No Space Hidden: The Spirit of African American Yard Work

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Book Review


Reviewed for the African Diaspora Archaeology Newsletter by Patrick H. Morgan, S&ME, Inc., Charleston, SC.

*No Space Hidden: The Spirit of African American Yard Work*, by Grey Gundaker and Judith McWillie, is an ambitious and satisfying culmination of research in which the authors have created a cogent and reliable source on African American yard workers and their material world. The volume shows how the use of material arrangements within the work yard, generally in the American South, illustrates the connection to religion, the land, and the past. In addition, this volume illustrates the connection and adaptation of similar yard ornamentation practices in Africa. Gundaker and McWillie, through many disciplines such as religion, history, and art history, attempt to chronicle the practice of African American yard adornment, but the volume really is an oral history which allows the subjects of the volume to ultimately tell their story.

Gundaker, an anthropologist, was influenced by the oral histories of former slaves interviewed during the Federal Writer's Project of the 1930s. This project allowed the authors an avenue to access "the invaluable legacy of the great-grandparents and grandparents of the current generations of yard makers" for the book (p. xvii). McWillie, an artist and professor, was raised in Tennessee and was exposed to these yards displaying everyday items conveying deeper meanings. Each author provides expertise which culminates in research and methodology that provides the link of the Africanism of yard work.

*No Space Hidden* is broken down into six portfolios and six chapters. In the portfolios the authors present, photographically, distinct themes with a descriptive explanation of the work on each. The subjects are allowed within these portfolios to express what their work's meaning is and how its expression affects their everyday life. It is within the following chapter of each portfolio that Gundaker and McWillie expound on the context. Yardworkers' oral histories provide the skeleton on which the authors base the book. It is from these histories that they are able to establish the "lexicon" of yard art and translate the meaning to the reader.

African traditions that have lasted several centuries of slavery, have manifested into a particular art form which allows "yard work [to be] a spiritual medium, rather than merely a form of 'expression' or accommodation for its own sake" (p. 11). Some of these traditions or "Africanisms" have a spiritual overtone, such as Central African customs of staking hollow rods into the soil in order to allow communication with dead. These rods also carried water, the "preeminent signifier of the spirit" (p. 32). In addition, statuary, from Jesus to chickens, in the yard and in cemeteries serves as "watchers" or the
conscience that "remind people that they are accountable for their actions" (p. 132). American Christianity, as Gundaker and McWillie point out, have "infuse[d] [with] older, transatlantic notions of matter and spirit with fresh purpose," most assuredly being the genesis of the yard work seen in the American South today.

While the yard workers attempt to convey messages of their belief systems, this sometimes is misinterpreted. Some of these articulate yards are dismissed by neighbors as unkempt, that despite their design, it is the purely visual which offends. Some were even directed to clean up their yards. In some instances, the labeling of some yards as "voodoo" yards "exposes genuine sensitivities and resistances to the dimensions of yard work that some consider unchristian" (p. 19). In many instances print journalism has associated yard art as "voodoo" or has referred to some as mere drug induced "artists" choosing to dismiss the yard work, giving an irresponsible portrait of what the yard workers do.

Despite these small hindrances to the expression of the yard workers, the authors do their best to show that the establishment and maintenance of the connection to their African roots is the ultimate expression of the yard workers. The essence of their argument can be summed up from page 12, "Certain yard workers are finding in materials and actions the ingredients of a metalanguage not reducible to speech or writing with which to comment on the human condition and take responsibility for directing its course." The work Gundaker and McWillie present here establishes and emphasizes their subjects' stories and oral histories in their own words. The ancestors are paid reverence through the presentation of the objects and the expression of ideals and beliefs are conveyed. Belief, both of life and of death, is displayed whether it is obvious or not. The expression of the yard, when one's past is filled with the lack of self expression, is utilized as a vehicle to communicate with everyone, both living and dead whether it is immediately understood or not.

Diaspora archaeologists may view this book as a foundation or background from which to begin and execute research. Since these yard workers and the "yard art" have been so heavily influenced by the African traditions, it is advantageous as the archaeologist to examine if there are material connections in the archaeological record with these same traditions. Slavery has been a growing topic in historical archaeology over the past thirty years. Colonoware pots found with cosmological symbols are shown in Leland Ferguson's work, Uncommon Ground. This particular example shows the how the symbols, despite the geographical separation, maintain a deeply rooted connection to one's ancestors, traditions and beliefs. Admittedly, this connection revealing itself in material culture, and hence the archaeological record is by no means completely new territory. However the connections explained by Gundaker and McWillie in this modern era have a genesis and it began in Africa, and was influenced by Christianity and within slavery. The expression of the African-American yard workers who are free to be overt is loud and clear, where their slave ancestors did not have the same avenues of expression. Their expression was far more subversive and hidden. Indeed this was also a way of communicating messages of escape, such as in the case of quilts and other sewn fabrics. Ultimately the archaeologist can find comparative research within Gundaker's and McWillie's work which can helpful and show the "connections" of the past and place where in this "timeline" the material culture of a particular archaeological site belongs.
*No Space Hidden* is ultimately a scholarly work which integrates emic and etic approaches, whereby the subjects' and authors' explanations are equally accessible to the reader. The book is well-researched and utilizes oral history and it is through this medium that the weight of the book can be felt. While beauty is subjective, the message of the yard workers' is cemented is tradition, spirituality and the connection to the past in order to guide the present. Gundaker and McWillie present a strong collaboration which is accessible to wide range of fields and its practitioners.