

## Trying to Make a Dollar Out of Fifty Cents

A Comprehensive Critique of Nicolette Bethel's 2009 Day of Absence.

By Ward Minnis

*Out of absence let the new day be born — [Helen Klonaris](#)<sup>1</sup>*

The response to Dr. Nicolette Bethel's [Day of Absence](#), held for the first time on February 11, 2009, was nothing short of amazing.<sup>2</sup> I had almost lost faith in the desire of Bahamians to band together for a cause, and yet here they were banding. Nicolette deserves to be commended because she did something — she threw an idea into the void and the response to that idea proves conclusively that we, as an emerging art community, need something like this to rally around.

Nicolette Bethel and I have been friends since she taught me English 120 at the College of the Bahamas in 2001. When I was in Nassau this past January gathering research for my Masters thesis, she suggested that we get together and share a coffee. We eventually met at the Starbucks across the road from the College of the Bahamas. At the time, I had only briefly heard about her Day of Absence, I had skimmed over the press release *cum* manifesto and I thought then, much as I do now, that the idea had potential. Over lattes and tea we talked about her upcoming day, the need for art in society, the inescapable nature of design in every aspect of our lives, and the fact that a place like the café in which we sat, was what it was, in large part because of the art.

The warm and fuzzy feelings left me once I read what had been written about the Day of Absence more carefully. The more I contemplated the ideas as presented, the more I was bothered by the incongruities in the project. This essay is thus my odd way of congratulat-

ing Nicolette on a job well done while taking her to task for ideas that are at best half-baked. Her Day of Absence clouds over and conflates many different and unrelated ideas while advancing an awkward historical agenda and a cumbersome theory of cultural development. It is political and apolitical, about something and about nothing, clear and blurry, all at the same time. I still believe that the Bahamian art community is in need of something *like* this though, and if we can begin a dialogue on what we really lack, maybe we can eventually get at what it is we really need.

### **A World Without Art**

I'm asking us all to stop — for a day, for a moment even, and imagine our country, our world, if we woke up one day and all the artists and cultural workers had disappeared. — [Nicolette Bethel](#)<sup>3</sup>

This Day of Absence requires us to think about a world without art. Can we imagine our world without artists? The around-the-world-ness of Nicolette's opening plea is, admittedly, quite compelling and gives her proposal a certain new-age sexiness. Everyone can agree that without art the world would be a pretty dull place. Unfortunately, this broad net also makes the fundamental argument meaningless. Yes, it is true that everything we touch, even a mug at Starbucks, has been designed by someone. However, this generalization covers over a very important issue for Bahamian artists. (I think it is important to underline the word to remind us who we are really talking about here.) The reality is that most, if not all, of the images and products that filter our way from the great foreign cultural creators, such as the United States, have been produced by professionals who have already been compensated.

I do not feel the need to conduct a sit-in for American movie directors; or Swedish industrial designers; or the graphic designers from some ad agency. The street graffiti artist

working feverishly under the bridge in some foreign city is another story, but we never see her work here. Most of the art that the Day of Absence invites us to imagine our world without has a price on it, and that price has already been paid. And if you really boil it down, our money has gone, and is going, to pay that price. Let's not even touch the issue of the cultural imperialism that these anonymous artists from abroad are perhaps unwittingly promoting.

Once we recognize that the artists for whom we were demonstrating have already been paid, with some of our money no less, and we ask again, "how about a Day of Absence?" the underlying absurdity becomes plainly evident — we are asking the wrong question. To ask the right question is to ask what the Bahamas would be like without BAHAMIAN artists, and this is a lot like asking what 100 Jamz would sound like without BAHAMIAN music. You know the answer to that question don't you? We artists in this country have not only had days of absence but we have had years, even decades, of absence. The Bahamian public is already aware of what their life would look like without Bahamian artists; it is the life they now lead.

Bahamian poet, [Maelynn Seymour-Major](#), expressed the situation to me like this:

I think the public gets the absence. We [the artists] are absent to them. We exist in the abstract. Even Ronnie Butler and KB and John Cox. Those of us who have no names aren't even abstract. We are ether.<sup>4</sup>

This is the doubtless the reason that Nicolette never articulates a true Day of Absence. She instead [describes](#) it as

a symbolic day, ... where artists can come together in person or in cyberspace, and blog, email, sing, act, perform, speak, or whatever they want to do, in honour of art and artists themselves.<sup>5</sup>

I will say it plainly: it is necessary for Bahamian artists to come out and *do* something on the Day of Absence because if they stayed home one day, or even a whole week, no one would notice.

The metaphor of absence is in error. We do not need any more absence. We need to make our presence felt. The dissonance at the centre of the proposal leads to more explaining than is necessary, and the point gets lost. Most important, the metaphor misses the problem that we, as an artistic community, have. Ours is not simply an issue of being taken for granted; the roots go far deeper than that. A day of hand-holding isn't going to get us where we need to go.

### **The Artist and Society**

The Day of Absence is not about withdrawal, about begging, about making money or getting jobs; it is about respect. — [Nicolette Bethel](#) <sup>6</sup>

One of the most striking images<sup>7</sup> to appear on the Day of Absence Facebook pages is that of a young woman — we will assume that she is an artist or cultural worker — with



the words “Respect Me” written on the masking tape that covers her mouth.<sup>8</sup> The image is entirely unforgettable. Now, the Day of Absence tells us that society should respect artists. Just because they say they is artist. But are all Bahamian artists worthy of respect?

The simple answer is no. Why should anyone respect bad poetry, bad writing, bad painting or poorly organized festivals? This not to say that all Bahamian artists produce bad work. Far from it. However, we do

not gather seagrapes from shepherd needles, nor cocoplums from love vine. It is as the good book says: by their fruits you will know them. Therefore, if someone jumps up and says to me they are a poet deserving of my respect, I need to see the proof. Show me the poems. Likewise a PhD in painting means nothing to me until I see the portfolio. Then I get to decide whether or not I give that person kudos or not.

Of course, this brings us face-to-face with the argument that the Bahamian visual arts community has deployed since [B-CAUSE](#) in the early 90s: the problem is the people.<sup>9</sup> It is THEY who do not get what we do! While this absurdity alone needs its own essay, I will boil it down to this simple question: Who are we trying to reach here? How can it be that we as an art community have completely missed our target audience for all these years? Are we really trying to reach the people, or have we been aiming at something else? Pandora is nervously clutching her box as she reads this and I am aware that this is a loaded and emotionally charged issue. Allow me to suggest that there are perhaps two reasons why Bahamians, on the whole, have not received much in the way of international (or local) acclaim for their art. The first, is that average Bahamians, and the rest of the world, don't understand us. The other, and more interesting, reason is that we are not that good. So, as we go about proclaiming a day for ourselves, we should perhaps contemplate what the latter conclusion, if true, would do to claims of inherent respect.

I alluded to a more complicated answer to the question of whether or not all Bahamian artists are worthy of respect, and here it is, albeit in a roundabout and complicated way. In a [blog post](#) expressing her solidarity from afar with those celebrating the Day of Absence, Helen Klonaris gets at the nut of the dilemma.<sup>10</sup> She talks of the need to create

the kind of society... that values the life of the artist, the role of the artist, (the artist who knows how to make life out of her body, his body, life that the com-

munity needs and most of the time doesn't know it, can't appreciate it, and can't live, really live, without)

As articulated by Klonaris, the artist's role in society involves making 'life.' This metaphor represents that essential soul of a people that it often does not want to confront, but that it needs for existence to be meaningful. Perhaps we should use the word 'truth' instead of 'life' to better see what she is getting at. Regardless, it remains that if part of the artist's job is to present society with what it "can't appreciate," it will be exceedingly difficult for the artist to demand respect from that society. Therefore, when the Day of Absence invites us to imagine a Bahamas that values the artist, we are being asked to imagine a country that enjoys having its favorite delusions challenged, burned and blown to bits; a community that wants to confront its innermost demons and then thanks the artist for pointing out its flaws. The desired place is utopia. In the real world, no one thanks you for making 'life.' Calling a spade a spade has never been a safe proposition. In essence, the Day of Absence is asking from society something that it is perhaps incapable of giving.

Of course, we could define the role of the artist differently, but in any case we do ourselves a disservice by suggesting that all artists deserve respect. It is true that all people deserve respect as human beings, but that principle does not apply here. Being an artist requires work, being a human being does not. We Bahamian creatives should not be engaged in a project to make society respect us, we should be trying to be real artists. Whatever follows that process of becoming will be a natural consequence and will be well earned. Whether that consequence is disgust, indifference or the Nobel Prize should make no difference. Seeking respect before it is due and other such nonsense is putting the cart too far in front of the horse.

Shrewd observers will note that there is still an inherent contradiction between my simple and complicated answers. Respect is given to those who earn it, and society is probably not capable of respecting artists who do their jobs well. Personally, I see this incongruity as more of a paradox than a catch-22. It is an issue that each artist must grapple with for themselves. Still, that our society does not respect us does not explain why they do not know we are here. That is our fault.

### **The Absence of Race**

In many ways like African-Americans in ... 1960s USA (and black Bahamians, and people of African heritage the world over), cultural workers in The Bahamas — artists, musicians, writers, actors, directors, dancers, designers, craftworkers, you name it — are marginalized, disrespected, and taken for granted in our nation. — [Nicolette Bethel](#)<sup>11</sup>

The concept for the Day of Absence comes from the play of the same name by [Douglas Turner Ward](#), first performed in 1965.<sup>12</sup> In his play the white people of some Southern town go into convulsions when all of the town's black population mysteriously disappear for an entire day and they are forced to perform for themselves all of the tasks that blacks would have ordinarily done. In the end, they realize, at least a bit, what black people mean to their lives.

The idea of bringing the premise of the play from the stage into the real world [began](#) in New York City in 1969 and continues right up to the present.<sup>13</sup> For example, Evergreen State College in Olympia, Washington has an [annual Day of Absence](#), most recently held on February 7, 2009, when all of the students and faculty of color go off-campus for a day of workshops and fellowship. It is followed about a week later by a Day of Presence that brings blacks and whites together to discuss the experience, thus reuniting their commu-

nity.<sup>14</sup> The same idea of racial absence fueled the 2004 film [“A Day Without a Mexican”](#) by Sergio Arau that extended Turner Ward’s metaphor to another oppressed minority.<sup>15</sup>

For her Day of Absence, Nicolette tells us that, like blacks in the 1960s US South, twenty-first century Bahamian artists are “marginalized, disrespected, and taken for granted.” Let’s take this at face value for a moment. Do you know of any Bahamian restaurants that have artist-only bathrooms? Or when was the last time a Bahamian artist was lynched? Do artists have to sit at the back of the jitney when a non-artist enters? Of course not. Bahamian artists are not prevented from getting work just because they are artists. Yes, they might prefer not to have day jobs, but they are not starving *because* they are artistically inclined. Just because someone is unable to land their dream job does not mean we have to sound a national emergency. In fact, this situation is by no means unique to artists. [Statistics](#) show that almost a third of people with a college degree do not end up working in the field for which they were trained.<sup>16</sup> Should we have a Day of Absence for them too?

Turner Ward’s play was written and performed during the height of the [civil rights movement](#) and reenactments of its premise usually involve issues of race and class.<sup>17</sup> This is how it should remain. There is no legitimate comparison between the civil rights struggle and the plight of artists in the Bahamas. To take the idea of absence from Turner Ward and deploy it in behalf of Bahamian artists, some of whom are doing quite well thank-you-very-much, in the twenty-first century does his play and the struggle of black people in the United States and in our own country and other oppressed peoples around the world a profound disservice. The suggestion that there is even the slightest correlation between the two is historically inaccurate, and, let’s say it, down-right offensive.



If the Day of Absence continues it should probably stay with its roots and become a protest about class and race relations in the Bahamas. Imagine a Day of Absence for Haitian-Bahamians. Or what if all people in the Bahamas on a work permit stayed home for a day? Now we're talking about a revolution. Suddenly everything fits and we don't have to stretch metaphors past their breaking point. Using the concept as it was intended would not only keep us within the context of the play but it would also illuminate the dependence Bahamians have on a *real* group of marginalized people.

### **A Word on Cultural Workers**

It is a day on which we encourage DJs to stop playing music ... when we ask talk show hosts and newscasters and writers and editors and songwriters and artists and straw workers and advertising agencies and whoever else works in the creative field, is unappreciated for their activity, is producing work that people think of as "soft" or unnecessary, to stop doing what they do so that the people who do not respect us understand for just one moment or just one day that we are important, that without us society stops. — [Nicolette Bethel](#)<sup>18</sup>

In an [interview](#) with Bahamian writer Lynn Sweeting, Bethel gives a blow by blow account of her five-year stint as Director of Culture.<sup>19</sup> The account is painful to read. As she describes the abuse of the civil servants in her division, it is clear that she was deeply affected by what she saw. The "[so-called](#)" Department of Culture described in the interview is beyond dysfunctional and is desperately in need of reform.<sup>20</sup> The Day of Absence was partially created as a way to recognize these nameless and faceless warriors lost in the government bureaucracy. This is part of the reason why Nicolette describes the Day of Absence as a day for all of the "cultural workers" in the Bahamas and around the world.

However, what does the term "cultural worker" actually mean? The connection between art and artists is straightforward, but how do we conceptualize the link between culture and cultural workers? Is a cultural worker also an artist? According to her definition, a

cultural worker could be a DJ, a talk show host, a journalist, a musician, a straw vendor, any one who works in an ad agency, civil servants from the Department of Culture, and anyone who is doing a job that others see as “soft” or unnecessary, which might also include hair stylists and barbers, teachers at D. W. Davis, the staff of Doongalik, most secretaries, and probably also the waiters and waitresses at Double D’s. Again, the net is cast so wide that the term has no meaning. We were originally asked to imagine a Bahamas without art, but a country without cultural workers, as vaguely as the term is being deployed, would be a place missing a full quarter of its work force. And if we stretch the definition just a bit further to those who feel under-appreciated, which is the direction the text leans, we could really include everyone — I am sure that even the Prime Minister feels unappreciated at times.

Just for argument’s sake, let’s say we narrow “cultural workers” down to only those people engaged in a creative venture, like a civil servant who judges Junkanoo or a hair braider plaiting a tourist’s hair. Now would we expect these people to have the same grievances as artists? Does a cashier at the gift shop at the National Art Gallery have the same concerns as the painters whose work surrounds him? Or does a DJ at Love 97 have the same problems with their job as the Bahamian musicians whose records she (occasionally) plays? Does someone who has written a single poem have the same issues as a poet with several published manuscripts? Probably not. Does lumping together anyone who ever had anything to do with something even remotely artistic help us figure out what is wrong with Bahamian art? The answer is the same.

Instead of working so hard to think of a Bahamas without art or a Bahamas without “cultural workers” can we cut to the chase and imagine a Bahamas without a chronically

underfunded, understaffed and crippled [Department of Culture](#)?<sup>21</sup> It may not be so hard to do. According to an article by [Larry Smith](#),

The [Department] of Culture has a \$2 million allocation — less than Bahamas Information Services — and most of that goes to fund the annual Junkanoo parades. The remainder is used to finance festivals throughout The Bahamas, maintain a “national theatre”, and run the National Arts Festival.<sup>22</sup>

What would the state of the arts in the country be if this department / division did not exist? Obviously, one of its main functions is to keep Junkanoo going, and if there is one cultural thing that can get money in this country, it is Junkanoo — so that will undoubtedly continue under some other authority.<sup>23</sup> Although it is listed as a responsibility of the Department of Culture on their [website](#), it appears that the [National Art Gallery](#) spins in its own orbit as a separate institution; so that would likely continue as well.<sup>24</sup> In total, we would probably lose the [National Arts Festival](#) and a few grants. In essence, the Bahamas as we know it would be unchanged. While it would be a shame to have a country without this Department, to think that it plays any significant role in the development of Bahamian culture is to grossly overstate the importance that it, and the government, play in relation to the arts.

### **Government and the Arts**

I AM NOT LOOKING FOR GOVERNMENT FUNDING. I AM LOOKING FOR LEGITIMATE EXCHANGES OF MONEY FOR SERVICES. (Captials hers) — [Nicolette Bethel](#) <sup>25</sup>

It would seem that one of the main reasons behind the Day of Absence is to awaken government to take up the responsibility that it supposedly had in the cultural golden age of the 70s and early 80s. Of course, such a wake-up call brings up, not only the uncomfortable issue of government handouts, but also the even more difficult problem of deciding

who should get what. In a lengthy [comments thread](#) on her blog, Nicolette has taken pains to make clear that she is “talking about trade, exchange, not handouts.”<sup>26</sup> She suggests that a way to improve the tourist product in the country is not by hiring foreign advertising agencies to create alluring ads about a non-existent vacation experience, but to invest that money instead in local cultural industries. She gives as an example the government doing “something as simple as commissioning a Bahamian to create a show for the tourist market” at fair market prices instead of asking the artist to do it out of “love of country.” She is basically asking for the Bahamianization of tourist entertainment. The equation is straightforward, if the government funds the local arts scene, tourists have more to see and more to do while they are here and will spend more money that will go into Bahamian pockets.

This explains a good deal of the rhetoric of “RESPECT” in the Day of Absence proposals. Bahamians, it is argued, generally do not want to pay another Bahamian for their art, but want that work donated, while at the same time they would quickly pay top dollar for



the same work if it came from some foreigner. The argument goes that if artists could get the same respect as business people, then they could get loans to fund their art-based industries. In line with the above theory, if government took the lead and redirected its funding, not in handouts, but in the “legitimate” exchange of cash for services rendered, then we could get somewhere.

The suggestion that Bahamian artists should be supported by the government has been the most resisted part of Nicolette's proposal. It was first challenged by Bahamian poet, singer, song writer and architect Pat Rahming, and later by Rick Lowe of the Nassau Institute. Bethel claims that her critics have misread her, that she never proposed anything as banal as an "[artists union](#)."<sup>27</sup> But did everyone get the memo? In another photo from the COB demonstration, an artist slash cultural worker had his mouth taped shut with the words "Feed Me!" written across the masking tape. Is his request completely out of line with Ms. Bethel's proposals? Does he not get the message she is preaching? It is quite likely that he did indeed read the manifesto; Nicolette seems to be of two minds in this matter and disentangling her separate arguments is, admittedly, not a simple task.

Take for instance where the Day of Absence manifesto decries our artistic "[brain drain](#)" which occurs when

Bahamians who want to exercise their talents in the cultural industries are faced with the choice of pursuing their callings as hobbies at home, or of leaving home to make a living by their gifts elsewhere.<sup>28</sup>

How are we to prevent this brain drain if we do not provide these people with a decent living? If the artists ought to remain, and it is the society's duty to ensure not only their artistic development but also their continued employment once they have matured, then it is naturally the artist's right to demand room and board. Hence, we have the message written across the mouth of the demonstrator: a simple imperative sentence without a please or a thank-you.

### **On Bahamian Brain Drain**

[Brain drain](#) has been defined as "a large emigration of individuals with technical skills or knowledge, normally due to conflict, lack of opportunity, political instability, or health

risks.”<sup>29</sup> The first example Nicolette cites of the creative version of this phenomenon is none other than Sidney Poitier, who over sixty years ago left the Bahamas and went on to become the biggest black movie star in the world. He is a surely a dramatic example, but he is not a good example.

According to Mr. Poitier’s own spiritual autobiography, “[The Measure of A Man](#),” he was encouraged to leave the restrictive environment of Nassau to prevent his fall into [delinquency](#).<sup>30</sup> He was not some frustrated Bahamian actor who could not get a break on the local scene, he had never even acted before his arrival in the United States and it is doubtful that he would have ever acted had he remained in Nassau. While Mr. Poitier has credited his island upbringing for much of his success, it is equally true that had he not left the Bahamas he probably would not have had any. Mr. Poitier had no technical skills or knowledge when he left this country and gained all of his expertise abroad and, most important, his acquired knowledge was as good as useless to him here. This was clearly not a case of brain drain.<sup>31</sup>

While the Bahamas has produced writers like Helen Klonaris, artists like Janine Antoni and musicians such as Roachie (Boom Pineapple Wine) Goff who have all decided to live away from the Bahamas, the fact that we do not have much in the way of a well-known creative diaspora undercuts the argument for an artistic brain drain. And, as we try to quantify the impact of creative brain drain on the country, we should not include those, like Poitier, who are specialists in fields in which the country is ill-equipped to compete, like film, fashion or even theatre. Despite these caveats, it still appears that the majority of our writers (all of whom are, at best, marginal by international standards) are here; many of our visual artists (who fare much better internationally) are also here and are able to make

a decent living; many of our best known musicians are here and our actors are, for the most part, content to remain amateurs. With more analysis it may very well be proved that the country is already able to retain a large proportion of its creative population, and this without even the most basic support mechanisms. Unless the goal is to ensure all artists never leave the country, we are probably doing much better than we should.

Of course, we also have to assume that creative brain drain is even possible. I seriously doubt that it is — an artist is not the same thing as an engineer. Take the Trinidadian [V. S. Naipaul](#) as an example. What has Trinidad really lost by Naipaul's exile in England? Despite the fact that Naipaul chose to accept his [2001 Nobel prize in Literature](#) as a British writer, and that he wrote most of his prose as a form of protest against the island of his birth, Trinidadians still claim his Nobel [as their own](#) and all of his novels, i.e. his cultural productions, are as available to Trinidadians as they are to the British public.<sup>32</sup> Where is the brain drain in this?

In fact, it can easily be argued that the prevalence of Bahamian artists to stay at home has *prevented* them from actually getting down to their cultural work. In other words, if Bahamians stayed away from the country more we might have better art to show for it. Ironically, this is a point that Nicolette herself has argued in one of her newspaper columns entitled "[On the Attractiveness of Exile](#)."<sup>33</sup>

### **Cultural Economics**

I am most inclined to agree with Nicolette's assertion that the Bahamian government should channel at least a portion of its immense tourist advertising budget towards local cultural development. However, even here there are reservations. I am not convinced that commissioning a Bahamian to create tourist entertainment will improve the authenticity of

our art. That is, of course, if more authentic art is the desired result. I am reminded of the opening ceremony of [Forum 2003](#), held in Nassau under the auspices of the Bahamas Association for Cultural Studies (BACUS). At that event, which was a conference for Bahamians by Bahamians, a forum for ideas on how to move the country forward, the College of the Bahamas choir decided that, of all the songs in the world to sing, the most appropriate was Raphael Munnings' 1986 tourist-brochure song, "Bahamas Experience."

The problem is that the line between what is produced for tourist consumption and what is made for Bahamians is as thin as wax-paper — it is so thin that we can hardly tell the difference ourselves. If the Day of Absence is really about tourist's pleasure, if this is what we really care about, let us at least be honest about it. I sincerely believe that we should deal with our own cultural hunger before we worry about how to provide better shows for our visitors. Confusing the two will eventually bring us right back to the same emptiness, no matter how much money we throw at the problem. Let me be clear, though, that I am not against the Bahamianization of tourist entertainment — far from it. Bahamians can be just as shallow as any one else, and if we are going to pay someone for trite silliness, let us pay one of our own. It is indeed possible that by investing in locally created shows we may increase the odds that some introspective dredging will be done. Unfortunately, it is far more likely that we will simply generate more of the same old, same old.

### **The Bethel Hypothesis**

Our cultural development didn't take place during his tenure because our country respected culture. It took place because our leaders respected *him*. (Italics hers) — [Nicolette Bethel](#) <sup>34</sup>

The theory that lies at the heart of the Day of Absence argues that cultural development in the Bahamas, at least in the 70s and early 80s, is directly correlated to the policies



of the Bahamian government. In other words, if the government gets involved in the arts, it flourishes, if not, it dies. The theory goes quite a bit further, however, by suggesting that Bahamian cultural development was mainly a product of the influence that a *single* person, her father, the former Director of Culture, the late [E. Clement Bethel](#), had on government policy. In Nicolette's opinion, her father was one of those few people who are "irreplaceable," and when he died unexpectedly in 1987 the flourishing of the Bahamian arts stopped and the country began turning into the cultural wasteland that it is today. Simply put, culture is related to the government, and the government only did its job because Mr. Bethel was Director of Culture. Nicolette contends that her father's presence was the "reason and none other ... that culture flourished to the extent that it did."<sup>35</sup> She concedes (jokingly?) that independence in 1973 might have played a factor in this flourishing, but ultimately seems to see this event as being of lesser importance.

Is it true that Bahamian cultural development only takes place because of Bahamian leaders? Did Exuma the Obeah Man sing, did Brent Malone paint or did Jeanne Thompson write because of the policies of the Bahamian government? And did any of the artists of the period do what they did, directly or indirectly, because of E. Clement Bethel? Is he the *only* reason that cultural development occurred in the Bahamas in the 1970s and 80s as Nicolette asserts? These are very serious claims. If they are true, they would support her choice of the date for the Day of Absence, February 11<sup>th</sup>, which is of course, her father's birthday. If he really is the father of modern Bahamian culture, as is suggested, then it is only fitting that a day to mark the importance of Bahamian arts should also be a day to honor him. If Ms. Bethel's aspiration is realized, that her Day will be adopted by other artist

communities around the world, then the Day of Absence, which is also at heart an “E. Clement Bethel Day,” will become an international event.

[Mr. Bethel](#) was by all accounts a notable Bahamian writer, musician, scholar, and civil servant, best known for his masters dissertation on Bahamian ethnomusicology and the folk opera Sammy Swain.<sup>36</sup> As the founder of the Cultural Affairs Division he has been [described](#) as “the country's first and most eminent director of culture.”<sup>37</sup> He made invaluable contributions to Bahamian music and theatre, so much so that the National Arts Festival is named in his honor. The [website](#) of the Bahamas government says that

his contribution to the cultural development in the Bahamas was recognized by the Bahamas Chamber of Commerce which presented him with a Distinguished Citizen's Award for the Performing Arts and Culture in 1979. In 1983, he received a Ministry of Tourism Achievement Award.<sup>38</sup>

Without fear of contradiction we can say that Mr. Bethel was a great Bahamian. He was one of the many important actors involved in the cultural flowering of that era and he made a strong mark on our culture and should be remembered as such.

However, the claims that the Day of Absence manifesto makes for his importance in Bahamian cultural history are nothing short of outrageous. This is not an attempt to disparage his many achievements, but it is difficult to convince me that I should attribute this country's entire cultural output to him. Why should I have to place his contribution to my heritage above that of Pat Rahming, Ronnie Butler, Gail Saunders, Vola Francis, Max Taylor, Eddie Minnis or Winston Saunders (to name only a few)? I asked a number of Bahamian artists who were active during the 70s and early 80s, whether or not this type of adulation is justified, and I could not find another person who would go even half as far as Nicolette has.

It is hard to believe that any branch of the Bahamian government, let alone a single individual, stuck as she herself [admits](#), in a department that does not even have the authority to spend its own money, in a position that has no authority to do anything but recommend, is solely responsible for what happened in the 70s and early 80s.<sup>39</sup> I would even argue that the government agency most responsible for that era's cultural flowerings was the Ministry of Tourism. Bahamas Goombay Summer and *The Fergusons of Farm Road* are two good examples of the way they stumbled on ideas that became popular with the Bahamian people. The point is that successive Bahamian governments have had practically zero interest in cultural development, and I remain unconvinced that any branch of government at any time, even during our so-called cultural golden age, is ultimately responsible for my heritage. The burden is on her to prove her claims.

While I am open to the remote possibility that Nicolette may one day convince me that her father had the impact on Bahamian culture that she claims he had, it remains a point of deep contention. Since I am also engaged in a project to recover my family's cultural legacy, I understand the impulse. However, slipping in a day to honor one's father, through the back door as it were, only mires the Day of Absence in nepotistic quicksand. I truly wonder how many calls of support would have sounded forth from the arts community had an "E. Clement Bethel Day" been proposed instead of a Day of Absence. The version of history that Nicolette is peddling is severely flawed, and the cultural theft that the seemingly innocuous selection of the date implies is an unnecessary burden that only serves to distract from what I imagine are her greater goals.

## **What we Really Need**

It is my belief that the Day of Absence should not reappear in 2010 unchanged. As I said at the outset of this essay, I do believe that Nicolette deserves to be commended for doing something, however, in its present form, the Day of Absence is flawed beyond salvation. She has attempted to give us a pre-packaged, shrink-wrapped and ready-made festival / arts holiday complete with its own mythology and appropriate attire and the result is an ideological mess. A proposal such as this needs to be fleshed out with the input of the entire arts community, should be open for debate, and not simply announced with an “are-you-in-or-are-you-out” tag-line.

The scope of the Day of Absence is far too broad to be effective. If we are going to give the Bahamian art community a day for self-evaluation, it needs to be far narrower, be held on a politically neutral day, and be something that everyone involved can agree on. We should not go around asking for respect from Bahamian society when we do not deserve it. Solidarity is a double-edged sword in this effort. We can not and should not be asked to support everything that a Bahamian does. Just because. How can we as a group speak truth to power when we can't even tell the truth to ourselves?

Despite all of the problems I have with the Day of Absence, I still believe that we can use it towards positive growth. It allowed us to see clearly the desire and demand for something like this. The fire-in-the-belly displayed by the present generation of Bahamian artists is greater than I have ever seen before — it can still lead us somewhere. Ironically, everything I have read about the Day of Absence points, not at absence, but at the concept of presence. It is the presence of the arts community that is sorely lacking in this country. The wider society needs to be reminded that we do exist. We need to remind ourselves that we

exist. I asked [Maelynn](#) what she would have liked to have seen instead of the Day of Absence and she said

[I wanted] A day where we were all encouraged to do something. Where we put guerilla art and poems all down Shirley and Bay and plastered busses with poems. Where we sent poems to the community announcements and had them put on screen for people to read among the dead. A day where we saturated the air waves with Bahamian music — all kinds. Where we could walk downtown and hand out flyers with poems and stories and photos and paintings to everyone.<sup>40</sup>

Like her, I believe that what we need is to take a baby step. A small step forward into the greater sphere of social responsibility. We need to put our distinctive stamp on Bahamian living, to let our voices be heard. We need to stop waiting for the government, to stop pointing fingers at everything 'out there' and realize that the greatest hollow is actually in our own back yard. We need to be here. Really here.

Or, to paraphrase the words of [Helen Klonaris](#): The new day will be born only when we come *out* of absence.<sup>41</sup>

## Endnotes

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<sup>1</sup> Helen Klonaris, "In Honour of A Day of Absence," *The Gaulin Wife*, <http://thegaulinwife.blogspot.com/2009/02/in-honour-of-day-of-absence.html>

<sup>2</sup> Nicolette Bethel, "Day of Absence: 11th February," *Blogworld*, <http://nicobethel.net/blogworld/2009/01/30/day-of-absence-11th-february>.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> Maelynn Seymour-Major, e-mail message to author, February 27, 2009.

<sup>5</sup> Bethel, "Day of Absence: 11th February."

<sup>6</sup> Nicolette Bethel, "Patrick Rahming's Response," *Blogworld*, <http://nicobethel.net/blogworld/2009/02/14/patrick-rahmings-response/>

<sup>7</sup> Photographs in this essay by Rachael Whitehouse, originally posted on Facebook.

<sup>8</sup> The Day of Absence Facebook page can be found at the following hyperlink: <http://www.facebook.com/event.php?eid=60263607088&index=1>

<sup>9</sup> Ayesha Morris, "On the Edge of Time: Contemporary Art From the Bahamas," *City Lights -Washington City Paper*, Jul. 28 - Aug. 3, 2000 (Vol. 20, #30), <http://www.washingtoncitypaper.com/display.php?id=20091>.

<sup>10</sup> Klonaris, "In Honour of A Day of Absence."

<sup>11</sup> Bethel, "Day of Absence: 11th February."

<sup>12</sup> "Day of Absence: Information from Answers.com," *Answers.com*, <http://www.answers.com/topic/day-of-absence>

<sup>13</sup> Demetria McCain, "A Day without a Mexican' Déjà vu: Douglas Turner Ward's Black Theatre Unforgotten," Negro Ensemble Company, <http://www.negroensemblecompany.org/index.cfm/bay/content.detail/contentid/26.htm>, (accessed April 11, 2009).

<sup>14</sup> Mobbsj, "Day of Absence and Day of Presence," *First Peoples*, <http://blogs.evergreen.edu/firstpeoples/2009/02/25/day-of-absence-2/>

<sup>15</sup> Day Without a Mexican. [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Day\\_Without\\_a\\_Mexican](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Day_Without_a_Mexican)

<sup>16</sup> American Council on Education. "Facts In Brief: Many Bachelor's Degree Recipients Find Employment In Their Majors Following Graduation, Report Shows," April 16, 2001, Vol. 50, No. 7. <http://www.acenet.edu/AM/Template.cfm?Section=Home&TEMPLATE=/CM/ContentDisplay.cfm&CONTENTID=10273>

<sup>17</sup> "African-American Civil Rights Movement (1955–1968)," *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia*, [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/African-American\\_Civil\\_Rights\\_Movement\\_\(1955–1968\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/African-American_Civil_Rights_Movement_(1955–1968))

<sup>18</sup> Bethel, "Day of Absence: 11th February."

<sup>19</sup> Lynn Sweeting, "And Still they Serve," *Womanish Words*, <http://womanishwords.blogspot.com/2009/02/and-still-they-serve.html>.

<sup>20</sup> Larry Smith, "Culture Wars in the Bahamas," *Bahama Pundit*, <http://www.bahamapundit.com/2009/04/culture-wars-in-the-bahamas.html>.

<sup>21</sup> "Department of Culture," *The Commonwealth of the Bahamas*, <http://www.bahamas.gov.bs/culture>.

<sup>22</sup> Smith, "Culture Wars in the Bahamas."

<sup>23</sup> Perhaps the department should simply be renamed the "Department of Junkanoo and Festivals." This might remove most of the ambiguity that surrounds it.

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<sup>24</sup> “Department of Culture: Contact and Areas of Responsibility,” *The Commonwealth of the Bahamas*, <http://www.bahamas.gov.bs/bahamasweb2/home.nsf/0/1C04BEB49DC5E14C06256F0000705866>

<sup>25</sup> Bethel, “Patrick Rahming’s Response.”

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Bethel, “Day of Absence: 11th February.”

<sup>29</sup> “Brain Drain,” *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia*, [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Brain\\_drain](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Brain_drain).

<sup>30</sup> Sidney Poitier, *The Measure of a Man*, (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 2007) 39, 40.

<sup>31</sup> It should be noted that Poitier assisted the Progressive Liberal Party (PLP) to achieve their January 10<sup>th</sup>, 1967 election victory, and was developing closer ties with his home land in the late 60s and early 70s. This commitment was demonstrated when he built a large winter home in Nassau. However Poitier subsequently sold this home and left the Bahamas in the late 1970s, thoroughly disgusted, among other things, by the PLP’s attitude towards cultural development. This second departure can be appropriately described as ‘Brain Drain.’ See Michael Craton, *Pindling: The Life and Times of Lynden Oscar Pindling First Prime Minister of the Bahamas, 1930-2000*, (Oxford: Macmillan Caribbean, 2002).

<sup>32</sup> Al Creighton, “Return of the enigma: Naipaul goes home for 75th birthday,” *Stabroek News*, <http://www.landofsixpeoples.com/news702/ns0704299.html>.

<sup>33</sup> Nicolette Bethel, “On the Attractiveness of Exile,” *Bahama Pundit*, [http://www.bahamapundit.com/2005/12/on\\_the\\_attracti.html](http://www.bahamapundit.com/2005/12/on_the_attracti.html).

<sup>34</sup> Bethel, “Day of Absence: 11th February.”

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> “Edward Clement Bethel,” *The Commonwealth of the Bahamas*, <http://www.bahamas.gov.bs/bahamasweb2/home.nsf/vContentW/Cultural+Affairs+Dept.--National+Cultural+Institutions--B+Musicians+Clement+Bethel!Opendocument>

<sup>37</sup> Smith, “Culture Wars in the Bahamas.”

<sup>38</sup> “Edward Clement Bethel,” *The Commonwealth of the Bahamas*.

<sup>39</sup> Sweeting, “And Still they Serve.”

<sup>40</sup> Maelynn Seymour-Major, e-mail message to author.

<sup>41</sup> Klonaris, “In Honour of A Day of Absence.”