

SIGNIFYING BLACKNESS: THE BLACK AESTHETIC REVISITED

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ABSTRACT: This short paper seeks to interrogate certain notions that work against the formulation of a black theory of art. It relies in part on audience-related theories in outlining an alternative way of theorizing black aesthetic. In the main, it suggests that a credible theory of black art must acknowledge shared preferences among black peoples of the world, and that such a theory must, in addition, take cognizance of the link between various forms of cultural expression – literature, music, painting, drama and film – within the cultural universe of the black world.

Keywords: Black aesthetics; Black art; Blackness; Theory

Scholars and researchers engaged in black studies often have to contend with finding a basis for their preoccupation, especially when they are interested in exploring the peculiarity of the artistic culture of the black world. There is no denying the fact that the activities of the Black Power Movement in particular catalyzed the emergence of black studies as a legitimate field of scholarly enquiry. What is often overlooked is the fact that a broader view of the black heritage is essential if a valid explanation is to be offered for the uniqueness of the black imagination.

Each time reference is made to the Black Aesthetic it is natural for one to wonder whether racial affiliations condition imagination and the perception of beauty. But as Demas Nwoko rightly observes, *“(all) living things are capable of aesthetic experience which they manifest in their ability to establish or demonstrate*

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*group preferences*¹. As should be expected, there have been different ways of explaining the Black Aesthetic, only a few of which deserve serious scholarly attention. We believe that a viable clarification of the Black Aesthetic has long been overdue. We therefore do not seek to restate familiar arguments and conclusions. Our intention is to extend the possibilities of its conception. This therefore necessitates an assessment of the issues that have been raised in relation to the concept.

Interest in the Black Aesthetic was generated in the main by the dimension that self-definition and self-assertion among African-Americans took in the 60's and the 70's. It grew out of the revolutionary temper which black nationalism assumed at the time. It was, in part, proof of the disenchantment of the black with the Christian reaction to the racial problem which encouraged humility and the Gandhian approach which privileged forbearance. The activity of the Black Power Movement led by Stokeley Carmichael particularly helped to propagate this outlook. This came in the wake of increased brutality toward the black community in America. The sense of insecurity which this development engendered deepened the consciousness of the black about their exilic condition, for they rejected the prospects held by the American dream, affirming their selfhood and the otherness of white America. In a sense, the black embarked on a mental process of de-Americanization and deconstructed the very idea of a monolithic America. Hoyt Fuller's clarification of the racial problem is relevant here. As far as he is concerned "*a fundamental and obvious truth of American life (is) that the two faces (i.e. – the white and the black) are residents of two separate and naturally divided worlds*"².

The Black Aesthetic was therefore a manifestation in the arts of a consciousness in African-American cultural life which had, for instance, found expression in the work of the Negritude poets of Africa. To Julian Mayfield, the Black Aesthetic at this historical moment was motivated by "*the search for a new program because all the old programs spawned out of the Judeo-Christian spirit (had) failed*"³.

Imamu Amiri Baraka, Hoyt Fuller and Larry Neal formulated the philosophy of the Black Arts Movement. We take the liberty to quote Larry Neal's rendering of the manifesto of the Black Arts Movement as cited in Houston Baker's *The Journey Back* at length:

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- (1) See: The Aesthetic Language and the Vehicles of Transmission. In: *New Culture*, Jan. 1979, 2(2): 3.
 - (2) See FULLER, Hoyt. Towards a Black Aesthetic. In: GAYLE, Addison (ed.). *The Black Aesthetic*. New York: Doubleday Inc., 1971, p. 7.
 - (3) See: You touch my black aesthetic and I touch yours. In: *Black aesthetic*, p. 28.

The Black Arts Movement is radically opposed to any concept of the artist that alienates him from his community. Black Art is the aesthetic and spiritual sister of the Black Power concept. As such it envisions an art that speaks directly to the needs and aspirations of Black America. In order to perform this task, The Black Arts Movement proposes a radical reordering of the Western cultural aesthetic. It proposes a separate symbolism, mythology, critique, and iconology. The Black Power concept both relates broadly to the Afro-American's desire for self-determination and nationhood. Both concepts are nationalistic. one is concerned with the relationship between art and politics, the other with the art of politics⁴.

The foregoing reinforces K. W. Benston's argument that "(the) concern with naming in Afro-American literature (reached) a new intensity with the rise of black consciousness in the 1960s"⁵. But some of the premises which informed the philosophy of black art popularized by the Black Arts Movement reveal fundamental contradictions.

In the first place, any outlook on the Black Aesthetic which limits its relevance over time and space within the black world undermines its very essence so long as we cannot say that the black imagination is only activated by, or relevant to, an isolated historical experience, namely the African-American experience in the 1960s and 1970s. The proponents of the black aesthetic obviously took the sense of militancy which marked black expression at that moment as the distinguishing traits of black art, even though it did not reflect the nature of the black imagination in continental Africa or the black diaspora.

The philosophy also undermines itself by conceiving of the black aesthetic as a product of the tendency to negate western cultural aesthetics. This implies that the black expressive culture was only given its distinctive colour by the tragic incursion of Europe and the resultant experience of slavery. This, incidentally, is the position of S.E. Ogude who says that "*the black man's apprehension of beauty in relation to his peculiar experience (...) is rooted firmly in the phenomenon of black slavery*"⁶. He states elsewhere that "*for black men all over the world, the only genuine, shared experience is slavery and what it excited*"⁷. These

(4) BAKER, Houston. *The Journey Back*, p. 135.

(5) See his: I am what I am: The topos of un(naming) in Afro-American Literature. In: GATES, Henry Louis Jr. (ed.). *Black Literature and Literary Theory*. London: Methuen, 1984, p. 165.

(6) See OGUDE, S.E. Ideology and Aesthetics: The African Dilemma. In: EMEYONU, Ernest (ed.). *Literature and Black Aesthetics*. Ibadan: Heinemann, 1990, p. 3.

(7) Slavery and the African-Imagination: A Critical Perspective. In: *World Literature Today*, Winter 1981, 1(55): 21.

assertions merely empower misconceptions about the identity of the black people and their destiny.

While we cannot deny the fact experiences have a way of feeding the creative imagination, we must also recognize the fact that a valid explanation for the uniqueness of black expression should not only account for the essential unity of black imagination in continental Africa and the black diaspora but also be rooted in whatever philosophy underlies the black expressive culture. Henry Louis Gates rightly acknowledges "*the unbroken arc of presuppositions and patterns of figuration shared through space and time among black cultures in West Africa, South Africa, the Caribbean and the United States*"⁸.

So long as our enquiry is informed by the desire to explore the essence of black art as a basis for defining its peculiarity, we assume that there are shared values among modes of cultural expression as diverse as black music, oral traditions, visual representations and literature. This view is shared by Sesan Ajayi in *Long after the black aesthetic. Black literature and a theory of meaning*. He sees "*(the) black text as a confluence of influences from both the written and spoken mediums*"⁹.

Our argument so far implies that any formulation of the black aesthetic should take cognizance of the nature of black expression right from the pre-slavery era as this should give us an insight into the art and culture of the entire black world. The first point we need make here is that black art is essentially functional; it is both responsive and responsible to society. The sensitivity of black art to society explains why its sustenance is derived from the black experience. This is to say that the private voice in the black creative tradition is at once public. The private voice is thus a convenient mask for the public. What is implied here is that the black artist, artiste or writer obtains authority from his/her community. The value of any product of the black imagination then consists in its relevance to society. Innocent C. Onyewuenyi shares this position in "*Traditional African Aesthetics: A Philosophical Perspective*", arguing that "African works of art are functional, community-based and, depersonalised, unlike Western art which is arbitrary, representative merely of the values and emotions of the artist without reference to the cultural environment and the historical reality of the people."¹⁰

(8) The blackness of blackness: a critique of the sign and the signifying monkey. In: *Black literature and literature and literary theory*, p. 286.

(9) AJAYI, Sesan. *Long after the black aesthetic... Black literature and a theory of meaning* (Paper presented at the 9th Ibadan Annual Literature Conference, March 12-15, 1990), p. 2.

(10) ONYEWUENYI, Innocent C., "*Traditional African Aesthetics: A philosophical Perspective*", *The African Philosophy Reader*. Eds. P.H. Coetzee and A.P.J. Roux... London and New York: Routledge, 1998. p. 400.

We are not in any way suggesting that black art is incapable of entertaining, though the notion of art – for art's sake – which most of the time indicates that an artist is at odds with his society – is almost always irrelevant within this cultural context. Whenever a black artist consciously strives for the “dissociation of sensibility”, he soon discovers the futility of his quest, for he is likely to lose the sense of identification with the community. An examination of the expressive forms which have been identified with black people in Africa and the African diaspora will help buttress our claims.

The African-American slave narrative, for instance, has come to be seen as a unique narrative form. Barbara Foley explains that “[it] has been employed in Afro-American Literature to convey different varieties of truth -whether private or public, generally representative or historically specific”¹¹. The uniqueness of this “documentary mode” draws attention to the inadequacy of artistic forms which have their roots in the European tradition in effectively conveying truths borne out of the black experience. The African-American self-narrative is not just conventional autobiography for it is not merely an instrument to revive memory or celebrate self. Its value consists in its therapeutic essence in the community of freed slaves. Black expression can thus be so conditioned by the black experience that it almost becomes impossible for an outsider to accurately decode it. Gates affirms that the very idea of signifying originated among the blacks¹². That is to say that the black community itself authorizes signification. The interpretive key in this case is the shared experience which an outsider-cultural critic does not possess. Consequently, such a critic will be prone to misreading black art as it has been divested of meaning for him. A particular song, say, a Negro spiritual, may have two meanings at once – one for the black community which constitutes the privileged interpretive community, and another for the outsider which is only meant to deceive. This is possible because, like any other discursive formation, the black community has the rules for exclusion and inclusion. It is on record that African-Americans inscribed their own meanings on existing metaphors and beliefs in the New World. Outsiders who attempt to reflect on black art therefore tend to express shock and surprise at the complexity and confusion which they encounter. This probably informs Barbara Loy's comment that “Black Americans are addicted to lying and signifying”¹³. D. T. Turner suggests a solution to the

(11) History, fiction, and the ground between: The uses of the documentary mode in black literature. In: PMLA, May 1980, 95(3): 397.

(12) *The blackness of blackness*: ..., p. 286.

(13) LOY, Barbara. *Black American Literature*: An overview. (Seminar presented at the University of Ibadan, May 16, 1989) p. 1.

problem posed for those not experientially acquainted with the black condition in the criticism of black literature. He says:

All criticism of Afro-American literature will develop (...) when all readers perceive that a thorough knowledge and understanding of the Afro-American experience, culture and literacy history is a prerequisite for an individual who wishes to be a critic of the literature¹⁴.

It will be wrong to assume that the tendency to defer meaning in the African-American cultural aesthetics is an exceptional case. It has long been realized that the practice of masking itself is a *leitmotif* which provides continuity over time and space. It also confirms that representation in the black world privileges extra-textual reference. If we then conceive of black expression as a product of the black experience we can affirm the essential unity of black art. In this sense, artistic expressions in the black diaspora can be seen as an outgrowth or at least an extension of a tradition that has always been cherished in Africa, for the artistic heritage in the African diaspora has merely reflected particular experiences in America and the West Indies. The primacy of shared experience to the black creative preoccupation is the unifying factor between reggae music in the Caribbean islands and the blues in America, just as the communal spirit is the energising force for the Ewi poetic practice of the Yoruba people of West Africa. In the sphere of written expression, the almost obsessive engagement of writers like Ngugi wa Thiong'o, Chinua Achebe, Ayi Kwei Armah, Okot p'Bitek, Oswald Mtshalli and Agostino Neto in Africa with collective memory and experience compares with the engagement of such African American writers as Toni Morrison, Richard Wright, LeRoi Jones and James Baldwin. This tradition has been sustained in the creative efforts of various generations of Afro-Caribbean writers, especially Claude McKay, Edward Kamau Brathwaite, David Dabydeen and Caryl Phillips. K. W. Benston for instance argues that:

All of Afro-American literature may be seen as one vast geneological poem that attempts to restore continuity to the ruptures of continuities imposed by the history of black presence in America¹⁵.

Houston Baker Jr. considers the blues a paradigm for Afro-American cultural expression. His argument is that:

(14) TURNER, D.T. Afro-American Literary Critics: An Introduction. In: *The Black Aesthetic*, p. 77.

(15) I am what I am: the topos of un(naming) in Afro-American Literature. In: GATES, Henry Louis Jr. (ed.). *Black Literature and Literary Theory*. London: Methuen, 1984, p. 152.

the blues' awesome genealogy makes them the signally legitimate expressive form of African-American culture. They are God-given, God-bearing resonances that survived the middle passage and provided coherence for black experience in the New World¹⁶.

Our present proposal does not necessitate that we outline any canonical texts. Moreover, because culture is dynamic and cultural expression equally responds to new challenges, cultural production in the black world always strives for relevance. It is remarkable that shared experiences in the black world have produced some motifs. The idea of naming in the Afro-American expressive culture is, for example, linked to "the search for purified selfhood", a longing for an escape from the memory that slavery has inflicted on the sensibility of the white. In the words of Frank Uche Mowah, the river too has become "*a very significant sign within and without the text in black discourse*"¹⁷. This motif in particular is a product of the experience of slavery. This is evident in the work of two black poets: Langston Hughes and Jean-Baptiste Tati-Loutard. In *The negro speaks of rivers* by Hughes, we have a summation of the psychic fractures which the experience of slavery has brought to the African-American. Tati-Loutard in *Pilgrimage to Loango Strand* on the other hand, depicts the bereavement which the black community in continental Africa suffered as a result of the same experience.

It is necessary at this point to restate our main arguments. We have suggested that the uniqueness of African-American art derives from the essence of black art which predates the diasporic experience. To claim otherwise will amount to negating the black aesthetic itself. Our proposition has an implication for the reception of black expressive culture. There is a sense in which the black world constitutes an interpretive community because black people the world over have shared aesthetic preferences and it is arguable that critics with this racial affinity are both privileged and authorized to evaluate black cultural production.

RESUMO: Este pequeno texto procura problematizar certas noções que vão contra a tentativa de formulação de uma teoria da arte negra. Para isso, são utilizadas, em parte, as

(16) BAKER, Austin Jr. *Afro-American Poetics: Revision of Harlem and black aesthetics*. Wisconsin: The University of Wisconsin Press, p. 157.

(17) See MOWAH, Frank Uche. *The sign within and without: The river in black discourse* – Alice Walker's *The Colour Purple*. Paper presented at the 9th Ibadan African Literature Conference, March 12-15, 1990, p. 1.

teorias relacionadas com o público para delinear um caminho alternativo para uma teoria da estética negra. Mas, principalmente, é defendido que uma teoria da arte negra que queira ter certa credibilidade, deve reconhecer as preferências compartilhadas pelas várias populações negras no mundo. Ademais, esta teoria deve também reconhecer o vínculo entre as várias formas de expressão cultural – literatura, música, pintura, teatro e cinema – existentes dentro do universo cultural do mundo negro.

Palavras-chave: Estética negra; Arte negra; Negritude; Teoria.