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History 365

30 April 2015

Screams from the Concealed: Race Relations in Student Poetry

Desegregation of Mississippi University for Women (MUW), or as it was known at the time, Mississippi State College for Women (MSCW), occurred in 1966.[1] This was, as any change might be, a shakeup to the routine and regular mindsets that were contained within the campus. Although there were of course more "official" documentations and recordings of the changes that occurred within and throughout the campus in regards to race relations, and the effects desegregation had upon MUW, one aspect that can be looked at is the creative side of MUW, that is, the *Dilettante* magazine and the creative works found within it, and looking at how they reflect the mindset of students of MUW. What similarities and what differences might be shown in the creative writing of MUW at the time compared to the official stories, and is there a story there at all? Fortunately, there is a story being told in the *Dilettante*, at the very least a display of emotions that bring to light some of the feelings relevant to the goings on of the time period, perhaps even more so than what might be found in the more formal, rigid accords of the time like the student newspaper, and even leaning toward more radical political ideals.[2]

A wealth of a source was found in the 1968 version of the *Dilettante*, just two years after the desegregation of MUW. More than any other *Dilettante*, this publication has very obvious subject matter bluntly dealing with race. Most prominently is both a poem and an image by Pat

1. For the sake of simplicity, the term "MUW" will be used regardless of year, for the remainder of this paper.

2. Not all years of the *Dilettante* were available for research, with many years not represented. However, this researcher believes that enough volumes exist that are close enough to the date of desegregation that an idea can be gathered of some of the mindsets that existed, and of what topics were written about. Similarly, some *Dilettante's* had no markers as to the year of publication, so only general guesses can be made as to the year.

Burkhalter, located almost directly in the center of the book.[3] Opposite a collage of images of African American children lies the poem, "Crumbling Cornbread Race," the only poem in the publication (in fact, the only poem found in all of the publications that were searched through) to be printed in an alternate font to the rest of the works included. The poem speaks with strong language:

> To trod torn-up asphalt tile, dirt ditches, railroad tracks, and hurdle mud holes.
> Listening to licorice children talk of lavender lollipops, fifty foot ferris wheels, and talking teddy bears
> Parents promising popsicles and pink popcorn.
> Suddenly seeing there is no retreat
> Only poverty staring into a glass hat at Renee and Pat
> Continuing its mold of fermented filth and promiscuity.
> Camel, chocolate, or cocoa. No, BLACK!
> Do they all live in a jungle of shifting sand castles and shacks,
> Made of cigar racks, manilla paper sacks, and Woolworth's penny tacks?
> Smoke slowly rises and curls lazily from these square shacks
> Made of crinkled cardboard and ticky-tac.
> How odd! They all look the same.
> If it wren't for family names Huffman, Hawkins, and Haber,
> I'd swear they were the same.
> Do all Negroes live in one domain?
> Outside the gray mist raps around drying clothes, ten children, and Miss Jumblejack next door.
> Inside it slithers between between sheets, sits on Martin's hamburger meat,
> Snakechains around a table leg and waits.
> Waits for a few more crumbs to F A L L.

Rather than make any claims about what Burkhalter is trying to say, what is important is that something is being said. It is not even completely clear whether or not Burkhalter is in fact black or white. What is clear is the sense of emotion, the sense of a mix of desperation, anger, and tense, pent-up hate and rage wanting to be released – a summation of emotion that is a perfect look on its own as a backdrop to the race relations of the time, angry and disgusted with the poverty endemic in the black community.

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3. Pat Burkhalter, "Crumbling Cornbread Race," pages 23-25, *Dilettante*, 1968, Hogarth Collection, MUW University Archive, Columbus, Mississippi.

In the 1968 *Dilettante*, that emotion of anger and rage, and a sense of struggle seems to pervade the works included. It must be mentioned that these works in the *Dilettantes* are not random happenstance, but assembled by individuals that had their own mindset of what they wanted to put together and what they wanted to say. So even though it is tempting to say that each *Dilettante* is a collection of the general mindset of the writers who submitted that year, it is important to remember that the works actually published could well have been chosen specifically to stick to a certain theme or attitude. Amazingly enough, Burkhalter's poem is not the only work in the 1968 edition that can be tied to race relations. Another untitled poem by Furr, reads:

> Like Bobbling blue apples
> The three birds caught and rode the oak.
> The one at the middle speculating
> On his place in the tree –
> Knowing the two others have
> More advantages than he.
> The two above – below
> Contemplating there are entirely better trees
> And flinging acorns in disgust at bees.[4]

There is a very real, clear disgust here at inequality. This poem is not as obvious as Burkhalter's, but it shows the other side of the anger, the side that shows itself through less obvious imagery, how the individual who has less takes it out on still lesser individuals – bees. This work is unclear about what exactly might be behind it: race relationships, gender inequality, socioeconomic status, but one way or another, inequality makes the author angry.

There are yet more angry poems in the 1968 edition and the poems are willing to take surprisingly controversial issues and imagery. One poet warns her lover "Don't ever say you love me – / If you generalize I'm through./ I'm not popcorn or flowers,/ And a vague statement will

4. Furr, page 2, *Dilettante*, 1968, Hogarth Collection, MUW University Archive, Columbus, Mississippi.

not do."[5] Only a little bit further in another author asks "What can be the use when words of fire/ Fall into the stagnant waters/ Of small-town minds?"[6] Yet more anger emerges in a simple, three line poem: "The clear stream resented my careful step./ The mud boiled angrily from the shallow bottom to bid/ the intruder, "Be gone!"[7] Simple, but it conjures the ideas of difference, intrusion, and being unwelcome. Another poet warns of being "Servants to the lettermen."[8] Perhaps one of the more surprising lines in the publication comes in "Build a baby in a jar. Choose man, woman, or hermaphrodite, and/ Color it blond."[9] This same work speaks of modern man being "artificial," and the very next work states "The gallant soldiers,/ the ones who die./ What are medals to the dead?/ What means to them the talk of peace?"[10] This is likely about the Vietnam war, and while not about race, it still links the 1968 *Dilettante* to the prevalent theme of anger and frustration with society and a desire for change, and that anger and desire for change can definitely be seen as a potential boon for race relations and desegregation. Overall, it would appear that the *Dilettante* was, at least, a place where students could speak openly – the poems published included even such topics as abortion, with a young woman discovering that the stigma of abortions being for a certain kind of woman was false, and that any and all kinds of women might have one.[11] The *Dilettante* could be seen as a testament to the ability of poetry and art in general to breach the taboos of discussion and allow for students to have a realm of

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5. Tate, "Poetry's Advice to Her Lover," page 4, *Dilettante*, 1968, Hogarth Collection, MUW University Archive, Columbus, Mississippi.

6. Norris, "George Lowery," page 6, *Dilettante*, 1968, Hogarth Collection, MUW University Archive, Columbus, Mississippi.

7. Jarmon, "Wading," page 14, *Dilettante*, 1968, Hogarth Collection, MUW University Archive, Columbus, Mississippi.

8. McGee, "Pigskin," page 29, *Dilettante*, 1968, Hogarth Collection, MUW University Archive, Columbus, Mississippi.

9. Tate, "Man-Made the Label," page 47-48, *Dilettante*, 1968, Hogarth Collection, MUW University Archive, Columbus, Mississippi.

10. Norris, "No Flowers, Please," page 50, *Dilettante*, 1968, Hogarth Collection, MUW University Archive, Columbus, Mississippi.

11. Debbie Burlingame, "Choices," *Dilettante*, (Date Unknown) Special Collections, Fant Library, MUW, Columbus, Mississippi.

exploration and discourse on controversial subjects.

The 1968 publication was not the only one to have content related to race or desegregation. In the 1972 publication, there is a poem that begins as what might be assumed as a happy and hopeful poem, but ends on a far more sour note:

> I wonder sometimes maybe if
> we took a group of children –
> 10 boys, 10 girls, black and white
> and shades of in between
> and raised them up
> without some words
> like war and hate
> or gun and fight
> teaching them instead
> love and happy,
> kind and tolerant,
> equality and compassion
> And never let them see
> the ugliness we know
> in word or what we do
> What kind of games they'd play.
> Would they play cowboys and Indians
> with no word for gun
> or bows and arrows?
> Would they play GI Joe
> without a word for army
> Would Jan and Tim
> laugh at Billy and Sue because their skin was yellow?
> And after that
> it saddens me
> to think:
> they prob'ly would.[12]

"Yellow" or "black," the message is clear: prejudice, racism and hate are seen as intrinsic parts of humanity, and not one that is going away easily. Whether this is a disillusionment with the resistance to the civil rights or the slow pace of change, or a disillusionment with the goals of the civil rights movement – the very idea that integration was possible – is unknown. It could even be both. In the 1974 publication anger and frustration at inequality in American culture emerge

12. Bridges, page 2, *Dilettante*, 1972, Special Collections, Fant Library, MUW, Columbus, Mississippi.

again:

"... A rose by any other name would smell
as sweet."

A very fine thought figuratively
Shakespeare was sure figurative
Too bad.

Man Is A
Labeler!

He labels himself conservative
liberal
hawk
middle class, etc.,

And he is PROUD.
Yet ...
White opposed to black
Carries a stigma when black
is not black but nigger
boy
mamie, or

worse; you[13]

Whether the "you" in the poem is referring to the author themselves, it is clear that the poet is putting the reader in the place of being black. The message is clear, like many of the poems, in that it sees a clear divide between white and black, with black on the side that is far worse off.

Of course, not all poems bringing up race did so in such obvious ways. Others mentioned it offhandedly, such as in "Interstate Idolatry," with a line that thanks the interstate "for not being choosey, I've noticed you welcome any race, creed or color to speed along your surface."[14] Another even potentially questions race equality, in the 1975 publication. Titled "A Question of

13. Bowling, page 12, *Dilettante*, 1974, Special Collections, Fant Library, MUW, Columbus, Mississippi.
14. Ross, "Interstate Idolatry," page 22, Special Collections, Fant Library, MUW, Columbus, Mississippi.

Equality," it reads:

> If everyone in the world
> could work out their lives like algebraic equations,
> subtracting here,
> dividing there,
> fixing everything just right,
> we would all be equal.
> But who would we be?[15]

This poem could be seen as similar to the earlier one that stated "they prob'ly would," remarking that the intrinsic nature of humanity is to be unequal. However, it could even potentially be suggesting that being unequal is even desirable to a state of equality if it means that we have to "fix everything just right." If so, it is rather remarkable that the *Dilettante* is publishing such radical commentary.

Often a picture of the desegregation of MUW or desegregation in general is shown in the positive aspect, as being one more step forward to equality, and in the negative aspect of the anger, negativity, and violence that black students had to face. The poems published in the *Dilettante* show a different, emotional angle. The major, important element that stands out is the anger and disatisfaction they have with the culture they live in and even the anger that the students could have for themselves. There is a deep-seated discontent in the tone. There were no positive, uplifting or proud poems in regards to being black. There was nothing that made any real mention of the black power movement, yet these same feelings are found in the radical politics of the time period – the sense of a need for something more is loud and clear.

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15. Barbara Harris, "A Question of Equality," *Dilettante*, 1975, Special Collections, Fant Library, MUW, Columbus, Mississippi.