

# CONTINUING THE CONVERSATION

## Personal Reflections on Pivotal Moments in Contemporary Harlem History

**A**s a youngster growing up in the Amsterdam Houses witnessing the 'groundbreaking' change of my beloved old tenement neighborhood into the Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts—a citadel of Eurocentric art and cultural expression—I could never imagine that one day, my very existence as a creative person of color, would challenge the basic premise at

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the foundation of these grand and towering buildings that housed the New York City Ballet, The Metropolitan Opera, New York Symphony Orchestra et al. Little did I know, that my mother Golda Matthias Thomas, a proud and fiery West Indian woman—who often had to accept domestic work to help

feed her three sons, while my father toiled on seafaring merchant ships - had lofty plans for her children. She took us faithfully to the Public Library every two weeks, until we were old enough to trek the six blocks up to 68th Street and Amsterdam Avenue on our own. Thus, my nurtured and acquired love of reading, allowed my young and fertile imagination to travel the universe in preparation for what was to become my life's work. In this idyllic setting just a few blocks north of the infamous "Hell's Kitchen" neighborhood, we as kids learned teamwork through sports and tolerance at an early age, in a truly multicultural environment that spawned an appreciation for music, dance and art. In my late teens after bearing witness to increasing gang violence and the traumatic infusion of heroin on our streets, I found an escape in music, and became enamored with the power of the Bass Fiddle after hearing the great contrabassist Paul Chambers on Miles Davis' classic album *Kind Of Blue*. In the course of learning to play, I had the good fortune to meet Jeanne Parnell, a young dance instructor who introduced us to formal theatre, dance and music at the after school programs in PS 191 which is still standing today. It was here that I met artist Abdullah Aziz who often visited from "uptown" - as we referred to Harlem in those days -and shortly thereafter met artist and graphic designer Bill Howell.

Memory eludes me as to how exactly the three of us found our way 'uptown' to Harlem, but here we were in the midst of the exciting and dynamic milieu of a Black cultural evolution that we would help to forge new leadership as members of the 20th Century

Creators, the predecessor of the Weusi Artists Collective.

In the annals of 20th century American art, the WEUSI Artists Collective emerged as a major cultural force in the evolution of social consciousness. Just the very process of coming together as a group of African Diasporan men and women while espousing a philosophy that focused on producing and disseminating imagery—that first and foremost was intended to serve Black Americans' needs—was a revolutionary act in itself. The conscious decision to physically build and open Nyumba Ya Sanaa Gallery and Academy of African Arts and Studies in 1967 and the prevalent action to deconstruct and transform the residual "Coon" "Aunt Jemima and Uncle Ben" "Sambo" images from enslavement that were created and used to demean the self image and public perception of African Americans, placed the WEUSI in the forefront of the struggle for equal rights and justice.

While today, it is commonplace to see proud and colorful historical and contemporary images of people of color in homes, the workplace, major cultural and educational institutions worldwide including popular and mass media, less than forty years ago - many derogatory visual images of African Americans stubbornly prevailed in the public consciousness. The impact of the Collective as well as the significant accomplishments of the individual members, has helped transform the American cultural, educational, social, religious, economic and even political landscape in too many ways to enumerate, providing a virtual harvest for social scientists, scholars, educators, historians and future generations.

**—Ademola Olugebefola  
International Peace &  
World Harmony**