

To the Graduate Council:

I am submitting herewith a thesis written by Peggy Brice-Means entitled "CYCLE OF SONG." I have examined the final copy of this thesis for form and content and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts, with a major in English.

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Dean of The Graduate School

CYCLE OF SONG

A Thesis

Presented for the

Master of Arts

Degree

The University of Tennessee, Knoxville

Peggy Brice-Means

May 1991

DEDICATION

For Jane who said, "Fly."
For Kwesi who said, "Imagine it."
For my parents who not only
taught me to love literature,
but how to live and pray, work and die.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I wish to acknowledge the professors who have assisted me in this knowledge quest. I wish to thank Professor Marilyn Kallet for her consistent and steady academic guidance and editorial skills. I also thank her for the incredible ability to remain calm in the midst of life's storms. I wish to acknowledge Professor George Hutchinson for his encouragement. I shall remain grateful for his assistance in my introduction to Soyinka. Professor Joyce Carol Thomas, whose advent was so keenly awaited, I thank for her encouragement, her time and her wealth of human spirit. Finally, I thank Professor R. Baxter Miller who has been a continuous source of inspiration and often the impetus for motivation when the gratification has seemed too long deferred.

ABSTRACT

The poems in this collection are generally written in free verse. This is significant to the work for it is the desire of the author that a strong sense of the natural flow of speech patterns be created in the majority of poems. The poem "Jesus in the Work Place" draws strongly from the oral tradition of Zulu "drumming" poems, and also resembles the praise poems of the Yoruba. The poem "Catharsis", while it appears to be influenced by the style of Baraka's later works, is indicative of ancient tribal ceremonial poems which purge so that the mind and spirit might be cleansed. The lines are created to be long enough to exhaust the breath of the speaker. The layout of the work is designed to represent the relationships between the Black male and Black female as they move through realistic history in a cycle of song.

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INTRODUCTION

The effort of this work is born out of the need to express something other than stereotyped versions of the Black male and Black female relationship. To do so requires either the recall of past experiences, or the experiences recorded in Black history which would serve as a beginning point from which I could work. Several obstacles become obvious in the pursual of this task. It appears impossible to write about relationships without some historical reference. If the historical reference is to be introduced then in some way that influence has to be explained. It is my decision to explain it poetically. In identifying the history, then both negative and positive aspects of this historical influence on the said relationship has to be introduced into the body of the work. However, one must remember that that which serves to separate can also be used as an impetus to unite.

In the 1921 June issue of Crisis, W.E.B. DuBois addresses the

same problem. "we have to face the Truth of Art. When an artist paints us he has the right to paint us whole and not ignore everything which is not as perfect as we would wish it to be." He also adds that "We insist that our Art and Propaganda be one." Dubois addresses the complaints made by individuals concerning the negative aspects of Black reality as expressed by Black artists. Sixty-nine years later it is the top heaviness of the negative and a propaganda of a different sort which inspires this poet to write about the positive and the whole. For to ignore the whole of any situation is in itself a form of denial and holds the potential of creating myth.

However, the intent of this work is to move beyond the mere providing of a "living room view" of these relationships. The work moves rather toward the psychological aspects of the relationships as well. Again, that psychology is directly related to two types of history: the historical fiction which is created to perpetuate the myth as viewed in "Catharsis", and the history of reality which is found in the Black (W)hole.

By working on this manuscript there grew and developed a philosophy. That philosophy is represented in what I choose to call the Black (W)hole concept. This should not be confused with the "black hole" as briefly discussed by Frantz Fanon in his book Black Skin, White Masks. Though the individual who enters this Black (W)hole would also have just cause to emit a scream which would also shake the pillars of the earth, it is not a hole of despair. Yet it remains a hole into which the individual must descend. However, descent is not to be viewed as a negative act, for the experience is the experience which propels the individual forward, upward, and onward.

Certainly this idea seems to paint a grandiose portrait, yet it remains true that those individuals who hold a solid sense of self, generally hold a solid sense of history, - roots - which serve to "ground" them. It is toward this Black (W)hole which the work moves. Indeed the very presence of this collection of poetry is representative of the knowledge gleaned from

it. For it is in the Black (W)hole that I live and from it that I write.

In the scientific world a black hole is a star which once burned as brilliantly as the Earth's sun. The light is created by a continuous source of nuclear fusion. As the source of energy is depleted the star implodes. (This can be linked to the underground railroads during the times of slavery.) Yet, in that incredibly violent action the star shrinks in size as it increases in mass. When this occurs, there is created a gravitational pull so strong that nothing is immune. One theory holds, that should an individual enter into the black hole, s/he would travel back in time. Yet another theory likens the black hole to a garbage dump, taking in, i.e. absorbing all that is in its path.

I submit that the Black (W)hole is a place of reality history. Thus that which seems without color and light, is that which contains it. Light and color cannot be "seen" because they are

absorbed into the body of the Black (W)hole. The Black (W)hole then is the dumping ground of all that is discarded when rhetoric is separated from ideology and becomes rather a means of measuring the effectiveness of the argument rather than a means of espousing truths.

In this work the majority of the poetry reflects an exclusive quality. Yet, it should be recognised that that exclusivity is necessary so that fictional history might be amended. It is my belief that it is the Black (W)hole which binds us all. It is the healing place where the earth bound spirit goes and the soul is healed. Each of those who seeks a greater reality must venture into the dark place which not only gives forth light, but is the keeper of it.

The image is not entirely a mystical one. For what exists in the realm of the Black (W)hole is a vast history of reality, community, love, and truth. The sphere of physical science is utilized because it provides a form of logic which allows

physicists as well as myself to deal in abstractions. It is the scientific which affords one the opportunity to "see" infinity. For this poet infinity translates into the infinite possibilities of color - all colors, thus providing the ability to rearrange the spectrum so that rhetoric, ideology and reality can again be defined.

(A Prelude)

Sea Salt

Our blood,
Blade-blue and
birthed into the hold
of a fallen star

nursed to the
bony cry
of freedom,
sentenced to
the barnacled plea
of justice
walked the uncrested
wave.

Given in livid gestation
from bloated and fly-full bellies
of yet unbeached wooden whales,
- nautical specters ringing rancid
from the sea.

"Toll the bell!"
for the darkness of such blacklessness
crawls as spineless
sightless
worms before maturity.

Out
of
lush greens of deep
forests and close gatherings
of disleisure

herded, with chipped spirits, fragmented,
and unwilling,
into sand-gritty
beds
producing blacker pearls
and priceless labor

to transverse
in
lunatic sieve,
bitter breakers
of the sea.
The death knell
of that creation
is the chant
which haunts
us now.

Down!

Down!

Down!

into an even blacker hold.
A crack in the earth where the sky has fallen
Into the abyss
Into the black hole.

Catharsis

I

We are fast-tracked, pulled back, into oblivion, dead before we are alive.
Womb dead fetuses, born into the world. Recompensed transactions,
redelivered goods.

Ain't seen no promised land. But carry heaven daily in our hands. "Hoe
down" from the field master. No Jubilee till '63.

Cinch-waisted, false and faded woman facing our mother's mother's mother's
mother, who stood in sack cloth delivered twice yearly, in a form of sub-
verted Christian Cha-ri-ty.

First Mother, who'd rather stand naked in her true roots (clinging yet to
this earth,) as she slides into native tongue, and finds full mirth.

Reality being the beaten bloody pulp, flooding down through the ground...
The fertilizer of this country is colored-human-brown.

Children, it is her blood that feeds you, fertilizes your heart, births
you from Earth's bowels from which you cannot depart.

II

Heritage? Strong Black men laid prostrate because "yessa" too hesitant, Thinking themselves a Crispus Attucks and in a single action thought themselves to liberate.

It is the infant pulled from the mother's breast before the milk has dried.

It is the milk that lets down in thought of her own when the masses children cry.

It is distant howling in the breeze as the night flesh train runs. The "no naming" of the by the father, as he knows not his son.

It is the hoof beat in the chasing, warning shot over the head and the praying that the bullets hit you, for you'd rather be dead.

It is the killing and mental maiming of our own beloved.

The life blood which flows in the rivers, the tenuous prayers which cannot deliver, the red blood, black blood, yellow blood, and white blood who chose to know.

We, fast-track and come back, return to this tale, the story of Asian sweat which laid down the rail.

Brilliant minds, whose gifts Marco stole, grey like the stone on the old Wall Road

III

Counting grains of sugar within a teaspoon held, by this means vote for hope.

One hundred years later the children's children's children's children's children push dope for hope,

Through their veins, up their noses to numb the pain that cries in a deep voice, "Things remain the same."

Kill it! Burn it! Destroy it before it kills you in your bed.
Rap it! Zap it! Make it die. And vomit what was truth...they said.

Remember the men that walked that road and felled the trees which cut the path that Sherman strolled. Black Men! What? Did no one tell?

It ain't enough to say it loud, got to know where you been before you are proud.

To know the history is to know the strength, to destroy false truths saying you don't exist.

African Trinity

Three days
I lay in
bed

 a day for each of you
sleep a drug
solitude
refuge
from the war

Each of you
a guard
captures
of the mind,
teachers
in the
word.

Soyinka
Achebe
Awoornor

at my feet
up rooting me

Ophir

I

Solomon. He remembers her black skinned
and glistening in the summer heat
as he circles the sun

How
her body became
one of burden
for the white beast,
rather
than a life-wish
for ¹Cuba's
unborn child

And
the wearing of unholy sackcloth
her body not free, how her mouth,
her breasts denied him, as if a sin
and she Cuba's great wife on the continent
across the sea

¹Cuba here is in reference to an African name rather than the Spanish
name for a country

II

In the night she became the wild one
knowing no fear, she sought a greater freedom
One she would not yield. Shutting her eyes to
the obstacles of darkness, trusting
her senses in the night
Abba carrier her Self and their seed
from the land of imposed plight

but the beast sought his possession
and transgression
desired her, with him to sleep

thus
by lighted torch
he found her
earth-bound
spirit an
beat her
as if
she were the beast

III

in the end her inner peace rose to a single swell
her body prepared to die -
"one less to take
the journey of need," the earth-bound spirit cried.

Three
days her body
festered
on
the fence
leading to the field
reminding others
what a chance freedom
might yield
But Cuba rejoiced in her blessed death
which quailed
his violent rage

On the fourth night with the wildness upon him
he took her body
from the stake
and held
an
all-night-vigil
a macabre wake

as the sun rose on the river
sharpened wood
pierced
his black
royal skin

IV

Dying
he remembered
her young black
glistening
in summer sun
in a world without sin

In
the
spinning
turning of
circles
and possibilities
endlessly
-as time does well-
their spirits fell
Winnie and Nelson
now
the color
of
their
name

Gift of Ghana

When others are only so many flickering lights
Against the mid-night blue sky,
Dare I reach and grasp
A rare black gem
Brought to my shore?

Trade I
Lights, a million years dead
Which fall in ash from the sky,
Once filled with molten passion
That cools quickly, then dies?

For a precious stone,
Pressed tight and hard,
Honed to a fine brilliance
From the solid soil that has
Cradled man?

A wise woman chooses not
That which falls from the sky,
spent.
But that which is brought on
the endless cycle of the wind.

I choose not light things
only flickering in the dark,
But rather
The Dark Gift of the harmattan.

Jesus in the Work Place

He is blackness
walking,
clothed
within
himself,
heels
below his
toes
on solid unshifting
ground-
creator of
the
hour glass,
owner of time

borrowed spirit
on this earth
vision bridging
era
evolution
space and time

compendium

ancient
eye
of eagles
with
full nest,
eyes
of
mystery
 death
 life

and
silent
want of prey

Tongue
of gentle
coaxing
ideas
laughter
beneficence

committed
to the clicking
of tribal
coup.

Ghosts

They come daily
Those gray riders, on grey horses
in grey coats.

They come
For absolution
and I absolve them.

"Hail Mary Full Of Grace"
In unison\ echoes from the holy box

Their guns unholstered,
Their swords unsheathed,
Dangling unceremoniously from
Unclaiming hands

Today as yesterday
They come en masse
file through the chapel

Begging penance - ablution
And I absolve them
again and again.

"Hail Mary Full Of Grace"

And I, but a concession to female voices
Rebutting a flaw in the doctrine.

"Hail Mary"

Yet I am. I am the damned spot
They would cast out.
"Hail Mary Full Of Grace"

And

I absolve them.

Fever

"It is the Fever my mother," I said,
 Shutting the door to my cold black
 room facing east, with out morning sun.
 no prayer mat, no kneeling
 And the voices came. All together. Each calling me a different
 name,
 Chile,
 prophet,
 la nina,
 little one,
 orphan,
 path finder,
 last one,
 alone one
 only one
 cool breeze...

I remember Cool Breeze. faster than a police
 car after black folks who ain't done nothing
 just running in the street, laughing at some
 hollow joy/

WILLIAM CHRISTOPHER BABBINGTON-JOHNSON
 sister, li'l' bit DIED YESTERDAY AFTER A LONG STRESSFUL LIFE.
 A MEMBER OF THE SHORT WAR, 1958-1964, GENERAL
 IN THE COLD WAR 1964-1989. SOURCES CLOSE TO
 THE FAMILY STATED THAT BABBINGTON-JOHNSON DIED
 FROM A SKIN DISEASE WHICH HAS COMPLICATED BY A
 SEVER CASE OF RAGANITIS IS A FUNGUS WHICH HAS
 BEEN REPORTED TO COVER WHOLE INNER CITY BLOCKS,
 PREDOMINATELY FOUND AMONG PEOPLE OF COLOR AS
 WELL AS ALL POOR PEOPLE. MOST RECENTLY IT HAS
 SPREAD TO THE MIDDLE CLASS...IRRESPECTIVE OF
 COLOR.

all
 breathing through the cracks in the wall.
 up through
 the used
 furniture
 and the "on time"
 easy (hell) payment bed.

SOME SAY ONLY THE RADIOACTIVE
 ISOTOPE WILL CURE IT. Communist
 sources state unfortunately "IT
 KILLS THE PATIENT AS WELL."

Preacher
 Man
 Boy you better get up.
 Your people gonna die.

"It's the fever," I scream,
 "It's got my mind worked up."

From my dark hole
 in society
 I hear
 some mother cry out in a voice I cannot understand. The earth
 quakes

Hiroshi!

Noitaka!

flash of white lightening brings a sad cruel peace to me.

The Real Deal

Cool Evening!
You are
the creeping
thing
Bearing gifts
of hyacinth
and night dew
upon your lips

You know the
bodies of
a hundred black
men
held waiting
to cast
nets
of
Joy

upon their
Woman
with
undone hair
spread out
against
their
sweat slick bodies
as they
sling
tenaciously to
a different
world.

Hands
slide stretched
to the ends
of that
moving tangle
of arms and legs
where
nails
and teeth
become

branding irons
leaving
impressions
held triumphantly
in a
moment
of
separate
reality.

Buying the nigger...still

for John McReynolds

This moment
not yet a day after divorce
we sit
you and I
separate and alone
together on
the curb of the sidewalk
chewing over the thought
of
"buying the nigger"
the nigger
too white
to live with

we know it now
but
couldn't see
it then

we be the nigger we bought

You with yours
I with mine
took them home -
30 pieces of silver
purchase price -
to the
white bread house
and
watched it crumble

We,
too
old to change
our collective
ways
Your nigger
My nigger
Two separate
monkeys
on two different backs

Pilgrimage

Of Roberta McDuffy

and

Robert Kemp

In my youth I was captured, slain by amber eyes
More fair than others, yet in them trouble lingered
touched and fired by some mystic's knarled finger.

Seeing no passion, save our own, safe in our sighs,
I succumbed to salient sounds, a distant siren-singer.
Knowing your sorrel beauty the messenger, harbinger
of some other grave despair, cast out thoughts as lies

We moved toward a promised land of rebirth and desire
To claim by right, fruit of our long journey and slave labor
Yet, the hot glow of Cleveland burned in those gems.

And the north journey found us both with new passion fired.
Lament of fuel, glass and rags. I accompanied w/fife and tabor.
That for which we live, we die! A Mecca's death a senseless whim
Elmo's fire burns amber, and sorrel swords hang in every chamber.

Shadow Boxing

That which should be the greatest gift
I know you bear as the heaviest burden
that which should be salvation is the vested sin.
Yet inside you beats a heart, a life, a rift
between those who should be bound by love.

Certainly, you make no excuses for the color of your skin
but the choicelessness you believe created by it
brings boiling to my blood.
How can you love, when the tissue that scars your heart
is the grand illusion?
And the illusion is real.

Summer\ 89

Reflections on the
dismantling of "Shanty Town"

I stood sweating
in Humanity's
towering shadow
as
Apathy raised
her lovely head,
feigning
triumphant victory
and said,
"The opposition
doesn't fight well
anymore."

I felt the chill
 a single finger ran my spine
but
never
the clutch
'round my throat
 silent
 and
 dry

Nor
the slow steady
rape
of my lamedormant
mind
till
She laughed
and sighed,
"even old victims
don't fight
anymore."

Sweating
 in the
 just heat
 of after-noon-day sun,
 Lady Apathy
 offered
 feast of
 flesh,
 a meal for one.
 I sat
 to eat
 the harvest of my action,
 bounty of
 the complacent tongue.
 the rare flesh
 the blood
 it was my own.

Ragged warfare
 ceased today
 rag-tag soldiers,
 long gone home-
 barracks in mass
 decay,
 Not one present
 to hear the last
 flat fall

Apathy
 With seductive motion,
 slowly slid her belligerent tongue
 into my ear
 "It is the nature
 of my game."

In Soweto real
right to life
issues eulogized,
doors to the children's
uncertain future
were immediately shut
coffined, nailed down,
finalized.

And
all the children
died
one by one
all their colors faded in the sun

"All of them?"
I heard the mothering voices cry.

"Not one child taken without
the other
Not one child without the giving
of a mother,"
Apathy calmly replied.

XI

another day:

you are the sweet meat in
the hour of the bitter
cup,
as I feel
like jesus
nailed to the cross

dove at my shoulder
when I am peter
slicing off an offending
ear

The prayer
in the garden alone
when the
11 sleep

the prayer
when even the
good others
cannot see

good earth upon which I walk
pacing
PACING
out the
weary
heavy compassion
on my brow

my bed
on which
I lie
when
answers of why
have eluded
me.

Abba's Song

If I could
I would
fill your
orchard -
be a willing
Basket
for your
man-fruit
bearing
many

joyful dancing
children
pulling at your
robe-
many anxious
minds and fingers
seeking rice from
your bowl-
many strong
warriors
to stand by your
side-

give
strong
arms
of safe
shelter,
and
a harbor
in which
to abide,
A Black
woman-warrior-walking
behind you to
cover your
back
beside you
to match
your stride.

Sunday Mornings

Sunday mornings taste of sunlight
on the tongue.
Real people are about.

Real men are going home
leaving secure long time
lovers
Satisfied not satiated
Leaving
with lady's breath
still in their hair.

In sudden kill reality
pairs of touching fingers flee
too cold pockets
emptied of warm coins the night before
now
ice in the hand.

Lids lower as eyes smiling search
the last look of life's fluff
caught
in this real man's hair.

Sunday mornings smell of wood burning
trapped in the woven fibers, sharp(!)
in the jacket of this woman real,
Tastes of fingers dipped in honied coffee
and cream from pots enough to spare,
saffron scented arms emptied of unpassed judgments
She's going fishing cause she dares.

Sunday mornings feel like change coming
 On the road of lingering Country
 Sparse and almost bare.

Real people passing paths/crossing
 With grace enough not to stare.
 No words exchanged between them
 Respecting change, life's stuff caught on single strands of hair.

Old radicals, used hippies
 Cast lines from worn bridges,
 Eyes from other times and lost places
 Which full beards cannot deny.

Young brave and old sage
 one walking water
 the other standing ground
 cast glances of recognition over
 The piece of life they stride.

Seven Sisters came Sunday morning
 Casting off elasticized stocking
 From their New-York-Too-Thin-Thighs,
 Not one waiting for the other,
 All simultaneously rebaptized.
 Each returning from the water
 received a mama's kiss upon the lips.
 Mama, fed them bread and melting butter,
 Giving thanks to Jesus
 for the reclamation of Southern hips.

Sunday Morning a painted portrait
 Of those who will live
 their bodies pressed like fresh flowers
 in the mind,
 Standing ground against time
 Treading water against the tide
 Going fishing because they dare
 Living in selves other have denied.

Against The Night

Now

I Close my eyes to talk
to you.

Closed

I see you, I see the vision.

How it was -

Mating Dances,

Passage rites,

I call you to me

with

Rhythms,

Pulsating from this earth,

Bodies

Shiver,

Shimmer,

Together

Both Black

Against the night,

We rise

up!

Out of the earth

Not to Conquer

but

to cover it

with our

love.

When we die
our
bodies burn
black in the night.

Flecks of
Spirit Fire
We rise
up!
And cover the
Earth.

Together.

hold me woman!

cup my face in your hands.
ease the pain from my brow.
wrap my body in wet brown paper and
take this sting from me.
draw the
poison from my soul.
lay hands on me woman!
heal the three hundred year
sore
lance the boils woman
and
wash me in the last clear spring
when others drink
they will
know what I have seen.

Always Amazed

My daddy always held me
high

way,

way up

high

On hot summer days

so my lips of soft rose and

brown might touch the cool water

from the

fountain

marked "whites only"

(a sign, he said, "too soon"

for me to

read)

Always, he

seemed

proud to hold me for that

cool drink of water

every time

I'd kiss his round face

my mouth wet with laughter

and water,

"Daddy, Daddy, That water

was sooo good!"

Then I'd bury my face, while

hugging, and giggling,

in his shirt

A Fresh
blue-cheer-starched-shirt,
Remaining amazed
how he never wiped
the water from my
mouth
or from his face
but let it
l
i
n
g
e
r
all natural like.

Prophecy

He shall lead
his people to
black revision of
the truth.
She shall be his woman
in the last days of his youth.
They shall live the
prophecy
Make the nation
one
The effort if their
actions
Validate
forefathers
and
future sons
She shall cover his tracks
Stand by his side
What is written
cannot be denied.

For it is
by the blessing
not
the curse,
these
two shall change
the color of
the universe
though
this fruitless union
bear no
heir
Their
inheritors
a nation
the continent
their lair.

She shall
love him softly
and out loud
by it
quail the din
of the wandering crowd
for
long ago she
was given her
blood
in sacred places before the flood.
He reclaims
his
by rite
returning to
God's
first earth.
Amen

Boo!

Who said
my mother
was afraid
of the
dark?

The Calling Song

There is a black
song singing
I can hear
it well,
Revealing
unto us
the
unfolding
tale.

There
Is
A Black
Star rising
above the warrior's
shield
bringing
the hope
of battle
and
dreams
full-filled.

There is
a black
son rising
dragging
his broken foot
from the west,
bringing home all his
brothers
black, red, brown, yellow,
the
very best.

There are
Black
Souls
singing,
calling
all to come
home
There is a black
soul singing...
Children come.

Oh
A spirit
fire
waiting
burning
in each one's
breast-
dipped in blood
and
re-al-i-ty
comes
bare foot
walking
to set
each one free

This black
Sun
rising
casts
no
shadow -
no
doubt
on any man

There is a
hope song
rising
crying-out
'cross the
barren
lands

final
peace battle
raging,
path-light
of survival
is
now engaged.

There is
a war
song
singing
from
the cradle
of
man's birth

a black song
singing
returning
man to his earth,
returning first
knowledge to this earth.

VITA

Peggy (P.J.) Brice-Means was born in Knoxville, Tennessee on May 23, 1953. She attended Holston High School where she was assistant editor of "Smoke Signals," the school newspaper. She was also poetry editor of the school's literary magazine.

Brice-Means completed her course work approximately two years early, and relinquished her position as Editor, to become a member of a government sponsored cultural exchange program. This program afforded her the opportunity to live in Europe.

The author began her college education at East Tennessee State University in 1970. There her fascination with words, drama, and literature, led her to active participation in the Speech and Theatre department. Her activities in this area brought her honors. She became a charter member of the Pi Phi Delta National Honor Society which recognizes individuals for excellence in Oral Interpretation and Readers Theater. However, because of the illness of her mother, Brice-Means returned to Knoxville after her second year of college. She completed course work and received her Bachelor of Arts degree in

Psychology from the University of Tennessee at Knoxville in 1976.

Still fascinated by words, and literature, Brice-Means entered The Graduate School at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville, in January 1989. As a graduate fellow, she earned her Master of Arts in English with an emphasis in Creative Writing.

Brice-Means has been a script writer for the Tennessee PBS History Series, a Contributing Editor for Chattanooga Life and Leisure magazine and a research consultant for Highlights Magazine for Children. She was named to Who's Who in America, Women and Who's Who in US, Writers, Editors, and Poets for 1990.