

“This Ain’t Hypothetical”

Engaging Black Aesthetics from an Ethic of Care

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IN AN INTERVIEW WITH PETER HUDSON, Katherine McKittrick (2013) suggested that there isn’t such a thing as safe learning or teaching. She suggested that the kind of questions educators ought to wrestle with across disciplines “necessarily attend to violence and sadness and the struggle for life” (p. 237). Black aesthetics insists on these questions, problematizing notions of Blackness and being against histories and institutions that are invested in the non-being of Black bodyminds (Gordon, 2018). In the context of an American schooling project that is inherently anti-Black (Anderson, 1988; Dumas, 2014; Grant et al., 2021), engaging Black aesthetics, as pedagogy and curriculum, represents a potential intervention in the service of life-affirming Black educational spaces. As the field of education is animated with discourse on “safe spaces” within the university, McKittrick’s critique of the classroom as safe a priori is especially salient for Black bodyminds navigating the classroom as educators, students, and researchers. After Schalk (2018), we use the term bodyminds in this manuscript to expand the ways Black people are understood as mental, emotional, spiritual, and spatial beings mediated through history.

Echoing this sentiment, Wynter (1992) urged educators to ask, “What are the societal mechanisms that produce with precise regularity [the] captive population” (p. 258). Influenced largely by curricula laced with white racial frames and discourses of normativity, violence encamps Black students and can arrest their self-defining possibilities (Okello, 2018, 2020). Buttressing this point, Gordon (1993) wrote that the training and socialization that many teachers receive is committed to advancing normative structures. Alternatively, she pointed to the potential of Black aesthetics as an onto-epistemological endeavor and discourse with the potential to name, deconstruct, and undo Black students’ captive status in the classroom (Gordon, 1993).

Black aesthetics is not a passive project; instead, it is deeply invested in curating livable logics to contend with anti-Black racism in and beyond the educational context. Embracing both theory and practice, rigorous and ethical engagement with Black aesthetics ought to be centrally concerned with what it means to exist as Black in an anti-Black world. Failure to attend to both rigor and ethics ignores the histories that created the Black aesthetic canon and undermines the

canon's potential for Black people, specifically, and for society writ large. Thus, this manuscript lifts the insights of one Black man and one Black woman and their relationship to the Black aesthetic canon, asking, how should educators and researchers handle the theory of Black aesthetics while simultaneously caring for the lived experiences of Black bodyminds? Specifically, we were interested in what Black aesthetics required of teaching and inquiry. In response to this question, we collaboratively examined our experiences as a professor and graduate student engaging with Black aesthetics in academe and offer recommendations from our process to ethically inform study on the intimate relationship that is theory and lived experience.

Natasha's Positionality

Paul Taylor (2016) defined Black aesthetics as “the practice of using art, criticism, or analysis to explore the role that expressive objects and practices play in creating and maintaining black life-worlds” (p. 2). He went on to explain that those “life worlds” are reflected in the lives and experiences of those with “dark skin, tightly curled hair, and full lips, or [those] descended from people who look like that, or from a place full of people who look like that [making] certain claims more likely to be true of you” (Taylor, 2016, p. 20). It is with this understanding of Blackness and Black aesthetics, that I enter into this inquiry. As a graduate student who has been introduced to elements of Black Studies throughout my education, it was an altogether different experience to study Black aesthetics in a class with an Italian woman as the instructor and a diverse group of students. Having this instructor for a class on Black aesthetics illuminated the necessary care for teaching Black bodyminds within this context, while also making clear the experience of being Black and studying Black aesthetics.

Wilson's Positionality

Blackness marks that which is extraneous to reason and rationality in society and is summarized in the heaviness of DuBois's (1903) query of what it means to be a problem. As an educator who identifies with the breadth of Black diaspora and the lived, material, realities of Black-being in the United States, teaching and working with the assemblage of Black aesthetics is personal and political. While I am not one who believes that something called Black aesthetics should be exclusively engaged by those who identify with Blackness, I am conscious, and uneasy, about the theoretical treatment of (Black) survival praxis. To this end, I am committed to layered study, and I ask that those with whom I teach or partner assume a similar responsibility, marked by the question, “Why are you here, and what will it mean that you were here (in this place of critical study)?”

Historicizing Black Aesthetics: A Literature Review

Responding to problems of being in the world, historically, Black aesthetics evolved in and against antagonisms of white supremacy that are invested in the non-being (Gordon, 1997, 2018) of Black bodyminds. The notion of Black aesthetics is fluid and unruly in response to attempts to definitely articulate its essence. While imprecise and subject to diverse interpretation, Taylor

(2010), contributing to the discussion, explained that the concept does not rely on a singular vantage, nor endeavor to congeal around an all-inclusive cultural monolith. Instead, he defined it as a collection of theories and ideas about the arts, beauty, and expression of the African diaspora. Casting the net a bit wider, Taylor (2016), linked Black aesthetics to the “philosophic preoccupations that routinely animate and surround the culture work of black peoples” (p. 5). Adding definition to his ruminations, Taylor (2016) wrote that, to do Black aesthetics was to “use art, criticism, or analysis to explore the role that expressive objects and practices play in creating and maintaining black life-worlds” (p. 5). The work of Black aesthetics emerged whenever and wherever the critical engagement with expressive modalities was essential to the formation and furtherance of the social phenomena known as Black people. As a way to interrupt the traditional organizing that tends to demarcate some disciplines, Taylor (2016) built on Hall’s (2005) call to conjecture. For these scholars, conjecture represents “a fusion of contradictory forces that nevertheless cohere enough to constitute a definite configuration” (Taylor, 2016, p. 4). Taylor (2016) similarly resisted categorical interpretation and instead situated the term in contextual factors like history and culture; he used the word assembly to describe the dimensionality of Black aesthetics.

Ranging in scope and method, Spillers (in Johnson et al., 1970) noted the importance of curating an archive:

laying out of those methods of knowledge and practice which will reveal to use our source and strength. If we are serious about creating a legacy, then we must get about the heavy task of recording and transmitting our revelation as it comes. The making of the record, then, requires builders and prophets—those who can see and believe—those can work and do. (p. 54)

Black aesthetics marks the expansive, anti-parochial view of critical and creative work that might come to represent a discipline or the realms of Black life. Shockley (2011) discussed the notion of Black aesthetics that emerged during the Black Arts Movement (BAM), calling it a set of characteristics of Black art that “derived organically from African and African diasporic cultures” (p. 2). The characteristics, “such as an emphasis on and celebration of black music, black speech, black heroes, and black history, should and do determine both the form and content of” Black aesthetic production (p. 2). Neal (1968) regarded the emergence of Black aesthetics as “a radical reordering of the western cultural aesthetic. It proposes a separate symbolism, mythology; critique, and iconology,” conceptually representing a desire for Black self-determination and nationhood (p. 29). During the BAM movement, in particular, Black aesthetics sought to establish reference points that could capture the needs and aspirations of Black people, distinct from white framings of perceived Black inferiority.

Gayle (1994) echoed this sentiment asserting that, when and where Black aesthetics longed for the validation of the white gaze, approval from and by touchstones divorced from the culture of origin, Black aesthetics would be found wanting. Rejecting notions of separatism, Gayle (1994) affirmed “the validity of an African American culture that encompasses not only the retentions of the African cultures ... but also the unique culture that the enslaved developed out of the conditions and imperatives of their lives in the U.S.” (p. 207). Beyond a particular site, and fictive essentialism, Taylor (2016) assembled Black aesthetics on philosophical preoccupations that have come to animate the cultural work of Black people.

The “Black” in Black Aesthetics

Attempting to responsibly attend to Black aesthetics, Taylor (2016) sought to address the *Black* in Black aesthetics by framing it as a racial category. Appealing to the term racialism, Taylor (2016) recognized that, in its criticality, the term has political implications and social consequences. Black aesthetics, in this way, has a relationship with political structures and conceptions of citizenship and justice. Accepting this premise has implications for Black aesthetics. Accordingly, the significance of race means that art could not simply be art for art's sake, as the social cost of doing so was too high (Gayle, 1994; Neal, 1968; Taylor, 2016). Second, the weight of race forces Black aesthetics to acknowledge the living and moving body, its somatic and phenomenological essences. Third, racialism as attached to Black aesthetics is grounded in historicity and the dynamism of race across time. Taken together, Black aesthetics centers and concerns those racially positioned as Black (Taylor, 2016).

Reflecting on the tradition, Taylor (2016) made a distinction between the first order and second order of Black aesthetic tradition. The first order “emerged as soon as black people ... began to seek and create beauty and meaning from within the cauldron of racial formation” (Taylor, 2016, p. 23). The second order began when people began to systematically approach their work from a racialized perspective. Endeavoring to map the breadth of Black aesthetics, Taylor located Black aesthetics in pre-modernity, which is to say that African and diaspora practices share similarities and that there are important questions to ask about the constructed role of pre-modern Africa in the social imaginary. Of note, the transatlantic slave trade marked a familiar moment in the racial formation process and development of Black aesthetics as “heterogenous crowds of uprooted Africans made themselves into less heterogenous communities by creating shared practices and expressive cultures” (Mintz & Price, 1992, p. 18). Another development in Black aesthetics pointed to African descendant people wielding performance and aesthetic objects of dominant culture to raise skepticism about whiteness and white supremacy. In this vein, Black aesthetics would morph into a project bent on “removing the Black population from poverty, illiteracy, and degradation” (Baker, 1988, p. 4) by cultivating the infused gifting of Black people instead of an overreliance on Eurocentric rationality. Employing pan-African ideas, Black people during the New Negro and Negritude movements cultivated new approaches to identity and culture. Expounding on their methodology, Taylor (2016) discussed three shared goals these thinkers and creatives accepted: racial vindication, an embrace of Africa's distinctive cultural gift to the world, and a reorientation of African consciousness.

Building on these moments, Black aesthetics developed an explicit commitment to cultural and psychological decolonization. “Unless the Black artist,” according to Neal, (1968), “establishes a ‘Black aesthetic’ [they] will have no future at all” (p. 30). This occurred as artists and thinkers, generally, broke with the belief in respectable self-fashioning as a way to demonstrate one's humanity. Alternatively, they redirected that energy toward the goal of uplift and communicable edification and submitted themselves to expressive authenticity. The call for decolonization is buttressed by a gendered and queer analysis achieved by creatives like Toni Morrison, Toni Cade Bambara, and Audre Lorde. Couching her work in an intersectional refusal of categorization, Lorde (1982), for example, stretched the boundaries and possibilities of the Black aesthetic tradition.

Ethically Attending to the Archive

As shown above, Black aesthetics has labored and survived across time as a way to add texture and meaning to Black existence in and against whiteness and the larger white supremacist, imperialist project. In other words, one can read Black aesthetics as a response to the sociopolitical expectation of Black non-humanness, the normative structure of dominant society designed to question the humanity of Black people. Wynter (1992) argued for a rewriting of the human that would understand the concept as more a “biological, genetically programmed organism” (Gordon, 1993, p. 221). The presumption here is that humanness was programmed, designed, with a particular moral and ethical system and, in this initiation, comes into being simultaneously through representation, meaning, and discourse (Gordon, 1993). Against this backdrop, Wynter (1990, 1991), recognizing teaching as a political practice (Apple, 1992), called on educators to take up a cultural model of instruction that would work to critique and deconstruct intellectual hegemony. Considering what it might mean to reconstruct the classroom, Gordon (1993) asked,

whose knowledge is being represented in schools and what is the function and purpose of the knowledge? How does the curriculum serve various constituent groups? And what are the models of being and meaning found in the language and discourse? (p. 220)

Teaching, thus, for and in the service of Black people, is not only about the content of the archives or infusion of information into the learner, but how close educators are to reconstituting modes of being and knowing. Black aesthetics, inherently, must question bodies of knowledge and should guide pedagogical processes to address the rules that govern knowledge production and behavior (Gordon, 1993).

The challenge for educators, according to Wynter (1990), is a confrontation with canonicity that runs counter and antithetical to Black life and existence. Beyond an intellectual exercise, Wynter understands reinvention, or the rewriting of the curriculum, as high stakes work because of the material consequences of omission. Therein, Black aesthetics is operationalized as an epistemological project and deciphering practice (Wynter, 1992) “to assist educators in understanding the rules of discourse that give lip service to but do not jeopardize the hierarchical status structures” (Gordon, 1993, p. 223). Blackness, and more broadly the Black aesthetic, in this way becomes the lens to question the shape of life and knowledge in and beyond the educational context, as the press of aesthetics “is always a non-dialogue between those who subscribe to the conditioned world order and those who stand to gain from a reconstructed forum” (Taylor, 1989, p. 90). In what follows, we discuss the theoretical framing that guided this critical analysis.

Theoretical Framework

Black aesthetics, as an arm of the larger Black intellectual tradition, has been a generative, self-defining, place-making enterprise for Black bodyminds in a western, United States context. By extension, Black aesthetics functions as an intervention on western, canonical thought and reason by way of the three fundamental departures. According to Marable (2000), the Black intellectual tradition has always been descriptive, corrective, and prescriptive. In its descriptiveness, the intellectual project has represented the realities of Black lives from the perspective and vantage of Black life-worlds. This presumed centrality has made room for

individualized subjectivities and collective experiences to work together in the establishment of historical knowledge (Marable, 2000). Building on its essence as descriptive, the Black intellectual tradition has been corrective in its critique and challenge to racism and its cooperation with other systems of oppression. The tradition has vigorously “disputed theories of Black people’s genetic, biological, and cultural inferiority” (Marable, 2000, p. 17–18). This theoretical corrective has also been richly pragmatic in its prescriptiveness. To theorize from a Blackened experience has meant making connections between social analysis and social transformation. Beyond identity and self-esteem restoration, the tradition uses history and culture as interpretive tools for the “purpose of transforming their actual conditions and the totality of the society” (Marable, 2000, p. 18). Taken together, we use this framework as an organizing principle to theorize on the ethical teaching and engagement of Black aesthetics toward a Black sense of place in the world.

Methodology

Traditionally, autoethnography has been defined as an all-encompassing methodology for researchers whose inquiry explored the intersections of self and society (Adams et al., 2017). More specifically, autoethnography has been described by Adams et al. (2017) as a research method that employs personal experiences to understand practices, beliefs, and cultural texts of a particular social environment. Thus, researchers engage autoethnography in order to “articulate insider knowledge of cultural experience” (p. 3), to challenge harmful narratives written by cultural outsiders, and to address components of lived experiences that are decentralized with other methods of data collection (Adams et al., 2017).

To capture and examine their experiences of the slave dungeons in Ghana, Dillard and Bell (2011) sought to develop a “reflexive autoethnographic” approach that would “shift one’s understanding of personhood ... allowing for the recovery of one’s humanity and one’s spirit” (p. 345). Dillard and Bell (2011) introduced nkwaethnography as an invitation to acknowledge the “sacred or life-affirming” (p. 344) aspects of autoethnography. They lifted Black women’s ways of knowing as an epistemology stemming from the spirituality, wisdom, and reverence of sacred praxis. Nkwaethnography also reflects and honors Black women’s ways of knowing as connected to indigenous African knowledge and communal destiny.

In this analysis, we use nkwaethnography to reflect on our introduction to and entry into Black aesthetics. Examining these experiences, we meditate on the ethics of Black aesthetic theorizing in and beyond the classroom. Nkwaethnography offered ways of speaking to the differences of our experiences while acknowledging the commonalities that we share as Black bodyminds navigating academe with what Dillard and Bell (2011) called “sacred praxis” (p. 344). Within nkwaethnography, there is a life-affirming acknowledgment of embodied knowledge as a piece of this praxis. That is, embodied knowing has something to tell us about teaching as a mode of theorizing that prioritizes and lifts affect as integral to knowing.

Methods

Elsewhere, we used Black aesthetics theorizing to interrogate embodied knowing through the lens of what Tina Campt (2017) called tension and stasis. During that experience, we began to consider how our individual relationships with Black aesthetics came to be shaped by our

introduction to its ideas, language, and theories. In this manuscript, we present vignettes to explicitly discuss our entry into Black aesthetics. Moreover, we examine what it is to be Black and utilize Black aesthetic theorizing as we move between the often *hypothetical* world of theory and our lived experiences. We interrogate these narratives asking the following research questions:

- 1) How should educators and researchers handle the theory of Black aesthetics while simultaneously caring for the lived experiences of Black bodyminds?
- 2) What are the pedagogical and methodological implications of centering Black aesthetics?

To conduct this inquiry, we began by writing short vignettes detailing our introduction to Black aesthetics in and outside academia. These vignettes served as the starting point for our analytical conversations. We used analytical memos (Saldaña, 2009) to notate our reactions using the following tenets of nkwaethnography:

First, nkwaethnography recognizes the fluidity in time and space, spanning the spiritual and the material conditions of its 'subjects.' Second, nkwaethnography fundamentally, systematically, and symbolically shifts one's understanding and experience of personhood: It is sacred because it re-centers, allowing the recovery of one's humanity and one's spirit. Thirdly, nkwaethnography embraces community and the idea of a common destiny. Finally, nkwaethnography recognizes that body, mind, and spirit must all be engaged in the process of research. (Dillard & Bell, 2011, pp. 343–346)

With tenets of nkwaethnography in mind, we read through each other's vignettes and wrote analytical memos reflecting the themes that emerged (Collins & Gallinat, 2010; Saldaña, 2009). Next, we met via Zoom for 60 to discuss the themes that emerged in our reading of each other's vignettes. We recorded this conversation so that we could use it as additional data. When recording, Zoom transcribed the session, making it available for additional analysis. After our conversation, we were each given the transcript and video recording of our Zoom session. With the transcript, we each engaged in line by line coding (Saldaña, 2009), noting salient points about our experiences in relation to the research questions.

Natasha's Encounter with Black Aesthetics

My first introduction to Black aesthetics was *The Black Book* (Harris, 1974), a collage of Black culture curated by Toni Morrison when she was an editor at Random House Publishing Company in 1974. This book illustrated Black culture from the early days of slavery to the year in which it was published. This book was my entree into what it means to be Black and the aesthetics of our lives. When I think back, I am grateful to have my perspective shaped by the beauty that Toni Morrison recognized in us reflected on the pages that I poured over before I could even read. Once I began to read, a new level of that beauty was exposed.

I didn't have the language of Black aesthetics until I began to formally engage with Black Studies as a doctoral student, but it has always been present. If Black Studies was like returning home, Black aesthetics was, in some ways, like returning to myself. Black aesthetics provides a way of engaging with the physicality, creativity, and intellect of Blackness unbound by

temporality. It provides opportunities to explore the interplay between the present, past, and future to imagine through and beyond our current state of being. The importance of this offering is even more apparent as I pursue this line of inquiry in the midst of the dual pandemics of racism and COVID-19 that the year 2020 melded together, both disproportionately impacting Black bodyminds.

My formal exploration of Black aesthetics started in a graduate course of the same name. I entered into the course with the hope and expectation of expanding my understanding of Black aesthetics, although admittedly cautious, as I wasn't familiar with the professor of the course. My formal learning of Black aesthetics was taught by a woman who was an Italian native in the Film and Cultural Studies Department. As I walked into the class, I noticed that there were students from the Film and Cultural Studies department and others. I tentatively engaged in the readings and discussions, acclimating myself to this new (to me) language. I began to consider the tension between learning the language of Black scholars (who grounded their work in Black experience, history, culture, and resistance) and being the hypothetically discussed—I felt like both the object and subject in the process. In sum, this didn't feel like my encounter with the “Black Book.” The beauty was missing and the power, to some degree, muted. I expected to not only see myself reflected in the pages, but to feel something. Symbolic, perhaps, of what institutionalization does to Black ideas and creativity, for all that Black aesthetics was to the world, it was being returned to me as an intellectual endeavor, nothing more. How does that experience impact the learning and understanding of Black aesthetics? It felt like a conflict to discuss the tender most parts of me as hypothetical. While I do not expect a shared understanding of my experience by those who have not lived it, I began to consider the ways Black life and Black thought are inextricably linked in theoretical study and pedagogy. Black thought may not be considered exclusive to Black scholars, but if we are sharing in this inquiry called Black aesthetics, what does it mean to be seen and cared for as a Black person in the room?

Wilson's Encounter with Black Aesthetics

Books with Black faces lined the shelves of my childhood home, instructing me on a history of Black contributions to this western, United States and the world. Black people were creatives and are doers of life, and as such, I came to know them as heroes and heroines worthy of celebration and of remembering. What I missed in this review of their accomplishments and, perhaps, the ways my parents and family were choreographing life around me was the praxis of Blackness that was always at work and waiting for me to catch on.

My catching on, my appeal and openness into a world where Blackness was not, and never intended be, was at the sighting and recitation of David Walker's (1829) “Appeal” in undergrad. Relentless. Imprudent. Fierce. Insubordinate. Following slave law, which dictated that the child assumed the status of the mother, Walker was born free, but it was the brand of (un)freedom that made him responsible to those who might never hold the term in their hands, “that we, (coloured people of these United States,) are the most degraded, wretched, and abject set of beings that ever lived since the world began” (Walker, 1829, para. 1). His writings conveyed a conviction that, perhaps, was always in the faces and names that encamped me but washed over in favor of post-racial discourse emanating from the formal curriculum. The urgency of his tone was unlike anything I had encountered as he demanded that readers unflinchingly see and reckon with the materiality of Blackness. Walker, in line with his contemporaries, forerunners, and legacies,

imagined an alternative future for Black people and, more specifically, was invested in the project of departing from futures that didn't center the fullness of Black life. I read and rehearsed his appeal with curious fascination as I wrapped my mouth around the force of his words. I wondered what it would mean for the spirit of his words to flow through and out of me. Blackness, in these moments of my learning, was more than a celebratory cause, but an active undoing. I read Black writers and essayists, heard Black music and poetry, for “the freedom part” (Bambara, 1996, p. 248), purposely placed to add texture to Black living and survival praxis. I came to understand Walker's appeal, and so forth, the Black creative, intellectual, aesthetic tradition, as part of a breathing archive that could, if taken up in earnest and deep study, inform the shape of resistance and desire, which is to say Black futurity.

Analysis of Vignettes

Analysis of the collected data using the lens of nkwaethnography revealed two critical themes, outlined below as *Black aesthetic fugitivity* and the *ontological reality of Blackness in theorizing*. Woodson (2020) described “Black humanity as an ontological reality” (p. 19) because Black people have survived even while they exist and live with the threat of epistemic, material, and social violence all around them. Thus, we begin by illustrating the first theme.

Black Aesthetic Fugitivity

The act of survival, for Woodson (2020), is a fugitive enactment. This fugitivity is not running away from, but rather running towards aesthetic spaces and conceptions of self that value the ontological nature Blackness. Thus, attending to Black aesthetic fugitivity, Natasha expressed, “I began to consider the tension between learning the language of Black scholars (who grounded their work in Black experience, history, culture, and resistance) and being the hypothetically discussed—I felt like both object and subject in the process.” The formal introduction of Natasha to Black aesthetic theorizing and academic study related to the nkwaethnography tenet of recovering personhood (Dillard & Bell, 2011). Natasha detailed her experiences entering into an unfamiliar department and discipline to study Black aesthetics and how that impact shaped not only her formal introduction, but also questions related to embodied knowing with regard to this line of inquiry. Reflecting on her experience, Natasha illuminated the tensions that exist between “learning the language of Black scholars and being the hypothetically discussed.” For Natasha, approaching Black aesthetics in a formal setting, in comparison to both researchers' first encounters with the canon in familial settings, shifted her relationship to the concept. In conversation with Natasha, Wilson stated, “It [Black aesthetics] can't fulfill its power through academia, because once it becomes part of white institutions it loses something.” This discussion is seemingly borne of Black fugitivity, as it questions the potentialities of teaching Black aesthetics in academic spaces. The indication, thus, is that teaching Black aesthetics in anti-Black spaces can inhibit the fullness of Black fugitivity for Black bodyminds. This is to say that, when Black aesthetics is treated as singularly theoretical, rather than lived, embodied experience, it becomes an extension of anti-Blackness, rather than part of a Black fugitive agenda. Dumas (2018) echoed this point, noting, “everything about the academy militates against” (p. 43) Black personhood and survival as generative and embodied knowing. This may lead those who engage with Black aesthetics within academic spaces to adopt neutral, genderless, and raceless notions of Black

aesthetic theorizing, forfeiting a close examination of Black life and knowing. Said differently, embodied knowing loses value in academic spaces in favor of theorizing a linear narrative of Black existence in the United States and diaspora more broadly. Rejecting this premise, nkwaethnography suggested that lived and, perhaps, living experience is integral toward understanding and theorizing Black aesthetics (Dillard & Bell, 2011).

Living as part of the Black fugitive agenda is expressed in Wilson's meditation of home, particularly the interior spaces that visually championed Black creativity. It was in the living space where Wilson learned that Black people "are doers of life," hearkening to Alexander (2004), who wrote that, "in the spaces we designate and create, the self is made visible" (p. 9). In other words, the conscious arrangement that surrounded Wilson was not only part of a living space; rather, it was an imaginative space, unbound by walls, that opened possibilities for re-presentation in society. Black interiority, and the arrangements thereof, be it physical dwellings, emotionality, or the spirit, become an interstitial space—intermediate, betweenness, situated in but not confined to—that can function as a praxis of Blackness. This praxis suggested that private life, beyond the classroom, could be generative. In this instance, parents, as teachers, seemed to understand that there was a public life that Wilson and his siblings would encounter and that public life was invested in anti-Blackness. The fugitive act, thus, began with the recognition that schools, as extensions of public life, and Black humanity were irreconcilable and could not lead to emancipatory visions or ways of being.

Blackness and Ontology

In both of our vignettes, Blackness as an ontological reality emerged as a second theme. Similar to the proclamations by Black Studies scholars (see Dumas, 2018; Woodson, 2020), Wilson recognized Blackness as something, by virtue of existing, that does not need justification. Further to the point, Blackness is a weighted reality, actively experienced, and not merely theorization. Following Dillard and Bell (2011), by recognizing Blackness as an ontological reality, we re-center ourselves as humans, reclaiming our personhood as sacred and, thereby, indisputable. By recognizing these truths, we also understand that if our bodies, minds, and spirits are an integral part of the research process, we as Black bodyminds have to be accounted for in Black aesthetic pedagogy. Said another way, if we are sharing in this inquiry called Black aesthetics, what does it mean to be seen and cared for as a Black person in the classroom? As we analyzed our reflections and conversation, we considered the implications of accepting Blackness as an ontological reality and how it should inform Black aesthetic pedagogy and theorizing. During the dialogue, Natasha considered the inherent claims made by the materiality of Blackness as that which demands to be seen and heard. That is, Black being recenters not only temporal humanity, but captures the longer reckonings of Black bodyminds to be seen and heard in society.

This claim to ontological recognition competes with origin stories that have produced Black people as nonhuman, uneducable, and deselected in the natural order of society (McKittrick, 2015), which demands that, amid ideological absence, Black people have had to think, create, and write themselves into being. Walker's (1829) "Appeal," as noted by Wilson, is an example of this claim. For Walker, Blackness did not seek reason or permission; rather, Blackness was a forceful claim to personhood amid legal and extralegal entanglements that sought to deny those claims. Wilson continued this thinking, pointing to a common purpose wrapped up in Black aesthetics, stating, "I began to consider the ways black life and black thought are inextricably linked in

theoretical study and pedagogy.” Drawing on McKittrick’s (2015) engagement with Sylvia Wynter, we imagined how *humanity as praxis* could inform Black aesthetic theorizing and pedagogy and discussed being human as praxis in conversation with tenets of nkwaethnography. For Wynter, broadly, the project of being human as praxis was to engage in the unwriting and re-writing of knowledge that emphasized western conceptions of humanness—Man. The praxis purposefully confronts historical fallacies and overrepresentations of Man-as-human (McKittrick, 2015). The conditions, she argued, that made way for this rewriting and epistemic shift rested in creative and political resistance (McKittrick, 2015). Wrestling with the holistic imperatives of both concepts, we understand the mind, body, and spirit as central to a humanizing, Black aesthetic, pedagogical approach. We also likened these notions of personhood and subjectivity to an ancestral call—a call that beckons scholars of Black aesthetics to hold subjectivity as fundamental to theory, practice, and, perhaps most importantly, teaching. As a mode of study stemming from the Black Studies Movement, which was tethered to both Black art and activism (see Biondi, 2012), we agreed that it should be taught in ways that seek to recognize Blackness as an ontological reality in the wake of Black suffering (Dumas, 2018). Black aesthetics theorizing and pedagogy without these considerations and praxis may not be Black aesthetics at all.

Implications

Analysis of the reflexive vignettes above and conversations among authors yielded several critical findings that ought to inform how Black aesthetics are attended to in the service of Black students in schools. Whereas Black being is seen as anathematic to reason, which results in presuppositions of unjustifiability (Gordon, 2018), ethical treatment of Black aesthetics grapples with the flesh and, in particular, actively works to help Black students unseat the white gaze that schooling trains into them (Dillard, 2012). This approach for us signaled a willingness to situate Black bodyminds’ indissoluble relationship to anti-Blackness in teaching, curriculum, and research. Second, the devaluation of Black life, that is anti-Blackness, should not dissuade claims of mattering that seek to love Blackness against spirit murder. Thus, ethical engagement involves the realm of sensory and the symbolic, as Black aesthetics is sutured to Black humanity. Furthermore, an ethical approach tends to that which is beyond the physical body to encompass the affective capacities of Black bodyminds, suggesting that they are deserving of value enriched with a full range of meanings and emotions. This tenet pushes educators and would-be readers of Black aesthetics to consider the potential of Black aesthetics in and against white institutional power and presence. Moreover, readers and doers will need to continually evaluate the goal of Black aesthetics as situated in academia and, if it is possible, to exercise those creative and radical potentialities as part of American education’s formal and hidden curriculum.

Unseating the White Gaze

Decentering whiteness, writ large, functions as a guiding thesis for Black aesthetics. In word and praxis, the ideas that inspired the Black aesthetic canon were attempting to follow Morrison (as cited in Grant, 2015) in her response to editors who accused of her intellectual narrowness: “as if our lives have no meaning and no depth without the white gaze. . . . I have spent my entire writing life trying to make sure that the white gaze was not the dominant one in any of

my books” (para. 1). For Morrison and for us as authors, the recognition of whiteness and effort to decenter it in our lives and work, at its core, was a pursuit of radical subjectivity (hooks, 1990). [Natasha] in the recorded conversation raised questions about how and whether her academic background “precludes” her from stepping into the fullness of Black aesthetic, “being as aggressive as I want to be sometimes,” as an onto-epistemological project. She noted that her background in sociology and psychology, disciplines that rely, broadly, on scientific method of analysis and an objective pursuit of psychological and social conditions, restricted how she might otherwise show up or communicate ideas, saying “I can’t just say it like that.” “It” in this instance referred to what she observed in [Wilson’s] writings, that wielded in her words a “more aggressive” and “affirmative” tone and pattern of thought. As Natasha encountered Black aesthetics in her graduate training, however, she was able to remake the assumptions that whiteness mapped onto her processing and was able to say that, “yes, actually you can [say things like that].” Her processing is instructive as it illustrates the capacities of Black aesthetics as a medium for critiquing whiteness and, in particular, the white gaze. Further to the point, Natasha discussed the notion of Black aesthetics as “inward versus outward facing.” This revelation was revealed as she juxtaposed her expression with Wilson’s writing, saying, “the way you talk about it feels very intimate. And sometimes I feel like the way I talk about it is a little more formal than I want to be sometimes.” This comment pointed to, as the findings above note, the ontology of Blackness and what it means to take on aesthetics as a way of being vis-a-vis subjectivity. Her comments encourage a reading of Blackness as beyond the theoretical or abstract, demanding that one consider the embodied materiality of Black aesthetics as something to be seen, touched, and felt.

Here, educators should consider providing opportunities for Black students to name the presence of the white gaze in their lives and learning. If the white gaze is a fact of society, teaching Black aesthetics is a rescue project that attempts to do what authors like Morrison labored so intently to accomplish and that is to direct one’s attention to the specificity of Black life lived in fullness through a rich and complex viewing of oneself in the learning context. That is, pedagogically, Black aesthetics labors to center Blackness as more than a cursory review of facts and accomplishments; instead, Black aesthetics forwards a pedagogical insistence on the rigorous study of Black ways of knowing and being, and how to use that study to advance the material realities of Black life. Thin, less-than rigorous engagement with Black aesthetics weakens the potentialities of Black intellectual and cultural production, opening it up to questions of relevance in and beyond academe. Purposeful engagement will raise pedagogical questions such as, does one have the subject expertise to do this work? Perhaps, as important as subject expertise, does one have the clarity, discipline, and acute discernment to journey with those under their stewardship as more than intellectual project, but one with felt realities? This latter question, as expressed, has consequences for how Black aesthetics is understood and its import in and for the lives of Black people.

Unfreedom and Passivity

It is possible to situate and teach Black aesthetics as a passive project, which is to say, a non-political, narrowly defined subject devoid of critical foundation. As reflected in Wilson’s vignette, the presence of a Black aesthetic canon, itself, does not mean that Black students will take hold of its words, lyrics, stanzas, or images. Black aesthetics positioned freedom as an ongoing and elusive idea that would not be distributed equitably, if at all. Notions of unfreedom,

or the reality that freedom is illusory for Black life, demand an audience with the idea of fugitivity, as the rapture of anti-Black terror continues to ensnare the schooling context. Though the truth of anti-Blackness is terrifying, it must not debilitate efforts to reach beyond its realities. Following Walker, as noted by Wilson, loving Blackness insists on speaking back to attitudes of power and dominance, whether it be in curriculum or, more broadly, a social context. Can educators, who claim to embrace and teach Black aesthetics, love Black humanity enough to give up their freedoms for the idea of it (Black humanity) without any promises of gain? Love, as expressed in the vignettes, owns past, present, and future orientations. Morrison anticipated the presence of whiteness in Natasha; Wilson's parents understood the importance of cloaking their children with ancestral tones; Walker was not seduced by the uneven distribution of "freedom"; these examples are the artifacts of a fugitive project that worked beneath the surface as much as it did above ground. Black aesthetics as a fugitive project in the education of Black students reckons with the fact that there is no permanent escape from white supremacy. Notwithstanding, Black aesthetics offers an orientation for existing under the looming threat of recapture in educational sites. Pedagogically, Black aesthetics is in the business of charting new geographies in and against shifting terrains. In this way, readings are more than readings; they are drums and stars, canals, swamps, and crawlspaces that should offer students opportunities to site and sight (McKittrick, 2006) possibilities. Moreover, Black aesthetics, re-presented in pedagogy and curriculum, points to a series of modalities that function to prioritize Black spirit and survival.

Conclusion

This manuscript motions for a renewed commitment to ethical engagement in the teaching, study of, and theorizing with Black aesthetics in the service of life-affirming Black educational spaces. Both pedagogically and methodologically, educators and researchers must address the question, where do I fit in? With respect to the former, educators must first recognize that students, broadly, will experience Black aesthetic content differently. This presumes, for example, that some will attempt to enter the conversation from an intellectual perspective, while others approach from their lived experiences. As such, educators should be responsive to the different and shifting needs and rationales that students bring to a learning space. In order to do this, educators will need to be mindful of how they enter as it relates to their positionality. For some educators and students alike, Black aesthetics "ain't hypothetical," it is generative, survival praxis and should be handled in ways that center racialized histories and current realities. Therefore, educators must create the conditions by which Black aesthetics is able to produce in ways that are central to its thesis. Methodologically, the ethical treatment of Black aesthetics necessarily invites interdisciplinarity and criticality throughout the research process. For example, questions for analysis should reach beyond the narrativized story to what is beneath the text. How does putting the data in conversation with history, systems of oppression, one's positionality shift interpretations? Ultimately, ethics engender a conversation about what it means to take up Black aesthetics in the service of life-affirming Black educational spaces (Grant et al., 2021), in its fullness, from the beginning of the research (and teaching) process to the end.

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