

Black Aesthetics and Black Worship

Introduction

For a long period prior to the Black Revolution of the nineteen sixties many Black people argued mightily against a substantive definition of themselves as anything other than Americans "whose skin happened to be black." White liberals, who were supposed to be our friends, offered similar views. In the Harlem of the nineteen twenties, which was exploding with the creative energy of poets, musicians, dancers and artists, Melville J. Herskovits could conclude that there was no unique Black cultural expression. "Why, it's the same pattern, only a different shade,"¹ he wrote. He also recorded that Black artists, writers and intellectuals themselves were refuting any suggestion of a distinctive racial angle of vision. "The proudest boast of the modern young Negro writer," he said, "is that he writes of humans, not of Negroes."² He concluded that the acculturation of the Negro in America was complete.

To his credit the brilliant, perceptive Alain Locke discerned and registered the distinctiveness of Black cultural expression. "The brands and wounds of social persecution are becoming the proud stigmata of spiritual immunity and moral victory," he wrote in *The New Negro* in 1925.³ Locke, nevertheless, felt obligated to argue toward a universalism that tended to blur that distinctiveness. Locke observed a new emphasis evolving from racial substance which was being used solely for the sake of art . . . "something technically distinctive, something that as an idiom of style may become a contribution to the general resources of art."⁴ The latter qualifier suggests that the legitimacy of a Black aesthetic is judged by what it contributes to art in general, that is, its universality. For although Locke recognized the learning effect of the rich racial experience then being unconsciously drawn upon, his measure of its validity is the

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¹ Melville J. Herskovits, "The Negro's Americanism," in *The New Negro*, ed. Alain Locke (New York: Albert and Charles Boni, Inc. 1925), p. 360.

² *Ibid.*, p. 356.

³ Alain Locke, "Negro Youth Speaks," in *The New Negro*, ed. Alain Locke (New York: Albert and Charles Boni, Inc.), p. 53.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 51.

wide recognition which that art received before the general (read "white") public.

Not many Black intellectuals would agree with Herskovits today, and many would find Locke also tentative and defensive. To some degree Black writers and other artists still suffer the strangulation that occurs when white critics are allowed to define the terms in which Blacks will deal with their own experiences.⁵ It was the rejection of this situation in the nineteen sixties which is responsible for the change in Black attitudes towards themselves and their creations.

The Black revolution of the nineteen sixties achieved a fundamental objective in the struggle for liberation of Black people. Sloganeering (Black is beautiful; Black power, etc.), Afro and "natural" hair styles, the raised status of Black language and idiom, are all concrete signs of a new mental and spiritual orientation that is of the deepest significance. In that period a substantial number of Black people began to measure their beauty by their own standards and in their own terms. They became convinced of the soundness, wholesomeness and attractiveness of the values which shape Black life and society. It is here that Black aesthetics is grounded.

What is the significance of this aesthetic for worship? Without getting into the perennial controversies involved in defining aesthetics, perhaps we may minimally agree that aesthetics includes the nature of the beautiful and the criteria by which judgments concerning beauty are made. The question, then, is whether there is a uniquely Black perception of what is beautiful. How does that perception shape the worship experience of Black Americans? First, following Plato, there is an essential connection between beauty and goodness. Of course, Black Americans' aesthetics are less shaped by Plato than their African roots. But, as we shall see later, in Africa beauty has several dimensions: a physical-mathematical dimension, a metaphysical and metamoral dimension, and an ethical dimension. There is, therefore, in the African understanding, a religious aspect to beauty which cannot be divorced from its essence. To the degree that the African view has shaped Afro-American perceptions, we can expect worship in the Black experience to be keenly sensitive to beauty, and that the "beauty" of worship is defined by the Black experience itself.

Furthermore worship in the Black tradition shares many of the same features that characterize the African arts: music, vocal and physical rhythm, bodily movement (in fact, dance). It is more readily apparent in Black worship than in white that the arts were conceived in the womb of

⁵ Addison Gayle, Jr., "Cultural Strangulation: Black Literature and the White Aesthetic," in *The Black Aesthetic*, ed., Addison Gayle, Jr. (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1971), p. 45.

religion. Blues and gospel, shouting and dancing are cousins.

Sources of the Black Aesthetic

Identifying the sources of the aesthetic we call Black is more complicated than detailing the aesthetic history of most peoples. By the brunt of much scholarship Black Americans have been able in recent times to lay claim to their African heritage. They have been able to identify in their arts tendencies, perceptions, and mindsets which clearly are gifts from the African past. Indeed, it is in the area of the performing arts (music, dance, etc) that a substantial African heritage was carried. Leroi Jones (Imamu Amiri Baraka) explains why this is so:

Only religion (and magic) and the arts were not completely submerged by Euro-American concepts. Music and dance, religion do not have *artifacts* as their end products, so they were spared. These nonmaterial aspects of the African culture were almost impossible to eradicate.⁶

It must also be added that for nonliterate people who were denied literacy in their new environment, music, dance and religion were the easiest to maintain.

Harris Memel-Foté has illustrated with African animal folktales the African aesthetic orientation. Africans conceive of beauty and ugliness as relative. Also beauty "does not have the transcending nature that we have seen in the ancient Greeks and Plato's ideas of beauty. The African concept is, rather, immanent, very concrete, adherent to things, to nature, to activity or to work."⁷ Beauty is multidimensional and one can unearth in the African stories and perception a physical-mathematical aspect, an ethical aspect, a metaphysical aspect, a complete ontology.⁸

At the base of the African aesthetic perception is the African understanding of his/her own being in relation to the community expressed in the saying, "I am because we are, and because we are, therefore I am."⁹ That strong community sense dictates that the fulfillment and expression of life cannot be in isolated individualism but as a part of the whole. That basic orientation has a crucial bearing on the aesthetic sense of the African.

In more concrete terms it is a well established fact that African music, depending upon percussion, is polymetric and polyrhythmical. Both characteristics have survived in the music of the West Indies and Latin

⁶ Leroi Jones, *Blues People: Negro Music in White America* (New York: Morrow, 1963), p. 16.

⁷ Harris Memel-Foté, "The Perception of Beauty in Negro-African Culture," in *Colloquium on Negro Arts* (Dakar, Senegal: Society of African Culture, 1966), pp. 63-64.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 49.

⁹ John S. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy* (New York: Anchor Books, 1970), p. 31.

America while in the United States elements of polyrhythm are found in jazz.

African poetry parallels African music in its polyrhythmic nature. An African propensity for alliteration, paranomasia and anaphora continues in Afro-Americans' frequent use of alliteration, anaphora and assonance in religious and secular public rhetoric.¹⁰

Black Americans also inherited from their African forebears an improvisatory attitude toward the arts, particularly music. The Greeks rationalized music and the symphony orchestra may be cited as the culmination of that rationalization process. Ortiz Walton likens it to an assembly line where everything is fixed and in place including audience participation at the box office and in applause.¹¹

In recent decades Black Americans have made some important steps in uncovering links to their African past, once thought to be irretrievably lost. The Black Revolution of the sixties emboldened some to assert, "We are an African people." That, of course is not entirely true even though Alex Hailey's *Roots* in the midnineteen seventies provided an enormous psychological boost to Black identification with Africa. Imamu Amiri Baraka (Leroi Jones) has performed a useful service in reminding us that slavery and the American experience changed the attitudes, customs and cultural characteristics inherited from the African past into something quite new and complex.¹² In the generations succeeding those that remembered Africa, a new people emerged which had no remembrance of the "old country." These new Afro-Americans developed as an amalgam of the African and American cultures, neither of which they could fully claim.

Finally, we are aided in tracing the African aesthetic inheritance by appropriating remnants of the African culture — music, language, dance, ritual — still present among people of the African diaspora in the Caribbean, and in Central and South America. In parts of Brazil, for example, Blacks have maintained a culture more closely resembling that of African societies than have Blacks in the United States.¹³

Factors shaping the Black aesthetic

If, as this essay means to assert, there is a uniquely Black perception of what is beautiful, then there are particular factors by which this per-

¹⁰ Memel-Foté, p. 55f.

¹¹ Ortiz M. Walton, "A Comparative Analysis of the African and Western Aesthetics" in *The Black Aesthetic*, ed. Addison Gayle, Jr. (Garden City: Doubleday, 1971), p. 161.

¹² LeRoi Jones, p. 7.

¹³ Roger Bastide, "The Function and Significance of Negro Art in the Life of the Brazilian People," in *Colloquium on Negro Arts* (Dakar, Senegal: Society of African Culture, 1966), pp. 397-402.

ception is shaped. It is obvious that the aesthetic sensibility is strongly shaped by environment, experience, tradition and associations. For example, the Japanese's sensing of beauty in old weather-beaten objects does not strike a sympathetic chord in Westerners unless they have begun to be shaped by the whole Japanese ethos with its religious, geographical and historical bearings. The images of beauty and meaning rise up out of the depth of the subconscious as distillations of the individual and racial past.

If the aesthetic perception is shaped by one's experiences, environment, associations and traditions, it need only be asked whether Black people in America have been exposed historically to an experience, an environment, associations and traditions so significantly different from the white majority that their aesthetic sense may have developed in a distinctively different way. The answer to the question is self-evident. The problem is to define the characteristic features of the Black aesthetic which rests, in Julian Mayfield's opinion, on "our racial memory, and the unshakeable knowledge of who we are, where we have been, and, springing from this, where we are going."¹⁴

Of course, the slave experience was the crucible in which Black values were shaped. The stripping of culture, language and family was a devastating and traumatic experience. That stripping was not confined to the era of slavery, but continued long after slavery was abolished. It continues in sophisticated forms today. Black values and modes of expression have been shaped by a continuous struggle on the part of Black people to survive as human beings in "a nation of killers."¹⁵ Some Blacks have come to the conclusion that their precarious position in American society is not a result of "benign neglect" but a calculated protection of the dominance of whites in American life and the elimination of most Blacks as "obsolete."¹⁶ Statistics on Black employment and the prison population illustrate the plausibility of these ideas. The great disparity in black and white unemployment rates remains constant regardless of economic conditions. Black unemployment is double the national average and is particularly acute among Black teenagers. At the same time the prisons of our country are disproportionately populated by young Black men in what should be the most creative and productive years of their lives. The implication of these statistics is that there are "excess" people in whose survival our economically oriented society has no stake.

¹⁴ Julian Mayfield, "You Touch My Black Aesthetic and I'll Touch Yours" in *The Black Aesthetic*, ed. Addison Gayle, Jr. (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1971), p. 27.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 31.

¹⁶ Samuel F. Yette, *The Choice: The Issue of Black Survival in America* (New York: Cottage Books, 1972), pp. 11-18.

The experience of American "freedom" has been for Black people one of continuous marginalization, denigration of their achievements, and isolation from the mainstream. To a degree belied by their professions of love and loyalty, Black Americans have responded to their experiences in the "melting pot" with varying degrees of alienation. Those who are openly alienated from the mainline culture are not an insignificant number, but they are vastly outnumbered by those in whom that alienation is incipient. Ostensibly the latter group has bought into the American system, but even casual conversation will reveal hostility towards national assumptions, cynicism about professed ideals, lack of faith in the evenhanded working of "the system," and an ambivalence about the role of America in world affairs. A blackout in New York City in the late nineteen seventies followed by widespread looting provided a clear illustration of the differences in perceptions of Blacks and Whites about law-and-order, justice, and poverty. Condemnation of the looters came almost wholly from whites. Blacks who commented on the TV cameras were, at the most, ambivalent. Increasingly, Black people perceive that the professed goals of American society have little to do with helping them; rather they sense that things are designed to prevent Black access to power. Black intellectuals like Addison Gayle, Jr. see de-Americanization as a necessary condition of Black liberation. Viewing the role of our nation on the world scene, he concludes: "To be an American is to be opposed to humankind, against the dignity of the individual, and against the striving in man for compassion and tenderness: to be an American is to lose one's humanity."¹⁷

The nature of a Black aesthetic

The nature of a Black aesthetic which will undergird Black worship will be determined by factors which shape Black perceptions of human life, the world, history, reality and a sense of desired objectives. This aesthetic outlook is summed up in the popular term "soul" which is itself difficult to define. Rather one must extrapolate from those things to which people give assent to the values they impose on life.

1. Black people have been accused—justly, I believe—of being "spiritual" people. This I take to mean that the wells of emotion and feeling are not far below the surface. At the risk of generalizing too much, I would say that Black people, collectively, place a higher value on empathetic feeling than on objective analysis. We are not antiintellectual, but if a choice must be made, warm blood is preferred to cold intellect. That feeling is especially valued when confronting unjust and inhumane

¹⁷ Addison Gayle, Jr. ed. *The Black Aesthetic* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1971), p. xxii.

acts against the weak and the helpless. "Soul is born out of the courage . . . to recognize and identify with the 'insulted and injured', the courage to be 'for others', for those who need an advocate. It is the quality of committing oneself, one's whole being where one's sympathy is."¹⁸ The two athletes who were stripped of their titles for giving the Black Power salute on the victory stand of the 1968 Olympics, Eartha Kitt making her speech at the Johnson White House, and Nina Simone at the piano are characteristic expressions of the courage of commitment. This characteristic suggests a mental bent toward open, immediate and sometimes costly assertion of one's support for those who are wounded and oppressed. As a people Blacks have been conditioned to have little faith in commissions, committees, study groups, or conferences in hotel rooms heavy with smoke and abstractions. What generally is observed to be lacking in these is commitment. Merely to analyze a situation leaves one outside it.

The sensitivity to and ability to respond to other's suffering with personal commitment is linked to Black people's own experience of suffering. Calvary is not a strange place for Blacks; they recognize it and think they know what Jesus was about. "Nobody knows the trouble I see/Nobody knows but Jesus." Martin, Malcolm, Medgar, Birmingham, Little Rock, Scottsboro, Wilmington . . . Black people find that the willingness to be personally committed in the struggle for justice is a beautiful thing.

2. Black people have learned through their communal experience the meaning of the pilgrim existence. This knowledge arises in part out of alienation. The values, the status symbols, the rigidly accepted patterns of society at large fail to bind "soul" people because having been denied access to them, and having lived without them, they have come to joyous certainty that these things are not what life is about. "So 'soul' people tend to be free and 'loose' about WASP decorum, attire, language, and the correct levels of laughter."¹⁹ They pick their way through these as pilgrims who recognize that they do not represent the foundation of their life. They are free to enjoy without apology things that the respectable and status conscious fear publicly to acknowledge, like soul food, rhythm and dancing, loud laughter and Saturday night joy.

3. Another characteristic of Black people generally is their readiness to call things, even embarrassing things, by their names. They get down to earth quickly and cut through words intended to obscure. They prefer depth to facility, rough honesty to slickness, naturalness to artificiality, and non-verbal communication to excessive verbalization. The admoni-

¹⁸ Darius Leander Swann, "Soul is the Nature of Man," *Concern* 12 (December 1970). This entire section on the nature of the black aesthetic draws heavily on this article.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

tion "Tell it like it is!" demands the truth rather than innocuous euphemisms. The dislike of euphemisms and sugarcoating unpleasant truths grows, in part out of the recognition of the fleeting nature of fame and the insubstantiality of honors and status. They are chance and momentary accomplishments, not to be taken too seriously. This sense of the ultimate valuelessness of rank, honor, and fame has been honed by the experience of dispossession. When people live close to the bitter knowledge that any such achievements may be stripped away, they learn to set no great store by them. Adversity teaches them what is real and precious.

4. The distaste for circumlocution and excessive verbalization does not mean that Black people distrust or do not appreciate language; rather they place a premium on direct and pungent expression. A chief legacy of Black preachers, poets and singers is an enriched and heightened language. The one who "can talk" is admired and enjoyed. The expression "can talk" carries with it more than a connotation of facility with words; it includes a quality of imagery and rhythm which relates language to poetry. The ability to create verbal symbols that evoke deep emotional meanings is the hallmark of people as diverse as the barbershop philosopher and the Black preacher. Apt imagery puts sap back into the language and the instinctive poetic cadences relate it closely to music.

5. Finally, Black people perceive life in strongly communal terms. There is a marked gregarious bent. The enjoyment of getting together underlies the stereotype of Saturday night good times. The communal instinct can be illustrated in three simple ways. First, Black people going on vacation or an outing seldom choose places where they think they will be alone or almost alone. Most Blacks seek places where people are, where "things are happening." A second illustration is contemporary Black dancing. Although contemporary dancing is very individualistic—partners seldom touch and any movement goes—a random collection of Black dancers become a group (if the music is good). They underscore the beat of the music; they stimulate each other; they become a group responding unitedly to the music, and each other. Thirdly, in small towns or even in cities Black men often congregate outside the store or shop or restaurant which serves as a meeting place. The walls of the building make for isolation or privacy. Outside, one sees others coming and going and one is involved with others. The instinct is communal.

6. Finally, Black people in the generality are fully attuned to their bodies. Being able to "move" is recognized as an asset whether on the dance floor, the basketball court, the football field or in the church. The body is a vehicle for emotional and spiritual expression. The distinctive features of Black outlook and expression have their roots in an African

origin overlaid by the American experience. The strong communal instinct, the poetic and rhythmic qualities of speech, movement and dance, the integration of the physical and spiritual, all are vestiges of the African heritage. These same characteristics are evident in African societies today.

The American experience has made Black people the heirs of a common experience of suffering which makes no distinction of status or class. The sense of a pilgrim existence and the sensitivity to the suffering of others caused by injustice are both the fruits of that experience.

Applying Black Aesthetics to Black Worship

In the face of Black perceptions about the national attitudes and intentions, worship assumes a critical role in the Black struggle for survival, liberation and self-development. If we have correctly identified the aesthetic values which underlie our life, we can develop services of worship—rituals, celebrations, sacraments, preaching—which will be affecting, liberating and humanly affirming. That worship in sum should reflect several characteristics of Black people's response to their historic situation:

1. It should address the need of Black folk to understand and make sense of their individual and group experience. In a word, it should help us to discover a Biblically based, theological interpretation of our history, and illuminate what God is doing with and through us.

2. It should address the need to validate the Black struggle for liberation as an entirely legitimate Christian concern, a Christian calling. Here it will speak relatively to the idea of mission, to the Incarnation, the prophetic ministry, and the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

3. Worship is the most basic instrument by which Black Christians may be brought to full maturity in Christ, to their full potential as individual persons and members of a community. In song, prayer and preaching worship must tap into the deep veins of feeling and emotion and set them flowing for cleansing and commitment. It is necessary to issue a caution against exploiting the emotions for ulterior purposes.

4. The service of worship will be characterized by a language heightened by the poetic use of parallelism, alliteration, repetition, imagery and rhyme. While avoiding "street" language it will recognize and claim the trenchant Black earthiness of phrase (e.g., "Turpentine our imagination . . ."). The leader of worship ought to be able to make the sap rise in the language.

5. Black aesthetics tells us that our worship should allow for the significant use of the body in physical acts that give rhythm and unity as well

as symbolic meaning to the service. Handclapping, foot patting, swaying in unison, marching, lifting up the hands, kneeling, footwashing, shouting and dancing may allow the body to image the whole self praising God.

6. Recognizing that Black people have a strong bent toward the creative and artistic suggests that worship should provide opportunity for a significant use of the arts: music, drama, poetry, dance, etc.

7. The gregarious, communal instinct which characterizes Black life should be exploited theologically and practically for building the community as an extended family.

Conclusion

Worship, if it is to be fully satisfying—emotionally affecting, intellectually stimulating, and socially integrative—must draw upon the aesthetic values learned and shaped by the experience of being Black. Those who fear separating themselves from others by “the black thing,” may remember that we do not draw apart from others by affirming ourselves and our experience. We may offer our gifts with more integrity when we have recovered and explored the gifts that have been given.