

The Colors of Soul

LORRAINE JOHNSON-COLEMAN

Wherever folks have lived, loved, hoped, dreamed, been happy, been sad, laughed, cried, been cherished, or hated, have been lost, have been found, mourned or survived, there remains in that place a special something, kind of like a lingering spirit or a festering soul. And it is this spirit or this soul (multiple energies merging into a single reality) settled comfortably in the worn cracks and crevices of history to which we must pay homage and attempt to give voice whenever we interpret places of the past.

“Tell the truth and shame the devil” my grandmama used to say. Well it’s sad to say that it is apparent that a whole lot of folks weren’t privy to grandmama’s brand of wisdom, and, as a result, the interpretation of the African American story is sometimes so removed from reality that it is almost unrecognizable. The problem seems to be more and more of an issue as the popularity of heritage tourism reaches new heights. At least now there is a consensus that historic places have an obligation to mention the Black folks whose lives were an important part of many significant spaces but there are still some failures in the system, especially in cases where the Black history is particularly painful to hear. The solution for some has been to shy away from the harsher realities for fear of reducing the visitors’ enjoyment. This is a frightening trend and it needs to stop. As a storyteller/interpreter, it would be easy to tell only warm stories with happy endings. I know first hand that tough stories are both hard to tell and hard to hear, but we do folks an injustice when we don’t tell it all. As children, we have all heard that if we can’t say something nice, we shouldn’t say anything at all, but I don’t think our preschool teachers were referencing historic interpretation when they said it, and we need to make that distinction.

Tell the truth and shame the devil. Well, my grandmama was right. It’s the only way to live and the only way to learn. But what my grandmama didn’t tell me was how many devils there would be to contend with, and historic interpretation sure has more than its share.

Devil #1 – For the last six years I have been commissioned as a storyteller, an interpreter, and at times a unique blending of the two. Now, the storyteller and the interpreter come to the telling from two very different perspectives. The interpreter draws a direct and factual correlation between the site and the history of that place. The desired result is that the visitor make a profound connection to that space. Not too long ago, it was considered crucial that the interpreter maintain a distanced neutrality from themselves and the story. Now, many recognize that interpretive neutrality is not only impossible but an undesirable ideal.

The storyteller, however, has an agenda from the beginning. He or she is using powers of persuasion to move you from where you are to a predetermined emotional place. They want you to feel. They want you to take something from the experience and chew on it for a while, and, believe me, they aren’t trying to be objective. So how does one woman who is both a storyteller and an interpreter reconcile these differences? By understanding that there is a place for both historical fact and emotional response, and good judgment dictates which is emphasized when. If I am commissioned to create a piece about history that can be told by anyone then interpretation rather than storytelling is in order. The very nature of its objectivity allows it to be appropriately shared by anyone. A story, however, that is personal, is limited in its telling to the people ethnically who own that story and to no one else. I consider the blending of interpretation and storytelling to be of course the ideal, and I consider that to be my specialty—but the combination poses its own unique challenges to say the least.

Devil #2 – We are all revisionist whenever we step into a historic place and look back. The story always reveals itself to us with the silent backdrop of how we live and how we believe at the moment. Often it takes time to grapple with interpretive complexity, particularly when that complexity calls into question cherished beliefs and ways of seeing oneself. Sometimes time and distance lead to a clearer view, but other times time and distance blur the view until nothing really is clear.

Devil #3 – The historical site tells stories, not a single tale, and sometimes these stories conflict with one another. The conflict may not be a problem since the ultimate goal is not just telling the story but creating an experience that allows the visitor to learn, to reflect, to dialogue critically, and to deepen their understanding of American history, our “civic glue,” so to speak. In the case of slave galleries, there are conflicting possibilities as the interpretation/storytelling begins. One possibility is that many who were forced to sit in the segregated seating were outraged and rightly so. Another is that there were many who looked forward to the private fellowship with family and friends, away from folks who were other than their kind. By exploring both possibilities, we open up the discussion in two ways instead of just one. How do we feel when we are separated or marginalized? Isn't it also comforting at times to be around folks that are just like us? Is it necessary at times to separate ourselves in order to maintain our cultural connectiveness?

Devil #4 – Interpreting African American history, we find more often than not that we simply don't have enough first-hand written accounts or documents to know the whole story. Memory and oral traditions represent the African practice of preserving the past in many instances. Black collective memory, vision, and “what somebody done told me” has to fill in the gaps. The slave galleries are no different. Once again there is very little data on the specifics of the folks who passed through that space but there are slave narratives available that can give us a sense of what it felt like to be relegated to separate seating. While there is no guarantee that the feelings expressed in these narratives are the same as the feelings of those who passed through the galleries, these resources are excellent places to begin. It is important to note that segregated seating existed in Southern places until the late 1960's. Many of the African Americans who lived under those conditions are alive today, and the telling of their experiences can add to our understanding of the effects of segregated seating.

Devil #5 – Visitors to historic sites take in history through multi-sensory experiences, a combination of what they see and feel when they come to a place as well as what they hear. As I take my seat in the slave galleries, I am immediately aware that the space is small, cramped, uncomfortable, and has a limited view. It will be up to me to use my voice and some evocative telling to convey exactly how it feels to sit here.

Devil #6 – There are opening questions any good storyteller or interpreter asks before they even begin . . .

- ◆ Can I make a connection between history and the present? Should I just tell it like it was and trust my visitor to make the connection?
- ◆ Are we celebrating or memorializing the people who have passed through this space?
- ◆ If I leave this narrative as my legacy, can anyone of any age, any gender, or any color tell this story? And, if not, does that necessarily make it inappropriate?
- ◆ How can I empower the custodians of this space to understand that their role is not stagnant but as ever-changing as the interpretation and physicality of that space?

For me there is no better way to deal with a devil than to throw a measure of spiritual goodness his way—so I just shout my way through. In the story found in Joshua, Chapter Six of the Holy Bible, we find reference to the shut gates of Jericho and to a city locked down tight. But the Lord explains to Joshua that the city, no matter how formidable, can be his for the shouting and so it is with the shout of Joshua that the barriers come tumbling down. I guess that's why Black folks connect so strongly to the power of the shout. It is because we have always known, even when the majority of us couldn't read or write, that there was strength in the utterance of the word. The shout for my people is song, praise, poetry, chant, dress down, word up, confirmation and condemnation. It is a right that must not ever be denied.

And so I go into the slave galleries of St. Augustine's Episcopal Church with the words of Wole Soyinka, author of myth, literature, and the African word seared into my soul. “When you go into any culture, I don't care what culture it is, you have to go with some humility. You have to understand the language and by that I do not mean what we speak. You've got to be able to understand the language, the interior language of the people. You've got to speak both the spoken language and the meta Language of the people.” It is said that there is no greater agony than having an untold

story inside you. The slave gallery at St. Augustine's has an untold story inside of it, and it is more than ready for the telling to begin.

The slave gallery project is a collaboration between the Lower East Side Tenement Museum and St. Augustine's Episcopal Church, intended to showcase a rare example of segregated seating in the Northern United States and an invaluable part of black history in New York City. St. Augustine's Church was built in 1827-1829 as the All Saints Free Church (Episcopal). In 1949 St. Augustine's Chapel moved into the building and became an independent parish in 1976. The slave galleries were constructed in 1827 at a time when slavery had been declared illegal in New York, yet the seating space has come to be known as the "slave galleries." It is supposed that one of the reasons for this name, legality or illegality aside, may have been because visiting parishioners from other states where slavery was still legal often visited with their slaves in tow. This is not certain, but for my purposes of storytelling/interpretation, it is inconsequential. Blacks, free or not, were segregated to those galleries relegating them to second class citizenship or perhaps no citizenship at all, so slave galleries they were named, and, for me, slave galleries they will be.

The physicality of the slave galleries plays an important role in the storytelling. The galleries consist of two small rooms located at balcony level. There is one in the upper east corner and another in the upper west one. The east and west galleries have different histories of alterations, seeming as if they had different lives. (Does this mean there are two stories?) It appears that the window openings were originally built to be open without panels to block the view. (But we don't know if these were kept open to allow visibility between those seated in the galleries and those in the sanctuary, or if they were closed.) There are indications that there were pews used in the galleries at one time, as evidenced by the ghost marks in the east gallery. Physicality always affects interpretation. In this case, the interpretive program should remind visitors that America was built on the backs of many, reflect that research is still in process, and be viable as a vehicle for dialogue about marginalization in contemporary America. Tough to do? You bet!

There is only one literary form that I would even consider to be appropriate for this program—the narrative, in tribute to the slave narrative and to Sojourner Truth, a woman enslaved in New York during the same period of time that the slave galleries were constructed. Her own published narrative became one of the most well known and nationally respected works of its kind. A great orator, preacher, and defender of freedom, she also left us an important literary legacy. The slave narrative dates back to 1768 (Brittan Haman in Boston) with the majority being published between 1830 and 1860. Until the slave narrative, almost all public discussions of slavery were solely from the perspective of white. Now, for the first time, the enslaved had a voice. Of course these narratives are not without blemish. The stories were filtered through the white writers' sensibilities so that, in some cases, these writers may have placed their own agenda ahead of authenticity. Still, the narrative plays a pivotal role in our storytelling, and it is ideal in this setting.

Now we can finally move into the slave gallery as the historic space becomes story theater. Story theater is a wonderful concept made famous by Walter Dallas, an Emmy-nominated director who worked successfully in off-Broadway theater in New York City. According to Mr. Dallas, story theater layers complex character, narrative, improvisation, and motivation on top of each other, very much the way a building is constructed. The storyteller can construct, destruct, or at any given time step completely outside the action and bear witness to the significance or emotion of the moment, becoming both performer and commentator. Story theater grabs at the heart and never lets go. So now the slave gallery becomes theater and the narrative begins...

A STORYTELLER LOOKING FOR TRUTH

As I sit in this space and look down on this sacred place, I am conflicted in ways I didn't anticipate. The church has always been for me a sanctuary of peace and deliverance that separates me from the troubles of the secular world, but I have always been a member of a black church so color has never been an issue. I have always been welcome: kinship, fellowship, and worship always coming together in breathtaking spiritual experiences. God loved me they always said and so did the folks on the pews around me.

Here, however, things are different. Here I need the kind of inspiration that comes from on high. It is not my voice that needs to be heard, but the voices of those who sat here wondering what in the world God had to do with casting folks aside. But they are not here and nobody bothered to ask them how they felt when they were, so I can only hope that somehow I can feel and imagine just a little bit of their living.

It is no secret that the voices who speak to me are usually women, so I begin this the way I begin everything else—with prayer. I am looking for a wisdom woman to reach down and touch me and only God can send her to me. So I pray.

Lord, how do you make 'em understand that sometimes a woman's got her back up against the wall and needs a silken strength to shoulder her and arms to hold her so she doesn't quite fall. And then when it seems like it's going to be you and me once again, you liberate me and consecrate me, Father. You send me one of your own who happens to be kin of my kind. You know the folks I mean—some of them soul-reaching, miracle-minded, way-making blessed ones. You know, one of them love-ladies, sister-friends, or one or two of them women kin. Then Lord, you throw in a few of them we-can-make-it-mamas, a couple of them I-know-where-you've-been, see-where-you're-headed, awe-inspiring-colored women.

Lord, just now and again, every blues singing moon, I need to be the one who sees the stains on the inside, the scars that no longer show or the wounds that still fester. And when the grief finally comes, please let me recognize the desert teardrops of parched souls and dried up dreams.

Lord, I'm just trying to get through the madness and this time it can't be about the me or the mine, the going it alone. No way. This time it's got to be about a Hagar, a Jezebel, a Sarah, or an Eve, so folks remember that we were never supposed to be a dark side of salvation or a casual reminder of redemption. I am calling on a sister so we can get down to business in order to get the job done. But we can do this, I know it. What I need is a wisdom woman, that one who is always willing to sacrifice herself so I can see the better way. Let us connect now so we can take this thing sister to sister, make it ally to ally, and handle it woman to woman.

Amen Lord, Amen.

As always, the Lord delivers. And now, A wisdom woman remembers . . .

***Oh, ain't it good to be faithful
'cause there sure been some times,
some of 'em pretty darn bad
when a little bit of faith was all we colored folks had.
But baby I can tell you, tell you how it's been true,
That it's good to be faithful,
so good Lord, let me tell you!***

Bless Gracious! Ya 'll is finally here. It's been lonely up here for so long, I wondered if I would ever have company again. 'Course being alone ain't always so bad. It's amazing how a pretty piece of quiet and the calming beauty of emptiness can set an old body still and put a good mind to recollectin'. You know I got me some rememberings that run so deep 'til they live in the pit of my stomach and touch the center of my soul. I didn't know if I'd ever get around to sharin' them either. I tell you, folks 'round here was getting downright frenzied that wouldn't nobody ever get to wonderin' 'bout this place, wantin' to see it or needin' to know about it. But I wouldn't hear none of that—no sir, not none of it. I tried to tell 'em that I wasn't 'bout to be hid away forever even if some folks do get to lookin' up here like I'm drippin' in shame. But I ain't the one that ought to feel disgraced. Nor sir, I ain't the one.

The way I figure it, if the Lord don't see color, ain't none of us supposed to. Bringin' folks to a place so they could praise the Lord and then go to stickin' em up here like they wasn't nothin' but trash you don't want nobody to see; it was a shame, I tell you. A shame! But sin will sure 'nough slow walk you down. Thank God for it too or this here story would still be stifled like a prison ache or a melancholy melody.

Ain't this place somethin'?

Oh, I know at first there don't seem like there's a whole lot to see. It looks like somebody done come in and stole out all that was glorious, leavin' nothin' behind but this here scarred hard marker of rememberin'. It kinda' reminds you of an old lady that

got nothin' left but a little bit of dignity draggin' some where raggedly 'round her knees. But everything don't need to be shiny and pretty. Sometimes you got to bring your own measure of goodness and grace 'fore you can really see a place. 'Course I see it all, sometimes I see too much. Born on the wrong quarter of the moon folks used to say. Yes sir, I see it all.

I see the colors of soul splattered here, there, and everywhere, cradled in crevices we ain't even begun climbin' into. I see ghosts, too, leftovers and leavin's of folks who waited for their spirits to be lifted clear up to the Lord. Ishmael's tears may have moved God to goodness and mercy but my folks couldn't help but wonder if theirs didn't just make them old and ugly, and if mercy wasn't just a promise for yet another day, that reigned up in heaven a million miles away. But now they sit right at the feet of the Father. All of 'em—Nigger, Boot, Coon, Spook, Darkie, Auntie, Sambo, Pickaninny, and Colored Gal. All of 'em finally shining in glory.

You know every once in a while, you tell yourself that this time you ain't gonna say one word 'cause so much of what you've already shared ain't even been heard. You've already decided that you ain't going to tell 'em one more thing 'cause they probably wouldn't listen no way. But today I get to have me quite a say. And I'm going to tell it like the Lord would have me do, just like I'm supposed to.

Baby, I'm here to tell you that there is a God who hears you and who sees you. He's always listening and I know it 'cause I talk to Him all the time. I sure hope He's listening now.

Lord, when they said that the Black woman was the mule of the earth, did they say it 'cause they knew they had burdened us with something no other soul would dare try to carry? Did they know we was too strong to be crushed under the weight of affliction or did they finally just realize that we was too stubborn not to make it all the way through? Why couldn't they see that our headrags were not banners of surrender but our crowning glory and these scars were not whelps of weakness but punctuation marks for a well-fought war story. Why couldn't they see that we was woman too?

And Lord, we can't forget our men. They too need to be heard. But Lord, when our brothers speak, let not their voices sound ragged from the lies told to us, the half truths uttered about us, or the blows that still sing. Let not their meanings be mocked, misconstrued or mixed up like lost lyrics or mere muttered curses of misunderstanding. Listen now as they burst into a litany of love, the song to stir the very soul and a unity laced rhapsody.

**Allow a Black man this, his very serenade to float free,
for this is not a death song, some hopelessly sung hymn,
for they have silenced their voices too long
Now they must shout their strength until it
Echoes throughout the land and declare proudly
That which makes them a man.**

**And when they speak, let their darkness
Give verse to an African legacy, a rich Black history
And give rise to their courage, determination & pride
As they lift every voice and sing.**

Lord for all of 'em, the sisters and the brothers whose souls reside in this place, let them speak now. They shall no longer choke back the truth, disrespect their discontentment or be seen as less than a human being.

And finally Lord, for the babies, 'cause when I was little, it sure was tough to be somebody's colored baby in this here place. I only hope now, that things done finally changed up their face.

Amen.

* * * * *

Lorraine Johnson-Coleman is a nationally respected consultant in the areas of cultural preservation and community programming who counts among her clients, The Kellogg Foundation, National Parks Service, and National Trust for Historic Preservation. Known for her "down home wisdom" Lorraine is enjoyed by millions annually as a regular contributor to NPR Morning Edition. In addition to her consulting work, Lorraine is a

sought after speaker in the field of heritage preservation as well. Lorraine is the best selling author of three books on Southern culture. Lorraine's first book, *Just Plain Folks*, was a November 1998 featured selection of the Literary Guild and the audiobook on which Lorraine performed the stories, won a 1998 Publishers Weekly Listen Up Award. The *Tale Tellin' Blues* episode of the nationally aired *Just Plain Folks* public radio series won a 1999 Crystal Jade Award of Excellence from the Communicator Awards. Her current literary work, *Larissa's Breadbook* is a celebration of the diversity of American culture through two of its staples - storytelling and food. The third book, *Talking Mules & Other Folks*, a collection of Southern storytelling and humor, is due out in December 2001. *JOURNEYS HOME™* - An African American Heritage and Cultural Arts Initiative developed by Johnson-Coleman has been recognized as a national model for cultural preservation and heritage tourism development. This initiative was being implemented in Battle Creek, Michigan and Lorraine is working with 15 counties in the states of Louisiana, Mississippi, and Arkansas as part of the Kellogg Foundation Mid-south Delta Initiative. In addition to her consulting and writing, Lorraine also tours nationally, a one-woman show of comedy, storytelling and poetic narrative based on her work.