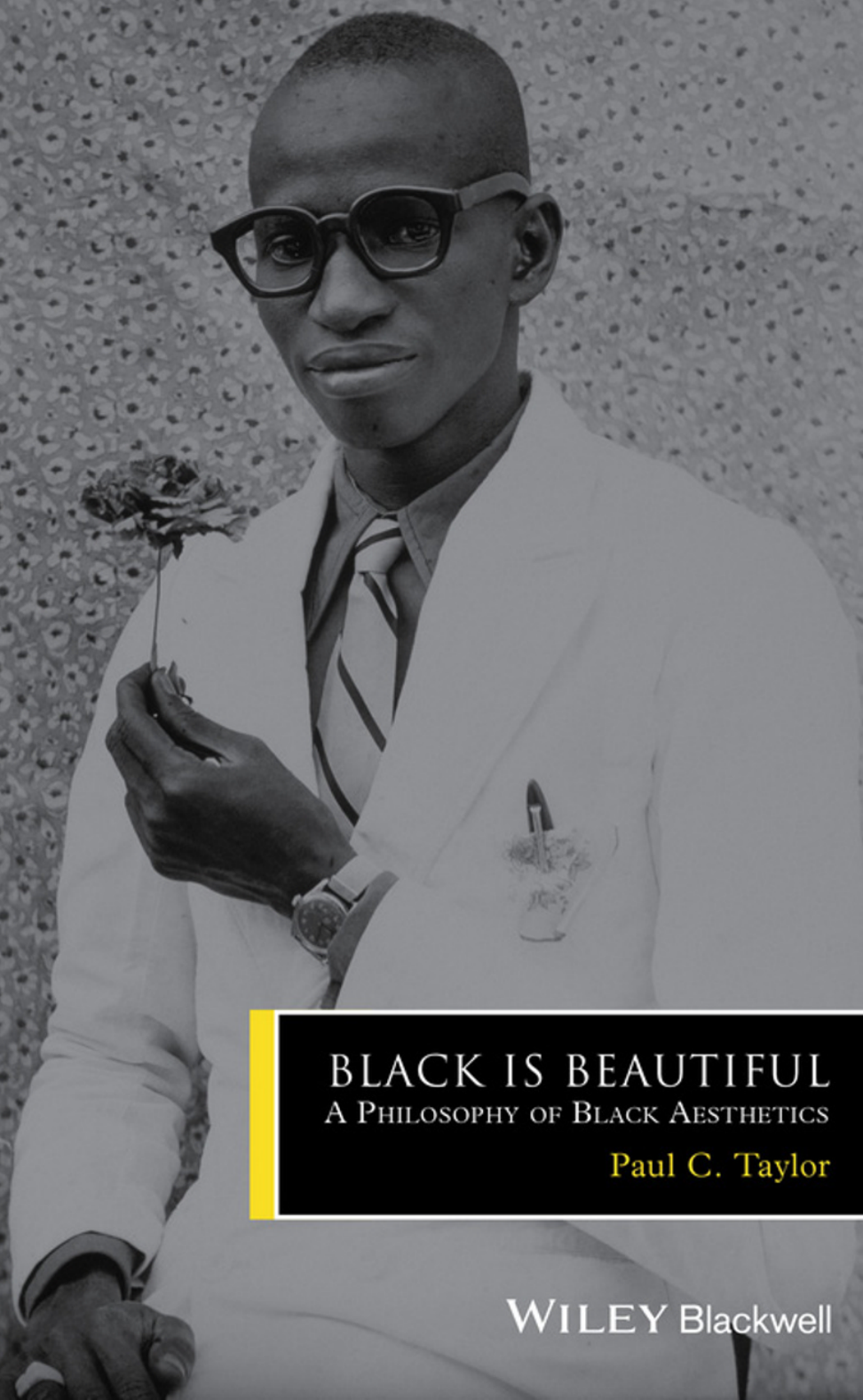


FOUNDATIONS OF THE PHILOSOPHY OF THE ARTS



BLACK IS BEAUTIFUL  
A PHILOSOPHY OF BLACK AESTHETICS

Paul C. Taylor

WILEY Blackwell



Black is Beautiful

## Foundations of the Philosophy of the Arts

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**Black is Beautiful**  
A Philosophy of Black Aesthetics

**Paul C. Taylor**

**WILEY Blackwell**

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# Preface and Acknowledgments

## Between Baraka and Brandom

“I don’t know where to begin (or, it turns out, to end) because nothing has been written here. Once the first book comes, then we’ll know where to begin.”

Barbara Smith, “Toward a Black Feminist Criticism”<sup>1</sup>

I went into philosophy because I thought it would help me help others think more productively about black expressive culture. This seemed like an important thing to do during the early days of the US post-civil rights era, in those days after world events had undermined the idea that, as Du Bois might say, the walls of race were clear and straight, but before it had seriously occurred to anyone to toy with thoughts of post-racialism. At that moment, black expressive culture – the aesthetic objects, performances, and traditions that defined blackness for many people as surely and as imperfectly as skin color or hair texture do – still seemed important in the ways that the US Black Arts Movement had insisted it was. But the old reasons for assigning it this importance had lost some of their purchase, and the old contexts for creating, experiencing, and understanding black expression were undergoing rapid and radical transformation.

The old reasons for focusing on black literature, film, music, and the rest were artifacts of earlier regimes of racial formation. Prior to the (qualified) successes of the twentieth-century black freedom struggles, black expressive culture mattered to blacks because culture work allowed them to escape, to some degree, more than aspirants to success in business or politics could, the yoke of white supremacist exclusion, and to achieve at a level commensurate with their talents. So blacks could look to entertainers and artists as emblems or defenders of their human possibilities. Black culture workers could show self-doubting blacks as well as negrophobes of other

racism the true potential of unfettered black strivings, and they could defend the race against the racist images and narratives that dominated western culture. At the same time, black expressive culture also mattered to people of other races, even anti-black racists of other races, and also for a handful of reasons. For some, primitive blacks had their fingers on the pulse of some quintessentially human impulses that over-civilized people of other races had forgotten. For others, blackness could be a symbolic field for working out their own identities and impulses, consciously or unconsciously. For still others, and most simply, blackness was associated with dimensions of human experience that are always of wide interest – it was exotic, titillating, dangerous, and sensual.

This dialectical struggle of colonial and anticolonial approaches to blackness began to lose its relevance after African countries became self-governing, and after black subject populations in settler colonial states began to assert and win something like their full citizenship rights. Put simply: Once Oprah becomes a global media icon, and Toni Morrison wins the Nobel Prize for literature, and Mandela becomes the president of South Africa, and Obama becomes the president of the United States – perhaps better: now that Tim Story can direct summer blockbuster films like *The Fantastic Four* (for good or ill), and Halle Berry can win an Oscar (more on this later) and headline her own tentpole superhero film (*Catwoman*), and Okwui Enwezor can curate Documenta and the Venice Biennale, and Michael Jordan and Jay-Z can, like Oprah, become global icons for their skills as performers and as businesspeople – once all of this happens, the old approaches to black expressive culture seem much less pertinent. Why ask culture workers to uplift and defend the race, in the minds of black folks or others, when the work of vindication, in aesthetics and in ethics, has already been done?

Many of the particular developments that I cite above were still some distance in the future when I decided philosophy was relevant to black aesthetics. But the general drift was clearly discernible, as was a widespread incapacity to think intelligently about the cultural dynamics that our new racial orders had unleashed. We were starting to see the import of questions like these: How should African Americans orient themselves to icons of African identity, like kente cloth, especially since those icons had specific meanings to participants in specific African communities, and these meanings were often invisible to people looking through the lenses of US racial politics? Does it make sense to demand that black artists produce “positive” images of black life, now that there is less need to defend ourselves against assaults like *Birth of a Nation*? Does the widespread adoration of figures like Michael Jordan and Michael Jackson, or, now, of Will Smith and Beyoncé Knowles, mean that racism is over? What does it mean that the most lavishly

compensated participants in black practices are often white people? How can we even make sense of the idea of “black practices” after the collapse of classical racialism? Worse, how can we make sense of this idea after explicit racial domination gives way, thereby removing the impetus to close ranks and ignore both the differences between the many distinctive ways of being black and the centrality of interracial exchanges to even the most iconic “black” achievements? And what do we make of the strange ambivalence with which black bodies are still widely regarded, which leaves them both invisible and hyper-visible, desired and despised?

Those questions are only more pressing now, in the world after Quentin Tarantino, Joss Stone, and Justin Beiber, a world populated by symposia on Black Europe and Body Politics<sup>2</sup> and by Japanese reggae artists who trek to Brooklyn and Kingston in search of authenticity.<sup>3</sup> They are pressing in part because they represent a kind of changing same, though not the one Baraka invites us to contemplate. None of the phenomena I’ve gestured at are new, exactly, which means that we have to account for their persistence. But they are still interestingly distinct from the precedents that we might cite for them, which means that we have to explain the difference between, say, Tarantino and Norman Mailer, Beiber and Elvis Presley, Sidney Poitier and Denzel Washington.

Anyway, as I keep saying, I dimly perceived that these were things worth thinking harder about, in ways that seemed, in my experience, either of little interest to or beyond the capacities of most people. I knew that there was a long tradition of serious reflection on black aesthetics, though that description of the enterprise had become available only recently. And I knew that the tradition had even more recently made its way into the academy, into English departments and programs in cultural studies and other places, carried there by people benefiting from the same political victories that now made it necessary to interrogate the shifts in black culture. My hope was to extend the tradition and join the ongoing conversations, and to do so by bringing the tools of professional academic philosophy to bear on our shared problems.

What I did not adequately understand was the degree to which professional philosophy – the part of the profession into which I had been socialized, anyway – had purposely walled itself off from the places and people with whom I wanted to be in conversation. This turned my desire to join the conversation into an attempt to bridge discursive communities – more precisely, to build a bridge from a particular network of discursive communities, the ones that raised me, to the mainland of inquiry into black aesthetics. And that subtle but profound shift in the project has led to the book that you now hold.

I want to be clear about this background because it bears directly on the structure of the project as it stands. I have recently found myself calling this

an exercise in “retroactive self-provisioning,” which means that I have tried to write the book that I’d wanted to read, back when the size of the gap between the work I was prepared to do and the work I wanted to do began to become apparent. So the shape of the project, its proximity to contemporary Anglophone philosophy and its distance from – though not refusal of – the veins traditionally mined by other approaches to black expressive culture, is a function of autobiographical contingencies and vocational choices. I undertook this project in part to fill a void in the expressive and theoretical resources of the intellectual traditions that inform my work, and to dissolve the dilemma that I once thought I faced: study philosophy, or study black expressive culture?

The void that I mention is doubly overdetermined. On the one hand, I was trained by analytic philosophers, and found while in their tutelage that I was interested in classical US thinkers like Emerson, William James, and John Dewey, and in the uses that people like Rorty and Putnam found for their ideas. I found further that following out the latter tradition in the right directions could lead me into productive encounters at the more accessible edges of “foreign” traditions, as represented by the likes of Foucault, Butler, Bordo, and Cavell. This sort of training, which was more ecumenical than it might have been, tends not to inspire curiosity about the likes of Amiri Baraka. On the other hand, I had long nurtured an interest in black critical thought. This began during my time at an HBCU (historically black college and university) in the 1980s, and has deepened in recent years as I’ve worked in greater proximity to scholars in African American Studies. This sort of training, for its part, tends not to inspire curiosity about the likes of Robert Brandom.

There is a small area of overlap between the traditions that claim Brandom and Baraka, an area occupied in increasing numbers by students and scholars of Africana philosophy and newer modes of political theory. But the bit of that work that attempts a rapprochement from the side of the philosopher tends not to fill the void I have in mind, for three broad reasons. First, much of it reproduces mainstream philosophy’s indifference to aesthetics, and focuses, albeit quite reasonably, on questions from other precincts of philosophy. Think here, for example, of the composition of the important companion volumes to African American and African philosophy, as those documents stand as of this writing. They are massive texts, and vanishingly little of their huge page counts are occupied with work in aesthetics.

Second, the work that does take up aesthetic questions tends to set aside the aspiration to explore black aesthetics as a whole – call this the conjunctural aspiration, for reasons I’ll come to in Chapter 1 – and focuses instead on particular idioms, periods, or thinkers. Think here of the fine work that people like Tommy Lott and Nkiru Nzegwu have done on particular

expressive idioms and media, or of the brilliant new work in political theory that treats Baldwin and Du Bois as thinkers whose approaches to the aesthetic and the political are inseparable. This is important work, but there is a need for more studies of the sort undertaken by people like Cornel West, Sylvia Wynter, and Fred Moten, work that aspires to think philosophically about the black aesthetic as such.

And third, the work that accepts the conjunctural aspiration tends to remain at a somewhat greater distance than I would like from the philosophical resources that I value. I am thinking here of philosophers who have left the profession to become, as Cornel West puts it, men and women of letters, not beholden to any narrowly specialized and professionalized approach to the life of the mind. These are people like West himself, of course, but also like Angela Davis and Adrian Piper, all of whom are card-carrying philosophers but whose interests – interests in, among other things, the issues that I will soon assign to the study of black aesthetics – have led them away from professional academic philosophy and into spaces that are in some ways (ways I don't have time to explore) more open.

I am also thinking, though, of figures who have not put aside academic philosophy but who have instead worked in or near it using vocabularies that are to some degree incompatible with my own. I think here of Moten and Wynter, and of others who have drunk deeply from the wells of post-structuralist thought. But I think also of Alain Locke, who did his work before the mid-twentieth-century ferments – in philosophy and in black cultural criticism – that shaped my vision of our shared interests. For this reason, Locke's arguments are for me nearly as distant and in need of translation as Royce's, or Hegel's, or Moten's. I accept that this need for translation is a shortcoming of my training, or of what I've made of myself in the wake of that training. It is surely the case that Locke's work (like Royce's, and Hegel's, and Moten's) should be less alien to me than it is. Still, one must on occasion cast down the buckets where one stands, which is to say that this project is an experiment in mining the resources that my upbringing, whatever its limitations, has prepared me to use.

All of that to say: My hope in this book is to use resources in and near the dominant traditions in Anglophone philosophy – which is what I will usually mean when I refer to “philosophy” here – to reconcile the black aesthetic with the contemporary race-theoretic consensus. If I do this properly, I will have written the book that I wanted, and could not find in graduate school, when I began to read Du Bois and Morrison through Danto and Dewey. And I will have given people who share my intellectual upbringing an accessible way into the study of black aesthetics.

Thinking, done properly, is about incurring debts. We end up beholden to our interlocutors and teachers, living and dead, to our correspondents and

collaborators, and to the people who have sustained us on our journeys through, and to and from, the worlds of our ideas. It is not clear whether I've thought properly here, but I have incurred the debts.

First, there are a number of audiences and commentators to thank, many of whom heroically masked their puzzlement as I tried to locate the questions and claims that make up this book. I am particularly indebted to the philosophy faculty and students at Rhodes University in South Africa, who have heard me work through the ideas here over several years of visits to Grahamstown. Ward Jones, Pedro Tabensky, and Samantha Vice have been gracious hosts, good friends, and generous conversation partners, and I am glad to have them as colleagues and comrades. Lectures at the University of Michigan, the University of San Francisco, the University of Cape Town, the University of the Eastern Cape, Middle Tennessee State University, Otterbein University, and Skidmore University have been similarly fruitful, thanks in large part to the comments and thoughtfulness of Robin Zheng, Ron Sundstrom, Elisa Galgut, Antjie Krog, Mary Magada-Ward, Stephanie Patridge, and Catherine McKeen. The philosophers at Bucknell University, led by Sheila Lintott, were especially kind as I worked toward the slowly dawning questions that now inform the chapter on funk. It has been particularly enlightening to share these ideas with faculty and students at historically black colleges and universities, both here and abroad. For these opportunities I have to thank Anika Simpson and Marcos Bisticas-Cocoves at Morgan State, Barry Hallen at Morehouse, and Abraham Olivier at the University of Fort Hare.

Audiences and commentators at various professional gatherings have also been quite helpful, beginning with the International Society for African Philosophy and Studies, where this project got its first public airing. Since then the good people of the Alain Locke Society, under the leadership of Leonard Harris and Jacoby Carter, and of the American Philosophies Forum, led by John Stuhr, invited me to give presentations that proved especially fruitful for this work. Similarly, opportunities to speak at meetings of the American Philosophical Association and the American Society for Aesthetics led to useful comments from Devonya Havis and Luvell Anderson, and from generous and attentive audiences.

I have also benefited from the edifying conversations put on by various college and university institutes and centers. I particularly appreciate the generosity of the University of Connecticut's Institute for African American Studies, led at the time by Jeff Ogbar and then by Olu Oguibe; of Florida Atlantic University's Center for Body, Mind, and Culture, under the direction of Richard Shusterman; of the University of Kentucky's African American & Africana Studies Program, led by Frank X. Walker; and of the Frederick Douglass Institute at East Stroudsburg State University, represented in its dealings with me by Storm Heter.

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A number of individuals outside my workplaces have made the deepest impact on this work. Jeff Dean green-lit the project during his time at Wiley and then waited, with patience beyond measure, for it to come to fruition. I am grateful to Jeff and to Nicole Benevenia and Tiffany Mok for their serenity in the face of interminable delays. Cornel West and Susan Bordo, by argument, instruction, and example, helped me think it might be possible to build the intellectual bridges that I wanted to build, to take black expression seriously as an occasion for and record of deep thought and profound achievement, and to put philosophy productively into conversation with cultural criticism. Eddie Glaude was and long has been an invaluable conversation partner, inspiration, brother, and friend, and has shown me, in a number of ways over a number of years, how one might bring the exact intellectual and cultural resources that interest me into a fruitful and fascinating combination. Charles McKinney, Mark Jefferson, and Charles Peterson reminded me that the life of the mind includes – no, *requires* – laughter, and that the bonds of brotherhood remain intact across borders and in virtual conversation. To Eddie, Chuck, Mark, and Pete, I say: Ankh, Tchou, Seneb.

Anne Eaton gave me hope for philosophical aesthetics, and, sometimes, for philosophy, and pushed me to think harder and more carefully about every aspect of this project, and about much else besides. This book would not exist without her, though it would surely be better if I had listened to her

more often. Siobhan Carter-David reminded me, in word and deed, of the exciting work that people in other fields are doing in this area, and helped me keep keeping on when my interest and energies were flagging. Eduardo Mendieta, Anika Simpson, Kelly Ellis, and Nikky Finney offered just the right encouraging words, I suspect more encouraging than any of them knows, at just the right moment. And Philip Alperson endorsed the idea of this project early on, and gave me the opportunity to pursue it with Wiley.

My brother Mark inspired me with his commitment to the working artist's life, and to cultivating the craft that makes the life possible. If I have become one-tenth the writer that he is a musician, and if I've studied expressive culture with one-tenth the care that he devotes to producing it, then I will have achieved something.

My teachers Peter Kivy and Howard McGary have left indelible marks on this project, though in different ways. Peter showed me that one can attend to the quality of one's writing and of one's thinking at the same time, and modeled a way of putting both arts in service of productive reflection on the philosophy of music. I found myself rehearsing his arguments much more frequently in these pages than I had anticipated. I hope this pleases him as much as it pleases me. Howard's mark on the book is less direct, but no less substantial. I hope to have learned from him how to engage carefully and charitably with all comers, how to work patiently through an idea until it yields whatever it has to offer, and how to do all of this in conversation with the best of the black intellectual tradition, taking Audre Lorde as seriously as John Locke.

Finally, my wife, Wilna Julmiste Taylor, showed me every day what it is to walk and live and love in beauty. She has supported me through this project, and through all the detours that the book and our lives have taken, to a degree that I do not deserve. Her reminders about the business of culture work pull me back from the land of austere academic reflection, and enrich my reflections with real-world detail. And her joyfulness, spirituality, and passion remind me that experience both has and should aspire to have, as Dewey rightly but inelegantly put it, aesthetic quality. Like the dewdrops love the morning leaves, honey.

## Notes

- 1 Barbara Smith, "Toward a Black Feminist Criticism," *The Radical Teacher* 7 (March 1978), 20–27; reprinted in Winston Napier, ed., *African American Literary Theory* (New York: NYU Press, 2000), 132–146, 132.
- 2 "Black Europe and Body Politics," *Africa is a Country* (blog), posted July 8, 2014, <http://africasacountry.com/2014/07/projects-black-europe-and-body-politics/> (accessed November 30, 2015). "For those not familiar with this



groundbreaking project, BE.BOP is a curatorial project, in co-production with *Ballhaus Naunynstrasse*, that includes exhibitions, presentations, screenings and roundtables by artists (among others) from the Black European Diaspora. This project seeks to fill a gap when it comes to deconstructing the coloniality of western art and aesthetics in Europe” (par. 1).

- 3 Josh Chamberlain, “How to Be a Japanese Reggaeophile,” *villagevoice.com*, posted July 28, 2009, <http://www.villagevoice.com/2009-07-28/music/how-to-be-a-japanese-reggaeophile/> (accessed July 3, 2013).



# Assembly, Not Birth

*It is 1790, and you are at a seaport in South America. The port is part of the Dutch colony that has since become the country of Suriname, and it is a vital part, if the amount of traffic you see is any indication. One of the many ships here has just docked, and the crew is busy hustling its cargo above deck. The cargo is, in point of fact, hustling itself above deck. The ship, it turns out, is a slave vessel, just arrived from the Dutch Gold Coast, in what is now Ghana.*

*The forty or so people who make their way up from the cargo hold appear much the way you would have expected, had you expected them. They are dark-skinned and slender, and some give the appearance of being quite ill. They are solemn, apparently resigned to their new fates in their new world. Some have difficulty standing, and most are blinking in the sunlight.*

*These new African Americans surprise you in only one respect. They have stars in their hair.*

*Not real stars, of course. The new arrivals have had their heads shaved, leaving patches of hair shaped like stars and half-moons. Just as you begin to wonder how the ship's crew settled on this way of torturing their captives or entertaining themselves, you receive a second surprise. Not far from where you are standing, a man who seems to be the ship's captain is speaking with a man who seems to have some financial interest in the ship's cargo. The capitalist asks the captain why he cut the niggers' hair like that, and the captain disclaims all responsibility. "They did it themselves," he says, "the one to the other, by the help of a broken bottle and without soap."*

## 1 Introduction

The story of slaves with stars in their hair comes from a groundbreaking anthropological study called *The Birth of African American Culture*.<sup>1</sup> The authors of the study, Sidney Mintz and Richard Price, report an eyewitness account

of something like the events described above, and use it to support one of their key arguments. They mean to reject and correct certain received ideas about the pace at which Africans became Americans. They hold that distinctly African American cultures emerged quite early on, as enslaved Africans built wholly new practices and life-worlds out of the various old worlds – from different parts of Africa, as well as from Europe and the Americas – that collided in modern slave-holding societies. In the case of the new Americans in this story, the process of cultural blending began before they even reached shore, with an act of “irrepressible cultural vitality” that bridged their different ethnic backgrounds, and that transcended their presumably divergent ideas about adorning the body.

Mintz and Price might have made a slightly different and in some ways broader point, a point not about the birth of African American culture but about the birth of black aesthetics. The uprooted Africans in the story were positioned to become African Americans because they had first been seen and treated as blacks. They put stars in their hair in response to this forced insertion into the crucible of racialization. Having been stripped as much as was possible of their preexisting cultural armament, they had to replace it with something, to put some stylized barrier between themselves and the new social forces with which they would be forced to contend. Instead of entering the new world in the manner of the animals they were thought to be, unadorned, unmarked by the self-conscious creation of meaning, they found common cause in the essentially human act of aesthetic self-fashioning.

This sort of activity, I will want to say, is at the heart of the enterprise that has come to be known by the name “black aesthetics.” Insisting on agency, beauty, and meaning in the face of oppression, despair, and death is obviously central to a tradition, if it is that, that counts people like Toni Morrison, Aaron Douglas, and Zora Neale Hurston among its participants. And reflecting on this activity is central, I will also want to say, to the philosophical study of black aesthetics.

We might start toward the philosophy of black aesthetics by rethinking the metaphor that organizes the Mintz–Price study. They speak of birth, a notion that could lead careless readers to overlook the amount of artifice and improvisation that people put into making a shared life. But think of what you saw at that South American port. A group of uprooted Africans engaged in an act of *bricolage*: they used what was at hand, both culturally and materially, to cobble together the beginnings of an African American culture. It appears that these cultures are not so much born as assembled.

The philosophical study of black aesthetics also involves a kind of assembly, in a sense that I will soon explain. I stress the philosophic nature of this enterprise because black aesthetics has been developed in many different ways, but

none, as far as I know, involve a sustained examination from the standpoint of post-analytic philosophy. This book will, I hope, correct for this oversight.

My aim in this introduction is to answer some preliminary questions concerning the project, and to gesture at what the other chapters will bring. The preliminary questions I have in mind emerge rather directly from the basic framing that I've given the project so far. First, to paraphrase cultural theorist and sociologist Stuart Hall: what is the "black" in "black aesthetics"? Second, in the same spirit: what is the "aesthetic" in "black aesthetics"? Third: what good is a philosophy of black aesthetics? And fourth: why discuss any of this in terms of assembly?

## 2 Inquiry and Assembly

In an essay on the Black Arts Movement in 1980s Britain, Stuart Hall introduces the sense of "assembly" that I'll use here. He writes:

This paper tries to frame a provisional answer to the question, How might we begin to 'assemble' [our subject] as an object of critical knowledge? It does not aspire to a definitive interpretation.... What I try to do ... is 'map' the black arts ... as part of a wider cultural/political moment, tracking some of the impulses that went into their making and suggesting some interconnections between them. I 'assemble' these elements, not as a unity, but in all their contradictory dispersion. In adopting this genealogical approach, the artwork itself appears, not in its fullness as an aesthetic object, but as a constitutive element in the fabric of the wider world of ideas, movements, and events.<sup>2</sup>

On this approach, assembly refuses the quest for a "definitive interpretation" — think here of necessary and sufficient conditions, or of static, trans-historical essences. It aspires instead to identify, gather together, and explore the linked contextual factors in virtue of which we might productively and provisionally comprehend various phenomena under a single heading. And it takes seriously the degree to which these contextual factors involve the historical, cultural, political, and, in the eighteenth-century sense of the term, *moral* dimensions of human social affairs.

The method of assembly makes it easier to credit the complexity of historically emergent social phenomena — what Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci encourages Hall and others to call "conjunctures." A conjuncture is "a fusion of contradictory forces that nevertheless cohere enough to constitute a definite configuration."<sup>3</sup> Assembly is the mode of inquiry that allows us to see and account for the coherence of the configuration without glossing over the respects in which it remains, in a sense, incoherent.