

J.B. Murray and the
Scripts and Spirit
Forms of Africa:

Making the Connections

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By

Licia Clifton-James

and Maude Southwell Wahlman

Cambridge
Scholars
Publishing



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This book first published 2022

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

Lady Stephenson Library, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE6 2PA, UK

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

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ISBN (10): 1-5275-8000-8

ISBN (13): 978-1-5275-8000-8

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Southwell Wahlman, Studio Books in association with Museum of American Folk Art: NY, 1993. 65.

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- 2-36. J.B. Murray's spirit writing and spirit figures, c. 1980s, pen and markers on paper. Image courtesy of Maude Southwell Wahlman, PhD.
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- 2-45. *Nsibidi* signs by Eliphistone Dayrell, 1911. From Wikipedia, this work is ineligible for copyright and therefore in the public domain because it consists entirely of information that is common property and contains no original authorship.
- 2-46. *Untitled*, J.B.Murray, c. 1978-1988, marker ink on paper, 14” x 10.25”. From *Two Transcend: Drawings by J.B. Murray and Melvin Edward Nelson*, catalog by Cavin-Morris Gallery. Jan. 24-Apr. 6, 2013. 58. In Murray’s work, “red represented torment or evil – evil people, evil spirits, evil forces.”¹ Here he has created energies, some of which he has encircled in red that he considers evil. These energies are connected to their evil speech, seen in his red script.
- 3-1. J.B. Murray, *Untitled*, Early 1980s, Marker and paint on paper. 19” x 24”. From *Souls Grown Deep: African American Vernacular Art of the South, Volume One: Once That River Starts to Flow*, edited by Paul Arnett, William Arnett, Maude Southwell Wahlman, Ph.D., and Theophus Smith, 2000, 475. Murray represents the cells of his prostate gland in healthy Caribbean blue, being invaded by evil red

¹ Paul Arnett et al., eds., *Souls Grown Deep: African American Vernacular Art of the South*, vol. 2, *Once that River Starts to Flow* (Atlanta, GA: Tinwood Books, 2000), 474.

energy from the right. Note the one solid white form with red ‘eyes’ and red base, perhaps his cancerous tumor. He has placed two +s within this form, perhaps requesting God to take it away. While the script and +s in the other blue forms request the cells remain healthy or heal, if invaded.

- 3-2. (Untitled) by J.B. Murray. Early 1980s. Ballpoint pens, marker, and paint, on paper. 24” x 18”. Image from *Souls Grown Deep: African American Vernacular Art of the South, Volume One: Once That River Starts to Flow*, edited by Paul Arnett, William Arnett, Maude Southwell Wahlman, Ph.D., and Theophus Smith, 2000, 472. Murray’s depiction of his house or home filled with his family, has colors to show that the house is blessed because it is gold, and each individual within the house is depicted in specific colors dependent upon how Murray feels about the individual.
- 3-3. (Untitled – Six Blue Spirit Forms) by J.B. Murray. 1970s. Tempera on paper. 19-1/2 x 25-1/2 in. From Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift of Chuck and Jan Rosenak and museum purchase through the Luisita L. and Franz H. Denghausen Endowment 1997.124.122. Murray’s spirit forms are displayed in Caribbean blue, a Kongo symbol for the watery world of the ancestors and ancestral protection. The spirit forms are created in a vertical style like the vertical element of the Kongo Cosmogram and Kongo conjuring canes, connecting life at the top to ancestral energy at the bottom.
- 3-4. *Trouble-Making Ladies*. By J.B. Murray, mid-1980s. Marker and paint on paper, 19-1/2” x 25-1/2”. From *Souls Grown Deep*, Vol. 2, 2000. 477. As stated by William Arnett, “Pink paper, a red figure, and black designs indicate trouble in store for Murray. Lines of pink dots represent a necklace worn by a woman who, according to Murray, “turned [Murray] in to the FBI. In this painting, Murray identifies the various women he had known and been involved with, some reasonably good, some not. The white smears likely indicate that some of the women were dead when the painting was made.” (479).
- 3-5. J.B. Murray, *God Bless This Little Babe, God Protect This Little Babe*, 1986, Ballpoint pen and marker on paper, 5-3/4” x 4”. From *Souls Grown Deep: African American Vernacular Art of the South, Volume One: Once That River Starts to Flow*, edited by Paul Arnett, William Arnett, Maude Southwell Wahlman, Ph.D., and Theophus Smith, 2000, 481.
- 3-6. J.B. Murray, reverse of *God Bless This Little Babe, God Protect This Little Babe*, 1986 Marker on Paper. From *Souls Grown Deep: African American Vernacular Art of the South, Volume One: Once That River*

Starts to Flow, edited by Paul Arnett, William Arnett, Maude Southwell Wahlman, Ph.D., and Theophus Smith, 2000, 481.

- 3-7. *Untitled*. By J.B. Murray, 1978-1988, pink paper, paint, marker, and pen. From Mary Padgelek's *Hands of the Spirit* website: <http://www.handsofthespirit.com/2010/05/05/the-visionary-art-of-j-b-murray-3/>. Murray tightly packed figures on either side of what Mary Padgelek calls a 'stream of writing.' In addition, Murray lines the four edges of his work with protective writing, essentially enveloping the problem and request for help in a script frame with a generous amount of Xs or +s imbuing the request with God's power.
- 4-1. Serigne Bousso. Photo taken by Amadou Laity Bodian for L. Clifton-James, at the Mbour Bousso compound, March 27, 2016.
- 5-1. Left, J.B. Murray, *Untitled*, Early 1980s, Marker and paint on paper. 19" x 24" Image courtesy of William Arnett in *Souls Grown Deep: African American Vernacular Art of the South, Volume One: Once That River Starts to Flow*, edited by Paul Arnett, William Arnett, Maude Southwell Wahlman, Ph.D., and Theophus Smith, 2000, 475.
- 5-2. Right, J.B. Murray, (Reverse of Fig. 5-1) Marker on Paper, 19" x 24". Image Courtesy of William Arnett in *Souls Grown Deep: African American Vernacular Art of the South, Volume One: Once That River Starts to Flow*, edited by Paul Arnett, William Arnett, Maude Southwell Wahlman, and Theophus Smith, 2000, 475.
- 5-3. Two Pages of Protective Writing by Serigne Bousso, Touba, Senegal, March 26, 2016, ink on paper, each measuring approximately 6" x 8". Images scanned April 8, 2016. These papers were given to Licia Clifton-James on March 26, 2016 by Serigne Bousso. He prepared these papers at the request for protection by Clifton-James. These pages are to be placed in one liter of water and allowed to soak until the ink has dissolved from the paper. Then she is to take a small amount of the water with dissolved ink and rub it on her face and hands each morning for active protection.
- 5-4. *Untitled*, ca. 1978-1988, J. B. Murray, born Sandersville, GA 1908-died Sandersville, Georgia 1988, tempera and marker on paper, sheet and image: 18" x 12", Smithsonian American Art Museum, Museum purchase through the Luisita L. and Franz H. Denghausen Endowment 2014.4.4.
- 5-5. Ethiopian Kitabe Amulet Brown Leather Pendant with Scroll. Photos by L. Clifton-James, April 8, 2016. A scroll such as this usually made to the height of a person who ordered it was used to provide

protection and healing. Often, the scroll would be ordered by a dabbara, healer, who would prescribe the sacrifice of a specific animal, and its skin would be used to prepare one or more scrolls. The scrolls have christian images and prayers. The subjects of these "Bibles" are always Christian, but actual content varies. Prayers are written in Ethiopic (Ge'ez), a Semitic language that is no longer spoken, but is still used for liturgical and other religious purposes by the Ethiopian Orthodox Church. Prayers sometime associated with images intend to protect the owner from the invisible. Scrolls like this are usual hung on the wall. The patient would look at the scroll and would recite prayers and the healing process would begin. Sometimes, scrolls are hung in the entrance of the home in order to scare off evil spirits and prevent bad spirits to penetrate the house. They could also be wore as a necklace during the day or laid on the bed or under the pillow in the bedtime. This description is taken from the information listed on Ebay with a similar kitabe. In collection of L. Clifton-James.

- 5-6. *Untitled*. By J.B. Murray, c. 1978-1988, marker and ink on paper, one continuous piece measuring 44.5" x 2.25". Photo by Jurate Vicerate, taken from *Two Transcend: Drawings by J.B. Murray and Melvin Edward Nelson, January 24 – April 6, 2013, Vol. 1: J.B. Murray*. By Judith McWillie in coordination with the Calvin-Morris Gallery, NY, 2012.
- 6-1. (Left) J.B. Murray drawing water from his well near his home, c. 1985. Photo by Andy Nasisse. From *Baking in the Sun: Visionary Images from the South*, University Art Museum, University of Southwestern Louisiana, Lafayette, 1987. 17. (Right) J.B. Murray reading his script on adding machine paper through a bottle of well water drawing near his home, c. 1985. Photo by Judith McWillie, 1985.
- 6-2. J.B. Murray, *Untitled*, Early 1980s, Marker and paint on paper. 19" x 24" Image courtesy of William Arnett in *Souls Grown Deep: African American Vernacular Art of the South, Volume One: Once That River Starts to Flow*, edited by Paul Arnett, William Arnett, Maude Southwell Wahlman, and Theophus Smith, 2000, 475. In this painting Murray has illustrated his diagnosis of prostate cancer. The left side shows still healthy body parts, while the right side, inundated with red, is the invaded areas of his body. The addition of protective script is a request for relief from this invasion. The boxed image is the only figure that is entirely white with red eyes and a red beard. For Murray, red is torment and evil. This is Murray's version of a *baka*, the evil spirit that has entered his body.

- 7-1. Nsibidi chart. From *Signs and Symbols: African Images in African-American Quilts*, by Maude Southwell Wahlman. The figure to the lower left of the chart is labeled “Ejagham Nsibidi sign for physical and spiritual vision, Nigeria.”
- 7-2. Anaforuana. From *Afrikan Alphabets: The story of writing in Afrika* by Saki Mafundikwa, 2004, 115.
- 7-3. *Talismanic Textile*, late 19th/early 20th century, probably Senegal, cotton, plain weave; painted; amulets of animal hide and felt attached by knotted strips of leather, 100” x 703/8”. From “Transformation,” by Nielsen, Christina M., Gregory Nosan, Stephanie D’Alessandro, Lisa Dorin, Kathleen Bickford Berzock, Tanya Treptow, Karen Manchester, et al. 2007. Art Institute of Chicago Museum Studies 33 (1). The Art Institute of Chicago: 70–96. doi:10.2307/20205546. African and Amerindian Purchase Endowment, 2000. 326.
- 7-4. J.B. Murray, *Untitled*, 1987, Marker and paint on paper, 23-3/4” x 17-3/4”. From *Souls Grown Deep: African American Vernacular Art of the South, Volume One: Once That River Starts to Flow*, edited by Paul Arnett, William Arnett, Maude Southwell Wahlman, Ph.D., and Theophus Smith, 2000, 480.
- 7-5. *King James Bible*. Photo by L. Clifton-James. From the collection of Claudia F. Clifton.
- 7-6. Mineral Springs Baptist Church, Mitchell, Georgia. Photo by L. Clifton-James, 03/28/10.
- 7-7. Marker on adding machine tape, 1978, J.B. Murray. Photo by Fred Padgelek at the home of William Rawlings, Sandersville, Georgia. In the black box one can see a multitude of dots, dashes, and other marks Murray has placed above, below and all around his script.
- 8-1. *The Spirit of African Art*, by Ndiri Onyemaechi Dike, carved wood panels, 85 x 250 cm, 1994, private collection. Image courtesy of Chika Okeke’s *Seven Stories about Modern Art in Africa*, London: Whitechapel Art Gallery 27, 1995.
- 8-2. “*True Story of Our Love Is Our Secret*,” 1997, acrylic, by Victor Ekpuk. Photo from www.victorekpuk.com.
- 8-3. *Song of Mami Wata* by Victor Ekpuk, from his Manuscript Series, 1995-2007. Acrylic paint, pastels, poster markers on *walaha*, wooden Islamic prayer board. “My continuous search for indigenous codes and forms to tell visual stories led me to the discovery of Islamic

prayer boards (*walaha*). The first idea to use *walaha* as an art medium first struck me in 1995, at a market in Jos, Nigeria, where I saw unused boards on display for sale.

I was attracted to their unique shapes, I was also fascinated by the ingenuity of African aesthetics and how it added meaning to Arabic scripts; I began to see how these boards could tell other stories and bear other meanings. My vision of the potential of the board as a bearer of two important elements of African spirituality and literacy was so strong that, I could not get it out of my head until it was realized. Works in this series are called "Manuscript Series"

"Manuscript Series", though executed on *walaha* do not make statements about Islam; rather they are an intercultural marriage of form and script. Instead of Arabic scripts, I employ Nsibidi signs and my own script-like drawings to make compositions with themes that center on the human conditions of joy, pain and hope. I try to manipulate the materials so the mystical essence of the board and that of Nsibidi signs are retained. The goal being to create contemporary sacred tablets whose verses tell our stories, hold our prayers and perhaps provide healing and inspiration to us." -Victor Ekpuk, from http://www.victorekpuk.com/victorekpuk.com/gallery/Pages/Manuscript_Series.html.

- 8-4. Elimane Fall stands before one of his painted papers. These serve as visual aids when he offers sermons to youth seeking spiritual direction in the philosophy and teachings of Sheikh Amadou Bamba. Mr. Fall practices a form of urban healing, which draws upon traditional techniques and writing practices while addressing the pressing contemporary needs of inner-city people. Photograph by Doran H. Ross, Pikine, 2001. From *A Saint in the City: Sufi Arts of Urban Senegal*, by Allan F. Roberts and Mary Nooter Roberts with Gassia Armenian and Ousmane Gueye. UCLA Fowler Museum of Cultural History, Los Angeles, 2003. 186.
- 8-5. *Untitled* (1980) and *Untitled* (1980). By J.B. Murray. Souls Grown Deep Foundation. Published In: *Souls Grown Deep: African American Vernacular Art*, Vol. 1, Tinwood Books: Georgia, 2000, 468. Television screen measures 13 x 16.5 x 5.5 inches, paint and marker on television picture tube; Stovetop measures 26 x 30 x 2.25 inches, paint and marker on metal stovetop and wall panel.
- 8-6. *Untitled Assemblage*. By Thornton Dial, 1987, rural Alabama, from *Souls Grown Deep: African American Vernacular Art of the South*, Vol. 1, Tinwood Books: Atlanta, 2000, 173. Found wood, roots, roots, glass bottles, wire, window screen, paint, Bondo, and Splash Zone compound. 111 x 108 x 24 inches. "Roots symbolize the oldest

things, all those things that come to be part of a man's life," stated Thornton Dial.²

- 8-7. *Jezebel*. (Left) By Bessie Harvey. Glass jewels and glitter adorn the veiled crown of Jezebel and twisted branches speckled with paint form the queen's body in this sculpture. Photo by Ron Lee, *The Silver Factory/The Arnett Collection*, Atlanta, GA. (Right) Detail view the reverse side of veiled crown of Jezebel. Photo by Ron Lee, *The Silver Factory/The Arnett Collection*, Atlanta, GA.
- 8-8. *Untitled*, by J.B. Murray, mid-1980s, marker and paint on paper, 25" x 19". Photo from *Souls Grown Deep*, Vol. 2, 2001. 478. Murray gives pairs of eyes to his figures. Black eyes if the figure represents good and red eyes if the figure represents evil or torment. Yellow splotched throughout the painting is Murray's representation of God's energy assisting in the matter.
- 8-9. Sister Gertrude Morgan painting. Taken webpage entitled, Once Upon a Time . . . Final year projects and dissertation. <http://hollietheedamillustrator.wordpress.com/>. Viewed 2/23/2013.
- 8-10. Left. Haitian Veve. http://38.media.tumblr.com/f468d98a2539039d2b4e85388ed2bf66/tumblr_inline_n92c21EQ111srodb7.png. Note the Simbi signs which appears in the form of the asterisk, *. Right, Ejagham *Nsibidi* sign for physical and spiritual vision, Ejagham people, Nigeria. From *Signs and Symbols: African Images in African-American Quilts*, by Maude Southwell Wahlman, Penguin Group: NY, 1993. 79.
- 8-11. The Palo religious signs and symbols painted on the wall in Callejon de Hamel in Havana, Cuba, Cuba, 20th century. Photo by Jan Sochor/Alamy Stock Photo.
- 8-12. *Untitled*. By J.B. Murray. c. 1978–88, tempera and ink on paper, 8-1/2 x 5-1/2 in. Photo from Cavin-Morris Gallery, New York and family of J.B. Murray. Murray placed three +s or Xs across the top of this piece, along with several within the body of the text as well.
- 8-13. (Left) *Vévé for Damballah*. Image from <http://www.ekiria.org/content/vudu-africano-veves---trazos-magicos> Damballah is the serpent god of Dahomean and Dahomean-

² Carol Crown, Cheryl Rivers, Charles Reagan Wilson. *The New Encyclopedia of Southern Culture: Volume 23: Folk Art*. University of North Carolina Press, 2013, 53.

influenced religions which occur in Haiti. Grey Dundaker in *Signs of Diaspora Diaspora of Signs*, Oxford University Press, 1998. 51. “Damballah was a Vodoun god, in serpent form, who is credited with creating the world and the gods, and is therefore the oldest of the gods.”³ (Right) *Vévé for Baron Samedi*. Image from <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:VeveBaronSamedi.svg>. “Baron Samedi is a member of the *Gede* family of Haitian *Loa* who are often considered to be spirits of the dead. He presides over cemeteries and crossroads and the spirits of the dead. His typical iconography includes a black top hat and long black coat, his face painted like a skull, glasses or sunglasses, and a cane often adorned with [a watery world reptile, such as an alligator].”⁴ In both images, +s can be seen showing God’s presence, by the M (Virgin Mary) in the left image and around the cross in the second image.

- 8-14. (left) *Untitled (X symbols)*. By Emmer Ree Sewell. Photos by William Arnett from *Souls Grown Deep: African American Vernacular Art*, Vol. 2, Tinwood Books: Georgia, 2001. 182. <http://soulsgrowndeeep.org/artist/emmer-sewell>. These demonstrate Sewell’s requests for protection. Emmer Sewell: “That cross is nothing to make a fuss about. You can see the same thing in a lot of places. It’s not nothing for nobody to be alarmed about. It’s not dangerous. I put it on refrigerators and those things—symbols of God. You’d be proud to be as what it is. I put it out on the car, you know, so if they ever sell the car they know whose care they sell to a person. It’s kind of like a Roman number that you had in your schooling days. That is a sign of history.
- 8-15. *Untitled*. By Emmer Ree Sewell. Photos by William Arnett from *Souls Grown Deep: African American Vernacular Art*, Vol. 2, Tinwood Books: Georgia, 2001. 181. <http://soulsgrowndeeep.org/artist/emmer-sewell>. Sewell’s assemblage requesting protection. Emmer Sewell: “That cross is nothing to make a fuss about. You can see the same thing in a lot of places. It’s not nothing for nobody to be alarmed about. It’s not dangerous. I put it on refrigerators and those things—symbols of God. You’d be proud to be as what it is. I put it out on the car, you know, so if they ever sell the car they know whose care they sell to a person. It’s kind of like a Roman number that you had in your schooling days. That is a sign of history. That sign is a great symbol of things. It’s no mean

³ Damballah is the serpent god of Dahomean and Dahomean-influenced religions which occur in Haiti. Grey Gundaker in *Signs of Diaspora Diaspora of Signs*, Oxford University Press, 1998. 51.

⁴ *Encyclopedia of the African Diaspora: Origins, Experiences, and Culture*. A-C. Vol. 1. ABC-CLIO, 2008. 821.

thing to it, nothing devilish in it. It is not. It is a symbol to recognize by. It is a symbol of recognized ways.

You watch Oprah Winfrey when she be running her show; watch her picture sometimes, when she come on at four o'clock. She got that same X on her place. It mean 'important work.' 'You could be somebody.' It mean 'reaching for the stars.' If you ain't got no common knowledge, and don't carry yourself in the right way, and learn nothing, you can never be a star; reach the star's. Never, if you got filthy ways and stupid ways." From Souls Grown Deep website at <http://soulsgrowndeep.org/artist/emmer-sewell>.

- 8-16. (Left) Ejagham *Nsibidi* sign for physical and spiritual vision, Ejagham people, Nigeria. From *Signs and Symbols: African Images in African-American Quilts*, by Maude Southwell Wahlman, Penguin Group: NY, 1993. 79. (Right) Anaforuana. From *Afrikan Alphabets: The story of writing in Afrika* by Saki Mafundikwa, 2004, 114. This shows the continuation of physical and spiritual vision in Cuba.
- 8-17. *Ladies, Don't Kill Your Babies*. By J.B. Murray, mid-1980s, marker and paint on paper, 19" x 24". Amazing anatomical drawing of fallopian tubes and embryos, about which Murray said, "[T]his is telling ladies not to kill they babies before they born." A few red signs or symbols request protection for the babies from God.
- 8-18. *Untitled*. By J.B. Murray, early 1980s, mixed media on paper, 18" x 12". From *Souls Grown Deep*, Vol. 2. 465. The fight against good and evil, African Americans (black figures) against the Ku Klux Klan (white figures). "A small cross, circumferential patches of yellow, and a vertical arrangement of blue dots all serve to provide protection for the endangered black figures," described William Arnett. (478).
- 9-1. John Bunion Murray (1908-1988). Photo by Andy Nasisse
- 9-2. Manuscript page by Maimonides Arabic in Hebrew letters. Photo by History and Art Collection / Alamy Stock Photo.
- 9-3. Arabic from Hebrew Script. CPA Media Pte Ltd / Alamy Stock Photo. Palestine/Israel/Egypt: Written in Arabic, using the Hebrew alphabet, this 'thank you letter' is one of the thousands of paper documents found in the Cairo Geniza in 1896. The Cairo Geniza is an accumulation of almost 280,000 Jewish manuscript fragments that were found in the 'genizah', or store room, of the Ben Ezra Synagogue in Fustat, presently Old Cairo. The documents were written from about 870 CE to as late as 1880.

- 9-4. Photo of J.B. Murray's home. From *Souls Grown Deep: African American Vernacular Art of the South, Volume One: Once That River Starts to Flow*, edited by Paul Arnett, William Arnett, Maude Southwell Wahlman, Ph.D., and Theophus Smith, 2000, 473.
- 9-5. Photo of J.B. Murray's Protective Elements in his yard. 1986. From *Souls Grown Deep: African American Vernacular Art of the South, Volume One: Once That River Starts to Flow*, edited by Paul Arnett, William Arnett, Maude Southwell Wahlman, Ph.D., and Theophus Smith, 2000, 473.
- 9-6. J.B. Murray, *Untitled*, c. 1980, Paint and marker on car windshield, 18" x 40". From *Souls Grown Deep: African American Vernacular Art of the South, Volume One: Once That River Starts to Flow*, edited by Paul Arnett, William Arnett, Maude Southwell Wahlman, Ph.D., and Theophus Smith, 2000, 466.
- 9-7. Interior of J.B. Murray "studio". 1985. Photo by Judith McWillie.
- 9-8. *Untitled*. J.B. Murray, *Untitled*, 1985, marker, acrylic, watercolor and crayon on paper. At the High Museum of Art, Atlanta, GA. Photo by Licia Clifton-James 04/01/2010.
- 9-9. J.B. Murray, *Untitled*, undated, paint stick on paper. At High Museum of Art, Atlanta, GA. Photo by Licia Clifton-James, 04/01/2010.
- 9-10. (Top Image) Outside of J.B. Murray's Funeral Pamphlet. From Judith McWillie. (Bottom Image) Inside of J.B. Murray's Funeral Pamphlet. From Judith McWillie.
- 9-11. J.B. Murray's Funeral, September 25, 1988. Photo by Judith McWillie.
- 9-12. Cemetery worker at site marked for Ray Murray's burial on March 28, 2010. Photo by L. Clifton-James.
- 9-13. Funeral pamphlet with Obituary, inside cover, from the funeral service of Ray Murray. Scanned image by L. Clifton-James.

PREFACES

Preface by Maude Southwell Wahlman, PhD

One of many rewards to being an art historian is discovering the art of an artist, even if the artist has died. Such is the case with the art of J.B. Murray. While I usually enjoy interviewing artists and learning their life histories, I could not do this with J. B. Murray. His work was shown to me by Andy Nasisse, an artist teaching at the university of Georgia, and at that time, a collector of folk arts. I bought a few pieces of J. B. Murray's arts, and at Christmas, Andy gave me a few more. I included Murray's art in my lectures on American folk arts, and often in images students were to identify in quizzes.

I was first intrigued by Murray's combination of water color painting and ink drawings. Then I was curious about his use of what could be interpreted as images of ancestors. Later I saw how these tied in to traditions of protective ancestral spirits.

It was rewarding when one of my best students decided to expand a research paper into an MA thesis, and then a PhD dissertation. Licia has expanded our understanding of JB Murray's life and art even further in this book. It will make an outstanding catalog for a traveling exhibit on JB Murray's art.

Preface by Licia E. Clifton-James, PhD

Mine has been a long journey of preparation, research and incorporation, and dare I say guidance, regarding the writing of this book. I did not know J.B. Murray while he was living and I did not know any of his family members during much of my research and discoveries. I have since come to know and love Murray's daughter, Mrs. Ellen Lindsey and his grandson, Mr. Taiwan Lindsey. But please allow me a little latitude to explain most of the journey I took to complete this book on the work of J.B. Murray.

When I was working on my Master's degree under the tutelage of Dr. Maude Southwell Wahlman at the University of Missouri-Kansas City, I gave a presentation on the artwork of J.B. Murray and was asked if I saw any connection between the work of Murray and the syllabaries of West Africa. My response was, "Yes, I do see a connection between Murray's

work and West Africa.” At that time, I did not know the extent to which I would be guided in my research. Dr. Wahlman’s response to my statement was, “Well then, that should be the focus of your dissertation.” And, from there a life-changing and life-affirming journey began.

I completed hours of library and online research in preparation for a trip to Georgia to do research closer to the home of J.B. Murray, Mitchell, Georgia. In the Spring of 2010, I took off on a road trip from Kansas City, Missouri, to various locations in the state of Georgia. One of my first stops was to meet up with Mary Padgelek in Athens, Georgia, to discuss her research of Murray for her 1998 dissertation, *In the Hand of the Holy Spirit: the Art of J.B. Murray*. As I remember, we met at a coffee shop and she had in her arms most, if not all of her research on Murray. It was a plethora of type-written and hand-written notes and papers compiled over the years during her preparation for her dissertation. She was more than forthcoming and offered me all of her research.

My next stop was to meet with then University of Georgia-Athens professor Judith McWillie. We, too, met at a coffee shop and verbally went over her research regarding Murray. We would meet again on a later trip her University office where she allowed me to photograph some enlarged pages of Murray’s script for possible future character counts. Additionally, she was instrumental in directing me to the Pilgrim Cemetery, where I located a number of African-American graves with tombstones that I would later analyze and use in my writings. I was also informed that the grave of Harriet Powers, a local folk artist and quilter, was in this cemetery, although I was not given the exact location.

I ventured further south in Georgia to Sandersville, where I met up with Dr. William Rawlings, the personal medical doctor of J.B. Murray, and the person to whom Murray initially brought his first script writings. Dr. Rawlings was instrumental in adjusting my initial way of thinking about my research of Murray. He posed several interesting questions to me, one of which was, “Do you know much about the ways of the South?” I had to take but a very short look at my upbringing and schooling both in the Midwest to come to the conclusion that I did not know much about the ways of the South. Dr. Rawlings made suggestions as to how I could educate myself in some of these ways and gave me interesting bits of information regarding his relationship with Murray.

As an interesting side note and backing up Rawlings’ suggestions is David Freedberg’s article *The Power of Images: Studies in the History of Theory of Response*, where he discusses complex reasons for which art is created. He looked at the ability of the viewer to impose human and divine qualities on works that they view. For example, the ability to be angry with

a statue for a poor result from a request placed upon that statue or the viewer to believe in the protection provided by one of Murray's protective works. Freedberg says the researcher must take into account not only the reason the art was made, but the cultural and societal beliefs of the person(s) creating or viewing the piece of art. Many societies of old held within their beliefs that the form, in a work of art, of a deity or loved one could be imbued with his/her spirit or soul. In addition, the form could have effect on the still living person's life. Freedberg goes on to attach to these objects the viewer's response in the form of talking to the object or adjusting one's behavior when in the presence of said object. In the end, he believes that one just fully understands the basis on which the object was created, the beliefs the people around this object imbue in it, and the response of the viewers in the form of their own behavior toward the work of art, in order to grasp the entirety of the significance of the work of art.

Both Rawlings and Freedberg's points-of-view would lead me to do greater research in the state of Georgia and the ways of people in both Murray's community and the South, and in particular Georgia. I wanted to visit the grave site of J.B. Murray who was buried in a small cemetery in front of his church, Mineral Springs Baptist Church in Mitchell, Georgia. I visited on a Sunday morning and found a crowd of Sunday congregates readying for Sunday services. I felt as if I were guided to Murray's nearly unmarked grave and much to my surprise, his son, Ray, had passed away and I was invited to attend the funeral service by some of the congregates. I felt guided and honored to be able to attend Ray Murray's funeral.

To further research Georgia's African and African-American culture, I traveled further East to Savannah, where I came upon the First African Baptist Church of Savannah, Georgia. It is here that I met Karen Wortham, the office manager and tour director for the church. Ms. Wortham introduced me to the church and its history, and told me about the highlights of the church that I should not miss. I told her of the research I was conducting on this trip to Georgia and she offered to show me a special section not open to the public at that time. Ms. Wortham took me to what I would have called balcony seating and informed me it was actually called the 'Slave Gallery,' where the slaves were sat to observe 'the proper ways to worship and the only true religion, Christianity.' It was here that I was able to view the script written down the ends of the pews, not in English but some other alphabet. Ms. Wortham then told me that it was the consensus of the church elders that the script was ancient Hebrew and it had a special meaning. This meaning I will let you discover later in this book. There is an interesting history that goes along with the special attributes of the First African Baptists Church of Savannah and I will let you discover those later

in this book as well. Let me just say this location on my journey through Georgia was very eye opening and exciting to say the least. Ms. Wortham was a wealth of knowledge both about the church and about the surrounding area's history which you will experience throughout this book, and I want to thank her immensely for sharing with me the intricacies of this wonderful place of life and worship.

At the water's edge in Savannah, I learned additional information about the importation of slaves from the Caribbean and Africa. It was at this point I decided I needed to expand my research beyond the shores of the United States. I decided my exploration should take place at the port nearest the United States' eastern coast and Georgia, nearly 4,159 miles away, Gorée Island and its 'Door of no return', off the shores of Dakar, Senegal. Once this decision was made I discovered plenty of help from two individuals who were at that time located in Kansas City, Missouri, my home. Nii Quarcoopome, the head of the Department of Africa, Oceania & the Indigenous Americas at the Detroit Institute of Art, was sharing his time with the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art and their African Department. Mr. Quarcoopome, upon learning of my intention to research in Dakar, Senegal, immediately put me in touch with a good friend of his that lived in Dakar at the time. She was instrumental in introducing me to Dakar and its city life and markets.

Continuing to feel guided on my research for this book, I was informed of one of our best students at the University of Missouri-Kansas City (UMKC), Samori Sy. He was very excited to introduce me through emails to his parents who live in Dakar. They would give encouragement and great dinners throughout my research trip. In addition, Samori would inform me that his father, Jacques Habib Sy, was a professor of African writing and literature in Dakar. To my amazement, his research fell right in line with what I was about to explore, African scripts.

I was entertaining the idea of joining a study abroad group of UMKC students making a trip to Dakar. In exploring this option, I was introduced to Waly Faye, who at the time was the director at the West African Research Center in Dakar. This center seemed a 'must visit' location for my research in Senegal. Little did I know Waly Faye would be a major source in the research to prove my thesis and the creation of this book. In a final sit-down with Waly at the end of my first trip to Dakar, he informed me of a friend of his, living in Touba, Senegal, at the time, who practiced in the areas of protection and healing. This would instigate a second research trip to Senegal, where Waly introduced me to Serigne Bousso, the protector and healer, and facilitate a meeting between the three of us that would draw my

research to a conclusion. Again, let me say I have felt very guided in this research.

I hope this book will express the possible connections I see between the world of the J.B. Murray and the African Americans noted in this book and the Africans in the country of Senegal and those brought from all over African to the port of Dakar, Gorée Island and its 'Door of no return', off the shores of Senegal.

TIMELINE OF J.B. MURRAY'S LIFE AND WORK

- 1865 Emancipation of slaves in the United States
- 1908 Birth of John Bunion Murray, March 5, 1908
- 1977 Murray's wife becomes ill and moves away with children
- 1978 Has vision in garden, May 1978
 Begins to produce his script, May 1978
 Jailed and committed to mental institution, October 1978
 Released from Institution, November 1978
 Begins using water to translate his script, December 1978
 First visit to Dr. William Rawlings, M.D., December 1978
- 1982 First brought to the attention of art world in Fall 1982
- 1984 Murray diagnosed with prostate cancer
 Nexus Gallery, Atlanta, Georgia, *Inspired Innocence*
 Indiana University, Bloomington, Indiana, *Mojo Working*
- 1986 San Francisco Museum of Folk Art, San Francisco, California,
 Group Show
 Ricco Johnson Gallery, New York, *Red Dog Running*
 First and only time Murray leaves home area with Dr. Rawlings
 to attend an exhibition that included his work in Atlanta, Georgia
- 1987-1988 *Baking in the Sun: Visionary Images from the South*,
 Multiple locations

University Art Museum, Lafayette, Louisiana

Meadows Museum of Art, Shreveport,
Louisiana

Alexandria Museum Visual Art Center,
Alexandria, Louisiana

Beaumont Art Museum, Beaumont, Texas

Mississippi State Historical Museum, Jackson,
Mississippi

Georgia Museum of Art, Athens, Georgia

1988 J.B. Murray dies at the age of 88, September 16, 1988

- 1992 Alpha Cubic Gallery, Tokyo, Japan, *The Art of J.B. Murray*
Los Angeles Museum of Art, Los Angeles, California, *Parallel Visions*
- 1996 Emory University, Atlanta, Georgia, *Souls Grown Deep*
- 2001 Phyllis Kind Gallery, New York, *Group Exhibit*
Schomberg Center for Research in Black Culture and Exhibitions International, *Testimony: Vernacular Art of the African American South*
- 2004 Art Museum of Memphis, Tennessee, *Coming Home!: Self-Taught Artists, the Bible and the American South*
American Visionary Art Museum, Baltimore, Maryland, *Holy H20: Fluid Universe*
- 2005-2006 Tate Museum, Britain, England, *Outsider Art: Journeys*
- 2006 Whitechapel Gallery, London, England, *Inner worlds outside: a supplement*
- 2011 Dean Jensen Gallery, Milwaukee, Wisconsin, *Naives, Seers, Lone Wolves, and World Seers XXIV*

- 2012 Boca Raton Museum of Art, Boca Raton, Florida, *Outsider Visions: Self-Taught Southern Artists of the 20th Century*
- 2013 Gallerie Susanne Zander, Cologne, Germany, *Voll und geschrieben und somit beendel*
- Cavin-Morris Gallery, New York, *Two Transcend: Drawings by J.B. Murray and Melvin Edward Nelson*
- 2014 Yukiko Koide Presents, Tokyo, Japan, *John Bunion (J.B.) Murray: Divine Messages*
- NSU Museum of Art, Fort Lauderdale, Florida, *When the Stars Begin to Fall: Imagination and the American South*
- Museum of African American Art, Los Angeles, California, *Free Exhibition: The Visionary Art of J.B. Murray*
- Gonzaga University's Jundt Art Museum, Spokane, Washington, *Amen, Amen: Religion and Southern Self-Taught Artists in the Mullis Collection*
- Figge Art Museum, Davenport, Iowa, *Self-Taught Genius: Treasures from the American Folk Art Museum, New York*
- 2014-2015 Cavin-Morris Gallery, New York, *Enigmas Rapt in Mysteries: American Art without Epoch*
- 2015-2016 Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, Kansas City, Missouri, *Self-Taught Genius: Treasures from the American Folk Art Museum, New York*
- 2016 Luise Ross Gallery, Chelsea, New York, *Art Bruts and Beasts*
- Delmes & Zander, Cologne, Germany, *Group Exhibition*
- Texas Gallery, River Oaks, Houston, Texas, *Glossolalia*
- Cavin-Morris Gallery, SoHo, New York, *Spotlight*
- 2016-2017 The Speed Art Museum, Louisville, Kentucky, *A New World in My View: Gifts from Gordon W. Bailey*

- 2017 Shrine, New York, *J.B. Murray: Visions from the Sun*
- 2017-2018 Museum of Old and New Art, Hobart, Australia, *The Museum of Everything*
- 2018 Shrine, New York, *Yard Show*
- Shrine, New York, *Annex*
- Cavin-Morris, SoHo, New York, *J.B. Murray: Eagle Crossed the Sun*
- 2019 High Museum of Art, Atlanta, Georgia, *Way Out There: The Art of Southern Backroads*
- 2020 WHITESPACE, Atlanta, Georgia, ONLINE: Parallel