



ARTS DAY

CULTURAL RESOURCES

Sunday, June 29, 2008

Bernice Johnson Reagon, Lectionary Team Cultural Resource Commentator

I. African American Art: Toward a Working Definition

Exodus 35:35

He has filled them with skill to do all kinds of work as craftsmen, designers, embroiderers in blue, purple and scarlet yarn and fine linen, and weavers—all of them master craftsmen and designers.

The Exodus passage describes work as art and art as work; the line between making the things we need to survive—shelter, food, clothing, community—and creating an environment of beauty, with wonder and transcendence being indistinguishable.

Art Historian Samella Lewis wrote in her Introduction to [Black Artists on Art: Volume I](#):

Black art as we have come to understand it was introduced in the United States with the landing of the first group of Black people on these shores. With the passing of time, numerous Black artists shifted to narrower categories of painting, sculpture, architecture, crafts or design. However, the majority of artists within Black communities have held to the principal purpose of Black art, which is the celebration of people's experiences. These celebrations are reflected in a combination of styles both visual and audio—styles that developed out of a unique awareness of Black life.¹

The brilliant and emotionally moving graphic artist, the late Tom Feelings, in talking about work as art stated:

Within African traditional creative expressions, great value is placed on the beauty and quality of a creative outpouring: be it dance, song, oratory, carved statues, a home, or the way one moves through space. The aesthetic is never separated from what it does to and for the creator and those who behold or partake in the phenomena. In fact, the creation of a celebration, the naming of a child, harvest festival, honoring the dead, a feast, carvings that grace the doorway of a home, jewelry, the way in which the hair is prepared... all of these outpourings are noted and highly regarded. Without them life would be a collective depression. Beauty is greatly valued, skill is honored and sought after—but nothing is higher or lower than what happens when an expression is used to express life or alter life or transform what is to what can be.²

In most African languages there is no word for “Art.” Art is not separate from function, and as a result is interwoven with the lives of African people in an intimate and meaningful way. In an interview, Baule artist Nuessan explains to Susan Vogel:

We live with art in the sense that statues are kept in our houses, but we don't do it in the way they do in America. We live with the spirits more than with the statues. . . you will never hear a Baule say, “This is beautiful,” because that is not what they are looking for in the statue or the mask. Even though it is beautiful, we are aware that Baule art is beautiful, but the aspect that interests us the most is the spiritual, religious side.³

The African American cultural tradition provides us with rich examples of art as form and what some call, “art as life.” In fact, we are one of the most powerful examples of a world people defined by the way we express ourselves as being fully alive. Our journey within the cauterizing fires of the United States of America has found us taking on the mantle of transformative artist—calling upon our innovative and ancestry spirit to transform a system which has been engineered to remove opportunities for personal and political expression and growth from us.

The emergence through our art of our political, personal, and communal selves, even as we struggle to exist, proves we are not ground in the dust, and **we move through**

adversity charging our journey with creative genius and beauty. We are the twinkling stars of American culture.

We take and own the stage, the film, the dance hall, the concert hall. We sit in our seats and applaud and support those who are the defining lights of their chosen forms of expressions. But we also pull back the rug and express ourselves with our own public and private stomp down. We walk into the house and put on Aretha, or Richard Smallwood, or as soon as we get into the car, we put on our favorite, and begin and end the day drenched in music of our own making, out-singing the singer.

The reason I sing this song, I don't want to be lost
The reason I sing this song, I don't wanna be lost
The reason I sing this song, I don't wanna be lost
I don't wanna be lost, in the storm ⁴

II. The Church As a Place of Art And Artists

Have you ever noticed in the black church how the choir enters the sanctuary when in new robes? The women look regal, their hair and makeup having been done to perfection. The men are stately, well groomed and standing tall. The entire choir moves elegantly to their places, in keeping with the moment at hand. This is true of our people at any special event. Whenever we have the opportunity we express ourselves as artists in the way we dress, in the way we move our bodies, in the way we prepare our food, in the way we create our spring gardens. If, there is a way to signature our efforts with a unique stamp we do not miss an opportunity. It is a way of saying that to be collectively black is to have room for individual signatures within the collective chorus.

Arts Sunday gives us the opportunity to think about why life is better if we salute it by expressing ourselves and our spaces with creative wonder. Historically, the black church's function as a opening to the power of spirit, has also always served its members by seeking ways to transform the day to day lives of her people, and for laying the foundation for a future that will be better. Here, within this spirit based community, we had our first experiences with collective property ownership and functional leadership structures. Our doors were opened to those would come and join in creating communal offerings to the God of our understanding. People who came to church open to receive, were taught that the creation of services whose function was transformation of spirit and energy was dependent on what the members put into the pot.

Calling the congregation to their highest ground is the role of those assigned to sing, preach, and dance. They, together with the congregation, take part in the creation of a temporal sanctuary. This is the place where the preacher reaches the highest heights, and when we in the pews, join the sermon by making echoes; and where those who go down in vocal prayer are covered with moans creating a private space in public witness and testimony. When these services are good, we leave filled with wonder at that which we have wrought and we step more ready to face and move through the next day of challenge and struggle.

III. W.E.B. Du Bois And Black People as Artists

When W.E.B. Du Bois wrote, “the Negro is primarily an artist,”⁵ he was not writing about those of us who have studied under the masters and were moved to perform as professional artists. He was talking about a people whose primary cultural marking is our creative, transformative, unending capacity to express everything we do with a unique signature. It is almost as if we say the way you know I am alive is by my sound, or by the feast of the visual I offer when I move into sight.

About the source of our sacred song tradition Du Bois wrote, “the Negro folk song entered the church and became the prayer song and sorrow song.”⁶ In his final essay in Souls of Black Folk, Du Bois wrote about the power, beauty, and essentiality of our offerings to this society, and defines our song and singing as nurturance for souls engaged in a torturous journey. “They that walked in darkness sang songs in the olden days—sorrow songs—for they were weary at heart.”⁷

Du Bois also balances our duality—our double consciousness—by which we keep our spirit in tact despite living in a system that shuts us out of its social class and is stratified. In The Gift of Black Folk: The Negroes in the Making of America, he makes inseparable, in the section on gifts, the creative outpourings of song and story with the sheer and massive effort of building the foundation of this nation; and charges it with the Spirit that calls upon this nation to do better – to come up higher.

The double consciousness Du Bois refers to allows us to keep perspective on our collective history. Our art and song give us information about our true and actual experiences and history in America. They help us create questions about the truth of the beginnings of the United State’s of America.

“Your country? How came it to be yours? Before the Pilgrims landed we were here. We brought our three gifts and mingled them with yours: a gift of story and song—soft, stirring melody in an ill-harmonized and unmelodious land; the gift of sweat and brawn to beat back the wilderness, conquer the soil, and lay the foundations of this vast economic empire two hundred years earlier than your weak hands could have done it; the third, a gift of the Spirit. Around us the history of this land has centered for thrice a hundred years; out of the nation’s heart we have culled all that was best, and throttled and subdued all that was worst; fire and blood, prayer and sacrifice, have billowed over this people, and they have found peace only in the altars of the God of Right. Nor has our gift of Spirit been merely passive. Actively we have woven ourselves with the very warp and woof of this nation--we fought their battles, shared their sorrow, mingled our blood with theirs, and generation after generation have pleaded with a headstrong, careless people to despise not Justice, Mercy, and Truth, lest the nation be smitten with a curse. Our song, our toil, our cheer, and warning have been given to this nation in blood brotherhood. Are not these gifts worth the giving? Is not this

work and striving? Would America have been America without her Negro people?”⁸

IV. Taking Art to the People

A. Langston Hughes took his poetry on tour

In his Autobiography, I Wonder as I Wander, poet and writer Langston Hughes wrote of losing his patronage and being persuaded by Mary McLeod Bethune to take his poetry to his people throughout the South. Hughes describes writing all black colleges and organizations he could get contact information for and saying he would present an evening of poems for a fee of 100.00. If they could not pay that, he offered to do it for 50.00 and then 25.00 and expenses and then for no fee but the opportunity to share culture and offer his books for sale. In that way he booked his first tour of the south.

“No matter how small a dot on the map a town was, we did not scorn it, and my audiences ranged all the way from college students to cotton pickers, from kindergarten children to the inmates of old folks homes.” Hughes even got admission to the Scottsboro jail and read his poems to the young men jailed in Scottsboro.⁹

B. For five years during the 20s, Paul Robeson only sang spiritual.

Robeson was concerned with wanting his people and his audiences to know how unique, how classic, how elegant were these songs created out of the struggle for survival and transformation by African Americans.

Yes, I heard my people singing! In the glow of parlor coal stove and on summer porches sweet with lilac air, from choir loft and Sunday morning pews—and my soul was filled with their harmonies. Then too, I heard these songs in the very sermons of my father, for in the Negro’s speech here is much of the phrasing and rhythms of folk-song. The great soaring gospels we love are merely sermons that are sung; and as we thrill to such gifted gospel singers as Mahalia Jackson, we hear the rhythmic eloquence of our preachers, so many of whom, like my father, are masters of poetic speech.¹⁰

The Negro spirituals have the same value as other folk songs, and there are many excellent melodies amongst them. But they are also an expression of the yearnings of a people to be free from bondage.... These songs are to Negro culture what the works of the great poets are to English culture: they are the soul of the race made manifest.¹¹

Singing with the sword in my hand
Singing with the sword in my hand
Singing with the sword in my hand
Singing with the sword in my hand¹²

NOTES

*Langston Hughes, “The Negro Speaks of Rivers” from *The Voice of Langston Hughes*, SFW47001. Used by permission of Harold Ober Associates and Smithsonian Folkways Recordings. © 1995. Provided courtesy of Smithsonian Folkways Recordings (www.folkways.si.edu).

1. Lewis, Samella S., and Ruth G. Waddy. Black Artists on Art. Los Angeles, CA: Contemporary Crafts, 1976.
2. Tom Feelings. us.penguingroup.com (At home page, enter Tom Feelings in search box.)
3. Vogel, Susan Mullin. Baule: African Art, Western Eyes. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1997.
4. “I Don’t Want to Be Lost.” Traditional Freedom Song
5. Du Bois, W.E.B. The Gift of Black Folk: The Negroes in the Making of America. 1924. New York, NY: Washington Square Press, 1970. p. 158.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 156.
7. Du Bois, W.E.B. The Souls of Black Folk. 1903. New York, NY: Knopf, 1993. p. 197; online location: www.bartleby.com/114/ accessed 3 April 2008
8. *Ibid.*, pp. 206-7.
9. Hughes, Langston, Hugh H. Smythe, and Mabel M. Smythe. I Wonder As I Wander: An Autobiographical Journey. New York, NY: Rinehart, 1956.
10. Robeson, Paul. Here I Stand. 1958. Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1988. p. 15.
11. Foner, Philip, S. and Paul Robeson. Paul Robeson Speaks: Writings, Speeches, Interviews, 1918-1974. Secaucus, NJ: Citadel Press, 1978. p. 79.
12. “Singing With A Sword In My Hand.” African American Spiritual