

**Black Aesthetics in the 20th and 21st Centuries:
Art, Music, Film**

Prof. Susanne Leeb

Topic

Embrace yourself: The meaning of black aesthetic

**Tsang Chun Leung, Steven
ID:3034943**

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Abstract:

Fighting for human rights and equal society is the ultimate goal for black communities in America and around the world. Especially in America, a lot of civil right movement and culture revision happened along with the black community in the 20th century where many cultures and knowledge have been exchanged. Although the rebellion history of slavery happened far long ago from the 18th century, the 20th century is a period where the exchange of black vision and shared spiritual connection happened most rapidly. From the start of the Harlem Renaissance in the 20s to the black live matter event in 2013, many spiritual and black representing work from music, literature, and film have produced and affected the contemporary creative industries base on the collective oppression from the black ethnic group. Black power has been established for the black people in a white hegemony society to define them in their own terms in which the concept of “black aesthetic” represents an important mindset for re-evaluating black. Therefore, this essay will focus on why the concept is necessary, what is the aims or goals for achieve black aesthetic along with the history analysis of black art movement and list out some representative work in order to analysis the meaning and value behind black aesthetic and end up explain that the reconstruct of black power can be fulfilled by black aesthetic.

What is black aesthetic?

After 200 hundred years of fighting for the liberation of black people from the slavery system, repression of black people still exists and losing their culture identification even after the Harlem Renaissance, an explosion of intellectual, social, and artistic that concentrate on Harlem, New York. This movement provides a chance for new Afro-American to have culture expressions across the urban areas in the Northeast and the Midwest United States affected by Great Migration, a movement of 6 million African Americans out of the South United States to located in the Urban Northeast, Midwest, and West between the years of 1916 to 1970. Many of the ideas created in this period lived on much longer and, therefore, considered to be the rebirth of African-American art. Soon it has derived to the more civil participation such as black art movement, civil right movement and more.

However, the explosion process is not a failure but a forward for reconstruction after the fall off of enslave and opportunity for African Americans to strive for civic participation

and re-local their culture within the white-dominated society. The start of practicing creative production such as music includes jazz, blue, and later rap, investigating the cultural interaction and relationship or analysis black culture through literature and expressing self-oppression and rebellion through poems are the many acts for the reconstruction of black power.

But soon enough that artist, intellectual and activists realize the simple practicing or exposure is not enough and afro American or black community around the world is still repression from its inner culture, identity and spiritualism and the long history of early civil movement was located wrongly. Therefore, it appears the term black aesthetic for re-evaluating black culture. According to Neal, L. (1968), Afro-American dramatists, poets, choreographers, musicians, novelists are having the concrete way of expressing political value in an aesthetical way to strength the black power. The use of the aesthetic expression, in my analysis, is to strengthen and connect the same oppressed group in pursuit of common racial and ethnic value. Neal also explains the primary duty of artists in the black art movement is to speak the spiritual and cultural needs of black people which in my understanding is to use the true inner mind and emotion as a spiritual expression for black people. Neal's continuous complement that the duty of a writer is the confront the exposure and dominate in the racist west in pursuit of re-evaluating western aesthetic, the traditional role of writer, and the social function of art. Thus, black aesthetic is the concept the re-define the artistic sensibility and making the own rule of artistic expressions which do not need to constraint by the standard of white cultural hegemony. By introducing Poet Don. Lee from Neal, culture defines people and to do that people need to collect old value and use it to establish a new one. From my perspective, the new one is the one that does not define by others by a collective group of value. Therefore, to understand an artwork, you also need to understand the culture and the value and to immerse yourself into the character that true express with no resistance.

Why black aesthetic is necessary?

With more and more appearance of black artistic work and music production, it seems that black culture has its way and opportunity to express culture or dominate the art industries in order to locate their nationalism, but in fact, black power is still constraint under the judgmental of white aesthetic.

Also, in response to the wrongly located civil engagement of culture expression I indicated earlier, using essentialism as the approach method in relation to black popular culture or as I would say the black artistic work is one of the reasons that it is inappropriate. But on the other hand, it is undeniable that essentialism has a certain degree to construct black power, but it is not everything and does not cover everything. Using the essentialism in the discussion of black popular culture would neglect the historical relationship between black and white and separate the artistic outcome into groups of pure black and white. This can be misleading or acknowledge culture development wrongly in which ignore the large contribution of black culture and the merge between black and white. This misleading outcome will be further analyzed in the latter reason.

The inappropriate approach

Back to the approach of discussion black, Hall, S. (1996) mention, although essentialism approach provides space for black cultural expression, space is limited only within the framework of popular culture and create a zero-sum game situation of cultural hegemony where cannot accept the share of power. This leads to the “structuring of culture space in terms of high and low” in popular culture. In relation to the historical content and Hall’s analysis, the displacement of European high culture, the emergence of United States as a world power, and the decolonization of the Third World, culture hegemony has not been ever dominated by white society nor be dominated by another culture, but a mixture of the oppressor and oppressed, creating the outcome of different. The situation can be coordinated as the disposition of power. Thus, there is no pure win or loss between different cultures. Using essentialism to discuss one’s culture on the other hand force race to acknowledge that racial difference comes in natural without its interrelate and interaction. For example, if one behaves different from its racial stereotype, he/she would be segregated from its culture and ignore one’s oppressed opinion that could be part of the culture. A more detail example would be that black woman or gay black men are still the oppressive group that exists and unrepresented within black expression and therefore, essentialism only express black masculinity and also the reason of later why intellectual need to use intersectionality concept to conduct the third wave feminism. The outcome is that the cultural representation of black is incomplete and it leads to the psychological dependence upon others that are excluded at the social level and a subjective culture

development lead by the high or white (high reject low). Black expression in my perspective is like the shadow of one elite that never formed but it shows the image.

If the essentialism approach has its vulnerability, the appropriate approach would be dialogic. As I mention before, some positions in cultural hegemony get to win to let marginal groups have their expression and it is not that a formed culture replaces another but a merge of culture. Dialogic approach admits that the discourse is defined by the relationship and response to other discourse. To prove that current culture is the culmination of the two, Hall provided three qualify reason, America's amendment relationship to European high culture form the ambiguities shift of Europe to America, modern nature is the period of cultural globalization progress and the deep and ambivalent fascination in pursuit of different in postmodernism. These three qualifications engaging the dialogical approach. The example of the outcome would be being black and British both or the choir music. However, the situation nowadays is high dominate and control while simultaneously depending on the low.

To allow the black express culture correctly and comprehensively, we must admit that the current culture structure is dialogically formed and it is a mutual influence. Using black aesthetic, we focus on incorporation as the negotiation of black expression in pursuit of an accurate representation of black experiences. As Neal mentioned, black aesthetic means the consistent of an African-American cultural tradition and it is boarder in which encompass usable elements of Third World culture to achieve collective conscious. This is the same idea that Hall suggested, to reject the biological definition of race and accept the culture transmission and inheritance. To cooperate with the complex relationship between African origins and the irreversible scatterings of the diaspora. Therefore, black aesthetic as a dialogical approach is needed to re-evaluation the black culture and a need to re-determinate one's identity, the need to purchase difference to create a complete shared culture. The need to purchase difference.

The constraint of culture expression (Invisibility)

The second reason is that the cultural expression is constrained in the frame of white. Afro-American and third-world black people still cannot express in a completely free way and is oppressively create the experience that is not representative but for the white. Hall

analysis the approach from popular culture perspective meanwhile there is a problem also in the visual in Afro-American Culture that pauses the black development of art industries and therefore, stop black to release their mind and spirit. The artistic expression of black and the oppressive feeling is sarcastically still oppressed.

The concept of Invisibility can explain how black culture is being limited from the power of white. From the visual perspective, the absence of black images in mass media produces the void of a race. Wallace, M. (2004) base on the problem in the visual of Afro-Americans argued that “How one is seen (as black) and, therefore, what one sees (in a white world) is always already crucial to one’s existence as an Afro-American. This statement indicated that whether one being perceived is important and the reason why visual is important. In my understanding, the racial existent is being segregated through the selection of images like the words used for descript Afro-American (nigger, black, schwartze) have the meaning of “other”. Visual art of black experience has never been treated as a common way of expression as the art of white. Then, the Invisibility comes in place to descript why black experience still unseen and still cannot fully express as in Wallace's explanation that “not being seen by those who don’t want to see you because they are racist”. White decided what they want to see. They do not want to understand the meaning of black, therefore, choosing to ignore and the neglecting process is how white gradually becomes the oppressor that not allow one race to shine their culture.

The contributions are deprived

Visual of black in the art are selectively shown. To understand how cultural expression is oppressive, we need to acknowledge what can be defined as culture, how it be defined, and by whom in order to know how we can jump out of the frame and establish a more authentic black culture. “Culture hegemony is a process that built upon the mechanisms of traditions and canons of Old Masters in order to waylay the utopian desire that is potentially embodied in cultural production” (Wallace, 2004) This statement answers the former two questions I made in which culture is defined by tradition. Culture can be defined because the elements can establish the utopia that represents a race. Thus, visual expression as Wallace descript is radically selective in favor of maintaining the whit dominance of a brutal status quo despite their best intentions to subvert it. Visual culture is

defined and dominated by white, thus, the oppressed exist, and thus, black aesthetic is necessary.

Because of the selective visual hegemony, the credits of Afro-American contributions to art are deprived. Modernism and Picasso epitomized the greatest fascination in art history. But Wallace point that Modernism is a take place in the environment of Afro-American and white American European. Afro-American modernism is both the same and different, as imitative as it is original. This is the notion of “critical signification” from Gate, H. L. that use to describe the mechanical relationship between Afro-American culture and Euro-American culture or as Hall described as dialogical, or one of the intertextuality. The Current culture is the imitation and reverses term from Afro-American and yet neglect by white authorities. This unilateral unwillingness of Euro-American culture to admit and acknowledge its debt and relationship to African and Afro-American culture. The reason why the visual representation of black is unwilling or unable to shine is because of concern of disposition of power and whole economic and eurocentrism mindset in the white mind. Black artists are not as widely accepted as black writers because the shifts in art historical judgment result in extraordinary economic contingencies. The judgment of art the aesthetic sensibility of black is alien to white, therefore, the change of aesthetic, in current concern of art industries, could collapse the art economic structure or utopia of current culture that long-established and the resistance of trade in artistic culture. Therefore, as Pindell, H. pointed out “artists of color an industry-wide ‘restraint of trade,’ limiting their ability to show and sell their work.” Artists need to rely on the kind of people and developments that determine the value of art and be accepted into rich white people’s home. This is the problem of the visual of Afro-Americans that Wallace addressed.

This invisibility that defined by Ralph Ellison is used for the oppressor to response to the racism and cultural apartheid. With the problem of eurocentrism, and not being seen, black power construction has the problem that written history and literature can hardly translate musical/oral Afro-American tradition. It also affects the patriarch of black and white family on how to tell the story of how it happened, the history, the feeling, the experience as a spiritual form, resulting to the outcome of lost identity and lost nationalism of black and incapable to occupy by the categories of the interchangeable concept of “woman and black”. As black criticism was blocked from the discussion of Modernism, academic art history, galleries, museums have resistance to discussing “primitivism”. Since the

oppression from the Third world and black America is directly traceable to the Euro-American sensibility, in order to let the black creative artist have meaningful roles, the dominated anti-human in nature need to be destroyed. To do that, Neal suggested that ethics and aesthetic must interact positively and be consistent with the demands for a more spiritual world. It is the reconstruction of what story should we tell, the oppressor or the oppressed and the purchase of true expression. Brother knight advises that “black artists must create new forms and new values, sing new songs. Creating new history, new symbols, myths and legends along with other black authorities that is accountable for only black people”. In my interpretation, black need to build their own standard and value base of the collective spirit of both African, third world, and Afro-Americans and express the new aesthetic that connects the whole to build up a nation. It is no longer defined by white and oppressed by white and it helps the whole black community to be more united and freely express themselves. In that, we have our own self-determination and nationhood by collective conscious and unconscious of black America. The power we construct can still be control but not taken away.

The embodiment of black aesthetic

After the analysis of the idea of black aesthetic and the need for the concept along with the currently black power construction limitation and the main goal. There is a need to use some examples to give the whole notion of black aesthetic a more detail description and better interpretation in a practical way. To make sure that the analysis is more concentrated, I will focus mainly on the Black Art Movement as an example along with the analysis of two plays to give the notion a complete round-up. The analysis will be followed along with the ideas from Larry Neal’s “The Black Art movement”.

Black Art Movement

Black Arts Movement believes that your ethics and your aesthetics are one. In 1964, Brother Jones opened the Black Arts Repertoire School which initiating a series of poetry reading and concerts into plays. The form of Black Art School attacked by the New York power structure along with the fear of Black creativity. It was HARYOU, an American social activism organization founded by psychologists Kenneth Clark and Mamie Phipps Clark in 1962, (Kenneth Clark and Mamie Phipps Clark is the intellectual using doll task and coloring test to measure the effect in self-esteem of black children from racism and

segregation and later suggested the initiative of integrated school) provide the need of the community. The revolutionary ideas of art establishment kept its progress into the street of Harlem. The ideas and Black Art group later develop their idea in many different places including Detroit, Philadelphia, Jersey City, New Orleans, and Washington, D. C.

The effect of the play collapses the illusion of the American body politic and liberalism and was aiming to awake Black people to the meaning of their lives and the existent of oppression as culture serves as the most important element for self-determination. To show the embodiment of black aesthetic in a more detail way. The plays “Who’s Got His Own” by Ron Milner and “We Own the Night” by Jimmy Garrett will be analysis along with Neal's interpretation.

“Who’s Got His Own” is play express in the search of its conscience and own definition of life. A conflict inside a black family of Tim. The main character Tim discovers the lies, self-deceits, and sense of powerlessness in a white world, expressing the powerless to be a man in the white world. Tim conducts the new Afro-American sensibility and he does not understand why his father let himself be oppressed in his job. In the end, Tim knows that he must confront the history of his family in order to bridge the “generation gap”. This play fits into the ideological of black aesthetic which is to confront the history of your own and to re-discover the culture sensibility.

Tim’s sister in the story has an affair with a white upper-class liberal, ending in abortion. In this play, she involved as the rejection of the body-oriented life of Black man and to represent the traditional religion of a mother.

In the play “We Own the Night”, the story focuses on the main character defending a section of a city. Main character Johnny decided to confront the oppression by violence. He blames the weak of his mother as in the old ideology of the character of a black mother, it represents the object of awe and respect. But Johnny found it character ambivalent and laced with tension. He blames for her of emasculating his father as he realized that his father as a “black” cannot live in a way a white man does and her mother despises his weakness instead of confronting the problematic social structure.

In both plays, Woman as Negro woman indicated that the old sensibility of woman's aspirations and values which are closely tied to the white power structure. Therefore, there is a need for liberation for the release of the spirit.

Both Tim and Johnny have liberated their minds and the meaning of living and now they need to fight for it and both purchase a revolution in the way from inner of Tim his own and outer of violence by Johnny.

Sum up

This article analyzes what black aesthetic is. This is an idea and belief for reconstructing black power and re-define art that is not constraint by the white cultural hegemony. After the slavery history of Black, there is a need to have a correct method to waylay the unique culture developed from the interrelated culture of black and white. The difficulties are that Black in art and visual have the problem of expression and it is still in an oppressive condition. The representation of Black is incomplete. Thus, Black people need to re-evaluate the way they re-built the culture and to be more included and complete. By doing so, black aesthetic admits the dialogical approach and connect the collective oppressed diaspora including third world people, trace back to the original to construct their own standard and value so that they can take back their own contribution to the current culture, respect in pursuit of united nationalistic and self-determination. They reject the essentialism of segregation by nature and looking forward to real freedom.

For me, current culture hegemony indeed neglects and ignores the contribution of Black and oppression is still existed. Therefore, I am looking forward to the development of black power, appreciate the black culture and to make further effort to understand and interpret more on the reason and goal behind the work of art in black. Listening to more rap and understand the condition. Finally, I hope the minority can truly embrace themselves in the way they want confidently and releases their true spirit that no long constraint by culture repression and different characters within the culture would not be leftover.

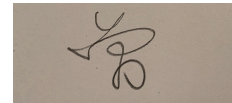
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2. Larry Neal, The Blacks Arts Movement, *The Drama Review: TDR*, Vol. 12, No. 4, *Black Theatre* (Summer 1968), pp. 28-39.
3. Michele Wallace, *Dark Designs and Visual Culture*, Durham: Duke University Press, 2004. Chapter 39: “Modernism, Postmodernism and the Problem of the Visual in Afro- American Culture”, pp. 364-378

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曾俊良 Tsang, Chun Leung