space which does not even welcome those whose culture it displays"(Haughin 2018).

Since racialized optics is the bastard child of ethics and aesthetics, it is a matter of philosophical exigency to go beyond mere appearances. This is why Taylor counters essentialist tendencies—for him there is not one identity that qualifies a person as Black as there is not one identity that qualifies one as a contributor to the study of Black aesthetics. His approach coheres with some recent philosophical readings of *Black Panther* as representative of "ecological blackness"—an aesthetics of inclusion that favors the collective over the individual and the relational over the exclusionary.[7] The Sarr-Savoy report, whose title includes the expression 'relational ethics,' recommends the same approach in the context of restitution. As Taylor shows, these are not untenable ideals but actionable strategies. In philosophy, they involve something Taylor not only urges but also generously models—a reconstruction through resocialization.

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7   See Haile (2018); Ekstrand (2018).

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