

Adorno's Problematic Entanglement with Blackness

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Abstract: Black aesthetics and Adornian aesthetics both articulate and embody what Hortense Spillers calls the “critical edge” of culture and art, and there is a recent history of black aestheticians engaging creatively with Adorno. Today, however, any constructive dialogue between these aesthetic traditions depends on whether Adorno’s aesthetics can be decoupled from the anti-black racism in the genealogy of Western aesthetics and whether Adorno’s negative dialectics can be reconciled to the transformative force of art, as that force is as central in black aesthetics as is the negative dialectics of art. Critically focusing on Adorno’s discussion of “the ideal of blackness” in *Aesthetic Theory*, this article will argue that such decoupling remains incomplete, that he resolutely did not believe in the transformative force of art, and that these issues are connected, at least in Adorno’s case. This article simultaneously demonstrates how black thinkers—Frederick Douglass, W. E. B. Du Bois, Angela Y. Davis, Fred Moten, Fumi Okiji, and Spillers—have long offered exemplary accounts of art that combine its negative dialectics, critical edge, and transformative force while defying the anti-black racism in Western aesthetics.

Keywords: Adorno, black aesthetics, critical edge, transformative art, negative dialectics

“... black culture could ... *become* culture, insofar as ...
it was forced to turn its resources of spirit toward negation and critique.”
—Hortense Spillers

“... black life cannot help but be lived as critical reflection.”
—Fumi Okiji

There are substantive correlations and recent interlocutions between black aesthetics and Frankfurt School aesthetics (i.e., critical theory aesthetics) that warrant examination. For example, Hortense Spillers discloses in 2006 that she is “returning” to critical theory to open “an interlocution between theorists of the black cultural problematic and thinkers of the ‘dialectical imagination’ ... because ‘critical theory’ and its aims toward praxis form a link between these

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disparate far-flung positivities across cultures, races, languages, temporal sequences, history and the geostrategic ground, and social formation.”¹ In explaining her return further, Spillers argues there are dual grounds for a constructive interlocution between these aesthetic traditions because, theoretically, they understand art to be the enactment of a “critical edge” and because, existentially, they share an “encounter with the extreme”: chattel enslavement and anti-black racism on the one hand, and the extermination of the Jewish people and anti-Semitism on the other, though both critical edges have other objects of critique, including capitalism.² As a result of their encounter with various iterations of the extreme, theorists from these traditions focus on the contribution of art and aesthetics to the realization of “historical possibilities” in the future that were unfulfilled in the past and they do so “as though their very lives depended on it.”³

Beyond the general basis for an interlocution between critical theory aesthetics and black aesthetics, I want to examine the particular connection between black aesthetics and Theodor Adorno, even though Spillers has Herbert Marcuse in mind.⁴ Arguably more than any other member of the Frankfurt School, Adorno has been central to black studies since the turn of the millennium. As Ciaran Finlayson notes, we find

Michelle M. Wright singling him [Adorno] out as a beacon in Western Philosophy for addressing the disaster of Enlightenment, Paul Gilroy nominating his own method as a kind of negative dialectics, Frank Wilderson figuring all of black liberation as a negative dialectic against civil society, and Fred Moten citing that same text as the disavowed ground to the opening, central claim of his landmark study of black aesthetics. The

¹ Spillers, “The Idea of Black Culture,” 14. See also her online lecture with the same title: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P1PTHFCN4Gc>.

² Spillers, “The Idea of Black Culture,” 25–26.

³ Spillers, “The Idea of Black Culture,” 15–16.

⁴ Spillers discusses the idea of black culture while I am discussing black art, but culture and art are included within my conception of aesthetics as “critical imagining, making, and thinking, about art, design, culture, everyday life, and nature.” This conception emerged from editing the Oxford *Encyclopedia of Aesthetics*, as it roughly captured what the 800+ contributors identified with under the heading of aesthetics (Kelly, 1998/2014). I do not mean to suggest that Adorno represents critical theory aesthetics as a whole or that he should be the focus because he developed arguably the most conceptually elaborate, though unfinished, aesthetic theory in the critical theory tradition.

further this wing of the discipline moves toward radical negativity the closer it runs up against the legacy of Adorno's philosophical project.⁵

In this light, the first of three reasons why I will focus on Adorno here is that major black theorists turn to him because he developed an account of negative dialectics—“a dialectics not of identity but of non-identity” between subject and object, concept and object, art (culture) and reality—that resonates with black aesthetics.⁶ As we will see, however, it resonates because black theorists (including, in addition to those mentioned above, Frederick Douglass, Angela Y. Davis, and Fumi Okiji) have long enacted their own modes of negative dialectics.⁷ Negative dialectics in the context of black aesthetics means that art critiques reality and imagines alternatives to it that artists and others may then “endeavor” to realize, to use Douglass’s word for art’s imaginative “aims toward praxis” that has motivated Spillers’s return to critical theory.⁸

A second reason why I will focus on Adorno is that his conception of negative dialectics leads him to disavow art’s transformative force, that is, its ability to help us transform reality, even though he argues that the rationale for art is to help make us conscious of the need for such

⁵ Finlayson, “Black Adorno.”

⁶ Adorno, *Lectures on Negative Dialectics*, 6. According to Adorno, “To change [the] direction of conceptuality, to give it a turn toward non-identity, is the hinge of negative dialectics” (*Negative Dialectics*, 12). As Brian O’Connor elaborates, one aim of Adorno’s negative dialectics is to sustain “a basic thesis of critical theory,” namely, a view of consciousness as anchoring criticality, which is generally true in black aesthetics as well (*Adorno’s Negative Dialectic*, ix, 173). He argues that, for Adorno, critical consciousness is also transformative and “true experience” is “transformative” (75, 77). Even if O’Connor is right about the criticality point, I am arguing that Adorno reneges on the transformation point, at least with respect to art. To be clear, Adorno’s discussion of identity and non-identity is not directly related to contemporary identity politics.

⁷ Spillers does not discuss Adorno in “The Idea of Black Culture,” but she does invoke negative dialectics in her reading of Marcuse: “The ambiguity of culture, in its oscillating weather patterns, is hardly restful and comforting, but a degree of discomfort is the best that we will be able to manage here, with a fairly high quantum of ‘negative capability’. But this imperfection may be sufficient to the case” (“Idea of Black Culture,” 14).

⁸ Adorno actually complicates, if not forecloses, the move from theory to praxis because he argues that “an immediate unity of theory and praxis is impossible,” which is perhaps why Spillers “returns” to Marcuse rather than to Adorno in her pursuit “toward praxis” (Adorno, “Marginalia to Theory and Praxis,” 265).

transformation. Critical consciousness made possible by art does not result in transformative practice, artistic or otherwise, because the nonidentity between art and reality, the cornerstone of art's autonomy and critical edge, means that art cannot engage reality without becoming entrapped in its logic and forfeiting its autonomy and edge. In the genealogy of black art and aesthetics, by contrast, black artists are, by and large, committed to art's transformative force and black aestheticians offer accounts of art to explain how it has transformative force beyond critical consciousness, albeit not on its own.⁹

Adorno's understanding of the negative dialectics of art and his disavowal of art's transformative force are, in turn, tied to his account of what he calls "the ideal of blackness" in a section of *Aesthetic Theory* entitled "Black as an Ideal." This is the third reason why I will focus on Adorno. He speaks explicitly about the kind of "extreme and grim" reality that Spillers identifies as a link between black aesthetics and critical theory.¹⁰ But in doing so, Adorno becomes problematically entangled in anti-black racism because of how he understands "the ideal of blackness." Racism emerges because the color black is seen as a metaphor for an ontological condition, not of blackness per se, but of "extreme and grim" modern reality writ large, which, according to Adorno, is beyond transformation by any means, not just by art. Blackness is seen principally as impoverishment, insufficiency, and the like, which are tropes compatible with, if not comprising, anti-black racism.

⁹ See Adorno's critique of Jean-Paul Sartre and Bertolt Brecht on the problem of theory's commitment to praxis ("Commitment"). This critique likely applies to some iterations of black aesthetics.

¹⁰ The section in *Aesthetic Theory* is entitled "Black as an Ideal" in the table of contents page in Hullot-Kentor's and Lenhardt's translations, but in the actual text, Adorno speaks about "the ideal of blackness" (*das Ideal des Schwarzen*). Hullot-Kentor uses "black" for the adjective *schwarz*, which refers to the color black, and uses "the ideal of blackness" for *das Ideal des Schwarzen*. However, Adorno shifts in the passage from *das Ideal des Schwarzen* to *das Ideal der Schwärze*, which is a switch from "blackness" to "black" as a color. Hullot-Kentor follows the switch, but in between he uses "ideal of black" to translate a pronoun tied to *das Ideal des Schwarzen*. So the translation is not a clear guide here (Lenhardt is clearer on this last score).

The presence of anti-black racism in Adorno's aesthetics is an important issue because it would only seem to reinforce the argument made by Larry Neal in the 1971 *The Black Aesthetic* anthology: "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."¹¹ More recently, however, black theorists who share this critique of the racism within aesthetics are more positive about the viability of black aesthetics today because they think that to disavow aesthetics entirely, even if the reason for doing so is that it is racist, indirectly mirrors the racist belief that black artists and theorists are incapable of developing any aesthetics. Davis and Moten are prime contemporary examples of this way of thinking.¹² In the end, I can imagine Adorno as a conceptual resource for black aesthetics only once his residual racism has been acknowledged and critiqued, and also only once his conception of negative dialectics is decoupled from a denial of the transformative force of art.

All three reasons for my focusing on Adorno are evident in the passage from *Aesthetic Theory*, so I will analyze it closely. During and after this analysis, I will engage with a range of black theorists—Margot Natalie Crawford, Davis, Frederick Douglass, W. E. B. Du Bois, Phillip Brian Harper, Moten, Okiji, Kevin Quashie, and Spillers—who have written about art's critical edge. Some have also engaged with Adorno's aesthetics, but typically without explicitly discussing the problematic section in *Aesthetic Theory*.¹³ Collectively though heterogeneously,

¹¹ Larry Neal, "The Black Arts Movement," in *The Black Aesthetic*, 258.

¹² See also Gikandi, *Slavery and the Culture of Taste*; Gordon, "Black Aesthetics, Black Value"; and Ongiri, *Spectacular Blackness*. Ongiri argues, for example, that the Black Arts Movement in the 1960s "linked the articulation of the radical political ethos of Black Power to a radically transformative culture of oppositional creativity," joining black experiences with black aesthetics, overthrowing existing cultural norms, and creating new ones. Amy Ongiri, *Spectacular Blackness: The Cultural Politics of the Black Power Movement and the Search for a Black Aesthetic*, 18, 52, 89, 115.

¹³ It is important to acknowledge that Adorno's text was written in 1969, Spillers's discussion of culture was written in 2006, and some of the black theorists I discuss were writing in a variety of distinctive historical times—from Douglass in the 1860s to the present. The different historical contexts matter

these thinkers provide exemplary accounts of art's negative dialectics, critical edge, and transformative force. Such accounts, instead of Adorno's aesthetics, serve as models for contemporary critical theory of art.¹⁴

I. ADORNO AND “THE IDEAL OF BLACKNESS”

The opening of the brief “Black as an Ideal” section in *Aesthetic Theory* reads as follows:

To survive reality at its most extreme and grim [*Äußersten und Finstersten der Realität*], artworks that do not want to sell themselves as consolation must equate themselves [*sich gleichmachen*] with that reality. Radical art today [between 1956 and 1969, at the time of Adorno's writing] is synonymous with dark [*finstere*] art: its primary color is black. Much contemporary production is irrelevant because it takes no note of this and childishly delights in color. The ideal of blackness [*Das Ideal des Schwarzen*] with regard to content is one of the deepest impulses of abstraction.¹⁵

Adorno's claims about blackness are perplexing and problematic in many respects for him but also for his interlocution with black aesthetics. To begin with, there are two conceptual oddities about these claims, tantamount to an inconsistency between Adorno's general philosophy of art and his entanglement with blackness.

The first conceptual oddity is that Adorno understands radical modernist art ontologically as the negation rather than affirmation of reality, so it is strange for him to say now that radical artworks must “equate” themselves with reality, to use Robert Hullot-Kentor's translation.¹⁶

philosophically as well as politically for the prospects of black aesthetics, but Spillers is hoping for an interlocution that cuts across these temporal contexts. What these different contexts share is that they are all marked by the relative neglect of black art and culture and, even more so, of black aesthetics—which is my main concern here.

¹⁴ To be clear, I am not suggesting that Adorno be ignored but, rather, that his problematic engagement with blackness be recognized and addressed so that black aesthetics can then selectively incorporate Adorno's aesthetics—along with the aesthetics others in that tradition offer, as Spillers and Davis do with Marcuse—into black aesthetics.

¹⁵ Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 39. The translator Hullot-Kentor adds section headings in his translation of *Aesthetic Theory* that are not in the original text.

¹⁶ In Lenhardt's translation of *Aesthetic Theory*, *sich gleichmachen* is rendered as “assimilate themselves [artworks] to” reality rather than equate themselves with it. Assimilation is clearly not a desirable political, aesthetic, or existential option for Adorno because it eliminates any critical edge. If *sich gleichmachen* were rendered “make themselves equal,” as one reviewer suggested, the task would be for

Admittedly, affirmation and equation are distinct, but equation is more compatible with affirmation than with negation. And, if anything were classically Adornian, it would be the concept of nonidentity (of subject and object, mind and matter, or, here, art and reality) and its conceptual companion, nonreconciliation; that is, art and reality are nonidentical, and they remain irreconcilably nonidentical, despite any well-intentioned endeavor to reconcile them.¹⁷ So, if the nonidentity and nonreconciliation between art and reality are the ontological basis of art, what does Adorno mean by saying that art equates (assimilates or equalizes) itself with reality? How could such an equation (assimilation or equalizing) be at the same time a negation of reality? Is Adorno offering an apparent affirmation to avoid association with the pseudo negations (pleasure, bright colors, or humor) of grim reality that the culture industry presents?

We can see whether and, if so, how Adorno might answer these questions of conceptual continuity by examining how he characterizes the irreconcilably nonidentical art and reality that are to be equated. He considers contemporary reality in his day to be “at its most extreme and grim,” seemingly similar to how Spillers describes anti-black racism in the “extreme circumstance” of enslavement and in the “despair at the very nadir of black life and development in the early decades of the twentieth century.”¹⁸ In turn, by taking black as its primary color, radical art for Adorno becomes “synonymous with dark art” and on that basis is able to equate itself with extreme and grim reality.¹⁹ Such embrace (equation) is the way that people and art

artworks to make themselves equal to reality. But this would still collapse the distinction between art and reality on which art’s autonomy and ontology depend for Adorno.

¹⁷ Adorno says, for example: “Through the irreconcilable renunciation of the semblance of reconciliation, art holds fast to the promise of reconciliation in the midst of the reconciled” *Aesthetic Theory*, 33). “Reconciliation is the comportment of artworks by which they become conscious of the nonidentical” (*Aesthetic Theory*, 134). “Paradoxically, art must testify to the unreconciled and at the same time envision its reconciliation” (*Aesthetic Theory*, 168).

¹⁸ Spillers, “The Idea of Black Culture,” 23, 15.

¹⁹ For example, Pozo (481) argues that “The contemporary radical is so by force of thinking the truth of his (our) times, and it is a black, ugly art, because the reality that thinks of is black, ugly, horrible. Black

survive reality.²⁰ So, the equation between radical art and reality, despite their nonidentity and irreconcilability, rests on the synonymy among the terms “dark,” “black,” and “extreme and grim.” However, such synonymy raises problems beyond conceptual consistency.

First, the synonymy echoes racist claims that anything that is black is dark not merely in the sense of color but in the sense of being undesirable and fearful: extreme and grim. Second, dark often means unknown, as in the expressions “dark ages,” when knowledge yields to ignorance, or in “dark continent,” which, when used to refer to Africa, means that the continent is unknown either in the sense of being unexplored or, worse, being unknowable because it is outside history, as G. W. F. Hegel and other philosophers have claimed.²¹ Even worse, the characterization of Africa as a “dark continent” is meant to convey that it is backward, unmodern, undeveloped—all terms relative to the presumed progress, modernity, and development of the Western, capitalist world.²² What all these different, negative connotations of the dark continent have in common is that each represents the perspective of people living

colour is the true of our time.” See Pozo, “Utopia in Black.” Alternatively and with more subtlety, radical art’s anthem, Jeremy Glick suggests (in an email exchange), might be Curtis Mayfield’s song, “Right on to the Darkness” (1973), where extreme and grim reality is embraced as if it had been willed.

²⁰ Adorno adds later in this same passage that “radically darkened art ... can today find happiness only in the capacity of standing firm,” or, in Lenhardt’s translation, “in nothing except its ability to stand its ground [*noch in der Fähigkeit des Standhaltens finden*].” For a critical discussion of standing, ground, stand your ground, and groundlessness in contemporary black art, see Lewis, “Groundwork.”

²¹ Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of World History*, 173–90. This section on Africa ends with the claim that it “has no history in the true sense of the word.”

²² Of course, “dark” has other meanings. For example, it can mean “gloomy,” as when Douglass describes enslavement in his essay on the “4th of July,” or “without light” as in the dark corner of unlit room, or the dark clouds in a storm. Racism emerges when the word “dark” is negative and associated with “black” as if anything black were only negative. In addition to the surrealists’ black humor, Adorno references Charles Baudelaire: “ever since Baudelaire the dark has also offered sensuous enticement as the antithesis of the fraudulent sensuality of culture’s façade” (*Aesthetic Theory*, 40). The link to sensuality is a link to pleasure but it, too, is fraudulent and, to counter it, Adorno proposes dissonance over consonance, that is, a new type of allure meant to negate the allure of the cultural equivalent of false consciousness produced by the culture industry. In this light, black art is a mimetic gesture capturing both the impoverishment of pleasure in contemporary capitalist society and the impoverishment of the arts to stand up to such impoverishment.

outside Africa designating how it is to be understood without any regard for people living inside Africa in all their aesthetic as well as political and historical complexity and multiplicity. If this perspective or any of its connotations are implied by Adorno's claims in *Aesthetic Theory* about dark and grim reality, it is hard to imagine how his aesthetics could be a constructive interlocutor with black aesthetics, as the latter is predicated on the negation of anti-black racism to which Adorno seems to be contributing, if only unwittingly, by perpetuating a constellation of stereotypically prejudicial terms used to characterize blackness: extreme, grim, dark, fearful, unhistorical, unknown, backward, undeveloped, unmodern.²³

Another problem here is that, without engaging at all in the ontological, political, experiential, or any other meanings of blackness, Adorno is using what he calls "the ideal of blackness" as a way of characterizing modern Western "reality at its most extreme and grim"—so much for European progress that Africa allegedly lacks. The problem here is twofold. First, the reality invoked by the namesake of blackness is not about black people but about Westerners. In other words, Adorno refers to "the ideal of blackness" but not to black people or subjectivity, which means he is not thinking here about either the ontology or the lived experiences of people suffering under anti-black racism. As Okiji points out, Adorno is near silent in his infamous essays on jazz about "African American and, more generally, black sociohistory."²⁴ And Okiji adds that in Adorno's book, *The Authoritarian Personality*, he "fails to include even a cursory examination of racism suffered by African Americans."²⁵ Rather, the black lifeworld is elided, yet, at the same time, used as a metaphor for the extreme and grim reality of the modern,

²³ For example, as Gates, Jr. and Curran argue (*Who's Black and Why?*, x), "in addition to the fact that the color black was [already in eighteenth-century France] a metonym for Africans, Black Africans themselves were undoubtedly a metonym for slavery and the trans-Atlantic slave trade."

²⁴ Okiji, *Jazz as Critique*, 12.

²⁵ Okiji, *Jazz as Critique*, 22.

Western world. Second, while black people are largely excluded from the self-conception of the Westerners to and for whom Adorno is speaking when he introduces “the ideal of blackness,” he does not acknowledge that, dialectically, this exclusion is constitutive of that self-conception. Not acknowledging this truth perpetuates the kind of exclusion that is all too familiar in the history of aesthetics. For example, Toni Morrison argues that modern American literature is constituted by the exclusion of black writers and the mistreatment of black characters in fiction as well as in real life.²⁶ That is, a constitutive premise of modern Western aesthetics dating back to at least the eighteenth century has historically and systemically been that black lives do not matter, given that chattel enslavement has been such a major factor in the development of modern subjectivity and modern aesthetics largely excludes black people as subjects. To use but not analyze or even mention the differential, unjust treatment of black lives while using blackness to create a metaphor for the extreme and grim reality of the modern Western world is a mode of perpetrating anti-black racism. In Adorno’s language, he is not negating but affirming the legacy of chattel enslavement and the anti-black racism underlying it.

Without letting Adorno off the hook here, however, it may be the case that, if we look at the context in *Aesthetic Theory* in which he introduces “the ideal of blackness,” the suffering endemic to the black lifeworld under anti-black racist regimes is implicit in his account of this ideal. Just before the short passage on blackness is a section entitled “Experiment (II), Seriousness and Irresponsibility,” which is principally about art and unspecified suffering. What is serious in art is “the pathos of objectivity that confronts the individual with what is more and other than he is in his historically imperative insufficiency [*Unzulänglichkeit*].”²⁷ This pathos

²⁶ Morrison, “Black Matters,” 5, 9.

²⁷ Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 38–39. Or, in the language of Adorno’s *Aesthetics: 1958/59*: “It is only really through this perspective of the radically destroyed or damaged that art in our time proves it is worth taking seriously at all” (54).

points to the suffering of individuals confronted by their historically insufficient predicament, but Adorno does not provide any details, as his main concern in this section is about the impact that this pathos has on art.²⁸ In this light, art's seriousness is "relativized" (*wird relativiert*), he adds, because aesthetic autonomy, a hallmark of modern art, is "external to suffering, of which the [art] work is an image and from which the work draws its seriousness."²⁹ That is, so long as art is autonomous, it can "echo" suffering but in so doing, it "diminishes" (*verkleinert*) suffering, Adorno claims: "form, the organon of [art's] seriousness, is at the same time the organon of the neutralization [*Neutralisierung*] of suffering."³⁰ The impoverishment of artistic means (i.e., its forms), discussed more below, is the artistic impoverishment or insufficiency of art in the face of suffering: "Art indicts superfluous suffering by undergoing its own."³¹ However, this double indictment, possibly a consequence of the equation between art and reality discussed earlier, only results in the neutralization of suffering, not its transformation. We are thus faced with an aporia (*Verlegenheit*): art is both responsible and irresponsible relative to the suffering that makes it objectively necessary, which makes art objectively serious yet objectively not up to the task of seriousness.³²

²⁸ For Adorno, in his lectures on aesthetics, expression in art "amounts to an expression of suffering" (*Aesthetics: 1958/59*, 49) and, as such, art gives voice to what has been muted or suppressed "in the process of the progressive control of nature" (*Aesthetics: 1958/59*, 54). On the importance of suffering in Adorno's philosophy in general, see *Negative Dialectics*, 17–18: "The need to lend a voice to suffering is a condition of all truth. For suffering is objectivity that weighs upon the subject; its most subjective experience, its expression, is objectively conveyed." For a recent discussion of art and suffering in Adorno, see Gordon, "Social Suffering and the Autonomy of Art."

²⁹ Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 39.

³⁰ Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 39.

³¹ Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 40. See also my critique of Adorno's conception of the alleged insufficiency of art as an inscription of the insufficiency of philosophy into the ontology of art (Kelly, *Iconoclasm*).

³² Okiji suggests that Adorno had the Arte Povera movement in mind when he discussed artistic impoverishment that is conscious of its impoverishment (*Jazz as Critique*, 81). Gordon ("Social Suffering and the Autonomy of Art") confirms and defends Adorno on the issue of artistic impoverishment, arguing that art that has the capacity to do more than echo suffering runs the risk of (a) overlooking current suffering and (b) abandoning its own autonomy, forfeiting negation in favor of a new mode of affirmation

Adorno's discussion of "the ideal of blackness" follows the introduction of this aporia and his critique of the various strategies, mostly some form of entertainment (e.g., childish delights in color), that the culture industry offers in response to it. As a way of sustaining rather than dissolving the aporia, Adorno claims that it is precisely the seriousness of modern art that "compels" it "to lay aside its pretensions" to overcome the aporia generated by suffering. Modern art has to be serious and take responsibility for its inability to be serious and responsible for the very suffering without which there would be no art. Can art ever achieve more, perhaps by relying on its formal powers as autonomous art? While art is unthinkable without its autonomous "form-giving power," "this capacity has nothing to do with an artwork's achieving expressive strength through its form," let alone realizing any transformative force.³³ In other words, art cannot alleviate suffering, even though that very suffering shapes the ontological possibility and historical development of art's expressive powers. If art cannot be transformative by providing any alleviation, however, then what does Adorno mean when he says, as we will see in more detail later, that artworks "bear witness that that world itself should be other than it is: they are the unconscious schemata of that world's transformation"?³⁴ Artworks bear the responsibility to hold out hope that the extreme and grim, dark, black reality will be transformed, but art cannot fulfill its own promise because of the insufficiency of its expressive powers. Hope is merely a consolation and offers no future: "Hope is soonest found among the comfortless."³⁵

(136). For an alternative artistic/aesthetic response to suffering developed by Douglass, see Moten ("Resistance," 3–4).

³³ Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 39.

³⁴ Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 177.

³⁵ Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, 223. Adorno claims that "black art bears features," which, though he does not specify, would "set the seal on historical despair." But, as if to insert a hopeful note to offset the despair, he adds: "to the extent that change is always possible," those features "too would be ephemeral" (*Aesthetic Theory*, 40). Some might see this addition as evidence of Adorno's slim belief in the transformative force of art, but he disavows it so explicitly that this short note does not negate the disavowals.

Thus, the purpose and value of art depends on expressing both the truth content of an extreme and grim reality and an unfulfillable promise, because, while such reality should be transformed, it will not be transformed, at least not by art. The purpose of art is, in effect, to sustain its truth content lest it negate art's purpose by fulfilling it.³⁶

Just after saying all this, Adorno asks how art can survive the reality for which it cannot be seriously responsible because it cannot do anything about the suffering for which it bears some responsibility. And this is when he explicitly turns to “the ideal of blackness.” While this turn in *Aesthetic Theory* might suggest the opening of the kind of interlocution between black aesthetics and critical theory that Spillers envisions, he effectively closes it down by issuing a preemptive judgment, entailed by his conception of modern art, that any attempt to develop black aesthetics or the black art it complements can never succeed—a challenging start to any interlocution if there ever was one. That is, if Adorno's aesthetics were to be part of an interlocution with black aesthetics, it could take place only on the condition that black art first concede unequivocally that its means (i.e., its forms) are impoverished in the face of extreme and grim reality, even if such reality were understood more concretely to be black and its bleakness to be caused by anti-black racism. Even if black art were to equate itself with the dark reality for which its blackness is both a metaphor and a lived experience, and even if such an equation were a negation rather than an affirmation, despite the obstacles discussed above, black art would be, for Adorno, the embodiment of the negation of the promise of art's transformative force more than the negation of the extreme and grim reality that gives rise to art and its promise. In effect, Adorno is proposing the negation of art's promise as the price for black art and aesthetics to pay

³⁶ Pensky offers a positive spin on this point: “The task of aesthetic philosophy for Adorno is to use philosophical interpretation to release art's truth content, without thereby resolving the tensions and contradictions constitutive to it” (“Natural History and Aesthetic Truth,” 25).

to be considered part of modernity, as he conceives it. This is simply too high a price for black art and aesthetics to pay to be included in modern life, which, as Morrison pointed out above, has historically been constituted in part by its exclusion of black artists and aesthetics.

II. FORM/CONTENT: ADORNO, CRAWFORD, MOTEN

The second conceptual oddity in Adorno's claim that radical art today is synonymous with "dark" art is that he considers black to be radical art's primary color and even its content. Yet he always focuses in *Aesthetic Theory*, and in his other aesthetic writings, on artistic form over content, as form ensures art's autonomy and, in turn, the critical edge that autonomy makes possible. Now, however, radical art seems to be understood in terms of the color of its content: "The ideal of blackness *with regard to content* is one of the deepest impulses of abstraction."³⁷ This content-oriented claim leads some Adorno scholars to interpret him rather literally as if he were talking about, say, Frank Stella's black polygon paintings, perhaps because Adorno himself seems to reduce ontological "blackness" to chromatic "black."³⁸ Such an interpretation seems to rest on Adorno's claim that radical art must take black as its primary color. But his claim is not a color recommendation for artists aspiring to be radical. Rather, the color black is Adorno's metaphor for the "extreme and grim" reality expressed through art and constituting its truth content, not its color content. Moreover, he believes that modernist art is black in the sense that it is abstract—"the ideal of blackness *with regard to [truth] content* is one of the deepest impulses of abstraction," which is a point about form. Art is abstract so as not to be conflated with (or seen as imitating or affirming) the dark reality that it negates, and abstract art is black to shift our attention away from art's literal content to its truth content, which also means to its abstract

³⁷ Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 39–40; emphasis mine.

³⁸ For example, see Suther ("Black as the New Dissonance," 113–14), who argues: "The literal impoverishment of the form illuminates the dead labor of the painting in its deadness." Suther ("Black as the New Dissonance") equates "black" and "ugly."

form, as abstract form conveys truth content. But abstract art need not literally be black in color to fulfill the formalist role Adorno has in mind for modern art. To illustrate this last point, Adorno could have analyzed the abstract work of black artists working in the 1960s. In painting, for example, Norman Lewis (e.g., *Processional*), Sam Gilliam (e.g., *10/27/69*), and Alma Thomas (e.g., *The Eclipse*) created abstract works that were also politically reflective of their times; in music, the members of the Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians produced music that was also aesthetically formalist yet politically incisive; and in sculpture, Elizabeth Catlett's *Homage to My Young Black Sisters* is iconic, aesthetically and politically.

At the same time, the rather literal interpretation of Adorno in terms of black abstract paintings raises other important questions about how he understands black as a color. In a physical sense, black is not a color even though it is typically understood only in the context of the color spectrum, which enables the word 'black' to imply a color that is at the same time the absence of color, which, in turn, seems to be how Adorno can think of it as a metaphor for the impoverishment of artistic form.³⁹ Is this characterization the result of his analysis of black in relation to the color spectrum, or is it another judgment about art that is masking the use of an anti-black prejudice, namely, that black(ness) is synonymous with absence or impoverishment? Would Adorno have arrived at his conception of black(ness) as if it were a color had he analyzed it the way, for example, Moten and Crawford do? Moten reveals how the color black embodies chromatic saturation, that is, "a rich, active interanimation of reflection and absorption" of "what it takes in and pours out."⁴⁰ Crawford expands on Moten's insights while interpreting Faith

³⁹ Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 40.

⁴⁰ Moten, "The Case of Blackness," 203–04.

Ringgold's *Black Light* paintings (1967–69)⁴¹ in contrast to Ad Reinhardt's series of black paintings (1954–67). Crawford shows in convincing detail how Ringgold discovers and displays “the plenitude of dark colors that can only be seen when the color black shines and becomes much more than ‘blackout,’” and, in contrast to Adorno as well as Reinhardt, Ringgold “unveils the explosive sounds and colors in the color black.”⁴² Thus, blackness is no longer the absence of color but is, on the contrary, its plenitude. As a result, there are political as well as aesthetic dimensions to Ringgold's paintings, according to Crawford, as their plenitude disrupts “the most ingrained aesthetic foundations of antiblack racism (a metaphysics of light that aestheticizes white skin) and the racial self-hatred created when the *white light* of antiblack racism is internalized.”⁴³ Whether or not Adorno would agree with this analysis of the color black, the important point here is that Moten, Crawford, and Ringgold engage in a deep exploration of black and blackness before rendering any judgment of them, and they do so while operating on aesthetic and political registers at the same time, whereas Adorno's judgment about black unwittingly reinforces racialized stereotypes of black as the absence of color and thus of blackness as a merely impoverished artistic as well as ontological-existential condition. Operating on aesthetic and political registers simultaneously is an Adornian trope, but, ironically, he missed an opportunity to do so in this case in a critical and constructive manner that could have facilitated a constructive interlocution between his aesthetics and black aesthetics.

⁴¹ Faith Ringgold, “American People, Black Light: Faith Ringgold's Paintings of the 1960s,” National Museum of Women in the Arts, 2013, <https://nmwa.org/exhibitions/american-people-black-light/> (accessed August 30, 2023).

⁴² Crawford, *Black Post-Blackness*, 60. So the color black is sonically as well as chromatically robust, which is how Okiji understands blackness in relation to Adorno.

⁴³ Crawford, *Black Post-Blackness*, 61. The contemporary painter Mokgosi explores the multiplicity of black as a color in his work. See his website and his essay, “Coloring History, Theory, and Painting”; Meleko Mokgosi's artist website, <https://www.melekomokgosi.com/> (accessed August 31, 2023).

In this same context, however, Adorno adds the potentially redeeming point that (the ideal of) blackness is an impulse of abstraction “with regard to content.” Is he arguing that radical modernist art is black *in content* (as a color) because reality is extreme and grim? Or is Adorno arguing that radical modernist art is abstract *in form* because reality is extreme and grim in its content? The second option would render his point about abstraction “with regard to content” consistent with the priority he gives to form over content. Moreover, it would allow Adorno to make his point that the *truth* content of abstract art is that, through its form alone, it discloses the extreme and grim objective content of reality. In addition to any concern about conceptual consistency or truth content, the second option would also seem to be the point here, because Adorno claims that blackness is about the impoverishment of artistic means, a claim ultimately about form in that art’s means or mediums are its forms: “what is written, painted, and composed is also impoverished.”⁴⁴

While Adorno earlier introduced artistic impoverishment in the face of suffering, we now learn that art’s formal impoverishment is “entailed by the ideal of black” because blackness is ontologically impoverished.⁴⁵ The mention of such entailment strengthens and clarifies the relationship between blackness and impoverishment, making it less likely that they could be decoupled. Deepening this entailment, Adorno adds that the task of radical art is *not* to transform this impoverishment, formal in the case of art or ontological in the case of the black lifeworld, but rather to “push this impoverishment to the brink of silence.”⁴⁶ Thus, Adorno is again using blackness as the equivalent of impoverishment, just as he earlier used it as the equivalent of

⁴⁴ Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 40.

⁴⁵ Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 40.

⁴⁶ Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 40.

extreme and grim reality.⁴⁷ And in neither case does he look beyond an abstract equivalence to the phenomenological realities of black experiences of impoverishment or extreme and grim reality—or to their potentially transformative remedies.

III. IMPULSE TO ABSTRACTION: ADORNO, DAVIS, QUASHIE, HARPER

Revisiting the context of Adorno's discussion of blackness in *Aesthetic Theory*, however, we can identify another, possibly promising link between his aesthetics and black aesthetics. Adorno's idea that "the ideal of blackness" is "one of the deepest impulses of abstraction" does seem to align with a prominent strategy in contemporary black art and aesthetics to prioritize abstraction in art, even when it is figurative. The goal of this strategy seems to be to avoid any reductionism of the form, content, or purpose of black art to resistance to anti-black racism because such reductionism would only exacerbate anti-black racism's determination of black art.⁴⁸ For example, Davis introduces "soft aesthetics" (e.g., Abdullah Ibrahim's *Mannenberg*, an unofficial anthem of the anti-Apartheid movement in South Africa endorsed by Nelson Mandela) as a complement to more aggressive or loud aesthetics because people generally already know about the injustices caused by anti-black racism (e.g., the facts about mass incarceration). With facts readily available, even when they are denied, people need art and aesthetics to inspire them to envision justice as a negation of, and an alternative to, the status quo, regardless of how remote the realization of any alternative might seem. That is, Davis advocates in her soft aesthetics on behalf of art that shows the future more than just the present, that is, historical possibilities (e.g.,

⁴⁷ In Adorno's *Aesthetics: 1958/59*, he claims the "task of art as such is ... to express the powerless and oppressed parts of humans" (54).

⁴⁸ This tendency toward abstraction in a way that does not exclude figuration is not new, as it was concern in the 1960s with, for example, the Spiral Group in Harlem. For a very recent reflection on this tendency, see the catalog for the recent exhibition, *Soul of a Nation*. See also Spillers, "Formalism Comes to Harlem," where formalism in black literary criticism is arguably analogous to abstractionism within black art.

abolition of prisons) more than just historical realities (e.g., mass incarceration). We know from injustice, she believes, and that is why we need to envision justice, which art is able to do because, as Douglass argues (see below), art “sees what ought to be in the reflection of what is.”⁴⁹ As Davis says in a recent interview, she might not be around in person to see any alternative to social injustice, but if she does not endeavor now to realize an alternative, in prisons or elsewhere, nobody will be around to see social justice because it will not materialize without people endeavoring to make it real. Thus, if the negative dialectics of art is part of what gives art its critical edge, as Davis argues, then its imaginative power, its form-giving power, enacts that critical edge: “Both art and critical theory direct our attention away from what is, away from the given, away from the facticity of the world, and they point elsewhere . . . towards possibility. And this happens through the power of negation.”⁵⁰ Adorno would largely agree with these points, but, as we saw, he would insist that art’s form-giving power is impoverished and thus its critical edge limited to equating itself, abstractly and formally, with dark and grim reality, in this case with mass incarceration.⁵¹

To take a second example of abstraction in contemporary black art and aesthetics, Kevin Quashie introduces “quietude” and “aliveness” as aesthetic and ontological categories to enable black art to escape any reduction to resistance, giving artists imaginative space to revitalize the present and envision the future.⁵² At the same time, quiet, alive art becomes a more potent form of resistance than loud art emphasizing social death, or so Quashie argues against both more content-centered black art and Afropessimism. But here, too, the temporality of what Quashie is

⁴⁹ Douglass, “Pictures and Progress,” 161.

⁵⁰ Davis, “Art and Negative Dialectics: On Soft Aesthetics,” 54.

⁵¹ For more on the role of aesthetics in the context of mass incarceration, including Douglass’s and Davis’s aesthetics, see Fleetwood, *Marking Time*; and Kelly, “Carceral Aesthetics.”

⁵² See Quashie, *The Sovereignty of Quiet* and *Black Aliveness*.

proposing, while oriented to the present (aliveness is now), is in the future in the form of historical possibilities. Spillers captures this temporality when speaking about the need for black culture: “perhaps black culture—as the reclamation of the critical edge, as one of those vantages from which it might be spied, and no longer predicated on ‘race’—has yet to come.”⁵³ Quietude and aliveness make black art both contemporary by being ahead of its time, and present by giving form to historical possibilities denied in the past and promised in the future.

A third example of abstraction in contemporary black aesthetics highlights a common thread linking Davis and Quashie and reconnects this conversation to Adorno, specifically to the notion of the impulse of abstraction and “the ideal of blackness.” Harper argues that all art is abstract, at least in modernity, because it operates in its own domain away from social reality, even while it is motivated and responsive to that same reality: “any artwork whatsoever is definitionally abstract in relation to the world in which it emerges, regardless of whether or not it features the nonreferentiality typically understood to constitute aesthetic abstraction per se. An abstractionist artwork, by extension, is one that emphasizes its own distance from reality by calling attention to its constructed or artificial character.”⁵⁴ This “distance” is what Adorno calls the autonomy of art, which he too insists is compatible with art being social. In Harper’s language, social-critical abstractionism “must necessarily negotiate a delicate relationship between clear real-world reference ... and obvious fictive contrivance.”⁵⁵ While black art is abstract, however, this does not mean it is opposed to figuration or realism, the typical contrasts to abstraction in art, which Adorno seems to exclude. For example, Jordan Castell’s

⁵³ Spillers, “The Idea of Black Culture,” 26.

⁵⁴ Harper, *Abstractionist Aesthetics*, 2, 19, 23. Harper also writes, “an aesthetic representation is by no means the same thing as the ‘reality’ to which it may seem to refer” (19). Abstraction here thus implies withdrawal, removal, defamiliarization, alienation from the real-world phenomena an artwork may resemble (3, 13).

⁵⁵ Harper, *Abstractionist Aesthetics*, 62.

contemporary “figurative” portrait paintings are as abstract as Alma Thomas’s abstract color paintings. To this point, one of Harper’s main examples of abstract black art is the work of Kara Walker, whose figurative silhouettes, drawings, films, and sculptures are explicitly graphic, sexual, and political in content. Walker’s art has all these qualities and any impacts stemming from them, however, because of its formal structures, which are abstract relative to their content: they “attain to the aesthetic mode” designated as abstractionism, but are “politically committed works par excellence.”⁵⁶ This tendency to abstraction in black art that Harper articulates could be called an impulse *to* abstraction (autonomy or freedom) that is tied to blackness, because the experience of blackness (constrained autonomy or unfreedom) generates its own abstract expression (the negation of unfreedom) in the form of black art.⁵⁷ The experience needs expression and, more specifically, needs that expression to be autonomous from yet related to what is expressed. As James Baldwin similarly argues in speaking about language, “*A language comes into existence by means of brutal necessity,*” such as “the horrors of the American Negro’s life,” “*and the rules of the language are dictated by what the language must convey.*”⁵⁸ Likewise, black art must therefore have enough formal plasticity and autonomy to convey what must be conveyed while refusing to be restricted by the anti-black racism that requires something to be conveyed. Developing the language analogy further, Baldwin argues: “People evolve a language in order to describe and thus control their circumstances, or in order not to be submerged by a reality that they cannot articulate. (And, if they cannot articulate it, they are

⁵⁶ Harper, *Abstractionist Aesthetics*, 25.

⁵⁷ Crawford discusses abstraction in the context of “the push to the mixed media, abstraction, satire, and sheer experimentation,” which links black art and aesthetics today to the Black Arts Movement and to the Harlem Renaissance (*Black Post-Blackness*, 3–4). For Crawford, black post-blackness is “the circular inseparability of the lived experience of blackness and the translation of that lived-experience into the world-opening possibilities of art” (2).

⁵⁸ Baldwin, “If Black English Isn’t a Language, Then Tell Me, What Is?” 782.

submerged).”⁵⁹ Art, like language, or art as language, evolves in relation to (as a negation of) the reality that it expresses—hence the impulse to abstraction. The possibility of being submerged echoes Adorno’s claim in the earlier quote that art is trying to survive in the face of extreme and grim reality.

There is a mismatch in this discussion of abstraction in Adorno and several contemporary black aestheticians, however, as we have two art forms moving in opposite directions rather than toward a constructive interlocution between Adorno’s aesthetics and black aesthetics. He believes that modern art is essentially abstract and, as such, it follows an impulse *of* abstraction in art to “the ideal of blackness” as its color, its metaphor (a) for the extreme and grim reality in which art is practiced and (b) for the impoverished formal means with which it operates. By contrast, Davis, Quashie, and Harper suggest that concrete black experiences of a lifeworld systemically structured by anti-black racism, which both predates modernity and partly constitutes it, generate an impulse *to* abstraction in art. This impulse enables artists to resist any reductionism of black art to resistance to anti-black racism while still exposing the realities needing to be resisted. In short, while modern art travels *from abstraction to blackness* (as only a metaphor), black art travels *from blackness to abstraction*. The directional difference is important here. When Adorno was writing, modern art already understood its essence as abstraction, and then it followed an impulse of abstraction to “the ideal of blackness” to signal that it was relatively autonomous from extreme and grim reality to be able to give expression to it, albeit on the condition that it acknowledge its constitutionally inadequacy to transform that reality. By contrast, black art has been historically embedded in anti-black racism and is always

⁵⁹ Baldwin, “If Black English Isn’t a Language, Then Tell Me, What Is?” 782.

already abstract as a way to establish its identity and relative autonomy and, in turn, to give expression to, resist, negate, and transform its reality.⁶⁰

Moreover, even though modern art as Adorno understands it and black art may have many things in common—extreme and grim reality, relative autonomy, expression, and abstraction—there is another difference that may also limit the feasibility of any critically fruitful interlocution between these arts and their complementary aesthetics. As we saw, Adorno appeals to blackness to give a conceptual label to the impoverishment of artistic means qua form, and he adds that this impoverishment “convulses the possibility of art.”⁶¹ The underlying philosophical claim here is that modern art is impoverished: ended but not dead—“though without bringing it down,” meaning that it has little efficacy to transform the extreme and grim reality of which it is a necessary expression. Adorno is Hegelian on this score, believing that art “is and remains for us a thing of the past.”⁶² By contrast, dating back to at least Douglass, if not to 1619, black aesthetics has enacted the hope of the transformative force of art, not merely the alleged fact of its impoverishment. Today, black artists engage their audiences critically through affective and cognitive means by challenging anti-black racism in the past and present (e.g., Titus Kaphar’s *Shifting the Gaze*, 2017), but they also engage audiences imaginatively by envisioning alternative forms of relationality and community in the present and into the future (e.g., Wangechi Mutu’s 2023 exhibition and catalog *Intertwined*). In performing both tasks, often simultaneously, black artists enact the transformative force of art among multiple audiences: among themselves and

⁶⁰ There are exceptions, of course, such as Afropessimism and the belief that art cannot improve the ontological predicament of the black lifeworld (Wilderson, *Afropessimism*). But an Afropessimist does not make this argument while being particularly focused on art or culture, as they believe that nothing can improve that predicament.

⁶¹ Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 40.

⁶² Hegel, *Hegel’s Aesthetics*, 11.

their communities, among their allies, among the general public, among those most responsible for perpetuating anti-black racism.⁶³

IV. ART AND OBSCURITY: OKIJI, MOTEN

Okiji proposes another possible avenue of interlocution between Adorno's aesthetics and black aesthetics, although it could be merely an example of what Adorno calls "the promise of reconciliation in the midst of the irreconciled."⁶⁴ Despite being critical of Adorno's use of "the ideal of blackness," Okiji interprets "dark" art as "obscure" art and sees obscurity as a positive quality for black art, if not for all art. Black art is obscure because it is an effort to share the incommunicable experience of enslavement, of other forms of anti-black racism, or of black life in general. Consider, for example, sorrow songs sung by those who were enslaved, as analyzed by Douglass, Du Bois, and Saidiya Hartman. Because the experience being expressed by the sorrow songs is itself incommunicable (beyond language) and thus necessarily linguistically obscure, any song is in turn obscure and thus mimetic in relation to the incommunicable experience that necessitates it. For example, Douglass writes in his first autobiography about how the enslaved could sing the most pathetic sentiment in the most rapturous tone, or the most rapturous sentiment in a pathetic tone.⁶⁵ Such separation or gap between a sentiment and its

⁶³ Art's transformative force can be effective on one or more audiences at a time without having to be effective on all of them, especially the last audience. Its force should not be measured by its effectiveness among the most intransigent audience, which in this case would be people who embody and enact anti-black racism, as that would reinforce their power. For example, Douglass engaged in art and aesthetics to speak to the first three audiences, which included President Abraham Lincoln, but not necessarily to Southern enslavers. Or, to offer another example, Sarah Elizabeth Lewis's Vision & Justice initiative (<https://visionandjustice.org/>) is not to be measured principally by whether it transforms prison wardens (or others responsible for social injustice) but rather whether it can transform those who can transform the wardens.

⁶⁴ Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 33. Okiji's *Jazz as Critique* is a brilliant argument that Adorno's expectations of modern art are embodied in jazz, which he might have seen had he actually engaged with it rather than just being entangled in it.

⁶⁵ Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, 23.

expression, rather than being an inadequacy, as Adorno would seem to see it, is the strength of the sorrow songs. For black art is mimetic, not in the sense of imitating black experience realistically, but in Édouard Glissant's sense of expressing the incommunicability of what has been experienced while finding a new mode of communicability where language fails. Hence the inextricable obscurity (indeterminacy, etc.) of black art, according to Okiji:

“Incomprehensibility, deep meaning, and incoherence are the markings of black radicalism.”⁶⁶

This is perhaps the most promising basis for an interlocution between black aesthetics and Adorno's aesthetics because both value opacity: indeterminacy, incommunicability, irreconcilability, incoherence, incompleteness, dissonance, and the like.⁶⁷ Moten confirms this promise when he argues, in a reflection on Baldwin on beauty, that “The truth to which criticism has access fades to blur and we're sorry for its reckless scrutiny. But the study that soils transparency, in the rightful belief that it reveals an opacity that's always there, need offer no apology to James Baldwin since it's he who teaches us to look so closely that we see all dark through what we see. Criticism is supposed to let you see (through) that.”⁶⁸ Darkness is opacity is the truth of criticism.⁶⁹

As Okiji adds, however, it is ironic that Adorno (again) missed a potential connection to black aesthetics because “he tended to talk past African America.”⁷⁰ Beyond irony, I think this missed opportunity means that the latest effort to reconcile the irreconciled between black aesthetics and Adorno's aesthetics is unconvincing because of the residual anti-black racism in Adorno's conceptual language. The use of “dark” in “dark art” that is presumed to be equivalent

⁶⁶ Okiji, *Jazz as Critique*, 79. See also her “Aesthetic Form in the New Thing.”

⁶⁷ See, for example, Adorno's interpretation of Samuel Beckett's *Endgame* (“Trying to Understand *Endgame*”).

⁶⁸ Moten, “A Prefatory Note.”

⁶⁹ For more on opacity in contrast to transparency but relative to difference, see Glissant, “For Opacity.”

⁷⁰ Okiji, *Jazz as Critique*, 79.

to “black art” implicitly rests, as noted earlier, on a reference to Africa as an allegedly dark continent in the sense of its being “unknown” or unexplored. What is unknown is now obscure, incomprehensible, etc.—the concepts Okiji highlights. But, since Africa is not unknown to Africans in the way that it is unknown to the Europeans and others who speak about the dark continent, we are dealing here with at least different senses of the unknown and thus different senses of the obscure (incomprehensible, etc.). Not fully comprehending the reality you experience cannot possibly be the same as not fully comprehending the reality you do *not* experience. That is, African experience of Africa yields an epistemic advantage over any European experience of Africa, which, even when it does not result in complete (self-) knowledge, does result in a more nuanced, affective sense of the unknown. Even when blackness serves as a metaphor for the unknown, anybody who actually experiences blackness knows a different sense of the unknown. Failure to recognize this difference is a failure to recognize what is distinct about the experiences generating it and about the art that emerges in relation to it.

At the same time, Okiji’s epistemic notion of obscurity points to the limits of self-knowledge developed by Moten. He understands “dark” as obscure in the sense of “dark to themselves.”⁷¹ His particular artistic reference is to Cecil Taylor’s live album with that title, which Moten interprets as “a collective commitment to a certain kind of obscurity.”⁷² But, again, being obscure (unknown) to oneself is not the same as being obscure to other people, especially those who regard one as unknown, even unknowable. So if Adorno adopts blackness as a metaphor for the unknown and the obscure, we still have a serious problem because, based on his

⁷¹ Moten, “An Ongoing Conversation,” 274–75.

⁷² Moten, “An Ongoing Conversation,” 274–75. He is discussing how some “folks,” such as himself and his interlocutors in a conversation about the *Trigger* art exhibition, have used identity as a weapon against identity, just as they have used politics as a weapon against politics. “And that in and of itself is a condition that tends to make you misunderstand yourself ... make you dark to yourself” (“An Ongoing Conversation,” 275).

lack of knowledge of blackness because he fails to engage it, he mistakes his own lack of knowledge for the unknown and the obscure as such. In doing so, he also exhibits his own lack of self-knowledge about what he does not know about blackness because he fails to engage with it.⁷³ Indeed, this lack, whether expressed as synonymy or equivalence, may be the basis of all the forms of elision of blackness we have critically identified because it corroborates the point that Adorno's use of "the ideal of blackness" is not based on a constructive engagement with blackness.⁷⁴

V. ART'S NEGATIVE DIALECTICS AND TRANSFORMATIVE FORCE:

DOUGLASS, DU BOIS, SPILLERS, DAVIS

The negative dialectics of art has been a point of convergence between Adorno's aesthetics and black aesthetics (Gilroy, Moten, et al.), but it is also a point of contention. For Adorno, negative dialectics is linked to art's insufficiency to transform reality, so he rejects any claims by artists or aestheticians that art can be transformative. Any alleged transformation is an affirmation rather than negation of reality, which is why Adorno calls all such endeavors "pretensions." The contention here, however, is not only Adorno's rejection of art's transformative force but also the fact that the rejection is linked to his problematic entanglement with blackness, where he

⁷³ This discussion clarifies the difference between "entanglement" and "engagement": Adorno is entangled in black aesthetics by discussing the ideal of blackness, as well as by writing about jazz, but he fails to engage black aesthetics or jazz.

⁷⁴ Perhaps Spillers could interject here that Adorno may have in mind, as examples of the unknown, the extermination of Jewish people, the persistence of fascism, or the ravages of capitalism that are analogous to, without being equivalent to, enslavement, anti-black racism, and police brutality (family resemblance rather than equivalence). But this only confirms the point that there are different "unknowns," different extreme and grim realities. This correlation would again elide blackness: black senses of the "unknown" are different because they are grounded in different, if similarly incommunicable life experiences or lifeworlds. See also Wilderson, *Afropessimism*, 13, 41. Sacks ("The Visual Poetry of the Work") argues that Adorno "subordinates a global field of racialization [nonidentical forms of racialized violence] and its history to the comprehension of Jews as 'animals, monkeys for example'" (Sacks, "The Visual Poetry of the Work," 122).

understands blackness as a metaphor for artistic as well as ontological insufficiency, which is antithetical to black aesthetics. A strategic response to these contentious claims is already evident in the history of black aesthetics (Douglass, Du Bois, Spillers, Davis), which is to decouple the negative dialectics of art from Adorno's rejection of art's transformative force and instead to see this force as an extension and fulfillment of art's negative dialectics.

Adorno argues in *Aesthetic Theory* that "What is essential to art is that which in it is not the case, that which is incommensurable with the empirical measure of all things. The compulsion to aesthetics is the need to think this empirical incommensurability."⁷⁵ When an artwork embodies what "is not the case," then it has truth content, which in turn is the basis for any possibility that the artwork could be critical and even potentially transformative of the empirical reality it negates: "By emphatically separating themselves [autonomy] from the empirical world, their other, [artworks] bear witness that that world itself should be other than it is: they are the unconscious schemata of that world's transformation."⁷⁶ In this conceptual scenario, what is not the case includes what should be the case, both in contrast to and as the negation of what is the case, also known as society or reality. If social reality includes anti-black racism, for example, then art negates that reality just by being there, Adorno insists, and art subliminally offers visions of what should replace it.

This all sounds promising for art's transformative force. Unfortunately, Adorno is not claiming that the transformation of social reality will be achieved through art or aesthetics, as his theoretical claims are intended to establish only the potentiality ("unconscious schemata") of such transformation. Moreover, it is a potentiality that, on historical more than philosophical grounds, Adorno does not expect to be realized because any such realization would be

⁷⁵ Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 335.

⁷⁶ Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 177.

affirmative, and “affirmative” is the contrary to “critical” as well as “negative” in the discourse of critical theory.⁷⁷ That is, any specification of what transformed reality might actually look like is inextricably caught up in the logic of the very reality that it aims to transform. As a result, Adorno’s stance here leaves reality *untransformed*, even though he recognizes that it should be transformed. As is typical in Adorno, he presents us with yet another aporia in his aesthetic theory: the transformative force of art is damned if it becomes more than a potentiality and damned if it fails to become more than a potentiality.

We can see what is at stake here by drawing a sharp contrast, again, between Adorno and several figures in the history of black aesthetics: Douglass, Du Bois, Spillers, and Davis. Not only is negative dialectics part of the tradition(s) of black aesthetics prior to critical theory and beyond Adorno, it is (almost always) linked to the transformative force of art. This force is the artistic enactment of the “aims to praxis” that we saw earlier has motivated Spillers’s (and likely other theorists’) (re)turn to critical theory. These aims are already embodied and enacted in the history of black aesthetics even before “the black aesthetic” of the Black Arts Movement of the 1960s and 1970s, which makes it easier to decouple negative dialectics from a reliance on Adorno’s conception of it.⁷⁸

Douglass is a key thinker here because he believed that art’s transformative force stems from its negative dialectics, whereas Adorno believed that negative dialectics precludes the enactment of this force.⁷⁹ Douglass argues that the force of poets, prophets, and reformers is their

⁷⁷ In Georg Bertram’s reading of this issue in Adorno, even this potentiality is a problem: “Adorno’s understanding of critique as negativity realized by form rests on the thought that possibilities of change imply *eo ipso* an affirmative stance. Put paradoxically, possibilities of change are given only where there can be no change in the full sense of this word. For this reason, critique cannot be related for Adorno to possibilities of change” (“Benjamin and Adorno on Art as Critical Practice,” in Ross, 12).

⁷⁸ See Gayle, *The Black Aesthetic*.

⁷⁹ Ralph Ellison offers yet another version of art’s negative dialectics tied to its transformative force: “And while fiction is but a form of symbolic action, a mere game of ‘as if’, therein lies its true function

ability to “see what ought to be by the reflection of what is,” which is a form of art’s negative dialectics.⁸⁰ Poets and other artists then envision and endeavor to create a new social-political reality that is not marked by a contradiction between what is (social injustice) and what ought to be (social justice). More concretely, Douglass envisioned (pictured) a world where black people were no longer enslaved and could achieve equality, and where legal freedom for them, guaranteed eventually by the Thirteenth Amendment, would be matched by a phenomenology of everyday freedom. His confidence in this prophetic vision stemmed (in part) from his understanding of the force of pictures, by which he meant not only photographs but all the arts due to their link to moral progress—in other words, because they could re-present black people as other than enslaved.⁸¹ Pictures of the soul (thought pictures), as he understood the origin of art, were able to re-present and realize a world different from and better than the world in which the people making and viewing pictures were living in his time, mostly under the burdens of state-sanctioned chattel enslavement. Without such vision, abolition and racial equality were not possible, Douglass was convinced, so much so that his four major lectures on pictures and progress were written in the midst of the U. S. Civil War. As for the issue of the transformative force of art, he believed that engaging in art and lecturing on aesthetics were performative ways to demonstrate that black people are human, as art and philosophy are distinctly human skills:

“The process by which man is able to invent his own subjective consciousness into the objective

and its potential for effecting change ... by a subtle process of negating the world of things as given in favor of a complex of man-made positives” (*Invisible Man*, Introduction).

⁸⁰ Douglass, “Pictures and Progress, 161.

⁸¹ To be clear, Douglass was not naïve about the transformative force of art, but he believed that “Material progress may for a time be separated from moral progress. But the two cannot be permanently divorced” (“Lecture on Pictures,” 140). For the relevance of Douglass’s art and aesthetics today, see Isaac Julien’s recent installation and accompanying book, *Lessons of the Hour. Frederick Douglass*. See also Kelly, “Frederick Douglass’s Prospective Aesthetic Theory.”

form, considered in all its range, is in truth the highest attribute of man's nature."⁸² They were also ways to improve the human condition, and the desire for such improvement is itself the mark of a human: by the cultivation of faculties, such as picture making, a human possesses "the marvelous power of enlarging the margin and extending the boundaries" of their existence.⁸³ A human, Douglass claims, "does not take things as he finds them, but goes to work to improve them. Tried by this text, too, the negro is a man."⁸⁴ Such demonstrations of humanity were ways to negate the prevailing belief that the enslaved were not fully human. To contradict that belief was to undermine the reality of enslavement it supported. If art and aesthetics contributed to that undermining, they contributed to the abolition of enslavement and were transformative.

Du Bois articulates his own version of Douglass's insight about art as prophetic negation that is necessary to transform the world shaped by anti-black racism. He speaks about the need for beauty in life in contrast to—that is, as a negation of—"the facts of the world," which he also calls "truth." "What has...Beauty to do with the world? What has Beauty to do with Truth and Goodness," where goodness refers to "the right actions of men"? He answers: Beauty, Truth, and Goodness in the "here and now" are "unseparated and inseparable."⁸⁵ The inseparability of Beauty, on the one hand, and truth and goodness (morality), on the other, means that beauty can have an impact on truth and goodness (and presumably, they on beauty). For artists see "what the world could be if it were truly a beautiful world," where a beautiful world is also a truly just world.⁸⁶ The critical edge of art is to endeavor to create a beautiful, if future, world in defiance of, but without being overdetermined by, the reality of enslavement, anti-black racism, white

⁸² Douglass, "Lecture on Pictures," 133.

⁸³ Douglass, "Life Pictures," 35.

⁸⁴ Douglass, "The Claims of the Negro Ethnologically Considered," 225–26.

⁸⁵ Du Bois, "Criteria of Negro Art," 995.

⁸⁶ Du Bois, "Criteria of Negro Art," 994.

supremacy, and all their contemporary heirs. Thus, Du Bois continues, “it is the bounded duty of Black America to begin this great work of the creation of Beauty, of the preservation of Beauty, of the realization of Beauty, and we must use in this work all the methods that men have used before.”⁸⁷ To this end, art is necessary, even if it is not sufficient, by helping to realize beauty, which means that Du Bois, too, believes that art is transformative.

Spillers argues that black culture, or more accurately black diasporic culture, “is born in the penumbra of the official cultures that are historically emergent at a particular moment that we could rightly call modernity.”⁸⁸ From this perspective, black culture, like black art, enacts “an *alternative* statement, as a *counterstatement* to American culture/civilization, or Western culture/civilization, more generally speaking, [and] identifies the cultural vocation as the space of ‘contradiction, indictment, and the refusal.’”⁸⁹ Black culture is the voice of the negation of American culture/civilization that perpetuates anti-black racism and, dialectically, that is constituted by it. In addition to negation, black culture as critical edge enacts an alternative culture of freedom in the here and now, not one waiting for the demise of the racist culture. Art as negation is, once more, art as transformation. Spillers thus provides another sharp contrast to Adorno on the issue of art’s transformative force: for Adorno, the historical possibilities that negate present-day reality are possibilities that were unrealized in the past, that haunt the present, but that will remain unrealized in the future; for Spillers, such possibilities were also unrealized

⁸⁷ Du Bois, “Criteria of Negro Art,” 1000.

⁸⁸ Spillers, “The Idea of Black Culture,” 21.

⁸⁹ Spillers, “The Idea of Black Culture,” 19; she is quoting from Marcuse, “Remarks on a Redefinition of Culture,” *Daedalus* 94, no. 1 (1965): 190–207.

in the past while they haunt the present, but they will be realized in the future, if only imperfectly.⁹⁰

The issue of a black culture of freedom leads back to Douglass, as interpreted by Davis through Marcuse (albeit more his writings on liberation than on aesthetics), because his eighteen years of enslavement embodied the negation of freedom, his escape from enslavement was the attainment of freedom in part, and his role in the abolition of enslavement helped to transform reality and achieve real, if still limited, freedom. His experience of this negativity was his introduction to critical consciousness, according to Davis: “Douglass apprehends that all men should be free, and thus deepens his knowledge of slavery, of what it means to be a slave, what it means to be the negative counterpart of freedom.”⁹¹ Despite “being bound to a state of unfreedom materially,” Douglass was able to find “his way toward liberation”: his experience of the contradiction between the objective experience of unfreedom (what is) and his subjective experience of freedom (what ought to be) was “the impetus towards total liberation” that was made possible, in part, by art (picturing) and aesthetics.⁹² That is, his philosophical refusal to accept being enslaved was his enactment of a critical edge and it was the first phase of liberation: “the decision to reject the image of himself that the slave-owner has painted, to reject the conditions that the slave-owner has created, to reject his own existence, to reject himself as slave.”⁹³ This multi-tiered rejection initiated “a philosophical voyage from slavery to freedom” and “a physical voyage from slavery to freedom.”⁹⁴ Douglass had to “forge his own humanity”

⁹⁰ Athanasiou analyzes the temporality of critique, or the critical edge, in ways that, again, extend beyond what Adorno considers possible, that is, beyond his “negative deployment of the utopian as critique of the present and reservation about futurity” (“At Odds with the Temporalities of the Im-possible,” 255).

⁹¹ Davis, “Lecture on Liberation,” 56.

⁹² Davis, “Lecture on Liberation,” 57.

⁹³ Davis, “Lecture on Liberation,” 52–53.

⁹⁴ Davis, “Lecture on Liberation,” 49.

from within the boundaries of enslavement (even after he escaped), within which he was considered to be merely a commodity. And to do so, he relied on art (qua pictures) and aesthetics (qua lectures) as necessary components of his struggle to attain freedom and abolish enslavement. As Moten argues, Douglass negated and transformed his status as a commodity by presenting himself publicly to be a commodity that speaks, i.e., that is human.⁹⁵

VI. CONCLUSION

To conclude, for now, any further discussion of a constructive interlocution between black aesthetics and Adorno's aesthetics would need to continue breaking down the two main fault lines separating them: (a) the residual anti-black tropes in Adorno's aesthetics, which are arguably artifacts of the racism within the genealogy of modern aesthetics—so this is a lengthy endeavor; and (b) his disavowal of the transformative force of art as an extension and fulfillment of its negative dialectics. In the meantime, there are other “thinkers of the ‘dialectical imagination’” who are better able to help with this interlocution, especially Marcuse, given how Davis and Spillers have creatively appropriated his work. For example, Spillers argues that “we may be able to recover Du Bois's entire cultural program ... as a version of what Marcuse would call the work of *humanitas*, or the aim of culture, as ‘modes of thought, imagination, expression essentially nonoperational and transcendent, transcending the established universe of behavior not toward a realm of ghosts and illusions, but toward historical possibilities.’”⁹⁶ And Davis's conception of negative dialectics is Marcusean, which means the transformative force of art is included therein: “If, according to Marcuse, art is negation and possibility, and if critical theory

⁹⁵ Moten, “Resistance of the Object.” Douglass recounts how he was even introduced sometimes on the abolitionist lecture circuit as “property,” albeit with the host's assurance to the audience “that *it could speak*.” Douglass, *My Bondage and My Freedom*, 366.

⁹⁶ “The Idea of Black Culture,” 16. See also Spillers, “Arts Now,” where she compares Marcuse and Randolph Bourne, a major contributor to *Seven Arts*, a short-lived, early twentieth-century journal combining “political analysis and poetic vision.”

relies on negative dialectics to focus our attention on and beyond what is in order to make room for what might be, then one can argue that this is precisely the power we need to generate: critical engagements, critical theory, critical resistance.”⁹⁷ These are promising models, showing that, independent of Adorno, black aesthetics should already be recognized as the leading voice of the critical edge in art and culture that is negative but also transformative.

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⁹⁷ Davis, “Art and Negative Dialectics: On Soft Aesthetics,” 54.

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ENDNOTES

FORTHCOMING
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