

## ABSTRACT

Title of Dissertation:

**A DIFFERENT KIND OF “STRANGE FRUIT”:  
LYNCHING DRAMA, AFRICAN AMERICAN  
IDENTITY, AND U. S. CULTURE, 1890-1935**

Koritha Ann Mitchell, PhD, 2005

Dissertation Directed By:

Professor Vincent Carretta  
Department of English

Since November 1999, the book and exhibition *Without Sanctuary: Lynching Photography in America* has made nearly 100 pictures of mutilated victims readily available. These images convince Americans that we can plainly see the destruction that mobs caused and encourage us to overlook the disadvantages of equating lynching with the hanging body—what Billie Holiday called “strange fruit.” My work argues that we not blindly accept the corpse as the ultimate symbol of racial terrorism by taking seriously the antilynching plays that African Americans wrote in the midst of mob violence (that is, before 1935).

The dramatists insisted upon the body’s inability to represent the horror of lynching. Rather than describe the crimes perpetrated on America’s trees, telephone poles, and bridges, the genre takes us inside black homes where widows and orphans survive only to suffer. Thus, it is clear that the violence continues long after the corpse has disintegrated and that the home itself is a lynched body. When a father is

torn from the family, the household is “castrated” and its head removed. (None of the plays mentions women lynch victims.)

Yet, the scripts do not merely protest racial violence; they also affirm racial pride. African Americans understood that black identity was vulnerable to the power of representation, especially when technology was making the distribution of negative images more efficient. At the turn of the century, blacks proclaimed themselves sophisticated, modern citizens...and they knew that mainstream messages to the contrary frequently caused—but more often did more damage than—physical assaults. So, even as recorded lynchings declined in the 1920s, black-authored lynching plays proliferated, in order to address the dehumanizing violence *inherent* in how the race was represented in America.

In five chapters, this project examines why lynching drama emerged, develops a theoretical framework for understanding the plays, offers close readings of ten plays by black women and three by black men, grapples with the fact that most black-authored lynching dramas were not professionally produced, and argues that appreciating the genre requires complicating our understanding of theatrical value.

A DIFFERENT KIND OF "STRANGE FRUIT": LYNCHING DRAMA, AFRICAN  
AMERICAN IDENTITY. AND U. S. CULTURE, 1890-1935

By

Koritha Ann Mitchell

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Advisory Committee:

Professor Vincent Carretta, Chair  
Professor Elsa Barkley Brown  
Professor Charles Caramello  
Professor Shirley Logan  
Professor Judith L. Stephens

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## INTRODUCTION: STRANGELY INVISIBLE FRUIT

*Southern trees bear a strange fruit. Blood at the leaves, blood at the root. Black bodies swinging in the Southern breeze. Strange fruit hanging from the poplar trees.*

-ballad sung by Billie Holiday

A VOICE is heard outside: — Come out, you damned nigger, or we'll burn the house down!

MARION—(*clings to [her brother], sobbing*) Don't go, Roy! We'll all die together!

LeROY—(*puts her from him gently*) No. (*Loud and Clear*) I'm coming, gentlemen!

(*With a last, long, loving look at [his grandmother, sister, and white fiancée] he walks out to his death victorious and unafraid.*)

CURTAIN

-from *For Unborn Children* (1926)

LIZA: For God's sake Tildy, whut's happened?

MATILDA: They—they done lynched him.

SUE: (screams) Jesus! (*gasps and falls limp in her chair. Singing from church begins.*)

*Bossie runs to her, crying afresh. Liza puts the camphor bottle to her nose again as Matilda feels her heart; they work over her a few minutes, shake their heads and with drooping shoulders, wring their hands. [...] (... curtain falls.)*

-from *A Sunday Morning in the South* (1925)

Will there come a time when we hear the word “lynching” and think of a devastated family? Or, will we continue to equate it with a hanging body, as if the violence ended with the victim's death? Because gruesome images and graphic descriptions of mutilation seldom fail to shock and draw sympathy, artists, activists, and scholars often highlight the physical aspects of lynching when trying to convey its horror. But in allowing the brutalized body to remain the most prominent symbol of racial violence, we ignore the truths that it cannot speak. That is, in focusing on “strange fruit,” we are choosing a specific representation of the violence—one that is more limited than we acknowledge.

With multiple renditions of Billie Holiday's 1939 ballad,<sup>1</sup> generations of Americans have come to identify the hanging body as the most damning evidence of mob brutality; but since November 1999 many have gone from imagining "strange fruit" to facing it. The book and exhibition *Without Sanctuary: Lynching Photography in America* has made nearly 100 photographs of lynch victims readily available. The bodies depicted are often bullet-ridden, burned, or both, horrifying modern viewers and making even greater the tendency to associate lynching with a mutilated corpse. In contrast, this study insists that the body can never fully represent the damage caused by mobs. Following the lead of African Americans who lived and wrote antilynching plays during the period when mobs remained a palpable threat, I argue that black homes were as devastated by the violence as bodies were. While not striving to eclipse the images in *Without Sanctuary*, I insist—as black playwrights of the 1920s and 1930s made clear—that we must allow other representations of lynching than that of "strange fruit" to speak their truths.

Certainly, *Without Sanctuary* has made an undeniable impact by making available evidence of crimes that citizens committed against other citizens on American soil. The photograph collection has drawn thousands to America's museums and thousands more to the exhibition on the World Wide Web,<sup>2</sup> where many posted impassioned responses to the electronic message board. In chorus with site visitors who attest to the collection's perspective-changing power, many of my students have said that the photographs made

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<sup>1</sup> The song was written by Lewis Allan (Abel Meeropol), but made famous when Billie Holiday lent her voice to it in 1939. For more, see David Margolick, *Strange Fruit: The Biography of a Song* (New York: Ecco Press, 2001). Holiday's influence has inspired numerous renditions, including Nina Simone's in 1965, Cassandra Wilson's in 1995, and Dwayne Wiggins' revision "What's Really Going On? (Strange Fruit)" in 1999. See Margolick's appendix for a more complete list of re-makes.

<sup>2</sup> Pictures were available for more than three years, as a forum beyond the museum exhibitions and books.

them realize how often—and how brutally—America has contradicted its claim to being a color-blind democracy. They say, for example, that they now appreciate why African Americans seem to be more suspicious of the legal system than whites. Knowing that the police “let such atrocities happen” opened their eyes. More recently, on June 13, 2005, the U.S. Senate offered a formal apology for its failure to pass antilynching legislation, and its historic Resolution 39 cited *Without Sanctuary* as the inspiration. Despite these responses from my students and from the Senate, I wonder how fully the photographs represent the devastation that mobs caused. Indeed, lynching was much more than a physical crime; it was a crime against families and the human spirit, and a mutilated body can never fully represent its horror. Thus, we must interrogate such representations of mob violence, which was just one component of the dehumanizing system of representation that permeated and bolstered American society at the turn of the twentieth century.<sup>3</sup>

Today, as *Without Sanctuary* is generating interest in mob violence, I offer a look at black-authored antilynching plays written between 1914 and 1935 because they interact with the history that *Without Sanctuary* preserves, but offer a vastly different perspective. Instead of coming from whites for whom the mutilated black body meant profit and a reaffirmation of white superiority, the thirteen antilynching plays investigated here derived from black women and men who lived and wrote with the threat of mob violence. The photographs focus on the mutilated black body, but the plays avert our

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<sup>3</sup> As Trudier Harris has argued, lynching was just the most extreme expression of the daily violence and indignities that blacks endure/d. I would argue too that the violence of dehumanizing representation continues today to the extent that black-face minstrelsy still informs our experiences of black images. Filmmaker Marlon Riggs’ work in *Ethnic Notions* as well as Eric Lott’s suggestions in *Love and Theft* certainly speak persuasively to the existence of those links. I want to suggest that if minstrelsy continues, violence also does, because minstrelsy/black-face are inherently and historically linked to racial violence.

gaze from it. The difference between what white photographers represent and what black playwrights depict is significant and indeed drives this study's inquiry. Rather than merely asking why the playwrights do not spotlight physical violence, I also ask whether focusing on the victimized body is the most effective way to represent lynching in the first place.

As I suspend assumptions that twenty-first century expectations are the most appropriate ones, I investigate not just the playwrights' representations of lynching, but also the cultural context that inspired them. To protest lynching—especially in dramatic form—was to interrupt a *cultural conversation* predicated on black inhumanity. African American dramatists quite consciously countered messages that permeated American society, and the strategies they used to do so reveal much about the historical moment in which they lived. In particular, the fact that these writers chose to enter the nation's conversation on lynching *as playwrights* indicates their understanding that lynching was based on certain kinds of representations and interpretations of the black body.

Historically, lynching was not always racially motivated, but its most culturally significant form was inspired by a distinctly white supremacist impulse. Lynching began in the United States as frontier justice in areas where the legal system was nonexistent or too inefficient for citizens to feel protected; mobs deemed themselves judge and jury, and meted out punishments. As James Cutler established in the first scholarly study of lynching, anyone who went against public opinion between the late 1700s and early 1800s could be lynched, although they were seldom put to death. Rather, they were usually whipped and ordered to leave town (Cutler 3, 9, 32, 40). Cutler remarks that physical punishments became more and more severe through 1830, but that the word

“lynching” did not become synonymous with death until after 1830 when abolitionists more often became the mob’s target. Though Cutler marks this shift and notes that it coincided with the rise of organized abolitionism, he does not acknowledge racial subordination as the primary aim of this change. Neither whipping nor the humiliating process of tarring and feathering seemed harsh enough for abolitionists, so mobs turned to killing them, often burning their victims to death (Cutler 91). These new methods were clearly linked to the abolitionists’ willingness to acknowledge the civil rights of African Americans. Thus, although these victims were white, their lynching was spurred by the desire to keep blacks oppressed—to ensure that a black body signified property.

By far, lynching’s most widespread cultural work was accomplished when it was used primarily against African Americans themselves. Once blacks were no longer legal chattel after the Civil War, there was no financial reason not to kill them. This is when lynching took on the characteristics that we now associate with the term; that is, when lynching became ritualized murder. In the late 1800s, antilynching activist Ida B. Wells extended arguments made by Frederick Douglass with her pamphlets *Southern Horrors* (1892) and *A Red Record* (1895), as she traced the excuses postbellum mobs gave for targeting African Americans: “The excuse given to the civilized world for the murder of unoffending Negroes was the necessity of the white man to repress and stamp out alleged ‘race riots.’” Wells continued, “...from 1865 to 1872, hundreds of colored men and women were mercilessly murdered and the almost invariable reason assigned was that they met their death by being alleged participants in an insurrection or riot. But this story at last wore itself out” (*Record* 76). The second excuse, Wells asserted, arose under the banner of “No Negro Domination,” as southerners insisted that lynching was the result of

the “natural resentment of intelligence against government by ignorance” (*Southern Horrors* 60). This excuse was offered for killing citizens “whose only crime was the attempt to exercise their right to vote” (*Record* 77). Once disfranchisement and mob violence had become effective tools of repression, “the murderers invented a third excuse—that Negroes had to be killed to avenge their assaults upon women” (*Record* 78). The claim that black men rape white women proved to be the most enduring, despite the fact that rape was not even alleged in the majority of lynchings.

Given that race-based lynching was most prevalent from the 1890s through the 1930s,<sup>4</sup> the significance of the black rapist myth cannot be overstated, and Wells’s characterization of its power provides significant context for this study. Like many antilynching activists, Wells saw the fight against mob violence as one that must engage how blacks were represented. For as she put it, “... this charge [of rape] upon the Negro at once placed him beyond the pale of human sympathy. With such unanimity, earnestness and apparent candor was this charge made and reiterated that the world has accepted the story that the Negro is *the monster which the Southern white man has painted him*” (*Record* 78, my italics). Wells clearly believed that it was this image created by whites that had to be met head-on. Whites justified mutilating and destroying black bodies by first destroying black reputations. Above all, then, “the Negro” must “defend his name.” Wells closed her preface to *Southern Horrors* thusly: “The Afro-American is not a bestial race. If this work can contribute in any way toward proving this...I shall feel I have done my race a service. Other considerations are of minor importance” (50).

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<sup>4</sup> Historians of lynching generally agree on this time span. See, for example, the extraordinarily comprehensive study from Phillip Dray, *At the Hands of Persons Unknown: The Lynching of Black America*. New York: The Modern Library, 2002. iii.

Lynching's height from the 1890s through the 1930s must be seen as a triumph of representations of African Americans as immoral, bestial, and subhuman. During this time, lynching took on its most culturally prominent form as ritualized murder. The violence began to follow a predictable script, and "white participants would often bring food and drink to the place of execution ..." (Harris 6). Furthermore, "to insure that an audience was available for really special lynchings, announcements of time and place were sometimes advertised in newspapers" (Harris 6). Once in attendance, "white men, women, and children would hang or burn (frequently both), shoot, and castrate the offender, then divide the body into trophies" (Harris 6). These predictable steps, and their standardization across the country, relied on white agreement about what blackness represented. The slow, excruciating torture of black bodies took on symbolic significance and gratified lynchers, who believed, in Trudier Harris's words, that they were exorcising evil from the community. These rituals were possible because the black body was consistently represented and interpreted as subhuman and evil.

Antilynching playwrights countered the theatricality of mob violence by portraying the black body in honorable ways. Theirs was a culturally conscious approach derived from an understanding of the extent to which mainstream representations justified lynching. In unison with Wells and other activists, the dramatists worked to create a more complex, human portrait of blacks. Rather than grinning and shuffling as black characters did in black-face minstrelsy or musical comedy, the characters in lynching plays live ordinary lives in domestic interiors. Thus, the dramatists correctly saw lynching as a form of mob violence that relied on distorted representations of African Americans, and they confronted it as a theatrical production in itself. Just as importantly,

the dramatists exposed mobs as not only mutilators of flesh but also destroyers of homes and families. Their work therefore reveals the inadequacy of the body-centered representations of mob violence to which modern audiences seem most responsive.

### **Tracing a Cultural Conversation**

This study examines thirteen antilynching plays written by African Americans before the incidence of lynching began to decline in 1935. In identifying and analyzing *antilynching* plays as a distinct genre, I build on the pioneering work of Judith Stephens and Kathy Perkins, who established that “a lynching drama is *a play in which the threat or occurrence of a lynching, past or present, has major impact on the dramatic action*” (3). Though American writers had always addressed racial violence, the mode developed “...when playwrights moved beyond brief references and focused on a specific lynching incident” (Stephens/Perkins 4). African Americans entered the genre that Stephens and Perkins identified, but they did not simply address a specific incident; they also advanced an antilynching agenda. They were the most prolific antilynching dramatists, and black women were the unmistakable leaders of this literary movement.<sup>5</sup> Therefore, this study argues that black women's texts constitute the bedrock of the genre and establish its most pronounced conventions.

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<sup>5</sup> In focusing on black-authored plays, I am examining antilynching drama, not the broader category of lynching drama that Stephens and Perkins identified. However, I will still use “anti-lynching drama” and “lynching drama” interchangeably. As Stephens’ introductory essay explains, some scholars believe that the “anti-” is redundant for black-authored plays because none of them advocate lynching. Nevertheless, I find both terms useful. (I should also mention that the dissertation limits its inquiry to plays currently published. See Stephens for more on antilynching plays not yet in print.)

Four remarkable women laid the foundation for antilynching drama: Angelina Weld Grimké, who penned *Rachel* in 1914; Alice Dunbar-Nelson, who wrote *Mine Eyes Have Seen* in 1918; Mary Burrill, who published *Aftermath* in 1919; and Georgia Douglas Johnson, who was the most prolific, with *A Sunday Morning in the South* (1925), *Blue Blood* (1926), *Safe* (1929), and *Blue-Eyed Black Boy* (c. 1930). In this study, I examine these plays, as well as three others by black women and three by black men: Myrtle Smith Livingston's *For Unborn Children* (1926), Regina Andrews' *Climbing Jacobs' Ladder* (1931), May Miller's *Nails and Thorns* (1933), G.D. Lipscomb's *Frances* (1925), Joseph Mitchell's *Son-Boy* (1928), and S. Randolph Edmonds's *Bad Man* (1934).

In bringing these texts to the fore, this study supplements the history preserved by lynching photographers and mainstream newspaper reporters but, because it addresses a unique literary genre, it also adds to the record left by antilynching activists who wrote speeches, pamphlets, poems, short stories, and novels.<sup>6</sup> Despite modern expectations, African Americans who wrote antilynching dramas in the midst of mob rule refused to portray physical violence. At a time when newspapers detailed the crimes perpetrated on trees, the playwrights depicted mothers and children who survived and suffered. As a result, antilynching drama showcases the “strange fruit” that has become invisible to modern readers: the devastated black home. Directing our gaze away from the victimized body, these texts argue that mob violence occurred *inside* black households and continued long after the corpse had disappeared. According to these plays, the home

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<sup>6</sup> For a classroom-friendly anthology of lynching literature, see Ann Rice's *Witnessing Lynching: American Writers Respond*, New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers UP, 2003.

*is* the lynched body. When a father or brother is killed, the household is “castrated” and its head removed.

Perhaps one reason that we forget that the black home was a victim of the mob is that antilynching drama itself has become strangely invisible. In neglecting these plays, scholars have overlooked truths that are not captured in artifacts like photographs. In making visible for modern readers the black home, and the genre so committed to representing it, this project reconstructs pivotal conversations that took place at the turn of the twentieth century. I propose the trope of “conversation” as the best way to understand the dramatists’ perspective because the late 1890s through the 1930s were such turbulent decades. In debates about lynching, blacks engaged in cultural conversations about racial representation—about how one could depict and talk about African Americans. In keeping with this focus on how the race was represented, antilynching dramatists focused on the theater because it was an increasingly important mechanism of representation in the early 1900s.

Studying lynching plays written while the mob remained a palpable threat has revealed an unmistakable historical coherence: though scholars have long referred to them as distinct entities, American theater and mob violence actually relied on each other *for meaning* at the turn of the twentieth century. Recognizing the profound cooperation between theater and lynching, African American authors became dramatists to create a unique genre that addressed the fluid and dynamic nature of mob violence and its (inherently theatrical and representational) function in American society.

To comprehend African Americans’ commitment to addressing lynching and theater simultaneously, I rely on cultural theory for its insistence upon the primacy of

language within culture. As theorists like Stuart Hall explain, culture provides the shared frame of reference that allows us to understand what objects are and what words mean. We cannot communicate without, or outside of, culture. Within a shared culture, we “read” objects or bodies just as we read letters in a word. For example, lynching could not have been explained as a legitimate response to miscegenation unless Americans knew to identify black men as beasts and white women as virgins. Once black and white were “properly” understood, any intimacy between a black man and white woman became rape. If objects and bodies have no meaning outside of culture, neither do events. No reliable boundary exists between language and “actual” events. The mob’s actions thus told a story, one which made sense because it worked in conjunction with other stories like those in newspapers. In other words, the nation’s cultural conversation about lynching was made up of bodies, events, and the discourses about them. If newspapers had not represented blacks as out-of-control brutes, then lynching would not have seemed a rational response to black enfranchisement. Likewise, if the lynching ritual had not lent itself to exciting narratives, then newspaper reporters and readers would not have found it so interesting.<sup>7</sup> To study lynching is to analyze a “cultural conversation” made up of objects, actions, and words.

Working within this framework, it is clear that antilynching playwrights interrupted a cultural conversation predicated on black inhumanity. This conversation was dominated by the language of white supremacist tracts and novels, objects like lynching photographs, and by institutionalized practices such as southern sharecropping

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<sup>7</sup> As Jacqueline Dowd Hall reports, newspapers did not begin to carry lengthy stories on lynching until they became spectacular. Before that shift, they were pithy, matter-of-fact notices.

and northern segregation.<sup>8</sup> Thus, antilynching dramatists complicated an already complex web of communication.

As I analyze that web of communication, many of my conclusions are based on inference. That is, I argue that tangible effects—such as the existence and literary characteristics of the plays—bear within them proof of their causes. My logic moves *from effects to causes* because the dominant discourses that fueled lynching also worked to erase black subjectivity and humanity. I therefore deem the black-authored text as a legitimate starting point for developing a fuller picture of the historical period. By reading from effects to causes, I privilege exactly that which was negated as lynching flourished in our nation's history: African American perspectives. As cultural theorist Hazel Carby, following Stuart Hall, might put it: in order to speak/write at all, African Americans engaged the dominant discursive practices that shaped their realities; their texts therefore reveal the material conditions that blacks had to resist if they were to survive.<sup>9</sup> Thus, the dramas themselves help explain why the playwrights were driven to pen them.

Inference is also key to this project because direct evidence is often unavailable. I cannot point to letters or diary entries that explain what motivated the writers of this study to become antilynching playwrights, for example. Yet it is not clear that such

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<sup>8</sup> I am influenced here by Lisa Duggan's discussion of the ways in which narratives are imbedded in all things cultural. See *Sapphic Slashers: Sex, Violence, and American Modernity*. Durham: Duke UP 2000.

<sup>9</sup> Carby adapts Hall's argument in "Race, Articulation and Societies structured in Dominance" to explain why certain patterns developed in black women's writing. It is not that black women share a common language; it is that language is "a terrain of power," so "language is accented differently by competing groups" (17). As a result, looking at a group's cultural production will bring into relief the "social relations that inscribed them" (17). [See Carby's *Reconstruction Womanhood*, especially 17-19, 95.] I take this idea a step further to assert that we can better understand why a counter-discourse emerges if we are willing to begin *not* with the dominant discourse but with the discursive acts that resist it. It is a way of taking on its own terms the language of the generally marginalized group—rather than further subordinating that language to the more dominant discourses.

testimonials would significantly alter my conclusions. Clearly, a number of black women living in the midst of racial violence responded to that violence by writing plays. It makes sense then to assert that they sought to enact societal change through the power of the word. Black women have long recognized the importance of using the word to challenge their life circumstances, and black women scholars have long identified the resulting traditions.

For example, Carla Peterson, in *Doers of the Word*, identifies black women activists' belief in the "performative power of the word" and Shirley Logan, in "*We Are Coming*," reminds us that they were encouraged by the idea that "the spoken word was [...] an integral part in creation" (24). That is, many were convinced that sowing a seed was not enough; one also needed to speak over it (Logan 24). *A Different Kind of "Strange Fruit"* takes particular inspiration from Carla Peterson, who demonstrates that nineteenth-century black women saw writing and speaking as vitally important components of their political activism. Like the nineteenth-century black women preachers, poets, and novelists that Peterson studies, antilynching dramatists placed their faith in the "performative power of the word—both spoken and written" (Peterson 3). In becoming antilynching playwrights in the early twentieth century, black women activists further advanced a political agenda to which they were already committed. They recognized that the performance of the word could be used explicitly to answer the denigrating images that emanated from the postbellum stage and from the nation's bloodied trees. Thus, as Peterson's study ends in 1880, my work picks up in the 1890s and extends her concept into the "postBellum/preHarlem" era.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Charles Chesnutt used this term to refer to those black writers who labored before the New Negro Renaissance emerged to support their efforts. His words have helped inspire the forthcoming essay

Black women in the early twentieth century trusted the power of language to fight lynching because they knew that mobs relied on representation. They realized that they must oppose not just physical violence but also the violence *inherent* in how the race was represented. Thus, Grimké, Dunbar-Nelson, and their successors became “doers of the word” who sought to effect social change by counteracting representational violence—a powerful byproduct of American modernism. As industrialization, urbanization, and technology permeated society, creating and distributing media became easier and less expensive. Magazines, newspapers, and films became more appealing, and transportation allowed for their wider distribution. Improved and increasingly centralized railroad systems also gave Americans greater access to the theater, as acting troupes could visit previously inaccessible towns. Finally, photography proved to be an ever more popular technology that allowed people to form impressions of far-away places, make judgments about events, and feel confident in their assessments of people they had never met.

Antilynching dramatists responded to damaging images of the race by addressing primarily *black* audiences. They wanted to ensure that blacks did not internalize the mob’s justifications. Those writing at the century’s turn recognized that black identity was being formed during this transitional period from post-Emancipation to modernity and that African Americans’ self-conceptions would inevitably be shaped by the images that they encountered.

In the early 1900s, African Americans had only recently gone from being property to being able to own property. They needed to adjust to this new social position,

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collection that examines this period as not just the “nadir of race relations” as Rayford Logan termed it, but as a period of active black cultural production. Edited by Barbara McCaskill and Caroline Gebhard, *Post-Bellum/Pre-Harlem: African American Literature and Culture, 1877 -1919* is forthcoming from New York University Press.

and also to contend with those whites who found it unsettling. Surrounded in the South by whites who expressed their anxiety through insults or violence, African Americans migrated north in large numbers. Many associated migration with opportunity, but it was also accompanied by additional challenges, including *intra*racial class conflict. Northern black elites believed in the necessity of adhering to strict standards of propriety as a means of countering white representations of African Americans as criminals, beasts, and buffoons.

As blacks sought to preserve healthy conceptions of themselves, they found it necessary to draw on spiritual resources. Many tapped into the African American tradition of adopting Christianity in dynamic and fluid ways. Blacks often saw themselves as unjustly persecuted, much as Jesus Christ had been, but they did not necessarily assume that enduring abuse in this life was necessary for a better afterlife. As theology scholar JoAnne Terrell argues, since slavery blacks have held love and justice in close relationship, believing that those who claim to love God should fight for justice. Accordingly, generations of African Americans have not only recognized white Christian hypocrisy, but they have also answered the traditional song “Are Ye Soldiers of the Cross?” with hymns of their own, including “I am on the Battlefield for My Lord” and “I’m a Soldier in the Army of the Lord” (Terrell 53-54). African Americans have identified with Christ the Warrior (Old Testament) as much as Christ the sacrificial lamb (New Testament). Therefore, Terrell insists, their tendency to ally themselves with the story of the cross arose precisely because the story contains a prophesy of retribution for those who persecuted Jesus (54). Influenced by this tradition, antilynching plays often

cast mob victims as Christ figures, but do not leave readers and viewers with the impression that the death is justified.

Thus, Christianity was engaged in a complex fashion by antilynching dramatists—as was every other issue raised in their works. The playwrights refused to offer simple conclusions to their texts, and they avoided any suggestion that there might be a clear solution to the problems that the characters face. By extension, the plays themselves testify that there is no easy way out of the dilemmas that Black Americans encounter. In every instance, the plays depict characters discussing pressing issues and testifying to individual truths; the genre is dominated by intense conversations and numerous valid testimonies. In this way, the writers moved beyond reactionary protest to proactive racial affirmation, and they did so in spaces where they and their audiences could escape not only white assumptions about black identity but also white expectations of theatricality.

In fact, these plays were significant precisely because they did not reach Broadway. As a result, the scripts require modern scholars to remember that theatrical power can exist outside of commercial venues. Even in the absence of professional productions, drama can (and did) perform important cultural work in community theaters, churches, schools, and even in black families' living rooms.

### **Dramatic Interventions**

As both literary text and cultural artifact, antilynching plays, much like newspaper clippings or photographs, are remnants of a specific historical moment. They bear the imprint of contemporaneous dominant racist ideologies, even as they resist them. Thus,

as I examine the emergence of this genre, I adopt an approach similar to Hazel Carby's account of the rise of black women's novels: "My basic premise is that the [early lynching plays] of black women should be read not as passive representations of history but as active influence within history. In other words, I am considering [the plays] not only as determined by the social conditions within which they were produced but also as cultural artifacts which shape the social conditions they enter" (95). By writing these plays, Grimké, Dunbar-Nelson, and their successors became "doers of the word" who used language to make a material difference.

One way that antilynching plays shaped cultural conditions was to influence their audience's perceptions of the black body. The dramatists wrote amidst mob violence and black-face minstrelsy, and they understood that the effectiveness of both of these theatrical productions hinged on how the audience read the black body. In the lynching ritual, the brutalized body represented white power; on the stage, black-face masks humorously but unmistakably communicated who was not worthy of citizenship. Admirable black families dominated domestic novels of the 1890s, such as *Iola Leroy* and *Contending Forces*; it was now time to create domestically successful black characters in dramatic texts. To this end, antilynching playwrights worked to alter representations of black corporeality, creating characters in domestic interiors who sat quietly, read, or sewed, activities that previous scripts never allowed of black bodies.

To the extent that they were successful in changing the black body's signifying power, the dramatists created a space for changing what lynching itself meant. For if the black body was not inherently immoral—if it could represent something other than immorality and degradation—then lynching was not justified. If dignified representation

was possible, then lynching was not a response to black barbarity and not just a physical act committed upon nameless bodies. Rather, it was a sign of white barbarity and a spiritual violation visited upon honorable black men and their families. By rejecting the image of a limp and isolated body hanging from a rope, the playwrights affirmed that lynched black men were connected to institutions and communities. It is not a coincidence, then, that lynching drama worked in and through those very communities and institutions—especially the black home, church, and school.

If black writers worked to change what lynching meant, they also hoped to alter what the theater could accomplish. They understood that the mainstream stage generated a discourse that defined African Americans as non-citizens who must be contained if not destroyed. In this climate, they could not use drama as it existed. They needed to alter its basic conventions and aesthetic tendencies. In presenting more complex black images, African American dramatists worked to create a theater that could affirm their humanity in ways that conventional theater, as a rule, did not. They worked to transform theatricality itself from a mode that solidified blacks' position as non-citizens to one that further established their right to full citizenship.

Certainly, in the essays and speeches of Frederick Douglass, Anna Julia Cooper, and Ida B. Wells, the playwrights found models for subverting the systems of representation that were designed to oppress them.<sup>11</sup> In drawing attention to the ways in which antilynching plays adopted and modified earlier African American discourse, I question the assumption—inherent in much scholarship on black theater—that black authors simply accepted the agenda and conventions of the white-led folk theater

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<sup>11</sup> The likenesses between the plays and earlier black discourse does not result from some inherent similarity among blacks that transcends time and space, of course. The similarities simply indicate the degree to which the ideologies surrounding black Americans remained consistent.

movement made prominent by playwrights Ridgely Torrence and Eugene O'Neill. Scholars consistently represent the link between the white folk movement and black playwrights like Willis Richardson as a straight-forward trajectory—assuming that black playwrights happily adopted the tools of this larger movement and became a sub-set of it. As a result, black drama histories routinely label black-authored texts “folk drama,” even when these resist that movement’s assumptions and conventions. My work questions this tendency and indeed locates inspiration for early black drama within earlier black-authored texts.

### **Antilynching Drama as Invisible Fruit**

Because antilynching drama marks a rich locus of issues and ideas, one wonders why black theater scholars, historians, and literary critics have all overlooked it. Why has each field underestimated the genre’s importance and remained unaware of the relationship between theater and lynching that it highlights? In order to answer these questions, I examine the formative texts of black theater history, prominent histories of the antilynching crusade, and full-length studies of lynching in literature. In each case, disciplinary biases have prevented scholars from recognizing the significance of antilynching drama.

Black theater scholars have been best poised to appreciate antilynching drama. Their neglect of the genre is especially puzzling since turn-of-the-century activists called for black writers to become dramatists at the same time that the stage began explicitly endorsing mob violence. In 1906, Thomas Dixon, Jr. established production companies

to bring his historical romance *The Clansman* to life. The actors traveled throughout the United States performing a play version of the novel, which featured proud Ku Klux Klansmen and burning crosses (Gunning 28-29). Impressed with Dixon's dramatic renditions of white supremacist ideology, D. W. Griffith recruited him to write the screenplay for *The Birth of a Nation*, which debuted in 1915. The movie portrays black men as brutes who must be controlled through violence, and its message was well received. It ran for eleven months and was the first film screened at the White House. After seeing it, President Woodrow Wilson remarked, "it is like writing history with lightning. And my only regret is that it is all so terribly true" (Cripps 52). As literary historian Sandra Gunning explains, the film was so influential that "its opening in Atlanta marked the reorganization of the Ku Klux Klan in the twentieth century" (29).

Dixon's stage success heightened African Americans' awareness in the early 1900s that drama and lynching were intertwined; they knew that they could not afford to ignore either phenomenon. Many demonstrated when *Birth* was scheduled to arrive in their towns.<sup>12</sup> Blacks did not simply protest Dixon's script, however; they also wrote their own. Angelina Weld Grimké drafted her antilynching play *Rachel* as early as 1914, turning to drama to address racial violence even before *Birth*'s triumphant debut (Hull 117-23). After the film was widely endorsed, black intellectuals sought to duplicate Grimké's efforts. In 1915, the same year as Dixon's success, W.E.B. Du Bois called for black-authored plays and created a drama committee within the NAACP. The committee

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<sup>12</sup> African American leaders worked to limit the film's impact on American minds. NAACP headquarters supplied branch offices with model protest letters and newspaper clippings documenting the violence that the movie inspired in peaceful cities. Such information gave each office a head start when trying to persuade local officials to censor all or part of the film (Cripps 63). However, there were also more physical protests. In April 1915, black Bostonians gathered in the streets and in the lobby of the (segregated) theater that was showing the film. William Monroe Trotter cut short his speaking tour to join the demonstration and was assaulted by police while speaking against the film in the theater lobby. For more information, see Thomas Cripps, *Slow Fade to Black*, especially 59-60.

sponsored a production of Grimké's *Rachel* in March of 1916 (Perkins 4). With this production, Grimké's *Rachel* began an important tradition: African Americans would now consistently write serious, non-musical scripts.<sup>13</sup>

*Rachel* inspired many, but its impact has been underestimated as scholars locate the origin of black drama in the mid-1920s, nearly a decade after Grimké's play was produced.<sup>14</sup> Willis Richardson and Langston Hughes are dubbed the fathers of African American drama largely because they enjoyed Broadway success. Richardson's one-act *The Chip Woman's Fortune* became the first black-authored play to reach Broadway in

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<sup>13</sup> Grimké's debut is significant not because she was the first to write serious drama, but because hers was the first black-authored drama to be executed by black actors for a broad audience on a semi-professional stage. Before *Rachel*, black-authored dramas were either not produced or were brought to life by amateurs in churches in schools. Of course, such productions are important. In fact, antilynching drama would not have existed without these small shows. Nevertheless, the impact of Grimké's work stemmed from the fact that it drew a relatively large interracial audience.

"Non-musical" is important here. Certainly, important progress had already been made by performers. For example, the Hyers Sisters performed musicals like *Out of Bondage* and *Peculiar Sam* in the nineteenth century. These women were quite famous and performed musicals with political messages. Nevertheless, these shows add to a musical tradition that diverges from the "legitimate" drama that African Americans felt was necessary at the turn of the century.

"Legitimate" (non-musical) theater efforts began in 1820 with the African Grove acting troupe in Harlem. They were active at least two seasons, usually performing Shakespeare or Broadway hits. Samuel Hay gives a thorough history of their activities in his introduction to *African American Theatre: An Historical and Critical Analysis*, and George Thompson, Jr. critiques Hay in *Documentary History of the African Theatre*. Thompson even asserts that we have mis-named this historic theater group.

<sup>14</sup> The term "drama" refers to written plays, whereas "theater" is a more general term and includes both written text and performance. Though many acknowledge blacks' achievement on stage before the 1920s, scholars often begin in the 1920s when referring to plays written by blacks.

Also note: As I retrace the history of black-authored, non-musical plays, I focus on plays that were published. Archival research is important, but my task here is to provide historical and theoretical context for texts that are available to us but widely misunderstood. Before *Rachel*, serious black-authored scripts were executed on the amateur stage. Between 1901 and 1910, Katherine Davis Chapman Tillman published four dramas through the AME Book Concern and *The AME Church Review*. These plays were specifically written for production in elementary and Sunday schools. See *The Works of Katherine Davis Chapman Tillman* (New York: Oxford UP, 1991) and Claudia Tate's thorough introduction for more information.

Two plays for a more general audience were written before 1916: William Wells Brown's *The Escape, or a Leap for Freedom* (1858) and *Caleb, the Degenerate* (1901) by Joseph Cotter, Sr. *The Escape* was not staged, but Brown toured the country giving dramatic readings. There is no evidence that *Caleb* was staged, and Sterling Brown virtually dubs it "unactable." (See his introduction to *Drama in Negro Caravan*). Ira Aldridge and Victor Séjour also wrote significant dramas during the 1800s. However, they both left the United States in their late teens and remained abroad. Therefore, to the extent that they are not written for African American actors or for American audiences, their plays do not help shape the American theater tradition.

1923, and Hughes's *The Mulatto*, albeit revised in ways that he did not authorize, began an unprecedented two-year run on Broadway in 1935.

A study of antilynching plays yields a history of black drama that diverges radically from accepted narratives. The plays challenge the assumptions upon which many black theater histories are built, most notably the assumption that a play is most significant when it reaches white theatergoers. Ironically, even though black theater historians decry Broadway's exclusion of black playwrights, their anthologies and histories nonetheless privilege "The Great White Way" by most passionately praising those whose work was brought to life on mainstream stages.<sup>15</sup> They often elevate Willis Richardson for reaching Broadway, and discount Grimké—all the while forgetting that Richardson's decision to become a playwright occurred after he saw Grimké's *Rachel* (Gray 12, 14).

Still, the primary reason that women antilynching dramatists remain undervalued is that modern scholars leave unexamined the biases that the earliest black theater historians held. In 1927, Howard University professors Alain Locke and Montgomery Gregory released the first anthology devoted to plays depicting African American life. Because it was compiled and edited during the 1920s, *Plays of Negro Life: A Sourcebook of Native American Drama* has taken a place of honor within black theater scholarship.

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<sup>15</sup>For example, in 1972, theater greats Woodie King and Ron Milner introduced their *Black Drama Anthology* thusly: "Until quite recently, so-called Negro plays were plays about Negroes written by whites to be viewed by a white audience. *No attempt* to change this pattern occurred until the mid-fifties after the demise of the 'Negro theaters' in Harlem when the fashionable 'night out' in Harlem became unfashionable" (vii, my emphasis). This statement cannot ring even remotely true unless one takes commercial houses to be the most significant venues. See King and Milner, *Black Drama Anthology* [New York: Columbia UP, 1972].

The term "Great White Way" is often used in theater scholarship to refer to Broadway. See, for example, theater historian Susan Curtis's *The First Black Actors on the Great White Way*. Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1998. (Her study is about actors on Broadway, so it is not an example of the Broadway bias that I say has unjustifiably pushed writers like Grimké to the periphery.)

Unfortunately, we have allowed our respect for these two pioneers to soften our critical gaze. That is, we have not questioned their biases, nor have we analyzed the social forces that shaped their monumental collection. In the critical essays supplementing the selected primary texts, Locke and Gregory declared that blacks entered the legitimate American stage in 1917, the year in which African American actors portrayed black characters in white playwright Ridgely Torrence's *Three Plays of Negro Life*. Locke specifically credits Torrence, Eugene O'Neill, and Paul Green with having the "pioneering genius" that made the years 1917 to 1927 an "experimental and groundbreaking decade" (i). Similarly, Gregory asserts that the production of Torrence's plays "mark[ed] the *first important* movement in the development of an authentic drama of Negro life and *the establishment* of Negro Theatre" ("Chronology" 410, my italics). As editors, Locke and Gregory deem April 5, 1917 far more important than the day *Rachel* was staged in March 1916. For them, it was Torrence who stimulated the development of "the legitimate drama of Negro life..." (411). Why Torrence and not Grimké? Gregory erases all doubt when he exclaims, "For the first time, *Broadway* beheld Negro actors in serious drama" (411, my emphasis).

Locke and Gregory's biases are understandable because they sought to establish Howard as the nation's training ground for black theater professionals. They could not afford to alienate white playwrights, theater critics, or academics who could bring national attention to their program. If Broadway was the nation's standard, blacks must aspire to it in order to gain respect. Rather than argue for new standards, they essentially said to their prospective colleagues in the theater and the academy, "Yes, you're right; Broadway marks theatrical greatness!"

Concerned with the viability of their new department as much as aesthetics, Locke and Gregory did not rigorously support a black playwright until Willis Richardson. As Richardson recalls in his memoir, “Locke and Gregory had a difficult time getting the consent of the [white] president of the university and the head of the English department. It was quite all right for them to stage a play written by a white writer at a black university, but a play by a Black writer was too rare to be considered” (qtd. on Gray 17). Meanwhile, Richardson caught the attention of theater manager Raymond O’Neil, a move that very quickly made him acceptable to Howard University administration. In January 1923, Richardson’s *Chip Woman’s Fortune* was produced by O’Neil’s Chicago-based Ethiopia Players. Three short months later, it began a two-week run at Howard University (Gray 17).

Black theater scholars have been aware of the power dynamics that affected pioneers like Locke and Gregory. Nevertheless, modern scholars have accepted the narrative they put forth without accounting for those forces. Locke and Gregory credited Torrence with inaugurating black theater instead of Grimké, and so have we. They labeled April 5, 1917 as the beginning of black drama, and so have we. They maintained that Ridgely Torrence and Eugene O’Neill were the catalysts for black writers’ dramatic efforts, and we have taken their word at face value. Without hesitation, we have traced a line of influence from Torrence and O’Neill to black playwrights, rarely wondering at the context of Locke and Gregory’s remarks.

If Locke and Gregory were determined to promote black playwrights rather than continue to rely solely on Torrence and O’Neill’s plays, then Richardson was a safe choice. Unlike Grimké, he was not unapologetically direct in his treatment of white

racism. Rather than focusing on how whites victimize blacks, Richardson decided to concentrate on African Americans' interactions with each other. Just as importantly, Richardson conscientiously networked with white playhouses and managers. Because black theater scholarship has inherited so much from Locke and Gregory, Richardson has easily eclipsed Grimké—even though he credited her with motivating his own playwriting.<sup>16</sup>

The initial approval that Richardson received from Locke, Gregory, and white theater professionals allowed him to become a theater critic in his own right. In 1930, he edited a black drama anthology that has further shaped our understanding of black theater's development. Published in partnership with Howard University history professor Carter G. Woodson, Richardson's *Plays and Pageants from the Life of the Negro* immediately distinguished itself from Locke and Gregory's volume by focusing on black-authored material. While Locke had published with a white firm and included many white-authored plays to garner mainstream credibility, Richardson aimed to serve a black audience that could use his anthology in schools (Gray xxiv). From elementary school to college, African Americans were conspicuously missing from the curriculum; Richardson and Woodson offered a remedy. Still, the collection omits Grimké and her immediate successors because their plays call attention to inequities and injustices. This literature fell outside of the anthology's mission to build self-esteem by focusing on African Americans and their history rather than indicting whites. In addition, many antilynching one-acts incorporate dialect; teachers could better use a book that helped sharpen students' ability to read "standard" English. Richardson's volume was much

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<sup>16</sup> Richardson often said in interviews that he returned from seeing *Rachel* determined to write drama of his own. He felt certain that he could do better. See Christine R. Gray's biography *Willis Richardson, Forgotten Pioneer of African-American Drama*. West Port, CT: Greenwood Press, 1999.

needed; yet, to the extent that scholars look to this early collection for insights on black theater history, *Plays and Pageants* does not disrupt the tendency to discount antilynching drama.

As a foundational scholarly study, Edith Isaacs' *The Negro in the American Theatre* (1947) rigidified and legitimized the early anthologists' practice of placing Broadway at the center of black theater history. Isaacs structured her monograph around April 5, 1917 when African Americans received "real" opportunities. According to Isaacs, events prior to that date are to be understood as preparation for the opportunity later offered by Torrence. Though the "Great White Way" accepted comedians like Williams and Walker from 1898 to 1909, black actors were completely exiled from it between 1910 and 1917. During this time, they created opportunities for themselves in Harlem theaters like the Lincoln and Lafayette. These houses flourished commercially and allowed black actors to perfect their craft, but Isaacs names the chapter devoted to this period "An Interlude." It is not surprising that Isaac, who was so inspired by Locke that she dedicated her book to him also marginalized antilynching dramatists.<sup>17</sup>

The power of accepted trajectories to shape scholarship is clear even in the more recent work of Elizabeth Brown-Guillory and Kathy Perkins who seek specifically to recuperate black women's dramatic contributions. Brown-Guillory's *Their Place on the Stage* (1988) is a book-length study of Alice Childress, Lorraine Hansberry, and Ntozake Shange rather than a comprehensive treatment of black women in the theater. Because it is such a monumental text, however, it has shaped our perceptions of black theater history and women's place within it. The title of the opening essay "Black Theatre Tradition and

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<sup>17</sup> Isaac's book dedication reads: "To Alain Locke [b]ecause he shares the faith that the arts provide a firm and rewarding two-way passage for men of good will of all races, creeds and cultures, everywhere."

Women Playwrights of the Harlem Renaissance” suggests that the chapter will spotlight pioneers like Grimké; ultimately, however, it follows patterns that diminish black women’s achievements. After referencing William Wells Brown’s 1858 play *The Escape*, Brown-Guillory asserts that there was no major activity again until “two occurrences marked a revolution in black theatre... and ushered in the Harlem Renaissance” (2). Those two events? First, the formation of the NAACP and *Crisis* magazine, and Du Bois’s use of them to promote black literature. Second, April 5, 1917 (Brown-Guillory 2). Because Brown-Guillory accepts these moments as the catalysts for black drama, the women of her study can serve only as supplements to a larger movement. She explains: “[Harlem Renaissance women dramatists] are crucial to any discussion of the development of black playwriting in America because they provide the feminine perspective, and their voices give credence to the notion that there was a ‘New Negro’ in America (Brown-Guillory 4).

Yet Grimké wrote her play before Du Bois founded the NAACP drama committee in 1915 and long before *Crisis* began offering drama contests in 1924; hence, it is more likely that she was an inspiration for Du Bois. Given this reality, Grimké and her women colleagues did not just “give credence to” the notion of a New Negro; they inspired much of the activity that created this figure. Thus, although Brown-Guillory provides one of the most thorough analyses of black women playwrights’ contributions, her conclusions are limited by the inherited notion that black women began writing only after encouragement from great men like Du Bois, and mostly to supplement images offered by white playwrights beginning in April 1917.

In her 1989 anthology *Black Female Playwrights*, Kathy Perkins's introduction puts forth much the same picture. Perkins credits Du Bois with inspiring black playwriting and maintains that such writing "...was a response to the works of white dramatists who in the 1920s attempted to capture the black experience through dramatic works" (Perkins 4). Ultimately, neither Brown-Guillory nor Perkins represents women as influential shapers of black drama history, but this is largely because their studies emerged when black women were not included in drama history at all. These scholars were therefore more interested in writing women playwrights into accepted histories than in challenging those histories. Without question, I can now work toward revising the accepted historical narrative precisely because pioneers like Brown-Guillory and Perkins placed black women dramatists firmly within it.

Theater historians Randolph Edmonds, James Hatch, Ted Shine, and Bernard Peterson also established the foundation upon which I build. While their work does not present Grimké, Alice Dunbar-Nelson, Mary Burrill, and Georgia Douglas Johnson as major influences, their inclusion of these women has helped to make my work possible. In 1971, Randolph Edmonds wrote an essay for Samuel French's *American Theatre: A Sum of its Parts*. This ambitious essay covers the period 1700 to 1970. Early on, Edmonds refers to April 1917, but he does so only within the larger context of the many performances, writers, and actors who helped build black dramatic traditions. Rather than elevating Torrence as someone who gave black actors the opportunity of a lifetime, Edmonds summarizes his plays along with several others that were written by whites and performed by black actors. Edmonds does not speak in detail of antilynching plays but—because he does not unequivocally praise Broadway—his scholarship makes room for

appreciating their importance. Broadway figures prominently in the essay, but he asserts what most critics had not: “Perhaps the most powerful influence upon the development of the Negro in the legitimate drama of America is the Little Theatre Movement among black colleges, universities, and communities” (416). Edmonds ends by discussing these community theaters, arguing that they provided the strongest foundation for African Americans’ dramatic endeavors.

In 1974, James Hatch and Ted Shine edited *Black Theatre U.S.A.: Forty-five Plays by Black Americans, 1847-1974*. As the first attempt at a comprehensive anthology, it narrates black theater history in ways that do not discount antilynching drama. Of the forty-five works in the collection, five are antilynching plays although they are not categorized as such. When Hatch co-edited *Lost Plays of the Harlem Renaissance* in 1996, however, his introduction included an overview of antilynching drama. Finally, because of the sheer breadth of his book projects, Bernard Peterson’s accounts of black theater history acknowledge antilynching drama. His reference texts—including *Early Black American Playwrights and Dramatic Writers*, *The African American Theatre Directory, 1860-1960*, and *Profiles of African American Stage Performers and Theatre People, 1816-1960*—do not analytically reshape our conception of black theater history or aggressively expand the narrow narrative that dominates it, but they have laid the foundation for me to do so.

If black theater scholars overlook antilynching drama when they use Broadway as the standard for cultural significance, historians have overlooked it because drama does not seem to them an important tool for political change. United States histories focus on organizations like the NAACP and activities like lobbying to tell the story of civic

empowerment, but antilynching drama demands a broadened definition of political activism. Robert Zangrando's *The NAACP Crusade Against Lynching* has shaped all scholarly discussions of antilynching activism since its publication in 1980.<sup>18</sup> His text is crucial because it documents the many ways in which the United States government resisted legislating measures that would protect black citizens from mob violence. As he tells the story of those who worked to influence the government, Zangrando focuses on traditional activities like lobbying, implying that art is generally outside of the realm of politics and that "good" art avoids political overtones. Yet, because it consistently marginalizes them, Zangrando's work calls attention to other facets of the struggle to end lynching such as antilynching drama. Thus, broadening the definition of political activism to include drama deepens our understanding of the antilynching campaign.

In fact, antilynching drama arose from a complex conception of political involvement because turn-of-the-century activists understood the links between mob violence and early American theater. Mainstream visual representations justified violence against blacks by depicting them as sub-human, and early American theater was aggressively taking its place as one of the most powerful venues for promoting this project. Consequently, NAACP leaders protested *Birth of a Nation*, but they also called for black-authored plays with more realistic images. While negative portrayals warranted boycotts, picketing, and national letter-writing campaigns, leaders also placed a premium on scripts that favorably depicted African Americans. They did not see antilynching drama as separate from political activism. These plays were not creative accessories to

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<sup>18</sup> Please note the distinction between histories of lynching and histories of antilynching activism. I do not presume to re-write the history of lynching. I am interested in how the fight against it has been characterized and how the dramatists suggest important revisions. If interested in more general histories of lynching, see for example James Cutler's *Lynch Law* (1905), Arthur Raper's *The Tragedy of Lynching* (1933), or Phillip Dray's 2002 *At the Hands of Persons Unknown*.

the movement; they were very much a part of it. Writing, reading, staging, and viewing these plays worked in conjunction with efforts to pass antilynching legislation. Black drama was therefore much more than a polemic; it also nurtured African Americans psychologically and spiritually so that they could later stand strong as a political constituency. Indeed, these plays helped form the spiritual bedrock that inspired blacks to oppose the race's slaughter.

Besides discounting the spiritual, emotional, and psychological dimensions of antilynching activism, Zangrando's focus on traditional politics yielded a male-dominated portrait of the antilynching campaign that feminist historians have revised. The most influential histories of women's antilynching activities have come in the form of biographies: Jacquelyn Dowd Hall's account of Jesse Daniel Ames and studies of Ida B. Wells-Barnett from Linda McMurry and Patricia Schechter. These biographies are indispensable; they thoroughly contextualize their subjects by analyzing the social and political forces informing their efforts. They also provide insights regarding the ways in which class, race, gender, and sexuality influenced their effectiveness. Still, because these biographies focus on an individual and paint her as exceptional, they must be supplemented if we are to appreciate the tremendous cooperation and community-building that antilynching efforts required. Like Hall, McMurry, and Schechter, I see biography as an important way of recovering historical events, but I spotlight groups of women. I create a collective biography of antilynching playwrights and discuss the work of the Anti-Lynching Crusaders, whom Zangrando considered to be a "women's auxiliary" of the NAACP.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Actually, because Hall writes about Jesse Daniel Ames, her text focuses on the efforts of white women who organized in 1930, years after most of the antilynching plays were written. Still, I have been

Because women played a larger role in political movements than many histories have suggested, feminist historians have worked to correct the oversights that have long kept women on the periphery. Though we can never document all that women endured at the turn of the twentieth century, revisionist histories (including this one) illuminate at least one truth extraordinarily well: when women activists faced obstacles, they continued their work by developing new tools. Black women empowered themselves by not relying solely on large organizations and traditional methods. Ida B. Wells valued speaking tours as much as NAACP conventions; the Anti-Lynching Crusaders valued prayer as much as lobbying; and playwrights valued reaching small all-black audiences as much as others sought Broadway acclaim. In each case, black women disregarded the false boundaries between politics and religion or art.

While adding to a tradition of woman-centered history, this study nevertheless complicates conversations among feminist scholars. Most early antilynching plays were written by women but none mentions women lynch victims, so many twenty-first century readers assume that the authors subordinated black women's struggles in order to place black male victimization at the center. My work makes no such assumption and thus problematizes this modern tendency...while not dismissing the concerns underpinning it. Ever since woman-centered scholarship began gaining institutional authority, black feminist critics have called attention to mainstream feminism's tendency to cast "men" and "patriarchy" as women's enemies. Some black feminists have argued that such characterizations do not work for black women because racism links their destinies to

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influenced by Hall's methodology in that she is interested in uncovering history through biography. (Ames's Association of Southern Women for the Prevention of Lynching was founded in 1930.)

black men's.<sup>20</sup> Antilynching playwrights support this assertion because they consistently portray women characters who defend their fathers, sons, and brothers. The characters and their creators clearly believe that black men's and women's plights were intertwined.

Just as surely, however, the plays demand that we challenge certain trends in black feminist criticism, most especially those that treat racial solidarity as a ruse that worked on naïve women of a bygone era.<sup>21</sup> My work insists that, though none of the plays references women lynch victims, the playwrights were not necessarily subordinating gender oppression to racial oppression. Instead, they grappled with the dominant ideologies of their time. The dramatists knew that the myth of the black rapist depended on perceptions of the black woman as whore. Therefore, in defending black male character, they simultaneously defended their own. By not assuming that twenty-first century perspectives should take precedence over the playwrights', my work engages ongoing debates among feminist and womanist scholars while keeping the playwrights' concerns primary. After all, their texts (not ours) grapple with the specific forces that characterized the turn of the twentieth century.

In addition to expanding discussions in women's studies and suggesting revisions of black theater history and U.S. history, this project supplements existing literary analyses of lynching literature by considering a genre left unaddressed. The two major

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<sup>20</sup> This argument has taken many forms. For example, any work that exposes what Alice Walker called "white female chauvinism" can be said to explore the ways in which white women's attitudes toward black women can prevent "sisterhood." Certainly, a striking example is Hazel Carby's "White Woman, Listen! Black Feminism and the Boundaries of Sisterhood."

<sup>21</sup> Here, I want to call attention to what I see as a post-*Black Macho* posture. Because Michele Wallace so forcefully exposed the role that misogyny played in Black Nationalism and the fight for civil rights, many who did not live through that period can come dangerously close to viewing earlier generations of women as naïve. For those who came of age after not only Civil Rights, but also after Wallace published *Black Macho and the Myth of the Superwoman* (New York: Dial Press, 1979), it is sometimes difficult to identify with women of an earlier era. Of course, one problem with refusing to think in pre-*Black Macho* terms is that one's refusal often derives from an inability to see that even that option comes out of a particular historical moment—a moment shaped by the existence of Wallace's text and the price she paid in publishing it.

studies of lynching in United States literature—Trudier Harris’s *Exorcising Blackness* and Sandra Gunning’s *Race, Rape, and Lynching*—focus on novels, short stories, poems, and essays. When drama enters their purview, it comes in the form of pro-lynching drama like Thomas Dixon Jr.’s or post-1960s plays that reflect an overtly militant Black Arts Movement orientation. Early antilynching drama is simply never mentioned. My study enriches literary explorations of the subject by analyzing the texts that countered Dixon’s and that laid the (constantly unacknowledged) foundation for the black dramatists of the 1960s and 1970s.

It is also important to note that antilynching drama does not figure in the work of Harris and Gunning because their work examines the ways in which brutality against the black body has shaped the American literary imagination. Harris’s 1986 study focuses on African American authors’ tendency to reproduce the horrors visited on black bodies; in particular, castration has proved “repulsively appealing” to black writers (5). In 1996, Sandra Gunning expanded such inquiry to account for both black and white authors. She asserts, for example, that lynching discourse hinged on conceptions of masculinity and power that both black and white writers accepted. As a result, there is sometimes more similarity than difference in texts written by white supremacists and writers now identified as progressive (8, 12). Together, Harris and Gunning trace the ways in which the American literary imagination has been haunted by the physical violence that the country permitted against its darker citizens, but this approach discounts more subtle articulations. Because the earliest lynching plays do not portray or describe physical violence, Harris in fact asserts that their writers “...could almost be accused of disguising the horrors that serve as the impetus to their work” (“Before the Strength” 32). In my

study, I insist that antilynching playwrights would have us appreciate less graphic, but equally haunting, representations of the destruction that mobs caused.

Studying antilynching drama has exposed the false boundaries that have shaped the inquiries of those working in three major fields. Our earliest and most foundational black drama anthologies and histories privilege Broadway, and many histories of antilynching activism focus on large organizations and traditional political activities. Meanwhile, literary studies have typically overlooked early black drama to examine scripts written during the overtly militant Black Arts Movement of the 1960s and 1970s. To similar effect, literary scholars have been more interested in authors who use the mutilated black body as shorthand for lynching destruction. This study offers significant revisions of such tendencies—hoping that scholars will contemplate why and how the devastated black home, and the genre that so faithfully represented it, became invisible. *A Different Kind of “Strange Fruit”* attends to how turn-of-the-century African Americans grappled with representation. Treating their texts in conjunction with modern criticism, I hope to produce a productive tension that suggests the validity of recognizing the theory embedded in imaginative texts.

### **Antilynching Drama as a Fruit of Black Labor**

Chapters 1 and 2 of *A Different Kind of “Strange Fruit”* revise accepted histories in order to account for the emergence of antilynching drama at the turn of the twentieth century. I identify the forces that sparked the need for such texts as well as the conditions that allowed black writers to produce them. Chapter 1, “Minstrel Fathers, Literary Daughters,” argues that much of the inspiration of early twentieth-century African

American dramatists resided in nineteenth-century black theater. Though we often think of early black performers as anything but politically savvy, black minstrelsy and musical comedy forged a path for the playwrights by engaging the politics of representation. Black men and women on and behind the stage labored in various ways to gain control of theater as a mechanism of representation, and they ultimately attracted a black audience that demanded black-authored scripts. As I uncover the legacy of the black stage, I eliminate the false boundaries between theater history and drama history that sometimes lead scholars to assume that minstrels and musical comedians only provided New Negro playwrights with examples of what *not* to do. Instead, I argue that these performers actually created theater that was variously about, by, for, and near African Americans long before Du Bois identified these as the criteria for black theater in the 1920s.

Protest drama grew from much more than a stage tradition, however, so Chapter 2, “Why Drama, Why Now?,” provides a cultural history of the 1890s and early 1900s that focuses on off-stage catalysts. I contend that because African Americans of the period saw themselves as modern citizens, but were surrounded by depictions that negated that self-conception, they constantly looked for new ways to represent *themselves*. That is, African Americans searched for a *forum* that was not hostile to black self-representation and a *form* that could accurately represent black identity. This chapter follows early twentieth-century blacks who engaged in this quest. I account for the ways in which migration and the NAACP, for example, offered various forms and forums that eventually disappointed many black women and inspired them to create the form of antilynching drama, which was compatible with the forum of the non-commercial stage. As the genre proliferated in the 1920s and 1930s, the New Negro Renaissance both

enabled and hindered the playwrights' endeavors.<sup>22</sup> Ultimately, then, this chapter offers insights into the ways in which black women of this period were both empowered and limited, and how their resilience enabled them to make drama work for them. Together, Chapters 1 and 2 explore the dynamics that led Angelina Weld Grimké to initiate what we now recognize as a distinct genre: the antilynching play.

Chapter 3, "Antilynching Drama: A Theoretical Framework," suggests that the scripts themselves offer interpretive guidance. Taking the plays written by black women before 1930 to be the genre's foundation, I identify antilynching drama's distinguishing features. I find that, as the playwriting pioneers interrupted the cultural conversation on lynching, patterns developed among their scripts: 1) action is set in the black home; 2) definitions of manhood are interrogated; and 3) the family's productive generation is consistently removed or neutralized through a process that I call "de-generation" (generation removal and prevention). The playwrights used these conventions to testify to the existence of solid black homes built by virtuous women and honorable men. Also, because de-generation documents the destruction that continued long after the bloody events had ended, the genre acknowledges the losses not documented by the mutilated, hanging body. I conclude the chapter by suggesting that traditional theatrical spaces did not accommodate the memorialization of blacks' spiritual and familial losses. As a result, the scripts best fulfilled their purpose when brought to life in private, community-centered venues. Blacks therefore tapped into the theatrical potential of intimate spaces, including their own homes.

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<sup>22</sup> Also known as the "Harlem Renaissance." I am aware of the scholarly debates surrounding these terms and explain in Chapter 2 the extent to which this project is concerned with engaging those debates.

This study foregrounds black women writers because they inaugurated the genre, established its conventions, and became its most prolific contributors. Chapter 4, “Black Female Texts” features readings of the ten published plays written before 1935, after accounting for the genre’s unique formal contours. I examine the ways that an investment in testimony led them to turn from traditional dramatic action to an emphasis on dialogue. I then analyze the plays in thematically complementary pairs: Angelina Weld Grimké’s *Rachel* (1916) and Georgia Douglas Johnson’s *Safe* (c.1929) engage in a conversation about whether blacks should have children in a racist society; Alice Dunbar-Nelson’s *Mine Eyes Have Seen* (1918) and Mary Burrill’s *Aftermath* (1919) consider whether blacks owe their country patriotism; Johnson’s *A Sunday Morning in the South* (1925) and Myrtle Livingston’s *For Unborn Children* (1926) discuss whether lynching is really a response to the rape of white women; Johnson’s *Blue Blood* (1926) and *Blue-Eyed Black Boy* (c.1930) suggest that the black woman’s domestic fulfillment may be predicated on her being silent about rape; finally, Regina Andrews’ *Climbing Jacob’s Ladder* (1931) and May Miller’s *Nails and Thorns* (1933) question whether antilynching plays should remain focused on the black home or also investigate the impact of lynching on larger institutions and on white homes.

Since black men began writing antilynching plays almost ten years after women, their work is taken up in Chapter 5, “Gendered Revisions.” This chapter focuses on the male-authored plays set in the black home and written before 1935: G. D. Lipscomb’s *Frances* (1925), Joseph Mitchell’s *Son-Boy* (1926), and Randolph Edmonds’s *Bad-Man* (1934). In tracing the generic shifts that men initiate, the chapter alters common perceptions of how literary traditions develop, since scholars so often assume that men

establish conventions and women revise them by adding an unrepresented “feminine” perspective. Here, the revisions *marked by gender difference* come from men. While women dramatists depicted households that failed only because men were taken from them, men present homes that seem castrated even when fathers, brothers, and uncles survive. By allowing black men to live, male dramatists suggest that they are often “castrated” in life, not just in death.

The Conclusion, “Of What Use is Drama?,” takes inspiration from Pauline Hopkins’s 1900 statement regarding the importance of the black domestic novel. Hopkins reasoned that, even in the midst of lynching, fiction was crucial because it preserves the race’s history and traditions. My conclusion considers drama’s value in similar terms while confronting the fact that little documentation exists to prove that antilynching dramas were staged. That is, I ask: Is it possible for a script to be significant without having received professional production before a large, integrated audience? Could a play performed in a small church do important cultural work? Could a black family’s living room become a valid space for drama? I work toward answers and argue that appreciating black-authored antilynching plays requires re-thinking theatrical value. Still, not unlike the playwrights themselves, I hope that what I offer will not be the final word but will spark further discussion.

As it engages American culture from 1890 to 1935, this project offers an account of the period that emphasizes forgotten elements. I use a layered approach that enriches our understanding by placing creative works on par with scholarly ones, and turn-of-the-century writing on par with today’s. In doing so, I aim to suggest in the following chapters that imaginative texts can do the work of theory and that literary criticism is

always a narrative process. In this case, the result of that process is a scholarly narrative committed to looking past the brutalized corpse to see the other “strange fruit” that the mob left behind.

## CHAPTER 1: MINSTREL FATHERS, LITERARY DAUGHTERS

Because negative depictions of African Americans had long precipitated and justified mob violence, an unprecedented number of black writers became dramatists in the 1910s and 1920s, understanding the importance of black self-representation to the race's survival and quality of life. As they turned to drama, they drew on many nineteenth-century models for how to engage representational politics—not the least of which came from early black theater practitioners. Unfortunately, many scholars have assumed that black performers, especially minstrels and musical comedians, were not concerned with how the race was portrayed. Yet, African Americans working on and behind the nineteenth-century stage consistently toiled to transform theater so that it did not automatically dehumanize blacks but instead enabled complex black self-representation.

One reason for the underestimation of the political efforts of the nineteenth-century black theater community is that this community produced virtually no playwrights, and scholars have accepted the idea that black self-representation in theater was not achieved before the emergence of the serious dramatist. The tendency to privilege the writing of drama can largely be attributed to the impact made by W.E.B. Du Bois's famous declaration that true black theater must be “about us,” “by us,” “for us,” and “near us.” Scholars still use Du Bois's criteria, treating them as timeless and universally applicable, but doing so is problematic because they arose out of a particular historical moment.

Du Bois published his statement on the creation of a black community-based theater in 1926, at the time of the Krigwa Players' debut performance in Harlem. He

identified the elements that made this performance a cultural triumph because he wanted this effort duplicated throughout the country; such duplication would produce the “Little Negro Theatre Movement” that he felt African Americans needed. When Du Bois declared that black theater must be “about us,” “by us,” “for us,” and “near us,” theater about, for, and near African Americans already existed. The new form of theater would be significant because it would rest on work by black playwrights; only this would make it “by us” in Du Bois’s estimation. His statement implied that, although scores of black performers, directors, and composers enjoyed considerable success, it was the emergence of the black playwright that would finally allow black self-representation in the theater. Du Bois’s bias toward playwriting was appropriate for his historical moment, but without accounting for his statement’s historical specificity, scholars have too often used it as *the* standard against which all black theater efforts should be judged. Blithely applying Du Bois’s standards across space and time, they have easily overlooked the extent to which black minstrels, musical comedians, and Harlem actors like the Lafayette Players who performed Shakespeare, created “black theater” despite having no serious playwrights among them.

To appreciate the extent to which nineteenth-century black theater practitioners created “black theater,” I will examine their efforts and identify the many ways in which theater could be about, by, for, and near African Americans. What results is a greater appreciation of the difficulties involved in attaining even one of Du Bois’s goals in a racist society. Furthermore, by considering each component of Du Bois’s definition in the context of the historical moment in which black theater practitioners operated, I will demonstrate that fulfilling all of Du Bois’s criteria was not always their aim.

In elevating playwriting, scholars have divorced black drama history from its roots in the theater.<sup>1</sup> They have treated nineteenth-century theater performers as if their legacy did not enable the advances that playwrights later made, intimating that these performers illustrate only what early twentieth-century dramatists should avoid. By severing the ties between African American playwrights and the stage history that preceded them, scholars have been forced to place these playwrights within white dramatic traditions that do not fully account for their work.<sup>2</sup> This chapter offers a revision of prevailing black drama history by recognizing that early twentieth-century protest playwrights continued the work begun by blacks who worked on and behind the nineteenth-century stage.

Rather than assume that blacks became more politically and socially conscious in the 1910s when antilynching drama emerged, I call for a more nuanced approach to black theater and black self-representation. In examining the work of theater performers, especially in the 1890s and early 1900s, I suggest that they actually provided the foundation for early protest dramatists and even for Du Bois's famous declaration. Both Du Bois's manifesto and the antilynching plays are historically contingent documents

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<sup>1</sup> Here I am emphasizing the distinction between "drama," meaning written plays and "theater," which is a more general term that includes performance. I hope to eliminate this distinction in my characterization of black drama history, but I must first identify its impact on those histories that elevate playwriting.

<sup>2</sup> For example, scholars insist that early African American playwrights wrote in the folk drama tradition, but they consistently qualify their readings by saying that the playwrights do not accept the major tenets of that tradition. Specifically, folk drama saw itself giving voice to "simple" rural people who struggled against the forces of Nature. But black playwrights, including Willis Richardson, who praised folk drama, consistently portray *their* folk as dealing with the complex and not-so-natural forces of American racism. Though the folk movement went in a very particular direction that black playwrights resisted, scholars use the category instead of considering the possibility of another. I will not argue that early playwrights were not aware of, and influenced by, folk drama, but I will insist that it cannot fully account for black playwrights' work. By placing them in conversation with other writers (and ignoring performers, directors, etc.), scholars have discounted much of their heritage.

Many scholars use the "folk drama" label without hesitation. For a sophisticated attempt to justify the label while acknowledging the limits, please see Leslie Sanders's chapter on Richardson and Randolph Edmonds in *The Development of Black Theater in America*, Baton Rouge: Louisiana State UP, 1988.

that responded to their material environment. The legacy left by minstrels, musical comedians, and actors like the Lafayette Players created the conditions that allowed Du Bois and the playwrights to envision a theater that was simultaneously about, by, for, and near African Americans. Yet, early performers did not merely create an audience that supported Du Bois's vision and the dramatists' work; this audience was the very same one *from which* Du Bois and the playwrights emerged as theater critics. Early performers drew blacks to the theater and convinced them of its relevance to the community. As a result, activists like Du Bois and the soon-to-be playwrights began to trust the theater's capacity to enable and offer more consistent black self-representation.

This chapter examines the many ways in which African American theater practitioners engaged the politics of representation so that they could take significant steps toward black identity formation. African Americans created theatrical performances that were variously about, by, for, and near blacks beginning in the 1850s but especially in the 1890s through the 1910s. They made theater that was *by* African Americans by gaining control of the mechanisms of representation. They created representations of black life, rather than simple stereotypes, so that theater could be truly *about* African Americans. They managed to make theater *for* African Americans by offering representations that uplifted, entertained, or otherwise benefited blacks. Finally, they made representations accessible to blacks in order to cultivate theater *near* African Americans. My exploration results in a more complex understanding of how "black theater" is defined and achieved, and how it relates to the group it serves and the group identity it strives to represent.

In sharp contrast to other scholars, I demonstrate that nineteenth-century black theater history is not characterized by confusion and indirection. To the contrary, this period—with its blackface comedians and its Broadway-imitating actors—provided the foundation upon which Du Bois and the antilynching dramatists necessarily built. My survey of the period begins in the 1850s, when blacks first gained access to the professional stage as minstrels, and I explore the ways in which they subverted these roles even while fulfilling them. Next, I consider how minstrels created new outlets for their talent by becoming musical comedians at the turn of the century. By the late 1890s, these comedians hired all-black creative teams and controlled the content of their shows to a degree that minstrelsy never allowed. These production teams quickly became models for what future generations of black theater professionals could achieve. By the 1910s, investors built theaters in Harlem to serve African American audiences, and blacks used these venues to hone their skills, both on stage and behind the scenes. As these houses prospered, the theatergoing population among African Americans swelled, and it produced drama critics whose demands could no longer be met by Harlem's existing commercial theaters. From this body of critics, antilynching playwrights eventually arose, creating voices that changed black theater forever. In examining this history, we find that the playwrights' contributions and Du Bois' manifesto emerged *because* of earlier black performers, not in spite of them.

Du Bois's call for performances that were simultaneously about, by, for, and near African Americans was born of a fundamental desire to make theater a permanent vehicle for blacks to portray themselves with accuracy and dignity. He believed that black performers alone could not create this kind of theater. Performances were too fleeting;

black-authored texts were more enduring. Yet, careful examination of the nineteenth-century black theater community reveals that, even without producing dramatists, it succeeded in making theater a space for black self-representation.

Despite not writing serious, non-musical scripts, early performers made theater benefit the race in ways that even Du Bois could appreciate. This idea may seem counter-intuitive because minstrels and musical comedians so often embodied representations that were widely considered unflattering and that certainly were not in keeping with Du Bois's Victorian sensibilities. Yet, transforming theater so that it became a space for accurate portrayals of African Americans was a complex struggle—further complicated by the dynamic relationship between representation and identity. The power of representation to shape identity is concisely described by cultural theorist Stuart Hall in his assertion that "...identities are... constructed within, not outside representation," and that therefore "...identities are about questions of using the resources of history, language and culture in the process of becoming rather than being: not 'who we are' [...] so much as what we might become, how we have been represented and how that bears on how we might represent ourselves" (Hall 4).<sup>3</sup> Individuals come to understand who they are based on how they have been represented by members of their own group as well as by others; for, representations influence our conception of who we are and who we are not. Identity does not exist before representation; it is created through it. As theorist Richard Schechner explains, "appearances are actualities" because performances "make belief" (35, 19). To believe that someone is trustworthy or deceitful, knowledgeable or ignorant, we generally need to see that person perform those

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<sup>3</sup> As the vibrant field of Whiteness Studies has articulated, white identities are as determined by these processes as black identities; here, I emphasize black identity for obvious reasons.

characteristics. For this reason, even the president's identity is performed; he does not assume that his title and office alone "make belief." For example, when he signs important bills, he does so in a television broadcast that emphasizes the gravity of the event and his personal importance. The flag is prominently displayed, and he is flanked by cabinet members. The more he performs his authority, the more the public sees him as a powerful and capable leader, and the more he believes that that is the essence of his identity (Schechner 35).

Given the interplay between representation and identity, an examination of "black theater" is complicated by the simultaneous acknowledgment that "black theater" strove to enable a socially disempowered group to represent itself, *but also* that black identity was fluid and ever-changing. Black identity has never existed prior to and outside of representation. Though Du Bois sometimes seems to subscribe to that notion, his concern with controlling how blacks were depicted underscores his understanding that identity is fluid, dynamic, and pliable. Because identity is vulnerable to the power of representation, blacks must be represented with accuracy and care, which is why Du Bois was so concerned with countering *Birth of a Nation* and using *Crisis* magazine to establish a very different picture of the race. According to cultural historian Daylanne English, *Crisis* became a racial family album that suggested that "the 'negro family' cohere[ed] enough... to permit exhaustive (and wholly positive) representation" (300). Du Bois used photography and an ever-expanding catalog of black elites' accomplishments to present "the 'college-bred,' middle-class, urban intellectual man as the authentic representative of an ideal racial family" (English 306). Thus, the man who

insisted that black theater accurately portray blacks recognized that African Americans' self-conceptions were dependent on how the race was represented.

Given the fluidity of black identity, defining and building black theater was necessarily a dynamic process that shifted according to the material conditions of the historical moment that enabled that theater's existence. Accordingly, black theater could and did exist before black-authored dramas proliferated. To recognize its various incarnations throughout the nineteenth century is to understand that black performers engaged the politics of representation as consciously as Du Bois did and that they were just as committed to black self-representation as he was.

### **Nineteenth-Century Black Theater Practitioners & the Politics of Representation**

From the moment that blacks stepped onto the stage as minstrels, they reshaped the previously all-white arena so that it would better accommodate black talent—essentially making theater black, making it their own. African American performers built “black theater” by gaining access to—and then increasing control of—the mainstream stage, a forum that was becoming more powerful as a means of influencing public opinion. In claiming this platform, black theater practitioners demonstrated their understanding of the “politics of representation,” defined by cultural theorist Stuart Hall as “the way meaning can be struggled over, and whether a particular regime of representation can be challenged, contested and transformed” (Representation 8). With each change that they made to their shows and staff, nineteenth-century performers developed a theater of their own. In the early twentieth century, Du Bois may have

stressed the need for black-authored dramas, but having such scripts was not initially the goal.

### **Black Minstrelsy**

In the 1850s, there were no blacks on the professional stage, so making theater “black” simply involved ensuring that African Americans could participate in that arena. When blacks became minstrels, they adopted an image that no one thought was flattering. Nevertheless, making theater their own first meant participating in it. As Robert Toll explains, black minstrels initially “had to act out white caricatures of Negroes. But since whites had already created and spread these images, it was really less a question of *what* [depictions] than of *who* would portray them” (227). At this time, black performers did not focus on making content reflect black culture; it was not about making theater truly “about us.” During this time, representation and identity were linked more by blacks’ insistence upon manipulating theater as a mechanism of representation by controlling their bodies and voices within that space. There was no pretense that the images they embodied were true representations of black identity. Yet, black minstrels insisted upon becoming agents, not just objects, of theatrical production.

Black minstrels knew that they could not transform theater overnight, but they believed that change must come from within. As Toll concludes, “participation at least gave blacks a chance to modify these caricatures” (228). Though white men made blackface minstrelsy a national craze in the 1840s, black men slowly began winning audiences in 1855 (Toll 198). Minstrel shows were highly stylized and depended on “oddities” and “peculiarities.” Made more peculiar because performers wore burnt cork

masks, the show consisted of three parts, each filled with numerous unrelated acts.

Historian Nathan Huggins offers an exceptionally clear description of the format:

The curtain rose on blackfaced performers playing a rousing opening. They sat in a row, facing the audience, costumed in the extremes; on the one hand, the careless abandon of Jim Crow, while on the other, the ruffled, ultra-stylishness of Dandy Jim.... After the opening, the interlocutor would play the “straight man” to the humor of the “end men”.... He would engage them in a series of short conversations where the end men’s twists of meanings or crudeness would force the joke back upon the pompous and pretentious interlocutor. Jokes and conundrums would give way to “serious” sermons, speeches, or lectures on the most weighty moral, political, or scientific topics by the blackfaced comedians. And this would be broken by the “specialty” songs of members of the group. After the “first part,” there would follow the “olio,” in which a mixed bag of individual and ensemble song and dance would be presented. Wild banjo music and abandoned dance would give way to sentimental ballads and dances of slow, rhythmic, insinuating shuffle. The “olio” over, the “third part” would be a grand finale: rousing music—perhaps a medley—in which the ensemble performed, culminating in a “walk-around” (Huggins 249-50).

Working within these conventions, black troupes gained momentum by promoting themselves as “delineators” of black culture. They were constantly billed as “genuine,” “real,” and “bona-fide,” and they asserted their “authenticity” in two important ways. First, many of them did away with burnt cork masks (Toll 200). Black actors may have considered the make-up demeaning and some may have resisted wearing it for those reasons, but a naturally black face also brought commercial benefits. Not needing make-up distinguished them from white actors who had to “black up” to get into character (Toll 200). Second, blacks marketed their supposed first-hand knowledge of plantation life. Because they were believable as ex-slaves, and Northerners were unabashedly curious

about slavery, black troupes soon proved to be too competitive for their white counterparts.

By becoming minstrels, these performers carved a space for themselves and developed a form of black theater. As Eric Lott explains in *Love and Theft*, blackface minstrelsy was “the first formal public acknowledgement by whites of black culture” (4). It did not take long for black performers to transform disparaging acknowledgement into bill-paying opportunity. Not only was minstrelsy a viable livelihood, it also allowed a measure of physical, social, and economic mobility available to few African Americans at this time (Toll 196). In this way, black minstrels made theater “for” African Americans by reaping some of its benefits. Rather than allow whites to profit from representations of the race, they insisted upon profiting themselves. Again, the images may not have reflected black identity, but they signaled blacks’ determination to assert themselves as resourceful manipulators of the power of representation.

Nevertheless, black minstrels’ commercial advantage came at a high price. They may have carved out a space for themselves as soon as the American stage presented an opportunity, but they were confined by their own marketing strategy. They could only insist that they were “true coons” and that white actors were imposters, so they soon seemed like anything but actors. The nation believed that they were simply “being genuine Negroes” who were not ashamed to “indulge in reality” (Toll 201).

There were moments, however, when black minstrels found ways to subvert their prescribed roles. Once they gained popularity, they could sometimes deviate from the material that had made the original white troupes so successful. Black minstrels often created skits that defied white assumptions. In particular, when presenting plantation

scenes that required nostalgia for the “good ole days” of slavery, black performers presented a special kind of longing (Toll 245). Whereas white minstrels crooned about how kind master had been, songs by blacks seldom mentioned master. They may have sung about plantation dances, possums, and watermelon, but nothing was more missed than the “loving presence” of “mudder, father, sister, or brudder” (Toll 245).

Such deviations from the minstrel tradition are significant when we consider whether minstrelsy could be considered “black theater.” Certainly, songs about missing one’s parents and siblings demonstrated black minstrels’ investment in using this creative outlet not just to make a living but also to offer more complex representations—to make what happened on stage more “about” African Americans than it had previously been. Black minstrels deviated from convenient, profitable stereotype in order to link black identity to familial love. In so doing, they anticipated themes that would later shape antilynching drama. Thus, in individual songs, they seized an opportunity to make minstrelsy more “by us” and increased the instances when the show was actually “about us,” demonstrating that even minstrel songs could give voice to African American identity. Long before blacks were writing serious, non-musical scripts, minstrels showcased familial love and made the stage articulate at least some truth about African Americans. As Eric Lott has suggested, when these black performers disrupted the tendency of American theater to dehumanize the race, they demonstrated black ability to seize power in these otherwise problematic shows.<sup>4</sup>

Black audiences understood that simply gaining access to theater as a mechanism of representation was important, and they apparently agreed that minstrelsy was a valid

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<sup>4</sup> See Eric Lott’s *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class*. New York: Oxford UP, 1993.

way of creating a theater that accommodated blackness. Despite the problematic images that minstrels embodied, many African Americans welcomed them enthusiastically. In Washington D.C., Pittsburgh, New Orleans, and Cincinnati, blacks attended these shows en masse. In fact, Toll asserts that “black minstrels were so popular with [African Americans] that some theater owners even deviated from their usual practice of restricting blacks to the ‘Nigger Heaven’ section of the gallery.” This was true all over the South, including cities like Galveston, Texas and St. Louis, Missouri (Toll 227). Undoubtedly, many supported minstrels simply because they had altered a racist practice of exclusion. In making a place for themselves within this profitable profession and giving black audiences a reason to come out and support them, black minstrels put theater “near” African Americans as well.

Of course, many formally educated blacks condemned minstrelsy in print. With so few professional entertainments available, however, many likely attended from time to time. Some even confessed to enjoying these shows. In *Music and Some Highly Musical People*, James Monroe Trotter separated himself somewhat from those who opposed minstrelsy. Having attended shows, he said that the Georgia Minstrels’ music was so charming that he almost felt compensated “...for what he was ready to confess he suffered while witnessing that part of the performance devoted to caricature” (274-82). As musical theater scholar Thomas Riis explains, though sometimes uncomfortable, many valued seeing African Americans on the professional stage (7). It meant that, in some small way, theater belonged to them, not just to whites.

Even if minstrels found moments of power during their shows, they also consistently worked to break from the form altogether. As Allen Woll argues, “...black

actors began to profess discomfort with the roles they were expected to portray. By 1890, promoters and performers began to envision a new type of black entertainment, one that might loosen the rigid bonds of minstrelsy. Change would be cautious, to be sure, since no producer wished to deviate abruptly from the expectations of the audience” (4). Simple changes to the predictable format of the minstrel show came with the production of *The Creole Show* and *Oriental America* in 1890 and 1896, respectively. Whereas minstrel troupes had been all-male, *The Creole Show* introduced a chorus of women. It also featured a woman interlocutor (Woll 4). *Oriental America* went further by de-emphasizing traditional songs and dances. The finale was not a cakewalk but a medley of classic opera pieces. Once this formal experimentation began, it was only a few short years to the emergence of the form that replaced minstrelsy: black musical comedy.

These formal changes did not address the notion that blacks had been happy slaves, however. Perhaps the best motivation for obliterating those assumptions came with *Black America* (1895). This production employed 500 performers and brought the plantation to Brooklyn, New York (Riis 22-24). As audiences strolled among the slave quarters, they were told that the actors had actually lived in them. Accordingly, the *New York Times* reviewed the performance to be just as “instructive as it is entertaining” (qtd. in Riis 23). Whites saw the show as an exhibition, and the performers as anything but actors.<sup>5</sup> Thus, Northern audiences felt uniquely privileged to see how blacks “naturally” behaved among themselves. Advertising for the show created these expectations, and the cast delivered. As theater historian Robert Toll explains, “when a watermelon cart entered the performance arena, the entire cast broke ranks and descended on the melons,

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<sup>5</sup> Some might be more comfortable calling this show an ethnographic pageant, given that it was staged outdoors and treated like an exhibition. Its ties to minstrelsy, though, are undeniable.

‘uninhibitedly’ breaking them open and gorging themselves on the sweet contents” (Toll 263). This show left no room for improvement on the plantation motif, and American minstrelsy began to fade after this 1895 production.<sup>6</sup>

Black theater scholar David Krasner has systematically acknowledged the agency of turn-of-the-century black actors and demonstrated that their performances were “scarcely as barren of self-assertion and resistance as many contemporaries imply” (7). Nevertheless, when speaking of *Black America*, he says very little about the black actors who brought the show to life; instead, he focuses on the managerial skills and market savvy of white producer Nat Salsbury (23-24). Still, as Krasner so effectively argues when discussing performers of other shows, the African Americans involved in *Black America* were not mere puppets. Despite the problematic images they embodied, these 500 singers and dancers maximized the opportunity to gain professional experience, monetary compensation, and New York contacts that led to other work. Black actors of this stereotype-driven show took from it the motivation and tools needed to free themselves from minstrelsy.

### **Black Musical Comedy**

With the form of the minstrel show altered in *The Creole Show* and *Oriental America* and the plantation tradition virtually exhausted in *Black America*, African American performers positioned themselves to enter a new era in entertainment. As they moved away from minstrelsy both structurally and thematically, they developed black musical comedy, a form whose content they could control because they shaped it more

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<sup>6</sup> Of course, minstrelsy did not disappear from American stages, but it was less common after this show. At least two factors contributed: 1) black performers found other outlets and 2) white minstrels had already begun abandoning blackface when they proved no competition for “authentic” black minstrels.

around plot than around “peculiarities.” In becoming musical comedians, black performers laid greater claim to the mechanisms of representation and turned simple participation into more effective manipulation. Since black musical comedy was even more “by” African Americans, they used the form to determine how black character would be depicted, so that their shows were more “about” blacks than about stereotypes. Just as importantly, musical comedians made theater “for” African Americans even while playing Broadway venues that routinely excluded black theatergoers, because they employed all-black creative teams. They ensured that theater would give African Americans valuable professional experience and an increasing share of American theater profits.

To demonstrate how black performers used this new format to change American theater, I will spotlight a few of the most successful men of the era: Will Marion Cook and the teams of Bert Williams & George Walker and Bob Cole & J. Rosamond Johnson. Between these two teams, Broadway revealed in a major black musical every year from 1898 to 1909, and Cook was a part of every major black show through 1915 (Riis 42-43). Exploring the black musical tradition through the careers of these men demonstrates that, whatever stereotypes they have been accused of preserving, they shaped American theater so that it would accommodate black talent, and they helped ensure that black theater would gain strength throughout the twentieth century. Indeed, their success helped create the atmosphere needed for serious drama, including antilynching plays, to emerge.

Before composer Will Marion Cook met Williams and Walker, he knew that the team had made the cakewalk an all-out craze and decided to compose a musical to tell its

story: *Clorindy, the Origin of the Cakewalk* (1898). His structure was novel because, at this time, musicals were designed simply to entertain, not necessarily to present a coherent tale. Songs were not expected to move the action forward, so they were added wherever the lead actors or director wanted them.<sup>7</sup> Individual songs were the most important units within these productions; they did not always bear a structural relationship to each other or to the scenes of the show (Riis 9, 49). Quite simply, a hit musical contained hit songs; it did not need a coherent storyline. Though Cook's acclaim as a composer would have come only from arranging hit songs, he wanted his musical to tell a story. He recruited poet Paul Laurence Dunbar to write the libretto, and they worked together tirelessly (Woll 7). Unfortunately, Dunbar's script was never used because the venue that Cook finally secured was a rooftop theater, not conducive to dialogue. In production, then, the show was more of a musical sketch than the full-length musical comedy that he had envisioned.

Still, Cook's desire to tell his audience the story of the cakewalk—rather than simply let them enjoy the spectacle of it—is significant. It shows that when blacks seized creative control, their first goal was to give the audience more substance than they expected from black material. Because the cakewalk was already associated with African American culture, Cook wanted to give audiences a fuller picture of it and the people who created it. His intention to present a more complete picture of African American life is also manifest in his next production. His success with *Clorindy* made the managers of the Casino Theatre's Roof Garden (Woll Dictionary 199) more eager to present *Jes Lak White Fo'ks* (1899). Despite extremely poor acoustics, the libretto was not dropped, so the story Cook wanted to tell was preserved—a story that anticipates later antilynching

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<sup>7</sup> This was true of most white shows as well; continuity was quite exceptional (Riis 9).

dramas with its emphasis on black family life. The lead character is Pompous Johnson, a black man who wins a large sum of money and decides that he will do “as whites do.” Intent upon entering high society, he hires a matchmaker who arranges for his daughter to marry an African prince. The prince later proves to be a “seedy character,” and Pompous finally admits that an honest, hard-working African American man would give his daughter a better life. He then encourages her to marry the man of her heart’s desire (Woll 10). This show was less successful than Cook’s first, but the narrative and its moral were presented as he intended.

With this musical, Cook reached a white Broadway audience but refused to abandon the black-centered issues that he wanted to address. Indeed, this is likely why the show did not do particularly well. As David Krasner notes, the musical forcefully interrogated issues of importance to modern black communities increasingly stratified by the class distinctions that accompanied freedom. The show criticized middle-class blacks who tended to distance themselves from their less well established brethren. Cook’s message was unmistakable; the moment that Pompous decides to stop trying to be “jes lak white f’lks” is marked in the text by the absence of dialect and a clear moral tone (Krasner 61). Pompous’s daughter overcomes him with her song “Love Look Not at Estate.” Pompous then decides that he is more concerned with his daughter being with “a man who will look after [her] and make a living for her” (qtd. Krasner 62). Thus, *Jes Lak White F’lks* ultimately places true love and honorable manhood at the center, as lynching plays would do later. This musical was therefore “by” and “about” African Americans, and Cook focused on how the race could advance while being true to itself.

Though his music alone made him a celebrated composer whom many Broadway managers sought, Cook clearly had a penchant for using his music not just to entertain but to illuminate black culture. Therefore, it did not take long for him to partner with Bert Williams and George Walker to transform Broadway (Woll 11). The duo came to New York in 1896 at the request of top manager and producer George Lederer. They had been successful on the West Coast, but made an even bigger name for themselves on Broadway when they became the only critically acclaimed part of Lederer's otherwise mediocre production (Riis 35). Since they saved the show by forcing the orchestra to learn their music, the former minstrels began to see opportunities widen around them. Their stage personas as "two real coons" did not fade overnight, but they realized that they could take greater control over their careers and carve a black theater space on the "Great White Way."

Williams and Walker changed Broadway by starring in their own productions and by joining forces with Will Marion Cook to assemble an all-black creative team. Their first full-length shows, *The Policy Players* (1899) and *The Sons of Ham* (1900), signaled that they would no longer be exotic additions to someone else's production. Though still in blackface, they added more humanity to their characters. For example, in the latter show, Williams began by describing himself as "Jonah Man," a fellow with unbelievably bad luck. This designation spanned the rest of Williams's career, consistently providing an opportunity for him to share the details of his character's life with the audience (Woll 35-36). As theater historian Allen Woll explains, the song "I'm a Jonah Man" "humanized Williams' shuffling minstrel image" because he could be seen as tragic, not just pathetic (35). Rather than remain a black dull wit whose stupidity created every

laugh, he became a man who told the audience about his interminable misfortunes, and they laughed with him, not just at him (Woll 35). Williams made space for highlighting black manhood even while accommodating the white audience enough to remain popular. Although not a serious, non-musical script, *The Sons of Ham* was as concerned with deeper depictions of black manhood as later antilynching plays would be.

Such humanizing alterations increased when Cook became the duo's composer and built an all-black staff. Though their early shows were full-length productions, they were mostly improvised; when there was a script, it existed only because assistants transcribed the team's adlibbing on opening night (Woll 36). Soon, Williams and Walker wanted more structure, and with Cook's help, they created it while remaining popular on Broadway for the next six years. *In Dahomey* (1903) ran for three seasons, *Abyssinia* (1906) for two, and *Bandanna Land* (1908) ended only when Walker was too sick to continue in 1909.

Though the content of these shows is problematic by today's standards, we must acknowledge the importance of their substantial storylines and black creative control. Because these musicals were written solely "by" African Americans, they forged a path for the more politically progressive dramas that came later. Writing content that overtly indicted American racism was not the only way to make a path for protest playwrights; sometimes it was more important to seize creative control so that blacks could hone their skills. Working within the confines of what Broadway audiences expected of them allowed these men to provide younger artists with behind-the-scenes opportunities that were not available in any other United States venue.

*In Dahomey* was Williams and Walker's first production with Cook's team. Though less action takes place in Africa than the title suggests,<sup>8</sup> the team believed that the shift would allow them to shed what lingered from their ties to American minstrelsy (Woll 36). The show presents two characters who want to collect the reward for recovering a valuable box that had been stolen from Mr. Lightfoot, a white official in the American Colonization Society. Though the pair cannot find the box, they decide to travel to Florida and con the distressed owner. Miraculously, at the end of Act II, the ruse is no longer necessary because Lightfoot finds a pot of gold, which allows him to take the entire cast to Dahomey in Act III. Lightfoot immediately wants to return home but Williams and Walker want to stay, because all black men are royalty in Dahomey (Woll 36-38).

The show reached many people,<sup>9</sup> but it did not enlighten its audience about African or African American culture (it was not "about us"), and some criticized the team for this shortcoming. Williams and Walker responded in an open letter in *Variety* magazine, reminding their critics that they were Broadway performers who relied on white audiences for their livelihood. While admitting that they catered to white expectations, they insisted that the number of black artists and performers they employed should not be overlooked (Woll 41-42). With this defense, the team reminds us that black performers would not always present what we (or even their contemporaries) would call progressive material, but they certainly changed the American stage as they made space for an unprecedented number of black theater professionals. Their scripts' content

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<sup>8</sup> Despite my wording here, I recognize that Africa is a continent.

<sup>9</sup> After a successful New York run, the show enjoyed good reception in Europe, including a command performance at Buckingham Palace (Woll 40). *In Dahomey* returned to New York and then toured throughout the United States, ultimately enjoying a 400% profit.

was not necessarily “about us,” but they made sure that the shows were “by us” as they were authored by black writers and “for us” in terms of providing money and opportunity so that black professionals could develop their skills. The expertise that blacks gained prompted later generations to see themselves less as entertainers and more as artists with creative control. Thus, it was not long before African Americans could imagine themselves as serious playwrights.

Despite admitting that they often catered to white expectations, Williams and Walker put limits on how much accommodating they would have to do in coming years. The seeds for less compromising techniques were sown even in musicals that some found problematic. In a song about establishing Broadway in Dahomey, they declared, “We’d sell big Georgia possums—some watermelons too—/ To get the coin for the other things we’d like to do—” (Woll 38). Their success ultimately helped them (and their successors) to make fewer compromises, as the team’s next show, *Abyssinia*, demonstrates. Here, Rastus (Walker) and Jasper (Williams) win the lottery and take family and friends on a tour of Europe. They have a misunderstanding with Paris police and flee to Abyssinia. Because “ras” means “prince” in Abyssinian, Rastus is assumed to be royalty. He takes advantage of the misunderstanding, and courts the princess. Later, Ras and Jasper go to a feast, and Ras is assumed to be chief of an enemy tribe. He runs but is cornered in a market, where he instinctively picks up a vase to defend himself. He is quickly accused of stealing and told that the penalty is to lose the offending hand. The young princess intercedes and the Americans are freed, but quickly report that they are leaving Abyssinia (Woll 42-44).

*Abyssinia* (1906) altered American theater to accommodate black talent by moving even further away from the minstrel tradition. Completely conceived and written by African Americans, it contains one of the first songs in which the label “coon” was rejected (Woll 42). Also, it uses a foreign setting as an opportunity to critique American society. Ras talks about America when wooing the princess, and she finds the culture strange. For example, she wonders how Americans can be so unhappy and accumulate debt when people in other countries feed large families on a fraction of an American income (Woll 43-44). Thus, by critiquing American society, a musical which modern readers assume lends nothing to the later protest tradition proves to be its forerunner. In addition, it helped foster race pride because “the Africans of Abyssinia were depicted as representatives of an ancient and praiseworthy culture, and Americans were the targets of humor” (Woll 42). Thus, it is African Americans’ American-ness that is lampooned, not their African heritage.

In 1908, Williams and Walker further demonstrated their awareness of race politics in America, using it to their creative advantage in *Bandanna Land*. Though there is no surviving libretto, we know that the plot involved a real estate scheme (Riis 118). Williams’ character inherits \$25,000 and agrees to help Walker’s character sell land to a railroad company. Their intention, however, is to build an amusement park that employs black entertainers adjacent to the railroad. They are confident that the railroad company will later pay any amount to be rid of their black neighbors (Riis 117). The show used minstrel elements like an interlocutor and a cakewalk finale to the second act, but these simply tempered the social critique. The plot certainly reflected the artists’ awareness of the reality that surrounded African Americans, including entertainers like themselves.

In the final analysis, Williams and Walker knew that whites were not thrilled with the idea of having blacks—even stars—too close. Thus, the structure of *Bandanna Land* revisited minstrel days but their message was painfully clear, demonstrating David Krasner’s point that “theatrical resistance to racism...was a phenomenon of advances and retreats” (5). I would add that this is why measuring progress can never be simple or linear. Resistance must often be masked because “direct confrontation [was] often rejected as being too risky” (Krasner 4). *Bandanna Land’s* parodic critique of American racism was cut short when Walker became ill (Woll 48). As long as they reigned, however, Williams and Walker pushed the limits of black entertainment and created professional opportunities for others. In doing so, they worked toward creating a new type of black theater, even if it was on Broadway.

Though often less celebrated than Williams and Walker, Bob Cole and J. Rosamond Johnson were also Broadway sensations, and made changes that even more pointedly prepared the way for protest drama. Like Williams and Walker, they collaborated between 1899 and 1909 (Riis 27, 34). Rather than hire large creative teams, this duo ensured black self-representation by insisting upon writing their own material.

Even before he teamed with Johnson, Cole resolved to maintain creative control. In 1896, he joined Black Patti’s Troubadours, the era’s most successful non-minstrel traveling troupe. Cole was extraordinarily versatile—an excellent director, writer, choreographer, and performer—and he developed original material during his first few months with the group (Woll 11). At the end of his first season, Cole demanded a raise for his exceptional contributions. The managers refused and had him barred from every theater possible (Riis 28). When he took the songs he had written with him, they had him

arrested. At trial, the judge ruled against Cole and ordered him to surrender his compositions (Woll 12).

These experiences convinced Bob Cole to strive for independence from whites. Though the managers' sphere of influence was wide, troubadours who agreed with Cole left with him and helped him establish his own group. *A Trip to Coontown* (1898) was their first show, and it was a huge success. As Cole and Billy Johnson provided a full night's entertainment with a coherent storyline, *A Trip to Coontown* became the first musical written, performed, and managed by blacks. The music and action were made for each other, and unlike *Clorindy* later that year, it was presented with libretto intact (Riis 28, Woll 12). From the beginning of the black musical comedy tradition, then, blacks opted to tell a plotted story.

After he inaugurated the black musical in 1898, Cole teamed with J. Rosamond Johnson and James Weldon Johnson and concentrated on composing songs; together, they soon became the decade's most successful songwriters (Riis 34-35). Many Broadway hit shows relied on their music, and they were recruited by top theater producer Abe Erlanger (Riis 35). They signed an unprecedented three-year contract with Klaw and Erlanger productions, obligating them to compose exclusively for their shows. In return, they received a monthly salary, a flat sum for each ensemble number, and royalties for each song (Woll 21 & *Along This Way*). With such a contract in hand, the press crowded them for interviews, and they began to share their artistic vision: "What we aim to do...is evolve a type of music that will have all that is distinct in the old Negro music and yet which shall be sophisticated enough to appeal to the cultured musician. We want the Negro spirit—its warmth and originality—to color our music; we want to

retain its marked rhythms, but we are trying to get away from that minor strain that used to dominate it” (qtd. on Woll 21).

The contract with Klaw and Erlanger indicated that Cole and Johnson had already established their distance from the “minor strain” of minstrelsy which had dominated black music, but they wanted to do more. Once their contract expired, Cole and Johnson decided to star in their own shows. (At this point, James Weldon Johnson withdrew from the team to become consul to Venezuela.) After having written so much material for other people’s productions, they felt confident that they could write their own full-length musicals. Their first show was *The Shoo-Fly Regiment* in 1907, a musical that foregrounds black manhood and intense love in ways unprecedented on the mainstream stage, making even Broadway a space for black self-representation. The story centers on Hunter Wilson, a recent Tuskegee Institute graduate who becomes a teacher. When the Spanish-American War erupts, he decides to serve his country. His friends support his decision but his fiancée does not, and at the end of Act I, she returns the engagement ring. Act II is set in the Philippines where Hunter leads his regiment to victory. He returns home a hero in Act III, but his fiancée takes him back only after much hesitation (Woll 23).

Cole and Johnson used their popularity and the autonomy it brought to portray blacks as more complete human beings so that even segregated Broadway venues gave voice to material that was truly “about us.” As James Weldon Johnson, speaking in 1930, and modern theater historian Allen Woll explain, *The Shoo-Fly Regiment* represented a step forward, because it was the first time blacks performed serious, tender love scenes before a white audience (Woll 23). At that time, no one expected whites to believe that

blacks experienced true love, so romantic scenes were always heavily burlesqued (*Black Manhattan* 171). It is significant, then, that Cole and Johnson refused to mask black love. Just as importantly, the team moved black theater forward by considering war's impact on black marriage and family life, anticipating antilynching plays like Alice Dunbar-Nelson's *Mine Eyes Have Seen* and Mary Burrill's *Aftermath*. Finally, *Shoo-Fly Regiment* made history because it spotlights a black man who is not only educated but also brave and patriotic (Woll 23). Hunter inspires everyone, including his fiancée who did not want him to serve in the military. Once we understand Cole and Johnson's accomplishments, it is clear that white folk dramatist Ridgely Torrence's production of "three plays of Negro life" in 1917 was not the first presentation of less stereotypical images.<sup>10</sup> Ten years before Torrence, Cole and Johnson proved that more humane depictions of blacks could be lucrative on the mainstream stage.<sup>11</sup>

Without question, musical comedy—dominated by Williams, Walker, Cole, and Johnson and shaped by Will Marion Cook—created an atmosphere conducive to the subsequent rise of serious drama in the black community.<sup>12</sup> Musicals not only

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<sup>10</sup> Sterling Brown and James Hatch explain that Torrence's shows popularized some of the racial stereotypes that continue to limit black actors' opportunities. At the turn of the century, however, many blacks considered these to be much more humane images than minstrelsy allowed. Certainly, the positive reviews from the black community document this sentiment. For example, Willis Richardson, Alain Locke, and Montgomery Gregory all named Torrence's *Three Plays for a Negro Theatre* as the beginning of legitimate "Negro drama." By linking black playwriting to black stage history, however, it is clear that Cole and Johnson gave black playwrights an earlier (and therefore more daring) model.

<sup>11</sup> It is also worth noting that Cole and Johnson used their autonomy to break more boundaries in their next endeavor. They brought Native American culture to Broadway with some semblance of dignity in *The Red Moon* (1909), which was proclaimed "brilliant" and ran for almost a year (Woll 27). It has comedic twists and turns but centers on familial ties and is based on what Cole and Johnson learned while touring the western United States. They had performed on an Apache reservation and spoke at length with their hosts about music and folklore (Woll 24). None of this is to suggest that the show was not problematic even if well intentioned. Still, it is important to note the fact that they veered from expectations.

<sup>12</sup> I will emphasize here that I am not suggesting that these shows constituted serious drama; they made a path for it. Even if they countered white assumptions to a degree, they were still comic productions. As William Branch explains in his introduction to *Black Thunder*, these musicals "often appeared to some Black observers as little advanced beyond actual minstrelsy itself." Branch concedes, however, that these

complicated common conceptions of African American character, but they also gave blacks important professional experience that fostered creative confidence. Because these stars employed black writers, producers, and directors, the next generation had more models for what it could achieve. Young artists could imagine themselves writing and directing, not just singing and dancing. If minstrelsy had relied on blacks being “natural” on stage as “real coons,” in contrast, these musicals foregrounded African American artistic talent because they were completely conceived, developed, and executed by blacks.

At this moment in history, black performers faced a society that welcomed them as entertainers but did not respect their talent or intelligence. Thus, shaping a black theater space meant manipulating America’s racist assumptions to create more opportunity for black professionals. These comedians may have kept white audiences laughing, but they also kept blacks employed. Though African American viewers sometimes criticized these shows, they more often expressed pride that these teams reigned on Broadway. Race men like Du Bois and journalist Lester Walton often proclaimed the comedians’ brilliance in navigating the theater world. In fact, Du Bois said that “Cole and Johnson and Williams and Walker lifted minstrelsy by sheer force of genius into the beginning of a new drama” (*Crisis* Aug. 1916). What he says generally should be appreciated more specifically. The representation of honorable black manhood, deep romantic love, and familial responsibility that we see increasingly spotlighted in musical comedies became the most significant themes in protest plays, especially the earliest antilynching dramas.

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shows were “an attempt, at least, to break the stranglehold of minstrel expectations...” (xiv). [*Black Thunder: An Anthology of Contemporary African-American Drama*. New York: Mentor, 1992.]

## Harlem's Heyday

It is fortunate that musical comedians cultivated behind-the-scenes talent by employing all-black creative teams because, without that expertise, 1910 may have been the end of black theater. Quite abruptly, mainstream audiences lost interest in black musical comedy, and downtown theaters denied African American artists employment in practically every other kind of show. As James Weldon Johnson explains in *Black Manhattan*, this was “the term of exile of the Negro from the downtown theatres of New York, which began in 1910 and lasted seven lean years” (170). Theater historians have explained the exile in many ways, attributing it to everything from industrialization to simple racism.<sup>13</sup> What is most important here, however, is that theaters blossomed in the black community during this time. As performance historian Allen Woll puts it, Harlem theaters “became the new Broadway for black theatrical performers” (54). Ultimately, then, musical comedies fostered creative confidence among aspiring theater practitioners, and their abrupt exclusion from downtown opportunities forced them to seek other venues. When this quest led them to Harlem, many more African Americans could enjoy theater entertainment than ever before; theater was more unapologetically “for us” and “near us.”

Beginning in 1909, African Americans who had been touched by the success of black musical comedies energized Harlem theaters. Eddie Hunter, Lester Walton, and Anita Bush all worked to bring black audiences impressive entertainment. Operating both on stage and behind the scenes, each of these figures relentlessly engaged the politics of representation by building black theater and insisting upon black self-representation.

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<sup>13</sup> See especially Woll, Riis, Mitchell, and Johnson's *Black Manhattan*.

As a young man, Eddie Hunter saw a Williams-Walker musical and knew that he wanted a theater career (Mitchell 65). Hunter worked as a hotel elevator operator but always watched for theater opportunities. One day in 1909, he overheard liquor dealers Martinson and Nibur making plans to lease the newly built Crescent Theatre. Hunter told them that he had full shows written, and the partners allowed him to stage one of them when he offered to work without a salary. Crescent audiences were delighted with *Goin' to the Races*, and Hunter was named the theater's primary producer. He gave his audiences mostly comedy acts and musicals and remained the Crescent's "driving force" from 1909 to 1912, when it could no longer survive competition from the nearby Lincoln Theatre (Mitchell 66-68).<sup>14</sup> Hunter's career was not over, however, because Martinson and Nibur leased the newly built Lafayette in 1912, and he remained their primary producer. He again offered musicals and comedy skits with significant success, but the business partners gave up the lease to the Lafayette two years later, in 1914. The new owner and manager allowed Hunter to produce for them, but he had substantially less influence over the house's artistic direction. Overall, though, Hunter's years of involvement ensured that those in the black community would enjoy the kind of professional entertainment that whites enjoyed elsewhere. Just as importantly, Hunter kept black theater professionals employed during many of the "lean years" of exile.

Hunter was not an influential producer at the Lafayette after 1914, but this house was nonetheless the first Harlem theater to have a black manager, when the new owner made Lester Walton, drama critic for the *New York Age*, his co-manager (Mitchell 68). Walton's passion for theater grew during the musical comedy heyday, and according to

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<sup>14</sup> Unlike the Crescent, the Lincoln could offer moving pictures, the excitingly new and substantially cheaper form of entertainment (Mitchell 67-69).

theater historian Bernard Peterson, he devoted significant time to the black musical genre. Before coming to the Lafayette, Walton co-wrote *Rufus Rastus* (1906) and conceptualized and produced *Old Man's Boy* (1913) (Peterson *Profiles* 252). In 1915, he co-wrote and produced *Darkydom*, a musical that proved to be his first smash hit during his stint as Lafayette manager from 1914 to 1916. Thus, though he later worked to expose black audiences to serious drama, musicals helped mold Walton's consciousness and his theatrical mission.

Walton did not use his authority as manager of the Lafayette to offer content that was substantially different from what Hunter had provided as producer, but behind the scenes, he was shaping a much different theater reality. He was proud that, during his short term as manager, his performers received "more money than paid in a similar length of time by any other colored theater in America" (*Age* Feb. 10, 1916). He also spoke with pride about the fact that all of the theater's "house help" was black and well paid. Artistically speaking, Walton used *Darkydom's* success to underwrite what he felt was most important: serious drama. Only months after the musical's premiere, he recruited a newly formed drama troupe led by Anita Bush (Riis 182, 166). He wanted it to become a permanent fixture, but he knew that it was the public that would ultimately make that decision. He understood the business well, saying "Many a play fails, not because it is bad from an artistic standpoint, but due to the failure of the theatregoers to appreciate it" (*Age* Mar. 25, 1909). Ultimately, "The public has in its hands the fate of all productions. It makes a playwright, a play, an actor, a manager" (*Age* Mar. 25, 1909). As a manager

who recognized the audience's power, Walton influenced public opinion by promoting the acting troupe in the pages of the *New York Age*.<sup>15</sup>

In promoting Bush's troupe, Walton invested in yet another person whose involvement with musical comedy would lead to more serious dramatic endeavors. When *Bandanna Land* ended in 1909, Bush appeared in *Mr. Lode of Koal* (1909-10) and then convinced fellow Williams-Walker chorus members to join her dance troupe, which performed until Bush suffered a back injury and a bout with pneumonia (Hatch 202, Thompson 14-15). While bedridden, Bush decided that she would pursue her real aspiration upon recovery: serious acting (Thompson 14-15).<sup>16</sup> In November 1915, the Anita Bush Stock Company performed at Harlem's Lincoln Theatre, then moved a few weeks later to the nearby Lafayette where they enjoyed years of success as the Lafayette Players. Their stellar reputation spread quickly; by 1916, Lafayette Players helped establish troupes in Chicago, Washington D.C., and Baltimore and organized an ensemble known as the Dunbar Players in Philadelphia (Thompson 22, Hatch & Hill 204).

Since Bush formed troupes primarily to give black actors professional stage experience, she did not seek "race drama." With "purely artistic" goals in mind, the actors valued the opportunity to hone their skills much more than the scripts' subject matter. The teams thus generally performed white-authored plays that were already popular on Broadway, and they often utilized discarded Broadway sets and costumes. This strategy kept the main company active from 1916 to 1932, even when Bush was no

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<sup>15</sup> Even when he left the Lafayette because of disagreements with the owners, he featured the Players' efforts. Thompson says that he wrote one or two articles about the Players from the time they arrived until 1923 (Thompson 21).

<sup>16</sup> Another excellent source for information on Anita Bush's career is Jo A. Tanner's *Dusky Maidens: The Odyssey of the Early Black Dramatic Actress*. Tanner consulted extensively with M.F. Thompson.

longer directly associated with it (Thompson 23-24).<sup>17</sup> Bush's troupe would eventually perform more than 250 plays, the most famous of which were *The Octoroon*, *Madame X*, *The Count of Monte Cristo*, and *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (Hatch & Hill 204). In *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, the lead actor performed in white-face, suggesting that black actors should not be limited to portraying black characters.

Above all, these actors craved dramatic range so that they could perfect their craft. Though many African Americans had developed behind-the-scenes skills, actors were still expected to master only comedy. Therefore, to Bush's troupe, a real black theater would be one that encouraged a range of theatrical expression from its actors. As former Lafayette Player Clarence Muse remembers: "Our aim was to give vent to our talent and to prove to everybody who was willing to look, to watch, to listen, that we were as good at drama as anybody else had been or could be" (qtd. in Thompson 18). Much more than "copy cats," as theater historian and black playwright Loften Mitchell dubs them, these actors expressed black identity by being innovative, resourceful, and undaunted by their exclusion from Broadway. Not unlike minstrels, they gained access to the professional stage by performing material that was not always "about us."

As it showcased Bush's acting troupe, the Lafayette Theatre which flourished in Harlem in the 1910s created a "black theater" that put no limit on black talent and welcomed black audiences. According to James Weldon Johnson, such houses constituted "...a real Negro theatre, something New York had never had before; that is, a

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<sup>17</sup> The troupe formed in 1915 but its career as "Lafayette Players" began in 1916 and faded by 1932, unable to withstand the Depression. Given the material that Bush and her supporters encouraged, we must think of antilynching drama as not just a response to lynching but also an attempt to transform existing black theater, like Bush's offerings. The black playwright emerges partly because she wanted to see black actors performing material written by and for African Americans. Black writers turned to drama long before Du Bois wrote in 1926 that black drama needed to be "by us," "for us," "about us," and "near us"—but they apparently agreed. (Also worth mentioning: Will Marion Cook initiated a less successful and more musically oriented stock company in Harlem in 1913. See Thomas Riis, *Just Before Jazz*, 164.)

theatre in which Negro performers played to audiences made up almost wholly of people of their own race” (170). It is significant that Johnson felt the need to define “a real Negro theatre” rather than assume that its meaning was clear. His definition of black theater in the 1910s emphasized the black audience. For although black performers had long been successful, black audiences could not enjoy them without the shame associated with segregated seating. So, black communities now placed importance on having spaces that catered to black audiences. Thus, even if the Harlem troupes brought white-authored plays to life, they were building black theater because they were black professionals providing quality performances for black theatergoers. Although detractors always existed, blacks were generally proud to see these actors reach another level of success. When Bush first founded her non-musical drama troupe, a headline in the African American newspaper *New York Amsterdam News* read, “New York at Last to Come Into Its Own Legitimate Drama” (qtd. on Riis 166).

African American audiences understood that these actors were claiming for themselves and the community a wider range of expression. By associating black identity with serious acting, they insisted that whiteness was not a prerequisite for serious dramatic talent. Troupes like the Lafayette Players used the stage to, as Stuart Hall might say, show that the dominant “regime of representation” could indeed be “challenged, contested and transformed” (Hall 8). Not simply bent on assimilating, troupes like Bush’s engaged the politics of representation in ways that turned the racist ideas that they could not escape into “resources” in their “process of becoming.” That is, they knew that blacks were assumed merely to be comedians with no real talent or range, so they insisted on representing themselves otherwise. According to historian Allen Woll, when blacks

established theaters away from Broadway, “they shed all vestiges of caricature and engaged material that white audiences would not have accepted from them” (54). Thus, they developed their criteria for black theater in ways that addressed the material conditions of the 1910s. Defining black identity—and the theatre that best represented it—meant shedding the limitations that skin color was supposed to represent.

Hunter’s productions, Walton’s management, and Bush’s acting troupe all illustrated African Americans’ commitment to making theater’s popularity work for the black community. Harlem theatres were owned by whites but Hunter, Walton, and Bush helped ensure that blacks would benefit in at least two ways. These theaters provided professional entertainment in an environment that welcomed African Americans, and these houses gave a large number of black actors professional experience.<sup>18</sup>

In many ways, however, Harlem success marked the beginning of the end of an era. These professionals cultivated a taste for non-musical dramatic scripts within the black community, but the audience that groups like Bush’s initially attracted to the theater soon became dissatisfied with what black actors offered them. This growing theatergoing audience soon objected to seeing black renditions of Shakespeare and Broadway hits. Though many factors contributed to the eventual decline of the Lafayette Players’ popularity, historian M.F. Thompson acknowledges the role that black criticism played: “Progressive critics who wished Black theatre ventures to succeed complained that, although theatres... operated by Blacks and for Blacks existed in New York, Chicago, New Orleans, Jackson, Memphis... [and] Atlanta..., all of these theatres seemed devoted to imitating the White man’s stage and the White man’s acting, instead

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<sup>18</sup> Most blacks who became big stars on the mainstream stage as serious actors received their first opportunities in these theaters. Gilpin is a much-cited example. See *Black Manhattan* and Thompson.

of developing a drama uniquely and distinctly Black” (30). In short, “... the time came when the imitation could no longer satisfy Blacks who began more insistently to clamor for a drama of their own” (Thompson 30).

### **A Call for Black-Authored Dramas**

Black critics’ abrupt call for a *drama* of their own was exactly that—a call for written texts. Blacks had successfully created a *theater* of their own, so black critics demanded exactly what existing theaters lacked: African American playwrights. Because the Shakespeare- and Broadway-performing actors had perfected their craft and demonstrated their talent for serious material, a theater based on black dramatists’ efforts suddenly seemed feasible.

African American theatergoers, like the vocal W.E.B. Du Bois, became invested enough in theater to begin demanding changes. Above all, these early critics wanted to see black-authored plays staged. As one early critic put it in 1917:

The theatre-going public desires to see at least occasionally, the work of some Negro playwrights...Daily this desire is becoming more intense. And as advice to every Negro in Harlem, I say—demand, kick, agitate until we get the work of our playwrights produced in the Lafayette Theatre; do not cease, for we must see our society reflected upon the American stage even if we have to call a mass meeting of Harlem’s theatre-goers and effect a boycott on the Lafayette Theatre.

(*Messenger* drama critic Lovett Fort-Whiteman, qtd. Hatch & Hill 205).

Though aware of criticism that their performances ignored black culture, Bush’s goal had always been “to perform legitimate drama solely for the sake of performing and to prove the capabilities of black performers in a new medium” (Thompson 30). Seeking black-

authored scripts was therefore not a priority for Bush,<sup>19</sup> leading her biographer M. F. Thompson to conclude: “if there occurred a surge toward Black consciousness during this period, the Lafayette Players, as a group, were not a part of it” (30). I would suggest, however, that their refusal to pursue black material did not mean that the Lafayette Players were not part a movement toward black consciousness; it is just that this particular surge of energy revolved around black writing and *took black performance for granted*. Performers had created a theater “for” and “near” African Americans and sometimes offered plays “about” them, but audiences now felt that a theater of their own must be built on scripts written “by” blacks.

These new critics were discounting black actors, not realizing that they would not have been able to envision a black theater built on the work of black dramatists without the accomplishments of their singing and dancing predecessors. Performers set the stage for playwrights in at least two ways. First, in developing their own creative confidence, they made Harlem theaters appealing and built a black theatergoing community. Theater was no longer the province of a privileged few who could afford Broadway seats. As a result, it became a viable forum for addressing the political and social problems that African Americans faced in the twentieth century, including lynching. Second, early innovators elevated the theater to a point where black writers considered drama a legitimate art form to pursue. Ultimately then, the material conditions that inspired black writers to become dramatists included this earlier history of blacks on stage. Black

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<sup>19</sup> At one point, the team reportedly offered a prize for the best play about black life, but there is no evidence that this call was fruitful (Thompson 19). It seems though that the call came from Walton’s column, not the Lafayette Players themselves. It is likely that the call was issued in order to squelch criticism from the public that the troupe was not interested in black material. Because he was interested in the development of black theater in general, Walton did not want anything to interfere with the troupe’s success. Above all, the announcement placed the onus on the readers who complained, instead of the Players. If the critics themselves needed to write the play, they could not complain if they did not submit an entry. Walton’s advertisement is in the January 6, 1916, issue of the *New York Age*.

writers could envision a place for themselves in theater, and critics could call on them to fill it, because they had already witnessed minstrelsy, musical comedy, and black actors who performed serious, white-authored scripts.

By 1914, black dramatic criticism appeared as theatre reviews, magazine articles, literary essays...and as black-authored plays from writers such as Grimké—who became the change that they themselves wanted to see. Whatever their differences, each of these critics acted on the same impulse that motivated Du Bois’s influential 1926 black theater manifesto. Each critic considered black theater’s development up to his/her time, and envisioned even more radical change. As cultural artifacts, the critics’ plays, newspaper columns, and essays bear the mark of the historical moment that produced them. That is, Grimké’s *Rachel* not only negotiated a reality that included lynching and the white supremacist texts that condoned it, but it also addressed the existence of black actors whose success did not seem overtly to challenge the race’s subordinate social position. Willis Richardson similarly noted these conditions, arguing that new playwrights must be recruited from other genres. Black theater could be built, he insisted, “if some of our numerous poets will consent to rest from their usual labors for a while and lend a hand towards the writing of Negro plays” (Richardson “Hope” 437). Alain Locke’s assessment of the situation led him to insist that, though the accomplishments of actors fade, training playwrights will create “a granary of art, stocked and stored for season after season” (Locke “Steps” 440). Without question, both Du Bois’s 1926 call for plays about, by, for, and near African Americans and its precursors from critics such as Grimké, Richardson, and Locke owed a tremendous debt to black performers whose talent called attention to the lack of black-authored, serious dramas.

Yet, this new vision of black theater—of which antilynching drama was an early manifestation—did not fully accommodate the performers who had made it possible. The drama that early critics demanded was not conducive to commercial theater and would therefore not allow theater professionals to make a living from their craft. Philosophers had to all but ignore commercial viability as they promoted serious black-authored scripts that contained no rousing musical interludes.

In fact, Du Bois and Locke emphasized the writer's role precisely because they wanted black theater to be less vulnerable to the vicissitudes of the market. They did not want it to fade whenever large audiences lost interest. The "exile" from Broadway had already proven that public tastes would not always favor black productions. Thus, Locke believed that a permanent black theater must spring from amateurs' efforts. In "Steps Toward the Negro Theatre," he described Howard University's accomplishments and posited an academic model as the most viable. He said, "a university foundation will assure a greater continuity of effort and insure accordingly a greater permanence of result" (Locke "Steps" 441). Du Bois also focused on amateur productions as he worked to build a black theater movement that could flourish without ties to the academy.

Thus, the actor was of secondary importance to this new black theater and, within it, he would not earn enough to survive. Not surprisingly, then, when Broadway ended the exile in 1917 with Torrence's *Three Plays for a Negro Theatre*,<sup>20</sup> performers were easily wooed away from black stages. Consequently, black theater's fate fell into writers' hands and, as new dramatists developed their skills, many of them chose to write antilynching plays.

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<sup>20</sup> The exile ended in 1917 when Torrence used black actors (instead of black-faced whites) in his *Three Plays for a Negro Theatre*.

## CHAPTER 2: WHY DRAMA, WHY NOW?

Black performers created the material conditions that enabled the emergence of protest drama by cultivating the audience that later demanded black playwrights, but the ideology that invigorated these performers was alive and well throughout African American communities. That is, whether involved in theater or not, blacks living at the turn of the century engaged the politics of representation; they were all concerned with how best to represent the race because the nation's cultural conversation portrayed them in inaccurate and humiliating ways. Blacks wondered how they could give voice to the truth about themselves when false depictions of the race proliferated with dizzying speed. How could they become all that they wanted to become under these circumstances?

Many off-stage forces collaborated with the progress made by black performers to convince black poets, essayists, and fiction writers to become serious protest dramatists in the mid-1910s. Blacks living at the turn of the century understood that the race's self-conception was vulnerable to how it was portrayed especially as technology increasingly enabled whites to produce and distribute denigrating images with greater efficiency. Because black self-representation was resisted at every turn, seizing the freedom to explore who they were, who they were becoming, and who they could be, became a full-fledged quest on the part of black Americans for a forum and a form that bolstered dignified racial identity. That is, African Americans needed to find a forum that enabled black self-expression, and they needed a form that could accurately represent black identity. This journey eventually motivated black women to initiate a new literary genre, antilynching drama, and to privilege the forum of the non-commercial stage.

This chapter traces the various ways in which migration, the NAACP, and the “Harlem Renaissance” all offered forms and forums that African Americans hoped would allow them to be and express who they were. Examining the strengths and weakness of each illuminates why writing and staging antilynching dramas seemed the logical next step, even to blacks who were not entrenched in theater. The North promised greater freedom, but migrants encountered intraracial class conflict in their new surroundings. Black elites’ investment in propriety found expression and legitimization in African American newspapers, and it became a building block for black women’s domestic novels. Yet, while these novels preached propriety by offering their black Victorian protagonists as role models, middle class women were teaching homebuilding skills to uneducated blacks through the club movement. As their club work put them in direct contact with poorer members of the race, many began to question whether it was blacks or whites who needed lessons in morality and proper behavior. Increasingly, the black middle class put as much energy into educating and criticizing whites as blacks, and they cooperated with white allies to form the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). The male leaders of this progressive organization spearheaded formal political activism, including lobbying campaigns, while women working behind the scenes helped significantly to raise funds and increase membership nation-wide. Despite these contributions, women encountered obstacles. Pursuing forms and forums not available through the NAACP, they became postbellum/preHarlem doers of the word who used language to create new ways to accomplish their political and cultural goals. This tradition of flexibility and innovation enabled black women in the 1920s and 1930s to benefit from the New Negro Renaissance even as it too presented

unexpected challenges. Because the forms and forums privileged by migration, the NAACP, and the New Negro Renaissance did not enable the level of self-representation and societal change that African American women in particular desired, they eventually turned to lynching drama and amateur theater.

I focus on social movements of the 1890s and early 1900s because this period shaped the poets and prose writers who committed themselves to antilynching drama. Houston Baker and Henry Louis Gates, Jr. both pinpoint the 1890s as a period of intense concern about racial self-representation. Self-proclaimed “New Negroes” were anxious about what Gates calls the race’s “public face” because, as Baker explains, “the signal white American *form* for representing blacks [was] the minstrel mask” (my italics, *Modernism* 93). Because the minstrel mask loomed so large, asserting its inaccuracy required blacks to construct another “face.” One way of doing this, Gates insists, was to foreground the refined “New Negro” man and woman in periodicals such as *The Voice of the Negro*.<sup>1</sup> I would add that by the 1890s racial violence could be justified and encouraged precisely because the brute was as prominent a representation of blacks as the buffoon; both these images dominated the stage as well as political cartoons in such respected magazines as *Harper’s New Monthly* and *Scribner’s*.<sup>2</sup> With not just mob violence but also the negative images that excused it surrounding them, many African Americans believed that these depictions of the race were as violent as physical assaults. Their vulnerability to denigrating depictions undermined their assertion of full citizenship as much as their susceptibility to physical violence. Hence, antilynching dramatists

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<sup>1</sup> See Henry Louis Gates, Jr. “The Trope of a New Negro and the Reconstruction of the Image of the Black.” *Representations* 24 (Fall 1998): 129-51. Quotations from Houston Baker here follow the pagination of “Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance” as it appeared in *American Quarterly* 39.1 (Spring 1987): 84-97.

<sup>2</sup> See Rayford Logan’s *Betrayal of the Negro* for more on these literary magazines’ practices.

attended to the *violence inherent* in how the race was represented. To control black images was also to shape black identity.

African Americans prioritized self-representation not simply because they worried that whites held to misconceptions of the race, but because they knew that it was possible for blacks themselves to accept harmful depictions. Knowing that black identity was vulnerable to the power of representation, African Americans were, in Houston Baker's words, "primarily interested in a form of discourse—of public address and delivery—that would effectively articulate the needs, virtues, and strengths of a mass of Afro-Americans" (92). Baker's argument about black ingenuity in addressing whites was equally true of their messages to each other; African American activists sought to persuade as many blacks as possible to think and behave in particular ways. Since industrialization and migration put blacks of every social background into closer proximity to each other, black elites were forced to acknowledge that their destiny was linked to that of "Southern Negroes." The period thus saw the publication of numerous articles and studies of the habits and beliefs of new migrants.<sup>3</sup> If blacks were to embrace rather than shun racial group identification, they would need to view even those from radically different backgrounds as representatives of the race. Thus, whether we label their behavior paternalistic or not, many activists felt that it was in the race's best interest to influence the thinking and behavior of the socially uneducated; persuading them was as important as persuading whites.<sup>4</sup> Essentially, race men and women sought to build

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<sup>3</sup> At the turn of the century, blacks took seriously the task of instructing "southern Negroes," and their efforts have been well documented. See, for example, the scholarship of Jacqueline Stewart and Kevin Gaines.

<sup>4</sup> One way to understand the need to persuade blacks is to consider Du Bois's essay "On Being Ashamed of Oneself" (reprinted in David Levering Lewis's *W.E.B. Du Bois Reader*, pages 76-80). Du Bois admits that his grandfather's diary revealed his "indignation at receiving an invitation to a 'Negro' picnic" because it

racial identity *through representation*; they therefore designated themselves “New Negroes.” In Gates’s words, this was “a bold and audacious act of language...to dare to recreate the race by renaming it” (132-33). Writing antilynching plays also proved an audacious act of language. Such writing did not simply protest lynching; it also constructed an image of black identity that contradicted mainstream depictions.

Black activists’ quest for self-representation and societal change led them to antilynching drama because the other forms and forums of the nadir did not fulfill their needs. Yet arriving at this new form required a struggle for black self-representation that was dynamic and in which “progress” could never be measured in a simple or linear way. Only a multifaceted approach would yield any “progress” at all, so even lynching drama did not end the quest. Indeed, the plays prove to be yet another manifestation of what Houston Baker calls “renaissancism”—the “ever-present...drive that moves always up, beyond, and away from whatever forms of oppression a surrounding culture next devises” (96). As will become clear, black women in particular encountered limitations from their surrounding culture even when their quest placed them in the North, in the NAACP, and in the New Negro Renaissance.

### **Modernization, Migration, Class Conflict, and the Investment in Propriety**

Modernization, in historian Grace Hale’s words, prompted all Americans to “narrate new foundations” of identity. Local networks lost influence—for example,

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signaled to him a “close association with poverty, ignorance and suppressed and disadvantaged people, dirty and with bad manners” (76). Moving blacks from this mindset to one focused on “building a racial ethos,” Du Bois asserts, requires overcoming this sort of shame among African Americans—a shame whose existence Du Bois felt could not be denied.

federal currency replaced local money—so Americans reorganized their sense of self around broader connections. Hale argues that race became the tool of choice as Americans negotiated modernity's fragmenting effects. By positing color as the marker of group identity, whites could unite across myriad differences to see themselves as part of a coherent group of moral, sophisticated citizens who belonged to a great nation. Hale demonstrates how segregation became the “central metaphor” of Southern culture so that, if nothing else, whites could cling to the belief that they were part of a solid group whose stability they could rely on. And this “Southern culture” proved tremendously influential in both the North and the South as the two regions united to form one nation (7, 22).

African Americans were also involved in the task of building individual and national identity. They strove to create a sense of stability at a time when everything around them was changing. They were no longer slaves; transportation increased mobility so that they no longer saw themselves as connected to a specific town; they had more options for making a living, so their self-conceptions were not necessarily tied to the land and farming but perhaps to the factory and its diverse population. In short, like white Americans, blacks negotiated the rapid changes that accompanied industrialization, urbanization, and technological advancement. However, African Americans also needed to contend with the manner in which new technologies were put in the service of a very old racism. In the racial violence of the nadir, African Americans were hanged not just from trees but also from telephone poles and bridges. Likewise, photography studios used lynchings as occasions for practicing their craft, advertising their services, and

turning a quick profit.<sup>5</sup> Thus, like all modern Americans, African Americans tried to construct a unified identity, but found doing so more difficult because they also had to find the freedom to develop and express that identity...without getting killed.

Because migration shaped so much of what turn-of-the-century blacks experienced, we can see their pursuit of free self-expression as a search for what Farah Jasmine Griffin calls in *Who Set You Flowin'?* “safe spaces.” Griffin argues that migrants seek “safe spaces” and that these spaces “are both material and discursive”(9).<sup>6</sup> In my conception, material safe spaces are the *forums* blacks claimed and discursive safe spaces are the *forms* they employed.

At the turn of the century, the North seemed to present itself as the ideal forum for the expression of black identity, and newspaper stories, histories, and essays seemed the most appropriate forms for articulating African Americans’ expanded sense of themselves. Specifically, they used newspaper articles to promote migration and advance a doctrine of propriety, especially for recent migrants. As the “voice of the ‘Old Settlers,’” newspaper features betrayed many African Americans’ belief that if the North was not as liberating a space as it had promised to be, it was because the race’s image was being damaged by newcomers who did not know how to behave. As a remedy, “black newspapers repeatedly instructed black migrants...,” teaching “the Southern Negro” to act in ways that represented the race well, in hopes that “appropriate” behavior would demonstrate readiness for full citizenship (Stewart 663).

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<sup>5</sup> Photographers often set up mobile printing facilities at lynchings so that they could quickly make and sell souvenirs. See the historical essays that contextualize the photographs in *Without Sanctuary*, esp. page 11.

<sup>6</sup> It is important to note that Griffin complicates “safe.” She acknowledges that safe spaces can sometimes encourage parochialism and keep migrants from adjusting to their new surroundings. She also maintains that safe spaces can also be hegemonic and oppressive. In the same spirit, I do not suggest that any sense of safety is permanent or simple; this is part of the reason that even lynching drama is not the end of the journey.

Of course, the concern about the behavior of the “Southern Negro” had much to do with how easily he was linked to “Negro Criminality.” Mainstream periodicals such as *Harper’s Weekly* often ran editorials warning readers that blacks were reverting to a bestial state now that they were free of the “civilizing” hand of slavery, and whites claimed to see these criminal tendencies among children as well as adults.<sup>7</sup> W.E.B. Du Bois admitted that Southern blacks were overwhelmingly associated with crime, but he insisted that they had *not* created the situation. To the contrary, “the police system of the South was originally designed to keep track of all Negroes, not simply of criminals.” As a result, “when the Negroes were freed..., the first and almost universal device was to use the courts as a means of reenslaving the blacks. It was not then a question of crime, but rather one of color, that settled a man’s conviction on almost any charge” (*Souls* 113-14). Indeed, as corresponding secretary of the Negro Problems conference, Du Bois reported that black crime could be explained by a close look at the “faults of the whites.” After all, whites supported “peonage and debt-slavery” as well as “the punishment of crime as a means of public and private revenue rather than as a means of preventing the making of criminals” (56, 57). Furthermore, whites consistently enforced a caste system “to humiliate Negroes and kill their self-respect” and they encouraged “ignorance and subserviency [*sic*] among Negroes instead of intelligence, ambition and independence” (57). Still, Du Bois felt that “it is possible, and sometimes best, that a partially undeveloped people should be ruled by the best of their stronger and better neighbors for their own good” (*Souls* 112). Du Bois therefore supported the efforts of the “Talented Tenth” to spread a doctrine of propriety among African Americans.

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<sup>7</sup> Examples of *Harper’s Weekly* articles include: Unsigned, “The Negro Problem and the New Negro Crime” (June 20, 1903): 1050-51; George Winton’s “The Negro Criminal” (August 29, 1903): 1414; and Unsigned, “Some Fresh Suggestions about the New Negro Crime” (January 23, 1904): 120-21.

What is interesting about much of the instruction found in newspapers is the extent to which theatricality informed blacks' racial uplift agenda. As cultural and literary critic Jacqueline Stewart so persuasively demonstrates regarding the reaction to migrants as late as 1918, newspaper stories treated all public spaces as theatrical sites for engaging the politics of representation. For instance, many pieces outlined the standards for "streetcar deportment," suggesting that "the streetcar function[ed] as the exemplary *stage* for black urban *performance*, an important corollary to the *theater*" (Stewart 663, my emphasis). Black behavior in these spaces was taken to be an indication of who one was as an individual and what the race as a whole could become.

Surely, it was the prominence of the minstrel mask and the image of the black brute in American culture that transformed all public spaces into stages for African Americans; theatrical images had shaped everyone's impressions of them. In addition, all the world became a stage for blacks because performance had played such an important role in African American survival. Scholar Trudier Harris has argued that, given patterns established in slavery, "in many ways, the history of black people in the United States is a history of deception that has performance as its basis" (3). After all, "certain performances, such as fooling ole master about the location of a recently cooked pig, or swearing that a plow really did break of its own accord, became so commonplace during slavery that they can be said to have become ritualized..."(Harris 3). Saidiya Hartman's analysis of the slave coffle also makes apparent how central performance has been to black life in America. Slaves were often made to sing and "step lively" as they marched to be auctioned; if they lagged behind or did not convey happiness and youth, they could

expect a beating.<sup>8</sup> For better or worse, then, black life has been shaped by performativity, and the popularity of the minstrel mask and the brute stereotype in the 1890s helped ensure that blacks appeared as if on stage—whether they donned burnt-cork masks or not.

Aware of the role that performance played in American readings of black bodies, a piece in the *Chicago Broad Ax* discouraging improper behavior presented its observations “as if describing a (cinematic or theatrical) show with ‘scenes’ in order to position black readers as spectators to their own embarrassing daily performance” (Stewart 664). In such instances, the black press argued for “progress through perfectability,”<sup>9</sup> assuming that the race would rise if it followed rules regarding cleanliness and appropriate behavior in public places, dignified dress, “proper” speech, and overall respectability.

### **Domestic Fiction and the Club Movement**

If the mostly male-authored newspaper article became a significant form for articulating the need for black propriety, its creative corollary was the mostly female-authored domestic novel of the 1890s. These texts featured black “Victorian” protagonists who were avatars of morality and virtue. As Claudia Tate argues in *Domestic Allegories of Political Desire*, these sentimental novels reflect what many middle-class blacks believed: “that acquisition of their full citizenship would result *as much or more* from demonstrating their adoption of the ‘genteel standard of Victorian

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<sup>8</sup> Saidiya Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America*. New York: Oxford UP, 1997. The use of “scenes” in her title seems to suggest this same point about the perpetual (and involuntary) theatricality of black existence in America.

<sup>9</sup> I take this phrase from Gates and his description of Booker T. Washington’s philosophies regarding obtaining social rights through cleanliness and proper behavior. See page 137 of “The Trope of a New Negro and the Reconstruction of the Image of the Black.”

sexual conduct' as from protesting racial injustice" (4, italics mine). As Tate demonstrates, these works equated domestic success—a good marriage and home life—with achieving social equality. They exemplified the belief that individual goodness would eventually be rewarded with social justice. By showing that blacks held Victorian values and lived accordingly, these works essentially argued that blacks should be socially equal to whites because they were already morally equal.

As they preserved the belief that living virtuous lives would soon be rewarded, authors of domestic novels, Tate argues, “enabled [their] readers temporarily to escape oppression and gain access [to a world of] enlarged social opportunity. . .” (7). In this sense, they created a discursive “safe space” in which the horrors of everyday life receded so that a more just reality could be *imagined*. Thus, many of these texts seem more concerned with depicting a successful black household than with exposing ugly realities, including lynching.

It is important to note however that providing this alternative world was “not simply gratuitous escapism” (Tate 7). As literary critic Elizabeth Ammons argues, these novelists’ portrayal of the black woman as virtuous homemaker “did not represent some misguided bow to outmoded Victorian morality [but instead] represented an essential part of their life-and-death struggle *as women* against lynching in the United States” (25). After all, lynching depended on whites’ claims that black women were immoral; the black male was supposedly irresistibly drawn to white femininity because black women were so carnal. Thus, it was important to prove that the black woman was virtuous because the myth of the black male rapist depended on her being a whore (Ammons 25, 30).

In this climate, depictions of virtuous black womanhood constituted an implicit denunciation of lynching. Still, the indirect nature of the domestic novel's antilynching message must be noted in order to understand the revisions that antilynching dramatists made. Both domestic novelists and antilynching dramatists protested mob violence without foregrounding the literal lynching of blacks. However, antilynching dramas drew attention to the devastation that mobs brought to black homes while domestic novels foregrounded domestic success and never dwelt on a black home devastated by the mob. The novelists' strategy certainly gives voice to the virtuous black woman homebuilder and suggests the absurdity of the black rapist myth, but it also betrays the belief that Tate identified—that black domestic success would bring social justice. An investment in propriety motivated this strategy of referencing lynching but never detailing its power to destroy the homebuilding efforts of black women. The novelists suggested that blacks would secure the safe space they needed to be their best selves if only they would follow the protagonists' examples.

*Iola Leroy* is one of the best-known novels of this tradition. Though published in 1892, the year in which the number of recorded lynchings reached its peak, the text features lynching only as a subject of intellectual discussion. Harper introduces the subject when a main character, Robert Johnson, argues that blacks are no less moral than whites. If blacks were in power, he says, they would not “. . .do any more lynching, burning, and murdering than [whites] do” (Harper 171). He goes on to note that lynching had increased since the Civil War and that younger blacks will not tolerate it much longer (Harper 171). Literate and militant, Robert represents the “New Negro” who resists wearing the mask of minstrelsy and accommodation. His attitude toward such violence

distinguishes the outspoken New Negro from his long-suffering forerunners.<sup>10</sup> Lynching resurfaces as Iola speaks with Dr. Gresham, a white man whose marriage proposal she had rejected years before. Still on friendly terms, they discuss how the nation can recuperate its greatness, and Dr. Gresham argues that America should be more concerned with taming reckless lynchers than with sorting out the “Negro question” (Harper 217). Later in the novel, Iola’s fiancé Dr. Latimer tells her that she frets too much about racial politics. She replies, “. . .they never burn a man in the South that they do not kindle a fire around my soul” (Harper 269). During still another philosophical conversation, Robert questions whether America is civilized given its refusal to protect its black citizens (Harper 224).

Showcasing a black household’s devastation at the hands of a mob is clearly not a priority in this novel; lynching seldom disrupts truly intimate moments or invades domestic interiors. Iola’s mother Marie cannot take her son Harry’s safety for granted; she worries herself sick because he is an outspoken teacher in the South (240). Yet, her anxiety does not disturb the overall tranquility of her immaculately exemplary household. In this way, the dangers of a hostile world are depicted as remaining outside of well-kept homes. We never see lynching directly transform a main character’s household.

Black women’s 1890s novels de-emphasize the impact of lynching on the home in order to highlight domestic success. Authors allowed their readers to do as Iola does: “look... beyond the present pain to a brighter future for the race...” (Harper 219-20). Accordingly, Iola’s fiancé says that “it is chiefly men of disreputable characters who are

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<sup>10</sup> I would argue that this text uses Uncle Daniel to represent the Old Negro; he refused to run away with the other slaves partly because he had given his word to his master that he would look after his family. Of course, the idea that only New Negroes were resistant was part of the *myth* constructed at the turn of the century, as Gates argues.

made the subjects of violence and lynch-law” (Harper 269). Because the text never challenges this idea, it maintains the delusional hope that living according to Victorian standards will ensure domestic and social success. By extension, it preserves the hope that an investment in propriety will widen possibilities for black identity. The sentimental novel thus nursed the assumption that blacks can succeed by relying on proper behavior to create social opportunities.

In 1900, eight years after *Iola Leroy* was published, Pauline Hopkins’s novel *Contending Forces* explored the issue of lynching to a greater degree, but the text nevertheless limited the representation of its destructive power. Though the story includes two vivid accounts of mob violence,<sup>11</sup> these are both narrated so that they do not directly devastate the tranquil black homes that the reader encounters. First, Hopkins offers a graphic description of the lynching of Jim Jones but creates distance by disrupting novelistic discourse to insert a lengthy direct quotation from a newspaper (223-24). After the excerpt, we re-enter the narrative as John Langley, a black politician, meets with one of his white allies. Though Langley seems faithful to his people when he tells his visitor that blacks will not tolerate the injustices much longer, he ends the exchange by essentially betraying the race as he promises to placate the residents of his district (229-39). Here, lynching is used to discuss party politics and its effect on the victim’s home is not highlighted.

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<sup>11</sup> Another graphic scene that could be interpreted as a lynching is the account of the day that Jesse and Charles Montfort, major characters in the novel’s present, became orphans as children. Their white father Charles Montfort and octoroon mother Grace are framed by an enemy who spreads a rumor that Montfort’s slaves had begun organizing an insurrection. A band of men invade the estate. They shoot Montfort, mercilessly whip Grace, set the house on fire, and throw Montfort’s body into the flames (67-70). Even if taken as a rape/lynch scene, these events are narrated as part of the past and do not utterly devastate the tranquil black homes (like Ma Smith’s) that the reader encounters in the novel’s present.

Finally, when the black community gathers in a church to discuss the reported lynching, Hopkins comes closer to spotlighting the mob's ability to destroy black homes. The American Colored League organizes a meeting at a church and, as promised, Langley works to pacify the group. He encourages them not to react hastily, and to avoid upsetting the whites upon whom they depend for employment. In response, a stranger named Luke Sawyer describes his father's lynching in detail. He tells the assembly that white men "broke open the doors, seized my father, and hung him to the nearest tree" because white shopkeepers could not compete with his store (Hopkins 256-57). Nevertheless, the novel does not dwell on the details of the attack; propriety and the conventions of sentimental fiction ensured that Hopkins would make her points without graphic descriptions.

By speaking against lynching and impressing upon the reader its horrors without gruesome details, the sentimental novel provided an example for antilynching playwrights, who also refused to focus on *physical* brutality. Still, antilynching playwrights revised novelistic conventions by focusing on how the mob "lynches" black homes. Playwrights present successful households, but only to make more striking the degree to which those homes are devastated by the mob. Certainly, Hopkins understood what the playwrights would later dramatize; for, she asserts through Dr. Lewis that the black rapist myth which supported lynching "strikes the *home ties*, and as such is the most deadly weapon that has yet been used against us" (297-98). Hopkins would have agreed with the playwrights that destroying African Americans' homes was as lethal as the noose itself. Nevertheless, she did not linger inside a mob-shattered domestic space,

but instead foregrounded black homes that remained intact.<sup>12</sup> In her first novel, then, Hopkins joined other black women novelists who, in Tate's words, "nurtured, exalted, and disseminated by means of ideal heroines their faith in the inevitability of their freedom" (11). These "ideal heroines" were offered as the best examples of black identity, assuring blacks living in America at the turn of the century that they would soon enjoy the freedom to express that identity without fear.

Women such as Frances Harper and Pauline Hopkins retreated to quiet spaces to write novels, but they complemented these individualized efforts with collective action through club work. The 1890s novels' insistence upon the rewards of propriety found a real-world corollary in the black women's club movement. Middle-class club women literally taught their uneducated sisters how to conduct themselves in order to broaden their individual opportunities and the race's horizon. They influenced blacks' quest for a new identity through the particular forms and forums of a national movement. Black women had engaged in uplift activities for decades, but in the 1890s they placed increasing importance on nationalizing their efforts. In 1895, thirty-six clubs in twelve states merged to form the National Federation of Afro-American Women. That same year, leaders of the Washington Women's Club formed the National League of Colored Women. In 1896, the Federation and the National League united to become the National Association of Colored Women (NACW) with Mary Church Terrell as president, supported by seven regional vice presidents. The clubs themselves were an important forum for black women to define and express identity and, because they aimed to

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<sup>12</sup> Still, it is worth mentioning that the main household we see is that of Ma Smith, whose dead husband was named Henry. Historically, a Henry Smith was the victim of a highly publicized spectacle lynching in Paris, Texas in 1893. Ten thousand people attended, making it the largest event of its kind to that date. See Dray 77-78.

standardize their efforts across geographical boundaries, certain forms rose in importance. In particular, women widened their influence by utilizing the speech and essay; in the process, they brought to life the antebellum philosophy of being “doers of the word and not hearers alone.” They spoke of educational progress, womanly deportment, and community service, and they lived accordingly.

In considering the directions that the turn-of-the-century quest for a form and forum took, the transformations within the black women’s club movement are key. As race women’s perspectives changed, they became less satisfied with traditional tools. For instance, while many black domestic novelists often club women, involvement in club work made the limits of black Victorianism apparent to them. Club women may have spread the gospel of black propriety, but the movement also had within it the energy to question the efficacy of this racial uplift strategy. That is, working with their unlettered sisters encouraged club women to ask whether conditions would really improve just because blacks conducted themselves in certain ways. Despite modern criticisms that the uplift movement was inherently condescending and paternalistic,<sup>13</sup> surely we can imagine that middle-class blacks were capable of having complex views regarding their unlettered counterparts. As she reported on the gains of club work in 1900, Fannie Barrier Williams spoke of illiterate women in the South who “had an enlightenment of heart and mind that meant sometimes more than a knowledge of the 3 Rs” (200). Even if she began her work irritated by the sound of “broken English,” Williams grew to recognize different evidences of intelligence and grace.

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<sup>13</sup> Examples abound. See, for instance, Kevin Gaines’s *Uplifting the Race*.

Because they saw that black “progress” was often met with white hostility rather than respect, black women focused as much attention on white impropriety in their speeches and essays as they did on black propriety in domestic novels. It is significant, then, that when lynching increased dramatically in 1892, America was confronted with the unmistakable indictments of Anna Julia Cooper’s essay collection *A Voice from the South* and Ida B. Wells’s first antilynching pamphlet *Southern Horrors*. These texts directly castigated lynchers and the society that shielded them, and they urged blacks to avoid ambiguity when addressing racial injustice.

To the extent that the club movement encouraged such uncompromising speeches and pamphlets, it persuaded blacks to supplement the Victorian novel with other forms. This willingness to question the efficacy of propriety likely arose from the impact that antilynching activism had on the nationalization of the club movement. As historian Paula Giddings explains, the organizers of black women’s clubs found Ida B. Wells inspiring; it was her exposés that most convinced them to organize on a national level (94). Interestingly, speeches and pamphlets that bolstered nationalization also created space for imaginative literature that did not adhere to Victorian conventions. When women spoke of literature, they often called for more distinctly black expression. For example, at a writers’ conference at Hampton Institute, Lucy Laney criticized those who did not rely on black traditions and speech patterns saying, “Too many of us are Anglo-Saxon Africans” (qtd. in Bruce 105-06).

W.E.B. Du Bois’s *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903) echoed Laney’s sentiments and is an important articulation of the direction that many felt black literature should take. Du Bois encouraged African Americans to be proud of their distinctive identity, the traits

that differentiated them from whites. Du Bois urged black writers to honor “the folk” because he believed that folk behaviors and beliefs were “pure” and represented the “greatest gift of the Negro” (16). Until then, literary portraiture of “the folk” had most often been comical, but Du Bois insisted that their culture be taken seriously.

Antilynching playwrights later put this philosophy into practice by frequently making their protagonists dialect-speaking domestic role models.<sup>14</sup> To the black Victorians that populated 1890s fiction, the speech of this new generation of protagonists would have seemed “broken,” yet their conduct and home life were no less moral and honorable.

This shift away from Victorianism was in line with Du Bois’s ideas about the need to affirm black distinctiveness in literature by elevating “the folk” within it. Du Bois believed that certain qualities were endemic to black people, and that spirituality was the most important of them (16). Thus, black writers must cherish and preserve Negro spirituals or “sorrow songs” and honor the purity they represented. Du Bois maintained that spirituals were so authentically black that, despite having been reared in the North, “. . .I knew them as of me and of mine” upon first hearing them (155). In distinctive black literature, there was no reason to be ashamed of dialect or the simple faith grandma expressed when singing “Go Down Moses.” Club leader Victoria Earle Matthews likely agreed with many of these assertions. In 1895, she urged African Americans to trust the uniqueness of their literary endeavors. Just as composers had finally come to recognize the distinctiveness of black music, she insisted, later

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<sup>14</sup> The main characters in Grimké’s *Rachel* do not speak dialect and are educated, but the playwrights in Grimké’s wake create less educated characters. This shift is an important feature of the revision that accompanies one-acts written for black audiences. As I argue later, the fact that Grimké hoped to speak to an integrated, if not a white audience, is significant here. She is chiefly concerned with countering the cultural conversation predicated on black inhumanity, while her successors more consciously join a black cultural conversation primarily about black identity.

generations would value the gift of black literature (120). Ultimately, black women's clubs became forums in which women put forth a clear call for imaginative works that would privilege distinctly black expression. Because antilynching drama emerged in the wake of this movement, it is not surprising that the genre replaced Victorian piety with folk religion, and that most of the scripts featured prayers and hymns easily identified with the black church of the rural South.

The impulse to place black folk culture at the center of this new literature resulted from the development of a new racial landscape at the nadir. Racial discrimination had always constituted a common ground for African Americans of diverse social backgrounds,<sup>15</sup> but the racial violence that increased in the "Progressive Era" and into the modern period strengthened group identity among blacks. In supporting Ida B. Wells's efforts and interacting with their unlettered brethren, club women in particular began to see that Victorian values did not quiet the mob's wrath, and black philosophers began questioning those values and the literary conventions that accompanied them. By the 1910s, some of the writers who came under their influence altered the development of the black literary tradition by creating a decidedly folk-centered and home-centered type of African American drama.

### **The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP)**

In the 1910s, black writers took inspiration from the black women's club movement as well as the NAACP, a newly formed institution that drew together men and

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<sup>15</sup> Before Emancipation, even those born free in the North understood that their destinies were linked to those in bondage. Many said that they were not truly free until all were. After Emancipation (throughout history, really), some blacks no doubt differentiated themselves based on their class or level of education, but many blacks—especially in the face of racism—would acknowledge their link to the race, even if they believed that the only thing they had in common with the masses was discrimination.

women, whites and blacks. As one of its most prominent members, W.E. B. Du Bois understood the need for a multifaceted fight against racism, and he complemented his insistence upon speaking directly to black writers with a commitment to targeting white audiences who could affect African Americans' quality of life. Du Bois saw the NAACP as a forum for black self-representation because it was an interracial civil rights organization that did not disregard black people and their ideas. Within this forum, blacks increasingly turned to the forms of the petition, the legislative bill, the press release, and the picket sign.<sup>16</sup>

Of particular significance is that the NAACP inspired African American women to inaugurate antilynching drama because the organization did not seem to value black women's efforts unequivocally or to be particularly responsive to their voices. Reviewing the encounters that activists Ida B. Wells and Mary Talbert had with the NAACP sheds light on how this otherwise progressive organization threatened to limit black women's endeavors. Wells's and Talbert's experiences help us to understand why writing antilynching drama became a liberating political strategy in the 1910s when Angelina Weld Grimké, Alice Dunbar-Nelson, and Mary Burrill published the first three plays in the tradition.

Now known as the foremost antilynching crusader in American history, Ida B. Wells's work spanned more than four decades. She wrote bold editorials and lectured internationally in the 1890s, and she led demonstrations against racial injustice in the 1920s. Wells often stood alone, but she also created organizations that could initiate

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<sup>16</sup> See Zangrando, *The NAACP Campaign Against Lynching, 1909-1950*. Philadelphia: Temple UP, 1980.

change without her direct participation. Therefore, she was effective not only because she was fearless, but also because she inspired others to join the fight.<sup>17</sup>

The NAACP began as the National Negro Committee, an interracial group of which Ida B. Wells was a founding member. Leaders formed the committee in 1909 in direct response to an Illinois race riot during which two blacks were lynched and 2,000 more were forced to flee (Zangrando 22). That summer, the Committee sponsored an interracial political conference to discuss strategies for racial uplift, and when Wells addressed the assembly, she suggested that the organization push for antilynching legislation (Zangrando 23). At the end of the conference, the National Negro Committee faded and the NAACP emerged as an organization determined to use publicity to end racial violence. Those at the helm aimed to fight physical force with “exposure, public education, judicial remedy, and legislation” and made W.E.B. Du Bois their first “Director of Publications and Research” and editor of their official organ, *The Crisis* (Zangrando 24). Interestingly, once Du Bois became director of research, he relied increasingly on Walter White, whose investigations of lynchings took significant inspiration from the work that Wells had already done. In essence, the NAACP duplicated Wells’s investigative reporting, but it also planned to advance activism by doing what she had not: lobby for the passage of an antilynching bill. Yet, Wells practically set this agenda for the nascent group because she had urged everyone at the original National Negro Committee meeting to prioritize formal lobbying.

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<sup>17</sup> Biographies on Wells include Linda McMurry’s *To Keep the Waters Troubled: The Life of Ida B. Wells*, Dorothy Sterling’s *Black Foremothers: Three Lives*, and Wells’s autobiography, *Crusade for Justice*. Wells sometimes had conflicts with various organization leaders. Therefore, as McMurry explains, she sometimes worked alone because her intensity seemed to strain her relationships.

Nevertheless, Wells felt her contributions were not appreciated by the NAACP. Remembering the inaugural meeting, Wells wrote in her diary that it was Du Bois's "deliberate intention ... to ignore me and my work."<sup>18</sup> Upon her death, his comments in *Crisis* magazine seemed to confirm her suspicion: "[her] work has easily been forgotten because it was afterward taken up on a much larger scale by the N.A.A.C.P. and carried to greater success."<sup>19</sup>

Much like Du Bois, modern histories have marginalized the contributions of black women in the antilynching campaign. For example, when speaking of the effort to get the Dyer Anti-Lynching Bill passed, historians often focus on the NAACP, but Mary Talbert worked with Dyer long before NAACP leaders joined forces with him (Masur 10). In fact, though she was not a national officer, it was Talbert who secured Dyer a place on the national convention platform so that he could solicit the group's support. Therefore the partnership between Dyer and NAACP officers James Weldon Johnson and Walter White was possible because Talbert introduced them. Talbert also organized the "Anti-lynching Crusaders" to raise money to promote the bill. She mobilized black women across the country using the network she had developed as a club woman in the 1890s. Though it did not reach their \$1 million goal, the group was much more than an "ad hoc committee that the [NAACP] would occasionally utilize"—as many histories would have us believe.<sup>20</sup> Without these female Crusaders, the NAACP's famous "Shame of America" advertising campaign would not have been possible. Furthermore, without

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<sup>18</sup> See Wells's autobiography, *Crusade for Justice*, 326-28.

<sup>19</sup> *Crisis*, June 1931 "Postscript"

<sup>20</sup> This quotation from Zangrando, page 78. A more disturbing example of black women's relegation to the margins of history can be found in James Cutler's seminal 1905 history of lynching. He refers to Wells only once and does not mention the pamphlets she wrote. Nevertheless, his chapter on "Remedies" echoes her work closely. This is especially strange because he mentions her in this "Remedies" chapter and says that she met with colleagues to develop solutions but claims that they mainly talked about promoting legislation.(229-30).

the fund that the Crusaders created, the NAACP may not have been able to resume its lobbying effort for federal antilynching legislation in the 1930s (Masur 49).

The NAACP made the form of the press release, legislative bill, and the picket sign available for black expression and self-definition, but women often invested in other forms as well, as Mary Talbert's life makes clear. Talbert's tactics typify the tendency among black women to rely on alternative modes of expression; for example, Talbert found prayers to be more relevant to her constituents than petitions. Because traditional histories have not readily acknowledged the politics inherent in such strategies, the importance of Talbert's leadership as national president of the Anti-Lynching Crusaders has been underestimated.

Addressing this oversight, historian Kate Masur has recuperated the Crusaders' legacy and demonstrated that their accomplishments far exceeded the work for which they are known.<sup>21</sup> Most histories focus on their activities between November 1922 and January 1923, mostly because they helped produce the recognizably political "Shame of America" advertisement during this time. Masur insists, though, that such accounts are a disservice because they "do more than simply truncate the duration of the movement" (8). Such narratives actually "...de-emphasize the coalition-building work so central to the Crusade ... and... downplay the significance of the Crusaders' philosophies about grassroots organizing..." (8). Masur continues, "even as they worked within mainstream party politics to support the Dyer Bill, they dedicated themselves to creating and strengthening a nation-wide and politicized African American community that was independent of the Republican Party and committed to an agenda of racial equality that would include, but not be limited to, civil rights legislation" (7).

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<sup>21</sup> All quotations of Mary Talbert from Masur piece.

The Crusade was born during an NAACP convention in June 1922. There, Mary Curtis, Mary Wilson of Boston, and Mary Talbert of Buffalo decided to raise one dollar from every woman in the United States. Their club movement activities throughout the 1890s ensured that they would have help from the likes of Alice Dunbar-Nelson, Jessie R. Fauset, and Nannie Burroughs of Washington D.C. With an ambitious goal of \$1 million dollars, they used club movement connections to organize hundreds of women in forty states.

The Crusaders' grassroots approach is best exemplified by the importance they placed on "quiet" activities like prayer. Such activities allowed the movement to grow because they did not interfere with members' household duties. In order to accommodate women with varying degrees of political experience and vastly different lifestyles, they promoted tasks that could easily be incorporated into daily life. Likewise, leaders avoided asking members to engage in overtly political labor, because black women in the South were in particular danger. As Emma Miller of Mississippi explained in a letter to Talbert, "Anything that bears the stamp of the N.A.A.C.P. arouses the ire of the people of this section instantly. Now that the K.K.[K.] is gaining such a foothold the risk would be greater..." (qtd. in Masur 17). She concluded, "I shall do, in a quiet way, all that I can to promote [your plans] and, of course, I shall contribute. You have no idea how often a blow can be struck for the race in a quiet way down here" (17).

Understanding southern members' predicament, Talbert asked her state leaders to encourage their constituents thusly: "It makes no difference where you live...you cannot possibly fear to engage in a campaign of prayer and self-sacrifice against the most wicked of all crimes" (18). Talbert thus exhibited compassion for her southern allies while

communicating to them that their involvement was crucial. She clearly understood that their participation helped to foster a spirit of resistance. Without such a spirit in black communities, the NAACP's efforts would not be supported.

Talbert's insistence upon combining the spiritual and the political in the Crusaders' "quiet" approach is evinced by the wording of the organization's official prayer guidelines. Published in the national newsletter, they read: "To your knees and don't stop praying until, the voice of the Negro woman is heard and their petition for the suppression of mob violence is accepted by the American people and lynchings and slaughter of Human beings be made a crime" (15). Talbert thus placed the quiet prayers of participants on par with the NAACP's lobbying efforts; their voices were an integral part of the political campaign. Even if individual Crusaders had limited access to traditional political arenas, they helped each other stay motivated by invoking the possibility of political change, and they attended to the black community's spiritual and emotional needs. Talbert and her state leaders felt that they could not make a political impact without keeping the community spiritually uplifted. Thus, they opposed lynching, not simply because it was a crime against the body, but also because it crushed the human spirit. Crusaders thus resolved to develop an African American community that was unified in its opposition to lynching and felt emotionally capable of fighting this injustice. Without such a community, African American leaders could not hope to build a politically significant constituency.

The NAACP encouraged the form of the petition and legislative bill, focused as it was on interracial cooperation. Nevertheless, because black women often operated without holding high official positions, they utilized contacts outside of this integrated

national group. Relying on the network of black women that they developed in the 1890s, they were more likely to continue the discourse-centered traditions established by their antebellum foremothers. Becoming doers of the word in the postbellum/preHarlem period, black women of the early 1900s promoted discursive forms like prayers and the similarly spirit-sustaining antilynching play.

### **Postbellum/PreHarlem**

When Angelina Weld Grimké wrote *Rachel*, she created a protagonist who loses her mind because she cannot deal with the racism that surrounds her. Rachel believes that motherhood is her God-given life's mission, so when she realizes that black children's lives are not valued in American society, she feels that her love of children is actually a curse. Rachel tries to out-laugh God and shuns a loving fiancé because she believes that she hears children begging not to be born. This tragic play inaugurated antilynching drama among black writers and it confirmed that Grimké, unlike her emotionally and mentally deteriorating protagonist, was determined to find ways to fight racism. Grimké proved to be a doer of the word who complemented the labor of her peers, including Ida B. Wells and Mary Talbert, whom the NAACP under-utilized.

Grimké's preHarlem turn to drama continued the political work she had done as a teenager. The years leading up to her playwriting life in Washington D.C. were marked by social activism and a unique family history. Grimké's father, Archibald Grimké, was the son of a white lawyer who did not acknowledge the children he had by his slaves. When Archibald's aunts Sarah and Angelina Grimké read an antislavery article, they discovered this long-lost family member and began corresponding with him. In 1874,

Archibald graduated from Harvard Law School and began practicing in Boston. He married Sarah Stanley, a white woman, in 1879, and Angelina was born the next year and named after the aunt who had so lovingly looked after Archibald's interests (Hull 108). Archibald's wife left him in 1882 when Angelina was two years old. By the time she was seven, her mother sent her to live with her father, explaining in a note that the child "needs that love and sympathy of one of her own race" (qtd. in Young 26). Grimké therefore grew up with a father who became a recognized race leader and with two great aunts, the Grimké sisters, who believed passionately in abolition and women's suffrage. In short, Grimké "lived in an atmosphere of religious, feminist, political and racial liberalism" (Hull 110).

This spirit of activism inspired Grimké early in life to take a stand on the issue of lynching. At age nineteen, in 1899, she worked to collect signatures for an antilynching petition. In 1900, she wrote the short story "Black is as Black Does" for the *Colored American Magazine*. In it, a black man who was lynched is admitted to Heaven while a self-righteous white man is condemned to Hell (Hull 110). Grimké's inauguration of antilynching drama was an extension of this earlier literary activism in the period before the New Negro Renaissance began creating opportunities for blacks. Grimké took a chance on drama before it was widely promoted in black communities, writing *Rachel* before Du Bois founded the NAACP Drama Committee. I contend therefore that the emergence of antilynching drama actually inspired later developments of the New Negro Renaissance.

Of course, this is not to say that Grimké did not benefit from the New Negro Renaissance or interact with its major figures. She settled in the Washington D.C. area in

her twenties, remained there until her late fifties, and enjoyed the camaraderie of the area's literati, galvanized by the literary salon that Georgia Douglas Johnson hosted in her home (Hull 151). In the July 1927 issue of *Crisis*, for example, Grimké was reported to have been an especially delightful addition to the always lively crowd at Johnson's salon (Hull 212). By the time of this report, Grimké was forty-seven and had written *Rachel* more than ten years earlier, so she clearly did not wait for the Renaissance or its networks of artists, to devise a form that she felt could accurately represent the race. As a result, this former poet made drama an important genre for the leaders of the New Negro movement.

Writing their antilynching plays in 1918 and 1919, shortly after the appearance of Grimké's *Rachel*, Alice Dunbar-Nelson and Mary Burrill also exemplify this genre's preHarlem roots. Like Grimké, Dunbar-Nelson, had made a name for herself well before the Renaissance. Dunbar-Nelson's lynching play *Mine Eyes Have Seen* spotlights a young man who has been drafted to serve in World War I but balks at the idea of fighting for the nation that let his father's lynching go unpunished. Though she had come from a fairly privileged background, Dunbar-Nelson's passion about the issues addressed in *Mine Eyes* is not surprising given the consistency of her political activism. Born in New Orleans in 1875, Dunbar-Nelson was the daughter of a newly freed slave mother and a white man who was probably a merchant marine. As she grew up, she took a prominent place in New Orleans's Creole community and became active in club work (Hull 35). In 1896, when she was twenty-one, her family relocated to Boston (Hull 41). The next year, she became a teacher in New York and remained an active club woman there until she moved to Washington D.C. to be with her new husband, Paul Laurence Dunbar, around

1898 (Hull 43). She left Paul in 1902 and was estranged from him when he died in 1906, but she nevertheless received many condolences, and “her career as his widow was officially launched” (Hull 47). From that point on, she was often promoted as his widow, and this strategy helped her establish a considerable reputation as a writer long before the New Negro Renaissance was under way.<sup>22</sup>

Having established her literary reputation before the Renaissance, Dunbar-Nelson was able to form acquaintances with writers and thinkers of that movement, despite the fact that she did not live in Harlem or Washington D.C. and despite spending more years as a journalist and activist than as a creative writer. From 1902 to 1920, Dunbar-Nelson lived in Wilmington, Delaware, passing some summers at Cornell University as a special student (Hull 60). During the Wilmington years, she was a member of the Delaware State Colored Teachers Association and successfully worked to equalize the pay of white and black teachers (Hull 60). She was chair of the League of Colored Republican Women and directed the party’s Delaware campaign in 1920 (Hull 68). When the Republican party disregarded black women’s concerns with its rejection of the Dyer Anti-lynching bill in 1922, Dunbar-Nelson decided to join the Democratic party. In fact, she led their 1924 efforts to reach black women from the party’s headquarters in New York City (Hull 69). During this highly political time in her life, her literary output amounted to her single antilynching play *Mine Eyes Have Seen*, which was published in *Crisis* in 1918 (Hull 72).

Some scholars believe that Dunbar-Nelson’s literary reputation has been diminished by the intensity of her political activism. According to literary historian and

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<sup>22</sup> Dunbar-Nelson initially made her name by writing short stories and poems. See *The Works of Alice Dunbar-Nelson*, a three-volume component of the Schomburg Library of Nineteenth-Century Black Women Writers, edited by Gloria T. Hull.

biographer Gloria Hull, Dunbar-Nelson relied mainly on her journalism skills after 1900, producing writing that did not make for “enduring literary prestige” (86). Yet, the responses that Dunbar-Nelson received from her contemporaries should temper our assumption that her journalism somehow reduced her literary influence. After her antilynching play *Mine Eyes Have Seen* appeared in *Crisis*, it prompted a revision in the form of Mary Burrill’s 1919 drama *Aftermath*. *Mine Eyes* depicts a black man’s dilemma at being drafted after his father’s lynching has gone unpunished, whereas *Aftermath* spotlights a soldier who returns from honorable service in the war to discover that his father has been lynched. As Burrill puts forth a more undeniably bitter portrait of a brave black soldier, she clearly considered Dunbar-Nelson’s play too important to leave unaddressed. Furthermore, Dunbar-Nelson was guest of honor at Johnson’s salon on July 23, 1927, signaling the respect and admiration her literary contemporaries showed her.

If Dunbar-Nelson’s focus on journalism has led modern scholars to question her literary significance, the circumstances under which her lynching play was produced could easily raise doubts about her importance as a dramatist. Though published in *Crisis*, a major periodical, this script was produced only because Dunbar-Nelson herself brought it to life at the high school where she worked (*Strange Fruit* 411). While many black theater histories discount work produced under such circumstances in order to boast about the few scripts that made it to Broadway, such biases hinder our understanding of the cultural work that early twentieth-century doers of the word accomplished. A close reading reveals that *Mine Eyes* must have encouraged intense discussion about African American claims to American citizenship. Dunbar-Nelson recognized the potential of the amateur stage to interrogate and mold blacks’ perceptions of themselves, and no amount

of commitment to Delaware politics or classroom teaching could keep her from using what she believed was the “best medium” for depicting black life (qtd on Hull 73).

Mary Burrill was another teacher who prioritized drama and the amateur stage as a way of helping blacks claim and represent identity. Born in Washington, D.C. in 1879, Burrill was in her early forties in the 1920s and proved to be a mentor to the young men and women who would energize the New Negro Renaissance. After graduating in 1904 from the institution now known as Emerson College in Boston, she taught high school English. In 1907, she returned home to Washington, where she directed the School of Expression at the Conservatory of Music until 1911 (Gavin 13 & *Strange Fruit* 80). Primarily a teacher, Burrill inspired a love of theater in her students, one of whom was younger lynching playwright May Miller. Burrill’s love of the arts obviously pre-dated the Renaissance, but it undeniably became more rewarding during it, as she participated in Johnson’s literary salon and saw an increasing number of outlets for her students’ talents.

Of the preHarlem dramatists, Burrill was the least prolific, with just two works to her credit. Her drama *They That Sit in Darkness* (1919), which was never produced, receives more critical attention than her antilynching play *Aftermath*, written in the same year. By detailing the plight of a mother who cannot afford to care for her children, *They That Sit in Darkness* dramatizes the need for birth control among poor black women. As a result, it appeals to scholars interested in the American eugenics movement shaped by women like Margaret Sanger. The play was published in Sanger’s *Birth Control Review* in a special issue called “The Negroes’ Need for Birth Control, As Seen by Themselves” (Burke 91). In light of this play’s context, scholars have categorized Burrill as a woman

with feminist politics (who just happened to be black). These feminist scholars have shown little interest in her lynching play *Aftermath*, despite its poignant commentary on two issues of great importance to the quality of black women's lives—mob violence and World War I.

By exposing the mob and the military as equally devastating to black families and by depicting a black soldier's desire to have his manhood acknowledged at home, just as it had been abroad, Burrill sought to alter—through drama—the ways that African American identity could be represented. Her work insists that blacks had complex responses to racism, to war, and to familial responsibilities while dealing with the chaos engendered by both. Like Grimké and Dunbar-Nelson before her, Burrill had not been involved in the theater, but she realized before the blossoming of the New Negro Renaissance that drama was a form that could accommodate black self-representation.

### **Antilynching Playwrights and the New Negro Renaissance**

While Angelina Weld Grimké, Alice Dunbar-Nelson, and Mary Burrill wrote the first antilynching plays in the 1910s, the most dramatic rise in the number of such plays came in the 1920s and 1930s. No doubt, the New Negro Renaissance had much to do with this proliferation, but the Renaissance also contained forces that threatened to stifle black women's voices. The Renaissance enabled antilynching drama to proliferate by encouraging a multitude of literary forms in the movement's forum of choice: the magazine. Because the magazine was longer, more varied, and had more editing time built into its production schedule than the newspaper, it provided an ideal space for literary experimentation. Indeed, the black monthly periodical became a mechanism for

cultivating literature; *Crisis* and *Opportunity* sponsored literary contests, and many of the women antilynching dramatists won them. The New Negro Renaissance was not just a literary movement, however, but also social and cultural. Influenced by the patriarchal society in which it occurred, the Renaissance operated in ways that often excluded women artists. Because Georgia Douglas Johnson, Myrtle Smith Livingston, Regina Andrews, and May Miller wrote their lynching plays when the Renaissance was at its strongest, their lives and careers illustrate the degree to which black women were both part of the Renaissance and not part of it. These women were both empowered and limited by the forms and forums that it offered.

As biographer and literary critic Gloria Hull has explained, sexism and favoritism among leaders of the movement limited women's participation (7-12). For instance, Alain Locke, who virtually declared the Renaissance into being,<sup>23</sup> divulged his belief in women's limited potential. As a professor at Howard University, he publicly guaranteed women students a "C" on the first day of class (Hull 8). To similar effect, many women artists were at a disadvantage because much networking took place after hours in bars (Hull 12). Georgia Douglas Johnson, who had children at home, certainly could not meet colleagues at a bar and spend the night discussing her work over beer, as the most successful male artists often did (Hull 12). And those women who did, like Zora Neale Hurston, had to contend with assumptions that they had loose morals. Of course, men did not have to worry about such issues. Given this male-centered mode of operation,

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<sup>23</sup> Many credit Locke with "birthing" the movement with two publications. He edited a special edition on African American culture for *Survey Graphic*, which led to *The New Negro* essay collection in 1925.

women writers like the playwrights of this study had ties to the movement but were not in its visible mainstream.<sup>24</sup>

Nevertheless, the Renaissance was a strong force that positively influenced these women's lives and literary careers. Above all, the collaborative spirit of the Renaissance fostered an atmosphere that made many of these writers direct acquaintances. Most of them lived in or near Washington D.C. during the 1920s and participated in Georgia Douglas Johnson's "Saturday Nighter" salon which helped the New Negro Renaissance come alive outside of New York.

Johnson, the most prolific dramatist under consideration, wrote all of her antilynching plays in the 1920s. There are four plays to her credit that have been published to date.<sup>25</sup> *A Sunday Morning in the South* (1925) depicts a black boy who has been at home with his family since eight o'clock but is nevertheless arrested for a rape that was committed at ten o'clock. *Blue Blood* (c. 1926)<sup>26</sup> suggests, through two black women's stories, that black women remain silent about white men's sexual abuse in order to protect their husbands from lynching. *Blue-Eyed Black Boy* (1927) is a play in which the governor sends the state troopers to stop a lynching because he knows that the black boy is his son. Finally, *Safe* (1929) spotlights a young woman who goes into labor because she hears the screams of a victim before the mob kills him near her house. Like

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<sup>24</sup> We are reminded of Cheryl Wall's point that women of the Harlem Renaissance contributed to the movement in ways that too often went acknowledged. For instance, though Jessie Fauset used her position at *Crisis* to debut many artists, her work was overlooked even at a dinner supposedly in its honor. Wall explains that Fauset remained polite as her novel *There is Confusion* faded from the agenda, but Fauset surely realized that evening that "whatever she had done to produce it, [she] would not have a starring role when the renaissance hit the big time" (71).

<sup>25</sup> Again, please note that others will be available in December 2005. See *The Plays of Georgia Douglas Johnson: From the "New Negro" Renaissance to the Civil Rights Movement*, edited and with an introduction by Judith Stephens. [University of Illinois Press, 2005]

<sup>26</sup> As noted in the introduction, many have read *Blue Blood* as a miscegenation play but I categorize it as a lynching drama because the threat of lynching drives the action. Of course, miscegenation remains a key component to any understanding of the play. In fact, I suggest in Chapter 4 that lynching itself often serves to erase from cultural memory stories of interracial coupling.

Grimké and Dunbar-Nelson, Johnson was in her forties when she wrote these plays and had already established a literary reputation. Unlike them, Johnson seems to have needed the energy of the New Negro Renaissance to begin giving voice to the racially charged ideas that dominate her lynching plays.

Johnson's responsibilities as wife and mother likely contributed to this pattern. She married at age twenty-six in 1903 and moved with her husband to Washington D.C. in 1910, when she was thirty-three (Hull 156). By this time, she had a newborn and a toddler who made considerable demands on her time, but she continued to write what many consider "raceless," genteel poetry. Though she was discouraged because her husband did not always support her literary aspirations, she dedicated her second book of poetry to him in 1922 (Hull 159). Three years later in 1925, her husband died of a stroke, and she had to begin working full-time. Even with adjusting to full-time work and single motherhood, Johnson tapped into the energy of the New Negro Renaissance by hosting a literary salon in her "S" Street home in Washington D.C. She brought many black women playwrights together and introduced them to major figures such as Du Bois and Locke. After having written in isolation, Johnson welcomed the opportunity to surround herself with talent, and she clearly took inspiration from these interactions.

Though Johnson organized the salon and was a leader in this regard, she was not among the pioneers who initiated antilynching drama. Grimké, Dunbar-Nelson, and Burrill influenced her writing more than she influenced theirs. In fact, her work sometimes clearly echoes theirs; in particular, Johnson's *Safe* (1929) reiterates the themes of Grimké's *Rachel* (1916). Though not speaking of her lynching drama, Johnson herself acknowledged that others inspired her racially conscious work. In a private letter to a

friend, Johnson explained, “My first book was the *Heart of A Woman*. It was not at all race conscious. Then some one said—she has no feeling for the race. So I wrote *Bronze*—it is entirely racial. . .” (GDJ Papers qtd. in Hull 160).

Once she entered the genre, Johnson’s antilynching plays offered significant revisions, and she helped shape the work of younger playwright May Miller, whose *Nails and Thorns* is the only drama under consideration that focuses on the impact of lynching on whites. The reader enters the home of a sheriff whose wife wants to prevent an impending lynching because she remembers how a similar incident degraded the town in which she grew up. She is unable to do so, and tragedy ensues. Miller’s access to Johnson’s salon was one of the many privileges that came with being the daughter of renowned Howard University sociology professor Kelly Miller. Miller grew up surrounded by many writers and thinkers of the Renaissance, including Du Bois and Locke, who visited her parents’ home (Gavin 187). Furthermore, as a student at Washington D. C.’s Dunbar High School, Miller had both Mary Burrill and Angelina Weld Grimké as teachers. It was through Burrill’s encouragement that Miller wrote her first play, *Pandora’s Box*, at age fifteen (Burke 94). Miller graduated from Howard University in 1920 with training from Locke and Gregory’s newly established theater department (Gavin 187), and she later studied under Burrill at the Conservatory of Music (Burke 90). Miller had a wide network of colleagues, but she was closest to Johnson. Besides attending her literary salon, Miller was at her mentor’s bedside during her final hours (Burke 94). May Miller was undeniably a child of the New Negro Renaissance, and her life epitomized its collaborative spirit.

Regina Andrews and Myrtle Smith Livingston were the youngest of the published antilynching playwrights; in 1920, Andrews was nineteen and Livingston was eighteen. Because they were women, their youthfulness must have complicated their participation in the Renaissance. If their contemporary Marita Bonner is to be believed, the promises of the big city proved particularly elusive for women. Bonner wrote that, attracted by its reputation, a young woman may make plans to leave for Harlem on the next train but then “you decide...that that train will not take you, nor the next—nor the next for some time to come. For you know that—being a woman—you cannot twice a month or twice a year, for that matter, break away to see or hear anything in a city that is supposed to see and hear too much” (1207).

Andrews seems to have overcome many of these would-be obstacles because she was well connected; even her antilynching play reached a substantial Harlem audience. Andrews’s drama *Climbing Jacob’s Ladder* is set in a church where dissension reigns. As the congregants try to raise money to hire a lawyer for a friend who is scheduled to be legally lynched, that friend is killed. Andrews had long been aware of such scenarios because, being born and educated in Chicago, she was familiar with Ida B. Wells’ antilynching campaign and the atrocities that inspired it. In her hometown, she gained experience as a librarian before leaving to work at the New York Public Library’s 115<sup>th</sup> Street branch from the late 1920s to 1939. Eventually, Andrews became chief librarian at the 135<sup>th</sup> Street branch, where she worked until 1948 (Mitchell 64-65). Her occupation kept her connected to many writers and artists, and she had direct contact with Du Bois and, to a lesser extent, with Locke. Just as importantly, she shared a bustling city apartment with Ethel Nance, Charles Johnson’s secretary at *Opportunity* magazine.

Located at 508 St. Nicholas Avenue, their home was known as “Dream Haven” to many. When recruited by Charles Johnson to come to Harlem and become writers, artists such as Countee Cullen, Eric Walrond, Langston Hughes, and Jean Toomer frequently gathered there and sometimes resided there temporarily (Hull 5-6, Lewis Ch.5). Still, as Nance recalled, it was Andrews’ position at the library that positioned her to promote the New Negro Renaissance and benefit from its energy.

In 1927, Andrews helped found the Harlem Experimental Theatre (HET). She used the model of Du Bois’s Krigwa Players and later said that Du Bois’s “influence and encouragement eased ... [its] growing pains” (qtd. in Mitchell 68). Du Bois also read a draft of her antilynching play *Climbing Jacob’s Ladder* (1931), gave her constructive criticism, and praised her accomplishments after seeing it produced (Mitchell 79). Du Bois’s influence in part explains Andrews’s commitment to the amateur Little Negro Theatre Movement and her rejection of art for art’s sake. Andrews’s commitment to elevating amateur theater, and writing dramas upon which it could be based, represents the fruit reaped in the 1920s and 1930s from black theater practitioners’ willingness in the 1890s and early 1900s to engage aggressively the politics of representation.

Of all the playwrights, Myrtle Smith Livingston is the least known, never having made a name for herself as a writer. Returning home to Colorado and married life before finishing her degree at Howard University, she seems to have trod what Marita Bonner suggested was the most lady-like path. Because her career was so brief, however, it illustrates how powerful the Renaissance was, even in its Washington D.C. manifestation. Livingston was born in 1902 in Holly Grove, Arkansas and grew up in Denver, Colorado (*Crisis* 1926). She went to Howard University briefly but transferred to Colorado

Teacher's College and was a teacher for many years thereafter (*Crisis*). Livingston was in Washington and acquainted with Locke and Gregory's activities for only two years, but that brief stint was enough to inspire her to write an antilynching play. *For Unborn Children* was published in 1926 after winning one of the magazine's drama prizes the year before. The play depicts a black lawyer who is ready to move North and elope because he and his white fiancée cannot be together in the South. To discourage him, his grandmother explains that he has never known his mother because she is white and could not love him. Determined not to risk giving his own children such a mother, he decides not to elope, but it is too late; the mob is waiting outside. By the time the piece appeared, Livingston was already in Colorado teaching, but she left a permanent contribution that evinces the impact made by the outspoken leaders of the New Negro Renaissance. Locke and Gregory provided her training at Howard, but *For Unborn Children* puts forth an explicitly militant stance that Du Bois must have been proud to publish in *Crisis*.

The collaborative spirit of the Renaissance inspired the lynching playwrights, but the closely knit networks also determined who and what would be recognized. As it exerted its influence, the New Negro Renaissance enabled lynching dramatists to write scripts, but it also limited the praise they received then and now. Because black writers were accepted by the mainstream in the 1920s and 1930s—because they were “in vogue”—those artists whose work was not conducive to commercial acceptance have been easily discounted; those who preferred speaking to small black audiences in amateur venues are assumed to have been far less significant.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> That is, they are assumed to be less significant if they avoid being deemed complete failures who could not “make it” outside of these venues.

Modern scholars often overlook community-based efforts like those of the antilynching dramatists and, in doing so, they fall into a pattern that has been described by Carla Peterson in another context. Peterson warns that scholarship often comes “...dangerously close to replicating the historical situation of the early nineteenth century in its valorization of those African American texts produced under the direction of white sponsors for the consumption of a white readership...” (5). Unfortunately, modern researchers are often guilty of “marginalizing and even occluding those other forms... produced specifically for the black community” (5). The danger lurks especially when studying periods in which black writers had gained wide acceptance. Categories of “major” and “minor” quickly form, and the latter tends to consist of works directed at black audiences. Accordingly, writing lynching drama often led to a decline in literary recognition, which has been exacerbated by the tendencies of modern scholarship.

Because Johnson had the longest, most varied career, her reception best illustrates the extent to which drama, especially antilynching drama, could negatively affect an author’s ability to attain traditionally defined success. Johnson’s persistence in playwriting cannot be attributed to a desire for acclaim, but rather to a belief that her plays could enact social change. Although she wrote history plays in 1935,<sup>28</sup> Johnson was most interested in drama at the height of the New Negro Renaissance when others were garnering acclaim by writing in other genres. During the 1920s, she wrote seven plays that remain extant. Five of them explicitly thematize lynching: *And Yet They Paused*, *A Bill to be Passed*, *A Sunday Morning in the South* (1925), *Safe* (1929) and *Blue-Eyed Black Boy* (1930). Of these five, two survive only in archives, three were

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<sup>28</sup> In 1935, at age 58, Johnson wrote *Frederick Douglass* and *William and Ellen Craft*, both published in the anthology *Negro History in Thirteen Plays*, edited by her protégé May Miller and Willis Richardson.

published only after her death, and none was formally staged during her lifetime.<sup>29</sup>

Johnson had greater success with scripts that were received as “folk plays”— *Blue Blood* and *Plumes*; both were produced by Little Negro theaters and published shortly after being written. Thus, of the seven racially themed dramas that Johnson wrote in the 1920s, it seems that she only saw two published and produced—the two that were *not* explicitly about lynching.

### **Debating Black Drama and its Proper Outlet**

Ironically, we come to understand the paucity of records documenting performances of antilynching plays by considering the very same factors that enabled the genre to proliferate in print in the 1920s. Grimké’s *Rachel*, the genre’s inaugural text, sparked debate among African Americans when it was produced in 1916 because it fell in line with Du Bois’s insistence that black art should be political. For Du Bois and Grimké, mainstream art amounted to anti-black propaganda, so black artists could not afford to shy away from making explicitly political statements. In contrast, Howard University professors Alain Locke and Montgomery Gregory, who both served on the drama committee that sponsored *Rachel*, objected to the play’s blatantly political stance. Indeed, Locke would later write that he felt like a “pariah” in drama committee meetings, and Gregory noted: “a minority section of this committee dissented from this

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<sup>29</sup> See Stephens and Perkins, *Strange Fruit* and Hull 171 for details. *And Yet They Paused* and *A Bill to be Passed* remain archived manuscripts; they are sketches spotlighting the American government’s resistance to the Dyer antilynching bill (Recovered 519). The plays *A Sunday Morning in the South* (1925), *Safe* (1929) and *Blue-Eyed Black Boy* (1930) all explicitly indict the mob and are read closely in Chapter 4. Also note that Judith Stephens will soon make the two sketches about the Dyer bill available in an anthology of Johnson’s work.

propagandist platform and were instrumental in later founding the Howard Players organization, promoting the purely artistic approach....”<sup>30</sup>

Given this disagreement, the production of *Rachel* was a much more formative moment in black theater history than scholars have acknowledged. In raising questions about what black drama should accomplish, it inspired an increasing investment in black-authored plays. Because *Rachel* was written before Du Bois formed the Drama Committee, it was not a response to his call for black-authored plays, but likely an inspiration for it.<sup>31</sup> Then, once the committee decided to stage the play, Grimké’s text helped Locke and Gregory identify their own artistic mission. Convinced that a commitment to propaganda would only hinder black artists, they vowed to create a space in which “purely artistic” concerns reigned. The more Locke and Gregory publicized their approach, the more Du Bois refined his articulation of the need for political art. Without question, then, *Rachel* influenced the founders of both the NAACP drama committee and Howard University’s theater department—organizations that would encourage and train black playwrights throughout the 1920s. To the extent that New Negro Renaissance leaders invested in drama, Grimké set their agenda.

By inspiring the ongoing debate, Grimké’s *Rachel* enabled black drama to grow at an unprecedented rate, and the numerous scripts in its wake were shaped by the terms of the now famous discussion. Du Bois, Locke, and Gregory all encouraged “native drama,” plays written by blacks to depict African American experience. They believed that such

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<sup>30</sup> See Gregory’s “Chronology” and Locke’s “Steps to a Negro Theatre.”

<sup>31</sup> Most assume that Du Bois motivated Grimké. For example, as he introduces *Black Thunder: An Anthology of Contemporary African American Drama*, theatre historian William Branch calls *Rachel* “the first produced play to result from Dr. Du Bois’s call...” (xv). However, the script was available to Du Bois by the time he founded the drama committee because it was already written. Grimké circulated her drafts as early as January of 1915 (Hull 117-23).

drama typically came in two forms: “race [or] propaganda plays” which exposed oppression, and “folk plays” which featured everyday life without strong political overtones (Perkins 3). Certainly, the works written during this period resist any rigid distinction between “propaganda” plays and “purely artistic” ones, but these categories help us to understand the difference in the philosophers’ approaches, and especially their radically divergent public responses to *Rachel*.<sup>32</sup> Locke and Gregory promoted folk plays because they felt that black artists limited themselves when they allowed politics to shape their creations. Further, as they strove to make Howard a nationally recognized school of drama and theater, they focused on aesthetics because they wanted their students’ work to be seen as truly artistic. On the other hand, Du Bois felt that black artists limited themselves by adhering to an aesthetic that ignored art’s inherent political power and denied the importance of direct protest. Accordingly, he valued race plays, including antilynching plays, because they unapologetically indicted American racism.

The men disagreed fiercely, but they were all committed to encouraging African American playwrights. As a result, though they had different artistic ideals in mind, they fueled the widespread promotion of black drama. Locke and Gregory nurtured their burgeoning theater department at Howard University, Du Bois edited the NAACP’s

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<sup>32</sup> Though Sandra Richards has suggested that scholars often make too much of these labels, the categories are helpful for understanding the impassioned responses Locke had to *Rachel* and the accompanying NAACP rhetoric. For more on Richards’ caveat, see the “Roundtable Discussion with Senior Scholars,” *African American Performance and Theater History A Critical Reader*, ed. Harry Elam and David Krasner (New York: Oxford, 2001). Margaret Wilkerson similarly argues that “race plays” are not so easily distinguishable from “folk plays” as she discusses Douglas Johnson’s work in her introduction to *9 Plays by Black Women* (New York: Mentor, 1986). My research accords with these scholars’ point about the potential to overstate the distinction, because I have found that the “purely artistic” camp mostly criticized *Rachel* in public! Gregory wrote Grimké a letter after seeing the production and said that he appreciated her “artistic achievement in laying bare the real *soul* of our race and in depicting with cruel accuracy its daily agonies” (Gregory’s emphasis, qtd. in Hull 119-20). Not only did he acknowledge her artistry, but he apparently did not believe that her political stance had kept her from capturing the “soul” of the race, which was the ultimate goal of folk drama and the purely artistic approach.

*Crisis* magazine, and each used his institutional resources to ensure that plays by African American authors were written, published, and produced. Interestingly, while men figure prominently in the promotion of black drama, they seem to have left much of the writing to women. Although all three men were involved with the literary competitions sponsored by *Opportunity* and *Crisis* magazines in the mid-1920s, women won most of the prizes for drama.<sup>33</sup>

Early antilynching drama received its warmest welcome from periodicals. Of the twelve black-authored, one-act lynching plays currently in print and studied here, six received initial validation from *Crisis*, *Opportunity*, *The Liberator*, or the Boston journal *The Saturday Evening Quill*—while most of the others were not published in the author’s lifetime. Antilynching drama’s acceptance by periodicals in part signals the genre’s compatibility with Du Bois’s political agenda. Magazine publication made them readily available for production by African American amateurs, thereby fueling the Little Negro Theater movement that he envisioned—a movement by, about, for, and near African Americans.

As much as magazines and amateur theater groups accepted works that explicitly critiqued American society, commercial theater rejected them. The 1920s and 1930s saw more non-musical commercial dramas about black life than previous decades had (Willis Richardson’s “folk dramas,” for example), but marketability depended on how much the work resembled that of white dramatists like Ridgely Torrence. Torrence’s *Three Plays*

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<sup>33</sup> See Jennifer Burton’s introduction to *Zora Neale Hurston, Eulalie Spence, Marita Bonner and Others: The Prize Plays and Other One-acts Published in Periodicals* (New York: G.K. Hall & Co., 1997). The Urban League’s *Opportunity* magazine announced its literature contest in August 1924, and a month later, *Crisis* published its call for submissions. In its November 1924 issue, *Crisis* specifically offered prizes of \$75, \$40, and \$10 for original plays.

*for a Negro Theatre* debuted on Broadway in 1917 and helped cultivate an interest in, and appreciation for, the value of black subject matter to the “legitimate stage.”<sup>34</sup> Since Torrence had successfully put non-musical black material on Broadway, black authors were encouraged to make Broadway their goal, which meant operating as if mainstream standards were the truest gauge of the quality of their work. The parameters for acceptable black material soon proved to be quite specific; most often, favorable reception necessitated keeping indictments of white racism to a minimum.<sup>35</sup>

As a consequence, writers committed to denouncing racism and addressing African Americans were attracted to the non-commercial stage as a forum for black expression. Antilynching plays in particular were clearly not suitable for commercial theater houses, but they were welcomed by political magazines and amateur stages...and it seems that this fact helped to shape the dramatists’ goals. The validation that they received from periodicals led them to invest in the amateur stage because they were less willing to compromise their content for acceptance from mainstream theatergoers. The periodical thus led the way to valuing the amateur, even informal, stage. Recognition from periodicals bolstered the artists’ confidence in their playwriting skills and affirmed their belief that their perspectives deserved to be part of the cultural conversation—without being modified to suit white tastes.

In the final analysis, the quest for a form and forum that led to the emergence of lynching drama in the 1910s kept black writers committed to it in the 1920s and 1930s.

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<sup>34</sup> It is important to note that Torrence’s series included *Granny Maumee*, which was arguably the first play about lynching that did not condone the practice. Many critics agree, however, that it focuses on painting the black family as superstitious, making a spectacle of them in ways deemed fascinating to white viewers.

<sup>35</sup> My aim here is not to reduce Richardson’s work to conformity to a folk aesthetic offered by white playwrights. As I argued earlier, his work actually does not fit that aesthetic as much as we assume. Still, it is important that his folk plays emphasize conflict among African Americans. This sometimes results in the impression that white racism is not the problem but rather some misunderstanding between or superstition among blacks.

At all costs, black women in particular would prioritize black self-representation and the identity-building power that it yielded. By valuing the lynching play and the amateur stage, black women dramatists who came after Grimké took black engagement with the politics of representation to a new level. Grimké, Dunbar-Nelson, and Burrill had led the way in altering assumptions about what was worthy of dramatic portrayal by spotlighting black bodies that did not shuffle and grin, and Johnson, Miller, Andrews, and Livingston continued that effort. Before and during the New Negro Renaissance, black women changed the ways in which blacks and black bodies were represented and, by turning away from the commercial stage and Broadway aspirations, they labored to change the standards by which theatrical value could be judged.

### CHAPTER 3: ANTILYNCHING DRAMA: A THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Antilynching drama became the form of choice for early twentieth-century doers of the word. In crafting these plays, black women entered the cultural conversation on lynching by responding to the anti-black notions upon which the practice depended; but their works also shifted the conversation and the material reality that it perpetuated. As they grappled with a discourse that was consistent in its dehumanizing strategies, they developed specific generic patterns in their plays. Building on the assumption that black women wrote with an understanding of the forces that surrounded them, I offer in this chapter a theoretical framework of interpretation inspired by the plays themselves. I then set forth reasons for the playwrights' tendency to steer clear of formal stages.

First, I discuss the ways in which antilynching drama demands to be read not just as literature but also as a theoretical statement on black women's conceptions of violence, theater, and African American identity. Because the plays insist upon addressing theater and lynching simultaneously, they expose the extent to which both cultural institutions relied on stereotypical depictions of African Americans. They do not simply resist the stereotypes, however; they take the proactive step of molding and bolstering black identity by showcasing the virtue of black women, integrity of black men, and innocence of black children. The genre's goals are accomplished through the three major conventions that shape the foundational scripts: 1) the black home as setting, 2) black men's moral, often Christ-like, character, and 3) "de-generation," the removal and prevention of familial generations. I discuss these conventions in turn, considering how each unfolds to create generic continuity and to advance the playwrights' antilynching goals. The first two conventions testify to the existence of solid black homes and

honorable black manhood, while de-generation documents the lasting damage inflicted by the mob. Rather than put forth a hopeful picture of the black family's ultimate triumph, the genre recognizes that black households, not just bodies, were mutilated.

Given that the commercial stage rejected scripts that emphasized black domestic interiors and the serious conversations that took place within them, early antilynching plays represent black women's determination to redefine theatricality, to change assumptions about what was worthy of theatrical portrayal. The content of antilynching plays differed significantly from scripts conducive to commercial production, which meant that the stages that welcomed them were also quite different. The new genre depicted black bodies engaged in ordinary domestic activities, and these representations testified to African Americans' civilization, morality, and normalcy. As the form of the antilynching play bore witness to truths denied by mainstream society, it needed a forum that would welcome those truths, and it found that in the amateur stage.

### **The Playwrights as Cultural Theorists**

Antilynching drama marks the refusal of turn-of-the-century African Americans to treat theater and lynching as discrete entities. Blacks had long recognized the theatricality of lynching and the violence endemic in portrayals of the race on American stages, but putting their antilynching message in dramatic form allowed them explicitly to address theater and lynching as partners in an effort to annihilate black pride. The texts ultimately point to the playwrights' belief that the cultural work of both institutions was achieved by portraying blacks as buffoons and brutes.

As I develop a theoretical framework for reading the plays that is based on extending connections made by the playwrights themselves, I take inspiration from the work of scholars who recognize that theory is embedded in literary texts. In “The Race for Theory,” for example, Barbara Christian argued that “...people of color have always theorized—but in forms quite different from the Western form of abstract logic.... Our theorizing...is often in narrative forms, in the stories we create, in riddles and proverbs, in the play with language, because *dynamic* rather than fixed ideas seem more to our liking” (281). I would add that dynamic approaches are crucial because the racism that so much African American literature works to oppose is itself dynamic. We simply cannot afford to be static in our thinking, writing, or theorizing. Yet, what Christian might call the “abstract logic” of today’s theorists also offers useful tools for uncovering the complexities of African American literature.

Thus, my approach is informed not only by the theory embedded in the plays themselves but also by the work of modern cultural critics. Together, these bodies of knowledge suggest that antilynching plays spotlight a crucial but overlooked historical coherence; namely, that American theater and mob violence actually relied on each other for meaning at the turn of the twentieth century. Lynching could not operate without theatricality, and early non-comedic American drama would have been far less significant without lynching. Mob violence and theater were not independent institutions that just happened to work together at the turn of the twentieth century; they allowed each other to exist and flourish.

My study of black-authored plays written in the midst of mob violence underscores this historical coherence. The work of intellectuals such as Jacquelyn Dowd

Hall, Trudier Harris, and Robyn Wiegman help explain why African Americans addressed theater and lynching as related entities, but none of them focuses on early black drama.<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless, these scholars provide an indispensable foundation by insisting that race-based lynching was explicitly theatrical. In her seminal essay, “The Mind that Burns in Each Body,” Hall asserts that lynching relied on spectacle and spectators in the 1890s: “Even as outbreaks of mob violence declined in frequency, they were increasingly accompanied by torture and sexual mutilation” (330). Partaking in such a production gave whites the satisfaction of seeing the accused tortured, not just killed. Hall also argues that reports of the incidents became increasingly graphic. The black victim’s agony was described in detail, and so was the crime that supposedly precipitated it. Hall dubs the discourse surrounding lynching “folk pornography”; it was a shared, voyeuristic discourse that embraced an increasing number of audience members. Even those who did not attend the lynching “viewed” it with their mind’s eye by consuming the story and taking pleasure in its details (335).

Trudier Harris’s *Exorcising Blackness* and Robyn Wiegman’s *American Anatomies* build on Hall’s work and similarly note the importance of spectacle. Harris emphasizes the ritualized nature of the violence and argues that crowds soon counted on a familiar ceremony that included hasty accusation, forced confession, mutilation, and souvenir hunting (Harris 2). Wiegman focuses on why castration became the mutilation of choice and asserts: “[L]ynching figures its victims as the culturally abject—monstrosities of excess whose limp and hanging bodies function as the *specular*

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<sup>1</sup> I examine black playwrights whose voices are muted in other critics’ work. Hall and Wiegman offer cultural examinations that do not focus on literature, and the full-length studies of lynching in literature are Harris’s *Exorcising Blackness* and Gunning’s *Race, Rape, and Lynching*. Harris engages black drama but only that of the Black Arts Movement of the 1960s and 1970s, and Gunning explores drama primarily through the work of white supremacist Thomas Dixon Jr.

*assurance* that the racial threat has not simply been averted but rendered incapable of return” (81, my italics). What is key here is that the assurance is *specular*. The crowd is comforted by the *sight* of subdued black manhood. By all accounts, then, both the meaning of mob violence (lynching as the community’s response to a black threat) and its ability to convey its message (“know your place”) resided in its theatricality. A mob’s actions could have the desired effect only if there was an audience, including those who only read or heard about the details. Just as importantly, mobs used a well-known script with familiar characters: black brutes, white women victims, and white male avengers.

Yet, the scholarly work that has illuminated these truths has said little about stage performance at the turn of the century. At the same time that lynching reached its apex, American theater was playing a key role in discussions about it. In the 1890s, there was a growing consensus that white American writers should use the stage not just for entertainment but for social commentary and education as well. In short, it was time to use theater to shape American identity.<sup>2</sup> The nation’s critics felt that American writers had skillfully represented the nation in fiction and poetry; it was now time to **dramatize** American exceptionalism. Thus, the stage was used to mold citizens who would support lynching as a patriotic duty. Thomas Dixon Jr.’s drama is an obvious example.<sup>3</sup> *The Leopard’s Spots* (1902) and *The Clansman* (1905) were bestselling novels, but after the extraordinary success of the *Clansman*, Dixon wrote a play version of the story and hired

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<sup>2</sup> Histories of American theater generally agree that the 1890s through the first World War was a time of great transition; I rely here particularly on Walter J. Meserve’s *An Outline History of American Drama* (1994) and Gary Richardson’s *American Drama From the Colonial Period through World War I: A Critical History* (1993).

<sup>3</sup> Dixon is important as an example of the most extreme uses for theater, but as will become clear in the next few paragraphs, my point here is not reliant upon plays that were explicitly advancing an agenda of white supremacy. Listing white supremacist examples here is not fruitful because my point relies on a much broader cultural conversation.

two acting troupes to tour the country simultaneously and bring his work to life (Gunning 28-29). The novels had already cast black men as brutes, but putting this image on stage gave it added visual impact.

As Dixon's plays toured the country, American theater came to justify mob violence. If black skin signified degeneracy, then lynching was a necessary evil. By disseminating images of blacks that put fear into white hearts, American theater gave meaning to lynching by defining it as a legitimate response to outrages against white women, white families, and the nation.<sup>4</sup> In return, lynching provided theater with a well defined set of themes, characters, and symbols. Mob activity made for compelling drama. Real-life lynching incidents provided a powerful mixture of danger, passion, and triumph with which to elaborate a uniquely American narrative of white bravery versus black barbarity.

In examining American distinctiveness, Toni Morrison in *Playing in the Dark* suggested that those fleeing to the New World believed themselves to be exceptional men who set out on their own, faced a wide, dark expanse, and tamed it. I would add that, by the 1890s, the lynching narrative gained currency in large part because it worked within this age-old master narrative. The predictable lynching story built on the existing American mythology of white male exceptionalism by emphasizing the sexual threat that supposedly lurked in the darkness. Quite conveniently, lynching stories helped create the identity that white men sought at this time—that of loyal brother, protective father, and

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<sup>4</sup> Again, I want to emphasize that I am not arguing for Dixon's primacy. His work is important simply because it did conspicuously on stage what countless other American institutions did off-stage.

masculine avenger.<sup>5</sup> Accordingly, I would expand Harris's premise in *Exorcising Blackness* that lynching was a historical ritual; it was also very much a dramatic convention.

As theater helped peddle lynching as a patriotic activity, it joined other more powerful American institutions in presenting race as an indicator of personal morality or immorality, worth or worthlessness. While claiming that true Americans needed to guard against a black threat, the theater/lynching alliance did not simply deny black citizenship; it denied black humanity. My goal here is not to suggest that blackness as evil and dangerous was a new concept at the turn of the century. Instead, I want to call attention to the fact that as American theater transitioned between the 1890s and 1910s from melodrama to realism, from farce and comedy to serious drama and problem plays, it built its new identity around racial difference. As critics increasingly made claims about theater's potential to promote American exceptionalism and to protect the nation's foundational values, many theatrical conventions relied on the (white) audience's aversion to dark Otherness.<sup>6</sup>

Indeed, I ground my study of this transitional period in American drama history in Toni Morrison's argument in *Playing in the Dark* that, even when blacks are not major characters in literary works, they shape the writer's imagination. Morrison maintains that a "dark, abiding, signifying Africanist presence" helped white authors make sense of the

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<sup>5</sup> My thinking here is particularly influenced by Glenda Gilmore's *Gender and Jim Crow: Women and the Politics of White Supremacy in North Carolina, 1896-1920*. Gilmore examines, among other things, the degree to which white men created their identities around protecting white women from dark dangers.

<sup>6</sup> These claims are cast in terms of racial/dark difference to indicate that they encompass the role that not only blacks but also Mexicans and other ethnically marked characters played in drama (and the dramatic imagination) of this period. I would suggest that when slavery is not the underlying reference, the backdrop is imperialistic expansionism and the fears that immigration prompted. In both cases, the primary issue is ethnic othering, which is arguably strongest when it can be linked to a difference in skin color, because that difference gives discrimination clear direction, making the "other" visibly identifiable.

world around them. Focusing on nineteenth- and early twentieth-century fiction writers like Poe, Hawthorne, and Faulkner, Morrison uncovers “the ways that Americans chose to talk about *themselves* through a sometimes allegorical, sometimes metaphorical, but always choked representation of an Africanist presence” (17, my emphases).<sup>7</sup> Though black characters seldom populated serious white-authored scripts of the 1890s and early 1900s, a “dark, abiding presence” surely shaped these works.

Early mainstream playwrights dramatized American identity as one of heroic self-determination and, as they did so, they effortlessly relied on white (and its unacknowledged companion, black) to signify what would otherwise take them pages to say. For example, in 1895, dramatist William Gillette created in *Secret Service* the cool, understated hero who still dominates American action adventures. Captain Thorne is in total control of himself and of every situation he encounters. He stands in “natural” opposition to Jonas, a black servant. The first time Captain Thorne appears, he is escorted into the room by Jonas, who bows submissively, speaks dialect, is humbly dressed, and is, in every way, clearly *not* in command.<sup>8</sup> To similar effect, dramatist William Moody makes distinctions between the men who invade the heroine’s home in *The Great Divide* (1906). Ruth is scared of all of these criminals, but she soon recognizes that she can survive by choosing one of them as a lover. It is no accident that one is a “Mexican half-breed [and] the others are Americans.” For the audience and for Ruth, the Mexican makes the white scoundrel that she chooses seem like a prize.

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<sup>7</sup> I find it interesting that Morrison says “choked” even while describing a historical moment that precedes the rise of the practice of spectacle lynching. But, of course, I see her phrasing as appropriately prescient.

<sup>8</sup> Examples abound in the plays of those credited with developing realism on the American stage before Eugene O’Neill. Though William Dean Howells called for realism in theater, the plays he authored during this period were mostly comedies and farces. Those writing serious drama include William Gillette, Espy Williams, James Herne, and William Moody. For more on realism in early serious drama, see Gary A. Richardson, especially 153-204.

Initially performed in 1895 and 1906, respectively, these American realist dramas emerged alongside the spectacle of lynching. Because photographs of mob victims were distributed as picture postcards, circulated in newspapers and magazines, and were sometimes used by advertisers as attention-getting devices, lynching was as much a backdrop for these playwrights' imaginations as was the recent slave past, Western expansionism, and U.S. imperialism. Thus, extending Morrison's ideas to early mainstream drama allows us to understand what blacks understood at the century's turn, that lynching had infused black and white, dark and light, with unparalleled metaphorical intensity. It helped determine what playwrights could imagine. For as Morrison suggests, "Africanism is the vehicle by which the American self knows itself as...not repulsive, but desirable; not helpless, but licensed and powerful; ...not damned, but innocent..." (52). Behind every characterization of a good, pure, or brave white person was the belief that blacks were brutes, whores, and buffoons.<sup>9</sup> Because blackness was understood in an unfavorable way in virtually every sector of American society, it repeatedly reaffirmed positive assumptions about whiteness. Put another way, "nothing highlighted freedom—if it did not in fact create it—like slavery;" nothing elevated virgins like the existence of whores; and nothing produced (white) innocence like the consistent assumption of (black) guilt (Morrison 38, 52).<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> I want to stress that media other than non-musical mainstream theater operated in ways that dehumanized blacks. Indeed, I would argue that emerging (non-musical) mainstream drama was not as prominent as these other forms. Therefore, when drama joins these forces, much of its strength comes from acting in unison with forerunners such as newspaper stories and comic strips in literary magazines. Again Rayford Logan's *Betrayal of the Negro* is relevant here, as well as Gates's commentary on black images in "The Trope of the New Negro..."

<sup>10</sup> I want to emphasize that the simply *existence* of slavery and the mere *assumption* of black barbarism bolstered whiteness. A denigrating image or comment about blackness did not need to appear in the text or stage performance to service white supremacy. Denigration of blacks off-stage allowed every stage production to be used for elevating whites and for defining true citizenship as white.

In addressing theater and lynching simultaneously and explicitly, antilynching drama emerged to mark their interdependence, and it exposed the extent to which both institutions relied on specific representations of blacks. African Americans living at the turn of the century knew that the black body was the key to lynching's theatrical power and the key to the theater's signifying power, with both hinging on negative readings of the black body. Antilynching dramatists set out to defy expectation by representing African Americans in affirming ways. If the black body was not inherently immoral—if it could represent something other than immorality and degradation—then mainstream media, including theater, had lied, and lynching was not justified. By portraying dignified black family men and women, the dramatists rejected the image of the buffoon and the brute as well as the too familiar picture of a limp body hanging from a rope.

Both the mob and the theater represented black bodies by spectacularizing them, and this tendency inspired antilynching playwrights to pen dramas that would require a different treatment of black bodies. Inevitably, the content of these black-authored scripts would differ greatly from mainstream drama. Here, I examine the core of that alternative content by identifying the conventions that distinguish the genre.

### **The Conventions of Antilynching Drama**

The women who wrote antilynching plays did so with an expectation that their words mattered—that words could make a material difference. They committed themselves to complicating that web of communication that enabled lynching, and in so doing, they hoped to enact societal change through what Carla Peterson calls the “performative power of the word.” Not unlike Ida B. Wells and Mary Talbert,

antilynching dramatists saw writing and speaking as vitally important parts of their political activism.

The literary conventions that make antilynching drama a recognizable genre surfaced as the dramatists sought to document and alter the conditions that enabled racial violence. Though individually written, the plays consistently use the black home as setting, explore the pressures associated with expressing honorable black manhood, and spotlight the deterioration of homes after men are taken from them. The conventions directly answer the assumption that lynch victims were brutes who operated outside of communities, families, and intimate relationships. With this image contradicted by the first two themes, the third memorializes the unacknowledged victims of the mob: the black home and the children who would normally flourish within it. Depicting the deterioration of the black household gives voice to black women's unacknowledged pain and identifies their homes and homebuilding efforts as victims of the mob. These discursive strategies interrupt the dominant cultural conversation by paying respect to victimized households which, like their murdered heads, have been denied proper burial.

### **Black Homes<sup>11</sup>**

Antilynching playwrights' insistence upon situating their plays in the black home is significant because mainstream theatrical tradition had rejected it as an acceptable setting for African American life. Minstrelsy and musical comedy routinely placed blacks in exotic locales or in white people's homes as servants. In contrast, antilynching

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<sup>11</sup> As I will demonstrate, it is unlikely that the playwrights used domestic settings simply to deal with the logistical challenges of production. Focusing on the home was not just a way to avoid staging a lynching; there were plenty of ways to indicate the violence if necessary—Dixon's fiery crosses, for example, or an onstage noose.

plays portrayed successful households in order to showcase black men's integrity and black women's virtue.<sup>12</sup>

The portrayal of domestic interiors had long been a strategy for establishing women's virtue. White writers of nineteenth-century sentimental fiction, black women novelists of the 1890s, and lynching playwrights of the early twentieth century all take their readers and audience into the homes of women who strive for the highest standards of sexual conduct and domestic order. These literary strategies point to the enduring influence of the cult of true womanhood, which maintained that women served the nation by staying at home and embodying domesticity, submissiveness, purity, and piety. A true woman created "a cheerful place" that attracted the male members of her family and allowed her to lead men "back to God" (Welter 162). In the first decades of the twentieth century, antilynching playwrights were committed to depicting black domestic role models, but they felt free (and perhaps obligated) to create heroines who differed from

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<sup>12</sup> Because the black whore and rapist myths relied on each other, these women's tendency to focus on black men should not be read as a way to prioritize men's oppression over women's. Ann du Cille warns against "phallogentric" readings of women's texts, whereby critical assessments reflect a preoccupation with how black men are figured and little regard for whether black women's lives are adequately represented. Scholars sensitive to the issues that du Cille raises may wonder if these 1920s women dramatists were themselves phallogentric in their portrayal of lynching. This question becomes more pertinent when we consider the work of historian Elsa Barkley Brown. Brown argues that black women of the 1890s and early 1900s attempted to "de-sexualize" themselves as a response to the overwhelming charge that they were whores. That is, the historical fact of black women's sexual exploitation was willfully silenced as they presented themselves as personifications of sexual morality. As a result, black women's gender-specific struggles were not fully integrated into the race's overall political agenda. The stage was set by the early 1900s, Brown argues, for political activism to become male-centered. In not mentioning female mob victims, lynching plays seem to exemplify the male-centeredness that Brown chronicles for historians and that du Cille warns literary critics to avoid.

However, the playwrights' literary strategies arise from their particular interests at a specific moment in history, and our historical moment need not take precedence over theirs. We cannot assume that our hindsight is 20/20. The women were aware of female mob victims but deliberately chose to write about men. Their doing so does not necessarily indicate acquiescence to "phallogentricism." In fact, given the *interdependence* of the black whore and rapist myths, foregrounding men's victimization does not rob the dramas of their ability to put forth a genuine and *simultaneous* commentary on women's oppression.

For du Cille's specific caveat, which is concerned with how we read African American literary works, see "Monster, She Wrote: Race and the Problem of Reading Gender-Wise," *Skin Trade* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1996). For a more historical look at how gender inequities within the race's political agenda emerged, see Elsa Barkley Brown, "Negotiating and Transforming the Public Sphere: African American Political Life in the Transition from Slavery to Freedom," *Public Culture* 7 (Fall 1994): 107-54.

those typically found in domestic novels. Because they valued club work, the dramatists spotlighted poor blacks who were not genteel but who were nonetheless domestically successful. They did not necessarily seek to replace elite blacks as role models, for they considered themselves to be teachers of the race, but they recognized that other women could be examples as well. In the plays, many of the families are poor and uneducated, but their households are filled with love and function as smoothly as middle-class club women's homes presumably did.

Depicting uneducated black women as successful homebuilders constituted a particularly bold statement about black female virtue. After all, these women seemed less removed from slavery than the well-to-do mulatto heroines of domestic fiction, and proximity to slavery always connoted moral degradation. White slave owners had insisted upon the impossibility of raping black women whom they asserted were promiscuous by nature. In their wake, African American activists often admitted that many black women had indeed been degraded and were no longer capable of distinguishing right from wrong in sexual matters. Even those providing aid to black women in the early 1900s established their services based on black women's unquestioned moral corruption. For example, one group of philanthropists argued sympathetically, "The negro women of the South are subject to temptations...which come to them from the days of their enslavement. ...To meet such temptations the negro woman can only offer the resistance of a low moral standard, an inheritance from the system of slavery, made still lower from a lifelong residence in a one-room cabin" (Slater Fund qtd. in Flexner 191).

In this climate, insisting upon black women's desire and ability to create domestic havens of love and morality constituted an assault on the idea that they were naturally and unavoidably morally bankrupt. Writing in the early 1900s when the declaration "I cannot imagine such a creature as a virtuous Negro woman" was far from forgotten,<sup>13</sup> antilynching playwrights testified to the existence of black women who had achieved what virtuous mothers had. Even while inhabiting modest shacks, the women in lynching plays answer the high call: "Woman, Mother—your responsibility is one that might make angels tremble and fear to take hold! [...] The training of children is a task on which an infinity of weal or woe depends." For even if a man exhibits compassion and a distaste for corruption, "that man has imbibed those impulses from a mother..." (Cooper 22, 60). Not only do these uneducated heroines create bastions of moral direction for their children, these are also "cheerful places" that black men do not want to leave.

As soon as the drama establishes the family's tranquility, however, the mob invades. As a result, these works suggest that blacks do achieve ideal domesticity but cannot maintain it as long as lynching remains a threat. As the home's destruction is thoroughly depicted, so is the injustice of its demise because the intimate setting attests to black male innocence.

Antilynching dramatists thus honored the accomplishments of black women homebuilders by insisting that they had, against all odds, established havens filled with love, honorable men, and happy children. Tragically but just as importantly, these dramas acknowledge the black woman's unique insights into mob violence. In these plays, women characters remain in the home before the lynching, during the lynching,

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<sup>13</sup> Commentator in a 1902 issue of the mainstream periodical *The Independent*. (Quoted and contextualized in Giddings, *When and Where I Enter*.)

and they survive—only to suffer there—after the lynching. Perhaps better than anyone else, they know that the mob may mutilate an individual on a tree, telephone pole, or bridge, but the household continues to be “lynched” long after the body has disappeared.

## **Black Manhood**

In foregrounding the black home, antilynching playwrights inevitably spotlighted responsible manhood as well. Doing so posed unique challenges, however. Since America overflowed with depictions that denied honorable black manhood, representing it required the playwrights to engage the same complexities that black men encountered as they navigated the country’s treacherous political and cultural terrain. Black women playwrights could not simply portray black men and trust that these characters would seem honorable—even to black readers and viewers. They needed to detail the struggles that black men faced and hope that it would become clear that they deserved respect and admiration as they managed to survive in a society bent on denying their humanity.

The mob’s preoccupation with denigrating black manhood certainly led the dramatists to prioritize defending it, but as they did so, they built on the legacy of African Americans who had previously engaged these complex issues. The centrality of manhood to black experience was evident in the decades before the Civil War, as black men struggled to find non-threatening but effective expressions of manhood under the slave system. It was common knowledge that those who refused to be whipped were admired in the slave community, while those who refused to fight were less respected. When considering strategies for obtaining freedom, the relationship of violence to

manhood became even clearer. Black men struggled to resist two contradictory, yet equally dehumanizing, characterizations of themselves. On the one hand, black men were deemed violent brutes who must be tamed by slavery. To counter that belief, they needed to refrain from violent expression to increase their chances of emancipation. On the other hand, whites believed that slavery was justified because submissive servitude was the African's natural and appropriate condition. If black men were to counter that belief and prove themselves men, they had to "assert themselves to the full" with a willingness to fight for freedom, as David Walker proclaimed in 1829 (Horton 83).

The physical assertiveness that Walker encouraged was criticized during the 1830s, however. White abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison insisted that "moral suasion" would end slavery, and he was particularly successful in spreading his message through his newspaper, the *Liberator*. Until the 1850s, his philosophies dominated, as black leaders like Frederick Douglass remained optimistic that the nation was on the verge of radical change. Though he had proclaimed in his first autobiography that he became a man the day he fought his overseer, Douglass was a staunch Garrison supporter. Thus, when militant abolitionist Henry Highland Garnet argued for the use of force at the 1843 National Negro Convention, Douglass ardently disagreed and the convention ultimately voted to reject Garnet's strategies (Horton 89). Until the late 1840s, Douglass remained committed to a non-violent philosophy of abolition and helped silence those who said it was ineffective.

Manhood was seen as an assertion of full civil rights, but black men were denied those rights as slaves and as free blacks. They sought to denounce characterizations of African Americans as savage brutes whose violence must be controlled, but at the same

time, they worried that not literally fighting for freedom would prove that they were a race of wretches who deserved slavery. Thus, black men—free and enslaved—reached an impasse, as individuals and as a group, as they contemplated the best ways to express black manhood.

By the 1850s, however, violence seemed a more reasonable strategy. The optimism about moral suasion quickly faded when the Fugitive Slave Law of 1850 empowered white masters to hunt for slaves in the North and even to kidnap and enslave free blacks. Seven years later, the Dred Scott decision upheld the Fugitive Slave Law and essentially declared that blacks could not be citizens. At this point, new advocates for physical force emerged to demand military training for African Americans. By 1861, more than 8,500 men had joined black militia groups, and they were more than willing to fight for freedom when the Civil War presented an official opportunity. As historian James Horton puts it, “Black men marched off to win freedom for slaves and respect and equality for those already free” (93). By 1865, the violence of the war gained blacks their freedom, but they had come to this violence reluctantly. Even while in the throes of battle, many surely did not see themselves as violent but simply pragmatic. Once the war was behind them, they looked forward to peaceful, prosperous lives as free citizens.

Whereas issues of violence were constantly at the forefront of abolitionist debates, economic and social responsibility were emphasized after Emancipation. After all, citizenship—the right to participate fully in American society—was closely tied to manhood. Now that they were no longer slaves, black men set their sights on the franchise and insisted upon competing in the marketplace to provide for their families. Because these were “manhood rights,” blacks often worked within a patriarchal

framework to make their case. Even Maria Stewart, whom many scholars now characterize as a “feminist” foremother, argued for black men’s access to the rights of patriarchy, asserting that it would benefit the entire community. When she urged black men to shed fear and show whites that they “possess the spirit of men,” she was not concerned with their bravery as fighters but with their aggressiveness as capitalists (Horton 86). Addressing free black men of the North, Stewart demanded that they prove their manhood not with brawn but by becoming successful, independent businessmen.

Though Stewart was speaking in 1832, black men continued to focus on building economic prosperity in the post-Emancipation era, and in response, white men became more interested in asserting themselves through violence. In addition, because they were now unable to “tame” blacks through legal slavery, whites began more fervently to claim that black men were unworthy of “manhood rights” because they were not men at all. The logic, according to U. S. cultural historian Gail Bederman ran thusly: men must be civilized, and only whites are capable of civilization; blacks are the antithesis of whiteness and therefore the opposite of civilized, so they cannot possibly be men (Bederman 50). Mainstream denial of black manhood often took the form of lynching because these “uncivilized brutes” were purported to be rapists.

Once again, black men individually and collectively struggled with how best to express their manhood. If struck by a white man, should they turn the other cheek or strike back? If they retaliated as a white man would, they not only faced lynching but also potentially gave whites more ammunition for characterizing all blacks as uncivilized. Of course, blacks recognized whites’ barbarity, but they were not in a position to punish

or control it. They therefore concentrated on their own behavior, always evaluating and adjusting it in response to the constant insults they faced.

Antilynching playwrights recognized black men's complex predicament. Understanding that dominant models of manhood were being reworked within a racialized discourse of civilization that excluded black men, black women dramatists portrayed their fathers, brothers, sons, and husbands with great care. In so doing, they continued in dramatic form the work of Ida B. Wells who, in Gail Bederman's words, "depicted black men as manliness personified" and argued that, in contrast, the mob "embodied white men's lust running amok, destroying true black manliness" (58, 59). Bederman's analysis of Wells's response to postbellum reconceptualizations of manhood helps us understand the playwrights' strategies.

At the time that lynching was at its most culturally powerful, from the 1890s through the early 1900s, manhood could be proven first by "manliness" and later by "masculinity." Understanding the difference between these two terms sheds light on why lynchers felt justified in their action, why the nation accepted their excuses, and why the playwrights chose certain strategies to counter them. "Manliness" emerged from Victorian values that were widely held by middle-class white men before and during the 1890s; to be "manly" meant to be morally upright, show good judgment, and control one's passions (Bederman 11-12). Especially in the era of the self-made man, the term "manly" applied to middle-class whites whose integrity and good judgment were designed to bring them prosperity.<sup>14</sup> As Bederman explains, though, white men began to lose interest in "manly" characteristics once they no longer guaranteed business success.

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<sup>14</sup> This hard work and integrity were the supposed ingredients for American success; there is never a mention that slave labor made it possible.

The number of self-employed men fell from 67% to 37% between 1870 and 1910 (Bederman 12). “Manly” men could now fail, so qualities like frugality and hard work became less appealing and less admirable (Bederman 12).

While “manly” connoted morality, “masculine” was neutral and referred to anything male; one could have a masculine walk, masculine clothing, or a masculine occupation (Bederman 18). When Victorian manliness began to fail middle-class white men, they turned to masculine activities for new ways to feel powerful. As Bederman chronicles, some men joined male-only organizations, avoided activities associated with women or femininity, and essentially celebrated all things male (Bederman 16). Most strikingly, though, they coined the term “masculinity” to shape a new conception of manhood (Bederman 17). “Masculinity” became the embodiment of man’s primitive capacity. Whereas a morally upright, emotionally restrained man exemplified “manliness,” a primitive, physically strong and instinct-driven man exemplified “masculinity.” Though white middle-class men preferred the former *before* the 1890s, the latter became more admirable *during* the 1890s. “Masculinity” did not overtake “manliness” with white middle-class men, however; each could be effective depending upon the situation.

Nevertheless, both conceptions were understood within the framework of “civilization.” The civilized supposedly radiated “manliness,” while masculinity came from one’s uncivilized side, what contemporaries called the “Natural Man” (Bederman 71). Importantly, the link between manliness and civilization was a racialized one, wherein “the White Man” was the epitome of civilized manhood, and “the Negro” was the ultimate primitive (Bederman 22). As the taboo fell from behaviors associated with

the Natural Man, however, it became acceptable for a white man to shed the constraints of his civilization and embody masculinity with aggressiveness, physical force, and instinctive reactions. Of course, as white men began to admire aggressiveness in themselves, they more often insisted that, being their opposites, black men were cowards.

With the introduction of “masculinity” as a positive trait, racial violence easily gained prominence without disturbing white men’s self-conceptions. Lynching was of course barbaric, not civilized, and Ida B. Wells identified it as such. Nevertheless, as they convinced themselves and others that black men were rapists, many white men took pride in being masculine enough to react to accusations of rape with savage intensity. Accordingly, white journalists often referred to “‘the white man’ of the lynch mob as the epitome of manhood, in contrast to the ‘shivering Negro’” (Bederman 71). In this scenario, the black man becomes a frightened animal facing a mighty hunter. Black men were already deemed unmanly because they were assumed to be uncivilized, but rhetoric like this also cast them as cowards who were not even masculine.

The rise of this newly acceptable expression of white manhood encouraged lynching because “masculinity” had made manhood corporeal. The term “masculinity” emerged alongside a new ideal for the male body, mass and muscle, allowing one to confirm manhood through brute strength rather than economic success and moral integrity (Bederman 15). In this climate, black men became a threat to white manhood. If manhood could be proven with the body, a black man could threaten a white man’s self-conception with the mere *possibility* of over-powering him physically. The simple existence of a black male body thus became a threat, and destroying that body was tantamount to destroying (feared and therefore unacknowledged) black manhood.

The mob's impulse to mutilate its victims no doubt arose from this body-based conception of manhood. Masculinity did not just emphasize the physical, however; it encouraged an obsession with sexuality. On both counts, black men could not be disregarded, no matter how much the cultural conversation cast them as subhuman. As a result, some white men who felt emasculated looked to comfort themselves by destroying black manhood through castration (Bederman 17). Where morality-based Victorian manliness would not have been so easily threatened, corporeal masculinity was, and lynching became a way of reinforcing white manhood. Though antilynching playwrights were not always explicit about the physical and sexual nature of the war between white and black men, awareness of it clearly fueled their insistence upon exploring the meaning of manhood.

Although historian Gail Bederman successfully demonstrated that manhood existed in two very different forms at the turn of the century, and addressed how those forms related to race and civilization, she did not take the next logical step to examine the ways in which a man's race virtually determined how he could express manhood. We need to analyze how race necessarily influenced a black man's perception and expression of identity. Just as black men found themselves in a quandary in the antebellum period, the discourse of manliness and civilization kept them there at the turn of the century. Black women playwrights sympathized with them by engaging in this cultural conversation over race, civilization, and manhood. In their one-act plays for black audiences, they argued that the distinctive blackness exemplified by their poor, uneducated characters was not antithetical to civilized manhood. They countered stereotypes, not just by declaring that black men were not brutes but also by depicting

them as they saw them: as civilized, moral, Christ-like men who loved their homes and families. Taking the same approach to portraying black men as club women had to representing themselves, the playwrights defined black men "...not by noisy protestations of what [they] are not, but by a dignified showing of what [they] are..." (Josephine St. Pierre Ruffin qtd. in Lerner 443).

Race influenced all expressions of manhood. Depending upon the situation, middle-class white men could adopt either manliness or masculinity. Because they were assumed to be civilized, their civilization was not negated by occasional acts of savagery like lynching. Black men did not have that privilege. Because they were assumed to be savages (whether cowardly or brutal), they needed always to appear moral and civilized. Of course, blacks recognized white hypocrisy, but they focused on what they could control—their own behavior. The pressure that African Americans felt to personify morality often led them to see parallels between their lives and that of Jesus Christ.<sup>15</sup> Since a black man was likely to be targeted and tortured by lesser men who refused to believe that he was who he said he was, antilynching dramatists did not shy away from saying as much, and often cast lynch victims as Christ figures.

By presenting black men as righteous, home-loving individuals, black women playwrights affirmed their community's belief in the civilization and morality of their men and their race, questioning in particular the rhetoric that labeled them brutes. They were determined to keep blacks from accepting the lies that mainstream society told them

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<sup>15</sup> African Americans have a long tradition of identifying with the plight of Jesus Christ. Religious scholar JoAnne Terrell gives a thorough account of blacks' ability through history to identify with Christ to withstand slavery and take a pacifist stand as much as to insist upon radical change. See her *Power in the Blood?*, especially 35-62. Wilson Jeremiah Moses also speaks of blacks' identification with Christ, the sufferer as well as Christ, the warrior as they devised plans of political activism. See Moses, *Black Messiahs and Uncle Toms* 75-85 and *The Wings of Ethiopia* 190-93.

about themselves. Insisting upon self-representation, these writers put forth what blacks of the time could refer to as drama “about us,” “by us,” and “for us”—ultimately bolstering African American identity by providing refuge from the violence inherent in how the race was otherwise represented.

### **De-generation**

Besides spotlighting the home and honoring black manhood, antilynching drama is characterized by its insistence that mob violence alters the very structure of the black family. The dramas underscore the true extent of mob-induced damage by focusing on the black bodies that were *not* represented when newspapers printed pictures of hanging victims: black households and children. Here, I am concerned with tracing how the genre’s focus on household mutilation memorializes victims whose plights are forgotten when we allow ourselves to be mesmerized by photographs like those in the book and exhibition *Without Sanctuary: Lynching Photography in America*.

The genre’s foundational texts expose a phenomenon that I have termed *de-generation*, meaning “generation removal and prevention.” Given its particular animus against black men, the mob alters the structure of the family by eliminating, or neutralizing, the generation whose happy marriages and resulting offspring would normally guarantee the black community’s healthy survival. The plays usually feature a grandmother and grandchildren, but in the middle generation, the father (and sometimes the mother) is missing altogether, or lynching keeps the husband-wife unit from functioning.<sup>16</sup> In four of the seven early plays—*Mine Eyes Have Seen*, *Aftermath*, *A*

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<sup>16</sup> Again, I reiterate that we must resist reading the playwrights’ literary tendencies as ways to elevate men’s oppression. The dramatists focused on men because they faced a historically specific cultural

*Sunday Morning in the South*, and *For Unborn Children*—there is no middle generation at all.<sup>17</sup> In these texts, grandmothers replace mothers to ensure that the household can function. But the grandmothers are themselves widows, and their husbands' absence is never explained, implying that they too could have been victims of the mob. There is therefore no substitute for the ejected father, making his absence more detrimental.

Other dramas do represent the mothers of the middle generation, but these characters prevent future generations by bearing witness to the consequences of black male vulnerability. Virtuous women yearn to create homes in which children can be produced and nurtured, but they realize that a household whose head is vulnerable to attack is a deathbed for future generations, not a safe haven. In *Rachel*, for instance, Mrs. Loving shares the truth about her husband's murder, and her daughter becomes convinced that danger surrounds all black males. Rachel rejects her loving suitor's proposal and decides to remain childless, because she is sure that she hears unborn children begging not to be born. In *Blue Blood*, John and May's wedding ceremony is

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conversation. As Jonathan Markovitz makes clear, "...because lynching was justified by referencing myths of black *male* sexuality and criminality, antilynching activists were forced to devote the bulk of their resources toward combating these myths..." (3). However, while Markovitz believes that this focus made them "less able to confront racist representations of black women," I maintain that, when they contradicted the idea that black men were rapists, black women *simultaneously* addressed the notion that they were whores—because these myths relied on each other.

Also for reasons of historical specificity, I urge scholars not to read the texts as if the dramatists counter lynching discourse by *simply* promoting an oppressive discourse of heteronormativity. If anything, the plays document the fact that this nation has long operated in ways that create "hierarchies of property and propriety" based on heterosexual privilege (Berlant and Warner 548). That is, the playwrights illustrate that what was true in the late 1990s was also true in the 1920s. I encourage scholars not to use a simple binary of complicity vs. resistance with these playwrights, especially given that the first two plays in the tradition were written by women who could not be labeled, anachronistically or otherwise, as heterosexual: Angelina Weld Grimké and Alice Dunbar-Nelson. That is not to say, of course, that they could not be complicit in perpetuating heteronormative patterns, but it is important not to jump to that conclusion based on the tendency in these plays to treat male presence as essential to domestic success.

<sup>17</sup> In *Mine Eyes*, the father was lynched in the South before the action begins and the mother died after settling North. In *Aftermath*, the mother and father both died before the action begins. In *A Sunday Morning*, the middle generation is never mentioned. Finally, in *For Unborn Children*, the middle generation is mentioned only to reveal that the mother was white, so that the warning that grandmother gives to LeRoy about interracial marriage is more credible.

only moments away when their mothers realize that, years earlier, they were impregnated by the same white man. They must call off the wedding... for, John and May are actually brother and sister. In this miscegenation plot, the missing biological father is a white rapist who casts a shadow over blacks' prospects for marital bliss. John and May's is not the only union affected, however. Their mothers have kept their rapes a secret precisely because they did not want the men in their lives to defend their honor; they knew that a protective black man would be a lynched black man.

Although the plots of *Blue Blood* and *Rachel* are quite different, their similarity lies in the decision of middle generation mothers to share their experiences. These women's choices have been limited by white male power; their unions with black men, and their roles as mothers, have been routinely devalued. Johnson and Grimké both allow mothers to survive, but their presence simply demonstrates how lynching alters not only their individual past and present but also their entire family's future. *Rachel* and *Blue Blood* insist that as long as black men, and therefore their households, are vulnerable to violation, black women take a risk whenever they have children.

Most interestingly, we see de-generation at work even when both the husband and wife survive. *Safe* depicts such a family. This drama features a happy marriage, but quickly shows how lynch-law prevents ideal domesticity. While John is away from home, his pregnant wife Liza hears a family friend call out for his mother as the mob drags him past the house. Johnson suggests that if black women are not haunted by the sound of children begging not to be born, as Grimké's Rachel is, they may have to contend with their screams later. Distressed, Liza goes into labor just after John returns. While her husband is waiting in the next room, his child is born a boy and his wife Liza

strangles him to death. Having killed one man and restrained another, the mob takes male leaders from both families, and also jeopardizes future generations.

Liza's disturbing declaration in *Safe* that her baby is "safe—safe from the lynchers—safe..." illustrates the most important distinction between de-generation and degeneration. While the latter would indicate pathology within the black family, the de-generation in lynching drama points to the degeneracy of the mob. Blacks had proven their ability to build successful homes. Therefore, if African Americans do not reproduce or if they resist by terminating young lives, it is not because they do not value family.<sup>18</sup> The characters simply give voice to the despair that African Americans felt as they lived in a nation that left white barbarism unchecked. According to these plays, white supremacists, especially those who supported *Birth of a Nation*, are the ones who disregard the family values that they claim to be protecting, giving blacks heartbreaking motivation for reducing the number of their offspring.

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<sup>18</sup> Though these women characters refuse to become mothers, we cannot too quickly equate the plays' message with Margaret Sanger's crusade to control birth rates among the poor. Certainly, antilynching playwrights Mary Burrill and Angelina Weld Grimké were supportive of Sanger's *Birth Control Review*, but these characters' actions cannot be interpreted as a wholesale acceptance of Sanger's cause. Daylanne English's work on turn-of-the-century eugenics appropriately points out that African American eugenicists were primarily interested in creating a stronger race through selective procreation. This is quite different from killing children who are already born, so Rachel's and Liza's thoughts and deeds are not at all in line with the project that English delineates. In fact, where eugenics is concerned, Rachel and Liza are particularly disturbing because, if they *had* become mothers, their children would have presumably advanced the race; their beloveds were honorable black men who offered excellent genes and positive moral influence.

Understood in this context, what is so painful about witnessing Rachel's and Liza's despair is that it points to the degree to which "breeding" superior members of the race will *not* discourage white brutality. Living an honorable life does not protect existing men, and birthing and rearing increasingly admirable specimens of the race will not halt the violence either. Therefore, the refusal to have children in these plays is less about eugenics than it is about depicting the long-term effects of mob violence—including insanity. Lynching causes physical, spiritual, emotional, and psychological damage; because the mutilation surpasses the physical, it lasts long after the single act. For a discussion of how "African American writers and intellectuals were not necessarily entirely alienated...from now-discredited but then-normative ideologies," see Daylanne English, "W.E.B. Du Bois's Family *Crisis*," *American Literature* 72.2 (2000): 291-319.

Overall, the genre suggests that it is dangerous for blacks to wed and reproduce in a racist society. The older generation had produced children under slavery; after Emancipation, these children were no longer sold at auctions, but they came to adulthood amidst mob violence. As progeny of missing fathers and sometimes missing mothers, this next generation regards bringing more children into the world as an unnecessary cruelty. Thus, the plays insist that the mob's murderous violence reaches into the next generation. In doing so, they tell a story that the hanging body cannot.

### **The Implications of the Genre's Conventions**

In directing attention away from the individual victim and toward the household and the crushed spirits of those within it, antilynching plays memorialize the structural and spiritual losses that black families suffered at the hands of the mob. While mainstream cultural conversations accommodated the circulation of photographs of lynched bodies, they did not recognize the castration of black homes; the nation acknowledged blacks' corporeal existence but not their personhood. As a remedy, lynching playwrights testified to African Americans' humanity by depicting their pain. Long after the physical attack, the intensity of their loss leads some characters to regret having children. Given that most victims were black men of marrying age,<sup>19</sup> we must especially consider the implications of de-generation and call for new sociological studies of the black family.

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<sup>19</sup> "Marrying age" is simply to say that few lynch victims were under eighteen or beyond their forties. The mob was most interested in what it saw as virile adults, despite its refusal to openly acknowledge blacks' status as adults. (Of course, there are always exceptions, the 1955 death of 15-year-old Emmett Till being the most widely known.)

American views of black domestic life have been substantially shaped by foundational studies like E. Franklin Frazier's *The Negro Family in the United States* (1939) and Daniel Moynihan's 1965 report *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action*. These studies argue that African American familial structures were damaged by both slavery and an abrupt emancipation. In a report that guided federal legislation, Moynihan insisted that the "deterioration of the Negro family" began with the "deep-seated structural distortions" that accompanied slavery. Because the institution denied black men the right to function as heads of household, it crippled blacks' ability to function successfully in a society based on patriarchy (29). Written almost thirty years earlier, E. Franklin Frazier's study greatly influenced Moynihan. Frazier argued that Emancipation and the freedmen's poor preparation for it wrought havoc on African American familial ties; black women were forced to become matriarchs because black men were increasingly unreliable (102).<sup>20</sup> Frazier further asserted, "promiscuous sexual relations and constant changing of spouses became the rule with the demoralized elements in the freed Negro population" (79-80).

In his 1976 study *The Negro Family in Slavery and Freedom*, Herbert Gutman set out to test Frazier's claims and Moynihan's conclusions. Gutman found that, contrary to common assumptions about African American communities, "the double-headed household did not decline in importance over time" (xx). Gutman's monograph challenged sociological models based on black pathology, but older ideas have remained remarkably resonant. It is still not uncommon to hear policy makers blame teenage

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<sup>20</sup> Of course, please consult Frazier's and Moynihan's texts for a fuller context, but Hortense Spillers offers a compelling discussion of how these sociologists inspired the nation's tendency to think of and speak of blacks as pathological. See "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book," *Diacritics* 17 (1987): 65-81. (Frazier is always implicated when we speak of Moynihan because the work of the former so profoundly influenced the latter.)

pregnancy in the African American community on absentee fathers, who have left their daughters with a void and sons with no decent role models. Often, folk historians (on porches, in pulpits, and along campaign trails) explain that these irresponsible fathers are continuing unhealthy patterns established in slavery and after Emancipation. They would apparently agree with Frazier's characterization of "demoralized" freedmen who preferred promiscuity to stable domesticity.

Yet, when we consider the record that antilynching drama presents, we must question these popular assumptions. Early studies rightly emphasize the negative impact that collapsing marital bonds had on the black community after Emancipation, but they underestimate the role that mob violence played at the time. As activists like Frederick Douglass, Ida B. Wells, and Walter White established long ago, race-based lynching emerged only after Emancipation!<sup>21</sup> It is unfortunate, then, that prominent scholars have not investigated the effects that racial terrorism had on the black family. They have not considered the "structural distortions" sustained by the household when a husband/father/son is lynched. Too many have assumed that all absences were voluntary, overlooking the fact that some black men were gone because the mob had taken them. Just as importantly, scholars do not consider how unattractive marriage must have been to those who knew that—at any time and without penalty—whites could make their wives widows and their children orphans.<sup>22</sup> Black women playwrights provide us with new

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<sup>21</sup> As Wells explained in *A Red Record*, blacks were too valuable as slaves to be killed, so lynching African Americans came into vogue after freedom. Not insignificantly, the excuse of rape also emerged belatedly, in the 1890s. Wells and Douglass therefore asked why black men were never accused of rape during the Civil War when white women and children were left in their charge (as Southern white men went to fight to keep blacks enslaved.)

<sup>22</sup> I cannot raise all of the possible issues here, but I want to suggest that we have not fully accounted for the psychological impact of knowing that you can be lynched at any moment. For instance, how might such knowledge influence one's decision to marry? These plays suggest that black men's possible

ways of viewing black family life at the turn of the century as they wanted to defeat negative stereotypes of black men that were prevalent at that time and that are perpetuated into the twenty-first century.

In writing antilynching dramas, the playwrights preserved an important portrait of black family life, and in the process, they exposed the interdependence of theater and lynching—insisting that both relied not only on negative representations of the black body but also on *reducing African Americans to their bodies*. Black bodies could be distorted by mainstream theater and mutilated by mobs because there was supposedly no soul and no beloved father, brother, or husband within them. In opposition to such assumptions, lynching drama is designed to highlight African Americans' familial ties and the reverberating pain of having them disregarded.

### **Finding a Stage of Their Own**

Antilynching playwrights intensified the impact of the *form* they had developed by embracing the *forum* that most enabled the outward expression of the truths captured in their scripts. Antilynching dramatists who chose the one-act format did not aim for professional production; they knew that non-comedic one-acts, especially those written by and about African Americans, were not welcomed by the 1920s commercial stage.<sup>23</sup> Instead, their work fueled Little Negro Theater efforts, which thrived in amateur—often informal—environments. Antilynching playwrights did not settle for informal venues,

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victimization led some *women* to hesitate before marrying and having children. Isn't it possible that lynching would similarly touch black men?

<sup>23</sup> The most representative of widely accepted black material on the 1920s commercial stage would be musicals like *Shuffle Along* and *Black Birds*.

however; they valued them. Grimké had had a successful debut before integrated audiences, but all of her successors targeted black audiences in intimate spaces.

By privileging informal theatrical venues that served African Americans, the dramatists bolstered black identity by freeing their work from the expectations of mainstream audiences. Whites often rejected the premises underpinning antilynching scripts, and their resistance is best exemplified by the responses that Georgia Douglas Johnson, the most prolific antilynching dramatist, received from the Federal Theatre Project (FTP). As theater scholar Winona Fletcher notes, although the FTP was founded to support protest drama that would not otherwise be staged, it rejected all five plays that Johnson submitted, most vehemently rejecting those about lynching. One FTP judge wrote: “it fails not because the idea is not dramatic, but because it follows from an absurdity— that they lynch Negro boys ‘Down South’ for defending themselves from thieves. In fact, the crime that produces lynching is vastly fouler.”<sup>24</sup> Evidently, the judge could not consider even the possibility that the play accurately depicts the injustice blacks suffered. Fundamentally, then, these words join the overwhelming chorus of voices that did not promote violence but nonetheless condoned it. The judge lays bare the assumptions that enabled lynching and that justified the nation’s indifference to it. Not only did the Dyer Anti-lynching bill ultimately fail, but it also met tremendous opposition at every stage of its development.<sup>25</sup> Therefore, the FTP judge’s sentiments are highly representative. Given American history,<sup>26</sup> it is not surprising that, though generally

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<sup>24</sup> See Winona Fletcher.

<sup>25</sup> See Zangrando, *The NAACP Crusade Against Lynching, 1909-1950*.

<sup>26</sup> In *A Beautiful Pageant*, David Krasner reminds us that not all FTP responses were negative—and indeed that most were favorable (157, 159). Such information is not compelling in the face of the nation’s history regarding lynching. That is, if the nation tolerated lynching and its leaders resisted antilynching legislation, then the comments from this *one* judge are actually highly representative.

tolerant of artistic protest, the FTP proved resistant to black women playwrights' sensibilities.

For various reasons, then, post-*Rachel* lynching drama targeted black audiences, but this fact raises serious questions. Namely, did African Americans need to be convinced that lynching was wrong? Why would blacks need to hear an antilynching message?

New Negro Renaissance dramatist Eulalie Spence insisted that political drama was unwanted in the black community. Believing that African Americans went to the theater to forget their troubles, not to be reminded of them, she consistently expressed her disagreement with Du Bois's philosophy. Agreeing with Spence, theater scholar Jennifer Burton explained in 1997, "[Du Bois's] position was complicated by his desire for performances within the black community; plays focusing on the vicissitudes of racism had little chance for popular appeal to audiences who wanted escape and entertainment" (xx-xxi). Spence and Burton seem to suggest that drama based on Du Bois's ideals was doomed for failure.

Yet, in order to gauge success or failure, we must establish standards that account for Du Bois's goals. When Spence and Burton characterize protest drama as inevitably unpopular, they do so in the context of Harlem theaters like the Lincoln and Lafayette. These houses flourished in the 1910s and 1920s, and they catered to black audiences by not relegating them to the balcony. The repertoire at these houses consisted mostly of musical comedies, so audiences did indeed flock to them for "escape and entertainment," as Burton suggests. However, Du Bois was not interested in these venues. He declared that the scripts he valued would be rejected by commercial theaters, but they were

suitable for production in “our churches and lodges and halls” (Paying for Plays 453). Modern scholars must therefore ask: Could these small, informal venues enable important cultural work, or were they ultimately insignificant? Blacks who invested in “race drama” claimed intimate spaces, including their own living rooms, as preferred theatrical venues. They clearly believed that controlling how the race was represented meant finding and creating their own stages.

Antilynching dramatists knew very well that their one-acts were not commercially viable, but they were conducive to publication in periodicals where they would be readily available to amateurs who wanted to bring them to life in “our churches and lodges and halls.” It is not surprising, then, that few records survive proving that these dramas were staged. When searching the archives of black churches and civic centers, one finds that record keepers prioritized financial materials, minutes from business meetings, and membership statistics. Efforts were also made to preserve paperwork that could give future generations a detailed picture of how money was raised or how worship services were structured. Still, certificates of incorporation and other documents pointing to the legitimacy of the institution were most cherished.

Clearly, documenting community activities was much less important than performing them. It is not until the 1960s Black Arts Movement that a sustained effort to document cultural activities is evident in black theater archives.<sup>27</sup> Although fairly substantial records survive for the shows staged in the 1920s by the New York Krigwa Players, that organization is hardly typical. After all, they were the “*Crisis* Guild of Writers and Actors.” As they were founded by *Crisis* editor W.E.B. Du Bois, the

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<sup>27</sup> This sustained documentation effort was preceded by a more subtle surge in the mid-1930s in response to the Federal Theatre Project.

magazine promoted their activities. It is important to remember that amateur theater groups were made up of people who participated while working paying jobs and tending to family responsibilities. The participants did not likely have the time and resources to create posters and programs or to persuade drama critics to attend their shows. In Du Bois, then, the Krigwa Players had an unusual asset: a well-placed reviewer and historian. *Crisis* notices and articles therefore remain to document the group's accomplishments, but playbills, programs, and box office records (which theater scholars normally rely on) are rare—and if rare for New York Krigwa, how much less likely is it that such documents would survive from other groups?

Given these circumstances, the plays' influence on the community cannot be judged by whether production records are available today. After all, in order for a small church to present a play, many congregants would have become invested in bringing the script to life. Those involved would need to designate “stage” space, determine what would count as wardrobe, and decide how much they would do to replicate the setting described in the script. Also, as amateur actors prepared at home, parents and siblings likely heard the material many times before the audience at a church or school did. Amateurs may not have made elaborate sets and costumes or radically adjusted lighting, but in simply considering the staging issues that these one-acts raised, they allowed the texts to become a part of the community—to shape African Americans' ideas about theater as well as lynching.

Just as importantly, their publication in magazines made antilynching dramas available for families to perform at home. As Elizabeth McHenry demonstrates in *Forgotten Readers*, African Americans have long exercised “communal literacy” by

advocating memorization as a kind of literacy, by reading texts aloud to each other, and by encouraging dramatic readings.<sup>28</sup> Given that McHenry traces these traditions from the 1830s through the 1990s, surely we can imagine black households in which lines from these one-acts were recited from memory or read aloud. One person may have read all the characters' parts to the rest of the family or parts may have been assigned. Sometimes, perhaps only a line or two was read aloud before a family member interrupted to begin a discussion or to tell a personal story about mob violence. The possibilities are endless, but in each scenario, the text becomes a part of the conversation in that home—as the playwrights intended.

Communal literacy must factor into our assumptions about how antilynching scripts were used (and meant to be used) in black communities because African Americans were deeply invested in black periodicals.<sup>29</sup> As historian David Levering Lewis asserts, even with remarkable improvements in black literacy rates since the nineteenth century, *Crisis* was published (beginning in 1910) “in an era of rampant illiteracy, when hard labor left Afro-Americans little time or inclination for reading Harvard-accented editorials.” Nevertheless, such articles—because they appeared in *Crisis*—drew all strata of the black community; “the magazine found its way into kerosene-lit sharecroppers' cabins and cramped factory workers' tenements. In middle-class families it lay next to the Bible” (*Harlem Vogue* 7). Accordingly, literary critic J. Saunders Redding recalled that he and his siblings could “child-handle and mistreat”

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<sup>28</sup> Elizabeth McHenry, *Forgotten Readers: Recovering the Lost History of African American Literary Societies*, Duke UP, 2002. See especially 34-37, 53-54, 89, and the introduction.

<sup>29</sup> Another indication that plays were used in these ways is 1920s dramatist Marita Bonner's tendency to subtitle her texts “A Play to be Read.”

other magazines, but “*The Crisis* was strictly inviolate until my father himself had unwrapped and read it—often...aloud” (qtd. Wall 46).

Because antilynching dramas reached African Americans through periodicals, black readers could engage the material as they pleased—at their own pace, in their own space, and without regard for what whites deemed theatrical or dramatic. They did not have to feel self-conscious when they chose to act the plays out at home; in fact, doing so afforded them a measure of safety from the violence and segregation that dominated public spaces. Also, the simplicity of the antilynching scripts’ scenery descriptions and stage directions encouraged blacks to mount these plays without elaborate costumes, props, or substantial changes to lighting. Blacks at the turn of the century very much viewed themselves as sophisticated, modern citizens (New Negroes), and minimalist productions did not disrupt blacks’ conceptions of themselves as such. Writers, actors, and viewers alike saw the value in bringing texts to life with “productions” in which the black voice was the most sophisticated apparatus. This was not unusual for a race that had sustained itself through slavery and Reconstruction with such practices. For all their gentility and aspirations of upward mobility within the larger society, they understood how nurturing performance-based literacy could be as they struggled at the turn of the century to define African American identity for themselves and find the best forms and forums for doing so.

By embracing one-acts and aiming for periodical publication, the playwrights designed their texts to be read aloud and interrupted by discussion. No doubt, this is how such work was engaged in the literary discussion groups that McHenry examines, including the “Saturday Nighters” who met in the 1920s in Georgia Douglas Johnson’s

Washington D.C. home. As discussed, many antilynching dramatists attended Johnson's salon around the time that they crafted the plays studied here.

In contrast to many scholars' assumptions about drama, then, these plays made an impact precisely because they were *not* compatible with the commercial stage. Their power derived from the fact that they reached African Americans where they lived, inside their "safe spaces." Appreciating the cultural work that dramatists hoped to do therefore requires re-thinking theatrical value. The plays' worth lies, not in the money they made or the crowds they drew, but in the degree to which they affirmed the community. In *Roots of African American Drama*, James Hatch explains that many scripts can be seen as attempts to counteract dishonest images from white playwrights whose work routinely reached mainstream stages.<sup>30</sup> Accordingly, pioneering black dramatists were more interested in resisting denigrating depictions—and helping their community resist them—than with garnering literary acclaim or securing production in "major" venues. Aware of the need to bolster black identity, rather than reach whites, they "wrote their dramas from moral convictions" –often struggling financially at a time when other New Negro Renaissance artists received multiple offers to write novels and poems (*Roots* 37, Hull 10). Because pioneering black playwrights countered hundreds of years of stereotypes in American drama and theater, Hatch declares that "...moral urgency combined with a natural talent for the dramatic, has emerged triumphant..." (*Roots* 37).

I contend that the triumph resides in the fact that a number of these plays survive today, calling for scholarly attention and available for production—formal or informal. These texts allow posterity to see that black writers insisted upon creating accurate

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<sup>30</sup> I believe that Hatch says "much of" because this is not to suggest that black drama is simply reactionary. Also see pages 21-25

representations of African Americans; they were not silenced just because whites rejected their scripts, nor did they passively accept the stereotypical portrayals they found in American literature, on mainstream stages, and in films like *Birth of a Nation*.

Antilynching scripts may have come alive only in black families' living rooms, and perhaps only excerpts were recited and debated in black barber shops and beauty salons, but these dramatists resisted—and they made sure that their texts were easily accessible to blacks, whether they were inclined to leave home for a theatrical experience or not.

As the 1920s wore on, antilynching playwrights turned away from the hope underlying Grimké's *Rachel* and its appeal to white audiences; they did not expect their scripts to convince whites that lynching was wrong. Instead, they worked to reassure African Americans that justifications for mob violence were unfounded. Working to affirm blacks' belief *in themselves*, the playwrights used drama for political self-definition. They wanted African Americans to recognize themselves in the scripts and to take pride in what they saw. If this happened, father or mother might finish reading *Crisis* and suggest that the family gather in the living room and pass the time with a dramatic reading of the play.

Still, the dramatists' motivation for denouncing mob violence in specifically family-centered ways and in scripts that could be easily staged at home is best exemplified by Ida B. Wells. Now known as the foremost antilynching crusader in American history, Wells admitted in an 1892 diary entry that, until her close friends were killed, she thought that lynching might be justified. She confessed:

Like many another person who had read of lynching in the South, I had accepted the *idea meant to be conveyed*—that although lynching was irregular and contrary to law and order, unreasoning anger over the terrible crime of rape led to the

lynching; that perhaps the brute deserved to die anyhow and the mob was justified in taking his life.

But Thomas Moss, Calvin McDowell, and Lee Stewart had been lynched...*with just as much brutality as other victims of the mob*; and they had committed no crime against white women. This is what opened my eyes to what lynching really was. An excuse to get rid of Negroes who were acquiring wealth and property and thus keep the race terrorized and “keep the nigger down.”<sup>31</sup>

Intimate knowledge allowed Wells to give an account of her friends’ life stories which countered that presented by the mob as justification, and lynching dramatists launched similar character defenses. Because virtually all public discourse cast black men as brutes, creating a different portrait required intimate knowledge and intimate settings. It is not surprising, then, that black-authored lynching plays read like domestic plays. They foreground the home as much as they protest lynching. Perhaps more precisely: they spotlight the black home *in order to* protest lynching. As Wells’ confession demonstrates, only intimate knowledge of good character could keep black communities from accepting “the idea meant to be conveyed.”

Yet rejecting these ideas was as important for the future as for the present. The playwrights therefore not only set the action of their scripts in the black home; they also designed them to come to life in blacks’ private spaces. Because African Americans could control the atmosphere in their churches and homes, for example, their perspectives were truly welcomed there. And, only unencumbered testimonies could generate the lasting memorials that the dramatists were committed to leaving. Black testimony provided the truth about fallen community members that the mainstream conversation

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<sup>31</sup> My italics throughout. Wells quoted in Linda McMurry, *To Keep the Waters Troubled: The Life of Ida B. Wells*, 143.

denied, and it paid homage to those beloved victims—erecting discursive monuments for future generations to appreciate.

Given America's hostile environment, creating memorials for lynch victims required unique, racially specific strategies, and cultural experience had prepared blacks for the challenge. As Karla Holloway has argued in *Passed On*, black communities developed unique traditions around death that responded to "how *we* die." As Holloway put it, "the generational circumstance may change but the violence done to black bodies has had a consistent history" (27). As a result, African Americans actually anticipated "untimely death" by forming burial societies, organizations that paid a family's funeral expenses out of a community fund. Importantly, "although the main function of these societies was to cover the costs of burial, they also guaranteed their deceased members the pomp and ceremony critical to the occasion" (Holloway 33). Also in response to the circumstances of "black death," morticians cultivated unique skills: "the African American embalmer is...generally more skilled than his white peers because... embalming black bodies often requires a repair job that masks the residue of violent death" (national association qtd. in Holloway 27). Burial societies and the skills honed by black morticians developed around "how *we* die."

I want to suggest that the lynching dramas studied here developed in similar ways. While society suggested that a lynch victim deserved his violent fate, blacks testified both to the tragedy of his death and the value of his life by granting him the same "pomp and ceremony" accorded to others. The burial societies that emerged in black communities were "benevolent," "secret," and "private" organizations, and black morticians shared the "privacy and intimacy" of a family's mourning but were also "responsible for

orchestrating a public performance” (Holloway 25). Likewise, one-act lynching dramas recorded African Americans’ private grief and encouraged its expression in intimate, community-centered spaces. While other black-themed material was making its way onto Broadway stages, these plays were performed in small churches and living rooms, providing comfort that did not exist in the more public venue of the commercial theater.

In developing this unique form and committing themselves to community forums, antilynching dramatists responded to the material conditions of their historical moment. Living and writing at a time when mobs not only killed with impunity but also sent photographs of their victims as picture postcards, the dramatists were surrounded by the spectacle of black corporeality. They therefore presented black bodies in ways that mobs, conventional theater, and the mainstream photography industry never did: as part of a loving family.<sup>32</sup>

As a result, the dramatists’ depictions stand in sharp contrast to the photographic history of lynching preserved by *Without Sanctuary*. Indeed, the dramas critique that history, reminding us that the pictures function(ed) not merely as historical artifacts but also as part of a coercive cultural project. The playwrights’ very different approach to representing lynching draws attention to the fact that the photographs were taken from the perspective of the mob and, quite inadvertently, expose the secret to white families’ stability. As disturbing as it may be, whites used the mutilated black body to establish

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<sup>32</sup> As Kevin Gaines and Karla F.C. Holloway have noted in different contexts, African Americans used photography to counter the denigrating images that circulated in the 1890s through the early 1900s, but this counter-discourse was not in full swing until the early 1900s. In contrast, as soon as photography reached the United States, whites used it to depict blacks as abject lynch victims, as poor farm laborers who were content with their subordinate position, and as caricatured buffoons. The plays therefore countered negative images of blacks—images which had been, since the 1890s, the most prominent representations of the race. Ultimately, then, the plays operated in conjunction with blacks’ attempts to create a counter-discourse with portraits in the 1910s and 1920s. See Gaines, 67-70. Black photographic discourse is also compellingly discussed in Holloway; see especially 139-41.

their own normalcy and solidarity. Lynchers gathered around black bodies to dissect them, roast them, and pose for pictures with them. During these violent rituals, husbands demonstrated their willingness to protect their wives, wives performed their understanding that they needed protecting, and parents taught their children the meaning of their racial heritage.<sup>33</sup> If members were absent, white families could bond by mail, as demonstrated by the many who sent picture postcards to friends and family to prove that they had participated in a lynching. Each time that a picture postcard of a “barbecue” was made and distributed, the abject and objectified black body was used to affirm white superiority.

While white families bonded in these ways, antilynching playwrights created scripts that drew together black families and communities and gave them occasion for asserting their status as humans with souls. It is therefore no coincidence that the texts most often and most successfully came to life in private venues, such as the black home, where black humanity was most cherished. They needed a different kind of theatrical space if they were to do justice to a different kind of “strange fruit.”

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<sup>33</sup> Scholars such as Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, Trudier Harris, and Robyn Wiegman have well documented and theorized the cultural impact of lynching rituals. See Hall’s “‘The Mind that Burns in Each Body,’” Harris’s *Exorcising Blackness*, and Wiegman’s *American Anatomies*.

## CHAPTER 4: BLACK FEMALE TEXTS

In initiating antilynching drama, black women created a new form and embraced the forum that most accommodated its non-spectacular depictions of African Americans. That is, while insisting that black domesticity was worthy of theatrical portrayal, they invested in amateur—often informal—stages. At the same time, they worked to modify their audiences' expectations of drama as a literary genre. Avoiding commercial pressures and rejecting mainstream standards of theatricality, they were free to construct their texts around conversation rather than spectacle and traditional dramatic action. Since drama typically enacts a story, enabling the audience to experience the central conflict in the present moment, one would expect a play about racial violence to reproduce that violence. Early black-authored lynching dramas often defy that expectation; readers and viewers encounter mob violence through characters who testify to their family's experiences of it. The personal testimonies and candid conversations of African Americans could dominate these dramatic texts precisely because the authors wanted their work to come alive in blacks' own private spaces, not professional theaters. This chapter discusses the transformations that antilynching playwrights made to drama as a literary genre as they emphasized conversation over action and spectacle; it also offers close readings of the ten dramas written by black women before 1935.

I begin by analyzing the forms that the plays take. Whereas Angelina Weld Grimké initiated antilynching drama with a three-act play, her successors all preferred writing one-acts, despite their incompatibility with traditional stage success. As they embraced Grimké's motifs but not her format, later antilynching dramatists believed that their chosen *dramatic form* would strengthen the cultural work of their texts. Yet, despite

the marked shift from full-length to one-act plays, the genre's *discursive form* remained consistent: all of the plays operate through the mode of testimony. In relying on testimony, the writers tapped into its Christian roots and legal implications and ensured that dialogue would dominate antilynching drama. These writers thus used their scripts to enter not only the cultural conversation on lynching but also the complicated, perhaps never-ending conversation about whether investing in either the law or Christianity served African American self-interest. Acknowledging the complex relationship that blacks have had with both the legal system and with Christianity, the writers filled their plays with dialogue that never leads to solid conclusions or simple solutions. Instead, each script engages issues by allowing the testimony of characters—and of the plays themselves—to take center stage. As they talk to one another, characters testify to their individual truths, and the plays enter larger national conversations in order to testify to truths suppressed in mainstream discourse.

Although the dramas encouraged dialogue, allowed different points of view to proliferate, and refused to provide definite solutions, the playwrights apparently agreed that certain issues had to be addressed. As a result, the scripts can be productively examined in thematically complementary pairs. The dramas discuss whether to have children in a racist society (*Rachel* and *Safe*); whether blacks owe patriotism to the nation (*Mine Eyes Have Seen* and *Aftermath*); and whether lynching is in fact a response to the rape of white women (*Sunday Morning in the South* and *For Unborn Children*). Additionally, Georgia Douglas Johnson's *Blue Blood* and *Blue-Eyed Black Boy* consider whether a black woman's domestic success is predicated on keeping rape a secret. Finally, Regina Andrews's *Climbing Jacob's Ladder* and May Miller's *Nails and Thorns*

encourage discussion of whether antilynching drama should remain focused on the black home. These ten plays offer us a diversity of voices, yet each bears witness to the existence of honorable black men and women, the injustices they suffer, and the truth about American hypocrisy that their pain exposes.

### **Why Testimony?**

To understand why antilynching drama prioritizes bearing witness, I consider testimony's biblical roots and, to a lesser degree, its secular connotations.<sup>1</sup> Biblical insight is especially appropriate because African Americans routinely referred to lynch victims as Christ figures who were unjustly and brutally persecuted. For audiences familiar with the many ways in which their plight as a race paralleled that of Jesus Christ, testimony was a powerful way to memorialize fallen victims.<sup>2</sup> In addition, the playwrights understood that, while mobs disregarded due process, they were implicitly supported by courts of law which rarely intervened. The dramas therefore offer testimony by African Americans to African Americans that would not otherwise be heard.

Whether viewed in a spiritual or secular context, bearing witness allowed these writers to transform the earthly struggle of the persecuted into an undying legacy. In

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<sup>1</sup> In everyday parlance, testimony refers to verifying that something is true, in the fashion of a courtroom witness. To acknowledge the term's Christian roots is to recognize that courtroom testimony, and informal witnessing in daily life, take their cultural significance from testimonies about Christ's life and works, burial and resurrection. Here, I use the *Catholic Encyclopedia (CE)* as a way to access this Christian foundation, partly because it is as much a scholarly resource as it is a religious one, bolstered by the very long history of research in the Catholic tradition.

<sup>2</sup> Many have noted that African Americans navigated the harsh terrain of slavery and disfranchisement by noting the parallels between themselves and Jesus Christ. To take just three varied examples: Eddie Glaude's *Exodus!: Religion, Race, and Nation in Early Nineteenth-Century Black America* (University of Chicago Press, 2000), Kimberly Rae Connor's *Imagining Grace: Liberating Theologies in the Slave Narrative Tradition* (University of Illinois Press, 2000), and Wilson Jeremiah Moses's *Black Messiahs and Uncle Toms: Social and Literary Manipulations of a Religious Myth* (Pennsylvania State UP, 1993).

Scripture, testimony creates the “continuity between the earthly Jesus and the glorified Christ” (CE 1048). In antilynching drama, even if the lynch victim is not portrayed, he lives on through those willing to speak his truth rather than allow the mob’s version of his life story to go unchallenged. Within the plays, characters vouch for the original stability of the home, the integrity of the missing head of household, and the lasting impact of his absence. Ultimately, the scripts survive to strengthen generations of African Americans by giving them a more accurate portrait of their ancestors.

Antilynching playwrights utilized the tools offered by dramatic form, such as dialogue, props, and sound effects, but they always worked within the larger discursive form of testimony. In fact, the playwrights put drama in the service of testimony precisely because they recognized the limits of existing theatrical productions. The dramatists grappled with the racist ideology embedded in the theater by designing texts that, especially when performed, would alter aesthetic tendencies by depicting black bodies in ways that theater typically did not. These scripts called for black bodies to sit and read, for example, thereby testifying to African Americans’ humanity and normalcy. Likewise, at a time when theatrical productions on trees and telephone poles made black bodies appear monstrous and abject, these playwrights depicted the mutilated body’s *absence*. In so doing, they foregrounded the race’s soul at a time when society acknowledged its physical presence but not its humanity.

The dramatists’ commitment to testimony not only inspired them to initiate a shift in emphasis from spectacle and action to dialogue and conversation, but it also led them to resist unifying dramatic discourse. Since a witness speaks from personal experience, anyone can offer testimony, and the listener can as easily reject it as believe it. A mode

of discourse that is both powerful and vulnerable precisely because it is so unabashedly personal suited antilynching dramatists because they believed that they did not have the privilege of asserting that their truth was *the* truth. Rather than argue that theirs was the only perspective on mob violence, the playwrights put forth their own accounts and built antilynching drama on earnest conversation. The one-acts consist almost exclusively of dialogue and exemplify what Mikhail Bakhtin in another context called “heteroglossia”—the presence of others’ speech within one’s own. The language of antilynching drama is undeniably “contested, contestable, and contesting—for this discourse cannot forget or ignore, either through naiveté or by design, the heteroglossia that surrounds it” (Bakhtin 332).<sup>3</sup> Each word uttered by the dramatists and their characters is shaped by a keen awareness of what others have said about mob violence and the people targeted by it.

Testimony also served the playwrights’ purposes because it places value on intimacy. By definition, testimony allows the word of a witness who has personal knowledge to replace the direct experience of the listener (*CE* 1045). Because they had to counter the pervading discourse that blacks were subhuman, the antilynching playwrights needed a form that privileged the word of friends, family, and close acquaintances. In Scripture, only those who had been “the close associates and table companions of Christ” could “in the strict sense, bear witness” (*CE* 1048). In similar fashion, the plays foreground the voices of those who knew the victim. And, more

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<sup>3</sup> Bakhtin claims that the heteroglossia of novelistic discourse is unique, and he even says that it is much more complex than the “statement-and-response” construction of drama (320). However, antilynching playwrights consciously entered a cultural conversation that was made up of lynching discourse as well as the actions it justified. Because the mob’s actions could not be separated from the language that supported it, the language of lynching plays operates in the same way that novelistic discourse does. That is, it is stratified or “dialogized” and, even when a statement seems “single-languaged and pure,” “substantial masses of [mainstream] language are drawn into [it]” (320, 315). The result, as Bakhtin suggests, is that attentive scholars can see in a single utterance “the battle between points of view, value judgments, and emphases...” (315-16). See Mikhail Bakhtin, “Discourse in the Novel” in *The Dialogic Imagination*.

generally, antilynching drama values intimacy in that its authors testified to truths about their own race.

The desire to protest lynching also encouraged an emphasis on testimony because the dramatists had to contradict countless witnesses. In a society that bombarded citizens with dehumanizing images of African Americans, those images essentially testified that blacks were inhuman and immoral. Because they were so numerous and far reaching, such depictions rivaled—or even took the place of—an individual’s personal interactions with African Americans. Even for blacks themselves, a barrage of accounts insisting that they were immoral and ignorant began to outweigh personal contact with friends and family. After all, brute images circulated at the turn of the century, not because so many people had had horrible experiences with black men, but because negative accounts were so easily generated and passed on. In this climate, it made sense to convey the truth about a lynch victim, not by allowing the audience to see him living on stage, but by permitting his family and friends to testify to his character. A brief encounter with the victim before his death may not have reverberated in the audience’s minds as much as testimonies from several of his acquaintances.

Yet, antilynching dramatists used testimony not just to assert the honorable character of the deceased, but also to document the lynching incident itself. The plays do not concern themselves with re-creating the violence but with recounting it. The scripts, and the characters within them, do not simply report that a man has been lynched, however; they argue that his death had been unjust. The plays therefore operate as Scripture indicates testimony should; it includes a rendering of both the empirical facts and their deeper meaning. The apostles reported not just that Jesus died and arose but

that his doing so was the ultimate sign of God's love (*CE* 1049). The testimony of antilynching drama, like that of the gospel, "reaffirms and confirms historical reality" but it does so in order to reveal the "interior dimension" of that reality (*CE* 1049).

Accordingly, the genre is not interested in representing the hanging corpse, or what Billie Holiday called "strange fruit." Reproducing the mutilation of a lynch victim's body would not uncover that which "escapes the outward gaze" (*CE* 1049). To reveal a deeper, more enduring truth, antilynching drama showcases a different kind of strange fruit: mutilated households and crushed spirits.

The impulse to testify to a lynching incident rather than re-create it was particularly appropriate for a genre targeting black audiences. African Americans generally did not attend spectacle lynchings; they came to the scene later to retrieve the body in hopes of properly burying their dead. This pattern in African American lived experience helps clarify how dramatic form serves—but is also expanded by—the form of testimony. Because the plays use the home as setting (dramatic form), they must rely on and operate as testimony (discursive form). The physical violation of lynching usually occurred in a public place outside of the home, so spotlighting the black household translates into *not* showcasing the act itself. Whites attended lynchings, whether or not they took part in the direct physical assault, while blacks arrived later to pick up the pieces—literally and figuratively—in order to make sense of what whites had done. Long after the physical attack was over and the physical remains had deteriorated, African Americans had to deal with the implications of the incident ... and this process involved constructing narratives about the incident itself and the deeper truth it exposed.

Antilynching scripts survive as evidence that both playwrights and the individuals they depicted constructed such narratives.

The strategy of rendering the lynching incident through testimony was also in line with African American interest in dramatic realism at the turn of the century. Even W.E.B. Du Bois, who had authored and produced majestic pageants, called for African Americans to begin writing serious, realistic dramas that accurately represented black life. Nothing could mimic the actual lived experience of African Americans more than a genre built on testimony. For blacks understood that in everyday life they were always testifying to the race's humanity and readiness for full citizenship. They knew that one person's behavior was taken to be proof of the entire race's worth or worthlessness. As such, African Americans' preoccupation with the politics of representation at the turn of the century arose from what Du Bois labeled "double consciousness"—the sense of always looking at oneself as if through others' eyes. I want to suggest that this translated into a sense of always being on stage—even when riding the train or shopping.

Not incidentally, this awareness of others' gazes was also the reason that blacks operated with an expanded conception of what counted as an important theatrical venue. A people this conscious of the politics of representation was not satisfied with having their stories told on formal stages alone. Indeed, it behooved them to make formal stages, especially commercial ones, *less* important to blacks so that their identities would not be assaulted by what was presented on them. Black playwrights and philosophers worked to resist the images that appeared on formal stages. Yet, they did so not by simply putting alternative depictions on formal stages, but by making amateur, private stages important... so that those could be used to bolster black identity.

## The Difference that Form Makes

With both dramatic form and discursive form in mind, antilynching drama's shift from the three-act to the one-act format becomes comprehensible. Those invested in the one-act format abandoned the traditional dramatic form that had served Grimké so well, but they proved as committed as she was to testimony. Grimké's text bears the influence of an Aristotelian conception of dramatic form; it emphasizes action—an unmistakable beginning, middle, and end with identifiable cause and effect patterns. In contrast, the women and men who wrote antilynching plays after the debut of Grimké's *Rachel* prioritized conversation with one-acts composed almost completely of dialogue. These one-act scripts work against chronological progression by ending ambiguously and suggesting that the discussion should not end with the words found on the page or uttered on stage.

The stage success that Grimké's *Rachel* had can be attributed to its adherence to mainstream expectations of dramatic structure. The play was first produced in March 1916 at the Myrtilla Miner School in Washington D.C. The newly formed NAACP Drama Committee sponsored the show, and it was the first time that a serious drama written by an African American was brought to life by black actors in a semiprofessional production. The Washington D.C. audience consisted of both blacks and whites, though as Gloria Hull suggests, even if Grimké sought to touch whites' hearts, they were surely in the minority at the production. The same was true when it appeared at New York City's Neighborhood Playhouse and in Cambridge, Massachusetts, in 1917 (Hull 119).

The initial staging of *Rachel* sparked the most controversy, thereby influencing Grimké's playwriting successors. That is, after 1916, black dramatists wrote as the

debate raged between those who believed that black drama should steer clear of political content and those who felt it should denounce American racism. In the final analysis, antilynching drama exemplifies the political agenda advocated by Du Bois more than the “purely artistic” approach promoted by Howard University professors Alain Locke and Montgomery Gregory. For the genre became one for black audiences when Grimké’s successors chose to write one-acts. Writing about African Americans in a serious manner and in the one-act format was tantamount to rejecting commercial production, but such scripts were well suited for publication in *Crisis* and *Opportunity*, periodicals that proved to be the foundation for amateur black theater movements.<sup>4</sup>

One-acts were available for amateur productions because their brevity made their publication in periodicals practical. Magazines were inexpensive and easily shared. Furthermore, a play short enough for periodical publication could be learned quickly. Therefore, even if only one member of a small organization could secure a copy of a play, the four to six actors needed to bring it to life could learn their parts during a few brief meetings.

Of the twelve one-acts that followed the 1916 production of *Rachel*, six gained an audience through periodicals. *Crisis* magazine published *Mine Eyes Have Seen* and *For Unborn Children*. Mary Burrill’s *Aftermath* appeared in *The Liberator*, G.D. Lipscomb’s *Frances* was published in *Opportunity*, and Joseph Mitchell’s *Son-Boy* ran in *The*

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<sup>4</sup> Non-comedic one-acts were not generally suitable for commercial theaters except in a three-play configuration. Of the playwrights of this study, only Georgia Douglas Johnson wrote enough plays in rapid succession to fill a commercial playbill, so the majority of these playwrights likely did not write with commercial production in mind. Eulalie Spence comes to mind as a prolific one-act writer who could hope for commercial production, but much of her commercial appeal came from her refusal to engage racism.

*Saturday Evening Quill*, an African American magazine based in Boston.<sup>5</sup> Georgia Douglas Johnson was the most prolific antilynching playwright, but her lynch plays were generally not published until the 1980s and 1990s. Still, *Blue Blood* was announced in the May 1926 issue of *Opportunity* because it had earned honorable mention in the magazine's playwriting contest. Readers could therefore contact the editors of that magazine if they were interested in the play, as the Krigwa Players of Washington D.C. apparently did, given that they performed it in 1927 (letter from Willis Richardson, DuB Papers). Also, in 1928, *Blue Blood* received its first printing in Frank Shay's collection *Fifty More Contemporary One-Act Plays*.

Still, the main difference between Grimké's inaugural play and the antilynching one-acts that followed it is that Grimké constructed her text so that it would resonate with white audiences. She used sentimentality, foregrounded Victorian-influenced courtship rituals and manners, and emphasized familiarity with European culture. The script calls attention to household décor because it features prints of paintings such as *Golden Stairs* by Englishman Edward Burne-Jones as well as *The Reapers* and *The Man with the Hoe* by French realist Jean-Francois Millet. Also, Raphael Sanzio's *The Sistine Madonna* from the Italian High Renaissance is highlighted in several scenes.<sup>6</sup> Even the four years separating acts II and III enhanced Grimké's ability to touch white audience members. Because we see Rachel at ages eighteen and twenty-two, the drama can more closely resemble a sentimental bildungsroman. For Rachel, coming of age means deteriorating

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<sup>5</sup> The plays that were not published in these periodicals did not see publication until drama scholars collected them. Thus, Georgia Douglas Johnson's *A Sunday Morning in the South* was published in 1974 in the first edition of *Black Theatre USA* and her *Safe* in Elizabeth Brown-Guillory's *Wines in the Wilderness* in 1990. Regina Andrew's *Climbing Jacob's Ladder* first appeared in 1998 in *Strange Fruit* and May Miller's *Nails and Thorns* was published in the 1991 anthology *Roots of African American Drama*. In 1934, Randolph Edmonds, unlike his antilynching predecessors, was in a position to publish a collection of his own plays titled *Six Plays for a Negro Theatre*, and he included *Bad Man*.

<sup>6</sup> Of course, the Madonna is also mentioned to emphasize Rachel's love of children.

mentally because a truly sensitive soul cannot bear the cruelties of the society in which she lives. Tracing Rachel's development as she encounters multiple racial injustices allowed Grimké more fully to explain her decline. Audience members who had not experienced racism first-hand required more "proof" of its power, and Grimké structured her text to bear that burden.

Grimké's investment in creating a work with which white audiences could identify is best articulated in her own rationale for the play; her goal had been to elicit sympathy from whites, especially white women. Grimké asserted: "Since it has been understood that 'Rachel' preaches race suicide, I would emphasize that that was not my intention. To the contrary, the appeal was not primarily to the colored people, but to the whites" (Reason 424). She continued, "The majority of women, everywhere, although they are beginning to awaken, form one of the most conservative elements of society. They are, therefore, opposed to change. For this reason and for sex reasons the white women of this country are about the worst enemies with which the colored race has to contend" (Reason 425). Hoping to convert these "enemies," Grimké used motherhood to make white women "see, feel, understand just what effect their prejudice and the prejudice of their fathers, brothers, husbands, sons" has on the "souls of the colored mothers everywhere" (Reason 425). Because she strove to convince whites that blacks deserved their sympathy, Grimké did not focus exclusively on depicting black life to blacks. She had hoped to effect change by speaking "primarily" to "the whites," but her successors quickly discarded this strategy.

When we look closely at the motivations behind Grimké's approach, the other antilynching playwrights' eagerness to reject her tactics (and her three-act format) gains

significance. In her rationale, Grimké insisted: “Whenever you say ‘colored person’ to a white man he immediately [...] conjures up in his mind the picture of what he calls ‘the darky.’ In other words, he believes, or says he does, that all colored people are a grinning, white-toothed, shiftless, carefree set, given to chicken-stealing, watermelon-eating, always, under all circumstances, properly obsequious to a white skin and always amusing” (Reason 425). Clearly, Grimké was responding to the minstrel image, and she was attuned to the power of the visual. In her formulation, when one *hears* blacks mentioned, a specific *picture* comes to mind. Because she chose to counter that image “primarily” for “the whites,” Grimké drew her characters from “the best type of colored people”—whom she identified thusly: “...[they live] in homes that are clean, well-kept with many evidences of taste and refinement about them. They are many of them well educated, cultivated and cultured; they are well-mannered and, in many instances, more moral than the whites; they love beauty; they have ideals and ambitions, and *they do not talk*—this educated type—in *the Negro dialect*” (Reason 425, my emphasis). In establishing for whites that blacks were not darkies, Grimké engaged in the cultural conversation over African Americans’ capacity for civilization. In contrast, her successors used the one-act format, deemed more suitable for engaging black audiences. In the process, these writers moved away from arguing for black humanity—indeed they took it as a given—and instead pondered the contours of black identity.

Grimké’s work, however, did not simply cater to whites and make no contribution to African American communities. After all, like Du Bois, Grimké was invested in black playwriting because she felt that the truest representations of the race would come from within it. She was likely pleased, then, that many black poets and prose writers became

dramatists after her play was staged. Of course, many were convinced that they could do a better job of depicting black life in drama than she had, but their willingness to enter the genre only confirms the importance of her work. Her script put forth a representation of the race that others felt was too significant to leave unaddressed. As a result, Grimké played an important role in the process that Stuart Hall describes when he insists: “...identities are about questions of using the resources of history, language and culture in the process of becoming rather than being; not ‘who we are’ [...] so much as what we might become, *how we have been represented and how that bears on how we might represent ourselves*” (Hall 4, my italics).

Furthermore, even while speaking primarily to whites, Grimké’s inaugural drama conveyed a crucial message to blacks. In an often overlooked passage, *Rachel* articulates fundamental assumptions about blacks’ obligation to speak with pride about fallen community members, suggesting Grimké’s own belief that drama could be used to affirm black identity as much as it had been used to denigrate it. Early in Act I, Rachel says that she feels sorry for mothers whose children grow up to be bad. Her mother Mrs. Loving asks, “...how do you happen to know all this? Mothers whose babies grow up to be bad don’t, as a rule, parade their faults before the world” (33). Rachel responds, “That’s just it—that’s how you know. They don’t talk at all” (33).

Though Rachel and her brother Tom are nearly adults, neither of them knows how their father and brother were killed; they simply know that their mother has always refused to talk about them. Mrs. Loving asks, “Did you think—that—perhaps—the reason—I—I—wouldn’t talk about them—was—because, because—I was ashamed—of them?” (39). Rachel and Tom uncomfortably fumble for answers, but Mrs. Loving

surmises that they have not broached the topic because, assuming that she was ashamed, they were too. Mrs. Loving bursts, “You evade—both—of you. You have been ashamed. And I never dreamed until today you could take it this way. How blind—how almost criminally blind, I have been” (40). She now knows, she explains, that it is her duty to tell her story, and she describes the night that her husband and son were lynched. She gives her painful testimony.

Like Mrs. Loving, Grimké the author realized that she must tell her people’s story. Black writers living at the turn of the century could not be content to use fiction, essays, or poetry; the historical moment demanded a dramatic response. While white writers were invested in using the stage to label black men rapists, black-authored dramas would show that African Americans believed black manhood to be worthy of defense. At a time when the stage was being used to cast black men as buffoons—and increasingly as rapists—silence from black playwrights would be tantamount to their expressing shame and accepting the dominant discourse about the race.

This passage about silence and shame provides insight into not only why Grimké wrote *Rachel* but also, I would argue, why the play inspired other African Americans to take up drama for themselves. Rather than pander to mainstream ideas about what made blacks worthy of human compassion (“they don’t speak dialect”), those who chose to address black audiences through one-acts reinforced what African Americans hopefully already believed about themselves. But, because being bombarded with negative images could obliterate healthy self-conceptions, these playwrights also spoke to black audiences as a form of damage control. By addressing whites, Grimké wanted to counteract their

tendency to attack black bodies, but many of her successors addressed blacks, hoping to heal the damage caused by the attacks on their minds and spirits.

### ***Refusing to Reproduce***

*Rachel (1916) and Safe (1929) portray deteriorating black homes whose women respond to lynching by refusing to have children. When mob violence leads them to abandon their goals of motherhood, these women become insane. In this way, they testify to the extent to which the mob damages not only the body but also the mind and spirit of the race. Thus, the convention of familial de-generation is introduced in Rachel, and Safe answers with an even more chilling illustration.*

### ***Rachel, Angelina Weld Grimké, 1916***

As the first published antilynching play written by a black woman, *Rachel* initiates the genre's investment in by documenting the existence of honorable black manhood and solid homes and creating memorials that acknowledges them as mob victims. The audience encounters sixteen-year-old Rachel, her mother and her younger brother Tom in their northern home ten years after their father has been lynched in the South. Mrs. Loving finally decides to share with her children the truth about their father's death, and her painful testimony highlights the injustice of the incident by establishing his impeccable character. Mrs. Loving declares that the family must always commemorate his life and death, but it is Grimké's play that proves to be the enduring memorial.

Within the text, Mrs. Loving testifies to the empirical facts surrounding Mr. Loving's death and their deeper meaning. She and her husband had been in bed but not asleep when whites "broke down the front door and made their way to our bedroom" (41). When the mob had begun dragging her husband down the hall, her seventeen-year-old son George tried to intervene; "it ended in [the mob] dragging them both out" (41). Her husband had been targeted because he had written an editorial denouncing mob violence. Despite knowing that "a white man was guilty," a group of "respectable people in the town" had lynched a black man. Mr. Loving was told to retract his words, but the next issue of his newspaper contained an even more searing indictment, and "some dozen masked men came to our house" (40).

Grimké uses the testimony of this grieving widow and mother to establish parallels between black family men and Jesus Christ. As his name suggests, Mr. Loving had epitomized love, and his editorial actions confirmed his love for truth and justice. His wife cries, "your father was a man among men. He was a fanatic. He was a saint!" (40). Nevertheless, he has been killed "by Christian people—in a Christian land. We found out afterwards they were all church members in good standing..." (40).

Mr. Loving dies under the same circumstances as Jesus Christ—he is killed by devout congregants and he dies so that others might live—but his plight leads his family to lose faith in God. Though a religious woman, Mrs. Loving confesses to her surviving children that when her son and husband had been dragged from the house, "I knelt down by you—and covered my ears with my hands—and waited. I could not pray—I couldn't for a long time—afterwards" (41). No doubt, the incident led Mrs. Loving to question the value of Christian faith precisely because her husband had been so devout. Then,

upon hearing her mother's testimony, Rachel questions the wisdom of investing in marriage and motherhood and doubts God's willingness to protect those who do. She therefore rejects John Strong's marriage proposal; she cannot bear the thought of bringing children into a racist society (77).

It is important that simply hearing her mother's story leads Rachel to lose faith in marriage, motherhood, and God. While some may be tempted to view Rachel's reactions as overly sentimental, they actually illustrate the power of testimony. Because Rachel trusts the witness, she allows the word of another to become a substitute for her own experience (*CE* 1045). As Mrs. Loving recounts the events, her tone of voice, facial expressions, gestures, and entire demeanor help to bring the story to life for Rachel. As her mother speaks, Rachel views the scene with her mind's eye, as if it were being enacted before her.

Similarly, we witness the power of testimony when a stranger, Mrs. Lane, visits Rachel to gather information about the neighborhood. Her seven-year-old daughter Ethel has been treated so cruelly by the teachers and students at her previous school that she often hides behind her mother and "looks over her shoulder fearfully" for no apparent reason (58, 56). Mrs. Lane places Rachel in Ethel's reality as she recounts,

They stared as only children can stare. Some began whispering about her. Presently, one child came up and ran her hand roughly over Ethel's face. She looked at her hand and Ethel's face and ran screaming back to the others, "It won't come off! See!" Other children followed the first child's example. Then one boy spoke up loudly: "I know what she is, she's a nigger!" Many took up the cry. [...] One boy boldly called her "Nigger!" before the teacher. She said, "That isn't nice,"—but she smiled at the boy. [...] Quite a crowd escorted [Ethel home]. They called her "Nigger!" all the way (57).

Rachel does not have to experience directly Mrs. Loving's plight, Ethel's pain, or even her brother Tom's emasculation via unemployment to understand the deeper meaning of their experiences. Recognizing that racism's many forms all diminish black life, Rachel laments, "Everywhere—it is the same thing. My mother! My little brother! Little, black, crushed Ethel!" (59).

Characters' testimonies preserve truths denied by mainstream society, but the play itself is also a testimony. In initiating the convention of de-generation, *Rachel* ensures that the cultural conversation on lynching will be informed by Grimké's lasting tribute to an individual who suffered physically as well as the households that were lynched along with him. Grimké's play presents de-generation with its spotlight on Rachel and her fiancé Mr. Strong, and even her unattached brother Tom. Early in the play, Rachel is told in a dream that her God-given mission is to become a mother (34). The news delights her because she loves children and wonders what could be wrong in the world as long as they are in it (34). After realizing that all black males are potential lynch victims, Rachel reasons: "Why—it would be more merciful—to strangle the little things at birth" (42). Later, she agonizes, "And so this nation—this white Christian nation—has deliberately set its curse upon the most beautiful—the most holy thing in life—motherhood!" (42). As the action progresses, Rachel is haunted by the sound of children begging not to be born, and her despair allies her with her biblical namesake (28): ". . . Rachel weeping *for* her children. . . would not be comforted because they are not" (Matthew 2:18). Grimké's Rachel promises the children that she will not bring them into the world. Feeling forced to abandon her dreams of motherhood, Rachel becomes convinced that she hears God

laughing at her pain. As her sanity corrodes, her anger escalates and she tries to out-laugh God, clearly regarding Him as her worst enemy (76).

In tracing this spiritual deterioration, Grimké insists that lynching destruction surpasses the physical realm and threatens the race's soul and psyche. For the lynching of Mr. Loving leads to the weakening of Rachel's present home and prevents her from creating another with Mr. Strong. Thus, the black male absence inflicted by the mob does not simply destroy an existing household; it prevents the creation of new ones.

In fact, the racism that had fueled the violence against Mr. Loving is already working to extinguish any sense of self-worth in his seventeen-year-old son Tom. Long before he has a chance to become a head of household or community leader, discrimination has kept Tom from finding work, despite his solid education. As he struggles to deal with that injustice, he realizes that a white girl in the neighborhood no longer visits because she has been criticized for associating with blacks. Tom then vows that he will never speak to her again. His mother says that she understands how he feels, but "I wish my son to always be a gentleman" (38). Tom quickly responds, "if being a gentleman means not being a man—I don't wish to be one" (38). Tom clearly questions the standards by which his behavior should be judged. His mother implies that a "gentleman" would be courteous in spite of the slight against him. His mother would have him be a manly man who rises above the insult at all costs. For Tom, accepting the insult would make him a coward who does not defend himself against injustice... and a disgrace to his courageous father's legacy. Tom argues that such "manliness" actually denies his manhood; he cannot preserve his dignity while allowing himself to be mistreated. While not interested in physical aggression, Tom embraces masculinity in

that he values his right to respond passionately. In this debate, the issue is whether the code of gentlemanly conduct can appropriately apply to the slights that black men routinely face. Tom argues that to adopt the code his mother advocates denies his experience as a black man.

Grimké uses Tom's predicament to acknowledge the complex choices that black men make about how to express manhood. In a racially charged society, any valid definition of manhood must account for race because black men cannot simply adopt mainstream standards. The manliness that would bring honor to a white man only brings him shame... and unfettered masculinity gets him lynched.

Given her portrayal of Rachel's suitor as the most admirable man in the play, Grimké seems to support manliness more than masculinity. Mr. Strong distinguishes himself from Tom and the deceased Mr. Loving because he refuses to react passionately to the injustices he suffers. Mr. Strong exemplifies his name with a strength of will that allows him to endure injustices with apparent calm. Tom and his father may have called this cowardice, but Grimké presents his behavior as the epitome of family-sustaining manliness. Though Mr. Strong is well educated and living in the North, he works as a waiter. Similarly educated and under-employed, Rachel says that their plight makes her pessimistic and morbid, but Mr. Strong disagrees. Though he knows he deserves better, his job enables him to fulfill his manly duties; his humble occupation can provide for his mother and prospective wife (51-54). Because his priorities are in manly order, he does not allow frustration and anger to determine his behavior. It seems that Grimké would have black men think of their families before reacting to social injustices, for masculine pride often resulted in lynchings that devastated black families. Though she is proud of

her late husband, Mrs. Loving says that she “used to plead with him to be more careful. I was always afraid for him” (40). In making Mr. Strong a role model, Grimké’s play criticizes black men who assert themselves at their family’s expense.

At the same time, Grimké makes clear that neither manliness nor masculinity offer a simple solution. Grimké criticizes those who would simply graft Victorian values onto blacks, *as well as* those who pretend that they can defend themselves freely. African American men cannot rely on white definitions of manhood; they must define manhood for themselves—while keeping the black family the priority. Throughout the play, though, Grimké demonstrates how difficult that is. Society forces black men to make decisions that whites never face. Often denied the right to defend themselves, they must constantly choose between personal dignity and staying alive to be with their wives and children. By exposing the injustice of having to make such decisions, Grimké honors black men—including those who die trying to strike a balance.

The complex portrait that Grimké put forth inspired intense discussion about the meaning of black manhood, womanhood, and childhood in a society that allows lynching. Remnants of the many conversations that it sparked survive in the form of reviews of the drama, in personal letters, and in the form of the twelve black-authored antilynching plays written in its wake and studied here. Some reviewers wondered if the play preached race suicide with its protagonist’s refusal to have children. Yet, the indication that most responses from African Americans were much more complex than this is that the play inspired equally complicated, irresolute, and conversation-provoking one-acts.

### ***Safe*, Georgia Douglas Johnson, 1929**

Like Grimké's *Rachel*, Georgia Douglas Johnson's *Safe* spotlights a black home only to detail its destruction, and uses de-generation to suggest that domestic success requires male presence. Johnson's play also conspicuously bears witness to the unacknowledged truths of a famous lynching. While most of the antilynching plays are set at the time of writing, Johnson takes her 1929 audience back to 1893 and retells the story of Sam Hose, who was lynched for hitting a white man, with a victim named Sam Hosea.<sup>7</sup> The Sam Hose case captured much attention in the 1890s, and historians have uncovered details about the murder and its aftermath. For instance, the real-life Sam Hose's knuckles were displayed in a store window in Atlanta. When W.E.B. Du Bois left to visit Joel Chandler Harris at the offices of the *Atlanta Constitution* to complain about the newspaper's biased coverage of lynching, he saw Hose's knuckles. Horrified, Du Bois turned around and became convinced that his sociological studies could not help the race (Lewis 226). At that moment, Du Bois the scholar became a relentless civil rights agitator—joining the ranks of Ida B. Wells, whose antilynching campaign was well under way.

Johnson's dramatic rendering of the case sheds light on facets of the story not readily acknowledged by whites. The family that wanted Hose killed recruited search parties by claiming in newspapers that Hose was a rapist.<sup>8</sup> Johnson tells a very different story in *Safe*, giving African Americans an alternative to the denigrating characterizations

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<sup>7</sup> However, the Sam Hose incident actually happened in 1899. See Phillip Dray's *At the Hands of Persons Unknown*, especially pages 3-16.

<sup>8</sup> Many African Americans felt that the white family's claims about rape were not even plausible. Hose supposedly killed the husband and then took the time to rape his wife several times (Dray 7-8). Du Bois in particular said that the rape charge was added simply to "arouse the neighborhood to find this man" (qtd. in Dray 7). Also note: an important difference between Hose and Johnson's Hosea is that Hose actually killed his boss while Johnson's character does not seem to have done more than strike back.

that saturated the press in the 1890s and American memory in later decades. Aside from revealing the truths behind the sensational mainstream headlines, *Safe* emphasizes the degree to which Sam Hose(a)'s story affected the larger community, not just his immediate family. The work thus bears witness to the fact that the isolated body parts that were so carelessly displayed in the shop window came from a man who was anything but an alienated brute.

The play's setting, stage directions, and dialogue immediately testify to the existence of solid, love-filled homes in the black community. Tender conversation fills the room as the mother-to-be happily sews, her husband reads the newspaper, and her mother, who has come to help prepare for the baby, must be convinced to rest. This household is not inhabited by black Victorians, though. Johnson's characters are poor, dialect-speaking African Americans who presumably have little formal education,<sup>9</sup> suggesting that uneducated blacks are as capable of domestic success as their black Victorian predecessors. Johnson thus endorsed the work of the black women's club movement and used her literature to testify to its success. The audience encounters Liza Pettigrew, her husband John and her mother Mandy as they eagerly await the arrival of Liza's firstborn. Liza's father is absent and never discussed. The current action therefore centers on Liza and John as a middle-generation couple.

John reads in the newspaper that a neighborhood teenager and family friend, Sam Hosea, has been taken to jail (111). The newspaper represents the court of public opinion, and the play complicates the testimony given in it. To the characters, Sam is not simply someone who hit a white man. He is a "motherly sort of boy" who has been

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<sup>9</sup> Those who speak dialect are not necessarily uneducated. Often, so-called Black dialect is spoken simply because one is in one's own home.

“working hard to take kere of his widder mother, doing the best he kin” (112). Just as importantly, they testify, he has been “trying to be a man and stan up for hissef, and what do he git? A slap in the face” (112). John decides to inquire about Sam’s situation, leaving Liza with her mother Mandy and a family friend named Hannah, who both complain that they live in constant fear for the men they love. Agreeing that mobs especially target black males, Liza declares that she hopes never to have a boy.

Moments later, Sam’s lynch mob passes the house. Hannah and Mandy tell Liza to remember her delicate condition and stay away from the window, but Liza hears Sam scream and looks out the front door (113). The horror sends her into labor. Hannah leaves to find a doctor and, shortly after the doctor arrives and John returns, Liza gives birth. The doctor emerges from the bedroom and tells the family that, while his back had been turned, Liza strangled the baby to death. The doctor reports that she had muttered repeatedly: “Now he’s safe—safe from the lynchers! Safe!” (115). What Grimké’s Rachel only suggests (“Why it would be more merciful to strangle the little things at birth”), Liza makes a reality when her child is born a boy. In 1916, Grimké implied that infanticide would be an understandable response to the injustice of lynching; by 1929, Johnson’s *Safe* testifies to exactly that level of despair in black mothers.

This powerful suggestion points to the genre’s insistence upon provoking conversation more than offering solutions to the race’s problems. Johnson directly answers Grimké’s suggestion, further engaging crucial questions that blacks faced, such as “Why are we lynched?,” “How should men respond?,” and “What can women do?” Liza’s actions do not solve anything—they are not presented as the solution—but they do point to black men’s similarity to Jesus Christ. Let us remember: Pontius Pilot hoped to

kill baby Jesus by having soldiers identify the firstborn sons in all civilian homes. *Safe* presents Sam as an unjustly crucified black man, but it also uses his murder as an indication of how unsafe America is for *unborn* black males.

The baby's death is particularly tragic when we read the text through the lenses of domesticity and manhood. Liza and John have achieved domestic success when the mob disturbs their tranquility—not just by targeting a family friend but also by keeping John away from home during his wife's time of need. When asked why he did not return sooner, he explains: "I tried to but I got headed off—[...] I oughter been here myself, but I didn't know I was gointer be cut off..." (115). That he had been "cut off" is significant because it points to the emasculation that accompanies not being able to protect one's own family. Then, as she recognizes the extent of the mob's unchecked power, Liza's gentle touch becomes a stranglehold. Lynching disturbs black domestic success with generation-destroying intensity.

Still, lynching's power to negate black homebuilding efforts is best exemplified by Liza's question to the older women who try to keep her from witnessing the violence. When the mob passes her house, Liza asks: "They wouldn't come in here? Would they?" (112). Her mother Mandy replies, "No, they wouldn't, but then we better keep it dark" (112). Mandy's response captures the irony of the situation. She consoles her daughter by claiming that the mob would not actually come into their home but immediately admits that they should be less conspicuous. In addition, Johnson as author makes clear that the mob invades Liza's home without physically entering it. Members of the mob have not walked inside—they have not even murdered her husband—but they have certainly violated her domestic domain, and destroyed her sense of safety.

In spotlighting a home other than that of the lynch victim, Johnson testifies to the far-reaching power of the mob and the particular loss black women feel. Although Sam's mother must have been devastated, Johnson focuses on the generational losses sustained by the home of a younger woman. Liza's father is missing without explanation, leaving open the possibility that he had been lynched; John and Liza represent a middle generation husband/wife unit that survives but cannot function normally because the black man is hiding from the mob; and finally, the newborn's death suggests that lynching targets even unborn black males. De-generation involves the removal *and* the prevention of generations, and because all of this devastation results from male absence, *Safe* testifies to black men's value to the home.

In the process, Johnson's play serves as a memorial to fallen community members that recognizes their integrity while dominant discourse denies it. For instance, Johnson's alternative account of the Hose case exposes the hypocrisy undergirding the nation's cultural conversation about manliness and civilization, since black manhood is attacked no matter what form it takes. At seventeen, Sam has become man of the house. He lives with and provides for his mother who, like Liza's mother, is a widow; again, the text never reveals the circumstances of his father's demise, leaving open the possibility that he had been lynched. The characters repeatedly testify to Sam's impeccable character and suggest that Sam's success as a dignified provider helped ignite his boss's primitive masculinity. Sam is offered less-than-fair pay, and his boss assaults him when he will not accept it (111). After being struck, the otherwise manly Sam physically defends himself. This masculine response is answered with death at the hands of a mob—the ultimate manifestation of white masculinity. In this play, whether a black man

expresses his manhood with quiet manliness or self-preserving masculinity, white men seek to destroy him.

In exposing this injustice, *Safe* argues—as Ida B. Wells had—that white men are the real savages. Thus, Johnson used her play to enter the cultural conversation on lynching with a strong criticism of the nation’s accepted rhetoric about manliness and civilization. Complicating this rhetoric required a multi-tiered attack on the assumptions about white civilization, and Johnson’s play seems to have contributed in a particularly private, and therefore powerful, way. While Wells published pamphlets and lectured internationally, there are no records that *Safe* was formally staged and it was not published until 1990, long after Johnson’s death. While Johnson lived, then, this work countered public stories about the Sam Hose case generally in private spaces where alternative versions of well-worn stories would be tolerated, if not welcomed. Of course, Johnson’s S Street literary salon is an important example of the sort of private venue in which blacks could discuss sensitive issues in a safe environment. Salon conversations about the Sam Hose case could have inspired the play or become the foundation for its dialogue. Then, once drafted, the conversations that Johnson created in her text would have sparked further discussion.

Whatever the specific circumstances of the many performances or dramatic readings, the text engaged and contributed to the cultural conversation on lynching as well as to discussions among African Americans about what it means to be black, especially in a nation that allows lynching. Ultimately, *Safe* (like *Rachel*) highlights the problems that black men face while living in a society that denies their manhood. Black manliness and a willingness to adopt Victorian values does not protect the black home

because mobs despise, rather than respect, black accomplishments. Yet, acting out of masculinity inevitably leads to lynching. In this climate, nothing can save the black woman from the horror of watching her homebuilding efforts negated. Even as Johnson promoted the black club movement's work, her play betrays her anxiety about the permanence of its triumphs. As a result, the play gives voice to the despair that black women feel about living in a country that disregards their homes and their husbands' and sons' lives.

Because the nation allowed such disrespect, Johnson and her colleagues offered their communities dramas documenting the truth behind mainstream newspaper stories. Each play was a final tribute to the many who suffered, proving that blacks did not passively accept their oppression in life or in literature. Just as Sam (the character and the man) stood up to his boss, black women playwrights countered the stereotypical portrayals that white playwrights created. With a poignancy that only a woman invested in the black home can muster, Johnson's play exposes lynching as not just a weapon against black bodies but as a tool for preventing the black man from being a protective husband and father and overall domestic success.

### ***Debating Black Patriotism***

*As a World War I pair, Mine Eyes Have Seen (1918) and Aftermath (1919) call attention to the fact that the United States does not protect black men from mobs, but nevertheless expects their loyalty in times of war. These plays also suggest the similarities between the mob and the military: both claim black men's freedom and their*

*lives while denying their citizenship and manhood. This pair of plays comments on war, mob violence, and the unsettling similarity of their effects on the black family.*

***Mine Eyes Have Seen, Alice Dunbar-Nelson, 1918***

Alice Dunbar Nelson's 1918 drama *Mine Eyes Have Seen* conspicuously unites in literature what was surely inseparable in life: the black woman's concern with lynching and her anxiety about World War I. Before the action begins, the young protagonist's father is lynched in the South; the play itself revolves around how his death influences his son Chris's feelings about military service. Every aspect of the setting highlights deterioration; the home that Chris shares with his older brother Dan and younger sister Lucy is "sordid," "dark," and even "damp"—in stark contrast to where they lived when their father was alive. Believing that "niggers had no business having such a decent home," town whites set the house on fire and shot the father for trying to save it (271). Therefore, when her brother is drafted, Lucy cries, "Oh, it can't be! They won't take you from us! And shoot you down, too?" (272). With this, Lucy and Dunbar-Nelson equate the mob and the military by giving them the same weapons.

Just as Lucy predicts Chris's fate, the reader can predict the family's. Dunbar-Nelson's entire play testifies to the fact that a black man's absence means sorrow and poverty for his loved ones, whether he is victimized by a mob or drafted by the army. When the father is taken from the home, his family moves into a squalid tenement in the North. Unaccustomed to the bleak climate, the mother dies of pneumonia. Then, the oldest son Dan is maimed at the factory into which the northern economy has forced him. In short, a successful generation is missing from this new household, and those who

remain struggle to reclaim their dignity—even as they are surrounded by reminders of everything they have lost. With the primary wage earner lynched and his successor crippled, they must “eat and live in the kitchen” (271). The family’s descent will be complete when the war claims Chris, its newest breadwinner.

If the family’s original prosperity enraged their white neighbors, then their financial problems in the North represent a victory for the mob. Still, the family’s devastation is best demonstrated not by the small space they occupy, but by the dissension that flourishes within it. Unlike the homes portrayed in other foundational antilynching dramas, this one allows an influx of visitors whose motives are unclear. As the action progresses, an Irish neighbor, a Jewish boy, a muleteer, and a settlement worker walk in unannounced. To varying degrees, each of these four visitors discounts Chris’s anti-war sentiments, and Chris’s girlfriend Julia ultimately sides with them. Thus, this unregulated household accommodates five people who challenge the man of the house, and their ability to do so testifies to the lasting damage that the mob has been able to do. Thus, the play not only preserves the truth about why their father was lynched, but it also memorializes his survivors’ devastated household. His family’s home proves to be as much a victim of the mob as he had been; it is simply a different kind of strange fruit.

As the “castrated” black household deteriorates, so does the manhood of its current male inhabitants. For Chris to be disrespected in his own home represents a crisis of manhood, whether he aspires to manliness or masculinity. When Chris’s distressed sister Lucy tells their Irish neighbor that her brother has been drafted, the woman answers, “An’ ef he has, what of it? [. . .] they took me man from me. . .an’ it’s a widder I

am wid me five kiddies, an' I've never a word [of complaint] to say. . . " (272). She seems to feel that, if her husband has been sacrificed, why should her black neighbor be spared? Next, Jake (described as a "Jewish boy") says that Chris should fight because "there's a future, Chris—a big one. We younger ones must be in that future—ready for it..." (273). The nation's record for mistreating blacks is of no consequence; it is in the past. In fact, Jake insists, "There isn't a wrong you can name that your race has endured that mine has not suffered, too" (273). With this, Jake overlooks the specific experience of African Americans in the United States and Chris's personal lynching-inspired reasons for not feeling obligated to Uncle Sam. Jake's sympathies do not lie with Chris or African Americans; he believes they should simply stop "grieving because you're colored" (274). The visitors' ability to cause tension by giving "advice" points to how damaged this household is. ...And the damage began with lynching. When Chris eventually agrees to serve, he apparently concedes to arguments that do not truly account for the fact that he will be serving "the nation that let my father's murder go unpunished" (272).

Chris passionately bears witness to the unjust death of his father and countless others, but Dunbar-Nelson nevertheless allows him to apparently agree to military service. In depicting a black man who is verbally overcome in his own home, Dunbar-Nelson exposed readers and viewers to the sorts of challenges that black men routinely faced. Because they were United States citizens, African Americans' conceptions of themselves were shaped by patriotism. Yet, they could not avoid dealing with the many ways that the nation denied their citizenship. Did a country that only begrudgingly accepted blacks into military service deserve their loyalty? Even for black men resolved

to be patriotic, expressing that patriotism was complicated by the fact that problems accompanied a black man's adoption of either standard of manhood. Did one best demonstrate one's readiness for full citizenship through manliness or masculinity? In *Mine Eyes*, Chris associates manhood with education (manliness) and Dan links it to physical power (masculinity), but it is not at all clear that either would improve their lives. After all, their father had adhered to the manly tenets of hard work, integrity, and constraint only to become a target for white hatred. On the other hand, although Chris is told to "be a man" and become a soldier, adherence to the principles of masculinity will bring more pain and poverty to his family.

Dan argues that black manhood is best demonstrated through military service, but his own words point to the futility of his philosophy. Dan declares that black soldiers are *real* men who brought honor to the race in 1776, 1812, 1861, and in 1898 in the Spanish-American War (273). He is ashamed that Chris does not want to continue that legacy, and he wishes that he could go in his place. Dan declares, "Oh God! If I were but whole and strong! If I could only prove to a doubting world of what stuff my people are made!" As Dan speaks, he "half tears himself from the chair, the upper part of his body writhing, while the lower part is inert, dead" (274). He cannot embody the type of manhood that he admires because he is crippled, but his condition does not kill his patriotism—despite the fact that lynching precipitated it. Dunbar-Nelson uses Dan's desire to serve to mark an important contradiction in pro-war rhetoric. Dan wants to prove to the world that black men are honorable and brave. Yet, he has just explained that blacks fought in four wars ". . . and saved the day, too, many a time" (273). Given this history, why does the

world still question black manhood? Furthermore, will dying in one more war convince this doubting world?

Given that such questions hover (like the father's ghost) over these scenes, *Mine Eyes* contributes to and advances important conversations about the contours of black identity. Certainly, blacks debated whether their racial identity included patriotism. Through the *Crisis*, the periodical that published *Mine Eyes* in April 1918, W.E.B. Du Bois often touted the respectability that accompanied black military service. Indeed, many African Americans believed in the American dream and were optimistic that loyal service would translate into civic equality *this time*. Dunbar-Nelson herself did "war work" with the Red Cross to support black troops. As she served in this capacity, she likely had moments of ambivalence inspired by experiences like those she articulates through Chris's girlfriend Julia. Though she later sides with the others, Julia initially counters Dan's pro-war comments with: "By why, Dan, it isn't our quarrel? ... These white people, they hate us. Only today I was sneered at when I went to help with some of their relief work" (274). When she sides with Dan in the end, then, it is clear that African American identity emerges out of a complex, never-ending process of negotiating one's lived experience and intense faith that the country will one day honor its creed.

Dunbar-Nelson's commitment to inspiring complicated, ongoing discussion rather than offering clear conclusions finds personification in Chris, whose name, especially on the page, is easily mistaken for "Christ." Dunbar-Nelson seems to encourage this conflation, particularly when Chris is encouraged to enlist with these words: "As He died to make men holy, let us die to make them free" (274). Indeed, Chris evokes both Christ the Warrior and Christ the sacrificial lamb; he militantly explains why blacks do not owe

patriotism to the nation but later seems to forget all of those reasons. He yields to his girlfriend's insistence that "it IS our country..." (274). After Chris's long list of crimes that America has committed against blacks, the audience must wonder if this appeal to his sense of patriotism is really sufficient. The answer is anything but simple because the arguments that "convince" Chris do not truly compare to the solid case that he has put forth. His conversion may very well be sincere, but it is certainly not based in reason. In this way, Dunbar-Nelson suggests that African Americans who fight for the United States despite its history are motivated by hope—a hope that is not altogether logical. Thus, the script preserves the complex factors influencing black identity and pays homage to those who lived and died while trying to define black identity for themselves, even as they navigated America's rugged terrain. That is, even as Chris ultimately capitulates, his testimony that the nation has left his father's death unpunished ensures that his father's plight will not be forgotten. Just as importantly, the play itself guarantees that the debate about World War I will engage lynching. Even while Du Bois and others used the pages of *Crisis* to tout the virtues of military service for African Americans, Dunbar-Nelson used drama—in the very same periodical—to insist that such notions be interrogated.

Strikingly, scholars who have studied this play typically argue that it encourages black participation in the War. Biographer and literary critic Gloria Hull speaks in unison with many others when she says that the play's "blatant intent is to persuade black people to support the war" (71). Pro-war interpretations assume that Chris's conversion accurately represents Dunbar-Nelson's stance, but such readings overlook the importance that antilynching dramatists placed on domesticity. As clubwomen, Dunbar-Nelson and her colleagues committed themselves to racial uplift, which they believed could be

achieved only by constructing solid black homes. If critics treated domesticity as seriously as these authors did, the argumentative guests in *Mine Eyes* would gain significance. They are not random characters written into the script simply to incorporate diverse perspectives. To the contrary, these suspicious visitors illuminate the very truths that made Dunbar-Nelson so conflicted about war work: those who encourage the black man to fight often do not respect him (even within his own home) and do not care if he dies serving a nation that allows lynching.<sup>10</sup>

The triumphant music that ends the play is another indication that scholars should pause before assuming that Chris's conversion corresponds in a simple way to Dunbar-Nelson's beliefs about black military service. Functioning like the five visitors who enter without knocking, the patriotic music from a marching band provides the final and most powerful argument against Chris. The band is playing "The Battle Hymn of the Republic" in "stirring march time," and the music "gets louder and louder until it reaches a crescendo" (274). Importantly, this final "visitor" enters at the height of Chris's frustration with those who surround him. Dan has called him a slacker and a weakling, and Chris lunges at him but then throws up his hands in anger. Then, Julia who had stood side-by-side with Chris in defiance of the others, has now joined them, telling Chris that "it IS our country..." (274). At that point, Chris is not just left alone; he is essentially silenced by the patriotic band. Music thus functions as a homogenizing force; dissent simply cannot be heard over it. Everyone knows the melody and will likely hum or tap along with it, even if not completely voluntarily.

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<sup>10</sup> There is no question that Dunbar-Nelson did much to support the war effort, especially in 1918, but she was also quite concerned about what the war would ultimately mean for African Americans. See Nikki Brown's essay "War Work, Social Work, Community Work—Alice Dunbar-Nelson, Federal War Work Agencies, and Southern African American Women" in the forthcoming *Postbellum/PreHarlem*.

As Christianity and military action come together in “The Battle Hymn of the Republic,” Dunbar-Nelson expertly infuses the text with even more ambiguity. Chris’s brother Dan, his girlfriend Julia, and even his sister Lucy have all clearly declared their patriotism. Then, the music arrives to silence Chris’s dissent, but he never claims to feel a genuine sense of duty. In answer to the lyrics “Mine Eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord,” Chris only says “mine too.” And, when everyone else has run over to the window to watch the marching band in all its glory, “*CHRIS remains in the center of the floor, rigidly at attention, a rapt look on his face*” (275). He is not saluting, and he is not caught up in the spirit; he just stands alone.

Dunbar-Nelson does not end her play with this patriotic music in order to inspire her audience; in fact, it more likely leaves them feeling uncomfortable because the final stage directions focus on Dan, who has spoken so passionately about the honor of military service. As the music intensifies, Dan struggles against his chair, emasculated and unable to rise and look at the band. The drama ends with these stage directions: “*DAN strains at his chair, as if he would rise, then sinks back, his hand feebly beating time to the music, which swells to a martial crash*” (275). This patriotic song stirs Dan to the core but the audience’s discomfort swells as the music does, because there is no way to ignore Dan’s condition. Dunbar-Nelson would have her audience feel conflicted as the play ends, and she surely accomplished this in the production at Howard High School in Wilmington, Delaware (*Strange Fruit* 411).<sup>11</sup> Though pictures of the production are not available, the stage was likely modest and the audience would have been in close proximity to, and perhaps on the same level as, the actors. The unavoidable intimacy of

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<sup>11</sup> Hull as well as Hatch and Hill assert that, on April 10, 1918 (the same day that *Strange Furit* lists for the Wilmington showing), Dunbar-Nelson granted permission to Dunbar High School in Washington D.C. to stage the play. See Hull 72 and Hatch/Hill 189-90.

an amateur production like this would have allowed the audience to feel Dan's straining and his disappointment. Moreover, many of the students and teachers in attendance would have known blacks who were serving at that very moment. Surely, their pride at their acquaintances' honorable service did not obliterate their conflicted feelings about them risking their lives. No number of optimistic *Crisis* editorials could have eliminated the knot of anxiety, and Dunbar-Nelson tapped into exactly that feeling—helping her audience to insist that the black community's anxiety be a part of the conversation.

Dunbar-Nelson presents African Americans' complex relationship to the country of their birth as very much worth writing about and talking about. Though the drama concludes by reminding us of the factory injuries that Dan sustained in the wake of his father's murder, Dunbar-Nelson does not clearly speak for or against military service. Clearly, though, she would have all issues discussed as her work suggests that the damage caused by the War is equal to that caused by lynching. In either case, the black household loses its men to a nation that never acknowledged their manhood.

### ***Aftermath*, Mary Burrill, 1919**

*Aftermath* complements *Mine Eyes Have Seen* by asserting that military service diminishes black families as much as mob violence. As in *Mine Eyes*, the father is lynched before the action begins, and the play testifies to the tragic consequences of his absence. The oldest son, John, has been away at war and does not yet know that a mob has taken his father's life. When John discovers what has happened while he has been fighting for his country, it is clear that the household will face more devastation as he is overcome by anger and a thirst for revenge. As Burrill records these moments, her work

memorializes the Christ-like father who has been unjustly killed as well as the familial devastation precipitated by his absence.

Burrill continues the tradition of spotlighting de-generation in order to memorialize black spiritual losses; *Aftermath* depicts a household containing only a grandmother and her grandchildren. Mam Sue and her granddaughter Millie and grandson Lonnie remain at home while their older brother John is overseas fighting in WWI. The middle generation is missing: the father has been lynched and the mother is never mentioned. Though their father's murder takes place six months earlier, and Millie has corresponded with John during that time, she has not told John about their father's fate (84). John is now on a brief visit home; a neighbor stops by the house, admires John's uniform and medals, and says that it is too bad that his father has not lived to see his accomplishments. John assumes that his father's life must have been taken by illness, so he is beside himself when he hears the truth. John rages: "I'm sick o' these w'ite folks doin's—we're 'fine, trus'worthy feller citizuns' when they're handin' us out guns... an' chuckin' us off to die; but we ain't a damn thing when it comes to handin' us the rights we done fought an' bled fu'!" (90). After a few more bitter words, he approaches the door, demanding that his younger brother come with him to avenge his father's death. The play ends with their departure, and the reader knows that nothing good can come of John's rage. He assures his grandmother and sister that he is not scared of the whites who might kill him, but his bravery benefits no one. The family has already lost the father and now it will likely lose two sons.

These losses are especially tragic because they are unwarranted, and the author and characters indicate as much with their many testimonies to the father's honorable,

Christ-like character. The audience never even learns his name, but Burrill allows us to feel his presence through a prominent prop: the Bible. When Millie confides that she is often afraid, Mam Sue insists that she would not be if only she would trust God. Millie retorts “Gawd didn’ tek no keer o’ po’ dad and *he* put *his* trus’ in Him! He uster set evah night by dis fire at dis here table and read his Bible an’ pray—but jes look whut happen’ to dad!” (83). Later, when Millie wants to keep the death a secret even though father will not be there when John arrives, she “fix[es] the Bible jes like dad’s been in an been a-readin’ in it!” (86). Also, John recalls that when he had been in the trenches, he would encourage himself with memories of home, one of the most vivid being “dad a spellin’ out his Bible” (88). The family’s admiration for their God-fearing father is clear, and their words memorialize his life, not just the circumstances of his death.

Without question, the father’s reverent life had created the atmosphere still observable in the household, but in response to the blow dealt by the mob, Millie uses the Bible to conceal the father’s death. The holy text is therefore taken from the mantel and placed on the table. John is easily misled and responds enthusiastically, “Let’s see whut he’s been readin’—“ (88). Picking up the open Bible, John finds the passages that he believes his father has been studying: “love your enemies” and “do good to them that hate you.” John angrily lets the Bible fall to the table, protesting “that ain’t the dope they been feedin’ us soljers on!” (88). At this point, lynching has motivated Millie to use the Bible as a prop in a deceitful performance, and John has handled it with less respect than his father would have. As a result, the mantel is empty when John needs a place to store and display his guns (88). Burrill emphasizes this moment in the text with specific stage directions: “(*He places the pistols on the mantel—on the very spot where the Bible has*

*lain*)” (88). This household is experiencing a changing of the guard, and Burrill would have her readers and viewers remember that an unjust lynching precipitates it.

In addition to testifying to the father’s character, his family eventually testifies to what has really happened to him. John shakes Millie for answers, declaring that he is man enough to handle the news. He demands, “...did he suffer much? Wuz he sick long?” (90). Millie finally bursts, “They burnt him down by the big gum tree!” (90). In addition to these empirical facts, the text reveals the truth behind them, that white men will not tolerate black manhood, whether expressed through manliness or masculinity. The father had led a manly life, working hard to provide for his family. A white man had insisted upon challenging the father’s price for cotton, calling him a liar, and hitting him (90). The father’s reaction had been natural: to hit back. Thus, the father had exhibited manliness in his daily life—working hard, providing for his family, and reading his Bible every night (86). White manhood assaulted his manliness. Then, when the father acted out of masculinity by physically defending himself, white manhood was equally intolerant and lynched him. The father’s manhood had been problematic for whites whether expressed through hard-working manliness or by reactionary masculinity.

Though Burrill acknowledges that whites will attack either expression of black manhood, she seems to use John to illustrate the problems with black men choosing masculinity. John’s masculine ways have made him a successful soldier who gains respect and admiration overseas. He has written to Millie that “it’s the first time evah in his life he’s felt lak a real, sho-nuf man!” (84). When he arrives home, John further confirms that he feels that being a soldier has developed his manhood. He claims that his younger brother Lonnie could also benefit from the experience: “It would ‘ave taken

some of the skeeriness out o' yuh, an done yuh a worl' o' good" (88). John obviously believes that masculinity is black manhood's best expression, but Burrill conspicuously questions this philosophy. After all, John's masculinity causes him to pursue revenge and take his brother with him. This masculine passion keeps him from considering his family and how risking his and his brother's lives would further devastate this already damaged home. His only concern is to prove that he can fight the lynchers "like a man" (90). His doing so will not bring his father back, and it will not heal his or his family's pain. His masculinity will only destroy any domestic success they have salvaged.

By clearly identifying the two major sources of John's lessons about manhood, Burrill's work suggests why masculinity can be so problematic. John has grown up with a father who epitomizes manliness, but as a soldier, he is persuaded by white men to nurture the "Natural Man" within him. In light of mainstream rhetoric about civilized manhood at the turn of the century, it is significant that black men were encouraged to be proud of their violence only in wartime. Black masculinity was censured unless it inspired black men to fight and die for "their" country. In this play, John realizes that he had been encouraged in these specific ways for white gain, but he does not consider abandoning his masculine mentality. He resolves, "I've been helpin' the w'ite man git his freedom, I reckon I'd bettah try now to get my own" (90). He insists upon proving his manhood, but he will do so with masculine methods that will hurt his family. As a result, the play survives as a testimony not only to the father's Christ-like demeanor but also to the downward spiral his family takes when he is killed. The audience can reliably predict the "aftermath" of John's rage, but the play does not depict it. Burrill thus leaves open for discussion the many issues raised by the juxtaposition of John and his father.

The Krigwa Players performed *Aftermath* at the Frolic Theatre in New York in 1928 with a modified ending that upset Burrill. Rather than closing with John and Lonnie's departure, the Krigwa performance concluded thusly: "Shots are heard off stage, the soldier staggers in...and dies melodramatically" (*Billboard*, May 19, 1928). Burrill complained in a letter to Du Bois that "the ending tacked on by the players changed what might otherwise have been an effective dramatic close into cheap melodramatic claptrap" (DuB Papers). Thus, it is clear that Burrill deliberately ended her play in a way that merely pointed to future tragedy. Doing so was important to her, I believe, because it avoided simplifying the issues to be considered as the play provoked further discussion. It seems that, to Burrill, "an effective dramatic close" would have inspired difficult conversations about how best to respond to lynching, especially in light of honorable black military service...and about how difficult a question that is to answer.

Because the 1928 Krigwa performance was for the David Belasco Sixth Annual Little Theatre Tournament, the audience was predominantly white, and scholars have speculated that this fact led to the change in the ending.<sup>12</sup> This may be the case, but Burrill was not disappointed because her work was reaching whites; after all, she published this piece in *The Liberator*. Her dissatisfaction more likely stemmed from the idea that content should be changed for whites. For *The Liberator* had welcomed her play as an important contribution to the conversations that it hoped to generate. It was a socialist periodical that began publication on February 12, 1918 and was edited by Max and Crystal Eastman. Burrill seems to have shared the editors' commitment to "conduct a remorseless campaign against lynch law" (*Liberator* inaugural issue). In allying with this periodical, Burrill joined its discussions, but she also complicated conversations in

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<sup>12</sup> See the introduction to the play in Stephens/Perkins, *Strange Fruit*.

black communities. Dunbar-Nelson had commented in *Mine Eyes* that Chris acquires his militant ideas from socialist meetings, but it is not clear whether she considered such exposure to be good or bad. In choosing the *Liberator* as a forum, however, Burrill made a clearer statement regarding the connections between socialist ideas and blacks' welfare.

More broadly, Burrill's text was a contribution to her community's conversation about how black identity should develop. How should blacks conduct themselves? Will the images projected to justify lynching shape their behaviors and self-conceptions? Will spirituality? Will black men try to prove their manhood to whites, or will they swallow indignities to stay alive for their families? Like Grimké and Dunbar-Nelson, Burrill did not pretend that there were any simple answers. Her work acknowledges that the injustices of lynching are real and that the brutal practice denies black humanity. Importantly, her work also suggests that the praise blacks receive for military service can encourage an expression of manhood that ultimately destroys black men and devastates their families. It seems that if lynching does not kill you, the war will. If a black man manages to survive the war, the masculinity that American society encouraged in him on the foreign battlefield will bring death in his own country, as his white peers put him in his "proper" place.

### ***Addressing the Myth***

*A Sunday Morning in the South (1925) and For Unborn Children (1926) directly engage the myth of the black male rapist. That is, these two plays respond to the nation's assumption that lynching was justified because it avenged and prevented assaults against white women. Written after the 1922 rejection of the Dyer antilynching bill, these dramas represent the black community's frustration and despair. Though most lynch victims were not accused of rape, it remained the most commonly used (and accepted) excuse for not punishing mob members. Because whites had revived this myth to defeat the Dyer bill, playwrights in the mid-1920s revived Ida B. Wells's antilynching arguments to an extent that other playwrights did not. These scripts survive as testimonies to black male innocence, but they alter the genre's tendencies by allowing the accused black man to live before the audience prior to being killed. Importantly, in both dramas, he appears for a moment in the presence of the white woman whose virtue his death supposedly serves. In short, these plays boldly attack the rapist myth, exposing it as a lie with tragic consequences for black communities.*

#### ***A Sunday Morning in the South, Georgia Douglas Johnson, 1925***

Georgia Douglas Johnson's *A Sunday Morning in the South* is set in a southern town in 1924. This was a time when the number of recorded lynchings was declining but the lynching of black reputations proliferated in the form of whites' claims that black men were rapists. Because the myth had so consistently been used to justify the nation's indifference to black victimization, explicit commentary was needed in drama to complement efforts elsewhere to bolster racial pride.

Johnson uses all scene-setting dramatic tools to testify to the depicted family's domestic success. *Sunday Morning* opens with Sue Jones calling her grandsons Tom and Bossie to breakfast. Tom and Bossie, ages 19 and 7, eat heartily; the stage directions even call for vigorous finger licking. Sue tells Tom to open the window so that the music from the nearby church can flood the house. Spirituals thus become the play's most prominent sound effect, further establishing the home's festive mood. Likewise, all opening dialogue testifies to domestic tranquility as the audience is made privy to family jokes and hearty laughter. This working-class family happily gathers and teases Tom because he had fallen asleep at eight o'clock the previous night (104). Not incidentally, everyone speaks dialect, suggesting that the educated characters that Grimké preferred were not the only blacks capable of creating homes filled with love.

As much as the play testifies to the family's success, it also memorializes it by keeping a lasting record of the injustices visited upon this household. Tranquility and joy disappear with the arrival of two white police officers. They suspect Tom of a sexual assault because he lives near the crime scene and fits their vague description—"around twenty, five foot five or six, brown skin" (106). The policemen bring with them the white girl who has allegedly been assaulted. Before asking if Tom is the assailant, they tell her that he fits the description. Then, they insist of her, "You say he looks like him?" and she "slowly and undecidedly" answers "Y-e-s" (106). The officers have the cuffs on Tom before the family realizes what has happened. At this point, the fact that there is no mention in this household of father or grandfather gains significance; the missing men could have easily been lynched. Being a black man is clearly Tom's real crime.

As we watch the peaceful setting transform, the dramatic tools that spotlighted domestic success now mark the family's pain. Tom is taken away, those left behind are overwhelmed by confusion and despair, and the hymns that made this house a sacred home become ironic slaps in the face. Appreciated food is forgotten, laughter turns into tears, and the knowledge that Tom had been in bed at eight o'clock changes from a family joke to a cruel one, for it proves that he is arrested without cause.

The family's changing surroundings testify to black pain, but so do individual characters as they insist that living honorably does not protect black men from rape charges or from the mob. Johnson allows the audience to encounter Tom before he dies; he is poor and uneducated but unmistakably manly. He is known in town as an upstanding individual, and his work ethic earns him a hurt back and an early bedtime (105). Before the officers arrive, the family discusses the rumor that someone in town may be lynched soon. Tom admits that he has been troubled by the violence, and he plans to fight injustice by gaining an education. Driven by manliness rather than masculinity, Tom does not rage about the injustice; he resolves to "git a little book learning to [...] help change the laws...make em strong" (105). Because the laws and their enforcement are currently weak, the family knows that many mob victims are innocent, but they are sure that Tom's reputation would prevent any false accusations. His grandmother says, "No sonnie, you won't never hafter worry bout sich like that but you kin hep to save them po devels that they do git after" (105). When Tom is accused of a crime that he did not commit, he remains manly, refusing to act out of emotion. He comforts his now hysterical grandmother, saying "Granma, don't take on so. I'll go long

with him to the sheriff. I'll splain to him how I couldn't a done it when I was here sleep all the time—I never laid eyes on that white lady before in all my life" (107).

Tom resolves to tell the sheriff his story, but the foregoing scene suggests that his testimony will not bring justice, even if he is allowed to address the sheriff. When the officers rush in, impromptu courtroom testimony commences as they declare themselves judge and jury. They interrogate Tom about his whereabouts the previous night and treat his answers with suspicion, asking who can confirm that he had been at home. When Grandmother Sue and his brother Bossie corroborate his story, one officer shouts, "Shut up. Your word's nothing.... Nor yours either. Both of you'd lie for him" (106). As black testimony is immediately rejected, the scene points to those fundamental characteristics of testimony that would allow the sheriff to be equally resistant to Tom's account. First, whether legal or religious, testimony is never neutral. In fact, "to testify...is to take a position and declare oneself for or against someone. Witnesses no longer simply tell a story or give a description, after the fashion of a journalist; they freely involve themselves and pass a value judgment" (*CE* 1045). Therefore, any statement in defense of Tom admits its bias. If the listener fundamentally disagrees with the value judgment motivating a testimony, he can quickly reject it. Also, vulnerability to rejection is built into any testimony because believing a testimony requires a degree of trust, and the listener is always free to withhold that trust (1045). By definition, believing testimony means allowing it to stand in for direct experience. A person who disagrees with the value judgment that the testimony carries is unlikely to make that leap of faith.

Representing mainstream assumptions, the officers are faithful to their own value judgments as they feed the terrified young woman the answers that they want to hear.

They do not ask her to make a strong claim; they just want a confirmation—and they do not pause when she does not confidently provide even that. The officer insists, “You say he looks like him?” and she answers: “Y-e-s (*slowly and undecidedly*) I think so...” (106). By recording this exchange and the injustice it represents, the play preserves truths that the sheriff and mob refuse to consider before Tom is killed. In the process, the play offers an affirming testimony to generations of African Americans who are bombarded with claims that their race is debased. Johnson’s dramatic testimony would not have held up in court—and indeed would not have been admitted—but the script can transform an unacknowledged injustice into a more fully documented one.

Indeed, by juxtaposing the rejection of black witnesses with the instant acceptance of white ones, Johnson implies that black testimony is needed in the cultural conversation as a counterbalance—even if whites will disregard it. By extension, she centers her play on black testimony in a way that suggests that she would agree with Du Bois’s declaration: “all art is propaganda and ever must be... I do not care a damn for any art that is not used for propaganda. But I do care when propaganda is confined to one side while the other is stripped and silent” (Criteria 296). She may have concurred when Du Bois said, “it is not the positive propaganda of people who believe white blood divine, infallible and holy to which I object. It is the denial of a similar right of propaganda to those who believe black blood human, lovable and inspired with new ideals for the world...” (Criteria 297). For it is with this spirit that Johnson offered her play as an antilynching testimony with no pretensions of neutrality. She presented a portrait of honorable black manhood, and she did so forcefully. It is clear that she understood that, like all antilynching one-acts, hers would enter the cultural conversation as an

inescapably “contested, contestable, and contesting” discourse. The playwrights could not pretend that theirs was the only perspective to be voiced, which was all the more reason to speak boldly. Though Johnson’s *Sunday Morning* was not published in her lifetime, and there are no records that it was formally produced, the document survives to address itself to posterity.

Because it did not see publication in Johnson’s lifetime, *Sunday Morning* circulated through private, informal black networks, testifying to the solid black homes and good black men that the myth of the black male rapist denied existed. Along the way, it also acknowledged parallels between black men’s experiences and that of Jesus Christ. When Tom leaves saying that he will speak to the sheriff, he exhibits unreasonable optimism, but he also exemplifies black manliness, testifying to its existence even in the face of white barbarism. Tom’s life is in danger, and there is terror in his eyes, yet he controls his emotions and tries to comfort Sue: “I’ll be right back granny—don’t cry—don’t cry. . .” (107). As Tom leaves with his false accusers, he represents moral black manliness in the hands of brute white masculinity, not unlike the black men whom Ida B. Wells said “clung to [the] right of franchise” despite facing mob terror. Wells declared that African American men “believed that in that small white ballot there was a subtle something which stood for manhood as well as citizenship, and thousands of brave black men went to their graves, exemplifying the one by dying for the other” (*Red Record* 77). In this drama, Tom is willing to invest in the white paper of a diploma and in the letter of the Law. Meanwhile, white men (who are assumed to be civilized) are free to express a primitive masculinity that permits the barbaric practice of lynching. Given the juxtaposition of Tom’s manhood to that of the lynchers, the play

highlights the existence of two expressions of manhood at the turn of the century, as had Ida B. Wells's pamphlets. In this way, Johnson enters the cultural conversation by extending Wells's ongoing antilynching campaign, memorializing examples of black manliness, and arguing that white men are the true barbarians.

Johnson continues Wells's work more directly by putting Wells's arguments in her characters' mouths. Before the police arrive, the family had been discussing lynching, and both Sue and Liza had been particularly outspoken. Sue says, "I don't hold wid no rascality and I bleves in meting out punishment to the guilty but they fust ought to fine out who done it. . ." (105). Similarly, in the preface of *Southern Horrors*, Wells had asserted that her statements are not "a shield for the despoiler of virtue... [but a] contribution to truth" (50). Later, Liza adds, ". . .but you know a sight of times they gits the wrong man and goes and strings him up [without a trial]. . ." (105). To the same effect, Wells had challenged American law from her podium in England to "prove your man guilty, first; hang him, shoot him, pour coal over him and roast him, if you have concluded that civilization demands this; but be sure the man has committed the crime first" (qtd. in Bederman 62). Finally, Tom comments that "they lynching you bout anything too, not just women" (105). This remark echoes Wells's proclamation that being "'sassy' to white folks" is enough of a crime (*Southern Horrors* 60). Because blacks could be lynched for any reason, Wells argued that American law was corrupt and that its perversion negated any claims that America is a civilized nation. Liza speaks of the law in similar terms when she says that it "...ought er be er ark uv safty to perpect the weak and not some little flimsy shack..." (105).

Beginning in 1918, many fought to make American law an ark of safety for black citizens by supporting the Dyer Antilynching bill. The bill proposed capital punishment for members of lynch mobs and a fine for local governments who did not prosecute lynchers. In 1922, the bill was defeated in Congress and American law proved to be a “flimsy shack” for African Americans. Though her play would not undo the damage Congress had done, those who had defeated the bill could not go unanswered, so Johnson used her play to revive arguments Ida B. Wells had used at the turn of the century. If whites could fall back on old rhetoric, the black woman of the 1920s would ensure that the cultural conversation included her dramatic testimony, which worked in harmony with the words of her literary and political foremother

***For Unborn Children, Myrtle Smith Livingston, 1926***

Myrtle Smith Livingston’s *For Unborn Children* is set in 1925 in the South. It continues the tradition that *Rachel* started by examining lynching through the black home, but like *Sunday Morning*, it specifically addresses the myth of the black male rapist. Whereas *Sunday Morning* depicts a black man accused of rape, Livingston revives other dimensions of Wells’s activism by dramatizing white reaction to a loving relationship between a black man and white women. As Wells had done years before, the play insists that white women are willing participants in relationships with black men and that lynching is not about protecting their virtue.

The action begins with LeRoy’s sister Marion and grandmother Mrs. Carlson worrying because LeRoy is not home from work. Because he is dating a white woman, they know that his life is always in danger. When LeRoy finally arrives, they scold him

for being so inconsiderate. He tells them that they will not have to worry much longer because he and his fiancée Selma have decided to leave town the next night. Marion says, “Well, if you marry her, may God help me never to breathe your name again!” and runs from the room sobbing (123). Grandmother Carlson is equally hurt by LeRoy’s decision but is gentler in her response. She explains to him that marrying a white woman is a disservice to his unborn children because “a white woman cannot mother a Negro baby!” (124). Like Grimké’s *Rachel*, this play insists that unborn children are in danger, but Livingston’s work argues that a white mother is chief among those dangers. As proof, she reveals the family secret: that his mother is white and that she has not been a part of their lives because they are not.<sup>13</sup> LeRoy then decides that eloping would be wrong, but the lynch mob is already on its way. His fiancée arrives to warn him, but it is too late. He marches out to his death with his head held high.

Before LeRoy appears on stage, Livingston uses the scenery and the other characters to establish his respectable character, as she introduces us to one of the few middle-class families depicted in antilynching one-acts. The Carlson household resembles those in post-Reconstruction novels; it is occupied by a “refined” family and is “tastefully, though not richly, furnished” (122). Livingston presents these evidences of refinement as a mere fraction of the success that the Carlson’s would have enjoyed if the family had avoided the household-destroying consequences of black male weakness. Though middle class, the home resembles those in other one-acts because it contains no middle generation. The father’s death is unexplained, leaving open the possibility that he has been lynched, especially since he had chosen to be with a white woman. The mother

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<sup>13</sup> Of course, this back story is reminiscent of Angelina Weld Grimké’s real life story, the details of which Johnson likely knew. According to Hull, even during years when Grimké shut herself off from most acquaintances, she and Johnson corresponded.

is mentioned only because Grandmother Carlson sees an opportunity to keep her grandson from eloping and repeating his father's mistakes. Livingston thus suggests that blacks are likely to adopt dangerous behavior when they do not know their history. In revealing the family secret, Grandmother Carlson does not simply tell a story, however; she testifies to the destruction that whites visit upon black homes.

As a testimony, her words are loaded with the value judgment she places on the events that she recounts. She therefore begs LeRoy: "I couldn't go through it again! Boy, you can't make the same mistake your father did" (124). According to Grandmother Carlson, blacks can only suffer when they mix with whites. She declares, "I'd almost rather that he should die now than to marry a white woman" (123). Livingston's play thus proves to be an early twentieth-century example of the mentality that literary historian Robert Reid-Pharr associates with nineteenth-century black intellectuals, such as Frank Webb and Martin Delany. In *Conjugal Union*, Reid-Pharr suggests that many urged African Americans "to sever their sexual, romantic and familial ties to whites" (116), believing that removing all traces of white influence on the household was the only way to create a stable black home that would in turn mold a stable black identity. In the process of cultivating such a home, Reid-Pharr argues, "mulatto characters are either killed off or reinterpreted as black" (11). In this light, LeRoy's and Marion's fates gain significance. Both are mulattos, but their grandmother has worked to create a pure black household by not telling them about their white mother. Because grandmother has fairly successfully severed Marion's and LeRoy's familial ties to whites, Marion has become committed to the black community, and pledges to disown her brother if he marries a white woman. LeRoy, on the other hand, has not broken his

ties to whites, making his separation from the black community inevitable. Either he will leave his family—as he plans to do—or he will die at the hands of white men who are offended by his relationship.

While insisting that white influence devastates black homes, *Unborn Children* enters the conversation on lynching by dramatizing Ida B. Well's rhetoric. Because he is an educated, accomplished young lawyer who jeopardizes everything he has, Wells would have described LeRoy as one of the many black Sampsons who "had been manly towers of strength until they were ensnared and destroyed" by white women (Bederman 58). LeRoy's professional success points to his manliness, but his relationship with Selma leads him to make irrational, foolish decisions. He realizes that lynching will be his fate, but he pursues her anyway and neglects his most basic responsibilities. Coming home late from work without bothering to call his sister and grandmother, he explains, "I was on my way home when—her note was brought to me and I didn't have time to call you then" (123). A mere note from his white fiancée leads LeRoy to abandon all responsibility to his family. He also plans to elope and leave the only home he has known. LeRoy's sister and grandmother express their disappointment that he is no longer making rational, responsible, manly decisions that benefit his family and community.

LeRoy's relationship with Selma does not simply make him less manly; it virtually transforms him into a slave of his own masculine urges. His predicament results from his refusal to curb his passion in light of his surroundings. That is, he begins to make decisions based on emotion, not the tenets of racial uplift. LeRoy must have known that an intimate relationship with a white woman was an expression of masculinity reserved for white men. In his relationship with Selma, LeRoy put his body

on par with white men's bodies. As we have seen, masculinity's emphasis on corporeality equalized black and white bodies in a way that idealized manliness had avoided. Just as an uneducated boxer could threaten a successful entrepreneur's manhood, LeRoy's black body in an imagined relationship with Selma's white body was too much for white masculinity to bear. LeRoy thus puts his life in danger by opting for a masculine expression of his manhood, rather than being man(ly) enough to discipline his desires.

The black women in LeRoy's life seem to be as intolerant of his new-found expressions of masculinity as white men are. When LeRoy announces that he and Selma will run away together, his sister Marion responds, "Have you lost all your manhood?" (123). For her, manhood means manliness—level-headedness, control of one's emotions, commitment to home and family. Livingston seems to privilege this definition when Grandmother Carlson immediately follows Marion with: "Ah, boy, you've forgotten us! Don't you love us at all anymore since [Selma] came into your life?" (123). The play thus argues that a manly black man would never forsake his family. Using Marion's tirade, Livingston privileges manliness over masculinity: "Even if you do love her can't you find your backbone and conquer it for the sake of your race?" (123).

Ultimately deciding not to elope, LeRoy resolves to conquer his love for Selma for the sake of the race. Nevertheless, he must die because the mob is already on its way. By not saving her manly character from the mob, Livingston refused to simplify any of the issues that her text raises. Livingston's commitment to provoking heated discussions like the ones she portrays among LeRoy, Marion, and Grandmother Carlson was rewarded with a playwriting prize from, and publication in, *Crisis* magazine. No doubt,

Du Bois and his readers saw the value in debating the contours of black identity with an eye toward interracial love. Black men's temptation regarding white women was clearly of serious concern because, like LeRoy's, their love for these women was real. Thus, just as Wells had, Livingston set out to show that black men in that position were essentially "Sampsons."

Livingston continues a Wells-inspired critique of LeRoy as a weak Sampson in Marion's explanation of miscegenation statutes: "... laws would never have been passed against it if states could have believed white women would turn Negro men down, but they knew they wouldn't; they can make fools out of them too easily..." (123). Wells had been much more diplomatic, but she too argued that "many white women in the South would marry colored men if such an act would not place them... within the clutches of the law" (*Southern Horrors* 53). In fact, Wells believed that white women desired black men and often actively seduced them (*Southern Horrors* 53). She therefore insisted that "white men lynch the offending Afro-American, not because he is a despoiler of virtue, but because he succumbs to the smiles of white women" (*Southern Horrors* 54). Wells' pamphlets and Livingston's script testified to the fact that white men labeled black men rapists in order to excuse lynching and justify their resistance to antilynching legislation. Thus, mere labeling became a form of violence. As this violent mode of representation flourished in the 1920s, playwrights worked with the understanding that blacks were assaulted more via their representation as rapists than through physical force.

To condemn both physical and "representational lynching," Livingston uses stage directions in *Unborn Children* to bear witness not only to the injustice of LeRoy's murder

but also to his transformation from weak Sampson to Christ figure. LeRoy may have been less than manly by being inconsiderate to his family and then planning to elope, but he re-establishes his manliness just before his death. By recording that moment, Livingston memorializes him and turns his earthly plight into a legacy that remains with us today. When LeRoy learns that his mother is white and therefore unable to love him, he decides to end his relationship because he realizes that it is a disservice to his race and to his future children. Acting now out of moral manliness, LeRoy is ready to give up the love of his life. Like Grimké's Rachel, he sacrifices his own happiness with a prospective spouse in order to save innocent children from a racist society. By then, it is too late; the mob is in front of the house. Though his sister suggests that they die together, LeRoy refuses to put the women in more danger (125). He proudly calls out to his killers, "I'm coming, gentlemen" (125). In manly fashion, "he walks out to his death victorious and unafraid" (125). Because LeRoy ultimately decides to act with the black community in mind, Livingston depicts him as a truly civilized gentleman as white men prepare to indulge their savagery.

As she enters the cultural conversation on lynching, the black woman playwright offers an image that is quite different from the "shivering Negro" or "grotesque beast" described in mainstream newspapers. When the bloodthirsty mob arrives, and LeRoy realizes his fate, "(a light breaks over his face and he is transfigured; a gleam of holiness comes into his eyes; looking heavenward he says): Thy will be done, O Lord" (124). Like Christ, LeRoy is killed by lesser men who do not recognize his greatness. Meanwhile, the black audience, who has heard testimony about his character from his grandmother, militant sister, and loving fiancée, is poised to see the truth—a truth that

contradicts mainstream claims about the black rapist. This dramatic testimony to black character confirms the conceptions that blacks hopefully had of themselves and their neighbors. Livingston thus immortalized a man, and his story further equipped African Americans in the mid-1920s to survive in a society bent on denying their true identities.

In making LeRoy a Christ figure, not unlike Chris in *Mine Eyes, For Unborn Children* joins the countless artistic works that marked a similarity between the race's persecution and Christ's crucifixion. The play represents a particularly explicit example of how the genre operates as testimony. The play testifies to LeRoy's manliness and innocence, and it survives as the record of his Christ-like demeanor at the moment when he faces the bloodthirsty mob. Furthermore, like all of the plays of this study, it survives—like the Gospel—to serve as the link between “the earthly Jesus and the glorified Christ” (CE 1048). It transforms LeRoy's life and death on earth into a legacy that outlasts both.

### *Acknowledging Victims of Rape*

*Georgia Douglas Johnson's Blue Blood (1926) and Blue-Eyed Black Boy (c.1930) suggest that the genre's successful homes may exist because black women pay a significant price of silence. Black women conceal the sexual outrages they suffer at the hands of white men because they know that a protective black man is a dead black man. By exposing black women's secrets, Johnson challenges the myth of the black whore as explicitly as she and playwright Myrtle Smith Livingston had questioned the myth of the black male rapist.*

***Blue Blood*, Georgia Douglas Johnson, 1926**

*Blue Blood* takes place in Mrs. Bush's kitchen as she prepares for her daughter's wedding, which is only minutes away. After the groom's mother arrives to help with last-minute details, the two mothers discover that the same white man fathered their children. Therefore, May Bush and John Temple cannot marry because they are actually brother and sister.<sup>14</sup> Johnson's play puts in conversation what these mothers would have liked to keep concealed. The play testifies to the fact that black women's domestic tranquility often relies on their willingness to remain silent about their sexual victimization because American society disregards them and the black men who would protect them.

In setting the scene, Johnson emphasizes the sights and sounds of wedding preparation but happy anticipation becomes dramatic tension when the groom's mother, Mrs. Temple, arrives. She offers unwanted help to Mrs. Bush, the bride's mother, and they begin arguing about which child is luckier to be marrying the other. As the debate intensifies, Mrs. Bush says that Mrs. Temple would be "struck dumb" if she knew May's origins. May's father is "Cap'n Winfield McCallister, the biggest banker in this town, ... 'ristocrat uv 'ristocrats" (20). Mrs. Temple is mortified. In tears, she explains that Captain McCallister raped her when she was nineteen years old.

In this climatic exchange, Johnson spotlights black women's vulnerability to white men's sexual abuse and the painful sisterhood it creates. The captain had gained entry to the young Mrs. Temple's room by bribing her landlady and, when she called out for help, no one responded. She ends her story thusly: "You know yourself, Mrs. Bush,

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<sup>14</sup> It is worth noting that May's and John's last names (Bush and Temple) also operate to erase their mothers' sexual exploitation.; neither surname points to the white rapist.

what little chance there is for women like us, in the South, to get justice or redress when these things happen” (22). Mrs. Bush responds, “Sure honey, I do know!” (22).

Suddenly, these bickering women have much in common—despite having moved in different social circles, “not being,” in Mrs. Temple’s words, “thrown very close together” (19). Mrs. Temple’s refined white gloves and her many comments about May needing to rise to the occasion of sharing her surname lose significance, and Johnson shows that her vulnerability to white men throws her into undeniable sisterhood with the less refined, dialect-speaking Mrs. Bush.

Johnson traces this unfortunate bond not just across social classes but also across generations. Mrs. Temple says that her own mother had discouraged her from trying to expose Captain McCallister: “[Mother] said I’d be the one...that would suffer.” Mrs. Bush immediately responds, “...whut your ma told you is the God’s truth” (22). Not only do Mrs. Temple and Mrs. Bush recognize the hopelessness of their situation, but Mrs. Temple’s mother had also testified to it. Next, May—representing the third generation—will discover that society does not punish those who violate black women.

Three generations of women testify to society’s lack of concern for black women’s virtue and safety but, in telling their stories, the text also acknowledges black men’s experiences. *Blue Blood*’s spotlight on black women’s sexual vulnerability simultaneously bears witness to the emasculation of black men. That is, the play presents black manhood and manhood rights—such as the right to protect one’s wife and children—as objects of crucifixion. The script therefore shows that the mutilation of manhood was effective even if it was not bloody. At the same time, *Blue Blood* insists that depicting a less spectacular lynching can indeed speak truths that the hanging body—

Billie Holiday's "strange fruit"—cannot. After all, Mrs. Temple never publicly accused McCallister mostly because she knew that her fiancé "would've tried to kill [the Captain] and then they'd have killed him" (22). Johnson's work thus argues that society condones black women's rape *and* black men's murder. The play is a testimony to the extent to which black women's rapes and black men's deaths are inextricably linked; protesting one simultaneously exposes and denounces the other.

Although *Blue Blood* is commonly labeled a miscegenation play, the threat of lynching shapes the action in every way, placing it squarely in the genre of antilynching drama. Mrs. Temple had remained quiet to prevent her fiancé's death, and May must now do the same to save her fiancé. Though she does not want the guests to believe that her daughter had been left at the altar, Mrs. Bush insists, "We can't let [John] know or he'll kill his own father..." (24). The mothers tell May that she must be strong and do her duty: "It's the black women that have got to protect their men from the white man by not telling on [white men]" (24).

It seems that black women attain domestic tranquility by keeping secrets. If a black man resides in the household, he can stay alive only if black women do not speak the truth about the gendered injustices they endure. Mrs. Temple had been able to establish a solid home and gain social standing because she had been willing to shield her fiancé from the truth. She confides, "He understood the whole thing—and he married me. He knew why I wouldn't tell him the man's name—not even when—when that man's son was born to me" (22). Because her fiancé had been understanding rather than perceiving her as a guilty concubine, he creates a home with her (22). Mrs. Temple and her fiancé built a life together because she does not speak of the rape or reveal the

identity of her child's father. If she had, they would not have been able to live together peacefully as a family. Silence thus prevents lynching and allows a measure of black domestic fulfillment. In recording this truth, the play stands as a memorial to the many unknown black women whose silence provided stability to a racist society; Johnson thus makes their plight part of the cultural conversation—even as that conversation, with its insistence that black women were whores who could not be raped—sought to erase their stories.

Interestingly, this script allows for a future marriage, between May and a family friend Randolph Strong, and thus modifies the trend established by other foundational dramas, but the impending union relies on the black woman's willingness to compromise. Indeed, Johnson uses their inevitable marriage to critique America's disrespect of black women. Because May cannot marry John, Mrs. Bush asks Randolph Strong to help. He had proposed to May the previous year, but she had rejected him; now she has no choice. The play's ending is worth recounting here because Johnson shows through masterfully choppy dialogue that May's desires simply do not matter.

Everyone agrees that May's fiancé John cannot know the truth, so all responsibility falls on May's shoulders:

MRS. TEMPLE: What are you going to do, May?

MRS. BUSH: Yes, May, what are you going to do?

RANDOLPH STRONG: We are going to run away and get married, aren't we, May?

Say yes, May—say yes!

[...]

RANDOLPH STRONG: May! Come with me *now*!

MAY: Randolph—do you want me?

RANDOLPH STRONG: I want you like I've always wanted you.

MAY: (shyly) But—I don't love you.

RANDOLPH STRONG: You think you don't...

MAY: Do you want me now?

RANDOLPH STRONG: I want you now.

MAY: Ma, oh, ma!  
MRS. BUSH: (*in tears*) Quick, darlin'—tell him.  
MAY: My coat.  
MRS. BUSH: I'll get your coat, honey.  
MRS. TEMPLE: Here May, take my coat!  
MRS. BUSH: What are we going to tell John—and all the people?  
MAY: Tell 'em—Oh God, we can't tell 'em the—truth?  
RANDOLPH STRONG: Mother Bush—just tell them the bride was stolen by  
Randolph Strong (*STRONG puts the coat around her and they go out the door,*  
*leaving the others staring at them.*) [Curtain]

Randolph Strong is an honorable man who loves May, and we know that he will soon marry her, but it is a marriage that she does not want. In contrast to the other plays, the women here have prevented lynching with their secrecy, so the mob has not directly prevented marriages. Nevertheless, black women's rape and black men's possible lynching place May in impossible circumstances, making her wishes of little consequence. May clearly feels violated as she cries, "Oh God—I've kept out of their clutches myself, but now it's through you, Ma, that they've got me anyway. Oh, what's the use..." (24). For May simply cannot afford to reject Randolph Strong because he is her only viable option now. They cannot reveal the rape that caused these siblings to want to marry each other because it would ruin Mrs. Temple's reputation and social position, and it would lead John to kill his own father. Therefore, May must disappear with Strong, knowing that without a man in her life, she is even more vulnerable to white men. After all, the Captain had gotten to nineteen-year-old Mrs. Temple because she was living alone in a boarding house until her wedding day (21).

Black women's silence about their encounters with white men in *Blue Blood* points to the degree to which slavery affected African Americans' lives for generations. Written in 1926 but set "shortly after the Civil War," the play demonstrates that racism

simply takes different forms “after” slavery. As generations of black women keep secrets in *Blue Blood*, Johnson’s text testifies to the truths that Harriet Jacobs recorded in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861). As literary historian Catherine Clinton insists, though everyone knew that white men victimized black women, speaking that truth would upset the power structure and expose the fiction of southern honor (205). Jacobs emphasized the consequences of **not** remaining silent thusly: “But did the mothers dare to tell who was the father of their children? Did the other slaves dare to allude to it, except in whispers among themselves? No, indeed! They knew too well the terrible consequences” (*Incidents* 31). Confined by such a system, Jacobs finds it difficult to have any semblance of virtue. To discourage her master’s advances, Jacobs decides at age fifteen to “give herself” to another white man, Mr. Sands, an “eloquent gentleman” who treats her well. Jacobs reasons, “It seems less degrading to give one’s self, than to submit to compulsion. There is something akin to freedom in having a lover who has no control over you, except that which he gains by kindness and attachment” (47). Given that Jacobs is fifteen years old and a slave, it is not altogether clear that she could have truly consented to any relationship. Judging her behavior as either good or bad, then, is impossible and indeed inappropriate.

Even outside of slavery, similar questions of agency arise around relationships between blacks and whites. As the offspring of an interracial union confides, “I don’t know if it was rape or money or lust or affection... that caused the mingling up. In my mother’s case, I don’t know. I’ve spent a lot of my life trying to know, but I don’t (qtd. on Clinton 207). This confession helps illuminate the complexities underpinning interracial unions as much as Jacobs did when she refuses to allow her readers to judge

her sexual behavior according to a simple binary of morality and immorality. For perhaps the same reasons, Georgia Douglas Johnson's *Blue Blood* leaves many mysteries in place as she writes in the 1920s about black women's experiences with white men. The reader knows very little about how consensual Mrs. Bush's relationship with the Captain had been. She commiserates with Mrs. Temple about her violation, but she also essentially brags that her child has the blood of an "aristocrat." Are we to assume that she had consented to her relationship with the Captain? Or, had she simply learned to repel the shame because she knew resistance to be futile? The ambiguity surrounding Mrs. Bush's complicity comes into focus when it is clear that May's paternity has destroyed her life. Mrs. Bush pleads, "God forgive me...God forgive that man. Oh no...I don't want Him to forgive him" (24). This leaves the possibility that, like Jacobs in *Incidents*, she had "given herself" because she knew she would be forced otherwise.<sup>15</sup> Not insignificantly, Johnson's next drama, *Blue-Eyed Black Boy*, also refuses to clarify the nature of the relationship that the black mother had with the governor.

Prominently displaying these sexual gray areas allows Johnson to comment on the degree to which black women continued to struggle, long after Emancipation, to create homes that were truly their own. In slavery, they nursed white women's children and kept the identity of their own children's fathers a secret. Emancipation made them optimistic that their homebuilding efforts would be respected, but white men still showed little regard for black women's marital bonds. As Hazel Carby has argued, though rape has not been "a transhistorical mechanism of women's oppression," the ways in which

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<sup>15</sup> Here, I am suggesting that the Captain may have raped Mrs. Bush if she had not consented. The circumstances are obviously different in *Incidents* because Jacobs decides to be with Mr. Sands to avoid being raped by a *different* white man, her master. Despite these differences, as well as the difference that slavery makes, I believe the parallels to be noteworthy and valid.

black women were linked to illicit sexuality during slavery continued to have powerful ideological consequences after emancipation. As a result, "... the representation of the struggle for sexual autonomy was to remain a crucial organizing device of the narrative structures of black women writers" (Carby 39).

As Johnson demonstrates through Mrs. Bush and Mrs. Temple, non-slave women often had to hide their sexual victimization. Because white men went unpunished, rape and lynching kept black women from being safe in their own homes, kept them from freely choosing their own lovers, and even kept their daughters from choosing their husbands. In fact, as May's predicament illustrates, the mob sometimes deprived black women of the option of remaining single and building a life without a husband.

### ***Blue-Eyed Black Boy*, Georgia Douglas Johnson, c.1930**

The action of Georgia Douglas Johnson's *Blue-Eyed Black Boy* revolves around the fact that blue-eyed Jack is in jail, and a mob is on its way to kidnap and kill him. The play ends, however, with every indication that he will be spared; the governor has sent state troopers to stop the mob. Despite the relief that the characters feel at the end of the play, a close reading that is sensitive to domesticity and manhood reveals the extent to which the script condemns the position that society carves for black men and women. Like *Blue Blood*, this drama suggests that the nation's stability is often predicated on black women's silence—a shameful foundation indeed. As Sandra Gunning has argued, white men cultivated amnesia around the historical fact of their rape of black women as they insisted that mobs needed to protect white women from black rapists. Understanding that white men had successfully made their sexual relationships with

black women a non-issue within America's cultural conversation about lynching, Georgia Douglas Johnson placed a spotlight on those very relationships.

When Pauline hears that her son is in jail on false charges, she sends Dr. Grey, her future son-in-law, to Governor Tinkham's house. She instructs him to place her ring in the governor's hand and recite these words: "Pauline sent this. She says they goin to lynch her son born 21 years ago [...] Look in his eyes and you'll save him" (118). The text leaves no doubt that the governor is blue-eyed Jack's father, but Pauline's friends and family seem ignorant of this fact. Not unlike the situation that Harriet Jacobs witnessed on plantations, it seems that blacks can live relatively peacefully even if everyone knows about their sexual ties to whites—as long as those bonds are never discussed.

The characters' naiveté is hardly believable. When speaking of how handsome Jack is, his sister Rebecca says "it's funny that he's the only one in our family's got blue eyes though. Pa's was black, and yours and mine are black too. It certainly is strange..." (117). When Mother Pauline sends Dr. Grey to the governor to say "Look in his eyes and you'll save him," Rebecca asks, "Mother, what does it all mean?," and Pauline's best friend Hester declares, "Well, ...I don't know what you mean but I recon you knows what you is doing" (119). To make their opaqueness even more incredible, a now distraught Pauline begins to pray aloud, pleading "Save him, Lord. Let his father...*(she stops and looks around at the two women, then cautiously speaks)* You understand all I mean, sweet Jesus" (119). For the rest of the play, even when the governor sends the state militia, no questions are asked about how Pauline could have so much influence over him.

Yet, blacks encountering the text in intimate spaces surely discussed quite passionately how incredible the characters' ignorance is. There are no records that *Blue-Eyed Black Boy* was formally staged, and it was not published until 1989, so it circulated in private circles. Those who attended Johnson's literary salon would have surely burst into conversation about the probability that the characters know the truth but do not dare speak it, largely out of respect for Pauline.

Indeed, like *Blue Blood*, *Blue-Eyed Black Boy* lays bare the reasons a black woman may have for **not** testifying to the truth about her life and the role that white men play in it. The secrets surrounding the mysterious ring and the message to Governor Tinkham are exactly what enable society to function smoothly. A black woman's silence proves to be the very mechanism that allows the governor to move on with his own life while leaving her alone. Because Mother Pauline does not reveal her son's paternity, the governor has no reason to disrupt the life she has managed to build with her husband. Likewise, her discretion allows the governor to use his influence to help her family without causing a scandal.

Not insignificantly, Pauline's silence is also a large part of the reason that "everybody in the Baptist Church" looks up to her and her family (116). Pauline believes that the community's admiration is only appropriate: "I ain't carried myself straight all these years for nothing" (116). Yet, her blue-eyed son is evidence that she does not have a spotless record—even if it is not clear whether her lapse had been voluntary or coerced. Either way, it is her silence that had enabled her proud husband to keep her "on a pinnacle" (116). As with the women in Johnson's *Blue Blood*, if Pauline had insisted

upon revealing the identity of her child's father, or if her husband had insisted upon knowing, they would not have been able to live peacefully as a family.

By spotlighting Pauline and the apparently open secret she has kept, Johnson's *Blue-Eyed Black Boy* exposes the kinds of truths that the dominant rape/lynch discourse sought to erase.<sup>16</sup> While everyone outside of the black home focuses on the rumor that Jack "brushed against a white woman on the street" (118), the action of this play spotlights a real case of miscegenation that never makes it into the rumor mill. The drama thus suggests that circumstances like Pauline's exist (unacknowledged) in countless black homes at the exact same time that lies about white female victimization abound.

As these lies proliferate in public discourse, they threaten to erase the truth about black men, but Johnson's play, and the black women characters within it, bear witness to honorable black manhood. When Jack is an hour late for dinner, his mother Pauline and sister Rebecca know immediately that it is not because he is "running after girls" (117). The reader soon discovers that they are right; he is late because angry whites have taken him away. While the mob acts based on lies about his character, Johnson emphasizes the testimony of the women inside the black home. For example, they speak of his determination to become an engineer. He plans to go to school as soon as his sister Rebecca gets married because, as Pauline explains, "He's been mighty tied

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<sup>16</sup> I take the phrasing "rape/lynch discourse" from historian Crystal Feimster, who suggests that we must always think of lynching when we think of white women's rape, and we should remember black women's rape when we think of lynching—even though the discourse worked to veil those continuities. Feimster is author of the forthcoming history *Ladies and Lynching*. Many other scholars have noted the dominant discourse's investment in concealing the rape of black women, however. Among them are Elsa Barkley Brown, Sandra Gunning, Darlene Clark Hine, Trudier Harris, and at the turn of the century, Ida B. Wells.

down since your father died taking care of us” (117).<sup>17</sup> Having intimate knowledge of Jack’s actions and motivations allows these women to speak confidently about his character. Mainstream assumptions about black men are proven wrong inside the black home. Not surprisingly, then, when Pauline’s best friend Hester comes to tell Pauline that her son has been arrested, she conveys two very different messages. She begins: “*They say* he done brushed a white woman on the street,” but she immediately adds: “They had er argument and she *hollowed out* he’s attacking her” (118, my italics). On the one hand, there is what “they say” happened, and on the other, there is what Hester knows. Yet she shares both narratives, for blacks must deal with both.

As African Americans contend with what they know and what whites say, they draw on both their knowledge of how to navigate a racist society and their hope that a higher, more righteous power will intervene. Pauline has faith that her son’s life will be spared, but it arises as much from her belief in the governor’s power as in God’s. To calm Rebecca, Pauline says, “Trust in God, daughter. I’ve got faith in Him, faith in...in the Governor. He won’t fail” (119). Just after claiming that the governor will not fail, stage directions indicate that “she continues to move her lips in prayer” (119). Then, when the mob noisily passes the house on its way to break into the jail, Pauline begins to pray aloud to God, asking Him to direct the governor and to fill the mob members’ wicked hearts with love (119). Pauline’s oscillation between relying on the power of God and that of man points to the complexities of black faith. Presumably, God would not allow injustices, but African Americans have too often witnessed men override what

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<sup>17</sup> It is interesting that Pauline’s line is structured so that it is not clear whether the father died taking care of them or if Jack has just been so busy taking care of them. Either way, the genre has shown us that black men who take care of their families are in particular danger of igniting white men’s violent masculinity. Also note: as in so many other plays, we are never told how the father died, leaving open the possibility that he has been lynched.

is right morally and spiritually. Their history demanded that they keep faith in God but also recognize white power. Black faith is never simple, Johnson suggests; it is neither based exclusively on the spiritual, nor grounded completely in the social.

African Americans' engagement with the rape/lynch paradigm was as complex as their faith. They could not escape the dominant discourse that cast them as rapists and whores, but black writers were committed to testifying to the truth that these myths were designed to conceal and sought to ensure that posterity would have a record of the truths not spoken. In using the form of antilynching drama, Johnson brought her words to life in black homes, churches, and schools to speak the truths that blacks, in Harriet Jacob's words, did not "dare to allude to, except in whispers among themselves..."

### ***Moving Beyond the Black Home***

*The action of Climbing Jacob's Ladder (1931) by Regina Andrews takes place in a black church, and May Miller's Nails and Thorns (1933) unfolds in a white household. Writing after 1930, these younger playwrights entered the genre after its foundation was well established. Their plays can be seen as commentaries on the genre itself which intimate that it is now time to move beyond the setting of the black home. In the process, Andrews suggested that community activism based in religion often failed to help black victims, and May Miller insisted that lynching black men could destroy white households. Entering the genre at a historical moment when their forerunners had addressed lynching from a myriad of perspectives, they moved forward from established insights to discover other issues that demanded critique.*

***Climbing Jacob's Ladder*, Regina Andrews, 1931**

Reading *Climbing Jacob's Ladder* poses challenges because the status of the surviving text is unclear. As Judith Stephens and Kathy Perkins note, three pages are missing from the script reprinted in *Strange Fruit*. If discovered, the missing pages may complicate current readings. In addition, the version now in print is likely one that Andrews revised before allowing Harlem Experimental Theatre (HET) to stage the play in the basement of the 135<sup>th</sup> Street branch of the New York Public Library.<sup>18</sup> Despite the limitations, I hazard a reading in order to understand Andrews's initial attempt at dramatizing the impact that lynching had on African American communities.

*Climbing Jacob's Ladder* is set in a small black church in an "outlying Negro district in the South," where congregants have gathered to raise money for Wash Thomas's legal defense (125). Because it emphasizes the difficulties of raising money from this poor congregation and the endless disagreements that emerge to delay the process, the play suggests that blacks, especially religious ones, expend their energy in ways that ensure their continued victimization. It spotlights the congregation's pettiness in order to disturb its black audience. Rather than offer succor, the testimonies in this play work to make blacks uncomfortable with their institutions and traditions. That is, Andrews' mob victim is no less a Christ figure than the black men of other dramas, but his death condemns not only the whites who lynched him but also the blacks who were busy bickering when he was being killed.

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<sup>18</sup> As editors of the only anthology of antilynching drama, Judith Stephens and Kathy Perkins admit that they cannot definitively assert that the text they published was the final version that pleased Andrews. Indeed, because there are numerous markings and deletions, they believe that this version was the early draft that W.E.B. Du Bois read and disliked; he insisted that Andrews could do better.

The script begins by creating a comforting setting that makes the events that follow even more unsettling. For the same reasons that her predecessors had focused on the tranquil home, Andrews here depicts the black church; she presents it only to detail its dismantling. A prayer appears before the list of characters and thus instantly frames the action: “Dear Father who art in Heaven, we come before you this evening with bowed down heads and heavy hearts, asking for mercy and compassion for one of thy children. O Lord, let the light of thy spirit shine in our hearts tonight and please help this lamb from thy fold” (124). The prayer continues, “Help us to realize that we don’t know when nor where the hand of fate is going to strike next, but oh Lord we do know that when and where-so-ever it may strike our faith in Thee is able to carry us on...” (124). Because readers and viewers would likely assume a reverent posture in response to this opening material, God’s apparent failure to improve black life in the play will soon become sickeningly disappointing.

Reverend Lumpkin is the first character to enter; he is described as a man with “sufficient intelligence to have gained the confidence, love, and respect of his flock” (125). He has made his church available to those working to raise \$300 to hire a lawyer for Wash Thomas, a member of the community who has been in state jail for the past six months. Wash is obviously beloved, for the meeting draws a diverse cross-section of the community. Once the meeting begins, those most involved in organizing on Wash’s behalf deliver speeches meant to comfort and inspire the crowd. Yet, there is a disagreement about who will be on the committee that will oversee the money. Just as this disagreement begins to brew, there is a disruption from outside. The congregants

hear clanging bells, barking dogs, and running feet, but everyone assumes that there must be a fire somewhere. The master of ceremonies calls for order.

Disagreements about money resume and continue until a man from the pool hall down the street makes a grand entrance. He donates the largest sum and makes a point of emphasizing that he does so in spite of the judgment the congregation has passed on those who frequent the pool hall. Shortly thereafter, a young man named Sammy enters, staggers to the front, and tells them to stop raising money. Earlier, when everyone else assumed that there had been a fire, he slipped out to investigate. He reports, “while you niggahs was doin’ what de *white folks* telled yo to do—while you was doing dat, dey was breaking open de jail door digging out po Wash—God, dey brought him right by heah, — [ ...]” (131).

The action of this drama suggests that both institutionalized religion and superstitious beliefs prevent blacks from taking effective action. When Sammy announces that Wash has been killed, a number of men arise, preparing to avenge his death. Immediately, Reverend Lumpkin warns them not to seek revenge because more bloodshed will not bring Wash back. The men are not at all discouraged; in fact, even more men jump up to join the would-be avengers (132). As they approach the exit, however, thunder roars and lightning animates the sky. They all immediately retreat because, according to the stage directions, they are “cowered by superstition and fear” (132). At this point, the preacher’s power is re-established since it seems that a higher power, communicating through thunder and lightning, agrees with him. If that higher power does not seem to condone actions, inaction becomes the appointed course.

As a consequence, the same men who earlier ignored Reverend Lumpkin's warning about revenge now allow Reverend Sampson, the man most responsible for the earlier disagreements, to preach about the ineffectiveness of fighting. Speaking in the wake of the lightning, Sampson tells one of the men to put away his knife. He counsels, "Dat's de hand ob God flashin across de Hebbens warnin you not to sin no mo" (132). He continues, "Did knives ever hep Niggahs?" (132). Bowing to the lightning's authority, the men allow Reverend Sampson, whom they had mocked earlier, to list centuries of injustices that blacks survived using prayer, not knives. Sampson is anything but admirable, but he can command respect when men are "cowered by superstition and fear."

The characters interpret events as proof that God opposes resistance to social injustice, but it seems that Andrews would have her readers and viewers take in the larger picture and find their inaction disturbing. It is strange that they would so easily accept Wash's death because no one ever questioned his innocence. In fact, many of them testify to it, appropriately calling attention to their intimate knowledge of him. Reverend Lumpkin shares that he has known Wash "since he was a little codger...running in that door ahead of his mother, comin to prayer meeting on a Wednesday night just like this" (126). A younger man later addresses the congregation, saying "You know, Wash Thomas an I was kids togedder, an no one knows bettern me, dat he wouldn't kill a little ant..." (127).

As these men's sentiments suggest, *Climbing Jacob's Ladder* is no less concerned with providing testimony about black male character than dramas set in the home. Yet, unlike her predecessors, Andrews seems to have been willing to bear witness to the

gruesome details of the lynching incident. When Sammy returns from investigating the real reason for the commotion outside, he is poised to tell them all the awful details;

Andrews puts the following words in Sammy's mouth but marks them for deletion:

Dey had him tied to a car naked, full of blood an sweat. Dey dragged him about a mile or so, me sneakin behin. Den, I saw em doublin' back—I climb a tree, dey stopped across de road almost in front of me, and cut his body loose. God, he stood up somehow! An all de time dos white folks was jumpin roun...building a fire an cutting switches, and yellin' and screamin. (*sobs*) Dey made him stan, and Wash, he stood dere somehow wif his head up, wild'n'proud. Dey all beat him, yelling, "Say dat you did it nigger, say dat you did it," even de wimmen and chillum. (*sobs*) (131).

Andrews did not simply want to have close acquaintances testify to Wash's good character; she also wanted to detail the horror of his death—perhaps as an antidote to the opiate called religion. Through Sammy, Andrews sought to break the spell that religion has cast on African Americans by making them confront the pain of the here-and-now, even while depicting the space in which blacks are encouraged to think only of the afterlife. To issue this wake-up call, Andrews was ready to present the physical horror of lynching more directly than her predecessors had. Her marking this passage for deletion may have been a response to Du Bois's criticism more than a reflection of her goals. Speculation aside, it is clear that both versions of the play hinge on a black person's testimony. Andrews's revisions therefore left that important feature of the antilynching drama tradition intact.

Given all the accounts of Wash's solid reputation, it is all the more disturbing that the congregation responds to his death with songs and prayers rather than protest. Sammy is the one character who, even after the lightning, remains resolved to take

action. Finally, though, he is visibly crushed by the weight of everyone else's complacency. Having decided not to respond passionately to Wash's death, the congregants sing "Were you there when they crucified my Lord... Oh!—sometimes it causes me to tremble, tremble" (132). As these words are sung, the stage directions focus on Sammy, the man who tried to awaken the congregation to the fact that they had been following white men's instructions while white men killed Wash: "At first Sammy stares wildly in broken protest against this final silent resignation—slowly his body relaxes, his head falls slowly in his arms" (132).

Sammy's defeated posture points to the degree to which the church cultivates resignation. The spirituals sung throughout the play do not simply articulate Christian faith; they also condone a level of passivity that allows members to tolerate a man's slaughter, suggesting that (especially for blacks) being a Christian demands exactly that. The first song is "Get on Board Little Children" (129). Next, the congregation sings "Tis Me, Tis Me," whose lines suggest that the one standing in the need of prayer "is me...not the preacher, not the teacher, but me..." Thus, rather than blame others—even rightly—the impulse is to focus on one's own shortcomings. Next, the congregants suggest their conviction that God blesses conformity when they sing "I love Jesus, So do I" (130). With these songs paving the way, the lyrics "Was you there when they crucified my Lord?" mark the shift from conformity to resignation. The song not only indicates that many were present when Jesus was crucified but also that they stood by as it happened. Having allowed it, they can only "tremble" at the memory.

If the church fosters resignation, it also helps emasculate black men. Because the mob drags the victim "right by" the church, Andrews's play comments both on the

futility of religion and on religion's ability to neutralize black manhood. The mob had come "right by here" in *Safe* while the man of the house was out, but here it strikes the community while the men are there. In earlier women's plays, few black men were physically present, but this one depicts an entire group. Instead of their presence translating into a powerful change, however, their drive quickly vanishes. We see them unite and rise to take action only to witness their resolve disappear. Andrews may not have been condoning impassioned masculinity, but she would certainly have African Americans discuss whether the "Natural Man" within them is kept in check by logic and moral conviction or by religion and superstition. The discussion needed to be further complicated, she suggested, by a close look at how Christianity can disadvantage blacks. The debut of Andrews's play before a Harlem audience in the basement of the 135<sup>th</sup> Street branch of the New York Public Library surely led many blacks to deal with these difficult questions.

Like the other antilynching plays, *Climbing Jacob's Ladder* explores black identity, but it does so by presenting less-than-ideal characters. Andrews perhaps hoped to inspire blacks to be better than those she portrayed; she took a chance on cultivating honorable black identity by showing blacks what they should *not* do and be. Just as importantly, she exposed the church as an institution that may be robbing African Americans of the clarity that will allow them to live up to their potential. In *Climbing Jacob's Ladder*, Andrews spotlighted the church in order to detail its demise, as earlier writers had done with the home. But Andrews suggests here that the church is a less than honorable place, and that its members' pettiness, fear, and superstition helped advance the mob's agenda.

***Nails and Thorns*, May Miller, 1933**

May Miller's *Nails and Thorns* depicts lynching destruction by focusing on a white home. This strategy was particularly appropriate, given that Miller entered the play into a contest sponsored by the Association of Southern Women for the Prevention of Lynching (ASWPL). Miller brought the genre full-circle—back to Grimké's commitment to targeting white women—but the existence of the ASWPL gave Miller reason to be optimistic that white women would actually listen. In 1920, Grimké believed that white women were “beginning to awaken,” but this awakening found a tangible outlet later with the founding of this organization in 1930. Because she knew that she had white women's attention, Miller set out to pull at their heart strings. Rather than trust in their ability to sympathize with those whom Grimké called “the best type of colored people,” however, Miller presented the havoc that lynching could wreak in white people's lives.

The action is set in the home of Gladys and Stewart Landers. Stewart is the sheriff of “a small town—probably South, probably West,” and the only black person we see is Annabel, the servant who cares for their baby. Gladys tries to convince Stewart to ask the governor to send state troopers, because she thinks that the townspeople will lynch “simple Lem” if left to themselves. Lem is a black man who is known to be mentally disabled, and he has been accused of assaulting a white girl. Stewart has put Lem in jail just to keep him safe; Stewart does not actually think Lem is guilty because the girl was so frantic that she did not identify an assailant (177-78). Gladys says she can feel that trouble is brewing, and she wants desperately to prevent it because she had lived through a lynching and knew the damage that such barbarity would do to the entire town

(180). Miller uses Gladys to explain her title: “For generations to come the children will be gathering the nails and thorns from the scene of that crucifixion” (180). Nevertheless, Stewart shows little regard for his wife’s testimony and makes no plans to take action.

Just then, their nanny Annabel rushes in, having literally run to work to avoid detection by would-be mobsters. Though he dismisses Annabel’s fears about the mob, more persistence from his wife Gladys finally motivates Stewart to leave and check on his prisoner. When alone with the more responsive Gladys, Annabel shares what she knows about the lynch plot, and it becomes clear that Stewart will find nothing at the jail; the violent ritual is already under way. Suddenly, Gladys resolves to stop the lynching herself. She insists, “I’ll tell that mob how I feel...I’ll show them my baby—he is this town’s tomorrow” (183). Gladys pushes past Annabel to get out of the door, for she maintains, “my son will show them the way” (183). When Stewart returns home, his wife and baby are gone. Finally, Gladys returns with the assistance of the town doctor. She is completely hysterical because the mob has crushed her baby underfoot. Finally, Gladys bursts, “He’s dead, dead, I tell you, and I’m glad. (*laughing hysterically*) He’ll never have to see a lynching” (186). Stewart is stunned but manages to admit what he had previously refused to acknowledge about his black servant: “Annabel’s a very good woman—a very, very wise woman” (188).

With this plot, Miller quite eerily anticipated an NAACP advertisement that would appear two years later. At a time when photographs of lynch victims circulated as evidence of white power, the NAACP used them to create a counter-discourse designed to inspire white shame about the ways in which they use that power. Reprinting a picture of Rubin Stacy, a man lynched on July 19, 1935, the advertisement pointed viewers’

attention to the white children who surround the hanging victim. The reader is instructed by the NAACP's caption:

Do not look at the Negro. His earthly problems are ended. Instead, look at the seven WHITE children who gaze at this gruesome spectacle. Is it horror or gloating on the face of the neatly dressed seven-year-old girl on the right? Is the tiny four-year-old on the left old enough, one wonders, to comprehend the barbarism her elders have perpetrated? Rubin Stacy, the Negro, who was lynched at Fort Lauderdale, Florida, on July 19, 1935, for "threatening and frightening a white woman," suffered PHYSICAL torture for a few short hours. But what psychological havoc is being wrought in the minds of the white children?... (qtd. in Markovitz 25-26).

To the same effect, Gladys tells her husband, "...I lived in a town once where they lynched a man and I can never forget how the town and the people suffered. It wasn't what they did to the unfortunate man alone. He was out of his misery" (180). Appealing to Stewart's sense of responsibility for his white constituents' quality of life, Gladys continues, "[the real tragedy] was what they did to every soul in that town. They crucified everything that was worthwhile—justice and pride and self-respect. Both Miller and her character Gladys clearly feel that an antilynching appeal based on the damage done to whites will be most effective. In the process, the author and her characters bear witness to the existence of a different kind of "strange fruit." Black bodies are crucified, but so are white households and towns and the nation's commitment to justice.

Miller modifies the genre's tendency to offer black men as Christ figures; here, the crucified are either abstract ideals or members of the white community, such as Gladys's own baby. Miller clearly focuses on these losses because she assumes that,

even to liberal whites, black pain is of secondary importance, even to liberal whites. For example, when Annabel arrives to report to work, she rushes in because it is not safe for blacks to be on the streets. In response to her frantic explanation, Stewart is dismissive. While this may not be surprising, his liberal wife Gladys is not very sympathetic either. Gladys insists, “All right, Annabel, now you’re here safe and sound, and you need not worry any more. You go fix the baby’s bottle and take it to him. And try to forget all about Lem and the affair” (179-80). The concern that the visibly unnerved Annabel expresses regarding her own sons, and for Lem and his family, simply does not register as relevant—even to Gladys. Although she immediately begins again to press Stewart to do something about the escalating tension, Gladys’s inability to empathize with Annabel is undeniable.

Gladys is not only unable to relate to Annabel; she also proves incapable of truly hearing her. As Gladys convinces herself that she must stop the lynchers, she reasons that they will end the frenzy if she can get them to “forget the poor crazy fellow and look at themselves and the children” (183). Annabel immediately interjects that they have the children with them. Gladys rages, “The children too! They can’t do that to our children. They’re all we have. They’re our promise—our future” to which Annabel replies, “Yes’m, mah chillun’s all I got, too. If’twasn’t foh ‘em, I wouldn’t be a-workin’ all the time ‘til I’s ready to drop” (183). Annabel’s loyalty to her children, not to Gladys, is apparent here, as is the pressure that Gladys presumably places on Annabel without regard for Annabel’s family. None of this makes an impression on Gladys, but Annabel continues, “Then come a time lak tonight an’ I get to thinkin’ that mah sons has gotta grow up in this town, too, an’ ‘sposin’ aftah all mah work they ends lak that” (183). As

Annabel finishes with “a futile gesture,” Gladys continues to insist that her own son is “this town’s tomorrow” (183). In this scene, Gladys’s behavior proves to be on a continuum with that of the lynchers, about whom Annabel says to Gladys to no avail, “they ain’t got no ears now, Ma’m” (183).

Though Miller moved the genre away from the black home, her characters explicitly discuss the media’s potential impact, suggesting that she was no less concerned with the politics of representation than her predecessors who had focused on honorable black domesticity had been. Early in the play, the impact of the media is explicitly addressed, as Stewart tries to calm Gladys by making her laugh. He tells her to sit down and read the newspaper; he confidently declares, “the comic will be good for your nerves” (178). He continues, “I wouldn’t miss an evening of ‘Desperado Joe’ for anything. (*enthusiastically bending over her shoulder*) Look here at the pickle he’s in. They’ve just caught Joe who kidnapped Percy’s girl. And look at this. It’s a wow. (*laughing*) Here, the gang’s got him, and is he scared!” (178). This “comic” plot resonates not just with the situation currently overtaking the town, but also with virtually all tales of “outlaws” and those who would tame them. Because American distinctiveness and its western frontier manifestations all revolved around the idea that real men can tame a wild, dark expanse, all such stories relied on what Toni Morrison labeled the Africanist presence. May Miller thus put forth a theory in *Nails and Thorns* that was not far removed from Morrison’s. Gladys says to Stewart, “...I worry about the kind of world Junior will have to live in...I hate the thought that he’ll be reading about gangs and mobs and enjoy them” (180). In this way, Miller insists that the comic is not “just a funny,” as Stewart insists, and that stories and shows that denigrate blacks are not

“just entertainment.” American realities are shaped by, and constituted by, these representations.

While acknowledging that representation shapes reality, Miller represents the importance of informal black networks, even as she speaks to the women of ASWPL. Annabel is sure that Lem will be kidnapped from jail because she knows that a relative of the girl who was allegedly attacked has keys to the jail. Neither Stewart nor Gladys immediately believe her, so she later explains to Gladys, “I knows mo’ bout this town n’ you does, Mis’ Landers, ‘cause mah mammy nursed mos’ o’ these folks. She say one haf them’s related an’ those what ain’t has got relatives what is” (182). Thus, Annabel suggests that whites represent themselves in one way, but blacks know the truth behind the façade. As a result, blacks offer each other truths about whites that are otherwise unavailable.

Informal black networks do not just expose whites’ lies about themselves, however; they also reveal the fallacies upon which white statements about blacks are based. When Stewart finally acknowledges that Annabel is wise, it is because she had been right about the lynching. Miller’s readers and viewers know that Annabel got this information because “Ruby tole me an’ she had it from Josh’s Sarah an’ Sarah got it from Josh from the store where he works on Main Street” (181). This active undercurrent of black information enables African Americans to understand the events that surrounded them in ways that were not controlled by mainstream media. Given that the “Desperado Joe” comic is condoned by mainstream newspapers, it is clear that blacks would be in dire straits if they had access only to white information networks. Thus, Miller’s play

also proves to be a black-authored testimony to the importance of black perspectives—whether whites have ears to hear them or not.

Miller's play is populated by white characters, but it nevertheless acknowledges the importance of black voices, not the least of which is hers. Not unlike the Bush Players acting troupe that refused to be limited to black-authored material, Miller valued the freedom to write about characters that were not black. Even while exercising that freedom, however, she remains committed to preserving the alternative discourses that ensured black's ability to represent themselves. Because there was no reason to believe that damaging white representations would cease, blacks had to protect themselves by creating safe spaces, both physical and discursive. None of the playwrights—not Grimké, not Johnson, not even Miller—thought they could end lynching or neutralize the impact of denigrating black images by writing a few plays. They were absolutely determined, though, to give generations of African Americans the kinds of depictions of themselves that would allow them to survive...even if lynching and racism proved to be realities that did not change.

## CHAPTER 5: GENDERED REVISIONS

Within antilynching drama, male writers revise the genre's conventions. The first black male-authored lynching play was published by G. D. Lipscomb nearly ten years after black women developed the genre, thereby contradicting the expectation that men establish literary traditions and women revise them. Antilynching drama therefore offers scholars an opportunity to question the hierarchical logic that so often informs our evaluations of literary revisions. Rather than categorizing texts and authors as "major" or "minor," I propose focusing on intertextuality—the concept that Henry Louis Gates, Jr. highlighted with his theory of "signifying," and that Patricia Liggins Hill usefully re-figured as "Call and Response."<sup>1</sup> Thinking in terms of intertextuality demands that we consider the possibility that revisions are not just supplementary but indeed complementary. We are driven to ask: Must a revision inspired by gender difference be reactionary and therefore secondary? Might revision be a mark of relationship, an egalitarian acknowledgement of linked destiny?

African American men came to antilynching drama later than women and were not as prolific, but this chapter resists the temptation to see the latter group as secondary; black men and women worked side-by-side in the early 1900s to interrupt the cultural conversation that allowed lynching.<sup>2</sup> In honor of the dramatists' cooperative spirit, I

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<sup>1</sup> See Henry Louis Gates, Jr., *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of Afro-American Literary Criticism*. New York: Oxford UP, 1988. Patricia Liggins Hill organizes her anthology of African American literature according to the paradigm of "call and response" to emphasize the vernacular influence on the tradition's formation, as opposed to the post-structuralist impulse that guides Gates. See *Call and Response: The Riverside Anthology of the African American Literary Tradition*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1998. What both Gates and Hill emphasize, though some applications of their theories do not, is intertextuality; my goal is simply to reiterate its importance.

<sup>2</sup> One reason that men entered the tradition later is that they were more often able to secure positions of authority within organizations like the NAACP. Even in these official capacities, however, they were working with women. As I have already shown, drama was an extension of more traditional political activism; it was not separate from it. I should mention that theater scholar Kathy Perkins also suggests that

refuse to privilege the efforts of one group over the other—as has happened too often in black theater histories that discount Grimké and the women playwrights who immediately followed. Literary traditions take shape from dynamic interchange, requiring much more than “leaders” and “major” voices. The influence of oral culture on African American literature highlights this reality. In the vernacular tradition, when a preacher’s sermon launches into rhythmic excitement, he cannot continue without the congregation’s enthusiastic amens. The group’s *response* proves to be as important as the preacher’s *call*. Black literary revision works the same way, so simple paradigms of “major” and “minor” hinder an appreciation of the richness of the tradition. Because women used drama to enter the lynching conversation earlier, black men needed to address their plays by the time that they became antilynching playwrights. Once men joined women in the literary trenches, however, they worked together to develop a literary genre, to advance a protest against vigilantism, and to offer a commentary on gender roles in African America.<sup>3</sup>

Black male playwrights G.D. Lipscomb, Joseph Mitchell, and S. Randolph Edmonds altered antilynching drama as much as the women who turned away from Grimké’s example of creating genteel black characters for integrated audiences. If women’s depictions of heroines with little formal education changed theater’s impact on black communities, men’s revisions broadened the message that antilynching drama conveyed. Thus, before discussing the men’s plays individually, I consider Lipscomb’s *Frances* (1925), Mitchell’s *Son-Boy* (1928), and Edmonds’s *Bad Man* (1934) collectively. When taken together, these three one-acts prove to be a group identity-

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black men were less likely to focus on literature because they had access to more formal political activities. See her introduction to *Black Female Playwrights*.

<sup>3</sup> I borrow the term “African America” from renowned historian David Levering Lewis.

inspired commentary on what had come before, and their revisions of the work of black women antilynching dramatists are of particular interest. Lipscomb, Mitchell, and Edmonds placed as much emphasis on the black home as women did, but the men's gender-based revision manifests as a refusal to transfer lynching onto the household. Unlike women's plays, men's lynching dramas routinely place the targeted man on stage. Male writers were not concerned with presenting a stable black home that could be destroyed only with the invasion of the mob. While women dramatists depicted households that de-generate only when men are taken from them, men presented homes that seem "castrated" even when fathers, brothers, and uncles survive. By often allowing black men to live, male dramatists suggested that mobs seek to castrate African American men in life, not just in death. As they appeared on stage, male characters—and the works they inhabited—testified to the mob's obsession with targeting strong black men and intensifying the fear that controlled cowardly ones.

Because male dramatists interacted with conventions already established by women, their contributions make more apparent the degree to which antilynching drama entered two distinct, but interrelated, cultural conversations: the nation's debate on black humanity and African America's on black identity. In 1914, Grimké launched a defense of black humanity by using as the foundation for antilynching drama a black home that whites would recognize as civilized and refined. In the late 1910s and early 1920s, Grimké's successors continued this tradition of denying national claims about black barbarity but—because they increasingly spoke to African Americans—they contributed primarily to community conversations on black identity. When male playwrights joined the discussion in 1925, they continued the focus on black audiences and therefore

concerned themselves less with insisting that blacks were human and more with complementing efforts to understand, bolster, and create black identity despite the forces that sought to destroy it.

### **Naming Practices**

Men's plays collectively testify to the extent to which naming affects black identity formation. Introducing readers to characters such as "Frances" and her lover "Professor Mannus," "Son-Boy," and "Bad Man," male dramatists demonstrated that mainstream naming of African Americans was an important component of the nation's dehumanizing system of black representation. For them, the conversation must include an explicit engagement with how naming practices contributed to and condoned mob activity.

Importantly, the manner in which these dramatists spotlighted names also advanced dialogue among African Americans about manhood and womanhood. For example, in titling his play *Frances* after the female protagonist, Lipscomb followed Grimké, but he also offered an important revision that spurred discussion about what black womanhood could and should be at the century's turn. We witness in Lipscomb's revision of Grimké an egalitarian effort among African Americans to construct gender roles that account for race. As they dealt with the reality of living in a nation that allowed lynching, women writers put forth guidelines for responsible black manhood, and black men offered commentary on black womanhood. Both groups made impassioned statements about their own responsibility to the race, but both also

acknowledged that their relationship to the opposite sex largely shaped their conceptions of their own gendered realities.

Lipscomb named his play after his female protagonist, suggesting that black women dramatists' preoccupation with manhood was paralleled by their male counterparts' interest in womanhood. Nineteen-year-old Frances "responds" to Grimké's *Rachel* by presenting a black woman whose evolution is marked not by insanity but by a move toward self-knowledge and pride. As Lipscomb portrayed a young woman who changes for the better despite her unfavorable circumstances, we would do well to acknowledge the call and response between Grimké and Lipscomb. *Rachel*'s descent into insanity is important because it gives voice to an undeniable pain and does not deny black women's human weakness. Grimké was not guilty of imposing what literary critic Trudier Harris has termed "this disease called strength," whereby African American authors seem incapable of imagining a black woman who buckles under pressure.<sup>4</sup> Still, Lipscomb's impulse to create a strong female character who successfully makes the transition from slavery to freedom, and from girlhood to womanhood, is important. If we can see revision as a way for black men and women to work together equally to tell a more comprehensive story, then there is no need to label Grimké's or Lipscomb's as the more accurate or significant portrait.

Still, naming is most interesting when we consider the male characters who populate the three plays. In *Frances*, the title character is in love with a teacher named "Mannus," a moniker significant for its homonymic relationship to the vernacular

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<sup>4</sup> See Trudier Harris, "This Disease Called Strength: Some Observations on the Compensating Construction of Black Female Character" *Literature and Medicine* 14.1 (1995): 109-26. Though Harris's argument hinges on mid- to late-twentieth century texts, I do not believe it to be completely irrelevant to earlier moments in the African American literary tradition.

“mannish.” Just as girls can be womanish in their behavior, a mannish boy acts like a man prematurely and therefore does not know his place.<sup>5</sup> Within the action of the play, Mannus is perceived as mannish by whites and some blacks. Whites are offended that he so boldly demands resources for his school. More than that, he expects to educate (and therefore take from the field) those blacks upon whom the planters most depend. What is most infuriating, though, is that Mannus dares pursue a woman that a white man, planter and landlord Charles Thawson, wants. Of course, that is the boldest presumption of equality that a black man could muster, so when Thawson rages about Frances’s association with “that Mannus nigger,” he is calling Mannus by name and labeling his behavior “mannish” (151).

Frances’s uncle Abram also believes that Mannus behaves inappropriately. Abram feels that Mannus generally makes life harder because he tells black townspeople that they tolerate too much ill treatment from whites. More specifically, Mannus shows Frances that she has options in life, thereby weakening Abram’s ability to profit from prostituting his niece. Abram also finds Mannus mannish because he refuses to abide by the code of conduct that other blacks in the South accept. As Abram puts it, Mannus does not understand what southern blacks have to do to get along. Thus, despite the fact that Mannus is the best teacher they have ever had, county officials will not allow him and his school to be successful (148). In Abram’s eyes, then, Mannus’s mannish ways turn an intelligent man into an ineffective fool with nothing to show for his efforts.

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<sup>5</sup> See Alice Walker’s *In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens: Womanist Prose*. San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1983. Walker uses “womanish” as the inspiration for coining the term “womanist” in her attempt to describe and develop a framework for understanding specifically black manifestations of feminist consciousness.

The importance of black men's names also looms large in *Son-Boy* and *Bad Man*. These plays are named after men whose lives are threatened by mobs, but they do not simply identify individuals. By choosing names that seem more generic than specific, the authors called attention to the biased labeling practices upon which lynching depended. That is, Mitchell and Edmonds used metonymic monikers to point to the need to question their representational capacities. In the case of *Son-Boy*, the task is to spotlight the impact that one's race has on the meanings attached to even the most ordinary labels. "Son-Boy" automatically evokes a double meaning because a son is not necessarily a boy, and a boy not necessarily a son. More than this, race complicates "Son-Boy" because being called "son" or "boy" by a member of the black community carries a very different connotation than if a white man refers to a black nineteen-year-old in these ways. Thus, as Son-Boy, the title character of Joseph Mitchell's 1928 play, walks through life with this name, its import oscillates easily and dramatically from friendly and approving to condescending and dehumanizing. If all black men are someone's son and were once boys, this moniker rightly applies...but so does its fluctuating connotation. African American men were familiar with the many different feelings that could be expressed with these terms. As "son" and "boy" are shown to be anything but universally endearing, it is clear that the race-based oscillation that Son-Boy experiences also shapes many other black men's self-conceptions. Such seemingly simple labeling reinforces the fact that African Americans were in no position to ignore race or racism while building individual identity.

While *Son-Boy* points to the need to account for race in any conception of identity, *Bad Man* highlights the necessity of questioning any label's ability to capture a

person's character. Just as black minstrels interrogated manhood despite the stereotypes they were forced to embody, Edmonds used a label that seemed to echo mainstream conceptions of blacks only to expose its failure to represent accurately. "Bad Man" is pregnant with legendary significance, and Edmonds utilized all of its meanings to create a complicated hero. Thea, the Bad Man,<sup>6</sup> curses, gambles excessively, and is known for having killed, but he is also a brave man of his word. Thus, *Bad Man* begins with a stereotype and readers think that knowing the stereotype illuminates Thea's character, but the more we see of him, the more we realize that the label—even though he himself has accepted it—provides little insight. This Bad Man also transcends stereotype because he has a voice; he expresses his own ideas about the world and explains his own values and motives. That is, when Thea rages, we are not left to assume that he is just barbaric. We actually hear him explain that he is angry because he feels his character has been assaulted when his co-worker Jack accuses him of cheating in a card game. Then, when Jack points a gun at him but is too scared to pull the trigger, Bad Man explains to Maybelle why he now must kill him. He says, "Yuh don't understand, Miss. Ef a man draws a gun on yuh and yuh let him off 'cause he ain't got de nerve tuh shoot, de next time he will git dat nerve" (248). Despite this careful rationalization, Thea spares Jack's life. Later, Thea tells a story about his childhood that reveals why he hates cowardice more than anything else (248). Finally, at the end of the play, this "bad man" explains why he is willing to sacrifice himself to the mob (250). In short, Thea's reputation as an "honest tuh goodness bad man" is accurate, but it does not tell as much about him as

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<sup>6</sup> In terms of denotation, there is a difference between a name and a label, but these plays demonstrate that, because blacks are so consistently depicted in negative ways, labels constantly threaten to replace their names.

mainstream media (including commercial theater) would suggest—and Edmonds makes sure that his audience recognizes this.

To engage naming in this way interrupted the cultural conversation predicated on black inhumanity; it exposed the stereotypical labeling of blacks as an important component of the country's dehumanizing systems of representation. Of course, interrupting the mainstream conversation also added to the conversation on identity within black communities. The playwrights recognized that race would shape their experiences as they worked toward self-knowledge. Just as importantly, they expanded the meanings that labels such as "Bad Man" could have, so that blacks would not simply accept mainstream rhetoric about the race. In both *Son-Boy* and *Bad Man*, then, names are crucially important because they enable a critique—specifically, that there is much more to these men and their experiences than their names would suggest.

### **Black Male Character and the Home**

As they challenged dehumanizing systems of racial representation, male dramatists also foregrounded their roles in the home, thereby testifying to African American men's commitment to their households. According to their plays, black men were not looking for white women to prey on. Nevertheless, mobs targeted them because they were terrified that the race would be elevated by its most dignified men—family men. Putting forth such testimonies confirmed what many in the race already knew about black men's honorable code of conduct.

The impulse to focus on black men's importance to the home also arose from the writers' understanding that the rhetoric designed to destroy the race's reputation often

exploited the privatized territory of the domestic sphere. At the century's turn, blacks and whites, women and men all understood that political battles had become domestic ones. Because black men were no longer slaves and now vied for social and political agency, white men needed more than citizenship rights to reaffirm their superior position. They therefore began to assert their manhood by making public claims about their domestic authority. A true man did not simply rule those within his household, however; he also protected them from black brutes. Accordingly, a man's ability to control and protect the home became the ultimate measure of political agency.

Whites used the home as a justification for political resistance to African American equality, and this emphasis on the domestic had serious implications for debates about black humanity and black identity. African Americans understood that they could not simply argue that they deserved civic equality; they must also "prove" that black freedom would not mean danger for white households. Without question, the charge that African Americans were so barbaric that they could not honor familial bonds more directly and viciously assaulted blacks' humanity and self-conception than did the claim that they could not responsibly cast ballots. Quite logically, then, antilynching playwrights established both their defense and offense on the domestic front.

Like their female counterparts, male dramatists prioritized exposing the destruction that mobs brought to black homes. As a result, their plays also take the form of testimony and resist depicting physical violence. Yet, they put forth a different message about the impact that racial violence had on the black family. While women portrayed tranquil spaces that could be disrupted only by the mob's invasion, male playwrights depicted homes that were damaged by the mere threat of lynching; the mob

targets men themselves, not just their homebuilding efforts. Rather than populating the plays with family and friends who testify to a black man's impeccable character, male-authored plays focus directly on black male protagonists in order to examine the many ways in which mob violence shapes their self-conceptions. While women playwrights insisted that lynching prevented blacks from *sustaining* domesticity, men suggested that African Americans could not—and sometimes did not want to—*create* it in the first place. Depicting brave black men alongside cowardly ones, these plays bear witness to a constant awareness that, at any moment and without penalty, the mob could make their wives widows and their children orphans.<sup>7</sup>

Remembering the importance that men placed on exposing both the power of naming and the obstacles to black domestic success, I next offer readings of three male-authored one-acts that use the home as setting.<sup>8</sup> By examining scripts that share women's concern for domesticity, we can better glean those elements that black men revised. In the process, it becomes clear that G.D. Lipscomb's *Frances* (1925), Joseph Mitchell's *Son-Boy* (1928), and Randolph Edmonds' *Bad Man* (1934) enhance the genre with their response to the call of women's plays; they helped to complete this dramatic tradition with insights that perhaps only black men could provide.

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<sup>7</sup> I want to suggest that historians have not fully accounted for the psychological impact of knowing that you can be lynched at any moment. For instance, how might such knowledge influence one's decision to marry? Antilynching drama suggests that black men's possible victimization led some *women* to hesitate before marrying and having children. (Recall *Rachel* and *Liza* of *Safe*.) Is it not possible that lynching would similarly touch black men?

<sup>8</sup> Other dramas written by men before 1935 include *Appearances* (1925) by Garland Anderson and *Scottsboro Limited* (1931) by Langston Hughes. I do not take them up here because they do not use the black home as setting. Perhaps one reason these men did not share the concern with the black home is that both Anderson and Hughes hoped to reach an integrated audience. I should also note that *A Sign* (in *Crisis*, January 1934) by George Streater is often included on lists of antilynching plays. However, it is more of a sketch than a play, with a total of about 15 lines.

***Frances*, G. D. Lipscomb, 1925**

Black men and women antilynching dramatists used the home in different ways as they testified to the impact that lynching had on African Americans. While women depicted “castrated” black homes, men portrayed emasculated black men. G.D. Lipscomb’s *Frances* initiated the gender-based revisions of the genre by spotlighting a home that is anything but domestically successful and in which two very different kinds of black men appear. Nineteen-year-old Frances lives with her uncle Abram in a shack in the Mississippi Delta, and she keeps the home clean, but we soon discover that her uncle has been prostituting her to the white man who holds the deed to the house. Like the women playwrights, Lipscomb thematized manhood, but his work spotlights a despicable head of household—whose actions suggest that the mere threat of lynching can destroy black men’s desire to live honorably. Then, by placing Professor Mannus on stage, the play testifies to the existence among black men of a strong, patriarchal spirit, and it insists that it is this strength (more often than cowardice) that attracts white men’s wrath.

Set in the winter of 1925, all action takes place in the “shot-gun house” that Frances shares with her uncle Abram. The play begins when we see Frances sewing with an open book in front of her. The tranquility that she steals for herself is soon disrupted when her brash uncle enters, worrying that the town “niggahs” have told whites that he is “makin’ gosh” (illegal liquor). He also says that he hopes the new black teacher, Professor Mannus, will soon leave town. Mannus has only made life harder by telling “niggahs” what they should and should not tolerate (148). Abram also reports that Mannus has upset county officials and will probably soon lose the school altogether.

Abram leaves the house, and Frances is left alone to worry about the news she has just heard. Soon, Mannus appears, and we discover that he and Frances are involved. He tells her that Charles Thawson, the planter who holds the deed to Frances' and Abram's house, has been harassing him. Mannus admits that he normally tolerates Thawson's abuse, but could not do so that day because Thawson had insulted Frances's honor. He assaulted Thawson, who vowed that the mob would come for him within twenty-four hours. Mannus plans to leave for Chicago and wants Frances to come with him. She eventually agrees and tells him that she will meet him later at 9 o'clock. Mannus objects, but Frances reasons that they will travel farther without arousing her uncle's suspicion if she leaves after he is asleep.

Mannus is gone when Uncle Abram returns to tell Frances that Thawson will visit her tonight and that he expects her to be friendly. When she objects, Abram reminds her that she had always been cooperative until Mannus put foolish ideas into her head. Frances says she had not known better before, but she now refuses to be involved with a white man who has a wife and children in Memphis (151). Abram is shocked to hear of Thawson's marital status but declares that he does not believe it. Frances says that he chooses not to accept many things that are obvious to everyone else, including the fact that Thawson has no intention of letting him pay off the mortgage on the house. Their argument is interrupted by Thawson's arrival but, as promised, Frances is not friendly.

Abram tries to explain away her behavior and assure Thawson that she will give in, but Frances quietly leaves the room, and Thawson demands to know from Abram if Frances has really been seeing Professor Mannus. When Frances re-emerges, she has her coat and hat, and Thawson is furious to know that he will not be spending the night with

her. He demands the deed to the house and reveals it has never been recorded (152).

Thawson's words to Frances come as no surprise to her but devastate her naïve uncle:

“This property is mine. I've been acceptin' payments from your uncle, but I didn't intend that he should buy it with anything but you. You're my woman!” (152). Thawson begins shredding the papers, and Abram falls to his knees begging him to stop.

When he realizes there is nothing to lose, Abram attacks Thawson and they fight fiercely until Thawson shoots Abram. Frances bends over her uncle but then lunges at Thawson and snatches the pistol. Thawson however rushes her and twists her wrist until she drops the gun. To Thawson's surprise, Abram is still alive and is now taking aim. Abram gasps, “De Lawd has puherved me fo' dis one pu'pose” (153). He shoots and kills Thawson and falls back to the floor himself. Frances holds her uncle's head in her arms and buries her face in his hair. She looks up when the clock chimes nine times; she is supposed to be leaving with Mannus at this very moment. The play ends with her lowering her head as she resumes grieving over her dead uncle. As Lipscomb leaves us with this image of a young woman mourning the loss of the uncle who prostituted her, Frances seems all the more pure-hearted; like her, the reader/viewer cannot simply despise Abram.

Lipscomb's action-packed climax is powerful because it highlights the moment when Uncle Abram's delusions are replaced with knowledge of a painful truth. Placing a magnifying glass over this corrupt black home, Lipscomb's work suggests that Abram sacrifices his own integrity and manhood by sacrificing his niece—only to realize when it is too late that it was a grave mistake. Throughout the play, Abram appeases whites because he believes that doing so will produce the financial rewards and independence

that he so desires. Because Abram measures a man's worth according to his access to resources, he makes decisions based on whether an action will likely bring economic freedom. In contrast, Professor Mannus sacrifices social and financial capital if he must barter his dignity to attain them. Abram therefore has little respect for Mannus because Mannus's refusal to acquiesce to whites has limited his economic success.

As playwright, Lipscomb showcased the implications of these two black men's different priorities by depicting them in a domestic setting. Inside the home, it becomes clear that the American power structure functions around white male desire. Because white men want unlimited access to black women, Frances becomes Abram's most valuable bargaining chip in his quest to attain the rights and privileges (such as owning his home) that would allow him to feel like an American citizen. Lipscomb thus demonstrated that some black men respond to white racism by refusing to become true heads of household who protect black women. In the process, Lipscomb's work also illustrates how intertwined black manhood and womanhood are. Indeed, *Frances* powerfully suggests that black men and women come into themselves through their relationship with each other. The threat of lynching rather than its actual realization drives the action, and that threat—though directed toward a black man—has everything to do with Frances. The white planter Charles Thawson has long enjoyed a sexual relationship with Frances, but because Professor Mannus has convinced her that she is being re-enslaved through that affair, she has begun resisting him. Unhappy that he is losing sway over Frances, Thawson threatens Mannus. Rather than appease Thawson, as Uncle Abram does, Mannus defends Frances' honor and tries to protect her. White male power manifests itself in the desire to own black womanhood, and black manhood proves

itself through its response to that predicament. Because both Mannus and Abram know that a protective black man is a dead black man, their character is defined by their response to that truth. Mannus puts his life on the line to protect Frances' honor, but Abram never would.

In relying on the assumption that black women needed to be protected, Lipscomb operated in harmony with the earlier black women playwrights. Both male and female dramatists interpreted lynching as an attack on manhood and "manhood rights," such as the right to shield women. The home was the ultimate site for articulating the struggle to obtain those liberties, because the home was increasingly interpreted as a corollary to the womb. In other words, as Sandra Gunning and others have suggested, protecting one's home was the same as saving one's race from miscegenation. Both men and women antilynching dramatists exposed the black rapist myth as a strategy for preventing black men from becoming heads of household who protect black women. Yet, more consistently and more directly than their women predecessors, male playwrights addressed the rape of black women as the truth that the myth was designed to erase.<sup>9</sup>

Women lynching playwrights tended to treat the topic more indirectly than Lipscomb did (for example). No doubt, this tendency arose from their desire to put distance between

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<sup>9</sup> Given this tendency, critiques like Elsa Barkley Brown's that turn-of-the-century black women allowed their own sexual exploitation to fall off the race's agenda demand attention. I therefore reiterate points made in an earlier note: Brown argues that black women of the 1890s and early 1900s attempted to "de-sexualize" themselves as a response to the overwhelming charge that they were whores. That is, the historical fact of black women's sexual exploitation was willfully silenced as they presented themselves as personifications of sexual morality. As a result, black women's gender-specific struggles were not fully integrated into the race's overall political agenda. The stage was set by the early 1900s, Brown argues, for political activism to become male-centered. In not mentioning female mob victims, lynching plays seem to exemplify the male-centeredness that Brown chronicles. However, the playwrights' literary strategies arise from their particular interests at a specific moment in history, and our historical moment need not take precedence over theirs. We cannot assume that our hindsight is 20/20. The women were aware of female mob victims but deliberately chose to write about men. Given the *interdependence* of the black whore and rapist myths, foregrounding men's victimization does not rob the dramas of their ability to put forth a genuine and *simultaneous* commentary on women's oppression.

themselves and the sexual exploitation that was too often used to define black womanhood. Nevertheless, in building the genre together, men and women dramatists all highlighted the degree to which the actions of the mob, and the motivations for them, hinged on black sexuality.

Indeed, not unlike Georgia Douglas Johnson's generic revisions in *Blue Blood* and *Blue-Eyed Black Boy*, Lipscomb's 1925 script underscores the importance of black women in the history of lynching. Rather than allowing mainstream narratives of race and sexuality to keep black women hidden, Lipscomb emphasized the extent to which conflict between black and white men revolved around black women. His play's action is driven by sexual desire for Frances (Thawson), the need to use her as a pawn (Abram), and the urge to protect her (Mannus). Placing Frances at the center reiterates the extent to which turn-of-the-century struggles for citizenship were staged through domesticity and masculinity. As Sandra Gunning so persuasively argues, white supremacist rhetoric depicted "the threat of blacks' voting, working, buying property, and thereby inevitably achieving full American citizenship [as] the threat of black rape" (32). In return, those resisting the rhetoric of black barbarity also constructed their arguments "on the idea of the endangered space of the domestic (in this case black, not white) ..." (Gunning 47). The concern with the household, then, was consistent; both sides of the race war saw the state of their homes as a reflection of their manhood and citizenship.

Because the black men in *Frances* respond so differently to white opposition to their "manhood rights," the play provides an excellent opportunity for discussing the turn-of-the-century collapse of the divisions between public and private, civic and domestic. Abram sacrifices his niece and his integrity because he believes that property,

rather than abstract ideals, will guarantee manly progress. He tells Frances that it will not hurt her to appease Thawson until they own the house. He insists, “ain’t no body axin’ you to be no slave [...but] you got to do a heap o’ things dat don’t jes’ please you ‘till you kin get independent of folks” (150). Frances says that she and Mannus do not live by that code, but Abram scoffs and insists that Mannus may be a “nice edgicated coluhd man...[but] he ain’t got nothin’ but his han’s (150-151). Abram is not impressed by the stand taken by a black man who has no property. For Abram, true manhood requires economic power; claims to manhood that are not accompanied by it are worthless. Presumably, only the economically empowered are in a position to protect women.

On the other hand, Mannus believes that manly progress results from attaining freedom and self-respect, not money and property. As with Abram, his value system is revealed through his interactions with Frances. Mannus is willing to give up his school and the resources to operate it because he refuses to leave an insult to black womanhood unchallenged. It is also through an exchange between Mannus and Frances that the text argues that access to education, like access to money, should not take precedence over personal dignity. When Frances insists that she is indebted to her uncle because he has borrowed money from Thawson to send her to school, Mannus fires back, “What good is it, Frances, to have an education and not be free?” (149). The loan has tied Frances to Thawson, so Mannus’s goal is to “snatch [her] from eternal degradation” (149). This declaration is telling because it reveals the degree to which manhood for Mannus (and perhaps Lipscomb) is really about claiming patriarchal status—about becoming “head of household” in the most traditional sense. Mannus admits that he had moved south to uplift “this mass from ignorance and depravity at any cost,” but he has now abandoned

that dream. He will not feel like a failure, though, if he can have Frances by his side. He declares, “to win you means more than to atone for my lost ideal” (149). This race man had come to the South to uplift scores of blacks, but he believes that creating a home and serving as patriarch of it would be an equal achievement.

In this play, Lipscomb set forth a clear ideal of black masculinity by emphasizing the difference between how Abram and Mannus behave in the privacy of the black home. Because Abram’s willingness to forsake manhood derives from his desire to own his house, Lipscomb demonstrated that, even when men are present, a house is not necessarily a home. Lipscomb would agree with the women playwrights that domestic success requires male presence, but he was invested in showing that black men can have different responses to domestic obligations, and that those differences can determine everything. After all, the threat of lynching revolves around black womanhood, and white men use violence to strip black men of their will to protect black women. When lynching dramas such as his highlight male oppression, they simultaneously address black female victimization. Such interruptions of the cultural conversation that enabled lynching exposed the racialized and sexualized assumptions that allowed white men to rape black women, kill black men, and destroy black homes.

### ***Son-Boy*, Joseph Mitchell, 1928**

Of all the antilynching plays by black men, only Joseph Mitchell’s *Son-Boy* has begun to receive critical attention. Regrettably, what scholars find most interesting about the script is that the character whom the mob pursues is not lynched at the end of the play. Noted theater scholars James V. Hatch and Leo Hamalian call this a “happy

ending” (*Lost* 74), and Judith Stephens reads the play as ironic and humorous: “*Son-Boy* introduces elements of humor into a genre in which humor is rare and unexpected” (“Performance Strategies” 664).<sup>10</sup>

Unfortunately, these scholars do not question the definition of a “happy” ending and, partly as a result of not having identified their criteria, they view certain aspects of the play through a lens of humor and optimism when neither the text nor context support that approach. After all, much of the humor that Stephens identifies arises from the constant “bickering” between *Son-Boy*’s parents, Dinah and Zeke. Their verbal sparring is much more than marital bickering, however; it points to Mitchell’s concern about the impact of racism on gender roles among African Americans. Women playwrights had presented man-less homes to establish that black manhood was under attack, but Mitchell’s work makes clear that Zeke stays alive by refusing to be a strong head of household. Ultimately, Mitchell uses both the so-called “happy” ending (*Son-Boy*’s narrow escape from the mob) and the constant arguing between Dinah and Zeke to testify to the fact that the living man of the house can be as “castrated” as his off-stage brothers who hang from trees.

*Son-Boy* is set in the home of Zeke and Dinah. The year is 1900, and they live in a shack in the South. Dinah’s is the first voice we hear; she is singing, “Before I’d be a slave/ I’d be buried in my grave/ And go home to my father and be saved.” Soon, Dinah and her husband are disagreeing about the song, because Zeke shuns all suggestions of

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<sup>10</sup> In the article “Racial Violence and Representation: Performance Strategies in Lynching Dramas of the 1920s,” Stephens argues that *Son-Boy* operates in line with the “underground tradition” of black jokes about lynching that Mel Watkins traces in *On the Real: Laughing, Lying, and Signifying* [New York: Simon, 1994]. She explains, “According to Watkins, the existence of such jokes and stories ‘underscores the irony in much black comedy’ as well as ‘a comic sense of some white southerners’ barbarity’” (664). Stephens continues, “The technique is successful because Mitchell’s ability to relieve a life-threatening situation with everyday domestic humor (the marital bickering between Dinah and Zeke) produces an ironic look at white ‘Southern hospitality’ from a black perspective” (664).

militancy. For the first third of the play, the couple argues constantly. Eventually, lynching begins overtly to drive the action when a family friend reports that a mob is looking for Son-Boy. As Dinah prepares to search for her son, she and Zeke argue some more. Zeke wonders what she thinks she can do to stop the mob, and Dinah calls him a coward for not even wanting to try. Dinah then brags that her ancestors had never been passive slaves and that Son-Boy has inherited their noble characteristics, instead of Zeke's worthlessness (84).

Just as Dinah reaches the door to leave, Son-Boy storms in asking for a weapon to protect himself, but Zeke has apparently hidden the gun and the razor (85). When Dinah resolves to go find a gun, someone knocks urgently. Everyone assumes that it is the mob and, further proving that he is not a protective father, Zeke locks one door and blocks the other so that Son-Boy cannot escape. Dinah urges Son-Boy to hide in the pile of laundry and insists that Zeke answer the door. Zeke cooperates, but as he nears the door, he speaks to Son-Boy with apparently no purpose other than to alert whoever is outside to Son-Boy's presence. After this transparent betrayal, Zeke hides in a closet (86). Fortunately, it is not the mob at the door but Son-Boy's concerned friend Joe. Dinah pretends that she knows nothing about the threat in order to obtain as much information from Joe as possible. Joe reveals that an unidentified man had entered a white girl's room to steal. When she screamed, he ran out of the house, and a black man named Snow-Ball saw him. When the growing mob asked him who it was, he said he did not know but that he had seen a black face and hands. One of the men suggested that it was Son-Boy and told Snow-Ball that they would "string [him] up" if he did not agree.

Fortunately, Joe reports, they soon caught the real criminal—a white man who had blackened his hands and face (90).

By this time, Zeke has come out of hiding, and Dinah and Zeke begin a new argument. As usual, Dinah berates Zeke and, now that he is safe, Son-Boy joins his mother in insulting his father (91). They agree that Son-Boy will be a better man than his father is. Next, Dinah, Son-Boy, and Joe become engrossed in calculating how old nineteen-year-old Son-Boy will be when he completes the twenty years of schooling that they believe becoming a doctor will require (91). When they finally finish, Dinah tells Son-Boy to make a fire in the stove because inconsiderate Zeke has eaten all of the food she had prepared. The play ends as Dinah straightens out the mess made during the lynch scare and repeats the song that she had been singing at the outset: “Before I’d be a slave/ I’d be buried in my grave/ And go home to my father and be saved.”

Convinced that Son-Boy’s survival constitutes a happy ending, scholars have repeatedly overlooked the significance of the script’s structure. The play ends as it began, testifying to the fact that very little has changed as a result of the mob’s threat. Dinah sings the same militant song, Zeke continues to be a self-preserving coward, and Son-Boy’s dreams of greatness and less strenuous labor show no signs of coming true. The lynch threat clearly creates dramatic tension and helps build dramatic momentum that engages the reader/viewer, but it ultimately yields nothing extraordinary. The question is, does the threat not transform the family’s future because they have been spared *or* because the threat itself is nothing unusual?

Scholars who assert that *Son-Boy* ends happily place importance on the family’s escape from physical violence, but Son-Boy’s survival is little reason to rejoice. After

all, no one pretends that Son-Boy's innocence necessarily obviates his death at the hands of the mob, so surviving this time does not guarantee survival next time. What's more, his being spared does not at all indicate that another innocent black man has not unjustly died. When the curtain falls, everyone knows that the threat remains for this family and the entire community.

I do not simply want to suggest that there is no happy ending; I urge scholars to ask if there is an ending at all. As Dinah sings the same song that begins the action, the play's circular structure becomes all the more suggestive. The script ends, but the lyrics take the audience back to the beginning. The song therefore works in harmony with the other elements of the play because *nothing* points to a better future—or even a different one. Indeed, Dinah's militant melody may be the best indication that the play is simply a snapshot of an ongoing cycle of fear and stale mobility. Like hamsters on a wheel, these characters move continuously but go nowhere. In fact, we only hear Dinah sing a refrain, a set of repeated lines. The song could end at any minute, or it could go on forever. The portion that we hear could come at any point in the song so that it cannot be used to gauge how close the characters are to the end.

The action of the play functions in the same way. For example, the characters speak of the education that Son-Boy will obtain, but the reader has no reason to believe that his life is on the verge of radical change. The glimpse of Son-Boy's life that Mitchell provides offers little evidence that the cycle of illiteracy, hard labor, and subjugation will end with Son-Boy. Son-Boy cannot even do the simple arithmetic needed to calculate how old he will be when he finishes medical school. In the same way, Dinah's life has an air of trapped circularity, made painfully ironic by her militant

diatribes. She constantly claims a proud heritage based on her family name, but she has married into another family. Moreover, her son bears Zeke's last name, not hers—no matter how much she claims that Son-Boy is more "Battle" than "Johnson." Also, despite constantly berating Zeke, she not only has married him, but makes no plans to leave him. Finally, while passionately listing all of the benefits of migrating North, Dinah remains in a shack in the South—doing white people's laundry. Like her soulful refrain and the laundry she folds, Dinah's complaints mark the painful irony of her situation but never give the illusion that it will improve.

If Mitchell's circular structure was unique among antilynching dramatists, his interest in thematizing manhood was not. Like his female predecessors, he spotlighted a black domestic space to interrogate the meaning of manhood but, unlike them, he did not take men out of the home to show the negative impact that the mob's obsession with targeting black manhood could have. For Mitchell, de-generation was not necessary for bearing witness to black emasculation, because Zeke is so handicapped by racism that he does not even *want* to be a strong father and husband—a true head of household. Because Zeke fears whites, he will not defend his family, ask for higher wages, hold up his head and walk straight, or dress nicely when he goes to town (78). In all instances, Zeke wants to be viewed as a black man who knows "his place." Of course, his fear is legitimate, as illustrated by what happens to Sambo and Snow-Ball, two black men who are mentioned but never seen. Sambo is a young man around Son-Boy's age who has been run out of town because he had begun educating himself.<sup>11</sup> As Zeke explains, town whites had said that Sambo "wuz gittin' too much learnin' to be a 'good nigger'" (79).

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<sup>11</sup> Sambo's name becomes ironic when we hear his life story. In similar fashion, Dinah's militancy contradicts her name, which is so often used in the plantation tradition for mammy figures. Once again, Mitchell complicates labels.

Here, a cowardly black man testifies to the reasons why a manly black man is not on stage. In contrast to Sambo, Snow-Ball acts out of fear. When a white man threatens to kill him if he refuses to incriminate Son-Boy, Snow-Ball stays alive by telling whites what they want to hear (88). In this respect, Mitchell's *Son-Boy*, like Georgia Douglas Johnson's *A Sunday Morning in the South*, suggests that whites do not seek the truth; they consider black testimony only when it serves their purposes.

If Son-Boy's narrow escape from the mob is not a happy ending, it is an opportunity for Mitchell to testify to Zeke's emasculation and Son-Boy's strong sense of self. Zeke's cowardice allows Mitchell to highlight the dignified manhood of Son-Boy, the mob's target. Son-Boy may not be in a position drastically to change his life chances, but he certainly believes in his own worth—whether whites affirm it or not. When pursued by the mob, he comes home looking for a weapon, saying, “ef dey HAD ter lynch me fer nothin’ I wus gwine ter make ‘em lynch me fer somethin’” (90). He feels his life is precious and that whites should be made to pause before taking it. He apparently agrees with Ida B. Wells, who had argued that “The more the Afro-American yields and cringes and begs, the more he has to do so, the more he is insulted, outraged and lynched [...] When the white man ... knows he runs a great risk of biting the dust every time his Afro-American victim does, he will have greater respect for Afro-American life” (*Southern Horrors* 70). Also, while Zeke pledges to stay alive at any cost, insisting, “don’t tell me dat a good run ain’t better’n a bad stand,” Son-Boy believes that it is better to die than to live with diminished dignity. Echoing the sentiments of Dinah’s song, he would rather be “a dead dog” than a “no-count dog” who is of no use to his own kind (90-91).

Mitchell's commentary on black manhood emerges not just in the contrast between Zeke and his son, but also in the difference between Zeke and his wife Dinah. Dinah seems more courageous than her husband, and she appears to be a more appropriate head of household. Yet, Mitchell does not allow her to assume that position, thus suggesting that black men and women must work together while fulfilling traditional gender roles. Black women cannot be virtuous homebuilders when their husbands are cowards and leave them to fend for themselves. In Mitchell's universe, however, even women who are able to protect themselves can never compensate for a weak man. Despite her audaciousness, Dinah is unable to change her or her son's life chances. Her stagnation suggests that lynching destroys black women's homebuilding efforts not just by taking men out of the home (as women dramatists had demonstrated), but also by infusing their life partners with emasculating fear.

To demonstrate how emasculating fear can be, Mitchell created the most traditional home we see from a black male playwright... only to expose it as a façade. The intact marriage unit—laboring man and housecleaning woman—do not represent the domestic success that they presumably should. Both mother and father are present, but the household is not at all successful. Dinah does not respect her husband Zeke, her husband does not seem to love her or his son, Dinah's domesticity benefits whites primarily, and Zeke is clearly more concerned with not upsetting those who hold the economic reins than with becoming economically empowered himself. He tells Dinah that he has no time for her because he needs to see "Mars Ross" about some work (90). Yet, he is too scared to ask for higher wages so that, perhaps, he could work less and bond with his own family. Slavery has ended and the Johnsons have their own home, but

as his calling Ross “master” indicates, Zeke’s poor leadership keeps his family subservient to whites.

In *Son-Boy*, Mitchell depicted a home that appears to be intact and traditionally successful only to spotlight the power that the threat of lynching can have within that space. Like Lipscomb, Mitchell linked a man’s civic standing to his ability to rule his own home. For both, male presence cannot translate into domestic success when men allow their fear of whites to rule their households. More so than women dramatists, male writers were willing to criticize black men openly; they are depicted not simply as victims of injustice but as agents who are responsible for what they allow American cruelties to do to them and their families. Male-authored plays expose the weaknesses that lead black men to hinder their own domestic success. If mob violence and white male power will not cease, African Americans must focus on responding in ways that do not further handicap the race.

*Son-Boy*’s narrow escape from the mob is not a happy ending but an opportunity for Mitchell to testify to Zeke’s emasculation and *Son-Boy*’s strong self-conception. *Son-Boy* is the one whose life is threatened, but he is fearless compared to his father. Rather than defend his son, Zeke tries to place him in the mob’s clutches by shouting *Son-Boy*’s name when there is a violently urgent knock at the door. Furthermore, though she is not head of household, Dinah is more courageous and protective than Zeke is. Thus, what scholars take to be humorous bickering between Zeke and Dinah actually shows how little respect Zeke commands from his own family... and, given that *Son-Boy* escapes the mob no thanks to his father, Mitchell suggests that Zeke deserves their disrespect.

***Bad Man*, S. Randolph Edmonds, 1934**

Like all of the antilynching dramatists who preceded him, S. Randolph Edmonds spotlighted domesticity and manhood, but he added to the conversation in 1934 by blending not just drama and testimony, but also folklore and realism. The result is a script that points to the difficulty of finding dignified expressions of black manhood in a racist society. Edmonds used an intimate setting to showcase the complexity of black life, and his characters and dialogue are realistic. Because the title character evokes legend, however, his mere presence among ordinary men inside this domestic space testifies to the fact that expressing black manhood is much simpler in folklore than in a home—especially one that contains a black woman.

Though Edmonds used the one-act format, *Bad Man* has a fairly complex plot and provides insight into each of its many characters' motivations. We feel the presence of renowned "Bad Man" Thea Dugger, the play's protagonist, long before he enters, because he is a living legend who is said to have truly earned his reputation. The action begins as Tom focuses on getting his sister Maybelle out of his modest shanty; their father has not yet arrived to pick her up, and Tom is willing to walk ten miles in the dark to get her out of the sawmill town. Ted, who we soon learn is secretly wooing Maybelle, offers to give up his bed so that she does not have to walk home. Tom does not seem moved by the offer, but says he will decide after making a quick trip to the store.

While Tom is away, Ted and Maybelle openly flirt, but Maybelle also asks lots of questions about Thea; she is excited to meet an "honest tuh goodness bad man" (244). Maybelle also informs Ted that her father and brother Tom are strict, that they do not want her involved with a sawmill worker, and they plan to send her away to school next

week. Ted begs her to run away to the North with him instead; she agrees, and they embrace. Just then, Tom comes back, sees them, and declares slowly and resolutely, “Dis is my youngest sis, Ted; Ah laks you all right, but ef Ah catches any sawmill han’ kissin’ huh, dat man don’t live no mo’” (245). Now resolved, Tom tells Maybelle that they had better start walking.

At that point, sawmill workers Jack and Hubbard enter raucously, immediately followed by Thea. They begin their normal routine of card-playing and gambling, and while they play, another worker named Percy enters, behaving suspiciously. Percy admits, “Ah ain’t felt right ever since Ah heard old man Sam was killed” (247). As they play cards, Jack accuses Thea of cheating, and Thea warns that no one has questioned his character and lived. Jack pulls a gun on Thea, does not have the resolve to shoot, and ends up begging for his life. Against her brother’s frantic advice, Maybelle intervenes and convinces Thea to let Jack live. Soon afterward, the white sawmill foreman Burt Ross enters to warn the group that an approaching mob is determined to avenge Sam’s murder. Ross says he will join the vigilantes and “do what I can to save you” but tells them to run for their lives (248).

Percy is the first to flee, followed by Tom, his sister Maybelle, and her boyfriend Ted. Jack is about to leave but notices that Hubbard is not on his heels. Hubbard is asking Thea if he is coming. Thea refuses to run: “Ef dey shoot me, dey is gwine tuh shoot me standin’ up and facin’ dem. Dey ain’t gwine tuh shoot me runnin’ through no bushes lak no rabbit” (248). Soon, those who had fled return because it is clear that they will be captured by the approaching mob. Thea immediately begins preparing them all for battle, giving each a gun. When the mob arrives, however, Thea shouts out the

window: “Don’t come any further up dat path or Ah’ll shoot” (249). The white men then decide simply to burn the house down. As promised, Ross tries to discourage the mob, arguing that they would be unnecessarily destroying his business: “I can’t run my mill if you kill all my hands” (250). He proposes a compromise: “Let’s tell them that if the one that did it comes out, we’ll let the others go” (250). In the five minutes that the mob allows, those inside discuss who should be sacrificed. Despite his innocence, Thea offers himself. He reasons that he has done a lot of bad in his life and that he does not have a woman who loves and needs him. In addition, he cannot bear the thought of letting a woman (Maybelle) die in his presence. When Thea appears outside, the off-stage voice of Burt Ross says he knows that Thea did not murder anyone because “I’ve seen you all day” (250). Nevertheless, Thea insists: “Ah did hit all right” (250). The mob happily declares this a confession, ties Thea up, and begins making a fire.

Edmonds placed a legendary character inside a realistic home in order to reveal the circumstances that create or stifle one’s ability to be a bad man. Black domestic space becomes the site in which to illustrate both the latitude to be “bad” (masculine) and the obligation to be “good” (manly). *Bad Man* takes its reader and viewer inside a shanty in backwoods Alabama, where Tom lives with other sawmill workers, including Thea, the bad man. Women usually do not inhabit this space, so Maybelle’s presence unsettles the group’s usual activities. In fact, the play begins with Tom trying to return his home to normal by removing his sister from it. He insists, “shanty houses at sawmill camps ain’t no place fuh women, least of all ma own sister. [...] Ah tells yuh too much happen roun’ heah fuh a woman tuh be mixed up in hit” (243-244). Before he can remove his sister, however, Thea and the rest of the men arrive to play cards as they always do after a

hard day's work. Tom wants her to leave because, "We's got men heah dat will stay 'roun de shanty house and gamble from de time de whistle blow Sattiday at noon, 'til Monday mawning" (244). Then, when Thea arrives, he tells her "...Miss, yuh had better stop yo' ears up wid cotton, 'cause Ah can't play gawgie skin and talk Sunday School talk" (246).

Yet Maybelle does change the atmosphere. Thea claims that he will not censor himself, but he does, and he stops Percy from swearing as well. Thea warns, "Hold dat, Percy. Dere ain't gwine to be no cussin' in heah tonight. Dere is a woman in de next room" (246). Maybelle does not even have to be in the same room to influence male behavior, despite Tom's claims that "a sawmill camp is de worse place in de world" (244). Also, although Jack pulls a gun on Thea, and Thea has good reason to retaliate with equal force, Maybelle is able to convince him to let Jack live. Most remarkably, though, Maybelle's presence ultimately leads to Thea's death. Though Thea is not guilty of the crime that supposedly inspires the mob, he willingly delivers himself to it in order to save her. Before walking outside, he reasons, "Young miss, [...] Maybe ef yuh wasn't heah, Ah'd feel better and know better whut tuh do. Ah's killed many men in ma life, but Ah ain't never stood 'round and seed no woman die. Somehow Ah can't bring mase'f tuh do hit" (250).

All of these adjustments in the bad man's behavior point to how much expressions of manhood depend on proximity to traditional domesticity. Just before sacrificing himself, Thea explains that he has, until then, lived a life of "driftin' from one camp tuh another, and one mill tuh another, shootin' and cuttin' and fightin'" (250). Not having obligations to a wife and children, "All ma life, Ah's been a bad man..." (250).

Prior to this moment, he had not felt confined by social norms precisely because he had no domestic obligations. He had never been compelled to tolerate insults because he had not been in danger of making a wife a widow or children orphans. Similarly, as long as this shanty had contained only men, it could operate free of the larger society's dictates. Thea had certainly been a bit of a bully to his housemates, but together they had created a non-traditional system that enabled everyone to have a comfortable place to eat, sleep, and take refuge from the rigors of sawmill work.

This male-centered domestic order is most disturbed by the romantic feelings that Ted has for Maybelle and, through Ted, Edmonds shows the degree to which love determines expressions of manhood. Ted will not make rash decisions to be aggressive toward whites because he does not want to leave Maybelle's side. He brags about Thea's courage but knows he does not have the same capacity for unbridled bravery. As the mob approaches the house, and Maybelle wishes she had never come there, Ted tells her "Don't git skeered, honey. Try tuh be brave lak Thea" (249). He cannot present *himself* as a role model when the mob is a palpable threat because he wants to be Maybelle's life partner, and he knows he will lose his life if he responds with masculine aggression to a physical threat from whites.

Edmonds did not simply suggest that domestic obligations emasculate and that "driftin'" empowers; he engaged the complexity of black manhood by populating his play with more black men than appear in any of the other antilynching scripts. Rather than one image of black manhood, Edmonds depicted six different men, giving a sense of each one's character and motivations. Above all, Percy behaves like a dishonest coward. The text leads readers to believe that he is guilty of murdering the old white man and that he

is too scared to face the consequences of his actions.<sup>12</sup> Indeed, as soon as foreman Ross reports that a mob is coming, Percy runs far ahead of the others (249). When forced back to the shanty because the bloodhounds had already begun scouring the woods, Percy literally crawls on the floor when he hears white men's voices (250). Then, when the group discusses who should save the others by giving himself over to the mob, Percy shamelessly refuses on the basis that he is simply too scared (250).

If Percy appears to be a dishonest coward, Jack behaves like a foolish one. He accuses Thea of cheating while they gamble and even pulls a gun on him, but he ends up begging for his own life because he is too scared to shoot. Jack instigates the situation but does not have the wherewithal to follow through with his own decision. Edmonds does not allow this to define Jack's character, though. After hearing that the mob is on the way, Jack is ready to run but then decides to stay with Thea and fight. Jack clearly fears Thea but is not a complete coward because, unlike Percy, he is willing to resist the mob. Their older co-worker Hubbard displays even more courage. He is the only man besides Thea who does not immediately resolve to run when warned of the approaching mob. He is not presented as Thea's equal, however. Despite being the oldest, he is just as submissive to Thea as the others. Such submissiveness is part of how this untraditional household works; the men have apparently agreed on a hierarchy that allows them to create a home. Governed by unique rules of domesticity, this home remains a refuge for the men after a hard day's work at the mill. In this light, we understand why

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<sup>12</sup> Percy seems guilty because, from the moment he walks in the door, he is "nervous and excitable" (246); while simply playing cards, he is "nervous and fidgety" (246); and when Ted roughly sits on a bunk, "Percy jumps" (247). Of course, it is possible that he is more fearful than guilty. When Ross comes with news of an approaching mob, Percy says "Ah knowed sompen would happen. Ah jes' knowed it" (248). Perhaps his fear arises from his knowledge that mobs do not care about black guilt or innocence. Edmonds may be intentionally leaving his guilt or innocence unclear in order to emphasize the degree to which it really does not matter to the mob.

Hubbard is much more comfortable with Thea's bullying than with white power. When the mob is outside the door demanding a victim, he says "Ain't nobody done nothin' heah. Ah don't see why dey have tuh go" (250). Clearly, Hubbard prefers Thea's arguably unjustified authority to that of white men because their demands are even more unreasonable.

While we come to know Percy, Jack, and Hubbard mostly through their interaction with the Bad Man, Tom's character is revealed through his relationship with his sister. He is protective of her, and the group respects him for that. When the foreman tells them to hide in the woods because the mob is coming, Tom quickly flees with his sister and returns only when it is clear that they cannot out-run the mob. Ted's character is similarly illuminated in relation to Maybelle; he decides how to express his manhood based on his responsibility to her. Accordingly, though Ted is overcome by emotion and wants to run out and condemn the mob that has unjustly killed Thea, he stops when Tom urges him not to make the situation worse. As Tom reasons, Thea is gone, and Ted would be vainly sacrificing himself. Ted wants to act on his sense of right and wrong but understands that whites have made that impossible. He must therefore let his commitment to Maybelle be his guide.

Still, it is Edmonds's conspicuous treatment of labels that yields his clearest testimony about the forces working to annihilate black manhood. Edmonds's investment in exploding labels becomes apparent in the opening description of the setting. Before the action begins, the scene is set thusly: "The people who inhabit these shanties are peasant Negroes who work at the sawmill. Many types are usually found at these camps, ranging from pious church goers to gamblers, murderers, and escaped convicts. All are,

generally speaking, illiterate; but some possess a keen native wit and worthy ambitions” (243). Edmonds thus refused to allow his readers to judge his characters’ values and beliefs based on their status as uneducated laborers.<sup>13</sup>

More specifically, Edmonds complicated the label “Bad Man.” Not only does Thea prove to be much more than his reputation implies, but the script also suggests that people overlook those elements of his character that do not conform to the label. Maybelle convinces Thea to spare Jack’s life by saying that she “knows dere is a good streak in yuh somewhar” (248). Thea is touched and reveals that he has never been described as “good.” Yet, Thea had been behaving admirably long before Maybelle’s declaration. He always shields Ted from the others’ teasing, he refrains from swearing in Maybelle’s presence, and makes sure that others do the same (244, 246). Nevertheless, the bad man label somehow overpowers the evidence that exposes it as insufficient. Though Edmonds may not be able to dislodge the label’s power in the wider society, he insists that—when seen in realistic home settings—so called “bad men” contradict their reputations. Thea’s behavior is a far cry from the reported actions of bad man Stagolee, for instance. According to folklore, Stagolee not only kills a man, but also then taunts his widow: “You don’t believe yo’ man is dead/ Come into the bar-room/ See the hole I shot in his head” (Hill 566). Edmonds suggested that viewing black men in domestic interiors could make all the difference because even a bad man does not live up to his reputation when placed in a home that contains a black woman. At the same time, Edmonds complicated the conversation on lynching by demonstrating that the legendary label sticks—despite evidence against it, especially because the bad man himself believes it.

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<sup>13</sup> Of course, the impact of these stage directions would be different on a reading audience than on a viewing audience. However, this project consistently deems the reading audience to be as important as a potential viewing audience, especially because they were often one and the same in amateur venues.

For this reason, these conversations must take place even if only blacks participate in them.

Showing compassion does little to remove the bad man label from Thea, yet white men avoid labels altogether. Edmonds's script makes clear that the whites who ultimately burn Thea and fight to keep his body parts as souvenirs are not at all interested in justice. The mob raids the sawmill shanties, but is not looking to apprehend a guilty criminal; any "nigger" will do. When Ross comes to the house to warn his workers of the approaching mob, he makes no pretense that their guilt or innocence will be a factor. He bursts in shouting, "Somebody found old man Sam...with his head split in two with an axe. They said somebody working at the mill did it." Without hesitation, he adds "the mob is coming down here to get *somebody*. You'd *all* better scatter to the woods" (248, my italics). Ross warns all of them because he knows that any of them might be lynched—without regard for their innocence or alibi. Ross's concern confirms that whites deem "somebody working at the mill" a sufficiently detailed description to justify black death and that white skin alone (not a superior commitment to justice and a civilized society) gives the mob license to invade black homes. Edmonds has Ross testify to white skin privilege in order to expose the injustice of the mob's power. The ironic interplay between Thea's bad man label and the assumption that the mob contains justice-seekers spotlights the problem with accepting labels as indications of truth.

Because lynching was justified through the dehumanizing practice of labeling black men rapists, it is not surprising that Edmonds would criticize labeling, but he ultimately did so with a class-based critique aimed at African Americans. The last person to speak on stage is Ted. He wants to go outside and do something about the fact that the

mob is burning Thea, but the others remind him that he too will simply die in vain. Realizing the bitter truth and feeling hopeless, he concludes: “Yuh is right, dead right. We ain’t nothin’ bu sawmill hands. All we is s’posed tuh do is to cut logs, saw lumber, live in dingy shanties, cut, fight, and kill each other. We ain’t s’posed tuh pay no ‘tention tuh a burnin’ man... ef de people wid larnin’ can’t do nothin’ ‘bout hit, ‘tain’t nothin’ we can do. ‘Tain’t nothing we can do” (251).

By making these the last words of the script, Edmonds pointed to the problem of labeling in black communities. Edmonds wrote this play while he was a professor at the historically black Morgan State University, and it was initially performed by Morgan students. Among these students, the attitudes regarding sawmill men that Maybelle’s father and brother Tom hold were probably common, even if many students came from similarly impoverished and uneducated communities. After all, they were at Morgan to do better than their family members had, just as Tom and his father want Maybelle to marry someone “better.” Notably, Tom does not simply want Maybelle to do better by marrying a doctor or teacher; he also puts down his peers, insisting that sawmill men are irredeemably bad (245). Thus, Tom’s view of his peers contradicts the ideas Edmonds used to set up the action: that sawmill camps are inhabited by a diverse array of people.

Ultimately, then, Edmonds was most concerned about members of the race believing labels, and he suggested that accepting labels as truth was problematic for practical reasons. Without regard for blacks’ snobbishness toward each other, the nation had ways of treating them as an undifferentiated group. The picture that Edmonds offered was particularly painful because it contained the genre’s largest number of living black men. Rather than a simple juxtaposition of the most admirable and most

despicable, Edmonds's portrait includes numerous examples of black manhood.

Nevertheless, they are all equally likely to be lynched. African Americans must therefore be particularly diligent in their resistance to accepting labels as truth and vilifying each other accordingly. The war against lynching, and the racial vilification that justifies it, must be waged by every stratum of African American communities. If no one else recognizes blacks' complexity and diversity, blacks themselves must. The conversations that Edmonds recorded in his text as well as those that he hoped to spark outside of it, would help blacks better to see and hear each other—rather than allowing themselves to be divided by the labels and stereotypes thrust upon them by American society.

In the final analysis, Lipscomb, Mitchell, and Edmonds joined women's efforts to expose the destruction that mobs caused, but they expanded the message that antilynching drama conveyed by more often illustrating the damage that the mere threat of lynching could do to black families. Like their woman counterparts, male dramatists exposed the injustice of the mob's power and memorialized its victims. By more directly spotlighting the emasculation of black men, however, male playwrights suggested that black men's fear helped to ensure the perpetuation of American injustice. Together, black men and women created a genre that urged their brothers and sisters to make sure that their gendered responses to the threat of lynching would not further damage their households and communities.

## CONCLUSION: OF WHAT USE IS DRAMA?

“Of what use is fiction to the colored race at the present crisis in its history?...Fiction is of great value to any people as a preserver of manners and customs—religious, political, and social. It is a record of growth and development from generation to generation. No one will do this for us: we must ourselves develop the men and women who will faithfully portray the inmost thoughts and feelings of the Negro with all the fire and romance which lie dormant in our history, and, as yet, unrecognized by writers of the Anglo-Saxon race.”

-Pauline Hopkins, September 1900  
prospectus for her first novel *Contending Forces*

“Drama more than any other art form except the novel embodies the whole spiritual life of a people; their aspirations and manners, their ideas and ideals, their fantasies and philosophies, the music and dignity of their speech—in a word, their essential character and culture and it carries this likeness of a people down the centuries for the enlightenment of remote times and places.”

-Theophilus Lewis, October 1926  
theater critic for black newspaper *Messenger*

In 1900, Pauline Hopkins argued for the value of fiction even when crises, such as mob violence, demanded African Americans’ attention. Here, I want to suggest (along with 1920s theater critic Theophilus Lewis) that serious, non-musical black drama was important for the same reasons. Yet, drama even more directly addressed the historical moment by calling attention to the ways in which theater was strengthening the assault against African American identity. Within black drama, the sub-genre of the antilynching play represented an even more focused challenge to the anti-black mechanisms of representation that shaped the early 1900s. For these scripts exposed the alliance of theater and lynching that worked to destroy black racial pride. To counteract the theater/lynching partnership, the playwrights preserved cultural knowledge, and doing so was crucial because mob violence was continuing the work that slavery had done to destroy black nuclear families. Antilynching dramatists seem to have resolved that, even if families did not remain intact to pass down stories from generation to generation, a

broader racial family could. Antilynching drama proved ripe for that task with its commitment to depicting African American characters in intimate settings before black audiences in safe spaces. I would thus claim for these dialogue-centered plays what Hopkins claimed for the novel: that they preserved the race's customs—religious, political, and social. The religious was captured in their complex use of Christ figures, the political in their insistence upon black self-representation and self-definition, and social tendencies were recorded as the plays testified that blacks were not isolated brutes but in fact part of loving families and very much connected to institutions like marriage.

While preserving cultural knowledge, antilynching dramatists redefined theatricality. If theatricality was normally equivalent to black abjection and objectification, early African American dramatists transformed it by depicting black bodies in ways that would not have been considered theatrical by whites. Their new definition of theatricality manifested in how blacks would be portrayed on stage (reading, not dancing) and in how the stage itself would be defined (not commercial venues but communal ones, like black homes and churches). They therefore brought drama closer to African Americans; they made drama less foreign and alienating, and doing so meant ensuring that drama would not be structured around black degradation. In fact, these emerging dramatic texts, unlike those of the mainstream, honored African Americans by valuing black testimony and acknowledging not just their physical existence, but also their manhood, womanhood, and childhood.

As they prioritized black testimony and invested in amateur stages where it would be cherished, antilynching dramatists sacrificed literary acclaim and financial rewards. In doing so, they made a bold statement about their belief that the Little Negro Theater

movement, because it stood apart from the machinery of the commercial stage, could memorialize lynch victims that would otherwise be forgotten.

Striving to create theatrical spaces in which blacks could perform and embody their modern citizenship and racial pride, actors, writers, and activists embarked in the 1920s and 1930s on multi-tiered efforts which included both formal and informal theater activities. Of course, the more formal events were better documented, but the less formal ones were more conducive to the sorts of non-spectacular black truths that the dramatists wanted to capture. The playwrights preserved testimony regarding the race's folkways, while they bore witness to African Americans' grief and the depth of their reverberating pain. That is, they provided posterity with a body of work that puts forth a different kind of "strange fruit." In addition, antilynching dramatists and their allies left different kinds of evidence than we expect to find in the wake of theater practitioners; there are no playbills, programs, or box office receipts. Yet, even without such records to prove that antilynching plays were performed before large audiences, it is clear that these scripts very much served black communities.

Black-authored lynching plays require scholars to re-think our assumptions about the parameters of meaningful theatrical practice and how we identify a powerful theatrical space. And, the need for an adjustment on our part is clear. If bridges and telephone poles became stages, it makes sense that African Americans would want to use their living rooms as playhouses. I cannot claim that these informal stages demanded the attention of thousands of people, but their power arose from intimacy. The playwrights and those who supported them wanted to make theater personal and personally relevant so that it could acknowledge black personhood and bolster racial pride—the very things

that were negated when whites used theatrical productions (on stages and on trees) to develop their own race pride. Given these conditions, the sparse evidence that black-authored antilynching plays were produced should not lead scholars to assume that the playwrights accomplished little; it should inspire us to re-think methodology in black theatre and drama studies. Here, I propose just a few ways to, in James Hatch's words, "hear the 'silences' in theatre history" (Here 155).

### **Lack of "Proof"**

Antilynching drama directs the gaze away from the brutalized body and challenges the representational capacity of physical evidence, such as lynching photographs, in order to privilege the less corporeal evidence of testimony. To similar effect, the genre challenges us to re-evaluate our assumptions about what creates theatrical power, what constitutes an audience, and what counts as proof of the impact that a production had on its audience. As discussed, lynching dramas were most suited for informal productions among family and friends, and amateurs were much more invested in participating in cultural activities than in documenting them. We must therefore recognize that there are reasons for the lack of production records, and that a dearth of documentation does not mean that the plays were unsuccessful.

In fact, beyond the understandable lack of investment in formal publicity and recordkeeping, there are actually reasons why small theater groups might have been dedicated to *not* publicizing their activities. Apparently aware that his publishing plays in *Crisis* was indeed inspiring amateur productions, Du Bois wrote in July 1926 that theater groups should acknowledge the playwrights' labor with a tangible reward: a royalty

check. In a notice called "Paying for Plays," Du Bois scolded organizations that were producing plays without paying for the use of the script.

We have published in *The Crisis* a number of plays and shall publish more. Most of them are adapted to amateur production. We would like to have them produced. But we have laid down the rule: Anyone who wishes to produce a play printed in *The Crisis* may do so upon payment of \$5. Of this money, \$2.50 goes to the author and \$2.50 to *The Crisis*. To our surprise there has been almost unanimous objection; and that shows the singular attitude of our people toward artists and writers. Plumbers, carpenters and bricklayers we pay without question; the workman is worthy of his hire. But if a man writes a play, and a good play, he is lucky if he earns first-class postage upon it. [If the play is] about the kind of Negro you and I know or want to know...it cannot be sold to the ordinary theatrical producer, but it can be produced in our churches and lodges and halls; and if it is worth producing there it is worth paying for. It seems to us that \$5 is not an exorbitant charge. Of course what is going to happen is that a number of our loyal friends are going to steal these plays, reproduce them without paying for them, and ask us impudently what we are going to do about it. And we can assure them pleasantly that we are not going to do anything. If they can stand that kind of encouragement for Negro artists, we presume we can.

Playwright Willis Richardson wanted to expand this policy. He sent a royalty check to Du Bois because Eulalie Spence's *Foreign Mail* won a 1926 *Crisis* prize, and Krigwa of Washington D.C. staged the play in early 1927. In the letter accompanying his check, Richardson mentioned looking forward to receiving funds for his own play *Compromise*, which the New York Krigwa group had staged. Du Bois responded that royalties were not paid unless *Crisis* had published the script. Richardson did not have to pay for Spence's work, Du Bois reasoned, because *Crisis* had not published it but simply listed it as a winner of the 1926 contest (and then provided the text to groups that

inquired). Richardson immediately responded, “We of the Krigwa Group in Washington are already paying royalty for each play we use, and I think, as you do, that it is a plan all Krigwa Groups should adopt. Besides encouraging the young playwrights to do more and better work, such a course will make them know that we really value what they do. Following our usual custom I have sent the royalty check to Miss Spence at her home address” (DuB Papers, May 18, 1927). Clearly, Richardson did not feel that publication in *Crisis* (and the requisite sharing of royalties with the magazine) should determine whether amateurs felt a duty to pay for plays.<sup>1</sup>

Because African Americans had to be convinced that they should pay for a playwright’s labor, scholars cannot assume that the majority of amateur productions would have been accompanied by documentation that would help us trace them today. We must therefore be willing to imagine the importance of productions that were not only informal but also possibly somewhat “under the radar” of the Little Negro Theater movement that Du Bois was trying to establish. Certainly, a script could make a significant contribution to the community even if produced only “underground.”

At the same time that we must imagine productions that groups may not have wanted Du Bois and other leaders to discover, scholars must be willing to account for how unceremonious the productions endorsed by black theater enthusiasts may have been. That is, “hearing the silences” requires conceiving of theatricality and theatrical power more broadly, and blacks who lived at the turn of the century pointed the way. Noted black theater critic Theophilus Lewis stated unequivocally that he would not judge performances on the quality of their staging. He insisted, “But the staging of amateur performances doesn’t mean anything. Anybody with money enough can hire expert

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<sup>1</sup> Du Bois never made an amended plea in *Crisis* as Richardson seems to have wanted.

property men and stage carpenters” (*Messenger*, Aug. 1926, 246). For Lewis, the acting was most important. That is, were those in attendance touched by the delivery? For W.E.B. Du Bois, truly touching black audiences meant presenting material from writers who “understand from birth and continual association just what it means to be a Negro...” (Krigwa 447).

Thus, the significance of a black theater presentation did not derive from how many people viewed it or from how impressive the space that they filled may have been. Performances were worthwhile if black-authored plays were brought to life by black actors (even amateurs) who served black audiences. The emphasis on African Americans, rather than on formal staging, is apparent in a letter that Du Bois wrote to Eulalie Spence in November 1927. Du Bois informed her that she had won a playwriting award and that he would present her with prize money at a Girls Club in New York City. Also, he requested that she stage her play *Hot Stuff* that evening. He advised, “there would be no scenery or costuming. You and your two sisters might take three of the parts... You could train and rehearse at home” (DuB Papers). As he deemed such a minimalist presentation to be legitimate, Du Bois supported claims made by cultural critic bell hooks about why performance has been so powerful for black communities. hooks argues: “Throughout African-American history, performance has been crucial in the struggle for liberation, precisely because it has not required the material resources demanded by other artforms” (211).

Within this context, we come to understand the problem with judging black theater by mainstream standards—standards that have been molded by access to material resources. Too often, acquiring props and other goods can alter the show’s content so

that it does not emphasize black culture and blacks' ordinary lives. For example, because the Lafayette Players (under Anita Bush) were so invested in showing that they were on par with Broadway professionals, the Great White Way often determined what they presented to their viewers because they relied on using the costumes that the Broadway actors no longer needed. On the other hand, antilynching drama remained free of this content-altering pressure because it was designed to maximize communal literacy—a tradition that grew out of blacks' ability to make one text serve many members of the community, whether they had resources or not.

### **Is All the World a Stage?**

Besides acknowledging the value of informal performances that did not require elaborate sets and costumes, pioneers of non-musical, black-centered drama and their supporters saw the theatrical potential of different types of forums. Indeed, it seems that Du Bois recognized the performative power of the word in much the same way that postbellum/PreHarlem women did. Though he supported amateur theater efforts, he was concerned that they were not committed to distributing black-authors' nurturing words. He therefore declared in *Crisis*: “Some excellent groups of colored amateurs are entertaining colored audiences in Cleveland, in Philadelphia and elsewhere. Almost invariably, however, they miss the real path. They play Shakespeare or Synge or reset a successful Broadway play with colored principals” (*Crisis*, July 1926, 134). To correct this tendency among amateur black performers, Du Bois initiated Krigwa in large part to elevate the status of black playwriting. As theater scholar Ethel Pitts Walker argues,

“[Harlem Krigwa] was the first black theatre company to emphasize dramaturgy rather than performance” (348).

I want to suggest then that Du Bois, Krigwa, and antilynching dramatists tapped into the performative power of the word even when these plays simply appeared in writing. Du Bois knew that artists had to feel that their voices were needed if they were to take up the work of writing plays. He therefore identified the absence of the black playwright as the reason that existing black theater fell short. In the case of antilynching dramatists, they were not only convinced to turn to drama and away from other genres, but also to do so when serious black drama appeared to be the only form that did not bring financial rewards or widespread recognition. As they invested in ensuring that black-authored dramas were written and therefore *existed* in opposition to mainstream plays, they proved that the word could change the cultural landscape and alter material reality. For one thing, plays were now stored up for posterity where none existed before.

The emphasis on first making sure that plays were simply written fell in line with beliefs that theater critic Theophilus Lewis articulated and that Du Bois and his philosophical adversaries Alain Locke and Montgomery Gregory clearly agreed with, as they all worked to build black drama in the 1920s. Lewis insisted: “Only a little while after [an actor] dies, his genius will become simply one more legend and pretty soon his name will be forgotten by everybody except bookish antiquarians” (*Messenger*, Oct. 1926, 302). Without question, “drama is the precious life blood of the theater and the only one of its features that can be treasured up on purpose for a life beyond the life of the time the stage represents” (Lewis 302). As demonstrated by Du Bois’s scolding notice to amateurs who did not send royalty checks, philosophers felt that they could take

physical performance for granted. It was clear that blacks would perform; the real challenge was to guide them to perform black-authored works. Within this context, philosophers cherished the ability of the written word to perform—to effect change—simply by being available on the page.

Believing that the pages of a periodical held performative power, blacks were defining theatricality in unique ways, and if anyone could conceive of theatricality in broad terms, African Americans could. As Du Bois put it in 1897 (*Atlantic Monthly*) and again in 1903 (*Souls of Black Folk*), many blacks lived with the sensation of always looking at themselves as if through the eyes of another. For better or worse, “double-consciousness” was an acknowledgement that African Americans went through life conscious of how they appeared to others—as if they were on a stage. This awareness was especially high during the 1920s and 1930s because blacks were so invested in demonstrating that they were “New Negroes,” that they were sophisticated, modern, and ready for full citizenship. They strove to make the nation see who they really were as a race with impeccable performances in everyday life. Blacks understood, as fully as the lynchers they opposed, that you did not need a raised platform to make a stage.

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