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Michael Kelly

University of North Carolina at Charlotte, mjkelly1@uncc.edu

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Black Aesthetics and Relative Autonomy

Michael Kelly

Abstract

There has been a recent revival of black aesthetics unprecedented since the 1960s. Some is happening inside academic philosophy, including in this journal (Volume 7, 2009). But there are more examples of black esthetics across other disciplines. A key, controversial concept in transdisciplinary black aesthetics is autonomy. Modern Western aesthetics was racist when it was established in the eighteenth century because blacks were not considered to be capable of autonomy, necessary to have taste. Now that this anti-black racism has been exposed, but until critics are convinced that aesthetics today is free of such racism, autonomy will be viewed as an ideological disguise for racism and even black aesthetics will be under suspicion. Simon Gikandi details the anti-black racism of early aesthetics yet argues at the same time that there was a black counter-aesthetic enacting its relative autonomy. I show that relative autonomy is enacted throughout modern and contemporary black art and aesthetics.

Key Words

autonomy; black aesthetics; Black Arts Movement; essentialism; race; resistance; taste

“Some view our sable race with scornfuleye,
‘Their colour is a diabolic die.’
Remember, *Christians, Negroes*, black as *Cain*,
May be refin’d, and join th’ angelic train.”
—Phillis Wheatley[1]

1. Introduction

Black aesthetics today resides well outside what might be assumed to be its home discipline of philosophy and is soundly transdisciplinary, drawing on the conceptual resources of many other disciplines, including Africana studies, art history, comparative literature, history, musicology, performance studies, and more. For example, recognizing that black aesthetics has migrated, if it ever had a home in philosophy, Paul Taylor's explicit aim in his recent *Black is Beautiful: The Philosophy of Black Aesthetics* is "to build a bridge from a particular network of discursive communities [philosophy]...to the mainland of inquiry into black aesthetics."^[2] Transdisciplinary black aesthetics convenes many disciplines in the efforts to explore and express the aesthetic dimension of the history of black experiences in the U.S. (and elsewhere), including slavery, mass incarceration, police violence, and the ongoing fight for black civil rights.

However, the involvement of aesthetics in these efforts is philosophically and politically complicated because some of the leading figures in early modern Western aesthetics, such as Hume and Kant, promulgated racist beliefs. For example, they proclaimed the universality of taste or aesthetic judgment while contradictorily denying that blacks had the capability for autonomy requisite for taste or judgment. Cornel West makes this contradiction explicit and argues that it is constitutive of aesthetics: "the very structure of modern discourse *at its inception* produced forms of...aesthetic and cultural ideals which require the constitution of the idea of white supremacy."^[3] Autonomy is one of these ideals, so if blacks are denied autonomy, they are excluded from aesthetics.^[4] While contemporary aestheticians would presumably accept at least a measured version of West's critique and distance themselves from Kant's and Hume's racist beliefs, the lingering concern, recently voiced by Lewis Gordon, is that aesthetics may still be racist today or at least haunted by such suspicions: "A problem with constructing black aesthetics is whether *aesthetics* has been so colonized that its production would be a form of colonizing instead of decolonizing practice."^[5]

Black aesthetics today needs to be assured of its relative autonomy from racist aesthetics in order to flourish as, among other things, a critical transdisciplinary practice against anti-black racism. If aesthetic autonomy, relative or otherwise, still embodies any traces of racism, if it is denied to blacks, or if the enactment of their capability for relative autonomy is constrained in principle, we can only conclude that aesthetics remains racist. Given this specter of racism, black aesthetics has struggled with the concept of autonomy. At the same time, black artists and theorists have re-appropriated the concept, starting when they arrived in the new world on slave ships, making the

concept their own, too.[6] Thus, as I will argue, *relative* autonomy is a central concept enacted throughout modern and contemporary transdisciplinary black aesthetics. Speaking of poetry in particular, the poet and theorist Evie Shockley succinctly captures the meaning of relative autonomy here, which I think is apposite in all the arts and in black aesthetics: “a mode of writing adopted by African American poets in their efforts to work within, around, or against the constraint of being read and heard as ‘black.’”[7] Following the lead of art, black aesthetics is relatively autonomous from anti-black racism and, as such, is a mode of resistance to it that, in the spirit of autonomy, takes many different forms.[8]

2. Gikandi and the racism of early modern Western aesthetics

Simon Gikandi’s *Slavery and the Culture of Taste* is both a damning and a constructive critique of aesthetics in the eighteenth century. He argues that aesthetics was racist in its origins but does so without rejecting aesthetics all together, for he believes we would then lose sight of the long-standing as well as current forms of black aesthetics that have been largely buried—invisibilized—in the history of aesthetics. Gikandi analyzes, in a detailed way, how the acceptance of slavery, even among the seemingly most enlightened thinkers of the eighteenth century, was inscribed into the discursive origins of modern Western aesthetics.[9] His argument is not merely that slavery and taste were in tension as “nonidentical twins,” as he characterizes their relationship, “intimately connected even when they were structurally construed to be radical opposites.”[10] He also argues that modern aesthetics became an ideological cover for slavery, expressing seemingly enlightened ideas about universal taste while countenancing chattel slavery. Gikandi’s argument is damning for aesthetics. [11] Speaking of racism within the foundations of American democracy, in 1861 Frederick Douglass, once a slave himself, offered no less of a damning perspective on the legacy of the similarly “nonidentical twins” of American democracy and racism: “Banish from your minds the last lingering shadow of a hope that your government can ever rest secure on a mixed basis of freedom and slavery.”[12]

However, there is another, equally important part of Gikandi’s *Slavery and the Culture of Taste* that helps to counter the view of modern Western aesthetics as mere ideology without whitewashing it. Gikandi also argues that slaves had their own taste, evidenced by the literature, music, poetry, and the like they created: “the site in which the black body was imprisoned” was also “the conduit for its liberation,” creating a counterculture of taste.[13] As Alain Locke argues, in the early twentieth century, “even ordinary living has epic depth and lyric

intensity” for people under social pressure and “this, their material handicap, is their spiritual advantage.”[14] In the same vein, Achille Mbembe emphasizes the importance of art for slaves: “For communities whose history has long been one of debasement and humiliation, religious and artistic creation has often represented the final defense against the forces of dehumanization.”[15] In a more dialectical and historically detailed manner, Saidiya Hartman argues that slaves developed their own forms of song and dance even while they were being forced to perform for their masters, compounding the “pleasure of terror” with the “terror of pleasure.” Moreover, slaves simultaneously enacted forms of resistance to slavery, “puttin’ on ole massa” while carrying out their demands.[16]

To overlook, deny, or under appreciate the slave counterculture of taste is, according to Gikandi, to be complicitous with racism, for it is to assume that slaves were incapable of taste, confirming the racist belief that they were subhuman that was used to justify slavery. That is, it was believed that slaves did not manifest European taste, therefore they were subhuman, as Europeans, and Americans mimicking their old-world counterparts, fancied themselves the standard bearers of humanity and of taste. Allegedly being subhuman, black slaves could not have any other mode of taste, for only humans have taste. One insistent, if often subtle, way for slaves to assert their humanity was to express their own taste, even if it was not recognized as such by slaveholders or others. In W. E. B. Du Bois’s words: “until the art of the black folk compels recognition they will not be rated as human.”[17] Once again, Douglass presages the spirit of Gikandi’s argument here, for there is another side of his argument, too, at least regarding taste: “The process by which man is able to invent his own subjective consciousness into the objective form, considered in all its range, is in truth the highest attribute of man’s nature. All that is really peculiar to humanity...proceeds from this one faculty or power.”[18] Despite the odds, slaves enacted their relative autonomy to invent their own “subjective consciousness into the objective form.” In such circumstances, one task of black aesthetics is to articulate and analyze the presuppositions of the counterculture of taste, such as relative autonomy.[19] In short, Gikandi’s book is important because it covers all of this controversial philosophical, moral, and political terrain and still makes a powerful case for the critical relevance of aesthetics today, helping to secure the relative autonomy of black aesthetics.

3. Black arts movement and black aesthetics

If modern Western aesthetics was racist in its origins, how is it possible to enlist aesthetics to recognize the counterculture of

taste that began at the same time, if not earlier? How can we best understand the counterculture of taste and aesthetics practiced among slaves who were entrapped in the Middle Passage slave routes that deterritorialized their indigenous taste and aesthetics? I invite you to read more of Gikandi to see how he answers these questions by arguing that slaves initiated their own aesthetics by relying on a ruin or fragment, for example, a drum, that embodied both their connection and disconnection to Africa, as “only the fragmentary and incomplete had the capacity to denote the doubleness that was the mark of African identities in the new world,” another iteration of Du Bois’s concept of “double consciousness.”[20] Instead, I want to jump from the eighteenth century to the 1960s, when the Black Arts Movement (1965-1975) and a contemporary conception of “black aesthetics” emerged in the U.S., as it is a way to see how black theorists have addressed these questions in contemporary terms. Are they satisfied that aesthetics today is relatively autonomous from its racist past? If their own theories presuppose the relative autonomy of aesthetics, as I will argue, the answer is affirmative.

The black aesthetics of the 1960s, honored recently with its own display in the new National Museum of African American History and Culture in Washington, D. C., received its iconic expression in Amiri Baraka’s 1965 poem, “Black Art,” which ends as follows:

“...We want a black poem. And a
Black World.
Let the world be a Black Poem
And Let All Black People Speak This Poem
Silently

or LOUD.”[21]

Seen in the context of the struggle for civil rights, the Black Arts Movement has often been understood as the aesthetic and spiritual sister of black power and thus has been seen largely as an aesthetic resistance movement. For example, Larry Neal, author of the 1968 manifesto of the Black Arts Movement, argues that black art is concerned with the relationship between art and politics, and black power with the art of politics. At the same time, Neal is radical in his assessment of the relationship of the black aesthetics to modern Western aesthetics: “the Western aesthetic has run its course; it is impossible to construct anything meaningful within its decaying structures. We advocate a cultural revolution in art and ideas.”[22] To achieve the goal of creating art that speaks directly to the needs and aspirations of black America, he advocates that black artists develop “a separate symbolism, mythology, critique, and iconology.”[23] Similarly, and more recently, Amy Ongiri argues that the Black Arts Movement “linked the articulation of the

radical political ethos of Black Power to a radically transformative culture of oppositional creativity," linking black experiences with black aesthetics, overthrowing existing cultural norms and creating new ones.[24] Black aesthetics would thus seem to imply aesthetic as well as political separatism. Moreover, each form of separatism implies relative autonomy, as each asserts that anti-black racism will not define black identity.

3.1 Blacks arts movement and essentialism

However, a number of theorists more recently argue that the Black Arts Movement has been too narrowly, if not wrongly, interpreted in at least two ways. First, the Black Arts Movement was not essentialist. The essentialist claim arose from interpretations of the separatism advocated by Neal and others, and it would seem to restrict, if not undermine, the relative autonomy of black aesthetics, limiting it to a fixed notion of blackness. That is, the separatist nationalist politics implied a separatist aesthetics that, in turn, was often thought to presuppose an essentialist notion of "the" black aesthetic to resist the conception of modern Western aesthetics that fashioned itself to be universal when, in fact, it was racist. But, to be clear, Neal already challenged this kind of interpretation, arguing that even though black aesthetics is tied to black power, it does not have a static essence, for black power itself "has no one *specific* meaning. It is rather...a kind of emotional response to one's history. ...it can ultimately be defined only...through actions, be they artistic or political." [25] So, "separatism" does not necessarily entail "essentialism."

Yet the specter of essentialism seems to linger around, if not within, black aesthetics, as it concerns the meaning of "blackness" at the heart of black aesthetics, which, in turn, impacts the scope, if not the possibility, of its relative autonomy. To address this concern, several contemporary theorists have explicitly disavowed essentialism in black aesthetics. For example, Michelle Wright rejects essentialism in *The Physics of Blackness: Beyond the Middle Passage Epistemology*, where she asks what it means to be black, given that "blackness" is not biological in origin but socially and discursively constructed.[26] If blackness is constructed, its meaning changes over time and space: "in any moment in which we are reading/analyzing Blackness, we should assume that its valences will likely vary from those of a previous moment." [27] Somewhat echoing and supplementing Nelson Goodman's definition of art as being about "when is art" rather than "what is art," Wright argues that although blackness is commonly defined as a "what," it instead operates more as a "when" and, even better, as a "where."

Bringing discourses about space-time in physics into conversation with artworks embodying the African diaspora, Wright then engages in an intersectionalist analysis (race, class, gender, sexuality) of bodies too frequently excluded from contemporary mainstream aesthetics: black feminists, black queers, recent black African immigrants to the West, and blacks whose histories may weave in and out of the Middle Passage epistemology but do not cohere to it. Wright explores how Middle Passage epistemology subverts racist assumptions about blackness, yet its linear structure inhibits the kind of inclusive epistemology of blackness needed in the twenty-first century. The critique of essentialism thus opens up a new methodology for black aesthetics along with new content, establishing a basis for enacting the relative autonomy of black aesthetics on two levels.

Similarly, Shockley eschews “racial essentialism” in *Renegade Poetics: Black Aesthetics and Formal Innovation in African American Poetry*, demonstrating again how the critique of essentialism leads to clarification of the methodology and content of black aesthetics. She argues that the term ‘black aesthetics’ “need not be inevitably linked to static understandings of how blackness is inscribed in literary texts,” such as the poetry of Sonia Sanchez, a key poet of the Black Arts Movement. Accordingly, Shockley argues for a descriptive rather than prescriptive conception of black aesthetics, and she is precise about the object of description: ‘black’ is meant neither to describe the characteristics or qualities of texts nor to refer specifically to the socially constructed race of the writer.[28] Rather, black aesthetics describes the kinds of “subjectivity produced by the experience of identifying or being interpolated as ‘black’ in the U.S.—actively working out a poetics in the context of a racist society.”[29] Blacks regularly experience being contingently interpolated as black but, Shockley adds, they are not essentially black as a result of any manner in which they are interpolated, as that would make the racist interpolation a permanent racist reality. The difference here is between the space of freedom—relative autonomy—and the art, culture, and aesthetics it makes possible. It is not that blacks are relatively autonomous and then engage in art, culture, and aesthetics to express their autonomy. Rather, they materially realize their capability for relative autonomy by engaging in artistic, cultural, and aesthetic practices, partly in response to the ways they are interpolated as black. In Shockley’s words, quoted earlier, black aesthetics refers “to a mode of writing adopted by African American poets in their efforts to work within, around, or against the constraint of being read and heard as ‘black’.”[30] In effect, she is asserting the relative autonomy of blacks to engage in art and aesthetics without being perceived, interpreted, or

interpolated as black.[31] At the same time, the methodological implication of Shockley's appeal to experience is that black aesthetics is "contingent, and must be historicized and contextualized with regard to period and place, and with regard to the various other factors that shape the writer's identity, particularly including gender, sexuality, and class." [32] Thus, black aesthetics is methodologically both intersectional and transdisciplinary in an effort to understand how blackness is objectively produced, subjectively experienced, and objectively expressed.[33]

3.2 Black Arts Movement and resistance

The second way that the Black Arts Movement has often been narrowly interpreted is that, even if black art is a form of resistance to the racist claim that blacks lack the capability to create art, its forms of resistance comprise more varied and indirect aesthetic strategies than some interpreters in the past have acknowledged. For example, literary and Africana theorist Kevin Quashie argues, in *The Sovereignty of Quiet: Beyond Resistance in Black Culture*, that the tendency to see direct resistance as the only framework for blackness is itself racist, because it sees blackness only through a public social lens as if there were no inner black life.[34] That is, any reduction of the aesthetics of the Black Arts Movement, or any form or period of black art, to "resistance aesthetics" would make it inseparable from racist aesthetics, which in effect would be tantamount to denying there is any black art or aesthetics, as Gikandi also argues.[35] For example, although slaves were oppressed by the ideology of aesthetics covering for the racism at the heart of American and French revolutions and democracies, among others, slaves did not accept racist taste but nor did they merely resist racist taste. Rather, they chose instead to develop new forms of taste and corresponding forms of aesthetics, aiming to assert their own identity rather than accept or directly resist the identity imposed on them by the slave owners. Jeremy Glick makes a similar argument while analyzing the art and aesthetics that emerged during the Haitian revolution, happening at roughly the same time as the American and French revolutions. [36] Encompassing the historical period covered earlier by Gikandi, Haiti provides a geographical site for the formation of a new aesthetics along with a new, if short-lived, democracy. In effect, Haiti embodied the first large-scale, aesthetic-political enactment of black aesthetics of the type Wright, Shockley, and others have proposed, and it thus potentially provides a better way of understanding the black aesthetics of the Black Arts Movement and, by extension, black aesthetics today.

If we then ask what other purposes or capabilities besides direct resistance inform black art and aesthetics, Quashie's answer is

to “rethink expressiveness,” much as Taylor proposes, as we will see below.[37] Quashie sees “quiet” as “a metaphor for the full range of one’s inner life—one’s desires, ambitions, hungers, vulnerabilities, fears. The inner life is not apolitical nor without social value, but neither is it determined entirely by publicness.”[38] For example, remember the iconic image of U.S. track athletes, Tommie Smith and John Carlos, raising their black-gloved fists while receiving gold and bronze medals, respectively, at the 1968 Olympic Games in Mexico City. Quashie portrays the prayer-like quietude of their stance: their eyes were closed, heads bowed, and they wore no shoes in solidarity with poor black Americans. Here, and more generally, an aesthetic of quietude entails “a black expressiveness. ...a black subject in the undisputed dignity of its humanity.” “In humanity, quiet is our dignity,” which is imaginary and material.[39] At the same time, quiet expressiveness is a form of relatively autonomous agency “shaped by the spirituality of being human” that, as Douglass argues, is “the wellspring for art and culture.”[40]

In a related vein, the philosopher and activist Angela Y. Davis defends “softness” as a key aesthetic distinct from but complementary to direct resistance. She developed several examples during her keynote address at Open Engagement, an annual art and activism conference held in 2016 in Oakland. One example was the unofficial but widely recognized anti-Apartheid anthem, *Mannenberg*, composed by Abdullah Ibrahim (aka Dollar Brand), a South African jazz musician.[41] Nelson Mandela reportedly said that he could feel the imminence of liberation when he secretly listened to it while still in prison, a liberation whose anthem was soft even as it was heard around the world. Davis’s second example for clarifying “soft aesthetics” was the poster created for the 1998 inaugural conference of Critical Resistance, a prison abolition movement based in Oakland. She said there was a tempestuous internal debate at the time about the aesthetics of the poster. While the initially favored aesthetic view was that the poster should depict images of chains or prison cells, Davis argued that, if people saw such images, they might conclude they already knew what the conference was about—oppressive prisons—and think they did not need to attend. Instead, the artist Rupert Garcia created an alternative to the aesthetics of resistance, depicting an eye on the horizon that appears both as menacing as ubiquitous surveillance and as hopeful as a Californian sunrise. Instead of the expected audience of 350 people for whom the organizers prepared, over 3,500 people attended, mostly as a result of the poster, Davis claimed, because they were as interested in imagination as resistance, recognizing that critical thinking and imagination—aesthetics—are allies in the fight for social justice, as they enact visions of possible ways of living more justly. In

elaborating on these claims, Davis argues that despite Kant's racist shortcomings, he offers key conceptual tools for defending the importance of the imagination in criminal justice struggles. For example, beauty is the symbol of morality, which Davis finds compelling, as she defends the necessity of black imagination within prison aesthetics.[42]

Another alternative to a narrowly conceived aesthetics of resistance within black art is articulated by Fred Moten and Stefano Harney through their concept of the "undercommons." This concept invokes a largely parallel autonomous culture, though one that, at times, intersects with mainstream white culture in the U.S. "We owe it to each other to falsify the institution, to make politics incorrect, to give the lie to our own determination. We owe each other the indeterminate." [43] The idea of the undercommons is critically, culturally, and politically rich because it locates black imagination in the here and now and does not worry about recognition by the powers that be, so long as they are white and racist. At the same time, the undercommons seems to imply an aesthetic withdrawal from politics and even from society. In Moten and Harney's words: "An abdication of political responsibility? OK. Whatever. We're just anti-politically romantic about actually existing social life. We aren't responsible for politics. We are the general antagonism to politics looming outside every attempt to politicise,.... We are disruption and consent to disruption." [44] Mbembe's critique of black reason indirectly clarifies such a withdrawal and what it entails, as it implies a shift from an "identity judgment" of blacks by whites ("Who is he?") to a "declaration of identity" by blacks ("Who am I?"). [45] That is, much as Gikandi and others have proposed a shift from directly resisting the denial of black taste to enacting black taste, the withdrawal is the enactment of relative autonomy.

The concept of the "undercommons" is new, but the withdrawal and relative autonomy it enacts are part of a long-standing tradition in black aesthetics. Besides being reminiscent of the separatism proposed by Neal and others in the Black Arts Movement in the 1960s, the undercommons is not unlike Langston Hughes's view expressed back in 1926, during the Harlem Renaissance: "We younger Negro artists who create now intend to express our individual dark-skinned selves without fear or shame. If white people are pleased we are glad. If they are not, it does not matter. We know we are beautiful. And ugly too. The tom-tom cries and the tom-tom laughs. If colored people are pleased we are glad. If they are not, their displeasure doesn't matter either." [46] Again, an aesthetic is advanced that neither accepts nor directly resists the dominant culture, setting up what could be called a parallel aesthetic state. At issue here is again the enactment of relative autonomy from the very world

that denies autonomy to blacks, albeit without regard to whether that world recognizes the enactment (even without regard to whether other blacks recognize it).[47] Hughes continues: "We build our temples for tomorrow, strong as we know how, and we stand top of the mountain, free within ourselves." [48] Arguably, the enactment is not often recognized precisely because it presupposes relative autonomy, for to recognize the enactment is to recognize blacks' relative autonomy.

The very idea of a black aesthetic withdrawal presupposes the relative autonomy of art, one of the cornerstones of modern aesthetics, for any such withdrawal implies that blacks qua artists are relatively free from the conditions from which they have withdrawn. Free in withdrawing, free once having withdrawn. Autonomy is thus tied to, if not equivalent to, freedom.

4. Relative autonomy of black aesthetics

The presupposition of relative autonomy on the part of blacks engaging in art while experiencing racism has a history in black aesthetics, as we have seen already, confirming and sustaining the possibility of what Gikandi calls the counterculture of taste. For example, Locke offers, in the 1920s, a similar account of the relatively autonomous aesthetics of the Harlem Renaissance as it was emerging: "race expression does not need to be deliberate to be vital. Indeed at its best it never is." Such work is "racially expressive" without being "racially rhetorical." In fact, in taking "their material objectively with detached artistic vision," the "newer motive...in being racial is to be so purely for the sake of art," which could not be a stronger avowal of art's relative autonomy, though I would prefer "relatively" to "purely." [49] The motivating idea here is "to evolve from the racial substance something technically distinctive, something that as an idiom of style may become a contribution to the general resources of art," resulting in a "new aesthetic." [50]

Similarly, Richard Wright, author of *Native Son*, later invoked the concept of autonomy when he explained his concept of "perspective," which, in turn, is related to the contemporary concept of perspective (or standpoint). [51] However, whereas the concept of perspective today seems to entail a lack of autonomy from social reality, as perspective is thought to be what embeds individuals "in" reality and gives them authenticity, Wright understands perspective as the functional, professional "autonomy" of an artist's craft that makes it possible for the perspective to be communicated and possibly be recognized. That is, perspective is "that part of a poem, novel, or play which a writer never puts directly upon paper" but "where a writer stands to view the struggles, hopes, and sufferings of his

people.”[52] At the same time, autonomous artists “should seek through the medium of their craft to play as meaningful a role in the affairs of men as do other professionals.”[53] Through the exercise of their autonomous writing, artists are “being called upon to do no less than create values by which [their] race is to struggle, live and die.” As was the case with Davis among others, this position is different from but complementary to direct resistance. For Wright offers what he sees as a necessary alternative to Negro writers’, as he called them back in the 1930s, being “a sort of conspicuous consumption” for white society as though they were “French poodles who do clever tricks” or who plead “with White America for justice.”[54]

However, while a number of writers and theorists instrumental in the development of black aesthetics over the last century have relied on some conception of the relative autonomy of art, autonomy may still be considered suspect by some people working in black aesthetics today. How, for example, can blacks possibly be even relatively autonomous from the lived experiences of racism in the U.S. today that, in part, constitute blackness and that, in turn, partly constitutes art as black? Even relative autonomy could seem to some to be an ideological expectation that is cruel if it can never be met, because it seems tied to disinterestedness and disinterest seems to imply disrespecting the very interests constituting the “black” in black aesthetics and thereby whitewashing racism, the object of black aesthetics resistance. Yet autonomy is the very thing racism denies blacks. In turn, that denial is the reason why many black writers and theorists defend autonomy—not for the sake of art, as Wright puts it, but rather for the sake of blacks. To enact relative autonomy through art is one mode of resistance to anti-black racism.

A recent example of the avowal of relative autonomy as a mode of resistance is the “aesthetic radicalism” strategy proposed by GerShun Avilez in *Radical Aesthetics and Modern Black Nationalism*. [55] The strategy is to practice black aesthetics by engaging in “disruptive inhabiting” of racist aesthetics in connection with black nationalism and artistic experimentalism, combined with intersectional theory, queer theory (queer of color critique), and critical race theory—transdisciplinary and intersectional black aesthetics. [56] The goal of Avilez’s strategy of disruptive inhabiting of aesthetics is to liberate the potential inactive within historically racist aesthetics, as Gikandi constructively proposed earlier, and as Mbembe also argues: “the anthropological and political foundation of classic Black art” is the “hope for the liberation of hidden or forgotten energies, the hope for an ultimate reversal of visible and invisible powers.” [57] Avilez’s disruptive strategy clearly presupposes relative autonomy, for the potential hidden within racist

aesthetics needs to be relatively autonomous from racist aesthetics in order to survive before it can be liberated, and once it is liberated, it must remain relatively autonomous or risk returning to its prior state of near oblivion or be complicitous with racism. So long as black aesthetics requires some distance or withdrawal from social and empirical reality in order to function, then relative autonomy is presupposed, even when the primary goal is disruption.

Ralph Ellison captures the idea of relative autonomy as a condition for resistance to anti-black racism when, in the 1950s, he introduces the “as if” modality of art: “while fiction is but a form of symbolic action, a mere game of ‘as if’, therein lies its true function and its potential for effecting change. For at its most serious, just as is true of politics at its best, it is a thrust toward a human ideal. And it approaches that ideal by a subtle process of negating the world of things as given in favor of a complex of man-made positives.”[58] That is, art’s “as if” status—an assertion of its relative autonomy from the status quo—is at the same time the basis for art’s criticality and resistance, albeit from the standpoint of a poetic withdrawal.

To return to Taylor’s *Black is Beautiful: A Philosophy of Black Aesthetics*, he, too, indirectly assumes the relative autonomy of aesthetics in his characterization of black aesthetics. He argues that to practice black aesthetics is “to use art, criticism, or analysis to explore the role that expressive objects and practices play in creating and maintaining black life-worlds.”[59] He clarifies his philosophical terms as follows: “blackness” is a racial condition; constructed, a human artifact, but socially and phenomenologically real, as Michelle Wright argues. Accordingly, the ‘black’ in “black aesthetics” refers, as Shockley similarly claims, to “people who have been racially positioned as black, and to the life-worlds that these people have constructed.”[60] Here, “black expressive culture” is defined by “the aesthetic objects, performances, and traditions that defined blackness for many people as surely and as imperfectly as skin color or hair texture do.”[61] This account of expressiveness presupposes relative autonomy because artists or everyday folks creating forms of expression have to be autonomous enough to create, especially if what they are expressing is in response, if not resistance, to the way they have been racially positioned. They are not merely expressing that they have been racially positioned, for they are also expressing themselves in ways that such positioning precludes. In Avilez’s terms, they are disrupting the prevailing racist aesthetics and creating black aesthetics.

There is a negative turn here, which Taylor does not advocate but which his analysis invites, that what artists and everyday folks express is also the seeming impossibility of their creating

black aesthetics that is not shaped by the ways they have been racially positioned. In Fumi Okiji's words, in *Jazz as Critique: Adorno and Black Expression Revisited*, "black expressive work cannot help but shed light on black life's (im)possibilities."^[62] That is, the disruption may entail creating new forms of expression or new identities but, to some extent, so long as racism prevails, they are also expressing the seeming impossibility of fully expressing new forms. Expressiveness entails disruption and, while both presuppose the relative autonomy of art and aesthetics, they also represent the seeming impossibility of even relative autonomy at present. This negative moment accounts, in part, for the rejection of aesthetics within black cultural studies, as it accounts for the seeming impossibility of a nonracist aesthetics even while black aesthetics disrupts racism and imagines a new aesthetics. This negative moment helps to clarify the relativity of relative autonomy without undermining it. But it is also what drives black aesthetics forward. Black aesthetics is a demand for relative autonomy that has been deferred and thus denied and, at the same time, it is an enactment of relative autonomy through a withdrawal from the societal conditions denying autonomy. Put in stronger terms, relatively autonomous art and aesthetics are themselves forms of resistance to racism, for they imagine possible alternatives to racism, as Davis argued earlier.

Relative autonomy is only one concept in black aesthetics but it is a pivotal one because it is hard to imagine how black aesthetics could ever have got off the ground without it. Instead of being construed as a barrier between philosophical aesthetics and black aesthetics, because the former has a history of denying autonomy to blacks knowing full well that it is a condition for the possibility of taste, relative autonomy can actually be part of the structure of the bridge that Taylor and others are trying to build between philosophy and other disciplines engaged in black aesthetics. Perhaps if the concept of relative autonomy is now recognized across all disciplines, Taylor will no longer need to worry that black aesthetics as a whole "remains at a somewhat greater distance" than he would like "from the philosophical resources" that he values.^[63] My goal here has been to show that many black artists and theorists have defended the relative autonomy of art and aesthetics, thereby drawing on a key philosophical, conceptual resource and expanding the prospects of transdisciplinary black aesthetics.

Michael Kelly
mjkelly1@uncc.edu

Michael Kelly's current research concerns the recent development of new forms of transdisciplinary aesthetics, including aesthetic computing, black aesthetics, and social-practice art aesthetics; and he is co-editing an anthology on black aesthetics. He also directs the Transdisciplinary Aesthetics Foundation, which sponsors international symposia on transdisciplinary aesthetics:
<https://transaestheticsfoundation.org/>.

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Endnotes

I would like to acknowledge the helpful comments I received from the anonymous CA reviewers.

[1] Phillis Wheatley, "On Being Brought from Africa to America:" <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/45465/on-being-brought-from-africa-to-america> (last accessed 10/30/19).

[2] Taylor, *Black is Beautiful: A Philosophy of Black Aesthetics* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2016), p. ix. While reaching outside philosophy to engage black aesthetics elsewhere, Taylor simultaneously makes a case for black aesthetics within philosophy by arguing that black aesthetics is a "philosophic phenomenon" (p. 27).

[3] Cornel West, "A Genealogy of Modern Racism," in *Race Critical Theories: Text and Context*, Philomenna Essed and David Theo Goldberg, eds. (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2002), pp. 90-112; ref. on p. 90.

[4] The modern ideal of art, starting in the eighteenth century, is that art is autonomous from ritualistic, religious, ethical, and political institutions. Such autonomy is considered to be either (i) an achievement, on the model of Kant's conception of enlightenment as maturity and independence, or (ii) a consequence of the spread of instrumental rationality under capitalism from the economic sphere to the artistic, thereby effectively excluding art from society because of it is presumed to be useless. On the significance of autonomy in modern Western aesthetics, see, for example, Christoph Menke, *The Sovereignty of Taste: Aesthetic Negativity in Adorno and Derrida*, Neil Solomon, trans. (Cambridge: MIT Press 1999).

[5] Lewis Gordon, "Black Aesthetics, Black Value," in *Public Culture*, 30, 1 (2017): 19-34, ref. on pp. 19 and 24.

[6] Simon Gikandi argues that there was a degree of relative autonomy even during slavery. For example, speaking of the provision grounds for slaves in Jamaica or the task system in the South, he argues that "A 'fugitive' system of labor enabled a measure of autonomy for the enslaved"—*Slavery and the Culture of Taste* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011), p. 244. To take a similar example from elsewhere, the main character, Cara, in *The Underground Railroad* speaks about her brief experiences of freedom, if only "for a tiny moment across the eternity" of servitude—Colin Whiteread, *The Underground Railroad* (New York: Anchor Books, 2016), p. 29. Finally, Taylor opens *Black is Beautiful* with a narrative of slaves engaging in aesthetic self-fashioning on a slave ship.

[7] Shockley, *Renegade Poetics: Black Aesthetics and Formal Innovation in African American Poetry* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2011), p. 13.

[8] Many of the artists and theorists represented here admittedly have different, even conflicting aesthetic and political views but, I argue, they have relative autonomy in common.

[9] Gikandi, *Slavery and the Culture of Taste*, p. xii.

[10] *Ibid.*

[11] Gikandi's critique is even more devastating when combined with the historian and painter Nell Painter's argument that aesthetic reasoning emerged as a complement to scientific reasoning and played a key role in the development of race theory in the eighteenth century by introducing "aesthetic judgments into [race] classification." For example, J. F. Blumenbach, who developed the term 'Caucasian,' still in use today to categorize white people, introduced "aesthetic judgments into [race] classification" by arguing that whites are superior because of their beauty. Nell Irvin Painter, *The History of White People* (New York: Norton, 2010), chapter 6; ref. on p. 79.

[12] Frederick Douglass, "Lecture on Pictures," in *Picturing Frederick Douglass: An Illustrated Biography of the Nineteenth Century's Most Photographed American* (New York: Liveright Publishing, 2015), pp. 126-41, ref. on p. 138.

[13] Gikandi, *Slavery and the Culture of Taste*, p. 13.

[14] Alain Locke, "Negro Youth Speaks," reprinted in Addison Gayle, Jr., *The Black Aesthetic* (New York: Doubleday, 1971), pp. 16-22; ref. on p. 16.

[15] Achille Mbembe, *Critique of Black Reason*, Laurent DuBois, trans. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017), p. 173.

[16] Saidiya V. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), ref. on pp. 5-6, 8, 32, 47.

[17] W. E. B. Du Bois's, "criteria of Negro Art, in *Du Bois Writings*, Nathan Huggins, ed. (New York: Library of America, 1986), pp. 993-1002, ref. on p, 1002.

[18] Douglass, "Lecture on Pictures," p. 133.

[19] With the counterculture of taste comes counter reason, black reason, whose primary activity, according to Mbembe, is "fantasizing," that is, "gathering real or attributed traits, weaving them into histories, and creating images." Mbembe, *Critique of Black Reason*, p. 27.

[20] Gikandi, *Slavery and the Counterculture of Taste*, pp. 235-36. "Ironically, it was through the incommensurability with the world it inhabited," the plantation, "that the slaves' aesthetic could be connected to a channel of life that existed outside enslavement." In chapter five, Gikandi focuses on sound and performance as ways for slaves to resist their enslavement; in chapter six, he focuses on spatial configurations in slave communities. On "double consciousness," see W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, in *Du Bois Writings*, pp. 357-547, ref. on 364-65.

[21] Amiri Baraka (Leroi Jones), "Black Art," in *Black Fire: An Anthology of Afro-American Writing*, Amiri Baraka and Larry Neal, eds. (Baltimore: Black Classic Press, 1968/2007), pp. 302-03.

[22] Larry Neal, "The Black Arts Movement," *Drama Review*, 1968; reprinted in *The Black Aesthetic*, pp. 257-274; ref. on p. 257.

[23] *Ibid.*, 258.

[24] Amy Ongiri, *Spectacular Blackness: The Cultural Politics of the Black Power Movement and the Search for a Black Aesthetic* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2010), pp. 18, 52, 89, 115.

[25] Neal, "An Afterword: And Shine Swam On," in *Black Fire: An Anthology of Afro-American Writing* (Baltimore: Black Classic Press, 1968), pp. 638-656; ref. on p. 646.

[26] Michelle W. Wright, *The Physics of Blackness: Beyond the Middle Passage Epistemology* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015).

[27] Wright, *The Physics of Blackness*, p. 20.

[28] Shockley, *Renegade Poetics*, pp. 7, 198.

[29] *Ibid.*, 9.

[30] *Ibid.*, 13.

[31] In a recent lecture at the Whitney Museum of American Art (July 2018), the contemporary artist Lorna Simpson said that she wants people to see her work in aesthetic terms rather than mainly in terms of race; and she specifically expressed interest in the concept of "interiority."

[32] Shockley, *Renegade Poetics*, p. 9.

[33] Daphne Lamothe offers a third critique of essentialism in *Inventing the New Negro: Narrative, Culture, and Ethnography* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008).

[34] Kevin Quashie, *The Sovereignty of Quiet: Beyond Resistance in Black Culture* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2012), p. 4.

[35] As the abstract artist Raymond Saunders remarked in 1967, "an artist who is always harping on resistance...is held there, unwittingly (and witlessly) reviving slavery in another form. For the artist this is aesthetic atrophy." Saunders, "Black is a Color," distributed as an independent pamphlet and published in *Arts Magazine* (June 1967).

[36] Jeremy Glick, *The Black Radical Tragic: Performance, Aesthetics, and the Haitian Revolution* (New York: New York University Press, 2016).

[37] Quashie, *The Sovereignty of Quiet*, p. 140.

[38] *Ibid.*, 6.

[39] *Ibid.*, 9, 26, 74, 133.

[40] *Ibid.*, 9, 21, 26, 32, 8, 125.

[41] Angela Y. Davis at Open Engagement 2016: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oqC6T4oooCE> (last accessed 10/30/19).

[42] Davis also discusses Herbert Marcuse in the 2016 lecture. For her critical appropriation of Marcuse, see *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism: Gertrude "Ma" Rainey, Bessie Smith, and Billie Holiday* (New York: Random House, 1998), pp. 163-65, 183, 195.

[43] Stefano Harney and Fred Moten, *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning & Black Study* (Brooklyn: Autonomia, 2013), p. 20.

[44] *Ibid.*, 20.

[45] Mbembe, *Critique of Black Reason*, p. 28. The shift here is from the “*Western consciousness of blackness*” to the “*Black consciousness of blackness*” (pp. 28-30).

[46] Langston Hughes, “The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain,” reprinted in Addison Gayle, Jr., *The Black Aesthetic*, pp. 167-172; ref. on p. 172.

[47] As Alain Locke says, speaking of black poets, “if America were deaf, they would still sing.” “Negro Youth Speaks,” p. 17.

[48] Hughes, “The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain,” p. 172. Another, more recent example of poetic withdrawal is evident in Brian Phillip Harper’s conception of “abstractionist aesthetics.” *Abstractionist Aesthetics: Artistic Form and Social Critique in African American Culture* (New York: New York University Press, 2015).

[49] Locke, “Negro Youth Speaks,” p. 20 (italics added).

[50] *Ibid.*, 20, 18.

[51] Richard Wright, “Introduction: Blueprint for Negro Writers,” reprinted in *The Black Aesthetic*, pp. 315-326.

[52] *Ibid.*, 323.

[53] *Ibid.*, 324.

[54] *Ibid.*, 315.

[55] GerShun Avilez, *Radical Aesthetics and Modern Black Nationalism* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2016).

[56] Avilez, *Radical Aesthetics and Modern Black Nationalism*, pp. 11-13, 30-31.

[57] Mbembe, *Critique of Black Reason*, p. 174.

[58] Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man* (New York: Vintage Books, 1952), p. xx.

[59] Taylor, *Black is Beautiful*, pp. 6, 12, 26.

[60] *Ibid.*, 11.

[61] *Ibid.*, vii.

[62] Fumi Okiji, *Jazz as Critique: Adorno and Black Expression Revisited* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2018), p. 4.

[63] Taylor, *Black is Beautiful*, p. xi.

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