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CRITICAL BLACK AESTHETICS:  
CURRICULUM FOR SOCIAL JUSTICE

BY

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DISSERTATION

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## Abstract

This study critically examines Black aesthetic theory. The sociopolitical sensibilities of Black aesthetics may be viewed as a response or a critical “talking back” to the power structures in society that consciously perpetuate a dominant narrative of the beautiful or what it means to be beautiful. The central tasks of this dissertation are as follows:

1. To examine the historical and political context in which Black aesthetics emerged
2. To analyze various Black aesthetic perspectives that speak to social justice
3. To explore and craft the interpretive conditions of differend necessary to perceive Black aesthetics as a language of social justice. A differend exist when there is conflict between at least two parties that cannot be equitably resolved for lack of judgment applicable to both arguments (Lyotard 1989a).

A multiple theoretical lens that encompasses curriculum theory and critical theory, as well as various contested Black aesthetic perspectives, is used to expand current and past notions of Black aesthetics and its meanings for education. Additionally, the theoretical perspective is used to situate Black aesthetics as a curriculum for social justice in education. Essential questions guiding this study include the following:

1. How does one explain/define Black aesthetic theory perspectives?
2. How does one assess the interpretive accuracy of these explanations/definitions?
3. Does Black aesthetic theory work in terms of creating the intellectual and psychological spaces (i.e. influence the human mind) for social justice for all people?

This study ultimately attempts to situate Black aesthetics in the context of education as a language through which to make meaning of the term *social justice*.

*To Maggie & Nettie*

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## Chapter 1

### Statement of the Problem

Much of the scholarly work in education, it may be argued, has been written from a “universalist” (Western) or, at best, a “multiculturalist” perspective (McCarthy, 1995). The traditional Eurocentric philosophies and canons of knowledge remain central to the education curriculum in general and aesthetic education in particular. However, The Harlem Renaissance, the civil rights movement, student protests, the Black arts movement, and the subsequent curricula additions at institutions of higher learning did not affect aesthetic education curricula fundamentally, nor did these events reshape the issues of epistemological dominance. Black aesthetic theory has not been a central part of the discussion in education, multicultural education notwithstanding. Likewise, curriculum and the significance of Black aesthetics to education have not been discussed or emphasized in the discourse of Black aesthetics.

The problem this research is concerned with is the lack of attention to the implications of Black aesthetics in terms of making social justice meanings at the elementary, secondary, and collegiate levels. This dissertation seeks to present a conceptual analysis of Black aesthetics broadly conceived in an effort to highlight a different dimension or purpose for Black aesthetics, that is, to help transcend curriculum habits and invoke new ideas of making meaning of the term *social justice* in education.

The term *social justice* seems to be ambiguous for many and has provoked various debates in the field of education. For example, the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education decided to drop the controversial language about social justice from its accrediting standards, an action brought on by a concern that social

justice is so elastic that it could be used to discriminate against individuals who do not subscribe to a given institution's interpretation of the phrase (Wasley, 2006). North (2006) stated that the term still remains under theorized, as she examined various claims as well as highlighted tensions among the various meanings of *social justice* set forth in the academy. In light of a wide spectrum of heterogeneous ideas about social justice, my hypothesis is that the structure (the origins, form, and content) of Black aesthetics adds to the complexity by bringing a relational aspect of social justice broadly conceived and adds an aesthetic language dimension not only to perceiving Black art work but also to understanding terms like *social justice*. However, before making the case for Black aesthetics as social justice curriculum, it is important to note that there is no uniform conception of social justice but there are many ideas concerning what constitutes curriculum. Therefore, it is important to specify which concepts of social justice conception and curriculum this dissertation is concerned with. Following the section addressing social justice concepts, I will explain the conceptual idea of curriculum as creative space and speak briefly to the concept of aesthetics to contextualize where and how I seek to situate a Black aesthetics as a social justice language/curriculum concept.

### **Conceptions of Social Justice**

Conceptions of social justice have been examined and debated for centuries. The literature on the subject is broad and immense. For example, ideas of justice have been theorized and discussed in the areas of law, theology and philosophy. It is not my aim to try to unravel such an immense body of work; rather, the goal is to present how social justice ideas have been broadly conceptualized/theorized in the academy.

Over the last 40 years, there have been various theories concerning the social justice. In 1967, the Institute for Philosophical Research presented a study titled *The Idea of Justice*. Written by Dr. Otto Bird, this study aimed to clarify the diversity of issues surrounding social justice theories. Bird (1967) identified and examined three basic theories of justice. The first is the “positive law” theory of justice characterized by six propositions:

1. Justice and injustice are dependent on positive law.
2. Law itself is independent of justice.
3. Justice consists in conformity to positive law.
4. Justice, apart from legality, is merely a subjective norm.
5. Justice is obligatory ultimately only because of legal and political sanctions.
6. The virtue of justice is identical with obedience. (p. 43)

The second basic theory of justice is the “social good” theory of justice. Bird stated that the social good theory disagrees with the positive law theory by rejecting the privileged relationship between the two terms *law* and *justice*, stating that “the heart of the social good theory lies in the claim that all questions of justice must ultimately be decided in terms of social utility” (p. 85). Furthermore, Bird posited a third basic theory, the natural right theory of justice, which asserts that “there is a norm for what is due to man, which is natural as well as moral-natural based on what man is and moral as obliging one to observance of it” (p. 151).

These three theories, though couched in modernist language, are particularly attached to the languages of law as well as the notion of moral obligation. The moral idea adds an important action (or behavioral) dimension to the social justice concept. On the

level of language, it seems that the moral obligation idea aligns with early frameworks of the beautiful made explicit and implicit to the Black aesthetic posited by Dubois (1926).

Further theorizing about social justice can be found in political philosophy. In *A Theory of Justice*, Rawls (1971) formulated a notion of justice that he termed *justice as fairness*. Justice as fairness proposes that the most reasonable principles of justice are those that would be the object of mutual agreement by persons under fair conditions (p. 2). Justice as fairness constructs a theory of justice with the idea of social contract (p. 3). In 1985, however, Rawls began to develop the notion that justice might be best understood as a political conception. Rawls (1999) asserted that “justice is not to be confused with an all inclusive vision of a good society, or thought of as identical with the concept of right” (p. 191). Rawls later continued his idea and asserted that justice as fairness should be understood as a political conception of justice rather than as part of a comprehensive moral doctrine (2001, p. xvi). Thus, social justice should not be understood as an application of moral philosophy but rather as “a political conception of justice for the special case of the basic structure of a modern democratic society” (2001, p. 14). For Rawls, justice as fairness “takes the primary subject of political justice to be the basic structure of society” (p. 39), which includes “its main political and social institutions and how they come together into one unified system of cooperation” (p. 40). In short, Rawls’ theory of justice as fairness is based on two principles of justice:

1. Each person has the same infeasible claim to a fully adequate scheme of basic liberties, which scheme is compatible with the same scheme of liberties for all.
2. Social and economic inequalities are to satisfy two conditions: first they are to be attached to offices and positions open to all under conditions of fair equality of opportunity; and second, they are to be the greatest benefit of the least advantaged members of society. (pp. 42–43)

Overall, Rawls' conception of social justice suggests that compatible structural schemes are needed to satisfy the necessary conditions for a unified system of cooperation.

However, an important idea for this study is Rawls' position that conditions of fair equality include fair equality of opportunity. I contend that there are Black aesthetic concepts, for example, Ellison's *Invisible Man* or Wright's *Native Son*, which speak to Rawls' concept of fair equality of opportunity. In other words, Black aesthetic works such as *Invisible Man* and *Native Son*, which happened to be produced under the American conditions of inequality, aesthetically point to the concept of social justice as fairness of equal opportunity posited by Rawls' concept.

Young (1990) pointed to a post modern philosophy of political philosophy and proposed that the various movements of the feminists, Black liberationists, and American Indians, as well as gay and lesbian liberation, all serve to question Western reason (p. 3). Young stated further that modern political philosophy such as that of Rawls "reduces political subjects to a unity and to value commonness or sameness over particularity or difference;" she also contended that a "conception of social justice should begin with the concepts of domination and oppression" (p. 3). Young was critical of the distributive conceptions of social justice posited by Rawls and stated that contemporary theories of justice are dominated by a distributive paradigm, which tends to focus on the possession of material goods and social positions (p. 8). She posited that, although "there are pressing reasons for philosophers to attend to issues of distribution of wealth and resources" (p. 19), "other important aspects of justice include decision making procedures as well as the social division of labor and culture" (p. 9). However, she also

asserted that conceptual confusion arises when people attempt to extend the distributive model of social justice to such nonmaterial goods as respect, opportunity, or power.

Instead of constructing a theory of social justice, Young (1990) argued that oppression and domination should be the primary terms for conceptualizing injustice (p. 9) and defined *injustice* as domination and oppression (p. 33). She asserted that “basic equality in life situations for all persons is a moral value and that there are deep injustices in our society which may be rectified by basic institutional changes” (p. 14). Young stated that social justice should “also refer to the institutional conditions necessary for the development and exercise of individual capacities and collective communication and cooperation” (p. 39). Young’s overall concept was developed within a structural and conditional context of society in that she situated a concept of social justice in terms of institutional conditions whereby the individual might achieve full capacities. Her concept of justice challenges societal structures that enable oppression and domination in terms of the exploitation, marginalization, cultural imperialism, and violence experienced by social groups (p. 48).

Still, more diverse concepts of social justice have been theorized across disciplines in the academy. In education, there has been a movement in social justice education that attempts to be more explicit than the political and philosophical theories in terms of what social justice means in education. For example, Adams, Bell, and Griffin (1997), professors in the Social Justice Education Program at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst, suggested that a socially just society is one in which all members have their basic needs met and all individuals are physically and

psychologically safe and secure, able to develop to their full capabilities and to participate as effective citizens of their communities and nation.

Adams et al. (1997) constructed a concept of social justice within the context of education and stated that “social justice education is both a process and a goal” (p. 3). They contended that the goal of social justice education “is the full and equal participation of all groups within a society that is mutually shaped to meet their needs” (p. 3). For these authors, social justice education espouses a theory of oppression and, at the same time, constructs an inclusive theory of oppression, attempting to “highlight broad ideas and themes brought forth by the various movements of civil rights, women’s liberation of the 1960s and 1970s” (Adams et al., 1997, p. 7).

Further, it has been argued that, to be authentic and relevant for students, social justice education needs to begin with children’s lived experiences—their concerns, hopes, and dreams—and then move toward multiple perspectives and action directed toward social change (Bigelow, Christensen, Karp, Miner, & Peterson, 1994).

Also in education, Lynch and Baker (2005) described social justice in terms of developing basic principles of “equality of condition that are essential for promoting equality in education” (p. 132). Lynch and Baker described several dimensions important to achieving equality of condition so that people can pursue a good life. Those dimensions of equality include “resources, respect and recognition; love, care and solidarity; power and working and learning” (p. 132).

Moreover, Fraser (1997) suggested that the idea of social justice is in a “post socialist” condition. She argued that “there are three constitutive features of the post socialist condition” (p. 1) and defined the *post socialist condition* as

[a]n absence of any credible overarching emancipatory project despite the proliferation of fronts of struggle; a general decoupling of the cultural politics from the social politics of redistribution; and a decentering of claims of equality in the face of aggressive marketization and a sharply rising material inequality. (p. 3)

Fraser asserted that in the U.S. academy, cultural theorizing is largely dissociated from social theorizing, resulting in the “intellectual life mirroring the decoupling of the politics of recognition from the politics of redistribution in social life” (p. 5). In short, Fraser contended that the cultural politics of recognition should do more than supplant the social politics of redistribution; rather, the two should be integrated with one another (p. 6). She rejected an either-or conception of social justice that the current postsocialist condition has created and suggested that an overarching goal should be “to open the way for another post socialism which integrates the politics of redistribution with the politics of recognition” (p. 7).

However, North (2006) identified additional tensions within Fraser’s model, asserting that tensions involve the “differential emphases on equality as difference and equality as sameness” (p. 508) as well as the attention given to the “macro level processes, such as educational policy making and social movement organizing and micro level processes characterized by individual behaviors and daily social interactions in classrooms” (North, 2006, p. 508). North continued to describe three social justice categories as “redistribution/recognition, sameness/difference, and macro/micro as multidirectional and intersecting spheres” (p. 509) and proposed that those categories that appear to be dichotomous often overlap and maintain tensions with each other. In her effort to glean substantial meanings of social justice, North resisted a unified concept of

social justice and stated that she hoped her analysis would stimulate more discussions about the meaning of various perspectives of social justice (North, 2006, p. 528).

Thus, as this broad overview of social justice concepts indicates, there is no uniform concept of social justice. The various conceptions differ from each other in terms of meaning. For example, Young (1990) presented the question of what *distributing rights* means, suggesting that “it is the material good being distributed not the right” (p. 35). The various social justice conceptions mentioned here use words such as *rights*, *duties*, *moral obligation*, *distribution*, *redistributions*, *injustice*, *oppression*, and *domination*. Although the specific language use may differ, there seems to be a consensus toward the notion of the social good and a social contract that implies an idea of moral or ethical charge toward humanity. This dissertation is most concerned with the moral-ethical idea implicit in conceptions of social justice.

It is important to make clear that this dissertation does not take issue with any specific concept of social justice discussed but seeks to shed light on the various concepts in order to help those policy makers, curriculum writers, and theorist who feel that the term is too elastic to include in an overall mission or standard (Wasley, 2006). Given that conceptions of social justice are “heterogeneous” (Lyotard, 1989 a p. 13) in nature and further complicated by language use, I contend that Black art is an aesthetic language that speaks to the moral or ethical implications of social justice conceptions and presents an alternative lingua to help make meaning of the term.

### **Curriculum Conception**

In this dissertation, curriculum is concerned with the political, moral, and ethical questions of “what knowledge and which forms of experience are of most worth” (Beyer

& Apple, 1998, p. 1). Curriculum is also concerned with the problems of “how we link curriculum knowledge to the biography and personal meanings of the student as well as the ethical/aesthetic issues of how we treat others responsibly and justly in education” (Beyer & Apple, 1998, p. 5). Curriculum as an aesthetic dimension offers opportunities to bring the politics of art to the foreground explicitly (Beyer, 1985, p. 397) and to inquire aesthetically about the meanings of justice.

Although there is no single or unified theory of Black aesthetics, this dissertation aims to show that, when curriculum is viewed and worked as an aesthetic space, Black aesthetics is a curriculum for social justice. In the context of social justice education posited by Adams et al. (1997), curriculum is defined as a goal or process that enables students to become conscious of their operating worldviews and to be able to critically examine alternative ways of understanding the world and social relations. Viewed in this way, the notion here is that the structure (origins, form, and content) of various Black aesthetic perspectives and/or works form a language nexus to make meaning of social justice, not only in the curriculum space of Black aesthetics but also in the case of ambiguity or conflict about the term. Given this overall conception, the end result is not to craft a formal curriculum guide of proposed learning objectives and outcomes. Rather, the aim is to point out theoretically that Black aesthetics in the form of literature and other art forms already exist and the structure of Black aesthetics, as well as its language, offers another way to make meaning of social justice. In short, drawing from hooks (1990), this dissertation assumes the notion that curriculum is a *space* where difference and otherness are acknowledged as forces that intervene in Western theorizing about

aesthetics as well as transform the discussion of the Black aesthetic project and its social justice meanings in a *differend*.

### **Aesthetic Conception**

*Aesthetics* has been defined as sense—perception—, the study of what is immediately pleasing to one’s visual and auditory perception or to one’s imagination. It is also defined as the study of the nature of beauty, the theory of taste and criticism in the creative and performing arts (Mautner, 2000, p. 8). However, Alexander Baumgarten (1714 -1762) used the term *aesthetic*. His analysis referred to an element of feeling or sensation as the ultimate ground of judgment in questions pertaining to beauty. Although these are two of many working definitions, it is on these two frameworks that this dissertation grounds its understanding of aesthetics.

To suggest there is a Black aesthetic is to allude to a White aesthetic or non-Black aesthetic. *White aesthetics*, here, is defined as the tradition of aesthetic judgments and thoughts based on the Eurocentric canon of philosophical thinkers. Though not discussed in this study, examples of this canon include Plato, Aristotle, Hume, Kant, and Hegel. It is within these frameworks that I define White aesthetics or key influences on what has become mainstream academic aestheticism. The purpose is not to critique those ideas, but it is a matter of making clear that there has been an ongoing project of discerning a theory of the beautiful.

The term *Black aesthetic*, however, was an expression of the Black power movement’s principles as well as its aspirations in literature. Advocates of this idea challenged artists to establish a new standard of judgment and beauty based in African American experience in explicit opposition to Western aesthetic ideals. The Black

aesthetic as a theoretical concept was developed by Gayle's *The Black Aesthetic* (1971). However, ontologically, the Black (American) aesthetic can be traced back to those first creative sounds of the Black American slave in the form of spirituals, coded singing and signifying, and later in writing.

It is not enough to suggest that the work of some Black artists is or is not political. Therefore, this study analyzes the concept of Black aesthetics to understand the real experience that is buried within the concepts of Black art. Adorno suggested that concepts always carry buried within them, even when they look entirely abstract, the traces of bodily pleasure or suffering, fear or desire, and that critically interpreting a conceptual idea can be a way of critically interpreting one's real social experience (Adorno, 1944/1997, 1970/1997). The social experiences from which concepts of Black aesthetics developed highlights the political conditions (or realities) necessary to create aesthetic forms that point to social justice. A close reading or investigation of Black aesthetic concepts is necessary to locate and understand the realities that the art product or event transcends.

The following questions for this study were developed to help clarify what is meant by Black aesthetics and then to help explore the implications of Black aesthetics for the meaning of social justice in education: (a) How does one explain/define Black aesthetic theory perspectives? Mentioned earlier, Black aesthetics might be viewed as a critical talking back to Western European ideas of the beautiful; given the socio-critical stances toward society within Black aesthetics, a social critical perspective, as well as concepts of the poststructural and postmodern located within the Black aesthetic seem to be appropriate lenses through which to read Black art work. (b) How does one assess the

interpretive accuracy of these explanations/definitions? This question was formulated in an effort to frame the problem of or highlight the subjective nature of interpretive research. Interpretive accuracy in this dissertation is not concerned with the conventional concepts of wrong or right definitions. *Accuracy* is defined as the ability of the interpretation to adjust or advance past and current ideas in question. In short, interpretive accuracy is judged as a successful attempt to provoke and frame the problem of the construction of Black aesthetics as well as seek new possibilities. (c) In what ways does Black aesthetic theory create the intellectual and psychological spaces for social justice for all people—particularly in terms of what *social justice* means in education? This question stems from the idea that no single theory of social justice would be universally agreeable for the needs of contemporary education. Therefore, a broad aesthetic outlook would encompass the possibilities of Black aesthetics (and others) as a framework for creating a new meaning of social justice in education.

### **Significance of the Study**

The significance of this study lies in the notion that the term *social justice* “remains an under theorized concept in the field of education” (North, 2006, p. 507). This dissertation attempts to enter that dialogue and add to the complexities in making meaning of social justice in education. Special attention to Black aesthetics is necessary due to the long history of art forms in the United States and abroad that have roots in the Black American experience. Further, Black aesthetics speak to the social realities (the creative spaces) for crafting art works in America and globally.

Careful examination of Black aesthetics might help to understand the social processes and experiences that influence the production and reproduction of aesthetic,

cultural, and philosophical material. Locally and globally, educators who care about social justice and its meanings must understand that philosophical material may implicitly or explicitly support the power of a particular social class or gender over another (Adorno, 1970/1997). This dissertation presupposes that those who are involved in education genuinely care about social justice meanings and speaks to those who are committed to teaching for social justice.

### **Form, Theoretical Framework, and Methodology of the Study**

This study is an interpretive analysis designed to sort out and examine the concept of Black aesthetics broadly conceived. I chose to analyze Black aesthetics broadly in order to highlight that there have been various contested notions of what constitutes Black art as well as its purpose. The aim is to highlight the possibility of Black aesthetics' language transforming how one might think about social justice as well as serve as a point of entry for understanding the connection between Black aesthetics and its contribution as an aesthetic language to inquiring and making meaning of a social justice curriculum in education.

I will use two theoretical ideas primarily to conduct the analysis and craft a new purpose for Black aesthetics. For example, the ideas of Lyotard (1989a, 1989b) and Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations* (1958, pp. 244-271) figure in how I analyze alternatives for Black aesthetics. It could be argued that it is quite ironic that an African American researcher uses the theoretical ideas of White philosophers and theoreticians. However, the aim is to exercise the idea of intellectual democracy (Locke, 1942) and use a broad spectrum of ideas (regardless of their cultural points of origin) to move the concept of Black aesthetics and the idea of its language beyond prevalent historical

surveys and critiques. As an interpretive researcher who happens to be African American, I have found that there is a multiplicity of philosophical sensibilities and theoretical orientations that influence my approach to Black aesthetics. Although the theoretical and philosophical orientations are broad and diverse, the irony of my choices might also be viewed as postmodern, particularly in terms of negating any grand narrative and negating the presupposition that an African American would engage theories only by Africans or African Americans. Although I theorize an alternative dimension of Black aesthetics, this research does not contend that Black aesthetics serves as grand narrative in which to define Black aesthetics or social justice, but one of many ways to re-present meanings of social justice. This research is explicit in its political orientation to the extent that I understand curriculum as well as the act of research and writing as a political act (Apple, 1995). For example, who gets to say what art is? Who gets a say in what constitutes aesthetics—the beautiful? Who gets to say what social justice is? This research seeks to highlight an alternative aesthetic language perspective, the aesthetics of the marginalized—or the oppressed.

**Conceptual and theoretical framework.** The following is the overarching theoretical framework used to develop an alternative concept of Black aesthetics and its relevance for making social justice meaning in education. Inspired by the work of Wittgenstein and Lyotard, I interpret Black aesthetics as an aesthetic language in which to make meaning in a context of differend. Lyotard (1989a) defines *differend* as “a case of conflict between at least two parties that cannot be equitably resolved for lack of judgment applicable to both arguments” (p. xi). Conflicts can arise when people are engaged in discourses that are incommensurable. Because there are no rules that apply

across discourses, the conflicts become differends. To enforce a rule in a differend is to enforce the rule of one discourse or the other, resulting in a wrong suffered by the party whose rule of discourse is ignored.

In the field of education, there seems to be a conflict or issue concerning the term *social justice*. Mentioned earlier, accrediting agencies and schools have dropped the use of social justice language due to its elasticity and ambiguous nature. Likewise, researchers and scholars have made attempts to understand or make meaning of social justice in education. Although there was an emergence and growth of social justice education over the last 40 years (Bigelow et al., 1994), it seems that the field of education continues to grapple with making meaning of “social justice.” I interpret the issue concerning the meaning of the term social justice in education as a kind of differend based in language games (Wittgenstein, 1958).

Wittgenstein (1958) posited that one way to divide a book of philosophy could be into parts of speech or kinds of words. In doing so, one experiences a particular kind of confusion when he or she considers how he or she might have to distinguish more parts of speech than ordinary grammar does. For instances, one could go on about verbs “seeing feeling,” verbs describing personal experiences. There would be another division describing numerals, then another kind of confusion with words such as *you* or *I*—and yet another kind of confusion with words like *beautiful* or *good*. Wittgenstein suggested that language plays its users entirely new tricks.

It is this very notion (i.e., that language plays new tricks) that informed or shaped my quest to understand as well as create meanings of the term *social justice* in education. Given the supposed ambiguity of the term *social justice* in the public sphere and in

education, an aesthetic language might help clarify what social justice could mean for education in terms of curriculum (Wittgenstein, 1958).

Wittgenstein stated that “there is constant surprise at the new tricks language plays on us when we get into a new field” (1967, p. 1). Drawing on this notion, I contend that the main mistake made by philosophers and policy and curriculum makers (in education) is that language terms like *social justice* are investigated in terms of the form of words and instead of the *use* made of the words. For Wittgenstein, language is a characteristic part of a large group of activities—talking, traveling, and meeting people, even writing. He contended that people do not do these activities focused on merely the words, but on the specific instances or circumstances in which they are said.

The specific instance or occasion includes the sociopolitical circumstances from which Black aesthetics and theory emerged. These circumstances present or add an aesthetic concept to the meaning of social justice in the form of visual art, literature, music, dance, and drama. If one accepts Wittgenstein’s notion that people do not start from certain words (or art) but from certain occasions or activities in which these words are formed and used, then I assert that the social political circumstances in America were occasions that shaped the theories of Black art (like Locke and Dubois) and are pivotal to understanding an aesthetic concept and/or language of social justice in the form of Langston Hughes’ poetry, the ballads and verses of Gwendolyn Brooks, and Richard Wright’s *Native Son*. Historically, the concern over social and political experiences that inspire the artistic state of affairs, such as the radically political performances of some hip-hop rap artists, are central to understanding what the term *social justice* could mean in education. The social political occasion in which these art works, performances, and

theories are crafted and subsequently used in terms of expanding ideas of social justice becomes the focus rather than the form of the words (i.e., art artifact, the novel, or the temporality of musical sounds, etc.).

A Duboisian aesthetic theory questions the issue of art and the beautiful and implies that the “right actions of man” is the primary project of artistic endeavors. This stance points to a theory of Black art that centers on ethical behavior or envisions socially just actions amongst mankind as the beautiful. In this way, Black aesthetic theory presents an aesthetic concept of social justice through artful (or ethical) behavior. Viewed this way, Black aesthetics collectively brings meaning to what has been seemingly “unpresentable” (Lyotard, 1984, p. 82) through language in education.

Drawing from Lyotard, I contend that the ethical problem for postmodernity as well as for education is to present the unpresentable. In *The Post Modern Condition*, Lyotard advocated learning from literary figures such as Proust or Joyce, whose works “allude to something which does not allow itself to be made present” (1984, p. 80). However, my hypothesis is that the various Black aesthetics perspectives of Locke, Dubois, and Black arts broadly are concepts that collectively create an aesthetic language or definition of social justice that now seems to be too elastic and ambiguous—or unpresentable. Lyotard goes on to say that the task is to search for new presentations, not in order to enjoy them but to impart a stronger sense of the unpresentable (p. 81). Although the discourse on Black aesthetics is not new, this dissertation seeks to impart new meaning and purposes so that the term Black aesthetics can be used in the specific occasion or activity of searching for more substantial meanings of social justice in education and the curriculum.

**Methodology.** By investigating Black aesthetics, this analysis attempts to reveal the constraints and possibilities of Black aesthetics as well as to understand what they might say in terms of social justice in education. For Adorno (1944/1997), this kind of investigation required an inquiry into the works' formation and reception. Such an inquiry seeks to understand given works in terms of their social origins, form, content, and function (Adorno, 1944/1997).

Specifically, I will bracket or closely examine in terms of structure Black aesthetics broadly conceived. Then, I will use the concepts of language games and differend to read what I contend are important moments in the development of Black aesthetic perspectives as well as creative works from various philosophers, critics, artists, and scholars in order to highlight problems and potentialities. The analyses will conclude with a discussion of the elements that constrain as well as those that might point toward transformation. The final implication is that the structure of the concept of Black aesthetics in general holds a potential aesthetic language meaning of social justice for curriculum and education.

Black feminist perspectives, such as those of Collins (1988, 1990, hooks (1990), Carby (1990 and Christian (1980 and 1985), were additional lenses used to examine the assumptions within Black aesthetics. Black feminist perspectives broadened the analysis to include issues of gender and power, which are historically implicit in Black aesthetics. Further, at least a minimal insight into gender-sensitive ways of thinking should be expected of all social science (Alvesson & Skoldberg, 2000).

## **Sorting and Analysis of Emergent Themes**

Bracketing or attending to the minute particulars will serve as a method of sorting thematic material or ideas. For example, I highlighted and examined significant milestones in the development of Black aesthetic theory and then conducted investigations into their structure—specifically, their origins, form, and content. I looked at what seemed natural and self-evident to these theories and attempted to move beyond the surface of those unquestioned beliefs and values or the taken-for-granted surface structure (Deetz & Kersten, 1983; Frost, 1987). Structural and unconscious sources of social and psychological phenomena were considered, that is, the analysis addresses those social-political realities (i.e., structure) as well as those unconscious actions toward power and meaning-making (e.g., those art creations). In short, social-critical lenses were used to analyze emergent themes in order to construct an explanatory understanding or interpretation. My hope is that the results of this analysis reveal new purposes, methods, and priorities for Black aesthetics in education and curriculum.

## **Methodological Parameters**

The following two questions were developed to frame the problem of the nature of interpretive research. This section was guided by these questions:

1. What are the limitations of postmodern critique and social theory?
2. What are the criteria for interpretive accuracy?

There are pitfalls to avoid in critical research that incorporates concepts of the poststructural and post-modern. Working with a critical intent against various forms of domination and, at the same time, refusing to specify what is to be done alienates and antagonizes those who require hard data or doctrine (Held, 1980). For example, it might

be argued that most critical theories, whether in the form of poststructural or postmodern, show undue concern for philosophical and theoretical problems. Although postmodern theory negates the idea of hegemonic grand narratives, there is seldom any mention of the Black experience or writings by Black people or, in particular, Black women (hooks, 1990). Postmodern theory creates a distance from practical political concerns and may place too much emphasis on intellectualizing, making it difficult to apply the theory to the empirical world. This research, however, avoids these pitfalls in that the conclusion posits ideas and potential frameworks that are explicitly connected to practical political concerns in education.

This approach to Black aesthetics presupposes that social movements, which in themselves agree with the ideals of critical theory or postmodernism by rejecting established ideas and traditions, can sometimes still act repressively (Alvesson & Skoldberg, 2000). Thus, although Black aesthetics might be considered a critical talking back to dominant Eurocentric traditions and ideals of the beautiful, asserting strict political criteria as absolute in the Black aesthetic likewise represses and limits the creative possibilities of the artist and audience.

How did I account for the criteria for interpretive accuracy? Interpretive accuracy is defined as the successful attempt to provoke and frame the problem of the construction of certain concepts or streams of thought as well as to seek new possibilities. The adequacy of any critique is measured not only by its systematic analyses and nuanced interpretation but also in terms of its recommendations and its contributions toward research and knowledge that are nonrepressive and its ability to “broaden the interpretive repertoire” (Alvesson & Skoldberg, 2000). In this light, the method or approach of this

study provides a means to interpret and craft meaning from the constraints and possibilities for Black aesthetics and presents research that adds to the broad interpretive world of ideas.

In short, this methodological approach is not concerned with conventional notions of wrong or right outcomes. The parameters of this methodology are to frame the problem of the construction (or the structure) of two streams of thought in Black aesthetics and, given the interpretive data, provide implications for Black aesthetics in education.

### **Summary**

The analytical framework and methods that I have described set out to broadly examine the Black aesthetic repertoire and expose emergent problems and potentialities for Black aesthetic theory. The theoretical lenses for engaging this analysis encompass notions of power, gender, and critical cultural capacity, which are sensitive to the fluidity of culture and theory. I theorize power as an active presence of patriarchal, hegemonic aesthetic concepts and curriculum practices as well as the omission of others (Buendía, 1997).

I have described a conceptual process, broadly informed by the ideas of bracketing or attending to the minute particulars of each work being investigated. In short, I have embarked on a kind of philosophical criticism. This analytical framework emphasizes that the act of interpreting is a subjective and political exercise. Given these methodological parameters, this interpretation is recognized as valid in that the research methods described attempt to provoke and frame the problem of the construction of Black aesthetics as well as seek new possibilities.

Chapter 2 will focus on defining Black aesthetics. The focus will be on outlining the history of Black aesthetics in the United States. I understand that, although there have been changes and tensions in other art forms, Black literature will be used to trace the history and craft a definition of Black aesthetics. The structure (origins, form, and content) of Black aesthetics will be the primary concern, focusing on investigating the origins and the nature of Black aesthetics.

Chapter 3 provides a critique of Black aesthetic theory and presents a closer reading of Black aesthetics. That chapter then summarizes Black aesthetics and presents pivotal moments and ideas. The notion is that the collective language of various perspectives and art works examined points to a new way to view Black aesthetics and will be the basis for analysis in Chapter 4.

Chapter 4 examines Black aesthetic perspectives that point to social justice as well as those aesthetic works whose language gives social justice meaning in the context of difference in education. Again, the concern is conceptual and theoretical. Therefore, a formal curriculum outline or guide is not presented. Instead, Chapter 5 discusses some philosophical points to consider in the application of Black aesthetics language in education.

## **Chapter 2**

### **Defining Black Aesthetics**

The focus of this chapter is to outline broadly the history of Black aesthetics in the United States. This chapter is not intended to detail the expansive history of Black arts but to highlight critical moments and major ideas concerning the questions of what is Black art and what is its purpose. This chapter will show that, not only have there been various ideas of what constitutes Black art, but also there have been conflicting notions concerning the question of the purpose of Black art. The aim is to move beyond describing the object (i.e., Black aesthetics) to synthesizing the various historic thoughts about Black aesthetics. An historical synthesis of the milestones in Black aesthetics is germane to this study because, before new ideas or possibilities for Black aesthetics can be discussed, it is important to know what has already been said in regards to Black art work and particularly its purpose. Therefore, I will explore the structure (origins, form, and content) of Black aesthetics in order to synthesize various viewpoints and advance a new concept or definition and understanding of Black aesthetics.

Works related to African American literary theory and criticism and Black aesthetics are innumerable. However, Black literature, broadly speaking, as well as the work of Black scholars will be used primarily to trace the history and craft a definition of Black aesthetics. Although music is my performance and academic area of expertise, literature (words only) provides the best material to enter the perceived language game and context of differend set forth earlier. While these same questions and debates have occurred in music, literature and literary criticism starts and ends with the spoken and written word. The construct of this study lies in words and phrases and making meaning

of language concepts such as social justice. Thus, literature as a heightened example of aesthetic experience provides access for exploring alternative ways of making meaning of the perceived ambiguous concepts.

While there have been works that chronicle and highlight major schools of thought in Black aesthetics (e.g., Appiah & Gates, 1999; Fowler, 1981; Gates & McKay, 1997; Mason, 1994, 2005; Napier, 2000), Gates and McKay (1997) is one of the most comprehensive anthologies used in secondary and higher education and functions here as a tool in constructing a chronology of Black literature and Black aesthetic ideas in America. Therefore, it is primarily used in this chapter for establishing a timeline. However, throughout the chapter, primary sources, such as key ideas taken directly from the Locke's *The New Negro* (1974) and "Pluralism in Democracy" (1942), Dubois' work as editor of *Crises*, Wright's "Blueprint for Negro Writing" (1937/1971), Jones' *Black Music*, Karenga's *Introduction to Black Studies* (1989), as well as other intellectuals and artists are used to further understand a definition of Black aesthetics. However, although there have been various contested ideas and concepts concerning Black aesthetics and its purposes, little to nothing has been written concerning Black aesthetics and its meanings in education.

### **Origins**

Black aesthetics and Black aesthetic theory in the United States may trace their origins to the "literature of slavery and freedom" dating from 1746-1865 (Gates & McKay, 1997, p. 127). The slave narratives are an important point of departure for understanding Black Americans' artistic and academic efforts to show their humanity. In keeping with this chronology of Black American literature, I will use the "slavery and

freedom literature” as a point of origin in print for Black literature. Beyond this point of origin, Black aesthetics has been recognized as having four periods of development (Gates & McKay, 1997). I will briefly discuss or highlight critical moments in the development of Black aesthetics post-slavery-and-freedom narratives. The first milestone is known as the Harlem Renaissance period (c. 1900 to 1940) and the second development (1940-1960) is identified as “realism, naturalism, and modernism” (p. xvii). The third period, also known as the Critical era for Fowler (1981) or the Black Arts Movement (Napier, 2000; Gates & McKay, 1997), is from 1960 to 1970. The fourth period of literature and Black arts since the 1970s includes form and analysis, poststructuralism, Black cultural nationalism, Black feminist theory, and hip-hop philosophy. I start with the Harlem Renaissance because it marked a moment when Black Americans’ artistic and academic efforts moved beyond proving their humanity. For example Hughes wrote: “We younger artists who create now intend to express our individual dark skinned selves without fear or shame. If white people are pleased we are glad; if they are not it doesn’t matter” (1926, p. 694).

Hughes’ statement highlights a pivotal turn in the mind of African American artists who no longer worked with the approval of White America as their primary purpose. Although the Harlem Renaissance was a prolific outpouring of Black cultural arts, what is important is that the writings of Dubois and Locke seem to have marked the beginnings of a theory of Black art that connects art and politics.

Selected works and aesthetic ideas from these periods are highlighted to give an overview of the multiple perspectives among African American artists and scholars. Each period or moment will reveal that social and political concerns shaped the Black aesthetic

production of that time. The object is not only to point out those common threads, such as the social and political, that connect each developmental period but to draw attention specifically to what was not explicitly said or theorized in terms of Black aesthetics and its relevance to education and social justice meanings. The next section of this chapter is guided by the following question: What is the nature of Black aesthetics?

### **The Harlem Renaissance (1900-1940)**

The Harlem renaissance could be described as an explosion of Black cultural awareness that found its voice in various artistic expressions such as poetry, fiction, music theatre, painting, and sculpture. Considerable research has already been conducted on the Harlem Renaissance; therefore, no effort will be made here to detail extensively what is available in other sources. Instead, attention will be focused on the various sociopolitical factors that influenced key perspectives and ideologies about Black culture and arts of that time.

Locke (1925/1974), one of the architects of the New Negro Movement, relied on notions of the collective and collective consciousness in terms of developing a concept of nationalism. Locke believed that nationalism could be achieved through cultural pluralism and in the notion of social and cultural reciprocity as well as in understanding the relativity of values. He believed that these ideas could “prosper in an atmosphere of intellectual democracy” (1942, p. 201). Locke’s idea of cultural nationalism could be characterized by an existence of social reciprocity in all values—social, economic, and aesthetic (i.e., intellectual) between White Americans and Black Americans. However, to create a pluralistic society means changing or deconstructing the status quo at both the political and cultural levels (Burgett, 1976, p. 34). In regards to culture, Locke advocated

the best of Black intellectual achievement as well as in Black arts. Locke's *The New Negro* (1925/1974) consisted of a compilation of fiction, poetry, plays, and essays about Black Americans, African art, culture, drama, and music. Locke stated that the purpose of the work was "to document the New Negro culturally and socially—to register the transformations of inner and outer life of the Negro in America that have so significantly taken place in the last few years" (p. xv). It is important to note Locke's effort to document the changes that were occurring in the inner (psychological and intellectual) life as well as the outer (social political) life of Black people. This was a moment when the possibilities for intellectual and social and political change could be imagined and questioned (through art). Locke's effort seems to be one of the first to link aesthetic material directly with the sociopolitical.

Locke (1925/1974) further claimed that "Negro spirituals had been suppressed for generations under stereotypes of Wesleyan hymns and harmony, secretive, half-ashamed, until the courage of being natural brought them out—and behold there was folk music" (p. xx). Locke believed that the "courage of being natural" was occurring in the mind of the "Negro," which he described: "[T]he Negro mind has slipped from under the tyranny of social intimidation and is shaking off the psychology of imitation and implied inferiority" (p. x). This quote indicates that Locke felt that the Black artist was no longer compelled to imitate Eurocentric art (which implied that imitating Eurocentric art rendered Black art inferior). Locke further highlighted a social circumstance characterized by "tyranny and social intimidation." An observation that is important to the extent that a substantial amount of Black artistic output in later decades was directly and indirectly linked to the social and political experience of Black people. The courage

to be natural in this case meant that one would produce and/or use works of art like the spirituals that reflected the immediate social and political circumstances. The spiritual was a cultural expression that sprang out of social circumstances that seemingly became natural to the daily lives of Black people. In terms of defining Black aesthetics, Locke presented an idea that seems to associate the Black cultural expression with the social and political points of a relationship between making meanings of social justice and Black aesthetics.

One social factor that influenced the emerging Renaissance was the migration of the Black Americans from south to north. This migration was due to practical concerns as well as being an integral part of the large industrial and social problems of the democracy of that time. For example, during the 1920s, many Black people migrated to industrial cities in the north. There was a shortage of European immigrant labor during World War I, creating a demand for industrial workers. Jobs were then plentiful for Blacks (Burgett, 1976, p. 34). Locke (1925/1974) indicated that “with each wave of movement, the Negro becomes more and more a mass movement toward a larger and more democratic chance” (p. 6). He further explained this statement in terms of Black Americans having “a new vision of opportunity, of social and economic freedom” (p. 3). The opportunity for economic and social freedom to which Locke referred was underscored by two economic and social factors. One factor was that a major decline in the agricultural economy of the south affected many rural Blacks who were share croppers and farm laborers, making migration a necessity. The second was that southern Blacks saw the move north as an opportunity to “escape violence by White people, which had become a way of life since Reconstruction” (Burgett, 1976, p. 34).

These social and economic factors played a role in terms of how art and its purpose were viewed. For instance, Locke (1925/1974) argued that, with this new vision of opportunity, came “the necessity for fuller, truer self expression, the realization of the unwisdom of allowing social discrimination to segregate him (the black American) mentally” (p. xx). Locke stated that “though each generation will have its creed,” the creed for him at that particular time was “the belief in the efficacy of collective effort in race cooperation” (p. 4). Thus, for Locke, the migration and the new overt “folk music” endeavors in the art world meant that “Harlem Negro life was seizing upon its first chances for group expression and self determination” (p. x).

Locke signals a link as well as an influence and relationship between social and political opportunities and the creative acts of expression. Some of Locke’s other works that imply the connection between art and the sociopolitical include *A Decade of Negro Self-Expression* (1928), *The Negro and His Music* (1936/1969), and *Negro Art Past and Present* (1936). In short, the socioeconomic and political factors of this time, along with the publishing of Locke’s work *The New Negro* are important to the link between social and political ideas such as “justice as opportunity and fairness” (Rawls, 1970, p. 2) with creative acts and expressions in Black arts. This connection is germane to this study’s aim to glean meanings as well as advance a new perspective and possibility for Black aesthetics in education.

Counter to Locke’s cultural perspective, yet just as important to defining a theory of Black art, was the more explicit political view point of Black art of W. E. B. Dubois. Dubois’ *Souls of Black Folk* (1903/1961) aesthetically presented a series of essays on Black America, sociology, politics, and music. In this work, Dubois presents the dual

consciousness in which the Black American found himself or herself, coining the phrase *double consciousness*. Dubois (1926) also wrote about the nature of Black arts and asked important questions regarding arts. In *Criteria for Negro Art* (1926), Dubois addressed questions and concerns such as “What has beauty to do with the world?” and “What has beauty to do with Truth and Goodness—with the facts of the world and the right actions of men?” (p. 295). Dubois’ question “What has beauty to do with the facts of the world and the right actions of men?” implies that issues of beauty are superficial, but the behavior of men is the real project. Given the sociopolitical circumstances of that time, the *actions* of men that Dubois referred to are socially and economically just acts. In this quote, I see the possibilities for Black aesthetics to be understood as aesthetic representations of social experience and as creative acts that highlight or exemplify social justice or the lack thereof.

In *Crises*, Dubois (1926) also set forth four basic principles for the “plays of the real Negro theatre” and asserted that the plays of the real Negro theater must be:

About us. That is that they must have plots which reveal Negro life as it is, by us. That is, they must be written by Negro authors who understand from birth and continual association just what it means to be Negro today, for us; that is, catering mainly to Black audiences and near us—that is, in a Black neighborhood, near the masses of ordinary Negro people. (p. 295)

Dubois advocated a propagandistic approach to Black art. He believed that the best message for Negro artist to convey was one of uplift. However, Dubois was elitist in that he espoused that the Black artist should strive to represent the best of middle and upper middle class Negroes as good examples to set forth before both White and Black audiences. His explicit stance, however, is clear:

I stand in utter shameless and say that whatever art I have for writing has been used always for propaganda for gaining the right of black folk to love and enjoy. I

do not care a damn for any art that is not used for propaganda. But I do care when propaganda is confined to one side while the other is stripped and silent. It is not the propaganda of people who believe white blood divine, infallible and holy to which I object. It is the denial of a similar right of propaganda to those who believe black blood human, lovable, and inspired with new ideals for the world. (1926, p. 296)

Dubois' explicit statements about the function of art and its possibilities for "uplift" for Black people is another point where I make the connection between the social and political experiences and the possibility of a theory of artistic production that is concerned with social justice.

In terms of this study's objective, Locke and Dubois' notions of art highlight the potential for a new perspective on Black aesthetics. Although Locke (1925/1974) held an artistic and democratic vision of cultural pluralism and reciprocity and Dubois (1926) maintained an explicit political and propaganda perspective, both Locke's and Dubois' perspectives on Black art and its purpose were born out of a concern for the social and political conditions of Black people. Therefore, the social and political terrain (or experience) was a material basis from which a Black aesthetic theory might be understood—which is a theory of art that is concerned with actions of men and advocates artworks that inspire socially and economically just actions. Interpreting both Locke and Dubois in this way suggests that Black aesthetics is about "being beautiful," that is, socially just. To my knowledge, this statement had not been theorized in Black aesthetics and presents possibilities for making meanings of the term *social justice* in education.

Locke was a positive influence on such Harlem intellectuals as Langston Hughes, Zora Neal Hurston, and Claude McKay, particularly in terms of helping them to get published and finding financial support. Further, it has been argued that Locke's literary work as well as his philosophical and political influence on younger Harlem intellectuals

helped move the New Negro Movement toward what became known as the Harlem Renaissance. For instance, Burgett (1976) asserted that, through Locke's philosophy, these artists "came to share a common consciousness, which when reflected in their art, signified an optimistic, aggressive pride in their uniqueness and their autonomy as Afro-Americans" (p. 37).

Some of the literary figures of this period who spoke explicitly and implicitly to the social political conditions in the form of poetry, stories, and plays include Claude McKay (1889-1948), Zora Neal Hurston (1891-1960), Langston Hughes (1902-1967), and Countee Cullen (1903-1946). The focus of this early movement was the promotion of Black art and culture. These artists looked for and used the sights and sounds of folk culture, the folk ethos, and folk forms as raw materials of art. It has since been argued that there seemed to be an expectation for the reinterpretation of the community's myths by the creative geniuses of the race (Fowler, 1981). However, these efforts using folk culture and folk ethos were not merely ways to reinterpret the community's myths, but signaled a conscious and unconscious desire of the artists to critique the current social and political circumstance experienced by many in the Black community.

McKay has been credited for being the first major poet of the Harlem Renaissance (Huggins, 1971). His poetry might be characterized as an explicit condemnation of bigotry and oppression as well as a race-conscious verse. In 1912, McKay published *Constab Ballads*, a book that focused on the contempt and exploitation of dark-skinned Blacks at the hands of Whites and mulattos in Kingston, Jamaica. Moreover, McKay's *Home to Harlem* (1928) was the first novel by an African American to become a best seller. Although some assert that McKay was not concerned with living up to the

intellectual, political, or aesthetic expectations of Dubois or Locke, he consciously or unconsciously used traditional poetic forms as vehicles to express his impatience with racism. For example, his poem “If We Must Die” shows clearly the extent of his frustration:

If we must die, let it not be like hogs  
Hunted and penned in an inglorious spot,  
While round us bark the mad and hungry dogs..

If we must die, O let us nobly die ...

Pressed to the wall, dying, but fighting back! (Huggins, 1971, p. 71)

Here, McKay’s poem depicts action. It describes social actions that are not just. The creation of this poem is an example of how sociopolitical conditions and experiences can serve as a particular and important ground to understand Black works of art and again points to a Black aesthetic that is concerned with the just or unjust actions of men and highlights the social and political conditions and experiences of Black people.

Zora Neal Hurston established herself as an artist in Harlem around 1925. She produced *Mules and Men* in 1935, a collection of African American folklore. Hurston’s second novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937/1998) highlighted an individual’s triumph over the limitations imposed on her by sexism and poverty. Hurston (1934/1969) was the first to attempt a formal analysis of Black art in her essay “Characteristics of Negro Expression,” reprinted in *Negro Anthology* (1969). In this essay, she claimed that the most significant characteristics of “Negro expression” included creative scenes in language through the use of metaphor and simile, double descriptives, and verbal nouns. She asserts a theory of asymmetry while describing Black art as having lack of symmetry. For example, she stated, “Asymmetry is a definite feature of Negro art; I have

no samples of Negro painting unless we count the African shields, but the sculpture and carvings are full of this beauty and lack of symmetry” (p. 41).

Hurston went on to make a social and political rationale in her theory. Theorizing that the presence of rhythm and lack of symmetry are paradoxical, she stated that there is always rhythm, but rhythm is in segments. Each unit has its own rhythm, but when assembled as a whole it lacks symmetry. She hinted at the everyday experience of the African American, stating that this circumstance is “easily workable to a Negro who is accustomed to the break in going from one part to another, so he adjusts himself to the new tempo” (p. 41).

Hurston also described a characteristic of angularity, stating: “Everything that he [the Negro] touches becomes angular. In all African sculpture and doctrine of any sort we find the same thing.” She described themes of Negro folklore, which include God and the Devil as prominent subjects, as well as asserting a critique of dominant Western ideal of what art is in describing the Negro characteristic of imitation. She asserted:

The Negro, world over is famous as a mimic. But this in no way damages his standing as an original. Mimicry is an art in itself. If it is not, then all art must fall by the same blow it strikes down. (p. 43)

Here, Hurston indicated that the everyday experiences of the Black American, characterized by unjust social and political circumstances, were easily navigated through mimicry. The Black American adjusted himself or herself to the day-to-day conditions of oppression with angularity and mimicry. Mimicry became a tool for survival as well an art.

Much of Langston Hughes’ writing was poetry, and early in his career, he published mainly in the journal *Crisis*. Hughes’ poetry showed an influence of blues and

jazz, and he published his first collection of verse titled *The Weary Blues* in 1926. He was one of the first poets to make use of the basic blues form. Hughes' first collection of short stories, *The Ways of White Folks*, was published in 1934. His overall corpus demonstrates a racial commitment on the part of the Black artist. As a Black artist, he recognized that Black folklore and Africa were precious resources. Hughes' commitment to Black folklore is also evident in his publishing efforts. For example, in 1926, Hughes along with Zora Neal Hurston, Wallace Thurman, Aaron Douglas, Gwendolyn Bennett, Bruce Nugent, and John P. Davis created a literary magazine *Fire!!* Dedicated to African American culture, this literary journal produced a response to the ideas espoused by their predecessors Locke and Dubois. They felt no need to restrict the content of their work to elevate the image of race as a means of advancing social progress.

In contrast to Hughes and Hurston, Countee Cullen was committed to conservative forms. Although Cullen resisted the label of *racial writer*, his works were known for their race conscious lyrics. For example, Cullen's interest and belief in racial integration is reflected in his poem "Tableau," which also appeared in *The New Negro*:

Locked arm in arm they cross the way,  
The black boy and the white,...../  
And here the fair folk talk  
Indignant that these two should dare  
In unison walk.  
Should blaze the path of thunder. (Cullen, 1991 p. 86)

In these lines, Cullen imagined a social circumstance in which a Black person and White could walk together, in unison. Although the language of this poem does not explain how this particular social context came to be, Cullen invoked the social and political conditions of plural and reciprocal democracy posited by Locke (1942, p. 242). I contend that the idea of a "black boy and a white in unison walk" creates a poetic imagery of the

social political cooperation seen in the social justice conceptions posited by Young (1990) as well as the social justice conceptions posed by Adams et al. (1997).

The art of the Harlem Renaissance in terms of poetry, fiction, drama, music, and painting represents an achievement of major proportions and highlights the will of a people to explicitly and implicitly espouse an aesthetic that concerns or highlights the sociopolitical experience. Although it might be argued that it was merely a literary movement, the Harlem Renaissance served as a form of resistance and a social rejection of racism and shaped the sociopolitical nature of Black works of arts, sparking the possibility of an aesthetic theory that reflects the social justice conditions and actions of men. It seems at this point that Black artwork was a reflection of the right or wrong actions of man and offered a critical moment in Black aesthetic history, suggesting aesthetic meanings of social justice that appear either implicitly or explicitly to Locke, Dubious, and the Harlem Literati in general.

The next section will examine the next generation of artists and their ideas concerning Black art. The following people and their work are briefly surveyed primarily to give a general sense of the development of Black arts but particularly to identify the ideas about the purpose of Black art. At this point, I return to the central focus of this chapter by investigating the structure (in terms of form and content) of Black aesthetics. The social political concerns and experiences continued to function as fertile ground from which the following writers worked.

### **Realism, Naturalism, and Modernism (1940-1960)**

The period immediately following the Harlem Renaissance was characterized by literature that bore the influences of realism, naturalism, and modernism Some of the

writers of this time include Dorothy West (1948, 1995), Gwendolyn Brooks (1945, 1949, 1953, 1956, 1968), Richard Wright (1937, 1940), Ralph Ellison (1952, 1964, 1966), and James Baldwin (1949, 1956, 1961).

Dorothy West, born into a family of middle-class and educated elite of Boston, wrote short fiction that seemed to reflect the racism and the intricacies of social class. West founded and edited a literary magazine titled *Challenge*. She published works by writers of the older Harlem Renaissance generation as well as emerging voices, such as Richard Wright and other Chicago writers. By the time *Challenge* ended its publication, she worked with Marian Minus and edited a new literary magazine, *New Challenge*, with Wright as associate editor. In the mid-1940s, Dorothy West became a regular columnist for the *Martha's Vineyard Gazette*. She published *The Living Is Easy* (1948), a study of upwardly mobile Blacks in the United States and the difficulties they encountered. In 1995, West published *The Wedding*, a narrative that is set in 1950s Martha's Vineyard and uses satire to reflect the island's wealthy Black community. She also wrote a collection of short stories and essays titled *The Richer, The Poorer* (1995b), which focused on African American family life, themes of impoverishment, prejudice, self-development, and desire. West examined these themes with stories about real and fictional relationships. Her essays and stories also explore differences of race, color, and class and bring attention to the effects of poverty and racism upon individual human potential.

Although told through a voice of middle-class elite, West's creative works are examples of artistic narratives that explore social justice in terms of the desire for economic upward mobility and highlight the complexities of social class among Blacks in

America. In terms of social justice as economic redistribution, social division of labor and class (Young, 1990), West's work provides a subtle aesthetic statement of social and political landscape and presents a middle-class aesthetic lens to view or think about social justice.

Gwendolyn Brooks primarily wrote poetry and employed traditional forms in most of her earlier works. Her first poem, "Eventide," was published in *American Childhood Magazine* in 1930. Her first book of poetry, *A Street in Bronzeville* (1945), was published by Harper and Row. She held a Guggenheim Fellowship and became a fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Letters. Her second book of poems, *Annie Allen*, was published in 1949, and in 1950, Gwendolyn Brooks became the first African American to win a Pulitzer Prize. From that time to the present, she has been the recipient of a number of awards, fellowships, and honorary degrees. A turning point in her career came in 1967 when Brooks attended the Fisk University Second Black Writers' Conference and became more involved in the Black Arts movement. Her involvement with the Black Arts movement led to a shift away from a major publishing house to smaller Black ones. However, Brooks' awareness of social issues did not result in diatribes at the expense of her clear commitment to her aesthetic principles and attention to traditional forms such as ballads and sonnets. In addition to individual poems, essays, and reviews, she published a number of books *Maud Martha* (1953), *Bronzeville Boys and Girls* (1956), and *In the Mecca* (1968). Although her poetic writing ranged from ballads and sonnets forms to blues rhythms and free verse, it might be argued that Brooks was a protest poet. However, in *Conversations with Gwendolyn Brooks* (Gayles, 2003), Brooks stated that she wrote what she saw and what was interesting to her (p. 4). She

asserted further, “Some . . . want their poems to become social forces. . . . I am not writing poems with the idea that they are to become social forces. . . . I don’t care to proceed from that intention” (p. 42).

Although Brooks did not characterize herself as “a polemical poet” (Gayles, 2003, p. 40), it is clear through her writing that the social and political landscape of Black America (Chicago, in particular) was an influence on her creative output. Her protest is subtle and complex and marked by suggestion rather than making an explicit social political statement. For example, in *The Bean Eaters* (1960), she referred to the many people who, by economic default, find themselves primarily eating beans. She also crafted “A Bronzeville Mother Loiters in Mississippi, Meanwhile a Mother Burns Bacon” and the ballad “The Last Quatrain of the Ballad of Emmet Till,” which depicts the murder of Emmet Till. Thus, Brooks works point to social and political justice. Her poetic language creates an aesthetic that questions the ways in which people imagine social justice legally. For example, the idea of justice was questioned when she wrote “how shall the law allow for littleness! – How shall the law enchief the chapters of wee brown black chime” (1994, p. 420). Although she worked with traditional forms such as ballads and sonnets, Brooks’ aesthetic stems from the sociopolitical terrain that surrounded her as well as the many Black people that she wrote about, thus providing an aesthetic alternative of making meaning of social justice.

Richard Wright, who migrated to Chicago in 1927 to flee racism, poverty, and lynch laws of the south (Wright, 1945). He turned to communism and began to create a literary voice in the leftist ideological camp of the 1930s. In 1936, he worked as literary advisor for the Negro Federal Theatre of Chicago. However, in 1937, he broke away

from the Communist Party due to his inability to exercise artistic freedom. This break could be seen when he published “I Tried to Be a Communist” (Wright, 1949). Wright (1937) crafted a literary theory for Black American writers titled “Blueprint for Negro Writing.” Originally published in the magazine *New Challenge*, this work highlighted an important moment in the development of a Black aesthetic theory concept. Wright’s “Blueprint” pointed toward a notion of an aesthetic theory rooted in social justice concerns. For example, Wright asserted that Negro writing, until then, had assumed two aspects: “it became a kind of conspicuous ornamentation, the ‘hallmark of achievement’” (1937, p. 53), and “[i]t became the voice of the educated Negro pleading with white America for justice” (p. 53). He further implied added dimensions or purposes of Black art and at the same time critiqued the Black writing since the slavery and freedom narratives. “Shall Negro writing be for the Negro masses, molding the lives and consciousness of those masses toward new goals, or shall it continue begging the question of Negro’s humanity?” (p. 56). Wright spoke to the concept of social consciousness and responsibility and asserted that “the Negro writer who seeks to function within his race as a purposeful agent has a serious responsibility” (p. 59).

For Wright, a deep, informed complex consciousness is necessary to depict Negro life in all of its intricate relationships. He posited that this complex consciousness draws upon the fluidity of lore and crafts this lore with concepts that move the forces of history. Thus, Negro writers must find the materials and experiences that will create a meaningful picture of the world today. Wright encouraged Black writers to embrace a Marxist conception of reality and society; for example, he advanced the idea that a Marxist conception of reality and society would provide the maximum degree of freedom in

thought and feeling for the Negro writer (p. 60). Further, he asserted that a Marxist vision “when consciously grasped, endows the writer with a sense of dignity, it restores the writer his lost heritage as a creator of the world in which he lives as a creator himself” (p. 60). An example of Wright’s complex consciousness is depicted in the Negro life and the intricate relationships in his story *Native Son* (1940). This narrative is widely considered his greatest achievement in fiction. Taking place in the city of Chicago, the story weaves the issues of race and social and economic inequalities, as well as male dominance over women, and represents a novel of urban realism and sociological theory.

Another aesthetic work depicting social and political realism can be seen in the narrative *Invisible Man* by Ralph Ellison (1952). Although Ellison is well known for this work, he experienced as much negative criticism for this piece as he had positive acclaim. Ellison argued the primacy of art over race and politics and advanced that art was universal and personal rather than Black. Although Ellison posited that he “was not interested in injustice but, rather, in art” (as quoted in Graham & Singh, 1995, p. 8), the idea of universality of human injustices is readily seen in the *Invisible Man* narrative. Ellison elegantly crafted issues of corruption and ill will amongst the bourgeoisie elite as well as the working classes throughout the story.

It should be noted that both Wright’s and Ellison’s work stem from the social and political conditions of their time. Thus, both Wright’s and Ellison’s narratives highlight the idea that social and aesthetic concepts are based on pre-existing sets of economic conditions that control cultural activity (Apple, 1990). Although not discussed at length here, both Wright’s *Native Son* (1940) and Ellison’s *Invisible Man* (1952) seem to show a

relationship between a social and economic structure that is unequal and unjust and the production of counter-aesthetic language material.

James Baldwin, however, asserted that “all art is a kind of confession, all artists, if they are to survive, are forced, at last to tell the whole story, to vomit the anguish up” (as quoted in Studs Terkel interview 1961). He was also known for his attack on protest fiction; for example, Baldwin’s *Everybody’s Protest Novel* (1949) critiqued Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* and Richard Wright’s *Native Son*. For Baldwin these served as examples of the limitations and excesses of ideological fiction. Baldwin posited that the idea of the Negro problem along with the fear of Black male sexuality in the United States was particularly reinforced in both Wright’s and Stowe’s work for example: “Uncle Tom’s triumph is metaphysical and since he is black, born without light, it is only humility, the incessant mortification of the flesh, that he can enter into communion with God or man” (1984, p. 17). In this statement, Baldwin indicated that, throughout the Stowe narrative, Uncle Tom is completely sexually repressed. It is implied that he never had sexual fantasies or desires, indicating, to some degree, Tom’s humanity. However, the direct opposite of Uncle Tom, Bigger Thomas, in Wright’s *Native Son*, who has no meaningful relationships with women, is accused of rape, and ultimately kills a White woman, also serves to perpetuate the myth and fear of Black male overindulgence in sex and points to White cultural fear of rape. Baldwin’s overall critique is that both narratives have their limits by feeding into a mythological fear and that both characters played into the role of the imaginations of White America. However, Baldwin’s critique of the limitations of Wright’s work notwithstanding, the thick

description of *Native Son* points to art's ability to define social justice and provides an aesthetic examination of the social and political realities of the time.

Baldwin also produced plays, short stories, and children's books. However, most of his work published in the 1950s and 1960s ranged from addressing male homosexuality in *Giovanni's Room* (1956) to race relations and social turbulence in *The Fire Next Time* (1963).

Baldwin's work held profound implications concerning the definition and purpose of Black art, implying that a Black aesthetic is concerned with social political experiences. It also advocated and inspired artworks that attempt to "tell the whole story" (Terkel, 1961), as Baldwin suggested. It might be argued that Black aesthetics as such would be mere propaganda. If this is true, then at the very least, it presents a moment for a "similar right of propaganda to those who believe black blood human, lovable, and inspired with new ideals for the world" espoused earlier by Dubois (1926, p. 296).

### **The Critical Era or Black Arts Movement (1960-1979)**

The next stage of development (1960-1979), sometimes referred to as the critical era (Fowler, 1981; Napier, 2000), is also known as the Black Aesthetic Movement or the Black Arts Movement. This, too, was a period of literary and artistic development among Black Americans. Hoyt Fuller (1971) was credited for first using the term *Black aesthetic*. The term grew out of frustration at the treatment of Black artists by some White establishment critics, namely in their assumption that Black art work was not to be taken seriously. This stage of Black aesthetics has its history rooted in the political climate of social change in the 1960s and 1970s. The civil rights movement was a time of

heightened struggle. The notion of equality crossed into every aspect of Black American life, including education and the arts.

The relevance of education to the lived experience of Black people became a recurrent theme and the philosophy of a revolutionary struggle that opposed the traditional liberal ideals. Given this historical frame, this chapter explores the ideas and writing of Sonia Sanchez (1967, 1969, 1970), Leroi Jones (1963, 1970), Hoyt Fuller (1971), Larry Neal (1968a, 1968b), Addison Gayle (1971), Haki Madhubuti (1969), and Maulana Karenga (1968, 1977, 1989). These writers are reviewed due to their provocative stances. For this project, understanding the purpose of Black art is integral to defining Black aesthetics as well as positing possibilities for education. These artists and scholars' ideas, although contested, are important to the extent that each spoke explicitly about the purpose of Black art.

Black aesthetics of the 1960s and 1970s expanded the Harlem Renaissance project toward a system of evaluating the artistic works of Black people, which reflected the character of the Black experience. At this time in America, there seemed to be an ideology of European aesthetic judgment that prevailed inside the academy as well as in the commercial or market sphere. Hoyt Fuller (1971) explained that, traditionally, the system of European aesthetic judgment meant that one did not evaluate the artistic works of Black people based on the relevance of the Black experience. Therefore, many artists, including the Black scholars listed above, spoke out against this tradition and embarked on a project to create a system to judge or evaluate Black art.

The Black Arts Movement was an attempt to move beyond the overt cultural mission of the Harlem Renaissance toward a mission that was explicitly political. Thus,

the Eurocentric gaze in the form of aesthetic judgment caused, again, a psychological blow to the Black American artist, as Locke had implied earlier concerning a psychology of inferiority prior to the New Negro Movement when he said “[T]he Negro mind . . . is shaking off the psychology of imitation and implied inferiority” (Locke, 1925/1974, p. x). Somewhere during the course of this history, the Black American mind had slipped back into psychological submission and was in need of an epiphany, or the “psychology of inferiority” had not been completely “shaken off” as Locke claimed. With that thought, I suggest that the Black Arts Movement was another moment when the unjust social and political conditions of the time inspired not only artists but intellectuals as well. Later in the chapter, I will present some Black scholars’ efforts to craft vernacular theories, which underscore the intellectual attempts to link the social experiences of Black people with a theory of Black art expression through language. A theory of black language expression helps create a language nexus from which to make meaning of social and political realities.

Black aesthetics in the critical or Black Arts Movement (the 1960s-1970s) may also be understood as being informed by two primary philosophies: Black Cultural Nationalism and Afrocentricism. In addition to examining the structure of Black aesthetics of this particular period, the aim of this section is to discuss the emergence of Black studies and Black aesthetics inside and outside of the academy.

The 1960s was a time of political and civil turbulence in America. Black Americans were not only in search of civil rights and liberties but also in need of an identity that was autonomous of mainstream perceptions and ideologies. Black intellectuals were in search of more effective means and methods of seizing power. The

search for methods and effective means of seizing power meant that, in order for socially and economically just acts or social justice to be realized, Black artists and scholars would have to first rid their minds of all inferior complexes concerning Black culture. To achieve this, Black writers turned away from the traditional themes and “journeyed toward a Black aesthetic” (Fuller, 1971, p. 5). Fuller contended that the explanation for this move may be clearly understood in the words of Dr. Charles A. De Leon, as quoted in Addison Gayle’s *The Black Aesthetic* (1971):

If young Negroes are to avoid the unnecessary burden of self-hatred (via identification with the aggressor), they will have to develop a keen faculty for identifying, fractioning out, and rejecting the absurdities of the conscious as well as the unconscious White racism in American society from what is worthwhile in it. (1971, p. 4)

For Fuller, the revolutionary Black author had decided that White racism would no longer exercise its control over his work and that he or she would no longer separate literature from reality.

Fuller went on to explain that the problem of irreconcilable conflict between the Black artist and the White critic was the failure to recognize the fundamental truth of American life: “The world of the Black outsider, however much it approximates and parallels and imitates the world of the White insider, by its very nature is inheritor and generator of values and viewpoints which threaten the insiders” (p. 7). Fuller’s explanation indicates that the sociopolitical experiences of Blacks in the world of arts and letters helped fuel a perceived necessity for the Black intellectual to create a system of evaluating artistic works of Black people. These attempts to create a theory opened the possibility of intellectually transcending the judgment of the Eurocentric insider.

Fuller worked as managing editor of *Negro Digest* and wrote critical reviews and commentary regarding the nature of Black arts in America. Fuller (1968) noted the complexity in defining or moving toward a Black aesthetic and highlighted the diverse opinions concerning the role and purpose of Black art and artist:

There is a spirit of revolution abroad in the shadowy world of letters in America. Not all Black writers are attuned to it, of course, and some are even opposed to it. . . . There is a wide divergence of opinion among Black writers as to their role in society, as to their role in the Black revolution, as to their role as artist.” (Fuller, 1968, p. 10)

In this passage, although Fuller perceived a revolution in arts and letters, he recognized that not all Black writers agreed with the notion or connection between social politics, art, and artist. Although Fuller recognized the different and, at times, opposing views among well-known as well as little-known writers, as managing editor of *Negro Digest*, he published fiction and nonfiction works that spoke to the social and political concerns of Black Americans. Fuller’s work as managing editor of *Negro Digest* coupled with its explicit sociopolitical content highlights the social and political nature of his work as well as the political nature of writing and publishing.

Black artists were extremely cognizant of their “outside-ness” and even more sensitive to their economic and political powerlessness and, therefore, saw the need for establishing an identity and unity by means of reclaiming and indoctrinating Black art and culture. For example, in 1965, playwright Leroi Jones established the Black Arts Theatre in Harlem, which led to other groups, such as Spirit House in Newark, New Jersey; The Black House in San Francisco; The New School of Afro-American Thought in Washington, D.C.; the Institute for Black Studies in Los Angeles; and the Organization of Black American Culture in Chicago. These theatre houses and schools were clear signs

of concerted efforts to establish Black art and culture. Jones (1970) presented a rationale for a Black aesthetic, while commenting on the current state of affairs in Jazz music:

The irony is that because the majority of jazz critics are not only White middle class Americans, but middle brow as well. Most jazz criticism tends to enforce White middle brow standards of excellence as criteria for performance of music that in its most profound manifestations is completely antithetical to such standards; in fact, quite often is in direct reaction against them. (pp. 15-16)

Using music as an example, Jones stated that the blues and jazz aesthetic must be seen in as nearly its complete human context as possible to be understood. Jones further suggested that “people” made bebop, but the question the critic must ask is “why?” For him, it was the *why* of Negro music that had been consistently ignored or misunderstood (p. 16), and he asserted that it was the philosophy of Negro music that was most important, and this philosophy was partially the result of the sociological disposition of Negroes in America (p. 14). Thus, it was the “pre-existing set of economic conditions” (Apple 1990) or systems that supported social and political inequalities that caused the Black aesthetic reaction described by Jones.

Charlie Parker and Dizzy Gillespie were key figures in the creation of the bop style. Further, it has been noted that the stated purpose behind its creation was to develop something new as well as to create something that White musicians could not play—and that ultimately would monopolize the music world as was the case with Dixieland, swing, and big band styles (Jones, 1970; Tanner, Megill, & Gerow, 1999; and others). Although the musicians’ efforts to create something new could be seen as a reaction against the sterility and formality of swing as it moved to become a formal part of mainstream American culture (Jones, 1970, p. 16), it was also an effort to create a music that would be inaccessible or unattainable to White musicians. This effort shows a commitment to

“reclaim” an element of Black culture. The important question here concerning defining Black aesthetics is “why?” What were the reasons for the creation of bop music? In short, the social and political experiences of these Black jazz musicians included the perception of a White monopoly of jazz that was seen with Dixieland, swing, and big band of earlier years. This social phenomenon speaks directly to the notion that Black aesthetic works are born out of social and political and, in the case of jazz as a commodity, economic circumstances. Thus, to really understand Bop music (or any Black art), the critic should move beyond the theory of chord substitutions and solo transcriptions that concern many critics and listeners of Bop. They should, however, look closely at the particular experiences that inspired such a creative act. Therefore, Jones’ idea of asking the question “why” of a work of Black art implied that a definition of Black aesthetics advocates or views music as aural representations of social experience that upon hearing and reflection would inspire the right actions of men. Although art will not create authentic change (Catelett, 1975), what is important to this study is the idea that art can “provoke thought and prepare us for change and even help in its achievement” (p. 13).

The desire for social change was also present in institutions of higher learning. The Black Freedom movement from 1955-1965 and the “Black Power” segment of 1966-1975 served as catalysts for the desegregation and the empowerment of Black people. The 1968-1969 student strike at San Francisco State University forced the school to incorporate Ethnic Studies and establish departments of Black, Asian, Chicano, and Native American studies. Several student actions such as the strikes and student takeovers of an administration building at Harvard and Black students’ seizing control of the student union at Cornell University provided further stimulus to the politically and

culturally charged notions of Black studies. By 1971, hundreds of Black Studies departments were organized.

At this point, it is important to note that, although the protests brought about several degree programs and curricula additions in higher education, there was not much (if anything) said in terms of Black aesthetics and its significance to education at the elementary or secondary levels. As mentioned in Chapter 1, the significance of Black aesthetics to education has not been discussed or explicitly theorized in terms of its meaning for social justice in education. However, the traditional school of Black intellectual thinking suggested that knowledge serves the social welfare of Black people and, ultimately, of humanity at large. This notion includes aesthetic knowledge or theory as well. A Black aesthetic theory that inspires artworks that serve the social welfare of Black people is an aesthetic theory of social justice.

Sonia Sanchez was an important figure of the Black Arts movement. She was a pioneer in developing Black studies courses as well as courses in Black English at San Francisco State in 1965. In 1969, she published *Homecoming*, her first collection of poems. She is noted for her intentional use of misspelled words to get the reader's attention as well as her social political explicitness. For example, "We BaddDD People" focused on Black dialect as poetic medium. Her work bridged a link between art and politics as well as critiqued Eurocentric American aesthetic establishment., Sanchez' language comes from her immediate environment and her refusal to use standard academic English can be viewed as part of a broader political statement that deconstructs the use of language as a tool of oppression. For example in *Negro Digest* (1967), she wrote:

america. land of free/dom land of im.mi/grant wh/ites and slave/ blks. There is no real problem here. . . . we the lead/ers of free a/mer/ica/ say. give us your hungry/ illiterates/ crimninals/ dropouts let them fight in Vietnam defending america's honor. we will make responsible citizens out of them or kill them trying. (1967, p. 40).

Sanchez crafted a link between unconventionally written art or poetry, which critiqued the Eurocentric American aesthetic establishment through the political situation of Vietnam. Sanchez' use of language also added another dimension to understanding social justice aesthetically.

Sanchez worked as a poet, author, and activist as well as an academic; her work reveals a concern for exploring the relationship between Black men and Black women and Black children. Her works for children include *It's a New Day: Poems for Young Brothas and Sistuhs* (1971) and *A Sound Investment* (1980), in which her short stories examines issues of identity and love.

The work of Haki Madhubuti (also known as Don L. Lee) set a stage for radical ideas that invoked an explicit political stance for Black aesthetics. Haki Madhubuti established Third World Press and the Institute for Positive Education as ways of forwarding a new conception of poetry and education in the United States (Gates & McKay, 1997, p. 1977). The most salient difference between his ideas of Black aesthetics and the ideas of Black aesthetics already discussed was his penchant for being unabashedly radical in his approach. For example, employing what critics called everyday street talk, Madhubuti published *Think Black* (1969a) and in *Don't Cry, Scream* (1969b), he advanced ideas about what Black art is as well as its purpose in terms of poetry:

Black poetry is written for/to/about and around the lives/spiritactions/humanism and total existence of black people. . . . Whereas, black poets deal in the concrete

rather than the abstract (concrete: art for peoples sake: black language or a Afro-American language in contrast to standard English. . . . Black poetry moves to define and legitimize black peoples reality (that which is real to us). (p. 15)

Madhubuti's quote is also important to the task of defining Black aesthetics. He advocated for Black art (poetry in this case) that is directly connected to the daily lives of Black people. He articulated that he was racially and culturally motivated and quite deliberate in his writing, particularly in terms of employing the Afro American language. His statement that "black poets deal in the concrete, art for people's sake" meant that Black aesthetics should focus on the everyday social and political lives of Black people. At this point, it should be noted that poet/author Gwendolyn Brooks was a fan, supporter, and mentor to Madhubuti. But as mentioned earlier, her awareness of social issues did not result in political art at the expense of her clear commitment to her personal aesthetic sensibilities, and she continued to attend to traditional forms such as ballads and sonnets. However, Madhubuti touched on the psychological implications regarding the purpose for Black art. For example he said: "Black art will elevate and enlighten our people and lead them toward awareness of self, i.e., their Blackness" (Madhubuti, 1969a/1996 p. 5). Madhubuti's perspective advocates a Black art work that is openly and purposefully political. For instance, he stated that "Black poetry will be political" and asserted that "there is no neutral Black art" (p. 16). This statement adds an important layer to the project of defining Black aesthetics and binds the connection between socially just acts, politics, and art. However, what is critical in defining Black aesthetics is the claim that "Black poetry will continue to define what is and what isn't. . . . Will tell what is to be and how to be it" (p. 15). This phrase "how to be it" resonates with the idea espoused by Dubois' question: "What does beauty have to do with the right actions of men?" (1926,

p. 295). Dubois' question implies that art has less to do with ideas about "the beautiful" but should be about actions—"right actions" and, thus, turns the aesthetic project toward the idea of "being beautiful." In a similar manner, Madhubuti's notions about Black poetry not only served to instruct but to inspire people how to "be" or act beautifully in the world.

The following section examines the continued development of Black aesthetics since the 1970s, which included formal analysis, poststructuralism, cultural nationalism, Afrocentricity, Black feminism, and hip-hop perspectives. The focus is to continue to investigate the structure in terms of form and content of Black aesthetics from 1970 and after. At this point, areas in the history that speak to the definition of Black aesthetics are highlighted, as well as those that address the case for advancing the meaning of social justice possibilities in education.

### **Black Aesthetics: The 1970s to the Present**

Since the 1970s, Black aesthetics has moved to include form and analysis, Afrocentricism, poststructural concepts, Black feminist perspectives, and the interconnected complexity between hip-hop philosophy, culture, and rap music. Given the degree of Black aesthetics' influence on popular culture (i.e., blues, rock, and gospel in the United States as well as global music), it seems appropriate and necessary to investigate cultural concepts such as hip-hop and its expression through rap music.

The following section sets forth some of the major scholars who critiqued the philosophies that dominated Black aesthetic discourse of the 1960s and 1970s while discussing what I identify as the subsequent expansion of the Black aesthetic enterprise toward formal analysis, post structural ideas, cultural nationalism, Afrocentricity, Black

feminist perspectives, and the highly commoditized philosophy and practice of hip-hop and rap music.

### **Formal Analysis**

Carolyn Fowler (1981) discussed the utility and notion of Black form and focused her attention on characterizing some of the salient features of Black art that may be consistent in all arts media. In her efforts to typify the Black American aesthetic, she pointed out the notion of balance (rather than symmetry, the core concept of the Euro American tradition) as the central concept:

Balance is knowing how far to go and still get back; how far to bend over in the dance without falling, how long to draw out a note without losing musicality, how far to take an improvisation without losing the theme. (p. 16)

Fowler revealed that balance comes with knowing how to dress extravagantly, mixing bold colors and many patterns. She invoked the embodiment notion with the facility of “celebrative exaggerated body movements” and the balance of histrionic speech patterns, dramatic pauses, and extreme contrasts in high and low pitch in intonation. Fowler gave an analysis of the taken-for-granted ordinary events in Black American life. For example, balance is in the art forms derived from those speech patterns in Black preaching and jazz. The “hipster’s strut” and the tilt of his or her hat is in the domain of balance—knowing how far to go.

For Fowler, this organizing principle may be suitable for all art forms, and with this principle, the notion of “exaggeration” or “extravagance” then became a part of or was “reclaimed” as a sense of what is appropriate, providing one could balance them all without losing control (1981). Other elements common to the Black aesthetic are rhythm and motion. Concerning the domain of balance, Fowler suggested:

Whereas symmetry implies immobilizing a subject, balance implies motion. From the viewpoint of balance, sometimes even stillness is motion, for it is a kind of grooving, a locking into the right wave length or energy field and going at the same speed as the cosmic forces with which he has made contact. (p. 17)

Fowler continued her analysis by considering the elemental feature of flexibility, which she defined as tension within looseness. “It is knowing how loose one can get without losing the tension necessary for existence.” Understanding that tension is in our daily experience as a result of racism, she asserted that Black Americans’ “survival ethos” has worked reality creatively into aesthetic responses. Fowler acknowledged that “grace under pressure” is a peculiarly Black characteristic. Therefore, balance in the context of formal analysis of Black aesthetics, specifically in scenes of the African American experience, may be perceived as a central concept.

### **Scenes of Poststructural Thought**

Winston Napier, one of the leading contemporary scholars in Black literature and criticism, created a space to critique the philosophy that sustained the Black aesthetic. He argued that, for a growing number of Black intellectuals, the critical era, also known as the Nationalists movement, was too focused on ideological platforms and establishing political agendas (Napier, 2000).

Houston Baker’s *The Journey Back: Issues in Black Literature and Criticism* (1980) is an important critique on the developmental issue of Black aesthetics, putting forth his stance on Black art and Black aesthetic movement:

Our stance was nationalistic; . . . The familiar terms were “Black aesthetic,” “Black Power,” and “Nation Time.” If this working vocabulary was limited, so too, was our perspective. We assumed we were fighting for survival, and we took Malcolm X’s words quite literally: we proceeded “by any means necessary” (p. xi).

Larry Neal (1968), another important figure of cultural nationalism, even shifted from Black Nationalist philosophy toward structuralist theories to explore what he understood to be systematic elements of Black America's expressive culture. For example, his Black Nationalist views were expressed in *Drama Review* (1968). He asserted that "a main tenet of Black Power is the necessity for Black people to define the world in their own terms and that the Black artist has made the same point in the context of aesthetics" (p. 23).

Neal summarized the rationale and need for a Black Nationalist philosophy:

It is the natural reaction to an alien sensibility that informs the cultural attitudes of the Black Arts and the Black Power Movement. It is a profound ethical sense that makes Black artist question a society in which art is one thing and the actions of men another. The Black Arts Movement believes that your ethics and your aesthetics are one. That the contradictions between ethics and aesthetics in western society is symptomatic of a dying culture. (p. 39)

Baker's concern about ethics and aesthetics echoes Dubois' (1926) ethical notion of "being beautiful" and "socially just." That there are contradictions between ethics and aesthetics in American society underscores the idea that the "cultural sphere is not a mere reflection of economic practices" (Apple, 1990). In this case, the Black cultural/aesthetic sphere is not a reflection of an unequal socioeconomic system but is mediated by forms of human action. It is mediated by the specific activities, contradictions, and relationships among real men and women (p. 4). The social, political, and economic conditions of inequality necessitated the Black Arts Movement, Black Power, and Black Nationalist language. However, the Black Power rhetoric seemed to wane and not only for Neal; It has been noted that by 1977, African American critics were incorporating the ideas of theorists such as Levi-Strauss, Roland Barthes, and Michel Foucault (Napier 2000).

Houston Baker (1987) and Henry Louis Gates (1988) were among the first Black American theorists to apply poststructuralist principles, in particular, Derrida's

“deconstruction” to their scholarship. It has been argued that Baker’s *Belief, Theory, and Blues: Notes for a Post-Structuralist Criticism of Afro-American Literature* provided evidence or, as he stated, “established in print” the beginnings of an African American deconstructionist theory (Napier, 2000, p. 5). Gates formally applied deconstruction in the Black aesthetic with *The Signifying Monkey* (1988). This piece directly opposed the domination of European cultural and academic values. He created a counter language that seemed more conducive to the analysis of Black culture and literature. Gates’ work further underscores what I identify as the expansion of the Black aesthetic theory:

I have tried to define a theory of Afro-American criticism not to mystify Black literature, or to obscure its several delightful modes of creating meaning, but to begin to suggest how richly textured and layered that Black literary artistry indeed is. By discussing explicitly that which is implicit in what we might think of as the logic of tradition, I hope to enhance the reader’s experience of Black text by identifying levels of meanings and expression that might otherwise remain mediated, or buried beneath the surface. (p. 6)

I contend that Gates, in this passage, moved the Black aesthetic project and expanded its space for theory, not by abandoning its original concepts of reclaiming, authenticating, and agency, but by appropriating different tools (such as incorporating the concept of deconstruction) to make the theoretical mission operational. Further, Gates’ use of African language concepts such as signifying was pivotal in reconstituting the language games of European modes of expression and communication. I agree with Napier (2005) that “deconstructive” concepts have often been at work in the Black community, either intuitively or cognitively. Although Derrida developed a lexicon of poststructuralist epistemological ideas, it is the attack on the concept of truth of Western culture as well as ideas of social justice that extends the Black aesthetic project as evidenced by the practices already present in the African American community. There has always been a

certain level of critique operating within the Black American community. What this means for Black aesthetics is that the works of Baker and Gates serve as intellectual representations of the struggle for liberation and social justice of Black people. Furthermore, on a cognitive level, they extend the Black aesthetic theoretical landscape.

### **Cultural Nationalism and Afrocentricity**

Maulana Karenga (1968) advanced a notion of Black cultural nationalism in the community. He also weighed in as to the purposes of Black art and asserted that Black art had to be “functional, collective, and committed to be considered real and relevant” (p. 5). For Karenga, functional art must self-consciously have and urge social purpose. He asserted that “Black art must respond positively to the reality of revolution and that it is very important that art plays a role in Black survival and not bog itself down in meaningless madness of the Western world wasted” (1989, p. 295). He went on to say that “all art must reflect and support Black Revolution and that any art that does not discuss and contribute to the revolution is invalid” (p. 295). Karenga (1989) explained that Black art must be functional, collective, and committing and dismissed the idea of “art for art’s sake,” claiming “there is no such thing as ‘art for art’s sake.’ And all art reflects the value system from which it comes” (p. 296). For Karenga, art does not exist in the abstract just as freedom does not exist in the abstract. However, “Black art must be an aesthetic translation of our will and struggle for liberation and a higher level of life” (p. 295).

Karenga (1977) created the African American celebration Kwanzaa, which he initially posited to oppose Eurocentric celebrations. “Kwanzaa is not an imitation, but an alternative, in fact, an oppositional alternative to the spookism, mysticism and non-earth

based practices which plague us as a people” (1977, p. 14). In *Kawaida Theory* (1980), Karenga defined *spookism* (for example, Christianity) as “belief in spooks who threaten us if we don’t worship them and demand we turn over our destiny and daily lives” (p. 27). Karenga’s (1989) *Introduction to Black Studies* has served as a point of departure and foundational textbook for Black studies. In it, he asserted that Black studies make contributions to humanity’s understanding of itself, using the African experience as paradigmatic for understanding human struggle and achievement.

Furthermore, Molefi Asante (1980) developed a philosophical concept of Afrocentricity, which he defined as “the standpoint of the agency of African people and the centrality of Africa in its own story” (p. 3). He stated further that Afrocentricity does not merely mean the study of Black people, but a philosophical and cultural approach to the interpretation of the social realities of Black people. Asante’s theory advanced an idea of Afrocentric aesthetics whereby art is functional and works toward the social and political liberation of Africans across the Diasporas. Asante’s work and theory made an impact on public schools. The early 1990s saw Afrocentrism advance in the form of curricula and textbooks developed around Afrocentric themes. In 1991, the Baltimore public schools adopted the idea of weaving Afrocentric studies throughout all disciplines in K-5, and several all Black male schools were established with an explicit Afrocentric curriculum (Mazama, 2003, p. 9).

The fact that the Afrocentric idea made its way into the early levels of education is important to note for two reasons. The first is that Asante posited an Afrocentric aesthetic that directly links the sociopolitical to the idea of social justice. Second, the adoption of his Afrocentric idea by some schools is an important moment that points to

the theoretical possibility of using Black aesthetics language to make meaning of social justice in education. For example, Asante (1991) stated that “Afrocentricity is a frame of reference wherein phenomena are viewed from the perspective of the African person” (p. 171). He also suggested that the Afrocentric curriculum has its roots in the philosophical orientation that argues that education is not a neutral process but a process that is used by government and other institutions for social and political purposes. His Afrocentric aesthetic criteria, in turn, require that art be meaningful and “committed” to African agency. However, this framework implies that an Afrocentric aesthetic should be solely based on the social and political and restricts the creative freedom of expression for the artist.

A major practical limitation I have found is that neither Asante nor Karenga have written a complete curriculum guide for K-12 for teachers to use. Likewise, neither Asante (1980, 2003) nor Karenga (1989) offered any other framework for producing works of art other than serving as a political tool. Further, there is little data in terms of publications that would indicate that either Kerenga or Asante had any formal training in arts or even worked as practitioners within genres such as poetry or fiction, music or drama. Given this lack of attention to practicing, creating, or studying art, it is reasonable to question the very broad (and prescriptive) statements concerning Black art and the purpose of Black artists’ creativity.

However, Ishmael Reed (1994, 2000) offered an alternative to the sweeping generalizations and artistic restrictions implied and asserted by Asante and Karenga. For example, Reed’s fiction, such as *The Free Lance Pallbearers* (1967) and *Mumbo Jumbo* (1972), offers a postmodern critique of language and self-representation. Both narratives

employ the art of signifying, the use of Black vernacular as well as the language of African religion such as Voodoo to create a narrative that critiques the social and political time. Reed's essays further point to his nuanced perspective of Black people. In *Airing Dirty Laundry* (1994), Reed noted that there are social and economic complexities involved in attempting to understand the Black American experience. For example, concerning the issue of the media feeding the prevalent misguided myths about the Black community, Reed used his particular social and economic background to highlight that attitudes within a Black community can be in part influenced by myth, stating:

I grew up in petit bourgeois surroundings where people were not just devoted to the work ethic....the moral exemplars in our community were those who put in a lot of overtime.... I was influenced by these values, but upon closely examining the attitudes of my relatives, and their friends and even myself toward those less fortunate, I realized that some of these attitudes were in fact based upon myths. (1994, p. 24)

This passage indicates that there are a multiplicity of social and economic experiences that might affect one's attitudes and value systems. What is important to note is that Reed understood that even Black working-class Americans' attitudes about those less fortunate (Black or other) are not always based in a balanced perspective. Although Reed (1994) made a call for a balanced perspective in how Blacks are portrayed in the media, he has been characterized by some Black female writers and critics as being misogynist in his work (Smith, 1977), as well as having patriarchal or sexist views concerning the treatment of woman writers. Notwithstanding, my point is that Reed did not presuppose the existence of a homogenous value system in the Black community. Furthermore, counter to Asante (1980), Reed suggested that the multiplicity of experiences of Black people should be considered when creating images in the media particularly but should

be extended to a far less essentialized view of Black Americans or Africans than Asante held.

The Black aesthetic ideas mentioned thus far have not been in terms of constructing a theory of Black art expression that would be useful in elementary, secondary, and higher education levels. However, I contend that the social and political nature of the art created by Reed, such as *The Free Lance Pallbearers*, offers an aesthetic dimension to examine terms like *social justice* as well as to challenge how one might think in terms of defining social justice. This dimension is important to this study in that Black aesthetics presents a possibility for crafting an alternative language to challenge or shed light on notions of social justice in education. The goal for subsequent analysis is to reveal further insights into the project of advancing Black aesthetics and their overall usefulness toward making meaning of the term *social justice* in education.

### **Black Feminist Perspectives**

Another dimension in Black aesthetics, at times in opposition to Black Nationalist and Afrocentric concepts, is the influence of Black feminist theory. Within the highly political atmosphere of the civil rights and women's movements, writer and activist, Toni Cade Bambara edited and published an anthology of nonfiction, fiction, and poetry, entitled *The Black Woman* (1970). Its publication was an important moment because it signaled a major feminist anthology, featuring work by Nikki Giovanni, Audre Lorde, Alice Walker, Paula Marshall, and others. In one of her essays, "On the Issue of Roles," Bambara articulated a feminist thought that argued that "in a capitalist society a man is expected to be an aggressive, uncompromising, factual, lusty, intelligent provider of goods, and the woman, a retiring, gracious, emotional, intuitive, attractive consumer of

goods” (1970, p. 102). Her social and political sensibilities can be seen in subsequent work as well. She later published *Gorilla, My Love* (1972). In *Gorilla, My Love*, the idea of community is a thread that connects the stories in the collection. More importantly, the identity of women within the context of community is a significant theme throughout the overall work. Bambara’s works show her concern with how the wisdom of the community passes from generation to generation or how community “manifests itself in the living.” In *Black Women Writers at Work*, Bambara characterized *Gorilla* as “on the - block-, in the neighborhood, back glances pieces” (Tate, 1983, p. 24) that grew out of a concern for insuring space for children.

Although she worked primarily with the short story form and produced a second collection of short stories, *The Sea Birds Are Still Alive* (1977), Bambara spoke to the sociopolitical in other mediums as well. In the essay “Salvation Is the Issue,” Bambara stated that she “wanted to experiment with new kinds of writing materials and writing forms and to pick up another kind of pencil—the camera” (1970, p. 44). For example, she wrote and filmed the documentary *The Bombing of Osage Avenue* in 1986. The film is about the May 13th, 1985, bombing of the headquarters of the Black organization, MOVE, in Philadelphia. The mayor at that time was W. Wilson Goode, who ordered the attack. More than 500 police officers surrounded 6221 Osage, and a 90-minute gun battle ensued. A bomb dropped from a state helicopter and ignited MOVE headquarters, as well as another 60 houses in the Cobb’s Creek neighborhood. Bambara’s film centers on eyewitness accounts and interviews of the bombing. Underscoring her intention “to tell the truth in her writing,” she used film to expose the brutality and inhumanity of an event that left six adults and five children dead.

Bambara's work is significant in terms of interpreting Black feminist aesthetic as an alternative way to make meaning of what might be perceived as elusive or ambiguous. She highlighted the social and political life world through aesthetic material. She used literature and film as aesthetic vehicles to challenge and redefine notions of social justice. In *Black Women Writers*, she stated that writing was one of the ways she participates in struggle and that "writing was a legitimate way, an important way, to participate in the empowerment of the community" (in Evans 1984, p. 42). I interpret these words to mean that the act of writing (creativity) may serve to communicate and aesthetically respond to social justice issues of inequality, oppression, sexism, and classism.

Other feminist perspectives include the works of Paula Marshall (1959, 1961, 1991, 2000), June Jordan (1968, 1977, 1998), Audre Lord (1978, 1984) and Toni Morrison (1972, 1974). Paula Marshall's works examine the social and political struggles of Black immigrant communities as well as explore the themes of the coming of age, the quest for identity, and the centrality of women's voices. For example, in *Brown Girl, Brownstones* (1959), Black women are central to the story, which addresses the development of a teen-aged girl from an immigrant West Indian family (p. 4). In the context of social and economic 1930s and 1940s America, the significance of women's voices in the family as well as Black culture can be seen in the matriarch character Silla Boyce in *Brown Girl*. In other works, such as *Soul Clap Hands and Sing* (1961), Marshall examined American quest for materialism, racism, and exploitation as well as the intersection between African American and African Caribbean cultures. Marshall continued to explore the complexities of constructing female identity within African American and Caribbean cultures in *Daughters* (1991). She used the voices of her

American Caribbean grandmothers to challenge conventional notions of gender as well as traditional cultural practices.

The work of June Jordan offers another contemporary Black feminist perspective in Black aesthetics. Creating poetry as well as essays, Jordan's work highlights the social and political. She published poetry collections *Who Look at Me* (1968) and *Things that I Do in the Dark* (1977) and political essays such as *Many Rivers to Cross* (1985), *On Call: Political Essays* (1985) and *Affirmative Acts* (1998). Jordan employed explicit social and political language in her poetry and essays. For example, she directly challenged how one might think about gender, male dominance, and identity roles in "The Female and the Silence of Man." In 1980, ideas concerning social and political rights were explicitly questioned in the work "Poem about My Rights."

Audre Lorde is known for her poetry and essays that challenge traditional ideas of gender, sexuality, race, and class. She published *From a Land Where Other People Live* (1973) and *The Black Unicorn* (1978). She is also well known for her book *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (1984). Her work highlights an effort to redefine the notion of difference as well as the importance of the marginalized being heard. For Lorde, a feminist perspective broadens the Black aesthetic project by questioning what it means when the tools of a racist patriarchy are used to examine the fruits of the same patriarchy (1979). Lorde's feminist conception not only deconstructs the traditional means and language tools of patriarchy, but also suggests a radical Black feminist language that might help define ambiguous terms like *social justice*. Lorde's question seems to speak to Young's (1990) definition of social justice, which challenges societal structures that enable oppression and domination in the context of exploitation,

marginalization, patriarchy and violence: thus creating a kind of radical language with which to help define or at least critically challenge how one thinks about social justice.

Toni Morrison is noted for her ability to examine the Black experience and, specifically, the Black female experience within the Black community. For example, her first book *The Bluest Eye* (1972) makes a critique on racism and class stratification. For example, the narrative depicts an adolescent Black girl who is preoccupied with White standards of beauty. Ideas of beauty, particularly those that relate to racial characteristics, are a major theme in this narrative. For instance, the title *The Bluest Eyes* refers to the wish of the main character (Pecola) that her eyes would turn blue. Her social experience taught her to revere Whiteness, and consequently, she views Whiteness as beauty.

Further, insults about appearance are often given in racial terms: a light skinned student named Maureen is given favoritism at school. There is an ongoing contrast between the world shown in the media (like the movies) to which Pauline (Pecolas's mother) escapes and the world where she is a servant, as well as the setting in which the main characters live. A further example of this contrast is seen in Morrison's subtle construction of the narrative chapters. Most chapters' titles appear as extracts from an elementary school reading book, which generally presents a happy White family. This kind of family presentation is a direct contrast with Pecola's existence.

Morrison also explored the notion of community in *Sula* (1974). In this work, she explored the nature of friendship and critiqued the perception that one should conform to the community's expectations. Morrison further challenged utopian concepts of social justice in *Paradise* (1998). In brief, this story might be understood as an examination of justice and agency, interpreting the process of social justice as communal. The *Paradise*

narrative addresses issues of agency and the necessity for building coalition in an oppressive patriarchal society. This story further complicates the dominant liberal and modern conceptualizations of social justice, particularly in the wake of the Civil Rights Movement.

I submit that Morrison depicted (through literature) the complex social and political life world of the Black community by employing a particular Black female lens. Morrison's aesthetic is an example of literary material that constructs a Black feminist language to craft a Black feminist meaning of the term *social justice*. Such narratives as *The Bluest Eye*, *Sula*, and *Paradise* illustrate that justice is understood as inseparable from sociohistorical context, thereby highlighting social justice concepts as an aesthetic reflection of sociopolitical injustices historically experienced by Blacks or any oppressed.

Furthermore, a Black feminist aesthetic in America can be seen in the work of Alice Walker (1970/1988), who focused on southern African American women's voices. Her work demonstrates a commitment to exploring the lives of Black women, examining such social issues as the lives that could be viewed as restrictive and narrow and including women who were physically and psychologically abused, for example, the two main characters (Margaret and Mem Copeland) in the story *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* (1970/1988). Walker challenged 1960s Black American cultural nationalist perspectives, which idealized Black manhood while rarely acknowledging the oppression of women. For example, her collection of poetry, *Revolutionary Petunias* (1973), articulated African American women's frustrations and resistance against injustice. Walker's narratives descriptively depicted women who suffered from communal alienation as well as characters who effectively persevered through oppression brought

on by Black patriarchy as well as the oppression brought by White society in the narrative, for example, in *The Color Purple* (1982). The nuanced social and political views implicit in Walker's work serve to challenge the way people think about justice as well as create an aesthetic language through which to understand terms such as *agency* and *social justice*.

Moreover, in *Toward a Black Feminist Criticism*, Barbara Smith (1977) stated that, for books to be understood, they must be examined in such a way that the basic intentions of the writers are at least considered. Smith, as a leading Black feminist scholar, asserted that, when Black women's books are dealt with at all, it was usually in the context of Black literature, which largely ignores the implications of sexual politics. Smith (1977) articulated another example of Black feminist approach to aesthetics: "A Black feminist approach to literature that embodies the realization that the politics of sex as well the politics of race and class are crucially interlocking factors in the works of Black women writers is an absolute necessity" (p. 132). In this passage, Smith suggested that Black feminist perspectives not only broaden the Black aesthetic project but also create an alternative language that reshapes the politics and tools used to perpetuate racism, classism, and patriarchy as well as the way people think about such ideas as social justice.

The 1980s and 1990s brought the works of Barbara Christian (1980, 1985), Patricia Collins (1998), and Joy James (1999) and further revealed moments in which Black feminists' thought informs the Black aesthetic. Black women theorists of this time engaged the issues of race, gender, politics, and sexuality as analytical tools to broaden the examination and interpretation of women's experiences. The work of these African

American women demonstrates that the incorporation of sexuality and gender expands the analytical tools of politics, race, and action already present in Black aesthetics. Black feminist thought can encourage collective identity by offering Black women and Black aesthetics, more broadly conceived, a different or nuanced view of their world and social justice than that offered by the established order (Collins, 1989).

It should be noted at this point that the Black feminists' concepts as well as the language used by Walker, hooks, Lorde, Smith, Collins, and others were in conflict with the Black Nationalist and Afrocentric ideas and language proposed by some Black male theorists (such as Karenga and Asante). Their explicit Black patriarchal viewpoint on their theories served to further alienate or censure the voices of Black American women. Black feminist language operates as a counter to the language of dominance inherent to some Black Nationalists and Afrocentric theories. The next generation of artist (1980s and 1990s), particularly in music, seemed to have succumbed to sexist and misogynistic qualities as well. This fact notwithstanding, conceptualizations of Black aesthetics, criteria, and work include the concept of hip-hop philosophy and the creation of rap music.

### **Hip-Hop Philosophy and Rap Music**

Hip-hop philosophy, along with its intrinsic connection to rap music, has also informed Black aesthetics. Gates and McKay (1997) indicated that coming out of U.S. Black urban centers of the 1970s and 1980s, rap draws from various sources, such as game chants, competitive trickster toasts, the scat singing of jazz, and the Black Arts Movement poetry of writers such as Amiri Baraka, Nikki Giovanni, and Gil Scott Heron. Gates and McKay advanced the idea that “rappers may draw from dance rhythms as

highly charged, sexualized, and politicized talk-sing from musicians such as Sly Stone, James Brown, and George Clinton” (p. 60). Comparing gangsta rap with realist fiction, Gates and McKay (1997) asserted that gangsta rappers and others “teach listeners by detailing in raw terms, the severe, violent nature of life in the Black urban world” (p. 60). Rappers may draw on the “Black prophetic tradition and urge listeners to new levels of political and spiritual consciousness” (p. 60). All of these sources help to define what a rap musician does and complicate the idea of what constitutes hip-hop culture.

Tshombbe Walker (2003) addressed the complex connection between hip-hop culture and the doing of rap. Walker also invoked DJ KRS ONE:

Rap is something you do; Hip-hop is something you live. While rap is an aspect of African-American oral culture, with deep roots both on the African continent and in the Americas, Hip-hop emerges as a lifestyle informed by the values and ideals expressed throughout the oral traditions. As such, Hip-hop encompasses the full range of experiences of African cultural experiences, including but not limited to ethics, philosophy, history, education, politics, psychology, economics and creative production. (p. 5)

Though contemporary media blurs the commodified cultural products (for example, the baggy clothes, boots, music, art, and language) with the actual creation of rap, closer examination reveals that the heart of the hip-hop philosophy is consistent with ideals of agency and community. To support this, hip-hop philosophy traces its beginnings to the 1970s and maintains a core concept of “edutainment.” This term coined by KRS ONE, refers to the active promoting of positive Black values, such as self-determination and education, or, as he put it, “edutainment” places emphasis on cultural education and socialization as the essential functions of the creative product (Walker, 2003, p. 4).

The essence of hip-hop may be understood as one of the embodied philosophical stances that are characteristic of Black aesthetics. I would like to clarify that rap music

serves as one of the heightened examples of Black aesthetic experience. Rap is the creation—the cultural product. It is the doing: the creating and the performance. Walker (2003) also stated that rap music is the most popular mode of hip-hop expression and warned that it is by no means the sum total of the hip-hop experience and never should be mistaken as such (p. 120). He invoked Smitherman's (1977) definition that rap is an African vocal-expressive modality, referring to one's skillful use of rhythmic speech and rhyme in order to facilitate communication. Hence, the practice of rap (a heightened example of Black aesthetic expression) comes out of the philosophy and style/culture of hip-hop.

I have attempted to articulate what has been identified as the fourth developmental period. Black aesthetics since 1970s is defined by the expansion toward formal analysis, poststructuralism, cultural nationalism, Afrocentricism, Black feminism, and hip-hop concepts. The fact that all of these theoretical frameworks overlap points to the complex nature and current state of affairs, which, in part, defines Black aesthetics in theory and in practice. It should be noted that the word *beauty* has not been a primary focus in the discussion about the Black aesthetic. However, what seems to be consistent thus far is the notion that art should say something about the social and political experience of Black people. It is also important to note that, even when some artists avoided or disagreed with the notion that the work of art or the artist should solely be predicated on the political, sediments of the desire for social justice can be found in the history of Black aesthetics. Therefore, close attention should be given to the nature of an aesthetic theory of Black expression, not only in terms of what this theory might say about the beautiful but also in terms of how to act beautifully or act with justice.

Thus far, I have highlighted important milestones and provocative thoughts that speak to the nature of Black aesthetics. However the next chapter's primary purpose is to highlight some of the problems, contestations, and limitations in defining Black aesthetics as well as in defining its purpose. Thus, the following chapter presents a broad critique of Black aesthetics and highlights some of the critical stances and problems in creating a theory of Black art and expression.

## Chapter 3

### Critical Moments and Limitations of Black Aesthetic Theory

Given the racial, gender, class, and political elements inherent to Black aesthetics, as indicated in the previous chapter, it is important to address the nature of operation and explore the limitations of Black aesthetic theory. This chapter will provide a general critique of Black aesthetic theory and present some of the ideas and conflicts concerning constructing an authentic conceptual framework for Black aesthetics. Reading closely at the various stages of development, the notions of race, culture, sociopolitical aspects, collectivity, and nationalism are recurring themes in Black aesthetic theory. Keeping these themes in mind, the ideas of Mason (1994, 2005), hooks (1990), and West (1999, 2005) are used to consider some of the complexities and problems in the development of Black American aesthetic theory. This chapter first examines the various stances and conflicts over what should serve as an authentic framework for Black aesthetics. The Harlem Renaissance and the Critical Period or Black Arts Movement of the 1960s and 1970s are periods in which the most critical information is readily available; therefore, Black aesthetics from these periods and in the form of rap music from 1980 to the present will be broadly examined. I will conclude this reflection identifying various perspectives in Black aesthetics with specific attention to those literary milestones or moments that frame my analysis and interpretation of Black aesthetics as social justice curriculum space.

#### **Critique: Harlem Renaissance and Conceptual Conflicts**

Various critical texts attempt to interpret the nature of Black American literary aesthetic production. *The Negro in American Fiction* by Sterling Brown (1938), *Negro*

*Voices in American Fiction* by Hugh Gloster (1948), and Robert Bones' *The Negro Novel in America* (1958) serve as significant critiques in terms of structural analyses. However, the nature of the early (Harlem Renaissance) Black American aesthetics is a critical body of work that, beneath the surface, presents Black American language through literature expresses the social and political conditions experienced.

The first major venue for early criticism of Black American literature was the journal *Crisis* (1910), under the direction of W. E. B. Dubois. For Dubois, literature and art should be beautiful and useful: "We want everything that is said about us to tell of the best and highest and noblest in us; we insist that our art and propaganda be one" (Dubois, p. iii). Dubois' position appears to be one of the beginnings of Black aesthetics merging with politics. His efforts are seen as pivotal because they connected ideas of the beautiful with the actions of humanity. The primary issue or limitation of early Black literary criticism in *Crisis* was Dubois' effort to balance the opposition between aesthetic concepts of literature and one of practical value. Dubois' critique of Black aesthetics was based on the conflict between analyses of beauty and the utility of propaganda. Another problematic point involves determining the nature of race and culture and nation in Black aesthetics.

Alain Locke (1925/1974) relied on notions of the collective and collective consciousness in terms of developing a concept of nationalism. For Locke, constructing a theme of nationalism over that of race in Black aesthetic theory and culture was a means or opening democratic possibilities for Black Americans. Locke's *The New Negro* (1925/1974) also marked a milestone in Black aesthetics in that he employed art with the specific motivation toward recording the nature of sociopolitical rise and psychological

uplift of the Black American. However, other critics of this era spoke negatively of the nature of culture in Black aesthetics as well as of the idea of nation in Black arts in America. For example, Schuyler (1926) stated that there had been and would exist Negro art because there are numerous Black nations in Africa, but to suggest the possibility of such development here in America was “foolish” thinking. Speaking of the Black authors of this time period, Schuyler went on to say that “although all Negroes; their work show the impress of nationality rather than race. They all reveal the psychology and culture of their environment—color is incidental” (p. 662). Schuyler, in short, attempted to de-emphasize race-culture in Black aesthetics and replace it with the idea of nation. However, given the very separate and unequal sociopolitical environment of Black Americans, Schuyler’s analysis reveals a narrow apolitical conception of race and culture, one that did not figure the collective unequal economic and separate world that shaped the Black aesthetic visions of social justice. The overarching sociocultural, political, and unequal economic environment in which Locke and others had to work set the basis for their aesthetic formulations and resolutions of the problem of social injustice.

In contrast to Schuyler, Hughes (1926a) indicated that ignoring race robs the Negro artist of his or her informing cultural perspectives and removes the artist from the most fertile source of material, which he defined as the Negro working class life. Hughes’ championing of qualities of lower class Black life highlights the social, political, and unequal economic realities of Blacks as source material. However, his critical stance against the Black middle classes and their desire for Eurocentricity created a subtle irony in that Hughes’ audience included the Black middle class as well as White elites.

Whether by way of cultural analyses or concerns over nationalism, constructions of Blackness continued to be problematic throughout the Harlem Renaissance in that most concepts adhered to racial stereotypes. One of the leading critics against this kind of social construct was Richard Wright (1957). His definition of Black culture included the collective experience of racism that formed a nationalist construction and reflected as much as possible the whole experience of the Black community. Culture was transmitted by a range of speech acts within the Black community and underscored a sense of strength and continuity. In this sense, Black writers and Black American aesthetics played an important role in cultural transmission.

Wright set up criteria for the Black American writer to solidify an enduring understanding of the “collective whole” (1937, p. 54) in Black culture. Wright’s *Blueprint for Negro Writing* (1937) represents another milestone in the development of Black aesthetics. He argued for a social realism informed by Marxist theory. Wright claimed that Marxist ideas offered “the maximum degree of freedom in thought and feeling for the Negro writer” (p. 53) and that “Negro writing in the past had been confined to humble novels, poems, and plays, prim and decorous ambassadors who went a-begging to White America” (Wright, 1937, p. 53). In a place where social justice seems elastic, Wright’s concept for Black American writing as well as his work *Native Son* creates an aesthetic of sociopolitical import.

In agreement with Lewis (1995), I contend that Wright’s work speaks to a historical context that takes into account the fragmented culture of African Americans. Wright’s crafting of *Blueprint* presents underscores the long, complex and, in part, unconscious “struggle to regain, under alien conditions, some form and life of a whole

culture again” (Wright, 1937, p. 69). Wright made a call for a collective effort among African American writers in the face of cultural isolation within a dominant White American culture. He argued that this isolation had “bred generation after generation of embittered and defeated literati” who must come together under the “progressive ideas of our day” in order to succeed (1937, p. 64). Wright’s sense of nationalistic urgency emphasizes that the act of writing, like education, is a publicly committed, socially political conscious act (Apple, 1995). The caution, however, is the problem of how Wright or any artist makes the transition from a nationalist perspective focusing on Black American cultural life toward an explicit and practical revolutionary theory.

From examining the nature of Black aesthetics of the Harlem Renaissance, I understand that the quest and conflict for defining and setting the criteria for Black literary/aesthetic theory did more to conflate the problem of defining the nature of the beautiful and did little to create a theory that was operational beyond those privileged Blacks and intellectuals. Conceptual debates concerning a theory of Black art continued through out the Harlem Renaissance and beyond. However, ideas of nationalism and culture also proved to be important criteria of the Black Arts Movement.

The next section will look at these ideas in terms of how Black aesthetics might be operational in the lives of everyday people. This section aims to show that, in an attempt to move beyond academic abstractions, the next period in Black aesthetic theory became narrow and restrictive in scope.

## **Critique: The Critical Era or Black Arts Movement**

The primary ideological framework for the critical era was the belief in the reality of Blackness and Black nationhood. Its connection with the Black Power movement was emphasized in Larry Neal's "The Black Arts Movement" (1968a). He stated:

When we speak of a "Black aesthetic" several things are meant. First, we assume that there is already in existence the basis for such an aesthetic. Essentially, it consists of an African-American cultural tradition. But this aesthetic is finally, by implication, broader than that tradition. It encompasses most of the usable elements of Third World culture. (p. 29)

Black aesthetic theory at that time held the recognition of the alienation of Blacks as a fundamental benchmark and posited that Black artists should embrace a nationalist stance. An overarching concept in theory and practice was that the artist's job was to speak to the cultural and spiritual needs of Black people (Karenga, 1968).

Although the Black Arts Movement made an effort to advance an ideology of Blackness, as mentioned earlier, it proved more often to be an overgeneralized or essentialized theory of Blackness. I agree with Mason (1994) that, ironically, Black aesthetic scholars often employed categories of analysis rooted firmly in White Western sociocultural perspectives. Also noted earlier, writers such as Walker, Bambara, Morrison, Smith, hooks, and others critiqued the sexism of the Black Arts Movement. Political power in the language of male dominance created the space for feminist revisions of Black American critical aesthetic language. For example, hooks (1990) suggested that the conscious construction of a Black aesthetic by Black American artists and theorists of the 1960s and 1970s was primarily an effort to bond or create a link between artistic production and revolutionary politics. However, links between Black cultural nationalism and revolutionary politics led to the subordination of art to politics.

Instead of engaging and promoting diverse artistic expression, “the Black arts movement began to dismiss all forms of cultural production by Black Americans that did not conform to the movement criteria” (hooks, 1990, p. 107). For example, when the work of art or artistic state of affairs did not fulfill the political-social or racial concepts of Black Nationhood and Black Power, the work was often dismissed (p. 107).

Hooks (1990) examined the Black aesthetic theory of the 1960s and 1970s and suggested that Black aesthetics, as posited by Neal (1971) and Karenga (1968), not only was prescriptive but did not allow for the recognition of multiple Black experiences or the complexity of Black life (p. 108). Keeping with hooks, I contend that, even though the Black Arts Movement insisted that it represented a break from White Western traditions, much of its philosophical underpinning re-inscribed prevailing notions about the relationship between art and mass culture, in this case, Black mass culture. That is, in this sense, ideas concerning naturalism and realism serving to inform mass audiences had already been posited in Eurocentric aesthetic and philosophical discourses. Generally speaking, the artistic creations presented by the Black Arts Movement were “restrictive and disempowering” (hooks, 1990, p 110).

I contend that the critical era’s prescriptive criteria that demanded that works of art highlight and work towards Black power, culture, and nationhood were restrictive and, in some cases, shut down the creative spaces for Black artists. It could be argued that the perspective of Haki Madhubuti (also known as Don L. Lee) was too prescriptive. In *From Plan to Planet* (1973), he was highly critical of the Black artist, stating that “Black Writers Are First and Foremost Black Men and Black women functioning within the context of their respective communities” (Lee, 1973, p. 95). He asserted that “Black men

and Black women writers were Black first and writers second” (1973, p.95). However, this statement presents the idea that the gift of art somehow exists separate from being. That is, one comes into the world with a certain penchant or talent or mode of discourse and cannot separate the nature of his or her talent from his or her particular essence or humanity, the sociocultural construction of race notwithstanding. Like Karenga, Asante, Neal, and others of this time, Madhubuti’s assertions appear to be limiting; for example, “Black art is a functional art “(1979, p. 108) and “Black poetry will be political” (1969, p. 16). However, what is important for this research is that, as a collective body of work, Black aesthetics of this period, particularly the radical language of Madhubuti, created a space and an aesthetic language to help craft the meaning of the term *social justice*. In turn, the Black aesthetic language of the 1960s and 1970s produced a kind of aesthetic social criticism to form new meaning as well as provoke how people think about social justice.

### **Critique: Black Aesthetics Since the 1970s: The 1980s, the 1990s, and Rap Music**

Black American aesthetic theory and criticism experienced a pivotal moment in 1977. The seminar on “Afro-American Literature and Course Design” at Yale University, along with the publication of *Afro-American Literature: The Reconstruction of Instruction*, edited by Robert Stepto and Dexter Fisher (1978), advanced the Black aesthetic project toward a literary and theoretically based analysis of Black American arts. These two events point to revision of the concept of Blackness and Black aesthetics, which had been characterized by hooks (1990), Lewis (1995), and others as essentialized and highly reductive. The recentering of Blackness by Gates (1988) as material object in addition to placing attention on the nature of Black figurative language

also helped to move theory toward outlining textual/language forms. However, drawing from Mason (1994), I contend that Gates' revision seems to revisit or underscore formalist underpinnings. Moreover, a formalist basis of analysis challenges the usefulness of Gates' revisions in terms of creating art as a weapon in the social, political, and economic struggle for liberation as seemed urgent in the 1960s and 1970s.

The theoretical and critical issues regarding the nature and operation of Black American aesthetics remain ongoing and primarily unresolved. The discourse of Black aesthetics in the form of hip-hop culture continues to engage similar art versus propaganda debates of earlier periods. One very critical issue, however, is the sexism and misogynistic flavor of many rap artists' music. Initially, the culture of hip-hop was born out of the Black political consciousness of the 1970s. However, the artistic material forms, such as rap, have modulated toward the absurd and even the "tragic-comic" (West, 1999, p. 481). Drawing from West (2005), I contend that the significance of Black aesthetics in the form of rap music depends on the "moral visions, social analyses, as well as political language strategies that highlight personal dignity, provide political promise, and give existential hope to the underclass and poor working class in Black America" (p. 484). Given this kind of language, suggested by West, Black aesthetic language could expand the various heterogeneous concepts of social justice (as discussed in Chapter 1) as well as suggest alternative language tools to define social justice in the case of differend in education.

### **Summary**

Historically speaking, ideas about the purposes of Black art that are still highly contested have not yet been resolved. The challenge of constructing a theory of Black

aesthetics that includes social change in the form of socioeconomic liberation for Black Americans as well as a theory or system of analysis concerning the nature of Black beauty remains. However, drawing from hooks (1990), I contend that Black Americans can question modernist notions of aesthetics without negating the discourse on aesthetics, and “there can never be one critical paradigm for evaluation of artistic work” (hooks, 1990, p. 111).

It is with hooks’ (1990) point that I argue that theorists of the 1960s and 1970s failed in their attempts to make Black aesthetic theory operational in the lives of everyday people. The prescriptive nature of Black nationalistic, Black, and Afrocentric perspectives as the only critical sources of evaluation for Black art seems naïve and just as misguided as the systems of analyses set forth as vehicles of truth and beauty in mainstream aesthetic discourse. Further, in a postmodern context, many Blacks in America may not have the same fundamental attachment to African, spiritual, or political perceptiveness.

I contend that critical theories about cultural production and aesthetics may confine or restrict the Black artists’ creative space. Hooks (1990) also acknowledged that narrowing and limiting aesthetics within Black communities tend to place innovative Black artistry on the margins. By and large, the nature of Black aesthetic theory remains highly theoretical and has not moved beyond conceptual abstractions. The challenge still remains to actively engage in the world of aesthetic ideas, and in keeping with hooks (1990), I submit that work in education should stem from a space where difference and otherness are acknowledged as forces that intervene in Western theorizing about

aesthetics and curriculum as well as transform the discussion of the Black aesthetic project and its social justice meanings in a differend.

**Perspectives.** The nature of Black aesthetics can be characterized by various perspectives or themes. Themes of collective consciousness and nationalism can be seen early in the 1900s with Alain Locke (1925). As leader of the New Negro Movement, he relied on notions of the collective and collective consciousness by developing a concept of nationalism. Noted earlier, Locke advanced the idea of nationalism over that of race in Black arts and asserted that cultural nationalism through pluralism and reciprocity was a means toward democratic possibilities for Black Americans. A concept of nationalism was also addressed by literary figures ranging from Richard Wright (1937, 1957, 1971) to the work of Maulana Karenga (1980) and Larry Neal (1968).

The connections between Black arts and identity were also debated. For example, Hughes (1926a) believed that race served as a fertile source for the Black artist to draw upon. However, opposite to Hughes, Schuyler (1926) de-emphasized race culture and advanced the idea that Black art had more characteristics of national identity rather than race. Self-evaluation became a principle theme of the 1960s and 1970s, advancing the idea that Black aesthetics would be a system of evaluating the artistic works of Black people, which reflected the character of the Black experience (Fuller, 1968, 1971). Furthermore, Afrocentrism, along with Afrocentric aesthetic criteria, was posited by Karenga (1989) and Asante (1980). Their concepts also challenged ideas of the beautiful while attempting to define an Afrocentric notion of social justice.

Further, structural form and analyses were explored by Hurston (1934/1969) in *Characteristics of Negro Expression*. For example, she examined and described the most

significant characteristics of “Negro expression,” which included creative moments in language through the use of metaphor, simile, double descriptive, and verbal nouns. She explained a theory of asymmetry while at the same time highlighting Black art’s salient lack of symmetry. Further analytical works include Henderson (1973) and Fowler’s (1981) analytical work. Moreover, Baker (1987) was one of the first African American deconstructionist theorists to incorporate vernacular theories to study Black aesthetic culture, and Gates (1988) also challenged dominant Eurocentric epistemologies by invoking African mythology to interpret Black verbal and literary practices in *The Signifying Monkey*.

However, the purpose of Black aesthetics has been a recurring and provocative concern throughout its development. As mentioned earlier, Dubois attempted to balance the ideas of aesthetic concepts of literature with one of practical value. Likewise, decades later, Madhubuti (1969, 1973) and Karenga (1980) advanced the notion that Black art must be functional and support Black revolution, rejecting the idea of art for art’s sake. Given these various perspectives concerning Black aesthetics, the social/political experiences of Blacks in America are inherent to Black art work. Black aesthetics are deeply connected to the sociopolitical contexts from which they were or are created. These social and political experiences are important to understanding the structure or nature of Black aesthetics. It is also important to note the ongoing relation between art and politics in constructing an aesthetic language of social justice.

**The nature of Black aesthetics.** This chapter presented a broad overview and critique of various viewpoints, revealing that there is no single or unified idea or purpose of Black aesthetics. However, Karenga (1980) seemed to provide a clear definition and

suggested that Black aesthetics could be defined as a “distinctive mode of artistic expression—judged in terms of its creativity and beauty as well as its social relevance” (p. 292). However, given the sociopolitical history as well as the sociopolitical nature of Black aesthetics, it can be defined as a theory of art that historically has been concerned with the right or socially just actions of humankind as well as one that inspires aesthetic works that reflect the social and political experiences of Black people.

On the surface Black aesthetics presents unique ways of understanding Black creative acts. However, historically, Black aesthetics has served as a creative space whereby the heterogeneous concepts of social justice, such as identity or recognition, as well as redistribution of economic life chances, could be explored. Therefore, I propose that, situated in the case of differend over the meaning of social justice in education, Black aesthetics should be defined and understood as an aesthetic language that helps create meaning of elusive and intangible concepts such as social justice.

## Chapter 4

### Black Aesthetic Language OF Social Justice

This chapter will focus on selected aesthetic perspectives discussed in the development of Black aesthetics. However, these will be read or analyzed through the theoretical concepts of Lyotard (1984) and Wittgenstein (1958), as discussed earlier. The aim of this analysis is to interpret the various viewpoints, as well as different art creations, in order to craft a different concept of defining social justice in the context of a differend in education. The nature of Black aesthetics may be characterized by various perspectives or themes: some are explicitly political in stance and others implicit. Though there have been various perspectives about Black aesthetics, concern about the social/political experiences of Blacks in America lie beneath the surface. As mentioned earlier, these social and political experiences are important to understanding the relationship between art, politics, and Black aesthetic visions of social justice. This relationship, in part, forms my understanding of how, theoretically, Black aesthetics has created an aesthetic language from which students, administrators, policy makers, and curriculum developers can draw to make meaning of social justice.

*A differend* is “a case of conflict between at least two parties that cannot be equitably resolved for lack of judgment applicable to both arguments” (Lyotard, 1988, p. xi). Conflicts can arise when people are engaged in discourses that are incommensurable (i.e., which cannot be translatable to another). Because there are no rules that apply across discourses, the conflicts become differends. Further, to enforce a rule in a differend is to enforce the rule of one discourse over the other, resulting in a wrong suffered by the party whose rule of discourse is ignored.

Furthermore, there seems to be a conflict or issue concerning the term *social justice* in education. For example, accrediting agencies and schools have dropped the use of social justice language due to its elasticity and ambiguous nature (Wasley, 2006). In addition, there have been various ideas and theories concerning social justice. For example, particular conceptions of social justice include Rawls' (1971) idea of "justice as fairness." He posited that the most "reasonable principles of justice are those that would be the object of mutual agreement by persons under fair conditions" (p. 2) and asserted that justice as fairness should be viewed as a political conception of justice as well as a "basic structure of a modern society" (2000, p. 14). Young (1990), however, situated social justice within institutional conditions from which one might attain full capacities. Her concept of social justice explores the structures that enable or reinforce oppression, domination, marginalization, and violence against social groups.

Moreover, Fraser (1997) described a "post socialist condition" in which there is "an absence of any credible emancipatory project as well as a decoupling of cultural politics from social politics of redistribution" (p. 3), and scholars such as North (2006) have analyzed and interpreted these ideas in an attempt to understand and/or create more "substantive meanings" of social justice (North, 2006, p. 507). Thus, given the various and quite heterogeneous conceptions of social justice, it is easy to understand how some education agencies might argue the elastic or ambiguous quality in discerning meaning of the term *social justice*. However, I interpret the issue concerning the meaning of the term *social justice* as a kind of differend based in language games. Although I do not take issue with the ideas of social justice mentioned, I suggest that those who are involved in education have relied on those language phrases or varying views concerning social

justice meanings and have not been aware of the aesthetic language of Black aesthetics. This analysis aims to show how Black aesthetics is a language that broadens the theoretical lines for understanding terms like *social justice*.

Drawing on Lyotard (1984) I also submit that the ethical problem for postmodernity as well as for education is to present the unrepresentable. In *The Post Modern Condition*, Lyotard suggested that people learn from literary figures such as Proust or Joyce, whose works “allude to something which does not allow itself to be made present” (1984, p. 80). However, the various Black aesthetics perspectives of Locke, Dubois, and Wright, connected with the aesthetic works of Brooks, as well as some of the radical poetic text of Madhabuti, are concepts that, when closely read, reveal an aesthetic language that describes social justice in a manner that, at this time, does seem to be too elastic, ambiguous—or unrepresentable. The task in this study, then, is to search for new presentations, not in order to enjoy them but to impart a stronger sense of the unrepresentable (Lyotard, 1984, p. 81). Given this task, this analysis will also show that Black aesthetics is a language nexus that offers a sense of the ineffable or the unrepresentable in a differend.

Wittgenstein (1967, p. 1) stated that language users experience a particular kind of confusion or confusions when they consider how they might have to distinguish far more parts of speech than ordinary grammar does. He suggested that language plays the users entirely new tricks. It is this very notion that informed or shaped my quest to create more substantive meanings of the term *social justice* in education. Given the supposed ambiguity of the term in the public sphere and in education, I submit that an aesthetic

language realm might help clarify what social justice could mean for social justice education and curriculum.

Drawing from Wittgenstein, I contend that the main mistake made by philosophers, policy makers, and curriculum developers in education is that, when language terms like social justice are investigated, what is examined is the form of the words and not the use made of the form of the words. For Wittgenstein, the idea of *how* words are used meant that language is a characteristic part of a large group of activities—talking, traveling, and meeting people, even writing. He contended that people do not do these activities focused on merely the words, but on the specific instance or circumstance in which they are said (Wittgenstein, 1967, p. 3). The specific instance or occasion of which Wittgenstein speaks includes the sociopolitical circumstances from which Black aesthetics and/or theory emerge. Black aesthetics gives aesthetic meaning to social justice—in the form of visual art, literature, music, dance, and drama. Theorists do not start from certain words or art, but from certain occasions or activities in which these words are formed and used (Wittgenstein, 1967). Given the framework of differend and language games, the following is a close reading of different aesthetic views and artistic works. However, when linked as aesthetic phrases, all point to the ineffable meanings of social justice. Specifically, what follows is a close reading of the Black aesthetics perspectives of Locke (1925) and W. E. B. Dubois (1926), along with the theory of art by Wright (1940), the Black radical poetic perspectives of Brooks (1945, 1953) as well as the radical poetic viewpoint of Madhubuti (1969). This reading highlights that, collectively, these aesthetic perspectives and literary pieces create an aesthetic language concept that could be useful to a curriculum developer, policy maker, or student who

seeks to define terms like *social justice*, particularly in the context of differend in education.

### **Analysis**

In Chapter 2, I noted that the social political conditions or occasions shaped the various theories of Black art, such as Locke's (1925/1974). Locke espoused ideas of collective consciousness and nationalism and, as leader of the New Negro Movement, he relied on notions of the collective and collective consciousness by developing a concept of nationalism. Locke advanced the idea of nationalism over that of race in Black arts and asserted that cultural nationalism through pluralism and reciprocity was a means toward democratic possibilities for Black Americans. Locke's idea of cultural nationalism can be characterized as an existence of social reciprocity in all values—social, economic, and aesthetic or intellectual between White Americans and Black Americans. In regards to culture, Locke advocated the best of Black intellectual achievement as well as those in Black arts. An effort to highlight the best of black art is seen in Locke's *The New Negro* (1925/1974), which was a compilation of fiction, poetry, plays, and essays about Black Americans, African art, culture, drama, and music. Locke stated that the purpose of the work was to highlight the cultural and social progress of the new Negro as well as to document the transformations that had taken place in the inner and outer life of the Negro in America. Locke's effort to document the changes that were occurring in the inner (i.e., psychological or intellectual) life as well as the outer (i.e., social or political) life of Black people is important in that it marked a moment when the possibilities for intellectual, social, political change could be imagined and questioned through art.

Locke's (1925/1974) effort directly linked aesthetic material with the sociopolitical. I interpret *The New Negro* as an aesthetic language in which poetry and literature can be used to glean the meaning of the term *social justice*. That is, Locke's *New Negro* is an aesthetic perspective born out of the concerns of the specific social and political instance or circumstance of his time. *The New Negro* created a space in which to describe the social and political and define social justice aesthetically through poetry, literature, and music. For example, *The New Negro* included Langston Hughes' poem "I Too," in which verses highlight the long-standing social and political conditions in which many Black Americans lived. Hughes wrote:

Tomorrow,  
I'll sit at the table  
when company comes  
Nobody'll dare  
say to me  
eat in the kitchen then.  
Besides, they'll see how beautiful I am. And be ashamed. (lines 8-14, p. 145)

Hughes' text acts as an aesthetic description of the social and political terrain in which the Black American found himself or herself. The poem overall implies a desire or hope that the social injustice of being considered inhuman and, therefore, not worthy of sitting at the table with "company" (line 12, p. 145), (i.e., White people) will one day pass.

I understand that Locke (1925) was directly opposed to art as propaganda. He believed that it was the artists' responsibility to use art and folk materials of the Negro and to represent the common man in art realistically. For Locke, art and politics were mutually exclusive (Locke, 1931, p. 363). He asserted further that "art must first of all give beauty and somehow too, a sincerely truthful version of life, if it is to last" (p. 363). Although he did not advocate for propaganda art, he believed that pluralism, reciprocity,

and democratic possibilities for Blacks could be realized through art. However, to create a pluralistic society means changing or deconstructing the status quo at both the political and cultural levels (Burgett, 1976). I contend that Locke's theory of Black art coupled with *The New Negro* deconstructed the status quo notions of art at the cultural level. The social and political qualities of the aesthetic material in *The New Negro*, such as Hughes' poems "I Too" (p. 145) and "Minstrel Man" (p. 144), helped create a Black aesthetic language. Important to the differend, however, is how people make use of this language (Wittgenstein, 1967, p. 2). Further, Locke's specific language use, such as "art must give beauty" (p. 363), sets forth an aesthetic vision while, at the same time, the text "somehow give[s] sincere truthful version of life" (p. 363) and deconstructs status quo ideas, such as those that espouse apolitical visions of art (Beyer, 2000).

Thus, a sincere truthful version of life must include any attempt to describe social and political conditions as well as the attempt to define social justice aesthetically. In the differend, the notion that art must "somehow too, give sincerely a truthful version of life" (Locke, 1931, p. 363) is a motivated move in the language game that provokes how one thinks about the use of art as well as how one might aesthetically question whose version of art or truth is used. In short, a Black aesthetic theory concept such as Locke's, along with poetic narratives that highlight or provoke thoughts concerning social and political justice, is a link in a Black aesthetic language nexus that allows the unrepresentable (like social justice meanings) to become presentable (Lyotard, 1984). In this light, *The New Negro* is a part of that aesthetic language nexus in the form of art or folk materials of the Black American. Its language use represents an attempt to define humanity in art realistically, socially, and politically. *The New Negro*, along with Locke's language use in

his theory of Black art, creates a move in the language game and differend. That is, words such as *pluralism*, *reciprocity*, and *democracy* (Locke, 1942, p. 196) provoke one to think deeply about the heterogeneous ideas of social justice such as “social justice as fairness” (Rawls, 2001, p. 39). When the idea of fairness (Rawls, 2001) is connected to concepts of reciprocity and democracy (Locke, 1942, p. 196), the meaning of social justice becomes less ambiguous. The social and political language of Locke’s theory of Black art, linked with the sociopolitical aesthetic language of the aesthetic content of *The New Negro*, help lead people out of differend. This language move, situated in a series of heterogeneous discourses, moves toward making presentable such social justice concepts as “basic liberties” and “conditions of fair equality of opportunity” (Rawls, 2001 p. 42).

A Dubosian (1926) aesthetic theory, however, creates a more explicit political language. As an alternative to Locke’s (1942) perspective, Dubois questions the issue of art and the beautiful and implies that the “right actions of man” (p. 295) is the primary project of artistic endeavors. This observation points to a theory of Black art that centers on ethical behavior and views socially just actions amongst humankind as being beautiful. Here, Black aesthetic theory becomes a concept of ethics—presenting an ethical aesthetic concept of social justice. Given the various languages used in conceptions of social justice presented earlier, Dubois’ ethical stance supports the notion of the social good and moral impetus toward social justice. For example, in *Criteria for Negro Art* (1926), Dubois addressed questions and concerns such as “What has beauty to do with the world?” and “What has beauty to do with Truth and Goodness—with the facts of the world and the right actions of men?” (p. 295). Given the social political circumstances of that time, those “specific activities or occasions” (Wittgenstein, 1967,

p. 2), in which Dubois wrote, “truth and goodness” (p. 295) includes the social and political actions of men, those socially and economically just acts. Thus, I understand Dubois’ aesthetic perspective as a theory in which the art or creative acts serve as aesthetic representations of social experience or those that highlight or exemplify social justice or the lack thereof.

Dubois’ (1926) notion that art would highlight or attend to “the right actions of man” (p. 295) creates an aesthetic/ethical language of social justice. Dubois’ theory of art introduced the ethical into art and writing. The notion of ethical writing, in turn, offers a curricular dimension for Black aesthetics. That is, in the context of differend, Dubois’ language “the right actions of man” (p. 295) speaks to the question of “how do we act artfully as curriculum designers” (Beyer & Apple, 1998, p. 5) as well as how do we act artfully and define social justice in education. The language “right actions of man” (p. 295) attends to the issue of how people treat others responsibly, justly, as well as how they create a curriculum (space) in which ideas of the beautiful and the definition of social justice are connected, with the possibility of social justice being realized through the language of art. Black aesthetic language viewed this way becomes an aesthetic theory that brings an interpretation of social justice. In the context of differend, Dubois’ “right actions” (p. 295) perspective presents a language that one might use to think about, define, and enact social justice in the context of differend in education and curriculum.

Dubois’ *Souls of Black Folk* (1903) aesthetically presents a series of essays on Black America. Although a sociological study, his *Souls* employs the language of the Negro spiritual, which Dubois called “Sorrow Songs” (1961, p. i). His examination as well as his discussion of songs created and developed by slaves within the context of a

sociological study bridges the sociopolitical with art. In the last chapter of *Souls*, “Of the Sorrow Songs,” Dubois stated: “And so by fateful chance the Negro folk song – the rhythmic cry of the slave – stands to –day not simply as the sole American music, but as the most beautiful expression of human experience” (1961, p. 182).

For Dubois, the Negro folk song was a gift to the nation as well as to the world, as he stated “in these songs, the slave spoke to the world” (p. 185). What is important in a differend, however, is that the language of these folk melodies speak directly to the day-to-day experiences of domination, violence and death, like the words used in “O Lord, keep me from sinking down” (p. 186) and “dust and ashes fly over my grave, but the Lord shall bear my spirit home” (p. 188). The psychological yearnings and social and political “strivings” (1961, p. 15) of the oppressed in “my soul wants something that’s new, that’s new” (p. 187) mark the achievement of a wholly satisfactory description of the way things are (Wittgenstein, 1922, sec. 6.5). Wittgenstein suggested that facts are only facts and that everything that might render the world meaningful must lie elsewhere (1922). Therefore, that which people in education care about (i.e., social justice meanings) lies in the aesthetic phrases of *The Souls of Black Folk*. Both Locke (1925) and Dubois (1926) specifically employed sociopolitical and ethical language to impart aesthetic visions of social justice. Linked together their work become aesthetic phrases with which to transcend what can be said or spoken of social justice.

In examining the sociopolitical viewpoint of Richard Wright, it can be seen that Wright’s perspective on Black art and writing presented an explicitly Marxist sensibility; however, his narrative *Native Son* serves as another link in the Black aesthetic language nexus through which to make the elusive presentable. For example, Wright’s “Blueprint

for Negro Writing” (1937) represents yet another milestone in the development of a theory of Black art. Wright was explicitly political in his stance and posited that art should be functional and that it was a social responsibility for the Black writer. He asserted “the Negro writer who seeks to function within his race as a purposeful agent has a serious responsibility” (1937, p. 59). Wright suggested that Negro writers must find the materials and experiences that will create a meaningful picture of the world and encouraged Black writers to embrace a Marxist conception of reality and society, suggesting that a Marxist conception of reality and society would provide the “maximum degree of freedom in thought and feeling for the Negro writer” (1937, p. 60). Wright argued that a Marxist vision, when consciously grasped, gives the writer a sense of dignity as well as “restores the writer to his lost heritage as a creator of the world in which he lives” (1937, p. 60).

Here, it should be noted that, as a performing artist, I do not advocate the abject submission of the creative act to politics, nor did Wright. He indicated that he did not mean “that the Negro writer’s sole concern should be the social scene” (1937, p. 62). What is important to note, however, is that Wright’s political language (however leftist or Marxist at the time) pointed to a theory of art born out of a concern for social and political justice. Wright’s “Blueprint” is understood here as a political aesthetic theory whose language is useful in a differend concerning the meaning of social justice. The language employed, such as the idea concerning writers and artists working as “purposeful agents” (p. 59), offers the differend an explicit political language for determining the meaning of social justice while the use of the word *responsibility*

presents ethical implications to the aesthetic exploration of concepts and terms such as social justice.

Every utterance, even in written aesthetic form, should be thought of as a move in a game of languages (Lyotard, 1984). Lyotard suggested that an observable social bond (in terms of language), as well as the work done in social institutions, is composed of “moves” (p. 11). Wright’s perspective, which was born out of the social and political bond of inequality, shaped his language concept in “Blueprint.” In turn, “Blueprint” does not only represent a theory of art whose language is rooted in the social and political concerns; it creates a move (Lyotard, 1984) in the language game of defining terms such as *Negro writing* as well as expanding the concept and the way one defines or shows social justice through writing or art. Thus, I submit that Wright’s *Native Son* (1940) is a move in the language game and a differend concerning social justice. It also serves as an aesthetic phrase and, when linked with Locke (1925) and Dubois (1926), helps create a Black aesthetic language of social justice. To show this, I will examine specific passages in *Native Son* that point to ideas of social justice.

*Native Son* (Wright, 1940) highlights the social political occasion (or the lived experiences) from which Wright produced that narrative and points to the notion that issues of social and political justice, if not completely realized, are at least made known or “presentable” (Lyotard, 1984, p. 80) through art. Wright’s language use helps to clear up ambiguity in the differend concerning social justice. For instance, the overall language use of *Native Son* refers to social justice and issues of recognition and redistribution, as well as perceptions of life and economic chances and patriarchal oppression and

domination. A close reading reveals that these issues are explicitly and subtly woven throughout.

The narrative is divided into three sections “Book One: Fear” (p. 2), “Book Two: Flight” (p. 81), and “Book Three: Fate” (p. 231). Wright (1940) began with addressing the idea of life chances in “Book One: Fear.” Bigger Thomas, the protagonist who should have been on his way to a job interview, took a detour toward the pool hall to discuss planning a robbery with his friend Gus. On the way in, Bigger shared a cigarette with Gus and, while smoking a cigarette, they both noticed planes sky writing; then, the conversation turned to learning to fly planes. Wright addressed social justice issues such as “fair equality of opportunity” (Rawls, 2001, p. 43) early and used a language that reflected the social and political conditions of many Blacks in America at that time.

These elements can be seen in Bigger’s and Gus’ dialogue:

Them white boys sure can fly,” Gus said.

“Yeah,” Bigger said, wistfully. “They get a chance to do everything. . . . I could fly one of them things if I had a chance” Bigger mumbled reflectively, as though talking to himself. (p. 14)

In this passage, Wright’s use of the term “white boys” is a subtle move in the language game. The use of the term *white* in a seemingly every day conversation of two young Black men does more than superficially describe the pilots; rather, it highlights or draws attention to the social and political scene. Gus’ statement “white boys sure can fly”, underscores the social and political climate of the 1930s and 1940s in America when Wright wrote. The notion that the plane would be flown by White men was a social and political reality for Bigger, Gus, and many others. A close reading of the text, “they get a chance to do everything” (p. 14), implies a perception or reality of unequal division between those who have all chances and those who have none.

In this narrative specifically (and in American society of this time, broadly speaking), the word “they” (p. 14) means White men in particular, implying the exclusion of Blacks, the phrase “get to do” implies action or engagement or the fulfillment of the “good life” (Lynch & Baker, 2005), and the following word “everything” (p. 14) implies more than just material goods but includes the social and political intangibles, such as life chances to which Rawls (2001) alluded. The social and political conditions that shaped or inspired Wright were not shaped by “equality of condition” (Lynch & Baker, 2005, p. 132) but by conditions of inequality alongside those social institutions that unknowingly reinforce status quo conditions (Apple, 1995).

Texts in Wright (1940) that further point to the sociopolitical and economic scene are noted in Gus’ response to Bigger. Gus states, “If you weren’t black and if you had some money and if they’d let you go to aviation school, you could fly a plane” (p. 14). The use of the words “if” and “they” are important to understand in the language game. The use of “if” allows room for conditions or a change in rules that, in turn, presents a sense of possibility. The word “they” in this passage alludes to White men, in particular, who have power to allow or not allow Bigger to go to aviation school. Here, the phrase “If they would let you go to aviation school” (p. 14) implies a widely held perception (by many Blacks) that power was solely held by Whites. Given the social and political conditions in America (e.g., segregation, Jim Crow, etc.) from which this narrative was written, this widely held perception and the language used—“They own the world” (p. 19)—is understood. This language use in these passages when situated in the context of differend concerning social justice helps clear the ambiguity concerning social justice issues in terms of life chances and socioeconomic equality.

It is important to point out that Wright (1940) did not simply craft a narrative in which a primarily good character is a victim of a cruel society. Bigger is painted as one who is primarily selfish in terms of motivation and drives. For example, initially, he has an opportunity to work for the Dalton family (who happens to own the small one-room apartment in which he and his family live). However, Bigger was angry. “He hated his family because he knew that they were suffering and that he was powerless to help them” (p. 9). Although the job possibility offers Bigger what he said he wanted, a chance, he was angry and bitter: “Yes he could take the job at Dalton’s and be miserable, or he could refuse it and starve. It maddened him to think that he did not have a wider choice of action” (p. 11).

As in the dialogue with Gus earlier, Wright (1940) made use of language that pointed to issues of social justice, such as life chances or equality of conditions that would foster a broader sense of choice. Bigger was overwhelmed by the sense of responsibility while feeling powerless as well as having limited options. Wright crafted the narrative in a manner that suggests that Bigger had more power than he imagined. Wright complicated what would be a simple narrative about a noble protagonist victimized by injustice. He implied that, even in those moments of feeling powerless, the power to choose, the decision in how to act, lies within the individual. For example, during the dialogue concerning the robbery scheme, Wright narrated that “Bigger felt a curious sensation—half sensual, half thoughtful. He was divided and pulled against himself”(p. 21). As the story progresses, it is understood that Bigger was, in fact, afraid to go through with the robbery and eventually crafted a way to avoid the crime.

As the story in Wright (1940) advances, Bigger took the job and, while working as a driver for Ms. Dalton one evening, Bigger tried to assist Mary, who was in a drunken state, back to her house. However, afraid of being accused of having had sex or, worse, raping a White woman, Bigger committed the most heinous crime. The fear of being caught inside her room by Mary's mother brought about violent images of what could happen to him. Therefore, Bigger made a choice and "covered her entire face and pressed firmly. And he pushed downward upon the pillow with his entire weight, determined that she must not move or make any sound that would betray him" (p. 74).

Again, Wright (1940) did not paint a noble character in his aesthetic construction—Bigger was clearly concerned about his being betrayed. However, "he had killed a White woman" (p. 75) and later chops and burns her body in a furnace (p. 79) and attempts to flee the city. Bigger did these heinous acts in fear. The social and political climate in America made the act of raping White women punishable by death—historically by lynching in the south. So, rooted in fear, Bigger wrestled with the notion that somehow he had no power, no control, and was left with no other options.

The moral issue of murder is obvious. However, it should be pointed out that Wright's (1940) complex narrative helped make social justice ideas presentable in the context of differend. As the events leading up to Bigger's trial unfolded, he was called a "monster" (p. 304), and there was a call for his life. He was eventually represented by an attorney named Boris A. Max, who was identified in the narrative as "the Negro's Communist lawyer" (p. 310). A critique of a change in venue is important to note in that it hints at the ineffable or what lies beneath the surface of the term *social justice* and points to the extent and possibilities of social injustice enacted by the legal system:

A change in venue is of no value now. The same condition of hysteria exists all of this state. . . . If anybody but a Negro boy were charged with murder, The States Attorney would not have rushed this case to trial and demanded the death penalty. (p. 318)

This passage highlights the general assumption of that time that Bigger (or any accused Black man) was guilty because he was Black, and the inevitable punishment by death, most Blacks had learned to view as inevitable. *Native Son's* language, in this passage, points to how social justice can be shown or made present in terms of a fair judicial system, thus implying that the meaning of social justice resides or can be found in the “right actions” (Dubois, 1926, p. 295) of a legal system carried out by humankind.

Another textual example in Wright (1940) that further points to social justice in terms of fair judiciary for all is noted in “Book Three: Fate.” For example, Bessie Mears was Bigger’s girlfriend, whom he also murdered out of fear of betrayal. In court, Bigger’s attorney acknowledged that Bigger was not on trial for the murder of Bessie and pointed to a social politics of not recognizing the significance of Bessie’s humanity. He asked, “Does not the life of a Negro girl mean as much in the eyes of the law as the life of a white girl?” (p. 336) and went on to suggest that Bessie was largely omitted from the consciousness of Bigger Thomas and that his relationship to Bessie a “poor Black girl also reveals his relationship to the world” (p. 336). This text and specifically the idea of the question “Does not the life of a Negro girl means as much in the eyes of the law” (p. 336) is an aesthetic reflection of the social and political conditions in America that shaped “Bigger’s most intimate dealings with his own kind” (p. 336). It is argued ultimately that “the fear of killing a white woman filled Bigger to the exclusion of everything else—his consciousness was determined by fear” (p. 336). The kind of unconscious and conscious fear by which Bigger was stricken was constructed and

embedded in the social political fabric of American life. The concept of ineffable panic that struck Bigger was born out of the day-to-day experience in a social and political system that condoned lynching. In the context of differend concerning social justice, *Native Son* is a complex aesthetic whose overall narrative language reflects an explicit concern for the socioeconomic distribution of life chances and power through such specific words as “if they let you . . . you could fly one of them planes” (p. 14) and “they own the world” (p. 19). Although Wright did not develop the social issue of patriarchy and male domination, Bigger’s misogynistic behavior, the psychological and physical violence endured by Bessie, and the court’s decision to legally ignore her murder point to the notion that sometimes this country’s institutions re-inscribe or perpetuate the oppression and domination of others. In an effort to link the aesthetic phrases examined thus far, I return to the rules that govern the differend concept in order to bridge the ideas set forth thus far.

In a differend, the two parties coming to an agreement about the sense of a referent is the important point (Lyotard, 1989b, p. 13). In the differend set forth here, the referent is social justice. Given the social and political language of Locke’s *New Negro* (1925/1974), Dubois’ *Criteria for Negro Art* (1926), and Wright’s “Blueprint” (1937) and *Native Son* (1940), when linked together, become aesthetic “phrases” (Lyotard, 1989b, p. 13) that help link the various “heterogeneous phrases” (Lyotard, 1989b, p. 13) or concepts of social justice such as those of Rawls (2001), Young (1990), Adams et al. (1997), and others discussed earlier. Given that “genres of discourse supply the rules for linking together heterogeneous phrases, rules that are proper for attaining certain goals; to know, to teach to be just” (Lyotard, 1989a, p. 13); *The New Negro, Criteria for Negro*

*Art*, and *Native Son* collectively create aesthetic phrases. When linked together, these form an aesthetic language to help make meaning of the heterogeneous concepts of social justice. If employed or used in the differend, then the aesthetic phrases of Locke, Dubois, and Wright create aesthetic language counter-moves in the language game concerning the meaning of social justice. These countermoves interject an aesthetic meaning and transcend what ordinary language might impart.

Earlier, I identified a milestone in Black aesthetics in the work of Gwendolyn Brooks. Specifically, in 1967, Brooks attended the Fisk University “Second Black Writers’ Conference” and subsequently began to work more in the Black Arts Movement. In addition to individual poems, essays, and reviews, she published a number of books *Maud Martha* (1953), *Bronzeville Boys and Girls* (1956), and *In the Mecca* (1968). Although Brooks did not characterize herself as “a polemical poet” (2003, p. 40), her writing shows a concern for the social and political landscape in Black Chicago, particularly, and America in a broader sense. It was noted that her language use was subtle and marked by suggestion rather than making an explicit social political statement. Her collection of works entitled *Blacks* (1994) highlights poems of social and political import. For example, in “The Bean Eaters,” she speaks to ordinary people as well as the economic conditions many Blacks found themselves: “They eat beans mostly, this old pair. . . Plain chip ware on the plain creaking wood, Tin Flat ware . . . . As they lean over the beans in their rented back room” (Brooks, 1994, p. 330). This passage not only depicts a narrative of everyday people who have aged, but brings about images of the economically disadvantage. A close reading of the words *rented* and *back room* indicates

a condition of not owning property as well as the economic condition of only being able to afford a single back room of a boarding house.

The poem “A Bronzville Mother Loiters in Mississippi. Meanwhile a Mississippi Mother Burns Bacon” depicts the lynching of Emmet Till. Ironically, however, Brooks used a familiar fairy tale to reflect the story of a brutal social injustice:

Herself, the mild-white maid, the maid mild . . . pursued by the Dark Villain.  
Rescued by the Fine Prince. (Brooks, 1994, 6 -8, p. 333).

In this passage the “maid mild” is the wife of the murderer, and her husband (the man charged and later acquitted) is her “Fine Prince.” The “Dark Villain” represents Emmet (a 14-year-old boy accused of whistling at a White woman). As the “maid mild” cooks and burns the bacon, she reflects: “But there was a something about the matter of the Dark Villain” (19, p.334):

He should have been older, perhaps.  
The hacking down of a villain was more fun to think about  
When his menace possessed undisputed breadth, undisputed height.  
And a harsh kind of vice. And best of all, when his history was cluttered  
With the bones of many eaten knights and princesses. (20 -25).

These lines indicate that the wife is consciously aware that something is not right with the actions of her husband (or society). She attempts to make sense of the lynching by reflecting on the typical villainous conceptions. The killing would be “more fun” as well as being married to a murderer would be easier to deal with psychologically if only Emmett had had a history of vice. But what weighed heavily to the core of this wife was that:

The fun was disturbed, then all but nullified  
When the Dark Villain was a/  
blackish child. (36)

As a mother, it is reasonable that she, too, understood the magnitude of injustice brought about by her husband's hands. The words "grown ups were supposed to be wise" (32) speaks to the idea that wisdom would bring about wise acts. Wisdom, in this, case is connected with acts of humanity. The repetition of the phrase "nothing could stop Mississippi" (78 & 81) speaks to the idea that systems of state such as the legal system, in their silence, sometimes re-inscribe or condone oppression. "Nothing could stop Mississippi" (78 & 81) indicates that even the federal court of appeals would not intervene with support.

Brooks' poetry also creates an aesthetic phrase that questions the ways in which social justice is imagined in terms of humanity and the humanity of Black women. For example, in "In the Mecca" (1994) she wrote:

how shall the law allow for littleness! – How shall the law enchief the chapters/  
of wee brown Black chime – wee brown-Black chastity?/ (10 & 11, p 420)

In this passage, Brooks pointed out that, in the context of the Emmet Till lynching specifically, as well as with the broader American social and political terrain of that time, there was a notion that White female chastity was more significance than Black female chastity. Thus, the language use aesthetically critiques the social and political scenes that ignore the humanity of Black women. Although she worked with traditional forms such as ballads and sonnets, Brooks' aesthetic stems from the sociopolitical terrain that surrounded her as well as the many Black people whom she wrote about, thus providing an aesthetic alternative to the heterogeneous phrases and concepts of social justice.

Yet another link in the Black aesthetic language nexus is provided by the concepts proposed and crafted by Haki Madhubuti, whose ideas about Black art and language use create a radical move in the language game and present an overall radical phrase in which

to construct a concept of social justice. Madhubuti (also known as Don L. Lee) crafted radical language that invoked an explicit political stance for Black aesthetics. In *Don't Cry, Scream*, Madhubuti (1969) advanced ideas about what Black art is as well as its purpose. He made a conscious move in the perceived language game and refused to employ the Standard English of White middle-class America in his writing. Rather, he advocated for Black art (poetry in this case) that was directly connected to the daily lives of Black people—particularly the people who did not use standard forms in day-to-day speaking. Following Lyotard's (1979) notion that invention is always born of dissension, I read Madhubuti's poetic efforts as inventive as well as pivotal in the game of language. He is racially and culturally motivated and quite deliberate in his writing, particularly in terms of employing the Afro American language. Madhubuti consciously used the poetic language of the Black vernacular (the Black vernacular particular to the streets). He asserted further that "Black poets deal in the concrete, art for people's sake" (1969, p. 15), which meant that Black aesthetics focuses on the everyday social and political lives of Black people.

Madhubuti's (1969) perspective advocated for Black art that is openly and purposefully political. He stated that "Black poetry will be political" and asserted that "there is no neutral Black art" (p. 16). Madhubuti's idea of there being no neutral art can be seen as a case of differend. In a differend, (i.e., the case in which there is disagreement between two parties concerning a referent), the linking of one phrase to another is problematic due to the heterogeneous nature of the phrases as well as there being no rule governing the linkage of these phrases (Lyotard, 1989b). Thus, in the differend set forth in which there is a lack of agreement on the meaning of *social justice*, the sociopolitical

language of Black art such as *Don't Cry, Scream* creates a move in the language game that constitutes an explicit connection between social and political lived experience and art creation. For example, in "The Third World Bond (for my sisters and their sisters)," Madhubuti (1969) wrote:

They were  
blk/revolutionist.  
& they often talked  
of the third world (lines 1 -4)

The language used here is socially and politically radical from the onset. The spelling of Black as "blk" marks an effort to write or capture a Black vernacular language. It serves as a counter-move to the sociocultural and bourgeois system of writing and spelling Standard English. The word *revolutionist* also brings about a radical sociopolitical image and highlights a language that is never politically neutral. For example:

They were revolutionists /  
& the blk/sisters knew it/.....  
While the brothers/ the revolutionists/  
made bonds with the  
third worl'".  
the sisters waited/  
(& wondered when the revolution would start). (lines 1-7, p. 56)

The words *blk*, *sisters*, *brothers*, *third world*, and *revolution* are connected to the idea of radical social and political change. The text brings about a palpable sense of urgency for social and political action.

This same sense of urgency and a heightened social and political awareness is magnified in "A Poem to Compliment Other Poems (Madhubuti, 1969, p. 36). Madhubuti used the word *change* 74 times in the poem, and in each line, the word *change* is connected with another word, an image or idea of sociopolitical import. For example, lines such as "change is something written on southern out-/houses. Change" (lines 11-

12) evoke the sociopolitical image of Jim Crow and segregation as well as the broader social injustices common at the time in the United States. In addition, “change, like a blues song talking about a righteous tomorrow” (38) points to an aesthetic like the blues songs that reflect the hope or desire for social and political change for the future, and “now now change, for the better change” (65) implies that social and political change should be immediate. The repetition of the word *now*, linked with social justice ideas, creates an immediacy or urgent sense that social justice is imminent.

In the language game, this poem along with others such as “Re- Act For Action,” works as a link with other Black aesthetic phrases to create an aesthetic language that helps intangible concepts like social justice become known and the sense of what seems ineffable becomes aesthetically expressed. Madhubuti (1996) wrote:

act in a way that will cause them  
To act the way you want them to act  
On accordance with yr/acts & actions:  
human acts for human beings. (21-28)

The use of the words *human* and *acts* in the “occasion or occurrence” (Wittgenstein, 1958/1967) of rendering this poetic phrase is a pivotal move in the language game in that the line “human acts for human beings” (28) can be linked with the notion that ideas of the beautiful are connected to the right actions of mankind in terms of human actions.

It should be noted here that what is important is the application or “use made” (Wittgenstein, 1967, p. 3) of this language. That is, in the context of differend, the use made or the application of “Re-act” as an aesthetic phrase helps construct an alternative language conception to understand social justice meanings. In this context, Madhubuti’s Black aesthetic perspective and his poetry become part of the Black aesthetic language nexus that connects the sociopolitical, economic justice to artful human acts. Therefore,

when linked together as aesthetic phrases that speak to social justice and as aesthetic phrases that help draw a connection between ideas of the beautiful with the right actions of humankind, *Don't Cry Scream* (Madhubuti, 1969), *Blacks* (Brooks, 1994), *Native Son* (Wright, 1940), and *The New Negro* (Locke, 1974) become creative occasions or moments that make social justice conceivable (Lyotard, 1984, p. 81). When ordinary speech acts confound or make ambiguous due to the heterogeneous nature of discourse, Black aesthetic language transcends and constitutes imaginative and intuitive knowledge of social justice. Therefore, given the social and political subtext of these phrases—those that are subtle (i.e., Locke and Brooks) as well as the explicit (Dubois, Wright, and Madhubuti)—the Black aesthetic language transcends ordinary speech and becomes an alternative aesthetic language concept that highlights an intention toward social justice meaning.

## **Conclusion**

The social and political yearnings, strivings, and experiences of Blacks in America are inherent in Black arts and Black aesthetics, suggesting an ongoing relationship between art and politics in Black arts. Black aesthetics linked as phrases become social justice texts and expressions. Furthermore, as social justice text, Black aesthetics informs education by transcending material notions of social justice toward aesthetic ethical meanings of social justice. The referent *social justice* within the differend then becomes tied to the notion of humanity and human rights.

In further developing this argument, the following chapter will place Black aesthetic language ideas and their meanings of social justice within the context of differend in education and discuss the possibilities and recommendations for using the

Black aesthetic language concept to explore the ethical meanings of social justice in education.

## Chapter 5

### Black Aesthetics and Social Justice

The purpose of Black art has been a recurring and contested question throughout the development of Black aesthetics. Dubois (1926) attempted to balance the ideas of aesthetic concepts of literature and aesthetic concepts of practical value. Many years later, Karenga (1971) advanced the notion that Black art must be functional and support Black revolution, rejecting the idea of art for art's sake.

Although there have been various opinions, the social/political experiences of Blacks in America are important in understanding the ongoing relationship between art and politics in Black aesthetic theories and art, which is where I have different understanding and purposes for the history of Black aesthetics. Although earlier assertions seem to have said little in terms of how Black aesthetics might inform and create a new meaning of social justice in education or curriculum, this analysis suggests that social justice is a recurring language motif sediment within the Black artworks discussed and thus provides an aesthetic lens through which to inquire and make meaning of the term *social justice*.

There can be no authoritative or definitive philosophy of social justice. The diversity in American culture makes it necessary that institutions move away from a principle that embraces an ever-changing and multifaceted world. In education, this move would require philosophical alternatives of social justice that are dynamic in response to diversity. The use made of a Black aesthetics corpus as curriculum space (for social justice) moves beyond the general survey of the history of Black arts to examine social and political language concepts in Black aesthetics

In the next section, I return to the ideas of making meaning for social justice in the context of difference in education while presenting findings of this study that suggest that Black aesthetics as a language reveals images of sociopolitical formations and conditions from which they are born. I will then discuss Black aesthetics and its social justice meanings in education.

## **Discussion**

The problem this research is concerned with is the lack of attention to the implications of Black aesthetics in terms of creating social justice meanings at the elementary, secondary, and collegiate levels. This analysis makes an effort to highlight a different dimension or purpose for Black aesthetics, that is, to help transcend curriculum habits of exclusion and hegemony and invoke new ideas of making meaning of social justice.

In Chapter 1, I briefly explored the term *social justice*, which seems to be ambiguous for many and has provoked various debates in the field of education. As mentioned earlier, the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education decided to drop the “controversial language about social justice from its accrediting standards,” an action brought on by a concern that social justice is too elastic that it could be used to discriminate against individuals who [do not] subscribe to a given institution’s interpretation of the phrase (Wasley, 2006).

However, I suggest the use of Black aesthetics as a possible language that various institutions could use to interpret the term *social justice*. This aesthetic language possesses instrumentality in that it can help define or make meaning of social justice. I contend that language is an instrument of power and propose its use for interpreting and

exploring social justice issues. Therefore, Black aesthetics would include art, in the form of poetry and literature, which would highlight the struggle for social and political power. If language has its meaning in its use (Wittgenstein, 1958), then Black aesthetics, when used as a curriculum of social justice ideas, frees education from oppressive language concepts. Black aesthetics, broadly speaking, does not allow ambiguous language in terms of social justice and sets forth direct and indirect language that might be helpful for societies or institutions that care to grapple with the meaning of social justice.

North (2006) primarily presented “three spheres of social justice”: macro/micro, sameness/difference, and redistribution/recognition (p. 528). At the same time, Fraser (1997) presented a “post socialist condition” and suggested that many appear to be moving away from a socialist political imagery in which the central problem of justice is redistribution to a political imagery in which the central problem of justice is recognition (p. 3). Although Fraser complicated social theories that limit discussions of justice to distribution of goods and services or the social structures that enable such material inequality, a Black aesthetic lens also complicates the discussion by challenging competing claims about substantive meanings of social justice. The varying theories about Black aesthetics as well its language as curriculum enlarge possibilities for more socially just educational policies, programs, and practices. I agree with North who resisted a “unified conceptualization of social justice” (p. 528). However, I contend that Black aesthetics adds to the complexity and relational aspects of social justice theories and their meaning for education.

## **Black Aesthetics Texts and Meanings for Social Justice in Education**

Black aesthetics, since slave literature, has pointed toward social and political justice. Though the Harlem Renaissance served as a form of resistance and a social rejection of racism that shaped the nature and a theory of the Black aesthetics, the Black aesthetics of the 1960s and 1970s expanded the Harlem Renaissance project toward a system of evaluating the artistic works of Black people who reflected the character of the Black experience. History reveals that this experience was highly social and political and that the character of the Black experience included concerns with ideologies that perpetuate one form of social or political power over another. Given the history, Black aesthetics, in the broad sense, might contribute to humanity's understanding of itself by using the African experience as a heightened example of a paradigmatic human struggle and achievement (Karenga, 1988).

During the 1960s and 1970s, education and its relevance to the lived experience of Black people became a recurrent idea. It is through this historical framework, augmented by the writings of Leroi Jones (1965), Larry Neal (1965, 1968), Addison Gayle (1971), Maulana Karenga (1988), and the works of Brooks (1968, 1994), that could be helpful in understanding that social process and experiences influence the production and reproduction of aesthetic, cultural, and philosophical material.

Black aesthetics explicitly and implicitly point to social and political transformation. For example, emerging from the social and political context of the 1930s and 1940s, Wright's theory of *Native Son* (1940), at first, appeared to be a project that was critical of a low achiever. However, after close examination, it is revealed that *Native Son* was an explicit attempt to move social consciousness and behavior toward social and

political justice. Furthermore, Asante (2003) stated that “collective consciousness is an action—demonstrable and meaningful in terms of psychological and political actions, and we must respond to external forces” (p. 35). Those external institutional forces to which Wright alluded in his narrative were, indeed, social and political.

It might be argued that Wright’s (1940) psychological and political response to “external factors,” in part, resulted in his theory and the narrative *Native Son*. According to Adorno (1944/1997), concepts always carry buried within them, even when they look entirely abstract, the traces of bodily pleasure or suffering (p. 178). Wright’s “Blueprint” (1937) and *Native Son* (1940) reflect traces of past and current suffering and point toward a Black aesthetic language meaning of social change and social justice.

Black aesthetics is a critical body of art and scholarship that sought over time to deconstruct powerful racist intellectual categories and White supremacy. In this light, Black aesthetics is viewed not only as a body of scholarship and works of art but also as a space that aesthetically embodies social and political transformation. Therefore, Black artworks along with the various theories of Black art create aesthetic language concepts that transcend current material meanings of social justice in education.

Benjamin (1977) suggested that every idea contains an image of the world and expresses unintentional truth. This thought suggests that various ideas offer subjectively unintended truth about the aspects of the world’s structure. Black aesthetics’ various conceptual forms (e.g., literature, Afrocentricity, signifying, and rap) serve as constellations, sets of aesthetic concepts or clusters of words and terms that assist in the reconstruction of particular meanings of social justice—in terms of action. In short, Black aesthetics reveals the unintentional truth about sociopolitical formations and conditions

from which it is born. Black aesthetics, in this manner, adds a dimension to making meanings of social justice by conceiving of social justice as a way of being, not as a thing, and therefore, Black aesthetic meanings of social justice are directly and indirectly connected with what it means to act beautifully. It is the ability to question and reconfigure the social and political life-world that indicates important motives and a role for Black aesthetics in education.

Black aesthetics expands the boundaries and understanding of social justice in education, presenting various modes of being and perspectives. Social justice concepts in Black aesthetics speak of ethical events or humane, sociopolitical actions. I contend that Black aesthetics shows that social justice is not a priori subjective but emerges from human subjectivity. Black aesthetics, to an extent, embodies an aesthetic “will to power” and generates particular aesthetic constellations of perspectives (i.e., literature, poetry, Afrocentricity, signifying, and rap), pointing to a ground from which a person or group might understand its world.

The significance of human life is the ability to be creative and inquire about one’s environment and oneself (Nietzsche, 1982), and all knowledge is contestable and in a constant state of flux. Thus, it is through aesthetic inquiry that Black aesthetics brings added dimensions and contests the ideas and meanings of social justice in the lived world and in education. Black aesthetics presents the will to power as suggested by Nietzsche (1968) of different social justice perspectives. Black aesthetics’ language and its will to power might help generate new institutions and modes of organization/thoughts as opposed to relying on the sometimes rigid societal structures (i.e., education/curriculum) as sources of what counts as social justice (Irwin, 2003, p. 240). This, social justice is

something to be achieved through willing, choosing values to motivate actions. Black aesthetics offers a space through which education and humanity can derive meaning and purpose. It is through this aesthetic that those who make decisions in education and curriculum can rid themselves of outdated moral truths and concepts of social justice.

Moreover, Black aesthetics and its attention to language underscore a refusal to live with stagnant representations of the beautiful and of justice. Further, an awareness of creative possibilities of all knowledge is meaningful to life, for enhancing culture, humanity and education specifically (Irwin, 2003, p. 242). It highlights the scope of the relationship between politics, humanity, and the arts, and at the same time, the application of Black aesthetics critiques education's modes of social organization (schools and curriculum) and issues of intellectual equity and difference. Broadly speaking, Black aesthetics rejects the view that the world (in this case education or curriculum) determines truth or that the world is the final court of appeal that compels one to accept what is social justice or what one should believe in terms of social justice meanings (West, 1999, p. 482). Black aesthetics presents an alternative theory of the beautiful and, in turn, provides added dimensions to how social justice concepts may be understood and realized.

The concepts of social justice addressed by Fraser (1997) seem to presuppose concerns with distribution of material goods in terms of identity politics. For example, Fraser described the postsocialist condition and asserted that many have moved away from a socialist political imagery, in which the central problem of justice is redistribution, to a political imagery, in which the central problem of justice is recognition (Fraser, 1997, p. 3). However, the knowledge created through Black aesthetic language, which

might be intuitively understood as ethical, can serve as an aesthetic realm of making meaning of social justice in education. Ethical action in education is in a state of becoming and, according to Nietzsche (1968), “knowledge and becoming exclude one another” because the character of the world in a state of becoming is “false” and self-contradictory (p. 280). Consequently, there must be a will to make social justice knowable and meaningful in education. Thus, Black aesthetics presents aesthetic visions to provide new thinking and meaning of social justice in education.

## Chapter 6

### **Philosophical Considerations in the Application of Black Aesthetics in Education**

Previous chapters showed that the Black aesthetic orientations include a broad range of ideas. One observation is that no single philosophy should be advanced as authoritative or definitive regarding the study or purpose of any art. Further, a contextualist philosophy, such as that of Leroi Jones (1963, 1970), or the radical aesthetic of Madhubuti might be suitable for a specific kind of student population such as the college student while being quite inappropriate for others such as elementary students. It might be argued that creating an all-purpose Black philosophy or theory of art by combining several Black aesthetic perspectives would be less effective in that a program would then focus on conflicting issues of aesthetic significance.

Likewise there can be no authoritative or definitive philosophy of what constitutes social justice in education. However, given the diversity in American culture, which includes differing worldviews, institutions, and languages, it seems reasonable to move from a principle that embraces an ever-changing and multifaceted landscape. In education, this move would require philosophical alternatives of social justice that are flexible in response to diversity. The use made of Black aesthetics as curriculum space (for social justice) moves beyond the general survey of the history of Black arts by examining the social and political language concepts in Black aesthetics.

The manner in which I interpret and use the language of Black aesthetics also informs curriculum. Black aesthetic concepts of social justice underscore the relation between theory and praxis. For example, Black aesthetics in the form of Dubois' (1926) theory links the notion of beauty with ethical behavior. Bambara's documentary *The*

*Bombing of Osage Avenue* (1986) is an example of how aesthetic medium can expose the issues of social injustices or unethical behavior while giving the opportunity for one to reconstruct notions of social justice and humanity as beautiful actions. Bambara's works, as well as the narratives of Toni Morrison, Alice Walker, Richard Wright, and others, are all part of the Black aesthetic language that creates an alternative for making meaning of social justice in education. Drawing on Wittgenstein (1958/1967) I contend that the meaning of language as well as practice is in its use. I interpret Black aesthetics (i.e., narratives, film, music, drama, etc.) as a language that expands material concepts of social justice, such as the redistribution of goods. Black aesthetics offers alternative ways of thinking about the beautiful in terms of beautiful behavior or actions.

Educational practices and curriculum through a Black aesthetics lens create a space in which explicit exploration of social justice meanings can be conducted in terms of how people might act beautifully. In education, acting beautifully is the conscious effort of educators to imagine and construct curriculum that inspires the right actions of human kind. In this light, curriculum would explore alternative ways to teach and inspire socially and politically just actions.

The social political language inherent to various Black aesthetic perspectives used in this study presents the possibility of understanding and using Black aesthetics as an aesthetic language to help make meaning of perceived ambiguous terms like *social justice* in education. For example, a curriculum or an education that seeks to explore meanings of social justice examines the aesthetic perspectives and concepts that stem from the Black American social and political experience.

The concept of Black aesthetics historically viewed and used as a curriculum space introduces an aesthetic meaning or idea of social justice. The following ideas are advanced as essential suppositions in support of the study of Black aesthetics in curriculum at all educational levels. First, most Black experience in America is a sociological phenomenon that is still significantly different from most White experience in America, as indicated by a unique history, economic and political disparity, and social alienation. Second, out of this Black experience have emerged a variety of Black artistic expressions. I submit that these expressions reflect, in varying degrees, the cultures from which they develop. Black American aesthetics, in all its variety, constitutes an integral part of the American art culture of the past and present. The cultural heritage of this nation is comprised of a plurality of cultures of which the Black culture is one. Recognition of a plurality of cultures as well as their aesthetic ideas of the beautiful and social justice leads to an awareness of the plurality of values and multiple aesthetic meanings of social justice.

Educators who are interested in social justice and its meanings would use these objectives and incorporate the theories and art of Black Americans as part of their arts curriculum. Social justice in education means that educators would create an atmosphere of professional interaction and cooperative scholarship with colleagues who challenge conventional ideas of social justice, such as the distribution of material goods, identity recognition, or superficial multicultural platforms.

Treatment of Black aesthetics in education requires consideration of two issues. The first concerns philosophical orientations or approaches. The second concerns the implications for course design that would be guided by these varying philosophies. As

stated earlier, no single philosophy should be advanced as authoritative; therefore, it must be recognized that flexible philosophical alternatives are needed. Although the demand for multicultural arts subjects in the curriculum challenged the fundamental structure of traditional aesthetic education at the practical levels, Black aesthetics and the concept of Black aesthetic theory have been generally excluded in aesthetic education.

### **Black Aesthetics and Recommendations**

This history of Black aesthetics reveals that curriculum, pedagogy, and the significance of Black aesthetics to education have not been primarily discussed nor emphasized in the discourse of Black aesthetics. Fuller (1971), frustrated by the treatment of Black artists by some White establishment critics on the assumption that Black artwork was not to be taken seriously, is credited for first using the term *Black aesthetic*. Likewise, an assumption that Black artwork should not be taken seriously also seemed to be implicitly true for education and curriculum. It has since been argued that much of the scholarly work in education has been written from a “universalist” (Western) or at best a “multiculturalist” perspective (McCarthy, 1995, p. 315). It is this state that allows the possibilities for Black aesthetics as a social justice curriculum that challenges how one might think about what constitutes beauty and justice. Black aesthetics is not completely concerned with beauty *per se* but challenges educational traditions and presents an alternative understanding of what it means to *be* beautiful. Black aesthetics is significant to education in that it offers an alternative lens through which aesthetic concepts and meanings of social and political justice might be explored.

Beyer (2000) suggested that the advent of the more individualistic and scientific modern age gave credence to assumptions that were quite different from previous

(traditional) understandings of art, which placed emphasis on the “essence” of the art object. He asserted that the historic movement away from emphasis on the art object to focused attention on the aesthetic experience may be understood as a concern for the quality of empirical experiences that are made possible through guided perceptual interaction with an art object as opposed to a concern to apprehend its internal essence (Beyer, 2000, p. 5). In terms of Black aesthetics in a broad sense, Gates’ (1988) theory of signifying and rap is an example of aesthetic works or acts of the day-to-day realms of human social and political experience.

Beyer (2000) also suggested that aesthetic education vision includes understanding art: its value and significance. He identified and was critical of “attitude theories,” which accentuate the presentational, distanced formal qualities of art that reduce viewers’ attention to the surface features while trivializing its content (Beyer, 2000, p. 13). Contrary to the “attitudinal” aesthetic theory, Black aesthetics does not separate art from personal insight, nor is it distanced from social and political context. Aesthetic meanings do not reside in isolated objects. It is through the personally engaged attention of individuals with the art object or event that an aesthetic meaning is revealed.

Artistic creation and aesthetic appreciation are socially and historically bounded, and situating aesthetic forms within their social and/or political context must lie in the center of any adequate aesthetic theory (Beyer, 2000). Black aesthetics is the answer to “What sort of aesthetic theory might help us in understanding the connections between the arts and contemporary material and social conditions and how those conditions might be altered?” (Beyer, 2000, p. 68). For example, Black aesthetics in the form of rap music creates scenes of dialogue or a dialectical exchange, highlighting that there is a dialectical

intersection between the nature of a society's institutions and the aesthetic forms and feelings it produces and values. The artists, such as KRS ONE, Mos Def, and Common (to name a few), advocate promoting positive Black values, such as self-determination, and assert that education should place emphasis on cultural education and socialization as essential functions of the creative product (Walker, 2003, p. 22). Therefore, Black aesthetics, broadly conceived, is transformative in that its language works to construct a critical, socially conscious alternative theory of social justice and promotes collaborative, collective pursuits that work toward the overthrow of relations of dominance in society characterized by oppressive and unequal relations of power and domination (Beyer, 2000 p. 83).

### **Reconceptualized Meanings of Aesthetics Education**

The significance of Black aesthetics to making meaning of social justice in education might be understood in terms of a revised conception of aesthetic education, which includes social action. Works of art can provide a critique of current situations that challenge the accepted order of things. For example, Beyer (2000) asserted, "Students need to be encouraged to use aesthetic forms to illuminate or challenge contemporary issues (the pattern of sexism, racism, or social class exclusion; the atrocities of hate crimes, violent, often gunshot-ridden conflict; other forms of conflict)" (p. 104). By situating Black aesthetics, such as rap music, as a social action domain within education, Black aesthetics can be used to foster an education or curriculum environment that seeks to produce a dialectical, participatory, situated feminist aesthetic, an aesthetic that breaks with the dominant notion of art as personal expression and resituates it, connecting the

social with the political and placing the artist as producer in a new situation of responsibility for her or his images (Beyer, 2000).

In terms of social justice, Black aesthetics contextualizes its creations and significance and fosters a commitment to using such experiences in schools to critique current realities and to promote new ways of seeing, knowing, and doing. This particular element of doing subscribes to the action that shapes aesthetic education toward the realm of social change and presents Black aesthetics as a text that points to social and political action and justice and transforms what social justice means in education. Thus, Black aesthetics is understood as a revised version of aesthetics education, serving the best interest of schooling. For instance, Beyer (2000) asserted, “Our students need encouragement to use aesthetic forms to challenge contemporary issues such as racism, or social class exclusion; hate crimes, guns other forms of personal violence; and war” (p. 104). Beyer’s revised aesthetic projected toward the political clearly makes room for the previously silenced voices to be heard. A call for aesthetic educators to embark toward a “revised theory of aesthetic experience” (Beyer, 2000, p. 104) requires courage and willingness to abandon or forego previous notions of aesthetic education as absolute. To accomplish this endeavor, educators must become more sensitive to the aesthetic qualities of all experiences and must be fully committed to using these experiences in the curriculum to promote new ways of seeing and to challenge current realities.

Black aesthetics’ meanings of social justice in the context of education would involve those who have been engaged in traditional aesthetic thinking to imagine other ways of being and to use different concepts of the beautiful beyond the sensuous and move in the direction of how to act beautifully (i.e., embodying political and social

justice). In education, Black aesthetics illuminates cultural, social, and political episodes of aesthetic experiences. Representations such as Black American music, visual art, theatre, and dance may then serve as heightened examples of those aesthetic experiences. Therefore, teaching Black aesthetics language would mean attempting to understand the sociopolitical context that shapes that Black aesthetic expression. This approach should be the heart of the education enterprise in terms of making meaning of terms like social justice.

## **Chapter 7**

### **Limits of This Study, Implications and Possibilities**

The idea of personal subjectivity and the issue of cultural relativism pose immediate limits to this study of Black aesthetics. The theoretical concepts I chose to engage in this study could also be viewed as major impositions that reflect my personal bias and sociopolitical inclinations as well as my personal understanding of critical and social critique. However, my personal experiences as a student, teacher, and professional musician have shaped my interpretations and the questions I created, as well as my conclusions. Therefore, my construction of this history of Black aesthetics and the subsequent analyses should be seen as one of many possible interpretations.

It might be argued that this study still leaves open the question concerning whether there can be a unified theory of Black beauty. To be certain, given the history of Black aesthetics, there can be no unified definition of Black beauty. This philosophical problem notwithstanding, this study found that further attention to the issues raised inside and outside the academy concerning what is social justice can be aesthetically understood. Through Black arts language, the idea or meanings of social justice have been questioned and aesthetically understood. They serve to inspire the right actions of men and women of a 21st-century society and beyond.

#### **Implications and Possibilities for Education**

Given the multiplicity of ideas in Black aesthetics, no single theory or philosophy should be advanced as authoritative or definitive regarding the study of Black aesthetics. For example, the ideas espoused by Baraka (1963, 1970) that might be characterized as a contextualist philosophy might be suitable for a specific student population. While other

radical philosophical work, such as Madhubuti's *Don't Cry, Scream* (1969), might be inappropriate for elementary student populations. However, advancing a general, eclectic philosophy (i.e., combining several Black aesthetic perspectives) might prove effective in creating substantive meanings of social justice in education. This approach seems reasonable to the extent that America is a multifaceted society that is continually changing. American diversity requires philosophical alternatives that themselves are flexible and responsive to the seemingly elusive terms such as *social justice*.

In terms of curriculum, Black aesthetics language will connect the African American intellectual and artistic traditions and the Western European/White American cultural philosophies of the beautiful with what counts as aesthetic curriculum. The use of Black aesthetics as social justice language-curriculum supports a general theory of educational and curriculum democracy set forth by Locke (1942). The assumption is that the study of Black aesthetics in some form needs consistent development at all levels. The final section of this chapter is devoted to exploring areas relative to Black aesthetics in teacher training and curriculum that are in need of further research.

There are two areas of concern regarding teacher education. The first is preservice training or formal education of the prospective teacher in the university. The second involves in-service training of experienced teachers in the field. It might be argued that the novice teacher depends on his or her teacher training institution to determine and provide the knowledge and skills necessary to work successfully as a teacher. Given this assumption, it seems that the faculty of the teacher education program would determine whether or not social justice is an important concept or aspect of their students' education. Moreover, the faculty would also determine whether Black aesthetics is

important in the project of making meaning of social justice education as well as take the initiative in developing a curriculum that is appropriate to the needs of students. In that vein are offered the following suggestions concerning preservice and in-service teacher training as well as procedures for developing a course of study.

**Preservice teacher training.**

1. Regarding the volition of the school administration and faculty, committees challenged to formulate academic policy might be encouraged to perform a study of the need for incorporating into the curriculum social justice concepts that include all philosophies or theories that broaden social justice interpretations.
2. Such a committee might examine the current ideas of social justice in that institution's curriculum. It then might ask whether or not the treatment of the subject of Black aesthetics is commensurate with the treatment of other subjects that contribute to the achievement of the institution's educational objectives (which, it is hoped, would include exploring social justice meanings and issues).
3. A nationwide survey of the curriculum in aesthetics and aesthetic education at other universities might be undertaken. The input of all students (African American, White Americans, Asian Americans, Latino Americans, Native American, etc.) who are currently enrolled in the school might be included in the deliberations of the committee.
4. Based on the evaluation of relevant data, the committee would formulate a list of philosophical principles and objectives that reflect a solution to the problem of incorporating social justice concepts and the subsequent aesthetic theories, such as Black aesthetics, into the teacher education program.

**In-service teacher training.** The responsibility of curriculum development in Black aesthetics and its relevance to teaching and developing substantive meanings of social justice fall directly on professional teachers themselves. It might be assumed that the working teacher would return to a formal educational setting to acquire the desired knowledge and skills or that he or she might attend workshops or conferences designed to meet these particular needs. The following ideas are advanced as possible elements of an in-service program:

1. Aesthetic educators (i.e., those in music, visual arts, theatre, and language arts) of a school district might form a committee to develop a curriculum policy and procedure regarding the inclusion of social justice concepts and Black aesthetics in the district program.
2. The committee would perform research studies and generate bibliographic materials for use by colleagues.
3. The committee would research the available literature regarding Black aesthetics (or Black arts) curricula of other aesthetic education programs. It might identify those schools where Black aesthetic concepts have been implemented and engage those teachers as consultants.
4. The committee then would create an in-service network of colleagues, recognized as experts in Black arts (music, visual arts, theatre, etc.), to provide information regarding teaching techniques.

These suggestions regarding preservice and in-service training are not exhaustive but serve as a point of departure in thinking about Black aesthetics and its relevance to making meaning for social justice in the educational setting. The next section offers some suggestions in terms of developing courses or classes for Black aesthetics.

The following section highlights significant issues that I view as relevant to the study of Black aesthetics and its connection to social justice at all levels of education. At the elementary level, this guide is intended to serve as a tool to alert the teacher to issues that he or she should be aware. The general course in Black aesthetics (to include music, literature, and visual arts) at the elementary level would be used to expose the student to the issues. The teacher who is sensitive to the complex aesthetic issues may decide the extent to which the social and/or aesthetic issues are appropriate and then develop instructional methods. These issues include the following:

1. The debate concerning what social justice is, as well as what *Black* aesthetics or art is,
2. The evolution of Black Cultural Nationalism and the effect of this evolution on the interpretations of social justice and Black art in general,

3. The evolution of theories regarding Black literature that issue from a Western literary tradition,
4. The multiple perspectives regarding a validating criterion for Black art,
5. The concept of generating an eclectic Black aesthetic lens to interpret current and past notions of social justice.

On the secondary level, it seems reasonable to believe that high school students would be mature enough to perceive the complexities of aesthetic and social issues inherent to Black aesthetics. Thus, teachers might use outlines to develop interdisciplinary approach between subjects. For example, an interdisciplinary humanities class exploring Black aesthetics, in which the faculties of music, art, literature, and social studies combine their knowledge and skills in a common goal, could be developed.

On the collegiate level, these issues might serve as tools to underscore significant social, economic, and aesthetic issues. It is my opinion that engaging these matters will help generate creative thought and scholarship that those charged with making policy and curriculum decisions might draw upon.

### **Do Black Aesthetics Create the Psychological Space for Social Justice for All?**

I understand that a dominant Eurocentric social and political environment has been created and sustained in education in the United States. Interpreting Black aesthetics as social justice text is one of many ways to make critical judgments about the beautiful and may be linked with a critical social theory that is concerned with issues of power, justice, and the ways the economy, race, gender, ideologies, discourses, education, religion, and other institutions and cultural dynamics interact to construct a social system (Alvesson & Skoldberg, 2000, p. 127).

These interactions are important and affect how one constructs his or her theories, judgments of taste, aesthetic criteria, and curriculum. In this manner, Black art works as social justice text creates a space to reconceptualize the purposes and possibilities for Black aesthetics. Highlighting their meaning for education and curriculum explicitly is much different from what has been debated in Black aesthetics historically. At the same time, the notion of Black aesthetics broadens current ideas and the meaning of social justice in education.

Interpreting Black aesthetics as social justice text in the context of curriculum implies a critical understanding that neither language nor art is a neutral and objective conduit of description of the “real world” (Alvesson & Skoldberg, 2000, pp. 136-137). Therefore, the sociopolitical language that makes up Black aesthetics serves to construct alternative “aesthetic realities” and, in part, engages and reconstitutes conceptions of what is real or what is beautiful.

Adorno (1970/1997) argued that “we are not to philosophize about concrete things; we are to philosophize out of these things” (p. 16). Social and political injustices are not abstract things but real lived experiences. Critically, Black aesthetics is a social justice text that creates a philosophical means to transcend unequal social and political conditions. Black aesthetics and the kind of knowledge it produces (i.e., theories, criteria, value, etc.) have not been primarily concerned about the subject-object problem or logocentric theories based on cognitive and rational thought. Instead, the traditional school of thought in Black aesthetics suggests that knowledge serves the social welfare of Black people and, ultimately, humanity at large. I argue that Black aesthetics is social justice text and produces knowledge that can highlight the lived social and political

experiences of all students and produce aesthetic forms of intellectual agency and transformation as well as ultimately creating the psychical space to imagine social justice for all for students.

Black aesthetics' meanings of social justice and its transformative value highlight a reconceptualized purpose and possibilities for Black aesthetics. It also presents a general aesthetic concept that transforms current meanings of social justice, and transformation is not suggested only in association with African freedom, for it is essential to all liberty. Black aesthetics creates the psychical space for all to imagine and forge new ground for aesthetic meanings of social justice in education and curriculum.

Following Adorno (1970/1997), I contend that educators should think or engage philosophically to work their way out of problematic issues such as the meaning of social justice. Social and political injustices are not abstract things but real lived experiences. Black aesthetics as social justice language and curriculum offers an aesthetic text and vision that defines social justice as well as inspires people to work their way out of the habits of social injustice.

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## Appendix A

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#### EDUCATION:

Ph.D. Candidate, Curriculum & Instruction University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign Champaign, IL	2003 – Present
Master of Music, Voice Performance Southern Methodist University Dallas, TX	1994 – 1996
Bachelor of Arts, Music North Carolina A&T State University Greensboro, NC	1991 – 1994

#### TEACHING POSITIONS:

Teaching Assistant, Dept of Curriculum & Instruction	2005 – 2006
Course: Diversity Issues in Social Studies C&I 447 & 448	2004 – 2005
University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign	

#### FACULTY POSITIONS:

Applied Voice Professor North Carolina A & T State University Greensboro, NC	2006 – Present
Director of Choral Activities St. Amant High School Gonzales, LA	2001 – 2002
Assistant Voice Professor Southern University and A&M College Baton Rouge, LA	1998 – 2001

Music Director, Department of Continuing Education 1992 – 1994  
North Carolina A&T University  
Greensboro, NC

MUSIC POSITIONS:

Applied Voice Studio 2005 – 2006  
Urbana, IL

Music Director 2004 – 2006  
St. Peter African Methodist Episcopal Church  
Decatur, IL

Organist/Music Director 2001 – 2003  
St. Paul Baptist Church  
White Castle, LA

Director of Music 1992 – 1994  
Caldleugh Multicultural Arts  
Greensboro, NC

PERFORMANCE AND SCHOLARLY PRESENTATIONS:

***OPERA, MUSICAL THEATRE & THEATRE***

TOSCA SPOLETTA  
Houston Ebony Opera Guild  
*Willie Waters, Conductor; Tallmadge Fauntleroy, Director*

MARRIAGE OF FIGARO DON BASILIO  
Southern Methodist University  
*David Milnes, Conductor; Dehan Milodenovich, Director*

AM AHL AND THE NIGHT VISITORS KASPAR  
Deep Ellum Opera, Dallas, Texas  
*Jolynn Jeffers, Musical Director; Gaitly Matthews, Director*

THE CONSUL THE MAGICIAN  
Southern Methodist University  
*David Milnes, Conductor; Dehan, Milodenovich, Director*

MERRY WIVES OF WINDSOR FENTON  
Southern Methodist University  
*Dale Morehouse, Conductor and Director (Scenes)*

PORGY AND BESS PETER/HONEYMAN  
Greensboro Symphony Orchestra  
*Anthony McRae, Conductor, (Staged Concert)*

THE MERRY WIDOW

RAOUL ST. BRIOCHE

Utah Festival Opera  
*Henry Holt, Conductor; Dottie Danner, Director*

LADY DAY AT EMERESON'S BAR & GRILL

PIANST/JIMMY

Virginia Technical University

***CONCERTS & ORATORIO***

INSPIRATIONAL SPOKEN WORD FEATURING VANISM TRIO

*St. Peters A.M.E. Church, Decatur, Illinois August 2004, September 2005*

THE MOMENT: CELEBRATING AFRICAN AMERICAN SPIRITUALS

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