The Black and White Museum

Ferdinand Dennis

Follow this and additional works at: https://ro.uow.edu.au/kunapipi

Recommended Citation
The Black and White Museum

Abstract
It was originally called The Emporium and while it bore that name it remained a curious but much underused retail outlet on Kingsland High Street. During those early days its proprietor, Papa Legba, could often be seen standing at its glass door looking wistfully at the indifferent passers-by making their way to MacDonalds, Kentucky Fried Chicken, Ridley Road market or the shopping arcade. The Emporium's crowded and untidy window display of books, plaster icons, bottled herbs and lucky charms were not on anybody's shopping list. Papa Legba was new to the retailing business but he was no fool. Squat and stocky with a complexion similar to the colour of cinnamon bark, he always wore a white ankle length Kaftan; and his thick convex spectacles, slight stoop, huge forehead and an untidy head of grey hair~ gave him an air of owlish wisdom. There was substance to this appearance: Papa Legba had travelled to many lands and possessed the gift of tongues. He spoke flawless English, all the major European languages; and so many African languages and dialects that he himself often forgot his knowledge of a tongue until somebody addressed him in it.

This serial is available in Kunapipi: https://ro.uow.edu.au/kunapipi/vol20/iss1/9
The Black and White Museum

It was originally called The Emporium and while it bore that name it remained a curious but much underused retail outlet on Kingsland High Street. During those early days its proprietor, Papa Legba, could often be seen standing at its glass door looking wistfully at the indifferent passers-by making their way to MacDonalds, Kentucky Fried Chicken, Ridley Road market or the shopping arcade. The Emporium's crowded and untidy window display of books, plaster icons, bottled herbs and lucky charms were not on anybody's shopping list. Papa Legba was new to the retailing business but he was no fool. Squat and stocky with a complexion similar to the colour of cinnamon bark, he always wore a white ankle length Kaftan; and his thick convex spectacles, slight stoop, huge forehead and an untidy head of grey hair, gave him an air of owlish wisdom. There was substance to this appearance: Papa Legba had travelled to many lands and possessed the gift of tongues. He spoke flawless English, all the major European languages; and so many African languages and dialects that he himself often forgot his knowledge of a tongue until somebody addressed him in it. So, after much thought over many nights, Papa Legba decided that The Emporium's shortage of customers was due to its lack of a clear-cut identity; so he carried out a number of changes and renamed it the Black and White Museum.

Within twenty-four hours of effecting this name change Papa Legba's establishment began to reap the rewards. A steady stream of customers wandered in. They browsed through the books, which were stacked in floor-to-ceiling wall shelves, and ranged from bestsellers like Alex Haley's 'Roots' to antique tomes with titles like 'Stolen History' and 'Narrative of a Survivor of the Middle Passage'; some were brand new, their stiff virginal spines waiting to be broken in by new readers; others were dog-eared with yellowing mildewed pages and reeked of abandonment.

Several notices on the bookshelves invited customers to borrow books for a token fee and proof of their name and address; and promised to secure, for a small deposit, within a month, any book published anywhere in Africa or the African diaspora over the past fifty years; three months for anything older.

But the Black and White Museum was far more than a bookshop. Its back room was a bazaar of African artifacts: ebony masks; statuettes made from ivory, ebony and makonde; lignum vitae walking sticks; malacite brooches,
earrings, necklaces and bracelets; bronze replicas of the Benin mask; fertility
dolls from Ghana; clay figures from the Nok people of Nigeria; soapstone
carvings from Kenya and Zimbabwe; metal horns from Hausalnd;
marimbas from Cameroon; cloths with elaborate patterns from the Congo;
Lagos and Dakar designed clothes in colours of indigo and gold; and
seashell necklaces from a small village on the Guinea coast where it was
believed that the shells contained the souls of enslaved Africans who had
drowned themselves rather than suffer the horrors of the middle passage. A
notice above the doorway leading to the backroom read ‘Please feel free to
browse’. Like the other notices, it was signed Mr P. Legba.

Papa Legba showed surprising generosity to these early customers. If a
book, a carving or a piece of jewellery caught somebody’s fancy, he charged
only what the purchaser could afford. Urging them to take the item, he
would beam on these astonished customers a most beautiful smile of perfect
white teeth – which were either dentures, expensive crowns or the result of
orthodontic knowledge unknown to the rest of mankind – and he would say
to these sceptical customers: ‘It’s your history, take it and pay me what you
can’.

Soon word of Papa Legba’s kindness began to circulate. But it was
satisfied customers who really brought the Black and White Museum fame.
Hortense Smith was one of the early enthusiasts. Hortense was a
long-suffering Jamaican mother of six children. She chanced up on the Black
and White Museum when she was going through one of the periodically
difficult phases that had been marking her life since she married Leroy
Smith, a shiftless, drunken foulmouth, violent, womanizer. Not being much
of a book reader, Hortense wandered to the back of the shop, and there she
discovered a small recess crammed with glass jars containing a variety of
herbs, barks and powders. According to the information on the jars, there
were herbs for physical ailments such as arthritis, lumbago, eczema and
psoriasis; dried barks from the baobab fruit for curing emotional problems
such as bereavement and troubled hearts. There were toxic powders for
eliminating tyrannical spouses or lovers, zombie powder for zombifying
your enemy, dried leaves that would give you courage, and herbs that gave
you freedom.

Hortense Smith expressed interest in some straightbackgrass, a herb which
the label on the jar informed her was particularly effective for reforming
wayward husbands. Papa Legba weighed out four ounces on a gold scale
and instructed Hortense to grind it up into a powder then mix the powder
with her husband’s shedded skin, and boil for three hours. The resultant
brew should then be consumed by the subject within the next twenty-four
hours. If, after a month, she wasn’t happy with the result – an industrious,
faithful, home-loving husband – Papa Legba promised to give her a
complete refund.

Hortense Smith returned five weeks later looking younger and happier
and gushing with praise for the straightbackgrass she had purchased. It had
not only turned her errant husband into a temperate, affectionate companion, it had made him into something of a sexual athlete who was submissively responsive to the starting pistol of her physical desires. She was accompanied by two friends, Mildred Marshall and Esther Harris, who wanted some of what Hortense had bought, the exact same thing. These satisfied customers became walking, talking adverts for the Black and White Museum.

Soon customers started arriving from all over London. Some days a long queue stretched outside as far as Ridley Road market; people even stood for hours in the rain and the cold for the opportunity to purchase the Museum's potent panaceas. Naturally, once they were inside the shop many of these customers became curious about its other goods, the books and the African artifacts. And when they had bought their herbs along with, say, an ivory earring or a goatskin drum, some noticed the red arrow pointing to the basement and the words: 'The Middle Passage'.

Initially only the most intrepid customers ventured down – the slimy, rickety wooden stairs. At the bottom they found hundreds of yards of rough cast iron chain, padlocks, leg clamps, necklocks and neck-rings in various styles, iron masks, cat-o-nine tails, branding irons, wooden clamps and leather thongs, sweat boxes, treadmills and torture racks. Everything was encrusted with dried blood. A notice invited customers to take advantage of a special introductory rate for the 'Middle Passage Week-End'.

The first fifty adventurous souls, an equal mixture of blacks and whites, had a hell of a time. For forty-eight hours they laid on their backs, head to toe, side by side in a dank, damp, fetid, sub-basement. By some hidden mechanical device, the sub-basement floor simulated the rolling and listing of a slave ship in the middle passage. It was mercilessly hot and every hour on the hour, sprinklers built into the ceilings sprayed the visitors with cold, salted water. And throughout all this the pain-filled voices of men, women and children issued from concealed loudspeakers. Those who needed to urinate or defecate had to do so where they lay. Once a day Papa Legba served a meal of foul-smelling, maggot infested gruel. A few traumatized adventurers emerged babbling in strange languages, some of which defied even Mr Legba's encyclopaedic linguistic knowledge. To aid their recovery he sold them sachets of dried elephant's testicles, which he assured them would restore their memory of who they were before the 'Middle Passage Week-End'. But the majority of people walked away unhurt; they found it a uniquely invigorating, a cathartic experience.

Indeed, one Englishman was so moved that when he had stopped shaking his head and muttering 'The horror, the horror, I didn't know,' he turned to a group of Caribbean men and asked them for forgiveness.

The Trinidadian in the group said: 'Forgiveness? Sure man. Let we get some girls, a bottle of rum, and go jump up at carnival.'

The Guyanese said: 'Sure, I'll forgive you. But we have to negotiate forgiveness. Let's talk about reparation.'
The Barbadian said, with great nobility and magnanimity: ‘That’s history; the soil from which a better tomorrow may grow. There’s nothing to forgive.’

The Jamaican, when asked for forgiveness by the Englishman, said: ‘Forgive you? Me would never forgive you, not on the beaches, not in the fields, not in the hills.’ The Jamaican then threw a wild punch at the Englishman and had to be restrained by his friends.

The Jamaican’s name was Winston Hill and the Middle Passage Week-End was something of a life-changing experience. He gave up his job with British Telecom, bolted some steel doors onto his twentieth floor apartment overlooking Hackney Downs, started growing dreadlocks, and turned his flat into a pirate radio station called Maroons FM. It played nothing but plugs for the Black and White Museum, and Juju, dub and Nyabinghi music interspersed with the terrifying sound of Mau Mau warriors initiating new recruits. Unfortunately, Winston Hill’s Maroons FM went out on the same waveband as Radio Three, and after much protest from that station’s outraged and influential listeners, the authorities started a campaign to close it down, without offending its thousands of black listeners and risking a riot. First they tried to trick him. They wrote to Mr Hill informing him that he would have to move out because they were planning to demolish the high-rise block where he lived. Winston Hill wrote back saying that they should go ahead and demolish the other nineteen floors, and leave him where he was. Eventually, a Chief Inspector Blair Orwell, leading what became known as Operation Big Brother, succeeded in removing Winston Hill from his apartment and silencing Maroons FM. Winston Hill was given a choice between going into a mental asylum or being deported to another country. He chose to be deported to somewhere in Africa, but within a month he turned up at Heathrow airport claiming refuge from the madness he had witnessed in Lagos, Nigeria.

Cyril Baker heard about the Black and White Museum on Maroons FM. A fat timid filing clerk who had daily and stoically endured racial abuses from his colleagues and neighbours, Cyril Baker first visited Papa Legba’s establishment to buy an extract of lion’s liver to give him courage. After several doses had failed to rid him of his cowardice, Papa Legba persuaded him to try the Middle Passage Week-End. It worked. He emerged leaner, fitter and mean; very mean. On his first day back at work Cyril wore a T-shirt with the message: ‘I survived the middle passage, so don’t fuck with me.’ Some months later Cyril gave up his job, became Papa Legba’s unpaid assistant and dedicated his time to publicizing the Black and White Museum.

Cyril’s publicity efforts, combined with those of Maroons FM, brought, so many enthusiastic customers for the ‘Middle Passage Week-End’ that Papa Legba became greedy. He began to ignore the maximum capacity of the sub-basement, which was seventy-five. One weekend he packed three hundred people in there. This feat was achieved by building four new layers of shelves, thus heightening the authenticity of the Middle Passage
experience. Sadly, thirty people almost suffocated to death in one session, forcing the proprietor to once again observe the maximum number. Far from adversely affecting attendance that near fatal mishap blessed The Black and White Museum with notoriety which boosted the number of visitors. Whole families booked in for the weekends and people came back for second and third trips. Like the earliest visitors, they claimed it helped to soothe some troubled part of their psyche. Mr Legba took their money and smiled his beautiful smile.

The impact of the Black and White Museum was felt way beyond its modest High Street site. Children on nearby housing estates replaced familiar games, like doctors and nurses, with new ones, like slave and slavemaster. And it inspired a new style of clothes. Young men and women could be seen standing on street corners in ragged half-length trousers, shredded shirts, iron necklaces that hung down to the ground, leg clamps, and leg chains attached to iron balls or chunks of logs. The wealthier exhibitionists favoured tattered linen and silk, and gold and silver-plated chains. Couples showed their affection for each other by chaining themselves together. The nightclubs now sweated to new dance crazes like the ‘Lashing’, which involved one dancer holding a cat-o’-nine tails and pretending to whip the other dancer who twisted and writhed in rhythmic pretend agony. Another dance was called ‘Escape’ and entailed the dancer dashing about wildly with bulging eyes apparently streaming with tears of fear. The strangest of these dance hall trends though, was the Middle Passage Bogle, in which the dancer lay on the floor, hands pressed to his side, convulsed madly and frothed at the mouth and all in perfect timing to the furiously fast, bass-filled music known as jungle.

Now, of course, it’s well known that black folk are major trendsetters in western popular culture. What ‘Black youths’ wear on the streets today are seen on the catwalks tomorrow; the music they listen to in obscure nightclubs are heard on mainstream popshows months later. So it won’t surprise you to hear that white folk soon started copying these street trends inspired by the Black and White Museum. An ambitious starlet outraged television viewers when she appeared on an early evening chat show wearing crystal earrings in the shape of Ashanti fertility dolls and a dress of rusting chains which concealed little of her delightful body. That triggered a craze for similarly risqué dresses and skirts in what became known as the ‘slave style’. Though more polite circles preferred the euphemism ‘ethnic’.

When a disgruntled pop musician branded his forehead with the name of the record company which had tricked him into signing a ten-year contract, the entire music industry was swept with slave fever. Several successful new groups were launched. One consisted of four flaxen-hair young men from Manchester, known as ‘Al White and the Oyinbo Posse’. They had an international hit with ‘Mother Africa’, a terrible ballad lamenting mankind’s centuries old exile from the Edenic conditions of the rift valley. Another group, ‘Mazungos with Attitude’, had a phenomenally huge one-off rap hit
with a repetitive song called 'The Atlantic Crossing'. They subsequently disappeared, leaving rumours that they had drowned themselves in the Atlantic Ocean, though two members of the band were, some months later, spotted in a brothel in Mombassa, Kenya.

The manufacturers of a well-known brand of sports shoes got in on the act with trainers known as 'The Plantation', an especially rugged and heavy footwear which, by some curious device, made a rattling noise as the wearer walked. Not to be outdone, their closest market rivals launched 'The Runaway' with a multi-million pound advertising campaign using Lynford Christos dressed in shredded electric blue lycra tights and wearing the eponymous trainers which were distinguishable from that of their rivals by foot-long chains attached to the heels. On the more expensive version an iron ball was attached to one of the chains.

Meanwhile, back on the streets black folk, perhaps feeling that their culture had once again been stolen, were finding new styles and fashion. The Black and White Museum, the unacknowledged inspiration behind dance, music and clothes styles, suffered a reversal of fortune. Fickle fashion had moved on and Papa Legba was forced to close down. He sold his entire stock to a forward-looking Jamaican Jewish businessman called Carl Spencer Marks, who believed that the wheels of history always repeat themselves, the first time as tragedy, the second time as farce and the third time as fashion.

The site where the Black and White Museum once stood is now a huge restaurant specializing in nouvelle soul food. Hortense Campbell is now the Conservative MP for Milton Keynes. Cyril Baker is now head of the Universal African Church of Revelation and Redemption, which has branches in Liverpool, Bristol, Greenwich, and the Shetland Islands. Winston Hill is now, reportedly, an illegal immigrant in Brooklyn, New York, where he belongs to a fast-growing sect which regards Cuba as Zion, Fidel Castro as God, and Bill Gates, the head of Microsoft, as the Antichrist. And Papa Legba was last sighted in the Bahamas where he is believed to be investigating the scientific and commercial potential of the humble banana for producing an intelligence boosting drug.