

LINDA – Fieldnotes – Monday, August 6, 2007

Subject: Meeting of Harlem Arts Alliance

Location: Theater in Riverside Church

Time: 10-12 (10:20-12:36)

I had met a woman from the Harlem Arts Alliance at the Harlem CBO fair. She invited me to their monthly meeting, telling me that it was a stop for tour buses.

I arrived at Riverside Church around 10:20, following several people in through a side door on Claremont. A woman in uniform (burgundy vest over white shirt and black pants) sat in a small, high cubby set between doors leading into the church. I asked her where the Harlem Arts Alliance meeting was and she directed me to go straight and turn left. Just before the entrance to the theater was a large table covered with flyers and pamphlets advertising various shows. I took a few, then went into the theater. Two women stood at the doorway, handing out papers, one a stapled set of papers and the other a half-sized flyer.

There were about 50 people seated in the auditorium when I arrived, and they were in the middle of introductions. A woman was talking for a long time. About 8 people probably introduced themselves already. The cordless microphone was passed from hand to hand. Most people were artists or musicians, and some had artwork on display on the stage. There was a man from Columbia, something about government and community (a Columbia search turns up (Lamar Lovelace, Project Coordinator for Government and Community Affairs). A woman in a suit told us she was here to share her documentary, after saying she had been invited from so-and-so. Others simply introduced themselves as “a Harlem Arts Alliance member.” One man introduced himself from Harlem Children’s Zone. Most people there were middle-aged and older, with a few young women. One young man was encouraged to speak up when he mumbled his introduction. People were dressed in anything from suits to halter tops, with some dashikis. Most were dressed semi-casually.

On the stage three HAA members, two women and a middle-aged man, sat at a table set with a red tablecloth, three padded red chairs, and red c-shaped pieces (art pieces?). A microphone was set in front of the woman named Linda. Linda wore a black v-neck wrap top over a red tank or camisole, silver hoop earrings, and braids. The man wore a blue oxford long-sleeved button down shirt. The other woman, who did not speak into the microphone during the meeting, wore an olive green sweater over a denim skirt and black sandals. Later she would open the sweater to reveal a white tube top with low-waist smocking. She also wore sunglasses on top of her head and gold hoop earrings. From the audience’s perspective, on the left were about 10 visual art pieces. On the right was a grand piano with a small padded bench. Two large speakers sat at either end of the stage. Another microphone was set up in front of the stage.

The introductions went on until 10:37. Some people spoke for a long time, particularly a white guy who was said he didn’t know how to “reach out to minority communities” to

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pitch his writing class (a man responded, we're here). I introduced myself as well, with people telling me to speak up, as being from Teachers College and wanting to know about innovative programs. A few people went after me, and someone finally interrupted the introductions to give the microphone to a young woman to make an announcement. I'm not sure if it was the man on stage or the man in the orange shirt who was fiddling around importantly as people introduced themselves who asked for the microphone.

They "started" the meeting with a middle-aged white man in a light colored suit from UAI/NYC talking about arts grants.

<http://www.nyfa.org/level2.asp?id=104&fid=1>

Ted Berger said that they wanted people who identified as "artists of color," and that they gave out over \$200,000 to artists who call themselves "African Americans." [He gave an actual number, not the vague number I have listed.] This got him applause. He went on, "You have to self-identify as an artist of color. No DNA test." This got him laughter.

He mentioned a series of application seminars beginning August 27, "again, this is all on the press release," then Sept 6, Sept 17, and Sept 19. [Here either my notes are incorrect or Ted Berger got the date wrong] August 27 at 10am, Sept 6 at 6pm, Sept 17 at 6:30pm, and Sept 19 at 6:30pm. [The first HAA class is on Aug 30.] Berger jokes about the web-based application, take from me, as an old guy, it's not too hard. [These seminars are to help people fill out the application. Immediately I wonder if this is an opportunity for us.]

[The crowd is very very different from Baby College; older, conveying both education and relative wealth, less diverse in terms of ethnicity and religion. Men in dashikis and women in headwraps, but nobody who seems "African" in the sense of recent immigration. Some American Muslims, who knew various greetings. In other words, a very "African American" crowd, one that I might have mistaken for "typical Harlem" before spending time walking around. Just Ted Berger, the writing teacher, a musician, and me who were not African American, with the possible exception of Latinos/mixed people.]

The woman sitting on the audience's right, Linda, started speaking. She also mentioned the movie Talk to Me now playing at the Magic Johnson Theater. When she said it was closing in a few days there was a collective gasp, and I'm not sure if people thought maybe she meant the theater, rather than the movie, was closing.

The man onstage echoed her endorsement of Talk to Me, telling us that he just came back from the National Black Theater Festival in Salem, North Carolina. He praised that experience, then said "when Linda mentioned Don Cheadle in Talk to Me, Harlem Arts Alliance also sent out a blast," which I understood as a blast of publicity. He said that the director [or producer?] of Talk to Me hired "one of ours," Jamal Joseph. He told us a bit about Jamal Joseph's history, including being in the Black Panthers, to serving 11 years, and "now a professor and tenured chair at Columbia University," of the film school. This also garnered applause from the audience.

He then talked about the studio that put out Talk to Me as an important studio that produces ethnic specific films and important roles for African Americans. He mentioned that he was “trying to get this guy here to talk so you guys can meet him.” At the time I understood this to be Jamal Joseph, but maybe it’s the producer of Talk to Me.

He also said, “When Linda spoke of Advocacy Week in October [...] there’s different segments of our community are very segregated. We need to talk to each other.” He implied that the HAA meetings are a time to do so, emphasizing that they did not take a summer break. He said that someone had told him, I’ll see you in September, he told them that they were meeting in July and August. To scattered applause he described the sharing of information as “timely.”

Next a large light-skinned woman also from Columbia University came up to the mic. My notes list her as the executive VP of something I did not catch, named Marsha. Staff listings for the office of Government and Community Affairs lists a Marcia Sells as AVP for Program Development and Initiatives.

<http://www.columbia.edu/cu/gca/vp-staff/staff.html>

She mentioned a Community Board 9 meeting about the proposed expansion for August 15, which garnered laughter, since the date apparently is already packed with other events. She prefaced her announcement by saying something acknowledging that people might not hear what she wants to say. She said the meeting would be at the Manhattanville Community Center at the Manhattanville Houses. “I’m not saying you have to come on and support Columbia [but] it is very important that the community of artists come out and speak.” She said the meeting was starting at 6pm “until it finishes,” which “could be 11, 12,” and to laughter, “or 1 in the morning.”

Next, Alethia Brown, listed on the agenda as “Curator, Culture Collective,” got up to the mic. She wore a black halter top with a glittery broach and black cropped pants, and had her dreads or braids piled up and tied on top of her head. She spoke for a few minutes, plugging various shows. Various others got up and plugged their artwork and shows. Someone introduced all the visual artists whose work was on display: a “mixed media” piece entitled “Brazilian Tree Goddess,” of a woman wearing a garment of leaves; wooden plaques, which earned a plug from the announcer to call on him when in need of a sign for an event; portraits, including one of a local Harlem artist; an acrylic on canvas, and so on. She remarked that Aug 16 “seems to be a hot date,” telling us that Creole Restaurant is having an appreciation party for her work. This will be free appetizers and a silent auction of one of her posters. She mentioned that it is walking distance from the Catholic Museum [another event?]. In response to a man’s question from the audience, she gave the address to the restaurant: 118th and 3rd Ave, 2167 3rd Ave.

Next two women came to the mike from Walker Communications. Tiffany, who was dressed in a suit, mentioned that “one of the projects I am working on is audience development” for “a black opera at the Lincoln Center.” “New York City Opera is presenting this,” and they are “beginning to do outreach in communities of color.” She mentioned that some people may remember X at the Met a while ago, and says “this

opera is different.” She tells us, “Toni Morrison is the librettist.” [I am not sure why this opera is different; a google search turns up that NYC Opera also produced *X: The Life and Times of Malcolm X*. Tony Davis, composed the music based on a story written by his brother, and cousin Thulani Davis wrote the libretto. My first thought, in seeing this posh woman talk about the Lincoln Center like it’s so great, is that the opera she is promoting is supposed to be “real art” in a way that X was not. This may be unfair.]

<http://www.nea.gov/national/gav/timeline.html>

<http://books.google.com/books?id=7Q0wrZSf0XgC&pg=PA91&lpg=PA91&dq=metropolitan+opera+malcolm+x&source=web&ots=RT7IG3n3sB&sig=d8BBnY6GzDVT7LR1CTp1CtyTm1I#PPA92,M1>

<http://www.margaretgarner.org/>

She continues to talk about the opera, *Margaret Garner*, as based on *Beloved* by Toni Morrison, around the theme of whether they were people or property. She says that when she read the book she didn’t know it was based on a real event. Margaret Garner went on trial and was convicted, “because she killed the property of her slave master.” She says that Toni Morrison says that *Beloved* was about forgetting the past, *Margaret Garner* is about remembering. This earned applause. [Now that the introductions are over, and it’s mostly more polished speakers, the meeting reminds me of celebratory mood of awards shows such as Essence, NAACP, etc.] The opera will run from Sept 11 to 29. She mentions that Bernice Johnson Reagon from Sweet Honey In the Rock will be speaking on Sept 16. Toni Morrison will also show up for a Q&A on Sept 16. She mentions that there is “a wide wide price range,” and people can get 15% off or 10% off. “We only need 20 people to get a group,” telling people to get their churches together to see it. “A great opportunity for schools,” especially those studying “the classic of Medea because it’s the same story.”

[This organization, Walker International Communications, is quite interesting, carving itself a niche with mainstream outfits that want more diverse audiences and groups perceived as ethnically based who want broader audiences. The website reads that the founder “has raised over \$12 million in earned income promoting the arts to multicultural communities.”]

The other woman, who I think is Natalie, wore a black jacket over a grey shirt. She introduced Fontina, who wore a black scoop neck t-shirt, dark jeans, and a silvery headband. Fontina had a British accent and was very thin. She announced musical and dance performances at W. 50th St every Wednesday from 12-2. This week was a Haitian performance, next week would be reggae, “up until the end of September,” and “absolutely free.” She gave a website, cccadi.org. Franklin H. Williams Caribbean Cultural Center African Diaspora Institute (CCCADI). She continued with another event on Sunday. “Every year we collaborate with the Lincoln Center. This year [we’re doing] a boogaloo event.” She described music from the 70s, Latino and R&B, celebrating the “diversity among our communities.”

Next a slender woman with her head shaved bald spoke. She wore black large black triangle earrings and chains dangling past her shoulders. I can’t read my notes on what

she said, but she mentioned “Three More Tenors” (an online search reveals it’s Three Mo Tenors), saying “My God, I love them. They’re so handsome.” She also was promoting a show called “Who Do Love,” and she emphasized that the artist graduated from Harvard and Columbia, works at XM radio, writes, edits, is “amazing.” [I get the sense of class dynamics, that some people in the audience would appreciate name-dropping but others would not.] She seems to win the audience back when she describes the play, a woman who falls in love with a musician who has a woman in each town he plays in. Women in the audience make “Mm mm” sounds. The heroine of the play wants to find out “how to get a piece of him,” and the promoter comments, “I don’t know why,” implying that the woman is not acting right. The audience laughs. She mentions that the Harlem Brewing Company is partnering with this show so there will be free beer. This also gets approving noises from the audience, mostly from male members.

At some point the man in the orange shirt makes an announcement, asking if anyone has lost a recorder, maybe starting to tape the meeting. A woman sitting behind me raises her hand, and he walks up the middle aisle to hand it to her. It’s Walkman-sized, taping on full-size tapes.

Next is Jonna Gill, who makes documentary films. “I’m here to show a trailer to my documentary.” The people sitting onstage get up and move their chairs. Two men and a young man get up to move the table. They flip the red art pieces down before they move the table, to prevent them from toppling over or off the table. A heavysset woman in a blue shirt moves the Brazilian Tree Goddess piece, which is the right-most piece of artwork. Later, after the trailer starts, she moves the next closest piece.

The lights dim for the trailer, Lady of All Nations. I note that there are still people arriving as the trailer plays at 11:23am. I find the trailer dull, too much text and stills and no action. [It turns out that she has not actually finished the documentary; this trailer is meant to get her money to finish it. I believe she’s already filmed much of it, but I can’t understand why none of that made it into this trailer.] She says that she made the trailer in 2 days for this meeting. She speaks about the process after the trailer, especially when the man onstage (whose table was reset after the trailer was over) invites her back to tell the audience who the Lady is. (At least in the back of the theater, where I was sitting, several people named her as the Madonna.) This documentary traces what she learns about the Lady when she experiences a miracle in Italy. She went to visit Rome first, “because all roads lead to Rome,” and got sidetracked into some small town, where she felt a profound sense of peace while in a small church. Someone told her that she had been standing in the very spot where the Lady had done something. Then, she began experiencing a series of small miracles, getting everything she prayed for.

Meanwhile a new white man comes in and sits in the second row. Next, the man onstage introduces Lamar Lovelace as Lamar Love-less, from the Office of Government and Community Affairs at Columbia. Mr. Lovelace corrects the man onstage: “Love-lace.” [I find this funny, as if the HAA guy pronounced his name disparagingly since he was from Columbia.] Mr. Lovelace has light skin the color of old parchment and a light beard. He wears a red polo shirt, dark jeans, and a brownish newsboy cap. He promotes an event

called “Shall We Dance,” which includes a dance lesson. He points out that many dance events in the city give people an “opportunity to dance, but you don’t actually *learn* to dance.” He jokes that “everything’s on the 16th”, and mentions that the event will also show *Favela Rising*, a movie.

The man onstage says, “We have a busy 16th. Let’s go on to one of our younger members, Jamal.” The young man who mumbled when introducing himself moves to the front of the stage. “Before you start,” the man onstage says, “tell us how old you are. Because everyone says we don’t reach out to our young people.” [I find this defensiveness/justification hilarious, since this meeting is so clearly dominated by older, established people, some very high-falutin’ who name-drop.]

Jamal Hinnant of Youth Poets International describes his organization as “run completely by youth.” [I always wonder, when do young people describe themselves as “youth”? When incorporating and trying to find funding and support from adults while differentiating themselves as not-adults?] He describes it as a “nonprofit organization dedicated to teaching people to express themselves, to express themselves through poetry.” He tells the audience, “We’ve made documentary films, books, DVDs, CDs, we’ve had no funding. 100 hours of community service. We’re dedicated to showing that there are positive youth out there.” He then asks if people know of performance spaces, events, funding, etc., conveying that members are eager to perform. He also promotes a show coming up on August 8 (joking that it’s not on the 16th). “I’m a native of New Jersey,” he says, naming a town whose name I don’t catch, telling the audience that the show will be held there. “Tickets are only \$20.” A woman from the audience asks if we can get there by PATH. He says you have to take another train from PATH.

He then performs a poem. “The poem I’m going to do is, Things My Grandmother Taught Me.” This earns a warm reception. His delivery is passionate and powerful, and he earns a standing ovation from most audience members. People take pictures of him as he performs. The poem is well-crafted, returning at the end to allusions made earlier, eliciting sighs of appreciation. He makes another plea for help in booking performances, saying, “We’re tryin’ to get to any platform.”

Another poet takes the stage, an older man with white hair and a cane. He wore a top that seemed to be a cross between a dashiki and tie-dye: purple dots. He also wore a black kufi skullcap, large glasses, and gray sideburns. He declared, “We have so many beautiful young people. We have to reach out to them.” The crowd is approving. “We’ve lost so many.” The mood turns quiet. He performs, speaking more rhythmically than the young man. He gets a standing ovation from about half the crowd.

Next the man onstage says, “I’d like to call Kanene Holder for her announcement.” She is a very thin young woman in a hot pink hoodie with a black and white bra or tank top peeking out over a short denim skirt. She also wears black glasses. She says, “Good morning everyone,” and people say “Good morning” back to her. “I’m going to start with my [inaudible] so you know.” She smacks her mouth as she speaks. Behind me a woman

snorts, “Sound like a Valley girl.” What would you do, she asks the audience, if you were told [something racist and ignorant]?

She tells the audience that she grew up Jamaican and Trinidadian in Flatbush, not African American, so she didn’t know racial stereotypes, fried chicken, watermelon, until she got to Spellman. Her piece is about “how I dealt with all those racial slurs without knowing they were racial slurs.”

[Learning to be African American]

She mentions a couple of performance spaces in Harlem and elsewhere, saying that her show will be at 37th St. When she says she will perform in blackface there is another collective gasp. “Black Like You” is a party celebrating her work at the Shrine, with a Coon Contest and her friend DJing who went on tour with somebody famous. August 12, 3:37-6:00. Not CP time, she says, to laughs, 3:37. This will be at Adam Clayton Powell between 133 and 134th streets. She tells people to bring their Coon Confessions. She thanks the Urban Artists Initiative and a couple of other funders. She jokes that people can bring money, although admission is free, because her funding is running out. She gives people a myspace address.

[Contrast with young man and other artists trying to find funding.]

Next the man onstage calls Kojo, asking, “Kojo, did I miss you at North Carolina?” Kojo replies yes. He comes to the front of the stage. He greets people with something that sounds like “Ecaro,” then a second greeting, then “Namaste.” I do not know what the first two terms mean or what language they are, but several people responded. He continued by saying something like, “I don’t know if we already did this because I was late.” He talked about Brother Sekou Sundiata and wished for a moment of silence. The man onstage indicated that he should proceed. Kojo asked the audience to stand. He spoke of the man, mentioning that he was a poet and professor at the New School.

People start leaving just before noon. The man onstage mentions that Harlem Week is the only week that lasts a month, to laughter. He says there are 114 different events before ending on Sept 10. He describes first Mondays (HAA meetings) as “sustenance,” saying that some people take a personal day in order to come to the meeting. He thanks these people, and everyone, and closes the meeting.

[I did not know that it was Harlem Week until this meeting. Hm!]

After meeting:

Salaam teaches art in schools as an independent contractor. I approached her after the meeting, since she had handed me a brochure after I introduced myself. She says that

everything I need to know is in the brochure, then proceeds to talk for a few minutes. I ask her how she is funded and she says through schools.

She tells me she is a product of the New York City public schools so she knows what she didn't get and what these kids need. She says she doesn't want to make it a race thing, but the teachers don't know how to reach the kids. She says that she uses song, dance, acting, etc. to teach the material. Then the teachers ask for her. I tell her that it sounds like she's doing what learning theory says, using a lot of different ways for kids to learn. She says that dance is sequencing, geometry. She gives the example of telling the kids to form a half circle. They don't know what it is, she doesn't tell them, they figure it out. She mentions something about most people who aren't dancers don't know what she's talking about. [Maybe when she mentioned sequencing? I didn't catch everything she said.]

She started with her two biological daughters. She says in an aside that she mentors a lot of young women and has 16 children (foster? Adopted?) she took in. With her daughters, the Black History months celebration was demeaning, all about slavery. All of the African American children were cast as slaves. She told them she was going to organize the performance for her daughter's class the following year. After that the principal asked her to work with other classes. She says that she was putting together a celebration for 10 years of work, then realized she's been doing it much longer.

I ask her if she's willing to talk some more with me and she assents. I ask if I can pass along her information to put in the IUME database, and she gives me another brochure.

Next I talk with the man onstage (the other two have left). I introduce myself again and he remembers I'm from Teachers College. I tell him I want to sit in on some of the classes they're offering to help people with the grant application process, and he tells me to talk to Linda. He then mentions Columbia and I confirm, Lovelace, right? He says that he wants to have students from Teachers College come into some of their workshops. I tell him I'm interested in that work. He says the Harlem Arts Alliance wants to develop a relationship with Teachers College, and I say I'm just a researcher but I can introduce him to some of the people who do arts education. He asks me for a card, and I hand it to him. He tells me he'll be calling me.

Next I make my way outside the auditorium, to the table covered with flyers. A smaller table also holds flyers and I pick up a few. Linda comes to the smaller table while I'm there and I tell her I'm interested in coming to the meetings. She tells me to call her.

Next the white-haired white-looking woman stops me. It turns out she probably is white, or mostly white, with green eyes. She is a jazz musician and has done some work with young people. We chat for a bit, about the importance of music and what it can do for people. Again I mention how important this work is especially in the age of reduced funding. [Next time I come to a meeting, I should say that we are working on papers that we hope will increase support for funding for arts and other programs in schools.] She asks me for a card and keeps talking. When she starts talking about her life and career, I ask her if she'd be interested in speaking with me some more and she agrees quite

enthusiastically. We exchange cards. A woman approaches her and I take my leave, letting her know that I will contact her.