

**Paul C. Taylor.** *Black is Beautiful: A Philosophy of Black Aesthetics.* Wiley-Blackwell 2016. 204 pp. \$89.95 USD (Hardcover ISBN 9781405150620); \$29.95 USD (Paperback ISBN 9781405150637).

The topic of Paul Taylor's book presents a number of challenges: What does the domain of 'aesthetics' include? Who counts as 'black' and who decides this? And given that academic philosophy has played (19) 'almost no role' in the development of black aesthetics, how to draw upon the resources of academic philosophy effectively? A further challenge is that traditional approaches to black expressive culture (in the work of W.E.B. Du Bois and others, for example) seem less relevant than they once were, given the critical and commercial success of black artists and performers and the political and social clout of blacks.

So Taylor does not have the luxury of any obvious or non-contentious starting points. By necessity, a good part of his book is taken up with defining parameters and laying out agendas. Most of this work is done in the first chapter (which clarifies the concept of 'black aesthetics') and the third chapter (on the political dimensions of black aesthetics). The remaining five chapters are more narrowly focused. The final chapter looks ahead to a forthcoming work on the ethics of cultural appropriation.

Taylor identifies himself philosophically as a pragmatist. Rather than attempt to determine 'essences' or necessary and sufficient conditions for black aesthetics, he aspires to 'identify, gather together and explore' (3) linked contextual factors in virtue of which we can understand various phenomena under a single heading. In particular, he connects black aesthetic practice to the wider issue of racial formation under white supremacy. His approach is to map the philosophical dimensions of black aesthetic practice, rather than to seek a unitary system of norms for producing or evaluating artworks. 'Black aesthetics' are the philosophic preoccupations that 'animate and surround' (6) the cultural work of black peoples. Taylor's form of racialism is critical, rather than racist or essentialist. 'Black' refers to people who have been racially positioned as black and their life-worlds. (In other words, people are 'black' if they receive the 'black treatment'.)

One key to understanding black aesthetics and Taylor's project is his claim that African American cultures were 'not so much born as assembled' (2). Central to the tradition is the insistence on agency, beauty and meaning in the face of oppression and despair. Distinctly African-American cultures emerged as enslaved Africans built new practices and life-worlds out of the various 'old' worlds (different parts of Africa, Europe, the Americas) that came together in modern slave-holding societies. Another key to understanding black aesthetics are the strong ties between aesthetics and politics. It is telling that 'Black is Beautiful' is both an aesthetic claim and a political slogan, as well as the title of Taylor's monograph. Taylor explores and defends these ties through a reading of Du Bois' 1926 address, 'Criteria of Negro Art.' The links between aesthetics and politics have informed both artistic practice and political programs. Artists are seen as political actors, ethics is a legitimate resource for art criticism, and the aesthetic is a resource for oppositional politics.

Taylor's book is unapologetically an exercise in theory rather than a work of criticism or curating. While more theoretical work may remain to be done, I found the book most rewarding when Taylor brought theoretical insight to bear on specific issues and problems. Chapter two, for example, considers the problem of black 'invisibility' with particular reference to race-specific casting decisions in film and theatre. Taylor shows how four distinct kinds of marginalization can be understood as variations on black invisibility: presence (a paucity of black characters); personhood (black characters tend to be less developed and are too often stereotypical figures);

perspectives (white ways of seeing are taken as default); and plurality (intra-racial diversity is obscured).

I found chapter four, on personal beauty, to be the book's richest. Taylor argues that while prospects for black beauty judgments have changed for the better in specifiable ways, 'the progressive narrative of tolerance and integration is not at all the entire story' (115) and 'the beauty gap has not narrowed as much as it might appear' (129). Taylor builds his position through a discussion of three topics, beginning with Thomas Jefferson's aesthetic objections to miscegenation. Jefferson's reflections on this topic now can only be read in light of the knowledge that he had a long-term sexual relationship with Sally Hemings, an enslaved woman of African descent. On Taylor's reading, the apparent tension between Jefferson's published views and his personal behaviour is evidence for how white supremacy 'short circuits' the process that changes feelings of attraction to judgments of beauty. The second topic, the history of 'relaxing' black hair (from the early twentieth century through to former First Lady Michelle Obama) serves to show how white norms shape a black person's preferences and choices about how to allocate resources of time and money. The chapter's third topic is Annie Leibovitz's 'post racial' cover for *Vogue* magazine, depicting LeBron James in a way that draws on explicitly racist historical imagery.

Taylor is never moralistic, admirably precise, and always careful about the extent of his claims. Still, in a few places I found him a little too careful and wished that he had pushed some of his thoughts further. Chapter six, on black music, is a case in point. Many pages are spent sorting out what 'black' music might mean before coming to the unsurprising conclusions that its central element is a focus on rhythm, and that rhythmic complexity takes the place of thematic or harmonic variation. Taylor's follow-up question, why rhythmic music has the effect it does, is better addressed with the resources of empirical science. The chapter ends with a glance at some engaging and provocative questions about black music that deserve more attention: Do black audiences have special access to this music? Is the music still 'black' if performed by non-blacks or by mixed groups? How might black audiences' knowledge of the histories of exploitation and oppression inform their response to performances by out-groups?

Although he draws on thinkers outside of analytic philosophy (Du Bois, Dewey, hooks, and others), this book is squarely in that tradition. This will reassure some readers and dismay others. Taylor is a direct and generous writer. He is always explicit regarding his theoretical commitments, assumptions, and debts to other thinkers. He is open about the limitations of the traditions he explores, recognizing that 'for too many' the twentieth-century struggle for black emancipation remained, 'a struggle for black heterosexual manhood' (17). His commitment to a pragmatic approach means that he avoids the pitfall of reducing 'black' aesthetics to 'African American' aesthetics. The discussion ranges widely enough so that expressive cultural practices across the Americas, as well as in Europe and Africa, are not homogenized. That said, the examples Taylor discusses come mainly from popular or mass culture (film, magazine covers, popular music). While this is understandable, given African-American influence in these areas, I would have liked to see the discussion extended over a greater range of black performers and creators: Marian Anderson as well as Nina Simone, and black classical (art) music composers as well as James Brown.

The topics that Taylor considers deserve more examination. This book is a valuable contribution to contemporary aesthetics. It would make an engaging text for courses in philosophy of art, aesthetics, or race theory.

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