# Foundations for a Black Soulcraft

Toward a theory of African and African diasporic technology and innovation
in Chicago Footwork, Afrobeats and other forms of digital embodiment

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Soulcraft is a theory of Black technology that reflects notions of being and practice in the material world by people of African descent. Default notions about technology or STEM presume the use of "bench science," logical positivism, and Eurocentric notions of a mind-body separation as being essential for doing what has come to be understood as "high technology." *Soulcraft* offers an alternative framework for thinking about innovation, in part by revisiting the original notion of technology, from the Greek word, *techne*, which can be translated as "the material or practical arts."

Black inventors, makers and creative communities have often been deemed incapable of participation in high technology practices, due to assumptions about their intellectual and cultural capacities, and patently racist ideas about science and civilization. Our intellectual and material creativity has often been denigrated as uninformed mimicry or as situational "cleverness" (Brock 2020) and seldom systematic.

Rather than engage in these critiques which equate Western cosmology with "science", *Soulcraft* attempts to answer Amiri Baraka's call for a Black-centered forms of technological practice, which ultimately advance our liberation. In 1970, writing from Newark, New Jersey, Baraka asked *"But what is our spirit, what will it project? What machines will it produce? What will they achieve? What will be their morality?"* (Amiri Baraka *Technology and Ethos: Vol. 2 Book of Life* 1970)

*Soulcraft* has become an essential concept for me in my research examining technology practices in two forms of global street-dance: Afrobeats from West Africa and its diasporas, and the Chicago House subculture of Footwork. These forms of dance-music utilize techniques of the Black body, utilize a language and discourse of systematic technique and skilled pedagogy with computers and digital media, and innovate on forms of digital production and distribution. Operating from the margins of society, these two cultures African and African American ultimately use this form of digital embodiment in ways that trouble distinctions between a mind-body or material and metaphysical divide, in line with generations of thinking about African and African diasporic cosmology.

**Soulcraft as Black Material Practice: Key Question**

There are two central questions that African and Afro-descendant practitioners of soulcraft engage:

• How is our "inner life" (our mind or spirit) reflective of our material reality? That is, how is our soul reflected in our craftwork or practices — the things we regularly do out there in the world, the things we work on professionally that wind up defining us?

• How does what we do 'out there' in society in our daily practices, in our art, in our technology or inventions, in our *craft*, shaping our inner-life or our soul?

Aside from a set of reflexive questions, this idea of *soulcraft* has particular implications for Black people, people of African descent: As Black people, we have always defined our uniqueness our aesthetic qualities in the United States as having 'soul'. We use terms like soul power, soul food, soul music. We might think these are terms invented in popular culture in the 1960s, but in fact these descriptions of ourselves and by others stretch back to the beginning of this country, to our slave past, and what I address more specifically about in my work on Africa; in the descriptions of Africans historically and by Africans themselves.

As a theory of technology, Dr. Royston's research studies tech development in Ghana and Africa. Royston looks at start-ups and also music practices, especial viral dance videos for Afrobeats. He is also a historian of science and technology, has examined Black invention and creativity with industrial arts, mechanics and invention going back to the colonialization of the New World. From this history and research data, he uses *soulcraft* as an attempt to label an authentically Black or African ethos in technology or material creativity in the world, utilizing some of his ideas and others.

**Here are some core aspects of Black Soulcraft:**

*Tools*
- The body is one our chief tools of innovation or creativity, including the drive to survive and thrive.
- In our highest ideals (not every practice/belief)), people of African descent do not see a distinction between mind-matter or body-soul or body-mind as being very strong.

*Inspiration*
This understanding of a dynamic interaction between mind/soul/body/matter allows for insight or creativity in the following ways:
• Spiritual awareness or observations can lead to creative, material innovation.
• Deeply focused creative, technical work allow for greater spiritual awareness.
• We use speculative insight, fantasy or spectacular performance to allow for new visions of possibility in the material and spiritual realms.
• So for instance, if society has created the expectation that Black people must live horrible lives and die horrible deaths, we refute these claims and live up to our notions of greatness as a way to not only cope, but to create a new reality.
• Think: Beyoncé's performances at the Coachella Festival, the work of Afrofuturism in *Black Panther*, and other texts; the music of John Coltrane or the production of Wu Tang's RZA; Muhammad Ali's career as a boxer, or Dr. J's elegance in basketball;

*Work (Craft, Tech, Practice)*
Understanding the source of these innovations allows us to think critically about our practice, on our craftwork or creative work. These are some enduring qualities of Black soulcraft:
• Recognizing that innovation emerges through austerity; Creativity emerges from the margins, as well as the elite science. Especially via re-invention, strategic adoption, creative appropriation of existing tools/practices. (Eglash and Fouché 2004)
• We utilize improvisation or tactical innovation.
• Music, art, design, rhetoric, dance and other embodied, creative practices such as sport and performance are fields are integral to *soulcraft*.
• We play with ephemerality, with things that don't last; In part, because we realize that life is about adaptation, about iterating. But we've got to start working against this. We can be mobile, agile, and liquid in our movements, but we still have to provide a way for our families, our communities to eat and survive and follow the paths we laid. So we need to struggle to think about how at this stage, as Black people we can institutionalize our soulcraft, and not just take it for granted.

**Putting *Soulcraft* into a Practice of ethics, inner-life, mind-body-soul.**

These are not superficial descriptions of race or racial essence, but point to a deep connection and/or longing for connection with our true or inner-self. So the concept of *soul*, we can equate this to African-American culture and identity.

The question might be then, how do we utilize that unique identity/experience, centered on a relationship between the soul/body or mind/matter — in ways that reflect our craft, our social-shaping of the world? How can we have our craft productively enhance how we access and nurture our inner-life?

African-American and African spiritual beliefs don't generally see a strong distinction between these two states of being, mind-matter, physical world and the metaphysical world (Gyekye 2009), and this is evidenced in our culture in many different ways, often with music, but definitely in our arts.

So we might ask, how does 'swag' inform the way we do architecture? How does the blues inform our painting? How can church, "the dozens" or double-dutch or cooking inform the way we teach and work in a classroom? How does our own belief in our connection to a higher-power, inform the way we achieve in sports? Or in any arena where we encounter challenges or limits?

In my research on tech-startups in Ghana, I am profoundly impressed by the ways in which entrepreneurs weave an ethos of social responsibility in almost every project. Most of the software developers I have interviewed there since 2010 have expressed a strong sense of social obligation, reflected in the language of religious redemption and spiritual destiny. In interviews with African street-dancers doing Afrobeats dances online, I have been similarly been struck by sense of self-assuredness and religiosity of their practices. Afrobeats dancers in Ghana, and in diaspora in Europe and the U.S., often see their work as redeeming the image of Africa, often portrayed as backwards and technologically inept. In many ways, the Black bodies used in these videos and with social media demonstrate quite the opposite. And in the United States, Black dancers

practicing Footwork, crump and other street-born forms, are adamant in their belief in the redemptive power of their technological art-form. "Footwork saves lives," is often the cry in public work and documentaries (Battle 2020).

How does our sense of justice, a connection to a creator, allow us to create or invent new realities — to physically and spiritually transform our circumstances? They work to together, or at least maybe they should. Some of us do this naturally — but by thinking *soulcraft*, we can think about how to do them *intentionally*, working from our core ethics and beliefs, working from our knowledge-of-self, including appreciation and knowledge of what our culture, what our ancestors have come through. And then utilizing that knowledge, in a critical way, we can see how *soulcraft* can inform our routines, our practices in ways that in-turn allow us to push deeper into our sense of self.

Mind/Spirit/Soul and the Body in this ethos *soulcraft* are indelibly linked. While some may take this to be a kind of religious ideal, it really goes beyond doctrine or belief, whether it be Christianity or Islam, Buddhism, or even more 'traditional' African beliefs in voodoo, santeria, juju or ancestor-spirit-religions. [1]

So that when people are doing basketball or street-dance or Alvin Alley or capoeira or what have you, for instance, we can see these as forms of material innovation as well as spiritual innovation or spiritual practices.

How do we use our sense of ethics, sense of justice, our social responsibilities to create things in this world? How does our soul shape our material reality? And conversely, how can our physical acts, our creativity, what we may call our *craft*, shape our inner-life, our soul, and ultimately our destiny?

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[1] Soulcraft is not a new word. It's been famously used by the conservative writer George Will; It was used in the title of a best-seller about the value of creative labor; It was a word used by occultists in the early 20th century. In all these iterations, the concept is poorly theorized and connected to a hazy set of ideas around public moralism and moral action. It doesn't mean sorcery or witchcraft — those are pejorative words anyways, often used to discredit traditional indigenous religions. My inspiration for soulcraft came by way of the Black hardcore punk rock and reggae band, Bad Brains. I was always inspired by Bad Brain's anti-establishment ethos, their focus on African spirituality, their use of self-help literature to foster a revolutionary consciousness to unite humanity. They are a really interesting and pioneering band that remade underground rock music in several ways since the 1970s. One of their breakthrough songs was called, 'Soulcraft,' and though the song itself if more poetic than literal, it describes how mind-body-spirit need to be used in unison in order to achieve greatness. A simply message, but my inspiration for thinking about how technology and any material arts practice, because that's what the word technology actually refers to. It's Greek root word, techne, means 'material arts/practices.' It may have to do with science, or engineering, but at the core of technology is the sense of creating something new or innovating with the material world. Soulcraft is a theory of black technology or black culture, in which the distinctions between the material world and the metaphysical world, are not hard and fast. These influence each other. And if we understand the history of black innovation, and from where this inspiration for material innovation emerges, we can see this as a dynamic practice.