April 1998

Darvil Meets Little Black Sambo in Nebraska—A Poetry Performance

Charles Fort
University of Nebraska at Kearney

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/pocpwi3
Part of the Race, Ethnicity and Post-Colonial Studies Commons

http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/pocpwi3/32

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the People of Color in Predominantly White Institutions at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in Third Annual National Conference (1998) by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.
Darvil Meets Little Black Sambo in Nebraska—A Poetry Performance

Charles Fort
University of Nebraska at Kearney

“Rarely acknowledged, my character becomes invisible out of necessity. The range of my poems is a result of my life and teaching.”

Rarely acknowledged, my character becomes invisible out of necessity. The range of my poems is a result of my life and teaching. I taught for three years at Xavier University in New Orleans, a predominantly black and religious institution. My other eighteen years were at the University of North Carolina at Wilmington, University of Hartford, Hartford Community College, Bowling Green State University and Southern Connecticut State University. These were private and public universities. I have taught wealthy as well as first generation working class students. At two universities, I was Director of a Creative Writing Program for a total of nine years. I now hold an endowed Chair at the University of Nebraska at Kearney. The campus is nearly lily (as well as the community), a rare breed for a professor from any background.

One of my students wrote this poem for me during my first semester:

The Art of Breathing
By Adrian Miller
For Professor Charles Fort

The man is black; a rare color
in vanilla Kearney, even rarer
for a professor, of poetry nonetheless!
The palm of his hand is pink,
like the inside of his eyes.

Through thick, dense teacup glasses
set on a strong African nose, he peers
across at students in section Two.
Someone begins to ask a question

and Charles' thick maple syrup
voice pours, spiced with thought
and emotion, out to interrupt.
A bad joke. A Northeasterner,
he is unsure of how to behave
in the confines of Midwestern style,
to joke and laugh with students
and convey his spirit in strong
strides as he is surely used to.
His soul, in its deep forest depths,
matches the shade of a man
whose every breath is poetry.

**The Worker**  
By Charles Fort

The father was a barber-surgeon  
for thirty-nine years from nine to five,  
a factory worker on the night shift  
from eleven p.m. to seven a.m.  
for thirty-eight of those years,  
and a landlord in our three-story  
tenement twenty-four hours a day.

On Saturdays it seemed as if  
the entire Negro section of town  
had grown long hair.  
The sounds of shears still vibrate my ears.  
I swept clouds into the wastebasket.  
The back room contained hard whiskey  
bookies and hidden magazines.

When my father came home at seven a.m.  
lifting his black aluminum lunch box,  
we seven children met him at the door,  
kneled, and untied his shoes.  
His tired eyes burned lines  
into the side of that box.  
Each of us wanted left-overs;  
we grew older and took turns.  
Steel ball-bearings turned in his hands given to us as marbles  
and the largest on the block.

They made my father a supervisor.  
His white friends for thirty years  
now turned from his voice.  
Years before the U.S. Army  
broke his legs in basic training  
and fused them for life.

When dust began to fill my father's bones  
I learned how chronic arthritis  
can lock together any old man.  
From the back room I heard my name
and a razor being slapped against leather. With magazines thrown into place
I carried out his clean towels.
I picked up clouds.

**Darvil Meets James Brown in Harlem and New Orleans**
By Charles Fort

Please, Please, Don't Go
Harlem, 1962. Apollo Theater. Ain't no potato like blackberry jam. Darvil sits three rows
and three hours before show time front stage his elephant ears and alligator eyes drift to a
black cajun a drummer like a waterfall in the rocky mountain fat back Americana rent
party on a twenty four hour street corner rock and roll born and stamped grade A by the
bastard blues and subway humming birds feed on race records found sunny side up on a
brownstone Victrola 78's thrown to a black bottom mama by a big daddy in a nine piece
suit woven in Harlem renaissance fire hydrant hot sauce hand out by a social worker in a
farmer's market mango pie in the glove compartment of a three story cadillac collards in
every black ass pot a green banana in every two door garage mast head alley cat wrecking
crew in grand central station grease on the ankle shoe shine pullman porter on a bag pipe
anchors away on a continent of the five and dime window cleaner on the fifty-ninth floor
juke joint catfish band in New Orleans. "Try Me", 1982. Mississippi Queen floats on a
red river midnight saxophone like a full moon carousel of bourbon and beer baroque
barbeque goat ribs alligator pie Mardi Gras mambo street car lizard smokes a Cuban cigar
five minutes to show time ain't no potato like blackberry jam.

**Race War**
By Charles Fort

We are carnal sinners blown about forever
like Hell proper's *Paolo* and *Francesca*.
We are face to face. We are reaching out
but we are not alive anymore, nothing like love
here tonight between races that moan, rocks that rise,
and a kindness that wounds and aches and whimpers.
This is a moment in history that refuses
to sit still, and our hands become great serpents
in a battle without victory. In this southern town
we exchange blows on our shapeless faces
until our eyes meet like playmates in a meadow.
We are children of circumstance, slave ships and reckless stars,
and there are few hours left in this world that "we may rise
on stepping stones taking our dead selves to higher things".
We lead each other away from each other
odd and sightless creatures.
This moment is against us. Ripe and cunning,
earth is not sufficient and earth is our only companion.
The Town Clock Burning
By Charles Fort

The clock positions each of us
in one square block behind the church.
Nothing has counted more and year after year
we march as it tells us to march.

This half-sleeping clock falters.
Its pendulum craves motion and time
As powder and flame shadow each face
we guard what it tells us to guard.

Does this half-stepping helmsman
know how a holy war begins?
What bell shaped terror? What moan? What hour
we stop when it tells us to stop?

This is the clock of boundaries marking its descent as its final seconds
pass into history and without pause
we harm what it tells us to harm.

PRESENTER