

Echoes of the Blues: A Study of the Aesthetic Thoughts of the Black Arts Movement

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Abstract

The Black Arts Movement is also known as "the Black Aesthetic Movement" because of the distinctive aesthetic thoughts this movement advocated. During the years from 1968 to 1971, Larry Neal, Amiri Baraka, Addison Gale, Jr., Hoyt Fuller, Ron Karenga, and other key BAM members and leaders published numerous articles on black aesthetics in the periodicals such as *Black Digest* and *Black World*. *The Black Aesthetic*, edited by Addison Gale, Jr., contains theoretical essays by a number of BAM thinkers, many of which are recognized as seminal works of the study of BAM aesthetics. These writings cover the definition, functions, techniques, and evaluation of black aesthetics, and have become an important spiritual legacy of this movement. This paper aims to discuss the BAM aesthetics from three aspects in the light of some relevant theories and texts.

Key words: The Black Arts Movement; Aesthetic Thoughts; Blackness

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INTRODUCTION

The Black Arts Movement (its short form is BAM), also known for its distinctive aesthetic philosophy as the "Black Aesthetic Movement". Over the years from 1968 to 1971, the key members and leaders of the movement published a large number of articles on black aesthetics in the BAM periodicals. In 1971, Addison Gayle Jr. edited an anthology titled *The Black Aesthetic*, which included theoretical essays by dozens of thinkers of the Black Arts Movement. Many of these works are recognized as primary sources for the study of Black Arts Movement aesthetics. The above mentioned writings and some other works written by authors like Sonia Sanchez, L. Eldridge Cleaver, and Barbara Ann Teer cover topics such as the definition, function, techniques, and evaluation of Black Aesthetics, and have become significant documents for promoting the aesthetic philosophy of the Black Arts Movement.

1. ACCUSATION, QUESTIONING, AND OPPOSITION

In the depths of the hearts of many African Americans, they are the slaves crammed into the foul-smelling holds of ships, the drudges toiling in cotton fields, the servants enduring the agony of lynching. Generally, the black color and the black community have always been maliciously vilified, while white aesthetics are filled with discriminatory and absurd logic.

1.1 The Color Black and the Black Community: Historically Vilified

Sonia Sanchez, a leading figure in the Black Arts Movement and a famous African-American poet, wrote an article and analyzed the rational human perspectives on night and day, sunlight and darkness. She explores how the colors black and white—originally very ordinary colors in the natural spectrum—bring about entirely

opposite psychological associations for humans. The article explores how these two ordinary colors evoke completely different emotional experiences in American society. Sonia Sanchez (2014) noted, “The night was associated with death, evil, immorality, weakness and mystery. Carried to color symbolism extremes, God and purity were associated with white; evil and defeat with black” (p.246).

The colors black and white have inherent symbolic meanings in the minds of Westerners: white symbolizes virtue and chastity, whereas black connotes gloom, sadness, and misfortune. This entrenched emotional experience is referred to as the “Polarized Western Mind”. This polarized mindset is reflected in various aspects of real life, such as the differences in attire during marriage ceremonies, religious rituals, and funerals. According to Sanchez (2014), “--- the power of the poet as a creator of social values so presaged as in the evolution of the dialectics surrounding the colors black and white. These dialectics which were originally used to inculcate metaphysical truth were later manipulated as a weapon of political and racial hegemony” (p.246).

L. Eldridge Cleaver (2014), a noted African-American writer and political activist, wrote about the beauty of colors, discussing how Black people are constrained by white aesthetics, and further elaborated on the aesthetics accepted by mainstream society. The essay argues that accepting Caucasian beauty standards inherently implies a denial of typical Black features. Traits such as blue eyes, long straight blond hair, and colorless skin, considered beautiful by these standards, are unrelated to Black people. Black people regard “whiteness” as a center, a standard. On the basis of this logic, being Black is seen as very unfortunate. Take hair for example. If Black people adhere to Caucasian beauty standards, they view the texture of their own hair as a torment, a cruel mockery of Black people by nature. According to Cleaver, Caucasian beauty standards and Black characteristics form a “binary opposition” relationship (p.139-140).

This Western polarized mentality is profoundly projected in Western literature. Addison Gale, Jr. (1971) recollected in his article:

The distinction between whiteness as beautiful (good) and blackness as ugly (evil) appears early in the literature of the middle ages—in the Morality Plays of England. Heavily influenced by both Platonism and Christianity, these plays set forth the distinctions which exist today. To be white was to be pure, good, universal, and beautiful; to be black was to be impure, evil, parochial, and ugly. This characters and the plots of these plays followed this basic format. The villain is always evil, in most cases the devil; the protagonist, or hero, is always good, in most cases, angels or disciples (p.40).

African Americans have played a complex role in American history. On one hand, they have been viewed as eternal servants and clown, who could sing, dance, and play the buffoon in comedies; on the other hand, they

have often been seen as soulless beasts. Much of this phenomenon can be attributed to the white aesthetics to which African Americans were subjected and the influence played by black periodicals and media propaganda. In his essay *As Crinkly as Yours*, Cleaver (2014) ruthlessly reveals the logic behind this phenomenon from a realistic standpoint. Under long-term vilification and denigration, African Americans often harbor feelings of frustration and bitterness toward the concept of being black. This undoubtedly negates the living conditions of African Americans and the Black community, a negation that inevitably brings psychological depression and a sense of defeat to African Americans.

1.2 White Aesthetics: Full of Discrimination and Absurdity

In his article “*As Crinkly as Yours*”, Cleaver (2014) clearly analyzes the profound internalization of aesthetic ideas and standards on a people. He argues that the traditionally accepted aesthetic standards are essentially Caucasian standards, whose ideals of beauty bring significant negative impacts and destructiveness. African Americans must believe in their own aesthetic standards, discard those outdated and negative associations with Blackness, and respond to discussions about Black aesthetics with pride and dignity (pp.135-136).

BAM aestheticians recognized the absurdity of white aesthetics and launched attacks against it. Cleaver (2014) said, “There were deeply imbedded in the thinking and folklore of the race such adages and beliefs as: ‘If you’re white you’re all right; if you’re brown stick around; but if you’re black—GET BACK!’” (p.137) Using vivid examples from life, Cleaver (2014) expressed his thoughts about the fossilized white aesthetic in a hopeless way:

At this point let it be recalled that physical appearance, i.e., skin color and texture of hair, is what primarily distinguishes the great majority of Negroes from other Americans. It is this salient factor—physical appearance—which points out the Negro and makes him readily available as a target of abuse and a more vulnerable mark for exploitation..... To an excruciatingly painful degree, Negroes were very much aware of their “burden of color and bad hair” (p.137).

Neal (1972) criticizes the Western white aesthetic as essentially a collection of dry, rigid ideas. He noted:

What the Western white man calls an “esthetic” is fundamentally a dry assembly of dead ideas based on a dead people; a people whose ideas have been found meaningless in light of contemporary history. We need new values, new ways of living. We need a new system of moral and philosophical thought”(pp.149-150).

The followers of the Black Arts Movement dismissed the prevailing aesthetic idea of “art for art’s sake” as a “white man’s orientation” to which oppressed peoples were to be indifferent. Cleaver concluded as follows: “It is superficially absurd for a given ethnic group to judge

itself by the standard of some other group”(Cleaver, 2014, p.142).

While exposing and criticizing the absurdity of white aesthetics, some theorists of the Black Arts Movement attribute the essence of white aesthetics to ethnocentrism. Cleaver asserts that there is no universal aesthetic model and that the essence of white aesthetics is ethnocentrism.

The aesthetic theorists of the Black Arts Movement often arrive at subversive evaluations when examining Western aesthetics. In his essay *The Black Arts Movement*, which is hailed as the manifesto of the Black Arts Movement, Larry Neal (1972) concludes that the West has reached its dead end (p.260).

The fact is that thinkers and aestheticians of the Black Arts Movement are heavily influenced by the ideas of Frantz Fanon. They believe that the West is in decay, and that America’s rapidly developing technology, material values, and racism are symbols of American society’s decline. Accordingly, the dying nature of Western society is reflected in the chaos brought about by its philosophy, cultural values, and aesthetic ideas, making the questioning and opposition of Western aesthetics inevitable.

2. PROMOTING THOUGHTS OF “BLACK IS BEAUTIFUL” AND “BLACKNESS” AND CONSTRUCTING A UNIQUE BLACK AESTHETIC

Toward a Black Aesthetic is one of the most influential essays on Black aesthetics written by Hoyt Fuller, who is hailed as the “spiritual father” of Black aesthetics. This essay is considered the battle cry of the movement. African American writers’ literary creations are constrained and suppressed by a “double standard”. In the face of this harsh reality, Black people need to seek their own Black aesthetics, explore and practice their own aesthetic criticism paradigm, and use their aesthetic paradigm to critique white creations.

2.1 Eliminating Double Consciousness and Establishing Black Standards

African Americans face the issue of a de facto double identity---dual self-perception experienced by the African Americans in an oppressive society, and African American artists are no exception. African-American writer Barbara Ann Teer (2014), in her essay *Needed: A New Image*, analyzes the confusion brought about by this double identity consciousness among African American artists. According to Barbara Ann Teer, culture is a way of life, or rather the lifestyle established by a group of people, which constitutes the cultural heritage of African Americans. Compared to other cultures, African American culture stands out uniquely. “It is uniquely, beautifully and personally ours and no one can emulate it. It is the

cultural responsibility of those before the public eye to wear our heritage like a badge of honor and project it whenever and wherever the opportunity arises. It is our responsibility as black artists not to assimilate another set of cultural values but to create and establish more realistic ones”(p.84). According to the author, African Americans need to eliminate double consciousness and replace it with a stronger sense of Black identity.

2.2 Upholding the Value of “Black is beautiful” and Advocating Appreciation of “Blackness”

If the year 1619 was the time that the first Africans were kidnapped into America, then “that is the date on which the traditional standard of beauty of the transplanted African was first undermined and the corroding process of subversion began. Certainly, up until that time, the Africans had their own standards of beauty, and they accepted them just as naturally, proudly, and unquestioningly as all other people accepted their own (Cleaver, 2014, p.136). According to the theorists of the Black Arts Movement, however, the soil of white aesthetics has shaped Black aesthetics; that is, the overall environment in the United States has created the current state of both Black and white aesthetics. They called for the establishment of their own aesthetic standards to judge and evaluate Black literature and art. Black aestheticians acknowledged the necessity of developing an aesthetic system to evaluate, analyze, and create revolutionary Black art. This is because dominant aesthetic norms and artistic standards are not relevant to Black art and, at worst, are oppressive to Black artists and their African American audiences. (Bracey, Sanchez, and Smethurst, 2014, p.5)

According to Black aestheticians, constructing a Black aesthetic system first requires addressing issues of perception. When discussing Caucasians, Cleaver (2014) believes that it is essential to neither “associate them with the noble connotations of the term ‘white’” nor “continue to associate themselves with the disgraceful connotations of the term ‘Black’”(p.144). In the eyes of artists of the Black Arts Movement, American society has, for centuries, conveyed to Black people in countless ways: you are ugly! Fair skin, straight hair, and aquiline noses are the only standards of beauty. Now, Black people are rebelling against this notion. This trend has not yet reached a tipping point, but the future is clear: more and more Black individuals are breaking free from the shackles of imitation and proudly showcasing their own skin color, hair, and natural features (Fuller, 1971, p.8).

The Black Power Movement and the Black Arts Movement proclaimed the slogan “Black is Beautiful”, which signifies that African Americans feel proud of their race, their ancestors, and their history, advocating for a worldview based on equality and devoid of personal greed or the desire to exploit others. For African Americans, “Black is Beautiful” is not just a simple slogan; they need

to explore its meaning and imbue it with extraordinary significance.

When Black aesthetics emerged and gained recognition, this new consciousness led to a wave of renaming among the leaders and participants of the Black Arts Movement. They began to change their original American names to African and Islamic names. In 1970, on the basis of Fuller's proposal, the magazine *Negro Digest* was renamed *Black World*. "The magazine should amplify the voices of Black people worldwide, and what Black people have to say should interest the world. The renaming of the magazine also reflected people's rejection of the term 'NEGRO', with the choice of the word 'black' representing the preference of the descendants of African heritage. The renaming also indicated an identification with African and diaspora identities"(Salaam, 2016, p.80).

2.3 Promoting the Concept of "Blackness"

Black aesthetic theorists fully recognize the revolutionary significance of embracing the idea that "Black is Beautiful". Larry Neal insisted, "We are beautiful, but there is still much work to be done. Merely believing we are beautiful is not enough." While advocating the concept of "Black is Beautiful", theorists of the Black Arts Movement also strongly promote the idea of "Blackness", considering it an important term within the Black Arts thought system. In the eyes of African American artists during the era of the Black Arts Movement, "Blackness" refers to the physical and cultural conditions, qualities, and circumstances of those whose identity is recognized as Black and who self-identify as Black. From a philosophical and cultural perspective, "Blackness" is a marker of African cultural traditions, which are diametrically opposed to Western cultural standards. Fuller's notion of particularity undoubtedly points to the African cultural background of African Americans. To achieve unity and strength within Black society, the Black community must reclaim and honor their unique cultural roots—a "mystical Blackness" free from the influence of white racist cultural values (Chen, 1990, p. 74).

2.4 The Uniqueness of the Black Aesthetic System

In contrast to the Western aesthetic concept of "art for art's sake", which Black aesthetic theorists sharply criticize, theorists of the Black Arts Movement emphasize the uniqueness of the Black aesthetic system. Hoyt Fuller, hailed as the "spiritual father" of Black aesthetics, defined Black aesthetics in his 1968 essay *Toward a Black Aesthetic*. He stated that Black aesthetics is "a system of isolating and evaluating the aesthetic works of black people which reflect the special character and imperatives Black experience" (Fuller, 1971, p.8).

In the preface to *The Black Aesthetic*, Addison Gayle Jr. (1971) elaborates on his views on Black aesthetics. He believes that the Black aesthetic in the minds of African American writers is "a corrective--a means of

helping black people out of the polluted mainstream of Americanism, and offering logical, reasoned debate... .."(p. xxii.) He further expresses the desire for de-Americanization in every Black community in America.

Fuller argues that the uniqueness of Black aesthetics lies in its spirit of struggle against white aesthetics. To him, the Black rebellion in the literary field is as evident as the rebellion in the streets, and the break between Black revolutionary writers and the "literary mainstream" is essential, clean, and decisive. "Black critics have the responsibility of approaching the works of black writers assuming these qualities to be present, and with the knowledge that white readers—and white critics—cannot be expected to recognize and to emphathize with the subtleties and significance of black style and technique. They have the responsibility of rebutting the white critics and of putting things in the proper perspective"(p.11).

Additionally, Black literary thinkers also have expectations for Black artists and critics. In his essay *The Function of Black Literature at the Present Time*, Gayle (1971) sharply points out that Black artists who do not agree with the cultural divide but instead seek recognition from American society will end up being transformed into "carbon copies of white men"(p.386). Fuller (1971) highlights that new Black critics will be able to clearly articulate and explain this new aesthetic and will ultimately launch the long-overdue attack on the restrictive presumptions of white critics (p.9). In the introduction to *The Black Aesthetic*, Gayle (2016) asserts the Black artist, due to his current historical position in America, is engaged in a war with this country that will determine the future of Black art (p. xxiii).

3. CELEBRATING TRADITIONAL CULTURAL ELEMENTS LIKE MUSIC AND PROMOTING A DIVERSE AND INTEGRATIVE AESTHETIC MODE

The editors of *SOS—Calling All Black People: A Black Arts Movement Reader* specifically discuss Black aesthetics in the preface. The essay emphasizes the performative nature of the Black Arts Movement's aesthetics. The art of the Black Arts Movement is multimodal, but overall, it is traditional in form and radical in content.

3.1 Constructing an Aesthetic Rooted in African American Life and Traditional Cultural Components like Music

African Americans have always had a strong desire for identity recognition and the enhancement of national consciousness through traditional culture. The unique historical context of the 1960s provided African Americans with a broad stage to fully express their demands and suppressed voices. African American social

life has always been reflected in their music. They use music not only to convey emotions such as joy, anger, sorrow, and happiness but also to express protest and promote change. Music has become a significant cultural symbol for African Americans. Karamu Ya Salaam (2016) refers to Black music as the avant-garde of Black art. During the era of the Black Arts Movement, Black music (gospel, blues, jazz, and popular music) was considered the “vanguard” of African American cultural expression. The significant changes and developments brought about by Black music have influenced all American popular culture (p.123). In the epilogue of *Black Fire: An Anthology of Afro-American Writing*, Neal (1972) repeatedly emphasizes the critical role of Black music in mobilizing and inspiring the Black community. He believes that Black music has always been far ahead of Black literature, being the most dominant display of what it means to be Black and how Black people feel. Baraka insists that art should accurately depict life, guide the masses, raise social awareness, and originate from and serve the community (p.248).

3.2 Using Diverse Art Forms to Showcase an Interconnected and Integrative Aesthetic

The art of the Black Arts Movement highlights the blend of various artistic forms. Some art forms emphasize the interaction between the audience and the performers, with the audience often taking on the role of performers themselves. When the Black Arts Repertory Theater/School opened, a grand poetry reading event was held, inviting Black poets from around the world to read at the new venue in Harlem. To understand the Black Arts Movement, one must understand the role of performance as an aesthetic model, an epistemological issue, and an institutional requirement within the movement (Sell, 2008, p.625).

For Baraka, poetry and music are inseparable. Similarly, Black Arts poets like Baraka, Larry Neal, and Sonia Sanchez elevated poetry and performance to the level of jazz criticism. They explored how to embed critique into poetry and performance, using the dialects, rhythms, and tones from Black popular life to convey meaning, viewpoints, and memories (Gennari, 2003, pp.258-259). Neal, while rejecting past values of Black writing, particularly emphasizes that Poets must learn to sing, dance, and chant their works (Smith, 1991, pp.100-101). The Black Arts Movement stressed performance, allowing poets to read or perform their poems almost anywhere imaginable, often combining their works with other African American cultural performance modes such as music, dance, and theater. It was often difficult to categorize the specific types of Black Arts Movement works accurately. Moreover, Black Arts Movement poets would reproduce this blend of media and genres, especially the intersections of poetry, jazz, Black popular music, and oral performance (Smethurst, 2012, p.640).

Another significant art form within the Black Arts Movement was visual art, which encompassed painting, sculpture, craftwork, or performance in a mixed art form. The visual arts of the Black Arts Movement conveyed fiery passion, marking another peak in Black visual art following the Harlem Renaissance. Furthermore, the Black Arts Movement’s characteristic of diverse integration was evident in the incorporation of African elements. During this era, Africa and its influence held a prominent position in aesthetics. The movement had performative, diverse, and multimedia tendencies. Mike Sell (2012) described the Black Arts Movement as an “textually supported anti-textual movement” (p.642).

CONCLUSION

The Black Arts Movement reached an extraordinary level in the dialectic relationship between performance and text, oral or auditory and printed pages. It also carried a spirit aimed at creating politically and aesthetically radical art to reach and move as many Black audiences as possible. The Black Arts Movement thinkers engaged in extensive theoretical exploration of Black Arts Movement aesthetics, with some theories even reaching philosophical dimensions. However, even though the Black Arts Movement theorists could reach a consensus on “Black aesthetics”, the fact remains that their Black aesthetics lack a coherent logical system. An overview of the aesthetic discussions by the Black Arts Movement theorists reveals that the movement pursued cultural nationalism and promoted separatism. The pursuit, in essence, was a quest for “Black power”, and their promotion of “Black aesthetics” as well as African American literature and art, became the vehicle for achieving this grand objective.

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