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strength, courage, wisdom



Dr. John Henrik Clarkrke And The Harlem Writers Guild

Dr. John Henrik Clarkrke And The Harlem Writers Guild

A Brief History of the Harlem Writers Guild and A Keynote Presentation from A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE HARLEM WRITERS GUILD

Join Date: Jan 2000

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Posts: 13,045

The Guild had come into being in 1950 in a small storefront office one flight above the corner of 125th Street and Lenox Avenue. The half century mark was just about midway between Jackie Robinson's breaking of the color line in Major League baseball in 1947 and the Supreme Court's 1954 decision in *Brown v. Board of Education*, which ended legal segregation in public schools.

In 1950 there were scarcely as many black stars in the major leagues of American publishing than could be found in professional sports. Ralph Ellison and Richard Wright were the only two best selling black fiction writers of the day and the major publishing houses were not seeking black talent in the manner that major league baseball teams were. Worse still, black authors had no forum in which they could hone their craft, showcase their ability and wait for a break. In essence, there was no farm system for black authors as there was for baseball players. Even the New Deals' meager opportunities, such as the writers branch of the WPA, had ended before President Roosevelt's death. At the very bottom of this dismal outlook was, of course, the fact that unlike black school children in the South, black writers could not expect that any court's decree improve their prospects.

But a group of unheralded black writers (first known as the Harlem Writers' Club, then the Harlem Writers' Guild) came together. They were determined to make the blank pages in their notebooks and in their ancient typewriters their level playing fields. Before they met for the first time in the 125th Street storefront, the original members found themselves on the fringes of Greenwich Village writing groups led and populated mostly by liberal, and in some cases, radical white writers. Though Greenwich Village groups were receptive to the serious writing efforts of black authors, the blacks found little in those groups to nurture themselves spiritually or to appreciate the unique

cultural aspects of their work.

The technical feedback was helpful to the blacks, but the well meaning whites consistently demonstrated that they had more sympathy than empathy for the black experience that was being put into words. It was largely in response to this that the Harlem Writers' Guild was formed. No one remembers where the rent for the first meeting place came from or if there was any. It may have been that the first meeting place was simply an unused room in a small office. What is remembered is that from that room the Guild and its meetings moved to libraries, meeting halls, other offices and finally to the apartments of members. The apartments of Clarke, Killens, Guy and Bill Williams Forde at one time or another all served as early meeting places. In 1982 The Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture became and remains the permanent meeting place for the Guild.

As the decades passed, the list of published works by members increased. In 1986, shortly before his death, John Oliver Killens estimated in an interview for Biographies Of American Authors that members of the Guild had produced over three hundred published works of fiction, non-fiction and poetry as well as screen and stage plays.

Even though the struggle to be published showed some positive results, Guild members still found themselves witnesses to continuing injustice in American society. Bearing this witness and reflecting it in writing and activism became an integral part of the Guild's mission. For instance, John Henrik Clarke and his great friend Dr. Ben Yakim, Professor Emeritus at Cornell University, are widely regarded as two of the co-founders of Black Studies at the university level. Colleagues of Clarke's such as Imiri Baraka entered traditional politics, helping to elect the new wave of black officials throughout the country which Kenneth Gibson who became Newark, New Jersey's first Black Mayor in 1970.

Moreover, within the Guild, reminders of the persistence of the struggle abound to this day. An example of this is the on-line writers' workshop that the Guild conducts at the New School University, entitled "Creative Struggle: The Harlem Writers' Guild in the Second Half of the Twentieth Century."

WHO WAS JOHN HENRIK CLARKE?

John Henrik Clarke died in July of 1998 at the age of 83. A noted author and scholar, Dr. Clarke was considered by many to be the father of Black Studies and by extension, one of the relative handful of people who were responsible for multiculturalism as we know it higher education today. (His complete official biography will be presented later.)

What concerns us here is relationship to The Harlem Writers' Guild and to creative struggle. Dr. Clarke was one of the first people to recognize that the emergence of free nation states on the continent of Africa in the early part of the second half of the twentieth century strongly paralleled the civil rights movement in America.

For the first six years that this course has been offered at The New School, Dr. Clarke, as one of the founders of The Harlem Writers' Guild, had been our keynote presenter. His death brought to an end what had become a wonderful tradition.

But in keeping with his commitment to creative struggle and the need for it continue even in the face of death itself, we will now present excerpts from his biography which he himself composed some months before his death. Lastly for now, let me add that this message was actually intended for his children and their children. But in a larger sense, it is intended for all people who have been

inspired by his life.

"I was born January 1, 1915 in Union Springs, Alabama. I remember when I was three years old, I fell off of something. From that unhappy incident, I think somehow my life changed. They tell me that the fall appeared to knock something INTO rather than OUT OF me. In those days, little black Alabama boys were not licensed to imagine themselves as conduits of political and social change. But from the moment that my Uncle Henry put some cool water on my head and I began to heal and mend, I seemed to become a different sort.

Let's face it.....I was stubborn and fixed upon re-inventing myself. While my family called me 'Bubba', I changed my christian name. I decided to add an 'e' to the family name 'Clark' and I changed the spelling of my middle name 'Henry' to 'Henrik', in honor of the Scandinavian rebel playwright, Henrik Ibsen whom I admired for his pure punck and for addressing great social issues in his play A DOLL'S HOUSE.

My father wanted me to become a farmer; feel the smoothness of Alabama clay beneath my feet and become one of the first blacks in our town to own land. But I was worried that about my history being caked with Southern clay and I subscribed to a different kind of learning and teaching in my bones and in my spirit. It was something vastly different than I would have ever found in the segregated schools of my town in that time. None of the public schools for black people went beyond the 10th grade. I was also displeased with the fact that many, many black people were still being lynched and hung from trees in that same Alabama soil my father so desperately wanted me to own. I am a Nationalist and a Pan-Africanist, first and foremost. I was well grounded in history long before I ever took a history course. The love of the subject was something that I guess was knocked into me when I was three.

In fact I did not spend much time in school---I had to work. One of the things I did to help my family survive was caddying(for white golfers, ofcourse....No black 'Tigers' in the golfing 'woods' then.) I caddied for Dwight D. Eisenhower and Omar Bradley long before they were even one star generals. Bradley was a much better tipper than the future president, by the way. It was my third grade teacher, Mrs. Harris who first told me that I should combine writing with my love of history. I heard her and I agreed. But I knew I had to leave the racist south if I was ever to make much of myself. I could not go around with GEORGIA ON MY MIND the way my life long friend Ray Charles could do.

But where to go? That was the question.

In the books that I could garner from what white only libraries threw away, I read about fantastic places abroad such as Timbuktu. But I soon settled for a last class trip on a slow moving train to New York City. I selected Harlem and the great libraries of the New York City as the laboratory and the academic resources of my mission. And what was my 'Mission'? It was to use my will to carve a career of scholarship and activism out of virtually nothing.

Organizations were the keys to this path of struggle. Some of the early ones I helped to found were: The Harlem Writers' Guild(1950), Freedomways(1954),The African Heritage Studies Association(1958) and the National Council of Black Studies (1962). These as well as every other organization that I was associated with had one basic principle:

*Life is the sum of all your choices. ~Albert Camus
Can't make blind eyes see.....*

*.....And I knew for sure I was loved
If I could get another chance, another walk, another dance with him
I'd play a song that would never, ever end
How I'd love, love, love to dance with my father again..... RIP dad*



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11-18-2003, 10:05 PM

#2

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strength, courage, wisdom



Join Date: Jan 2000

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Posts: 13,045

WHEN EUROPEANS EMERGED IN THE WORLD IN THE 15TH AND 16TH CENTURIES, THEY NOT ONLY COLONIZED MOST OF THE TERRITORY OF THE WORLD, THEY COLONIZED INFORMATION ABOUT EVERYTHING IN THE WORLD, INCLUDING EVEN THE IMAGE GOD!

The last point bothered me to no end for many years. That is probably why I wrote and published THE BOY WHO PAINTED CHRIST BLACK in 1948. It was the first published work of fiction by anyone associated with the Guild. After that came about 200 short stories as well as my writing and editing of about 60 works

of political and historical non-fiction. Along the way I've held professorships at Cornell and Hunter College. But all that is much less important than the fact that my quest for knowledge and for the uplift of all oppressed people was a RESPONSE to injustice.

That is what every writer has to look for; a chance to change the world through creative struggle and through the best possible use of your thoughts and your oh so precious words.

But while I must make this physical departure, spiritually I will not leave you and God will take care of you. When you feel a cool breeze blow across your face every now and then, just know that it comes from the deep reservoir of love that I hold for you. Oh, by the way, Christ IS Black; I see him walking only a short distance away with Nkruma. I think they are coming to greet me. And let me leave with these words that always guided my steps in the world you still occupy:

MY FEET HAVE FELT THE MANY SANDS

OF MANY NATIONS,

I HAVE DRUNK THE WATER OF

OF MANY SPRINGS,

I AM OLD,

OLDER THAN THE PYRAMIDS,

I AM OLDER THAN THE RACE

THAT OPPRESSES ME.

I WILL LIVE ON.....

I WILL OUT-LIVE OPPRESSION

I WILL OUT-LIVE OPPRESSORS.

"DETERMINATION"

Thank You,
John Henrik Clarke

source: New School University Website; excerpt from presentation made on November 15th, 2003.

Life is the sum of all your choices. ~Albert Camus
Can't make blind eyes see.....

.....And I knew for sure I was loved
If I could get another chance, another walk, another dance with him
I'd play a song that would never, ever end
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11-23-2003, 11:22 AM

#3

Solidarity
Guest

Counted among my heroes!

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The man was a giant...i thank the ancestors for providing us with him. It is *and will be* a better world, in part because of his works. i swear nuff of his material should be required reading.

R.I.P. John Henrik Clarke and thank you!



Solidarity



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