

the PARIS REVIEW

ARTS & CULTURE

Rivers, First Draft

January 13, 2016 | by Caille Millner

Lorraine O'Grady's living künstlerroman.



Rivers, First Draft: the Debauchees intersect the woman in red and the rape begins, 1982 Digital C-print from Kodachrome 35mm slide. Photo via Alexander Gray Associates

In 1982, the artist Lorraine O'Grady staged her first major performance piece in Central Park, "Rivers, First Draft." In the park's bucolic Loch section, the audience watched a black woman in a red dress walk down the ravine. Red is a sign for wanton women, and this one was in the company of wild-eyed dancers, barely clothed—all of them white. She was shy, lingering behind the dancers as they shimmied and shook down the hill. When she caught up and tried to engage them, they spurned her.

So the woman in red wandered over to a door. Several black male artists were gathered behind it. She knocked, and they, too, turned her away. While she hesitated, hoping to change their minds, the dancers returned and attacked her with Dionysian energy.

It doesn't take an academic to find the narrative: her heroine's layers of gender and racial difference—what today we might call her intersectionality—was affecting her ability to find an artistic community. There was a sly bitterness in the fact that O'Grady staged her heroine's rejections with the kinds of New York cliques that liked to advertise how inclusive they were. Her staging suggested that real life wasn't that simple. In this context, her heroine's red dress was less a marker of her actual behavior and more a sign of the social threat she represented.

O'Grady has described the piece as her most personal. It's also, in its way, instructional: a kind of *künstlerroman*, it's one of the clearest how-to guides for women of color on how to become artists. In the hands of a lesser artist, the attack is the moment when "Rivers" would start to fall apart—to get bogged in the muck of identity politics. Instead, O'Grady showed a way out. Her woman in red escaped the dancers and ran from the male artists' door. When she was alone again, she considered the final object in front of her. It was a stove: a classic totem of female entrapment. Calmly, she took up a can of spray paint.

In 1980s New York City, the spray can was a sign, too—of defiance, demand. The woman shot paint at the stove until it was as red as her dress. Only when they wore the same color did she stand before it to cook—to begin, that is, creating her own work.

For the woman in red and her audience, that moment at the stove was every bit as defining as Stephen Daedalus's epiphany in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*: "He was destined to learn his own wisdom apart from others or to learn the wisdom of others himself wandering among the snares of the world." The first incidence of artistic transformation is a crucial moment in every *künstlerroman*. What's significant about "Rivers" is that it was addressed to a group, young black women, that's historically had few of them.

Of course in 1982 there were magnificent bildungsromans—Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*, Maya Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, and Paule Marshall's *Brown Girl, Brownstones* are just a few examples of the wonderful novels for young black women as they sought to

become autonomous individuals in a brutal world. But the bildungsroman is a novel of formation, showing how the innocent survives the shoals of adolescence to become an individual; the *künstlerroman* is specifically for people who seek to become artists. Though the genre's heroes are usually young, they need not be—in Henry James' *The Tragic Muse*, Nick Dormer comes to art after another career, much as O'Grady did. Since the artist's existence is always fraught, always a state of becoming, authors ranging from Wolfgang von Goethe to Knut Hamsen recognized that this treacherous terrain required a different map.

O'Grady—black, a woman, and a descendant of Caribbean immigrants—couldn't find the map she needed. So she created it herself, starting with "Rivers." It shares many features with the classic *künstlerroman*, like the woman in red's decision to work despite her experience of oppressive conditions. That's a choice that would ring true for other *künstlerroman* heroes, like Hamsen's starving narrator in "Hunger":

I rose, oppressed by weird terrors, and took some furious strides down the path. "No!" I cried out, clutching both my hands; "there must be an end to this," and I reseated myself, grasped the pencil, and set seriously to work...

O'Grady, who has said that most of her "art heroes" are writers, charts the territory for those who aren't recognized by the classic literature. One of her first performances, in 1980, took the art world by surprise. The scene was an opening of avant-garde black art, mostly by male artists, at the Just Above Midtown gallery in New York City. As the artists accepted their plaudits, O'Grady came roaring in as "Mlle. Bourgeoise Noire," disrupting the self-satisfied proceedings in a pageant gown created from 180 pairs of thrifted white gloves, swatting herself and bystanders with a cat-o-nine-tails whip. "Black art must take more risks!" she shouted. "Now is the time for an invasion!"

Once she had fully earned the consternation of everyone present, she marched out of the gallery and went to the New Museum, which was then displaying work overwhelmingly by white male artists. O'Grady stood among it and repeated her performance to an equally shocked and unwilling audience. The piece, "Mlle. Bourgeoise Noire," was discussed among women artists of color as if it were a trail of breadcrumbs along the exhausting path to acceptance.

Which brings us to the most important distinction between O'Grady's early-career *künstlerroman* and the classic novels on which her work is based: the group. Where a classic *künstlerroman* is wedded to radical individuality, its hero based on a romantic vision of the artist set apart, O'Grady's heroines can't afford the luxury of the solo quest or the myth of heroic individuality. When her artists try to act alone, they wind up like the woman in "Rivers"—cast away from every door, abused, and abandoned. They need others, and her most successful heroines find them.

At the end of "Rivers," the woman in red manages to escape the Loch, but she doesn't leave alone. She's joined by two younger women who have experienced their own terrors during the performance—dressed, like her, in shades of red—and she leads them beyond the ravine. For her heroines, the true artistic becoming happens when they have the opportunity to lead others.

Caille Millner is the author of The Golden Road: Notes on my Gentrification. Her work has appeared in the Los Angeles Review of Books, Hyperallergic, Zyzzyva, and Joyland, and she contributed to Greil Marcus's anthology A New Literary History of America.

TAGS New York, James Joyce, Central Park, Toni Morrison, performance art, Künstlerroman, Maya Angelou, 1980s, conceptual art, The New Museum, Rivers First Draft, African American art, bildungsroman, Lorraine O'Grady, Just Above Midtown Gallery, Mlle Bourgeoise Noire, Knut Hamsen, Alexander Gray Associates