

Received Date: January 2023

Revised: March 2023

Accepted: June 2023

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.3126/jpd.v4i1.64239>

African-American Cultural Expression: The Defiance of Black Aesthetics

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Abstract

This research delves into the transformative realm of Black Aesthetics as a profound and resilient cultural resistance strategy employed by African-Americans. In a historical context marked by the degradation of the genuine image of African-Americans through Western perspectives, Black Aesthetics emerges as a dynamic force challenging stereotypes and reclaiming agency over cultural narratives. The study explores the foundational influences of key socio-political movements, namely the Harlem Renaissance, the Black Power Movement, and the Civil Rights Movement, in shaping and catalyzing the development of Black Aesthetics. During the 1920s, the Harlem Renaissance served as a crucible for cultural revitalization amid the multifaceted struggles faced by African-Americans. Fueled by a desire to break free from racial stereotypes, this movement laid the groundwork for the emergence of Black Aesthetics as a tool for empowerment and self-expression. The subsequent impact of the Black Power Movement and the Civil Rights Movement on Black Aesthetics is examined, revealing how these movements contested prevailing Western perspectives and sought to redefine the narrative surrounding African-Americans. The Black Power Movement, emphasizing self-determination and autonomy, stood in stark contrast to the assimilationist goals of the Civil Rights Movement, collectively contributing to the nuanced evolution of Black Aesthetics. Through an interdisciplinary lens, this research navigates the intersection of art, ideas, and socio-political dynamics, elucidating how Black Aesthetics serves as a cultural resistance mechanism. It explores the multifaceted dimensions of this resistance, including the creation of alternative narratives, the celebration of cultural identity, and the reclamation of dignity. Ultimately, this research contributes to a comprehensive understanding of Black Aesthetics as a transformative force in cultural resistance, shedding light on its historical roots, its evolution through significant movements, and its enduring impact on reshaping the narrative of African-American identity.

Key Words: Black Aesthetics, Cultural Resistance, African-American, Harlem Renaissance, Black Power Movement, Civil Rights Movement, Racial Stereotypes, Identity Politics

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Introduction

Black Aesthetics emerges as a powerful and transformative response to the pervasive Western perspective that has historically degraded the authentic image of African-Americans. Rooted in a cultural revolution within the realms of art and ideas, this movement challenges and interrogates the stereotypical notions imposed by the West. The catalysts for the emergence of Black Aesthetics can be traced back to significant socio-political movements such as the Harlem Renaissance, the Black Power Movement, and the Civil Rights Movement. The Harlem Renaissance, a cultural and artistic phenomenon during the 1920s, played a pivotal role in shaping the foundations of Black Aesthetics. This movement gained momentum amidst the political, economic, and social struggles faced by African-Americans, providing a platform for the expression of their identity and creativity. Fueled by a desire to break free from the constraints of racial stereotypes, the Harlem Renaissance became a driving force for cultural revitalization and empowerment. The Black Power Movement and the Civil Rights Movement further propelled the evolution of Black Aesthetics. These movements, arising in response to systemic racism and oppression, sought to redefine the narrative surrounding African-Americans. The Black Power Movement, with its emphasis on self-determination and autonomy, questioned the prevailing Western perspectives that perpetuated racial injustice. Simultaneously, the Civil Rights Movement, advocating for equality and integration, contributed to the discourse on the rightful place of African-Americans within the broader societal fabric. In this dynamic interplay between social movements and artistic expression, Black Aesthetics emerged as a means of reclaiming agency over the narrative of African-American identity. This introduction sets the stage for a deeper exploration of how Black Aesthetics transcends conventional boundaries, paving the way for a reimagined and authentic representation of the rich and diverse experiences within the African-American community.

Methodology

The methodology employed in this research seeks to comprehensively investigate the dynamics of Black Aesthetics as a cultural resistance strategy among African-Americans. Through an interdisciplinary approach, this study aims to navigate the realms of art, history, and socio-political movements to unravel the nuanced evolution of Black Aesthetics. This study will involve an examination of scholarly articles, books, and other relevant sources to provide a foundation for the research. The research will employ a historical analysis to trace the origins and development of Black Aesthetics. This involves examining primary sources, historical documents, and archival materials related to the

Harlem Renaissance, the Black Power Movement, and the Civil Rights Movement. This historical lens will enable a contextual understanding of the socio-political landscape that shaped Black Aesthetics.

Review of Literature

The Black Aesthetic Movement, a pivotal cultural and artistic phenomenon, has garnered diverse interpretations from critics, reflecting its impact on the voices of African Americans across literature, music, and art. James Haskins, a prominent critic, underscores "The era as one where African Americans celebrated their culture and experienced a unique form of recognition (13)." However, internal divisions among the black community manifested in contrasting portrayals, with some emphasizing intelligence and capability, while others highlighted poverty and exoticism. The Harlem Renaissance emerged as a unifying effort, aiming to empower African Americans and establish a distinctive cultural identity through various art forms. Inspired by the Harlem Renaissance, a new wave of artists and intellectuals sought a separate black aesthetics, reviving black musical theater and legitimizing jazz and blues in American theaters. Larry Neal, in his essay "The Black Arts Movement," links this movement to the Black Power Movement, both driven by the Afro-American desire for self-determination and nationhood "(29). He advocates for a reordering of the Western cultural aesthetic to do justice to black culture, urging black individuals to define their identity through their own literature and voice. Brother Knight emphasizes, "the creation of new forms, values, songs, and a separate black history, accountable only to the black community" (qtd. in Neal 30). The Black Arts Movement, rooted in cultural awareness, advocated for a separatist stance against historical white exploitation. The movement staged themes of violence, reflecting a desire for complete separation from the white community and challenging mainstream white culture to establish black autonomy in literature. Contrasting the Black Arts Movement, the Civil Rights Movement emerged, emphasizing integration as its core theme. Led by Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., it celebrated non-violent actions like sit-ins and peaceful demonstrations in the pursuit of equality. In contrast, the Black Power Movement sought separation, demanding economic, cultural, and political power, as well as a separate nation within the larger one. Leaders like Elijah Muhammad and Malcolm X voiced the call for black independence, rejecting assimilation with white America.

Daniel C. Thompson articulates the Black Power Movement's stance, highlighting, "the quest for a black nation and dismissing integration as elimination" (149). The movement elevated black consciousness, fostering self-esteem and inspiring a more

militant stance within traditional civil rights organizations. Bert A. Norman emphasizes, “the movement's methods, including physical resistance and violence through riots and demonstrations” (658), suggesting that black individuals fought for identity establishment through confrontational means. Both the Black Aesthetic Movement and the Black Power Movement played pivotal roles in reclaiming black dignity, social, economic, and political power.

Analysis and Interpretation

The Harlem Renaissance, the Civil Rights Movement and the Black Power Movement empowered Black Aesthetics literature that addresses and glorifies the aspirations and suppressed artistic intellectual strength of the black and radically reorders the western cultural aesthetics through the use of a separate symbolism, mythology, critique and iconology. The Black Aesthetics centralizes artistic and political freedom of blacks and emphasizes self determination through self reliance and black control of artistic world and stands firmly upon ideologies and perspectives of art focusing on culture and life. It creates awareness of the idea of a black separatism and upholds black ideals, solidarity and creativity. The Black Aesthetics plays key role to create a separate literary domain for the blacks, steering away from white domination. The black literature incorporated Black English vernacular and confrontational tone addressing the issues of black separatism, their past, myths, and struggles to create a space of their own in racial America. Similarly, Black Aesthetics advocates for violent means of self-defense, separation from racist American domination and pride in and assertion of the African heritage. Black Arts Literature embodies music, performance, orality and rituals as major elements. The purpose of this movement was to create community awareness for a complete emancipation from white suppression. The aesthetics in art was an inspiration to foster a sense of equality for blacks, encouraging them to voice against white oppressors. Being stimulated by the movement, black artists ventured into creative endeavor for establishing social, political and economic stability within a new America. Black art acted as a vehicle to express their thoughts to fight for the black cause. However, black artists faced a new challenge to recapture their heritage of creative originality and to lead it to a new height in a radical fashion.

Black Aesthetics movement was a creative move that redefined race and progressed the black aesthetics. As a result, the black artists chose their theme on spirituality and cultural heritage. Their main aim is to address the contradictions arising out of the black man's experience in the racist America, reevaluating western aesthetics, the traditional role of

the writers and the social functions of art. They rejected the racial dynamics of western aesthetics as it misrepresented the ethnic minorities, i.e. blacks.

Black Aesthetic theorists, standing against the western aesthetic ideology, developed the concept of Black Art Movement that energized black artists to compose art based on traditional African aesthetics. The Black Aesthetics, challenging western aesthetic ideology, geared the notion of Black Nationalism. Black Aesthetic critics, refusing the concept of Art for Art's sake, emphasized the notion of art for society's sake. They believed that art should deliver moral, social, political and cultural message to the people. The black theorists during 1960s celebrated elements of African culture in an attempt to rejuvenate alternative cultural tradition that survived the middle passage, the ensuing history of slavery and political oppression. Recognizing the cultural resources of the black community, black aesthetic theorists condemn the western aesthetics prioritizing the individual black artist as the source of his/her works. However, they did not ignore the collective efforts of black artists as they tried to redefine their identity and repaired the damages caused by western hegemony. Black theorists deconstruct white supremacy that always glorifies racist intellectual activities and denounced the white mainstream culture that projected the negative image and identity of the Black Americans. The white supremacy demeans the image of the black by portraying them as the tragic mulatto, the clown, the mammy, Uncle Tom and others. One of the leading black theorists Amiri Baraka realized that if black artists wanted to change, they needed to contest these ridiculous black images themselves. As the deeply rooted white supremacy goes beyond its limitation, radical black voices protested to change black images in the mainstream theater marking the beginning of the Black Arts Movement that came into being during 1960s with the assassination of Malcolm X. The Movement empowered the black artists to create a separate space for them in American Literature. Consequently, Amiri Baraka set up a separate Black Theater to portray black consciousness and unravel social contradictions. He explains why he founded Black Arts Repertory Theater School (BARTS): "We wanted an art that would reflect black life and its history and legacy of resistance and struggle. We wanted an art that as black as our music. A blues poetry; a jazz poetry; a funky verse full of exploding antiracist weapons. A bebop and new music poetry that would scream and taunt and rhythm--attack the enemy into submission" (2). The Black Radicalism of the 1960s emerged as theoretical approach to reinforce the New Negro Renaissance's ideologies by introducing radical protest, assertion and spirituality to the black theater and focusing on changes in social economic status of African-Americans. The dramas based on this approach unveil racial ills of white world and force whites to recognize

the power of black spirit. Baraka suggests that “plays be used as tactical weapons in the psychological war against white hegemony as bullets to be used against the enemy” (qtd. in Turner 18). He claims that the black dramas psychologically overpower the whites by using black art as literary weapon.

Apart from Baraka, other black artists also made significant contributions to the movement that included some renowned authors who participated in it through their poems, music, essays, and plays. The movement empowered the black artists to capture diverse areas in their creation. In the words of Mike Sell:

The origin of the Black Arts Movement . . . are most effectively traced to a number of small, distinctively local communities of poets and intellectuals, which gathered in Philadelphia, New York, and Oakland in the middle years of 1960s. These groups pursued a diverse range of projects, including research into African and African American folk, popular, and high cultures; readings of the most significant political, cultural, and aesthetic theories of their day; concrete experimentation with poetic form; self-criticism; and consciousness rising. (59)

Mike Sell highlights that the black authors encapsulated diverse themes like research, folk cultures, political and aesthetic theories, new literary forms and social awareness creation. Larry Neal, introducing his philosophy in his essay, “The Black Arts Movement”, enumerated a wide range of artists involved: “the political values inherent in the Black Power concept are now finding concrete expression in the aesthetics of Afro-American dramatists, poets, choreographers, musicians, and novelists” (29). Likewise, music became immensely popular in the movement, an indispensable part of black aesthetic activities. In his essay “Generational Shifts and the Recent Criticism of Afro-American Literature,” Houston Baker states that the Black Arts Movement, akin to the ideological influence of Black Power, focused on expressing the experiences inherent to the black urban masses. The movement operated under the premise that by examining the distinctive musical and linguistic expressions of the masses, a literary-critical investigator could uncover unique elements of Afro-American creative expression. These elements, encompassing form and performance, were believed to closely align with the genuine emotional references and experimental categories within Afro-American culture.

Baker further asserts that black authors can find creative energy from the black communities who embody source of music and verbal forms of art. In 1968, Neal published an essay that focused on how the movement opposed, any concept of the artist that alienates him from his community (29). Citing it as “the aesthetic and spiritual sister of the Black

Power concept,” Neal directly identified the movement’s mission as one that envisioned “an art that speaks directly to the needs and aspirations of Black America” (29). Black theorists rejected white values and ideas; however, they supported black patriarchy. As a result, male domination came into limelight and the black male writers started to make derogatory statements about black women within their own community.

The Black Arts Movement created awareness among African Americans by which they sought to recreate black images. For this purpose, they required a separate literary means that could fulfill their desire. They realized the foundation of black theater as mainstream theaters marginalized and demeaned the real image of the blacks. Moreover, the artists from the mainstream culture were biased against blacks and far removed from black experiences. Woodie King Jr. declares: “Black communities must have their own art centers, because white values are not Black values” (10). Woodie also advocates for the need of a separate art center to express black values, historically marginalized by mainstream culture.

African-Americans raised voice against social and cultural exclusion in politics and art particularly in theater. Baraka demanded a theater “about, with, for Black people--and only black people” (qtd. in Hatch and Shine 380). Ed Bullins called for a National Black Theater in Harlem to raise black consciousness in America. He claimed it would be an “institution for the black people in America who are a nation within a nation” (qtd. in Marvin X x). These black activists wanted to establish a separate black theater that would address black identity.

White culture has been controlling the black image and black group identity in the theatrical world. A classic example of stereotyping and controlling the image of African-Americans can be seen in minstrelsy, the comic entertainment in which whites put burnt cork in their face to mock at Negroes. Edith Isaacs states that minstrelsy “helped to create and fix the Negro stereotypes--passive or scheming, over-dull or over-shrewd, but always irresponsible and caricatured--which have burdened our theater ever since” (27). The minstrelsy codified the public images of blacks either the Fool or Sambo. James Haskins, in *Black Theater in America*, describes three major stereotypes that appeared on the minstrel stage. The first stereotype depicted the southern Negro as a carefree individual, naturally inclined towards rhythm, enjoying watermelon, and content with plantation life under the care of mass. The second stereotype portrayed the southern black who ventured north as ignorant and clumsy, seemingly incapable of surviving in the new environment, suggesting they would fare better back on the farm. The third stereotype

depicted the northern dandy, excessively dressed, preoccupied with women and leisure, and bearing flamboyant names like Count Julius Caesar Mars Napoleon Sinclair Brown, often speaking in a grandiose manner reminiscent of political speeches.

Before minstrelsy came to an end, black performers began to challenge the negative images against the black through their own theatrical performances. Being offended by their false characterization as ignorant, grinning, happy-go-lucky, and subservient, African Americans decided to set up their own theatre and take over theatrical performances for their liberation. Consequently, they gained power when they began writing their own plays for their own theaters. Blacks challenged white control over the theater by establishing their own African Theater in New York in the early nineteenth century. Dramas acted as an effective literary form for reaching a black audience and for advancing a black identity. Bullins states in an interview:

But now in the theater, we can go right into the Black community and have a literature for the people, for the “people-people,” as Bob Macbeth says for the great masses of the Black people. I think this is the reason that more Black plays are being written and seen, and the reasons that more Black theaters are springing up. Through the efforts of certain Black artists, people are beginning to realize the importance of Black Theater. (qtd. in Marvin X viii)

The Black theaters gained publicity and staged only the plays written by blacks, portraying the black experience. These plays represented revolutionary notion by focusing on agitation, propaganda, non-traditional structure and dialogue.

Black Nationalism gave birth to Afrocentrism (a movement from the mid 1970s to the end of 1980s) that advocates a return to African consciousness in the form of ritual based aesthetics and emphasizes Kuntu (cosmic connection) and Nommo (power of the voiced) in black dramas. Oliver Jackson, defining Kuntu drama, explains that this form of drama aims to uncover and bring forth the essence of the specific ritual it embodies. It relies on the invocation of power, employing words, dance, and music to influence behavior. It carries a mystical quality, striving to evoke spiritual insight and transformation.

Afrocentrism, focusing on psychological issues, inspired black writers to employ symbols, motifs, rituals, and signs of black community. It further encouraged the black people to seek and establish their subject in America by promoting African cultural elements as historically valid in the context of art, music, and literature. It places blacks at the center and makes commitment to lexical refinement that eliminates pejoratives about them. It

highlights a powerful imperative from historical sources to revise the collective text of African people. The main objective of Afrocentrism is to educate black mass by theatrical performance of African rituals

The theater influenced by Afrocentrism displays a ritualized context of reality with positive spiritual purpose. It involves the audience in the ritual as a part of a community invoking the spirits who help bring forward the enlightened insights of the ritual. The drama based on Afrocentrism breaks the hierarchy between the artist and the audience. It intends to invoke the power of the cosmos and the spirit world toward the welfare of humanity. It is based on Dionysian element against the fusion of Apollonian and Dionysian modes of Euro-centric theater. Afrocentrism stresses the need of cosmic awareness or spirituality as an essential element in the formation of a black ground and framework for artistic and theoretical existence and evaluation.

Conclusion

The Black Aesthetics movement, emerging from the Harlem Renaissance, Civil Rights Movement, and Black Power Movement, served as a crucial platform for African American artists to reclaim their cultural identity and challenge oppressive white hegemony in the artistic realm. Through literature, theater, music, and other forms of expression, black artists sought to redefine their image, assert their autonomy, and foster a sense of solidarity within their community. This movement not only aimed to confront racial injustice but also to celebrate African heritage and spirituality. The subsequent development of Afrocentrism further underscored the importance of cultural authenticity and ritualized aesthetics in black artistic expression, promoting a deeper connection to African traditions and consciousness. As a result, the Black Aesthetics movement and Afrocentrism have left a lasting legacy, empowering black artists to assert their voices, reshape societal narratives, and advocate for social change. Through their creative endeavors, they have paved the way for a more inclusive and equitable artistic landscape, enriching the cultural tapestry of America.

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