

# Toward a Black Formalism

AUTHOR

Darell W. Fields

Overt manifestations of violence against blackness often obscure an underlying aesthetic rationale: blackness, and anything associated with it, is inferior. While it is necessary to push back against racial protocols legitimizing force against specific black bodies, it is also necessary to push deeper—to disclose the conditions under which blackness gained historical and aesthetic inferiority.

The following excerpt from the upcoming book *Architecture in Black, 2nd ed.* suggests that taking the black cause to the streets is only one means to counter authoritarian regimes. Perhaps understood as a demonstration that the “theory is mightier than the sword,” this research proposes a pure black aesthetic (i.e., formalism) as a means to intersect and overturn aesthetic regimes legitimizing traditions of subjugation. From this polemical perspective, the negative origins of race are the aesthetic fallout of Kantian philosophy and autonomy. Black Formalism signifies a specific moment in aesthetic time where blackness challenges racial negativity by perceiving, synthesizing, and projecting spatial systems for its own (black) purposes.

*Permission granted by Bloomsbury Publishing, London.*

## §1

The Negroes are born white apart from their genitals and a ring around the navel, which are black. During the first months of life the black color spreads out from these parts over the whole body.

When a Negro burns himself the spot turns white. Long illnesses also turn the Negroes quite white; but

**Black Formalism signifies a specific moment in aesthetic time when blackness challenges racial negativity by perceiving, synthesizing, and projecting spatial systems for its own purposes.**

PROJECT

Black Lives Matter

TAGS

aesthetics

black lives matter

theories

DOWNLOAD PDF

a body that has become white through illness turns blacker in death than it ever was before.

And it might be that there were something in this which perhaps deserved to be considered; but in short, this fellow was quite black from head to foot, a clear proof that what he said was stupid.

—Kant, “Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime,” 57, 60.<sup>1</sup>

Statements such as these are usually left out of any contemporary discussion of Kantian autonomy and formalism. They are forced to the surface here to make clear that, no matter the level of abstraction embraced, the Black Subject is an exemplar of historical, philosophical, and racial subjugation. Even so, Kant’s negative statements, similar to those offered by Hegel, are treated with intellectual care. No matter how deplorable, they are viable fragments (content) in the process of signifying. While spatial concepts are envisioned beyond strictly racial orders, signifying the concrete (e.g., language, space, art, etc.) thrives, creatively speaking, in the midst of pronounced negativity.

We begin the discussion regarding formal autonomy through Kant’s *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime* (1764) for three reasons. The first dispels any doubt that his thinking is unaffected by the emerging racial ideas of his time. The second reaffirms the tendency for eighteenth- and nineteenth-century philosophy, at least in terms of Kant and Hegel, to ensconce racial observations and discourse in anthropological texts seemingly distant from the rarified philosophical treatises. The third seeks to understand whether Kant’s racial observations resurface in the *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781) and, if so, where.

To the first point, if Kant held racial beliefs, what kind of beliefs are they? It is widely held that racial determinism, as it relates to the history of man, resides in two categories. The first, monogenesis, on the one hand, instructs that all forms of the human species flow from the creation of Adam. Accounting for racial variation, this position suggests that racial characteristics are in the process of changing their defective states. Polygenesis, on the other hand, holds firmly that racial characteristics are immutable. That being black, for example, signifies an altogether different species of mankind. With these clear categories, Kant’s observations are placed in the context of racial practices to clarify the trajectory of his racial beliefs. Kant’s observations fall on the side of monogenesis. He sees blackness as a “disease.” The

nature of the pathology suggests that it is changing and, possibly, curable.

Kant's view of race is dogmatic. It fixes a specific lack of intellect, stupidity, to skin color. He observes that "this fellow," due to blackness having spread over his entire body, is both "sick" and "stupid." Nothing mentioned in these accounts, however, suggests that the black body and its intellect originated from another species or, as such, was removed from the grace of God. The slip in Kant's rigor signifies race as *a priori* doctrine or "certainty" associated with unquestioned moral beliefs. While the Kantian "black body" signifies all that is defective and stupid, race is not immutable. This strongly suggests that race for Kant is an environmental and moral process. Therefore, this very same process may be used to "sanctify" it. Sanctification resides, again, in monogenesis liturgy. While the black body and its intellect are rendered as wholly negative, under certain environmental conditions they may change. For the polygenist, race is immutable. Blackness represents another species of man, sanctioned by God as quintessentially inferior. That Kant is a monogenist is critical to understand how race gets into autonomy through the conduit of religion. This suggests an adaptation of Christian transformation. Perhaps demonstrating its intellect and faith means that the Black Subject must be baptized in transcendental Kantian space to be born again, emerging anew, adorned in a robe of autonomy.

It is important to make a distinction between what Kantian autonomy means versus what it conveys. On the one hand, meaning, here, is understood as the term's fixed definition. Conveyance, on the other hand, signifies the mobility of the concept—how it achieves momentum and moves forward. J.B. Schneewind in "Autonomy, Obligation, and Virtue" offers, more or less, a standard definition:

At the center of Kant's ethical theory is the claim that normal adults are capable of being fully self-governing in moral matters. In Kant's terminology, we are "autonomous." Autonomy involves two components. The first is that no authority external to ourselves is needed to constitute or inform us of the demands of morality. ... The second is that in self-government we can effectively control ourselves. The obligations we impose upon ourselves override all other calls for action, and frequently run counter to our desires. We nonetheless always and frequently run counter to our desires. We nonetheless always

have a sufficient motive to act as we ought. Hence no external source of motivation is needed for our self-regulation to be effective in controlling our behavior.<sup>2</sup>

But for one caveat, Schneewind's description represents a standard, concise meaning of autonomy. Although it has fallen on hard times, one of the gifts of postmodern critique is to question certain underlying assumptions, structures, and so on of historical, philosophical, and theoretical texts. Without being overt, Schneewind brilliantly inserts a moral question into an otherwise benign definition. That question relates to just who or what Kant sees as a "normal adult." Given his own observations, one can say that black people, categorically speaking, are not normal. Their bodies, from birth, confront the "spread" of a defective pigmentation that, at the time of death, can result in the host "turning blacker in death than it ever was before." Furthermore, just being black, for Kant, is "clear proof" of stupidity. With a body rendered as (naturally) defective and a mind trapped in that same body signifying its stupidity, it is difficult to imagine this adult having a "normal" capacity to comprehend the individual "authority" necessary for self-governance.

In his article, "Antinomies of Race: Diversity and Destiny in Kant," Mark Larrimore not only cautions that care must be taken in how one reads Kant, but also argues that situating race in the *Critique* is specifically related to the philosopher's conceptualization of moral autonomy, explaining that "Kant's invention of race was attended by the simultaneous invention of 'whiteness' as an escape from it".<sup>3</sup>

Whether Kant invented race is a matter of debate. What is clear, however, is he invented a means to disseminate it. The "vessel" for the dissemination is moral autonomy. The only question that remains is how and why moral autonomy is situated in the *Critique*? Kant responds:

I cannot even make the assumption—as the practical interests of morality require—of God, Freedom, and Immortality, if I do not deprive speculative reason as its pretensions to transcendent insight. For to arrive at these, it must make use of principles, which, in fact, extend only to the objects of possible experience, and which cannot be applied to objects beyond this sphere without converting them into appearances, and thus rendering the *practical extension* of pure reason impossible. I must, therefore, abolish *knowledge*, to make room for *faith*.

The dogmatism of metaphysics, that is, the presumption that it is possible to advance in metaphysics without previous criticism, the true source of unbelief (always dogmatic) which militates against morality.<sup>4</sup>

Considering Kant's evaluation of race in *Observations*, this statement must be measured from two perspectives. First, recalling the principles of monogenesis ideology of which Kant's anecdotes are clearly a part, "making room for faith" is tantamount to "making room for race." It is not possible to detheologize the *Critique*. Therefore, it is impossible to accept Kantian "faith" without accepting the environmental, paternal, and racial liturgies of monogenesis theology.

Second, in "abolishing knowledge, to make room for faith," Kant establishes a condition that can only be defined as spatial. Upon considering what it means, in Kant's own words, one arrives at the full potential of all that has been stated thus far:

Not only in judgments, however, but in concepts, is an *a priori* origin manifest. For example, if we take away by degrees from our empirical concepts of a body all that can be referred to experience—colour, hardness or softness, weight, even impenetrability—the body will vanish; but the space which it occupied still remains, and this it is utterly impossible to annihilate in thought.<sup>5</sup>

The impossibility of annihilation means that we have finally arrived at a magnitude of indivisible space, with room for faith, created by the absence of the black body in the spatial expanse of The Classical (P)eriod.<sup>6</sup> Most important, the term "absence" is used with specific intent. The Black Subject, particularly in contemporary discourses, is usually characterized as "outside" or "marginal." This is due, primarily, to dialectical processes continuing to subdivide it to the point of being infinitesimal. But this process, as Kant defines it, stops at the moment of spatial intuition. The space is indivisible and black. In a word, it is *absent*.

The Black Subject, as a matter of its own autonomy, must claim a part of the space made through its negation, disfigurement, and alienation. This space is the beginning and end of discourse. As a beginning, it is difficult to know what to do—and certainly, as a matter of morality, something must be done. But let us not overlook what has been done thus far. Mapping (thinking) the precise

intersection of race and autonomy in the *Critique* demonstrates systemic thinking. The ability to uncover Kant's systemic racial unity demonstrates reasoning behavior. "Pure reason, then, contains, not indeed in its speculative, but in its practical, or, more strictly, its moral use, principles of the *possibility of experience*... For since reason commands that such actions should take place, it must be possible for them to take place, and hence a particular kind of systemic unity—the moral, must be possible."<sup>7</sup> Kant's "principles of the possibility of experience" are taken to mean the development of the *spatial theory on absence*. "A particular kind of system unity" is taken to mean *formalism*. Taken together, they represent *Black Formalism*.

Black Formalism, like Kantian "faith" in autonomy, is the evidence of things not seen. It is a practical result of Concrete Signification, the creative search to conceive of and represent spatial principles unique to its "absence" in Western epistemology. Thinking systemically and spatially contradicts *a priori* inferiority. It confronts Kantian morality with Kantian morality. The emergence of Black Formalism, a constellation of negatively displaced fragments, is already outside "aesthetics." While rejecting overt categorical displays, it is an indirect response to Kant's autonomy test—an ability to produce an architectonic:

By the term *architectonic* I mean the art of constructing a system. Without systemic unity [morality], our knowledge cannot become science; it will be an aggregate and not a system... We require, for the execution of the idea of a system, a *schema*, that is, a content and an arrangement of parts determined *a priori* by the principle which the aim of the system prescribes. A schema which is not projected with the accordance with an idea, that is, from the standpoint of the highest aim of reason, but merely empirically, in accordance with accidental aims and purposes (the number of which cannot be predetermined), can give us nothing more than *technical* unity. But the schema which is originated from an idea (in which case reason presents us with aims *a priori*, and does not look for them in experience), forms the basis of *architectonical* unity.<sup>8</sup>

The reconstruction of the black racial/spatial subject is schematic. The term "schema" suggests the interaction between the diagrammatic and the constructive. The schema, drawn through certain principles, is antithetical to

preconceived *taxinomia*. While *taxinomia* represents all that is fixed, stable, and aesthetically routine, the schema is *projective*. It is a motivated system of representation that is reflective, structured, legible, and ambiguous. While *taxinomia* is always in the service of the discursive, the schema's relationship to language can only be intersectional. If *taxinomia* defines art, the schema projects it.

Black Formalism, through Concrete Signification, produces an autonomous schema. Pure aesthetic forms or practices for their own sake are viable “parts” of autonomy's construction. Proposing a schema, a Black Architectonic, complements and broadens the social critique. It does so, however, by supplanting the cultural and the social—by projecting blackness in its purest diagrammatic form.

Darell Fields, “Toward a Black Formalism,” *Aggregate 3* (March 2015), <https://doi.org/10.53965/BOVH3527>.

\*Not peer-reviewed

1 Immanuel Kant, “Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime,” in *Race and the Enlightenment: A Reader*, ed. by Emmanuel Chukwudi Eze (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1997), 57, 60. [↑](#)

2 J.B. Schneewind, “The Autonomy, Obligation, and Virtue: An Overview of Kant's Moral Philosophy,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Kant*, ed. by Paul Guyer (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 309–10. [↑](#)

3 To quote Larrimore: “As is the case with Hegel, Kant's observations on race in his anthropological texts ... shows the importance of reading together the elements of his oeuvre that tend to be read in isolation: practical philosophy, philosophy of history, anthropology, physical geography. But race is more than an instance of their interrelation. Both before and after the critical turn, Kant was committed to race for its potential to anchor his larger understanding of human diversity and destiny, and reserved a special place for whites beyond race. In a manner paralleled by his characterizations of the German national character and one of his accounts of moral autonomy, Kant argues that Whites are a superior race but they are the predemption and redemption of race; Kant's invention of race was attended by the simultaneous invention of “whiteness” as an escape from it.” Mark Larrimore, “Antinomies of Race: Diversity and Destiny in Kant,” in *Naming Race, Naming Racisms*, ed. by Jonathan Judaken (London: Routledge, 2009), 8–9. [↑](#)

4 Immanuel Kant, *The Critique of Pure Reason* (London: Orion Publishing Group, [1781] 1934), 21. [↑](#)

5 Kant, *The Critique of Pure Reason*, 32. [↑](#)

6 The Classical (P)eriod, derived from history, is not taken to mean historical classicism (i.e., antiquity). Here it reflects that moment in Hegelian dialectics, described primarily in *Aesthetics*, as the classical category—that moment in the historical process canceling out “defective” material found in the symbolic category of art. [↑](#)

7 Kant, *The Critique of Pure Reason*, 519. [↑](#)

8 Kant, *The Critique of Pure Reason*, 532–33. [↑](#)