

GRIOTS 'R WE

Black Stories
The Textbooks Overlook

KRAK TEET

Griots 'R We: Black Stories The Textbooks Overlook

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EARTHA KITT



Eartha had a long list of talents.

Eartha Kitt was born on January 17, 1927, on a cotton plantation in North, South Carolina. After a rough childhood, she was sent to Harlem as a teenager. She also went to a performing arts high school. Then she started dancing with the Katherine Dunham Company when she was about 16 years old. (Katherine Dunham is another amazing griot.) Through this company, she got a chance to dance on stages across the world. She also recorded albums as a singer and performed in movies as an actress. One of her most famous roles was Catwoman in *Batman*. She spoke four languages but could sing in 11 languages. Orson Welles, a famous movie director back then, called her “the most exciting woman in the world.”

Eartha was exiled.

A day after her 41st birthday, Eartha was invited to the White House for lunch with the president’s wife, Lady Bird Johnson. A few other celebrities were invited too. They were to answer the question: “Why is there so much juvenile delinquency in the streets of America?” (In other words, why are the kids acting up so bad?) Eartha started getting frustrated because everyone was talking about everything but the issue. When it came time for her to speak, she asked the president and his wife about the children’s parents who had to work two and three jobs.

She also brought up the Vietnam War, “You send the best of this country off to be shot and maimed. They rebel in the street. They will take pot ... and they will get high. They don’t want to go to school because they’re going to be snatched off from their mothers to be shot in Vietnam.” Lady Bird Johnson started crying, and Eartha was asked to leave. They cancelled her limo ride home, all of her movie and performing deals were cancelled, and the CIA

began spying on her. She moved to Europe to continue her career and live in peace, and she didn't move back to the U.S. until 1979.

Discussion Questions

In your opinion, "Why is there so much juvenile delinquency in the streets of America?"

How do you react when you get passionate about something (either ecstatic or irate)? You just feel the feelings intensely. Do you get loud? Do you stand up and use your hands when you speak? Does your heart beat faster? Does your skin get tingly?

Krak Teet Wit Ya Body

Eartha was a dancer and an actor. She was used to embodying emotions. Movement was her medicine. Let's practice that. Imagine something that could happen to light you up inside then act it out. For example, I imagined that I got a call about one of my books being turned into a movie. The movie

goes on to win an award, and I'm giving my speech. My hand slaps my chest, and my mouth drops open. For a second, I'm stuck. Then I hop out of my chair and walk up to the stage and while talking, I start to cry a little bit. My hands are shaking, and my voice is even shaking a little bit. I ramble off some thank-yous, then I go back to my seat and think of everything that I forgot to say.

Now it's your turn. Think of something that you're passionate about. What's something that can make you ecstatic, or something that can make you irate? Act it out. Don't be afraid to let go and actually feel the feelings—whether you're by yourself or working in a group.

Learn some mo.

Alone with me: A New Autobiography (a book)

All By Myself: The Eartha Kitt Story (a documentary)

Foremothers | Day 12 | Eartha Kitt (a podcast episode by GirlTrek Black History Bootcamp)