3. Malcolm’s Conk and Danto’s Colors; or, Four Logical Petitions Concerning Race, Beauty, and Aesthetics

It was at once the most fantastic and the most logical petition he had ever received. Here was an ugly little girl asking for beauty... A little black girl who wanted to rise up out of the pit of her blackness and see the world with blue eyes... For the first time he honestly wished he could work miracles.

—Toni Morrison, The Bluest Eye

I have opened with this passage from Toni Morrison for a number of reasons. The passage reflects the long-standing preoccupation that African American activists have had with standards of physical beauty, a preoccupation that I will soon call antiracist aestheticism. The passage also captures in singularly effective language the existential, social, and psychological conditions that motivate this preoccupation and contributes the language of logical petitions that I will use to frame my discussion of aestheticism. Morrison’s ugly little black girl, a character named Pecola, makes a request that would be ludicrous were it not for the nature of her circumstances. In this essay I want to consider how Pecola’s circumstances motivate her petition and two others, after which I will offer my own petition concerning the practice of aesthetics.

First, a few words about the social and intellectual conditions that make Pecola’s petition “logical.” One of the cornerstones of the modern West has been the hierarchical valuation of human types along racial lines. (Unless I say otherwise, I will be concerned throughout with the modern West, particularly with England and its former possessions in the Americas.) The most prominent type of racialized ranking represents blackness
as a condition to be despised, and most tokens of this type extend this attitude to cover the physical features that are central to the ascription of black identity. So a central assumption has been that black folks—with our kinky hair, flat noses, thick lips, dark skin, prognathism, and steatopygia—are ugly. (I call to your attention the evaluative overtones of this standard descriptive language: imagine the difference if I had said broad noses, full lips, curly hair, and so on.)

To make matters worse, the most prominent type of racialist thought took shape under the same intellectual circumstances that in the eighteenth century produced efforts to define an aesthetic morality centered on the “beautiful soul” and in the nineteenth century led to the “science” of physiognomy. The circumstances that I have in mind consist, as much as is pertinent for my purposes, of the widespread assumption that bodily beauty and deformity covary with moral beauty and deformity as well as with general cultural and intellectual capacity. This practice of conflating different categories of value—of running together the good, the beautiful, the intelligent, and the civilized—could only have made it easier for hierarchical racialism to become what I call thick racialism, which holds that the physical differences between races are signs of deeper, typically intellectual and moral, differences. Thus it became part of the content of the standard thick, hierarchical racialism—that I call classical racialism—that the physical ugliness of black people was a sign of a deeper ugliness and depravity.

The classical racialist order that presupposed the thoroughgoing odiousness of black people was composed of complex social formations that brought about the inequitable distribution of social goods along racial lines. (By “social goods” I mean material goods like property as well as other goods like freedom, self-esteem, and the right to own property.) This distributive project was both facilitated and constituted by ideological projects of justification that made the notion of black odiousness, inhumanity, and inferiority a part of commonsense sociology. These justifying projects made it possible for a humanist to be a slaveholder without contradiction, for the dominance of capital and land to be concealed and maintained by the social and moral authority of racial hegemony, and, most important here, for imported Africans, stripped as much as could be of their own culture, to be socialized (though not, of course, universally and seamlessly) into the assumption of their own inferiority. Since the notion of black inferiority typically involves inferiority with respect to beauty, the modern black experience has been intimately bound up with a struggle against the cultural imperative to internalize the judgment of one’s own thoroughgoing ugliness—hence the widespread sentiment among black people, in the nineteenth century especially, that black features are a problematic link to a “dark past” and to uncivilized ways.

Given these conditions, it is logical for Pecola to think of blackness as a pit and to petition for escape from it. It is logical for her dream of escape to be expressed as the desire to transcend the physical features that are usually the most obvious signs of blackness. And it is logical for her to conceive of the whole process of personal improvement as a movement from ugliness to beauty.

But it is also logical for people interested in bettering the black condition to do what Morrison has done: to ask that we critically examine the conditions that make Pecola’s petition reasonable. The Bluest Eye is just one example, though a particularly salutary one, of a strong and varied strain in the black antiracist tradition, a strain that I promised at the outset to call antiracist aestheticism. The participants in this subtradition—a group that includes writers like Gwendolyn Brooks and Zora Neale Hurston, academics like bell hooks and Cornel West, and filmmakers like Julie Dash and Spike Lee—have a double motivation. They are motivated first by the realization that a white-dominated culture has racialized beauty, that it has defined beauty per se in terms of white beauty, in terms of the physical features that the people we consider white are more likely to have. They are motivated also by the worry that racialized standards of beauty reproduce the workings of racism by weaving racist assumptions into the daily practices and inner lives of the victims of racism—most saliently here, by encouraging them to accept and act on the supposition of their own ugliness. The problem of internalization that these activists are concerned with manifests itself in a variety of ways, some of which we will come to. But we can most efficiently discuss this worry in the context of what I will call the straight hair rule.

The straight hair rule is the presumption, long embraced in African American communities (and, for not quite as long a time, in communities of African-descended peoples throughout the world), that straight hair is a necessary component of physical beauty. The necessity of this component is evident from the ordeals that people—including nonblack people unlucky enough to have curly hair—will endure in its name. Consider Malcolm X’s account of his first “conk,” or chemically straightened hairstyle:

The congelene just felt warm when Shorty started combing it in. But then my head caught fire. I gritted my teeth.... My eyes watered, my nose was running. I couldn’t stand it any longer; I bolted to the washbasin.... My scalp still flamed, but not as badly.... My first view in the
mirror blot out the hurting. . . . The transformation, after the lifetime of kinks, is staggering. . . . On top of my head was this thick, smooth sheen of shining red hair. . . . as straight as any white man's?

The straight hair rule might be more precisely stated as the principle that long straight hair is a necessary component of female beauty. The aestheticist concern with beauty tends to be a concern with female beauty, as we might expect given the nature of the cultural forces at play; since current social conditions make physical appearance central to the construction of womanhood and femininity and fairly peripheral to the construction of manhood and masculinity, talk about physical beauty more or less reduces to talk about womanhood, femininity, and women. Participants in the aestheticist tradition tend either to conduct the race-based critique alongside the gender critique, or, too often, to discuss the racial issues without any regard for the gender dynamics. I mention all of this because I will express myself below as if the problems of female beauty can stand in for the problems of racialized aesthetic standards in general. This is an attempt on my part to capture the main concern of the aestheticist tradition, not a denial of the need for gender critique.

The straight hair rule dominates African American culture to such an extent that one commentator can meaningfully ask, "Have we reached the point where the only acceptable option for African American women is straight hair?" This dominance should not be surprising, since the cultural imperative for black women to enact beauty engages most powerfully with the processes of racialization and internalization in connection with their hair. Until the fairly recent perfection of the technologies of colored contacts and cosmetic surgery, Pecola's dream of escape from the physical markers of blackness was most effectively focused on the hair, the part of the body that is most amenable to frequent, radical, and relatively inexpensive alteration in the direction of approximating "white" standards (since, at any rate, Madame C. J. Walker's work at the beginning of this century, about which more in a moment). Consequently, as Paulette Caldwell reports, "the writings of black women confirm the centrality of hair in the psychological abuse of black women. Virtually all novels and autobiographical works by black women writers contain some treatment of the issue of discrimination against black women because of . . . hair texture."

In light of all this, the aestheticist tradition offers a logical petition of its own. The request is made in different forms by figures with different political affiliations, with different degrees of attachment to an essential black subject—the Form, as it were, of Blackness—and to one or another of the relevant psychological notions like pride or alienation. But the basic point remains the same. The aestheticist requests that we work to loosen the hold that hair-straightening has on the collective black consciousness, that we critically examine the conditions that make Pecola's request reasonable, and that we strive to cultivate the idea that we can be beautiful just as we are.

Stated broadly, the aestheticist account and critique should seem intuitively plausible. Given the present constitution of Western societies it seems right to say that the category of race tends to be central to the self-conception of the people we consider black, that physical features are central to the assignment and assumption of racial identities, and finally that, other things being equal, a person whose self-conception involves characteristics that she finds valuable is better off than someone whose identity is bound up with features she finds odious. But it is easy to narrow any broad statement of the aestheticist position in ways that make it more problematic. One might assume, for example, that the value of the aestheticist account is that it warrants inferences to the mental and moral states of individual agents; that it allows one to assume, in other words, that any person with straightened hair is, in the parlance of Spike Lee's School Daze, a "wannabbe"—someone who wants to be white. On such a view, straightening involves the moral failing of groundlessly devaluing huge portions of the human family, and it involves the psychological problems of alienation and self-hatred—of devaluing one's own portion of the human family, and hence devaluing oneself.

Some people are moved by the dangers of this crude version of aestheticism to offer a third logical petition: They urge that we take seriously the complexity of the processes by which individuals participate in patterns of social meaning. They point out that people can participate in meaning-laden practices like hair-straightening while, or as a way of, shifting the meanings; or that hair-straightening itself has taken on such racialized significance that participation in the practice can be a way of expressing black pride rather than a way of precluding it. So, for example, when Malcolm X attacks his earlier self for the "self-degradation" of "burning my flesh to have it look like a white man's hair," historian Robin Kelley suggests that this interpretation is too beholden to Malcolm's later politics to do justice to his earlier behavior. Kelley explains:

[T]o claim that black working-class males who conked their hair were merely parroting whites ignores the fact that specific stylizations created by black youth emphasized difference. . . . We cannot help but view the
Paul C. Taylor

Malcolm's Conk and Danto's Colors

conk as part of a larger process by which black youth...reinscribed coded oppositional meanings onto styles derived from the dominant culture.9

Noliwe Rooks makes a similar argument about Madame C. J. Walker, who amassed a fortune just after the turn of the twentieth century by popularizing the hot comb, the principal instrument for hair-straightening. Rooks explains that while "African Americans had long struggled with issues of inferiority, beauty, and the meaning of particular beauty practices...[Walker] attempted to shift the significance of hair away from concerns of disavowing African ancestry."9 Walker, it turns out, even rejected the claim that hair-straightening was principally what she was up to; she argued instead that she provided a way for black women to keep their hair healthy and, not coincidentally, to expand their economic and social opportunities in the process by becoming hairdressers.

This request that we take seriously the complexity of the relations between individuals and their cultures is an important addition, both as a corrective to the potential oversights of the aestheticist account and as a clarification of the aestheticist project. Rooks and Kelley help to affirm that the aestheticist argument at its best involves political criticism of culture, not moral criticism of individuals. They show that the aim should be to consider the extent to which an individual's actions presuppose, reproduce, maintain, and re-fashion broader and perhaps troubling patterns of behavior and structures of meaning, both consciously and unconsciously. They show, in short, that anti-racist aestheticism is an indigenous mode of cultural criticism, produced by efforts to come to grips with the uses and abuses of the concept of beauty in the experiences of black folks.

I want to insist for a moment on this last point, because it is the one that I have been aiming at all along. I have tried to discuss beauty here in a way that differs from what one usually finds in essays of philosophical aesthetics. Most often we consider beauty in its capacity as a property of artworks, either the property of general artistic merit or some more specific property that may not be necessary for the success of a work. But there is no reason for aestheticians to take up beauty only in the context of art—no reason, that is, apart from the widely held assumption that aesthetics just is the philosophy of art, an assumption that is deeply contingent as a matter of history and, though dominant, not universally accepted. I have discussed beauty in the context of cultural criticism because it seems to me that cultural criticism is one of the things that aesthetics can and should be. And that, of course, is the fourth of my eponymous petitions: that we explore the possibility that aestheticians can examine something broader than and, in a sense, prior to the arts—the reciprocally constitutive relationships between cultures and individuals.

This is not, of course, a radical proposal. No less a figure than Arthur Danto has argued that aesthetics is "virtually as wide in scope as experience itself, whether it be experience of art or of insects." Aesthetics, he says, has to do with the "encoloration" of human cognition and perception by historical meaning and cultural value: To attend to something aesthetically is "to suspend practicality, to stand back and assume a detached view of the object, see its shapes and colors, enjoy and admire it for what it is, subtracting all considerations of utility." He goes on to suggest that the future of the discipline of aesthetics lies not simply in continued examination of the philosophical issues arising from the practices of fine art, but also in showing cognitive scientists how they have undermined their own prospects for success by "treating us in abstraction from our historical and cultural locations." Aesthetics becomes for him, then, "a discipline which borders on philosophical psychology in one direction and the theory of knowledge in the other"—something like the under-laborer to cognitive science.10

I find Danto's proposal compelling except for the final step. Where he sees aesthetics bordering on the theory of knowledge and informing cognitive science, I see it bordering on political philosophy and informing social theory. I share his interest in the encoloration of cognition and perception by history and culture, but my concern has to do with how that process shapes our interactions with each other in the social realm. What more useful task could the discipline take up than that of excavating the hidden ways in which history and culture condition our choices, beliefs, desires, and preferences—such as the preference, say, for straight hair?

Recasting aesthetics as a kind of cultural criticism, as a discipline as ready to deal with the beauty of human bodies as with the beauty of art, would, I think, produce a number of benefits. First of all, cultural criticism relies heavily, and often obscurely, on the central aesthetic practice of interpretation. The much-ballyhooed (and sometimes overstated) clarity and rigor of philosophy could help to clear some of the ground here. Second, cultural criticism is, in the form of Cultural Studies, a thriving discipline in its own right. As such it represents a viable source of interdisciplinary cooperation, which makes it a useful intellectual and professional resource for a discipline that is often under attack both from the ax of downsizing administrations and from the arrogance of fellow philosophers. Finally, the move from aesthetics narrowly construed to an aesthet-
ics "as broad in scope as experience itself" represents the opportunity to rebut once more the claim that philosophy is culturally detached and socially irrelevant.

I realize that I have said rather little about a number of crucial issues. I have simply gestured at what cultural criticism is; I have given no reason for the antiracist critic to stop at indexing judgments of beauty to racial body types instead of going on to question the whole framework of racist (but, significantly, not necessarily classical racist) thinking; and I have not been exactly clear about how the experience of being a black woman with hair that is not naturally straight, and can be made so only provisionally and with some expenditure of time and effort, differs from the experiences of similarly situated Jewish and Irish women. (As you might imagine, I mention these particular questions because I think I have answers to them, though I could not give them here.) My aim in this essay has not been to settle those issues but simply to point in a direction that seems to me to require, and likely to reward, further exploration. If I have done that adequately, then the rest can wait for another time.

Notes