


Black Nativity: *Twenty Years of Holiday Cheer!*

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PRESENTED BY  *Thrivent Financial for Lutherans*
Foundation

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Educational Tools

Penumbra Theatre Study Guide

Greetings! Thank you for visiting Penumbra Theatre Company's **Study Guide Library**. We are so pleased that you seek to extend and engage your understanding of the drama we produce and the thematic issues it brings to the fore.

Penumbra Theatre Company occupies a very unique place within American society, and by extension of that, the world. Penumbra was borne out of the Black Arts Movement, a time charged by civic protest and community action. An artist making art by, for and about the black community was charged with merging aesthetic (artistic) principles with ethical (moral) ones. Subsequently, in this historical and political context, art had an agenda to strive toward social change. African American artists were part of, and greatly influenced, the social currents that carried people from their homes, schools and places of worship to the streets.

Bonding artistic interpretation with civic responsibility engenders an important kind of creative dissonance, a harmony of balance. It creates something neither art nor civic action could do alone. This is mission driven art, informed by a black ethos and aesthetic, which can adequately illuminate our experience. **Ensemble Theatre** in that context is the creation of a community of people committed to the telling of a story that acknowledges the experience of everyone involved. This kind of art demands that each audience member recognize his or her place in relation to the art. When that happens, we begin to think about ourselves as interactive forces in a greater social context. Our own agency becomes clearer to us; our choices and reactions start to make sense within a broader, more nuanced environment. We begin to see that others have lived with similar issues, and that their perspectives have great potential to enrich our experience and help us problem-solve. This kind of art creates and sustains community. It encourages coalition.

The function of an **Education and Outreach Program** inside an institution such as Penumbra Theatre Company is to use informed discussion and interdisciplinary tools to unpack the issues stimulated by the drama. Just as an actor must learn lines and blocking before interpreting a character, we offer our audiences the practical tools so that they may respond to the art both critically and creatively. It is our job to push conversation, critical analysis, and commentary beyond emotion toward solution.

The **Study Guides** are meant to stimulate discussion, not to present a definitive voice or the "right answer." Theatre is *fluid*, active, interactive and reactive; we must engage it intellectually that way too.

We hope to create space for the themes inspired by the drama to take root and blossom. Penumbra invites audiences to participate in the art and social action, by using our Education and Outreach tools to locate their contribution, their voice, within the larger human story we tell over and over again. We love. We fail. We begin anew. Over and over, told by countless tongues, embodied by some of the finest actors and carried in the hearts of some of the most committed audience members; we speak our human lessons through the prism of the African American experience.

PENUMBRA THEATRE STUDY GUIDE
Black Nativity: Twenty Years of Holiday Cheer!

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THE ARTISTIC PROCESS

The Social Symbolic: Individuals in Society

Art is a complicated process that we rarely fully engage. It stimulates emotional, intellectual, even physical responses in audiences. Art is so powerful because it is one example of a deep and necessary connection between an individual and the collective world. To better understand the process of art, it helps to consider this connection and how it works.

The connection between an individual and society is made through complex systems of meaning and metaphor; groups of symbols created by humans that represent how we feel, think, see and understand the world in which we live. These systems represent the tie that binds us all to one another in relationships that constitute identity, and help us comprehend our human experience. Art is one such system and there are others too.

Individuals can only access these systems through the collective, social world. In order for a human child, for example, to learn to use language (really just a system of symbols, meaning and metaphor), that child must come into contact with other human beings who already grasp and make use of the faculty of language. Once the child is inducted into this social system, the symbols, meaning and metaphor common to all members of the community will eventually dominate the life-experience of that child and his or her ability to reflect upon or process that experience. In fact, these systems are so powerful, that the child will also only come to understand him or herself in relation to other community members, and only through the system of meaning and metaphor common to that group. This process is called socialization. A community's system of meaning, metaphor and symbolism forms its culture. Socialization does two things: it sustains culture and forms an individual's identity.

Social Commentary and the Nature of Art

Art works by tapping into a community's system of meaning, metaphor and symbolism to represent the experience, knowledge or reality specific to that culture. Art is ultimately the expression of an idea, emotion or experience through the creation of a symbolic structure. The artistic product does not have to have *physical structure* to be considered art. Music, story-telling, dance are all artistic modes that are active and not permanent. Instead art is defined by its ability to recreate human experience through the point of view of the artist and affect a response within an audience. This might seem fairly simple, or even obvious. A deeper examination, however, will illuminate the special quality of art and explain why it is so important to a healthy society.

Human beings have the unique ability to critically observe ourselves. We can, in other words, reflect upon our actions, emotions and experiences. The fact that the word "reflect" can mean "to think" and "to mirror, or reverse an original image back to its source," is quite telling about the nature of art. In the most basic terms, an artist creates a piece of art as a reflection of culture. Culture is made up of individuals, their experiences and the integration of all of these things to become more than the sum of its individual parts.

Artists use many different structures, or "mediums," to communicate meaning. The artist's effort to communicate his or her intent is both informed by, and limited to, his or her cultural perspective; no individual exists completely outside of some cultural context. Within that cultural context, the artist embodies different symbols that have meaning within the culture. His or her navigation of the cultural landscape will be informed by these symbols and will also

inform the art too. This is what we mean when we talk about an artist's "voice." Even though the artistic product may not have sound (like a painting or a piece of sculpture) it was created by a particular person with a particular experience in a particular social context. The artistic product reflects those particularities (the artist's perspective or point of view) and the meaning it conveys is determined by them.

Moreover, any form of communication (like language or art) requires the use of the symbolic tools of the culture. This means that in order to reflect the culture through artistic representation, the artist has to be able to stand both outside and inside a culture simultaneously (but never be totally in either place). Only from that vantage point can the artist use the symbolic tools of a culture to communicate what he or she observes about the culture itself. This is what is known as "artistic commentary." It conveys the artist's intent, or impetus for creating something.

The Role of the Audience and the Alienation of the Artist

The process does not end with the creation of an artistic product. Art needs an audience other than the artist who created it. In solitude, the artist may marvel at his or her creation—might even be enlightened or surprised by it—but the artist will remain unfulfilled without the participation of an audience. The artist was moved to respond to cultural stimuli, the response now requires an audience to receive it, absorb it and refract it back to the artist. This is the contribution of the artistic product to the cultural landscape that inspired it. This way the artist can observe the change engendered by his or her commentary. To comment on something is to change it.

If the nature of the artist is to observe, interpret and then comment in order to change, the nature of the audience is also to observe and interpret. Because each human being has been exposed to an infinite number of symbols in widely divergent patterns and trajectories, and at different points in our lives, each spectator will "read" (or make sense of, interpret the symbols) the artistic product differently. An entire audience might have similar emotional or intellectual responses to a piece of art, but each spectator will have a slightly different experience than his or her neighbor. When the members of an audience have an opportunity to discuss their experience, the entire group is enlightened or engaged, bound by the same artistic element. This is how art creates community. A kind of spontaneous culture is fashioned by virtue of a shared experience. The culture is singular to itself because of the unique qualities of each audience member and any variance within the art.

The audience has one last critical role to play in the artistic process, and it is both enlightening and violent. The audience is invited to observe a translation of a common experience through the perspective of an artist. The audience is then momentarily able to achieve a similar distance from the culture as the artist did before creating the artistic product, but this time the audience starts at the end and works in retrospect back to the state of things to which the artist originally responded. They are afforded the benefit of the impetus for the art and the art itself simultaneously. This event illustrates the extent of, or limit to, the intent of the artist.

In order to comprehend the art, in order to feel it, the spectator must contextualize it within his or her own unique experience. Of course this experience is largely determined by the spectator's cultural context. Even as the spectator experiences the art he or she changes it, manipulates it so that it will fit within the frame of reference particular to him or her. Art encourages all who use the system of symbolism, meaning and metaphor to consider it differently. This is where the integrity of the artist's original intent starts to break down, and it is the moment in which the

artist **loses** the ability to control his or her artistic product. The artist can no longer speak for the art; the art now speaks for itself and for the artist. By virtue of its nature, an audience changes the artistic product fundamentally from the scope of what is intended by the artist to the full breadth of the potential audience experience. To claim the art is to fulfill it, it is also to sever it forever from its original intent—it is no longer defined by a striving to effect change through artistic translation and commentary, it is the reception of the comment and the realization of change. The artistic product has traveled a very great distance between the artist and the audience. It is now absorbed back into the cultural system of metaphor and symbolism and becomes another tool for communicating meaning. The artist is impotent to reclaim or control the artistic product. So to reiterate, the nature of the artist is to observe, interpret, comment and in so doing effect change. The nature of the audience is to observe, interpret, and claim.

Perpetual Motion: The Circle of Art and Culture

The manipulation, possible misunderstanding and absorption of the artistic product by the culture, is both a fulfillment and a violation of the artist. The only way for the artist to regain agency or engage his or her artistic product from this point on is to produce more art in response to the culture. This is how art is perpetual and how culture and art continually constitute one another. It stimulates growth in both arenas and so keeps a society from stagnating.

Summary

To review, an artist responds to cultural stimuli through the manipulation of symbols that the culture uses to communicate meaning. The artistic product is a blend of the system of meaning specific to a culture and the artist's interpretation of that system. The art produced is the artist's commentary. The audience functions as an agent of translation as it claims the artistic product for itself and alters it in order to access it. The culture absorbs the art and the artist no longer can change or access his or her artistic product now that it has entered the social realm of the symbolic. The artist can only create more art, using the tools of the cultural symbolic, a system that has already been altered by its absorption of the original artistic product. Thus art and culture are constitutive of one another.

A BRIEF OVERVIEW ON THE HISTORY OF AFRICAN AMERICAN THEATRE

Aspects of the dramatic performing arts can be found in cultures around the world. Globally speaking, American Theater is a relatively new tradition. As theater has evolved from the **African roots** of Greek tragedy to Shakespearean epics, American stages have produced a wide range of plays, largely influenced by the diverse peoples inhabiting this nation. In its early years, American Theater reflected the lives of its proponents, namely white, property-owning, Christian men. Ironically, even as America established itself as a sovereign nation, the drama of the day came largely from Europe, which boasted a unique canon of work. Still, as early as 1821 black American artists were creating, staging and performing for mixed audiences, showcasing both existing and original work.

One of the first theater companies to approach the dramatic performing arts from an African American perspective was **The African Grove Theater** in New York City. It was founded by **William Henry Brown** and **James Hewlett**, both who had traveled by ship throughout the Caribbean, where story-telling, performance, dance and music were essential to the culture and survival of the slaves working on sugar cane and tobacco plantations, salt flats and mines. The company performed tragedies and comedies from Shakespeare to American playwrights. Eventually, the need for work that came from within the African American experience proved itself. Two years after it opened, the first play written and produced by an African American was presented at the African Grove in 1823. The play, *The Drama of King Shotaway*, by Brown, played to mixed (though predominately black) audiences that year. However, many whites were adamantly opposed to the existence of such a theater and frequent police raids, harassment and threats forced Brown and Hewlett to relocate the theater several times throughout the lower East side of Manhattan. Eventually, the white opposition won out over the tenacity of the black actors, directors and producers of The African Grove Theater Company and it closed its doors permanently.¹

As Americans established a canon of their own, dominant political and social trends were addressed by the work. One of the nation's most successful and fraught enterprises was racialized slavery in the American South. Depicted on white stages, black characters often fit into stereotypical characters which would haunt American stages for decades to come. Some of the most prevalent of those were **the Sambo, the Uncle, the Mammy and the Jezebel**. These

¹ For more information see Bernard L. Peterson Jr.'s "Introduction: The Origin and Development of the Black American Playwright from the Antebellum Period to World War II," *Early Black American Playwrights and Dramatic Writers: A Biographical Directory and Catalog of Plays, Films, and Broadcasting Scripts*. (New York: Greenwood Press, 1990) 1-21.

racist depictions would be reflected over and over again in the theater, usually performed by white actors in blackface. African-American artists struggled against these stereotypical images as soon as they entered the public sphere. In 1857, **William Wells Brown**, (no relation to William Henry Brown) juxtaposed a stereotypical black male character named Cato with an exemplary black male character named Glen in his play *The Escape; or a Leap for Freedom*. This play highlighted the difference between an image created by black people for black audiences and an image created by white people for white audiences. It was an important statement.

Still the popularity of comical representations of black Americans continued. **Minstrelsy** was very popular in the 19th Century. This performance tradition was created as whites made light of and fantasized about slave life and plantation culture in the antebellum South. White entertainers in **blackface** would do comedic impressions of, or parody, the stories, songs and dance, jokes and music of blacks for white audiences. Minstrelsy was a very lucrative and beloved form of theater for white audiences for many years. White theatre-goers filled houses to laugh at representations of blacks as happy, contented and dim-witted. The tradition would continue long into the mid-1900s. Responsible for the creation of one familiar American character, **Jim Crow**, this theatre tradition was hardly benign. Its impact had a life that extended far beyond the stage in American social, political and civil rights policy.

For many years, (largely due to the audience expectations created by these white performers) the only work black performers could find was to perform in minstrel shows, *in blackface*. This absurd situation reinforces the notion that the depictions of blackness and black people on white stages was not real. Even black actors had to “perform” white ideas of blackness by darkening their skin, wearing silly costumes and miming the white actors’ racist depictions of black people.

In Hollywood, some of America’s most revered epic films depict the early stereotypes created in the theater and in the 1920s and 30s. Black artists, writers and musicians began responding to the racist depictions and creating their own artistic representations of black life and philosophy. This period of burgeoning talent and new work is known as **The Harlem Renaissance**. In 1923, the first serious play written by a black playwright produced on Broadway. It was called *The Chip Woman’s Fortune* by **Willis Richardson**.² Still, the prevalent trend was for white artists and producers to pull from black narrative, song and dance and parody it for audiences. **Langston Hughes** and **Jean Toomer** were particularly concerned with white representations of blackness in the theater. Read below, Langston Hughes’ famous poem “**Notes on Commercial Theater**”:

² Ibid., 165.

You've taken my blues and gone --
You sing 'em on Broadway
And you sing 'em in Hollywood Bowl,
And you mixed 'em up with symphonies
And you fixed 'em
So they don't sound like me.
Yep, you done taken my blues and gone.

You also took my spirituals and gone
You put me in Macbeth and Carmen Jones
All kinds of Swing Mikados
And in everything but what's about me --
But someday somebody'll
Stand up and talk about me --
Black and beautiful --
And sing about me,
And put on plays about me!
I reckon it'll be
Me myself!

Yes, it'll be me.³

This poem echoes one of the founding tenets of another critical moment in black theater history, the **Black Arts Movement** of the 1960s. It was during this period that some of the most celebrated black writers responded vociferously to the racism American citizens were struggling against in the Civil Rights Movement. Self-representation became a major focus of the movement—art was created by, for, and about black people. Artists such as **LeRoi Jones/Amiri Baraka**, **Ed Bullins**, **Nikki Giovanni**, **Harold Cruse**, **Ray Durem**, **Adrienne Kennedy**, **Larry Neal** and **Sonia Sanchez** all produced seminal work during this period of time. In 1959 **Lorraine Hansberry's** famous play *A Raisin in the Sun* opened on Broadway in New York City. It was the first time a play written by a black playwright, directed by a black director (**Lloyd Richards**) and written about black people was presented at this level. The next twenty years saw an eruption of African American theater companies springing up around the country, one of which was **Penumbra Theatre Company** in St. Paul, Minnesota.

Founded in 1976 by Artistic Director **Lou Bellamy**, Penumbra addressed issues of racial tension and misrepresentation between what were visibly separate black and white Americas. Over the last 30 years, Penumbra has provided a consistently clear message that the African American experience is rich, dynamic and critical to the American theater canon. While visiting the Twin Cities, playwright **August Wilson** said of Penumbra:

It was with the indomitable spirit associated with pioneers and visionaries that Lou Bellamy took a handful of actors over [sic] twenty years ago and challenged them

³ Hughes, Langston. *The Collected Poems of Langston Hughes*. (New York: Vintage, 1995) 215.

not only to believe in themselves but to have a belief larger than anyone's disbelief. When I walked through the doors of Penumbra Theatre [sic], I did not know that I would find life-long friends and supporters that would encourage and enable my art. I did not know I would have my first professional production, a musical satire called *Black Bart and the Sacred Hills*. I did not know then what Penumbra Theatre would come to mean to me and that there would come a time when Penumbra would produce more of my plays than any other theatre in the world. And that their production of *The Piano Lesson* would become not only my favorite staging but a model of style and eloquence that would inspire my future work. I only knew that I was excited to be in a black theater that had real lights, assigned seats and a set that was not a hodgepodge of found and borrowed props as had been my experience with all the black theater I had known. We are what we imagine ourselves to be and we can only imagine what we know to be possible. The founding of PTC enlarged that possibility. And its corresponding success provokes the community to a higher expectation of itself. I became a playwright because I saw where my chosen profession was being sanctioned by a group of black men and women who were willing to invest their lives and their talent in assuming a responsibility for our presence in the world and the conduct of our industry as black Americans.⁴

Through artistically excellent theater, Penumbra has sought to plumb the depths of the human experience by presenting culturally specific and historically accurate depictions of African Americans. Sadly, many of the black theater companies founded during the BAM have closed over the years, largely due to lack of funding, managerial problems and poor attendance. Penumbra's survival is a testament to all the people who believe in its power for social change. Our artists, administration, audiences and community have consistently buoyed us up and kept this important institution afloat on the occasionally stormy seas of non-profit arts administration. Today, because of our growth and the changing world, Penumbra is widely regarded as a pioneer of cross-cultural dialogue. Our template of finding the universal through the specificity of human experience has become a model for teaching, arts application and criticism. We are nationally and internationally recognized as a preeminent African American theater company.

Lou Bellamy explains that black people not only "have to be at the table" to engage in cross-cultural conversations, but host such debates as well. In an America that increasingly more often accepts oversimplified answers, we seek out nuance and enjoy disturbing the veneer. At Penumbra, we provide the table at which artists and audiences alike may sit down and rigorously engage one another with complicated questions. We are proud to have these artists in our midst and excited to produce work that circumvents a hackneyed black / white binary.

⁴ August Wilson, excerpted from a speech given at Penumbra Theatre Company, 1997.

INTRODUCTION

Black Nativity has become a hallmark of the Twin Cities Christmas tradition. Over the years, patrons of Penumbra Theatre have witnessed many incarnations of the production, which celebrates the story of the birth of Christ as told through the lens of African American gospel music. Written originally in 1961 by Langston Hughes, *Black Nativity* is a patchwork compilation of traditional gospel songs, folklore and African American spirituality. The rhythm of Langston Hughes' work echoes a pulse that reverberates through various modes of black culture to the far reaches of the diaspora. Its point of origin was Africa. It was heartbeat, blood beat, an umbilical cord. It was the drum. Over time and across the Middle Passage the song was changed but not broken. Hughes is among a select few who managed to harness its prowess with his pen, he captured its cunning, shifting ingenuity throughout the ages. Langston Hughes wrote about himself, his family, his life and living. He loved black people. He marveled at, lamented and celebrated the black experience. He endeavored to write the spirit that would not die out, the very breath of a people that, in and of itself, was a revolution.

One of the Penumbra favorites featured in this musical is "the quilting song," when five women sit together and stitch a quilt for Mary who has just birthed Jesus. This year we commemorate the textile artisans in our community who honor our ancestors by keeping record through a rich tradition of African American quilting.

This year come with us on a journey back through four hundred years of revolutionary artistry proving that sometimes a needle and thread may be greater than a sword.

CHARACTERS IN THE PLAY

Grandma Walker: The Walker family matriarch, she is sweet and stern. A recent widow, this year marks her first Christmas without her beloved husband by her side. She is a mother and grandmother, a sister, a daughter and a friend. Grandma Walker symbolizes the many warm, strong women who are the glue that keeps the family together.

Henry Walker: Recently departed husband of Grandma Walker. He was a jovial, kind-hearted man with a notable military career.

Ensemble: The rest of the cast is made up of the Walker family, including daughters and sons, nieces and nephews and the newest member of the family, an infant born to a couple who has traveled quite far to join the family for this holiday season.

A Twenty-Year Holiday Tradition
by Stephanie Lein Walseth, August Wilson Fellow

This season Penumbra marks its 20th anniversary of staging the gospel Christmas musical *Black Nativity*. Originally written by the prolific poet and playwright Langston Hughes in 1961, the play debuted on Broadway, toured Europe, and was broadcast on television in 1963. Its impact has stretched from coast to coast, and each year in addition to Penumbra's production, companies in Boston, Seattle, San Francisco, Cleveland, Chicago, and New York present their own version of the Nativity story.

Throughout its twenty years on the Penumbra stage, *Black Nativity* has undergone continual change. Under the artistic guidance of Lou Bellamy, Penumbra has shaped and re-shaped *Black Nativity* by framing it within different critical points in African and African American history. These moments have included the Reconstruction period, featuring a journey of recently emancipated African Americans northwards, biblical times in North East Africa, and most recently, a contemporary setting in St. Paul. In this incarnation, we are taken into the home of recently widowed Grandma Walker, whose family brings the spirit of hope and holiday cheer to her, filling the house with song, dancing, the sharing of presents, and the tradition of quilting. With this year's focus on the quilting tradition, Penumbra brings attention to an integral and lasting African American skill. Both *Black Nativity* and quilting have served as ways of preserving, telling, and re-creating the stories of African Americans in this country. The quilt you will see in the production today has been a community creation of local artists dedicated to keeping those stories – biblical, ancient, and recent – alive.

SYNOPSIS

Henry Walker has recently passed away, leaving a large and loving family. This holiday season, the Walkers are confronted for the first time with celebrating Christmas without one of the pillars of their family. Overtaken by grief, Grandma Walker has not had the energy to organize the family's traditional celebration of the season. One of her daughters has returned to stay with her to ease her burden in this time of mourning. Unbeknownst to Grandma Walker, her daughter has contacted the entire family, far and wide, and urged them to bring Christmas home. They have responded with love, excitement and determination, to press on in the spirit of the holiday, even as their hearts are heavy with the loss of a dearly loved family member. The surprise is enough to lift Grandma Walker from her chair and remember her place as the elder who must carry on and remain the keeper of the flame.

SETTING

The Walker home in St. Paul, Minnesota.

Winter, the eve of Christmas. The present.

2007 SONG LIST

I Love the Lord He Heard My Cry (Traditional)

T. Mychael Rambo, Ginger Commodore

Jennifer Whitlock, Ensemble Cast

Go Tell It on the Mountain (Traditional, adaptation by Keith McCutchen)

T. Mychael Rambo, Thomasina Petrus

Jack Yates, Dennis Spears, Ensemble Cast

Joy to the World (Music and Lyrics by G.F. Handel, arrangement by Keith McCutchen)

Ensemble Cast

I Wonder as I Wander (Music and Lyrics by J. J. Niles, arrangement by Sanford Moore)

Dennis Spears

My Way's Cloudy (Traditional, arrangement by Sanford Moore)

Jennifer Whitlock, Ginger Commodore

Oh Jerusalem in the Morning (Traditional, arrangement by Sanford Moore)

Ensemble Cast

No Room at the Inn (Traditional, arrangement by Sanford Moore)

Greta Oglesby

Turned Away (Music and Lyrics by J.D. Steele)

Cameron Hughes, Aimee Bryant

Ensemble Cast

Jesus Is On The Main Line (Traditional)

Dennis Spears

Mary Had a Baby (Traditional)

Ensemble Cast

Mary Had a Baby (Traditional, arrangement by Sanford Moore)

Jamecia Bennett

(Alternate) Thomasina Petrus

What You Gonna Name That Pretty Little Baby?

(Traditional, arrangement by Sanford Moore)

Greta Oglesby, Tonia Hughes

Jennifer Whitlock, Thomasina Petrus,

Aimee Bryant, Ginger Commodore, Jamecia Bennett

Wasn't That a Mighty Day (Traditional, arrangement by Sanford Moore)

Dennis Spears, Jack Yates

T Mychael Rambo, Cameron Hughes

Christ is Born (Traditional, arrangement by Sanford Moore)

T. Mychael Rambo

Sweet Little Jesus Boy (Traditional)

Ginger Commodore

(Alternate) Jennifer Whitlock

Poor Little Jesus

Tonia Hughes

Prayer Song (Arrangement by Keith McCutchen, Adaptation by Sanford Moore)

Ensemble Cast

Lord I Know I've Been Changed (Traditional, arrangement by Sanford Moore)

Ensemble Cast

Hallelujah (Music and Lyrics by T.C. Terrell)

Greta Oglesby, Tonia Hughes

Jack Yates, Cast

Rise Up Shepherd & Follow

R. Mathes

Ensemble Cast

Come Let Us, Adore Him

Jamecia Bennett

Tonia Hughes

Jesus is a Rock (Traditional, arrangement by Sanford Moore)

T Mychael Rambo, Ensemble Cast

How Excellent Is Thy Name (Music and Lyrics by V. Michael McKay)

Ensemble Cast

Silent Night (Music and Lyrics by F. Gruber/J. Mohr, Arrangement by Sanford Moore)

Ginger Commodore, Thomasina Petrus

Silent Night II (Music and Lyrics by F. Gruber/J. Mohr, Arrangement by Sanford Moore)

Aimee Bryant

Little Drummer Boy

(Music and Lyrics by Davis/Onorati/Simeone, Arrangement by Sanford Moore)

Thomasina Petrus/ Aimee Bryant

Cameron Hughes

Angels We Have Heard on High (Traditional French carol)

Ensemble Cast

Seven-fold Amen (Music and Lyrics by P.C. Lutkin)

Ensemble Cast

Children Go Where I Send Thee (Traditional, arrangement by Sanford Moore)

Ensemble Cast

Go Tell It On The Mountain (Traditional, arrangement by Sanford Moore)

Ensemble Cast

**SPOTLIGHT INTERVIEW: DIRECTOR AUSTENE VAN AND
CO-CONCEIVER T. MYCHAEAL RAMBO**

by Stephanie Lein Walseth, August Wilson Fellow
Conducted on November 10, 2007

Stephanie Lein Walseth: You've had a long life with this production. Can you tell me about your years of experience with this piece?

Austene Van: I believe my first production [with Penumbra] was either in 1991 or 1992, and Louis Whitlock III was the director and choreographer. I knew Louis because he was my high school dance teacher. He was teaching us theater and we had no idea. He was really, really hard on us, but it was fantastic. He let us know in high school that dance is a thinking sport; it's not just about natural ability. You have to know your history. You have to know your body. You have to do your homework. He hired me first to do a show here [at Penumbra] called *Lost in the Stars*, I was really, really nervous. It was my first professional play. It was trial by fire, I remember that. I got through it though! It was painful, you know, growing pains. And then I did a couple more shows here, and he had auditions for *Black Nativity*. So, I auditioned for Louis, I did a dance combination, and sang a song for Reverend Carl Walker, and I got hired to do the show and it changed my life forever. Forever. Because there I met my family, my husband, and some of my best friends in the whole wide world – the people that I consider to be my family for life. Professionally I grew, and I got to see these veterans at work – Louis at work outside of school, and Kathi Gagnon and Regina Williams, Mary Winchell and Deidre Whitlock. I learned how disciplined you have to be and how tough the work is. Even when I moved to St. Louis, I would always come up here to do *Black Nativity* every winter. I never wanted to leave. It was more than a show, it was our family coming together, you know. So, that's what it still is. It still is.

Lein Walseth: So, from your first production to becoming the director, what were the steps in between? Did you act and sing in the production? What were the different roles you played?

Van: For the first 10 years I was a member of the ensemble – acting, and dancing, and singing. Then we went in a different direction with it for about three years, and then we had to take a break from it and rethink things. So, T. Mychael and Lou started to re-conceive the show, and the first year that it came back home to Penumbra, and it was more like a eulogy...

T. Mychael Rambo: Reflections.

Van: ...Mmm hmm. We started to reflect and remember what it used to be and why we came together to do this show, and who was in the show. I remember in that show we honored Kathi Gagnon who's no longer with us, and Danny Clark, and a few others. We actually said their names in that show. It was more of a review than it was a play. Then the next year, T. Mychael and Lou started forming what's now *Black Nativity*, about the woman and the house, and she's a widow, and family,

and bringing life into the family. It was significant that we returned to Penumbra. It reminds me of all of the patrons and show-goers that came every year, every single year, to see the original *Black Nativity*. I think the community missed that show. You know, the African American community has wonderful oral histories, and we're continuing that with this show. The singing and the storytelling ensure that we shore up our younger folks to be able to keep history. A lot of the members of the original cast were coming back home, a lot of the songs returned, you know, so that's powerful.

Rambo: Our piece starts with that moment that Langston Hughes began with, "Here, here again," like the season of Christ's birth, returning to this place, the theater, returning to the cast of characters and actors. Now we're bringing members of the company full circle, conceiving and directing, there is a sense of the cycle of life, and it's really beautiful.

Austene's direction and movement ushered that forward. There's nothing [in the production] that isn't given effort and movement and rhythm – it doesn't sit still. And that's something that Austene, as a director, has constantly been bringing forward in our minds. She's getting us to really be present – we can't sit still, we can't not move, we have to be in it, even when we're coming out of a plié, our bodies don't stop. Our movements have movement. It's all about that flow. It's like a great breath, it's like a cleansing breath.

Van: Thank you, T. Mychael. That reminded me of the work we do here in general, whether it's August Wilson or anything. August Wilson, you know, is *musical*. It's musical, and I think African Americans, we have a way about us that *is* rhythm, we move through the world in rhythm, we speak, we teach in rhythm, we receive rhythms and song and movement. That's a style.

Lein Walseth: That seems to go back to what you said at the beginning, in your work with Louis Whitlock, about how it was mind and body and history and homework and all of those things together.

Van: Being whole. Yeah, it's about being whole. I was thinking about, and I've been saying this for three years, and I still haven't remembered the word, but there's a word in Swahili for music and dance. It's not separate. There's no music, there's no dance, it's all one.

What makes me nervous, a little bit, about the state of the world and our community is that we have begun to dismember ourselves from our family, from our community, from compassion, from our minds, from our hearts. What's left then, is these physical shells focused on materials. That's not usually an African American trait, you know, but we're gearing toward that way. We're focused on the bling and not so much the family, the cars and the money and the stuff like that. We used to be really family oriented, so that's what I'm trying to do. Spirituality has been a strong element for African Americans through our history

here. It was important for Africans and slaves and African Americans for years, it kept us sane and healthy and whole. That's why I want *Black Nativity* to continue because it underlines the importance of spirituality. How we express ourselves spiritually goes back, again, to how we worship and sing and praise, you know, through music and dance, how we give our *whole* selves in worship and praise.

Lein Walseth: Something that you said struck me, when you were talking about spirituality and praise. During the Penumbra company conference a couple of weeks ago, one of the company members talked about when his mother died, coming here. He said that Penumbra was like his church, that this place was more than a theater: it was his home and his church and all of these other things as well. It sounds kind of like what you're talking about, it speaks to that.

Van: For me, yes, definitely, it has been. Being around the cast and crew and family, it's its own ministry, not just to the community, but to the participants and the members inside.

Rambo: For many years there was a slogan, 'Penumbra Theatre – Testify.' It was just a word, but it gave an anchor, a focus of what this theater does: it gives testament. That testimony is a celebration, and that word is very powerful because that was one of the reasons, and one of the callings of the community about bringing the show back, they wanted to hear that testimony. *Reflections...* gave an opportunity for the people to step forward, for the audience, the community, the theater, to say, "Here's a chance to give homage and to hear from you." It became clear that this is where it needed to be. The scale of the production, how it was going to be done, needed to be very similar to almost what Langston had done in his writings, and that was bringing a community of Reconstruction folks, the slave era, members of the African community together in this place. And here we've come back in 2007, to bring it back into this place. It's not so far-fetched, it's not far removed, it seemed very fitting and apropos that the organization understands the power of that and how provocative it is to say that the woman who had her first show here in 1988 at 17 or 18 years of age...

Van: 5. I was 5. (Laughter)

Rambo: ...is now directing. How provocative that, in an industry where black women are about as visible as small blades of grass in an overwhelming field of men, we are doing this work. That Penumbra would be powerful and provocative enough to say, "Yes, Austene Van can do this." This is why you work here, this is why you were brought here again to do this.

Van: I was thinking about how the show mirrors real life and vice versa, because how it's been in the show is that the elders, they teach the kids, they pass it on, and they go forth. So, the elders who have been involved in this show, mentors like Louis Whitlock III, and Lou Bellamy, go, "Okay, here's some stuff. Ready? Go," and they've pushed me forward, giving me the tools that I need to be able to bring

a show together, to direct a show like this. It means so much to me, so much to me.

Lein Walseth: Speaking of that bringing forward, do you think there's something specific this year that you're bringing forward? As opposed to other years? And also, beyond that, where do you see this piece going?

Van: To Vegas! (Laughter) I think because it's been on my heart, the state that our young people are in, and like I was telling you, I feel we're just kind of in parts right now, and I think I've been trying to pull out how important it is for us to continue to really touch our children, put our hands on them, and really help to value them and shape them. So, I've been trying to focus on that. Not just for the show, but personally, with the youngster that we have in our show, who is so, so super talented, and I'm looking around at his mentors, and I'm like, 'He doesn't even know.' He's got T. Mychael and Dennis and Jack and Sanford and Greta and all these folks that are molding him and pushing him and that's important. And in 15-20 years he's going to be directing something, you know, running sound, lights, you know what I mean? That's really, really exciting to me.

Rambo: Austene was really very telling when she referred to the Swahili word, and it eludes me, but in some West African languages, there is *no* word for music, because it is so integral. I guess what I see as the direction, watching Austene as the director, and hearing Lou and Austene both speak of how musical theater is a challenge for dramatic artists who understand the value of the African American voice, is looking at how we, as a community can make musical theater have integrity and tell a story. Austene has really been forcing us to step out of the way of our very established perceptions of the work that we do, and understand that this piece has to have integrity. It has to have a dramatic and a very authentic core. I think that if we send out that message we have to be able to, and this is what is beautiful about her direction, is that we have to say to our audience that there *is* no difference between musical theater and drama. We create work that is seamless because to breath is to sing, to exhale is to dance, to live is to be dramatic, to cry is to have comedy and joy, and so all of that is, I think the focus of the direction. When we do *Piano Lesson*, I am confident, having been an understudy in past productions, having been part of *Ma Rainey*, having done *Jitney*, that Lou is getting us and the audience, and his actors to understand that the music is there, that the dance is there, that the dance is the walking downstage for a monologue. With this piece people think they're coming to see musical theater, and Austene is saying, "Nope." We're not just going to up and dance. It has to come out of something real. How many of us, she asked, start dancing in the middle of something? Is that true to who we are and the skin we live in? Sometimes. Other cultures that emulate that, emulate it because they've seen the joy that we bring to the world, and how black people do all those things seamlessly. That's what I see her doing, and that's what is wonderful – looking at what the play used to be like, with those who initially started it, what it morphed

into and became, and we went somewhere else with it, and then where we're coming again. Right, families do start singing in the middle of nowhere...

Van: Yes they do.

Rambo: ...it isn't, "And *sing*. And *dance*. And now it's stop and talk three words to sing again."

Van: Yep. Uh huh.

Rambo: What Austene is asking, what Lou is asking, what Penumbra is asking, is that people come and see the fullness and the wholeness. I just really applaud her for that.

Van: Thank you, T. Mychael.

Lein Walseth: Thank you both.

The Revolutionary Spirit: Priming a Poet

For four centuries these United States functioned as a terrorist regime. Plantation slavery required a strictly enforced system of brutality. Planters campaigned together to promote fear and obedience amongst their slaves. The need to exact immense, overabundant pain and anguish upon the noncompliant black body was a critical component of the Southern plantation system as well as the imperial projects in the Caribbean and South America. The historical record is littered with examples of elaborately designed punishments intended at the time for public consumption. For example, self-liberated slave Nathaniel (Nat) Turner, who led the August 1831 slave uprising in Virginia wherein a reputed fifty-five white planters and members of their families were killed, was tried and then sentenced to death by hanging in a public arena. After the execution, his body underwent scores of abuses. His asphyxiated corpse was beheaded, then skinned, drawn and quartered and distributed amongst the bystanders and his captors as souvenirs of the momentous occasion.⁵ This very public process was not uncommon in the Caribbean, on sugar plantations, nor in the American South. Such spectacular violence was typically reserved for unruly slaves whose repeated disobedience, though less grand than Turner's, encouraged rebellious behavior and threatened disruption of the slave system. Often, after an attempted rebellion, white mobs attacked any blacks they could find. Frantic and fearful, their brutality was unspecific and went largely unchecked by the government. The government neither sanctioned nor suppressed white mob violence, and relied on its ability to "scare people straight," into behaving like the docile, complacent creatures they expected rather than proud, independent human beings. In this world, two institutions were of grave importance to the survival of blacks as a people and to the creation and preservation of their Creole culture: *faith* and *literacy*. Neither a spiritual nor a cognitive life can be threatened by corporeal violence; both withstand any attempt to mutilate, degrade or disassemble the human body.

This was the world into which the sensitive poet Langston Hughes was born, the legacy to which he was heir. Harsh, complicated and illogical, the injustice young Langston saw unsettled him deeply. His family boasted a rich history of activism, courage and racial pride. Hughes' grandmother, Mary Langston, lost her first husband in the fray at Harper's Ferry when John Brown and his men attempted to overtake the federal arsenal and arm the slaves to overthrow the plantocracy.⁶ Both worked to bring slaves north along the Underground

⁵ <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/aia/part3/3p1518.html>

⁶ For further reading see Louis A. Decaro's *Fire from the Midst of You: A Religious Life of John Brown*. (New York and London: New York University Press, 2002); or, for an assessment of the excessive corporeality of the decay of the South and the plantation system through the cadavers

Railroad and had met and been married in one of the stronghold cities of the Abolitionist movement, Oberlin, Ohio. In his biography of Hughes' life, Arnold Rampersad reveals that Mary Hughes frequently wrapped her sleeping grandson in the bullet-ridden and blood-stained blanket that had cloaked her slain husband's shoulders.⁷ While the gesture expresses rare tenderness from the rather stern woman, bearing the symbolic weight of such reputed gallantry as a young boy was likely overwhelming. Regardless, it serves as a powerful metaphor for the centrality of activism within this family and their legacy of responsibility to "the race." Rampersad writes, "[m]uch was expected by his ancestors. They demanded, from the moment his elders recognized the boy's unusual intelligence and began to talk to him about Duty and The Race, that he had a messianic obligation to the Afro-American people, and through them to America."⁸ Here Rampersad brings to light a significant idea, namely a symbiotic vitality connecting black people and the nation. Such an obligation to the country is in dire straits today. Since the majority of black people do not feel a significant measure of influence within the project of democracy, naturally the inclination to participate has tapered. Times were different in the not too distant past, however. Though poor, Hughes was born into a kind of aristocracy; a courageous clan of people who seemed determined with each generation to best one another in terms of accomplishment and advocacy in a concerted effort to improve the country.

Part of the project toward social activism and democratic participation was the cultivation of dispersed but highly prolific black literati whose ranks included W.E.B. DuBois, Booker T. Washington, and Charles Chesnutt. As the young poet came of age, literary activism was at an unprecedented high. The editors of these magazines were forward looking objectors who regarded their work and the words of the black poets, intellectuals, journalists and educators as critically important efforts of activism. Black papers and periodicals were read not just by the intellectuals of the day, but those who considered it part of their civic duty as Americans to remain connected to a larger, dispersed, literary black community.⁹ Revolution

of the Civil War era, see Franny Nudelman's *John Brown's Body: Slavery, Violence, and the Culture of War*. (Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 2004).

⁷ Rampersad writes, "A friend brought [Lewis Sheridan Leary's] blood-stained bullet-riddled shawl home to Mary in Oberlin. Despite her loss, she always revered the memory of John Brown. 'His soul is marching on,' she wrote with a shaking hand late in her life; 'I am proud that he and his followers are not forgotten who braved death for Liberty to an oppress race.' Lewis Leary's shawl remained a symbol for her of his martyrdom; she still wore it fifty years after his death, or used it to cover her young grandchild, Langston Hughes, while he slept at night." (*sic*) See Arnold Rampersad's *The Life of Langston Hughes Volume I: 1902-1941 I, Too, Sing America*. (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986) 6.

⁸ Rampersad, *ibid.*, 4.

⁹ This is a clear distinction from the latter movement toward expatriation urged by Marcus Garvey and the more militant and aggressive efforts toward social change ushered in during the late sixties and early seventies.

was in the air. The education of the black masses spread like wildfire. People were eager to learn from that which had been kept from them for so long and they mastered quickly. The fact that literacy spread as swiftly as it did from person to person during a time wherein blacks were prevented from learning to read or write by pain of death, speaks volumes about the tenacity and spirit of the early freedom-fighters.

If the link between revolution and literacy seems a stretch, consider for a moment the Haitian Revolution.¹⁰ In Saint Domingue colony (present-day Haiti), the education of the *gens du couleur*, a class of mixed race peoples, was in part responsible for the proliferation of news of the progress of the French Revolution and its philosophies throughout the colony. The Haitian Revolution (1791-1804) took up the same tenets which drove the masses in France as they stormed the Bastille. *Liberté, égalité et fraternité* (freedom, equality and brotherhood) became the battle cry for unified forces made up of slaves and the *gens du couleur* for whom these ideals had direct implication within their racially stratified society. Together, they overtook the prosperous colony.¹¹ Thus literacy at the time offered a window into a shifting political world that defined the inexorable rights of man, rejected the tyranny of despotism, and articulated an emergent sense of independence that ironically included, by virtue of its exclusion of blacks, the enslavement of some even as it outlined the freedom of others. In fact, it is likely as a result of the system of slavery that the concept of freedom was born to its full meaning and took on such mighty weight.

¹⁰ The importance of the Haitian Revolution to early black activism in the United States should not be underestimated. During the Harlem Renaissance, Haiti was often used as a point of reference to describe a revolutionary spirit, the power of unification, and the triumph of good over evil. Indeed, Langston Hughes repeatedly refers to Haiti with a kind of reverence and curiosity.

¹¹ For further reading on the Haitian Revolution see the detailed account offered by C.L.R. James' *The Black Jacobins: Toussaint L'Ouverture and the San Domingo Revolution*. (New York: Random House, 1963).

Voices from the Antebellum South

There is an old adage that says, “history is told from the viewpoint of the victors.” What that means is that for four hundred years—from the late 1400s to 1863—white, property owning, Christian males got to tell the story of America. Women (of any ethnicity), poor whites, non-Christians, Native Americans and African Americans were largely written out of the early history of this country. In other words, those who birthed and raised future generations, those whose land this great country was built upon, and those who labored to build what is today one of the most powerful nations in the world would be virtually silent if limited to the official record.

In order to get a more complete sense of the founding of this country, it is necessary to explore the experiences of all those who participated in its formation. Historians working today must braid official records with instances of colloquial and collective memory. While the experiences of these groups were not inked into the history books, alternate forms of documentation were maintained. Through personal letters, stories, illustrations, textiles, music, alternative newspaper articles and fiction, members of these groups found ways to voice and preserve their experiences even when the dominant class found their experiences inconsequential. Until relatively recently, this kind of record keeping was not considered as viable as those records sanctioned by the dominant class.

Today, we realize that traditional historiography cannot adequately portray a broadly imagined early American experience. In order to get a wider, more accurate picture, an historian might investigate birth and deaths rosters from slave plantations, advertisements for slave auctions and books of sale, port records of slave ships arriving from the Caribbean, abolitionist papers, and postings offering rewards for the return of runaway slaves. Into the gaps of this fragmentary and one-sided history, black Americans add family stories passed down over generations, music, poetry, sermons from preachers and revolutionaries, jokes, visual art and textiles. This information begins to counter attempts to suppress or silence the full history of slavery and its critical impact on the contemporary American economy. Passed down generation after generation through song and sermon, *Black Nativity* is one of those stories.

Historian Gladys-Marie Fry began researching antebellum slave quilts for reasons similar to why many African Americans explore the American archive—to find information about her roots, her kin and our collective contribution to the making of this impressive country.

Several decades ago, I embarked on an emotional and intellectual journey to research and write an historical account of the life of Amanda, my great-great-grandmother. She was an enslaved African on an Arkansas plantation. . . . So sparse is the historical account that I was unable to corroborate any details in the family

traditions with existing historical records. I know so little about Amanda, and I wanted to learn so much—her birthplace, information about her family, the circumstances surrounding her death and the place where she is buried.

Unable to reclaim Amanda from the history that denied her the skills that would have enabled her to leave a written record, such as a diary or even a more complete oral account that I could corroborate with available historical records, I decided to tell Amanda's story through a composite portrait of the lives of enslaved African women in the antebellum South. These women lived a common history as skilled artisans who worked as quilters, weavers and seamstresses.¹²

Gladys-Marie Fry is hailed by her contemporaries for her careful and patient historiography. Betty McKeever Kay, Director of the Oral History Program of the Maryland Historical Society, points to Fry's work as "commendable [based on two features worth noting] First, [Fry's] . . . prologue critically examines what is available as historical source material for earlier periods (such as the slave narratives of the Works Progress Administration in the 1930s). Second, the author's own interviews, obtained from people who were children in . . . about 1900, are compared with contemporary city records for the same period as a means of corroboration."¹³ Today Fry is considered one of the preeminent historians on the textile arts of African Americans from the antebellum period.

¹² Fry, Gladys Marie. *Stitched From the Soul: Slave Quilts from the Antebellum South*. (Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 2002),vii.

¹³ Key, Betty McKeever. "Publishing Oral History: Observations and Objections." *Oral History Review* 10 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982) pp.145-152; 150.

Quilting and Cultural Cohesion

Piecing together the experiences of those voices omitted from the official historical record is no easy task. Historians searching for information that details the experience of women or people of color in the early American archive have a daunting undertaking ahead of them. Not only are they faced with the massive—and some would argue deliberate—omission of female and nonwhite accomplishments and contributions to early American society, they are faced with having to corroborate and contextualize what bits they do unearth.

Left to early anthropologists and ethnographers much of the information that ran counter to the dominant story was relegated to the realm of emotional versus cognitive relevance and had little bearing on the historical archive. This information often described as childlike, primitive, illogical and arcane was usually overlooked. Women's experiences were consigned to that which was emotional in nature. Any contemplation or judgment considered worthwhile came from men who were believed to be naturally more even-keeled and less subject to the tumultuousness of human emotion than women. Hence the division of labor between the sexes made for one side to be thinking, rational and important and the other to be emotional, illogical and insignificant. Women's work was often considered trivial. Society was ordered in such a way as to imagine that women were minor contributors to matters beyond the home. Those duties and skill sets employed within the home were considered almost totally irrelevant to the development of this country. If left up to these early scientists and historians, such important and often subversive forums for record keeping would be virtually erased from the historical archive.

Artifacts are one of the primary materials for building alternate historical narratives that speak to those populations who were not documented through written word in the official archive. Over centuries, archaeological investigations have recovered a vast array of artifacts and objects created by our predecessors. It is the work of an historian to investigate how these artifacts of stone, pottery, glass, fabric, wood, and metal tell us about our collective past. Through the work of art historians and anthropologists, historians have a wealth of material to explore. Their work to situate the creation of these artifacts within a larger historical framework is a delicate and meticulous project of documenting what has been left out, giving voice to those who would otherwise remain voiceless.

As researchers like Robert Farris Thompson point out, cultures value certain modes of artistry over others and reward the achievement of excellence in these arenas. As practitioners strive to be recognized for their talent or skill, competition within a society grows and creates a standardized criterion for evaluation. Subsequently, specific cultures become known not just for particular skills, artistry or trades, but also for their aesthetic interpretation of the value of the

artistic products. The Mande of Africa, for example, are known for their skill in weaving and textile art, observable by their unique multistrip patterning and staggered rhythms. When piecing together the history of black people in the New World, cultural continuity can be explored through artifacts such as woven cloth or even the rhythmic patterning of a quilt. As Thompson explains, “slaves shipped from ports filled with captives from inland Mande-influenced areas certainly must have included weavers who would have remembered their craft in captivity.”¹⁴ This also tells us something unique about history and the reasons why Mande presences are prominent in the New World: Thompson explains that “despite its inland position near the headwaters of the Niger and the Senegal, Mande was vulnerable to the reach of European slaving from its earliest period.”¹⁵ Here one can see how the examination of artistic patterns in textiles can fill in the gaps left unexplored by the official record.

Thompson’s work does much to situate black Americans within a continuum of people that goes back across the Atlantic Ocean toward Africa, thus repairing a history that without this kind of research would remain vacuous and empty. Even though most of these characteristic elements of artistry “have been blended with local elements and improvised upon for so long that in most cases the practitioners of these traditions have no specific memory of Mande origins,” it is still an important link to understanding our origins. Continued exploration of the corresponding peculiarities between African American textile art and those artistic patterns from the prominent textile regions in Africa has contributed greatly to our understanding of the role of textile art in the preservation of culture. Thompson’s work illustrates the ingenuity, improvisation and adaptability of New World descendants of Africans as cultures began to blend together through the generations. Thompson explains that

“[t]he recombination of these variables to form novel creole art—also embodying European influences—is an autonomous development in the history of Afro-American visual creativity.... Nevertheless, the vibrant visual attack and timing of these cloths are unthinkable except in terms of partial descent from Mande cloth, a world of metrically sparkling textiles.”¹⁶

It is because of this kind of rich contextualization that we can piece together a history that runs parallel to, though distinctly different from, the dominant trope. Such extensive research and keen attention to methodology gives merit to oral history, artistic representation and storytelling as viable historical resources.

Foremost in the African American textile tradition is quilting. As Fry points out, a focused study of African American quilting opens up the possibility for an “environmental,

¹⁴ Thompson, *ibid.*, 214.

¹⁵ Thompson, *ibid.*, 197.

¹⁶ Thompson, *ibid.*, 208.

historical, and cultural context” that becomes critical to the story of black people in this land. The use of textiles and rhythmic patterns throughout the South by black slaves laid the foundation for the rhythmic patterns of poetry, song and jazz that are hailed today as cultural art forms unique to America. Throughout this ever-expanding collection of black American art are striking similarities to rhythmic patterns dating back to the Mande and Wolof dynasties of Africa, signaling cultural continuity, innovation and adaptability. Fry contends that “the appliqué tradition that flourished in the American South was brought over by slaves from Benin (formerly known as Dahomey), [in] West Africa.”¹⁷

As mentioned before, similar research by Thompson traces the figures, color patterns and rhythms of textiles in the Caribbean to early African dynasties. The same research done to place women within the creation and formation of this country can be used to locate the origins of millions of forcibly relocated captive people to plantations in the New World. As Thompson and others point out, in order to maintain a cultural connection with their origins, many slaves of African ancestry interpreted the major stories and saints as recounted by Catholicism through the lens of the great deities and *orisha* of Africa. Thompson explains how a portrait of St. James in battle against the infidels might have been interpreted by Africans living in the New World as reminiscent of Ogun, the god of iron and war.¹⁸ Today the two are synonymous in many South American communities.

Paper Tigers and Fabric Facts: Weaving Traditional and Colloquial Information

Quilts are an important first-person testimony from the artisans of the antebellum period. The process by which these quilts are “read” today is both investigative and interpretive. Gladys-Marie Fry explains that antebellum slave quilts “record family history and legends, as they express the personal philosophy and religious beliefs of their makers.”¹⁹ Color choice, patterning, staggered rhythms and metric repetitions can be read in relation to culturally specific aesthetic choices originating in Central and Western Africa, aiding in the tracing of cultural continuity and ethnic origination. Robert Farris Thompson’s extensive research on the corresponding peculiarities between African American textile art and those artistic patterns from the prominent textile regions in Africa has contributed greatly to our understanding of the role of textile art in the preservation of culture.

¹⁷ Fry, Gladys-Marie. *Stitched from the Soul: Slave Quilts from the Antebellum Period*. (Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 1990). 12.

¹⁸ See Robert Farris Thompson’s *Flash of the Spirit: African and Afro-American Art and Philosophy*. (New York: Vintage, 1983). See especially his chapter “The Rara of the Universe: Vodun Religion and Haiti,” pp. 163-190.

¹⁹ Fry, Gladys-Marie. *Stitched from the Soul: Slave Quilts from the Antebellum Period*. (Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 1990).

The difficulty in corroborating the artifacts themselves with written data is a major challenge. Historians frequently rely in personal narrative and oral history to piece together the puzzles left between a finished quilt, its use and intent, and the life of the artist who made it. Another unique challenge to detailing early African American textile production is that “slave women were included less often than men in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century historical accounts.” She uses the records from the Museum of Early Southern Decorative Arts in Winston-Salem, North Carolina as an example:

Only *two women* are found among the *twenty-five hundred* pre-1822 slave artisans recorded by the museum. Trades range from the more common carpenter, wheelwright, shipwright, and bricklayer to the less common coppersmith, bookbinder, gunsmith, and upholsterer. Only eight weavers or weaver apprentices and two dyers are listed, and here are found the only women on the list—Hester Hyeth, a free African-American artisan and carpet weaver, and Kim (who may be male), a slave artisan and weaver. Nowhere is there any reference to typically female trades, like that of seamstress.²⁰

Fry purports that the perceived value of this work may have been lesser because “much handicraft was probably done in ‘spare’ time and was not considered a ‘main’ trade.”²¹ Evidence as to how a racist, patriarchal regime not only privileges some details over others, Fry’s research demonstrates how certain voices are literally written out of the archive, silencing their contributions in the historical record.

Also, one can see the authoritarian European influence that organized plantation life. In West Africa, textile art was traditionally a masculine realm. Fabric arts such as weaving and dying served as apprenticeship models to induct young men into society with a learned trade and a mentor. In Europe, and subsequently America, the opposite was true. Sexism prevented early American communities from valuing textile work because it was regarded as traditionally feminine. Equally, it was sexism that prevented women from attaining accolades as artists for their skill and knowledge of textile technique, while men were esteemed for similar skills in West Africa. Yet African women did possess the technical skill and ability to sew, weave, dye cloth and do pattern work before their forced relocation to the Americas. However, because early American men did not see the relevance of female experiences or those of black peoples, society did not value their unique contributions.

Subsequently, one of the resources for Fry as she searched for information on these black female textile artisans were plantation records that were maintained by women. These logbooks may not have thoroughly detailed women’s work, but many kept a running tally of the supplementary work of their slaves. Because the white mistress was likely responsible for overseeing the maintenance of the household, which included the upkeep of clothing, linens and

²⁰ Fry, *ibid.*, 4. Emphasis mine.

²¹ Fry, *ibid.*, 4

other fabrics, the mistress had to be aware of the skill and craft work of her workforce. By simply documenting the tasks assigned to each female slave, white women were unconsciously preserving the contribution of black female slaves in the wildly lucrative enterprise of the American slave economy.

The fact that many of these quilts, especially those stitched for family members, were made during the time when slave women were not “working,” is further testament to their dedication to family. It is also one of the factors that complicates the documentation of this work. For slaves, no time was “free” time or belonged to them. One who is owned can own nothing; that time must be instead regarded as borrowed, stolen or preciously saved up. Those quilts stitched for a mistress are often well documented, sometimes under the name of the white slave-owning mistress and not the black artists who crafted and created the quilt. Fry calls “the notion that the quilts made by slave women on antebellum plantations were crafted under the watchful eye of the mistress and were made according to nineteenth-century concepts of Euro-American design traditions,” a “damaging stereotype.”²² It is thus even more important that art historians specializing in African and New World African art are included in the contemporary interpretation of any art from the antebellum period. Their expertise lends itself to following those American aesthetic choices to similar dictates from Africa that demonstrate the presence of a culturally specific and unique model. It is only through this sort of transatlantic register that we can appropriately situate the growth of an artistic mode over six centuries of blended cultures. It becomes an unconscious signature for the artists whose names were lost.

Another major complication to historical research is the racism that intentionally ignored the experiences of people of color, and sometimes deliberately distorted the events or, as in the case below, supplied misinformation of the circumstances in which people lived. For example, below is an excerpt from a letter written to Gladys-Marie Fry by the white president of a Southern historical society addressing African American quilting:

Quilts made by slave labor in the South were a sorry affair, both as to the pattern devised and the workmanship thereof. Some few slaves were educated well enough to sew....but all the clothing on the plantation—for white and black—was made by the wife of the plantation owner—working night and day.²³

²² Fry, Gladys-Marie. *Stitched from the Soul: Slave Quilts from the Antebellum Period*. (Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 1990). 7.

²³ Fry, *ibid.*, 8. To cull material for her research, in 1979 Fry mailed “thousands of letters to museums, private collectors, quilt shops, and scholars asking for the names of African-American quilters in their communities.” She sent self-addressed, stamped envelopes along with the letters and soon they began “trickling in.” This quote was excerpted from one such letter, though Fry takes care not to mention the museum, or its president, in name.

Fry's historiography counters this messaging and deems it prejudiced. She does this by searching the archive for alternate testimonies that speak to a different reality. One of the resources of which she makes good use is the WPA Project that documented the narratives of freedmen and women who had been born into slavery and could speak first-hand about their experience as slaves in America. Nancy Dodson's story is one such example:

At 16 [Nancy Dodson] was sent to Mrs. Jones' home to learn to be a tailoress. Nancy remained for a year or two but instead of being taught her trade she was made to do general housework and mind the child. . . . One day the overseer sent some cloth for Nancy to cut a coat—he wanted to see who much she had learned—Mrs. Jones say nothing to Nancy, but took the cloth cut the coat and partly made it—basted the other seams and gave them to Nancy to sew while she went out to pass the evening with a neighbor—no sooner had she gone than Nancy rolled up the coat and ran away home with it. As soon as the overseer saw her he asked if she could undertake to cut out some cloth for the hands—Nancy replied “I have a pattern and I can make them by it.” She sat up that night and ripped the coat all apart, cut an exact pattern and then put it together again. She did the same with pants and vests and then she undertook her *trade*. From this time she made and superintended the making of *all the clothing*—pants, coats, vests, shirts, etc. for all the men and boys on two large farms.²⁴

It is important to recognize that the disenfranchisement of women and people of color in this country is directly related to a sexist and racist system that omitted certain experiences from the documentation of this country thereby stripping these groups of any potential to reap the benefits of their toil in making this country one of the most powerful in the world.

The divergent narratives explored above raise an important question: what is the difference between reliable oral history and hearsay? Increasingly it is becoming more apparent that alternate histories can be corroborated through innovative methods of tracking events, circumstances and stories. Gladys-Marie Fry is actually exemplar for her methodology and is hailed by her contemporaries for her unique and thorough historiography. Betty McKeever Kay, Director of the Oral History Program of the Maryland Historical Society, points to Fry's work as “commendable [based on two features worth noting] First, [Fry's] . . . prologue critically examines what is available as historical source material for earlier periods (such as the slave narratives of the Works Progress Administration in the 1930s). Second, the author's own interviews, obtained from people who were children in . . . about 1900, are compared with contemporary city records for the same period as a means of corroboration.”²⁵ Today Fry is considered one of the preeminent historians on the textile arts of African Americans from the antebellum period.

²⁴ Excerpted from the papers of Susan Walker, Cincinnati Historical Society, as quoted by Gladys-Marie Fry in *Stitched from the Soul*, *ibid.*, 16. Emphasis original.

²⁵ Key, Betty McKeever. “Publishing Oral History: Observations and Objections.” *Oral History Review* 10 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982) pp.145-152; 150.

A good example of the way in which oral histories and official records intersect and complicate one another is the question of the role quilts played in the clandestine liberation of black slaves along the Underground Railroad. Research on the Underground Railroad—which includes the logbooks of “station agents” who would receive and reroute runaways to safe houses—does not account for the use of quilts as signal devices, though there are accounts of packages being delivered that include quilts. William Still, largely considered “the father of the Underground Railroad,” documented this account from 1860:

ELLINGTON, Jan. 2d, 1860.

WILLIAM STILL:—Dear Sir:—Enclosed are \$2,00, to pay freightage on the box of bedding, wearing apparel, etc., that has been sent to your address. It has been thought best to send you a schedule of the contents of said box. Trusting it will be acceptable, and be the means of assisting the poor fugitive on his perilous way, you have the prayers of our Society, that you may be prospered in your work of mercy, and you surely will meet with your reward according to your merciful acts.

Two bed quilts, 32, \$8,00; five bed quilts, 24, \$15,00; one bed quilt, 28, \$3,50; two pairs cotton socks, 3, 75 cents; three pairs cotton stockings, 4, \$1,50; one pair woolen stockings, 6, 75 cents; one pair woolen stockings, 4, 50 cents; three pair woolen socks, 2, 75 cents; five pair woolen socks, 3, \$1,88; eight chemise, 32, \$4,50; thirteen men's shirts, 66 cents, \$8,58; one pair pants, 12, \$1,50; six pair overall pants, 80 cents, \$4,80; three pair pillow cases, \$1,00; three calico aprons, 2, 75 cents; three sun-bonnets, 2, 75 cents; two small aprons, 1, 25 cents; one alpaca cape, 8, \$1,00; two capes, 1, 25 cents; one black shawl, 4, 50 cents. Total, \$56,51.

The foregoing is a correct list of the articles and the appraisal of the same. Please acknowledge the receipt of the letter and box, and oblige the Anti-slavery Society of Ellington.

Mrs. DR. BROOKS.

We are left to imagine who made these quilts, their patterns and where they were going. Presumably, these quilts were in-kind donations to be distributed amongst recent arrivals from the Underground Railroad.

A pattern known as “Underground Railroad” is often used as an example of a signal quilt, however there is no evidence documenting the usage of this pattern for quilts in the antebellum era. One historian on American quilting, Barbara Brackman, encapsulates her dilemma with the Underground Railroad pattern, “as a quiltmaker I’ve always loved the pattern and the secrets hidden in the name, but as an historian, I’ve come to realize that there are no known quilts in this pattern dating back to the days of the Civil War or to the decades before the War when the Underground Railroad flourished.”²⁶ Still, many families tell stories of quilts hung from porches carrying signs and signals for travelers. The incongruity may never be

²⁶ Brackman, Barbara. “Quilts and The Underground Railroad.” Online article: <http://www.culver.org/news/quilts.asp>.

resolved. Given that the preservation of such artifacts was not necessarily foremost in the minds of those whose need became largely utilitarian in a time of war, we cannot know what was lost along the way, or bartered for nourishment or protection. Fry explains that “the number of surviving quilts made by slaves for their own use on their own time is astonishingly small. Many factors contributed to their destruction, beginning with the increased mobility brought about by the emancipation of slaves.” One freed slave recounts the experience of having to leave in the wake of liberation:

When we started from Mississippi, dey tol’ us de Yankees ‘ud kill us iffey dey foun’ us and dey say, “You ain’t got no time to take nothin’ to wher you goin.” Take your little bundle and lev all you has in your house. So when we got to Texas I jus’ one dress, what I had en. Dat’s de way all de cullud people was fer freedom, never had nothin’ but what had on de back.²⁷

The plantation system was under siege, mansions and properties burned, and people scattered. People venturing out from familiar territory for the first time were particularly susceptible to such fraudulent behavior on the part of resentful white Southerners. Inherent in the quote above is the deliberate attempt to deceive recently emancipated slaves by spreading rumors that the soldiers of the North were not allies but in fact marauding murderers on the hunt for black travelers. This misinformation played upon horror scenes familiar to slaves of Southern planters sending out search parties armed with whips, guns and dogs after runaways. Framed in these terms, traveling light became about survival of self versus preservation of culture or legacy. “The Civil War was a major contributing factor in the loss of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century quilts and their histories.”²⁸ The sum of what vanished with the fall of this monstrous, peculiar institution will never fully be identified.

²⁷ George P. Rawick, *Georgia Narratives*, vol. 13 of *American Slave*, page 198, as quoted by Fry, Gladys-Marie. *Stitched from the Soul: Slave Quilts from the Antebellum Period*. (Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 1990) 39.

²⁸ Fry, Gladys-Marie. *Stitched from the Soul: Slave Quilts from the Antebellum Period*. (Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 1990). 10.

Harriet Powers: An American Storyteller

Hanging in the Smithsonian's American History Museum and Boston's Museum of Fine Arts are two quilts from the mid-1800s made by a woman named Harriet Powers who was born into slavery in Athens Georgia in 1837. Gladys-Marie Fry's research on antebellum slave quilts began with her examination of Harriet Powers' life and artwork, which Fry calls "visual masterpieces, jewels of creative imagination and artistic expression."²⁹

Harriet Powers was a narrative—or story—quilter. A deeply religious woman, her interpretation of Bible stories is preserved in bold appliqué patterned blocks that depict scenes such as Adam and Eve naming the animals in the Garden of Eden (Fry points out that the rib from which Eve was made features prominently in the foreground of one of the panels), Jonah and the whale, and Noah's arc in which matching animals are paired with one another in different panels throughout the quilt. The representation of animals, angels and humans interacting and given the same prominence within the blocks brilliantly illustrates an alternate aesthetic than the dominant European tradition. Gladys-Marie Fry contends that Powers' quilt gestures toward the Fon people of the great Dahomey empire from which many Africans were exported into slavery in the New World,

in the Benin tapestries, stories from oral tradition and history are illustrated with appliquéd figures. Animals are used to symbolize kings or central figures of proverbs or folktales. The influence of Benin appliqué on the Bible quilts executed by Harriet Powers, an ex-slave from Benin, has been firmly established by scholars, particularly in her technique and animal symbolism. Another intriguing aspect of Harriet Powers' quilts is the merging of Christian religious symbols with the African cosmology of the Bakongo people.³⁰

It is possible that one of the reasons the animals play such a large part in Powers' quilts is because of how animals were used to represent people or special powers in the oral traditions passed through the generations from Africa. The monkey and lion tales still figure prominently in African American folkloric traditions, and the Br'er Rabbit tales are American interpretations of this system of order reflecting the primacy of wit over strength, the trickster role so prominent (often represented in African tales by Anansi the spider). These tales also mirror the playfulness and power of the major deities within the early African spiritual systems that cast gods as sometimes mischievous and spiteful as well. While Fry describes Powers as a pious fundamentalist—because she interprets the Bible literally—still the influence of her culture through her meditations and interpretations of these stories is quite significant.

²⁹ Fry, *ibid.*, 84.

³⁰ Fry, Gladys-Marie. *Stitched from the Soul: Slave Quilts from the Antebellum Period*. (Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 1990). 12.

Frequently, quilts overseen by a mistress were entered into county fairs and either went up for sale or, ironically, became a point of pride for the house. Even quilting parties illustrated power and prestige for white planters:

Occasionally, masters on some of the larger plantations, who were eager to impress their neighbors with evidence of wealth and importance, [sponsored or] helped to stage elaborate quilting parties.” One former slave remembered that “there was always plenty of food, [because the] masters were vying with one another for the honor of giving his slaves the finest parties.”³¹

Demonstrated in this detail is the rampant paternalism that guided the patriarchal Southern plantation. Cast as its naïve wards slaves were presented as childlike charges for which the goodly master was wholly responsible. However, even more telling is the great irony that when deemed important for them, white masters had the economic wherewithal to provide their labor forces with ample food and living conditions, yet regularly chose not to. It was, after all, the benefit of free labor of that allowed for the display of so much expendable wealth as to be able to throw lavish parties for slaves.

Even as their masters regarded these parties as fun and folly, quilters took advantage of the time to create pieces that they would either give to family members or sell. There is even documentation of slaves buying their freedom through the sale of their textiles.³² One such woman was Mrs. Elizabeth Keckly, who used her sewing skills to buy freedom for she and her son. She then became a “prominent dressmaker in Washington D.C.” whose most recognized client was none other than the First Lady of the United States, Mrs. Mary Todd Lincoln.³³ Other examples also exist.

Harriet Powers is particularly remarkable because there is so little information documented about her contemporaries and those artists who preceded her. “Early (pre-World War II) accession cards give detailed information about the white donor family for whom the slave made the textile,” but little to no information about the artist.³⁴ In fact, “such details as family military honors, political achievements, civic awards, and land ownership are frequently described,” for the white donor family, thereby attaching white American history to an artifact that was created by a black American artist who is often “dismissed with a sentence or two in which the slave is described as an ‘old negress,’ ‘unknown slave,’ or ‘slave girl.’” When slave quilt

³¹ Quoted by Gladys-Marie Fry from George P. Rawick, *Unwritten History of Slavery*, vol. 18 of *American Slave*, 24.

³³ For more information on Elizabeth Keckly, see James E. Newton’s “Slave Artisans and Craftsmen: The Roots of Afro-American Art.” James E. Newton and Ronald L. Lewis, eds., *The Other Slaves, Mechanics, Artisans, and Craftsmen*. (Boston: G.K. Hall., 1978).

³⁴ Fry, Gladys-Marie. *Stitched from the Soul: Slave Quilts from the Antebellum Period*. (Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 1990). 8.

makers are identified, the term ‘aunt’ (or ‘uncle’) precedes the name. [Gladys-Marie Fry] did not locate a single accession card in which the slave quilt maker is fully identified either physically or in terms of plantation duties, family ties, or artistic versatility.”³⁵ In other words, the lives of those black artists who left a legacy from the period are overwritten with detailed accounts of the white families who owned them.

However, because one woman happened across one of Powers’ story quilts at a county fair, more documentation is available about her quilt than almost any other artist from the antebellum period. Gladys-Marie Fry details the story in her article “Harriet Powers: Portrait of an African American Quilter.”³⁶ Oneita Virginia (Jennie) Smith was a local artist who had studied in Baltimore, New York and Paris. Upon returning to Athens, she took up the mantle in the Art Department at her alma mater becoming the director at Lucy Cobb for over fifty years.

At the Cotton Fair, Jennie Smith spotted Harriet Powers’ quilt and was immediately drawn to the artistry. She approached Powers and inquired as to the asking price. Harriet Powers told her that the quilt was not for sale, not for any price. Jennie Smith stayed in contact with Harriet Powers, offering to purchase the quilt should she and her husband fall upon hard times, which is exactly what happened nearly five years later. Powers brought the quilt to Smith’s home and spent a great deal of time explaining the intent of each panel and its importance. She was very reluctant to let it go, especially at half the price she had hoped to fetch for it. Her husband beseeched her to part with the quilt and accept Smith’s offering of five dollars for it. After leaving the quilt in Smith’s hands, Harriet Powers apparently returned with some frequency to visit the quilt and look upon it.

Perhaps because she spoke so passionately about what she had created and her artistic vision, Jennie Smith took it upon herself to document the story of the quilt, and how she happened to claim it, in an eighteen-page narrative that “help to set Harriet Powers’ quilt in proper artistic and historic perspective.”³⁷ However, as Fry points out, the narrative is riddled with personal conjectures and anecdotal musings on African Americans as “musical but not artistic, religious but still liars and thieves.”³⁸ This is the only written record of the quilt, Smith being only person to have left an eye-witness account of Powers. Fry found that census records indicated that neither Harriet nor her husband Armstead Powers could read or write.

³⁵ Fry, Gladys-Marie. *Stitched from the Soul: Slave Quilts from the Antebellum Period*. (Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 1990). 8.

³⁶ The article “Harriet Powers: Portrait of an African American Quilter,” was originally published in *Missing Pieces: Georgia Folk Art 1770-1976*. The article was reprinted and included as an epilogue to *Stitched from the Soul: Slave Quilts from the Antebellum Period*. (Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 1990) pp. 84-91.

³⁷ Fry., *ibid.*, 86.

³⁸ Fry., *ibid.*, 86.

As Gladys-Marie Fry points out, “it is one of the ironies of history that, heartbreaking as it was for Harriet to part with her quilt, its sale to Jennie Smith preserved it for posterity.”³⁹ Fry did extensive work to corroborate the stories of natural events that Harriet Powers depicted in her quilt, such as “dark days” and meteor showers, with accounts of the weather from meteorologists and scientists of the era. Fry explains that this is one of the most significant things about Powers’ quilt and the accompanying narrative. Her accounts of real events turned out to be “startlingly accurate” as Fry did further research.⁴⁰ This places the personal account of one slave woman into a collective archive of oral histories that are given a renewed sense of purpose, relevance and authenticity. Today Harriet Powers’ quilts are rightly credited as masterworks of American folk art.

³⁹ Fry, *ibid.*, 86.

⁴⁰ Fry, *ibid.*, 86.

Religion and Cultural Cohesion

While perhaps ironic given the history of Christianity in the Americas, it is no surprise that black people have long found refuge in the church. Within the brutal, terrorist regime that was New World, religion eventually came to represent an effort to balance the ferocity of slavery, running contrary to a cornucopia of corporeal violence exacted on black people. From the early colonial period in this hemisphere, Europeans sought to spread Christianity; its doctrines were tightly woven into both conquering the New World and the establishment of an unparalleled institutionalized project of slavery that would grow and prosper for five centuries. It is critical to understanding the philosophical underpinnings of the creation of this nation that we explore the religiosity of the early explorers, missionaries and colonists. The language used to frame colonization of the New World also informed the Declaration of Independence and helped pen the U.S. Constitution. To regard religion as a separate enterprise than the construction of this nation or the development of the New World is to seriously deflate the historical record. Framing the black experience without consideration to the theological currents running through the culture would be to analyze history within a vacuum. We would miss much of the development of a sense of self-awareness, the covert activity that supported a rich tradition of activism and protest, and most certainly a resounding sense of hope for a better tomorrow. To that end, let us retrace some important steps that helped this country come into focus during its early years.

Early explorers and missionaries deemed it their divine mission to civilize the so-called heathen peoples of the world. This was called manifest destiny.⁴¹ Upon entering the New World, having encountered literally millions of indigenous people who, despite elaborate evidence of their spirituality, the early explorers deemed godless, the colonists set about a major effort to convert and thereby “save” the souls of the “heathen tribes.” Even as colonists attempted to enslave the native peoples of the Caribbean, Mexico and South America, many Europeans wanted to Christianize the indigenous peoples. Establishing a solid slave labor force amongst the native peoples of the Americas proved quite difficult for two reasons in particular: one, native people were dying rapidly and *en masse*, having been infected with the plagues of European disease brought to the New World via rats on ships. Various illnesses to which sailors had established relative immunity wreaked havoc on the fragile ecosystem of the New World. Colonists regarded these disastrous plagues a testament to their rightful ownership of the vast land in the New World. This is a powerful example of how religious ideology of the time

⁴¹ For a complex and detailed Freudian analysis on the idea of manifest destiny as it pertains to the New World, Anne see McClintock's *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest*. (London and New York: Routledge, 1995). See especially the first chapter.

merged with the imperial project in the New World: it was interpreted as a spiritual intervention, the manifestation of a divinely ordained right to the land and its riches. The other major complication the Europeans faced was that native people were well-acquainted with the land and had the upper hand on the Europeans, both in terms of knowledge as to the terrain and navigational abilities in the Caribbean waters. In short, the few who survived plagues simply would not stay put, much to the dismay of the colonials. Given the enormity of the project developing the New World was, a large-scale, dependable workforce was needed, and quickly.

Europe began an unparalleled effort to import what would eventually amount to an estimated 10 to 20 million Africans who would deforest, develop and work the lucrative plantations. European reasoning declared Africans a heartier bunch than the people indigenous to the area. Indeed, imported African populations withstood both European and tropical diseases comparatively well.

Another hotly contested issue in European philosophical and legal circles revolved around the question of the African's soul. While early missionaries regarded the native people of the Americas as naïve children in need of protection and guidance, a trope of brutal bestiality accompanied black African people. According to colloquial opinion, indigenous people were simple, trusting, in need of protection; they were salvageable. Upon realizing their value as a free labor force, the Africans were described as a brutish race, whose inherent tendencies toward disobedience, viciousness and even cannibalism, necessitated the order of slavery in order to save them from themselves. Also, Christians could not enslave other Christians according to the foundations of the faith. Thus Africans were relegated to an ambiguous and oxymoronic existence; they were not human, they were not exactly beasts, they were somewhere in between. Whatever they were, they were beyond salvation, and therefore justly enslaved.⁴² Government officials and land proprietors with a vested interest in the rich economy of the plantations fought the indoctrination of black people into the church. They did not want to surrender such a wildly lucrative project.

Yet even as some found the idea of indoctrinating slave populations threatening, the church also seemed to provide colonists with a forum for orientation, a primary stop along the trajectory of "seasoning" new slaves underwent.⁴³ The goals of the seasoning process were twofold: the first was to acclimate new slaves to their surroundings including basic language acquisition, lay of the land and laws to abide; the second goal was to break any rebellious spirit

⁴² For further reading see Robin Blackburn's *The Making of New World Slavery: From the Baroque to the Modern 1492-1800*. (New York: Verso, 1997). The author provides a well tracked, trans-continental analysis of the historical record as the colonies were established in the New World.

⁴³ See Sue Peabody's "'A Dangerous Zeal': Catholic Missions to Slaves in the French Antilles, 1635-1800." *French Historical Studies* 25:1 (2002) 53-90.

that would encourage newcomers to incite trouble amongst the senior populations. Seasoning was a brutal, confusing and critical feature of the slave system. The church quickly found its custodial role as a trusted establishment with the potential to assuage fear, enforce law and keep track of developing allegiances between slaves. The debate as to the souls of slaves was swept under the rug as the church proved its worth in keeping slave populations complacent and content.

Of course the slaves who attended churches in the New came already imbued with strong ideologies about life, spirituality and the order of the world. As time went on and the “civilizing mission” gained momentum, these original African spiritual systems from various regions of Africa would blend covertly with Christian traditions, forming new comprehensions of faith and spirituality. In these churches African slaves began to underwrite the teachings of the Catholic priests and missionaries with their own interpretations of the word, of the saints and the stories as told by the scriptures. Imbued with century old epistemological knowledge, they began to make their own meaning out of what they were being taught.⁴⁴ Thus the churches, albeit entirely by accident, began to articulate, perambulate and sustain an underground, subversive culture that allowed for a sense of cultural cohesion, creativity, and autonomy that would threaten the very foundation of the colonial presence in the New World.⁴⁵ Black slaves came together to get news of loved ones on other plantations, to get news from the Old World, both Europe and Africa. They shared stories about plantation masters and families, of how various plantations were run, who the sentries were and what habits they maintained. They got and spread word about the major ideological crises and shifts within Europe that would soon usher in the French Revolution.⁴⁶ They shared stories of uprisings, of protest, of revolution. Since the middle of the 16th century, the church was established as a place of refuge, community, spiritual sustenance, creativity, and strength for black people in the New World.

⁴⁴ Still one of the most valuable analyses of Creole or New World systems of spirituality and religiosity is Robert Farris Thompson’s *Flash of the Spirit: African and Afro-American Art & Philosophy*. (New York: Vintage, 1984).

⁴⁵ Carolyn Fick makes excellent use of the Creole systems of meaning-making that were established in the New World and nicely relates these frameworks to a growing revolutionary spirit. See her book *The Making of Haiti: The Saint Domingue Revolution from Below*. Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1990.

⁴⁶ For a more detailed account of the covert meetings at least pertaining to the francophone Caribbean, more specifically the colony of Saint Domingue, see Carolyn Fick’s *The Making of Haiti*, *ibid*.

Making Meaning: The Context for Conversion

Religious faith for black folks speaks to a need to take care of one another to make everyone better. It addresses the need to believe in something greater, something beyond the ceaselessness of injustice and oppression in the earthly world. In addition to providing a downtrodden folk with hope, the church also became a place to establish order, exact rituals of society otherwise denied to black people, such as marriages, funerals, and other rites of passage. In the church there was both accountability and forgiveness. There was penance and salvation. There was order. Things made sense. It addressed a serious need for explanation where things seemed unjust, unfair or illogical. It managed to alleviate severe senses of loss, grief and disappointment. It spoke to a need for community and consistency. Finally, it fortified a society in need of leadership and respectfully ordered a community in which elders are honored and the experience-wizened could be appreciated. The church, therefore, became a place for black folks to recreate a world in which they mattered, in which their experiences were valid, their living important, their relationships and talents celebrated. In short, it was a place to revitalize those deadened by the force of slavery.

The tradition of “testifying” is a powerful one within the black community, especially for black Christians in the United States. A kind of exercise in truth telling, to speak the word before an audience of one’s family, community or church was a powerful means by which black people affirmed one another, their knowledge—which is often contested by the larger, dominant and oppressive society (e.g. someone might say, “there is racism in the world,” and though it is broadly true, it can and has been contested. In the absence of tangible, quantifiable proof, language becomes speculative, reducing the means by which we communicate and name our experiences (a powerful exercise) to indistinct and indefinite terminology, constantly in flux within the context of an irrational, disordered world.) The practice of “testifying” of speaking out, outloud, of naming an experience, “telling it like it is,” becomes critical to preserving a sense of identity, a sense of logic within the chaos of an oppressive society that exhibits manic behavior to protect its most devious, unjustifiable though often financially lucrative institutions. Simply the act of saying, “I have seen,” or “I know,” becomes revolutionary within a context wherein the mission of the controlling or dominant class is, in part, to break down any sense of independence or ownership of self, that would reject or counter the position of slave. There is no “I” within this kind of context, I does not belong to the speaker. “I” denotes a kind of control or freedom.

The black community then, in its call and response to the speaker, both encourages the speaking or telling, but also catches the speaker should he or she falter as the voice is used and the silence is broken. Speaking up takes practice, speaking as though one’s experience matters

and has relevance takes practice, the more one speaks and explains the world, translates it to make meaning and make it relevant, in their own words, the more that person will want to communicate with others, to talk, to name and order things according to his or her experience and developing worldview. The “amen-corner,” or those who speak back, are there to encourage, like revelers in a carnival they celebrate, but they are also like the patrons of a marathon, who with water and words of encouragement, place themselves strategically at mileposts where they can be close to the runners, offer them a cool drink or a shout to keep going when the path becomes steep or slippery, or even worse, disappears altogether. This, more than anything else, is at the heart of faith: a communal buoying up of its individual members for the greater good.

SPOTLIGHT ON THE PLAYWRIGHT

The Literary Education of Langston Hughes

When Langston Hughes was a boy, all over the country black people were being swept up by a patient, observatory, well-considered well of criticism aimed at the project of democracy that was the United States. Slowly but surely, movements toward independence and decolonization gained momentum as European powers lost their grip on a world wide net of colonies. The proprietors of the world's most powerful governments faced serious and steadily amplifying criticism. The proliferation of this revolutionary language through the literary periodicals of the time managed to knit together a vastly dispersed culture. Reading the papers and writing essays and articles were civic duties critical to the advancement of peoples of color world over.

While the circulation of these publications was nowhere near the capacity we can imagine today with modern technology, there was still a voracious following. In the far corners of the country, rural areas and frontier towns, readers would wait eagerly for months before new issues reached them. This was a time wherein black towns dotted the belt of land stretching along the west side of the Mississippi River, areas of land that had not yet been deemed valuable by the white populace, too desolate, tough or too well protected by Native Americans. Such towns sprung up in the middle 1800s in Texas, Oklahoma, Kansas and Missouri, steeled against the protestations (and worse) of whites in the region. They had governing systems in place with democratically elected officials, schools, doctors, stores, anything one would expect to find on a larger scale in more established cities. Folks would wait for someone to travel north to Chicago, or east to Cleveland, and return with the *Chicago Defender* or the latest issue of *Crisis* or *Opportunity*. These documents would land eventually at the small libraries or schools in these towns where they would pass from hand to hand, dog-eared, pages softened from wear.

Hughes spent the majority of his childhood in one such town with his grandmother, Mary Hughes. Founded in 1854, blacks hoping to leave the terror and injustice of the South migrated to Lawrence, Kansas in steady numbers. It was home to pioneers, folks who would pack up their meager belongings and move rather than buckle under the pressures of a racially stratified society. The town was

an enterprise in Abolition by a party of settlers, sponsored by the New England Emigrant Aid Society, who had swept across the Missouri River . . . just ahead of pro-slavery forces. . . Lawrence became a center of ant-slavery radicalism; John Brown first made his name when he and

Hughes remembers “through my grandmother’s stories always life moved, moved heroically toward an end. Nobody ever cried in my grandmother’s stories. They worked, or schemed, or fought. But no crying.”

his sons killed five pro-slavers on the banks of the Pottawatomie River during guerilla warfare in the Kansas territory.⁴⁷

The spirit of Lawrence in its early years was one of community; neighbors would help newcomers as they struggled to put down roots. A stone's throw from Fort Leavenworth, Lawrence was steeped in a rich tradition of military service; many of the families had settled there because a husband, brother or father had served in the US Calvary after the Civil War. They were known as the buffalo soldiers.⁴⁸ The legacy these proud men left behind stoked a strong sense of racial pride, of bravery and certainly the sense of a consummate right to claim full citizenship of the United States of America. What began as an effort toward peace and racial tolerance, however, was short-lived. The egalitarian environment deteriorated as the land became more valuable to whites. By the time of Hughes' childhood, the town was segregated.⁴⁹

Beyond Lawrence were rocky bluffs and dangerous outcroppings, wind-blown prairie land that stretched as far as the eye could see, land that buffalo once ran in vast numbers. This was by no means an elegant or cosmopolitan town. Life was rugged. Still, continuous efforts were made to establish a modern, informed system of education by way of the cultivation of churches, schools and a library. Young Langston spent the first thirteen years of his life in and around Lawrence. Rampersad notes that the small town library and the few books his grandmother kept, including the Bible and an edition of Grimm's fairy tales, provided the boy with a diversion from life confined by the austere home of his grandmother and bleak landscape that would become vital to him.

Then it was that books began to happen to me, and I began to believe in nothing but books and the wonderful world in books—where if people suffered, they suffered in beautiful language, not in monosyllables, as we did in Kansas. And where almost always the mortgage got paid off, the good knights won, and the Alger boy triumphed.⁵⁰

This world of emotive fiction ran contrary both to Hughes' experience (his grandmother struggled almost constantly to pay the mortgage) and to the stories his grandmother told him

⁴⁷ Rampersad, *ibid* 8.

⁴⁸ Instrumental in securing the land west of the Mississippi and Missouri Rivers, their reputation is still awe-inspiring. During what would become known as the Indian wars, America raged its campaign against the Native American peoples of the Great Plains, who were desperate to keep the throngs of the "modern" world at bay. As history dictates, the men of the 9th and 10th Cavalries were some of the most courageous and dedicated soldiers this country has claimed within its ranks; no one assumed they would ride against the indigenous defense forces and live.

⁴⁹ In 1863, Confederate William Quantrill and his followers entered Lawrence and slaughtered every man they could find, burning business and homes in their wake. This was their revenge for the "loss" of the town, including the Fort, to black settlers. The enforced segregation of the town would soon follow. "By the time of Langston Hughes' childhood, all blacks were barred from formerly open churches, hotels, restaurants, and other social establishments." (Rampersad, *ibid.*, 8)

⁵⁰ Hughes, 16.

as well, “through my grandmothers stories always life moved, moved heroically toward an end. Nobody ever cried in my grandmother’s stories. They worked, or schemed, or fought. But no crying.”⁵¹ Of Hughes’ literary education Rampersad writes,

. . . Du Bois’s magnificent essays on black life and culture in *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903), and his stern articles as editor of the *Crisis* magazine, published first in 1910. The stirring poems of Paul Lawrence Dunbar, of whom Mary Langston approved, could not have been far behind. Then came novels: all of Zane Grey and Harold Bell Wright, and early work by Edna Ferber as well as *The Rosary* and *The Mistress of Shenstone* by the inspirational British writer Florence L. Barclay. He read everything he could find on Haiti, where John Mercer Langston had lived and to which Mary Langston had been invited; he leafed through Charles Langstons’ main legacy to his family, a collection of speeches. But Hughes was gripped by *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* and a first reading of *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* so thrilling that he remained a lifelong admirer of Mark Twain. Always he returned to Dunbar, the true fireside poet of the black American home; thanks to Mary Langston and Auntie Reed, the Bible was never far away; and, week after week, racial and harrowing, came the black *Chicago Defender*, with sensational details of lynchings and gallant exhortations to the race.⁵²

Hughes was thus intellectually, politically and emotionally educated through literature, introduced to the world through the pages of books and journals as opposed to a more communal, empirical maturation.

Coming into Consciousness: Racial Awareness and Heritage

Hughes recalls that his grandmother, Mary Langston, whose ancestry was largely Native American, “could lay claim to Indian land,” but would not because “she never wanted the government (or anybody else) to give her anything.”⁵³ Throughout his autobiography, *The Big Sea*, whenever Hughes makes reference to his grandmother he mentions two traits that seem to sum up her spirit from his childhood memories of her: Indian and proud. In Hughes’ mind, the

One of Harlem’s most gifted poets wrote from a place of awe and respect and sadness and only marginal belonging.

two seem equitable, mutually reinforcing; one comes from and explains the other. A light-skinned woman with straight hair that she wore in two long braids, Mary Hughes represented only a portion of the ancestry of mixed-bloods that Hughes would embody. On both the paternal and maternal sides of his family there was

black, Native (Cherokee), Scotch and French (white) blood.⁵⁴ Throughout his family, people mediated race differently. While Mary Hughes could have easily passed as Native as opposed to black, which some people did, she devoted herself whole-heartedly to the liberation, education

⁵¹ Hughes, 17.

⁵² Rampersad, 19.

⁵³ Hughes, Langston. *The Big Sea*. (New York: Thundermouth Press, 1940) 12.

⁵⁴ Hughes, *ibid.*, 11-12.

and improvement of black people. Langston Hughes' father, on the other hand, was comparably darker, and Hughes repeatedly remarks that the man despised black people, particularly those who were economically disenfranchised or uneducated. Hughes also had a white grandfather who spent his life living with a black woman.⁵⁵ He then went against societal pressure and social mores to leave his entire will to their children, which was rarely done; though mixed race children abounded in the South, rarely did their white parent acknowledge them legally or financially. Early on, then, Hughes learned that while we might attempt to make assumptions, there is really no predictability in terms of the correlation between physicality and identity on an individual basis.

Over time, Hughes would develop a modern concept of race and race relations, expressing a patient though protective approach.⁵⁶ Largely influenced by the fact that his grandmother's home was one of just a handful in their white neighborhood, the boy also attended an almost entirely white school. Hughes greeted white people with relatively moderate suspicion, "I learned early not to hate *all* white people. And ever since it has seemed to me that *most* people are generally good, in every race and in every country where I have been."⁵⁷ While Hughes describes an early ability to assess individuals rather than generally relying on hearsay, the experience of continued exposure to white people and their culture also isolated him. Rampersad explains that

. . . Langston had grown up in virtually all-white neighborhoods . . . a major source of his sense of isolation and loneliness, as well as of a consciousness steadily dividing between the world of the Langstons, on the one hand, and of the masses of blacks on the other. The white world represented

Hughes' early immersion into a white world sparked his romance with black culture, a need to be near it, to explore it, to steep in it like a long, dark, river.

⁵⁵ Hughes, *ibid.*

⁵⁶ In regard to Hughes' cool-headed, largely observational approach to racism Rampersad writes, "Hughes's sense of balance was maintained by at least two factors. One was his precociously developed rational sense. Which kept his judgement under control. He could reason and watch where others rushed toward danger, just as he learned to govern his sexuality with apparent ease. The other factor was his sense of himself, fostered by his grandmother, his mother, the Reeds and other striving blacks, as a little prince—even if he was almost a pauper. For Hughes, this sense of aristocracy would have little to do with money; its values were essentially those of radical Abolitionism tempered with strong racial pride. With John Brown, Lewis Leary, Charles Langston, and John Mercer Langston behind him, he nursed a sense that he was obliged within his lifetime, in some way, to match their deeds. Because of these men and, above all, his grandmother, no one could convince the boy that he was intrinsically inferior. His greatest psychological wound had been inflicted not by racism but by parental neglect; he would measure all future hurts against this primary wound and find them, on the whole, easier to endure." (Rampersad, *ibid.*, 18).

⁵⁷ Hughes, 14.

a third force, entirely beyond his control but perhaps associated, in his mind, with the values of Mary Langston.⁵⁸

Later, in a high school that was also almost entirely white, Hughes describes his introduction to the complexities of racism,

from the students I learnt, too, that lots of painful words can be flung at people that aren't *nigger*. *Kike* was one; *spick*, and *hunky*, others. But soon I realized that the kikes and the spicks and the hunkies—scorned though they might be by the pure Americans—all had it on the niggers in one thing. . . . employers would *not* hire Negroes.⁵⁹

Elsewhere, after having encountered more of the world and having seen the traumas white colonialism had exacted upon Africans, especially children (for whom Hughes had a true affinity), little wharf-rats or prostitutes. Here Hughes describes a fear and mistrust of whites:

'The white man dominates Africa,' Hughes would write. 'He takes produce, and lives, very much as he chooses. . . .And the Africans are baffled and humble. They listen to the missionaries and bow down before the Lord, but they bow much lower before the traders, who carry whips and guns and are protected by white laws, made in Europe for the black colonies.'⁶⁰

Perhaps nothing informed his understanding of race more than his visit to Africa as a young man.

But it was the early immersion into a white world that did not include but rather only tolerated the boy that sparked his romance with black culture, a need to be near it, to explore it, to steep in its movement and depth like bathing in a long, dark, river.

At thirteen, Hughes probably already viewed the black world both as insider and, far more importantly, as an outsider. The view from the outside did not lead to clinical objectivity, much less alienation. Once outside, every intimate force in Hughes would drive him back toward seeking the love and approval of the race, which would become the grand obsession of his life. Already he had begun to identify not his family but the poorest and most despised blacks as the object of his desire to please. He would need the race, and would need to appease the race, to an extent felt by few other blacks, and by any other important black writer. This psychological craving was a quality far more rare than race pride or merely defensive antagonism against whites; it originated in an equally rare combination of a sense of racial destiny with a keen knowledge of childhood hurt.⁶¹

Later, as a poet, Hughes felt at once part of and outside the blackness he sought to represent in his writing. His words were a constant reach from a revelatory distance; one of Harlem's most gifted poets wrote from a place of awe and respect and sadness and only marginal belonging from a body and soul encompassed by that very world.

⁵⁸ Rampersad, 18.

⁵⁹ Hughes, 32.

⁶⁰ Rampersad, 78.

⁶¹ Rampersad, 22.

The Spiritual Education of Langston Hughes

As a child, Hughes developed a relationship with the Reeds, a childless couple with whom he frequently stayed when his grandmother would lease out her home to renters.⁶² The Reeds became extended family to Hughes and by his own account he loved them very dearly. Auntie Reed taught Sunday school at the Methodist Episcopalian church. She often carried young Langston, even as he occasionally respectfully grouched, along with her. Uncle Reed, on the other hand, never went to church, in spite of his wife's pious dedication to the salvation of her and other souls. Hughes describes an important and unique lesson he learned from the couple at quite an early age, one that would undoubtedly temper his approach to people throughout his life, ". . . both of them [the Reeds] were very good and kind—the one who went to church and the one who didn't. And no doubt from them I learned to like both Christians and sinners equally well."⁶³ The connectedness between the Episcopalian and Baptist churches in town made for a forum wherein black townspeople gathered weekly along with

university students . . . to sing and play classical music, recite poetry, read original essays and other compositions, and discuss the affairs of the day, especially as they affected The Race. What fascinated Langston was not the decorous forum, but the drama of black religion, with its fiery sermons, inspired responses, and passionate, skilled singing. . . . the Warren Street Baptists drew a poorer, more "down-home" Southern congregation [in contrast to the Episcopal church]. The sight of black-skinned worshippers captured by the Holy Spirit, their ecstatic groans and cries, fired young Langston's imagination. Here was high drama enacted by people of his race but well beyond his grandmother's world, people with sin glistening dark as jet (far darker than that of pale Langston's), ancient women with colored rags around braided hair, old men with gnarled black hands, some of whom must have been born in slavery. The boy felt both at home and utterly apart, at no time more so than when he watched Auntie Reed herself transported by religious ecstasy while he, impenetrable, watched in wonder.⁶⁴

It was the drama that stirred Langston Hughes; the passion of this very uniquely black expression of faith that inspired him to chase after it. It was the theatricality, the music, the life of the church that for the poet embodied the best and brightest of the black folks he cherished so dearly but from whom he felt perennially isolated.

Throughout his life Langston Hughes expressed both interest in, and respect or admiration for, people of faith though he himself was quite decidedly secular. His spiritual education was largely based largely in cultural exposure and exploration; he appreciated the customs surrounding a particular faith as columns of cultural continuity. He was particularly fond of Jewish people, and as an adult his friends included Muslims, Bahians, Christians,

⁶² Rampersad, 15.

⁶³ Hughes, Langston. *The Big Sea: An Autobiography*. (New York: Thunder Mouth Press, 1940) 18.

⁶⁴ Rampersad, 16.

Episcopalians, Baptists and atheists. Hughes was a remarkably well-traveled individual. By the age of twenty-two he had seen much of middle America, the East coast, Mexico, much of the western coast of Africa, and Europe. His experiences abroad enriched him and his writing became infused with a truly cosmopolitan understanding of the world.

Perhaps nothing, save his isolated childhood, informed his understanding of race and the diaspora more than his visit to Africa as a young man. Like many black Americans, Hughes harbored a somewhat overzealous romance for Africa. He was both disappointed and captivated by his experience there. Hughes was surprised when the black Africans he encountered did not receive him as one of their own. Taking review of his light skin and his relatively straight hair, they called him a white man, something the poet found deeply disturbing. He clearly had wanted to be received in Africa as the Native Son returned. Instead he found he did not fit.

The next day we moved on. And farther down the coast it was more like the Africa I had dreamed about—wild and lovely, the people dark and beautiful, the palm trees tall, the sun bright, and the rivers deep. The great Africa of my dreams! But there was one thing that hurt me a lot when I talked with the people. The Africans looked at me and would not believe I was a Negro.⁶⁵

In protest he explained that he was not a white man.⁶⁶ Keenly aware of distinctions of color under the colonial regime, the Africans replied, you are not black either.⁶⁷ Rampersad explains that this prompted a pan-African consciousness in the work Langston created.⁶⁸ His travels also introduced him to the particulars in the cultural underpinnings of spirituality in the West Indies including two incredibly rich Creole religions, *vodun* (Haiti) and *Santeria* (Cuba). He spent time

Hughes remembers “crying because I couldn’t bear that I had lied, that I had deceived everybody in the church. I hadn’t seen Jesus. I had waited for Him and He hadn’t come.”

⁶⁵ Hughes, 11.

⁶⁶ Hughes seemed to find the navigation of his mixed heritage tiresome, “You see, unfortunately, I am not black. There are lots of different kinds of blood in our family. But here in the United States, the word “Negro” is used to mean anyone who has any Negro blood at all in his veins. In Africa, the word is more pure. It means *all* Negro, therefore *black*. I am brown. My father was a darker brown. My mother an olive-yellow.” (Hughes, *ibid.*, 11). While always regarding himself as a person of color, a black person, he would occasionally toy with passing while traveling abroad. As a young man, in his late teens and early twenties, with light brown skin and only loosely curled hair, Hughes often passed as a Mexican when traveling back and forth from the States to Toluca. (See Rampersad, *ibid.*, pp. 38-49).

⁶⁷ Rampersad, 78.

⁶⁸ As though his recurring affirmations of the strength of connection of all peoples throughout the Diaspora was part of his effort to make real the “homeland” of which Marcus Garvey back in America spoke. It is likely that his perception of black Africa and its customs and culture were internalized from revelatory and romantic distance similar to what Langston imagined and recreated in regard to poor black Americans, though the distance was surely greater abroad.

amongst the devout Catholics of Mexico.⁶⁹ He was raised in a region steeped in the strong, central heart of Baptist faith. In Africa he encountered Arab Muslims and the spiritual and ontological systems of the Yoruba and Kru peoples. All of this would inform his project to refashion the Nativity story through the gospel tradition.

His feelings about organized religion were shaped early on. Hughes recounts an experience at the age of about thirteen years old when he encounters the religious fervor of his Auntie and her community and, while his hopes had been high, finds himself deeply disappointed. Rampersad goes so far as to suggest that this moment was “the most harrowing episode of his childhood.” The following passage, while lengthy, describes a critical break from the religious atmosphere in which the boy was raised. It undoubtedly informed his perspective regarding the culture of gospel music, opening him to its musicality rather than its determinations. It also allowed him to balance the tension inherent in gospel music, that while stemming from traditional spirituals, it is also in dialogue with what the devout considered Devil’s music, namely the blues.⁷⁰ Rampersad writes,

As she had done many times before, Mary Reed had been taking him to an extended revival sponsored by her church. Every night, for what seemed like weeks, the rafters had rung with sermons, hymns, prayer and shouting as sinner after sinner was led to Christ. To conclude the revival, a special evening near the end was set aside for the youngest sinners. At home, Auntie Reed talked to him incessantly about the coming service and its importance to his life and, because she loved him, to her own. She assured Langston that, “when you were saved you saw a light, and something happened to you inside! And Jesus came into your life! And God was with you from then on! She said you could see and hear and feel Jesus in your soul.”

Imaginative and susceptible, Langston believed her. To a hypersensitive boy who had spent his conscious life waiting for his mother and hoping for his father, the notion of a savior coming who thereafter would be always by his side struck and sounded deep. On the children’s evening he went eagerly to church. As the preacher preached and the congregation amen-ed, Auntie Reed hovered expectantly about him with several of the other enthusiasts. One by one, the children were saved, until only

⁶⁹ “On the weekends in Mexico City he usually stayed with the three Patino sisters in their house behind the cathedral near the Plaza of the Constitution. Attending vespers and Sunday mass with them, he liked the gloomy interiors of the churches, the dolorous Virgins and crucifixes dripping with what looked in the dark, after the corrida, like real blood. As in the United States, the drama of religion appealed to him, not its dogma: Jesus was dead, ritual was alive. Latin culture, like black culture, seemed richly elemental compared to white Protestantism; Hughes felt very much at home in Mexico.” (Rampersad, *ibid.*, 47).

⁷⁰ In Chicago, Hughes heard “the music of his Holiness and Sanctified churches—the storefront tabernacles ministering to southern blacks stunned by life in the north. The gospel music reminded him of the Baptists in Lawrence, but it possessed a far greater intensity in stepped-up rhythms driven by fierce handclapping and wild tambourines; in polyrhythmic sermons black ministers showed off all the gifts of great actors. Hughes never forgot one preacher who depicted the ascent of Calvary by climbing onto a piano stool, then up onto the keyboard, before finally planting himself on the piano top, arms extended as if crucified, preaching eloquently all the while.” (Rampersad, *ibid.*, 27)

Langston and another boy remained. Finally, the boy whispered to Langston that he couldn't wait any longer, he was going to be saved. Now only Langston was left. Auntie Reed knelt down beside him, praying aloud. The old folks in the amen-corner prayed aloud. "The whole congregation prayed for me alone, in a mighty wail of moans and voices. And I kept waiting serenely for Jesus, waiting, waiting—but he didn't come. I wanted to see him, but nothing happened to me. Nothing!"

Then he could wait no longer. "And the preacher said do you love God? And I said yes. And the preacher said do you accept him? And I said yes. And I was converted." The church erupted in jubilation. Throwing her arms around him, Auntie Reed led him home in triumph. But Langston was not triumphant. That night, he would remember, he cried for the last time in his life but once. "I cried, in bed alone, and couldn't stop. I buried my head under the quilts, but my aunt heard me. She woke up and told my uncle I was crying because the Holy Ghost had come into my life, and because I had seen Jesus. But I was really crying because I couldn't bear to tell her that I had lied, that I had deceived everybody in the church, that I hadn't seen Jesus, and that now I didn't believe there was a Jesus anymore, since he didn't come to help me." And elsewhere: "I had waited for Him and He hadn't come."

If indeed Hughes never cried again but once in his life, his loss of faith was not only in Jesus but also in all those on whom he had waited in vain to save him from loneliness. Since he had seen Jesus come to old black men and women, even to Auntie Reed herself, then the fault, if Jesus now failed to come to Langston, must have been the boy's own. Langston could not rest there; he oscillated between self-blame and rage at his parents—and at Jesus.⁷¹

But Hughes was not without spirituality, a sense of something greater than himself and the world of human flesh; he was often awestruck by the bounty of the world, the earth he traversed inspired revelatory praise from the young poet. On his trip South to Mexico to see his father before going to college, Hughes wrote,

It is sunset and my car window frames a Maxfield Parish painting. Mexico's great jagged mountains are bathed in yellow wine and honey. There are some old peaks far in the background that have wrapped a purple veil about themselves, and sit huddled like Indians, silent. But there in the foreground, sunset's wonder colors of crimson and amber and gold change the dull gray mountains, these stark rugged mountains, into magic hills, the dream of mountains of childhood. Only God could paint such a picture and only Mexico could be the canvas.⁷²

Falling somewhere in between a general cosmic spirituality and his rejection of the organized religious experience he had as a youth, Hughes nonetheless felt deep reverence and passion for the culture from which gospel music came. Because of the writer's secular beliefs, *Black Nativity* was more a project in capturing the cultural flavor of the gospel tradition and preserving, through the music, an important aspect of African American ethos.

To Harlem: Finding His Niche

Like the other prolific black writers of his time, Langston Hughes concerned himself sincerely with a quest to know and describe black people. Unlike the recognized poet laureate of

⁷¹ Rampersad, 20-1.

⁷² Rampersad, quoting Langston Hughes, *ibid.*, 41.

Harlem, Countee Cullen, with whom Hughes shared a tenuous friendship, Langston Hughes was determined to write about black life from the perspective of those whose voices were rarely considered worthy of depiction. He wrote with the gifted ear of a poet, but in a language that seemed to spring organically from within black culture, infused with notes from Africa, the Caribbean, Mexico and the American South, anywhere black folks had been and put down roots, Langston Hughes paid attention. Cullen, on the other hand, was widely embraced by the black middle class and enjoyed a relatively strong white readership as well. Hughes was the poet celebrated more by his peers than his patrons for many years, writing poems that would be published in the black press and papers of the day, stalwarts such as *Crisis* and *Opportunity*.

In the early 18th century Harlem, New York was a bustling, boisterous community that grew exponentially between 1910 and 1945.

Early in his career Langston Hughes took it upon himself to celebrate the vitality, the creativity and the resilience of black people in the United States. Working in Harlem, New York in the early 18th century, Hughes was part of a bustling, boisterous community that grew

Young writers and thinkers flowered in a diverse medley of the most celebrated jazz and blues musicians, formidably talented dancers, actors and comedians, men and women of letters including journalists, lawyers, sociologists, anthropologists and other keepers of the cultural flame.

exponentially between the years of 1910 and 1945. Up from the southern states came black migrants in search of opportunity, eager to see for themselves the rumored black Mecca in America, this place called Harlem. Harlem is not a large neighborhood, and it was already quite well populated at the start of what became known as the Great Migration. Newcomers found housing not only short, but also very expensive indeed. Families already occupying flats uptown were eager to take on boarders, however, to ease the burden of their rent. Thus newcomers were acclimated via established families and

extended kinship networks, creating tightly knit, interdependent pockets of folks. This unique situation allowed for an unparalleled experience; nowhere had black people, hailing from all over the United States, the Caribbean and Africa, lived free on American soil in such close proximity and with relative autonomy.

In Harlem New York Langston Hughes found himself in the company of a collection including the most prolific writers and thinkers of the day. Alain Locke, Marcus Garvey, W.E.B. DuBois and the other prominent black scholars of the day wrote vociferously about the potential for radical change that Harlem represented, for social and political growth, for self-representation, at last, for sovereignty. Like a syringe, this centralized and cosmopolitan city

would draw the best and brightest in the country. Eager to meet with one another and share ideas and new work, the black literati gathered in salons and cafés and the living rooms of the well to do such as A'Leila Walker, the daughter of the millionaire Madame CJ Walker who had created a virtual empire in her lifetime of black beauty products.

One should not underestimate the influence the cosmopolitan centers with their diverse medley of inhabitants; the most celebrated jazz and blues musicians, formidably talented dancers, actors and comedians, and the men and women of letters including journalists, lawyers, sociologists, anthropologists and other keepers of the cultural flame. In this environment young writers and thinkers flowered and felt a need to respond, to be at the table, so to speak. Langston Hughes was no different.

Though it was his tendency to take flight from time to time on ships, his reputation in Harlem nevertheless grew in spite of his absence from the social circles and parlors where the literati convened. It is likely that Langston had a keen clarity about his need to be lonesome, to long for Harlem and its people, his people, so that he could find the heart that missed them, and write from that place. Much of his work stands at a rather revelatory distance, melancholic or celebratory, but from afar. He enforced a kind of self-imposed exile so that he would write to find his way home. Home lived in his head and heart, in his memories of black hands clapping in the Midwestern churches, in the buoyant laughter of the Pullman porters in New York City and that of wash-women and laundresses gossiping while they worked like the tinkling of bells. It was in the shuck and jive of men playing cards and throwing dice, the streetwalker's stare, and

It is possible that Hughes harbored a tender hope that his parents would finally recognize and celebrate the talent and ingenuity of their child.

in the wonderment of schoolchildren paging through books or playing hopscotch in the streets. Langston's world was rich indeed. He carried it with him wherever he went. It was a song that would romance him throughout his life, standing ever at the edges of his grasp; a tender thing that would wither and die should he try pin it down. But to let it be free, to live and exist all around and away from him, he could follow and long for it, seducing and being seduced, the project of a lifetime.

It is one of the quiet ironies of life that a play so deeply connected to family and genealogy would be written by a man whose own relationship with his parents was fraught with

Nowhere had black people, hailing from all over the United States, the Caribbean and Africa, lived free on American soil in such close proximity and with relative autonomy.

both neglect and disappointment.⁷³ By his own admission and via other accounts, it is clear that Langston Hughes felt largely abandoned by his parents. Throughout his autobiography, those resurfaced letters to his close friends and intimates, and in the principal biography of his life to date, Hughes muses that life might be better were it possible to be born without parents at all.

In Rampersad's account of Hughes life, we get the sense that this divorce from a real sense of parental support and love somehow stunted Hughes, leaving a large part of him that did not develop beyond the wounded child who grew up in the austere home of his grandmother Mary Langston.⁷⁴ Undoubtedly there was a correlation between Hughes' memories of his childhood and the maltreatment of the Christ child. Surely the deeply apologetic gospel songs that both praise the Lord Jesus Christ and recognize the abuse he suffered at the hands of those he had come to save resonated with Hughes. For example, in the honeyed, dark tones of "Sweet Little Jesus Boy" one feels both the pain of the martyr and the sorrowful regret of the mortal, though in the end the two are equitable, common, similar, sharing a unique bond forged out of the general meanness of life and their survival and eternal hope in spite of great odds:

Sweet Little Jesus Boy / Born not so long ago / Born in a manger child / . . . The world treat you mean Lord / Treat me mean too / But that's how it is down here / Where we didn't know who you was / Please Lord forgive us child / We didn't know who you was.

It is possible that Hughes, in his continual return to his mother and the pilgrimage he made to reconvene with his father, had harbored some tender hope that his parents would finally recognize and celebrate the talent and special ingenuity of their child. The heralded return of their son never fulfilled itself, however. Hughes came and left without the garlands of their praise or love laid upon his shoulders. Instead he was met with frosty indifference from his father, who was concerned only for the money his son should make and the practicality of the profession the young man chose, and his mother's disgruntled tolerance of Hughes' creative impulses which threatened the household income for steady, reliable pay.

Indeed, much of his life was spent scratching for a pittance. In spite of his growing reputation as a poet of great caliber, Hughes never made much money by way of his pen. What

Gospel music was the soul of the Civil Rights Movement. The deep moans, the rhythmic chants, the call to stand up, to rise to meet the swelling crowds and join them, was intoxicating, thrilling, stirring and perhaps even threatening because of its depth, its resonance, its insistence on survival.

⁷³ See Arnold Rampersad's *The Life of Langston Hughes Volume I: 1902-1941 I, Too, Sing America*. (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986). See especially chapter one.

⁷⁴ In an obviously Freudian interpretation of events, Rampersad locates the origination of any sexual ambiguity or anomaly Hughes exhibits in his deep sense of disappointment and alienation from his parents.

little money he did receive for his poems was continually supplemented by his work aboard ships, as a waiter, busboy, even a bouncer in Paris.⁷⁵ As Harlem became increasingly more popular, especially as it pertained to jazz music, stride piano and cabaret and swing dance, the talent within the neighborhood was instantly commoditized. The success of those Broadway shows that capitalized on black performers and black musical style offered a unique opportunity for composers and writers to make a profit for their work. Hughes was offered a commission to write a musical featuring gospel music. Unlike the previously successful “*Tambourines to Glory*” that included gospel songs, [Hughes] would attempt to make black gospel music the heart and soul of the drama, and not merely its adornment.”⁷⁶

The growth of Harlem distressed many of its early residents, Claude McKay lamented its decline, as the city began to take on a tone of seedy quality during the Prohibition era. Rampersad writes that, “[v]ery early, as the Jazz Age ripened in New York, Harlem was accepting the role forced on it—that of bookie, bootlegger, and bordello to white downtown.”⁷⁷ Still Hughes found beauty, elegance and grace in even the toughest of these situations and the people that administered to the white patrons of uptown. The times uptown in Harlem were changing. “Gospel . . . [was] virtually exploding in popularity, with several of its finest exponents now performing with great success in nightclubs such as the Village Vanguard, the Blue Angel, and Birdland, where jazz had ruled alone.”⁷⁸ Gospel music was the soul of the Civil Rights Movement. The deep moans, the rhythmic chants, the call to stand up, to rise to meet the swelling crowds and join them, was intoxicating, thrilling, stirring and perhaps even threatening because of its depth, its resonance, its insistence on survival. Rampersad describes Hughes understanding of gospel music as informed by

yet another aspect of black culture on which he would draw later as an artist and an individual. At an open air theatre on Independence Avenue, from an orchestra of blind musicians, Hughes first heard the blues. The music seemed to cry, but the words somehow laughed. The effect on him was one of piercing sadness, as if his deepest loneliness had been harmonized. . . . Between the church and the blues singers, . . . the world of black feeling and art opened before Langston. He neither felt religion nor could sing the blues, and yet both the religious drama and the secular music soothed and diverted him from his sense of solitude. They also alerted him to a power and a privacy of language residing in the despised race to which he belonged; approaching the church and the blues as an outsider, because of his grandmother’s own forbidding distance, Langston only respected them more.⁷⁹

⁷⁵ Rampersad, 85.

⁷⁶ Rampersad, Arnold. *The Life of Langston Hughes, Volume II: 1941-1967 I Dream a World*. (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988) 344.

⁷⁷ Rampersad, Arnold. *The Life of Langston Hughes Volume I: 1902-1941 I, Too, Sing America*, 54.

⁷⁸ Rampersad, *The Life of Langston Hughes, Volume II: 1941-1967 I Dream a World*, 344.

⁷⁹ Rampersad, *The Life of Langston Hughes Volume I: 1902-1941 I, Too, Sing America*. 16-7.

Hughes found the music of black culture wherever he went; if it was hidden from him, he would seek it out, certain after experiences such as the one above, that it was always nearby, that it was necessary. Rampersad recounts a visit to Washington DC during which Hughes encountered an insufferable black bourgeoisie that made him feel tremendously out of place. In search of the familiar, something to remind him of the blackness he knew, he hit the shadier area of town known as “Seventh Street.” Here, as Rampersad describes, people were poor, unapologetic, and lively. Hughes once again found the music he’d longed for, “ ‘ Like the waves of the sea coming one after another, . . . like the earth moving around the sun, night, day,—night, day—night, day—forever, so is the undertow of black music with its rhythm that never betrays you, its strength like the beat of the human heart, its humor, and its rooted power.’ ”⁸⁰ It was here that Hughes embarked upon a new, most sincere journey to maintain a certain “vigilance about the need to find new ways, based on a steadfast loyalty to the forms of black culture, to express black consciousness—and, in so doing, to assist at its passage into the hostile modern world.”⁸¹ According to Rampersad, Hughes was going through a period wherein he quite vocally expressed his frustration with the criticism of his work by white reviewers who, though they may have lauded his skill, understood little of the culture behind the work, the roots from which it sprang.

Black Nativity marked a major breakthrough in the gospel musical form. As with his evolving mastery of the blues in the 1920s, when he moved from a complete immersion in it—writing blues themselves, without mediation—Hughes now deliberately allowed black music and religion to overwhelm the traditional play form. Serving to link but also to liberate the vocal skills and religious emotions of a company of authentic gospel musicians, the narrator offers a few remarks here, a touching lyric invitation there. . . [but almost the entire bulk of the play contains] songs [that] were in the public domain as part of the religious music tradition.⁸²

The poet would redouble his efforts to depict the deep well of black life he knew, not writing for the critics, nor to compete with his peers. Hughes instead wrote in honor of those people who had loved him and protected him as a boy; for the poor, simple folks he knew in the Midwest, the South, in the hardened industrial cities of Chicago, Cleveland and Detroit, for those he knew in Harlem; he wrote for the black heart whose pulse rocked him like a lullaby, shook him to the core and beat ever-vigilant in his own breast.

⁸⁰ Ibid., 102.

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² Rampersad, (*I Dream a World*) 345-6.

CONCLUSION

Piecing together alternate histories is paramount to a more complete understanding of the development of modern-day societies. Gleaning data from non-traditional records is a challenging, complicated task. However, as Gladys-Marie Fry's work on African American quilting demonstrates, or Arnold Rampersad's research on Langston Hughes proves, the fruit and findings of such labor are invaluable. This kind of research only deepens and adds more texture to the remarkable history of this country.

The maintenance of an alternate, parallel history that valued their experience is one of the primary factors that sustained a cohesive sense of culture, pride and community for black Americans throughout the years. If limited to official documents, little would be known about the early black experience in this country. It is instead through alternate records that we uncover the rich legacy of African Americans that extends back into the 15th century. "Denied the opportunity to read or write, slave women quilted their diaries, creating permanent but unwritten records of events large and small, of pain and loss, of triumph and tragedy, in their lives. And each piece of cloth became the focal point of a remembered past."⁸³ This is the remarkable and harrowing story of the triumphant survival of a people against incredible odds. The pride and purpose of our ancestors, their resilience, determination and humor have set down a path upon which we can walk today with our hearts full and our heads high. If we were to ignore methods of documentation that were limited or artistic, we would drain our cultural history of the nutrients and flavors necessary for cultural nourishment and continuity. Langston Hughes and Harriet Powers are just two examples of people whose personal ethos and passion for black culture was strong enough to move each to create a legacy to which we can look for guidance, reference and inspiration.

As America grows increasingly more diverse, incorporating new populations and adjusting the mixtures of the old, it is necessary to consider alternate modes of historiography and documentation of events and experience. America is hailed as a place to come aground, a promised land for weary travelers and those seeking refuge and solace from tyranny and despotism. If we are to truly embrace all peoples who broach our shores and our borders as we so pledge, without attention to race, creed or color, we must learn to appreciate their customs, their languages and what comes enclosed in their hearts. It is only through a search for connection that we can find our way to understanding. Without those common themes that stitch together the human heart, each of us would blister in the cold winds of seclusion. As we

⁸³ Fry, Gladys-Marie. *Stitched from the Soul: Slave Quilts from the Antebellum Period*. (Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 1990). 1.

celebrate this holiday season, in the name of peace, prosperity and health, let us weave our stories together into one mighty patchwork under which we can all find warmth and safety.

DESIGN STATEMENTS

The creative design team is responsible for making the text on the page into a literal reality onstage. By using sound, lighting, set and costumes elements, the designers create an atmosphere inside which the actors play. Designers use methods such as color, temperature, or volume to help them as they work. Each of these methods can create a feeling onstage based on which tools the designer chooses to use.

In production, the design elements come together with the text, the actors and the direction, to create a three dimensional world. Penumbra Theatre is guided by an ensemble aesthetic, which means that no element is more important than another. This is Penumbra's ethical approach to art, in which every voice is unique, necessary and communally rooted. This approach also creates artistic balance and excellence. The audience often does not realize that any of the elements were at one time separate. They are totally bound; the result is something greater than the sum of each of its parts. Patrons of Penumbra Theatre Company often say the work looks effortless because the end result feels magical, feels surreal. This is one way the creative team, including the director, designers, cast and crew, can evaluate the success of their endeavor.

It is not magic, though. A lot of work goes into creating a production. Here you can read about the intent of the designers, how they arrived at their concepts and what challenges and methods they used to make their part of the play come to life. (For information on production internships, please visit our website at www.penumbra theatre.org, or call 651-288-6791.)

SCENE DESIGN

JASON ALLYN-SCHWERIN

Based off Seitu Ken Jones' concept from *Black Nativity – A Celebration of Family, A celebration for the Soul ... Testify!*, the idea behind this setting was to create an environment that can be used for future productions. Although the specific themes for future years may change, the foundation will always be the family. Christmas is a time to share the birth of Christ with the ones we love. This performance gives our audience a chance to witness the magical transformation of a mourning family as they recapture the joy in celebrating Jesus' birth.

A production of this nature puts several demands on its designers. The setting must facilitate this family's celebration which is founded in song and dance. Music, movement, and the story of Christ's birth are intermingled into one cohesive art form. The set has to be open enough to allow a large cast to move artfully and safely. The home, by itself, is nothing spectacular; it is made beautiful by the people who live there.

SOUND/MEDIA DESIGN

MARTIN GWINUP

This is my fourth production of *Black Nativity* as the Multimedia/Sound Designer. Each production has had changes, improvements, and grown in complexity. This year we are planning on individually mixing each performer. In the past we had "space mics" to add to the house mix if necessary and to send a monitor to the band. It was decided that we needed more control of individual voices so that the audience could hear and

understand the songs throughout the house. Otherwise the sound design remains the same. The biggest design challenge with “Black Nativity” is keeping a good blend of the music throughout the house and keeping the audience’s focus to the stage. The multimedia component is used to help convey the closeness and meaning of family and tradition within the production. Here we use images and video to help to tell the story. The old adage “A picture is worth 1000 words” is very true and helps the audience to understand the meaning and intent of the production. We are trying a little twist at the end which we attempted last year but time ran out to perfect it so we cut it. This year, hopefully, we will have better success. Again as a designer, no matter what area, my job is to support the story and the characters so the audience can understand, relate, and empathize with their situations. This is a wonderful piece that should leave the audience with a smile on their face and hope in their heart.

LIGHTING DESIGN

MARK DOUGHERTY

The look, feel, and mood of *Black Nativity: Twenty Years of Holiday Cheer!* is the result of close collaboration with both the director and design team. By working *directly* with the other designers, I’ve created color that both blends and contrasts the color of the production as a whole. My first step is the technical process: I’ve picked specifically where each of the 125 lighting instruments should be placed. Then, taking what I’ve learned in collaboration with the design team, I transfer our visions onto the stage. By using “gobos” (sampled below) and “gels” (color filters), I can create any mood on stage I wish.

As the Lighting Designer, I carefully integrate movement into each scene and execute synchronized and scripted changes in performance. When designing a show, you are faced with many choices along the way. Lighting can significantly impact the theatrical experience, via large dramatic light cues and through subtle shifts in tone and color that subconsciously relay information to the audience. Communicating the subconscious is what really drives and challenges me as a designer. For a play such as *Black Nativity*, the challenge is how to integrate subtle lighting moods with the fast, dramatic, bold style of the musical. Clearly, lighting for a piece of musical theater is completely different than lighting a drama. The ebb and flow clicks along at a rapid pace, and often the lights follow the music, peaking with the end of each song, then transforming the stage into the mood of the upcoming number, introducing each song to the audience before the song actually starts. These are the elements that make musicals popular, but also challenge the designer to really support the music and action on stage.

In *Black Nativity*, dance is heavily incorporated throughout. When lighting the body in motion, there is an opportunity to use higher contrast on stage. I layer more saturated colors and gobos to enhance the movement and dancing onstage. I also use side lighting to sculpt and define the dancing bodies. One of the more dramatic choices we’ve made for *Black Nativity* is using a star-shaped gobo for the Angel character. The star can be used in stark detail, or softened to create a more subtle pattern in the space, and effectively sets the Angel apart from the rest of the cast, in his otherworldly light.

TOOLS FOR TEACHING

The following are a series of questions you may use to prompt discussion, critical analysis or dialogue about this play. They may be used either before or after the play, either to guide audiences toward specific issues as they watch or, to stimulate conversation about topical issues afterward.

These questions are intended to meet the state standards for High School Language Arts and Literacy set by the Board of Education. (Grades 9 through 12).

Penumbra Theatre Company also offers Lesson Plans that use the script, the production, and the study guide to investigate specific themes. Each plan can run from approximately 15 to 45 minutes for discussion. Please contact the Education and Outreach Director for more details: sarah.bellamy@penumbra theatre.org

A Feel for the Times -- Comprehension Questions

1. Name three religions Langston Hughes incorporated into *Black Nativity*.
2. What was the Abolition Movement?
3. Name two politically influential objectors who were part of the black literati.
4. What were the tenets of the French Revolution? How did they influence the New World?
5. Why was literacy so important to black people at the turn of the century?
6. Explain how spiritual has faith sustained black communities, give one example from the antebellum and one example from the post-bellum periods.
7. What is Creole?
8. What is Manifest Destiny? How was this term used in the expansion of the United States?
9. What is seasoning?
10. Explain what it means to “testify.”

Critical Thinking and Analysis -- Short Essay Questions

1. Langston Hughes exhibited a complex understanding of race that was in many ways ahead of his time. What were some of the contributing factors to his particular comprehension of race and ethnicity?
2. In what ways can you see blended spiritual systems in the New World influencing art and culture? How do these new systems articulate identity?
3. What is the difference between a cultural interest in a faith versus a belief in it? How did Langston Hughes negotiate this difference in his life and work?
4. Have a look at the following poems by Langston Hughes: *A Dream Deferred*; *I’ve Known Rivers*; and *Notes on Commercial Theater*. Do you consider Langston Hughes an activist? How does his work reflect his concerns about the representation of black people and culture? How did he influence and reshape this representation based on his life experience?
5. How does *Black Nativity* reflect the gospel tradition?

Language Arts and Theatre – Reflection

1. What are three ways in which *Black Nativity* blurs the boundaries between real time and the past or future?
2. How does *Black Nativity* negotiate material reality versus cosmic spirituality? Think especially about the visibility and invisibility of the story-teller; what is his role, specifically? How does the fact that the audience can see him but the ensemble cannot affect the show?
3. How is dance incorporated into *Black Nativity*? How does the movement component enhance or articulate aspects of the Nativity story?

Exercise #1

As part of his effort to document the Underground Railroad, William Still included data from the logbooks of “station agents,” as well as his own records about recent arrivals and departures as thousands of people moved under covert conditions toward freedom. Often called “The Father of the Underground Railroad,” Still helped as many as 60 slaves a month escape to freedom, interviewing each person and keeping careful records, including a brief biography and the destination of each person, along with any alias that they adopted, though he kept his records carefully hidden.

Below are two letters from William Still’s *The Underground Railroad*. Ask your students to read each of the letters and write a letter in response. Prompt questions include: what words were unfamiliar? What did you notice about the language? Was the letter signed? What reasons may the letter be unsigned? What are similar themes in the two letters? What historical events are the letters addressing (this is particularly relevant as the second letter mentions John Brown)?

TOPSHAM, VT., September 1st, 1855.

WM. STILL, MY DEAR FRIEND:—I have the heart, but not the time, to write you a long letter. It is Saturday evening, and I am preparing to preach to-morrow afternoon from Heb. xiii. 3, "Remember them that are in bonds as bound with them." This will be my second sermon from this text. Sabbath before last I preached from it, arguing and illustrating the proposition, deduced from it, that "the great work to which we are now called is the abolition of Slavery, or the emancipation of the slave," showing our duty as philanthropists. To-morrow I intend to point out our duty as citizens. Some to whom I minister, I know, will call it a political speech; but I have long since determined to speak for the dumb what is in my heart and in my Bible, let men hear or forbear. I am accountable to the God of the oppressed, not to man. If I have his favor, why need I regard man's disfavor. Many besides the members of my own church come out regularly to hear me. Some of them are pro-slavery politicians. The consequence is, I preach much on the subject of Slavery. And while I have a tongue to speak, and lips to pray, they shall never be sealed or silent so long as millions of dumb have so few to speak for them.

But poor Passmore Williamson is in bonds. Let us also remember him, as bound with him. He has many sympathizers. I am glad you did not share the same fate. For some reasons I am sorry you have fallen into the hands of thieves. For some others I am glad. It will make you more devoted to your good work. Persecution always brightens the Christian, and gives more zeal to the true philanthropist. I hope you will come off victorious. I pray for you and your co-laborers and co-sufferers.

My good brother, I am greatly indebted to you for your continued kindness. The Lord reward you.

I have a scholarship in an Ohio College, Geneva Hall, which will entitle me—any one I may send—to six years tuition. It is an Anti-slavery institution, and wholly under Anti-slavery control and influence. They want colored students to prepare them for the great field of labor open to men of talent and piety of that class. When I last saw you I purposed talking to you about this matter, but was disappointed very much in not getting to take tea with you, as I partly promised. Have you a son ready for college? or for the grammar school? Do you know any promising young man who would accept my scholarship? Or would your brother's son, Peter or Levin, like to have the benefit of it? If so, you are at liberty to promise it to any one whom you think I would be willing to educate. Write me at your earliest convenience, about this matter.

ELLINGTON, Chautauqua Co., N.Y., Dec. 7th, 1859.

MR. STILL:—Dear Sir:—Yours of the 29th, was duly and gratefully received, although the greater portion of your epistle, of a necessity, portrayed the darker side of the picture, yet we have great reason to be thankful for the growing interest there is for the cause throughout the free States, for it certainly is on the increase, even in our own locality. There are those who, five years since, were (ashamed, must I say it!) to bear the appellation of "Anti-slavery," who can now manfully bear the one then still more repellant of Abolitionist. All this we wish to feel thankful for, and wish their number may never grow less.

The excitement relative to the heroic John Brown, now in his grave, has affected the whole North, or at least every one who has a heart in his breast, particularly this portion of the State, which is so decidedly Anti-slavery.

At a meeting of our Society, to-day, at which your letter was read, it was thought best that I should reply to it, a request with which I cheerfully comply. We would like to hear from you, and learn the directions to be given to our box, which will be ready to send as soon as we can hear from you. Please give us all necessary information, and oblige our Society.

You have the kind wishes and prayers of all the members, that you may be the instrument of doing much good to those in bonds, and may God speed the time when every yoke shall be broken, and let the oppressed go free.

Yours, truly,
Mrs. DR. BROOKS.

P.S. I have just learned that John Brown's body passed through Dunkirk, a few miles from this place, yesterday. A funeral sermon is to be preached in this place one week from next Sabbath, for the good old man.

Exercise #2

Ask students to read through the list and in small groups select one of the arrivals to create a story about. Students should focus on point of view, narrative and creating a believable back story.

1. Female Slave in Male Attire, fleeing as a Planter, with her Husband as her Body Servant.
2. CAPT. F. ARRIVES WITH FOURTEEN "PRIME ARTICLES" ON BOARD.
3. Charles Hall and others.
4. Mother and Child from Norfolk, Va.,
5. ARRIVAL FROM CAMBRIDGE, 1857.
6. Silas Long and Solomon Light—"The Mother of Twelve Children"—Old Jane Davis.

Here is one example of one such story of an arrival described as a box of cargo:

In the winter of 1857 a young woman, who had just turned her majority, was boxed up in Baltimore by one who stood to her in the relation of a companion, a young man, who had the box conveyed as freight to the depot in Baltimore, consigned to Philadelphia. Nearly all one night it remained at the depot with the living agony in it, and after being turned upside down more than once, the next day about ten o'clock it reached Philadelphia. Her companion coming on in advance of the box, arranged with a hackman, George Custus, to attend to having it brought from the depot to a designated house, Mrs. Myers', 412 S. 7th street, where the resurrection was to take place.

Custus, without knowing exactly what the box contained, but suspecting from the apparent anxiety and instructions of the young man who engaged him to go after it, that it was of great importance, while the freight car still remained on the street, demanded it of the freight agent, not willing to wait the usual time for the delivery of freight. At first the freight agent declined delivering under such circumstances. The hackman insisted by saying that he wished to despatch it in great haste, said it is all right, you know me, I have been coming here for many years every day, and will be responsible for it. The freight-master told him to "take it and go ahead with it." No sooner said than done. It was placed in a one horse wagon at the instance of Custus, and driven to Seventh and Minster streets.

The secret had been intrusted to Mrs. M. by the young companion of the woman. A feeling of horror came over the aged woman, who had been thus suddenly entrusted with such responsibility. A few doors from her lived an old friend of the same religious faith with herself, well known as a brave woman, and a friend of the slave, Mrs. Ash, the undertaker or shrouder, whom every body knew among the colored people. Mrs. Myers felt that it would not be wise to move in the matter of this resurrection without the presence of the undertaker. Accordingly, she called Mrs. Ash in. Even her own family was excluded from witnessing the scene. The two aged women chose to be alone in that fearful moment, shuddering at the thought that a corpse might meet their gaze instead of a living creature. However, they mustered courage and pried off the lid. A woman was discovered in the straw but no sign of life was perceptible. Their fears seemed fulfilled. "Surely she is dead," thought the witnesses.

"Get up, my child," spake one of the women. With scarcely life enough to move the straw covering, she, nevertheless, did now show signs of life, but to a very faint degree. She could not speak, but being assisted arose. She was straightway aided up stairs, not yet uttering a word. After a short while she said, "I feel so deadly weak." She was then asked if she would not have some water or nourishment, which she declined.

Before a great while, however, she was prevailed upon to take a cup of tea. She then went to bed, and there remained all day, speaking but a very little during that time. The second day she gained strength and was able to talk much better, but not with ease. The third day she began to come to herself and talk quite freely. She tried to describe her sufferings and fears while in the box, but in vain. In the midst of her severest agonies her chief fear was, that she would be discovered and carried back to Slavery. She had a pair of scissors with her, and in order to procure fresh air she had made a hole in the box, but it was very slight. How she ever managed to breathe and maintain her existence, being in the condition of becoming a mother, it was hard to comprehend. In this instance the utmost endurance was put to the test. She was obviously nearer death than Henry Box Brown, or any of the other box or chest cases that ever came under the notice of the Committee.

Vocabulary – Important Terms

Abolition – the act of formally repealing an existing practice through legal means, either by making it illegal, or simply no longer allowing it to exist in any form. In the United States, The Abolition Movement refers to the project to end racial slavery and liberate black Americans. The movement gained momentum after the British Parliament outlawed the African slave trade in 1807 and incorporated people from various ethnicities and cultural backgrounds including but not limited to free blacks and liberal whites such as the Quakers. In 1863 slavery was outlawed in the United States with the formal declaration of the Emancipation Proclamation.

Antebellum – the period of time before or existing before the American Civil War during which slavery, the slave trade and the sale and purchase of slaves was legal and protected by local and federal governments.

Anthropology – the science that deals with the origins, physical and cultural development, biological characteristics, and social customs and beliefs of humankind or, the study of human beings' similarity to and divergence from other animals.

Artifacts – an object produced or shaped by human craft, especially a tool, weapon, or ornament of archaeological or historical interest.

Bahia – is actually a state in the country of Brazil in South America. As the chief locus of the early Brazilian slave trade, Bahia is considered to possess the greatest and most distinctive African imprint, in terms of culture and customs, in Brazil. These include the Yoruba-derived religious system of *Candomblé*, the martial art of *capoeira* (especially the style of *capoeira de Angola*), African-derived music such as *samba*, *afoxé*, and *axé*, and cuisine with strong links to western Africa.

Bastille – a prison located in Paris, France, the Bastille was the symbolic center of the French Revolution whose tenets were “liberté, égalité et fraternité” (freedom, equality and brotherhood). When the masses stormed its walls on July 14, 1789 it was considered a coup signaling the fall of the French aristocracy and tyranny of the wealthy. Today the French celebrate Bastille Day as a national holiday.

- Bookie** – a person that takes bets and may pay winnings depending upon results and, depending on the nature of the bet, the odds. Bookies worked illegally in the United States and were especially successful during Prohibition when illegal gambling was at an all-time high in major metropolitan centers.
- Bootlegger** – the illegal sale, production or consumption of alcohol, bootlegging became especially prevalent during the 1920s during the American Prohibition period and was controlled predominately by organized crime enterprises. A bootlegger operated the business.
- Buffalo Soldiers** – The black infantrymen of the 9th and 10th Calvary who rose to celebrity upon their heroic return from the Indian Wars of 1866 – 1890 and patrolled the frontier territories as the U.S. spread westward beyond the Mississippi and Missouri Rivers into heavily contested indigenous land. While most returned to civil society some, realizing the terror the American government asked them to inflict upon Native American peoples was the same that had been inflicted upon blacks in the country, defected and joined the ranks of Native tribes, ingratiating themselves and became absorbed into indigenous American culture.
- Chesnutt, Charles** – (June 20, 1858 – November 15, 1932) an African American author and political activist best known for novels and short stories exploring racism and other social themes. His first and most famous book, *The Conjure Woman*, was published in 1899. Charles Chestnutt was a mixed-race individual who was often mistaken for a white man though he never attempted to “pass.”
- Civil War** -- (1861–1865) was a sectional conflict in the United States of America between the federal government (the "Union") and eleven Southern slave states that declared their secession and formed the Confederate States of America led by President Jefferson Davis. The Union led by President Abraham Lincoln and the Republican Party opposed the expansion of slavery and rejected any right of secession. Fighting commenced on April 12, 1861 when Confederate forces attacked a federal military installation Fort Sumter in South Carolina.
- Clandestine** – private or surreptitious; happenings or relationships characterized by, done in, or executed with secrecy or concealment, most frequently used to describe purposes of subversion or deception.
- Colloquial and Collective memory** – “the memory of the people” that may be passed down through the generations through song, oral history, folklore or through other artistic mediums but is very rarely included (and is often contrary to) the dominant historical record.
- Colonization** – the systematic expansion of European control of foreign territories. The region colonized is typically known as the Third or Developing World today, though at one point America, today a superpower, was contested colonial territory of the British, French and Spanish. The enforcement of colonial rule includes oppression, racism, forced religious conversion and language acquisition, efforts to undermine cultural continuity through education and the prohibition of students to speak their native languages.
- Corporeality** – bodily, material, of or pertaining to the flesh. Individuals who are socially and politically “marked” are done so through their bodies via gender, race, sexuality, etc.

Corroborate – to strengthen or make more certain with other evidence. Historians use various materials in dialogue with one another to prove an assumption or answer a question.

Creole – the merging of cultural, ontological and spiritual systems into a new, blended articulation of culture in the New World. Creole tradition incorporates European, African and indigenous American traditions into emergent expressions of culture and identity. It is often most easily identifiable in terms of cuisine, music and art though language and religion are vital to understanding the process.

Cullen, Countee – (May 30, 1903 – January 9, 1946) Considered the Poet Laureate of Harlem, Countee Cullen wrote for many of the premiere black magazines during the Harlem Renaissance including *Crisis* (NAACP) and *Opportunity* (National Urban League). Although his more notable poems deal with issues of both race and poverty such as “Saturday’s Child,” “Incident,” he wrote in verse unlike his contemporaries such as Langston Hughes and Jean Toomer. He received a master’s degree from Harvard University.

Decolonization – any effort organized or independent toward liberating the oppressed masses from imperial influence and control.

Du Bois, W.E.B. – (February 23, 1868 – August 27, 1963) One of the preeminent philosophers and historians of his day, W.E.B. DuBois was a beacon for African Americans struggling for autonomy, respect and self-representation, a true race-man. He was a founding member of the NAACP, a veteran author of creative and sociological writing, and a thinker who put forth some of the foremost social philosophies to come out of the era. Some of his best-known works are *The Souls of Black Folk*; *John Brown*; and *Black Reconstruction*.

Dynasty – is a succession of rulers who belong to the same family for generations. The term "dynasty" is also used to describe the era during which a family reigned, as well as events, trends and artifacts of that period.

Ethnography – is the genre of writing that describes the social or cultural lives of human beings based on fieldwork that includes observation, historiography, interview and analysis. Ethnography situates the findings of fieldwork within a holistic framework founded on the idea that any society cannot be understood through individuals in isolation or in part of the social system—all pieces must be taken into consideration not just for their sum but also for their interconnected nature. The genre has both formal and historical connections to travel writing and colonial office reports. Many cultural anthropologists consider ethnography the essence of the discipline.

French Revolution – (1789–1799) was a pivotal period in the history of French, European and Western civilization. During this time, republicanism replaced the monarchy in France and the Roman Catholic Church underwent a radical restructuring. While France would oscillate among republic, empire and monarchy, for 75 years after the First Republic fell to a coup d’etat, the Revolution is widely seen as a major turning point in the history of Western democracy—from the age of absolutism and aristocracy, to the age of the citizenry as the dominant political force. The slogan of the French Revolution was “*liberté, égalité, fraternité, ou la mort!*” (“Liberty, equality, fraternity, or death!”). This slogan outlived the revolution, later becoming the rallying cry of activists, both militant and non-violent, who promote democracy or overthrow oppressive governments.

Garvey, Marcus -- (August 17, 1887 – June 10, 1940) was a publisher, journalist, entrepreneur, Black nationalist, and founder of the Universal Negro Improvement Association and African Communities League (UNIA-ACL). Garvey, born Jamaica, is best remembered as an important proponent of the Back to Africa movement, which encouraged those of African descent to return to their ancestral homelands. This movement would eventually inspire other movements ranging from the Nation of Islam to the Rastafari movement which proclaimed him a prophet. Garvey said he wanted those of African ancestry to “redeem” Africa and for the colonial European powers to leave it.

Great Migration – The rapid relocation of masses of black Americans from the traditional South to the northern states that coincided with the industrialization of major cities at the early part of the 20th Century.

Haitian Revolution – (1791-1804) was the most successful of the many African slave rebellions in the Western Hemisphere and established Haiti as a free, black republic, the first of its kind. Africans and people of African ancestry freed themselves from slavery and colonization by taking advantage of the conflict among whites over how to implement the reforms of the **French Revolution** in this slave society.

Harlem Renaissance – was a flowering of African American art, literature, music and culture in the United States led primarily by African Americans in Harlem New York City. **Langston Hughes’** work was seminal to the movement.

Harper’s Ferry – a town in Jefferson County, West Virginia, situated on the banks of the Potomac and Shenandoah Rivers where the Maryland, Virginia and West Virginia meet. On October 16, 1859, the radical abolitionist **John Brown** led a small group of followers in a raid on the Arsenal. Brown attacked and captured several buildings; he hoped to use the captured weapons to initiate a slave uprising throughout the South. However, he and his men were quickly pinned down by local citizens and militia, and forced to take refuge in the fire-house adjacent to the arsenal. On October 18, U.S. Marines were sent via train to Harpers Ferry. Under the command of Colonel Robert E. Lee, they stormed the fire-house and killed or captured most of the raiders. Brown was tried for treason by the State of Virginia, convicted, and hanged in nearby Charles Town. The failed raid was a major catalyst in accelerating the slide to **Civil War**. Brown was successfully prosecuted and sentenced to death by hanging.

Historiography – studies the processes by which historical knowledge is obtained and transmitted. Broadly speaking, historiography examines the writing of history and the use of historical methods, drawing upon such elements such as authorship, sourcing, interpretation, style, bias, and audience. The word historiography can also refer to a body of historical work.

Hughes, Langston -- (February 1, 1902 – May 22 1967) was an African American poet, novelist, playwright, short story writer, and newspaper columnist. Hughes is best known for his work during the **Harlem Renaissance**. His life’s work was dedicated to expressing the heart, passion and strength of black American culture.

John Brown -- (May 9, 1800 – December 2, 1859) was an American **abolitionist**, the first white abolitionist to advocate and to practice insurrection as a means to the abolition of slavery. He has been called "the most controversial of all nineteenth-century Americans." His attempt to start a liberation movement among enslaved blacks in Virginia in 1859 electrified the nation. He was tried for treason (to the state of Virginia) and hanged, but his behavior at the trial seemed heroic to millions of Americans.

Lincoln, Mrs. Mary Todd – (December 13, 1818 - July 16, 1882) was the First Lady of the United States from the years between 1861 and 1865. Her husband, Abraham Lincoln served as this country's sixteenth President.

Locke, Alain -- (September 13, 1896 - June 9, 1954) was an African American writer, philosopher, educator, and patron of the arts. He is best known for his writings on and about the **Harlem Renaissance**. Locke received his Ph.D. in philosophy in 1918, the first African American to earn a Ph.D. from Harvard University. Locke promoted African American artists, writers, and musicians, encouraging them to look to Africa as an inspiration for their works. He encouraged them to depict African and African American subjects, and to draw on their history for subject material. *The New Negro* a collection of writings by African Americans, which would become one of his best-known works.

Mande people -- The Mande peoples founded and managed one of the largest ancient West African empires. It was a vast region that incorporated coastal and savanna groups, stretching throughout Burkina Faso, Senegal, Gambia, Guinea, Sierra Leone, Liberia, Ivory Coast, and Ghana. The Mande are known for their music and their dexterity in fabric art, particularly in weaving rhythmic patterns in cloth. As a result of the transatlantic slave trade, many of these people ended up in the New World, their presence traceable through cultural, musical and textile customs particular to the region.

Manifest Destiny – a phrase that expressed that the belief that the United States had a mission to expand, spreading its form of democracy and freedom. Advocates of Manifest Destiny believed that expansion was not only good, but that it was obvious ("manifest") and certain ("destiny"). Originally a political catch phrase of the 19th Century, "Manifest Destiny" eventually became a standard historical term, often used as a synonym for the territorial expansion of the United States across North America towards the Pacific Ocean and an ideological excuse or pardon for the slaughter or forced relocation of vast numbers of indigenous peoples. The term fell out of usage by U.S. policy makers early in the 20th Century, but some commentators believe that aspects of Manifest Destiny, particularly the belief in an American "mission" to promote and defend democracy throughout the world, continued to have an influence on American political ideology.

McKay, Claude -- (September 15, 1889 – May 22, 1948) was a Jamaican writer, humanist and communist. He was part of the **Harlem Renaissance** and wrote three novels: *Home to Harlem* (1928), *Banjo* (1929), and *Banana Bottom* (1933). McKay also authored a collection of short stories, *Gingertown* (1932), and two autobiographical books, *A Long Way from Home* (1937) and *Harlem: Negro Metropolis* (1940). His book of poetry, *Harlem Shadows* (1922) was among the first books published during the Harlem Renaissance. His book of collected poems, *Selected Poems* (1953), was published posthumously.

Middle Passage – refers to the portion of the Atlantic Slave trade that transported enslaved people from Africa to markets in North and South America and the Caribbean. It was called the Middle Passage because the slave trade was a form of Triangular Trade; it left Europe for African markets, sailed to Africa where the goods were sold or traded for people in the African slave markets, then sailed to the Americas and Caribbean (West Indies) where the Africans were sold or traded for goods for European markets, and then returned to Europe. About 18 million Africans were transported from Africa with 3 million dying during the journey. Disease, abuse and starvation due to the length of the passage were the main contributors to the death toll.

Miscegenation -- is the mixing of different ethnicities or races, especially in marriage, cohabitation, or sexual relations. *Interracial marriage* or *interracial dating* may be more common in contemporary usage. While the English word has a history of ethnocentrism and racial superiority, the Spanish, Portuguese and French words, *mestizaje*, *miscigenação* and *métissage*, connote a positive ethno-cultural melting pot. It was outlawed in the United States until the landmark civil rights decision was enacted in 1967 by the US Supreme Court and declared Virginia's anti-miscegenation statute, the "The Racial Integrity Act of 1954", unconstitutional, thereby ending all race-based legal restriction on marriage in the United States.

Nathaniel (Nat) Turner -- (October 2, 1800 – November 11, 1831) was an American slave whose failed slave rebellion in Southampton County, Virginia, was the most remarkable instance of black resistance to enslavement in the antebellum Southern United States. His methodical slaughter of white civilians during the uprising make him a controversial figure, but he is still considered by many as a heroic figure of black resistance to oppression.

New World – describes the territory explored by the Europeans after Christopher Columbus landed ashore in the Caribbean. Thinking momentarily that he had discovered a new oceanic path to India, he declared that the people inhabiting this land were Indians. They were in fact, Native Americans, more than likely Taino and Carib peoples. Upon realizing that the land discovered was not India, the European explorers declared this vast stretch of land in the Western Hemisphere the “New World,” and set about exploring, claiming and cultivating the land.

Ontology (ontological) -- is the philosophical study of being or existence.

Orisha – are multi-dimensional beings who represent the forces of nature. They have attributes and stories similar to the stories and attributes used to describe the ancient Greek and Roman pantheons. To the followers of Santeria, however, the Orisha are not remote divinities; on the contrary, they are vibrant, living entities who take an active part in everyday life.

Passing -- refers to the ability of a person to be regarded as a member of a combination of sociological groups other than his or her own, such as a different race, ethnicity, social class, gender and/or disability status, generally with the purpose of gaining social acceptance. This may take the form of changing only one group from the person's own, such as a person dressing such as to pretend to be of a higher social class, or may take the form of simultaneously changing multiple groups. In the United States, some black people found it advantageous to let whites assume they were also white, thereby denying their family and history but gaining access to privileges reserved for whites only in a segregated society.

Paternalism – describes a system under which an authority presence decides to supply needs or regulate conduct of those under its control as individuals as well as in their relations to the authority and to each other. A paternalistic society is organized much in the way of a **patriarchal** family structure wherein the leaders are not only responsible but additionally control and mediate any interaction between other members of society.

Patriarchy – describes a society that is structured around the notion of men as breadwinners, leaders and representatives of the society. This kind of society is marked by the supremacy of the father in the clan or family and the legal dependence of wives and children. Additionally, a patriarchal model traces birth lineage back through the father's bloodlines, which often determines inheritance. In more broad terms, patriarchy describes the control by men of a disproportionately large share of power over the rest of society.

Plantation Slavery – the use of slave labor to promote the intentional planting of a crop, on a large-scale production or pasture. Crops may be called plantation crops because of their association with a specific type of farming economy. Most of these involve a large landowner, raising crops with economic value rather than for subsistence, with a number of employees carrying out the work. Often it referred to crops newly introduced to a region. In past times it has been associated with slavery, indentured labor, and other economic models of high inequity. However, arable and dairy farming are both usually (but not always) excluded from such definitions.

Prohibition – The enforced time period in the United States between 1920 and 1933 during which the sale, consumption or production of alcohol was illegal.

Santeria -- is a set of related religious systems that fuse Catholic/Christian beliefs with traditional Yoruba beliefs. In the Yoruba language, Lukumí means "friends" and also applies to descendants of Yorùbá slaves in Cuba, their music and dance, and the Cubanized dialect of the Yorùbá language.

Seasoning -- the forced acclimation of newly arrived slaves. The goals of seasoning were twofold: the first was to acclimate new slaves to their surroundings including basic language acquisition, lay of the land and laws to abide; the second goal was to break any rebellious spirit that would encourage newcomers to incite trouble amongst the senior populations. Seasoning was a brutal, confusing and critical feature of the slave system.

Segregation -- or "Jim Crow law" the enforced, at one time legal, separation of the races in the United States based on racial prejudice and assumptions of racial superiority that was contested largely in the public realm as it pertained to people of color accessing social services such as public transportation, public drinking fountains and bathrooms, schools, theaters and stores. Segregation also influenced miscegenation (interracial or interethnic marriage or dating) hiring practices, legal representation, voting practices, medical care and housing. Citizens, business owners, state and federal officials, terrorist mob groups and the KKK enforced segregation. The Civil Rights Movement spurred the US Supreme Court to declare segregation officially unconstitutional in 1954. Its retraction throughout the country proved both slow and very violent.

Testify -- a solemn attestation as to the truth of a matter. Within the context of black culture and spirituality it can connote truth-telling or preaching.

Theology (theological) – reasoned discourse concerning religion, spirituality and gods. Theologians attempt to use rational analysis and argument to discuss, interpret, and teach on any of a myriad of religious topics.

Underground Railroad – a network of clandestine routes by which African slaves in the 19th Century United States attempted to escape to free states, or as far north as Canada, with the aid of abolitionists. Other routes led to Mexico or overseas. It's estimated that at its height between 1810 and 1850, between 30,000 and 100,000 people escaped enslavement via the Underground Railroad, though U.S. Census figures only account for 6,000. The Underground Railroad has captured public imagination as a symbol of freedom, and figures prominently in Black American history.

Vodun – is a transliteration from the Fon language from Africa. Sometimes referred to as voodoo, or vodou, the religion of is practiced primarily in Haiti. Haitian Vodun (also known as Sèvis Gine or “African Service”) is a Creole religious form. Vodun has strong elements from the Bakongo of Central Africa and the Igbo and **Yoruba** of Nigeria, although many people or nations of Africa have representation in the liturgy of the Sèvis Gine.

Washington, Booker T. – (April 5, 1856 – November 14, 1915) was an influential educator, political leader and author working at the turn of the century. He was the founding principal of the Tuskegee Institute. He is perhaps most famous for his autobiography *Up From Slavery* and his 1895 address in Atlanta wherein he suggested that the best way for African Americans to participate within US society was to redirect efforts to end segregation in order to focus on education and developing a skilled labor force. His debates over this with **W.E.B. DuBois**, who considered Washington an apologist, are well-known.

Wolof Dynasty — the Wolof are an ethnic group found today in Senegal, Gambia and Mauritania. Wolof history probably dates to about the 12th or 13th century. Wolof forefathers migrated west to the coast from Mali following the defeat of the Empire of the Ghana in the 11th century. Oral family histories indicate that at least some of the first settlers in the area were of Fulbe origin. Much Wolof history has been preserved in oral praise songs which are recited by **griots** (“professional praise singers”). Portuguese traveler accounts from the 15th century indicate an organized Wolof presence in what is still their homelands. Europeans established a fort on Gorée Island off the coast of modern day Dakar, which served as one of the primary points of departure for slaving vessels bound for the Americas. Since European contact Wolof history has undergone numerous conquests and revolts as competing rulers challenged one another for kingship. Most Wolof are Muslim, and it was most often the case that Wolof leaders converted to Islam first, before the religion spread to the less powerful members of society. (For more information, please see: <http://www.uiowa.edu/~africart/toc/people/Wolof.html>)

Yoruba – a large ethno-linguistic group or ethnic nation in Africa; the majority of them speak the Yorùbá language. The Yoruba constitute approximately 30 percent of Nigeria’s total population, and around 40 million individuals throughout the region of West Africa. While the majority of the Yoruba live in southwestern Nigeria, there are also substantial indigenous Yoruba communities in Benin, Ghana and Togo, as well as large diasporic Yoruba communities in Sierra Leone, Brazil, Cuba, Puerto Rico and Trinidad, the Caribbean, and the United States.

Contemporary African American Quilting

The quilting tradition has remained an important part of African American culture and has a strong following today. Below are some of the more prominent examples of current quilting practices, exhibitions and quilting collectives. The wealth of material available at present is a testament to the important legacy African American textile artists have left behind.

You may check the footnotes for the URL to follow these descriptions to their original website addresses. *The copy presented below is excerpted directly from the respective websites and is included for informational purposes only.*

Penumbra Theatre Company's Quilting Circle Series

In 2007 Penumbra launched the Quilting Circle Series. Twenty women came together to create a unique quilt that is featured in this year's performance. This quilt tells many stories. Stitched into its fabric are the bonds of family, friendship, mentorship and spirituality. Quilting has long been an important tradition for African Americans. As we celebrate the twentieth anniversary of *Black Nativity*, we are thrilled to celebrate the start of a new holiday tradition!

Quilting Sisters: African-American Quilting in Michigan⁸⁴

This exhibition of fifteen quilts from the Michigan State University Museum's extensive textile collections represents the diversity of quilting traditions found within historical and contemporary African-American communities in Michigan. From very conservative to highly innovative styles, the quilts reflect these themes:

- 1) records of patterns of migration and settlement;
- 2) expressions or documents of ethnic identity;
- 3) quilters as artists/quilts as art;
- 4) documents of personal, family, and community history; and
- 5) quilting traditions. The inclusion of photographic portraits of individual quilters taken by Kalamazoo-based artist Mary Whalen and excerpts from taped interviews make this exhibition a truly enriching experience.

This exhibition has been displayed at Castellani Art Museum at Niagara University, Niagara University, NY; Ella Sharp Museum, Jackson, MI; Flint Institute of Art, Flint, Michigan; Kalamazoo Valley Museum, Kalamazoo, MI; Museum of African American History, Detroit, MI; Krasl Art Center, St. Joseph, MI; Port Huron Museum, Port Huron, MI. And is currently on display at Gallery 194, Lapeer Center for the Arts in Lapeer, Michigan through November 3, 2007.

⁸⁴ http://museum.cl.msu.edu/museum/tes/AfrAm_Quilts.htm

The Gee's Bend Collective⁸⁵

Gee's Bend is a small rural community nestled into a curve in the Alabama River southwest of Selma, Alabama. Founded in antebellum times, it was the site of cotton plantations, primarily the lands of Joseph Gee and his relative Mark Pettway, who bought the Gee estate in 1850. After the Civil War, the freed slaves took the name Pettway, became tenant farmers for the Pettway family, and founded an all-black community nearly isolated from the surrounding world. During the Great Depression, the federal government stepped in to purchase land and homes for the community, bringing strange renown — as an "Alabama Africa" — to this sleepy hamlet.

The town's women developed a distinctive, bold, and sophisticated quilting style based on traditional American (and African American) quilts, but with a geometric simplicity reminiscent of Amish quilts and modern art. The women of Gee's Bend passed their skills and aesthetic down through at least six generations to the present. In 2002, the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, in partnership with the nonprofit Tinwood Alliance, of Atlanta, presented an exhibition of seventy quilt masterpieces from the Bend. The exhibition, entitled "The Quilts of Gee's Bend," is accompanied by two companion books, *The Quilts of Gee's Bend*, and the larger *Gee's Bend: The Women and Their Quilts*, both published by Tinwood Media, as well as a documentary video on the Gee's Bend quilters and a double-CD of Gee's Bend gospel music from 1941 and 2002.

The "Quilts of Gee's Bend" exhibition has received tremendous international acclaim, beginning at its showing in Houston, then at the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York and the other museums on its twelve-city American tour. *Newsweek*, National Public Radio's *Talk of the Nation*, *Art in America*, *CBS News Sunday Morning*, PBS's *NewsHour with Jim Lehrer*, the *Martha Stewart Living* television show, *House and Garden*, Oprah's *O* magazine, and *Country Home* magazine are among the hundreds of print and broadcast media organizations that have celebrated the quilts and the history of this unique town. Art critics worldwide have compared the quilts to the works of important artists such as Henri Matisse and Paul Klee. The *New York Times* called the quilts "some of the most miraculous works of modern art America has produced." The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, is currently preparing a second major museum exhibition and tour of Gee's Bend quilts, to premiere in 2006.

In 2003, with assistance from the Tinwood organizations, all the living quilters of Gee's Bend — more than fifty women — founded the Gee's Bend Quilters Collective to serve as the exclusive means of selling and marketing the quilts being produced by the women of the Bend. The Collective is owned and operated by the women of Gee's Bend. Every quilt sold by the

⁸⁵ <http://www.quiltsofgeesbend.com/history/>

Gee's Bend Quilt Collective is unique, individually produced, and authentic — each quilt is signed by the quilter and labeled with a serial number. Rennie Young Miller of Gee's Bend is the Collective's president.

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An Annotated Reference List produced by The Smithsonian:

http://anacostia.si.edu/Online_Academy/Academy/classroom/docs/book_list.htm

Algotsson, Sharne. *African Style Down to the Details*. New York: Clarkson Potter, 2000.

A hands-on guide to home decorating using African and African-inspired arts and artifacts. The extensive resources sections makes it easy for readers to locate hard-to-find specialty stores and suppliers of textiles, furniture, and accessories.

Allen, Ana M. *The Beginner's Guide to Collecting Fine Art African American Style*. Washington, DC: Positiv!, 1998.

This guide is designed to teach the novice how to begin collecting African American art. It includes a bibliography, lists of museums and cultural centers, African American artists, and a glossary.

Barnwell, Andrea D. *The Walter O. Evans Collection of African American Art*. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1999.

Features a broad selection of works from this private collection. Eighty color plates illustrate the aesthetic legacy created by African American artists over more than 150 years.

Britton, Crystal A. *African-American Art: The Long Struggle*. New York: Smithmark, 1996.

An historical overview of African American art from the Colonial period the present day.

Driskell, David C. *The Other Side of Color: African American Art in the Collection of Camille O. & William H. Cosby Jr.* San Francisco: Pomegranate Communications, 2001.

The Cosby collection of African American art is one of the most highly respected in the world. The text by Professor Driskell explores the historical, biographical, social, and political background for the works included.

Freeman, Roland L. *A Communion of the Spirits: African-American Quilters, Preservers, and Their Stories*. Nashville: Rutledge Hill, 1996.

A national survey of African American quilt makers. It is also a personal record of how the author's life has intertwined with the world of quilt making for almost sixty years. This work covers 38 states and the District of Columbia.

Fry, Gladys-Marie. *Stitched from the Soul: Slave Quilts from the Ante-bellum South*. New York: Dutton Studio Books, 1990.

This indispensable work is written by one of the leading scholars on African American quilts.

Higgins, Chester, Jr. *Some Time Ago: A Historical Portrait of Black Americans, 1850-1950*. Garden City, NJ: Anchor Press, 1980.

Chronicles 100 years of the black experience in America. Some rare and beautiful documents depict the many roles blacks have had in shaping the national character and culture.

Mazloomi, Carolyn. *Spirits of the Cloth: Contemporary African American Quilts*. New York: Clarkson Potter, 1998.

Although the African American quilting tradition dates back to Colonial times, contemporary pieces are highly valued because of their astonishingly vibrant creativity. The book highlights 150 beautiful contemporary African American quilts.

Myers, Walter Dean. *One More River to Cross: An African American Photograph Album*. New York: Harcourt Brace, and Company, 1995.

Stunning photographs reflecting the diversity of African American life.

Patton, Sharon F. *African-American Art*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1998.

Explores significant issues such as the relationship between art and politics, the influence of galleries and museums, the growth of black universities, critical theory, the impact of artists' collectives, and an assortment of art movements since the 1960s.

Taha, Halima. *Collecting African American Art*. New York: Crown Publishers, 1998.

Provides practical guidelines for becoming an informed collector and includes specific criteria for working with dealers. This guide presents both new and established artists and defines the role of the collector of African American art.

Thompson, Kathleen and Hilary McAustin. *The Face of Our Past: Images of Black Women from Colonial American to the Present*. Bloomington: University of Indiana, 1999.

The images in this collection of drawings and photographs tell compelling stories of the struggles and triumphs of black women in America.

Wilson, Jackie Napoleon. *Hidden Witness: African-American Images from the Dawn of Photography to the Civil War*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999.

A comprehensive and significant collection of photographs of African Americans taken from 1840 until the Civil War.

Always There: The African American Presence in American Quilts⁸⁶

This section of the Smithsonian Encyclopedia offers an annotated bibliography of resource material for further research and inquiry, including books for young readers:

PUBLICATIONS

Benberry, Cuesta. *Always There: The African American Presence in American Quilts*. The Kentucky Quilt Project, Inc.: Louisville, 1992.

⁸⁶ http://www.si.edu/Encyclopedia_SI/nmah/always.htm

A selection of quilts and with chapters that include slave-made products, free blacks in antebellum America, late nineteenth century, and contemporary quilts.

Callahan, Nancy. *The Freedom Quilting Bee*. University of Alabama Press: Tuscaloosa, 1987.

The story of patchwork quilts created by African Americans and sold through a cooperative in Wilson County, Alabama.

Ferris, William. *Afro-American Folk Art and Crafts*. University Press of Mississippi: Jackson, 1983.

Features a variety of crafts with a section devoted to quilters.

Fry, Gladys-Marie. *Stitched from the Soul: Slave Quilts from the Ante-Bellum South*. University of North Carolina Press, 2002.

A thoroughly researched and richly illustrated treatment of slave quilts as cultural icons, with chapters on the enslaved seamstress, production areas, and quilting party.

Grudin, Eva Ungar. *Stitching Memories: African American Story Quilts*. Williams College Museum of Art: Williamstown, Massachusetts, 1989.

A collection of mostly contemporary quilts that show how African American artists have expressed personal stories, history, religious ideas, and whimsical images.

Leon, Eli. *Models in the Mind: African Prototypes in American Patchwork*. Winston-Salem State University: Winston-Salem, 1992.

Draws parallels between African fabric motifs and designs found in African American patchwork quilts.

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A selection of pieced and stripped contemporary quilts by African Americans.

Picton, John and Mack, John. *African Textiles*. Harper and Row, Publishers: New York, 1989.

A richly illustrated publication on traditional African textiles, including beaten bark cloths and woven cloths and raphia.

YOUTH TITLES

Flournoy, Valerie. *The Patchwork Quilt*. Dial Books for Young Readers: New York, 1985.

Tanya and her family use scraps of materials from their clothes to finish a quilt that her sick grandmother has started. For third grade and above.

Hopkinson, Deborah. *Sweet Clara and the Freedom Quilt*. Alfred A. Knopf: New York, 1993.

Twelve-year-old Clara becomes a seamstress in the "big house" and makes a quilt that serves as a map to freedom for slaves. For third grade and above.