

The SOJOURNER
TRUTH *Newsletter*

A PUBLICATION OF THE CENTER FOR AFRICANA STUDIES AT CENTRAL CONNECTICUT STATE UNIVERSITY

THE BLACK AESTHETICS



A LEGACY OF LOVE AND EMPOWERMENT
PART ONE

Message from the Editor in Chief

Welcome everyone to our special edition of the Sojourner Truth for the fall 2011 semester. For this edition, we present Part One of The Black Aesthetics: A Legacy of Love and Empowerment that showcases the best of the human spirit through the lives, talents, and contributions of our cultural ancestors. Their living memories are powerful extensions of our existence, an existence that we are privilege to experience. What is the definition of the Black Aesthetics one might ask? Although there are variations, for this issue it will be defined as the combination of both beauty and strength that inspires and uplifts rather than marginalizes and denigrates our lives and the images reflected about our lives. In addition, the phrase expresses the essence of who we are and what we truly stand for as a mainstay of clarity that keeps us moving forward towards a future filled with optimism, despite the current stresses that may temporarily cloud our vision or our ability to progress.

We believe this issue is rather timely in encouraging us to reflect seriously upon numerous individuals who collective works established varying forms of an aesthetic for people of color; particularly, during the latter 19th and early 20th centuries and well before the more notable Black Arts Era of the 1960s. Whether or not we are effectively building upon the legacy of their accomplishments is a conversation worth having today. Strengthened by the works of so many artists, writers, and musicians as well as social and political activists, historically, the concept continues to illustrate a broad and versatile meaning for so many of us through its subtle shaping of our collective lives as vibrant, beautiful, and remarkable. We hope that the focus upon these select memories in time in this issue will promote further discussions about The Black Aesthetics during this timeframe and beyond, especially, the value of this concept in the early 21st century.

A special thanks to all who have made Part One of this special edition possible and who will work on Part Two of this special edition that will focus on The Black Aesthetics: 1960s and Beyond.

Dr. Beverly A. Johnson

Features in this Issue

Page 4.....	The Black Aesthetics' Legacy: Part One
Page 6.....	Reflections: Legacies Remembered
Page 8.....	LAMP: Literature, Art, Music, Politics
Page 10.....	News from the Motherland

READERS' COMMENTS

A very informative article was covered entitled "The Value of Sharing Life Experiences: Women in Business Panel at CCSU" in the January-May 2011 issue of the Sojourner Truth newsletter. The article exposed the unavoidable sacrifices women must make while attempting to achieve their goals. I really liked reading about the impact these women are making in their communities. Having a career that is suitable to ones' qualities and personality was a strong message within the article. Also, the "no excuse" policy expressed can aid women of color, especially, to surpass all odds that are deemed unreachable. As a male, I found these four women of color had good approaches to life that helped them overcome challenges in order to reach their dreams and aspirations as career women.

Kentrale Evans, CCSU Junior, Political Science Major

I like the Black History Month Feature article in the spring issue. This article addressed a very important topic that remains relevant today. There are numerous races the society deem to be Black, but the people they are referring to may not consider themselves as Black people. For instance, a Jamaican person may say he or she isn't black, yet to many people in this society, a Jamaican is perceived as a Black person. The article does a good job showing how the definition of the term varies among individuals and groups.

Antoinette Kinard, CCSU Sophomore, Sociology Major

The article "Targeting Race and Gender" spoke to me personally, especially Professor Nunnally's key questions: "Who is considered Black?" and "What does it mean to be Black in the United States?" These questions continue to be debated in Black culture. For other ethnic groups, this article will help them understand what a Black person in the United States thinks about daily life living in this country.

Christina Carpenter, CCSU Junior, Business Management Major

I did not know this event existed, and I was really impressed reading about the International Festival: "The World within Your Reach" article. It is great that the school and community come together and acknowledge the diversity of people. I enjoyed reading about the production that allowed the audience to learn about different cultures. I did not realize the university and community have activities such as this one that involve so many different cultures. I like the fact that people are willing to teach others about their cultures, and people are interested in learning about cultures that are different from their own.

Monee Lee, CCSU Junior, Accounting Major

Reading "The Legacy of the Amistad Revolution: Lessons for the 21st Century," made me desire to know more about the Amistad Revolt. I also had doubts as Dr. Osagie did about how much knowledge people have about this revolt. This article reinforces how important it is to appreciate our historical legacies.

Kristen Rogers, CCSU Sophomore, Sociology Major

The Black Aesthetics: A Legacy of Love and Empowerment

Part One

There are so many ways that Black people who represent the African Diaspora have experienced a measure of progression personally and professionally throughout the world, and there are so many reasons why those who have need to rethink their current efforts of continuing a progressive journey that has been restricted or stalled for numerous people of color in today's time. We are all intricately linked to one another, and our ability to encourage and to assist others, once we are able to do so, should not be underestimated. Furthermore, we have concrete examples of strong regional and national leaders as well as influential societal figures in politics, business, academics, arts, etc., whose collective voices help to maximize our potential to be empowered by their accomplishments. We not only respect the important roles select leaders and high profile individuals of color play in our society, but we also respect our role in supporting them because we believe they possess distinct qualities (displayed globally) that help to define us as a dignified and proud people. Whether we intend to or not, so many of us promote aspects of the Black Aesthetics in our daily lives, and we all share a part in displaying this aesthetics to the world in some major or minor context. Yet how we display a Black Aesthetic, currently, can be better understood through the prism of our historical and cultural roots, especially those prior to the sixties. Both average and prominent persons of color who lived before and during the early to mid- Twentieth century, paved the way for us to have a substantive rather than surface consciousness to express authentic images of ourselves. These images reflect the essence of who we are as Black people here and abroad.

During the times of the Reconstruction Period and the Harlem Renaissance in the United States (as well as the Pan African movement of the early Twentieth century, representing African, the Caribbean and the Americas) many people of color became vital cultural ancestors to the Black Arts Movement, which embedded as a core tenet, the Black Aesthetics during the sixties and seventies. These cultural ancestors deserve, therefore, our renewed attention and our renewed praise because they left us with timeless gifts that can enhance our self development and cultural awareness in the several ways. For instance, some cultural ancestors underscored a special love which is imminent in a righteous fight for any group's dignity and self- preservation. This unifying love has shaped our cultural consciousness and has motivated us to fight in both subtle and direct ways. Our cultural ancestors fought with love as the core drive force for the achievements gained in the latter Twentieth century that distinguish us as having a relevant place within this world and they united us to specific causes that demanded our attention. Cultural ancestors such as Harriet Tubman, Sojourner Truth, Frederick Douglass and David Walker were the ancestral fighters who passed this legacy of love to cultural ancestors of the Reconstruction era such as Booker T. Washington, W.E.B. Du Bois, Ida B. Wells Barnett, and Anna Julia Cooper.

We have also inherited a moral compass that serves as an internal protective measure. This moral compass guides us to instinctively connect to the wider African Diaspora and to prioritize our collectivism as a means to promote courage and resoluteness when facing challenges that seem in-surmountable for temporary periods of time. Religious and political leaders understood the value of this moral compass because it was not steeped in ambiguity or ambivalence, but rather, steeped with clarity of vision and integrity based principles. From the emergence of the Pan-African movement to the redistribution of ancestral land from colonial hands, we honor our cultural ancestors whose moral fight for freedom is a constant reminder that we are a people who ultimately prevail when we work together as a unified people.

An equally significant gift to us is a formidable work ethic that evokes power and grace in order to display how our ordinary lives can produce extraordinary results. One major way this is highlighted for us is through those who breathed life into the Harlem Renaissance. Many writers and artists of this time understood the value of projecting the authentic voices and images of a people whose work gave them a sense of purpose and the ability to pass on their skills and talents to another generation. Select artists understood that the inherited work ethic defined us as a people and shaped our identities as much as the actual work defined or shaped our identities during this time. Through inspiring poetry, empowering short stories and novels, and beautiful artistry, we have a legacy of talent that reminds us to be diligent in preserving the grace and dignity our work ethic represents on multiple levels throughout the world.

We are empowered, therefore, with a strong sense of self and cultural awareness through these gifts of a fighting spirit, a moral compass, and a work ethic that should uplift us to new heights, yet keep us grounded in our reality at the same time. The resoluteness of our cultural ancestors is central to a Black Aesthetics that evolved prior to the sixties. Their resoluteness to remain undeterred by the indignities and insults faced before and during the early Twentieth century is a testament to an indomitable spirit that we have inherited as a special legacy. As caretakers of these gifts, we are obligated to pass on the love, knowledge, and power that will ensure our progression in this life will be paramount beyond what we realize or imagine is even possible for us today.

Johnson, B.

References:

Gates, Henry Jr. and N. McKay eds. *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature*. New York: Norton, 1997. Print.

Worley, Demetrice A. and J. Perry Jr. eds. *African American Literature: An Anthology*. 2nd edition. Lincolnwood: NTC Publishing Group, 1998.

Reflections: Legacies Remembered

It is good to be mentally active by reflecting upon past legacies, especially the legacies of Black people that have created the platform for our current success. One way to promote such action is through asking the types of questions that will cause one to state with pride the answers that speak of a qualitative aesthetics and the empowerment inherent in our collective voices. Thus, below are interviews with Co-Director of the Center for Africana Studies and Art Professor at CCSU, Sheri Fafunwa-Ndibe; CCSU Dean of Engineering and Technology, Olusegun Odesina and Sociology Major at CCSU, Kristen Rodgers. They offer us their reflections on cultural legacies representative of the Black Aesthetics within their lives.



Sheri Fafunwa-Ndibe

Who inspires you from the latter 19th and early 20th century as a Black Aesthetics proponent?

Educator and activist Mary McLeod Bethune: Throughout her life, she exemplified the Black Aesthetics.

Share a strong message, creed, or slogan that is from a leader, artist, writer etc. that represents what the Black Aesthetics means to you.

Mary McLeod Bethune's quote, "Invest in the soul. Who knows it might be a diamond in the rough". Also, Langston Hughes' quote, "An artist must be free to choose what he does, certainly, but he must also never be afraid to do what he might choose".

Name a couple of key attributes or characteristics that help to shape or to define the Black Aesthetics for you.

Growing up in Nigeria, my aesthetics has been informed by Yoruba art and culture. Yoruba mythology is one of the most elaborate and complex mythic world views. In Yoruba art aesthetics, for example, the artist must possess oju-inu, an "inner eye," in order to understand the specific nature and essence of his subject matter, and to communicate the inner reality of that image. Artists provide access to an invisible world inhabited by the divinities or spirits. Art work is not intended to mirror real forms but the essence of what they stand for. Much of my work is informed by this.



Olusegun Odesina

Who inspires you from the latter 19th and early 20th century as a Black Aesthetics proponent?

Obafemi Awolowo, a Nigerian (Yoruba) Political leader and founder of the Political Party Action Group.

Share a strong message, creed, or slogan that is from a leader, artist, writer etc. that represents what the Black Aesthetics means to you.

In accordance with O. Awolowo and the Action Group, the message/slogan is "Life More Abundant".

Name a couple of key attributes or characteristics that help to shape or to define the Black Aesthetics for

you. Awolowo believed the states in Nigeria should channel their resources into education, and he introduced free and mandatory health and primary education into the then Western region of Nigeria. He also built of the first television station and skyscraper in Africa.



Kirsten Rodgers

Who inspires you from the latter 19th and early 20th century as a Black Aesthetics proponent?

W.E.B. Du Bois and Marcus Garvey are inspirational proponents of the Black Aesthetics, especially their instrumental roles as leaders; W.E.B. Du Bois was one of the founders of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and Marcus Garvey was the founder of the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA). These organizations helped with educational and employment opportunities for African Americans, and they encouraged a togetherness and positive expression of our African and African American heritage.

Share a strong message, creed, or slogan that is from a leader, artist, writer etc. that represents what the Black Aesthetics means to you.

“Black is Beautiful” is a slogan by Langston Hughes that I believe stood out the most in regards to the Black Aesthetics. This slogan is meant to empower African Americans and to make them feel just as important as any other group of people feel in this country. African Americans should feel that their heritage is beautiful and worth keeping alive because it will continue to promote the belief that beauty is within us in a way that no other group can effectively promote.

Name a couple of key attributes or characteristics that help to shape or to define the Black Aesthetics for you.

The writings of Langston Hughes and Richard Wright shape, in part, what I deem to be beautiful. They reinforce and I reinforce for myself that beauty is within and not just what is on the outside. This beauty within comes from a cultural attitude rooted in strong moralistic beliefs. What I may believe is beautiful will be different from others because of my upbringing and my understanding to truly know how Black is beautiful.

Interviews conducted December 8th 2011

LAMP: Literature, Art, Music and Politics

Introduction

There are several mediums that evoke the Black Aesthetics in our public and private lives, and for most people of color, these four areas of literature, art, music and politics would certainly be part of the general concept or any broad definition of the phrase. These fields of study separately (and collectively) shine their historical spotlight on us through the display of our joys and heartbreaks as well as our failures and triumphs. LAMP gives voice to how we understand this world and how we determine our sense of identity and place within it. In addition, LAMP can serve as a collective torch highlighting a competitive spirit that we pass on through tangible and intangible means. We are and can continue to be empowered by words, images, lyrics, and action that enable us to express who we are in a variety of ways. Ultimately, select moments in time that are illuminated by the artists and personalities (who should inspire us to be daring and bold or at the very least reflective and critical about our past and current conditions) will serve as the measure of our remarkable evolvement as a unique and unified people. In this vein, we give our appreciation of these influences, historically, in the lives of our cultural ancestors.

Literature

Whether it is the poetry of Paul Laurence Dunbar, James Weldon Johnson or Aime Cesaire, a short story by Zora Neale Hurston or Ann Petry, a novel by China Achebe or an essay by W.E.B. DuBois, the literature prior to the sixties, gave us a plethora of literary aesthetics that established core standards for different genres. It gave directions for writers to build upon or to blatantly challenge standards and provided readers with both the harsh realism and the endless dreams that solidified our worth on the world stage as great authors, story tellers and critics. Writers during the early Twentieth century, in particular, understood the influence and legacy they wished to leave behind. Whether they stood firm in their belief to be nonpolitical or deliberately produced works that explored racial identity politics and morality issues, these authors (and so many others like them) elevated us to great heights as we saw ourselves reflected with images of love and strength by writers whose messages were informative, expressive, and, ultimately, a resounding call to action for Africans, African Americans and the cultural ancestors representing the wider African Diaspora.

Art

In a similar context as literature, art has the ability to inspire people to be transformative human beings through any one or any collection of sculptures, drawings or paintings. For people of color, especially, art has become a powerful vehicle that goes well beyond acknowledging the creative depths of the artists' talent or to give aesthetic pleasure to viewers. For instance, artists and sculptors such as Jacob Lawrence, Mary Edmonia Lewis, Malvin Gray Johnson were naturally expressive, and at times, subtle in producing the type of art that centralized a Black consciousness. Their works prompted worthwhile questions about identity and place, and as other noted artists, demonstrated with effectiveness varying points of views about Black life. We are better informed as to what aesthetic value truly means in our lives because Black artwork teaches us to be selectively keen, to engage in layered analysis and to participate in a meaningful process of making tough evaluations about the aesthetics that enhance our lives on multiple levels. Furthermore, art forms that specifically reflect the Black Diaspora fill a vacuum useful in reshaping and redefining the meaning of displacement and loss with delicate yet powerful symbols of historical memory and identity. Overall, art as an aesthetic legacy for people of color is profound in its role as presenting "creative ambassadors" who proudly used their heightened sense of vision and touch to speak with a special eloquence in order to further build upon the established records of our existence and our prominence throughout the world.

Music

There are countless musical artists who have given people of color such a rich legacy of experiences through their music, and who paved the way for future musicians to express themselves fully, and to overcome the challenges of financial distress when earning a living through this medium. The varying genres denote musical legends who defined or redefined artistic styles for so many artists of the sixties. Several artists from the sixties and beyond understood that career development would be a favorable result of incorporating the gifts of select legends onto a national or global stage. Names such as Ella Fitzgerald, Bessie Smith, Duke Ellington, Dizzy Gillespie, Ma Rainey, Otis Redding, Sam Cooke, and Charlie Parker are permanently etched in a Black Aesthetic consciousness that will remain timeless for so many of us. The music and lyrics they created are testaments of our affection for one another and our expression of love on a variety of levels.

Because of such a rich heritage of music, we are extremely effective in presenting to the world varying interpretations of the Black Aesthetics. For many, it is the definitive aesthetic form that promotes a unified Black Diaspora through images of confidence, style, and innovation that most cultures throughout the world admire and identify with in many ways. The uplifting messages, the resounding drum beats, the bass guitar, and, of course, the performances that captivate audiences of all ages, reinforce such a timeless legacy that reflects the fighting spirit within us through a celebration of raw talent and a conscious work ethic—defining us as complex and beautiful people.

Politics

A Three- Dimensional Path

The images of a Black Aesthetics through a political lens are quite remarkable given where we started and where we have arrived. Any progressive forms of politics that have advanced, aesthetically, the lives of people of color by people of color, is indebted to the Black consciousness that has evolved in three parts over the course of many decades.

Prior to and during the early Twentieth century, a more fear based sentimental consciousness was reflected through the lives of millions of people of color. Many leaders in Africa and the broader Diaspora understood that minority regimes fears were based on pretense and illusions of our identity and general lack of knowledge about African people; thus, many projections of a Black political consciousness and Black aesthetics were done, eventually, through negotiations of differences which further alarmed us to change the severe power imbalances. As time progressed, our cultural ancestors evoked a strong aesthetics of identity that promoted the intellectual component of representing African and African based people in authentic ways. For example, the noted intellectual Cheikh Anta Diop was extremely influential in voicing the message of awareness that embodies a Black consciousness. Black intellectuals here and abroad were at the forefront of a political consciousness and aesthetics, and they had a significant impact on the Black empowerment movement that characterized the sixties and beyond. In political realms, Africans and those of the wider Diaspora are inextricably connected to the efforts of the ancestors who carved out a path toward consistent political freedom. This was done primarily through negotiations and awareness of cultural identity that help form a Black Aesthetics. Our accomplishments through their aesthetic voices of empowerment, politically, could have been vastly different and relatively prolonged without these patterns of progression.

News from the Motherland



Nobel Peace Prize Winners: Leymah Gbowee, Ellen Johnson Sirleaf and Tawakkol Karman

It is with extreme pleasure that we present for this third version of our standing topic the news that emanate from one part of the African continent yet is positively inspirational to the lives of millions of people in Liberia, Africa, and other parts of the world. As winners of the Nobel Peace Prize for 2011, Ellen Johnson Sirleaf and Leyman Gbowee join a distinguished group of prominent people who actively represent the dynamic changes that are taking place throughout the Motherland. Their contributions are both a testament to the Black Aesthetics and unifying presence of a Black Diaspora consciousness.

Editor in Chief

Perspective One: Inspirational Women

The accomplishments of these two women will have a great impact on the lives of young girls who see them as role models. These young girls can be inspired to rise above hatred, injustice, corruption, and abuse. These African women set an example of greatness by accomplishing their goals with the intent to benefit so many people. Ellen Johnson Sirleaf gave voice to the ills of the government and overcame many challenges to become Liberia's president. Gbowee's struggles with poverty and abuse shaped her consciousness to be a spokesperson fighting against the abuse of women and children. Young girls should take the life stories of these two accomplished African women and be determined not to die in abuse, to speak out against injustice, and to find ways to obtain help when needed. Johnson Sirleaf and Gbowee also send a key message that, no matter the cost, an education will be one of their tickets to freedom and a better quality of life.

Olufunke M. Odebayo

Perspective Two: Blessing Yes, Curse No !

This year's Nobel Peace Prize award is a game changer. Liberians Leymah Gbowee and Ellen Johnson Sirleaf may have been undetected by the international radar for some time; however, they now have arrived at the ultimate global arena of leadership. This award's significance is twofold because it reshapes the image of African women from a passively traditional one to a politically bold and active image, and it encourages self-development regardless of a person's gender. Of equal importance is the wake-up call community policy makers are receiving to no longer ignore women who, in many African countries, remain an untapped resource for social stability and economic advancement.

In academic terms, it reinforces for students and other audiences that work well done will sooner or later find recognition. Thus, it pays to be dedicated to a good cause! These women work and honor reminds us that Africa offers every African a platform for self-dedication; there is room for freedom fighters, gender equity reformists, and social and cultural developers. Hence, this prestigious honor goes to Johnson Sirleaf and Gbowee, but the actual winners of the prize are the women of this great continent.

M.T. Assado

You are Cordially Invited to the

2012 ANNUAL AMISTAD LECTURE

"The Life and Times of the Amistad Returnees to Sierra Leone and Their Impact: A Pluridisciplinary Exploration"

Dr. Abdul Karim Bangura

PhD Linguistics, Georgetown University; PhD Political Science, Howard University; PhD Development Economics, University of Maryland; PhD Computer Science, and PhD Mathematics, Columbus University

Professor of Research Methodology and Political Science at Howard University, Washington DC

&

Author of 65 books and more than 550 scholarly articles; former President & United Nations Ambassador of the Association of Third World Studies

Date: Tuesday, February 28, 2012

Time: 3:00 p.m. - 4:20 p.m.

**Place: Founders Hall, Davidson Building
Central Connecticut State University**

New Britain, CT

Organizer: *AMISTAD Committee - Center for Africana Studies, Central Connecticut State University*

For more information, please contact Dr. Olusegun Sogunro at 860-832-2131 or Dr. Gloria Emeagwali at 860-832-2815

THE SOJOURNER TRUTH NEWSLETTER

EXECUTIVE BOARD

CO-DIRECTORS

SHERI FAFUNWA-NDIBE

WARREN PERRY

KEY CONTRIBUTORS

M.T. ASSADO

OLUFUNKE ODEBAYO

OLUSEGUN ODESINA

SHERI FAFUNWA-NDIBE

KIRSTEN ROGERS

EDITOR IN CHIEF

BEVERLY A. JOHNSON

KEY CONSULTANTS

PETER KYEM

OLUSEGUN SOGUNRO

GEORGE RICHARDSON

GRAPHIC DESIGNER

JERRY BUTLER

SPECIAL THANKS: CCSU STUDENT SUPPORTERS:

CHRISTINA CARPENTER

KENTRALE EVANS

ANTOINETTE KINARD

MONEE LEE

KIRSTEN ROGERS

THE SOJOURNER TRUTH NEWSLETTER

A PUBLICATION OF THE CENTER FOR AFRICANA STUDIES AT CENTRAL CONNECTICUT STATE UNIVERSITY