

BLACK ART AND CULTURE: THE 70s

The areas of black art and culture are, of course, vast. They subsume and permeate all of black life as well as the life of the society that oppresses us. Notwithstanding, it is necessary to begin again the process of assessing our knowledge of ourselves so that we may order our priorities for research, for criticism, and for creation to the end of black liberation and black celebration. This paper is thus a brief tentative statement of those concerns and makes no pretense of completeness, if such a thing were, indeed possible.

It seems to me that our present knowledge and awareness of black art and culture leave a great deal to be desired, especially as we move from the relatively few persons with great masses of specific information to the vast majority of black people, both schooled and unschooled, who still believe that European standards and tastes and contributions to a vague "universal culture" should govern our preferences, our education, our aspirations--should, in short, govern our lives. The problem is thus one of education, and although I said that it is one both for the schooled and unschooled, paradoxically enough, it is chiefly one for the schooled. By this I mean that although the man on the street may admire Euroamerican booklearning or might be deferential when one of his educated

brothers extols the virtues of symphonic music, he still knows what he likes and understands and what is meaningful to him in black culture. The problem for him then is to become aware of the value of the culture which he knows and, in addition, to become aware of the fact that certain aspects of black culture rival or exceed anything comparable in Euroamerican culture. For the schooled person the problem is much more complex because it involves first of all a systematic questioning of the assumptions upon which formal education was largely based, particularly in those areas, disciplines, and subjects which involve concepts of beauty, morality, sensibility, taste; which involve value judgments and concepts of reality, and which raise the questions which are usually crystallized by or embodied in the arts, practical and applied, and in that group of studies and techniques which address themselves to an evaluation or interpretation of the arts, or, by extension, of the interior life of a people.

Put another way, the educational problem of black art and culture may be broken down as follows:

1. Discontinuous knowledge
2. Neglected areas of knowledge
3. Undefined areas of knowledge
4. Apathy and inferiority feelings regarding black culture

5. Problems of personal vision vs. commitment to collective movement

These topics may be further resolved into specific kinds of research and artistic and political concerns; but for the present let us spell them out, or at least illustrate, what they may involve.

By discontinuous knowledge I mean knowledge of segments of a whole without any comprehensive sense of the whole. This is obviously the case of much of human knowledge, for various reasons; so, for example, one might speak of medical knowledge--which has no cure for cancer--as discontinuous. Notwithstanding, the disease is being attacked in systematic fashion, which includes theory as well as laboratory analysis and experimentation. So an attempt is being made to eliminate the discontinuity, chiefly because dedicated and skilled people can see the problem.

Admittedly, questions which involve value judgments, and, hence, questions of art and culture, are less subject to the kind of precise response which science and technology can make. Still there are precise responses which can be made which violate neither intellectual integrity nor the larger human concerns of the people whose art and culture are being discussed. In this case, we are, of course, talking about the art and culture of black people, chiefly in North America. And many of the gaps in our knowledge are painfully obvious. Still the obvious may be with us for so long that we take it for granted and fail to

respect its significance to our larger struggle and ultimate well-being.

A good case in point would be in music, the most obvious aspect of black culture anywhere, but especially here in the United States. Where is the black college or university which has seriously examined the sources of our music? Where are the black scholars who treat the complexities of modern jazz with the intelligence and compassion which they deserve? Where are the seminars in jazz history which examine the development and the influence of our music? Where is the historian of the blues? Where is the historian of gospel music? Where is the historian of the music of the Civil Rights Movement? Where is the analysis of the music of the World War II generation?

It is that much needed analysis of the economics of black music which would indicate why men of genius have had to starve to death or make humiliating compromises in order to survive in a white consumer-oriented society? Where is the analysis of the role of the mass media in suppressing and distorting black music? The questions could go on ad nauseum, but the point is that one of the chief ironies of the education of black people in the United States is that these questions have largely been ignored by the very people who produced the music, and although one has to respect the sincerity and dedication and basic fairness of scholars like Gunther Schuller and Paul Oliver, they are solitary beacons in a sea of willful distortion and

uninformed and, apparently, unconscious racism.

The reprint industry too has brought mixed blessings, for although it is useful and necessary to have available the researches of men like Kriehbel, George Pullen Jackson, Guy Johnson, and others, their works are either left with no modern introductions or the introductions are done by white scholars who when not overtly racist, lack knowledge of the intimacies of black life which severely curb the validity of their interpretations of the music; thus stereotypes and false assumptions are reinforced and perpetuated. Sometimes these false assumptions verge on complete falsehood, as, for example, in Robert Bone's preface to the Atheneum reprint of Sterling Brown's Negro Poetry and Drama and The Negro in American Fiction, he flatly asserts that Brown's basic thrust was integrationist, and that he was not a "black chauvinist." The fact of the matter is that he was neither "chauvinist" nor "integrationist" but a brilliant scholar and poet, and a great teacher, dedicated to the uplift of his people through scholarship and art. He made no apologies either for his exploration and celebration of black soul life or for his knowledge of, and influence by, the literature of the United States mainstream, or, for that matter, of Western Europe.

Another example of the duplicity of the reprint industry is the Apollo reprint of Benjamin Brawley's The Negro Genius,

Book is described on the paperback cover as "A New Appraisal of the Achievement of the American Negro in Literature and the Arts," despite the fact that the text was originally published in 1937, when most of the contemporary writers, artists, and musicians were hardly more than toddlers. Still worse, however, is the advertisement for the volume, which appeared in major literary periodicals, and implies that the late Dr. Brawley is currently serving as professor of English at Howard University.

All of this, to be sure, is very serious business, and the most effective way to uproot it is with concerted response by black scholars and their allies. But the task is indeed formidable and mere polemics and rebuttals will not do. Instead of this, the black intellectual community must build on the work of the Brawleys and the Browns and the Reddings, and they must build with daring, with imagination, with sensitivity, and with impeccable scholarship. But even this is not enough, for in music and literature and art especially, the problem of continuous knowledge is not only one of information, but one of organization, interpretation, popularization, and, indeed, of application.

Janheinz Jahn's Neo-African Writings has many flaws, but no one can deny this man's serious involvement in the problems to which we must address ourselves, again, in this generation,

if we mean anything at all by the words black culture, black pride, black power, and, especially, black liberation. We must establish texts and canons, we must set the criteria for the evaluation of black creations, we must bridge the gap between The Negro Genius and Blues People; we must perform the "enabling" acts of criticism and scholarship which will make it possible for black art in the '70s to be fully responsive to the lives and needs of our people and not merely to a privileged minority of specialists.

In some respects the problem of discontinuous knowledge is less serious than the problem of neglected areas of knowledge. This is so because the areas involved are so crucial to a proper understanding of the black experience, and they have generally not been explored on any large scale basis. Nor has the knowledge which has been discovered been sufficiently energized and disseminated among the black population. Of course, this is more true of some areas than others. Notwithstanding, I have listed areas which seem to me to be crucial, and, indeed, areas in which some black persons have excelled but which have traditionally been either totally neglected on the undergraduate level or have been taught from essentially a European perspective. The list is as follows.

1. Graphic arts, painting, and sculpture
2. Photography
3. Folklore
4. Architecture
5. Philosophy
6. Aesthetics
7. Anthropology
8. Archeology

Our artists have made significant efforts to interpret the lives of our people in this country and abroad, and to some extent our schools have assisted in this task. Yet there is great work to be done. The treasures of local collections at Atlanta, Hampton, Yukegee, Nashville, Washington, D.C., Chicago, and Detroit, for example, need to be made available in inexpensive form for courses in general education both in college and in the public schools. Our artists need to be supported by the community, especially the business and the intellectual community. Murals ought to be commissioned not only for academic buildings, but also for public buildings-- for any buildings which the community uses, to remind it of its past and to inspire its future. Textbook illustration needs serious attention, especially for the very young. Art history texts need to be written so as to show the full contribution of black men and women to world art. In the cities, the spread of the Chicago "Wall of Respect" idea is encouraging, suggesting as it does art for people's sake, a living, outdoor, museum. Other encouraging ventures are the private museums and the black artists organization in Los Angeles--Contemporary Crafts, Inc.--which prints arts books, films, and slides especially for use in courses on the Black Experience.

Allied with the graphic arts and sculpture is architecture. Here is, indeed, a great challenge for the black artist to

synthesize the old and the new, to build liveable habitations which are at once reasonably priced, attractive, and true to the soul-force, the design, the movement of Afro-American life. Where is the black business, the black college which will lend its support to the vision of, say, black architect, Max Bond? When black people inherit the inner cores of our great American cities, will they continue to live in degradation and ugliness; or will the new black political leadership realize the necessity for transforming the urban environment into forms which enhance the lives of its citizens? Will they encourage our architects to build 21st century Zimbabwes, or will they settle for functional cubes and African echoes by Picasso?

Some interesting developments are taking place in photography which need to be encouraged in a formal way by our educational institutions and the black business community. Classes in photography are being offered on a number of educational levels and in various kinds of settings, both formal and informal. Black professionals are getting involved in film making and in the teaching of their skills to others. Among the kinds of projects which need to be further encouraged are photographic essays in black cultural history, drawing upon the archives of places like Hampton Institute and the resources of black newspapers and magazines. These could be used to document trends in fashion, dance, and other forms of cultural

expression. Other kinds of essays would document the specific history of institutions and cities, for example, a documentary history of all of our major educational institutions, a documentary history of Harlem, of black Atlanta, Chicago, and New Orleans, to name just a few.

In another context, the use of movies to capture the fluid life style of black people is in an embryonic state. It needs to be systematically encouraged, both as sheer documentation and as artistic creation. Educationally, it seems to me, the problem lies in giving to photography the place which it deserves in the high school and college curriculum, and in having courses taught by professionals who have demonstrated their imagination and their skill but who may not have formal college training, which, really they may not need.

Philosophy, aesthetics, and folklore are intimately linked in any serious examination of the Black Experience. Perhaps, though, one should begin with the folklore, since it forms the substratum of any consideration of the culture of black people in the United States. Indeed, it forms the substratum of any consideration of so-called American culture, since so much of that culture is black-derived, whether it be music, dance, language style, or dress. Notwithstanding all of this, the study of folklore has been ironically and seriously

neglected at black schools in the United States. Perhaps the reason is not hard to come by. There are certainly enough indications in our history that we have associated our folklore with the stereotyped images of the American minstrel tradition and with all of those ethnic aberrations which we hoped would be melted away in the American melting pot. It is high time now, to reassess our position vis-a-vis our folk life and to realize just how valuable that heritage is. Unfortunately, a great deal of the material that we need to study the folk life has been collected and interpreted by non-black people, and distortions abound, to say the least. Still we have the records, and we have access to living sources of information which will aid us in understanding those records. What we need, then, is a systematic examination of the field of folklore as it now exists in the United States; and a critique of that field so as to derive the maximum benefit from the work which has already been done; at the same time seeking to eliminate methods, techniques, and interpretations which do not actually contribute to a sound understanding of the lives of our people. In short, the study of black folklore must be freed from 19th century bias and from Eurocentrism. The major works must be critiqued, the major theories must be critiqued, the major collections must be re-evaluated. But above all the study of black folklore must be humanized and popularized. One could start, perhaps, by eliminating the notion of folklore itself and substituting for it the concept of Black Humanism, out of

which, and upon which will develop the kinds of specific knowledge and strategies which will help us to build upon the life style of our parents. This task is so enormous that it must be the exclusive work of a group of dedicated workers, perhaps of an entire institute, for what we are fundamentally talking about is refining and controlling the source of the spiritual energy of American life, which is to say, the basic forms of the Black Experience.

Black aesthetics and philosophy are simply refined and self-conscious forms of this basic energy source, abstracted ways of viewing and handling the Black Experience in its various permutations. Thus Aretha Franklin doesn't have to speak very precisely about Soul, or the Black Aesthetic--her singing embodies these qualities; but if future generations are to avoid the prodigalities of the past and the present--if we are to avoid being merely the suppliers of Energy and not the Users and the Controllers--then black people have to define themselves and their contributions, not only to keep the record straight, but also to ensure the proper transformation of Black Humanistic Energy into Black Liberating-Economic Potential.

What we are talking about, of course, is black books, black records, black audio-visual materials for public school and college and other educational uses; but we are also talking about

Black publishing houses and record companies, and multi-media companies. We are also talking about a systematic thrust for important positions on editorial and other policy making boards in the publishing industry and in government agencies which deal with public education.

But to move back to the theoretical and the programmatic, the concept of Black Humanism over against Black folklore takes us to what I designated earlier as "Undefined Areas of Knowledge" of Black Art and Black Culture. It means that we need to know how to talk precisely about our distinctiveness, whether we call it soul or Negritude or something else. It means that we have to talk about our experience in such a way that statements about the blues in 1970 will be valid for discussing the blues in 1925. It means that a critique of Negritude, instead of a simple condemnation or exaltation of it has to be made by black people. It means that we have to study the processes by which the larger society co-opts the language and the style of Black Culture. It means that we have to seek systematically to discover and to describe and to utilize the processes of Black Creativity. We have to seek to understand the psychological bases of that creativity, especially looking toward that day when we react no longer to our oppressors but still realize the historic importance of the blues and the

spirituals in our survival--in short, toward the day when we no longer protest but celebrate.

Further, it means that we must systematically seek to extend the boundaries of our knowledge, especially of our recent past, through the acquisition of manuscripts, documents, and other artifacts which we need. The recent discovery in Harlem of over 10,000 papers of Marcus Garvey's Universal Negro Improvement Association is a good case in point. They perhaps should have been searched for a generation ago. At any rate, the cultural growth and movement of our people, especially in urban areas should be systematically and scientifically documented through the introduction of the methods and techniques of the anthropologist and the archeologist into the urban environment, the creation, so to speak, of an urban archeology, an urban anthropology, scientific, yes, but suffused with Black Humanism, with that black verve which we call Soul.

The apathy and the inferiority feelings which obstruct our present drive, the personal ambitions which distort our collective commitment will not be easily dispelled. We have no monopoly on these human failings, yet of all the world's people, because of our unique past and the strategic importance of our present consciousness in this country, we can least afford to indulge them. There is work for all. There is work

for a generation. Let us, then, at the risk of the displeasure of those who called themselves our friends, boldly strike out wherever we are to define, refine, and to control the sources and the directions of our culture.

The dangers in all of this are obvious. Private collectors control important segments of information, important artifacts and important living resources. Private foundations and governmental agencies still think that Black people are fundamentally incapable of interpreting their lives and goals in this country and around the world. Some black people share that distrust, and unfortunately some of these people are highly influential in the Black Community. Moreover, the problems of black people tend to be viewed strictly in economic and political terms, and anything which sounds "artsy-craftsy," which smacks of "culture" is suspect. This is perhaps as it should be. Our basic problems are economic and political. However, behind any realistic drive to reach permanent solutions there must be a regeneration of the spirit. And this regeneration has been the historic role of art. It has always been the role of black art, especially here in America. In our drive for economic and political liberation, then, we can avoid the mistakes of other people and other generations by drawing consciously from those deep wellsprings of Being which we call by so many names, especially now by the beautiful term Soul.

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