

Freedom Gaze: Explicating the African Freedom Aesthetic

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“First we must define the terms 'noun' and 'verb', then the terms 'denial' and 'affirmation', then 'proposition' and 'sentence.’”(Aristotle, 115)

“Spoken words are the symbols of mental experience and written words are the symbols of spoken words. Just as all men have not the same writing, so all men have not the same speech sounds, but the mental experiences, which these directly symbolize, are the same for all, as also are those things of which our experiences are the images. This matter has, however, been discussed in my treatise about the soul, for it belongs to an investigation distinct from that which lies before us.” (Aristotle, 115)

Signs, symbols, experiences and frameworks, this is how humans perceive the world. Attempts to describe or express the meaning of a perceived moment of experience can be affected by many factors, inclusive of displacement. The attempts or products of what gets perceived is known as the aesthetic or at least what gets perceived is perceived through the aesthetic, but, what does it mean to perceive or what is perception and why don't we all perceive experiences the same? Beyond what is perception, what causes a change or shift in an aesthetic? It is the plan of this paper, first, to define perception with some amount of certainty and secondly, to determine how some events shape perception such that entities that are called cultures get created. Finally, with this groundwork set and the connection firmly established between perception and aesthetic, I will argue that there exist an African Freedom Aesthetic among Africans in the diaspora that is demonstrable in creative productions, using African Americans as the foremost exemplar culture of this phenomenon through an examination of specific linguistic signs and

symbols that evidence this particular aesthetic. I will also show why I think this aesthetic to be foundational to any attempt to explicate what is African American Philosophy.

To truly philosophize in earnest, by my understanding, is to create separation, which simply means to identify a thing or phenomenon. Next the entity must be interpreted and then it follows that it is represented or communicated to the phenomenal world. We do this first through conception, next through the releasing of air in order to make noises we call verbal symbols or words, lastly through markings or written symbols. All of this is contingent upon spatial-temporal dynamics and is always contextualized accordingly. This contextualization or the filtering of phenomena through our appetites and aversions, while giving consideration to time and space, is the making of perception. So as the Greek word *αισθησις* means sensation, consciousness, knowledge, or perception, then aesthetics is the science or study of perception. (Heidegger, 5) Therefore, as it is given that all philosophers base their philosophizing on some foundational assumption, and I believe it good to make that assumption known and not keep it hidden from your audience. This research, as well as my previous philosophizing is grounded in the basic assumption that to separate, interpret, and represent an experience or phenomena to others, with the greatest amount of clarity, it is necessary to begin with the study of the aesthetic. This is because, as suggested earlier, in different spaces, under different conditions, and among different people, the world is seen very differently.

Blackness in the American context is one such condition, in which to truly communicate its meaning to others, we must tease out its differences creating the ability

to discuss it as a particular, rather than attempting an understanding of blackness in general. Some use a Marxist epistemological framework to form their analysis of what is blackness, however this type of analysis does not capture the full scope of blackness. (Ferguson, 7) While narrowly focused on the metaphysics of the conditions in which African American find themselves, this type of analysis seems to miss the phenomenon of blackness and therefore fails to give an accurate account for the subjective actions and reactions to the American experiential moment. (Neal, 35) In order to get at the particular of the variegated of nature blackness, some attempt to perform a separation must occur. This separation is performed by categorizing or defining exactly what is meant by blackness in the American context. Of course, blackness in this respect is understood to mean African American, but has in the past been referred to as Negro and by the pejorative Nigger. Its defining characteristics have at times been arbitrarily ascribed to say the least, but they can range from skin color and hair type to having one black relative, regardless of how distant. The meaning of blackness has been permanently and ironically predicated as black in the negative connotation of black, which can be understood as not white and therefore not deserving of whatever is considered normative treatment to humans. This description may seem illogical, but it is meant to demonstrate a clear vision of black existence in the American moment. Representations of blackness, by others, whether in the arts or letters, has mainly to do with the accentuation of differences to insure the separation between ethnic groups, which maintains an illogical and precarious status for blacks, one that assures devaluation. (Davis, 12)

Blackness, as constructed in this way of being, in this experiential/aesthetic moment has formed the perception for those beings, which can be considered to inhabit such an existence. This is to say, blackness is at once a sign of death, a symbol of depravity, an experience of oppression, and a framework for struggle, while also acting as veil behind which exists a multiplicity of accurate expressions of life.(Bergson, 85) As humans, our epistemological foundation for all knowledge is always subject to our perception and moment of existence. Moment is yet the largest determinant of a people or community's perception. Moment, although usually connected to time only, is in this research referring to the relationship of space and time in the creation of culture and culture's relationship to the general thought process of a people, which is significant in the shaping of perceptions. A person's ability to be conscious, the degree to which they are conscious, and whatever the aim of their consciousness, it is a direct reflection and is also dependent upon the time and space in which they exist.(Heidegger, 35) I will call this phenomenon the experiential moment. A working definition of experiential moment arises from the concept of the lived experience, which I take to mean a phenomenological account of an individual's or group's reality. The experiential moment deepens this description by attempting to account for those significant experiences which have charted or changed an individual's or group's lived experience in a substantial way such that their consciousness is also effected, i.e. race, slavery, war.

Conscious always means conscious of a particular phenomena.(35) In this sense, there is always a conscious aim. In my earlier work, consciousness is defined as awareness intentionally focused on a physical object or mental creation that is

subjectively understood.(Neal, 2) The phrase “subjectively understood” is pivotal in that it gives credence and method to the more thorough meaning, from earlier of perception. This definition demonstrates a level of contingency inherent in the concept of consciousness. It is a contingency based upon the perception of the subject as the subject participates in a subject/object relationship with the aim of consciousness. In this way, the perception or gaze now becomes a type of dialectic relationship, in that the cognition of what is now synthesized depends on the perceiver as well as that which is being perceived in this experiential moment. To put it plainly, as it pertains to black people, black people see white people and they see how white people respond upon seeing black people. Black people see the structures or institutions in this society and the responsiveness of the institutions towards black people. The African Freedom Aesthetic is in direct response to this dialectical relationship of this experiential moment. It is when this dialectical relationship is trivialized or ignored that mischaracterizations occur. These mischaracterizations are grounded in wrongful historical idealizations and thwart any enterprise concerned with a true understanding of a particular people within a particular experiential moment.

In this experiential moment, even when blackness is not viewed as a type of deprived of existence, it is mostly viewed as other, even by blacks. This is to say blackness is viewed as the antithesis of normative or human. When trying to gain an understanding of the self as the self or as normal in a world where the perception of your particular existence is mostly other, there can certainly be confusion. Over the centuries, this continuous illogical state has been a factor in the causation of a differing aesthetic.

However, I think it necessary to state that it is not the black body, which is illogical regardless of how it is perceived, because existence only is. Perceptions, conceptions, and the subsequent correlative descriptions can be logical or illogical, but being cannot participate in this sort of word play. As being is concerned, if it can be accepted that being is not static, but is always in transition, and this transition is affected by experience, then experiential moments become critical to the understanding of being, so that in order to give a proximally accurate depiction of being in a given moment, then the particular being plus all available experiences must be considered. This is necessarily true of the individual as the particular and it is also necessarily true of the group, as the group becomes the individual or one when under observation. Plessy v. Ferguson (1896) is an example of a significant experience which changed the lived experience for African Americans in a substantial way such that their consciousness was also effected, for this is the court decision which made legal the concept of separate but equal.(Hartman, 9) This decision went beyond class in an economic sense, having such a broad ranging effect as to determine everything from your birth place to where you could be buried. It determined nutritional intake, genetic makeup(based upon procreation partners), religious practices, intellectual pursuits, the scope of ethical behavior, and it also determined life, liberty and the very pursuit of happiness. Whites could basically define the limits of freedom for themselves and for everyone else, usually reserving the strictest definitions for those with African ancestry. It was in this experiential moment that the black perception of blackness was formed.(10) It was a perception formed of a distant African past, the rejection of a not so distant past in captivity, and an immediate present defined

by a struggle to teach the meaning of humanity through the development of a human community, in spite of being denied its benefits.(Scott, 75)

It can be said that this particular usage of experiential moment can be equivocated with a conceptualization of epoch or milieu. For this reason, it lends itself to a consideration of the horizontal temporal-spatial existence, while capturing a phenomenological and even processual interpretation in the performance of this hermeneutic of experience. To this end, any analysis of blackness must, of course, be emic in nature, bearing in mind that the experience of blackness in the American moment is particular. However, the interpretation and representation of this experience must also consider the African Freedom Aesthetic. From a phenomenological perspective African Americans must not be taken as object, but instead as subject with a particular intentionality just as other groups. As such, and giving consideration to the African Freedom Aesthetic, the realization of the difference between blackness and black people should be viewed in a similar manner as the thing as seen or as it appears held in tension with the assumption there exists a thing in itself. Sometimes the two are mutually aimed but in most cases they are not and they should never be taken as one to one. An example of this can be found in the well-known poem “We Wear the Mask,” by Paul Lawrence Dunbar.(Black, 387)

We wear the mask that grins and lies,
It hides our cheeks and shades our eyes,—
 This debt we pay to human guile;
With torn and bleeding hearts we smile,
 And mouth with myriad subtleties.

Why should the world be over-wise,

In counting all our tears and sighs?
 Nay, let them only see us, while
 We wear the mask.

We smile, but, O great Christ, our cries
 To thee from tortured souls arise.
 We sing, but oh the clay is vile
 Beneath our feet, and long the mile;
 But let the world dream otherwise,
 We wear the mask!

Daniel Black, Professor of African American Studies at Clark Atlanta University,
 Describes this poem as a primer for reading early black literature such as the poetry of
 Phyllis Wheatley.(387)

The African American Freedom Aesthetic is also affected by the fusion of
 horizons. Black people in the American moment cannot exist wholly apart from others
 with an ahistorical outlook unaffected by the cultural immersions of their times. In this
 American moment, black people have developed music, literature, and systems of
 spiritual formation. However, all of these developments were influenced to some degree
 by surrounding cultures. To be sure even under tremendously adverse conditions, African
 Americans were able to apprehend(Whitehead, 32) positive experiences useful to their aim
 such that they participated in their own forward development or autopoieses.(32) The
 many rebellions, attempts at revolution, and engagements in wars go a long ways towards
 demonstrating that regardless of the plight, African Americans did not see themselves as a
 determined or predestined people for the oppression they encountered.(Thurman, 39)

So what brings about this work and what makes it necessary to put forth this
 description of aesthetics? Most of my work is enveloped in the philosophical quest to

understand blackness in the American context for the purpose of determining just what can be called an African American Philosophy and as such I am concerned with the methods of just how such a study should be performed. Since I am not the first to make this attempt, I have given large amounts of time to the consideration of others who have also made this journey. For the sake of time and space, I will certainly not outline all of the attempts to create an African American Philosophy, but I will discuss the attempt I find to be most problematic. Before doing so, I would like to expose the three schools of thought pertaining to African American Philosophy and their problems(Gordon, 91):

1. African Americans doing Philosophy is African American Philosophy
2. Any philosopher of race focusing on the nature of the black experience, whether analytic/continental in method, with the aim of offering correctives to bring about eudaimonia. It is mostly political in nature.
3. Constructive or Corrective philosophy, which rejects Eurocentric schools of thought as normative and focuses on what would be African American philosophy if not for slavery.

It is the 3rd school, which I find to be most problematic, especially as far as my research is concerned. This group is most problematic because it is necessary for this group's philosophy to put forth a theory of what is the meaning of blackness in the context of America. Within this group are those Afrocentric theorists whose foundational assumption is based upon what is called Location Theory and they also maintain that there is an essential nature to being black.(Welsh-Asante, 53) Without explicating the details of this theoretical framework, suffice to say if it is maintained that there is an

essential nature to being black, then any understanding of the connection that time and space might impose upon any displaced community is negated, particularly for the African American community.

Why does this matter? Its importance is rooted conceptually in the foundational questions of African American Philosophy beginning with, “what does it mean to be black?.” This question loses significance if at anytime a group of black people appears in history we can simply refer to them as African. To do so would allow us to make certain assumptions about what it means to be African and that the term African applied in such a way does work in the application, such as provide a basic understanding of the culture of the group to which it is applied. This is simply not so. So then the basic question must be improved to determine what does it mean to be black, in America? If by this addition, the question applied to the group adds clarity because of the spatial temporal relationship then either the two groups are not the same, or better even there is no transcendent essential nature to being black. Blackness in the American context is shaped by the American context and is different in significant ways from blackness in the African context, although I would admit that there are significant similarities, but to speak of them as if there are no significant differences reduces any claims of the effects of slavery and oppression. A more accurate and efficient way to consider the connection of Africans proper to Africans in the diaspora, particular those in the diaspora is to use the mathematical analogy of multiplicity, with discreet multiplicity vs. continuous multiplicity. In the essentialist way of thinking, being an African represents a continuous multiplicity with only a qualitative difference in successive event. Each qualitative

differentiation represents only a symbolic difference, such as the difference between an individual at age 20 and the same individual at 40. In this scenario there would exist a steady stream of consciousness with only qualitative difference. However, with a discreet multiplicity, there is quantitative differentiation. Instead of thinking of the same person at a progressive age in life, the example here would be a particular and their offspring. Whereas the difference in the former example was irreducible to number, in the later example the difference is numerical. The multiplicities in this example can share the same time but not the same space. The first example, only the space can be shared but not the same time.

This is why I must refer to the American moment which approximates a time and also clearly identifies a space. It was the American moment that was causal in a particular consciousness, the African Freedom Aesthetic as the main lens of African American Philosophy. African American philosophy is distinguished from other genres of philosophy by society's objectification of its main subject of discourse, which is the black body. In other words, African American philosophy is necessarily humanistic in its discourse and as a field of inquiry because of the requisite goal it has in the reclamation of human status for black bodies. In many ways African American philosophy was set in motion, just as Greek philosophy, in its rejection of the previous worldview and/or perceptual frameworks. The relevance of African American philosophy is derived from the context of enslavement. While other groups certainly were enslaved in the Americas in addition to Africans, it was the freedom struggle of those people of African descent

that in many ways shaped the freedoms that all Americans enjoy through a prolonged social movement, not all Africans, but particularly those in the American diaspora.

How then does one do African American philosophy, in other words who can and is doing African American philosophy? This is simple! Anyone can do African American philosophy, but there should be some distinction made between studying African American philosophy (i.e. the writings of any African American philosopher) and doing African American philosophy, however this is a major bone of contention among philosophers who are drawn to this discourse. I am contending that African American philosophy must have as a central concern the conflict between the lived experience of oppression and the desired experience of freedom. African American philosophy must toil with the variance between normative experience equated with humanity or whiteness and black experience, which was thought to lack human essence. It must be suspicious of blind patriotism just as it should be suspicious of any type of blind faith. The questions and issues of African American philosophy are not limited to these, nor are these questions limited to African American philosophy but these issues and questions in conjunction with an attempt to understand the experience of blackness must be central and not peripheral. In short, African American philosophy begins by rejecting the definition of the black body as a tool defined by the institution of slavery, and self-defines black bodies as human and also free, and to express in a phenomenological manner the experience of blackness (which simply means expressing this experience based on the perception of the expresser).(Heidegger, 3) Also, particularly when studying American political thought, since much of this thought was shaped either in contention or in

conjunction with the African American freedom movement and African American philosophy, it would seem that the full picture cannot be had without a firm understanding of African American philosophy which is bolstered by understanding the African Freedom Aesthetic.

It is necessary to distinguish further, the African Freedom Aesthetic from other aesthetic views. First, while it is a black aesthetic, it is not the black aesthetic. The black aesthetic is time locked as a product of the black arts movement beginning in 1965 and is mostly the creation of Addison Gayle, Amiri Baraka, and Larry Neal. (Johnson, 22) It was not meant to explain as much as it was meant to be a creative impetus for a particular kind of protest literature and artistic creations. The name African Freedom Aesthetic serves more of a descriptive function for a particular meta-philosophical framework and cultural memory, which has shaped a group of people, namely African Americans. This shaping began instantaneously upon arriving in the American context but it reached its zenith in 1896 with the Plessy vs. Ferguson decision, bringing the question of what is blackness front and center. (Neal, 1) While developing the African Freedom Aesthetic, African Americans became a discreet people, immersed in many cultures, adverting some while also intentionally subsuming others, all with the aim of freedom.

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