
BLACK AESTHETIC THEORY: A PERSPECTIVE

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ABSTRACT

Descriptions, discussions, and appraisals of Black Aesthetic Theory are plentiful. Among the principal commentators on Black Aesthetic Theory are Amiri Baraka, Stephen E. Henderson, Addison Gayle Jr., and Houston A. Baker. The theory itself is relatively simple; commentaries on it have not complicated it. An idea of the essentials of the theory can be had from any one of the essays, monographs, and books available on the subject.

What strikes an outsider about discussions of Black Aesthetic theory is the view reiterated again and again that black literature is a literature of blacks, by blacks, and for blacks. With contempt for the legislative process, Black Power entered the Civil Rights Movement in the mid-'60s and urged black people to acquire political and economic strength, and resort to violence and riots, if necessary, to realize their long deferred dreams. While Black Power propagated political nationalism, the Black Arts Movement of the '60s and '70s celebrated cultural nationalism.

The present paper, Black Aesthetic Theory: A Perspective aims to discuss various aspects of Black Aesthetic Theory, its role in history, the reason behind its emphasis on Black Literature as a separate entity.

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INTRODUCTION

Descriptions, discussions, and appraisals of Black Aesthetic Theory are plentiful. Among the principal commentators on Black Aesthetic Theory are Amiri Baraka, Stephen E. Henderson, Addison Gayle Jr., and Houston A. Baker. The theory itself is relatively simple; commentaries on it have not complicated it. An idea of the essentials of the theory can be had from any one of the essays, monographs, and books available on the subject.

The historical background of Black Aesthetic Theory is fairly known and can be quickly reviewed. As laws enacted during the '50s and '60s by the United States Government in order to end segregation and discrimination of black Americans and to secure freedom and equality largely failed because of white intransigence, many black civil rights leaders realized that freedom is not given, but rather won. These leaders felt that peaceful marches, disciplined sit-ins, and non-violent demonstrations were simply exercise in futility because the limited reforms, tokens, and substitutes gained thereby would bring about no drastic change in the situation of the blacks. They recognized that love, conscience and moral suasion did not help them achieve their aspirations of freedom and human dignity. Radical methods and a total revolution seemed to them the only ways by which they could win their rights.

With contempt for the legislative process, Black Power entered the Civil Rights Movement in the mid-'60s and urged black people to acquire political and economic strength, and resort to violence and riots, if necessary, to realize their long deferred dreams. While Black Power propagated political nationalism, the Black Arts Movement of the '60s and '70s celebrated cultural nationalism. As Houston A. Baker observes, the poetics accompanying the new ideological orientation underwent a "generational shift" (Houston, *Black American Literature Forum* 15, 3-21) during this period of political and cultural turbulence. Afro-American critics abandoned those traditional integrationist poetics which was aimed at bringing black literature criticism in line with the American mainstream, and set up Black Aesthetic Theory, a poetics wholly indigenous to black culture, anti-formalist, and politically committed to a separate identity for blacks.

What strikes an outsider about discussions of Black Aesthetic theory is the view reiterated again and again that black literature is a literature of blacks, by blacks, and for blacks. For example, Conrad Kent Rivers declares: "If we fail to write for black people, we — in effect — fail to write at all" (Conrad 79). Referring to certain black poems under review, Stephen E. Henderson comments: "There should be no doubt in anyone's mind that these poems were not intended for white readers and white audiences, that their purpose was direct address to

the black community to get us together to TCB” (Stephen, *Survival Motion: A Study of the Black Writer and the Black Revolution in America* 79). With vehemence Larry Neal affirms: “We must determine, for ourselves, what good literature (art) is and what is bad. We cannot abdicate our culture to those who exist outside of us. We should guard and protect our culture viciously, and work critical ju-ju on those who screw up” (Larry 79). In black criticism seldom does a book by a white author on black life or literature find approval, whether it is a novel like William Styrons *The Confessions of Nat Turner* or a critical work like Robert Bone’s *The Negro Novel in America*.

Generally, white American readers and critics find the ethnocentricity of Black Aesthetic Theory untenable in the field of art, isn’t art, they ask, universal? Doesn’t a good writer try to transcend, the accidents of his birth and upbringing and deal with universal human problems? Shouldn’t black literature be read by white Americans as well as others or judged by the same standards as are, for example, applied to the mainstream American literature? Why a separate aesthetic theory? Isn’t insularity contradiction of universal ideas in literature? Many black writers and critics committed to Black Aesthetic Theory are, in fact, accused of racism, cultural chauvinism, and of practicing apartheid.

The pioneers of Black Aesthetic Theory respond to such points by arguing that the concept of universality, as understood in white aesthetics, strongly smacks of parochialism and racism. The concept is according to them, based on Judeo-Christian and Greco-Roman traditions and falls seriously short of its claim to represent all humanity. Black critics feel that the so-called universal outlook can give no real help in the interpretations of literature rooted in traditions other than white European traditions.

The creation of Black Aesthetic Theory makes a big change in black literary studies. In criticism, as well as in other spheres, integration with the American mainstream had been the black man’s ideal, but now the reverse becomes true: “The problem of the de-Americanization of black people lies at the heart of the Black Aesthetic” (Addison, *The Black Aesthetic* xvii-xviii) and he conceives it as “a corrective – a means of helping black people out of the polluted stream of Americanism” (xvii-xviii). Gayle adds that the black writer must “wage unlimited, continual warfare against American society – against its values, its morals, its ethics” (Addison, *Indian Journal of American Studies* 37). This anti-American posture of Black Aesthetic Theory galvanizes blacks to act as a group, bring pressure on the powers that be. We have come a long way from the supposedly clinical neutrality of formalism.

The coalition of Black Power and Black Aesthetic Theory is self-evident. Acting hand in hand with Black power, Black Aesthetic Theory has made white American readers recognize the uniqueness of black literature. Long denied human dignity and freedom, let alone distinction in arts and literature, blacks were forced to affirm their separate identity, political and cultural. A group of any strength will take pride in its distinctive character; if oppressed, derided or scoffed at, its members will repudiate the very standards that deny it its distinction. Seen in the context of historical and political circumstances, the alliance between Black Aesthetic Theory and Black Power Movement is perfectly understandable, and even justified. The anti-formalist conception of the nature and function of literature put forward by Black Aesthetic Theory grows directly out of an ethnocentric, nationalistic outlook Amiri Baraka (LeRoi Jones), the most vocal spokesman of Black Aesthetic Theory, defines black art as follows in terms of his racial group:

I would like to ... say that my conception of art, Black art, is that it has to be collective, it has to be functional, it has to be committed and actually if it isn't stemming from conscious nationalism, then at this time it's invalid. When I say collective, that it comes from the collective experience of Black people, when I say committed, it has to be committed to change, revolutionary change. When I say functional, it has to have a function to the lives of Black people (Amiri, *Black American Literature Forum* 17.1, 27).

Mulana Ron Karenga talks about black art in almost the same language:

... all art must reflect and support the Black Revolution ... all Black art, irregardless of any technical requirements, must have three basic characteristic which make it revolutionary. In brief, it must be functional, collective and committed ... we cannot accept the false doctrine of "art for art's sake" (Maulana 33).

The Black Arts Movement and the Black Aesthetic people were doing in the 1960s and '70s what Pauline Hopkins promised to do in 1900 when she published her first novel, *Contending Forces: A Romance Illustrative of Negro Life North and South*. In the preface to this novel, she wrote:

Race (Negro) must encourage Black writers because they can preserve the rich Afro-American heritage....No one will do this for us; we must ourselves develop the men and women who will faithfully portray the inmost thoughts and feelings of the Negro with all the fire and romance which lie dormant in

our history, and yet unorganized by the writers of the Anglo-Saxon race (Pauline 7).

Houston A. Baker Jr., an exponent of Black Aesthetic, has written extensively on Black culture and arts. He claims that Black culture, particularly as measured through Black folklore and literature serves in intent and effect as an “index” of “repudiation” of white western values, culture and literature. He turns “repudiation” into an exclusive category when he argues that it “is characteristic of black American folklore; and is one of the most important factors in setting black American literature apart from white American literature” (Houston, *Long Black Song: Essays in Black American Literature and Culture* 13). He further asserts that neither Black African nor White American literature can provide valid standards by which black African folklore and literature can be judged — because of “repudiation.” A text becomes blacker if it follows repudiation. The other characteristic of this culture are oral tradition, musical and collective ethos. Black American culture is therefore distinct because of the three aspects – oral, repudiative and collective ethos.

In Black Aesthetic Theory a writer need not fight shy of didacticism or propaganda. In fact, he is called upon to teach his people. Commenting upon the functional aspect of literature elsewhere, Amiri Baraka writes: “The function of art was to teach and educate and move and unify and organize people, not to mystify them, or offer dazzling support of the status-quo!” (Amiri, *Black American Literature Forum* 14.1, 8). About those who complain that this literature is not art but didactic politics, his simple reply is “we just argue that they have a bourgeois view of art” (Amiri, *Black American Literature Forum* 12.4, 149).

It may be pertinent to ask if, by making the artist a propagandist and a revolutionary, art is not sacrificed for politics or made subservient to it. In Black Aesthetic Theory the artistic function is not viewed as something separate from the political function, one canceling or contradicting the other. The two functions do happily mix and blend at least in certain major black writers, work together in harmony, support and strengthen each other.

Despite its strong political bias, Black Aesthetic Theory recognizes the importance of the formal aspect of art. The forms and techniques it commends are, however, different from the Western forms and techniques. They are drawn from Afro-American and African traditions. Spirituals, blues, jazz, gospel, rhythm ‘n blues, voodoo, mumbo jumbo, occultism, signs, symbols, rituals, myths, etc., taken from these traditions provide models and techniques for black writer.

A steady decline is perceivable in the popularity and influence of Black Aesthetic Theory. The declining influence may perhaps be partly explained by the improving of economic conditions among blacks in America. According to Martin Jay, nationalistic aesthetic movements start when a formerly colonized people begin to achieve political equality with their former oppressors, but before they achieve economic independence. The fate of such a movement then becomes a function of economic history. When economic equality follows political equality, the aesthetic will lose its force. A nationalistic aesthetics is thus a way of asserting self-determination when there are signs of its political possibility but when there is not the sort of economic base which makes any autonomy real.

Whatever may be the reason for its loosening grip on black literary studies today, Black Aesthetic Theory has, it should be admitted, played an important role in history. For nearly two decades, it held black letters under its sway. It made blacks conscious and proud of their own artistic tradition and encouraged the development of that tradition in contemporary literature. By stressing the uniqueness of black literature, it helped readers — especially white American readers settled in their ways — develop proper appreciation for it. Without recourse to politics, Black Aesthetic Theory could not have achieved so much in so little time.

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