

From: Introduction to Black Studies (4th ed),

Maulana Karenga, PhD
(2010)



BLACK CREATIVE PRODUCTION

CHAPTER 9

9.1 INTRODUCTION

DEFINING ART

Although the category, creative production, can be used more generally to include various other forms of creative work, it will focus in this chapter on Black Art, Music and Literature. These are definitive of Black aesthetic creations and can, for the purpose of this chapter, be categorized as Black arts or art in the general sense. The sense of an overall interrelatedness of art is evident in the anthology, *Call and Response*, which links literature, music and the performing arts (Hill, 1998). By art, then, I mean "*cultural production informed by standards of creativity and beauty and inspired by and reflective of a people's life-experiences and life-aspirations*" (Karenga, 1980:80). The focus here is on the collective base of art, for as Evans (1979:37) contends concerning Black art, "... it is Black art because it is saturated in the experience and behavior patterns of the people for whom it is created and because its substance is functional."

DuBois (1925) also stressed the collective source of Black art in his discussion of its social origin. He (1925:53) stated that even though Black art has both a personal and universal aspect, these are "combined with a certain group compulsion...meaning that the wishes, thoughts and experiences of thousands of individuals influence consciously and unconsciously the message of the one who speaks for all." This "social compulsion", DuBois continues, was shaped by the Black experience in enslavement and emancipation, and the struggle African Americans waged to liberate themselves and strive upward. In a word, it rises out of a culture in which a people are creating themselves, celebrating, sustaining and developing themselves and introducing themselves to history and humanity (Karenga, 2008:5; Powell, 1997; Stuckey, 1994).

It is this struggle for freedom, dignity and self-definition in a hostile and challenge-filled world, then, that shaped Black art and gave it its relevance and reality. Black art, therefore, "as an expression of Black life experiences and aspirations, is the conscious and unconscious aesthetic contribution of Black people to their struggle to rescue and reconstruct their history and humanity in their own image and interest" (Karenga, 1980:80). Thus, Alain Locke (1969:266), a key figure in the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s, argued for the development of an African-American mode of artistic expression which spoke directly to the Black need for self-expression in their own terms. "We ought and must have a school of (Black) art," he asserted, "a local and racially representative tradition." The impetus and inspiration for this, he maintained, would come from Blacks' recognition, respect and use of their African heritage. This stress on the use of Africa as a rich and ancient source of culture and creativity is also made by Kariamu Welsh-Asante (1993) and others (NuHall, 2007).

THE BLACK AESTHETIC

Although this question was raised and debated during the Harlem Renaissance and after, it received its most critical and enthusiastic attention during the Sixties in the debate revolving around the Black aesthetic (Gayle, 1971). The Black aesthetic had two distinct but interrelated meanings. First, it was used to mean a distinctive mode of aesthetic expression by which Black art could be identified. Secondly, it meant a criteria by which Black art could not only be judged in terms of its creativity and beauty, but also in terms of its social relevance.

If one combines these two interrelated definitions, the **Black aesthetic** can be defined as *a distinctive mode of artistic expression and a distinctive standard by which Black art can be identified and judged in terms of its creativity and beauty as well as its social relevance*. From the debate around this question which continues even now, two schools evolved: the **detached-art school** and the **committed-art school**. Writers such as Ellison (1966) and Redding (1966) argued the primacy of art rather than race or politics, suggesting art was universal and personal but not Black. They asserted that the artist does a disservice to himself/herself and his/her profession by being overly concerned with race and politics.

Langston Hughes, Richard Wright and the creative artists and critics of the 60s all argued against such a view. Hughes (1970:262) stated that he was "ashamed for the Black poet who says 'I want to be a poet not a (Black) poet', as though his own racial world were not as interesting as any world." Also, he expressed shame for the Black artist who paints sunsets instead of Black faces "because he fears the strange un-whiteness of his features." Wright, as Gayle (1970:xiii) notes, "argued, in essence, that conditions in America had not

changed to the degree that the (African-American) could desert the race question, engage in an art for art's sake endeavor or wander free in the sunny utopia of abstraction in an attempt to desert the harsh reality of being Black in the twentieth century."

In the 60s Hoyt Fuller, Larry Neal, Mari Evans, Haki Madhubuti (Don L. Lee), Carolyn Rodgers, Rhonda Davis, Addison Gayle, Amiri Baraka, Sonia Sanchez, Woodie King, Ron Milner, Dudley Randall, this author and others contributed to the discussion and definition of the Black aesthetic (Gayle 1971). Neal (1971:272; also Gates and McKay, 1997:1959ff) posited essential contentions of the committed-art school when he rejected "any concept of the artist that alienates him from the community," posed Black art as "the aesthetic sister of the Black Power concept" and argued that the Black artist's primary duty is to speak to the spiritual and cultural needs of Black people. Moreover, the *Negro Digest* (later named the *Black World*), under the editorship of Hoyt Fuller (1971) who helped establish it in 1967, ran over a year of continuous commentary and discussion on the Black aesthetic from September 1968 through November 1969. In the January 1968 issue, a wide spectrum of views was presented on the question of the Black aesthetic. Most of these commentaries reaffirmed the need for Blacks to create and employ an aesthetic in their own image and interest.

In the 70s, the discussion continued. Elizabeth Catlett (1975:13) reaffirmed the need for art being linked to Black struggle, stating that "only the liberation of Black people will make the real development of Black art possible. Therefore, it is to our advantage as artists as well as Blacks to lend all our strength to the struggle." She notes that art "...will not create authentic social change, but it can provoke thought and prepare us for change, even helping in its achievement. For art can tell us what we do not see consciously, what we may not realize, and that there are other ways of seeing things-maybe opposite ways."

John Killens (1975:46) also reemphasized that culture and literature were weapons for liberation and "words are the writer's ammunition." And Madhubuti (Lee) (1972:39) continued his stress on the social role of art and the artist, and the need to develop a people-focused art stating that "To be able to define one's self from a historically and culturally accurate base and to follow through in your work; keeping the best interest of your history and culture in mind is to, actually, give direction to the coming generations." In addition, Evans (1979:37) reaffirmed the political character and role of Black art, contending that "It is political since its intent is to speak to the Black community about the quality of life in that community and the ramification of individual responsibility for the community both within and outside the systems of the larger society."

Finally, Chestyn Everett (1975:34-35) reasserts the need for respect of Black tradition. For any art "which denies tradition removes the necessary cul-

tural cohesion of the form, sensibilities and integrity" of the art itself. Artists, he continues, "enrich themselves and their works when they bring to themselves and to their writing a clear perspective and appreciation for the cultural and historical tradition of Black life and (art). The need, then, is to "advance the best of this tradition and 'standing on the shoulders of our forefathers' set our rainbow in the sky!"

It is in the context and support of the commitment-art school, that I (Karenga, 1971, 1980:34ff;) offered suggestions for a Black aesthetic, first in the *Black World* series of commentaries and afterward in an outline of *Kawaida Theory*. Essentially, I (1980:84ff) argued that "for Black Art to truly be in the image and interests of Black people to whom it owes its existence and inner thrust, it must be informed, inspired and judged by social criteria as well as an aesthetic criteria." This social criteria which evolved within the framework of Kawaida philosophy was based on: 1) the tradition role of art in African society; 2) the discussions by advocates of the commitment-art school during and before the 60s; and 3) a Kawaida perception of the demands of Black life and struggle (Ransaw, 1979).

Therefore, I (1980:84ff) contended that for **Black art** to be real and relevant it had to have three basic characteristics, i.e., it had to be *functional, collective and committing*. For art to be functional is to be useful. And if art is not useful, it is by definition, useless. To be functional, art must self-consciously have and urge social purpose, inform, instruct and inspire the people and be an unashamed partisan for them. "In a word, to be functional, Black art must be an aesthetic translation of our will and struggle for liberation and a higher level of life," searching for and creating new forms and styles to speak our truth and possibilities. To be collective, Black art must be done for all, drawn and synthesized from all, and rooted in a life-based language and imagery rich in everyday relevance. It must be understandable without being vulgarly simplistic, that is, so pedestrian and impoverished that it does damage to art as a discipline and to the social message it attempts to advance.

Finally, Black art must be *committing*. It must not simply inform and inspire Black people, but also commit them to the historical project of liberation and a higher level of human life. To do this, "it must demand and urge willing and conscious involvement in struggle and building of a new world and new men, women and children to inhabit it". And it must move beyond protest and teach possibilities, beyond victimization and teach Blacks to dare victory. Art, then, "must commit us to what we can become and are becoming and inspire us to dare the positive in a world defined and deformed by the negative."

Moreover, "committing art is nationally self-conscious art, i.e., consciously a fundamental contribution to the definition, defense and development of the national Black community." This is not to deny art's human character, but to

endow it with a concrete human reality by giving it a people-specific expression. For "our art, like our lives, is great not because it's defined as more human than Black, but because we have explored the richness of our own life experience and aspirations and discovered and offer life-lessons from which the whole world can benefit - not only aesthetically, but culturally in the wide sense of the word." It is in the framework of these assumptions that the following summaries of Black artistic achievement are offered and explained. This also maintains the stated thrust of this text to present a proactive and positive view of African American life and struggle in its current and historical unfolding.

9.2 BLACK ART

THE CONTINENTAL AFRICAN DIMENSION

African American art has its origins in Africa where art and artistic production, like religion, manifested itself in all aspects of communal life. African art was functional as well as aesthetic, being created for and used in various religious and social activities (Farrington, 2004; Collins, 2002; Lewis, 2003, 1994; Blauer and Laurbe, 2001; Blackman, 2000; Patton, 1998; Adler and Barnard, 1992; Drewal and Pemberton, 1990; Niangoran-Bouah, 1984; Gillon, 1984; Porter, 1970 Smith, 1981). African artists were carvers in wood, ivory and bone, sculptors in stone, clay, bronze, gold and iron, and created one of the oldest and most skilled traditions of functional and aesthetic art in the history of humankind (Locke, 1936; Butcher, 1956 McLeod, 1980, Wilkinson, 1992). Although there is continuing controversy over how much of the African artistic tradition was transferred to the U.S., the fact cannot be denied that there are clear evidences of the African motif in early African American art (Porter, 1943; Dover, 1960; Thompson, 1983).

Even though enslavers often condemned and destroyed Black art to destroy Black communication and culture, enslaved Africans nevertheless produced impressive works of art (Driskell, 1976:12ff). These included not only personal art objects, but public works as Samella Lewis (1978:9ff) asserts. Among the personal art objects, Robert F. Thompson (1969) lists ceramics, basketry, earthenware, grave decorations, wood carvings and weavings. Examples of these are in the works of Elsa Fine (1973:12ff) and David Driskell (1976:12ff). James Porter (1943) contends that the Janson House, built on the Hudson River in 1712 for a Dutch patron, exhibits a clear African motif in its construction and ornamentation, i.e., hand forged hinges and detailed-work fire-place. He also cites their art work in silver, gold and iron. Driskell (1976:22ff) shows remarkable similarities between African and African American art and architecture, among which are wrought iron balconies in New Orleans, plantation houses

in African motif, a cylindrical quarter for enslaved Africans in Virginia which resemble Tembu houses in South Africa, and carved mantels with an African mask motif in North Carolina.

In addition, there is impressive evidence of African building and masonry skill in the Chapel of Cross in Chapel Hill, N.C., the Virginia State Capital building, the Torrence House of Mecklingburg County, the Harvey Castle near New Orleans, St. Andrew's Episcopal Church in Prairieville, Ala., and the famous Melrose plantation, near Natchitoches, LA. (Dozier, 1974; Newton, 1977). James Newton concludes that there were at least 90 different areas of arts and craft in which African Americans exhibited skillful workmanship.

PROFESSIONAL EMERGENCE

Samella Lewis (1978:12-13) marks the emergence of the professional artist before Emancipation with painters Scipio Moorhead and G.W. Hobbs in the 1770s, and Josua Johnston who "was the first artist of Black ancestry to gain public recognition in the United States as a portrait painter." After these were Julien Hudson (active 1830-40); Robert Douglass (1809-87); an abolitionist and painter, Patrick Henry Reason (1817-50); an engraver, William Simpson (active 1854-72); and later Robert Duncanson, Edward Bannister, Grafton Brown and Nelson Primus.

Edmonia Lewis (1843-1900) was the first Black woman in the U.S. to gain widespread recognition as an artist and the first Black to gain national reputation as a sculptor. Her *Forever Free*, a Black couple looking upward with broken chains, is in Howard University's Gallery of Art. Also, one of the most impressive early Black artists was Henry O. Tanner (1859-97), famous for his oil on canvas pieces such as *Banjo Lesson* and *The Thankful Poor*. However, having suffered much from racism, Tanner went to Paris and although he helped young Black artists who came to Paris, he refused to return to the U.S. and establish the Black Art School Alain Locke advocated.

THE HARLEM RENAISSANCE

The **Harlem Renaissance** produced race and socially conscious artists who reached back to Africa and the Black masses for a distinctive Black motif (Marks, 1999; Powell, 1997). As mentioned above, Locke (1968:267) had challenged Black artists to turn to their "ancestral arts of Africa" in order to develop a race art. He argued that if African art had influenced Pablo Picasso, Modigliani, Matisse and other White artists, it was surely "not too much to expect . . . its influence upon the culturally awakened (Black) artist of the present generations." Three artists in particular - Palmer Hayden, Archibald

Motley, Jr., and Aaron Douglass - focused on developing styles that reflected the Black aesthetic.

Hayden in his *Fetiché et Fleurs* (Fetish and Flowers) used African print to emphasize Africanness and later painted subject matter which stressed the life and custom of the Black masses as in *John Henry on the Right, Stem Drill on the Left* and *The Janitor Who Paints*. Motley also used African and African American themes. His *Old Snuff Dipper*, *The Barbecue* and *Chicken Shack* are clear examples of his focus on Black life. Douglass was a "pioneer Africanist", using the ancestral legacy to develop an original style which "combined modernism and Africanism in an astonishing (and original) synthesis" (Driskell, 1976:62). Focusing on the beauty and strength of Black life, he employed geometric figures reflecting an African motif in his illustrations for Locke's (1925/1968) *The New Negro* and James Weldon's Johnson's *God Trombones* and in his major work, a series of murals for the Countee Cullen branch of the New York library which portrayed the history of African Americans.

POST RENAISSANCE

Hale Woodruff also reflected a race and social consciousness in his art. In 1939, he painted a series of three socially conscious oil on canvas pieces entitled *The Amistad Murals* in honor of the Amistad Mutiny. This creation for Talladega College in Alabama, reflects the influence of socially-conscious Mexican muralists Jose C. Orozco, Diego Rivera, and David Siquieros on him and other Black artists during the 30s and 40s (Lewis, 1978:67-68). Richmond Barthe (b.1901) is clearly one of African Americans' leading sculptors. His sculptural figures are technically immaculate and graceful and focus on Black life, strength and dignity. Among these are *Blackberry Woman*, *Wetta*, *African Dancer*, and the *Negro Looks Ahead*. He also produces two marble reliefs, *Exodus* and *Dance*.

The 40s continued the tradition of race and socially conscious art, and mural art stood out as a major mode of expression. This, as mentioned before, was influenced by the Mexican muralists Rivera, Orozco and Siquieros, but also Lewis (1978:110) notes, "mural art is a major aspect of African architectural tradition". Charles Alston was one of the most important Black muralists during this time. Using a cubist style, his mural, *Magic and Medicine* for the Harlem Hospital in 1937, depicts a contrast between African and American life, the former being nature-oriented and warm, and the later, mechanical and cold. Alston also produced with Hale Woodruff a joint mural documenting Black contributions to the founding of California for Golden State Mutual Life Insurance Company of Los Angeles. Alston's panel is *Exploration and Colonization* (1527-1850) and Woodruff's is *Settlement and Development* (1850-1949).

Charles White is by all estimates one of the most gifted race and socially conscious Black artists. Early in his art, he announced that he was interested in the social role and function of art and sought to express it in his own. He showed Black people in various roles in history as worker, soldier, mother, father, scientist, civic leader, and musician. Drawing from the muralists school, his works are monumental, bold and defiant. Some of his most famous murals are *Five Great American Negroes* and *The Contribution of the Negro to American Democracy*. His lithographs, *Frederick Douglass* and *Harriet Tubman*, and his crayon *Mother and Child* are also impressive pieces.

James Porter, who wrote *Modern Negro Art*, and was appointed head of Howard University's art department and art gallery in 1953, was also a painter. Essentially between 1954 and 1964, he painted African and African American themes and as an art critic and art historian, he, like Alain Locke, played a vital role in the early establishment and development of Black art (Lewis, 1978:102).

Lois Mailou Jones and Elizabeth Catlett were two important Black women artists during this period. Although Jones at first painted the French countryside in an earlier period, she evolved into a self-conscious Black artist, visited 11 African countries and incorporated African imagery in her subsequent painting. Her *Moon Mask* from her African series reflects this consciousness. Catlett, a sculptor and printmaker, was involved in the Civil Rights Movement as a student and teacher, and assigned art a social role in the struggle against oppression. Some of her strongest works are *Black Unity*, in honor of Pan-Africanism; her lithograph *Negro Es Bello* (Black is Beautiful), a gentle rendition of the profile of a Black child; and *Harriet* and *Malcolm Speaks For Us*, strong linocuts in her series on Black heroes.

THE SIXTIES AND BEYOND

The Sixties and Seventies saw an impressive growth of race conscious and socially conscious art (Thompson and Randall, 1998). The Black Arts Movement of the 60s, which demanded that art serve Black people and their struggle, recruited many artists who reflected in their art not only a commitment to their heritage but also a commitment to use their medium to support and achieve Black liberation. Murals again became a way to make art serve and express the people. Among these are Mural at Massachusetts in Boston by Dana Chandler and Gary Rickson, Eugene Edna's Howard University Mural, John Outerbridge's *Something From Nothing* in Compton, California, Dana Chandler's *Knowledge is Power: Stay in School* in Boston, and in Chicago, William Walker's *Peace and Salvation Wall*, Mitchell Caton's *Universal Alley Wall* and *Wall of Respect* by Eugene Edna, William Walker, Jeff Donaldson and other members of

the Organization of Black American Culture, a group of artists and community workers dedicated to bringing art to Black people.

Paintings with Black themes of struggle, repression and daily life are also found in the works of David Hammonds, Cliff Joseph, Faith Ringgold, Alvin Hollings, Benny Andrews, Milton Johnson, Joe Overstreet, Daniel Johnson, Ben Jones, Murray De Pillars, Malcolm Bailey, Ernest Trove, Lovett Thompson, Ernie Barnes and Mikelle Fletcher. Herman Kofi Bailey's *Unity*, Varnette Honeywood's *Gossip in the Sanctuary*, David Driskell's *Shango Gone*, John Bigger's *The Time of Edge, Nigeria and Web of Life "Ananse"*, Jacob Lawrence's *The Worker*, Vernell DeSilva's *Chicago Pool Hall* and *Harriet Tubman* and Murray De Pillars' *People of the Sun* are definitive period pieces also.

Mixed media assemblages include Noah Purifoy's *Sir Watts*, Bettye Ann Saar's *Nine Mojo Secrets*, John Outterbridge's *Shoeshine Box*, and Kay Brown's *Take It Now*. In sculpture, Margaret Burrough's *Head* and Doyle Foreman's *Corner* with their African projections stand out. And in graphic processes, Ruth Waddy's *The Key*, Jeff Donaldson's *Victory in the Valley of Eshu*, and Carol Ward's *Foloyan* are strong examples of African and African American focus. Examples of these and all others listed above can be found in Lewis (1978), Driskell (1976) and Fine (1973).

9.3 BLACK MUSIC

AFRICAN ORIGINS

The African origins and character of Black music are well-documented (Southern, 1971; Meadows, 1979; Maultsby, 1979; Caldwell, 1997; Floyd, 1996). Not only did Africans bring songs and dances but also brought and reconstructed musical instruments played in Africa such as the banjo, the balafone (xylophone), the musical bow, flutes, the elephant tusk horn, a kind of bagpipe, types of clarinets (dududen), trumpets made of wood and ivory, gongs, rattles, castanets, the quill or panpipes, the sansa or thumb piano and, of course, the drum (Kebede, 1995). Harold Courlander (1963) gives a detailed discussion of Africa-derived instruments played by African Americans. Moreover, as Meadows (1979:185) notes "the performance practices, melodies, rhythms, and aesthetic musical practices of today's Black Americans are only a mirror of the practices of their African forefathers and mothers."

None of this means that Africans in the U.S. did not borrow from their new environment for they did (Levine, 1977). But as Maultsby (1979:200-21) states, "these elements were recycled through the concepts and aesthetic principles that defined the musical tradition of the Africans." For example, melodies, rhythms, texts, and tempos were changed and shouts, calls, words,

clapping, foot stomping and body movements were added to give them an African character. The first music Blacks sang in the U.S., then, were songs from Africa. These included war and struggle songs and holiday songs in their own languages. However, fearing rebellions and plots, the enslavers moved to prohibit both African song and languages as well as instruments like drums which could be used for communication.

THE SPIRITUALS

Following African tradition, early African Americans distinguished many different types among their songs according to how they were used (Southern, 1971:175). Given the religiousness of Africans, the largest number of songs in the ante-bellum or pre-Civil War period were religious songs or spirituals (Reagan, 2001; Cruz, 1999; Jones, 1999, Cone, 1992). DuBois (1969) in 1903 was the first scholar to pay deserved attention to the beauty and significance of the spirituals. He saw these "sorrow songs" of enslaved and disappointed Africans as a message to the world in their expression of "faith in the ultimate justice in the world."

There are three basic approaches to the interpretation of the spirituals, i.e., that they are: 1) essentially social; 2) essentially religious; and 3) a synthesis of both the social and religious. John Lovell (1969) and Mark Fisher (1953) see them as essentially expressions of social strivings and struggle whose themes are: 1) the desire for freedom, justice and penalty for the oppressor; 2) criticism of the existing order; and 3) coded messages of escape, meetings and struggle. "Go Down Moses," "Swing Low Sweet Chariot," "Oh Freedom, Oh Freedom," "Before I'd Be A Slave I'd Be Buried In My Grave," "If I Had My Way I'd Tear This Building Down," "Oh Mary Don't You Weep, Don't You Mourn," "My Lord Delivered Daniel," and "No More Auction Block For Me," etc., are examples of these.

Secondly, Howard Thurman (1947) and Benjamin Mays (1968) saw the spirituals as essentially religious. Thurman (1947:12) contended that, "The clue to the meaning of the spirituals is to be found in religious experience and spiritual discernment." He saw them as a religious expression of the enslaved African's struggle to maintain his/her dignity, personality and human spirit and transcend the context dedicated to their destruction. Mays (1968:21) argues that the spirituals are rooted in the "compensatory idea, that God will bring His own out victoriously in the end." The compensatory aspect, then, is rooted in a religious force and outcome not social ones.

Finally, James Cone (1972) sees the need of a synthesis for the two interpretations. He (1972:20) contends that "no theological interpretation of the Black spirituals can be valid that ignores the cultural environment that created

them." The enslaved African found him/herself in a violent and brutal and dehumanizing environment and he/she offered both social and religious resistance. Spirituals, then, Cone concludes are a religious expression of resistance. It is reinforcement of identity and dignity, an expression of the use of religion as a "source of strength in a time of trouble" and "a vibrant affirmation of life and its possibilities in an appropriate aesthetic form" (Cone, 1972:32-33).

SONGS OF WORK AND LEISURE

Work songs, as Eileen Southern (1971:177) notes, grew out of work activity in the fields, in prison, on roads, on the waterfront, on railroads, and other work sites. Essentially, this was not only psychic relief from tedium, but also depicted graphically the worker's situation and built on a sense of shared responsibility and fate (Roberts, 1974:140ff). Especially relevant were heroic work songs like "John Henry" which showed Blacks defeating "white society on its own terms" by smashing its expectations and stereotypes, by insisting that their lives transcend the traditional models and roles established for them and their people by the white majority" (Levine, 1977:420).

Southern (1971:182) also list dance songs and play songs often called "fiddle songs", "devil songs", etc. As the names suggest, these were recreational songs. In addition, there were also narrative songs, satirical songs and field and street cries. All these reflected Blacks' aesthetic expression created in the midst of giving beauty and color to a hostile and challenge-filled world.

THE BLUES

It is important to stress here how each kind of Black music, both religious and secular, reaffirmed and reinforced the functional, collective and committing character of Black art forms. All truly African art was/is rooted in and reflective of life-situations, aspirations and possibilities. Thus, Black music, as an art form, expresses these characteristics also. This is clear also in blues which began to take form in the late nineteenth century and "by the twentieth century had become a major form of Black expression" (Maulsby, 1979:203; Cone, 1972; Oliver, 1998).

James Cone (1972:112) argues that the blues are secular spirituals; secular in their focus on this world and the body and spiritual in that "they are impelled by the same search for the truth of the Black experience." According to Amiri Baraka (Jones, 1963:18), "the immediate predecessors of Blues were the African American...work songs which had their origins in West Africa." Maulsby contends that blues is rooted in both secular and religious musical traditions, citing the training blues singers had in church, their singing of both hymns and blues,

and the tendency to call on the Lord while expressing deep sorrow, etc.

Blues, then, is rooted in the totality of the Black experience in the U.S. and the historical and social burden of being Black in a racist society which this implies, i.e., exploitation and oppression, loss of love, "hard rows to hoe," bad news and worse dreams, drinking and loving hard, resignation, reaffirmation and above all durability (Handy, 1941; Van Rijn, 1996). In an earlier article on Black art, I (Karenga, 1971) criticized blues as being essentially focused on resignation, but as my critics have rightly observed, blues is much more multi-dimensional than that (Neal, 1972).

Thus, blues speaks of: Black beauty; woman so good looking "make a bulldog break his chain and a snail to catch a train;" being down and out, "sometimes I feel like nothin', somethin', th'owed away, Then I get my g'itar and play the blues all day;" defiant dignity, "I'd rather drink muddy water, sleep in a hollow log, dan stay in this town and be treated like a dirty dog;" sexual betrayal, "went out this morning left my gate unlatched, come back home, found that boy in my potato patch;" plea bargaining, "come back baby, please don't go, cuz the way I love you baby, you'll never know," and social criticism, "Uncle Sam ain't no woman, but he sure can take yo' man. Boys der got'em in the service, doin something I cain' understand."

Some of the more important names in blues are William C. Handy, considered the "Father of the Blues," who first published *Memphis Blues* in 1912 and in 1914 published *St. Louis Blues* which made blues a household word around the world; Ma Rainey, the first professional blues singer considered "Queen of the Blues," Billie Holiday; John Lee Hooker; Leadbelly; Muddy Waters; Blind Lemon Jefferson; B.B. King; Bobby Blue Bland; Nina Simone; Lightnin Hopkins; Aaron T-Bone Walker; "Sonny Boy" Williamson; Bessie Smith; Alberta Hunter; Josh White; and Ray Charles (Frayer, 1998; Awmiller, 1996).

RAGTIME

Ragtime, like blues and spirituals, was another early manifestation of distinct African American music (Metis, 1966, Lems-Dwrokin, 1991; Hasse, 1985). Because it was associated primarily with the piano, it evolved after enslavement when Blacks had access to the instrument. It was especially designed for Black consumption and was played by Black musicians anonymously and known in eating places, saloons, riverside dives, honky tonk spots and later clubs. Ragtime composers were many. Among the earliest were Irving Jones and Cris Smith. Others were Scott Joplin, the "King of Ragtime", whose music was made popular in the 1970s by the movie *The Sting*; Thomas Turpin, "Father of St. Louis Ragtime;" Joe Jordan; Eubie Blake; James Scott; Scott Hayden and Louis Chauvin.

GOSPEL MUSIC

Gospel music rose out of the late 19th century and early 20th century folk church as opposed to the 20th century middle class church (Reagan, 2001, 1993; Blue, 2001; Harris, 1992; Williams-Jones, 1975; Helibut, 1975). Essentially, it is created in a context of individual and collective spontaneity, improvisation for church service and are thus called "church songs". Methodist minister, Charles Albert Tindley, the pioneer Gospel song creator, wrote his first songs in the early 1900s. And Thomas Dorsey, another pioneer, contributed to the Gospel idiom "a ragtime, boogie woogie piano style, his blues-based melodies, harmonies and an interest in religious spirit and faith" (Maultsby, 1979:204). To this instrumentation, chants, calls, hand clapping and foot stomping were added in the free creativity and expression characteristic of folk environments. Some of the most notable gospel singers are Mahalia Jackson, James Cleveland, Clara Ward, Marion Williams, Rosetta Thorpe, Sallie Maetin, Mother Smith, Bessie Griffin, the Golden Gate Quartet, the Sensational Nightingales, the Dixie Humming Birds, Ruth David and the Staple Singers.

THE EMERGENCE OF JAZZ

Southern (1971:374) states that "the fusion of blues and ragtime with brass band and syncopated dance music resulted in a music called Jazz, a music with its own characteristics". Jazz started in New Orleans with pioneers like King Oliver and his Creole Band; Jelly Roll Morton and his Red Hot Peppers; Louis Satchmo Armstrong with his Hot Five and Hot Seven, and clarinetist John Dodds. From New Orleans, jazz moved in the 1920s to the Chicago Southside (Conyers, 2001; Lee, 1999; Seymour, 1996). In addition, big bands like those of Chuck Webb, Jimmie Lunceford, Cab Calloway, Erskine Hawkins, Lionel Hampton, Count Basie and Duke Ellington also emerged in the 20s.

With jazz several styles developed. Among them were: swing in the 30s associated with Duke Ellington and big bands; bop in the early 40s which evolved into hard bop or soul jazz in the 50s represented by Dizzie Gillespie, Thelonius Monk, Kenny Clark, Charlie Christian, Lester Young, Jimmy Blanton, Charlie Parker, Bud Powell, Miles Davis, Earl Hines, Max Roach, Art Blakey, Horace Silver, Nat and Cannonball Adderly, Sonny Rollins; avant garde in the late 50s exemplified by Ornette Colman, John Coltrane, Cecil Taylor, Charles Mingus and Eric Dolphy. In addition, Sun Ra, Pharaoh Saunders, Albert Ayler, Don Ayler, Marian Brown and Archie Shepp have shown impressive originality.

There are obviously too many Black musicians to be listed in this short overview, but it is important to mention musical greats like jazz singers Ella Fitzgerald, Billie Holiday, King Pleasure, Joe Williams, Sarah Vaughn, Arthur

Prysock and pianists Fats Waller, Errol Garner, Hazel Scott and trumpeter Donald Byrd.

RHYTHM AND BLUES

Rhythm and Blues (R&B) emerged during the 1940s and 1950s, but reached its height in the 1960s (Vernon, 1999; Caldwell, 1996). Essentially an urban product, it reflected a self-conscious identity, cohesiveness and focus on love, combining elements of pop, gospel and blues traditions. In the 60s, rhythm and blues became "Soul" music, a further indication of its identification with the Black Power thrusts of the 60s. Stress was placed on distinctiveness from White music, Black self-respect and self-celebration of soul. This is, by far, the most popular music among Blacks although it is constantly challenged by the music industry's constant attempts to absorb and dilute it and deprive it of its distinctiveness was the case of disco.

Some of the classic rhythm and blues artists and songs from the 60s were James Brown, "Mr. Soul," I'm Black and I'm Proud; Aretha Franklin "Ms. Soul," Respect; Otis Redding, Sitting on the Dock of the Bay; Chuck Berry; The Four Tops; Curtis Mayfield; The Impressions, We're A Winner; Marvin Gaye and Tammy Terrell, Ain't No Mountain High Enough; The Supremes, Love is Like An Itchin In My Heart; Gladys Knight and the Pips; The Temptations, My Girl; Message From A Black Man; Al Green, Let's Stay Together; Sam Cooke, Change Gon' Come; Smokey Robinson, I'll Try Something New; Nina Simone, Young, Gifted and Black; Ray Charles, Les McCann and others. Some current positive R&B artists include: India.Arie, Alicia Keys, Anthony Hamilton, Jennifer Hudson, Jaheim, Maxwell, Jill Scott, Angie Stone, and Usher.

Given the influence music has on Black life, there is a continuous discussion on how to make it better serve the interests of Black people. This question becomes especially urgent for Black music which seems to be struggling to hold on to its social consciousness and its distinctiveness as Black music (George, 1988). One cannot help but notice the contrast between the race and socially conscious quality music of the 60s and its transformation in later decades. What one observes, as disco most vividly showed during the 1970s and negative forms of rap have shown afterwards, is the merciless drive of the music industry to make money, reducing all music to a homogenized packageable sound, regardless of its effect on social life, aesthetics or a rich Black heritage or the destructive tendency to dilute and divert Black music's *serious* social content (Byrd, 1978). In the early 20s, Locke (1969:45) had argued Black music had become "tarnished with commercialism and the dust of the marketplace," and that Black musicians were "in commercial enslavement to the Schylocks of Tin Pan Alley and in artistic bondage to the cash of...dance halls and vaudeville

stages." If this were true, then, it is obviously even more so now (Byrd, 1978; Ashborne, 1977).

James Stewart (2005) has provided an important critical discussion of the political content of R&B and by comparison also of Hip Hop. Indeed, as he (Ibid: 198-199) notes, he has documented a "wide variety of political messages available to audiences in using R&B as the vehicle for their personal and collective political affirmations and empowerment." This is done in an effort to offer a corrective to the claim of some academics and advocates of rap that rap is a self-generated genre of music with little or no precedent and the only or most political music produced.

Clearly, as Stewart notes, there is also some political content in some rap music, especially early conscious rap, but often academics and advocates of rap claim an intention and presentation of political message that a favored or favorite rapper neither had nor achieved. Providing a balance assessment of both the political content of some R&B and Hip Hop songs, Stewart not only corrects the record on political messaging, but also shows how art, as is defined in this text, reflects the life and lived experiences of the people. *And this happens in every period and in every generation.* However, every lived experience is not translated politically, and every mention of a situation of suffering or oppression by an artist is not necessarily *understood* or *advanced* as a political message. In fact, it might be little more than personal confession, therapeutic release or individualistic angry complaint. Indeed, once a vocabulary and visible projection is deemed profitable and within racial protocol, the industry will not only allow, but actually encourage and request harmless personal rant and rage or racially injurious minstrelsy and other forms of ethnic, gender and personal degradation. In a word, Black oppression, self-degradation and musical rage – personal and detached from a movement – can be for the dominant society entertaining, diversionary and extraordinarily profitable.

Few artists are strong or politically conscious enough to oppose the tide of commercialism and create the race- and socially-conscious model and music which so marked the 60s. Paul Robeson stands as a model in the past of the socially conscious artist who excelled aesthetically and refused to compromise politically (Robeson, 1958; Dent, 1976). During this later period of transition, Terry Callier, "Be A Believer", "African Violet" and "Martin Street Martin," and especially Gil Scott-Heron stand out as models of artists who have a high level of aesthetic achievement and social consciousness. As Kalamu ya Salaam (1982:12) states, "Scott-Heron represents the most socially conscious element of (the message-music) tradition." His hits - among which are "The Revolution Will Not Be Televised;" "The Bottle," an attack on alcoholism; "We Almost Lost Detroit," a criticism of nuclear power; and "Angel Dust," an appeal to youth to avoid it - all demonstrate a commendable aesthetic and socially con-

scious quality. This concern for socially conscious music led African Americans in the 70s to embrace and support reggae for its social commentary and criticism and then turn to socially conscious rap to celebrate community and reaffirm the necessity of the struggle (George, 1988:188ff. 2005; Spencer, 1991; Eure and Spade, 1991; Kitwana, 1994; Conyers, 2001; Watkins, 2006)).

RAP AND HIP HOP

Rap is one of the major genres of Black music and the key aspect of what is called Hip Hop culture most often, but also Hip Hop Nation and Hip Hop Movement. Of the four elements – rap, breakdancing, Dj-ing and graffiti – clearly rap is the hub and hinge on which Hip Hop turns, its core and most lucrative, viable and idolized public presence. In spite of titles that religiously put forth the inclusive category of Hip Hop, it is rap that immediately seizes and holds center stage (Aldridge and Stewart, 2005; Chang, 2005; Perry, 2004; Forman and Neal, 2004; Kitwana, 2002; Toop, 2000; Rose, 1994). Although rap emerges in the 70s, it is in the 80s that it becomes a wide-spread definitive statement of new Black music (Neal, 2002; Lemmel, 2000; Ayazi-Hashjin, 1999; Boyd, 1997; Perkins, 1997; Caldwell, 1996). Ronald Stephens (1991) is correct, however, to put the origins of rap back even further within the context of Black musical history as well as the African cultural tradition of Nommo or oratory (Stephens, 1998, 1991; Asante, 1987:59ff; Toop, 1984:19; Smitherman, 1973). The form clearly evolves in the tradition of oratorical modes such as “signifying” and “playing the dozens” as well as “rapping” in both the sense of political discourse and romantic “programming”, in a word, the sense of skilled word use to achieve given ends.

In music, artists like King Pleasure, Eddie Vinson and Joe Williams created modes of singing-talking that already prefigures rap in the pre-60s period. Later, the Last Poets, Gil Scott-Heron and the Watts Prophets in the 60s and 70s continued the tradition adding to it their own unique contribution (Williams, 1992). Thus, as Ceola Ross Baber (1984:104) notes, “Master rappers of today are keeping alive and visible the tradition of African American artistry in communication, like all those unnamed Blacks who toasted B’rer Rabbit, Stagolee, or some other fictitious character; like the authors and lyrics who have praised Black perseverance in poem and song; and like all the average Black Americans who speak poetically and poignantly of their experiences, and who give rhythm and sense to their daily existence through music of rhyming speech.”

Rap, then, evolved from an ancient tradition passing through modern forms of that tradition and emerging in night clubs and the streets of New York in the mid-seventies. Some major early artists include figures include Afrika Bambaataa, Kurtis Blow, Eddie Cheba, D.J. Hollywood, Grandmaster Flash,

Furious Five, Lovebug Starski, Junebug, Melle Mel, Whodini, Run DMC and others. Rap gets its definitive push on the national and international scene with Sylvia and Joe Robinson's recording of the Sugar Hill Gang's "Rapper's Delight" in 1979, which sold over 2 million copies. From this point on, rap becomes a major and engaging African American music form (Rose, 2008; Forman and Neal, 2004; Frick and Ahern, 2002; George, 1993).

It is important here to note that there are various schools of rap music defined by their self-definition and lyrical stress (Powell, 1991). The first kind is a teacher-rap or nation-conscious rap which stresses social consciousness, social commitment and struggle (Eure and Spady, 1991). This includes earlier rap by KRS-One, Arrested Development, Def Jef, Poor Righteous Teachers, X-Clan, Sistah Souljah, Queen Latifah, Kool Moe Dee, Prince Akeem, Boogie Down Productions, and perhaps the premier nation-conscious group, Public Enemy. Some current artists in this genre include: Black Star, Common, the Coup, Medusa, Jurassic Five, Immortal Technique, dead prez, Jean Grae, Talib Kweli, Mos Def, Kanye West and others. A second major form of rap is "gangsta rap" represented by earlier rappers like NWA, Ice Cube, Ice T, BWA, Tupac Shakur, Notorious B.I.G. and later 50 Cent.

Thirdly, there is a player/lover rap represented earlier by LL Cool J, Salt n Pepa et al. Fourthly, there is porno rap as reflected in the lyrics of 2 Live Crew et al. There is also religious-based rap as represented by the Five Percenters and less self-assertive Christian rappers (Miyakawa, 2005). Although these are major forms of rap, there are other forms which can be categorized differently, and even these forms are not always clear cut. On the contrary, they often overlap and resemble each other and, as mentioned above, the artists are not always consistent; and some may sing a socially conscious song and then revert to gangsta rap and vice versa. Furthermore, there are underground artists who aren't often counted or discussed widely because they won't "do Hollywood" or compromise (Morgan, 2009; Abdullah, 2006).

Rap, unlike any music before it, initiates a passionate discourse of supporters and critics. Essentially this is because of its dual character and mixed messages and its relevance to both youth culture and the Black musical tradition (Aldridge and Stewart, 2004; Kitwana, 1994, 2002; *Black Collegian*, 1990). Rap's relevance began with its providing a much-needed challenge to the crossover tendency of many Black artists such as Prince and Michael Jackson (George, 1988). This tendency included denial of Blackness, servile attempts to appeal to White audiences through both alteration of music and physical features and claiming a desperate and vague universality which denied African authenticity. This created the basis for White co-optation of Black music in sound and market, and the initiation of a trend which Nelson George calls "the death of rhythm and blues." And, although rhythm and blues did not die,

it was for a brief period rendered less vigorous. Ironically, however, as crossover artists abandoned their rootedness in Black music, White artists, especially those from Britain, began to sing Black music, reviving old songs and making them popular. Also, rap artists while often denying their debt to predecessors in rhythm and blues (R&B), nevertheless added depth and color to their rap by using R&B music as background, i.e., sampling (Conyers, 2001; Corio and Goldman, 1999).

Rap's relevance then begins with its reaffirming the creativity and distinctiveness of Black music. Moreover, it carved out a space for independent Black artists and companies though eventually most succumbed to capitalist co-optation. Thirdly, rap rebuilt an eroding sense of community among Black youth, spoke to them in a special way and at its best, i.e., nation-consciousness rap, contributed in a significant way to conscious raising. Fourthly, rap helped build an equally eroding sense of community among Black musicians who, since the introduction of mechanization of music, began to lose both the opportunity and ability to build community along the model of the earlier jazz community which was so interactive, mutually supportive and creatively challenging. However, this sense of community would quickly erode and turn into deadly rivalry and competition on the regional and personal levels. Fifthly, rap's relevance lies also in its reintroducing in its nation-consciousness form a political discourse in African American music which was missing since the 1960s. It thus became a way to both criticize and understand U.S. society.

Rap, however, because of its varied forms brings mixed messages which divides its history into both the relevant and positive and the problematic and negative (Dyson, 1996). The first problem rap poses is the sexist character of much of it (Adams and Fuller, 2006). It demeans the Black woman, reducing her to her genitals and an objectified instrument of male gratification, and preaches violent domination of the woman. Moreover, closely related to this is the widespread vulgar character of gangsta and porno rap, rejecting all boundaries under the amoral observation that people want it, and it's "keepin' it real," as if reality, at its lowest level is *all* of reality instead of simply *one aspect* of it. Certainly, values and practices like respect, love, gentleness, caring, and sharing are also real and in most quarters a preferred reality.

Thirdly, gangsta and porno rap are too often violent in a vulgarly individualistic way, pretending strength by symbolically claiming the power to destroy, injure, and maim. Also, such rap is also extremely nihilistic, tending to offer bravado threats to destroy and dominate rather than propose creative or life-affirming ways to relate and interact. Fourthly, these negative forms of rap offer an easy vocabulary and image to stereotype Blacks and give license to racists to use anti-Black images and vocabularies. It is, at this level, the height of self-disrespect and self-mutilation, reducing oneself to mindless, hypersexual and

flesh-focused beings, and calling each other and oneself the “n_” word, the “b_” word, “ho’s,” “nasty,” “freaks,” etc., and which has been categorized as modern-day minstrelsy (Ogbar, 2007).

Also, as mentioned above, negative forms of rap often pretend a *sui generis*, self-generating, origin for rap, dismissing a rich cultural history and drawing generational lines so typical of the dominant society these rappers claim to reject. Finally, some rappers have a tendency to claim a knowledge they do not have, a link with struggle they do not demonstrate, and a political relevance they still must prove. The point is that singing songs is not making revolution nor will it come from one generation or an amorphous and unorganized grouping within a people. It will come from a whole people, united, culturally-rooted, conscious of itself and its oppression, and willing to turn “bad” attitude into outrageous organized revolutionary struggle. In a word, revolutionary political transformation will come from a people who understands and accepts Sekou Toure’s insight and assertion that, “to take part in the African revolution, it is not enough to write a revolutionary song; you must make the revolution with the people. If you make it with the people, the songs will come by themselves and of themselves” (quoted in Fanon, 1968:206). What rap offers, then, is a promise and this promise can only be realized in positive social practice.

The continuing need then is for the cultivation and support of the positive in rap and in every other form of African American music. For, in the final analysis, a people saves itself from social danger and disintegration or there is no hope for it. Moreover, Blacks are for the most part Black artists’ main customers and have the capacity to give or withhold support. Thus, if the records and concerts of negative artists were not bought or attended, raw sex, sexist labeling and assaults on Black women, the reductive translations of love, and other negatives could not survive. And in place of much of the current music which has neither socially or aesthetically redeeming value, a music marked by community and social consciousness and solid aesthetic quality can and will re-emerge, and a rich distinctive Black heritage will be preserved and expanded.

Some writers have raised serious questions about the way hip hoppers or rappers too often conduct themselves, i.e., failing to live up to assumed or real potential and presenting and practicing the negative (Asante, Jr., 2008; Ogbar, 2007; Watkins, 2006; Kitwana, 2002). As Aldridge and Stewart note, any critical analysis of the Hip Hop phenomenon must be balanced, sober, and free from wholesale and unjust condemnation or grandiose claims. The success of such a project, however, will depend upon the revival of the cultural and political spirit and struggles which characterized the Sixties, i.e., a movement. For without a cultural struggle to transform consciousness and the political struggle to acquire control of Black destiny and daily life, neither Black music nor Black lives will be shaped in their own image and interests. On the contrary, they will

be little more than stereotypical, stylized, high-paid packaged performers for the interest of entertainment and enrichment of the established order.



Nommo. The Creative Word



Meryt and Ramose

teacher-priest and the writing board as a loving son. Books of instruction are their pyramids; the reed pen became their child and the stone surfaces on which they wrote became as their wife. The great and small became their children. For as a scribe they became their guide. A person dies, his corpse becomes dust and all his relatives pass away also. But a book causes him to be remembered through the mouths of those who quote it. Better is a book than a well-built house, than a tomb in the West. Indeed, better is a book than a great house with a solid foundation or memorial plaque in the temple. Death might (otherwise) have caused their names to be forgotten, but it is their writings that cause them to be remembered.

In Praise of the Scribe

As for those learned scribes of ancient times who foretold the future, their names have become everlasting even though they have departed having completed the days of their lives...

They did not make for themselves pyramids..they did not know to leave heirs... Instead they made heirs out of the books of instruction which they composed.

Source: p. 84, *The Book of Songs*
Maulana Karenga, (1984) *Selections from the Huma*
Los Angeles: University of Sankore Press

9.4 BLACK LITERATURE

THE EARLY PERIOD I

Black literature is the oldest literature in the world and appears in ancient Egypt in the Nile Valley at least 5000 years ago (Simpson, et al, 2003). Although there was literature in the classical civilizations of the Western Sudan, the Holocaust of enslavement did not allow for the bringing of books and even outlawed writing. Therefore, Black literature in this country does not begin with written aesthetic expressions, but with oral ones (Hill, 1998; Gates and McKay, 1997). Debate still rages on how much oral literature survived from

Africa but every serious writer concedes a significant amount of African retentions (Courlander, 1976; Dorson, 1965). Moreover, as Arna Bontemps and Langston Hughes (1958) noted, in addition to Africanization, there was a parallel process of Americanization which translated as Africans modifying characters and themselves to reflect more accurately their new experience in the U.S. Thus, the African animals - jackal, hare, tortoise and hyena - are translated in an American environment as the fox, rabbit, turtle or terrapin and wolf.

African American folklore is often associated with animal stories like B'rer Rabbit, made familiar to American audiences through Joel Chandler Harris' collection and publication of them in his *Uncle Remus: His Songs and Sayings* and Walt Disney who made them into a movie, *Song of the South*. But as Sterling Brown (1970) contends, it is important to note that there are many more kinds of folklore than the animal stories. Zora Neale Hurston (1935) in her collection, *Mules and Men*, Charles Chestnutt in the *Conjure Woman* (1889), Arthur Huff Fauset, Thomas Talley, and J. Mason Brewer all give an idea of the rich variousness of Black folklore.

From the above, several kinds of folklore emerge: 1) animal stories; 2) legendary hero stories; 3) human trickster stories; 4) exaggeration stories; 5) why stories; and 6) tales of satire. In animal stories, there is the theme of weakness overcoming strength through intelligence, skill and cleverness. B'rer Rabbit, B'rer Squirrel and other small animals outwit the larger slower ones. In legendary men stories, like those of Stagolee, African Americans are posed as defiant and rebellious or in colloquial terms "a bad, crazy 'n_' that don't take no 's_' from nobody, Black or white". In the ones like John Henry, they are posed as beating the White man at his own game, breaking stereotypes and winning against all odds. The human trickster is ol' John that outwits the White man playing on his ego - saying, "I went on the red light cuz the whites were going on the green and I knew then it wasn't for me." The exaggeration stories in Hurston's collections have mosquitos sing like alligators, eat up the cow and then ring the bell for the calf; or a man so fast he shoots at a deer, runs and catches the deer and holds the deer until the bullet hits it. "Why stories" give explanations of the origin of the world, races, division of labor, etc. And tales of satire lampoon the enslaver and White man, in general, who figures or counts with a crooked pencil that "ought's a ought, figger's a figger, all for de white man, none for de 'n_'."

Although blues, spirituals and work songs can be considered folklore also, their treatment in the music section will be considered sufficient. It is important to note here that folklore though originally oral, took on a written form in the works of Charles Chestnutt, Paul Lawrence Dunbar, Earnest Gaines, George Henderson, Langston Hughes, Zora Neal Hurston, Claude McKay, Jean Toomer, Margaret Walker, Sarah Wright, J. Mason Brewer, Arthur Huff Fauset, Thomas Talley, et al.

THE EARLY PERIOD II

A second early period of Black written literature began in 1746 with Lucy Terry's (1730-1821) poem on a Native American raid in Massachusetts which was the first known piece of literature by an African American (Whitlow, 1974:15). After her came Jupiter Hammond, poet and essayist and Phyllis Wheatley, who wrote the first Black book of poems by an African in English, *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral* (1773). Narratives of enslaved Africans by Briton Hamon in 1760 and Oladah Equiano (Gustavus Vassa) in 1789 followed with Equiano's narrative being the most popular and detailed on life in Africa and during enslavement. These early writings are marked by a "redeemed Christian" mentality which is racially self-effacing and apologetic for enslavement, seeing it as God's way of rescuing them from savagery.

THE 1800S

The 1800s marks a third period and the rise of what is commonly called "protest" literature, i.e., the speaking out strongly against the established state of things - enslavement, oppression, exploitation, racism. It is set in the midst of the revolts by enslaved Africans and other forms of resistance like abolitionism. Thus, almost all Black writers who published during this period wrote in the spirit of protest and resistance (Whitlow, 1974:29). George Moses Horton's (1797-1883) *Hope of Liberty*, James Whitefield's *America and Other Poems*, Lucy Delany's *From Darkness Cometh the Light or Struggles for Freedom*, Maria Stewart's *Religion and the Pure Principles of Morality, The Sure Foundation on Which We Must Build*, David Walker's *Appeal*, and Frances Harper's *Poems on Miscellaneous Subjects* all indict the slave system for its injustice and brutality.

Also, in this period autobiographies were written by Frederick Douglass (1817-1895), *Life and Times*, a brilliantly well-written autobiography with strong political content by Harriet Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*; and by William Wells Brown, *The Narrative of William Wells Brown*. Also, Brown wrote three novels and three plays. The first novel *Clotel: or the President's Daughter* was written in 1853 and was the first Black novel. The earliest novel by a Black woman was *Our Nig; or Sketches from the Life of a Free Black* (1859) written by Harriet Wilson. Other novelists were Frank Webb, *The Garies and Their Friends*; Frances Harper, *Iola Leroy*, which criticizes the failure of Reconstruction and the racism which followed; and Martin Delaney, *Blake*. Delaney also wrote a major political work, *The Condition, Elevation, Emigration and Destiny of the Colored People of the United States*. Also included in this period is the classic womanist writing of Anna J. Cooper, *A Voice From the South* (1892).

THE PRE-HARLEM RENAISSANCE PERIOD

The pre-Harlem Renaissance period begins with publication of poetry by one of African America's most gifted poets, Paul Lawrence Dunbar. Dunbar is well-known for his poetry in African American idiom like "When Malindy Sings", "The Antebellum Sermon" and "Keep A Plugging Away". Dunbar also wrote short stories and a novel. His works were, however, consciously unpolitical to accommodate the fact that his main audience was White. The Black middle class was embarrassed by his use of Ebonics instead of English.

Charles Chestnutt is known for his *Conjure Woman and Other Tales*, based on folklore heard in North Carolina and narrated by Uncle Julius, a shrewd African who was formerly enslaved, and now manipulates his employer with these tales. Chestnutt also wrote short stories and three novels. James Weldon Johnson spans two main periods in African American literature. He wrote his novel, *Autobiography of An Ex-Colored Man* in 1912, *God's Trombones*, *Seven Negro Sermons* in verse in 1927, *Black Manhattan*, an excellent study of Black culture in 1930 and his autobiography *Along This Way* in 1933. His poetic sermon "The Creation" is considered a classic. Also Johnson wrote the Black National Anthem, "Lift Every Voice and Sing" along with his brother, John Rosamond Johnson. Ida B. Wells joined literature with political activism, writing essays critical of lynching and racism in general. She is most known for her essays *Southern Horror* and *A Red Record*. W.E.B. DuBois wrote in this period also. In addition to his social and political writings, he wrote five novels and a volume of poetry. His most known piece during this period was his *Souls of Black Folk* in 1903. Finally, Pauline Hopkins wrote four novels and many short stories in this period. Her first novel was *Contending Forces* (1900). She was also founding editor of the *Colored American Magazine*, the first monthly magazine dedicated to African American art and literature, with a readership extending to China, Hawaii, Manila and the West Indies (Carby, 1987:125ff).

THE HARLEM RENAISSANCE

The Harlem Renaissance was one of Black writers' most prolific period (Bontemps, 1972; Huggins, 1979; Wall, 1995; Watson, 1995). It was a time when Harlem became the capital of Black America (Schoener, 1995); Blacks looked to their African roots for revitalization; Marcus Garvey issued the call for Black pride and power and the rescue and reconstruction of Africa (Garvey, 1977); and Alain Locke (1969), the main interpreter of the Renaissance, announced the coming into being of the "New Negro". In fact, Garvey's and Locke's influence on the Harlem Renaissance cannot be overestimated. Garvey's ideological and political push for respect, African heritage and race

pride, coincided with Locke's stress on the need for examination and use of the African ancestral legacy. And although Garvey was misunderstood and often maligned by the writers of this period, it is safe to assume he and his movement are significantly responsible for their stress on Black culture and consciousness (Martin, 1983).

Locke's *The New Negro* is a classic and his most known work, but he wrote and edited other works on Black culture, i.e., *Four Negro Poets*, *The Negro in Art*, and *The Negro and His Music*. Claude McKay was one of the most militant writers of the Renaissance. His "If We Must Die" in 1917 which calls for Blacks not to die like dogs but fight the "murderous cowardly pack" is definitive and is considered by some to be the beginning of the Renaissance. His *Home to Harlem* is also well-known. Jean Toomer's *Cane*, a collection of prose and poems; Countee Cullen's collection of poems, *Cooper Sun*; Nella Larsen's novel *Quicksand*; and Langston Hughes classic poem, "The Negro Speaks of Rivers", his dozen books of poetry and two autobiographies, *The Big Sea* and *I Wonder as I Wander*, stand out as definitive of the period. Also included in this period is Jessie Fauset's *There is Confusion* and *Plum Bun*. Later, she would also write *The Chinaberry Tree* and *Comedy American Style*.

The Depression of 1912 marked the slowing of the prolific writing of the Renaissance. New writers emerged such as Zora Neal Hurston, *Mules and Men* (folktales), three novels and a satire on America race relations, *Jonah's Gourd Vine*, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, *Tell My Horse*, *Moses, Man of the Mountain* and *Dust Tracks on a Road* (autobiography); and Arna Bontemps' three novels, *Black Thunder*, *Drums at Dusk* and *God Sends Sunday*.

In the period of 1940-1960, Richard Wright stands out as a giant with his classic novel *Native Son* and his autobiography *Black Boy*. He established a school of writing called Urban Realism, a rough unadorned exposure and critical depiction of urban Black life. Among the writers who were included in this school were Chester Himes, *If He Hollers Let Him Go*, and Ann Petry, *The Street*. Ralph Ellison's work *Invisible Man* (1952) is another Black classic in which he poses Blacks as invisible in a racist society and in search of a solid identity. James Baldwin is a multitalented essayist, novelist and playwright of this period. Among his works are the novel, *Go Tell It On the Mountain* (1953); an essay, *The Fire Next Time* (1963); a play, *The Amen Corner* (1967); and his novel *Just Above My Head* (1982).

Gwendolyn Brooks emerged in this period also. She was obviously one of the most gifted poets in the U.S., having won the Pulitzer Prize for Poetry for her collection *Annie Allen* in 1940. She was the first Black to receive the award. Moreover, she wrote *Maud Martha*. Margaret Walker is known for her classic poem "For My People" and her novel *Jubilee*. Her poem, written in free verse, is a praise poem to the life, struggle, adaptive vitality, durability, strength

and achievement of Blacks. It is also a call for struggle and a new social order. Robert Hayden has published five volumes of poems, among which are *A Ballad of Remembrance* and *Words in the Mourning Time*. Lorraine Hansberry's play, "A Raisin in the Sun", was a successful Broadway production and marked a high point in critical achievement and recognition for Black drama.

THE SIXTIES *Decade*

The Sixties is considered by many a Second Black Renaissance (Biggsby, 1979). It produced and was produced by both literary and political diversity and multiplicity. It was, as argued in chapter 4, Blacks' most significant decade in terms of self-conscious goals and achievements. The Harlem Renaissance was, in part, fostered by White patrons and declined with their withdrawal after the Crash of 1929. But the Sixties was self-generating, self-determining and self-sustaining. Its literary personalities are often known in political as well as literary circles, for the decade demanded a merging of the political and the literary. Larry Neal, Askia M. Toure, Ishmael Reed, Amiri Baraka, Sonia Sanchez, Nikki Giovanni, Mari Evans, Etheridge Knight, A.B. Spellman, Johari Amini, June Jordan, Quincy Troupe, Lucille Clifton, Stanley Crouch, Joe Goncalves (Dingaam), Carolyn Rodgers, Yusef Iman, Ed Bullins, James Randall, Stephany, Conrad Rivers, Eugene Redman, Haki Madhubuti and Kalamu ya Salaam are but a few examples of Black socially conscious writers (Randall, 1971). Many of the above wrote poetry, drama and prose.

Definitive of this period are Sonia Sanchez's *We a BaddDDD People*; Amiri Baraka's *Black Magic Poetry* 1961-67 and *Four Revolutionary Plays*; Johari Amini's *Black Essence*; Haki Madhubuti's *We Walk The Way of the New World*; June Jordan's *Who Look at Me*; Ishmael Reed's *Yellow Back Radio Broke-Down*; Ed Bullins *New Plays From the Black Theatre*; Larry Neal's and Leroi Jones' (Baraka) *Black Fire*; Mari Evans' *I'm A Black Woman*; Etheridge Knight's *Poems from Prison*; Nikki Giovanni's *Black Feeling Black Talk*; and John Williams' *The Man Who Cried I Am*.

THE SEVENTIES *durability under stress*

The Seventies saw the emergence of Alice Walker whose credits include novels, *Meridian*, poetry, *Revolutionary Petunia*, and short stories, *In Love and In Struggle*; novelists Toni Morrison who had then written four novels and whose *Song of Solomon* won the Best Novel of the Year Award in 1977; and a long list of Black poetesses and poets which have published in the Black literature issues of the *Black Scholar*, '71, '75, '78 and '81. Notable also are the poetry of Sonia Sanchez, *I've Been A Woman*, Mari Evan's *Night Star*; Lucille Clifton's *Ordinary*

Woman; Roseann P. Bell's, Bettye S. Parker's and Beverly Guy-Sheftalls, *Sturdy Black Bridges: Visions of Black Women in Literature*; Gwen Brooks' anthology of new Chicago poets, *Jump Bad*; Maya Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*; Kalamu ya Salaam's *Revolutionary Love*; and Eugene Redmond's *Drum Voices: The Mission of African American Poetry*.

Although these writings do not have the self-conscious urgency and fire of the 60s, they, nevertheless, like the literature of the 60s and other periods, speak the truth of Black people, i.e., their hopes, aspirations, love and constant struggle to have a full and free life. Thus, by teaching beauty in the midst of ugliness and strength and durability under stress and strain, they inspire and teach possibilities which, as argued at the outset, it is the fundamental function of African American literature.

THE EIGHTIES AND NINETIES

Literature in the 80s and 90s is marked by several distinguishing features. The first of these is the overwhelming predominance of works by and about Black women. This surge begins in the 70s and reaches its height in the 80s. In the 80s this process seemed to be defined by Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* (1982) which won a Pulitzer Prize and initiated a rather passionate discourse which ran the gamut of topics from the quality of Black male-female relations to the political use of the book by the dominant society to indict the Black community and reaffirm its racist conceptions and practices. Drawing both avid supporters and critics, the book nevertheless was a kind of literary omen of both the predominant women-focused character of the coming literature and the larger society's interest in or preference for publishing it (Nunez and Green, 1999; Sandi, 1998; Gates, 1998; Roses, 1997).

Other notable works were Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987) which also received a Pulitzer Prize; Gloria Naylor's *Women of Brewster Place* (1982), Ntozake Shange's *Betsy Brown* (1985); Paule Marshall's *Praise Song for the Widow* (1983); Sonia Sanchez's *Home Girls and Hand Grenades* (1984), *Under a Soprano Sky* (1987), *Wounded in the House of a Friend* (1995) and *Shake Loose My Skin* (1999); June Jordan's *Passion: New Poems, 1977-1980* (1980) and *Living Room: New Poems 1980-1984* (1985); Audre Lorde's *Chosen Poems: Old and New* (1982) and *Our Dead Behind Us* (1986); Sherley Anne Williams *Dessa Rose* (1986); Maya Angelou's *All of God's Children Need Travelling Shoes* (1986), *The Heart Of A Woman* (1987), and *A Brave And Startling Truth* (1995); and Rita Dove's *The Yellow House on the Corner* and *Thomas and Beulah* (1986) for which she won a Pulitzer Prize and became the only Black woman since Gwendolyn Brooks' award to win the Pulitzer Prize for Poetry. Pearl Cleage's *Looking Like Crazy One Sunday Morning* and Lucille Clifton's *Good Woman*

(1987) and *Blessing the Boats* (2000) for which she received the National Book Award. Certainly notable also is Henry Louis Gates, Jr.'s editing of the *Schomburg Library of Nineteenth Century Black Women Writers* (1988), a thirty-volume set of prominent texts by Black women from 1890-1910.

Finally, among women writers of this period, no one emerged as quickly and distinctively as Terry McMillan. Her *Waiting to Exhale* became both a tremendous commercial success and a major literary achievement which, while resembling other major women writers' approach, differed in significant ways. First, McMillan, although critical of Black male-female relations as Walker, Naylor, Shange, et al, nevertheless maintained an open-textured posture toward reconciliation and reconstruction. Secondly, her women characters were more self-critical and her criticism of Black men appeared more as a challenge to them to self-correct than a condemnation. Thirdly, she writes in a popular style and thus created a mass reading audience which differed from the academic style and audience many other Black women writers cultivated.

Black men continued to write, of course, but were less prominent and less published, causing some authors and critics to suggest the publishing industry was both interested in and hostile to works by and about Black men. Nevertheless, important works by Black men did emerge. Among these were John Edgar Wideman's *Brothers and Keepers* (1984); August Wilson's *Fences* (1985) for which he won a Pulitzer Prize and *The Piano Lesson* (1990); Ishmael Reed's *Reckless Eyeballing* (1986), *Airing Dirty Laundry* (1993) and *The Reed Reader* (2000); Henry Dumas' *Goodbye Sweetwater* (1988); Jay Wright's *The Double Invention of Komo* (1980); Haki Madhubuti's *Earthquakes and Sunrise Missions* (1984), *Killing Memory*, *Seeking Ancestors* (1987), *Say that the River Turns: The Impact of Gwendolyn Brooks* (1987), *Groundwork* (1996) and *Heartlove* (1998); Etheridge Knight's *Born of a Woman: New and Selected Poems* (1980), and Walter Mosely's *Devil in a Blue Dress* (1997) and *Black Betty* (1997). Worthy of note also are the anthologies by Terry McMillan, *Breaking Ice* (1990); Henry Louis Gates, Jr. *Reading Black, Reading Feminist* (1990); and Frank McGill, *Master Plots of African American Literature* (1992); Henry Louis Gates and Nellie McKay, *Norton Anthology of African American Literature* (1997); and Patricia Higgin Hill, *Call and Response, The Riverside Anthology of the Afro-American Literary Tradition* (1998).

A second defining characteristic of the Eighties and early Nineties is the continuing expansion of African American literary criticism. This includes both a general criticism as well as a specific womanist or Black woman's criticism. Among works in this genre are: Mari Evans' *Black Women Writers: A Critical Introduction* (1984); Gloria Wade-Gayles' *No Crystal Stair: Visions of Race and Sex in Black Women's Fiction* (1984); Barbara Christian's *Black Feminist Criticism: Perspectives on Black Women Writers* (1985); Hazel Carby's

Always the focal point of story

Reconstructing Womanhood: The Emergence of the Afro-American Woman Novelist (1987); Henry Louis Gates, Jr.'s *Figures in Black: Words, Signs and the 'Racial' Self* (1987) and *Loose Cannons: Notes on Cultural Wars* (1992); Charles Johnson's *Being and Race: Black Writing Since the 1970s* (1988); Houston Baker, Jr.'s and Patricia Redmond's *Afro-American Literary Study in the 1990s* (1989); Fred Lee Hord's *Reconstructing Memory: Black Literary Criticism* (1991); Houston Baker Jr.'s, *Workings of the Spirit: The Poetics of Afro-American Women's Writing* (1991); and Toni Morrison's *Playing in the Dark* (1992).

A third feature of the writing of this period, which has continued in varied forms, is a tendency for the authors to distance themselves from the long literary tradition of social engagement as a member of the African American community. This problematic distancing is achieved in several ways. First, there is a tendency to privilege the vaguely universal and human at the expense of the particular and the African. This is done first in the spirit and language of deconstructionism with critiques of racial essentialism and calls for focus on the specificity of the texts which is supposed to "reveal a depth and range of culture details far beyond the economic exploitation of Blacks by Whites" (Gates, 1992:101). From these "close readings of the text," it is argued, "one learns to invent oneself and the other and rejects the preconstituted racial self." For Gates (1992:151) the project of the new generation of writers "is about affinities, unburdened by an ideology of descent; it speaks about blackness without blood" and sees race as a trope, i.e., a mere problem-atic figure of speech.

A second mode of distancing and creating what Trey Ellis calls "a new Black aesthetic" is to privilege gender over racial or ethnic concerns. Such a posture while giving necessary voice to Black women can and often does treat gender concerns as exclusive of and often hostile to ethnic concerns. In fact, appeals to ethnicity are often seen as ways to stifle women voices and equate the race with men, as an important text states in its title, *All the Women are White, All the Blacks are Men, But Some of Us are Brave* (Hull, Scott and Smith, 1982). And as Deborah McDowell (1989:59) contends, focus on race "is often almost tantamount to focus on maleness." Thus, she advocates a women's literature free from race conscious concerns and transcending social and linguistic boundaries. It is important to note that all women writers do not separate race and gender struggle, but those who do, contribute to the transformation of the tradition of engaged literature.

A third way of distancing from the historical tradition of an engaged Black literature is to declare literature and text exempt from the burden of history and community and essentially an individual author's context for invention and reinvention of self, a self no longer "shocked," "surprised" or "enraged" by racism as Trey Ellis states (McMillan, 1990:xxi). Self-focus is privileged here over

collective concerns or self-in-community. For these writers, speaking deconstructionist language, the self is fluid, ambiguous, contradictory and hardly a candidate for the unchanging essence of race or ethnicity. Loyalties and relationships to various social groups are ambiguous, complex and constantly shifting. What is key, then, is not the community or group, but "self."

Deborah E. McDowell (1989:55) notes that "... Afro-American literary criticism has finally seen the beginnings of a paradigm shift, one that has extended the boundaries and altered the terms of inquiry." She goes on to say that "falling in step with recent developments in contemporary critical theory, some critics of Afro-American literature have usefully complicated some of our most common assumptions about self, and about race as a meaningful category in literary study and critical theory." This paradigm shift, of course, is not only in literary criticism, but also in the literature itself. And thus, "self," in the making and constantly in transition and contradiction, becomes the replacement for the person-in-community, and one who is socially conscious and committed to liberation and a higher level of human life. According to this argument, the focus on struggle is limited and limiting. Indeed, the self must have no boundaries, no fixed identities and thus cannot be concerned with defense of cultural borders it does not recognize, nor with ethnic loyalties it does not feel compelled to maintain.

A final development in the literature of the 80s and early 90s is the assumption of a relevance for literature equal or even superior to social science in understanding the Black experience. Many writers and their supporters have argued that literature can and often does yield a more accurate portrait of Black life than the social sciences. Such a claim can best be seen in the discourse around *The Color Purple* which became a text that, for many, offered a more accurate assessment of the Black family than the works of sociologists such as Harriet McAdoo, Nathan and Julia Hare, Robert Staples, Andrew Billingsley et al.

Moreover, in major universities this same text becomes for various interrelated reasons, the central text to explain Black culture and history in multicultural classes. Thus literature, even as fiction and personal imagination, is used as an alternative to a social scientific understanding of Black life rather than as a contribution to a holistic understanding of it. In other words, personal subjectivity is privileged over social science study and a novel or short story becomes the most important and, at times, only way one understands Black life.

This privileging of literature over social science data takes place in a context where humanities discourse in general becomes more important and frequent than discussion of real life. In such a context of privileging humanities, history is reduced to a Rap song, relationships to imaginative revelations of a novel or short story, and the complexity and achievement of a world historical man reduced to the banality of a comedic movie. This is clearly a

problematic deserving a creative solution. For although one can easily concede the importance of literature to life, given its personal and subjective character, it cannot serve as an alternative to an objective study of life nor as a substitute for the social struggle to enrich and expand it. A sociology of this problematic development suggests that its life and tenure fit well within the interests and ideology of the established order. For emphasis on the personal at the expense of the social, and discussion of literature rather than its source, i.e., concrete life, is less likely to pose a threat to the existing social power and wealth relations. In fact, such discourse is by its own definition detached from its social source, and instead rooted and developed essentially in and through the text itself. Such a discourse, then, is not a social analysis but rather the imaginative product of authors and audiences constantly reinventing themselves in the context of ambiguity, contradiction and shifting loyalties.

In such a context, art is no longer a reflection of life, it becomes its surrogate or substitute. And discourse on literature becomes a myth of social action relieving its participants of the responsibility of seeking social solutions. In their place one seeks personal understanding and personal gratification. The point, therefore, is not to heal the world, but to heal oneself, not to concern oneself with the issues of human flourishing in community but of personal expansion and enjoyment in the context of shifting loyalties and ambiguous and contradictory callings.

The problematic posed by such a paradigm shift in African American literature is clearly one worthy and demanding of further discourse. It is, thus, posed here to provoke and expand the discussion, not to close or avoid it. It is important to note here that some Black Studies scholars have critically engaged this issue. Cristel N. Temple (2005) responds directly to this author's critique. She argues that the solution lies in recapturing the historical role in literature, both fiction and non-fiction, so that it does not replace or compete with social science, but rather complements it in creating a holistic conception, curriculum and pedagogy of Black Studies.

Among the numerous specific solutions she (2005:782) proposes are "a socioliterary enterprise" which "uses literature as a catalyst to inspire solution-seeking discourse in a Black Studies classroom." Moreover, she (Ibid:783) proposes greater stress on comparative literature, especially in a pan-African initiative in which students are "systematically guided in exploring the collective African world experience using literary texts." And she has produced a volume which exemplifies this proposed initiative (Temple, 2007). None of this is to detract from the enjoyment of literature as literature. It is to enhance its enjoyment, not simply as entertainment, but rather as another field of engagement in understanding and appreciating the Black initiative and experience and engaging that lived experience in expansive and transformative ways.

THE NEW CENTURY

The first decade of the new century saw a reduction of the massive publications of the 1980s and 1990s. Moreover, there was a tendency to publish, discuss and teach classics in Black literature rather than focus on new literature as in the past. Still, there was an abundance of literature and more than can be discussed in this framework. However, two authors stand out in terms of both creativity and continued productivity, and define the beginning decade: Toni Morrison and August Wilson.

Toni Morrison, clearly one of the world's greatest writers and winner of numerous awards including the Nobel Prize for Literature (1993), continued to write fiction and non-fiction and win awards in the new century. Her books in the first decade of the new century were: *Remember: The Journey to School Integration* (2004) (Blue Ribbon Non-Fiction Award); *Burn This Book*, (ed.) (2004); *Jazz* (2004); *Love: A Novel* (2005); and *A Mercy* (2008). Morrison also was awarded the National Humanities Award (2000) for "deepening the nation's understanding of the humanities and broadening citizens' engagement with the humanities." And she was listed in *100 Greatest African Americans* by Molefi Asante, professor of African American Studies, Temple University and theoretical architect of Afrocentricity (Asante, 2007, 1998).

August Wilson, who is, likewise, one of the greatest playwrights of all times, finished his life's work a short time before he made transition in 2005. He had wanted to finish and did complete writing of a set of 10 plays which dramatized African American life and history in the 20th century for each decade. This extraordinary life work was published in its entirety for the first time in a single set titled, *August Wilson's Century Cycle* (2007). These 10 plays, the decade they are set in, and the year Wilson wrote them are: 1900s, *Gem of the Ocean* (2003); 1910s, *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* (1988); 1920s, *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* set in Chicago, (1984); 1930s, *The Piano Lesson* (1990), Pulitzer Prize; 1940s, *Seven Guitars* (1995); 1950s, *Fences* (1987), Pulitzer Prize; 1960s, *Two Trains Running* (1991); 1970s, *Jitney* (1982); 1980s, *King Hedley II* (1999); and 1990s, *Radio Golf* (2005).

All but one of these plays were set in the Hill District of Pittsburgh where he grew up. There, in Pittsburgh, he had worked with his friend and fellow playwright, Oba Rob Penny, to build a theatre and both were influenced by Kawaida philosophy which informed Wilson's concept of the Black aesthetic as he recounted in interviews (Bryer and Hartig, 2006: 57, 73-4, 97-8). In an article in the *New York Times*, April 23, 2000 and reprinted in his *Century Cycle*, August Wilson reaffirms the Black Aesthetic that was essential in the 1960s and discussed above. He says:

Art is beholden to the kiln in which the artist was fired. Before I'm anything, a man, or a playwright, I am an African American. . . . The cycle of plays that I have been writing since 1979 is my attempt to represent that culture on stage in all its richness and fullness and to demonstrate its ability to sustain us in all areas of human life and endeavor and through profound moments of our history in which the larger society has thought less of us than we have thought of ourselves.

Indeed, it is this conception of the Black Aesthetic which gave his work its cultural grounding and creative expansiveness.

KEY TERMS

African retentions
art
Black Aesthetic
Black art

committed-art school
detached-art school
Harlem Renaissance

STUDY QUESTIONS

1. What is art?
2. Give examples of African art retentions.
3. Discuss the artists of the Harlem Renaissance period and of the 40s.
4. Discuss some of the main Black women artists.
5. What are the main themes of Black art in the 60s and 70s?
6. What are three basic approaches to interpretations of the spirituals?
7. Discuss the multidimensionality of the blues as a reflection of the Black experience.
8. Discuss the origin of gospel and ragtime and some of the pioneers.
9. Discuss the evolution of jazz and the different styles.
10. What are the origins of rhythm and blues and the problems it poses?
11. Discuss fundamental developments in the literature of the 80s and 90s.

12. What are the several forms of African American folklore?
13. Discuss the evolution of African American literature from narratives through the 70s including themes and focus.

CRITICAL THINKING QUESTIONS

1. Define and discuss the Black aesthetic. What are the two schools which developed around the issue? Discuss their views. What is your opinion on this?
2. What is the Kawaida social criteria for art? Discuss the three criteria. What do you think about this criteria?
3. Discuss the early relevance of rap. What are some of its problematic aspects? How do you assess its strong points and problems?
4. What are some basic aspects of the new aesthetic among some African American writers? How does it relate to the concept of Blackness? How does it understand itself in relationship to social science? What is your opinion of this?