

REMEMBERING WILLIAM LOREN KATZ

Lil' Nas X owes Bill big time. Can you imagine "Old Town Road" without *The Black West*?

The Black West has long been a staple in many black homes; it was de rigueur, like pictures of Jesus and Martin Luther King, Jr. And I'm guessing this was the case for the Georgia-born Montero Lamar Hill (Lil Nas X) (who incidentally shares a birthdate with Paul Robeson).

Our house was no different (just replace Jesus with Yogananda). My mother filled our tiny Harlem apartment with books, and William Loren Katz held a prominent place. Besides our copy of *The Black West*, the first edition with Isom Dart on the cover, I distinctly remember reading *Eyewitness: The Negro in American History* and several volumes from his Arno Press series.

Of course, I thought William Loren Katz was a black man, like all of those other black historians with Jewish names – Aptheker, Litwack, Levine, and all the Foners. When I finally met Bill in person, I still regarded him as a black historian, my brother from another mother – or better yet, my uncle.

I had to share my story if only to correct the *New York Times* obit which asserts, wrongly, that Bill was "inspired by the scholarship of historians like John Hope Franklin and Robin D. G. Kelley." The former, yes, but certainly not the latter!! It was the other way around....

If memory serves, the late, great Marc Crawford first introduced us in the early 1990s. Bill and Marc later asked me to write the foreword to a new edition of their book, *The Lincoln Brigade: A Pictorial History*.

So when I joined the faculty at NYU, we began meeting occasionally at his and Laurie's apartment on Mercer Street. He would regale me with stories of his father, Ben Katz, a commercial artist and jazz lover who discovered black history through the music;

--of accompanying his dad to demonstrations to free the Scottsboro Boys;

--of FBI agents tailing his family during the Red Scare, asking his dad: "If you're not a Communist, why do you have so many books about Negroes?"

Bill was especially proud of his dad's friends, great artists and cultural figures such as Charles White, Harry Belafonte, Ernest Crichlow, Alice Childress, and William Christmas, who was like an uncle to Bill.

Bill became my William Christmas, in a sense. Think about it – a man who wrote a 200 page thesis on the history of jazz as a student at Elisabeth Irwin High School (the Little Red School House) *was my kind of guy!!!* He instantly became my hero, this tough but sweet, no nonsense Jewish man, who spent his undergraduate years at Syracuse fighting racist professors armed with a deep knowledge of labor history, an unswerving commitment to human freedom, and a copy of W. E. B. Du Bois's *Black Reconstruction*.

That he joined the ancestors in 2019 is a fitting coincidence on the 400th anniversary of when 20 kidnapped Africans were brought to the Virginia coast near Jamestown. Although Bill is not mentioned by any of the writers or editors of the *New York Times* widely read and debated 1619 Project, for over half a century Bill Katz **WAS the 1619 Project**. And he was part of a team made up primarily of black archivists, librarians, historians – Ernest Kaiser, Jean Blackwell Hutson, Dorothy Porter, Lerone Bennett, John Hope Franklin, and others.

What's more amazing is that he did most of his pioneering work without support or an academic institution to back him up. In fact, he was teaching high school in Westchester when he completed his first book, *Eyewitness*, a beautiful documentary history, infused with his own lively prose, original documents (some of which had not been previously published), and photographs. Bill had a knack for picking the right visual sources to tell stories. Not surprisingly, the book arose directly from the classroom and his efforts to recast American history.

The classroom was his resource, but so was the black community—a community with which he always remained grounded. In 1966, for example, the Carver Community Center in White Plains invited him to lecture on Reconstruction. He embraced these invitations because Bill was a public intellectual, deeply committed to social justice, equal rights, and eliminating racism. When James Baldwin and Rabbi Gordis debated black anti-semitism in the pages of the *New York Times* in the spring of 1967, Bill

weighed in with an outstanding letter reminding readers of the history of black resistance to anti-semitism. He quoted black Congressman Arthur Mitchell's response to Krystallnacht, who warned that anti-jewish sentiment unchecked "will manifest itself sooner or later against all minority groups, perhaps in all parts of the world."

Around 1968, Arno Press, a *New York Times* imprint, hired Bill as the general editor of two series: "The American Negro: His History and Literature" which generated 141 volumes, and "Anti-Slavery Crusade in America," which yielded over 70 volumes. These were massive, paradigm-shifting undertakings—the latter, in particular, still represents the most extraordinary collection of anti-slavery writings to date, laying the groundwork for the massive (and ongoing) Abolition of Slavery Project.

The Black West first appeared in 1971, and it blew down walls. Bill doesn't simply add black names and faces to the story of Western settlement. He advances a thesis that racism was not diminished, contrary to myths about the West as a sanctuary for freedom. And being black wasn't just being a darker-skinned settler or a slave but it also meant being indigenous. He applied an expansive definition of "West," which extended across much of the U.S. because he understood the West not as a geographical location but a relation to colonial settlement, a process of frontier-making. The "West" was really just a moving war zone, a terrain of violence and dispossession. In a letter to Bill dated February 16, 200, I wrote that all of his books on the black west, including *Black Indians* and *Black Women of the Old West*, beautifully capture "their struggle to construct their vision of freedom on new lands, and the creation of new societies out of the fusion of African and Native American cultures. Black Pioneers holds a special place, for throughout the book you demonstrate the DuBoisian principle that black struggles for justice touch the entire nation and alter the political landscape. These pioneers of the expanding West are not just explorers, adventurers, etc., but people engaged in struggle--fugitive slaves, community leaders, labor organizers, abolitionists. They are fighting and settling, demanding liberty and moving all at the same time. And in the process, they each profoundly change America."

Above all, Bill Katz--along with his longtime partner Laurie Lehman, were revolutionaries, not only interpreting the world but changing it. They were in Zucotti Park

during Occupy Wall Street; Bill had even begun writing what he described to me as “a free booklet for Occupy on their ideological ancestors.” His regular essays always drew on history to speak to the fierce urgency of NOW—whether he was addressing conditions here or around the world. Laurie is not only a brilliant educator and education scholar, but she was his most important collaborator. I had the pleasure of reviewing their stunning collection of working-class narratives from the early 20th century, *The Cruel Years*, for the *Village Voice*. It was the perfect response to the cruelty of neoliberal capitalism at the turn of the 21st century.

I know my time is almost up and I’ve barely scratched the surface. I didn’t mention his massive, multi-volume History of Multicultural America, his book on slave resistance, his history of Black New York; the series of picture albums depicting moments in U.S. history; or his book about the Ku Klux Klan, among other things. But I want to close with a sobering reminder that Bill was a radical independent scholar, and for that he suffered financially. He frequently complained about his inability to secure paid speaking engagements. Despite being one of the most prolific authors and editors of any generation, he struggled to make a living. Funny how the very institutions willing to pay tribute posthumously were not so forthcoming when it came to paying him a worthy honorarium or hiring him as a regular faculty member.

So I’m appealing to all of us to do something beyond talk in order to honor Bill’s extraordinary legacy – whether it takes the form of a scholarship fund or launching a foundation, we need something that lasts. We might begin by soliciting a major gift from Lil’ Nas X.

William Loren Katz, Presente!!