

“MEETING TONIGHT” EXHIBITION – INTERPRETIVE HOMILY

Black Life Together: On Black Gathering

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The experience of ingathering, of collection, of recollection, is to be coveted beyond all reckoning.

—Howard Thurman, *The Inward Journey*

Like the children of Shady Grove and St. Paul, I grew up a Methodist. Which is merely to say that my mother and father were dues-paying members of one of the three black Methodist congregations in town: St. Matthew African Union Methodist Protestant (AUMP) Church on Revolution Street in Havre de Grace, Maryland. Though deeply devoted to our church’s spiritual and material struggles to remain alive and fervent—and thus germane to black living in the wake of late capitalism—in the emotional sense, we were not a sectarian family in the strictly theological sense, really. Indeed, our moorings in Methodism were decidedly more historically inspired than theological, and more social, it seems to me now, than doctrinal. (I recall I was a young adult before anyone got up nerve enough to ask the visiting bishop why we Methodists were weekly commending the “holy catholic church” in the Apostle’s Creed.) I mean that St. Matthew and the two African Methodist Episcopal (AME) congregations were unique among the other Black congregations in town in our common reverence for the storied history of Black Methodism’s beginnings under Peter Spenser, founder of the AUMP church, and Richard Allen, father to the AMEs. Our reverence for these divines, both ex-slaves, was not the effect of any catechizing that I can remember, but was of that quieter, more diffuse practice of connectional gathering Methodists call “conference,” with its mixed drama of serious platform addresses and comedic anecdotes told over supper in the church basement. At conference, history was memory and memory was like an iced-cold can of Fanta washing down a chicken plate.

Conference *was* camp meeting, in effect. Less so, perhaps, because unlike some of our sister churches further away *we* were not a wishfully out-of-doors class exactly (though a few old-timers waxed nostalgic about picking cotton as kids). No, *we* were factory folk, constrained by factory time and the rhythms of factory life lived in town close to work. Still, it would be a mistake to call us city folk. Conference was not camp meeting, then, in the sense of tents and tabernacles but it certainly *was* a meeting all the same!

Who was it who coopted our exquisite expression of black gathering, *meeting*, for those cold encounters we require to conduct politics or business? Who emptied *meeting* of faith and feeling and made it part of the dialect of markets, bureaucracies, and the petty transactional affairs of institutions wishing to appear fair, deliberate, democratic? Who sabotaged *meeting*?

Meeti-i-i-i-ng. Meeting.

Meeti-i-i-i-ng. Meeting.

At the meeting.

At the meeting.

At the meeting...

Never mind the coming-together of the boards and committees that make it go, the campground is for meeting, not as an event controlled by clock or calendar but as a faithful practice, a verb for the enactment of black social life together “with and on the earth,” as one writer put it, where “the possibilities of a togetherness that exceeds understanding,” quoting another, are glimpsed in the flesh.ⁱ

We gather more than just ourselves *at the meeting*. We become more than just us under its power. *At the meeting*, we recall meetings past, live together in the feeling of their common memory, and rehearse in earnest the world we’ve been dreaming of, as if a new world was not just possible or promised but pending. *At the meeting*, we live as art configured in dark-toned tableaux of resolute aliveness, becoming with the trees and groundlife a new creation. Outside the tabernacle but within the circle, our liturgy is our living, and our theology embodied in the eloquence of our most devoted practices. *At the meeting*, we test new wings, get to live a short while in as-if time—“as if the streets were not militarized and organized against Black life, Black gathering, Black being, Black breath, Black habitation.”ⁱⁱ *At the meeting*, there’s the room for this. Room to breathe. Room to be. All around the campground, room abounds where the gift that is the gathering of black people unencumbered by the dead weight of antiblackness burgeons. In the clearing, across the field, through the meadow’s grass, life is afforded room and room is life to those born in the shadow of the hold. So meet we must, forsaking not our assembly together, as life and health allow, less motivated by obligation than by the inspiration of the right and need to gather if we are to live into the beauty of black life together and be saved.

Upon these gallery walls are gathered many whom sickness and death have threatened to disappear. But the sustaining power of pictures overcomes their threat. Here pictures hold camp life in suspension while you and I, slowly and solemnly making our ring-shout around the room, keep their meetings going at a distance. Here, on this carpeted campground indoors, we are the understudies in a pageant of Black social life seldom seen so closely. Thusly staged, each image is a tent welcoming of visitors, and inside each tent a story waits to be told of black life together, vital and abiding, righteous and life-giving. In spite of everything, camp meeting continues. In spite of everything, black gathering goes on.

Amen.

ⁱ Sarah Jane Cervenak, *Black Gathering: Art, Ecology, Ungiven Life* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2021), 13, 17.

ⁱⁱ Christina Sharpe, “Black Gathering: An Assembly in Three Parts,” in Sean Anderson and Mabel O. Wilson, eds., *Reconstructions: Architecture and Blackness in America* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2021), 25.