

CULTURAL RESOURCES

FATHER'S DAY

Sunday, June 20, 2010

Juan M. Floyd-Thomas, African American Lectionary Team Cultural Resource Commentator

Simply put, it is more commonplace and reasonable to imagine a world where Black fathers do not exist both literally and figuratively!

I. History Lesson

Prior to Father's Day weekend in 2009, President Obama gave remarks at a White House Town Hall meeting on the topic of fatherhood. A reading of Obama's biography suggests that his great passion about the importance of fathers was forged by his lifelong challenges to fill the hole left by his own father's absence. A picture of President Obama as a child being warmly embraced by his namesake Kenyan father in the Honolulu airport was taken on that brief visit during the Christmas holiday of 1971. Dressed in a dark suit and red tie, Barack H. Obama, Sr. is depicted smiling with his arm around his young son's left shoulder. Barry, as the President was then known, has a radiant smile beaming across his rather chubby baby face, but he is not looking away: looking straight at the camera, the son is fully engaged in the moment of meeting his biological father for the first time. His arms crossed, Barry is holding on tightly, pressing his father's large hand to his heart. He looks as though he wished that moment would last forever. Sadly, he never saw his father again.

Deprived of a father's presence and love, Obama chose to build his own universe, an invisible center where the failings and flightiness of others could do him the least harm. Obama himself acknowledges the centrality of the statement: "A man's either trying to live up to his father's expectations or make up for his father's mistakes." Obama often adds: "In my case, both things might be true." However, unlike his father, President Obama found a way to be comfortable in his own skin, reconciling his biracial ancestry while being raised largely by his white grandparents. Lacking a father, he was forced to figure things out for himself, and like too many black children in this country, the President was forced to chart his own path in a world he could barely understand.

The story of Barack H. Obama, Sr.'s absence from the President's childhood is one story representative of a deep rupture within African American culture; a crisis that literary scholar Hortense Spillers refers to as "a cultural situation that is father-lacking."¹ In a fuller explanation of this phenomenon, Sharon Patricia Holland argues that this dilemma of "father-lacking" has become a "founding and necessary condition/experience of what it means to be black ... While the condition of the community to reiterate this lack as loss in

a process of mourning that requires no dead body, per se, but merely the idea of one looming and therefore returning in the not so distant future."² This predicament is so deeply ingrained within our cultural mindset and collective memory that, as cultural critic Mark Anthony Neal suggests, there have been a pathetically tiny number of realistic and/or redemptive representations of black fatherhood in the history of commercial broadcast television.³ To make matters worse, a majority of Americans—including blacks—actually have internalized this "father-lacking" as a normal if not altogether natural feature of the contemporary black experience. Simply put, it is more commonplace and reasonable to imagine a world where black fathers do not exist both literally and figuratively!

Confronting this problem within the African American community transcends political partisanship. For instance, in a recent interview, Gen. Colin Powell, a moderate black republican who became the first African American man to serve as US Secretary of State, argues:

Every child has a father, and some of those fathers don't want to live up to the responsibility of being a father. Whether it's a father in a marriage or a father in a good home, that father is a father and owes that child financial support, owes that child companionship, owes that child an example in life.

Those of us who have been blessed with some success ... can look back and see family members who kept you in play. If it hadn't been for my relatives and my parents and my cousins and my priest and all the other people in my neighborhood, I wouldn't have made it. But they had a level of expectation for me.⁴

Although President Obama and General Powell probably part ways on various matters of public policy, they both see the severity of the "father-lacking" crisis within the black community as a formula for failure, especially as black boys attempt to grow into manhood in this era devoid of black male role models/father figures.

II. Songs that Speak to the Moment

“He Say She Say” by Lupe Fiasco, featuring Gemini and Sarah Green, is an intensely thoughtful and poignant meditation that deals with the story of a young boy growing up without a father in his life. The narrative is ingenious because it evokes the perspective of both the mother and son as they recount the devastating effects that the absence of loving, caring father-figure has had in life of the child. During an era where his hip-hop has been defined too much by gratuitous sex, rampant violence, and relentless materialism, Lupe Fiasco’s sensitive lyrics demonstrate the provocative power and prophetic artistry of hip hop as an art form.

He Say She Say

I can't, I won't, I can't, I won't
Let you leave

I don't know what you want
You want more from me?

She said to him
"I want you to be a father
He's your little boy and you don't even bother
Like 'brother' without the R
And he's starting to harbor
Cool and food for thought
But for you he's a starver
Starting to use red markers on his work
His teacher say they know he's much smarter
But he's hurt
Used to hand his homework in first
Like he was the classroom starter
Burst to tears
Let them know she see us
Now he's fighting in class
Got a note last week that say he might not pass
Ask me if his daddy was sick of us
Cause you ain't never pick him up
You see what his problem is?
He don't know where his poppa is
No positive male role model
To play football and build railroad models
It's making a hole you've been digging it
Cause you ain't been kicking it
Since he was old enough to hold bottles
Wasn't supposed to get introduced to that
He don't deserve to get used to that
Now I ain't asking you for money or to come back to me
Some days it ain't sunny but it ain't so hard
Just breaks my heart
When I try to provide and he say 'Mommy that ain't your job'
To be a man, I try to make him understand
That I'm his number one fan
But its like he born from the stands
You know the world is out to get him, so why don't you give him a chance?"

So he said to him
"I want you to be a father
I'm your little boy and you don't even bother
Like 'brother' without the R
And I'm starting to harbor
Cool and food for thought
But for you I'm a starver

Starting to use red markers on my work
My teacher say they know I'm much smarter
But I'm hurt
I used to hand my homework in first
Like I was the classroom starter
to burst to tears
Let them know he sees us

Now I'm fighting in class
Got a note last week that say I might not pass
Kids ask me if my daddy is sick of us
Cause you ain't never pick me up

You see what my problem is?
That I don't know where my poppa is
No positive male role model
To play football and build railroad models
It's making a hole you've been digging it
Cause you ain't been kicking it
Since I was old enough to hold bottles
Wasn't supposed to get introduced to that
I don't deserve to get used to that

Now I ain't asking you for money or to come back to me
Some days it ain't sunny but it ain't so hard
Just breaks my heart
When my momma try to provide and I tell her "That ain't your job"
To be a man, she try to make me understand
That she my number one fan
But it's like you born from the stands
You know the world is out to get me, why don't you give me a chance?"⁵

Our second Father's Day song is "I'll Stand By You" made famous by the Pretenders. When posited as a message from a father to his children, the song becomes an anthem that places fathers in the role of one who is guardian of his children no matter their age, dad is always there to "Stand by you."

I'll Stand By You

Oh, why you look so sad?
Tears are in your eyes
Come on and come to me now

Don't be ashamed to cry
Let me see you through
'cause I've seen the dark side too
When the night falls on you

You don't know what to do
Nothing you confess
Could make love you less

I'll stand by you
I'll stand by you
Won't let nobody hurt you
I'll stand by you

So if you're mad, get mad
Don't hold it all inside
Come on and talk to me now
Hey, what you got to hide?
I get angry too
Well I'm a lot like you
When you're standing at the crossroads
And don't know which path to choose
Let me come along
'cause even if you're wrong

I'll stand by you
I'll stand by you
Won't let nobody hurt you
I'll stand by you
Take me in, into your darkest hour
And I'll never desert you
I'll stand by you

And when...
When the night falls on you, baby
You're feeling all alone
You won't be on your own

CHORUS⁶

III. Cultural Response to Significant Aspects of the Text(s)

Historical Lesson

On January 18, 2009—two days prior to President Obama's historic inauguration— a letter he had written to his daughters, Malia and Sasha, was published by *PARADE* magazine. The publication of this touching letter from the nation's first African American president to his young children subsequently garnered great attention both nationally and internationally. In the letter, he not only expresses his deep affection for his daughters but also shares with them his profound hopes and dreams for them and all children. This document, shared in its entirety below, also demonstrates the depth and complexity that is

possible for black men who are willing to step out on faith by stepping up to challenge of fatherhood by focusing not only on his family but also improving the world for other families as well.

Dear Malia and Sasha,

I know that you've both had a lot of fun these last two years on the campaign trail, going to picnics and parades and state fairs, eating all sorts of junk food your mother and I probably shouldn't have let you have. But I also know that it hasn't always been easy for you and Mom, and that as excited as you both are about that new puppy, it doesn't make up for all the time we've been apart. I know how much I've missed these past two years, and today I want to tell you a little more about why I decided to take our family on this journey.

When I was a young man, I thought life was all about me—about how I'd make my way in the world, become successful, and get the things I want. But then the two of you came into my world with all your curiosity and mischief and those smiles that never fail to fill my heart and light up my day. And suddenly, all my big plans for myself didn't seem so important anymore. I soon found that the greatest joy in my life was the joy I saw in yours. And I realized that my own life wouldn't count for much unless I was able to ensure that you had every opportunity for happiness and fulfillment in yours. In the end, girls, that's why I ran for President: because of what I want for you and for every child in this nation.

I want all our children to go to schools worthy of their potential—schools that challenge them, inspire them, and instill in them a sense of wonder about the world around them. I want them to have the chance to go to college—even if their parents aren't rich. And I want them to get good jobs: jobs that pay well and give them benefits like health care, jobs that let them spend time with their own kids and retire with dignity.

I want us to push the boundaries of discovery so that you'll live to see new technologies and inventions that improve our lives and make our planet cleaner and safer. And I want us to push our own human boundaries to reach beyond the divides of race and region, gender and religion that keep us from seeing the best in each other.

Sometimes we have to send our young men and women into war and other dangerous situations to protect our country—but when we do, I want to make sure that it is only for a very good reason, that we try our best to settle our differences with others peacefully, and that we do everything possible to keep our servicemen and women safe. And I want every child to understand that the blessings these brave Americans fight for are not free—that with the great privilege of being a citizen of this nation comes great responsibility.

That was the lesson your grandmother tried to teach me when I was your age,

reading me the opening lines of the Declaration of Independence and telling me about the men and women who marched for equality because they believed those words put to paper two centuries ago should mean something.

She helped me understand that America is great not because it is perfect but because it can always be made better—and that the unfinished work of perfecting our union falls to each of us. It's a charge we pass on to our children, coming closer with each new generation to what we know America should be.

I hope both of you will take up that work, righting the wrongs that you see and working to give others the chances you've had. Not just because you have an obligation to give something back to this country that has given our family so much—although you do have that obligation. But because you have an obligation to yourself. Because it is only when you hitch your wagon to something larger than yourself that you will realize your true potential.

These are the things I want for you—to grow up in a world with no limits on your dreams and no achievements beyond your reach, and to grow into compassionate, committed women who will help build that world. And I want every child to have the same chances to learn and dream and grow and thrive that you girls have. That's why I've taken our family on this great adventure.

I am so proud of both of you. I love you more than you can ever know. And I am grateful every day for your patience, poise, grace, and humor as we prepare to start our new life together in the White House.

*Love,
Dad [President Barack H. Obama]⁷*

IV. Books to enhance your understanding of Father's Day

Obama, Barack. Dreams from My Father: A Story of Race and Inheritance. New York, NY: Three Rivers Press, 2004.

Neal, Mark Anthony. New Black Man. New York, NY: Routledge, 2006.

Powell, Kevin. The Black Male Handbook: A Blueprint for Life. New York, NY: Atria Books, 2008.

Notes

1. Spillers, Hortense. "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book." African American Literary Theory: A Reader. Ed. Winston Napier. New York, NY: NYU Press, 2000. p. 277.
2. Holland, Sharon Patricia. "Bill T. Jones, Tupac Shakur and the (Queer) Art of Death." Callaloo. 23.1 (2000): 387.

3. Neal, Mark Anthony. Soul Babies: Black Popular Culture and the Post-Soul Aesthetic. New York, NY: Routledge, 2000. pp. 57-98.
4. Powell, Colin. Interview. "Colin Powell on African-American fathers, volunteering." Don Lemon for Essence. CNN. 3 Nov. 2009. Online location: <http://www.cnn.com/2009/LIVING/11/02/black.men.colin.powell/index.html>. accessed 9 January 2010
5. "He Say She Say" Lyrics by Lupe Fiasco. Online location: <http://www.azlyrics.com/lyrics/lupefiasco/hesayshesay.html> accessed 9 January 2010
6. "I'll Stand By You." Lyrics by The Pretenders (Chrissie Hynde, Tom Kelly, and Billy Steinberg) Online location: http://www.lyricsfreak.com/p/pretenders/ill+stand+by+you_20110661.html accessed 9 January 2010
7. Obama, Barack H. "What I Want for You — and Every Child in America." Parade. 18 Jan. 2009. Online location: <http://www.parade.com/news/2009/01/barack-obama-letter-to-my-daughters.html> accessed 9 January 2010