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Always Occupy

By Edgar Nkosi White

And so I left Montserrat, a place of brief and merciful funerals. She does a good burial, Montserrat: The only place in the world where the barefoot gravedigger rules. He gets to choose the hymns sung, judge the quality of the choir's voices, and keeps up a running conversation as he joyfully sets about his work. Death isn't a sentence in Montserrat; it's a release. You see, in Montserrat when men die their spirits become goats and roam the hills and continue their conversations. As for the women, they become sheep and fowl and gossip to each other about the men who have slain them.

As for me, God was merciful when I was a child and so, He saw to it that I started my exile in America and not England. You see, England is a dreamless land, a land without dreams. What you're born to, you stay with. Whereas, America is a land of dreams and dreamers to dream them. Instead of dreams, England has pride and that pride helped her conquer the world.

Now I was returning to perform three of my plays in New York. It was almost a year I'd been away and New York, the city of cities, had changed. A year is a long time in New York. I learned that as soon as I went in search of Borders book store on 59th and Columbus Circle. I was quickly informed that Borders no longer existed, it was gone, gone not only from there but everywhere in The City: Borders had been sodomized and then eaten whole by Barnes and Noble and other bigger aggregates. They no longer existed in New York, and if you don't exist in New York you don't exist.

Fair enough. I went to Barnes and Noble instead. It gave me a refuge to gather myself before the battle ahead. You see, I had burned all bridges before me and changed plantations. I had moved from America to Montserrat, that small volcanic island on which I was born, a place that had never heard of winter. This return home was desertion and an unpardonable sin. Not that they loved me in Montserrat either but people always love you more when you're somewhere else. Bless them.

I had given the wrong answers to girlfriends and wives and so found myself homeless. I was a man without keys. But you see I'd rather be keyless in the world than to be clueless in the world.

Still, it was Spring and there was even hope of Summer. Barnes and Noble was a good place to start. There among the overpriced Starbuck's café-latte with exotic sounding names, I could line up my ducks like in a bathtub. There were endless books and magazines which would help me catch up on changes and Barnes and Noble itself, which was like a microcosm of New York.

You had tourists (those who dipped their snouts into their coffee cups), and the Blacks and Latinos who serviced them and for this received carfare allowance disguised as pay checks. You had the literate homeless (as distinct from the illiterate homeless who spent their day in parks). And then you had those who still had homes and so spent their time reading biographies of the rich and famous, mainly movie stars

or singers. You had also the young students from Julliard, the premier music school just a few blocks and several auditions away. Most of them were children of concert orchestra musicians, some of whom got to play at Lincoln Center, which was directly across the street from Barnes and Noble. All of this made the place ideal for gathering your forces. It was a good place from which to make phone calls to friends who wish you dead.

Now, it's important when calling friends and seeking refuge, not to sound desperate. This is more easily done while watching young pubescent nymphets (of which Barnes and Noble has an abundance) who already have fame in their eyes. And despite the fact that they have no money yet, their parents do, and their bodies give even the poor, hope. It's easy then to forget that a quarter of the population is surviving on dog and cat food. Scarcity only makes these young girls even more appealing.

You see, Barnes and Noble exists on the Hollywood system. In Hollywood, only ten percent of actors actually work. Yet this ten percent is enough to carry the other ninety. Likewise in the bookstore, only ten percent of people actually buy books and magazines, yet this is sufficient to keep the store open.

Now although most of my friends were vague and betrayed me, three stayed true, which was good because I didn't want to have to sleep in that park across from Barnes and Noble where, somewhere between fame and famine, I'd spent many a night half-sleeping.

Although I'd been away only a year, a lot had taken place. Wall Street, for example, had collapsed and managed to take half the world with it. Never before in the history of the world had so few mad men with power manage to effect the lives of so many. Not even Hitler and his boys had managed to alter the world as greatly. So this then was post-Armageddon America. I wanted to see for myself if what I'd read was true. So on my second day in New York I took the number 1 train to Wall Street.

Now Wall Street (that street walled by the sea), is a very personal thing with me because the first commodity ever sold there was: me. Consider Wall Street a betting shop where they made wagers on everything, even the Middle Passage.

The Stock Market is that great game of chance and trade which started with slavery but now dealt in houses and lives. And, thanks to Alfred Jones, something mystical was created, called *Hedge Funds*, made from tear drops and misery.

Banks were closing and men grew richer. Wall Street itself is an irony because it was once the first black ghetto, the first Harlem. There, graveyards abound.

So you can understand why I wanted to see their faces, this new crop of traders. I wanted to see if there was any sign of panic or remorse; but no, there was nothing. They were absolutely the same. They were still certain in their certainties; they still wore the same Brooks Brothers suits, and were still masters of the universe.

There was no cutting back in their lifestyles. The young lions still went outside at lunchtime in their striped shirts and bought ganja from the young Blacks and Latinos who dealt and dwelt there. They still gathered in front of office buildings, Goldman Sachs and 666 (the biblical number of the beast).

The only thing which was different was the small gathering of youth who called themselves **Occupy**. The traders didn't like them because they caused much too much attention. The common thinking was Occupy would only exist for a few days and then go away. They were just young and therefore they'd soon grow bored. Impatience is a young man's vice and patience an old man's solace. But they didn't just go away and so the problem now was how to make them disappear. With most groups you simply find the leaders and then you either buy or kill them. After all, wasn't that what the '60s was all about? Assassinations and betrayals and government sponsored infiltrations?

But this movement had no leader. So now how do you assassinate an idea? Still the Wall Street moguls were defiant. They had time and limitless resources, not just the entire New York Police Department, but their own security force as well, made up of Blackwater forces fresh from Iraq and mayhem. Now they stood guard behind the glass doors and made certain that the young barbarians wouldn't get pass the gate. Nothing could stop the Stock Market bell from ringing; not even Bin Laden.

So, yes their faces were still arrogant, the traders. But I'd seen that same arrogance on the faces of the elite on my own island of Montserrat before the volcano erupted. Those who had power and a sense of entitlement, mostly because of the estate system whereby wealthy land owners left property to their off-spring of color. (It doesn't really matter if you know your father; what matters is that he knows you and remembers.)

They too were certain in their certainties. They lived their many-mansioned lives in the sun, but what they hadn't reckoned on was a volcano erupting impolitely. Not even the Mafia (and yes, Dorothy, there really is such a thing as the Mafia), they too had big plans for sweet Montserrat. They were going to transform it to a drug haven complete with off-shore banking and other goodies. But not even the Mafia had ever imagined lava or pyroclastic flows coming down on you at over a hundred miles an hour and forcing people to evacuate half the island.

Now those same mansion houses are being occupied by feral pigs, goats and cattle, like some vision from Orwell's *Animal Farm*.

The Occupy movement had its base at Zuccotti Park, a space no larger than a school yard and yet which managed to attract world wide attention. What was so unusual was that you could actually hear the sound of thinking going on there.

Everyone had a chance to express an opinion without censure. It was a university without walls and the result amazed me. There was a hopefulness and expectation that I hadn't seen since the '60s. It was the kind of awakening you get the first time you hear a solo by Charlie Parker or Ornette Coleman with his "Free Jazz". Or the first time you saw an "Action painting" by Jackson Pollack, a sense that anything was possible. Pollack was the first American to take his instruction from the

Vodou art of Haiti instead of trying to copy dead European geniuses. He realized that it was the power released by the attack of paint on canvas which was the main thing and not just slavish imitation or reproduction.

So then what happened to that hope? I think it died at Kent State with the shooting down of students and the entrance of reality: The sudden realization that these people in uniform really don't wish you well. In fact, they might even kill you despite those pretty flowers in your hand.

The response was the '70s. Students, when faced with the choice of either becoming their fathers or being killed, chose the former. Wouldn't you? It's no accident that enrolment in Humanities courses plummeted and students chose accounting instead. Wall Street is the result of all those bright young ones coming to the realization that money is what the world is all about. And, of course, the Liberals helped by offering Wall Street the weapons. They used the good intentions of the American dream of owning your own home and turned it into an excuse for foreclosure and hedge funds. It was cleverly done and greed helped, as it always does. The very nature of Capitalism is "and all you can get away with." *Laissez Faire* has more to do with the basic nature of man, which is, as Hobbes says: "brutish."

All this came to me in Zuccotti Park as I searched in vain for a toilet.

I watched the Occupiers. I would have stayed there with them but I'd already slept in too many parks, and not always willingly. So I left them and went to Boston to hide and gather. But guess what? Occupy was there too.

Now, Boston is a secret and subtle place. It's never obvious like New York. It likes to leave lights on and curtains drawn. It's no wonder that the highest concentration of Montserratians in America live there. I think that's because Boston has the three things Montserratians are obsessed with most: education, religion and crime. Boston offers all three in abundance. There were more than three hundred bank robberies in Charlestown alone in one year, almost one a day, (the Irish found their own solution to the banking crisis) and so it was a perfect place for a Montserrat man to hide.

Boston is divided between the Irish and the Italians. They keep the crime and power between them. Not that the Irish and the Italians like each other, they don't, but they can at least unite in religion and can meet in Roman Catholic churches (which also provide excellent opportunities for money laundering). While the two groups may not like each other, they do on occasion marry. The second thing they agree on, beside Catholicism, is their total hatred of blacks.

Isn't it amazing we Blacks cause so many people to unite? This is an irony of God. Everyone hates us (including and especially we Blacks ourselves). As such, we've united the world. Even Chinese at a tender age learn the word: "Nigger." It may be the first word they learn in English and I think it's a requirement for proof of citizenship.

But to return to Boston, the Irish and the Italians owned most everything. What was left, the Polish owned. There is still a remnant of the old Boston money, of

course, Beacon Hill and all that good stuff. They're dying off slowly though and are seldom seen in public. However, their grandchildren can and a lot of them are in Occupy.

I had to put a play together but it's funny, this writing business. You can only do it alone and apart and you have to be careful when committing acts of art. You need darkness but still enough light to see the page. Like a Jazz club.

I neither drank rum nor smoked herb all the time I was in exile. Why waste God's gifts if there's nothing of beauty to look at?

Not that Boston wasn't pretty (it even tried sunsets and dawns). And what it lacked in love it made up for in history. But I never felt at home there. I played no drums there but the flute instead. The flute is an instrument people can forgive. The drums bring too many spirits.

Boston had its own spirits to deal with: Its tidy colonial houses with witchcraft in the woodwork, houses tight as Christianity. Perhaps they brought it with them on the Mayflower. I don't know, but witchcraft was definitely there along with the remnants of piracy. Whenever I see water and ships I think slavery. Boston has a lot of water and a lot of ships. The American Revolution starts there but ends in New York. You can transform slavery into many things: Sometimes into universities, sometimes into banks and even sometimes into churches and museums.

It was interesting to see how many times the name Winthrop came up in Massachusetts. He was the first governor and a good slaver. Then, as now, you needed money to run for office and we were everyone's opportunity but our own, like sand upon the shore.

So far so dull but then there are visions of healthy young white girls in cotton panties, jogging along the Charles River. Girls from Radcliffe (called "Cliffies" and the pursuit of them is called searching for Clifflie-cotton). It seems as if they're always on their way to Lacrosse practice or something. And they're always carrying those nice long sticks (which make excellent weapons by the way).

Girls blonde and young; I mean blonde and impossibly young like Grace Kelly was young in her early movies before she became Princess Grace of Monaco: The perfect distraction for a not so young man from the Caribbean.

Boston is a very healthy city, unlike New York. Sports abound. So it's easy for men from the Caribbean to get lost there among the Lotus-eaters. The women make excellent trophy wives. It takes a while to learn that the ivy-league universities are really just another plantation. Reality is always just beyond the gate, always just a ghetto away.

What's interesting is that more and more women are getting doctorates and are excelling in both the sciences and law. For over a century, women in Boston have been fighting to prove that they are at least as intelligent as men. The problem is that women are not only *as* intelligent but more (usually much more) intelligent, and they know it.

As a result they are gobbling up all the degrees. And so men in academia suddenly find themselves under occupation, and feel seriously threatened, especially in a non-existent job market. We've found a solution to that problem though, by making certain women never become more than glorified secretaries, regardless of qualifications. We don't care if they are Nobel Laureates, the same rules apply. Always confine them to clerical work. That may be why so many women have joined the Occupy movement. The same reason women were in the forefront of the Middle East Arab awakening, the Jasmine Spring.

Unfortunately, once the Arab men woke they noticed the women and tried to force them back to where they belong, in their box, hidden behind their veils.

So there was a lot of thought going on in Boston. Thought, drugs and crime.

Oxycondon was the drug of choice and came in from Canada and Amsterdam. It had almost replaced heroin. Almost, but not quite. Nothing will ever replace heroin, not as long as we're in Afghanistan where poppy is so easily available and plentiful as yachts sailing along the Charles River. But now it was time to leave Boston and go deal with my play in New York.

I had no yacht so instead I took one of those Chinese buses that charge half the price of Greyhound, and that will soon drive them out of business. I started rehearsals at New Federal Theatre which was, thank God, just a few streets away from Chinatown. I didn't have far to walk and there was always the food to look forward to for solace. The producer was Woodie King, the last of the black giant producers of Black Theatre in America. It was he who started people like Denzel Washington and Morgan Freeman and Billy Dee Williams (who is also from Montserrat, by the way). Woodie King gave them all a stage to act on. And as for me, he knew me before I did.

So I was performing my play *Trance*, which was about Langston Hughes. It was a producer's dream because you only had to pay one actor: me.

Now, my first (and best) agent, Helen Merrill, taught me some interesting things about theatre. Helen, who had known both Brecht and Paul Robeson personally, had experienced the madness of Germany during World War II. Maybe that was why she chain smoked Camel cigarettes every waking moment of her life. She always said:

"Edgar, to hell with dialectics. People will do anything for a piece of meat, even kill each other. Never forget that when you write. Don't get lost in the clouds."

Well Langston Hughes had spent a lot of time in the kitchens of the world. He always wrote about food. He always talked about food in his writing because he lived the early part of his life searching for it. "Amazing what you can do with mustard greens seven days a week. You see life differently."

When theatre is done right a power is unleashed. That unleashing of power, I call **Trance**. The performance allowed me to sing my soul. I wanted a director because a good director gives the actor permission to be better than he is. He functions like a priest in a ceremony and focuses energy and light. I chose Ronnie

Clanton from **The Actor's Studio**. The simple set consisted of a huge photograph of Langston Hughes and the sound of the sea.

My first experience of theatre was the church. Maybe that's why I take it so seriously. I saw that something happened when the Priest raised the chalice. He was more than himself. The Priest occupies the church. The lifting of the host is the transformation of man to spirit. As in Vodou, there is always a war taking place between spirit and the body, a struggle between rider and the horse. When the rider takes control the spirit is freed.

It's no accident that most theatres started as churches. There is The Actors Studio, New Dramatists and New Federal Theatre, which is still housed in an active church.

I found a room in Brooklyn to park myself. It was somewhere in the desert of East New York. Vermont Avenue. I travelled there by night. Like a thief. Which was good because I got a chance to see the homeless who slept dressed *in* subway platforms. I kept thinking of what Brendan Behan, the Irish writer, said: "You want to help the poor, don't join them." They were bent like wire or else they lay prostrate, feet propped on the seats, hands clutching their crotch in an effort to protect the one bit of real estate they still owned.

So I lived in this rooming house. I and the four other cell-mates who lived there were all West Indian. What made it bearable was that most worked nights and mostly in hospitals. (West Indians occupy hospitals like bees a hive. The Health Industry is primarily Caribbean. And in all probability, the first voice that you hear as an infant and the last voice you'll hear, if you die in hospital, will probably have a Caribbean accent. It's they who'll put pennies on the eyes of the dead and remove the body to the morgue. And so having escaped the cutlass and the hoe on some tropical island, we now wear hospital gowns or the uniform of guards.) Or else we do stoop work scrubbing floors. (Fortunately, Caribbean people stoop with grace, whether retrieving a cricket ball or emptying a dust bin).

You see, I'd never lived in a rooming house before. We were all celibate like monks because the landlady allowed no women to enter. As she said, "Women are trouble. I know; I'm one." Couldn't argue with that. She also said, not everything in life is "pum-pum" (meaning Sex).

As I say, I travelled mostly by night and I soon got used to the grammar of the lonely Brooklyn streets and the sadness of the all night Arab groceries with their bullet-proof glass and the half shut eyes of the Arabs who occupied us.

One night, I came home and fell in bed, turned on the radio to WBAI and found out that the police had surrounded Zuccotti Park and were about to dislodge the Occupiers.

It was 2:00 a.m. (It's always best to attack before dawn, like in Iraq. Before you can tell a white thread from a black, as the Koran says.) An hour later I was there. I hadn't seen so many police since 9/11 and the fall of the Twin Towers. Mayor Bloomberg had had enough. It was beginning to look like the Paris Commune.

He sent in police from all five boroughs. They gave the Occupiers ten minutes to evacuate. He promised that whatever items were left would be returned the following day at the Center Street Police Station. They then proceeded to send in the sanitation trucks which crushed and demolished everything, tents, lap-tops and books. (The Occupiers had started a free library.) Suddenly the assurance of items being returned was nonsense. Lap-tops don't respond well to trucks driving over them. The night was grim with drizzle and the swirling lights of police vans. A paperback copy of Fanon's *The Wretched of The Earth*, (just the cover) lay at my feet. That night the city was a necropolis, a place of the dead. So we waited on the dawn.

Mayor Bloomberg is the perfect poster child for money and power. He's the only mayor of New York who managed to triple his net worth while in office. Not even "Gentleman" Jimmy Walker from the good old Irish Tammany Hall days, and who had to flee to Europe rather than go to prison, not even he had managed to go from 7 to 22 billion dollars while in office. This mayor simply bought himself an office and a city. Rewrote all the election rules so that he could run for a third term and who if he chose to, could run even three more terms, virtually unopposed.

A good clear message was sent: The Occupiers were nothing more than refuse. And what do you do with refuse? You remove it. But then, 99% of the population is irrelevant and crushable. When faced with a judge who dared to oppose him, the mayor simply bought himself another judge. They would do the same in any Middle Eastern or African country. I couldn't believe that Occupy was so naïve that they didn't expect it. They had let their guard down because they had started to believe that they were adopted, like house cats.

The mayor speaks through his commissioner, Kelly, who is an Irishman. The Irish have always found that the best survival technique is to always make yourself indispensable to those in power (even on my own Caribbean island of Montserrat where they functioned as brutal overseers). The method has always been emigration followed by occupation. (Just take a look at the both the police and fire department of New York or Boston if you want to see what occupation looks like). The thing is this: when Police eat, their families also eat. A hungry belly has no conscience. The irony is that this same police, as reactionary as they are, will still fund the IRA on the side (rebellion is still part of their DNA).

There are two things in the world for which there is no disinfectant: Slave-ships and prisons. The smell of want and fear, sex and despair. It seeps into the walls. And you can't get rid of it.

America has the highest prison population in the world. There's a place called Rikers Island and it's the largest prison facility in the universe and the "home of New York's boldest." It was there that Dominique Strauss-Kahn, the former head of the IMF, was unkindly held while awaiting bail when charged with raping that African chamber-maid in his pricey hotel room.

I made a visit to Rikers, not to see Dominique Kahn, but Tariq, a Haitian friend of mine. But when I arrived he had been moved, like a package, to Woodbourne, another prison facility. I had a play that I had written for him. The theatre saved me and I hoped it would save him. In prison you either use time or do

time. The play was about Iraq on the eve of the invasion. I called it *The Birds of Baghdad*.

I first became involved with prison when I was teaching Creative Writing at City College. It was a good fit because the education system taught me a lot about prisons and vice versa. I found that the prisoners I dealt with had one thing in common: illiteracy. The one question I heard over and over was, "Why did I have to go to prison to learn to read?" I had no answer for that one either.

The most common sight you'll see in any black neighborhood, be it the Bronx, Harlem or Brooklyn, is the presence of no less than four armed police at every entrance to a public school. It's good training for students. This way they have no problem adapting to prison. They get use to daily searches. It's in fact, a self-fulfilling prophecy. It sends a signal. But no matter what form power assumes, youth will find a way to subvert it. And when you see those young girl students, even in the charter schools, wearing their clean and clinging uniforms, you realize they can never be subdued.

America is unique in that not only does it have the largest prison population in the world, but also because only America asks its prisoners to build their own prison (pre-fab material from China) as part of incarceration.

What I taught in City College was the difference between construction and creativity. All I was really asked to do was to help students to become literate enough to become good wage-slaves, and if possible keep them out of prison.

Before I jumped ship I was an adjunct professor. If you check the dictionary you'll find that 'adjunct' means something added on, like an appendage. In other words, something unnecessary, an after thought. The Holy Grail is to make tenure. You see, without tenure there is no Health Insurance, which means if you come down with cancer you're on your own. So professors kill for tenure, but they mostly kill themselves

Working with prisoners kept me in touch with reality. The greatest resistance I encountered was not from the inmates. It was the guards who were jealous of the fact that prisoners were getting a free education. I soon realized that I would have to teach them too.

If Occupy is to be relevant it has to address the prison problem. There is no one in the black community (and I assume Occupy wants the black community) who, one way or another, is not affected by the Prison industry. Everyone has some experience, if not as an inmate then through family members or employment as guards. We either feed it or feed off it. Therefore, if Occupy is to last it has to address this issue. And closely related to this is homelessness. Believe it or not, more vets die in prison than die in battle. They return from Iraq or Afghanistan and find themselves homeless and abandoned by society. Next stop: Prison.

I performed *The Birds of Baghdad* at City College and watched the students get the shock of recognition. There are two things that I like about City College: It's

not NYU and it's not Columbia University. It's not busy swallowing up New York City property for corporate interest. Not yet anyway.

I like performing for students because they're always astonished and have to put what they witness into another part of their brain. Somewhere they've never been. Students are so use to lies. That's what successful education is: learning to package lies better.

The Birds of Baghdad just drops you in Iraq right before the invasion. I tell what I saw with my eyes and make the audience walk with me. I'd gone to Baghdad expecting to see camels and genies in lamps. What I found instead was babies dying in incubators. From uranium poisoning. And money, more money than I had ever seen in my life. You see, in Baghdad, money isn't counted, it's weighed.

But when I looked into the children's eyes, I knew we could never win in Iraq. They know their history. You can't defeat an enemy that has a history. I understood then why it was so important that African history be destroyed. Napoléon understood that and therefore made certain to disfigure all the faces of the statues in Egypt. He disfigured the noses so you couldn't see the African connection. God rewarded him with the Rosetta Stone. That was why the museums were looted and books and libraries set afire.

The students were amazed that I went to see for myself and bear witness. Why didn't I just stay safe in New York and await the blessings of Social Security?

Then they wanted to know what I thought about the Occupy movement. I had just three simple things to say:

The reason Socialism never really caught on in America is mainly because no one in America really thinks of themselves as *The Poor* since the possibility of wealth is always just a Lotto ticket away. Not even those in the deep South or Appalachia where coal mining has long died and left the earth an open grave.

But there really is still is a thing called the American dream. Everyone expects that their life can change in a day if they just scratch the right card, answer the right question or spin the right wheel. And as such the anger of the poor is never against the billionaire who breezes by in a chauffeur driven limousine. No, the anger of the poor will be directed against his neighbour who is sleeping on the park bench beside him. Why? Maybe, because that neighbour has a cigarette, which makes them a property owner. That's where their fight will be. That's about as deep as the class warfare will go.

The one phrase in the Declaration of Independence: "*And the pursuit of happiness*" makes America truly unique. No other nation on earth would have dared to suggest that men have a right to happiness. Of course, it was brilliantly crafted by Thomas Jefferson (another good slaver who despised blacks but fathered many).

So what do I think of Occupy? Occupy is a thing greater than itself and that's why it's important. It's a way of seeing, a different way of seeing. America has always been about the process by which the '*They*' becomes the '*We*'. In other

words, we always aspire to be let into that exclusive club which won't have us. This wish to be let in is at the very heart of Capitalism. This is what makes it work.

A Chinese curse is to wish that someone live in interesting times. Well this is that interesting time.

Some occupy property. Some occupy the soul. There was a time when English was important because of Shakespeare. Now, English is important, not because of Shakespeare but because the language of the revolution is American. Rap music, especially, has penetrated the entire world. Not bad for a despised people. We have managed to unite the world in a way that the UN never could.

We have claimed the youth of the entire world.

It was time for my third and most important play, *The Scottsboro Boys*. If you take nine black boys from Alabama in the depths of the Depression, and add two white girls who work in a cotton mill and add the ingredient of accused rape, you have the story of the Scottsboro Boys. What fascinated me most about the case was the fact that only two of the nine actually knew each other (because they were brothers); the other seven were total strangers.

The main motif of the play is the train. Trains (as I learned from Langston Hughes) are always present in our music (the blues). The sound of the train's moan can most clearly be heard on the harmonica, and is echoed in the saxophone.

Why were trains so important to us? Was it because of A. Philip Randolph and the Sleeping Car Porters? No, it's because trains were the only possibility of flight from the South to the supposed refuge of the North. The problem was that we seldom had the money for passage and so we had to stow away as hobos. If you were caught, you were beaten and sometimes killed. So it was that these nine boys came together on a train. Unfortunately for them, there happened to be two white girls (Ruby Bates and Victoria Price who were supplementing their income by prostitution) also on board and unknown to the nine.

The boys never even got to enjoy the pleasure of these young ladies. In an effort to save themselves from prosecution the two vestal virgins concocted a story of rape. Sex and economics was the reason for slavery. Call slavery a full-employment miracle.

For me, the Scottsboro Case is a microcosm of America and the American Dream. Victoria Price saw an opportunity for celebrity status and rode it. The second girl, Ruby Bates recanted her testimony, yet the wheel of fate was already in operation. The testimony of these women managed to destroy the lives of nine people. Managed to eat their youth. Two women who the nine never met at any point in their lives.

This destruction of youth to me is at the heart of the Occupy movement. This attempt to claim back life. I performed this play at the New Federal Theatre and asked Alice Spivak of the **Bergoff Studio** to direct. It's easier when you have a

director who has known your work. The play has essentially to do with the search for redemption (as is all my work). Redemption or at least, the search for it.

I needed to come home. I missed the Montserrat Sundays with their untidy choirs. I needed to come home. Sometimes when you go searching for family, you find famine instead but that's alright.

Somewhere in the City of Cities, I had a son hidden among the shadows. There's a lot of shadows in the city. He's an artist like his mother and deals with lines on paper. He has strong wrists and so I wanted to see him deal with stone because stone lasts a thousand years. One day I hope he starts to carve in stone the way the Montserrat artists do. He wasn't interested in Occupy. He said they didn't speak for him. They looked too white and too privileged. I said, give them time. Already Occupy was dealing with foreclosed houses in Brooklyn, the very street where I was staying in that rooming house on Vermont Avenue. If they could deal with East Brooklyn and not just Zuccotti Park, then there's hope for them. Maybe they'll last after all.

It was in the stillness of the night when I stole away. I needed to come home, my real home. The only good thing about Brooklyn is that it's near Kennedy Airport. Escape is therefore possible. I was frightened to walk away from New York, but I was more frightened to stay.

It's only by walking you learn to walk. Never lose the love. Once you lose the love the game's over. When you work in stone you need not be ashamed. Anyway, despair is only for amateurs. Where ever you find yourself in the world, always Occupy.

May your flight be not in winter, the Bible says. I was lonely so I brought the drum and my dreams along. Drum and dreams together make drama. I came keyless. Keyless I came. Forward again.

The End



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