

How OBAC was Born: A Personal Memoir

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The origin of OBAC is a story rooted in the lives of specific people and the life of a city, dynamic relationships that spanned different generations. OBAC was founded by three people in 1967: Conrad Kent Rivers (1933-1968), Hoyt Fuller (1923-1981), and Gerald McWorter (1942-). Chicago gave rise to one of the most important local expressions of the national Black-consciousness/Black arts movement. OBAC is part of this story, the life of an innovative and vibrant movement toward a new Black aesthetic that emerged in virtually every city in the country. OBAC represented continuity with the past, reflected the present, and set the stage for much of what was yet to develop.

I was Chicago born in the famous Cabrini projects, to working class parents. My father was a steel worker, my mother was a clerical worker, and neither had graduated from high school. However, my father came from a family sired by a paternal ancestor who had in 1819 Kentucky purchased his freedom and moved to Illinois in 1831. His legal property rights were defined by a special act of the Illinois State Legislature in 1837. Further, my maternal ancestry was rooted in the struggles of the labor movement.

My mother's brother, Otto, and his wife, Eleanor, as full-time progressive activists from the National Negro Congress and the Steel Workers Organizing Committee, turned all of us kids onto DuBois and Paul Robeson. I especially remember them giving me a record about the Underground Railroad, and a book about great Black people called Thirteen Against the Odds. My father's older sister, Thelma, was part of the black arts scene in Chicago during the 30's and 40's. Her house was full of original

paintings and traditional African sculpture. In summary, my background influences were strong in Black culture and working class politics. Like most Black families, the McWorter clan sacrificed for education. My family first connected with the University of Chicago in 1914, and I found myself studying there towards a PhD in sociology in the 1960's.

During the summer of 1962, I was working at the downtown post office as a weekend sub. (That was when the hours varied almost to your individual taste, and the money was good.) I lived in the far South side community called Chatham, and rode the Cottage Grove bus to 63rd Street, where I transferred to the El (rapid transit train) to go downtown. One day while standing and reading a book (Ashley Montagu, The Natural Superiority of Women), on a very crowded bus someone taped me on the shoulder and said "I know Ashley Montagu". That is how I first met Conrad Kent Rivers, and from that point our friendship was on.

Conrad was only about ten years older, but he had been advanced for his age and therefore seemed much older. He was from Philly, and had been close to Langston Hughes, virtually a protégée. His other influences were Casper Jordan, a librarian in Ohio, and an uncle in Atlanta, a brilliant literary critic who I spent a night getting drunk with in Pascalls Motor Hotel in Atlanta while he quoted Black songs from poets known and not, including much of what is eternal and beautiful in the greatest white muse Bill Shakespeare. Conrad had great teachers and was well schooled.

Conrad and I rode the bus and then the El to the post office, where he happened to be working as well. We went through the assignment station after punching in, and got assigned to the same place. We talked all day – I found a mentor, and he found an

energetic student. Our relationship developed quickly. He opened the door for me to the world of Black literature. He taught me what he knew, and I challenged him and drove him to discipline and self renewal like every good student should. That summer, I read all of Wright, Ellison, and Baldwin, in addition to Chester Himes, and all of the major poets of the Harlem Renaissance. We used to ride down the street in his green convertible Thunderbird reciting Black poetry. I remember once pulling up in front of a bus stop and, while standing up on the seat, reciting to people waiting for the bus that great sonnet by Claude McKay, "If we must die". I was singing, they were amused and bewildered, and as we sped away through a red light everyone smiled, laughed, and waved goodbye. I was in love with Blackness, and they somehow knew that what was happening was a good thing.

Conrad introduced me to Hoyt. He was a sophisticated world class literary figure, an editor, a journalist, and itinerant critic of injustice and immorality from a Black perspective. And, most important of all, Hoyt was concerned about listening to and assisting the young. Although I was one of the few isolated Blacks at the University of Chicago, Hoyt joined Conrad in providing me with a rare form of Black mentorship. They gave me bibliography, but also I was made privy to the previous several decades of Black intellectual discussion and debate. In return, I was helpful to them by being their resident angry theoretician from the current youthful 60's scene.

Hoyt seemed to have been where intellectuals of his generation wanted to go. He had been an expatriate in Europe and Africa. He had achieved professional excellence in mainstream journalism, both Black and White. And, he was in the process of building the premiere Black journal of the 1960's – *Negro Digest/Black World*. He published

most of us, many for the first time, and he reported on the relevant artistic and literary trends. Indeed he was our Allain Locke (*Pylon*), or Charles Johnson (*Opportunity*), or DuBois (*Crisis*), because he dared to publish new and innovative work, even going beyond a normal editor's mandate, by sometimes publishing us, not for the work submitted, but to encourage us so that we would persevere and create work beyond what we might otherwise have achieved. He was the impresario par excellence to the Black arts literature of the 1960's. The OBAC writers workshop became what it did because of Hoyt Fuller.

Hoyt, Conrad, and I would meet in Hoyt's apartment, where scotch and water flowed in his oversized glasses. He lived in a south side high rise near the lake, in an apartment filled with books and art from all over the Black world, as well as some of the best from world culture in general. Hoyt was not a narrow person, and he was adamant about fighting in the interest of Black people.

Sometimes we would be joined by others. I remember once when Ronald Fair, the novelist-sculptor, joined us in heated debate. In fact, it is interesting to note now that the meeting ended just short of physical violence as Conrad and Ronald verbally fought over their respective views of Hemmingway's craft, its relevance to their work, and Black writing in general. We have yet to have a full discussion of the intellectual and technical issues that fueled the debates of the 1960's. At that point I understood some of the issues, but felt that the Rivers-Fair debate was an agenda item plaguing an older set, and that we of the 60's had other more pressing issues to deal with.

Out of these many varied discussions, we were able to reach a common view that a positive Black consciousness (image of self and the world) was essential, and that we

sh/could do something about it. We named ourselves the Chicago Committee for the Arts, and planned a public meeting at the South Side Community Arts Center, the only WPA cultural project still going strong. We had a program of three people – Arna Bontemps (poet/historian/librarian), Margaret Danner (poet), and Terry Callier (poet/musician).

Hoyt summed it up this way:

Miss Danner, whose poetry long had reflected the now fashionable “Black is beautiful” philosophy, represented the venerable. Mr. Callier, a rising and as yet “undiscovered” star, represented that which is ever-new in simple untarnished Black talent; and Mr. Bontemps, a national treasure, was Black literary history on the hoof, a virtual walking encyclopedia of the past half century of literary labors among Black people. It was a stimulating Sunday afternoon. *Negro Digest*, July 1968, pg. 92.

We began to network, and build the group. The key to expanding the group was aimed toward the activists of the current scene. I pulled in Jeff Donaldson, a high school art teacher at my former school Marshall High, (later a professor of art and Dean at Howard University), and a mutual friend Bennett Johnson, a politico and publisher with a commitment to cultural advancement of the community (Bennett is now Vice President of Third World Press). I also pulled in one of my rare U of C Black close friends, Joe Simpson, then a PhD candidate in psycho-pharmacology. (Joe is now doing cancer related research after also getting a medical degree.) He became the secretary of OBAC and coordinator of the community workshop programs. (Diana Slaughter now at the University of Pennsylvania was my other running buddy.)

Another friend pulled in was the Attorney E. Duke McNeil. We used to meet above his record store on 47th Street, just west of King Drive (then South Parkway). Also there was Donald Smith (then of the Center for Inner City Studies, and later at Bernard Baruch

College in New York City), George Ricks (musicologist with the Board of Education), and Ronald Dunham, a printer. There were no sisters involved at this point.

As the group was developing, we needed a name. The name OBAC was developed in a phone conversation between Jeff Donaldson and myself. We were both interested in Africa, and we had had a working relationship for several years, including working together on his 1964 book of sketches with commentary, *The Civil Rights Yearbook*. The key was that the acronym had as its root “OBA” which was Yoruba (a Nigerian language) for royal, chief, or leader, and this was the role we envisioned for our organization. Shortly thereafter Jeff designed the OBAC logo. Our creativity and inspired interaction reflects the positive vibes of the period, of the organization, and of friends and colleagues who worked together and made history.

Chicago has always had exciting community level arts activity. So, when OBAC formed and began to expand it did so along with other organizations that already existed. The best example was the AACM (Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians), formed in 1965. OBAC built a working relationship with the AACM, especially with then leader Richard Muhall Abrams. During the same period, OBAC went to 43rd Street to paint “The Wall”. AACM went to 43rd Street to play their vanguard sounds – Joseph Jarman, Roscoe Mitchell, Christopher Gaddy, Charles Clark, and others. It was a different business plan for the blues joint – the herb tea and orange juice crowd. Also, in some areas, OBAC recruited people who left to establish independent organizations. For example in drama, Val Gray Ward was on the OBAC council, and then left to form what became the Kuumba drama workshop. The three main workshops

of OBAC were the writers workshop, the visual arts workshop, and the community workshop.

One of the interesting aspects of this process was the fact that a school of Chicago Street photography had emerged. They were part of OBAC and that gave them an insider's position to document the history. They froze our images in creative arts of political culture – Billy Abernathy, Bobby Sengstocke, Roy Lewis, Bob Crawford, Onegua, Ed Christmas, and others. Mostly they were magical in capturing images of fundamental human reality in the everyday motion of the African American people. They made us look timeless.

After forming and consolidating a leadership group, it was decided to organize a public program in order to introduce ourselves to the community. We planned a general program to be held in the auditorium of the Center for Inner City Studies. Ann Smith, then in speech and theatre at Northeastern Illinois University and now at the University of Illinois, joined to direct us and pull the program together. This program was quite a spectacular event. Each member of the leadership spoke and explained his/her area of expertise/responsibility. The key artistic moment was the inspired poetry recital by Ames Mor who was then the reigning underground Black poet Laureate in Chicago. I chaired the program, and presented the general theoretical statement. It was the best example of DuBois' talented tenth of the Chicago Black arts scene, a Black style noblesse oblige set all the way.

But after two thirds of the program there was a tension between the rational/conceptual and the emotional/experiential aspects. There was theory and there was demonstration, but tension existed because both aspects had not yet been brought

together. I was an “egghead” not associated with the expressive. Sherri Scott had been in the program as a hip be-bop inspired singer/dancer who turned everyone on. This was also the period of Aretha’s great spiritual power of feeling and rhythm. The tension reached a high point, someone put on Aretha and Sherri began to dance. The OBAC leadership turned to me, and demanded that I join her. As chairperson of the organization, it was up to me to demonstrate that we had the commitment to overcome ourselves and bring the two aspects of our organization into one dynamic union. I was embarrassed for a moment, hesitant because my dancing skills were weak (not from religious taboo, just too much library and parental control after dark). As she danced on, I leaped to my feet and began to get down, Afro-boo-ga-loo. The Black U of C “egghead” had soul, and OBAC’s introduction to the community threatened mainstream assimilation with the inspired cultural dynamic of Black people getting down.

The summer of 1967 was really quite an experience - it was what James Foreman had called “the high tide of resistance.” The three OBAC workshops got off to a whirlwind start, and OBAC became known on the national scene almost immediately. Jeff Donaldson led the visual arts workshop through an amazing process of collective action in creating the first public mural of the movement, *The Wall of Respect*. The wall was jazz, a collective product inspired by tradition, guided by the politics of Black art, and created by gifted, creative, art-makers. Hoyt led the writers workshop and patiently guided the initial discussions in which one topic dominated - what is Black writing? What is the Black aesthetic? And Joe Simpson led discussions and hosted speakers from other cities in exploring the meaning of art and cultural innovation in the larger social setting of the fight for Black Liberation.

The summer of 1967 was key for two other reasons – the Newark Black Power Conference, and my departure from Chicago. Hoyt and I co-chaired the workshop on the professions (see Floyd Barbour, ed., *The Black Power Revolt*). It was a critical time because we had the responsibility of defining OBAC’s ideological orientation. My ideological position (yet to fully emerge) was suggested by a slogan in my report to the final plenary – “We must not only help to develop revolutionary professionals, but we must develop professional revolutionaries!” The conference was a turning point as we were all being confronted by the vicious repressive powers of the US state in putting down urban rebellions all over the country. I kept hearing Amiri’s mandate about Black art: *We want poems that shoot guns*. Our theories must lead to practice. I took my commitment to Black people seriously and so I followed my commitment – in the fall of 1967 – from the University of Chicago and the chairmanship of OBAC to Fisk University.

Afterward

I changed my name in 1969 two years after leaving Chicago. I had left Fisk to join Vincent Harding, Stephen Henderson, Ab Spellman, Clyde Taylor and Larry Pushing to found the Institute of the Black World in Atlanta. Kofi Wangara (Harold Laurence) joined our Department of History and Sociology at Spellman. Vincent was our chair. It was an identity moment. Kofi translated McWorter into IBN Alkalimat, the son of word. I defined my role as a Black Studies scholar activist. He helped me choose Abdul Hakim, servant of knowledge. I found language, comfort/security in this Ki Swahilli/Arabic framework. So my full name means “servant of knowledge, the son of word” but to my oldest relative Alberta McWorter Ewing, 105, I am still little Gerry.