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Eng101_015

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African American Oppression through Art and Music (A Proposal for My Exhibit)

Introduction

People often generalize the history of African Americans into three categories: slavery, post-slavery, and post-MLK. These generic groupings do not do justice to the complexity of the story. Shirley Graham Dubois, wife of the famous W.E.B. Dubois, decided to educate the world by presenting a detailed account of the African American story, prior to 1932, through her play/opera *Tom-Tom*. The play adopts the perspective of the African American, to convey, through a series of anecdotes that emphasize the power of music, the African American tale (*Essay on Tom-Tom 3*). In the first scene, Dubois reveals the significance of the title “*Tom-Tom*”, describing the sound of a drum, also known as a tom-tom, in the night (*Essay on Tom-Tom 3*). The play begins by depicting the capturing of Africans from their homeland, and progresses to slavery, escaping slavery, and life after slavery (*Essay on Tom-Tom 3*). While each of these time periods somewhat differs in terms of the music used and the attitude of the African Americans, there are also striking similarities that remain consistent despite the era.

History is one of my passions. I’ve always been interested in learning about the plight of other cultures and how people reached the place they are today. Likewise, Dubois displayed her passion through the physical nature of *Tom-Tom*. Her play was handwritten on delicate papyrus

paper, with a copious amount of notes in the margins. The coffee stains in combination with the meticulous notes and intricate prop list convey the effort Dubois exerted to ensure her tale was created to the best of her ability. Furthermore, by choosing an all-black cast to perform her play, Dubois augmented the first-person perspective she creates throughout the work, which in turn grants viewers a deeper insight into African American life (Horne 59). This proposal includes my statement of purpose, the objective of my project, a plan of action, and an annotated bibliography of secondary sources.

Statement of Purpose

My curated exhibit intends to convey the development of African American culture from the Civil War era to the 1930's. The exhibit illustrates the significance of the drum, as well as music as a whole, as the melodies changed with time. Dubois employs music as a gateway to understanding the true state of African Americans in the United States. Each Act of Dubois's *Tom-Tom* has a specific musical accompaniment, which is used to indicate both mood and setting (*Essay on Tom-Tom 3*). My exhibit highlights how music can be demonstrative of an era, and how music can show that although culture continuously changes, it always partially returns to its roots (*Essay on Tom-Tom 4*). The very first scene of the first Act--set in Africa-- includes only percussion instruments playing traditional African rhythms (*Essay on Tom-Tom 5*). However, as the Act progresses, reed instruments such as the oboe blend with the percussion (*Essay on Tom-Tom 5*). Initially, this mixture is harmonious, but as the main characters are captured, the music swiftly transitions into a cacophony, instilling terror into the audience (*Essay on Tom-Tom 5*). Yet, through the chaos, the beat of the tom-tom drum can still be heard steadily maintaining rhythm (*Essay on Tom-Tom 5*). Despite the influence of time and other cultures,

Dubois demonstrates how a group of people can maintain crucial parts of its identity, while incorporating new elements due to this influence. Act 2's music depicts the cultural and identity change African Americans underwent during the slavery period (*Essay on Tom-Tom* 4). The African rhythms are replaced by forlorn plantation songs as the characters' struggle. Despite the rapid musical shift, the beat of the tom-tom can still be heard, signifying the strength of the African Americans and their commitment to both their own culture and survival (*Essay on Tom-Tom, 4*). Dubois utilizes music to portray what words cannot: emotion and identity.

Objective

By conveying the eclectic African American musical culture in combination with the history of the race, Dubois hints at the transformation each new generation of African Americans endured (Schmalenberger 27). Yet, despite the passage of time, many key aspects stoically remain, just like the continuous beat of the tom-tom throughout each era in the play. Although we believe each new generation creates brilliant ideas and pushes society forward, we often fail to question why some aspects, such as the tom-tom, or racial oppression, have withstood the test of time. *Tom-Tom* highlights these lasting thoughts, causing readers to question how racial oppression has managed to last despite all the change that has occurred. Even in Act 3, when African Americans are finally free and able to express themselves through jazz, the Garvey violence of the 1920's, as well as Jim Crow Laws, tainted that progress (Van der Horn-Gibson 14). Perhaps, the new generation of young African Americans can write the 4th act of the play, through organizations such as Black Lives Matter, finally defeating the negatives that have withstood the eras. However, my exhibit demonstrates the importance of unity in order to achieve ambitious goals: Act 3 of *Tom-Tom* depicts the harm a lack of solidarity can cause. The

people are split between following the Voodooman and his Back-to-Africa Movement, or the Real-Estate Man, and his nationalistic movement (*Essay on Tom-Tom* 6). As a result of this discord, the people were separated and focused on arguing with each other, rather than with the common foe: racial oppression.

Plan of Action

I will consult an eclectic collection of resources in order to achieve my objective. The play *Tom-Tom* is an ethnography on its own, so I will turn to other ethnographies in order to compare the two. *Tom-Tom* is a sort of musical history of African Americans in the United States, so an ethnography could provide insight into topics discussed in the play. Likewise, criticism in the form of scholarly analysis of the text can help inspire ideas I may not have been able to develop myself. Furthermore, archives such as images, music, and perhaps a textual resource will contribute to the construction of my ideas. Music is a central theme of my analysis, so auditory archives could assist me in expanding on my ideas regarding the impact of music in the play.

While many resources can help drive my paper forward, there are others which I will not access for this project. Comparative analysis and oral history do not seem to be useful for my specific objective.

Two main sources that I've turned to so far: An essay written by an anonymous play critic, and the book outlining Dubois's life written by Nathan Horne. These have been essential because they analyzed the music of the opera, which I have not personally been able to hear yet. A source I have not used often is my fourth source in the bibliography: the book by Sharon Harley. It is too broad for my exhibit, since I grasped the broad concept early on, and needed specifics rather than more general knowledge.

I will achieve my objective by: first, I will analyze the music of each act, and relate it to the struggle of each generation of African Americans.

Second, I will connect the music to events going on during those eras, demonstrating the importance of music in African American culture.

Finally, I will connect modern movements, probably Black Lives Matter, to the current events affecting the African American community, namely the continued injustice it faces from police.

To conclude, I will tie together the analysis of each era, including modern, and comment.

Timeline: Week of September 26-30

- Work more on my objective
- edit introduction and statement of purpose now that I'm fairly sure of my theme

Week of October 3-7

- Work on finding resources, such as a recording of the play
- Do more research on current events
- Find images or newspaper clippings from each era to relate to the music and character analysis

Week of October 12-14

- Edit each step
- Focus specifically on the conclusion
- **Final draft of Proposal is due on Friday**

October 17

Exhibit due

Annotated Bibliography

Van Der Horn-Gibson, Jodi. "Americana: The Journal of American Popular Culture (1900-present)." *Americana: The Journal of American Popular Culture (1900-present)*. Questia, Apr. 2008. Web. 02 Oct. 2016. 1-18.

This scholarly journal analyzes Shirley Graham Dubois's contribution to African American culture as well as American popular culture in general. The author does not only focus on *Tom-Tom*, but incorporates other plays by Dubois in analysis as well. A primary point of focus is the effect of Graham using African music rather than traditional European opera music, and how this music is used to help identify each generation of African Americans. Likewise, the author describes how Graham addresses issues of racial discrimination and the importance of never losing sight of one's roots. This source argues that Graham was one of the most important black intellectuals of the 20th century and deserves more recognition for her works. This source is well-written and has many strengths. The author frequently cites other works and directly quotes *Tom-Tom* to support his claims. By using other works, the author demonstrates that he is not the only scholar with this certain opinion, which strengthens his argument. However, the main limitation of this source is the lack of addressing another position. The author only spends two sentences explaining why some may not view Graham as a top-tier black intellectual. The source provides an analysis of both *Tom-Tom*'s content as well as its music, both of which are central to my objective. The author discusses the play at a deeper level rather than just on the surface, commenting on how it highlights the social injustice that African Americans have endured.

Schmalenberger, Sarah, "Debuting Her Political Voice: The Lost Opera of Shirley Graham." *Black Music Research Journal*. Questia, May 2006. Web. 01 Oct. 2016. 23-31.

Step by Step: 1) Go to questia.com

2) On the left-hand side, there is a tab that says “Keywords”, click on it, and then select “Publisher”, which is the last option in the drop-down menu

3) Search “Black music research journal”

4) It will say 0 results, but don’t panic. Scroll down until you see “Publication name”, and type “Black music research journal” into that search box

5) Select the first and only option, and press “ok”

6) Under the first search result “Introduction, “Black Music Research Journal” is in hyperlink text next to “Publisher:”. Click on the hyperlink

7) In the “Search this publication” box that appears, type in “Shirley Graham” and press enter

8) Select the first option, that’s the source.

This source focuses on the lack of research about Shirley Graham Dubois, but focuses on *Tom-Tom* while also providing a biography of Graham. Arguing that political activism was a primary motivator for the creation of *Tom-Tom* and its content, the journal proceeds to discuss the impact of the opera on Graham and her political power. The author emphasizes the importance of *Tom-Tom*’s music to Graham’s goal of exposing social injustice. The source acknowledges how the majority of analysis about Graham and her works is very recent, especially analysis on *Tom-Tom* since it was only found lately. Two major strengths of the source are the history it provides of the play and the peer-reviewed aspect, which suggests that other scholars have read the source and found it to be accurate. In contrast, the primary weakness of the source is its breadth. This source provides insight into *Tom-Tom*’s political impact, and how the play changed Graham’s public image. While it does discuss music as well as major

themes in the play, the source also focuses on the impact the play had on America, and Graham's political intentions while writing the opera, both of which are essential to my project.

Horne, Gerald. *Race Woman: The Lives of Shirley Graham Du Bois*. NYU Press, New York City, New York, 2002. 57-70.

Step by step: Google search "Google Scholar", press the first link. You're now on Google Scholar. Search "Shirley Graham Dubois Tom-Tom", and select the first link.

The book is a full biography about Shirley Graham Dubois, describing her entire life and her many life works. I focused on the section about *Tom-Tom*. This book is considered to be the foremost scholarly work published about Shirley Graham Dubois. Each previous work I've cited has cited this book as a source, which says a lot about its credibility. The book is extensive and I would like to read more. This source is my main information regarding Graham's life. Most of my background about Graham and *Tom-Tom* will come from this book, and it serves as an encyclopedia about Graham. Whenever I need more information, this is the source I will turn to.

Harley, Sharon. *Women's labor in the global economy: speaking in multiple voices*. Rutgers University Press, Newark, New Jersey, 2007. 9-24.

This section of the book discusses how global factors influenced Shirley Graham Dubois's work, such as political forces. Graham was often considered to be radical due to the influence of communism on her social justice work. This source is less specific to Graham, but provides a larger picture of her and *Tom-Tom*. Its main strength is its objectivity, and its main weakness is its breadth. I will compare info from this source on the outside factors influencing *Tom-Tom* to my second source which also focuses on Graham's political motivations.

Essay on *Tom-Tom*, *Tom-Tom* papers, Stuart A. Rose Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library, Emory University. 1-6.

This essay was written by an anonymous play critic and provides a musical analysis of each act of Dubois's *Tom-Tom*. Although lack of knowledge about an author can be a red flag, I believe this source is extremely reliable due to its inclusion in the Rose Library exhibit on *Tom-Tom*.

The main strength of the source is its specificity. It helped me understand the music of the play, since I could not procure an audio copy, and its only weakness is the lack of a known author.

This source was extremely applicable to my project: I relied on this source for a majority of my knowledge regarding the specifics of the play itself.