

A Turbulent Voyage

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Black Expressive Culture: Music and Literature

Although the oppressive and dehumanizing system of chattel slavery sought to destroy (and post-Emancipation America sought to deny) any remnants of African culture and to impose white European culture in its place, Africans and their American descendants preserved and transformed their own resilient culture. Significantly, it has been this African-based creative impulse that has largely energized and shaped what has emerged as American popular culture.

In the historic struggle to survive and resist Euro-American cultural domination (from the shock and chaos of chattel slavery to the contemporary period) African-descended Americans have refashioned themselves by transforming aspects of African culture. Through a tradition that included sacred and secular music, folktales, and autobiography, African American slaves were able to salvage a degree of self-esteem, dignity, and hope; in the process, they left a legacy that African American writers, singers, poets, and producers have taken and transformed.

The articles in this part depict aspects of African American expressive culture, particularly in the areas of music and literature. The purpose is not to ignore other areas of cultural expression, such as drama, dance, sculpture, painting, photography, or film-making, but to limit coverage to what is manageable.

Portia K. Maultsby's work "Africanisms in African American Music" skillfully examines the historic interaction between African and African American musical traditions. She points out that this African/African American cultural connection is not the retention of particular African songs but a conceptual framework that links these two dynamic traditions and clearly distinguishes them from Western European cultural forms. According to Maultsby, Africanisms were preserved in culture and music because African-descended Americans maintained ties to their African past, adapting to a hostile and changing environment by relying on familiar traditions and cultural practices.

Showing the development from the earliest African American sacred and secular musical forms to the most contemporary musical expressions, the author delineates the elements that characterize African and African American expressive culture. African and African American music-making, Maultsby says, is above all else communal and participatory.

In her essay, "Wild Women Don't Have the Blues': Blues from the Black Woman's Perspective," Daphne Duval Harrison recounts the social history of the blues tradition in the 1920s, giving special attention to the variety of themes articulated by urban black female singers. Blues themes included infidelity, alienation, loneliness, despondency, death, poverty, injustice, love, and sex. These early blues women struggled with the fundamental issues of their existence and, as Harrison indicates, "brought to their lyrics and performances new meaning as they interpreted and reformulated the black experience from their unique perspective in American society as black females." Blues queens, like Ma Rainey, Bessie Smith, Sara Martin, Sippie Wallace, and Ida Cox, transformed their personal feelings into artistic expression by skillfully integrating the elements of disappointment and happiness to create the songs that made thousands of black people pack their shows and buy their records. The blues allowed these women to become major advocates for northern and southern black women.

Facing racial, class, and sexual oppression and exploitation, black female blues singers, very much like their male counterparts, used their music as an artform to demonstrate black people's toughness, resilience, and language versatility in the face of an absurd and vicious American world. Harrison shows that although black blues queens sang about the same issues that men did, they provided innovative interpretations. They sang openly about issues that were specific to urban black women—freedom from social and religious constraints, sexual and economic self-determination, alcoholism, and drugs. Like black singers of all ages, they lived the experiences that found articulation in their music. In the process, they raised the status of black women entertainers to a new height and were adored at home and abroad.

Nelson George in the essay "Black Beauty, Black Confusion (1965-70)" examines critically the interaction between the rise of soul music (an elaboration of rhythm and blues) and the political economy of the music world when the Civil Rights movement was declining and the Black Power movement was emerging. George explores the musical and business life and times of James Brown ("the hardest working man in show business") and Aretha Franklin ("the Queen of Soul"), who represent a period of volatile and creative African American cultural politics. In a moment when political activists were calling for African American self-determination and self-reliance, George shows that James Brown clearly exemplified a cultural and economic response. Hard working, audacious, innovative, versatile, and powerful on stage, Brown dis-

played these qualities on the business end as well; he controlled every aspect of his organization. George shows that during the late 1960s Brown was an important musical—and to some degree social—leader in the African American community because he exemplified African American pride and self-reliant development. Pointing out Brown's success, George also critically assesses Brown's ideological conservatism and the contradictions in his music's messages.

If James Brown was the godfather of rhythm and blues-soul, Aretha Franklin certainly was/is its undisputed queen. Emerging from the urban African American church, she integrated a sacred (gospel) ethos into her secular music-making with a unique and versatile style, a deeply emotional and meaningful message, and a hard-driving vocal power. This rendered Aretha heir to a long tradition of African American female blues, jazz, and rhythm-and-blues singers, which includes Dinah Washington, Ella Fitzgerald, Sarah Vaughn, Billie Holiday, Bessie Smith, and Ma Rainey. George traces Aretha's musical evolution from the restraining conditions at Columbia Records to her expressive freedom and blossoming at Atlantic Records. He reviews the wide range of her songs, showing how her uncompromising African American sound and musical versatility made her music accessible and acceptable to a broad spectrum of Americans—African American and white. Nelson George also talks about other developments in the music world during the late 1960s.

It is ironic that the African and African American literary tradition (that is, literary production in European languages) emerged during the eighteenth century largely so authors could contest Europeans' negative or distorted portrayal of African-descended people. From Phillis Wheatley's poetic efforts in the early 1770s to the present, African Americans active in the literary culture (including folklorists, essayists, novelists, poets, autobiographers, critics, playwrights, comedians, and screen-writers) have sought to tell their own stories about the African and African American experience. In the process, they have had to reject, refute, refashion, or improvise upon the literary conventions of the dominant Euro-American cultural establishment at particular historical moments.

The three remaining articles in this section focus on some of the trends and developments in twentieth-century African American literature, particularly literature as protest and challenge to white Euro-American cultural domination, economic exploitation, and political oppression. In his 1940 essay, "How 'Bigger' Was Born," Richard Wright discusses how he acquired the ideas about his tragic hero, Bigger Thomas, that went into his novel *Native Son*, published the same year. [Considered by some to be one of the greatest African American writers of all time, Wright authored an assortment of works, including *Uncle Tom's Children* (1938), *Twelve Million Black Voices* (1941), *Black Boy* (1945), *The Outsider* (1953), *Black Power* (1954), *The Color Curtain* (1956),

Bigger Thomas
"dislocated social order"

Pagan Spain (1957), *White Man, Listen!* (1957), *Eight Men* (1961), *Lawd Today* (1963), and *American Hunger* (1977).] For the radical intellectual Richard Wright—he was a Communist Party organizer and writer from 1934 to 1942—Bigger Thomas was the product of a dislocated social order. He was dispossessed and disinherited in a land of plenty. Capitalism and antiblack racism had long permeated every dimension of American life. The nation's culture, economy, politics, and psyche all were deeply penetrated. In America, the white ruling class was as powerful and hostile as ever; and poverty was rife, alienation rampant, and nihilism pervasive. As Wright constructed him, Bigger Thomas represents the failure of modern Western civilization.

Wright reveals that it was during his own childhood in the South that the literary representation of Bigger Thomas developed. Acknowledging that there were many Bigger Thomases, Wright describes five typifications. All of them were economically impoverished, culturally alienated, and politically dispossessed, which is why they were violent, angry, resentful, cynical, or even nihilistic. Wright's own development and social location helped him to sense the internal tensions of the people he encountered who came to embody the behavioral patterns of Bigger Thomas. As he matured in Chicago, Wright's voracious reading and evolving class consciousness allowed him to see that Bigger Thomas was not only black; there also were white Bigger Thomases (e.g., in Nazi Germany and Old Russia), who, because of their life experiences, reacted to the world in patterns very similar to those of black Bigger Thomas.

As a product of racist capitalist America himself, Wright wrestled with a concern about white America's reaction to his portrayal of Bigger Thomas; this slowed the writing process. Courageously, Wright concluded that he had to present a truthful image of Bigger Thomas—"resentful toward whites, sullen, angry, ignorant, emotionally unstable, depressed and unaccountably elated at times, and unable even, because of his own lack of inner organization which American oppression has fostered in him, to unite with the members of his own race." Wright also was aware of the black middle class's desire to conceal Bigger Thomas's truth from whites. The black bourgeoisie wanted to appease their white oppressors. What also slowed Wright's progress was his awareness of the necessity to portray Bigger Thomas's complex realities—his personal and private life, his double consciousness, his fear and dread, his political impulses, his relationship with white America, his reaction to oppression, and the impact of urban life on him. For Wright, *Native Son* would not be another piece of fiction (like his book of short stories, *Uncle Tom's Children*) that would cause liberal whites to cry, for "it would be so hard and deep that they would have to face it without the consolation of tears."

In many ways, Wright's powerful and angry protest writing prefigured the aggressive political and cultural insurgency of the late 1960s and

1970s—the Black Power and the Black Arts movements. Echoing yet going beyond Wright, these movements sought to challenge the very foundations of Western and Euro-American cultural domination in order to empower black people by transforming their self-consciousness. That is, if Wright spoke mainly to whites, hoping to encourage them to overturn their antiblack racism, the Black Arts movement spoke largely to black people, hoping to encourage them to take pride in the power of black culture. Black Arts advocates had no faith in the capacity of white moral transformation.

In his 1968 essay, "The Black Arts Movement," Larry Neal argues that Black Art is the cultural companion to the Black Power idea. He states that the central principle of both movements is for black people to define the world, politically and aesthetically, in their own interests. Hence, the creation and establishment of a black aesthetic was the necessary goal of Black Arts advocates, whose broader purpose was to transform American society. In order to accomplish these objectives, the Black Arts movement had to challenge and destroy the Euro-American aesthetic—its anti-human sensibility and its cultural domination. Hence, Black Arts advocates linked the ethical battle to demolish a declining Western cultural hegemony with the struggle to construct a new and powerful constellation of black cultural values and artistic expression.

In the remainder of his article, Neal describes the development of the Black Arts movement on the East and West coasts. He explores the influential work of some of the exemplars of the Black Arts movement—Maulana Karenga's cultural nationalist ideology, LeRoi Jones/Amiri Baraka's poetry and drama, and other important black playwrights of the period. According to Neal, what gave the Black Arts movement and its cultural expressiveness revolutionary significance—and where the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s and 1930s failed—was the conscious effort to link art to the struggles of the black community.

Culture is an important way to construct, mobilize, and maintain power. In the field of American literary studies, the relationship between culture and power is most evident in the curriculum. Even after the 1960s assault by the Black Arts movement, the traditional course of study in high school and college continues to be dominated by a Eurocentric and male orientation, as if the field of important literature is the exclusive domain of dead white males. What is understood as the "classics" is composed of European and American authors and their literature. But how does literature become "classic"; who decides? On what basis is some literature included and other literature excluded from the "mainstream" curriculum or literary canon? The canon is the set of literary works, the grouping of significant philosophical, political, and religious texts, the particular accounts of history generally accorded cultural and intellectual weight within a society (Lauter, 1991). In recent years, the controversy surrounding the American literary canon

has expanded, as African American and other scholars increasingly have contested the Eurocentric hegemony of American literature.

In "Unspeakable Things Unspoken: The Afro-American Presence in American Literature," Nobel Prize winner Toni Morrison focuses on the Western, or Euro-American, literary canon as a "protected preserve of the thoughts and works and analytical strategies of white men," and she investigates the impact of African American culture and literature on the study of literature in the United States of America. [Arguably one of the premier American writers of the contemporary period, Morrison is the author of a number of works, including *The Bluest Eye* (1970), *Sula* (1974), *Song of Solomon* (1977), *Tar Baby* (1981), *Beloved* (1987), *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (1990), *Jazz* (1992), and *Race-ing Justice, En-gendering Power: Essays on Anita Hill, Clarence Thomas, and the Construction of Social Reality* (1992), which she edited.] Her subject is especially significant because in America, where every aspect of the culture historically has been racialized, contemporary defenders of the literary canon still seek to deny the relevance of "race" to writing. "Race," or blackness, becomes an unspeakable thing for the white literary establishment, even though it shapes the contours and content of American cultural and literary life. Morrison wants to know why it is that white male resistance to canonical change (i.e., to inclusion of a black presence in the construction of high literary art) is so virulent.

Morrison argues that this hostility stems from the seventeenth-century construction of Eurocentric hegemony and the sequence of arguments historically employed to justify black cultural exclusion: (1) there is no black or Third World art; (2) it exists but is inferior to Western European art; (3) it exists and is superior when it measures up to the "universal" criteria of Western European art; and (4) it is not so much art as it is a natural product that requires Eurocentric cultivation. Elaborating on the implications and consequences of each of these successive rationalizations of black exclusion, Morrison then offers three alternative strategies that would allow the inclusion of African American literature in the American literary canon: (1) develop a literary theory that accommodates African American literature; (2) examine and reinterpret the history of the American canon, searching for the manner in which the Africanist or black experience has influenced the language, structure, and meaning of American literature; and (3) examine contemporary and/or noncanonical literature for this Africanist presence.

Morrison argues that the nineteenth-century Eurocentric evasion of blackness by white American literature, while that literature celebrates itself as "universal," may well have reduced the quality of American literary expression. She then critically examines Herman Melville's novel *Moby Dick*, pointing out how an attentiveness to the black experience reveals deeper meanings in the text, especially about antiblack racism and the meaning of "whiteness" as ideology. Morrison then

spends the remainder of her essay using her own writing to explain the literary and cultural ingredients that make a work of literature "Black." In this way, she suggests the impact of black culture on contemporary American literature. Morrison demonstrates that it is the particular manner in which she uses language as the expression of the cultural complexity of the African Americans that renders her work "Black."

As the study of African American expressive culture reveals, the Euro-American effort to silence and ignore it has been unsuccessful. Rather, that culture continues to demonstrate its resilience, power, and innovation. Derived from its African origins and retained by captured African slaves, an evolving and improvisational African American culture and style descended from the experience of black people. In the face of white America's dehumanization process, African American culture has formed the basis of black survival, resistance, and development.