Aesthetics as ethics: an analysis of the black aesthetic

Rose Mary Wooldridge

Atlanta University

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AESTHETICS AS ETHICS: AN ANALYSIS OF THE BLACK AESTHETIC

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BY
ROSE MARY WOOLDRIDGE

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

When one speaks of aesthetics, he is speaking in terms of preconceived ideas or notions of what is beautiful or pleasing to the senses which judge a particular art work. Art is common to all cultures but there is no universal standard or application of Aesthetic principles in judging the beauty, pleasure, or worth of all art. In "Is Universal Science of Aesthetics Possible?" Archie Bahm argues for a more objective rendering of aesthetic judgment. He proceeds from a thesis that aesthetics is a science and, therefore, can be universally applied to all cultures. "Part of the reason why so many attempts to formulate universal hypotheses about aesthetic objects have failed to be generally satisfactory," he writes, "is that they have been founded upon or framed within cultural perspectives."¹ In fact, he says that which is universal and that which is science are one and the same. Bahm concludes that, "Aesthetics like any other science, is adequate only if its conclusions hold in the experiences of people no matter what their other cultural conditionings may be."² This statement illuminates some basic issues concerning the black aesthetic as valid and viable literary criticism. In other words, can the black aesthetic be applied systematically and

¹ Archie J. Bahm, "Is A Universal Science of Aesthetics Possible?," Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism, XXXI (Fall, 1972), 3.

² Ibid.
objectively as a literary tool or as an approach to literature? Can its conclusions hold (or any aesthetic conclusions) no matter what the other cultural conditionings may be?

Bahm concludes that aesthetics is a system but he does not distinguish between the art for art's sake theory which proposes art as an "aesthetic non-essential" and art as utilitarian or functional for social man. Here lies part of the controversy, the attempt to apply or designate a universal science of aesthetics. In this instance, speaking primarily about the written arts or verbal craftsmanship, what is the purpose of literature?

Many critics of a black aesthetic argue, like Archie Bahm, that aesthetics is colorless and cultureless, that there is one science of aesthetics applicable to all art. Even if we conclude that aesthetics is a system, a system is not wholly independent of its natural environment.

Artistic creation is always a complicated turning inside out of forms, under the influence of new stimuli which originate outside of art. In this large sense of the word, art is a handmaiden. It is not a disembodied element feeding on itself, but a function of social man indissolubly tied to his life and environment.1

Thus the black aesthetic can be viewed as part of the larger body of social criticism or literary theory which concerns social man. "The writer is not only influenced by society: he influences it. Art not merely reproduces life but also shapes it."2 In this succinct statement

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of the reciprocal interplay between literature and society, Rene Wellek and Austin Warren imply a general framework of understanding the black aesthetic as social criticism and the ethical responsibility of the art which does not merely reproduce life but also shapes it.

Literary criticism, since Plato, has prescribed that the purpose of literature is educative, that is, it predicates ethics on the basis of imitation of that which is good. Plato, an idealist, saw poetry as the ultimate truth transcending the material flux of transitory things. There was unchanging stability in nature which could and should be imitated in art and emulated in life. Yet, Plato simultaneously indicts the writer for being a deceiver of man—"he is a manufacturer of images and is very far removed from the truth."\(^1\) Plato would even wish to ban such a writer from the state, condemning him on the basis that his poetry "feeds and waters the passions instead of drying them up; she lets them rule, although they ought to be controlled, if mankind are ever to increase in happiness and virtue."\(^2\) Poetry or imaginative literature as educative, or the formative developer of the mind, became the moral agent. The imitative poet aimed for popularity by appealing to the emotional nature rather than the rational nature in man. This imitative poet was detrimental to Plato's concern for a "well ordered state."

The real artist, who knew he was imitating, would be interested in realities and not in imitations; and would


desire to leave as memorials of himself works many and fair; and, instead of being the author of encomiums, he would prefer to be the theme of them.  

Plato would argue then that the real artist should be concerned with the truth, reflecting the unchanging stability of nature as closely as possible. Aesthetic qualities, then, tended to imitate the desirable moral qualities in characters. Here aesthetics as a value system is intimated as early as Plato's *The Republic*. Philosophers after Plato carried the idea further.

Sir Philip Sidney, following the precedent set by Plato, emphasized the moral value of literature in the consistency with which it shows good rewarded and evil punished. Therefore, any literature had the expressed end to "teach and delight." "So that, the ending end of all earthly learning being virtuous action, those skills, that most serve to bring forth that, have a most just title to be princes over all the rest." The poet's creative skills, then, served to bring about virtuous action by rendering the image of the good so truthfully that men are forced to recognize the good as good and desire that their lives reflect the good.

An analogous tenet, aesthetics as ethics, can be seen in the black arts movement. LeRoi Jones, one of the movement's major spokesmen, utters a similar thought. He proposes that the purpose of black revolutionary

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drama, black art for that matter, is to expose, to be such a mirror for black people's lives, that they see themselves as "themes" and consequently moved toward virtuous action. According to Jones, that virtuous action would manifest itself in liberation for all black people.

Like Sidney, Jones reiterates a basic classical tenet. Virtue, as distinct from learning abstract precepts, consists of an active desiring of what is known and valuable and moving toward that desire. As social criticism the black aesthetic finds its immediate ally in Marxist criticism as the most consistent, systematic treatment of literature as an enlightening agent for the oppressed class. Note Leon Trotsky's statement:

We believe that the supreme task of art in our epoch is to take part actively and consciously in the preparation of the revolution. But the artist cannot serve the struggle for freedom unless he subjectively assimilates its social content, unless he feels in his very nerves its meaning and drama and freely seeks to give his own inner world incarnation in his art.¹

Trotsky merely restates the classical tenets of the desirability of rendering that which is truthful and beneficial to the moral well being of the people. Realizing the persuasive powers of the arts as a molding and formative agent of the psyche, Plato, Sidney, Jones, Trotsky and others who made similar statements dictated the moral responsibility of the artist to render that which is beautiful.

To be a poet is to apprehend the true and the beautiful, in a word, the good which exists in the relation, subsisting, first between existence and perception, and

secondly between perception and expression.¹

Shelley, in the above statement from "A Defence of Poetry," heralded poets, "the unacknowledged legislators of the world." Thus poetry was "the most unfailing herald, companion and follower of the awakening of a great people to work a beneficial change."²

Matthew Arnold in *Sweetness and Light* further advanced the classical promise that literature, like the other arts, is valuable to the extent that it stimulates man to seek that which is best for him. Arnold defined "the best for him" as sweetness and light," harmonious perfection which is always in the state of becoming. (Marxist critics echo this premise.) Arnold saw the striving after this harmonious perfection as culture. Culture is not only "curiosity" which keeps man seeking after that which better him, but:

There is a view in which all the love of our neighbour, the impulses towards action, help and beneficence, the desire for removing human error, clearing human confusion, and diminishing human misery, the noble aspiration to leave the world better and happier than we found it,--motives eminently such as are called social,--come in as part of the grounds of culture, and the main and preeminent part. Culture is then properly described not as its origin in curiosity, but as having its origin in the love of perfection; it is a study of perfection. It moves by force, not merely or primarily of the scientific passion for pure knowledge, but also for the moral and social passion for doing good.³

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² Ibid., p. 435.

Arnold notes, therefore, that ethics, "sweetness and light," is culture which draws us nearer to the beautiful, or harmonious perfection. It is this social aspect of culture which the black aesthetic isolates and simultaneously encompasses.

The problem and issues arise here in the concept of the beautiful or the harmonious perfection. "After all, who shall describe beauty?" As the discussion of Plato, Sidney, Shelley, and Arnold has shown, the culture defines beauty but not independent of the value system. Thus, at the same time, the "art for art's sake" theory is invalid on just the above premise. If art for art's sake exists, then aesthetic qualities exist outside of and independent of any forces in the world. Art even exists outside of its creators. In other words, there is no material world, or metaphysical world, molding the character of the art. As Trotsky points out, even the assertion of the complete independence of the aesthetic factor from the influence of social condition, the art for art's sake theory, has its root in social conditions also. And, with circular motion we return to, "And who shall describe beauty?"

Charles Augustine Sainte-Beuve and Hippolyte-Adolphe Taine both spoke to the idea of beauty or aesthetics independent of a culture. In applying the general principles of natural science to criticism,

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2 Trotsky, op. cit., p. 39.
Sainte-Beuve defined the classic as "literature in complete accord and harmony with their epoch, with their social frame, with the directing powers and principles of the society, content with themselves,"¹ in essence, literatures in accord with their cultures. Taine enlarged the idea by expressly applying a theory of cultural history. All literature, he noted, addressed itself to race, moment, and milieu. His method showed that a psychology of a people could be seen in the history of their literature. When this failed, the literature was ethically adverse to the culture, thus to the people who make up that culture.

What is a philosophy but a conception of nature and its primordial causes, under the form of abstractions and formulaties? What is there at the bottom of a religion or of an art but a conception of this same nature and of these same causes under forms of symbols more or less concise, and personages more or less marked.²

The precedent of social criticism set by Plato, Sidney, Shelley, Arnold, Sainte-Beuve, and Taine ironically leads us into a consideration of the black aesthetic as literary social criticism. Aesthetics is a dated concept when we note that long before the twentieth century, philosophers, as critics, spoke to aesthetics as a value system, each elaborating and extending the concept beyond morality to poetic justice, legislation, and finally to culture as a historical record of a people. What is significant, however, is that the black aesthetic, a very recent

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¹ Charles A. Sainte-Beuve, from "Tradition in Literature," in Criticism: The Major Texts, p. 496.

criticism appearing in the early 1960's, speaks to similar points: the end of art is not only its beauty but to teach as well as to delight.

The similarities in ideas of the critics mentioned above are not to establish universality as an abstract concept, but to concretize the precept that each culture establishes its conventions and values for itself by speaking through maxims of universal sympathies, etc. For example:

They knew man, but not men; they had penetrated to the soul; they had seen the infinite diversity and marvelous complexity of souls; they did not know that the moral constitution of a people or an age is as particular and distinct as the physical structure of a family of plants or an order of animals...

The literature of a people captures this moral complexity. Therefore,

As we continue to cautiously and minutely study the literature of any race or period, then, we eventually discover that all shibboleths, or creative and critical efforts are but the outgrowths of the social system in which they have their being, and which in turn is the product of the material conditions of the time.

On this very basis the Black Arts Movement is an ethical movement. As early as 1926, DuBois in "Criteria for Negro Art" had written that beauty, truth, and right are inseparable. Aesthetics as ethics, then, has a history not only in the Western world, but can be seen in the theory as well as the literature of the Black Arts Movement. That those

1 Ibid., p. 503.


ethics prescribed by Western culture, especially American racist society, have been inconsistent and contradictory to peoples of color DuBois can write:

All art is propaganda and must be despite the wailing of the purists. I stand in utter shamelessness and say that 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.¹

"Gaining the right of black folk to love and enjoy" has informed literature by black writers since the beginnings of a black literature. It is evident, then, that the theoretical utterances of the 1960's viewed in historical perspective enhances the viability of a black aesthetic as representative of a culture, and thus, culturally expressing the psychology forms which express the moods of time, and the differences of persons and the distinction of place, are convertible with respect to the highest poetry without injuring it as poetry."²

DuBois, in "The Social Origins of American Negro Art," prophetically predicted in 1925 the trend of black literature in America. He wrote:

Whither now is all this art impulse pointing? Manifestly as it has come out of the social conditions under which Negroes have found themselves in America so those same social conditions are going to determine its future very largely. Art expression in the day of slavery had to be limited, a matter of wild strains of music with still wilder laughter and dancing. But as the Negro rises more and more toward economic freedom he is going

¹ Ibid.
² Shelley, op. cit., p. 430.
on the one hand to say more clearly what he wants to say and do and realize what the ends and methods of expression may be. A more studied and purposeful restraint is going to change his method of art expression and yet the grim truth burning through will not for generations permit the mere stylist and dilettante.¹

An analysis of black literature and the historical conditions surrounding that literature from before the Harlem Renaissance to the present give supportive weight to DuBous' statement.

The black aesthetic grows out of and develops from this historical confrontation with social conditions. As history develops, the black aesthetic acquires a more sophisticated veneer, taking on the semblance of a culture and at the same time becoming a culture of black people. Any "serious art implies a view of life which can be stated in philosophical terms, even in terms of systems."² A correlation exists between literature and society predicated on symbolic or meaningful relations: of consistency, harmony, coherence, congruence, structural identity, stylistic analogy or with whatever term we want to designate the integration of a culture and the inter-relationships among the different activities of men.³

Thus, we can see as the leading Marxist critic Georg Lukacs pointed out in Writer and Critic, that we eventually discover that we are simply not


³ Wellek and Warren, op. cit., p. 108.
arguing aesthetics. "Internal discrepancies in artistic form are manifestations of distortions in life patterns and result from unresolved and therefore especially compelling social contradictions."¹ The black aesthetic attempts to deal with these compelling social contradictions.

In this study of a black aesthetic the investigation is primarily concerned with the issues which have influenced the literary treatment of a black aesthetic such as racial identity and image manipulation. The second aspect is to deal with black literature and show these emphases in the writings of three of the more imagistic black writers.

After putting the black aesthetic in literary perspective in Chapter I, Chapter II, Black Literature and the Quest for Racial Identity, demonstrates the black writer's preoccupation with racial and cultural identity. It attempts to trace the historical development of black literature through the compelling necessity to establish a coherent sense of self. Chapter III, Propaganda: Language in the Service of Vision, concerns literature as propaganda, and proceeds from DuBois' contention that all literature is propagandistic, in that words carry weight by supporting or opposing certain values. Thus images in literary works finally play an important role in establishing a coherent sense of self. Chapter IV, Towards a Walk in the Sun: The Apocalyptic Imperative of the Black Aesthetic, deals with images as they are shaped in definite pieces of black literature, namely Zora Neale Hurston's Their Eyes Were Watching God, Jean Toomer's Cane, and Keorapetse Kgotsitsile's My Name is

Afrika. The conclusion summarizes as a whole calling attention to the evidence that the debate concerning a black aesthetic is not simply literary but political and cultural and then examining the implications of this evidence for black writers and black literature.
CHAPTER II

BLACK LITERATURE AND THE QUEST FOR RACIAL IDENTITY

Aesthetics as ethics has a historical continuity as Western philosophers from Plato to the present have shown. However, aesthetics as ethics not only informed traditional African literature, but, in fact, is the basis of African literature and a primary source of the statements by black writers and critics today. Mazini Kunene, in his introduction to Zulu Poems, explains the communal or social ethic surrounding the black arts movement as an ethical movement with Zula literature as his demonstrative example:

Zula literature, like most African literature, is communal. This has fundamental and stylistic and philosophical implications. The communal organization in Africa is not just a matter of individuals clinging together to eke out an existence, as some have claimed, nor is it comparable (except very superficially) to the rural communities in Europe. It is a communal organization which has evolved its own ethic, its own philosophical system, its own forms of projecting and interpreting its realities and experiences... In brief, it is a communal structure which has affirmed its particularity through forms of religion and thought arising out of its organization.¹

The fundamental stylistic and philosophical implications of African literature can be seen in the values of the communal idea. The highest virtue is not justice, which to the community is an expression on individualism in its attempt to minimize friction between individuals, but heroism, that is, self-sacrifice on behalf of the community. The philosophy of the Zulus requires one not to read "I," but "I on behalf of."

Thus the literature as an expression of the culture, or the ethic, stresses "we," that is, "I on behalf of" as its prevalent theme.

The concept of the community can also be seen in the presentation of Zulu poetry. Oral literature in traditional African literature has its basis here. Poetry readings are not merely recitations, but actions, a poet acting out the poem in an attempt to stimulate the imaginative faculties. Thus the poem might result in a chant, a drama, or a dance. Words stimulate through their performance, thus achieving unity of art and action.

A poet receives appreciation and approval for his poetry when the audience attempts to imitate the poet's actions. Thus, if praise for the created but non-fictional hero of the community is warranted, the audience shouts those praises enthusiastically for the hero and in praise to the artistry of the poet. Therefore the poet is seen to be always a part of the community and answerable to it. "It is on the basis of things done, and on the basis of an awareness of obligations expected by the community that the individual composes his poems; thus his 'praise' is an affirmation of a social ethic."\(^1\)

The role of the black writer in America is not so clearly seen because of the historical developments surrounding him as person or his self-conscious identity. Yet, black writers' preoccupation with the question of identity should be looked at against such a background. That is, the black writer's concern for self-identification is twofold:

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\(^1\) Kuene, *op. cit.*, p. 13.
the impulse is personal, but the response is collective. As Ron Karenga explains in his principles for black art, the black writer must display personality and not individuality, which is the antithesis of the community.\(^1\) Personality asserts not I in spite of, but I on behalf of. Such is the question of identity.

The art instinct is naturally and primarily individualistic. It is the cry of some caged soul yearning for expression and this individual impulse is, of course, back of Negro art. But while in some cases this artistic impulse resulted in an expression which was simply individualistic or which might become national or even universal, in most cases individual impulse was combined with a certain group compulsion, as we usually say, meaning that the wishes, thoughts, and experience of thousands of individuals influence consciously or unconsciously the message of the one who speaks for all.\(^2\)

This social compulsion that inspires black art, DuBois explains, is the struggle for black liberation, the I on behalf of, coming historically out of Africa to slavery, to the half-hearted emancipation, the Jim-crowism, and all the travails of the colonized experience of black people. In Claude McKay's "The Negro Tragedy," we see the compulsion of a black aesthetic gaining clarity.

\[
\text{It is the Negro's tragedy I feel} \\
\text{Which binds me like a heavy iron chain,} \\
\text{It is the Negro's wounds I want to heal} \\
\text{because I know the keenness of his pain.} \\
\text{Only a thorn-crowned Negro and no white} \\
\text{Can penetrate into the Negro's skin,} \\
\text{Or feel the thickness of the shroud of night}
\]

---


Which hides and buries him from other men.

So what I write is urged out of my blood.  

The experience informs the art, and the experience compels the art. The quest for identity literally and symbolically relates the literature to the various struggles of black people in the new world.

Identify is a coherent sense of self, it depends upon the awareness that one's endeavors and one's life make sense, that they are meaningful in the context in which life is lived. It depends also upon stable values, and upon the conviction that one's actions and values are harmoniously related.

This necessary preoccupation with identity or self-consciousness was expressed quite cogently by DuBois in his *Souls of Black Folk* (1903) and in terms that still apply:

After the Egyptian and Indian, the Greek and Roman, the Teuton and Mongolian, the Negro is a sort of seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with second-sight in this American world,—a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his twoness,—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder.

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Black writers inevitably related this sense of twoness in their craft. DuBois thinks that the double-aim struggle could only result in making the artist a poor craftsman. However, those artists who reflect the struggle going on within them do not necessarily fail, and Jean Toomer's Cane may be taken for a case in point.

The narrators, generally from the North like Toomer, rove through the South observing and recording. They compare life in the South to life in the North. The book culminates in a view of the protagonist of the third section. Kabnis is a sort of seventh son born with a veil over his face and gifted with second sight in the world, the insight of the artist.

Whoeveryou are, do not think that the face that rests beside you is the real Kabnis. Ralph Kabnis is a dream, and dreams are faces with large eyes and weak chins and broad brows that get smashed by the fists of square faces. The body of the world is bull-necked. A dream is a soft face that fits uncertainly upon it... God, if I could develop that in words... If I, the dream (not what is weak and afraid in me) could become the face of the South. How my lips would sing for it, my songs being the lips of the soul. 1

Toomer, in an article to the Liberator in 1922, wrote that racially, he seems to have seven blood mixtures: French, Dutch, Welsh, Negro, German, Jewish and Indian. But withstanding the variety of his own heritage, Toomer saw the scene in America as either white or black. Thus he had to find himself racially in one or the other of the two categories. Toomer solved the immediate problem by declaring himself as first and foremost American. He explained:

1 Jean Toomer, Cane, introduced by Arna Bontemps (New York, 1969), p. 158.
From my own point of view I am naturally and inevitably an American. I have strived for a spiritual fusion analogous to the fact of racial intermingling. Without denying a single element in me, with no desire to subdue one to the other, I have tried to let them function as complements. I have tried to let them live in harmony. Within the last two or three years, however, my growing need for artistic expression has pulled me deeper and deeper into the Negro group. ¹

Having been born in Washington, D. C., Toomer returns to Georgia to find his roots among the black people in the deep-rooted cane. The soil as the beginning of "roots," both literal and figurative, holds a promise of Toomer's identity: "When one is one the soil of one's ancestors, most anything can come to one... I felt that things unseen to men were tangibly immediate."² "Things are so immediate in Georgia."³ "Kabnis, a promise of a soil-soaked beauty: uprooted, thinning out. Suspended a few feet above the soil whose touch would resurrect him."⁴

Toomer realizes that he will find his real identity, the real Kabnis, if only he can reconcile the warring dualities, the double-consciousness. Kabnis affirms his Southern blue-blood heritage, the Pinchbacks of Georgia who later achieve prominence in Louisiana, but not his black blood. "Master; slave. Soil; and the overarching heavens. Dusk; dawn. They fight and bastardize you."

¹ Toomer, quoted by Arna Bontemps, "Introduction" to Cane, op. cit., viii-ix.
² Toomer, p. 31.
³ Ibid., p. 164.
⁴ Ibid., p. 191.
Although Toomer attempts to search for his identity through the revelatory unconsciousness of dreams, he finds that his dreams are rooted deep in the South. He is the victim and he speaks from deep within his soul to other black people searching for their identity.

You know what hell is cause you've been there. Its a feelin and its ragin in my soul in a way that'll pop out of me an run you through, an scorchy, an burn an rip your soul. Your soul. Nigger soul.¹

The impulse is personal here and always will be "Your soul." But the response is collective, "Nigger soul."

Langston Hughes speaks to the same point in the poem, "Mulatto," which first appeared in Saturday Review of Literature in 1927.

The Southern night is full of stars,
Great big yellow stars.
0, sweet as earth
Dusk dark bodies
Give sweet birth,
To yellow bastard sons

The Georgia dusk captures Hughes' attention as it did Toomer's. There is also questioning as seen in the poem "Cross."

My old man's a white old man...
My old mother's black.
...
My old man died in a fine big house.
My ma died in a shack.
I wonder where I'm gonna die,
Being neither white or black.²

Both Toomer and Hughes refer to the physical mulatto as non-white blacks.

¹Ibid., p. 232.
This "being neither white or black" carries over into the culture. These writers who recognize themselves as non-white (as distinct from black) will find a cultural dualism which evidences itself in trying to reconcile an African heritage with European culture.

The cultural mulatto shows up repeatedly in the literature by black writers of the 1920's. That decade saw the rise of the "new Negro," as Alain Locke termed the metamorphosis of the psyche of black people. Before, blacks saw themselves "in the distorted perspective of a social problem." However, with a reorientation of view, the spiritual emancipation evidenced itself in renewed self-respect and self-reliance. The 1920's also saw the rise of Marcus Garvey's "Back to Africa" movement.

While Garvey, a Jamaican-born black, was initiating the Universal Negro Improvement Association to glorify blackness and to foster pride in African heritage, writers were questioning the part Africa had played in their lives. Thus, juxtaposed with Garvey's proposal of a return of blacks to Africa to establish a sovereign nation of black people, were songs of physical and cultural estrangement. Hughes shows this estrangement in "Afro-American Fragment," an appropriate title.

So long,
sol far away
Is Africa.
Not even memories alive
Save those that history books create,

Save those that songs
Beat back into the blood---
Beat out of blood with words sad-sung
In strange un-Negro tongue---
So long,
So far away
Is Africa.
Subdued and time-lest
Are the drums--and yet
Through some vast mist of race
There comes this song
I don't understand,
This song of atavistic land,
Of bitter yearnings lost
Without a place--
So long,
So far away
Is Africa's
Dark face.¹

While Hughes shows an awareness of blackness or an African heritage, he simultaneously reveals an estrangement, an estrangement which characterizes the problem of identity. Countee Cullen expresses a similar awareness of an estrangement in "Heritage."

What is Africa to me:
Copper sun or scarlet sea,
Jungle star or jungle track,
Strong bronzed men, or regal black
Women from whose loins I sprang
When the birds of Eden sang?
One three centuries removed
From the scenes his father loved,
Spicy grove, cinnamon tree,
What is Africa to Me?

Africa? A book one thumbs
Listlessly, till slumber comes

Father, Son, and Holy Ghost,
So I make an idle boast;
...although I speak
With my mouth thus, in my heart
Do I play a double part.

Not yet has any heart or head
In the least way realized
They and I are civilized.

The above poem appears in Cullen's first volume of poetry, Color (1925).

The title of the poem and the title of the book both suggest Cullen's self-consciousness and cultural estrangement.

The question of identity is unarguably linked with the question of culture. For instance, Langston Hughes writes, "I too sing America. I am the darker brother," and Ralph Ellison writes "I am a Negro American. It does not mean race, it means something cultural, that I am a man sharing a dual question." 1 Claude McKay had written earlier in "America:

"Although she feeds me bread of bitterness
and sinks into my throat her tiger's teeth,
Stealing my breath of life, I will confess
I love this cultural hell that tests my youth!"

Similarly, the titles of contemporary novels by black writers such as Invisible Man, Nobody Knows My Name, Another Country, The Man Who Cried I Am, The Outsider all attest to this preoccupation.

LeRoi Jones shows this same preoccupation "to understand where and who" he is in the "cultural Hell." The development of Jones' black consciousness was the product of a struggle within the man which is reflected in his poetry. Jones experiences the same double-consciousness which infected other black writers. For example, in Jones' play Dutchman, Clay, the protagonist, says, "Well, in college I thought I was Baudelaire. But I've slowed down since." The derisive Lula shrieks in hysterics, "A black Baudelaire." Clay tells here in all seriousness, "That's right." While white Lula recognizes a lack of racial identity in Clay's statement, Clay is unwittingly aware of anything extraordinary. Clay is symbolic of the struggle of black artists to come to terms with

double-consciousness, this sense of twoness or warring ideals. The progression from LeRoi Jones to Amiri Baraka, the development of a black consciousness, is the progression from the double-consciousness to a distinct racial identity, a struggle and movement reflected in his poetry. In *Home: Social Essays* Jones writes:

> And there is a sense of the Prodigal about my life that begs to be resolved. But one truth anyone reading these pieces ought to get is the sense of movement—the struggle, in myself, to understand where and who I am, and to move with that understanding... And these moves, most times unconscious...seem to me to have been always toward the ting I had coming into the world with no sweat: my blackness.1

There is a sense of the Prodigal about Jones' life that begs to be resolved by those who read his works and discover the tensions inherent in a man who feels his twoness, the peculiar sensation of double-consciousness, to be black and a Baudelaire. These feelings intensified as 1970 approached. For example, one can sense a feeling of black awareness in Jones' first volume of poetry, *Preface to a Twenty Volume Suicide Note*, but that awareness stems from the ambiguity of being black and American. The poem "Notes for a Speech" does not exclaim its questions.

> African blues
> does not know me ...
> a country
> in black & white, newspapers
> blown down pavements
> of the world. Does not
> feel what I am.
> ...they conduct
> their deaths apart
> from my own. Those
> heads I call my "people."

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(And who are they.
... My color
is not theirs.
... my own
dead souls, my so called
people. Africa
is a foreign place. You are
as any other sad man here
American.1

The above poem, written in 1961, expresses an awareness of an African Heritage but more readily an estrangement from "Those heads, I call my 'people'." The attitude in the poem can be further illustrated in the essay, "The Myth of a Negro Literature," written in 1962. Jones says, "The American Negro has a definable and legitimate historical tradition, no matter how painful in America, but it is the only place such a tradition exists, simply because America is the only place the American Negro exists."2 In the same article he makes his point even clearer. "It is only the American experience that can be persistent cultural catalyst for the Negro. In a sense, history for the Negro, before American, must remain an emotional abstraction."3

In *Home: Social Essays* and in the majority of Jones' creative writings we see an outlined movement by Jones himself toward an increasing black awareness. Only one year later after writing that "History of the Negro, before America, must remain an emotional abstraction,"


2 Jones, Home, p. 111.

3 Ibid.
Jones warns, "Let no one convince any black man that he is an American like anybody else."¹

The transition from LeRoi Jones to Amiri Baraka was not sudden. It covered a period of almost ten years. Jones spent his early creative career in the Bohemian setting of Greenwich Village. Having been born in a middle-class family, in childhood, adolescence, and early maturity, he acted out a pattern of middle-class norms. His parents kept him away or attempted to keep him away from the Newark gangs and other "undesirable" influences. He obtained his B.A. degree in English from Howard in 1953, having transferred to Howard from Rutgers University, where he had a science scholarship. After returning from the Air Force, he entered Columbia University and received his master's degree in comparative literature. Thus we see Jones, prior to the era of blackness, as the black middle-class intellectual with a traditional educational background.

However, by 1961, when Preface to a Twenty Volume Suicide Note appears, Jones begins to feel a "heavy contract of emptiness" prevailing his life. He writes:

Lately, I've become accustomed to the way
The ground opens up and envelops me
Each time I go out to walk the dog.
Or the broad edged silly music the wind
Makes when I run for a bus . . .
Things have come to that.

In the poem which gives the book its title Jones reveals the disilluisionment and uncertainty which characterize most of his work in this period.

¹ Jones, "black writing," in Home, p. 165.
The struggle for Jones to understand who and where he is can be found in "Betancourt," which gives Jones; early definition of a poem.

I know now
What a poem
is) A
Turning away ...
from what it was
had moved us... A
madness.

This madness also characterizes his middle-class life, the desire to
turn away "from what it was had moved us," our blackness. Keorapetse Kgositsile clarifies the problem in the following:

The vocabulary of the Black man's experience in America is contaminated with terms like integration, melting-pot society, civil rights--which be nothing but a way to destroy the Black victim's identity to ensure his psychological captivity and his alienation from himself. Thus it is that the question of identity among AfroAmericans is of primary importance as the first step toward liberatory struggle. Identity and nationalism then are simply strategic points of reference in our struggle for liberation.

This is the point Jones finds himself when he writes the majority of the poems in The Dead Lecturer, published in 1964. In this collection of poems Jones continues the search of who and where he is. However, the search still remains negative in its doubting tones. "What you are, you will have no certainty, or end. That you will stay, where you are, a human gentle wisp to life." In the poem "The Liar" Jones

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1 Jones, "Betancourt," in Preface, p. 36.


continues in the same vein, citing his endless doubt and uncertainty.

"What I thought was love in me, /I find a thousand instances as fear."

The poet in the poem fears that mentally and psychologically he is dying as long as he remains unfamiliar with his self, with who he is.

When they say, "It is Roy
Who is dead?" I wonder
who will they mean?

The poet apparently realizes that his self is dying and that death will find him still sitting in darkness as to who he really is. "I wonder who will they mean?" Jones also realizes that that force which compels him is the desire to create. In the poem "I Substitute for the Dead Lecturer," the poet relates this force.

For all these wan roads
I am pushed to follow, are my own conceit.
A simple muttering elegance, slipped in my head
pressed on my soul,... And I am frightened
that the flame of the sickness will burn off my
face. And leave the boxes, my stewed black skull,
an empty cage of failure.

Jones' preoccupation with emptiness, barrenness, coldness, death, and suicide in his early works surrenders to his will and tendency of body and mind "to make," as he writes in "Home." His suicidal preoccupations and death urges give way to Sabotage, the necessity to break or wear down the superstructure or the rulers who have oppressed him. He explains in the preface to Black Magic that "talking bad and getting high" armed him temporarily against the failing Western culture.

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1 Jones, "The Liar," in The Dead Lecturer," p. 76.

2 Jones, "I Substitute for the Dead Lecturer, Ibid., p. 56.
Talking bad and getting high, Jones admitted as early as 1960 in the essay "Cuba Libre," did not alleviate his feelings of inadequacy. He was still the immobile intellectual, a talker and not a participant. "The rebels among us have become merely people like myself who grow beards and will not participate in politics."¹ The rebel intellectual did not even include himself when he talked about "the people." He speaks always of he, she, they. It is other people's struggle, not yet his.

However, about 1962 Jones begins to recognize that he cannot rest outside the struggle. His language grows harsher. He belches it out, but he thinks about a time when, "my eyes and hand and mind can turn and soften, and my songs will be softer and lightly weight the air."² But the drive leading him toward his "target study" is a result of the inability of his mind to turn to softness but he is not yet ready to compose with "the preciseness any violent man could propose..."³

However, during the period from 1963-65, in Target Study, Jones begins to home in on concrete issues, on the pressing issue, himself. With the focus on target, Jones has reached part two of his progression, he writes, "An artist, any artist must say where it is in the world that

¹ Jones, "Cuba Libre," in Home, p. 61.


he is. And by doing this he will also say who he is."¹

Thus in Dutchman and the Slave we see the protagonists Clay and Walker Vessels respectively struggling to assert their manhood by destroying their muted pasts. When Lula, the white female protagonist, questions Clay about his identity, he responds, "I thought I was Baudelaire." Thus Lula is able to kill him because Clay listens to the lies of white America and therefore lies to himself. Neither does Clay realize the ritualistic castration that Lula performs with great adeptness.

Lula: We'll sit and talk endlessly.
Clay: About what?
Lula: About what? About your manhood, what do you think? What do you think we've been talking about all this time?
Clay: Well, I didn't know it was that... Every other thing in the world but that.²

In The Slave as in Dutchman the white woman tells the black man, the would-be revolutionary Walker Vessels, "I don't even think you know who you are anymore... You're split so many ways."³ Vessels is the would-be revolutionary confronting his past, his middle-class intellectual inertia (he admits that he would rather be arguing politics or any subject, but not fighting). He confronts his former white wife and her "liberal" husband, but he can only partially erase his past. When the play closes, his two daughters, whom he has claimed to have killed, are


left crying among the ruins of the bombarded house as Vessels walks tiredly out of the door.

Jones is now ready to move into the third phase of his becoming, into black art, "the crucial seeing, the decisions, the actual move."
The first phase saw through the existing values, but the only response was verbal, a literary anti-Western language. The second phase attempted to fashion a way out of the superstructure, zeroing in to the issues.
The third phase demonstrated seeing action, and the strength to build.
"A Poem for Black Hearts" is a poem for Malcolm and for all black people.
In the poem we see the emerging Amiri Baraka.

For all of him, and all of yourself, look up,
black man, quit stuttering and shuffling, look up
black man, quit whining and stooping
...let nothing in us rest until we
avenge ourselves for his death.1

Jones has come a long way from defining the poem as a turning away, a madness. The turning away was from the self, the lies, lack of beauty in a black body and a white soul. Thus in defining the black poem, he now defines himself.

We want "poems that kill."
Assassin poems, Poems that shoot guns.

...Put it on him, poem. Strip him naked to the world!
Let Black People understand
that they are the lovers and the sons of lovers and warriors and sons of warriors are poems and poets and all the loveliness here in the world.

1 Jones, _The Slave_, p. 61.
We want a black poem. And a
Black World.
Let the world be a Black Poem.¹

Black art was a "rebeginning" in calling for poems that kill to allow the black man life. Jones emerges as a man who can finally reckon with who he is, where he is, and where he is going. He forces the artist and the politician to come together to make up the body politic. In defining the role of the black artist in America he defined his role in today's struggle. His role is to report and reflect so precisely the nature of the society, and of himself in that society, that other men will be moved by the exactness of his rendering and, if they are black men, grow strong through this moving....²

Jones' quest to discover his racial identity is his transition from Everett LeRoi Jones to Imamu Amiri Baraka demonstrating the importance of name, identity, as determines how we see ourselves. Keorapetse Kgotsitsile describes how we see ourselves.

Names like places are concrete like a son
Perhaps even deeper than the eye
For our images remember more than white whips.

Names give birth to people in places anytime

To give birth to a people
Singing our name concrete
As places and a song
Steeped in blood, the only
Gateway to our place under the sun.³


We are led to the importance of identity, black identity, in asserting a black literature and a black aesthetic. The quest for racial identity is significant when we understand that, "Names give birth to people in places anytime." Ralph Ellison reiterates that, "It is through our names that we first place ourselves in the world. Our names, being the gift of others, must be made our own." It becomes apparent that a sense of identity precedes naming and naming presents the question of language in that language is the tool of naming. Language gives birth to people and therefore can be said to be propagandistic in the service of people, any people.

The affirmation of racial identity is caught in a moment through symbols and images as a way or means of definition. If language--through symbols and images--defines being, then the quest for racial identity is ultimately linked to the language which leaves identity and selfhood unquestioned. Language operates in the service of vision.

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1 Ellison, "Hidden Name and Complex Fate," in *Shadow and Act*, p. 151.
CHAPTER III

PROPAGANDA: LANGUAGE IN THE SERVICE OF VISION

In this world of direct existential confrontation with blackness, the black poet can talk with himself or seek a black identity with a black audience, it is true.... But will he ever write a poem about snow and how someone does something with snow to make robins and roses and seeds warm for "us who sleep in one another's arms?" I doubt it. And therein lies the pity of it all. He will never sing of Spring or birdsongs or love. The poet of the black avant-garde, I am afraid, will continue to move in a world of charred beams and splintered glass and roasted rats where men die outraged and indecently "shouting impieties and betrayal." For him there will never by any searing apocalyptic vision--only the cobweb of creative insecurity and the dance of death on some "Paddy's" extremities.1

Many of the arguments concerning a black aesthetic speak to similar points as the above quotation. Will the black artist ever write about "universal" subject matter? This is a question often put to the black artist himself and a standard by which much of his literature has not passed the traditional Western criteria of judgment. However, exactly what is universal? Perhaps the universal includes the frequently dramatized love, hate, duty, loyalty, death, fear, pride, prejudice and a host of other nouns which generally take on different meanings in varying situations. "Different cultures not only have different conceptions of these but have different attitudes to them. Not only that, they give them different emphases."2 The universal in an abstract made concrete


Art is communication. Communication implies the awareness, by the artist, of an audience. The "ways" and means—that is, the "language" of communication—must be determined by the particular audience for which the artist performs. By "language" is meant not only the particular language used (whether English, French or Swahili) but also the imagery, symbolism, style, etc.\footnote{Okpaku, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 14.}

The whole history of a people, their culture, their values, their myths are preserved and transmitted to their progeny through their written language. The obvious symbols and the not so obvious images that their language employs are the active transmitters of their cultural values. When we look at this delineation of the language into symbols and images, we can see their employment within all cultures. Preserved in both are the capsule values of the culture. They say to the people on a subtle, long initiated basis what is good and in turn must be preserved and what is bad, and in turn not worth keeping. Frantz Fanon in \textit{Black Skin, White Masks} explained the relationship between language and identity with a particular emphasis on the function of language in a colonial society:

A man who has language consequently possesses the world expressed and implied by that language. What we are getting at becomes plain: Mastery of language affords remarkable power... Every colonized people—in other words, every people in whose soul an inferiority complex has been created by the death and burial of its local cultural originality—finds himself face to face with the language of the civilizing nation; that is, with the culture of the mother country. The Colonized is elevated above his jungle status in proportion to his adoption of
the mother's cultural standards. 1

Language consistently and persistently affirms or disclaims; it is
never quite objective. "Language not only expresses ideas and concepts
but may actually shape them. Often the process is completely uncon-
scious with the individual concerned, unaware of the influence of the
spoken or written expressions upon his thought processes." 2 So that,
whether we know it or not or care to mention it at all, in reading and
speaking the language and in internalizing the symbols and images, we
become socialized to certain values and establish our ethics on such a
basis.

The world view that one uses to determine what is
right and wrong, good and bad, beautiful and ugly, and
human and non-human is a product of culture in which one
is formally and informally socialized. Language is a
fundamental part of culture; it reflects one's culture
and is the indispensable vehicle for the transmission of
culture. People through language and other forms of
communication are carriers of cultural standards of
beauty, love, art, music, childbearing, funeral prac-
tices and so on. 3

"To speak means to be in a position to use a certain syntax, to grasp
the morphology of this or that language, but it means above all to
assume a culture, to support the weight of a civilization." 4

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4 Fanon, Black Skin, White Masks, p. 17.
Marxist critics in the United States during the 1930's spoke to similar points. Granville Hicks, Joseph Freeman, James T. Farrell and others outlined aesthetic theories based on the worldview of historical materialism and the Marxism concept of a class struggle. They asserted that no aesthetic theory could be formulated without social considerations to form a philosophical foundation, because what controls the writer's pen and the critics evaluation is their world attitude. All artists have a world view which reveals itself in the works which symbolize a recognizable reality. Granville Hicks explained that the author's world attitude is an extension of his social background. He also notes that for complete understanding of a literary work the reader must see the artist in relation to his age.

...we can understand an author best if we examine his relation to the social movements of his time and to the class alignments out of which they grow.1

The writer's world attitude in embracing the age as he knows it must isolate the central issues and make those issues the focus of his work. The central issues as Hicks isolates them place him among the Marxist critics. The writer must or should decide according to Marxist philosophy that the capitalist bourgeoisie is on the decline, and he must therefore take up the battle for the proletariat.

Today in China a similar attitude prevails and speaks officially for the nation in explicitly political terms. Mao notes that literature and art do not transcend classes, but in fact conventional Western

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literature and art uphold the bourgeois class and oppose the proletariat.

In the world today all culture, all literature and art belong to definite classes and are geared to definite political lines. There is in fact no such thing as art for art's sake, art that stands above classes or art that is detached from or independent of politics.¹

Although man's social life must provide the only source for literary material, Mao notes that the reader does not want that material in raw form; art should be richer and livelier than "life." But still, the purpose of literature and art is to help the masses (which Mao notes make up ninety per cent of the Chinese population) propel history forward.

For example, there is suffering from hunger, cold and oppression on the one hand, and exploitation and oppression by man on the other, these facts exist everywhere and people look upon them as commonplace. Writers and artists concentrate such everyday phenomena, typify the contradictions and struggles within them and produce works which awaken the masses, fire them with enthusiasm and impel them to unite and struggle to transform their environment. Without such literature and art, this task could not be fulfilled, at least not so effectively and speedily.²

Mao asserts here that all literature must be used as propaganda. "The Red Detachment of Women," the story of a slave girl under the feudal system who escapes to join the Red Army, is a case in point.³

¹ Mao-Tse-Tung, On Literature and Art (Talks at the Yenan Forum, 1942), p. 25.

² Mao, in Ibid., p. 19.

³ The play was aired on the educational network as a special documentary in 1972.
Mao would agree with Granville Hicks that all literature and art must be used for propaganda, that is, the literature and art must contribute to producing the necessary values and world attitudes compatible to eliciting the ethics of a society, the desired responses. On this level what becomes universal is that which becomes acceptable as standard for a given culture. Joseph Freeman, a contemporary of Hicks, addresses himself indirectly to the universal and to propaganda, major issues surrounding the black aesthetic.

The liberal critic, the man in white, wants us to believe that when you write about the autumn wind blowing a girl's hair or about "thirsting breasts" you are writing about "experience," but when you write about the October Revolution or the five year plan or the lynching of Negroes in the South, or the San Francisco strike you are not writing about "experience...." Hence, to say "bed your desires among the pressing grasses" is 'art' while Roar China, Mayakowsky's poems or the novels of Josephine Herbst and Robert Cantwell is propaganda.

Freeman points up the issue with clarity. Content determines language and therefore language operates in the service of vision.

As the cultural and ethical stance of a people changes, the changes become solidified in the changing patterns of the language. The language continues to operate as a perpetual reminder and reinforcer of the values or the changes in values. Language in society does not develop apart from that society's historic, economic, and political evolution. "The interconnection of language with other forces can be best seen through its usage as a form of symbol. Pure language does not exist: a word may have a particular meaning in a society and a totally different

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If pure language does not exist, in terms of the vision of a society's identity, any language used could justly be considered a language of propaganda and indoctrination. Around this system of symbols which makes up the language is a field of images that continually reinforce the symbols to which the culture has attached its values. These images operate in conscious and unconscious ways as do all other aspects of the language shaded by the cultural identity of a people. A word is therefore not just a word; it is charged with the cultural heritage of its originations.

Language is the material of literature as stone or bronze is of sculpture, paints of pictures, or sounds of music. But one should realize that language is not mere inert matter like stone but is itself a creation of man and is thus charged with the cultural heritage of a linguistic group.

Mazini Kunene demonstrates this same idea, language charged with the cultural heritage of a linguistic group, in his notes on Zulu literature.

Kunene explains that there are some concepts in Zulu literature which have special significance when attached to the Zulu cultural experience. For instance, a whole body of meanings exists around the sun. Because of its "dominating presence," its heat, its life-giving regenerative nature, and its "awe-inspiring distance," the sun acquired

1 Podair, op. cit., p. 42.
2 Wellek and Warren, op. cit., p. 22.
special significance as power, light, and life. "Daily life was not divided into time units but into cycles." Therefore, as John Mbiti pointed out in *African Religions and Philosophy*, the whole concept of time in African society is vastly different from standard Western time. Looking at black culture in America we can readily note the jokes about "C. P." time or "Colored People's" time. Looking at the joke in this manner, time as related to the seven cycles of the sun stresses that a word is not a word but the weight of a culture. Also, since much preparation goes into preparing for the night, the dusk, or sunset enlivened many myths about that time of day. Similarly, because of the concept of the community, stories and myths have evolved around the traveler (the feet know no rest). The traveler tested the ethical demands of generosity necessary to the communal society. Until a stranger tested this generosity, one's generous nature was still in doubt. The concept of life or periods in life relate specifically to community needs also. The community stresses the interconnection and interdependence of generations for the maintenance and survival of future generations. The well being of future generations is seen to be vital to the well being of the present generation. "In this sense, generations become a series of interconnected existencies.... Life, in short, is according to this philosophy an alteration of cycles of existence between generations."¹

The umbilical cord then becomes highly regarded as the symbol of linkage between the generations of the community. A Zulu refers to his place of birth as "'the place where my umbilical cord is.'" "In short,

the person considers himself part of the soil where his umbilical cord is buried, uniting him not only with the present generation of his family but also with the past.1

These are only a few instances in which a word is a symbol for a particular culture. However, a distinction can be made from these words as examples to show the difference between the real and the created image. As Carolyn Gerald points out, the created image is described through the use of the language. If one sees a woman in a black dress no immediate association reveals itself to the viewer. However, if one sees that same woman in a black dress with a handkerchief to her eyes, carrying a wreath of flowers, we automatically associate the scene or panorama of images with death.

A whole complex of images have been built around the word "black" itself. "Blackmail," "blacklist," "black sheep," "black market," "black-guard" are examples of a language in service of a dominant white culture. From the origin and initial use of this particular symbol to the virtual present, "black" has gone through a whole process of imagic handling so that in Western culture it not only projects a denotative meaning, the absence of light, but encompasses a field of images which gives it a high symbolic charge.

Concomitant with that projection for several hundred years---ever since the black man has come within the sphere of influence of the white---the moral and aesthetic associations of black and white have been mixed up with race. Thus, the negative reflection of ourselves is, in the white man's system, the reverse side of his positive

1 Ibid.
projection of himself. The white man has developed a myth of superiority based on images which compare him symbolically with the black man. The very fact of this interconnection is at once a hold over from previous bondage. We realize now that we are involved in a black-white war over the control of images. For to manipulate an image is to control a peoplehood. Zero image has for a long time meant the repression of our peoplehood.¹

In controlling our peoplehood, Gerald writes, these images in the common written language determine the potentials and capabilities of black culture. They, through a process of internalization on both sides, help to solidify not only the dominant culture's positive image of itself, but foster a negative self-image within the psyches of black people.

Since the dominant culture through the use of its language, as in all cultures, must project its strengths and in turn insure its longevity, what of the identity of the colonized culture? Frantz Fanon notes that the first step in securing an identity is the assimilationist phase.² The colonized attempt to phase into the existing dominant culture, imbibing all of its social and ethical values. The other alternative is to divorce one's self from a culture that is adverse to one and seek to define one's self outside of its values. But taking this particular route, the colonized man has a difficult task to perform. "Because of the anthropomorphic nature of images the self view of the dominant culture is in all of his linguistic projection."³ So there


³ Gerald, op. cit., p. 372.
can be no hermetic conditions for the performance of this task. For
even as the colonized seeks to redefine itself in viable self-images, it
does so in the terms of the colonizer.

They gave me the wrong name, in the first place,
They named me grade and waited for a light and agile dancer.
But some trick of the genes mixed me up
And instead I turned out big and black and burly.
In the second place, I fashioned the wrong dreams.
I wanted to dress like Juliet and act
Before applauding audiences on Broadway.
I learned more about Shakespeare than he knew about himself.
But of course, all that was impossible.
"Talent, yes," they would tell me,
"But an actress has to look the part."

So I ended up waiting on tables in Harlem
And hearing uncouth men yell at me:
"Hey momma, you can cancel that hamburger
And come on up to 102."

In the third place, I tried the wrong solution.
The stuff I drank made me deathly sick
And someone called a doctor.
Next time I'll try a gun.1

So, left with a zero image, an indissoluble puddle of blackness
("For it is through our names that we first place ourselves in the
world")2 the black writer has been left with the task of making new and
radical associations from the already established language of the dom-
inant culture. The colonized has been defined in terms which attest to
the superiority of the colonizer and the inferiority of the colonized.
They, within the confines of the language, can be no more than what the

1 Naomi Long Madgett, "Her Story," in Black Insights, ed. Nick Aaron

2 Ralph Ellison, "Hidden Name and Complex Fates," in Shadow and Act
images that they have internalized say they can be. They know who they are only in terms of what the body of language associations and images say they are. "The situation of the black man in the Western world today, is that of a man in the midst of an open war without the benefit of a complete knowledge of the weapons he holds." This has been the position of blacks in America. "When one is invisible he finds such problems as good and evil, honesty and dishonesty, of such shifting shapes that he confuses one with the other, depending upon who happens to be looking through him at the time." A zero image of one's self makes man only invisible. Thus each piece of paper handed to him dictates how to act, but never who he is.

The tie that ultimately links blacks in America to their new self-image, their identity and peoplehood, is provided by the black aesthetic. The black writer, using the black aesthetic which is cultural and ethical, provides the direction in the redefinition and reestablishment of images; in this, he is the myth-maker of his people. In his attempts to make and mold a myth that will determine the peoplehood of blacks within America he must also "clear away the symbolic debris of the white man's attempt to control and define black reality." The black writer,

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3 Gerald, op. cit., p. 375.

using the value-laden terminology of American culture must work the
images of black people to suit this new world-view, this new peoplehood
and this new reality. His work "at this stage is clearly to destroy the
zero and the negative image-myths of black people by turning those
images inside out. To do this, we reverse the symbolism, and we use the
reverse symbolism as the tool for projecting our own image upon the
universe."¹

What is new, I believe, is the deliberate desecration
and smashing of idols, the turning insideout of symbols,
to which black writers are now proceeding with a vengeance.
Bitterness, which runs through the whole of black litera-
ture, is being replaced by wrath; a sense of frustration
is giving way before a sense of power. It is the sense of
power which proceeds from a mythic consciousness based on
a people's positive view of themselves and their destiny.²

And in the same vein, Lerone Bennett says of the new black aestheticians
in their formative roles of directing images as the shorthand symbols of
the ideals and aspirations of a culture:

They tell people who they are; they define roles and
apportion tasks. They are maps of the territory and of
the soul. They define paths, the obstacles, the instru-
ments and the goals. They project ideal images of the
ideal relationship between man and man, between man and
woman, between man-woman-child...the role of the family
and the transmission of values to the next generation.³

All language acts in service of a particular vision, thus all language,
to support that vision, must be in a sense propagandistic. In the black

¹ Gerald, op. cit., p. 376.
² Gerald, op. cit., p. 376.
³ Bennett, op. cit., p. 4.
writer's quest for racial identity for himself and his people his symbols have, of necessity, a certain basic value as propaganda. In becoming the language of black culture, the images and symbols point to a positive black culture which has been obscured by centuries of cultural repression:

She does not know
Her beauty,
She thinks her brown body
Has no glory.

If she could dance
Naked,
Under palm trees
And see her image in the river
She would know.

But there are no palm trees
On the street,
And dishwater gives back no images. ¹

The black aesthetic teaches movement, purpose, and direction. But springs and birdsongs or love do not define black people. There is no purity in snow save those purities given it by whiteness. But black writing is full of apocalyptic vision as black people move from the dishwater to the river.

CHAPTER IV

TOWARD A WALK IN THE SUN: THE APOCALYPTIC IMPERATIVE OF THE BLACK AESTHETIC

One cannot deny an African heritage grounded in an American experience when speaking of black people in America. "There are roots," says Keorapetse Kgotsile, "stronger than the baobab tree and there are no distances." There are roots which do not begin on American shores, but which cross oceans and dig deep into African soil. The black aesthetic searches for these roots and attempts to rebuild the myths which are the collective experience of a cultural group.

Think of each black personality as the separate branch, as beginning where it ends... And the trunk is black as the branches are black, and the roots are eternally hidden though real, and therefore eternally memorial; and as the memorial preserve is itself black, it is not hard to know what color is the color of black desperation.¹

As the memorial preserve is blackness and the collective experience is shaped by blackness, the aesthetic as "culture specific myths" inevitably concerns itself with blackness, not only as skin color but culture, a way of viewing the world.

In traditional oral cultures such as Africa's the teller makes words come alive as Mazini Kunene explained in his notes on Zulu literature.² The spoken word reverberates with the myth and rhythm of a


²Kunene, op. cit., pp. 21-27.
culture. If "speech describes the natural proposition of being alive,"
according to LeRoi Jones,¹ then the word cannot be static but must be
dynamic and regenerative as it imitates and mirrors the activity of a
culture. In attempting to capture the dynamic and life-giving force of
speech a writer creates an aesthetic in employing language in the serv-
ice of vision. The reciprocal interplay between language and myth will
have a cultural base. "Words' meanings, but also the rhythm and syntax
that frame and propel their concatenation, seek their culture as the
final reference for what they are describing of the word."²

In African culture the word is active as it derives from African
genesis. The epitome of this concept is the African's idea of "nommo,"
the word. All-encompassing, "nommo" is the belief that the word is a
verbal commitment to a vision which is molded by a culture and simul-
taneously molds a culture. Jahn effectively substantiates this all-
encompassing aspect. "Amma, 'the great begetter,' produced the world
through the seed of the word."³ That the word in African culture is
active can also be validated by the Ife myth which in attempting to ex-
plain the creation of man describes his beginnings with transitive verbs.
"God created the first human being Ba-atsi with the help of the moon.

¹ LeRoi Jones, "Expressive Language," in Language, Communication,

² Ibid., p. 326.

He kneaded the body into shape, covered it with a skin, and poured in blood.\textsuperscript{1} James Weldon Johnson, a black American writer, employs both a Christian and an African concept in "The Creation."\textsuperscript{2} He takes his Christian-American experience and his African heritage and expresses a Christian interpretation in active words.

\begin{verbatim}
And God stepped out on space, 
And He looked around and said,  
"I'm lonely-- 
I'll make me a world."

And as far as the eye of God could see 
Darkness covered everything.

Then God smiled,  
And the light broke,
\end{verbatim}

\begin{verbatim}
Then God reached out and took the light in His hands, 
And God rolled the light around in His hands,  
Until He made the sun 
And He set that sun a-blazing in the heavens. 
And the light that was left from making the sun 
God gathered up in a shining ball 
And flung against the darkness, 
Spangling the night with the moon and stars.
\end{verbatim}

God steps, talk, smiles, reaches, gathers, and flings. "God walked, and where He trod His footsteps hollowed the valleys out and bulged the mounts up. God stepped over to the edge of the world and He spat out the seven seas: He batted His eyes, and the lightnings flashed; He clapped His hands, and the thunders rolled; and the waters above the

\begin{footnotes}

\end{footnotes}
earth came down." Johnson shows the synthesizing of his experiences in this Negro Sermon. We can compare the making of man with the Ife myth as well as the Biblical Genesis.

Up from the bed of the river
God scooped the clay;
And by the bank of the river
He kneeled Him down;
And there the great God Almighty,
Who lit the sun and fixed it in the sky,
Who flung the stars to the most far corner of the night,
Who rounded the earth in the middle of His hand--

This great God,
Like a mammy bending over her baby,
Kneed down in the dust
Toiling over a lump of clay
Till He shaped it in His own image;

Then into it He blew the breath of life,
And man became a living soul.

In this passage God is a black Christian deity, he toils over man like a "mammy" toiling over a child. Mammy is a black mother; she was never mistaken for a white mother. Here, then, we have words acting as outward manifestations of the culture they represent.

Similarly, in Zora Neale Hurston's Their Eyes Were Watching God we encounter a Christian God and the African gods simultaneously. The Christian God is the "Watcher" who "turns his eyes away in resignation," mocking the lives of men. The Christian God is a 'white' deity with enormous might and power. He made the black men "tongueless, earless, eyeless conveniences all day long. He made white men lesser gods than He.

Like the pecking-order in a chicken yard. Insensate cruelty to those you can whip, and grovelling submission to those you can't.... All gods who receive homage are cruel. All gods dispense suffering without reason.
Otherwise they would not be worshipped. Through indiscriminate suffering men know fear and fear is the most divine emotion. It is the stones for altars and the beginning of wisdom. Half gods are worshipped in wine and flowers. Real gods require blood.¹

And yet the title of the novel itself, Their Eyes Were Watching God, suggests the African concept of their gods. Just as Weldon's god was active and immediate, Hurston's god is also immediate. He is seen in the cruel, insensate storm as the "monster" rolling in his bed, summoning the thunder and lightning that trampled over the rooftops and houses, arousing the lakes to anger with only the dikes between the men and himself. Janie, the protagonist, says, "Old Massa is doin' His work now. Us oughta keep quiet."²

Man, the white man, nature and god are one for Hurston. God, like the white men who live in the big houses, are referred to as Ole Massa. He requires blood and reverence.

The wind came back with triple fury, and put out the light for the last time. They sat in company with the others in other shanties, their eyes straining against crude walls and their souls asking if He meant to measure their puny might against His. They seemed to be staring at the dark, but their eyes were watching God.³

Again, as in Johnson's description, the word becomes like quick, rhythmic brush strokes painting a picture, a word picture which "con-jures" an image as soon as the last word is spoken. "And one of the

¹ Zora Neale Hurston, Their Eyes Were Watching God (New York, 1937), pp. 215-16.

² Ibid., p. 235.

³ Ibid., p. 236.
essential differences between Western and African poetry is the different function of the image. In Western poetry the image precedes the word. Images are 'ideas' in the Platonic sense, they are given in advance.... In African poetry, on the other hand, the word is there before the image. It is the word, Nommo, that creates the image."¹

...It was sundown.... It was the time for sitting on porches beside the road. It was the time to hear things and talk. These sitters had been tongueless, earless, eyeless conveniences all day long. Mules and other brutes had occupied their skins. But not, the sun and the bossman were gone, so the skins felt powerful and human. They became lords of sounds and lesser things. They passed nations through their mouths.²

We see words preceding images; we see words' meaning delineating a particular lifestyle or way of life. The words "the sun and the bossman" used together conjure a picture relating an image. The sun usually enforces an idea of brightness and glowing warmth. Most visual media personify the sun by giving it smiling eyes and glowing plump cheeks to signify the sun's benevolent qualities. This fact can be seen in almost any Saturday morning cartoon as well as advertisements for breakfast cereals and orange juice. However, when the sun is used concomitantly with the bossman, the sun takes on qualities of the bossman. The sun becomes cruel and relentless and carries a big whip. Yet, at the same time that the sun beats down on the backs of the workers, "the tongueless, earless, eyeless conveniences," the sun compels the day, bringing with it new life. The images then are by no means simple and

¹ Johnson, op. cit., p. 151.

² Hurston, op. cit., pp. 8-10.
static but compelling and regenerative. Hurston explains the multiplicity of uses and the cultural contest of symbols and images thusly: "A mood come alive. Words walking without masters; walking altogether like harmony in a song."\(^1\)

The setting of the novel is the rural South, particularly rural Georgia and the Florida Everglades. Hurston explains that Janie's story is about coming into womanhood not divorced from nature but a womanhood which can be seen and explained in terms of natural processes. That is:

Janie saw her life a great tree in leaf with the things suffered, things enjoyed, things done and undone. Dawn and doom was in the branches.\(^2\)

Carolyn Gerald explains this phenomenon clearly. She says as man's natural impetus "is to impart to the whole cosmos the qualities which he possesses...man's self-concept must inevitably be tied to his view of the universe, since he sees his own reflection in it at every moment."\(^3\) Therefore, she concludes that "man projects his cultural and racial images upon the universe and derives a sense of personal worth from the reflection he sees gazing back at him."\(^4\) Hurston demonstrates the importance of self-concept through the story of Janie's longing for self-revelation.

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Oh to be a pear tree--any tree in bloom! With kiss-bees singing of the beginning of the world! She was sixteen. She had glossy leaves and bursting buds and she wanted to struggle with life but it seemed to elude her.  

Seeing life, human life as inevitably tied with all of nature's processes, Janie searches for the "confirmation of voice and vision" that she has discovered under the pear tree while "soaking in the alto chant of the visiting bees, the gold of the sun and the panting breath of the breeze....." Janie feels that she has been summoned to behold a revelation. She witnesses a marriage:

She saw a dust-bearing bee sink into the sanctum of a bloom; the thousand sister-calyxes arch to meet the love embrace and the ecstatic shiver of the tree from root to tiniest branch creaming in every blossom and frothing with delight.

Consequently at sixteen Janie stands at the front gate, "Looking, waiting, breathing short with impatience. Waiting for the world to be made."

She waits through two marriages; the first with Logan Killicks, the second with Joe Starks. "So Janie waited a bloom time, and a green time and an orange time... She knew now that marriage did not make love. Janie's first dream was dead, so she became a woman." She marries Joe Starks. After his death, "After a long time of passive happiness, she got up and opened the window and let Tea Cake leap forth and mount to the sky on a wind. That was the beginning of things."

Janie finds the confirmation of voice and vision which she sought in her marriage to Tea Cake. After Tea Cake's death Janie tells her

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1 Hurston, op. cit., p. 25. The subsequent quotations are from Their Eyes Were Watching God.
friend, Pheeby, "Ah done been tuh de horizon and back and now Ah kin set heah in mah house and live by comparisons." Thus Hurston shows the apocalyptic imperative in the confirmation of voice and vision. Janie has been to the horizon and back by the end of the novel. Hurston says at the beginning of Janie's story:

Ships at a distance have every man's wish on board. For some they come in with the tide. For others they sail forever on the horizon, never out of sight, never landing until the Watcher turns his eyes away in resignation, his dreams mocked to death by Time. That is the life of men.

For women, however, "The dream is the truth." The dream arrives with Tea Cake. "So in the beginnin' new thoughts had tuh be thought and new words said. After Ah got used tuh dat, we gits 'long jus' fine. He done taught me de maiden language all over."

Image-making is part of all human experience. However, we are speaking here of the image created by the magic of words. We are considering image not so much as life but as literary art. Art reshapes the raw materials of nature and of human interaction and, in so doing, interprets reality in a non-analytical, non-intellectual way. Art thus makes a direct appeal to the senses and calls forth a spontaneous emotional identification with other men and with the universe.1

Jean Toomer's Cane is such a work. In terms of image-making it deals with "de maiden language all over."

A college of images flashes across the mind when reading Cane. Cane is the story of the black man to be sung, not necessarily as the sweet melody of life but the shrill keen, juxtaposing joy with sorrow, fertility with barrenness, hope with despair, productiveness with

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1 Gerald, op. cit., p. 350.
futility. What is the story of the cane--so supple, so flexible, so yielding in its sweet boiling sap? The cane is cut down by the reapers waiting to be tied into sheaths like cornstalks. "Time and space have no meaning in a canefield."¹ Time and space are infinitude. Life is like that for the women and men.

Section I of Cane consists of the stories of six women portrayed or viewed through their relationship with the soil. The women share an identification with the soil in that the soil is fertilized to procreate and sustain life. On the other hand, the soil is the soil of "a growing thing ripened too soon." The women express the dualistic fertility and futility in the Georgia South.

Karintha, who as a child "old men rode hobby-horse upon their knees, at twelve beautiful and matured, no longer riding on old men's knees, at twenty she was mated and supported by men. "Karintha is a woman. Men do not know that the soul of her was a growing thing ripened too soon."

Becky, a white woman, had two Negro sons. After the first son she retreats to a cabin; after the birth of the second son, she is assumed dead. "The pines whisper to Jesus." Becky dies when the chimney falls through the roof into the cabin. Through the dust and rubble, Becky lay buried, smouldering in a mound of sawdust which symbolizes the chipped pieces cut away from the whole.

In "Carma" the soil appears in Carma's mangrove-gloomed," yellow

¹ Jean Toomer, Cane, introduction by Arna Bontemps (New York, 1923), p. 19.
face." Carma who is strong as any man has a body like a song. "Pungent and composite, the smell of farmyards is the fragrance of the woman." Carma's tale is the "crudest melodrama ever told" because we learn that "Time and space have no meaning in a canefield. No more than the interminable stalks... It is difficult carrying dead weight through cane."

The soil flowed in Fern's eyes. "They gave the impression that nothing was to be denied.... Men saw Fern's eyes and thought she was easy. But when they took her they got no joy from it. After which, however, they felt bound. It was a life-time debt to fulfill their obligation." Fern, "like her face, the whole countryside seemed to flow into her eyes. Flowed into them with the soft listless cadence of Georgia's South." As God flowed into the countryside, He flowed into her eyes and Fern fainted in the canefield after pounding her head despairingly upon the ground. The narrator explains that "Nothing ever came to Fern, not even I."

The symbols are becoming clearer as the stories and poems fill out the collage. The soil and sun set the tone for Toomer's Cane. Intercourse between the soil and sun takes place naturally and silently, creating the beauty "perfect as the dusk when the sun goes down." As the women are the soil the men are the sun hammered into a band of gold. "The sun, which has been slanting over her shoulder, shoots primitive rockets..."

Oland and soil, red soil and sweet-gum tree
So scant of grass, so profligate of pines
Now just before an epoch's sun declines
Thy son, in time, I have retained to thee.1

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1Toomer, "Nullo," in Cane, p. 34.
The sun filters down through the fringe of pines. The pines are evergreen trees having needle-shaped clusters, bearing cones, and yielding resinous sap. "The sun, molten and glorious, was pouring down between the fringe of pines." In "Karintha" Toomer describes the birth of a child using the pine-needles as the fertile bed. "A child fell out of her womb into a bed of pine-needles in the forest." Then in the poem "Nullo" we see barrenness described in contrast to the fertility of Karintha:

A spray of pine-needles,
Dipped in western horizon gold,
Fell onto a path.
Dry moulds of cow-hoofs.
In the forest.
Rabbits knew not of their falling,
Nor did the forest catch a flame.

"Nullo" precedes the story of the barren, near-white Esther.

Toomer paints an unattractive portrait of Esther. At nine her "chalked white face makes her look dead and starched." By the age of twenty-two the mulatto woman's hair has thinned until "it looks like the dull silk on puny corn ears." Her face is like "gray dust and dead cotton leaves."

"Blood-Burning Moon" closes the first section on the ill omen of the moon. Louisa, whose skin was the color of oak leaves on young trees in fall, whose breasts were firm and up-pointed like ripe acorns, whose singing was like the low murmur of winds in fig trees, had two lovers, one black and one white. In a quarrel, Tom, the black lover, slashes Bob, the white lover. Tom kills Bob and is lynched by the townspeople. Afterwards, Louisa, sitting languidly in the "flesh-soaked air," attributes the lynching to a blood-burning moon, "an evil thing, an omen,
Toomer constantly juxtaposes the North (Section II) and the South in a composite set of images. "A soil-soaked fragrance comes from her (Muriel). Through the cement floor her strong roots sink down." In the North the characters have bodies and minds "opaque to the soil." But "when the wind is from the South, soil of my homeland falls like a fertile shower upon the lean streets of the city." Toomer explains that "mental concepts" rule the people of the North. "Colored; cold. Wrong somewhere." Thus we understand when Dan Moore, who was born in a cane-field, calls Muriel a "she-slave, sweet, tame woman in a brass box seat. The seats are slots. The seats are bolted houses."

In Section III, "Kabnis," we come face to face with a man attempting to find his roots in the canefields of the South. Toomer presents Kabnis as the bastard son, "the half-moon white child" who sleeps upon the tree-tops of the forest, so close to the folk-songs of his past, so close and yet unable to reach them. Kabnis is like the people in Section I, "an atom of dust in agony on a hillside." But Kabnis is cut off from everything he is, but he learns that "things are so immediate in Georgia."

The characters in "Kabnis" live a muted existence. "The walls are of stone, wonderfully fitted. They have no openings save a small iron-barred window toward the top of each." But Kabnis is the poet, the streak of light, who will capture this song of the South with its muted existence and thus live as the sun, "gold-glowing child."

Light streaks through the iron-barred cellar window... Outside, the sun arises from its cradle in the tree tops of
the forest... The sun arises. Gold-glowing child, it steps into the sky and sends a birth-song slanting down gray dust streets and sleepy windows of the southern town.

Toomer tells the story of the "deep-rooted cane."

Here dream and vision interrelate. Toomer becomes the sayer and the prophet, the artist as the deemed "legislator" of the world. As the artist's destiny is inseparable from the reality of his experience and the experience of his people within the culture, he must speak of the collective experience of his people, smashing as he goes the linguistic weapons in the form of negative images:

Blowing up white myths
which built up layers of mists
which veiled the roads to the strength
of our laughter in the sun.¹

The black writers of the Sixties attempt to formulate an aesthetic in such a way.

Words, be they elegant
As verse or song
Robust and piercing as sunshine
Or hideous memories of our
Cowardice in bondage are meaningless unless
They be the solid coil around our desire and method
Or the "most competent rememberer."²

Nommo, the word as life-force, makes men masters over things, as Jahn states in Muntu. "They passed nations through their mouths." This signifies that through images as self-concept man controls his own

² Kgositsile, "Like the Tide: Cloudward," in Afrika, pp. 61-62.
destiny. The word, for the black man in the service of vision, becomes the "most competent rememberer" of the times when Africans were dancers of steel.

The dancing road
uncoils in the ear
pierced by the finger
of the slender smile
of tight roots... these
retrieved eyes across the tight
belly of a pregnant drum
these are the words
of an ancient dancer of steel.1

"The image must carry us to the goal desired."2 The "ancient dancer of steel" is the synthesis of African expression. He relates rhythm, melody, gesture and word in the human body sending the mind soaring to the sovereign heights of freedom.

The fire of the tom-tom
in his veins
The fire of the tom-tom
in his heart.

It is the dance,
And of the dance,
He is the Phoenix
And the Giant.

His muscles
Of glistening ebony
Shine with the glory
Of the sacred rhythm.
He creates life
Intense and wild
To mock and taunt
death...

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1 Kgositsile, "Bandung Dance," in Afrika, p. 54.

Keorapetse Kgositsile is the "ancient dancer of steel" as he synthesizes rhythm, melody, and gesture in images which express the apocalyptic imperative not invoking a future time but fusing past, present, and future in his demand to move to the meeting place, "The pulse of the beginning the end and the beginning."

...Don't you
know time is not a succession of hours!
Time is always NOW, don't you know!
Listen to the drums. That there is a point of departure
NOW is always the time.

His vision is clear. He says, "What you do with words is a very precise indicator of where you are, where you want to be." From his position as sayer, as prophet, he picks up the word and whirs the times to us. We know where he is and where he is going.

To move towards
laughter has always been my desire
So here now knowing what
you should do you must do
right now, I laugh
moved by the memory
of hate and guns and love
moved by my son's memory
whose face is yet to be born

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in the name of the act
triggered by us when we know
armed peace is an act of love
rhythm
is
this,
and clarity. 1

Therefore, with clarity of vision he attempts to move black people from
the dishwater which gives back "No Images" to the river where men can
see themselves and grow strong in the image given back to them in con-
tinuous fluidity.

In Kgositsile's poetry the same images appear over and over like an
"unrelenting talking drum:" memory, dance, sun, laughter, fire, roots,
rhythm, spirit and blood, Afrika. And yet, words are impotent for him
unless they are steeped in purposeful action. He says, "There are no
sanctuaries except in purposeful action." 2 He is moving toward the NOW
time when:

This wind you hear is the birth of memory. When
the moment hatches in time's womb
There will be no art talk. The only poem
you will hear will be the spearpoint pivoted.
in the punctured marrow of the villain; the
timeless native son dancing like crazy to
the retrieved rhythm of desire fading in
to memory. 3

This memory is a time when black men were warriors moved by the "elegance
of fire."

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1 Kgositsile, "Fire Dance," Afrika, p. 83.


3 "Notes from No Sanctuary," p. 87.
Kgositsile, however, does not romanticize the past; he does not deal in "glib" talk. There are no shouts of "BLACK POWER." There are no nostalgic cries of "BLACK IS BEAUTIFUL." There is a statement of purposeful action.

The choice is ours
So is the beginning
"We were not made eternally to weep"
The choice is ours
So is the need and the want too
The choice is ours
So is the vision of the day.1

"Except today it is fashionable to scream of pride and beauty as though it were not known that "Slaves and dead people have no beauty."2

Kgositsile's poetry shows "sould gangrened to impotence." The tone is not biting or sarcastic but clear and an observant statement of where black people are today. In the statement, "Slaves and dead people have no "beauty," he is noting that to say "where it is we are going, we have to know where it is we are today."

Know you are a ghost
more pale than faded junk
higher than snowflake
not even swayed
by song or dance from there
to here
not in jail no eyes
noears no magic
you are the jail
ageless doom
ball of transparent pus where
the manhood used to be
son of a sonless father


yet you survive to die
and again die a death
unheralded by life
never been here nor there
how can I tell you to
remember the life of those ghouls
you envy is a death dance
without song nor natural laughter
memory you do not have
nor legs to stand or dance
so thinned
you are not even
your own possible shadow. 1

The "ghost more pale than" junk without song or dance are the "slaves
and dead people who have no beauty," who dance without the rhythm or the
laughter to thrust them to the intended purpose. The purpose which is
the dream:

The sons and daughters of our beginnings
Boldly move to post-white fearlessness
Their sharpnesses at the murderer's throat
Carving your song on the face of the earth
In the stillnesses of the night
Informed by the rhythm of your spirit
We hear the song of warriors
And rejoice to find fire in our hands
"Ain't no mountain high enough..." Dig it,
The silences of the wind know it too
"Ain't no valley low enough..."
Freedom, how do you do! 2

The purpose and dream are vivified in a "rhythm of unchained
spirit," "swift, as image, in spirit and blood."

It is the rhythm of guts
blood black, granite hard
and flowing like the river or the mountains.
It is the rhythm of unchained Spirit

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1 "For Sons of Sonless Fathers," p. 86.

will put fire in our hands
to blaze our way
to clarity to power
to the rebirth of real men.¹

The images become instruments, linguistic weapons, informers of consciences like the

Drum, or a dancer,
Perhaps a way into things like
Memory could be just
A coil around time.²

And "memory is defiant like pain." With memory there is a movement from origin to roots.

We move from origin,
The singular fruit, at times bitter
As the Sophiatown winters we did not create
To roots, stronger than grief.³

Roots are symbolized by the baobab tree, a tall, strong tree with deep, strong roots. "Don't you know even the roots of the dead baobab tree remain in the soil."⁴ The images connect us to our time. With memory defiant as pain there is movement from origins to roots: breath, grain, root, flesh, blood, fluidity. The flow is continuous and determined by commitment, responsibility, vision.

We are breath of drop of rain,
Grain of seasand in the wind

¹ "Spirits Unchained," part IV, p. 85.

² "Could Be," p. 25.

³ "For Eusi, Ayi Kwei & Gwen Brooks," p. 73.

⁴ "Bleached Callouses, Africa," 1966, p. 43.
We are root of baobab,
Flesh of this soil,
Blood of Congo brush, elegant
As breast of dark cloud
Or milk flowing through the groaning years.\(^1\)

There is no dissection here. Images are swift and pronounced and committed to a vision "Towards a Walk in the Sun."

The sun, fire, the dance and other images culminate in the apocalyptic imperative, the dream as reality, the vision fusing the past, the present, the future. The images spur the action as the coil around things or the "most competent remember."

Some say it is youthful adventure in the summertime for they have lost natural instinct which teaches a man to be free.\(^2\)

The fire burns in the heart as black men reach for the sun, the regenerative light of freedom; as black men dance the fire dance of black warriors with memory and desire; as black men strive toward the laughter they no longer know.

The purpose is collective and the language is collective, a language in the service of vision. Many of the images are composed of archetypal symbols forming associations leave no doubt of the unrelenting talking African drum informing the vision. The apocalyptic imperative demands and commands, "words walking without masters; altogether like harmony in a song."

\(^1\) "The Gods Wrote," p. 68.

\(^2\) "When Brown is Black (for rap brown)," p. 76.
We are beautiful people
with African imaginations
full of masks and dances and swelling chants
with African eyes, and noses, and arms,
though we sprawl in grey chains in a place
full of winters, when what we want is sun.1

The sun, then, is symbolic of freedom, regenerative life. Tea Cake
is the "son of Evening Sun." Kabnis is the "gold-glowing child who has
found his roots and emerges free to sing those roots. "The sun wakes up
laughing with the sharp-edge birth of retrieved root nimble as dream."2
"The dream is the truth."3


3 Hurston, op. cit., p. 9.
CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

Although it has been established that the black aesthetic has its theories firmly planted in the larger body of social criticism, the black aesthetic speaks exclusively to black people, and this as many critics have noted, strikes at its viability and validity. Many of the opponents of a black aesthetic invariably speak to the universality of aesthetics or the science of aesthetics. The premise of their arguments, of course, is that criteria for judging a work of art are objective and standard. They state that aesthetics is neither black or white, that the science of aesthetics is universally applicable. And yet literature is not free of the values and culture from which it derives, for a writer exists within a culture and his worldview is primarily culturally circumscribed. A similar case can be argued for judging the literary merits of a work; that is, literary criticism itself is not free of the culture from which it proceeds.

Aesthetics and culture are not separate entities. When we delineate a set of aesthetic qualities we delineate a particular culture. Culture is the way a people live. "How you live is how you project and how you will project, your progeny, your creations are products of life, manifestations of your way, scenes from your path." The aesthetic is not stable but in the process of change as the culture changes. Thus,

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any national literature can be dissected into literary periods. For example the literature of the English involves the English Renaissance, Neo-Classicism, Romanticism, etc. The literature communicates a people. Therefore, when we designate a literature according to its national character or its culture, we perceive specificities which amount to political, sociological, ethical and cultural differences in works like *Madame Bovary*, *Riders to the Sea*, *The Cherry Orchard*, *Pride and Prejudice*, *Siddhartha*. The designations speak to a distinctive kind of experience issuing forth certain themes and modes of creation which are interrelated and comprise an imaginative whole. The imaginative whole claims a unique experience.

While it is true that content, style, structure, point of view, tone, mood, character, and any other elements which work together to make a literary work would be present in creative literature, it is not true that the judgments as to how these elements work together will always be uniform. The point is that the literature in its final form with all of these elements present constitute values, cultural values. Therefore, the debate over the validity of the black aesthetic is not just simply literary but ethical, political, and cultural.

Black as a physical fact has little significance. Color as a cultural, social and political fact, is the most significant fact of our era. Black is important because it gives us ground from which to fight—a way to feel and think about ourselves and our own reality—a way to define.¹

This is the issue concerning a black aesthetic today, an issue which

Langston Hughes had stated with characteristic clarity in 1947:

The moon belongs to everybody, but not this American earth of ours. That is perhaps why poems about the moon perturb no one, but poems about color and poverty do perturb many citizens.¹

Hughes suggested here that the subject matter of black art since its conception was ethically predetermined. He clarifies his statement with poetic clarity.

I was born poor—and colored—and almost all the prettiest roses I have seen have been in rich white people's yards—not mine. That is why I cannot write exclusively about roses and moonlight—for sometimes in the moonlight my brothers see a fiery cross and a circle of klansmen's hoods. Sometimes in the moonlight a dark body swings from a lynching tree—but for his funeral there are no roses.²

Jean Toomer, some twenty years earlier, had expressed a similar idea in "Blood Burning Moon," a tale not exclusively about moonlight and its soft, pale beams, but about moonlight and the mingling of burning black flesh. In the regal picture of this Georgia South, there were no roses here; there was the stench of burning flesh. A black aesthetic speaks to this point. As Hoyt Fuller, managing editor of Black World, says, young writers have set out in search of a black aesthetic, "a system of isolating and evaluating the artistic work of black people which reflect the special characteristics and imperatives of black

¹ Langston Hughes, "My Adventures as A Social Poet," Phylon, VIII (Third Quarter, 1947), 205.

² Ibid., p. 212.
The black experience speaks to these special characteristics, to racial identity, that is, understanding who we are and where we are. Larry Neal in the essay "The Black Arts Movement" termed these imperatives a "revolution of the psyche," a freeing of the black man's mind and art to aim at positive and directive self images. Therefore, to achieve these positive and directive images, the black aesthetic speaks to language, not as adorned moonlight and roses, but as Keorapetse Kgotsitsile would say, language is the weapon "to take us to the thrust of our intended purpose." Thus the black aesthetic itself as social criticism encompasses racial identity, language as image manipulation, and black literature itself as the evidence of a black experience steeped in "fiery crosses and klansmen's hoods." Any analysis of black literature inevitably requires a serious look at a black aesthetic.

1 Hoyt Fuller, "Towards a Black Aesthetic," in Gayle, op. cit., p. 8.

2 The Black Aesthetic, pp. 257-74.


