

Looking Back on When

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Cincinnati, Ohio 45219
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Reading

“Nihilism is not new in black America. The first African encounter with the New World was an encounter with a distinctive form of the Absurd. The initial black struggle against degradation and devaluation in the enslaved circumstances of the New World was, in part, a struggle against nihilism. In fact, the major enemy of black survival in America has been and is neither oppression nor exploitation but rather the nihilistic threat - that is, loss of hope and absence of meaning . . . The genius of our black foremothers and forefathers was to create powerful buffers to ward off the nihilistic threat, to equip black folk with cultural armor to beat back the demons of hopelessness, meaninglessness, and lovelessness. These buffers consisted of cultural structures of meaning and feeling that created and sustained communities; this armor constituted ways of life and struggle that embodied values of service and sacrifice, love and care, discipline and excellence . . . If cultures are, in part, what human beings create . . . in order to convince themselves not to commit suicide, then black foremothers and black forefathers are to be applauded.”

-Cornel West, *Race Matters*

Reading

“The difficult and delicate quest for black identity is integral to any talk about racial equality. Yet it is not solely a political or economic matter. The quest for black identity involves self-respect and self-regard, realms inseparable from, yet not identical to, political power and economic status . . . For our part [we], must take seriously the quest for self-respect, even as we train our eye on the institutional causes for black social misery. The issues of black identity - both black self-love and self-contempt - sit alongside black poverty as realities to confront and transform. The uncritical acceptance of self-degrading ideals that call into question black intelligence, possibility, and beauty not only compounds black social misery but also paralyzes black middle-class efforts.”

-Cornel West, *Race Matters*

Sermon

So often a sermon on black American achievement and sacrifice focuses on slavery, Jim Crow, Civil Rights, and affirmative action - the political and economic story of black Americans and American history. Yet I am often left with the sense that because this American story of ours is so compelling, so tragic, and monumental, it overshadows a quieter, but equally important story, the story of black community and black identity, the cultural armor that Cornel West so eloquently describes. The Cincinnati Art Museum's on-going exhibit "African American Masters: Highlights from the Smithsonian American Art Museum" creates a wonderful balance by focusing on elements of community life that enable the viewer to weight, consider, to understand the interplay of black American community, family, politics and economics.

In a chapter of *Race Matters* entitled "The Crisis of Black Leadership," Cornel West writes "Quality leadership is neither the product of one great individual nor the result of odd historical accidents. Rather, it comes from deeply bred traditions and communities that shape and mold talented and gifted persons."¹ This brief Smithsonian exhibit (it's only two rooms) offers snapshots of black American life. Subject matter varies, the artists tell different stories, yet somehow they are connected with the theme of community life and the communal and personal struggle for black identity, love, and self-respect.

Several weeks ago our Music Director, Kenny Smith, and I attended the exhibit together. I didn't really know what to expect from the exhibit, but I had the idea that if we went together we could talk about the exhibit,

¹Cornel West, *Race Matters*, 56.

learn from one another, and see if there was enough material for a service. It was really a delightful experience for me, and I think for Kenny as well. It's a gem of an exhibit, strong, colorful, unique, thought provoking, moving, and it tells stories, so many, wonderful, whole stories.

I considered entitling this sermon "Hatitude: A Celebration of Black Community and Identity." Let me explain. The one of the first paintings that Kenny and I discussed is a 1949 piece by James Porter entitled "Still Life with Peonies." I didn't notice this painting. It didn't come forward to me. It is essentially a large painting of peonies sitting on a table. I was interested to later read that Porter insisted that black artists should not intentionally do art differently from white artists because this would be a form of segregation. For me, he was largely successful. It looks like the average 1950 painting to me. But Kenny saw something different.

In the bottom right corner of the painting there is what looks like a high fashion portrait of a woman wearing a hat. Kenny immediately said, "Oh, I love the hat. It reminds me of my mother." This was so interesting to me, not only because I learned that Kenny's mother has over 100 hats, most of which she has hand made, but because whether Porter wanted this or not, a white and black viewer saw his painting differently. I think the difference says a lot about the black community that Kenny knows, but of which I am less aware. So Kenny and I immediately had a long discussion about hats. He educated me.

He explained to me that in most black churches black women wear hats. I knew this from attending services at various black churches, but although I knew this, I didn't know what it meant. I hadn't looked closely enough, paid attention. Yeah, I'd seen the hats, saw they were big and beautiful, but I didn't get the statement. Kenny explained to me that the New Testament says that women should cover their heads (which I also knew), but

hatitude goes far beyond scripture. Kenny said to me "They call them crowns. Hatitude is the attitude with the hat on, your self confidence, your self-esteem." I love the meaning of the hat. It is practical, creative, expressive, woman centered. I think the Cincinnati Art Museum should offer an exhibit on Hatitude.

As Cornel West writes

"The genius of our black foremothers and forefathers was to create powerful buffers [religious institutions] to ward off the nihilistic threat, to equip black folk with cultural armor [the hat] to beat back the demons of hopelessness, meaninglessness, and lovelessness. These buffers consisted of cultural structures of meaning and feeling that created and sustained communities; this armor constituted ways of life and struggle that embodied values of service and sacrifice, love and care, discipline and excellence."²

Church is also a buffer where generations of black Americans found and still find self-respect, education, music, love, purpose, and beauty. So often religion has been the spoke of the black community. Both Martin Luther King, Jr. and Malcolm X came out of the black American religious experience, Christianity and the Nation of Islam. So you see, a painting of peonies tells a big story. And this was not the only painting with hatitude.

There is a wonderful untitled 1992 photograph by Jules Allen, which depicts a line of black men in suits, sunglasses, and hats standing on a street corner. They are the men of the Nation of Islam. Well I remember them. They looked just like this standing on Mass Avenue in Boston. Allen noted that he hoped this photo challenges

² West, 23-24.

our idea of threat, with a community of belief. He is also quoted saying of the photograph "No one ever chooses the wrong hat." Although they have a checkered past, there is so much about the Nation of Islam that embraces the ideas of identity and community. If you are who you are, you can't choose the wrong hat.

My other favorite photograph is by the well-known Harlem photographer James VanDerZee. It was taken in 1932 and is entitled "Frances Williams at Home after Being Installed as Head of the Manhattan Temple Bible College." I love this photograph. Ms. Williams is dressed in white. She looks up to a birdcage (interesting). Her living room is filled with flowers and gifts. This is the height of the Depression and Ms. Williams is giving it all she's got. She's telling a story of hope, and personal and communal success. Ms. Williams has had a great day. I look at the photo and I feel like shouting "Say It Loud. I'm Black and I'm Proud." It was her great day and it is our great day too.

The novelist Ralph Ellison wrote, "Whatever else the true American is, he is also somehow black." I also loved this exhibit because it affirms for me that the black experience is the American experience. I can be proud for Ms. Williams, no matter what her color, or my own. It also says to me that the black experience in America is more than the African American experience.

I don't notice it so much in Cincinnati, but in a city with more immigrants it is obvious that black America is changing. In Boston my husband was a friend with a black man from Haiti who spoke patois, French, and English. In my hospital chaplaincy unit I met a woman from Puerto Rico. She was black and her first language was Spanish. Her sister, from the same parents, is almost as light skinned as I am. Because of the legacy of slavery, our friends can ultimately trace their roots back to Africa, which is part of the reason we included African music in

our service today. Yet so many black Americans trace their more immediate story to Haiti or Puerto Rico or the Dominican Republic or Brazil, and they speak French, Spanish, and Portuguese.

Other black Americans consider themselves biracial. For example, Tiger Woods, whose mother is Thai, and his father is a black American. There are other people with a different mix (not all of them "black"), and I believe that everyone has the right to self-identify their race whether it fits on a census form or not. The black story in America is one that encompasses a very large and diverse community, that because of the burden of racial prejudice that we all share, struggles with identity, respect, and beauty.

The Smithsonian exhibit includes a mask by Sargent Johnson. The mask is both immediate and timeless. It could be a black American. It could be an African. Johnson writes of his work that he wanted to "show natural beauty and dignity in that characteristic lip, and hair, bearing, and manner . . . to show that beauty not so much to the White man as to the Negro himself." The words of Johnson remind me of Cornel West

"The difficult and delicate quest for black identity is integral to any talk about racial equality. Yet it is not solely a political or economic matter. The quest for black identity involves self-respect and self-regard, realms inseparable from, yet not identical to, political power and economic status . . . The issues of black identity - both black self-love and self-contempt - sit alongside black poverty as realities to confront and transform. The uncritical acceptance of self-degrading ideals that call into question black intelligence, possibility, and beauty not only compounds black social misery but also

paralyzes black middle-class efforts to defend broad redistributive measures.”³

In a healthy and whole America we would all see beauty in that characteristic lip, hair, bearing, and manner of black Americans.

At the entrance to the exhibit hangs a 1937 painting by Palmer Hayden, entitled "The Janitor Who Paints." It is a painting of a man painting a woman and child. The man is dressed in simple clothes. The woman is carefully attired in a white and red checked dress and she holds a baby in swaddling clothes. The characters are large and their eyes stare out and draw the viewer into their world, that of a small, spare room. Kenny loved this painting. Our member, Lucille Blocksom, a museum docent who gave me a tour of the exhibit, told me that children also love this painting.

Hayden created this painting to honor his friend, Cloyde Boykin, who is the artist in the painting. Hayden said he created this painting of his friend "because no one called him a painter, they called him a janitor." I was moved by the significance that Hayden saw in the work of his friend. Boykin did not need to be famous, to paint in an opulent studio to be a worthy subject. Instead Hayden honored him as he worked, in the basement when he was not working as a janitor. Of course the sting of racism is apparent that so talented an artist could only work as a janitor. But in this painting, the story is moving, yet it does not truly matter, the simple painting of a simple talented life is strong enough on its own, that is what moves me about this work. It tells the story of identity and community, of quiet integrity and purpose in a hostile world. It interested me to learn that Hayden was criticized for his work, which was said to caricaturize blacks.

³ West, 97-8.

My favorite artist in the exhibit, William Henry Johnson, was also accused of caricaturizing blacks, for creating cartoon looking characters. Again, children also love his paintings, and I think they are wonderfully accessible, bold, colorful, strong. There were at least three Johnson paintings in the exhibit, a sly one of a couple entitled "Cafe," another of a family entitled "Going to Church," and another of a farming family entitled "Early Morning Work."

Lucille told me that when she takes student groups through the exhibit she asks them what they see. They see the big hands of the farm family and they wonder why they are so large. They immediately see that the couple is not looking at one another and they wonder why. These paintings are wonderful because they tell such compelling human stories about hard work on the farm and the difficulty of dating or being in a relationship. When I went through the exhibit with Kenny, he immediately saw the symbolism of the painting "Going to Church," that the family in the wagon was positioned in between the anchors of their life, home and church. I did not perceive this when I saw the painting, but Kenny is right. Like Johnson's other paintings, this one is about family and community, the buffers of black culture.

I find the shared criticism of Hayden and Johnson, that their work is a cartoonish characterization, enlightening. Neither artist chose to paint in traditional, painterly ways. In addition, they painted average black life, not "worthy" subject matter to their critics. I surmise that their critics did not see this as fine enough art, no matter that their work is bold, true, accessible, and articulate. I think that as black artists painting in the early twentieth century, this was a stylistic argument they were never going to win. They weren't going to be "good" enough for other white painters even if they shared the same style,

even if they painted better. Anything else they did, including what they did do, was going to be criticized as well.

In a hostile world it is even more essential to love oneself, to be oneself, to paint the story that is known and seen. I hope these men, and other black American artists like them had buffers and cultural armor. I hope they had hatitude and believed that no one ever chooses the wrong hat. I am grateful they had the courage to tell their story through art the way they saw it and knew it.

One of things I liked about the exhibit is that although there are many similar themes and stories of community survival and celebration within the works, every artist is different. From Porter who did not want to paint black life, to VanDerZee who continually documented it in his studio, from Faith Ringgold's extraordinary quilt to Norman Lewis' abstract expressionist depiction of the KKK entitled "Evening Rendezvous," every artist wears a different hat, and tells a different but inter-related story.

Without words, this exhibit teaches the American story. It tells of community, family, church, poverty, rural living, city living, service and sacrifice, love and care, discipline and excellence. I love this exhibit as a reminder that only within community can great individuals be mentored; only within community can people acquire the armor to thrive in a hostile world. Only in community can we learn that we are beautiful, intelligent, and called to do more. Only in community can we find hope and meaning. Like West I am grateful to our black foremothers and black forefathers for teaching us to say it loud, "I'm black and beautiful and I'm proud."

First Unitarian Church, founded in 1831, was the original Unitarian voice in Cincinnati. First Church is proud of our long-standing commitment to an urban presence that draws our 260 members from a wide geographic area. We are a church rich in tradition and alive with a diverse, caring community. Our sanctuary brims with history, inviting us to reflection and service.

Sunday services begin at 10:30 a.m.
Religious Education information is available by calling RE Director Carly Smith at 281-2150.
You may also call the church office at 281-1564.

MISSION STATEMENT

Our urban Unitarian Universalist community celebrates and SUPPORTS ONE ANOTHER on our SPIRITUAL AND ETHICAL PATHS.
We work for JUSTICE, dignity and respect for the web of life.