

“In the Streets”

Bernice Reagon

In Black communities throughout the African Diaspora, streets form the link between “home” and the “rest of the world.” Being “in the streets” connotes a state of living in the open, the place where anything can happen. Successfully maneuvering the streets of one’s environment requires special tenacity and skill. Here one’s personality and “home-training” make one alert and ready.

In the United States, streets in Black communities often carry powerful and graphic cultural statements revealing basic methods of human survival and creativity—in the midst of economic and political depression.

Much has been said about the pathology of the streets, and its social degradation of the human spirit. This project on Street Culture focuses on cultural forms and the carriers of those forms who use the streets for a way to the rest of the

world, for their living and for the celebration of life. A powerful dynamic exists as individuals move into a space within their community, which by definition is of and within the outside world. Streets lead to and from home and community. They are also the place where many people spend a great deal of their working time creating a cultural and life force.

Home is the training ground, the nurturing unit, the place and environment charged with preparing individuals for the not-so-protected outside world. Porches, stoops, or yards are extensions of the home and provide a transition to the street and the world beyond. Taking the children “outside” is a conscious stage of training, a change of atmosphere—to where one can see and feel the streets within the range of one’s home. The activities of the porch and yard can range from just sitting and funning to talking with neighbors, sew-

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14th and T Streets, N.W., Washington, D.C.

(Photo by Rosie Lee Hooks.)





Linda Goss of Philadelphia leads a group of children in yard games.

ing, quilting, patching, playing checkers, games and ring plays.

One dynamic of the streets is moving, leaving, a way to another place—other than home. It can be a few doors away within the confines of the community or the way to the other side of town or the other side of the world (in many instances equivalent to the same thing). Traditional blues lyrics are full of references to roads, highways, and streets that open a way out and onward . . .

*I'm going down the road, baby
Don't you wanna go
I'm going down the road, baby
Don't you wanna go
I'm going somewhere's I never
been before*

—Little Hat Jones, (Texas Blues Singer)

Waiting for the bus, Washington, D.C.
(Photo by Rosie Lee Hooks.)



Washington, D.C., fruit vendor
(Photo by Rosie Lee Hooks.)

The most consistent presence is evidence by those who provide services: the vendors of food, crafts, newspapers, or music. As long as the streets themselves have existed vendors have been selling foods. In Africa, plantains, peanuts, oranges, rice, and stew dishes are sold; in the Caribbean, these as well as meat pies. In the United States, peanuts, sweet potatoes, and fruits—and in the South, honey-dippers (homemade popsicles). Vendors have traditionally supplied brooms and mops; more recently in the Washington–Baltimore area they have expanded to jewelry and imported artifacts from Africa sold at small portable street stands.

The Baltimore, Maryland Arabber community has one of the strongest and oldest traditions of street vending, as described by Roland Freeman:

My earliest clear memories of childhood are of the

Shoeshine stand and operator, Washington, D.C.
(Photo by Fred Lee.)





Flora Molton, for 40 years a singer on the streets of Washington, D.C.
(Photo by Rosie Lee Hooks.)

summer of 1941. This was the summer of registering for kindergarten, Saturday afternoon cowboy movies, playing cowboys and Indians, and a growing infatuation with the men who sold things from horse-drawn wagons. These were the iceman, the woodman, the coalman, the junkman, the fishman, and the Arabbers who sold produce.

I began to notice that as the men went about hawking their goods, they had different songs, cries, or hollers that went about along with what they were selling. Being fascinated, like many of the kids in the neighborhood, I would tag alongside them for a block or two and

The Scene Boosters, a marching "Second Line Club" from New Orleans, adds the Mardi Gras spirit to the 1976 Bicentennial Festival.

(Photo by Debbie Chavis.)



try to mimic their cries. (One could never really understand all of what they were saying). The iceman had a song about his ice and the prices of the different size pieces he was selling; the Arabbers sang songs about the different fruits and vegetables on his wagon; each hawker had his own distinctive cries.

—"Arabbing in Baltimore"—Roland Freeman

The vendors are joined by street cleaners, newspaper sellers, shoeshine stands, the police, and street singers. Street singers are a special breed of Black musician, who by personal preference or physical handicap choose the street for their stage. Singers such as Flora Molton and harmonica-playing Charlie Sayles fill the air with religious songs and blues. The street is also a business place for those whose activities go against community morals: dope pushers, pimps, and prostitutes, to name a few. There are people who live in the street—the bowery bums and rag women. The street gives them whatever they have for survival.

There are times when the community moves into the street for a major statement of cultural identity and history, for example, drill teams, carnivals in the Caribbean, block parties, or New Orleans Mardi Gras.

Rather than focus on a prototype of a specific street we capture a blend of secular and sacred activities in Black street culture. We invite you to smell and eat the foods, hear the street calls of the children and musicians. Listen to the sounds of everyday activity, punctuated by old men playing chess and children skipping rope.

Smells of foods are an integral part of Black street culture.

(Photo by Rosie Lee Hooks.)

