

Daniel Genzelev

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Dr. Cooke

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“A Day Well Spent”

The diner resembled a hive of bees. Somehow, the general standard cold nature of New Yorkers seemed to be lifted as strangers chatted amicably. Having eaten lunch at Harlem’s famous Dinosaur BBQ nearly every day for the last fifteen years, I exit the establishment to re-check the sign outside, to ensure I am indeed at the same diner. My feet sink through the inch-deep layer of classic New York City slush as I confirm my location. Curiosity sparked, I re-enter, and approach John, my favorite waiter. Before I manage to open my mouth, he smiles and tells me a new exhibit by an unknown young curator has opened. I order my usual, a half-slab of ribs, and decide I too would rebel against the New York standard and socialize. Each person I speak to is more excited about the exhibit than the last. After consuming the last bite of the mouth-watering ribs, I decide to investigate the hype. I shake John’s hand, tell him the ribs were marinated to perfection, take one more breath of the divine diner smell, and exit. After several minutes of frantic waving, I finally manage to procure a taxi.

Still grumbling about the traffic, I enter the museum and head up to the eleventh floor, hoping the *African American Identity and Oppression through Music* exhibit will not be too crowded on this Sunday morning. A large crowd waits for the immense double-doors to the exhibit to swing open. Finally, a staff member announces that the exhibit is now open. He unlocks the doors and I enter: a massive movie theater is the first stop. Once the crowd filters in, the employee delivers a brief overview of what we will see today: “*African American Identity and Oppression Through Music* conveys the simultaneous development of African American music and African American people. Beginning from the classic

tom-tom drum, brought over from Africa, the exhibit demonstrates the music in each era: from pre-slavery to the 1930's. Unique rhythms correspond to the state of each African American generation, conveying generational identity. One musical aspect, the consistent beat of the tom-tom, withstands time by consistently being included in each era's music. While time changes people, this exhibit also portrays what time has not changed. Throughout this time period, African Americans did not lose sight of their core values, which the tom-tom's inclusion in music from each era conveys, but more nefarious aspects, such as oppression due to race, also withstood time. Finally, the exhibit relates modern racial tensions and events to *Tom-Tom*". The staff member exits, and a five-minute clip outlining the life of Shirley Graham Dubois plays, conveying interesting information such as her first attempt at activism at the young age of thirteen. The succinct film concludes, and another cheery staff member opens a door on the side of the theater, directing us through it.

Upon entering the second room, the plain white walls leave no impression. Instead, a massive picture of messy handwriting on old, dilapidated paper immediately catches my eye. Even to my untrained eye, the picture appears to be an original due to the combination of coffee stains and meticulous notes in the margins. The words "*Tom-Tom*" loom over this image: the play's title. I recall hearing about "*Tom-Tom*" during both the film and the overview, so I shift my gaze to the caption below the image. Realizing that this play will be central to the exhibit, I appreciate that I'm provided with intricate details such as the cast being all-black. From the caption, I understand that the play focuses on African American life. However, the lack of real information regarding the content of the play instills a sense of suspense, making me eager to progress to the next room.

Again, I am met by bland walls. It seems as though the lack of color is intentional, since it causes the viewer to focus solely on the artifact in the room. I notice a station with multiple pairs of noise cancelling headphones and a colorful image of an African man holding a large drum: perhaps this drum is the start of the musical theme of the exhibit. The caption explains that the drum is known as a tom-tom,

and I exclaim audibly upon reading this information: the title of the play is also the name of an African drum. I proceed to put on the headphones. The steady, deep rhythm resonates through my body: I can truly feel the beat as well as hear it. The caption explains that the tom-tom drum is central to African culture, since its consistent beat represents the heart of African people. I remove the headphones, and now with the basic understanding that the exhibit will discuss music in this play, which is named after a drum, proceed onwards.

Grey walls surround me, producing a sense of melancholy. A picture of a crowded slave ship occupies the wall across from me. Assuming that the African drum segueing to a slave ship is the chronologically correct order to view the exhibit, I walk over to the image. The forlorn faces in the black-and-white display catch my eye, so I decide to read the caption for more understanding. Interestingly, the caption addresses these faces and the music involved, connecting the image to the play. I learn that the music in the play shifts from the peaceful sound of the tom-tom drum to a cacophony, and even reading about this transition instills a feeling of discomfort. I can clearly see the congestion in the image, and understand that the music is intended to enhance this claustrophobic feeling. The beat of the tom-tom can barely be heard through the discord, signifying that the Africans are clinging to life.

I pause for a moment, in order to reflect on what I have seen so far. Thus far, the exhibit seems to be about the music in a play, which is named after an African drum. The play begins from in the pre-slavery era, and by the end of Act 1, transitions to the slavery era, with Africans being portrayed in an overcrowded slave ship. I recall the title of the exhibit, *African American Identity and Oppression through Music*. The exhibit seems to be depicting the music of different eras through the orchestra of a play: a novel concept. My brief reflection concludes, and I wander through the door under the image.

A uniform grey dominates the room again. An image of a group of African Americans in the fields, of what I assume to be a slave plantation catches my gaze. Seeing as Act 1 was the pre-slavery era, logically it fits that Act 2 will focus on slavery itself. The uniformity of the image, in combination with

the grey walls, causes a cold shiver to run down my spine. Each row of the field appears to be identical. Moreover, the people have no distinguishable features: there is no way to tell one from another. Despite my strong initial reaction, I humbly recognize yet again that I am merely an art enthusiast, not a well-versed critic. This epiphany leads me to the caption for more information regarding the image. Thankfully, it provides both more insight into the symmetry and the role of music, the latter of which I could not experience without the caption. Although I managed to notice the uniformity, I failed to connect it to a larger theme, such as the stripping of individuality. The lack of facial features in combination with the identical clothing symbolize how white slave-owners treated the African Americans. Slave-owners failed to see African Americans as unique, generalizing each black person as merely another slave. As a result of this treatment, the traditional African American form of expression, music, transitioned again. The connection between music and identity is beginning to become more apparent to me. Furthermore, the caption explains the music of the era shifted to call-and-response songs, which I understand served as morale boosters, as well as a form of honest expression. These songs, still incorporate the original African rhythms, demonstrating that the now African-Americans have not forgotten their past. I have been exposed to an immense amount of information, so I recognize that I need to reflect again.

My main takeaway from the exhibit at this point is that African American music adjusts to the situation the people are in. The treatment of a group shapes its identity: I can see how transitively; music relates to identity. After telling myself to hold on to this thought, I progress to the next room.

Immediately, I am struck by the bright, vibrant colors. Rather than adopting the bland white walls of the previous rooms, this walls of this room are covered with a seemingly crazy assortment of colors. There appears to be no order or sequence to the coloring: red, baby blue, and yellow are splattered on each wall. I stomach the initial shock and glance straight ahead at the lone image in the room, and instantly the coloring of the room makes sense. The title "Freedom: Jazz era" sits above an image of a band. Smiling

faces have replaced the expressionless, featureless faces of the previous room. The musicians appear to be young and healthy, which is extremely distant from the terrified, worn-out people from the prior images. Thankful for a break from the grim atmosphere of the prior sections of the exhibit, I divert my attention to caption. Jazz was the result of dozens of years of oppression: finally, African Americans could truly express themselves. I comprehend that jazz is a symbol for freedom, further strengthening the relationship between music and African American identity. Likewise, Jazz corresponds to what seems to be the Third Act of *Tom-Tom*, the freedom era. I glance under the image: the caption mentions scat singing, which is somewhat improvisational. Perhaps, this in-the-moment expression relates to the random assortment of bright, happy colors. The drum is a crucial part of jazz, although the music changes drastically, the core aspect remains the same. I make the connection that since the tom-tom symbolizes the initial values of African Americans, its prevalence in jazz suggests that these values have not entirely changed despite the large passage of time. As I progress to the final line of the caption I raise an eyebrow: the last sentence, “However, increased African American prominence in the artistic community did not quell racial tensions” is ominous and somewhat darkens the jubilant atmosphere of the room. Curious as to how the exhibit will elaborate on this “tension”, I advance to the next room.

My jaw drops; I did not think a color arrangement could baffle me more than that of the previous room had, but I am proven wrong. Two of the four walls are the old, bland white that characterized the first few rooms, while the other two walls maintain the smorgasbord of vivid colors. Like most rooms, a singular artifact hangs on the wall: A somewhat blurry rendition of Marcus Garvey and one of his most famous quotes. Even without looking at the caption, the relevance of “A people without knowledge of its past is like a tree without roots” to the exhibit is evident. As African American music transitions, a drum is consistently included, regardless of the era. Hence, The African American people do indeed stay in touch with their roots. The same phenomenon can be applied to African American generational identity, since the exhibit highlights how musical change is indicative of identity change. A quick glance at the caption

confirms my interpretation of the quote. Satisfied with my understanding of this central idea, I again begin to ponder the significance of the last line of the previous caption about racial tension. I expected this room to focus on racial issues; however, I understand why the curator chose to include the quote as an affirmation of a main idea. My intrigue about the aforementioned tension drives me to the next room.

All sense of jubilation is now gone as the pure black walls of the room seem to envelop me in dread. A picture of a newspaper hangs on the far wall, and the title of the article, “Omaha Race Riots Force Martial Rule” immediately catch my eye. The extended wait for an explanation of racial tension has concluded. I look to the caption for more information regarding the riot and am horrified by the atrocity I read. An African American man, still awaiting trial, was lynched by a large group of whites, fueling a complete chaos. The event took place in 1919, during the Jazz era. I pause for a moment to reflect on the duality of 1920’s America: the caption explains the situation perfectly. Despite the progress in places such as Harlem, racial oppression is still prevalent. I recall from the original overview of the exhibit that modern events will be related to themes in *Tom-Tom*, and guess that the Omaha Riots foreshadow the nature of the remainder of the exhibit. Captivated by the connection to the current world, I open the door to the next room.

Before I can absorb my surroundings, a staff member approaches to inform me that the remainder of the exhibit will indeed focus on modern events. When she turns around, I punch the air a few times, exuberant that I understood the exhibit so well up to this point that I was able to predict the next section. The walls are filled with the same despair-inducing black. The words “STREETS OF RAGE” grab my attention and draw me to the back wall. Another newspaper clipping, this time from Ferguson, Missouri faced me. Another core idea from the overview, the consistent racial oppression of African Americans, has been demonstrated. However, confused as to exactly how this riot would relate to the musical theme of *Tom-Tom* I turned my gaze to the caption. Once again, I exclaimed audibly as I read about the connection between rap and the riots. Due to the poor treatment of African Americans by police, as well

as poor living conditions overall, rap surfaced, continuing the theme of musical expression being fueled by oppression. The caption explains how like jazz; rap maintains a steady beat throughout the song. Likewise, rap maintains the conversational nature of call-and-response, since the songs tell a story. Moreover, rap is vulgar, and this profanity is in a sense similar to the freedom of scat singing in jazz: the artist can express himself/herself however he/she pleases. This image and caption combination connects two central themes of the exhibit to the modern era. Sensing the exhibit is nearing its conclusion, I progress to the next room.

Light red walls, the color of love, instill a sense of resolution. I advance to the image on the far wall: a picture of Black Lives Matter protestors. The caption expresses the hope I felt upon entering the room. Unified protests have achieved so much for African Americans in the past, and perhaps the new generation, the one defined by rap music, can take another step toward the goal of equality. Each era has presented a new sort of racial oppression, the latest being profiling. I understand that I have reached the conclusion of the exhibit. A staff member asks me if I am ready to hear the curator's final thoughts, to which I eagerly agree. He states, "The exhibit highlights how, like the African American identity-shaping values, both African American music and race-relations have maintained a similar set of core principles throughout the generations. Due to oppression, African Americans could at times only communicate and express themselves via music. Hence, in order to truly understand the identity of a group, one must look not only at written works such as *Tom-Tom*, but also at honest forms of expression, such as music. While words can tell the story of a generation, music can relay the true state more powerfully. Dubois illustrates this phenomenon in *Tom-Tom* by her focus on music: the play/opera itself is short, consisting of only brief conversations. Likewise, the new generation of African Americans must once again face the same problem African Americans have faced since their arrival in the United States: racial oppression. However, newfound unity and the joint efforts of progressive whites offer hope that the time for

breakthrough has finally arrived". Upon hearing this concluding speech, I decide to reflect one more time on the exhibit as a whole.

From the perspective of a visitor, *African American Identity and Oppression through Music* is well-organized and thought-provoking. The sheer amount of artifacts differentiates it from many exhibits of its kind. Likewise, the exhibit accomplishes the goals that were outlined by the staff member's overview. The level of detail in the captions is superb: a casual art-enthusiast such as myself was able to fully understand the key ideas of the exhibit. However, the captions were not so excessively long that the visitor does not have to think for himself/herself about the content of the exhibit. The inclusion of the curator's thoughts regarding the exhibit was helpful, since it allowed me to compare my opinions with those of the creator. Aesthetically, the wall-coloring was a creative and effective way to both build interest in each room and immediately instill a certain feeling or mood. The rapid transition from the blank white walls to colored ones was shocking, but built interest. Yet, although the exhibit executed its goals in a creative way, it could be strengthened. Hearing the beat of the tom-tom augmented greatly to my understanding of the music, so I believe more multimedia, such as clips of call-and-response, jazz, and rap songs would elevate the exhibit to another level. Despite this weakness, I would say the buzz at the diner this morning was valid: the exhibit succeeded in connecting African American music to generational identity, in illustrating how African Americans never lost sight of core values, as well as in demonstrating the connection to modern events and racial oppression.