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# The Appropriation of Blackness

by *Nehprie Amenii*

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“Of all the peoples on the planet, the Africans of Ancient Egypt were the only ones who attempted to map the journey of the Soul. Black Peoples in every aspect of their Lives speak of soul: soul music, soul food, soul force, soul brother, soul sister. They use ‘soul’ most poignantly to describe the feelings which the heart experiences.”

—Ahmad Azzahir

This is a topic that greatly annoyed me. The expression keeps coming to mind: “If you’ll lie, you’ll steal, and if you’ll steal, you’ll murder.” I think of the lies that America has been founded on, the lies of Black people having no soul, being of no worth and no value, and not even being full human beings. I think of the Constitution that has supported these lies. I think on the countless black bodies that have been stolen and murdered on the basis of the lie. So, it is very difficult for me to go from these thoughts and images of human cargo ships, torture devices, and past and present-day lynchings, to then direct my attention and energy to images of white people with caps turned backwards, wearing baggy clothing, doing hip hop dances, and Asians with their hair in cornrows. Are those images and conversations of such “takings” really to cause me alarm or concern when the entire BLACK BODY AND MIND has been appropriated? We have in fact quite uniquely become ... LIVING OBJECTS. What remains is soul and our ability to access SOUL.

I have to go first to the definition of the word, and based on the definition of the word “appropriation,” I have come to realize that I do believe in it. Yes, I believe in appropriation. APPROPRIATE APPROPRIATION. I believe that as Black people, who have gone through a severe process of cultural erasure, our energy must go towards the re-appropriation of *ourselves*. The excavating and re-articulating of our own intellectual

heritage and knowledge systems should be the only place energy is given. The rest is merely conversations about the symptoms. The rest is surface.

For me, this is not about race. Race is a construct that has been created to serve those who created it. However, that construct at this point is like a piece of tape with all of the “sticky” worn away. I think we have to go to a place deeper than the idea of “race” to begin understanding, untangling, and uncovering truths. We have to ask ourselves, what are the various ingredients that make up a people? That make up a collective?



*Food for the Gods*, by Nehprii Amenii. Photo by Theo Cote.

Author and scholar Ahmad Azzahir, in his book *The African and Westernization*, writes extensively on cultural epistemology and the different modes of thought operating amongst world cultures. He outlines the African’s and European’s very different paradigms of thinking. He writes that “the African mode of thought (metic thought) is based in spirituality, symbol, mythos, and harmonium. The European mode of thinking (modoic thought) is based in object, science, rationality, and technology.”

My work as an artist is at this level. My company, Khunum Productions, creates highly visual narrative-based work that combines the personal, the social, and the magical to create experiences that transform the human heart and thus our society. Khunum

Productions recognizes itself as a platform for what I coin as “**creative anthropology.**” This is deliberately contrary to the Western branch of knowledge called anthropology that has also been used to cultivate, sanction, and expand the very lies that have allowed a human to be deemed as OBJECT. I am most interested in the study of what makes us HUMAN—(LIVING BEINGS!), and the interconnectedness of all people and things. I believe it is the historian John Henrik Clarke who says, “You must take what you love and do it for your people.” My art and creativity are for my people. I am most interested in the excavation and reconstruction of African peoples of the Diaspora who have gone through a unique process of cultural erasure. Art is my method of examination—the same as an archeological restoration artist uses chemicals and swabs to preserve and care for cultural objects. I use the imagination, storytelling, personal narrative, movement, and puppets in an attempt to restore what has been damaged in humanity.

This thing I’m calling “creative anthropology,” this thing of personal narrative, storytelling (mythos), and image-making (symbol), is ultimately about SELF-STUDY (in order to reach a place of harmony). I believe self-study to be the highest form of scholarship we can produce. If it is not the highest, then I certainly believe it offers the greatest potential for human transformation. In order to produce transformative knowledge, we must first be willing to ask ourselves the hard questions. We must be willing to have deeply honest dialogue with ourselves on the micro-, meso-, and macro-levels.

There is a center in Minneapolis founded by Atum Azzahir, called the Cultural Wellness Center. It exists and operates with the understanding that each culture must be responsible for studying and caring for themselves based on their own knowledge systems. A part of their mission reads, “Culture is a resource for people in their health and healing. Healing happens when people recognize and accept the wisdom within themselves and their elders and tap into the life-affirming ceremonies, rituals, practices, disciplines and philosophies from their cultural traditions.”<sup>1</sup>

I recall attending a conference there some years ago. This was a circle of community and cultural interfacing, led by each cultural elder. (If I’m remembering

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<sup>1</sup> “Our Philosophy.” *The Cultural Wellness Center*, 12 April 2019.  
<http://www.culturalwellnesscenter.org/about-us/our-philosophy/>

correctly, I think it was titled “Healing from the Four Directions.”) I vividly recall the elder of the European circle speaking and saying the words, “At some point along the way we became disconnected from our own hearts.” Those words stuck with me. I wondered about the level of discussion, and courage and pain that had to be experienced to reach that level of self-truth. It’s that level of self-study, self-questioning, and raw honesty that has to be embraced in order to bring about true transformation. There is a very important symbol in ancient Africa, called the khepra. It is commonly known as the scarab beetle, or dung beetle. To the African of Ancient Egypt, it was a symbol that represented divine transformation. I think it is rather funny, and poignantly appropriate that this beetle, designed to engender *itself* through the task of toiling with DUNG, is also the symbol for divine transformation. We too must deal with the excrement of what has been created through the disconnect of soul, and the objectifying of the human being.

Specifically regarding appropriation as it relates to decisions in the practice of puppetry: my fellow panel member Valeska Maria Populoh asks the question, “When is it okay for White performers to perform or puppeteer black puppets?” She has noted the casting choices in my production of *Food for the Gods* as one of the moments of notice. I think that in making such decisions we again have to first question ourselves: What is my intention? What is my collective agenda? What is my responsibility? and Whom may these decisions impact? From there, we can at least begin to ensure that mindful consideration is given to the interconnectedness of us all.

*Food for the Gods* is a multi-media performance installation created in response to the killings of Black Men by police and other institutions of authority. The show contains four black speaking characters and a *non-black* ensemble. The puppeteers/ensemble transform into several different characters. They are first featured as “dead bodies,” resurrected as “sailors,” who then land and stand in a “police line-up” of sorts where they deliver the stories of the Black Men who have been murdered. Lastly, in the final scene, they become the servants and caretakers of these Black Men. As a black woman, and the playwright, director and designer of the work, the decision to make the puppeteers *non-black* was one I thought about for a great amount of time. It was a *very conscious* and deliberate decision for many reasons.

One reason was an effort this topic be seen and heard as a *global issue* and a *global concern*. Not simply a Black issue. Thus, I aimed to cast multiple languages in the show. I wanted the room to be filled with global tongue. We ended up with Spanish, French, German, and Mandarin. My goal was to create a happening of global atonement and responsibility. On the first day of rehearsal, I openly discussed my casting decisions. One of the white puppeteers, Enoch Riese, shared a story of attempting to empathize with his black best friend after the acquittal of George Zimmerman, stating to him, “I understand what you’re going through.” The friend in response said: “No, you do not.” And after much thought and bother, Enoch said he had to realize that no amount of



*Food for the Gods*, by Nehprii Amenii. Photo by Theo Cote.

empathy could ever compare with what Black people have to feel and experience on a day-to-day, minute-by-minute basis. He concluded with saying, “This play is grueling to perform. A Black person shouldn’t have to carry it twice.” I stayed sensitive to my decision throughout the entire process to ensure that each moment lent value and power to the image of the Black Man. In example, even though these men were “puppeteered” by White, Spanish-speaking, and Asian puppeteers, it was the puppets—the erected

presence of the Black men—that gave the *puppeteers* the permission to speak. It was the Black Puppets that the puppeteers were in reverence to. My intention was for the *non-black* to take Responsibility. My intention was to create a ritual and experience of healing and Atonement.

*Food for the Gods* was written to uncover the lie. To redeem the value and humanity in Black people. To return dignity back to the Black Man. I must note that the response it received by white and black audience members was drastically different. From the white audience members, it was difficult and yet cathartic. There were a great many tears. However, in every instance, the Black man approached me with a smile or laughter. It was sometimes behind his eyes and sometimes outright. And each gave me a quiet *thank you*. *Food for the Gods* is an expression of my own heart—an expression of soul.

So, I will end here with an excerpt from the final monologue of the show:

*Misunderstandings of a BLACK HOLE.*

*It's a place VOID OF LIGHT... they say...*

*No.*

*Not void at all.*

*It swallows the light.*

*Holds the light!*

*Is filled with the light—so much light—*

*till it appears BLACK.*

*LIGHT! Perhaps you are the culprit...*

*LIGHT!! (You are charged with murder!!)*

*Ah! Or...maybe you were just wanting to reclaim yourself.*

*... each of your little SUNS ... each ray that has beamed ...*

*We hold no anger here ... no remorse*

*But we say a prayer ...*

*... Yesss ...*

*We pray ... that those who are allergic to the sun ...*

*Will one day be able to stare at it without going blind.*

*We say a prayer that the affliction in your eyes will one day allow you too to swallow light ...*

*Become a silhouette of the light.*

*But in the meantime, we'll continue to send our stars—the little ones—they come to teach you ...*

*To challenge your eyes! Your SOUL! To ILLUMINATE!*



*Food for the Gods, by Nehprii Amenii. Photo by Theo Cote.*