



Performance by Shirlette Ammons

Savi Horne: It's hard to find words to describe someone in a family that has been so close to me from their uncle George Ammons, the Eastern North Carolina farm leader, farmer, and then way, way back an ancestral memories the like of the jazz musician Ammons, Lockjaw Ammons, who could be, I mean his blowing of the alto horn was phenomenal. Now today just to introduce his kin and a member of a twin, a sacred twin and oh Shirlette here and her sister Shorlette, a farm leader in her own right, and Shirlette, her farm right now are the children that she has been pruning and growing for years, but in between keeping that on track, she has found the time to be a performer, a rap artist, a signifier, a poet, an activist and one of the most beautiful persons that I have come to know since transplanting my spirit and soul to the fair land of North Carolina.

I would like you to listen. Her first piece is very important. It is grounded in Mt. Olive. Yes, the land of the cucumber and the pickle. And so, a lot of what she riffs on has that pickle and spice, and it is nice. I am going to stop trying to be a poet up here. I might get in trouble. So I would just like to say this first piece, is it this first piece? The last piece is an especially beautiful piece because it's about her ancestral land, her uncle's land, the history of being, working as a child as a sharecropper. We uphold that as a position of strength. She has touched the soil. And she is one of us. It gives me a great deal of joy and pride, but above all, love for Shirlette.

Shirlette Ammons: How's everybody doing? (Audience responds, "Good".) My name's Shirlette. I bring you greetings from Durham, North Carolina by way of Mt. Olive, North Carolina, home of Mt. Olive pickles and beautiful people. That's what we do.

So, I'm just going to share a few pieces that I thought might be appropriate for this gathering. Hopefully, you know, speak to some issues and some experiences that we all share as people who have a direct relationship with the land, and you know, we do different things with that relationship. For me, it made me very contemplative, you know, sitting on a porch watching the rain come in will make you a poet, I believe, if you allow it. So that's like what it did for me.

For my twin, it made her want to actually go put her hands back in the dirt. It didn't really do that for me. It made me want to be a rock star. So this first piece is called "John Anonymous", and it's about the different ways we are made to feel invisible, and then also how we find likeness in each other.

"John Anonymous"

There ain't no once upon
that's just a literary fantasy phenomenon
something harmless
obedient to lines and corners

just like a battlefield with beautiful debris
fatalities, no ceremony for the diseased
happily bury the masses
grind their bones to ashes
life flashes, bland snatches
of pictograms and fast forward
No chronicle, no obstacle, no story
just onerous sound bytes
five parts poor plot
unoriginal word choice
suspense without climax.
But you can't keep us from comin

What kind of jail cell
is a grayscale
Where is my pandaemonium
and my kaleidoscope
Where is my rainbow coalition
association for colored folk
my overcome,
Where is you at, huh?
I see the barbed wired.
I hear the statistician
breakin me down into
lacerations and skewed percentages
I want my plot thickened
edit my paragraph
decipher every lines
study me in English class
And then you do the math
I deserve a pretty name
something like crucifixion
or creative knowledge.
(Crying. I don't know what is happening")
Don't call me Section 8.
my name ain't welfare.

but I'll be a petunia
you can call me crystal stair
name me anomaly.
you can call me chosen quilt
or just anonymous.
There's just a lot of us.

(Audience applause). All right, okay, all right. Now this one right here is called "Census Man Cometh". I wrote it. My last name is Ammons, and there're many incarnations of that last name down home. So I did some research. I went to the library and researched my last name and found, I was able to trace it back to the first census of 1865. I wrote this poem called "Census Man Cometh for the Ammons family tree." And it's very much inspired by this Toni Morrison concept of re-memory where, you know, you take an object and then build a story around it. So, um, like you take an ear of corn and build a whole history around that ear of corn. So, this is called, "**Census Man Cometh for the Ammons family tree.**" (Sigh) James Brown.

Census Man cometh
counting mulattos muddling 'round
dirty wit Duplin County's scarlet gravel
redbone Americans, able bodied
but under the table
collecting good company and cat house calls.

Way downeast
arrowheads and horseshoes welcome
like placemats on porch fronts
beneath the front door stuck under a doorstep
on a bent nail is the doorbell –
betta not step on it if you don't want
none-a Boogiemans' bad side

Shack smoke stacks soot on census record
unrecorded whores wit delicious dancin hips
press against piano, no pianist
he stumpdrunk and humpin the cat
dead on the pantry flo
next to Unc's left four-fingered hand,
which, when bit by the kerosene lamp,
licks the last sip of city gin
from the five-string guit' strumming sweet while
Aunt Eleeza's main squeeze's bed keeps squeakin
She fireant-pissed and her skirt simply won't sit down

Unc wake up looking for his 5th finger
and Census Man's knees keep creakin and crickin cause

he simply won't sit next to a thumb that can't be found
dime liqua and those Ammons women
make Census Man forgit his numbers every time
and this is what he scribbled on his way up County Line—

*In 1784, 86 and 89,
Them Ammonses spelt their names
Difurnt ways at difurnt times
There was Everit in Piney Grove
Who threw a -d there on the end
And Zachariah in '90
Went and took it off agin
Now I ain't got no problems
Wit fellaship and citygin,
But seems like them Ammonses
Is messin up my scribbulin
But they's sho is some purty colors
Shimmerin beneaf they skin.
Look like next Sat'day nite
I'll be back countin em agin.*

(Applause). Thank you all. Thank you very much. Thank you, Savi, for having me. Thank you all for having me. Hope you enjoy the rest of your day. I want to share one last piece. It is called, "Set in my Ways". I wrote it for my grandma. (Crying... Just give me a second. I'll be good in a minute. It was the rap. I'm crying because the rap was so good. (Audience laughing).)

"Set in my Ways"

I'm set in my ways
been like this for days
days that amount to nothing but time
time I once recognized as borrowed
when the beating of the sun
equaled the length of tobacco fields and cotton yields

Hard work build strong character
laughter resounds over peanut laced Coca Cola breaks
and surveys of afternoon's labor
when the heat becomes something to beat
rather than beans to savor.
conceived thoughts of better days
as an engaged sun peers round omniscient clouds.
sky blankets of haze
mazes we walk
stripping tobacco stalks of their dignities
confined to life as a field hand
reprimands extended abilities
as the man

consistently reminds me that hard work pays.

So I remain set in my ways
been like this for days.
days that extend
beyond trilogies of ancestry
I have only sampled the well waters
they drank daily to tame thirsty souls
I am a spirit of old molds
Broken, only to be reconstructed
set free.
once abducted by unidentified fascists' objects
whose motto 'to protect and serve' didn't apply to me
because my toiletries and my residence
are still separate entities.
Tin-plated out houses
ain't never been considered
top of the line facilities,

so 'til change comes
my intention is to be set in my ways.
been like this for days.
days that extend beyond momentary mounds of bliss
where perseverance waits patiently
for the next methodical plummet
where tales of hope
despair brew like jiggaboo stew
So 'til change comes
my recommendation is to
remain set in your ways.

Thank you. (Long Applause).

Carolyn Mugar: Shirlette, I want to extend your invitation to people that they sit on a porch more when it's raining because everybody can be a poet. And I think you've got a great, your wisdom, your wisdom is wonderful. Thank you so much. We love the way you put it together. (Applause.) We're now going to invite the morning panel.