

CULTURE LUANA

WHAT MAKES THAT BLACK?

THE AFRICAN AMERICAN AESTHETIC IN AMERICAN EXPRESSIVE CULTURE

LUANA

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Luana
Luanaccsf@gmail.com
www.whatmakesthatblack.com

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What Makes That Black?

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I believe there is something special about Blackness

> and that this specialness manifests itself in distinctive ways.

> > I wanted to know about this distinction ...

I wanted to know what makes something Black.

I believe that talking about it will make a difference.

Luana

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An aesthetic is a profusion of questions and a culling of answers from a specific sensibility, from a specific compositional approach.

In the arts, these cultural rules of beauty
and proportion empower our senses
with pleasure, our minds with authority, and our existence with history.

AESTHETICS . . . A CULTURAL INTELLIGENCE

with the slave trade, ignoring the rich *millennia* of cultural, political, social, and artistic history prior to 1509 when the Portuguese brought enslaved Africans to Puerto Rico; or 1619 when the first boat of slaves arrived in Virginia; or 1719 when the French landed their first cargo / slave ship, the *Duc de Maine*, traveling from settlements in West Africa to its Louisiana colonies. Horrendously, the cultural wealth residing inside the men, women, and children initially brought to the Americas during the first centuries of American formation was ignored at best, disgraced or satirized at worst. The hegemonic practices then painted a distorted composition of the lives of early African and African American settlers through minstrelsy into the early 1950s.

This disfigured history results in embarrassment and shame for most children of color who are not taught the larger history. My mother proudly told her three progenies that "the horrors of the slave trade and the four hundred years of slavery, with its forced violence, weeded out the psychologically and physically weak colored folks. So, baby, you are the crème of the crop!"

Whether my mother's theory was correct or not, I had a very healthy attitude about each generation who travelled from the depths of Africa toward the creation of me. And I *still* had levels of shame about my history—I call it TMH: Tarzan-movie humiliation.

I think I originally engaged in this research as a personal correction. My stated academic intent was to re-define the African American Aesthetic in dance; it quickly evolved to de-marginalize the African American in the construct of American art, to contribute to the literacy of re-reading Black bodies (whether or not a Black body is present), and to re-assert the African American Aesthetic as

X

being not only significant but one of the *pioneering cores in the formalization of the American Aesthetic*. In striving toward all this I academically achieved the following:

- An expanded definition of the African American Aesthetic, viewing it as an expressive form of African-descendent peoples living in the Americas, an artistic structure, a cultural intelligence¹ possessing self-consciousness, and a structure that serves cultural function
- An architecture of the African American Aesthetic: a typology of seventy-one aesthetic tenets, or markers, that embody the structure and function of the African American Aesthetic. These tenets are a suggested rubric to analyze art coming from either the African American culture or anyone who engages the Aesthetic
- A demonstration of how aspects of the African American Aesthetic tenets have psychologically, theoretically, and stylistically configured American art, being therefore an inextricable part of the American mainstream, clearly not functionally denied or separated
- A path to sagaciously resonate with the beauty and intelligence of the Aesthetic—with its high variance of configurations

While the impetus for the research was to define "Black Dance," it grew to include other art forms. Then it included me personally ... The African American Aesthetic became a way of thinking ... that had never dawned on me. I realized it was so much bigger than me, or dance, or other arts. It's about America, the world, and how we do not see each other; I'm still fleshing this out myself. That's why I'm glad this story is in your hands. You, the reader, are helping to grow this important concept ... Blackness as a language and psychology we all share, or at least know as Americans ... as a species human on planet earth ... and as individuals of energy.

OVERVIEW

It can take decades, if not a lifetime, to find our voice—a way of sounding / vocalizing that reflects the spirit, feel, or zeitgeist of who we are and how we want to see ourselves. In reality we have several voices, some well-honed and often employed, others underdeveloped.

The latter was the case with both my literary voice and my cultural acumen. What Makes That Black? The African American Aesthetic in American Expressive Culture² delineates the African American Aesthetic pattern in both the African American culture and in the artistic cultural³ formation of the United States. However, the voices that would eventually write this book were initially buried within me. I needed help to excavate, or maybe liberate, my cultural and literary declarations.

In the first chapter, "Linguistic Languages," I introduce the team of inspirational archeologists / revolutionaries and personal experiences that shaped the subject, style, structure, and voice of this book:

Historian / author Dr. Henry Louis Gates: My encounter with him at a lecture in New York
 City validated Africanist vernacular presentation style in academic settings.

- My mother, author Dr. Evelyn Willis Fairbanks: Her tutelage demanded that I retain all of my speaking styles.
- Educator / author Dr. Diane Lapp: She identified my ability to flip from one linguistic language to another.
- A multiculturist / lecturer, whom I identify as Dr. Blah, Blah, Blah: His presentation on Latino cultural dynamics not only echoed Dr. Gates' ability to code switch, he also modeled the importance of providing cultural models for students.
- Neuroscientist / author / mentor Dr. Dawna Markova: She cautioned against my singular use of the language peculiar to the academy.
- Folklorist Tejumola Ologboni and Broadway theatre director Marion McClinton: They both demanded that I "go deep" and write in a blues vernacular.
- Author / educator / cultural critic Dr. Brenda Dixon Gottschild: She repeatedly modeled taking the road less traveled.

Each person, directly or indirectly, insisted on honesty in my literary voice because the book carried the double responsibility of reflecting me, as an African American, and the cephalopodic construct of Africanism.

While the heart of this book is the African American Aesthetic, there is another equally pertinent story being told, one I investigate in chapter 2, "Let's Bare Our Arms and Plunge Them Deep." Throughout this chapter I delineate my upbringing in both the Africanist and the Euro-centric mainstream. I describe the global "social currency" that comes when highly valued cultural dynamics are attributed to its authors. I address the tragedy of not knowing how much the African American Aesthetic is woven into the fabric of American art and culture, and the ways in which that lack of Africanist learning inspirited my research. I write, "This book came from my spiritual Griot, it is a story to myself. Manytimes authors write books they need to read. In these pages, I have written the words I needed not only as a student of the arts so many years ago, but also as a person of African descent, and as an American."

In the final section of chapter 2, "Highlighting the Myriad Shades of Blues That Contribute to the Color Purple," I explain the gestalt of my research process. I address the inapposite use of westernized reductionist methodologies in accessing the Africanist sensibilities within the African American and American cultural constructs. And while the use of reductionist techniques may have been deemed inappropriate as I *experienced* the Aesthetic manifesting from an art genre, certain analytic tools were functional in the discussion of my research. Throughout the book elements of the African American Aesthetic are extracted from cultural contexts and examined. I put it all back together again later, but separated and magnified singular elements of the Aesthetic are easily seen and understood.

I define the term "Africanist," and identify other authors who have used exact or parallel terms in chapter 3, "What Makes That Black?" I delineate "aesthetic" and "Blackness," the latter cited from Dr. Yaba Blay's research on Colorism. I outline the African American Aesthetic as a construct and how it can be palpated through seventy-one African American Aesthetic tenets.

Resourcing multiple endeavors of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century continental Africans in America, historical and contemporary African Americans, and Africanist art-endeavors of European-descendant Americans, the chapter pieces together the highly complex system of the African American Aesthetic.

The section titled, "Uniqueness. Yes, It Is a Distinct Aesthetic," addresses the argument that confuses universal ideas, found in all cultures, with ethnic or folk ideas, particular to a culture. Demonstrating specific expressive endeavors as a cultural *response* to a universal situation, I compare examples of cultural aesthetics found in poetry, music, attitude, and clothing design to respond to those who say, "Hey, the concept of 'Tragedy and Resiliency' is part of my culture too! African Americans are not the only culture to use it as an aspect of art making."

In deciphering cultural contexts, most viewers use surface features of the art, a simplistic and often erroneous measure of an art's aesthetic. A "divining tool" became extremely helpful as a rubric in discriminating between the base properties, or "deep structures," of the African American Aesthetic; and "surface features," such as the skin color of the participants and the content of the storyline.

Interwoven into chapter 3 is the narrative of my research. I explain the invaluable progression of self-decolonialization, a process that addressed my own transubstantive error—looking at myself though the lens of values taught in a Eurocentric educational system (the opposite of cultural relativism). The progression was dynamic, revealing new ways of perceiving Africanist artistic endeavors.

I close the chapter by delineating the African American Aesthetic as a functional, structural, historical, and psychological concept defined by usage and yet in constant flux, making its borders, and therefore the Aesthetic itself, difficult to set.

The lineage of scholars who have come before me in this industry of African American expressive culture opens Chapter 4, "The Tenets of the African American Aesthetic Matrix." Many of the African American Aesthetic tenets I identify came from their diligent scholarship (Zora Neale Hurston, Langston Hughes, Robert Farris Thompson, Marshall and Jean Stearns, Thomas DeFrantz, Brenda Dixon Gottschild, Halifu Osumare, and Barbara Glass). I also acknowledge another thirty-three scholars in various fields who tutored me, not directly but through their work.

What follows is a detailed discussion on the specifics of the Aesthetic. I review the salient aspects of the African American Aesthetic as a construct, then present the Aesthetic tenets individually, identifying the structural, functional, psychological, and social / historical components of the African American Aesthetic. This is the core of my fifteen-year research. While the list is comprehensive, it is not exhaustive. I consider it a contribution to the ongoing definition.

By nature, I am a visual and kinesthetic person, so the format and presentation of each Aesthetic listing is designed to communicate on multiple neural levels—with the lexicon of the Aesthetic listed alphabetically, a brief, dictionary-like definition of each tenet, an accompanying symbol, a demonstrative visual image, and finally a descriptive, anecdotal, historical and/or contemporary example for the tenet.

I want the reader to experience the art that illustrates each tenet in as many ways as possible. An aspect of Africanist knowledge is the self-determination of the art—music, painting, dances, song,

theatre, or rap intrinsically holds evidence of its own genome and scholarship; therefore, particular aspects of my theory are supported by the art itself. Yes, I will use the mandated European-based scholarship of measured markers, linear time, statistics, quotations of other scholars, facts, figures, and numbers, but the real evidence of a specific aesthetic is *sitting in the art*, with its figurative nature. My work is to provide a map toward the road I took in experiencing the Africanist Aesthetic within the art-example provided. Hopefully, this will increase the accessibility of a stylization Toni Morrison used to write *Jazz*, Alvin Ailey used to choreograph *Revelations*, Tina Turner uses to sing *Proud Mary*, and I use when I walk into a club on Saturday night to dance.

In the section "Dark Matter," I address how the Aesthetic functions; namely, the reader might not see the Aesthetic directly, only evidence of it, like dark matter. I write, "View the tenets as an architecture comprising multiple systems of instructions and codes that are interdependent, interdigitated, correlated, and coevolving.... Because they are concatenated, the reader should not dwell too long on any one tenet. It is in the act of *interweaving the whole* that each tenet is truly understood." For example, Improvisation usually entwines with other tenets—Efficacious Technique, Limbic Resonance, Soul Stirring, Rocking, and Call and Response. Or, read the 1941 short story by Ralph Ellison, "Mister Toussan," for an example of the habitual co-emergence of the Griotic with Correct Entrance and Exit, Call and Response, Verbal Visual Play, Limbic Resonance, Rhythm, Nommo, and Efficacious Technique.

Sampling six works of art I explain what makes each particular work Black. Using examples from swing dance, jazz music, Hip-Hop street dance, theatre, literature, blues, and postmodern dance, I illustrate the interconnected / constellated quality of the Aesthetic. In the beginning of the chapter I take the Aesthetic apart; at the end, I return it to its natural interdependent and interconnected state.

There are myriad ways the African American Aesthetic wove itself into the cultural mainstream of the United States. Chapter 5, "African American Aesthetic as Integral to the American Aesthetic," cites instances where African, African American, and non-African-descendant Americans infused the Africanist sensibility into the mainstream U.S. aesthetic. Topics such as physical memory, migration, assimilation, acculturation, and appropriation are presented to inform the reader of the complex process by which infusion occurs in any cultural makeup.

The final chapter relates the impact of this research. In chapter 2 I narrate the impact of this research on me as the author. In chapter 6, "Coda," I narrate the impact on other scholars. In the 2009 documentary *Herskovits—At the Heart of Blackness*, scholar and Spellman University President Emeritus Johnnetta B. Cole emphatically spoke of the personal effect of the groundbreaking work by Jewish-American anthropologist Melville J. Herskovits in African and African American culturalisms. Cole stated, "I will always be grateful to Melville J. Herskovits for *the contribution he made to my sense of self*. I had a culture that could be traced to a place called Africa." It is my hope that this work and that of others will have a similar impact on readers.

While I plan to use this book academically, the soul of this book is designed to reside on multiple shelves ... the shelves of the thousands like me ... from the teenager dancing on the street to my fellow colleagues in universities and art houses, all who grapple with the same questions.

\$ \$ \$

Disclaimers

My investigation into the wealth of African American artistic endeavors in the United States has profoundly informed my personal self-image and affected my writing style and my aesthetic worldview. Whether labeled colored dance, Negro Dance, Black dance, Africanist dance, African dance, African American vernacular dance, Race dance, African American concert dance, the *Coltrane Changes*, Ailey's *Revelations*, or my personal memory of the way in which my mother called me home for dinner—I now witness history and contemporary American artistic endeavors with a new set of glasses. I see the Africanist influence as ubiquitous. Much like buying a red convertible sports car and suddenly seeing a variant of the same car everywhere, the lens through which I look is skewed toward seeing many aspects of the American cultural expression as being Africanist. But, honestly, this potential bias is okay with me. For far too long I have seen the world through the eyes of European-Americans who taught me *who I am is who they are*, and that is not true. So, for now, I may make a few errors, but much fewer than I made before.

Welcome to my house.

Storytelling, you know, has a real function.

The process of the storytelling is itself a healing process, partly because you have someone there who is taking the time to tell you a story that has great meaning to them.

They're taking the time to do this because your life could use some help, but they don't want to come over and just give advice. They want to give it to you in a form that

becomes inseparable from your whole self. That's what stories do.

Stories differ from advice in that once you get them, they become a fabric of your whole soul.

That is why they heal you.

-ALICE WALKER

1 LINGUISTIC LANGUAGES

(Or, If You Want To Understand The Structure of This Book, Do Not Skip This Chapter.)

THIS BOOK IS ABOUT the definition, structure, function, consciousness, history, application, and spirit of the African American Aesthetic and how that spirit manifests as a foundation of the American Aesthetic. It is written in a style firmly parented in me from many sources, so I will begin with stories that are feverishly waving their arms, wanting to be told because they are pinnacle moments that have shaped my life and this book.

The first story is about a man and his lecture, my erroneous expectations of him, our mutual Blackness strutting the halls of a New York academy in exquisite complexity, and our common thoughts of pluralism and **Bricolage** that would unknowingly, many years later, birth the structure of my research on the African American Aesthetic in America.

I saw him first in 2003, at the New York Public Library's Center for the Humanities. He was to speak on his latest project, a book he had edited, *The Bondwoman's Narrative*. Unlike most projects of this genre, written by contemporary scholars, this slave-narrative manuscript was written by a runaway slave in the mid 1850s, a woman named Hannah Crafts. While I found the topic of the lecture engaging, I was more interested in the presenter.

I had seen and read Dr. Henry Louis Gates' work prior to the lecture. I thoroughly enjoyed his 1987 book, *Figures in Black: Words, Signs, and the "Racial" Self*, and sections from his 1989 publication, *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African American Literary Criticism.* I respected his inquiries as reflected in the 1999 PBS series *Wonders of the African World*, and I had sent his film *African American Lives I and II* to many friends. I was excited to finally see this man in person. So there I sat, one of twelve African Americans in a sea of 350 European-descendant New Yorkers, prepared for an intellectual discourse on the African American as woman, as slave, as author.

Anticipation is an interesting animal. Its authorship is usually realized after its preconceived notions are not matched by reality. I had anticipated many aspects of the event, such as the grandeur of the New York Library lecture hall, the pomp and fanfare associated with presenting the chair of Harvard University's African American Studies Department, and the small attendance by my Black brothers and sisters. However, I was not prepared for the speaker himself. First, he sauntered his debonair self onto the stage—mind you he walked with a cane and a shortened leg extended by a thickened shoe—and I remember thinking, "Only Blackness could carry this physicality as syncopated layers of grace and elegance!"

When he spoke, his style was exceedingly nonchalant. He was casual as he began the evening's talk, telling us about sitting in the Harvard Club "killing time" before the lecture, and ... yada, yada, yada. Then, as he embarked on the topic of the evening—this was the pivotal moment for me—his delivery was even more laid-back, definitely street and at times dipping into full down-insouciant-ghetto-cool. His oration was a mix of Cornell West's intellect, James Baldwin's passion, Barbra Jordon's diction and vocabulary, Alex Haley's storytelling abilities, and Dick Gregory's humor. I was mildly taken aback and yet, most importantly, comfortable. His literary authority and colloquial / vernacular delivery unearthed related scenes from my youth.

When a student, during college breaks I would return to my mother's home. My mom was extraordinarily verbal, inquisitive, and well read, and at the time she was working on her master of arts degree. There was never a lack of conversation between us. However, what I remembered, after the Gates lecture, were the odd challenges my mother would offer during our discussions. She would occasionally ask me, "How would you say what you just said if you had *not* gone to college? If, for example, you were just hanging out with your friends, sitting on the curb, drinking pop and watching the cars pass?" The first time she asked this odd question I stuttered, baffled by the *how* of translating the language I acquired and/or used in college, to my home language. My mom would patiently wait until I was able to make the full conversion. Then she would say, "Girl, don't be forgettin' things!"

I also remembered attending a continuing education cultural literacy workshop given by Dr. Blah, Blah, Blah of Latino descent. Only Dr. Blah, Blah, Blah did not show up. Instead a *stone-street* Latino brother in full regalia, replete with hair net and appropriately colored and folded handkerchief, came in, styling that Brother Blah, *Blah* could not make it, and that *he* had been asked to speak to us about "this cultural shit from the street-side of things." Some audience members got up and left; I almost left ... thinking, "Shit, I grew up as this. I do not need some cultural brother telling me about the street!" But I stayed, simply because I didn't like my attitude—it was condescending and I knew

better. The street needs to bring its rich and vibrant suns into the all-too Cartesian academy, and my mother's words haunted me: "Girl, don't be forgettin' ..."

Through words, full-bodied posturing, and street attitude this Latino brother spoke truth and beauty for an entire hour. All of us were mesmerized as we learned of a culture inaccessible to us due to our "otherness." And then it happened, in the space of one sentence: code switch. During the next two minutes, he took off his "street" clothes, which had hidden his three-piece suit, and changed his carriage. As his vocabulary, posture, clothing, and attitude changed, his social identity changed. Turned out Dr. Blah, Blah had been in the room for the entire workshop. This Latino brother had retained all his linguistic treasures. We gave him a standing ovation because he had blown our multicultural bullshit cover and, imperatively, he had retained his speaking style—a dexterity many of us had forgotten or intentionally checked at the academic classroom door.

These memories and Dr. Gates' lecture redirected my thoughts. During the following fall, when I returned to teaching, I decided to revolutionize my lecture style to include the "street" of my own youth—in other words, I decided to code switch (known as "diglossia" in linguistics). When I blended the various linguistic registers within me, something amazing happened: not only did I take a renewed pleasure in teaching again, but the retention rate of my classes increased significantly—not slightly, but substantially, especially among people of color. The trend continued for several semesters and has held true through the writing of this book.

It would be my friend and colleague, Dr. Diane Lapp, who would "pull my coattail" by giving me the nomenclature behind the practice I had begun many years prior. She spoke of "academic language" and "informal language"; of the taxonomy and word choice of the academy, scholarship, western/classical literature, analysis and criticism; and of the cultural intelligence, metaphoric brilliance, and look vernacular I use when I chitchat with my homies Jessica, James, Jan, or Wolf.

As a San Diego master teacher, Dr. Lapp works diligently to increase the facility of teachers to recognize and navigate intelligent code switching within their classroom.⁵ In her paper, "Academic language, discourse communities, and technology: Building students' linguistic resources," she writes:

Such a perspective is aligned with the recent research on academic English from a functional grammar perspective (Fang et al., 206; Spycher, 2007; Zwiers, 2006). [...] Academic English is only one register, or discourse (Gee, 1996), among many, and it is not linguistically superior to other registers. [...] A perspective of additive communication invites instruction that better blends one's home and school languages (Brock, Lapp, Salas, & Townsend, 2009).

Another chisel to shape my writing voice was Dr. Dawna Markova, a mentor, a friend, and a reader of the seventh incarnation of the manuscript. After her first reading Dr. Markova sat on my sofa speaking the words of my mother many years prior. "The information of this book is good and needs to get out, darling. But where is *your* voice? This isn't your voice! It doesn't have the emotional or psychological breadth or depth. Someone stole your voice!"

The next two influences were part Siren, part Moses, and part Coltrane. Folklorist and storyteller Tejumola "Teju" Ologboni and theatre director / playwright Marion McClinton demanded 1 take the book into unchartered waters. They delivered me from the enslavement of western thinking as 1 wrote, and repeatedly encouraged my outside-the-perimeter thinking. Both men spoke of the narrowness of western (European) paradigms for the Americas and their inadequacy to inform me of my cultural paradigms.

Marion said, "Jazz is the truth of America. It has its own aesthetic, truth, and history." He firmly stated that I was "looking for my cultural knowledge, [not the knowledge of] Greek theatre and its focus on religious mythologies." Teju was also emphatic. "What you are writing is deep ... an enduring mythology that supports our daily actions. Historically we turned our back on ours. White people have a mythology that supports them. Your work is not an 'Odyssey' ... that was about a woman. It is not a 'Golden Fleece' ... that was about money and power. And it is not a 'Holy Grail' ... that was about something that doesn't exist. Looking for women, money, power, and finding a way out of no-way ... that shit happens in the hood *e-ve-ry-day*. What you are investigating is a million times deeper than what those [protagonists] went though. Greek and Roman mythology is individual—for them it was about personal gain and overcoming self-doubt. *Pah-leese* ... don't trivialize my experience by relating my story to [western thought]. Make it real. ... The words you use don't have to be neat—jargon is too neat. Make it real!"

Academic art scholarship as a revolutionary act. It would take courage to write in such a manner, and Dr. Brenda Dixon Gottschild would show me the way. Not directly, I would not personally meet her until fifteen years into my research. But she was there on Day One of my search for my aesthetic truth. In 1996 her first book was published, *Digging the Africanist Presence in American Performance*. Inside this miraculous book was a chapter on George Balanchine and his use of the Africanist idioms. The chapter titled, "Stripping the Emperor: George Balanchine and the Americanization of Ballet," took a bold move, declaring the foundational principles shaping the hallowed white art form of American ballet to be Africanist.⁷ Her writing gave me the mettle to write against the academic grain.⁸

I could feel my mother chewing, grinding my cognitive left-brain dissociate linear-research with its abstract-formulaic-monolithic canons of performativity, and carefully coaxing my mouth open to dispense a different way of presenting my research findings ... in other words, sounding out my truth.

Many are familiar with Charles Dickens' Ebenezer Scrooge character and the four ghosts who visited him on Christmas Eve with the goal of enlightening his spiritual path by informing him of his truth. While not well-known, a more accurate metaphor is the story of real-life Haitian painter Hector Hyppolite, who was visited in a dream by the goddess Erzulie and Saint John the Baptist. The story, elegantly conveyed within Geoffrey Holder's ballet *The Prodigal Prince*, told of the impregnation of Hyppolite with the genius spirit—Saint John the Baptist serving as guide and the goddess Erzulie as the one to impregnate. After the insemination, Hyppolite journeyed as an artist guided by the spirit Genius. I was fortunate to be blessed as both Scrooge and Hyppolite. While I wrestled to find my voice within the research, the genius-spirit of each Aesthetic tenet came whispering its truth—seventy-one muse-spirits in all.

I began to rewrite feverishly about the African American Aesthetic; *however, I wrote not as an academic*, but as a woman who had found in the whispers of history her own Hip-Hop-swing-jazz-blues cadence. What came were memoir writings associated with the African American tenets, observations in story-structure concretizing my academic understanding of those principles. I then began the difficult task of weaving these stories with historical and critical data. Philosophically this was not an easy task; I repeatedly questioned the validity of using narrative (my personal story and experiences in the Aesthetic) within a critical literary tradition.

... Before I continue, a slight digression, or rather, an Improvised Break.

You arrive at a personal or professional mountaintop with gifts from the gauntlet of striving to achieve your goal—face bloodied and emaciated from long-term exhaustion, arms ashy and gashed, hiking shoes held together with duct tape and layers of cardboard, clothes torn and laced with sweat, dirt and urine from wilderness wanderings, a gait once determined (or cocky), but now reduced to small, staggered half-steps, and speech diminished to something unfathomable. Reaching your destination, you collapse. Too exhausted to even open your eyes, you sit and ponder the sacrifices required to achieve this goal—opportunities, family, parties, lovers, all left on the unpaved roadsides and steep cliffsides of your climb. There is fatigue, sadness, and relief, but before long your thoughts are interrupted by a bright voice. "Here you go." Someone hands you a crystal glass of iced tea. You look past the voice and refreshment to see a smiling woman wearing three-inch black Giorgio Armani pumps and a white Italian-designer dress. She struts off to a large group whose members are also well-clothed, smiling, and talking with each other as they take in the magnificent view of the mountaintop. A man styling an Ozwald Boateng suit passes by you and casually mentions, "You know, there is a tram car that will bring you here."

Here's a question ... Aside from the Ozwald suit and Armani pumps, has that ever happened to you? You took the long, kick-the-shit-out-of-you road only because you didn't *know* about "the tram"?

An anonymous reviewer of this manuscript commented, "This [writing] style has similarities to the critical personal narrative, to autocritography (as discussed by Kim Benston and others), and to Black Feminist writing (such as bell hooks, June Jordan, and Audre Lorde)." Five years prior, when I was finding my writing voice, I didn't know about the apostate literary traditions of "life writing," Michel Foucault's "askesis," "critically ethnographic narrative," "autoethnographic narrative," "personal narrative," or "critical personal narrative"—in other words, the tram. I didn't know about the tram until I was three-quarters into writing the book.

Let me take that back, I did know about it in other arts—in Alvin Ailey's Blues Suite, Jacob Lawrence's Migration Series, Ntozake Shange's play For Colored Girls, Tally Beatty's Mourner's Bench, Donald McKayle's Saturday's Child, Blondell Cumming's Chicken Soup, Jawole Willa Jo Zollar (Urban Bush Women) Batty Moves, Ralph Lemon's Geography, August Wilson's Joe Turner Done Come and Gone, Robert Johnson's "Crossroads," Miles Davis' So What, Carrie Mae Weems' Kitchen Table Series 1990, my own Kundalini Rising of the Shekinah, and NY chef Madison Cowan's cooking. I knew about

artists using embodied story to critically discover and express the self in personal and cultural history, through civic scrutiny, power, politics, knowledge, praxis, and truths held to be self-evident. It just took time for me to comprehend that the rules of performing / visual arts and literary arts are in a mysterious lovership, stealing away behind closed doors, passionately kissing and whispering trade secrets of the critical personal narrative.

These days, I take the tram.

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Now, of course, I have a deeper intellectual understanding of what transpired that evening in New York with Dr. Gates' oration; my mother's tutelage; Dr. Blah, Blah, Blah's ruse; Dr. Lapp's convictions; Dr. Markova's declaration of theft; my "genius-spirit" visitations; Marion and Teju's call to cross the ocean of the jazz cadence; Dr. Dixon Gottschild's indirect mentorship of courage; and the anonymous reviewer's stamp of "critical personal narrative." That brings me to this moment—the academic canon, the street, finding my Africanist academic voice, and the structure of this book— research mashed through the sieve of translation skills my mother had lovingly inculcated within me.

In the telling of the African American Aesthetic ... I Improvise, Self-Reference, Repeat, embody, adorn, reference, and "sample" other scholars, and hopefully I Entertain. The book will code switch, and do so radically. In my Juxtaposing of Styles, I will engage analogous thinking ... I will flaunt, strut, refreak, and Break ... I will develop evaluative criteria ... I will engage Socratic discussion ... I will refuse to separate an Ellington melody from a Hurston prose ... I will reclaim public space ... I will be irreverent ... I will dutifully elucidate the westernized taxonomy of my research, directly and Symbolically ... I will leave you in the dark to struggle into your own light ... I will be authentic and imitate ... I will "Call" to you, expecting a "Response" ... I will explicitly curse ... and, I will clearly repurpose the ellipsis.

In accordance with the African American tradition, this book is Non-hierarchical; subsequently, the reader is expected to be an equal and active participant—to agree, disagree, laugh with me as I love my people, cry with me as I love my people, listen to Coltrane as you read about Rhythm or basketball, or tell me your story as you read mine. The narrative is at times Non-linear, with fuzzy literary boundaries; consequently, the reading is best understood if one is familiar with the Africanist tendency of the author as narrator to occasionally play the protagonist, and the propensity to lie in order to underscore a larger, more relevant point. It is also Polycentric—simultaneously carrying four centers from which the research unfolds: My Griot, all stories impact meaning and encode contextually; my Nommo, using the "energy forces" of words to embed ideas that ripen and bear fruit; my Symbolic Expression, using the power of the image or Polyrhythmic pattern to communicate a complete vocabulary and semiotic code; and fourth, the analytical structures of my academic training blended with the literary structures of the street. I muddle binaries. I use all of my linguistic languages as I place myself in the context and content to better understand the dynamics of the Aesthetics of my own many cultures. This is an Africanist act of Hantu and Self-Reference, where events, space, and

time (what happened, where it happened, and when it happened) inextricably include the narrator-protagonist-me-you. I want to give us a mythical space to feel with our eyes.

In many ways, I am following in the tradition of dance anthropologist Dr. Katherine Dunham. She did not separate herself from her research material, she understood the Haitian dance *Yanvalou* by rolling the undulations along her own spine, singing the songs with her own breath, and marking the rhythms with her own feet. Dunham *then* re-gifted this dance to others, each discovering the *Yanvalou* in his or her own spine. This is a Black tradition—our ontology (organization of knowledge), epistemology (theory of knowledge), rhetoric (expressive style), and text as a critical autoethnographic narrative for others to Self-Reference.

This book is nonlinear in many ways. Chapters 1-3 proceed with a semblance of narrative linearity. But, in chapter 4 you are dropped off at the edge of a multi-dimensional dictionary where you are free to explore each Aesthetic tenet in any order. Some tenet definitions are simply listed with bullet points, others scholastically conveyed or narrated as a story, and some definitions are packed with one instance after another of the tenet's use. Linearity will pick you up on the other side, in chapter 5.

Those who have heard me speak on this subject know of the psychological and intellectual power of Improvisation, Repetition, Syncopation, Bricolage, Symbology, Competitive Camaraderie or Paradoxical Thinking—all pillars in Black cultural dynamics. Just as I use the ancient aptitudes and agencies of feminine archetypes / logical intelligence to guide me, I use the cultural intelligence of Blackness daily. It reveals ancient wisdom-powers, and models modern intelligent-action, for anyone who engages this genius in their lives. Paradoxically, I will likewise ignore Black/Brownness; indicating it a term too small to define a moment, a dynamic, a person, a work of art, or a situation.

I began writing this book simply for academic curiosity, birthed of personal necessity. I needed a book for my students in this subject area—a discourse on the Jazz, the Blues, and the Jambalaya-ness of the African American Aesthetic sensibility as it has been applied to American dance. My initial research found a dearth of dynamic critical literacy that connected the American Aesthetic and the African American Aesthetic in the study of dance. Since then writers have begun to address this issue (see opening of chapter 4); however, there still remains a gap. My hope is that this critical personal narrative will join the works of other authors in producing a paradigm shift toward complex aesthetic analysis. ¹⁰

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The list below of African American Aesthetic tenets is from chapter 4, "The African American Aesthetic Matrix;" it is provided here only to help the reader better understand the tenets discussed in chapters 2 and 3. In many ways I hesitate to present the list in this sequence. The fear is that readers will take this knowledge and erroneously run with it, thinking they have the whole of the treasure. In reality, one needs the entire book, or better yet, a lifetime inside the mind of Toni Morrison, Quincy lones, August Wilson, Chris Rock, Jawole Willa Jo Zollar, Wynton Marsalis, and Saul Williams to unlock how each tenet works and how it clusters with others to form a miniature matrix from which

an art appears. This is an important aspect of the Construct, how the tenets dynamically create the Aesthetic. As mentioned in the "Overview" section above, chapter 4 contains deeper analysis, with close readings and examples of each tenet. That is the bulk of the book. The reader can either read this list now, refer back to it when clarification is needed, or read it later in chapter 4.

LEXICON OF THE AFRICAN AMERICAN AESTHETIC MATRIX® (AKA "THE LIST")

1. IIII Admiration of the Black / Brown Body

The human physiology of African and African-descendant peoples is recognized as innately beautiful and sensual, functioning as high art. The body is a canvas of and for art; the sensuality of the Black body is acknowledged, and celebrated.

2. Aesthetic of The Cool

This personal and artistic style expresses the eminenence of royalty, stillness, composure, and down-to-earth elegance with a touch of flaboyance and audacity. The term was coined by Robert Farris Thompson.

3. Angularity • Akimbo

Beauty, vitality, and strength are communicated as lines of paint, movement, or sound that intersect at sharp or obtuse angles. Angles are dynamic and equate with life, and the acuity of angle is valued more than the obtuseness of the angle, while straight lines are static and associated with death.

4. Art Intelligence • Transformative Functionalism • Ngombo

Art is sentient and a form of knowledge; it is intelligence, intuition, reason, history, and transformation. Art functions—it thinks, evaluates, responds, informs, and transforms. It is a psychology.

5. **B** Balanced Asymmetry

Asymmetrical synchronization. Strength in design, dynamics, and function is attributed to the uneven, lateral distribution of qualities within the art.

6. Blood Memories

The physical (cellular), cultural, and historic memory of Africa, the Middle Passage, and the Diaspora legacy is a source of artistic material and identity. The body is a reservoir of cultural Black energy and historic legacy free from constraints of linear time. All information, regardless of when or where it was dispensed, is accessible through the body.

7. S Blues—Pain into Art

This is the act of transforming personal pain, difficulty, and struggle into music, song, poem, dance, painting, rap, sculpture, story, theatre or conceptual art.

8. Break

Unmetered percussive rupture or an interruption of the established, underlying flow of accompaniment where only one or two voices, dancers, or instruments carry the theme. The Break can also set a liminal moment for the re-entry of the ensemble.

9. Call and Response

A verbal, musical, or movement statement followed by an answering statement; this includes antiphonal patterns and estribillo patterns and invites a communal participation in performance.

10. **Candid and Direct**

The acute frankness and openness in matters of sex, race, the body, gender, personal matters, and sexual orientation, what Hurston calls "absence of the concept of privacy." Blues exemplifies this openness.

11. Celebrating Virtuosity

A celebration of and flourishing in one's self and one's mastery; feeling comfortable with one's excellence. One struts (flaunts) virtuosity by pushing the performance envelope.

12. Competitive Camaraderie • Cutting • Ciphering Circles

Battles of aesthetic virtuosity with the goals of achieving higher levels of artistry and extending the parameters of meaning. This is combative interplay, where dueling strategies are engaged in hopes of bringing performance to its highest artistic, verbal, or intellectual level.

13. Complementary Pairs

Oppositional concepts or facts are not experienced as in conflict but rather as two different aspects of one force; contradictory.

14. Compound Synchronized Body Movements

The simultaneous use of isolations, Polycentrism, Polyrhythm, Syncopation, Improvisation, and Torso Articulations. Present in intentional group coordination, as in football celebration at the goalpost.

15. Correct Entrance and Exit

Appropriate entrance or exit in an artistic performance as practiced in Africanist kinetic arts such as house, Hip-Hop, and voguing dance genres or jazz music improvisation. Entrance and exit is based on kinesthetic, emotional, and intellectual "feeling" states and usually employed by the adept.

16. * Creative Adjustment • Willingness for Change

Slight impromptu variations or elaboration during performance; flexibility. Katherine Dunham's "Self-Interrogation" and Robert Farris Thompson's "Willingness for Change."

17. Creative Synthesis • Fusion Techniques

Reinvention of the art and the artist by fusion techniques and/or a compendium of idioms. Hybridization; syncretism; becoming an "octopus." Can be momentary, or codified into a structured technique.

18. Cross Rhythms

A specific type of Polyrhythm wherein contrasting or dissonant rhythmic patterns require the listener to reconcile the anticipated with the perceived. Cross Rhythm is in collaboration with the transforming spirit of the individual, providing a vehicle for surrender—the goal being renewal and redefinition of consciousness.

19. Efficacious Technique

Using the artistic tool (body, musical instrument, camera) with emotional energy to shape the form that effectively delivers a function; using the dancing body, painted colors, or the musical sound to impact.

20. Rembracing the Conflict

Aesthetic utilization and celebration of dynamic tension. Demonstration of mechanics. Visible tension.

21. Entertainment and Enlightenment as Concurrent Objectives

The conjoining of utility, edification, art, pleasure, and celebration.

22. The Ephebism and Vitality

Visual dynamic flow of energy and life force. Athleticism; a combination of suppleness, strength, speed, and power. Gottschild calls this "Unexpected Vitality, celebration, or and youthful portrayal in a situation or character."

Once an aesthetic perimeter has been established, the artist intentionally plays with the edges, stretching into non-established possibilities.

24. Festive Stylization & Adornment • Fly

A personal carriage of elegance, sophistication, and flamboyant ornamentation. Adornment in clothes, hair, and actions can conjoin with Verbal/Visual Play and Oral-Aural Tradition. The body is a canvas for art—used as a form of art, as in decorative scarring, body painting, hair styling, and adornment with jewelry.

25. Fluid Time Perception

An instant of undetermined length in which the participants engage as long as the energy, the intent, the rapture, or the divine inspiration lasts. Ceremonial time (Chiras) versus chronological time (Chronos).

26. Griotic • Folkloric • Autobiographical Expression

Placing high value on personal, historical, and cultural story. Using symbolism grounded in the African American experience.

27. Hantu • Time-Space Synesthesia

A force that connects the here and now with the then and there; appreciation of the attachment between time and space and of their essence as nonlinear and unfixed. Time and space can bifurcate, or branch, and bend over to become one.

28. High Density

A visual, physical, auditory, and intellectual compactness within a comparatively short time or spatial frame.

29. **W** Humor

Use of Humor as a semeiotic structure to reveal truth, to cool a situation, to connect with another's humanity, or to dispense compassion.

30. Imitation • Representing • Mimesis

Impersonation and caricature for sheer enjoyment or power in ritual. Reproduction of movement as seen in derision (Cakewalk) to mock or parody. Imitation as used socially in dances (The Monkey), for entertainment (Hip-Hop ciphering), or ritualistically (Yanvalou) to align with an archetypal ancestor, deity, or animal; and literary tool (*The Invisible Man*) to incorporate jazz structures such as Improvisation, Dissonance, High Density, Abstraction, and Polycentrism.

31. Immediacy of Access

Ritual efficacy—through rhythm, song, dance, phrase, and body, a direct and personal transcendent interaction with God, the Divine, ancestors, or spirit is achieved.

32. Improvisation—Solo

The solo artist invents, responds, reconfigures, synthesizes, explores, storys (v.), digresses, and elaborates, proffering into existance spontaneous performance through song, dance, music, or acting. Theme and variation. This is Stanley Crouch's "giving form to the present."

33. Individual Stylization • Profiling

The performer demonstrates individuality within the context of the group performance. During this stylization, the artist develops a signature sound, phrasing, movement, or approach to art-making; he or she also develops an identity that celebrates the self. This is Robert Farris Thompson's "Apart Playing."

34. Innovate the Tradition • Novelty

An insistence on personal vision, innovation, and individual stylistic contribution where the Kuumba (creative) process maybe more important than the product. This is Ara, or the ability to amaze, in the Yoruban Tradition. "An artist must learn the best of the past, and add to it his personal vision." (Ralph Ellison)

35. Instrument Switching

The process of producing the sound and quality of a particular musical instrument from a dissimilar instrument, which possess variant sound-producing mechanics. For example, using the voice to produce the sound of a trumpet, or playing the trumpet to produce the sound of the human voice.

36. Invisible Conductor

A rhythm that is neither played directly nor heard quantitatively. An inner pulse regulator. It is a felt rhythm, a resultant silent rhythm created by the special pattern between the notes.

37. A Jamming

Displaying one's virtuosic best during a soloist Improvisation in a group situation. Improvisations are based on a theme, and the goal is to either expand the current vocabulary or flaunt/Celebrate Virtuosity. This is a collective Improvisational process.

38. 🔊 Jooking • Juke

To dance, party, or imbibe at a jook (juke) joint, bar, or club with others; where a high value is given to enjoyment and entertainment as a tool to recalibrate.

39. Kinetic Vocabulary • Embodiment • Athleticism

A form of comprehension and engagement in which the vocabulary is kinetic and embodied; a distinct, untranslatable kinetic language. Dance is valued as a particular way of perceiving, locating, and articulating knowledge; dance distills life, psychology, emotion, and tradition into physical components.

40. Wujichagulia • Self-Referential

Simultaneous self-definition and self-determination; subjective agency. To define oneself and then to use that self-affirmed definition as a zero-point reference by which art is created, performed, and appraised. The African American artist or culture is the "zero point"— the reference or the standard from which all else is based.

41. D Limbic Resonance

A "call" for community "response." The process by which the audience and the performer become different aspects of the same performance. There is intentional use of the participatory nature of the performance dynamic because the community is an aspect of the artistic unit. This is Zora Neale Hurston's "compelling insinuation" and Voguing's "Fierce" and "accelerated Fierceness."

42. Eliminal Space

An in-between place, transition, or opening in the rhythmic structure of the art allowing other performers or the audience to enter the field, dance, story, song, rhythm, painting, or poetry without stopping the flow or causing an abrupt closure.

43. **L**oud!

The act of increasing the magnitude of a signal to make it larger than required for the task, be it auditory, visual, or physical. This is Zora Neale Hurston's "Inclination to Dramatize"

44. Sense of Gravity

Rootedness in physical space, with the body taking its orientation from the earth rather than from the air. Knees are held soft, lowering the pelvis to the earth and grounding the torso.

45. Mask • Masking • Counterfeit

Exhibiting elegance, ingenuity, and humor as one attempts to live an authentic life while appearing to wear the mask or façade created by the "Other." A ritual or theatrical use of an article or action to conceal one's persona, enabling another spirit to manifest itself.

46. O Ngoma

Music, dance, song, and the moving body are one concept, simultaneously birthing and embedding each other. This is Jacqui Malone's "Multidimensionality."

47. Nommo • Significance of Names and Naming

The significant power of names, naming, and gesturing. The vibration of sound—in the form of word or thought—penetrates the vibration of the universe and becomes a creative force, making manifest that which has been named into existence.

48. 🗱 Ntu

An interrelationship and active engagement between the form, the subject matter, the dancer, the music, and the intention of the dance that facilitates communication between all entities. Force and matter are one concept, and the participant becomes what he/she dances, sings, plays, or acts.

49. Object Gesturing

The gestural use of canes, hats, sticks, staffs, scarves, clothing, or musical instruments. Barbara Glass calls it "Something in Hand."

50. Coral-Aural Tradition

In Oral-Aural Tradition all learning—regarding history, values, beliefs, morals, legend, social organization, techniques, and talents—is passed from person to person, verbally, musically, through speech, storytelling, signing, drumming, music, naming, or demonstration.

51. Paradoxical Thinking • Divergent Thinking • Simultaneous Inclusion

The ability to relate two or more views, events, or concepts that, at first glance, appear inconsistent, absurd, contradictory, opposing, impossible, or "illogical," but operate as different / continuing forces / aspects of one reality. A consciousness that is aware of duality and distinction but does not differentiate one concept qualitatively from another because logic travels a circular path rather than a linear one.

52. Percussive

To tap, hit, strike, or make sudden contact; drumming or bass beat. In movement the action is unbound, fast, and direct, with either firm or light force.

53. So Polycentrism

Two or more physical, musical, visual, or literary centers are activated simultaneously. For instance, counterclockwise rotation of the pelvis with forward and backward shifting of the ribcage and opposing circling of the shoulders.

54. Polyrhythm • Polymeter

Simultaneous use of different rhythms, keys, or meters in the making of art. Contributes to an asymmetrical quality in art. For instance, contrasting meters, such as 3/4 or a 6/8 against a 4/4.

55. Protest Thought

Art serves as a vehicle for social and political change. The primary role of art is to serve as a medium to develop the Black identity.

56. Quoting • Sampling • Ciphering

The "appropriated" use of a melody, fragment, motif, or rhythmic phrasing from a song, dance, or painting, inserting it into another song or context, such as part of an improvised solo.

57. Radical Juxtaposition

A repeated cojoining of disperate concepts; syncopated disruption of the underlying narrative flow. Pastiche; fragmentation; the use of magical realism. Art is created with a noncausal, nonlinear, algorhythmic approach or stucture.

58. Repetition and Riffing

Short phrases that re-occur in a driving or pulsing manner.

59. 🏖 Rhythm

A sentient, vibratory force expressed in time and space; time expressed in space; patterned occurrence and non-occurrence; a grouping of beats (and sub-beats) within a measure that are Polymetric, Polyrhythmic, complex, Cross-Rhythmic, and Syncopated.

60. S Rocking

Spontaneous combustion of rapture and bliss; an altered state; catching the ghost; catching the holy ghost; being mounted; catching fire; possession. This is Robert Farris Thompson's "Flash of the Spirit."

61. **3** Spiritual Themes

Aesthetic concerns / characteristics arise from ritual, ceremony, religion, and spirituality. Idioms used in sacred, secular, and entertainment venues are the embodiment of a single life force and are interchangeable. "Going to church" on the stage and sometimes in the nightclub. Propensity to ritualize.

62. Straight Line and Ring Formations

Movement around a solo dancer or couple, as seen in ring-shout religious dance, Hip-Hop formations, and children's games; dance between two straight lines, as seen in fraternity and sorority step shows and "soul train" social dance; dance in a single-line formation of the Conga dance, as noted by Zora Neale Hurston.

63. Style Juxtaposition

Nonhierarchical intermingling of the African American Aesthetic vernacular structure, American popular idioms, and techniques of "fine" art composition. Intellectual and physical democracy; This is Stuart Hall's "Conjuncture" and Brenda Dixon Gottschild's "High-Effect Juxtaposition."

64. 🔁 Suspended Beats • Leaving Space

A delay, or "skip," that is implemented for a specific time in a driving movement, color, energy, and/or sound.

65. Symbolic Expression

Heritage, knowledge, values, spirituality, emotions, abstract truisms, and/or tribal affiliations are stored, expressed, and transmitted through symbolic artistic expressions such as Kente cloth, dance-music-drum forms, movement, sculpture, numbers, architecture, proverbs, ideograms, color, philosophical mysteries, and "masconic" words.

66. Syncopation

Accent, of any given beat or measure, placed on the usually unaccented division of the beat or measure, shifting or breaking the regular rhythm. Accents fall between the beats (regularly or irregularly).

67. II Timbrel Variation

A wide palette of sound qualities, or timbre; a breadth of tonality ranging in variations of buzzing, humming, growling, clicking and screaming, scatting, screeching, improvised melismas (a syllable carried through several notes of varying pitch), blue notes, and body sounds such as snapping and the "high-five," or other paralinguistic elements.

68. Torso Articulations and Isolations

Movement derived when the torso is broken down into its component parts—shoulders, chest quadrants, abdominals / waist, pelvis, hip quadrants, and articulated spine.

69. 🏋 Trickster

A corporeal or supernatural being (orisha, deity, avatar, animal), due to extraordinary gifts of ingenuity, is deft at manipulating a situation through prodigious verbal or physical acts. Trickster strategies either teach a spiritual lesson or supply humor for the trickster. As an act and as a story the Trickster / trick is a stratagem for survival.

70. 26 Verbal/Visual Play • Signifying

Syntactic and semantic dimensionality as seen in the rhetorical devices of signifying, satire, derision, metaphor, simile, innuendo or double entendres, and turning nouns into verbs and verbs into nouns. Polysemy, or multiple levels of signifying imagery. An example is the Dozens. Another is the derisive dance of the Cakewalk.

71. _____ Virtuosic Speed

Value placed on the skilled speed of performance. While aspects of the Aesthetic of The Cool can require stillness or an unhurried, measured pace, Virtuosic Speed is about how fast an artist can play, dance, sing, or talk while maintaining virtuosic levels.