# The Aesthetics of Blackness: Theology, Aesthetics & Blackness in the Black Arts Movement Western Aesthetics and Blackness

by

Damon Powell, Ph.D.
info@damonpowell.com
damonpowell.com

The Reverend Damon Powell is a practicing visual artist and independent scholar who resides in Oakland, California. His research employs an interdisciplinary, constructive theology that makes use of theological aesthetics. As an artist, his mission is to give divine light form through the manifestation of striking visual images that encourage reflection upon the myriad ways Spirit reveals itself within our world.

## Abstract

This article examines the aesthetic dimensions of blackness and its relationship to Black-American art, aesthetics, and culture. It begins by identifying the role and symbolism of blackness within the Western context and goes on to point out its effects upon the cultural productions of Black-Americans in the arts and religion. The second portion of the article addresses the transformation of blackness within the Black Arts and Black Power Movements with particular emphasis upon the aesthetic dimensions of blackness as it was expressed in the artistic and religious life of the movements.

Although the terms *"Aesthetics," "Art,"* and *"Religion"* are Western social constructs that most often reflect the tastes and interests of the dominant socio-cultural group, the phenomena these terms seek to describe are trans-historical and trans-cultural.[1] In the Western manifestations of this phenomena, visual images occupy an important role within a cultural matrix that has inscribed negative symbolism upon blackness throughout Western culture. This is highly significant important because *"visual images are a part of a culture's structure and not simply expressions of its religious beliefs, historical myths, moral codes, aesthetic preferences, internal social system, and relationship with outsiders…"*[2] When not explicitly expounding and illustrating political or religious messages; art has also played an insidious role in the perpetuation of socio-cultural systems.

Nowhere is this more easily illustrated than in the depiction or exclusion of persons of African descent within the Western Art tradition. Persons of African lineage have been subject to negative and stereotypical portrayals since their first encounters with Euroethnic culture. The association of blackness with evil, danger, repugnancy, the demonic…has been permanently inscribed with negative symbolism in Western culture since the early Greco-Roman period. Robert Hood sums all this up by aptly stating,

> *…we see the emergence of an aesthetic and color code in Western thought in which many of the carnal forces associated with Blackness in modern times and evident in such events as the lynching of black teenagers …were alive and well in the imagination and the consciousness of both the Greeks and the Romans: curiosity, carnality, and negativity or at least social and intellectual disdain…Hence the roots of cultural beliefs about blacks were implanted early on in Western thought based on ethnocentric interpretations…Blackness was given a moral category by Christians as they tried to make sense of biblical notions of sin and evil …furthermore, sex and evil began to figure prominently as ontological attributes of blackness, in turn shaping Christian beliefs about blacks.*[3]

Greek art in the 6th century was already depicting satyrs as beasts with dark skin and Negroid features whose origins were purportedly somewhere in Africa.[4] In the 1st century Christian tradition, the Epistle of Barnabas refers to the devil as the *"Black One"* and associates a long laundry-list of negative characteristics which are to be associated with evil and blackness.[5] By the Middle Ages, the European mind had already made blackness a symbol of baseness and evil, and rendered the features of black-skinned people ugly thereby establishing a negative, counter aesthetic to whiteness. In the 14th and 15th centuries, one of the three Magi was usually depicted as an African.[6] During the 16th century, the African slave trade vastly increased. As it did so, the depiction of African slaves as page boys in upper-class portraiture became a popular device for emphasizing the sitter's much paler complexion – while simultaneously supporting the notion of Euroethnic beauty and superiority.[7] As greater numbers of abolitionists arose in Britain and the Americas, the British Abolitionist Association enlisted illustrators to help its cause. Unfortunately, most of these depictions did more to perpetuate images of African docility, subservience, inferiority, and helpless dependence upon Euroethnic persons for their liberation.

In the colonies, America's leading artists and publications re-enforced these negative ideals by producing images of their African slaves as grotesque buffoons, servile menials, comic entertainers and threatening sub-humans. The masses of American society could not help but be informed and shaped by the power of these negative depictions which were presented to them on a daily basis. These depictions reinforced negative stereotypes while working in conjunction with Christian beliefs regarding blackness to strengthen and perpetuate colonial myths regarding their African slaves-thus justifying and naturalizing the inhumanity of the slavocracy.

Later, these negative images were transformed into depictions of minstrels who performed in black face. In addition, books like Uncle Tom's Cabin, the Sambo stories, and negative depictions of Black-Americans as coons with highly exaggerated features…all helped re-enforce racist stereotypes and aided the slavocracy's efforts at dehumanization. This process of signification by the dominant culture is responsible for the color prejudice which has become *"indecipherably coded"* into American language, art, and literature.[8] The negative association of Blackness with that which is ugly, or morally and intellectually inferior speaks volumes about the value of Blackness literally as color symbolism, and figuratively as it has been applied to persons of African ancestry within Western art and culture. The dominant culture's negative signification of blackness creates a dilemma that strikes at the very core of Black-American personhood. Black-Americans have been attempting to challenge these dehumanizing racial representations from the very moment they stepped foot onto America's shores.

Once the African slaves stepped onto the shores of the Americas the realities of their enslavement effectively rendered any possibility of maintaining their African artistic creations, religious beliefs, and aesthetic sensibilities incomprehensible within the context slavery. Their abrupt relocation to a hostile environment forced the enslaved Africans to find a different set of values and sensibilities to draw from as they responded to the experiences of sheer horror and psychic trauma they were forced to confront on a daily basis within the slavocracy. The abrupt rupture from their homeland combined with the horrors of the middle passage and chattel slavery, forced them to undergo a kind of psychic deconstruction that could utilize their former beliefs and practices as a basis for the development individual or cultural identity. This violent deconstruction of the African worldview forced those enslaved,

> *…to either generate or identify a new set of symbols, images, and rituals that could give sense and meaning to the incomprehensibility of the slave experience in North America. African slaves took what was available from their past and reinterpreted it…*[9]

The Art Historian and critic Guy McElroy reminds us that, "*…African-Americans commenced their cultural lives in this hemisphere as veritable deconstructions, so to speak, of all that Western culture so ardently wished to be."*[10] McElroy recognizes that the experience of slavery forced the African slaves to rapidly deconstruct their previous worldview and construct a new psycho-spiritual matrix which integrated pieces of their previous symbol systems with others garnered from their new experiences. This self-integration process is akin to what theologian Dwight Hopkins refers to as *"co-constitution of the self."* [11] This process of self co-constitution is an embodied struggle to obtain some semblance of psycho-spiritual liberation and bolster a sense physical and spiritual humanity.[12] The act of self co-constitution is an inherently creative endeavor that involves the development of a new web of relationships between one's self, the past, and the realities of one's present context.

Self co-constitution is an aesthetic act because human *"creativity is always 'contextual' in that it is conditioned or limited by multiple influences from history and the environment"* [13] The implications of this statement help us to identify self co-constitution and the relationships which it seeks to recreate as aesthetic.

Therefore, it is not surprising that the primary modalities utilized by Black-Americans to achieve self co-constitution: art and religion are both aesthetic. For our purposes, these aesthetic modalities refer to vehicles of expression that rely upon what has been traditionally labeled as acts of artistic or creative expression – such as art, music, literature…etc. For Black-Americans these modalities have acted as the wellspring from which we interpret, and then express our values. This process of interpretation and expression has resulted in the creation of art, political structures, and religious beliefs which in turn served as the seeds of development for Black-American culture. While culture serves as the repository for a society's moral, ethical, and philosophical judgments regarding the nature of physical and spiritual reality.[14] All cultures recognize art and religion as aesthetic modalities but the primary mode of cultural expression for any culture has always been its art. The reason art has occupied this place of primacy is due to its ability to exist without religion. However, religion cannot exist without art. Every religion expresses its truths through some form of artistic expression. Within the Black-American context even public prayer is prized as an act of creative artistry. Black-American preachers are well-known and praised for their ability to give expression to the deepest tenets of their faith tradition through the use of rhythm, poetic language, metaphor, sonorous, melodic intonations…in a manner which would rival any other traditional form of artistic expression.

From an aesthetic standpoint, the very states of consciousness and feeling which religion and art seek to achieve are aesthetic in nature. The most cherished aspects of religious experience like bliss, communion with the divine, peace, ecstasy, catharsis, transcendence, enlightenment, and illumination are all states that invoke the kinds of feeling and relation that are most easily conveyed through art.[15] This is one of the reasons why the use of aesthetic modalities is an integral part of religious expression. The arts

> *… help us to encounter the holy and the sacred. They provide the means that enable us to perceive life's ultimate meanings. They remind us that faith precedes theology, character precedes moral decision making…that our knowing of God precedes our conceptualizations about God.*[16]

Without the arts we would be unable to adequately express the ineffable, let alone communicate the depths of religious experience or tradition.

Historically, art and religion have been the only two means of cultural development that were easily and readily accessible to the Black-American community. It was art that supported the process of self co-constitution and allowed for the transmission of newly developed cultural values through its ability to embed the new insights within the collective cultural memory by engaging perception, feeling and cognition simultaneously.[17] Not only does art invoke deeper feeling and cognition, but these emotions are often shared and experienced communally. In other words, art has a way of converging, coordinating, and attuning people or groups to one another.[18] Not only does this characteristic of art allow for the cultivation of fellow-feeling, it also functions as a means of promoting social cohesion. In all cultures we find people bonded together to hear the same stories, see the same things, share common feelings…all bound together by the emotions expressed in ritual, religion, imagery, and like feelings.[19] The emotive aspects of art enhance our capacity for expression, communication, social cohesion, representation, and signification; thus making it the perfect vehicle for transmitting a community's cultural values.

The African slaves who entered the Americas were from varying tribes, which spoke different languages, and had their own unique cultural matrices. Once they reached Americas shores they had to find a vehicle which would allow them to work with one another and form a new common cultural identity. From this perspective, it is not surprising that the modalities of art and religion were utilized in this process since they have allowed Black-Americans to maintain some semblance of sanity in the midst of a physically hostile and psycho-spiritually abusive environment. For those who suffer from the affects of marginalization and oppression, *any* acts which allow them to affirm their ability to exercise self-determination and personal agency i.e. freedom, are acts of liberation. When one chooses to order one's experiences and environment, or to place emphasis upon certain perceptions and experiences over others, freedom is exercised at the most fundamental level. The very fact that Black-American artists continue to create works of art despite attempts at objectification, fetishism, silencing, and exclusion is an affirmation of their efforts to refashion their materiality for the purpose of exercising self-determination and personal agency both individually and culturally. The existence of Black-American religion, Spirituals, Blues, Jazz, and Hip-Hop serve as ample evidence that Black-Americans have always intuitively known that creative power is transformative power.

The Spirituals were not only works songs, but songs of praise that contained coded messages that were easily recognized by those who were within the community. "Steal Away to Jordan" wasn't just about freedom, it was also about meeting up later in the night where they could be free and express themselves as a community. Hip-Hop isn't just about entertainment. At its best it is cultural critique, inspiration, cultural expression and a host of other things. Black youth not only found a way to express themselves, but to also process the affects of their marginalization, and exercise self-determination through the aesthetic modality of music. These creative acts simultaneously affirm their humanity and give a sense of freedom and liberation.

## Black Aesthetics and the Harlem Renaissance

From a theological perspective, the Black Church was the single most potent force within Black-American culture throughout slavery, reconstruction and the post-bellum period. As the mainline Black-American denominations expanded numerically and geographically they became a driving force behind a period of unprecedented radicalization. However, as the nation eased its way into the twentieth century the majority of these mainline denominational churches shifted their theological teachings towards a more accommodating *"hermeneutic of sacrifice"* which emphasized a more evangelical, and pacifistic response to White oppression that would no longer support the politico-radicalism of the past.[20] This theological shift led many to assert that Black churches and their leaders were the advocates of accommodation to Whites and a *"pie in the sky"* religion that focused more upon justice in the life hereafter.

Although the Black church may have slipped quietly into institutionalization, Black-American artists found a renewed sense of self-identification and creative exuberance that could only be described as heaven-sent. As the twentieth century dawned, Black-Americans began to propagate a *"New Negro"* concept whose aim was to nullify and counteract some of the negative, dehumanizing depictions of blackness which permeated Western culture. Although the dominant culture's dehumanizing images were based primarily upon physical characteristics, the *"New Negro"* agenda focused predominantly on reason, language, ethical imperatives, and the promotion of literacy.[21] In other words, the *"New Negro"* concept was at its heart an apologetic approach aimed at nullifying and/or refuting the negative stereotypes which plagued the Black-American community. Anthony Pinn points out the circular nature of Black apologetics in relation to Euroethnic racial ideologies by indicating the dialectical relationship between them. Although Euroethnic racial ideologies took on their own distinctive flavor in the Americas, many of their ideals eventually influenced the cultural philosophies of Black-Americans to such a degree that from the beginning of the nineteenth century and through late twentieth century, Black-Americans primarily attempted to define and justify themselves by the negative metaphysical determinants of Euroethnic racial ideologies surrounding blackness.[22] The *"New Negro"* cultural philosophy operated as a counter-discourse to the blackness which whiteness had created. It was hoped that this counter-discourse would act as an antithesis to categorical racism by re-inscribing Black-American culture as aesthetically heroic, creative, morally masculine, and self determined.[23]

The Harlem Renaissance and the artistic productions of that era played an integral role in the propagation of the *"New Negro"* agenda. The writings of W.E. B. Du Bois illustrate the philosophical dilemma Black-American artists faced during this era. Many of the Harlem Renaissance artists struggled to make sense of their position within society as Black-Americans who happen to be artists, and their responsibility to use their art as a vehicle to aid the plight of their people.

This struggle would continue throughout the period - shifting from one extreme to the other. Du Bois' personal struggles around this issue are reflected in his comments regarding the significance of the visual arts. In the 1921 issue of the magazine *"Crisis"* he wrote, *"Negro Art today is plowing a difficult row…We insist that Art and Propaganda be one. This is wrong and in the end it is harmful."*[24] However, just five years later he begins to feel that much more radical action is necessary. He alters his position in a later article on *"Criteria in Negro Art"* penned in 1926 by writing,

> *Thus all art is propaganda and ever must be…whatever art I have for writing has been used always for propaganda for gaining the right of black folk to love and enjoy. I do not care a damn for any art that is not used for propaganda. But I do care when propaganda is confined to one side while the other is stripped and silent.*[25]

Just as the Black-American artist begins to find his/her own aesthetic voice and inner subjectivity, Alain Locke, W.E.B. Du Bois and others also call upon them to make a stand for their people. Although I see the issue of artistic responsibility to be the central struggle of the Harlem Renaissance era, this inability to adequately reconcile or separate aesthetic from non-aesthetic concerns was not the only issue which these artists struggled to address. There was also a need to develop valid standards for artistic criticism, reconcile personal creativity with social criticism, and establish clear boundaries surrounding the acceptance of White patrons.

Despite the many significant achievements of the era, the promise of the Harlem Renaissance was ultimately unfulfilled. Black-American artists and aestheticians failed to develop any definitive aesthetic statement in the period prior to the Civil Rights and Black Power Movements. David Driskell believes that during the post Harlem Renaissance period between 1930 and 1960 (approximately) the desire for White acceptance and assimilation became so strong that any other options were simply put aside or ignored. Driskell said,

> *The majority of black Americans have consistently attempted to become as much as possible like other (white) Americans and have resented and strongly resisted being thought of as different…it is no wonder that any theory or philosophy that suggested separation, whether in art or elsewhere, was promptly attacked. Such ideas were a threat to integration…it was impossible to discuss such concepts seriously.*[26]

Despite the failure of Black artists to develop any definitive aesthetic position, Black-Americans still made considerable progress both aesthetically and racially. Organizations like the NAACP and the Works Progress Administration (WPA) synergized with the efforts of many WWII veterans and the new burgeoning Black middle class in ways that allowed the Black-American masses to reap benefits in areas such as: education, the development of a middle class, patronage and recognition for artists…etc. From this perspective, the events that led to the Civil Rights and Black Power Movements were the result of many smaller victories that helped to build momentum, confidence, and solidarity among Black-Americans despite differences in class, religion, and pigmentation. The question was not whether Black-Americans would obtain equal rights, but under what circumstances.

## Black Aesthetics and the Black Arts Movement

The Civil Rights and Black Power Movements were both radical watershed moments within Black-American history and the nation at-large. The radical changes that occurred as a result of these movements were some of the most intense and galvanizing moments this nation had ever experienced. But when one attempts to define or identify the Black Aesthetic one must be prepared to reflect upon Black-American culture and the ways in which Black people express their experiences, feelings, and perceptions of and about - their particular context. Even when discussing art, we can ill afford to do so at the expense of other factors which contribute to its' creation. Each and every work of art is connected to a particular background that is historical, social, spiritual, political and psychological in nature.[27] Art should not be separated from its cultural context any more than it should be from everyday life. *Life is art is prayer*. Imamu Amiri Baraka echoes this principle by describing culture as, *"Simply, the way one lives…what you are formed by. Your total experience and its implications and theories."*[28] The way in which one lives is inextricably connected to the existing social order, which expresses itself through the use of religion, art, and politics. It is these three points that form the nexus of any given culture. Art describes the culture, religion elevates it, and politics aids in defining the social order-so that it may function as an organism.[29] One cannot afford to separate them, nor view them as non-related entities which co-exist without overlapping one another.

The three factors of religion, politics and art are all embedded within a cultural framework that is subsumed within the given social order based upon the way people feel about them. These feelings are not always readily apparent because a society's overall cultural ethos allows them to be encoded and preserved in rational and supra-rational forms*"*[30] Black-Americans have been living out and developing their cultural experience on the basis of these feelings and intuitions from the moment they set foot on America's shores. Although Amiri Baraka uses the term *"feelings"* I am sure he means much more than emotional content. He is also referring to the physical, supra-sensual, and sensuous aspects of life that are part and parcel of human embodiment.

This experience of *feeling* relates directly to perception and is therefore, aesthetic. In order to feel something one must first have some type of experience that is in turn apprehended by the senses. Thus Baraka intuitively connects feeling directly to aesthetic experience. Black Art is creative work by and about, the feelings, perceptions, and experiences of a people who shared a common bond based upon their experiences of racial oppression within the North American context. It is a commentary upon "*how we feel*" our situations, and "*how we feel about*" our situations.[31] Politics, religion, and art are manifestations of these felt reflections.

Keeping the above in mind, there is one issue within the early Civil Rights Movement which I believe to be of extreme aesthetic significance for our discussion of Blackness and aesthetics. That being a point included within the argument developed by the NAACP in their 1954 trial *Brown vs. the Board of Education*. The Supreme Court's *Brown vs. the Board of Education* ruling was a major blow to the forces that sought to maintain the separate but unequal status of segregation. This decision helped to begin the struggles to confront White supremacy that were characteristic of the era. Although there were many examples of Black-American life and development used as evidence by the NAACP within the case, I would like to point out the internalization of the ideal that White-Americans and white skin were inherently superior to that of Black-Americans. There were and have been, numerous studies which indicate that many Black-Americans wished to be White, or at the least, to be like White-Americans by having lighter skin, thinner hair, or other characteristics…all of which were used by the NAACP as evidence when the Supreme Court ruled that segregation was inherently discriminatory.[32] In addition to the studies, testimony was provided on the sale of hair straighteners and skin lighteners as evidence of the horrible effects racial domination exercised upon the Black-American spirit and psyche.[33]

Dr. Francis Cress Welsing has applied Einstein's Unified Field Theory to psychology. Einstein posited that a total behavioral energy system can be viewed as a unified field of energetic phenomena. Once this field is perceived and described, laying out its etiology and dynamic will shed light upon the individual phenomena within the field.[34] Dr. Cress Welsing identifies symbol and symbolism as the *"unifying field"* through which a variety of etiologies and cultural dynamics may be perceived and described. By understanding the major symbols and forms of symbolism within a particular culture, we are better equipped to understand *why* and *how* that culture came into being (etiology). If we apply Dr. Cress Welsing's theory to the symbolism ascribed to Blackness within Western art, the central unifying theme is the persistent perpetuation of Greco-Roman ideals regarding physical perfection within Western art. This ideal has encouraged and perpetuated Euroethnic racial prejudice, promoted the notion that persons of Euroethnic descent possess greater physical beauty, and supported doctrines of White intellectual and ethical superiority.[35]

The process through which this symbolism has become encoded into this unified field is referred to as semiosis. Semiois is the action of a sign. Since a sign points to a reality beyond itself, it initiates a cognitive effect within the interpreter.[36] In this case, the interpreter is Western culture. The re-inscription of these negative symbols is repeated throughout history as part of the signification process. This ongoing process of interpretation results in the development of psychological and ideological meaning in both the individual and communal consciousness. It is this process which allowed for the negative symbolism associated with blackness to become encoded within the European cultural matrix.

For persons of Euroethnic origins the effects of this negative symbolism are often manifested in ways that are equally damaging to Whites as well as Blacks. Dr. Na'im Akbar notes that racism damages the Euroethnic psyche by promoting ideals of superiority and justifiable entitlement; stunting and retarding the moral capacity for realistic self-evaluation or self-correction which in turn results in an inability to curb self-destructive behaviors; and encourages the creation of a God complex.[37] Dolores Williams expands this list by speaking about the development of what she defines as racial narcissism. She has observed that many White-Americans have an unnatural regard for their whiteness which serves as the basis of their determinations about their own self-worth-both individually and collectively. She argues that the development of racial narcissism within the white psyche eventually results in pathological overvaluation of an individual's or their race's skin color to the point of misusing one's power and authority to abuse, persecute, or commit acts of genocide against members of the less powerful racial group.[38]

Both of these theorist's ideas help us to comprehend how the negative aesthetic value associated with blackness laid the a foundation for the objectification and fetishism of Black-American bodies. These negative associations have supported the cultural values of mercantilism and colonialism by allowing Black bodies to be bartered, sold, branded, disfigured, castrated, degraded, raped, and treated as any other commodity. Sara Savage illustrates this poignantly by pointing out that,

> *In our culture today, it is women, children, the elderly, blacks, and the disabled who are accorded with a body as an intrinsic part of their person. And all of these classes of persons have a body in a problematic sense: they cannot escape their body's impact.*[39]

In other words, there is nowhere to run and nowhere to hide. To be Black in Euroethnic culture is to be a living, breathing symbol. Your very presence not only signifies volumes-but generally produces a negative impact upon those around you both within and without your culture. To be Black is to be constantly and critically aware of one's self, one's body, and its impact upon those around you.

The inscribing of negative associations to black bodies helps to fuel White-American fear and disdain for Black bodies - and is at least partially responsible for the experience of *"double consciousness"* which Black-Americans so often feel as they attempt to live and move within American society. It is the constant awareness that you cannot escape your blackness combined with a constant need to monitor how, and what type of affect your black visage has upon those around you.

The question we must now ask is, *"How does one develop any positive anthropological aesthetic when their very humanness is at stake?"* Dolores Williams also sheds light on this question by pointing out some of the negative effects of racism and the negative signification associated with black bodies. She asserts that modern Blacks appear to be color struck. The majority of Black America has internalized and been conditioned by the negative aesthetic value placed upon the color black and their own black visage. They consider their black skin to be a symbol of their intellectual and moral inferiority.[40] In Black-American life, this internalization has exhibited itself in color caste systems which put emphasis on the lightness of one's skin as an indication of greater intelligence, beauty, and overall social value. *"If you white you're alright…if you brown, stick around. But if you're black, stay way back!"*[41] This preoccupation with skin tone has resulted in: the proliferation of skin lighteners, wigs, hair straightening techniques, futile efforts to look and act like Caucasians, the belief that kinky hair is *"bad"* hair, the inability to accept other Black-Americans in positions of leadership, and infighting among Black-Americans of varying skin coloration throughout our communities. All of these communal divisions have an aesthetic basis which was initiated by slave-masters who tended to give greater *"privileges"* to their lighter skinned illegitimate offspring and house slaves. But what many Black-Americans have still failed to realize is that in the eyes of Whites, all blacks were believed to be hopelessly inferior.[42]

In North American culture the Black-American body has been inscribed with an archetypal symbolism that has been unconsciously attributed to Black personhood. Kwame Ture and Charles Hamilton put it this way, *"There is no black man in this country who can live 'simply as a man.' His blackness is an ever-present fact of this racist society, whether he recognizes it or not."*[43] The Black Power and Black Arts Movements recognized this fact and took decisive steps to fight against it. Before the Black Arts Movement, *"No social movement to end white supremacy addressed the issue of internalized racism in relation to beauty as intensely as did the Black power revolution of the nineteen sixties."*[44] The idea behind the Black power revolution and the well known slogan, *"Black is Beautiful!"* was not simply an attempt to initiate another set of dualistic constructs based upon thesis and antithesis by simply putting Black-Americans on top and placing White-Americans at the bottom. Its goal was to demand that Black-American people counteract the negative effects of race and representation by encouraging Black-Americans to *"Love our own Black flesh!"*

This loving ourselves meant working to abolish the color caste system within our own culture. It meant working to uncover and alter racist stereotypes that have historically depicted us as ugly, inferior, and undesirable. New standards of beauty were set in place that valued varying shades of Blackness and opened the door for public discourse about the detrimental effects of internalized racism and the aesthetic standards surrounding race.[45] This loving was a step toward decolonization that opened doors and inspired changes that continued to take place well into the 1980's. The effort was to not only address Euroethnic standards of beauty and the color caste system; it was also about freeing the Black-American psyche and imagination so that it could promote self-determination by helping us to interrogate our own implicit assumptions about beauty. The promotion of the concept *"Black is beautiful"* was a deliberate attempt to subvert the dominant aesthetic paradigm concerning blackness by initiating a process of decolonization within the Black-American psyche and spirit. *"Black is beautiful"* is a consummate example of what the religious scholar Charles Long referred to as signifying upon the legitimated signification.

The new goal was to foster self-affirmation, social freedom, and economic gain through the promotion of positive images of Black beauty, pride, and power within Black-American schools, churches, businesses, and media.[46] More specifically, *"The goal of black self-determination and black self-identity-Black Power-is full participation in the decision-making processes affecting the lives of black people, and recognition of the virtues in themselves as black people."*[47] This new emphasis filled many Black-American artists with a new sense of power, anger, determination, and revolutionary ardor which rendered them vital components of the Movement.[48] The slogans, *"Black Power," "Black is Beautiful,"* and *"It's beautiful to be Black"* created a new attitude of outspoken expressiveness which required new aesthetic and ideological formulations that could aide in decolonizing the Black-American masses through subversion of the dominant aesthetic paradigm.

The Black artist's search for new ideological formulations inevitably led to an identification with Africa which was on a much broader scale and deeper intensity than had been present during the Harlem Renaissance. During the Harlem Renaissance the works of Africa were seen as physical symbols; Black Power artists began to identify with and apply the invisible, spiritual, and sacred themes of African Art to the Black-American experience. In order to go beyond an African work of art's aesthetic qualities, many artists began conducting intense studies and to traveling to Africa on a regular basis. This metamorphosis began within the artist and presented itself to the world in multi-faceted forms. As in the Harlem Renaissance, the connection to Africa was expressed by visual artists through the use of bright colors, bold patterns, intricate designs, and the working of multiple patterns and colors into single image creations which were both representational and abstract.[49] But this change was most significantly reflected through the depiction of images which,

*…equated 'black' style with self confidence, beauty that was the antithesis of white supremacist models, and 'power'…although many blacks scoffed at the idea that a hairstyle, an attitude, or an alternative worldview could advance black people in the same way that political revolts had liberated oppressed peoples in the past, others believed that revolutions began with these metamorphoses of the self.*[50]

The first group to hit the scene did so in 1963 using the name *"Spiral" (1963-1966).* Spiral was formed in order to explore how the Black-American artist could support and participate in the Civil Rights Movement. The name was coined by Hale Woodruff, and was based upon the ascending upwards spiral of the Archimedes spiral. The initial creation of Spiral was *"…for the purpose of discussing the commitment of the Negro artist in the present struggle for civil liberties, and as a discussion group to consider common aesthetic problems."*[51] Spiral was comprised from a wide range of artists from Abstract Expressionists to Social Protest painters, from the young up-and-coming to the prominent and established. All agreed that style and method was only a means to an end. Simply painting Black subject matter was not the same as developing a manner or way of visualizing painting that was based upon Black-American experience and culture.[52] This awareness was a significant point of recognition that has still not been sufficiently answered. Anyone can paint black subjects but that does not make it Black-American art. More was and is still needed if one is to have any kind of authentic discussion about the existence of a Black-American aesthetic within the visual arts.

Ultimately, Spiral's significance is tied to the willingness of these artists to come together and initiate dialogue upon the issue of artist involvement and the role of art within the context of the Civil Rights liberation struggle. Their sense of responsibility to their people and their willingness to explore an issue that was left unaddressed by the artists of the Harlem Renaissance shows the ongoing progression of Black-American artist's in their attempts to address this issue.

Two other important groups formed in 1969. One was called *"AFRI-COBRA"* (1969-present) also known as the African Commune of Bad Relevant Artists. Afri-COBRA seeks to create art that speaks directly to Black-Americans and their experiences, by communicating visually positive messages to a community who looks and acts like them.[53] Afri-COBRA utilizes design sensibilities based upon African prototypes as points of reference, thus spreading its agenda to foster liberation and solidarity among Africans throughout the diaspora while creating an art of *"expressive awesomeness."*[54] One of their primary goals is to make art accessible to all people by creating posters that are of low cost so they can be easily disseminated to the community.

The group makes no distinction between its political and aesthetic goals.[55] This position is significant in that it illustrates another step in the evolution of Black-American artists and their solid commitment to Black-American experience and liberation. Spiral initiated the dialogue, Afri-COBRA picked up the discussion and took a definitive position which included the development of an aesthetic philosophy that emphasized the artist as a member of the community who was also responsible to it.

The second group to emerge in 1969 was the *Black Academy of Arts and Letters (*1969-72). The Academy was comprised of approximately 50 artists, writers, and scholars. It was supported by an operational grant from the 20th Century Fund.[56] Dr. C. Eric Lincoln served as the academy's president, and detailed its purpose in 1969 at a program in Boston, Massachusetts. In his opening address he responded to the question, *"Why a Black Academy?"* by offering these words, *"[the Black Academy]…is one way of coming to terms with reality in a society which has not made up its mind about the significance of color in its evaluations of excellence, and it is not at all incredulous about that fact."*[57] He went on to admit that there are not separate standards for excellence; but pointed out that in many cases Black-Americans are overlooked or forgotten when they should be given recognition for their contributions to the nation's cultural milieu.

The Black Academy's most significant contribution was its acknowledgement of the need for greater recognition of Black-American artists within every area of the arts. Their creation of incentive awards, touring exhibitions, a hall of fame, rotating chairs of the Arts at Black colleges, and other activities bolstered the careers of many artists and scholars. These activities also created greater visibility and awareness of Black artist's contributions to their community and the larger American cultural landscape.

These aesthetic expressions of Black Pride, Power, and Beauty were reflections of the inner metamorphosis occurring within the Black-American psyche as it attempted to subvert the negative effects of: White racial narcissism, Euro-ethnic standards of beauty, and Western notions about blackness on the symbolic, literal, and theological planes. These efforts at decolonization can be equated with Dr. Charles Long's ideals about intuiting the archaic-as Black-Americans attempted to intuit the realities of the situation to their current experiences in order to create a new common Diaspora understanding of archetypal blackness.

## Black-American Religious Aesthetics and Black Power

The aesthetic dimensions of spirituality have consistently played a vital role in the religious, political, economic, and socially transformative aspects of Black-American experience. This is especially relevant with regard to Black Aesthetic experience-since the commitment of Black-Americans to their respective religious institutions has consistently outranked that of other ethnicities.[58] Since religion, art, and politics are essential aspects of culture, it is imperative that we identify the religio-aesthetic connections within the Black Art and Power Movements.

Theologically, both the Muslim and Christian traditions helped to fuel the Black Arts and Black Power Movements. The contributions of Malcolm X during the early sixties were an invaluable source of inspiration and truth. Malcolm loudly and unapologetically proclaimed the feelings, situation, context, and history of Black-Americans within the United States. He unashamedly proclaimed what Black-Americans instinctively knew and felt about Whites, the system, racism, certain aspects of Christianity, and certain Black-American preachers. *"Blacks loved his angry eloquence. Even devout Christians found themselves crying out, 'Yes, that's right…you know those Muslims are telling the truth about white folks..."*[59]

Malcolm challenged the White-American establishment by effectively pointing out the that the entire basis of American democracy is inherently racist. He spoke boldly to, and against the White-American power establishment and those members of it who used its power for exploitation, acts of violence, and manipulation of colored people on the national and international levels.[60] He threatened those in power by pointing out that despite their attempts at historical silencing through the omission of Black-American contributions to the national fabric, their attempts to perpetrate their version of *"Truth"* as being historically objective was nothing but a lie. Malcolm knew that neither their history, nor their *"Truth"* were objective. He reminded White Americans that Blacks within this country have developed a very different interpretation of the *"Truth"*. Malcolm himself proclaimed *"truths"* relevant to the Black-American experience in order to confront and warn those with power that justice would be served.[61] Malcolm's truth-telling helped Black-Americans release negative feelings of inferiority and low self–esteem so they could discover their own innate Beauty and Goodness. It was this new way of identifying with and uncovering the truth about themselves aesthetically which led to the later adoption of positive affirmations and exclamations such as, *"Black Power"* and *"Black is Beautiful."* None of which would have been possible without Malcolm.

The Christian response to Black power resulted in the development of Black Theology of Liberation. Black Theology was birthed during the turbulent 1960s as an aspect of the Black Power Movement. Despite Dr. King's nonviolent efforts, many Black Church persons felt the need to address the call of Black Power by articulating how they felt the gospel of Jesus Christ not only related to King's love ethic, but to the resounding cries for Black-Americans to rise up and claim their power and dignity in the face of White hatred and oppression. Their response was based upon their belief that the gospel of Jesus Christ was instrumental in helping to liberate the oppressed–thereby enabling them to exercise power and self–determination.

The parent of Black Theology Dr. James Cone was an ordained member of the African Methodist Episcopal Church (AMEC), with a doctorate in Systematic Theology. Cone released his first book, *Black Theology and Black Power* in 1969. From the outset he made it clear, *"…that the good news of Christ called for a ministry in which God and human beings work together to transform this oppressive social condition into a new community of justice on earth."*[62]

Cone's second book, *A Black Theology of Liberation* was published in 1970. This publication is responsible for re-directing the entire course of religious thought in the United States. He successfully argued that Christianity and Black Power were not only compatible, but were critical for continued Black-American survival, resistance, and liberation. Black Theology is a constructive theology that grounds itself in the day-to-day life experiences of the Black-American poor. Dr. Cone asserted that God does not do theology-people do. As we exist in particular contexts the theologies we create are based upon our understanding of that particular context.[63] Thus it is a theology which approaches the divine from below, working from the particular to the universal. After encountering the universal, Black Theology also seeks to further ground itself in experience through the use of praxis. Praxis is an experiential approach which utilizes a process of action, reflection, adjustment, and then reengagement through action.

However, Dr. Cone is a theologian not an artist. Thus any expectation that his writings provide insights related to Black-American art or aesthetics would be unfulfilled. Nevertheless, Cone's third book *God of the Oppressed*, does contain a few references to art in his chapter on *"Black Experience as a Source of Theology."* In this chapter Dr. Cone makes reference to art and creativity as they are connected to experience in general and Black-American theology in particular. The opening lines of this chapter contain these words:

> *There is no truth for and about black people which does not emerge out of the context of their experience…this means that there can be no Black Theology which does not take experience as its starting point. Black Theology is a theology of and for black people, an examination of their stories, tales, and sayings…the Word is more than words about God. God's Word is a poetic happening, an evocation of an indescribable reality in the lives of people.*[64]

Stories, tales, poetic happenings, evocation…are all aesthetic terms used to speak about art. One of the primary means through which the divine discloses, communicates, and reveals, is through the medium of art, and art must be *experienced.* Not only are these experiences fundamentally *sui generis* (of a different kind); but they represent the people's creative attempts to shape life according to their dreams and aspirations. Cone's comments directly reflect my earlier discussion regarding the connections between art and religion, while also supporting Imamu Amiri Baraka's discussion of culture and experience as they relate to feeling and context.

Cone goes on to outline the following experiences as sources for Black Theology: sermon, song, prayer, and the feeling of the spirit; humor as expressed in animal and folk figure tales; the tragic as expressed in Black-American Spirituals and Blues; the narratives of slaves and ex-slaves; and, Black literature.[65] He also specifically mentions several forms of artistic expression as sources and directly links his thinking to Amiri Baraka.

Dr. Cone states, *"…art is never for its own sake but for people's sake. Black art is black people creating values based on their own experience and affirming the willingness to invent new definitions and life-styles commensurate with their struggle to be free."*[66] This statement is a direct response and critique of Modern Art's call of *"art for art's sake"* that was instituted by Marcel Duchamp with the creation of his ready-mades. Cone clearly articulates a position which calls for the Black artist to voice the experiences and struggles of their community. He then goes on to discuss the role of the artist by quoting Baraka, *"The Black Artists role in America is to aid in the destruction of America as he knows it. His role is to report and reflect so precisely the nature of society, and himself in that society, that other men will be moved by the exactness of his rendering…."*[67] Unlike the artists of the Harlem Renaissance, Cone and Baraka are both very clear about what they believe the role of the artist is within the Black community. Art is not for its own sake, nor for the artist's sake. Art is the expressive voice of the people. As such, it must reflect their experiences and their struggles for freedom. Art should and must be in complete solidarity with, and service to the Movement.

The rendering which Baraka speaks of is none other than the Black-American artist's own black body. Cone also intuited this connection between blackness and the black body. But he expressed his understanding through the development and contributions of Black Theology. This process of intuiting is connected to Dr. Charles Long's theories on intuiting the archaic that I discussed previously. Both Baraka and Cone made use of intuition as a means of perceiving the connections between the materiality of their Blackness and the negative affects its marginalization was having upon their community. Each then began to creatively re-define and re-apply those insights into a framework that was both contemporaneous and identity affirming. For them, the symbolizing, signifying, aesthetic power of the Black body could not be ignored.[68] The Religious scholar James Noel also acknowledges this reality by pointing out that,

> *"The symbol that every African-American must struggle to transform and give meaning to-that which represents and defines their social and existential location in the political economy-is their blackness...This fact imposes on black persons in general, and African-American artists in particular, the task of deciphering the symbol of their own materiality."*[69]

The artists of the Black Arts Movement forced America to behold an exact rendering of American blackness as it was symbolized within their own materiality. The creation and re-appropriation of Blackness as beautiful was not just an act of naming and ordination; but a counter-signification against the established signification. This act of self-definition and determination forced Black-Americans to tap into the wellspring of their own experience in order to find the meaning, inspiration and beauty that was hidden deep within.

This meaning was expressed through a re-identification with African culture and worldviews that went beyond the re-appropriation of artistic symbols and expression that accompanied the Harlem Renaissance era. Both the Black Art and Black Power Movements adopted a radical and often inflammatory response to White-American racism and oppression by calling for the development of Black-American studies programs and greater emphasis on valuing and perpetuating Black-American cultural expressions as a source of racial pride.

The medium through which this was done can best be described as *"Soul."*[70] Soul is the penultimate form of recognition, affirmation and homage to the life, work, attitude, and artistry of the entire Black Arts and Black Power Movement. I can find no better way to conclude than with a definition of *"Soul"* as defined by C. Eric Lincoln,

> *Soul is the reaffirmation of the black man's estimate of himself. It is the connective skein which runs throughout the totality of Black experience, weaving it together and infusing it with meaning…it is that which retrieves kinship, and empathy and understanding from the brutalizing atomization of oppression and humiliation. Soul is resuscitated black ego wresting victory from defeat and investing a tragic historical experience with courage, dignity, creativity and determination. Soul is not art, but it has an artistic expression…Soul is the essence of blackness. It is the creative genius of the liberated men and women who have come to terms with themselves and with their heritage. If black is beautiful, it is soul that makes it so….*[71]

Ashe'

## Endnotes

[1] Paul Crowther, "Defining Art, Defending the Canon, Contesting Culture" British Journal of Aesthetics, vol. 44, no. 4 (October 2004), 371.
[2] Robert, Begrimed and Black: Christian Traditions on Blacks and Blackness. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1994), 134.
[3] I have utilized this quote by Dr. Hood to provide a summation of his ideas and overall conclusion(s). My focus is not to provide an overview of blackness in Western history, but to make a point about its relevance to aesthetics in relation to Blackness. Ibid., 43.
[4] Ibid., 27.
[5] Delores S. Williams, Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk (New York: Orbis Books, 1993), 92.
[6] Hood. Begrimed and Black., 29.

[7] The first European country to abandon slavery and the slave trade was Denmark (1792), followed by: Britain (1834), France (1848), the USA (1865) the Spanish colonies (1873), and Brazil (1888). Ibid., 29,
[8] Williams. Sisters in the Wilderness, 91.
[9] James Noel and Matthew V. Johnson, eds., The Passion of the Lord: African American Reflections (Augsburg: Fortress Press, 2005), 10
[10] Guy McElroy, Introduction to Facing History: The Black Image in American Art, 1710-1940, Christopher French, ed., (San Francisco: Bedford Arts; Washington D.C. Corcoran Gallery of Art, 1990), xi.
[11] Dwight N. Hopkins, Down, Up, and Over: Slave Religion and Black Theology (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 1.
[12] Hopkins lists these disciplines as: macropolitical economy, micro everyday life, racial cultural identity and language. He refers to them as areas of creativity without ever defining what he means by the use of the term. Ibid., 2.
[13] Lucinda A Stark Huffaker, Creative Dwelling: Empathy and Clarity in God and Self, American Academy of Religion Series, no. 98 (Atlanta, Georgia, Scholars Press, 1998), 19.
[14] Leroi Jones, Home: Social Essays (New Jersey: Ecco Press, 1998), 212.
[15] Earle J. Coleman, Creativity and Spirituality: Bonds between Art and Religion (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1998), 188.
[16] John Dykstra Eusden and John H. Westerhoff III, Sensing Beauty: Aesthetics, the Human Spirit, and the Church (Cleveland, Ohio: United Church Press, 1998), 4.
[17]Noel Carrol,. *"Art and Human Nature*" The Journal Of Aesthetics and Art Criticism 62: 2 (Spring 2004)., 102.
[18] Ibid., 100.
[19] Although Carroll makes his statements in support of an argument for human nature, I have applied them to this discussion solely to address art's emotive/expressive functions.
[20] JoAnne Marie Terrell, Power in the Blood: The Cross in the African American Experience, The Bishop Henry McNeal Turner/Sojourner Truth Series in Black Religion vol. 15 (New York: Orbis Books, 1998), 75.
[21] McElroy, Facing History, xxxvi.
[22]Anthony B. Pinn, Beyond Ontological Blackness: An Essay on African American Religious and Cultural Criticism (New York: Continuum Publishing, 1995), 61.
[23] Ibid., 79.
[24] Dolan Hubbard ed., The Souls of Black Folk: 100 Years Later (Columbia, Missouri: University of Columbia Press, 2003), 172.
[25] Ibid., 179-180.
[26] David C. Driskell, Two Centuries of Black American Art (New York: Alfred A. Knopf/Los Angeles Museum of Art, 1976), 74.

[27] Ernest D. Mason, *"Black Art and the Configurations of Experience: The Philosophy of the Black Aesthetic,"* transcripted from the Symposium on the Black Aesthetic in Honor of Spelman College' Centennial Celebration (Atlanta: 1981), 1.
[28] Jones, Home: Social Essays., 245.
[29] Ibid., 248.
[30] Ibid., 246.
[31] Mason. Configurations of Experience., 4.
[32] Jack M. Bloom, Class, Race, and the Civil Rights Movement (Indianapolis, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1987), 126.
[33] This phenomenon is still affecting Black children today. A young Black student recently re-duplicated this study among young preschool children. The results were strikingly the same after all these years. These young children had already internalized the negative effects of the dominant white aesthetic. Ibid.
[34] Einstein's Unified Field Theory was the search for a single equation which would serve to combine all the various manifestations of energy phenomena within the universe. Dr. Welsing applies her theories specifically to the phenomena of Racism/White Supremacy, but her ideas about symbol and the unified field can be applied to a variety of images and constructs. Francis Cress Welsing, The Isis Papers: The Keys to the Colors, (Chicago: Third World Press, 1991), 43.
[35] Hugh Honour and John Fleming, The Visual Arts: A History, sixth ed. (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc.), 28.
[36] Kyong Kim, Caged in Our Own Signs: A Book about Semiotics, vol. 4 in the series, Advances in Discourse Processes (New Jersey: Ablex Publishing Corp., 1996), 3.
[37] Na'im Akbar, Chains and Images of Psychological Slavery (New Jersey: New Mind Productions, 1984), 42-44.
[38] Williams, Sisters in the Wilderness. 88.
[39] Although Savage is speaking primarily about Gender and Embodiment, I find her observation to be relevant and applicable. Sara Savage "Through Dance: Fully Human, Fully Alive" in Beholding the Glory: Incarnation Through the Arts, Jeremy Begbie ed. (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Books, 2000), 71.
[40] Williams. Sisters in the Wilderness, 86-87.
[41] Ibid., 87.
[42] Akbar also formally defines what Williams refers to as "color struck" by using the term "color consciousness" which he defines as: the unnatural assignment of mental or moral traits based upon physical skin color. Akbar. Chains and Images of Psychological Slavery, 24.
[43] Kwame Ture and Charles V. Hamilton, Black Power: The Politics of Liberation in America (New York: Vintage Books, 1992), 54.
[44] Bell Hooks, Killing Rage: Ending Racism (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1995), 119.
[45] Ibid., 121.
[46] Richard J. Powell, Black Art and Culture in the 20th Century (New York, N.Y.: Thames & Hudson, 1997), 127.

[47] Ture and Hamilton, Black Power, 46.
[48] Center Gallery of Bucknell University, Since the Harlem Renaissance: 50 Years of Afro-American Art (Lewisburg, Pennsylvania: The Center Gallery of Bucknell University, 1985), 86.
[49] This aesthetic ideal runs parallel with the complex rhythms of jazz and the black church's use of call and response.
[50] Powell, Black Art and Culture, 144.
[51] Spiral met in July, before King's march on Washington in August. Romare Bearden and Harry Henderson, A History of African-American Artists: From 1792 to the Present (New York: Pantheon Books, 1993), 400.
[52] Ibid., 402.
[53] Afri-COBRA, in Afri-Cobra.tumblr.com. (blog post from Monday, January 31, 2011) accessed October , 20, 2015.
[54] Powell, Black Art and Culture, 145.
[55] David C. Driskell ed., African-American Visual Aesthetics: A Postmodernist View (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1995), 25.
[56] Due to space limitations, I am unable to reproduce a specific and detailed list of the "Purposes" of the Black Academy of Arts and Letters, but one can be found in the resource text on page 581. Abraham Chapman ed., New Black Voices: An Anthology of Contemporary Afro-American Literature (New York: Mentor Publishing, 1972), 580-81.
[57] Ibid., 582-83.
[58] Brian K. Blount, general ed., True To Our Native Land: An African American New Testament Commentary. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007), 4.
[59] Although Cone is specifically speaking about Malcolm's earlier speeches, the comment is still applicable to all periods of his life. James H. Cone, Martin, Malcolm and America: A Dream or a Nightmare (New York: Orbis Books, 1991),174.
[60] George Breitman, Malcolm X Speaks: Selected Speeches and Statements (New York: Pathfinder Books, 1989), 34-36.
[61] Ibid., 25.
[62] Dwight N. Hopkins, Heart and Head: Black Theology, Past, Present, and Future (New York: Palgrave/MacMillan, 2002), 14.
[63] Ibid., 17.
[64] James Cone, God of the Oppressed, (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1975), 17-18.
[65] Ibid., 18-28.
[66] Ibid., 28.
[67] Ibid.
[68] Driskell. African-American Visual Aesthetics, 91.
[69] James A. Noel, *"African American Art and Biblical Interpretation"* in True to Our Native Land: An African American New Testament Commentary, Brian K. Blount gen ed (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007), 78.
[70] Ture and Hamilton, Black Power, 38.
[71] Chapman. New Black Voices, 585.