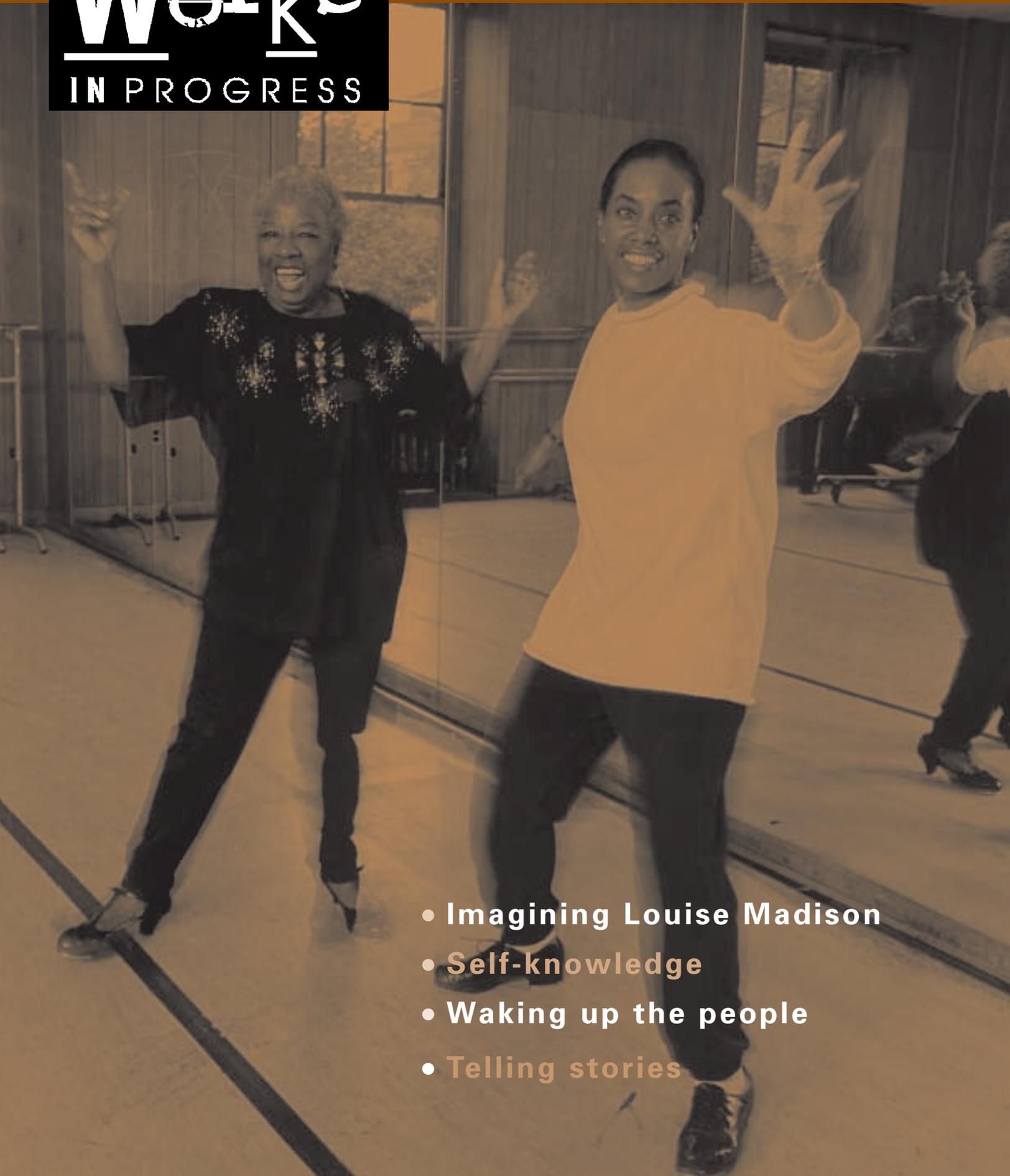


# Works

IN PROGRESS

Volume 18:1 winter 2005  
ISSN 1075-0029



- **Imagining Louise Madison**
- **Self-knowledge**
- **Waking up the people**
- **Telling stories**

# Works

IN PROGRESS

Works in progress is the magazine of the Philadelphia Folklore Project, an 18-year-old public interest folklife organization. We work with people and communities in the Philadelphia area to build critical folk cultural knowledge, sustain the complex folk and traditional arts of our region, and challenge practices that diminish these local grassroots arts and humanities.

To learn more, please visit us: [www.folkloreproject.org](http://www.folkloreproject.org) or call 215.468.7871

#### philadelphia folklore project staff

Editor/PFP Director: Debora Kodish  
Associate Director: Toni Shapiro-Phim,  
Designer: IFE designs + Associates  
Printing: Garrison Printers  
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#### philadelphia folklore project board

Germaine Ingram  
Mogauwane Mahloele  
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#### we gratefully acknowledge support from:

- The National Endowment for the Arts, which believes that a great nation deserves great arts
- The William Penn Foundation
- The Pew Charitable Trusts
- Pennsylvania Council on the Arts
- Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission
- Independence Foundation
- The Malka and Jacob Goldfarb Foundation
- The Humanities-in-the Arts Initiative, administered by The Pennsylvania Humanities Council, and funded principally by the Pennsylvania Council on the Arts
- Dance Advance, a grant program funded by The Pew Charitable Trusts and administered by Drexel University
- Philadelphia Exhibitions Initiative, a grant program funded by The Pew Charitable Trusts and administered by the University of the Arts
- The Philadelphia Cultural Fund
- The Philadelphia Foundation
- Stockton Rush Bartol Foundation
- The Henrietta Tower Wurts Foundation
- and wonderful individual Philadelphia Folklore Project members

thank you to all



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As the first black woman hired in many workplaces, the lawyer and writer Patricia Williams has often had cause to challenge bias. She observes that her actions have earned her a reputation as someone with remarkable insight and as a radical troublemaker. But she sees her perspectives as far from unique: people who find her surprising are simply hearing, for the first time, some of the everyday insights and common experiences of whole classes of people just like her, but generally excluded from—and unable to speak and be heard in—the contexts of universities and law firms.<sup>1</sup>

Speaking common experiences out loud and in unusual contexts can be a dangerous, lonely, and revolutionary undertaking—especially when such storytelling represents the perspectives of people who are disenfranchised and when it challenges everyday practice. In this issue of *Works in Progress*, four African American women describe ways that stories can shake things up, challenge the status quo, and keep possibilities alive. They also consider some of the obstacles facing anyone following an oral tradition.

It is 40 years since Kathryn L. Morgan first wrote publicly about her family's stories, handed-down tales of resistance and opposition to racism that had sustained generations. Insisting on the importance of African American middle class traditions, family folklore, and women's storytelling, Dr. Morgan challenged a wide range of scholarly and popular conventions. The first African American woman to get a Ph.D. in Folklore from

the University of Pennsylvania, she has inspired many people, including storyteller Linda Goss, who grew up with a heritage of family tales in Alcoa, Tennessee. In the 1970s, Ms. Goss was in the vanguard of what would become a storytelling movement, and her account in these pages of her years at Howard University give a glimpse of what it felt like to balance her attachments both to a legacy of Southern rural oral tradition and to the emerging Black Arts and Black Power movements.

Who has the right to call herself a storyteller, a poet, a dancer? Thelma Shelton Robinson describes how other people were considered the poets when she was young, and how she eventually came to claim the right to define herself. It takes courage to name yourself in terms that feel right, that allow dignity, agency, and justice. But telling stories is about more than self-definition. All the women in this magazine see stories and storytelling as a responsibility. As Kathryn Morgan says about her own storytelling mother: we pass on things that ought to be known. We pass on essential stories, stories that are necessary.

Stories about African American tapper Louise Madison are just such essential stories for Germaine Ingram. Madison had a reputation as a great dancer, a solo act, a woman who was anyone's equal. These stories serve as an inspiration, and a point of beginning for Ingram's own dancing, and for her exploration of the hidden and all-but-forgotten histories of earlier African American women tap dancers. And notably, when

there is too large a gap in the record, when stories are unknowable, Ingram (and Morgan) refuse to be daunted, turning to imagination, fiction, and art-making, grounded in what they do know, but naming too the tragedies of what is lost.

This spring, PFP will bring all of these people to various stages, and we hope you'll be there. Ingram's essay marks the long-delayed release of our documentary, *Plenty of Good Women Dancers*, about some of these amazing local African American women hoofers. *Plenty* will be broadcast on March 28th on WHY, after a 10-year effort by PFP (itself a story). Germaine is performing her own work on May 22nd, as part of PFP's artists in residence program. Morgan, Goss and Robinson speak as part of a PFP program on self-knowledge and storytelling on February 19th, organized as part of Art Sanctuary's Celebration of Black Writing and in honor of ODUNDE's 30th anniversary. And Goss leads a 3-session round-table storytelling program in the new home that PFP is currently rehabbing. (A great chance to share your own stories.) There is much more to tell than we can fit in these pages, and we invite you to check out the calendar of PFP programs on page 23, to visit our website, or call us for more information: [www.folkloreproject.org](http://www.folkloreproject.org), 215.468.7871. We look forward to seeing you. ...

— **Debora Kodish**

<sup>1</sup> Patricia Williams, *The Rooster's Egg*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995, p. 93.



Left: Hortense Allen Jordan in front of the line, for the Marva Louis show, which she produced and brought to the Paramount Theater, c. 1955-56. Photo courtesy Ms. Jordan. Edith "Baby Edwards" Hunt, c. 1928. Photo courtesy Ms. Hunt.

Facing page: Cholly Atkins and Philadelphia tap dancer Dotty Saulters. Photo courtesy Ernie Smith collection. Jeni LeGon and Bill Robinson in "Hooray for Love." Photo courtesy Ms. LeGon. "Salt and Pepper" (Edwina Evelyn and Jewel Welch). Photo courtesy Theatre Collection, Free Library of Philadelphia.



# Imagining Louise Madison:

remembering African American women dancers

by Germaine Ingram

Some might judge it a rather unprepossessing celebration—a modest spread of bagels, cream cheese and coffee in the Folklore Project’s cramped but welcoming office on a crisp weekend morning in November 2004. No festive attire—just well-worn Saturday-run-the-errands duds, caps covering unrimped hair. People coming and going in twos and threes, sharing hugs and news of relocations, retirements, travels and other personal tidbits. Friends peering into old photographs exhibited on the walls, stitching an impromptu patchwork of memories of Libby, Dee, Baby, Fambro, Hank, Mike, Dave, and Tommy—all of whom have transitioned since those heady months in the fall and winter

of 1993-94 when our lives seemed to revolve around the mercurial course of “Stepping in Time,” PFP’s uncommonly democratic and elastic stage production that played to three SRO houses at the Arts Bank at Broad and South in February 1994.

“Stepping” was a revue reminiscent of the stage shows of the 1930s, 40s and 50s where African American performers—dancers, singers, comics, variety acts and instrumentalists—regaled audiences of all ages. Our “Stepping” production was a platform for a dozen or so senior Philadelphians, most of them in their 60s and 70s (supported by about an equal number of younger folks, ranging from teenagers to baby boomers), to relive the

discipline, excitement and comradeship of producing a show like the ones back in the day. On that brisk Saturday morning in November 2004, survivors of the show came together to celebrate the public release—after a decade of wrangling with studios for the rights to screen some archival footage—of “Plenty of Good Women Dancers,” a PFP documentary that recounts the journey that “Stepping” took from spontaneous conception in Isabelle Fambro’s basement one Sunday afternoon to feathered and sequined splendor on an Avenue of the Arts stage. Laced through the story of the stage production is a tribute to four African American women hoofers whose contribution to

[Continued on next page →]

Hortense Allen Jordan confers with musicians during rehearsal for "Stepping in Time." January 1994. Photo: Thomas B. Morton



Philadelphia's artistic and cultural legacy has been mostly overlooked.

The women who are featured in the documentary are as different from one another as chocolates in a Whitman's Sampler box. Edith "Baby Edwards" Hunt was a child star in Philadelphia's African American community from the time she was four years old, enthraling Depression-era audiences with her singing, tap dancing and acrobatics. (She was especially known for her Chinese splits). She matured into a popular professional entertainer, half of the boy-girl song and dance team of Spic and Span. At the time of "Stepping," Baby—well into her 70s and recovering from a heart attack—brought the house down with a bold and vibrant performance, in marked contrast to her quiet and demure private persona.

Libby Spencer hailed from New

York City, where as a youngster she picked up tap steps and routines from relatives and neighbors. In 1940, eager for work, she auditioned and was hired for the famous Apollo Theater chorus line. As one of the "tall girls" on the line, she learned three new routines for each show, which typically changed weekly, and performed several shows per day. One of the highlights of her career was being paired in performance on Broadway with Bill Bojangles Robinson. After marriage settled her in Philadelphia, Miss Libby became a respected and beloved jazz and tap dance teacher for children and adults throughout the city.

Even as a schoolgirl in her native city of St. Louis, Missouri, Hortense Allen Jordan forecasted the prolific dancer, choreographer, and producer she would become. She mined every opportunity to hone

her talents in choreography and stagecraft, eventually assuming key creative roles in the companies of band leaders and producers such as Leonard Reed (creator of the "Shim Sham Shimmy," a/k/a "The Tap Dancers' National Anthem"), Louis Jordan, and Larry Steele. She confronted barriers with dogged resourcefulness, as when she resolved to design and fabricate costumes for dancers in her chorus lines rather than settle for the old tattered goods that costume rental houses offered black production companies. After settling down in Philadelphia, Hortense continued to produce shows at the Robin Hood Dell, Club Harlem in Atlantic City, and other local nightspots. (Jordan is the only one of Plenty's four subjects who survives.)

Philadelphia native Dolores McHarris married into hoofing. She trained intensively with her



husband, tap dancer and all-around showman Dave McHarris, to prepare to share his life of entertainment and international travel. Later, she became a capable drummer, often joining her husband in a show-stopping double-drum set routine. McHarris and Dolores toured their troupe for many years before settling into semi-retirement in the Philadelphia area.

Each of Plenty's subjects gives us a distinct window into the roles that African American women have played in shaping and promoting jazz tap dance, a dance form that is central to Philadelphia's cultural legacy and America's contribution to the world reservoir of dance traditions: Baby Edwards for her singular performance prowess; Libby Spencer for her historical and political clarity; Hortense Allen Jordan for her multiple talents and entrepreneurial spirit; and Dee

McHarris for her longevity and versatility. The video portrayal is enhanced by archival footage of other women hoofers who defied the convention of tap as a men's club, among them the sensational Lois Miller of the Philadelphia-based tap trio The Miller Brothers and Lois, a class act that merged catchy rhythms, sophisticated movements and costuming, and exciting acrobatics. One woman who would certainly have been represented in Plenty, had there been material to draw from, was Louise Madison, a dancer little-known to today's tap fans, and, as far as we know, undocumented on film or video. She was nonetheless remembered and greatly admired by the veteran members of Stepping's cast. But even without the aid of her words or performance exemplars, Louise, as remembered and imagined, provided a palpable backdrop for

the story that Plenty tells.

It was around 1980 when I first heard of Louise Madison from my mentor and dance partner, LaVaughn Robinson (now 78), who related his memorable introduction to her. As LaVaughn tells it, he was about 17 years old when he and some buddies were buskin' (dancing on the street for money) around Philadelphia's South Street. They were approached by a local tap dancer known as "Cy" (of an act called Popcorn, Peanuts and Cracker Jacks), who invited them to ride to New Jersey to see an exceptional hooper, without disclosing that the dancer was a woman. The boys jumped into Cy's run-down auto and made the short trip to the Cotton Club, a nightspot located in the historic African American community of Lawnside, New

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# Self Knowledge

by Kathryn L. Morgan



Self-knowledge is information necessary in the development of one's self. Na'im Akbar writes that self-knowledge results in four general outcomes: self-acceptance, self-

help, self-discovery and self-preservation, and that "the foundation for most of human productive activity is found in these four processes which are direct outcomes of self-knowledge."<sup>1</sup>

I am convinced that my family stories, my fiction, and some of my poetry are important sources for insights into self-knowledge. To illustrate this point, in the essay that follows, I use examples which I have written. I provide a brief background for each example, tell a story through narrative or poetry, and demonstrate how each example relates to self-knowledge. I speak only for myself.

When my brothers and I were growing up in Philadelphia in the 1930s and 1940s we were constantly told stories about slavery.<sup>2</sup> My mother told us tales about how my great-grandmother Caddy was born free and kidnapped and sold into slavery when she was eight years old. She also told us stories about children in Africa, awakened in the middle of the night, dragged screaming, kicking, blind with terror, who were thrown into slave ships and brought to the strange land.

My mother Maggie acted out these stories; she cried; she hugged us; she put us to bed. She always reminded us of how lucky we were to have a wonderful mother like her, a nice bed to sleep in, and the knowledge that nobody could come to drag us out of bed in the middle of the night to send us to a strange land. Maggie always gave us something to make us thankful and we were taught to value freedom and to never forget what slavery was like. I remember those stories, about the night raids, the murders and the rapes. And long afterwards, I wrote about a fictional village in Africa called Camino:

**"Camino, a coastal city, was attacked in the middle of the night...The raiders crawled out of the sea like a body of locusts, obscuring the moon and stars, swarming over the land, destroying green things, killing black**

**warriors who raised spears against them; filling the air with the moans and groans of the dying, chaining together the black bodies of men, women and children, their wails and screams mingling with the clanking of chains; turning Blackness against Blackness in a maddened struggle for self-survival, leaving emptied souls frantically searching for their lifeless black bodies, swinging wild whips in passionate fits of hate, leaving hearts of black men, women and children barren of movement, piled high in mounds beside pathways strewn with vomit and decaying flesh, leaving bodies stretched out in the darkness of night grinning up at the moon."**<sup>3</sup>

One of the almost ageless beliefs among Africans and their descendants throughout the diaspora is the belief in life after death. The souls and spirits of the ancestors could not only whisper in the wind, they can sing. If you listen with your heart, you can hear them.

Maggie believed this. She taught us to believe it. And we were taught that some of our African ancestors chose death by drowning rather than enslavement in the strange land.

I vaguely remember a childish whisper one night that always haunted me. "Mommy, what does it feel like to drown?" This question was never answered by Maggie. And, as far as I know, despite the intensity of the academic arguments about how many Africans perished at sea, no academic has been able to answer it either. And so I attempted to answer it in "Song of Nino, the Young Bride" whose spirit sings:

**I saw the ship of death.**

**I remember my decision to die.**

**I jumped and felt the rush**

**of unknown waters**

**commanding my breath,**

**running like blazing fuel**

**through my mouth, my nostrils,**

**my brain. A limitless terror washed**

through me.  
**I struggled. I strangled.**

I saw the myriad waters vibrate

like a rainbow of flashing claws  
joining in the suffocating wetness  
penetrating, possessing, devouring  
beast flinging me with  
a roar within, without.

**I was gone.**<sup>4</sup>

My work with my family stories, slave narratives, ex-slave narratives, oral and written history, literature about black folk, and first hand experience with the terror and violence of the racial status quo in the United States helped me to shape the following fictional conversation with my ancestor, Caroline Gordon of Lynchburg, Virginia, affectionately called Caddy. If she could speak to me about her life what would she say? How would she describe her contemporaries, those trapped in the terror of the slave labor system? What does this have to do with self-knowledge? I called the piece "The Sage":

**"Weep not for me because I am dead and you knew me not. Remember only that I lived long enough to discover that I was not one but many. If you attach yourself only to my suffering, I become nothing but the residue of oppression. Remember, I lived long enough to discover that I was part of a hurricane, part of the swirl of lust, passion, joy, sorrow, cruelty, kindness, hate, love, laughter, birth and death that make up human existence. I knew wind, rain, water, fire and clouds. I discovered the beauty and ruthlessness in nature.**

**Weep not for me because I am dead... Remember, I lived long enough to discover my own internal contradictions. I discovered my own strengths, weaknesses, lies, truths, falseness, and sincerity. I experienced the constancy of internal change within me. So I was both hero and coward, conqueror and conquered, king and subject, owner and slave. Negative and positive like everything else, everywhere.**

**So you see, if you put my suffering above all else, you stress only one part of me, only one part of the whole. If you glorify my beauty, then you deny my ugliness. If you thus simplify my existence, you desecrate my complexity.**

**Weep not, for you have neither time nor energy...to waste. Remember you are at war. A war started long ago. But do not abandon emo-**

**tion. For life is empty devoid of emotion. But in war, emotion must be backed up with intellect, power, discipline.**

**Tears, curses, passivity and escapism never won battles, fed the hungry, clothed the naked, housed the homeless, weakened the enemy, or...cut through chains."**<sup>5</sup>

The life patterns, beliefs and customs traditionally valued by the storytellers in my family include: Remember the horrors of slavery. Never forget it. Cherish freedom. Listen to the wind for the whisper of the ancestor's song. Listen with your heart and you will hear it. Weep not, we are at war. A war started long ago.

What does all this say? Fantasy can be used to reflect the outcomes of self-knowledge. However, it can be used to revitalize history, not to replace it. It can be used as one instrument in the mass of weaponry needed in the struggle for black liberation from racism and injustice in the United States. It functions to free the image of black folk behind the famous from their burial in a sea of undifferentiation. It functions to stir up the "mass" and capture the kaleidoscopic sense of complexity and diversity reflected in African American experiences in the United States. It makes no pretense of conformity nor omnipotence. It values difference and does not deem it a hindrance to ultimate unity. It creates rather than documents and is based firmly upon the conviction that as much can be learned about self-knowledge from fiction as from fact.

Dr. Kathryn L. Morgan is Sara Laurence Lightfoot Emerita Professor of History and Senior Research Scholar at Swarthmore College. Formerly on the board of the Philadelphia Folklore Project, she is part of this year's Local Knowledge project (p. 17). For more information about Dr. Morgan, visit the PFP website ([www.folkloreproject.org](http://www.folkloreproject.org)).

Notes

<sup>1</sup> *The Community of Self*. Jersey City, New Jersey: Mind Production, 1985. p. 31

<sup>2</sup> Some of these stories are recounted in Kathryn L. Morgan, *Children of Strangers: The Stories of a Black Family*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1980

<sup>3</sup> Adapted from Kathryn Morgan, "More Excerpts from the Midnight Sun," *Journal of Ethnic Studies* 5:1 (1977), pp. 86, 88.

<sup>4</sup> Adapted from Kathryn Morgan, "More excerpts from the Midnight Sun," *Journal of Ethnic Studies* 5:1 (1977), p. 89.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid "On black images and blackness," *Black World* (December 1973), pp. 84-85.





Photos this page: Linda Goss and her mother, Alcoa, Tennessee, c. 1990s. Linda and her cousin Carolyn Crabtree, c. 1960s. Photos courtesy Linda Goss. Facing page: Linda Goss, 2004. Photo: Debora Kodish

# Waking up the people

**W**ell, I guess I've always been fascinated with listening to stories. And I used to just listen to my aunts and uncles and you know, my grandfather, and—I have an uncle who is living now, Uncle Buster. And he is such a character. He is funny! And he is always telling stories. And he is really, like an oral historian. And it hasn't been until recently that we even think of him as an historian, but that's what he is. That's what he is. He's in his 80s and people will come to him and they'll just call out a name. They may say, "The Dean family" and he takes you all the way back. Really, like the griots, back in Africa. You know. So whenever he sees me now, he just hugs me and we'll get to talking about different things. And he really kind of inspires me.

When I was younger, I was influenced by my grandfather. You know, by granddaddy Murphy, and my parents. And Uncle Buster, I would hear about him. He was always the one who would call on the phone and he

would call collect, you know, to my mom. He would call with a different name. He would say, "It's James calling." And he would trick her. Because if she knew it was Buster, she wouldn't accept the call. So he would say, "It's Tyler on the phone." Or "It's Lyle on the phone." And he has all of these names. His name is James Lyle Tyler Martin. And he's known as Buster. So whenever he would call, it was always a story, just behind him. And at the same time, as funny as he is, there's also a sadness about him. And it wasn't until as I got older that I discovered what that sadness was.

Because, it's almost like people let Uncle Buster be himself. And come to find out, he was in World War Two. I think he was stationed in Alaska or somewhere. And my grandmother passed away. And for some reason, when he got the word about it, by the time he got back to Tennessee, everything was over. Her funeral and everything. And he never—well, to this day, he has never gotten over it. So even when he starts telling sto-

ries, he'll start laughing. And he may start out on a very high note. He may end just sobbing and crying, telling you about my grandmother, telling you about some of the sad things that have happened in the town too.

So from him, I guess, I developed just the whole idea of just how powerful a story can be. How it can just lift you up and at the same time, it can kind of purge you. It can kind of heal you. And even to this day, I kind of lean on Uncle Buster when I see him. I kind of lean on him for a little strength to just keep me going, and making me realize that you do have to pull out some of those stories that can kind of heal you, and some of those stories that are painful. But it's important to get them out. It's important to express yourself. And I guess I'm thinking about him even more right now, because we are in a war situation. And that's how my storytelling is. Depending on what's going on in the world, depending on what's going on in my life, what's going on in my fami-

[Continued on p. 14→]



# Telling stories my whole life

**Thelma Shelton Robinson** primarily focuses her tales on her own life experiences, and shares stories that she heard coming up in Philadelphia in the 1940s-1950s in a richly oral tradition. Her father was a vivid storyteller and her mother raised her on stories about her own childhood in Virginia. A weekend roomer, Mrs. Walton, told "stories... so scary you were afraid to go to bed." Her father's corner store, Veteran's Rest, was a hangout for Ms. Robinson as a child; she'd go in and out, listening to neighbors passing time and telling tales. She valued what she heard, appreciating the different narrative styles and perspectives. She reflects, "When an elder passes, it's like a library burns down because there is so much information that is lost. And without other people who know that information—it just goes." Growing up near 12th and South Streets in Philadelphia, around the corner from the Standard Theater, Ms. Robinson watched street corner singing, dancing, and preaching, all of which left a lasting impression. She also loved the rhyming poetry of Paul Laurence Dunbar and Langston Hughes, and she loved music—from the Wings Over Jordan Choir to Louis Jordan and his Tympany 5. But it wasn't until she retired from decades of secretarial work that she began to truly pursue her love of poetry and storytelling. Over the last decades, she has made her presence felt, performing in storytelling celebrations, schools, and other social, civil and educational gatherings. She has received a PCA Fellowship in Folk and Traditional Arts and was awarded the Oshun award in 2003, from ODUNDE, Inc., naming her the "poet laureate of South Philadelphia." Here she reflects on how she became a poet and storyteller.

## by **Thelma Shelton Robinson**



Family photos: Thelma's father, "Hop Dick" Shelton, and Thelma, courtesy of the artist. Facing page: Thelma Shelton Robinson 2004, photo : Debora Kodish. Painting, "Yo Mama" courtesy Ife Nii-Owoo.

**I** find that truth is stranger than fiction. If you tell some of these true stories, people don't believe it. I tell about things that I remembered as a child, and about things that were important, not just to me, but to everybody. Experience doesn't matter if you haven't got stories.

I always loved stories. And I loved to listen to stories in the neighborhood. My father was a walking storybook. See, he was a hustler. He did so many things. He used to tell me back in Norfolk, he would sell fish. And he used to have a cart, and he'd say, "Miss Annie. Get your pots and pans, here I am the FISH man!" He always had something that would rhyme. He would make things up, like: "To see how sweet your home can be, go away but keep the key." He'd say things like that all the time. My father, he had charm. People loved to talk to him. And he loved talking! He had so many stories. After he came to Philadelphia, he sold vegetables. He sold papers. Then he had this little store on the corner of Twelfth and Rodman. And he named it the Veteran's Rest. And he had mainly men coming in there. You know, that corner store where they shoot the bull. They played cards and they played checkers. And they'd argue. And they'd talk about their war experiences and everything.

We lived at 506 South Sartain Street, which was right across the street from the Standard Theater on South Street. And that was the main thoroughfare. I mean—there were so many things you could see.

They had people on the corner preaching, or tap-dancing, or what-not. That was commonplace. I'd watch things—because, you know, the different things you see—the actions that people put on. What you would see happening in the neighborhood, well, the truth is stranger than fiction.

I put myself in school. Because my brother and my sisters were older than I was. I was the youngest. One morning I woke up and none of them were there. That was odd. And when I asked my mother where they were, she said, "They went to school." So at that time, people would put their children out—they could go outside and play and not worry what was going to happen too much. So I

I crossed that street. Then I saw this old friend of the family. His name was Mr. Whitey. He was a plumber. And he called me Mommy Lump. He says to me, "Where you going, Mommy Lump?" I said, "I'm going to school. But I need a book and a pencil and piece of apple pie." (Always worried about my stomach! ) So he laughed and he took me to the corner store, Mr. Snyderman's little store, and I got the book and I got the pencils. Then we went next door. I think there was a Greek restaurant there and I got a piece of French apple pie with the ice cream on the top and the raisins in it. So I was all set! So he was laughing! It tickled him. He just walked me on. He said, "Are you really going to school?"

## **I always loved stories. And I loved to listen to stories in the neighborhood. My father was a walking storybook.**

went out to play and nobody was out. And every house I went to on our side of the street, everytime I rang the bell or knocked on the door, I would ask for the child and the mother would tell me, "They're in school."

Nobody was outside but me. And I said, "School? I want to go to school, too!"

So I knew it was taboo to cross the street. But I wanted to go to school. So I looked, and I went and

I said, "Yes."

So we went around on Lombard Street and down to the school entrance. And he stood at the gate and he says, "OK, I'll see you." And I says, "OK." And he just stood there and he was just laughing, and this lady happened to come up and she had a little girl she was going to enroll, so I went in with them. And when I got inside, there was a nun there. And the lady was giving her the informa-

ly, kind of steers me into a way of how my stories come across.

So the things that I know of my grandmothers are stories that have been passed on to me from my father and my mother. And what I noticed that happens within the black family is that there are stories that we share to the public, there are stories we share with the world, but then there are very personal stories—I think Zora Neale Hurston talked about that—that we just keep inside, that we don't share with anyone, that we don't share even share within our families.

And once I started sharing with people that I was a storyteller, that's when the family members started coming to me, sharing with me some of these stories, some of the stories I had never heard before.

And it could have been because of my age, because I was a child. But I was always listening out. I was one of these kids always eavesdropping, always finding out about stuff. I would pretend like I was on the couch asleep but I'd be really eavesdropping. You know what I'm saying. So that's how I found out about a lot of stuff.

But now, now that I've gotten older and I'm supposedly the so-called storyteller, now people come to me with other stories. ...

I was always curious and I could read at a very young age according to my parents. Of course everybody kind of exaggerates. Everybody's a storyteller in my family! They claimed I was reading when I was two or three. But I became very ill. I had pneumonia or chicken pox at the same time and then I forgot everything. I became so sick they thought I was going to die. And that's a story in itself. But when I came out of that my mother started reading to me again and telling me stories. And they tell me how I would carry around a wagon. I would pull it. And inside were all these books, my favorite books. Now I have a vague recollection, but that's because they had told me that, over and over again.

But I just loved stories. I loved listening to stories on the radio, too.

My favorite story at the time,

when I was little, was Peter Rabbit. But I didn't realize until as I got older, once my mom got sick, that that was her favorite story. So she would tell me the story of Peter Rabbit all the time. So I just loved hearing about him. My father and my grandfather would tell me stories of Buh Rabbit, and I would kind of mix the two together, you know. My mother, really, was very religious and she would tell me lots of Bible stories. And the way they would tell me these stories—it would just frighten me. It would just scare me, you know.

I didn't start calling myself a storyteller really until 1973. Before that, I was in theater. Before that I was a poet. I was a writer. I always wanted to be writer. I think I announced I was going to be a writer when I was about 8 or 9 years old.

My mother encouraged me no matter what I wanted to do. If I said I was going to be a poet, my mother and father said, "Right on." I remember when I said I was going to be a track runner. "Right on." No matter what I said. I even said, one time, I wanted to be a humanitarian. I didn't even know what that was—they said "Right on." I wanted to be an interpreter. I got hung up with the United Nations. . . and because I was from a little town, I was influenced by television. I would have all these crazy ideas. Then the people in the town would give you ideas, too. They would say, "Oh, the way you walk, Linda, I think you should be a nurse." Or, the way you talk, you should be a lawyer." Plus I played the piano and I played the flute and even though I was terrible at it, people said I should go into music. So I had all these ideas and somehow this led to theater. If I had to do it all over again, it probably would have led to folklore, but at the time that wasn't mentioned to me.

And the thing was, I knew I wanted to go to Howard University, and going to Howard I came across all kinds of people and movements. I was right there during the Black Arts, Black Power, Black History Movements. And at the time, I started writing my own little things. And

my teachers would put on the papers, "This is so unorthodox. But go ahead." I wasn't conforming to what was considered acceptable theater or standardized theater at the time. I guess I was more into an avant-garde thing, or trying to pull out some of my Black roots and things like that.

I was always relating things to back home. At the time, that was considered unorthodox, because I was there to study Shakespeare and Ibsen.

Again, being at Howard—you had all these people coming through. You had LeRoi Jones (who became Amiri Baraka) coming through, and Ossie Davis, as well as Eldridge Cleaver and Muhammed Ali, you know. So this just put a spark in us. So I joined this group called Theater Black. At first it was Theater Noir, then it became Theater Black, and then it became WATTSA, and WATTSA stood for We Ain't Takin' This Shit Anymore! So it got very, very, crazy, you know! So we were doing Malcolm X poems and I wrote this poem called "Black." You know, "You call me black, white man..." Later, Glenda Dickerson put it in one of her productions. I don't even know all the words to it. I just remember that at the time, it became popular. And what I started doing in my presentations, I started taking songs. I remember taking Nina Simone's songs, and Johnny Taylor's songs, and Langston Hughes' poems and I would dramatize them. And I would do them in a way—it was kind of like a storytelling thing, you know, and this would just excite the crowd....

And I was always still thinking about the folktales I had heard as a kid, plus I was reading folktales, and I think the 60s was a time when a lot of collections were published. You know, Harold Courlander and all these things, and Howard had a tremendous library. Plus DC had these tremendous bookstores. So I was reading all these things, plus I was in the [Howard Student Center, called the] Punch Out sharing my tales of home, and I think things kind of came to a head for my senior pro-

ject. Because as a senior, you had to do a recitation or whatever. And most people would do scenes from plays. And again, me and my avant-garde unorthodox self, I got up there and did a whole thing of storytelling, telling stories, singing.

But that kind of led me more into the storytelling and into the folktales. Because I had been in the Punch Out just sharing stories from home, you know, about 'splo and all that kind of stuff. And I thought everybody knew what 'splo was. Because 'splo was like home-brew, home-made liquor, you know. And I think the reason it was called 'splo- because that was like short for explosion. And once you taste it—well, just the smell would knock you. ... So when I would talk about what was going on down in Tennessee at the Punch Out some of the people were shocked. Because some of the people who came to Howard at that time were considered like the light bright. They came from the middle class. Their parents were like judges and lawyers and doctors and all of that. So some of the stuff I was sharing—some of them were embarrassed by it. Some of them had never heard of it.

So a lot of these elements were kind of bursting out of me. And like I said, they kind of reached a head with me at Howard, with me still liking theater but kind of merging them together. And then I remember when my husband, Clay, was a teacher there. And you had black poets, you had black dramatists, you had all this stuff, you know black, black, black, black, black, but there was nothing in terms of black storytelling, in terms of preserving the folktales.

And Stephen Henderson, he had developed something called the Institute for the Arts and Humanities. And he is really the one that started bringing all the different Black Arts together. Because, like I said, the Black Arts Movement really came out of the poetry and the plays. And it was really almost like a Black male movement, too. You had people such as Sonia Sanchez, who is one of the people who emerged, but it was really dominated by the men, you know. And they were going to

have this program and they wanted it to reflect all of the black arts. And Stephen Henderson was the one who said, "You know, we need storytelling. We need a storyteller." And that's the first time that that idea clicked in my head. And my husband was teaching in the department at the time, and he thought of me, because I was telling stories, I was telling stories to him, I was telling stories to my kids. So he came home and he said, "Linda," he said, "They're looking for a storyteller." And I said, "Well, here I am." And that's how I started, really.

But that first program that I did. I think I told a story about Buh



Rabbit and I think I even did an Aesop fable. I was just doing whatever I had been telling my kids. And I remember I had all these cloths, and after I had done everything, it was like people were just staring at me. It was like they had never seen anything like that before, just staring. I didn't know if they liked it or what they felt. But then they come up to me and they hugged me, and they said, "Wow this is just unbelievable, this is something." So from there, I said, well, this is what I'm going to do now. This is it. I've found my calling. Because that was the thing, trying to find your calling. So this was it.

And being at Howard and being at those times, I thought of storytelling as a political statement. And that's where I come out of it. Like I said, I come out of the Black Arts and Black Power movement, and I wanted to make a political statement. So I would use storytelling. And I would say "ancient tales for new times."

And my audiences at the time

were adult. You know, because a story is an animal story, they tend to think it is a story for children, but it is a story for everybody. So I was telling these animal stories, but they were really for the adults. And I would tell a story that almost kind of had a political thing to it. In other words, a person had to figure it out for themselves, but the whole power of a fable, of an animal story is that even though you're talking on an animal, it's taking on human characteristics. Also, you have to remember, this was a time during the Vietnam War. There was all kinds of things going on during that time. So my stories tended to be fables and animal stories but they were stories again to kind of wake up people. To kind of excite the crowd, you know, to get people to react, to express themselves. And during the 60s and 70s, you could say pretty much anything you wanted to say. There was no censorship, like there is now.

And you'd hear all kinds of stuff, and I remember Leroi Jones coming to Howard's campus, on campus. They would do programs on the steps, and he did this fabulous program. Nowadays we would call it spoken arts, poetry, or that type of thing. In those time, it didn't really have a title. But to hear LeRoi Jones do his poem "Up against the wall"...It was like nothing I had ever heard before in my life! And he and his manner, his mannerisms had the elements of what I would call storytelling. Because Leroi Jones would do his poetry to get the word out. In other words, he did whatever he could to get the word out. He might be hollering or screaming or stomping and all that kind of stuff. And that's the kind of stuff I wanted to do. So storytelling kind of gave me that outlet, where I could mimic people. Because I loved the idea of making faces, I loved the idea of mimicking people....

I didn't know that that was considered an African way of telling a story. I was just telling a story the best way I knew how. My influences—I mean coming from my mother, my father, my grandfather, you know, my aunts and uncles, the

*Photo: Linda Goss and relatives on a rare snowy day in Tennessee, c. late 1950s-early 1960s. Photos courtesy of artist.*

[Continued on page 21→]

tion for her daughter. And I was standing there. And finally the sister said, "Well, how about this little girl?" And the lady said, "I don't know her! She didn't come with me!" And so the sister asked me what was my name. I knew my name and I told her that my brother and my sisters went to that school, and I told her their names. So she says, "All right. But you have to have a seat." So I was elated! Because all of the kids were there, and the teacher, she was singing, and I'll never forget: "A, B, C, D, E, F, G...." And I learned my ABCs! But I wasn't old enough to be in school. And the thing about it was, when we went to recess, we came out of the school and went into the schoolyard, and I was standing there getting ready to play something. And I looked at the gate and here came my mother. She was running—she didn't know what had happened to me. But Mr. Whitey had gone and told her, said "Mommy Lump said she was going to go to school and I took her there. "So when I saw here, I knew I was headed home. And I started crying. And the nun, Sister Helen Rita, I remember her—She told my mother. She says, "Oh, don't take her." She says, "Her brother or her sisters can take her home at lunchtime." Because I was enjoying myself. And she let me stay.

And my sister Lucy brought me home at lunchtime. And evidently, after lunch I must have fell off to sleep because when I woke up my sister was coming in from school in the afternoon, and I wanted to go back. I told her, "Mom, can I go back?" And when my sister came in, she was always loud. And first thing she hollered out, "Sister wants to know when Thelma's coming back!" And that was it! I cried and I cried and I begged and I begged. So finally, she let me go the next day. So I started going to school! But they couldn't promote me because I wasn't six. And so they had me stay in first grade for an extra school term. So that's about it! That's how I put myself in school.

I memorized poems when I was young. Just for myself. I loved Paul Laurence Dunbar. His poetry

stuck with me. At school there was another girl. Phyllis. Paul Laurence Dunbar seemed to be her baby. And she'd do that. So I would do other things. I loved rhyme. That's how I would remember. One time I could flip them right off. That's what I love—it's just like songs! You hear a song and you like it, you hear it enough, you'll learn the words.

I guess I started writing in high school. But I really didn't push it. Because we had a girl. Chaka Fattah's mother, Frances Davenport, she was in my class at Southern. And Frances was the poet. So I never even considered myself as a poet, right? Because you know how they say who's going to be what? Well, they said Frances was definitely the poet. One teacher there said, there're two girls in this room who have a tendency to poetry. And she said, "Frances Davenport." I knew that. Then she said, "Thelma Shelton." I said—"What?" I didn't know it! I didn't even pay it any mind.

When I was working for the city, this guy was retiring and they wanted someone to write a verse and I happened to come into the office, and this little secretary—she said, talking about me, "She could write it." I said "OK." And it wasn't that difficult to write, because this man was comical, and everybody liked it. So then, every time somebody retired, they'd get me to write a verse. I gave away so many poems. Because I didn't think it was anything special.

And so then I started thinking about the different stories that fascinated me: Corrine Sykes, Soldiers on the Trolley. So I just wrote 'em for myself. I wrote Soldiers on the Trolley because my son, we were talking one day, and he was in Drexel and he thought he knew everything. So he was telling me something, and I said, "Oh yeah, that was like soldiers on the trolley." And he said "What soldiers on the trolley?" And the same thing for Corinne Sykes. He was instrumental in my doing it because he didn't know about it. And I thought, well, if he doesn't know about it, there are a lot of people who have seen historical things, but they don't pay

it any mind. They don't say anything about it. And then children come along and they're shocked! They never heard that before.

After I retired, I went to this poetry reading. And I was just surprised that the people liked what I wrote. Before that, I had a thing. I would always write. But I would never read it. I'd always give it to somebody else to read. And so this way, at the open mike, I started reading.

And when I found out I wasn't being laughed at, I went along with it. I used to just go for the open reading, and then Bob Smalls, Poets and Prophets, he asked me to be a featured reader. And that's how I started. I had no intentions. I didn't have even any plans as to what I wanted to do after I retired. But something came—and something I never even dreamed about. I said, "I've been telling stories all my life—but not this way!"

I think that after I went to that first reading, I said to myself, "I could do that," so after that, everybody had some kind of title, and I do write in rhyme, so I said, "I'm a poetic storyteller." That's how I come up with that. And then I hesitated saying that. I said to myself, I'm stepping too far.

I've had a couple of older women come to me and say, "Oh, I wish I could do that." If I can do it, you can do it, too! I don't think anybody's life is boring. If you don't write about yourself, you write about things that you see. And I do find that people like to listen to something that they can relate to.

That's what I try to do. What I write, it's not any original story. It's a story that I actually saw or heard about that stayed with me. Lasting impressions. That's what it is, that's what I tell. The things that have stuck with me.

*Ms. Robinson will tell stories as part of the PFP "Self Knowledge" program on February 19th. See next page.*



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Jersey. LaVaughn and friends took seats in a remote corner of the nightclub and guzzled cherry-garnished glasses of ginger-ale that Cy brought for them. Soon Louise hit the stage, dancing solo, decked out in white trousers, white tails, and low-heeled shoes (“just like a man would wear,” LaVaughn added). “She was doing so much dancing, it was unbelievable.” Her command of the stage and the quality of her rhythms captured

admired Madison’s dancing. (LaVaughn relates that a pot of beans and hog jowl was simmering on the stove when they arrived, and Louise invited them to join her for dinner.) There were suspicions, or assumptions, that she was gay. She enjoyed a good card game, especially in the downtime spent in dressing rooms between shows. Some of the Philadelphia tap veterans were convinced that she was responsible for steering Baby

tone, hair texture, and facial features—imposed by blacks as well as white—and its impact on who got what breaks, is a frequent theme in the testimonies of the women featured in *Plenty* and other women entertainers of that era. Or might she have been limited by her choice to perform solo? While there were other women who had solo acts, (the Stearns assert that if women dancers were good, they usually performed alone,



*This page: Hortense Allen Jordan and Libby Spencer in finale of “Stepping in Time,” February 1994. Next page: Libby Spencer rehearsing dancers for “Stepping.” Photos courtesy Jane Levine.*

LaVaughn’s attention and embedded themselves in his memory, such that, more than a half century later, you can still hear the excitement in his description of this first encounter: “She was doing as much dancing as any tap lover would ever want to see!” About a decade later, in 1955, LaVaughn, by then a professional hooper, encountered Louise when they both were on a show at New York’s Apollo Theater. Once again, he was awed by her style and technique and she was generous with her encouragement to LaVaughn and his dance partners.

Despite Louise’s popularity with audiences and the respect she commanded from her peers, little is known about her career or private life. What glimpses there are tend to be fragmented and disconnected. We know that she lived in North Philadelphia: LaVaughn once visited her along with master tap dancer Jerry Taps Sealy, who greatly

Laurence to abandon singing for tap dancing—a career move that resulted in Laurence becoming a jazz tap icon. Marshall and Jean Stearns, in their classic volume *Jazz Dance: The Story of American Vernacular Dance*, credit Louise with “cut[ting] a five-tap Wing like a man.”<sup>1</sup> It’s not clear when or why she retired from performing.

Entertainers who were Louise’s peers wondered and speculated why, given her stage presence and technical skill, she did not have a longer and more successful career. (As LaVaughn put it, “why she never did make it like she should have”). Without a doubt, opportunities were limited for black performers in general, and especially for women who dared to pursue such a male-dominated domain as tap dancing. But beyond these considerable hurdles, was she hampered, as Dave McHarris pronounced, by her looks? The tyranny of attitudes toward skin

as soloists),<sup>2</sup> it seems that the convention of the time for both men and women hoofers was to perform in teams of two, three, or four dancers—although outside of chorus lines, it was relatively uncommon for women to perform in an all-female ensemble. LaVaughn cites a business motive for the prevalence of duos, trios, etc., in that agents could demand bigger fees, and realize larger commissions, for a team than for a single tap dancer. Other explanations include Isabelle Fambro’s perspective that her and her partner’s act, Billy and Eleanor Byrd, was designed to capitalize on the popularity of Marge and Gower Champion, who were the prototypical white elegant stage couple. For Baby Edwards, working with a male partner gave her protection and a sense of security on the road.

Was Louise’s use of male attire onstage off-putting to agents and

presenters? Other female forerunners and contemporaries of Louise donned suits, ties and low-heeled suits. Mildred Candi Thorpe and Jewel Pepper Welch, of the Philadelphia-based team of Candi and Pepper wore zoot suits and Windsor-knotted ties. When interviewed in the early 1990s, Candi noted that “people wanted to see flesh but we never exposed our bodies.” Indeed, one of the most successful and durable acts in

to speculate on what social factors and personal choices might have driven or hindered Louise’s dance career, we will have to content ourselves with what little we know of her. It has been many years since she could speak to us in her own voice, and it is unlikely that her surviving contemporaries can illuminate the details of her life and talent more than they have already. But even if a trove of data lay right around the corner, I think I would prefer the Louise in my



vaudeville, the Whitman Sisters troupe, featured one of the sisters as a male impersonator. But I wouldn’t underestimate the ambivalence there might have been in Louise’s time toward women who dared to challenge convention by not only practicing a male art form, but also presenting themselves dressed like men.

A personal experience that offered me a glimpse of attitudes that Louse Madison and her peers might have encountered occurred in 1989 when LaVaughn and I were in New York City taping the PBS special, *Gregory Hines’ Tap Dance in America*. LaVaughn and I, both dressed in tuxedos, had just finished our up-tempo, wing-filled rendition of “How High the Moon.” The wife of tap legend Bunny Briggs came backstage and congratulated me on my dancing, then added, “Dear, you need to get yourself a little skirt. At first I thought you were a young boy up there.”

As intriguing as it is to theorize,

imagination—the Louise conjured from a few scraps of potent storytelling, the Louise whose powers of self-invention and whose willingness to challenge custom and convention are unsullied by inconvenient facts. I prefer the Louise whose technical and stylistic muscle is immune to comparisons with grainy film footage and offhand, possibly uninformed, critiques. I choose the Louise in my imagination, the one that was, in LaVaughn’s words, unbelievable.

<sup>1</sup> *NY: Macmillan, 1968*, p.195

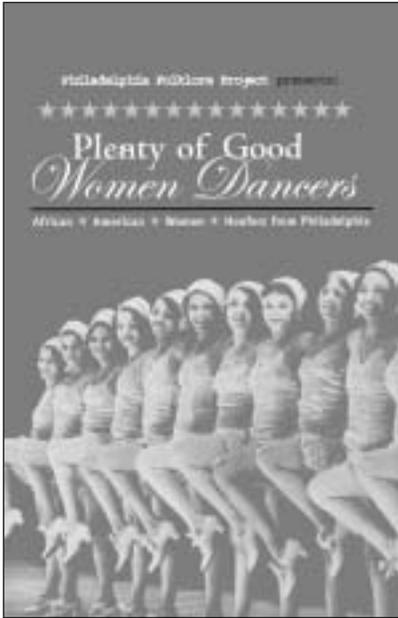
<sup>2</sup> *ibid*, p. 195



*Long-time PFP board member Germaine Ingram initiated the PFP Tap Initiative which included interviews with veteran Philadelphia hoofers, and which resulted in the production Stepping in Time, and the documentary and exhibition Plenty of Good Women Dancers. Germaine is currently a consultant on educational and child welfare policy and programs. To purchase the newly released DVD Plenty of Good Women Dancers, see p. 20, or visit our website. Plenty will be broadcast in the Philadelphia area on March 28, 2005 at 10 PM on WHYY-TV 12.*

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town itself...and then hearing people like a Amiri Baraka or a Jayne Cortez, a Sonia Sanchez and also seeing and hearing Sun Ra and Ornette Coleman and Pharaoh Saunders and Sonny Rollins—and once you started seeing these people, and hearing these people...and all this just kind of came together for me so that I emerged.

And the whole thing with me with storytelling was to not only to be influenced by my culture but also to develop my own thing. I'm the kind of person that I want to be unique, no matter what I do....

So even with my storytelling, I'm always looking for ways, exploring it, taking it out, take it in different directions, you know, because to me storytelling is so powerful and I think it is so important and so crucial to really get the story out. And I think of storytelling, really, as a force, and I think of it as a survival tool, and I think that's how we as a people survived, and I think that's how people—human beings as a species—will continue to survive—if we get the story out. And I think what's happening now is really a suppression of the story, of the word, getting out.

I was so shocked when I heard there were other storytellers, because I thought I was so unique! I thought, "Oh boy, I'm the only storyteller in the world!" I think the first storyteller I started hearing about was either Brother Blue or Mary Carter Smith. They had a tremendous influence on me, especially Brother Blue, because he was so different, he was so unique and I was influenced by that.

Apparently, talking to Brother Blue and Mother Mary, they kind of started doing their things around '73, too. Something happened, in the 70s, that led to the storytelling movement. Now what or why, I haven't been able to figure out. Why people were driven or drawn to this, you know, because people left their jobs, they started saying "this is what I am going to do," type of thing.

And what was so funny, I was discouraged, too. See, I don't want you to think that everything was all roses, because it wasn't. Sometimes people

didn't know what I was talking about, what I was going to do.

And at the time I was very disappointed. I was very, you know, discouraged, and I think that's what kind of reminded me of the story my grandfather used to tell about the frog who wanted to be a singer, how you had to keep going and that was a story I was telling to my kids anyway. And that kind of led me to telling that story in public.

They started the Smithsonian Festival of American Folklife and Bernice Reagon was at Howard and [my husband] Clay and her would talk and she heard about what I was doing and she said, "Well, maybe Linda should be featured." And I remember that I had to kind of like come and audition for her. And I was so afraid, so nervous. I could hardly talk. I was stuttering, because I stutter anyway. I could hardly move. My feet were so wooden. And I really did a horrible job. But it was something in me, something she saw. And she encouraged me, and she said, "Well, you can come and you can tell your stories." And I just remember she said, "I just hope you"—I remember she pointed to my feet—"I just hope you move your feet a little more."

And then in '75 they had me to tell stories. But one year, when I was there, they had me to come out of this shack, which was similar to what was in my home town, and they even had a garden. And I never will forget. And I think Bernice just said this. But they didn't have—they didn't give me a microphone. Either they couldn't find a microphone or they forgot that I would need one. So Bernice said, "Just use your voice. Just use your voice. Use your voice. They'll come. They'll come." So that's when I started doing this cry: "Well, oh well, well!" Before I had never done that, to the public. But I wanted people to come and hear the stories! And I had all this so-called competition because, you know, people from all over the world were there, sharing their art, their folklore. And how was people going to come and look at little old me, you know?! And I just started going "Well,

oh well!" "Story! Story-telling time!"

"Well, oh well, well," that came from a little man called Squeal 'em Carr. Now to this day I do not know his real name. Because a lot of people in my town have nicknames. Everybody has a nickname. You know the Negro Leagues, the baseball teams, would come though the town and they would play in this big field that isn't there anymore, you know, and whenever there was a home run, you could hear "Well, oh well, well!" and it just took me out! It was like, "Who is that?! Who is saying that?!" Again, I was curious. I always had the questions. And my mother said, "That's Squeal 'em Carr," you know. And my mother would sing it around the house too. In other words, that became like something people would say around the town, because you think of Squeal 'em Carr and that saying, you know. And one day, I saw Squeal 'em Carr, and he was so tiny. He was a very short man. And the whole idea of something that powerful, that you could hear all over that field, coming out of his voice, you know. So apparently, when Bernice said "You've got to call 'em," that is what came out of me.

And what happened next, I bought some bells. These are bells that I have been using ever since the 70s. I thought that since I am going to be at the Smithsonian, and I'm using my voice—I got to do something else [to attract people] so I started ringing the bells.

And so, once I kind of emerged as a storyteller, and when I told my grandfather what I was doing, that's when he brought this old bugle, this old bugle he had. I'd never seen it before. And he told me that was his job. On the plantation. He had worked in this big plantation in Alabama. Now, you know, my grandfather, he always got to tell a story. And again, you didn't know what was true and what wasn't. But he claimed that the rooster would crow first, early in the morning. The rooster would crow. And when the rooster would crow, this would wake up Shep, the dog. Then the dog—now again, the way he would tell it, it would sound like the

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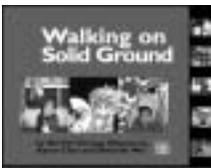
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**Walking on Solid Ground**  
A new children's book about Philadelphia's Chinatown



By Sifu Shu Pui Cheung, Shuyuan Li, Aaron Chau, and Deborah Wei. A children's book about Philadelphia's Chinatown, told from the point of view of two artists and their young student. Walking shows people taking risks and struggling to hold on to community and folk arts—things which money simply cannot buy. 32 pp. Photographs. Bilingual Chinese/English. \$12.95 + \$1.50 postage

Please make checks payable to: Philadelphia Folklore Project  
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pfp video:



**T**ouching on community efforts to stop a stadium from being built in Chinatown (one of many fights over land grabs and "development"), and on other occasions when the community comes together (including Mid-Autumn Festival and New Year), this documentary attends to the everyday interactions, relationships, and labor—so often overlooked—that build and defend endangered communities. Directed by Debbie Wei, Barry Dornfeld, and Debora Kodish

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truth!—the dog would come and like lick his hand. And that would wake him up, and then he would get the bugle and then he would blow—mmmmm—and that would start waking up everybody. Now I believe it, because that's what he said. And so he says, "I had to wake up the people to get them to start working." He said, "And that's what you're doing. You're waking up the people." So he gave me the bugle. And that was so odd. Because before that I did not know that's what he did.

A lot of the times, you might do something, you don't know why you're doing it, you don't know where it comes from. You don't know if they can trace it back to Africa if you're aware of it. You know, you just start doing it. So that's something I just started doing, you know!

And at DC, at the Smithsonian thing, these crowds just kept going, would gather around. And one of the people who saw me, who heard my stories was Louise Robinson, She was one of the original members of Sweet Honey in the Rock. So a lot of them came, they would see what I was doing. And one of the members [of Sweet Honey] now uses, tells the frog story I tell, and also the Stuart sisters, Ardie Stuart Brown [came], and it kind of inspired her to develop what she developed. And so what I started doing kind of led to a movement.



*Linda Goss was born near the Smoky Mountains in an aluminum factory town, Alcoa, Tennessee. She grew up listening to the storytelling of her grandfather Murphy and other family members who shared stories of life under slavery as well as a heritage of folk tales, oral history and legend. Stories about ethical values, the civil rights struggle in Tennessee, and stories from personal experience are among many hundreds of stories that she has gathered over decades of serious study and performance. She is currently working to document play-party songs, as well. The "Official Storyteller" of Philadelphia, and a pioneer of the contemporary storytelling movement, Ms. Goss was co-founder of "In the tradition..." the National Black Storytelling*

*Festival and Conference and The National Association of Black Storytellers, a founding member of Keepers of the Culture, and of Patchwork: a Storytelling Guild. She is the author of numerous books, and a contributor to many collections on African American storytelling. She will be sharing stories as part of PFP's February 19th program (see calendar to right) and will be leading a 3-part series of storytelling round-tables at our new home. For more information about these events, and about Ms. Goss, visit [www.folkloreproject.org](http://www.folkloreproject.org).*

## >grants workshops

**Jan 15, Mar 19, May 21: BUILD SKILLS.**

Help for folk arts projects. 10-Noon. Call for details.

## >studio visits

**Feb 8, 16, 19 & 26: BEHIND-THE-SCENES**

**VISITS WITH PHILLY ARTISTS:** Kulu Mele,

Herencia Arabe, Ollin Yolitzli in rehearsal. Call for details.

## >storytelling

**Feb 19: FOLKLORE & SELF-KNOWLEDGE.**

@ Art Sanctuary, 18th & Diamond, 1- 5 PM. \$5 See p. 17.

## >workdays

**March 26, April 2 & 9: HELP US GET THE**

**NEW PFP BUILDING IN SHAPE!** Paint, clean, &

make our garden grow with master heritage gardener

Blanche Epps. 9 AM @ 735 S. 50th St. All welcome.

## >exhibitions

**April 15: "IF THESE WALLS COULD TALK"**

**EXHIBIT OPENING.** After 18 years of being a tenant,

the Folklore Project is going to own our own home, and

our new dining room is a work of folk art and social history.

5-8 PM @ 735 S. 50th St.

**May 13: "WE SHALL NOT BE MOVED:"**

**THOMAS B. MORTON: 30 YEARS OF**

**ODUNDE** photo exhibition opening. 5-8 PM

@ 735 S. 50th St.

## >salon performances

**May 4, 11 & 18: LINDA GOSS:** Storytelling Table! 7

PM. 735 S. 50th St. \$10. **May 8: ELAINE & SUSAN**

**WATTS:** Klezmer. 2 PM. 735 S. 50th St. FREE. **May 22:**

**GERMAINE INGRAM:** Tap Dance. 230 PM

@ Indre, 1418 S. Darien. \$10.

## >grand opening (of our new home)

**Sept. 13: SAVE THE DATE**

**WANT TO LEARN MORE?** For details, visit

[www.folkloreproject.org](http://www.folkloreproject.org), or call us and we'll send you a full calendar: 215.468.7871.

about the  
**philadelphia folklore  
project**

Folklore means something different to everyone—as it should, since it is one of the chief means we have to represent our own realities in the face of powerful institutions. Here at the PFP, we're committed to paying attention to the experiences & traditions of "ordinary" people. We're an 18-year-old public interest folklife agency that documents, supports & presents local folk arts and culture. We offer exhibitions, concerts, workshops & assistance to artists and communities. We conduct ongoing field research, organize around issues of concern, maintain an archive, & issue publications and media. Our work comes out of our mission: we affirm the human right to meaningful cultural & artistic expression, & work to protect the rights of people to know & practice traditional community-based arts. We work to build critical folk cultural knowledge, respect the complex folk & traditional arts of our region, & challenge processes & practices that diminish these local grassroots arts & humanities. We urge you to join—or to call us for more information. (215-468-7871)

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