

## Musings on Black History - Obed Norman

Celebrating Black History Month, February  
2004, San Jose, CA.

Cantos I: History, Passage and Connection

History, for Dostoyevsky<sup>1</sup> it was  
'the centuries of the systematic exploration  
of the riddle of death';  
And because we all die  
history is 'Everyman's' tale;  
And Everyman has since  
claimed his full humanity  
and is now 'Every Person';  
And history is now more than his story  
and now includes her story  
and is maturing into our story.  
History, the collective and intertwined  
narratives of our human existence;  
Testimony to the grandeur of our spirit  
but also the sometime pedestrian tawdriness  
of our commerce.

History as the conqueror's tale will not do;  
Not in a space and around a table  
where all claim equal time and consideration.  
Paul Gilroy laments:  
'Ain't no Black in the Union Jack'<sup>2</sup>;  
Paul is a brother who moves with great fluidity  
between Ebonics and the King's English;  
moves with feline grace and seamlessly  
from the context of soulful solidarity  
to the context of erudite challenge:  
'The problem' Gilroy states,  
'Is the excision of Africa  
from the narrative of civilization'.  
Black History month affirms a  
history that will no longer exclude;  
History is no longer  
the lone pontification of the powerful;  
It is now a conversation of us all about us all ;  
Conversation as in together talking,  
Only seemingly contrapuntal,  
cacophonous, and discordant;  
But always in search of its true compass point  
of harmony, symphony, and unison.  
History is about voices;  
varied, nuanced,  
uniquely expressive and illuminating.

And in this place at this time  
the focus is on African-Americans.  
Africans in America,  
Americans from Africa;  
Hyphenated and inviting the question:  
'What is that hyphen?'  
Is it a connect or a divide?  
A bridge or a barrier?  
We affirm here, because it is within  
our agency to do so:  
The hyphen joins and does not tear asunder  
the bonds of our collective humanity.  
The hyphen is a bridge joining two worlds within us;  
and proclaiming our double consciousness.<sup>3</sup>  
It is also an umbilical cord  
traversing the Black Atlantic,  
Binding to Africa her scatterlings  
on distant shores and hostile climes.  
Umbilical cords are human substance  
and this one no different;  
Composed as it is of fifty million<sup>4</sup> of us  
who did not survive the Middle Passage;  
Fifty million who now lie beneath  
the waves of the Atlantic,  
In an unbroken human chain  
joining Africa to America,  
the bereaved motherland  
to the cruel new world.  
Fifty million ancestral souls  
we celebrate and mourn  
each time you or we say our name:  
African-Americans.  
Africans in America,  
Americans from Africa  
Black History month highlights  
a long ignored strand of the human story.  
Black History is not  
a single event confined to one month;  
Black History Month is not a period  
and an end but an exclamation mark of  
an ongoing tale woven in with all other tales;  
Black history month is not an optional coda  
nor even a grand finale but a crescendo  
in the ongoing symphony of our life;  
your life and my life;  
because I inhabit your story  
and you dwell in my narrative  
and we people our tales  
and there is no story that is not our story  
and this is our history  
never mine alone  
never yours alone  
always, our history.

## Cantos II: Diaspora and Subversion

History continues in those who  
made it to the shores of the cruel new world;

Attempts were made to wipe out the hyphen,  
the connection to Africa:  
The injunction to the enslaved:  
Do not speak your own tongue.  
Have no African names.  
You shall assume the culture of we who  
have the gall to call you 'slave; and the  
hubris to call ourselves 'master'.

But there is always  
the contrariness of the dispossessed  
and the oppositionality  
of the oppressed and subjugated;  
Israel in Diaspora refused  
to sing the Lord's song in a strange land,  
because 'those who took us into captivity  
required of us a song'.  
In the cruel new world  
In the face of cultural oppression  
The African Diaspora  
broke out into song:  
The Negro Spirituals;  
Subversive freedom songs  
laced with the forbidden cadences,  
intonations and incantations of Africa.  
The African in Diaspora,  
captive in a strange land,  
Forbidden to speak an own tongue.  
Our African tongues forbidden  
and fast forgotten;  
Found a safe haven in  
our subconscious,  
And from there laced  
The cadences, inflections, and tessitura<sup>5</sup>  
of our speech with fragments,  
remnants, and residues from Africa.  
And willing accomplices in this subversion,  
We declare: 'Is all good!'

The simple act of naming our children;  
An act of subversion and defiance.  
Not for us the given choices  
of 'proper Christian names';  
for us; Nekisha, Luanda, La Toya,  
have the flavor;  
And carry the subtle message:  
We were enslaved but were never slaves!  
We have always been  
and are still about  
Affirming who we are!  
The words out of our mouths;  
Syncopated, truncated, contracted,  
parachuting off our tongues  
like guerrilla fighters,  
forming into commandos of resistance,  
and battalions of defiance;  
Declaring to all who would listen:  
We will not be defined by others.  
Others will not define for us

what is proper in speech or whatever!

Benediction: The Good Word

And so we stand suspended  
within the vortex of our common history  
Contemplating a past of passage and pain  
connection and conjunction  
subjugation and subversion;  
And our together talking difficult at times  
but we must continue to talk and hope  
of healing, and restitution  
yes, restitution  
Talk about restitution  
as together we slouch  
toward our common Bethlehem<sup>6</sup>  
to attempt once more  
a rebirth in reconciliation.

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Reference Notes:

1. From Dostoyevsky's Crime and Punishment, I think.
- 2.. Title of a book by Paul Gilroy. This book and The Black Atlantic by Gilroy are to my mind the seminal exploration of the problematic relationship between Blacks and the West as a cultural entity. Highly recommended reading.
3. With acknowledgment to WEB du Bois
4. The number of Blacks who died in the Middle Passage are estimated to have been between 7 and 100 million. Fifty million is somewhere in the middle.
5. A term used by musicologists and linguists to denote how speech in the same language can differ in range and tone with different speakers.
6. Image borrowed from the last lines of W. B. Yeats' poem, "The Second Coming".