

Toward a Critical Vocabulary for African Diaspora Expressivity

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Abstract

Recognizing that Black Theatre comes in several different forms and that its contents vary greatly, it now becomes abundantly clear that we must begin to distinguish between those works that fall squarely under the current rubric of Black Theatre... (biographical chronicles, personal and collective histories, celebrations, domestic dramatizations, etc.)... and those works that aspire toward challenging inquiries of cosmos and existential dilemmas. These challenging and aspirational works engage highly inventive theatricality and ritual without being seduced by the whimsy of the avant garde. Thus, in (re)branding Black Theatre, we must begin to explore theatrical performances beyond popular culture, i.e. Hip Hop, and examine the significance of post Black Afrological vs Eurological constructions in the performance aesthetics of Neo-Black Theatre and AfroFuturism. What I am suggesting in this essay is an examination and affirmation of highly inventive practices that can be identified under a rubric beyond the popular insinuations of Black Theatre.

Spirits conjured...I saw a piece of theater last night that was, perhaps unintentionally, ritual on stage and thought of you. My heart is still in my throat as I attempt to process what was stirred up. It is a one man show called UnFRAMED, written and performed by Iyaba Ibo Mandingo. He tells his story of being a West Indian immigrant to the U.S., but it is really all of our stories. I am becoming more and more aware, as I dive deeper into the work with spirit, that we all hold this energy in our bodies and our psyches--"oppressed" and "oppressor" alike--that shows up, on the surface, as inwardly and outwardly expressed anger, fear, depression, hatred, lust, gluttony, greed, racism, capitalism/corporatism, etc., that is more indicative of a profound collective grief that is desperately seeking release. My God, the power of the word, and the power of theater to conjure up deeply hidden truth and bring it to the light for healing, was never more evident for me than in last night's performance. [1]

-Martha Grier

Over the past forty years, we have accepted the expedient rubric of Black Theatre, Black Music, Black Poetry, Black Dance, Black Visual Art without a culturally specific critical language to make valid assessments about what makes the expressive product *Black*. For most African Americans it suffices if the expressive product, in whatever genre, simply tells “our story”, irrespective of “how” or what aesthetic choices are engaged to tell the story. Yet, *Porgy and Bess* is a Eurocentric fabrication of Black life that has never been considered a Black Opera or Black Musical, but rather, an American Opera on a *Black* theme which reaffirms how often the *Black experience* has driven much of the American historical narrative. And despite a sonorously compelling score by composer George Gershwin who attempted to mimic the syncopations of Black popular music of the period, close inspection of the score will reveal the rhythms and harmonies of Jewish Klezmer bands, confirming Duke Ellington’s aesthetic declaration that “It don’t mean a thing if it ain’t got THAT swing...Doo-Waart, Doo-Waart, Doo-Waart Doo-Waart, DooWaarrrrh!”^[2]

Clearly, the mere presence of Black actors on a stage should not be the factor that constitutes Black Theatre, nor otherwise the dramaturgical contrivances that freeze the Black experience in familiar replications of Black life so often depicted in melodramas. Representation of *Blackness*, and worse, the spurious performance of *Blackness* cloaked in the stock Negro Performance that reliably shows up on Broadway as *Driving Miss Daisy*, is seemingly an innocuous validation of the most capricious stereotypes of Black iconography that inhabit the imagination of the dominant culture, thereby inhibiting the fullest verification of *Black* characterization.

Generally, a work is considered *Black* if it depicts the apparent verisimilitude of a Black milieu, or figured as a familiar or popular iconographic portrait on a canvas, or riffing-in-the-tongue of Blues in poetry and song. Thus, the representation of *Black experience* in all genres, without the benefit of an expressive mode that illuminates the *Souls of Black Folk*...perhaps aptly inferred by the distinguished Art Historian Robert Farris Thompson as a “flash of the spirit”...is a defused spectacle of life frozen in the snapshot of causally related sociological description.^[3] Such expressive products do not release the transformative wisdom of African expressivity retained in the collective, albeit diverse, experience of the African Diaspora. They are, rather, much like journalistic slices-of-life, a chronicle of mundane experience arrested in an expositional tableau.

In 1971, the late scholar Addison Gayle observed in his introduction to an edited collection of essays, *The Black Aesthetic*, that,

(the) Black artist of the past worked with the white public in mind. The guidelines by which he measured his production was its acceptance or rejection by white people. The invisible censor, white power, hovered over him in the sanctuary of his private room---whether at the piano or the typewriter---and, like his Black brothers, he debated about what he could say to the world without bringing censure upon himself. The mannerisms he had used to survive in the society

outside, he now brought to his art...the result was usually an artistic creation filled with half-truths. [4]

Perhaps such self-censoring can be attributed to an unrelieved psychic sense of being immersed in the hegemonic aesthetic priorities of *whiteness* which is, media critic, John Fiske observes, not an essential racial category that contains a set of fixed meanings, but a strategic deployment of power” whereby the “space of whiteness contains a limited but varied set of normalizing positions from which that which is not white can be made into the abnormal; by such means, whiteness constitutes itself as a universal set of norms by which to make sense of the world. [5]

As a result, the critical establishment, using the yardstick of the Western Canon, has been the arbiter of which Black expressive products are most representative of the all too familiar social pathologies, chronicles of slavery, and narratives of personal journeys to overcome adversity that are usually endorsed as authentic descriptions of Black experience. Such presumptive authority over the expressive production has been frustrating for many Black artists, such as the poet/playwright Ntozake Shange who has complained that her work is often given high approval in reviews for reasons inconsistent with her intentions. And Nobel Laureate novelist, Toni Morrison has echoed the same when she observed in an interview that “I tend not to explain things very much, but I long for the critic who will know what I mean when I say “church” or “community” or when I say “ancestor,” or “chorus.” Because my books come out of those things and represent how they function in [B]lack cosmology.” [6]

Typically, a *New York Times* critic misinterpreted Bill T. Jones’ effort to ritualistically employ sacred Yoruba gestures as an aesthetic choice to invoke the power of ancestors in the construction of his production of *FELA!*. The unapologetically sensualized invocative gestures in the production were simply dismissed by *New York Times* critic, Ben Brantley as being a bewildering “pious haze of hagiography” [7], a cumbersome homage to *saints* since he was unable, even disinterested, to discern the power of the gestures to summon *ase*’ from *orishas*. Most of the critics were captivated by the theatrical provocations of the compelling, polymorphic improvisatory ritual strategies of orchestrated word, dance, and music that galvanized rhythms, choric testifying, and call ‘n response performance strategies, but they did not have the critical language to talk about the work or articulate why they found the work so compelling, or otherwise disconcerting. Charles Isherwood, writing in the same *New York Times* in 2010, could not restrain his sense of racial divide when he acknowledged, patronizingly, that the production gave him great discomfort, leading him to view the “presentation of African culture as a feast of exotic pageantry” that had the potential “to reinforce stereotypes of African people as primitive and unsophisticated, albeit endowed with astounding aptitudes for song and dance.” [8]

Similarly, another *New York Times* critic, Rachel Saltz, was equally blind-sided by racial expectations when viewing Kermit Frazier’s taut absurdist drama, *Kernal of Sanity*, produced in

2009 by Woodie King Jr. at the New Federal Theatre. Set in the 1970s, an ambitious, young, Black actor, Roger, en route to Los Angeles in pursuit of a career in film, makes an unexpected visit to the Mid-western childhood home of an indolent, yet privileged, White actor, Frank, with whom he had once shared a stage. Ms. Saltz was confounded by the unanticipated visit by Roger who speaks of “trying to stretch your skin so tightly over someone else’s image that you feel you just might be able to absorb them.”^[9] As the play meanders mysteriously to a conclusion without stumbling over familiar trappings of Black social signifiers, Ms. Saltz could only conclude that the “tense ambiguity” of the play was “unsatisfying” because the Seventies setting failed “to yield some insights into character or race”, summarily noting that “the biggest payoff seems to be [Roger’s] bell-bottom” trousers.^[10] It never occurred to the critic that Roger’s behavior had mythic proportions, the ambiguity of his language and physical gestures being the reenactment of the archetypal verbal and shape-shifting dexterity of Eshu, a formidable Yoruba trickster at the crossroads of experience. Nor was she able to discern that Roger’s veiled comportment was the benign *mask* required to disarm his former scene partner who becomes ensnared in Roger’s ventilation of rage through a ritual-reenactment of the past that allows Roger to reclaim a sense of manhood that had been compromised and undermined at an earlier time by Frank’s abuse of white privilege and authority over the Black body, much like the slave/master relationship.

The inability of the critical establishment to parse the insinuations of Yoruba myth and symbolic gestures embedded in the epic dramas of August Wilson has led, despite wide acclaim, to the misinterpretation, even misrepresentation of the Wilson’s oeuvre as being an aesthetic response to the American tradition that produced Arthur Miller, totally ignoring the mythic layers and symbolic underpinning that suggest a strongly Yoruba vision.

Case in point is *King Hedley II* which, when framed in the orthodoxy of Social Realism, cannot escape becoming a melodramatic narrative about an unsympathetic *avenger* whose predictable demise is without redemption. As a result, *King Hedley II*, one of Wilson’s most monumental works, achieves very limited resonance among Black audiences, and white audiences tend to disregard the extended soliloquies as a tedious self-indulgence in the prolix of *gangsta rap*, the sublimely poetic narrative of Wilson’s ritual drama becoming arrested in the stasis of melodramatic directorial conventions that never allow the work to realize its intended epiphany.

In order to enter the world of Wilson’s vision, producers and directors must first accept that while *King Hedley II* is a narrative about the return of a young Black man to his community from prison in the mid-eighties who, though eager to construct a new and productive life, is confronted by the many challenges that threaten the survival of young Black men---minimal job opportunities, drive-by-shootings, teen-age pregnancy, and a general sense of despair---Wilson did not intend for the work to be construed as a chronicle of social dysfunction or a documentary drama on ghetto life. Instead, much like a *prophetic witness* in search of spiritual enlightenment to assuage social injustice, he was concerned with the instability of the Black community in the absence of its spiritual moorings, African ancestors.

King Hedley II, then, must be attended as an allegory about a community trying to negotiate the challenges of living in a world of social injustice and unequal opportunity in the absence of spiritual ancestors. Thus the characters are not inscribed as mere mortals with individual personas whose dramatic expositions serve the development of a linear plot. In fact, as opposed to character-types with personal narratives designed to expose the interior-motives of their actions, they are inscribed as archetypes, *demi-gods* who are veritable *prophetic witnesses* that offer testimonial exhortations---as in testifyin'---that reveal a collective purpose beyond serving King's personal need to redeem his vengeful angst. The propelling objective of the entire dramatic arc is toward the ritual resurrection of the mythic ancestor, Aunt Esther, so that the community might become reconnected with its history and spiritual power in an effort to restore order while facing the specter of social disintegration. King is constructed as a potent, however irascible force that must be placed at the center of a sacrificial blood ritual that is necessary for the revival of the spiritual ancestors in order to recover the restoration of harmony and revitalization in the community.

King, thus, is bounded by a host of Yoruba mythic archetypes that ritualistically guide his behavior toward its necessary conclusion: a sacrifice for the potent blood needed to resurrect Aunt Esther. His mother, Ruby, the nurturing spirit of the Middle Passage, Yemoja; Elmore, a world-weary gun-slinger, symbolizing the Warrior of iron-works, Ogun; Tonya, the fertile bearer of fruit, Oshun; Stool Pigeon, the heraldic Trickster, Eshu, griot-guardian of the rites at the crossroads that lead to enlightenment or tragic judgment; and Mister, a choric-figure, the shadow of the Community whose voice symbolizes a communal *response* to King's *call*.

The dramatic ritual opens with the cacophonous sound of yelping dogs---a sign of disruption in harmony---that are appeased by a ritualistic offering of bones by the griot-trickster, Stool Pigeon who then launches into a foretelling of how the drama will unfold. Soon after, he issues the alarming bulletin about the sudden death of the 360 year old Aunt Ester, a rupture in the decaying community that portends certain destruction. At the same moment, Aunt Esther's Black Cat has also died. The Black Cat, symbolizing Aunt Esther, is buried in the backyard that adjoins the houses of King and Stool Pigeon who initiates a resurrection ritual with a recursive offering of objects on the Black Cat's grave site along with words of invocation intended to bring back the spirit of Aunt Esther. The ritual gesture, however, cannot be completed without a ritual sacrifice of blood---not simply the blood of a chicken or a *fatted-cow*, but the *best* or most potent blood in the community. The concern here is not about morally *good* or *bad* blood, but the most *potent* blood. And we immediately discern that the most potent blood is embodied in the Shango warrior archetype, King.

When King makes his initial entrance on stage in the *thunder 'n lightning* persona of Shango, he rudely demarcates a circle in the unhallowed ground of the backyard of his home where nothing grows and, resolutely, begins planting seeds to propagate flowers for his wife. The forcefulness of his procreative gesture is a testament of his potency, exacted with a sense of certitude that he has the power to do what had formerly been considered impossible: issue life in a dead space.

As the ritual gathers force it reveals that King's biological father is not Hedley, a dead man with whom Ruby had a brief intimate encounter and, due to his legendary reputation, had become the namesake that King had lionized as a model for his warrior nature. King discovers that Leroy, a former lover of Ruby whom he had never met, was his true biological father who had been slain earlier by Elmore, her ardent admirer. A confrontation between the combustible King and the wily Elmore becomes imminent: it would be an apocalyptic confrontation on the scale of the original Yoruba myth where the irascible young warrior-god, Shango, challenges a fearless Ogun with an hubris that is no match for the master over iron who had already passed through the transitional abyss of the chthonic forces in the cosmic *underworld* where he had experienced death and rebirth, and is thereby symbolized, according to the Nigerian Nobel Prize Laureate Wole Soyinka, as "both an essence of anguish and as combative will within the cosmic embrace of the transitional gulf." [11]

Leading up to the cataclysmic moment, tools of combat are ritually passed hand-to-hand: a Machete, once owned by Hedley, is passed into the hands of King by Stool Pigeon as a legacy from his mythic-father; and a Pistol, once owned by Elmore and passed on to Mister, the Community Shadow, who passes the weapon on to Ruby, the Yemoja nurturer who, in an effort to defend her son against a lethal threat from Elmore, inadvertently---if not otherwise deliberately--- kills King. Yet, this ritual cataclysm is not inscribed as a moment of personal remorse nor otherwise tragedy. Rather, it is a moment of epiphany and collective transformation, paving the way for the appearance of the ancestor, King laying across the grave-site of the Black Cat, his spilled blood seeping through the grave, as Ruby, in the spirit of Yemoja who nurtured the Africans across the travail of the Middle Passage, passively intones, without melodramatic intimation, "Red Sails on the Sunset"---which is not sung as a homage to Tin Pan Alley, but as a reassuring signification of rebirth during the blood stained crossing of the Middle Passage---as Mister offers a passionate invocation to God that summons forth the sound of a Cat's meow, symbolizing the return of Aunt Ester. We should now anticipate harmony to be restored in the community. As Wilson was wont to say..."and that's how that goes!"

As far back as the 1920s, the highly esteemed scholar Alain Locke, one of the leaders of the New Negro Movement, challenged Black artists to break away from the limitations of the established aesthetic conventions proffered by the movement's paternalistic White patrons at the Harmon Society by reaching back into the repository of African culture for ideal expressive production that might pave the way toward an alternative style of work not limited to Western traditions.[12] In the seventies, St. Lucian Nobel Laureate poet, Derek Walcott counseled, when training Trinidadian actors to perform his plays, that in order to get "the imagination and body to move with original instinct, we must begin again from the bush. That return journey with all its horror or rediscovery, means the annihilation of what is known..."[13]

Nearly a half-century has passed since the robust Black Arts Movement of the Sixties initiated a vigorous endeavor to reclaim African heritage as the foundation of artistic expression. Energized by a nationalistic impulse to encourage self-definition of African American humanity and rescue

African American expressivity from the rapacious commodification of dominant culture, the poet, Larry Neal, a guiding luminary, issued a challenge to African American novelists, poets, musicians, and visual and performing artists, to abandon the aesthetics of the Western Canon and pursue aesthetic constructions in their expressive practices that reflected, as evinced in the collages of Romare Bearden, a culturally specific "symbolology, mythology, iconology, and critique" consonant with the retention of an African worldview within the African American experience.^[14]

However, much of the expressive products of the sixties had been fueled by rhetorical inquires of personal angst which reduced expressivity to the ephemeral, cathartic release of agitation-propaganda. Since the aesthetics of an expressive practice is constructed and informed by a process that mints the social rituals and values of a particularized experience, the connotative replications of Black experience as the principal benchmark for Black Aesthetics has very limited expressive currency. It may be argued that the socio-political ideologies that emerge from a descriptive narrative of Black resistance to oppression is a sufficient barometer of Black Art aesthetics, particularly when it serves as *prophetic witness*—as intended in the homiletic persuasion of Black sermons—to shed spiritual light onto collective consciousness of Black experience, as revealed in the spiritually evocative ritual of African Canadian playwright, Djanet Sears in *The Adventures of a Black Girl in Search of God*, or the epic journey of Martiniquan poet, Aime Cesaire, in *Return to My Native Land* or the sentinel essays of the African American novelist, James Baldwin in *The Fire Next Time*. Yet, the new paradigm for Black Aesthetics should reveal an expressive trajectory toward crafting the appropriate culturally specific riffs and vamps required to distill from mundane experience the kind of spiritual illumination galvanized by the recursive texts that drive a James Brown rhythm, or the heightened incandescence achieved by the orchestration of spare, rigorous, ritualized texts in the non-linear poetic expositions of Adrienne Kennedy's dramaturgical vision. And certainly as demonstrated in the recent solo performance of Iyaba Ibo Mandingo in *UnFRAMED*, aided by a panoply of African Diasporic expressive strategies---initiated with a non-verbal tableau of "captivity" forcefully articulated in body movement choreographed by Margaret Liston (a former member of the Bill T. Jones/Arnie Zane Dance Company)---mimesis, vocal incantation, shape-shifting characterizations, poetic invocation, testifyin'---were deftly employed to consecrate spiritual space to tell the story of his personal journey from a childhood in the Caribbean with his abandoned mother, moving to America to face the challenges of a manhood under assault by racism and confused identity, crossing the gulf of despair until he makes the transition that binds him with the validities of his past which is illustrated, on stage, with the completion of a self-portrait, rudely and crudely drafted and painted throughout the testimony with without tools, only bare hands, that symbolizes his transformation by way of a reconnection with his spiritual-self, a new enlightenment that has him make a commitment to the world "to bear witness".^[15] Such expressive production, as evinced throughout the African Diaspora, insinuates a ritual that is transformative, the inevitable outcome of a poetic vision informed by

the expressive strategies that continue to own mnemonic African resonance despite the specificity of diverse cultural experiences.

Cultural scholar, Houston Baker has noted that,

The guiding assumption of the Black Arts Movement was that if a literary-critical investigator looked to the characteristic musical and verbal forms of the masses, he could discover unique aspects of Afro-American creative expression---aspects of both form and performance---that lay closest to the verifiable emotional referents and experiential categories of Afro-American culture. The result of such acritical investigation...would be the discovery of a "Black Aesthetic"--*adistinctive code* for the creation and evaluation of Black art." [13]

In his 1996 defense of Jazz Improvisation as a legitimate "real-time" compositional musical form, the composer, musician, scholar George Lewis observed how the *distinctive code* embodied in the spontaneous, uncharted---as opposed to notated---inventions of Be-bop music in the forties disrupted what had been considered acceptable compositional conventions in the Western musical tradition. Lewis argues that despite not being a "style of music nor a body of musical techniques" improvisation does have a "structure, meaning, and context" that emanates from the "domain-specific analysis, generation, manipulation, and transformation of sonic symbols." He employed as critical tools for his analysis the construct of "Afrological and Eurological" systems of musical improvisation that "exemplify particular kinds of musical logic" with the intention to "historicize the particularity of perspective characteristics of two systems that have evolved in such divergent cultural environments". [14] Applying Lewis' critical frame, it is possible to lay a foundation to study the Afrological construction of an expressive product based upon uniqueness...and commonality...of social and ontological worldviews in the African Diaspora, offering an opportunity to identify the *distinctive codes* in the expressive product that promote the advancement of a veritable critical vocabulary. One need only to listen to Thelonious Monk's discordant harmonies and tonal vamp on the familiar Christian hymnal, *Blessed Assurance* in the fifties, or the hallowed dirge inventions of Albert Ayler's *Holy Ghost* in the early sixties, to recognize that the reclamation of a *distinctive code* was in progress.

Baker had presaged that without a *distinctive code*, artistic expression of African Americans conceived under the rubric of Black Art would be marginalized within the dominant culture and provided minimal financial or developmental support from major institutions --including foundations, government agencies, universities, publishers, and most egregiously, regional theaters-- unless the expressive product conformed with the familiar ethno-centered representations and aesthetic formulations consistent with the marketing expectations of the dominant culture.

Part of the problem for Black Theatre institutions to secure aesthetic legitimacy, if not otherwise authenticity is, lamentably, their lack of resources to develop new, ethnic-centered work, despite a wealthy pool of talent. As a result, paradoxically, they tend to program their seasons with the

work that white institutions have sanctioned as accomplished *Black* work, irrespective of the limited aesthetic and political--and rarely spiritual--insights which serve to affirm, enlighten, and bind cultural/social vision of the Black community. Further, there is a penchant among the current generation of writers to distance their work from being critically labeled *Black*, an acute reminder that Black artists are still confused about the ontological and historical moorings that inform the aesthetics of their work beyond *color*. Rather than pursuing or at least inspecting the layers of symbolic references retained in what Wole Soyinka refers to as the *metalanguage* of African Diasporic cultures---notwithstanding the inquires of a few young writers such as, Tarrell McCraney's attempted appropriation of Yoruba archetypes to identify contemporary characters in his ritualized *The Brother's Size*, and the compelling re-figuration of Aeschylus' *Seven Against Thebes* with Greco-Yoruba insinuations in Will Power's *Seven*---most content and expressive exploration in new Black work developed at White institutions is usually subordinated by the popular receptivity of the subscription base of the mainstream theaters---*feel good* banalities such as Regina Taylor's *Crowns*-- and systems of critical logic codified by the aesthetics of the dominant culture.

In addition, the problem is exacerbated by the expressive product being held hostage, if not simply accountable, to the limited capacity of establishment critics to view Black experience beyond the codifications of popular culture, their gaze focused on *color* rather than the specificity of *practice*, thus lack cognizance of the global commonalities in expressive strategies among Africans throughout the diaspora, i.e., North and South America, Caribbean, Great Britain, France, The French and Dutch Antilles, East, West and South Africa. Despite cultural rupture and dislocation from the African continent, Africans scattered in the New World have been able to retain manifestations of many sacred and secular traditions that shape the quality and purpose of their cultural expressivity. In order to shift the gaze, irrespective of regional specificity, and establish a verifiable global legitimacy beyond *color* (which is often reductively confined to reactions to oppression, burlesques of local color, and worse, inflated portraits of dignity figured in the Nobel Savage) Black expressive practices must be understood and critically appraised as being a unique cultural manifestation with its expressive tentacles rooted in Africa, albeit modified by the specific location of social experience, such as evinced in the sacred practices of the Holiness Church in the United States, Pentecostal in Puerto Rico, Shango Baptists in Trinidad, Santeria in Cuba, Candomble' in Brazil, and "Riding the Devil" in the Diablo Tun Tun Congo ritual annually performed during Panama Carnival, all deeply rooted in African cosmology.

Though transformed by the new cultural and physical landscape, close exploration of sacred and secular practices that influence ritual, ceremony, carnival, masquerade, testimonials, rites of passage, storytelling, song, dance, instrumental improvisation, just groovin' or jumpin' Double Dutch, will reveal expressive modes of performance deeply rooted in the ancestral ethos of Africans in the Diaspora, a transformative process designed to reveal spiritual aspects of mundane life. However, when a *distinctive code* is obscured by the cultural priorities of the

dominant culture, the ethnic specific significance of line, circle, color, rhythm ‘n repetition, call ‘n response, poly-rhythm, cadence, syncopation, improvisation, spacial tension, and the function of chorus in the *Afrological* construction of Black expressive production becomes blurred, if not otherwise, disregarded and thereby vulnerable to an interpretation based upon the facile, reductive, sociological datum consigned to the Black experience. Such interpretations would be indifferent to the poet Leopold Senghor’s cognizance of rhythm as “the architecture of being, the inner-dynamic that gives form, the pure expression of life force...In the degree to which rhythm is sensuously embodied, it illuminates the spirit.” [15]

In his controversial 1996 keynote address at the Theatre Communications Group National Conference, “*The Ground on Which I Stand*,” [16] August Wilson declared that his work was influenced by the “spiritual temperament” of the ancestors whose songs, dances, and art were a manifest act of the “creator from whom life flowed”, thereby placing the craftsman at the “spiritual center of his existence.” Since spirituality is central to the sacred and secular lives of African peoples worldwide, the creative inventiveness of expressive production is a manifestation of the collective ethos required to generate the incandescence of spiritual continuity and empowerment---a “flash of the spirit” that illuminates the soul---so as to assuage disruptions to communal harmony with a sense of cleansing, binding, and healing. In as much as the African creative process points to the significance of spiritual invocation as the procreative mediating force required to transform the corporeal experience, the task of creative expression is, then, to attend the familiar with a rigor which illuminates its spiritual properties.

Even Lorraine Hansberry’s *Raisin in the Sun* reveals ritual elements that could have lifted the narrative to a more redemptive purpose than integration into a white neighborhood. Closer inspection of her dramaturgy, intentional or otherwise, reveals a play constructed around the invisible, spiritual force of the father whose appearance in the play, like the shape-shifting Yoruba trickster deity Eschu at the crossroads of experience, is revealed in the form of *Money*, challenging the family, in response to his physical absence, to choose a path between that would destroy the family and another that would bond the family around his spiritual essence. The final action, then, should be critically comprehended as the spiritual bonding of a family on the verge of imploding, rather than simply achieving the material reward of moving to the suburbs.

In the final analysis, when Black Theatre can be practiced as a uniquely specific aesthetic construction of a ritual re-enactment of reality rather than a replication of experience, it can verifiably qualify as Black Art. Otherwise, works of excellence by Black artists such as Hansberry, or the early twentieth century classical composer, William Grant Still, or the post-modernist sculptor, Martin Puryear, conceived within the aesthetic practices of the dominant culture, should not be consigned to Black Art, but rather, recognized for what they are, the best practice of American Art. It is possible to conjecture, nonetheless, that while the internationally acclaimed soprano Leontyne Price is indisputably singing opera within the European tradition, a familiar vocal *resonato* can be discerned in her performances that evokes the inexorable expressive aesthetics of the Black Church.

Given the emergence of gifted Black artists in the United States, it is time--and most exigent --to claim ownership of Black expressivity by looking beyond the limits of *color* and the provincial locations of the experience. Addison Gayle addressed the dilemma of not having ownership of the aesthetic devices of Black Art when he noted that "a unique art derived from unique cultural experiences mandates unique critical tools for evaluation." Gayle further observed that when reconstruction of self through transformation of the moral universe is a goal---an objective of the *prophetic witness* clearly lost to the apperception of the *jejune* Katori Hall, author of *The Mountaintop*, a 2011 misadventure on Broadway which was an unconscionable demystification of the Martin Luther King legacy---then a "critical methodology has no relevance to the Black community unless it aids men in becoming better than they are....Such an element has been sorely lacking in the critical canons handed down from the academies by the Aristotelian Critics, the Practical Critics, the Formalistic Critics, and the New Critics. Each has this in common: its aim to evaluate the work of art in terms of its beauty and not in terms of the transformation from ugliness to beauty that the work of art demands from its audience."

The same could be echoed with respect to contemporary Post-Modern discourse. Africans in the diaspora who pursue a process of work that re-visions their imagination through an African lens are often disparaged as atavists, romantics, and worse, *essentialists*...a contemptuous rebuke of the reclamation of Africa as the source of ethno-centric worldview...as if the Western Canon is a construction based on modernity as opposed to reaching back into its past for significant mythic and philosophical references to conceive notions as Aristotelian Logic, Socratic society, Platonic relationships, Sisyphean effort, the Achilles Heal, and the foundation of its ontological view, Christianity.

Demonstration of the commonalities in expressive strategies throughout the African Diaspora requires a rigorous identification of the afrological strategies that undergird expressive forms so as to advance the development of a verifiable critical vocabulary to frame the uniqueness of Black cultural expression. Thus, in my role as Resident Artist at Emory University over the past two years, I have initiated an interdisciplinary working group of scholars to pursue, by observing expressive practices throughout the African Diaspora, criteria to establish valid assessments of what constitutes Black Art so as to construct a new critical vocabulary that might become the foundation for an informed approach to critical analysis of Black aesthetic expression. This work has culminated in an NEH supported 2014 Summer Institute at Emory to bring scholars from around the country together for a 3 week intensive inquiry of the subject. The challenge is to pursue an entirely new scholarship which incorporates Visual and Performing Art, Literature, Linguistics, Music, Anthropology, Religion, and systems of Cosmology, i.e., Dogon, Yoruba, and Akan. We are now moving forward on plans for future projects to "Re(De)Fine and Divine African Diasporic Expression" with the input of scholars nationally and internationally. Such a pedagogical exegesis, I anticipate, should launch an inquiry into the significance of African ontology and social practices within the African Diaspora that might lead to the reconstruction and formulation of a critical model erected from the worldview of the "African Continuum."

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