

L I T E R A R Y H U B

Poet Sister Artist Comrade: In Celebration of Thulani Davis

Jessica Hagedorn: "It was a freaky-deaky time, in a
freaky-deaky city..."

By Jessica Hagedorn
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Thulani Davis has been my poet sister artist comrade for nearly 50 years. We met in San Francisco one night in either 1971 or 1972—young poets with flash and sass, opinionated and full of ourselves. We were reading at the Western Addition Cultural Center with several other poets, fiery types like Roberto Vargas, Serafin Syquia, Miz Redbone, maybe even Avotcja and Marvin X. Buriel Clay, a local writer and community activist, had organized the program and brought us all together. I was new at doing readings and didn't know anyone there. I remember being nervous and excited. There wasn't much of an audience, but being a part of this dynamic group felt like a very big deal.

Dim lights. A podium, a mic, rickety folding chairs.

Thulani was one of the last to read. The quiet, incantatory power of her voice and the bravado of her poem got me.

I am Brown

I am a child of the third world

my hair black n long
my soul slavetraded n nappy
yellow brown-Safronia
in this world, illegitimate seed...

On her way out the door that night, Thulani made a cryptic comment about the tattered, patched-up jeans I had on. Whatever she said made me laugh. We became friends—hung out at her place on Oak Street, smoked Kools and Gitanes, and *talked*. Talk, talk, and more talk. We were curious and passionate about everything, from Jimi Hendrix to Anna May Wong to Jean-Luc Godard and Tennessee Williams. Thulani turned me on to The Original Last Poets, Bill Gunn's *Ganja and Hess*, Archie Shepp & Jeanne Lee's "Blasé," Ishmael Reed's *Mumbo Jumbo*, Pedro Pietri's *Puerto Rican Obituary*, Nikki Giovanni's "Ego Tripping," and Amiri Baraka's "Beautiful Black Women."

We found ourselves suddenly being invited to participate in marathon benefit readings for righteous causes. Free Angela Davis, Stop the War in Vietnam, Support the Farmworkers, Save the I-Hotel. The audiences were huge and could be disruptive at these politically charged events. Our token status wasn't lost on us. Ken Kesey, Allen Ginsberg, and Lawrence Ferlinghetti were the stars the people were there to see and hear. No matter. We showed up with our poems and our swagger, determined to have fun. Maybe, just maybe, we'd win the crowd over.

My world kept expanding. Thulani introduced me to her East Coast running buddies, who came out for a visit and ended up staying awhile. Brainy, arty, fabulous people like Arnim, Monsieur Henri, Mother Popcorn, and the poet Ntozake Shange. Ntozake and Thulani met as students at Barnard and became great friends. She would become a significant figure in our writing lives.

It was a freaky-deaky time, in a freaky-deaky city filled with duende and strife. Chaos and creativity reigned. You could burn out quickly, die anytime. We were immersed in language and music. Writing felt potent, dangerous, and necessary. As we grew bolder and more ambitious, collaborations with

musicians, visual artists, and dancers began happening with more frequency. Thulani left the Bay Area in 1973. New York City beckoned, in all its grimy splendor.

Fast forward to 1977. Thulani, Ntozake, and I create *Where the Mississippi Meets the Amazon*, a poetry and music cabaret show that was produced and presented by Joseph Papp at the Public Theater that same year.

The title derives from a poem by Ntozake, and the ever-evolving script was made up of poems written by each of us. We called ourselves The Satin Sisters and performed with an all-star band of kick-ass musicians: David Murray on saxophone, Anthony Davis on piano, Fred Hopkins on bass, Pheeroan akLaff on drums, and Michael Gregory Jackson on guitar and vocals. The Public's Martinson Theater was transformed into a gritty nightclub, with charming waitstaff serving drinks. (A forerunner to Joe's Pub, perhaps.) And there we were—glammed-up and talk-singing mystifying poems while channeling Chaka Khan. Somehow, it all worked. *Where the Mississippi Meets the Amazon* ran for four astonishing months. Nothing like it had ever been done before, and nothing like it ever since.

A couple of months before the COVID-19 pandemic shut New York City down, I re-read the script for *Mississippi/Amazon* and listened to an archival recording of one of our final performances. I'm glad I did. One of the high points of my listening session came towards the end, with Thulani's rendition of "Zoom (The Commodores)." It's my all-time favorite poem of hers. Written before video-conferencing became the new normal, Thulani's "Zoom" is a lusty poem you can dance to—a celebration of humanity and "the love that can keep death waiting." Her best line never fails to crack me up: "Talking trash is one of the lost arts." Funny, poignant, oh so true.

A lot of people know Thulani as a masterful writer in multiple genres. They've read her fiction and non-fiction, they've seen the movies she's written, they've attended her operas and plays. *Nothing but the Music* brings our attention to Thulani's grounding as a poet, allowing us to appreciate her body of work in a fresh and startling way. With this new book, "Zoom (The Commodores)" has claimed its rightful place alongside brilliant poems about

Cecil Taylor, Henry Threadgill, Thelonious Monk, and the Art Ensemble of Chicago.

How cool is that?



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